

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Pioneers of the Islamic Conquest in the Central Maghreb: From the Campaign of Mu‘āwiya ibn Ḥudayj to the Killing of al-Kāhina (44 AH / 665 CE – 96 AH / 689 CE)

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Abstract:

This study aims to shed light on a significant and decisive period in the history of the Central Maghreb, represented by the early arrival of Muslim expansionists to the western regions for the purpose of spreading Islam. The research seeks to address this topic by highlighting its various aspects as manifested in historical reality. Particularly, during this period, the Maghreb—corresponding to present-day North Africa constituted a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups driven by their own interests and tribal loyalties. The study analyzes these events and stresses the consequences of the Muslims’ determination to complete the campaigns despite fierce resistance from the local populations, who were led by native leaders, especially after the defeat and expulsion of the Byzantines from major cities and urban centers, notably from Carthage, their principal capital.

Keywords: Islamic expansionists, Central Maghreb, ‘Uqba ibn Nāfi’, al-Kāhina, Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān.

Introduction:

The topic of the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb in general, and of its central region in particular, is of great significance, especially in its early phase. This is because, despite the abundance of studies that have addressed the subject, the events of the Islamic conquests in their initial stage—what we have termed the “pioneers of the conquest”—have not received sufficient analysis and explanation. This is particularly evident given the continued presence of the main obstructive force confronting the conquering army and its leaders, namely the Byzantines, along with the Romanized Africans. For this reason, we have undertaken the study of this phase, providing an analytical and explanatory approach to the events that had a direct impact on the course of the Islamic conquests in their early stage in the Central Maghreb (present-day Algeria).

The Research Problem:

It is well known that the Maghreb in the second half of the seventh century CE was characterized by a human mosaic composed of various tribes, some of which were indigenous, namely Berber, while others were of diverse origins and ethnic backgrounds, including Greeks, Romans, Vandals, and others. This situation raises a central problem for the study, namely: to what extent would the Muslims succeed in dealing with this complex reality in order to spread the Muhammadan message and confront those elements that hindered the conquest, especially the Byzantines?

➤ And how would the local population react under Byzantine political and security control over the region, and to what extent would this control shape events in a way that served Byzantine interests?

➤ What was the role of the local leaders (such as Kusaila and al-Kāhina) after the defeat of the Byzantines, and how did they communicate with the local population?

It is worth noting that the subject of the beginnings, or early manifestations, of the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb has been addressed by many researchers on the basis of what the early historians of that period wrote, foremost among them Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and his book *Futūḥ Ifrīqiya wa-al-Andalus*, followed by Ibn al-Athīr and his work *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* (vol. 3), as well as Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr and his book *al-Istī‘āb fī Asmā’ al-Aṣḥāb*. In addition, a number of other references were important for our study of the topic, such as al-Ḥabīb al-Jinhānī and his book *al-Qayrawān through Its Civilizational Flourishing*, and Mūsā Laqbal and his work *The Islamic Maghreb*, among other studies that addressed the subject. These works assisted us in analyzing the topic and in reaching a set of objectives, the most important of which are:

1. Highlighting the condition of the Central Maghreb on the eve of, and during, the Islamic conquest.
2. Emphasizing that the pioneers of the Islamic conquest played a decisive role in ensuring the continuity of the Muhammadan message and its spread throughout the Maghreb in general, and the Central Maghreb in particular.
3. Demonstrating the role of local leaderships in prolonging the period of the conquests by rallying the Berbers and uniting them around their cause, without excluding the Byzantine element from this phenomenon.

To achieve these objectives and to address the main research problem, as well as the subsidiary issues that stem from it, we adopted the following plan:

1. 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' and the Pioneers of the Conquest (51 AH / 55 AH).
2. Abū al-Muhājir Dīnār succeeds 'Uqba and continues the conquest of the Maghreb.
3. The dismissal of Abū al-Muhājir Dīnār and the reappointment of 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' as commander of the conquest.
4. The repercussions of the Battle of Tahuda on the Islamic conquests.
5. The killing of Kusaila and the Muslims' regaining of the initiative.
6. Ḥassān ibn al-Nu'mān concludes the conquest.

Preface :

Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was content with the conquest and consolidation of Egypt and did not pay any attention to Africa; in fact, he opposed 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ's proposal to invade it, saying: «“It is not truly Africa, but a divided land, treacherous and betrayed; no one will be able to conquer it as long as it remains so...”»¹ .

