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Centrifugal Forces Impacting Urbanization in the Eastern Mediterranean during Roman and Early Islamic Times

Abstract

My goal with this essay is to make the existence of a distinctive Levantine cultural paradigm a lens through which to examine long-term patterns of urbanization and cultural change in the Eastern Mediterranean—focusing especially on present-day Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. Inspired by the agenda and approach of global history, the essay is an attempt to highlight a number of salient features of societal formation processes in this region that set them apart from such processes in the heartlands of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The paradigm holds that societal formation dynamics in the Levant have been dominated more by centrifugal than by centripetal forces, thus predisposing local social order in the region towards greater local agency, resiliency, polycentrism, heterarchical social structure and societal complexity less conspicuously reflected in grand monumentality. The implications of this hypothesis for understanding urban resilience in the Late Roman and Early Islamic periods in the Eastern Mediterranean will be explored drawing, in particular, on previous research on the "cities of the Decapolis" and on findings of archaeological excavations at Tall Hisban and the wider Madaba Plains region in Jordan.

Global History and Cultural Paradigms

The dawn of our global age has necessitated a new approach to history writing, namely global history. Global history draws its inspiration from our planet as seen from space – a pale blue dot on which all of humanity's history has unfolded[1] – along with that of all other living things and that of the planet itself, our common Earth home. What animates this new approach to writing history is the urgent need for a vision of the past that overcomes the many built-in biases that permeate much traditional history writing, including biases arising from the research agendas championed by specific period-focused disciplines, denominational allegiances, national aspirations, and last but not least, ethnocentric notions of the superiority

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[1] Sagan 1994.

of Western civilization (orientalism) and culture.[2] While still very much an emerging new field of historical inquiry, certain salient features of the approach include a deep-time perspective; an embracing of *la longue durée* or long-term history, a focus on particular world regions and their physical as well as cultural environments (including also rivers, lakes, seas and oceans), the interactions between these, and last but not least, an eye to uncovering the manner and extent of humanity's journey to our present age on the verge of climate catastrophe due to humans overwhelming the very forces of nature.[3]

An early example of history writing from the perspective of global history – and one that is close to home for those of us working in the Eastern Mediterranean, is *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell.[4] In this influential study, the unit of analysis is an entire world region, in this case the circum-Mediterranean world, and the goal is to understand the workings of this entire region through the lens of thalassology – the study of how the affordances provided by oceans and seas have impacted and been exploited by humans and their institutions. Through this lens, they posit a core characteristic of this Mediterranean world, which is the opposite of that of their muse, Fernand Braudel.[5] While for the latter, the Mediterranean world was seen as unitary, for Horden and Purcell, it is fragmentary in terms of environmental affordances and risks. The new insight they bring to their analysis, however, is how this region-wide fragmentation is overcome by connectivity that is modified over time and space by cycles of intensification and abatement in the extent to which particular localities participate in this region-wide web of connections. While case studies of particular events and places highlighted in the volume reflect the authors' background as Classicists, the temporal scope of their inquiry is multi-millennial. The work also devotes more attention to the challenges of daily existence – the food system – than it does to highlight the cultural programs and predations of imperial rulers and their agents, in this way anchoring drivers of cultural change and progress predominantly in the agency role of ordinary people. Though the authors prefer thick description to making claims about a world region that could be assailed as essentialist, the wide interest in the work stems, in my opinion, from its opening a new way forward for the study of history that moves beyond the traditional focus on civilizations, empires or nations. There is also no denying that the "connectivity that overcomes fragmentation" trope approaches what I would consider here a key characteristic of a Mediterranean cultural paradigm.

Cultural paradigms are the bundles of artefacts, ideologies, institutions, habits, and practices that facilitate identity formation and path-dependent, accumulative cultural production and adaptation to changing environmental and socio-political conditions over the long-term by the population of a particular world region.[6] Noteworthy about the above definition of cultural paradigm is its inclusion of the words *path-dependent, accumulative* and *long-term*. The point here is that cultural paradigms represent an unfolding constant (oxymoron intended) that both enfolds and transcends the agency role of particular rulers, social or religious movements, states, empires or civilizations. They represent, as it were, the guard-rails that

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[2] Geyer, Bright 1995; Crossley 2008; Belich *et al.* 2016.

[3] Schafer 2003; Schäfer 2004; Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill 2007; Maurell 2011; Sommer 2015.

[4] Horden, Purcell 2000.

[5] Fernand Braudel 1966; Braudel 1995.

[6] Stordalen, LaBianca 2021b.

shape the accumulative unfolding of various cultural products, institutions and practices in a given region over multiple centuries and millennia. This deep-time dimension of the cultural paradigm notion makes it an apt heuristic construct for uncovering and describing accumulative cultural production over time in particular world regions – in our case here, the Southern Levant. It thus has great relevance also for studying and understanding urban resilience and change.

