

17,30: **Bethany Walker**, Missouri State University

Transjordan as the Mamluk Frontier: Imperial Conceptions of Authority and Space

Situated on the eastern border of the Mamluk empire, Transjordan is simultaneously presented in contemporary Arabic sources of the 13th century as a backwater and as the backbone of the state's security system. It is true that Egyptian sources speak disparagingly of the region around Kerak, for example, as the most culturally and politically remote of the empire. Nonetheless, Transjordan as a whole was far from peripheral to the interests of the state, as the region brought sultans to power, unseated amirs, served as a bulwark against the Mongols, tied Syria to Egypt and Damascus to Mecca, and buttressed the imperial economy through sugar and grain production. Defining the region with respect to imperial interests is a difficult task, as its roles were ever-changing and ambiguous. The administrative structure of Transjordan was fluid, frequently adjusted to the immediate geo-political needs of Cairo or Damascus. Imperial investment in the region, moreover, lacked long-term vision and tended toward distinctly localized patterns of agricultural development. Concurrently, new administrative centres were quickly built and declined with equal suddenness, as imperial interest in a district waned. Exacerbating the difficulty in defining the character of Transjordan for the Mamluk state is the very real cultural and political-administrative division between Kerak (the capital of its own province) and the rest of Jordan (collectively constituting the southernmost section of Damascus Province). There was, in essence, two "Jordans", with the town of Kerak, and its hinterland, presenting an exceptional case in imperial-provincial relations and not representing the region as a whole. This presentation explores the concept of the imperial frontier, and this special "ambiguity" of the character of Jordanian lands, from the perspective of the state itself. How did the Mamluk state conceive of "empire"? What was the "frontier" and how did the Mamluks treat it (administratively, politically, economically, socially)? In an effort to reconstruct imperial perceptions on these issues, we will make use of a variety of 13th-century Arabic sources (primarily chronicles – both Syrian and Egyptian – and administrative manuals), as well as 14th-century sources (including legal and economic documents) that evaluate the evolving policies of the early Mamluks in Transjordan and their long-term impact. Special attention will focus, as well, on the ongoing excavations at Tall Hisban, where 13th-century occupation on the summit of the tell attests to a transformation of

formerly domestic and sacred space to militarized and economic functions.