

Was the Christian conquest over al-Andalus irreversible?

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Abstract

The consideration of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa as a turning point in history must necessarily be contemplated within the larger framework of the incapacity shown by Andalusí society to oppose the conquering dynamics manifested by the Iberian feudal aristocracies and monarchies since the conquest of Toledo (1085). This is a crucial matter that cannot be seen in isolation from the wider context of the expansion of Latin Christendom. In this regard, the present article suggests a comparison between the disparate fortunes of the Iberian kingdoms and the Latin principalities in the east through the critical assessment of three factors: (i) dissemination of, and role played by the ideology of *jihad* as a response against the Christian pressure, (ii) the emergence of professional military castes in the Muslim east, capable of confronting the powerful Frankish cavalry, and (iii) the characteristics of the colonization of conquered territory. This kind of analysis proves that the result of the battle was irrelevant in the general context of Christian expansion, as was the case with the previous Muslim victories at Zallaqa and Alarcos.

Keywords: jihad; military castes; colonization; Latin East; Medieval Iberia; Christian expansion; Las Navas de Tolosa

Any approach to the question of the significance of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa must contemplate the long-term historical context. The deepest insight into this question, posed for the first time by Miquel Barceló in 1985, was set forth in Pierre Guichard's thesis on Valencian Muslims, which examined "how and why this society, wealthy, culturally advanced and superior in many technical fields to Christian society, progressively retreated before the latter, never acquiring the political, military and cultural structures necessary to offer an effective resistance".¹ The present essay will locate the events of 1212 within the context of the expansion of Latin Christendom at large, a process which includes the conquests in the Iberian Peninsula after the fall of Toledo (1085), suggesting that the closest parallel is that offered by the Latin principalities of Syria, first detained and later destroyed by the Near Eastern Muslim states.

Although Dominique Urvoy and Guichard himself already stressed the need for a comparison along these lines their recommendation did not extend beyond ideological aspects (even though Guichard admitted that the military and 'demographic' advantages enjoyed by Christian feudal society should be taken into consideration). The main argument is that al-Andalus lacked a true doctrine of holy (or 'legal') war against the Christians. Far from being considered an individual duty, *jihād* stood as a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) over the community at large, a view which implied delegating this obligation to the State. This idea would be supported by the Mālikī legal doctrines dominant

¹ Barceló, "Vespres de feudals"; Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 1, 100. Given the limited space available and the nature of this paper, bibliographical references will be reduced to a minimum.

in the Muslim west, for which *jihād* was not among the most pressing duties of the faithful.² The Almoravid dynasty, in power in al-Andalus from the late eleventh century, was a strong advocate of the Mālikī orthodoxy, and duly assumed its institutional role in carrying out the holy war through the organisation of periodical expeditions beyond the Christian frontier. The legal-religious elite was thus allowed to maintain a passive stance regarding the obligations to wage holy war and to clear individual consciences from direct involvement against the infidel threat. In the mid twelfth century, the new Almohad regime directly confronted the Mālikī doctrines, but its military priority remained the unification of the Muslim west, a task which primarily involved fighting other Muslims. The *jihād* against Christians stood only as a subsidiary to this main target, for example with the conquest of Almería and Baeza from Castilian hands and with the expulsion of the Normans from the coast of Ifrīqiya. It was not until the 1170s, and most particularly under the Caliph Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184-99), that an ideology of holy war was promoted with any degree of determination. At this juncture many *fuqahā'* – Muslim law experts – joined these military campaigns seeking martyrdom, most especially at Las Navas. Furthermore, this campaign was preceded by a general appeal from the Caliph an-Nāṣir calling all Muslims to join the *jihād* in 1211.³ It would therefore appear that both the defeat in Las Navas and the important prior victory at Alarcos (1195) took place amidst an ideological background propitious to the universal extension of the moral duty to fight the Christians. Yet according

² Urvoy, "Sur l'évolution"; Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 1, 87-100, 162-163.

³ Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 1, 129-131.

to Urvoy, Mālikī traditions—which the Almohads had been incapable of uprooting—blocked the emergence of new sensibilities towards the ‘spiritual mobilisation’ of Andalusis. *Jihād* thus remained an obligation of the State, which would be held accountable for its fulfilment and in which ‘individual initiative and enthusiasm’ were curtailed.

This is a crucial difference with the case posed by eastern Islam, at war with Crusaders and the Latin principalities. Long ago Emmanuel Sivan—whose work Guichard also follows—showed the active intellectual role played by the legal-religious elites in the expansion of the idea of *jihād* in the Near East during the twelfth century. This included the production of poetry, treatises, correspondence and religious readings, with the full support of the Zengid and Ayyubid dynasties, whose sovereigns sometimes even adopted the title of *mujāhid* (holy warrior).⁴ It is true, as Sivan points out, that this popular mobilisation never had any practical influence on the military defeat of the Latin Christians. Even Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn lacked the ability to propitiate a truly massive volunteer movement. As is well known, the task ultimately fell to professional troops; adequately equipped, paid and trained. What was then the real role of the ideological factor in the success of Eastern Muslim armies? According to Guichard, sovereigns would take advantage of a favourable public opinion towards *jihād* to reassert their legitimacy through proclamations and other manifestos. This dimension was absent from the Muslim west, with but a few exceptions, such as the proclamations issued by the aforementioned Caliph al-Manṣūr. In an excellent article, Pascal Burési has examined Guichard’s arguments, admitting that military *jihād* had been fully assumed by the state,

⁴ Sivan, *L’Islam et la Croisade*.

both under the Almoravids and the Almohads, although in different ways. It is at any rate remarkable that both dynasties used this ideology as an instrument for propaganda and legitimacy: public readings of “victory letters” (*kutub al-fath*) with the Almoravids; *jihād* based preaching with the Almohads. The favourable social impact thus generated was, however, channelled through a ‘spiritual’ *jihād* manifested in ascetic and mystical practices.⁵ In this regard, Burési challenges Guichard’s view on the causes that drove Eastern Islam to success and Western Islam to collapse, concluding that the real causes must be found elsewhere. In fact, the practical differences would be scarcely relevant, since in the east the obligation to wage holy war was similarly left to those with the power and the resources to carry it out, although we cannot ignore the influence of periodical demands in favour of holy war posed by the learned elite and public opinion at large.

In Guichard’s view, two factors would propitiate the decisive change in sensibility that took place in the East regarding this matter: first, the diversity of legal schools in the Sunni east, against the strict Mālikī monopoly in the west; second, the alleged degeneration of state structures which in the east followed the seizure of power by the ‘military classes’, which stands in sharp contrast with the continuation and predominance of central state forms and notions in al-Andalus. *Jihād* would have been permanently delegated, leaving Andalusī Muslims “with no intellectual tools or political conceptions for the rearrangement of their political and military structures and of their relationship with their Christian neighbours”.⁶ In my own opinion, this second factor is the weak link in

⁵ Burési, “La réaction idéologique”.

⁶ Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 1, 98-100.

an otherwise impeccable argument. This is not so much because it stresses, somewhat riskily, the alleged persistence of a 'centralised state' in al-Andalus, but because it accepts the idea of a deterioration of the Muslim political order in the East as a result of the increasing control exercised by military castes.

This idea never crystallises beyond Guichard's observation that in the Near East "the Turkish factor introduced a military and, to some degree, 'feudalising' element, which was absent from al-Andalus after the Almoravid and Almohad fiascos".⁷ It must be recognised that at first sight the situation could be indeed interpreted from such an angle: the multiplication of regional sultanates caused by the Turcoman migrations of the eleventh century, the precarious nature of military dynasties and the apparent weakening of central authority as a consequence of 'territorial concessions' (*iqṭā'*) aimed at the sustenance of professional warriors. These are the 'feudal' features pointed out long ago by Abraham N. Poliak and more recently taken up again by Halil Berktaý and others.⁸

This is not the place to discuss these controversial ideas (that is, the degree to which the *iqṭā'* involve the cession of effective power and control over certain communities from the state into 'private hands') but to make some critical observations on the comparison suggested by Guichard (who can hardly be considered a follower of Poliak). First of all, we must contest the assumption that a fragmentation of sovereignty implies a change in the nature of Muslim states and in the tributary relationships on which they rested. It is in fact thanks to Guichard himself that we know this not to be the case in the analogous (and

⁷ Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 2, 357.

