NOTE ABOUT CONQUEST OF THE BASQUES NORMAN

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Abstract

A brief pre-Islamic legal research into pre-Islamic Persian Zoroastrianism, but which is sometimes no longer associated with Zoroastrism, in fact shared with Islam in the Middle Ages. This word is studied. It is a pre-Islamic Persian category of people who the Muslim political powers, in their early conquests, in the 7th and 8th centuries, attributed a juridical status of "protected by Islam" (ahl al-dhimma) of second class, as they had no prophet, holy book or religious heads of religious revealed by God. The article analyses the documented situations in the Muslim west, such as the Basques, Berbers, Vikings, Scandinavians, Normans and Britons, and the conquest of Christian Iberia in the Visigothic Hispania.

Key words

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NOTE ABOUT THE MUSLIM CONQUEST OF THE 7TH-8TH CENTURIES: THE BASQUE, BERBER, NORSE VIKING, NORMAN AND BRITON "MAGICIANS"

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ABSTRACT

A brief presentation of new research into the Arab term of madjús (‘magician’), that comes from the name for religious characters in pre-Islamic Persian Zoroastrianism, but which is sometimes found in Arab texts applied to “ethnic” minorities in contact with Islam in the Muslim west. Some texts are analysed and the evolution of the word is studied. It appears that it was only related to Zoroastrianism to deal with populations that were neither Muslim, Christian, Jewish nor idolaters. This was a category of people who the Muslim political powers, in their early conquests, in the 7th and 8th centuries, attributed a juridical status of “protected by Islam” (ahl al-dhimma) of second class, as they had no prophet, holy book or religious heads of religions revealed by God. The article analyses the documented situations in the Muslim west and its Atlantic coasts (Basques, Berbers, Vikings, Scandinavians, Normans and Britons), and in the conquest of Christian Lleida, in the Visigoth Hispania.

KEY WORDS

Muslim conquest, magicians, Persians, Christians, Basques, Vikings, Al-Andalus.

CAPITALLIA VERBA

Mahumedana dominatio, Magi, Persae, Christiani, Vascones, Ascomanni, Arabica Hispania.
The term *Madjús* was applied many centuries before Islam to the Zoroastrian priests of the Sassanid Persian Empire and, after the Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia and the highlands of Iran, the Persians of this religion also used this name for some “ethnic groups” in contact with the Muslim west, especially for some mountain Basques in the northern Iberian Peninsula, mountain Berbers in the Maghreb and the Norse Viking, Norman and Briton sailors who pillaged the Atlantic coasts of Al-Andalus and the Maghreb and reached the Mediterranean coasts of these two countries. It is a subject that touches on three continents, “from the (Arabian or Persian) Gulf to the (Atlantic) Ocean” as the Arabs usually describe the area where their language was spoken, obviously alongside other languages. It is “the setting, the so-called Mediterranean or, perhaps better, *south European*, setting” to which the magazine *Imago in speculo: Medievo*, “is linked”.

This theme of conquest, especially in the early centuries of the Islamic Empire (7th-8th centuries), is exceptional and minority. However, it was run along political lines similar to those of the Muslim conquest of most of the politically and religiously fairly Christianised Mediterranean territories of the old Roman Empire. That is why we compare the elements of the judicial situation of the *madjús* with the example of the conquest of the city of Lleida, in modern-day Catalonia, a situation very well summarised by Professor Flocel Sabaté.

This research, begun for a local or regional congress in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Álava, Spain, 1984)\(^2\), has recently culminated in a well-documented and elaborated hypothesis or thesis\(^3\), whose main conclusions are presented here. It is an analysis of a form of Muslim conquest on the western edge of the Muslim empire, of integration of populations that were not socially or religiously structured like the Christians. Although these were minorities, the political action of the Islamic authorities to integrate them into Muslim society or conquer them can be compared with how the same authorities had treated the mainly Christian populations of the old Roman Empire, especially in the Visigoth Kingdom of Toledo half a century earlier.

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This hypothesis from nearly a quarter of a century ago has been reworked, revised and documented enough to be presented as a scientific thesis. It is multidisciplinary research to the extent that there are few 8th century sources (in Arab, Latin, etc.,) and these are not very varied (Qur’an, chronicles, geographic, juridical, theological, and of Muslim politics and later Christian reactions). Firstly, an attempt must be made to integrate all this information logically and relatively coherently and try to understand the term Madjūs in its true sense, with an explanation that does not exclude any of these sources, and is always open to new documentation and new papers.

