

***Introduction: Authority beyond Tribe and State in the 'Middle Maghrib'***

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The history of Ancient and Medieval North Africa has all too often been written as the history of its conquerors. Accounts of Roman, Vandal, Byzantine, or Islamic North Africa typically focus on the civilized heartland of Carthage or Kairouan and their environs and neglect the upland regions, pre-desert and Sahara beyond as the undifferentiated world of the barbarians. These were the lands of *al-Barbar* (the Berbers) in the eyes of medieval Arab commentators, who were the first to group together the peoples in this universalising label; it was 'L'Afrique oubliée' ('forgotten Africa'), to Christian Courtois in the last major work of colonial-period scholarship on the pre-Islamic Maghrib.<sup>1</sup> His was the latest in a long line of colonial scholarship which commonly defined the inhabitants of such regions by what they were *not*: not Punic, not Roman, not Arab, and often not actors in history at all. As the Moroccan intellectual Abdallah Laroui argued in 1970 in one of the first works to disrupt this consensus, North Africans most often appear as "mere supernumeraries in a history enacted on their soil".<sup>2</sup> In challenging these assumptions, Laroui divided the stage of North African history into three. He devoted his greatest attention to the region he termed 'the Middle Maghrib', the territories of Morocco and northern Algeria, the uplands of the Atlas and the Tell ranges, and the pre-desert and high plateaux beyond, in which imperial power of successive occupiers was resisted, and in which new social and political systems developed, particularly in the second half of the first millennium.<sup>3</sup> This he contrasted with the 'Subjugated Maghrib', that is the heartland of Roman Africa and Islamic Ifriqiya which has been the primary focus of scholarship, and the Sahara to the south, which was frequently accorded a romanticized (and often implausible) agency in the grand narratives of North African history (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In the period between the decline of western Roman influence in this region in the early-fifth century CE and the rise of Almoravid and Almohad imperial claims half a millennium later, the Middle Maghrib was a crucible of social and political change. This was every bit as remarkable as that apparent in Europe or the Fertile Crescent in the same period, if much less familiar to many scholars. Perhaps most significantly, the medieval history of this region has retained a political valence of remarkable intensity. The works of Courtois and Laroui emerged either side of the revolutions in North Africa, and Laroui himself intended his work to have a relevance in the changed political environment in the aftermath of independence. The years that followed prompted an increasing recognition of the influence

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Brett, "The Arab Conquest and the Rise of Islam in North Africa", in *The Cambridge History of Africa II* ed. J.D. Fage, (Cambridge: CUP, 1978), 509-11; Ramzi, Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers. History and Ideology in the Maghrib* (Philadelphia: Penn, 2019), pp.15-43; Christian Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris: Arts et métiers, 1955), pp.325-52.

<sup>2</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib. An Interpretive Essay* tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Laroui, *History of the Maghrib*, 70-9.

of colonialist assumptions on scholarly models of North Africa's past.<sup>4</sup> New attention was paid to those groups traditionally overlooked in histories of the region, including those broadly identified as 'Berbers'.<sup>5</sup> More recently, contemporary Amazigh or Berber identity movements across the Maghrib have themselves drawn inspiration from the prehistoric, medieval, and ancient past, and particularly upon the region's complex history of colonial occupation.<sup>6</sup> The resistance of 'Berber' societies to Roman, medieval and modern imperialisms, and the catalytic role of Islam in the development of early medieval polities have proved particularly significant points of reference in this changing historical discourse.<sup>7</sup>

It is regrettable, but perhaps not surprising, that North African societies are not better known to medievalists working in neighbouring regions. The societies of 'Moorish' or 'Berber' North Africa are rarely included in discussions of the successor states of the post-Roman west, and Masuna, the Kahina or Ibn Rustam are much less familiar figures than Clovis or Charlemagne in the wider historical imagination. Similarly, the Maghrib and the Islamic West are usually little more than a footnote in scholarly discussions of the early Islamic Caliphate and Islamic world. Even well-known states and empires, which have left a material and textual imprint, such as the Aghlabids, the Almorovids and the Almohads are seldom included in discussions – or worse, interpreted through a core-periphery framework by scholars working outside the region.<sup>8</sup> It is frequently assumed that a paucity of textual sources, combined with practical difficulties of dating archaeological sites and materials, have rendered late antique and early medieval North Africa unknowable to scholars.<sup>9</sup> The same claim used to be made of early medieval societies elsewhere in the Mediterranean world in the so-called 'dark ages' but has been categorically overturned, and it is demonstrably incorrect for North Africa too.

### *Histories of 'The Berbers'; Histories of 'The Maghrib'.*

<sup>4</sup> See esp. David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism Power and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), pp.43-72; Bonnie Effros, *Incidental Archaeologists. French Officers and the Rediscovery of Roman North Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gabriel Camps, *Aux origines de la Berbérie: monuments et rites funéraires protohistoriques* (Paris: Arts et métiers, 1960); idem, *Les Berbères. Mémoire et identité* (Paris: Hespérides, 1980); Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress, *The Berbers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) and the ongoing *Encyclopédie berbère* (1984-)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. James McDougall, "Myth and Counter-Myth: "The Berber" as National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies", *Radical History Review*, 86 (2003), 66-88; Corisande Fenwick, "Archaeology and the search for authenticity: Colonialist, Nationalist, and Berberist visions of an Algerian past", in *TRAC 2007: Proceedings of the 17th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. C. Fenwick, M. Wiggins and D. Wythe (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008), 75-88.

