

## Article

# What Should They Do? Depictions of *Ribāṭ* and *Murābiṭūn* in Early Islamic Ifrīqiya

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**Abstract:** What was *ribāṭ* in early Islamic Ifrīqiya and what was its primary function? The answer often differs depending on the sources that are used, and whether they focus on the building or the institution more generally. Rather than approaching the question through either of these aspects, this study will consider the expectations, reflected in textual sources, about the behavior of the *murābiṭūn*, or the men who inhabited them. Analyzing expectations about the character of the *murābiṭūn* and the activities carried out in the *ribāṭ* offers an insight into how the writer of the text viewed the institution, including its function and significance in early Islamic society. By comparing the expectations reflected in various texts, it is also possible to recognize different views of the *ribāṭ* building and institution and to relate these to the historical context or the perspective of the writer. The analysis in this study will focus on the *ribāṭ* in the Ifrīqiyān tradition but will relate some of the developments to the significance of the institution in the wider Islamic Empire and its intellectual tradition.

**Keywords:** *ribāṭ*; Islamization; al-Mālikī; Ifrīqiya; sacred space



**Citation:** Bosanquet, Antonia Sigrid. 2023. What Should They Do? Depictions of *Ribāṭ* and *Murābiṭūn* in Early Islamic Ifrīqiya. *Religions* 14: 1340. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111340>

Academic Editor: Labeeb Bsoul

Received: 23 July 2023

Revised: 22 September 2023

Accepted: 25 September 2023

Published: 24 October 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The north-eastern coastline of what is now Tunisia is punctuated with fortress-like buildings overlooking the sea and the surrounding landscape. Many of these were built during the 3rd/9th century, under the Aghlabid rulers of the region, then known as Ifrīqiya.<sup>1</sup> The largest and most well known of these structures are those of Monastir and Sousse but smaller buildings with a comparable form and coastal position are common throughout Tunisia and many other structures were constructed which are no longer visible today.

These structures are often referred to as *ribāṭs* but some caution is advisable when using this term. *Ribāṭ* is not a strict architectural category (Cressier 2019, p. 110), and although many of the buildings characterized as *ribāṭs* seem to follow a standardized architectural plan with a central courtyard encircled by small cells, the term is also applied to buildings with a different layout, to individual rooms within buildings and to entire cities (Jallūl 1999, pp. 69–90).<sup>2</sup> Neither, given that some of the buildings described by 4th/10th century Arab geographers as *ribāṭs* had been built before the Islamic conquest of North Africa, should we always understand the term *ribāṭ* to refer to a purpose-built structure and interpret the form accordingly. Not all buildings that conformed to the plan of a *ribāṭ* were actually seen as *ribāṭs* in the 3rd/9th century and not all *ribāṭs* conformed to this architectural form.

In early literary sources, the root *ra-ba-ṭa* is associated with a group of cavalry riders and the defense of a border region, but rarely with a building or place (Kennedy 2011, p. 161). Even in the 3rd/9th century, al-Ya‘qūbī’s (Al-Ya‘qūbī 1860, p. 140) description of the Ifrīqiyān coast uses the term in relation to a practice rather than a typology of building. He mentions fortresses (*ḥuṣūn*) situated close to one another along the coastline, “in which the *murābiṭūn*<sup>3</sup> and worshippers stay”, rather than describing the buildings themselves as *ribāṭs*. Even by the 5th/11th century, when the Ifrīqiyān scholar Abū Bakr ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Mālikī wrote his *Riyāḍ al-nufūs fī ṭabaqāt ‘ulamā’ al-Qayrawān wa-Ifrīqiya*, now

regarded as one of the definitive works about *ribāṭs* in North Africa, he uses the word *ribāṭ* almost exclusively in reference to an activity rather than to describe the building (Amri 2015, p. 339).

The term *ribāṭ* does not appear in any inscriptions, a fact which Hagit Nol (Nol 2020, p. 271) interprets as an indication that it was not relevant as an architectural term. However, a tombstone for a man called Zakariyyā b. Yaḥyā, who died in 306/918, refers to him as *al-ribāṭī*, a term which could conceivably refer to his reputation for practicing *ribāṭ* or to his having lived in a building known as a *ribāṭ* (Roy and Poinssot 1950, vol. 2, p. 194). Thus, although it is undeniable that the term *ribāṭ* did come to be associated with certain buildings by the late 4th/10th century,<sup>4</sup> it is difficult to ascertain when that happened, or to which category of building it was applied. By contrast, the concept of a *murābiṭ* as a “*ribāṭ*-doer” is used more frequently and with more clarity in early literary sources. Therefore, by analyzing how this concept was used and understood, we can learn more, not only about the concept of *ribāṭ* but also about how the writers regarded the buildings that came to be known by this term or associated with the practice.

This approach builds on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Martina Löw (Lefebvre 1991; Löw 2001, 2008), who have shown that the use of space, including behavior, interaction and body language, is constitutional for the way that it is understood or defined. For example, a space such as an office, which can take many different architectural forms, is primarily defined by what people do and how they behave in it. Just as examining behavior and practice in offices would help us to understand more about the definition of what an office is, so too can we examine accounts about *murābiṭūn* to understand what *ribāṭ* was and what the building meant, in a specific space and time.

As will be shown in the following section, most depictions of the *murābiṭūn* have a strong idealistic component, so that they should be understood as expectations rather than descriptions of their subjects. It is important to be aware of this distinction, but it does not affect the sources’ value for this study, as it is precisely the expectation of behavior within *ribāṭs* that helps us to understand how their role was perceived. Where it is possible to identify historical practice or to detect a divergence between expectation and practice, this will also be noted as part of the relationship between ideal and reality.

I will focus on behavioral expectations for *murābiṭūn* reflected in texts relating to early Islamic Ifrīqiya between the post-conquest period of the 2nd/8th century and the mid-4th/10th century. This is not because the *ribāṭ* was not a central spiritual and military institution in other parts of the Islamic realm or during other periods; several studies have been dedicated to the role and significance of the *ribāṭ* in other regions and a comparison with the conclusions of these studies would be necessary for a fuller study of those of Ifrīqiya.<sup>5</sup> For the sake of cohesiveness, this study will focus on a specific space and period, which is associated in the later literature with an increasing importance of the *ribāṭ* and the *murābiṭūn*.

Although the behavioral expectations for the *murābiṭūn* were not always upheld, this did not prevent them from influencing public perception of what the practice of *ribāṭ* was and how it shaped the culture of Ifrīqiya. As will be discussed in the following section on sources, many of the texts used to understand *murābiṭūn* were written later than the period that they describe or have a strongly hagiographical aspect, both of which can be seen as problematic for their historical relevance. Both the limitations of the written sources and their relation to archaeological evidence will be considered in the following sections. Before discussing the sources, however, a brief overview of the institution of *ribāṭ* is helpful for understanding the focus on this region and period in this article.

## 2. *Ribāṭs* and Early Islamic Ifrīqiya

The Aghlabid period has been described as the golden age of *ribāṭs* (Marçais 1957, vol 1, p. 33; Hentati 1999, p. 51) but the *ribāṭ* was not an Aghlabid invention, and neither was the phenomenon limited to North Africa. Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 367/977) and al-Muqaddasī (d. after 381/991) use the term *ribāṭ* to refer to small, fortified buildings along the coasts of

Syria, Palestine and Egypt and the *ribāṭ* was also common along the Turkic–Islamic frontier in the east of the Empire (Eger 2012, p. 434). By the mid-Umayyad period, the practice of *ribāṭ* was widespread around the frontiers of the Islamic Empire, where it played an important role in defending and extending Islamic rule and became integrated into broader notions of piety and militarism in the Islamic tradition.

