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Dihya: An Algerian Symbol of Resistance

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the life and historical legacy of Dihya, the seventh-century Amazigh warrior queen through a historicist analysis of her resistance against the Arab Conquest of North Africa. As an emblematic figure of resistance, Dihya stands as a powerful reminder of Algerian cultural identity and the country's enduring struggle for autonomy. The present study brings ahead the historical importance of Dihya's resilience while stressing the impact of her efforts for a cultural recognition in a context stridden with foreign pressure.*

KEYWORDS: Dihya, Kahina, Resistance, Algeria, Arab Conquest

RÉSUMÉ: *Cet article examine le parcours historique et l'héritage de Dihya, la reine guerrière amazighe du VIIe siècle, à travers une analyse approfondie de sa résistance contre l'expansion arabe en Afrique du Nord. En tant que figure emblématique de la résistance algérienne, Dihya représente un symbole crucial de l'identité culturelle et de la lutte pour l'autodétermination en Algérie. L'étude met en lumière l'importance historique et sa résilience, soulignant l'impact de sa lutte pour la reconnaissance culturelle dans un contexte de pressions extérieures.*

MOTS-CLÉS: Dihya, Kahina, Résistance, Algérie, Conquête Arabe

Introduction

Dihya, also known as Kahina, occupies a unique and enduring place in the history of Algeria and North Africa. A Berber queen and accomplished warrior, she stands as an emblem of resistance against the Arab conquest of the 7th century. Dihya's life and legacy provide an invaluable lens through which to understand the complex interplay of cultures, religions, and political powers that have shaped the Maghreb. Her story is not only a tale of defiance and bravery but also a narrative that encapsulates the struggles and resilience of the Berber people.

In the seventh century, North Africa was a region of significant transformations. The advent of the Arab expansion brought significant changes to this region. The Berbers were faced with the challenging task of defending their territories and way of life against the expanding Arab Empire. It is within this context that Dihya emerges as a crucial historical figure. As a leader of the Berber resistance, she orchestrated a defence that was both strategic and symbolic, embodying the fierce independence and resilience of her people. Her efforts, though ultimately unsuccessful in halting the Arab conquest, left a long-lasting legacy that continued to inspire subsequent generations.

This article aims to explore Dihya's background, the historical context of her time, and the impact of her resistance efforts. By employing a historicist approach, we seek to place Dihya within the geopolitical context of North African history, shedding light on her role not just as a warrior queen but as a pivotal figure whose actions reverberated through the centuries. Understanding Dihya's story allows us to gain deeper insights into the broader historical forces at play and the symbolic legacy of the Berber resistance in the face of foreign conquest.

Dihya’s Background and Regional Context

In the seventh century, the Atlas Mountains of North Africa—extending from present-day Morocco through Algeria and into Tunisia—were home to self-sufficient villagers who maintained a lifestyle as ancient as the mountains themselves. These mountains, with peaks reaching up to fourteen thousand feet, cradled valleys, springs, and green pastures, provided a habitat for communities that had thrived there for over five millennia. The rugged terrain nurtured tribes and villages where many

people continued to live according to traditional customs, immensely influenced by the challenging environment.

The Ancient Greeks referred to North African tribes as Libyans, but today they are often called Berbers—a term that may have originated from "barbarians," a label given by the invading Romans (Salisbury 2019, p.180). These tribes, however, identified themselves, and still do today, as Amazigh, meaning free people, a name that reflects their fiercely independent nature. Some tribes were semi-nomadic, moving their flocks of goats and sheep in search of hospitable terrains, while others were fully nomadic, living in skin tents that provided shelter from the harsh desert winds.

At the eastern edge of the Atlas Mountains, between Tunisia and Algeria, lived the Jarawa tribe. Their strategic location made them more prosperous due to the extensive olive groves that made this region one of the richest in the ancient world. Olive trees, cultivated since the Bronze Age, required minimal rainfall but had the disadvantage of being slow growing, often taking years before yielding their produce.

