

**Some of the Impacts of the Early  
Islamic Conquests (Futūḥ) on  
Medinan Trade**

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The Medinan, because of the availability of agricultural products and different sources of water, and the strategic position of their city, which lent it some degree of safety for its inhabitants and the passing caravans, they did not rely only on agriculture but participated in other economic activities. With these advantages the city served as a station on the caravan route between the Yemen and the Mediterranean Sea<sup>(1)</sup>. This gave the Medinans the opportunity to participate in trade with these passing caravans.

It is clear from certain sources that trade was also important to the Medinans. These sources<sup>(2)</sup> mention that when the Prophet migrated to the city it had many market places: one in Zubālah, one in al-Jisr, one in B. Qaynuqā', and one at al-Şafāşif. Ibn Rustah mentions that Yathrib was a market place for the neighbouring villages and the passing caravans<sup>(3)</sup>. Of course, these markets gave the Medinans the chance to sell their products and, in return, buy the produce of those who participated in

these markets. Some reports speak of the Jews as wine merchants and clothes dealers<sup>(4)</sup>. One can assume also that the Jewish community in the city played a role in the development of the trade in the city.

It is probable that traders from Syria participated in the Medinan markets and that the Medinans engaged in trade with Syria to sell their products and to import what they needed, but it cannot have been on the same scale or had the same importance as the trade of Mecca with Syria. The Syrian trade became very well established after the spread of Islam. Also, it is clear from some Qur'ānic verses<sup>(5)</sup> which refer to trade and its regulations that the Medinans had a good deal of experience in trade.

Besides agricultural products, crafts also flourished in the city. They centred chiefly on the goldsmith. Some reports<sup>(6)</sup> claim that there were about 300 Jewish goldsmiths in Ḥarrat Wāqim alone, specializing in this trade. One can assume from this figure that the city was one of the centres of this trade in pre-Islamic times for

its people and the neighbouring area. Medina was also famous for the manufacture of weapons and arms. Some reports mention that the Jews were specialists in arms and weapons manufacture and they claim that they inherited this from their ancestor, the prophet Dāwūd (David)<sup>(7)</sup>. In addition, there were other local industries dependent on the palm- tree.

As previously mentioned, it is clear that the importance of this city to its people and their neighbours was derived from its geographical position and its climate, which differed fundamentally from those of its neighbours and most of the rest of Arabia. As a result, its products were considered rare in neighbouring areas.

The rise of Islam in the seventh century led to fundamental changes in the Arabian Peninsula in general and in Medina in particular, since in Medina both a community and a state were created. Although the Riddah (apostasy or renunciation from the authority of Medina) uprisings threatened both the new faith and the changes produced by it, the transformation of the Arab

tribes under a single central government and Islam was nevertheless achieved throughout almost all the Arabian Peninsula within a year of the death of the Prophet<sup>(8)</sup>. This step paved the way for the early Islamic Conquests, during which the Muslim armies extended the new faith to the former Persian and Byzantine territories<sup>(9)</sup>. Consequently, vast and rich areas extending from Persia in the East to Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and the Mediterranean fell under the control of the Muslims, enabling the state to control the most important commercial centres. This in its turn brought in another set of influences.

As a result of the Conquests, the financial and economic institutions of the state were developed along with the resources of the Treasury. This new income consisted of the *jizyah*, *kharāj* (land tax), *'ushr*<sup>(10)</sup>, and the *khums*<sup>(11)</sup> taxes, all the money gathered from which was sent to Medina for the caliph to distribute. Fixed salaries or stipends (*'aṭā'*) were granted according to the date each recipient converted to Islam or joined the

Conquests movement, so that those who converted in the earlier times and joined in the earliest campaigns received the highest stipends. Trade developed following these changes. In addition, a small minority of Medinans gradually became possessed of immense riches because of their commercial and agricultural enterprise<sup>(12)</sup>.

