

Dirassat & Abhath
The Arabic Journal of Human
and Social Sciences



مجلة دراسات وأبحاث
المجلة العربية في العلوم الإنسانية
والاجتماعية

EISSN: 2253-0363
ISSN : 1112-9751

The Spread and Status of the Arabic Language in the Islamic Maghreb During the Medieval Period

انتشار اللغة العربية ومكانتها بالمغرب الإسلامي خلال العصر الوسيط

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تاريخ القبول : 08 -03 -2025

تاريخ الاستلام: 27-01-2025

Abstract:

The Islamic conquest of the Maghreb region brought with it a rich cultural legacy, yielding significant religious and cultural outcomes. Chief among these was the dissemination of the Arabic language in the region. Teaching Arabic to the inhabitants of the newly conquered territories progressed alongside the conquest campaigns, a process welcomed and admired by the local populations. This had a profound impact on various aspects of life throughout the historical stages of the Islamic Maghreb and contributed to the infusion of Arab-Islamic culture into the region's cultural fabric.

The conquering armies were accompanied by the Companions of the Prophet and their successors, who spread the Quran and taught Islamic principles to the inhabitants. Over time, this role expanded through educational missions and the establishment of institutions that became centers of cultural enlightenment, most notably mosques, Quranic schools, and religious lodges.

In this research paper, we aim to elucidate the enthusiasm of the people of the Maghreb for learning Arabic, driven by their desire to understand and fulfill Islamic teachings with precision. This endeavor ushered the region into the realm of Islamic civilization, enabling it to become a cornerstone of knowledge dissemination and cultural achievements through its scholars and contributions, ultimately benefiting humanity as a whole.

Keywords: Arabic language; Islamic culture; Islamic conquest; Islamic Maghreb; Medieval period.

الملخص:

حمل الفتح الإسلامي لبلاد المغرب الإسلامي إرثا حضاريا ثميناً تبعه نتائج دينية وثقافية لعل أبرزها وأهمها على الإطلاق نشر اللغة العربية في هذه الربوع؛ فتعليم اللغة العربية لسكان الأقاليم المفتوحة سار بالموازاة مع عملية حملات الفتح مع ما رافق هذا الأمر من إعجاب وترحيب من أولئك السكان وهو ما كان له بالغ الأثر على جوانب الحياة في مختلف المراحل التي مر بها تاريخ المغرب الإسلامي عموماً وإضفاء الثقافة العربية الإسلامية على ثقافة المنطقة ، فقد رافق الجيش الفاتح صحابة وتابعون نشروا القرآن الكريم ولقنوا تعاليم الإسلام لأهل البلاد وتعاضل هذا الدور مع مرور الزمن وتطوره إلى بعثات علمية وبناء مؤسسات أضحت مراكز إشعاع ثقافي في مقدمتها المساجد والكتاتيب والربط.

وبدورنا نسعى من خلال هذه الورقة البحثية إلى المساهمة في توضيح إقبال أهل بلاد المغرب على تعلم اللغة العربية حرصاً على فهم تعاليم الإسلام وأداء فروضه وإتقانها، وهو ما سيدخل المنطقة في رحاب الحضارة الإسلامية لتكون رافداً من روافد بث العلم والثقافة من خلال علمائها ومنجزاتها الحضارية لتعود خيراً ونفعاً على الإنسانية جمعاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة العربية ؛ الثقافة الإسلامية؛ الفتح الإسلامي؛ المغرب الإسلامي؛ العصر الوسيط.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical studies addressing the history of the Islamic Maghreb during the conquest phase have predominantly focused on political and military aspects. Comparatively less attention has been given to the civilizational contributions accompanying the arrival of the conquering army to the region. Among these contributions were the Companions of the Prophet and their successors, who disseminated the Quran and taught the principles of Islam to the inhabitants. Over time, this role expanded, evolving into scientific missions and the establishment of institutions that became centers of cultural enlightenment, including mosques, Quranic schools, and religious lodges.

The Islamic conquest of the Maghreb brought a valuable civilizational heritage to the region, leading to significant religious and cultural outcomes. Chief among these was the dissemination of the Arabic language. Teaching Arabic to the inhabitants of the newly conquered territories went hand in hand with the process of conquest. This was met with admiration, acceptance, and enthusiasm from the local populations, leaving a profound impact on various aspects of life throughout the history of the Islamic Maghreb. It also facilitated the integration of Arab-Islamic culture into the region's cultural fabric.