A Levantine Cultural Paradigm

What sets the Levantine cultural paradigm apart is its bottom-up character where personal agency and collective action are concerned – what Hodder described as "the experience of individual action in creating a life story"[7] and what Chapman[8] and Shackel[9] described as "resistance or challenge to system-wide power structures through direct or indirect individual or collective action".[10] In several recent publications, Terje Stordalen and the writer have posited possible reasons for the crystallization and persistence of this bottom-up character of the social order in the Southern Levant.[11] To account for this persistence of local level agency I have elsewhere proposed the endemic polycentrism hypothesis.[12] It is rooted in research by a number of anthropologists and archaeologists on the origin and nature of non-hierarchical forms of social organization in the ancient world.[13] It was reading the Egyptologist Jan Assmanns's book, *The Mind of Egypt* that set me on the path I am about to describe.[14] In this book Assmann seeks to understand the ups and downs of centralized power during the pharaonic era, ca. 3000-200 B.C. The extent to which particular pharaohs and dynasties managed to impose centralized control over the land of Egypt varied significantly. During periods when such power was ascendant, great monumental works could be completed, such as the building of enormous pyramids and temples. When centralized power flamed out, work on such grand building projects typically suffered as well. The terms that Assman uses to describe these ups and downs in pharaonic power are unicentric and polycentric, respectively. Egypt's pharaonic past could thus be characterized as involving shifts back and forth along an axis with unicentres on one end and polycentrism on the other.

The endemic polycentrism hypothesis posits that, when compared to Egypt, the Levant tends heavily toward polycentrism. In other words, unicentric polities and social structures have had a harder time forming and sustaining in this region as it tends to bend toward the polycentric end of the axis – it is an endemic condition of the Southern Levantine. To get beyond the obvious, I need to introduce two sets of related concepts: centripetal and centrifugal force and hierarchy and heterarchy. These are not concepts used by Assman, but they have great relevance for attaining a theoretical understanding these questions.

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[7] Hodder 2012.

[8] Chapman 2014.

[9] Shackel 2000.

[10] Dobres, Robb 2000, 9.

[11] LaBianca 2009; Stordalen, LaBianca 2021a.

[12] LaBianca 2009.

[13] Crumley 1995; Harrison, Savage 2003; Wright 2005; Gebel 2004; Braemer 2011.

[14] Assmann 2003.

In a seminal article in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1939) the political geographer Richard Hartshorne takes up the question of what makes a state and what makes a nation?[15] To answer this question, Hartshorne introduces the concepts of centrifugal versus centripetal forces. While the former tends to negate the formation of states, the latter does the opposite. Examples he gives of forces that negate state formation include "regions that are more or less separated from each other by physical or human barriers; regions that in greater or lesser degree diverge in their relations with outside states; and regions that differ among themselves in character of population, economic interests, and political attitudes".[16] By contrast, for a state to form and flourish, it needs to "establish centripetal forces that will bind together the regions of that state, in spite of centrifugal forces that are always present…The basic centripetal force must be some concept or idea justifying the existence of this particular state incorporating these particular regions; the state must have a raison d'etre- reason for existing".[17]

When the two – Egypt and the Levant – are compared in light of Hartshorne's opposing forces, the contrast is rather stark. During pharaonic times, the vast majority of Egypt's population lived in agricultural villages along the two banks of the Nile. While a wide range of options existed in terms of ways to farm these lands, the annual flooding cycle of the Nile River was a huge risk factor that had to be dealt with. Its waters were thus both a great blessing and a constant source of uncertainty. To the extent that the political, economic and cultural programs of the various pharaohs were understood by these farmers to be a means to manage such risks and benefit their livelihood pursuits, the state had a raison d'etre. Where such rationale flailed, the centralized polity also floundered. Hence the alternating sequence of unicentric and polycentric social order throughout the pharaonic era of Egypt.

The situation in the Southern Levant was very different. Here, a varied canvas of different types of highland and lowland environments existed, each with its own risk regime. Unlike Egypt, where the flooding of the Nile prevailed as a ubiquitous risk factor, Levantine farmers faced no such overriding risk regime. Instead, they faced a wide range of different kinds of risks, depending on the affordances of their particular local environment. Furthermore, as farming villages became established in the region, many ended up in rather isolated locations, which in turn favored local self-sufficiency as a means to survival and managing risks. The continuous influx of Bedouin tribes, which has been part of the Levantine experience since prehistoric times, also kept injecting into the region sentiments favoring communal level self-reliance. In these ways the conditions for managing risks in the Levant favored centrifugal practices and institutions that tended to negate centralization, state formation and grand monumentality. The opposite was the case in Egypt, where conditions were much more favourable to the sorts of centripetal forces that are required to form and sustain state-level polities and grand monumentality.

