6

Medieval European Mercenaries in North Africa: The Value of Difference

Michael Lower

President Obama does not demand a Muslim-only Secret Service, nor does President Rouhani of Iran insist upon an exclusively Christian bodyguard. During the medieval and early modern periods, however, Muslim and Christian rulers regularly hired mercenary guards of each other's faith to defend their persons and strengthen their armies. In a time famous for its religious antagonism, these mercenary bands crossed a confessional divide, spread through the Mediterranean, and carved out a presence for themselves in their host societies, sometimes for centuries. While they often fought against members of different faiths, they sometimes took up arms against their co-religionists as well. Even so, they usually operated with the consent of their own religious and political authorities.[1]

Though employing foreign soldiers was commonplace throughout the medieval Mediterranean world, it was especially popular in North Africa. Here dynasties large and small, from the mighty Almoravid and Almohad Empires to the successor dynasties of the Hafsids in Tunisia, the 'Abd al-Wadids in Algeria, and the Marinids in Morocco, hired European Christian fighters in impressive numbers. As they worked, raised families, and reproduced themselves over the centuries, these mercenaries came to occupy a key role in North African political and social life. They decided the course of battles, propped up and toppled dynasties, served as intermediaries in inter-religious diplomacy, and created a fascinating hybrid lifestyle that combined elements from their natal and adopted homelands.

Although scholars have noted the importance of European mercenaries to western Mediterranean history, little attempt has been made to explain their enduring appeal to the North African regimes that employed them. What few contemporary analyses there are have tended to focus on a technical military argument that was first put forward by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century.[2]

1 Michael Lower, "Christian Mercenaries in Muslim Lands: Their Status in Medieval Islamic and Canon Law," in *The Crusader World*, ed. Adrian J. Boas (London, 2015), pp. 419–33.

2 Simon Barton, "Traitors to the Faith? Christian Mercenaries in al-Andalus and the Maghreb, c. 1100–1300," in *Medieval Spain: Culture, Conflict, and Coexistence. Studies in Honour of Angus MacKay*, ed. Roger Collins (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 30–31; Alejandro García Sanjuán, "Mercenarios cristianos al servicio de los musulmanes en el norte de Africa durante el siglo XIII," in *La Península íbérica entre el Mediterráneo Atlántico; siglos XIII–XV*, ed. Manuel González Jiménez and Isabel Montes Romero-Camacho (Cadiz, 2006), pp. 436–37.

The great North African thinker suggested that local rulers valued heavily armed mounted European knights for their ability to hold the line on the battlefield. By setting a defensive screen in front of the ruler, the European knights enabled their more lightly armed and speedier local counterparts to launch the rapid attacks and feigned retreats that were the hallmarks of their style.[3] What the European fighters offered, in other words, was diversification. They added a distinct but complementary element to a Maghribi ruler's tactical array in combat.

This explanation is compelling but partial because it does not account for the other functions these mercenaries performed away from the battlefield. Set-piece battles were as rare in North Africa as they were in the rest of the medieval Mediterranean. The many other jobs that these mercenaries did – serving as personal bodyguards to the ruler, collecting his taxes in the countryside, and negotiating with European powers on his behalf – were just as important as their combat operations and must be accounted for when explaining their popularity. Building on Ibn Khaldun's notion of the positive value of diversification, I will suggest that the widespread use of European mercenaries in North Africa was due not just to differences in the way they fought, but to differences in who they were. Ultimately, it was their status as outsiders as much as their military qualities that made them attractive to Maghribi rulers.

The Rise of the Mercenaries

The initial appearance of European mercenaries in the Maghrib owed much to the growing involvement of North African regimes in Muslim Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In al-Andalus, there was a tradition of recruiting Christian fighters that went back to the Umayyad caliphs of Corboba. The third Umayyad caliph, al-Hakan I (r. 796–822), had founded a palace guard made up of Galicians and Narbonnais. They were known as the "silent ones" (*al-khurs*) because they did not speak Arabic. Al-Hakan I's successor, 'Abd al-Rahman II (r. 822–52), bolstered their numbers with Christian slaves and free volunteers compelled or attracted to his service from the Languedoc and Gascony.[4] The collapse of the Umayyad caliphate in the eleventh century did nothing to halt the flow of European soldiers into al-Andalus. The local strongmen who ruled the *ta'ifa* principalities that came to dominate the region often found allies in their internecine struggles among ambitious Christian adventurers from the north. Rodrigo Diaz – El Cid – was only the most famous of a common type. At first, the arrival of the Almoravids in al-Andalus seemed likely to transform the

3 'Abd al-Rahman b. Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar wa-diwan al-mubtada' wa-l-khabar fi ayyam al-'arab wa-l-'ajam wa-l-barbar wa-man 'asarahum min dhawi al-sultan al-akbar*, 7 vols. (Beirut, 1956–61), 1:479–86; translated as *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Princeton, 1967), 2:74–81.

