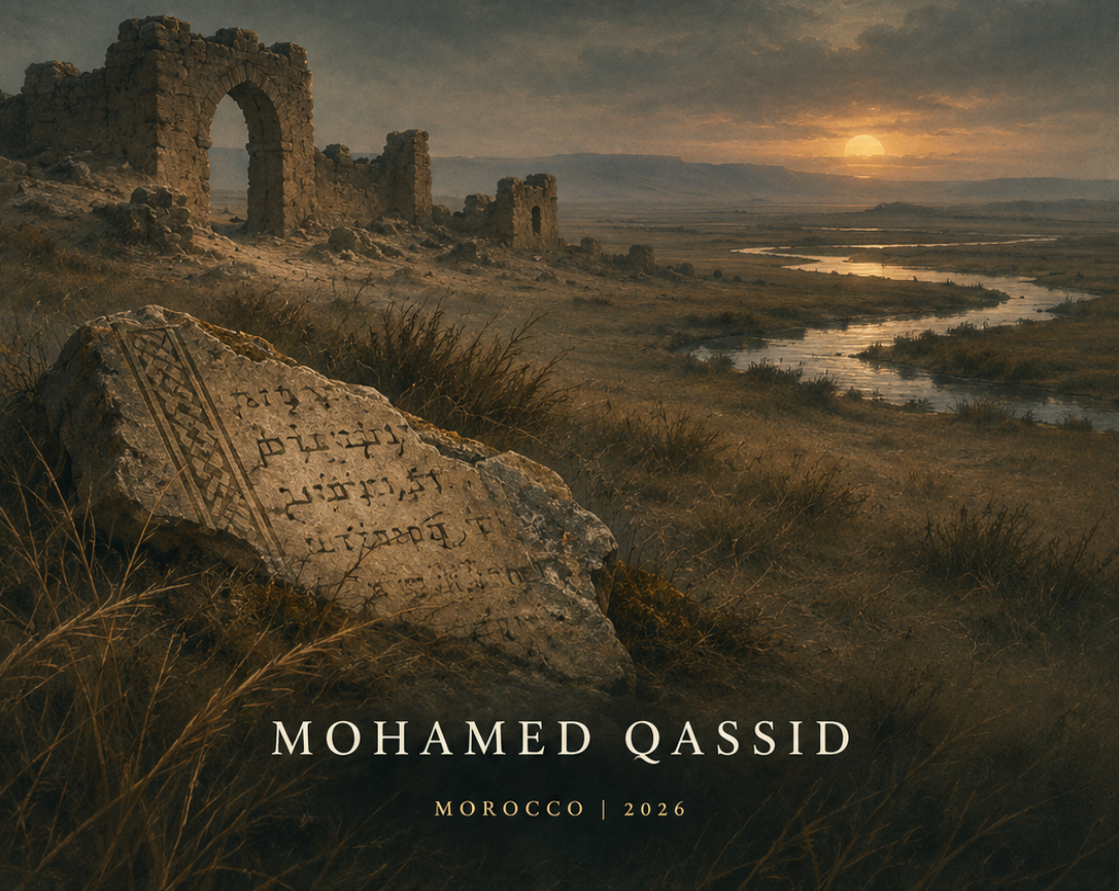
A KASSIDIAN HISTORICAL ESSAY

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA

Barghawata, conquest, and the long life of a silenced name



MOHAMED QASSID

MOROCCO | 2026

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA

"Water has never agreed to become an archive."

A LITERARY-HISTORICAL ESSAY

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA

Barghawata, conquest, and the long life of a silenced name

MOHAMED QASSID

MOROCCO • 2026

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA

First illustrated literary edition · November 2026

Text by Mohamed Qassid. All rights reserved. Permission is required for reproduction or republication.

Cover: original interpretive artwork. Its ruins, carved stone, and landscape are imagined motifs, not a documented Barghawata archaeological site or authenticated inscription.

