

The Impact of Islam on Urban Development in North Africa

Author: Dr. R. Saoud
Chief Editor: Professor Salim Al-Hassani
Production: Faaiza Bashir

Release Date: May 2004
Publication ID: 4056

Copyright: © FSTC Limited, 2003 2004

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

All rights, including copyright, in the content of this document are owned or controlled for these purposes by FSTC Limited. In accessing these web pages, you agree that you may only download the content for your own personal non-commercial use. You are not permitted to copy, broadcast, download, store (in any medium), transmit, show or play in public, adapt or change in any way the content of this document for any other purpose whatsoever without the prior written permission of FSTC Limited.

Material may not be copied, reproduced, republished, downloaded, posted, broadcast or transmitted in any way except for your own personal non-commercial home use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of FSTC Limited. You agree not to adapt, alter or create a derivative work from any of the material contained in this document or use it for any other purpose other than for your personal non-commercial use.

FSTC Limited has taken all reasonable care to ensure that pages published in this document and on the MuslimHeritage.com Web Site were accurate at the time of publication or last modification. Web sites are by nature experimental or constantly changing. Hence information published may be for test purposes only, may be out of date, or may be the personal opinion of the author. Readers should always verify information with the appropriate references before relying on it. The views of the authors of this document do not necessarily reflect the views of FSTC Limited.

FSTC Limited takes no responsibility for the consequences of error or for any loss or damage suffered by readers of any of the information published on any pages in this document, and such information does not form any basis of a contract with readers or users of it.

FSTC Limited

9 Conyngham Road, Victoria Park, Manchester, M14 5DX, United Kingdom

Web: <http://www.fstc.co.uk> Email: info@fstc.co.uk

THE IMPACT OF ISLAM ON URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH AFRICA

Abstract

The decade of the nineties saw a substantial increase in critics against Islam blaming it for the backwardness and primitive state of Muslim societies. Such critics were much louder in the North African region, especially after the unfortunate events leading to the Algerian crisis. The new millennium, especially after the American incident of September 11th, 2001 brought serious threats against Islam. The present paper seeks to remind the readers of the contribution of Islam to the civilisation of peoples of North Africa by looking at its influence on the urbanisation of the region. The aim is to define the forces and circumstances underlying the urbanisation process during the Islamic period, discuss the nature and character of the urban development activity, and assess the urban morphological consequences resulting from it. Following these objectives, the paper first defines and provides the general setting of the study area (North Africa). Next, it addresses the region's pre-Islamic urban development. The emphasis is made on the assessment of the pre-Islamic origins, and the impact of the Islamic rule on the urban development in North Africa, and the emerging urban form of the Islamic pre-colonial North African city.

CONCEPT AND NATURAL SETTING OF NORTH AFRICA

The concept of North Africa, as a geographical area, is used to cover a region that differs among researchers. Abu-Lughod (1976, 1979) and Clarke (1973), for example, used the concept to cover Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Others exclude Egypt (Blake, 1974) and a third group adds Sudan to the list. Lawless (1981), Valensi (1977) and most French researchers used North Africa to mean the Maghreb region which extends from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Mediterranean sea in the east, covering only the countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. This definition is also adopted in the present paper.

The region covers an area of 2,996,000 km² and has a population of more than 70 million people (table 1). This vast land is marked by a variety of relief which runs from the west to the east in a succession of strips.

The coastal area forms the first strip extending over 3000 km from the Atlantic coast in the west of Morocco to the eastern Mediterranean coast in the east of Tunisia. This band contains pockets of fertile plains namely in the Moroccan western coast, central coast of Algeria, and eastern coast of Tunisia. It is succeeded by a chain of mountains, the Tell Atlas Mountains which reach a height of 2,308 m (Djurdjura) in Algeria and 2,456 m in the Rif Mountains (Tidighin) in Morocco. Behind this chain lie the High Plains, extending from the east of Morocco to the east of Algeria near the Tunisian frontier. This area is famous for wheat production. To the south of the High Plains, a second chain of mountains, the Sahara Atlas, extends from the centre of Tunisia to Morocco where it joins with the Haut Atlas Mountains. The Sahara Atlas attains a height of 2,320 m in the Aures region (Chelia and Nememcha Mountains) in eastern Algeria, and 4,165 m in the Toubkal Mountains in the Haut Atlas in Morocco. To the south of these mountains lies the Sahara Desert.

North Africa falls under the Mediterranean climate but is also influenced by the subtropical weather conditions which dominate the Sahara. The Mediterranean influence results in a wet cold winter season mostly in the northern part. The effect of the sub-tropical climate appears in summer when the hot dry weather is predominant for a period extending from three to five months with temperatures reaching 28 and 30 degrees C in the coastal regions.

