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Conquest to Conversion: The Archaeology of Religious Transformation in Early Medieval North Africa

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North Africa (west of Egypt) is a compelling locale to explore how and when a Muslim minority became the Muslim majority. Previous scholarly approaches to medieval religious change rely almost exclusively on much later written sources, and as a result, little is understood about the religious landscape in which believers operated in. This article examines critically the material evidence for mosque construction and church abandonment and proposes certain tipping points in the process by which Islam become the dominant religion. While mosque construction reveals more about state and elite religious investment than the believers who may have used them, other forms of evidence, including funerary evidence, dietary practices and inscribed material culture, occasionally give us an intimate glimpse into the practices of simple believers. The evidence shows that the chronology of religious change differs between those regions under Byzantine rule (eastern Algeria, Tunisia, coastal Libya), and those ruled by Berber chiefdoms in late antiquity. Much of the latter converted in the 8th century, whereas the late 9th century marks the mass conversion of town dwellers from the Byzantine core and a first period of crisis for Christianity. This early conversion was an important factor in the collapse of the caliphate in North Africa and the emergence of successor states that used Islam as the main idiom through which to establish and legitimize their right to rule.

Introduction

A recent book by Jack Tannous (2018) focusing on the non-Muslim majority in the medieval Middle East has made a strong call for the need to put simple ordinary believers at the centre of histories of religious change. North Africa (west of Egypt) is a compelling locale to explore how and when a Muslim minority became the Muslim majority. Conquered much later than the rest of the Umayyad Caliphate, the link between Islam and the state was explicit from the first days of the conquest. During the conquest phase, some of its peoples, the Berbers, famously converted to Islam and joined the Umayyad armies in subduing North Africa and Iberia. Conversion on

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this scale, whatever it meant in practice, did not occur elsewhere in the Caliphate. Caliphal rule did not last long. The first Muslim rival states arose in the mid-8th century in the far west, and by 800, North Africa was ruled by a series of states whose rulers legitimized their authority by recourse to Islam. These states were followed in turn by North African empires, the Fatimids (and their vassals, the Zirids), the Almoravids and the Almohads, all of whom proclaimed their right to rule through their own sectarian brands of Islam. But if the earliest successor states and empires were legitimized by Islam, what was the situation of simple believers in this period?

Colonial scholars typically conflated military conquest with religious conversion and the swift Islamisation of the Berbers (Mercier 1875, 64; Marçais 1946, 35–40), though some saw it as a slower process only completed with the invasion of the Banu Hilal in the 11th century (Gautier 1927). Christianity, like Judaism, never disappeared, however, and Christian communities are attested into the 15th century (Talbi 1990; Savage 1997; Handley 2004; Prevost 2007; Valérian 2011). In the 1970s, Richard Bulliet attempted to quantify conversion rates across the Islamic world by producing a statistical curve from ancestral names in biographical dictionaries: for Tunisia, he concluded that mass conversion took place during the 10th century under Fatimid rule (Bulliet 1979, 92–103). Subsequent scholars have proved more wary, with the notable exception of Allaoua Amara (2011) who proposed a convincing four-stage model for the central Maghreb based on a close reading of the Arabic sources. He argued that in the immediate aftermath of the conquests a small number of communities converted; in the late 7th–early 8th centuries, the large-scale conversion of rural Berber communities took place; in the 9th century the urban Christian populations of the Zab and Aurès converted; finally, in the 10th century, an alliance between political and religious authorities enforced Sunni orthodoxy on the diverse rural communities of southern Algeria. Amara emphasises the close links between state power and religion, in contrast to Bulliet's model which argues for a more bottom-up spread of Islam through trade and increased contact between Muslims and non-Muslims (see also Brett 1992). These models of religious change rely almost exclusively upon the written sources, and as a result, the everyday practices of believers and the materialities of the religious landscapes in which they lived are poorly understood.

What follows is an attempt to examine religious change in early medieval North Africa from the archaeological perspective that has been traditionally ignored. Chronologically, the focus is 600–900, that is from the period immediately preceding the drawn-out conquest of North Africa up to the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate. The paper aims to provide a material baseline for the spread of Islam in North Africa in this period by charting broad trends in mosque construction, church use and abandonment, burial practice, pork consumption and inscribed material culture. Of course, the construction, restoration and abandonment of religious buildings reveals more about religious investment or proscriptions by rulers, elites, and civic authorities than their use by believers, and it would be foolhardy to attempt to calculate the proportion of Muslim believers. However, regional patterns of building investment do provide a crude way of measuring the tempo and rhythm of religious transformation of North African landscapes. By widening the scope to evidence, where it exists, for burial practice, dietary practice and inscribed material culture as scholars have done elsewhere (e.g. Insoll 1996, 1999, 2003; Gutiérrez Lloret 2007; Horton *et al.* 2017), it is possible to gain insight into the daily practices of simple believers and the landscapes in which they lived and practiced their faith.

Before proceeding, some caveats about the data and scope of the paper are necessary. As most of the evidence for early medieval North Africa—textual or archaeological—pertains

to urban contexts, the analysis focuses on cityscapes and not the countryside. Further challenges arise from the history of scholarship in North Africa (see Fenwick 2020). Late antique and medieval archaeologists have long focused their attention on monumental architecture (churches, mosques, fortifications and palaces) and these form the primary dataset for this analysis. It is challenging to map the distribution of early medieval mosques. Multiple ninth- and tenth-century mosques of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia survive and have been intensively studied by architectural historians, especially in the first half of the 20th century, however, there are no useful gazetteers (see Marcais 1954). Other probably early medieval mosques such as the mosques of Tripoli and Béja, remain in use today, and have been substantially rebuilt or renovated multiple times, making it difficult to date their construction or earliest phases of use. Few mosques have been excavated, and as a result they are usually dated by stylistic criteria. A cautionary tale is provided by Aḳka, Morocco where the Agadīr Amghār mosque was thought to be Almohad (12th century) based on the form of its minaret, but excavations demonstrated that it was a Saadian foundation of the 16th century (Belatik *et al.* 2020). Written sources or local oral traditions sometimes provide dates for the foundation or renovations of individual mosques, though for the early medieval period, these rarely exist outside the biggest cities, such as Kairouan. The archaeological evidence can be supplemented with occasional mentions of mosque-building in the conquest chronicles and geographies. Al-Bakrī (d. 1094), though very late, is the first author to mention systematically the presence of mosques but rarely mentions Christian and Jewish communities; he notes 77 settlements with a mosque (63 were Friday mosques) in North Africa (*Description*, trans. De Slane). It seems that most large towns had congregational mosques by the 11th century, as he draws attention to the exceptions, for example that Sétif (Algeria) had no mosque, while at Ghirza (Libya), they continued to worship and make sacrifices to an idol and near Beni Lamas (Morocco), there were idolatrous Berbers who worshipped a ram (al-Bakrī, *Description*, trans. De Slane, 155, 31, 305).

Mapping the medieval use, abandonment or re-use of churches is also more challenging than one might anticipate. Few of the large corpus of churches were excavated stratigraphically, and as a result the main criteria for dating the construction of churches and their renovations are stylistic: mosaic floors, ground plans, baptistery font shape, marble fitments, and orientation. Of the churches identified as being occupied in the Byzantine period, the approximate date of abandonment, destruction or repurposing is known for very few, and there is a deep-seated tendency to presume that their abandonment coincides with the Arab conquests without any archaeological corroboration (Handley 2004). The process is far more complex. Some churches had already gone out of use long before the conquests, such as Church III at Sidi Jdidi, destroyed by fire in the 5th century and never rebuilt (Ben Abed-Ben Khader *et al.* 2011). Conversely, it is assumed that none of the excavated churches were built after the Arab conquests, though in Kairouan at least one church was built in the 8th century, and Christian communities are also attested at other new urban foundations such as Tahart. It is possible therefore that new churches were also occasionally built in the old inherited Christian centres.

