

In pursuit of history

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In becoming the first and so far most successful of the recent uprisings in the region, it may indeed seem that Tunisia has already made history. But how does the 2011 Revolution measure up against some of the other radical points of change in the country's past?

Before the Phoenicians arrived and settled on the land that is modern-day Tunisia around 1100 BC, a small population of agricultural homo sapiens are known to have inhabited it. Emerging from the Capsian culture, they eventually became known as the Berbers. The Berber people formed a robust culture and language, which survives to this day and continues to be imbedded in modern Tunisian society. This culture – while itself having evolved over the years – is probably the only constant element in Tunisian history since antiquity. While empires have risen and fallen over the centuries, the indigenous Berber culture has forever remained.

The Berbers and Phoenician settlers eventually fused to create the Punic people, who propelled the status of Carthage to one of the greatest port cities in the Mediterranean. A hub for trade and conquest, it was from here that the legendary military general Hannibal launched his campaign against the Romans during the Second Punic Wars in 216 BC. Fascinatingly, he came close to conquering Rome but following his defeat at the Battle of Zama, the Romans went on to seize Carthage and reconstruct it as one of the main cities of its empire by 44 BC. Tunisia thus became

the breadbasket of Rome until the fall of the empire. Tunisian Berbers subsequently faced the invasions of Vandals, which they frequently resisted. Eventually in 533 BC the Byzantines took control of Tunisia, but they too lost it to another burgeoning empire that would transform its cultural, political and physical landscape forever.

Following the establishment of Islam and its rapid expansion across the North African coastline, Tunisia (or *Ifriqia* as it was then known) became the first and predominate base on the continent. The first mosque in Africa was built in the cultural town of Kairouan, 184 km south of Tunis, which thereafter served as the region's capital. The Islamic worldview, the Arabic language, a new calendar, distinct architecture and a new system of governance would have the most profound and lasting impact on the Tunisian people. During the Islamic Golden Age (from the 8th to 13th centuries), Tunis, through the iconic Zaytuna Mosque academy, thrived as a cultural and intellectual hub and produced leading intellectuals, artists and leaders. This period itself experienced successive dynastic changes – caliphates and emirates including the Umayyads, Fihrids, Kharijites, Abbassids, Aghlabids, Fatimids, Zirids and finally the Hafsids. While they each brought their own influences, the common denominator over this period remained a Berber-Arab-Islamic culture.

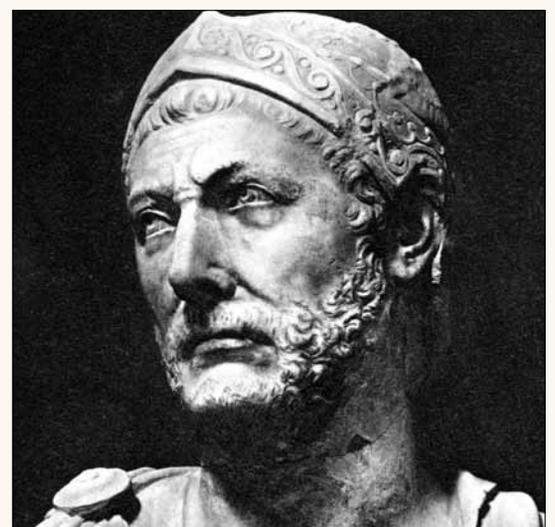
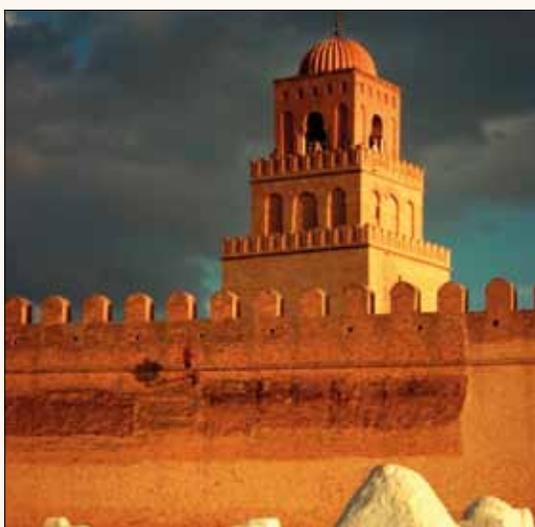
The sixteenth century battle for Tunisia was fought between two of the most powerful and rapidly growing

