Crusades on the Water: A New (Integrated) View

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My paper today seeks to integrate sources from across time, cultures, and disciplines to achieve a better understanding of the Crusades, and to change our focus from land to sea. To answer Tyerman’s famous question:¹ Yes, there were Crusades in the 12th century - a plurality of them, in the ‘military intention’ view of Riley-Smith and Phillips.² All around the European Atlantic, said Levecq:

… the river peoples... became globally integrated...

and the frontier regions, won in an outburst of faith,

became more and more... [important] to develop and
to control maritime commerce for political and
economic benefit.³

These regions were called Outre-Mer - not Outre-Terre - for the simple reason that one could only get there by sea.⁴ Therefore, as John Pryor wrote recently, Crusader history needs to be told from “… the gaze of a seaman... from the masthead of a ship.”⁵ Both Crusaders and their opponents had significant ocean coastlines: Control of this coast, especially at river-mouths, was key to control of the interior lands, not merely for administration or defense, but for consumable-goods trade
that was both necessary and very valuable. Thus we must study the maritime history of the 12th-century Crusades... in the ATLANTIC!

Wrote John France: “The problem was political, for at the time... (Andalusia was) in Muslim hands, making the journey very hazardous in a period when all shipping clung to the land.” To this end, the Europeans clearly employed a strategy, working along the coasts to wrest control of key river-mouth ports from their opponents: A strategy I call “harbor-hopping”. Among four contemporary harbour-hopping efforts overall—my speech today focuses on the Crusaders fighting to take Atlantic Iberia/Andalusia from the Moroccan/Muwahid Empire in order to secure passage via Straits of Gibraltar and the survival of the Crusaders’ “Outremer” in Jerusalem. Why Gibraltar? Control of Gibraltar was just as important to the medieval Christian and Muslim powers then as to the British Empire recently. Certainly the Kings of Sicily knew this and acted aggressively all around the Mediterranean, as did the Italians, while supporting the Atlantic Europeans’ efforts. Therefore the 12th century Crusaders pursued the “harbor-hopping” strategy down the Atlantic Coast — first, by taking Tuy, Oporto, Lisbon, Silves and Cadiz — each conquest followed by interior dominance via river, culminating at Gibraltar in 1213.

But the stage had been set, not in 1095, but in the *sixth* century. There, McCormick’s work helpfully reduced the Pirenne debate to the condition of maritime trade and he noted a shift from discrete, temporary travels toward permanent, public measures that sustained general traffic and emigration from Northwestern Europe, around the Iberian Peninsula, toward Outremer. His research indicated that
travellers chose the quickest among several ships - the choice indicates a large, steady volume of sea-traffic - the traffic assumes a strong maritime infrastructure. Kellenbenz called it an enduring “Seeverbindung” (sea-tie) between the northern and southern European Atlantic coasts from 589AD, noting especially the Viking resupply ports in the South which he called “overseas branch offices” - colonies supporting maritime trade. Dalché proved this travel was a constant feature of the Christian landscape merely in greater or lesser numbers from the sixth century until 1095AD, whereafter today’s historians argue about distinguishing the major (numbered) and minor (unnumbered) Crusades. But for a century now, four German historians have urged us to refer not to Crusade, but to the militarization of extra-European trade.

Moreover, the multidisciplinary approach advocated by Mollat yields important non-documentary evidence supporting this “German” school. To focus on the sea, Levecq found that European languages developed a maritime vocabulary in the new millennium; reciprocal contact in medieval subcultures proves that transmaritime travel continued, for example, Jewish “progressive settlements” followed the Mediterranean trade into Atlantic Europe via the sea-coasts, thence upriver to the Continent’s interior. Meanwhile the Templars expanded from Outremer backward into the merchant ports of Europe, establishing houses on the Atlantic coasts and along interior rivers to facilitate the solicitation, and transport, of resources. Simultaneously we note the growing practise of reliquary-gifts made by returning Crusaders to churches in coastal Germany. Further on the theme of social evidence, we find the Scandinavian tradition of the Knotted Tree, whereby a Crusader would
tie a knot around a tree in Jerusalem before returning home, where he challenged someone to go undo it. And weight must be given to genealogical relationships between European powers and Crusade frontiers, not just marriage-alliances, but multigenerational family Crusading traditions in families and Crusading saints in dynasties.  

