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# From Africa to Ifrīqiya

## The Transition from Byzantine to Islamic North Africa: an Introduction

by *Anna Leone, Ralf Bockmann and Philipp von Rummel*

North Africa, intended from the ancient perspective to include modern Algeria, Tunisia, the north-western part of Libya, and some parts of Morocco, has seen extensive archaeological investigation and borne large amounts of text and inscriptions. Although it has yielded a rich body of data, research in the area was carried out primarily during the colonial period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., focused principally on the pre-Roman/Roman and Byzantine periods (consisting mostly of investigation in churches). Excavations were generally not stratigraphic, and, especially in the study of churches, the phases and the interpretation of the excavated evidence have been based principally on historical accounts and the expectations of the excavators rather than effective data. In the last fifteen years the archaeology of the later periods (including the early Islamic period) has drawn more attention, but a large amount of data have been irretrievably lost. Combining the data for the later periods, especially that of the post-Islamic conquest, is still challenging, due to the quality and relatively low quantity of evidence, often only tentatively dated or interpreted.

It is within this context that the idea for a conference emerged that was held in Rome under the title «Africa – Ifrīqiya. Cultures of Transition in North Africa between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages» in the Museo Nazionale Romano – Terme di Diocleziano, from February 28 to March 2, 2013<sup>1</sup>. It brought together scholars from Algeria, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Libya, Tunisia, the UK, and the USA working on the Byzantine and Islamic periods who presented the results of their latest studies on these periods in order to set the agenda and direction for future research in the field. The confer-

ence at Rome on the transitional period between Late Antiquity and the Early Islamic era in North Africa had a specific archaeological approach, and is therefore a fitting addition to a conference with a more historical approach held at Dumbarton Oaks the year before, and vice versa<sup>2</sup>. The fact that both conferences have been held around the same time indicates the rising interest the transition between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in North Africa has received recently. The group of authors that contributed to this volume changed from the group that presented at the conference in Rome back in 2013, which is reflected in a different title. From our current perspective, the terms chosen in the title for this volume best characterise the epochs in question, although we are aware of the possible ideological and the phenomenological implications they might have. For this reason, terms have not been standardized in this volume.

There were a number of themes we felt were necessary to address and reconsider from a more archaeological perspective. The first part of the present volume contains introductions, mainly from a historical point of view: Jonathan Conant, on the state of the question concerning the transitional epoch, followed by Walter Kaegi on the situation of Late Byzantine North Africa. Mohamed Ghodhbane discusses the toponym «Ifrīqiya», its role in the early coinage of post-Byzantine North Africa, and its implications. The analysis of the transition, mainly from an archaeological point of view, is subdivided into three parts: papers on general and comprehensive questions of urbanism, the establishment of power centres and religion in the first part; case studies of individual sites in the second section; and studies of

<sup>1</sup> The conference was financed by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Rome Department of the German Archaeological Institute, that also supported the conference logistically. The Museum and Soprintendenza have kindly made their conference room at the Baths of Diocletian available. The editors of this volume, who were also the organisers of the conference, wish to express their gratitude to these institutions and their members for their assistance. This publication would not have been possible without the extraordinary support of the editorial staff at the Rome Depart-

ment of the German Archaeological Institute, namely Marion Menzel, who has gone out of her way to ensure its appearance and to whom we are deeply indebted.

<sup>2</sup> Stevens – Conant 2016. – We wish to thank Jonathan Conant for helpful discussions on terminology prior to the final publication. We would also like to thank John Haldon, Clifford Ando and Chris Kaegi for ensuring that Walter Kaegi was able to review his article before publication.

larger regions and economic questions in the third and final part. A synthesis by Chris Wickham sums up the results of the volume.

One of the major points to be re-addressed here is the urban transition and evolution in North Africa, which has been the subject of many studies and discussions in recent years, and is still only partially understood. A number of case studies address these issues. In terms of research focus, only in very recent years has attention shifted to the post 7<sup>th</sup> c. Several papers in this volume consider the issue of the elements that define the early Arab cities, although our understanding of a clear basic layout of these urban settlements, their legislation, and their organisation is still very limited. Several cities are considered in the volume, starting from a general overview by Corisande Fenwick (stretching from Libya to Algeria and Morocco), and going into papers that consider specific settlements in detail, such as the original works by Fathi Bahri on Kairouan. The city of Carthage is a special case which, despite extensive excavations, presents a number of problems, especially in the transition from the Byzantine to the Arab period. It certainly deserved a reconsideration, and Ralf Bockmann's and Richard Miles' papers have addressed some of the key aspects of the transformation that occurred in the city<sup>3</sup>. Faouzi Mahfoudh and Stefan Altekamp discuss in detail the sources on Carthage with a focus on the texts produced in Arabic contexts, which provides a very useful set of material considered here in its entirety for the first time. Research on urbanism at various levels, especially when considering the impact of Christianisation, the insecurity in the region from Late Antiquity onward, and the Arab presence, is key to understanding the character of the newly transformed North Africa. The impact of Christianisation and the Byzantine presence has been discussed in detail for the cases of Haidra (by François Baratte) and Chimtou (by Philipp von Rummel and Heike Möller), with a view toward the Arab presence.

