



Impressions and Thoughts from our Conference “Cities, Objects, and Circulation of Goods in the Maghreb and the Iberian Peninsula” Oct., 5-6, 2023.

Why studying traffic and trade in historical periods? Mobility has not always been what it is today. Crossing the Sahara by caravans connected North Africa and the Sahel region. Trade in gold and salt, and also the rise of the cities evidently went together.

The latest RomanIslam (Early Islam) workshop undertakes to tell apart evidence of continuity and change between Late Antiquity and the Islamic period.

Whether North Africa – “al-Maghrib” in Arabic – has at all existed as such, was questioned by **Ramzi Rouighi** in his key note speech. Starting out of from the term al-Maghrib as a cardinal direction, which shifts due to one’s own position, Ramzi Rouighi demonstrated that the regional use of the term al-Maghrib mainly reflected outside perspectives. A surprising variety of spatial/cultural conceptions sprang from questioning the regional conception.

The first panel discussed the impact of trade routes in the rise and the demise of cities.

The Muslim conquest with the foundation of Kairouan is often perceived as a fundamental shift in the spatial organization of Roman or Byzantine North Africa centered around ports such as Carthage. During the first centuries after the Islamic conquest capitals of ruling dynasties and regional centers such as Tubna, M’sila, Ashīr, la Qal’a, Tahert and Sijilmāsa mainly developed southwards, establishing commercial networks from east to westwards. While it seems that the coastlines were first abandoned, **Dominique Valérian** argues that during the 9th and 10th century the Maghrib began to (re-)turn towards the sea. The rise of the new littoral cities such as Mahdia, Bougie, Oran, Ténès, Tabarka, in fact caused a profonde transformation integrating two regions until then separated from each other into the same economic space, connecting (North) African port cities with the shores of the Christian states.

Ahmed Maouloud el Hilal ventures into the far west. Underlining the particular rise of the caravan cities in the Western Sahara, he postulates that their foundation and presence was a direct consequence of the trans Saharan trade. He stresses how commercial tights with the Maghreb influenced and reshaped the West Saharan region, fostering the settlements of various nomadic groups such as the Sanhaja in Awdaghost, leading to urbanism in a previously predominantly nomadic environment. However, several of the towns first mentioned by the 8th century Arab geographers e.g. Awdaghost, Ghana, Tadmaka emerged and prospered during the gold trade with the medieval empire of Ghane, soon declined and remain nowadays untraceable, while other sites seem to be influenced by Maghrebi building structures.

The second panel investigate the axes and routes of trade.

Tarek Kahlaoui took a particular view from Sicily to North Africa based on the Idrisian maps. Comparing various maps from early Arabic geographical authors, Tarek pointed out the paradox between Sicily being a space of convivencia, while Idrisi's map, other than the maps of the remaining Arab geographers, was meant to serve a practical purpose – the conquest of North Africa by Roger II.

Ahmed el Bahi, re-reading known sources combined with editions of new ones, presented a new route within Ifriqiya, connecting the Jebel Dimmir massif to Oued Souf by passing of Nifzawa and of Qastiliya, either crossing or surrounding Chott al-Jerid from the South. Interestingly, the route escaped the central power of Kairouan until the mid-10th century when the Fatimids were able to monopolize it and town named Sumāta was founded to control the road.

The first day of the conference, ended with a thrilling talk by **Kurt Franz** who queried that the trans-Saharan trails to the south, arguing that until the 9th century a few isolated routes existed, while the formation of a true network of routes in and across the Sahara did not commence before the 10th century. Using the maps of the Arabic geographical authors, he offered a comprehensive interpretation of routes, shedding light on continuity and change of the trade routes in North Africa from Antiquity to the early Islamic period.

Our second workshop day aimed to shed light on the administration of circulation of goods and merchandise.

Mohamed Ben Abbès described three major forms of commerce predominant in North Africa. Intertribal trade, taking place in periodic markets or fairs i.e., *nundinae* where sedentary, nomadic pastoralists and nomadic tribal groups trade and purchase goods, such as wheat, barley, wool, livestock, etc.