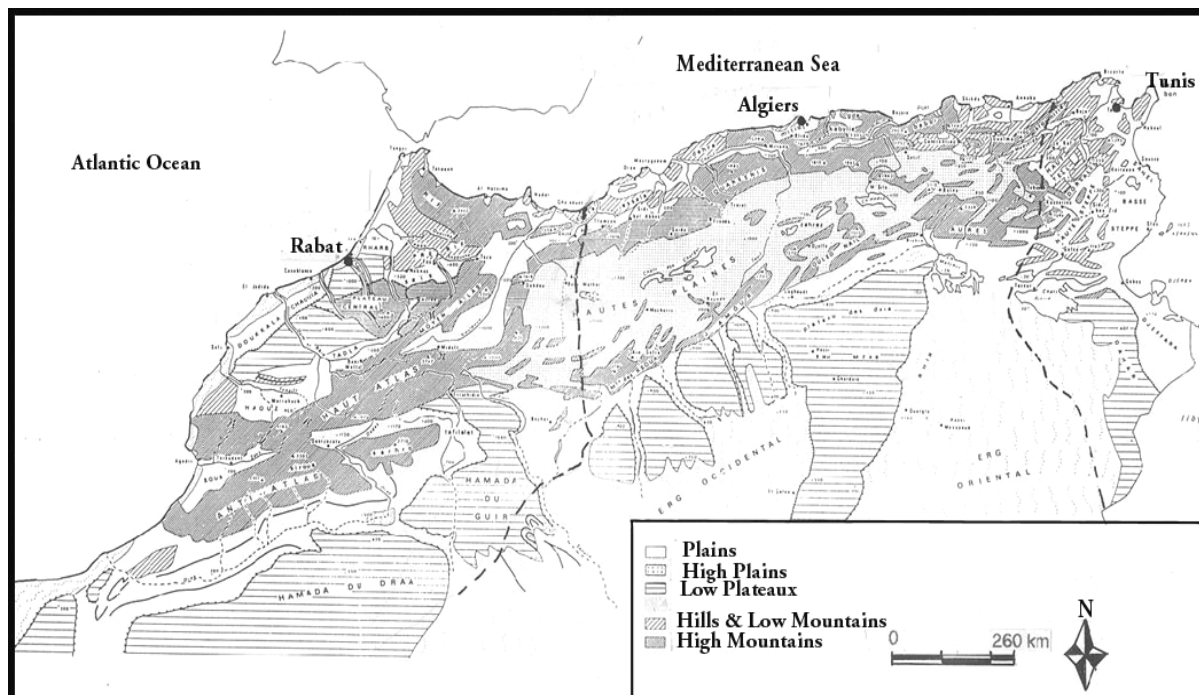


Figure 1 - North African natural environment Source: Troin (1985)

The characteristics of the land have had a great impact on the distribution of the population and thus urban settlements. Higher density settlements are found on the coastal plains along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts. In the interior, towns are mainly located in the high plains, but only a few are found in the Sahara. Mountains are only occupied by villages and small hamlets. The role of the climate is visible in the concentration of towns in the northern region where the Mediterranean climate is predominant. In the south, the Sahara with its hot dry climate does not provide ideal conditions for the development of settlements, and only a handful of small towns are found there. Furthermore, the effects of climate also appear in settlement and building design and material. This is very noticeable in early towns such as the narrow covered streets of the medina which provide shelter from the summer hot sun and allow cool air to circulate. Similar provisions are used in the buildings such as those found in the south where particular forms and materials were introduced to escape the heat¹.

On the other hand, the geographic location of the North African region has ensured that it has remained close to successive Mediterranean civilisations and a gateway to Africa. Its plains, climate and wealth have played a major role in raising its strategic importance and attracted many civilisations which brought it prosperity and cultural richness, and established an advanced settlement system. It attracted the Romans

for its wheat and animals while through it Islam reached Spain and Europe. The Spanish and Portuguese conquered parts of North Africa and still hold parts of northern Morocco. Finally, imperial France colonised it in late 18th century. Much of today's urban settlements carry the finger prints of these successive civilisations. However, the impact of Islam in its lasting and overwhelming influence is unique.

Table 1 - General indicators on North Africa

	Morocco	Algeria	Tunisia
Area	450,000 km ²	2,382,000 km ²	164,000 km ²
Population in 2000	29,878,000	30,291,000	9,459,000

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision* and *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.

PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD : MERCANTILE ORIGINS (814 BC-670 AD)

As indicated earlier, the strategic geographical location of the region has played a decisive role in its urban development. Being the gateway to and from Africa, early towns of North Africa were established on the coast as commercial centres linked to major Mediterranean empires, forming part of its trading system. This is clearly evident from the Phoenician² towns³, which represented the earliest urban origin in the region. These spread from Carthage (their capital in Tunisia built in 814 BC), Icosium (Algiers) in Algeria, to Rabat in Morocco⁴. In the second century BC, the Numidians (a Berber tribe) founded scores of towns in the centre of North Africa (Algeria) including their capital Cirta (Constantine today), which accommodated no more than 15 thousand people (*Bulletin Archaeologique de l'Est*, 1952). Only a little is known about the form and function of these towns, and what is left of them today are ruins and artefacts.



Figure 2 - Aerial view of a Typical North African Roman Town showing here Timgad (Algeria)

Source: Lassus (1981, p.14)

Given the vast and diversity of its land, North Africa attracted successive Mediterranean Empires, including the Romans. The search for grain, luxury commodities such as precious stones, gold and silver, and exotic

beasts for their popular animal shows was the main driving force behind the Roman occupation (Owens, 1992). Towns were first built partly to provide shelter for Roman migrants and legionnaires (Parker, 1987), and partly to extract and send these commodities to Rome. Later, towns and cities played an additional role, that was to maintain peace (Pax Romana) and promote Roman civilisation (Owens, 1992). However, as profits and wealth extracted from the region expanded, the Romans extended their occupation to the interior. Consequently, North Africa saw the emergence of a number of towns of various sizes. The economic basis of these towns was generated mainly from the agriculture through the trade of olive oil and other agricultural products. Such towns served as the religious, administrative, and military centres for the Roman Empire. They reached a legal status of *coloniae*, a fact which indicates their importance. Carthage, destroyed in the last Punic Wars, was rebuilt again in 45 BC to become a very important settlement. Tunis and Icosium (Algiers) were also rebuilt but they never reached the importance of Timgad and Djemila (Algeria). In Morocco, the Romans founded also a number of towns including Sala Coloniae (part of Rabat today). Their urban layout reflected these functions, and exhibited the general Roman features (table 2).

Table 2 - The general form of the Roman town

Shape	Rectangular or square (Mumford, 1961)
Boundary	Wall
Open Space	The Forum, at the centre. It was the arena where people met for national events and animal shows.
Streets	<p>The Cardo: a wide columnated street running from the North to the South and crossing the Decumannus at the centre of the town.</p> <p>The Decumannus maximus: Another columnated street running from the Eastern gates to the Western gates and crossing the Cardo in the centre.</p>
Main buildings	<p>The theatre: A civic building which had a capacity to accommodate up to 4000 people (Owens, 1992).</p> <p>Baths, temples and a public library in addition to other municipal buildings, public lavatories and military buildings.</p>

Sources: Mumford (1961), Owens, (1992).

However, this urban experience excluded local Berber populations who continued to live separately in the countryside, especially uncongenial mountainous areas. This was because the Roman settlement policy favoured Roman soldiers and migrants. Meanwhile, the rebellious Berbers preserved their environmental way of life. A proof of this "ethnic" separation is the Berber settlements which continued to exist independently from the Roman rule. The famous Queen of Al-Kahina who was the only Berber leader to resist Islam causing considerable trouble for Uqba Ibn Nafi⁵.

