

Death or taxes

Choosing itineraries between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean in the mid-18th century

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Abstract

In the 18th century, the fastest passage between Europe and the Indian Ocean was by way of Syria and Iraq. Travellers were faced with the choice between a number of routes across the desert and along the rivers, each with advantages and disadvantages in terms of price, time and security. This article discusses the choices made by a selection of European mid-18th-century travellers utilising perspectives from New institutional economics, arguing that their decisions must be interpreted in light of their status as outsiders and the socio-economic structure of the societies they moved through.

18th-century travellers in Syria and Iraq

As the 18th-century statesman Benjamin Franklin pointed out, “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes” (1833, p. 619). Valid as this observation might be, sometimes there is a choice between the two. Before the start of steam-service in the Red Sea in 1830, the swiftest passage between Europe and India was by way of Syria and Iraq. Ships needed at least six months for the journey around Africa, but couriers, diplomats and individual travellers frequently utilised the shortcut between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, following either the large Mesopotamian rivers or the merchant caravans crossing the Syrian Desert be-

tween Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra. While the river-routes offered provisions and infrastructure for the traveller, many nevertheless preferred the strenuous 30 days haul across the desert. Reports of their travels are preserved in diaries, travelogues and letters, which contain considerations on the advantages and disadvantages of different travel options. These sources provide an opportunity to look behind the decisions made by people who were rarely travelling for leisure, and who had to deal with very real concerns for the safety of life and property – death and taxes. This article approaches the experience of a selection of such travellers in light of theory from New Institutional Economics. The aim is to better appreciate why the shorter, cheaper or the safer itinerary was not always the most attractive alternative when choosing among the plurality of routes between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

Modern academic interest in these early travellers has been more limited than in their 19th- and early 20th-century aristocratic counterparts such as Burton, Digby, Bell and Lawrence. Douglas Caruthers published three of the travellers' reports utilised in this article in his *Desert Route to India* (1929), which also contains an overview of other European travellers and their accounts, and Christina Phelps Grant depended heavily on travel descriptions for her published dissertation, *The Syrian Desert* (1937). Mohamad Ali Hachicho has compiled a catalogue and summary of known English travel books of the eighteenth century, which also covers works by travellers who went to India by other routes, thus also including the riverine and maritime alternatives to the desert route (Hachicho, 1964). These early contributions all emphasise the positivist question of what contribution these early travellers made in collecting and disseminating knowledge about the Middle East in Europe. In the wake of Edward Saids *Orientalism* (1978), research turned to focus more on travellers' part in shaping the western image of the "other" both in the sense of 18th-century Middle Eastern society (Murphey, 1990, pp. 292-3) and in the sense of the historical landscape of the distant Oriental past (Ooghe, 2007; Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Drijvers, 1991). As Murphey argues, however, although most pre-industrial European travellers in the Middle East were clearly biased, this was before aristocrats had extended their grand tours to include the Middle East, and before westerners had developed a clear idea of their own perceived superiority

towards other groups. Western travellers in the region were generally practical men, mostly merchants, soldiers and artisans, moving through what was in many cases hostile and dangerous landscapes. Their decisions could ultimately become matters of survival, and their writings, although certainly influenced by their cultural background, reflect this in a generally practical, fact-oriented and open-minded approach (Murphey, 1990). The practical vein in 18th-century travel literature can be utilised, not in order to reconstruct the Middle Eastern society of the period, as most pre-Said scholarship aimed to, but to better understand the problems and priorities of the travellers who put down their advice in writing.

Difficult decisions

In late 1765, 32-year old Carsten Niebuhr found himself in Basra in southern Mesopotamia. He was the sole survivor of the Danish scientific expedition to Southern Arabia, which had set out almost five years earlier. After making his way from India, up the Persian Gulf and through Iran. Niebuhr now had to decide how to cover the next leg of his journey, which was a ca 1400 km haul across Mesopotamia and Syria to Aleppo, where European representations could be found.

