

Africa's Transitions to the Middle Ages

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In history writing, we need to have words, whether technical or not, to denote economic tendencies, changes in institutions, exchanged objects, or social practices. These words may remain the same, but behind their stability, they designate specific historical configurations. In this concluding note, I reflect on the possible meaning of the words we currently use to describe the social and economic histories of Africa in the long era stretching from 300 to 900 CE (or even 1000, as the title of this collection argues). I draw particular attention to the word “transition” which in the contemporary literature has become an umbrella term to describe any kind of transformation occurring across time. The result of this intellectual operation is that any implication about historical periodization and “structural changes” has vanished from the research agenda. In outlining the contents of this collection, my crucial task here is to restore the potent analytical meaning that a word such as transition implies and to reject the tendency to transform the descriptive into the explanatory.

Keywords: Africa, Late Antiquity, Islam, transition, transformation, economy, trade

If there is an overarching theme common to the essays collected in this volume, it is their inclination to think of the history of Mediterranean Africa from 300 to 900 CE in terms of transition.¹ They do so along the lines argued in the recent literature regarding Africa.² Transition is indeed a recurrent word throughout the entire collection, where African history is described (more or less explicitly) as a continuous process of transformation driven (or “punctuated”) by a series of transitions within and beyond Late Antiquity. Changes are presented as the completion of the social system which had emerged from the transformation of the Roman institutions, and which became visible following the Islamic expansion.³

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- 1 In this essay I use the term Mediterranean Africa or simply Africa to refer to the lands stretching from western Libya to Morocco, which are conventionally labelled the Maghreb. For an overview of this ecological space, see Shaw, *A Peculiar Island*, 93-99.
- 2 Leone *et al.*, *From Africa to Ifriqiya*. Introduction, 1-6; Conant, *Forgotten transition*, 11-21; Stevens, *Carthage in transition*, 89-103; Leone, *Cultural transitions in archaeology*, 265-277; Sjöstrom, *Tripolitania in Transition*, 1-3.
- 3 See the introduction to this themed section: Steinacher and Margreiter, *Africa 500-1000: Introduction*; for comparable analysis, see Stevens and Conant, *Introduction: Reimagining Byzantine Africa*, 1-12; Brown, *Byzantine and early Islamic Africa*, 295-301.

If this narrative is correct, then at the end of this volume one may legitimately ask what this process of transformation-cum-transition(s) was really about. The answer is anything but simple and requires some theoretical as well as empirical clarifications. There are two opposite characterizations and uses of the notion of transition in modern scholarship: transition as a decline, and transition as synonymous with transformation.

As a potent concept of political economy, the term “transition” is used to indicate the passage between two periods, during which the conditions are created for a change that is so significant that it affects overall periodization. As a concept describing change, transition is not neutral, but presupposes a rejection of the continuist hypothesis.

In a more generic and less theoretical sense, however, the term “transition” is useful for indicating slow and protracted changes. These changes lead to a different scenario, but in a linear way, without tensions or leaps forward, or sudden ruptures. This concept of transition has no specific implications as regards periodization. In essence, transition implies the antithesis of crisis, and is synonymous with transformation in its most continuist significance.⁴

In what follows, I will try to review these two uses of transition in the light of the new insights, approaches and understanding of late antique and medieval Africa presented in the recent literature, including the essays gathered in this collection. My own view, which I shall be setting out in more detail in the course of these pages, is that the concept of transition applied to Africa implies systemic discontinuities that directly affected the relationship between production and exchange across the whole African economy.

I begin with transition as decline. The legacy of French colonialism, and its political counterpart, has exerted, and still exerts, a powerful influence over how this meaning of transition applies to African history.⁵ Treatments of Roman and post-Roman Africa in particular seem unable to evade the framework set by the French colonial agenda, in which conquest (either Roman, Vandal, Byzantine or Islamic) is both a moment of transition and an actual marker of historical periodization.⁶ The essays of Bonny Effros and Andy Merrills can be said to be part of an outright attempt to cast off this colonial agenda.⁷ They do so by emphasizing two opposing visions of conquest as they emerge in the writings of ancient and colonial authors. The crucial point of their analyses is that both colonial discourse and its historiographical inversion tend to present African history in a perennial status of binary partition between conquerors and conquered, colonizers and colonized, or rulers and subalterns, while Africa’s past differs radically from such narratives. In the first case, these narratives produce anachronism, in the second case, ethnocentrism: in both cases, it is a matter of failing to question one’s own system of knowledge.⁸ Historians apply a concept born at a given moment, in a particular historical circumstance (such as the French colonial conquest or the Algerian revolution), to other realities (the Roman imperial restoration or the Islamic conquest).⁹ They

