Chris Wickham
Africa-Ifrīqyia, Conclusions

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Africa-Ifrīqiya, Conclusions

by *Chris Wickham*

Twenty years ago, the 7th c. in Africa (i. e. Tunisia and Tripolitania, the focus of this book) was simply seen through the optic of crisis, in all respects. Historians still remembered Charles Diehl's view that the East Romans (whom I shall call Byzantines here, to fit the terminology in African historiography) got little or nothing out of their African conquests in 534 and the following years[1]; archaeologists knew better, because they understood the building boom in 6th-c. Carthage, which certainly showed the commitment and the prosperity of the Byzantine state (see Richard Miles in this volume), but they too were very downbeat about the 7th c., a century in which, indeed, Carthage demonstrably went into crisis in terms of its buildings and doubtless also its demography, probably after c. 650 (Ralf Bockmann)[2]. In the countryside, the absence of post-c.550 ceramics in the field surveys of Kasserine and Segermes was simply seen as a sign of abandonment (this makes some sense in Kasserine, on the edge of the steppe of the pre-Sahara; but that date in Segermes coincided with the end of the Sidi Khalifa kilns, which produced the survey's main diagnostic ARS, Hayes 88). It took until 2000, with the Dougga survey of Mariette de Vos, to make it clearer that what was happening in later periods was simply the end of the classic diagnostic fine wares, and their slow substitution by local types[3]. And even then many people were reasonably happy with a basic assumption that everything went further into crisis with the Arab conquests, notwithstanding the classic critical article of Thébert and Biget from 1990[4].

We now understand much more about the 7th and 8th c., as this book shows. This simple fact means that there is no doubt, now, that there was indeed continuity in Africa, not just in the 7th c., but also in the 8th, and up to the region's revival in the 9th and (particularly) the 10th. We certainly do not understand it fully; diagnostic pottery types are rare after 750 at the latest (even if by now not unknown; I will come back to the point), which makes the process of pinning down dates for archaeological evidence difficult. But it is at least now evident that it was not that everyone simply abandoned urban and rural sites. Continuity is a recurrent theme in this book, and rightly so. But continuity in what? Precisely because we now have a little more evidence for the post-Arab conquest period, it also becomes clear that it was by no means at the level of prosperity which had been normal under the late Roman empire, across most of the Vandal period, and again in the mid-6th c. So, given that we do not have to worry about the existence of continuity, we can recognise that there was a substantial element of crisis too. In what follows, I will try to balance the two, while I try to make generalisations about what we know now, as well as what we still do not. I will look in turn at the relations between Africa and the wider world, the effect of the arrival of the Arabs, urban and rural societies in different micro-regions, and finally ceramics.

I have argued elsewhere that Africa's agrarian and artisanal economy under the late Roman empire was more export-driven than that of any other major Roman region. The patterns of archaeological finds indicate that products went from the hinterland to the coasts along separate paths, with very little internal economic integration; ARS types, in particular, are found, as is well known, across the whole Mediterranean, but the different subtypes much more rarely turn up in other parts of Africa itself[5]. (Ceramics are the best guide, as usual, to the distribution of other products, less archaeologically visible; we know of course that late Roman Africa exported massive amounts of olive oil and *garum*, as amphora finds show, and we know a good deal about the grain *annona* too; furthermore Jonathan Conant is certainly right to stress on the basis of the written sources that Africa also exported textiles and maybe slaves.[6]) This however means that Africa was more exposed than were other regions to the steady weakening of western Mediterranean exchange which is visible in the archaeology from the mid-5th c. and which reached a near-terminus at the end of the 7th. As Michel Bonifay shows, here and elsewhere, ARS exports by the 7th c. were con-

1 Diehl 1896, 593. I am grateful to Lisa Fentress for a critique of this text. This conclusion was written in 2016, and is not revised to take into account more recent work.