During the second part of the seventh century, the Jarawa tribe was led by Dihya. Born in about 575 CE, she lived in the Aures Mountains, an area controlled by the Byzantine Empire based in Constantinople. Byzantine rule was generally unpopular due to high taxes and religious oppression, leading many tribes to welcome invaders who offered better terms. However, in the region where Dihya lived, Byzantine rule was more flexible, allowing the tribal people greater freedom to practice a heterogeneous lifestyle. This is proven by her diverse familial background. Dihya's father, a Byzantine man named Mathias, was married to a local Berber woman. She had two sons, one by a Byzantine father and one by a Berber parent (Taha 1989, p.70). Dihya likely spoke both Greek and Amazigh, making her well-suited to mediate between the two cultures and "strengthened her position as leader of the two groups" (Sweetman 1987, p.19).

Dihya was also renowned among her people as a prophetess. Many Berber tribes practiced ancient pagan religions that involved the veneration of stones and other objects, with prophecy playing a central role in their religious practices. Dihya thus gained a large following not only as a queen but also as a seer, solidifying her influence and leadership among the tribes. But because sources about her life and background are scarce and opaque,

divergent pieces of information lend her different religious inclinations. Abdulwahid Dhanun Taha in his *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (1989) brings ahead theories about the Judaization of the Jarawa tribe, while other scholars such as Mohamed Talibi suggest that she was a Christian believer (Taha 1989, p.70; Talibi 1971, p.42).

Dihya's tribe may have indeed been religiously diverse, as it was not uncommon to find monotheistic presence along the trade routes bordering the Sahara at the edge of the Atlas Mountains. While it remains uncertain whether Dihya was pagan, Jewish, or Christian, these possibilities do add an interesting dimension to her historical profile, especially when considering that her religious background has long been speculated as the sole motivation in fighting against the incoming Muslims.

> The reason for her resistance was long thought to be religious. Many Berber groups had adopted the Jewish faith, which they had acquired from groups of Jews who had settled in North Africa after the destruction of their homeland in ad 638. As a Jew the Kahina would have opposed the Moslem advance. It now seems likely, however, that the Jerawa, like other Berber groups, had been converted to Christianity before the spread of Islam. As a Christian, the Kahina would have been no more welcoming to the Moslems than if she were a Jew, but in fact religion was only one reason for her opposition. The Arabs were seen as destroyers, rootless warriors pillaging settled communities or destroying established agricultural systems. To the Kahina they were barbarians and had to be opposed. Only later, with the establishment of their empire, were the Arabs to create their admirable civilization (Sweetman 1987, p.19).

As Sweetman suggests there is indeed no evidence that Dihya's opposition to the Muslims was driven by religious convictions. Instead, her fight against foreign incursion appears to have been motivated by a desire to protect the land that her ancestors had inhabited for thousands of years.

Subsequently, her resistance to the Arab conquest was rather fueled by her determination to defend her homeland.

The Arab Conquest of North Africa

Before the Arab conquest of North Africa, the Middle East, and Mediterranean regions, there had been a prolonged war between two ancient superpowers: the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium and the Persian Sassanian Empire. This conflict left both sides economically weakened, and internally unstable. As Muratza Hussain explains, this constant state of war between two empires left both of them drained:

> Imperial warfare on the periphery also corrupted life in the metropole. Sasanian and Byzantine society both became poorer and more oppressive for the average person, as their leaders poured all their resources and attention to waging wars of conquest against rivals and neighbours (2022, p.1).

Furthermore, periodic outbreaks of bubonic plague and internal struggles for succession further sapped the strength of these empires. The timing was consequently opportune for the rise of a new conquering force, particularly one emerging from the deserts of Arabia.

It is important to note that initially, many of the Arabs' incursions were akin to armed raids aimed at seizing plunder rather than establishing territorial control (Smith and Hopwood 2024). By the time of the Arab invasion of Egypt in 639, the early Arab Empire had transitioned from opportunistic raids to a more systematic and planned approach to conquest. Crossing the Sinai Peninsula marked a commitment to a war of conquest in unfamiliar territory, necessitating a more disciplined and organized military force resembling a national army. This strategic shift was crucial for the Arabs to successfully conquer major cities like the Egyptian capital and Byzantium's second city, Alexandria.

