



TMSR

The Mediterranean Seminar Review

[www.mediterraneanseminar.org](http://www.mediterraneanseminar.org)

Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

Krasner Balbale, Abigail, *The Wolf King: Ibn Mardanīsh and the Construction of Power in al-Andalus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781501765872. 360pp. 64 b&w halftones, 4 maps, 1 chart. \$56.95 hardback.

**Reviewed by:** Travis Bruce, Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University ([travis.bruce@mcgill.ca](mailto:travis.bruce@mcgill.ca)).

**Date posted:** 16 February 2024

In *The Wolf King: Ibn Mardanīsh and the Construction of Power in al-Andalus*, Abigail Krasner Balbale studies the twelfth-century ruler of eastern al-Andalus who successfully resisted Almohad power for a quarter of a century. She carefully excavates textual sources for historical narratives and the production of systems of power. She reads these in conjunction with material sources and the guidance they provide in understanding Ibn Mardanīsh's ambitions as a ruler. Balbale examines Ibn Mardanīsh within the context of the Islamic Middle Period that saw the decentralization of power from the caliphate to regional dynasties and the transformation of the Islamic world that came from the Arabization and Islamization of newly Muslim groups. Importantly, Balbale challenges the binary approaches, such as Islamic/Christian and secularism/religiosity, that have characterized the study of the Iberian Peninsula. *The Wolf King* marks an excellent contribution to the renewed scholarly interest in medieval Spain and al-Andalus. Balbale's careful scholarship provides a much-needed rereading of some fundamental sources and challenges accepted ideas on Ibn Mardanīsh and normative views of the period.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the changing expectations for caliphal power as newly Islamized regional authorities such as the Saljuqs assumed the authority behind the caliphal title. Scholars such as al-Māwardī and al-Ghazālī articulated new expectations for the recognition and delegation of caliphal power in an effort to maintain unity across dar al-Islām. In the West, however, the Almohads developed new conceptions of Islamic power that centered on the mahdī Ibn Tūmart. In Almohad propaganda, Ibn Tūmart's life paralleled the prophet Muḥammad's and his place as the mahdī superseded the authority of the caliph within the umma. Caliphal authority no longer sat with the Abbasids in the East, but traced its lineage through the family of the mahdī. Political conflicts thus ultimately came to center on the nature of the caliphate itself.

Chapter 2 examines the place of Ibn Mardanīsh in the face of the Almohads' universalist claims. The Almohad message of unity and purity left no room for dissent, and those who failed to recognize their authority, especially fellow Muslims, became the object of jihād. Ibn Mardanīsh was the longest-lasting opponent to Almohad authority as he associated his rule with the Sunnī Abbasid caliphate, and replaced the Almoravids as the Almohads' primary opponent after the former's defeat. Contemporary Almohad sources portray Ibn Mardanīsh as a traitor against God for his refusal to recognize Almohad authority. They emphasize his alliances with Christians to underline his status as an unbeliever deserving of divine retribution in the form of Almohad jihād.

Chapter 3 traces the connections between Ibn Mardānīsh and previous dynasties and regimes. Although his genealogy likely led back to a Christian forebear, Balbale points out that this was not a point of discussion in twelfth century al-Andalus. Instead, Ibn Mardānīsh created genealogies that connected him first to the powerful families of al-Andalus's northern Upper March and then to Arab tribes from the East to establish his lineage of legitimacy. The Sharq al-Andalus under Ibn Mardānīsh attracted Mālikī scholars who carefully traced their authority and connections with the Islamic East through scholarly chains of transmission. Ibn Mardānīsh then relied on those authorities for the structure of his administration and for local legitimacy. The chapter's most important contribution is a careful examination of coinage under Ibn Mardānīsh. Balbale carefully demonstrates how he first associated his reign with his Almoravid predecessors by imitating their coins. As he developed a ruling ideology, his coins placed him in opposition to the Almohads. On coinage that explicitly mentioned the Abbasid caliph, monetary inscriptions portrayed Ibn Mardānīsh as a pious Mālikī ruler who represented traditional caliphal power in rejection of Almohad claims. This reiterates that the conflict between Ibn Mardānīsh and the Almohads was ultimately one of righteous authority within Islam.

Chapter 4 continues Balbale's examination of the material sources for Ibn Mardānīsh. The built environment displayed Ibn Mardānīsh's claims to delegated caliphal authority in a way that countered not only the Almohad message, but also their ideological perspectives on representation. Ibn Mardānīsh's cultural program existed in conversation with other Mediterranean regimes in an articulation of princely power. Balbale draws comparisons in particular with the Fatimid Western Palace and the Norman Cappella Palatina where rulers employed similar visual representations of their courtly image. Balbale argues that regional authorities like Ibn Mardānīsh sought to establish their Sunnī legitimacy through architectural programs that employed visual markers associated with the tradition of the caliphate. She uses the example of the muqarnas as an architectural element that spread quickly from the peripheries to symbolize Sunnī revivalism. Ibn Mardānīsh's prominent use of them in his various constructions thus reads as an affirmation of his embrace of the traditional caliphate and rejection of the Almohads. Balbale further points out that pictorial programs that depict courtly scenes painted on the muqarnas ceilings of his palace articulated princely languages of power that translated across Mediterranean courts and predated the rise of Islam. The visual signifiers at play in Ibn Mardānīsh's court would have been at home in Umayyad and Abbasid settings, as well as the courts of the Fatimids, Normans, and other regional powers. Ibn Mardānīsh moreover occupied the landscape through a building program of fortresses that would have been recognizable as representing his authority.