Recent studies have emphasized entire frontier societies “organized for war” during the Crusades.

Moreover, let us shelve Gertwagen’s statement about “inconsistent” maritime itineraries, as I have discussed, since the 6th century the sea-route from Atlantic Europe to the Holy Land via Gibraltar was well-known and well-used: If not familiar to an individual Crusader, then certainly to a ship’s captain, who had the knowledge and skills to navigate; or the wit to hire pilots, as in one account. By the 12th century, sea-travel was so far developed that Crusaders had pre-arranged ports for tourist jaunts and to regroup after storms, in addition to an explicit maritime resupply strategy for Outremer and, I argue, for Atlantic Iberia/Portugal as well. A continual theme of the sagas is an experienced person coming from Byzantium or Outremer to Atlantic Europe then guiding the new Crusaders thither by sea, too. So there is a plurality of evidentiary sources and argument FOR an Atlantic-based view.

Speaking of this continuity of experience, we must re-assess the early land-borne Crusades as exceptions to the sea-borne rule: For, immediately after the 1st Crusade, the sources begin describing sea-borne Crusading in terms of ‘lessons learned’. After the 2nd Crusade, even the French King finally admitted that the Crusaders had been “in no condition to accomplish so long a March by Land”. Among 3rd Crusade
sources we find several references speaking to the superiority of sea-travel, by which time it seems that the common perception relegated land-travel to seasick kings and scaphaphobic emperors who could afford to indulge their finer feelings.  

Oddly, to date we medievalists have looked only at the Crusader Outremer as an “overseas branch office”, a colony, whereas the Muslim empires all had overseas colonies, too. On the Atlantic side of this history, Morocco produced three successive empires reliant upon sailing some 2000 km of coastline and sustaining the regular, Channel-like crossing to Iberia/Andalusia from Ceuta and Tangiers. In terms of war, the Moroccan Empires spent a lot of time and money to ensure they were floating the best possible sea-scouts and navies, as I shall show in a moment. While caravans were common - perhaps more exotic to Westerners - it really was the ship, the water, which held these Empires together.  

Along the Atlantic maritime front, the Moroccan Emperors continually pitted their naval might against the Crusaders in Iberia/Andalusia; their problem was primarily resource wealth, also with distinct religious overtones, much like the early modern colonial efforts of Europeans. Lirola-Delgado demonstrated clearly that Viking presence on the Atlantic/Algarvan coast was observed and raised a real alarm - the Moroccan/Umayyad Emperor’s scouts informed his forces, which presented a combined-force response, at first defensively using the natural bottleneck at Gibraltar, then pro-actively in Atlantic waters from 972 AD. The locals so strongly supported the alarm system that it survived the civil disorder of the First Taifa period and was quickly
adopted by the successor Moroccan/Moravid Empire, who were fending off the successor Normans, until 1072AD. Between 1070-1095 AD the system declined, and perhaps this is why the 1st Crusade in the Mediterranean Holy Land included several parties of pirates from Atlantic Europe? Then occurred the 1107AD Crusade of King Sigurd who, Picard asserts, was really a pirate of the Atlantic Straits, perhaps one of many endorsed by the Portuguese King. (SLIDE: pirates haha/ SLIDE:sigurd)

