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Cultural Transitions in Archaeology. From Byzantine to Islamic Tripolitania

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) 265–278

der Reihe / of the series

Palilia

Band / Volume **34 • 2019**

DOI dieses Beitrags: <https://doi.org/10.34780/71d5-x9i9>

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

Zenon-ID dieses Beitrags: <https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/002003287>

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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Cultural Transitions in Archaeology

From Byzantine to Islamic Tripolitania

by *Anna Leone*

Cultural transitions develop in strict connection with the creation of a social memory¹. This is normally reflected in how a society develops during transition processes and in the impact that such changes have on the landscape. The Romano-Byzantine landscape of Tripolitania, after the Islamic conquest, was probably fragmented into a variety of different landscapes transformed by environmental changes and the changes in, or emergence of, social groups living in the area. Ultimately these transformations had an impact on the economy and the way in which the territory was exploited.

As Byzantine North Africa became part of the Islamic world, the centre of economic activity clearly shifted away from Carthage to the south, where areas like Kairouan (Qayrawān) and the harbour of Mahdia became hubs of exports and productions. This trend appears to have continued at least until the 13th c. and is reflected in the transformation of trade and goods circulation within the region². Tripolitania, which included the north-western part of modern Libya and the southern part of modern Tunisia up to the isle of Jerba, continued to play an essential role in the trade system and internal/intraregional commerce. Tripolitania was particularly rich throughout the history of North Africa, characterised primarily, at least until the Arab conquest, by olive oil, wine, and garum production. The region has also been surveyed intensively in modern times³, and the quantity of data makes it an excellent case study for discussing the transition from the Byzantine into the Islamic world. Tripolitania has always been inhabited by a variety of different populations that interacted with Ro-

man, Vandal, Byzantine, and Arab presences⁴, yet always maintained their independent characters. The Roman presence does not appear to have had a substantial impact on the urban landscape, and only a few major cities are known: Oea (modern Tripoli), Sabratha, Lepcis Magna, and the island of Jerba. In southern part, none of the above-mentioned three Libyan Emporia expanded beyond the coastal zone in the Tripolitania region. The *limites* were subject to several reorganisations during the Roman period⁵. The principal focus of the archaeological research in these regions has been on the Roman period. This is especially true of the research carried out during the colonial period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c., when major destructions of post-Roman evidence occurred. Study and analysis of the transition between Byzantine rule and the Islamic presence, i. e. the 7th and 8th c., is made particularly difficult by our limited knowledge of the pottery produced⁶. In this regard, this paper aims to reconsider critically all the available data on the Late Byzantine/Early Medieval occupation of the region⁷. Traditionally there have been two major problems in approaching the study of ancient North Africa at a general level. The first is the consideration of North Africa as a whole entity, rather than as a collection of regions with different geographical settings and different populations. The second is the analysis of <Roman>, <Vandal>, <Byzantine>, and <Islamic> North Africa as distinctive, clearly defined categories; such a clear distinction is not always obvious. Considering North Africa as a whole, without specific regional distinctions, has often led scholars researching

1 Assman 2008.

2 Rossiter et al. 2013, 266.

3 Barker et al. 1996. For the recent Italian survey in the region covering the later period see recently Munzi et al. 2014b. – The border region of the Jebel Nefūsa is characterised by several different communities. See more recently Prevost 2012.

4 Mattingly 1995; Modéran 2003.

5 For a recent synthesis see Ferdinandi 2012, with previous bibliography.

6 For discussion see the contribution of Bonifay in this volume.

7 Very little work has been done on trade and trade routes after the Arab conquest. This is due primarily to the lack of specific archaeological data, which makes it very difficult to follow the organisation (or possibly re-organisation) of trade after the Arab expansion in North Africa. For some discussion on the textual evidence see Vanacker 1973; on textual evidence see Vanacker 1973.

archaeological evidence to make interpretations using texts from other territories that had completely different organisations in antiquity. This has been a major problem, especially in Late Antiquity, when the majority of textual evidence comes from Numidia but the largest part of archaeological data is from Africa Proconsularis and Tripolitania. The two territories and their societies in fact had very different characteristics; the latter was largely rural and the Roman presence was only primarily visible on the coast, while the former was for the most part highly urbanised with a social organisation influenced deeply by the Roman presence. Similarly, there are not many ancient texts that refer directly to Tripolitania, a territory with a very unique identity, given that the Romans never really entered its inland territory and their presence was strong primarily in the coastal area. Recent work on the island of Jerba⁸, however, indicates that differences in territorial organisation also occurred within the same province of Tripolitania, and its vicinity to Africa Proconsularis had a major influence over the evolution of the island. A similar generalised approach has traditionally been applied to the analysis of the populations living in the region. The people of Tripolitania had always been highly varied, a combination of nomads, Berbers, Romans/Byzantines, and later Arabs⁹. Each of these groups had an impact on the landscape and its organisation. Some local populations were always very strong and they emerged from Late Antiquity as sedentary populations, as for instance in the case of Ghirza. Here a local population from the 3rd c. became progressively sedentary and built a settlement characterised by stone-built fortified houses and monumental funerary tombs, recalling the Roman tradition¹⁰.

Christian Tripolitania has been studied primarily through specific religious buildings, rather than from an overall perspective. Moreover, the region has seen a variety of different religions living in the same areas, including Jewish communities in the Jebel Nafūsa¹¹.

The present paper aims to bypass these traditional approaches and read the evidence from a more local/in-

dividual identity perspective. This approach is difficult, as it requires splitting up the already limited data into smaller categories; however, it is time to start to process and de-categorize traditional, chronological, societal, and religious divisions, which are hard to reconcile with both the ancient and modern landscapes. The focus is therefore intentionally regional, looking at Tripolitania, although in some parts other areas will be introduced as comparative material.

