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The Fate of the Classical Cities of Ifrīqiya in the Early Middle Ages

by *Corisande Fenwick*

Introduction

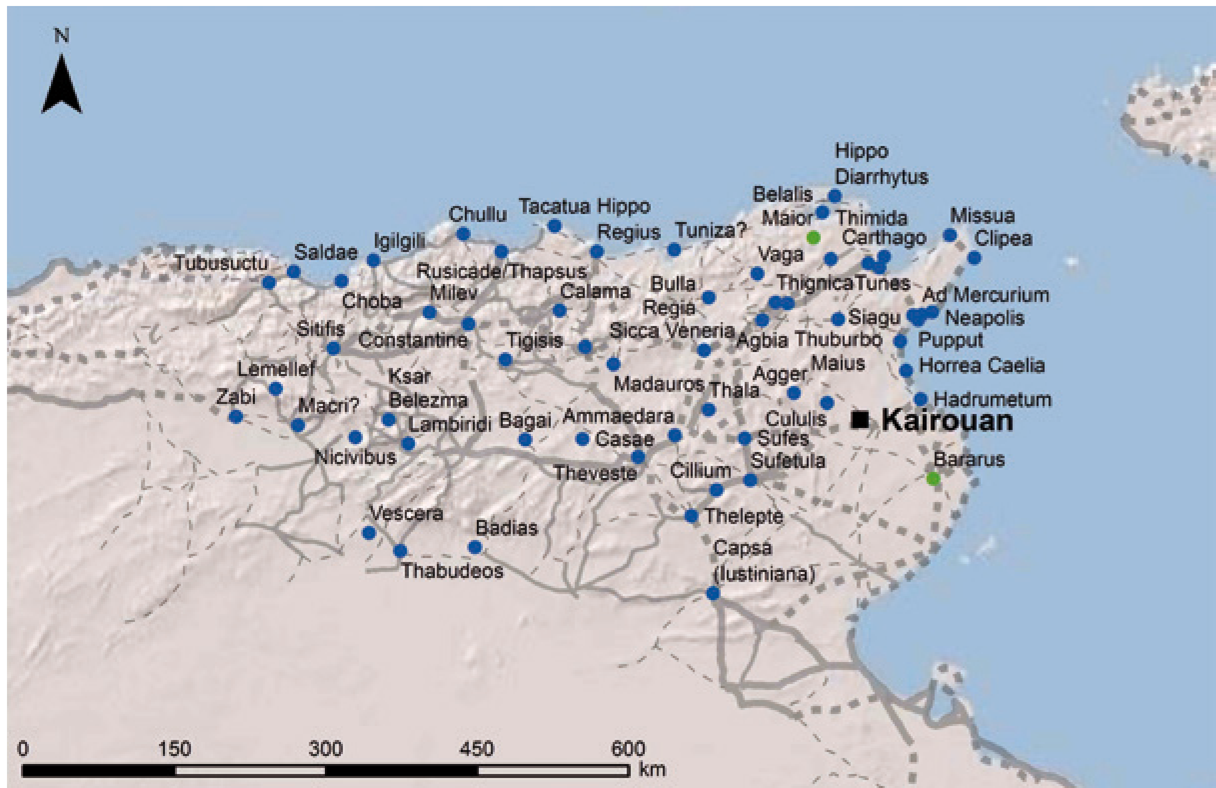
In 642, when the Umayyad armies crossed the Western Desert to raid North Africa, they found themselves in a landscape of cities that could defend themselves – or that at least is the story told by Muslim scholars writing in Arabic several centuries later[1]. In contrast to the medieval sources, which paint an image of an intensely urban North Africa both during and after the Arab conquests, modern scholars have often seen the period as a time of rapid dissolution in urban life, resulting in the complete or partial abandonment of many towns, and the fragmentation or «ruralisation» of others into small, scattered zones of habitation within the ruins of the classical town. In the past three decades, this model has been completely overturned in the central lands of the caliphate, where a series of studies drawing heavily on archaeology offer a very different reading of Byzantine and Sassanian towns in the early Islamic period[2]. Yet, despite repeated attempts to challenge such narratives for North Africa on similar archaeological grounds over the last few decades – most forcefully by Yvon Thébert and Jean-Louis Biget in a provocative 1990 article on the disappearance of the classical city – the catastrophist model remains strong in the absence of explicit discussion of North African urbanism after the Arab conquests[3].

This article re-examines the question of the fate of the inherited classical cities of Early Medieval Ifrīqiya (broadly understood as eastern Algeria, Tunisia and coastal Tripolitania) during the late 7th and 8th c., that is, the period when this region was ruled by the Umayyad and then the Abbasid caliphate[4]. While other papers in this volume by and large focus on how particular sites experienced the transition from Africa to Ifrīqiya, I am equally interested in understanding broader patterns of urban success and failure in the Early Middle Ages. My argument is threefold: first, that the inherited Byzantine towns continued to dominate the urban hierarchy in the Early Medieval period, accompanied by a decline in the number of coastal sites and smaller towns; second, that those towns that survived follow a range of trajectories, but overwhelmingly do not fragment or «ruralize»; and third, that these patterns expose a slow but significant transformation of the urban organisation of Ifrīqiya in the Early Medieval period.

Gaps and holes

The urban history of Early Medieval Ifrīqiya is difficult to write because it has been so seldom studied. Our difficulties in coming to grips with what actually happened in the post-conquest period are compounded by the shortcomings of our written evidence, most of which was composed not in the 7th or 8th c., but rather in the 9th c. or later. The most detailed geographical accounts of North Africa – al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897-8), al-Muqaddasī (d. 380/ 990), Ibn Ḥawḳal (late 4th/10th c.), al-Bakrī (d. 487/ 1094), al-Idrīsī (d. 560/1165) – provide eloquent descriptions of individual towns, often recounting such details as the number of *ḥammāms* (bath-houses), the ethnic make-up of the population or the types of goods manufactured or sold in different towns. In many cases, these writers had first-hand knowledge of the cities from their own travels, but even so, we do not have anything close to the level of descriptive detail for North Africa and its towns that we have for the central and eastern lands of the caliphate in this period. What is clear, however, is that both the conquest chronicles and geographies describe Ifrīqiya as a prosperous region of many cities[5].

1 For an excellent historical overview of the conquests, see Brett 1978, and the recent account of the Byzantine and Arab conflicts in Kaegi 2010. The latter draws heavily upon Benabbès 2004, a systematic re-evaluation of the conquest chronicles for North Africa.
2 Kennedy 1985; Foss 1997; Kennedy 2006; Walmsley 2007; Avni 2011; Eger 2013; Avni 2014.
3 Thébert – Biget 1990. See also Février 1983. For earlier attempts to characterize the archaeology of Islamic North Africa, see Sjöström 1993; Gelichi – Milanese 2002; Pentz 2002. – On the catastrophist model, see Ward-Perkins 1997.
4 For the administrative organization of Ifrīqiya in the caliphal period, see Djaït 1967; Djaït 1968.
5 See Mrabet 1996 on the prosperity of Ifrīqiya from the perspective of the Arabic sources.



1 Map of Early Medieval towns in Ifrīqiya

Archaeology offers the most potential to shed new light on these towns and cities, but poses its own substantial challenges[6]. The first of these derives from the fact that many cities have been continuously occupied for millennia, and the medieval layers are hidden below by subsequent development. Salvage urban excavations are still uncommon in much of the Middle East and North Africa: as a result, we know almost nothing about the major cities of medieval Africa – Tunis, Kairouan, Tripoli, Béja and so on. Archaeological research has therefore tended to focus on a handful of cities which were completely or partially abandoned at some point in their history[7]. This has important implications for an archaeology of urbanism[8]. Focusing on cities that ultimately failed means that we risk viewing as normative those sites which become less important in the Late Antique or post-classical period. Second, even for excavated sites, we often have a very partial understanding of the Late Antique and Early Medieval phases. Many towns were excavated on a huge scale down to their 1st–3rd-c. Roman layers in the colonial period; Late Antique and Early Medieval layers were stripped and rarely recorded[9]. Finally, our knowledge of medieval ceramics is at an early stage and it is often difficult to accurately date and identify medieval occupation – particularly in the post-conquest period[10]. These issues constrain the urban histories that we can write.

