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Commercial relations between the Hafsids and Christian powers under the reign of al-Mustansir

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ABSTRACT

The crusade of 1270 should not undermine the importance and the significant development of trade relations with Christian powers during the reign of al-Mustansir. Tunis had already, since the twelfth century, a tradition of trade with Italian city-states such as Genoa, Pisa or Venice, but from the middle of the thirteenth century Provençal and Catalan merchants also made of the Hafsid capital one of their most important destinations. Immediately after the end of the crusade, which can be considered – and was probably considered by many – as an anachronistic parenthesis, new peace treaties were signed with the most important Christian powers of the Mediterranean, in order to promote maritime trade. This policy had an obvious economic dimension, and contributed to the development of the city of Tunis and, more generally, of the Hafsid sultanate. But it was also a political choice: by making of Tunis a major hub in Mediterranean trade and one of the most prosperous cities of the Islamic world, the active Hafsid diplomacy reinforced the imperial and caliphal project of al-Mustansir.

KEYWORDS Ḥafṣids; Ifrīqiya; Genoa; trade; diplomacy; crusades

When, in 1249, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al Mustansir (1249–1277) received the *bay’a* as sultan of Tunis, the port had already long-standing tradition of trade relations with European Christians. From the tenth century, if not before, the merchants from Southern Italy and Sicily were present and active in Ifrīqiya (Valérien 2010). Tunis, a Mediterranean port, was progressively replacing Qayrawan, the city founded by the first Arab conquerors, as the primary economical centre of the region. This transition from Qayrawan to Tunis started under the rule of the Banū Khurasān and, later, under the Almohad caliphs (Valérien Forthcoming; Bennisson, 2016, 200; Abulafia 2010). In Italy a parallel transition occurred. Pisa and Genoa progressively replaced Amalfi and Palermo as the main trade centres in the Central Mediterranean (Abulafia 1977). The independence of the Hafsids, followed by the Hafsid conquest of Bijaya, strengthened their position in Mediterranean trade networks. Al-Mustansir’s reign inherited of the tradition of commercial relations with Italian powers. But he also

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widened and deepened those relations, extending them to other Christian powers through active diplomacy in the Western Mediterranean. These diplomatic and commercial ambitions helped secure Hafsid claims to the Caliphate.

Al-Mustansir's reign corresponded thus with a period of great commercial prosperity and of diplomatic stability in the central Mediterranean, in spite of Louis IX's Tunis crusade of 1270 CE. This crusade, far from being the sign of a change in Hafsid policy toward Christian power, paradoxically showed the strength of diplomatic and commercial ties between Tunis and Christian powers.

The growing power of the Hafsids, as well as the difficulties encountered by the Almohads in the West, undoubtedly benefited to Tunis, and to a lesser extent Bijaya, which became the two most important destinations of European merchants in North Africa. Ceuta, their historical rival, was perturbed by wars in the Strait of Gibraltar (Cherif 1996, 31–49). Notarial records are a good testimony of this shift to Tunis and Bijaya. Genoese archives conserve numerous cartularies for that period showing the domination of these two ports. Pisa or Venice have fewer known records, which does not mean that their merchants were less active. Pisa had probably more ancient and intense relations with Ifrīqiya (Berti 2003) – but it is impossible to measure this commercial activity because of the losses of archival documents dating from that period (Valérien 2006b, 53–61). Genoese data on their own cannot be considered as completely reliable quantitative indicators. Only a part of their merchant operations were registered by the notaries. Not all the Genoese cartularies have been preserved and there are important discrepancies between the ones that do exist. However limited, they still make it possible to describe a general trend, one that clearly shows the growing prominence of Tunis in Genoese trade networks on the Maghribian coast.

In the second half of the twelfth century, under Almohad rule, Tunis represented 17.9% of the contracts (and 16% of the capital invested), Bijaya and Ceuta attracting the majority of Genoese investments. In the first half of the thirteenth century 30% of the contracts (24.7% of the capital) concerned Tunis. After 1250, 36% of the contracts were with Tunis and 47.6% of the capital (Jehel 1993, vol. 3, 67). If we observe these changes in detail, by decade, we notice that the rise of the Hafsids produced an inversion of the ratio between Tunis and Bijaya – which was conquered by the Hafsid Sultan Abû Zakariya in 1231. In the 1220s Bijaya attracted 66% of the value of Genoese investments in the two cities, but only 17.5% in the 1230. Afterward, Bijaya regained a part of those investments, but remained behind Tunis (Valérien 2006a, 628). Clearly, the new status of Tunis as capital of an independent sultanate ruling the whole Eastern Maghrib benefited commerce and prosperity.