Similarly, the approach to and definition of the idea of 'Islamic' or 'Arab' Tripolitania need some reconsideration¹². As will be apparent in the present research, the community living in Tripolitania was characterised by a variety of different groups who lived and interacted at least until the 10th/11th c., when a more organised Islamic presence can first be detected; the process of Islamisation of the region was slow. Rūms were the descendants of Byzantine and Christian communities and continued to live in the region¹³. Berbers were characterised by various groups with different religious beliefs, including Judaism¹⁴. Finally, the Arabs entered North Africa in various phases and their presence in the territory must have increased slowly. The so-called 'Islamisation' of the region was in fact a very slow process that developed over more than fifty years, from the second half of the 7th c. to the beginning of the 8th c.; even the conquest itself had several phases. Similarly, in Tripolitania the process of Christianisation was very slow and very diverse between coastal and inland areas.

The slow speed did not imply a sudden, large infusion of Arabs, but instead a gradual integration and exchange with local populations¹⁵. Moreover, it appears, as happened in the Vandal conquest, that the number of Arabs entering the region was relatively small¹⁶.

This reconsideration of Tripolitania requires, therefore, an analysis of the different communities living in North Africa, before and after the final Islamic conquest. This analysis will be carried out using different sets of data, according to the availability of region-specific archaeological and textual evidence.

8 Fentress et al. 2009.

9 For a discussion in particular on the Berber community see Brett - Fentress 1997.

10 Brogan - Smith 1984.

11 Other Jewish communities are recorded in Numidia and in Carthage (Aillett 2011, 121). In Tripolitania Jews communities are mentioned by texts in Al Surt, Yahūdiya, Misurata, Lebda-Leptis, Mesallātā, Tarabulus al-Gharb - Tripoli, Sabrat, Surmān, Nafusa, Jadu, Misin, Ghadames (Hirschberg 1974, 140-142).

12 For a discussion on the impact of the concept see Aillet 2011.

13 Amara 2011, 114.

14 Aillett 2011. - For a list of the ancient local populations mentioned by sources living in the territory of Libya, see Oden 2011, 151.

15 Arab conquest was slow and characterised by raids, victories and retreats. Berber populations had often been responsible for Arab defeats. Some of these defeats or victories clearly appear to have been elaborated by later sources to favour the diffusion of Islam (Hirschberg 1974, 88-90).

16 See for instance Djait 1973.

1. Christians and Christianity in Byzantine and Early Islamic Tripolitania

Despite the limited study of the spread of the new religion, Christianity and its physical presence within the region offer some insights on the strong differences between urban coastal areas and the inland territories.

The first and only comprehensive work focusing on the impact of Christianity in Tripolitania that dealt with the archaeological evidence dates back to 1953; it was completed by Ward-Perkins and Goodchild during the period of the British Protectorate in Libya¹⁷. Ancient sources are very limited and refer primarily to the presence of Bishoprics from various cities¹⁸, identifying a substantial reduction in numbers until the 11th c., when only one Bishopric is recorded¹⁹. The ancient sources are, however, very patchy and difficult to interpret²⁰. For this reason the focus has been almost exclusively on the architectural form and presence of Christian monuments in towns; these have been studied individually²¹. The majority of known and excavated churches are located in urban areas, while rural churches have been only partially investigated²². Although the work by Ward-Perkins and Goodchild (1953) is rather dated, the analysis of rural areas has never been very detailed; equally in urban areas, only the Churches of Sabratha have been subject to more recent detailed studies²³. The lack of new data on churches does not allow us to attempt substantial reinterpretations or re-dating, but some specific trends can be identified by reconsidering some of the evidence. For instance, as indicated above, when considering the archaeological evidence it appears very clear that there is a substantial difference between urban and rural churches. Obviously the models, as well as the patrons, were substantially dissimilar, reflecting a differentiation in the inhabitants of rural areas and cities. Moreover, at a more general level, there is an identifiable and stark contrast between church building techniques and decora-

tive motifs in the region, especially for the new Byzantine building activities. This paper intends to address these two points, through the use of some specific case studies.

Rural areas

The limited investigations carried out in rural churches do not allow for a detailed analysis. The best-known churches in rural areas are located in the West Jebel (Ad el-Asábaa, Bir el Cur, the church near the Wadi Crema, and one near Tebedùt), in the East Jebel, south-southwest of Leptis Magna (Ain Wif, Breviglieri, Gasr Maomùra) and on the upper part of the Wadi Sofeggini (Chafagi Aamer and Gasr es-Suq el Oti)²⁴. It has been suggested, although without specific stratigraphic evidence, that the churches at Ain Wif, Gas res-Suq el Oti, and Wadi Crema were built in the Byzantine period, while the others are dated to between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th c., enlarged during the Byzantine period (fig. 1)²⁵. The element which has been identified as an expression of Byzantine Christian influence in the countryside is the addition of a cruciform baptistery. However, in all relevant cases the baptistery appears to have been added behind the apse, while in the urban Byzantine churches the baptistery was normally monumental and located in an annex near the apse. Only in Basilica I in Sabratha, in the forum, was the first baptistery behind the apse, and in the second phase it was moved to the annex; the cause of the transfer was the need for building a larger baptistery²⁶. The rural churches were also expanded, with the building of rooms annexed to the churches themselves that were perhaps used for residences of rural clergy members²⁷. When considering rural churches, the best-investigated religious building (although many years ago) is the church at Breviglieri, El-Khadra²⁸, built in proximity to a 5th c. fort, in the Early Byzantine period or possibly earlier²⁹. Its decorations, all in local stones, find specific parallels in the tombs of

17 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 1953. They also conducted a survey in Cyrenaica whose results were published many years later by Reynolds 2003.

18 For a synthesis and further bibliography see Leone 2011/2012.

19 See for instance: Handley 2004, 291–310.

20 For a synthesis Seston 1936.

21 A recent synthesis, based primarily on ancient texts, has been published by Oden 2011. He suggests the presence of early monastic communities in the Libyan desert based on texts (133 f.).