Something that strikes one on visiting the temples and pyramids of pharaonic Egypt is the difference in the scale of these monuments when compared with what has survived from the same time periods in the Southern Levant. Compare, for example, the difference in scale between the Megiddo triple temple and the Pyramid of Abusier (FIG. 1a and b). Both are dated

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[15] Hartshorne 1939

[16] Hartshorne 1939, 105.

[17] Hartshorne 1939, 110.

to about the same period, the former to the Intermediate Bronze Age (ca 2500-2000 B.C.) and the latter to Old Kingdom Dynasty V (ca 2686-2181 B.C.). While the base of the Abusier pyramid is estimated to have been about 105 m x 105 m, the base of the triple temple at Megiddo is estimated at roughly 20 m x 20 m. The difference in scale is at least five-fold. Add to this that monuments on the scale of the triple temples of Megiddo are very rare in Southern Levant until the first millennium B.C., and the extent to which these two regions differ becomes even more apparent. Indeed, it is really not until the Roman period that monuments at the scale of Egyptian temples and pyramids become a part of the landscape in the Southern Levant.

The reason for this stark difference is, of course, that centripetal forces took off much earlier in Egypt and were far more powerful there than in the Levant. While state-level polities were in place in Egypt already by 3000 B.C., it took two thousand years before the first state-level polities emerged in the Southern Levant, and these were fledgling ones at best.[18] Furthermore, while the state level entities that arose in Egypt established enormous bureaucracies to support them, this was not the case in the Levant. What emerged here were fledgling tribal kingdoms.[19] These were a type of secondary state in which tribal loyalties and sentiments remained in force and in which the sort of bureaucratic institutions that developed and sustained the state apparatus in Egypt never really emerged.[20]

The difference between the two regions when it comes to the use of writing follows from this observation. In Egypt the invention and use of hieroglyphs was primarily in the service of the pharaoh and the state and thus goes back to the 3rd millennium B.C., to when state-level society emerged in Egypt. When writing eventually did emerge in the Southern Levant, it coincided, roughly, with the rise of the secondary states of Ammon, Israel, Moab and Edom at the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. And in this case the scripts that came into use were far more eclectic in origin and form, reflecting the fact that their use was not primarily in the service of the state, but in the service of non-state actors such as prophets, poets and priestly chroniclers.[21] This begins to explain why evidences of writing are far rarer in the Southern Levant than in Egypt.

Heterarchical Social Structure

Another related contrast between these regions is social stratification – the extent to which each society ranked various individuals and groups according to their perceived social value and function. In Egypt, such ranking was extensive, with hierarchy being more the norm, while in the Southern Levant, the opposite, heterarchy, was much more the norm. Heterarchy is a much more flexible type of social order in which individuals and groups can be ranked in a number of different ways, and in which there can be multiple centers of authority, depending on the circumstances (FIG. 2a and b). Its prevalence in the Southern Levantine has been compellingly argued by Braemer who writes that "During the EBA, the developed urban system is secondary, existing only during short periods or in restricted areas. The rural system

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[18] LaBianca, Younker 1995.
[19] LaBianca, Younker 1995; LaBianca 1999.
[20] LaBianca 2009.
[21] Stordalen 2012; Stordalen, LaBianca 2021a.

is far from being homogenous and static. The village is the main category of settlement. There is a large range of types of village agglomerations, whose plans correspond to different social organizations".[22]

Why this is an important distinction is because of the extent to which individuals and communities experienced a sense of agency and freedom of action under the two systems. Thus, as a general rule, people living under a bottom-up, heterarchical type of order experience a greater sense of agency or motivation to imagine and follow through on ideas than is typically the case under top-down hierarchical type orders.[23] Heterarchical orders also have to rely to a far greater extent on trust and honor as a way for its members to achieve consensus and deal with conflict. As might also be expected, the latter also opens the door wider for both positive and negative deviance from the established order to occur. We shall return to this point in the next section!

