

North of the Sahara

Separated by the arid expanses of the Sahara, North Africa has followed a distinct cultural path to that of the rest of the continent, its history closely aligned with that of its Mediterranean neighbours. Today, many of the historical cities of the region still reflect this ancestry, and have been awarded World Heritage Status.



Historic Cairo, Egypt
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For almost three million years, the nine million kilometres of desert that make up the Sahara ('the Greatest Desert') have separated the countries lying on the Mediterranean coastline of North Africa from the rest of the continent. This stretch of land was once home to the ancient nations of Carthage and Numidia, which both became Roman provinces. In the early fifth century, Rome lost North Africa to the Vandals; the loss marked a crucial point in the fall of the Western Roman Empire, as North Africa had served as an important supplier of grain .

In 533, Byzantine emperor Justinian I reclaimed the territory. A hundred years later, the Arabic Islamic conquest of North Africa began; by 670 most of the region was under Muslim control. From the Middle Ages onwards,

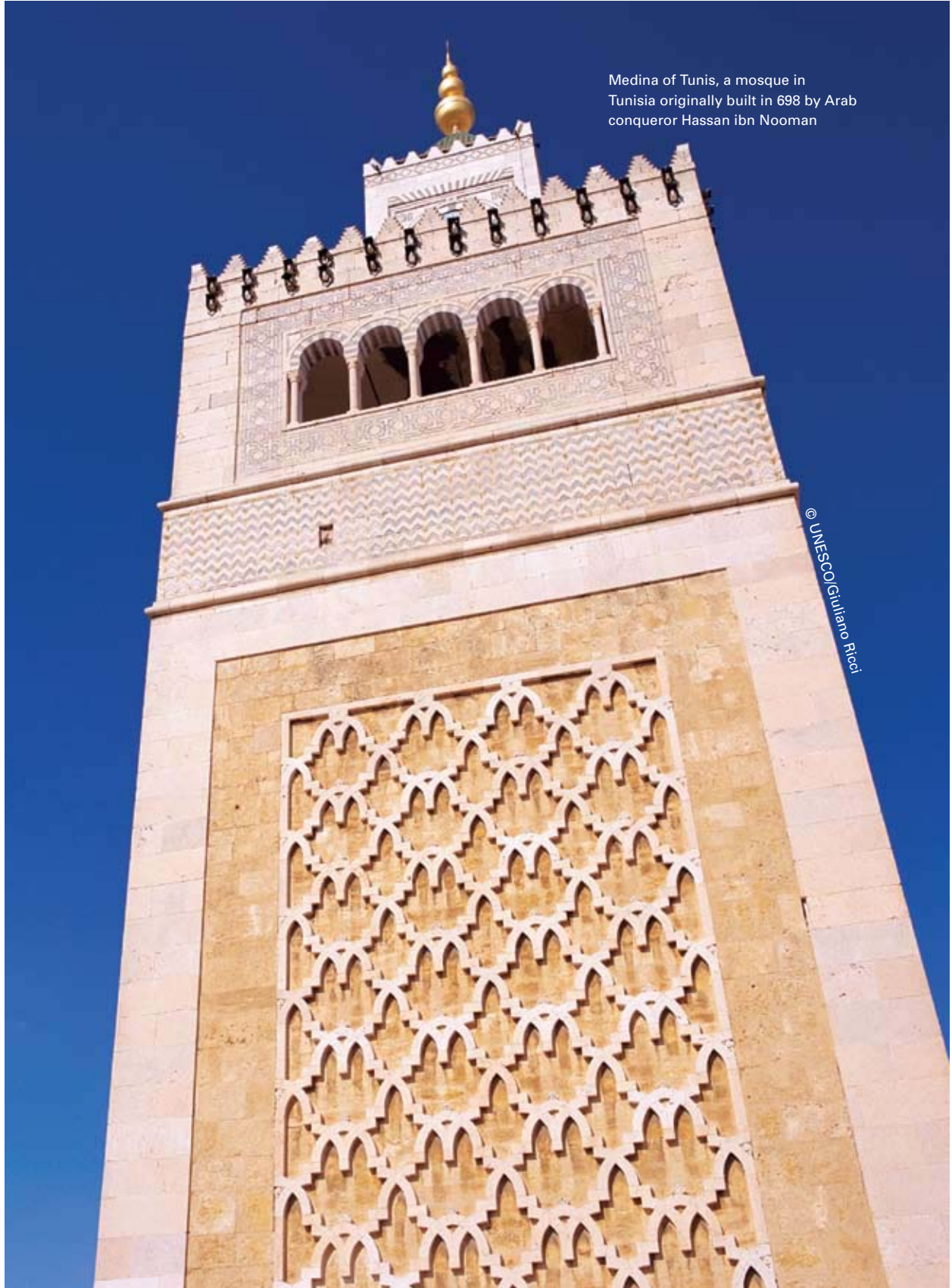
the Ottoman empire held sway over most of North Africa with the exclusion of Morocco, until the 19th century when Spain, Italy, France and the United Kingdom colonised territories. Since the middle of the 20th century the countries of North Africa have been independent.