⁸ Poliak, *Feudalism in Egypt*; Berktaý, "Feudalism Debate".

coeval) evolution of the *mulūk at-ṭawāʾif* constituted in al-Andalus during the eleventh century, at least beyond the shortcomings of legitimacy suffered by their princes (which have in any case probably been overstated by historiography⁹). Regarding the relationship between the eastern *iqṭāʿ* and the emergence of a warrior class allegedly comparable to European feudal knights, the evidence seems to suggest that their main beneficiaries were troop leaders (*amīr*), for whom these concessions were only a secondary reward, their main privilege being their ability to participate in matters of state. Additionally, the available evidence suggests that military pay was drawn mainly from the public treasury.¹⁰

In reality, therefore, the differences with Almohad practices in the west – particularly during the reign of al-Manṣūr – seem to be negligible: a professional army (which from 1187 included the *ghuzz* contingents of Turkish-Kurdish cavalry) and, less often, ‘territorial concessions’ (*aqṭāʿ*, *sihām*) managed by the state’s tax administration and conceived as an extra reward for the main leaders. As correctly pointed out by Yassir Benhima regarding the Almohad case, the development and sustenance of an *iqṭāʿ*-based system requires a centralised and well-organised state administration.¹¹ It seems clear that these concessions extended further and were more numerous in the east, but this was only under the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasties, and most particularly in the thirteenth century, when the Almohad Empire was hopelessly disintegrating. We cannot ascertain whether these *sihām* would have reached a similar scale in the

⁹ Retamero, “La formalización del poder”.

¹⁰ Irwin, “*Iqṭāʿ* and the End”.

¹¹ Benhima, “Note sur l’évolution”.

west if this regime had lasted for longer, but it must be noted that the proliferation of *iqṭāʿ* in the east did not coincide with processes of debilitation and fragmentation of the state, but quite the opposite, under strong political powers that maintained control over Syria, Egypt and the Jazīrah.

The warrior castes which substituted the Turcoman tribal cavalry were thus created by increasingly strong states—from the Zengid to the Mamluk dynasties—through the combined use of military wages and *iqṭāʿ*. The military forces included *ḥalqa*, paid professional troops recruited among free men of Turkish or Kurdish origin, and *ghilmān* (sing. *ghulām*) recruited among purchased or captured slaves who, from the late twelfth century onwards, were to be known as *mamālīk* (sing. *mamluk*). These *mamālīk* forces soon became the backbone of the army because of their versatility in the use of various weapons, the quality of their equipment—they were armoured from head to foot—and their strict combat discipline, resulting from constant and severe training. Their numbers and efficiency progressively grew, enabling them to seize control of the state and impose their own dynasty from 1250. These men, the first capable to confront the mighty Frankish cavalry with any degree of success in reasonably equal conditions, created the powerful war machine that eventually overran the Latin principalities created after the Crusades.¹²

We can therefore concede, despite our reservations, that the military structure progressively developed between the mid twelfth and mid thirteenth centuries gave the Eastern Muslim states the ability to exercise a more sustained and energetic pressure over their Christian neighbours than could the Almohads (and previously the Almoravids) in the Iberian Peninsula with their

¹² Humphreys, “Emergence of the Mamluk Army”.

cumbersome and slow to mobilise armies. Nevertheless, there are reasons to dispute this as a truly determinant factor. After all, Almoravids and Almohads obtained, as is well known, considerable military victories. The key thus resides in their lack of ability to take full advantage of their results. The sharp differences between the fruits gained after two battles with such similar backgrounds—and so close in time—as Hattin (1187) and Alarcos (1195) is therefore revealing in this context. Whereas the former allowed Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn to conquer Jerusalem and to almost fully expel the Franks from Palestine in a matter of months, the latter resulted only in the Almohad occupation of the uninhabited area of Campo de Calatrava.