The changing landscape, the impact of Christianisation, and the changing economy of production comprise a second set of important issues to address. In doing so, the intent is to create a regional perspective. One of the major problems of the approaches to North Africa taken thus far is the trend toward considering the region as a singular unity. Ancient sources that talk about Numidia have often been applied to interpret archaeological evidence across Africa Proconsularis. This idea had been favoured by the nature of the data, where the largest

number of written sources, especially Christian ones, come from modern Algeria, but the majority of the archaeological evidence today comes from Tunisia and Tripolitania. Archaeologically, despite the discrepancy in terms of quantity and quality of data, it is instead very clear that different regions had very different set-ups. For instance, Numidia and Tripolitania were mainly rural, while Africa Proconsularis in Northern Tunisia was highly urbanised. These differentiations, which already existed in the Roman period, became even stronger with the Christianisation and then the diffusion of Islam. The need for a regional perspective (although with the possibility of proceeding with comparative analysis) was imperative in the organisation of the present volume: the papers by Susan Stevens on the Sahel region, and Anna Leone on Tunisia and Tripolitania have addressed the changing landscapes by looking at the very different regional and territorial settings.

The issue of the changing economy, touched upon in the analysis of the transformation of the rural landscape, receives a detailed treatment in the paper by Michel Bonifay that includes an overview of ceramic production in the transitional period. Understanding pottery production is essential for the definition of the products which characterised the end of the circulation of the so called 'Roman products', and the beginning of a new type of production. Economy and production is a key aspect that must be understood in order to define the economic role of North Africa between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> c.

## From Byzantine to Islamic North Africa: a long-term transition

The Byzantine conquest of North Africa initially saw a phase of building reconstruction and re-appropriation of public spaces<sup>4</sup>, developing together to ensure continued economic vitality<sup>5</sup>, which began in the Vandal period during the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. This situation had, however, been progressively changing since the Vandal conquest of North Africa. This conquest had cut the area out of the fiscal system of the Roman Empire and the shift of the centre of the empire towards Constantinople determining a reorganisation of interconnected trade across the Mediterranean. The 7<sup>th</sup> c. saw a crisis in the Byzantine Empire<sup>6</sup>, in terms of its control of provincial areas; this is detectable in North Africa, both in the

<sup>3</sup> The only work looking at Carthage in the early Islamic period is Vitelli 1981.

<sup>4</sup> For a synthesis see: Leone 2007; Sears 2007; Conant 2012.

<sup>5</sup> This is confirmed by the pottery production. On the society and economy of Vandal Africa see Merrills – Miles 2009, von Rummel 2011, and, on Carthage in particular, Bockmann 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See Haldon 1990; Haldon 2016.

monumentality of its towns and in the rural exploitation and pottery production. It is within this context that the Islamic conquest of North Africa must be viewed. This was a slow process, developed over 50 years, characterised by various Arab penetrations into the region, followed by retreats<sup>7</sup>. The effects of this long-term transformation are visible on several levels, including urban topography, buildings, social structure, and economy.

## From the Byzantine to the Islamic presence: North Africa in transition

Towns followed a slow process of transformation, starting in Late Antiquity. Numerous North African cities have shown evidence of decay in public spaces beginning in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. In some instances the occupation of public spaces by private people had already occurred in this phase<sup>8</sup>, but the phenomenon increased in the Vandal period during the 5<sup>th</sup> c. The *Cardo Maximus* of Carthage, for example, had the portico blocked up by the construction of dwellings<sup>9</sup>. Immediately after the Byzantine occupation, building activity restarted, primarily with the construction of churches and forts. Public buildings once again came under control of the city, and the *Codex Justinianus* indicates the attempt by the municipality to maintain the monumentality of the standing structures still in use and also protect them from spoliation by private people. The spoliation of former public buildings occurred mostly under the control of the government. Legislation indicates the practice by the municipality to sell or rent available spaces, which must have been the case at the House of the Donkey in Djemila-Cuicul, where a private house occupied part of the precinct of a temple<sup>10</sup>. Archaeological data suggest that amphitheatres and theatres were mostly abandoned and reused with other functions. Some bath complexes continued to be used during the