The special concern was piracy on the Atlantic side of Gibraltar itself, which both drove and adapted to policy on both Christian and Muslim shores of the Atlantic Straits: The King of Portugal’s personal galleys performed escort duty for Crusader vessels transiting the Straits, which escort reveals just how profoundly unstable was the passage through that essential point, especially in a time when civil authority wobbled with each fresh incident of combat. The waters of the Moroccan side were long since notorious among Europeans for piracy and slaving, which reputation lasted into the 1800s. Likewise, the Atlantic/Iberian coast, called the Algarve, was long since infamous among the Moroccans. The Moroccan/Moravid Emperor continued to fight European piracy, as well as the 2nd Crusade, but his eventual failure to resist Christian piracy caused the downfall of that Empire, resulting in the Second Taifa Kingdoms; the successor Moroccan/Muwahid Emperor acted quickly to suppress both the Taifa Kingdoms and another period of general piracy, but the 3rd Crusade disrupted his work and pirates of all faiths (or perhaps of none) re-emerged. Picard described a permanent “guerre de course” in the Atlantic/Algarve sea. But piracy is bound to happen in any sea-lane subject to high-volume, high-value traffic, much like at the Somalian end of the Red Sea today.
Susan Rose noted, “…how difficult it is to distinguish unadorned theft and murder at sea from the same acts dignified by some sort of… officially[-]sanctioned warfare.” At the end of the 12th century the Moroccan Emperor’s chronicler, Ibn Quzman, articulated the official view: these self-styled “Crusaders” were an external military threat imperilling Morocco and its “Outremer” of Portugal, thus requiring prompt eradication of any and all Christian sympathy, presence and influence. Much as the Papal Bull authorizing the so-called Iberian Crusade was an effect, not a cause, of this multi-generational effort to harbor-hop toward Gibraltar, so too the Moroccan Emperor framing his edicts and battles as “jihad” indicated a post-facto effort, an official justification of a battle already engaged. But we must be careful that our “crusade” and “jihad” baggage does not obscure our view. Certainly it did not obscure the medieval view: Despite the official crusade and jihad, people regularly used whatever ship was available regardless of religion, most famously Ibn Jubair. One of the things I learnt in combat was to back away from the political, social, and religious concerns as motivators in favor of accomplishing the military mission; I hope we can begin to do this now, too.

Returning to our main theme, in late 12th-century Iberia, intensifying the confusion of piracy and politics well-served the Crusader agenda. Simply sustaining the Portuguese realm “was hardly possible without a big fleet” and the Portuguese King’s was modest, requiring the sea-borne Crusaders’ periodic augment. As the Crusades progressed harbor-by-harbor down the Iberian Atlantic coast, the newly-made Portuguese towns became stop-overs for the Crusaders and settlers from 1100-1160AD, much like the Viking and Norman trade-colonies of prior
centuries. Keenly anticipating the “reconquest” of the Atlantic/Algarvan coast in the period 1170-1200, the Portuguese telegraphed their intent to strike by moving into Lisbon the relics from popular Algarvan shrines! One Crusader even recorded all of the Moroccan Atlantic ports from Lisbon to Marrakesh - not a comfortable thought for the Emperor! Thus conquering the Algarve would allow the Crusaders to attack Gibraltar itself. Realizing this imminent threat, the Emperor created a new ‘Admiralty of the Strait’ exclusively to withstand Crusader offensives. Next, he had 400 ships built in the Mediterranean and brought West through the Strait to combat the Crusaders at sea - a massive investment of money, resources and skill required to defend all three of the Moroccan capital cities, all accessible from the Atlantic; as was the aforementioned Moroccan colonial capital of Silves. Indeed, the Emperor refortified Gibraltar, while castling any unprotected Algarvan river-mouts, like at Alvor beside Silves. This activity certainly should tell us to re-focus our research: The really meaningful naval action was not in the Mediterranean, which has been researched to death, but rather in the Atlantic.

