How to Found an Islamic State: The Idrisids as Rivals to the Abbasid Caliphate in the Far Islamic West

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1 Introduction

By the late second/early ninth century, North Africa was lost to the Abbasid caliphate.* Rival states had emerged in the Maghrib al-Aqṣā (roughly modern Morocco and western Algeria) a few short decades after its conquest (fig. 5.1). The earliest were the Ṣāliḥids at Nakūr (91/709–710), which followed in the wake of the Kharijite revolt by the Barghawāṭa (127/744–745), the Midrārids of Sijilmāsa (140/757–758), the Rustamids at Tāhart (160/776–777), and finally, the Idrisids, who ruled much of northern Morocco (172/788–789).[1] Their emergence coincided with a phase of intense urbanization that transformed the social and economic landscape of the Maghrib al-Aqṣā: new cities were built, old settlements re-occupied or expanded, and new trade links were established.[2] By 184/800, caliphal rule had failed entirely in North Africa, and the Abbasids abandoned even Ifrīqiya to their vassals, the Aghlabids, independent rulers in all but name.[3] From this point on, North Africa was ruled by Islamic dynasties who were independent from, and rivals to, Baghdad. Yet these shadowy—often short-lived—North African states are all too often overlooked

1 Talbi, Hérésie, acculturation et nationalisme; Aillet, Tāhart et l'imamat rustumide; Capel and Fili, Sijilmāsa; Cressier, Nakūr; García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, Idrīssisme. For an account of early Islamic North Africa, see Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*.
2 Brett, Islamisation of Morocco; Cressier, Urbanisation; Rosenberger, Les premières villes islamiques.
3 See Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide*; Anderson, Fenwick, and Rosser-Owen (eds.), *Aghlabids and their neighbors*.
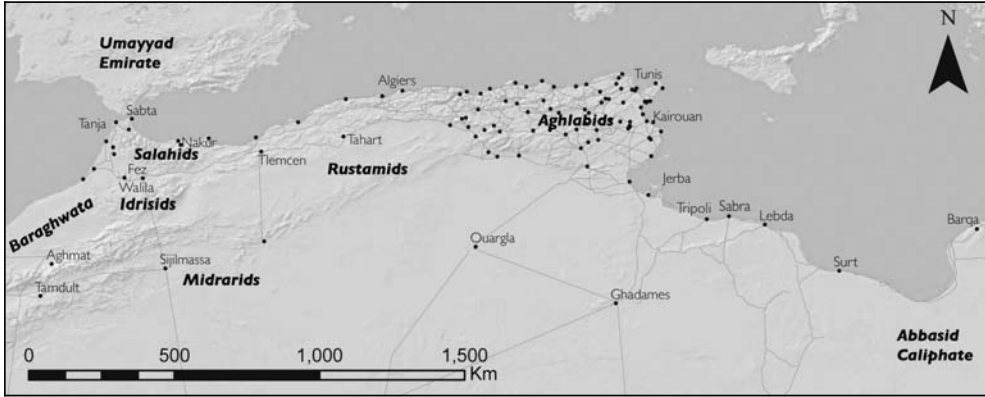
FIGURE 5.1   Map of early medieval North Africa showing the location of the rival states
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in discussions of Islamic state formation, despite their important positions in
the power spectrum and the developmental trajectory of Muslim statehood.

That new Islamic political forms emerged as the paradigm for state authority
in the Maghrib al-Aqṣā is surprising, and by no means inevitable. In stark con-
trast to al-Andalus and Ifrīqiya, which had urban-based societies, tax econom-
ies, and well-developed state apparatuses inherited from Romano-Byzantine
rule, the western Maghrib was sparsely populated, with only a handful of lar-
ger settlements, and may not even have had a monetary economy on the eve
of the Arab conquest. The region was never fully conquered or subdued by the
caliphate; indeed, though the Kharijite revolt started there in 122/739–740, the
presence of an Umayyad garrison was restricted to the districts of Ṭanja, Tilim-
sān, and Ṭarqala (thus far unlocated).[4] What, if any, Abbasid activity took place
in the region is unclear, but *dirham* were minted south of the Atlas Mountains
at Tudgha in the name of Yazīd b. Ḥātim, the Abbasid governor of Ifrīqiya, and
circulated widely in the caliphate and beyond. Why was it in the Maghrib al-
Aqṣā that the earliest rivals to the caliphate emerged? How did their rulers
justify their rule? And what was the relationship between these new states
and the Abbasid caliphate? These questions invite discussion of the relations
between Islam, rulers, and local populations on the one hand and the dynam-
ics between these newly established rival states and the Abbasid caliphate
on the other, a topic I have frequently debated with Hugh Kennedy over the
years.

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4   Djaït, Wilāya 97–98. On the nature of Umayyad rule in North Africa, see also Fenwick, Umayy-
      ads.

This brief piece will explore the process of establishing an Islamic state on the western borders of the Abbasid caliphate in the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries using the example of the better-known Idrisid state established by Idrīs I and his son, Idrīs II, so as to highlight some of the issues at stake. Though the Idrisid state of northern Morocco was the latest of the polities to be founded in the Far West, it was arguably the most significant rival—and the greatest perceived threat—to Abbasid claims. Its ʿAlid rulers claimed their right to rule from their descent from ʿAlī and the Prophet—a sufficiently powerful claim that Idrīs I was reportedly poisoned by an Abbasid secret agent on the orders of the caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd. His descendants continued to be a thorn in the Abbasid flank, increasingly mediated by the Aghlabids in Ifrīqiya, as well as their immediate neighbors—the Midrārids of Siljilmasa, the Rustamids of Tāhart, and, across the straits, the Umayyad emirate in al-Andalus—who occasionally came together against the Idrisid threat. Several modern studies have already made significant headway in exploring the relationship between state formation and urbanization in Morocco,[5] the Idrisid mint and economy,[6] and the archaeology of Idrisid towns.[7] However, a full history of Idrisid state formation remains to be written, and the Idrisid state continues to be almost entirely ignored by scholars working on the Abbasids and the ʿAlid successor movements.[8]

This chapter draws together literary, numismatic, and archaeological evidence to explore different elements of the state formation process. I first present a brief introduction to the formative period of the Idrisid state and the ʿAlid-Abbasid rivalry. I then explore the often-neglected claims that the Idrisids themselves made on their coins about their sovereignty and right to rule; I argue that these provide an important counterpoint to the narratives refracted through later texts and explain why the Idrisids were perceived as such a threat to Abbasid rule. I finally turn to explore relations between the Idrisids and their Berber subjects at the first Idrisid capital, Walīla (Roman Volubilis), where extensive excavations provide a unique glimpse into daily life in a town during the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. Taken together, I suggest

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5   See especially, Cressier, Urbanisation; García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, Idrīssisme; as well as García-Arenal, *Messianism* 44–51, on the relationship with Mahdism.