Mapping urban change at the regional scale

To understand how the urban landscape was transformed in the Early Middle Ages, we must begin with a simple question: how many towns continued to operate as such under Umayyad/Abbasid rule? This is a far more difficult question to answer than one might imagine. There is no equivalent to Pierre Salama's magnificent, reworked, *Carte des routes et des cites à la fin de l'antiquité* or the Barrington Atlas for the medieval period[11].

6 Fenwick 2013, 11–14.
7 The key sites are Leptis Magna, Sabratha, Tocra, Cyrene in Libya; Carthage, Sbeïtla, Haïdra, Oudhna, Bulla Regia, Chemtou, Dougga, Thuburbo Maius, Mactar, Utica in Tunisia; Tipasa, Cherchel, Timgad, Lambaesis, Djemila, Madaure and Khemissa in Algeria.
8 See Christie 2012.
9 Leone 2007 demonstrates the potential of systematically re-visiting this material for the Late Antique period.
10 See Cressier – Fentress 2011 for the latest on the state of medieval ceramic research in North Africa.
11 See Desanges et al. 2012 and Talbert 2000. The data from the Barrington Atlas is now available to access and download from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/> (accessed 15.01.2015); their site co-or-

Any analysis has to be based largely on literary sources which can be corroborated or supplemented by archaeological evidence for individual sites, where it exists[12]. In practice, the difficulty in securely dating material from the late 7th and 8th c. means that arguments for Early Medieval settlement often rest on indirect evidence. For instance, I assume that major North African towns today like Sousse (anc. *Hadrumetum*) or Constantine (anc. *Cirta*) had continuous dense urban settlement, even during those centuries when we have no contemporary written information or excavated evidence. In other cases, my argument for urban continuity rests on a few coins or ceramic sherds, the absence of destruction layers, or more frequently the simple fact that a Roman city is described as a city in the Arabic sources of the 9th or later centuries[13].

Figure 1 maps the distribution of towns in Ifrīqiya with direct or indirect evidence for Early Medieval occupation. A general trend of urban continuity is immediately obvious. Only two towns – Kairouan (670) and Tunis (699) – were formally founded under the Umayyads and Abbasids; both were established on, or near to, existing settlements[14]. The remainder of the urban network consisted of towns that had been occupied for centuries, many with pre-Roman origins. Those towns that continue share some common characteristics: they tend to be the largest in antiquity with all the Roman monumental buildings (temples, theatres, ampitheatres, baths) that one would expect a sizeable town to have[15]. They are situated in strategic places and often gain town walls or intra-mural fortifications in the Byzantine period[16]. In Late Antiquity, they usually become bishoprics and gain several churches[17].

Alongside this continuity, a second pattern – a decrease in the total number of functioning cities – emerges clearly. Put simply, there are far less towns in medieval North Africa than there were in Roman Africa. Identifying when and why towns ended is a difficult but important question; it is apparent that the process of deurbanisation is very gradual and some regions were affected more than others[18]. Some cities were already severely depopulated decades before the first Arab raids. Meninx on the island of Jerba, for example, may have disappeared as early as the late 6th c.[19]. At Cherchel in Algeria, a large sand deposit in the forum area provides clear evidence of a hiatus in settlement between the 6th c. and reoccupation in the 14th c.[20]. Recent excavations at Volubilis in Morocco suggest an even earlier hiatus: 7th c. houses are built on two metres of destruction material dating to the late 4th or early 5th c.[21]. In all three cases, stratigraphic excavations were conducted on a fraction of the site and we do not know whether all or only part of the town was abandoned, before being later reoccupied.

On the other hand, it is equally unwise to deny that some cities were abandoned or much reduced in the Early Middle Ages. Although we can rarely be precise about the exact dates of urban abandonment, Figure 2 does reveal a significant scale of loss in total numbers of urban sites between the 7th c. and 9th c. Some areas were affected more than others. The former province of Proconsularis, densely urbanised in antiquity, has far fewer towns in the middle ages. In Byzacena and Numicia, in contrast, where urban sites largely cluster along the main east-west routes or coastal routes there is far less difference between the Late Antique and Early Medieval

dinates are used in my analysis, with corrections or additions where necessary.

12 This textual evidence is largely compiled from Paul-Louis Cambuzat's 1982 gazetteer of sites in the Tell (Cambuzat 1982), supplemented by Claudette Vanacker's 1973 work on the geography of medieval North Africa (Vanacker 1973).

13 In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I assume that this reflects continuous dense settlement of an urban nature.

14 The Arabic sources are confusing and contradictory on the early history of Kairouan (see e. g. Talbi 1976). One tradition relates that 'Uqba b. Nāfi' built his new town *ex novo* in a plain covered by thick vegetation and home to reptiles and savage animals, while others suggest that the camp was established on, or on the outskirts of, an existing town. M'Charek 1999 convincingly identifies this existing settlement as Iubaltianae and dismisses its earlier identification as Qamūniya. Nothing is known of the municipal history of the site: it may have been an imperial estate centre or a small road station, but it was certainly a bishopric and bishops are attested at various councils between 397 and 646. More is known about the transition from Roman Tunes to medieval Tunis (Lézine 1971, 141–154). On the eve of the conquests, Tunes was a strong town protecting Carthage from its south; although it is barely mentioned in the classical sources, bishops attended Councils in 411 and 533 (Mesnage 1913, 164 f.). Al-Bakrī gives us the fullest account and tells us that the inhabitants of Tunes had fled when Hassan b. al-Nu'mān captured it, established a garrison there and built a mosque (de Slane 1913, 81 f.). Ibn Ḥawḳal tells us that «after the Muslims had built new constructions there, renovated the gardens and walls, it was called Tunis» (Kramers – Wiet 1964, I 70). Finds in the western part of the medina, especially in the vicinity of the Zitouna mosque, suggest that the medieval town was founded atop the Roman centre (Mahfoudh 2003, 173–209).

15 Andrew Wilson 2011, 183 f. tabl. 187. 188 recently estimated that fewer than 10 per cent of early Roman cities were likely to have had over 5000 inhabitants or an area in excess of 25ha. Carthage was the largest city, by some measure, with c. 300,000 inhabitants in a walled area of 390 ha followed by Lepcis Magna, Hadrumetum, Iol Caesarea and Cirta. He estimates c. 46, perhaps more, towns had populations of between 5000 and 25,000. With a few exceptions, these are the towns that survive.

16 See Pringle 1981 on Byzantine fortifications in North Africa.

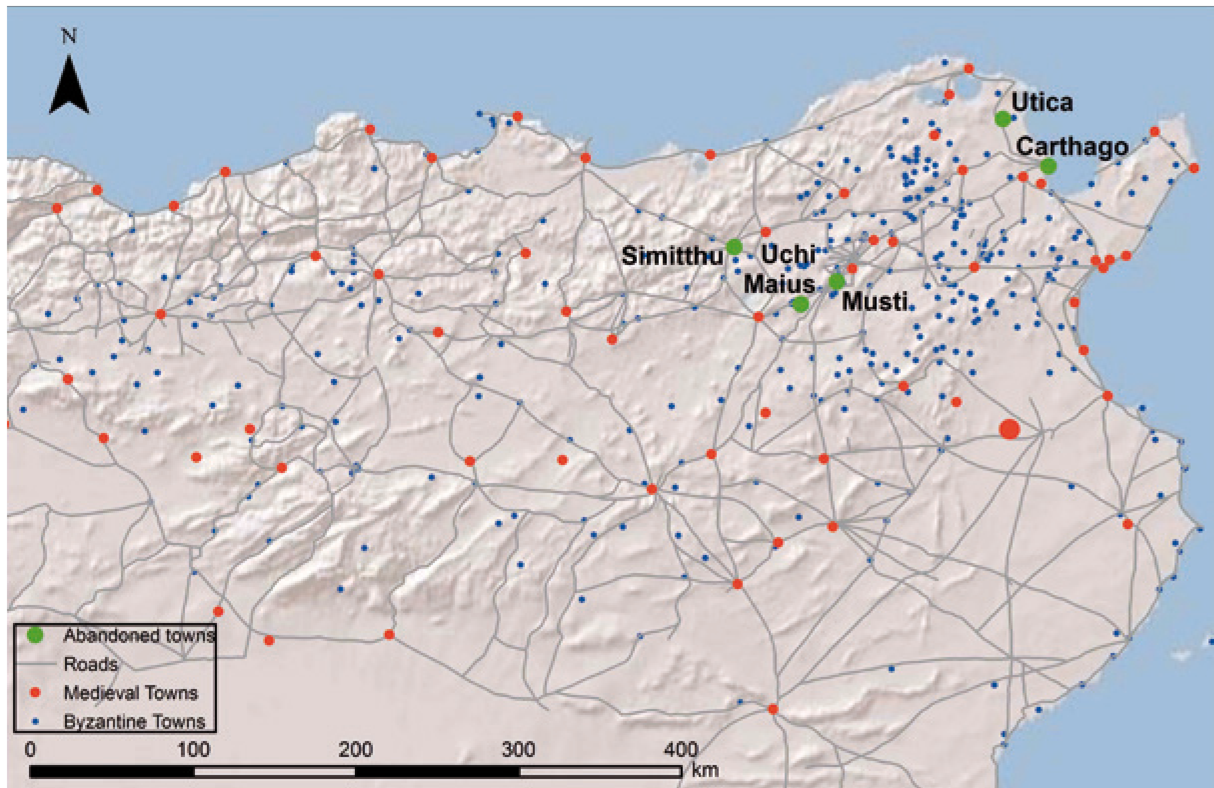
17 On bishoprics, see Maier 1973.

