

The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon

Review Number: 2079

Publish date: Thursday, 9 March, 2017

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ISBN: 9780226329642

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £26.89

Pages: 296pp.

Publisher: Uinveristy of Chicago Press

Publisher url: <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo22776804.html>

Place of Publication: Chicago, IL

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Why would a hardened band of foreign jih?di warriors agree to work for a self-proclaimed leader of the Christian world – especially one militantly opposed to Islam, who kept his own Muslim citizens under close surveillance? And why would such a ruler choose to keep that particular type of professional killer in his personal employ?

These are not just questions you might expect to see aired by conspiracy theorists in modern tabloid media. They also arise from Hussein Fancy's meticulous investigation of real episodes in the history of the Crown of Aragon – an important collection of Christian (and frequently crusading) polities that ruled over eastern Spain and other parts of the Mediterranean basin in the later Middle Ages. The apparently contradictory nature of such unlikely instances of interreligious military cooperation serves as his stepping-off point for a fascinating, compelling, and at times provocative study of how political power, religious identity, and the complexities of interfaith relations actually shaped a period which has since become renowned for its bewilderingly intertwined legacies of both violence and coexistence.

It is always a pleasant surprise when a serious work of historical research also makes for a stimulating read, as is the case with this book. Its dramatic opening scene depicts an intriguing 1285 visit by Muslim *jenet* warriors to the Catalan king Pere II (AKA Peter III of Aragon); from there on in Fancy's writing is both energetic and engaging, punctuated throughout with anecdotes and colorful details. It is also thoughtful, and every episode is introduced for a reason. Bit by bit, the author takes us on a guided tour through a period that he has obviously taken a great deal of personal pleasure in exploring and making sense of. At times there is an aura of mystery, as he lingers over the imperfect state of archival documents, or carefully pieces together fragmentary evidence from contradictory sources, before finally coming to a nuanced verdict. Twists and turns emerge along the way, and they sometimes threaten to break the thread of a narrative which is after all still full of gaps and speculation. But like all good detective stories, it concludes with the presentation of a satisfyingly plausible 'bigger picture' in the dénouement. There is even room for a sequel, as tantalizing questions for future research are very deliberately left hanging when the curtain falls.

As Fancy acknowledges in his introduction, the topic of *jenets* (Latin *jeneti*, Spanish *jinetes*, Catalan *ginets*,

a term for imported Muslim mercenary soldiers in the pay of Christian masters from at least the later 13th to the 14th centuries), is not exactly new to medieval historians. But apart from a handful of articles, it has generated little in the way of intense or effective scrutiny. Its close study is, therefore, as the author clearly anticipated when embarking on his initial project, a promising angle from which one might seek to shed new light on the eternally vexed question of just how and why inter-group relations took the form that they did in certain medieval frontier societies. This is especially the case as new developments in the historiography of Almohad Islam, and its successor-emirates in the western Mediterranean basin, have recently led researchers to revisit long-held assumptions about that notoriously intolerant and short-lived caliphal dynasty. Along with scholars such as Maribel Fierro and Amira K. Bennison, Fancy is one of those who has posited that the Almohads' legacy was more complex, important, and long-lasting than has often been supposed. This notion underlies much of his subsequent analysis of the *jenet* phenomenon, the findings of which also lead him to ask further pointed questions about the political logic of interfaith relations more generally, the nature of religious violence, and the study of 'religion' itself.

Departing from previous etymologically-driven notions that *jenets* were simply hired cavalry who happened to be *Zan?ta* Berbers, Fancy spends much of chapter one untangling the messy but often delightful source problems that lie at the heart of his research. The Archive of the Crown of Aragon, long famed as an unparalleled trove of early documentation, is now seen through fresh eyes and yields up new clues – thanks in part to the author's familiarity with parallel evidence from contemporary Arabic chroniclers such as Ibn al-Kha??b and Ibn Khald?n. The result is his realization that the *jenets* here at issue were far from being random North African *gastarbeiter* who happened to enter Christendom with martial talents on their résumés; they were in fact members of a very specific group of religious warriors, traditionally aligned with the (post-Almohad) Mar?nid sultanate and known in their Maghribi homeland as *al-Ghuz?h al-Muj?hid?n*. And puzzlingly, as that name suggests, it would seem that these willing (if occasional) servants of the Aragonese Crown were fundamentally and explicitly motivated to engage in *jih?d* against Christian targets. The plot thickens. How could this be?

