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Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Carthage and the Transition of Power to Tunis and Kairouan

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) 77–89

der Reihe / of the series

Palilia

Band / Volume **34 • 2019**

DOI dieses Beitrags: <https://doi.org/10.34780/qha5-a5hb>

DOI des Gesamtbandes: <https://doi.org/10.34780/l8a5-8cmw>

Zenon-ID dieses Beitrags: <https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/002052876>

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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Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Carthage and the Transition of Power to Tunis and Kairouan

by *Ralf Bockmann*

This chapter will deal with the fate of Carthage, the largest city and administrative centre of Late Antique North Africa, and will discuss the transition of the centre of political power in North Africa to Tunis and Kairouan. I will reconstruct from an archaeological point of view how Carthage functioned as a city in the 7th c. and after the Arabic conquest. I will pay attention to two points specifically: the practical aspect of municipal and administrative life, and the ideological dimension involved.

In a general perspective, capitals as power centres had to fulfil a number of roles in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. First of all, they were the seat of the ruler or his governor, and of political and military institutions. A capital therefore had to host a certain amount of buildings suitable to serve representational, administrative and defensive functions. The capital had to be well connected to enable the movement of troops, but also for trade and provisions. It served as political and diplomatic hub, and it therefore had to represent rulership in a suitable way. That included, especially in our period, religious edifices.

Tunis and Kairouan were power centres in Early Islamic North Africa. According to Arabic sources, Tunis was founded in the Early Islamic period – in reality, the city existed before, but superseded neighbouring Carthage in the 8th c. as the seat of power. The great mosque of Kairouan, considered to be originally a 7th c. building, indicates impressively the importance of this city in the Early Islamic era. The building, as we will see, relates directly to Carthage, pointing clearly to the fact that until the Arabic conquest, Carthage was the undisputed centre of Byzantine Africa. However, it seems to have quickly lost its position, and we have to pose the question as to how far it properly functioned still in the later 7th c. In this paper, I will take a look at the archaeological evidence we have for Carthage. For early Tunis and Kairouan, we have to rely much more on historic sources from later periods.

I will argue that Carthage, although in a favourable position, had a number of disadvantages from the point of view of the new government that made it untenable as a capital of Early Islamic North Africa, despite its prestigious name that lived on for centuries.

Apart from its vulnerability towards the sea, which seems to have preoccupied the new rulers because of the Byzantine naval advantage, it seems to have been the fact that Carthage was clearly the most prestigious Christian city of North Africa, with an all-encompassing religious topography of martyr churches, memorial buildings, parochial churches and monasteries. Although practical questions in real life often seem to be decisive over ideological ones, I would argue that in this transition of power centres, the aspect of Christianity versus Islam did play a considerable role.