This page, left: Kairouan, formerly the Islamic cultural capital, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This page, right: Hannibal of Carthage is considered the one of the greatest military generals of all time

Opposite page, left: The Zaytuna Mosque remained an iconic institution under the Arabs and the Ottoman Turks

Opposite page, right: Habib Bourguiba was a prominent pro-independence activist before becoming the country's first President



empires of the time - the Spanish and the Ottoman Turks. Khair-ud-din (known to the Europeans as Babarossa) took the country in 1534 for a brief period before it was snatched by the Spanish for almost two decades. Tunisia finally came back under Ottoman rule in 1574, and was thereafter treated as a sort of semi-autonomous province. The Ottoman culture, while grounded in Islamic ideals, was distinct from the Arab-Berber culture of before. Institutional reforms were made, particularly towards the end of the Ottoman reign the nineteenth century, notably the enactment of the constitution in 1861 – the first such reform in Muslim national history.

The transition of Ottoman Tunisia to a French protectorate was not a sudden or radical one, despite substantial differences between the motives and natures of the two empires. This was because as the Ottoman Empire was weakening, there was an ongoing ‘scramble for Tunisia’ between the British, French and Italians which lasted over a decade; and this made the transition a relatively gradual one. Interestingly, the British were very close to acquiring Tunisia as its protectorate in 1878, but eventually came to an agreement with the French that they would take Cyprus instead and allow the French to claim Tunisia under its sphere of influence. In 1881 Tunisia was thus declared a French protectorate, who would for the next fifty years install their culture, language, architecture and institutions, leaving a strong legacy to the present day.

Disgruntled with French rule following the Second World War, Tunisian nationalists began to call for independence. As decolonisation gained pace (Morocco gained its independence in 1956) pressure on Paris increased, and eventually culminated in the recognition of Tunisia as an independent state by 1957. Habib Bourguiba, one of the foremost activists, became the country’s first President. He introduced

liberal laws, instituted a secular state, established women’s rights, free education and the abolition of polygamy, and laid out the groundwork for the economically savvy structure of today’s Tunisia. The main street referred to as the ‘Champs Elysée of Tunis’ is named after him and he is still considered a national hero. But his excessively long reign lasted until 1987, when he was ousted in bloodless coup led by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, whose doctors deemed Bourguiba ‘unfit to rule’.

But Ben Ali’s love affair with power proved to be even greater than his predecessor’s. The dubiously overwhelming results at the 1989 and 1994 elections affirmed his stranglehold on presidency, peaking with a 99.44% majority in the 1999 and 2004 elections. Having been expected to retire in 2004, Ben Ali ‘amended’ the constitution and allowed himself to run for another two terms. Discontent with Ben Ali’s autocratic rule reached a climax in 2011 with mass street demonstrations, finally prompting him to step aside.

The Tunisian land has clearly gone through a series of profound changes throughout its history; changes that dramatically shifted the country’s social, institutional, cultural, linguistic and administrative scenery. It may seem ambitious (even audacious) to compare the 2011 Revolution to such phenomenal milestones as the Phoenician settlement, Roman conquest, instatement of Islam, Ottoman reforms, French control and national independence. Where the 2011 Revolution supersedes these previous transition points in its history though – perhaps with the exception of sporadic Berber uprisings and independence in 1957 – is that it was instigated and pioneered primarily by the people of the country rather than by its ruling elite or foreign powers. This alone warrants it a place in the pages of history. **E**

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