4 Évariste Lévi-Provençal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1950–67), 1:189–90, 260; François Clément, "Reverter et son fils, deux officiers catalans au service des sultans de Marrakech," *Medieval Encounters* 9 (2003), p. 80.

situation. This confederation of Sanhaja Berber tribes from southern Morocco had ostensibly crossed the Straits to impose a new moral order on Muslim Spain. Almoravid intervention would put a stop to practices that, in their eyes at least, undermined the legitimacy of the *ta'ifa* kings. These included resorting to Christian military assistance, paying tribute to Christian rulers, and financing it all through non-Qur'anic taxes on Muslims. Soon enough, though, the Almoravids were forced to adopt a more flexible stance toward the constellation of issues that were so important to their early expansionist ideology. The impetus came from the Almohads, a new North African power that was threatening to eclipse the Almoravids by the early 1130s. To defend his regime against the newcomers, the Almoravid emir 'Ali b. Yusuf b. Tashfin began to deport Christian captives from his Iberian campaigns back to Marrakesh, where he formed them into combat units to defend the heartland of the empire. These seem to have been the first major contingents of European fighters to serve in North Africa.[5]

These conscripts were soon working alongside volunteers who saw opportunities for self-advancement in the Almoravid crisis. The most successful of these free fighters was Reverter, viscount of Barcelona and lord of La Guardia de Montserrat. By the early 1140s he was leading Almoravid campaigns against the Almohads, sometimes fighting alongside 'Ali b. Yusuf b. Tashfin and at other times, remarkably, taking sole command of Muslim troops. His death in 1144, perhaps by crucifixion, hastened the collapse of the Almoravid dynasty and cleared the way for the Almohads to take power in Marrakesh.[6]

The Almohads followed the same path as their predecessors when it came to European mercenaries, with initial rejection eventually making way for enthusiastic adoption. The turning point was defeat by a coalition of Iberian Christian monarchies at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. The result stimulated both supply and demand in the mercenary market. Since the Almohads and the Castilians agreed to a truce shortly afterwards, many Castilian soldiers looked to North Africa for opportunities to continue their military careers. Conditions in the Maghrib, meanwhile, encouraged these economic migrants, because the defeat at Las Navas unleashed forces of local autonomy across the Almohad Empire. By the mid-thirteenth century, three main successor dynasties had emerged: the Hafsids in Tunis, the 'Abd al-Wadids in Tlemcen, and the Marinids in Fez. Each dynasty hired mercenaries from overseas to help establish itself in the transformed political landscape. At the same time, as the legitimacy of the Almohad caliphate

5 *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*, ed. Antonio Maya Sánchez, in *Chronica Hispana saeculi XII, Pars I*, ed. Emma Falque, Juan Gil, and Antonio Maya Sánchez, CCCM 71 (Turnhout, 1990), p. 200.

6 For Reverter's career, see István Frank, "Reverter, vicomte de Barcelone (vers 1130–1145)," *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona* 26 (1954–56), 195–204; Barton, "Traitors to the Faith?," p. 40 n. 28; and Clément, "Reverter et son fils," pp. 79–106.

was increasingly called into question, it turned to the same military market in a bid to maintain the status quo.[7]

The struggle for survival that ensued was multilateral and protracted. Each of the new dynasties, and the old Almohad regime as well, harbored centralizing aspirations. These aspirations, in turn, were contested on two fronts: externally, as each power tried to curb the ambitions of its rivals; and internally, as each encountered opposition from entrenched local interests. These local interests varied from place to place but often included Arab Bedouin tribes, urban elites, Andalusi refugees from the *reconquista*, and members of the old Almohad aristocracy who had been excluded from the new dispensation.[8] These groups combined and recombined in ever-shifting coalitions that the new dynasts attempted to co-opt or contain with varying degrees of success. Faced with the questionable loyalties, and sometimes the overt hostility, of these constituencies, the centralizers sought out military force that was not enmeshed in local networks of power. As the ultimate social and religious outsiders, with a distinct set of military attributes, European mercenaries were perfectly suited to this role.

Ibn Khaldun's Tactical Analysis

"The war of the Moors is not like that of the Christians . . . . In every way, the one style differs from the other." So said Don Juan Manuel (1282–1348), the nephew of King Alfonso X of Castile, echoing the observations of Ibn Khaldun.[9] This difference in fighting style was noted and appreciated on both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the main recruiting grounds for the European mercenaries who fought in North Africa – the Crown of Aragon, Castile, and the kingdom of Sicily – the heavily armored cavalryman maintained his prominence. He wore heavy mail armor, carried a large shield, and was wedged onto his horse by a saddle with a large pommel and stirrups positioned to keep his legs outstretched, bracing him for the heavy blows delivered and received with a long lance. This style of riding, known as *a la brida* in Iberian sources, was well suited for what Ibn Khaldun called "fighting in close formation" or "the advance in rows or lines" (*al-zahf sufufan*). By contrast, Arab and Berber mounted troops were mainly light cavalry. They fought with shorter lances, which could be thrown, and sometimes

7 Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, "Les relations du Maroc et de la Castille pendant la première moitié du XIIIe siècle," *Revue d'histoire et de civilization du Maghreb* 5 (1968), pp. 37–40; Barton, "Traitors to the Faith?," p. 24; Michael Lower, "The Papacy and Christian Mercenaries of Thirteenth-Century North Africa," *Speculum* 89 (2014), pp. 607–08.

8 For North African political history in this period, see now Ramzi Rouighi, *The Making of a Mediterranean Emirate: Ifriqiya and Its Andalusis, 1200–1400* (Philadelphia, 2011).

9 Don Juan Manuel, *Libro de los estados*, ed. Ian Macpherson and Robert Tate (Oxford, 1974), p. 144; for an excellent discussion of these differences in combat techniques, which also cites this quotation, see Hussein Anwar Fancy, *Mercenary Logic: Muslim Soldiers in the Service of the Crown of Aragon* (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 2008), pp. 44–46, 131–32.

with crossbows. They sat on saddles with shorter stirrups and lower pommels, called raiding saddles. Their highly maneuverable riding style was known as *a la jineta* in Iberia. It allowed them to advance and withdraw at high speed, a technique Ibn Khaldun referred to as "al-karr wa-l-farr."[10]

In an extended discussion of battlefield tactics in his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun explained that fighting in close formation and the technique of advance and withdrawal had been the two main combat styles since "the beginning of men's existence." While the Arabs and Berbers of the Maghrib specialized in *al-karr wa-l-farr*, all non-Arabs preferred fighting in close formation. So did Ibn Khaldun, and he praised its advantages at length:

> Fighting in closed formation is more steady and fierce than fighting with the technique of attack and withdrawal. That is because in fighting in closed formation, the lines are orderly and evenly arranged, like arrows or like rows of worshippers at prayers. People advance in closed lines against the enemy. This makes for greater steadiness in assault and for better use of the proper tactics. It frightens the enemy more. A closed formation is like a long wall or a well-built castle which no one could hope to move.[11]

Battle lines helped to preserve order and those who fell back during an attack could induce panic in the ranks and provoke a rout.

