ROGER LE TOURNEAU

The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the 12th and 13th Centuries

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The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

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The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

ROGER LE TOURNEAU

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To the Memory of Georges Marçais

FOREWORD

In the fall of 1959 I gave three public lectures on the Almohad movement as part of the Class of 1932 Lectureship at Princeton University. Later, Professor T. Cuyler Young, Chairman of the Department of Oriental Languages at Princeton, asked me to prepare these lectures for publication. This allowed me to develop the subject further and to present it in a more scholarly way.

It is very gratifying to acknowledge here the kindness of Professor Young and the generosity of Princeton University. I want to add that Professor Bayly Winder, Mrs. Edward Sullivan, and Mrs. T. Cuyler Young were kind enough to revise my English text, and I am greatly indebted to them.

This book is a series of reflections on the Almohads, and is in no sense a history of the movement since such an enterprise has been undertaken many times, most recently by Señor Ambrosio Huici Miranda of Valencia in his two-volume, *História política del imperio almohade*, published in 1956-1959. My principal aim is to try to understand how the Almohads succeeded in uniting all of North Africa and Spain under their domination, and, in addition, why they failed to maintain this unity. Furthermore, the interest of such an inquiry is not a purely academic one since North African unity is a contemporary problem. I do not mean to say that what happened in the past will necessarily take place again along the same lines in the future and that North African unity can never be anything other than temporary and fragile; after all,

the main factors and circumstances of the present period differ markedly from those of the Almohad period. I do think, however, that some essential factors are still in effect today that were operative in the twelfth century, and that consequently the eventual promoters of North African unity should meditate on the Almohad experience and avoid, if possible, some of the shortcomings of the Almohad rulers.

ROGER LE TOURNEAU

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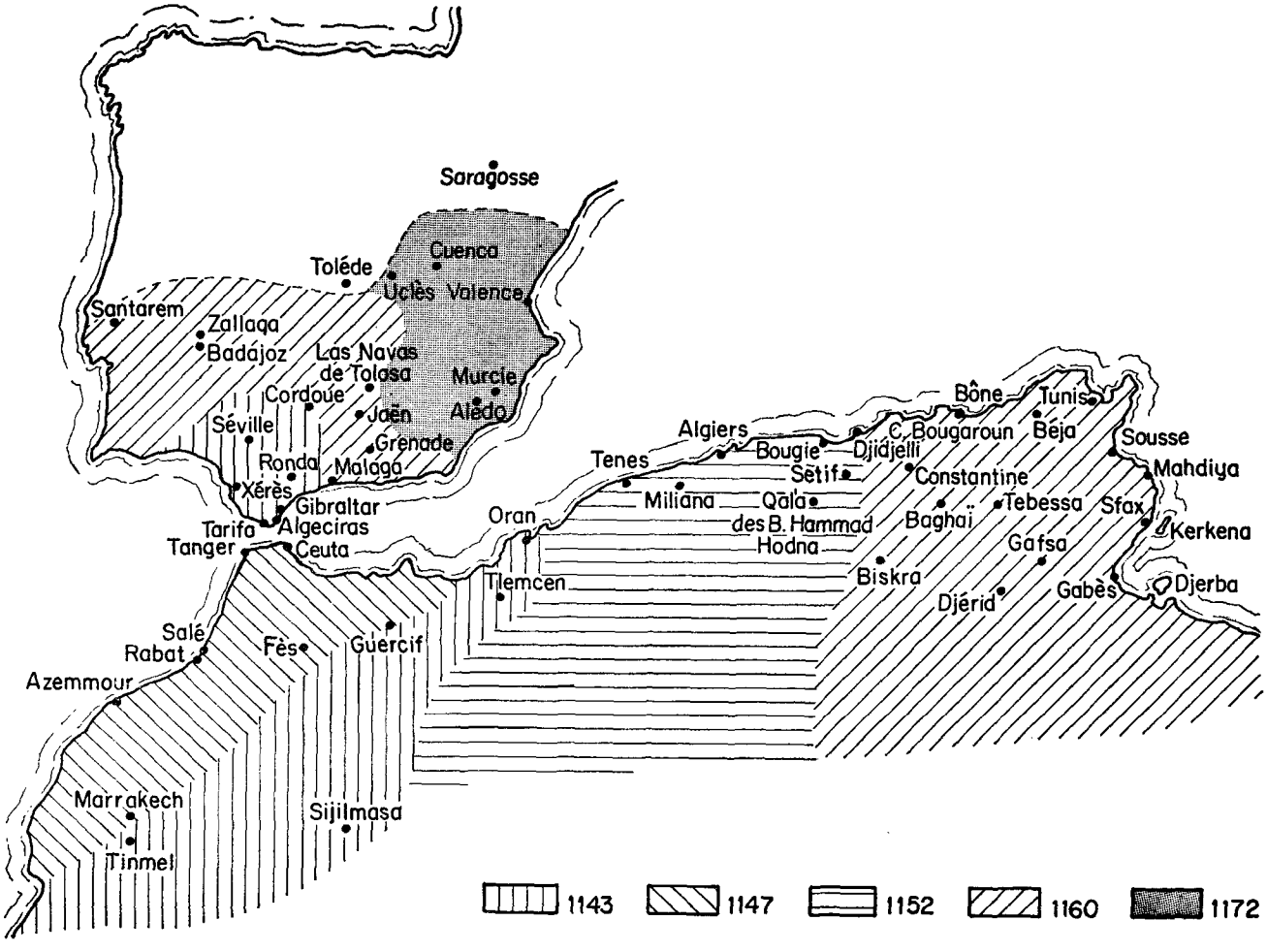
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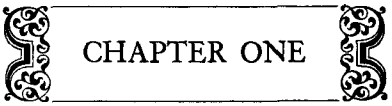

