Arab Invasions: The First Islamic Empire

By Eamonn Gearon
Published in History Today Volume 61 Issue 6 June 2011
Medieval Syria, Middle East Empire, Islam

During the seventh century the Arabs invaded North Africa three times, bringing not just a new religion but a language and customs that were alien to the native Berber tribes of the Sahara and Mediterranean hinterland. Eamonn Gearon looks at the rise of the first Islamic empire.

The city of Alexandria, from the floor mosaic of St John's Church, Gerasa, Jordan, sixth century

When Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, died in 632 the new religion had already gathered a number of impressive victories on the battlefield. The armies of Islam quickly and easily conquered the Arabian peninsula before moving on to take the homelands of their various neighbours. Marching out of Arabia in 639 they entered non-Arab Egypt; 43 years later they reached the shores of the Atlantic; and in 711 they invaded Spain. In just 70 years they had subdued the whole of North Africa, instituting a new order. This conquest, from the Nile to the Atlantic, was more complete than anything achieved by previous invaders and the changes it wrought proved permanent.

Before the arrival of the Arabs, in 533 the Vandals had, after a century-long residence, been beaten and expelled from North Africa by the partially resurgent Byzantines. However, Byzantium’s grip on the region was never as strong as that of Rome and, as a result, oppression, revolts and insurrections characterised Berber-Byzantine relations. This century of animus saw the slow collapse of Byzantine influence in the region. In the eastern Mediterranean and the lands beyond two decades of war between Byzantium and Sassanian Persia had left both sides exhausted and impoverished. Periodic outbreaks of the bubonic plague and, especially in Byzantium, divisive succession crises further weakened the old empires. The timing could not have been better for the emergence of a new conquering force that sprang unannounced from the city-free, plague-free deserts of Arabia.

Following the subjugation of the Arabian peninsula – as well as Syria and Iraq – to the new faith the emboldened warriors of Islam turned their eyes westward. The Arab invasion of Egypt was different from their earlier conquests. The Arabian peninsula was their heartland, where they won over rival tribes but remained firmly among their own kind. In tackling Syria and Iraq, Arabs pitted themselves against people, many of them settled Arabs, to whom they had long been exposed, mainly through trade; they were not, apart from when they entered Sassanian Persia, among complete strangers. In crossing the Sinai peninsula and taking on the Egyptians the Arabs quite deliberately committed themselves to a war of conquest in unfamiliar territory against non-Arab peoples.
Following Muhammad's death the elderly Abu Bakr (c. 573-634), the first caliph ('successor' or 'deputy'), reigned for just two years before he died. He was succeeded by Umar bin al-Khattab (c. 586-644), who ruled from 634 and is portrayed by Arabic sources as a determined, even puritanical ruler, driven by the desire for ever greater conquests in the name of Islam.

Initially reluctant to risk an invasion of Byzantine Egypt, Umar was eventually persuaded to do so by the military governor of Palestine and interim governor of the Levant, Amr ibn al-'As (c. 573-664). Like Muhammad and many prominent leaders of Islam Amr was a member of the Quraysh, a settled tribe from Mecca. Having already secured Palestine and the Levant and with serious Muslim incursions harrying Byzantine forces in Anatolia, Amr successfully argued that not only was the time right to invade Egypt, but also that such a move would secure the southern borders of the nascent Muslim empire by attacking those Byzantine lands from which the Arabs expected they themselves would otherwise be threatened.

A 13th-century Islamic miniature from Syria shows Arab travellers on their way to Mecca

Egypt was a prize of great value, in spite of its devastation in recent wars, 11 years of Persian rule, outbreaks of plague and an unhappy time under the alien Byzantines. The envy and goal of many ancient empire-builders, Egypt remained a vital source of grain, especially for Europe. The land of the pharaohs was also known as a land of wisdom, legend and mystery. On first seeing the pyramids the Arab invaders believed they had found Joseph's granaries.

However, the invasion was very nearly abandoned before it began. Having had second thoughts, Umar wrote to Amr ordering him not to enter Egyptian territory, believing with some justification that the 4,000-strong army of Yemeni tribesmen accompanying Amr was too small and ill-equipped to be an effective invasion force. At Rafah, just short of the Egyptian border, Amr saw the caliph's messenger riding towards him at a gallop. Guessing the contents of the letter he bore, Amr said he would open it at the end of the day's march, which took him and his force just over the Egyptian frontier to the small town of al-Arish.

According to the Egyptian chronicler Ibn Abd al-Hakam (died c. 870), while the caliph's letter had ordered Amr home, it also contained a postscript that stated: 'If you receive this letter when you have already crossed into Egypt, then you may proceed. Allah will help you and I will send you any reinforcements you may need.' It was December 639 and Amr was free to push on and execute his dream of the conquest of Egypt.