In Ifrīqiya, the construction of fortified constructions that came to be called *ribāṭs* began well before the Aghlabids came to power. The most well-known *ribāṭ* of Ifrīqiya, now known as Qaṣr Monastir, was founded on the orders of the Umayyad governor Harthama b. Aʿyan and others were constructed by the Muhallabid rulers after the dynasty came to rule Ifrīqiya in 151/768 (Hentati 1999, p. 55). However, rather than Umayyad or Muhallabid governors, Arab historians of Ifrīqiya associate the Aghlabid rulers particularly vividly with the construction of *ribāṭs* and financial support of the *murābiṭūn* (Al-Tijānī 1981, p. 95; El Bahi 2019, p. 335). The Aghlabid ruler Abū Ibrāhīm Aḥmad (242/856–249/863) is described as having built 10,000 fortresses (Ibn al-Athīr 1987, vol. 6, p. 66), a figure which is surely exaggerated but nonetheless reflects the perception of this Aghlabid ruler as someone who supported the “*ribāṭisation*” of Ifrīqiya. The names of Aghlabid rulers are also inscribed in some of the structures known as *ribāṭs*. By contrast, the Fatimid rulers are depicted as having deconstructed or repurposed some *ribāṭs* as arsenals or caravanserais, a development seen negatively by the Sunni authors of Ifrīqiya and the wider region.

### 3. Sources for Understanding *Ribāṭs* and the *Murābiṭūn*

The *ribāṭs* of Ifrīqiya are often mentioned in geographical texts such as al-Yaʿqūbī’s *kitāb al-Buldān* or *kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* by Ibn Ḥawqal, but most of the references in these works are brief and say little about the building’s wider relevance. Even a more detailed account, like Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī’s (d. 487/1094) description of the *ribāṭ* of Monastir in his *kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, which does contain information about the building’s form and its administration (Al-Bakrī 1992, vol. 2, p. 692), is silent about the daily life of the *murābiṭūn* and the institution’s social function. Historical texts, whether of the conquest or of the wider political history of the region, such as Ibn ʿIdhārī al-Marrākushī’s *Bayān al-mughrib fī akhbār al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib*, only mention the *ribāṭs* when these are relevant to wider political or military events. These references expand our understanding of the political and military role of the larger *ribāṭs*, but because they rarely mention smaller events or buildings, they are of less use for understanding the phenomenon as a whole.

The most detailed accounts of the *ribāṭs* and *murābiṭūn* in Ifrīqiya are contained in the biographies of religious scholars composed in Ifrīqiya and al-Andalus between the 4th/10th and the 6th/12th centuries. The earliest biographical dictionaries are *kitāb Ṭabaqāt ʿulamāʾ Ifrīqiya* by Abū l-ʿArab Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Tamīm al-Tamīmī (d. 333/945) and *Akhbār al-fuqahāʾ wa-l-muḥaddithīn* by Ibn Ḥārith al-Khushanī (d. 361/971 or 371/981), but the relevance of the *ribāṭ* for the scholarly landscape of Ifrīqiya is demonstrated in more detail in later works, particularly *Riyāḍ al-nufūs fī ṭabaqāt ʿulamāʾ al-Qayrawān wa-Ifrīqiya* by Abū Bakr ʿAbd Allāh al-Mālikī (d. after 449/1057) and *Manāqib al-Jabanyānī* by Abū l-Qāsim al-Labīdī (d. 440/1048) which, although it focuses on the scholar and ascetic Abū Ishāq al-Jabanyānī,<sup>6</sup> also provides a wealth of information about the activities of al-Jabanyānī’s contemporaries. The author of the text, al-Labīdī, describes the coast as peopled by virtuous sheikhs, who were continually visited by Muslims seeking blessing or learning, and who would travel between *ribāṭs* to benefit from the different scholars and holy men who inhabited them.<sup>7</sup>

The depictions of the *murābiṭūn* in these sources played and continue to play an important role in the construction of the religious landscape of Ifrīqiya, but the texts are problematic as historical sources for two reasons. Firstly, many of them were written long after the period that they describe, and the authors’ depictions are clearly influenced by their own historical context and concerns. For example, al-Mālikī’s *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* was composed around two centuries after the lifetimes of the people that he describes. As one of the few intellectuals who remained in Kairouan after the raids of the Banū Hilāl, and

writing against the background of rising Almohad power in the west, Zirid–Hammadid tensions in Ifrīqiya and the Norman conquest of Sicily, al-Mālikī's presentation of the Aghlabid age as a golden period of Islamic scholarship and piety has much to do with his interest in integrating Ifrīqiya into the larger religious narrative of the Islamic Empire. It also relates to his view about the political and social role of scholars. In al-Mālikī's depiction of political strife and impious or ignorant rulers, it is the scholars who are the real heroes of Ifrīqian history, and their *ribāṭs* that protect the province from both moral and military collapse. Either because of his perspective, or because of the amount of time that elapsed between the events and his compilation, al-Mālikī omits several aspects that are important for a comprehensive understanding of religious developments in Ifrīqiya. For example, he rarely refers to Hanafi scholars in his work, despite the indications on manuscripts contained in the Kairouan Repository that the Hanafi legal school played a key role in religious discussions in Ifrīqiya for most of the 3rd/9th century (Tsfarir 2004, pp. 103–4).

A second problem with the biographical texts is their improbably positive, almost hagiographic, view of the scholars that they describe, which leads them to omit details that dull the sheen of their subjects and possibly to embellish stories of their strengths and virtues. This is not only the case for later authors such as al-Mālikī and al-Labīdī but also for writers whose lifetimes were closer to those of their subjects. For example, al-Tamīmī lived in the late 3rd/9th and early 4th/10th century and many of his biographical accounts are taken from eyewitnesses or companions of his subjects. Al-Tamīmī's private library, which has been studied by Miklos Muranyi (1986), shows his intimacy with the scholastic landscape of Ifrīqiya. But, perhaps due to his unhappiness with the non-Sunni version of Islam promoted by the Fatimid rulers under which he lived, al-Tamīmī's portrayal of the Sunni scholars of Aghlabid Ifrīqiya is suspiciously shiny. His subjects, particularly those in his *kitāb al-Miḥan*, are mostly models of integrity and courage, capable of vanquishing Muʿtazilī theologians and corrupt Shiʿite rulers in a single paragraph, fearless in the face of consequences when defending the faith and oblivious to the demands of the body or worldly status. Given his concern to present the scholars in a certain light, both al-Tamīmī's portrayal of the scholars' actions, and of the role that they occupied in society, should be interpreted with some caution. Like the later texts of al-Labīdī and al-Mālikī, the main relevance of these texts for this study is the expectations that they reflect about *murābiṭūn* in the period in which they were written. Their historical value for understanding the 3rd/9th century must be measured against earlier textual sources and the archaeological evidence.

Most of the texts from Ifrīqiya that pre-date the biographical dictionaries are legal compendia.<sup>8</sup> Fragments of theological works compiled in the 3rd/9th and early 4th/10th centuries and deposited in the repository of Kairouan give some insight into the range of scholarship that characterized the intellectual landscape of early Islamic Ifrīqiya but most of these still require editing and analysis (Muranyi 1997). Legal texts, which also constitute the majority of texts in the Kairouan Repository, are still the main group of sources from this period.