However, when 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān assumed the caliphate, the perspective on Africa changed, as Caliph 'Uthmān appointed 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd ibn Abī al-Sarḥ over Egypt 2 Who led a campaign against Africa and achieved a decisive victory over the Byzantines in 29 AH / 644 CE in the city of Sbeṭla³. Where a decisive battle took place in which the Byzantine commander Gregory was killed, and this battle became known as the Battle of al-'Abādila.

1 Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Ifrīqiya wa-al-Andalus*, edited by 'Abdullāh Anīs al-Ṣabbāgh, Dar al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, Beirut, Lebanon, 1964, p. 33.

2 It seems that 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd knew how to leverage his familial connection to Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (his brother through milk kinship), as he consulted his close aides and acted contrary to the orders of the previous caliph. He proceeded to invade Africa and fought the famous battle in the city of Sbeṭla in 29 AH / 650 CE, defeating the Byzantine governor and commander Gregory. He then made a peace agreement with the Berbers and left the region, returning to Egypt. For further information, see: Ibn al-Athīr, **al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh**, 6th edition, Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, Beirut, Lebanon, 1986, vol. 3, p. 46.

3 Jamāl Masrahī, “The Battle of Sbeṭla in 29 AH / 644 CE and the Early Signs of the Islamic Conquest in the Maghreb,” **Al-Muqaddima lil-Dirāsāt al-Insāniyya wa-al-Ijtimā'iyya** (The Introduction to Human and Social Studies), Vol. 7, No. 1, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Batna 1, 2022, pp. 485–500.

The Muslims failed to capitalize on their spectacular victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of Sbeṭla, as they chose to retreat beyond Tripoli instead of settling in the Maghreb and consolidating their presence. Consequently, the Byzantines quickly attempted to regain control after reorganizing their ranks, taking advantage of the Muslims' withdrawal to Egypt, and then of their preoccupation with the conflicts among the Companions following the assassination of Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, which disrupted the momentum of the conquests in general.

The Islamic conquests did not return to their former momentum until authority passed to Mu'āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān in 41 AH / 662 CE, who resumed the campaign by sending Mu'āwiya ibn Ḥudayj in 45 AH / 665 CE to Africa at the head of ten thousand soldiers¹.

The dispatch of the latter came after the death of the governor of Egypt, 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ, in 43 AH. Consequently, Ibn Ḥudayj was entrusted with both the governance of Egypt and the leadership of the conquest in Africa simultaneously. Accordingly, Ibn Ḥudayj appointed 'Uqba ibn 'Āmir al-Juhānī as governor of Egypt in his stead, while he himself organized an army and marched to Africa in 44 AH, successfully consolidating trust with the Berber tribes there².

By the year 50 AH / 670 CE, Mu'āwiya ibn Ḥudayj was dismissed from Africa, and 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' was appointed in his place, the latter having been settled in the city of Barqah since its conquest during the time of 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ³.

1. 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' and the Pioneers of the Conquest (51–55 AH):

The new commander set about building the camp of Kairouan to serve as a base for launching military campaigns. He also aimed to ensure the continued adherence of the people of Africa to Islam, after observing a decline in their commitment following the departure of the conquerors—or rather, the Muslim military leaders—from the region⁴.

Accordingly, 'Uqba was cautious in dealing with the local population, and Ibn al-Athīr reports the following about him: «“This is your Kairouan... this is a source of pride for you... When a commander enters Africa, he binds its people to Islam, but when he leaves, they return to disbelief...

1 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr al-Namīrī, **Al-Istī'āb fī Asmā' al-Aṣḥāb**, 1st edition, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, Lebanon, 2002, vol. 1, p. 549.

2 Ibn al-Athīr, **previously cited source**, vol. 3, p. 235.

3 Ibid., p. 230.

4 Ibn 'Adhārī, Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad, *Al-Bayān al-Maghrib fī Akhbār al-Maghrib*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1947–1950, vol. 1, p. 19.

I advise you to establish a city where we can build a camp that will serve as a stronghold for Islam for all time »¹ .

Once the construction of the city of Kairouan was completed, and amid the preparations and enthusiasm that 'Uqba showed to continue the conquest, the decision to dismiss him came from the new governor of Egypt, Musaylima ibn al-Mukhald, even though the dismissal was issued by Caliph Mu'āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān² .

Afterwards, Abū al-Muhājir Dīnār was appointed commander of the conquest army in Africa, succeeding the dismissed leader. The researcher al-Ḥabīb al-Jinhānī notes, based on early texts by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, and al-Nuwayrī, that 'Uqba was deeply distressed by the humiliating manner of his dismissal and by the treatment he received from the new commander, who disregarded the great services 'Uqba had rendered to the Muslims and to Islam since assuming leadership in Africa. He recorded this grievance in a letter of complaint to the Caliph himself, highlighting the harsh conduct of Abū al-Muhājir Dīnār toward him³.