This study aims to elucidate these points, focusing on the conquest period as the temporal framework for the topic, addressing the following:

- The entry and spread of Islam in the Mediterranean.

- Factors contributing to the spread of the Arabic language in the Maghreb during the conquest phase.
- Civilizational aspects of the spread of the Arabic language in the Maghreb.

2. The Entry of Islam into the Mediterranean :

The Islamic states encompassed all the countries bordering the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, namely the Levant, Egypt, and North Africa. Due to its strategic geographical location, this region became a bridge linking the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. As a result, the cultural heritage of the Islamic world was transmitted to Europe through this connection¹.

At this stage, the Arab Sultan had settled in Egypt, and the military necessity forced the governor of Egypt, Amr ibn al-As, to head towards the region of Barqa in order to secure the new Fustat base and preserve the Arab gains in Egypt. This move was also aimed at countering any Byzantine expansionist projects that sought to recover Egypt. This strategy required Amr ibn al-As to send expeditions, patrols, and advanced units to scout the region, learn about its inhabitants, and bring them under the Islamic state².

It appears that what paved the way for the Arab conquests in the East and made the Romans and Persians welcome the arrival of the Islamic armies was the manner in which Muslims treated the lands they entered with complete tolerance. They allowed people the freedom to practice their religion and use their lands. Islam never resorted to force

or coercion to make other peoples embrace the religion, in contrast to European countries that used all forms of oppression and violence, resulting in loss of life and bloodshed to impose their teachings and ideologies. The history of Europe during the Middle Ages bears witness to this³.

In the Maghreb, the people embraced Islam with great enthusiasm due to its simplicity and the compatibility between Arab life and the social structure of the Berbers. The reasons for the spread of Islam were almost the same factors that contributed to the spread of the Arabic language⁴.

Islam found its way into the hearts of a large portion of the population of the conquered lands, as evidenced by the documents that highlight the absolute tolerance of the Arabs towards Christians and Jews, a tolerance they had not experienced under their previous rulers⁵.

The Islamic conquest of the Mediterranean coastal lands followed a strategy aimed at engaging the local populations and confronting the Byzantine influence, which was mainly concentrated in the cities along the Mediterranean and its islands. From the time of the Rashidun Caliphate, the Arab leadership prepared to face the Byzantine forces both on land and at sea. Although land operations were the primary driving force of the Islamic conquests, naval operations were crucial. Once the Muslims had conquered the Levant and Egypt, they quickly sought to utilize the material and human resources of these regions to engage in naval activities⁶, focusing on the development of a fleet to counter the Byzantine threat and adjust to their new role as a Mediterranean naval power. Soon, the Muslims became a formidable naval force, conquering Cyprus in 648 AD and delivering a

major defeat to the Byzantine fleet at the Battle of the Masts in 34 AH / 655 AD⁷.

The Arabian Peninsula has more than one maritime front, as it overlooks the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea. The inhabitants of the coastal areas bordering these seas have been known for their seafaring since ancient times. The first naval expeditions also began from the shores of the Arabian Peninsula. During the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), the governor of Bahrain, Uthman al-Thaqafi, launched an expedition against the shores of India⁸. The failure of this campaign likely contributed to Caliph Umar's policy of opposing military risks across the seas. However, this policy changed during the caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan. To protect the coastal cities that had become part of the Muslim realm along the shores of the Levant and Egypt from Byzantine raids, naval forces were established by Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the governor of Syria, and Abdullah ibn Saad, the governor of Egypt. These naval forces soon played both offensive and defensive roles against the Byzantines in the eastern Mediterranean, as previously mentioned⁹.

The military efforts from the time of Amr ibn al-As to the time of Muawiya ibn Hudayj were characterized by reconnaissance and familiarizing themselves with the outskirts of the region and its paths, followed by a swift return after the completion of the reconnaissance operations. The reason for this was that they did not have a secure stronghold to retreat to. However, the idea of establishing a permanent base and leaving an Arab garrison began with Muawiya ibn Hudayj and was solidified during the era of Uqba ibn Nafi' al-Fihri, who succeeded in securing the Arab

presence in the Maghreb region. It was proposed that the new base be near the sea to serve as a fortress, but this idea was rejected due to the risks it posed from the superior naval power of the Romans. The idea of advancing inland was also ruled out due to the unpredictable movements of the Berber tribes. Between these two opinions, the location for the new base was chosen, leading to the establishment of Kairouan¹⁰, which became "the base of Islam and Muslims in the Maghreb"¹¹.