The Conquests led to a change in the status of Medina as it became the centre of the Islamic state, the assembling place of the fighters, and the distribution centre of the 'aṭā'. Prisoners of war who belonged to different social classes in their homeland were sent to the caliph in Medina to be divided up. The distinct position of Medina at that time as a capital, base of the expansion, and centre for the distribution of 'aṭā' encouraged some people to migrate to it<sup>(13)</sup>. This in its turn led a steady increase in the population of the city.

It is natural these changes should have left their mark on the Medinan trade. The major concern of this study is to examine and evaluate some aspects impact of

the early Islamic Conquests on Medina trade during the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Focusing on some of the changes brought in by the Conquests during their era, the study will try to examine those changes and their impact on Medina trade during that period and the degree to which the Medinans were affected.

The extension of the Islamic state to include large areas with different trade routes helped to develop trade and increase commercial activities during this period. It also gave trade between Ḥijāz and the newly established cities a new dimension. Foreign commodities from Oman, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, and Bahrain would flow into Medina especially during the months of the Pilgrimage, helping Medina to develop as an important commercial centre . As mentioned above, the role of the Medinans in trade in pre-Islamic period was not the same as that played by the Meccans since the Medinans depended mainly on agriculture as their means of livelihood. They participated fully in the internal markets and imported some of their needs through the

Meccan caravans or through the Nabataean traders who used to come to the Medinan markets. The Muhājirūn also helped in the development of trade in the city and the appearance of new traders. The development of trade was helped both by the experience of some Muhājirūn in this field and by the situation of Medina on the Syrian trade route.

The increase in population, which occurred as a result of the direct and indirect impact of the Conquests, led to an increasing demand for foodstuffs and this in turn led to a flourishing of the trade in foodstuffs to meet the growing demand of the population. This became an important component of the caravan trade between Medina and Syria and Egypt in particular.

The conquered areas provided the Medinans with a means of supplementing their own products. During this period we find that al-Jār, Medinan port on the Red Sea, became the main base for the distribution of Egyptian imports. The search for securing a permanent supply for the Medinans led to the ordering of the excavation of an

old canal linking Egypt to the Red Sea. Al-Ṭabarī informs us that ‘Amr b. al-‘āṣ, the governor of Egypt, told ‘Umar that if he wanted the price of food in Medina to be on the same level as that in Egypt, he (‘Amr) would excavate an old canal which had been dug to the Mediterranean and also had an outlet into the Red Sea but which the Byzantines and Copts had made unusable. He pointed out, however, that this might have a negative impact on the economy of Egypt and the amount of kharāj raised. ‘Umar ordered him to carry out this project and, as a result, the food prices in Medina reached the level of those in Egypt<sup>(14)</sup>. ‘Umar built stores (quṣūr) and food was distributed according to documents (ṣukūk, sing. ṣakk) issued by the caliph and sealed under his seal<sup>(15)</sup>. It seems that some of the Medinans would have sold their documents because most of the Medinans were farmers who were able to meet their needs from their own produce, so that they were not in need of them. As a result, the trade in these receipts became common in Medina and led to a lot of debate between religious men and in religious circles<sup>(16)</sup>. It is clear that some people

used to sell their document (*ṣakk*) as soon as they received it, indeed before it was due, and they would give the buyer the document to cash. When one of the Medinans sold his before its due date, 'Umar ordered him not to do so<sup>(17)</sup>.

As noted earlier, al-Jār became the entrepôt for imported goods from Egypt before the caliph ordered his men to distribute them to the Medinans. Some sources mention that 'Umar was the first to import food from Egypt by sea and then have it carried up to Medina. There is mention that 'Umar wrote to Ibn al-'āṣ requesting him to send food to Medina to meet the needs of the Muslims and relieve them in times of crisis, as, for example, in the time of the Ramādah famine<sup>(18)</sup>. According to al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-'āṣ did what the caliph asked him to do by sending twenty ships, each carrying around 3,000 *irdabbs*<sup>(19)</sup>. from Egypt to al-Jār. Other commodities were also imported from Iraq and Syria during the same period, as is clear from the letters sent by the caliph to Mu'āwiyah and Sa'd<sup>(20)</sup>.

