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Review of Hussein Fancy, *The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*

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Fancy, Hussein. *The Mercenary Mediterranean: Sovereignty, Religion and Violence in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xv + 310pp, 5 halftones, 5 maps, 1 table.

In this fascinating study on Muslim mercenaries (known as *jenets*) that were active within Christian-ruled society from the later thirteenth century, Hussein Fancy accomplishes two feats remarkably well. First, he takes an exhaustive approach to a well contained but scantily evidenced subject that literally leaves no stone unturned using documentation in all of the relevant languages. Second, he transforms a topic that has tended to be treated as a curiosity into a formidable methodological and philosophical challenge to scholarship regarding ethno-religious groups within the medieval Mediterranean world. His book uses the relationship between Christian monarchs and these Muslim mercenaries “not only to offer a novel perspective on interactions between Muslims and Christians in the Middle Ages but also to rethink the study of religion more broadly” (4). Fancy’s handling of this latter objective is what makes this work such an important contribution. He develops the convincing case that the activity of the *jenets* was linked to key political developments within Iberia and North Africa and can thus instruct us about developing attitudes within Christian and Muslim-ruled societies regarding sovereignty and religion. It is notable that Fancy began his research expecting to present the *jenets* as yet another example of the secular pragmatism that Brian Catlos and others have held was pervasive throughout medieval Iberian societies. His willingness to reverse his argument in response to the evidence he uncovered enabled him to develop a much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the *jenet* phenomenon. As such, he is able to present it as an archetype for reevaluating the extent to which other ethno-religious behavior was indeed so simply undergirded by the desire for convenience. The result is a highly engaging and thought-provoking monograph that, at times, reads like a gripping mystery.

The book is elegantly organized and flows together nicely. Fancy does a masterful job linking together different parts of his discussion and peppers his text with helpful quotations and principles from eminent philosophers and theorists. We get a front row seat to observe his sleuthing as he grapples with difficult or unanswerable questions. He also takes us on tours of the royal archives of the Crown of Aragon and gives ample background on his Maghrebi and Andalusi texts and explains how the limitations of these sources can complicate the process of historical reconstruction (40-41). The book has just enough historical background to make the argument intelligible without overwhelming the reader with unnecessary esoteric details. Fancy has clearly worked diligently to streamline his discussion in order to prioritize his argument and resist the temptation to narrate interesting historical episodes that would have sidetracked his train of thought.

These *jenets* have received sporadic attention from a handful of scholars who have nonetheless left basic questions unanswered (or answered

unsatisfactorily), such as who they were, whence they came, why they were eventually employed by the Crown of Aragon when they did. Through impressive historical detective work, Fancy identifies the *jenets* as the holy warriors, the al-Ghuzāh al Mujāhidūn. This identification enables him to address other questions that have mystified prior scholarship: most importantly, he can account for why the Ghuzāh transformed themselves from serving among the cavalry of the Marinids raiding Christian lands to fighting for the king of Aragon as the *jenets* in the 1280s. Chapter two delves into the political background and context of the watershed moment in 1284 when Pere II intensified and systematized the crown's sporadic use of the *jenets*.

The next chapter, arguably the most nuanced, creative, and potent of the book, seeks to address the difficult question of how this emergency use of the *jenets* in 1284 eventually developed into a routine military practice within the Crown of Aragon. Some of this chapter's important work may remind readers of Fancy's Bishko Prize-winning article that appeared in *Past & Present* in 2013. Here he works hard to develop his methodological/theoretical critique of the historiography on the *jenets* and Iberian coexistence, traditionally by Spanish Catholics and liberals, and more recently by scholars who have tried to divorce ethno-religious interaction from religious belief in favor of seeing self-interest as the prime motivator. As he cogently explains, scholars have manifested a tendency to restrict themselves to an artificial, ahistorical binary: seeing people as either rationally aware of their beliefs or as blindly and irrationally following them. "In spite of religion or regardless of it, Fancy writes, "the conclusion is the same: this religious encounter curiously has nothing to do with religion. ... [This reading] reproduces an enduring historiographical bias that sees the Middle Ages as a period of incomplete secularism, a way station on the road to a disenchanting modernity" (67-68). This is the facet of Fancy's argument that stands to contribute the most to the current discussions regarding ethno-religious relations in the premodern Mediterranean. In building this critique, this chapter makes the case that, akin to the service roles and status they had accorded Jewish inhabitants in their realms, Aragonese kings employed the *jenets* as their "slaves" precisely because they were Muslims, not only because they were useful servants but also in order to reinforce their attempts to promote their sovereignty.

