Historical Interpretations and their Legacies: Dialectical Materialism and the Umayyad Conquest of Morocco

Grayson Shaw
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the African History Commons, Arabic Studies Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons, Medieval History Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, and the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3706

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
Historical Interpretations and their Legacies: Dialectical Materialism and the Umayyad Conquest of Morocco

Shaw, Grayson

Academic Director: Belghazi, Taieb

Academic Advisor: Maghraoui, Driss

Pomona College

Late Antique-Medieval Studies

Tangier, Morocco, Africa

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for MOR:

Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Abroad, Fall 2023
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements..................................................................................................................3
Foreword.................................................................................................................................4
Abstract................................................................................................................................5
Introduction...............................................................................................................................6
Dialectical Materialism............................................................................................................8
Umayyad Conquest of Morocco.........................................................................................15
Synthesis...............................................................................................................................22
Personal Limitations and Conclusion.............................................................................30
Bibliography..........................................................................................................................33
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost my family and friends from around the world who have always been incredibly supportive of me and always helped me both personally and academically. Many of the sources and inspirations for this project are based on recommendations from friends and family, so for that I am forever grateful.

I would like to similarly thank all of my professors who have instructed me and guided me through this research as well as through my college experience. A special thanks to Professor Belghazi, Professor Maghraoui, Professor Wolf, Professor Frangieh, Professor Khan, Professor Khazeni, Professor Alwishah, Professor Shawki, Professor Reznik, and Professor Runions in all of their help with history, philosophy, religious studies, and Arabic.

Finally, I would like to thank my Moroccan host family for providing me international support and always looking out for me. My time in Morocco would not have been the experience that it was without your affection and aid.
Foreword

Several times throughout this paper, academics or historical recollections of the events described will utilize an outdated and derogatory term for indigenous North Africans stemming from the Roman designation of barbarian. In my own analysis, I will always use the preferred term of indigenous North Africans which is Amazigh for the singular and Imazighen for plural. If the derogatory term is used in quotations, I will bracket in Amazigh in place of the derogatory term. This will be done to represent that it is my own insertion whilst simultaneously acknowledging the preferred terminology for Amazigh people who are still alive and critical to the cultural landscape of North Africa and Morocco specifically.
Abstract

The death of the Prophet in the 7th century paved the way for the Umayyad Caliphate, one of the largest empires by land to exist in human history. Most notably, the Umayyads controlled a territory that spanned from India across North Africa into Spain. Along this expansionary route, the Arab Umayyads interacted with, integrated, and fought local indigenous Amazigh people all along Northern Africa into Morocco. Historical records about the Umayyad influence in Morocco are widely varied, ranging from later Abbasaid records to 20th century European interpretations. At its core, the Umayyad conquest of Morocco has fallen victim to interpretations based on ideological biases of interpreters rather than a thorough examination of the material reality 7th century Arabs faced. This paper offers a new direction: a synthesis of existing historical records under an interpretative framework of dialectical materialism.

Combining what is left from the Umayyad and Amazigh histories alike with Karl Marx’s synthesis of Hegel’s dialectical idealism and materialist philosophy, this paper explains how Islam, Umayyad government structure, and Amazigh resistance are all linked to one another via the physical conditions of North Africa in the 7th century.

Key words: History, Philosophy, Regional Studies: Africa
Introduction

The present conditions of a modern nation-state such as Morocco are inherently linked to its history. More specifically, Morocco’s status as a majority-Muslim country stems from the historical process of Islam’s spread across North Africa. Similar to other modern countries in the Maghreb, the advent of Islam as the prominent religion traces its historical origins from the expansionary efforts of the Umayyad Caliphate respectively, despite its relatively short historical time frame. In the later half of the 7th century following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islam spread across the contemporary Middle East/North Africa region via military campaigns. This would eventually lead to an Umayyad Caliphate that spanned from India in the East to Morocco in the West. A majority of the areas in North Africa that were conquered and placed under Umayyad rule were previously under the rule of the Byzantine Empire, eventually disrupting the previously continuous control over the Mediterranean that the Roman Empire had established centuries beforehand.

The history of the Umayyad Caliphate’s conquest across North Africa and into Morocco is a contentious one. The discourse of Muslim influence in North Africa is fraught with Orientalist academics intertwined with a hesitancy to even use Arab sources when evaluating the historical record. This kind of interpretative bias is indicative of a larger trend within historiography, namely the inescapability of narratives when attempting to answer the “why” of history. One perspective on this issue of narrativization is that the historical interpretations that dominate the academic discourse are based on biased perspectives that fill in gaps based on ideological differences rather than analysis on the material conditions of a given society under historical investigation. This tends to lead to broad, sweeping narratives that imply certain

---

groups will always act in a specific way based on political or religious beliefs. These oversimplifications separate the historical reality from its material reality, ultimately serving to reinforce essentialist positions about the ideologies of historical groups.