Several of the ancient cities of this region have become World Heritage sites, valued in part for the historic,

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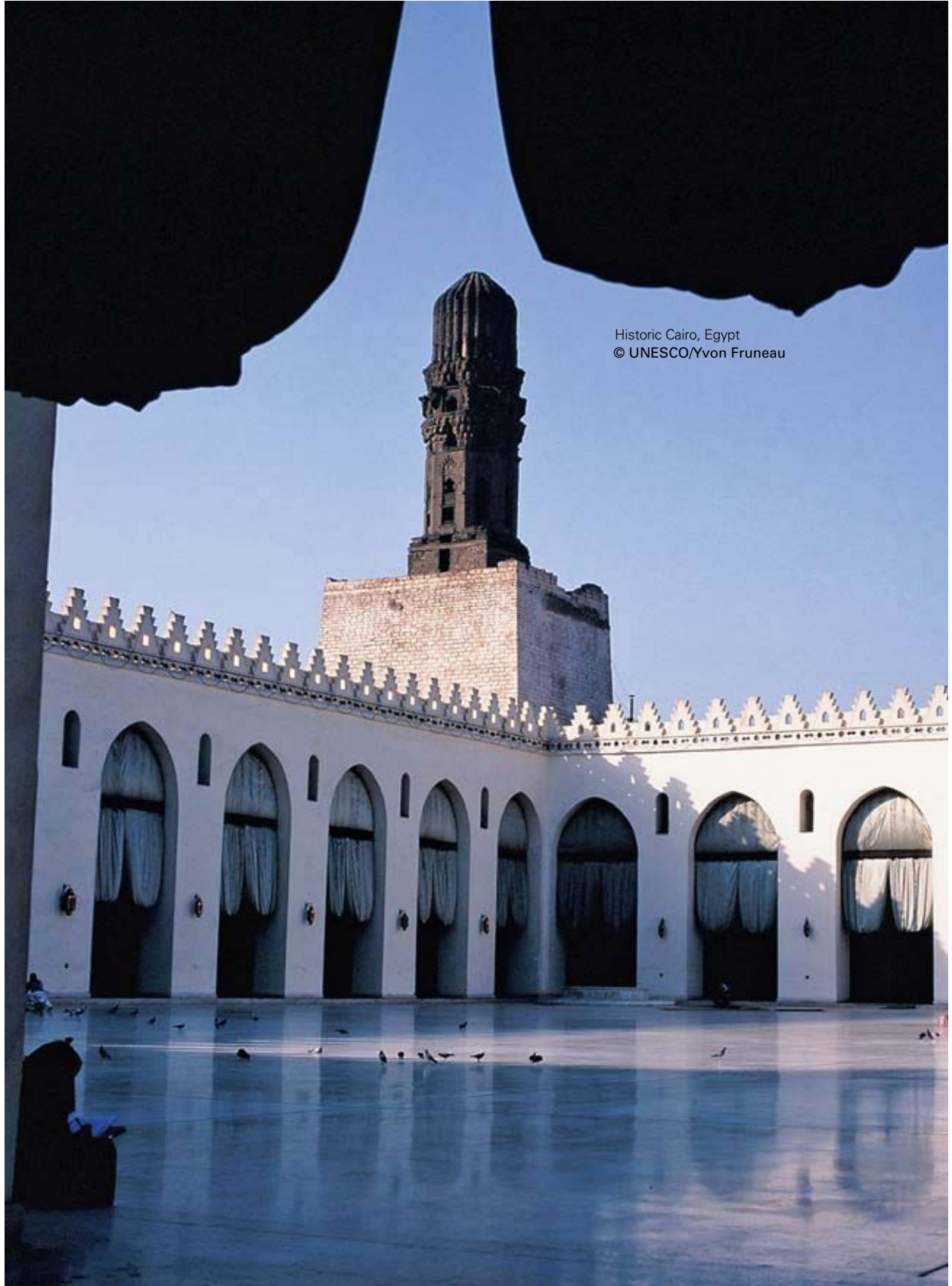
social and cultural information embedded within their use of space, building materials and so on. Investing in the maintenance and integrity of these cities not only preserves such information, but in many cases benefits the lives and prospects of those who inhabit them.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Algeria's Casbah, where the city stands in need of urgent repair, as there is an imminent possibility of houses collapsing – a far cry from its glory days. Nicknamed 'la Blanche' ('the White One') due to its sharp slope of white buildings descending towards the sea, the city has a history riddled with infamy, glamour and intrigue. From its antique origins as a Phoenician trading post in the 6th century BC, it came under Roman rule, until the Vandals in turn expelled them. In the 16th century the city rose to power as a stronghold for the Barbarossa pirate brothers who plundered the vessels and towns of the Mediterranean and Atlantic; tens of thousands of Europeans were kidnapped and held for ransom in the Casbah's dungeons, among them Miguel de Cervantes – author of *Don Quixote* – who spent five years in the city before being ransomed, and Fra Filippo Lippi, a renowned artist of the Italian Renaissance.