<sup>7</sup> Most obviously Marcel Bénabou, *La résistance africaine à la romanisation* (Paris: Maspero, 1976), which focuses on the earlier period. Cf. McDougall, "Myth and Counter-Myth, p.77.

<sup>8</sup> See for critiques from art historical, archaeological and historical perspectives : Anderson, G. D. (2014). Integrating the Medieval Iberian Peninsula and North Africa in Islamic Architectural History. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(1), 83-92; Fenwick *Early Islamic North Africa*: 1-20; Maribel Fierro, "The other edge: the Maghrib in the Mashriq" in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *Studying the Near and Middle East at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, 1935-2018*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018):354-8

<sup>9</sup> See, Peter Brown, "Byzantine and Early Islamic Africa CA 500-800: Concluding Remarks", in *North Africa under Byzantium and early Islam, 500-800*, eds Susan T. Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks), at 295-6.

The greatest challenge in the study of the early medieval Maghrib is not the absence of source material, but resisting the tendency to essentialize, and to draw wider conclusions from specific fragments of information. The extrapolation of general patterns from discrete points of evidence must be a basic part of any historical or archaeological methodology, of course, but students of North Africa must be particularly wary. It is often tempting to use sources from one part of this vast world to relieve the silences in another, but doing so risks simplifying regional complexity and presenting large swathes of North Africa – and substantial periods of time – in more or less identical terms. No less significantly, it risks unconscious perpetuation of social caricatures about the ‘permanence Berbere’ which were established during North Africa’s violent colonial history.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, eschewing entirely the possibilities for comparison and cross-illumination risks leaving the study of this period as a series of isolated fragments.

In fact, the vast majority of recent scholarship on early medieval North Africa is acutely sensitive to regional diversity and chronology, but framing the subject of our study in appropriate language remains exceptionally difficult. ‘Berber’ is the most common shorthand to describe the inhabitants of the Maghrib (and sometimes the Sahara) from prehistory onward, for example.<sup>11</sup> The label was a coinage of the earliest Arabic writers on the region, of course, and one that has since been burdened with the ideological baggage of colonial period ethnography.<sup>12</sup> Given this history, uncritical use of this language would indeed be problematic, but scholars frequently address this at length in their studies; indeed, the changing evolution of the term has itself been the subject of extensive scholarship.<sup>13</sup> Nor are the alternatives without difficulties. In recent years, the term Amazigh/Imazighen has become more common in scholarship on historical periods, in deference to the preferred terminology of contemporary groups within North Africa, but assertions of ‘Amazigh’ identities in prehistory are scarcely less essentializing than the language that they replace.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, studies of late antique North Africa now commonly refer to *Mauri* or ‘Moors’ rather than ‘Berbers’, but the difficulties remain: there is little reason to think that the groups so named by later Roman or Byzantine sources regarded themselves as unified, and there is good reason to think that they did not.<sup>15</sup> References to the ‘autochthonous’ or ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of the region may side-step universalizing ethnographic terminology of this kind, but they too implicitly reinforce some of the assumptions of colonial-period ethnography. Even seemingly innocuous references to the populations of ‘North Africa’ (or the ‘Maghrib’) impose clumsy geographical parameters on the past which have little

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<sup>10</sup> See esp. Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, prejudice and race in colonial Africa* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1995) and Elizabeth Fentress, “Forever Berber”, *Opus*, 2 (1983): 161-75.

<sup>11</sup> Camps, *Aux origines*; Camps, *Berbères*; Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers; Vandals, Romans and Berbers*, ed. A.H. Merrills (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). And of course the ongoing *Encyclopédie berbère*.

<sup>12</sup> Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers*, examines the earliest evolution of the term.

<sup>13</sup> Lorcin, *Imperial Identities*; Gilles Boetsch and Jean-Noël Ferrie, “Le paradigme berbère: approche de la logique classificatoire des anthropologues français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d’anthropologie de Paris*, ns 1.3-4 (1989): 257-75.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mattingly, *Imperialism*, 59-63; McDougall, “Myth and Counter-Myth”, pp.82-3

<sup>15</sup> For example, Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et L’Afrique Romaine (IV<sup>e</sup> – VII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. (Rome: BEFAR: 2003); Jonathan P. Conant, *Staying Roman. Conquest and identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 273-5.

reference to the extraordinary human (and indeed topographical) diversity disguised by such labels.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the names of individual groups – where they are known – offer limited help. Not only do terms like ‘Mazices’, ‘Frexes’ or the ‘Awraja’ mean little to scholars of other regions or periods, they may have meant little to members of the groups themselves outside a few specific moments in their history.

Scholars have attempted to make sense of Laroui’s ‘Middle Maghrib’ (or Courtois’ ‘Forgotten Africa’), in a variety of different ways, and this work is ongoing. A vital first step has been to recognize the limitations on our scholarly vocabulary, whether we refer to groups as ‘Berbers’, ‘Moors’, or ‘Imazighen’, (or indeed simply as ‘groups’). A second crucial step has been to demonstrate that a critical reappraisal of textual and archaeological sources, imperfect as they are, can bring the political structures and everyday practices of local societies into sharp focus. It is becoming ever clearer that such societies are often very different from one another, and we need to appreciate the individual puzzle pieces in their own right. At the same time, however, it is important not to get lost in the detail: reflection on wider patterns and differences across regions and time is also crucial to understanding political and social trajectories in this pivotal period. Although challenges remain, these obstacles are not insurmountable. Over the past three decades especially, archaeologists, philologists and epigraphers have done a great deal to illuminate a startling range of societies across this diverse region which offer new perspectives on debates about kingship, state formation and identity in the early medieval world.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Middle Maghrib: A historical and archaeological introduction***

North Africa had been at the heart of the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> Famously described as the ‘granary of the Roman empire’, in the third and fourth centuries CE, the African provinces were among the richest and most urbanised in the Roman world, and the political and

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<sup>16</sup> Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers*, 105-29; Laroui, *History of the Maghrib* notes some of the problems with the term at p.9.