The second axis of trade took place between urban settlements and the countryside, the latter being rather a tribal dominion, as the majority of farmers in North Africa, until the end of Antiquity, has lived in vast sedentary or semi-nomadic groups, who remained strong tights to their tribe. Hence, their trade with towns supported the pastoral and agrarian economy of the tribes.

The third axis was the trans-Saharan (long distance) trade, which was mainly monopolized by (Berber) tribes living on the periphery of the Sahara. While it is assumed that trade between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa existed since Antiquity i.e., during the 4th century, it is certain that trade regularly took place and was developed more and more after the Muslim Conquest (7th – 8th century). It is assumed that the Berber tribes played a dominant role in the trade as camel owner, guides, supplier of food and water,

Mohammed Ghodbane stressed the role of Sijilmasa as a minting center for gold dinars and a commercial crossroad. Founded in the 8th century by Berbers of Miknasa, it soon came under the control of the Midradids. Due to its distance to Kairouan it became of special economic and political importance for the Fatimid state. When returning from the East Abd Allah al-Mahdi Billah stayed almost 5 years in Sijilmasa, which was also described as the door of precious metals to North Africa, with apparently several monetary workshops that issued coins in the name of the Fatimids, however not displaying the name of the mint. In comparison to other dinars, the ones from Sijilmasa contained a much higher gold %. In the course of the presentation, debates arouse about merchant's role in coinage production and whether minting coins should be a monopole of the ruler.

In the last talk of our workshop, **Susana Gómez Martínez** illustrated what ceramic findings might tell us about trade networks expanding through the Mediterranean, showing the main places of production of glazed ceramics on the Iberian Peninsula. Evoking the difficulties of carrying out analyzes and identifying workshops and their origins, Susana insists on shapes and decoration to study the circulation of ceramic objects (as luxury products).

During the Roundtable, scholars of different disciplines from Europe and North and West Africa debated questions of continuity and change between Late Antiquity and the Islamic period in the Maghreb. Many facets

of the early Islamic period and its continuity (in question) to Roman/Vandal/Byzantine prehistory were juxtaposed. During the workshop, heterogeneous kind of sources were presented and by related to one another: literary and cartographical, archaeological, historico-geographical, numismatic, and ceramic evidence.

Besides, the workshop revealed the very many large blanks that there were between the talk and so anticipated future debates. To bring this up was the merit of the concluding plenary discussion, which became what many felt was the workshop's highlight.

Looking back upon two days of discussion, it was noted that movements and trade had been investigated with more ease and detail than first expected; in contrast, the discussion of specific goods and transactions hung back, largely because these do not become as clear from the sources. Not just the main commercial actors remained obscure – who were the merchants? – but it also had been difficult to query the early period's tribal constellations to the extent desired – who were the “Berbers” and to which extent did they in fact lead a nomadic life before the Banu Hilal's and Banu Sulaym's inroads? Agriculture, it was said, was underrepresented (as is the case with Middle Eastern Islamic history, too) while commerce received the most of attention. Of course, neither the scarcity of pertinent sources for the early days of Islamic North Africa, whether literary or material nor the Muslim authors' blind spots – namely their intrinsic dislike of agriculture and indeed labor issues – can easily be overcome. One possible way to tackle this, it was suggested, is to address particular environments (such as mountain life) or functions (e.g., the reloading of merchandise in the Maghreb's “port cities” to the south like Sijilmasa or the Fazzan cluster) across scholarly discipline boundaries.

More open strings were named, among which: the continuous reuse of Roman forts first as monasteries and then tribal *qusur* by the hundreds; the possibly very gradual colonization of coastal North Africa's desert fringes; the ways how the Islamization of North Africa may have brought about change in local (agricultural) production; the long-standing absence of trade and travel across Algeria's Grand Sud; or, to stop with, the similarity of not just the environmental conditions, but also those of literary transmission between Islamic North Africa and the Near East. All in all, the participants of the workshop “Cities, Objects, and the Circulation of Goods” were convinced that that in future debate it will be worthwhile to stress the integration of short distance trade, agriculture, and other kinds of labor and production within a theatre that comprised urban and rural dwellers as well as mobile tribal groups. Will it be possible to go beyond the well-established talk of salt, gold, and slaves as commodities?