Amr's first obstacle in Egypt was the fortified town of Pelusium, or Farama, near the coast, east of Port Said. Known as Egypt's eastern gate, the town fell after a siege of just two months with limited loss of life and, more importantly for Amr, a notable lack of Byzantine reinforcements. It appeared that Byzantine commanders were unwilling or unable to confront the Arabs whose numbers had been added to by Bedouin tribesmen from the Sinai, keen to partake in what they reckoned would be significant spoils ahead.

Following another, bloodier, month-long siege and battle at Bilbays the undefeated Arab army marched towards Babylon, near the site of modern Cairo. Babylon was a bigger and better-fortified city than either Pelusium or Bilbays, with both defensive walls and ditches in place. Here the Byzantines had prepared themselves for a long siege. After some initial skirmishing that saw the defenders win the upper hand, Amr pulled his force back and sent a request to
Umar for reinforcements. By September, with no sign of a breakthrough in the siege, Amr had 8,000 reinforcements, many of them veterans from campaigning in Syria, making up a 12,000-strong force.

The Byzantines began to negotiate a peace deal. Unfortunately for them, the Arabs, believing the negotiations were going nowhere, launched a successful attack at night against Babylon, using siege ladders to scale the walls, routing the defenders after a six-month siege.

After the fall of Babylon, Cyrus of Alexandria (died c. 641) met with Amr to hear terms for surrender. Apart from being a highly regarded Byzantine general, Cyrus, who had been appointed viceroy of Egypt by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641), was also the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Alexandria. As such he was negotiating for two very different constituencies, the one imperial, the other spiritual. With no practical alternative, Cyrus handed over sovereignty of Egypt to the caliphate under Umar and agreed to the payment of two dinars per adult male as jizya, a religious tax levied on all non-Muslims across the expanding Islamic empire. Cyrus also made it clear to Amr that, although the terms were subject to approval by his master, Heraclius, whatever the emperor decided his followers would stick to the agreement.

The Arab empire at its greatest extent, 700-850

The reaction of the native Egyptians to the Arab invasion was mixed. Heraclius, who regained Egypt from the Persians in 629, had been working towards the forced conversion of the Coptic Christian majority to his own Chalcedonian branch of Christianity. Having been allowed to practise whichever brand of Christianity they chose by the Zoroastrian Persians, many Egyptians were happy to welcome the Muslim invaders, who offered the same promise of religious freedom. Left to pursue their religious rites and to retain ownership of church property as long as they paid the jizya, Copts enjoyed greater freedom than under their co-religionist overlords from Constantinople. Jizya was one important reason why the Muslim armies that conquered North Africa did not follow a policy of enforced conversion of local populations: any increase in the Muslim population of a newly occupied land meant a reduction in tax revenue.

When Heraclius learned of Cyrus' surrender he was furious and stripped his general of his temporal posts. Cyrus remained patriarch because Heraclius had no control over religious appointments. Faced with Heraclius' refusal to accept the terms of surrender, Amr had little choice but to march on Alexandria, the capital of Byzantine Egypt. All along the route from Babylon to Alexandria small units of Byzantine skirmishers were sent against Amr's army, doing their best to prevent the inevitable. The Arab army arrived at Alexandria in March 641 and once again set about laying siege to a walled city.

Alexandria was more heavily fortified than Babylon, with double walls in many places. In addition the city could always be supplied by sea, a definite advantage to the Byzantines. Suddenly, while preparing a force that he said he would personally lead into Egypt, Heraclius died. The reinforcements melted away and the garrison at Alexandria was left to its fate. In spite of this blow the demoralised Byzantine defenders managed to hold out until September when the Arabs launched a successful attack against the weary city.

Instead of putting the city's defenders to the sword, Amr gave them an 11-month amnesty
during which time they were allowed to pack and leave Alexandria in an orderly fashion, taking their possessions with them when they sailed for Constantinople. In order to ensure the smooth transition from one authority to another Amr also kept in place many of the city's tax collectors and other administrators.

At that time the lighthouse of Pharos still stood outside the harbour at Alexandria. Also standing in the city then were two obelisks which were already more than 2,000 years old. The Arabs left them in place, a testament to the esteem in which they held the native Egyptian civilisation. They were only removed 1,200 years later in a remarkable act of engineering and vandalism, when they were shipped: one to Central Park in New York, the other, as Cleopatra's Needle, to the banks of the River Thames.