According to Ibn Khaldun, close formation fighting was key to the success of the Arab armies who waged the wars of early Islamic expansion. Even though the technique did not come naturally to them, they used it because their enemies did and because it suited their intense commitment to holy war. Over time, though, the practice fell out of use, especially in the Maghrib. Ibn Khaldun associated the shift away from close formation fighting with his model for understanding the rise and decline of dynasties in terms of group solidarity. Back in the day, the founders of the great dynasties had lived in tents and kept their camels, wives, and children with them in camp. They fought in the inferior *al-karr wa-l-farr* style, but it worked well, for two reasons: first, the close proximity of their families encouraged them not to flee the field; second, they used their camels as a kind of defensive screen to guard the camp. Once they achieved their royal ambitions and took up a sedentary life in the city, however, they got used to going on campaign without their families or even their camels. When they went out to battle they would set up their baggage and pack animals just outside the camp, but these proved no substitute for the line of camels or the knowledge that they were fighting in front of their loved ones. Warriors who had once stood their ground became frightened by the turmoil of battle and prone to flight.

Here is where the European mercenaries came in. Since Maghribi soldiers could no longer fight in close formation, their rulers had to import European Christians who had expertise in that style. Replacing the pack animals that had proved ineffective in the role, these European troops would hold the line behind

10 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar*, 1:480 (*Muqaddimah*, 2:74); Fancy, *Mercenary Logic*, pp. 44–46.
11 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar*, 1:480 (*Muqaddimah*, 2:74–75).

the local light cavalry and prevent them from fleeing the battlefield and exposing the ruler to capture or death. In the eyes of these rulers, the obvious tactical need for these holding troops justified the recourse to infidel aid, a practice that prevailing legal norms in the region might otherwise have frowned upon.[12]

Compelling on its own terms, Ibn Khaldun's explanation for the prevalence of European soldiers in North African armies also jives well with what we know about the composition of such forces from other sources. There was a tendency toward diversification from the twelfth century onward. The Almohads, for example, quickly expanded beyond the original Masmuda Berber elements of their military confederation. They were adept at incorporating troops from the ranks of defeated rivals. They took the Almoravids' elite Sudanese guard into their service after defeating them; brought the Arab Bedouin Banu Hilal into the fold after conquering Ifriqiya; and found a place for the Ghuzz after these mounted Turkish archers had supported an unsuccessful insurgency against them in the eastern Maghrib. European mercenaries who came to fight in North Africa were usually joining armed forces already marked by a high degree of ethnic and technical diversity.[13]

This broader context of military diversification lends plausibility to Ibn Khaldun's suggestion that North African rulers recruited European mercenaries to play a specific role on the battlefield. The challenge from the modern historian's point of view, though, is to verify that they actually fought in the way Ibn Khaldun describes. There are very few, if any, detailed tactical descriptions of medieval European mercenaries in battle in North African narrative sources. We know that they fought in large-scale combat operations, that they suffered defeats and won victories, and that they led charges and even killed rival rulers. I have found no source, however, that describes them maintaining a mounted defensive line as light cavalry attacked and retreated in front of them. This lack of evidence does not invalidate Ibn Khaldun's theory, but it does suggest that further research into how the mercenaries operated in North Africa could help to flesh it out. While contemporary sources do not have much to say about mercenary combat tactics, they do offer information about a wide range of roles they performed for the dynasties that hired them.

Personal Military Service: The Dependency–Loyalty Dynamic

Regardless of the particular tactics they employed, the core function of the medieval European mercenary in North Africa was to provide his employer with military force that was loyal and free of local entanglements. These two desirable

12 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar*, 1:480–86 (*Muqaddimah*, 2:74–81).

13 J. F. P. Hopkins, *Medieval Muslim Government in Barbary until the Sixth Century of the Hijra* (London, 1958), pp. 74–83; Abdellatif Sabbane, *Le gouvernement et l'administration de la dynastie Almohade (XIIe–XIIIe siècles)* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 1999), pp. 348–89; Jean-Pierre Molénat, "L'organisation militaire des Almohades," in *Los Almohades: problemas y perspectivas*, ed. Patrice Cressier, Maribel Fierro, and Luis Molina (Madrid, 2005), 2:547–65.

qualities – outsider status and dependency – were linked. As Europeans who did not belong to a North African tribe and as Christians who did not adhere to the region's majority faith, the mercenaries were doubly foreign to the medieval Maghrib.[14] Lacking ties to local social and religious networks, they were reliant on the ruler for their wages and very survival. If they failed in their work, they could be disposed of with few repercussions. The local interest groups whose power they had been brought in to counteract – Andalusis, Arab Bedouin tribes, Almohad shayks – were not going to save them if they fell out of favor with their employer. Conversely, if they succeeded and grew powerful – as many did – the religious difference ensured that however influential they might become they could not actually supplant the ruler and take power into their own hands. Although we now recognize that religious identities were more fluid in the medieval Mediterranean than we once thought, it remains the case that a Christian mercenary captain simply could not become – and none in fact ever did – the next emir of Tunis, Tlemcen, or Fez. He could be the power behind the throne, but never the power *on* it. In an environment where sovereigns with centralizing aspirations were constantly battling against forces of local autonomy, this was a reassuring quality to possess.