<sup>17</sup> See esp. Elizabeth Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, A Gateway to Paradise. The North African Response to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, Darwin Press, 1997); Moderan, *Les Maures*; Alan Rushworth, “From Arzuges to Rustamids. State formation and regional identity in the pre-Sahara zone”, in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, ed. A.H. Merrills (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 77–98; Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp.303-38; *La légitimation du pouvoir au Maghreb médiéval: de l’orientalisation à l’émancipation politique*, ed. Annliese Nef and Élise Voguet (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2011); Cyrille Aillet, “Tahart et les origines de l’imamat rustumide: Matrice orientale et ancrage local”, *Annales Islamologiques*, 45 (2011), 47-78; Conant, *Staying Roman*, 252-303; Christine Hamdoune, *Ad fines Africae Romanae: Les mondes tribaux dans les provinces maurétaniennes* (Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2018); Greg Fisher and Alexander Drost, “Structures of power in late antique borderlands: Arabs, Romans, and Berbers”, in *Globalising Borderland Studies in European and America*, ed. J.W.I. Lee and M. North (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Marie Lassère, *Africa, quasi Roma. 256 av. J.-C. – 711 apr. J.-C.* (Paris: CNRS, 2015) is the best recent overview.

economic tendrils of the empire extended even deep into the Sahara.<sup>19</sup> The nature of the Roman presence varied dramatically across the region, of course. In the imperial heartlands around Carthage, in the Tunisian Sahel and in the Numidian cereal plains around Cirta (Constantine), this was a region of intense agricultural exploitation.<sup>20</sup> Well-connected towns covered the landscape, and Latin Christianity took deep root alongside Judaism, Manichaeism and the traditional civic cults. Here, as throughout the empire, *Romanitas* was inflected with local elements, and regional identities flourished. Such variations were particularly pronounced on the fringes of this imperial world. In the upland regions of the Moroccan Atlas and the Algerian Tell – the Roman provinces of Mauretania Tingitana, Caesariensis and Sitifiensis – and in the pre-desert borderlands of Tripolitania and southern Byzacena, the Roman presence was felt differently. Here, towns were scarcer, agricultural exploitation developed alongside different modes of pastoralism, Christianity mingled with a range of local religious practices, and military authority frequently devolved to local powerbrokers acting in the name of the empire, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>21</sup>

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The occupation of Carthage by the Vandals in 439 shrank this political landscape, and it reduced further following the conquest (or ‘reconquest’) of Africa during the reign of the eastern emperor Justinian in 533.<sup>22</sup> Vandal and Byzantine rule was largely restricted to the rump territories of Africa Proconsularis, Byzacena and eastern Numidia; outside this region, authority was restricted to the coastal enclave of Septem and Tingis (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> The vast territories beyond were to follow their own trajectories.<sup>24</sup> These regions are imperfectly illuminated by our textual sources, and have been little studied by archaeologists more interested in early Roman towns, public buildings, aristocratic housing and – in late antiquity - churches, but some hints remain. Civic life continued in some of the widely-scattered towns of the west. The best known is that of Volubilis/Walīla, the provincial Roman capital of Mauretania Tingitana, partially occupied in the sixth and seventh century<sup>25</sup>. The late antique town was strikingly different in appearance to that of the early Roman provincial capital, however, and from the changing cityscapes of contemporary

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<sup>19</sup> Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome*. (Athens: Ohio University press, 2007) discusses this *topos* and its colonial implications.

<sup>20</sup> Brent D. Shaw, *Bringing in the Sheaves. Economy and Metaphor in the Roman World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) is a fine introduction to this world.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. David J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania* (London: Batsford, 1995); Hamdoune, *Ad fines*

<sup>22</sup> Andy Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.56-82

<sup>23</sup> Denys Pringle, *The Defence of Byzantine Africa from Justinian to the Arab conquest* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981); Pierre Trouset, “Les limites sud de la réoccupation byzantine”, *Antiquité Tardive*, 10 (2002), 143-50.

<sup>24</sup> Modéran, *Les Maures* and Hamdoune *Ad fines* are essential. See also Nora Yahiaoui, “Les confins occidentaux de la Maurétanie Césarienne”, *Sciences de l’Homme et Société. Ecole pratique des hautes études* (2003).

<sup>25</sup> A. Akerraz, “Note sur l’enceinte tardive de Volubilis”, *Bulletin du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* 19B (1983), 429-36. E. Fentress and H. Limane, (eds.) *Fouilles de Volubilis 2000-2005* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), E. Fentress, C. Fenwick and H. Limane, “Early Medieval Volubilis: the Archaeology of a Berber Town” *Hesperis-Tamuda* 55 (in press, 2020).