'Uqba had hoped that the Caliph would vindicate him; however, the Caliph's response fell short of 'Uqba's expectations and amounted to little more than promises, due to the difficult circumstances facing the central authority of the Islamic Caliphate in the capital, Damascus.⁴

"II. Abu al-Muhajir Dinar succeeds Uqba and continues the conquest of the Maghreb:

"Abu al-Muhajir Dinar began his leadership in Africa with a policy that differed from that of his predecessor Uqba. He adopted a policy of leniency and conciliation towards the Berbers, encouraging them to embrace Islam and motivating them to engage with it. He succeeded in this

1 In addition, Ibn al-Athīr points out that what motivated 'Uqba to build the city and camp of Kairouan was his desire to secure the soldiers stationed in Africa against any rebellion by the local population that could harm the Muslims there. Moreover, the city would serve as a base from which the conquest could extend to the rest of Africa and the Maghreb. For further information, see: Ibn al-Athīr, *previously cited source*, vol. 3, p. 230.

2 Musaylima ibn Mukhald ibn al-Sāmit al-Sā'idī was appointed by the Umayyad Caliph Mu'āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān over Egypt in 50 AH / 670 CE. He ruled both Egypt and the Maghreb for over sixteen years and died in Medina around 62 AH / 677 CE. If what Ibn 'Abd al-Barr reports is accurate, then Ibn Mukhald was the one who suggested to Mu'āwiya the dismissal of 'Uqba, due to the intense rivalry between them, as well as the jealousy and resentment he harbored toward 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' for the significant victories he achieved in Africa and for beginning to consolidate Muslim rule there—actions that would have elevated 'Uqba's status in the eyes of Mu'āwiya. For further information, see: Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *previously cited source*, vol. 2, p. 231.

3 Al-Ḥabīb al-Jinhānī, *Kairouan through Its Civilizational Flourishing*, Tunis, 1965, pp. 28–36.

4Ghanim Muhammad al-Ṣaghīr, *Articles and Opinions on the Ancient History of Algeria*, vol. 2, Dār al-Hudā, Aīn M'lila, Algeria, 2010, p. 295.

endeavor remarkably, as noted by most historians who have studied this period of North African history."

In line with this policy, Abu al-Muhajir moved towards the central Maghreb (present-day Algeria), where he either conquered—or more accurately, won over—the Kutama tribe when he followed the Tell road, a route established by the Byzantines to connect cities such as Tebessa and Mila, passing through Guelma and Constantine. He resided in the city of Mila for about two years ¹.

It seems that he settled in the city of Mila for two years, making it a political capital and a base from which he launched his campaigns to spread Islam by conquering cities such as Constantine, Tiddis, and then Setif, followed by the Zib region, eventually reaching the city of Tlemcen. Although these campaigns were primarily peaceful efforts to propagate Islam, they were not entirely free from the use of force in certain cases, and it is not unlikely that such force was employed against the Byzantine element, whose leaders often used the local population—the Berbers—as a tool to resist the Muslim conquerors ².

It is not unlikely, according to Prof. Dr. Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir, that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar's policies and his forward-looking vision of events were behind the separation or exclusion of the Byzantine Romans from the Africans, at a time when he managed to create a certain rapprochement and harmony between Arabs and Berbers. This was motivated by a desire to overcome the sense of fear and caution that had developed among the Berbers over the centuries due to the repeated foreign occupations of the region—especially the Roman occupation—and the repressive policies that were enforced against the local population³.

Abu al-Muhajir Dinar continued his policy of leniency and peaceful relations with the Berbers, which enabled him to build rapport with them. Despite his victory over the Urbah tribe and its leader, Kusayla, he did not exploit this triumph for political or material gains. Instead, he treated the Berber prince well and invited him to embrace Islam. Sources report that he and his tribe converted to Islam under the guidance of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar, an event considered a significant victory for Islam in

1 Ibn Taghribirdi, *Al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Muluk Misr wa al-Qahira* [The Shining Stars in the Kings of Egypt and Cairo], Cairo: Egyptian General Organization for Authorship and Publishing, BLAT edition, vol. 1, p. 152.

2 Jamal Masrahi, *ibid.*, pp. 493–497.

3 Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir, *ibid.*, p. 297.