4 Giardina, *Perspectives in Roman history*, 743-744; Giardina, *Transition to Late Antiquity*, 29-30. See also Liebeschuetz, *Transformation and decline*, 45-47; Pohl, *Transformation*, 45-61.

5 Courtois, *Les Vandales et l’Afrique*; Modéran, *Les Vandales et l’Empire Romain*; Lassère, *Africa, quasi Roma*.

6 Hitchner, *Africa, quasi Roma*, 757; Hitchner, *De Africa Romaque: Some concluding thoughts*, 259; Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power*, 43-72; Vermeren, *Misère de l’historiographie*, 11-17.

7 Effros, *A new age of Saint Augustine?*; Merrills, *A subaltern’s view of early Byzantine Africa?*

8 Bourdieu and Chartier, *The Sociologist and the Historian*, 13.

9 Yacine, *Nedjma*, 135, quoted in Hannoum, *Violent Modernity*, 2.

do this in order to test that concept, but also to display this older reality in a more striking fashion. Yet what is clear from the study of imperial and ethnohistory is that the subjects of the two kinds of history are the same. The more history we know, the more clearly “their” history and “our” history emerge as part of the same history. Thus, there can be no “African history” apart from “Roman or Arab History”, only a component of a common history suppressed or omitted from conventional study for economic, political or ideological reasons.¹⁰

Although transition can be applied to the narration and interpretation of a decline, we shall see in a moment that not all transitions imply decline. The best way of reframing the problem of decline and of avoiding the catastrophist implications of connecting transition with conquest is to think of history (and in particular ancient economic history) as marked by cycles, that is, as broad fluctuations across whole swathes of history.¹¹ We can distinguish between two great economic cycles in the Mediterranean and the lands around it in the first millennium. The first was that of the Roman Empire, which peaked in its density and scale in the fourth century in the West, the early sixth in the East, and which unified the whole Mediterranean on the level of the exchange of products, more fully in fact than it has ever been unified since.¹² The later seventh century appears to have been the start of a cyclical downturn, which was, however, peculiar to the Byzantine Empire and did not involve the territories under Islamic control.¹³ Although a contraction of social and economic life took place on its shores as a consequence of the disintegration of the imperial fiscal network and due to the Islamic expansion, the Mediterranean did not become an under-developed area. From the end of the eighth century, beginnings of new political and commercial vitality appear, particularly in Africa and Sicily.¹⁴ It is at this point – in the decades around 800 – that Mediterranean historians date the initial appearance of the second Mediterranean trade cycle, which slowly but steadily increased in scale over the next two centuries up to the notable levels of activity visible in the Geniza archive around 1000.¹⁵

If, on the one hand, this interpretation defies a catastrophist thesis, on the other hand, it opens the way to the second and opposite meaning of transition: the continuist version. Some scholars take the explanation based on the succession of cycles as consistent with the view of economic continuity, that is, that trade assured the continuity of the commercial economy despite changes in political regimes (or mere fiscal crises).¹⁶ The picture that emerges for Africa from numerous recent publications is one in which persistent occupation of sites and the trade in commodities (whether these were agrarian surplus, slaves or textiles) are

10 Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, 19. See also Mattingly, *Imperialism, power*, 26-30.

11 Banaji, *Exploring the Economy*, 19-22; Tedesco, *Late Antiquity, early Islam*, 127-128.

12 Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, 89-95; Ward-Perkins, *Specialization, trade and prosperity*, 175; Wickham, *Mediterranean around 800*, 164.

13 Whittow, *Decline and fall?*, 407; Banaji, *Exploring the Economy*, 20; Zavagno, *Cyprus*, 175; Tedesco, *Late Antiquity, early Islam*, 127-128.