Byzantine Tunisia: no churches or fortifications have yet been uncovered, and there is no evidence of continued occupation of the splendid insulae with their mosaic floors. Urban settlements of this scale were rare in the sixth- and seventh-century western Maghrib, but are paralleled at Pomaria (mod. Tlemcen), Altava and Tingartia (mod. Tahert) in Algeria.<sup>26</sup> Christianity, too, seems to have survived across the old Roman provinces, and there are occasional hints of Jewish communities.<sup>27</sup> Papal letters of the fifth and sixth centuries, and conciliar lists down to the later Byzantine period testify to the survival of an episcopal network which seems to have been an important rallying point for local and provincial identities, and surprising clusters of Latin Christian epigraphy survive into the seventh century.<sup>28</sup> But there are hints too at the emergence of new religious practices across the region, or perhaps the revival of the old, including cults of the ram and the bull, and traditions of ancestor veneration.<sup>29</sup>

Very little is known of the inhabitants of this changing world, their political organisation or their rulers, apart from a few tantalising hints.<sup>30</sup> Sedentary and mobile populations certainly continued to coexist throughout this period, although there is some reason to think that pastoral communities rose to greater prominence in the centuries following the eclipse of Roman power.<sup>31</sup> The population also remained polyglot, as the long survival of the Latin epigraphic tradition, alongside with the occasional appearance of inscriptions in Libyan scripts, demonstrates, but historical linguists have also proposed that there was a marked spread in the use of Berber dialects across the region from the fifth or sixth century onwards.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge of the political and social structures of the region has traditionally

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<sup>26</sup> Saïd Dahmani, "Note sur un exemple de permanence de l'habitat et de l'urbanisme", *Bulletin du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* 19B (1983), 439-47; Jean Marcillet-Jaubert, *Les inscriptions d'Altava* (Aix-en-Provence: Ophrys, 1968); Aillet this volume.

<sup>27</sup> Stéphane Gsell, "Le christianisme en Oranie avant la conquête arabe", in *Etudes sur l'Afrique antique. Scripta varia* (Lille: Université de Lille, 1981), 17-32; Pierre Cadenat, "Rouahia, site berbéro-romain inédit dans la commune de Kéria (Tiaret, Algérie)", *Antiquités africaines*, 12 (1978), 241-52; Mark Handley, "Disputing the End of African Christianity", in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers*, ed. A.H. Merrills, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 291-310;

<sup>28</sup> Hamdoune, *Ad fines*, 239-314.

<sup>29</sup> Yassir Benhima, "Quelques remarques sur les conditions de l'islamisation du Maghreb al-Aqsā: aspects religieux et linguistiques", in Dominique Valérian (ed.), *Islamisation et arabisation de l'Occident musulman médiéval* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 2011): 315-30.

<sup>30</sup> Important discussions include: Rushworth, "From Arzuges to Rustamids"; Fisher and Drost, "Structures of power"; Camps, "Rex gentium"; idem, "De Masuna à Koceila: les destinées de la Maurétanie aux VIe au VIIe siècles", *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques*. 19B, (1985): 307-25; Conant, *Staying Roman*. pp.252-303.

<sup>31</sup> Yassir Benhima, "Quelques remarques sur le nomadisme préhilalien au Maghreb (VIIIe – XIe siècle)", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 39.2 (2009), 209-27. Cf. also Elizabeth Fentress and Andrew Wilson, "The Saharan Berber Diaspora and the Southern Frontiers of Byzantine North Africa", in *North Africa under Byzantium and early Islam, 500-800*, eds Susan T. Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks), 41-64 and Andy Merrills, "Invisible Men: Mobility and Political Change on the Frontier of Late Roman Africa", *Early Medieval Europe*, 26.3 (2018): 355-390

<sup>32</sup> Andy Merrills, "The Moorish Kingdoms and the Written Word: Three 'Textual Communities' in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Mauretania", in *Writing the Early Medieval West*, ed. Elina Screen and Charles West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 185-202. On broader linguistic change, see Fentress and Wilson, "Saharan Berber Disapora", pp.50-3 (with references).

rested on a comparatively small handful of texts, inscriptions, and funerary sites, but this evidence base is slowly growing and interpretation has developed with it. Most famously, we know of one Masuna, who proclaimed himself to be ‘King of the Moorish and Roman peoples’ (*Rex gentium Maurorum et Romanorum*) in a Latin inscription of 508 CE from Altava in the far west of Mauretania Caesariensis.<sup>33</sup> Masuna’s near-contemporary Masties seems to have ruled in the Aurès mountains later in the sixth century, and either rejoiced in the title ‘imperator’ or (more probably) the less exalted (*praepositus limiti*) (‘frontier officer’).<sup>34</sup> But these rulers were not alone. Recent discoveries have identified another Masties from an inscription in northern Numidia, and we know of a handful of other prominent powerbrokers from across the region both from their own epigraphic testimony and from the accounts of Byzantine sources of the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>35</sup> Latin, Greek, and Arabic sources variously describe these figures as Christian, Jewish or pagan, and while such texts need to be treated with caution, the impression of religious variety that they present is striking.<sup>36</sup>

Precisely whom, how, or what these individuals ruled, and how these spheres related to the wider worlds of the Maghrib, the Sahara, and the Mediterranean is far from clear. Archaeological research on the late antique ‘Middle Maghrib’ remains thin outside a few isolated pockets and much of our knowledge still relies on research undertaken before the advent of modern archaeological techniques.<sup>37</sup> Those towns which survived into the post-Roman period retained some political importance, and certain civic institutions evidently survived to the time of the Arab conquest if not beyond.<sup>38</sup> Only a handful of plausible sites for political centres have been identified outside the cities, and even here identification is far from certain. These include a small fortified settlement at Sidi Medjahed to the west of Altava and (more recently) a similarly pseudo-military site of approximately 15 hectares from Douken Jfara in the south of the Tunisian Dorsal.<sup>39</sup> Ceramic evidence suggests an occupation of this site down to the seventh century, and the discovery of architectonic and decorative masonry elements hints at its importance. Its proximity to prehistoric cave-paintings may also be significant, and the scholars who worked on the site have plausibly

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<sup>33</sup> Marcillet-Jaubert, *Les inscriptions*, pp.126-7; Gabriel Camps, “*Rex gentium Maurorum et Romanorum*. Recherches sur les royaumes de Maurétanie des VIe et VIIe siècles”, *Antiquités africaines* 20 (1984): 183-218;

<sup>34</sup> Modéran, *Les Maures*, pp.398-414 provides a full discussion. On the reading of Masties as *Limiti Praepositus* (rather than *Imperator*) see Pierre Morizot, “Masties a-t-il été imperator?”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 141 (2002): 231-40.