Alternatively, historical interpretations that analyze material realities help to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced narrative on the specificity of historical events like the Umayyad conquest of Morocco. As this paper will argue, a philosophically materialist framework of history does a better job of explaining the context that led to the Arab expansion across North Africa in addition to understanding its aftermath. More specifically, the Marxist position on dialectical materialism best illuminates the motivations behind historical events that otherwise would be explained on the basis of idealist evaluations.

Attempting to create or analyze a narrative that explains history has a variety of its own limitations and ethical dilemmas. There are the biases of the primary sources themselves, the positionality of the interpreter, and the issue of incomplete historical record to account for when creating a historical narrative that tries to answer the “why” of history. This paper is far from the solution to problems surrounding historical portrayals, rather it attempts to act as an example of how historical interpretation can be done in a meaningful way that avoids falling into the same traps that previous historians have started their perspectives from.
Dialectical Materialism

There are two necessary prerequisites in order to promote dialectical materialism as the most effective framework for historical interpretation of the Umayyad conquest of Morocco. The first is a definition of dialectical materialism, and the second is a contextualization of what the historical record literally says about Umayyad expansion. This section will address the former. Philosophically speaking, the precursor to dialectical materialism is dialectical idealism which was most thoroughly developed by Hegel. Georg Wilhelm Friedreich Hegel was a German philosopher of the 19th century who, through several works such as *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Philosophy of Right*, revolutionized the existing conception of dialectics, previously conceptualized as related to the Greek words dia and logos, which are the roots of dialogue.

In their simplest form, dialectics are still dialogues but applied to more abstract principles like existence or infinity. Hegel’s unique contribution (for the sake of dialectical materialism) is the explanation of dialectics as motivated by internal contradictions. As he writes in the *Encyclopaedia of Physical Sciences*, “That true and positive meaning of the antinomies is this: that every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements. Consequently to know, or, in other words, to comprehend an object is equivalent to being conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations.”\(^3\) Here and several other places throughout Hegel’s life’s work, he argues that necessary contradictions create a product of the abstract object and its negative force against it. This process of experiencing the opposing force is defined by Hegel as “sublating”, and in *Science of Logic* Hegel writes, “Nothing is immediate; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of mediation; it is a non-being but as a result which had its origin in a being. It still

\(^3\) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel “Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences,” (1830).
has, therefore, in itself the determinate from which it originates.” This experience is key to philosophy in general according to Hegel, for the process of undergoing the sublation has a sense of preservation of whatever faces the negative force.

This expansion of dialectics was critical to modern German idealist philosophy and still remains relevant to this day. Despite the monumental influence of Hegel, the idealist grounding of his dialectics oftentimes led to disagreements with other philosophers. This is where the second half of dialectical materialism comes in with the synthesis of materialism into existing Hegelian idealist dialectics. Materialism is a school of philosophy which states that the only things that exist in the world are physical things. This is in contrast to idealism, which asserts that the only things that exist in the world are consciousness. Materialists advocate the position that reality cannot be produced by the subject of any phenomena, rather there is an objective external situation that imposes itself onto a subject. 

There are several variations to the broader philosophical doctrine of materialism. Dialectical materialism is one of these genres of materialism, specifically incorporating the contradiction model from Hegel with the materialist dependency on physical and natural realities as shaping history. This incorporation is the legacy of Karl Marx’s philosophical contributions. Marx, another German philosopher who followed yet criticized the tradition of Hegel’s philosophy, advocated for a dialectical materialism, viewing the contradictions found in dialectics as caused by the physical reality of the world. In this way, Marx saw dialectical materialism as a kind of physical science wherein social laws are the product of a repeatable physically real process in the same way a chemical reaction yields a product. As Isaiah Berlin

---


5 Sebastiano Timpanaro, On Materialism. ed. by Jerry Palmer and Mo Dodson. (Routledge, 2003), 73.
writes in his work *Karl Marx*, “The central Hegelian conception remains at the basis of Marx’s thought, although it is transposed into semi-empirical terms. History is not the succession of the effects on men of external environment... as earlier materialists had supposed. Its essence is the struggle of men to realise their full human potentialities...that is, to attain to the mastery of them [natural conditions] and of himself, which is freedom.” Marx still followed the rudimentary framework of the contradictory model of dialectics, but dialectical materialism argues that the physical world is the root of these contradictions.

Notably, one of the defining characteristics of dialectical materialism as a framework is that it attempts to account for abstract aspects of human experience as being a product of material reality. This means that social structures or phenomena that are immaterial such as religious beliefs or ideologies are still a product of the material conditions made by humans and their surroundings. Dialectical materialism does not claim that ideologies are irrelevant to the historical record. In fact, contemporary Marxists allege the opposite. As the French Marxist philosopher Henry Lefebvre writes in *Dialectical Materialism*, “The dialectical method, worked out first of all in an idealist form, as being the activity of the mind becoming conscious of the content and of the historical Becoming, and now worked out again, starting from economic determinations, loses its abstract, idealist form, but it does not pass away. On the contrary, it becomes more coherent by being united with a more elaborate materialism. In dialectical materialism idealism and materialism are not only re-united but transformed and transcended.”