At this time, the Muslim Empire was under the leadership of its second caliph, Umar Al-Khattab, who ruled from 634 to 644. Initially hesitant about invading Egypt, Umar eventually took the fateful decision to launch an Arab conquest. Egypt's agricultural richness due to the Nile made it a coveted

prize, often referred to as the breadbasket of Byzantium (Holt and Baker 2024).

The Arab forces reached Alexandria in March 641 and immediately began besieging its fortified walls. Alexandria, second only to Constantinople in Byzantium and a crucial naval base, stood isolated from the empire after the Arab conquests of Syria, Palestine, and Jerusalem in preceding years. The fall of Alexandria signaled the end of significant resistance to the Arab invasion of Egypt.

Once Alexandria fallen under their grip, the "Arab conquerors did little in the beginning to disturb the status quo" (Smith and Hopwood 2024). Illustrating this was the way the new rulers treated the Egyptian inhabitants. Instead of executing the city's defenders, the Arab conquerors allowed them a year to depart with their belongings or to remain under Arab-Muslim rule. Many chose to leave, while others opted to stay and adapt to the new political order. To facilitate a smooth transition, Arabs retained the city's existing tax collectors and administrators, recognizing their expertise in running Alexandria—a decision that ensured stability (Ziauddin 1985, p. 378).

With Egypt secured, the Arabs turned their attention westward and led an expedition into modern-day Libya. Their campaign into Libya spanned 1,000 miles along the southern Mediterranean coast, reaching as far west as Tripoli and Sabratha. They captured these cities with relative ease, extending Muslim control further westward across North Africa. The Arab activities in North Africa during this period were characterized less by conquest and more by extensive raiding. The first major military expedition beyond Egypt's borders was launched in 647 by the third caliph, Uthman. He dispatched an army variously estimated at 10,000 to 20,000 men from Fustat on a campaign that lasted 15 months (Drissner 2016, p. 456).

Uthman's forces moved swiftly through Libya and into southern Tunisia, where they decisively defeated a Byzantine force. This battle marked the only direct engagement between Arab and Byzantine forces in North Africa outside of Egypt. Following their victory, the Arabs engaged in skirmishes with indigenous Berber tribes for plunder, but for the next two decades, they made minimal efforts to expand their territorial holdings. Instead, they focused on lucrative raiding activities similar to those conducted before the

invasion of Egypt. In 670, the Arabs founded the city of Kairouan, which not only became the capital of the Arabs in North Africa but also emerged as a center of learning that influenced Islamic law and culture for centuries. It became a revered holy city and remains a significant cultural and tourist destination to this day. The establishment of Kairouan marked a pivotal moment in the Arab presence in North Africa. It was "a place of outstanding diffusion of Arabo-Muslim civilization" (Unesco 2023). Founding Kairaouan did indeed solidify Arab rule in the region and set the stage for further expansion and cultural influence in the region.

In 694, the third Arab invasion culminated in the Arabs establishing firm control over Tunisian territories. After years of paying little attention to the Byzantine presence in Carthage, the Arabs launched a coordinated assault on the city. They expelled its residents and fortified its defenses, marking turning point in the conquest of North Africa (Bosworth 2007, p.536). The fall of Carthage carried historical significance comparable to Rome's conquest of the Carthaginians in 146 BC, signifying the definitive end of Romano-Byzantine influence in North Africa. Following their approach in Egypt, the Arabs opted not to prioritize Carthage as their coastal capital, instead concentrating on governing from their inland base at Kairouan. This strategic choice emphasized their preference for controlling the interior regions and safeguarding trade routes, rather than holding vulnerable coastal cities susceptible to naval assaults.

The decline of Byzantine control did not, however, bring an end to opposition against Arab rule. Berber revolts persisted for years. The most significant Berber uprising began in the 680s, led by the Dihya herself. Likened to Boudica and Joan of Arc, she is remembered today for her desire for freedom from foreign rule.

Dihya: An Algerian Symbol of Resistance

Dihya stands as a powerful symbol of resistance in Algerian history. Her legacy is one of defiance and resilience against the Arab conquests of the 7th century. While her valiance did stand out, Dihya's resistance efforts can be seen as a continuation of the struggle already begun by figures such as Gregory the Patrician and his daughter Yamina, who fiercely opposed the Arab advance into North Africa. This historical pattern of persistent resistance against foreign domination is a reminder of the enduring spirit of

the Algerian people, who fought valiantly throughout history to protect their land, culture, and autonomy.