<sup>35</sup> Hamdoune, *Ad fines*, 283-4.

<sup>36</sup> Handley, “End of African Christianity”.

<sup>37</sup> Esp. Pierre Morizot, “Les recherches en matière de protohistoire dans l’Aures”, in *Actes du VIIIe Colloque International sur l’Histoire et l’Archéologie de l’Afrique du Nord*, ed. M. Khanoussi. (Tunis: Institut National du patrimoine, 2003), 65–98; Elizabeth Fentress, “Diana Veteranorum and the Dynamics of an Inland Economy”, in *Local Economies? Production and Exchange of Inland Regions in Late Antiquity*, ed. Luke Lavan (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Conant, *Staying Roman*, 284-96.

<sup>39</sup> J. Marion, “L’éperon fortifié de Sidi-Medjahed”, *Libyca*, 7 (1959), 27-41; Moussa Tabbabi and Jaâfar Ben Nasr. “Des gravures rupestres néolithiques à la Caprapicti de Victor de Vita: essai d’identification d’un pays Maure du sud-ouest de la Byzacène à l’époque vandale”, in *Le peuplement du Maghreb antique et médiéval*, ed. Abdellatif Mrabet (Sousse: Université de Sousse, 2017), 177-190.

connected it to the territory of the ‘Caprapicti’ (‘Painted Goats’) identified by a Vandal-period author.<sup>40</sup> But beyond that the political structures represented by this tantalizing site remain obscure.

Monumental tumuli (*bazinas*) known from the region provide our other great source of evidence. Best known among these are the thirteen great monumental tumuli near Tiaret known as the Djedar. Probably dating between the fifth and seventh centuries, the largest of these tombs are comparable in scale to the great Numidian tombs of the second and first centuries BCE, and may have drawn inspiration from them.<sup>41</sup> The Djedar share similarities with other tumuli across the western Sahara, and hint at the wide geographical horizons of the communities which built them, but the earliest were clearly the work of provincial masons and incorporate dedicatory inscriptions in Latin, alongside supposedly ‘Saharan’ elements.<sup>42</sup> Other important late antique tumuli are known across the region, and include a substantial necropolis at Djorf Torba, far to the south of the old Roman frontier, where plaques decorated with apparently Christian elements may reveal the spread of that faith among neighbouring populations.<sup>43</sup> Further clusters of *bazinas* are known from southern Numidia, including two from Néméncha preserving with what would appear to be religious inscriptions in Libyan script made in red ochre.<sup>44</sup> Among the innumerable tumuli across the region are eight further *bazinas* constructed on top of an old Roman frontier fort at Ausum, which plausibly hints at their political as well as religious importance, and the aspirations of these new societies to supplant the old.<sup>45</sup> Still other examples are known from Morocco, including the massive circular *bazina* and rectangular platform known as the ‘Gour’ to the south of Meknes, which has been dated to the seventh century.<sup>46</sup> More recently, survey and excavation to the south of the Atlas mountains has identified nucleated settlements and burial tumuli which probably also date to this period.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Victor Vitensis, *Historia Persecutionis*, ed. and trans. Serge Lancel, [Budé] (Paris, Belles Lettres, 2002); trans. J. Moorhead, [Translated Texts for Historians, 10] (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1992), I.36.

<sup>41</sup> Fatima Kadaria Kadra, *Les Djedars: monuments funéraires Berbères de la Région de Frenda* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1983); Jean-Pierre Laporte, “Les Djedars, monuments funéraires berbères de la région de Frenda et de Tiaret (Algérie)”, in *Identités et culture dans l’Algérie Antique*, ed. Claude Briand-Ponsart (Rouen: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2005), 321-406.

<sup>42</sup> Laporte, “Les Djedars”, pp.339-367.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Lihoreau, *Djorf Torba nécropole saharienne antéislamique* (Paris: Karthala: 1993).

<sup>44</sup> E. Battistini, “Note sur deux tumuli de la région de Négrine”, *Recueil de la Société de Préhistoire et d’Archéologie de Tébessa*, (1936-37), pp.183-195; D. Grébénart, “Sépultures protohistoriques de la région de Ferkane”, *Libyca*, 9-10 (1961-62), pp.171-84

<sup>45</sup> Morizot, “Les recherches”, 70; Fentress and Wilson, “The Saharan Berber Disapora”, 44-5.

<sup>46</sup> Gabriel Camps, “Le Gour, mausolée berbère du VIIe siècle”, *Antiquités africaines*, 8 (1974): 191-208.

<sup>47</sup> Y. Bokbot, Y. “Protohistory and Pre-Islamic Funerary Archaeology in the Moroccan Pre-Sahara”, in *Burials, Migration and Identity in the Ancient Sahara and Beyond* ed. M. C. Gatto, D. J. Mattingly, N. Ray and M. Sterry, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 315-40; D.J. Mattingly, Y. Bokbot, M. Sterry, A. Cuénod, C. Fenwick, M.C. Gatto, N. Ray, L. Rayne, K. Janin, and A. Lamb, “Long-term History in a Moroccan Oasis Zone: The Middle Draa Project 2015”, *Journal of African Archaeology*, 15 (2017): 141-72.