This integration of idealist dialectics with historical materialism simply identifies an origin for

---

ideology rather than attribute it to an immaterial genesis like previous dialectical idealism had ascribed.

These kinds of arguments pertaining to ideologies influenced by material reality continue to be made by academic Marxists into the 21st century. For example, Professor Timothy Mitchell in Carbon Democracy makes the argument that the physical extraction process of coal led to the establishment of democratic values and systems in some parts of the world, while the physical extraction process of oil led to the development of more autocratic governments in other parts of the world. This is because coal extraction required several different chokepoints in its production, so workers (and other people generally excluded from the decision making process of government) were able to disrupt the required processes. The physical removal process, paired with the necessity of energy consumption for the given time periods, required state actors to listen to the demands and grievances of the working class in those areas. Contrastingly, Mitchell alleges that countries that were naturally rich with oil didn’t experience this same development because oil extraction did not have the same choke points that coal extraction did. The argument utilizing dialectical materialism says that the comparatively autocratic governments of oil-rich regions are a direct result of the physical reality that is extraction for each substance.

One of the most frequent criticisms parried at dialectical materialism (and Marxism in general as a philosophical and historical framework) is that it is a Western ideology that can only explain specificities within the West. Naturally, there are criticisms made in bad faith from members of economic classes that Marxism is antagonistic towards. Despite this, non-Western revolutionaries and members of the international proletariat have voiced such concerns, and these critiques must necessarily be heard if dialectical materialism is to be used as a framework

---

For non-Western histories (such as the Umayyads in Morocco). For example, Iranian revolutionary and philosopher Ali Shariati wrote, “When the intention is to deny the West, to resist it... whereas it is seldom realized that Marxism itself is utterly a product of the history, social organization, and culture outlook of this same West. This is not simply because its founders and leading figures are all Western, but... the ideology itself must be accounted a mere superstructure resting on the social infrastructure of the bourgeois industrial system of production in the modern West.” According to Shariati and other ideologies outside the scope of Western philosophy, Marxism must necessarily carry the baggage of the West along with it, for it is a product of that very West.

This criticism, while valid in some ways, ignores a few key components of the construction of dialectical materialism. The first is that, historically speaking, Marxism (and dialectical materialism by extension) has been routinely utilized by philosophers and political activists outside the scope of the West. Radical movements spanning across several continents (specifically in the Global South) have employed this interpretation of history in order to explain and undo the concrete impacts of previous transgressions. Beyond that, the philosophical history of materialism is not one that finds its roots in Western theories. One of the earliest recorded mentions of materialist schools of thought come from the Charvakas school dating over a thousand years before Marx in 600 C.E. The Charvakas philosophy was a mixture of skepticism and materialism, arguing against Jainism and Buddhism that, “religion itself is a snare and delusion, false and misleading. Hard truth is the sole existence a material world” 10. Additionally, other Marxists philosophers have addressed this alleged incompatibility. In his critical work

---

Marxism and the Muslim World, French philosopher Maxime Rodinson argues, “The faithful obviously hold that Islam was founded by God, who, at a moment of His choosing, sent the Prophet to declare His will... Naturally, unbelievers account for the life and work of Mohammad in quite a different way. But these two interpretations can at least agree on the fact that social and human conditions also obtained at the time of the Prophet’s appearance...indeed Ibn Khaldoun explains the appearance and rise of the Prophet in this way, though no one would cast doubt on the strength of his Islamic faith. Marx was not without precursors. All that we are really rejecting here is the idea that the Prophet’s mission was purely a miracle.” In this segment, Rodinson brings up famous Arab historian Ibn Khaldoun as a sort of pre-Marxist for his work in explaining the material conditions of the Prophet Muhammad’s rise to prominence given the contextual information of Arab society during the 7th century. Inherent to Rodinson’s argument is the assertion that Islam, as a non-Western religion, can still have its history and legacy explained by the framework of dialectical materialism.

At a bare minimum, this explanation and justification of dialectical materialism only has to show how this can be a legitimate interpretative framework for the history of the Umayyads in Morocco. Following the historical account of Umayyad conquest in North Africa, further synthesis and analysis will be done as to why dialectical materialism is the preferred historical perspective, but the point in demonstrating dialectical materialism’s use across geography and time is to simply demonstrate the potential of it as a narrative structure. The combination of Western idealism with a centuries long history of materialist schools of thought which has been utilized to explain historical developments from capitalism to Islam (in the case of Rodinson’s view concerning a pre-Marxist and faithful Ibn Khaldoun) surely can’t be rejected at face value.

