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Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies

ISSN: 1754-6559 (Print) 1754-6567 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ribs20

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To cite this article: David Abulafia (2010) Christian merchants in the Almohad cities, Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies, 2:2, 251-257, DOI: 10.1080/17546559.2010.495294

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17546559.2010.495294

Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies
Vol. 2, No. 2, June 2010, 251–257

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Christian merchants in the Almohad cities

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The presence of Christian merchants in cities under Almohad rule raises important questions about their policy towards non-Muslims. A series of commercial agreements ensured that Christian merchants could travel safely to the Maghrib, although relations periodically disintegrated, amid accusations of piracy by the Pisans and Genoese. In addition to treaties in Arabic, Latin and Italian, surviving evidence reveals that relations between the Almohads and the Norman kings of Sicily were healed around 1180. At the heart of these relationships lay the trade in grain from Sicily and in leather and other primary goods from North Africa.

Keywords: Genoa; Pisa; Sicily; Almohads; Tunis; Béjaïa; piracy

The aim of this short article is to add to the discussion of non-Muslims under Almohad rule a group of Christians who were present in the Almohad territories and were allowed to enjoy a protected status rather different from that traditionally accorded to the *dhimmis*: the Italian merchants. Their presence in Almohad cities, with the approval of the Almohad authorities, suggests how important to the Almohads was the revenue they received from external trade; and their willingness to provide space for Christian merchants from western Europe also indicates that the abrogation of the *dhimma* often attributed to the Almohads did not result in the exclusion of Christian merchants, who were, in any case, exempt from *dhimmi* status. In a classic article, David Corcos questioned how absolute and consistent was this supposed abrogation of the *dhimma*, looking at the Jews of the Almohad lands, especially Morocco. Corcos made occasional reference to the Italian presence in Ceuta and elsewhere, and to the creation of their warehouses and trading quarters [*funduqs*], and the intention here is to open up the question of their status in the Almohad world, from the perspective of current research on Mediterranean trade in this period.[1] If the discussion were extended into the thirteenth century, with a focus on Hafsid Tunis, it would be possible to add a great amount of material about the Catalan merchants in Tunis, as well as other groups, including Christian mercenaries and missionaries. We even have the acts of a Genoese notary based in Tunis, Pietro Battifoglio, from 1289, by which time the strictness of the early Almohads had been significantly relaxed.[2]

There is, however, a special interest in the very first contacts between the Almohads and the Italian merchants – the former at the height of their commitment to their

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[1]Corcos, "Attitude of the Almohads towards the Jews," 149–51 [in Hebrew]; reprinted in Corcos, *Studies in the History of the Jews*, 330–28 [Hebrew section in backward pagination].
[2]Pistarino, *Notai genovesi in oltremare*.

ISSN 1754-6559 print/ISSN 1754-6567 online

DOI: 10.1080/17546559.2010.495294
http://www.informaworld.com

doctrines and the latter in the vigorous first stages of their commercial expansion. It should be stressed that most of the material to be cited concerns North Africa rather than al-Andalus.[3] The documentary base is a series of treaties which survive in Latin or Arabic, or sometimes in both (and occasionally in a late Italian translation), preserved in the State Archives in Pisa, though when they were published by the great scholar Michele Amari they were in Florence – hence the title of his 1863 study, *I diplomi arabi del R. Archivio fiorentino*.[4] These and other documents were also studied around the same time by a French scholar, Louis de Mas Latrie, who took into account the occasional references to negotiations between the Almohads and Genoa or Pisa in the contemporary Latin chronicles of the two cities.[5] Finally, there is some intriguing material from around 1180 recording a treaty between the Norman king of Sicily and the ruler of Tunis, which passed into one of the great works of early Italian literature, and which will be examined towards the end of this article.