Niebuhr was a conscientious man. Although he was originally a subordinate member of the expedition and although Mesopotamia was not its main objective, he carefully recorded the information that would lead to the official expedition report, *Beschreibung von Arabien* (1772) and to his published diary, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* (1774/1778). His diary contains not only information on his own travels, but any information he thought could be of use to European travellers following in his footsteps, including on the routes between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean.

Niebuhr describes four main itineraries (fig. 1): (1) a caravan across the desert to Aleppo, organised by merchants and protected by Bedouin tribes, (2) an upriver passage to Baghdad followed by caravan to Damascus protected by Ottoman authorities, (3) a journey on and along the Euphrates, crossing over to Aleppo from Northern Syria, and (4) a voyage along the Tigris through Northern Iraq and Southern Turkey, reaching Aleppo by way of Mosul and Diyarbakır. The Baghdad-Damascus caravans, he reports, were the

most expensive and least safe option. This was because the role of *caravanbashi*, caravan leader, was auctioned by the Ottoman authorities, and the highest bidder had to make good his investment; also these caravans relied on hired guards rather than cooperation with the Bedouin tribes and thus had to pay more protection money. Moreover, he claimed, there had been several incidents where *caravanbashis* had deliberately arranged the plundering of their own caravans (1778, p. 238). Niebuhr does not reveal his reasons for not continuing along the Euphrates, but security seems to have been among them, as he several times mentions Bedouin raids along the river (1778, pp. 243-5). He would have preferred the desert route, because it was faster, but no caravan was due to leave for Aleppo because trade has been disrupted by political conflict in the Persian Gulf (1778, pp. 235-6). He describes the desert route as quite safe, as long as there was no war among the Arab tribes or between them and the Ottomans, the *caravanbashi* was honest and providing that the traveller spoke the language and was used to living according to local customs, but as he comments himself, these circumstances rarely coincided (1778, p. 237).

Carsten Niebuhr was one of the few western travellers who could live up to most of these personal requirements to individuals opting for a safe passage by way of the desert route. His sojourn in Egypt and his journeys in Yemen had made him familiar with the language, and he had gradually taken up local diet and clothing. As for the political conditions, they were outside his control. For reasons of safety he settled for the Tigris route (1778, p. 334), and spent six months underway to Aleppo, albeit with extended stops in cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, Mardin and Diyarbakır, on a passage he could have covered in 25-50 days if times had been more stable and he had been lucky enough to catch a caravan.

Crossing the desert

The desert route between northwestern Syria and Southern Mesopotamia was perhaps the shortest route in terms of distance, but as Niebuhr's advice implies, it was not necessarily the easiest. Desert travellers had to arrange with animals and to bring most provisions for a long journey. For safety, directions and water, they depended on cooperation with the nomadic Bedouin population, whose territory the caravans passed through. That such considerations were

important is best illustrated by the fact that from the Bronze Age to the early twentieth century, the Euphrates Valley was always the preferred corridor of communication between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean (Finet, 1969; Gawlikowski, 1994, p. 32). There are two exceptions to this: The first three centuries AD, when trade seems to have deviated from the Euphrates valley towards the desert city of Palmyra (Gawlikowski, 1994; Gawlikowski, 1996), and the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, when biannual caravans crossed the Syrian Desert between Aleppo and Basra (Carruthers, 1929; Grant, 1937). In antiquity, the desert route seems to have been created by political tension between the Parthian and Roman empires and political fragmentation in the Euphrates valley (Gawlikowski, 1994, p. 27; Gawlikowski, 1996, p. 139; Millar, 1998, pp. 126-7). Related factors seem to have played a role in the Ottoman period: the extortion of local and government officials, and the threat of Bedouin raids in the desert as well as along the rivers.

