

RESEÑAS

MEHDI GHOURGATE, *Les empires berbères: constructions et déconstructions d'un objet historiographique*, Berlin–Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2024, Islam-Thought, Culture and Society, vol. 11, 455 pp.

This book provides an insightful analysis of how the so-called Berber empires — the Almoravids and most especially the Almohads — have been studied and interpreted in different historical periods and regional contexts such as in the modern nation-states of Morocco, Algeria, Spain and France. Those already familiar with Mehdi Ghouirgate's scholarship — for example, his book *L'ordre almohade (1120-1269): une nouvelle lecture anthropologique* (Toulouse, 2014) — know that his research is based on his thorough knowledge of the sources and the extant bibliography, the latter being not limited to the specific object of his interest, but encompassing wider discussions as well as historiographical and anthropological concerns. Mehdi Ghouirgate reminds us in his Introduction that historians are always in need to reflect on the scholarly traditions in which they have been formed, directly or indirectly, and on those that have informed the state-of-the-arts of the issues on which they are working, because they inevitably influence their thinking in ways sometimes unsuspected. This reflection should be the starting point of any attempt at renovating or changing existing interpretative frameworks. Mehdi Ghouirgate succeeds in alerting us of the legacy of previous historiographical approaches, and proves to be a good guide in identifying gaps and biased or incorrect perceptions, as well as in proposing possible venues for advancement that may lead to a more productive and trans-disciplinary explanatory potential. His interest in anthropology and sociology informs what he writes, as well as his conviction that topics often considered marginal in the study of Islamic societies, such as cuisine, non-Arabic languages and the rural context should be given the prominence they deserve as an effective corrective in order to more reliably capture the realities of the past under study.

The range of issues dealt with in this book is extensive as it is the range of sources and studies Mehdi Ghouirgate's engages with. The different sections — on the legendary elements in the biography of Ibn Tūmart, pre- and post-Almohad sources as well as detailed studies of authors such as 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī and Ibn Šāḥib al-ṣalāt, the reception of Ibn Ṭufayl and the European context under different angles (Enlightenment, the colonial period, the writing of national history in Spain, Morocco and Algeria) — are interwoven in multiple ways and, at the same time, function as units in themselves, having been formulated with a coherent conception. Of special interest is his treatment of how knowledge about the Almohad period began to be incorporated into European scholarly circles, with different paces and for different reasons. This section could be further developed, but the main lines are well traced and represent an original contribution. The pages dedicated to the use of the Almohad past by Maghrebi nationalists offer a very useful overview with new data, especially regarding the Egyptian context.

On the formal side, a careful revision would have improved the text, for example, regarding the transliteration from Arabic (*al-Ḥulā as-sīrā* should be *al-Ḥulla al-siyarā*, *Sīrat a'māl al-nubalā* should be *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā*). As regards the contents, although this book is centred on the 'Berber empires', the study of the Almoravid case is not as developed as that of the Almohads, but another book devoted specifically to the Almoravids is announced as forthcoming. Mehdi Ghouirgate's interpretations will elicit different degrees of agreement, but they are always suggestive and

thought-provoking. Contrary to him, I think the Arab genealogies attributed to both Ibn Tūmart and the Mu'minids can be dated to 'Abd al-Mu'min's times, and constitute one of the many paradoxes of a movement that had in its origins a strong Berber character. In this and other areas, 'Almohadism' is often perplexing because any attempt at pigeonholing proves to be unsatisfactory or inadequate. This aspect is deservedly highlighted by Mehdi Ghouirgate and is one of the reasons that make the study of the Almohads so fascinating and rewarding, as it forces us to think against received opinions and to reflect on the shortcomings of prevailing frameworks for understanding the history of the Maghreb and al-Andalus, and more generally also of the premodern Islamic world. Mehdi Ghouirgate's is an important contribution to better shape how we study such history.

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