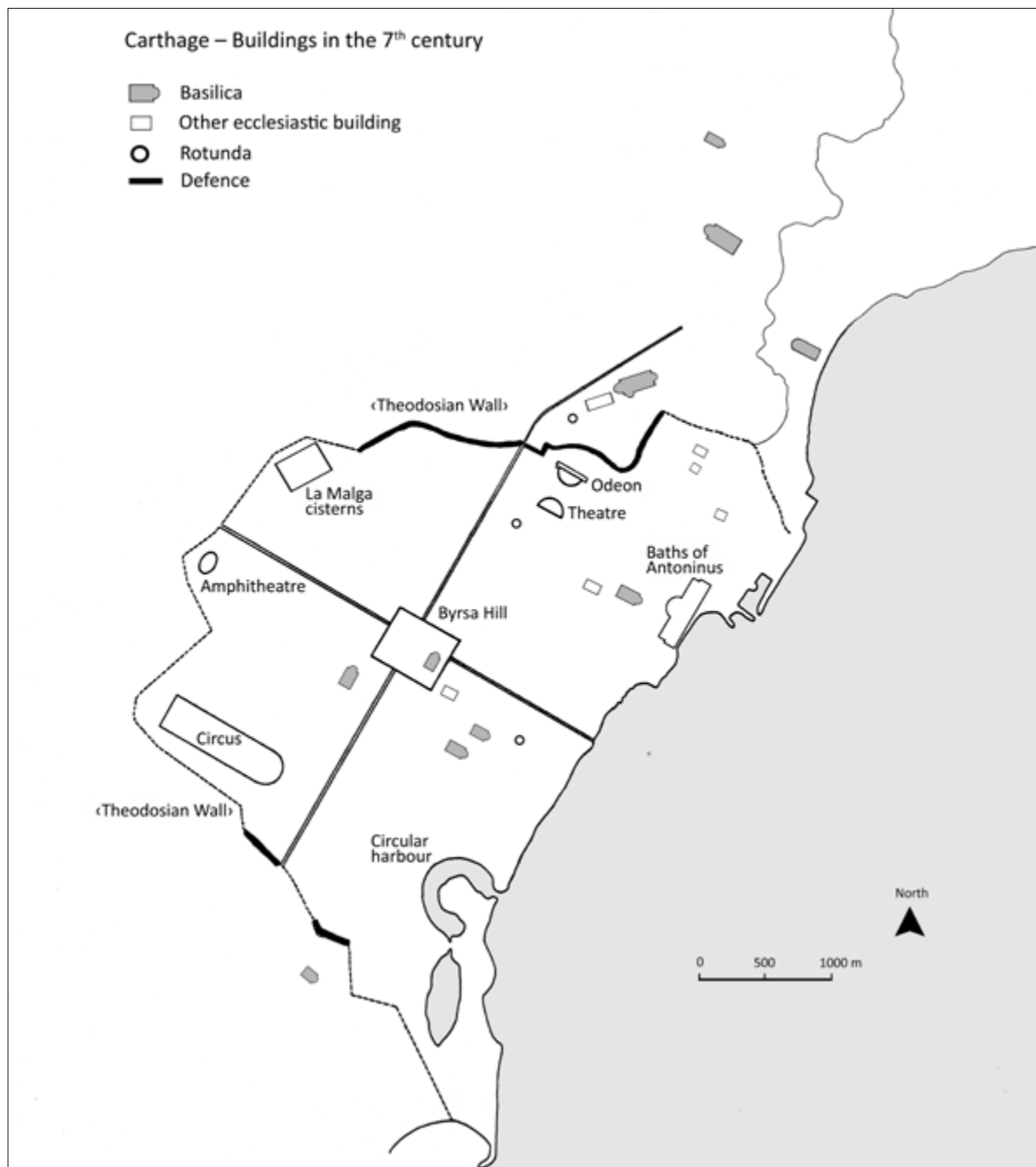
Byzantine Carthage

The archaeological evidence for Byzantine Carthage can perhaps be interpreted in different ways, but there is no doubt that the city was far from what it had been in earlier centuries, even though historic evidence indicates that it remained of some importance until the middle of the 7th c. The evidence for the later periods at Carthage is not overwhelmingly large, and we lack material still for major parts of the city that might add to the picture. New evidence is coming up regularly from new excavations and sites being restudied. However, the general lines can be reconstructed and are unlikely to be radically changed by new discoveries.

Carthage saw considerable building activities in the Early Byzantine epoch, including the re-establishment of some neglected public areas, but mostly concerning ecclesiastical buildings¹ (fig. 1). After the Byzantine conquest of the Vandal kingdom, a praetorian prefect was

¹ See Ennabli 1997 for a general overview, and Ennabli 2000, Miles 2006, Miles – Greenslade 2019, Stevens et al. 2005 for build-

ings newly founded in the Early Byzantine period, though usually on pre-existing building structures; the rotunda at the Rue Ibn



1 Schematic plan of Carthage's main public buildings in the Byzantine period (scale 1 : 50 000)

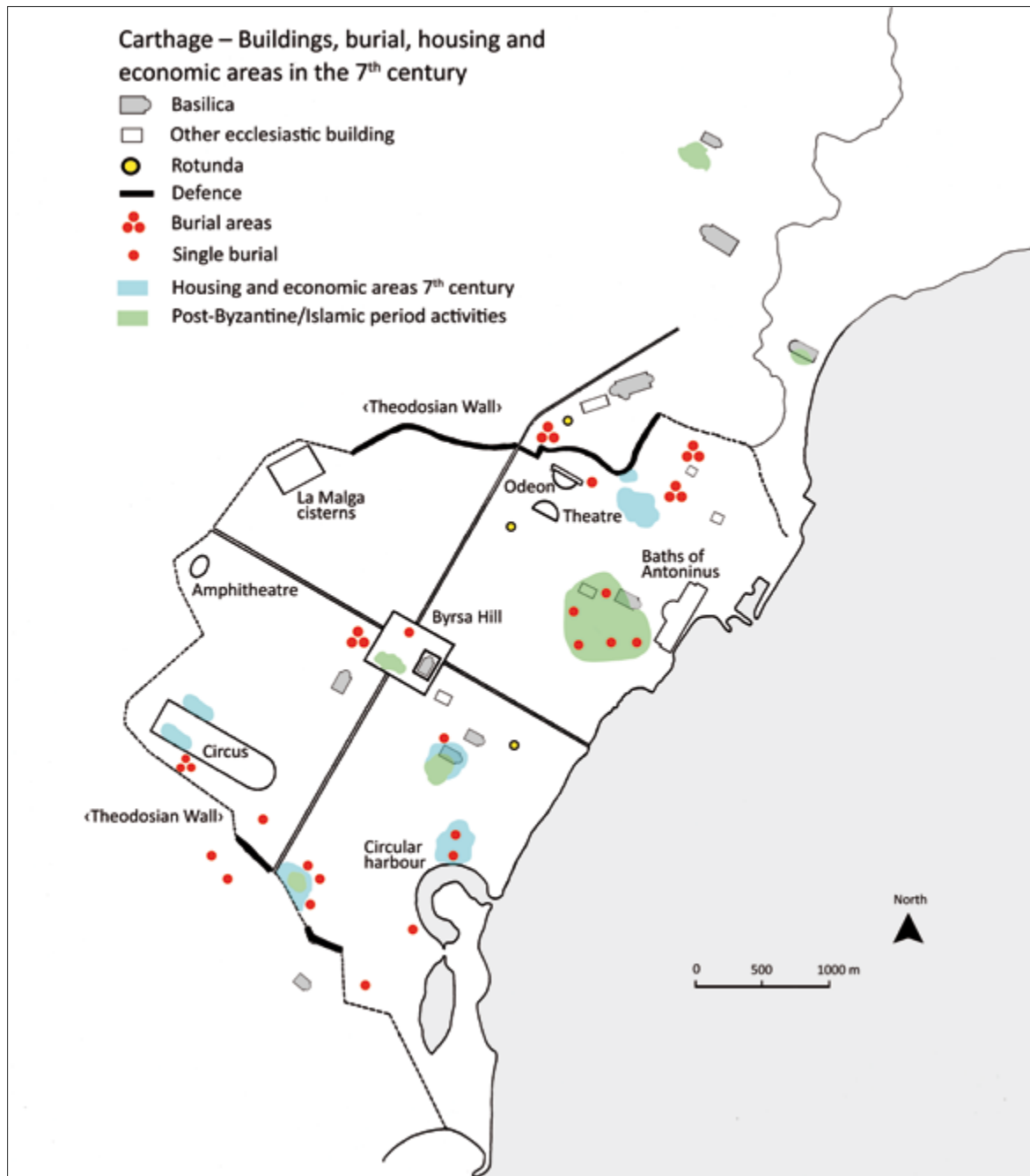
installed at Carthage who had the highest civil command over the seven Byzantine provinces of Africa, supported by a staff of almost 400 officers at Carthage, civil and military, that was built on the model of the late Roman proconsular organisation². Between the 4th and 6th c., Carthage had developed a diverse Christian topog-

raphy celebrating its famous martyrs and important saints, that dominated every part of the city in Late Antiquity. Many of these buildings had been founded in the 4th and 5th c. Some had been erected in the Justinianic period, and many others restructured at that time³. Around the middle of the 6th c., two earlier public build-

Chabâat adds to the picture, although it is less well known. – See Bockmann 2016 for a short discussion of the structural transformation in this central area of Carthage in the early 6th c. – See also Richard Miles' article in this volume and Stevens 2016.