North Africa possessed enormous value for Italian merchants. Ifrīqiya absorbed great quantities of Sicilian grain, as a result of a severe decline in production in the old Roman province of Africa. The Pisans and Genoese visited the ports of the Maghrib to acquire leather, wool, fine ceramics and, from Morocco, increasing quantities of grain – it is noticeable that whenever they quarrelled with the kings of Sicily, another source of grain, they built up their trade in Ceuta. Particularly important was the supply of gold, in the form of gold dust, that reached the towns of the Maghrib along the caravan routes that stretched across the Sahara. Thus there were plenty of good reasons for trading in North Africa, and plenty of reasons to be disconcerted by the political conflicts affecting North Africa that culminated in the Almohad invasion. Our evidence begins to accumulate from about 1150: according to the Genoese chronicler Caffaro, who was a former city consul and was contemporary with the events he recorded, the Genoese were already on good terms with the Almohads in 1153–54. That year, eight Almohad galleys encountered some Genoese ships off Cagliari in southern Sardinia, which had arrived from Alexandria; the Almohads tried to seize the rich cargo that was on board the Genoese ships, but once they understood the ships were from Genoa they realised they were attacking a friendly, or at least neutral, power and desisted.[6]

In 1161 the Genoese sent an embassy to the Almohad caliph, which was well received as it travelled through Almohad territory, and reached him in Morocco; a fifteen-year peace was agreed, and the Genoese were assured that they could travel throughout the Almohad territories with their goods, free of molestation. They were to pay a tax of 8% on the value of their goods, and no more, except at Bijāya, where they were to pay 10%; however, a fifth of that was remitted back to the Genoese republic, so we could think of this as 8% for the caliph and 2% for Genoa.[7] This seems in fact to have been a renewal of a pre-existing arrangement, to judge from the incident at Cagliari a few years earlier. It is also plain from the many commercial contracts that survive from Genoa at this time that trade with north-west Africa was flourishing. Although these records are far from complete, they do record voyages to Bijāya, Ceuta and the Mediterranean coasts of Spain – in 1160 these destinations accounted for over

[3]For an overview of some aspects, see Hammam, "Les relations commerciales."
[4]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*.
[5]Mas Latrie, *Traités de paix*.
[6]Mas Latrie, *Traités de paix*, 47.
[7]Belgrano and Sant'Angelo, *Gli Annali Genovesi*, 1: 62, 1161.

20% of recorded Genoese trade, and north-west Africa was a more popular trading destination than anywhere apart from Byzantium. One factor that stimulated investment in trade with North Africa was the departure of the ambassadors sent to the Almohad court, since many merchants seized the opportunity to load goods on the galleys bound for the Maghrib.[8]

The relationship obviously had its ups and downs, because the Genoese sent another ambassador on a galley to Ceuta in 1169, but he seems to have come back quite satisfied with the arrangements he made.[9] Towards the end of the twelfth century, large numbers of commercial contracts again survive, and Ceuta is very well represented, taking 29% of recorded trade in 1182, a little ahead of Norman Sicily, but, if one includes Bijāya and Tunis, North Africa dominates the recorded trade of Genoa, with nearly 37%. Ceuta was also strongly represented in 1184 and 1186.[10] Evidence of a very different sort survives from 1179. That year a Genoese merchant in Ceuta engaged in a disputation with a Jew, the theme being whether the Messiah had come. It is generally agreed that the disputation is based on a real encounter, however much it may have been embroidered later; and the interest in the coming of the Messiah may reflect an intensification of interest in this question among Jews at a time of difficulty, reflected also in the letters concerning persecution of Moses Maimonides.[11] From these scraps of information we can conclude that Genoese visits to the Almohad world were regular and profitable. It is impressive that they managed to maintain this relationship even though they also entered into treaties with the Almoravid rulers of Majorca (1160, 1181, 1188), and on the eve of the Almohad takeover of Ifrīqiya they were trading in the Norman-controlled towns of North Africa.[12] They steered a neutral course between enemy forces, but the Almohads appear to have accepted that, so long as they did not actively encourage their enemies, they would remain welcome.