The late antique background

On the eve of the first Muslim raids into North Africa in 642, North Africa was defined by religious and doctrinal plurality. In those areas under Byzantine control, roughly eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and coastal Libya, the population had become predominantly Christian by the 6th or 7th century. Widespread church-building had taken place in towns and the country-

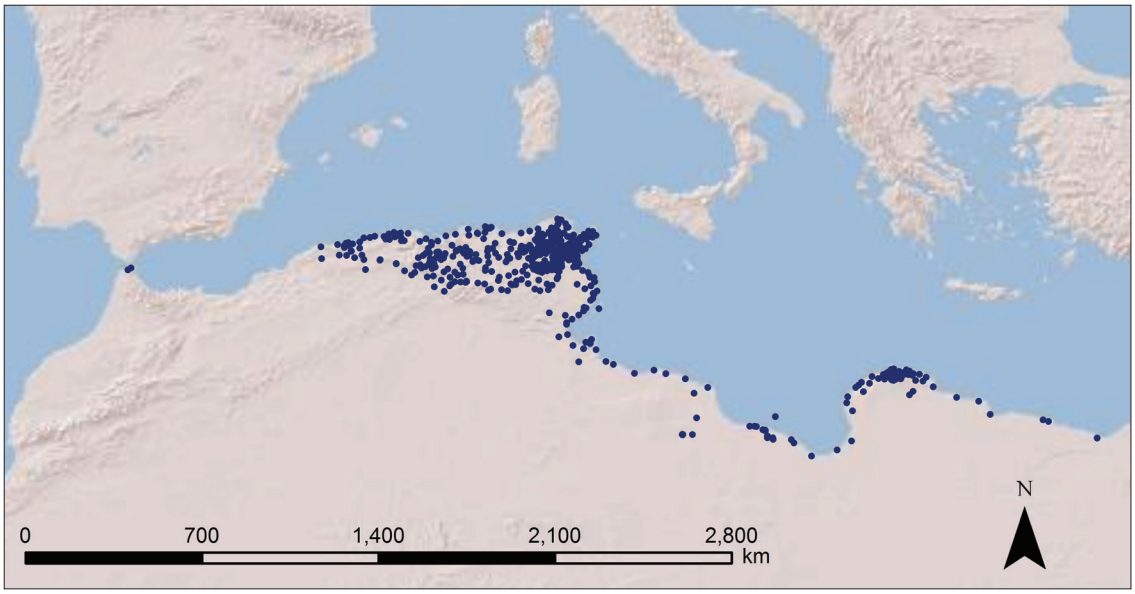

Figure 1. Distribution of late antique churches in North Africa.

side and over 470 churches are known archaeologically, primarily from Algeria, Tunisia and coastal Libya (Gui *et al.* 1992; Baratte *et al.* 2014; Ward-Perkins *et al.* 1953; 2003; Euzennat 1974). There were also Jewish communities across North Africa, including the Sahara, though this has proven difficult to identify archaeologically. While a Jewish presence is suggested at many sites across North Africa by graves, inscriptions and material culture with Jewish symbols (see Le Bohec 1981), synagogues have only been identified at Naro (Hammam Lif), Clipea (Kelibia) and tentatively Carthage (Le Bohec 1981; Fantar 2009; Lund 1995).

But North Africa was not primarily a Christian landscape. Figure 1 maps the distributions of churches and shows a striking difference between a Christian north, which maps almost exactly onto the territory ruled by the Byzantines and the pagan or polytheistic zones of the Mauretanias, pre-desert and Sahara. These regions were peopled by different groups whom the Arabs categorized collectively as *al-barbar* (the Berbers), and who they differentiated from the *Afariq*, the Latin-speaking, Christian town-dwellers of Byzantine Africa. These groups were both settled and mobile, some were monotheists practicing Christianity or Judaism, while others worshipped a multitude of polytheistic gods, particularly the cult of the ram (Benhima 2011). Ancestor cult was particularly important and late antique monumental tumuli are known throughout this region. The best known are the 5th–7th-century Djedar (Algeria) (Laporte 2005) and the Gour (Morocco), which has been dated to the 7th century (Camps 1974). Conquest chronicles and later legal texts confirm that many of the *Barbar* made their *islam*, or submission, as pagans and accordingly were regarded as Muslim and paid the alms (*sadaqat*) of believers (Brett 1992). These pre-conquest differences had significant implications for the spread of Islam in North Africa.

The religious transformation of urban landscapes

Three towns in Ifrīqiya—the newly founded capital of Kairouan, the former capital of Carthage, and the port of Sousse—and one town in the far West, Walīla, provide some sense of the great

degree of variability of the religious landscape of new foundations and the transformation of the old, inherited cities with their rich Christian heritage.

Kairouan: The making of a Muslim capital

Kairouan was founded by ʿUqba b. Nafiʿ in 670 as a *misr* and it was soon known as the fourth holy town of Islam. According to one tradition, ʿUqba laid the foundations of Kairouan in a deserted wilderness frequented by reptiles and savage animals, while other traditions suggest that the camp was built on, or on the outskirts of, an existing town (probably that of Iubaltianae) (M'charek 1999). His mosque established the *qibla* direction (an angle of 141 degrees), and this remains the dominant orientation of mosques in Tunisia. Other traditions, however, suggest that the earliest mosque was built in 667 by Rwaifa b. Thābit al-Anṣārī, a companion of the prophet, in the locale of Kairouan prior to ʿUqba's act of foundation (Mahfoudh 2008, 284).

A substantial building programme took place subsequently under Hishām (r. 723–742) when the Great Mosque was apparently expanded because it was too small for the growing city and the number of believers (al-Bakrī, *Description*, trans. De Slane, 53–54). In 771, the Muhallabid governor Yazīd b. Ḥātim demolished all but the mihrab of ʿUqba's mosque and rebuilt it. Unpublished sondages in the prayer hall found three superimposed surfaces, of which the most ancient dates to the 8th century (Gragueb Chatti *et al.* 2016). A pillar from the prayer hall of this mosque was also found, which was inscribed with pious graffiti as well as depictions of boats and a horse. Several of the inscriptions invoke Qurʾan: 23.29, a verse about the safe landing of sailors which is also included in the 821 dedication of the *ribat* at Sousse (Abdeljaouad 2017). In the early 8th century, a series of oratories (masjid) were built, primarily in the western area of the town at crossroads and corners (Mahfoudh 2008). One of the earliest—now known as the Zaytūna mosque—was constructed in 711 by Ismail b. ʿUbayd, a slave merchant turned missionary to the Berbers. Other early oratories were built by pious individuals, including a man of Romano-Byzantine origin (and thus presumably a Christian convert) who had participated in the conquest of Iberia and was also made a missionary to the Berbers. These oratories are extremely modest, simple buildings (less than 8 x 8 m) usually constructed in rubble and coated in a lime whitewash. They usually open directly onto the street and only occasionally have narrow courtyards. The prayer halls are typically divided into two or three aisles by columns, reused; the mihrabs are simple, undecorated niches. Mahfoudh (2008) convincingly argues that their simple form reflects the modesty of the scholars of Kairouan and their rejection of decadence.

The Aghlabid emirs conducted a substantial building programme in and around Kairouan with the proceeds from raids on Sicily (Mahfoudh 2003). The Great Mosque was demolished and rebuilt by Ziyādat Allāh I in 836 on the same plan as the first mosque, keeping the original *qibla* orientation (Figure 2). It was subsequently enlarged and renovated in 862/863 by Ibrāhīm II following an earthquake, and today survives more or less in its 9th-century form of a large colonnaded prayer hall, courtyard and square minaret creating a rectangular footprint (127 x 78 metres). Private mosque endowments continued to occur in this period: the Mosque of the Three Doors was built by an Andalusi immigrant in 866 (Golvin 1970, 190–191). In the same period, Muslims started to commemorate their dead with elaborate pillars and plaques inscribed in Kufic Arabic: the earliest epitaph is found in the al-Janāḥ al-Akhdar cemetery and dates to 850 (Roy and Poinssot 1950; Dagorn 1973; El-Habib 1975).

Kairouan was never exclusively a Muslim city, however. There was a substantial Jewish population in the city, who seem to have lived in a quarter (the Ḥāra al-Yahūd), had a market (the

Figure 2. Great Mosque of Kairouan.

Sūq al-Yahūd), at least one large synagogue (al-Maqdis al-Jalīl) destroyed in 1057 by the Banu Hilal, a cemetery (al-Makbara al-Yahudiya), and the Yeshiva of Kairouan which was one of the main centres of Talmudic studies between the 8th and 11th centuries (Sebag 1991, 41–61). There was also a thriving Christian community and in the late 8th century Qustas (Constans) was granted permission to build an (unlocated) church in the city (Talbi 1990, 319). 11th-century Latin funerary epitaphs mentioning a *senior* (d. 1050–1051) and a *lector* (d. 1048) attest to the continued presence of clergy at Kairouan (Mahjoubi 1966). Strikingly these inscriptions use the expression *annorum infidelium* (years of the unbelievers) to mark the hijri date, as well as giving the Latin calendar date. That the Christian community was thriving into the 11th century is further suggested by a contemporary Kairouanese fatwa which states that Christians must not augment their churches by replacing mudbrick with stone or completing unfinished facades, but that they could make repairs, do internal works or raise the door if the ground level had risen (a common issue in Kairouan) (Lagardère 1995, I, no. 35).