While Niebuhr never attempted the desert crossing, others did. Portuguese couriers started using both the Euphrates and desert routes for urgent despatches between Lisbon and India in the sixteenth century (Carruthers, 1929, pp. xvi-xvii). English travellers, at first connected with the founding of the Levant Company and later in the employment of the East India Company appear from 1580 onwards (1929, pp. xix-xxx). Italian, Dutch and German travellers are also attested (1929, pp. xvi-xxx).

One of the most thorough descriptions of the desert passage was made by William Beawes, an otherwise unknown Englishman travelling by this route on his way to India in 1745. Together with his travel-companion, Robert Golightly, he approached the English community in Aleppo and local travelling merchants for advice on the different routes. Going in the opposite direction from Niebuhr, he also had the option of swift downriver passage on boats or rafts, so in this case the desert was not necessarily the fastest alternative. Niebuhr's northern route he describes as the most frequently used, but he dismisses it in his own case, because he found the detour to Mosul too long, and because the rafts of inflated skins (*kellek*) used downriver on the Tigris had a reputation for accidents (Beawes, 1929, p. 5). The passage along the Euphrates, which was not explicitly considered by Niebuhr, Beawes deemed the easiest and most comfortable, but exposed to impositions, probably by local authori-

ties, and also to robbers (1929, pp. 5-6). Beawes also describes an overland option close to the Euphrates, with never more than two nights outside town and villages. Then there were two varieties of the desert route: either to Hit on the Euphrates and downriver to Baghdad and Basra from there, or directly from Aleppo to Basra, the route preferred by Beawes (1929, pp. 6-7). Considerations of time and safety seem to have been the most important when he and his travel-companion decided to opt for the desert option.

Bartholomew Plaisted travelled from Basra to Aleppo in 1750. He was on his way home to England, where he planned to complain to the directors of the East India Company after losing his post as engineer and surveyor in Calcutta (Carruthers, 1929, pp. 51-52). Plaisted chose the desert route because he arrived in Basra in late April, when the seasonal flood in the Euphrates caused the passage to Baghdad to take an estimated 40 days (Plaisted, 1929, p. 64), more than twice the normal time, while he was told that a desert caravan was due to depart shortly. This, however, proved to be premature, as the caravan had to wait for permission from the Turkish governor, and Plaisted was not underway until early June (1929, p. 59, p. 68). He states that the direct desert route was faster and cheaper than going by way of Baghdad and from there to Aleppo by caravan or to Mosul as Niebuhr did, but that the desert traveller risked meeting with robbers or dishonest travel companions, and had to make do with bad water and without fresh food (1929, pp. 102-3).

Our fourth and last traveller was John Carmichael, who travelled from Aleppo to Basra the year after Plaisted, on his way back to India after an unsuccessful complaint to the East India Company's directors in London. Carmichael does not go into details about the different routes in the way Niebuhr and Beawes did, but states that both the Euphrates and the Mosul-Tigris routes were better options for those "having money and leisure" (Carmichael, 1929, p. 177). All the travellers, by the way, were also concerned with the ruins and ancient remains they passed underway, and Carmichael (1929, p. 177), Plaisted (1929, p. 103) and Beawes (1929, p. 6) all mention the possibilities for sightseeing and antiques hunting along the road.

Summing up, there were three main options for travel between northern Syria and southern Mesopotamia in the mid 18th century (fig. 1), both with several variations and combinations:

1. Desert passages between Aleppo and Baghdad or Basra, alternatively between Damascus and Baghdad (Niebuhr). The direct desert passage is described by all our travellers as faster and by most as cheaper than other options, but depending on departure times of caravans, political conditions in the desert and exposed to robbers as well as the hardships of desert travel. Niebuhr (1778, pp. 238-9) and Plaisted (1929, p. 103) both report that passage with the caravans from Baghdad was more expensive than with those leaving from Basra, and Niebuhr (*ibid.*) deemed this route less safe. Still, Plaisted advises travellers from Basra to proceed via Baghdad if they can, in order to keep the Tigris option open if the waiting time before the next westbound caravan is too long.

