
In the second half of the twentieth century, the multi-cultural and multi-religious world of the kingdom of Valencia in the mid-thirteenth century has come to light at the hands of Robert I. Burns. This book, written by Burns in cooperation with Paul Chevedden and Míkel de Epalza, explains the bilingual surrender treaties drafted between Christian and Islamic powers in Sharq al-Andalus in the mid-thirteenth century. The authors provide an edition and an analysis of the 1245 treaty between the Muslim leader al-Azrāq and King James the Conqueror of Aragón, and the 1244 bilingual surrender treaty of the city of Játiva to the Christian armies of the Aragonese king. Based on a historical and linguistic analysis of these two bilingual treaties, the authors explain how in the fast changing world of the crusader kingdom of Valencia in the mid-thirteenth century, both Christians and Muslims, each with a different mentality and political situation, interpreted the surrender treaties differently.

The book is divided into three thematic sections. The first section, chapters one through three, concentrates on the al-Azrāq treaty of 1244, while the second and longest section, chapters four through nine, studies the surrender treaty of Játiva in the year 1244. According to Burns, the authors preferred the thematic to the chronological approach because the Játiva treaty does not represent an isolated episode like the al-Azrāq treaty, but is the culmination of a long series of negotiations, for which the al-Azrāq treaty provides a better “overture”. (vii) The first and second sections are written by Burns with the addition of a chapter in each section by Chevedden, who analyzes the Arabic texts. The last section of the book, comprising chapters ten and eleven, is written by Epalza and provides a general discussion of the different types of agreements between Islamic powers.

The diverse backgrounds of the authors, who specialize on Christian and Islamic Spain in the Middle Ages, complement each other and are essential to achieve the book’s goal of providing a balanced analysis of the Christian and Islamic interpretations of the treaties. Equally important to understand the treaties is an analysis of the wider Christian and Islamic historical context that produced these treaties. According to Burns, the context comprises “the dizzying changes that issued from the collapse of Almohad Islam, the bitter rivalry of Castile and Aragón on this frontier, the role of the popes and North African sultans, the historiographical confusions, the geographies of war, the ideologies and limitations each party carried into battle, and the individual personalities must all be sorted and each given its proper place in history” (xv). Contextualizing the events surrounding the two treaties is masterly done by Burns, who uses documentation from the royal archives, the book of land distribution or *Repartiment*, and King James’ memoirs.

The reader who is familiar with Burns’ extensive scholarship may wonder why Burns and Chevedden included in this book a new edition of the al-Azrāq treaty. According to Burns, the two earlier publications of the al-Azrāq treaty had suffered
from sloppy publishing at the hands of the publishers. In turn, these mistakes had been propagated by historians such as Pierre Guichard, who have incorporated the flawed text into their own publications. To this Burns adds that the Catalan edition of the treaty also limited its accessibility. The reader, however, will find an additional reason for the inclusion of the al-Azrāq treaty: Burns’ firm belief in Epalza’s model, according to which, the countryside of Sharq al-Andalus was plagued with “feudal” Muslim lords, such as al-Azrāq and the Banū ʿĪṣā dynasty from Játiva. As described by Burns, the Epalza paradigm advocates that the ḥisn or rural fortification formed “part of the larger defensive network of the central ruling power or ’state’, and at the same time helps with collecting a district’s taxes” (pp. 17–18). Essentially, the villages and the castle were tied to the “central” government. The local qāʿid in charge of the local ḥisn was appointed by the “central” government and took over control of the area during times of political crisis. Both al-Azrāq and the members of the Banū ʿĪṣā dynasty of Játiva who appear negotiating the treaty with King James are examples of local qāʿid figures who took over control of local politics in the crumbling world of Sharq al-Andalus in the mid-thirteenth century.

This model is, of course, opposed to the Guichard model, which advocates the Berberization of the countryside, where the population lived in villages, called alquerías or qurā. In the Guichard model, the qurā “operated as collective tribalized communes, without either absentee or presiding proprietors” (p. 19). The ḥisn or castle, in this model, acted as the place of refuge for villagers. The reinforcement of the Epalza model explains, according to Burns, the existence of figures such as al-Azrāq and the Banū ʿĪṣā of Játiva.