In Chapter 5, Balbale uses Andalusī silks to trace the pathways of Ibn Mardānīsh's alliances with Christians. He likely governed the city of Almeria for the Christian coalition that conquered it in 1147, and under his authority the city became a point of connection with Christian Iberia and the Italian Mediterranean. Silks produced in the city drew on visual traditions of power from the East and travelled to Iberian and European courts where they became material markers of authority and rulership. Within this material context, Ibn Mardānīsh cultivated alliances with Barcelona and Castile, among others, in his efforts to resist Almohad aggression. In these alliances, Ibn Mardānīsh appears as a vassal to the Christian kings who refer to him as "Rex Lupus", the Wolf King. Hundreds of thousands of dinars flowed from his court to the north as tribute to buy the Christians' support for his independence. Balbale demonstrates that Alfonso VIII of Castile responded to the vacuum left by Ibn Mardānīsh's defeat and death by minting his own dinars. Those coins imitated Ibn Mardānīsh's, not just for reasons of

monetary recognizability, but especially to translate the Wolf King's place as the Iberian bulwark against the Almohads to the kingdom of Castile.

Chapter 6 discusses the rapid assimilation of the Mardanīshī clan into the Almohad hierarchy, as they became regional governors, military commanders, and wives to the caliphs. More importantly, the chapter argues that Ibn Mardanīsh's defeat allowed the Almohads to pivot their message to one of jihād against the Christians and to engage in large scale building programs that commemorated their success. In absorbing Ibn Mardanīsh's family and territories, the Almohads incorporated visual elements associated with his authority as their rule became increasingly tied to the Iberian Peninsula. As the Almohad message shifted, the regime also came to rely on Mālikī scholars from Ibn Mardanīsh's regime to legitimize their reign in more traditional terms.

Chapter 7 stands apart in its treatment of how later sources treat Ibn Mardanīsh. In this chapter Balbale expertly reads later Arabic sources to trace a changing narrative of Andalusī decline and binary conflict between Christians and Muslims. While contemporary sources allowed Ibn Mardanīsh to be a complicated mix of competent ruler and infidel collaborator, later authors such as Ibn al-Khaṭīb and al-Maqqarī treat him as a morally corrupt harbinger of failure and the loss of the Andalusī paradise. Balbale's analysis is all the more important in that it challenges modern-day scholars who have read and continue to read those sources without an eye for the teleological narratives they carry. The chapter continues by examining how modern scholars have portrayed Ibn Mardanīsh as a proto-Spanish nationalist, or as an example of flexible Muslim secularism against the religious rigidity of the Almohads. In both sections, Balbale's close scholarly attention provides much needed material for reconsidering how we understand Andalusī sources and contemporary historiography.

Balbale concludes with a short postscript in which she considers depictions of Ibn Mardanīsh in contemporary media as a nationalist hero who resisted African invaders. As Balbale argues, these depictions, whether scholarly or in popular media, "continue to legitimate visions of the world as divided between a civilized, secular and/or Christian Europe and a barbaric, violent, and religious Islamic world." *The Wolf King*, on the other hand, allows Ibn Mardanīsh the necessary space to be a messy individual who existed before later authors corrupted him for their own purposes.



TMSR

The Mediterranean Seminar Review

[www.mediterraneanseminar.org](http://www.mediterraneanseminar.org)

Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

## Table of Contents

Front Matter i-xviii

Introduction: Ibn Mardanīsh as Historical Figure and Historiographic Subject 1

Chapter 1. Caliph and *Mahdī*: The Battle over Power in the Islamic Middle Period 22

Chapter 2. Rebel against the Truth: Almohad Visions of Ibn Mardanīsh 51

Chapter 3. Filiative Networks: Lineage and Legitimacy in Sharq al-Andalus 89

Chapter 4. Material Genealogies and the Construction of Power 131

Chapter 5. Vassals, Traders, and Kings: Economic and Political Networks in the Western Mediterranean 187

Chapter 6. Renaissance and Assimilation after the Almohad Conquest 233

Chapter 7. The Reconquista, a Lost Paradise, and Other Teleologies 264

Postscript: Medieval Stories, Modern Anxieties 294

Bibliography 305

Index 333

## Author's Response:

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.