---

to explain the movement of Arab military forces across Northern Africa into Morocco during the late 7th century.
Umayyad Conquest of Morocco

The second half of the necessary prerequisites to make an accurate historical interpretation is an examination of the historical record that has survived. This section is not intended for any interpretation, rather it should serve to give the proper contextualization required for any perspectives to be offered later. These sources will be a combination of Arab, Amazigh, and other North Africans to contextualize not only the Umayyads in Morocco, but the reports will also contextualize the surrounding world in the 7th century following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

To start, who were the Umayyads? Following Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, the newly blossoming Muslim religion had initially enjoyed success in military and diplomatic campaigns across the region. Muhammad’s first four successors are referred to as the Rashidun Caliphate (632-661 CE), and their rapid successions one after the other define one of the largest differences in the Muslim sects of Sunni versus Shi’a Islam. Of these four successors, the third caliph Uthman ibn Affan hailed from the same descent as Muhammad under the Quraysh clan. More specifically, Uthman ibn Affan was tied via kinship to the Umayyads who were wealthy contributors towards Muhammad after he had cemented his rise to power. Although Uthman’s position as caliph was relatively short lived after his assassination in 656 CE, his influence and amplification of Quraysh claims to power during his reign improved the position of the Umayyad tribe in the successive years. Following the Rashidun Caliphate’s expiration, the Umayyads led the first Islamic empire for the next century and expanded its control from its origins in Arabia to spread from modern-day India to modern-day Spain. The Umayyad clan, which had amassed its

---

fortune before the rise of Muhammad, would eventually expand the influence of the Muslim religion across three separate continents despite its relatively short rule (644 CE to 750 CE).

The Umayyads began most of their expansion from a previously conquered Egypt under the Rashiduns. Compared to the extremely successful military efforts in Arabia, the Umayyads’ expeditions into North Africa took much longer with much higher casualties. Additionally, the interactions with indigenous populations across the Maghreb were markedly different from the interactions in the Middle East. For example, there was still a large unconverted population of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians in the original Arab conquered territories who operated under the Umayyad Caliphate in a modified but ultimately similar manner compared to pre-conquest.\(^{14}\) Contrastingly, many indigenous people across North Africa (such as Tamazight groups that were previously ruled by the Byzantine Empire) converted to Islam in large swaths and eventually helped continue conquests across North Africa into Al-Andalusia (modern Spain). Various historians offer various explanations for this phenomena, and one of the most generally agreed upon ideas is that the difference between the two treatments of conquered populations can be attributed to the difference in governmental strategies. For non-Muslims living under Umayyad rule during its infancy, they were dealing with what historian Andrew Marsham describes as a “conquest state”. On the other hand, Tamazight people across North Africa were interacting with a “mature empire”\(^{15}\). Regardless of the Caliphate’s change in policy and/or attitude towards its expansionary efforts, the result was a Maghreb that was quickly bureaucratized and incorporated into the sectionalized government structure of the broader Ifryqia.

Following the establishment of some provinces in North Africa, the Muslim efforts to expand continued westward. There were two surges following the successful initial campaigns.

---

\(^{14}\) Andrew Marsham, *Umayyad World*, 2.

\(^{15}\) Marsham, 293.
In 670 CE, Umayyad forces had established outposts in the Ifriqiya region which would now be in modern Tunisia. At first, the Umayyads tried to establish the city of Kairouan as their military outpost to continue across the Maghreb into present Morocco, but a civil war amongst the Arab elite in the east known as the Second Fitna led to an imperial inability to maintain conquest efforts out west. The Second Fitna was fought due to an internal conflict involving Umayyad inheritance of the Caliphate and the dissenting Muslim sect known as Kharijites. The Kharijites operated under the motto “lā ukma illā li-llāh (judgement is God’s alone)”, and one of the sources of their division was their belief that the caliph could be any person who was faithful as opposed to a hereditary order. The Umayyads eventually defeated the opposition to their Caliphate after the murder of Ibn al-Zubayn in 692 CE. Oppositional forces finding their motivation in the doctrines of the Kharijites would later come back to negatively impact the Umayyads, but for the time being they were able to resume their conquest efforts out west.

The second wave of conquests led to the largest extent of land that the Umayyad Caliphate would hold. In 705 CE, the governing structure of Northern Africa adapted to the new size of the empire by recognizing Ifriqiya as a separate wilaya (province) from its previous control center of Egypt. Now, closer military and economic districts allowed for a more efficient governing and expansion into modern-day Morocco. Similarly, this is an extension of Marsham’s argument regarding the maturity of the Caliphate faced by non-Umayyad Arabs versus non-Umayyad Amazigh populations. Notably, in this new Ifriqiya province, the Near Sus and Far Sus regions in Morocco were only given commerce capitals that operated as centers for

---

18 Hagemann, 3.
predominantly slaving expeditions in modern-day Tangier and the unknown location of Tarqala. In this second iteration, there was a greater effort to incorporate and combine Arab efforts with that of Amazigh populations in North Africa. This incorporation led to some revisions to the Muslim idea of slave as well as the one of the first tests of Islam as a proselytizing religion versus a hereditary in-group. Amazigh populations largely converted to Islam and as a result pretty easily conquered Byzantine-controlled Morocco. With this momentum and surplus of military force, the Umayyad forces continued from Tlemcen into Tangier, eventually reaching Ceuta. In Ceuta, the Amazigh mawlā commander Tariq b. Ziyad (who was employed by local governors in lieu of a standing military) crossed into Spain with help of the Ceutan count named Julian. Within a year of heavy military occupation of Tangier, Umayyad forces had entered and wholly defeated the Visigothic King named Roderic in Spain in 711 CE where, “The governor of Ifriqiya had become the governor of the Maghrib”.

