# Chapter VII

# Umayyad "Palace" and the 'Abbasid "Revolution"*

Since the time of Wellhausen and Lammens, almost everything that has been written on the dynastic change from Umayyads to 'Abbasids has been primarily based on the written sources already available, for the most part, to early twentieth-century scholarship. It is true, of course, that much in our understanding of the events and of their religious, ethnic and social components has been refined to a far greater degree than is apparent in earlier works. One of the consequences of the refinement – as it appears either in B. Lewis's assessment of the 'Abbasids in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* or in H. A. R. Gibb's essay on "The evolution of Government in Early Islam"[1] – has been to underplay the "revolutionary" character of the change in dynasty in the sense that it involved massively the whole Iranian world and to consider it instead as the "Third Civil War" of early Islam, at the time of no greater or lesser significance than the 'Ali-Mu'awiyah conflict three generations earlier, although portentous of considerable later changes.

All the arguments and discussions so far have centered on written sources, whose partiality has often been pointed out and whose specific reliability in precise instances of fact as well as interpretation is hence often difficult to assess. It is only comparatively rarely that the considerable and impartial archaeological documentation has been brought into the [6] discussion. The two monuments from the Umayyad period which have been known for many decades – Qusayr 'Amrah, the single bath with extraordinary paintings in the wilderness of Transjordan, and Mshatta, the unfinished but grandly planned palace a few miles south of 'Amman – have usually been taken to be symbols of an ill-explained Umayyad megalomania and romantic attachment to the desert; the recently discovered palaces of Khirbat al-Mafjar in the valley of the Jordan near Jericho, Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi along the road from Damascus to Palmyra, Khirbat al-Minyeh, north of Tiberias along the shores of the sea of Galilee, Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, some sixty miles northeast of Palmyra, in an area hardly visited any longer by caravans, to name but

* First published in *Studia Islamica*, 18 (1963), pp. 5–18.

[1] *Studia Islamica*, 4 (1955).

those few with extraordinary architectural characteristics or in which particularly remarkable discoveries of sculpture, paintings, or mosaics were made, have not yet fully penetrated, as historical documents rather than artistic oddities, into the consciousness of most historians who have dealt with the early Islamic period. As far as the early 'Abbasid period is concerned, the Round City of Baghdad, the mysterious palace at Ukhaydir, and ill-defined remains at Raqqah have often been described, but rarely brought to bear on the wider historical and cultural problems of the period.

To this general rule there is one major exception. In a series of articles[2] J. Sauvaget challenged many of the traditional views on Umayyad secular constructions, but his untimely death prevented the completion of the promised *Châteaux* [7] *Omeyyades de Syrie*, in which presumably a new interpretation of the archaeological evidence as well as a more flexible explanation of the historical development which led from Umayyads to 'Abbasids would have been proposed. Regardless, however, of what Sauvaget's final conclusions would have been, the hypotheses and explanations he proposed in the late 1930s can for the most part be considered as established and it is only in comparative details – such as the precise identification of Hisham's Rusafah with Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi or the location of the bath of Khirbat al-Minyeh – that they have been modified by subsequent research. If we take then Sauvaget's remarks on Umayyad "palaces" and relate them to several other investigations carried out either in earlier periods of the archaeology of Syria and Palestine or in entirely different areas of the Middle East, a series of conclusions – or at least working hypotheses – suggest themselves, not only for our understanding of the monuments themselves, but, as we shall try to show, also for the wider question of the 'Abbasid "revolution". The final validity of these hypotheses will have to be tested through more thorough archaeological surveys than have been made so far and through new studies of the information provided by texts; but the hypotheses themselves may be valuable in showing ways in which archaeological materials supplement literary evidence and at times replace it altogether. This has, of course, been demonstrated already by S. P. Tolstov in Khorezm, where the whole social and political development of an area in the early Middle Ages can be suggested almost exclusively on

