

THE RELATIONS OF KING SANCHO VII OF NAVARRE WITH THE ALMOHADS

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relations between Sancho VII of Navarre and the Almohad rulers of Muslim Spain, with special reference to the story told by the English chronicler, Roger of Hoveden¹.

This story is that a daughter of the Almohad Caliph 'Boiac', by which is meant Ya `qub al-Mansfir, fell in love with King Sancho by hearsay, that is, by description without having seen him, and pestered her father until he agreed to offer her in marriage to him, with as much money as he wished for her dowry and all the land which, the account says, is called Saracen Spain from the limits of Portugal to the great mountain of Muncian. By Muncian was no doubt meant Montsia, then on the Aragonese-Muslim frontier, just north of Peñiscola. The King accepted the proposition and set out for the Almohad court, then in Africa. On arrival he found that Ya 'qub was dead and that the succession of his heir who was still under age was disputed. This was in fact Muhammad al-Nasir, then 17. The young ruler insisted that Sancho, before receiving his wife must first help him establish himself against his enemies; otherwise he would detain him in captivity indefinitely. Seeing no alternative, Sancho helped to the best of his ability and within three years al-Nasir's succession was assured. Meanwhile however the Kings of Castile and Aragon had jointly attacked Navarre, capturing a number of cities. Here the story breaks off abruptly, but a later paragraph tells us that Sancho thereupon returned home and made a truce with the two kings.

Hitherto no detailed study of this story appears to have been made. In spite of its improbability it was accepted as it stands by the Navarrese historian Jose" de Moret in the 17th century. As a Christian and a patriot he was clearly shocked by the friendly relations known to exist between Sancho and the Almohads and preferred to think that Sancho in making this visit was influenced by a romantic motive and the prospect of a transfer, as Moret supposed, of Muslim territory to Christian rule rather than by the hope of securing Muslim military aid against fellow Christian monarchs². Presumably Roger's story is also the source of the statement in the Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada, published in the present century, that Sancho married a Muslim princess, though Roger does not in fact say that he did so. On the other hand the most recent historian of the Almohads, Huici Miranda, himself Navarrese, quoting the phrase of an earlier critic, rejects the story as the 'fable of a worthy Englishman',

¹ Roger of Hoveden. *Chronica*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series), 4 vols. London 1868-1871, III, 91, IV, 113.

² Jose de Moret. *Anales del regno de Navarra*. Pamplona 1695, II, 357.

though he recognise that Sancho did visit Muslim territory and did seek aid from the Muslim ruler. Huici objects that no harem lady in Marrakesh could have fallen in love by hearsay with a then obscure Christian prince; that it is absurd to suppose that al-Mansur would have thought of handing Muslim territory over to a Christian king; and that al-Nasir's succession was not seriously disputed³. To these arguments we may add the improbability that al-Mansur would in any circumstances give his daughter in marriage to a Christian prince.

The undisputed historical background to this story is the following. King Sancho was born in 1154 and reigned for the forty years from 1194 to 1234. He is said to have been married and to have had one son, who had the odd nickname of Calabaza or Pumpkin and died young as the result of a fall from his horse. But the name and origin of Sancho's wife are variously given and he was succeeded by a nephew⁴. In 1191, Sancho's sister, Berengaria, was married to Richard Coeur-de-Lion, King of England. In the following year Sancho helped Richard's governor suppress a rising in Gascony and in 1194 he was on the way to help Richard himself at Tours when he received the news of his own accession. After King Richard's death Sancho signed an agreement with Richard's successor, King John, dated at Chinon in 1201, in which he agreed to defend him 'against all men except only the King of the Moroccans'. In January 1202 he confirmed this undertaking at a meeting with King John in Angouleme, adding specifically that he would not make peace with the Kings of Castile and Aragon until John had settled his own disagreements with them. As counterpart John in Chinon had agreed the sums to be paid to Sancho's sister, the widow of King Richard⁵.

