

## Book Review

Ghourigate, Mehdi. *Les Empires berbères: constructions et déconstructions d'un objet historiographique*. Islam – Thought, Culture, and Society, 11. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024. ISBN 9783111017112. xvi + 455 pp. \$135.99 cloth. \$135.99 ebook.

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*Les Empires berbères* is an exceptionally ambitious work that spans the history of the Maghrib, Europe and parts of the Middle East from the eleventh to the twenty-first centuries. The author, a specialist on the Almohad Empire and on the Tamazight languages, sets out to investigate how what he calls the “Berber Empires”—the Almoravids and Almohads—have been perceived and interpreted since the medieval period in North Africa and elsewhere. This book is a welcome addition to the recent flurry of interest in the history of perceptions of the Maghribi past and the interplay between different temporalities in North African history. While Eric Calderwood’s *Colonial al-Andalus* explores the instrumentalization of al-Andalus in discourses on Morocco in Francoist Spain, Jocelyn Hendrickson’s *Leaving Iberia* demonstrates the enduring relevance of legal texts forged in the context of premodern Iberian conquests for resistance and accommodation to the French colonial order in the modern period.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Natividad Planas’ new monograph outlines how French colonial discourse about the Maghribi past contributed to obfuscating the connections between the premodern Maghrib and Europe.<sup>2</sup> Ghourigate’s monograph distinguishes itself by his extensive chronological framework, which allows for a nuanced examination of the interplays between medieval, premodern, and modern discourses regarding North Africa’s imperial pasts.

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1. Eric Calderwood, *Colonial al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Jocelyn Hendrickson, *Leaving Iberia: Islamic Law and Christian Conquest in North West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Program in Islamic Law and Harvard University Press, 2021).

2. Natividad Planas, *Koukou, le royaume enfoui: Enquête sur les relations entre Europe et Islam* (Paris: Fayard, 2023).

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The book's main strength is the breadth of Spanish, Tamazight, Arabic, and French primary sources it is able to weave together. Divided into sixteen short chapters, it moves chronologically, beginning with the first chronicles composed about the Almoravids and Almohads during the imperial period (1040–1269). Although these dense first chapters may pose a challenge to readers unfamiliar with the medieval Maghrib, the author convincingly demonstrates how the enduring cult dedicated to Ibn Tūmart, the founder of the Almohad dynasty—particularly in the High Atlas Mountains—prompted Maliki scholars to redact or destroy pro-Almohad documents. Ghouirgate identifies this as a form of *damnatio memoriae*, which shaped subsequent discourses about these empires until the modern period. This process of erasure was not, however, entirely successful. One chapter explores the posterity of the few surviving sources shedding positive light on the Almohads, focusing on ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī’s (d. ca. 1249) *al-Mu‘ghib*. Emphasizing both its context of production and the dubious claims of its author, Ghouirgate shows how *al-Mu‘ghib* went from relative oblivion to becoming a key text in shaping nineteenth-century European views of the “Berber Empires” and later North African discourses about the Almohads.

The next three chapters delve into the knowledge developed about the Almoravids and Almohads in premodern times, with a particular focus on Western Europe. The author underscores the importance of early modern Spain as a center for the preservation and production of knowledge on the history of the Maghrib. However, he contends that, from the late seventeenth century onwards, interest in medieval North Africa shifted from Iberia to France and Holland. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the role of the Almoravids and Almohads in the Spanish national past began to be reevaluated, spurred by the emergence of a new generation of Arabists. This reevaluation is one of the central themes of the seven chapters that examine the modern historiography of the Almohads and Almoravids. Of particular interest is the discussion of the interactions between French and Spanish academic circles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author persuasively shows how competing colonial policies in North Africa fostered academic collaborations and transfers of ideas as much as they promoted the establishment of rival research institutions and antagonistic interpretations of the Maghribi past, such as the opposition between the French *occident musulman* and the Spanish notion of *hispano-árabe*. In its final chapters, though sometimes too dense to easily navigate, the book successfully addresses recent polemics surrounding the history of the Almoravids and the Almohads since the end of the colonial period, both in Spain—with the recent resurfacing of a movement negating the Muslim conquest<sup>3</sup>—and in the Maghrib. In particular, the author examines the role that the Almohads played in past Algerian and Moroccan nationalist discourses and analyzes their current significance among Imazighen activists.

One of the most important contributions of the book is to demonstrate that the legacy of the “Berber Empires,” particularly the Almohads, has been constantly mobilized across time in imperialist rhetoric and discourses of conquest by Maghribis and Europeans alike. During the Saadi sultanate, for instance, the Almohads were revived as a model to bring

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3. On this, see for instance Alejandro García Sanjuán, “Denying the Islamic Conquest of Iberia: A Historiographical Fraud,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2019): 306–22.

about the unification of the Maghrib. In the modern period, the French held the Almohad past to be the only historical precedent that could inform the French civilizing mission in North Africa, while it was invoked by some Spanish officials and academics as a shared heritage that legitimized their ambitions vis-à-vis the Maghrib. Ghouirgate further explores the plasticity of references to the Almohads in contemporary discourses across North Africa and the Middle East by showing, for instance, how references to Ibn Tūmart permeated the rhetoric of several jihadist and Islamist movements since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Overall, *Les Empires berbères* represents a significant contribution to the study of the medieval Maghrib and interpretations of the Maghribi past that will be valuable to scholars of North Africa and the Middle East, as well as to researchers focusing on the intellectual history of premodern and modern Europe. More broadly, this thorough excavation of the discourses produced about the Almoravids and Almohads will benefit anyone interested in understanding how historical knowledge sediments across time and how these layers inevitably inform contemporary perceptions of the past.