[Due to time constraints, we have to speed through the late 12th c]: Throughout the 1160s, the Moroccan Emperor struggled to supress holdout Taifa Kingdoms, the ocean posing both a strategic and political problem. Returning to Rose’s “officially sanctioned warfare” idea, by 1180 the warfare gained further official standing: The Portuguese began sending ambassadors to agitate in Europe for sea-borne Crusaders to accomplish the “reconquest” of the Atlantic/Algarve. Once more the Moroccans began struggling to defend the Atlantic waters, fighting off
the piracy quasi-officially endorsed by the Portuguese King, as well as attacks by sea-borne Crusader en route to Jerusalem. Thus in 1180 the Moroccan Empire, a true medieval naval superpower, was fighting on three maritime fronts - it was not a winnable war - everyone wanted the Strait. Specifically, the former Taifa Kingdom-City of Silves gave the Crusaders a direct approach to the Atlantic Straits and, with the Anglo/Italian-held Tortosa as an exit, plus Sicilian suppression of the Barbary coast from the direction of Tunisia, having the key Atlantic river-port of Silves allowed the Crusaders direct transit not only through the Straits but through the very heart of the Moroccan Empire. Augmented once more by Crusaders from 1182AD, the Portuguese fleet regularly harassed Silves until its capture in 1189AD cut the Algarve’s civil and legal ties to Morocco, destabilizing the Emperor’s authority and disrupting his enforcement of the Muwahid cult of Islam there, while denying any Moroccan access to and benefit from its resources. So important was Silves that the Emir of Cordova turned up personally to retake it by land in 1190, and was replaced when he failed. Consequently, in 1191 the Almohad Emperor personally “crossed the sea” from Morocco, bringing with him enough siege-engines to outnumber by *4 times* those of the Crusader-settlers; he retook Silves, but it remained subject to the Portuguese royal fleet’s raids as before. Finally, in 1197AD, Silves was utterly destroyed by seaborne German Crusaders on the understanding that, if the Portuguese King could not hold a harbor, the Crusaders would take it out of play entirely; another important “lesson learned” in dealing with the Moroccans specifically, and the Atlantic Reconquest generally. Moreover, the Crusader conquest of Silves - the supposedly invincible fortress - proved that any Moroccan stronghold could, and would, be taken - especially now that the Atlantic
Crusaders’ had invented the COG, a sturdy and uniquely Atlantic cargo vessel easily converted into siege-engines. The last “harbour-hop” was Jerez/Cadiz, but for now Crusaders could only attack it in passing. Thus we have traced the first 500 years of maritime conflict in the Atlantic.

Affirming a shift in Crusades focus can be found among the Military Orders, already turning away from Portugal/Andalusia. By the turn of the 13th century, the Orders and the settlers’ militia were well-established to handle the interior work occasioned by coastal reconquest. Indeed, by 1213, Innocent III had officially disqualified the Iberian Peninsula from the Crusades; again an official confirmation of the struggle, this time as Disengagement. As Mollat noted, “The dominance of the sea, episodically, passed from one party to another.” - especially in the Atlantic 12th century. Thus we may reduce the Reconquest and the larger Crusades effort to, essentially, an Atlantic war. With each side having many “colonies” reliant upon sea-supply and sea-dominance, victory or failure was simply a matter of time - and water.
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NOTES

MGH = Monumenta Germaniae Historiae
DIN = De Itinere Navali
The author extends her thanks to Prof Lynette Nusbacher for her help with this point.

Throughout the 12th century the Crusaders “harbour-hopped” along the Western Mediterranean from Barcelona south toward Gibraltar, while simultaneously working the African Mediterranean westward from Sicily/Tunisia toward Gibralter. Prof Nusbacher notes that “harbour-hopping” was already at work in Crusader Outremer, where ports were maintained a days’ march apart specifically to supply the land-based forces tackling the interior. The reader may note that the medieval Muslim sources spoke of three Crusading fronts - Sicily/North Africa, Cyprus/Jerusalem, and Iberia – but with a land foci; I believe it is essential to adopt the maritime view and, in keeping with my “maritime” perspective, I have split Iberia into the Atlantic and the Mediterranean aspects, giving a total of four fronts. For a discussion of the Muslim three-front sea view (which I have refined here to four fronts, and emphasized a maritime perspective) see Paul Chevedden, :The Islamic View and the Christian View of the Crusades: A New Synthesis” in: The Historical Association 2008 (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford UK, 2008):184-186. For the Sicilan in the South Mediterranean and Genoese in the West Mediterranean, see: France, John. “The Normands and Crusading” in: Richard P. Abels and Bernard S. Bachrach, eds. The Normans and the Adversaries at War: Essays in Memory of Warren C. Hollister, Warfare in History Series, The Boydell Press (Woodbridge VT, 2001):99 AND Lucas Villegas-Aristizabal, “Anglo-Norman Involvement in the Conquest of Tortosa and Settlement of Tortosa, 1148-1180” in: The Mariner’s Mirror 83.4 (Nov 1997):392