14 Delogu, *Transformation of the Roman world*, 256; Banaji, *Exploring the Economy*, 26.

15 McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 434, 508-515; Wickham, *Mediterranean around 800*, 164; Wickham, *Framing*, 720-728.

16 Leone *et al.*, *Africa-Ifriqiya*; the criticism is in Wickham, *Africa-Ifriqiya: Conclusions*, 317; more generally, Wickham, *Historical transitions*, 1-6; Wickham, *Problems of comparison*, 221-231; Tedesco, *Late Antiquity, early Islam*, 142-143.

taken as manifestations not only of the continuity of the Mediterranean exchange but also of the infrastructures that sustained it. This reading defuses historical dynamics and does not really help us in thinking about state formation or political power as experienced concretely through fiscal structures or economic relationships. Production and exchange in themselves form too broad a conceptual framework to consider the gradual shifts and changes in the sub-structures of society, economy, and state.¹⁷ In brief, this approach raises the problem of how socio-economic systems are compared.¹⁸ For my part, I usually distrust comparisons of the before/after type, and a fortiori grand generalizations about economic trends. They lead us to fret over false problems of comparing economic indicators such as production and exchange, without seeing that we are dealing with two totally different structures, in which the rates of representation that are translated into figures (numbers of sites or exchanges of commodities, for example) do not have the same economic meaning in the two different historical contexts. Given these premises, I shall compare in the following paragraphs the structures that we think sustain the economic and social life of the African people from 300 to 900 CE.

The history of the African economy under the Late Empire is well known. Africa, with Tunisia at its center, was deeply and productively integrated on both Mediterranean-wide and regional levels into the imperial economy. African provinces exported their agrarian surplus (mainly grain, oil, wine and salsamenta) in the form of taxes, rents or trade all over the Mediterranean basin. The motor of this economic organization was above all the Roman tax system, which underwrote the transfer of rents and commercial sea traffic, particularly from the African producing regions to the centers of consumption. In the 440s, the Vandals severed African fiscal links to the rest of the Mediterranean. This collapse of the fiscal machinery in the fifth century led to the end of a system of extraction, distribution and investment of wealth that was the basis of the Western imperial economy.¹⁹ Commercial export of Tunisian goods continued, however, owing to both the ability of the Afro-Roman landowners to reorient their production to new networks and to the economic boom of the Eastern Mediterranean that assured a stable demand for bulk commodities. While a substantial share of such commodities exported from Vandal Africa was bought by merchants in exchange for eastern foodstuffs or gold coins, a portion was paid for through the money collected via taxation in the territories under western and eastern imperial control.²⁰ This meant that the African

17 Haldon, *Problems with periodization?*, 39.

18 Wickham, *Land and Power*, 77-98; Whittow, *Decline and fall?*, 408-10; Liebeschuetz, *Transformation and decline*, 40-45.

19 McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 103-111; Wickham, *Framing*, 87-92; Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 226-238; Sarris, *Integration and disintegration*, 171-176.

20 Procopius, *BV* I,20,5: merchants at Carthage; Loseby, *Mediterranean economy*, 626; Reynolds, *From Vandal Africa to Arab Ifriqiya*, 139; for the reorientation of imperial taxes, see Tedesco, *The missing factor*, 399-400.

productive infrastructures were still partially integrated into the Mediterranean system of exchange, despite the political fission from the empire.²¹ After the Byzantine conquest in the 530s, the shift of the center of the empire towards Constantinople determined a slow reorganization of taxation and of the interconnected trade across the Mediterranean away from the west.²² Between 620 and 650, the imperial authority reinforced those fiscal links with Africa and Sicily via the tax arrangements called *coemptiones* (compulsory purchases undertaken in exchange for monetary payments under the control of local officials) from estates concentrated primarily in northern and central Tunisia.²³ Although the relative quantities of traded commodities versus taxes increased, the overall system did not change between 450 and 650. What did actually change in this period was the number and scale of the African sites producing goods for Mediterranean export: these constantly decreased, and, as a consequence, African goods were steadily less and less available elsewhere in the Mediterranean.²⁴ Furthermore, the patterns of archaeological finds in Africa indicate that products went from the hinterland to the coasts along separate paths, while very little internal economic integration took place.²⁵

