

The Almoravids and Almohads

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THE ALMORAVIDS (1030-1147)

The origins of the Almoravid empire goes back to early in the 11th. century when the Soninke of Ghana took control of Awdaghost and the surrounding area which was populated by the Lamtuna branch of the Sanhaja Berbers. Soon afterwards one of the Berber leaders visited Mecca. On his return in 1036 he stopped at Al Qayrawan, (Kairouan) an Islamic holy city in northern Tunisia, where he spoke with the scholars about how the quality of Islam had deteriorated in his home area. He returned with a northern Berber scholar called Abdallah Ibn Yasin.

Abdallah was shocked to find the level of illiteracy and ignorance of the Koran amongst the believers. They had also combined local traditions with Islam and Abdallah saw this as the reason for their disunity and having been overcome by the pagan Soninke. Abdallah's first attempts to reconvert the Juddala Sanhaja failed.

Abdallah then moved to a secret fortress or place of retreat, a 'ribat' in Arabic, which was probably on one of the Tidra Islands, off the Mauritanian coast. There he built up a group of Islamic followers who came to be known as the 'al-murabitun' ('men of the monastery') or the Almoravids - the name by which they are known to Western historians.



Other sources say that their name means 'people of persuasion' or 'the body of men committed to the fight of establishing true Islam' and also say that it is not certain if the 'ribat' actually physically existed.

The Almoravids preached a strict observance of Islamic law and the waging 'jihad' (Islamic holy war) against the infidel (unbeliever). The Lamtuna Sanhaja nomads, who were in conflict with the Soninke, joined the Almoravids in the early 1040s. Two of the outstanding Lamtuna were Yahya Ibn Umar and his brother Abu-Bakr who helped Abdallah conquer and convert the Sanhaja Berbers of the Western Sahara in the early 1050s. The Almoravid movement unified the rival Sanhaja

The Almoravid Empire

(12th. Century)



trade. By the end of the eleventh century the Soninke leaders converted to Islam and the Ghana empire became both Islamic and Independent. This was possibly brought about by a combination of the sword and politics in order that the empire could re-establish trade links with the Islamic Sanhaja.

Abu-Bakr died in 1087 and so began the collapse of the southern Almoravids. Many

of the best soldiers had also returned north to join Yusuf in his conquests. These factors combined to weaken the southern Sanhaja's resolve and unity, and they were overrun again by the Soninke and later by the Malinke.

clans. This helped them to stand firm against both the Zenata Berbers of Sijilmasa and the Soninke of Ghana. Yahya and Abu-Bakr formed a strong enthusiastic army. They seized towns of Sijilmasa (1054) and Awdaghust (1055) which gave them control over the gold trade and the western trans-Saharan trade routes. They also made allies of the Tokolor, in middle Senegal, who had converted to Islam earlier.

Yusuf took the northern Almoravids army through Morocco and as far as southern Spain. They invaded Morocco in 1055 and founded the city of Marrakesh (1062) as their capital and later they captured Fès (1069). They united Morocco under a single government. In a few years, by 1091, the Almoravid dominated all the Muslim states in Spain, except for Valencia which was conquered by 'El Cid' (Lord Rodrigo) who went to Spain to fight the Christian powers at the request of the Spanish Muslims.