The fall of Alexandria marked the end of any real resistance to the Arabs in Egypt and although a Byzantine force managed to retake the city four years later, Amr reclaimed it the following year. In 654 a Byzantine fleet was dispatched but repulsed. This was the last attempt by the Byzantine empire to reclaim the city that had been the Greek-speaking capital of Egypt for nearly 1,000 years. If Amr had had his way Alexandria would have remained the capital, but Umar told him that its maritime setting made it vulnerable to future attack from Constantinople and instructed him to find another spot in which to build a new Egyptian capital.

Legend has it that before setting out for Alexandria, after the fall of Babylon, Amr found a bird nesting in his tent and ordered that, because it had sought out his protection, it should not be disturbed until the young had hatched and learnt to fly. Returning from Alexandria late in 641 Amr ordered that the new capital would be founded where his tent stood. The city of Fustat – its name is possibly derived from one of a number of Arabic words for tent – grew in an organic fashion along the Nile. It remains the heart of old Cairo, still the Egyptian capital.

Another building project proposed by Amr was refused permission by the caliph. Where Amr saw the strategic advantages of digging a canal to link the Mediterranean and Red Seas, Umar instead saw a further possible threat to the Arabian homeland from the seafaring Byzantines. Britain, 1,200 years later, would raise similar objections – that opening up such a route made British India more vulnerable to attack – when the Suez Canal was eventually dug.

In the summer of 642 Amr sent an army south to attack and subdue Nubia (modern Sudan). This force was under the command of Amr's nephew, Uqba bin Nafi (622-683), later to become one of the most renowned early Arab generals, the 'conqueror of Africa' according to Gibbon. The Nubians soon outmanoeuvred the Arabs, both with their advanced archery skills, which resulted in the blinding of many Arab soldiers, and their superior cavalry. In a rare if only partial admission of defeat Uqba wrote to Amr asking for permission to withdraw in spite of not having beaten the Nubians. Uqba justified his request by saying that the Nubians could not be vanquished while they refused to stand and fight any pitched battles. Perhaps to soften the bad news Uqba added that there was no loot in the country worth taking.

Having failed in Nubia Amr turned his attention to securing Egypt's western borders and marched into modern Libya. The occasion of his departure highlights an unexpected friendship. Amr had become close to the Coptic patriarch Benjamin (590-661), lately returned to Alexandria after a 13-year exile in Upper Egypt. Amr described Benjamin as the most
religious man he had met during his years of conquest. Before setting off for Cyrenaica and beyond Amr asked Benjamin to pray for him. According to Benjamin’s Christian biographer, the patriarch was only too happy to do so. The idea of the head of the Christian church in Egypt praying for the successful outcome of a Muslim invasion against his Christian neighbours is an arresting one.

Amr marched via Barca as far as Tripoli and Sabratha, taking these cities after a thousand-mile march along the southern Mediterranean coast from Alexandria. Only in Barca, in eastern Libya, did he establish a permanent Arab base (appointing Uqba governor) before he was relieved of his command and ordered to pull back to Fustat. This was not conquest but raiding on an extraordinary scale.

The first serious invasion of North Africa beyond Egypt was launched in 647 by the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, a member of the powerful Umayyad family, who had succeeded Umar three years earlier. Uthman had inherited an empire and he was keen to see it grow. He dispatched an army of approximately 10,000 (some sources say 20,000) from Fustat on a campaign that was to last 15 months. Marching via Barca, Uthman’s army moved rapidly without meeting any serious opposition through what is today Libya and into Tunisia. A Byzantine force eventually met the Arab army at Sbeitla in southern Tunisia. Gregory, exarch (governor) of Africa, the Roman province that more or less covers modern Tunisia, led the Byzantine forces into battle: they were soundly beaten and withdrew to Carthage.

This was the only battle between Arab and Byzantine forces in North Africa outside Egypt. After this the Arabs fought the indigenous Berber tribes for booty but for the next 20 years they did little to secure more land. Instead they seemed content to limit their activities to profitable smash and grab raids before withdrawing with their loot to Barca and other points east.

The murders of the last two Rashidun caliphs, Uthman (from the Umayyad clan) in 656 and his successor Ali (from the Quraysh tribe) in 661, led to a struggle for the caliphate that was more pressing than the expansion of the Arab empire in North Africa. The battle for supremacy was won by the Umayyads, which ended the Rashidun caliphate. Once established as caliph in Damascus Mu‘awiya (602-680), founder of the Umayyad dynasty, decided to consolidate and expand this empire. He appointed Uqba, who had earlier failed to subdue Nubia, governor of all North Africa, but under the governorship of Egypt. With his hard-earned knowledge of the region Uqba was able to ensure that this second Arab invasion made rapid progress back across Libya and into Ifriqiya, as the Arabs knew the Roman province. Having got within 80 miles of Carthage Uqba decided that his army would be in a stronger position if it had a permanent military base in the region and so, in 670, he founded Kairouan.