The essay distinguishes established facts from inference and literary reflection. Historical sources and the limits of the surviving record are discussed in the final pages.

CONTENTS

TEN MOVEMENTS, AN EPILOGUE, AND A HISTORIAN'S MARGIN

I. THE RIVER KEEPS NO MINUTES 7

II. BEFORE SOMEONE SAID HERESY 9

III. A REVELATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF HOME 11

IV. THE ROAD FROM THE SAHARA 13

V. WHAT THE SWORD COULD NOT FINISH 15

VI. THE SCRIBE ARRIVES AFTER THE SOLDIER 17

VII. THE MISSING BOOK 19

VIII. THE DANGER OF LOVING THE DEFEATED TOO MUCH . . 21

IX. THE LAND BENEATH THE NAMES 23

X. A SMALL TRIAL OF THE ARCHIVE 25

EPILOGUE. AN ADDRESS TO THE ABSENT 27

Historian's margin 28

Selected references 30

A NOTE BEFORE THE ROAD



This booklet asks what became of the Barghawata, the Amazigh confederation whose distinct religious and political life endured in Morocco's Atlantic country for centuries. The writing sometimes stands in the present landscape and imagines the questions a traveller might ask. Such moments are literary reflections, never recovered Barghawata testimony. The historical claims rest on the studies listed at the end. Where the evidence falls short, the sentence must stop with it.

The river keeps no minutes.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 01 / 10

THE RIVER KEEPS NO MINUTES

01

At Azemmour, the Oum Er-Rbia goes out to meet the Atlantic with the untidy patience of a river that has been doing its work longer than any dynasty. It carries clay and reeds, winter rain, and the refuse of our own century. It offers no explanation of the men who once crossed these plains with banners, no inventory of the families who survived them. Water has never agreed to become an archive.

I think of Tamesna whenever I travel in this part of Morocco: a name stretched across ground that is now divided into districts, roads, farms, concrete, and addresses. It was a country before it became an entry in a history book. People sowed, quarrelled, traded, prayed, married, buried their parents. No source preserves that ordinary breathing world in anything like its fullness. Instead, the record opens its mouth chiefly when kings and clerics have something to say.

Here is the wound that interests me. The Barghawata are remembered. Their name has travelled across more than a millennium. Historians can place them in a region, discuss their leaders, reconstruct some of their beliefs, and describe wars fought against them. Yet almost every road to their world runs through someone else's manuscript.

Someone called them deviants. Someone explained why their religion was unacceptable. Someone described the campaigns that ended their independence. What did a Barghawata mother call the men approaching her village? What word did a farmer use for his own faith? Did a defeated

elder think of himself as a heretic, or as a man who belonged to the place where his father's bones lay?

We do not know. I refuse to fill the gap with theatrical certainty. Still, I refuse the easier comfort of pretending that the gap is unimportant.

For centuries, Morocco has been narrated through the arrival of its ruling houses. There is much to admire and much to study in those histories. But a country is also made from the lives over which a dynasty passes. Sometimes the rider receives a monument and the trampled field receives a footnote.

That unequal distribution of attention is where this little book begins.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 02 / 10

BEFORE SOMEONE SAID HERESY

02

The Barghawata did not appear out of empty sand. Their formation belongs to the unsettled eighth century, after the great Amazigh revolt against Umayyad rule in North Africa. Communities who had good reasons to resent taxation, hierarchy, and distant claims of authority entered alliances that cannot be explained by religion alone. In Tamesna, along the Atlantic plains, an Amazigh confederation developed a lasting political presence. Mbarek Redjala describes a kingdom forged from tribes and fragments of tribes, and he is strikingly frank about how little we know of its earliest organisation (Redjala, 1983).

A name, then, precedes our knowledge of the people who carried it. Even the origin of *Barghawata* has provoked debate. Redjala's study is a reminder that the historian must sometimes spend years examining a word that the confident storyteller uses in passing.