Regional divergence is a key element of the process of transformation in Africa from the late seventh century onwards, as a result both of the waning of the unified political-economic system of the Eastern Roman Empire,²⁶ as well as the fragmentation of the caliphate that came with the Kharajite movements in the 750s and the coincidental decline of the Umayyad.²⁷ In this changing context, an apparently greater degree of fluidity or flexibility in social identities, status and power relationships allowed local elites to gain access to and control over the distribution and consumption of wealth.²⁸ If there were substantial Arab landowners in Tunisia, they are quite likely to have been occupying fiscal and absentee-owner land, much as the Vandal and Byzantine elites probably had.²⁹ This meant that regional capitals like Tunis, Kairouan, and later Fez, served as urban hubs of economic activity on a smaller scale than Carthage, but still large enough to be significant.³⁰ However, the weakening of systematic taxation (already evident during the end of Byzantine rule) and the localization of surplus extractive mechanisms meant that the true heart of the system lay at a lower level,

21 Fulford, Pottery and the economy, 9; Kingsley and Decker, *New Rome, new theories*, 13, 20 f. 91; Wickham, *Studying long-term change*, 388-390; Reynolds, *From Vandal Africa to Arab Ifriqiya*, 132-137; Reynolds, *The supply network*, 387-388; Tedesco, *Economia e moneta*, 119-124; Tedesco, *The missing factor*, 398-404.

22 Loseby, *Mediterranean economy*, 615-617; Laiou and Morriison, *Byzantine Economy*, 24-26, 35; Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 155-157.

23 Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die*, 201, 262; Prigent, *Le rôle des provinces d'Occident*, 290-293; Morriison, *African economy*, 193-195; Conant, *Forgotten transition*, 15.

24 Wickham, *Studying long-term change*, 390; Conant, *Staying Roman*, 139-141; Leone, *Topographies of production*, 274-277; Leone, *Changing Townscapes*, 133, 142, 159-160.

25 Wickham, *Africa-Ifriqiya: conclusions*, 318.

26 Haldon, *Production, distribution and demand*, 230-243; Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die*, 197-204.

27 Brett, *Arab conquest*, 513-522; Brett and Fentress, *Berbers*, 81-98; Manzano Moreno, *Iberian Peninsula and North Africa*, 590-593, 610-613.

28 Haldon, *Framing the transformation*, 333.

29 Talbi, *Law and economy*, 210-214; Wickham, *Africa-Ifriqiya: conclusions*, 319.

30 Carthage: Bockmann, *Capital Continuous*, 125-129; Stevens, *Carthage in transition*, 89-103; Tunis and Kairouan: Bockmann, *Late Byzantine and early Islamic Carthage*, 77-89; Fez: Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 113.

in smaller, commercially active centers like Mahdia, Sijilmāsa, Tahert, and Sfax, and their vibrant networks. These centers were the true backbone of the economy, but each had its own separate economic story.³¹ Tunis included among its products cotton, which was exported to Kairouan, apparently with good profits. Flax for linen production was also grown there.³² Cotton was also cultivated in Tubna, Msila, and Biskra.³³ Mahdia in the Sahel manufactured finely worked textiles proclaiming “Made in Mahdia”, which were widely exported since the workmanship was of a high standard. The port itself attracted merchant shipping from all parts of the Mediterranean.³⁴ Numerous other ports and inland towns in Ifrīqiya served as important hubs for the gathering and re-export to the Middle East of white slaves captured in Southern Europe and of black slaves taken in Sub-Saharan Africa.³⁵ Along the same southern routes, as Isabel Toral discusses, Berber and Arab merchants also imported gold.³⁶ Although we have little information about the prices paid for such ore and the amounts of gold that were then exported across the Sahara, Islamic *dinars* (gold coins) are an invaluable source for documenting the transregional demand for West African gold.³⁷ Islamic *dirhams* (silver coins), on the other hand, bear testimony to commercial (and, at times, tributary) relations between Ifrīqiya and the Middle East.³⁸ African coastal towns looked not only southward and eastward, they also reoriented their interests towards the central Mediterranean, where Sicily served as intermediary between a plurality of Tunisian ports and various commercial centers in Southern Europe and elsewhere in the Mediterranean.³⁹ On the local production side, Antonia Bosanquet argues on the basis of an analysis of the legal sources that agrarian production re-emerged from the ninth century onwards, and that agrarian surplus was widely traded across the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Elisabeth Fentress seems to reinforce this point, showing how changes in housing and diet involved a shift in the storage system through the introduction of silos.⁴¹ Fentress’ essay also lends support to those who (like Chris Wickham in his essay on historical transitions and myself in this brief note) adopt changes in economy as the main interpretive parameter of the concept of “transition”.⁴² Her contribution shows