6   Eustache, *Corpus*; Manzano Moreno, El desarrollo económico.

7   Excavations and field surveys have taken place at Walīla, al-Baṣra, Fez, Āghmāt, and Ḥajar al-Nasr.

8   Though, see Talbi *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 362–378 for an excellent analysis of the relationship between the Idrīsids and the Aghlabids.

that this evidence sheds new light on the claims made by the Idrisids, the workings of their new state on the ground, and its relations with the caliphate.

2   Challengers to Empire: Idrīs, the *ahl al-bayt*, and the Foundation of the Idrisid State

As an ʿAlid and member of the Ḥasanid branch of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*), Idrīs b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥasan (d. 175/791) was a leading figure within the larger Zaydī community in the Ḥijāz. Members of the Prophet's family provided a rallying point for those Muslim elites who did not accept Abbasid rule.[9] Indeed, the first serious challenge to the Abbasids was a simultaneous, but unsuccessful, uprising in Mecca (the Ḥijāz) and Basra (Iraq) in 145/762–763, led by two of Idrīs's elder brothers, Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and Ibrāhīm.[10] Idrīs played a pivotal role in a second ʿAlid revolt in 169/786 led by his cousin or nephew al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī that erupted in Medina and culminated in the disastrous Battle of Fakhkh and the exodus of Idrīs and other surviving family members from the Ḥijāz to the furthest margins of Abbasid rule—North Africa and the Caspian Sea.[11]

There are well-established challenges with the literary sources that describe Idrīs's arrival in Morocco in 172/788–789 and the subsequent history of the Idrisid state. The earliest surviving accounts were written through the lens of ʿAlid-Abbasid rivalry; indeed, the flight and subsequent assassination of Idrīs I on caliphal orders became a panegyric theme in Abbasid historiography.[12] Pro-Abbasid sources in particular often cast the Idrisids as credulous and naïve and their Berber followers as unfaithful and misguided. As Najam Haider has shown, there are important differences between these early narratives and an alternative Zaydī tradition that appeared in the mid-fourth/ tenth century and was framed within contemporary theological polemics about the broader Zaydī community.[13] A newly published edition of Ahmad b. Sahl al-Rāzī's (fourth/ tenth century) *Akhbār Fakhkh wa-khabar Yaḥyā b. ʿAbdallāh wa-akhīhi Idrīs b. ʿAbdallāh* (The stories of the battle of Fakhkh and Yaḥyā

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9   On the insecurity of early ʿAbbasid rule, see Lassner, *Shaping of ʿAbassid rule*; for the rivalry between Abbasids, Ḥusaynids, and Ḥasanids, see Elad, Struggle for the legitimacy of authority; on the ʿAlids, see Bernheimer, *ʿAlids*.

10   For the revolt, see Elad, *Rebellion*.

11   For the revolt, see van Arendonk, *Les débuts de l'imāmat zaidite* 62–63.

12   See, for example, the poem reproduced by al-Ṭabarī, *History* 30.

13   Haider, Community divided, for an illuminating study of different versions of Idrīs's journey and subsequent murder.

b. ʿAbdallāh and his brother Idrīs b. ʿAbdallāh) offers significant potential to shed new light on early Idrisid history and politics, but it has yet to be integrated into Idrisid historiography.[14] The most detailed information about the Idrisid rulers comes from the much later but local ninth/fourteenth-century Merinid sources, particularly Ibn Abī Zarʿs *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, which as Herman Beck, Mercedes García-Arenal, Eduardo Manzano Moreno, Simon O'Meara, and others have shown, sought to simultaneously reclassify the Idrisids as leaders of Mālikī Sunnism, to assert their relationship to the Prophet as members of the *ahl al-bayt*, and to glorify the status of the city of Fez (Fās) and Idrīs II.[15]

Even so, the sources do provide a broadly reliable narrative of the establishment of the early Idrisid state from Idrīs's arrival in the Maghrib to the division of northern Morocco among the sons of Idrīs II, though there are challenges in resolving the different chronologies provided by authors. Idrīs, accompanied by his client Rāshid (in some accounts a Berber), arrived at the town of Walīla (Roman Volubilis) in 172/788–789 after a long and torturous journey from the Ḥijāz.[16] Here he was welcomed by the Awraba tribe, whose leader, Abū Layla Isḥāq b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (who according to al-Bakrī had already converted to Islam and was a Muʿtazilite), declared him imam shortly thereafter. By incorporating a member of the *ahl al-bayt* into their community, the Awraba acquired prestige and Islamic legitimacy. Idrīs subsequently undertook a series of military expeditions with his new Berber allies, which united a large swath of Morocco for the first time, as well as perhaps capturing silver mines south of the Atlas in the Draʾa and at Tudgha, where Abbasid *dirham* had been minted between 163–166/ 779–783 by Yazīd b. Ḥātim, the governor of Ifrīqiya. Idrīs minted silver *dirham* (at Tudgha and then Walīla) immediately to pay his followers,[17] and as we will see below, these reveal his millennial claims and threat to Abbasid authority.

Idrīs's rule was short-lived, however, and he died in 175/791, apparently poisoned by a secret agent, probably in his tooth powder, sent by the Abbasid governor of Ifrīqiya (in some traditions it is Ibrāhīm b. al-Aghlab, the governor of the Zāb who became *amīr* of Ifrīqiya in 184/800) on the orders of the Abbasid

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14   Al-Rāzī, *Akhbār*. First published in 1995 by Maher Jarrar.

15   Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II*; O'Meara, Foundation legend of Fez; García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, Idrīssisme.

16   See Haider, Community divided. The *Kitab al-Istibsar* suggests that Rāshid was a Berber; see Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II* 25.

17   Rosenberger, Les premières villes islamiques 238.

caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd.[18] That the murder of Idrīs was facilitated by Ibrāhīm is both a reflection of the limits of caliphal authority in North Africa as well as of the early rise of the Aghlabids as regional power brokers. Fortunately, Idrīs's Berber wife or concubine, who was called Kanza or Kathīra, was pregnant and gave birth to a posthumous son, Idrīs II, who in turn was proclaimed imam in a mosque at Walīla in 187/803 and received an oath of loyalty (*bay'a*) from the tribesmen.[19] Rāshid served as regent during Idrīs II's minority and continued to expand Idrisid control over northern Morocco; supposedly, he was so successful that he prepared a military campaign against Ifrīqiya. He was either assassinated or killed in a fight in either 186/802 or 188/804 through the machinations of Ibrāhīm b. al-Aghlab, and his head was sent to Baghdād.[20] Ibrāhīm continued to be on the offensive against the Idrisids, bribing Berber chiefs such as Bahlūl al-Matgharī (who may have been Rāshid's successor as regent) to come over to the Abbasid cause. Bahlūl was replaced by Abu Hālid Yazīd b. Ilyās al-ʿAbdī, presumedly of Arab rather than Berber origin.[21] Idrīs II apparently then wrote to Ibrāhīm a supplication for peace, making reference to his relationship with the Prophet and exhorting Ibrāhīm to submit to his authority and to renounce his pretensions to rule.[22] Though the written sources are obscure and contradictory on these developments, coins provide firm evidence of Aghlabid campaigning—or at least political maneuverings— in Morocco: silver *dirham* were minted at Tudgha (south of the Atlas) in the name of Ibrāhīm b. al-Aghlab (r. 184–196/ 800–811) in 192/ 807–808, 193/808– 809, and perhaps also 186/802–803.[23]

The minting of Aghlabid *dirham* at Tudgha coincides with a significant shift in Moroccan power dynamics. In 192/ 808–809, Idrīs II executed the chief of

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18   On different traditions, see Haider, Community divided; and on the pivotal role of Ibrāhīm b. al-Aghlab, who was appointed governor in 179/795, see Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 369– 371. As he points out, this could support a later date of 179/795 for the death of Idrīs, which is further supported by the coins that continued to be minted in Idrīs's name until this date.

