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Who Conquered Spain? The Role of the Berbers in the Conquest of the Iberian Peninsula

*“For a century, Arabs’ tribes gave Islam the first of these victories.
Then the rough mountain peoples of North Africa,
the Berbers, helped it to conquer Spain...”*
(Braudel 1995: 54)

Abstract: Categories such as “the Berbers” and “the Arabs” are historical. Their production, maintenance, and reproduction occur under particular circumstances. As circumstances change, so do these categories. The role of Arabs in the Medieval History of Maghreb is usually exaggerated. A number of Berber powerful dynasties emerged during Middle Ages in Maghreb and al-Andalus. This report is motivated by the desire to trace the process of the conquest of al-Andalus at the beginning of the 8th c. As we speak about al-Andalus it worth noting that the Muslims who entered Iberia in 711 were mainly Berbers, and were led again by a Berber, Tariq ibn Ziyad. May we claim that Berbers formed approximately 65–70% or at least the major part of the Islamic population in Iberia that time? That was the question that had pushed me to the research. I argue that it’s true, considering the analysis of the military structure of Arab-Berber army, the comparison that would be made on basis of the sources related to the topic, from the point of view of Berbers position in the power hierarchy in Iberia, and through the description of the cultural and historical background. This study provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of the role of the Berbers in the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, who may be were the ones who tipped the scales in the favor of Arabs’ tribes.

Key words: North Africa, Maghreb, Berbers, al-Andalus, Arabs, Medieval history.

A great deal has been written and said about the term “Berber” and the Berber people, but both the term and the ethnic group are still shrouded with mystery. Broadly speaking foreigners use the term “Berbers” to define the native inhabitants of North Africa, whilst the Berbers call themselves Imazighen (“the free people” or “freemen”). Although they are the original inhabitants of North Africa, and despite numerous incursions by the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans and French, Berber groups lived in compact communities (PRENGAMAN 16.03.2001).

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According to Leo Africanus, Amazigh meant “free man”, though that etymology has been disputed. It has also a cognate in the Tuareg word “Amajegh”, meaning “noble” (MADDY-WEITZMAN 2006: 71–84; BRETT, FENTRESS 1996: 5–6). Ibn Khaldūn in his *Book of the Lessons and the Record of the Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs, the Persians, the Berbers and their Powerful Contemporaries* (*Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa-Dīwān al-mubtada’ wa’l-khabar fī ma’rifat ayyām al-‘Arab wa’l-‘Ajam wa’l-Barbar wa-man ‘āšara-hummin dhawī’l-sultān al-akbar*) says that the Berbers were the descendants of Barbar, the son of Tamalla, the son of Mazigh, the son of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah. (MACGUCKIN 1852). Abraham Isaac Laredo in his work “Bereberos y Hebreos en Marruecos” (LAREDO 1954) proposed that the name Amazigh could be derived from the name of the ancestor Mezeg which is the translation of biblical ancestor Dedan son of Sheba in the Targum.

As we clearly see, this term may be defined in many ways and scholars argue about its origin, but what we may be sure of, if we speak about Morocco, is that the Berbers were Morocco's first inhabitants. Foreign influxes are thought to have had an impact on population make-up but did not replace the indigenous Berber population (KEITA 1990: 35–48).

According to historians of the Middle Ages each region of the Maghreb was inhabited by several tribes that had independence and territorial hegemony; some of them are Sanhadja, Houaras, Zenata, Masmouda, Kutama, Berghwata, Awarba and others (MACGUCKIN 1852; BRIGGS 1960; HACHID 2001).

A number of Berber dynasties emerged during the Middle Ages in Maghreb and al-Andalus. The most notable are Zīrids (973–1148) and Ḥammādids (1014–1152) in Ifrīqīya and Western Ifrīqīya respectively, also the Almoravids (1050–1147) and the Almohads (1147–1248) in Morocco and al-Andalus, the Ḥafṣids (Ifrīqīya, 1229–1574), the Ziyānids (Tlemcen, 1235–1556), the Marīnids (1248–1465) and the Waṭṭāsids (1471–1554) in Morocco. (BAGLEY 1997).