Dihya's story is thus not merely about battles and conquests; it is about the unyielding determination to preserve a way of life and identity in the face of overwhelming odds. Her military astuteness, combined with her ability to unite diverse groups, including Berbers, Jews, and Christians, highlight her significance as a unifying figure in Algerian history. By leading a coalition of various ethnicities and religious denominations, Dihya demonstrated an inclusive approach to resistance, aiming to forge a collective identity strong enough to withstand external pressures.

As mentioned earlier, this spirit of resistance had earlier manifestations in the actions of Gregory the Patrician and his daughter Yamina. In 647, Caliph Uthman ordered Abdullah ibn Sa'd to march west into North Africa. The general faced an army composed of Berber and Byzantine soldiers, led by Gregory the Patrician. The forces moved south to confront the Arab armies in central Tunisia, near the town of Sufetula, modern-day Sbeitla. Gregory's daughter, Yamina, rode with him and fought fiercely in the battle.

The Battle of Sufetula ended in disaster for the Berbers, and Yamina was captured. According to legend, rather than face captivity, she chose to end her life by breaking her neck from a leap off a camel—an improbable feat, yet a narrative much telling in symbolism (USDSSG 2014, p.20). This tale underscores Africa's strong tradition of sacrifice as a means to secure prosperity for the land. Over time, Yamina's story circulated widely, becoming another example of sacrifice in the struggle for North African freedom.

In 656, Uthman's assassination in Egypt triggered a prolonged succession war among Muslims vying for the caliphate. This conflict led to a permanent division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, temporarily halting unified Muslim efforts to complete the conquest of North Africa.

Arab general Uqba ibn Nafi conquered in 669 vast swathes of the Tunisian desert and established the city of Kairouan as a permanent fortified settlement to secure the newly acquired territories. Despite these efforts, Berber forces managed to mount a successful attack on the city in 683. Led by tribal alliances under the command of Dihya and another Berber general named Koseila, the Berbers challenged the Arab presence in the region.

After Koseila and Dihya ambushed and killed Uqba in 683, his army temporarily withdrew. Following Koseila's death, the center of resistance now passed to Dihya since she assumed leadership of the coalition of Berber troops and established a Berber state that spanned from the Aures Mountains to the Gadams Oasis in southern modern Tunisia and Libya.

Carrying the Berber resistance movement was certainly no easy task for the warrior woman as she was mourning the loss of her husband as well as bearing an old age at that point in time (Sweetman 1987, p.19). Her attempts of resistance were even more remarkable as she was leading a coalition which consisted of people from different ethnicities that adhered to different religious denominations. She indeed successfully assembled a diverse army composed of Berbers, Jews and Christians, extending her rule well beyond traditional tribal boundaries.

Anticipating the inevitable Muslim invasion, Dihya prepared for the Arab armies' return. This time, the Arabs sent a more strategic general, Hassan ibn al-Numan al-Ghassani. Rather than initially confronting Dihya's forces, Hassan chose a different tactic: he divided his opponents. He first focused on the Byzantines by capturing Carthage in 695, the fortified capital of the region.

With Carthage secured, Hassan turned his attention to Dihya's forces in the Atlas Mountains. Dihya, anticipating the coming battle, first destroyed her own capital at Baghaya to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. She then selected a strategic location along the banks of the River Meskiana in Algeria, preparing to confront the approaching Muslim armies led by Hassan. Following her victory at the Battle of River Meskiana, Dihya anticipated Hassan's return and formulated a new plan to deter the Arabs from conquering North Africa.

Dihya's scorched policy deserves further examination for it sheds further light on her unwavering commitment to resistance. Aware of the region's allure due to its wealth and fertile lands, Dihya sought to make it unappealing to the invaders. Continuing a longstanding tradition of sacrifice for the land's prosperity, she instructed her people to take drastic measures. They were to burn their crops, their homes, and, most significantly, the olive trees that symbolized wealth and sustenance in the region (Weltman-Aron

2015). This dramatic act was intended to render North Africa less desirable to the Arabs and discourage further incursions.