² Conant 2012, 197 f.

³ See Bockmann 2014 for a detailed discussion of the topography of Carthage's martyrial basilicas to the north of the city and its development in Late Antiquity. – See Bockmann 2013, 87–117 for



2 Byzantine und Early Medieval archaeological sites in Carthage (scale 1 : 50 000)

ings, probably small churches, at the sites of Bir Mes-saouda and Carthagenna were turned into substantial basilicas⁴. On the remains of a third, secular building nearby, a memorial rotunda was erected. A whole part in the centre of the ancient city was thereby turned into an ecclesiastical centre⁵. The harbour area saw some build-

ing activities in the Early Byzantine period that attest to continuous commercial activities; furthermore, a fortified monastery was erected nearby⁶. The city wall was restored⁷. Outside of the city, the old massive cemeterial martyr churches at Mcidfa and Damous el-Karita were turned into «modern» veneration centres with reduced

a discussion of the ecclesiastical topography of Carthage in the 5th and early 6th c. – See in general Ennabli 1997.

4 Miles 2006; Ennabli 2010; Miles – Greenslade 2019.

5 See Bockmann 2016.

6 Proc. BV 2, 26, 17; Hurst 1994, 53–63. 109–114.

7 Proc. BV 1, 23, 19–21.

spaces⁸. At Damous el-Karita, an architecturally well-planned and executed memorial rotunda was added to the ecclesiastical centre⁹. At Bir Ftouha, a whole new church was erected that combined eastern and western building traditions with a lavish accoutrement, destined as a new pilgrimage destination in Carthage¹⁰. Although the 7th c. did not see much building development, archaeological evidence shows that the large majority of ecclesiastical buildings was still in use. The majority of interventions seem to have been minor and consolidatory rather than expansive, though (fig. 2).

The basilica of Damous el Karita is one of the few churches where a major restructuring can be dated to the early 7th c. The basilica lay outside of the city, not far from a major gate to the north, and constituted a large ecclesiastical centre with traditions reaching back to the 4th c. as well as a major cemeterial basilica that received a memorial rotunda in the 6th c. In the early 7th c., the floor levels both in the basilica itself as well as in the great hall to its south that served most likely as *secretarium* were considerably raised. The basilica received a new presbyterium inside the east-west oriented main aisle that considerably reduced the internal space of the basilica. The memorial rotunda received a new ground level storey¹¹. In the early 7th c., the rotunda was subdivided in the actual ‹sanctuary› below floor level and the upper level that provided space either for further visitors or for visitors who were not allowed down into the subterranean rotunda where the relics seem to have been presented. The Damous el Karita church gives the impression that the congregation gathering for church services was smaller than in earlier centuries, but that the memorial part might have been visited by more people than before, indicating that Carthage was still in a central position within the Mediterranean trade and travel routes, although its population itself seems to have been shrinking, as indicated by evidence documented in various parts of town discussed below shows.

It is important to note, though, that pilgrim routes led to Carthage and through Carthage continuously

through the Byzantine period. Since the 4th c., Carthage had been associated with the influential martyr-bishop Cyprian, who has to be considered the city's patron-saint, with Perpetua and Felicitas who were, like Cyprian, venerated also in other parts of the Mediterranean (e. g. Rome and Ravenna), and with the Scillitani who belonged to the earliest martyrs in the Christian world¹². In the 5th c., relics of Saint Stephen came to Carthage, and the Seven Monks of Gafsa who were martyred during the Vandal period were added to the martyrs venerated at Carthage, which apparently amounted to a considerable number¹³. In the 6th c., Julian seems to have been added to the already large group. It has been proposed that it was Julian who was venerated at the basilica of Damous el-Karita – the evidence indicating this is a report on a pilgrimage leading through Carthage, where Julian's memorial was visited, and on to Palestine¹⁴. Carthage's draw for pilgrims seems to have survived even after the Islamic conquest of the city – a group of pilgrims visited Cyprian's tomb as late as the 9th c.¹⁵. Pilgrimage to Carthage was very much alive in the 6th and 7th c., and probably re-vitalised in the Byzantine period after a period of conflict due to the Vandal kings' Arian confession¹⁶.

One of the most impressive originally Justinianic buildings in Carthage, the basilica at Bir Ftouha remained in its 6th c. state but was continuously used for burials through the 6th and 7th c., and surely remained active as an ecclesiastical centre¹⁷. The old large martyr churches of Mçidfa, the *basilica Maiorum* connected with Perpetua and Felicitas, and the basilica at Sainte Monique, probably one of the Cyprianic basilicas, seem to have remained in function, but apparently at a largely reduced level with only few burials interred in both basilicas¹⁸. It is important to note that the oldest ecclesiastical centres of Carthage seemed to have already lost much of their attraction in the later 6th c.¹⁹. The southern suburban church of Bir el Knissia received a new mosaic floor with geometric design in the late 6th or rather early 7th c., and also some of its annex buildings show new floor levels in this period²⁰.

