

Book Review

The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors: Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa. Edited by Glair D. Anderson, Corisande Fenwick, and Mariam Rosser-Owen, with Sihem Lamine. *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, 122 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017). ISBN 978900435566-8. xxxviii + 688 pp. \$218/€189 cloth and e-book.

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This collection of twenty-nine essays, in English and French, with an extended introduction by the editors, emerged from an interdisciplinary symposium in London sponsored by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (May 23–24, 2014). It is a handsome and well executed book. It includes an Aghlabid timeline, three color maps, a full set of illustrations, a thorough bibliography, and a good index. Edited volumes are often hastily assembled; the editors are to be commended for their due diligence. They have brought together an impressive set of submissions, by established scholars (from both the Anglophone and Francophone worlds) as well as younger colleagues.

The volume opens, in compelling fashion, with a photo of Mohamed Talbi seated alongside Sihem Lamine of CMES/Harvard University, a close collaborator with the volume's editors and the author of one of the essays. One understands that

Talbi, the most important modern scholar of Aghlabid history bar none, and a prolific writer on Maghribi history more generally, knew of the book and was slated to contribute a foreword. Talbi died on May 1, 2017, sadly before the book's appearance. His splendid *L'émirat aghlabide* (Tunis: Maisonneuve, 1966), despite some aging, deserves a careful reading. A touchstone for the present volume, it is cited by a number of the contributors.

One might quibble with the subtitle; as much as many of the book's essays address the material legacy of the Aghlabids, a near equal number deal with the dynasty's political and cultural history. The volume opens with chapters on Aghlabid politics and power. Hugh Kennedy and Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi cover much the same ground: the rise of the Aghlabid polity in the context of early Abbasid imperial history, with detailed comments on conditions in pre-Aghlabid Ifrīqiya. As with, say, the

Tulunids of Egypt, the threads connecting Aghlabid Ifrīqiya to the Iraqi imperial center were acknowledged on both sides but subject to considerable pressure. The difference is that the Tulunids, for reasons of relative proximity but also the policies pursued by their *pater familias*, Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn, did not experience the same level of autonomy as their Ifrīqiyan counterparts. The much-lamented Michael Bonner was to have published a comparative study of the two dynasties; the lacuna waits to be filled.

Kennedy's chapter, more narrative in style, closes with passing comparative comments on the demise of the Abbasid and Soviet empires. One would have preferred consideration of the increasingly dire conditions of the Abbasid polity that allowed the Aghlabids to flourish (a topic Kennedy has addressed more successfully elsewhere). This would entail addressing the mix of, on the one hand, Aghlabid symbolic deference to the Iraqi center and, on the other, the emirate's near complete sovereignty and decision-making. Chapoutot-Remadi delves in greater depth into what are mostly later Maghribi sources. Her chapter is comparatively richer as a result, if slightly disjointed in its conclusion. To her credit she devotes full comments to the part played by enslaved persons and freedmen in Aghlabid religious, military, and political affairs. She does not address directly, however, the question of equating *walā'* with enslavement; she speaks throughout of each *mawlā* (pl. *mawālī*) as an enslaved or freed person when, in all likelihood, one is dealing with a spectrum of legal and social origins. Talbi, in his *Ēmirat*, is clear as to the extent to which slavery played a part in Aghlabid social, cultural, and economic

life (one need only consult his Index). If one were to organize a companion to the current volume, a chapter on precisely this topic would be in order. The volume's Index lists only one reference to slavery (p. 556) when, according to my count, the following pages ought to be cited as well: 45, 53, 59, 64–66, 69–75, and 572.

A noteworthy contribution of the (present) volume is Annliese Nef's chapter on the Aghlabids' "Sicilian Policy." The chapter is, it seems, a condensed version of her arguments on the same topic in French. Her work, always stimulating, not simply on Aghlabid matters but more generally on the shaping of early medieval Islamicate and Mediterranean society and politics, deserves to be widely read. This chapter concerns the long Aghlabid campaign in Sicily. It was, she argues, firstly, less an expression of careful Aghlabid policy than the playing out of new regional ambitions on the part of the emirate; and, secondly, a campaign that laid the groundwork for the appearance of the Fatimid state in the fourth/tenth century. The Aghlabids acted on the potential—commercial, diplomatic, military—of the central Maghrib; the Fatimids, having muscled in, took even fuller advantage.