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[2] The most important one is "Observations sur les monuments omeyyades, 1: Châteaux de Syrie," *Journal Asiatique*, 231 (1939), although two other articles published in the same year contain important notes for our purposes, "Les ruines omeyyades du Djebel Seis," *Syria*, 20 (1939), and "Les ruines omeyyades de 'Andjar," *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth*, 3 (1939). The essential bibliography on Umayyad palaces will be found there, but one should add D. Schlumberger, "Les fouilles de Qasr el-Heir Gharbi," *Syria*, 20 (1939); R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar* (Oxford, 1959); K. Otto-Dorn, "Grabung in Umayyadischen Rusafeah," *Ars Orientalis*, 2 (1957); M. Chéhab, "Excavations at Anjarr," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963). The author is preparing an annotated list of Umayyad settlements known archaeologically and through texts, which should be completed in the near future. The work was never completed, but see J. Sauvaget, "Châteaux umayyades de Syrie," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 35 (1967).

archaeological grounds, or in Turkmenistan, where recent surveys permit a reconstruction of the social and physical setting of pre-Seljuq Khorasan.

The single most important point made by Sauvaget was that, in almost all instances (Qusayr 'Amrah being the only possible but by no means certain exception), clearly identifiable Umayyad sites, as we may recognize them through the existence of a mosque or through analogy with undoubted Umayyad buildings, were not simply places for high princely living and entertainment, but also centers for agricultural exploitation. The extensive irrigation system, the canals, cisterns and aqueducts [8] which surrounded many of them did not merely serve to supply the palace with water, but also to provide for fields and meadows. As agricultural exploitations established most of the time in areas not easily provided with water, these centers of early Islamic occupancy are related to a large series of farms, manors, at times even small villages with a few houses, a cistern, enclosures for animals and equipment, and the ubiquitous and fairly diversified water systems, which literally cover the whole area between desert and sown extending northwest or west of a line drawn from the Euphrates around Raqqah to Damascus through Palmyra and then through the mountains of the Hawran down to the gulf of 'Aqabah in an ill-defined fashion approximated by a straight line from the present oasis of Azraq to the modern town of 'Aqabah.

The precise date at which these settlements were developed is not known. Some probably have historical peculiarities of their own, but the investigations of N. Glueck and Fr. Franck in Transjordan and the wadi 'Arabah, as well as the air surveys of A. Poidebard in Syria,[3] have clearly shown that it is generally in Hellenistic and especially Roman times that, in spite of considerable natural difficulties, the agricultural growth of this area took place. The development was hardly slowed down by the creation of the Christian empire; and, from the fourth century on not only do most of the earlier settlements acquire churches, but many new settlements appear either in the areas of the previous settlements or in entirely new places such as certain parts of the Negeb and the superb wilderness of Khilwah in the southeastern part of the present Kingdom of Transjordan. Some of these new settlements were purely religious centers in which anchorites and cenobites lived. These must have had a limited economic significance, but in all at least a rudimentary program of conservation of water and subsistence agriculture has to be assumed.

[9] The second point made by Sauvaget is that in the large majority of cases clearly identifiable Umayyad buildings or settlements were intimately related to existing older buildings or settlements. This relation was especially

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[3] N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*, in *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 14 (1933–4) and following. Fr. Frank, "Aus der Araba", *Zeitschrift der Deutsche Palästinavereins*, 57 (1934). A. Poidebard, *La trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie* (Paris, 1934).

close in so far as water was concerned, as at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, where a superb dam and system of canalization from Palmyrene times served the Umayyad palace, at Khirbat al-Mafjar, where a Roman aqueduct brought water to the palace, or in the very important but still unmapped site of Humaymah in southern Transjordan, where the 'Abbasid plot was hatched and where all the presently visible means of water supply are of pre-Islamic origin. The point can be generalized to say that there are practically no Umayyad "palaces" which fail to show stones or foundations from an earlier origin and that the physical or ecological infrastructure which made the Muslim settlement possible existed before Islam had conquered the area. In fact in three of the four instances of excavations carried out on Umayyad buildings – Khirbat al-Minyeh, Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Khirbat al-Mafjar (the exception is Rusafah, where the excavator actually sought Hisham's palace) – the excavators were not looking for and did not at first expect to find Umayyad buildings, and Mshatta was considered for a long time to be a pre-Islamic palace. From these remarks two conclusions emerge: that Umayyad settlements were directly related to the economic organization of the pre-Islamic world, which the Muslims had to maintain in working order lest their establishments perish; and that apparently the choice made in so many instances by the Muslims to settle in the difficult area between desert and sown, which requires extensive waterworks, did not derive from a presumed atavistic craving for the desert but from reasons which involved a consciousness of the value of land ownership and land use.

