

RESEÑAS

CYRILLE AILLET, *L'archipel ibadite. Une histoire des marges du Maghreb médiéval*, Lyon–Avignon, CIHAM Éditions, 2022, 582 pp.

This tome, the work of a mature scholar and the culmination of many years of research, is a major contribution to the growing field of Ibādī studies, but aims even more to push historians of the medieval Maghreb to look beyond dynasties and large cities, to include marginalized groups, areas, and literatures that provide perspectives that must be taken into account in order to construct a fuller regional history.

On Ibādism, the author steers his way carefully and judiciously between the opposing pitfalls of Sunni polemics and Ibādī apologetics as he traces the school's history from its origins. Ibādīs number no more than three million worldwide and thus constitute, in Aillet's words, "a mere drop of water in the ocean of Sunnism and Shi'ism" (p. 1). They uphold a particular religious ideal of political leadership: an imam who is selected for his piety and knowledge by the leading men of society, whom the imam must continue to consult throughout his rule or risk forcible removal from power. Ibādism arose in second-century Basra as a protest against the transformation of the caliphate into a monarchy passed on through dynastic succession. It was one of several religio-political groups that emerged in early Islam, all of which are grouped under the pejorative label "Khārijī" by Sunni theologians. Ibādīs reject this appellation for themselves, though they are willing to apply it to groups that held similar ideals but considered those who disagreed with them to be unbelievers whose blood may be shed. Although there were a number of rebellions that aimed to establish Ibādī imamates in the early Islamic period, Ibādīs also developed an ethos of coexistence with other Muslims and deemed it permissible to live in a state of dissimulation (*kitmān*) of one's true beliefs in an environment hostile to their interpretation of Islam.

For Maghrebi Ibādīs there was a single golden age, that of the Rustamid dynasty (777-909), centered on the town of Tāhart in northwestern Algeria. The Rustamid imams are idealized as models of piety and religious knowledge, but are also ascribed royal descent from the last Sassanid king of Persia, and their capital city is praised for its beauty and scholarship. An earlier Ibādī imamate in the Nafūsa mountains of northwestern Libya was very shortlived, but that region remained a major center of Ibādī habitation and the main source of the Rustamid imams' military prowess. As Aillet points out, the Rustamid imams controlled a belt of provinces ranging from northwestern Algeria to the Nafūsa mountains and appointed governors and tax collectors for those regions. The Fāṭimids' destruction of the Rustamid imamate led to the scattering of Ibādīs into distinct areas of the Maghreb: Jabal Nafūsa and Jabal Dammar, massifs that constituted the "backbone of the faith," in addition to the island of Jerba, the Jarīd region of southwestern Tunisia, and oases of the northern Sahara, especially Wārglān (corresponding, in part, to the modern province of Ouargla in eastern Algeria). Aillet likens each area of Ibādī habitation to a small island, mainly autonomous but linked by scholarly networks to other Ibādī regions and by economic ties and political domination to the larger metropolitan areas and political centers of the region. If each discrete region is an island, taken together they are an archipelago, the image reflected in the book's title. In the absence of an imamate, over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries Maghrebi Ibādīs developed a form of collegial government known as the 'azzāba, led by religious scholars charged with supervising the law.

The areas of Ibādī habitation shrank under the predations of regional powers and waves of nomadic invaders, followed by the increasing encroachment of Mālikī Sunnism, made popular particularly

through the Sufi orders. By the fourteenth century, areas with significant Ibādī populations in the Maghreb were largely reduced to Jabal Nafūsa (in present-day Libya), the island of Jerba (in present-day Tunisia), and the Mzāb valley (in present-day Algeria). According to Ibādī sources, the Mzāb embraced Ibādism in the eleventh century at the hands of Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Bakr b. Yūsuf al-Fursatā’ī (d. 1049), founder of the first council of ‘*azzāba*.

