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The Forgotten Transition. North Africa between Byzantium and Islam, ca. 550–750

in: Africa – Ifrīqyia. Continuity and Change in North Africa from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic Age. Papers of a Conference held in Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano – Terme di Diocleziano, 28 February – 2 March 2013 (Wiesbaden 2019) 11–21

der Reihe / of the series

Palilia

Band / Volume **34 • 2019**

DOI dieses Beitrags: https://doi.org/10.34780/1ywz-5y42
DOI des Gesamtbandes: https://doi.org/10.34780/l8a5-8cmw

Zenon-ID dieses Beitrags: https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/002002580
Zenon-ID des Gesamtbandes: https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/001605909

Verantwortliche Redaktion / Publishing editor **Redaktion der Abteilung Rom | Deutsches Archäologisches Institut**
Weitere Informationen unter / For further information see **https://publications.dainst.org/books/dai/catalog/series/palilia**
ISBN der gedruckten Ausgabe / ISBN of the printed edition **978-3-477-11333-5**
Verlag / Publisher **Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden**

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Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Rom, Via Sicilia 136, 00187 Rom, Tel. +39(0)6-488814-1
Email: redaktion.rom@dainst.de / Web: https://www.dainst.org/standort/-/organization-display/ZI9STUj61zKB/18513

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The Forgotten Transition

North Africa between Byzantium and Islam, ca. 550–750

by *Jonathan P. Conant*

The transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic period in North Africa has rightly been characterised as «the forgotten transition»[1]. Around the year 400, Africa was the keystone of the Roman Empire. Strategically located at the bottleneck between the eastern and western Mediterranean, Africa was also the imperial breadbasket, providing through the *annona* the grain and oil that fed Rome, the court, and the administration. The province was therefore also a rich prize, much fought-over by numerous contenders. In recent years, the fate of Africa as it fell from Roman to Vandal domination has come to be increasingly well studied[2]. The East Roman or Byzantine conquest and especially the first decades of renewed imperial rule in the region have also garnered some scholarly attention, though rather less than the Vandal period[3]. But the study of the later 6th, 7th, and above all the 8th c., as the region passed from Byzantine to Islamic hands, is still very much in its infancy[4].

In part this has to do with the nature of the written evidence. Though a remarkable cluster of texts allow us to see North African society in vivid detail in the second quarter of the 6th c., from about 550 until the 9th c. the literary sources for Africa are remarkably poor[5]. Even at their most illuminating, the latest ancient and earliest medieval texts most easily allow us to see two things: first, Africa's peppery history of Christian theological controversy, which stretched from the late Roman period all the way into the Islamic age; and second, the military conflict that troubled the region in this same period, and which in the 6th, 7th, and 8th c. pitted the Byzantine army, Berber warriors, and Arab *ghazi*s against one another in varying permutations. The archaeology is therefore absolutely central to writing a fuller history of the region in the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic period. Here too, though, our knowledge is fragmentary at best, especially – again – from the late 7th to the 9th c.[6]. The picture that the archaeology has most forcefully impressed upon modern scholars is that of the unravelling of the Mediterranean economy in this period; an unravelling that, as Chris Wickham has recently enabled us to appreciate with great clarity, seems to have hit North Africa particularly hard[7].

Yet, as the papers collected in this volume demonstrate, it is possible to round out more fully the picture of Africa's fate in the Byzantine and Early Islamic eras. To contextualize that discussion – so central to our understanding of the broader transition between Antiquity and the Middle Ages in the Mediterranean world writ large – this paper will consider the state of research on the social and economic changes that characterized the Maghrib in the 6th, 7th, and 8th c., and suggest some possible avenues for future inquiry. It will focus above all on two major questions central to our understanding of developments in this period in general: first, what we know about Africa's place in the larger Mediterranean, and second, what was happening in town and countryside within Africa itself.

1. Africa and the Mediterranean world

As the economic connections that had woven the Mediterranean world so closely together in the Roman period came unravelled from the 5th c. onward, the volume and range of African exports began to shrink. There are, of course, important variations in this picture over both space and time; for our purposes, the most significant of these was the fact that the Byzantine conquest of 533–534 brought with it the re-imposition of the imperial tax system in Africa and a revival of annual grain shipments to Constantinople[8]. Though African amphorae are rare in the East, exports of African Red Slip Ware (ARS) or *terra sigillata* to the imperial capital and to the Aegean basin remained strong from the mid-6th to the later 7th c., and ARS also continued to reach both Alexandria in Egypt and Levantine cities like Antioch, Beirut, Caesarea, and even Hama in inland Syria. In exchange, eastern amphorae were sent west to Carthage, though in general imports of this sort seem to have contracted over the 7th c. In the West, African fine wares and amphorae both continued to reach major urban centres and military installations in the 6th, 7th, and (in some cases) even into the early 8th c., including some sites that were certainly outside of imperial territory, like Marseille[9]. Even so, in the later Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, African exports generally commanded a diminishing share of a shrinking market.