This expansionary effort into Spain would mark the peak of Umayyad control over the world. After the conquest of Spain, Umayyad forces in the east had attempted to take Constantinople which resulted in an abject failure. This came at a uniquely unfortunate point for the Umayyad given the military loss paired with an ongoing tension rising amongst Amazigh populations in Morocco. The treatment of the Amazigh converts was often inconsistent; sometimes they would be treated as second-class Muslims, other times they would be viewed as unconverted occupied populations, or they would be treated equally with Arab Muslims. At first, Amazigh people converted to Islam in great numbers and were treated essentially as if they were Arab. Over time, the governorship of Ifriqiya would change hands and employ a more

23 Marsham, 4.
heavy-handed approach towards Amazigh integration, oftentimes reverting previous policies that had initially treated the two groups as equals.

This treatment led to a sense of discontent amongst the indigenous population of Morocco which ultimately led to the Kharijite Revolt of Amazigh people in contemporary Morocco. Adopting the slogan and theological position of the Kharijites from the Second Fitna, Amazigh soldiers and civilians rose up against the sitting Umayyad forces. For Amazigh people facing a backsliding Arab government, the Kharijites were appealing because they argued that kinship should not determine the succession of the Caliph. Instead, Kharijites argued that the most pious of the Muslims should lead, with some radical sects suggesting that caliphs who engage in egregious sin should be murdered and removed from their post. The Amazigh people had come to support the Kharijite position through dissemination efforts from the Sufrite and Ibadi Kharijite’s efforts to spread the ideology starting in Kairouan in 719 CE. Two decades later in 740 CE, the Kharijite Revolt began in Tangier and quickly spread across the Maghreb. The Ibadi efforts would eventually lead to the establishment of a loosely confederated Ibadi Amazigh caliphate in the 760’s CE that would represent the first Islamic Caliphate that was not based out of Arabia. This new Ibadi influence would supersede Umayyad rule in the Maghreb, and the Umayyads would fall in 750 CE.

This concludes a brief summary of the events given by the historical record of Moroccan rule under the Umayyads. Based on the success of previous Egyptian missions, the Umayyads continued west in the later half of the 7th century. They eventually reached modern-day Tunisia and established an administrative area in Kairouan that was abandoned but eventually re-established later. Following the civil war in the Second Fitna back east, the

---

Umayyads engaged in a second surge of military conquest efforts. These efforts saw the conquest of Tangier in the early 8th century, and this new formalized establishment was used as a point from which to reach Spain. The momentum of the Umayyads paired with initially successful integration efforts with local Amazigh populations saw massive success in their military efforts in Spain. Despite this, military campaigns in Constantinople failed in the 710’s CE while administrative efforts to revert the Arab-Amazigh assimilation had taken place in the Ifriqiya wilaya. This discontent, paired with an introduction of the Kharijite ideology as a theo-political stance led to the Amazigh Kharijite Revolt in 740 CE. The loss of control over the Maghreb alongside administrative difficulties and insurrections in the east led to the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750 CE. In its place, Ibadi Kharijites saw a rise in power in Morocco and they would contend with the Abbasaid (who would replace the Umayyads in the east) for territory and control for the rest of the 8th century.

One notable caveat to the historical record of Arabs in Morocco is the timing and political influence of the primary sources. Unfortunately, the first known written record of the Umayyads in North Africa was written over two centuries later during the Abbasaid Caliphate. Not only were they written 200 years after the conquests, but they were mostly written by court historians of the Egyptian and Iraqi tradition with Ibn ʿAbd al-Hakam (d. 871), al-Baladhuri (d. c. 892) and al-Tabari (d. 923). Unfortunately, these accounts are somewhat limited in their detail as well as their objectivity. There are more detailed historical records, but these come even later with Andalusian scholars like Ibn ʿIdhari (d. after 1310), the North African scholar Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), and the Ibadi sources written from 800-1300 CE. Additionally, the accounts of the earlier accounts were written by court scholars of a caliphate that sought to define its importance over the Umayyads. As historian Murray Dahm claims, “Much of the information contained in

26 Andrew Marsham, *Umayyad World*, 293.
the Arab source material we have is contradictory and difficult to use because of personal or ideological biases, propaganda and legend, which render a coherent incorporation into the historical record nigh on impossible”27 This means that the historical record, which is already facing problems of bias based on positionality of the writer and usual issues surrounding historical writings from the perspective of those who conquered, is further muddied by the fact that the authors wrote these accounts several generations after they held administrative control over the Maghreb.

Synthesis

The previous two sections are intended to only offer a base from which to make interpretations of the historical record. Now, keeping the limitations of both dialectical materialism and the Umayyad record in mind, the process of synthesizing these two components can begin. In order to accurately provide a historical interpretation that seeks nuance and material understanding, it is easier to identify existing historical records that miss this mark. Clearly, this criticism is subjective based on this paper’s previous arguments about history and interpretation, but it will be easier to show the benefits of a robust framework when contrasted against examples (egregious and subtle) of idealistic interpretations.