2 For the Carthage of the latest 7th and 8th c., Stevens 2016 is also now fundamental.

3 Neuru 1990; Lund 1995, 466–472; de Vos 2000, 38–46. 65 f. 71.

4 Thébert – Biget 1990.

5 Wickham 2005, 720–728.

6 For slaves see also R. Bagnall in: Drine et al. 2009, 338.

centrated, in the western Mediterranean, above all in a few entrepôts such as Marseille, Rome and Naples, and, from these, in a few high-status non-port sites such as St-Peyre; and the white-fabric versions of ARS which he has identified in sites around Cap Bon, datable into the 8th c., perhaps up to 750, are hardly visible outside Africa at all – although St-Peyre, and also the Crypta Balbi excavations in Rome, do show African amphorae in 8th-c. levels[7].

There is much more work than there was a decade ago on the forms of Mediterranean exchange which followed 700. The 8th c. is less of a blank than it used to seem, including to me[8]. Cyprus is more visible than it was as a crossing-point for eastern Mediterranean exchange; the still-active productive centres in Egypt and the Levant were communicating with each other more than we previously thought, as the Beirut excavations show[9]. And, above all, the network of post-LRA 2 (or, for some authors, post-LRA 13) globular amphorae, which are now identifiable in more and more places in the central Mediterranean from the Aegean, through the Ionian sea (with a side-link up to the northern Adriatic), to the already-recognised Tyrrhenian trade network linking Rome, Naples, Calabria and Sicily, is coming to be seen as a 9th-c. type-fossil with firm roots in the 8th. This network has not yet received the proper synthesis it needs, but it is already clear that it was multi-polar, in that kiln sites have been identified in almost every region, and that it was linked closely to areas of Byzantine rule. Sicily can be seen, in the 8th c. in particular, as the core of this «western Byzantine» world, a set of island and coastal provinces which were only linked by sea, but which were perhaps more prosperous than the beleaguered Aegean-Anatolian heartland of Byzantium; Malta was also a very active entrepôt, in as-yet incompletely understood ways[10]. Africa was certainly linked into this network, including after the Arab conquest; globular amphorae have been found at Nabeul in the early 8th c., apparent imports have been found in post-conquest Jerba, and a 9th-c. kiln for small versions of the type has been found at Leptis Magna[11].

This gives us a clear sign that ceasing to be part of the Byzantine world did not mean ceasing to be part of a surviving Mediterranean network. The Arab conquest, in this respect as in others, did not necessarily mark much of an economic break for Africa. All the same, it is also the case that the scale of this network did not, as it appears at present, in any way match that of the 4th to 6th c., or even that of the 7th; and, although Africa was part of it, it did not dominate western/central Mediterranean economic interconnections, as it had done before 650/700. Africa, that is to say, had a less central role in a far more limited exchange system. Given the close links between the structuration of the late Roman/Vandal/Byzantine economy of Africa and the Mediterranean export network, this must have had a sharply negative effect on that economy. In particular, given the fact that Africa's pre-7th-c. internal links were all focussed on the Mediterranean network, its severe weakening would have encouraged economic fragmentation. The different micro-regions of a more inward-looking Africa could be expected to have different histories from now on, at least until the exchange revival of the late 9th c. and, especially, the 10th–11th. And, as is clear from the articles in this book, indeed they did.

I would argue that the crisis marked by the substantial changes in Africa's export economy was rather more important than the disruptions of the Arab conquest. Walter Kaegi here shows that the defence of Africa from the 640s on was a sideshow by comparison with the defence of Anatolia. This would not have made sense as late as 608–610, when Heraclius took Constantinople by force, starting from Africa; as late as 663–668, the fact that Constans II made his choice to base himself in Syracuse must have been because of the importance of at least Sicily. But by then Syracuse was almost certainly a more prosperous place than Carthage, and the overall ineptness of the Byzantines in defending Africa against what was a very intermittent and often uncommitted aggression on the part of the Arabs (for whom the war was also a sideshow) is probably itself a sign that the economy of the region was beginning to lose traction, making its defence indeed less central. (The fact that nearly every major city of Africa was by now defended with a Byzantine fortress, as François Baratte has described here for Haïdra, makes the ineffectiveness of defence even more striking.) The political uncertainties of the period 670–700, when the Arabs were in control of Byzacena but not Proconsularis, will simply have made the crisis systemic at a political-institutional level, as well as an economic one. Anyway, the Arabs in the early 8th c. took possession of a region already in serious trouble. There is no sign whatsoever that they made it worse, except at Carthage, which was soon, as Ralf Bockmann discusses, replaced by Tunis (even if Carthage remained in part inhabited). The focus on Kairouan did not have a similar negative effect on any major African city – Susan Stevens indeed argues convincingly here that Sousse managed