Two examples can serve to show the dependency–loyalty dynamic at work in the relationship between medieval European mercenaries and North African rulers. The first involves the later Almohad caliphs, who turned to foreign fighters in their bid to maintain power in the face of a Marinid insurgency around Fez, internecine struggles among the leading families of the dynasty, and rebellions against their rule in al-Andalus. The key figure in this transition was Abu al-'Ula al-Ma'mun (r. 1227–32). Proclaimed caliph in Seville in the autumn of 1227, he found his claims challenged in Morocco by a nephew, Yahya b. al-Nasr, who gained the support of the Almohad shayks who composed the empire's traditional ruling elite. With enthusiasm for his plans equally limited among potential backers in al-Andalus, al-Ma'mun sought military aid from King Fernando III of Castile. In exchange for several fortresses on the Castilian frontier, King Fernando provided al-Ma'mun with five hundred cavalry to take to Morocco.[15] They proved their worth almost immediately: in a battle just outside Marrakesh, the Castilian troops charged down and destroyed the red tent that marked out Yahya b. al-Nasr's headquarters, provoking panic and flight among his followers. Shortly after this victory, which won him the caliphate, al-Ma'mun installed his mercenaries in Marrakesh and built them a Christian church dedicated to Mary. Signaling a broader political reorientation, he then rounded up the most influential Almohad tribal leaders and had them executed, while issuing an edict that repudiated Ibn Tumart, the Almohad founder, and

14 Clément, "Reverter et son fils," p. 85.

15 Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi, *Al-Bayan al-mughrib fi akhbar al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib: Qism al-Muwahhidin*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim al-Katani et al. (Beirut, 1985), p. 284; translated as *Al-Bayan al-mughrib fi ijtisar ajbar muluk al-Andalus wa al-Maghrib: Los Almohades*, trans. Ambrosio Huici Miranda, 2 vols. (Tetuán, 1953–54), 1:313.

ordered his name removed from the Friday prayers. Lacking support among the traditional constituencies that had served the dynasty for generations, al-Ma'mun built his regime on an improbable new foundation: European mercenaries and alliances with Castile and the papacy, the powers that ensured their continual replenishment.[16]

Al-Ma'mun's death in October 1232 revealed just how close the ties between the Castilian soldiers and the Almohad regime had become. The caliph had passed away while marching back to Marrakesh after suppressing a rebellion in Ceuta. Yahya b. al-Nasr had taken advantage of his absence from the capital to sack it and burn down the church of St. Mary – a clear strike against the caliph's European soldiers. Al-Ma'mun's wife, a Christian and former captive named Habab, wanted her fourteen-year-old son to succeed to the caliphate, but she was concerned that effecting the transition far from home, at the tail end of a difficult campaign, might be challenging. With Yahya b. al-Nasr ensconced in Marrakesh, the temptation among al-Ma'mun's followers to abandon the caliph would be strong if they learned he were dead. So she met secretly with the *caid* (commander) of the Christian guard and they agreed to keep al-Ma'mun's death a secret until they could return to Marrakesh. They spread the word that the caliph was ill and could not ride, and placed his corpse in a covered and closely guarded litter. With the rank and file apparently none the wiser, they trundled the body back to the gates of the city, defeated Yahya b. al-Nasir and his followers, re-installed themselves in the Almohad palace complex, and then, finally, proclaimed Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahid al-Rashid as the new caliph.[17]

Al-Rashid would continue his father's practice of relying on European mercenaries, accepting more reinforcements from Castile in 1233 and leading them on a sweep southwards in 1235 that culminated in the re-conquest of Sijilmassa.[18] Once the city was retaken, he recruited the defeated emir's own troop of European mercenaries into the Almohad army and brought his now even larger force of foreign soldiers back to Marrakesh. Following al-Rashid's death in a boating accident in 1242, his half-brother al-Sa'id succeeded him. The new caliph maintained close bonds with his European cavalry and deployed them successfully against the gravest threat to the dynasty: the Marinids of Fez. In a battle fought between the Almohads and the Marinids on 12 November 1244, the mercenary captain Juan Gaïtan killed the Marinid emir Abu Mu'arif Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Haq.[19]

Victories such as these became rarer in the decades to come, even as European soldiers continued to serve the Almohads. Despite suffering a string of defeats, the relationship between the caliphs and their Christian troops remained strong. In June 1248, al-Sa'id lost his own life and that of his young son and heir in the

16 Lower, "Papacy and Mercenaries," pp. 609–12.
17 Ibn 'Idhari, *Al-Bayan al-mughrib*, pp. 298–301(trans. Huici Miranda, 1:338–39).
18 Ibid., pp. 324–25 (trans. Huici Miranda, 2:67–69).
19 Ibn Abi Zar', *Al-Dhakhira al-saniyya fi tarikh al-dawla al-mariniyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Wahab b. Mansur (Rabat, 1972), pp. 62–63.

course of a calamitous battle against the ʻAbd al-Wadids of Tlemcen.[20] The victorious ʻAbd al-Wadid emir, Yaghmurasan b. Zayyan, took many captives, including a sizable number of Christian mercenaries. Yaghmurasan incorporated the European soldiers into his army and made some of them into an elite palace guard. In this capacity, they served as a personal bodyguard and publicly displayed the new monarch's sovereign might in military processions. Behind the scenes, though, all was not as it seemed. In 1254, the *caid* of the European guard staged an uprising against Yaghmurasan, which cost the emir the life of his son and nearly took his own as well. Yaghmurasan had to call on indigenous troops and the residents of Tlemcen to destroy the guard he had worked so hard to cultivate. Ibn Khaldun, our source for this story, tells it as a tale of infidel treachery.[21] From the ʻAbd al-Wadid point of view, this was certainly how it must have appeared. But the story can also be read as a demonstration of loyalty to a previous employer.