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[1] J. Tannous (Princeton University), personal communication; see also Brown 2016, 295.

[2] See esp. L'Afrique vandale et byzantine 2002/2003; Merrills 2004; Berndt 2007; Howe 2007; Leone 2007, 127–165; Berndt – Steinacher 2008; Hattler 2009; Merrills – Miles 2010; Conant 2012, 19–195; Bockmann 2013; Modéran – Perrin 2014; Steinacher 2016.

[3] The standard synthesis on Byzantine Africa is still Diehl 1896. See also Durliat 1981; Pringle 2001; Modéran 2003; Leone 2007, 167–279; Merrills – Miles 2010, 228–255; Conant 2012, 196–361.

[4] For an excellent, recent assessment of the archaeological evidence (with the relevant bibliography), see now Fenwick 2013. On the Islamic conquest specifically, see Christides 2000 and Kaegi 2010.

[5] For the Byzantine period, see Cameron 1982, and now Hays 2016, and Dossey 2016. – For the Early Islamic period, see Brett 1979, 490–495.

[6] See, however, Fenwick 2013.

[7] Wickham 2005, 635–644. 708–728.

Though ongoing excavations continue to refine its details, this overall picture of the trajectory of Africa's economic connections with the rest of the Mediterranean is solidly grounded in the archaeology and, by now, well established in the scholarly literature. It is not my intention to challenge it here. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile pausing briefly to consider just how dependent we are on the ceramic evidence for our understanding of African and Mediterranean exchange in the 6th, 7th, and early 8th c. Ceramics are, of course, extraordinarily useful indicators: their near-ubiquity in Antiquity and their durability in the archaeological record allow us to quantify questions like the volume and direction of exchange to a degree that is simply not possible with any other ancient commodity. It is useful to remember, though, that written sources for the late ancient economy – sources like the 4th-c. *Description of the World and Its Peoples* – do not comment on Africa as a producer of high-quality tableware[10]. By contrast, they do remark on African clothing and textile exports[11]. Only fairly recently have archaeologists begun to figure out just how important textile production was within Africa, and of course the exchange of textiles per se – as distinct from that of the ceramic cargoes with which fabrics are argued or assumed to have travelled – is extremely difficult to see archaeologically[12]. Yet it is perhaps telling that one of the few merchants to appear in the textual sources for 7th c. North Africa was a (possibly-fictitious) Jewish clothes-merchant named Jacob, from Acre in Syria[13]. As in the late Roman period, Africa probably also continued to be an important exporter of slaves in the Byzantine and Early Islamic era. At least, slave-raiding and captive-taking are mentioned with striking regularity in the accounts that survive to us of the military conflicts between Romano-Africans, Berbers, imperial forces, and Arab ghazis, from the 6th all the way to the 8th c.[14]. Though it is not impossible to trace, the export of slaves is, of course, also challenging to see archaeologically. The same is true of important African commodities mentioned in late Roman and Islamic-era written sources like leather, figs, sponges, salt, and so forth[15]. None of this is meant to suggest that the African economy sustained into the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods the levels of affluence that it had achieved in the 4th or even 5th c., with slaves and commodities that are less durable than ceramics somehow taking up the slack over and against what is visible in the archaeological record. Indeed, there are good reasons from within Africa itself to question how far the region continued to prosper in the 6th, 7th and 8th c.[16]. But at the same point, it is important to recognize that there are significant limits to our knowledge, and that exchanges that we cannot easily quantify or even follow will have contributed to African prosperity in the Byzantine and Islamic periods to an uncertain degree.

