

The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors: An Introduction

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This book takes an interdisciplinary and transregional approach to the Aghlabid dynasty and ninth-century North Africa, to highlight the region's important interchange with other medieval societies in the Mediterranean and beyond. It comprises new invited essays alongside revised versions of select papers presented at the symposium, "The Aghlabids and Their Neighbors: Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa," held in London in May 2014 under the aegis of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.¹ This event was originally intended as a small interdisciplinary workshop on the history and material culture of the Aghlabid dynasty of Ifriqiya and its immediate neighbors in the region, but it rapidly became a larger event when we realized the scale of scholarly interest in the topic. The workshop brought scholars together from different national as well as disciplinary traditions to consider the Aghlabids and their neighbors, with the aim of moving toward a more integrated understanding of this crucial dynasty and period within the Islamic world. Our stated aim in the call for papers was to consider North Africa not as a peripheral frontier whose artistic production was inferior to or derivative of trends in the Abbasid heartlands of Iraq and Egypt, which is how it has long been situated in the history of Islamic art, but as one of the vibrant centers of the early medieval *dār al-Islām*. In doing so, we hoped not only to reevaluate problematic yet persistent notions of the region's peripherality in Islamic (art) history and archaeology, but also to illuminate processes of acculturation and interaction between ninth-century North Africa, Iberia, Sicily/Italy, and other regions. These same hopes inform the production of this volume, which we would like to stand as a state of the question on the Aghlabids and their material culture at this academic moment, as well as to propose new directions for future study.

1 See the conference website with program and audio recordings: <http://aghlabid.web.unc.edu/program/>

The Aghlabids and North Africa

The Muslim conquest of the Maghrib was notoriously long and contested.² Neither the Umayyads nor the Abbasids ever managed to establish firm control over North Africa, and the eighth century was characterized by repeated rebellions and revolts of both the local Berber populations and rival factions in the Muslim armies (the *jund*). In 800, the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) appointed Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab hereditary amir of Ifriqiya. Ibrahim's ancestors originally hailed from northern Arabia and had participated in the conquest of Khurasan, where they subsequently established themselves. Ibrahim's arrival in North Africa was part of a series of Abbasid gubernatorial appointments of Arabs from Khurasan, which included the Muhallabids, giving rise to the widespread use of the *nisba* "al-Khurasani" throughout the medieval period.³ Ibrahim and his successors quelled the rebellious *jund* and Berber tribesmen, and established what was to be the first autonomous state within the Abbasid caliphate.

This state was centered around Kairouan and the palatial cities of al-'Abbasīya (founded in 800) and Raqqada (founded in 876) in Ifriqiya proper – roughly what are now modern Tunisia, eastern Algeria, and western coastal Libya. At its peak, under Ibrahim II (r. 875–902), the reach of the Aghlabids extended far beyond Ifriqiya to Sicily, the Italian mainland, Malta, Sardinia, and Corsica. Aghlabid interest sometimes equated to conquest and direct rule, as in the case of Sicily, which proved to be an important counter in diplomatic negotiations with Byzantine Italy.⁴ More often, however, it was limited to raids on the islands and shores of the central Mediterranean launched from their ports in Sousse and Tunis. They even sailed up the Tiber and sacked Rome in 846. It was within this Mediterranean maritime context that the Aghlabid rulers of North Africa defined their position against the Byzantines, who still held much of Italy and Sicily, as well as their rivals, the Umayyads in al-Andalus and the Tulunids to the east.

The Aghlabids were not the only ones to lay claim to North Africa. Several decades earlier, new embryonic Muslim states had emerged in the uplands of the Aurés, the pre-desert and the Sahara, and above all western Morocco: the Barghawata (744); the Rustamids (776); the Idrisids (788), and the Sufrites of Sijilmassa (758). The forms of these states varied depending on local circumstances. Sometimes, as with the Idrisids of central Morocco, incomers from

2 Fenwick, "Arab Conquest of North Africa."

3 On the origins of the Aghlabids, see Talbi, *L'émirat aghlabide*.

4 Nef, "Comment les Aghlabides ont décidé." See also, Amari, *Storia dei Musulmani*.