It is tempting to see the early Maghreb as a map waiting for a single religion, a single language, and a single political centre to settle everything. Maps are often more obedient than human beings. The region was full of competing allegiances, uneven religious change, older customs, new legal vocabularies, and communities making practical decisions in difficult circumstances.

The Barghawata endured because their society possessed resources we can now glimpse only imperfectly: a capacity to organise, to command loyalty, to negotiate difference, and to defend territory. They survived the

rise of states more familiar to today's schoolbooks. Four centuries cannot be explained by an eccentric doctrine alone. Four centuries require neighbours and harvests, arrangements among families, and the hard business of being governed.

This is where the adjective *heretical* begins to fail us. It reports a theological judgment made from within a particular tradition. It tells us much less about a community's crops, laws, internal disagreements, humour, fears, or habits of care. The historian who starts and ends with that adjective has mistaken the label on a sealed jar for the life inside it.

I do not ask the reader to admire everything the Barghawata did. We lack the evidence for such sentimental absolution. Their history includes stories of coercion and conflict that deserve scrutiny. I ask for something smaller and harder: allow a people to become historically intelligible before allowing their enemies to define the limits of that intelligibility.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 03 / 10

A REVELATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF HOME

03

The surviving Arabic accounts associate the Barghawata with Salih ibn Tarif and a line of religious leaders whose claims disturbed later Sunni chroniclers. They describe distinctive prescriptions and a sacred scripture in an Amazigh language. We should be cautious about treating every reported detail as a direct window onto Barghawata worship. These reports travelled through writers who stood outside the tradition and who sometimes had reasons to condemn it.

Yet even a cautious account permits an arresting thought. Somewhere in this Atlantic country, people appear to have heard sacred meaning voiced in a language their grandparents could recognise without translation. Whatever one thinks of their doctrine, the linguistic fact reported by the sources asks to be considered with seriousness.

Who decides the language in which a people may imagine revelation? The question is not a modern slogan slipped backward into the eighth century. It is a question made possible by the reports themselves. A local scripture, if the descriptions are broadly reliable, would have joined religious authority to the intimate sounds of home.

Conor Dube's recent work is invaluable here. He revisits the established Arabic materials and distinguishes two strands of reporting: one associated with Ibn Hawqal, another with al-Bakri. He also examines earlier legal evidence, showing that the familiar portrait cannot be treated as a single, transparent account (Dube, 2025). His interpretation places

the Barghawata within an early local engagement with Islam's religious vocabulary, rather than making them the convenient heroes of a modern anti-colonial drama.

I find that warning refreshing. We would learn nothing by dressing medieval people in our contemporary politics and congratulating ourselves on their courage. They were living through their own century, not rehearsing ours.

But a lost local scripture remains a painful possibility. We know descriptions of it; we do not possess a securely surviving complete copy through which its readers could correct the record. That absence should make us modest. It should also make us curious. The difference between a text and an opponent's summary of it is the distance between looking at a face and studying its reflection in a cracked mirror.

A great deal of Moroccan history has been discussed in the language of those who wrote the chronicles. The Barghawata invite us to listen for the languages that the chronicles mention and cannot restore.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 04 / 10

THE ROAD FROM THE SAHARA

04

In the eleventh century another Amazigh movement gathered strength, this time among Saharan Sanhaja groups. The Almoravids would remake the western Maghreb. Their rise involved religious discipline, military organisation, alliances, trade routes, and the patient accumulation of power. Abd Allah ibn Yasin supplied an influential programme of reform grounded in the Sunni legal culture associated with the Maliki school.

He was not leading a foreign people against an indigenous one. The easy picture of Arab conquerors crushing Amazigh victims will not serve us here. The men who met in this conflict emerged from different Amazigh political worlds. Religious disagreement and territorial ambition ran together along the same dusty roads.

By 1058 the Almoravids had reached Aghmat. In 1059 Ibn Yasin joined an attack on the Barghawata in Tamesna. He was fatally wounded. That death is among the firmer points in an often uncertain narrative, and it appears in modern scholarship on the Almoravid movement (Lourinho, 2023).