Recognizing the limits of our knowledge is all the more critical when comparing the archaeological evidence for the circulation of goods with the written evidence for the circulation of people. In fact, though scholars tend to assume that in Late Antiquity human travel piggybacked on that of cargoes intended for exchange, Mark Handley has recently suggested that the reverse might in fact have been the case: at least, on one strikingly well-documented voyage from Spain to North Africa in the early 6th c., the sale of grain accounted for only 27% of the ship owners' profits, while passenger fares accounted for the rest: nearly three-quarters of their gains[17]. People certainly continued to move between Africa and the rest of the Mediterranean in the 6th, 7th and 8th c. With the Byzantine conquest and the revival of grain shipments to Constantinople, there also came the imposition of a military government in Africa. Until the creation of the exarchate in the late 6th c., the new ruling class of Byzantine officers and administrators served short terms of service: they were regularly and rapidly reassigned to distant posts elsewhere in the empire, typically within three to five years. Only later (and rarely) do they seem to have planted roots in Africa[18]. Thus a steady stream of praetorian prefects, generals, subordinate commanders, and tax officials will have passed between Constantinople and its distant western province. At the same time, ambitious Africans like the poet Flavius Cresconius Corippus or the lawyer Junillus Africanus sought to advance their careers by relocating to Constantinople[19]. The re-imposition of imperial rule also meant managing the consequences of imperial displeasure, and alongside the circulation of imperial officials and aspiring provincials we can also follow the coerced movements of exiles to and from Africa on the one hand, and places as far afield as Constantinople, Egypt, and Armenia, on the other, as bishops, abbots, fiscal officials, rebels, and conspirators found themselves on the wrong side of imperial disfavour[20]. Texts and funerary inscriptions alike further attest to the settlement of both families and individuals from the Aegean basin, Syria, and Egypt in places up and down the African coast, from Sullecthum to Hadrumetum to Carthage to Hippo Regius[21]. The 7th c. Persian and Islamic conquests sent a wave of refugees from the Eastern Mediterranean to Africa, and then – as the Arabs advanced westward – from Africa onward to Italy, Sardinia, and Spain[22].

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[8] McCormick 2001, 102–111.

[9] General surveys are provided by Panella 1988; Reynolds 1995, 31–34. 57–60. 99 f.; Sodini 2000; Wickham 2005, 712 f.; Conant 2012, 336 f.; and now Reynolds 2016. See also above, previous note. The fundamental typologies are provided by Hayes 1972; EAA 1981; Bonifay 2004.

[10] *Expositio totius mundi et gentium.*

[11] *Edictum Diocletiani et collegarum de pretiis rerum venalium* 19, 24 (rugs); 19, 39; 19, 42; 19, 49; 19, 56; 19, 61 (clothes); *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* 60–61 (grain, clothes, animals). See in general Haywood 1938, 52 f. and 116–118; Jones 1986, 849 f.; Panella 1988, 631.

[12] On textile production in North Africa, see e. g. Wilson 2001 and Wilson 2004. On flax production, see Dietz 1995–2000, 771–799, at 796 f.; van der Veen et al. 1996, 246. On dye-works, see also below, note 52, and in general Wickham 2005, 693–824 on systems of exchange in the late ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, and the place of cloth in them.

[13] *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* 1, 3.

[14] Conant 2012, 298–300. 335.

[15] Late Roman: Veg. mulom. 2, 13, 8; 2, 34, 1; 2, 80, 3 (sponges); 2, 48, 3; 3, 28, 15 (figs); 1, 42, 4 (cumin); 3, 24 (salt). – Cod. Theod. 13, 5, 10 (A.D. 364) (wood); see also Veg. mulom. 3, 14, 2 (Punic wax) and Val. Nov. 13, 1 (A.D. 445) (salt, alum, flax). – Islamic: Goitein 1978, I 112 (leather, hides, gilded shoes). 121 (figs.). 125 (wax and honey). 153 f. (coral, wax, felt, hides, leather, shoes). 224 (linen made from imported Egyptian flax).

[16] For a good discussion, see Wickham 2005, 723–728, now in light of Fenwick 2013.

Just as the structures of imperial control began to weaken in Africa, those of caliphal government began to be built up, ensuring the continued circulation of officials to and from the region. From the foundation of Kairouan in 670 onward, Africa was integrated into an emerging Islamic world whose centres of power – like those of the Byzantine Empire – lay far to the east. Once again, this involved a reconfiguration of the local ruling class, as a succession of generals and military governors of Arabian, Egyptian, and Syrian origins were sent to and recalled from Africa. In the 8th c., the overland caravans that had probably long linked Africa to Egypt now continued onward to Mecca. Early in the 8th c., Coptic Christians were transferred from Egypt to Tunis to develop (or redevelop) the region's naval power. By 718, the endeavour had progressed to the point that Yazīd ibn ᶜAbd al-Malik could venture to relieve the Muslim forces besieging Constantinople with fresh supplies brought from Africa – even if, in the end, the effort ended in disaster, with the desertion of the Egyptians and the destruction of the fleet[23].