The first example of historical misinterpretation is probably the most egregious while also unfortunately being utilized by several other sources in the academic discourse. French historian Charles-André Julien’s *History of North Africa* is a widely used narrative about Arab influence in the Maghreb, yet the language it utilizes clearly indicates a European perspective that holds discontent for Muslims at large. For example, one of the subsections of Julien’s work is titled “The Treacherous Maghrib”, which includes a gratuitous interpretation in, “It is with great satisfaction that Arab historians have described this beautiful Amazon [a Byzantine patrician’s daughter], riding beneath a parasol of peacock feathers or appearing unveiled at the top of a tower. But she... became the prize of a man of the Ansars, and escaped slavery only by throwing herself from the back of her camel so as to break her neck. This tragic tale, though doubtless of pure invention, nevertheless gives graphic expression... to the abhorrence that must have been felt by aristocratic Grecian ladies when they fell into the coarse hands of the nomads.”28 Other than the blatantly charged (if not outright racist) commentary that Julien

provides, the historical record being slanted here is that the Arabs acted as a ruthless occupying force that sought to destroy the territories they conquered. It seeks to oversimplify the decades-long conflict between the Byzantines and Rashiduns/Umayyads, while also emphasizing characteristics about Arab people that allegedly arise from their religious beliefs. In ignoring the material reality of the Mediterranean at this time that both the Byzantines and Umayyads utilized the Roman institution and legal definition of slavery.\(^\text{29, 30}\) Julien begins his *History of North Africa* with a clear interpretive bias, demonstrating positionality and bias in his record.

Another example of this kind of bias comes in Michael Brett’s *The Islamisation of Morocco from the Arabs to the Almoravid*. In this case, Brett’s historical slant disparages the Amazigh inhabitants of North Africa as opposed to Julien’s bias against Arabs. In this work, Brett writes, “Paradoxically, the Arabs chose as their principal allies in the Maghrib, not what remained of the civilised Latin-speaking Christian population of North Africa, but the [Amazigh]... tribesmen traditionally despised as barbarians for the incomprehensible language they spoke.”\(^\text{31}\) Again, the categorization of “incomprehensible” or civilized versus barbarian holds weight in the analysis of historians and also ignores the material reality of the legacied history of Imazighen languages and their development alongside other Afro-Asiatic languages like Arabic.\(^\text{32}\) The conclusions drawn by both Julien and Brett are based on inferences that originate in an interpretation of ideology. If someone were to ask “Why did the Arabs act this way?” or “Why were Amazigh people treated this way?”, the underlying the justifications of both authors relies on their own ideological interpretations. The frightening part of this bias is that these are not fringe pieces that are widely rejected as short-sighted perspectives. Instead, a vast majority of the academic literature published in the 20th century references *History of North Africa* and “The Islamisation of Morocco” explicitly as influencing other conclusions.

\(^{29}\) Damian Alan Pargas and Juliane Schiel, *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery Throughout History*. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of Springer, 2023), 123.


\(^{32}\) H. Wolf “Tamazight Language.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 
If Julien and Brett represent some facet of the idealist interpretation, how can their same questions be answered with dialectical materialism? First, looking at Julien. What Julien is attempting to do is give a comprehensive overview of the Arab role in North Africa against a contextual backdrop of internal conflict amongst the Rashidun and Umayyads while simultaneously explaining expansionary efforts against the Byzantines and in the Maghreb. Instead of a “treacherous” Maghreb conquered by “coarse hands of the nomads”, a dialectical materialist explanation looks to the physical conditions that the Umayyads originated from. Why did the Umayyad Caliphate expand? Surface-level explanations look to simply the existence of economic factors.

Indirectly, early 20th century Belgian historian Henri Pirenne makes this claim with his fall of Rome thesis. In his defining work *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Pirenne attributes the official fall of the Roman Empire (and by extension the end of Antiquity as a historical time period) to the Umayyad Caliphate’s disruption of long-distance trade routes along the Mediterranean and in Spain. As a result, Europe as a collective continent was forced back to exportations exclusively to where they eventually fell behind economically to a more powerful Islamic Caliphate that co-opted those trade routes. The rest of Pirenne’s thesis also hinges on a materialist analysis when he later states, “Without Islam, the Frankish Empire would probably never have existed, and Charlemagne, without Muhammad, would be inconceivable” This utilizes a materialist framework because it recognizes that the Rashiduns and Umayyads had a certain influence on the material conditions of Europe with their conquests, and those unique conditions were key in the establishment of a figure such as Charlemagne centuries later.

Pirenne’s thesis is not without its own faults, but for the sake of the Umayyads it lays a convincing baseline. The Umayyads, in search of a population from which they could collect

---


taxes from, needed more people in order to increase their revenue which could only be found in populations of non-Muslims. This also explains a lot of the unique aspects of Muslim conquests, specifically in their preference towards co-option as opposed to elimination of conquered populations. Unfortunately, this theory alone is still based on some idealism because the laws of Islam drive the decisions of the caliphs. An idealist could argue that the laws of Islam came from immaterial sources, so the motivation of history would by extension be immaterial. Governmental practices like the jizya (a tax on non-Muslims in a conquered territory) stem from Quranic law and, at face value, are based on the divine revelations given to the Prophet from the angel Gabriel.