7 Bonifay 2004, 210. 485; Reynolds 2016, 147.
8 Wickham 2005, 758 f. 794.
9 Zavagno 2011/2012; Reynolds 2003.
10 Arcifa 2010; Ardizzone 2010; Molinari 2013. For Malta, Bruno – Cutajar 2013.
11 Bonifay 2004, 152 f.; Holod – Cirelli 2011, 174; Munzi et al. 2014, 229.

quite well to survive as an urban centre precisely because it was linked to Kairouan. But it would take a century and more before we can see any sign of a real revival, once the Aghlabids achieved effective independence. This in itself shows the degree to which Africa was in a poor state, structurally – for the economies of most provinces of the early caliphate were rather more prosperous than that.

It must be remembered that there cannot have been many Arabs in Africa in 700. Arabia is not very populous a peninsula, and the Arabs conquered very fast; they had to garrison a huge area at once, and in 700, or even 800, the Arabisation of subject peoples had not got very far. The great bulk of the Arabs will anyway have settled in Iraq (perhaps above all), Khurasan, Syria and Egypt, and there will have been as a result still fewer left over for the ruling of Africa – hence, indeed, the fact that it took fifty years to conquer the region. The Berbers were not yet subdued, and their Islamisation will therefore have not got far either; Spain was conquered for the Arabs by a mostly Berber army, but that was a decade later, and the main areas of Berber settlement were anyway on the far side of Africa from the Arab perspective, and on the way to Spain. The by-now Muslim Berbers were important in Tunisia and Tripolitania later – under the early Fatimids above all[12] – but this was not the case in the early years of Arab rule in Africa, and even less so after the great Berber revolt of 740. So the Arabs must have been thinly spread in Africa, especially outside Kairouan and Tunis. It would be unsurprising if they did not have a large-scale impact on the territory, as a people, for a very long time. It is likely that their major leaders became landowners, following the patterns of Byzantine landowning[13]; this marks them out as different from the Arab élites in the *amṣār* of Iraq and Egypt, who simply lived on taxes in this period, and it may well show that the Byzantine fiscal system in Africa was in poor shape by now – the only other major caliphal province where this was the case was Spain, where under the Visigoths taxation had virtually disappeared. (Early Muslim Spain indeed had as fragmented an economic system as Africa, or more so; and, inside the micro-regions which had by now formed there, there were in some cases very simple economies, with handmade pottery, something which is invisible in the core lands of Africa[14]). I would indeed expect that Africa began to regain economic coherence when the fiscal system was properly re-established, as in the 9th and 10th c. Spain also did. To show this, however, requires work which has not yet properly been done. What we can say all the same, for the 8th c. at least – the period we are looking at here – is that explanations for the problems faced by the African micro-regions in most cases will have to come from the internal features of each, and not from the impact of the Arabs as an incoming force. Let us look at three examples of this.