The aim of this research paper is not to trace the stages of the Islamic conquests in the Maghreb, but rather to explore the civilizational manifestations of Arab-Islamic culture that accompanied this process. This includes the firm establishment of Islamic principles and teachings, as well as the spread and consolidation of the Arabic language throughout the region at an admirable pace.

3. Factors Contributing to the Spread of the Arabic Language in the Maghreb:

The influence of the Arabs and Islam during the medieval period is not limited to the political changes they brought about in the world; its impact is most evident in the field of civilization¹². One of the most notable civilizational impacts in the conquered lands, especially in the Islamic Maghreb, was the spread and teaching of the Arabic language to the local populations. The Arabic language managed to triumph in all the lands conquered by the Arabs, from the Atlantic to the Gulf, replacing languages such as Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Berber, and others. Even among the peoples who maintained their own languages, such as the Persians and

Turks, Arabic became the tool for science and literature¹³.

The parallel process to the Islamic conquests and the mass conversion of the Berbers to Islam was their eagerness to learn Arabic in order to understand the religion and convey it in its original language to other communities that embraced Islam through them. Therefore, Islam was the primary factor behind the spread of the Arabic language¹⁴.

In other words, Arabization was closely linked to the conversion to Islam¹⁵. Scholars widely agree that Arabic is one of the richest and most expansive languages, a fact clearly demonstrated in pre-Islamic poetry with its precise expression and carefully crafted meters. The revelation of the Quran in Arabic elevated the language and solidified its status¹⁶.

The speed with which both the Arabic language and Islam spread continues to puzzle scholars. Arabic is not a simple language with minimal complexities that could explain its rapid spread from the Atlantic to the Arabian Gulf. However, it succeeded in asserting its dominance over the majority of the lands conquered and ruled by the Arabs. This can be explained by the fact that the spread of the Arabic language was intrinsically linked to the spread of Islamic beliefs, which required knowledge of the Arabic language to properly perform the religious duties, a fact that facilitated the widespread adoption of Islam in the areas that embraced Islam¹⁷. Clearly, this factor was one of the most significant contributors to the spread and establishment of the Arabic language.

The population of the Maghreb during this period was divided into three main classes: the Byzantine Romans, the

urban dwellers, and the Berbers. The first group spoke Greek, which was the language of administration, politics, and the courts, and was used by the educated elite. Alongside Greek, there existed another language that was a blend of Latin, Greek, and Phoenician, inherited from successive peoples and governments that had ruled the coastal areas. These influences left enduring linguistic and cultural traces. Meanwhile, Berber dialects were predominantly spoken in the interior regions and mountainous areas¹⁸. Historically, Berber was written in a cryptic, primitive manner, unsuitable for anything beyond a limited oral tradition. Over time, it remained largely a spoken language, sufficient only for the basic needs of rural communities¹⁹.

On the other hand, the absence of a sophisticated language capable of competing with Arabic in terms of cultural and intellectual heritage played a significant role in the spread of Arabic. The Berber language lacked a written tradition to preserve it, and Latin, which had been the language of official records during Roman and Byzantine rule, was also in decline²⁰.

It is important to clarify that these three languages did not enjoy equal intellectual or cultural significance. Greek, for instance, was the official language and a scientific medium supported by a rich civilization and profound intellectual tradition. It was the language of philosophy, literature, art, and religion, marking it as a language of science and culture in that era. No nation, past or present, has been able to immortalize its legacy among other civilized peoples without possessing a high-level scientific language.

In contrast, the Berber dialects were scientifically impoverished and

incapable of articulating even the daily lives of the Berbers. Thus, when Arabic encountered this linguistic environment during the Islamic conquest, Greek disappeared alongside its speakers, who migrated to Spain, Sicily, and other Byzantine territories. As previously noted, urban populations spoke a language heavily influenced by Phoenician elements, which bore similarities to Arabic, thereby facilitating the latter's spread²¹.