Carthage: Dismantling a Christian pilgrimage centre

The Byzantine capital of Carthage was the most important bishopric in Africa, as well as the largest city by some measure. Its importance as a Christian metropolis is reflected in the archaeological remains of an astonishing 23 basilicas, monasteries, funerary chapels (Ennabli 1997; Baratte *et al.* 2014, 103–149) (Figure 3a). Most closely allied with the Papacy in Rome, it was often a site of theological resistance to Constantinople. It was also an important centre of martyr veneration and pilgrimage, and the city was associated with saints of local and Mediterranean significance, several of whom were buried in enormous extra-mural pilgrimage complexes. The Umayyads famously captured Carthage in 697/698 and by the 9th century, its vast

walled area had splintered into small villages centred around a fortified Byrsa Hill (Fenwick 2013; Stevens 2016). Even so, Carthage continued to be Africa's primary see, and the Bishop of Carthage's primacy over all other North African bishops was reaffirmed as late as 1049 by a letter from Pope Leo IX to Bishop Thomas of Carthage (Valérian 2011).

Churches seem to have been particularly affected by the capture of Carthage: the church of Bir el-Knissia was destroyed by fire, and a thick burnt layer was found covering the mosaics of the church and its annex (Delattre 1922, 303). Fire also destroyed the north and south transepts of the basilica of Bir Messaouda, and there is a substantial collapse layer elsewhere (Miles *et al.* 2020). Though it is tempting to link the destruction of the churches to the capture of the city, the dating is not conclusive. Many of the churches were systematically stripped for their materials at some point; at Bir Ftouha, the main basilica was dismantled in the 9th century to remove the marble decorative elements for re-use and to create lime; a second phase of exploitation took place in the 11th century when the walls were robbed for stone (Stevens *et al.* 2005, 490–491, 494–495). At Bir Messaouda, the walls were removed in their entirety, together with columns and bases—and sometimes even the floors. The columns, capitals and bases were probably reused, but much of the marble would have been processed in the lime kiln discovered at the south end of the site (Miles *et al.* 2020, 124–127): unstudied glazed ceramics in the robber trenches suggest a similar date to the dismantling of Bir Ftouah. Excavations at the Basilica of Carthagenna found few intact architectural elements, but many fragments of chancel marble, capitals and fenestration, stucco and burnt sandstone in pits and robbing trenches

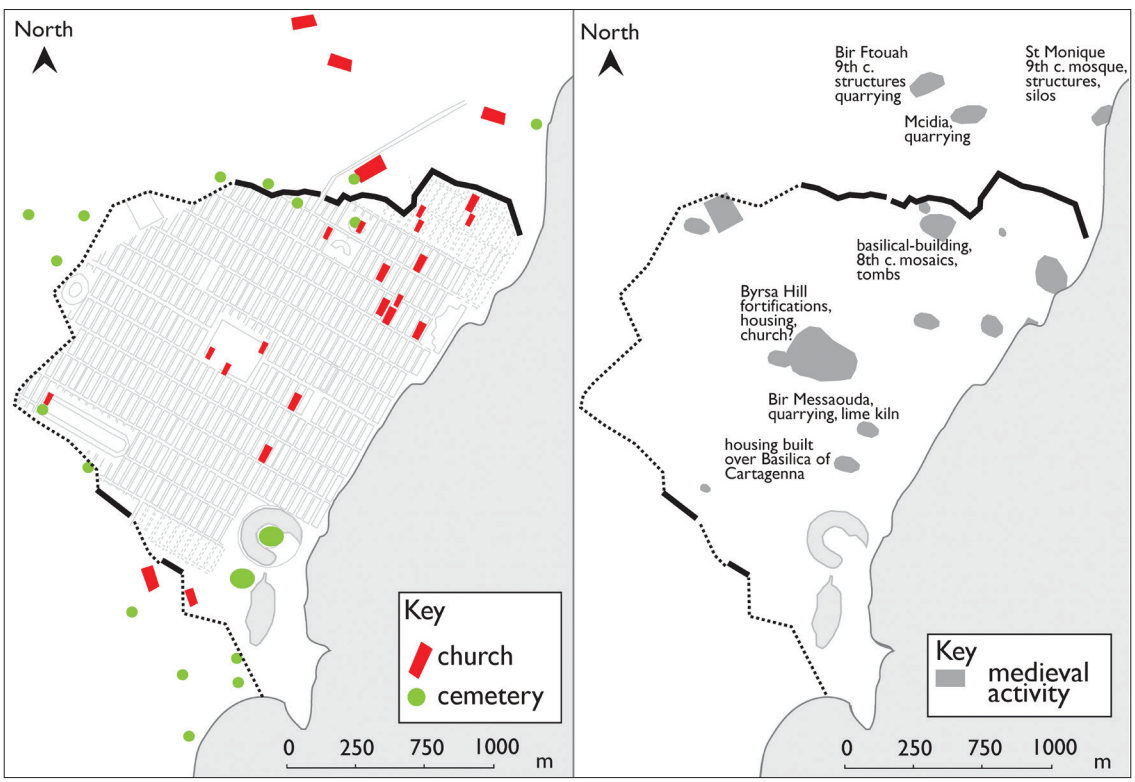

Figure 3. (Left) Carthage's churches in the 6th and 7th centuries; (Right) Medieval Carthage in the 9th–10th centuries.

(Ennabli 2000, 45, 73, fig. I–V, VII). At the Basilica Mcidfa, traces of quarrying were also noted including an (unpublished) marble column fragment with an Arabic graffito (Delattre 1907, 119). Whether all churches in Carthage suffered in this way is unclear. St Cyprian's tomb apparently continued to be a site for pilgrimage in the mid-9th century (McCormick 2001, 931, R521), several decades after his body was reportedly translated in 801 from Carthage to Arles and then Lyons under Charlemagne (Conant 2010).

By the late 9th century, new rural settlements had emerged in the ruins of the Basilica of Carthagenna, the monastery of Bigua, St Monique, Bir Ftouah and perhaps the Basilica Maiorum (Figure 3b). These new communities seem to be observing Muslim dietary and burial practice and worshipping in mosques. At St Monique, the razed church was built over by 9th–11th-century buildings on an entirely different orientation, including a nine-bay rhomboid structure that may be a mosque (Whitehouse 1983) and the finds included a plaster cornice with Arabic characters (Delattre 1916; Vitelli 1981, 123–125). Analysis of the 9th–12th century settlement at Bir Ftouha revealed an absence of pig bone and a predominance of lamb in rubbish deposits (Stevens *et al.* 2005, 528–533; Rossiter *et al.* 2012, 274–279), in contrast to late antique Carthage where pork was 37.2% of the main taxa (MacKinnon 2010, tab. 15.3). The Byrsa Hill, which may have housed a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Sebaï 2003), became the base of Muḥriz b. Ziyād of the Banu Hilal in the mid-12th century (M. King 2021). On the slopes of the hill was a Muslim cemetery with 11th–12th-century tombstones (Delattre 1896, 45–49; Stevens 2016, 100) and a nearby silo of similar date contained no pig bones (Payne 1981). This is not the case everywhere: 10th–12th-century layers in the so-called "Ecclesiastical Complex" contained 25% pig bones, and a Christian community may have dwelt here (Reese 1977).

Carthage is certainly an extreme example: unlike other North African cities, the city itself was reduced to very little, and its ruins were famous for being a quarry in the middle ages. But by the 10th or 11th century, though it continued to be the primary see in North Africa and perhaps a site of pilgrimage, many of Carthage's churches had been stripped and razed and the communities living in their ruins were observing Muslim dietary habits.

Walīla

Moving to the far West, the site of Walīla (Roman Volubilis, Morocco) provides our most detailed glimpse into the uptake of Muslim practices. In the 6th and 7th century, the town was occupied by local Berber groups who lived inside the walls (Fentress and Limane 2018; Fentress *et al.* 2022). A small group of contemporary tombstones inscribed in Latin, the presence of lamps and plates with Christian symbols, an ivory statuette of the Good Shepherd and a bronze incense burner mounted with a cross is suggestive of the presence of a Christian community, though no church has yet been identified (Lenoir 2003, 176–178). After the Muslim conquest of Morocco, the town took on new importance as the residence of the Berber Awraba tribe (presumably, but not certainly, the same group living inside the walls).