31 Von Rummel, Transformation of ancient land and cityscapes, 108; Fenwick, Fate of the classical cities of North Africa, 138-140; Stevens, Not just a tale of two cities, 248-253; Leone, Cultural transitions in archaeology, 273-275; Leone, Land, forts, and harbours, 280-282.

32 Baker, *Islamic Textiles*, 24.

33 Lamm, *Cotton in Mediaeval Textiles*, 244-246.

34 Banaji, *Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*, 131; Valérian, *Ports et Réseaux d'Échanges*, 53; Picard, *La Mer des Califes*, 161.

35 Savage, Berbers and Blacks, 353-357; Alexander, Islam, archaeology, and slavery, 45-47, 49.

36 Toral, Umayyad dynasty and the Western Maghreb, 97, 99 with nt. 27.

37 Messier, Dinars as historical texts, 204-205; Austen, Sources of gold, 67.

38 Heidemann, Circulation of North African dirhams, 462-463.

39 Morrisson, La Sicile byzantine, 307-317; Prigent, Mints, coin production and circulation, 340-342; Molinari, Sicily between the 5th and the 10th century, 104-107; Arcifa, Byzantine Sicily, 479-486; Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 138; Tedesco, Exploring the economy, 183, 185-186.

40 Status of question: Watson, *Agricultural Innovation*, 2-3, 123-128; Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 95-99. For a set of qualifications, see Decker, Plants and progress, 190-191, 203-206; Bosanquet, Maritime trade from 3rd/9th-century Ifrīqiya; for comparable archaeological examinations, see Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 95; Leone, Cultural transitions in archaeology, 275.

41 Fentress, Islamizing Berber lifestyles.

42 Wickham, Historical transitions, 5-6.

that to contest this approach would be a mistake.⁴³ The economy is part of the social system, part of culture. One is always forced to take account of socio-cultural factors that are bound to impinge upon the economy as well as upon all economic operations, which are always subject to cultural considerations, since all are part of the same social system.⁴⁴

African socio-economic histories as they emerge from the picture summarized above make it possible, I believe, to conceive of the notion of transition in terms of discontinuity. There is a tremendous break in Africa between 700 and 800. The late seventh- and eighth-century crisis in the region was systemic and deep.⁴⁵ It determined a transition from a Mediterranean world in which Africans produced within an exchange system based on trade supported by distribution, to a world where Africa's economy was turned upside down, with the people of its isolated regions producing at the local level in the absence of an integrated market. In order to exchange, they had to have enough capital, and a commercial network that would allow exports at regional and interregional levels, knowing that without these tools they would not sell a single product.

The investigative challenge for historians is not to identify the moment when the transition from one system to the next took place: 700, 750, or 780. One could characterize this as the search for origins, while always intriguing, is never satisfying because there is hardly ever a single monocausal answer. Instead one should focus on the structural outcomes of this process of change. The crucial point is to acquire sufficient knowledge to portray the structural situation that was typical for production and exchange, the role that merchants and commercial capital played in this new phase, and finally to explain why recovery required well over a century, and, even then, as Chris Wickham has reminded us, the region did not achieve the levels of economic integration found in 400 and perhaps even in 500.⁴⁶

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43 Fentress, Islamizing Berber lifestyles, 67-93 and her early article, Romanizing the Berbers, 27-31.

44 Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity*, 48.

45 Wickham, Africa-Ifriqiya: conclusions, 319.

46 Wickham, Africa-Ifriqiya: conclusions, 319. For the role of merchants and commercial capital, see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 149-161; McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 693-695; Banaji, *Brief History of Commercial Capitalism*, 129-133.

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