To account for this resistance to hierarchical organization, we would highlight four salient characteristics of the Southern Levant. First are its natural endowments – especially its great elevational and topographical variability – which have made parts of the region difficult by foreign invaders to dominate. Unlike the situation in the civilizational epicenters of the Fertile Crescent, where agriculture depended primarily on river basin irrigation agriculture, agriculture in the Southern Levant has mostly depended on local level collection and storage of rainwater using hillside terraces, diversion dams, reservoirs, and cisterns. Second is the region's geographic position astride an intercontinental land bridge linking the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Having served since prehistoric times as a vital corridor of communication, migration, and trade, the Southern Levant has long been a coveted piece of real estate over which rival dynasties in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Greece, Rome and Western Europe have sought to exert control and domination. Third is the region's proximity to the Arabian steppe. This steppe has served not only as the desert headquarters of long-distance caravan trade, but also as a wellspring of Bedouin culture and aspirations. Since earliest antiquity, Bedouin tribes from the Arabian steppe have infiltrated the fertile highlands of both Transjordan and CisJordan, replenishing its population while emboldening it in its resistance to foreign domination and control. And fourth is the Mediterranean Sea,[24] which connects the Southern Levant to ports of call around the Mediterranean and beyond. Coastal cities, such as Tyre, Sidon, Ashkelon, and Caesarea, are harbors through which trade goods could be channeled from inland cities and towns to distant ports of call and vice versa. At various points in time, this same coastline also served as a point of access to the region by seafaring invaders such as the Philistines, Greeks, Romans and Crusaders. To sum up what we have said about the endemic polycentrism hypothesis: it posits the existence of a distinctive Southern Levantine cultural paradigm in which centrifugal forces have tended to overpower centripetal ones, thus bending the region towards polycentrism and heterarchical social structure (see FIG. 3).

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[22] Braemer 2011, 32.

[23] Dobres, Robb 2000; Hodder 2000; O'Donnell 2010.

[24] Braudel 1995; Purcell, Horden 2000; Abulafia 2011.

Cities of the Decapolis

The foregoing discussion offers a much-needed new perspective on a long-standing puzzlement in the scholarly debate and understanding of urbanization during the Greco-Roman period in the Eastern Mediterranean, namely the question of the nature of the interconnections that existed between the cluster of cities and towns known as the Decapolis.[25] In his review of past research on the Decapolis, Parker pans the idea of it having been a formally organized "league" of some sort, as proposed by a number of earlier scholars. In his view, it was merely a group of cities that "were all apparently Greco-Roman culturally and probably shared a common religious and cultural identity".[26] He also notes, as does Kennedy,[27] that the list of cities included in the Decapolis expanded over time to include perhaps as many as 18 cities. Furthermore, the designation, Decapolis, was also used to refer to a particular geographical region in today's Israel, Jordan, Palestinian Territories and Southern Syria which shared certain cultural and religious practices and connections.

A way out of the puzzlement about the nature of the Decapolis is to conceive of it as a polycentric heterarchy along the lines discussed above. In other words, the Decapolis was simply an unfolding of the Levantine cultural paradigm over a particular period of time when urbanization was ascendant in the region. In essence, it was a loosely knit network of cities and towns that shared certain cultural and religious similarities thanks to the agency and mobility of a well-connected group of elites whose influence and power were responsible for the production of a certain set of elite cultural productions throughout the region known as the Decapolis. Their exertions, both in terms of building practices and institutional creations, produced a certain amount of homogeneity and uniformity across the landscape that contemporaries referred to as the region of the Decapolis. Elsewhere I have introduced the "Great and Little Traditions" framework as an aid to uncovering interactions between elites and local masses throughout the ancient world. "Great Traditions" are the cultural programs of a mostly literate, elite minority whereas "Little Traditions" are the ways of the mostly non-literate majority.[28] The Decapolis, I thus would argue, was a cultural production primarily of a transient, mobile, elite minority heavily inspired by Greco-Roman influences. Much less influential was the "Little Traditions" of the non-literate, much less mobile minority whose ways were far more ancient in origin and locally adapted, having been shaped by their ancestral forbearers over the millennia.

Esbus, a Decapolis town?

This brings us to the town of Esbus, the Greco-Roman name for the town of Hisban, also widely assumed to be biblical Heshbon. While never included in the list of "ten cities", a case can nevertheless be made for it as having been "a Decapolis town". The argument can be made on four grounds: hints in the ancient sources; its location on a major highway linking Decapolis cities, compelling evidence of a Decapolis-like elite cultural program and the fu-

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[25] Jones 1931; Parker 1975; Kennedy 2013.

[26] Parker 1975, 440.

[27] Kennedy 2013.