This situation underscores that the Berbers' enthusiastic embrace of Islam was accompanied by an equally fervent desire to learn Arabic. This enthusiasm stemmed from their eagerness to understand their faith and disseminate it to societies they would help conquer, as historical realities have demonstrated. The role of Berbers in spreading Islam and Arabic in Al-Andalus serves as a poignant example of this phenomenon.

4. The Civilizational Manifestations of the Spread of the Arabic Language in the Maghreb

The companions were among the pioneers of the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb. Sources have mentioned their names, provided detailed biographies of their lives and upbringing in the Arabic Maghreb²², and highlighted their military contributions to the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb. For example, one of the prominent companions who fought with their weapons and knowledge was Abu al-Yaman Sufyan ibn Wahb al-Khulani (d. 82 AH / 701 CE), who witnessed the conquest of Egypt first and then participated in the conquest of Ifriqiya twice. The first was in 60 AH / 679 CE, coinciding with the military campaigns of the conqueror Abu al-Muhajir Dinar (55–62 AH / 675–682 CE) in the central

Maghreb, and the second was in 78 AH / 697 CE, coinciding with the campaign of Hassan ibn al-Nu'man (73–85 AH / 692–704 CE)²³ during the phase of the organized and comprehensive conquest that involved several achievements, including the establishment of administrative offices and the formalization of the Arabic language²⁴.

One of the most significant scientific roles is associated with the mission sent by Caliph Umar ibn Abdul Aziz, which consisted of ten jurists. According to the most widely accepted view, this mission was sent during the period 99-100 AH / 717-718 CE, settling in Kairouan. Its primary goal was religious and cultural, represented in consolidating Islam, teaching the people of the Maghreb about their religion, and connecting them to the rulings of Islamic law²⁵.

The first action taken by the conquerors was to establish or renovate mosques, as they became the centers of activity in the Muslim city and its beating heart²⁶. The mosque, in all its forms and sizes, played a major role as an educational and cultural tool, one that was not limited to a specific social class but was a popular institution connecting with the general public, delivering the same teachings everywhere, which resulted in the emergence of a unified intellectual framework²⁷. It can be said that the mosque combined two main functions: religious and cultural²⁸. This close connection to the life of the Islamic community led to the widespread establishment of mosques across the entire region of Islamic Maghreb, among the most famous being:

- **The Great Mosque of Kairouan:** This mosque was founded by the conqueror Uqba ibn Nafi in 50 AH / 670 CE. The mihrab of the

Great Mosque of Kairouan is considered the oldest mihrab to be introduced into mosques, and it has been preserved such that subsequent renovations did not alter it²⁹. As Al-Dabbagh mentions, when Hassan ibn al-Nu'man renovated the mosque, he "arrived in Kairouan and ordered the reconstruction of the great mosque, making it a beautiful and splendid structure, which he completed in the month of Ramadan in the year 84 AH³⁰."

In the central Maghreb, urban development began with the first mosque built there, inheriting a rich Islamic cultural legacy from the time of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar, who built the first mosque in the region in 59 AH / 678 CE³¹.

When the Muslims settled in the Maghreb in the second half of the first century of the Hijra, after the foundation of the city of Kairouan by Uqba ibn Nafi in 50 AH / 670 CE, which became a permanent city for the Muslims, they established houses and mosques. They then turned their attention to their children, establishing the "Kuttab," which was the first place where children received their education, resembling the elementary school phase. This phase usually ended with memorizing the Qur'an and some other knowledge³².

The spread of these institutions coincided with the expansion of Islamic conquests, the people's fervent enthusiasm for the Qur'an, their devotion to religious matters³³, and their efforts to spread its message, much as Islam and the Arabic language spread, took root, and deepened in the hearts of the people of the Maghreb.

3. CONCLUSION

Islam spread across the globe, and the Maghreb region was one of the lands blessed by the efforts of the early conquerors, who brought with them knowledge and virtue alongside their roles in jihad and guarding the path for the sake of God. The establishment of the city of Kairouan marked the beginning of the Arabs' dominance in the region and the consolidation of Islam and

the Arabic language, which spread simultaneously. It is impossible to speak of one without the other in their blessed journey. Subsequently, the construction of the region's civilization flourished, giving rise to scientific centers of learning such as Tunis, Tlemcen, and Andalusian capitals like Toledo and Córdoba. These centers served as bridges for knowledge and learning, benefiting the region and beyond.