Africa. Furthermore, a bond of friendship and affection emerged between the Arab leader Abu al-Muhajir and Kusayla, the Berber leader and prince, as noted by Ibn Khaldun¹.

Despite the great victory achieved by Abu al-Muhajir in Tlemcen, he did not continue the conquest further west and was satisfied with what had been accomplished up to Tlemcen, even though all circumstances were favorable for him to complete the conquest. To what can this be attributed?

Did the Berber leader Kusayla play a role in this, especially given that his authority over the Baranis tribe was considerable? Or was it Abu al-Muhajir's own strategic decision, particularly since there were still enclaves under Byzantine control that he feared confronting? Or were there orders from Damascus, the capital of the Islamic Caliphate, instructing him to halt?²

Abu al-Muhajir Dinar's policy was a wise one, enabling the region to establish direct contact with Islam and the Muslims through the alliances concluded by the leader of the conquest. He was able to win over the Berber tribes to his side, allowed the locals to perceive the harsh nature of the Byzantines, and gradually paved the way to confront them—particularly those enclaves in the central Maghreb north, which controlled the agricultural and strategic regions³.

III. The Dismissal of Abu al-Muhajir and the Reappointment of 'Uqba ibn Nafi as Leader of the Conquest :

Yazid ibn Muawiya succeeded his father, Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, as caliph, and did not wait long before reappointing 'Uqba ibn Nafi as the commander of the conquest army in Ifriqiya. 'Uqba had no choice but to treat Abu al-Muhajir Dinar in the same harsh manner that he himself had been treated after assuming command of the army. This has led most historical accounts to hold Abu al-Muhajir Dinar responsible for initiating the severe treatment and mistreatment of 'Uqba, disregarding his honorable past in Islam and his sacrifices for spreading the faith among the people of Ifriqiya.

The historian Ibn Abd al-Hakam mentions that during his second campaign in Ifriqiya, the commander 'Uqba set out from the Kairouan camp, which he had established during his first

1 Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman, *Kitab al-'Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wa'l-Khabar fi Ayyam al-'Arab wa al-Ajam wa al-Barbar wa Man 'Asarahum min Dhu al-Sultan al-Akbar* [The Book of Lessons and the Record of Beginnings and Events in the Days of the Arabs, Persians, and Berbers, and Those Who Lived Among Them with Great Authority], Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1983, vol. 6, p. 216

2 Moussa Lebkal, *Al-Maghrib al-Islami* [Islamic Maghreb], Algiers: National Publishing and Distribution Company, 1981, p. 33.

3 Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir, *ibid.*, p. 299.

campaign to serve as a base for military operations toward the rest of the Ifriqiyan territories ¹. He fought battles against the Byzantines in several areas, particularly in Monastir (in Tunisia) and then in Baghai in the Aurès (in Algeria). He also destroyed many Byzantine fortresses in the Aurès, the Zib region, and al-Hadna, as well as in the territories stretching from Tihert to Tangier in the far west of the Maghreb. ‘Uqba continued his march and campaigns until he reached the shores of the Atlantic Ocean ².

After reaching the shores of the Atlantic, ‘Uqba decided to return to his capital, Kairouan. However, the return route was not safe, as he encountered conspiracies plotted against him and his soldiers, including the filling in of wells and springs, as well as sporadic attacks. Some historians attribute this to Kusayla and his tribe, as an act of revenge for ‘Uqba’s actions against them and against his ally Abu al-Muhajir Dinar—actions that involved humiliating Abu al-Muhajir and anyone allied with or close to him, including Kusayla himself, despite Kusayla’s recent conversion to Islam and his high status among his people prior to his conversion ³.

Some historical sources indicate that Abu al-Muhajir had advised ‘Uqba to treat Kusayla well, taking into account his status among his people. In this regard, Ibn al-Athir reports: «...be cautious with the man (Kusayla), for he is a recent convert to Islam, and I fear his treachery. He is among the best of his people and is in the prime of his power...» ⁴.

Accordingly, some historians mention that Kusayla managed to escape from ‘Uqba’s captivity and took refuge in the fortress of Tahudah (Thabudius), where some remnants of the Byzantines were still stationed. He allied with them after reorganizing his followers and ambushed ‘Uqba and his soldiers when they reached the Tahudah area in 63 AH / 683 CE. ‘Uqba then fought this battle against Kusayla and his Baranis followers, as well as members of the Jerawa tribe residing in the Aurès and on the fringes of the desert, who were allied with the remaining Byzantines and the Christianized Africans ⁵.