[28] LaBianca 2007.

nerary practices of Esbus elites in the town's cemeteries. First, with regard to Esbus in the ancient sources, the town of Esbus – or rather, the district of Esbonitis – is mentioned by Josephus as part of the Herodian building program throughout the cities of the Decapolis.[29] In a study of *The Coins of the Decapolis and the Provincia Arabia*, Michele Piccirillo lists 18 cities as being part of the Decapolis in alphabetical order: Abila, Adraa, Bostra, Canatha, Capitolias, Charach-Moba, Dium, Esbus*,* Gadara, Gerasa, Hippum, Medaba, Nysa-Scythopolis, Pella, Petra, Philadelphia, Philippopolis and Rabbat-Moba.[30] The most recent publication including Esbus as part of the cities of the Decapolis region is David Kennedy's *Geresa and the Decapolis*.[31]

The town of Esbus was a waystation on two major highways connecting Decapolis cities. The so-called King's Highway, later known as Via Nova Traiana, runs north to south, linking Esbus to Petra, and to the Gulf of Aqaba to the south and to Decapolis cities to the north as far as Damascus. Another road, La Strada Romana or the Esbus-Livias Road,[32] ran east to west linking Philadelphia via Esbus with Jerusalem. The fourth-century pilgrim Egeria mentions this road in her diary.[33] Evidence from coinage and architecture attest to the existence of an acropolis at Esbus, crowned with a pagan temple likely dedicated to Jupiter. Esbus earned the right to mint coins during the same period and these featured a façade of a temple with a central pillared platform with four columns, incorporating an arch between the center columns. With the arrival of the Byzantine, the temple was erased and replaced by a Christian Basilica – a common practice at the time.[34] Christian Esbus played a relatively prominent role in the Church and served as an episcopal seat. Ecclesiastical records show that Gennadius, the Bishop of Esbus, attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. Another bishop, Zosius, represented Esbus at the later Council of Chalcedon in 451. A third bishop, Theodore, received a congratulatory letter from Pope Martin I in ca. 649 for his stand against heresy.

The Byzantine community at Hisban erected another church at the base of the north slope of the site. This new "North Church" had three superimposed mosaic floors, showing that two renovations occurred, as well as dedicatory inscriptions. A white marble reliquary enclosing an oval silver reliquary containing roughly thirty human bone fragments was also recovered from the church. The discovery of several plaques and inlays of bone from three probes beneath the east end of the church suggests that an artisan's workshop existed at the site prior to the foundation of the ecclesiastical building. According to accounts of local informants, a third church existed at Byzantine Hisban, but its exact location – possibly on Hisban's eastern slope – is uncertain. The fourth line of evidence for a Decapolis cultural connection at Hisban is its necropolis,[35] which includes at least two rolling stone tombs and a range of other tomb types familiar from other Decapolis cities.[36]

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[29] Jones 1931, 79.

[30] Spijkerman 1978, 254.

[31] Kennedy 2013.

[32] Ibach 1987; Borstad 2008.

[33] Ibach 1987, 68.

[34] Van Eldern 1986; Storfjell 1994; Van Eldern 1994; Hahn, Emmel, Gotter 2008; Chambers 2009; Avni 2014.

[35] Waterhouse 1998.

[36] Peleg-Barkat 2011

Urban resilience

In concluding this chapter, I would like to offer a few brief reflections on the topic of urban resilience. How might the various theoretical constructs and case studies of the Decapolis and Esbus inform our understanding of this important topic? A place to begin, in this regard, is to consider the following definition of urban resilience in a recent review of the concept by Meerow *et al.*: "Urban resilience refers to the ability of an urban system – and all its constituent socio-ecological and socio-technical networks across temporal and spatial scales – to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity".[37]

In what follows, I will focus my reflections on the following phrase in their definition, "rapidly return to desired functions". The question then becomes: whose desired functions – those that matter to elite stakeholders of the Great Traditions, or those that matter to stakeholders of the locally situated Little Traditions? Viewed through the lens of the Levantine cultural paradigm, it would seem that resilience is more about a return to the cultural programs of the latter. In the Southern Levant, successive and often competing Great Traditions flourish for a time, until they are succeeded by a successor. In the meantime, Little Traditions persist and unfold over the centuries and millennia, consistently bending the region in the direction of resilience and agency at the local level – in short, polycentric heterarchy over unicentric hierarchy.

What will be of particular importance to future research on resilience and the Levantine cultural paradigm is the history and cultural program of the Decapolis. The reason why this is important is that it offers an opportunity to examine the unfolding of the paradigm in an urbanizing, as opposed to a predominantly rural, context. A pattern well documented at Hisban are successive periods of urban floruit followed by urban decline and a return to more resilient, and often fewer, permanent modes of livelihood and habitation. In the particular context of Hisban/Esbus, the word "urban" should not be mistaken for a large city like Roman Geresa or Caesarea, but rather, the term connotes a period during which a particular elite directed cultural program is in evidence – as was very much the case during Roman and Byzantine[38] times at the site, and to a lesser degree during Mamluk times.[39]

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[37] Meerow *et al.* 2016, 39.
[38] Mitchel 1992; Storfjell 1994; LaBianca 1990.
[39] B.J. Walker 2003; B. Walker 2013.