Of these texts, the earliest and most well known is the *Mudawwana* by Saḥnūn b. Saʿīd (d. 240/854). Saḥnūn was the most renowned legal scholar of early Islamic Ifrīqiya and is credited with having definitively contributed to the dominance of the Maliki legal school in the region. The *Mudawwana* is a collection of questions and answers supposedly put to the legal scholar Ibn al-Qāsim after Saḥnūn visited him in Egypt and is said to have been completed in 191/807 but it is unlikely that the redaction was made by Saḥnūn himself, or that this redaction constituted the final version. Students attending the teaching circle of Saḥnūn copied his transmission of Ibn al-Qāsim's teaching, probably into discrete, subject-relevant volumes that could be easily circulated and memorized. The compilation of these volumes into a larger work may well have taken place later and both the copying, oral transmission and final compilation of the *Mudawwana* could have been accompanied by small alterations to the transmitted material.



This should not mean that the *Mudawwana* is disregarded as a literary source for early Islamic Ifrīqiya. As the work of Jonathan Brockopp and Miklos Muranyi on manuscripts of the Kairouan Repository (Muranyi 2014; Brockopp 2014) has shown, written redactions of Saḥnūn's work already began to be collated and cross-checked for accuracy in the 3rd/9th century, and the manuscript fragments that remain show remarkably few differences between transmission groups (Brockopp 2014, p. 136). Jonathan Brockopp (2014, p. 136) refers to chapter headings and "minimal interpolative remarks" and finds little evidence for the ongoing editorial activity by students that Calder (1993, pp. 7–9) suggested in his discussion of Saḥnūn's work. It seems legitimate, therefore, to regard the queries and the answers relating to *ribāṭs* in the *Mudawwana* as deriving from the 3rd/9th century, although, as with all legal queries, each one should be checked against other evidence and what we know of the wider context before it is interpreted as a source from this period (Bosanquet 2022, p. 114).

The *Mudawwana*, like later legal compilations such as *Ajwibat Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn* and Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī's *al-Nawādir wa-l-ziyādāt*, contains a series of queries relating to a situation, practice or inter-personal conflict. Each query is followed by the jurist's answer recommending a course of action or solution. It is likely that many of the queries in these compilations arose out of actual conflicts or situations from early Islamic Ifrīqiya. Unlike later legal compilations, which often included hypothetical queries for the sake of theoretical discussion, the queries in the legal texts of early Islamic Ifrīqiya tended to be *nāzila*, or questions arising from actual social problems without a prior legal ruling (Al-Jayzānī 2006, p. 24). Therefore, although it is not possible to know how common the incident described in the query was, it seems likely that the question reflects a social reality to some extent. By contrast, the answer of the jurist was a recommendation, without coercive power and should be seen as a prescriptive rather than descriptive statement. Therefore, it is possible to see the questions in the legal texts as closer to the historical reality, while the responses reflect an ideal or expectations that might not have been put into practices.

In addition to textual evidence, archaeological evidence is also helpful for understanding the social relevance of the *ribāṭ* and the expectations relating to the *murābiṭūn*. Even for repurposed structures, the form and location of the *ribāṭ* reveal a lot about its function and material evidence found within the *ribāṭs* can also indicate much about the activities that took place in them (Louichi 2000). Inscriptions, whether in the *ribāṭ* itself or close by, such as on tombstones, can contain information about the kind of people who founded *ribāṭs*, became *murābiṭūn* and their theological orientation (Zbiss 1981). Although the archaeological investigation that has been carried out on *ribāṭs* is quite limited, and much of that which has been undertaken has not been fully published (Mahfoudh 2000, pp. 98–99), the results that are available are an essential component of this research and should be brought into conversation with textual research.

#### 4. Behavioral Expectations for *Murābiṭūn*: Military Activity and Conduct

What expectations then, about the behavior or conduct of *murābiṭūn* do the literary sources reflect? How does this literary evidence correspond to the material evidence? And what do these expectations reveal about the function of the *ribāṭ* in early Islamic Ifrīqiya? The most obvious answer to this question is the military role of the men living in the *ribāṭs*, and the assumption that the *ribāṭs* would offer protection against a sea-borne attack on Ifrīqiya. This is clearly indicated by their architectural form; most of the buildings described as having been used for *ribāṭ* and which have been examined are relatively tall buildings, comprising at least two stories in contrast to most domestic buildings for which a second floor was rare (Mahfoudh 2000, p. 117). In some cases, the fort, or *ribāṭ*, is described as possessing a tower or *burj* (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 127) that would have functioned as a lookout post for the *murābiṭūn*. They were often equipped with a cistern, which allowed the inhabitants to withstand a siege or to shelter refugees, as well as enabling the ablutions necessary for prayer (Mahfoudh 2000, p. 118). Some *ribāṭs*, such as that at Younga or Iunga,

only had one entrance, and this was built on the side facing away from the sea. Others, like Monastir, had crenelated upper walls, allowing occupants to keep watch or defend the structure without being seen themselves.

Their military function is also suggested by the location of the *ribāṭs*, and their position with respect to one another. Many *ribāṭs*, such as Qaṣr Ibn Jaʿad, were situated on a promontory overlooking the sea (Mahfoudh 2000, p. 121) while others, such as Burj Younga, were situated between the main settlement and the sea, enabling the *murābiṭūn* to deter attackers before they reached the population close to the coast. Although some *ribāṭs* became the center of a new settlement that developed around them, most seem to have been established in more isolated locations, where the coast was otherwise unprotected from invasion.<sup>9</sup> In the case of attack, the *ribāṭs* appear to have been built sufficiently close to one another to allow fire signals to communicate a message along the coast (Khalilieh 1999, p. 214) and in al-Mālikī's account of Ibn Saḥnūn, he describes one *ribāṭ* sending to another for help when they had been attacked by Byzantines (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 447). Faouzi Mahfoudh mentions the discovery of catapult canons during excavations in Qaṣr al-Ṭūb, which he also interprets as indicating a military function for the building.

Literary accounts refer to weapons being stored in the *ribāṭs*, making these the only repositories for arms other than the arsenal in Sousse or Tunis (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāji 1968, vol. 2, p. 292). The words used to describe buildings used for *ribāṭ*, such as *ḥiṣn*, *qaṣr* and *maḥras*, had clear military connotations, further indicating that the occupation was a military one. At the same time, however, their military relevance seems to have been more defensive than aggressive and there is never any indication that the role of the *murābiṭūn* paralleled that of the *jund*. Al-Mālikī describes men visiting *ribāṭs* for the purpose of worship and defense (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 446) and the 8th/15th-century traveller al-Tijānī describes the *ribāṭ* near Sfax as offering a refuge to which the inhabitant would run if the coast were attacked (Al-Tijānī 1981, p. 85). In his discussion about *ribāṭs* in *al-Nawādir wa-l-ziyādāt*, the Ifriqiyan jurist Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī transmits the saying of Ibn ʿUmar, that “[the duty of] jihad was imposed to spill the blood of the unbelievers and [the duty of] *ribāṭ* was imposed to protect the blood of the Muslims” (Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1999, vol. 3, p. 14), distinguishing hereby between two aspects of military service to Islam. Although some historical accounts contain references to the harbors overlooked by *ribāṭs* being used for attacks, this relevance is not emphasized in most depictions, leaving a primarily defensive role for the *murābiṭūn*.