22 A synthesis of urban and rural churches in Tripolitania has been provided by Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 1953. A. Di Vita published a preliminary work with some discussion on rural churches (Di Vita 1967).

23 See Bonacasa Carra 2004 and for the Basilica I see Leone 2013.

24 Di Vita 1967, 123.

25 Di Vita 1967, 128.

26 The old baptistery was filled in and transformed as a place for relics; see Leone 2013, 250 for further bibliography and more detailed discussion.

27 Di Vita 1967, 126 f.

28 It was located in an important strategic point overlooking the road connecting Tarhuna and Cussabat (Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 44).

29 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953 indicate the building of the church from the 4th c. to the 5th c. is dated by the nearby fort (centenarium; on the definition see Munzi et al. 2014a). The epigraphic evidence from the church suggests a later date. It is possible that the church was built in the fourth or fifth century and then rebuilt in the Byzantine period. Stratigraphic data are too scanty to define the phases.

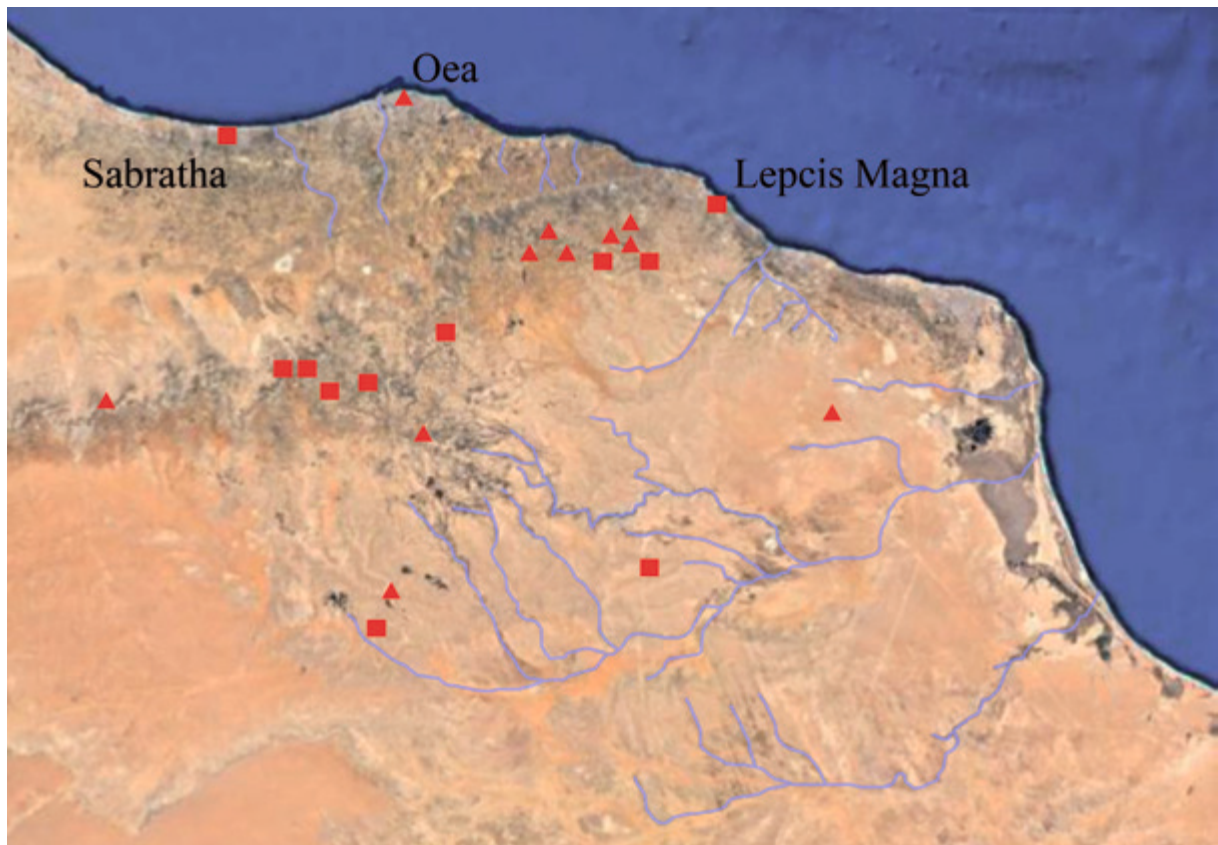


Fig. 1 Urban and rural churches in Libyan Tripolitania. Squares: churches, Traingles: necropoleis (data from Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 1953)

the Late Antique settlement of Ghirza³⁰. Architecturally the church appears to stand in contrast to the monumentality of urban churches, with the structure rather small. Despite this fact, the decorations appear to be produced locally. The plan of the church is unique in North Africa, characterised by the lateral aisles and central nave, finished with an apsed chapel³¹. Only one column block, bearing a very faded Punic inscription, appears to have been reused and redecorated in the currently preserved building³². The excavation indicated that the block was located at the entrance of the church and, as the only recycled element in the church with an inscription over-scribed with a chrismon, may have been reused intentionally with a sacral or dedicatory/symbolic function. All the decorations of the capitals and windows were worked in local stones by local artisans, confirmed by an inscription found on a block. A 6th c.

chronology has been suggested on the basis of the palaeography, and Margherita Guarducci indicates that it refers to the director of the work or the local artist who decorated the block. The inscription (*[Te]nteithanus s(cyrbsit)/Biba ma(gi)ster kartitis*)³³ bears a name of Libyan origin although it is written in Latin, and recalls in its use of local nomenclature some of those found in Ghirza. The decoration of the church has been compared in particular to the tomb north-east of Ghirza that is considered to be of a lower quality than the others³⁴; at this tomb, the capitals and chip carving have been compared to the church of Breviglieri. It has been suggested that the church and the tomb are probably contemporary, due to the similarity in the work, and possibly even produced by the same hands. Some elements of the Breviglieri church decorations, like the rosettes, recall architectural elements found at the rural churches of El

³⁰ The site developed from the end of the 3rd c. and was characterised by a series of fortified houses (Brogan – Smith 1984). On the Christianisation of Ghirza see Oden 2011, 247 f. The largest part of the decoration of the church has been removed and is now in the Museum of Tripoli.