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FIG. 1a – Abusir pyramid, Egypt. Image credit: Chanel Wheeler, CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons (image enlarged).

FIG. 1b – Triple Temple, Megiddo. Image credit: Matthew J. Adams, July 2008, ASOR Photo Collections (image enlarged).
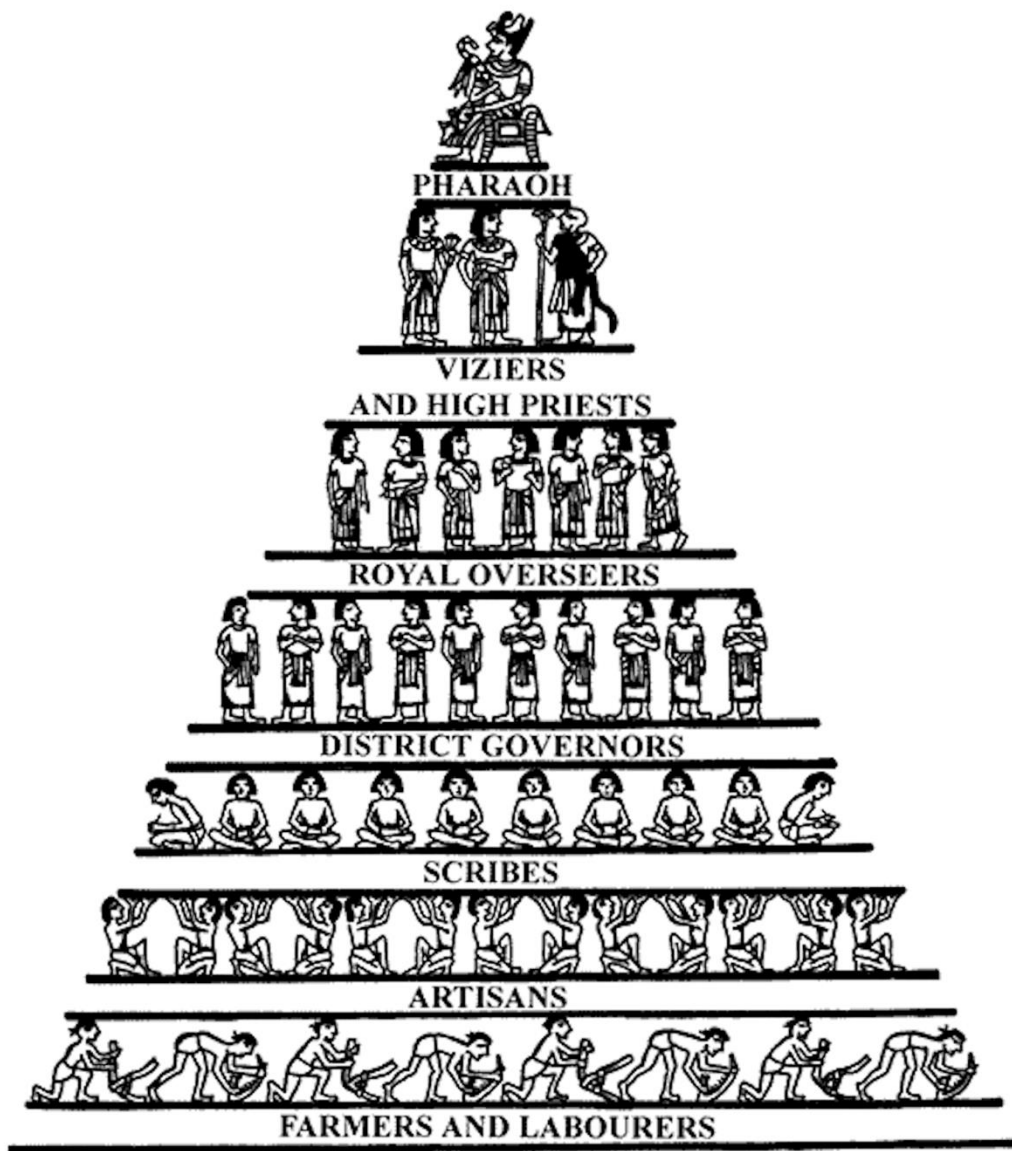
FIG. 2a – Pharaonic Egypt Social Order. Centripetal forces have favored mono-centrism and hierarchy. Force, bureaucracy. Less local level agency. Image credit: Reptail82, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.