The research arose from a conjunction of two studies: 1) an outstanding well-known Arab text about an early expedition to conquer Álava in 767, related implicitly to the use of Madjūs (“magicians”) applied to the Basques, and 2) a study in Muslim theology and Arab philology of the different meanings that the Arab word Madjūs had acquired since its Persian origins.

1) The above-mentioned text, by the Al-Andalus historian Ibn-'Idhârî (8th-9th centuries) was presented at the local congress in Vitoria-Gasteiz by professor María Jesús Rubiera Mata, from the University of Alicante. It describes an expedition in 767 against Álava and the primitive Castile (araba wa-l-qilâ) by Badr, the governor of Zaragoza, appointed by Abd ar-Rahman I, the first Umayyad sovereign of Al-Andalus, who had come to power in Cordoba ten years earlier (756).

According to the study by María Jesús Rubiera, under the Umayyad emirs in Cordoba, there was a notable shift in Moorish policy in Al-Andalus. While the conquerors of Hispania in 711 worked to consolidate the territory seized from the Visigoth Kingdom of Toledo (an eminently political conquest), the Umayyads tried to control (mainly fiscally) the whole Peninsula, especially the independent zones that the previous governors had neglected. That explains Badr’s expedition to the north, which travelled up the Ebro valley. Here is the translation of the text:

In the year 150 [of the Hegira, 767 on the Christian calendar] Badr went on an assaqa [military expedition] to the thagr [military frontier of Islam] and reached Álava, which he conquered: Álava paid him the dżizia.

Badr ordered all the men from that area to be examined and the most intelligent to be selected, and those in whom bad intentions were found in the thagr, he took with him.5

Rubiera calls attention to the fact of conquest that meant establishing the obligation to pay the dżizia tax, an emblematic political show of sovereignty, that estab-

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4. This was begun at the local or regional congress in Vitoria-Gasteiz with two complementary publications, the paper by Rubiera de Epalza, María Jesús. “Álava y los alaveses en los textos árabes”, La Formación de Álava... Ponencias, 1985: 385-593, and the communication mentioned above by Epalza, Mikel de. “El derecho político musulmán y su influencia en la formación de Álava”, La formación de Álava... Comunicaciones, 1985: 303-313.

lished a stable situation with views to the future, as the inhabitants of that region could then be required to meet the payments more or less constantly and could be sanctioned with punitive expeditions and pillage, as a fine for non-payment if they failed to comply with this obligation, as happened to the Alavese with the expedition of 792.

The professor also emphasised that “the men of that region” were represented by no other political or religious authorities, as was the case with other similar expeditions known from that time against populations north of Al-Andalus. In accordance with other Christian and Moorish documents, she deduced that the western Basques, those in Álava, were still not Christian and owed no allegiance to any other Christian authority in the region (the sovereigns of Asturias or Navarre).

In my paper in that congress⁶, I defined the political and religious significance of this text in greater detail. I wrote what Muslim theology understood by madjúš despite not using the word. It was a name applied to the western Basques in other Arab chronicles, known through the research by Dozy⁷ and presented by Melvinger⁸, implicitly expressed here by Ibn-‘Idhârî and his sources.

In fact, this text does not state that the people of Álava were Christians or that their lay or religious authorities had established a pact with the Moors to pay the djizia tax, as a similar text states about the inhabitants of a town in the Granada/Elvira region in the same epoch⁹. It simply states that they would submit themselves to paying this tax, like the others “protected” by Islam (ahl adh-dhimma, “the protected people”, under Moorish power, or People of the Book (ahl al-Kitâb) meaning Christians or Jews). However, the text adds that “Badr ordered the men of the region to be examined”.

This test or “exam” (intihân), that was an “exam, inquiry or investigation” to find out if they were really Christian or Jews or not, was a Muslim technical, juridical or theological formula that describes the procedure for recognising the communities of madjúš as integrated and autonomous within the structure of Islamic society and Islam itself and the varied make-up of the Muslim Empire. This juridical-political reality can be seen in the jurist Al-Balâdhurî (a 9th-century Arab historian)¹⁰, when he mentioned the formula for the submission of the madjúš in Yemen and Bahrain.