To reiterate, the dialectical materialist position does not foreclose on the influence or even legitimacy of immaterial ideologies like religion (see Rodinson’s use of Ibn Khaldoun). As Rodinson argues, “In my opinion there is nothing to prevent the believer from collaborating in further, more systematic study of the causes of the Muslim conquests. Indeed nothing prevents him from again presupposing that the will of God was manifesting itself through laws He has laid down for the social world and for the dynamic of human thoughts and projects throughout history.”35 This interpretation is not meant to broadly paint any religion as patently wrong against dialectical materialism. Instead, religious origins like Islam’s can be studied in a robust and critical way. This is the position that Marxist anthropologist Eric Wolf advocates for in his work *The Social Organization of Mecca*. He argues that the origins of Islam are found in the material conditions of Mecca along with the thesis that the conditions of merchants in Arabia increased their productivity and economic bottom line in the transition from kinship oriented societies into a formalized state. He claims, “We have seen that the economic centralization of western Arabia

35 Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim World*, 9
through trade was accompanied by a related tendency in the centralization of religious worship. Here we venture the hypothesis that the emergence of social classes out of the network of a society based primarily on... kinship was accompanied... by an increased emphasis on the deity associated with non-kin relationship.36 Wolf continues by arguing that the true centralization of power in Medina was based on those with the strongest economic ties by saying, “It may be said that Mohammed accomplished for the Meccan traders that which they could not accomplish themselves: the organization of state power.”37 The introduction of zakat and jizya as a means of increasing economic (and therefore political) prowess under a society that synthesized its economic and religious conditions necessarily was a result of its material reality. This is to say that Islam as a religion thrived due to its ability to survive in Arab society. The physical reality of that society pre-dated Islam, and by the materialist interpretation it was influenced by those existing society’s laws.

In the same vein of Wolf’s argument, the Umayyads similarly needed to expand the range of their economic revenue. They accomplished this by expanding both eastward and westward, largely fueled by advantageous trade positioning along the Mediterranean and Gulf Coast. The evidence for this is in the path of the conquerors. If the motivation for expansion was based on some desire for land simply for the sake of land, then the Umayyads would have continued moving southward into the sparsely populated Sahara which would have given little resistance. Instead, they moved westward and only conquered existing Byzantine provinces with established city centers.

This also lends credit to the co-option theory as opposed to destruction. A key feature of the Umayyad Caliphate outside of the Arab periphery was that provincial governors were not

37 Wolf, 353.
allowed to raise their own armies. Their options were to request troops from the Arab core, or (as most governors did in their expansion) they would hire local armies called *malawi* to carry out the fighting. In order to satisfy the demands for expansion, paradoxically the Umayyad Caliphate had to expand further. This was done to secure natural resources as well as provide slaves for *malawi* to be adequately compensated for their military efforts.

This kind of contradiction is at the core of the dialectic. The necessity to increase tax revenue meant that the Umayyads needed more subjects, but the Caliphate found its origin in military campaigns and internal uncertainty. As a result, caliphs forbid local governors to raise an army in fear of a disseminated political power. This meant governors turned to *malawi* to carry out military efforts. Notably, the local armies usually consisted of indigenous Imazighen people across North Africa. These Amazigh armies, which enjoyed high populations due to their positions alongside booming urban centers that had been used for long-distance trading, needed to be paid adequately for their military expeditions. This led to continued expansion, notably into Morocco where Tangier and the unknown Tarqala were used almost exclusively as centers for slaving expeditions.

This very process also answers Brett’s analytical shortcomings. To accelerate this process and cement political power, the Arabs incorporated Amazigh people fully into Muslim society as equals, abolishing the *jizya* for Amazigh Muslims in the Maghreb. Unfortunately, the goal of conversion under Caliph ‘Umar II was too successful. Enough conquered subjects had to pay the smaller *zakat* tax, so the Umayyad Caliphate started losing economic revenue. As a result, later caliphs undid ‘Umar II’s reforms and forced Amazigh Muslims to pay *jizya* or be labeled as non-Muslim slaves entirely. Later caliphs similarly reverted the egalitarian reforms by ceasing

---

38 Andrew Marsham, *Umayyad World*, 297
40 Marsham, 302
the payment of *mawali* outside of military spoils. As a result, the material conditions of Amazigh people changed as they received less income for the jobs they had previously been completing. This reversion, paired with an effort to spread the Kharijite ideology following their loss in the Second Fitna, created the specific material conditions for a successful Amazigh Revolt in 740 CE. Amazigh military forces already had quantity over the Arab governors who were not allowed to raise armies, and their economic conditions had worsened along with a harsher treatment from the Arab government. This Amazigh Revolt was not based out of some “incoherent religion” or divine intervention, but rather it was the result of a ruling political regime that was forced to revert its integration efforts due to a material lack of income.