³¹ These were mutilated in the Byzantine phase by the addition of the baptistery (Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 67).

³² De Angelis D'Ossat – Farioli 1975, 167. Blocks with similar decorations have been found in the Tarhuna valley.

³³ De Angelis D'Ossat – Farioli 1975, 169. If the 4th c. date for construction suggested by Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953 is accepted, then the decoration must have been part of the new decorations put in place during the Byzantine rebuilding of the complex.

³⁴ Brogan – Smith 1984, 167.

Asaaba³⁵ and Ain Wif³⁶. These centres possess a common feature in the stark contrast between the decorative material and the building technique, the latter being characterised primarily by mudbrick and small irregular blocks, mostly reused³⁷. Similar evidence has also been found in urban areas, as in the case of Basilica II in Sabratha (probably part of the Justinianic building programme), which is characterised by poor building technique³⁸. Overall, the inland churches are either connected to a fort or fortified themselves. This is the case at the tower-church in Chafagi Aamer in the Upper Sofeggin Valley³⁹.

The church at Breviglieri is smaller than urban churches and the decorations contrast with the size of the building. It has been suggested that the reduced size of the building was intentional, meant to contrast with the size and form of urban religious complexes⁴⁰. The contrast between the different architectural traditions seems also to point towards a substantial differentiation within the population living in Tripolitania. The Byzantine Empire appears to have had a strong influence on the coast, but its control of the countryside is somehow almost absent. This substantial differentiation also impacts the way in which coastal and inland areas developed until at least the 12th c⁴¹.

Urban Areas: Sabratha

The urban sector presents monumental churches decorated with recycled Roman marbles, buildings that appear to follow Roman tradition and bear rich marble and mosaic decorations. In structures that were part of official building programmes, there is also evidence of marble materials that may have been exported directly from Constantinople or Ravenna.

Sabratha, for instance, one of the coastal cities of Tripolitania, had an early Christian complex near the theatre, dated between the end of the 4th c. and the beginning of the 5th c., characterised by a double basilica (Basilicas III and IV)⁴². Two other churches (Basilica I and Basilica II – the latter also named the Justinianic Basilica), both

located in the forum area, are well known. Basilica I was certainly Byzantine in its final state but is more difficult to date in its earlier form, although it can likely be placed at the end of the 5th c. or possibly immediately before or after the Byzantine conquest. Basilica II is commonly identified with the church built in the town by Justinian and mentioned by Procopius, part of the Byzantine Emperor's building programme⁴³. This structure, located in the forum by the sea, contains the most impressive, monumental, and rich decorative elements, especially the well-preserved mosaic floors of high quality. The excellence of the floors is probably explained by the involvement of Justinian in the construction of the church, which designated it the official religious building in town⁴⁴. The capitals of the *ciborium* have been compared with capitals preserved in the National Museum of Ravenna and indicate that at least some decorative elements of the church were imported from other major centres; overall, the style of these decorations is original and it has been proposed that local artists elaborated upon some parts⁴⁵. Among the imported materials for the Justinianic church are the *plutei*, whose style is found in several proto-Byzantine churches across the empire, and it has been suggested that these were influenced by, or possibly even sourced from, Constantinople⁴⁶.

Looking at recycled materials, columns, capitals, and most of the marble elements were recycled and, when necessary, reworked. For instance, the base of an altar located in the east of the building was made from a reused block of marble⁴⁷. The *pulpitum* was reworked from a block of the entablature of the *Capitolium*. The marble was clearly taken and reworked locally, as indicated by the decorations which imitated pulpits from the metropolitan workshops and those from the islands in the Sea of Marmara, albeit in simplified forms⁴⁸. The wealth of imported materials recorded at Basilica II should be seen as connected to the fact that the building was part of the official building programme. The rich decorations mixed the locally reused marbles with others of clear Byzantine influence which had been imported. The church was grand and lavish, but the building technique was rather poor. This same evidence can be found in the country-

35 Although the decoration of the church is less elaborate. The church was surrounded by a settlement characterised mostly by rock cut dwellings (Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 37).

36 The church was built using mud and rubble masonry, faced with small irregular blocks, Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 46.

37 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 60.

38 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 61.

39 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 50 f. The church was built using concrete rubble and mud.

40 De Angelis D'Ossat – Farioli 1975, 131.

41 Bianquis – Garcin 2000.

42 Bonacasa Carra 1992, 310.

43 This church has been identified with the one built by Justinian and listed by Proc. aed. 6, 4, 13 (Proc. aed. Vol. VII, with an English translation by H. B. Dewing [The Loeb Classical Library] Harvard 1971, 376): ἀλλὰ καὶ Σαβραθῶν εἰσῆλθαι πόλιν, οὐ δὴ καὶ λόγου ἀξίαν πολλοῦ ἐκκλησίαν εἰδείματο.

44 A detailed analysis of the mosaic floors is in Maguire 1984 and Bonacasa Carra 2004.

45 Bonacasa Carra 1992, 316–322.

46 Sodini 2002.

47 Bonacasa Carra 1992, 307–310.

48 Bonacasa Carra 1992, 322. For a detailed discussion on the reuse see also Leone 2013, 241 f.

side. Basilica I was mostly decorated with locally reused marble that had been removed from the forum area and stored in the basement of the *Capitolium*⁴⁹. In this case Basilica I was built reusing the existing civic basilica of the town, so the building technique is not possible to assess.