On account of these developments, the city market became the central market of Ḥijāz and the centre of attraction for traders from Mecca, Yamāmah, Bahrain, and Yemen, as well as for those arriving from Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Islamic world. According to some sources, some of the traders from enemy territory (dār al-ḥarb) requested ‘Umar that he should allow them to enter his land. By trading with new cities and the conquered lands, the Medinans tried to fill the gap in their commodity supplies, whether these needs were minor or major. There are no details concerning these goods apart from what we may glean from the scattered reports. They imported from Egypt fabrics<sup>(21)</sup>, corn<sup>(22)</sup>, dye stuffs<sup>(23)</sup>; from Syria cooking oil<sup>(24)</sup>, fruits, and fabric<sup>(25)</sup>; from Yemen fabrics<sup>(26)</sup>, dye stuffs<sup>(27)</sup>, shoes<sup>(28)</sup>; from Iraq, fabrics, fruits<sup>(29)</sup>; and from Azerbaijan sugar;<sup>(30)</sup> from India spices, perfumes, corundum, and diamonds<sup>(31)</sup>. Most of items from the East came through Basra and Bahrain. Besides the goods imported from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, there were the local products, including dates, barley, horses, cattle, camels, and other

commodities like wheat, gold, and silver. There are in addition some reports about trade in perfumes from Yemen<sup>(32)</sup> and Bahrain<sup>(33)</sup>. Sometimes these also came as part of the booties<sup>(34)</sup>. Trade in clothing was one of the most important branches of trade. Some of it was locally produced but most garments came from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other parts of the Islamic state. ‘Uthmān was reported to have worn expensive Yemeni striped garments (burds and miṭrafs). However, this dependence on imports had some negative impacts at times, as for instance when communication with Egypt was severed following the murder of ‘Uthmān and there ensued a general decline in economic activities during political disturbances.

Flexibility in the imposition of taxes also helped trade during this period. Sometimes traders were exempted from taxes to encourage them to trade in the city and to provide the city with its needs. ‘Umar ordered that the Nabataean traders should pay only half the ‘ushr on their cooking oil and wheat to encourage them to bring more to the city.<sup>(35)</sup> The caliph also ordered his

men to collect the taxes once a year from the Dhimmī traders after they protested to him that his men used to charge them twice during their trade in Ḥijāz<sup>(36)</sup>. Taxes were collected only once a year, even if a merchant passed by the collector several times during the year. The town markets were of great importance because they formed the centres of all commercial transactions. The merchants brought valuable commodities from different lands. It is therefore clear that Medina was a centre of government, trade, industry, and other allied interests. With gradual social progress and acquaintance with luxurious living, the demand for various commodities increased and a flourishing in land trade helped to provide the desired articles from the nearest source. Medina became the centre of trade, as commodities from various regions were accumulated there. Foreign trade became an important phenomenon in the economic life of Medina. Owing to these development, the inflow of trade to the city increased with consequent increase in the size of the market during the time of ‘Uthmān. As pointed out earlier, the

scattered source materials that are available do not give any comprehensive account of articles of merchandise actually exported or imported. However, the scarce information at hand does offer a fair glimpse into this trade.