The Almoravid victories in Zallāqa (1086) and Uclés (1108) had also resulted in insignificant territorial gains, despite the conquest of Ocaña, Huete and Cuenca, at the time mere frontier fortresses, after Uclés. It is interesting to note that from the fall of Toledo (1085) and the occupation of the Ebro valley (1095-1120) high population densities in Andalusī territories ceased to be an obstacle for Christian invaders. In sharp contrast, Almoravid and Almohad military successes never resulted in the re-conquest of territories where the Christians had consolidated their presence, through the application of policies towards the creation of stable settlements, the permanent occupation of agricultural lands by Christian peasants, the establishment of a new agrarian order and the organisation of local socio-political structures, such as *concejos* and *fueros*. It is here, in my view, that the main difference with the eastern case resides.

In 1951 Joshua Prawer pointed out that the decisive factor in the downfall of the Latin principalities was the absence of a European peasant population

widely settled in the country. In a later work, while referring to the situation generated after Hattin and the new possibilities opened by the Third Crusade, Prawer stressed that the only Christian hope had rested on an influx of immigrants that did not finally materialise.¹³ In the thirteenth century the Dominican Humbert de Romans, trying to rekindle the enthusiasm for a new Crusade, had to answer those who inquired about the population willing to remain in the east and cultivate the conquered lands. Humbert conceded that “we don’t currently have people to settle the acquired land”.¹⁴ The main problem faced by the Kingdom of Jerusalem and other *Outremer* principalities was not, therefore, their lack of ability to defeat the enemy in battle (which the crusaders rarely failed to do) but their inadequate demographic basis and, relatedly, the absence of a colonising policy. There certainly were attempts to settle European rural inhabitants, but their scope was very limited. The only author who has challenged these ideas, the geographer Ronnie Ellenblum, supports his contentions with the archaeological evidence offered by a series of sites incorrectly catalogued as ‘settlements’, which reflect the control exercised by the Frankish aristocracy over the Palestinian countryside (facilities, warehouses, fortified residences, towers) but which in no way show that Latin immigration was as significant as he claims.¹⁵

In the Iberian Peninsula, on the other hand, after the conquest of Andalusi territories Christian colonists more or less rapidly substituted pre-

¹³ Prawer, “Colonization Activities”; *Crusader Institutions*, 102-142; *Latin Kingdom*, 29-32.

¹⁴ Prawer, “Roots of Medieval Colonialism”, 26-27.

¹⁵ Ellenblum, *Frankish Rural Settlement*.

existing Muslim populations, reinforcing the newly established political Christian orders by supporting them with a social basis. Their mere presence, of course, does not fully explain their immunity against military threats from Muslim states. The most defining feature of these local structures has to be taken into account: they were war-oriented; this was indeed a 'society organised for war'. But, for what kind of war? In the first place, for offensive, expansive actions, rather than for a defensive war, which was what the Muslim populations were ready to commit to (as shown by the relatively stiff resistance posed in Valencia in the mid thirteenth century). Secondly, for an autonomous war and not, therefore, exclusively in compliance with the military obligations due to the king (*hueste*, *exercitum*, *fonsado*) and other great aristocrats, for which, through the use of militias, imposing armies for the siege and occupation of important locations could be mustered.¹⁶

Urban militias and independently constituted war parties could carry out their own expeditions and incursions without regard to higher authority. These incursions, fundamentally aimed at the capture of chattels, livestock and captives, rarely resulted in stable territorial gains but significantly contributed to increasing the experience of its members in the acquisition and management of war spoils. None of this can be detected in the east, where city militias—of little military significance—never took this kind of initiative.¹⁷ The most important element in the Iberian case is the development, from the mid twelfth century, of highly sophisticated procedures for the distribution of the *ganancia*, which were to become the technical reference for the distributions of land and other

¹⁶ Powers, *A Society Organized for War*.

