Historiographie contemporaine sur les débuts de l’Islam en Afrique du Nord

Contemporary Historiography on the Beginnings of Islam in North Africa

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Abstract
The 7th century CE was a turning point in the evolution of North Africa, with the Arab-Muslim conquest ushering in a period of decisive change. This study seeks to develop a grid for reading the contemporary historiography on this period. We begin by focusing on the origins of studies of the topic and then turn to a division between Western and Arab authors, in order to provide a sense of the geographical specificities of the extant scholarship. In doing so, we are able to see how the Arab conquest and the arri-

Résumé
Le VIIe siècle de l’ère chrétienne constitue un tournant décisif dans l’évolution du Nord de l’Afrique où la conquête arabo-musulmane a ouvert une période de mutation. L’objet de cette étude est de proposer une grille de lecture de l’historiographie contemporaine réservée à cette période. En mettant l’accent, tout d’abord, sur les débuts des études sur la question, puis, selon une division entre auteurs occidentaux et auteurs arabes, pour bien voir les spécificités géographiques, nous avons essayé de voir com-
val of Islam in the region have been represented, and then observe the gradual development of the scholarship on this period into a fully-fledged field of historical studies.

Keywords
Arab Conquest, Contemporary period, Historiography, Islam, North Africa

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Mots-clés
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The Arab conquest of the Maghreb and the place of Islam as the “new religion” of this region is an exceptionally rich historical topic that has attracted considerable scholarly interest. As a result, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive bibliography. In what follows, we will content ourselves with drawing up a chronological table of the major studies that have been carried out on the subject. This approach will allow us to identify who the specialists are on particular questions and who participated in the development of the research, in particular by drawing on sources originally written in Arabic.

While this initial direct approach to the sources has been vital for the evolution of scholarship in this subject area, in recent years many sources relating to the African region have also become accessible to non-Arabists in translation. Indeed, Arabic editions are now often accompanied by translations published in various European languages, a development that has facilitated the exploration of these sources by Western historians.

1. Western Historiography

1.1 Translations of Arabic Chronicles and the First General Studies

It is impossible to speak of 19th-century scholarship on the Maghreb without mentioning the role of the philologist and Arabist, William Mac Guckin, Baron of Slane (1801-1878). While no expert on historical matters, the Baron of Slane nevertheless contributed a great deal to the field of research related to the conquest of the Maghreb. Indeed, it is thanks to his numerous translations of and rich commentaries on the accounts of Ibn ‘Abd Al-Hakam, Nuwayrī, and Ibn Ḥaldūn that a new perspective was provided to the specialists working on this topic.


For example, Henri Fournel (1799-1876) was able to write a series of pioneering studies by drawing on the Baron’s translations. This mining engineer and historian treated the issue of the conquest most directly in his *Étude sur la conquête de l’Afrique par les Arabes*, published in 1857, and *Les Berbères. Étude sur la conquête de l’Afrique par les Arabes d’après les textes arabes imprimés*, published in 1875-1881 (volume 2 of which is edited by Louis-Olivier Harty de Pierrebourg in collaboration with Gustave Dugat). In these two monographs, Fournel seeks to prove that, despite being conquered by the Arabs and subjected to various oriental dynasties, the Maghreb had remained essentially Berber and that the departure of the Fatimids for Egypt finalised the failure of the conquerors and returned the country to its own control. Despite its controversial conclusions, Fournel’s work was a great success and wielded considerable influence on later scholars, as can be seen in the similar conclusions found in the *Histoire de l’établissement des Arabes dans l’Afrique septentrionale* by French historian and politician Jean Ernest Mercier (1840-1907).

Another French author, the jurist and professor of Constitutional History, Maurice Caudel (1871-1950), wrote a text on the first Arab conquests entitled *Les premières invasions arabes en Afrique du Nord*, dealing with the period between 651 and 718 CE (641-697 CE in a second version of the same work, published the year after). The author explains this thematic revival by declaring that “the Arab invasions in North Africa have already been studied more than once. I picked up the topic for two reasons. I could draw on two new sources of fairly serious interest for shedding light on the question. It seemed to me, moreover, that my predecessors had not employed the most suitable method for elucidating such an obscure question”. The two sources to which the author refers here are *Maʿālim al-īmān fi Maʿrifat Ahl al-Ḳayrawān* by Al-Dabbāġ (d. in 1297), revised and annotated by Ibn Nāǧī (15th cent.), and *Kitāb Riyāḍ Al-Nuṣūs* by Al-Mālikī (d. after 1057).