8 See Bockmann 2014, 364–369.

9 Dolenz 2001.

10 Stevens et al. 2005.

11 Dolenz 2001, 38 f.

12 On Cyprian and his veneration in Carthage, Bockmann 2013, 96–100. – See Bockmann 2014, 357–361 for the veneration of Perpetua and Felicitas outside of Africa. – See Conant 2010 for an excellent discussion of the veneration of African saints in Early Medieval Europe.

13 On St Stephen's relics at Carthage see Ennabli 1997, 37 f. – For the burial of the Seven Monks of Gafsa at Carthage, Ennabli 1997, 38 f. – Ennabli 2000, 81–138 publishes a site in Carthage that she identifies with the Bigua monastery where they were supposed to be buried, criticised in Bockmann 2013, 113 f.

14 Dolenz 2001, 103 f.

15 Discussed by Stevens 2016: according to the Acts of the Saints of Redon, a group of pilgrims visited Cyprian's tomb in Carthage in the 850s or 860s; *Gesta sanctorum Rotonensium* 3, 8. – See also Conant 2012, 366 f.

16 See the discussion in Bockmann 2014, 364–369.

17 Stevens 2005, 574–577.

18 At Mçidfa, only three epitaphs of a total of around 300, and some rewritings on earlier inscriptions are dated to the second half of the 6th c., Ennabli 1982, 27. – The situation is similar at Sainte Monique, Ennabli 1975, 47–49.

19 Bockmann 2014, 368 f.

20 Stevens 1993, 93. 119–121.

In the city, annex rooms of the Carthagenna basilica received new floors in the 7th c., and archaeological evidence seems to indicate that the churches at Bir Messaouda and Dermech also remained active in the 7th c.²¹ We still see general activities in the church buildings in Carthage in the 7th c., although predominantly usage and not restructurings, with a certain focus on the sites that had been transformed or initialised in the 6th c.

Carthage was still in the 7th c. a city defined by a Christian topography connecting sites associated with internationally venerated martyrs, as seems to have been the case for example at the Damous el Karita basilica. The city had already been housing a number of monasteries since the 5th c. that were connected to saints' cults (local ones, like the Seven Monks of Gafsa, as well as international ones like St Stephen) and received new ones in later periods as well: Procopius reports the foundation of a monastery by Justinian near the city's harbour (the *mandrakion* monastery)²². Furthermore, sites for the veneration of saints were dispersed through the city, completing its spiritual topography, like the hypogaeum east of the Bir Messaouda basilica, the 6th c. rotunda further east at modern Rue Ibn Chabâat and the rotunda in the north near the theatre and odeon²³.

The second quarter of the 7th c. seems to have been a more vibrant period for Carthage than the late 6th c. The building activities at the Damous el Karita might be a case in point. Military pressure in the east rising in the second quarter of the 7th c. furthermore apparently led to the influx of many easterners, especially clerics, monks and nuns, into Carthage²⁴. «Maximus the Confessor», who was involved in the theological disputes that developed in the 640s and was one of the leading figures against the policy of Heracleius' successor, Constans II, was in Carthage where he led theological disputes in 646. At this time, the theological conflicts grew into a serious controversy that involved the western papacy as well, and have been considered to have seriously damaged the ability of the Byzantine administration to put up an effective defence against the Arabic invaders in

Africa²⁵. The councils that were held during this dispute in the provinces of Africa Proconsularis, Numidia, Byzacena and Mauretania are the last for which council acts are transmitted²⁶. The names of the bishops of Carthage are transmitted, with *lacunae*, until 649²⁷.

In 643, Arabic troops conquered Tripolitania. The threat also became more serious for the central part of Byzantine Africa now. The exarch Gregorius, who had supported the anti-imperial line in the theological conflicts, declared himself independent from the emperor and moved his headquarters to the strategically important town of Sbeitla in the southern high plains to face the invaders, where he suffered a devastating defeat in 647²⁸. At Carthage, deprived of its government and its troops having suffered a serious defeat far away from the capital, we see the first signs of abandonment. At Bir Messaouda, at least part of the mosaic floor was covered with a simple dark mortar floor around the middle of the 7th c., and the building was abandoned and later systematically looted for building material²⁹. The Carthagenna basilica seems to have received its annex chapel only in the early 7th c.³⁰; however, the removal of the piers began as early as at the end of the 7th c., meaning that the building had apparently been abandoned beforehand³¹.

The reduced space of the Damous el Karita basilica and the near negligence of the old extramural basilicas seem to indicate a smaller community, but there can be no doubt that, at the end of the 7th c., Christian buildings still dominated the cityscape, and their communities life in Carthage. For the rest of public life, the picture looks as bleak as in many other cities. In the Byzantine epoch, burials were interred both in the theatre and odeon area, with a small chapel or oratory added at the theatre site³². The circus, which had been in function probably at least up to the middle of the 6th c., was at least in part derelict and was dismantled in the early 7th c.³³. To the south of the circus, roughly in the same period, an orderly cemetery containing around 60 burials was established between the arena and the Theodosian city wall³⁴. Single burials are found in many parts of the Byzantine city,

21 The cistern turned into crypt/memoria seems to have been backfilled at the end of the 7th c, when also the basilica fell out of use, Ben Abed et al. 1999, 114; Ennabli 2000, 73; Miles 2006, 219–221.

22 The textual evidence for the monasteries is discussed by Ennabli 1997, 37 f. and 40 f.; see Bockmann 2013, 112–114 on the physical evidence for monasteries.

23 On the Rue Ibn Chabâat rotunda: Dolenz – Flügel 2012, 70–74; for the rotunda near the theatre and odeon, the so-called *monument circulaire*, the dating of the phases, even proposed for the 8th c., is in discussion.