Pieces of the puzzle gradually come together as subsequent chapters provide relevant context and advance potential explanations. In chapters two and three, for example, we are reminded that king Pere had since 1262 been linked by marriage to the recently-fallen Hohenstaufen family, and that through his wife the House of Aragon now had a claim on the putatively universal Holy Roman Empire. Evidence that he recruited *jenets* as early as 1265, and that he employed Hohenstaufen agents such as Conrad Lancia (along with Arabic-speaking Jews) to negotiate with them, allows Fancy to speculate that there was more at stake here than simply locating the best fighting men money could buy. Indeed, regular use of such troops for over a century by Pere and his successors, combined with the fact that they were very deliberately maintained as Islamic outsiders (with distinctive clothing, privileges, and legal status), suggests that their religious identity was far from incidental, and that this was no mere arrangement of passing convenience. The employment of a Muslim soldiery had imperial precedents and so may have carried something of an imperial resonance; at the same time Aragonese aspirations to geopolitical control over Sicily (a Hohenstaufen patrimony seized by Aragon in 1282) would have greatly benefited from some sort of alliance or neutrality relationship with Muslim forces across the straits in (post-Almohad) ?af?id Tunis. Could the royal decision to recruit a powerful and well-connected band of Maghribi warriors be related to either or both of these considerations?

Chapter four fleshes out Fancy's argument that what was really at stake was indeed a claim to imperial authority on the part of the Aragonese kings, and that their ostentatious subjection and deployment of foreign Muslim troops was an integral part of this. Building on revisionist framings of Almohad forced conversion policies as evidence of that movement's exaggeratedly 'universalist' (if still Islamic) imperial ideology, rather than simple expressions of religious intolerance, a case is made that the Aragonese monarchy was more or less self-consciously acting as a virtual successor to both Holy Roman *and* Almohad imperial pretensions by the later 13th century. In a political milieu where notions of divinely-sanctioned *imperium* on either side of the Mediterranean could be symbolized by a ruler's ability to control externally-recruited warriors (as practiced in ancient Rome, later Byzantium, and the 'Abb?sid caliphate as well as by the Hohenstaufens and Almohads), such gestures would presumably have mattered a great deal. Following

this logic, then, king Pere and his heirs were not just hiring warriors when they contracted with the Ghuz?h; they were demonstrating their authority to command beyond political or religious borders.

Compelling though this hypothesis may be, it leaves a great deal of scope for further discussion. What, for example, were the motivations of the actual *jenet* warriors themselves, beyond any imperial ideologies that their presence and actions may have reinforced for a Christian employer? In chapter five, again with recourse to documentation from the Crown of Aragon and illustrating his points with a carefully chosen set of illustrative episodes, Fancy engages directly with a potential counter-hypothesis that perhaps, after all, religion may *not* have been as important to these mercenaries as more material concerns – in this case making a living, raising a family, and advancing other such personal interests.

Thus in one example, Mahomet Abenadalil and his men are shown to have briefly entered the service of Alfons II in 1290 by raiding against Alfons' (Christian) Castilian enemies – seeking to further enrich themselves in the process by contracting to sell their plunder to Christians from the Aragonese town of Calatayud. This development, along with the fact that Mahomet's *jenets* were subsequently robbed by those same Aragonese townsmen as soon as the opportunity presented, could be taken to show that interreligious strife was at best a cover for the raw pursuit of pragmatic self-interest. Taking a previous analysis to that effect by Brian Catlos as his starting point, Fancy here argues the contrary: that while material interests may have helped to encourage the violence of both *jenets* and townsfolk in this case (and others), it is nevertheless important to also recognize evidence for actions that worked against simple pragmatism, and which are indeed best explained by considerations of religious difference. Other examples reveal the *jenets*' often complex and varied – but generally sympathetic – relations with non-combatant *Mudéjar* Muslims permanently resident in the Crown of Aragon. In all cases Fancy's conclusions, though appropriately hedged about with qualifications and caveats, remain that religious motivations were at least equally, if not more, important than materialistic ones.

Chapter six takes his analysis well into the 14th century, and reinforces the notion that religion was truly a lasting and central concern for Muslim *jenets*. Far from seeing themselves as traitors to Islam for their service to the infidel, Fancy argues that these men remained true to their religious principles by choosing their moments for frontier crossing with some care. When service to an Islamic ruler did not provide satisfactory scope for their performance of religious violence, they might instead opt to fight against Christians in the pay of a Christian king. And beyond such immediate opportunities for combat against unbelievers, the Ghuz?h may also have seen inherent value in helping to establish occasional diplomatic alliances with Christians – not just to get paid, but as a way of securing and advancing what they took to be the overall interests of Islam. The western Mediterranean was after all a complex chessboard of constantly shifting political factions, and rivalries between co-religionists were at least as common, and as dangerous, as conflicts across religious boundaries. Collaborations between Muslim and Christian forces might therefore serve both parties against a common enemy, or to preserve a much-needed period of peace. The logic might have been convoluted, and there was inevitably some degree of messiness in such arrangements, but there is no inherent reason to suppose that even a jih?di individual's or group's loyalty to Islam necessarily required an attitude of hostility toward all Christians all of the time (or vice versa, for that matter).

Fancy's overall point is well taken. Rather than imposing monolithic and ahistorical assumptions about what true 'Muslim' behavior should encompass, and deeming any deviation from that as evidence for an irreligious emphasis on material interests, we should acknowledge that the actions of historical agents who claimed to be motivated by Islamic belief have a fairly strong claim to being considered, *ipso facto*, 'Islamic'. The Ghuz?h were Muslim warriors in the end, and for the most part they never ceased to see themselves as such, even if their understanding of what constituted a properly 'Muslim' activity may not have always aligned entirely with the ideals of others. In the eyes of the Aragonese king and his subjects, these *jenets* may have been primarily understood as trappings of Christian imperial pretension; but this does not necessarily change the fact that in their own estimation, they fought for Islam.