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² Moussa Lqabal, *The Islamic Maghreb*, National Company for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2nd edition, 1981, p. 18.

³ Mohamed Mohieddine Al-Musharfi, "Islamic Societies in the First Century: Review and Commentary on Shukri Faisal's Book," *Dawaat Al-Haq*, published by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Issue 237, June 1984, p. 62.

⁴ Mohamed Mohieddine Al-Musharfi, *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁵ Saeed Abdul Fattah Ashour, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 104; Aziz Ahmed, *The History of Islamic Sicily*, translated by Amin Tawfiq Al-Taybi, Dar Al-Arabia for Books, Tripoli, 1980, p. 30.

⁶ Mahmoud Ahmed Abu Sawah, *Studies in the History of the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages*, Elga Company, Malta, 2000, p. 27.

⁷ Ibn Abdul Hakim, *Futuh Misr wa al-Maghrib*, edited by Abdel Moneim Amer, Al-Amal Printing and Publishing Company, Cairo, 1999, p. 255; Saeed Abdul Fattah Ashour, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, pp. 101-102.

⁸ Mahmoud Ahmed Abu Sawah, *Op. cit.*, p. 28

⁹ Aziz Ahmed, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Mahmoud Ahmed Abu Sawah, *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹¹ Aziz Ahmed, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹² Saeed Abdel Fattah Ashour, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 104.

¹³ Saeed Abdel Fattah Ashour, *Islamic Civilization and Its Influence on European Civilization*, Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya, Cairo, 1st ed., 1963, p. 10.

¹⁴ Abdelkader Rabouh: "The Arabization Movement and Its Impact in the Maghreb During the Medieval Era," *Ansana Journal for Research and Studies*, Issue 1, June 2013, p. 62.

¹⁵ Georges Marçais, *The Maghreb and Its Relations with the Islamic East During the Middle Ages*, translated by Mahmoud Abdel Samad Hekal, *Mansha'at Al-Maaref*, Alexandria, 1991, p. 47.

¹⁶ Saeed Abdel Fattah Ashour, *Islamic Civilization and Its Impact on European Civilization*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Sa'id Abdel-Fattah Ashour, *The History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Mohamed Mohieddin Al-Musharrafi, *The Previous Reference*, p. 63.

¹⁹ Georges Marçais, *The Previous Reference*, p. 46.

²⁰ Abdelkader Rabouh, *The Previous Reference*, p. 62.

²¹ Mohammed Mohieddine Al-Musharfi, *the previous reference*, p. 64.

²² Al-Tayyib Bousaad, "The Entry of the Companions and Followers into the Islamic Maghreb and Their Civilizational Role During the First and Second Centuries AH / 7th-8th Centuries CE," *Studies in Human and Social Sciences*, Issue 30, p. 343.

²³ Abu Zayd Abdelrahman Al-Dabbagh, The Previous Source, p. 151; Al-Tayyib Bousaad, The Previous Reference, p. 346.

²⁴ Ibn Abd al-Hakam, The Previous Source, p. 271; Al-Tayyib Bousaad, The Previous Reference, p. 346.

²⁵ Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, p. 324; Al-Tayyib Bousaad, The Previous Reference, p. 347.

²⁶ Abdul Rahman Ali Al-Haji, *The History of Al-Andalus from the Islamic Conquest to the Fall of Granada (92-897 AH / 711-1492 CE)*, Dar Al-Qalam, Beirut, 2nd edition, 1981, p. 145.

²⁷ Mohamed Zarrouk, *Cultural Communication Between the Countries of the Maghreb: A Historical Foundation*, in *Studies in the History of the Maghreb, Afrique Orient*, 1412 AH / 1991 CE, p. 72.

²⁸ Abdallah Kannon, *The Moroccan Genius in Arabic Literature*, Casablanca, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 47.

²⁹ Al-Dabbagh, The Previous Source, p. 10.

³⁰ The same source, p. 67.

³¹ Tayeb Bousaad, *The same source*, p. 353.

³² Bashir Ramadan Al-Tleisi, *The same source*, p. 364.

³³ Muhammad ibn Sahnun, *Kitab Adab al-Muallimin*, edited and commented by Muhammad al-'Arrousi al-Matwi, Dar al-Kutub al-Sharqiya, Tunis, 1392 AH / 1972 AD, p. 33.