The rise of Al-Mustansir accelerated the volume of trade between Genoa and Hafsid Ifrīqiya. In the 1230s the volume of Genoese investments in

Bijaya recorded in notarial contracts was l. 3480, and in Tunis l. 16,405. In the 1250s it rose to l. 25,290 (Bijaya) and l. 31,597 (Tunis) (Valérian 2006a, 628). Even if we can consider that this is also the result of a better conservation of notarial cartularies for that period, the quantitative change is significant. Romania still attracted the most part of Genoese investments, but Tunis was a major emporium in their trade networks, having always the first place in the Maghrib (Balard 1991). The city benefited of its position between the Eastern and Western basins of the Mediterranean, closely connected to Mamluk Egypt which was another important destination of Christian merchants.¹ Tunis could be a 'substitute market' when the political or military situation in Egypt and the Levant was dangerous, as it was in 1256, during the war of Saint Sabas in Acre which perturbed the Genoese trade in the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. That year, almost three fifths of Genoese investments were made in Tunis (Balard 1991, 372). But Tunis and Bijaya were also important markets in themselves, not just substitutes for the East. Christian merchants could sell textiles produced in Italy and the rest of Europe and buy raw material for European industries, such as wool and leather (Valérian 2006a, 331–420). They were also termini of the gold routes from the Sahara, as gold striking resumed in Europe in the middle of the thirteenth century (Lopez 1956).

Ifriqiya in the thirteenth century thus benefited both from the difficulties faced by other Mediterranean markets and from the rising power of the Hafsid dynasty, which guaranteed political stability and commercial security, granted by the peace treaties signed with all the great European merchant cities.

While Hafsids built upon Khurasânid and Almohad policy toward the Italian powers, they also actively made peace and commercial treaties that offered a stable framework to economic exchanges. They considerably widened the range of their diplomacy beyond what was done before. The Hafsid Abû Zakariyâ' Yahyâ had already signed peace treaties with Venice in 1231 (Mas Latrie 1866, 96–99), Pisa in 1234 (Amari 1863, serie seconda, 292–294) and Genoa in 1236 (Mas Latrie 1866, 116–118). The advent of Al-Mustansir created the opportunity to renew truces previously signed with the Italian republics. In October 1250 a treaty was signed with Genoa (Mas Latrie 1866, 118–121), in April 1251 with Venice (Mas Latrie 1866, 199–202), and a little later in August 1264 with Pisa (Amari 1863, serie seconda, 295–302). But the titles given to the Hafsid sovereign in these treaties show an important change of status. Whereas in the two first treaties, signed before the proclamation of the caliphate, Abû 'Abd Allah was designated (the texts are preserved in their Latin versions) as king of Tunis (Genoese treaty) or sultan of Barbary (Venetian one), in the 1264 text, preserved in its Italian version, he signed as caliph and *amîr al-mu'minîn* (*lo signore califfo grande et alto, per la*

gratia di Dio, elmiro Momini Buabidelle), which shows a change of political status, well perceived in European chanceries.

Hafsid relations with Sicily were more complex because of the internal political situation in the island and also due to Sicilian ambitions in Ifriqiya, a legacy of the Norman period. A consul of Sicily was appointed in Tunis by Pope Innocent IV in 1254, a sign of the existence of institutional relations between the Hafsids and the Hohenstaufen Fredrick II (Berger 1897, 539). But the real change was the widening of commercial networks beyond Italy. The merchants of Marseille, and probably also Montpellier, were present in Tunis from the beginning of Hafsid rule. Even if there is no trace of a peace treaty, the *Statuts* of the city of Marseille in 1255 mention a consul and a *fondaco* in Bijaya – but, curiously, not in Tunis (Mas Latrie 1866, 90–91). Notarial records are preserved, showing commercial relations, mostly with Bijaya (Valérian 2001, 7). Even the king of Norway Haakon the Old, who developed a Mediterranean policy, sent an ambassador in Tunis in 1262 to conclude a commercial treaty, but the death of the king in 1263 aborted the mission (Brunschvig 1940, 50).