Dorn, Alexander, ed. Die Seehäfen des Weltverkehrs. (Volkswirtschaftlicher Verlag, Vienna, 1891):1.488

The Sicilians continually offered aid to European Crusaders, as well as enacting their own Reconquest effort in the South Mediterranean. Sicily had briefly controlled ports in Tunisia, and it is clear that the early 13th-century crusades intended to get those Almohadin Tunisian – plus Egyptian ports – back into the fold, having settled the Iberian coastal question in the 12th century.

As early as 1147, the Bishop of Langres had advocated that the 2nd Crusaders take Constantinople to eliminated the Byzantines and ally formally with Sicily to secure the coasts from all Saracens, presaging the 4th and 5th Crusades. Maimbourg, Louis, John Nalson, trans. The History of the Crusade or, the Expeditions of the Christian Princes for the Conquest of the Holy Land (Thomas Dring, London, 1685):1.3.106-108


The author extends her thanks to Prof Lynette Nusbacher for her help with this point.


Too many examples to cite!


DIN. My research shows the Emperor gave ships to the eyewitness Crusader, whose account reveals he was totally new to the sea. Nevertheless his group sailed from Bremen to Marseilles, with only a crash and a missed port-call blamed on lack of pilots.

DIN in 1189. Roger of Howden (Riley pp 2.146-153); Roger of Wembour (Giles pp 2.96-97) in 1190.

E.g. the Heimskringlasaga for 1107 and Orkneyingasaga for 1152, aforementioned. Also the German experience, whereby chroniclers self-report the accumulation of prior experience of Crusades: 1125 for 1147, 1147 for 1189, 1189 for 1196, the Thuringian Crusaders, etc.

For a full discussion of this point, see Bernard S. Bachrach, “From Nicaea to Dorylaion” in: John H. Pryor, ed. Logistics of Warfare in the Age of the Crusades (Ashgate, Aldershot UK, 2006):51-53

Moreover, we find obvious maritime connections between the Moroccan Empire and Saladin's in the later 12th century. While Saladin's predecessors had allowed the Mediterranean fleet to deteriorate, Saladin himself embarked on a program of ship-building; and while the aforementioned al-Mansur ignored a letter from Saladin asking for naval assistance, it was not because the Almohadin could not assist the Ayyubidin; both Empires were busy with aggressive naval policies, and I posit the Almohad Emperor had no love for the Ayyubid Emperor's provoking of the Crusaders at Hattin, which created more pressure on the Straits.


DIN


As recently as 2004, I heard a German colleague asserting that Emperor Frederick Barbarossa went by land on the 3rd Crusade because he was paralyzingly afraid of boats (scaphophobic), by oral tradition. This may be truth: My research into DIN shows he gave boats to those Crusaders, and commanded other counts to go by sea specifically. For King Phillip and the superiority of sea-travel, see the many French and English 3rd Crusade sources.