Even so, shipping itself continued. In fact, economically speaking, one of the big challenges of looking synthetically at the 7th and 8th c. is the need to reconcile two seemingly incompatible scholarly visions of what was happening in Africa at the time: the vision of a moribund Byzantine African economy on the one hand, and the vision of a resurgent Islamic economy in Africa on the other[24]. At least, it seems reasonably clear that merchant ships were crossing between Tunisia and Sicily in the mid-8th c. Thus, for example, in the 740s bubonic plague spread across the caliphate, from Mesopotamia to Syria to Egypt and then on to Africa; in 745 it jumped the Strait of Sicily, which – strikingly – appears to have been the first point of regular naval contact between the caliphate and the Byzantine Empire in the mid-8th c.[25]. Three years later, we hear explicitly that Venetians were buying slaves in Rome to sell in the Maghrib[26]. Even as longstanding connections broke apart elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, then, by the middle of the 8th c. exchange is once again clearly visible at the central nexus of communications that had long linked Africa to Italy and Sicily.

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[17] Handley 2011, 11; citing Cassiod. var. 5, 35.

[18] Conant 2012, 196–251.

[19] Martindale 1992, 354 f. s. v. Fl. Cresconius Corippus. 742 s. v. Iunillus.

[20] Conant 2012, 323 and 350 f.

[21] Lycians: SEG 9, 111 no. 872 (Hippo Regius). – Egyptians: Terry 1998, 632 f. no. 185 (Hadrumetum); Maximus Confessor, *Epistolae* 12 and 18, PG 91, 460–509 and 584–589; Ennabli 1975, 228 no. 91B (Carthage). – Syrians: Ennabli 1975, 262 f. no. 117A (Carthage); Handley 2011, 131 no. 393 (Sullecthum). See also: Wessel et al. 1989, 6 no. 16 (Constantine) and SEG 18, 244 no. 777 (Tébessa).

[22] McCormick 2001, 354–357; Conant 2012, 351 f.

[23] On the early Arab administration of Africa, see Djaït 1973, 601–621. – Caravans: McCormick 2001, 509 f. with Bonifay 2004, 454–456. – Copts: McCormick 2001, 510 n. 38 and 858 no. 57.

[24] Fenwick 2013, 19.

[25] McCormick 2001, 504 f.

[26] Lib. pontif. 93, 22 (Zacharias); McCormick 2001, 510–515, esp. 512.

This in turn leads to two important points. First, African transport amphorae have now been found in early 8th c. archaeological contexts from Rome, Marseille, and San Peyre, indicating that (on some level) exchange must have persisted into this period[27]. When taken together with both the transmission of plague and the trade in slaves across the Tunisian–Sicilian strait in the mid-8th c., it increasingly looks like an economy in which exchange across parts of the western Mediterranean played at least some kind of role either survived the end of Antiquity in Africa, or was reborn there very shortly thereafter. Second, the breakdown of a chronologically precise ceramics typology by ca. 700 and our increasing reliance thereafter on textual sources and other proxy data to assess the nature, direction, and extent of long-distance exchange raise important questions about how the Islamic conquests changed the kinds of transactions that we are able to see and why. Thus, for example, from an official point-of-view the buying of slaves in Europe – even of Christian slaves – and their subsequent re-sale in North Africa were almost entirely unproblematic in both legal and religious terms prior to ca. 700[28]. But all of that changed with the Islamic conquest and, still more, with the earliest wave of Christian conversions to Islam in Africa; developments which certainly seem to have been causing anxiety in papal circles in Rome by the end of the 8th c.[29]. Suddenly the sale of Christian slaves in Africa became a much more heavily freighted transaction – not because it was new, but because it entailed at least the possibility that the enslaved would apostatize from their faith and convert to Islam – and so exchanges of this sort were of concern to the bishops of Rome (and their biographers) in a way that they never really had been before.

In short, then, taking a wide view of Africa's overseas connections in the 6th, 7th, and 8th c. does not substantially challenge the well-established vision of a crumbling Mediterranean economy in which Africa played a decreasing part. But pushing at that interpretation, testing our assumptions, and re-examining the circumstances surrounding the production and preservation of our sources, both written and material, nevertheless allows us to flesh out that picture more robustly; and with time – as more evidence becomes available – it may perhaps even allow us to nuance our understanding of the extent and nature of Africa's economic breakdown at the end of Antiquity.