The function of defense would have been particularly relevant for the first century after the Arab conquest of Ifriqiya, when the threat of Byzantine reconquest from the sea was more serious. As Ibn ʿIdhārī explains, the fear of Byzantine aggression was the reason why ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ chose an inland site for the *miṣr* of Kairouan, and why fortresses were established between the coast and other inland cities (Ibn ʿIdhārī al-Marrākushī 2013, vol. 1, p. 44). Ibn ʿIdhārī's interpretation represents a view held in the 7th/14th century in which he was writing, and it is likely that other factors were also significant, but there is no doubt that the military threat played an important role. Concern about Byzantine reconquest was also a factor for the Muslims' negligence of Carthage after they captured it in 182/798, despite the important role that the city had played before the conquest and the remaining infrastructure in the surrounding region (Fenwick 2020, p. 54).

The likelihood of Byzantine reconquest decreased as Arab control over the region solidified. Textual references to peace treaties suggest that there was a formal basis for a cessation of state-led hostility and a formal peace agreement between the Arabs and the Byzantines is mentioned as the reason for some scholars' reluctance to support Ziyādāt Allāh's campaign in Sicily (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāji 1968, vol. 2, p. 27). The increased volume of maritime trade evident during the 3rd/9th century is partially due to the gradual demilitarization of the Mediterranean engendered by changing relations between the Arabs and the Byzantines. However, these agreements did not signal the end of all attacks, and references to the capture of Muslim slaves by Byzantines (described as *rūm* in the literary sources) in Saḥnūn b. Saʿīd's *Mudawwana* indicate that non-state raids on the Ifriqiyan

coastline continued (Saḥnūn 1906, vol. 3, p. 17). Due to the increasing volume of maritime trade, and the rising wealth of the coastal settlements, the threat of piracy also increased, as did attacks on the settlements along the Ifrīqiyan coastline. Legal sources contain references to pirates, described as “sea-thieves”, without attributing them to a Byzantine or any other larger power and it is likely that these were independent groups of men from around the western Mediterranean coast who undertook raids for commercial rather than political purposes (Khalilieh 2006, p. 217). It is also likely that Arabs were involved in this form of sea-raiding. Count Boniface II of Tuscany’s raid of Carthage in 213/828 is attributed by the sources to his concern about pirates described as Saracens, which he sought in Carthage after he failed to find any in Sardinia (Wickham 1981, p. 59).<sup>10</sup> Both Boniface’s raid and the justification given for it are indications of the prevalence of small-scale attacks on coastal regions, against which the armed bands of men in *ribāṭs* were probably an important defense. Sources also refer to men in *ribāṭs* offering assistance to commercial ships at sea (Khalilieh 2006, p. 217), and al-Mālikī’s description of ‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. ‘Abd Rabbiḥī’s foundation of the Qaṣr Ziyād to “protect the people” (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 422) also suggests that the *ribāṭs* and the *murābiṭūn* were perceived as a support for the villages along the coast.

The harbors that the *ribāṭs* overlooked tended to be quite small, and most of them would not have had the capacity for more than two or three boats to dock at the same time. This is in contrast to the arsenal in Tunis, built by Ḥassān b. Nu‘mān after a Byzantine attack in 82/701, and to the harbor in Sousse, which was able to hold 60 ships by the time that al-Tijānī visited it (Al-Tijānī 1981, p. 28) and which was used by the Aghlabid emir Ziyādāt Allāh to launch the Ifrīqiyan raid on Sicily in the early 3rd/9th century. Rather than an entire army, it seems more likely that the men in *ribāṭs* were expected to fend off smaller attacks from up to 100 men. This scale of attack is also commensurate with the size of the *ribāṭ* buildings, most of which would not have been able to house more than 50 men.<sup>11</sup>

It is noteworthy that the biographical accounts of al-Mālikī, al-Labidī and al-Tamīmī say little about the military function of the *murābiṭūn*. There are occasional references to military activities in the *ribāṭs*, such as al-Mālikī’s description of two *murābiṭūn* who used military exercises to train newcomers to the *ribāṭs* (Mahfoudh 2000, p. 122), but these are rare and far outweighed by the references to the scholarly and pious activities in the *ribāṭs*. Rather than interpreting this as evidence for their actual military irrelevance, as Nājī Jallūl does, it is more likely that the weighting in the biographical accounts reflects the authors’ own positionality as religious scholars and their interest in emphasizing the contribution of the *ribāṭs* to the development of Ifrīqiya’s intellectual–religious culture.

The perception of the *murābiṭūn* as military men, with a military function, is indicated more clearly by queries and responses in the legal texts. One example is the following query put to Saḥnūn b. Sa‘īd:

“It was asked about the people guarding a *ribāṭ*. They raise the *takbīr* at night and they sing and they raise their voices.”

He said: “As for the singing, I don’t know about that.” And he disliked it. And he said, “but I see no harm in [raising the voice for the] *takbīr*.” (Saḥnūn 1906, vol. 3, p. 44).

The same question is transmitted in al-Qayrawānī’s *al-Nawādir wa-l-ziyādāt*, where the formulation of the query makes it clear that the loud voices of the *murābiṭūn* were irritating residents living close by (Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1999, vol. 3, p. 17). A question put to the 6th/12th century jurist al-Māzarī (d. 536/1141) refers to similar practices. The questioner mentions that the *murābiṭūn* “gather at night, after the nighttime prayer, with candles, and they walk along the walls, saying that they intend to guard [the *ribāṭ*]. They unite their voices in praise of God almighty, with singing and in a melodious fashion” (Al-Wansharīsī 1981, vol. 12, pp. 361–62).

In their responses, all three jurists permit the *murābiṭūn* to raise their voices in *takbīr* and shout together. They are less sure about whether this may be undertaken in a melodious fashion, or whether the *takbīr* may be “led” by one man whose call is then answered by the others. But the jurists’ acceptance for raised voices within the context of religious practice of the *ribāṭ* makes an interesting contrast with their view of raised voices in a mosque. While answering a question about people raising their voices in dhikr, Ibn Saḥnūn castigates loud worship, making it clear that he regards the mosque as a place of quiet worship, and raised voices as a sign of impiety (Ibn Saḥnūn 2011, p. 296). Al-Māzarī also criticizes Sufis who raise their voices in dhikr and a similar criticism of noisy worship is attributed to the 3rd/9th century jurist Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar (Al-Wansharīsī 1981, vol. 12, p. 361). Ibn Nāji notes that raised voices in a mosque are disliked by the jurists (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāji 1968, vol. 2, p. 16). Noisy worship, therefore, is permitted to the *murābiṭūn* in the *ribāṭ* but not to worshippers in a mosque. This distinction is related to the military function that the *murābiṭūn* are expected to fulfill. For example, al-Māzarī explains in his answer that the *murābiṭūn*’s shouts demonstrate the strength of the men arming the fortress and contribute to deterring the enemy (Al-Wansharīsī 1981, vol. 12, p. 362).

However, there is less tolerance for *murābiṭūn* who extend their activities outside the walls of the building itself. After mentioning the *takbīr*, the questioner to al-Māzarī goes on to describe the *murābiṭūn* as “marching through the narrow streets and crossing the slaughter squares and the rubbish tips”, chanting and carrying lights (Al-Wansharīsī 1981, vol. 12, p. 362). He mentions the irritation that this causes the surrounding inhabitants and asks whether this, too, should be allowed. Al-Māzarī expresses his disapproval for this practice, stressing the debasement of God’s name entailed in calling the *takbīr* in unclean places such as rubbish tips. The implication here is that the muscular spirituality of the *murābiṭūn* must be limited to the *ribāṭ* itself even if, as mentioned in other texts, their prayers and Qur’an recitations were welcome throughout the residential area.

