

Identifying the Rustamid Imamate. State Building and Urban Foundation through the Case of Tāhart

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ABSTRACT

The Rustamid Imamate emerged in the aftermath of the uprisings against the Caliphate (around 160/777) and was the leading and only long-lasting Ibādī State in North Africa. Tāhart, a settlement in the Roman borderlands, became its cradle and witnessed the foundation of a new Islamic stronghold. How was this Islamic polity able to establish itself on the edges of the Caliphate, in a strikingly different social and political milieu? How did the Imamate assert its authority over a fragmented tribal society? The answer to these issues requires understanding of how pre-Islamic traditions influenced state-building and adapted the foreign Eastern model of the Imamate. Through the analysis of foundation narratives and archaeological data, this article reconstructs the formation of this early Islamic polity.

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Introduction

The Rustamid Imamate emerged in the aftermath of the great uprisings against the Caliphate in North Africa, around 160/777, and was the only long-lasting Ibādī State in the Islamic West. Its centre was the twin cities of Tāhart: “Old Tāhart” (*Tāhart al-qadīma*), a Roman/ Late Antique city in the Roman borderlands, and the neighbouring Islamic foundation of New Tāhart. When the Fāṭimids defeated the dynasty in 296/909, they nevertheless preserved the twin cities.¹ How was this new Islamic polity able to take root on the edges of the Caliphate in a well-established North African social and political milieu characterised by tribal structures? We should first consider how local non-Muslim traditions incorporated the foreign Eastern model of the Imamate. How did the Imamate assert its authority over such a fragmented society? What was its relationship with the ‘Abbāsīd Empire? How did the Ibādī Imamate express opposition to the Caliphate within a shared cultural tradition? How did this ideology of self-constrained authority coexist with competition with the Caliphate?

Interpreting this early Islamic polity is still challenging for scholars. Contemporary third/ninth-century sources are few and later Ibādī literature tended to idealise the Imamate as a golden age, when doctrinal “free expression” (*ḡuhūr*) was still possible.²

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¹Ibrāhīm Bahāz, *Al-dawla al-rustumiyya, 160–296/777–909. Dirāsa fi l-awḍāʿ al-iqṭisādiyya wa-l-hayāt al-fikriyya*, 3rd ed. (Ghardaia: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿArabiyya, 2010); Gérard Dangel, “L’imamat ibadite de Tāhart (761–909). Contribution à l’histoire de l’Afrique du Nord durant le haut Moyen Âge”, PhD Thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1977.

²Cyrille Aillet, “L’image du bon gouvernement et le façonnement d’une mémoire communautaire dans l’ibadisme maghrébin médiéval”, in *Apprendre, produire, se conduire : Le modèle au Moyen Âge*, ed. Société des Historiens Médiévistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur Public (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015), 333–45.

Archaeological evidence is even more difficult to interpret, since no significant excavations have taken place in either New or Old Tāhart. The numismatic evidence is even scarcer. As a result, modern scholarship has found it challenging to define the Imamate. Was it a city-state, a tribal state or a centralised government? Some scholars have even assumed that it was a “democratic” regime ruled by a “tolerant Islam”, or the cradle of the Algerian nation.³ This contribution is a step towards a better and wider understanding of this early Islamic state and its capital. It relies mainly on a reassessment of the foundation narrative and the archaeological evidence.

Tracing the origins of the Imamate

Tracing the origins of the Rustamid Imamate is not an easy task, since the extant Sunni sources lack detail, while the Ibādī narratives provide an idealised vision of the formative period.⁴

A first question concerns chronology. Most sources mention that Abū l-Khaṭṭāb al-Maʿfirī (r. 140–144/c. 757–761), the Maghribī Ibādī imam, designated ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam as *qāḍī* and governor of Qayrawān. After the ‘Abbāsīds defeated the first “imam”, Ibn ‘Idhārī relates that Ibn Rustam left the city “with his remaining goods and men” and took refuge in Tāhart, where other supporters joined him.⁵ Ibn Khaldūn simply mentions that Ibn Rustam ran away and managed to bring together a coalition of Ibādī supporters and local Berbers from the Lamāya, Lawāta and Nafzāwa tribes.⁶ In contrast, the Ibādī memorialist Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Wārjlānī, who himself relies on the slightly earlier *Kitāb al-siyar* written by Abū l-Rabī’ Sulaymān b. Yaghlaḥ al-Mazātī (d. 471/1078–9), transforms his flight “to the West” (*ilā arḍ al-maghrib*) into a pathetic odyssey.⁷ In this narrative, Ibn Rustam is portrayed as an old man purchased by the new ‘Abbāsīd governor Ibn al-Ash’ath, escorted only by his son ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and a servant who took turns to carry him on their shoulders after their only horse died.⁸ However different these narratives may be, they agree that the Rustamid polity was established after the fall of what Ibādī literature calls the “first Imamate”, in a context of political fragmentation among the Ibādī and Ṣufrī movements in North Africa. In another tradition transmitted by Ibn ‘Idhārī, Ibn Rustam takes part in the assault against the caliphal stronghold of Ṭubna in the Zibān (151/768). The list of participants presents him as an independent actor alongside Abū Qurra, the Ṣufrī Imam of Tlemcen, and Abū Ḥātim al-Malzūzī, the new Ibādī leader in Ifriqiya.⁹

³Nabhani Koribaa, *Les Kharidjites, démocrates de l’Islam* (Paris: Publisud, 1991); Shaykh Bekrī, *L’Algérie aux II^e–III^e s./VII^e–IX^e s. : Quelques aspects méconnus du royaume rustémide : L’exemple d’un Islam tolérant* (Paris: Publisud, 2004).

⁴Cyrille Aillet, “Tāhart et les origines de l’imamat rustamite (c. 160/777–296/909): matrice orientale et ancrage local”, *Annales Islamologiques* 45 (2011): 47–78.

⁵Ibn ‘Idhārī al-Marrākushī, *Kitāb al-bayān al-mughrib, Histoire de l’Afrique du Nord et de l’Espagne musulmane*, ed. Reinhardt Dozy, revised by Georges Séraphin Colin and Évariste Lévi-Provençal, volumes I–II (Leiden: Brill, 1948; repr. Beirut: Al-Dār al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1983), I: 196.

⁶Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, ed. Khalīl Shahāda and Saḥīl Zakkār, volumes I–VIII (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), VI: 147–8.

⁷Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Wārjlānī, *Kitāb siyar al-āʾimma wa-akhbārḥā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ayyūb (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1985), pp. 76–7; *idem*, “La ‘Chronique’ d’Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Wārjlānī (m. 471 H./1078 J.C.), trans. Roger Le Tourneau”, *Revue Africaine* 104 (1960): 99–176, 322–390, 124.

⁸Al-Wārjlānī, *Kitāb siyar al-āʾimma*, 42; *idem*, “Chronique”, 100.

⁹Ibn ‘Idhārī, *al-Bayān*, I: 75–6. See also al-Raḥqīq al-Qayrawānī, *Tārīkh Ifriqiya wa-l-Maghrib*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-ʿAlī al-Zidān and ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Umar Mūsā (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1990) 105–6, and a slightly different list in Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh*, VI: 147.

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