The most economically complex part of pre-7th c. Africa, outside the special case of Carthage and its hinterland, was doubtless the Medjerda valley and its environs, with its dozens of tiny cities, set very close to each other, wealthy from grain farming and, in part, olive cultivation (Anna Leone)[15]. In many respects, this area was the most unchanged after 700, for that grain-land was still, as far as we can see, fully exploited, and oil presses can be found in Islamic levels too, as for example at Belalis Maior (Henchir el-Faouar) and Bulla Regia. Actually, as Corisande Fenwick shows here, not all was stable; in particular, the (excessively) dense network of cities thinned out substantially, although cities which survived did not fragment internally. Not all may ever have had serious urban characteristics, but from now on some were abandoned, and others became rather smaller, for up to two centuries, as with Chemtou (Philipp von Rummel) or Uchi Maius. Others, however, as with the unexcavated Béja, or again Bulla Regia and Belalis Maior, continued to be active. A hierarchy of settlements must always have existed, but by now the lower rungs of it were no longer recognised as *civitates*. So there was a simplification here, but not necessarily much of an involution. This must indicate a survival of local élites; if there were substantial Arab landowners, they are quite likely to have been on fiscal and absentee-owner land, much as the Vandal aristocracy had probably been.

Byzacena shows continuities too, but different ones. It had never had many cities except in its coastal strip; in the hinterland, Sbeïtla (Fenwick) and Haïdra (Baratte) continued to be significant centres, some way from the coast, and were joined by Kairouan – which seems to have been founded on, or beside, a Roman city, but was built up, on a square plan as it appears, in the late 7th and 8th c. (Fathi Bahri and Mouna Taamallah). What happened to the export-orientated olive plantations of the interior when there was much less exporting available, after 700, is unclear, although the work required to uproot an olive plantation must have deterred even the most radical local boss – it was doubtless the same trees which remained available for renewed exploitation in the 9th c. and onwards. The coastal cities, however, suffered, as their major role had been export. Not Sousse, as we have seen; but Leptiminus lost its urban characteristics (Stevens), and turned into a set of villages, even if

12 Brett 2001, 79–139.
13 Talbi 1981, 210–214.
14 Wickham 2005, 742–751.
15 See also Fenwick 2013 (a wide-ranging survey; 30 for olive presses) and Touihri 2014.

prosperous ones. Stevens shows that the coast was not a real disaster area – it was fertile land on its own account, more than the interior was – but it did not have the prosperity which it had had until the late 6th c.

Tripolitania was different again (Anna Leone). Here, the greatest continuities were in the cities of the coast of what is now Libya, Leptis Magna, Oea (Tripoli – see Hafed Abdouli for its very slow takeover of centrality from Leptis) and Sabratha; and we must add the best-studied rural area along the coast, the island of Jerba (now in Tunisia), where, after a 6th-c. crisis for its major city Meninx, perhaps when the Byzantines moved the main focus of murex production to Tyre, the countryside continued to be exploited throughout our period[16]. All these places maintained links with whatever Mediterranean exchange there still was, and the Libyan cities remained oil-producing centres. It was in the countryside back from the coast that there were more changes. The Italian survey of the lands south of Leptis showed a steady thinning out of the fortified farms of the 5th c., and a move to a more pastoral environment – a classic example of what Øystein LaBianca calls «abatement»; newly-visible villages with fortified granaries from around 800 onwards (which show renewed grain cultivation) were on different sites from the earlier fortifications for the most part[17]. Here, we are on the fringe of radically alternative ways of exploiting the landscape, for the hinterland stretched southwards, ever drier, to a pre-Sahara which was rather closer than anywhere in modern Tunisia except the far south. This must be the reason for a set of discontinuities which northern Tunisia and the core lands of Byzacena did not experience. But it further emphasises the survival of the cities of the coast, which is visible to a rather greater extent than in much of Tunisia. We cannot, essentially, expect the patterns of development to have been the same from place to place. Other micro-regions, such as the different parts of the Tell, reaching westwards into Numidia, or Cap Bon (not to speak of the local variation in the wide lands stretching westwards into modern Morocco), will have been different again. This makes generalisation hard; we cannot make assumptions about similarities; but this will, when there is more work on the period, make more nuanced and focussed analysis more straightforward too.