Probably in the early 8th century, the so-called "Arab quarter"—was established outside the West Gate and by the wadi (Figure 4). Built partly over the city-midden and the ruins of an early Roman pagan cemetery, this new quarter contained densely-built medieval housing and a possible mosque (Eustache 1956, 134, n.2). A Muslim garrison may have been housed here, at least initially, and a gold *dinar*, several *dirham* hoards and hundreds of copper *fulūs* as well as an intaglio inscribed in Arabic have been found here (Figure 5) (Eustache 1956; Fentress *et al.* 2021, 2022). Copper coins with Arabic legends were minted at the town, most probably in

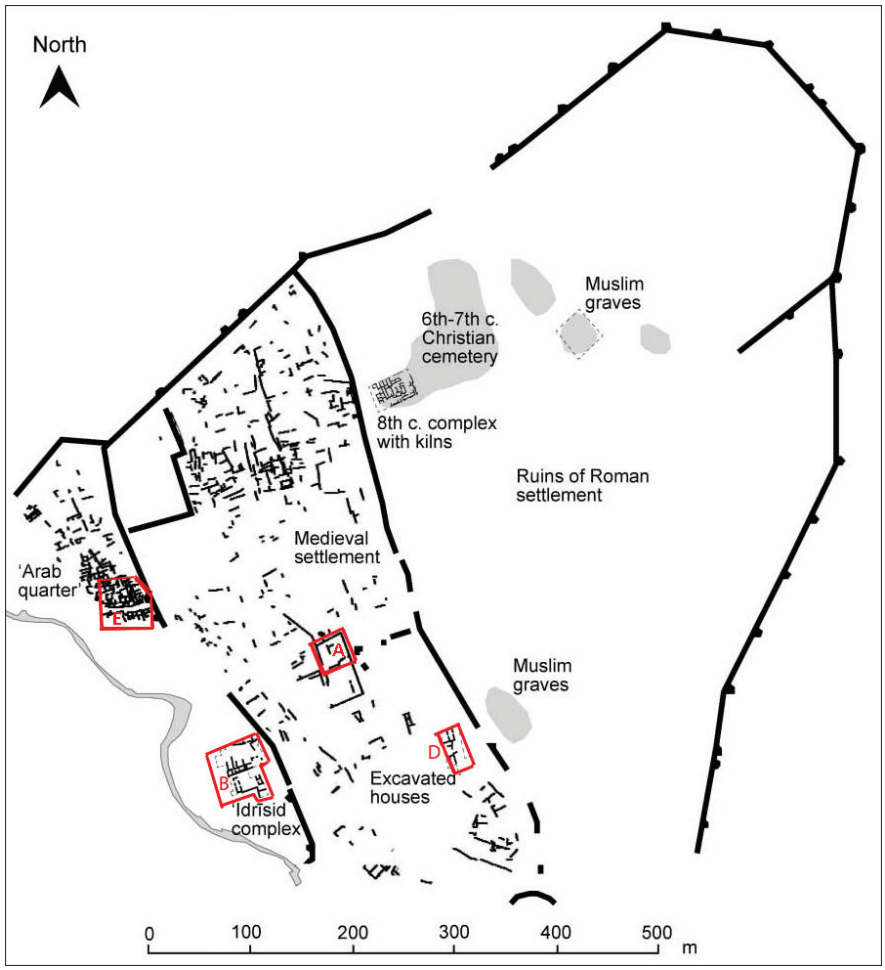

Figure 4. Medieval Volublilis (Volubilis Archaeological Project).

Figure 5. Intaglio with "bismallah" (Ruth Pelling).

the late 8th 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-Hasanī) who chose to write in Arabic, and usually, though not always, included the standard formulas of faith on Umayyad and Abbasid coins. These individuals have been identified as Abbasid generals (Eustache 1956) or leaders of an independent Muslim Berber city-state (El Harrif 2001).

The literary sources confirm that the Awraba tribe had already converted to Islam when a descendant of the Prophet, Idrīs I arrived in 788–789, as they declared him imam shortly afterwards. The town briefly served as the capital of the Idrisid state of northern Morocco before being displaced by the new foundation of Fez. Idrīs minted

Figure 6. M113 Idris I dirham (Volubilis Archaeological Project).

silver dirhams and copper *fulūs*, as soon as he was proclaimed imam, and his successors continued this practice. The early Idrisid dirhams mimic Abbasid dirhams but were made distinctive both by the highly visible addition of ʿAlī below the name of Idrīs in reference to his lineage to the Prophet and the replacement of the standard "Prophetic Mission" verse (Q : 9.33) with the verse on "Truth" (Q : 17.81) (Figure 6). These coins served as a rallying call that supported Idrīs' claim to rule by right of descent from ʿAlī and as a restorer of truth and justice (Fenwick 2022).

There was at least one mosque in the Idrisid town. Ibn Abī Zar (*Histoire*, trans. Beaumier, 24,29) indicates that a mosque existed at Walīla where Rashid presented Idrīs II to the Awraba to be recognized as sovereign. This mosque was probably a relatively simple structure. A possible candidate in the "Arab quarter" is a large building with nine column bases and a large courtyard with a well just off the main street that was excavated but unrecorded by French excavations in the 1950s. Its identification remains to be verified by our ongoing excavations in this building (Fentress *et al.* 2022). A second, much disputed, possible mosque was found in a cemetery outside the medieval settlement. The building, very similar to early mosque-tombs, consisted of a 10 x 15m rectangular three-naved building containing columns and a small protruding apse (a possible mihrab?) surrounded by graves, one of which contained a ring inscribed in Arabic (Euzennat 1974, 183–186). Close by, 8th-century burials laid out in accordance with Muslim funerary rites were found in, and around, the earlier Christian cemetery (Akerraz 1998). This practice of using a Christian cemetery for Muslim burial is condemned in Q : 9.85, but surely reflects the conversion of the local inhabitants who now practiced Islam. The early conversion of Walīla's inhabitants to Islam is further supported by an absence of faunal evidence for pork consumption in 8th-century contexts, indicating a shift in eating habits in line with a Muslim proscription of pork (A. King 2018). At Walīla, the early spread of Islam is reflected through a change in diet, the presence of mosques and new burial practices, alongside the use of Arabic for coins and rings inscribed with pious acclamations.

Sousse

Sousse provides a tantalizing glimpse into the religious transformation that many of the largest towns in Ifrīqiya underwent in the mid to late 9th century (Laporte 2015; Lézine 1971; Mahfoudh 2003). As Hadrumetum/ Justinianopolis, it was the provincial capital of Byzacena and a prosperous, fortified port city and bishopric when it was conquered. It continued to serve as a regional capital under the Umayyads and Abbasids and became the naval base for Aghlabid expeditions against Sicily. The 9th-century geographer al-Yaʿqūbī (1892 I: 78) describes a mixed community with Persians, Syrians, Christians and Jews. Three late antique churches are tentatively identified. One of these churches may have been destroyed in the late 8th century to build the *ribat* (fort) that guarded the interior port (Foucher 1964, 341). This is believed to be the oldest known *ribat* in Ifrīqiya and was probably built by the Muhallabid governor Yazīd b. Ḥātim; it would presumably have housed a prayer hall for its defenders.

The city was subsequently entirely transformed in the 9th century (Figure 7). In 821, the *ribat* was rebuilt in its current form with a prayer hall on an upper floor and watch tower under the emir Ziyādat Allāh I; the small nine-bay Bu Fatata mosque was founded by the emir Abu ʿIqal al-Aghlab and his freedman Khiḍr in 838–841, the Kasbah was built in 844–845 and augmented in 851 by the tower of Khalaf which had a small prayer room presumably for the use of the garrison (Lézine 1956, 54–55). Finally in 851, the construction of the Great Mosque (59 x 51 m) by the emir Abū l-ʿAbbās Muḥammad al-Aghlāb in front