18 See Christie 2012 on the challenges of examining urban abandonment.

19 Fentress et al. 2009, 174.

20 Benseddik 1986; Potter 1995.

21 Fentress – Limane 2010.



2 Map contrasting the location of Early Medieval towns occupied with those which have either archaeological or documentary evidence for occupation in the Byzantine period 6th–7th c.

periods, though an overall drop in numbers is still readily apparent. Further to the east, in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, where the major urban centres were always constrained to the coast and good anchorages, there is no evidence for urban abandonment at all[22].

Small towns in the north of Tunisia seem to suffer disproportionately in this period compared to other regions; a trend that appears to be confirmed by recent excavations. Excavations at the small urban sites of Uchi Maius, Musti, Althiburos and Chemtou found clear signs of abandonment in some zones between Late Antique layers and later medieval re-occupation of the 9th or 10th c.[23]. At Musti, for example, there is a deep layer of colluvium visible between the Late Antique and medieval housing lining the street in the lower town[24]. Excavations in the forum of Chemtou found a similar alluvial layer between kilns and workshops of the 6th–7th c. and a medieval settlement of small houses dating to the 9th–10th c., but it remains an open question as to whether this reflects a site-wide hiatus[25]. The old forum at Uchi Maius has a similar abandonment layer separating a lime kiln in the late 6th–7th c. from housing of the 10th–12th c.[26]. Here, however, the entire town may not have been abandoned, but instead reduced to the walled citadel at the high point of the site, which seems to have been occupied in the 8th and 9th c. before being given over to similar housing to that found in the forum[27]. At other sites such as Jama (Zama Regia) and Henchir es Souar (Abthugni), there is increasing evidence for continuity of occupation, particularly inside the walled zone of the

22 See King 1989 for a summary of the archaeological evidence for urban continuity in Libya. However, Munzi et al. 2014, 220 note in their survey of the Lepcitanian hinterland that smaller coastal sites and villas were abandoned from the 4th–5th c. on and inland rural sites a few centuries later before a rural boom in the Aghlabid period. They state that they have found no secure archaeological proof of rural continuity between Late Antiquity and the medieval period.

23 Uchi Maius: Gelichi – Milanese 2002. – Althiburos: Kallala – Sanmartí 2011, 43. – Zama: Ferjaoui 2001; Ferjaoui – Touihri 2005; Bartoloni et al. 2010.

24 Personal observation. The 1960s excavations at Musti have never been published, but it would be important to establish whether the Fatimid occupation attested in the central sector of the site in the form of an inscription, coins and ceramics represents resettlement or continuous occupation from Late Antiquity: Desanges et al. 2010, 182 f.

25 von Rummel, this volume.

26 For a summary, see Gelichi – Milanese 2002. On the colluvial layer in the forum separating the 6th/7th lime kiln and structures from 10th c. medieval housing, see Milanese 2003, 39. The forum at Uchi Maius has a complex Late Antique history but seems to have lost its civic function by the end of the 4th c.

27 Milanese 2003, 31 note that the contexts of the transitional period are characterised by slipped ceramics, probably dating to the 7th–9th c.

sites, but not continuity of municipal function[28]. In all these cases, stratigraphic excavations have only been conducted on a fraction of the site and new work in other zones may well transform this picture. Even so, by the 9th or 10th c., these settlements were not sufficiently important to be noted as towns in the accounts of the Muslim geographers. The sharp drop of urban settlement in northern Tunisia may perhaps be explained by the dense urbanisation of this region in the Roman period, which seems to have become increasingly unsustainable by the 6th or 7th c., and was likely exacerbated by the thirty-odd years of Arab-Byzantine fighting around Carthage.

Another apparent trend is a reduction in the number of coastal sites. A recent survey of the Tunisian coastline identified only 13 sites which had evidence of activity in the period 700–800, in contrast to 90 sites which had evidence for Byzantine occupation[29]. Progressive coastal erosion and rising sea-levels in Late Antiquity may be, in part, responsible for this decrease[30]. At several of those coastal sites (e. g. Carthage, Leptis, Utica) which seem to become less important or even disappear by the Early Medieval period, the shallow ports had already become clogged with alluvium in Late Antiquity[31]. The impact of environmental changes on cities was exacerbated by the failure to dredge and maintain harbours, build sea walls, keep dams in good repair and drains and sewers clear. Carthage's ports, for example, became clogged with alluvium and choked with weeds from around 600[32]; the study of botanical remains in the harbour area found a notable increase in waste-ground taxa in the Late Byzantine period, suggesting that this area was more or less derelict well before the capture of Carthage[33]. Indeed, the first and only substantial investment in infrastructure that took place under the caliphate was the construction of a new harbour and arsenal at Tunis (Tunes) in 705; this early investment in a massive port construction project can only be explained by the fact that Carthage lacked the harbour infrastructure that Ḥasan b. Nuʿmān required to protect his new navy[34]. After centuries of neglect and lack of investment in infrastructure, the coastal towns that thrived in the medieval period were sites such as Bizerte, Sousse, Sfax, Tunis, Mahdia and Tripoli with naturally deep harbours which continue to be used to the present day[35].

There is no need to be wholly environmentally deterministic, however. Maritime trade and urban success on the coast did not simply depend upon the provision of good harbour facilities. Lebda (Lepcis Magna) provides an excellent example of a town with a silted-up harbour which continued to prosper and function as an important coastal trading centre into the middle ages. By the 7th c., the harbour had become completely filled in aside from the seasonal wadi cutting through to the sea and the city had probably been displaced as the central town in Tripolitania by Trablus (anc. Oea/ Tripolis – see paper by Hafed Abdouli in the volume p. 121–135)[36]. Urban life and maritime trade did not stop, however. Enrico Cirelli has ably pulled together the evidence for medieval Lepcis and shown that the town continued to thrive, comprising an enclosed settlement of 28 ha focused on the port area, perhaps with some pockets of occupation outside the walls in the market, chalcidicum, circus, and Hunting Baths[37]. Although the harbour was no longer functioning as it had in the early Roman period, small ships could probably still dock near the end of the western dock, or perhaps be pulled up on the beach[38]. Certainly, the ceramics (globular amphorae and jugs dating to the 9th–10th c.) produced at the medieval kiln at the

28 Touihri 2014. It should be noted that Bartoloni et al. 2010, 222 state in the interim report that Jama seems to have been abandoned before being re-occupied in the 9th c. For the medieval settlement, see Ferjaoui – Touihri 2005, 110 s.; Touihri 2014, 135–137. The full publication of these important excavations will provide key information on the relationship of the medieval settlement to that of the late antique town.

29 Slim et al. 2004. The project identified 210 coastal sites in three main areas: the gulf of Gabès (87 sites), the Sahel and Cap Bon (69 sites), and the gulf of Tunis and northern coast (52 sites). My numbers are based on their table of sites, p223-6.

30 Slim et al. 2004 identify an erosive crisis in Late Antiquity which predates the Arab conquest. See for the Mediterranean: Goiran – Morhange 2003; Marriner et al. 2010.