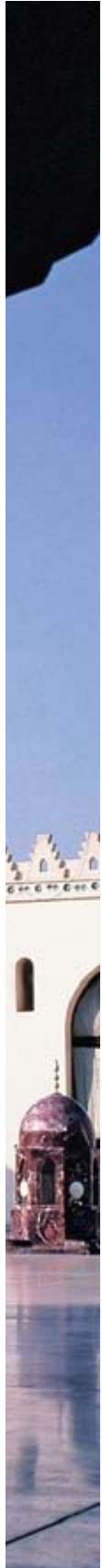


Medina of Tunis, a mosque in Tunisia originally built in 698 by Arab conqueror Hassan ibn Nooman

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Historic Cairo, Egypt
© UNESCO/Yvon Fruneau



At that time the fortified city was a place of abundant wealth, boasting a plethora of fountains, public baths, mosques and more than 100 prayer halls. Much of this was destroyed in reprisals by European forces, and, in 1716, by an earthquake that levelled a great deal of the city. The Ottomans rebuilt the Casbah, only to lose it to French colonisers in 1871. Fearing that the labyrinthine nature of the fortified city offered potential for resistance fighters, the French destroyed its walls and surrounded the city with colonial-style buildings, also creating a central boulevard and wider streets to facilitate the movement of troops. Despite this, the twisting, hive-like structure of the Casbah made it a focal point for the resistance during Algeria's 1954-1962 war of independence; in the early 1990s it once again sheltered insurgents, this time Islamist guerrillas revolting against the government.