Kairouan (from the Arabic *qayrawan*, or caravan) was built on the site of an established camp and crossroads. As well as becoming the Arab capital in Ifriqiya Kairouan also established itself as a centre of Islamic learning that was to exert a centuries-long influence on Islamic law.

Having established Kairouan, Uqba pressed on. His ultimate goal was Morocco, in Arabic *al-Maghreb*, the west, or, as he told his sons before he set out, to those lands that no Muslim had previously seen. Defeating every Byzantine and Berber force that he encountered Uqba
successfully reached Tangier before moving south, crossing the Atlas mountains and heading west to the coast.

As the 14th-century Andalusian historian Ibn Idhari al-Marrakushi tells it, on reaching the waters of the Atlantic Uqba rode his horse into the ocean, crying out: ‘Oh God, if the sea had not prevented me, I would have galloped on forever like Alexander the Great, upholding your faith and fighting the unbelievers!’ While possibly apocryphal, the account rightly remains one of the most famous and colourful from the period and is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the Arab conquests.

Uqba was later killed in battle by Kusayla, a Berber convert and former ally who had grown embittered by Uqba’s disdain, some say contempt, for the Berbers as second-class citizens compared with those of Arab stock. Leading a major insurrection, Kusayla even took Kairouan, turning it into a Berber city and declaring himself the Amir of Ifriqiya and the Maghreb. Four years later, in 688, an Arab army struck back, killing Kusayla and routing his supporters.

However it was not until 694 that a third Muslim invasion of North Africa finally settled the question of who would ultimately control Ifriqiya. After decades during which they seemed to have ignored the Byzantine presence at Carthage the Arabs now attacked the city, expelling its denizens and razing its walls. The fall of Carthage was as important for the earlier Roman defeat of the Carthaginians in 146 BC, as it marked the end of Romano-Byzantine power in North Africa. Just as they had done in Egypt, the Arabs ignored the earlier coastal capital and contented themselves with ruling the province of Ifriqiya from their inland stronghold at Kairouan.

The removal of Byzantine influence did not, however, mark the end of opposition to Arab rule. For years Berber revolts continued to trouble the Arabs, leading one Arab governor to declare despairingly: ‘The conquest of Ifriqiya is impossible; scarcely has one Berber tribe been exterminated than another takes its place.’ The Roman term of opprobrium for any non-Roman – barbarian – had now morphed into an Arabic proper name, creating a Berber identity of a united people rather than merely disparate desert tribes.

The most serious uprising, from the 680s, was led by the legendary al-Kahina, the seer or sorceress. Al-Kahina, who was most likely a Jewish or Christian Berber, can be likened to a Berber Boudicca who, through her desire to see her tribe remain free of foreign domination, inspired others in a series of ultimately doomed revolts. Described as a beauty with the gift of prophecy, she put this last skill to good use. Understanding that her resistance movement would not ultimately be successful, she gave her sons over to her Arab enemies. There they were raised and became successful commanders of Arab armies, thereby guaranteeing the Berbers a measure of glory in a story otherwise characterised by defeat and subjugation.

Al-Kahina herself died fighting the Arabs in around 700, which effectively marked the end of organised Berber resistance. Since her death she has been adopted as an inspiration by an array of disparate groups, from Berber nationalists, Maghrebi feminists, Arab nationalists and even French colonialists.

At the time of al-Kahina’s death the Arabs had conquered virtually the whole of North Africa. They proceeded to divide the region into the provinces of Egypt, Ifriqiya and the Maghreb,
with their capitals at Fustat, Kairouan and Fes, respectively. When confronted with the realities of ruling an empire, the erstwhile nomads quickly took to the business of building and settling cities. In all three instances they founded entirely new provincial capitals that allowed them, with their still relatively small numbers, to rule over but live apart from the much larger native populations with a high degree of security. Again in all three instances these new capitals ignored earlier, maritime bases, preferring the security of inland locations more in keeping with the interior of their Arabian homeland.

In the spring of 710 Arab forces took the city of Tangier, completing the conquest of North Africa. The next year, an Arab army under Tariq bin Ziyad crossed from Tangier to the Iberian peninsula, landing near Gibraltar, named Jabal Tariq, or Tariq’s Mountain, after the commander. From the entry into Egypt to the capture of Tangier had taken the armies of Islam less than 70 years, a remarkable feat in any age, especially when one considers the harsh terrain they had to traverse. As Gibbon puts it: ‘The sands of Barca might be impervious to a Roman legion; but the Arabs were attended by their faithful camels; and the natives of the desert beheld without terror the familiar aspect of the soil and the climate.’

Source URL: http://www.historytoday.com/eamonn-gearon/arab-invasions-first-islamic-empire