For a moment the familiar direction of the story changes. The reformer advancing against the supposed heretics dies in the country of those he has come to subdue. A historical narrative written from the viewpoint of a victorious movement can easily turn that moment into martyrdom. The people who fought him may have remembered the same clash in a very different grammar.

No Barghawata witness is available to tell us what happened in the seconds before his death. We do not know the names of the defenders who were killed beside him, or who was wounded, or how the news travelled between their settlements. To describe the battle as though I had watched it would be a species of theft.

What is clear is that the movement continued. Abu Bakr ibn Umar and other Almoravid leaders pressed forward. Campaigns weakened Barghawata power and opened the way for a new regional order. These were wars in which religious exclusion could help justify political conquest. Inês Lourinho's analysis reminds us that piety and strategy occupied the same historical field; neither can be dismissed by pretending the other did all the work.

The dead preacher entered an illustrious history. The names of most who opposed him entered nothing at all.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 05 / 10

WHAT THE SWORD COULD NOT FINIS

05

One date has been made to do too much work. The eleventh-century Almoravid campaigns are sometimes retold as the instant disappearance of the Barghawata: an army arrives, the confederation is destroyed, the story ends. But history rarely closes its accounts so neatly.

The Barghawata remained a presence after the death of Ibn Yasin. Their position was reduced and their political independence eventually broke down, yet later campaigns under the Almohads form part of the story. Scholars place their survival as a recognisable group well into the twelfth century. An entry in the *Encyclopédie berbère* even notes people bearing the name in connection with a Marinid campaign in 1285 (Deverdun, 1991; Iskander, 2007).

This later appearance does not prove that their earlier religious institutions survived intact. Nor does it entitle us to trace every person carrying the name back through an unbroken line of faith. It does, however, expose the error of declaring every Barghawata body annihilated by the Almoravids in 1059.

An army can take a town. It cannot, with the same simple gesture, determine what every household will remember, what every child will be taught, or which name an old man will still answer to decades later. Conquest changes the terms of survival. Some resist. Some flee. Some negotiate. Some accept the new law while keeping old kinship ties. Which

of these things happened, in which proportions, and where? Our sources rarely permit an honest tally.

It is possible to speak of the destruction of a political-religious order without claiming the extinction of its entire population. The distinction may sound cold to those who rightly suspect that violence hides behind polished historical language. Yet accuracy is not tenderness toward the conqueror. It is the only way to honour people whose lives were more complicated than our anger.

I want no invented massacre on the page. The verified campaigns are grave enough. I want no false certainty that every descendant vanished. That is how the victor's fantasy of total success becomes the historian's mistake.

And I want us to notice the quieter forms of disappearance: a title no longer used, a school of belief no longer sustained, a political boundary erased from a later map, a language of worship reduced to a hostile paraphrase. A people may continue to have descendants when the public world that gave their ancestors a name has ceased to exist.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 06 / 10

THE SCRIBE ARRIVES AFTER THE SOLDIER

06

There are two different acts at work in the Barghawata story. One takes place in the fields and settlements of Tamesna, where armies contend for rule. The other takes place later, at desks, in libraries, under dynasties for which the past is useful. The second act may outlive the first by centuries.

John Iskander followed the changing treatment of the Barghawata in medieval Maghribi histories. His argument is subtle: earlier accounts could preserve ambiguity, whereas later treatments increasingly reduced the group to an object of religious condemnation. These changes reflected a growing ideal of orthodoxy and the political needs of subsequent rulers, including the Marinids (Iskander, 2007).

This matters because a chronicle never arrives innocent of its present. A writer asks questions that make sense to his patrons and readers. He inherits earlier phrases. He selects a detail because it proves something. He omits another because he considers it irrelevant. Centuries later we open the resulting book and call it 'the past', forgetting the hands through which the past has passed.