2: Riverine passage on the Euphrates. This is described by Carmichael (1929, p. 177) and Beawes (1929, p. 6) as a fast, scenic and comfortable downriver alternative with good access to food and water, but travellers were exposed to impositions by authorities and Bedouin raids from the desert. None of our travellers discuss the use of this route for the upriver journey.

3: Riverine passage on (downriver) or along (upriver) the Tigris to Mosul, overland to Aleppo. This was the route taken by Niebuhr, and considered the "common" itinerary by Beawes (1929, p. 5). Its main advantage was its relative security and uninterrupted local access to water and provisions for travellers and animals. Both Beawes and Niebuhr, however, were concerned about the possibility of robber-attacks along certain stretches of the road, and neither had a high opinion of the *kellek*, rafts used for crossing and downriver passage (Beawes 1929, pp. 4-5; Niebuhr 1778, p. 348).

As for the motivation of the travellers, they were concerned with time, cost, security, comfort, sights and scenery. Comfort, sight and scenery are mentioned, but never given priority. All the travellers discuss costs, although they travelled in relative affluence, and Beawes (1929, p. 33) and Plaisted (1929, p. 103) both comment on the comparably low expenses connected to travel in the region. Emphasis, however, is placed on avoiding taxation and keeping protection money at a minimum, probably one of the main reasons for the operation of the desert route (Carruthers 1929, pp. xxxi-xxxii). Time also seems to have been important. Carmichael and Plaisted had undertaken the long voyage to England in order to complain about conceived injustice experienced in the service of the East In-

dia Company, and naturally had little inclination to linger under-way. We are not informed about Beawes' business, but it is likely that he was also on his way to India. Niebuhr was heading home after a long journey, and although he spent almost six months *en route* between Basra and Aleppo, he never lingered longer than he had to in order to find a caravan, so that he did not have to travel alone, and he only chose the Tigris route because there was no caravan heading from Basra when he arrived and because he did not trust the caravans from Baghdad. For all travellers, however, considerations of security had priority. This caused Niebuhr to stay away from the Baghdad caravans and Carmichael and Beawes to prefer a strenuous desert voyage to a comparably comfortable downriver passage on the Euphrates, ironically paying the same Bedouins who represented a threat of robbery along the river for protection in the desert.

Which way to go? Organisations, institutions, protection and predation

How then can this collection of individual stories reveal anything about the nature of early modern trade and travel? Neo-classical economic theory would have explained the choice of routes in terms of transaction costs (cf. North 1990, pp. 27-30). This is the taxes part of the death and taxes argument, albeit in an extended sense of the word. Although difficult to calculate, the rational traveller would choose the route which he perceived to give the lowest total costs including taxes, transport, sustenance, security costs and so on. This approach, however, misses the death part of the argument – the very real opportunity for violence (whether lethal or not) and seizure of property. Here insights from the field of New Institutional Economics might help us look behind the idiosyncrasies and short term considerations preserved by our sources.

The North American discourse on taxes, which Benjamin Franklin was a part of, was concerned with legitimacy and representation. In the Ottoman Empire his contemporary travellers moved through, no one could have cared less. As Peder Bang points out in his comparative study of premodern empires, the line between taxation, protection money and predation was thin, in many cases beyond discernment (2008, pp. 202-238). Douglass C. North and his colleagues Wallis and Weingast conceptualise this difference by divid-