The Arab conquests of the late seventh century did not erase the regional differences which had developed in the centuries following Roman rule, but rather exacerbated them, and introduced new aspects to the dynamics of political and social change.<sup>48</sup> Although the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphate laid claim to the entirety of North Africa and professed to have converted the Berbers – at least in theory – direct political authority across the region was limited.<sup>49</sup> Umayyad and Abbasid rule again centred on the old African provincial heartland, now known as Ifriqiya, in what is today Tunisia and eastern Algeria. In the west, authority was restricted to a handful of outposts at towns such as Tlemcen, Tanger Ceuta, and perhaps Walīla (Volubilis).<sup>50</sup> The interactions between imperial power and the Berber societies in the West in the seventh and eighth centuries remains poorly understood. The earliest surviving histories and geographies were compiled in the late-ninth century by scholars living hundreds of miles away under Abbasid rule in Egypt, Jerusalem or Baghdad when North Africa had already been lost to the caliphate.<sup>51</sup> While these later traditions contain important hints of the political landscape as it existed at the time of the Arab conquest, and have been scrutinized in some detail by scholars, the record is far from reliable, and the basic social organization of the region, as well as the immediate impact of caliphal rule and the spread of Islam, have only recently been investigated in detail.<sup>52</sup>

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

In the hilly, mountainous and desert territories of the far west and in regions beyond the garrison towns, the caliphate had little effective control. In 739-40, the so-called ‘Kharajite revolt’ broke out in Morocco, and rapidly spread to Iberia and Tunisia. In its wake, new Muslim political forms emerged in the West as rivals to the Umayyad and then the Abbasid caliphate: the Ṣāliḥids (709), the Barghawata (744); the Midrarids of Sijilmasa (758), Rustamids (776); Idrīsids (788) (Figure 3).<sup>53</sup> The origins of these states was extremely varied: some were local creations, whilst others were established by exiles or incomers from the East, as in the case of the Idrīsids of central Morocco, the Ṣāliḥids at Nakur, or the Rustamids

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<sup>48</sup> Corisande Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> See Hichem Djaït ‘La Wilāya d’Ifriqiya au IIe/VIIIe siècle: Étude institutionnelle’, *Studia Islamica* 27 (1967): 77-121; ‘La Wilāya d’Ifriqiya au IIe/VIIIe siècle: Étude institutionnelle (suite et fin)’, *Studia Islamica* 28 (1968): 79-107, Corisande Fenwick, ‘The Umayyads and North Africa: Imperial Rule and Frontier Society’, in A. Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World* (London: Routledge, 2020): 293-313.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Brett, ‘The Islamisation of Morocco: from the Arabs to the Almoravids’, *Morocco I* (1992): 57-71. For an archaeological overview of Islamic Morocco, see Abdallah Fili ‘The Maghreb al-Aqsa’, in B. Walker, T. Insoll and C. Fenwick (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 267-86.

<sup>51</sup> See, most recently: Charles Picard, ‘Islamisation et arabisation de l’Occident musulman médiéval (VII<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> siècle): le contexte documentaire’, in *Islamisation et arabisation del’Occident musulman médiéval (VII<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> s.)*, ed. D. Valérien (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 35-61.

<sup>52</sup> Compare, for example, Dahmani, ‘Pouvoirs tribaux autochtones’; Moderan, *Les Maures*, 686-810; for the archaeology, see Fenwick *Early Islamic North Africa*, esp. 31-52.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Savage, *A Gateway to Hell*; Abdelkader El Ghali, *Les états kharidjites au Maghreb (II<sup>e</sup> s. – IV<sup>e</sup> hég / VIII<sup>e</sup> s. – X<sup>e</sup> s. apr J.C.)* (Tunis: Centre de Publications, 2003); Paul M. Love Jr. ‘The Sufiris of Sijilmasa: toward a history of the Midrarids’, *Journal of African Studies*, 15.2 (2010): 173-188; Cyrille Aillet, ‘Introduction: L’ibādisme, une minorité au sein de l’Islam’, *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 132 (2012): 13-36; *Le légitimation du pouvoir*, ed. Nef and Vouget.

based at Tāhart. These new political and social constellations herald a whole package of wider changes in the western Maghrib, including wide-spread urbanisation, the appearance of new forms of architecture (mosques, hammams, courtyard houses), the spread of Islam and Muslim dietary and burial practices, and the introduction of new crops, husbandry practices, manufacturing techniques and ceramic forms.<sup>54</sup> Dynastic cities were established to house the new rulers, and to act as the centre of government. These were not top-down foundations: local tribes played a pivotal role in the process of urbanisation and most medieval centres developed in, or near, existing settlements or market-places.<sup>55</sup> Cities were even established in the Saharan oases, as in the case of Sijilmasa, the famous caravan city established in the eighth century that subsequently became the centre of the Midrarids and the principal centre of trans-Saharan trade.<sup>56</sup> Some such foundations, such as Fes or Sijilmasa thrived and became major hubs; however, the majority – such as Tahart, Sedrata or the later foundations of Achir and the Qala of the Beni Hammad– boomed for several centuries and then disappeared.<sup>57</sup> Outside the caliphate as it was, the Maghrib al-Aqsa was now integrated into a vast new trading world linking it with Ifrīqiya, al-Andalus, West Africa and the Mashriq.<sup>58</sup> This success and prosperity paved the way for the North African Berber Empires of the tenth-twelfth centuries CE, the Almoravids and Almohads, who conquered much of the western Mediterranean.<sup>59</sup>