A word like *heresy* is especially powerful. It looks as though it tells us what a community was. Usually it first tells us what someone else believed that community ought not to be. A religious judgment can be part of the evidence. It should not be allowed to swallow the society being judged.

The Barghawata's enemies did not have to conspire in a single secret programme to influence their reputation. Texts accumulate. Categories harden. A sharp accusation becomes a standard adjective; the adjective becomes an identity; the identity enters a schoolbook where its origin is never questioned.

The result is an odd survival. We can name the people, sometimes their rulers, and a few doctrines attributed to them. Their laughter, debates, agricultural decisions, children's stories, and self-description are mostly beyond reach. Their adversaries have left us the vocabulary with which we keep trying to summon them.

I cannot blame a medieval chronicler for failing to practise modern source criticism. I can, however, ask modern readers to practise it. That small act is owed to the dead and to the living alike.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 07 / 10

THE MISSING BOOK

07

Some absences are ordinary. Papers decay. Fires happen. A language changes. A library is moved and never arrives. Others are produced by violence, exclusion, or the unequal conditions under which anyone gets to preserve a record. The trouble is that centuries later these different absences can look alike.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote about the power that enters historical production at the moment facts are made, assembled, narrated, and granted significance. His account of silence offers a demanding discipline: investigate the processes by which evidence becomes available instead of treating the archive as a transparent window (Trouillot, 1995).

Consider the Barghawata scripture attributed to their religious tradition. We have descriptions of such a text, yet no securely identified complete copy to consult. Where did its manuscripts go? Were they suppressed? Did transmission stop as the community's institutions collapsed? Did copies perish through neglect, or were they absorbed into a world that no longer knew how to read them? The record does not give us a final answer.

I will not fabricate a bonfire. It would be an easy scene to write: flames beside a frightened village, a judge nodding, sacred pages curling into ash. One could make a reader weep with it. Yet the spectacle would belong to the novelist, not the historian, unless evidence supported it.

The truth that we can defend is spare and troubling enough. A community once associated with its own scripture can now be approached chiefly through descriptions in other people's books. The voices that once authenticated that scripture are missing from our hearing. We must distinguish the possible causes of the loss, but we need not pretend the loss has no consequence.

A page written by an opponent is still a precious source. Sometimes it preserves the only surviving detail. Without al-Bakri, Ibn Hawqal, and later compilers, much of this history would be harder to reconstruct. The task is to read them gratefully and suspiciously at the same time; neither worship the chronicle nor tear it up because its author was partial.

The missing book stands at the centre of this one. It has no quotation marks because I cannot quote it. It has no chapter heading because I do not know its chapters. To give it invented contents would repeat, in gentler clothes, the old appropriation of a voice that cannot answer back.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 08 / 10

THE DANGER OF LOVING THE DEFEATED TOO MUCH 08

I know how quickly an old injustice can stir the wish for a clean reversal. A story once told by conquerors invites the modern writer to place halos on the heads of the conquered. Here are our innocent ancestors, we say; here are the villains who stole their future. The sentence is satisfying. It is also suspiciously convenient.

The Barghawata were a medieval political community. Their rulers had interests. Their religious leaders made claims. They fought wars. They may have punished dissent and imposed obligations on those under their authority. Descriptions of internal violence in our sources require careful testing, particularly when hostile writers report them, but disagreement with a chronicler's theology cannot serve as an automatic acquittal of the people he described.

The urge to turn the Barghawata into modern secularists, democrats, or conscious advocates of contemporary Amazigh nationalism is equally misleading. Their age furnished different arguments and fears. Dube's treatment of their religion is a useful corrective to the temptation to give their beliefs a modern political script (Dube, 2025).

I am interested in their humanity, and humanity has always arrived with quarrels and contradictions. They deserve the right to have been imperfect. Only figures made from propaganda must remain consistently wicked or impossibly pure.

There is another trap. Some polemics treat the Almoravids as a single monstrous force, forgetting the historical conditions that made their movement compelling to its own followers. A full history asks why people joined it, what order it promised, how it governed, and how its rulers used religious language to justify force. Understanding is not approval. A historian who cannot explain an enemy will eventually caricature him.