ing societies into the minority of “open access societies”, such as Franklin’s young United States of America and the majority of “natural states” or limited access societies, such as the Ottoman Empire of the eighteenth century and many modern states. Among the traits of open access societies are the wide distribution of the right to form organisations and the foundation of social relationships on impersonal variables such as rule of law, property rights etc. Natural states one the other hand are dominated by ruling coalitions restricting access to forming organisations and basing relationships on personal variables such as friendship, kinship ethnicity etc (North, Wallis, Weingast 2009, pp. 11-12). North et al. also state that all societies have to cope with the problem of violence, and that they do this by way of organisations and institutions, organisations being “groups of individuals pursuing a mix of common and individual goals”, and institutions “the patterns of interaction that govern and constrain the relationships of individuals” (2009, p. 15; North 1990, pp. 4-5). In the landscape between Aleppo and Basra in the mid-eighteenth century as described in the travel literature discussed here, we find a number of such organisation, notably the Ottoman government, Bedouin tribes, Kurdish tribes and the Safavid Empire. These were all competing political organisations specialising in the containment and use of violence with the aim of raising revenue by means of institutions such as gifts, protection money, taxation and robbery. Failure to comply with the demands for revenue in various forms would lead to the withdrawal of protection and in many cases the transition to predation – from the containment of violence to the actual use of violence.

The most important difference between these eighteenth-century travellers and the nineteenth-century leisure and adventure travellers and explorers in the Middle East is perhaps in this emphasis on security: Beawes, Plaisted, Carmichael and their many colleagues were not travelling for the experience of it, but because they had to, and although they always acted with imperfect information, they also always tried to minimise risk. Niebuhr was the only explorer in this small selection of travellers, but the results and preliminary reports from his expedition had already been sent ahead, and now he was going home, and was under no obligation to take risks. As Murphey points out, from the age of imperialism until today, European travellers in the Middle East have been protected by virtue of

their nationality. For the 18th-century European traveller, his status as an outsider and Christian was primarily a problem. European powers were still not militarily superior to the Ottoman Empire and neither capable of nor interested in operating in the Middle East (1990, pp. 294-7). The British factory in Aleppo or the Danish consul in Constantinople operated at the mercy of their hosts, and could do little to help their countrymen if they got into trouble. In the terms of organisations and institutions outlined above, our travellers were excluded from the organisations they had to deal with, and as outsiders they lacked the social relationships integrating the societies they travelled through, and were thus at a disadvantage when interacting with other individuals by means of the local institutions. The reports of our travellers must be read in this light. In order to cope with their exposed position, they teamed up with other Europeans they met underway, and depended on the advice of resident countrymen and seasoned travellers. Niebuhr, in lieu of European company, enrolled in a Jewish company of travellers (Niebuhr 1778, pp. 334-335), thus joining up with another group of outsiders. The travellers also hired servants, typically from Middle Eastern Christian minorities such as Greeks, Georgians or Armenians, to act as interpreters and take care of practicalities. Importantly, by joining caravans, they also joined a sort of organisation, in the sense used by North et al. Doing this they placed themselves under the protection of the *caravanbashi*, typically a respected and experienced merchant (Beawes 1929, p. 13; Plaisted 192, pp. 98-100; Niebuhr 1778, p. 238), who in return for the fees they had paid was under obligation to safeguard them from harm to life and property, thus taking care of their interaction with other organisations. By choosing the desert route, as the British travellers did, they could deal with a single *caravanbashi* for the whole journey, and this is probably one of the reasons why this route was considered the cheapest, while travellers going by way of the Tigris would have to deal with local or Ottoman authorities in a number of places and deal with a number of *caravanbashis* if they preferred to travel in company with others, as Niebuhr did. In this way they only had to interact with one organisation dealing in the protection/violence business rather than several.

The discussion above is based on the reports of four travellers only. They have not been selected because they are representative,

but because they shared their thoughts on the challenges of early modern travel. In this, however, they also have wider interest. This was information deemed useful and important by the people who recorded it and by those who read and in some cases published it, thus giving insight into the practicalities and sometimes hardships of early modern travel rarely glimpsed in the summary itineraries of preceding periods or the romantic travelogues that followed. In their emphasis not only on costs (taxes), but also on the possibility of violence (death), they highlight how social and political considerations influenced the decisions of early modern travellers in this part of the world as much as economic considerations did.

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