

Book Review

Aillet, Cyrille. *L'archipel ibadite. Une histoire des marges du Maghreb médiéval*. Collection Mondes Médiévaux. Lyon: CIHAM-Éditions, 2022. ISBN: 9782956842644. 592 pp. €45 paper.

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How to write a long-term history of the Maghribi Ibadis without reproducing the dominant narrative, either of the Arab imperial authors or of the Ibadi historiography itself? This is the question that Cyrille Aillet asks in the introduction to his magisterial work, *L'archipel ibadite. Une histoire des marges du Maghreb médiéval*, which covers the history of the Ibadi community between what is now Mali and Libya from the eighth to the thirteenth century. As he shows throughout the book, authors writing within the Islamic empire tended to portray the Maghribi Ibadis in a negative light. This was partly because they regarded Ibadism as a development from the sectarian Kharijite movement and also because most Ibadis of the Maghrib belonged to the non-Arab population of the region, whom the Arabs referred to as Berbers. Negative portrayals of “Berbers,” which abound in Arab imperial texts about the Maghrib, came to be conflated with their practice of Islam and their adoption of Ibadism from the eighth century. Aillet shows in the first two chapters of the book how adverse views of “Berbers” and Ibadism affected the Ibadis’ own historiography, as the authors sought to legitimize and integrate their interpretation of the religion into a broader Islamic narrative.

Another challenge that Aillet addresses in his book is the view of the Ibadi community as a marginal phenomenon of the Islamic world. Aillet, who has devoted considerable attention in previous works to notions of centrality, margins, and connectivity in empire, makes this question the pivot of his study of Ibadi history in the Maghrib. Throughout the eleven chapters he focuses on the question of how the Ibadi presence along the edges of the Islamic Maghrib shaped the region and its relation to the Islamic world and how this presence can be seen as politically and culturally unified despite its lack of territorial contiguity.

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Broadly speaking, the book takes a chronological approach to the question. After the first chapter on the sources for Ibadi history, which includes an invaluable overview of manuscript collections in the Mزاب, Djerba, and Nafusa mountain region, in the second and third chapters he focuses on views about the early history of the Ibadis in Sunni and Ibadi historiography. One of his arguments in this discussion is that Ibadi historiography portrays the community as both autochthonous to the Maghrib and integrally linked to the Islamic east owing to the Basran origins of Ibadism and the Persian genealogy of the Rustamid dynasty.

The fourth chapter about Tahert, the capital of the Rustamid dynasty between 777 and 909 in what is now Algeria, contains a valuable discussion about the location of the city and its relation to pre-Islamic settlements. This chapter also contains an overview of the history of the Rustamids in Tahert and depicts the dynasty as mediators between different tribal, ethnic, and religious groups rather than rulers over a closed territorial entity. This depiction is developed in the following chapter, which summarizes the tribes that adhered to the Ibadi sect and shows how the fostering of relations between network nodes, rather than hegemonic rule from the center, was what characterized the Ibadi community during the Rustamid era. Aillet argues that it was its decentralized character that enabled the Ibadi community to survive the end of Rustamid rule, when the Fatimids captured Tahert as part of their conquest of the Maghrib in 909. In the sixth chapter he addresses the historical and historiographical changes after this conquest. Although he contests the binary view of a flourishing, united community under Rustamid rule and decline and dissipation after 909, he does show how Fatimid expansion into the central Maghrib began a process of Sunnification throughout the region. As shown in the seventh chapter, many Ibadi communities adopted Sunnism from the tenth century, and Ibadi presence was gradually reduced to smaller settlements in Djebel Nafusa, Djerba, the Mزاب valley, and Saharan oases such as Ouargla. Rather than Fatimid aggression, the Sunnification of Ibadi tribes was largely a response to pressure from post-Fatimid emirates such as the Zirids (972–ca. 1014) and the Hammadids (1014–1152) as they competed with other regional powers for territorial control. Later, in the twelfth century, the incursions of the Ayyubid commander Qarāqūsh put further pressure on Ibadi communities, as did the raids of the Banu Ghāniyya from the thirteenth century, who used Ibadi settlements for their conflict with the Almohads.

The portrayal of diminishing Ibadi presence in chapter 8 segues into the analysis of chapter 9, which examines the role of Ibadi scholars in defining the history and historiography of the remaining community. Aillet shows how the *‘azzāba* institution, roughly translatable as a council of elders, took on the administrative as well as the spiritual leadership of the community and also preserved wider Ibadi connections throughout the Maghrib.

It is possible to dispute Aillet’s view of doctrinal unity as the basis for inter-tribal cooperation, or at least to complicate it. For example, the Ibadi rebel Abū Yazīd b. Makhlad was able to mobilize wide support against the Fatimids between 944 and 947, but most Ibadi tribes refused to join him because, as Aillet argues in chapter 5, Abū Yazīd belonged to the Nukkārī branch of Ibadism, and the larger Wahbī branch was reluctant to extend him a political leg-up. One could argue that the schism between the Nukkārīs and the Wahbīs

was not exclusively doctrinal (although when is any schism exclusively doctrinal?), but it remains the case that our perception of cohesion between the Maghribi Ibadis is partly a result of our reliance on accounts produced within the Wahbī Ibadī communities. Perhaps if texts written by Nukkārī Ibadis or members of other dissident Ibadī groups had survived, a different picture of the Ibadī community would emerge.

However, doctrinal unity is not the only lens that Aillet uses to analyze the links between the nodes of the Ibadī network. His examination of sub-Saharan trade routes in the book's last two chapters highlights how economic dependencies accompanied doctrinal and intellectual relations. While the outline of the three key routes from north into sub-Saharan Africa in chapter 10 will not be new to readers with a background in trans-Saharan trade networks, the analysis of the trade's impact on Ibadī self-consciousness and its enabling of intellectual and religious communication makes it an important contribution to the field. So too is the chapter's emphasis on Jewish and other non-Ibadī participation in the trans-Maghribi trade routes. The eleventh and last chapter focuses on Wārjlān, a settlement in what is now the Ouargla province of Algeria. This city, which became a key connection between sub-Saharan and north Africa from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, has been the subject of excellent archaeological research but its significance for the development of the Ibadī network has received less academic attention. Therefore, Aillet's analysis of how this settlement served as an intellectual and geographical link between different Ibadī communities is an important advancement in this regard.

Aillet's archipelago model of Ibadī history is a welcome corrective to the center-periphery approach often found in studies of the Islamic Empire. At the same time, his deconstruction of Ibadī historiography, particularly the "golden age" view of the Rustamid era, is a valuable contribution to understanding memory and identity construction in religious communities. The Maghrib-specific component of the book's argument, that the Ibadis of the Maghrib fundamentally shaped the character of the region between the late eighth and the fourteenth century, might not be as new to readers as it was when Aillet began his research over a decade previously. But this is largely due to the excellent research that Aillet has coordinated or produced in this field, of which *L'archipel ibadite* is the fullest demonstration. The scrupulous attention to detail, range of sources, and incorporation of different contextual levels (imperial, Maghribi, Ibadī local and translocal) is outstanding in a study of this geographical and historical scope. While posing as many new questions as it answers, Aillet's *L'archipel ibadite* has already become required reading for any researcher of medieval Maghribi or Ibadī history. However, historians of the Maghrib or of the Islamic empire in later periods will also benefit from this superb analysis of a construction of religious community that enabled intellectual and political cohesion across dispersed geographical territory and that underpinned enduring relations between the Maghrib and the rest of the Islamic world.