The participation of the mawālī in trade during this period also helped in developing the trade in Medina. Evidence of this is found in Ibn Shabbah's report that when the Medinans asked 'Umar about the market, he said to them, "I saw that most of those dealing in the markets were mawālī and there were only a few Arabs." The Medinans' reply to his criticism was that they had enough from spoils of wars (al-fay) and hated to do inferior work which their slaves could do for them<sup>(37)</sup>. The mawālī engaged in trade activities either as agents for their masters or as hired hands (ma'dhūnūn, sing. ma'dhūn). The slave could obtain a permission from his master to practise trade (ma'dhūn). We have a few references to some of these Medinans who employed their slaves in trade, such as al-Zubayr, who was said to have employed 1,000 slaves<sup>(38)</sup>; the Prophet's uncle al-

‘Abbās, who had around twenty ma’dhūn, each of whom employed a capital of around 10,000 dirhams<sup>(39)</sup>; Ḥakīm b. Ḥuzām; and Ibn ‘Umar<sup>(40)</sup>. This reflects the important role played by the slaves and mawālī in trade at that time, which had been made possible by the changes brought about by the Conquests.

This participation is evident from information in many sources, as has been pointed out earlier. For example, ‘Umar had a young servant (ghulām) who traded in clothes and ‘Uthmān had another who traded in garments (ḥulal). Some of the Medinans left their mawālī and slaves to run their trade. Their functions were not limited to selling and buying, as they also used to hire out transport to other traders. They participated in both the internal and external trade<sup>(41)</sup>. Since some of the slaves and mawālī had formerly engaged in trade with the Meccans before the conquest of Mecca, it was no new step for them to participate in this work. Some of them specialized in certain avenues of trade, such as the selling of wedding foods and wedding accessories.<sup>(42)</sup>

They carried oil and ghee to Kufa and, in return, brought back sugar and wheat. As pointed earlier, al-'Abbās had around 20 slaves (ma'dhūn), the capital of each one of them being 10,000 dirhams<sup>(43)</sup>. Slaves had the right to participate in any type of trade or any partnership, like any free person, but the logic of things may lead us to believe that these partnerships were with their masters in Medina, who were legally responsible for their activities. The masters would, we may expect, have sought to co-ordinate the activities engaged in by their different slaves and, in this way, they would have formed trade unions. We sometimes find in the city more than one trade union of workers engaged in the same trade.<sup>(44)</sup> Some reports mention the participation of Medinan women in trade. Some, for example, mention that Asmā' bint Mukharrabah traded in perfume, which used to be brought to her by her son in Yemen<sup>(45)</sup>.

No doubt the change brought about by the Conquests enabled the Medinans to extend their activities to those parts, but our information is not enough to enable us to draw a clear picture about trade

during this period. We do, however, have some information about trade transactions or deals made by some individuals and we have some information about the profits made by some traders from their transactions. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar paid 40,000 dirhams for part of the booty taken at Jalūlā’ and sold it for 400,000 dirhams, chalking up a 1,000% increase in value and causing ‘Umar to interfere and allow him only a 100% profit. The caliph apparently said to him, “I am not allowing you more than the profit of a Qurayshī trader”<sup>(46)</sup>. ‘Umar b. Al-Ḥārith paid one million dirhams for part of the Nihāwand booty and sold it for two million, a 100% increase<sup>(47)</sup>. These two examples, though they were not the norm, do reflect the wealth that could be gained from trade.

The city used to receive a large amount of silver and gold from jizyah and as profits from the money invested by some of the Medinans in the occupied lands. We can assume that the amount was large because the financial system and ‘aṭā’ were based on silver. The rate of

exchange between silver and gold can be deduced from the amount of blood money set by 'Umar, which was 12,000 dirhams or 1,000 dinars<sup>(48)</sup>, and the amount which was set for theft punishment, which was 4 dirhams or  $\frac{1}{4}$  dinar<sup>(49)</sup>. The rate in the time of the Prophet was 10 to 1 and the continuation of this revenue led to the lowering of the rate. The conquerors laid their hands on the Persian treasures and the gold mines of Egypt, and dominated trade in gold. We have few details about this trade, but it is possible that the Medinans played a major role in it. Others think that Hijāzīs may well have dominated, or at least participated in, this trade<sup>(50)</sup>.