It is true that at the beginning the Arab rule in North Africa was not very sustained and the number of Arab tribes that migrated toward these lands was rather small. The role of Arabs in the medieval history of Maghreb is usually exaggerated. One argument cannot be ignored: the Arabs were slow to colonize non-Arab lands, since the number of cities they founded proved to be very low. None of the major Moroccan cities has been built by Arab rulers, but by the Berbers, either before or after the arrival of Islam. The reason is that unlike most of the great conquering nations, the Arabs did not

have an urban tradition and historically did not feel at home in an urban environment. Though many of these cities have often been linguistically arabized (like Fes or Marrakesh), from a historic point of view it is accepted that the core population of North Africa is Berber.

In addition it is worth noting that there was a natural, albeit regrettable, tendency to give a particular region, tribe, people, or settlement a longer and more distinguished Islamic past than it might actually have enjoyed. This is particularly true of the vast mountainous regions of modern Algeria and Morocco, whose actual conquest by the Arabs would be a far longer and slower process than the sources pretend, and in which Islam would be established much less rapidly and with less homogeneity than the piety of the 13th c. and later Muslim historians writing in North Africa would find able to credit (COLLINS 1949: 125).

The Berbers of the Maghreb, led by someone known as Kāhina, often described as a queen, although it seems that Kāhina would be an Arabic title meaning ‘Predictor’ rather than a female name, had fallen to the Muslim forces in 703. Arab raids on Sicily, Sardinia, and the Balearic Islands followed very soon after; however, none of these resulted in permanent conquests. Further west, Arab and Berber forces sent by sea took Tangiers between 705 and 710 (AL-BELĀDSORĪ (de Goeje) 1866: 230; AL-BALĀDHURI (Ḥitti) 1916: 362).

The Muslim forces led by Ṭāriq b. Ziyād, though under the suzerainty of the Caliph of Damascus ‘Abd al-Malik and his North African viceroy, Mūsā b. Nuṣayr, were concentrated for their first expeditions across the straits and into the territory of the Visigothic kingdom on the northern shore. As part of the truce, 12,000 Berbers, presumably including Ṭāriq, were conscripted to the Umayyad army. Honestly speaking, it is almost impossible to determine the size of forces involved, in any case, 7,500 is likely to be too high, something like a quarter of that number may be more realistic (COLLINS 1949: 141). It was under Ṭāriq’s leadership that the mixed army of the Arabs and the Berbers invaded the peninsular for the second time with a greater success. Ṭāriq must have been a remarkable man to have risen so far in only eight years; but his rise demonstrates the social mobility that characterized the Islamic societies of that era.

Medieval historians give nearly no information about Ṭāriq’s origin. Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, Ibn al-Athīr, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Khaldūn say nothing on the subject. Still there are at least three different accounts which seem to date from between 400 and 500 years after Ṭāriq’s time (DE GAYANGOS 1840: 255). There are allusions that he was a Persian from Hamadān (ANONYM (al-Ibyārī)

1989: 6), a member of the powerful South Arabian tribe of al-Ṣadaf genealogically affiliated to Kinda (IBN KHALLIKĀN 1843: 476), but it's more often said of his Berber origin. Modern historians who accept this standpoint tend to settle on a version or another without giving any reason in favour of their choice. For example, Baron De Slane, in an editorial note to the French translation of Ibn Khaldūn's *Kitāb al-'Ibar* (MACGUCKIN 1852: 215) states that he belonged to the Walhāṣ tribe. Numerous more recent works identify his tribe as Warfajūma (VAN SERTIMA 1993: 54). Both opinions derive from Ibn Idhārī, who cites two versions of Ṭāriq's ancestry. He is referred to as Ṭāriq b. Ziyād b. Abd 'Allāh b. Walghū b. Warfajūm b. Nabarghāsan b. Walhāṣ b. Yaṭūfat b. Nafzāw and also as Ṭāriq b. Ziyād b. Abd 'Allāh bin Rafhū b. Warfajūm b. Yanzghāsan b. Walhāṣ b. Yaṭūfat b. Nafzāw (COLIN 1948: 5). The differences between those genealogies may be caused by copyist errors; *cf.*:

طارق بن زياد بن عبد الله بن ولغو بن ورفجوم بن نبرغاسن بن ولهاص بن يطوفت بن نفاو
 طارق بن زياد بن عبد الله بن رفهون بن ورفجوم بن بنزغاسن بن ولهاص بن يطوفت بن نفاو

The earliest reference seems to be the 12th c. geographer al-Idrīsī, who referred to him as Ṭāriq b. Abd 'Allāh b. Wanamū al-Zanātī (COLIN 1948: 17). The majority of researchers agree on the fact that he was a Berber.