While these historical outlines are well-known to scholars of medieval Maghrebi Ibādism, Aillet’s study goes much further. He meticulously analyzes the main Ibādī literary sources for this history, the medieval *siyar*, biographical dictionaries that offer edifying hagiographies of prominent religious scholars of the different regions and generations. This literature has obvious drawbacks for historians, both in its idealized image of the men it describes and even more in its fragmented presentation of history and the lack of an overarching narrative or any concern with broader regional developments. As Aillet points out, Ibādī scholars have tended to celebrate the survival of Ibādism despite the array of forces ranged against it, take at face value the idealization of the Rustamid dynasty, and grieve its loss. Aillet, on the other hand, analyzes the social dynamics and ecological forces that led Ibādīs to reorganize their communities. His description of the role of religious scholars and their circles of students also emphasizes their roles in regional trade, both in the major commercial centers of Mediterranean empires and in the trans-Saharan trade in gold and slaves. Aillet consistently links Ibādīs’ local histories with global history, and points out that some of the great Ibādī scholars, such as Abū ‘Ammār ‘Abd al-Kāfī, spent significant periods of time in the region’s capital cities. Although Ibādī communities were ravaged by predatory regional forces, they were also embedded in the economic and human networks of these powers.

Aillet takes us through each major region and population center of the medieval Ibādī archipelago, which was far more extensive than its current boundaries. The landscape, ecology, hydraulic systems, physical and social structures, livelihoods, and commercial networks of each are described. This geographical breadth and detailed focus on material culture set this book apart from previous studies on medieval Ibādism. Nonetheless, Aillet emphasizes that each of these places deserves a much more detailed study of its history, forms of habitation, and geography of the sacred than he was able to do. He ends this survey with a plea to integrate these still marginalized regions into the larger history of the Maghreb. He also describes regions that were important trading partners with Ibādīs, such as Sijilmāsa, Ghana and other West African kingdoms, and Fezzān, and traces the routes taken to reach these places.

One of this book’s major contributions is Aillet’s insistence on the influence of Sufism on Maghrebi Ibādism. Sufism constituted a threat to Ibādism because of its effective role in the spread of Sunni Islam among the Berber populations of the Maghreb, but it also offered a form of piety and sociability that Ibādīs emulated. Aillet argues that the creation of circles (*ḥalaqāt*, sing. *ḥalqa*) of students around Ibādī scholars in the Maghreb, the precursor to the formation of the ‘*azzāba*, was influenced by the circles of disciples that followed Sufi masters, although, as Aillet admits, the gathering of pupils around a master to form a “circle” of apprenticeship and transmission is as old as Islam. But it is the context of the emergence of the institution of the *ḥalqa* in Maghrebi Ibādism, at a time of pervasive Sufi influence, that makes this borrowing evident. An authoritative twelfth-century work on the ‘*azzāba* describes it as a way of life that requires turning away from worldly pleasures, separation from profane society, Sufi practices, and vigils on mountain tops. The emphasis on asceticism as a primary characteristic of Ibādī piety, though present in early Islam, was also encouraged by the pervasive Sufi piety. Sufism’s popularity was greatly bolstered by claims of saints’ miraculous powers; likewise, Ibādīs attributed miraculous powers to their scholars and imams, and developed the practice of visiting saints’ tombs. One should note that all of this is rejected by many modern Ibādīs who have absorbed Salafi ideas about acceptable forms of religiosity, but the quantity of evidence that Aillet produces is persuasive. He concludes:

That Ibādism and early Sufism had a common base of cultural references is a point that warrants verification. That Maghrebi Ibādism developed a regime of sainthood that tried to gain currency on the same ground as the conquering wave of Sufism, especially in rural areas, is no longer in doubt. At the end of the medieval period, certain ulama went so far as to claim that their school belonged to Sufism, a bit like others today who present themselves as members of a fifth Sunni school (p. 401).