2. Internal developments within Africa

Even so, within Africa, too, the general picture from the 6th c. into the 7th and 8th seems to be one of generally decreasing complexity. Our understanding of the larger picture is still fragmentary and it is difficult to generalize, but early returns suggest that both ARS and amphorae reached the countryside in progressively diminishing quantities in the Byzantine period. This was already the trend in the interior in the Vandal period; now it extended into the coastal zone as well. On the island of Jerba, in the area around Segermes, and even in the immediate hinterland of Carthage itself the number of rural sites where diagnostic pottery has been found dwindles steadily in the later 6th and 7th c.[30]. It would seem, then, that the African countryside was becoming less affluent.

Why this was happening is a matter of some debate, but given the progressively diminishing levels of African amphora-borne exports that we can see making it to markets across the Mediterranean, it seems reasonable to suppose that at least part of the answer lies in the decreasing profitability of an agrarian economy geared toward the production of olive oil and other commodities for export overseas. It is worth considering, though, whether other factors may also have played some kind of role. For the late Roman period, for example, Leslie Dossey has convincingly suggested that one of the principal reasons for the fluorescence of ARS on rural sites was the emergence in the 4th c. of a class of absentee landlords of senatorial origins (often former imperial officials) who commanded vast, though very dispersed estates in Africa. For these distant grandees, a prosperous peasantry was a source of both wealth and status, and they therefore relaxed the restrictions on access to low-level luxuries like glossy tableware, glass vessels, and tiled roofs through which locally-based landowners had maintained their own social prestige[31]. This new, 4th c. system collapsed with the Vandal conquest. Imperial estates and the holdings of super-wealthy senatorial aristocrats in what is now northern Tunisia appear to have been expropriated by the Vandals and to have formed the basis of their own landed prosperity; and though patterns of landholding in Byzantine North Africa are not well understood, Procopius heavily implies that Vandal holdings were, in turn, confiscated for the *fiscus* in the wake of the imperial re-conquest[32]. Perhaps significantly, large estates continued to dominate the northern rural landscape well into the Islamic period, long after central Tunisia and western Libya had begun to be characterized by more egalitarian village settlements and by smaller estates in the hands of local elites[33]. As their economic horizons contracted in the Byzantine period, might the locally-based owners of small, southern estates have sought to reinforce hierarchies of status by once again restricting their peasants' access to prestige goods, even as the imperial agents charged with the management of large northern holdings took a more permissive approach to such items? For now, the idea is entirely speculative: it should be treated as a question, not as an answer. But it is at least worth exploring whether new patterns of landholding in the 6th and 7th c., combined with the continued prominence of local churches and city-based elites as landlords, might somehow have undermined peasants' access to the kinds of goods that we use to track rural prosperity in Late Antiquity. It is also worth underscoring that increasing scarcity and more restrictive patterns of elite dominance could well have been mutually reinforcing: the decreasing profitability of overseas exports may have combined with new forms of landlordship, changes in land use, and a shrinking rural population to produce the patterns that we see in the distribution of diagnostic ceramics on rural sites in the Byzantine period.

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[27] Reynolds 2016.

[28] NB however the restrictions on Jewish ownership of Christian slaves in the later Roman Empire, on which see Linder 1987, 82–85.

[29] Silverius, *Epitaphium Hadriani I Papae*, 114 and Conant 2012, 363–369.

[30] Hitchner 1990, esp. 247; Greene 1992; Dietz 1995–2000, 782 with figs. 5m–p; Fentress et al. 2009, 197–199. See also de Vos 2000, 72–75.

[31] Dossey 2010, esp. 92 f.

Indeed, more rather than less complex explanations might help us to bridge another disconnect in the sources for Late Byzantine and Early Islamic North Africa, that between coins and ceramics. In a new and compelling analysis, Cécile Morrisson has emphasized that – despite the contraction of fine wares on rural sites in the 6th and 7th-c. – the numismatic evidence does not support the vision of a universal deterioration in the African economy after ca. 550. In comparison to the 6th c., the mint in Carthage appears both to have been striking more gold coins under the 7th c. emperors and to have been reminting these coins more frequently. To be sure, these trends were probably connected to increased military expenditures and to a higher degree of regionalization in the Byzantine monetary supply at the time; but they also suggest efficient taxation, and thus a productive economy characterized by active exchange. The gold from which these coins were struck seems to have come from Constantinople – at least, metallurgical analysis precludes a sub-Saharan source – and, in conjunction with the sigillographic evidence, the impressive 7th c. hoards suggest that the provisioning of the imperial capital was now being carried out not through the *annona* system, but rather through purchases (under the control of local officials) from estates concentrated primarily in northern and central Tunisia[34]. In the Late Byzantine period, in other words, the supply of ARS may also have mapped onto a landscape of power, characterized above all by imperial fiscal exactions.