Without the specificity of Islam’s origins in Arabia given the economic conditions, the social institution of Islam (and its associated taxation systems) would not have manifested themselves in the way that they did. In the same way, Umayyads would not have forbidden local militaries if it wasn’t for the internal conflict that the Rashidun Caliphate underwent. Furthermore, the *malawi* would not have been as effective in their conquests if they were not given equal footing with Arab Muslims. To further reinforce the role of material realities, the Umayyads would not have reverted their previous integration efforts if it wasn’t for their falling income. Finally, the Amazigh would not have risen up and overthrown their Arab rulers if it wasn’t for the worsening of their economic conditions. All of these events are necessarily linked, the product of several contradictions, and necessarily rooted in the physical, material reality of Arabia and the Maghreb in the 7th and 8th century. This material reality, paired with the ideological contradictions of expansion and scarcity, are necessarily the product of a history depicted by dialectical materialism. These contradictions are motivated by real natural
developments, and this tension led to different historical outcomes that are what Hegel would define as the product of sublation.
Personal Limitations and Conclusion

There are, of course, limitations to any interpretation I can make. It would be tragically ironic if I had prefaced my argument in the introduction as being a response to biased interpretations without acknowledging the biases that I myself hold. To act as if I am able to give a neutral or objective perspective on a history that already has so many interpretative layers would weaken the overall position of dialectical materialism as an interpretive philosophy. I am a college student from the United States, and the interpretations of Arab history that I have access to in general are done by European or historians from the U.S. that are available in English. This, paired with other issues about the West’s painting of the non-West undoubtedly has established a discourse that is biased and potentially inescapable. The criticisms of this discourse, most succinctly stated in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, are valid and ones that I have read and agreed with before ever beginning this paper. This also does not include the role that the biases of the sources have, coming well after the Umayyad invasions from political opponents of the Umayyads. It would be impossible to get a truly neutral account of any historical event, but the aspiration of the dialectical materialist position is that material conditions take preference over far more subjective ideological concerns.

Outside of the historical record, there are similar philosophical limitations to dialectical materialism. Echoing the criticisms of Shariarti again, Marxism is a Western construction. Not only is it born and bred in the West, but it also comes from individuals who have only known capitalism for their entire lives as a dominant economic system. There is a very possible reality that dialectical materialism can perfectly explain all aspects of capitalist history, yet is unable to account for social relationships under pre-capitalist societies. This is especially true when
combined with the previously mentioned source-bias issues. If all of the history that is available to interpret has already been biased under pre-capitalist relationships, then even a perfect interpretation of that material is still wrong at the end of the day.

The final limitation worth noting is the discourse surrounding Arab colonialism and nationalism. As mentioned in the foreword, several sources and interpretations (Western and Arab alike) routinely use the name given to Amazigh people by their colonizers. This, paired with ongoing struggles of Amazigh people to be recognized in Moroccan discourses of history means that a similar West versus non-West divide is happening along the lines of Arab versus non-Arab. There was a genuine hesitation on the title and vocabulary used in this paper on whether or not “conquest” was an appropriate word. Words with less of a charge to them such as “expansion” or “incorporation” would potentially resist Orientalist discourses, however it would also delegitimize the impact of Arab colonialism on Tamizghen people across North Africa and in Morocco (an impact that is still strongly felt to this day). Ultimately, conquest was the word chosen, but not without serious consideration for alternatives.

As I have maintained throughout this paper, my argument here is far from a final verdict on the historical reality of Arab influence in Morocco. The best case scenario for this argument is that it makes the historical record less, rather than more, simple. That being said, the other historical records included in this paper that utilize dialectical materialism directly or indirectly (Rodinson, Wolf, Pirenne, etc.) are worth expanding upon as well as criticizing when applicable. If any of the arguments of dialectical materialism cannot withstand the harshest of criticism and

---

41 Mohammed Masbah, “The Amazigh in Morocco: Between the Internal and the External.” (Dohain Institute, October 2011).

deconstruction, then they are not worth exalting as a guiding framework for any historical interpretation.

Despite these shortcomings and limitations to my own work, the goal of the historian’s interpretation should still remain the same. Rather than imposing a mindset or belief onto the people of centuries past, the critical ability to understand worldly realities and combine them with historical motivations can help fully explain the role that humanity plays in the progression of history. The philosophical synthesis of idealist dialectics and materialist positions seeks to thoroughly test this progression of history in a way that can resemble the scientific method. It is up to people alive today, be it those affected by these historical processes, disaffected populations, philosophers, historians, or academics, to conduct this thorough testing and cultivate potential understanding.
Bibliography


Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. “Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences,” 1830. 


Masbah, Mohammed. “The Amazigh in Morocco: Between the Internal and the External.”

*Dohain Institute*, October 2011.


https://books.google.co.ma/books?id=4ztPn6T3CL4C&dq=pre+capitalist+dialectical+ma


[https://www.britannica.com/topic/Amazigh-languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Amazigh-languages).