Another way that this book is unique is the range of materials it considers as sources. Aillet is well versed in non-Ibādī Muslim literature, and notes the symbolisms and sources of inspiration in the broader Islamic tradition for Ibādī myths surrounding the formation of Ibādī missionary treams in Basra, the implantation of Ibādism in North Africa, and the establishment of the Rustamid capital city, Tāhart. He also points out how Ibādī literature can fill in gaps and correct areas of incoherence in the historical narratives of non-Ibādīs, such as the Fāṭimid account of that movement's propaganda in Berber regions (pp. 236-237). Ibādī sources in Jerba, mainly found in family libraries, provide a perspective of a Mediterranean society in which Christian, Jewish, and different Muslim populations coexisted that one might miss by passing over Ibādī sources (p. 297). He points out the case of a recent monograph on Saladin's policies in the Maghreb that, failing to give Ibādīs any serious consideration or even to have any awareness that Sunni sources might have biases and inaccuracies, simply reproduces them (p. 352).

Aillet also draws on the results of archaeological excavations. He furnishes us with a plethora of site maps of both Tāhart and Sedrata, the former capital of Wārjlān, in addition to photographs of ruins, excavated sites, and aerial photographs of Tāhart, Sedrata, Jabal Nafūsa, and Jabal Dammar. Archaeology provides data unavailable in traditional textual sources. For example, despite Ibādī narratives about the wildness and lack of human habitation at the site of Tāhart before the Rustamid dynasty, scholars' maps and archaeological excavations reveal that there was an older town before the Rustamid capital was built, and the population was broadly dispersed. Aillet devotes an entire chapter to a detailed description of archaeological excavations conducted at Sedrata, which became the main Ibādī cultural center in the Maghreb in the tenth to twelfth centuries.¹ It is very rare for a historian to acquire knowledge of not only a broad range of historical literature, but also the fruits of archaeological labors. Aillet is especially indebted to the unpublished work of a Swiss archaeologist, Marguerite van Berchem, which he was able to locate and read in Geneva.² The archaeological evidence appears to contradict Ibādī sources that claim that Sedrata was precipitously abandoned when the Banū Ghāniya destroyed it sometime in the period from 1228 to 1230: the houses excavated at Sedrata bear no trace of destruction or abandonment of material goods that one would expect in the case of a precipitous departure. The absence of objects of daily use lends credence, on the contrary, to the idea that the inhabitants had progressively abandoned their homes, taking their possessions with them. In their above-mentioned book on Sedrata (pp. 161-168, 175-176, 206-212), Aillet and his colleagues favor the hypothesis that the site was abandoned after hydraulic resources had been depleted, and not for political reasons—an important illustration of the ways that archaeology can supplement or even overturn textual evidence.

Throughout the book, Aillet suggests correctives to current scholarly narratives and paths for future research. He points out that we know very little about the history of Ibādī communities and their relations with the sultans of Tlemcen and Tunis in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and hopes that that his research, for example on Ibādism's engagement with Sufism, might open new avenues for understanding this period.

In short, this book is a model of historical scholarship; it is the first truly comprehensive and carefully critical history of Ibādism in the Maghreb. Its writing is clear as it sifts carefully through all types of available documentation, challenging assumptions derived from various traditional sources and openly stating what we know, what we may surmise, what we might speculate, and what we do not know. In addition to being a signal contribution to the history of Ibādism and of the medieval Maghreb, the book deploys evocative metaphors and is eloquently written, making it a genuine pleasure to read for those who enjoy a felicitous turn of phrase.

¹ Aillet and fellow researchers previously published another weighty tome on Sedrata: Cyrille Aillet, Patrice Cressier, Sophie Gilotte (dir.), *Sedrata. Histoire et archéologie d'un carrefour du Sahara médiéval*. Aillet earlier published an article on archaeological excavations at Sedrata: "Archéologie, savoirs coloniaux et projet saharien".

² Cf. Cyrille Aillet, "La dame de Sedrat".

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