### 5. Behavioral Expectations for *Murābiṭūn*: Chastity

A second component of the expectations regarding the behavior expected in a *ribāṭ*, or from the *murābiṭūn*, is chastity. Although the *murābiṭūn* were often married, the biographers are unanimous in depicting them as celibate during the time that they spent in *ribāṭ*, with the married *murābiṭūn* sometimes lodging their wives and families in a nearby settlement so that they could visit them or be cared for by them if necessary.

Chastity is not an inherently positive practice in the Islamic intellectual tradition, and it is possible that the glorification of chastity in relation to the *ribāṭ* reflects the influence of north African monasticism on the religious traditions of this region. However, in the biographers’ portrayal, the chastity of the *murābiṭūn* is also a reflection of their dedication to God and to pious scholarship. This is typified by al-Mālikī’s portrayal of the scholar Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Hāshim Masrūr al-Tujībī, also known as Ibn al-Ḥajjām, whom al-Mālikī describes as having been given a slave girl but failing to notice her because of his absorption in his books. Eventually, the slave girl complained and was sent back to her seller (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 423). The famous *ribāṭ*-dweller, ‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. ‘Abd Rabbihi is said to have never married or to have taken a concubine, and to have been unaware of the beauty of his slave girls because of his devotion to God (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 423), while another *murābiṭ*, Abū Hārūn al-Andalusī, is said to have never needed to cleanse himself from impurity (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 516). The chastity of the *murābiṭ* is important for the biographers’ portrayal of the space or practice of *ribāṭ* as a whole; through the exclusion of sexual activity, the *ribāṭ* becomes, like the individual scholar, a space untouched by worldly or physical needs, which is wholly dedicated to God and religion.

It may be assumed that many scholars in the *ribāṭ* were not able to live according to this ideal. Ibn Hawqal criticizes the immorality in the *ribāṭ*s of Sicily (Ibn Hawqal 1992, p. 85) and in al-Mālikī’s account of the *ribāṭ* scholar al-Ghadāmasī, he describes his discovery of two other *murābiṭūn* embracing one another (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 452). However,



al-Mālikī's emphasis on the shame that the men experienced when caught, and their fear that al-Ghadāmasī would expose them, indicates that the biographers did not regard this practice as acceptable, just as they also regarded heterosexual intimacy within the *ribāṭ* as forbidden.

How does the biographer's depiction of the *ribāṭ* as a chaste space relate to depictions in other genres? Other texts do imply the presence of wives in *ribāṭ*s. For example, there are references to women's quarters in the *ribāṭ* of Monastir and a ruling given in the *Mudawwana* permits men to take their wives to *ribāṭ*s if its size makes it unlikely that they will be endangered (Sahnūn 1906, vol. 3, p. 5). In the same discussion, soldiers are prohibited from taking their wife and family into a raid on enemy territory, indicating a clear distinction between *ribāṭ*s as places of protection and conflict sites outside the Realm of Islam. A squabble about grazing rights in the land around one *ribāṭ*, transmitted by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, indicates that in the decades after the conquest of Ifrīqiya, *ribāṭ*s and the grazing land around them tended to be allocated to specific tribes, a settlement practice that would certainly have involved families and wives.

The fact that some sources do indicate a female presence in *ribāṭ*s is an indication of the flexibility of the term *ribāṭ* in the wider literary tradition, in contrast to its more precise use in the Ifrīqiyān biographical texts. For example, in the conflict about grazing rights, the term is clearly being used to refer to a wider settlement for a community, whereas for the Ifrīqiyān biographers, it refers to a single building or complex, even if this included grazing lands. The reference to size as a criterion for safety refers to cities or large settlements that had come to be called *ribāṭ*s,<sup>12</sup> and in which women had access to the same privacy and security that they did elsewhere. By contrast, the Ifrīqiyān biographical texts refer to *ribāṭ*s only in the sense of smaller defensive structures, in which women would have been more vulnerable and exposed. Shortly after transmitting the permission to *murābiṭūn* to bring their wives to larger *ribāṭ*s, Ibn Abī Zayd transmits another ruling recommending that they do not take their families to the *ribāṭ*s of Sousse and Sfax because of the risks to which they could be exposed (Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1999, vol. 3, p. 46). Given that the *ribāṭ*s of Sousse and Sfax were larger than most other *ribāṭ*s built in the region, this ruling can be seen as an indication that the other *ribāṭ* buildings in North Africa were seen as too small and too exposed to be able to offer safety to women and children. Therefore, other than the large urban complex into which the *ribāṭ* of Monastir developed, it is unlikely that women's presence was accepted or common in Ifrīqiyān *ribāṭ*s. This is also reflected by al-Bakrī's (Al-Bakrī 1992, vol. 2, pp. 691–92) reference to the *ribāṭ*s of Ifrīqiya as occupied by "a group of righteous men and *murābiṭūn* who have shut themselves away, removed from the family and the tribe" (*wa-fīhi jamā'a min al-ṣāliḥīn wa l-murābiṭīn qad ḥabasū anfusahum fīhi munfaridīn dūn al-ahl wa l-ashā'ir...*).

The legal scholars only mention practical aspects, such as safety, among the reasons why women may not live in *ribāṭ*s and do not mention the *murābiṭūn*'s dedication to God as a factor. The different explanations for women's exclusions from *ribāṭ*s reflect the different views of the institution in the legal and the biographical sources, which are related to the different aims of the authors.

The architectural form of the *ribāṭ* also indicates that wives did not live permanently in the building. The typical layout of the *ribāṭ*, of individual cells built around a central courtyard, would have left little space for privacy and although it is possible that female slaves were present to help with the administration, it is unlikely that these conditions were seen as suitable for wives or families.

## 6. Behavioral Expectations for *Murābiṭūn*: Disinterest in Worldly Acquisition

In addition to chastity, another indication of the other-worldly orientation that biographers expected of *murābiṭūn* is their indifference to or even dislike of material riches. Al-Labīdī describes Abū Ishāq al-Jabanyānī as belonging to a family that was so wealthy that as a child, he was accompanied by 15 slaves when walking in the street (Al-Labīdī 1959, p. 4), but as choosing to renounce this wealth to dedicate his life to scholarship and worship,

even hiding from his father for fear that he would force him to return to a life of luxury. Al-Jabanyānī's renunciation functions as proof of his love of God and pious character in al-Labīdī's biography, which also emphasizes his dedication to *ribāṭ*. Another example is the wealthy trader ʿAbd al-Raḥīm b. ʿAbd Rabbihi, who is described as abandoning his trade in the market to dedicate himself to scholarship and *ribāṭ*, and who used some of his wealth to build a fortress on the coast (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 422). Although some of the scholars who lived in the *ribāṭ*s clearly had steady sources of income and were at no risk of poverty, this is downplayed in the biographical sources, who show more interest in their renunciation of material wealth.

Austerity is often listed among a scholar's virtues in biographies of scholars as well (Al-Tamīmī 1914, p. 101). However, there is less emphasis on this aspect for scholars than for *murābiṭūn* and in general, wealth is not depicted as detrimental to a scholarly career. Al-Khushanī describes several scholars, such as ʿAbdallāh b. Sahl al-Qibriyānī and his son Sahl, as extremely wealthy, without implying that this detracted from the quality of their scholarship (Al-Tamīmī 1914, p. 134). He also describes Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar al-Andalusī as extremely poor, but without depicting this as a religious virtue, or relevant for his academic reputation. An exaggerated interest in money is depicted negatively in biographers' accounts of scholars but poverty or the renunciation of material wealth is not portrayed as relevant to the quality of their scholarship, whereas this is the case for the piety of the *murābiṭūn*.