My final point concerns ceramics: or what little we know of them after ARS productions vanish. That some ARS kilns survived the Arab conquest is evident from Bonifay's contribution; but by 750 they too had gone, or else shifted to much simpler common-ware productions – as was already occurring in the Dougga area by 650[18]. We do not know much about these, and we also cannot easily date what we have, until glaze begins to be common, which is not until the 10th c. We run into trouble in most areas quite fast if we try to use diagnostic types to date urban and rural settlements. But we can say some things. The most recent surveys, on Jerba and behind Leptis Magna, which were more attentive to patterns of common wares, showed a continuing elaborate set of well-produced types: in the Libyan case, bottles, jugs, bowls, oil-lamps, and a wide distribution of the small Leptis amphorae by the 9th c.; on Jerba, jars, jugs, carinated bowls, dishes, and globular amphorae[19]. Elsewhere, less clearly-characterised sets of post-Byzantine common wares are at least all of good quality in their fabrics and firing[20]. This all signifies a continued consistency for localised demand, in a variety of different micro-regions of Africa, which, like urban survival, marks a continued presence of local élites. The African crises did not destroy that demand, or the people who bought such products. This low-key continuity (which, in the western Mediterranean, recalls Italy, rather than southern France or much of Spain, both of which saw more involution) is not dramatic, but it is a great deal more than nothing. Even if macro-economic changes took away Africa's export economy, most of the region was after all still notably good land, enough for local élites to remain prosperous on. That would be, as it turned out, a sufficient basis for Aghlabid centralisation (however it actually worked on the ground), the revival of demand, and new glazed styles from Egypt and the east, to create the new high-quality ceramic productions which would be important in the central Mediterranean in the central middle ages. African oil and cloth will have had much the same trajectory. The 10th- to 12th-c. high point of medieval Africa did not, that is to say, come out of a void. What in detail it came out of, in the 8th c., the obscurest of all medieval centuries, will be understood in more detail in the future than it can be in the present; but so far, as this book shows, we can say at least that.

16 Holod – Cirelli 2011, 169–175.
17 LaBianca 1990, 9–21. For the Italian survey, Munzi et al. 2014, 216–220. 226–228.
18 de Vos 2000, 41–46.
19 Holod – Cirelli 2011, 171–175; Munzi et al. 2014, 229.
20 See references in Wickham 2005, 727 and Reynolds 2016, 147–150.

Abstract

This conclusion discusses the implications of the papers in the volume, taken as a whole. It discusses what can now be said about the 8th century in Africa, a period of crisis but not of complete devastation. Africa was much more cut off economically than it had been, which means that its internal economy fragmented, until a probable Aghlabid fiscally-backed recentralisation. Arab immigration was almost certainly socially and economically marginal. The local societies which we can track archaeologically, in the Medjerda valley, in Byzacena, around Leptis Magna and on Jerba, had very different trajectories, as the fragmentation of the eocnomy would indeed make us expect. But localised ceramic continuities imply the survival of local elites, who doubtless operated as the underpinning of economic revival from the late 9th c. onwards as well.

Résumé

Cette conclusion examine les implications des articles du volume, considérés dans leur ensemble. Il discute de ce que l'on peut dire aujourd'hui du VIIIe siècle en Afrique, une période de crise mais pas de dévastation totale. L'Afrique était beaucoup plus isolée économiquement qu'elle ne l'avait été, ce qui signifie que son économie interne s'est fragmentée jusqu'à une probable recentralisation fiscale aghlabide. L'immigration arabe était presque certainement marginale sur le plan social et économique. Les sociétés locales que l'on peut suivre de manière archéologique dans la vallée de la Medjerda, en Byzacena, autour de Leptis Magna et sur Jerba, avaient des trajectoires très différentes, comme la fragmentation de l'économie nous l'aurait bien fait présumer. Cependant, les continuités céramiques localisées témoignent de la survie des élites locales, qui ont sans doute été à l'origine de la reprise économique à partir de la fin du IXe siècle.

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Address

Chris Wickham
Chichele Professor of Medieval History (emeritus)
University of Oxford
OX1 4AL
United Kingdom
chris.wickham@all-souls.ox.ac.uk