By the fall of Rome, the region was ravaged by the Vandals and Byzantine invaders between 429 and 533 AD respectively. This unfortunate occupation exhausted the local economy and created political instability leading to social unrest and sectarian strife (Courtois, 1955). Furthermore, these struggles took place mainly in cities where the political power and commercial resources were concentrated. The consequences were a demographic decline and destruction of many cities including Carthage, Icosium and Sala (Laroui, 1977, p139). This continued to be the case until the arrival of the Muslims.

ISLAMIC PERIOD, RELIGIOUS BASED URBAN DEVELOPMENT, (670-1830)

The penetration of Islam to Tunisia in 670 AD, and subsequently to the rest of North Africa had an irreversible and overwhelming impact on its urban development. The voluntarily accepted religion with its philosophy gradually established numerous towns inducing urban development of that area. This was due to a number of reasons. Islam is considered, even by non-Muslims, to be an urban religion (Fischel, 1956). The religious practices, beliefs and values, especially those relating to organisation and authority, emphasised the effectiveness of and cohesiveness within the social gathering. Firstly Muslims are requested to undertake the obligatory five daily prayers in congregation in mosques, each known as a *Masjid*⁶, as pointed out in the Hadith narrated by 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar who said that Allah's Apostle (pbuh) said, "*The prayer in congregation is twenty seven times superior to the prayer offered by person alone.*" (Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 11, Number 618). To achieve this reward, Muslims had to live in an proximity of a congregational mosque. Secondly, the Friday prayer, which is also a compulsory duty, is only carried out in congregation in main mosque, known as *Jami'*. This can only refer to settlements rather than nomadic life. Thirdly, the emphasis on the protection of privacy and the application of head covering (*Hijab*) also refers to urban living where neighbourliness and the presence of great number of strangers can constrain such private life. Fourthly, the annual pilgrimage ritual takes place in cities of Makkah and Medina, another emphasis on urban living. In addition to these "urban" religious duties, the Muslim is also requested to lead a strong social life and avoid isolation. The Quran states:

"And keep yourself patiently with those who call on their Lord morning and afternoon seeking His face, and let not your eyes overlook them, desiring the pomp and glitter of the life of the world; and obey not him whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance, one who follows his own desires and whose affair (deeds) has become all excess" (The Cave, 18:28).

There is at least one hadith which warns against dispersal and isolation: Narrated AbudDarda': I heard the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) say: *If there are three men in a village or in the desert among whom prayer is not offered (in congregation), the devil has got the mastery over them. So observe (prayer) in congregation, for the wolf eats only the straggling animal.* Sa'ib said: By the word Jama'ah he meant saying prayer in company or in congregation. (*Sunan Abu-Dawud: Book 2, Number 0547*).

So Islamic towns in North Africa were erected at early stage to preach and practice Islam. Consequently a number of thriving towns emerged due to this religious role. In the tenth century AD, for example, there were six major towns⁷, each having a population of 20,000 inhabitants or more (Chandler and Fox, 1974). These were mainly inland towns dependent on the land routes, which were essential for the trade and economic life of their communities. Waterways were still of very limited importance. Quirawan (also spelt Kairawan), founded by Ibn Nafi' in the seventh century, was the main centre of civilisation of this period. With its famous school (medrassa) and economic and artistic booms, it attracted students, artists and merchants from all over the Muslim land. Under the Aghlabid leaders, Quirawan played a key role in the spread of Islam to the rest of North Africa, Sicily and southern Italy.

By the ninth century AD, the prestigious role of towns was replaced by political motives as North Africa broke its traditional links with the Caliphate in the East. This was a period when local leaders and influential groups pursued their political ambitions, neither respecting the will of their populations nor their

Islamic moral convictions⁸. At first three states were established. The Idrissids in Morocco founded Fez as a capital in 809 AD on a strategic site at the crossroads of the east-west route from Tunis to the Atlantic and the north-south route from Tangiers in the north to the south. The Rustamids in Algeria took Tahart (Tiaret) as their capital. Finally the Aghlabids in Tunisia replaced old Quirawan with Tunis. These states were soon involved in disputes over sovereignty and sometimes quarrels erupted between members of the one ruling family or tribe. As a consequence several dynasties succeeded resulting in the appearance of a succession of capital cities as each dynasty founded its own distinctive capital. The rise of a new capital was often achieved at the price of the existing one. This could have produced a multiple number of former capitals but, since power was usually taken by force after heavy fighting, such towns were destroyed or abandoned.

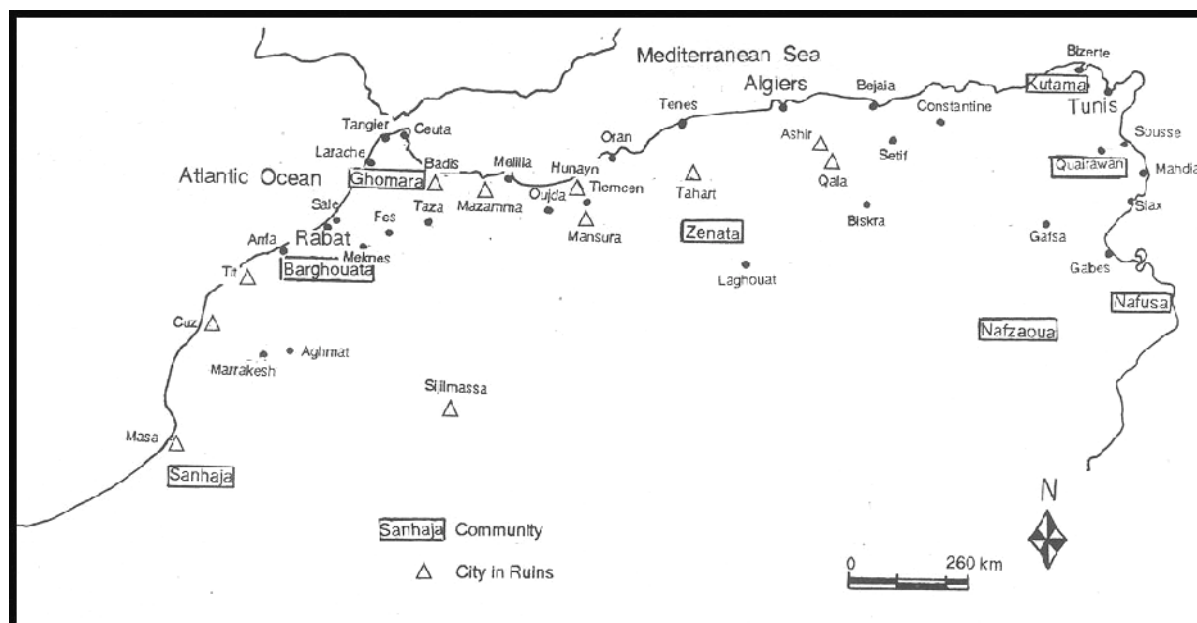


Figure 3 - Islamic North Africa in the 13th century.