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

PROBABLY during the year 1118—the chronology of these events is not very precise[1]—a Berber from southern Morocco, having left the Near East where he had spent years as a student in close contact with many distinguished scholars and philosophers, disembarked at Mahdiya in Ifrīqiya. Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Tūmart was returning to his fatherland full of new ideas and convinced that he had the mission of reforming Islam in the Maghrib. He was to initiate one of the most important ideological and political movements ever seen in that area, the movement of the unitarians, *al-muwaḥḥidūn.*

Ibn Tūmart was born in southern Morocco, probably on the northern slopes of the Anti-Atlas range, in a place called Igīllīz-n-Hargha, a village inhabited by some families of the Hargha tribe, itself a member of the wide Berber group of the Maṣmūḍa, commonly known now as Shleuh.[2] He was the son of a minor chieftain of the village, and genealogists later established that his family was related to that of the Prophet.[3] This may well be true since at the end of the eighth century several members of this noble family had come to the Maghrib in order to

[1] On the beginnings of Ibn Tūmart and a chronology, see Ambrosio Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade* (Tetuán, 1956-59), I, pp. 23-38.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[3] Evariste Lévi-Provençal, *Documents inédits d'histoire . . .* (Paris, 1928), text and translation; Miranda, *Historia política, op.cit.*, pp. 26-27.

escape the persecutions of the 'Abbāsids and, according to some chroniclers, some of them went as far as the Atlas Mountains. However, the Sherifian ancestry of Ibn Tūmart is not certain and may be unfounded. In any case, even if he had some drops of Sherifian blood in his veins, he was educated in a purely Berber environment and most of his ancestors were Maṣmūḍa.

The Maṣmūḍa Berbers have been carefully studied[4] because they form an original and homogeneous community. As they do today, they occupied, toward the end of the eleventh century, the western half of the High Atlas range, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Tadla regions, and the whole Anti-Atlas range. They were divided into a number of political units of unequal importance: confederations, tribes, or fractions.

The Maṣmūḍa have continued to the present day to keep pure their Berber language, their political organizations, and probably their judicial customs and their family patterns. They had, moreover, adhered to Islam for some time, perhaps since 'Uqba ibn Nafī' had traversed those regions at the end of the seventh century,[5] or from the time several descendants of the Prophet in order to escape the menace of the Oriental 'Abbāsids came to the mountain ranges of southern Morocco in search of a refuge,[6] or pos-

[4] Robert Montagne, *Les Berbères et le Makhzen dans le Sud du Maroc* (Paris, 1930); Jacques Berque, *Structures sociales du Haut Atlas* (Paris, 1955).

[5] Evariste Lévi-Provençal, "Un nouveau récit de la conquête de l'Afrique du Nord par les Arabes," *Arabica*, 1 (1954), 38-39.

[6] Rawḍ al-Qirṭās, *Annales regum Mauritaniae* . . . , C. J. Tornberg, ed. (Upsala, 1843-46), pp. 4/5 (the first page number is that of the Arabic text and the second that of Tornberg's Latin translation).