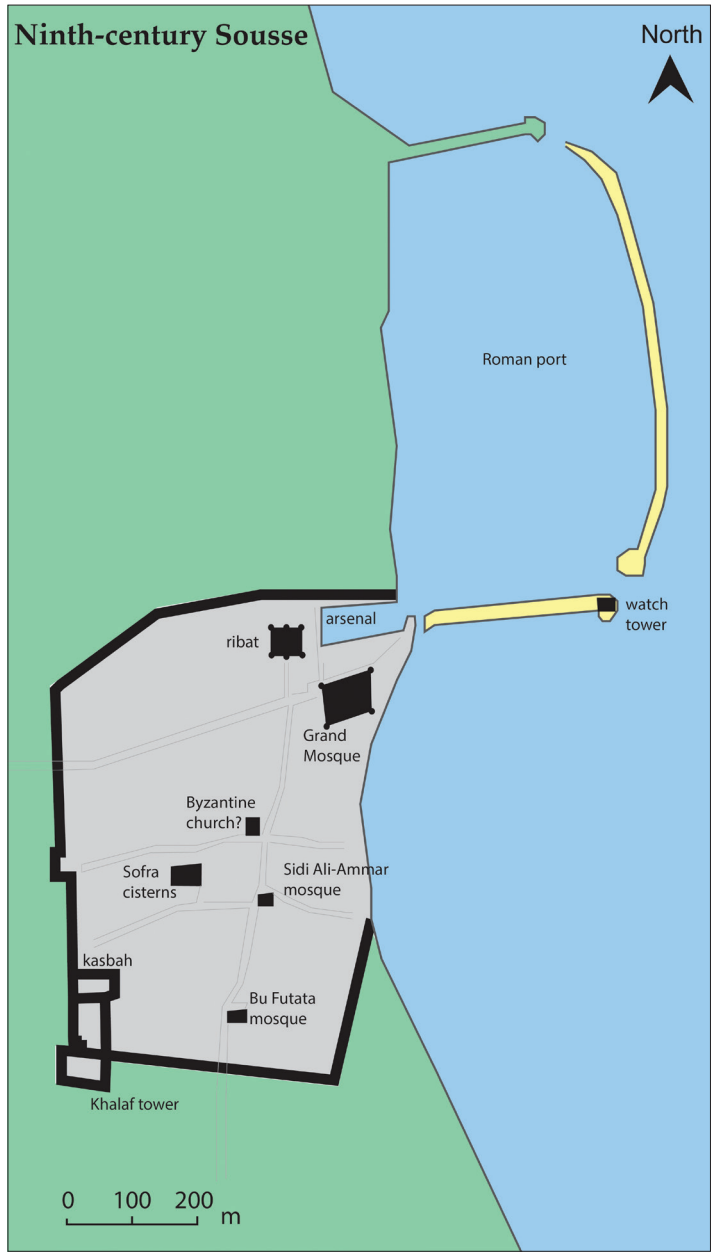

Figure 7. Plan of medieval Sousse.

Figure 8. Great Mosque of Sousse.

of the *ribat* decisively transformed the urban aesthetic of Sousse (Figure 8). Its prayer hall is divided into thirteen naves and six bays. The mosque has no minaret, and the call of prayer would have been proclaimed from the top of the north-east tower. A series of inscriptions and graffiti proclaiming that "the Qurʾan is the word of God" reveal the theological discussions in 9th-century Ifrīqiya (Abdeljaouad 2001, 422–423). This phrase is attested in three places at Sousse: the dedicatory inscription of the Great Mosque of Sousse, a carving in a column in the mosque and a graffito on an arch in the *ribat* (Abdeljaouad 2001, nos 91, 92, 88) and also appears in an inscription in the Great Mosque of Tunis (Abdeljaouad, nos 106), and two 9th-century epitaphs from Kairouan (Roy *et al.* 1950, nos 77 and 83). It represents the official return of the Aghlabids to Sunnism under Abū l-ʿAbbās Muḥammad and a refutation of the Mutazilite thesis that the Quran was created which under Ziyādat Allāh was state doctrine. Sousse shows how rapidly a town could be transformed from a Roman city into a walled medieval Islamic city centred around mosque and *ribat*. Here, the transformation was driven by the state and the speed reflects the city's new importance as the port-city for Kairouan and the launching pad for the conquest of Sicily.

The spread of Islam in North Africa

Though the evidence is patchy, it is possible to chart some transformations in the religious landscape of North African cities, and occasionally to see in more detail, the practices of ordinary believers. During the Arab conquests, large congregational mosques were built in the new Muslim foundations of Kairouan and Tunis (Marçais 1954, 9–22). The first mosque was reportedly first built in Kairouan by ʿUqba b. Nafiʿ in 670, and subsequently renovated and extended several times during the caliphal period as the community of believers grew. The Zaytūna mosque in Tunis was seemingly built much later in 734 under the caliph Hishām (though there may have been an earlier mosque). Nothing is known about their appearance in this period. These new mosques were powerful statements of the relationship between Islam and caliphal rule. Al-Bakrī tells us that Hasan b. al-Nuʿmān seized the red porphyry columns for the mihrab

of the Great Mosque from a church (De Slane, 1913, 195), whilst tradition holds that the Zaytūna mosque was built on the remains of a Christian basilica, a legend supported by the discovery of earlier Roman buildings below the minaret and the presence of "Christian" architectural elements including a keystone with a Byzantine cross (Gauckler 1907, 794). The appropriation of materials from churches were, on at least at one level, symbolic acts which would have signified the religious and political primacy of Islam after the conquest.

Outside Kairouan and Tunis, the Muslim community were a minority in Ifrīqiya in the caliphal period. There is no evidence for mosque construction outside the provincial capitals where large congregational mosques were established early on. Muslim rule in this period meant military rule by small garrisons of the *jund* who were stationed in the major towns of Ifrīqiya (Fenwick 2013). It seems likely that the garrisons were housed in Byzantine forts and small mosques or prayer rooms, typically decorated with spoliated columns, have been identified inside the citadels of Bagaï, Tobna, Tigisis (Gsell 1911, 17, 340) and Ain Tuburnuc (though this may be much later) (Ghalia *et al.* 2003). The only well-dated example is that of Henchir el-Faouar (Belalis Maior) where an 8th-century fort was built above a razed 7th-century church. Its prayer room (10.70 x 6m) is divided into two naves and three transepts by re-used columns and contains a platform in front of a recess cut into the southern wall, which could be the *qibla*; a room opposite is cut by a channel which could be the *midha* for ritual ablutions (Mahjoubi 1978, 384). Towards the end of the caliphal period, the *ribat*, a new type of building appeared. The contentious debate about the function of the *ribat* is beyond the scope of this paper, but scholars generally agree that they served both religious and military functions (see Picard and Borrut 2003). What makes them distinctive is their internal organization with long rows of cells and a large prayer hall (typically on the first floor in two-storey *ribat*s). The earliest securely dated is that of Monastir built by in 796 by the governor of Ifrīqiya, Harthama b. Aʿyan on virgin soil, near the town of Ruspina. The *ribat* of Sousse, as described above, may have been built over the ruins of a church.

Rare insight into the beliefs of the conquering minority comes from a series of overlooked Arabic graffiti in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, most of which remain unpublished. At the church of Ras el-Hilal, intermingled with Christian graffiti in Greek by suppliants appealing for help are a series of early 8th-century Arabic graffiti which mention God and exhort the reader to piety. One is dated to 722 and refers to a monastery, while another dates to a decade earlier (Harrison *et al.* 1964, 19–20). The authors are certainly Muslim Arab soldiers, some of whom were probably from the Syrian jund—one was from the Yemeni tribe of Yaḥṣūb who were mostly based in Hims (Syria) in the early Islamic period, while a second individual has a nisba of Hims. Two of the graffiti state that they were inscribed in a "raid" (*ghazwat*); similar graffiti are found in churches in Cnidus (Turkey) and Cos (Greece) suggesting a pattern of Muslim soldiers inscribing pious acclamations in churches on their raids. One of these, scratched on a column in the church of Saint Gabriel from Cos (Greece), commemorates a raid in 716–717 or 717–718 by one Mahdī b. Rabī from the troops of Ifrīqiya (*wa-huwa min ahl ifrīqiya*); this individual has two nisbas which suggests that he may have been a convert of Egyptian or Yemeni origin placed under the tutelage of another tribal group (Imbert 2013, 747–748, 755). Contemporary unpublished graffiti with Arabic personal names are visible in the West Church at Ptolemais (Ward-Perkins *et al.* 2003, 183), the Central Church at Apollonia (Ward-Perkins *et al.* 2003, 77) and in Church 1, the Temple of the Unknown Deity and the Antonine Temple at Sabratha (Ward-Perkins *et al.* 1953, 14; Joly *et al.* 1984, 8; Bartoccini 1964, 41–42).

Religion seems to have played a significant role in differentiating between the conquerors and conquered in many towns. Early mosques are found only in fortifications rather than in the old Christian towns, where churches continued to operate, though this is not the case everywhere. A systematic look at the (slim) evidence for the "ends" of recently excavated churches reveals that as at Carthage, some churches seem to have been destroyed by fire or abandoned in the late 7th century or soon thereafter, particularly in northern Tunisia. At Sidi Jdidi, both Church 1 and Church 2 seems to have been destroyed or abandoned in the late 7th century (Ben Abed-Ben Khader 2011). At Chimtou, the large basilica was abandoned in the second half of the 7th century and subsequently collapsed, as is apparent from a massive layer of debris containing large quantities of interlocking tubes from the vaults of the church (von Rummel *et al.* 2019). At Bulla Regia, the so-called Church of Alexander and the outlying funerary church were destroyed by fire in the late 7th century or later (Carton 1915; Chaouali *et al.* 2018). The picture is not uniform, however, even within sites. At Bulla Regia, a child burial with a small hoard of Umayyad copper coins cut through the mosaic floor of the episcopal complex show that Church 1 continued to be used for burial into at least the 8th century (Duval 1971b, 50).