One of the aspects of the uniqueness of medieval Spain can be seen in the makeup of the Muslim invasion force: the majority of the common warriors in the army was actually the Berbers rather than the Arabs. Al-Maqqarī cites several sources which mention the composition of Ṭāriq's host. One of them states that Mūsā gave him the command "of an army composed of chiefly the Berbers and slaves, very few only being genuine Arabs" (DE GAYANGOS 1840: 4.2). Another source mentions the forces to be almost completely the Berbers with only few Arabs, and then al-Maqqarī mentioned that the chroniclers Ibn Ḥayyān and Ibn Khaldūn had recorded the percentage of "mostly Berbers" and "10.000 Berbers and 3.000 Arabs", respectively, that demonstrate a clear pattern of the Berber majority. The society of the Berbers seems to have provided a unique solution to the deficiency of warriors of Arab origin, which has no parallel anywhere on that scale.

The literary source, which is chronologically the closest to these events, is the Chronicle of AD 754, written most probably in Toledo (COLLINS 1989: 57–63). The chronicler, having mentioned Roderic's reign, then goes on to record of how the new king sent armies against Arabs and Mauri (Berbers), who were raiding and destroying many towns (LÓPEZ PEREIRA 1980: 68–70). Around AD 860, in the first narrative of that kind about the conquest of al-Andalus, Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam wrote in his book *Conquest of Egypt and of the*

Maghreb (*Futūḥ Miṣr wa'l-Maghrib*) that Count Ilyān or Julian, lord of Ceuta and Alchadra, for the revenge for Roderic's seduction of his daughter transported Ṭāriq and his forces to Spain (IBN ABD-EL-HAKEM (Jones) 1858: 18–22). The decisive battle took place in a location that is generally identified as the valley of the Guadelete, near Medina Sidonia (COLLINS 1949: 135). The invasion itself was not unique among its counterparts in other areas of the Muslim empire, except perhaps in regard to the relative ease of conquest.

On the first stage of the invasion the armies were made up of the Berbers and different Arab groups. These peoples did not mix together but remained in separate towns and boroughs. Much more numerous Berbers were generally used to fill subordinate rank-and-file positions. The Berbers were usually in charge of the most difficult tasks and the most rugged terrains, while the Arabs occupied more gentle plains of southern Iberia (COLLINS 1989: 49–50).

During the Umayyad conquest of Iberia, the Berbers formed their own military units based on tribal allegiances and had little contact with their Arab masters (FLETCHER 2006: 1; COLLINS 1989: 97; RODD 1925: 731–2). It is probable that the conquest represented a continuation of a historic pattern of large-scale raids into Iberia dating to the pre-Islamic period, and hence it has been suggested that Ṭāriq's campaign was not originally planned. Both the Chronicle of AD 754 and later Muslim sources speak of raiding activity in previous years, and Ṭāriq's army may have been present for some time before the decisive battle. This possibility appears to be supported by the fact that the army was led by a Berber and that Mūsà b. Nuṣayr, arrived only in the following year and hurried across, when the unexpected triumph became clear. The Chronicle of AD 754 states that many townspeople fled to the hills rather than defended their cities in accordance with the view that this was expected to be a temporary raid rather than a permanent change of government (WOLF 1990: 26–42, 111–160, 205; CONTINUATIO HISPANA 1894: II, 323–369).