Morrisson's arguments also make good sense of the fact – otherwise difficult to explain – that in the historical memory of Early Medieval Arabic accounts Africa was still prosperous enough in the second half of the 7th c. to make the conquest of the region worthwhile. To be sure, the Maghribi interior was remembered as a particularly rich source of slaves[35]. However, this was clearly not the full story. In a much-cited anecdote, recounted by the 9th c. historian Ibn ᶜAbd al-Hakam, in the course of the first major Arab incursion into Africa in 647 local Romano-African notables paid the leader of the expedition, ᶜAbd Allāh ibn Saᶜad, a substantial tribute in coin to leave their province. Astounded at their wealth, ᶜAbd Allāh asked the notables where they got their money, whereupon one of them dug up an olive pit and showed it to the warrior, telling him that the Byzantines (the *Rūm*) had no olives of their own, and so Africans sold them olive oil[36]. Whatever the truth-value of this story, over a dozen hoards assembled in Africa from the mid-7th c. into the early 8th do make it clear that at least some elements within local society managed to prosper at the time, even amidst the generally downward trends[37].

It is also worth emphasizing that North Africa seems to have retained much of its urban character throughout the Byzantine and into the Early Islamic period. To be sure, as with its rural landscape, the widespread urban affluence so noticeable in Africa in the 4th c. was not sustained into the Byzantine era. Even so, in the early 7th c. the geographer George of Cyprus still conceptualized Africa as a network of cities[38]. As the studies of Paul-Louis Cambuzat and Corisande Fenwick have demonstrated, the majority of these continued to be urban centres in the Early Middle Ages, with garrison towns and cities sited on important networks of trade and communications faring particularly well through the Byzantine-Islamic transition. With the exception of Kairouan, there appear to have been few new urban foundations in Africa before the 9th c., but some less eminent sites like Tunis, Béja, and Tripoli gained new prominence as administrative, military, or economic hubs, even as others – most notably Carthage – sank into comparative obscurity[39]. Even at Carthage, though, some kind of continuity of occupation into the Early Islamic Middle Ages is visible in the archaeological record[40].

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[32] Proc. BV 1, 5, 11–15 and 2, 14, 8–10; Victor episcopus Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae* 1, 13; see also Val. Nov. 34, 2–3 (A.D. 451). On the contentious issue of the nature of Vandal expropriations, see the conflicting views of Modéran 2002, on the one hand, and Durliat 1988, Durliat 1995, and Schwarcz 2004, on the other.

[33] Talbi 1981, 210–214; Fenwick 2013, 18 f.

[34] Morrisson 2016.

[35] See e. g. Ibn ᶜAbd al-Hakam, *Futūh Ifrīqiya w'al-Andalus* 46. 60–64. 80 and 88; Ahmad ibn-Yahyā al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb futūh al-buldān* 229 f.; Savage 1997, 67–78.

[36] Ibn ᶜAbd al-Hakam, *Futūh Ifrīqiya w'al-Andalus* 46–48.

[37] Guéry et al. 1982, 78 f. interleaf, with fig. 7 (map); Pringle 2001, 128–130.

[38] Georgius Cyprius, *Descriptio orbis Romani* 638–684.