In order to elucidate these reasons, it is essential to understand in some detail the exact functions of these lands in pre-Islamic times and to explain why it is that, in so many instances, the land on which the Umayyads built required a highly artificial system of water supplies and was on the edge of the desert. It is true, of course, that not all Umayyad settlements and palaces [10] are in these areas. Khirbat al-Mafjar, Khirbat al-Minyeh and 'Anjarr are all in fertile valleys with sufficient water, requiring usually only systems for distribution and not for storage. But there is no doubt that at least the first two of these palaces (little is known so far about the third one)[4] were surrounded by agricultural exploitations in the past just as they are today and that the reasons which will be given below for the existence of Umayyad settlements in less hospitable lands actually apply in fertile areas as well, except for the fact that in fertile areas the circumstances of the conquest did not permit the systematization of a practice which was probably common in more inclement regions.

A partial answer to the question of the exact functions of these lands in pre-Islamic times is now provided by G. Tchalenko's admirable volumes, *Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord*.[5] In describing with painstaking details

4 The excavations began only two years ago.

5 Three vols, Paris, 1953–8.

the remaining buildings and the evolution of settlements in a small area of northwestern Syria which has been since then almost totally in disuse, Tchalenko has reached the following conclusions of significance to Umayyad problems. First, the villages of northern Syria during the period of prosperity – i.e. before the seventh century – were predominantly concerned with the monoculture of olive trees and the accessory industry of oil-pressing; second, these agricultural and semi-industrial enterprises were almost entirely sponsored from the great Hellenized cities where enough capital existed to finance the undertakings and to amortize their losses; third, much of the final product – oil – was used for export beyond the metropolis of Antioch into the great cities of Greece and Anatolia; finally, the decadence of the region in the seventh century is entirely due to human rather than natural changes. These human factors were partly the destructions which accompanied the Persian wars and the obliteration of Antioch, but especially the loss of outside markets after the elimination of the great city, and after the Muslim conquest.

[11] The region between Aleppo and Antioch which has been studied by Tchalenko has a number of peculiarities, some of a geographical character, others human, and its position in Umayyad times practically on the frontier with Byzantium certainly explains the almost total lack of any early Islamic settlements there. But as one begins to move southwards, in the areas of Palmyra, Damascus, the Hawran, and especially the long depression of the Ghawr and the plateau east of the depression – the very area of most identified Umayyad settlements on or near pre-Islamic sites – the question is raised whether the pre-Islamic sites of this area, whose number is astounding (in a comparatively limited area of Transjordan Fathers Saller and Bagatti have counted 141 Christian sites)[6] can be and should be explained in the same fashion as the villages of northern Syria. No final answer can be given as long as these sites have not been subjected to the type of careful and complete analysis made by Tchalenko in the north; however, there are two features in which the north Syrian villages are comparable to the villages of Syria and Transjordan. On the one hand, the extensive techniques of water use and conservation – canals, cisterns, aqueducts – which are still visible in most places can only be explained through external sponsorship, either by government or private capital, because the investments involved were considerable and losses in bad years would have to be covered. On the other hand, in spite of the evident Umayyad concern in maintaining and utilizing the infrastructure provided in these locations, the sites did not survive the fall of the first Muslim dynasty. This decay cannot be attributed to 'Abbasid destructions, which mostly involved centers, such as Rusafah, that had an administrative and political meaning, and it is interesting to note that the

[6] S. J. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem, 1949).

completely waterless city of Rusafah survived for a considerable time after it had stopped being an Umayyad capital, because it had a commercial significance. The implication of these points is that, just as in the north, the prosperity of these centers was [12] related to some aspect of Christian Syria and Palestine which could not be permanently carried over into Islamic times. The possibility of a monoculture of wine rather than oil is not excluded, although it could only be proved by extensive archaeological surveys (see however below for a possible argument from a literary source); but an explanation that these establishments bear some relation to the tremendous growth of Christian sanctuaries and pilgrimage routes can perhaps be suggested. The numerous and large establishments needed to house and feed the multitude of travelers and settlers in the Holy Land certainly required a considerable infrastructure of agricultural and animal husbandry, even though differences existed between such dissimilar areas as, for example, the Hawran and the region east and south of ʿAmman.