Around the same time that Yaghmurasan was struggling to integrate Almohad Christian mercenaries into his military retinue in Tlemcen, the Marinid emir Abu Yahya b. ʻAbd al-Haq was encountering similar problems in Fez. After taking Fez from the Almohads, Abu Yahya appointed a governor and assigned him a detachment of former Almohad Christian soldiers as a personal bodyguard. Instead of helping him to establish Marinid control over the city, they conspired with some leading Almohad shayks in an attempt to restore the old regime. One day as the governor was holding court in his audience chamber, the *caid* of the Christian guard stalked in with several of his fellow soldiers, addressed some insulting words to the governor, and killed him in the scuffle that ensued. The *caid* took command of the city and dispatched an oath of fidelity to al-Murtada, who had succeeded al-Saʻid as Almohad caliph in 1248. The Marinids regained control of Fez only after a nine-month siege. While the motivations behind the uprising of the former Almohad mercenaries in Tlemcen remain murky, in Fez they were clearly striking a blow for their old masters.[22]

The difficulties that the ʻAbd al-Wadids and the Marinids encountered when they tried to integrate Almohad Christian mercenary guards into their own armed forces proved short lived. By the 1270s, both dynasties were employing troops recruited independently from Iberia and southern Italy. So too were the Hafsids, who had carved out an autonomous emirate around Tunis by the 1230s. It was not just North African dynasties in decline that found European mercenaries an attractive proposition. In modern and medieval discussions, their service is often

20 ʻAli b. ʻAbd-Allah b. Abi Zarʻ, *Al-Anis al-mutrib bi-rawd al-qirtas fi akhbar muluk al-maghrib wa-tarikh madinat Fas*, ed. ʻAbd al-Wahad b. Mansur (Rabat, 1999), p. 338; French translation: *Roudh el-Kartas: Histoire des souverains du Maghreb et annals de la ville de Fès*, trans. Auguste Beaumier (Paris, 1860), p. 370. Spanish translation: *Rawd al-Qirtas*, trans. Ambrosio Huici Miranda, 2 vols. (Valencia, 1964), 2:499–500.

21 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-ʻibar*, 7:174–75; translated as *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale*, ed. and trans. William MacGuckin de Slane, 4 vols. (Algiers, 1852–56), 3:353.

22 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-ʻibar*, 7:359–60 (*Histoire des Berbères*,4:40–41).

linked with political chaos and wider social breakdowns. In Ibn Khaldun's cyclical model of the rise and fall of dynasties, the Almoravid and Almohad turn to external sources of military aid signaled the erosion of the group solidarity that undergirded their original rise to power. Following along from this, we might expect that the successors to the Almohads would have shunned European mercenaries and looked inward for the social cohesion that could fuel military expansion. This was not the case, however. As the Hafsid example shows, European mercenaries could feature at the beginning and end of the Khaldunian cycle of dynastic growth and decline.

The Hafsids employed European mercenaries for the same reasons the Almohads had: the soldiers offered unaligned and biddable military force. Rather than consolidating around a tribal core, the Hafsids looked to diversify potential sources of support for their fledgling dynasty in the decades after its establishment by Abu Zakariya Yahya (r. 1229–49). To counter entrenched local interests (in this case the Almohad shayks whose families had once ruled over Ifriqiya), his son and successor Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Mustansir (r. 1249–77) reached out to a number of outsider groups: highly literate Andalusi émigrés who could serve in his administration, freed slaves from overseas (*'uluj*) who could fight in his army, and, most foreign of all, European mercenaries who could provide personal protection.[23] In 1257, a Catalan aristocrat named Guillem Moncada brought seventy knights to Tunis from the Crown of Aragon, with the permission of his king, Jaume I. The knights earned salaries ranging from forty-five to ninety silver bezants per month, while Guillem himself earned considerably more than that as *caid* of the guard. For permitting their absence from the realm, King Jaume claimed a cut of each knight's salary – fifteen bezants a month – along with a hefty one thousand a month from the *caid*.[24] Complementing this Catalan core were several prominent overseas exiles, including Enrique and Federico of Castile, brothers of King Alfonso IX, and two leading members of the Ghibelline (pro-imperial) faction in Italy: Conrad Capece and Conrad Lancia. These glamorous exiles enhanced al-Mustansir's prestige and served a practical role as well. Enrique of Castile helped to lead an expedition that crushed an insurrection against the emirate in Milania in 1261. Federico of Castile served on al-Mustansir's inner council in 1270 as the emir tried to fend off King Louis IX of France's last crusade.[25] The religious sanction attached to this venture did not sever the ties of loyalty and dependency that bound the royal exile to his Hafsid employer.

23 Robert Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafsides, des origines à la fin du XVe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1940–47), 1:39–49; Rouighi, *Mediterranean Emirate*, pp. 34–37.

24 Charles-Emmanuel Dufourcq, *L'Espagne catalane et le Maghrib au XIII^e^ et XIV^e^ siècles: De la bataille de Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) à l'avènement du sultan mérinide Abou-l-Hasan (1331)* (Paris, 1966), pp. 102–03.

25 Michael Lower, "Tunis in 1270: A Case Study of Interfaith Relations in the Late Thirteenth Century," *International History Review* 28 (2006), p. 508.