One characteristic common to the portrayal of both the *murābiṭūn* and the scholars is their indifference to political power, despite the leaders' eagerness to find favor with them. Just as the scholars of Ifrīqiya are depicted as having to be forced into accepting the ruler's nomination to a judgeship, so too are the *murābiṭūn* depicted as reluctant to have any kind of relation with the ruling class. One example is Ibn Nāǧī's portrayal of the *murābiṭ* Abū ʿUthmān, who refused a retinue of the Aghlabid leader entrance into his *ribāṭ*. When asked why, he is depicted as replying "we have withdrawn from you as far as the frontier space (*thaghr*) and now you wish to take even this from us" (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāǧī 1968, p. 256). His answer conveys the impression of the *ribāṭ* as a space of withdrawal from a society that has become increasingly wealthy and corrupt since the Aghlabids' rise to power. In addition to a subtext of political criticism, it emphasizes the orientation away from worldly concerns within the *ribāṭ*.

This depiction, which is particularly prominent in the biographical texts, sits ill with references to the worldly advantages that the *ribāṭ* offered its inhabitants. A legal ruling prohibiting men to use the hajj, the mosque or *ribāṭ* to escape a debt (Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1999, vol. 3, p. 17) suggests that a spell as a *murābiṭ* was indeed used for precisely this purpose, especially as it was probably easier and more comfortable than the other two options. Another financial benefit was the income that could be derived from the *ḥimā* or grazing land around the *ribāṭ* which had been granted as a waqf to sustain the building and its inhabitants (ʿIyāḍ b. Mūsā 1968, p. 13).<sup>13</sup> The income from the *ḥimā* (pl. *aḥmiyya*) must have been quite high in some instances, and in the 5th/11th century, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Khalaf al-Maʿāfirī composed his *Aḥmiyyat al-ḥuṣūn* addressing the conflict around the grazing lands and the use to which these could be put (Jallūl 1999, p. 93). Although the work reflects debates from a later period than the 3rd/9th century under discussion in this study, it is likely, given that these lands had been granted waqf status in the late 2nd/8th century, that the *ḥimā* had already become a profitable institution before this.

Another source of income for the men living in *ribāṭ*s was maritime trade and the transport of commercial goods along the coast. Although commercial contacts with other Mediterranean ports had declined steadily after the end of Roman unity over the western Mediterranean (Loseby 2005, pp. 234–38; Tedesco 2018, pp. 399–402) after the Arab conquest, the stability brought by Aghlabid rule, demilitarization of the Mediterranean and the development of production and transport networks of inland Ifrīqiya enabled maritime trade to gradually increase from the 3rd/9th century onward (Valérian 2020, p. 53; Picard

2015, pp. 237–38). The larger ships would have docked at the large ports of Sousse and Tunis, but the smaller inlets monitored by *ribāṭs* also played a role in the development of trade. This is particularly the case because most sea travel in the 3rd/9th century was along the coast rather than across the open sea, due to the risks that this form of crossing involved (Al-Yaʿqūbī 1860, p. 143). Unable to sail by night and aware of their vulnerability to pirates, the ships traveling by coast-wise navigation would dock in the smaller ports for one or two nights before continuing their journey (Goldberg 2012, p. 110). These shorter stopovers enabled them to pick up other goods or to trade some of the wares that they had on board before continuing their journey, an arrangement which probably involved the *ribāṭs* as the main building overlooking the harbor (Abidi 2021, p. 118). Queries in legal texts refer to *murābiṭūn* participating in trade, and to *ribāṭs* being used for storing trade wares. These queries correspond to other references suggesting that *ribāṭs* were used for storage, such as anecdotes about thieves attacking them for the goods that were kept there (Jallūl 1999, p. 199).

As with the references to the grazing land around the *ribāṭ*, the earliest references to this practice can be dated to the 5th/12th century,<sup>14</sup> and so we should not assume that the practice was widespread in the 3rd/9th century. However, given that trade along the coast was developing during this period and the possibilities for safe storage that the structure of the *ribāṭ* offered, it is likely that the practice was widespread long before this date. However, it was not seen as an acceptable function for the *ribāṭs* or the *murābiṭūn*. The jurists discussing this question note that storage of trade goods (*silʿat al-tijāra*) in the *ribāṭs* is prohibited, justifying this with the explanation that commercial use of the building was incommensurate with their status as waqfs. The view that the legal scholars take of the *ribāṭs*' function is similar to the biographers' view in this sense, but it is noteworthy that the use of *ribāṭs* for trade is not mentioned in the biographical accounts.

Settlement along the Ifrīqiyan coastline and around the *ribāṭs* increased during the 3rd/9th century. In his prosopographical study of the Genizah merchants, Goitein observes that many of the merchants who were based in al-Mahdiyya are identified by nisbas relating them to inland North African cities such as Tahert and Fez (Goitein 1978, vol. 1, p. 20). It is likely that the families of these merchants had left the inland regions for these cities at an earlier date, probably drawn by the economic opportunities that the cities represented (Goldberg 2012, p. 41). Although Goitein's research is based on documents compiled by the Jewish community, the same is surely true for Muslim and Christian merchants, and we can imagine a progressive demographic densification of the Ifrīqiyan coastline as its commercial significance increased. As a result, the initially isolated areas that the *ribāṭs* were intended to protect became increasingly built up and in some cases the *ribāṭ* became the center of a complex urban settlement. This is certainly the case with Monastir, which is depicted as an isolated piece of land at the time of its founding but which was an important urban complex by the time al-Bakrī's source al-Warrāq visited it in the 4th/10th century.<sup>15</sup> It is also reflected by the complaints about the noise caused by *murābiṭūn* discussed previously; from having been constructed to protect an isolated coastal site, the *ribāṭs* to which these queries relate are now in the center of an urban settlement, the residents of which are troubled by noise within the *ribāṭ* building. It is likely that the construction of housing on land granted to the *ribāṭ* and the collection of rent on these buildings was relevant for the discussion about *ḥimā*, as these spaces became increasingly profitable.

In addition to benefiting financially, the *murābiṭūn* also acquired an administrative role. Al-Mālikī mentions that the *murābiṭūn* were the first to raise the taxes of eight dinars on each pair of ploughing animals after this was introduced by the Aghlabids (Jallūl 1999, p. 51), indicating their links with the ruling elite and the political and social influence that they enjoyed. This was particularly the case for the *amīn* of the *ribāṭ*, also called the *imām* or *mukarram*, whose social and political authority increased as settlement around the *ribāṭ* developed. For example, one account describes the founder of the Ibn Jaʿd *ribāṭ* as requesting permission from the *mukarram* of the main *ribāṭ* in Sousse before beginning his building, and this *mukarram* as telling him where to build it.<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Behavioral Expectations for *Murābiṭūn*: Piety and Religious Devotion