The suggested character of these agricultural settlements and their likely relationship to social, economic, political and religious institutions of pre-Islamic Syria and Palestine may serve to explain also why it is that so many Muslims settled there in Umayyad times. Two major sources – the treaties signed by the Muslim conquerors with the Syrian cities and the fiscal rescript of ʿUmar II – have in recent years been studied afresh[7] and, together with works on the economy of the first Muslim century by Løkkegaard and Salih al-ʿAli, have established several conclusions of significance to our purposes. It appears, first of all, that the large and rich landowners usually emigrated before or shortly after the conquest; therefore if our conclusions with respect to the ownership of the irrigated lands in the semi-desert and mountainous areas are acceptable, it follows that such lands would, as abandoned property, fall into the category of booty. Land falling into this category has been shown by Dennett to have been taken by the Umayyad princes for their own use or for redistribution among their clients or allies; in some of the earliest occurrences, as at Humaymah, even ʿAlid sympathizers could end up by [13] settling on these lands. Since these properties possessed an infrastructure for successful operation and presumably a labor force, it is quite likely that the new owners sought to maintain them in working condition and to use their revenues. Some of the owners may have used the revenues to build estates in the Hijaz, while others settled there and built their *châteaux* or manors and thereby changed the character of some of the settlements by introducing into them not only mosques, but, more interestingly, baths, richly decorated palaces and houses, in short, an element of "gracious" living, imitated from urban centers, which had hitherto been lacking. This hypothesis may also explain the well-documented phenomenon

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7 H. A. R. Gibb, "The fiscal rescript of ʿUmar II," *Arabica*, 2 (1955); D. Dennett, *Conversion and Poll-tax in early Islam* (Cambridge, 1950).

of the peregrinations of caliphs from one place to another; rather than an expression of peripatetic restlessness of princes of nomadic origin, these were visits to productive enterprises. Furthermore, this hypothesis permits us to solve some of the more puzzling features of Umayyad secular architecture: the extraordinary number of buildings erected in a short period and the rather considerable variations in quality which exist between the presumed splendor of a Mshatta and the rusticity of other sites, such as Qasr al-Hallabat where an old Roman fort was rebuilt by the Umayyads; or even the apparent lack of major Muslim buildings in a town like Humaymah, which was demonstrably a major early Muslim center. The reason for these divergences is that the land appropriated by booty was not kept by caliphs alone but distributed among many individuals whose taste and use of their possessions varied considerably. One last point may be suggested, although more tentatively: could it be that the inclusion in 'Umar II's rescript of a whole paragraph on prohibition of wine in the midst of complex problems of taxes and land tenure derived from the considerable production of wine in the very type of settlement we have tried to define?

These settlements could not survive, even though the Umayyad princes and their clients had at their disposal the capital needed for their exploitation. For, as Tchalenko has shown in the instance of north Syria and as has been suggested for the rest of Syria and Transjordan, the economic usefulness of these settlements depended on their relationship to markets [14] outside the Muslim world, or on wine, which lost much of its significance, or on Christian religious establishments which weakened considerably. The Umayyads may have maintained the system for a while on a more or less artificial basis, but as it became meaningless economically, it declined rapidly; and, after the fall of the dynasty, only a few places survived in which supporters of the Umayyad regime barely managed to live, and often revolted against 'Abbasid governors.[8] Eventually the whole system was obliterated, to be revived briefly in the Ayyubid period and then in the middle of the twentieth century, when a new influx of population created anew a need for the development of Syria and Transjordan as agriculturally productive areas.