The Genoese acquired a *funduq* – a warehouse and headquarters with living quarters – in Tunis, Bijāya, Mahdia and other important cities along the coast of North Africa. The Almohads encouraged the creation of *funduqs* not just for Christian merchants, but for the trans-Saharan traders who reached Tunis from the south.[13] The *funduqs* of the Italians and Catalans could expand into a whole merchant quarter. A privilege of 1234 to the Pisans stipulates that a wall will be built between the Genoese and Pisan quarters in Tunis, and the acts of the Genoese notary Pietro Battifoglio, of 1289, portray a large and vibrant Genoese community in Tunis of merchants, soldiers, priests and fallen women, that took great pride in its tavern, from which the Hafsid ruler was happy to draw taxes.[14] Al-Mustansir, the Hafsid ruler of Tunis (d. 1277), specified in a privilege to the Pisans issued in 1264 that they were to have a church, a cemetery, an oven and access to a bath-house, and that their quarter was to be of the same size as that of the Genoese. The term *funduqs* clearly now meant a merchant quarter rather than a khan surrounding a courtyard, a transformation visible in Italian commercial settlements in Acre, Constantinople and elsewhere. In the twelfth century,

[8]Abulafia, *Two Italies*, 119.
[9]Belgrano and Sant'Angelo, *Gli Annali Genovesi*, 1: 228.
[10]Abulafia, *Two Italies*, 161, 166.
[11]Limor, *Die Disputationen zu Ceuta (1179) und Mallorca (1286)*; Soifer, "*'You Say that the Messiah Has Come'*;" Halkin and Hartman, *Crisis and Leadership*.
[12]Abulafia, "Gli inizi del commercio."
[13]Constable, *Housing the Stranger*, 126–30.
[14]Pistarino, *Notai genovesi in oltremare.*

the Genoese and Pisans may not have possessed a quarter on that scale, but their *funduqs* were already coming into being. As with Genoa, the Pisans were trying to build contacts with the rulers of the North African towns even before the Almohad conquest of the region. In 1157 the emir of Tunis granted the Pisans special rights in the export of alum, and praised them for supporting him against his foes, who included the Almohads. However, once the Almohads were in charge, the Pisans did experience occasional difficulties, even though they secured the right to a *funduq* in Zawila, the suburb of the Tunisian coastal town of al-Mahdiyya, in 1166, only a few years after the king of Sicily was forced to surrender Zawila to the Almohads.[15] In 1181 they complained to the caliph that a Pisan ship carrying Sicilian grain to Tripoli had been cast by a storm on the coast of North Africa; they struggled into the port of "Macri" and there the inhabitants refused them water unless they sold them some of their grain. There is a Makri (modern Fethiye) in south-west Anatolia, beyond Rhodes, but this seems too far off course, and this particular Macri was most likely a stopping-point along the North African littoral.[16] Meanwhile an Almohad galley arrived from Tripoli and its crew decided that the Pisans were pirates; the Pisans were carried off to Tripoli and the governor cast them naked into prison, where they suffered hunger and thirst. The Pisan republic requested the return of the men, their ship and their goods. Whatever the outcome, this was not the only irritation. The same year the Pisans complained that they had been forbidden from exporting anything but leather and skins from Bijāya.[17] There was an attempt to demand a fat guarantee of 500 dinars from Pisan merchants who wanted to trade more widely in Bijāya; this was contrary to the terms of past treaties, and was probably no more than an attempt at extortion by the governor or the customs officials.[18] It marked the beginning of a continuous grand tradition of extortion of Christian merchants from western Europe, and eventually even North America, by the rulers of the Barbary coast, culminating in the early nineteenth century in the victories of the US fleet over the Barbary regencies.[19]