The development of relations with the Crown of Aragon was also important to Bijaya and Tunis. In the beginning of the 1230s the king of Aragon initiated a vigorous and ambitious policy of expansion in the Mediterranean. Barcelona, but also Valencia and Majorca recently conquered, became the centres of an important commerce, stimulated by an active merchant milieu (Dufourcq 1966b). After a first period of tension, due to Hafsid interventions in al-Andalus to support the jihad, the king James I the Conqueror sent diplomatic missions in Tunis which may have resulted in a peace treaty signed in 1256 or 1257, but not preserved (Dufourcq 1966b, 111). Catalan presence in Hafsid ports increased in those years: a *fondaco* is mentioned in Tunis in 1253, in Bijaya in 1259, and a second one was opened in Tunis in 1260, sign of the dynamism of the Catalan community in the Hafsid capital (Dufourcq 1966a). Even if Catalan notarial archives are poor for that period, the few commercial documents preserved show an important trade between Barcelona, Majorca and Ifriqiyian ports during the reign of al-Mustansir (Batlle i Gallart, Joan-Josep, and Coral 1989).

Unlike the Italian city-states, interests of the crown of Aragon in the region were not limited to the commerce. Diplomatic relations with the Hafsids were closely linked to political issues involving other Maghribian sultanates and connected to the conflicts in the Iberian Peninsula. Al-Mustansir's Catalano-Aragonese Christian militia, in particular, was important for the kings of Aragon. They considered it as a political instrument in their Mediterranean policy. Mercenaries serving Muslim rulers, who appeared in the Maghrib beginning with the Almoravids, were present in Tunis under the reign of al-Mustansir and their presence was regulated by political agreements (Batlle i Gallart 1987; Lower 2016). Nevertheless, until the conquest of Sicily by the

king of Aragon in 1282, there was no particular Aragonese expansionist ambition in Ifrīqiya, and this absence of imperial ambitions facilitated the good diplomatic relations between Barcelona and Tunis.

The Hafsids – who considered themselves as the true heirs of the Almohads – briefly claimed the title of champions of the jihad in al-Andalus. These ambitions were dropped, however, when they chose another strategy in their relations with the Christians of Iberian Peninsula. Their objective became more pragmatic, to promote peace in order to reduce the piratical threat, attract Christian merchants and develop maritime trade. This benefited both economic prosperity, at least in the main ports of the sultanate, and to fiscal incomes, and thus to the power of the Hafsid dynasty. The multiplication of peace treaties, with Christian powers often in conflict between each other, guaranteed a certain independence to the Hafsids sultans, who could take advantage of rivalries in diplomatic negotiations.

In this context, 1270 crusade appeared to be a clear challenge to good commercial relations between the Hafsids and European powers. Writers, beginning with Joinville, the French biographer of Louis IX, have long questioned the objectives of that strange crusade. It was the last of the large expeditions launched to conquer or defend the Holy Land, which ended with the death of the king of France Louis IX in Carthage. Many hypotheses have been proposed concerning the role and responsibility of the various actors of the crusade (Louis IX, his brother Charles of Anjou, mainly, but also the Italian Republics), and the strategic or missionary reasons of the choice of Tunis as first destination of the crusade (Hélary 2016, 110–139; Lower 2018, 144–173). The kingdom of France, at that time, had no real Mediterranean policy, and its maritime access were very limited: Marseille and Provence belonged to the Empire, and were ruled by Louis's brother Charles of Anjou, king of Naples and Sicily (Lesage 1950). The Mediterranean was, for Louis IX, a way to the Holy Land and thus important in his projects of crusade, but played no part in a larger economic policy (Le Goff 1996, 169–175, 657–665). Thus, before the crusade, the kingdom of France was not particularly interested in the commerce with Tunis and its merchants were not directly involved in it before 1270. The Genoese influence on Louis's choice has been considered: they were numerous in the crusader army and fleet, and Italian republics, since the beginning of the crusades, were involved in the transport of troops and supplies. Their help was decisive in many occasions, and was paid in return by commercial privileges in the ports conquered by the Christians. They also supported some expeditions in the Western Mediterranean, against Muslim ports in al-Andalus. The Genoese could have expected, if Tunis had been conquered by the crusaders, to exclude their rivals from the city or at least to gain some commercial or political privileges. But nothing in the sources can support that hypothesis, on the contrary. The *Annales Januenses*, the official chronicle of the Commune,