Again, our sources on these early Muslim polities are far from ideal, but the information that is available is suggestive. Almost nothing written by North African scholars survives before the fourteenth century of the rich literary culture of Kairouan or Fez, except fragments quoted in later manuscripts. An important exception is the Ibadī manuscript tradition which was first compiled in the ninth century, and provides significant insight into the foundation of the Rustamid state, Ibadī doctrine and the development of the communities in the Djebel

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<sup>54</sup> Patrice Cressier “Urbanisation, arabisation, islamisation au Maroc du Nord: quelques remarques depuis l’archéologie”, in *Peuplement et arabisation au Magreb occidental*, ed. J. Aguade, P. Cressier, A. Vicente (Madrid: Casa de Velazquez, 1998): 27-39; ‘Quelques remarques sur la genèse des villes islamiques au Maghreb occidental’, in S. Panzram and L. Callegarin (eds.), *Entre civitas y madīna. El mundo de las ciudades en la Península Ibérica y en el norte de África (siglos IV-IX)* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez): 317-30; Patrice Cressier and Elizabeth Fentress (eds.) *La céramique maghrébine du haut moyen âge, VIIIe-Xe siècle: état des recherches, problèmes et perspectives* (Rome: École française de Rome), 2011. See also Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*: 105-152.

<sup>55</sup> Cressier, “Urbanisation”; he explores this process in detail at Nakur, see Patrice Cressier, “Nakur: un émirat rifian pro-omeyyade contemporain des Aghlabides”, in G. Anderson, C. Fenwick and M. Rosser-Owen (eds.), *The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors: Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 491-513.

<sup>56</sup> Capel, this vol; Capel, C. and Fili, A. (2016), ‘La fondation de Sijilmâsa: réexamen historique et découvertes archéologiques’, *Hespéris-Tamuda* LI: 39-82.

<sup>57</sup> See especially, Cressier, “Urbanisation”. M. Garcia-Arenal and E. Manzano Moreno, “Idrissisme et villes idrissides”, *Studia islamica* 82 (1995): 5-33.

<sup>58</sup> On trade networks in early medieval North Africa, see especially Claudette Vanacker ‘Géographie économique de l’Afrique du Nord selon les auteurs arabes du IXe siècle au milieu du XIIe siècle’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* (1973): 659-80; Dominique Valérian, *Ports et réseaux d’échanges dans le Maghreb médiéval* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Amira K. Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Nafusa, Jerba and the M'zab.<sup>60</sup> Archaeology provides a rather more optimistic picture, particularly as scholars have engaged more directly on the Islamic period in Africa and especially the complexities of the earliest periods.<sup>61</sup> Excavations have taken place at many of the dynastic capitals of the Berber successor states over the past century and more—Volubilis, Sijilmasa, Nakur, Tahart, Sedrata, Achir and the Qal'a of the Beni Hammad.<sup>62</sup> Islamic archaeology is most developed in Morocco and it is here that the most significant steps into understanding the different trajectories of states and societies between 700 and 1200.<sup>63</sup> However, with a few notable exceptions, excavations remain small-scale with limited resources, and it is only in the past decade that a handful of sites have been satisfactorily excavated and published. So too, the impact of this research has been exacerbated by a dependence on imported ceramics for dating evidence which effectively render sites invisible, particularly in the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>64</sup> As a result, much work is still to be done on the material culture and settlement of this pivotal period.

## New Approaches

The contributors to the present volume seek to bring this ongoing discussion of early medieval North Africa to a wider audience and to build upon it, to illustrate the extraordinary variety of this world, and to explore the range of methodologies that may be employed in its study. Rather than apply a single interpretative model to 'Berber' or Moorish society, they present a consciously fragmented series of approaches, deploying philological, archaeological, anthropological and paleo-climatological data. They do not purport to present a definitive picture of North African society in this volatile period, but rather demonstrate the complexity of this field, and the possibilities for future work from a range of different approaches.

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<sup>60</sup> See especially, Aillet and Prévost this vol. Valuable published textual sources include: Yahyà Ibn Abi Bakr. *Kitāb Siyar al-A'imma wa Akhbārihim*, ed. Ismā'īl al-'Arabi (Algiers: Dār al-Maghrib al-Islāmi, 1979) and A.C. Motylinski, "Chronique d'Ibn Saghīr sur les Imams Rostimides de Tahert", *Les Cahiers de Tunisie*, 22(91) (1975): 315–368.

<sup>61</sup> See now Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa* and the discussion therein.

<sup>62</sup> Patrice Cressier 'Ville médiévale au Maghreb. Recherches archéologiques.', in P. Senac (ed.), *Histoire et Archéologie de l'Occident musulman (VIIe-XVe siècles), Al-Andalus, Maghreb, Sicile*. (Toulouse: Maison de la Recherche, 2013): 117-40. For the excavations of these centres, see: Ronald A. Messier and James A. Miller, *The Last Civilized Place: Sijilmasa and Its Saharan Destiny* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Cyrille Aillet, Patrice Cressier and Sophie Gilotte *Sedrata: Histoire et archéologie d'un carrefour du Sahara médiéval*, (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2018); Martin Carver and Djemal Souidi, "Archaeological reconnaissance and evaluation in the Achir basin (Algeria)", *Archeologique islamique* 7 (1996): 7-44; Lucien Golvin, "Le Palais de Zīrī à Achīr (Dixième Siècle JC)", *Ars Orientalis* (1966): 47-76; L. De Beylié, *La Kalaa des Béni Hammad* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1909).