It is worth noting, however, that Caudel’s work was not unanimously appreciated by his colleagues, possibly because of his criticism of his predecessors. Moreover, many of his fellow

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historians considered the Arab conquest to be an episode that was of only limited interest in the history of the region, which had recently come under French domination. The markedly different opinion of Stéphane Gsell (1864-1932), a specialist on ancient Africa, provides a perfect example of such views and reflects well the ideological opposition to Caudel's treatment of the history of North Africa. Gsell writes,

"Je ne mentionne ici que pour mémoire un travail de M. Caudel, en cours de publication dans le Journal Asiatique), sous ce titre : Les premières invasions arabes dans l’Afrique du Nord (651-718 J. C.). Au bout de près de 180 pages, M. Caudel n’a pas encore entamé son sujet. Il s’attarde à des généralisations fausses ou très discutables sur la psychologie et les mœurs des indigènes du Maghreb et des habitants de l’Arabie. Tout cela est écrit dans un style singulièrement prétentieux et déclamatoire. Il est fâcheux que la Société asiatique encombre sa revue de telles pauvretés".

Before closing this overview of early studies of the rise of Islam in the Maghreb, the contribution of Charles Diehl (1859-1944) must first be considered. This former member of the French Schools of Rome and Athens was an important authority on Byzantine Africa. His most important work, for which he received an award from the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres, is *Afrique byzantine. Histoire de la domination byzantine en Afrique (533-709)*. This work, which discusses in detail the Arab conquest of the region and the fall of Byzantine domination from 641 to 709, remains a classic text even now for any historian interested in the Byzantine settlements in the region. Diehl understands the Arab arrival as accelerating the loss of Byzantine Africa, putting an end to any attempt to retaliate and regain the former position there. In pursuing this topic, Diehl relied on the previous work carried out by Arabists like Fournel and Mercier, but he moved the subject forward by integrating this with information drawn from Greco-Latin authors.

### 1.2. The French Orientalist Medievalists

A critical turning point in the study of the conquest of the Maghreb came with the contributions made by a number of distinguished French specialists working on the Islamic Medieval period. The first of these was Albert Gateau’s (1902-1949) edition of Ibn ‘Abd Al-Ḥakam’s

9. St. Gsell, "Chronique archéologique africaine", *Mélanges d’Archéologie et d’Histoire – Antiquité*, 20, 1900, 79-146 (101): “I only mention here for the record a work by M. Caudel, currently being published in the Asian Journal, under this title: The first Arab invasions in North Africa (651-718 J. C.). After nearly 180 pages, Mr. Caudel has not yet begun his subject. He dwells on false or highly questionable generalizations about the psychology and mores of the natives of the Maghreb and the inhabitants of Arabia. All of this is written in a singularly pretentious and declamatory style. It is unfortunate that the Asian Society encumbers its review with such poor texts”.
text, which is concerned with the Muslim conquest of Egypt and the Maghreb. Gateau’s edition was a rarity in providing a European translation of a medieval Arabic source in parallel with the original text. It also came with a very interesting critical apparatus that identifies a number of particularly useful comparisons with other Arab accounts of the conquests of North Africa and Spain.

The second contribution was made by Robert Brunschvig (1901-1990). In a paper on Ibn ‘Abd Al-Hakam and the Arab conquest of North Africa, Brunschvig showed, for the first time, the importance of legal or legislative considerations in the formation of early accounts of the conquest, particularly among Faqih historians such as Ibn ‘Abd Al-Ḥakam. This scepticism about the historicity of the accounts of the conquest is also clear in his study of Muslim expansion in the Libyan Fezzan.

Georges Marçais (1876-1962), who was especially well known for his work on Islamic archeology, was one of the first historians to occupy the chair of Muslim Archaeology at the Faculty of Algiers. Marçais wrote an extensive section on the Arab conquest of the Maghreb in his La Berbérie musulmane et l’Orient au Moyen Âge. He then went on to produce a study of the ‘Uqba, Abū-l-Muhāǧir, and Kusayla.

Évariste Lévi-Provençal (1894-1956) also made a number of notable contributions to the historical research on the Maghreb. In particular, his 1954 discovery of a new narrative text concerning the North African conquest has enabled a significant advance in the treatment of the topic. Hady Roger Idris (1912-1978) has also made important contributions, both through his translation of Al-Māliki’s account of the conquest of Ifriqiya and his comparative analysis of this “Kairouanais” author alongside another Maghrebian author, Ibn ‘Idārī (14th cent.).