The point of recovering a defeated community is to restore difficulty to the narrative. Difficulty is a form of respect. It allows us to hold moral questions open without tampering with dates, inventing victims, or forcing the dead to sign our political manifestos.

Perhaps the Barghawata do not need rescuers. They need better questions.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 09 / 10

THE LAND BENEATH THE NAMES

09

Tamesna has not remained still for the centuries we have been discussing. Names changed. Tribal identities were reworked. New political structures altered the countryside. Cities expanded and roads opened. The same Atlantic air moved through different human arrangements.

I imagine a young Moroccan travelling across the plain with a phone in his hand. He may know the names of distant dynasties, the dates of famous victories, and the lineage of celebrated rulers. Yet the word Barghawata may never have entered his classroom. If it did, perhaps it arrived with one adjective attached to it, as though that adjective were sufficient biography.

What can the landscape offer him? Very little by itself. A road cannot establish a genealogy. Soil contains no ready-made proof that a modern family descends from a medieval community. The desire to claim the Barghawata as our direct ancestors may be understandable, particularly in places close to their historical country, but claims of descent require their own evidence. Geography is an invitation to investigate, not a certificate of blood.

Still, I believe place can sharpen a historical question. At the Oum Er-Rbia, where the country of Tamesna met regions farther south, a traveller may begin to feel the strange intimacy of an inaccessible past. People lived here before our categories were made. They are close in distance and almost unreachable in speech.

The task of scholarship is to keep that tension alive. We ought to ask archaeologists what material traces could survive; linguists how place names and reported vocabulary may be approached; historians which manuscripts differ and why; teachers which stories have become habitual and which have scarcely been told.

There is no obligation to find a heroic answer. Discovery may consist of proving that a cherished account is too simple. It may consist of learning that one medieval author's accusation was copied from another. It may consist of a single legal judgment, previously overlooked, that changes the order in which we believed the evidence appeared.

The history of a country is enlarged whenever we stop asking its past to flatter us.

THE LAST LANGUAGE OF TAMESNA / MOVEMENT 10 / 10

A SMALL TRIAL OF THE ARCHIVE

10

Suppose we assembled the surviving witnesses in a room: a geographer, a jurist, a court historian, a later compiler. We would ask each to name the Barghawata. They might agree about certain rulers and territories. They would disagree, openly or by implication, about the meaning of beliefs and events. Some would speak from a century nearer the people; others would inherit stories polished by generations of repetition.

Then I would leave an empty chair.

It belongs to the witness whose words we most need and do not possess: someone from the community explaining its world from within. The chair is a literary device, not evidence that such a testimony once existed in written form. I place it there to keep myself from forgetting the structure of the surviving record.

What would a fair historian do? Begin by comparing the witnesses rather than averaging them. Date each report. Ask whose interests it served. Locate the phrases repeated from older works. Separate claims about doctrine from descriptions of everyday life. Treat a theological condemnation as evidence of a judgment, not immediate proof that the judgment was accurate. Notice when later texts are more certain than earlier ones.

And when the material refuses a verdict, write *we do not know*.

Those four words are difficult for anyone who loves a strong essay. They interrupt the music. But they protect it from turning into noise. A sentence made beautiful by pretending to knowledge it does not have is a badly dressed lie.

EPILOGUE. AN ADDRESS TO THE ABSENT

I cannot bring you back, people of Tamesna. I cannot learn from a book that no longer reaches us how you greeted the morning or how you buried your dead. I cannot place a genuine sentence in the mouth of a Barghawata woman, however much I wish one had survived.

I can read the men who wrote about you. I can argue with their judgments and correct the mistakes of those who repeat them. I can refuse the neat date after which everyone says you vanished. I can tell my readers that an assault on a political community is not a census of its dead, and that a surviving name is not the same thing as a surviving voice.