One hundred and sixty years earlier Sancho's ancestor, Sancho III, had been the most powerful Christian ruler in Spain and had even styled himself emperor⁶. By that ruler's will however his realms was divided into three parts, one son inheriting Navarre, another Castile, and a third Aragon. One result of this was an intermittent state of war between the Kings of Navarre and those of the two separated kingdoms. This continued on and off to Sancho VII's own day. In 1195, a year after his accession, for one reason or another, he failed to fight on the Christian side at the battle of Alarcos, in which Ya equb al-Mansur inflicted a disastrous defeat on the King of Castile. On the contrary Sancho, as also the King of Leon, then took this opportunity to attack Castile in collaboration with the Almohads⁷. At first Navarre had some successes but the position was entirely changed in 1197 when the Castilian king made a ten years truce with the Almohads and married his daughter to the King of Leon. Navarre was left to face Castile unaided. It was now that Sancho, as we learn from two contemporary

³ A. Huici Miranda. *Las Grandes Batallas de la Reconquista*. Madrid 1956, p. 220-223.

⁴ Moret. *Anales del regno de Navarra*, p. 360.

⁵ T. Rymer. *Foedera*. London 1714, I. 126, 127. A. Richard, *Les Contes de Poitou*, Toulouse 1893, II, 389.

⁶ Menendez Pidal. *El imperio espanol y los cinco reinos*. Madrid 1950, pp. 67-82.

⁷ Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada. *Pp. Toletanorum Opera*, ed. Lorenzana y Buitron. Madrid 1793, p. 170.

Spanish sources, proceeded to Muslim territory, taking a few knights with him, and remained there for a prolonged period between February 1199 and March 1201⁸. One of these two sources confirms the statement that Sancho went to N. Africa; the other has been taken to imply that he merely despatched ambassadors there while himself remaining in al-Andalus. The disastrous results of the attack on Navarre by Castile and Aragon then caused him to return home, having received substantial subsidies and revenues from the Almohads but no military aid.

⁸ The detailed sequence of events during this period was the following. After the Castilian defeat at Alarcos, Pope Celestine III made great efforts to detach Sancho and the King of Leon from their Almohad connexions and to promote good relations between Sancho and the Castilian and Aragonese Kings. On 29 March 1196 he wrote to Sancho reproaching him for having made friends with the enemies of the Christian faith; this, he said, was the equivalent of making friends with the enemies of Christ himself. He had been informed that Sancho was receiving annual subsidies from the Almohad, in return for not fighting against them. After exhorting Sancho to fight the Muslims the Pope undertook, if he did so, to urge the Kings of Castile and Aragon to settle their territorial claims against Navarre in a satisfactory manner. In a further letter (22 April 1196) he flattered Sancho by addressing him as King instead of as Duke, the title which the Papal court had been employing since Navarre had recovered its independence after a brief union with Aragon. On 28 May the Pope instructed his Legate in Spain to use his utmost efforts to persuade the Castilian and Aragonese kings to compromise with Sancho. In consequence of these efforts a meeting of the three kings was held at Agreda, but proved abortive. When Sancho continued hostilities against the King of Castile, the latter was forced to make a ten years truce with the Almohads. Innocent III, who succeeded Celestine in 1198, thereupon excommunicated Sancho and put Navarre under an interdict; he also took Richard Cœur de Lion's side against him in a dispute concerning two castles which Sancho's father had promised as dowry for Berengaria but which had never been handed over. Sancho now attempted to detach Aragon from Castile by offering his other sister in marriage to the Aragonese King. This plan failed, the Pope declaring that such a marriage would be within the prohibited degrees (letter of 2 Feb. 1199). On 8 March 1199 Innocent III himself wrote a courteous letter to Muhammad al-Nasir proposing an exchange of Muslim and Christian prisoners. This was a matter of some delicacy since the King of Castile had failed to keep his promise over an exchange of prisoners after Alarcos, receiving the Christians and then failing to hand back the Muslim captives in exchange. About the same time Sancho was making his way to Almohad territory. (Letters in Fidel Fita. *Bol. Academ. Hist.*, XXVI, Madrid 1895, pp. 417, 443).