Thus, Kusayla took advantage of ‘Uqba’s separation with a group of his cavalymen (about 300 horsemen) from the rest of the army, which had split at the city of Tubna. While Kusayla took the northern route back to Kairouan, ‘Uqba and his men traveled the desert route through the Zib despite

¹ Ibn Abd al-Hakam, *ibid.*, p. 179.

² Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir, *ibid.*, p. 301.

³ Slaoui, Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri, *Al-Istiqsa’ li-Akhbar al-Maghrib al-Aqsa* [Investigation of the History of the Far Maghreb], vol. 1, Cairo, n.d., p. 37.

⁴ Ibn al-Athir, vol. 4, p. 107.

⁵ Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir, *ibid.*, p. 303.

the dangers that threatened travelers along this path. This presented Kusayla with an opportunity to plan and execute his attack under these favorable circumstances. This led to the famous Battle of Tahudah, in which ‘Uqba ibn Nafi and all those with him—314 soldiers and horsemen—were killed¹.

IV. The Impact of the Battle of Tahudah on the Islamic Conquests :

It appears that the intense Islamic-Christian conflict in the Levant had shifted to Ifriqiya through Kusayla's alliance with the Byzantines, forming a coalition of Byzantines and Christian Berbers. Kusayla may have chosen the Tahudah area as the battlefield because it was inhabited by groups of Christianized Berbers and remnants of the Byzantines fortified in castles or strongholds, waiting for an opportunity to strike at the Muslims. Moreover, the strategic location of the area, serving as a boundary between the Aurès and al-Hadna on one side, and the Aurès and the desert on the other, added to its significance. The victory achieved by the Byzantines and Kusayla proved disastrous for the Muslims and was regarded as a genuine setback for the conquering army. Kusayla advanced eastward until he captured the city of Kairouan, which the Muslims had abandoned—or rather, what remained of them retreated to Tripoli, Barqa, and then Egypt. They settled there awaiting orders from the governor of Egypt or from the Islamic Caliphate's center in Damascus, resigned to the impossibility of conquering the Maghreb, which ultimately compelled them to leave Kairouan and evacuate it out of fear of Kusayla's onslaught².

The Islamic conquests entered a phase of stagnation and caution, accompanied by a loss of confidence among the army, both Arabs and Berbers who were recent converts to Islam.

During the same period, Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan assumed leadership of the Muslims and began reorganizing the affairs of the Caliphate starting in 64 AH. After security was restored at the center of the Caliphate, the new caliph appointed Zuhayr ibn Qays al-Balawi, previously deputy to ‘Uqba ibn Nafi, as commander of the army and leader of the Muslims returning from Ifriqiya. He entrusted him with what can be described as a mission to restore confidence and boost the morale of the army in preparation to regain the initiative and discipline Kusayla and his allies, including the remaining Byzantines and the Christianized Berbers.

1 Ibn ‘Adhari, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 30.

2 Albertini (E.J) et autres, *L'Afrique du Nord dans L'histoire*, éd, archat, paris 1937, p 136.

V. The Death of Kusayla and the Restoration of Muslim Initiative:

As mentioned earlier, Kusayla managed to take control of Kairouan and its surroundings, preparing to confront the returning Muslim conquest army. However, the new commander of the Muslim army had received sufficient training and gained experience in Ifriqiya under his predecessor, ‘Uqba ibn Nafi, which made him cautious and fully aware of the dangers he was likely to face along the way ¹.

On his way to Kairouan from Tripoli, he was attacked by Kusayla at a place called "Mams," near the city of Sbiba, located south of Kairouan and not far from Sbeitla, which witnessed the decisive battle between the Byzantines and the Muslims, known as the Battle of al-‘Abadila.

This battle—the first engagement of the Muslim army in Ifriqiya under the command of Zuhayr ibn Qays al-Balawi—resulted in the defeat of Kusayla’s army and the killing of Kusayla along with a large number of his followers and aides. This occurred in 69 AH / 689 CE. Through this victory, Zuhayr ibn Qays regained control of the city of Kairouan, along with the territories that Kusayla had seized from the Muslims following the death of ‘Uqba and his companions ².

Like his predecessors among the leaders of the conquest in Ifriqiya, Zuhayr ibn Qays did not capitalize on his victory at the Battle of Mams. The significant and widespread impact of Kusayla’s death on the morale of his followers—the apostate Berbers—and his allies among the remaining Byzantines could have provided a strategic opportunity. He could have continued achieving victories by advancing westward, especially since the region was already familiar with Islam due to ‘Uqba’s campaigns and his successes prior to his death ³.

