

## **Military Foundations, *Ribāts*, and Urbanization Workshop**

**Workshop - February 1-2, 2024**

**RomanIslam Center (Early Islam), Universität Hamburg**

Organizers: Stefan Heidemann and Kurt Franz (RomanIslam Center)

The workshop was held at the RomanIslam Center on February 1 and 2, 2024. A lively group of eight scholars from North Africa, Germany, Spain, and Denmark discussed the role of the military in processes of urbanization, empires' impact on conquered societies, and in turn the acculturation of these to imperial culture and the changing imperial culture in turn. It was a fruitful test of the Center's claims on the comparison of empires.

The lectures and notably the ensuing discussions explored the foundation of cities and of *ribāṭs* (as a special form of military settlement) in three empires – the Roman, the early Islamic, and the Spanish Empire in the Americas. While in the latter two cases, a salvation religion was fundamental for imperial expansion, the Roman Empire's expansion and the consequent Romanization raised no specific religious claim, apart from celebrating the cult of the emperor. Only in the late Roman period Christianity was adopted as a state preserving religion.

However, all three empires likewise built their strongholds in preexisting cities as well as in new urban, often military, foundations. The geographical layout and conditions varied but in all cases reinforced their military urban foothold: Rome was a maritime empire integrating the entire Mediterranean Basin; the Islamic Empire was a landed empire, despite its dominance over the Arabian Sea; and the Spanish Empire was oceanic with vast distances to bridge. The resulting differences in the internal organization of conquered land and the different approaches to the conquered people were vividly discussed throughout the sessions.

Militarily initiated cities were an important feature of imperial expansion. As the military was always inevitably foreign to the conquered regions, the newly founded cities and fortifications were crucial agents of the spreading of imperial culture, and religion. But there were differences, too: Where were these cities built? What purposes did they serve in an empire's fabric? What role did (salvation) religion play in these processes? In what ways were indigenous populations included or did participate? And finally, was their status, a subordinate, and equally civilian one, or even military? The discussions of these issues led into new directions. Each presented case study was followed by a joint reflection on how the other empires' military and legislature did respond to similar conditions. Thereby, implicit assumptions on each empire could be scrutinized. New fields were touched upon not anticipated during the preparation of the workshop.

One of these discussions, e.g., revolved around the notion of salvation religion. In the Roman case, religion did not play any role in the early military expansion while Christianity became a stabilizing and invigorating force after the third century's Imperial Crisis. It was the first of salvation religions to assume the role of a state religion and prove an organizing force able to integrate the empire's manifold regions. Islam came as a conquest religion and remained in

competition with other salvation religions, notably Christianity and to a certain extent Judaism and Zoroastrianism (the latter of a different kind). In the Spanish case, lastly, the conquest of the Americas was aimed to convert any population to Catholicism, and indeed Christianity was unrivalled soon after the total defeat of indigenous polities.

The debate also dwelt on the phenomenon that while generally the cities of the conquerors became cultural brokers, each individual empire fashioned a different mode. Not only garrisons, but Roman military cities and civilian cities of veterans, too, brought Italic Roman culture to the almost non-urbanized western frontiers and their hinterland. The Hellenized East, however, was already very largely urbanized. As the military camps housed celibatarian armies, a civilian city would develop outside the garrison. They were separate spaces next to each other, if not true twin cities. Meanwhile, auxiliary troops of indigenous people had their own camps and were occasionally sent across the empire. In contrast, the early Islamic Empire consistently dispatched armies of fighters who took their families with them, whatever the purposes of founding military settlements were. This was different of the Roman army, which was celibatarian in nature. Every military camp was in effect a city with newly arrived families living next to craftsmen of regional origin. At first, the (Umayyad) Islamic armies created tribally organized garrison cities in the conquered lands as launch pads for further expansion (ca. 630s to 720s). When the frontiers had stabilized, some large fortified Iranian-Khurāsānian garrison and capital cities were built across the empire from Iran to North Africa. They were built in the Islamic hinterland of a now almost stable frontiers to serve as launch pads to exercise prestigious annual raids into Byzantine territory and also to quell rebellions within the regions (ca. 760s to 780s). Usually, these early ‘Abbāsīd garrison cities were built adjacent to already existent larger (i.e., al-Raqqā), and smaller settlements (i.e., Baghdād). Finally, the super-large residence and military cities in Iraq, such as Sāmarrā’, were populated by bonded military families from Central Asia, and female slaves were transferred from Central Asia for them. Their relocation from Central Asia was probably aimed at controlling this militarily able population more efficiently at the empire’s center than would have been possible in their peripheral homelands (ca. 830s to 870s). These armies were also occasionally employed to quell internal unrest.