24 Kaegi 2010, 73–75.

25 Kaegi 2010, 83–89.

26 Maier 1973, 80–84.

27 Victor of Carthage is mentioned in the list of the Lateran

council of that year, but was absent: Maier 1973, 84.

28 Kaegi 2010, 117–121. 138–140.

29 Miles 2006, 222.

30 Ennabli 2000, 70.

31 Ennabli 2000, 48.

32 Leone 2002, 240 f.

33 Norman 1986, 91; Humphrey 1990, 24 f. – See in general Humphrey 1988 and Stevens 1988 especially on the poems from a 6th-c. collection that indicate late usage of the circus. – The circus of Carthage and its context are studied since 2015 in a cooperation project of the German Archaeological Institute Rome and the Institut National du Patrimoine Tunis, co-directed by Ralf Bockmann and Hamden Ben Romdhane.

34 Ellis et al. 1988; Humphrey – Ellis 1988.

also in the centre, but more frequently at the fringes, where they indicate shrinkage of the inhabited territory. Burials started to be interred within city limits in remote places already in the late 5th and 6th c.; however, only in the later 6th and 7th c. are burials frequently found in the city, where they indicate changed usage of areas. An exception to the rule of not burying in the cities was made in North Africa as early as the 5th c. for cemeteries connected with churches. In Carthage, this might have been the case at the large inner-city basilica of Dermech between the Antonine Baths and the Juno Hill, which had a large cemetery surrounding it. Although the datings of the individual burials are disputed, the basilica had been in existence since the 5th c.³⁵ Burials were also placed on the Juno and Byrsa Hills in the Byzantine period³⁶. Single burials, rather than the larger cemeteries outside the circus, had been set in various places at the defunct circular harbour and in its surroundings in the Vandal and Byzantine periods, although the area was at the same time still in use³⁷. The same situation can be observed near the theatre and odeon, where, not far from the area used for burials, larger rooms of a domestic building were subdivided by *opus spicatum* walls and a pottery kiln inserted³⁸.

Although burials advanced into many parts of the city, evidence for continued housing has been documented at a number of sites, sometimes in combination with economic activity. In the Antonine baths, which had been reopened on a reduced scale in the 6th c. after partly collapsing already in the early 5th c., a pottery kiln was inserted in the part of the baths not used anymore as such in the 7th c.³⁹. Similar activities at the same period have been documented in the northwestern part of the city, where a pottery kiln was established in a former domestic context⁴⁰. The increasing establishment of small, individual production centres in functionally changed environments also used for small-scale habitations is illustrative of the economic change that took place in Carthage and North Africa in general in the course of the 7th c. The economy became more locally oriented, and with it pottery production. The production of fine ware was decreasing, as was amphora production, in combination with a lack of demand, both in Africa as

well as in the Mediterranean markets at which African export was oriented⁴¹.

The increase of subdivisions in originally larger houses, documented in some parts of the city, and the establishment of new, simple housing, for example in the former circus building, have been interpreted together with local economic activities as symbols of a dynamic 7th c. at Carthage⁴². Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the inhabited area was considerably smaller in 7th c. Carthage than in earlier centuries. Also considerably earlier, parts of the streets had been blocked, especially at the fringes of the city. The majority of the public buildings had fallen out of use, and also some church buildings seem to have already been given up in the second half of the 7th c., as seen above. Carthage still was a large city, but more in terms of spatial area rather than population, which might have made things more difficult at times. Although we can presume that upper-class housing still existed and was in use in the city in the early 7th c., much of the evidence points to a predominantly very simple life in a city that was in steep decline compared to earlier epochs. As we have seen, in the middle of the 7th c. the exarch of Africa moved his command centre to Sbeitla to react to the threats of attack of the Arabic forces in the south, which coincides roughly with the last transmitted church councils for Africa. The defeat at the battle of Sbeitla was without doubt of high importance for the ultimate loss of the African provinces for the Byzantine Empire in a general situation of largely reduced resources. The deterioration that seems to be visible in various parts of Carthage and some of its major buildings in the second half of the 7th c. coincides with that.

Carthage was not given up lightly, though. Some kind of defensive system seems to have still been intact, reportedly repaired and re-enforced on a large scale in the Early Byzantine period⁴³. Carthage had first been captured by Hassan ibn al-Numan in 695/696, who lost it the year after again to a Byzantine fleet sent by Leontios, but captured it for the second and final time in 698⁴⁴. Hassan ibn al-Numan reportedly had to lay a siege on the city, and destroyed it after he had gained it⁴⁵. As we will see below, settlement did continue in the city,

35 Ben Abed et al. 1999, 108; Leone 2002, 241 f.; Bockmann 2013, 108 f.

36 Leone 2002, 242 f.

37 Hurst 1994, 310–313; Leone 2002, 244.

38 Ellis 1985, 32.

39 Leone 2007, 59.

40 Ellis 1985, 32.

41 Although it has always to be kept in mind that a good part of the economic activities, especially corn and textile production, is often hard to grasp archaeologically, the general tendency is clear in evidence from fine ware and transport amphora studies. – See

Wickham 2005, 720–728 for a synthesis of the economic developments in Africa in the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. – See also the article by M. Bonifay in this volume, who points out that some pottery production centres that were active in the 7th c. continued to produce also in the 8th. – See also the detailed discussion in Ben Abbès 2004, 91–135 who also considers numismatic and historical sources.

42 Argued by Ellis 1985, 35–40.

43 Proc. BV 1, 23, 19–21.

44 See the detailed discussion in Ben Abbès 2004, 288–310.

45 See the discussion in Kaegi 2010, 247–249.

though. It has to be questioned to what extent the defensive system was still intact in its entirety – at the least, neuralgic points like the harbour were further fortified, in that case by a monastery, and the basilica on the Byrsa Hill had been turned into what seemed to be more of a fortlet than a church in the 7th c.⁴⁶.

