

“Un-Central” arid Landscapes of NE-Africa and W-Asia – Landscape Archaeology as a Tool for Economic History

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Arid regions of the Old World Dry Belt are normally seen as marginal and of little interest in ecological, economic, and societal regards. Archaeology, but also geography and sociology, are disciplines perpetuating such views, based on ‘derivates’ of Central Place Theory.¹ Since this influential theory was developed on the evidence of Medieval city-based economies in central Europe, its application to other times and regions has inhibited the development of socio-economic research with data-based and non-biased approaches that acknowledge specific historical and local conditions.²

In the archaeology of arid regions, which in general are and were not densely populated, the focus on central places is on the one hand methodologically the easiest due to little quantities of material culture, and the difficulties of finding the scattered evidence. On the other hand this focus extremely limits our understanding of such areas and their role in larger (economic) networks.

The paper presents a comparative interpretation of two datasets from different arid regions in the eastern Mediterranean in Greco-Roman times through the lens of “central places and un-central landscapes”. The case study of the eastern Marmarica (NW-Egypt) is based on landscape-archaeological survey and excavation data taken from analyses of life-strategies and economic potentials in the region.³ The example of Hauran (southern Syria, northern Jordan) reviews published data from the perspective of religious institutions and their relation to the landscape and resources.⁴ Approaches from landscape archaeology and social network analysis, combined with the “small world phenomenon”,⁵ help overcome a dichotomous view on cores and “their” areas, and understand settlement patterns and economic practices in a nuanced way.

In both regions the scarce and highly variable resource of water determines life strategies and social organization throughout history. Starting from observations on the water management and water availability, the case studies demonstrate how a shift in perspective away from looking for centers, but for areas and interrelations improves or even changes our understanding of people’s socio-economic and socio-cultural strategies. In Hauran the high number of settlements of various sizes (1st to 5th century CE) seems to call for central places and small satellite-like villages. However, the analysis of the complex interrelations through a network of natural and artificial “lines of water” (wadis, channels, deviations, aqueducts) reveals that there is not a hierarchical organization at work, but a highly heterarchical one according to the resource distribution. Interdependencies between the settlements and their socio-religious framing become much clearer if we follow the area-wide water network and do not put individual places in the foreground.

In the Marmarica, focus laid on agro-economic potentials through water harvesting methods and on the interrelations between catchment areas of numerous parallel wadis, the settlements, the pottery production sites, and the route network. Together, these offered insights into the surplus economy of the arid environment (2nd century BCE to 5th century CE). Beside the climatic conditions, morphology and topography influence the spatial distribution of settlements, their economic potential, and the interrelations. Unlike one would expect, people lower down the course of the intermittent rivers depended on those further up the course, but also vice versa. Flood prevention is the clue for a mutual dependency.

We cannot deny the existence of central places, such as Paraitonion in the Marmarica, or Bostra in the Hauran. However, the search for qualitatively and spatially defined relationships between settlements, as well as the analysis of the resource management in two arid regions in Greco-Roman times shed light on their socio-economic organization. To take this “un-central” perspective on arid landscapes allows us to overcome the hierarchical dichotomy of central places, embedded in a hinterland, that dominates our historical narratives. Supported by methodologies of landscape archaeology and social network theories, this “un-central viewpoint” reveals the complex economic and social history of marginal, “un-central” regions. As such, it indicates sensitive regions for long-term changes in the Mediterranean.

Notes

¹ Christaller 1933.

² Rieger 2019.

³ Rieger et al. 2012; Vetter et al. 2013; 2014.

⁴ Braemer et al. 2009; Rieger 2017.

⁵ Granovetter 1973.

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