
Early Islamic North Africa. A New Perspective, by Corisande Fenwick. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. 202pp., \$90. ISBN-13: 9781350075184.

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The publication of Corisande Fenwick's *Early Islamic North Africa* in the collection "Debates in archaeology" is important. As the author underlines, specialists of the Islamic Maghreb can be rightly dissatisfied by the place made to this region in the works about the Islamic World. Offering a synthesis of what we know (and we do not know) today about the beginning of Islamic history in North Africa is certainly a good way to try and change this frustrating academic situation. It is all the more relevant if we consider the lack of English academic productions on this topic, although one must concede that even in academic traditions where the Islamic Maghreb has more of a presence (France, Spain), they are not always very good at producing useful and accessible syntheses.

Fenwick is no doubt in a good position to write this book: as a specialist of ancient archaeology, for some years she has been investigating important sites in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya where the Islamic period is documented through excavations and surveys. She thus proposes to take measure of the progress made in the last 30 years and the change of perspective it should bring about as well as what remains to be done. In this short text, Fenwick succeeds in summing up the problems encountered by the archaeologist of the Early Islamic period in the Maghreb. She demonstrates the limits of our knowledge, but also provides an idea of the material we could use in order to ask new questions and develop new perspectives. This will be useful both for students (more future specialists are needed) and specialists of other regions in the Islamic medieval world.

The layout of the book is quite classic: I. *Foundations* begins with the problems and impediments of research, and on the nature of the evidence; II. *From Conquest to Muslim Rule* sets the chronological frame from the 7th to the 9th century; III. *Cities*; IV. *The Countryside*; V. *Economic Life*, a chapter slightly mistitled since the preceding chapter also deals with economy, is focused on crafts and trade; VI. *Social Life* is concentrated on a few points which are considered indicators of the social dynamics and evolutions brought about by the first Islamic centuries in the Maghreb, namely the spread of Islam, the development of Christianity, housing and domestic life, and food. The book has the advantage of clarity, and of allowing comparisons with other regions on these themes. All this justifies the subtitle of the book, "a New Perspective," which reflects the author's consciousness of the fact that a good part of the framing of the questions raised and interpretations given are built upon written sources, and as such, a new interpretation is seriously needed given the increase in archaeological research.

Fenwick underlines quite a few obstacles that have hindered the progress of archaeological research and of its (re-)interpretation until now. Some are linked to the state and history of the field: the long lasting idea that the Islamic conquests had caused drastic, negative changes, precipitating the end of Antiquity's prosperity and urban civilization. Equally problematic is the undeveloped nature of Islamic archaeology in the Maghreb (and above all in Algeria)

Keywords: Early Islam, North Africa, Islamization

compared to other regions of the Islamic World, which is directly related to the precedence given to ancient contexts, often at the expense of medieval layers. The lack of archaeologists (and historians) mastering (or at least aware of) Roman, Byzantine and Islamic references and sources further contributes to this issue as well as the insufficient collaboration of historians and archaeologists. Other obstacles are raised by the quality of the evidence: the written sources are fewer there than in some other regions, and the numismatics (and sigillography) have not been studied systematically. As for the archaeology, the continuity of life in some major cities and the absence of 8th-century ceramic indicators—as well as a concentration on the fine ceramics at the expense of the coarse ones—prevent us from knowing about ‘earlier’ developments. This situation, combined with the lack of excavations and the disproportional importance of surveys (where specialists of the Islamic period are poorly represented) has caused what Fenwick rightly calls “the tyranny of the African Red Slip Ware”. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Fenwick identifies a number of findings.

First, the specificities of Early Islamic North Africa—the tensions between Arabs and Berbers and the strong militarization of the province—would explain in part the failure of the Caliphal Maghreb as well as the importance and precocity of the successor states—the Idrisids of Fez, the Rustamids of Tāhert, the Midrarids of Sijilmāsa, and the Aghlabids of Kairouan. In the second place, the book succeeds in invalidating the “classic” chronology of elements long seen as consequences of the Islamic conquests, i.e. the end of the antique *villae* in the countryside and a decrease in agricultural production. In some cases these are analysed as being the result of previous evolutions, in other instances as accompanying a reorganization of the land order and a boom in production, which can no doubt be read in the 9th century.

The book makes a convincing case to consider the strong regional diversity of the Maghreb and to study evolutions at a micro-regional scale. This is due to contrasts dating back to the pre-conquest period, when the oriental part of North Africa was a region more integrated to the Byzantine Empire and more Christianized than its central and western parts. The coastal regions are not the same as pre-desert ones, and oases do not raise the same issues as other types of human settlements and agricultural production. Fenwick even analyses the diverging and distinct urban evolutions of a few new towns like Kairouan and Tunis against that of “inherited cities,” such as Carthage and Volubilis, and “dynastic foundations,” like Tāhert, Nakur, and al-Basra.

Fenwick convincingly presents the innovative contributions of archaeological analyses, such as bioanthropological and DNA studies that can provide evidence of population movements, archaeobotany’s ability to raise questions about changes in agricultural methods and productions, ceramic paste analyses in tracing the diffusion of ceramic productions, and environmental studies explaining some cases of urban decline or the boom.

The book provides a clear picture of the Islamic Maghreb as a place of crafts and agricultural production characterized by prosperity and technological innovation that was well integrated in both Mediterranean and Saharan networks, at least since the 9th century. According to Fenwick, it was also one of the main regions for slave trade activity in the Islamic world, a dimension that she encourages be further studied.

Taking all these points into consideration, a close reading of the book invites scholars to rethink questions about the Maghreb with respect to the central Islamic lands in the early Islamic period. Should we think of North Africa as closely following the traditional chronology

of Islamization and Arabization based on Middle Eastern patterns, or should we think of it in its own terms? We should certainly stop considering the Maghreb a periphery of the Islamic world, and advance towards a polycentric model.

Fenwick's *Early Islamic North Africa* is a stimulating book that raises multiple important questions, and provides new historical and archaeological interpretations. Fenwick also provides potential avenues for future research that will likely attract new students and specialists to the field.