Another element of distinctness can be seen in few notable features. A general practice of the invasion of new territories by Muslim forces in that period consisted in leaving local organizational structures intact, so that Muslim armies were able to continue their expansion, towards the next target (COLLINS 1989: 39). Even tax amounts were often kept the same, although it should be paid to new authorities. The non-Muslims were given the status of *ahl al-dhimma* “the people under protection” whenever there was a Christian authority in the community, and when there was not, they were given the status of *majūs*. *Majūs* was originally a term meaning Zoroastrian and specifically, Zoroastrian priests. Also, it was a technical term, meaning

magus (STEINGASS 1892: 1179), and originally had no pejorative implications. *Majūsī* could either have the status of *mozarabs* or of *mūlādī*. No cultural center, no government proved to be of lower status. There was no pressure to reduce a rank of any important municipality in favour of Arab organs of power. Muslim government chose Seville and then Córdoba as its residence (LANGSOM 1970: 831). Iberia was not considered a separate province but was under the authority of Qairouan (COLLINS 1989: 125). The Córdoba Caliphate had subsequently clearly defined boundaries and the first region broke totally from the rule of Damascus.

After Mūsà b. Nuṣayr his son ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Mūsà governed al-Andalus from AD 714 to 716. He proved to be a capable and imaginative administrator consolidating and extending his power to Portugal, Málaga, Granada, Orihuela, Girona, and Barcelona. He was the first Muslim governor, who arranged the financial and administrative affairs of the newly conquered territories of Iberia and sought to eliminate the ethnic distinctions in government service between the Berbers and the Arabs. As a result of his marriage to Egilona, who was either the sister or the widow of Rodrigo, the last Visigothic king, he was accused by both the Arabs and the Berbers of favouring the native Christian population and of having monarchical ambitions. Tensions grew within the army. He was executed in AD 716 after having been accused in the intention to separate al-Andalus under his rule from Damascus (GERLI 2013: 3).

It is claimed that the Berbers formed approximately two thirds of the Islamic population in Iberia. The Berbers stationed in Galicia, who gave up their Andalusian outposts to join the Berber revolt (740–2), are reported to have converted to Christianity (COLLINS 1983: 165). The Berbers revolted against the Arab aristocracy due to oppression by the Arab ruling class. The Moors ruled in North Africa and for the most part in the Iberian Peninsula for several centuries, and the Umayyad Arab aristocracy dominated in all the regions from Damascus to Spain (FLETCHER 2006: 20). Ibn Ḥazm remarks that many caliphs in the Umayyad Caliphate and the Caliphate of Córdoba were blond and had light eyes (IBN HAZM 1994).

The Berber rebellions swept the whole al-Andalus and were quelled in blood. Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Fihrī was the local governor at that time. The Arab commanders came up reinforced after AD 742. Different Arab factions reached an agreement, but this didn't last long, since Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Fihrī remained in power up to his defeat by the last Umayyad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān I in AD 756, and the establishment of the independent Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba.

Yūsuf struggled to manage the conflict between the Arabs and the Berbers. The latter formed a vast majority and resented the pretension to racial and cultural superiority of the Arabs despite Islam's precept of equality (GERLI 2013: 4). In the fight for power in al-Andalus between Yūsuf and al-Raḥmān, the "Syrian" troops, the mainstay of the Umayyad Caliphate, split. For the most part, the Arabs from Qays and other tribes of Muḍar sided with Yūsuf, so did the indigenous Arabs (in the second or third generation) from North Africa, while Yemenite units and some Berbers supported 'Abd al-Raḥmān.

'Abd al-Raḥmān escaped after the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty to Morocco, where he took refuge with the Nafza Berber tribe, to which his mother belonged. When his efforts to gain power among the Moroccan Berbers failed, he looked to Spain, where the lack of unity among the Muslim conquerors — the Yemenite Arabs, the Syrian Arabs, the recently converted Berbers and Iberians — made for an easy conquest. In AD 756, Southern and Central al-Andalus (Córdoba, Sevilla) were in the hands of 'Abd al-Raḥmān, but it took still 25 years for him to hold sway over the Upper Marches (Pamplona, Zaragoza and the entire North-East) (COLLINS 1989: 180).

'Abd al-Raḥmān I ruled al-Andalus for over thirty-three years and spent most of that time trying to solve the same problems of unity that the governors before him had faced: the Berbers who had been settled in the geographically familiar mountainous north and north-west regularly rebelled against the central Córdoba authority. However, through a relatively lengthy reign and with the prestige attached to the Umayyad name, he was able to slowly consolidate power.