The return journey seems to have been made through Valencia, and took place a few months before the meeting with King John which I mentioned above⁹.

There follows an interval of nine years before the final occurrence which is of significance for the purpose of our study. In 1211 Muhammad al-Nasir having restored Almohad rule in the eastern Maghrib resolved on a supreme effort to decide in Muslim favour the struggle for supremacy in Spain. Since the fall of the Cordova Caliphate, nearly two centuries before, this struggle had been moving of favour of the Christians, in spite of occasional Muslim successes such as Alarcos. There is abundant evidence from Christian as well as Muslim sources that al-Nasir's threat was taken seriously in western Christendom and that it was

believed that he might attempt to advance into France¹⁰. Though only at the last moment and with a small force, Sancho on this occasion participated on the Christian side and helped the King of Castile win the great victory of Las Navas de Tolosa¹¹. He had long hesitated and only yielded at the last moment to the insistence of the Pope. This fact is confirmed for us both by Christian sources and by Mohammad al-Nasir in an official letter in which he tried to minimise the disaster. 'The Lord of Navarre', he wrote, 'was linked to the Almohads by agreements and guided to them by the most gentle of reins. He was however threatened by the Lord of Rome should he not mobilise his people and reinforce the coalition of his coreligionists. Stimulated in this way he joined the throng and launched himself into that foaming ocean'¹². The defeat at Las Navas brought about the collapse of Almohad power and with it the end of Sancho's special relationship with them.

We must now turn to consider the credentials of the chronicler who tells the story. Roger was parson of Hoveden, a Yorkshire village now known as Howden; he is believed to have died late in 1201 or in 1202. For some fifty years before that date, English chroniclers had been showing an interest in the affairs of Christian and Muslim Spain. This was due to two causes. The first was the adoption by English crusaders of the practice of sailing round the Iberian peninsula on their way to Palestine and their consequent occasional involvement in the Portuguese struggle against the local Muslims. The second was the close relationship which now existed between the English court and those of the Pyrenean regions and of Spain. This had been brought about by the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to the future Henry II of England and the addition of her duchy to the domain of the English crown. Roger of Hoveden was directly influenced by both factors. For many years he was connected with the English court; he was a royal clerk under Henry II and carried out a confidential diplomatic mission for him. In the reign of the next king Richard Cœur de Lion Roger was brought into close contact with crusaders, since he was present at the siege of Acre, having probably accompanied the King on his journey there across France and through Sicily¹³. It was no doubt from crusaders

¹⁰ Al-Bayan al-Mughrib tr. Huici, Tetuan 1953, I, p. 271. Walter of Coventry. Rolls Series. London 1872-1873, II, 204. The back-ground on this occasion is that the King of Castile, wishing to avenge his defeat at Alarcos, refused to renew the ten years truce with al-Nasir. Pope Innocent III thereupon organised a crusading force from outside Spain and renewed his efforts to unite the kings of the Christian Spanish states. As far as Leon was concerned the attempt failed and the outcome was long doubtful as regards Sancho. The latter again attempted to bring Aragon over to his side, this time by means of loans, presumably out of the proceeds of the subsidies which he received from al-Nasir. In the end however he decided to join the Castilian forces (Huici *Las Grandes Batallas*, pp. 227-230. Fidel Fita Bol. Acad. Hist. XXVI). 'To the same place came Sancho King of Navarre, who at first pretended not to want to come, but at the critical moment did not deprive the service of God of the glory of his efforts...'. Rodrigo de Jimenez, op. cit., p. 181.

¹¹ Huici. *Las Grandes Batallas*, p. 247.

¹² *Al-Baydn-al-Mughrib*, tr. Huici, I, p. 171.

¹³ F. Barlow. *Roger of Hoveden in English Historical Review* 1950. D. M. Stenton. *Roger of Hoveden in English Historical Review* 1953, p. 574.

whom Roger met in Acre that he heard of their adventures in Portugal in 1190, described in his chronicle, and on their information that he based his description of Muslim Spain.