Tunis pre- and post-conquest

The site of Tunis undoubtedly held a strategic advantage over Carthage, being set back from the seashore itself at the end of a lagoon. A Byzantine fleet recaptured Carthage shortly after al-Nu'man had first captured it, and the threat of naval assaults seems to have been one of the reasons why Tunis seemed the better alternative to establish an administrative centre. To gain access to the sea, a canal was built and secured by a fortress. Hassan ibn al-Numan is proclaimed founder of Tunis in some medieval sources, although the city clearly existed before. Nevertheless, the development of Tunis in the Early Islamic period, although Kairouan was for most of the time the seat of power, made it appear to be an Arabic foundation⁴⁷.

The decision for Tunis was not made arbitrarily. El Bekri describes how the Byzantine population of Tunis fled after al-Nu'man had defeated a Byzantine army on the plain in front of it⁴⁸. Obviously, it was more practical to concentrate on a rather restricted settlement in a good location than try to establish Carthage as main seat in the region. Already in the Vandal period, it is questionable how far Carthage was still the main centre of representation of the Vandal kings. Geiseric's residence was reported to have been at Maxula, on the shore south of the lagoon⁴⁹. Residences of later kings are described as being in «Anclas» and «Alianas», apparently Carthaginian suburbs, that have not as yet been located⁵⁰. The circular harbour of Carthage, which had played a main role until the late 4th c., had silted up during the 5th c. – although the rectangular harbour remained in function, it is possible that part of the maritime trade and traffic had already relocated in the Vandal period to an anchorage inside the lagoon, where the first Punic harbours were

also presumably located⁵¹. The transition of the entirety of the administrative centre from Carthage to Tunis in the Early Islamic period might therefore have not been something radically new, but rather the finalisation of a process that had been ongoing on and off, probably since the 5th c.

Also, Tunis was a pre-existing settlement. Although archaeological investigation beneath the old city is very scarce and we have virtually no hard evidence, the mentioning of a bishop of Tunis in 411 and 553⁵² indicates that the settlement must have been of some size and that it had contained a Christian community. El Bekri was the first to describe Tunis in detail. At the centre, he describes the great mosque, reportedly founded in 732. The city grew around it, and was surrounded by a wall with five gates in different directions⁵³. The urban structure of Tunis therefore was considerably different than the one of Carthage: Bekri describes here an ideal «Islamic» city plan, opposed to the standard Roman one. According to Bekri, al-Nu'man also oversaw the construction of the arsenal built by Coptic specialists brought in from Egypt. The defensive system included not only the lagoon itself, but also a fortress wall, whose mudbrick structure was reinforced towards the east, where the sea lay, by stone blocks⁵⁴.

Medieval sources such as El Bekri and El Idrisi describe Carthage as a collection of ruins with little villages in between, Ibn Hawqal mentions the settlement as highly productive in agricultural goods⁵⁵. Archaeological evidence tells us that settlement continued in some places beyond the end of the 7th c. (fig. 2). We can presume that some people stayed and the city did not become completely depopulated⁵⁶. However, the lack of evidence for occupation in the Islamic period on a larger scale indicates that settlement was very punctual, taking the form of rather isolated and self-sufficient areas equipped with silos and cisterns for storage of food and water. Although it is true that Early Islamic occupation of sites has not been the focus of attention for a long time, and much evidence has surely been lost, in Carthage as well as in many other North African settlements⁵⁷, the picture we get for medieval Carthage would probably not change very much had earlier excavators paid more attention to post-antique evidence at their

46 Gros 1985, 113–126.

47 Sebag 2002.

48 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 91.

49 Victor Vitensis, *Hist. Persec. Vandal.* 1, 17; Bockmann 2013, 57.

50 Bockmann 2013, 52–58.

51 Hurst 1994.

52 Maier 1973, 228.

53 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 85.

54 Cited and discussed by Lézine 1971, 141.

55 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 93–96; El Idrisi, 113 f.; Ibn Hawqal, 83 f.; see the article by Mahfoudh – Altekamp in this volume for a detailed discussion of the Arabic sources on Carthage.

56 As Stevens 2016 has pointed out, probably mainly the leaders of the Byzantine city left Carthage after 698, with the majority of the population remaining in the city.

57 Vitelli 1981, 1. See also the article by Corisande Fenwick in this volume and Stevens 2016.

sites. The UNESCO Save Carthage campaign was documented well in its various points of intervention throughout Carthage, and the image that the city changed from a large urban site with typical antique fabric to an agglomeration of villages over the medieval period seems accurate.

On the Byrsa Hill, a settlement was documented that existed mainly in the 12th c., as indicated by the date range of the pottery that was found in comparatively large amounts during the excavation. On the Byrsa, silos, cisterns, walls, and burials were recorded⁵⁸. The settlement seems to have been known under the name of al-Mu'allaqa («the suspended») at that time. El Idrisi states that the Mu'allaqa was inhabited by a tribe called Banu Ziyad, which seems to coincide with a mentioning of a similar group there that raided Tunis regularly from this base in a later report by Ibn Khaldoun⁵⁹.

The medieval settlement at the Sainte Monique site was clearly installed after the basilica had already been dismantled⁶⁰. A trapezoidal building was recorded cutting the church wall. It had pillars on the inside, indicating that it was a turret with at least a second storey. Next to it, artillery balls of stone were found. Silos and cisterns were recorded in the vicinity, as well as further massive wall remains cutting the church walls, which might further strengthen the interpretation of this site as a defensive structure⁶¹. Its dating is unknown.