19   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 239. While the Arabic term may be anachronistic, an oath of allegiance of a contractual nature has precedents in late antique North Africa, as well as pre-Islamic Arabia.

20   See Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 373–374; and Benchekroun, Rašid et les Idrissides; Ibn al-Abbār, *Kitāb* 99–100.

21   He may have been one of the 500 horsemen from al-Andalus and Ifrīqiya who reportedly came to Walīla in 189/805 and offered their services to Idrīs II, though this is only mentioned by Ibn Abī Zarʿ, *Histoire* 14.

22   Ibn al-Abbār, *Kitāb* 55.

23   Al-Ush, *Monnaies aglabide* 99, nos. 188 and 183; 97, no. 175 (the date of 186/802–803 is deduced on stylistic grounds—no date is legible).

the Awraba, Isḥāq, because of his treacherous dealings with the Aghlabids and dispatched his head eastward in a power play demonstrating the fate of disloyal chiefs.[24] In the same year, he established a new quarter at Fez, which become his new center, displacing the dominance of Walīla and the Awraba further still. In so doing, he was following the well-established tradition of Muslim rulers as city-founders that Hugh Kennedy and others have explored elsewhere in detail.[25] Our knowledge of Fez is almost entirely based on later written descriptions that draw heavily on established Arabic literary tropes for city-foundation.[26] A first medina, Madīnat Fās, was built—most probably—by Idrīs I in 172/789 as a military camp for some of his Berber followers. This does not seem to have been a substantial settlement, and no coins were minted there.[27] A second walled medina, called al-ʿAliyya (the higher), was founded by his son Idrīs II in 192/808–809, and the earliest known coin was minted there in 197/812–813.[28] Its foundation coincides with challenging political circumstances and tense relations between Idrīs II and the Awraba at Walīla following his execution of Isḥāq.[29] According to al-Bakrī, Idrīs II gained the land for al-ʿAliyya through an agreement with the Berber chief of the Zawāgha who resided there in tents; the agreement was presumably similar to that made by his father with the Awraba at Walīla several years earlier.[30] The ninth/fourteenth-century *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās* provides a crucial detail about this agreement: Idrīs purchased this land for 6,000 *dirham* and then started building.[31] In the Quarter of the Andalous, Idrīs II built a mosque called the "Mosque of the Shaykhs," where he gave a Friday sermon, and in the al-Qarawiyyīn quarter, he built a mosque called the Mosque of the Shurafāʾ (today the Zāwiya of Moulay Idrīs II), where the sermon was also given; apparently, next to it he built a *qaysāriyya* where coins were minted. Finally, he told the people to build their houses and cultivate the ground.[32] Our limited archaeological knowledge of early medieval Fez supports a rapid investment in the infrastructure of the city in the second

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24   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 376.

25   Kennedy, How to found an Islamic city; Bacharach, Administrative complexes.

26   On the history and organization of Fez, see Lévi-Provençal, La fondation de Fès; García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, Idrīssisme. On literary tropes and city foundation legends, see O'Meara, Foundation legend of Fez; Valérian, Récits.

27   No Idrisid coins have been found with the name Fās, only al-ʿAliyya and al-ʿAliyya Madīnat Idrīs.

28   O'Meara, Foundation legend of Fez. See Eustache, *Corpus* 146–160.

29   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 376.

30   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 240.

31   Ibn Abī Zarʿ, *Histoire* 30–34.

32   Ibn Abī Zarʿ, *Histoire* 42–44; Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II* 67.

half of the third/ninth century. Rescue excavations have discovered stucco fragments with Quranic inscriptions as well as the foundations of the Idrisid phases of the al-Qarawiyyīn mosque, which according to tradition was built by a Kairouanese woman, Fāṭima al-Fihriyya, in 242/857.[33] A painted wooden beam dedicated by Dāwūd b. Idrīs in 263/877 indicates that the decor of Idrisid mosques in Morocco was similar to that in Ifrīqiya and al-Andalus, unsurprising given the level of mobility in this period.

The construction and monumentalizing of Fez did not occur in a vacuum. The rise of the Idrisids coincides with a phase of intense urbanization in the Maghrib al-Aqṣā: old settlements were re-occupied and still more towns were newly built or significantly expanded by the addition of fortification walls, mosques, hammams, markets, hydraulic systems, and so on.[34] The building of Fez also needs to be situated within the political dynamics of third/ninth-century Africa: in a short span of a few decades, the Idrisids' rivals had already built the dynastic capitals of Sijilmāsa and Tāhart, and in Ifrīqiya, the Aghlabids built al-ʿAbbāsiyya in honor of the Abbasids.[35]

Now in his majority, Idrīs II continued to expand his control over the northwest Maghrib and in 197/812 made a campaign against the Maṣmūda of the High Atlas, followed by an expedition to capture Tilimsān in 199/814–815, where he apparently established a mosque. This substantial territorial expansion is reflected in a proliferation of new mints in 197/812–813 (al-ʿAliyya, Tahlīt, Wargha, Wazeqqūr) and 198/813–814 (Āghmāt, Ṭanja—dubious), which are assumed to reflect the foundation of new towns (fig. 5.2).[36] Less is known about the other so-called Idrisid foundations, but it is becoming increasingly clear that many were not new towns but rather were established on, or near, existing Berber settlements.[37] The best known archaeologically is the town of al-Baṣra. *Dirham* were first minted there in 80/796–797, that is, during the regency of

33   Ettahiri, À la aube. Further rescue excavations in the al-Qarawiyyīn quarter have also found traces of early occupation, probably from the Idrisid period, see El Omari, Laoukili, and Akasbi, Fouilles archéologiques 222.

34   Rosenberger, Les premières villes islamiques; Cressier, Urbanisation; Cressier, Quelques remarques.

35   The model of the Idrisids as city-founders and benefactors is largely due to the testimony of al-Bakrī, our fullest pre-Merinid source for the region, and to whom we also owe our earliest detailed information on the foundation of the Midrārids at Sijilmāsa, the Rustamids at Tāhart, and the Salīḥids at Nakūr.