Despite Dihya's determination to deter the Arabs by sacrificing crops and olive trees, not everyone in her coalition shared her zeal for such drastic measures. The mountain Berbers, accustomed to a nomadic lifestyle, were more amenable to a scorched earth policy. However, tensions persisted between these nomadic tribes and the settled farmers who relied on agriculture, particularly the precious olive trees that were central to their livelihoods (Ali 2019).

Many settled Berbers were unwilling to destroy their olive groves, which had been nurtured over generations and took years to yield fruit. They preferred to continue cultivating their olives under Arab rule rather than risk losing everything in a scorched earth strategy. This dissent weakened Dihya's coalition as "resentment toward the queen replaced the earlier admiration," causing rifts among the Berber tribes and Byzantine allies (Mark 2018).

By the time Hassan returned to invade again around 698, Dihya's forces were no longer cohesive. Hassan faced the challenge of tracking down scattered Berber groups in the rugged Aures Mountains, where conventional desert tactics were less effective.

In 701, Hassan successfully engaged Dihya's forces near Gabes on the coast. The night before the battle, Dihya is said to have received a prophecy predicting her defeat (Sweetman 1987, p.21). In response, she instructed her two sons to save themselves by changing sides. They crossed over to Hassan's army, swiftly converting to Islam to fight alongside him (Ali 1). Despite Dihya's willingness to sacrifice herself, she prioritized the safety of her sons—an understandable human sentiment.

Following her escape from the battle at Gabes, Dihya fled back to the mountains. However, Hassan eventually caught up with her and killed her. He sent her head to the Caliph as proof of his victory. With Dihya's death, the Berber resistance came to an end, and the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb was completed. Over the next decade, Berber tribes converted to Islam, and Berber Muslims would later lead the Islamic armies into Spain.

The location of Dihya's death is subject to controversy and regional claims, each seeking to associate her demise with local significance. According to the mainstream tradition, however, Dihya died near Tabarka, a coastal town in northwest Tunisia close to Algerian borders, purportedly near a well known as Bir Al-Kahina. Wells traditionally hold symbolic significance related to women and goddesses and linking this well to the prophetess Dihya certainly added to the region's lore (Kadiri 2020).

Regardless of where Dihya might have died, her death symbolized her sacrifices for freedom and fighting for it. The erection of a statue in Algeria in 2003 in the city of Khenchela, honoring Dihya, reflects the enduring legacy and admiration for her bravery and leadership. Dihya's story resonates and inspires people regardless of historical or cultural backgrounds (Nawel 2011). Her courage and defiance against foreign invasions have made her a symbol of resistance and pride for many, ensuring that her memory continues to inspire future generations.

Conclusion

Dihya's story is a powerful reminder of the complex history of Algerian resistance and cultural identity. As a warrior queen, Dihya epitomized the fierce independence and resilience that characterized the Berber resistance to foreign conquest. Her leadershi, though ultimately unable to halt the Arab advance, highlights the challenge she posed to the Arab expansion in North Africa. This resistance, although it ended in her defeat, symbolizes a broader struggle for autonomy and cultural preservation in the face of external forces.

Understanding Dihya's life and the historical context in which she lived enables a great understanding of the broader historical forces that have shaped Algeria and the Maghreb. As Nabil Boudraa argues "she is a reference that contains a larger cultural significance, much like Boudica's Celtic opposition to the Romans" (2022, p.2). Indeed, her legacy is much similar to Boudica's, insofar that stresses the importance of resilience and the ongoing quest for self-determination in the face of external pressures. It serves as a reminder of the rich cultural tapestry of North Africa and the enduring influence of its historical figures.

In a contemporary context, Dihya's story resonates as a significant symbol of the struggle against cultural erasure and the fight for autonomy. As Abdelmadjid Hannoum remarks, Dihya "has captured the imagination [of

Algeria and the Maghreb] because it speaks directly to the transformation of North Africa from a Berber, Byzantine, Christian, Jewish land to an Arab-Berber Muslim land" (2001, p. 187). Bearing this in mind, her legacy is a call to recognize and honor the diverse histories that have contributed to Algeria's identity.

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