Tax Collectors

As the wages al-Mustansir paid to his personal guard suggest, European mercenaries did not come cheap. They also required payment in cash rather than kind. In theory, then, they placed heavy fiscal demands on the states that employed them. This was especially the case because the main North African dynasties of the central medieval period struggled to project their power into the countryside. Their efforts to raise revenues beyond their immediate orbit were widely contested and often undermined by collectors with conflicted loyalties. European mercenaries offered an elegant solution to this fiscal dilemma. Their allegiances lay with the central government and, because they were essentially gathering their own salaries, they were highly motivated.

Under the Almoravids, the link between recruiting foreign soldiers and raising revenues was strong. When the Almoravid emir Ali b. Yusuf b. Tashfin imported the first units of European cavalry into the Maghrib in the early 1130s, he quickly put them to work collecting the new taxes he had imposed in the countryside to pay their salaries.[26] Ibn Khallikan tells a story, later repeated by Ibn al-Athir, about how their work provided Ibn Tumart, the founder of the Almohad movement, with outstanding propaganda material as he drummed up support for his anti-Almoravid insurgency in the Atlas Mountains. Speaking to one group of men in Tinmal, he asked them why their children had blue eyes and light skin while their features were dark. They were too ashamed to answer at first, but after he pressed them they explained that as subjects of the Almoravid emir they owed him *kharaj* (a kind of land tax) and that every year "Frankish and Rumi [i.e. Roman] mamluks" came to collect it. These agents would expel the men from their houses and spend the night with their wives. The fair-skinned children that caught Ibn Tumart's eye were the result. The next time the Christians came to the village, Ibn Tumart advised, the men should allow them into their homes and kill them under the cover of nightfall. This is exactly what they did, at least according to Ibn al-Athir. Every European tax collector died in the assault except one, who had gone outside to relieve himself.[27]

This story combined several distasteful elements into one powerfully negative depiction of the European mercenary at work in North Africa. He was a foreigner who would steal your money, take over your house, and impregnate your wife. For all that such imagery helped the Almohads in their campaign against the Almoravids, it did little to dissuade subsequent dynasties from using mercenaries to shake down their rural subjects. In the late thirteenth century, the Marinids assigned this task to Alfonso Pérez de Guzman, who led a force of some 1,600 European mercenaries, freed Christian captives, and Muslim soldiers – all apparently wearing

26 Ambrosio Huici Miranda, "Un fragmento inédito de Ibn 'Idari sobre los Almorávides," *Hésperis-Tamuda* 2 (1961), p. 108.

27 *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. William MacGuckin de Slane, 4 vols. (Paris, 1842–71), 3:215–16; Ibn al-Athir, *Annales du Maghreb et de l'Espagne*, trans. Edmond Fagnan (Algiers, 1898), p. 532; Hopkins, *Medieval Muslim Government*, pp. 54–55.

the sign of the cross on their arms and backs – into the Moroccan countryside to collect outstanding taxes.[28] The symbolism behind wearing the cross is complex and multifaceted. At the least, it suggests again how closely the value of the mercenaries to the regimes that employed them was bound up in the maintenance of a politically and religiously distinct identity, which allowed them to impose the will of the state on indigenous communities without favoritism, partisanship, or mercy.

Diplomatic Intermediaries

The Christian faith of the mercenaries also allowed them to play an important role outside the domestic sphere. As the Marinids and other successor states to the Almohads developed their political and commercial relations with the northern Mediterranean world, they turned to their Christian guards as intermediaries. Cross-Mediterranean diplomacy was especially intense, and fraught, in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. During this time, the Marinids alternated between propping up and destabilizing Granada, the sole surviving Muslim state of Iberia, while the Crown of Aragon sought to extend its influence into the Maghrib in unprecedentedly tangible ways. The mercenaries moved easily within Mediterranean diplomatic networks. Trusted by their North African employers, they also maintained religious and linguistic bonds with their home countries. Their outsider status in North Africa, which proved so valuable in the region's domestic politics, also gave them a vital role in its external affairs.

Some of the most successful of these mercenary-diplomats had connections with the royal houses of Spain. Enrique of Castile, the son of King Fernando whom we saw serving the Hafsids, led an embassy to King Jaume II of Aragon in 1294 on behalf of the emir, Abu Hafs Umar. King Jaume dispatched an envoy in return who negotiated with Enrique over renewing a treaty of peace and commerce between the two realms.[29] The 'Abd al-Wadids were able to do the Hafsids one better when they wanted to form an alliance with the Crown of Aragon in 1325. The rulers of Tlemcen sent to King Jaume II none other than his own illegitimate son, also named Jaume. All told, Jaume of Aragon would lead four embassies to his father over the next several years as Tlemcen sought an alliance against Hafsid Tunis.[30] The family tradition of combining service in a North African military guard with diplomatic missions back home to the Crown of Aragon would continue with Jaume of Aragon's younger brother, the equally illegitimate Napoleon. In the 1320s, he represented the Marinids in their negotiations with Barcelona. In 1337, he switched over to the other side, leading an embassy to the Marinds on behalf of his uncle, King Alfonso IV of Aragon.[31]

28 Sanjuán, "Mercenarios cristianos," p. 437.
29 Andrés Giménez Soler, "Caballeros españoles en África y africanos en España," *Revue Hispanique* 12 (1905), p. 305.
30 Ibid., pp. 323–42.
31 Ibid., p. 343; Soler, "Caballeros españoles," *Revue Hispanique* 16 (1907), p. 67.