Byzantine period, but one of the major interventions is the reduction in size of the bath complexes<sup>11</sup> or the construction of new baths for use by a single person<sup>12</sup>. The use of baths continued into the Islamic period, with the construction of new complexes; one such structure, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> c., was excavated in Dougga by Marco Milanese and Sauro Gelichi<sup>13</sup>. Continuity of use of bath complexes into the early Islamic period have been recorded in Teucra and Ptolemais<sup>14</sup>. Baths (*hammam*) and bathing continued to be essential aspects of everyday life in the urban context<sup>15</sup>. The limitation of specific archaeological evidence related to baths in the Arab period probably results from the destructions of later stratigraphic levels that occurred during the colonial period<sup>16</sup>.

The fate of the numerous churches built since Late Antiquity is difficult to follow. Due to the poor recording (or lack of recording) of the abandonment and later phases of occupation of churches, we know very little about how these monuments fared. In a few cases it has been suggested that they were transformed into mosques, but this activity does not seem to have been particularly common<sup>17</sup>. Activity dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> c. is recorded in the churches of Sts. Gervais, Protas, and Tryphon at Sufetula<sup>18</sup>, as well as in the Basilica of Mactar and its cemetery<sup>19</sup>. At Bulla Regia, 9<sup>th</sup> c. graves were found inside the church<sup>20</sup>; inscriptions at Kairouan<sup>21</sup> and Tripoli attest to the existence of Christian communities into the 11<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>22</sup>. It is still very unclear when Christianity effectively ended. Most excavations of churches (principally carried out during the colonial period without a strong methodology) have often assumed that the buildings were abandoned immediately after the Arab conquest. Recent excavations and reconsiderations of old excavations, as well as ancient texts, seem to offer a different perspective, in some cases suggesting continuity of use<sup>23</sup>.

Mosques were the new emerging religious structures in the landscape after the Arab conquest. The process of Islamisation was much slower than the process of Arabisation. Apart from the building of mosques in major cities, it is difficult to follow the process of Islamisation in urban spaces. The Byzantine world followed a pattern of

7 Hirschberg 1974, 88.

8 See for instance Uchi Maius (Vismara 2007).

9 Leone 2007, 136.

10 Blanchard-Lemée 1975, 46. 60.

11 For a detailed discussion on the transformation of the Antonine baths and the recycling of materials see Leone 2013, 151–164.

12 Gerner Hansen 2002, 117 f.

13 Results of the excavation were presented at the Conference on «Medieval North Africa» in Siena in 2000.

14 Jones 1985, 37; Pentz 2002, 60.

15 For a general discussion on the function and role of hammams/baths in the Arab world see Pentz 2002, 61–64.

16 Evidence of reuse is recorded, but mostly undated and the function in the new use is often also very vague (see for instance Thénac, Thermes du Mois – Fendri 1964, 55 f.; Thébert 2003, 428–433 gives a summary of the evidence).

17 See for instance the work in Prevost 2012 in the Jebel Nafusa.

18 Duval 1964, see also Valérian 2011.

19 Picard 1957, 130; Valérian 2011.

20 Leone 2007, 201; Duval 1969.

21 A. Mahjoubi 1964. See also Seston 1936.

22 See contribution by Anna Leone in this volume.

23 For a discussion on the end of Christianity in North Africa, its limits and the problem of understanding the sources, see as last Valérian 2011.

intense rebuilding activity following the conquest of North Africa, reflected in the construction of several churches and forts, some as a result of the official Justinianic programme, and in response to the needs of the population. There is a substantial difference in this process: the Byzantine Empire conquered a territory which was already largely Christian, while Islam arrived as a new religion. Understanding the effect of Islamisation in the landscape is very difficult for a number of reasons.

First of all, Arab territorial organisation was based on the presence of a few large cities serving as administrative centres for the surrounding countryside<sup>24</sup>. As archaeology (and texts) tell us, at the moment of the Arab conquest of North Africa production and cultivation was still very rich, but there were no longer rich and important cities that could fulfil this role; at least, that is what has been believed by scholars until now. There is always the issue of the importance of Carthage, which for a long time (also as a result of the interpretation of ancient sources) has been considered derelict, a city inhabited mostly by squatters at the time of conquest. The problem with this assumption – one that is perhaps biased by the ancient sources – is that there have been very few excavations focussed specifically on the Arab period, along with further issues with dating. Nevertheless, the centre of power immediately shifted to Tunis and Kairouan. This topic and the archaeology of Late Byzantine and early Islamic Carthage are addressed by Ralf Bockmann's paper in this volume.