31 For Utica, which was affected by the in-filling of the wadi, see Chelbi et al. 1995. – For Leptis, see Pucci et al. 2011. – For Carthage, see Hurst 1994; Van Zeist et al. 2001.

32 Hurst 1994.

33 Van Zeist et al. 2001

34 On the maritime works of Ḥasan b. Nuʿmān, see Sebag 1970.

35 Even in the Roman period, many coastal sites did not have artificial port structures (jetties, wharfs etc.): Stone 2014 notes only 29 definite and 16 possible man-made structures between Mauretania Tingitana and Cyrenaica. It is striking that almost all of his firmly identified artificial port structures are located at towns that continue to thrive in the medieval period.

36 Massive inland flooding between the mid-4th and mid-5th c. caused the dam to collapse and the wadi to regain its former course with devastating effects for the city. Huge amounts of alluvial sands were deposited throughout the city, perhaps causing some buildings to collapse, and the harbour began to silt up. Pucci et al. 2011. See also Goodchild – Perkins 1953, 71–72. These archaeologically attested inundations lend support to Procopius' statement that large parts of Lepcis Magna were buried in sand in the 6th-c. (Proc. aed. 6, 4, 1).

37 For a full account of medieval Leptis, see Cirelli 2001.

38 Leidwanger 2013 has recently identified an increasing trend in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean to use simple maritime facilities, such as beaches or small jetties, as «opportunistic ports» for trade and exchange. Goods could be offloaded from ships in shallow water and carried ashore. The same phenomenon may have occurred in North Africa, as attested by a mosaic found in a mid-3rd c. CE tomb at Sousse (Hadrumetum) which shows just this phenomenon (Houston 1988, 561).

Flavian temple circulated to the village and ksour sites in the town's hinterland; the amphorae presumably containing olive oil would have also been exported by sea[39]. Even with a silted-up harbour, Lepcis remained a sizeable coastal town into the 11th c. and continued to trade, producing and importing globular amphorae and olive oil on some scale.

Two final points about the drop in number of coastal cities are worth making. These coastal cities that failed may have been more dependent on larger-scale networks of economic exchange, particularly maritime networks that collapsed in the Early Middle Ages[40]. Indeed, several excavated coastal towns, such as Meninx and Cherchel, faltered in Late Antiquity when Mediterranean maritime trading networks first began to fragment and may have already lost their urban function by the time of the Muslim conquests[41]. At the same time that long-distance maritime exchange collapsed, the Mediterranean was simultaneously transformed from a connected sea into a frontier. If Tripoli, Tunis and Sousse, cities with large, deep fortified harbours, housed the Arab navy and were the base for frequent raids on the western Mediterranean, North Africa's coastline was also increasingly at risk from Byzantine sea raids[42]. Unfortified or smaller towns would have been particularly susceptible to raids by sea. A similar reduction in the number and size of coastal cities is paralleled on the coast of Syria/Palestine, where port towns such as al-Mina, Selucea and Qaysariah (Caesarea) were significantly reduced in size during the 7th and 8th c.[43]. A combination of these factors, then, may best explain the reduction in number of coastal towns.

Towns in transition

If, as we have seen, many towns did remain occupied in the Early Middle Ages, what did this continuity of occupation look like? Three towns taken from across the settlement hierarchy provide us with different information on the transformation of Byzantine cities in the Early Middle Ages: Carthage, the former Byzantine capital; Sbeïtla (Sufetula), a town which might have served as the base of the Byzantine troops in the mid-7th c.; and at the very other end of the spectrum, the small town of Henchir el-Faouar (Belalis Maior) which disappears from the written sources after the 4th c. These comprise some of the more fully-excavated sites in Ifrīqiya proper for our period, but by the 14th c. and often much earlier, none of these settlements were occupied in any substantial manner[44].

Carthage

Carthage is a spectacular example of a major metropolis that failed in the Early Middle Ages (fig. 3). The capital of Africa under Punic, Roman, Vandal and Byzantine rule, and one of the largest cities in the Mediterranean, it was captured by Ḥasan b. Nuʿmān in 698, after he cut the aqueduct and water supply[45]. The capture of Carthage had immense symbolic weight, signalling the appropriation and conquest of one of the most famous Mediterranean cities of the Byzantine realms. According to the sources, Carthage was abandoned by its Byzantine inhabitants who sailed away; the city was subsequently sacked, its walls destroyed and the harbour filled in. Ibn Idhari, for example, states that once the inhabitants had run away, Ḥasan b. Nuʿmān «had Carthage destroyed and dismantled, so that every trace was effaced»"[46]. The stones from Carthage were used to build Tunis, and indeed to decorate the Great Mosque at Kairouan, a highly symbolic gesture. This is the only such example of a capital being abandoned and destroyed in the entire Islamic world. Rhetorical exaggeration colours the descriptions of complete abandonment, perhaps in part a reference to the infamous Roman destruction of Punic Carthage. The archaeological evidence suggests both severe urban collapse as well as continuous urban settlement in parts of the city.

The sacking of Carthage can perhaps be seen in destruction deposits associated with the robbing out of the Theodosian wall and a substantial destruction layer in

39 Cirelli et al. 2012, 772. For the kiln, see Dolciotti – Ferioli 1984. – For the ceramics, see Dolciotti 2007.

40 On systems of exchange in the Early Middle Ages and the collapse of large-scale maritime networks, see Wickham 2005, 693–824.

41 See above. Meninx: Fentress et al. 2009, 174. – Cherchel: Potter 1995.

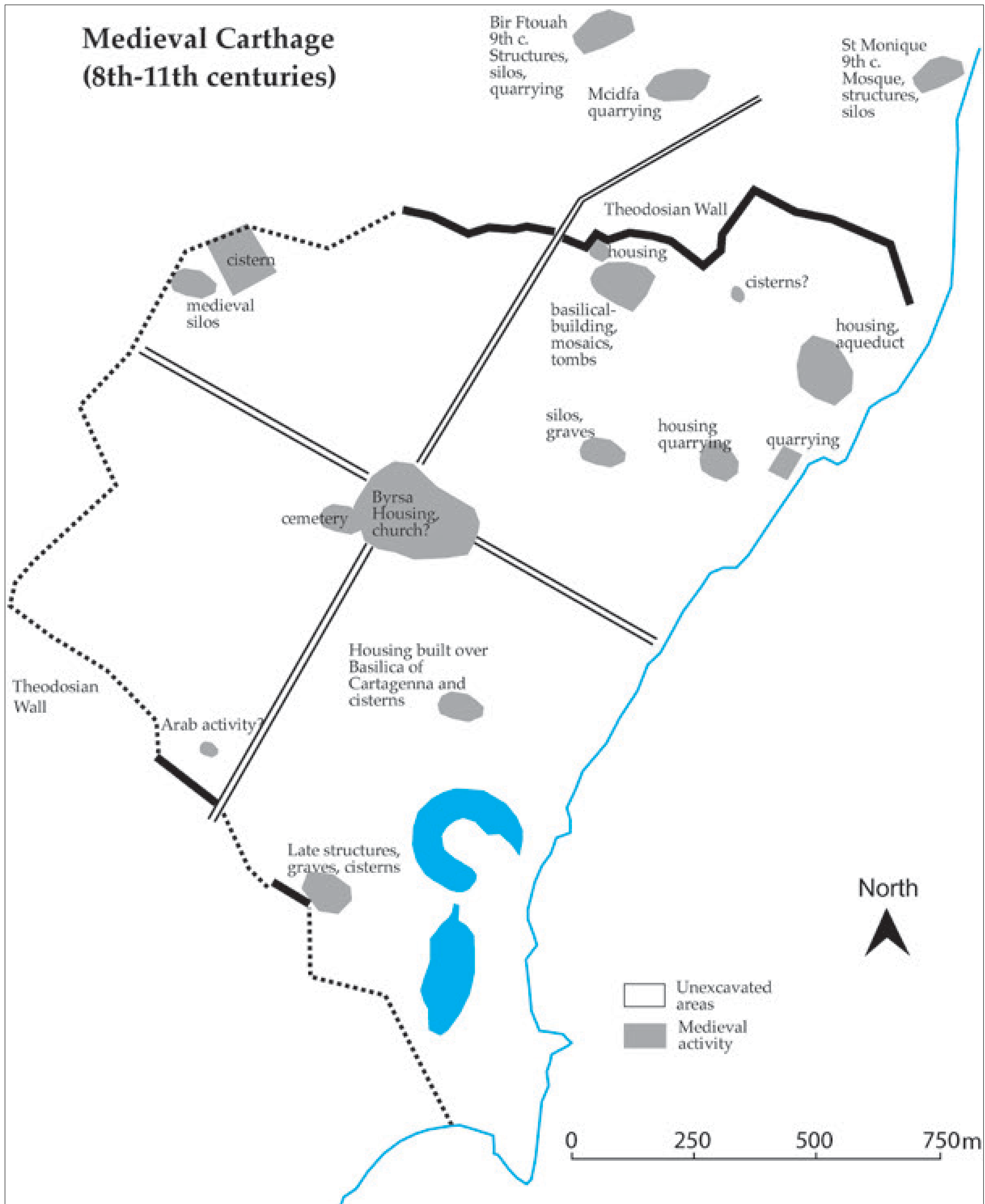
42 On the Muslim navy, see Fahmy 1966. Sousse became a particularly important port in the 9th c. when it became the launching pad for Aghlabid raids on Sicily and the central Mediterranean. On the Aghlabids and their Mediterranean connections, see papers in Anderson et al. 2017.