Source: Laroui (1977)

The lack of stability was also reflected in the economic, cultural and social declines which are essential ingredients for urban prosperity. This was followed by the advance of Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaym tribes. Driven from Egypt, these two Arabian tribes swept through North Africa "like locusts" (Ibn Khaldoun, 1925). Algiers was destroyed as were many other towns while Tunis faced a major set back. Morocco, however, was spared the destruction, as these tribes did not manage to go beyond Algeria. These conditions have greatly undermined the survival, growth and birth of towns, as they were the battleground for these divisions and disputes.

In the eleventh century, Europe took advantage of the weakening state of the North African Caliphate invading it from various corners. In Spain, Christians conquered Toledo (1085), Badajoz (1086) and Saragosa (1118). In Italy, the Normans occupied Sicily and invaded Tunisia and managed to occupy most of its towns. Meanwhile, the rising powers of Genoa and Pisa managed to re-conquest Sardinia in 1016 and began harassing the North African coast including Bone (Annaba in Algeria) in 1034. Amid these deteriorating conditions people looked back to Islam for inspiration leading to the rise of a devoted group calling themselves Al-Murabitun (the Almuravids), the retired worshippers and defenders of God. The

choice of the name was not accidental as this group soon emerged as a leading power defending against European threats. Within a century of their rule, they managed to unify Spain and North Africa under one Muslim Caliphate extending it from Andalusia to Mauritania and Mali in the south (11th century) and Algiers and Tunis in the east (12th century). North Africa and Spain entered a golden age benefiting from the political stability and tolerance of the Almuravid leaders. The urban life prospered significantly with the establishment of a number of towns including Sijilmassa, Telemcen, and Marrakesh. Sijilmassa in particular reached an important position, becoming the northern station of the trans-Saharan gold trade coming from Awdaghust in ancient Ghana. In fact the Almuravid managed to completely control this route and established new routes to connect to places more firmly within their domain. Sijilmasa's role in the islamisation of the western Sudan and other parts of Africa was decisive.

The collapse of the Almuravid Caliphate came as late leaders, corrupted by wealth and excessive power, lost their Islamic piety and devoted themselves to worldly desires. As consequences, disputes broke out and the dissatisfaction of the population grew significantly leading to the rise of Almowahidun, the proclaimers of oneness of God. Originally from the high Atlas Mountains, the Almowahidun (commonly known as Almohads), united North Africa under one authority for the second time (Abun-Nasr, 1971, p.110). They established their capital in Marrakesh in Morocco. They gave great impetus to learning and hosted a number of great scholars including Ibn Tufail and Ibn Rushd. Their Kutubia Medrassa reached outstanding position in disseminating science, technology and arts. The Almohad art and architecture surpassed their predecessors, especially in their famous minarets (see our article Architecture in Muslim Spain and North Africa).

Towards the end of the twelfth century, Yaqub Al-Mansour (the third Sultan of Almohads between 1184-1199) founded Rabat. He decided to make the fort used by his predecessors and named Ribat El-Feth, a royal town. The city was located on the right edge of the River Bouregreg facing the old Sala (Sale). It was enclosed by a wall from the south and east while the ocean and the river provided natural defences from the north and west. The walls were about four miles long and bordered an area of over four hundred hectares (Abu-Lughod, 1980, p56). Rabat reached its golden age during this period but unfortunately only three gates and some parts of these walls still remain today. Algiers was used as a small port and did not achieve a substantial importance. Tunis, however, flourished and became once again the provincial capital (capital of Almohads province of Tunisia).

By the collapse of the Almohads in 1250, North Africa and Andalusia entered a troubling period of divisions and disputes affecting greatly the stability and prosperity of the area. In general, between 1200 AD and 1500 AD urban development concentrated on the coast due to the rise of the importance of sea transport. Consequently, urban population increased significantly as flourishing ship manufacturing attracted many migrants (Wagstaff, 1980). In addition to that, thousands of Andalusians, who fled Spain after the Christian recapture, settled mostly in coastal towns. Issaoui (1969) adds another significant reason suggesting that the countryside's insecurity, which was caused by the Bedouin raids, made the rural population flee to the cities. Therefore, coastal towns multiplied. According to Abu-Lughod (1976), North Africa saw the appearance of at least four new coastal towns⁹ in addition to the growth of existing ones, and only one new inland town "Marrakesh", during that period.

Stability was regained in the region by the arrival of the Ottomans in 1516. The Ottomans were enabled to take control of North Africa (excluding Morocco) not only in a desire to revive the Islamic rule (Caliphate),

and as a defence against Spanish and Portuguese colonial invasions. Cities and towns again assumed political and economic functions. They served to consolidate the Muslim (Turkish) Caliphate. They were governed by the *Bey*, who was designated by the *Dey*¹⁰ and accountable only to him. The authority of the *Dey* was based in urban areas, while a *Bey* appointed by him handled the administration of the countryside and the collection of taxes there.

In economic terms, these towns were energised with an unprecedented economic activity geared towards ship-building to support the Turkish fleet, and defend Muslim ships against European pirates in the Mediterranean. The economic prosperity and political stability encouraged the flow of migrants from the Ottoman Empire (but essentially from Turkey), leading to a substantial urban growth (figure 3).

With the increasing power of imperial Europe in the seventeenth century, North African cities' main role was to provide men, money, and armaments to maintain Muslim supremacy over the Mediterranean Sea. Slowly, these efforts started to exhaust local resources amid the rise of a corrupt generation of leaders. Once again the region went into dark period of internal fighting, ignorance and immorality. It was followed by the spread of disease during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Historic sources revealed that a plague, which cost Tunisia a third of its population in 1784, spread to Algeria between 1793 and 1799, and to Morocco in 1800 causing the same devastating effect. In 1817, the same plague re-appeared to claim a quarter of the population of Tunisia and an equivalent proportion in Algeria (Vallensi, 1977). In general, on the eve of colonisation (in 1800) urban population in North Africa represented about 20% of the total population (table 3).