36   For the mints, see Eustache, *Corpus*; and for their relations with urbanism, see García-Arenal and Manzano Moreno, Idrīssisme 23–30; Rosenberger, Les premières villes islamiques 236–241.
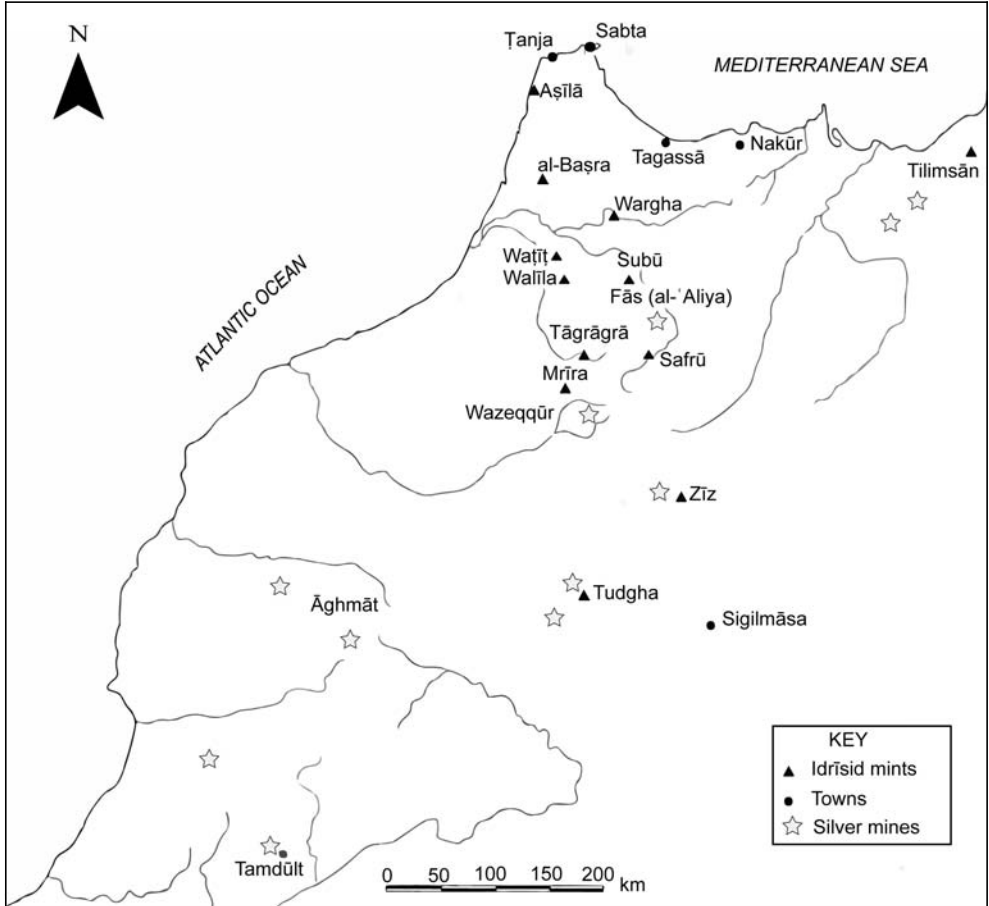
37   Cressier, Quelques remarques.

FIGURE 5.2 Map of Morocco showing the location of Idrisid mints, towns, and known silver mines
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Rāshid. The choice of name is certainly deliberate—the city of Basra in Iraq
was where Idrīs's elder brother Ibrāhīm had raised an abortive rebellion against
the Abbasids in 145/ 762–763, and it continued to be a major center of both Shiʻi
and Kharijite agitation in subsequent centuries. Though al-Baṣra was tradition-
ally thought to be an Idrisid foundation of the late second/eighth century,[38] it
was not a wholly new creation. A substantial settlement of stone and mudbrick
buildings with tiled roofs and flagstone pavement existed there as early as the

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38   Eustache, *Corpus* 119–120; supplemented by Ettahiri and Meftah, Quelques émissions.

fifth or sixth century CE.[39] This settlement seems to have collapsed, followed by a phase of ephemeral occupation, perhaps dating to the late first/seventh century. The town was subsequently refounded and covered an area of about 30 hectares protected by an enceinte in an ovoid form flanked by semicircular towers. These fortifications are described by al-Bakrī, who also mentions a seven-naved congregational mosque, two hammams, and two cemeteries.[40]

Territorial expansion and urbanization were not matched by increased Aghlabid intervention into the west, and on the guidance of his advisors, Ibrāhīm left to Idrīs II those areas of the western Maghrib that were in his control and kept the status quo.[41] Idrīs II died at Walīla in 213/828 at the age of 33 after choking on a raisin. He left behind many sons, and when the eldest of these, Muḥammad b. Idrīs, succeeded, on the advice of his Berber grandmother he divided the territory among his brothers.

3   Striking Sovereignty

The Idrisids seem to be the first and only successor state in the Maghrib al-Aqṣā to mint silver coins in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, a claim for sovereignty that placed them in direct opposition to the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and their Aghlabid vassals in Ifrīqiya and—across the straits—the Umayyad emirate in al-Andalus. The production of silver and gold coinage (*sikka*) was held to be a caliphal prerogative alongside the *khuṭba* (the ruler's right to have his name proclaimed during the Friday sermon); in contrast, petty coinage in copper was not regulated and could be struck in the name of governors and other officials.[42] Within the early Islamic world, coins were also a well-established medium for propaganda and revolutionary claims, particularly those about succession and the relationship between Islam and rulership.[43] The Idrisid coins therefore offer what the later written accounts cannot: contemporary evidence for the claims that the Idrisids made themselves about their sovereignty and right to rule, rather than narratives recast through the lens of later sources. Coins have other advantages, too—when

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39   Benco, *Anatomy*.
40   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 216–217. Excavations have revealed a residential zone consisting of courtyard housing built in brick and pisé with roof tiles in the center and an industrial zone on the west; there may also have been gardens and orchards housed within the walls.
41   Al-Raqīq (d. 417/1026) cited in Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II*, 20.
42   Darley-Doran. et al., Sikka.
43   Bacharach, Signs of sovereignty; Heidemann, Evolving representation; Gaiser, What do we learn.

FIGURE 5.3
Silver *dirham* of Idrīs I minted at Walīla
(M113, INSAP-UCL Volubilis 2000–2005
excavations)
PHOTOGRAPH CORISANDE FENWICK

legible, they provide evidence on the date, the ruler, and the place of minting.[44] However, the full potential of the numismatic evidence can only be extracted when stratigraphic evidence about their find spots is recorded, which is only rarely available for Morocco.