Were the *jenets* (or their contemporary opposite numbers, Christian *farfanés* and others who served Muslim masters in the Maghrib) hypocrites? Were they deluded, duped, or desperate? Was religion simply a meaningless identifier, or at best a matter of personal spirituality, while real interactions between Christians and Muslims – and above all the determination of whether they should take a violent form or not – were actually determined by a materialistic calculus of profit on either side? These are rhetorical questions that Fancy raises again and again, and his answer is ever a cautious ‘no’. Religion was a real factor in people’s lives, and it did play a major role in determining the course of their actions. Muslims acted as Muslims, and Christians acted as Christians, and each dealt with the other in terms that kept religious difference always under consideration. But of course other factors must be taken into account as well; historical behaviors and events are never monocausal.

Fancy’s conclusions are thus careful, and subtle, and bound up with still more questions. In a brief epilogue, he proceeds to move far beyond the narrow topic of *jenets* in medieval history by applying his findings to larger epistemological issues. Arguing that previous scholars’ lack of attention to the *jenets*’ religious dimension was a direct consequence of philosophical and political blind spots inherited from both Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment movements, he calls for new approaches to history in general. Religion must not be relegated to a subsidiary realm of analysis as a matter of course, or treated as a purely internal and private affair that stands outside the ‘real’ flow of human events. Neither the idealistic liberals who saw the Iberian Middle Ages as a time in which religious differences could be set aside for the sake of *convivencia* (or *conveniencia*, in Catlos’ more recent formulation), nor the Romantic conservatives who saw them as a zone of necessary, if at times intermittent, struggle between fundamentally opposed cultures, have been able to adequately account for what our totality of available evidence suggests were the actual lived experiences of the peoples concerned. Modern medievalists, Fancy argues, may now be well-placed to break out of this analytic dead end by developing a richer comprehension of how ‘religion and politics, body and spirit, matter and meaning’ need not be conceived as binary opposites. They can, and should, be seen as mutually-informing aspects of a phenomenological whole.

The ultimate goal of this book is not to press too far in advancing religious commitment as the sole, or necessarily even the main, motivator in any given historical moment. What Fancy seeks instead is to provide a corrective to what he sees as an overly ‘secularist’ historiographical tradition. It is a laudable objective, and common sense would tend to agree that it is always good to explore all possible dimensions of historical experience rather than to artificially confine research to a single viewpoint, analytical mode, or presumed type of causality. Blind spots are always to be questioned. But I must admit that I am not entirely convinced that the existing scholarly field is quite as dismissive of religion as Fancy seems to contend. There is a whiff of straw-man argumentation in some sections of the book that is to my mind somewhat overstated.

On the other hand, I also think it is important to remember that history *does* often involve hypocrisy, unbelief, and pragmatic self-interest. Just as religion should never be ignored out of hand, neither should it be granted an uncritical preeminence or undue respect simply because our sources invoke religious language, or make religious claims. I’m sure Fancy would agree with this truism, but I expect we might agree to disagree about some aspects of his analysis. Intriguing though it is, for example, I am not fully convinced by the hypothesis that imperial ideologies and Almohad inspirations lie at the core of the Aragonese *jenet* phenomenon. Sometimes a mercenary is just a mercenary, regardless of religion, and it is sometimes in a ruler’s political interest to surround himself with notorious killers who have no particular sympathy for or ties to the local populace. And sometimes, warriors simply contract with the highest available bidder. It may not be possible at the end of the day to determine for certain precisely how ideologically-driven either party was really being in keeping up their end of the bargain, but there is a certain circularity to the argument that religious people act religiously.

Nevertheless, I remain deeply impressed by this exemplary study, which so effectively combines two types of scholarship that are rarely to be found within the same monograph: a splendidly executed minute examination of a narrowly-defined historical phenomenon, based on close readings of often unpublished

sources (many of which are transcribed in the copious endnotes); and an ambitious theoretical study that takes a critical big-picture view of entire scholarly fields of endeavor.

Quality research involves identifying good questions, and pursuing them with a healthy combination of diligence and intelligence to arrive at accurate and useful conclusions. Fancy's instinct to more closely examine the obscure *jenets* was most fortuitous, and he has prosecuted that examination admirably. Thanks to his efforts we are now able to much more fully comprehend how and (perhaps) why the warriors of al-Ghuz'h al-Muj'hid'n became employees of the medieval Crown of Aragon. Perhaps more importantly, he has also reminded us that religion does need to be taken seriously as a factor of real influence in human affairs – not just as ancillary to other motivations but also on its own terms, and above all on the constantly shifting terms of those who actually embodied it at any given point in history.

The author is happy to accept this generous review and does not wish to comment further.

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