However, he chose to halt and even decided to return to Damascus, content with what had been achieved—namely, the elimination of Kusayla and his followers and the restoration of Kairouan as the center of army command.

Thus, on his return through Egypt after completing his mission in Ifriqiya, ‘Uqba fell into an ambush set by the Byzantines allied with some Christianized Africans in the region of Derna in the Barqa province of Libya. There, he met his death along with a group of his soldiers. Professor Ghanem

1 ‘Ubayd Allah Salih ibn Abd al-Halim, *Fath al- ‘Arab li’l-Maghrib* [The Arab Conquest of the Maghreb], edited by Lévi-Provençal, *Journal of the Institute of Islamic Studies*, Madrid, no. 2, 1954, pp. 193–293.

2 Ibn ‘Adhari, *ibid.*, p. 20.

3 Abd al-Wahid Dhanoon Taha, *The Arab-Islamic Conquest and Settlement in North Africa*, Ministry of Culture and Information, Dar al-Rashid Publishing, Iraq, 1982, pp. 132–133.

Muhammad al-Saghir compared this uneven encounter to the Battle of Tahudah, in which ‘Uqba ibn Nafi had been martyred ¹.

VI. Hassan ibn al-Nu‘man Concludes the Debate over the Conquest:

The news of the martyrdom of Zuhayr ibn Qays al-Balawi had a profound impact on Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, especially as it coincided with a rebellion led by Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr—or an internal uprising, as Islamic sources call it. This compelled the caliph and his aides in the capital to work on restoring security and resolving internal issues of the state, as well as to redirect attention away from the East, or more precisely, away from the central authority in Damascus. After Ibn al-Zubayr was killed by al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi in Mecca in 73 AH, Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan appointed Hassan ibn al-Nu‘man². Appointed at the head of the conquering army and ordered to march to Ifriqiya, Hassan had been in Egypt since the martyrdom of Zuhayr. Hassan ibn al-Nu‘man worked to eliminate the imminent threat to Islam in the Maghreb by seriously planning to eradicate the Byzantine presence in the region, directing his campaign toward Carthage and other strongholds where remnants of the Byzantines and their allies among the Christianized Africans were fortified. He pursued this objective throughout his time in Ifriqiya, which extended from 73 AH / 692 CE to 85 AH / 704 CE ³.

At first, Ḥassān was able to gather around him the Muslims who had left Ifriqiya following the martyrdom of Zuhayr ibn Qays al-Balawī, and he managed to regain the areas previously under Muslim control. He then concentrated his efforts and forces on Carthage. After the Byzantines failed to resist him, they were forced, in 75 AH / 694 CE, to leave the city by ships to the island of Cyprus, planning to return to it once the Muslims had vacated it, as they had originally intended ⁴.

Ḥassān continued subjugating the remaining areas where the Byzantines and their followers among the Berbers had taken refuge, most of whom were the Baranis Berbers.

1 **Ghanem Muhammad al-Saghir**, *ibid.*, p. 308.

2 Hassan ibn al-Nu‘man’s lineage is connected to the Ghassanids, who settled in the Levant and, in the 5th century CE, were under Byzantine rule before establishing their own principality there, albeit in alliance with the Byzantines against the Persians. Thus, Hassan was a descendant of leaders experienced in governance and military command. He was also known for his discipline and dynamism in military operations—qualities that motivated the caliph to appoint him commander of the Muslim army and order him to march to the Maghreb to avenge the leaders who had been killed there. He was even appointed governor of Ifriqiya. For further information, see: Saleh ibn Qurbah et al., *History of Algeria in the Medieval Period through Sources*, National Center for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the November 1, 1954 Revolution, Ministry of Mujahideen edition, Algiers, 2007, pp. 23–25.

3 **Abd al-Wahid Dhanoun Taha**, *ibid.*, p. 143.

4 Ibrāhīm Aḥmad al-‘Adawī, *The Umayyads and the Byzantines: The Mediterranean as an Islamic Lake*, Anglo-Egyptian Library, Cairo, Egypt, 1963, pp. 220–222.

After that, Ḥassān returned with his army to the city of Kairouan so that his troops could take some rest, allowing their wounds to heal and enabling them to be fully prepared. On the other hand, this also gave him the opportunity to devise a new plan to continue the conquest according to the current circumstances of the battle. This required moving toward the interior regions to suppress another rebellion that had arisen in the Aurès, led by al-Kāhina ¹.