Sbeïtla (anc. *Sufetula*) in central Tunisia, provides the best evidence of a town with a flourishing Christian community in the early medieval period (Figure 9). In late antiquity, this town had eight churches, including a cathedral complex with two basilicas, five churches and a cemetery church. At least four churches (Basilicas I, II, IV and V) continued to be used after 650, and the latter two continued in use until the 10th/11th century (Duval 1982, 625; 1999). Basilica II gained a new altar after 647, five years after the defeat of the Byzantine troops outside the town, and people continued to be buried nearby (Duval 1971a, 145–298; Béjaoui 1996, 43, fig. 18). A Christian presence is further suggested by the re-use of lintels with a chrism symbol as thresholds in two of the insulae which were occupied into at least the 9th century (Béjaoui 1996, 42–43, figs. 13, 15), a phenomenon also observed at Pheradi Maius. Over time, however, the adaptation of some churches suggests that the Christian community at Sbeitla diminished. In the 8th or 9th century, Basilica VIII was divided into rooms, perhaps serving as workshops since slag and kilns were found in the area (Béjaoui 1998). Elsewhere, the evidence is not as clear, though many churches continued to be centres of Christian worship and burial for centuries after the conquest. Early medieval Christian graves inside or near churches have been identified at Mactar, Sabratha and Lepcis (Church III) (Picard 1954; Bartoccini 1964, 38) and Islamic lamps were found in in Church 1 at Henchir Seffan in Algeria (Berthier 1943, 246).

In the former Byzantine holdings of Africa, then, the initial impact of the conquest on religious practices was limited. Though some churches were destroyed, or repurposed soon after, churches were not abandoned en masse, and mosques were not built in quantity. Indeed, mosques were confined to fortresses, presumably for the Muslim troops, and to the provincial capitals where large numbers of incoming Muslims lived.

A different trend is apparent in the far west of North Africa, where the sources tell us that the Berber populations converted early on. The Kharijite revolts in the 740s reveal that there were tensions between converted Berbers and the Umayyad military aristocracy about taxation and inequality, and the rapid spread of the insurrection suggests that, at least nominally, Islam had spread quickly on the outskirts of the effective rule of the caliphate (see Amara 2011). As described above, excavations at Walīla point to the spread of Islam amongst the town's inhabitants before the arrival of Idrīs in 789/790 and the establishment of the Idrisid state. Though no mosque has yet been securely identified, new burial and dietary practices which

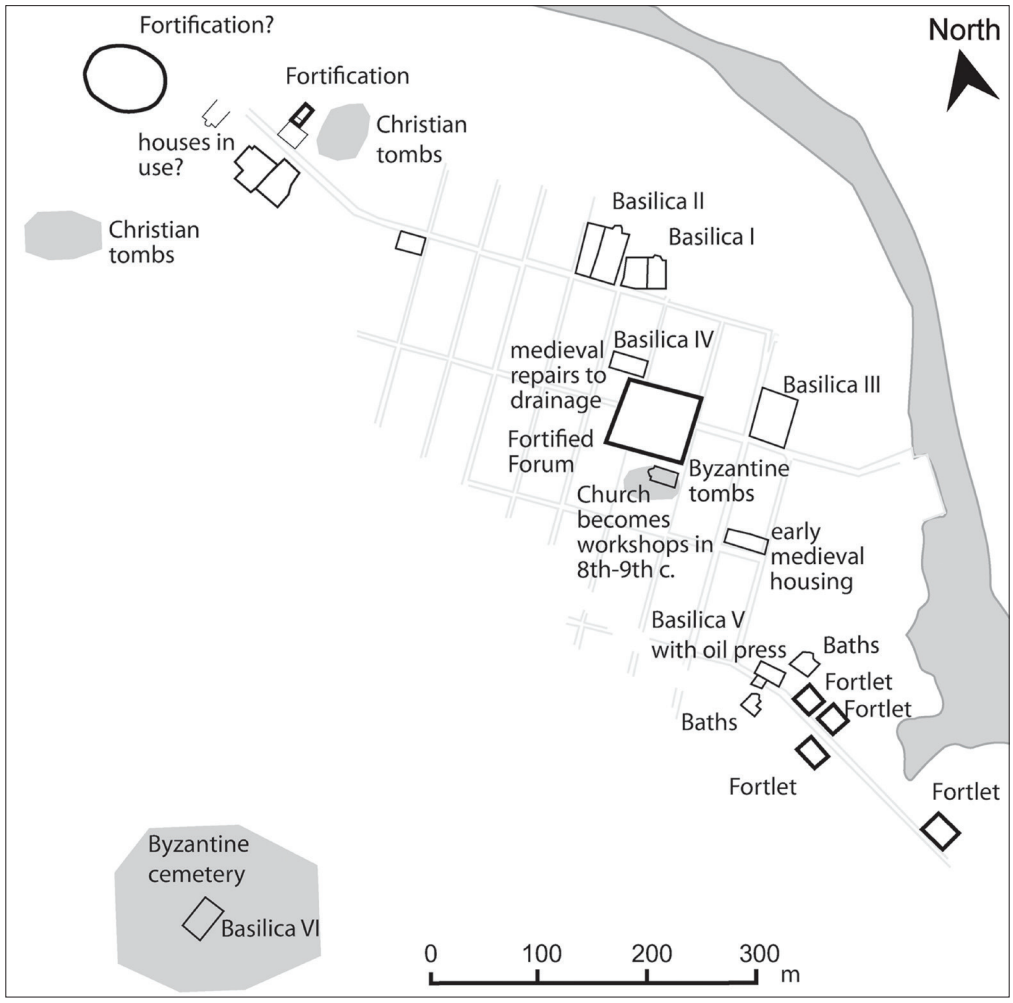

Figure 9. Plan of medieval Sbeitla.

follow Muslim prescripts, rings inscribed with pious acclamations and coins minted at the town in Arabic with the Muslim profession of faith were current by the mid-eighth century.

Elsewhere, the picture is far less certain, however, further support for the early 8th-century conversion of some North Africans to Islam comes from the earliest known Muslim cemeteries in Europe. Berbers played an important role in the conquest of al-Andalus where many subsequently settled as is shown by the mid-8th-century Plaza del Castillo cemetery in Pamplona, northern Spain. The cemetery was located outside the late Roman walls, probably near a gate, in the ruins of earlier Roman baths. It contained 172 graves with at least 177 individuals of both sexes and varied ages. The burials were interred following Muslim practice: individuals were placed in a simple pit lying on their right sides, with heads towards south-southeast in the direction of Mecca; a further 10 burials following Christian practice was identified (de Miguel Ibáñez 2016). aDNA analyses showed that just under two-thirds of the men were of North African origin in comparison to less than a tenth of the women; a small-scale strontium isotopic study identified a north-eastern Moroccan signature (de Miguel Ibáñez *et al.* 2016;

Prevedorou *et al.* 2010). Filed teeth of sub-Saharan tradition were also identified in twelve individuals, including one female with local genetic markers. Many of the male skeletons have traumatic injuries suggestive of combat, including a high frequency of fatal knife wounds. This is a Muslim population of North African, perhaps Moroccan, origin who arrived in the conquest phase, presumably as Umayyad troops, and subsequently settled in Pamplona; some men were accompanied by family groups, while others married local females who themselves were then buried according to Muslim norms. This is not the only example: at Nimes (France), aDNA analysis identified three adult males with paternal North African ancestry who were buried between the late 7th and mid-8th century (Gleize *et al.* 2016). Each body (perhaps wrapped) was placed on its right-hand side facing southeast in the direction of Mecca.

The new Muslim states in the far West also built congregational mosques in their new dynastic capitals and cities in the late 8th and 9th centuries. Mosques were established at Nakur, Tahart and Sijilmasa early on, as well as at other city foundations. The earliest known is the *jamiʾ al-atiq* of Agadir-Tlemcen, apparently constructed in 790 by Idrīs II. Unfortunately, it was excavated before the age of stratigraphic excavation, and little more than its plan is known (Bel 1913). The mosque had an irregular trapezoidal plan (48 x 45 m), at least four bays, with the mihrab on the eastern side, and had a bath complex that lay to the north-east (Charpentier *et al.* 2018; Dahmani and Khelifa 1980). At Fez, rescue excavations have discovered the ninth- and tenth-century phases of the Qarawiyyin mosque, founded, according to tradition, by a Kairouanese woman, Fāṭima al-Fihrī, in 857 (Ettahiri 2014). How far the construction of mosques in urban settings reflects the spread of Islam and related practices amongst local communities is uncertain. While 8th–11th century faunal assemblages at the towns of Walīla and al-Basra contained less than 0.5% pig bones (King 2018; Loyet 2004), the rural site of Rirha, (Morocco) presents a strikingly different picture: 9th–10th century layers have 28% pig bones, before subsequently dropping to 4.5% in 11th–14th century contexts (Oueslati 2016, 123), perhaps reflecting differences between urban and rural populations.