Chapter four zooms out to study the mercenary phenomenon within a broader western-Mediterranean context and illustrates how the *jenets* were part of an established tradition of the use of mercenaries as "military slaves" within Muslim and Christian-ruled societies. Accordingly, Fancy asserts, the "Aragonese tradition was not an aberration from the tradition of military slavery but a reflection of its deepest logic." Defining these Muslim mercenaries "as slaves, as their possessions," Fancy reiterates, enabled the Aragonese kings to articulate "their claims to absolute authority and universal jurisdiction" (96).

As Fancy is well aware, the status of Muslim and Jewish subjects remains a controversial, hotly debated topic. He accordingly addresses an important subset of the historiography regarding the terms "servi regis" and "servi camere

regis” that were applied to these groups. But scholarship has moved away from viewing these terms as connoting outright servitude, and Fancy’s characterization that the crown conceptualized the *jenets* as their outright “slaves” (Chapter 3) and contention that the *jenets* therefore fit within a long tradition of military slavery (Chapter 4) deserved more support. I was intrigued but not fully convinced by his theory that the practice under Christian rule paralleled the phenomenon of military servitude within the Abbasid context that was transmitted into other areas of the premodern Islamic world. Is this yet another case of trans-Mediterranean institutional continuity or diffusion or a different manifestation altogether? Fancy provides glimpses of the crown’s efforts to use the *jenets* to bolster their sovereign image when he shows how kings actively prevented the Aragonese nobility from recruiting *jenets* for their own purposes and uses them to suggest that the *jenets* represented an “extension of the royal body, an expression of its power, [and therefore] could only belong to the king” (73). I found myself asking, what were the nobles’ views of such attempts to assert such a regalian monopoly? Speculating further about (admittedly poorly evidenced) non-royal discourses and perspectives would have further enriched this discussion. I would also add that Fancy conceptualizes Aragonese monarchy’s ideology and policies regarding its authority and regalian rights regarding ethno-religious minorities as more dependent on the German imperial examples than I would have (71-73).

The fifth chapter delves into the existences of the *jenets*, which is no easy enterprise given the nature of the source materials. Here Fancy exposes some fascinating examples of disconnects between these Muslims and their employers. The Aragonese kings, for example, seem to have been unaware that *jenets* were organized into tribal agnatic kinship groups, leading to some surprising miscalculations. Far from a “seamless union” or a phenomenon recommended by convenience and rational self-interest, the involvement of these mercenaries with the monarchy and other elements within Christian-ruled society therefore consisted of moments of “competing, overlapping, and often incommensurate claims, values, and jurisdictions” (102).

In the final chapter Fancy shifts his attention squarely on the fourteenth century, which witnessed the withdrawal of the *jenets* (Ghuzāh) from the Crown of Aragon’s service. Through deftly handled narration, which remains readable despite the intricate twists and turns, we learn how rivalries involving the Aragonese, Castilians, Nasrids, and Marinid Ghuzāh during the early 1300s prompted the *jenets* to reject their alliance with Jaume II of Aragon. In keeping with his argument that the religious identity and beliefs of the Ghuzāh sat at the core of their activity and was not simply pushed aside in order to permit self-interested pragmatism, Fancy shows how these mercenaries preferred to act against their own financial and political well-being by breaking with the Aragonese king rather than number among Christian-led raiding parties that would threaten Granada for, what seemed to them, unjustifiable reasons. Although this parting, combined with controversial activity by the Ghuzāh within Granada, did weaken the group’s position of authority among the Nasrids by the second half of the fourteenth century, this shift did not end the

use of *jenets* by the Crown of Aragon in future years, when it was recommended and made feasible by Muslim diplomacy.

In short, Fancy's ability to employ what might seem a peripheral topic to tap into important scholarly quandaries at so many levels is impressive and inspiring. *The Mercenary Mediterranean* has made a remarkable number of major contributions for a book of its size and apparent scope and offers valuable lessons for any scholar interested in medieval ethno-religious relations, royal/imperial authority, or the political history of the western Mediterranean.

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