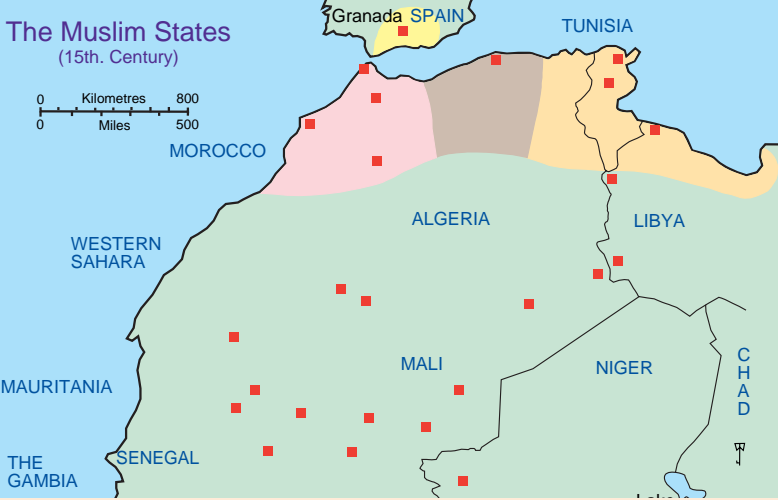
After these successes the Almoravids turned north with a view of conquering Morocco. At this time the tide turned somewhat with the death of Yahya, in 1057, and Abdallah, 1059. Abu-Bakr tried to hold things together, but the territory had become too large for one man to control and so much of the former unity was lost. Abu-Bakr returned south to continue the battle against the 'Sudanese', leaving his cousin Yusuf Ibn Tashufin to control the north. Thus the Almoravid movement and territory was split in two.

Despite the gradual collapse of the southern part of the Almoravid empire it remained vast and very wealthy. It's fate was that of most great empires: the settled nomads became corrupted by their wealth and power. They also began to lose their Islamic fervour and piety, which provoked a reaction from neighbouring Muslim Berbers.

The southern Almoravids, led by Abu-Bakr, are often said to have overcome the Sudanese state of Ghana by 1076 and brought Islam to this part of Africa. It is not clear if the Almoravid actually conquered the Soninke of the Ghana empire. The evidence suggests that there was a series of conflicts which pushed the Soninke back beyond Awdaghust and disrupted their

THE ALMOHADS (1140-1268)

The Almohads, 'al-muwayyidun' meaning 'those who proclaim the unity of God', were Zenata and Masmouda Berbers of the Atlas mountains



and were arch-enemies of the Almoravids. Their origins can be traced to Muhammad ibn Tumart, an Arab reformer, who gathered a large following of both Arabs and Berbers. He was proclaimed Al Mahdi ('The Rightly Guided') in 1121. The founder of the dynasty was Abdel Moumen (Abd al-Mumin), who succeeded Ibn Tumart, was the first Almohad Caliph. He managed to unite the North African Berbers in the 'jihad'. The Almohad army was made up of Berbers from the Anti-Atlas mountains of Morocco. The empire had a professional civil service, recruited from the educated classes, but did not have mass appeal amongst the other peoples of the time.

The Almohads conquered Morocco between 1140 and 1147 and gradually they gained control over the northern part of the Almoravid empire. At the time this included Algeria, Tunisia, eastern Libya, part of southern Mauritania and to the Ebro River in Spain. Moumen's successor, Yacoub El Mansour, had crossed the Mediterranean in 1165 and beaten the disunited Almoravid Emirs.

One of the most famous Almohad rulers in Spain was Yakub al-Mansur, who ruled from 1184 until his death. He helped Sultan Saladin fight against the Crusaders and was responsible for the construction of numerous architectural monuments in Spain and North Africa.

The the united Kingdoms of Castile, Aragón, and Navarre fought back against the North African invaders in their campaign of the 'reconquista' ('war of reconquest'). In the

battle of Navas de Tolosa, 1212, the Almohads suffered their first major defeat and were gradually expelled from Spain by 1232.

While fighting on their European front the Almohad left their North African side open to attack from local groups which they had conquered and so they began to lose ground on both sides of the Mediterranean. This signalled the slow disintegration of the empire over the next thirty years. All that remained was roughly the coastal area across Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. This eventually broke up into the independent dynasties of Hafsids (Tunisia from 1236), Ziyayids (in Algeria from 1239) and Marinids (in Morocco from 1269) due to further advances by the Christian Kingdoms in Spain and the Berbers in central Magreb.

So ended a vast Berber empire and the unification of the Magreb. Both the Almoravids and the Almohads left a great cultural and religious legacy in their wake across North and West Africa. This has given the region distinct cultural characteristics upon which numerous kingdoms and dynasties built. Later, the subsequent North African states, continued to take part in the creation of the Muslim world's literature, science and mathematics, the benefit of which we all share today.