Yet the Almohads still found the Pisan presence useful. In 1184 and 1186 the Pisans renewed their treaty with the Almohads, first in a document issued by the caliph's son and then in a formal privilege from the caliph.[20] The term "treaty" is not, perhaps, appropriate, since the document of 1186, which only survives in Arabic, consists of a one-sided grant by the caliph, who begins by observing that the mission of Islam is to abolish all other sects and religions, and that of the Mahdi is to restore the pristine purity of Islam. The Pisans were granted the right to trade for twenty-five years, but only from four places: Ceuta, Oran, Bijāya and Tunis. They were forbidden from landing in other parts of the Almohad realm, unless driven there by a tempest. If that happened, they were not allowed to conduct any trade, nor even to make contact with the inhabitants. The one exception was that they could refit their ships and take on supplies at Almería when they needed to do so – a rare reference to Spain in the Almohad treaties with the Italians. If any Pisan transgressed these rules, his life and property would be at the mercy of the Almohad government, "nor will the treaty be a shield against the effects of his transgression". It was even forbidden to carry any Muslims on board Pisan ships.

[15]Lupo Gentile, *Gli Annales Pisani di Bernardo Maragone*, s.a. 1167.
[16]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, docs. i. II, ii. XIII, 7, 269.
[17]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, doc. ii. XIV, 270.
[18]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, doc. i. III, 11–12.
[19]The best of the large recent literature is Lambert, *Barbary Wars*; also Leiner, *End of Barbary Terror*.
[20]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, i. IV, V, ii. XVI, XVII, XLVI, 14, 17, 230, 273, 274.

The Pisans must not stand in the way of Almohad fleets they might meet on the high seas.

The document is more notable for its prohibitions and threats than for what it grants. One oddity is that this was a period when, as has been seen, the Genoese were investing quite heavily in trade with Ceuta and Bijāya, and were apparently able to move fairly freely within Almohad waters, despite their friendship for the Almoravid Banu Ghaniyah, who still held power in Majorca, and were trying their best to capture strong points in North Africa.[21] The Genoese had no compunction about carrying Muslims aboard ships leaving Ceuta. In 1184 Muhammad ibn Jubayr departed from Ceuta on a Genoese ship bound for Alexandria, for some Italian ships indulged in a grand tour of the Mediterranean, carrying goods between the Maghrib, the Levant and Byzantium, not just between Italy and their first port of call across the sea.[22] It may be that the Pisans were regarded as particularly untrustworthy, and that tighter limits were placed on them than on other merchants (the Sicilians will be examined later).

A particularly serious incident occurred in 1200.[23] The governor of Tunis informed the Pisans that two pirate ships from Pisa had captured Muslim ships, killed many of those on board, and carried away their goods. He pointedly remarked that if he told the caliph about this, "all your people who are found in his lands would be killed." "But," he continued, "we kept silent," and he now requested and required the Pisans to act towards the pirates as he believed was done in similar cases in Genoa: their houses, vineyards and possessions must be destroyed, and the pirates must be executed; and then he would inform the caliph that the Pisans had acted properly in separating themselves from the malefactors. In fact, the Pisan pirates had already returned the Muslim ships they had captured, because an Almohad flotilla had caught up with them, and the pirates had roundly declared that the Pisans in Tunis would pay the Muslims for what they had lost. Following a less serious incident off Malta in 1184, the governor of Tunis had complained at the seizure of a Muslim ship by a Pisan corsair, and the consuls had taken action against the pirate; but how seriously the city fathers took the incident in 1200 is not known.[24]

This was also the period in which the Almohads made peace with their longstanding enemies, the kings of Sicily, from whom they had gained control of Ifrīqiya and Tripoli. One motive was probably the wish to revive the grain trade linking Sicily to North Africa, on which Tunis and neighbouring cities depended and which, indeed, brought handsome revenues to the king of Sicily. But the circumstances in which a treaty was made were, apparently, quite dramatic.[25] According to the Norman monk and chronicler Robert of Torigni, the Sicilian royal navy intercepted a Muslim ship carrying the daughter of the ruler of Tunis to Spain, where she was to marry an Andalusi emir. Rather than keeping the princess captive, King William II (William the Good) returned her to her father, who was so grateful that he gave back to the king of Sicily the twin towns of al-Mahdiyyah and Zawila "Affricam et Sibiliam".[26] Mas Latrie was quick to point out that there is simply no evidence for a Sicilian re-occupation of al-Mahdiyyah, and what Robert probably misremembered was a trade treaty between the king of Sicily and the Almohads, ending twenty years of sundered