describes the stupefaction of the Genoese when the news of the landing of the crusader fleet in Tunis arrived in Italy, and reaffirmed that the only goal of the crusade had to be Jerusalem and the Holy Land (*Annales Italici aevi Suevici*, 268; H  lary 2016, 131–132). Charles of Anjou, brother of the French King Louis IX, has also been accused of being responsible of the choice of Tunis and of the failure of the crusade, exonerating Louis IX of any responsibility in the disaster (Mas Latrie 1866, Historical introduction, 136–137). But even if Charles had imperial objectives in the Mediterranean and was interested by the situation in Ifr  qiya, claiming the right, inherited from the Norman king, to receive a tribute from Tunis (Borghese 2008, 56–57), his subjects, in Sicily or Marseille, also had important commercial relations with Hafsid ports, and war was not good for business. The real reason for the crusade was probably a dream to convert al-Mustansir to Christianity, encouraged by the spirit of Dominican and Franciscan missions of the thirteenth century, and by some of the king’s advisers. They convinced the French King that the Hafsid caliph was open to conversion (Lower 2007). The Tunis crusade thus appears as an anachronistic enterprise. It occurred at a time when the spirit of crusade was already being challenged by political and economic interests, as it is confirmed by the peace treaties signed after the end of the expedition, by the crusaders but also by the other Christian powers. These treaties show what were the real priorities in the relations with Tunis and the Hafsids: the development of trade.

The treaty ending the Tunis Crusade was signed in 30 October 30, two months after the death of Louis IX, by Charles of Anjou, chief of the crusader army, and Philip III, the new king of France. For them, the religious and missionary dimension of the war was obviously not a priority, and it was urgent to put an end to the conflict. The text of the treaty (Ouerfelli 2018, 339–344) contains some political clauses, and Charles obtained the payment of a tribute by the Hafsids, partially presented as a continuation of the one paid to the king of Sicily in the time of the Hohenstaufen successor to Frederick II, Manfred. The exchange of captives is also mentioned, which is not unusual after a war. Most of the treaty however concerns commercial issues, identical as those found in other commercial agreements previously signed by the Italian Republics in the Maghrib: the freedom and security of the merchants in the Hafsid lands and on the sea (piracy is forbidden and pirates have to be purchased and condemned), and religious freedom. There was one novel clause: the right for monks and priests to build churches and monasteries, but there is no evidence that monasteries were actually built in Tunis (Ouerfelli 2018, 322–323).

Everything in the treaty was done to return to the status quo prior to the crusade, to restart commercial activity of Christian merchants in Hafsid ports. The war probably had some impact on trade with Tunis or Bijaya, due to the risks for the ships, merchants and their goods caught in the

crossfire. But it seems that the merchants present in Tunis did not have to suffer much inconvenience. The Genoese, who could have been accused of complicity with their countrymen involved in the crusader army, were protected by the Hafsid officials. The *Annales Januenses* report that le 'king' of Tunis gave the order that the Genoese merchants who could not leave Tunis in time, because they ignored the crusaders' plans, would be detained and protected in a small palace, and they add that the intentions of the king were not to harm them but to save them (probably from possible violence of Tunis inhabitants), because he was aware that the Genoese were not responsible of the attack (*Annales Italici aevi Suevici*, 267). Moreover, the treaty of 1270 specifies that the goods and debts of the Christian merchants present in Tunis before the crusade had to be returned, in order to turn the page rapidly and facilitate the return of the merchants. Indeed, all the merchant powers that were present in Hafsid ports before the crusade sent ambassadors and signed new treaties in the following years, even when the existing ones were still valid: Venice and the kingdom of Aragon in 1271 (Mas Latrie 1866, 203–206, 280–284), Genoa in 1272 (Mas Latrie 1866, 122–125), and a few years later the king of Majorca, in 1278 (Mas Latrie 1866, 187–188). Only Pisa did not renew its treaty of 1264.

Christian merchant activity restarted in Hafsid ports almost immediately after the crusade. In 1271 a priest was appointed for the chapel of the Pisan *fondaco* of Bijaya, and the act of nomination by the archbishop of Pisa specifies that he returned in the port after having been obliged to abandon it because of the crusade, and that his presence was requested by the merchants still present in the city (Mas Latrie 1866, 47–48). The same year the Genoese priest Bongiovanni Canonico arrived in Bijaya, accompanied by another cleric for two years (Archivio di Stato di Genova, *notai*, cart. 95, Petrus de Clavica, f^o. 149v), and commercial contracts for Bijaya or Tunis are registered by Genoese notaries. In 1288–1289 the cartulary of the Genoese notary in Tunis, Pietro Battifoglio, shows a numerous and active merchant community originating in Genoa, Pisa, Barcelona, Majorca, Venice and Sicily, and at least four *fondachi* (Pistarino 1986).

The 1270 crusade was merely a part of *histoire événementielle*, an exception to the longer, *moyenne durée* of exchanges between Europe and North Africa. It was violent, but without any major effect on commercial and diplomatic relations between Tunis and the Christian powers. It was, in some ways, an anachronistic event in the long history of the crusades but also of the Western Mediterranean. It was also a 'crash test' of the strength of Hafsid diplomatic policy with Europe, one they engaged in from the beginning of their reign. Once the crisis was solved and the crusader army was gone, business continued as usual, at least until the beginning of the fourteenth century (Valérien 2006a, 630–650).

