

Relations between Norway and the Maghrib in the 7th/13th Century

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Several years ago Patria Ramsay, then one of my pupils at Columbia, was working on Baibars, the well-known Mamluk ruler of Egypt from 658/ 1260 to 676/ 1277. Reading around her subject she came upon references in Western sources—English, French, Norwegian—to contact between Scandinavia and certain Arab rulers, notably the Ḥafṣid Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Mustanṣir, but apparently also the redoubtable Baibars himself. To students of the history of northern Europe the circumstances are evidently well enough known, but scarcely so to the Orientalists, with whom I have since found the account, apart from Mas Latrie¹ only in Robert Brunschvig’s standard work on the Ḥafṣids.²

It seemed desirable to see what the Arabic sources had to say about the matter. This I deferred at the time, and now the occasion of paying tribute to my former colleague Dr. Bravmann offers an opportunity which I am glad to be able to take. As will be seen immediately, the results of the investigation are minimal. The subject is an obscure episode in what might be considered an outlying part of Islam and in any case remote from Dr. Bravmann’s main scholarly interest. Nevertheless these few remarks are offered as a sincere tribute to one whose life was spent in learning and study, in a search for the truth; that is, no doubt, where history is concerned, an account of the past, *wie es geschehen ist*.

To begin with, we must have some account according to the Western sources. These are in the first place the Norwegian sagas. This material was worked up notably by the great Icelandic historian Torfaeus at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century and was again handled with much originality by Riant, from whom I may take the following:³

... the origin of the curious relations of Hakon with Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Mustanṣir bi’llāh, sultan of Tunis and suzerain of the Muslim states of Spain. In 1255 the canon Ellis sent to Spain by the son of Hakon IV, Hakon V⁴, already associated with the throne of Norway, had returned with Spanish ambassadors, charged to request for Alfonso the Wise, king of Castile, then on the point of repudiating his childless spouse, Viola of Portugal, the hand of Christina, princess of Norway. Christina departed for Spain with a brilliant suite and after some time spent at the court of France (1257), she arrived at Burgos, where

1 *Traité de paix et de commerce* (Paris, 1866), Introd., 134; *Relations et commerce de l’Afrique septentrionale*, (Paris, 1886), 242.

2 *La Berbérie orientale sous les Ḥafṣides* (Paris, 1940), 1:50. Brunschvig gives the date July, 1263, for the death of the Norwegian king Hakon, apparently in error. See note 6 below.

3 *Expéditions et pèlerinages des Scandinaves* (Paris, 1865), 349f.

4 I.e. Hakon the Young, son of Hakon IV, who predeceased his father and since he never ruled independently, is usually omitted in the king-lists of Norway.

she married instead of the king the Infante Don Felipe, his brother (3 May, 1258). A number of Norwegian lords had accompanied the princess, among others Peter, bishop of Hamar, two high-ranking barons, Ivarr Englason and Andres Nikolasson, and the knights Thorlauger Bosi and Lodinn de Leppr. It is known that they had received formal instructions in virtue of which they were to promise to king Alfonso the help of Hakon against the Saracens, and the long stay of Andres Nikolasson in France, both going and returning, allows one to suppose that his master had charged him to resume with St. Louis (Louis IX of France) the previous projects of alliance and crusade in common. But the demands of Alfonso X, who wished to make use of Hakon much more for his pretensions to the German Empire than for war against the Muslims, and especially the sad fate of Princess Christina, who soon succumbed to the ill-treatment of her husband, must rapidly have cooled the religious zeal, always rather tepid, of the king of Norway. For the rest Andres Nikolasson and the other ambassadors had seen at the marriage celebrations of Christina the envoys of the sultan of Tunis and admired their luxurious style. Two of the Norwegians, Ivarr Englason and Thorlauger Bosi, both initiated into the policy of their master who had often employed them on embassies, continued their journey eastwards probably in company of the Tunisian envoys themselves. Ivarr died on the way, but Thorlauger who went on to Jerusalem must on his return have confirmed, by his description of the wretched condition of the Holy Places and the power of the infidel, the reports of his colleagues who had returned previously. It is therefore not surprising that the idea occurred to Hakon, as much in order to establish useful political and commercial relations as to be avenged on the Spaniards, to send to Tunis a solemn embassy charged with concluding a treaty of peace and alliance with Abū ‘Abd Allāh. Accordingly he chose for the purpose one of the persons who had accompanied Christina and knew the Tunisians, Lodinn lord of Leppr and seneschal of the kingdom, together with a knight called Hakon Eysill. Lodinn was entrusted with presents for the sultan (falcons, furs and rarities of the North). The departure took place ceremoniously, and the scald of the king, Sturli Thordarson, nephew of the great Snorri, sang a stanza in honour of the occasion, which is still preserved:

King of the people, for your magnanimity
 You will be celebrated in the distant country of Serkland⁵
 And as far as the confines of the land of the blacks, your falcons
 Will bring joy to the rulers in these parts.
 Everywhere you scatter imperishable
 Monuments of your glory!
 Wise prince, your treasures
 Go to adorn the whole universe!

