

The Political Geography of North Africa and Spain

NORTH AFRICA

(pages 19-24)

The term 'North Africa' is a general one, and it will first be necessary to define the precise geographical area included in this study. It is equivalent to the term 'al-Maghrib' which is used by Arab historians and geographers to describe the entire area extending from the western boundaries of Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean.¹ In this study 'North Africa' will be used to indicate the territory nowadays divided into Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, Arab chroniclers also used 'Ifriqiya' which was sometimes confused with the whole of the Maghrib.² but later on it became clear that 'Ifriqiya' meant approximately the area now covered by Tunisia and eastern Algeria.³

The political geography of North Africa at the time of the Arab conquest is a rather difficult subject to approach because we are dealing with a huge area and people of diverse origins. North Africa had been invaded several times during its long history. Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, and Byzantines in turn tried to control as much territory as they could of this enormous area, but they never succeeded in occupying more than the coastal towns and only a few strongholds in the interior. Here the Phoenicians and the Romans succeeded to some extent in integrating with the Berbers around them. The rest of the country, however, especially the hinterland, remained in Berber bands⁴

When the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-65 AD) decided to conquer North Africa in the year 533 AD, he was acting to restore the unity of the Roman Empire,⁵ but his army failed to occupy all of the Roman provinces; the territory occupied by the Byzantines was much smaller. Mauritania Tingitania was reduced [19] to Septem. Ceuta, Sabu, Caesariana had lost its western parts and Tripolitania its northern region: only Numidia, Proconsular Africa, and Byzacenia remained as they had been previously.⁶ The Byzantines could not penetrate at all into the interior of Tingitania. Even Ceuta was isolated from the mainland and could only communicate with the eastern part of North Africa by sea. In Tripolitania, Byzantine control was limited to the strategic highway linking Qâbis [Gabes] with Cyrenaica,⁷ the eastern parts of Libya.

The Byzantines divided North Africa into seven provinces, which have been identified as follows:⁸

- (1) Proconsular Africa: nowadays northern Tunisia.
- (2) Byzacenia the interior of southern Tunisia
- (3) Numidia: roughly western Tunisia and eastern Algeria.
- (4) Mauritania Prima: (Sitifian and Caesariana) western Bajäya to Mulwiyya valley.
- (5) Mauritania Secunda: Septem and the Byzantine possessions in Spain and the Balearic isles.
- (6) Tripolitania: western Barqa to Qâbis.
- (7) Sardinia: which also included Corsica.

Each province was governed by a Consul or Praeses (Paraesides) and the whole prefecture including Corsica and Sardinia was to be governed by a praetorian Prefect, who exercised all civil authority and was responsible for finance and the administration of justice.⁹ Later, during Maurice's reign (582-602 AD), however, the civil and military governor was given the rank of Exarch, which was superior to that of Prefect because he was the personal representative of the Emperor. The position of Prefect was maintained in North Africa, but its holder was an administrative officer receiving his orders from the Exarch.

The Commander-in-Chief of the army, the *magister militum*, was in theory independent of the Prefect, but when external attacks were expected, the powers of Prefect and Commander-in-Chief were exercised by one person.¹⁰ The country was divided into four military districts:

- (1) Tripolitania: its capital was Leptis, Labda.
- (2) Byzacenia: its capital was Capsa, Qafsa and Thevest, Tabsa.[20]
- (3) Numidia; its capital was Cirta, Constantina, Qasantina.
- (4) Mauritania: ¹¹ their capital was Caesarea. Shirshäl.

An officer called *dux* (duke) was at the head of each district, Another officer was in charge of Septem: he was of an inferior rank under the command of the Duke of Mauritania. The functions of the duke were principally the defence of the *Limes* (the Roman lines of fortifications), and the control of the Berber tribes.¹² As for the frontier defences, the Byzantines revived the *Limes* established during the Roman period, rebuilt fortifications which the Vandals had destroyed, and constructed new ones. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the fortifications were strong enough to withstand any external attack, as they were built or reconstructed in a hurry. Julien is therefore correct when he describes these fortifications as a Roman power in a state of decline.¹³ In order to protect the *Limes*, especially when their power was established in North Africa, the Byzantines revived the practice of relying on the provincial peasant soldiers, the *Limitanei*.

According to the authorities, we can identify three races of people in North Africa at the time of the Arab conquest: Byzantines, *al-Rüm*; Africans, *al-Afäriqa*, or *al-Afäriq* (singular: *Afriqi*); and the Berbers. The term *Afäriqa* was used by the Arab writers to indicate certain groups of the population which were not Berbers. Sometimes they used another expression: '*Ajam Ifriqiya* or *al-Afäriqa al-a'äjim*,¹⁴ which means the non-Arab Africans. Guatier, suggests that they were the survivors of the ancient Carthaginian people,¹⁵ but we find that the Arab historians consider some of this group to have Byzantine origins.¹⁶ It is therefore difficult to ignore the possibility that the *Afäriqa* were a complex group of Christian people who had survived the Phoenician, Vandal, Roman and Byzantine periods; or even that some were Greeks, because Ibn 'Idhärî mentions that a son of al-Kähina was Greek *yunäni*.¹⁷

These people settled principally in the towns on the coast, especially in the province of Proconsular Africa where Qabis was known, even after the conquest, as a city of the Africans, *madinat al-Afäriqa al-a'äjim*.¹⁸ However, as they are found everywhere in the coastland, there are also indications in the sources that some of them may have settled in Numidia, and even in places in the interior near the region of Fäs.¹⁹ [22]

The major source of income for the settlers along the coastland of the province of Proconsular Africa was the trade in olive oil.²⁰ It is interesting to note that trade in general had been flourishing for a long time before the Arab conquest of North Africa. It was not only a vital part of the African contribution to the whole of Mediterranean commerce, but also involved the Berbers of the interior who controlled the Saharan trade routes.