Roger thus had access to excellent sources of information. He frequently quotes documents in full and enjoys a good reputation as a recorder of contemporary events.

At this point we must consider two absurdities in the narrative. One is that the Caliph and his daughter are made to quote couplets of Ovid's poetry at one another. This literary device is not in fact quite so odd as it seems to us today. European writers of that age had a highly developed cult of Ovid and other chroniclers besides Roger introduce quotations from his works at most incongruous moments¹⁴. But though these are literary ornaments, not to be taken as actually spoken, they certainly do not inspire confidence in a historian. The second point is however much more significant. The beginning of Sancho's journey is placed in 1190. This must be nine years too early, since al-Mansur died in 1199 and also because there are documents in Navarre showing that Sancho did not leave the country before February 1199 and that he was back by March 1201¹⁵. It is impossible to think that the well-informed Roger, whose own death soon followed would have made such a gross error about a contemporary event. The explanation is to be sought in the fact that his chronicle comes to an abrupt end late in 1201, presumably owing to an illness which resulted in his death. In these circumstances it will have been left to an editor to make the final revisions of text. There are in fact textual indications that some additions were made to the miscellaneous notices inserted at the end of the account of each year's events and that the narrative of Sancho's experiences in Africa is one of these. Roger can therefore be acquitted of responsibility for the absurd misdating and no doubt also for the form in which the story is told, even if it is based on some note which was found among his papers after his death. These additions however occur in all the MSS of his works. As some of the MSS almost certainly date from before 1213, we can nevertheless be sure that the story assumed its present form within some twelve years of the events which it purports to describe¹⁶.

In view of the independent evidence we can safely assume that the journey did take place and that its aim was to seek Muslim financial and military aid, of which the former was acquired but not latter. Was some transfer of territory also considered, as the story suggests and, if so, what was it? The chronicle states that it was the whole territory known as Saracen Spain, from the limits of the King of Portugal to the mountain of Muncian which it says, divides the Saracen territory in Spain from that of the King of Aragon. Nobody is likely to dispute Huici's statement that it is unthinkable that al-Mansur should ever consider such a

¹⁴ The cult of Ovid was so widespread in the second half of the XIIth century that a literary historian named the age the 'aetas ovidiana'. J.J. Parry. *The Art of Courty Love*. New York 1941, p. 6.

¹⁵ Huici. *Las Grandes Batallas*, p. 223.

¹⁶ W. Stubbs. *Roger of Hoveden* (Rolls Series), II, introd., p. X-XII, notes 2 and 3; II, 195, note 3. Cf. IV introd., p. XII, parag. 5. The passage relating Sancho's return in 1200 is not open to the same suspicion, since it does not occur as the last item of the year's events. There is no doubt, according to Stubbs, that all the passages at least formed part of the compilation as first circulated.

proposal. Nor, one may add, could Sancho have wished it. It would have created a Navarre composed of two widely separated provinces, with the powerful and hostile Castile in between them. In fact the description itself is nonsense, since Montsia marked the southern, not the western, frontier of Aragon. Its introduction must be connected with a passage in the chronicle occurring with reference to the year where the story of Sancho's departure has been wrongly inserted. Here we are told, in connection with the journey of the nordic crusaders around the peninsula, that Saracen Spain extended along the sea-coast (*secus mare*, in the original) from Silves the last Christian possession in south Portugal to Muncian. This is true, but it is not a form of description which anyone would normally use to define an area of territory. Moreover it only applied to a few months following the temporary capture of the by the King of Portugal, with crusading aid, in 1190, as Roger himself tells us. Silves was lost again in the following year and subsequently for nearly half a century the Portuguese frontier was some 70 miles inland from any point on the southern coast of Portugal. The only explanation which I can find of this strange description is that the editor, much less well informed than Roger, found a mention of territory lying between Portugal and Aragon and assumed it must refer to Muslim territory, either because he connected it with the existing passage in the chronicle, mentioning Portugal and Aragon, or because like Moret he did not suppose that a Christian king could be seeking Muslim aid to win territory from a fellow Christian monarch.