43 Walmsley 2000, 290–299. Note the contrast with Red Sea and Persian Gulf ports in the Early Medieval period which seem to be booming.

44 Other well-documented towns include Lebda (Cirelli 2001); Tocra (Fenwick 2013, 20 f.), Uchi Maius Gelichi – Milanese 2002 and Volubilis (Akerraz 1998; Fentress – Limane 2010; Fenwick 2013, 24–26; Fentress – Limane 2018).

45 It is generally assumed that the aqueduct remained out of use until the Fatimid restoration in the 10th c.

46 *Bayan* I: 35. See Benabbès 2004, 295–309.



3 Early Medieval Carthage (scale 1 : 12 500)

the Canadian zone of excavations, all dated to the late 7th c.[47]. Outside the walls, the extra-mural church complexes also seem to have suffered: 9th-c. structures built over the Basilica of St Monique are on a completely different alignment to the razed basilica below[48]. Destruction layers have not been found everywhere at Carthage by any measure. The Byrsa Hill, the centre of Byzantine Carthage, was continuously occupied. It was fortified and may have housed a substantial church (perhaps the enigmatic «monument with the basilica plan») and Christian community[49]. It has also been suggested that the ribāṭ 'Borj d'Abou Soleïman' described by al-Bakrī was located on the Byrsa, perhaps on the site of the Roman judicial basilica[50]. Whilst this identification is disputed, excavations certainly suggest that this substantial building was fortified at some point in Late Antiquity and continued to be occupied in the Early Middle Ages[51].

Other zones seem to have been destroyed, or at least briefly abandoned, in the 7th c. and re-occupied in the 8th or 9th c. Most areas excavated reveal some sign of medieval activity, whether the presence of glazed wares or the insertion of pits and cisterns into Byzantine layers, with the notable exception of the harbour area, which seems to have been abandoned by the 6th or 7th c.[52]. Between the *cardo maximus* and *cardo* II, a substantial terracing was created from landfill, completely covering the earlier 4th-5th c. structures: everything built above is medieval[53]. This reoccupation was not ephemeral. The monumental basilica-planned building, basin and mosaic at the Rotonde de l'Odéon has recently been re-dated to the late 8th c., suggesting substantial investment in urban monumental structures[54]. North of the Odéon, excavations have uncovered two houses built over a 7th-c. destruction layer. These houses were simpler than those in earlier centuries. House 1, for example, consisted of earthen floors, rubble walls, perhaps topped with pisé, the roof supported by a post. Even so, the house had a complex drainage system which fed into the main *cardo* drain[55]. Excavations in the same area found further signs of habitation above a large rubble layer of bricks and mosaics covering 7th-c. housing[56]. In the west of the city, at some point after 650, people seem to be living in huts and farming in the ruins of the Basilica of Carthagenna[57]. The monastery of Bigua was also converted into an agricultural complex at some point in the Early Medieval period, where the counterweight of a screw oil press (perhaps originally located in the maison du cryptoportique where the structures of a late press have been recognised) and basins to store the olives have been found[58]. Securely dating the appearance of agriculture within the walls is important – were these built to provide a food supply inside the city walls during the insecurities of the late 7th c., or are they a later medieval phenomenon? It is worth noting that the screw press is not known in Tunisia and Tripolitania before the medieval period, which may support a later date[59].

Outside the walls, small rural agricultural communities emerged by the late 9th c. around the old, now destroyed, basilicas of St Monique, Bir Ftouha and perhaps the Basilica Maiorum. At St Monique, a nine-bay rhomboid structure, perhaps a small mosque, and two other substantial structures were found over the razed foundations of the basilica, together with a number of silos, hand-mills, a plaster cornice with Arabic characters and

47 Wells – Wightman 1980, 57; Stevens et al. 2009, 82 f.

48 See Delattre 1929, 124 for the plan.

49 On the fortifications, see Leone 2007, 174 who convincingly suggests these were built in the Byzantine period. There are numerous signs of continuous occupation here including cisterns and drainage systems Morel 1991, 32 f. and an Islamic cemetery on the south slope in a former Roman house Zitrides et al. 2005. Ladjimi Sebaï (Sebaï 2002) suggests that al-Bakri's *Mu'allaqa* refers to the church of *Theotokos* on the Byrsa which she tentatively locates in the enigmatic «monument with the basilica plan», which contains a large quantity of medieval ceramics in its upper levels; see Ferron – Pinard 1955, 31 for the medieval ceramics.

50 Ennabli 1997, 87; Sebaï 2002. Equally disputed is the suggestion that the judicial basilica was transformed into a church in the Byzantine period, perhaps even the Mandracium, the fortified monastery described by Procopius (Proc. aed. 6, 5–11). On this identification with varying degrees of caution, see Gros 1985; Ennabli 1997, 85–87; but see Duval 1997, 327.

51 Gros 1985.

52 See Vitelli 1981 for an excellent summary of medieval occupation across Carthage. On the harbour, see Hurst 1994; Van Zeist et al. 2001.

53 Caron – Lavoie 2002.

54 Caron – Lavoie 2002. A coin in the pavement provides a *terminus post quem* of 759, though it should be noted that the excavator, Pierre Senay, dates the complex to the 4th–5th c., see Senay 2008, 115–141.

55 A late pit containing a fragment of Islamic pottery suggests that settlement continued here into the 9th-10th c. Wells – Wightman 1980, 53–55. In a later publication, however, Wells comments that he did not find any evidence of medieval or modern occupation earlier than 1943 Wells 1992, 122.

56 Neuru 1992, 138 s. Various mud-brick structures have been noted in the area of Bordj Djedid, the area of Dermech and the Antonine baths, though it is unclear whether they date to the Byzantine or medieval period Gauckler 1903, 415; Merlin 1904; Ellis 1985, 35–37. Between the Byrsa and the harbours, the Michigan excavations provided further evidence of post-7th c. occupation when a cistern was converted into a well, before being used as a dump for architectural fragments Humphrey 1981, 63–65.

57 Mortar pavements associated with the huts contained two demi-*follis* of Constans II (648–659) and a piece of Hayes 105 cookware (550–680) cover the mosaics suggesting that the basilica was no longer in use Ennabli 2000, 63.

58 Ennabli 2000, 129 f.

59 Commenting on the absence in the Roman period, Mattingly 1996 notes that the screw press was not suited to bulk production on the scale in North Africa. For a general survey of the screw press, see Lewit 2012.

9th- to 11th-c. lamps[60]. This church may have been built over the grave of St Cyprian, whose tomb apparently continued to be a site for pilgrimage in the mid-9th c., several decades after his body was reportedly translated from Carthage to Arles and then Lyons under Charlemagne in 801[61]. Bir Ftouha, still in use as a church in the late 7th c., was systematically stripped of its marble and decorations between the 9th and 12th c. and transformed into some sort of farm or agricultural site[62].

