

**Conference Report:  
Military Foundations, *Ribāṭs*, and Urbanization:  
The Roman, Early Islamic, and Spanish Empires in Comparison  
(RomanIslam Center, University of Hamburg,  
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*Conference Organizers:*

STEFAN HEIDEMANN      KURT FRANZ

*RomanIslam Center*

*Report by:*

STEFAN HEIDEMANN, KURT FRANZ, & KATHARINA MEWES

This workshop brought together a lively group of eight scholars from North Africa, Germany, Spain, and Denmark to discuss the role of the military in processes of urbanization, the impact of empires on conquered societies, and in turn the acculturation of these societies to changing imperial cultures. It was a fruitful test of the Center’s commitment to the comparison of empires.

The lectures and notably the ensuing discussions explored the foundation of cities and of *ribāṭs* (as a special form of military settlement) in three empires—the Roman (Michaela Konrad, Peter Bang), the early Islamic (Stefan Heidemann, Joan Negre, Werner Schwartz, Abdelkerim Chebli, Mehdy Shaddel), and the Spanish Empire in the Americas (Javier Francisco). While in the latter two cases, a salvation religion was fundamental to imperial expansion, the Roman Empire’s expansion and subsequent processes of Romanization were not driven by a specific religious claim, apart from celebrating the cult of the emperor. It was not until much later in the Roman period that Christianity was adopted as a state-preserving religion.

However, all three empires built strongholds in preexisting cities as well as in new urban, often military, foundations. The geographical layout and conditions varied—Rome was a maritime empire integrating the entire Mediterranean Basin; the Islamic Empire was a landed empire, despite its dominance over the Arabian Sea; and the Spanish Empire was oceanic with vast distances to bridge—but in all cases they established or reinforced a set

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of urban footholds for their military. The resulting differences in internal organization of the conquered lands and approaches to conquered peoples were the subjects of vibrant discussion throughout the sessions.

Militarily initiated cities were an important feature of imperial expansion in all three cases. As the military was almost always foreign to the conquered regions, the newly founded cities and fortifications were crucial agents for the spread of imperial culture and religion. But there were differences, too: Where were these cities built? What purposes did they serve in an empire's fabric? What role did (salvation) religion play in these processes? In what ways were indigenous populations included or how did they participate? And finally, was their status a subordinate, civilian one, or were they able to serve in the military? Each presentation featured a case study, which was followed by joint reflection on how the other empires responded militarily and legally to similar conditions. These discussions provided an opportunity to scrutinize implicit assumptions about each empire and opened up new directions for research not anticipated during the preparation of the workshop.

One of these discussions revolved around the notion of salvation religion. In the Roman case, religion did not play any role in the early military expansion while Christianity became a stabilizing and invigorating force after the third century's Imperial Crisis. It was the first of the salvation religions to assume the role of a state religion and prove an organizing force able to integrate the empire's manifold regions. Islam came as a conquest religion and remained in competition with other salvation religions, notably Christianity and to a certain extent Judaism and Zoroastrianism (the latter of a different kind). In the Spanish case, lastly, the conquest of the Americas was aimed at converting the native population to Catholicism, and indeed Christianity quickly and rather thoroughly displaced or absorbed indigenous religions after the defeat of local polities.

The debate also dwelt on the phenomenon that while generally the cities of the conquerors became cultural brokers, the process looked different in each empire. Roman military cities and civilian settlements of veterans brought Italic Roman culture to the almost non-urbanized western frontiers and their hinterlands. The Hellenized East, however, was already largely urbanized. As the military camps housed celibatarian armies, civilian cities would develop outside the garrisons. They were separate spaces next to each other, if not true twin cities. Meanwhile, auxiliary troops of indigenous people had their own camps and were occasionally sent across the empire. In contrast to the celibatarian Roman armies, the early Islamic Empire consistently dispatched armies of fighters who took their families with them. Every military camp was in effect a city with newly arrived families living next to craftsmen of the same origin. At first, the (early and Umayyad) Islamic armies created tribally-organized garrison cities in the conquered lands as launch pads for further expansion (ca. 630s to 720s). When the frontiers had stabilized, some large fortified Iranian-Khurāsānian garrison and capital cities were built across the empire from Iran to North Africa. They were built in the Islamic hinterland of now almost stable frontiers to serve as bases from which prestigious annual raids into Byzantine territory were launched and regional rebellions were quelled (ca. 760s to 780s). Usually, these early ʿAbbāsīd garrison cities were built adjacent to already existent larger (e.g., al-Raqqa) and smaller (e.g., Baghdād) settlements. Finally, super-large palatial and military cities in Iraq,

such as Sāmarrāʾ, were populated by bonded military families from Central Asia, augmented by an influx of enslaved women from the same region. Their relocation from Central Asia was probably intended as a more efficient method of controlling this militarily-skilled population than would have been possible in their peripheral homelands (ca. 830s to 870s). These armies were also occasionally employed to quell internal unrest.