Mercenaries from more modest backgrounds could also take on delicate diplomatic missions. Bernat de Fons was a Templar knight who had fled from the castle of Monzón just weeks before it fell to the forces of King Jaume II of Aragon in June 1309. The king was rounding up the Templars for interrogation after the mass arrests launched against members of the order in France and elsewhere. Bernat eluded the dragnet for a time but in February 1310 he fell into royal custody and was interrogated at Lérida. Once again, though, he escaped, probably heading south. Having abandoned the military order that had given him a career but had crumbled all around him, and now a royal outlaw as well, he fell in with a group of Catalan mercenaries who were conspiring with a dissident Hafsid prince named Abu Zakariya b. al-Lihyani to launch a coup in Tunis. While al-Lihyani attacked the city by land, the mercenaries sailed three armed ships into Tunis harbor, blocking the current emir's escape by sea. By mid-November 1311, al-Lihyani was master of the city and Bernat de Fons was second in command of his European mercenary guard.[32]

To strengthen his hold on Tunis, al-Lihyani sought out an alliance with the Crown of Aragon. After several conventional approaches were rebuffed, the emir asked Bernat to write directly to King Jaume II. The Templar turned mercenary for the infidel might seem a strange choice, given his outlaw status back home. But it was precisely Bernat's desperation to be restored to royal favor that al-Lihyani was looking to exploit. Writing on al-Lihyani's command, Bernat revealed to Jaume that the emir was a Christian "in his heart" and wanted to receive baptism. Besides dangling al-Lihyani's conversion, Bernat also stressed the emir's willingness to surrender Tunis to the royal house of Aragon. Al-Lihyani had confided that he had just two brothers in the world: King Jaume and King Federico of Sicily. The emir was a gracious lord who would happily submit to his brothers when the time appeared right.[33]

Throughout his letter, Bernat played on the rhetorical possibilities that his ambiguous status as both an agent of the emir and an Aragonese subject provided. He stressed that he was Jaume's "humble servant," that he always did what the king ordered "by word and deed," and that his aim was to preserve the king's honor and that of his men. At the same time, he noted that he was "*alcaid* of all the Christian soldiers who are in the lordship of the king of Tunis," that the emir was his intimate friend, and that they spoke together nearly every day about embracing Christianity.[34] The self-image that Bernat presented in the letter – the committed Christian and Aragonese loyalist who helps both causes by

32 Alan Forey, *The Fall of the Templars in the Crown of Aragon* (Aldershot, 2001), pp. 28, 76, 111; Michael Lower, "Ibn al-Lihyani: Sultan of Tunis and Would-Be Christian Convert," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 24 (2009), p. 19.

33 Ángeles Masiá de Ros, *La corona de Aragón y los estados del norte de África: Política de Jaume II y Alfonso IV en Egipto, Ifriquía y Tremecén* (Barcelona, 1951), no. 186 (pp. 490–92).

34 Ibid.

leading a Muslim prince to the true faith and political submission – was well chosen to elicit sympathy from King Jaume for al-Lihyani and himself.

The letter succeeded on both counts. King Jaume entered into diplomatic negotiations with al-Lihyani and received Bernat de Fons as a Tunisian envoy in the summer of 1313. The matter of Bernat's status as an outlaw Templar was also resolved. He received absolution from the archdeacon of Besalú and a sizable pension from the crown. He then returned to Tunis and helped to conduct the final negotiations that resulted in the signing of a ten-year truce between the Hafsids and the Crown of Aragon in February 1314. Even after the peace was agreed, Bernat continued to live a liminal existence. He returned to the Crown of Aragon in 1315 to enjoy his pension, then had it taken away when he returned to Tunis (no source reveals why) later in the year without royal permission. By 1316 he was back in the Crown again, with his stipend and arms restored. He died the following year, leaving behind armor and horses valuable enough to be requisitioned by the king and distributed as presents to his favorites.[35] His example is perhaps an extreme one: most of the mercenary diplomats who are known to us from this period were not former Templar knights, fighting monks devoted to the cause of crusade. But Bernat's case highlights how well suited Christian mercenaries were to the role of inter-religious go-between. By holding fast to his identity as a Christian fighting man, Bernat was able to cross the religious divide repeatedly and productively, to the mutual advantage of his home and host societies.

Maintaining Difference

Since much of a medieval Christian mercenary's value to his Muslim employer – as a soldier, bodyguard, tax collector, and diplomat – was linked to his status as a political and religious outsider in the Islamic world, both the mercenaries and their masters went to great lengths to avoid eliding the differences between them. One common strategy was to build separate quarters for the mercenaries, where they could live in isolation from the broader community. Simon Barton has shown how the Almohads housed at least some of their European mercenaries in an exclusively Christian suburb near Marrakesh that is called Elbora (and sometimes Ebora or el-Bora) in European-language sources. In January 1218, the Castilian aristocrat and Almohad mercenary Álvar Pérez de Castro had a charter written up "on the road that leads from Ebora to Marrakesh." A year later, his fellow Castilian Count Fernando Núñez de Lara died in Elbora, after having joined the Hospitallers on his deathbed. A Christian captive who lived in Marrakesh in the mid-sixteenth century toured the ruins of Elbora and described it as a large settlement surrounded by impressive walls.[36] The Marinid emir Abu Yusuf Yaqub took a similar approach to

35 Forey, *Fall of the Templars in Aragon*, pp. 141–42, 216, 223; Lower, "Ibn al-Lihyani," p. 21.

36 Simon Barton, "From Mercenary to Crusader: The Career of Álvar Pérez de Castro (d. 1239) Re-Examined," in *Church, State, Vellum, and Stone: Essays on Medieval Spain in Honor of John Williams*, ed. Therese Martin and Julie A. Harris (Leiden, 2005), pp. 120–23.

housing European soldiers. When he established New Fez in the 1270s, he set aside a quarter there for the Christian mercenaries in his army, where they could live apart from their Muslim neighbors.[37]

