

Project: Rex Lupus and Other Saracens: Shifting alliances among the kings of 12th century Iberia

Outline:

- I. The context: The “*Reconquista*” and the rise of the Almohads
- II. Three documents in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon
 - a. November 1168: Alliance between Rex Lupus and Alfonso II of Aragon
 - b. December 1168: Alliance between Alfonso II of Aragon and Sancho VI Garcés of Navarre against Rex Lupus
 - c. June 1170: Agreement between Alfonso VIII of Castile and Alfonso II of Aragon that the latter would stop attacking Rex Lupus
- III. Analysis: The complexities of allegiance among Christian and Muslim kings in 12th century Iberia

I. The Context

In the first half of the twelfth century, a new power arose in North Africa and began to win territory on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. The Almohads espoused a radically monotheistic philosophy and began to fight against Christians and Muslims who did not share their outlook. The Christian kings of Iberia fought to win territory from Muslim hands in the process known today as the “*Reconquista*.” Yet, this conventional narrative of battles between coalitions of Christian kings and the vast armies of the Berber Muslims belies a deeper, more complex, and far more interesting interaction. Christian and Muslim rulers alike held overlapping allegiances. This project examines three treaties preserved in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon that deal with Muʿammad ibn Saʿd Ibn Mardaniḥ, the most powerful independent Muslim ruler of al-Andalus during the Almohad period.¹ These treaties show that religion was not the only – nor indeed the primary – fault line along which conflict occurred. In fact, when faced with co-religionist rivals who challenged both their religious and territorial claims, many Mediterranean rulers allied with those whose authority was rooted in a different faith tradition. Ibn Mardaniḥ’s alliances and enmities with the other kings of Iberia elucidate the complexities of the politics of allegiance.

Muʿammad ibn Saʿd was known as Ibn Mardaniḥ in the Arabic sources of the day and as Rex Lupus in the Latin sources (Rey Lobo in the Castilian). He ruled South Eastern Iberia from Valencia to Granada from 1146-1172 CE/540-567 AH, fighting the Almohads and constructing elaborate trade and military alliances with his neighbors. Ibn Mardaniḥ’s alliances provided him with the

economic and military power to maintain power. This meant that Ibn Mardani^{sh} was able to create what María Jesús Viguera Molíns called a third option in the ambit of Andalusí religious relations, maintaining an ideological distinction from the Christians while paying them tribute. As she pointed out, it was this model that would remain the most powerful in Iberia after the reconquest, when the Nasrids would continue tribute to Castile while elaborating their own ruling ideology.²

Ibn Mardani^{sh} built alliances with Christian rulers in Iberia as well as the broader Mediterranean context, which were often accompanied by tribute. Ibn Mardani^{sh} gave the fortress of Uclés to the Castilians in exchange for protection, sent tribute to Barcelona in exchange for military equipment and soldiers, and signed treaties with Genoa and Pisa granting them factories in the ports of Valencia and Denia.³ His alliances with Emperor Alfonso VII and Alfonso VIII of Castile and with Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona were particularly long lasting and important to his military success. His relationship with Castile is particularly well represented in the archives and chronicles, and in some records Ibn Mardani^{sh} is referred to as a vassal of Castile⁴. Many Christian chronicles record tribute and close connections between Ibn Mardani^{sh} and the rulers of Barcelona and Castile.⁵

Ibn Mardani^{sh}'s alliances were vital in supporting his continued power. Al Maqqari^{sh} reports that Ibn Mardani^{sh} asked the Count of Barcelona for help fighting the Almohads in 546/1151, and that the Count obliged by sending ten thousand soldiers to assist him. This scared the Almohads so much that they retreated without engaging.⁶ His trade alliances with Italian city-states seem to have also been established in order to protect his territory. Ibn Mardani^{sh}'s ten-year peace treaties with Genoa and with Pisa (signed in 1149) stipulate that he pay a yearly tribute and establish houses of commerce for them in the ports of Valencia and Denia, and give their merchants a free weekly bath, in exchange for their protection of his subjects in Tortosa and Almeria.⁷

