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Although a term seldom used when writing the history of Islamic societies, revolution is the most adequate to convey what the Almohads stood for in the Islamic West – the regions that are now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, the western part of Libya and al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula) – during the sixth/twelfth century. The Almohads did what revolutionaries do: they openly and explicitly marked the break between the old and the new times, resorting to the use of violence, but also developing an ambitious propagandistic and pedagogical programme to habituate their subjects to the new Almohad beliefs and ways of doing things.

The silver coins they minted were square instead of round and no date was mentioned in them, thus suggesting that a new era had begun. The mosques of the territories that submitted to their rule were purified. The dhimma status was abolished, an almost unprecedented step in Islamic history. In fact, not only Christians and Jews, but also non-Almohad Muslims, were obliged to convert to the Almohad understanding of what truth was. That truth was contained in the profession of faith formulated by Ibn Tümart, the founder of the Almohad movement. Political and religious authority were united in this founding figure in a combination that evoked the Prophet Muhammad, but that acquires contemporary meaning when inserted into a framework including Berber prophetism and aspirations to rule, Fatimid memory and the Fatimids’ present, Ismā’īlī preaching (the new da’wa) and Sunnī revival, Sufi claims to religious and political authority such as those of the Andalusī Ibn Qaṣī (d. 546/1151), the Andalusī Maliki scholars’ reaction to such claims together with their internal debates about how to carry out the proper understanding of God’s will under the forceful challenge of Ibn Ḥazm’s Zāhirism, Christian military and commercial advance, and Jewish intense immersion in and contribution to the Islamicate intellectual milieu.

Ibn Tümart (d. 524/1130) was al-mahdī al-ma’lūm al-imām al-ma’ṣūm, “the acknowledged rightly guided one and the impeccable or infallible imām”. One of Ibn Tümart’s pupils, ‘Abd al-Mu’mīn (r. 527/1130–558/1163), proclaimed himself caliph on the basis of having been chosen by the Mahdī as his successor. Mahdist1 and caliphal claims transformed two Berbers, the

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Maşmuda Ibn Tūmart and the Zenāta ‘Abd al-Mu‘min, into Arabs, the first becoming a descendant of the Prophet and the second a Qaysī (Northern) Arab. The Mu‘minid caliphs benefited from this Arab genealogy in many ways, one of them being the fact that it allowed them to link themselves to the Arab tribes who had been penetrating into what is now Tunisia since the first half of the fifth/seventh century, and who had taken advantage of the opportunities opened up by the Zirids’ abandonment of Fatimid obedience in 440/1048–49. Those Arab tribes were eventually incorporated into the Almohad army after their defeat by ‘Abd al-Mu‘min in 546/1151. Their subsequent displacement westwards set in motion the process of Arabization of what are now Algeria and Morocco.

The Almohad movement had originated among Berber tribes whose allegiance to the Mahdi allowed its expansion out of the High Atlas mountains and made possible the defeat of the Almoravids and the conquest of their capital, Marrakech, in the year 541/1147. After 546/1151, these Berber tribes had to make room not only for the Arab tribes, but also for the new elites (the talaba and the ḥuffāz) recruited by the Mu‘minid caliphs to help them carry out their political and cultural programme – but mostly to give them an independent basis of power. Members of those Almohad elites were intellectuals of such importance and lasting influence as Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185), the author of the philosophical and mystical novel Hayy b. Yaqẓān (The Self-Taught Philosopher), and the philosopher, jurist and doctor Averroes (d. 595/1198), who started to write his commentaries on Aristotle with the backing of the second Almohad caliph, Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (r. 558/1163–580/1184). Maimonides (d. 1204), the great Jewish thinker whose works in theology and law – among many other disciplines – renovated Judaism, was trained during Almohad times and shared many of their religious and intellectual concerns. The same can be said of the famous Sufi thinker Muḥyī l-dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240).