Carthage's medieval history is in many ways unique. The only example of a provincial capital abandoned under the Umayyad caliphate, it is also one of the few sites where archaeology does indicate 7th-c. destruction, though not everywhere. It is tempting to associate the destruction layers with the sacking of Carthage by Ḥasan b. Nuʿmān in 79/698 or perhaps abandonment layers caused by the flight of much of the population[63]. Whether one prefers to see these layers as destruction or abandonment, Carthage is a clear case of discontinuity, rather than of gradual demise and transformation. The terracing, houses and huts built over the destruction levels, however, can be seen as the attempts of Carthage's community to re-establish themselves – and perhaps the city. If Caron and Lavoie's re-dating of the Rotonde de l'Odéon is correct, the construction of new monumental architecture with elaborate mosaics indicates a substantial investment in civic life in Carthage during the 8th c. that is so far unparalleled at other excavated sites in northern Tunisia. Nonetheless, by the 9th or 10th c., Carthage was a failed city. The huge metropolis had fragmented into a series of village-like agricultural communities within and outside the Theodosian walls just as al-Bakrī describes in the 11th c.; these villages may perhaps have been centred around the fortified Byrsa hill with its *ribāṭ* or the fortified settlement by the La Malga cistern occupied by the Banu Ziyād (1075–1160)[64]. Its role as Africa's capital and harbour-city was lost for good, but the memory of Carthage's glorious urban past persisted into the early modern period.

Sbeïtla (anc. Sufetula)

Sbeïtla (anc. *Sufetula*) in central Tunisia, by contrast, provides a striking example of urban continuity. Pioneering analysis of Late Antique layers by Noël Duval demonstrated continuity in the Middle Ages. This work produced a plan of a city reduced by the 7th c. to a series of small inhabited nuclei consisting of fortified complexes, a church and a production site, and surviving in this fragmented state until at least the 9th c.[65]. More and more evidence is emerging for continued occupation across the site outside the clusters identified by Duval, suggesting that the fragmentation model may need to be revisited. While we do not yet know the full spatial extent of Early Medieval Sbeïtla, it is clear that the central core of the site around the old forum, and the southwest area remained occupied into the 9th c. (fig. 4).

Unusually, Sbeïtla was not fortified with a town wall in the Byzantine period, though a wall had been erected around the forum (probably in the Roman period), and the amphitheatre and the «temple anonyme» in the northwest of the town may have also been fortified[66]. The absence of a major fort is surprising given the significant role the city played in the 7th c. as a military base for the Byzantine army and later the seat of the renegade exarch Gregory, who was killed by the Arabs in 647 somewhere outside the city. Fortified dwellings or «fortlets», occupied in the 7th–9th c., line the southern entrance to the town. These typically contained an internal well, cisterns, and stabling and are reached by outside stairs on the first storey[67].

In the centre of town, around the fortified forum, houses were occupied into the 9th c., albeit with their floors and thresholds raised from earlier levels[68]. So far, only one block has been excavated, but Aghlabid ceramics have been noted in unexcavated *insulae* throughout the town, particularly in the southern sector. All the churches (Basilicas I, II, IV and V) continued to be used after 650, and the latter two continued in use until the

60 See Delattre 1929, 124 for the excavations and Vitelli 1981, 123–125 for the dating of the lamps. Whitehouse 1983 suggests that the rhomboid structure may be an early mosque on the basis of its nine-bay plan, the thickness of its walls (1/6m), the orientation of the south (*qibla*) wall and the «projection» on its outer face which he suggests is the *mihrab*. He draws attention to its similarity in size, plan and orientation to the Bu Fatata mosque in Sousse (830–841 AD) and the Mosque of the Three Doors in Kairouan (866 AD).

61 For the identification of the basilica with the grave of St Cyprian, see Ennabli 1975, 13–16; Ennabli 1997, 129–131. On the mid-9th c. pilgrimage, see McCormick 2001, 931 R521. On the translation in 801, see Conant 2010, 2, 16 f.

62 Rossiter 1993, 308 f.; Stevens et al. 2005, 494. See now Rossiter et al. 2012 for the suggestion that there may have been an elite 10th–11th c. Muslim residence in the area of the bathhouse.

63 For Caesarea in Palaestine, Holum has argued that the layers once identified as destruction layers are in fact «abandonment layers» caused by the flight of the wealthy urban aristocracy, see Holum 1992; Holum 2011; Patrich 2011.

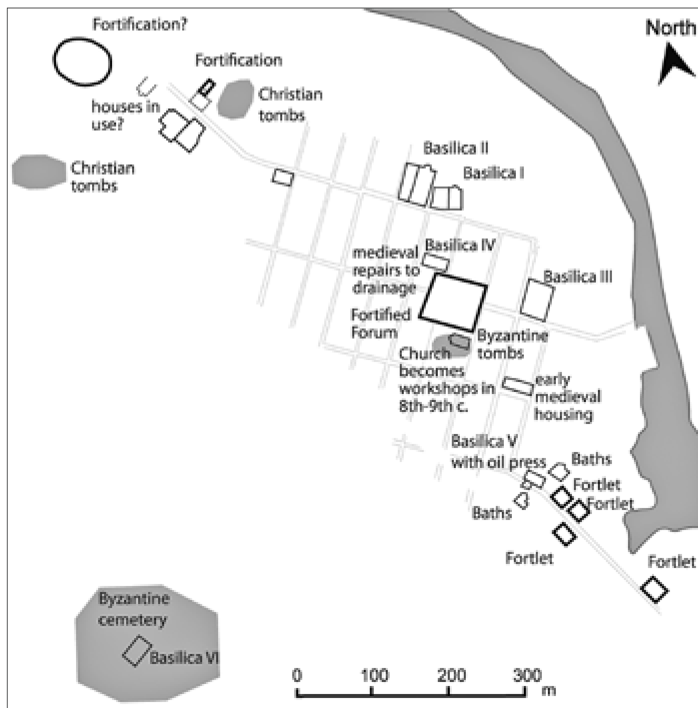
64 al-Bakrī: «aujourd'hui les ruines de Carthage sont couvertes de beaux villages, riches et bien peuplés» (de Slane 1913, 95). On the fortified medieval site by the cisterns of La Malga, see Poinssot – Lantier, 1923, 308–310.

65 Duval 1982; Duval 1990. See also Leone 2007, 183–185. 266–268.

66 Duval – Baratte 1973, 73. 64.

67 Duval – Baratte 1973; Béjaoui 1996, 38 f.

68 Béjaoui 1996.



4 Early Medieval Sbeïtla (scale 1 : 10 000)

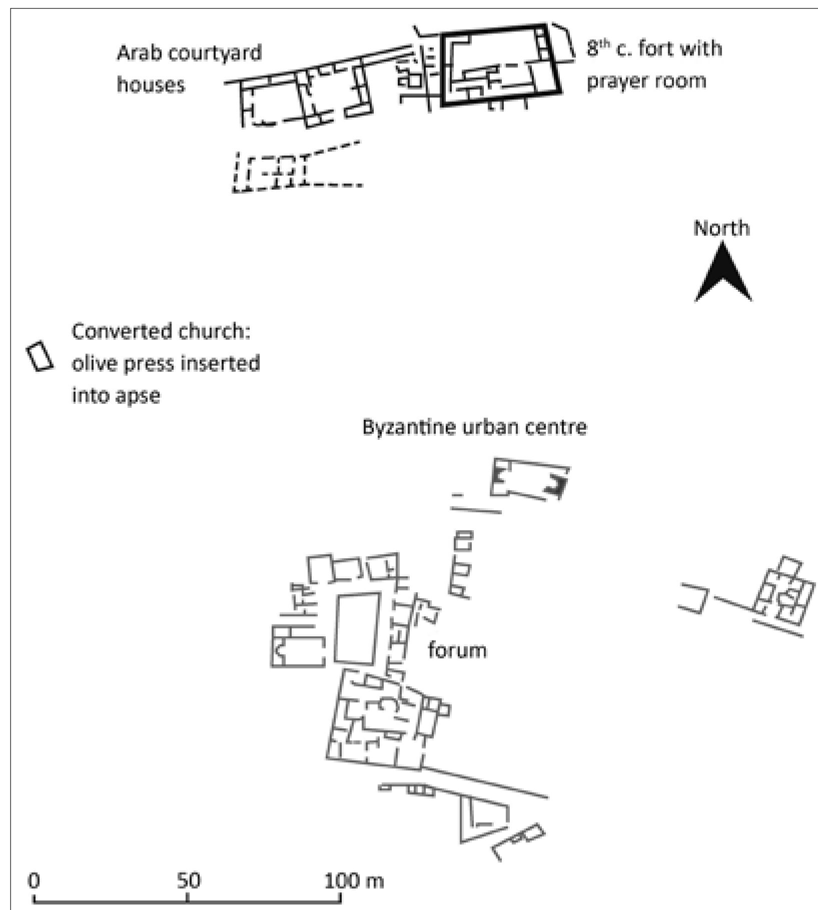
10th–11th c.[69]. As in the Byzantine period, olives continued to be pressed in the southern sector. In general, the gridded street system seems to survive relatively intact, with relatively few signs of encroachment. The drainage system also continued to function, and was repaired in the post-conquest period[70]. Alongside these continuities, there are changes, however, and some religious or public spaces were converted to residential or industrial use. In the 8th or 9th c., a church was transformed into a series of subdivided rooms, perhaps serving as workshops since slag and kilns were found in the area[71]. Inside the fortified forum, a series of domestic or commercial structures were erected at some juncture[72]. Sbeïtla was thus a very different place by the 9th c. than in the 6th or even 7th c., but still a thriving and ordered settlement on an orthogonal plan with churches, workshops, presses and a working drainage system.