At Bir Ftouha, in the former ecclesiastical site, a cistern probably associated with a well and 24 silos were found that, indicated by pottery, seem to have been associated with a settlement with its main phase in the 10th and 11th c.⁶². A considerable proportion of glazed ware has been interpreted as indication for the presence here of a rather well-off stratum of society, who could afford imported goods on a regular basis⁶³.

At that time, not much of the original church building was left. The majority of the churches of Carthage were completely dismantled and all construction material deliberately taken out for secondary usage. This is very clear in the archaeological evidence on the sites. Less clear in many cases is when exactly this happened. Some buildings were apparently taken apart comparatively shortly after the capture of Carthage, some proba-

bly even before as we have seen above. The cupola of the memorial rotunda at Damous el Karita had collapsed at some point after the end of the 7th c. However, the site remained untouched and stood open for a long time before the stone material of the upper levels of the rotunda was removed and the subterranean structure was back-filled⁶⁴. Many Late Antique capitals are found in Early Medieval buildings, most of all the great mosques, at Tunis and Kairouan. Idrisi reports in the 12th c. that still then, and since a long time, large amounts of stone material were extracted from Carthage and transported to settlements all over Africa⁶⁵.

The survival of some churches is likely, as the Christian community in Carthage did continue to exist into the 11th c.⁶⁶. But was it still of any significance? Carolingian sources of the mid-9th c. were convinced that the relics of the great Carthaginian martyrs Cyprian and the Scillitani had already been transferred to Lyon in the early 9th c.⁶⁷. This did not mean that pilgrimage ended, though, as discussed above. The community in Carthage might still have been existent, but it apparently lost its influence and received no more attention, even from its adversaries.

Ideological aspects between Carthage and Kairouan

Medieval authors like El Bekri and El Idrisi do not mention the Christian past or present of Carthage with a single word in the 11th and 12th c. For Idrisi, Carthage was uninhabited, apart from the hilltop called al-Mu'allaqa, even though according to him it produced exquisite fruits and agricultural commodities⁶⁸. El Bekri's description is quite similar, although he refers to the little villages between the ruins that were provided with water from old canals and reservoirs, apparently near the Antonine Baths, which had been reused and equipped with scoop wheels⁶⁹. Both authors were particularly fascinated with the old water provision of the city in the form of the Zaghouan aqueduct⁷⁰. Both El Bekri and El Idrisi

58 Ferron – Pinard 1955; Ferron – Pinard 1960–1961; Vitelli 1981, 18–27.

59 El Idrisi, 112 f. See also Vitelli 1981, 41–43 for a discussion of these sources.

60 Delattre 1916, 152. 162; Vitelli 1981, 9 f. sums up the evidence at the site. See also Ferron – Pinard 1954, 41.

61 Whitehouse 1983 proposed the building to be a mosque instead, though this interpretation is not convincing, discussed by Stevens 2016.

62 Stevens et al. 2005, 489–494.

63 Stevens 2016.

64 Dolenz 2001, 68.

65 El Idrisi, 113 f.

66 Conant 2012, 362–370.

67 Conant 2010, 2 f. See also Courtois 1945, 11–13, with critical discussion.

68 El Idrisi, 112 f.

69 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 95.

70 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 94 f.; El Idrisi, 113 f.

refer to the impressive ruins of Carthage, but both also describe the city as a large quarry. El Idrisi states that people had been digging for stones in Carthage even below the building's foundations ever since its fall – if we take him at his word for over 400 years – and that the variety of marble found here is impossible to describe⁷¹. He refers to gigantic columns and blocks that can be found, and that are transported to every part of North Africa. El Bekri describes the impressive ruins of the large Roman buildings that were still standing to a certain height. Idrisi talks about the five stacked colonnades of the amphitheatre⁷². El Bekri describes a cupola so high that it was impossible to throw arrows and reach it with them from the floor⁷³. Some places were haunted, for example the «cisterns of the demons» that El Bekri describes, with their age-old water, maybe the La Marga cisterns that also impressed Idrisi⁷⁴. A building on several levels evoked horror in El Bekri with the bodies that could be found there and that fell to dust when touched. One could find inscriptions in long forgotten languages in Carthage, and marvel at the wonders of the city, as both El Bekri and El Idrisi describe vividly. In these descriptions, Carthage was an enchanted, age-old place whose younger history as the Byzantine capital of Africa and centre of Christianity was completely blanked out. When El Bekri talked about Carthage, Hannibal and Scipio were the characters associated with the city⁷⁵. The same author also connected the early history of Carthage to Old Testament events, that his readers could relate to⁷⁶.

It is probably no coincidence that the Christian history is not mentioned anymore, although a community seems to have existed at Carthage at least in the days of El Bekri. The secondary usage of capitals and columns from churches might have happened in many cases for practical reasons, but could bear an ideological component as well. The great mosque at Kairouan is a case in point. The origins of the mosque are generally dated to the foundation of Arabic Kairouan in 670 with the founding events being mystified⁷⁷. After the capture of Carthage, Hassan ibn al-Numan allegedly initiated the complete renewal of the building⁷⁸. According to Bekri, Hassan had two porphyry columns brought from a church to endow the new mosque, which the Byzantine emperor wanted to buy from him paying their weight in gold⁷⁹. The symbolic meaning of this episode lies on the

