Landowners in Lower-Iraq in the 8th century
Types and Interplays

Studying landholding in Lower-Iraq is essential in trying to understand the formation of the Islamic imperial elites as well as the upholding and evolution of regional elites. This paper aims to identify types of landowners in this area, the Sawād, where lands raised a social, political and economic issue, especially during the 8th century. Obviously, debates about lands and landholding that we can come across in Islamic, Nestorian or Jewish sources, point out the importance of lands in relation to Lower-Iraqi society, from the end of the Umayyad period to the first decades of the Abbasid one. I take an extensive view of the period of study, the 8th century, that is to say from the beginning of al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ governorate in Iraq (75/695) to the settlement of al-Ma’mūn court in Baghdad (204/819).

The focus on landholders pertains to the characterisation of Lower-Iraqi elites, imperial as well as regional. Indeed, this paper will take into consideration Jewish and Christian landowners, for example ecclesiastical landed elites in the Nestorian community, and Persian landowners like daḥāqīn – who settled in the region before the Islamic conquest - and the landed Islamic elites, who are related to the conquering group. With this attempt at a typology, I hope to shed light not only on the diversity of landed elites in Lower-Iraq but also of the subgroup of Islamic landowners.

Defining landowner groups can be useful to study the interplays between local and imperial elites and particularly the changes which occurred in the course of the 8th century. Indeed the 8th century is regarded as the period of the rise of Islamic elites. Some talk about the formation of an urban aristocracy or about a Muslim bourgeoisie but it can be said that researchers agree on the formation of elites who were no longer specifically bounded to military functions. This development went along with consequences for other landed groups. But, interplays not only concern inter-groups’ relationships but also intra-groups’ ones. In other words, it seems relevant to take into account various scales for the study of interplay. Interactions between local and imperial elites seem as significant as between imperial elites themselves or local elites when it comes to Lower-Iraq.

This paper does not aim to focus on one kind of interplay but rather seeks to offer types of these interactions in order to understand what relationships and ratio of power were at stake between Lower-Iraqi landowners. Thus, this paper will be a way to draw up a pattern of landowners in Lower-Iraq during the 8th century.