<sup>63</sup> See Fili "The Maghreb al-Aqsa". The ongoing work at the later sites of Igliz and Aghmat, whilst outside the period covered by this special volume, should also be highlighted here. For a summary, see Ettahiri, A. S., Fili, A. and Van Staëvel, J.-P., 'Nouvelles recherches archéologiques sur la période islamique au Maroc: Fès, Aghmat et Îgîlîz', in P. Senac (ed.), *Histoire et Archéologie de l'Occident musulman (VIIe-XVe siècles), Al-Andalus, Maghreb, Sicile*. (Toulouse: Maison de la Recherche, 2013): 157-82.

<sup>64</sup> On the challenges that these pose scholars, see Fenwick *Early Islamic North Africa*: 7-30 and

The papers collected here had their origin in a two-day workshop funded by the Society for Libyan Studies which took place in University College London in May 2018. Participants at the workshop were invited to reflect on modes of engaging with the history of North Africa beyond the traditional scholarly paradigms of 'state' or 'tribe'. The circulated papers – and resulting discussions – were stimulating in their variety, and benefitted from a range of scholarly perspectives. Different contributions reflected on North African society in a range of ways, from the minute scrutiny of familiar texts and the representation of comparatively well-known archaeological material, to the demonstration of the value of environmental historical perspectives – or the imagery provided by satellite technology – in asking new questions of this world. The result is far from a monolithic picture of North Africa in a period of transition – if anything, this volume seeks to present the opposite. But together they demonstrate the value of revisiting familiar sources with new perspectives, and the relevance of North Africa to scholars of the wider medieval world.

In his article, Andy Merrills looks at the symbols of 'Moorish' rulership as they are known to us from two of the principal textual sources of the mid-sixth century. The accounts of Procopius and Corippus provide complementary portraits of African society in the first decades of the Byzantine period, but remain challenging sources to use effectively. They have variously been read either as glimpses of the unchanging nature of Berber society – where ethnonymic fragments may occasionally be connected to those from early or later sources as evidence for the longevity of tribes, and details of politics or religion connected to other isolated fragments to create an image of cultural continuity – or simply as reflections of the chauvinism of imperial attitudes to the barbarians. Merrills reads these texts as active evidence for Moorish social hierarchies in a process of change, and argues that trappings and titles once thought to be evidence for atavistic practice, are better read as moments of renegotiation during a particular period of upheaval. He argues that even apparently timeless titles like 'king (*rex*)' need to be understood in their immediate political and cultural context.

If the Moorish polities can be traced only dimly in the fifth and sixth centuries, those of the early Islamic period can be explored with more confidence. In his contribution, Cyrille Aillet discusses the Rustamid Imamate which developed around Tahart from c.160/777 and retained its autonomy for more than a century. Tahart itself lay both on the old Roman frontier and on the edges of Caliphal authority: in this sense the polity that emerged was a political formation which responded to both imperial models, as well as to local elements within the region itself. His analysis addresses the multiple, often contradictory, narratives describing the foundation of the Imamate. He also considers the archaeology of the twinned capital complex, which is itself a complex palimpsest of information from the colonial period and after. Ultimately, Aillet presents an image of Rustamid power which drew upon local traditions, including regional religious authority which helped bind together disparate populations, but which also adopted wide discourses of Islamic rule to its own ends.

Chloe Capel considers another of these political formations – the so-called 'Midrarid kingdom of Sijilmasa', which developed on the south side of the Atlas range in the later eighth century, and considers the degree to which its emergence was shaped by environmental as well as historical circumstances. Although interest in the environmental

history of the early middle ages has developed spectacularly in recent years, once more North Africa has frequently been left out of this conversation. This is due in part to a relative lack of climatic data, but also to a recognition of the extraordinary micro-climatic variability across this world. Capel presents the results of recent environmental study at Sijilmasa and argues for the role that this change had on the emergence of that state. While her discussion acknowledges the importance of cultural and religious impulses in the shaping of Sijilmasa, she also shows clearly that historians and archaeologists need to appreciate the importance of the *longue durée* in their discussions of political change.

Finally, Virginie Prevost combines a careful scrutiny of local historical traditions and current archaeology to explore the peculiar power maintained by the Banū Yahrāsān family on the island of Djerba from the later ninth century CE. Her study reveals the potential of later historical traditions to shed light on earlier periods, when utilised with due care and caution. As Prevost demonstrates, the power of their imamate developed from the aftermath of the Rustamid polity, and in some senses was a response to it. Although certain aspects of this influence recall the familiar trappings of medieval states elsewhere – including the dominance of a central dynasty, investment in focal buildings like the Djerba mosque, and presumably practices like dispute settlement and taxation – the power of the Banū Yahrāsān rested primarily on cultural authority.

The papers assembled here consider North African society in a range of geographical contexts: from Djerba and the Djebel Nafusa to the Atlas Mountains. They consider political change from the long-term perspective of environmental change, the ways in which civic foundations and political institutions could emerge and change over decades, and reflect on even the most ephemeral moments of social distinction and hierarchy. They do not claim to present a complete portrait of political change in the early medieval Maghrib, of course: no collection could do that, but hint at the multiple paths for future scholarly discovery.

#### **Figure List:**

**Figure 1: Topographic map of North Africa (Corisande Fenwick).**

**Figure 2: Cities in late antique North Africa, the postulated location of the 'Moorish states' and key towns mentioned in the text are also indicated (Corisande Fenwick).**

**Figure 3: Cities in ninth-century North Africa; the location of medieval states and key urban centres mentioned in the text are also indicated (Corisande Fenwick).**