

The RomanIslam Center (Early Islam) at the DOT 2025 in Erlangen

State-Building and Social Space – Crossroads between History, Geography, and Cartography,

The center presented maps from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula at the Deutscher Orientalistentag (DOT) in Erlangen from September 8-12, 2025.

Over the past four years, the RomanIslam Center has developed new maps of Late Roman and Early Islamic North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in collaboration with cartographer Martin Grosch. On Monday, September 8, the RomanIslam panel presented the three Early Islamic maps and their supporting research.

Stefan Heidemann provided an overview of the current state of mapping in Early Islamic North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. The three maps from the RomanIslam Center are thematic, and each one presents a historical argument. The maps cover the period between 745 and 820 CE, and topics such as settlements, political structures, and the economy. All maps are based on philological research and also use proxies from archaeology and numismatics. The RomanIslam Center is setting new impulses for historical maps by making great efforts to transfer information from historical narratives and material sources from a one-dimensional textual perspective to a two-dimensional map.

Kurt Franz focused on the technical aspects of the settlement map. Because the early Islamic and Roman concepts of North Africa differ, the two sets cover slightly different areas. Simply put, one was a maritime empire with Africa Proconsularis (modern-day Tunisia) as the western limit; the other was a landed empire looking southward, with the Syrte as the western limit (modern-day Libya). The maps show how place names have changed from antiquity to the present day, using different fonts and symbols to indicate the changes. Toponyms are generally considered a contingent element that allows for the localization of places. Franz provided an example of the cities Tihirt al-Qadīma and Tihirt al-Ḥadītha of the Rustumids in modern-day Algeria.

Katharina Mewes discussed the wave of new urban settlements and the expansion of existing ones in the early Islamic period. She based her talk on narrative sources and place names on coins. Minting activity was suggested as a proxy for urban settlements, as it was a non-agricultural industry. Narrative sources and numismatic evidence imply an increase in urbanization following the silver mining boom of the 790s and 800s under the Idrisids. Analysis of around 25 minting sites in the Atlas region reveals various settlement types.

On Wednesday, our colleague Ömer Sazak from Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University and the RomanIslam Center gave a presentation on ethnic elements in the Abbasid political and administrative system at the time of al-Mutawakkil's assassination.