Although the social and political influence of the *ribāṭ* leaders is not ignored by the biographical sources, the authors of these texts focus more heavily on the pious and scholarly nature of the *murābiṭūn*. An important motif for the *murābiṭūn*'s piety is their emotion as they recite the Qur'an, which is often so strong that they weep as they read. Descriptions of sobs and wails from cells in the *ribāṭ* feature in many anecdotes in the biographies. Pious crying, whether out of fear of God, yearning for the afterlife or sorrow over one's own sins, plays a significant role in the Islamic intellectual tradition,<sup>17</sup> with roots in accounts of the Companions and the Prophet himself. It is particularly widespread in the ascetic tradition, as reflected by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's (d. 281/894) composition of *Kitāb al-Riqqa wa-l-bukā'* (*The book of softheartedness and weeping*) and al-Ghazālī's praise for the merits of crying in some of his works. However, crying is also associated with military men and practice. For example, 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), who was renowned for his battles against the Byzantines in north Syria and for composing one of the earliest works on jihad, is frequently described as having been quick to weep during religious practice (Bonner 1992, p. 27; Melchert 2015). Thus, the emphasis on the tears and emotions of the *murābiṭūn* in the biographers' accounts is an important literary motif, that associates their religiosity with that of both the ascetics and the warriors, characterizing the *ribāṭ* as a place of intense religiosity closer to the Sufi convent or the field of jihad than the mosque.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to their devotion to God, the biographers also emphasize the piety of the *murābiṭūn* through their depiction of God's attachment to them. Many of the men that al-Mālikī describes are *mujāb al-da'wā*, or men whose prayers are answered by God. Descriptions of this gift tend to relate to the benefit that it brings to the community as a whole, such as when Abū Khārija 'Anbasa b. Khārija al-Ghāfiqī, a *murābiṭ* based in Younga, had his prayers for rain answered, ending a long drought in the region (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 241). In another account, the joint prayer of the *murābiṭūn* in Monastir is depicted as bringing about a storm that caused the destruction of a ship of Byzantine soldiers that had tried to invade the coastline (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 421). In this sense, some *murābiṭūn* are treated in the literary traditions almost as interceders for their community with God, anticipating the marabout tradition that developed in North Africa from the 5th/11th century onward (Idris 1935).

Other aspects of *murābiṭūn*'s piety include their other-worldly orientation described earlier and kindness to vulnerable members of society such as widows and the poor. For example, in al-Mālikī's description of the *murābiṭ* Abū l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Wahhāb as *mujāb al-da'wā*, he emphasizes that he gave freely to widows and the poor, when not withdrawing to his *ribāṭ* for contemplation and prayer (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 266). The portrayal of the *murābiṭūn*'s piety and favor with God can be compared with other depictions of holy men in the Islamic textual tradition. As with other holy men, the piety of the *murābiṭ* brings practical benefits to the community that surrounds them, but also imbues the space with blessing. Thus, through this portrayal, both the institution of the *ribāṭ* and the memory of the *murābiṭūn* contribute to a sacralization of the coast and the coastal landscape.

## 8. Behavioral Expectations for *Murābiṭūn*: Dedication to Religious Knowledge

The *ribāṭs* are also associated with the spread of Islamic scholarship, and particularly the development of the Maliki school in Ifriqiya, with many Maliki scholars described as spending long periods in one or several of the *ribāṭs*. The biographers sometimes depict the *murābiṭūn* as engaging in intense scholarly activity by visiting inhabitants of other *ribāṭs* for the sake of learning or debate. But other references suggest that too much discussion and travelling between *ribāṭs* was frowned upon, and that contemplation, rather than academic discussion, was expected of the *murābiṭūn*.

It is also relevant that some scholars described as dedicated to the practice of *ribāṭ* in later texts are not described this way in earlier texts. For example, Ibn Nāji's depiction of Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn emphasizes his practice of *ribāṭ* and describes him as weeping for a whole night as he read the Qur'an in one *ribāṭ* (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāji 1968, vol. 2,



pp. 128–32) but al-Khushanī (Al-Tamīmī 1914, pp. 128–30) does not mention Muḥammad b. Saḥnūn engaging in *ribāṭ* at all. He focuses on his quarrels with other scholars and how the academic debates related to social and political conflict in Kairouan. *Ribāṭ* is rarely mentioned in al-Tamīmī's biographical history, which focuses more on the development of the theological and legal doctrine.

### 9. Expectations about *Ribāṭ*, Jihad and the *Murābiṭūn* in Different Genres of the Ifrīqiyan Literary Tradition

This analysis of the depictions of *murābiṭūn*'s behavior or character in literary texts shows some shared notions about the institution of *ribāṭ* and some aspects that are more prominent in certain genres or historical contexts. The biographical accounts composed in North Africa depict the *murābiṭūn* as pious worshippers, with later biographers such as al-Mālikī placing increasing emphasis on the relevance of religious scholarship to *ribāṭ*. The biographers do not ignore their military function, but little reference is made to it and neither does military prowess feature in the list of a *murābiṭ*'s virtues. Neither is much mention made of their political and administrative influence, and the commercial activities of the *murābiṭūn* are almost completely ignored. Thus, the biographers construct an image of the *murābiṭūn* as pious scholars and of the *ribāṭ* as a place of self-abnegation, religious service and scholarship.

In contrast to the biographers' focus on piety and worship, the depiction of *murābiṭūn*'s behavior in legal and historical sources places greater emphasis on their military or defensive role. The religious component of *ribāṭ* is relevant, and is regarded, for example, as incompatible with self-serving activities such as trade in some texts. However, rather than the meek and ascetic religiosity portrayed in the biographical texts, for the legal authors, the *murābiṭūn*'s religiosity is assertive, corresponding well to their presentation as men of arms. This portrayal awards the *ribāṭ* a sacral character but one associated more closely with jihad than with the reclusive scholarship depicted in biographical texts. It is also noteworthy that Kairouan constitutes the geographical focus of his account and the Ifrīqiyan coastline plays a secondary role.

How can these depictions be related to the historical context of the texts? Is it possible to regard one depiction of the *murābiṭūn* as more accurate than another, and does the historical context explain why one text contains a different interpretation to another? It was argued at the beginning of this chapter that legal sources offer a less filtered representation of social realities than the biographical texts, as the questions and answers seek to regulate social reality rather than to construct a narrative, but that both the questions and answers should be assessed by being related to wider information about the general context. Questions relating to the *ribāṭ* in the earliest legal texts, from the 3rd/9th century, suggest its defensive function was primary during this period but queries in later texts refer more frequently to trade and administration among the activities of the *murābiṭūn*. This perception, and the changing nature of the functions of the *ribāṭ*, corresponds to what we know of the historical context, as Ifrīqiya's coastline changed from a primarily military to a more economic frontier. The legal texts' concern with the piety and other-worldly orientation of the *murābiṭūn* also corresponds to the wider intellectual context. *Ribāṭ*, like jihad, may have been a primarily military function but it was also a religious obligation or service that the believer could offer to God. The sacral character is not ignored in legal texts, even if it is too familiar to the jurist and the questioner to require much discussion.

Neither the questions nor the answers in the legal texts imply that scholarship was expected of the *murābiṭūn*. Although this observation conflicts with al-Mālikī's account, it does correspond to the expectations reflected in biographical and historical texts from the same period. For example, both al-Tamīmī's and al-Khushanī's portrayal of the scholarly landscape of early Islamic Ifrīqiya feature *ribāṭ* as a familiar institution that sometimes overlapped with scholarship, but they do not depict it as essential for a scholarly career. Unlike al-Mālikī, who depicts Kairouan as the home of decadence and impious rulers, al-Tamīmī portrays this city as the backdrop of most theological and legal discussions, with

the coast playing a peripheral role. Neither does he portray the practice or the building of *ribāṭ* as essential to the credentials for any scholar.