Historical sources concerning the period of the Islamic conquests mention that, with the death of Kusayla, the leadership of the Berbers passed to the Jerawa tribe, one of the Butr confederation tribes, as reported by Ibn Khaldun, who says in this regard: «Ifriqiya was thrown into turmoil, and the Berbers became divided, with their authority dispersed among their chiefs. Among them, the most prominent at that time was al-Kāhina, the daughter of Maṭīh ibn Tīfān, queen of the Aurès Mountains, whose people were the Jerawa, rulers of the Butr confederation, and their leaders »².

Ḥassān had realized the dangers that awaited him based on the experiences of those who had preceded him in the region. As we mentioned, he headed to the Aurès to confront the leader of the rebellion there. When al-Kāhina learned of Ḥassān's campaign and his preparations, she sought to meet him and take him by surprise. She descended upon the city of Baghaïa, expelled the Byzantines residing there, and destroyed its fortresses, believing that the Muslims might use them for defense. When Ḥassān learned of this, he moved north to the Wadi al-‘Adhārā (present-day M'sila). Al-Kāhina advanced toward him with her army from the Butr tribe, and a major battle ensued between them. Victory went to al-Kāhina, who, in addition to killing many Muslims, captured eighty Muslim soldiers ³.

After her victory over the Muslim army in the Battle of Wadi al-‘Adhārā, al-Kāhina pursued them as they retreated eastward, driving them out of the vicinity of Kairouan and Qābis. Ḥassān joined Barqa and stayed there; it is said that he built palaces there, which are still known by his name today. He then wrote to the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, seeking advice and support ⁴.

By her victory over Ḥassān, al-Kāhina was able to win the loyalty of the Berbers, especially the Zenāta tribe and the Jerawa people, as well as the other tribes of the Aurès region. Not to mention the

1 Ṣāliḥ ibn Qurba, *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

2 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 218.

3 Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam mentions that al-Kāhina released the Muslim captives, who numbered eighty men, including notables and soldiers, after treating them with honor and kindness—except for one of them, named Khālīd ibn Yazīd al-Qaysī, whom she made like a son to her and a brother to her own children, and later appointed him as her advisor. For more information, see: Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Ibid.*, p. 228.

4 Ibrāhīm Aḥmad al-‘Adawī, *Ibid.*, p. 224.

remnants of the Byzantines, who still held extensive estates in the Aurès. Her fame grew so much that it is said a large part of the Maghreb came under her influence, as reported by Ibn ‘Idhārī ¹.

However, Ibn Khaldun, who was well-versed in the affairs of the Maghreb, limited al-Kāhina’s sphere of control to the Aurès Mountains ².

Al-Kāhina adopted a strategy she believed would prevent the Muslims from returning to the region, namely, the destruction of the cities she reached, believing that the Muslims were primarily after the spoils and wealth of those areas. In this regard, Ibn ‘Idhārī records a speech she delivered before her people, in which she said: « The Arabs seek only the cities, gold, and silver of Ifriqiya, whereas we desire only the farms and pastures. We see for you nothing but the devastation of all the lands of Ifriqiya, until the Arabs despair and have no return to them for all time »³.

According to this vision, her followers among the Berbers set about destroying the cities they encountered, demolishing their fortresses and cutting down their trees, without concern for the consequences that would ensue. Indeed, at that time, many Christians and Africans became dissatisfied with what had befallen them as a result of the actions of al-Kāhina and her followers, and among them were those who migrated or fled in horror at the devastation that had struck the land⁴. Among them were those who contacted Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān, requesting his intervention to rescue them from the hell that had befallen them as a result of al-Kāhina’s scorched-earth policy. Naturally, this pleased the Muslim commander, and he had no choice but to respond. He first contacted al-Kāhina’s captive, Khālīd ibn Yazīd al-Qaysī, asking him to provide information that would enable him to assess the condition of al-Kāhina’s army, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and prepare for the second phase of the decisive battle⁵.

Without a doubt, Ḥassān sought to take advantage of the situation, as the inhabitants of the region—both Berbers and Byzantines—were discontented with the consequences of al-Kāhina’s destructive policies. He began preparing for the decisive campaign to suppress this rebellion, which

¹ Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Ibid.*, p. 35.

² Ibn Khaldūn, *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 218.

³ Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 36.

⁴ Ibrāhīm Aḥmad al-‘Adawī, *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

⁵ Ghanīm Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr, *Ibid.*, p. 311.

had exhausted the Muslims and hindered the completion of the conquest of the Maghreb, especially since he had received reinforcements in the capital, Damascus, sent to him by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān.