Table 3 - Major towns in North Africa and their sizes (in '000's) at the eve of colonisation.

Morocco (1834-1836) ^a		Algeria (1830) ^b		Tunisia (1850) ^c	
Fez	100*	Algiers	30-60	Tunis	100
Marrakech	70*	Constantine	25-35	Quairawan	15
Mekness	40*	Tlemcen	20	Sfax	10
Rabat	22	Mascara	12	Bizerte	5
Tetouan	16	Oran	10	Monastir	5
Mogador	10	Miliana	10	Sousse	3
Safi	8	Medea	10		
Tangier	7	Cherchell	3		
Larache	2.5				

Sources: a- Abu-Lughod (1980, p153); b- Magali Morsi (1984); c- Bennoune Mahfoud (1988, p27)

* between 1910-1913

THE ISLAMIC CITY IN NORTH AFRICA

In our previous article, [Introduction to the Islamic City](#), we referred to the theoretical debate dealing with the concept of Islamic city. Here, we provide the reader with some practical examples of the Islamic city in North Africa, which greatly resemble those of the rest of the Muslim world. In addition to the influence of local topography, and morphological features of pre-existing towns, the city reflected the Muslim socio- cultural, political, and economic structures of the North African society. The social organisation of the urban society which was based on social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives was translated in the concept of quarters¹¹. Religious beliefs and practices,

which formed the central base of the cultural life for these populations, gave the mosque a pivotal position in the institutional hierarchy. The religious beliefs separating between public and private lives and between male and female lives regulated the spatial order for usage so that areas formed well defined territories. The low technological level meant that topography and climate largely defined the design of buildings and streets. Thus the form of the city had a cultural, social, political, and economic logic in terms of physical fabric, layout, and usage.

EXAMPLES OF THE ISLAMIC CITY: RABAT, ALGIERS, AND TUNIS

The aim of looking at these three case studies is to provide concrete examples to illustrate the morphological features created, and provide a contextual framework that includes local (national) circumstances of each country within the general discussion of North African urban development. The selection of Rabat, Algiers, and Tunis was due to the fact that all three cities share the same historic, social and economic importance. These factors play a major part in the evolution of the urban form and its development. All three cities have been under similar pressure for development due to their social, administrative and economic roles as capital cities.

Rabat

Rabat was founded towards the end of the 12th century by Yaqub Al-Mansour (the third Sultan of Almohads 1184-1199). It was initially built as a garrison station to defend the Sultan against hostile Berber tribes in the region (around Rabat). The Casbah here was given to the distinguishable tribe of *Oudea* whose members were the Sultan's fighters while he kept his palace outside the internal walls of the city for use in royal visits. It was located on the right edge of the river Bouregreg facing the old Roman Sala (Sale today). For defensive reasons it was enclosed by walls of about four miles long and surrounding an area of over four hundred hectares (Abu-Lughod, 1980, p56). The social composition of the city included Andalusians, Jews, Arabs, Berbers, and Moors. This was translated in the system of quarters. Morphologically, the town was similar to the rest of North African cities at that time. Rabat reached its golden age during this period and so continued until colonisation overtook it (map 4.6). On the eve of the establishment of the French protectorate (1912), Rabat had a population of 20,000 people of which 18,000 were Muslims and 2,000 were Jews (Ehlers, 1986, p.58).

Algiers

Algiers (Icosium) was founded by the Phoenicians as a commercial entrepot and a port for their vessels in 1200 BC (Lambert, 1899). It was rebuilt by the Romans¹² but did not reach the importance of Timgad city. In early Islamic period, Icosium was conquered and its importance declined further as prosperity shifted to newly founded cities. In the 10th century AD, the prince Bologhine ibn Ziri revived the city of Icosium and gave it his family name "El-Djezair Banou Mezghana", a reference to his family Banu Mezghana (Lespes, 1930, p.100). Since then, Algiers was used as a small port and did not achieve a substantial importance. However, by the arrival of the Ottomans in 1516, Algiers, assumed the role of the capital of the Ottoman North Africa.

On the eve of colonisation in 1830, Algiers had a population of about 30,000 (although a greater number has been suggested by Brahimi (1978) with five main ethnic origins. There were 10,000 Moors, 7,000 Berbers, 6,000 Jews, 5,000 Turks and Kouloughlis (of mixed Turkish and Arab descent), and about 1,500 black Africans. These were accommodated in 8,000 houses of which 3,000 were privately owned and the rest belonged to the *Beylik* or *Habous* (Boyer, 1963, p.48). However, Brahimi (1978) suggested that the number of houses reached 15,000. The town was organised into quarters reflecting these social compositions, all within strong well defended walls. As Algiers was the political capital of the Ottomans, the citadel was occupied by the Dey (Sultan) and the Turkish elite with their defensive army.

Tunis

Tunis was rebuilt under the Roman Emperor Augustus in the first century AD, but without the importance of Carthage. The Muslims re-fortified it in 720 AD, and built the *Zaytouna Mosque*. The city was used as an administrative centre, and as a garrison town subordinate to Qairawan. Its main role was to supply the Muslim army protecting the settlements of Sicily and southern Italy. Meanwhile the *Zaytouna Mosque* and university were preparing religious teachers to preach and teach new converts, while other teachers were being sent to Andalusia, Cordoba, and Sicily. Since the *Aghlabid* reign (ninth century), Tunis replaced Qairawan as the capital of the province of Tunisia (*Ifriqya* as it was known then), and became a centre of religious orthodoxy.