Basilica I was richly decorated with marble. With pointed indifference to the architectural grammar of earlier centuries, the old elements were reused according to their potential in shape and dimension and with a major focus on chromatic impact on the internal area of the church. There does not appear to have been any concern about reusing stones taken from temples. The availability of material in the vicinity, along with convenience, appears to be the driving force in the building of the church⁵⁰, and the architectural framework was probably designed on the basis of the pieces available in the nearby depository and the likely affiliated workshop. Similar circumstances were present at the Justinianic Basilica, although principally in the cases of the largest and heaviest architectural elements. Some other smaller pieces were instead imported, such as a decorated slab thought to originate in Constantinople⁵¹. Reworked marble parts influenced in form by Constantinople can also be identified here. Overall, the data clearly indicate the presence of local, specialised workmen who were reworking marble materials.

Data from the two basilicas point to one important factor: Tripolitania saw a substantial reduction in imported marble – or more likely a complete halt of the practice – from at least the second half of the 4th c., with only a brief resumption period to support the Justinianic building programme⁵².

The lack of marble use is also recorded in the countryside, where the limited number of churches were decorated exclusively with local stones and locally worked material. It is therefore evident that there was a presence of active craftsmen in the countryside who had developed an independent and common style. It has been supposed that they were by this point completely separated from the workmen that were active in urban areas, and contact between coast and inland was lost⁵³. It is, however, very likely that local craftsmen with good skills in

working local stones were itinerant in inland areas. One common element that links the two areas, coastal and rural, is poor building technique in sharp contrast to the decorative scheme. It remains unclear why – especially in the countryside where experienced craftsmen were employed and there was certainly no lack of building material – churches in Tripolitania were often built with reused rubble or mudbrick.

Overall the data from urban contexts for the Early Byzantine period indicate a substantial decrease of imported marble to Tripolitania in coastal cities, where the church building programme was limited almost exclusively to using recycled material. On the other hand, the rich decoration of the Breviglieri Church seems to indicate an economic vitality in the inland areas. At the moment, without a specific systematic study, data from interior churches are insufficient to provide other significant elements of comparison.

Moving to the post-Byzantine period, as in the rest of North Africa understanding and following the fate of the church after the Arab conquest is very difficult. All of the churches were excavated during the colonial period and post-Byzantine phases were destroyed, with little record. It has been suggested that the conversion took place in two phases, the first during the raids between 647 and 701, limited primarily to hostages, while a second major conversion, more diffused, took place between 701 and 718⁵⁴. Archaeological evidence is missing, due to colonial-era destruction. At the church at Gasres-Suq el Oti, it has been suggested that at some point a *mirhab* was added in the apse of the church⁵⁵.

Continual use of Basilica III by a Christian community in Lepcis Magna has been suggested based on burials, which appear to have continued into the 11th c.⁵⁶. Elsewhere in Tripolitania, the cemetery of En Gila (18 km south-southwest of Tripoli) has been studied primarily on the basis of inscriptions dated between 945 and 1021⁵⁷. The cemetery had a total of eleven tombs, of which eight still display the name of the deceased. In 1968 some new graves were excavated⁵⁸. Of particular interest is one of the inscriptions that indicates the presence of *PETRVS [mon(AC)v(S)]*⁵⁹; the name seems to indicate the presence of a monk. A second inscription refers to a *'Iudex'*, that

49 For a detailed discussion on the building and its transformation see Leone 2013.

50 These are usually the major elements that seem to be taken into consideration in the process of a building reusing spolia; on this aspect see Greenhalgh 1999.

51 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 14 f., with some more comments in Sodini 2002, 586.

52 A similar trend is identified in the Leptis Magna, see Ward Perkins – Goodchild 1953.

53 Brogan – Smith 1984, 230.

54 Amara 2011, 112.

55 Di Vita 1967, 128.

56 Ward-Perkins – Goodchild 1953, 82.

57 A second, larger cemetery with Christian inscriptions is located outside of Tripoli, at Ain Zara. The inscriptions were originally dated to the Byzantine period, but a chronology to the Early Islamic period is now commonly accepted (for further discussion and the complete bibliography see Bartocchini – Mazzoleni 1977, 168 and 162 note 17).

58 Rizzardi 1973; Bartocchini – Mazzoleni 1977, 168.

59 Rizzardi 1973, 285. Another point that emerges from the inscriptions is the age of the deceased, two of whom died at the age

has been identified as corresponding to the Arabic qadi⁶⁰, suggesting that the Christian community had a parallel set of officers⁶¹. The chronology has been based on an analysis of the text, which is Latin influenced by Arabic in the transcription of some letters⁶².

The burials indicate the presence of Christians and a monastic community⁶³ at least until the beginning of the 11th c. Traditionally, scholars have supposed a rapid disappearance of Christians in North Africa, but the evidence is not so clear⁶⁴. There is no doubt that data on the presence of Bishoprics indicate a substantial reduction in their overall number. In 1076 only one Bishopric was known in North Africa, and Tripolitania had only a limited number of bishops throughout its history⁶⁵.

Christianity appears to have continued for long in urban areas, while it is almost impossible to follow the pattern in rural areas. The non-stratigraphic excavation of most of the churches does not allow for an identification of later phases of occupation. Archaeologically there is a contrasting set of evidence, with monumental urban churches decorated by marbles, as was the Byzantine tradition in cities, while in the countryside the churches reflect decorative traditions. This also shows the presence of rural local elites, as opposed to those under the Byzantine influence in cities. This split between coastal and inland areas at different levels is also visible in the countryside.

2. Trade, connections, and production: the geographical and economic importance of Tripolitania from the Byzantine into the Islamic periods

The region, including its coastal cities, had always been central to the trans-Saharan trade networks⁶⁶. Its position had in fact favoured the economic growth of the

area, while also facilitating contact and interaction between different populations. The successful integration of a melting pot of different communities has been considered one of the most successful aspects of the region.