The lectures and discussions, then, turned to different means of defending the frontier. Two presentations dealt with Islamic *ribāṭs*—frontier fortresses often close to civilian cities—one focusing on Ṭurṭūsha on the northern border of al-Andalus facing the Carolingian Empire and the other on the North African littoral facing the Byzantine-dominated Mediterranean. These *ribāṭs* were operated by male Muslim volunteers in a Muslim-dominated environment. Religious benefit gained through military exercise (*jihād*) was a strong motivation for the mostly civilian-derived militias (*mutaṭṭawīʿūn*, *mujāhidūn*, *baḥriyyūn*, etc.) who served on the frontlines of territorial and maritime border defense in these regions.

The next major topic was the participation of indigenous peoples in military activities and the process of urbanization. The Roman armies were no doubt an engine of Romanization in the West. On the one hand, indigenous populations had access to equal military participation only when they passed the threshold of Roman citizenship. In the meantime, however, they could join the army as auxiliaries of the Roman legions in order to work towards citizenship. On the other hand, local elites functioned as a “transmission belt” into the indigenous society. The situation was different for the Islamic Empire, which was from the start one of the most diverse and urbanized of all empires under discussion. In principle, the indigenous free population was equal in status concerning all legal matters (e.g., regarding real estate property and economic activities), with the exception of ritual matters and taxation. The army consisted of Muslims throughout the period of conquest, save very few and historically specific cases. During the early phase of the conquests, military units (sing. *jund*) were tribally-organized, while male converts from conquered populations could join the army as *mawālī*, i.e., clients of a tribe. They would be registered in the army payrolls (*dīwān*) and become affiliated to that tribe. Later the military consisted mainly of an eastern Iranian (Khurāsānian) army of assimilated Arabs and Islamized Iranians. In a third phase, at the end of the imperial period, the army was of Central Asian origin and had the status of a bonded military (*ghilmān*, *mamālīk*). Nevertheless, the garrison cities were mostly located at a certain distance from established civilian cities. This arrangement allowed troops to keep their ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities separate from those of the local population for several decades, especially because they usually arrived with their families, were provided with (enslaved) women, or were supplemented by other groups from their places of origin. There was no need, therefore, to mingle with the local population. However, as time went on, the manumission of military slaves broadened the Muslim elite beyond its initial Arab ethnic origin, and military cities developed into civilian ones.

In the case of the Spanish Empire, *Indios* were regarded as legally equal subjects of the Crown once they had converted to Catholicism. Thus, indigenous people became part of an early modern corporate society, owing specific rights and participating in economic life and administrative affairs. A phenomenon particular to the early Spanish conquistadores, due

largely to their practices of military alliance, was that natives constituted up to 95% of the troops. Once a region was militarily incorporated, however, most of its inhabitants were barred from service in the regular army, although some regions offered the local population the possibility to serve in auxiliary troops.

Summing up, the diverse workings of the three empires under discussion became more transparent to the specialists from each of the individual fields participating in the workshop. The existence of the RomanIslam Center has been founded on the premise of certain commonalities between the Roman and Islamic empires. The inclusion of the Spanish Empire into the debate about empire, as a family of empires with salvation religions in diachronic perspective, was enriching on multiple levels. While each of these empires was unique, the case of the Spanish Empire cast new light on many challenges that all three were facing. These included: long-distance military logistics and strategy (the small Spanish armies were without any possibility of fast replenishment); the role of imperial competitors (the Spanish Empire had to defend its realm against other European empires); questions of regional autonomy (the Spanish provinces possessed a high degree of internal autonomy while the far-away Crown provided the legal frame); the production of regional loyalty far away from the center (a powerful loyalty bound Spanish American elites to the Crown until the nineteenth century); relations with conquered people (Church and Crown expressed the need to protect natives against undue exploitation); the relation to nomads at the fringes (the Apache and Comanche were at various times allies and foes, and only the horses of the Spanish Empire enabled them to build up vast nomadic realms of their own).

The discussion about the comparison of the three Empires will be continued in our next conference “A Family of Empires of Salvation Religions – The First 300 Years,” Dec. 12–13, 2024. The abstracts are available on [the RomanIslam website](#).