The second important issue is our understanding of the impact of Islamisation from the point of view of its architectural manifestations. This is very difficult for a number of reasons. Destruction and removal with no recording (apart from signalling the presence of glazed ware) were common practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. (when the majority of excavations took place). Much data has been lost and interpretations can only be very tentative. The nature of the buildings is another issue. Leaving aside the large mosques built in Kairouan and Tunis after the conquest, identifying early religious Muslim complexes is a difficult task; existing buildings may have been reused with new functions that are materially difficult to identify. The recorded presence of Arab inscriptions in former Roman or Byzantine buildings, found during excavations, is in fact a weak evidence, at least until a systematic study can look at the text of these inscriptions

and differentiate between official writing and graffiti<sup>25</sup>. Again, in some cases this will prove impossible; the numerous Arabic graffiti recorded on the baptistery of the basilica II in Sabratha, for example, are nowadays not visible following the excavations and restoration of the sites<sup>26</sup>. There have been a few attempts at identifying mosques set up in reused buildings, such as the Church of Cyprian in Carthage, though this case is debatable<sup>27</sup>. Equally, the mosques of Vaga/Beja and Sicca Veneria/El Kef require detailed study<sup>28</sup>. The topic is addressed in this volume in the paper of François Baratte, who presents – among other evidence for the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic occupation of the site – a possible early mosque at Haïdra. Furthermore, Anis Mkacher addresses the problematic from the point of view of the textual evidence.

A final set of buildings whose function in the Islamic period is still difficult to understand are the forts (ribāts). These forts have been a feature in the North African landscape for around two millennia, making their first appearance in the Roman period on the frontier zone and becoming a common feature in both rural and urban areas after the Byzantine conquest. The so-called denucleated city, as presented by Noël Duval using the example of Sbeitla, is characterised by inhabited nuclei in former Roman cities with the presence of a fort, a church, and houses. This type of settlement became a common feature in North Africa. Other, bigger cities, such as Carthage and Lepcis Magna, developed a different type of settlement that combined the presence of forts and city walls, limited mostly to a small portion of land along the coast, where all production activities since the Byzantine period have been located<sup>29</sup>. Some of these forts continued to be in use well into the Early Islamic period, but the archaeological evidence is too scanty to draw a clear picture. After the important work by Denys Pringle on the Byzantine fortifications of North Africa<sup>30</sup>, there has been no comprehensive detailed work on the subject. It would be important to reconsider all the evidence up until the Early Arab period, in order to include the ribāts. The analysis would require reconsidering their distribution in the landscape, and evaluating how and when their function changed. The ribāts developed along the coast, but originally without a defensive function, acting instead as residences for hermits<sup>31</sup>. The study of the transition to a fortified landscape from Late Antiquity into the Arab world needs

24 Djaït 1973; Amara 2011.

25 Mattingly 1995.

26 Leone 2013.

27 Whitehouse 1983.

28 Touihri 2014, 133.

29 This is for instance also the case of Leptiminus, where progressively production activities before confined to the suburb of the city, moved into the coastal area, Stone – Stirling 2007.

30 Pringle 1981.

31 Brett – Fentress 1996, 142 and as last Amari 2011. The ribāts were also given possession of lands, Hassen 2014, 312.



thorough reconsideration and an overall analysis from a diachronical perspective.

A consideration of both the rural and urban landscapes needs to take into full account the diversification between the Arabisation and the subsequent (and not immediate) Islamisation of the region. The two processes did not go hand in hand, but rather the transition was a slow movement. The population living in North Africa in the aftermath of the Arab conquest was characterised by a melting pot of different traditions and cultures. These differentiations are strongly reflected in the landscape. What is important in future work on North Africa is the necessity of having a regional perspective in order to identify similarities and differences. We have

tried to follow this perspective in the present work. The full definition of the economic situation of North Africa after the 7<sup>th</sup> c., when we stop following and tracing Roman products, still remains a problem. The limited knowledge of early Islamic pottery production also remains a major issue<sup>32</sup>. This situation has prevented the dating of sites in the past, and even recent surveys for the later periods find it very difficult to draw a clear picture of the changing landscape. This volume shows that a lot of work has been done in recent years and that archaeologically very large steps have been made. We present this volume with the certainty that this represents the first stone of a very complex architecture that future work will be able to build on.

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32 See the synthesis by Cressier – Fentress 2011.

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