During the era of the *Mulūk al-ṭawā'if* (independent Muslim-ruled principalities), petty kings came from a variety of ethnic groups. The Berbers had traditionally settled in central Iberia since the 700-ies, as its landscape was similar to their homeland in North Africa. Thus, the *al-ṭawā'if* kings were mostly of Berber origin. The leaders of the *ṭawā'if* were as heterogeneous as the society of al-Andalus itself. Such as the Aftasids, the *al-ṭawā'if* rulers of Badajoz, who adopted the Ḥimyarite genealogy, or, for instance, the dynasty of the *ṭā'ifa* kingdom Toledo, the Banū dhī'l-Nūn were of Berber origin. The Ṣanhāja Berbers ruled in the *ṭā'ifa* kingdom of Granada. The Zanāta Berber clan, the Dammarīs, who had been brought over to al-Andalus by al-Manṣūr, received Moron at the same time. Another group of the Zanāta, the Khizrūnīs, took over Arcos and the Iframs, also from the Zanāta, controlled Ronda (MOLINS 1992: 50–4). Small *al-ṭawā'if* were also established by the Ḥammādīs, who had contested the title of caliph from AD 1016 to 1026 in

Malaga and Algeciras, but their efforts were continuously undermined by family quarrels and by AD 1065 their power was extinguished by the Zīrids of Granada (KENNEDY 1996: 143). There was certainly widespread hostility to the newly arrived Berbers in the 1st quarter of the 11th c. AD, but in the second and third generations the Berbers rulers became increasingly Arabised and acculturated to the Andalusian civilization. Even within their own ranks, the newly arrived Berbers did not form a cohesive group, the Ṣanhāja Zīrids coming from a different tribal group than the Zanāta Berbers further to the west, and they had never united against their enemies.

It is interesting, however, that the struggle among the Muslim *al-ṭawā'if* kings was not based on ethnic divisions. Instead, their fighting was based on individual desires to increase their own power. While the *al-ṭawā'if* wars were raging in the Iberian Peninsula, a new movement was taking shape in North Africa.

The *al-ṭawā'if* period ended, when the Almoravid dynasty took control over al-Andalus; they were succeeded by the Almohad dynasty from Morocco, under the reign of which al-Andalus was flourishing. In the power hierarchy, the Berbers were situated between the Arabic aristocracy and the Mūlādī populace (Muslims of local descent or of mixed Berber, Arab and Iberian origin, who lived in al-Andalus during the Middle Ages) (FRODE 2009: 122–24). Ethnic rivalries were one of the factors of Andalusian politics. After the fall of the Caliphate, the *al-ṭawā'if* kingdoms of Toledo, Badajoz, Málaga and Granada had Berber rulers (COLLINS 1983:172–7; MARTINS 1969).

The Muslims who invaded the Iberian Peninsula in AD 711 were mainly the Berbers, and were led by a Berber, Ṭāriq b. Ziyād, though under the suzerainty of the Arab Caliph of Damascus and his North African Viceroy, Mūsā b. Nuṣayr. The second mixed army of the Arabs and the Berbers came in AD 712 under the leadership of Ibn Nuṣayr himself. They supposedly helped the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Raḥmān I in al-Andalus, because his mother most probably was a Berber. During the *al-ṭawā'if* era, the petty kings came from various ethnic groups; not few — from the Berber ones. The *al-ṭawā'if* period ended when a Berber dynasty, viz. the Moroccan Almoravids, took control over al-Andalus; then they were succeeded by the Almohad dynasty of Morocco, also of Berber origin.

In the power hierarchy, the Berbers were placed between the Arabic aristocracy and the Mūlādī populace. Ethnic rivalry was one of the most important factors of Andalusian politics. The Berbers made up as much as 20% of the population of the occupied territory. After the fall of the Caliphate, the *al-ṭawā'if* kingdoms of Toledo, Badajoz, Málaga and Granada

were governed by Berber rulers. During the Reconquista, the Berbers, who inhabited the areas recaptured by Christian kingdoms, were acculturated and lost their distinct identity. Their descendants are to be found among the present-day Spaniards and Portuguese. But we may clearly see that the role of the Berbers in the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and their place in the local society were of very considerable importance.

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