That said, we should not be surprised by the abandonment, spoliation, or repurposing of classical civic architecture in the Byzantine period, or that of Christian sacred buildings in the Islamic era. In Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, the African townscape was not a nostalgic space. It was a pragmatic one. When buildings lost their function, they (or their materials) were put to new uses; and while these arrangements may often seem crude and improvised to modern sensibilities, in Late Antiquity they could be both long-lived and profitable, as would appear to have been the case with the ceramics workshop installed in a converted bathhouse at Oudhna[41]. Moreover, by the end of Antiquity the very idea of the city had itself changed radically from that of the classical past[42]. The types of cities that proved most capable of negotiating the transformations of the 7th and 8th c. give us our surest clues as to what was valued in the new townscapes of the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic age. Now cities were privileged above all for their fortifications, their sites of communal worship, and their economic production[43]. Developments that Peter Pentz has pithily characterized as «the dissolution of the nucleated town» may in part be explained by reference to decreasing urban prosperity; but they were also part and parcel of a re-imagination of the urban landscape in a social context that had been profoundly shaped by the changes of the Vandal and even the late Roman periods[44]. By the 6th c. – as far as Procopius was concerned, at least – it was the walls that made the city[45]. Monumental military architecture in Byzantine Africa sought to project a message of power and security under God and the empire[46]. In the Islamic period, too, new foundations like Kairouan and perhaps even re-foundations like Tunis seem to owe their situations at least in part to the dictates of defence. The town of Belalis Maior may have the only known early 8th c. fortress, but by the end of the same century *ribāṭ*s had begun to shape a new, distinctively Islamic landscape of coastal fortifications[47]. Churches and, later, mosques also represented important foci of settlement and urban activity in Byzantine and Early Islamic Africa, and as such probably projected a similar message about faith and power[48]. Moreover, when olive presses were erected in urban areas in the Byzantine period, they were repeatedly sited close to churches, a fact that Anna Leone has argued may indicate some kind of ecclesiastical supervision of the production of olive oil, perhaps even in a public capacity[49]. Early mosques, like those in Kairouan and Sousse, were built like fortresses, though it is not entirely clear that they were ever intended to have military functions[50]. When read together, then, perhaps urban and rural landscapes in Byzantine and Early Islamic North Africa tell us a consistent story, one about the desire of shifting local elites to project their power and status in an increasingly uncertain economic environment.

3. Conclusions

In Late Antiquity, things fell apart. They fell apart everywhere, but they also fell apart in Africa specifically. We see this in the diminished levels at which African ceramics reached shrinking overseas markets; we see it in the decreased prosperity of the African countryside; we see it in the remaking of Africa's cities. But this should not blind us to the fact either that communications were also sustained across the Mediterranean or that the Byzantine and Early Islamic period in North Africa also saw both creativity and adaptability in the face of sweeping social and political change.

In order to deepen our understanding of that transition in the future, first and foremost we will need more data from which to reason. The documentary evidence for Africa in the 7th and 8th c. is sparse in the extreme, and we cannot be certain of the future discovery of new textual sources relevant to the period. The story will therefore have to be told from the archaeology up, and so we desperately need more evidence. That means more work: more excavations and field surveys; more typological and chronological studies of late ancient and Early Medieval common and coarse wares, especially at a local level; more attention to paleobotanical and paleozoological data; more work on the sigillographic and numismatic evidence, and especially on the Early Islamic coinage; more work on historical toponymy, along the lines that Mohamed Bennabès has begun to sketch out[51]; a reexamination of the undated Latin epigraphic material, and so forth. A synthetic study of human osteological remains across sites – throughout Late Antiquity – could provide invaluable insight into questions of nutrition, health, disease, trauma, violence, and so forth in Africa. We must also be attuned to new insights of scientific research and how these may intersect with the history of 7th- and 8th-c. Africa: how climate change might have affected agricultural and pastoral regimes, for example; or how bacterial DNA in human dental pulp may provide evidence for bubonic plague in the region; or how stable isotope analysis might provide evidence for the regional origins of the individuals whose bones survive in Byzantine and Islamic-era burials. At the same time, it will be crucial always to question the epistemological grounding of what we think we know, and always to read as far as possible across linguistic, disciplinary, and chronological frontiers.

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[39] Cambuzat 1986; Fenwick 2013, 15 f.

[40] Caron – Lavoie 2002. However, see also Vitelli 1981, and now Stevens 2016.

[41] Barraud et al. 1998, 139–167; Bonifay 2004, 53–55.

[42] Wickham 2005, 591–692; see also Haldon 1999.

[43] Proc. aed. 6, 3, 9–6, 7, 16; Durliat 1981, 108–112; Pringle 2001, 109–120; Pentz 2002, 29–75; Leone 2007, 167–279; Fenwick 2013, 14–16. 20–32.

[44] Pentz 2002, 43, with discussion at 44–51.

[45] Proc. aed. 6, 5, 13 and 6, 6, 13–16. So too Georgius Cyprius, *Descriptio orbis Romani* 638–684 and 795–798, with Pringle 2001, 535–537 (map 6 and the associated Gazetteer references).