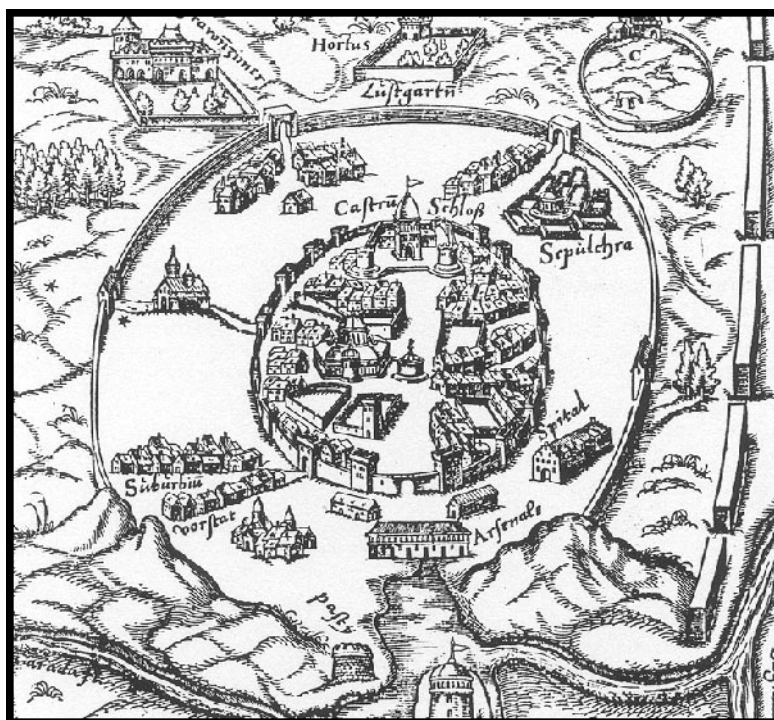


Figure 4 - Tunis in 1636

Source: Abdelkafi (1989, p.52)

It remained so until the period of European colonisation. Tunis naturally had a multi ethnic composition reflected in a number of quarters which catered for Arabs, Jews, Andalusians, a number of Italians, Maltese and other minorities.

Just before becoming a protectorate, Tunis had an area of 270 ha and had a population of 90,000 people (AbdelKafi, 1989, p.39). It was surrounded by two sets of walls with three major spatial components (map 4.8). The central medina occupied the heart of the city and was bordered by ramparts. The two ribats (faubourgs), as they are called, were added to the medina in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (Woodford, 1990).

SPATIAL FORM AND MORPHOLOGICAL COMPONENTS OF THE MUSLIM NORTH AFRICAN CITY

The organisation and land use of the city reflected its Islamic social and cultural values. Ordered around the main mosque, the town consisted of the following elements.

The Central Mosque

It was the main mosque of the city and occupied its heart. In Tunis, it has always been a complex of buildings incorporating the Zaitouna Mosque and University, famous for its religious teaching and public library. In Algiers, it was the al-Jami' al-Jadid Mosque. Not far from it there was the *Jenina* complex which included a large public garden, the government seat, the Dey's palace, the treasury and other government buildings. In Rabat, the heart is situated in the southern half of the city not far from the Al-Kharazin district, on the road to the Bab al-Shallah gate. Surrounding it there were a number of suqs and shopping streets.

Commercial quarters (suqs)

In Tunis, around the Zaitouna complex, there was a network of suqs, bazaars and shopping streets. These represented the economic heart of the city. The spatial distribution of these activities also followed a particular pattern based on socio-cultural and environmental considerations similar to those described above. Near the mosque the prestigious trades and crafts were grouped together. Activities involving pollution or noise such as dyeing and pottery were located on the fringes near the gates.

In Algiers, a number of suqs were organised around the *al-Jami' al-Jadid* as it was called, in the form of a market and commercial streets. Close to the mosque, there was the suq *El-Kebir* where wheat, and other agricultural products were sold. There were also book shops providing an abundance of scientific and religious books. Next to them, there were the merchants of expensive clothes (gold embroidered clothes), and leather merchants (including shoe makers). There was *Zankat al-Ferraga* (serruriers), *Zankat al-Basmaggia* (shoemakers), *Zankat al-Dhawwaba* (gold melting and moulding), *Zankat al-Siagha* (jewellers) and so on. The suqs continued in similar order until they reached *Bab al-Jazeera* (the Island gate) in the north. There was also a shopping street running from *Bab Azzoun* in the east to *Bab al-Wad* in the west. Near the *Bab al-Wad* gate (river gate) were industries of construction (construction materials), pottery and dyeing which needed a good supply of water. Near *Bab Azzoun* gate, there were *funduqs* (hotels) providing accommodation for travellers and visitors (*Barraniya* as they were called). Beyond this were complexes where the tanning and olive oil extraction industries operated.

In Rabat, the commercial quarters were located to the south of the city in the district called "*Sweeka*" in the form of suqs, bazaars and shopping streets. In this district, most foods were sold including butchers

and fish sellers. To the south of this, the straw market was found near the gate which still bears its name, *Bab al-Tibn* (the straw gate). Next to these came the merchants of metal goods, armour, and copper objects. The shoemakers and *Al-Jutia*, as they were called in Rabat where the term included leather workers, saddlers, and harness makers, occupied the second commercial district located to the east of *Sweeka*. Near the Great Mosque, the *al-Kharazin* section was established where there were the professional tailors and knitters as well as shoemakers, tailors, cord winders and others. In the centre of *Al-Rahba* square (*al-Rahba* means open place), the grain market was located. Grain was sold and stored there leading to the establishment of a number of grain mills and bakeries. Behind the grain market, there were the copper smiths, bronze polishers, tar merchants, and black smiths. In *Al-Rahba* also, there were the Jewish jewellers and cosmetic sellers. Outside the square and near *Bab al-Bahr* (sea gate) the dying industry was located.

Residential quarters

Known locally as *Humate*, residential quarters surrounded the local mosque (*Masjid*) where the five daily prayers were held. Each quarter had a high degree of independence.