In the second half of the 9th century, archaeology and inscriptions also provide evidence of widespread foundations of mosques across Ifrīqiya, much of it sponsored by state investment. The Aghlabids built or rebuilt several congregational mosques which still survive today, including the Great Mosque in Kairouan (862), Tunis (856–863), and built, presumably for the first time, congregational mosques in the major coastal towns of Sfax (849), Sousse (851), Monastir (9th century) and perhaps also at inland towns (Figure 10). The mosque at Mila in Algeria may, for example, be an Aghlabid construction: excavations revealed an early mosque constructed of spoliated building materials with keel shaped arches; sondages dug to the foundations produced an Idrisid coin (8th–9th century). Small mosques were also founded in urban and rural settings outside Kairouan. These usually have a square plan with nine bays and are roofed with domes or vaults, a plan common throughout the Islamic lands. A small medieval building with columns and a trapezoidal plan has been uncovered inside the citadel at Haïdra and is convincingly interpreted as an early mosque (Baratte 1996), though no date is given. Some are austere, such as the Bu Fatata Mosque in Sousse (830–841) built on the order of the Aghlabid emir (Lézine 1970, 35–43). Others are extremely elaborate, such as the Mosque of the Three Doors in Kairouan—founded in 866 by Muhammad b. Khayrun al-Maʿafiri al-Andalusi—with its decorative façade of Kufic epigraphy and floral and vegetal motifs arranged in bands above the triple-arched entrance. There is no firm evidence for the size of Muslim communities in these towns, and it is unclear whether this mosque-building was intended to inscribe a Muslim

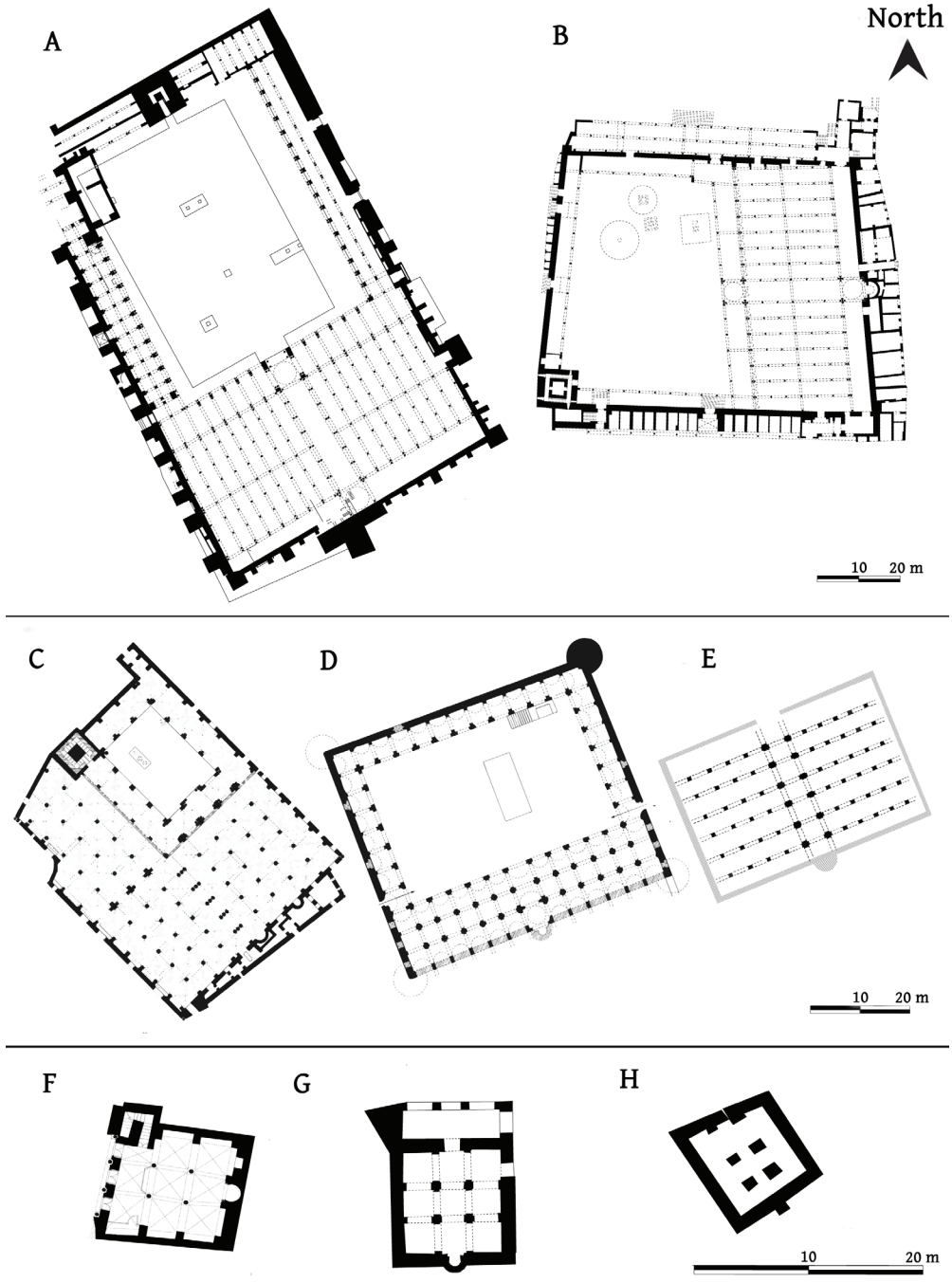

Figure 10. A selection of early mosque plans from North Africa (A) Great Mosque of Kairouan (862); (B) Zaytūna Mosque, Tunis (856–863); (C) Aghlabid mosque, Sfax (849); (D) Aghlabid mosque, Sousse (9th century); (E) Qarawiyyīn Mosque, Fez (9th century phase); (F) Bu Fatata mosque, Sousse (830–41); (G) The Mosque of the Three Doors, Kairouan (866); (H) possible mosque at the Basilica of St Monique (9th century?).

presence on cities or reflects the need of growing Muslim urban communities. However, Kufic funerary inscriptions also appear from 850 and have been identified at Kairouan (115), Sousse (4) and Béja (2) (Abdeljaouad 2017, tab. 15.1).

Coastal regions were also transformed and at least twenty *ribats* are securely dated to the second half of the 9th century, some of which were built by the Aghlabid emirs but the majority were built by pious individuals (Djelloul 1995; El Bahi 2017; Hassen 2001). The site of Monastir offers some insight into the making of a spiritual pilgrimage centre (Figure 11). Hadiths survive praising those who served at Monastir, such as "He who keeps watch in Monastir for three days has the right to Paradise." (Abu l-ʿArab, *Classes* trans. Ben Cheneb 2–3). On the coast, a few kilometres from the town of Ruspina, the Abbasid governor of Ifrīqiya built a first *ribat* in 796. Immediately outside, a small mosque was built in the 9th century. The single storey *ribat* of Qasr Duʾayd was built in 854, which was rectangular with round corner towers; on the inside, the cells were arranged off a large courtyard and the prayer hall was on the SW side. In the mid-9th century, the "*ribat* of the Sayyida" was built; it had polygonal towers and was probably also single storey, as the prayer hall and cells are located on the ground floor. In 871, another *ribat* was built on an island off the headland by a wealthy Kairouanese, Ibn al Jaʿad. In the 10th and 11th centuries, Monastir became a focus for burial and the bodies of the Zirid royal family and Sufi saints were brought for burial in the vicinity of the Great Ribat (Zbiss 1960).

The investment in mosques and *ribat*s coincides with the abandonment and re-use of churches in Ifrīqiya and presumably reflects a gradual decline over time in size of Christian communities. At Sbeïtla, for example, while some churches were used into the 10th century, others were repurposed at some point for secular purposes, typically residences or light industry (see Fenwick 2013, for examples). More frequently churches were dismantled for their materials, as at Carthage, though 10th/ 11th-century jurisprudential sources suggest that this was only permissible for abandoned churches (van Staëvel 2008). The elements required for mosques were essentially those used in churches: columns, capitals, bases, marble panels, and perhaps glass and stone tesserae. In the Great Mosque of Kairouan, most of the imported Byzantine capitals (212) certainly came from churches built or renovated in the 6th and 7th century (most likely in Carthage or Sousse); the same is likely to be true of locally made imitation capitals dating to the 5th century or later (Harrazi 1982). Three Roman columns in the Great Mosque are inscribed "for the mosque," in an elegant 9th-century script (Marçais 1954, 8), indicating a highly organized spolia industry

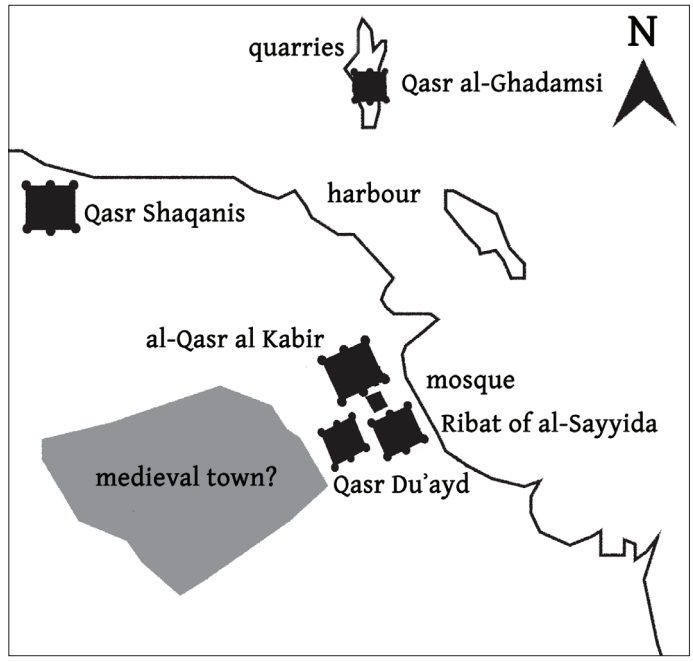

Figure 11. Plan of Monastir.