An unintended, but not unimportant, result of the work carried out by these eminent French orientalists is that research into the beginnings of Islam in the Maghreb has tended to be anchored in the field of Medieval studies. Consequently, the question has received little

attention from specialists focusing on Late Antiquity, a term that did not appear in French or English until the late 1960s.

1.3. Other Western Research during the 20th Century

The richness of the historiography on the Arab conquest of the Maghreb derives to a not inconsiderable degree from the interest shown in the subject by historians from a wide range of European countries. In Italy, the Arabist Michel Amari (1806-1889) clearly showed the importance of Arab stories for illuminating the history of Sicily from the Arab conquest to the establishment of Norman rule. Indeed, the period of Italian colonial rule over Libya was one of the most fertile for the generation of advances in the scholarly understanding of Libyan history and its relation to the histories of its geographical neighbours.

In the case of Spain, studies of the conquest of North Africa have often focused on problems with the sources, in addition to the importance of the Maghreb region during the conquest of the peninsula and its later evolution in relation to Arab rule in Spain.

Anglo-Saxon research has benefited from a number of notable trends: the discussion in the 1970s of the authenticity of the Islamic historical sources; the extension to the 8th century of the concept of Late Antiquity, under the auspices of the historian Peter Brown, which brought the conquest into focus for classicists and ancient historians working on this period; and an interest in the Byzantine influence on the 7th century Mediterranean. With regard to the first trend, the first works addressing the question of authenticity also provide syntheses on the early Arab conquests more generally, although they were not, initially at least, concerned specifically with the movement into the Maghreb. However, as time passed, the focus of these discussions began to shift towards North Africa. We can cite as examples Michael Brett’s chapter on the topic

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beginning of the Muslim occupation of Libya written in 1967 by Richard G. Goodchild, an archaeologist and historian of Late Antiquity. In the latter work, the author draws a comparison between the Arab traditions on the Muslim conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, on the one hand, and the narratives of Christian writers, such as John of Nikiu and Severus of El Ashmunein, on the other.

Byzantine scholarship has served to confirm the conclusions of the earlier studies regarding the importance of the Arab conquest during the 7th century. One such example can be found in the monumental works of Andreas N. Stratos (1905-1981). Meanwhile, Denys Pringle, in a study of the defensive works of the Byzantines in North Africa, provides a lucid overview of the events of the Arab conquest, as does Vassilios Christides, who studied the presence of Byzantium in Libya. One of the merits of Christides’ book in particular is that it emphasises the role played by Byzantine maritime superiority in slowing down the first Arab invasions in North Africa.

2. Contemporary Arab Historians and the Beginning of Islam in the Maghreb

So far, we have focused on the work and views of Western writers, but to these we will now add examples drawn from contemporary Arab historians. A major challenge faced when considering these scholars, just as is the case for their Western counterparts, is the wide range of different perspectives from which the topic is approached. While a classical methodology, combining historical developments and geographical origin, has been preferred in the first section of this chapter when dealing with the Western scholarship, such an approach is more problematic when considering Arab or Arabic-speaking historians. Taking account of the geographical origins of the writers in question quickly draws our attention to the important fact that, with the exception of a small number of Egyptian scholars, the other writings derive almost exclusively from Maghrebi authors who are interested in “reappropriating” their local history. These attempts lead to highly divergent results.

2.1. Egyptian Historians

The study of the Arab conquest of Libya as described in Arab narratives – some of which have been published while others are still only available in manuscript form – has its origins in Egypt. One of the earliest 20th-century works we have identified clearly supports the hypothesis that Egypt was of central importance for the history of Libya. The book is entitled Tārīḫ ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀs (History of ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀs), submitted by Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Ḥasan (1892-1968) in 1921 for a doctorate at the Egyptian University and then published in 1926. In this “biography” of a famous conqueror, the writer focuses on the actions that took place in Libyan lands, while emphasizing the role of Egypt in the successful completion of the conquest.

The same scholar later broadened his focus to encompass the whole of the Islamic world, publishing in 1948 and 1949 his monumental Tārīḫ al-Islām al-siyāsī wa-al-dīnī wa-al-ṯaqāfī wa-al-iǧtimāʿī (Political, Religious, Cultural and Social History of Islam).

In 1947, Husayn Muʾnis (1911-1996) provided additional details on the history of the conquest of the Maghreb with the publication of a compilation of sources. A number of other Egyptian historians – for example, al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (1928-2003) in 1960, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Saʿad Zaḡlūl (1934-2005) in 1964, and Aḥmad Muḥtār al-ʿAbbādī (1922-2016) in 1974 – continued to elaborate the story of the conquest of the region over the following thirty years. In each of these studies, the structure of the work is very similar: the author lays out a general history of the Islamic Maghreb, organized around chronology, names, and places.