By itself, the description 'between the frontiers of Portugal and Aragon' would be a natural though not a precise definition of territory which had been captured by Castile from the Muslims during the preceding 120 years — that is, more or less, the former Muslim Kingdom of Toledo. If al-Mansur had favoured an extension of Navarre it would surely have been at the expense of Castilian not Muslim territory. Such a transfer could have only been enforced by a fresh Almohad victory, sufficient to bring about the resumption of Almohad rule over southern Spain as far as Toledo and Guadalajara. It would be very rash on the strength of this story to suppose that Sancho would so far betray Christian solidarity for the sake of enlarging his own kingdom. The fact remains that he was clearly willing to go great lengths to secure Almohad aid, and that he was known as a determined and selfwilled character. In the words of his contemporary, Archbishop Rodrigo Jimenez of Toledo, he was *fortis viribus armis stremms, sed voluntate propria obstinatus*. Moreover it might very well have suited al-Mansur to establish an enlarged Navarre in the north to serve as a counterweight to Castile, whose subsequent resentment could moreover be depended on to prevent Navarre from itself becoming dangerously powerful. It must surely have been the hope of a spectacular coup which led Sancho to leave his country at such a critical moment and for a prolonged period. Such a prospect would explain his continuing his journey even if the news of Ya'qub's death had already reached him, as Huici suggests that it might have. He was not to know that the new ruler would have to give priority to a resurgence of rebellion in the eastern Maghrib. Nor would there have been anything unusual in al-Nasir's taking advantage of Sancho's presence in Muslim territory to secure the services of a Christian military leader. Such taking of service

with Muslims had been frequent since before the time of the Cid. Al-Mansur himself employed many Christian soldiers and profited greatly at the Battle of Alarcos from the services of a great Castilian noble, Don Pedro Fernandez de Castro. After al-Nasir's death, his own son and successor, al-Mustansir, employed an exiled brother of the reigning King of Portugal as military adviser in Marrakesh¹⁷.

There remains the story of the enamoured princess. I cannot think that al-Mansur would have considered giving daughter in marriage to a Christian. But the story is there and it is worth while trying to see how it came into being. For this purpose it is useful to consider what we know of the attitude towards Muslims not only of Sancho but also of the English royal family, the Plantagenets, with whom he was so closely associated. Of his own attitude we know that he attacked Castile in cooperation with the Almohads, that he spent several months in Muslim lands as their guest, that he shocked Christian opinion by his acceptance of financial subsidies from them, and that this resulted in his being excommunicated by Pope Celestine III and rebuked by Pope Innocent III. The attitude of the early Plantagenets toward Muslim was itself uninhibited. In 1162 Henry II exchanged valuable gifts with the Muslim king of Valencia, Ibn Mardanis¹⁸. Six years later, as we learn from the scholarly and trustworthy John of Salisbury, Henry's ambassadors told the Pope that their master would sooner follow the errors of Nur-al-Din and adopt his faith than have Becket any longer as bishop in Canterbury¹⁹. They were, no doubt, as John says, lying when they said it, but they did think it a suitable argument to advance. Henry's son, Richard Cœur de Lion, when in Palestine proposed that his sister Joanna should be married to Salah al-Din's brother. For this, as he recognised in his negotiations on the subject, it would be very difficult to win Christian approval²⁰. The chronicler Matthew Paris asserts that ambassadors sent to Muhammad al-Nasir by King John actually told him that their master was prepared to become a Muslim²¹. Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, mother of Richard and John, was the granddaughter of that Duke William who was the first troubadour poet; and the conceptions of troubadour poetry certainly played a part in her emotional life and in that of her children²². Richard himself wrote verse. Contemporary poets and authors were fascinated by the themes of courtly love and in particular by that of 'falling in love by hearsay'. The troubadour Jaufré de Rudel is said, in the biographical note attached to his verse, to have fallen in love by hearsay

¹⁷ *Analecta Franciscana*. Ad Aquas Claras. 1885-, HI, 15-21, 583-593. Huici. *Las Grandes Batallas*, p. 214. *Cronica de Don Sancho I*, ed. A. de Magalhaes Basto. Lisbon 1945, pp. 42 and 329.