Idrīs minted silver *dirham* as well as copper fulūs as soon as he was proclaimed imam in 172/788–789, and his successors continued this practice. The early Idrisid *dirham* mimic Abbasid *dirham* in most respects, but with some significant modifications that provide contemporary evidence of their claims for sovereignty (fig 5.3). First, they were made distinctive by the highly visible addition of 'Alī below the name of Idrīs in reference to his lineage to the Prophet.[45] Second, they replace the standard "Prophetic Mission" verse (Q 9:33) with the Quranic verse on "Truth" (Q 17:81). The reverse margin of the earliest *dirham* reads "Among the things ordered by Idrīs b. 'Abdallāh: the truth has come (*jā'a al-ḥaqqu*), and falsehood has perished; surely falsehood is bound to perish." As Luke Treadwell has shown, the phrase *jā'a al-ḥaqq* had multiple connotations, referring to the arrival of the true religion of Islam and the salvation offered by the 'Alids.[46] The verse was a rallying cry of the *ahl al-bayt*: Idrīs's brother al-Nafs al-Zakiyya referred to his partisans as *aṣḥāb al-ḥaqq* (companions of the truth) in his correspondence with the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr.[47] Precisely the same verse appears on a *dirham* minted some 20 years earlier by Idrīs's brother Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdallāh in Basra (Iraq) during his abortive rebellion in 145/762–763 against the Abbasid caliphs as well as on the "al-Mahdī al-Ḥaqq" *dirham* minted by an 'Alid who may have been a third brother, Yaḥyā b. 'Abdallāh, who raised a revolt in Tabaristan in 176/792.[48] A recently published letter attributed

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44 Eustache, *Corpus*, provides the definitive catalogue of Idrisid coins; supplemented by El Harrif, Les monnaies.

45 There is even an example of an Idrisid *dirham* found in an Azerbaijan hoard minted in the name of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib at Tudgha in 173/790–791; Noonan, When and how dirhams first reached Russia 453.

46 Treadwell, Qur'anic inscriptions 58.

47 Traini, La corrispondenza.

48 This was first observed by Lowick, Une monnaie 'alide; and more recently revisited in a

FIGURE 5.4   Silver *dirham* of Idrīs II minted at Walīla (M115,
             INSAP-UCL Volubilis 2000–2005 excavations)
             PHOTOGRAPH CORISANDE FENWICK

to Idrīs and preserved in tenth-century and later Zaydī sources supports Tread-
well's reading of the verse and its use on coins. This *da'wa* to the Berber Zanāta,
Zawāgha, Ṣanmā, Ṣanhāja, and Lawāta tribes frames Idrīs's claim to legitimacy
in religious terms—as a restorer of religion and justice—and urges them to
join the cause of the defenders of the Quran and the Sunna and to support
justice, equality, and the rights of the descendants of the Prophet.[49] We should
therefore read the addition of 'Alī and the selection of the "Truth verse" on the
dirham as a purposeful rallying call that supported Idrīs's claim to rule as a
member of the *ahl al-bayt* by right of descent from 'Alī.[50]

The use of the "Truth verse" was short-lived. By 197/812–813, Idrīs II had
reformed the text used on the *dirham* as well as the weight standard (fig. 5.4).[51]
The coins reverted to the standard but abbreviated "Prophetic Mission" verse
used in the Islamic west, bringing them in line with those minted by the Agh-
labids in Ifrīqiya and the Umayyads in al-Andalus, as well as by the Abbasids
in the Middle East. Though the millennial message is removed, references to
Idrīs II's descent from 'Alī take on a more prominent place and are repeated in
multiple places: on the obverse, 'Alī now appears below the profession of faith,

thought-provoking article by Treadwell, Qurʾanic inscriptions 59 (Treadwell does not ref-
erence Lowick's article). See also Miles, al-Mahdi al-Haqq 340. Eustache suggested that the
slogan referred to the Idrisid war against the Kharijites and the unbelievers (Jews, Chris-
tians, and animists), but this is less convincing now; *Corpus* 63.

49   Jarrer, *Arbaʿa rasāʾil*. These letters are excerpted from his 1995 edition of Ahmad b. Sahl
      al-Rāzī's *Akhbār Fakhkh wa-khabar Yaḥyā b. ʿAbdallāh wa-akhīhi Idrīs b. ʿAbdallāh* [The
      stories of the battle of Fakhkh and Yaḥyā b. ʿAbdallāh and his brother Idrīs b. ʿAbdallāh].

50   On the importance of descent from the Prophet and Mahdism in Morocco, see also García-
      Arenal, *Messianism*.

51   There seems to be a gap between in the mint output between (193/808–9) and (197/812–
      13).

as well as in the circular legend, which reads "There is no god but Allāh alone, who has no equal, ʿAlī." On the reverse the name Idrīs (for Idrīs b. Idrīs) appears alongside the message "Muḥammad is God's Prophet" and again with the name of ʿAlī. The *dirham* weight also drops from 2.6–7 grams to 2.3 grams (this fell further to about 2.1 grams by the end of the ninth century). It is tempting to link this coin reform and debasement—for a reform is what it was—to the expansion of Idrisid control across much of northern Morocco and the need for more silver to pay troops as well as to fund the foundation of Fez (the first coin from al-ʿAliyya dates to 197/812–813).

Occasionally, the coins also reveal the honorific titles used by Idrīs or his successors, who are usually referred to as imams in the written sources.[52] Ibn Khurdādhbih, writing in ca. 870, remarks that one did not address an Idrisid sovereign as a caliph in the sermon (*khuṭba*) but in his function as *Ibn Rasūl Allāh*, that is, as a descendant of the messenger of God.[53] An intriguing undated *fals* found at Volubilis has a circular legend on the margin that states "on the order of the *amīr* Idrīs"—this must be either Idrīs or, perhaps more likely, his son Idrīs b. Idrīs.[54] The title of *amīr* was a pre-Islamic Arabic term commonly used for governors and military commanders, and it also appears on two *dirham* minted at al-ʿAliyya by Muḥammad b. Idrīs in 216/831–832.[55] Idrīs II may have used the title in other contexts. A 198/813 letter from Pope Leo III to Charlemagne reports that the patrician Gregory of Sicily had received a Muslim ambassador sent by the "amiralmumin" in Africa, a slightly scrambled Latin transliteration of the Arabic for *amīr al-muʾminīn* (commander of the believers).[56] Talbi has convincingly identified this individual as Idrīs II (rather than the Aghlabid *amīr* Abdallāh I), though he suggests that it is unlikely Idrīs II used the full title.[57] A contemporary, but as yet unparalleled, coin minted at Tahlīṭ in 197/812–813 bears the inscription "Muḥammad is the messenger of God and the *mahdī* is Idrīs b. Idrīs."[58] This use of the messianic title of *al-mahdī* (the guided one) was used by other members of the *ahl al-bayt*, especially Idrīs I's brother Muḥammad, who was known both as *al-mahdī* and *al-nafs al-zakiyya* ("The Pure Soul").

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52   Ibn Khaldūn explains that this is because they were Shiʿite; *Histoire des Berberes* i, 453.
53   Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb* 88–89.
54   امر به مما الاميرادريس. El Harrif, Les monnaies 316. No picture or find spot provided.
55   The title *amīr* is pre-Islamic, and can refer to any leader, see Athamina, Pre-Islamic roots.
56   Migne, *PL* 98, 544–548; Senac, Le maghreb al-aqsâ 40–45.
57   Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 396.
58   Eustache, *Corpus* 199, pl. v and vi (no. 140).