¹⁷ Zajac, "Captured Property"; Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, 90-93.

properties made possible by the great conquests of the thirteenth century (*repartimientos*). The scale of these *repartimientos* was beyond the capabilities of the rudimentary royal administration, promoter of the campaigns, which thus required the cooperation of local councils (*concejos*) and their experts (*cuadrilleros, sexmeros, quiñoneros, divisores*). These actions resulted in the constitution of new communities with their own *concejos* and, obviously, militias ready for the continuation of the war. This stands as a particularly efficient—and aggressive—manifestation of the *cell replication* dynamics suggested by Robert Bartlett to explain the expansive drive shown by Latin medieval Christianity.¹⁸

A crucial aspect for the value of these military corporations (*concejo* militia units and societies of combatants) rests on the informal nature of their associative links. Family relationships, patronage, vassalage, etc. only played a secondary role in the formation of these groups. Individual links were established with no reference to kinship, which was, after all, irrelevant for the social structure of Latin Christendom. All this stands in sharp contrast with the Andalusí case (and the Muslim world at large), where the references to *mughāwir*, frontier warriors devoted to *jihād*, are in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries scarce and suggestive of little social significance.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Christian sources systematically recourse to Arabic nomenclature to refer to their incursion tactics (*ghāra* > *algará*, *saṛīyyah* > *azaría*) and their types of combatant (*dalīl* > *adalid*, *muqaddam* > *almocadén*, *mughāwir* > *almogávar*), suggesting that they were inspired by tactics previously used against them by

¹⁸ Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, 306-314; Barceló, “La *spurcitia paganorum*”.

¹⁹ Guichard, *Les musulmans de Valence*, vol. 1, 144-145.

the Andalusí forces, but this time, and this constitutes a considerable paradox, serving a social system that multiplied their efficiency and scope.²⁰

It is seldom recollected that the *Cantar de Mio Cid* was written very shortly before Las Navas. It is also often forgotten that the poem, written in the vernacular, explicitly sets the story of Rodrigo Díaz in a very specific context, that of c. 1200, marked by the expeditions launched by council militias and societies of combatants. These are referred to in the poem with a wealth of information regarding their composition, conditions of service and the plunder distribution criteria which, around that time, were also being codified in their most polished version (*fueros* of Cuenca and Teruel). It is also of note that the *Cantar* hardly transmits any ideas suggestive of a religious-restoration ideology, and nothing in it evokes the 'Crusader spirit'. The *ganancia*, however, is mentioned. And it is mentioned a lot. The celebration of booty and its virtues is in fact a constant in the first two *cantares*.²¹

I want this to be properly understood. By questioning the steering force usually attributed to the idea of crusade—supposedly a symmetrical equivalent to *jihād*—I do not cast any doubts upon the ability of this ecclesiastical construction to channel the expansive energies of Latin Christendom, giving them a meaning and directing them towards specific targets. I am instead pointing towards these 'expansive energies' in themselves, which must be

²⁰ The generalised use of throwing weapons (*dardos*) among foot troops (the effectiveness of which was fully realised by the Almogavars from the Crown of Aragon in their Mediterranean campaigns), is peculiar to the Iberian peninsula, probably due to its Andalusí origin.

²¹ Lacarra, *El Poema de Mio Cid*, 32-50.

explained with reference to a specific social system—that of Medieval Western Europe—the continuity of which derived from the replication of its basic institutions in new territories following the elimination of alien societies. Indeed, Islam had an expansive ideology, but at the same time, in twelfth and thirteenth centuries, almost completely lacked the social mechanisms required to develop the sustained policies of frontier pressure and colonisation displayed by the Latin Christians in the Iberian Peninsula and other peripheral areas of Europe. In quite a stark contrast, Muslim dynastic states were based on tributary political networks which, if extended over large territories—for example with Almoravids and Almohads—evolved into imperial states built on the ancient model which sooner or later became too big to be efficiently managed from the centre. These states thus became not only incapable of expanding further at the cost of hostile neighbouring societies but also of defending themselves from aggression. It seems therefore obvious that nothing would have substantially changed should the Almohads had won the Battle of Las Navas.

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