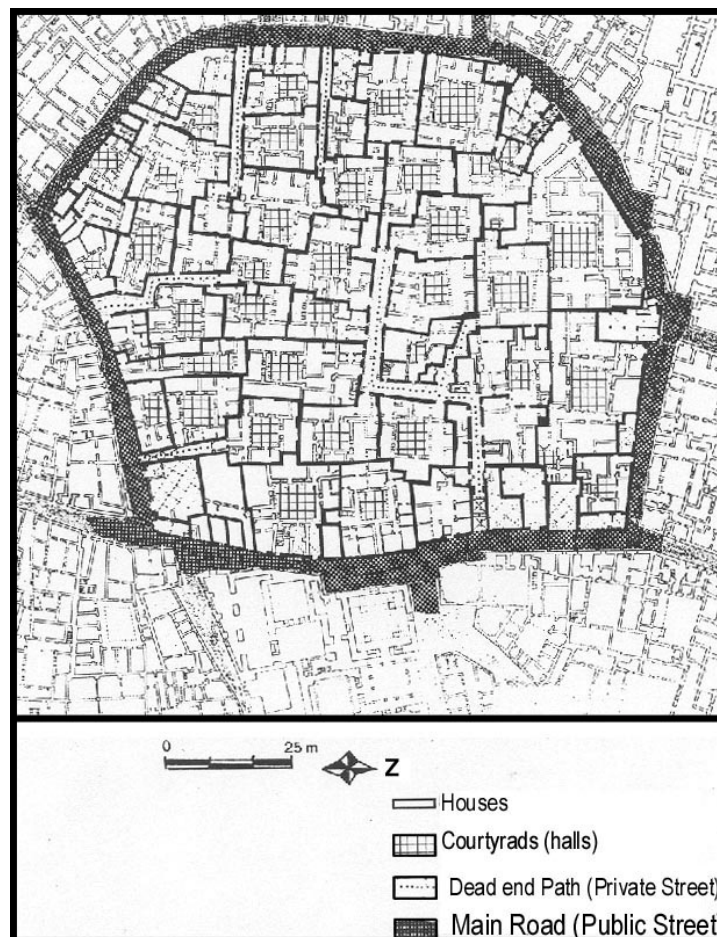


Figure 5 - Typical Residential Quarter (Huma) in Tunis.

Source: Abdelkafi (1989, p.44)

It had its hammam, bakery, main shops, Quranic schools (*Kuttab*) and a *Zawiya* (charitable premises providing shelter, aid and religious lessons). It had its own gates which could be, in case of troubles, shut isolating any particular quarter from the rest of the medina (city). Houses had single or several storeys surrounding a courtyard. They had few openings to the outside which usually had shutters. They were provided with either individual wells or had water reservoirs. The population of the quarter usually shared a common origin, social or economic status. Quarters were named in recognition of these features. For example, in Tunis there was *Humat Al-Andalus* mainly occupied by the Andalusian Muslims who had fled from Spain, the Jewish *Hara*, and the *Humat al-Ifranj* for the European Christians.

Similar provisions were found in Algiers where these quarters grouped the population of similar ethnic origin, economic, social or professional status. They were often named for that status or for one of the famous buildings in that quarter or for springs or for a holy man's tomb or shrine. Examples include *Humat Lalahum*, *Humat Sidi Ahmed Al-tha'libi* and *Humat Bab al-Jadid*.

In Rabat, three quarters could be distinguished. The Casbah of *Udaya* originally accommodated members of *Udaya* tribe which protected the Sultan. The *Waqasah* quarter, situated on the north of *Mellah*, was mainly occupied by migrants from rural areas or neighbouring countries who worked as porters or water carriers. The *Mellah* quarter, occupying the south eastern corner of the city, accommodated the Jewish minority.

Street network

The various quarters of the city of Tunis were connected with a network of narrow streets which offered access to pedestrians, horsemen and pack animals. Two categories of streets could be found. The first consists of private streets, called *Durub* (singular *Derb*), made of a network of narrow streets with a dead end (cul-de-sac) and used mainly by the inhabitants of the residential unit. The second type consists of the public streets which surround the residential quarter and contain the essential sources of household provisions such as bakery, wheat mill, hammam and so on.

In Algiers, the street network was organised in three main arteries (locally known as *Zanka*). The Bab al-Jazeera road led traffic to the port. Bab Azzoun Road connected with the southern gate towards the southern rural fields. Finally Bab el-Oued connected with the northern gate.

In Rabat, the road system was based on two main horizontal roads running from the eastern to the western gates. The first road, in the north, extended from Casbah of Udaya to Bab El-A'lu. The second horizontal road in the south linked Bab El-Bhar with Bab El-Had in the west. Crossing these two roads, were networks of vertical narrow streets linking the northern gates with the southern ones. The main vertical roads were the ones that linked the Casbah with the Al-Rahba square. The second extended from Bab El-Bhar facing the ocean to Buwayba in the south.

Casbah

It is a citadel fortified with strong walls. It is isolated on the highest point in the city to the west of the medina. In both Tunisia and Algeria, the Casbah was the seat of the Ottoman government and residence of the Dey.

In contrast to this prestigious site, there was in Rabat the Casbah (also spelt Qasbah) which contained poor dwellings occupied by the *Udaya* troops and their families with a number of shops for self efficiency. It

formed the origins of that Rabat which was built to accommodate military volunteers, from the *Udaya* tribe, for the service of the Sultan. It remained so after the foundation of the city.

Walls

Strong fortifications surrounded the cities of Tunis and Algiers. In the latter, they consisted of 2,500 metres long ramparts, between 11 and 13 metres high and between 11.5 and 14.5 metres wide, pierced with five gates (Deluz, 1988, p10).

In Rabat, the city was enclosed by three sets of walls: internal walls surrounded the densely urbanised area of the city and had a total of eight gates. The second set of walls enclosed a large area of gardens of the suburban south and the Touarga complex which contained the royal palace, a mosque and gardens. These walls date from the Almohads dynasty (Yakob El Mansour) of the twelfth century. The external walls, located beyond the Almohad walls on the east, had three main gates

Cemeteries

They were located mainly outside the outer walls in the east towards the sea. In Rabat, the cemeteries occupied the area on the Atlantic coast and near the main mosque. Two other cemeteries, one Jewish, were located outside the western walls. There were also a number of graves of holy men or shrines attached to these cemeteries. Beyond them were large gardens of orchards and open cultivated fields.

Conclusion

Although North Africa experienced urban living before Islam, especially under the Romans, this experience remained very limited as Roman towns were mainly reserved for Roman army and migrants. They were built for mercantile or military purposes as forts to house the troops as was the case during the Roman period. Other towns were established on strategic locations such as a potentially well defended hill. These towns' main function was to extract wealth to serve the Roman empire. Local populations, namely the Berbers, continued to occupy the countryside, especially mountainous areas. The Romans failure to incorporate them in their towns was due to the continuous state of rebellion by the Berbers.