A further lesson, for the Fatimids and modern historians alike, involved the challenge of urban elites. This is the topic of Caroline Goodson's valuable chapter on Kairouan and its uneasy relationship with the Aghlabid center. Goodson sees Kairouan as not an Aghlabid capital but, as local mercantile and Sunni judicial "alternative topographies of power" (p. 101) rose within the city, an abiding challenge to Aghlabid authority. The sense is that the emirs, starting with Ibrāhīm b. al-Aghlab, anticipated the challenge

by ramping up investment in urban development outside the city proper. Later sources know this first of two major administrative and military centers as al-‘Abbāsiyya (the second being Raqqāda). Al-‘Abbāsiyya is, in turn, the subject of Abdelhamid Fenina’s close study of the many extant early Abbasid-style coins minted in Ifrīqiya from the late 760s on. His argument, “attractive” in the view of the editors (p. 18), is that the numerous numismatic references that predate the rise of the Aghlabid state indicate the presence of an active center (*qaṣr*) prior to the decision by Ibn al-Aghlab to transform the site with the introduction of a new mosque, fortress, and land-grants. He did so on the model of Abbasid Samarra, another of the close similarities between the Tulunid and Aghlabid polities. Close numismatic research informs Mohamed Ghodhbane’s chapter as well; his approach, more technical than Fenina’s, concerns the stylistic history of Aghlabid coin production. Part One closes with Dwight Reynolds’s very reasonable assessment of the single account, in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s fourth/tenth-century *Kitāb al-‘Iqd*, of the brief and troubled sojourn of Ziryāb, the renowned singer and teacher, at the court of the Aghlabid ruler Ziyādat Allāh I (r. 817–838).

Two full sections follow on the material legacy of the Aghlabids: the subtitle’s promise is more than fulfilled in these thirteen chapters, each of which is fully illustrated. A shared strength of the submissions is their interdisciplinary approach. The extent of Aghlabid investment in monument building, the general topic of Part Two, is well-known; the great mosque of Kairouan and the Zaytūna in Tunis come readily to mind.

The two structures are the subject here of, respectively, four chapters (Mahfoudh, Bloom, Picotin and Déléry, and Hamdi) and two (Daoulatli and Lamine). But, as is made clear by Lotfi Abdeljaouad’s study of the numerous surviving Aghlabid inscriptions (on a series of structures small and large) and Ahmed El Bahi’s chapter on the history of the North African *ribāṭ*, Aghlabid investment extended well beyond what are today the most visible of the dynasty’s public structures.

Part Three turns to ceramics. Five chapters, reflecting the extensive work carried out over decades at Raqqāda, Palermo, the wider Maghrib, and al-Andalus, share a concern not only with the spread of shapes and techniques but with the potters themselves, whose mobility likely serves to explain the spread (or lack thereof in the case of the western Maghrib and al-Andalus) of given styles across the Late Antique Mediterranean. Graguer Chatti puts it this way: “L’empreinte orientalisante, que nous relevons dans la céramique, objet de notre étude, s’explique par les échanges culturels et commerciaux entre l’Orient et l’Occident islamique, mais aussi par une importante communauté orientale installée à Kairouan qui avait introduit son goût particulier” (p. 361). The questions posed across these chapters regarding stylistic and cultural connections linking (or not) the different regions of the Islamic West remain tentative. This, in turn, underscores the point made by the editors (pp. 14–16) on the myriad challenges of funding, access, and physical security faced by archeologists across the Maghrib. A very considerable amount of in situ work remains to be carried out.

The six studies in Part Four draw, in varied manner, on a balance of written, documentary, and archaeological sources. In their chapter, using settlement patterns identified from archeological surveys, Renata Holod and Tarek Kahlaoui argue against any discernible Aghlabid presence on the island of Jerba. Lorenzo Bondioli, drawing on sources in several languages, addresses the Aghlabid intervention in third/ninth-century southern Italy. The emirs, in his view, in conflict with the Papacy, the Carolingians, and the Byzantines, played a proxy role in a chaotic local political scene without prevailing over their rivals. Patrice Cressier's chapter might be read alongside Charles Pellat's *EI*² article on Nakūr, first an early Islamic settlement and then an autonomous polity on the northern Moroccan littoral. After opening with a brief comment that nothing points to contacts between Nakūr and the Aghlabid emirate, Cressier reads the fragmentary literary references in light of relevant archeological evidence, much of it his own. The emirate also does not occur in Elizabeth Fentress's chapter on early Idrisid history. In both cases—Nakūr and Idrisid Walīla—it is a matter of two further venues, like Ifrīqiya, where socio-cultural and religious symbiosis followed the arrival of “easterners” (read as, in many though certainly not all cases, “Arabs”) into the predominantly “Berber” milieu of the western Maghrib.