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6. See Epalza, Mikel de. “El derecho político musulmán”...: 308-309. The 1984 study was extended in perspective and presented in homage to professor Clelia Sarnelli Cerqua on 28th March 2001 (unpublished) in the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, in French, and it upheld the same theses as this current study under the title “Note sur la catégorie socio-religieuse de madjúš appliquée à des non-Chrétiens et non-Juifs à Al-Andalus, à l’époque omeyyade”.


in the times of the Prophet, on the southern and eastern edges of the newly-born Muslim Empire and its conquests, the juridical antecedent of the religious (and thus, juridical) statute of all the *madjūs*. This doctrine, with the texts from the respective *hadiths* (sayings, facts and consents of the Prophet) about the expeditions to conquer Yemen and Bahrain, is found especially in the classical treatise about the statute and obligations of the *dhimmī-nās*, by the theologian and jurist, Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya (Damascus, 8th and 9th centuries)\(^{11}\). The about medieval texts are from a late date, but reliable enough in their traditional nature, if they are minimally and thoroughly linked to modern textual criticisms of each literary genre which they are included in.

2) The Persian word that has given English *magians*, *magicians* and *wise men*\(^{12}\), in Catalan *mag* and *màgic*, in Spanish, *mago*\(^{13}\), and in Arab, *madjūs*\(^{14}\), has undergone two great semantic transformations extensions in Arabic.

**The first extension of the meaning**, from a stage, or epoch, when the Persian word had the original sense of ‘priest’ or ‘pontiff’ in the Zoroastrian faith and doctrines, in their different languages (see, six centuries before Islam, the well-known Wise Men [“Magi”, “the Magi” of the Gospel according to Matthew 2, 1-12], in Greek in the original, but with an underlying strata of Aramaic) would become a collective noun to describe all Zoroastrians and their beliefs and worship (*madjūs* and *madjūsiyya*). This semantic extension undoubtedly contributed to the passage from the Qur’ān (Q. 22:17) that mentions the *madjūs* as a group of believers in God, but who “associate God with, or place other divinities beside him” (Qur’ān, sura or chapter, 22 “*The hajj* pilgrimage”, aleya or verse 17):

11. See as-Sālih, Subhi. *Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya. Ahkām ahl ad-dhimma*. Beirut: 1981, 2nd ed.: diverse origins of Muslim doctrine, about the Christians and Jews, the Madjūs and the “worship of idols” — *‘abdat al-awthān*, *‘abdat al-asrām*— (I. 1-3, 6-7, 9-10); about the association of trade with Jews and Christians, and also with *Madīs*, especially when it is a question of usury or the purchase of wine and pork (I. 271-273; II. 271-273); about hiring to Jews, Christians and *Madīs*, all considered as *people under protection* — *ahl ad-dhimma*— (I. 317-338); about questions of marriage, and after conversion to Islam (I. 337-338); about other questions of marriage, in which neither the *madjūs*, nor the idolators are considered *ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book), given that the Prophet had authorised Muslims to demand the “protection” tax from the *madjūs* (I. 391-400); about the prohibitions of marriage with *madjūs* women and sharing food sacrificed by *madjūs*, as they had no Holy Book (II. 343-436).

12. Referring to the evangelical characters in the infancy of Jesus.

13. *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. Madrid: Real Academia Española (22nd ed.), 2001: II, 12: “Díciese del individuo de la clase sacerdotal en la religión zoroástica. 2. Díciese de la persona versada en la magia o que la practica. 3. Díciese de los tres reyes que fueron a adorar a Jesús recién nacido. 4. Persona singularmente capacitada para una actividad determinada”, Obviously this presentation only uses the word in the first sense and as the translation of the Arab notion of *madjūs*, which it aimed to determine exactly.

Surely those who believe and those who are Jews and the Sabeans and the Christians and the Magians and those who associate (others with Allah)—surely Allah will decide between them on the day of resurrection; surely Allah is a witness over all things!⁵⁵

In this list of religious groups that will judged in the Muslim Final Judgement, the groups are named for their beliefs, especially for their monotheist faith, but their other beliefs are not described, nor are their leaders mentioned, especially the Zoroastrian mədjid. The name is applied to all the faithful from this community, who are given the status of dhimmi through the payment of the specific tax of dijizja, like the Christians or the Jews. It is the only explicit or nominal mention of the mədjid in the Qur’an.

The second extension of the meaning, from the general application to all those Persians who believed in the Zoroastrian religion, considered as a set of Persians faithful to this belief (obviously differentiated from the Christians, Jews and the Muslim converts and their descendants, who also lived in Persian society), to the extension of this title of mədjid to many peoples and ethnic minorities who were still not Christian on the edges of the Muslim Empire in the 8th century, and not only to the mid-7th century Persians, who, with their enormous population mass, had provoked this political and theological solution, which arose from the same Muslim tradition based on the Qur’an.