[46] Pringle 2001, 319 no. 4 (Cululis); CIL VIII 1863 + 16507 = ILCV 806 = Pringle 2001, 325 no. 23 (Tébessa); CIL VIII 5352 = ILCV 791 = Pringle 2001, 323 no. 17 (Calama); CIL VIII 5346 + 17579 and CIL VIII 5359 + 17529 = ILCV 1622 a–b = Pringle 2001, 323 f. no. 18 (Calama). See also Pringle 2001, 109; Pentz 2002, 106–113; Wickham 2005, 638.

[47] Fenwick 2013, 26; Pentz 2002, 68–71 and 120–134. – Belalis Maior: Mahjoubi 1978, 371–387.

[48] Proc. aed. 6, 4, 4; 6, 5, 9; 6, 7, 16; Pentz 2002, 44 f.; Wickham 2005, 637 f.; Leone 2007, 188.

[49] Leone 2007, 227–237.

[50] Pentz 2002, 120–124.

But we can also seek to approach old questions from new directions. I have tried to sketch out some speculative first thoughts about such approaches in this paper. First, our understanding of the late ancient and Early Medieval economy will be immeasurably deepened if future scholars pay as close attention to textile production and dye-works as has, for example, the recent Jerba Archaeological Survey team[52]. Leather production, at all stages of the process – from herding to the creation of finished goods – is probably even harder to see in the archaeological record, but might nonetheless reward similar scrutiny. The North African slave trade surely merits a dedicated study. Certainly all three – textiles, leather goods, and slaves – were commodities that survived the Byzantine–Islamic transition. Second, the aspirations of the regional elite as they sought to navigate the challenges of the 7th and 8th c. warrant further study, both on their own terms and in terms of how such aspirations may have affected the peasant majority. This includes an increased sensitivity not only to issues of land-holding, urban lifestyle, and the formation of a new, Muslim ruling class from the late 7th c. onward, but also greater attention to the reconfiguration of Christian and Jewish communities across the conceptual divide of the year 700. Then too there is the age-old question of the role that Berber populations played in the remaking of Africa. The *magnum opus* of the late and much-lamented Yves Modéran has justly transformed how we think about *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*. But the North African borderlands extended over 2,500 km. Given both the vast geographical area involved and the diversity of local circumstances, *a priori* it seems very likely indeed that the social processes underway in the African interior will have played out differently in contexts ranging from the Mauretanias in the west to Tripolitania in the east. In seeking to build on or to challenge Modéran's work, then, we must be attuned both to the archaeology of mobility[53], and to the ways in which our textual sources hold up a distorting mirror in which to reflect late ancient and Early Medieval realities.

The papers collected in this volume take an important step in the endeavour of discovering, analysing, and synthesizing the new data that we so urgently need. Their contributions enable us to focus with new clarity on critical questions like the fate of cities and settlement, as well as of religious devotion, the economy, and topographies of power in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. In so doing, they remind us of the dynamism, vitality, and energy that characterized North Africa at the end of Antiquity, and help to bridge the artificial divide that modern scholars have erected there between the Byzantine and Islamic periods.

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[51] Benabbès 2016.

[52] Drine 2009, 167–173.

[53] On which see Fentress – Wilson 2016.

Abstract

The critical period of the Byzantine-Islamic transition is rarely discussed in scholarship on late ancient and Early Medieval North Africa, yet it is central to our understanding of the broader transformations in the contemporary Mediterranean. This paper considers the state of research on the social and economic changes underway in 6th, 7th-, and 8th-c. North Africa, and suggests some possible avenues for future inquiry. It focuses primarily on two questions central to developments in this period in general, and to the themes of this volume in particular: first, Africa's place in the larger Mediterranean world, and second, changes in townscapes and landscapes within Africa itself.

Résumé

La période cruciale de la transition byzantino-islamique est rarement abordée dans les études sur l'Afrique du Nord du pointe de vue de l'Antiquité tardive jusqu'au haut Moyen Âge. Elle est pourtant essentielle à la compréhension des transformations plus vastes de la Méditerranée de cette époque. Ce chapitre examine l'état des recherches sur les changements sociaux et économiques en cours en Afrique du Nord aux VIe, VIIe et VIIIe siècles, et il suggère quelques pistes de recherche futures. Ce chapitre aborde principalement deux questions essentielles aux développements de cette période en général, et aux thèmes de ce volume en particulier : quelle était la place de l'Afrique dans le grand monde méditerranéen ? Comment les paysages urbains et les paysages ruraux ont-ils changé en Afrique même ?

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