The claims on the coins were an explicit challenge to the authority of the Abbasid caliphs, a claim that would have been obvious far beyond northwest Africa given the astonishingly wide circulation of Idrisid *dirham* in the early second/late eighth and late second/early ninth century. Idrisid *dirham* have been found in Abbasid hoards in the Levant, Iraq, and Iran, as well as beyond its borders in the Caucasus and Russia, and in lesser quantities in the Baltic, Scandinavia, Central Europe, and Sicily.[59] It is perhaps in this light that we should read al-Bakrī's (writing ca. 460/1068) satirical verses about Idrīs II that accuse him of wanting to be a caliph and Ibn al-Abbār's (d. 658/1260) claim that Idrīs II minted gold *dīnār*. He explains that the Aghlabid *amīr*, Ziyādat Allāh I (r. 201–223/817–838) sent to Caliph al-Maʾmūn a sum of 1,000 *dīnār* minted in the name of Idrīs al-Ḥasanī so that he would understand the threat to the caliphate posed by the new state.[60] This is probably historiographic fiction (certainly there is no numismatic evidence for the Idrisids minting gold, and it was their rivals, the Midrārids and Rustamids, who controlled Saharan trade with gold-rich West Africa), but the anecdote reflects the threat that the Idrisids as members of the Prophet's family continued to pose to Abbasid claims to rule, as well as Aghlabid authority in Ifrīqiya.

4   Walīla: From Berber Center to the Center of the Idrisid State

When Idrīs arrived at Walīla in 172/788–789, he would have found a bustling small medieval town that looked very different from the towns of the Ḥijāz or the Mediterranean cities with their Romano-Byzantine heritage he had passed through on his way west (fig. 5.5).[61] Though the town had served as the provincial capital of Mauretania Tingitana until the retreat of the Roman authorities in the third century CE, it was abandoned at least partially by the mid-fifth century CE following an earthquake. In the sixth century CE, Berber groups occupied the site and concentrated the population in the western third of the

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59   Manzano Moreno, El desarrollo económico, especially table 1, 356–367. See also Noonan,
      Ninth-century dirham hoards.

60   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 122. Ibn al-Abbār, *Kitāb* 104–105. See Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 343–
      345.

61   This section draws on the results of the ongoing INSAP-UCL project at Volubilis directed
      by myself, Elizabeth Fentress, and Hassan Limane, as well as the work of earlier scholars
      on medieval Volubilis. See especially, Akerraz, Recherches; Fentress and Limane (eds.),
      Volubilis après Rome; Bennison, Walīla-Volubilis; Fentress, Fenwick, and Limane, Early
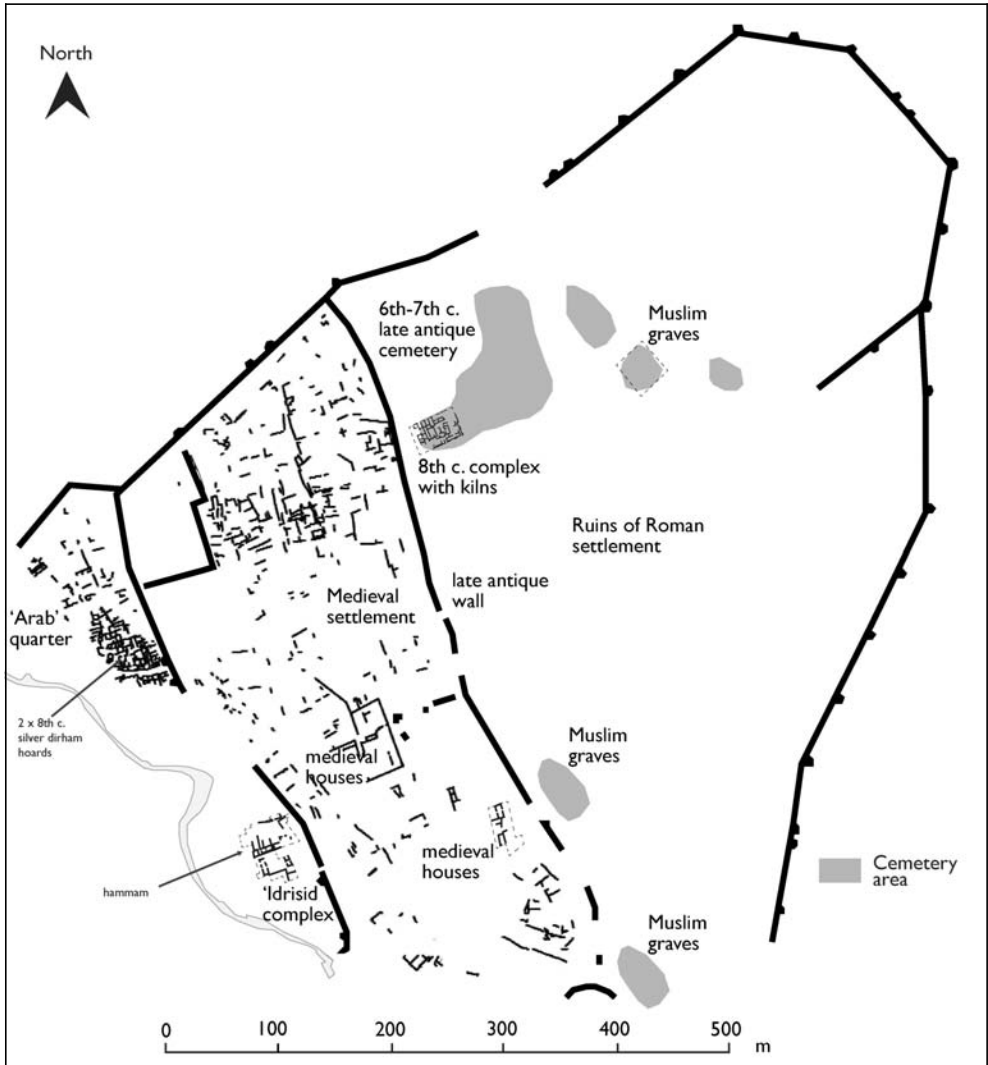   medieval Volubilis.

FIGURE 5.5 Plan of early medieval Volubilis
CORISANDE FENWICK AND INSAP-UCL VOLUBILIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

city, near the wadi; their elite continued to memorialize their dead in Latin and use Roman titles and the Roman provincial calendar until at least 34–35/655.[62] After the Muslim conquest of Morocco, the town took on new importance as the residence of the Berber Awraba tribe who had converted to Islam (pre-

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62   Akerraz, Note sur l'enceinte tardive.

sumably, but not certainly, the same group who had settled there in the sixth and seventh century CE). Over a century of excavations at Idrīs's first base at Walīla (Roman Volubilis) offer exceptional—and untapped—potential to explore how the new Idrisid rulers interacted with their Berber subjects.[63]

The town of the Awraba was a substantial agro-settlement that minted its own coins, produced its own ceramics, and was linked with larger networks of trade and exchange. The residents of the town seem to have lived in rather simple, scattered housing within the late walls: small two-room houses—divided into domestic spaces and stabling/workrooms with storage silos outside—dating from the late first/seventh to third/ninth centuries have been excavated in two different areas (fig. 5.6).[64] Probably in the early second/eighth century, the so-called "quartier arabe" was established outside the west gate and by the wadi. Built partly over the city midden and the ruins of an early Roman pagan cemetery, this new quarter contained densely built medieval housing, industrial activity, a canal, and possibly a mosque. We believe that a Muslim garrison may have been housed here, at least initially, and a gold *dīnār*, several *dirham* hoards, and hundreds of copper *fulūs*, as well as an intaglio inscribed in Arabic, have been found here.[65] Copper coins with Arabic legends were minted at the town, most probably in the late second/eighth century, some inscribed simply with its name "Walīla" and others with the names of otherwise unknown individuals (Rashīd b. Kadīm, Muḥammad b. Khalifa, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥasanī).[66] Ceramics were produced in kilns in the ruins of the Roman city, in the "Maison au Compas," and in the center of the Berber settlement.[67] The early conversion of Walīla's inhabitants to Islam is supported by an absence of faunal evidence for pork consumption in second/eighth-century contexts, as well as burials laid out in accordance with Muslim funerary rites in the latest layers of the late antique cemeteries.[68]

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63   For the archaeology of this period, see Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*.