Three conclusions are suggested by this explanation of the evidence provided by Umayyad "palaces". First, the location of most Umayyad manors clearly shows that the economic system of pre-Islamic Syria and Palestine was, on the whole, maintained until the fall of the dynasty. Second, the palaces themselves appear as a highly original type of architecture; in function they are comparable to Roman villas as they were described by Pliny or to the manorial houses – at times also imitating fortified structures – which grew in the nineteenth century in much of agricultural Europe or in the American South. As an intrusion of sophisticated living in the agrarian

[8] An incident of that order will be described and discussed in an article written for the memorial volume being prepared for L. A. Mayer.

world of the older tradition, they actually illustrate a considerable change in at least one aspect of the use of the land: in some instances, as at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, agriculture was replaced by gardens and game preserves, a change of sufficient notoriety to have impressed the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes, who, in an often quoted passage, speaks of Umayyad "paradises". But spectacular though the latter may have been, they did not constitute the majority of cases. The explorations of N. Glueck have shown that in a large proportion of the sites with "Nabatean" or Christian settlements, [15] remains of early Islamic times are also found although without monumental architecture. For a few estates transformed into true palaces, the majority remained under the new order what they had been before the conquest.

The third conclusion requires some elaboration. The pattern of early Muslim settlement in Syria and Palestine was in strong contrast to what occurred in the Jazirah and in Iraq. The Jazirah had been, for the most part, a frontier area between Byzantium and Iran, covered with forts along major routes and strategic points rather than with agricultural settlements. Iraq's economic development had declined considerably under the late Sasanian princes. This character of the two provinces in pre-Islamic times is confirmed by the tremendous economic endeavors of the Umayyad governors of Iraq and of the Umayyads themselves in the Jazirah, at least along the Middle Euphrates. In Iraq canals were rebuilt, the land was divided, and the systematic agricultural exploitation of the area, which had such momentous results in the ninth century, began with all the abuses known for later times.[9] In the Jazirah Hisham undertook considerable work along the Euphrates.[10] The tribal warfare between Qays and Taghlib constantly involved presumably new settlements along the Balikh and the Khabur.[11] Maslamah b. 'Abd al-Malik built canals in Iraq and his name is to be connected with the Hisn Maslamah mentioned by Ibn Khurdadhbih near Raqqah, one of the many properties identified by Gabrieli as owned by the great Umayyad hero.[12] One may even wonder whether the choice of [16] Rusafah as a capital by Hisham should not be explained by the growing consciousness – often discussed – in the mind of that prince of the economic significance of the Mesopotamian valley in the new Muslim world. The classical explanation of the change from Damascus as the result of the plague and of fear of big

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9 H. Lammens, "Études sur le règne de Mo'awia," *Mémoires de la Faculté Orientale, Univ. St. Joseph*, vol. IV (1907), pp. 123 ff.; L. Caetani, *Annali dell'Islam* (Milan, 1905 ff.), vol. 1, pp. 353 ff., based mostly on Baladhuri.

10 Hisham's work is tied up with the complicated problem of Zaytunah, on which most of the texts have been gathered in the last instance by Sauvaget, "Remarques", pp. 1 ff., although his conclusions are not necessarily definitive. See now O. Grabar, "Le nom ancien de Qasr al-Hayr Sharqi," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 38 (1970).

11 Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, vol. V (Jerusalem, 1936), pp. 316, 326, 314, 321. There is no doubt that the eventual publication of this work will add a great deal of new information.

12 F. Gabrieli, "L'eroe omayyade Maslamah", *Rendic. Accad. Lincei*, ser. VIII, vol. 5 (1950), p. 33. See works by D. Whitcome, T. Leisten and K. Haase.

cities[13] should be relegated to a romantic view of the Umayyads, to which Tabari as well as twentieth-century historians have succumbed, even though for different reasons.