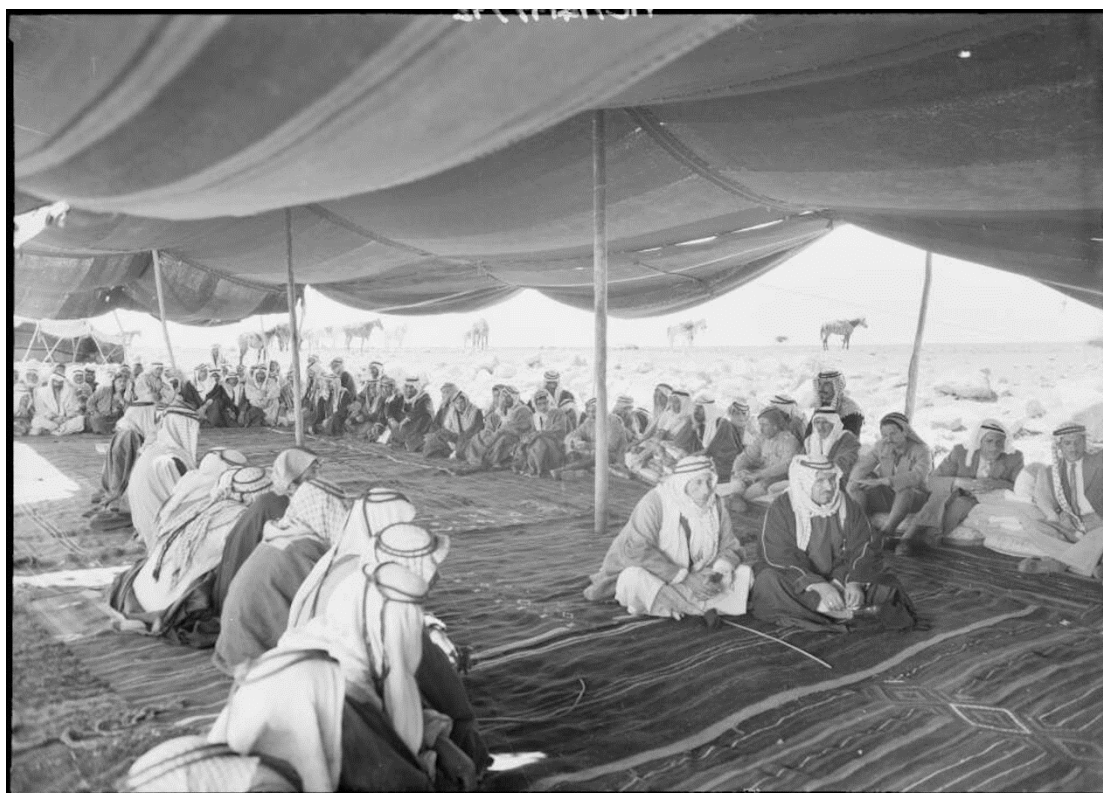
F<small>IG</small>. 2b – Southern Levantine Social Order. Inside a shig tent of the Majali bedouins at an encampment near Karak, Transjordan, ca. 1943. Centrifugal forces have favored polycentrism and heterarchy. Trust, honor. Greater local level agency. Image credit: Frank Hurley, *Inside a shig tent of the Majali bedouins at an encampment near Karak, Transjordan, ca. 1943*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-151359365.
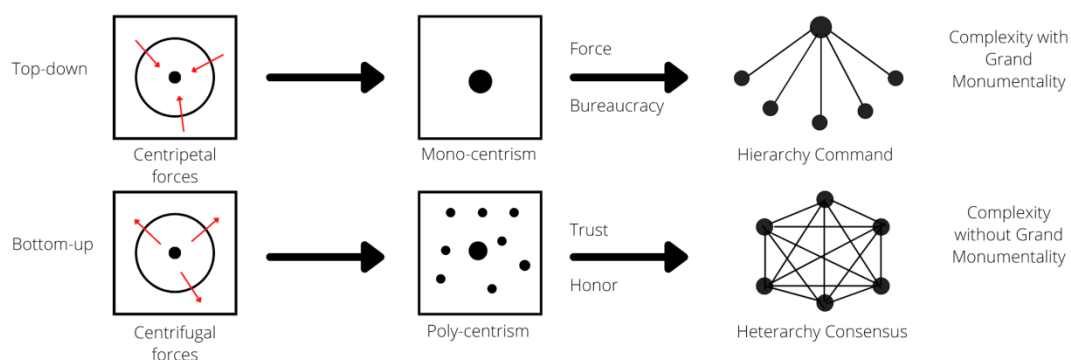