Tripolitania has been subjected to several surveys in the past as well as in more recent years; despite this fact, the data collected (and the difficulty in interpreting it for later periods) still provides a rather incomplete picture. A recent survey by Lisa Fentress has investigated the isle of Jerba (southern Tunisia), looking at site occupation from the pre-Roman period into Late Antiquity. In the 6th c. the decline in rural settlements in Jerba became more rapid, with the total number of farms decreasing from 63 to 40. This change, however, appears to have been connected to a transformation in rural organisation. In fact, the survey recorded 16 new farms and 7 new villages, all larger in size than those from the previous period, suggesting an overall reorganisation in land management. Data from the 7th c. seems to indicate a decrease in population density, which coincides with a probable economic crisis on the island from the second half of the 6th c.⁶⁷.

Moving south through the pre-desert area, a large systematic survey focused on all periods was conducted in the 1970's in the territory of Lepcis Magna along the Wadi Sofeggin and the Wadi Zem (fig. 2). The UNESCO 'Libyan Valley Survey'⁶⁸ has provided important and unique results for the pre-Roman, Roman, and Late Antique periods, while it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the Early Islamic phase due to dating problems. Here data have shown a drop in settlement numbers from the middle Roman into the late Roman periods (279 sites for the 3rd c. to 4th c., and 193 sites in the 5th c.). However, the change is uniform and appears clearer in the eastern part than the western part of the surveyed area⁶⁹. A further decrease is recorded from the 6th c. into the Islamic period with a reduction to 141 sites. In order to explain the evidence some hypotheses have been put forward. The first, common to all survey results, is that the reduction in sites can be related to the decrease in import of diagnostic vessels or the general

of 75, rather uncommon for the time. – Seston 1936, 115, when El Bekri travels across the mountains of North Africa, indicates the presence of numerous monasteries in the Adrar.

60 On the function of the qadi see Brett 1980.

61 Rizzardi 1973, 294 n. 3; the qadis were traditionally responsible for the law. The presence of a sort of Christian hierarchy in North Africa is also attested to by an early Arab inscription found in Kairouan, which refers to Petrus Senior (Seston 1936, 116).

62 In particular K=C, B=V, E=AE, E=IE, D=T and X=T; double letters omitted; and occasionally consonants missing, for instance Lx=Lux. See Gualandi 1973, 298. On the basis of these Latin texts, a similar chronology has been suggested for the necropolis at Ain Zara, in Tripoli, which was originally dated to the end of the Byzantine period.

63 A letter from Maximus indicates the presence of a large number of Monastic communities around Carthage in the 7th c. Handley 2004, 295.

64 For a discussion see Tilley 2001.

65 For a discussion see Romanelli 1925/1926 and more recently Fedalto 2008, 547–549. Tripolitania never had more than 6 bishoprics.

66 See for some discussion on the sub-Saharan trade in the Early Islamic period Mattingly et al. 2014.

67 Fentress et al. 2004 and see also Dossey 2010, 66.

68 Barker – Mattingly 1996.

69 Barker – Mattingly 1996.



Fig. 2 Map showing the areas surveyed by the Libyan Valley survey and more recently by the Italian team (in yellow)

problems of chronological pottery definition. The second explanation is an environmental shift (a reduction in water supply?) that also determined a change in settlement distribution. A final possibility is a transformation in landscape organisation, with more nucleated settlements becoming common. This last hypothesis appears to be supported by data from other surveys. Moreover, in the case of the countryside of Tripolitania, a progressive development of fortified farms from the 3rd c. and the 4th c. has been identified, resulting in a depopulation of the landscape in the subsequent centuries⁷⁰. The phenomenon has been explained as a result of decreased security in the territory surrounding Lepcis Magna, due to the rise of local tribes (the Laguatan and the Asturians) who began sacking the countryside.

A recent survey has been carried out by an Italian team, less extensive but covering five transects overall: along the Wadi Bendar; in the area of the 'cabila' of Silin; the area of Gighna; along the Wadi Caam-Taraghat; and along the coast in the territory between Maghreb and Ras-el Hammam⁷¹. The territory along the Wadi Caam has provided more information on the Late Antique phases, and some of the interpretations proposed by the Libyan Valley Survey mentioned above have been recon-

sidered on this basis. It appears that the rich villas along the coast (particularly well preserved in Tripolitania) were abandoned in the 3rd c. and 4th c., but the inland settlement pattern followed a different line. Open farms continued to exist, while at the same time in the 4th c. and the mid-5th c. (more or less a century later than previously postulated by the Libyan Valley Survey) new fortified farms started to be built. Evidence of this phenomenon is based on a potential existing agreement between local farmers and local tribes to interact on a commercial basis rather than fighting⁷². Due to this pact, tribes instead turned their aggressions on the richer coastal sites, where a final drop in settlement numbers occurred later in the 7th c. This new interpretation does not necessarily imply that the results of the Libyan Valley Survey need to be fully reconsidered. While it is possible that a more precise definition of pottery chronologies would allow for adjustments in site chronologies, it is also possible that the much wider sector surveyed in the 1970's followed a different trend beginning in the 3rd c. In fact a substantial micro-regional diversity has been highlighted from both surveys; such diversities may have also been connected to the different populations occupying different territories.

⁷⁰ Mattingly 1995.

⁷¹ Felici et al. 2004.

⁷² Felici et al. 2004, 645.