¹⁸ Robert de Torigni. *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, Richard I*. (Rolls Series). London 1899, IV, 215.

¹⁹ *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket* (Rolls Series) London 1879, VI, 406.

²⁰ *Recueil des historiens des Croisades (Historiens orientaux)*, III, Baha al-Din, 274-279.

²¹ Matthew Paris. *Chronica Majora* (Rolls Series). London 1874, II, 559.

²² It has been said of Eleanor by a modern student that 'her presence was for the poets what the dawn is for the birds' (Tamizey de Larroque), *Revue d'Aquitaine* 1864, pp. 261, 309, 433.

with the Countess of Tripoli and to have made the long sea voyage to Syria in order to visit her, a story which is significant for contemporary sentiment even if, as seems certain, it is not historically true²³. Another 13th century writer of historical romances, known as the Minstrel of Reims, alleges that Eleanor herself fell in love by hearsay with Salah al-Din and planned to join him²⁴. This is certainly an invention since Salaaah al-Din was only 13 when she was in Syria; but it is none the less indicative of reputation of the family for unconventional behaviour with regard to Muslims. With Queen Eleanor's troubadour background, the proximity of Aquitaine to Spain, and her visits to Navarre and Castile, she must surely have come across Muslim singers and taken an interest in the Muslim attitude to love and marriage. It is probably too much to suppose that she ever heard of the treatise on love known as *Twwq al-Hamama* composed by Ibn Hazm some 200 years earlier. But the chapter in it which he devoted to the theme of 'falling in love by hearsay' — *al-mahabba bi'l warfi duna mu'-dyanah* — saying that this was a fatality to which the great ladies of Cordova in his day were particularly prone, could very well be the source from which the interest of the troubadour in this theme was originally derived.

Though it is impossible to believe that al-Mansur would have offered his daughter in marriage to Sancho, there is no reason why he should not have presented him with a beautiful *jdriyah* or girl slave. When Sancho met John soon after his return from Muslim territory, it would only be natural for him to tell him about his experiences there. Directly or indirectly Sancho's sister, Berengaria, will no doubt have heard the story also, and possibly her mother-in-law Queen Eleanor.

From one source or another gossip on the subject reached Roger, who may have made a provisional note about it. After his death, his editor will have made the actual insertion, being certainly responsible for the coast-line definition and blundering badly over the date. How much more he added or altered is a matter of guesswork. Possibly the note is mainly his handiwork. As we have it, the story has been romanticized to suit the taste of the age and distorted to present Sancho's conduct as conforming to the standards expected of a Christian prince. If the chronicle was in fact published in 1213, there would be a motive for this rehabilitation in Sancho's last minute but valiant intervention in 1212 in support of the King of Castile. But equally it can hardly be doubted that Sancho did invoke Almohad military aid in order to force Castile and perhaps Aragon to yield territory to him. It is quite probable too that a Muslim lady from al-Andalus or from Morocco did come into the picture, if only in a passive capacity. And it may be that Sancho's failure to get a definite commitment from the Muslim

²³ 'Toutefois ces audacieuses inventions ne sont pas d'ordinaire forgées de toutes pièces; elles ont avec la réalité un point d'attache qu'une critique ingénieuse peut réussir à discerner' A. Jeanroy. *La poésie lyrique des troubadours*. Toulouse-Paris 1934, I, 112.

²⁴ Natalie de Wailly. *Récit d'un minestrel de Reims*. Paris 1876. A variant of the Sancho story — in reverse — occurs in the XIVth. century French poet, Dumart. * Un chevalier s'eprend d'une reine, sans l'avoir vue, la rencontre sans la connaître, la perd et enfin, Payant aidee a reconquérir son royaume, devient son epoux'. Gaston Paris. *Hist. Lit. de France*, XXX, Paris 1912, p. 151.

ruler in 1199 was a factor which decided him in 1212 to fight at Las Navas on the Christian and not on the Muslim side.