How then, to explain the convergence between religious scholarship and the institution of *ribāṭ* in later texts? Part of the answer lies in the changing significance of this institution in other parts of the Islamic Empire. By the 5th/11th century, when al-Mālikī and al-Labīdī were writing, the *ribāṭ* had acquired more relevance as an institution of public piety and this, together with the changing significance of Sufism and the relevance of the *ribāṭ* for this religious movement, gave the institution more centrality in the religious tradition of the Islamic Empire as a whole. If historians like al-Mālikī and al-Labīdī wished to relate their province's intellectual history to that of the wider Islamic Empire, highlighting the role of the *ribāṭ* in its development of Islamic discourse was one means of doing so.

At the same time, the centrality of the *ribāṭ* in al-Mālikī's intellectual history also reflects his view of Ifrīqiya as a site of jihad and of its scholars as leaders of this struggle. Al-Mālikī opens his history with a reference to the unending nature of jihad in this part of the Islamic realm, transmitting a hadith to the effect that even after jihad has ended in all other parts of the Empire, it will continue in the province of Ifrīqiya (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 1, p. 6). Notably, however, he never describes the expansionist raids into the Maghrib by the Arab conquerors using this term, and neither is jihad used to describe the conquest of Sicily, which is referred to instead as *ghazw* (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 269). In al-Mālikī's text, the term jihad is used to describe the struggle against the Fatimids, a usage that he justifies with the explanation that they are a serious threat to Islam, as "they are *majūs* in all but name" (Al-Mālikī 1983, vol. 2, p. 297). If, for al-Mālikī, it is the Fatimids who are the real infidel enemies of Islam, then the struggle against them can be seen as jihad and the Sunni Maliki scholars as the leaders of the struggle. Small wonder then, that his portrayal of these scholars often situates them in *ribāṭs*, buildings that his readers would have associated with defense and sacrality and whose function fitted well to his understanding of the scholar's role. So too does al-Mālikī invest his scholar-*murābiṭūn* with similar characteristics (ascetism, heightened religious emotion, military spirituality) to those ascribed to *mujāhidūn* in many portrayals. In al-Mālikī's merging of the function of jihad and religious scholarship, the *ribāṭ* plays an important role as a halfway house between the two institutions. His portrayal probably resounded well with readers because of the centrality that the *ribāṭ* had already acquired in Ifrīqiyān religious culture, due to wider political and social developments. But in giving the institution center stage in the struggle against deviant Muslims, as well as non-Muslims across the sea, al-Mālikī provided *ribāṭ* with a further dimension of symbolic significance that is less apparent in earlier texts.

The analysis of behavioral and character expectations of *murābiṭūn* that are reflected in texts relating to early Islamic Ifrīqiya reflect a perception of the institution and by extension, the building, as one of military defense for the borders of Islam. Partly because of the religious character of this obligation, the practice of *ribāṭ* is infused with religious significance, which in turn imbues the space of practice with a near-sacral character. The religious significance of *ribāṭ* meant that literary depictions of the tradition tend to downplay or to disapprove of the political and commercial activities of *murābiṭūn* but it is nonetheless likely that these became increasingly important as trade increased along the Ifrīqiyān coast. The connection between religious scholarship and piety makes the association between the Ifrīqiyān '*ulamā*' and the *murābiṭūn* an easy one. However, the religious scholars are not primarily men of *ribāṭ* in the earlier biographical accounts and Kairouan, rather than the coast, is usually depicted as the focus of religious scholarship. The centrality of the *ribāṭ* for religious scholarship and the Islamic identity of Ifrīqiya is more evident in the intellectual histories of the 5th/11th century, particularly in the account of al-Mālikī. His portrayal is closely related to his view of the formative role of scholars in defending the Islamic identity of Ifrīqiya and his antipathy toward the Fatimid rulers of the province. What began in the 2nd/8th century as a practice to protect isolated sites from non-Muslim reconquest became a locus of piety, trade and urban settlement a century later and after that, a central symbolic element in the struggle against the province's own Muslim rulers.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Roman Islam Center for Comparative Empire and Transcultural Studies, DFG grant number FOR 2924.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In most Arab sources, Ifrīqiya is used to refer to what is now Tunisia, western Libya and eastern Algeria. For a more precise definition of the territory ruled by the Aghlabids, see (Talbi 1966, pp. 122–29).
- <sup>2</sup> A well-known example is the city of Alexandria (‘Athamina 1997, p. 109).
- <sup>3</sup> *Murābiṭūn* is the name given to the men who practice *ribāṭ*. The singular form is *murābiṭ*. Because of the technical specificity of this term, it will be transcribed rather than translated in this study.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, the late 4th/10th-century writer al-Muqaddasī refers to *ribāṭs* along the Syro–Palestinian coast.
- <sup>5</sup> These studies are too numerous to mention in detail here. Overview works for the western Mediterranean include “Râbata, Ribât, Râbita: Une institution à reconsidérer” (Picard and Borrut 2003) Cuadernos de arquitectura y fortificación 6 (Albarrán and Daza 2019), edited by Albarrán and Daza, while the works of Khalilieh (1999) and Masarwa (2011) remain key studies for the Syrian–Palestine region. The study of Atta (Muhammad 2023) offers important insights for the relevance of the *ribāṭ* to social and political structures in the east.
- <sup>6</sup> Also written as al-Jabniyānī.
- <sup>7</sup> On the author and the work, see the introduction in (Al-Labīdī 1959).
- <sup>8</sup> The works of al-Ya‘qūbī and Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, although early, were not written in the region itself.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, Qaṣr Sahl, the *ribāṭ* founded by Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Sahl al-Qibriyānī, was located three miles from the city of Sousse itself (Al-Dabbāgh and Nāji 1968, vol. 2, p. 196).
- <sup>10</sup> The fact that the sources regard Sardinia as a suitable place to look for Saracen pirates may indicate an independent Arab settlement on this island, similar to those founded in Bari and elsewhere along the Italian coast, but this is not indicated in the Arab sources.
- <sup>11</sup> The *ribāṭ* of Monastir had larger capacities but this was unusual, and its expansion to house this number took place later.
- <sup>12</sup> See the introduction to this article for a discussion of this question.
- <sup>13</sup> See also the article by Pierre van Staevel in this volume on this institution.
- <sup>14</sup> The question about *ribāṭs* being used to store wares is cited as being put to the jurist al-Māzarī (d. 536/1141), although he specifies in his answer that his teacher was asked a similar question. Al-Māzarī’s most well-known teacher was al-Lakhmī (d. 458/1085), meaning that an earlier dating of this question could be set around this date.
- <sup>15</sup> Although al-Bakrī wrote in the 5th/11th century and never visited the countries that he wrote about, he relied on the 4th/10th-century source al-Warrāq, who did have first-hand knowledge of most of the spaces.
- <sup>16</sup> On the Ibn Ja‘d *ribāṭ*, see (Jallūl 1999, p. 113).
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, references to the prophets weeping when knowledge of God is revealed to them in surat al-Isrā’ (Q. 17:107–9) and surat Maryam (Q. 19:58). A well-known hadith about God’s compassion for Muslims who cry out of fear for God is the hadith that “No man who weeps for fear of Allah will be touched by the Fire until the milk goes back into the udders” (Sunan al-Nasā’ī, *Kitāb al-jihād*: 3107).
- <sup>18</sup> On the modern context, see (Hegghammer 2020, pp. 358–87).

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