Henchir el-Faouar

Henchir el-Faouar (anc. *Belalis Maior*) is an interesting example because it disappears from the written record after the 5th c.; it is not even represented by any bishop after the Carthage Council in 411 (fig. 5). Nonetheless, excavations by Ammar Mahjoubi in the 1960s showed that this small town was still thriving in Late Antiquity, with three small churches, two sets of baths and so on[73]. At the end of the 6th or 7th c., the paving of the forum and streets became covered by about 1.3 metres of spoil, which he argues relate to massive destructions across the site. Our clearest example of early destruction comes from the basilica on the northern edge of the town that was destroyed at some point before the early 8th c., when a fort was erected over its razed foundations[74]. We cannot know whether these destruction episodes were related to the intense fighting between Muslim and Byzantine forces in the late 7th c., but it is tempting to connect them[75].

The construction of this fort is dated tentatively to the early 8th c. on the basis of a coin dating to 91-9/709-17, and is currently the only fortification in North Africa attributed to the Umayyad period. The fort is a simple trapezoidal structure (27.20 × 38.80 m) with a single protruding entrance on the south side, similar to that of the ribāṭ at Sousse, dated to the last quarter to the 8th c.[76]. Inside, a series of rooms were set around a large court; one in the south-east corner of the fort seems to have a

69 Duval 1982, 625; Duval 1999.
70 Béjaoui 1996.
71 Béjaoui 1998.
72 Merlin 1912, 8. 15.
73 Mahjoubi 1967–1968; Mahjoubi 1978.
74 The church has a funerary inscription dating to the reign of Heraclius suggesting that it was still in use between 610–641.
75 On battles in this region, see Benabbès 2004, 284–286. 293 f.
76 Lézine 1956; Mahjoubi 1967–1968. Like Byzantine forts, the walls consisted of a double facing of dressed masonry with an infill



5 Early Medieval Henchir el-Faouar (scale 1 : 2500)

mihrab and may have served as a prayer-room. To the west of the fort are at least three courtyard houses comprising a right-angled entrance, the presence of a large central courtyard off which modular rooms opened. Elizabeth Fentress has convincingly suggested that this type of courtyard plan is Arab in origin and that its presence in North Africa reflects the Arabization of society[77]. A further row of possible houses to the south of a street is visible on satellite imagery, and it seems likely that these houses and fort, built on the northern edge of the town, were a new Muslim extra-mural settlement, similar to that identified at Volubilis in Morocco and far more common in the Middle East[78].

We know little about the rest of the site, much of which remains unexcavated. A productive quarter was installed around a small Byzantine church, perhaps in the 6th or 7th c., and probably enlarged in the medieval period, when an olive press was placed inside the church[79]. One church, then, was destroyed and the other adapted for secular use in a town that appears to have some Muslim settlement. It is unclear whether the third church at Belalis Maior remained in use in the Early Medieval period: it was certainly reinforced at some point in the mid-7th c.[80]. Finally, it is suggested that the baths continued to be used in the Middle Ages, on the basis of a mosaic that is dated to the Umayyad or Fatimid period[81]. Belalis Maior provides an example of a town forgotten by the sources, which nonetheless had a long medieval urban history. This small town was prosperous enough to recover after destruction events hit the forum area and some of the churches. A new quarter was established on the edge of the existing town together with a fort containing Muslim soldiers, presumably to house the new Muslim community.

of mortared rubble. However, earth is used instead of lime mortar and *opus africanum* is used instead of *opus quadratum* masonry (as at the forts of Téboursouk, Aïn Hedja, Tifech) Pringle 1981.

77 Fentress 1987; Fentress 2000; Fentress 2013.

78 For Volubilis, see Fentress – Limane 2010; for the broader phenomenon, see Whitcomb 1994.

79 Mahjoubi 1978, 242–253.

80 Mahjoubi 1978, 428–430.

81 See Desanges et al. 2010, 112. A similar late date has been suggested for a mosaic pavement at a church in Bulla Regia, on the basis that one of the panels was renewed using the decorative repertoire of the 9th–10th c. (Louhichi 2004, 144 n. 147).

Towns in flux: growth, contraction and fragmentation

On the eve of the Muslim conquests, North African towns looked very different from those of the early Roman period. Major structural changes in towns had already occurred during the 6th and 7th c., when a growing emphasis on security resulted in the construction of town walls and intra-mural fortresses under the Byzantines[82]. At the same time, public spaces were adapted for other uses, some industrial and agricultural activities moved into towns, peripheral zones of towns were often abandoned and there is very little evidence for monumental building aside from churches or fortifications[83]. In North Africa, these trends are often thought to have accelerated after the Arab conquest, with the fragmentation or ‹ruralisation› of surviving towns into small, scattered zones of habitation within the ruins of the classical town. Elsewhere, I have examined the changing topography of Early Medieval towns[84], here, I wish to focus discussion on the size and coverage of Early Medieval towns, as this is a fundamental element of the debate on how urban these towns actually were in early Islamic Africa. The three examples above highlight the very different trajectories possible for towns in the Early Medieval period, ranging from urban growth and continuity to fragmentation and contraction.

Carthage, perhaps, is the most spectacular example of a city that failed in the Early Middle Ages; the vast area surrounded by its walls was transformed into a series of small village-like agricultural communities within and outside the Theodosian walls, perhaps centred around the Byrsa hill which seems to have retained some semblance of urban function albeit on a far reduced scale. This is the same model for urban settlement – the *città ad isole* model – proposed for Early Medieval Italy by archaeologists which essentially argues that in the middle ages the old monumental centre of towns weakened and the urban fabric fragmented into smaller settlement units typically centred around churches[85]. Carthage is a textbook example of the *città ad isole* model, and accordingly has proved influential for interpreting cities in Late Byzantine and medieval North Africa, with some scholars suggesting that a similar pattern of scattered settlement within the ruins of earlier cities may be observed elsewhere, most notably at Sbeïtla[86]. The recent discoveries at Sbeïtla, outlined above, however, suggest that this model needs to be re-visited. The identified clusters of occupation in Duval's often-reproduced plan align almost exactly with the areas of the site that had been excavated by the 1960s, a product of the burden of proof placed on Late Antique and medieval archaeologists to categorically demonstrate continuity of occupation into the middle ages. It is now evident that Sbeïtla continued to be a nucleated settlement into the 9th or 10th c., and may even have covered roughly the same area as in the Byzantine period, though further excavations are needed to confirm its full extent.

Beyond Carthage, I suggest, very few towns fragmented into the scattered pockets of inhabitation imagined by the *città ad isole* model. One factor may be the small size of the walled areas in North African towns. Unlike much of the rest of the Mediterranean, most cities did not gain walls until the Byzantine period: as a result only a portion of the active town was walled, and usually this zone contained military, administrative and religious buildings[87]. The walled space (390 ha) at Carthage was five times greater than the next walled town areas (Lepcis/Lebda, Oea/Ṭarābulus, Constantine, Sousse), which themselves range between 32–55 hectares and are far larger than the bulk of town enceintes which encompass between 2–8 hectares[88]. Put simply, then, the small size of the fortified area of the majority of North African towns precludes the *città ad isole* model, which seems more appropriate for very larger cities like Carthage and Rome, and perhaps also the next rank of cities with large walled areas of 32–55 hectares. Lebda, in many ways, proves the point. Cirelli has convincingly suggested that the area inside the Justinianic enceinte (44 ha) remained occupied well into the 9th c., when perhaps the second smaller internal circuit was constructed reducing the area to 28 ha[89]. Nonetheless, excavations have uncovered small pockets of occupation within the zone encompassed by the early Roman earthworks (425 ha) and the late Roman town walls (130 ha), which may represent the emergence of smaller farming communities outside the fortified core of the town but still offered some protection by the earlier walls and earthworks[90].