Lodinn arrived in Tunis in 1262. The sultan received him with honour, detained him at his court during the winter and sent him back in the spring (1263) with ambassadors and presents for the king of Norway. Unfortunately Hakon had just died (8 July)⁶ at Kirkwall in the Orkneys following an unsuccessful expedition in Scotland, and the treaties concluded with Tunis remained a historical curiosity.

The account in Torfaeus⁷ is similar, with details added—for example, that the Norwegian party on the outward voyage put in at Yarmouth in England—or omitted. There is also a chronological difficulty.⁸ But by and large the two accounts depending on the older saga material agree.

Nor is this all. As already indicated, we have further a notice of a Norwegian *démarche* in Egypt. Again following Riant:⁹

5 I.e. “East Land” or perhaps rather “Saracen Land,” from Ar. *šarq*.

6 There is confusion here between Hakon IV, who died in Kirkwall on 15 December, 1263 (Mas Latrie, *Trésor de Chronologie*, col. 1752) after being defeated by the Scots at the battle of Largs (October, 1263), and his son, Hakon the Young, who, according to Torfaeus (*Hist. Rerum Norvegicarum* [Copenhagen, 1711], 4:275) died unexpectedly and greatly mourned on 5 May of some year, perhaps even earlier than the departure of Christina.

7 *Ibid.*, 4:291.

8 See note 6.

9 *Ibid.*, 376.

The son of Hakon, Magnus, continued the policy of his father, and the same Icelander who had been charged to conclude at Tunis the first treaty of commerce with the Muslims returned to the East some years later on the orders of Magnus, and went to the court of Cairo to solicit from the formidable Baibars, the mortal enemy of the Christians of Palestine, the advantages already obtained from the Saracens of Barbary: vessels of the infidels at this time came to trade as far as the North Sea.¹⁰

Mas Latrie was this time more doubtful of the authenticity of the notice.¹¹ What should have induced Baibars to be willing to treat with envoys of the Norwegian king? When the point was considered in our seminar years ago, the presumed need in Egypt for supplies of iron and timber for a fleet was suggested. Could the Norwegians have contemplated the sending of heavy materials to so distant a destination in the boats available to them? The answer to this was not forthcoming. Yet the notice concerning the embassy to Egypt seemed to be given by more than one early record,¹² and that Norwegians should be in Cairo in the 13th century is in itself not more difficult than that they should be in Tunis.

Could confirmation come from the Arabic sources? This was evidently the main direction of the enquiry, but to elicit information from these sources about relations between Norway and Muslim powers in the Mediterranean was evidently going to be a difficult task. The great work of al-Maqqarī *Naḥḥ at-Ṭīb*, I may here note, has a good deal on al-Mustanṣir, but nothing about his dealings with the Norwegians. The historians of the Ḥafṣids—Ibn al-Qunfudh in his book *al-Fārisīyah*, az-Zarkashī in the *Kitāb ad-Daulatāin*, also the later writer Ibn abī Dīnār, author of the *Mu'nis*—have nothing. A long detailed account of the reign of al-Mustanṣir by Ibn Khaldūn is equally silent on a Norwegian *démarche*, but has one notice of peripheral interest, as follows:¹³

In the year 658/1260 there came Don Henry (*al-R.n.k.*), brother of the king of Castile, being angered against his brother, and appeared before the sultan in Tunis. He received him with the benefactions and gifts which are bestowed on persons of the highest rank and mighty kings, and he obtained the most exalted place in his government. The succession of these embassies (Ibn Khaldūn had previously mentioned others) commended the government and raised its prestige.

This notice corresponds with what is known from Western sources of the presence of Henry, brother of Alfonso X, and another brother, Frederick, at the court of al-Mustanṣir in consequence of family dissensions. It cannot be said to throw light on the Norwegian connection except in so far as Tunis and its sovereign again appear—as they do again a little later in the case of the embassy of Lodinn de Leppr—to be the natural resort of those who for whatever reason are dissatisfied with the policies of Alfonso. In another Arabic author the same notice is to be found, somewhat disfigured. This is Ibn al-Qunfudh in his *Fārisīyah*, which has:¹⁴ “And in the year 658/1260 there came the Christian Alfunish, brother of Alfunish, lord of Seville, to al-Mustanṣir, being angered against his brother. He received him with honor, bestowed wealth on him and particularized him much.” This is a garbled text, due no doubt to someone who took “Alfunish” (Alfonso) as a title or other description of Christian princes.

10 Cf. Torfaeus, *Rerum Orcad. Historia*, 163, s. anno 1233: *Navis Judaeorum in Orcadibus periit* (?).

11 *Traités*, loc. cit.; *Relations*, loc. cit. The wording is the same in both places.

12 Cited by Riant, *in loco*.

13 Ed. J. A. Dagher (Lebanon, 1959), 6:652; *Histoire des Berbères*, transl. De Slane (Paris, 1927), 2:347.

14 Edition of 1968, 123.

We therefore have to conclude our survey with next to nothing from the Arabic sources on Norwegian intrusions in the politics of Spain and the Muslim powers. This is unfortunate, though it may yet be remedied. On the other hand, the investigation has certainly not at any point suggested that what the Norwegian records report on these so-called accidental relations of Norway with the Maghrib and Egypt did not take place pretty much as recorded.