The Hafsid priority was always the pursuit of trade, and thus peaceful relations with Christian powers. Tunis and Bijaya benefited in the thirteenth century of a favourable economic context in the Mediterranean, stimulated by the European prosperity, in particular by the dynamism of the textile and leather industry that needed raw material the Maghrib could provide, and markets to sell its production. They were two cities ideally situated on the main maritime routes, and the political stability of the Hafsid sultanate was an important asset, compared to the difficulties in the Western Maghrib and Ceuta, or the instability in Orient and the Crusader States. But their prosperity was also the effect of a political choice made by the Hafsids to promote the maritime trade with the Christian merchant cities of the North instead of war, and thus to abandon the duty of jihad in favour of a politic of peace.

This choice was not isolated nor completely new, and it was also made by other Muslim dynasties since the twelfth century, if not before. The Ayyûbids, or later the Mamluks, who claimed to be the champions of the jihad against the Crusaders in the East, signed commercial treaties with Christian merchant powers, and promoted maritime trade with them. The reasons for signing treaties were many. The peace treaties were a way of breaking the unity of the Christian military front. The Italian Republics and their interest in trade became more important than their support to the expeditions against Muslim countries. Commerce also supported the Hafsid economy, at least in the ports but also, indirectly, in their hinterland, which provided the Christian merchants in products they needed. It also brought in some luxury goods demanded by the Hafsid elites. Finally, taxes paid in the customs could be an important part of the State revenues, and were easy to levy and to control.

The extent of diplomatic activity under al-Mustansir can also be related to his caliphal ambitions, while the Abbassid caliphate had been restored in Cairo by le Mamluk sultan Baybars in 1261. The Almohads, before him, even if they also signed treaties with some Italian Republics (Pisa and Genoa) and with Sicily, had put the jihad in the very heart of their action and of their discourse, as a major source of legitimacy – as did before them many caliphal dynasties (Picard 2015). The jihad was indeed considered as one of the duties of the caliph, or his representative on the frontier, and the '*ulamâ*' – in particular the *fuqahâ*' – recalled that imperative duty in a context of threat on the frontiers of Islam (Sivan 1968). The new dynasties that emerged in Islam from the eleventh century onward were not of Arab origin: they were Turkish, Kurdish, or Berber in the West, as the Hafsids – and even former pagans and slaves in the case of the Mamluks. They needed to prove their legitimacy to rule. Jihad was one of the most powerful instruments in the hands of those princes; it was even more important for someone who claimed to be a Caliph, as al-Mustansir did. In the Western Mediterranean, the main battlefield was the Andalusí frontier, dangerously

threatened since the defeat of the Almohads in Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, but far from Hafsid Ifrîqiya. Taking advantage of their distance from the front lines, the Hafsids made another choice. They limited their jihad to a short and inconclusive intervention in Al-Andalus in the beginning of their rule, and to the resistance to Louis IX's crusade. Al-Mustansir privileged developing and promoting his imperial ambitions through an active diplomacy, one that made of Tunis a major port in Mediterranean trade networks. Indeed, negotiations with European powers have to be analysed within a larger context. They were part of the general policy of al-Mustansir and closely connected to his caliphal ambitions. Diplomacy has always been a powerful instrument in the affirmation of a Hafsid imperial project, and the arrival of ambassadors from remote empires or kingdoms was the sign of the universality of the caliphate. The Hafsids had diplomatic relations in the East with the Mamluks (Chapoutot-Remadi 2019) and Mecca, in the South with the sultan of Kanem, in the West with the Merinids and Abdelwadids, and in the North with the Christian powers – the treaty of 1270 also involved the Latin emperor of Constantinople, Baldwin, the King Edouard of England and other Christian princes participating to the crusade such as the counts of Toulouse or Flanders. Beyond the strategic, fiscal and economic advantages that could be expected from those trade relations, active Hafsid diplomacy was an important piece of the imperial project that led al-Mustansir to proclaim the caliphate. In this respect, the embassy of the distant kingdom of Norway in 1262 was perhaps not as surprising as it first appeared. Attracting embassies from distant lands contributed to assert the central place of Tunis and the Hafsid caliphate in the Islamic world, and far beyond.

Note

1. European trade in Egypt was important since the Fatimid period, and continued during the crusades. It is only after the fall of Acre in 1291 that the papacy forbade Christian trade with the Mameluke sultanate – but never with Hafsid Ifrîqiya.

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