This hypothesis or way of arranging the documented data rationally makes it easier to understand the doubts or divergences found among four Arabist and Islamic scholars (J. F. Büchner, M. Morony, A. Melvinger and W. R. Darrow) who wrote the articles “Madjis” and “Al-Madjils” in the prestigious English-language encyclopaedias, the Encyclopaedia of Islam, the Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam and the

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   El dia de la Resurrecció dels cosos
   Al-là, Déu, farà veure molt clarament les diferencies
   entre els creients, els musulmans
   i els qui han judaïzat,
   els sabeus
   els cristians
   els mədjid
   tots els qui han posat amb Déu Al-là altres deïtats.

   Al-là, Déu és sempre un testimoni molt fesant de totes les coses!

For the justification for this typographic and expansive layout of the literary, clear and precise translation of the Qur’an text, see Epaiza, Mikel de. L’Alcorà... i cinc estudis, 5th study, about the principals of this translation of the Qur’an into Catalan in Epaiza, Mikel de. “El Corán y sus traducciones: Algunos problemas islamológicos y de traducción, con propuestas de soluciones”, El islam plural, María-Àngeles Roque, ed. Barcelona: Institut Europeu de la Mediterrània-Icària, 2003: 379-400; Epaiza, Mikel de; Forcadell, Josep; Periùo, Joan M. El Corán y sus traducciones. Estudios y propuestas. Alacant: Universitat d’Alacant, 2007 (in print).
Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ân. Summing up this research, Morony and Darrow only mention the beliefs and practices of Zoroastrianism from an ethnologic point of view with no mention of the juridical and political dimension that had been put forward in part by the Muslim law specialist, R. Brunschvig. Melvinger mentions this, but rejects it. Only Büchner mentions it and follows it as shown by the text reproduced below.

For the juridical-religious and non-ethnic application of the Arab epithet of madjūs to Basques, Berbers, Vikings, Normans and Britons we rely on J. F. Büchner’s conclusion:

The name Madjús has also been extended to peoples who have nothing to do with Zoroastrianism, but who, being neither Jews nor Christians, nor Muslim converts, had to be treated for practical purposes as dhimmis paying the djizya. This was done in North Africa and Spain by the Madjús of al-Awzā’ī and by the Mālikites and the Hanafites on the strength of the tradition that the Prophet had accepted the djizya from the Madjús in Bahrain. So the Berbers were considered as Madjús, and also were the Scandinavians who raided the Spanish coast since 844 and with whom occasional peace treaties were concluded.

With an example a contrario, or at least, a diverso, the policy of conquest and integration of new territories and peoples into the Muslim Empire can be better understood: the Muslim policy of conquest and integration of Lleida, resumed by professor Flocel Sabaté.

In this context, the limited dimensions of the city of Lleida and its position encouraged a reaching of a pact of submission (‘āhed) that formally allowed the ruling groups to maintain their property and their initial pre-eminence in exchange for accepting a fiscal dependence that thus guaranteed an initial stability under the Islamic peace and protection (aman). The payment of a personal capitación in money and in kind (jizia) even allowed their own religious beliefs to be observed. In fact, the bishops normally had notable weight among the local authorities that negotiated with the invaders, as they themselves promoted in the majority of places. These advantages and the fear of the newcomers justified the willingness to pact. The fear of reprisals was in their souls and also in the reminders. Immediately after Lleida, the Islamic troops reached Tarragona, where the population, who opted not to pact, met a very different fate. In contrast, the agreement reached in Lleida was soon sanctioned with the arrival, behind the Berbers advance guard, of the Arab army under Musa.

16. See full bibliographic references in the entries under the names of these authors, in other footnotes by the different authors, and comments where they contrast their diverse opinions, in Epaúl, Mikel de. “Los madjús (‘magis’): un hápax coránico (Q. 22:17), entre lo étnico y lo jurídico, hasta su acepción en Al-Andalus”, Estudios coránicos y lingüísticos en honor del profesor Julio Cortés Sorra, Miguel Hernando de Larramendi Salvador Peña, eds. (in print).
After having analysed the process of "conquest" or insertion into Muslim society of the Madjūs and with a synthesis on the process of conquering a small Romanised and Christianised city on the plain (as was the case of Lleida), it is easier to understand how the Basque Madjūs agreed a pact with the Moors, but with the difference that, while the people of Lleida were Christians, the Basques had no clear beliefs nor Christian political or ecclesiastical authorities, like those of Asturias or Navarre. That obviously raises the fascinating subject of the degree of influence that Muslim political law had on the rapid total Christianisation of the Christian mountain kingdoms in the north of the Iberian Peninsula or the rapid and almost total Islamisation of the territories that came directly under the Muslim power of Al-Andalus. However, to clarify whether this theme was linked to the rapid disappearance of the Madjūs from the north of the Iberian Peninsula is beyond the reach of this simple note.19

