

## **A Note on Arabic and Terminology**

I refer to place names and archaeological sites in their most commonly used modern, not ancient or medieval, spellings (e.g. Carthage not Karthago, Volubilis not Walila). In North Africa, Francicised transliterations are most commonly used for Arabic place names and terms (e.g. Maghreb not Maghrib, Kairouan not Qayrawan, ksour not qusur). Italicised Arabic or French words are explained in the Glossary. Throughout, I do not use diacritical marks for Arabic names or terms on the principle that those who read Arabic do not need them, and those that don't are unlikely to find them helpful.

### **Ch 0. The Problem of North Africa**

Arabian armies first entered Byzantine Africa from Egypt in 642, but unlike the swift conquest of the Middle East, these early raids did not result in conquest and Muslim rule. Instead, the later Arabic accounts describe devastating defeats, widespread revolts and hasty retreats to the safety of Egypt that took place over many decades (Brett 1978; Benabbés 2004; Kaegi 2010). The end when it finally came, was brutal and short. The Byzantine capital, Carthage, was captured in 697/8 and Africa became Ifriqiya. In a few short years, the Muslim armies reached Morocco and the southern shore of the Mediterranean became part of the Umayyad caliphate. Imperial rule was short-lived. In 740-1, the so-called 'Kharajite revolt' broke out in distant Morocco, and rapidly spread to Tunisia. In its wake, new embryonic Muslim states headed by Arab and Berber elites emerged across North Africa as rivals to the caliphate. The Abbasid caliphate briefly regained control of parts of Ifriqiya in 761-2, but within a few decades, the imperial experiment had failed and in 800 they abandoned the region to their vassals, the Aghlabids. From this point on, the region was ruled by a constantly changing collection of Muslim states and empires but never again by the Abbasid caliphate.

Islamic North Africa poses a problem for modern scholars. A vast region which made up nearly a third of the caliphate, it is frequently left out of standard historical and archaeological accounts of the early Islamic world (e.g. Donner 1981; Kennedy 2004). In part, it is this complicated sequence of events that explains the neglect: it does not fit with the tidy narrative of a rapid military conquest followed by Umayyad and Abbasid rule that is told for the central and eastern Islamic lands. North Africa's distinctive history outside the caliphate has reinforced a second trend—particularly dominant within art history—to depict North Africa as a provincial backwater with architecture and artistic traditions that were inferior to, or derivative of, developments in the Middle East. So powerful is this outdated core-periphery model that even today, except in passing, Islamic art survey books rarely include material from the region.

This marginalisation of North Africa is not a modern scholarly construction, but is mirrored in the earliest Arabic accounts which provide only limited details on North Africa and its peoples. Those sources which we do possess were often ambivalent about the region and its inhabitants. In a series of apocryphal hadiths (sayings attributed to the Prophet), North Africa is portrayed both as a land of untold riches and the gateway to paradise and as the greatest threat to caliphal power and the gateway to hell (Marçais 1955: 20-2). In the Arabic geographies, North Africa is frequently depicted as one of the wealthiest and most fertile regions of the Islamic world but inhabited by boorish and uncivilised people. Some of its peoples, the Berbers, converted to Islam and joined in the Muslim armies in the conquest of al-Andalus (Iberia), but they famously apostatised twelve times and are often portrayed as unreliable and treacherous (examples in Norris 1982).

North Africa is not only important to study because it fills a 'gap' in scholarly understanding of the Islamic world or because scholars have neglected it. Conquered later

and with far more difficulty than Syria or Iraq, it posed different challenges, which the early caliphate ultimately failed to meet. Its late conquest makes it an ideal region to explore larger processes of medieval empire-building, the spread of Islam and the emergence of new urban, economic and cultural forms. North Africa is important precisely because it was a success story for Islam, even where the caliphate failed. Within only a few decades of the conquest, rival states arose in the far west and by 800, the region was ruled through a succession of states which used Islam to justify their rule over their multi-confessional communities. North Africa therefore provides an ideal opportunity to explore how and why Muslim successor states arose – a phenomenon that has yet to be explored by scholars.

Despite the obvious importance of North Africa in this formative period, our understanding of it remains limited owing to the comparative absence of archaeological and historical research on the period. Although there are a number of monographs treating late antiquity which stretch into the early Islamic period (Leone 2007; Pentz 2002), no book-length study of early Islamic North Africa between the seventh and ninth centuries has previously appeared. There are a handful of important historical analyses of North African dynasties, most of which were written many decades ago (Talbi 1967), as well as some excellent introductory texts which feature archaeological evidence (Djaït 2004; Sénac and Cressier 2012), but there is nothing even close to the number of books and articles that have been dedicated to other regions of the Islamic world, particularly Syria-Palestine and Iraq.