Like Algeria's Casbah, the Medina of Tetouan in Morocco garnered infamy for its reputation as a base for piracy at various points in its history. In 1305 King Abu Thabit established the city, from which many attacks on Spain's Ceuta were launched, ultimately ensuring the Medina's destruction at the hands of the Castilians in 1400. A century later the Medina at Tetouan was rebuilt by Andalusian Moors fleeing the Spanish Reconquista; it also became home to a noteworthy Sephardi Jewish community. In 1860 the city once more fell to Spain, who virtually transformed the Medina into a European city, a metamorphosis so loathed by the Moors that they razed all signs thereof at the first available opportunity.

In 1913, the city became the capital of Spanish-occupied Morocco, a status it maintained until 1956, when it became part of the independent state of Morocco.

In contrast to the pirate strongholds of the Casbah and Tetouan, the Medina of Tunis has garnered itself a more respectable history. The Medina grew up around 'Ez Zitouna' – 'The Mosque of the Olive Tree', originally built in 698 by Arab conqueror Hassan ibn Numan. With the mosque as its sacred heart, and surrounded over time by the souks of noble trade guilds, the medina grew to be a self-contained city encompassed by ramparts. During the Hafsid era (1230-1574), the region became an important focus for intellectual, religious and economic activity throughout Africa, the Middle East and Europe, and one of the wealthiest cities in the Arab world. This status is reflected in the diverse influences present in the architecture of the city. The medina remains one

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of the best preserved cities of the region, having passed through 13 centuries of existence without being ravaged by either natural or man made disasters; buildings from the middle ages still stand, as do many of the palatial homes built during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, as well as some 600 monuments, including mosques, fountains, mausoleums, and madrasas.

Like many of the old Islamic cities, the medina consists of a tightly-knit collection of alleyways and covered passages. Although these are not laid out according to a grid – or any easily observable system – anthropological studies have shown that the city in fact demonstrates a method of planning, structured around privacy and a system of human relations.

Known as the ‘pearl of the desert’, the oasis town of Ghadames in Libya has a recorded history dating back to the Roman conquest, yet archaeological evidence suggests that is the oldest inhabitable town in the Sahara, dating back

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to the Paleolithic period. It is thought that the oasis town was invaded by the Romans during the first century BC; by the sixth century Byzantine missionaries had converted the inhabitants to Christianity. During the following century Islam took hold, brought by Arab rulers, and the oasis came to be one of the busiest caravan trading centres in the Trans-Saharan trade route, a status it maintained until the 19th century.

Ghadames is remarkable for the construction of its

buildings, engineered to withstand the extremes of temperature experienced in the desert. Thick, whitewashed clay walls, angled and pierced with occasional ventilation holes, are carefully laid out to form a cool interior space throughout the city. The layout of Ghadames also displays rigid social mores – the underground passages form walkways for men, while a network of rooftop alleyways allow women to separately pursue their own daily activities.

Since the 1980s, the majority of former inhabitants have left Ghadames for the air-conditioned spaces of the neighbouring city – yet at the height of summer, many still retreat back to their homes in the oasis, when the scorching heat overwhelms modern technology.

A survey of some of the historic cities of North Africa would not be complete without a mention of the Egyptian city of Cairo. Founded in the 10th century, it rose to prominence as a centre of learning, with a library alleged to contain some two million books. In 1250, the Mamelukes tore Egypt from Arabic control, and



Historic Cairo, Egypt
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established Cairo as their capital; during this time the city is said to have experienced a golden age. In 1517, they were routed by the Ottomans, who ruled until 1798 when Napoleon briefly held the city. Muhammad Ali Pasha then established an independent empire with Cairo as its capital; in 1882 the city fell to the British, eventually becoming independent in 1922.

Today historic Cairo still displays its medieval layout, and abounds with monuments, mosques and Coptic churches, built over the course of the last millennium. It is home to more than 600 classified monuments, many of which are described as ‘incontestable masterpieces’, and which reflect the longstanding status and prestige of this unforgettable city.