(Fenwick 2013). Occasionally, the redeployment of architectural elements from churches had an ideological significance, as was the case with the red porphyry columns seized from Kairouan described above. Over a century later, Aḥmad b. al-Aghlab (c. 874–878) reportedly seized marble columns and stones from the church on Malta after a raid in 870 and used them to build his qasr near Sousse (Qasr Habashi) and erected an inscription which celebrated the magnitude of the Maltese victory and the symbolic act of re-use (Talbi 1966, 475–476).

Conversion of churches into mosques is a rare phenomenon which occurred several decades or centuries after the church has fallen out of use, rather like the conversion of pagan temples into churches in late antiquity. The conversion of a church near Sbiba into the mosque of Sidi ʿUqba appears to date to the 10th century (Bahri 2003, 169–177). At El Kef, a building which certainly served an official Christian function in antiquity became a mosque at an unknown point in the middle ages (Mahfoudh 2017). The late antique building is of the enigmatic "monument à auges" type and consisted of a square domed building with a cruciform internal plan and an atrium. In the middle ages, the atrium was extended to the north to create a prayer hall of five naves and six bays; the *qibla* wall was mounted by a dome above the mihrab, while the cruciform building was converted into an annex with a minaret in one chamber and a room for ablutions was added outside (Gauckler 1913, pl. VI–VII).

The zooarchaeological evidence provides further support of these changes. In other regions, scholars have been able to correlate a drop in the consumption of pork, which is not *halal*, with the spread of Muslim dietary taboos and conversion to Islam (e.g. Insoll 1999, 94–106; Muñiz *et al.* 2011; Gaastra and Insoll 2020; Aniceti and Albarella 2022). For North Africa, 24 medieval (8th–11th century) assemblages from 15 urban sites and 6 rural sites have been published (Figure 12), in contrast to 51 late antique (5th–7th century) assemblages from 22 urban sites and 5 rural sites. Table 1 shows a dramatic drop in the proportion of pig bones in North African assemblages from 31.8% in the late antique period to 1.1% in the medieval period,

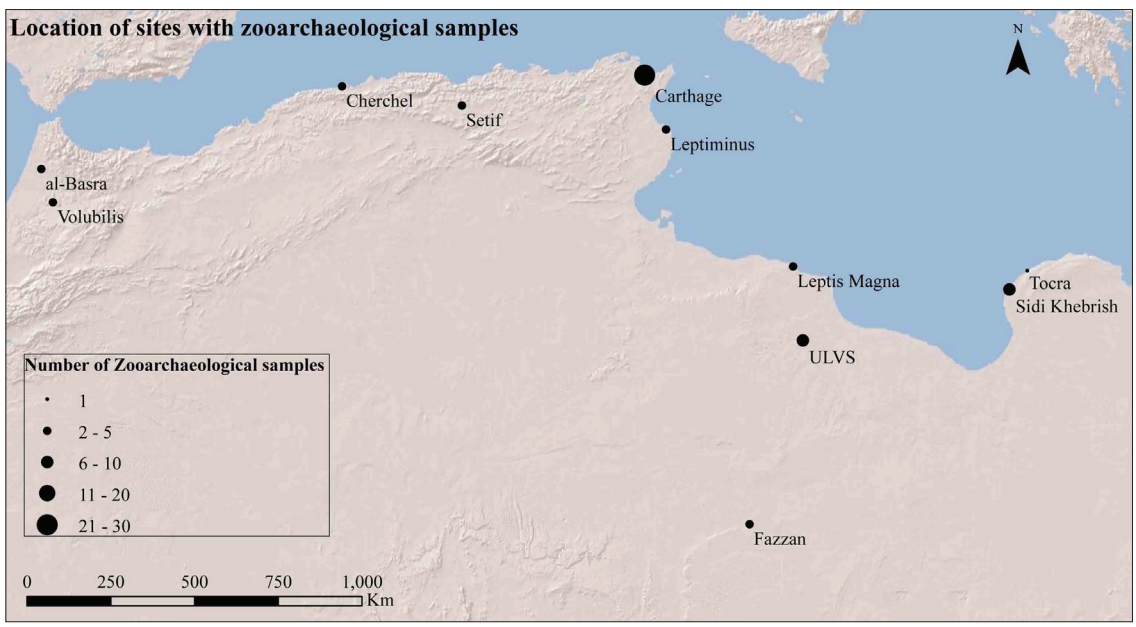

Figure 12. Distribution of published medieval zooarchaeological samples across North Africa.

Table 1. Breakdown of three main taxa from Roman, late antique and medieval North Africa.

Phase	No of assemblages	NISP (bos/cap/sus)	Bos %	Cap %	Sus%
Roman	34	15376	22.8%	52.2%	24.9%
Late Antique	51	26258	7.8%	60.5%	31.8%
Medieval	24	28933	21.6%	74.2%	1.1%

which suggests that by the late 9th or 10th century, the majority of people in urban settings were avoiding pork across North Africa (Fenwick 2013; see also, A. King 1999). Nonetheless, at almost all sites, there is evidence of pig bones; some may have been wild boar which are still hunted in the forested regions of Algeria and Tunisia today (Ferrié and Ferrié 1994). There are some notable exceptions to this trend in Ifrīqiya; pig continued to play an important role in the diet at Cherchel and Carthage Eccl. 5, perhaps indicating the presence of Christian communities.

The archaeological evidence therefore suggests that by the late ninth century, urban populations in Ifrīqiya were living in landscapes that were dominated by the mosque and *ribat* rather than the church and many were observing a pork prohibition. Increasing tensions between Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities about regulating inter-communal boundaries in Ifrīqiya are vividly referenced in late 9th century Arabic texts. The *qadi* of Ifrīqiya, ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭālib (r. 871–873 and 880–888) forced the Christians and Jews to wear a patch of white cloth on their shoulder, on which was designed a picture of a monkey or of a pig, and to paint a picture of a monkey on the front door of their homes (Speight 1978, 65). Ibrāhim II, "the butcher," (r. 875–902) crucified a Christian who refused to convert to Islam to become minister of finance (Talbi 1966, 276). Similarly, there is also a 9th-century peak in references to Africa in papal sources, which Conant (2015) suggests may correspond to the initial large-scale acceptance of Islam in North Africa identified by Bulliet (1979) and thus the first awareness of a major threat to Christianity.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the potential of archaeological evidence to contribute to scholarly debates about the timing and process of religious change in medieval North Africa. Examining mosque construction and church abandonment reveals not only patterns of state and elite religious investment, but also sheds light on the landscapes that simple ordinary believers lived, worked and worshipped in. Diet, burial, inscriptions and graffiti, and religious material culture reveal changing everyday practices as Islam become the dominant religion in North Africa. The chronology of conversion differs between heavily Christianised Ifrīqiya (eastern Algeria, Tunisia, coastal Libya), and the far West ruled by Berber chiefdoms in late antiquity. In Ifrīqiya, under caliphal rule, Islam served as a means of differentiating between the Arab conquering minority and Christian (and Jewish) populations. Mosques in this period seem to be restricted to the new administrative hubs of Kairouan and Tunis and to the fortresses housing the Arab troops. In the far West, the archaeological evidence, limited as it is, supports the early eighth-century conversion of Berber communities, such as those at Walīla. This early conversion was an important factor in the collapse of the caliphate in North Africa and the emergence of successor states that used Islam as the main idiom through which to legitimize

their right to rule. The late ninth century is marked by state and elite investment in mosque and *ribat* foundation, the mass conversion of town dwellers in Ifrīqiya and a first period of crisis for Christianity.

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