Overall, the most original section of the book is that dedicated to the Játiva treaty, which according to Burns, “is the only treaty for Mediterranean Spain in that century of conquest to survive with a Latin-Arabic text” (p. 157). The edition of the long lost surrender treaty of Játiva silences anyone who still conjectured that the surrender date for Játiva took place in 1248 or even later. Chevedden’s linguistic analysis of the Játiva treaty, and especially Epalza’s detailed description of the different types of agreements according to Islamic tradition, bring stronger than ever the voice of the Muslims of Sharq al-Andalus in the mid-thirteenth century. Rather than passive observers of the Christian reconquest, the Muslims of Sharq al-Andalus appear as active participants in a complicated and fast changing world. Epalza, who disagrees with the theory that attributes the fall of al-Andalus to military weakness, states that the Muslims of Andalus were powerful military adversaries to King James I. Their military power allowed Muslim rulers in Sharq al-Andalus to retain bargaining power. As Chevedden’s edition of the bilingual surrender treaty of Játiva illustrates, the Banū ʿĪṣā, the ruling dynasty of the strategically located city of Játiva, retained after their surrender to King James I of Aragón important tax and other privileges, including the right to keep Christian slaves.

More important than the concessions that the Muslims received from the Christians is the book’s emphasis on the fact that each of the bargaining powers interpreted the bilingual agreements in different ways, based on its own cultural idiosyncrasy. This is best illustrated by the lengthy process to overtake Játiva, which
began in 1231 or 1236 and ended in the surrender of Játiva in 1244. The 1244 agreement concluded with the surrender of the minor castle of Játiva and the promise to surrender the main castle in two years, at which time the Banū ʿĪsā rulers had to move to the castle in nearby Montesa. According to Burns, the 1244 Játiva treaty may have seemed “a major and permanent conquest” for King James I, while for the qāʿid of Játiva it may have seemed “a transient compromise” (p. 105). Indeed, the Banū ʿĪsā benefited from the fact that al-Azrāq, who had signed a treaty with King James I in 1245, broke the agreement and opened the door to a major Muslim revolt in the kingdom of Valencia, which kept the Christian king occupied and threatened the success of the Christian conquest. The Banū ʿĪsā moved to the castle of Montesa in 1248, when the Christians began to gain control of Játiva. For Burns, however, the final surrender of the Banū ʿĪsā dynasty did not take place until 1278, when King Peter the Great conquered Montesa.

The authors’ linguistic analysis of the two surrender treaties supports the central thesis that the content and interpretation of the two treaties was culturally conditioned. In the al-Azrāq and Játiva texts, the Arabic and Castilian or Latin texts are not mere translations of each other. Each side used different titulature and terminology and emphasized the aspects of the agreement that it considered most relevant. Moreover, the authors’ comparative analyses of the texts illustrates that in some instances there were discrepancies between the two parts of the treaty. Based on his analysis of the two texts, Chevedden concludes that the Arabic text was written by Jewish scribes from the chancery of King James I, who had moved north fleeing the persecution of the Almohads. Chevedden conjectures that “the scribe who wrote this text may well have been a Jew whose family had converted to Islam under pressure and, following the demise of Islamic rule, had reverted back to Judaism” (p. 57).

Ultimately, the goal of the book is to highlight the different worlds in which Christians and Muslims operated, as well as the rapidly changing circumstances. In that sense, this book has succeeded, especially since the two worlds come to life at the hands of specialists on both sides of the isle. Moreover, the book is an important step towards the cooperation between medievalists who work on Christian Spain and Arabists, whose skills need to complement each other in order to decipher the multi-cultural and multi-religious world of medieval Spain. At the same time, the book illustrates the cooperation between Spanish and North American historians, a highly beneficial relationship for both sides, and especially for Spanish scholars, who in the past have been isolationists. While the cooperation between the authors is good, the book would benefit from a conclusion written by all three authors in order to relate the Christian and Islamic perspectives of the two surrender treaties discussed. Otherwise, in this book the reader will gain a taste of Burns’ erudition, which includes excellent footnotes, a very complete bibliography and a useful glossary.

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