The value of archeology to the study of early Islamic Maghribi history—a history for which the medieval Arabic chronicles and geographies are so often lacking—is apparent in the chapters by Chloé Capel and David Mattingly and Martin Sterry. Capel, drawing on her doctoral research and what appears to have been

considerable fieldwork, argues for a new reading of the third/ninth-century foundation of Sijilmassa. She connects it to the series of new administrative and military settlements created by, among others, the Aghlabids at al-‘Abbāsiyya and, soon thereafter and perhaps in direct response, the Idrisids at al-‘Āliya. (The Tulunid center at al-Qaṭā’i‘ comes readily to mind as well.) Mattingly and Sterry, for their part, draw on their own considerable work in Roman and early Islamic archaeology in arguing for extensive commercial links, including, importantly, human trafficking, between the Sahara and the series of “Arab-dominated successor states...and...the Berber Kharijites...who occupied the Saharan fringe and the major oases along the Saharan trade routes” (p. 551). Their evidence derives from three areas: Jarma, Qaṣr al-Sharrāba, and Zuwīla, all thriving oasis commercial hubs prior to the arrival of Muslim armies in the first/seventh century; the Aghlabids, here as in Sicily, acted on the demonstrated potential of this fiscal and human wealth.

The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors closes with two quite different chapters on widely-discussed *muṣḥafs*: the Blue Quran, the dating and origin of which remain unclear though it is associated by many scholars with the fourth/tenth-century Maghrib, and the fourth/tenth-century Palermo Quran. The first of the two manuscripts is the subject of Cheryl Porter's straightforward account of the materials with which it was created. It is not without interest—one is made aware of the differences between “shell gold” and gold leaf, and the specific chemical reaction of sheepskin to blue dye—but more would be welcome on the political and cultural context in which the manuscript was

produced. Jeremy Johns describes his rich, layered article on the Palermo Quran as, in effect, a preview of a full study in preparation. One very much looks forward to its appearance. Johns follows a close physical description of the manuscript with an equally close discussion of the sectarian milieu of Ifrīqiya and Sicily as the third/ninth-century Abbasid *miḥna* (“test,” or “interrogation”) played out. Johns addresses a four-line statement denying the “createdness” of the Quran, part of the decoration of the manuscript, alongside inscriptions on the principal mosque in Sousse and the Zaytūna mosque in Tunis. He relates these examples of public writing to the factional infighting between rival Sunni *madhhabs* in Ifrīqiya and, in time, Sicily, and the shifting postures on the part of Aghlabid emirs in response.

The volume takes up, in a sense, this question: how and when does an academic field—in this case, Arabic and Islamic studies—reorient itself to better reflect the history, culture, and material legacy of the societies that it sets out to study? The question concerns the relative but abiding neglect of Maghribi (North African) history

in modern scholarship, especially in the English-speaking world. In her valuable recent survey of North Africa in the first Islamic centuries, Corisande Fenwick, one of the three editors of the present volume, argues for a complex of historiographical, evidential, and disciplinary reasons for the lacuna (*Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020], 1–6). Again, it seems fair to say that the problem has been particularly acute in English-language scholarship. A raft of specialized studies on the main Islamic-era Maghribi dynasties, many quite substantial, were published by French-language researchers in the first part of the twentieth century, among them, of course, Mohamed Talbi. But the point remains that nothing of the degree of modern scholarship on the early and medieval Islamic Near East (including Egypt) has been devoted to the Maghrib. To date, in any case: the appearance of this collection—alongside, for example, new monographs by the (renamed) British Institute for Libyan and Northern African Studies (BILNAS), a source of funding for the present volume—suggests a reorientation is afoot.