While Ibn Ṭufayl’s close links with Almohadism are generally accepted,2 the nature of such links in the cases of Averroes and Maimonides has been subject to varied interpretations.3 Underlying such interpretations there

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seems to be a reluctance to accept the connection of two major intellectual figures who greatly influenced Christianity and Judaism to a Berber Muslim dynasty that used to be mostly associated with fanaticism and violence. We are especially indebted to Dominique Urvoy⁴ and Madeleine Fletcher⁵ for proposing a more nuanced picture, to which Pierre Guichard, Michael Brett and Tilman Nagel, among others, have also greatly contributed.⁶ The advances made in our understanding of Almohad coinage and intellectual elites should also be highlighted.⁷

In my case, I owe my dedication to researching different aspects related to the Almohads for the past twenty years to the generous invitation that Maria Jesús Viguela made for me to contribute a section on religion to the volume she was editing on the Almoravid and Almohad periods as part of the multi-volume Historia de España Menéndez Pidal. I very much enjoyed the opportunity to pay attention to an age of which I knew little – my research till


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then had mostly focused on the early history of Islam and the Umayyad period
in al-Andalus —, especially because what I found was an exciting atmosphere
of intellectual and religious effervescence that crossed religious boundaries.
The enjoyment, however, was not accompanied by satisfaction. After finishing
my section that appeared in the volume published in 1997, I knew for sure that
what I had produced was good enough, but that I still did not understand what
the Almohads had tried to do and why. In 1999 and 2000 I co-edited with my
colleague María Luisa Ávila two volumes of the series Estudios Onomástico-
Biográficos de al-Andalus devoted to different aspects of Almohad history,
studied mainly through the material found in the biographical dictionaries.
Between 2000 and 2002, in collaboration with Patrice Cressier and Pierre
Guichard, three seminars were held in Madrid dedicated to new perspectives on
Almohad politics, society, art and culture, the results of which were published
in 2005. The contributions included in these and other publications appearing
around the same time revealed that the Almohads had to be acknowledged
as having set in motion an exceptional and sophisticated political, religious
and intellectual experience that mostly affected the Islamic West, but that also
influenced Latin Christendom, Judaism and the Islamic East in ways still to be
fully explored.

The articles collected in this volume are indebted to such contributions, as
well as to the different forums that allowed me to present and debate what I
was learning from my readings of Arabic sources, but also from books on the
Fatimids, the so-called Sunni revival, Sufism, philosophy, Batinism and Latin
Averroism. The articles are not chronologically ordered according to the date
of their publication, and some internal cross-references are therefore at odds in
the present arrangement. But their present order attempts to shed light on the
Almohad experience as it developed and changed through time.

The first two articles explore the political, religious and intellectual
developments taking place during Almoravid times in order to contextualize
the appearance of the Almohad movement. The third and fourth articles focus
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on some of the possible sources of influence to which the original Berber Mašmūda movement was subject, and that contributed towards shaping it in the early period: the contact with al-Andalus, on the one hand, and the Fatimid caliphate, on the other hand. The fifth and sixth articles concentrate on two specific features of the Almohad-Mu’minid caliphate: the adoption of Arab genealogies and the minting of coins. Religious knowledge and scholarship, law and history writing were of crucial importance for the new dynasty, as they served to mark the specificities of the revolution and to give it the legitimacy it needed. They are dealt with in the seventh, eighth and ninth articles. Articles number ten, eleven and twelve follow certain developments in the political and legal construction of the Almohad Mu’minid caliphate, namely the itinerancy of the ruler, jihad and Sufism, and the context in which Averroes wrote his legal work, in close connection with Almohad abhorrence of diversity of legal and religious opinions. Finally, the last two focus on the yearning for universal religion and for the ruler’s “sapientialism” that can be detected during Almohad times and that allow a close connection to be established between the Almohad political and cultural project and certain developments in Latin Christendom, such as the appearance of a “wise king”, Alphonso X. The thread that runs across all these studies is precisely the intertwining of knowledge and political power, or how knowledge should stand at the foundation of both religion and politics.

In spite of how much we have advanced on the road to a better understanding of “Almohadism”, there are still many miles ahead of us. The figure and the work of Ibn Tūmart still have to be subjected to a thorough critical analysis, to be greatly helped by the archaeological excavations carried out by A. Ettahir, A. Filii and Jean-Pierre van Staavel in the Mahdī’s birthplace, Igiżi. The Almohad political project will become clearer thanks to the study of the “letters” sent by the Almohad caliphs, being carried out by Pascal Buresi. The study of works produced by Almohad scholars still has much to offer. Almohad influences on the Islamic world, and on the Christian and

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12 Pascal Buresi presently directs the project “Imperial government and authority in Medieval Western Islam (IGAMWI)”. Advanced Research Grant – European Research Council: see http://www.cnrs.fr/irshs/recherche/docs-actualites/erc-buresi.pdf.