II. Three Documents from the Archives of the Crown of Aragon

The first treaty with Iberian kings preserved in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon records an alliance between King Alfonso II of Aragon (also Alfons I of Barcelona and Provence) and Rex Lupus, in November 1168.⁸ The text reestablishes peace between Alfonso II of Aragon and Ibn Mardani^{sh} (represented by Giraldo de Jorba) for two years starting May 1, 1169, in exchange for an annual tribute of 25,000 Morabetinos, to be paid before Christmas of that year. This may have been inspired by the new ten-year peace

treaty between Navarre and Castile (1167), which meant that Sancho VI of Navarre would have been able to help Ibn Mardani-sh, already ally of the Castilians, attack the Aragonese.

But the next month (and only two documents later in the Chancery register), Alfonso II of Aragon and Sancho VI Garcés of Navarre signed a treaty against Ibn Mardani-sh (19 December 1168, in Sangüesa).⁹ This treaty calls for both of the rulers to work to acquire the territories of Rex Lupus and all other Saracen land and to divide it and subject its population.¹⁰

Only Castile remained faithful to Ibn Mardani-sh and Murcia. The third document

is a treaty signed on June 4, 1170, between Alfonso VIII of Castile and Alfonso II of Aragon in Sahagún,¹¹ which determined that the Aragonese would cease attacking Ibn Mardani-sh's territory the following year in exchange for an annual tribute of 40,000 Morabetinos¹² of gold. ¹³

The treaty calls upon Alfonso II as a relative of Alfonso VIII's, and talks extensively about the love between the two kingdoms.¹⁴ Ibn Mardani-sh's territory is protected by virtue of his close relationship of vassalage with the Castilians.

III. Analysis

Ibn Mardani-sh is portrayed differently according to the political context. In the first, he is a king with sovereign claims to his land, while in the second he becomes simply one more Saracen to be expelled, along with the Almohads. In the third, he is a special figure protected by the Castilian crown. The ongoing territorial conflict among Navarre, Aragon and Castile led to shifting alliances among the kingdoms, and dynastic conflicts within individual kingdoms further complicated their diplomatic practices. Sharq al-Andalus was a crucial buffer state between Christian states and Almohads, and this, along with the region's substantial tribute to Christian kingdoms, made it an important ally for each of the kingdoms at various points. Rulers turned toward Ibn Mardani-sh when feeling threatened by their rivals or by the Almohads, since his army could help protect against either. They turned against him when he allied with their rivals or when their desire for his territory outweighed the advantages of his military assistance. When this happened, the Christian kings frequently couched their opposition to him in religious terms.

The long twelfth century was the height of Christian expansion into Islamic territories (from Toledo in 1085 to Seville in 1248). Ibn Mardani-sh's rule

began just as Pope Eugenius III declared fighting the Muslims of Iberia to be a crusade (1147), and the kings Ibn Mardani^{sh} counted as allies—in Castile, Genoa, Pisa and Aragon—formed alliances pledging to divide his territories amongst themselves. His success despite these challenges reflects the flexibility of religious and political ideologies throughout the period. The same documents that refer to Ibn Mardani^{sh} as “Rex Lupus,” a name that suggests the danger and irrationality of a fierce animal, also vow to protect him. Sometimes, he is seen as a valued Iberian ally against North African enemies, while other times he is grouped with them in an undifferentiated mass of Saracens. For the Christians of Iberia, Ibn Mardani^{sh} was not quite the enemy, but dangerous in his ambiguity nonetheless. Ibn Mardani^{sh}, occupying the physical landscape between the Almohads and the kings of Castile, Leon and Aragon, also served as a theoretical intermediary between Iberian alliance and holy war, alternately rejected and embraced by those on each side.