The arrival of Islam brought new social, economic, political and cultural ideologies which were transformed into the physical organisation of towns and their functions. Because of the nature of the Islamic belief and its practice which favour the settlement system, North Africa entered a period of consolidation and urbanisation. Towns were established to facilitate the spread of Islam. Later, they assumed political roles serving the ruling dynasties. This often resulted in discontinuity and in urban decline in times of internal disputes, but with prosperity in times of stability. To summarise, the main function of towns was religious although other functions (economic and administrative) evolved later as subordinate activities as towns developed. The urban city was a social organ assembled by various socio-cultural and religious forces of that time. Its form was essentially based on blood related social organisation, the separation between the private and public spaces, and their relation to the religious centre, the main mosque.

Unfortunately these towns were subject to systematic destruction by the French colonial invaders as part of the destruction of the Muslim identity of the North African populations. French "Christian" construction and

design norms were imposed, creating divergence between people and their environment. The independence of the North African states did not change much of the situation as they continued to apply these norms but under the name of modernisation. The North African city, as well as in many other Muslim regions, lost much of its Islamic identity so becoming increasingly ambiguous. The processes and consequences of this change will be discussed in another paper coming soon.

NOTES

¹ For more information on this issue see Delaval (1974) and Mr Shateh's article '[Interior Architecture of Desert Climate](#)'.

² Phoenicians originated from the eastern Mediterranean. They occupied North Africa in the 9th century BC.

³ The contemporary understanding of the concept of town is not applied here. It is used to mean a gathering of a large group of people on a site exercising activities and provided with services more developed than in rural areas. These include administrative, military and religious services.

⁴ This is based on the Phoenician currency and items found in Rabat which dated from the 3rd century BC. No other evidence of the Phoenician foundation of Rabat is yet provided.

⁵ For the difference between Masjid and Jami' see our article '[Morphological and functional categories of the Mosque](#)'.

⁶ Some sources indicate that Uqba was killed by Al-Kahina's plotting.

⁷ The six main towns were: Sijilmasa, Meknes, Fez (in Morocco); Tlemcen and Constantine (in Algeria) and Quairawan (in Tunisia).

⁸ Clearly defying the command emphasised in the Qur'an: "*And obey Allah and His Messenger and do not quarrel for then you will be weak in hearts and your power will depart, and be patient; surely Allah is with the patient*" (8:46)

⁹ Tunis, Mehdiya (Tunisia), Bejaia, Oran (in Algeria).

¹⁰ He was the Sultan, living in Algiers and designated by Constantinople.

¹¹ Such groups include: Moors, Arabs, Andalusians, Berbers, Kouloughlis (resulting from the marriage of Arabs and Turks), Turkish, and Jews.

¹² Algiers is the site of Icosium, a legendary city founded by 20 companions of the mythical hero Hercules. Icosium remained a small coastal trading post throughout the Phoenician and Carthaginian eras. In 146BC Icosium became part of the Roman Empire.

References

- Abdelkafi, J. (1989) 'La Medina de Tunis: Espace historique', Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris.
- Abu-Lughod, J. (1976) 'Development in North African urbanism: The process of decolonisation', B.J.L. Berry, (ed.) urbanisation and counter urbanisation, Sage Publications, London. pp. 191-213.
- Abu-Lughod, J. (1979) 'Moroccan urbanisation: Some new equations', in R.A. Obudho, and Salah El-Shakhs (eds.), 'Development of Urban Systems in Africa', Praeger publishers, New York, pp.61-78.
- Abu-Lughod, J. (1980) 'Rabat. urban apartheid in Morocco', Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Abun-Nasr, Jamil M. (1971) 'A history of the Maghreb', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Blake G.H. (1974) 'Urbanisation in North Africa: its nature and consequences', in D.J. Dwyer (ed.), 'The city in the third world', Macmillan, London. pp.67-80.
- Boyer, P. (1963) 'La vie quotidienne a Alger a la veill de l'intervention Francaise', editions Hachettes, Paris.
- Brahimi, T. (1978) 'Opinions et regards des Europeans sur le Maghreb au 17eme et 18 eme siecles', SNED, Algiers.
- Chandler and Fox (1974) '3000 years of urban growth', New York Academic Press, USA. pp.49-57.
- Charles Andre Julien (1986) 'Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord', Vol.I and II, Payot, Paris.
- Issaoui Charles (1969) 'Economic change and urbanisation in the Middle East', in Lapidus (ed.) Middle Eastern cities, University of California Press, USA. pp. 102-121.
- Clarke J.I. (1973) 'Urban population growth in the Middle East and North Africa', in J.Despois (ed.), Maghreb et Sahara, Societe de Geographie, Paris. pp.79-90.
- Courtois Christien (1955) 'Les Vandales et l'Afrique', Arts et Metiers Graphiques. Paris.
- Delaval, B. (1974) 'Urban communities of the Algerian Sahara', in Ekistics, Vol.38, No.227, pp.252-258.

- Eckart Ehlers (1986) 'The structural development and differentiation of the Moroccan city: Rabat, Marrakech and Meknes ; A cartographic and aerial-photographic analysis', in 'Applied Geography and Development, Vol.28', pp.56-83.
- Ibn Khaldun (1967) 'The Muqadimah', translated from the Arabic by F.Rosenthal, edited by Dawood, N.J., Princeton pub.
- Lambert, R. (1899) 'Algeria and Tunisia', 5th. edition, John Murray, London.
- Laroui Abdellah (1977) 'The history of the Maghreb', translated from French by Ralph Manheim, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, USA.
- Lawless, R.I. (1981) 'Social and economic change in North African medina : The case of Tunis', in J.I. Clarke, and H.B.Jones (eds.), 'Change and development in the Middle East', Methuen & Co Ltd, London. pp.264-279.
- Mumford, L.(1966) 'The City in History' Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, UK.
- Owens, E.,J. (1992) 'The City in the Greek and Roman World', Routledge, London.
- Parker Richard (1987) 'North Africa', Praeger, New York, USA.
- Vallensi Lucette (1977) 'On the Eve of Colonisation: North Africa before the French Conquest', translated by Kenneth, J.Perkins, African Publishing Company, USA.
- Wagstaff (1980) 'The origin and evolution of Towns:4000 BC to 1900 AD', in G.H.Blake, and R.I. Lawless (eds.), 'The Changing Middle Eastern City', Croom Helm, London, pp. 1-11.
- Woodford, J.S. (1990) 'The city of Tunis: Evolution of an urban system', Middle East and North African Studies Press Ltd. Cambridge.
-