[21]Abulafia, "Gli inizi del commercio," 10.
[22]Ibn Jubayr, *Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 26.
[23]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, ii. XIX, 278–9; Hammam, "Relations commerciales," 49–51.
[24]Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, doc. ii. XV, 271.
[25]Abulafia, "Reputation of a Norman King."
[26]Howlett, *Chronicle of Robert of Torigni*, 285; Mas Latrie, *Traités de paix*, 152.

ties between Sicily and North Africa. Indeed, the Montecassino chronicle, written much closer to the theatre of operations, records a ten-year truce between the king of Sicily and the *rex Maxamutorum*, signed at Palermo in August 1181, allowing a plausible interlude after the dramatic events of 1180 for peace negotiations.[27] These negotiations must have been slow and at times painful: Ibn al-Athir, writing only a few decades later, described how a Sicilian ambassador visited al-Mahdiyya in May 1180, negotiating a ten-year truce (a story repeated by an-Nuwayri).[28]

These events were commemorated in Boccaccio's romantic tale of the Christian knight Gerbino who fell in love with a Muslim princess, which he included in the *Decameron*.[29] In this version of the story, Gerbino was so infatuated with the princess that he armed a galley and pounced on the ship carrying the princess while it was off Sardinia; the Muslim sailors put the princess to death rather than allowing her to fall into infidel hands. Al-Marrakushi had his own embroidered version of these events, insisting that the king of Sicily agreed to pay tribute to the Almohad caliph, and sent him as a gift a precious stone so large that it was called "the horse's hoof"; it was used to decorate the cover of a Koran. Money came into the arrangement, for sure, but it was the taxes generated by trade that interested the two sovereigns, and therein lies the vital clue explaining the readiness of the Almohads to encourage Christian merchants to visit their lands.[30]

The acceptance by the Almohads of a Christian merchant presence in their empire can be understood in several ways. In the first place, the merchants had established themselves in these territories before the Almohad conquests, and played a significant part in the economic life of the cities with which they traded. Revenues from Italian and Catalan merchants were not to be scorned, if the evidence from the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century *funduqs* is a guide. It should be remembered that Muslim merchants rarely ventured into Christian lands, and – particularly with the eclipse of the Jewish trading community known from the Cairo Genizah – much of the long-distance trade in the Mediterranean lay in Italian hands from the mid-twelfth century. In the second place, their powerful fleets could be neutralised by permitting the Italians to trade in the Almohad empire, subject to dire penalties if they indulged in piracy, and the use of piracy or arrest against the Italians if they proved uncooperative. This did not work perfectly, as the continued Genoese and Pisan support for the Almoravids in Majorca shows, support they continued to display even when the king of Sicily tried to capture Majorca for Christendom in 1181. On the other hand, the Almohads were not necessarily averse to commercial contact with other Muslim regimes, such as Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt and Almoravid Majorca. It has been seen that ibn Jubayr set out from Ceuta for Alexandria on a Genoese ship. On balance, then, the Italians had their uses. They could be tolerated as Christians whose homeland lay outside the *dar-al Islam*. This did not make their life in Almohad lands as comfortable or as safe as the privileges granted by the caliphs appeared to promise, but in this respect their experiences were not much worse than in Egypt or Byzantium. By the late thirteenth century, under the Hafsids, they had built successfully on their privileges in Tunis, creating a Christian quarter of massive proportions. But the foundations for this success were laid in the relationship they had built with the original Almohads.

[27]Mas Latrie, *Traités de paix*, 152.
[28]Amari, *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, 185.
[29]Boccaccio, *Decamerone*, day 4, story 4.
[30]Amari, *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, 131.

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