To conclude this brief presentation we shall indicate that the main contributions to this study can be summed up in different themes, some specific or local and others, general:

It states that the phrase from the Arab text by Ibn-'Idhārī links the action of the expedition by the governor Badr to Álava and Castile in 767 to the act of conquest or integration of a local populace in the Cantabrian region, namely the "Basques of Araba/Álava or the Gorbea mountains" which explains the later denomination of Madjūs applied to the Basque groups in some texts from Arab sources. They are not related to the Persian "mags" by any of the three ethnic traits (beliefs, worship, language), but rather by the juridical status of Madjūs, second-class dhimmi-ns in Muslim society.

It confirms with an Arab-Muslim text that at that time the population of Álava and the primitive Castile (Al-Quillā) did not come under the Asturians of the Kingdom of Oviedo or the Navarese of the Kingdom of Pamplona and had no outward sign of Christianity (beliefs, worship and Christian political or religious authorities or structures).

The agreement to pay the emblematic tribute of the dījizia and the transfer of hostages is evidence of the integration of that region and its inhabitants into the Islamic society under the political jurisdiction of the governor of the region of Al-Thagr al-A’lā (the ‘frontier' or ‘higher march'), based in Zaragoza, and the emir of Al-Andalus in Córdoba. These peacefully agreed links, which brought them into the orbit of the Muslim world was broken some years later and, under Muslim policy in the Iberian Peninsula, this break would justify the punitive expedition of 792.

The analysis of this text allows the political-religious charge of this Islamic title of madjūs to be better understood, applied to both Persian Zoroastrians and the Basques, Berbers, Norse Vikings, Normans and Britons. They were linked by the same political-religious status in their integration into Muslim society but not by similar ethnological characteristics (beliefs, worship, customs and culture).

In a more general way, this small study shows that, in their conquests in the West, the Muslim authorities of Al-Andalus followed political-religious norms and guidelines from the East rather closely, from the model government by the Prophet and his successors, the caliphs of Medina and, more directly, the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus. This normative came to be more widely imposed with the installation of the Umayyad dynasty in the independent Emirate of Al-Andalus in Córdoba, with high civil servants from the administration in Damascus.

It can be observed that, methodologically, the multi-disciplinary analysis and knowledge of the linguistic and social context enables significant information to be extracted from texts that a superficial view could consider anodyne or irrelevant, such as some texts analysed during this research. These include the one by Ibn-‘Idhârî about the 767 expedition, the extract from the Qur’ân about the Madjûs, those of the four modern Arabist scholars from the first and second editions of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, about the Madjûs in general and the Andalusians, Maghrebins, Norse Vikings, Normans and Britons in particular.20

SUMMARY

I PART. THE PAST INTERROGATED AND UNMASKED
13-23 Foreign and Mediterranean: Integration and Rejection
Mohamed Tahar Mansouri
25-30 Which History for the 21st Century
José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec
31-58 Catalonia and the Midi: Sixty Years of Medieval Urban History (1946-2006)
Philip Daileader

II PART. THE PAST STUDIED AND MEASURED
61-69 Note about the Muslim Conquest of the 7th-8th Centuries: the Basque, Berber, Norse Viking, Norman and Briton "Magicians"
Mikel de Epalza
71-85 Documents of Dispute Settlement in Eleventh-Century Aragón and Navarra: King’s Tribunal and Compromise
Takashi Adachi
87-104 Did Frederic Barberousse Have a Mediterranean Policy?
Pierre Racine
105-119 James I and God: Legitimacy, Protection and Consolation in the Llibre dels Fets
Damian J. Smith
121-148 "Cort e Palau de Rey": The Real Palace of Valencia in the Medieval Epoch
Amadeo Serra Desfilis
149-176 Facing the Depredations and Fighting the Predators. Urban Castile and the Defence of Municipal Jurisdiction in the Late Middle Ages
José Antonio Jara Fuente
177-185 The Sephardic Communities in Rome in the Early Sixteenth Century
Anna Esposito

III PART. THE PAST EXPLAINED AND RECREATED
189-201 Teaching History, Learning History: a Three-Way Dialogue
Teresa Vinyoles Vidal
203-225 From Research to the Exploitation of Medieval Patrimony: the Calafell Project
Joan Santacana Mestre

229-328 ORIGINALS OF THE TEXTS NOT WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

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