one hand in the fact that the columns came from a church, which is specifically mentioned, but more strongly on their direct relation to the Byzantine ruler, to whom they were of immense importance. Hassan's incorporation of the porphyry columns, representing Romano-Byzantine style rulership, in the mosque was a symbolic triumph over Byzantium. Additionally, the mutilated capitals originally showing eagle protomes might have been a symbolic triumph over the Christian emperor⁸⁰. It has to be kept in mind, though, that the reluctance to depict living beings in accordance with religious rules was strong, and furthermore, a reluctance existed to even use building material that came from churches in general⁸¹. This attitude is another argument for the strong symbolism connected with the alleged usage of porphyry columns from a church in the mosque at Kairouan. The general structure of the great mosque as it is still existent today is the result of a reconstruction of the 9th c., that apparently reused much of the spolia that had already been built into the earlier structure⁸². A minute study of the architecture of the mosque has shown how the green column shafts were used to highlight the larger main aisle, whose columns were crowned by more classical Roman capitals, whereas the mihrab was dominated by red colours and typologically later Byzantine capitals⁸³. The positions of the red and green columns in the inner rows of the prayer room form in combination with the capitals several geometric patterns typical of Early Islamic art, and the proportional scheme of the mosque at Kairouan even refers to the al-Aksa mosque in Jerusalem⁸⁴. The great mosque at Kairouan in this respect becomes a building that uses the past in the form of building materials, overcomes it in a triumphal way, and refers to holy sites in an already established Islamic environment. We have to keep in mind though that the evidence we have from the great mosque and the sources do not come from the transitional period itself, but are of later date when the political and social situation had already changed. Nevertheless, the conflict with the formerly predominant religion in North Africa seems to have influenced how new religious and political centres were constructed.

The great mosque at Tunis received a new endowment as well – capitals in both buildings match according to early studies and seem to be originating partly from the same buildings, many surely placed in

71 El Idrisi, 113 f.

72 El Idrisi, 113 f.

73 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 95.

74 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 94; El Idrisi, 113 f.

75 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 91–93.

76 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 89 f.

77 See the article by Bahri – Taamallah in this volume.

78 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 57.

79 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 57 f.

80 Ewert – Wisshak 1981, 46.

81 Harrazi 1982, 214 f.

82 Moorsel – van der Vin 1973, 363 f.

83 Ewert – Wisshak 1981, 31–35.

84 Ewert – Wisshak 1981, 17–20. 46.

Carthage⁸⁵. The site of the bay of Tunis, or the bay of Radès, was in the Early Islamic period connected to religious events in the Islamic tradition. El Bekri reports how, after the Byzantine counterattack, the caliph Abd el-Melek was encouraged to send reinforcements to Tunis by religious leaders, who promised the defenders that if they guarded it even only for a single day, they would directly enter paradise⁸⁶. The defence of Tunis and the bay of Radès was a religious duty, at least looking back in the days of el Bekri, and accordingly rewarded. The bay of Radès was considered the place where the patriarch El Khidr (associated with Elijah) landed, killed the king of Carthage and where he was left by Moses⁸⁷. Pre-Mohammedan events were placed at the site, but even more important was probably that it was the starting point on the way to Kairouan. The system of control and defence of the road connection between the Bay of Tunis and Hammamet and the eastern coast, going along the foot of the Cape Bon peninsula, was maintained very similarly in the Early Islamic period⁸⁸. At that point, Radès had gained importance as a harbour and connection to the eastern inland areas.

The religious sphere was important from an ideological point of view, and could be used for propagandistic reasons. Although the shift of the capitals, from Carthage to Kairouan and Tunis, must have appeared logical and necessary, it nevertheless bore the ideological component of religious affiliation, which should not be underestimated. As we have seen earlier, the city of Carthage was also, from a practical point of view, far from being a suitable residence after the Arabic conquest. It was soon reduced to a romantic museum and quarry. The ability to defend the capital, and to connect it with supply and information routes was important, and that also made Tunis important at the bay. In the case of Carthage and Tunis, their topographies differed very much, and the history and state of Carthage in the later 7th c. surely excluded it from becoming a capital again. Even though this case is exceptional and, as has been pointed out several times, the developments cannot be generalised, it shows how not only the secular infrastructure, like water supply, roads and economic production centres, but also the religious infrastructure could in some cases predetermine the survival and transition of cities from the Byzantine period to the Islamic era in North Africa.

Abstract

Carthage was not only the cultural, political and administrative centre of North Africa, it was also the centre of African Christianity, clearly visible in a rich and diverse Christian topography that was being developed throughout the Byzantine period, even though the city, like many others, went through considerable changes to its urban structure from the end of the late Roman period. After the Arab conquest of Carthage, neighbouring Tunis was favoured as a new centre because of its strate-

gic and practical advantages. The symbolic appropriation of classical and Byzantine building material, visible in the great mosques of Kairouan and Tunis, furthermore shows a religious component in the power transition, due to the heavy Christian imprint on Carthage. Later Arabic sources blend out the Christian past of Carthage and describe it as an almost romantic field of classical ruins interspersed with agricultural villages – a picture in general coinciding with the archaeology.

Résumé

Carthage n'était pas seulement le centre culturel, politique et administratif de l'Afrique du Nord, mais également le centre du christianisme africain, clairement visible dans une topographie chrétienne riche et diversifiée

qui se développait également à l'époque byzantine, même si la ville, comme beaucoup d'autres, a connu des changements considérables dans sa structure urbaine à la fin de l'époque romaine. Après la conquête arabe de

85 Ewert – Wisshak 1981, 31–35.

86 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 83.

87 El Bekri, ed. de Slane, 83.

88 Mahfoudh 2000.

Carthage, la ville voisine de Tunis a été privilégiée comme nouveau centre, en raison de ses avantages stratégiques et pratiques. L'appropriation symbolique des matériaux de construction classiques et byzantins, visible dans les grandes mosquées de Kairouan et de Tunis, montre en outre une composante religieuse dans la

transition du pouvoir, due à la forte empreinte chrétienne sur Carthage. Les sources arabes postérieures omettent le passé chrétien de Carthage et la décrivent comme un champ presque romantique de ruines classiques entrecoupées de villages agricoles – une image qui coïncide en général avec l'archéologie.

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Figs. 1. 2 R. Bockmann and Marion Menzel on the basis of Ennabli 1997, 6 fig. 1

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