Ḥassān marched toward the Aurès Mountains to confront al-Kāhina in the decisive battle after completing the necessary preparations for the campaign. When al-Kāhina learned of the approaching Muslim army, she withdrew to a fortified stronghold in the Aurès, leaving the towns and open lands behind, as she knew from experience that a confrontation in the towns or open fields would not be in her favor given the high level of preparedness of the Muslim forces. Al-Raḳīq al-Qayrawānī notes that, before the decisive confrontation, al-Kāhina realized with her insight that her end was near, and she said to her children, along with Khālīd ibn Yazīd al-Qaysī: «“I am doomed to be killed, and I see my head running among the beasts, dragging its ears toward the east, from where the sun rises, and I see it severed, placed before the greatest Arab king who sent this man»¹ .

Al-Kāhina had adopted Khālīd ibn Yazīd al-Qaysī through breastfeeding. When her end drew near and she sensed her approaching death, she confided in Khālīd, because of her adoption of him, and said to him: «I adopted you for a day like this. I am doomed to be killed, so I entrust these two brothers to your care.” Khālīd replied, “I fear that if what you say is true, they may not survive.” She said, “No; one of them will be more highly regarded by the Arabs than we are today. Go, grant them safety »².

Some historians mention that Khālīd had suggested to al-Kāhina to halt the war and leave the region, promising not to pursue her. She refused this and ordered him to join Ḥassān along with her children. They obeyed, joined Ḥassān, and informed him of her instructions, and he treated them kindly³.

¹ Al-Raḳīq al-Qayrawānī, *Tārīkh Ifriqiya wa al-Maghrib*, edited by ‘Abdullāh al-‘Alī al-Zaydān and ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Umar Mūsā, 1st ed., Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, Beirut, Lebanon, 1980, p. 9.

² Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³ Ghanīm Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr, *Ibid.*, p. 312.

Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān and his army met al-Kāhina and the Berbers who were with her. The two armies clashed, and the battle intensified, with each side exerting all their effort and endurance¹. Ḥassān and his army succeeded in defeating al-Kāhina, who withdrew to the place now known as Bir al-Kāhina. Ḥassān pursued her and was able to eliminate her and those who were with her².

This occurred in the late year 81 AH / 700 CE and the beginning of 82 AH / 701 CE. Her destructive actions had disastrous consequences for the region and its inhabitants, turning those green lands into a barren area unsuitable for life³.

The Arab conquerors faced difficult phases in the history of the Islamic conquests in North Africa, which lasted for a long time. However, with the death of al-Kāhina in 82 AH / 701 CE, a particularly challenging phase came to an end. In it, the Muslims had lost many of their best soldiers and had exerted their utmost effort. Moreover, with al-Kāhina's death, Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān achieved one of his most important objectives, as he had realized that defeating the Berbers required eliminating their leader. This ensured their subjugation and the eventual integration of the entire region under Muslim authority, which indeed happened. The Muslims thus gained control, and the path was open for them to extend their dominance over all of the Maghreb by completing the conquests. The Berbers then entered a new phase in their history, characterized by their gradual integration into Arab-Islamic civilization, after having rid themselves of Roman occupation and its aftermath, which had lasted more than eight centuries.

CONCLUSION:

Based on the above, it can be noted that by eliminating Byzantine dominance over the cities of Ifriqiya, destroying their fortresses, capturing Carthage, and expelling the Byzantines from their capital and place of refuge, the features of the Islamic conquest gradually began to take shape, despite the difficulties and obstacles faced by the Muslims during their initial engagement with the region.

With the death of Kusayla, the Muslims were able to overcome a major obstacle that had hindered the progress of the conquest, although they did not fully capitalize on the victories achieved

¹ ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Dhunūn, *Ibid.*, p. 137.

² Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³ Ibrāhīm Aḥmad al-‘Adawī, *Ibid.*, p. 227.

on the battlefield and left the initiative to the Berbers and the remnants of the Byzantines or their African allies. The most significant obstacle preventing final victory, however, was al-Kāhina, who had fortified herself in the Aurès Mountains.

By eliminating her, Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān was able to consolidate the foundations of Islam in the region. Thus, it can be said that Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān laid the first cornerstone of Islamic Ifriqiya, where the efforts of the Arab conquerors and the Berbers—both the Butr and Baranis—were merged. Furthermore, Ḥassān ibn al-Nu‘mān is considered the founder of a system of governance based on cooperation between Arabs and Berbers, which allowed the region to be fully incorporated into the Islamic state and its geographic domain.

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