The state did not hoard and tried to increase the flow of trade to the city by reducing the taxes on foreign traders. Most of them were non-Arabs and that may have encouraged them to prefer trading with the countries they had formerly lived in. According to Mālik, while 'Umar was in the market he noticed that one of the traders was underselling some of his raisins. 'Umar said to him, Either increase the price or leave our market.

There is no hoarding in our market and men who have excess gold in their hands should not buy up one of Allāh's provisions which he has sent to our courtyard and then hoard it up against us. Someone who brings imported goods through great fatigue to himself in the summer and winter, that person is the guest of 'Umar. Let him sell what Allāh wills and keep what Allāh wills<sup>(51)</sup>. 'Uthmān also forbade hoarding<sup>(52)</sup>.

Although we have no details about the internal organization of the markets, it is clear that traders in some products gathered in certain parts of the market, e.g. the traders in cloth, drugs, perfumes, horses, camels or goats. We cannot, however, arrive at a definite number for these traders. The market came under the regulation of the market agent or supervisor (‘āmil al-sūq), part of whose role was to supervise the use of different weight and measure units, and to mediate in cases of differences between traders and consumers. Some of those agents may have used their position to take advantage of their power and use the information they gained to make a profit for their own benefit. It is

worth mentioning that one of the economic problems which led some of the Medinans to protest to ‘Uthmān was the appointment of al-Hārith b. al-Ḥakam as supervisor of weight and measure units. Shortly after his appointment, he bought all the date kernels available in the city market for himself, which led the Medinans to protest. Consequently, the caliph dismissed him from his job<sup>(53)</sup>.

Those traders who did not have enough money formed loan companies or contracts with the wealthy who did not want to participate in trade themselves, and there is some information about these types of contracts and examples of them, and of persons who engaged in them, including ‘Uthmān, ‘Umar, and ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd, but there are no details about their partners, some of whom may have been from the mawālī. There are many details about these contracts in jurisprudence and Ḥadīth books, but this is not part of our study.

Although the conditions created by the Conquests enabled a wider distribution of goods both socially and geographically, nevertheless, as noted earlier, some of these developments had a negative effect on trade in the

city<sup>(54)</sup>. This was owing to a number of factors, including the engagement of the Muslims in the wars and the establishment of the new state system of stipends. The the policy of banning the leading Companions from going to the occupied lands without ‘Umar’s permission and then only for a limited period may also have affected trade or at least their role in trade<sup>(55)</sup> The ‘aṭa’, as a new source of income, led some Medinans to abandon their traditional sources of income or to hire someone to do their work for them, as is clear from many reports previously cited. This affected trade in the region and helped in the change of the trade route to its traditional course through Iraq and Syria. These routes, which changed from Iraq during the political unrest to come through Ḥijāz from the east to the Mediterranean, returned to their traditional courses through Iraq and Syria towards the end of the Rightly Guided caliphs’ reign<sup>(56)</sup>.

## References:

- (1) Musil, Arabia, 516.
- (2) Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah, I, 305-306; ‘Alī, “Studies”, IC, XXXV, 86.
- (3) Ibn Rustah, A‘lāq, VII, 61.
- (4) Yāqūt, Mu‘jam, II, 180; Horovitz, “Judaean-Arabic relations”, IC, III, 187.
- (5) Nisā’, 29; Tawbah, 241; Nūr, 16; Jum‘ah, 9-11.
- (6) Matarī, Ta‘rīf, 19-20; ‘Abbāsī, ‘Umdah, 331.
- (7) Samhūdī, Wafā’, I, 198; Sharīf, Makkah, 116.
- (8) Omer, "Impact", JISTAC, Vol. 13, No.2, 209
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) One tenth of the yield of land, to be levied for public assistance; see Ibn Manz.,ūr, Lisān, IV, 568-75
- (11) One fifth of war booty given in Allāh’s cause. See Anfāl, 41; Ibn Manz.,ūr, Lisān, VI, 66-71; Abū Yūsuf, Kharāj, 82-94
- (12) Omer, "Impact", JISTAC, vol. 13, No. 2, 210
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, IV, 100; idem, History, XIII, 154-55. M
- (15) Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, II, 177.
- (16) Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, Futūḥ, 224; Mālik, Muwaṭṭa’, II, 643-50.
- (17) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa’, II, 63.
- (18) Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, II, 177.
- (19) The irdabb is a measure of capacity for grain, approximately 128 lbs., although the actual weight varied depending on time and place. See Ibn Sallām, Amwāl, 260-61, 512-33; Ashtor, “Makāyil”, EI2, VI, 117-27.
- (20) Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, IV, 99-101.
- (21) Ibn Sa‘d, Ṭabaqāt, III, 315; Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, IV, 100.
- (22) Ibn Sa‘d, Ṭabaqāt, III, 315; Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, IV, 100; Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, Futūḥ, 224.
- (23) Abū Nu‘aym, Ḥilyah, VII, 319.