Altogether, then, literary sources suggest that a considerable transformation of the land took place, giving a great impetus to possible agricultural activities. But the instances derived from textual sources have not been verified on the spot. The actually visible remains in the Syrian Jazirah are very numerous but have usually been considered from the point of view of a more ancient history. They have never been subjected to any sort of systematic archaeological investigation since the famous trip taken before World War I by F. Sarre and E. Herzfeld. Their account sheds little light on our problem, and it is only Miss Bell who has pointed out the existence on the eastern bank of the Euphrates south of the Khabur of a series of ruins which can typologically be related to Umayyad constructions in Syria.[14] For Iraq the important survey carried out by the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute is still unpublished.

It is clear that archaeological investigations in all these areas must be undertaken, but the evidence of the texts is sufficient to lead to the general conclusion that, whereas in Syria and Palestine the Umayyads took over an existing form of land use, in the western Jazirah and in Iraq they created – or, more correctly, recreated – a new system, related, no doubt, to the older practices of these areas. Because the old system had decayed or been abandoned, the new Umayyad creations were more adequately suited to their own actual needs and possibilities [17]. It is the Umayyads, then, who in reality fostered the growth of the area which became the center of 'Abbasid rule. That the principal emotional attachment of most Umayyad princes was to Syria remains true; it is there that the members of the ruling family built their palaces, while the known Iraqi palaces of Wasit and Kufah were urban centers of authority rather than places for personal enjoyment. This point may explain, for instance, why the fully excavated palace at Kufah was so poor in ornament and decoration, when Syrian palaces are so rich. But on this score our information is still very uncertain, as neither archaeological nor literary sources have yet been properly searched and coordinated for a detailed analysis of Iraqi topography in the first Islamic century. While it is doubtful that there were many castles and manors built there by Umayyad princes, it would be interesting to know for whom exactly the many *qusur* of Iraq mentioned by Tabari were built and what they looked like. The very fact that this information is more difficult to obtain in Iraq is a sign of the difference between Umayyad Iraq and Syria, for in the former the Umayyad foundations, by becoming the nucleus around and over which the later growth of the province took place, were much more often destroyed and

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13 Tabari, *Annales*, ed. M. de Goeje and others (Leiden, 1879 and ff.), part II, pp. 1737–8.

14 G. Bell, *From Amurath to Amurath* (London, 1924), pp. 77 ff. Of particular significance are also the explorations of A. Musil.

built over than in Syria, where they symbolize a basically pre-Islamic use of the land by man.

These remarks, in spite of their tentative character as far as Iraq is concerned, confirm the suggestion that the traditional conception of a complete revolution in Islamic history as power shifted from the Umayyads to the ʿAbbasids needs to be revised, if not truly abandoned. Both the growing wealth of Iraq and the coming decadence of Syria are phenomena of the Umayyad period, and it is one of the paradoxes of the Umayyad century that the center of political and imperial power and of a rather exuberant princely life artificially remained in an area which continued a by then meaningless economy, while the region to whose development these same princes and their powerful viceroys devoted so much money and energy, and from which they derived much of their wealth, became both a center of political opposition to them and, at the same time, of greater contributions to the elaboration of an Islamic culture than were Syria and Palestine.

[18] In suggesting the addition of this paradox to the paradoxes of Umayyad government discussed by H. A. R. Gibb[15] in an earlier issue of this journal, I do not want to imply that economic factors – as they are suggested by an analysis of archaeological remains – were the only or even the main causes of the ʿAbbasid takeover. It is rather that, as one tries to understand the peculiarities of Umayyad secular monuments and the purpose they fulfilled, their meaning and their implications only become clear if instead of considering them merely as creations of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, one contrasts them with what they replaced and with what followed them. As one proceeds along these lines, however, it becomes apparent that Umayyad culture – best known though it may be through its Syrian forms – involved the whole of the Fertile Crescent and that, whereas it appropriated and used, but misunderstood, the features of life, artistic or economic, available in the western part of the Crescent, it created a more viable and newer basis for further developments in the eastern part. As seen from the point of view of the Umayyad palaces in deserted parts of Syria and Transjordan, the ʿAbbasid revolution appears as the natural result of the conscious efforts of the masters of the palaces.

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[15] H. A. R. Gibb, "The evolution of government in early Islam," *Studia Islamica*, 4 (1955), pp. 1–17.