Dalché (1995):46


Picard (1992):191

Picard (2001):110

E.g. the shipyard and navy of Almeria was so strong that, upon the fall of the Empire in 1147, it proclaimed itself an independent admiralty. Among the petty realms of this Second Taifa Kingdom era, Almeria was the first Atlantic Straits port attacked by the Almohad Emperor; it was essential to Almohad power that Almeria be retaken by its fleets from the Mediterranean Straits port of Ceuta. Fighting for control was continuous in 1148-1151 AD in order to gain control of this important power and the Strait it controlled, which struggles continued through the 1150s. For a synopsis see: Picard, Christophe. "La Politique navale de premiers califes almohades: Un système de government et de souveraineté“ in: Patrice Cressier et al., eds. *Los Almohades: Problemas y perspectivas* (Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas, Madrid, 2005): 2.571


Emperor Al-Mansur mandated mandatories for Christians including clothing-symbols, conversion, deportation, and mass-killings, designed to make them easily visible and thus more easily eradicated. Viguera Molins, Maria, ed. *El retroceso territorial de al-Andalus: Almorávides y Almohades Siglos XI al XIII*. Historia de España Menéndez Pidal 7.2 (Espaca Calpe, Madrid, 1997):525-526
In a letter from an Iberian merchant to his home port of Cairo, Egypt, a Jewish writer in Iberia “apologizes for not coming home that year [1137CE] because of the insecurity prevailing on sea owing to the war between Christians and Muslims...” but he anticipated travelling the next year; and we should note that it was proven by De Goeje in 1909 that, even in 1184CE when the Xian-Muslim conflict was extremely ‘hot’, Ibn Jubair travelled safely aboard Christian ships. “Obviously such a big ship provided protection against pirates and enemies...”


Kurth (1911):205
Kurth (1911):141
Dorn, Alexander, ed. Die Seehäfen des Weltverkehrs. (Volkswirtschaftlicher Verlag, Vienna, 1891):1.537
King Alfonso-Henriques took the relics of St Vincent, a popular pilgrimage stop in the Algarve, from Cape Saint Vincent (where the coast turns from N/S to E/W) into the safety of Lisbon. His official excuse was to protect the relics from Moroccan pirates. Picard, Christophe. “Sanctuaires et pélérinages chrétiens en terre musulmane” in CTHS, ed. Pélérinages et Croisades: 118th Congrès des Sociétés Savantes, Pau 1993 (CTHS, Paris, 1995):246 AND Picard (1992):191

DIN
Picard (2005): 2.571
Seville, Rabat, and Marrakesh: Picard (1992):190, 193, 197
Kurth (1911):176
E.g. the shipyard and navy of Almeria was so strong that, upon the fall of the Empire in 1147, it proclaimed itself an independent admiralty. Among the petty realms of this Second Taifa Kingdom era, Almeria was the first Atlantic Straits port attacked by the Almohad Emperor; it was essential to Almohad power that Almeria be retaken by its fleets from the Mediterranean Straits port of Ceuta. Fighting for control was continuous in 1148-1151 AD in order to gain control of this important power and the Strait it controlled, which struggles continued through the 1150s. For a synopsis see: Picard (2005):2.571

Rose (2002):43
Kurth (1911):176

Villegas-Aristizabal (2009) AND DIN: “...this city is the Christians’ first, which the Pisans and Genoese captured whilst Lisbon was taken..."

Picard (1992):191
Picard (1992):191
Benouis, Mustafa. “L’organisation du qada sous les Almohades” in: Patrice Cressier et al, eds. Los Almohades: Problemas y perspectivas. Estudios árabs e islámicos, Monografías 11. (Consejo Superior des investigaciones científicas, Madrid, 2005):Figure 1


The author is grateful to Paul Chevedden and Giuseppe Ligato for their assistance in identifying the machines described, and anticipates publishing an article before 2012 on this history. See also the author’s forthcoming work: Dana Cushing, De Itinere Navali (Brill, Leiden, 2012)

Jerez was of greater influence among the Almohadin, but Cadiz was the ancient key port. Cadiz had value as an astronomical and tidal observation point (important for transiting the Strait) as well as its famous market nand, of course, its position beside the Straits. See also: DIN, “hither thrice annually [the Sarascens] were accustomed to gather for exchanging goods from Africa and Spain... because it was like a midpoint.”


67 Mollat, Michel. “Problèmes navals de l'histoire de croisades” in: *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale Xe-XIIe siècles* X (1967):348