In addition, overall data must be reconsidered in the view of environmental changes affecting pre-desert areas. As highlighted by the Libyan Valley Survey, the sites that survived in Late Antiquity were those positioned in close proximity to water resources. In fact, in the Islamic period the major concentration of fortified farms (*gsur*) were located along the Wadi Ben Ulid and Wadi Merdum (fig. 2). The more recent survey by the Italian team has shown a very similar pattern, with occupation continuity found primarily in the surveyed area along the river (the Wadi Cam)⁷³. Therefore, the progressive depopulation of the countryside may be only partially connected to insecurity and economic factors, and more closely related to a change in the environmental resources, the availability and then maintenance of water supply systems, and the consequent adaptation of the population living in the territory.

Similar evidence which shows a very close connection between water systems and new sets of fortified settlements after the 7th c. is also found in the inland areas of Jebel Nafūsa, far from the territory of Lepcis Magna that had been the primary target of previous surveys. Here as well, the first phase of fortifications dates back to the Roman period, but this is attested to with certainty only in a few cases, such as at the site of Giosc⁷⁴. The organisation of Jebel Nafūsa in the Early Islamic period shows the presence of villages primarily in connection with fortifications and mosques, as well as proximity to water resources and rivers. Despite the difficulty in dating the same trend, a major concentration of settlements along rivers is attested to by the Libyan Valley Survey. A substantial reduction in site numbers in the 7th c. (although this evidence may suffer from our limited knowledge of the pottery circulating after production of African Red Slip ceased), with greater occupation resuming at the end of the 8th and beginning of the 9th c., when a second phase of fortification across the territory of Tripolitania, is clearly outlined⁷⁵. In only twelve cases does evidence from pottery recorded in the survey and the presence of reused building materials indicate with any certainty a continuity of occupation from the Roman into the Early Medieval period, while in the majority of cases new settlements developed at the end of the 8th c.

or in the 9th c. These data indicate the development of a new landscape organisation following the Arab conquest, which impacted some areas of the region, like Jebel Nafūsa, where an increase in settlements is recorded during the same period⁷⁶. This seems to also suggest the development of new trade routes, which now included more direct lines to the Gebel. The territory then continued to play a central role in regional development into medieval times. Hilltop villages and the presence of fortified storage spaces confirm the continuous presence of a strong local community⁷⁷. The more recent survey carried out by the Italian team in five transects in the territory of Lepcis, mentioned above, shows a similar trend. The development of a new territorial setting after the 8th c. principally along the rivers (Wadi Taraglat) is recorded, with fortified villages characterised by the presence of fortified granaries, which appear to become the typical feature of settlements. A case study is offered by the village Gasr Darryah on the Wadi Sajuna, dated to the 9th c.⁷⁸. The development of granaries and the commonly found reuse of elements of olive presses in walls and buildings suggest a progressive decrease in the production of olive oil in the region, (which was the major product during the Roman period) and an increase in the cultivation of grain. Data therefore points towards a reorganisation in the exploitation of the territory. This territorial organisation seems to have lasted homogeneously in the northern and central territory of Tripolitania until the 12th c.

In fact, a substantial difference in site patterns in the territory of Lepcis Magna is that of the areas closer to the coast, where settlements see a substantial drop after the 12th c.⁷⁹. In the Jebel Nefūsa, intense occupation continues at least until the 13th and 14th c., when many of the mosques bear evidence of restorations through inscriptions. In this case, the reason is likely a further development of new internal trade routes, probably connected to developing pilgrimage routes to Mecca⁸⁰. In the territory a substantial decrease of occupation is recorded after the 12th c., and the settlement pattern gives space to a more nomadic/pastoralist community. This did not occur, however, along major routes, where instead there was continuity of occupation⁸¹.

73 Felici et al. 2006.

74 Sjöström 1993, 104. The area of the Nafusa has never been investigated systematically and the past surveys have focused primarily on the architectural features and the mosques rather than the occupation pattern. For earlier work see Basset 1899 and Allan 1973.

75 Munzi et al. 2014b.

76 Allan 1973.

77 Allan 1973. Fortified granaries are a common feature in some areas of the Arab world. They are found in some rural areas of Spain (Humbert – Fikri 1999).

78 Munzi et al. 2014b.

79 Munzi et al. 2014b.

80 The changing organisation of the trade routes in the medieval period is attested to in many neighbouring regions, such as the area of Fezzan (Mattingly et al 2015).

81 This is the case at the fort connected to the settlement of Banū Hasan mentioned in the 12th c. (al- Idrisi) and 13th c. (al- 'Abdari) together with other forts in the vicinity of Leptis Magna – Lebda (Abdouli 2012, 62).

The presence of fortified granaries in inland areas starting from the 8th and the 9th centuries and the intense reuse of olive press elements in buildings in some surveyed areas⁸² point to a certain decrease in olive oil production in the Arab period, but probably also suggest a change in production from primarily olive products to grain. The recorded presence of fortified granaries in the whole of Tripolitania indicates that the inland area, which was never fully Romanised, switched to a different type of production in the Arab period, making the cultivation of grain one of the primary products in inland areas. Reasons for this shift may be related to the needs of the society living in the region, or, more likely, to the difficulty of trading olive oil, an activity that became progressively more difficult after the collapse of the Roman Empire. The increase of grain production may also be related to the impact of new incomers, arriving mostly from Egypt, known notoriously as the granary of the Roman Empire. The development of the fortified granaries from the 9th c. onwards is also recorded in areas on the other side of the Mediterranean with the same characteristics, for instance Morocco and Spain⁸³. The phenomenon was therefore not limited exclusively to this region, but rather grain production and fortified granaries become typical of some regions of North Africa. It is probable that in Tripolitania this corresponds to the changing balance between grain and olive cultivations. There is also pastoralism to consider, which probably existed in the region prior to the Roman conquest but re-emerged with a semi-nomadic connotation⁸⁴.