If towns did not fragment into small pockets of inhabitation, many do contract in size in the Late Antique

82 Pringle 1981. On the shifting ideal of the city in the 6th c., see Saradi 2006.

83 Leone 2007, 166–279. See also: Mahjoubi 1979; Février 1983; Thébert 1983; Lepelley 2006; Benabbès 2007.

84 Fenwick 2013, 26–32.

85 E. g. Wickham 2005, 642 f.

86 Duval 1990; Wickham 2005, 640.

87 On Byzantine fortifications, see Pringle 1981, supplemented by Duval 1983.

88 Pringle 1981, 126 f.

89 Cirelli 2001.

90 On the different fortification walls, see Goodchild – Perkins 1953.

and Early Medieval period: outlying suburbs could be simply abandoned or given over to burials or industrial activities, but do not seem to fragment into smaller scattered units of settlement. At Bulla Regia, for example, the core of the city continues to be occupied with the baths of Julia Memmia, fort, theatre and church showing clear signs of medieval activity, but the northern formerly residential sector was given over to burials and industrial activity at some point after the 6th or 7th c.[91]. Sétif provides another example of urban contraction in the 7th–8th c. Continuously occupied, the excavators suggest that the town retreated into the shadows of the Byzantine citadel in the Early Medieval period[92]. Excavations in the 1960s found continued ephemeral medieval housing to its west, whilst the area north of the citadel seems to have been abandoned after the Roman baths were destroyed. In the 9th–10th c., this latter area seems to be reused as a market space, surely a mark of its liminal location on the edge of the town, before being transformed into a new residential quarter that expanded gradually over the course of a century. Urban contraction is site-specific however, and rarely coincides precisely with the Arab conquest in the late 7th c.

Some old towns even grew in the Early Medieval period. In the far west, Walīla (anc. Volubilis) provides a striking example of Late Antique contraction and Early Medieval expansion[93]. In the 6th c., long before the Arabs reached Morocco, the city had contracted to the western third of the original Roman settlement near the wadi (some 18 ha), and a new rampart was erected blocking off this settlement from the ruins and old monumental centre which gradually became used for burials and industrial quarters[94]. In the 8th c., to the south of this settlement and outside the walls, a new quarter was established under the Umayyads or Abbasids, probably to house a garrison, and subsequently another quarter was established under the Idrīsids, possibly as the administrative complex of Idrīs I[95]. Walila is one of the few sites in North Africa where we can categorically demonstrate that the monumental centre was abandoned and yet the town prospered and expanded in the immediate post-conquest period. The addition of extra-mural quarters to house the new Muslim community must have increased the total area of the town at other sites, as at Belalis Maior (Henchir el-Faouar) and Pomaria-Agadir[96].

Conclusion

The ruined streets, temples and baths of a Carthage or Lepcis Magna, names that evoke the splendour and wealth of Roman cities in North Africa, were once taken as material proof of an urban crisis in the 7th and 8th c. brought about by the collapse of Byzantine authority and the drawn-out conquest and consolidation of Muslim rule. A rather different urban history emerges when one combines analysis of broader patterns in urban success and failure with detailed study of the fate of individual towns in the Early Middle Ages. If the conquest was to all extents an invisible one (to borrow Peter Pentz's phrase)[97], resulting in little obvious destruction that can be linked with the Muslim armies, by the 9th c., the urban network was strikingly different from that of Late Antiquity. For the first time in hundreds of years, Carthage lost its role as North Africa's capital, biggest city and largest port; the new inland capital of Ifrīqiya, Kairouan, made the central Tunisian steppe the geo-political heartland of imperial power. For the most part, however, the Muslim authorities found North Africa's existing urban network adequate to their needs, and the largest of the inherited towns continued to be major political units. Even so, the urban network was modified throughout the long process of conquest and consolidation. Some cities grew during the early Islamic period, whilst others declined or were abandoned. By the 9th c., there is an increasing dominance of large towns, accompanied by the loss of many small and medium-sized towns, particularly in the northern Tell and on the coast. Thus we should be wary of assuming that Muslim rule meant a simple takeover of the existing infrastructure without serious and substantial reorganization.

Those towns that survived follow a variety of different trajectories: some expanded beyond their Byzantine limits, others retained the size and layout they had in the Byzantine period, others still contracted, or far less frequently, splintered into smaller settlements. The examples of Carthage, Sbeïtla and Henchir el-Faouar reveal a long process of urban transformation which extended through the Byzantine period well into the medieval period. The pattern and chronology of urban change varied from site to site: each showed moments of continuity, crisis and recovery at different phases in their history.

91 For a summary of the Byzantine and medieval evidence, see Leone 2007, 242–244. Medieval activity includes housing and oil press in the baths of Julia Memmia (Broise – Thébert 1993, 385–386); 12th c. coin hoard in fortified theatre (Boulouednine 1957, 286); Umayyad coin hoard in grave in southern basilica (Duval 1971, 220); lime kilns in Eglise of Alexandre (Carton 1915, 116) and Maison de la Chasse (Beschaouch et al. 1977, 55). 9th–10th c. glazed ceramics are visible on the ground, particularly in the unexcavated eastern sector of the site, around the fort.

92 Février 1965; Mohamedi et al. 1991.

93 Akerraz 1998; Fentress – Limane 2018; Fenwick 2013.

94 Akerraz 1983.

95 Fentress – Limane 2010.

96 On Pomaria-Agadir, see Dahmani – Khelifa 1980; Dahmani 1983.

97 Pentz 1992 on the «invisible conquest» of Syria.

These towns, of course, were not the most successful of the inherited towns in the Early Middle Ages: we only know about them because they ultimately failed and were abandoned. We may never learn more about the success stories, but the fact that the new foundations of Kairouan and Tunis not only survived but became large cosmopolitan hubs within only a few decades, should warn us against underestimating the vitality of urban life in many towns, both old and new, after the Arab conquests.

Abstract

This article examines the fate of the inherited classical cities of early medieval Ifrīqiya under Umayyad and Abbasid rule (the late 7th and 8th century). It takes a regional approach to the medieval city to reconstruct broader patterns of urban success and failure in the early middle ages. The argument is threefold: first, that the inherited Byzantine towns continued to dominate the urban hierarchy in the Early Medieval period, accompanied by a decline in coastal and smaller towns; second, that those towns that survived follow a range of trajectories, but overwhelmingly do not fragment or ruralise; and third, that these patterns expose a slow but significant transformation of the urban organisation of Ifrīqiya in the Early Medieval period.

Résumé

Cet article examine le destin des villes romaines de l'Ifrīqiya du haut Moyen Âge, sous domination omeyyade et abbasside (fin du VIIe et VIIIe siècles). Il propose une approche régionale de la ville médiévale pour reconstruire la continuité urbaine et l'abandon urbain au début du Moyen Âge. Cela montre que les grandes villes byzantines ont continué à dominer la hiérarchie urbaine, accompagnées d'un déclin des villes côtières et plus petites; les villes qui ont survécu suivent une série de trajectoires, mais ne se fragmentent généralement pas et ne se ruralisent pas ; et ces schémas révèlent une transformation lente mais importante de l'organisation urbaine de l'Ifrīqiya.

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Illustration credits

Figs. 1. 2 Medieval towns data based on Cambuzat 1982

Fig. 3 adapted from Hurst – Roskams 1984, 33 fig. 11

Fig. 4 adapted from Duval 1990, 504, figs. 4 and 5; integrating excavations described in Béjaoui 1996 and Béjaoui 1998

Fig. 5 adapted from Mahjoubi 1978, pl. 1 and Google Earth imagery: (8/26/11), Henchir el-Faouar, Tunisia (lat 36.766227; lon 9.257989, Eye alt 897 ft). GeoEye 2013, Google Earth 2013. <http://www.earth.google.com> (accessed January 15, 2013)

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