- (24) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', I, 280; Ibn Sallām, Amwāl, 529-37.
- (25) Ibn Bakkār, Nasab, I, 273; Iṣfahānī, Aghānī, II, 564; 'Alī, Mufaṣṣal, VII, 312.
- (26) Ibn Sa'd, Ṭabaqāt, II, 241, 282-283; Ibn Ḥajar, Iṣābah, I, 299.
- (27) Ibn Sa'd, Ṭabaqāt, IV, 132.
- (28) Ibid., V, 161.
- (29) Ibn al-Faqīh, Buldān, 252.
- (30) Iṣfahānī, Aghānī, III, 351.
- (31) Ibn al-Faqīh, Buldān, 251.
- (32) Kattānī, Tarātib, II, 40-41.
- (33) Ibn Ḥajar, Iṣābah, I, 124.
- (34) Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah, III, 855.
- (35) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', I, 280; Ibn Sallām, Amwāl \_1, 529-37.
- (36) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', I, 281; Ibn Sallām, Amwāl, 529-37.
- (37) Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah, II, 746.
- (38) Abū Nu'aym, Ḥilyah, I, 90.
- (39) Sarakhsī, Mabsūṭ, XXV, 3; Diyārbakrī, Tārīkh, I, 211.
- (40) Iṣfahānī, Aghānī, I, 39, 41; Sarakhsī, Mabsūṭ, XXX, 45.
- (41) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', II, 425; Kattānī, Tarātib, 151.
- (42) Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah, IV, 1050; Iṣfahānī, Aghānī, IV, 408-625; Ibn Sa'd, Ṭabaqāt, V, 301.
- (43) Diyārbakrī, Tārīkh, I, 211.
- (44) 'Alī, Baṣrah, 71-91.
- (45) Ibn Sa'd, Ṭabaqāt, III, 300-301; Kattānī, Tarātib, II, 40-41.
- (46) Ibn Sallām, Amwāl, 258-60; 'Alī, Baṣrah, 194.
- (47) Ibn Sallām, Amwāl, 258; 'Alī, Baṣrah, 194.
- (48) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', II, 850-51; see also Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah, II, 756-58.
- (49) Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', II, 831-33.
- (50) 'Alī, Baṣrah, 187.

- <sup>(51)</sup> Mālik, Muwaṭṭa', II, 652.
- <sup>(52)</sup> Ibid.; Ibn Shabbah, Madīnah,, IV, 1050.
- <sup>(53)</sup> Diyārbakrī, Tārīkh, II, 268; Kattānī, Tarātib, II, 36.
- <sup>(54)</sup> Omer, “ Some of the economic and social”, 171.
- <sup>(55)</sup> According to Ṭabarī, ‘Umar, he used to say to those who asked for permission to join the armies, “Your participation with the Prophet is enough for you and it is better for you not to see this new life”. See Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, IV, 396-97
- <sup>(56)</sup> Omer, “ Some of the economic and social”, 171

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