These attempts to isolate the mercenaries from North African society went along with encouragement of vigorous Christian worship. The Almohad caliph al-Ma'mun built a church for his mercenaries dedicated to Mary and even allowed the ringing of bells, a practice forbidden in the so-called Pact of Umar, the document that set forth traditional norms governing Christian and Jewish life in the *dar al-Islam*.[38] In fifteenth-century Tunis, the Christian mercenaries of the Hafsids worshipped in a church dedicated to Francis of Assisi, which a European visitor described as "very beautiful and great."[39] It was large enough to house eight altars and numerous precious ornaments. Clergy celebrated Latin mass there every day. The mercenaries themselves would sing along, although they could not understand the language. This church of St. Francis had three large bells and several smaller ones, which could also be rung, a privilege not granted to the Genoese and Venetians who maintained chapels in their Tunisian merchant factories.[40]

This description of mercenary religious life in late medieval Tunis comes to us from Jean Adorno, who composed an account of his father Anselme's voyage to the Maghrib and the Holy Land in 1470. Anselme Adorno belonged to a branch of a prominent Venetian family that had settled in Flanders. His journey around the Mediterranean, which was sponsored by Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy, was part pilgrimage and part reconnaissance mission for a prospective crusade. Given this latter aim, he paid close attention to the military resources at the Hafsids' disposal, including their elite Christian guard. Anselme was amazed by these strangely hybrid figures, whom he called "Christians of the *rabat*," using a term for a Muslim religious community associated with jihad. However evocative such a description of these soldiers might sound to modern ears, his understanding of its origins was actually more prosaic. He thought the label derived from the neighborhood in Tunis where they lived, "a place called Rabat." This neighborhood consisted of several streets closed off by gates near the Hafsid palace complex in the western end of the city. Its inhabitants were not recent transplants; they were the descendants of the long line of mercenaries who had served the Hafsids for over two hundred years. Anselme described them as culturally and linguistically assimilated into Tunisian society. They were "entirely like the Moors in relation to language, culture, and means of living." Because the emir loved them very much, and counted on them to be his defenders and bodyguards, he had granted them "the greatest privileges." When he

37 Évariste Lévi-Provençal, "Un nouveau texte d'histoire mérinide: Le *Musnad* d'Ibn Marzuk," *Hespéris* 5 (1925), p. 45.

38 Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'ibar*, 6:530–31 (*Histoire des Berbères*, 2:235–36).

39 Robert Brunschvig, *Deux récits de voyage inédits en Afrique du nord au XVe siècle: Abdalbasit b. Halil et Adorne* (Paris, 1936), p. 157.

40 Ibid.

went off on campaign, they provided him with his closest personal escort. Not even the emir's son dared come closer. They dressed like pagans, except for their headgear. "They do not wear turbans on their head, but rather small hoods [*capucia parvula*] in the Teutonic style." Their wives, by contrast, dressed entirely "as Moorish women do." The emir would invite the spouses of the soldiers to festivals and celebrations of marriage and childbirth.[41]

Culture and religion are often seen as powerfully linked in the Middle Ages. What Anselme Adorno describes, however, is a group that had integrated culturally while remaining a distinct religious minority. With only their Germanic hoods remaining as an external marker of their distant origins, these soldiers nonetheless retained an attachment to Christianity that reminded Anselme of the vibrant faith of the Flemish peasants he knew back home. Just as the peasants did, the mercenaries would sing along to the Latin mass even as they used a different language for everyday speech, in this case Arabic rather than Flemish or French. As late as the fifteenth century, the religious difference between the soldiers and their masters remained essential to their function.

Conclusion

Scholarly approaches toward the many borders of belief and belonging that criss-crossed the medieval Mediterranean have shifted significantly in recent years. The earlier tendency was to dwell on the strength of the borders and the divisions they enforced. The emphasis now is on their relative permeability and the complex networks of interaction that could be built across and between them.[42] At first glance, the mercenary guards seem to fit comfortably into this fluid environment that scholars now describe. The easy flow of soldiers back and forth across the mercenary market does demonstrate that boundaries of all kinds were far from impermeable in the late medieval western Mediterranean. But a closer analysis of the workings of that market suggests that various forms of allegiance – to tribe, monarch, language, and religion – may have mattered more than we currently imagine, although perhaps not in the way we might expect.

The medieval Christian mercenaries of the Maghrib and the Muslim rulers who hired them did not try to break down the differences in fighting style, culture, and

41 Ibid., pp. 157–58.

42 Important discussions of this shift include Hussein Anwar Fancy, "Theologies of Violence: The Recruitment of Muslim Soldiers by the Crown of Aragon," *Past and Present* 221 (2013), pp. 42–43, 72–73; Brian A. Catlos, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, c. 1050–1614* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 508–35; Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore, 2003); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York, 2006); Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Sciences, 124th ser., 2 (Baltimore, 2006).

belief that stood between them. To the contrary: both parties prized and protected these distinctions. The mercenary was valuable to the regime he served because he fought in a style that diversified its military options, kept apart from local networks of power that threatened its rule, and maintained a religious identification that facilitated tax collection at home and inter-religious diplomacy abroad. As the "Christians of the Rabat" who protected the Hafsid emir in fifteenth-century Tunis make clear, the religious difference was especially critical. In effect, the mercenaries were able to serve a crucial double function, gaining popularity by their ability to mark off and at the same time cross the religious boundary between Christianity and Islam. Powerful assertions of religious difference are usually thought to have been a source of anxiety, provocation, and conflict in the pre-modern world. Studying the medieval Christian soldiers of North Africa suggests a possible exception to this grim rule. For the mercenaries and their masters, religious difference could be a positive value worth maintaining and a source of stability and cooperation in a pre-secular age.