64   Fentress and Limane, *Volubilis après Rome* 74–81.

65   Eustache, Monnaies musulmanes; Fentress, Fenwick, and Limane, Early medieval Volubilis.

66   These individuals have variously been identified as Abbasid generals, see Eustache, Monnaies musulmanes; and leaders of an independent Berber city-state similar to those established at Nakūr and Tilimsān in this period, see El Harrif, Monnaies islamiques trouvées à Volubilis. Most recently, it has been suggested that Rashīd b. Kadīm was the Rāshid who acted as regent for Idrīs II during his minority; Benchekroun, Rašid et les Idrissides.

67   Akerraz, Recherches 299–302.

68   For the cemeteries, see Akerraz, Recherches 297, 303; for the animal bones, see King, Faunal remains.
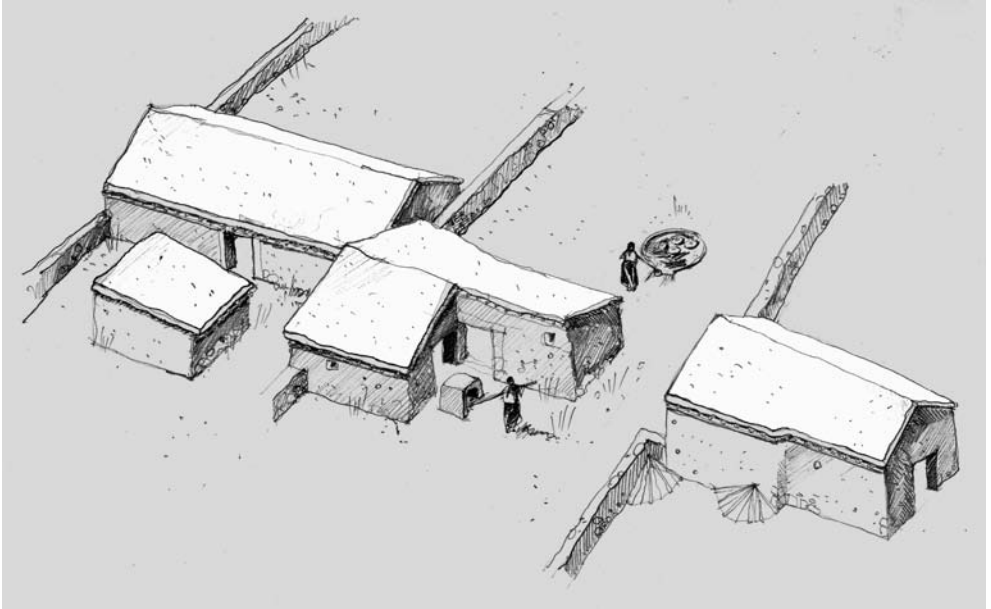
FIGURE 5.6   Reconstruction of the housing in sector D
            FERNANDA PALMIERI, INSAP-UCL VOLUBILIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Under Idrisid rule, in the late second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, the town grew rapidly and traces of occupation discovered outside the Roman walls to the northwest, as well as in the extramural zone, suggest that its extent far exceeded that of the late antique Berber settlement. There was at least one mosque in the Idrisid town. As we saw above, Idrīs II was apparently proclaimed imam in a mosque at Walīla where he received the *bay'a*.[69] In the much later, but local, ninth/fourteenth-century account, Ibn Abī Zar' indicates also that a mosque existed at Walīla, and it was there that Rāshid presented Idrīs II to the people in order to have him recognized as sovereign.[70] This mosque was probably a relatively simple structure: a possible candidate in the "quartier arabe" is a large building with nine column bases just off the main street that was excavated but unrecorded by French excavations in the 1950s. Its identification and chronology remain to be confirmed by our ongoing excavations.

The new rulers seem to have lived separately from the inhabitants of the town outside the city walls. A complex of three courtyard buildings and a hammam was constructed in the late second/eighth to early third/ninth cen-

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69   Al-Bakrī, *Description* 239.
70   Ibn Abī Zar', *Histoire* 24, 29.

tury by the wadi, which Elizabeth Fentress and Hassan Limane suggest served as the residence of Idrīs I and his son (fig. 5.7).[71] Each courtyard seems to have been reserved for different functions: from south to north a domestic space with a kitchen, a reception space, with rooms carefully floored with plaster and a raised platform decorated in red ochre at one end, and finally a storage space, with very large grain silos in the center that may have been a collective granary. These buildings are wholly different in plan and organization from the simple rectangular houses excavated in the Berber town, and Fentress has demonstrated that the courtyard plan has its origins in the Middle East and only appears in North Africa after the Muslim conquests.[72] The small hammam was also organized on a Middle Eastern rather than typically North African plan and consisted of a vestibule, a cold room lined with benches and a pool at one end, a warm room, and a hot room. Analysis of consumption patterns suggests that those living in the extramural complex were living in a more privileged way than those living in the town: they were eating choice cuts of meat butchered elsewhere, dining off simple decorated tableware, discarding more coins, using imported glazed lamps, and processing cotton that must have been cultivated south of the Atlas Mountains.[73]

If this complex was indeed the residence of Idrīs and Idrīs II, it is worth underscoring its small size and the simplicity of its surviving décor, even in comparison to contemporary housing elsewhere in Morocco. The only suggestion of monumentality is in the vestibule of the hammam, where a large spoliated block with a shield in relief from the still-standing Arch of Caracalla was built into the wall, perhaps as a "deliberate, symbolic, and ideologically charged transfer" from the old town.[74] In contrast, excavations at the medieval Saharan trading entrepôt of Sijilmāsa, the Midrārid capital, uncovered a roughly contemporary elite residential complex consisting of rooms off a courtyard, a garden and a kitchen tentatively identified as the early *dār al-imāra* of the Midrārids.[75] This house was lavishly decorated with painted and carved plaster, some inscribed with Quranic verses, and wooden ceilings painted with geometric patterns in an eastern style. Similar signs of wealth are seen in another third/ninth- to fourth/tenth-century house at Sijilmāsa that contained stone columns and similar painted plaster décor, as well as a filigree gold ring and

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71   Fentress and Limane, *Volubilis après Rome* 82–102.