I can also ask Morocco to make a little more room in its historical imagination: room for religious experiments that failed, for states that did not become dynasties of national glory, for people whose dead never supplied the names of public avenues.

Perhaps that is all this book can honestly offer. A place at the table, the dates we can defend, the questions that remain, and the courage to leave one chair empty.

Outside, the Oum Er-Rbia continues towards the ocean. The river owes us no answers. We owe the people who once lived near its country something better than certainty purchased at their expense.

HISTORIAN'S MARGIN

On origins. The Barghawata emerged in the context of eighth-century revolts and alliances in the far western Maghreb. Their precise early institutional history is fragmentary. Even the name has attracted competing explanations (Redjala, 1983).

On belief. Medieval Arabic sources report an indigenous prophetic legacy and a scripture in an Amazigh language. The surviving reports are external and must be compared rather than treated as one undifferentiated account (Dube, 2025).

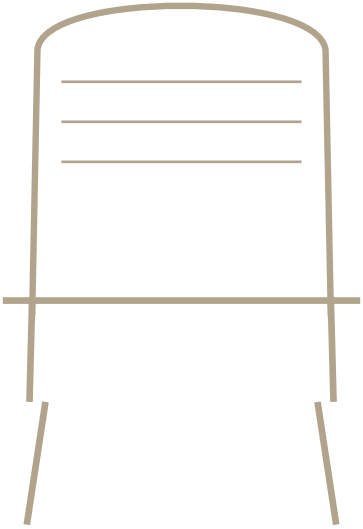
On the Almoravids. Abd Allah ibn Yasin died during fighting against the Barghawata in Tamesna in 1059. The struggle involved religious conflict and political expansion (Lourinho, 2023).

On annihilation. The group did not vanish in a single year. Barghawata references extend into the Almohad and later periods; a notice from 1285 is particularly important. Such survival does not demonstrate continuity of the older religious polity (Deverdun, 1991; Iskander, 2007).

On erasure. Iskander documents a change in later historiographical representations toward sharper condemnation. That supports a study of how their image was remade; it does not prove a single centrally ordered programme to destroy every Barghawata record (Iskander, 2007).

On the absent archive. No securely identified complete copy of their reported scripture is available to modern historians. Its precise fate is unknown. Claims that every copy was deliberately burned would require evidence not supplied by the works used here (Dube, 2025).

THE EMPTY CHAIR



“Then I would leave an empty chair.”

For the witness whose words we most need
and do not possess.

A LITERARY IMAGE, NOT A SURVIVING TESTIMONY

SELECTED REFERENCES

Deverdun, G. (1991). Barghawata. *Encyclopédie berbère*, 9, document B39. https://doi.org/10.4000/encyclopedieberbere.1294

Dube, C. (2025). Re-reading the Barġawāṭa. *Arabica, 72*(1–2), 133–242. https://doi.org/10.1163/15700585-20241690

Iskander, J. (2007). Devout heretics: The Barghawata in Maghribi historiography. *The Journal of North African Studies, 12*(1), 37–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380601099484

Lourinho, I. (2023). Military jihād against Muslims: ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn and the foundation of a Saharan political unit that would conquer the Maghreb and al-Andalus (eleventh century). *Al-Masāq, 35*(2), 119–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2022.2133479

Redjala, M. (1983). Les Barghwâta (origine de leur nom). *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée, 35*, 115–125. https://doi.org/10.3406/remmm.1983.1984

Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.

What the archive cannot say, we must not make it say.

BARGHAWATA / TAMESNA

What happens when a people lose not only the right to govern their land, but the power to speak for themselves in history?

From the Atlantic plains of medieval Morocco to the fragile pages of surviving chronicles, this essay follows the Barghawata into the shadows cast by conquest, heresy, and memory.

A work of historical inquiry written with the ache of a poem—and the discipline of an unfinished question.

“The river owes us no answers. We owe the people who once lived near its country something better than certainty purchased at their expense.”

MOHAMED QASSID

MOROCCO · 2026