2.2. Libyan Historians

In the newly independent Libya of the post-war years, historians, writing almost exclusively in Arabic, sought at first to rewrite the history of the country in a spirit of decolonization. For several years, they completely turned away from pre-colonial history to focus on the history of the nation’s liberation and independence. However, in developing a new post- and anti-colonial identity, that is, an anti-Western identity, Islam came to be seen as the funda-
mental element\(^\text{37}\). Consequently, the Islamic conquest of the region became a medium for the crystallization and elevation of this newly discovered identity. Two historians in particular are often cited in connection with this development: al-Ṭāhir al-Zāwī al-Ṭāribulusi (1890-1986)\(^\text{38}\) and Muhammad Muṣṭafā Bāzāma (1923-2000)\(^\text{39}\). In their works, the writing of a Libyan national history appears as a new element in historical scholarship, and the subject of history is therein redefined and renewed. However, in reality, this apparent innovation was merely a facade. Although these authors insisted on the periodization of the history of Libya, they carried out no critical analysis of the texts on which they drew\(^\text{40}\).

While some Arab studies have given Libya a place of only secondary importance in the North African conquest, other researchers have gone further by drawing direct links between the conquest and the history of certain important Libyan localities. The most obvious example is that of the city of Tripoli. As the historical capital of the eponymous province (Tripolitania) and the seat of Arab governors, the city has been the subject of numerous studies\(^\text{41}\). Other locations, such as Barqua\(^\text{42}\), Benghazi\(^\text{43}\), Sabratha\(^\text{44}\), Fazzan\(^\text{45}\), and Germa\(^\text{46}\), have also been subjected to this new manner of treating the conquest primarily in terms of its long-term historical consequences. While this approach may be innovative, it nevertheless raises many problems. As the titles of these works indicate, they were inspired by places. As a result, even when they begin with a historical overview and contextualization of the place,
the analysis is essentially centred on the geographical territory itself. These works rely, thus, on what we might call the “physiognomy” of the place rather than on the sources, which take on only a secondary role. In these studies, the narrative of the conquest is only a preamble to the study of the historical evolution of the place in question.\(^{47}\)

2.3. Tunisian Historians

In Tunisia, Hassan Hosni Abdelwaheb (1884-1968) is considered to be one of the first historians to have focused on the period of the conquest. In 1914, Abdelwaheb published his *Summary of the History of Tunisia (Hulāṣat Tārīḥ Tunis)*, a work written primarily to serve as a school textbook aimed at helping Tunisian schoolchildren come to know “their history”. He also authored a more detailed work entitled *Waraqāt ‘an al-ḥadāra al-‘Arabiyya*\(^{49}\). Drawing on his familiarity with and knowledge of medieval Arabic sources, Abdelwaheb continued his research by studying the city of Kairouan, which led him to criticize its founding myth.\(^{50}\)

After independence, the early centuries of Islam sparked the enthusiasm of a new generation of Tunisian historians, although none chose to dedicate a monograph to the subject. Two examples of such scholars are Hichem Djait (born in 1935) and Mohamed Talbi (1921-2017). In two major papers published in 1967 and 1968, Djait painted a picture of North Africa both during and after the Arab conquest.\(^{51}\) Talbi is the author of a fundamental work on the Aghlabids. In 1971, he published a remarkable analysis of Al-Kahina’s epic, taking as his starting point a new fragment of the history of the Muslim West attributed to al-Raqiq, an attribution on which he cast doubt.\(^{52}\)

The scholars of the Arab conquest discussed above were all Medievalists, but this monopoly was broken in the 1980s by Hédi Slim, an archaeologist specialized in antiquity.

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The publication of a Byzantine treasury discovery at Rougga (ancient Bararus), the burial of which seems to have been related to the first Arab raids against the Byzacene, provided this author with the opportunity to exploit Arab sources and thus to participate in the study of this pivotal phase in the history of the region53.

2.4 Algerian Historians

In Algeria, the political will of the nation in the aftermath of independence was articulated around a return to “Islamic” origins. As a result, Algerian historians tended to glorify the Arab conquerors while minimising episodes of Berber resistance to the various Arab expeditions, as is evident in Mubarak al-Mili’s work on the history of Algeria and in that of Laqbāl Mūsā54. However, as in Tunisia, a new generation of Algerian historians is now forging new paths in the study of Algerian history and the history of the Maghreb in general. Examples of scholars working in this tradition include Alaoua Amara55, Youssef Aibech56, Abderrahman Khalīfa57, and Bakhta Moukraenta58.