It is, in part, the sheer scale of the region that overwhelms: at its greatest extent, the reach of the caliphate in North Africa stretched from Atlantic Morocco in the west to the western Egyptian desert in the east, and from the shores of the Mediterranean to the oases of the deep Sahara in the south. It encompasses the modern nation-states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Each country has its own complex colonial and post-independence

history, in which the early Islamic period and archaeology have played different roles. The Arabs called this region the *Maghreb* ('the place where the sun sets') in opposition to the Levant which was known as the *Mashreq* ('the place where the sun rises'), though the precise limits of the Maghreb are poorly defined and vary tremendously between period and author. In the period covered by this book, the region is divided into the *Maghreb al-Aqsa* (roughly modern Morocco), the *Maghreb al-awsat* (roughly modern Algeria), *Ifriqiya* (roughly eastern Algeria, Tunisia and part of Tripolitania, Libya) and *Barqa* (Cyrenaica, Libya) which was often ruled from Egypt, but will be covered in this book.

But scholarly neglect is also due to a complex historiographical, evidentiary and disciplinary tradition. North Africa's early Islamic history was ignored for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by colonial scholars who dismissed the period as a 'Dark Age'. Thirty years ago, a clear narrative told how the Arab conquest marked the 'end' of Roman Africa, permanently disrupting Mediterranean trade networks and causing a rapid dissolution of urban life and society, a product of a violent and destructive conquest by rapacious Muslim hordes. This view was first popularised in the nineteenth century when Europeans first encountered the spectacular ruins of Roman towns that filled the North African landscape. Various attempts have been made to overturn this narrative for North Africa, most notably by Yvon Thébert and Jean-Louis Biget (1990), who argued in a seminal paper that such assumptions exaggerate both the scale of collapse and the degree of rupture with the classical world. In the last three decades, an explosion of archaeological research has further called into question such neat 'ends' (Fenwick 2013, Pentz 1992, Stevens and Conant 2016), but the notion of a rupture between the ancient and medieval world has proved a remarkably difficult one to dispel completely.

The second and most often invoked hurdle is the evidence, both written and material. There is not much. As scholars of the Islamic world know well, there are no contemporary

Arabic descriptions of the conquests or the first centuries of Muslim rule. Archaeology has not filled in the breach: a complex colonial legacy that privileged Roman archaeology over that of all other historical periods and our poor knowledge of medieval ceramics has until recently made the eighth century invisible to the archaeological eye. In the ninth century, however, there is a surge in the amount and quality of evidence. Historians can draw upon a wealth of conquest accounts, geographies, judicial treatises, religious tracts and biographical dictionaries, while archaeologists can more easily identify ninth-century material culture. Indeed, many of the most remarkable ‘firsts’ of Islamic art history come from North Africa, including the earliest surviving *minbar* (pulpit), *maqsura* (mosque screen) and *tiraz* (silk textile) and some of the best-preserved ninth-century monumental architecture from anywhere in the Islamic world. This book argues that while there are significant problems with the evidence—most of them created or exacerbated by modern scholarship—there is much more to be said about this pivotal period if we think creatively.

The third hurdle—and perhaps the hardest to overcome—stems from disciplinary divisions. There is an immense gulf between scholars of late antique Africa and Islamic Africa. They inhabit different scholarly worlds, each with a different historiography, journals and conferences, and their own scholarly debates, favoured sites and methodologies. Further widening this gulf is the fact that most scholars working on the late antique period focus on the fourth-sixth centuries, whilst those working on Islamic Africa work on the ninth century and later. Few are sufficiently familiar with both the classical and medieval periods and their scholarly debates to think constructively across the divide. The formative period of Islam in North Africa thus all too often falls through disciplinary cracks.

Just as damaging are divisions between the different branches and regional traditions of Islamic scholarship. It is not the case that historians, archaeologists and art historians

ignore each other's works, but rather that they do not come to terms with the challenges of the evidence, models and historiographic situation each is working within—and sometimes do not even recognise the legitimacy of the approach or research questions. Many historians remain unaware of the potential of material evidence to offer new insights into major debates. Conversely, Islamic archaeologists (still a minority) have focused on single sites or regions rather than attempting synthetic analyses and have yet to show just how archaeological evidence can transform historical debates on, for example, empire, economy and social relations. Greater still is the rift between archaeologists and art historians, who rarely talk to one another despite their shared emphasis on material culture. If it sometimes seems that scholars working in Islamic history, archaeology and art-history are from different planets, those working in the Middle East and the Maghreb might as well be from different galaxies. North Africa and the Islamic West is almost completely ignored by the far larger pool of scholars working in the Middle East, an issue which cannot be completely explained away by linguistic barriers or the complexity of North Africa's medieval and modern history.

These hurdles—historiographical, evidential, disciplinary—explain why North Africa has played so little part in broader Islamic histories. But they do not justify its neglect. This short book aims to introduce the Islamic archaeology of this important region to a broader audience, to raise new questions about the key debates between the seventh and ninth centuries and—above all—to demonstrate why North Africa is relevant to histories of Islam, Europe and Byzantium. It draws on a wealth of recent archaeological research in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, much of it led by my North African colleagues whose work is not sufficiently known outside the region. It demonstrates the need to challenge old, but still powerful, models of early Islamic North Africa, and to place North Africa at the centre of historical debates about the impact of the Arab conquests, the spread of Islam and the transition from the classical to the medieval world. Given the changing nature of the field,

this book does not aim to offer a comprehensive history of the period, as there is both too little scholarship and, in what there is, too little consensus. Rather it offers an archaeological perspective on life in early Islamic North Africa which it is hoped will go some way to filling this lacuna in scholarship as well as acting as a stimulus for future research.