The lectures and discussions, then, turned to the different ways of protecting the frontier. Two presentations dealt with Islamic *ribāṭs* – frontier fortresses often close to civilian cities – focusing for one on Ṭurṭūsha on the northern border of al-Andalus in face of the Carolingian Empire, and for another on the North African littoral facing the Byzantine-dominated Mediterranean. The *ribāṭs* were manned with male Muslim volunteers in a Muslim-dominated environment. Religious benefit gained through military exercise (*jihād*) was a strong motivation for the mostly civilian-formed militias (*mutaṭṭawī‘*, *mujāhidūn*, *baḥriyyūn*, etc.) serving territorial and maritime border defense.

The next major topic was the participation of indigenous peoples in military activities and the process of urbanization. The Roman armies were no doubt an engine of Romanization in the West. The indigenous population had access to equal military participation only when they passed the threshold of Roman citizenship on the one hand. Indigenous people, however, could join the army as auxiliaries of the Roman legions in order to later gain the prized Roman citizenship. On the other, local elites functioned as a ‘transmission belt’ into the indigenous

society. The situation was different for the Islamic Empire, which was from the start on the most diverse and urbanized of all empires under discussion. In principle, the indigenous free population was equal in status concerning all legal matters (e.g., regarding real estate property, and economic activities) – to the exception of matters considered as ritual, and taxation. The army consisted throughout, save very few and historically specific cases, of Muslims. During the early phase of the conquests, military units (sing. *jūnd*) were tribally organized while converted indigenous men could join the army as *mawālī*, i.e., clients of a tribe. They were equally registered in the army payrolls (*dīwān*) and became affiliated to that tribe. Later the military consisted mainly of an eastern Iranian (Khurāsānian) army of Iranianized Arabs, or Islamized Iranians. In third phase, at the end of the imperial period the army was of Central Asian origin and had the status of a bonded military (*mamālīk*, *ghilmān*). Nevertheless, the garrison cities were mostly separated by a certain distance from the established civilian cities, even in the case where they built adjacent to them. They continued to keep their foreign ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity for several decades. Also, there was no need for the troop to mingle with the local population because they arrived with their families, or womenfolk, from their places of origin. At the same time, however, the manumission of slaves broadened the Muslim elite beyond its initial Arab ethnic origin. Over time, new imperial military cities developed into civilian ones.

In the case of the Spanish Empire, Indios were regarded as equal subjects of the crown once they had converted to Catholicism. Thus, indigenous people became part of an early modern corporate society, owing specific rights and participating in economic life and administrative affairs. As a specificity of the military alliances of the Spanish conquistadores during the early conquests, indigenous people constituted up to 95 % of the troops. Once a region was militarily incorporated most natives were barred from service in the regular army, although some regions offered natives the possibility to serve in auxiliary troops.

Summing up, the diverse workings of the three empires under discussion became more transparent to the specialists of each of the individual fields. The existence of the Roman-Islamic Center was founded already on certain communalities between the Roman and Islamic empires. The inclusion of the Spanish Empire into the debate of a family of empires in a diachronic perspective enriched the discourse on many levels tremendously. Not all resulting questions could be taken up during the workshop. While each of these empires were unique, the case of the Spanish Empire threw new light on many challenges that all three were facing: Military logistics and strategy under short supply: the small Spanish armies were without any possibility of fast replenishment. The role of imperial competitors: the Spanish empire had to defend its realm against other European empires. Regional autonomy: the Spanish provinces' possessed a high degree of internal autonomy while the far-away crown provided the legal frame. The production of regional loyalty within elite and military both far away from the center: An unshaken loyalty bound Spanish America to the crown until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The protection of the conquered people: Church and Crown had a deep sense of protection of the indigenous population against undue exploitation. The relation to nomads at the fringes: The Apache and Comanche were at various times allies and foes, and only the horses of the Spanish empire empowered them to build up vast nomadic realms of their own.