The coastal situation was different. Here we find a progressive reduction in the occupation of sites. Taking into consideration urban areas, the city for which we possess the most information on the Arab phases is Lepcis Magna, and some of its data can be elaborated upon⁸⁵. Within the city of Lepcis pottery kilns producing globular amphorae have been identified near the harbour and in the Flavian temple⁸⁶. The amphorae were mostly used to transport and store olive oil, and their presence therefore indicates a continuity in that production. The location of the pottery kilns suggests that some surplus was produced and exported, doubtless not in the same quantity or with the same organisation that existed in the Roman period. The presence of production centres within the harbour of the city and in the area surrounding it suggests that the latter, although now reduced in size and

capacity, was still functioning and still used for exporting activities. The direction of these exports is difficult to single out due to the lack of detailed knowledge on globular amphora production in the region, but it is very likely that the material was travelling a short distance to other parts of the North African region. The condition of the harbour would in fact probably not have allowed items to be transported a long distance via the sea.

Inland and coastal areas: two parallel worlds

Overall, when looking at the development of the region of Tripolitania the differentiation between rural and coastal areas continues to be striking, in terms of settlement patterns and organisation, architectural forms, and decorative systems. The church decorations confirm, together with the case of Ghirza, the presence of an internal network of artisans and workmen, proving an existence that was only superficially influenced by the Roman and Byzantine architectural traditions. The level of Christianisation of the population living in the countryside is also difficult to identify and to fully understand, because of the lack of specific stratigraphic excavation.

The differentiations between rural and coastal areas (as attested to by the evidence of churches) reflect the history. The coastal areas, which were first strongly Romanised and then later under the influence of the Byzantine Empire, maintained an organisation and level of production which was built strictly on past tradition. This was also the area of the region which was inhabited primarily by the Rūms and where Mediterranean history and traditions continued to play a significant role. The coastal areas, characterised by the presence of pottery kilns that produced small amphorae, along with the presence of parts of olive presses within the city⁸⁷, seem to indicate that olive oil production continued instead in urban areas along the coast. The location of the production may indicate that some small, short distance exports continued from the small harbours. The continuity of the vitality of the harbours of coastal cities is proved, for instance, by the case of Lepcis Magna. Here, the port was characterised by the presence of a series of shops

82 Munzi et al. 2014b.

83 For Morocco: Humbert – Fikri 1999. For instance the granary at the Agadir d'Oumsdikt presents characteristics very similar to the one at Nalut in the Gebel Nafūsa (365). For Spain see for instance Le Cabezo de la Corbetera (Amigues et al. 1999).

84 Munzi et al. 2014b.

85 For a synthesis on the development of the city in the Early Islamic period see Cirelli 2001.

86 For a synthesis and further bibliography see Leone 2007, 225.

87 In Lepcis Magna for instance evidence of olive presses have been identified in the area of the palaestra of the Hadrianic bath, see Leone 2007, 232.

along the quay. The display of these numerous shops as well as the production areas recorded in proximity to them indicate that the exports, although at a much smaller scale and less organised, continued without interruption; this is also proved by the pottery kilns mentioned above⁸⁸.

The inland regions instead continued to follow a different pattern, and when high demand for olive oil from the Roman Empire waned after the empire's collapse, it reshaped the landscape and its exploitation under a new system. Sedentary populations were living in fortified villages and shared fortified granaries, while Nomadic populations developed a stronger pastoralist tradition. Internal territories originally developed a similar organisation with the presence of fortified villages and granaries. This new settlement pattern became apparent in the 8th and 9th c. and the driving force in conducting and shaping this new occupation seems to have been proximity to water resources and rivers. The environmental data from the Libyan Valley Survey indicate the cessation of olive oil production in the internal region, replaced by a predominance of grain and cereal production. The shift to grains in various areas of North Africa

after the Arab conquest is well documented, especially in the north of Algeria and the northwest of Tunisia (including the Mejrda valley), although it has been suggested that this production was not destined for export but instead for local consumption⁸⁹. Grain production was probably now equalling olives, whose production was now primarily developing to the coastal areas. The organisation appears to have continued substantially unchanged into the 12th c., when different patterns seem to characterise different regions. Some areas, like the Gebel Nafusa which had acquired a key position in trade and as a connection to the south of Tunisia in the area of Gabes, continued to maintain the same organisation. The transformation of the trade routes after the Arab conquest is well attested. The major axis between Carthage and Tebessa no longer existed, and was now replaced by a major centre of networks in Kairouan, the main connecting point to Gafsa⁹⁰. Other parts of the inland areas, closer to the coast, probably now outside of the major trade routes, developed a more nomadic nature to support pastoralism, which became one of the most important elements of the medieval North Africa economy.

Abstract

This paper considers the region of Tripolitania in the transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic world. It discusses the difficulty of defining cultural transitions through a precise chronological perspective, as changes take place over many centuries and cannot be categorised to fit one chronological period or another. The case of Tripolitania is taken as an example because of its large

amount of available data, in particular for these periods. The paper argues that environment as well as local traditions played an important role in reshaping the life and the economy of the region after the Arab conquest. Evidence from the Byzantine period shows that local traditions were already very strong in the Byzantine period.

Résumé

Cet article considère la région de la Tripolitaine dans la transition du monde byzantin au monde islamique. Il aborde la difficulté de définir les transitions culturelles à travers une perspective chronologique précise, étant

donné que les changements se produisent sur plusieurs siècles et ne peuvent pas être catégorisés pour correspondre à une période chronologique ou à une autre. Le cas de la Tripolitaine est pris à titre d'exemple en raison

⁸⁸ Cirelli 2001, 431.

⁸⁹ Vanacker 1973, 675.

⁹⁰ Vanacker 1973, 668.

de la grande quantité de données disponibles, en particulier pour ces périodes. Le document soutient que l'environnement ainsi que les traditions locales ont joué un rôle important dans la refonte de la vie et de l'économie

de la région après la conquête arabe. Les preuves tirées de la période byzantine montrent que les traditions locales étaient déjà très fortes à cette époque.

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Illustration credits

Figs. 1. 2 Massimo Brizzi

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