The Arab chronicles put forward many explanations concerning the derivation of the Berbers' name and their origins. They usually consider them as people who had migrated from Palestine or Yemen, and say that they had (Kan'anite) or (Himyarite) origins.²¹ Although Ibn Hazm rejected these theories, he himself failed to present a reasonable alternative explanation.²² The name 'Berber' is derived from the Latin *barbari*, a Term equivalent to the English "barbarian", which the Romans used to call people who spoke neither Latin nor Greek.²² Yet in spite of this, their precise origin is still unknown to us: all that can be said for certain is that the Berbers had been established in northern Africa for a very long time before the Arab conquest.²³

The social organisation of the Berbers was tribal from the earliest times of their history. The Arab historians give two classifications of their tribes: the *Butr* and the *Baranis*. Each of these groups was divided into numerous tribes, but we can distinguish some large and powerful tribes at the time of the Arab conquest, such as the *Butr* tribes of Luwata, Nafuza, Nafzawa, Mighrawa, Zanata, Mitghara, Maghila, Miknasa, Maduna, and Zuwagha, and the *Baranis* tribes of Sanhaja, Masmuda, Haskura, Auraba, Kutama, Hawwara, Ghamara, Azdaja, Mistata, and Jazula. As we shall see later, according to the settlements of the Berbers, most of the *Butr* lived in the plains which enjoyed a mild climate, while the *Baranis* dominated the cold mountainous areas. It has been suggested by Shaban that it is highly probable that the terms *Butr* and *Baranis* came from the distinction between the costumes of these people. The mountaineers had to clothe themselves with a hooded cloak (*burnis*), from which came the term *Baranis*. while it was not necessary for the others to do so — they clad themselves with a cloak only, which was without a hood (i.e. *abtar* in Arabic) — hence the term *Butr*.

The majority of these tribes were pagan,²⁵ and some of them remained so for about three centuries after the conquest, as did some groups of Sanhaja in the western Sahara.²⁶ However, Christianity had spread widely among them, especially in the [23] coastland where they were influenced by the Romans and the Byzantines. Many clans of Zanata in Mauritania Prima, as well as Auraba in the Auras mountains, and Nafusa in Tripolitania, were converted to Christianity.²⁷ Judaism also obtained some converts in North Africa, such as Jarawa, the strong tribe of al-Kahina, and some of Nafusa in Tripolitania, as well as many small communities further west, which still survived later on in the Islamic periods.²⁸

On the eve of the Arab conquest the Berber tribes were generally distributed in the following way. The tribes of Luwata,²⁹ Nafusa,³⁰ Hawwara,³¹ and some other groups Zanata,³² Nafusa,³³ and Zuwagha,³⁴ were mainly to be found in the province of Tripolitania and its desert in the south. Some of these tribes had settled in the coastal plains, leading a sedentary life, particularly in Tripoli, Sabrath, Sabrata, Ajdabiya, and in the region of Barqa, while the vast majority were nomads in the steppes and the desert.

The Berbers in these districts had been carrying on the Saharan trade between the interior and the littoral. In the south, Zuwayla was famous as a crossroads for the caravans from all the surrounding

regions: it marked the beginning of the *Sudan*³⁵, the country of the black people. Leptis, Labda and many other ports on the coast had been in existence as outlets for the Saharan-Mediterranean trade for centuries.³⁶ Moreover, there was a great deal of trade with the east. Cattle, sheep, wool, oil, honey, and tar, were carried from Barqa to Egypt. The Berbers of Kuwar in the southern desert used to trade in alum, which was the most common mineral in their region. Their activities covered a huge area between Egypt and Warjalan, as far as al-Maghrib *al-aqsa*.³⁷

In the province of Proconsular Africa, and in Byzacenia in the south (i.e. southern Tunisia), there were many kinds of Berbers. Zanata, Nafzawa. Nafusa. and Luwata were the most numerous tribes there. Many small clans of other tribes were also to be found in the region, including Hawwara near Marmajanna in the upper valley of Majrada, Wazdaja and Wadraja in the region of Baja, northern Tunisia, and Mitmata, western Qabis. The Berbers of Zanata were semi-nomads leading pastoral and agricultural lives in the plains. However, in al-Jarid southern Tunisia near Nafta, Tawzar, and Qafsa, Zanata and Nafeawa were entirely nomadic. Some of the Luwata and Nafusa tribes lived near Qabis and Sfax, Safaqis. It is probable that most of the tribes wandered [24] between Tripolitania in the east and Proconsular Africa and Byzacenia in the west.

Owing to its fertile plains. Proconsular Africa was renowned for its agricultural produce.³⁸ Besides the olives, which have been mentioned earlier, wheat, figs, ambergris, saffron, and pistachios, were cultivated and exported to many Mediterranean ports, particularly in Spain. Tabraqa and Tunis, the main ports in this area, were considered as gateways for the Spanish trade.³⁹ Salt was another trade item on the eastern coast, near al-Munistir. It was transported from a salt mine owned by the Berbers of Limta to the neighbouring countries.⁴⁰

Like Proconsular Africa, the province of Numidia (i.e. western Tunisia and eastern Algeria) enjoyed vast fertile lands with sufficient water resources.⁴¹ This had encouraged the settlement of Kutama and its branch Zawawa in the cultivated land of Constantine, Qasantina, which extended to the Mediterranean coast near Bajaya in the north, and the foot of the Auras Mountains in the south. Small groups of Luwata, Zuwagha, and Mighrawa, a branch of Zanala, were also to be found here.⁴²