2.5 Moroccan Historians

The approach of Moroccan scholars to the study of history bears some significant similarities with that taken by historians in Libya. The work of Ahmad al-Salāwī (1835-1897)59 can serve as an example. Al-Salāwī was content simply to collect Arab narratives related to the Muslim conquest of Morocco. The compilation of sources was also the goal of a work published in the sixties by ʿAbd al-Salām al-Mārī60, while a book by Ibrāhīm Ḥarakāt (1929-2020) follows a similar approach61. On the other hand, as in Libya, the collected Arab sources are subject

56. Y. Aibech, L’occupation byzantine du Maghreb, étude de la vie sociale et économique, Constantine, 2009 (in Arabic).
59. A. al-Salāwī, Kitāb al-Iṣṭiqāq li-ʾakhbār duwal al-Maghreb al-Aṣqā, Casablanca, 1894-1895 (in Arabic). The part of the book concerned with the conquest was translated into French in 1923 by A. Graulle.
to almost no critical analysis at all. After the independence of Morocco, as also happened in Algeria, the teaching and study of early Islam came to be dominated by nationalist ideology. The work of the historian and Islamologist Abdallah Laroui (born in 1933) provides a striking example of this trend. The section of this work that deals with the Arab conquest is found in the first part of the volume, entitled “The Maghreb dominated” (pp. 19-98), which covers the period from 2000 BCE to the 8th century CE. This phase is framed in terms of the “conquered autonomy” of the region, an autonomy that the author does not consider to have been broken by the Arab conquest on the grounds that the Berbers continued their fight against the foreign invaders. Laroui then goes on to consider the emergence of indigenous powers in the Maghreb in the Middle Ages as the crowning achievement of this long struggle for the country’s independence and autonomy. Laroui is sharply critical of all “foreign” writings on the history of the Maghreb, a criticism that is undeniably rooted in his ideology.

A partial revision of this idea can be seen in the work of Mohamed Kably, who, while trying to give a new interpretation of the subject matter, only reinforces the idea that the conquest was indeed an “invasion”, the first victim of which was the “Berber people”. Genuinely innovative scholarship on the topic of the conquest and the arrival of Islam came in the 1990s with the work of Ahmed Siraj. In his L’image de la Tingitane (1995), Siraj analysed the Arab narratives in depth, considering their content and showing how modern scholars can really exploit these texts when writing about this period.

### 3. 21st century Studies on the Conquest

#### 3.1. Yves Modéran’s Precursory Work

One of the scholars who contributed the most towards demonstrating the importance of this period was the late Yves Modéran (1955-2020). An eminent expert on Late, Vandal, and Byzantine Africa, Modéran’s publications exhibit all the advantages to be gained from the

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In addition to his major work on the Moors and the Roman Empire, Modéran also authored studies on leaders of the Berber resistance, such as Kusayla and Kahina. He is also the author of a strikingly original study in which the non-Arab sources are related to the history of Gregory the Patrician, a leading figure in Byzantine Africa.

3.2. The Confirmed Research Focus

In this chapter, we have examined the contributions of national schools to the definitive emancipation of the period of the conquest from the tug-of-war between classicists and medievalists. As the study of the conquest has evolved, it has become a truly independent and richly renewed field of research, as can be seen in works ranging from the as-yet unpublished thesis of Mohamed Benabbès to the studies of Hichem Djaït, Ahmed el Bahi, Hayet Amamou, and the late Mohamed Tahar Mansouri.

In the western sphere, and particularly in France, recent publications have shown definitively that there is a new impetus in the study of this period. Of particular note in this regard is the publication in 2011, under the direction of Dominique Valérian, of a volume entitled *L'Islamisation et l'arabisation de l'Occident musulman (VIIe-XIIe s.)*, which collects together important papers from the seminar “Medieval Islam of the West”, organized between 2006 and 2007. The full historical potential of the study of the Maghreb can be seen in the contri-
butions of Cyrille Aillet, Christophe Picard, Alaoua Amara, Anleese Nef, Dominique Valérian, and Yassir Benhima. A similar validation of the new approach can be found in the Anglo-Saxon works of Hugh Kennedy and Fred Donner, and in Walter E. Kaegi’s *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse in North Africa*.

We conclude this historiographical overview with a collection of accounts of the Arab conquest of the Maghreb that has just been published, offering for the first time an anthology of the narrative texts concerned with the beginning of Islam in North Africa. It is hoped that this work will encourage further research on the issue.

77. D. Valérian (ed.), *L’Islamisation et l’arabisation…*, op. cit., n. 76, 7-34.