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The Near West: Medieval North Africa, Latin Europe and the Mediterranean in the Second Axial Age by Allen James Fromherz (review)

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The Near West: Medieval North Africa, Latin Europe and the Mediterranean in the Second Axial Age. By ALLEN JAMES FROMHERZ. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 288 pp. \$120 (hardcover).

For Allen Fromherz, the 'Near West', the North-West of Africa, is an integral part of 'Western' culture. Fromherz focuses on what he calls the 'Second Axial Age,' roughly corresponding to the twelfth century, when political upheaval, increased commerce and military and religious confrontations provoked 'a shift towards spiritualism and mysticism all along the great trade routes of the world's twelfth-century commercial revival' (p. 212). While the Maghreb is often excluded from or at best peripheral to narratives of twelfth-century histories of commerce, intellectual exchange and spiritual renewal, Fromherz argues that it is in fact key to understanding these intertwined phenomena. He is particularly interested in the role played by the Almoravid and Almohad empires, which dominated successively much of the Maghreb and the Iberian Peninsula from the late eleventh to the mid-thirteenth centuries.

The first four chapters focus on different cities at key historical moments. Chapter 1 takes us to Bèjaïa (Bougie), a bustling port on the coast of what it now Algeria, at the turn of the fourteenth century, when a young Pisan student, Leonardo Fibonacci, came to study mathematics. Other Pisans (and Genoans, Venetians and others), came to trade. In this context of twelfth-century commercial prosperity and intellectual ferment, local Sufis, including Ibn 'Arabi, explored the path of holy poverty as a means to return to true spiritual values, just as Francis of Assisi and his Friars Minor would do the following century in a similar context of urban commercial growth in Italy. Chapter 2 backtracks to ninth-century Rome, to show how 'Saracens' from Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia) were key players in the economic and military history of southern Italy, even as the popes vilified them and those Italian Christians who allied themselves with them. Chapter 3 focuses on Tunis, a commercial hub built in proximity to the ancient port of Carthage, from the rise of the Fatimids through the onslaught of the Banu Hilal and the arrival of the Almohads in 1160. Chapter 4 looks at how Marrakech was conceived as a capital and symbol of unity of the new Almoravid Berber Empire, linked to the surrounding tribal landscape. Yet as the Almohads gradually gained power, Marrakech behind its ramparts came to represent the introspection and isolation of the Almoravid elites against the inexorable rise of the Almohads, who in turn would make it their own capital. Chapter 5 focuses on the Almohads, looking at how their power tapped into traditional Berber

social structures. Chapter 6 examines the perspective of one of the great Maghrebi intellectuals, Ibn Khaldun, and his takes on Maghrebi history after the demise of the Almohads.

Much of what has been previously written about the two Berber dynasties has been seen from the perspective of Iberian history: the fanatical Berbers supposedly thwarted the culture of the urbane and tolerant Andalus. Yet a closer look at the intellectual and artistic legacy of the Almoravids and Almohads shows significant intellectual ferment, in theology to be sure, but also in law, philosophy and the sciences. While scholars since Ernest Renan in the nineteenth century have portrayed Averroes as an isolated genius in a hostile intellectual desert, Fromherz shows that this is far from the case, placing him in a rich intellectual landscape, which includes figures such as Ibn Bajja or Ibn Tufayl. Artistically, as well, the Almohads left their mark, notably in creating a distinctive architectural style fusing Andalusí and Berber elements. Rather than cutting al-Andalus off from its roots and culture, the two Berber dynasties linked it more closely to their vast empires that were undergoing considerable commercial, intellectual, and spiritual ferment.

Though few of the specifics will be new to specialists in the history of the Maghreb, Fromherz has provided a fresh and well-crafted synthesis that heuristically questions standard narratives of European medieval history. Does this make the twelfth century a 'second axial age'? A very brief paragraph recalls Karl Jasper's 1949 construct of the first 'Axial Age' of 800–200 B.C., in which major new religions evolved in different parts of the oecumene (pp. 212–213). It seems unnecessary to invoke this notion of axuality to explain the upheavals of the twelfth century world. Fortunately, Fromherz spends little time and energy attempting to justify this choice. The book heuristically restores the Maghreb to its proper place in the wider history of the twelfth-century Mediterranean world. New spiritual movements in Judaism, Christianity and Islam emerged in the context of religious rivalry, political upheaval and commercial revolution, and Fromherz's broad comparative approach is a useful model. As he suggests in his conclusion, similar phenomena are probably in play elsewhere along medieval commercial routes, in Song China (in a context of rivalry and emulation between Neo-Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) and in India (as traditional 'Hindu' practice and doctrine confronted the arrival of Islam). These dynamics offer promising new perspectives beyond debates over oppositions between tolerance and violence.

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