72   Fentress, Reconsidering Islamic housing.

73   Fentress and Limane, *Volubilis après Rome* 97–100.

74   Fentress, Idris I 523–524.

75   Messier and Fili, Earliest ceramics. The building is dated by by radiocarbon to 785–875 Cal AD. A detailed account of the excavations remains to be published.
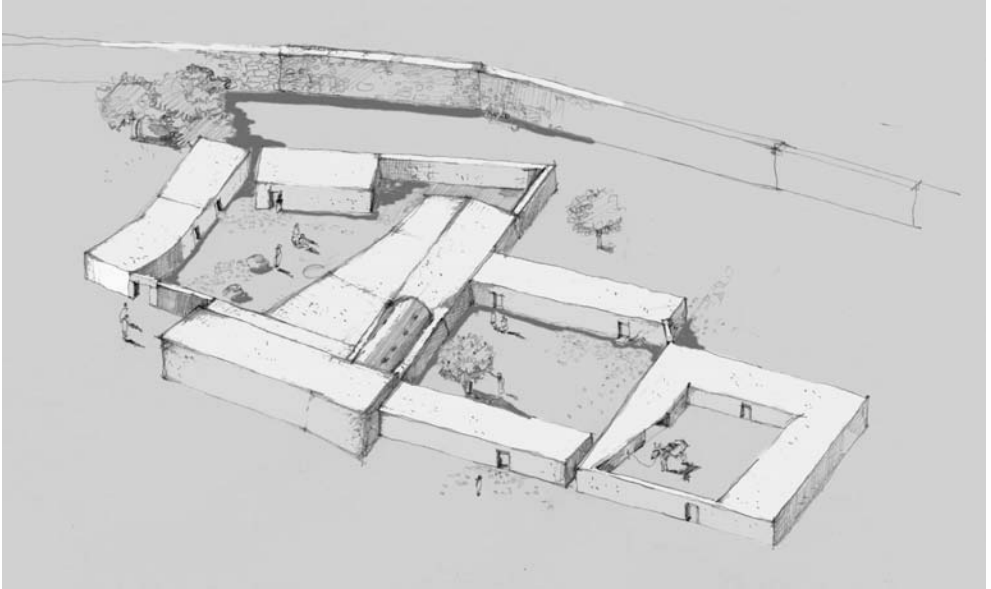
FIGURE 5.7 Reconstruction of the Idrisid complex
            FERNANDA PALMIERI, INSAP-UCL VOLUBILIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

carved ivory acquired through Saharan trade. Excavations at Walīla have not yet revealed such signs of imported wealth.

As the archaeological evidence reveals, Walīla seems to have remained very much the town of the Muslim Awraba. Life in the Berber town continued much as it had before Idrīs's arrival, albeit perhaps with a more monetized economy: houses, ceramics, eating practices, and funerary habits follow the same pattern. The new rulers seem to have been very much outsiders: they resided outside the city walls in a separate compound consisting of houses and hammam built on a Middle Eastern rather than North African architectural plan. Even though they seem to have had access to a broader range of goods and foodstuffs than those living in the Berber town, there is no sign of drastically discrepant wealth. Indeed, Ibn Khaldūn states firmly that "his [Idrīs's] rule over them cannot be considered an Arab rule, because the Berbers were in charge of it, and there were not many Arabs in it."[76] It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Berber town of Walīla was not enough for Idrīs II, and he sought to establish his own new capital at Fez.

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76   Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah* II, 288.

5   Conclusion

By the late second/early ninth century, North Africa was ruled by Muslim states but not by the caliphate. The exodus of Idrīs to the Maghrib recast the board for the powerplay between the Abbasids and the ʿAlids, as encounters between the two groups became increasingly dependent on intermediaries like the Aghlabids.[77] Even in the Far West, however, the Idrisids, as members of the *ahl al-bayt*, remained a substantial threat to the Abbasids in the late second/eighth and early third/ninth century. This brief exploration of the early Idrisid state identifies some key points for future exploration.

The first point is the fundamental driving role that local tribes played in state formation and urbanization. Idrīs was an outsider from the east who grouped around him different Berber tribes who selected him to lead for reasons that escape us but might include his connection to the Prophet, personal charisma, a saintly role, arbitrating role, as well as his military success. As Patrice Cressier and others have highlighted, this pattern is also replicated in later written accounts of the genesis of other North African states: new states and cities only formed as a result of a symbiosis between old "Berber" and new "Arab" populations.[78] This fits well with the influential "internal frontier" model developed by Igor Kopytoff to describe the rise of political entities in sub-Saharan Africa.[79] Kopytoff argues that the majority of African "states" did not evolve from simpler political forms but rather were established by immigrant groups who migrated into the "internal frontiers" between fully formed regional political systems. These frontier zones were occupied by small, decentralized groups like the Awraba. The new immigrant groups, often of chiefly or royal origins, brought with them pre-existing social and political models from their former polity. To legitimate their authority and claim to the land, newcomers had to tap into the principle of "first-comer primacy";[80] hence the role of the charismatic, saintly, but neutral, founder and the importance of foundation myths. Initially, newcomers sought to attract followers and new members as kinsmen or pseudo-kinsmen using a corporate kin-group model, but as the new polity became established, new followers were integrated under a contractual model between ruler and subjects.

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77   For an excellent, and the fullest, analysis of the politics between the Idrisids and the Aghlabids to date, see Talbi, *L'Émirat Aghlabide* 362–378.

78   For a full exploration of these issues, see especially Cressier, Nakūr; and for a detailed examination of the formation of the Rustamid state, see Aillet, Tāhart.

79   Kopytoff, Internal African frontier.

80   Kopytoff, Internal African frontier 51.

Islam, as a religion, played a fundamental role in legitimizing and justifying the rule of individual rulers, but Islamic structures of power were also sophisticated and flexible enough to act as a model and framework for ambitious rulers on the edges of the caliphate. In the case of Idrīs and his descendants, their claims for legitimacy seem to have been based in part on descent (consanguinity with the Prophet), an imam-centric conception of the religio-political order, and a model of reciprocal loyalty between ruler and elite that was periodically reaffirmed through ceremonies such as the *bayʿa*.[81] The performance of the *bayʿa* in the mosque at Walīla (and perhaps the minting and distribution of silver *dirham* to pay troops) provides an illustration of the contractual model in practice using the language of pledges and allegiances provided by Islam. The messages inscribed on the Idrisid *dirham* provide contemporary evidence into the legitimizing discourse used to justify their rule and how it shifted from an original emphasis on ʿAlid millennial claims for justice and the truth under Idrīs to descent from the Prophet and *ahl al-bayt* membership under his son. The act of urban foundation—of establishing a new city for a new dynasty—proved one of the most visible and enduring acts of legitimization in the Maghrib al-Aqṣā, just as it did in the imperial center. These acts of striking coins and urban foundation in Idrisid Morocco were not purely a local phenomenon but part of a far wider conversation in the medieval world about how to be a Muslim ruler—a dialogue that the rival states in the Far West brought to a head for the Muslim world.

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81   On ceremonial, see Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic monarchy*.

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