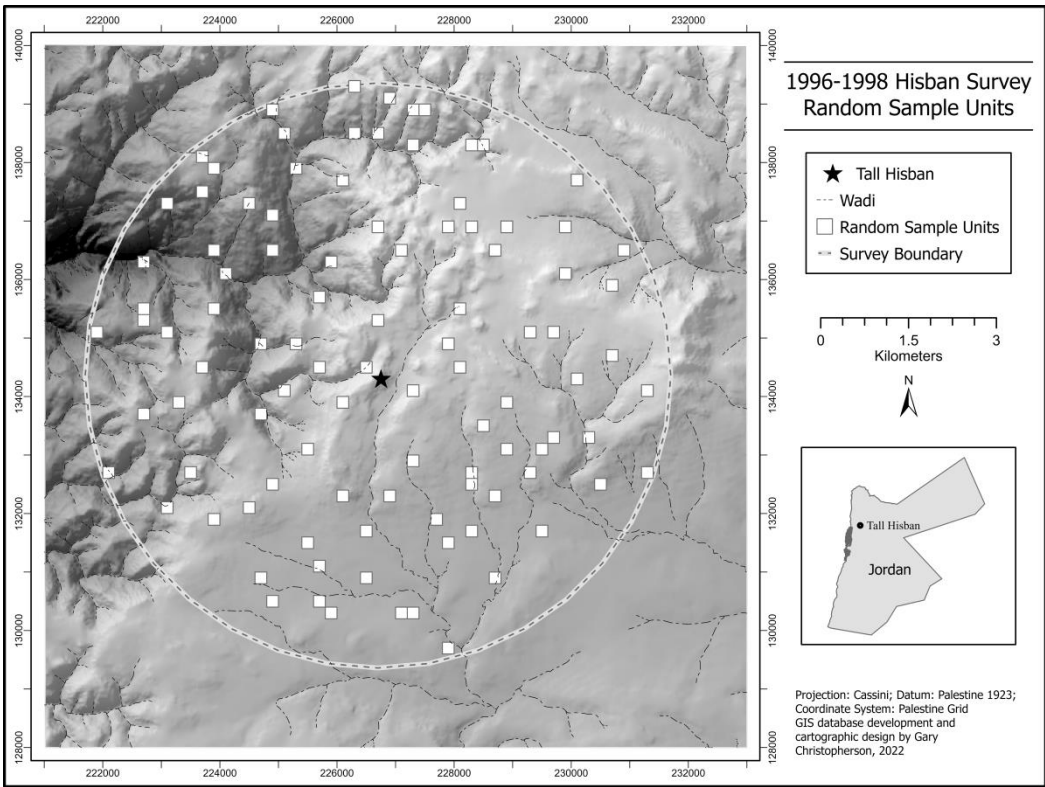F<small>IG</small>. 3 – Two contrasting models of agency and social order in the ANE.

FIG. 4 – Random Square Survey sampling areas. Credit: Gary Christopherson, Center for Applied Spatial Analysis, The University of Arizona.
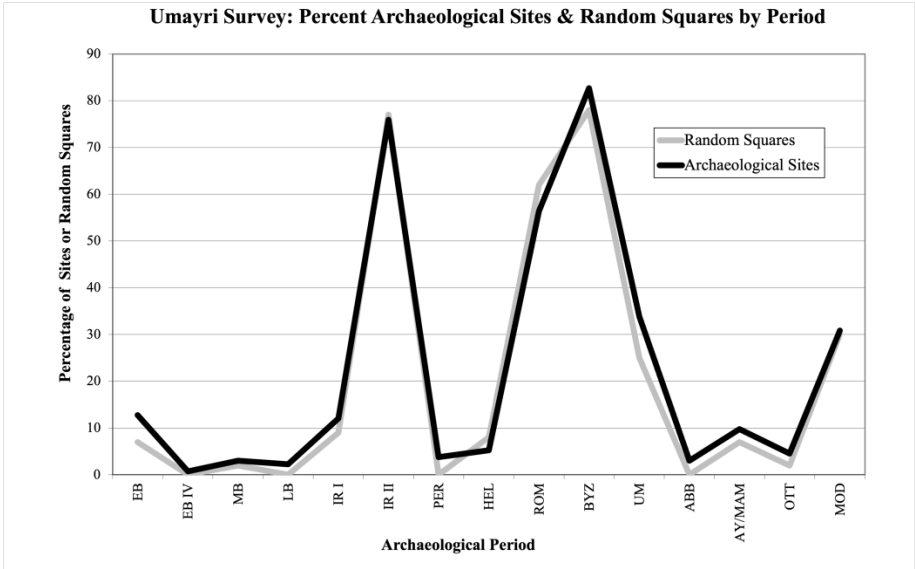

FIG. 5 – Survey of Umayri region. Credit: Gary Christopherson, Center for Applied Spatial Analysis, The University of Arizona.