
A Golden Tree in the “Garden of Pages”

The Genoese Embassy to Morocco of 1292

ABSTRACT This article offers a critical evaluation of a purported diplomatic mission from Genoa to the Marīnid sultan of Morocco, Abū Ya‘qūb Yusuf (r. 1286–1307 CE). Ibn Abī Zar‘, author of a famous chronicle known as the *Rawḍ al-qirṭās*, or “Garden of Pages,” recorded the arrival of the Genoese along with their impressive gift: a golden or gilded tree with singing birds. His inclusion of the episode in a narrative otherwise devoted to the deeds of the dynasty and history of Fez raises several interesting questions. How did the Genoese construct or acquire the tree? Why was the nature of this gift important, and what might have been the goals of the Genoese embassy in bringing such a costly object along? I propose that we understand the embassy and its inclusion in the narrative as part of a Marīnid desire to promote the dynasty as legitimate heirs of previous Islamic rulers. This desire made use of symbols of pious and wise kingship, including the mechanical marvel represented by the tree, which bore an impressive ideological pedigree in Islamic and Christian literary and representational traditions. For their part, the Genoese may have been motivated by a desire to repair relations with Abū Ya‘qūb damaged by the activity of Benedetto Zaccaria in the straits of Gibraltar. Taken as a whole, this brief but under-studied event suggests both the Mediterranean scope of this symbol of kingship and its use by medieval diplomats to achieve practical ends. **KEYWORDS** diplomacy, Marīnids, Genoa, kingship, *automata*

Shortly after the month of Shawwāl 691 AH (October 1292 CE), the Marīnid sultan of Morocco, Abū Ya‘qūb Yusuf (r. 1286–1307 CE), received a diplomatic mission from the Italian city-state of Genoa at the fortress of Tazūṭa, in the foothills of the Middle Atlas Mountains, about seventy kilometers southwest of Fez. The identities of the Genoese ambassadors, their aims, and the outcome of their mission are lost to history. However, the embassy attracted the attention of one of the dynasty’s chroniclers, Ibn Abī Zar‘, because of a remarkable gift that the ambassadors brought with them. His account follows below:

And in that year [691 AH], there came to the Commander of the Muslims, while he was at Tazūṭa, some Christians from Genoa, from the lord of Genoa. They brought with them a magnificent gift: a tree covered in gold, with birds that sang by mechanical movement, just like the one built for al-Mutawakkil the Abbasid [caliph, r. 847–861 CE].¹

1. “Wa fi hādhihi al-sana qadama ‘alā amīr al-muslimīn wa huwa bi-tāzūṭa rūmā janawī min šāhib janawa bi-hadiya jalīla, fiha shajara mumawwaha bi-l-dhabab ‘alayha aṭiyār taṣawatu bi-ḥarakāt handasiya mithl-a alati ṣunī‘ at li-l-mutawakkil al-‘abbāsi.” Ibn Abī Zar‘, *Al-Anīs al-Muṭrib bi-Rawḍ al-Qirṭās fī Akhbār Mulūk al-Maghrib wa tārikh madīnat Fās* (Rabat: Dār al-Manṣur, 1972), 382.

With that, the chronicler turns his attention back to the focus of his narrative, the deeds of Abū Yaʿqūb Yusuf, leaving the reader with more questions than answers. What exactly were the Genoese attempting to accomplish? Did they succeed? How did they obtain the golden tree, how did it work, and what was its fate? How similar was it to earlier examples of mechanical *automata*? Beneath these questions, there is a more prosaic, textual one: what role did this episode play in the literary project of Ibn Abī Zarʿ, and how seriously should modern historians take his account? Although not all of these questions may be answered definitively, by examining the cultural and historical context—both Moroccan and Genoese—of this thinly attested embassy, we can get a glimpse of enduring literary and representational traditions surrounding Islamic kingship, and the power of related objects and ideas to cross boundaries in the medieval Mediterranean and beyond.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT: IBN ABĪ ZARʿ AND THE “GARDEN OF PAGES”

Our knowledge of the Genoese embassy to Morocco derives from a single literary source: an Arabic chronicle, composed sometime before 1326 CE, intended as a history both of the ruling dynasties of the Maghrib and of the city of Fez, commonly known as the *Rawḍ al-qirtās* or “Garden of Pages.”² Very little is known about its author, Ali b. Abī Zarʿ, except that he was a contemporary of the Marīnid sultan Abū Saʿīd ʿUthman II (r. 1310–1331 CE) and a resident of Fez, where he served as *imam* near the end of his life.³ In addition to the *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, he may have been the author of an additional historical work, the *Dhakhīra al-saniyya*, although historians disagree on this attribution.⁴ He is generally understood to have been a supporter, even a propagandist, for the Marīnid dynasty, based in Fez: the work is dedicated to the sultan Abū Saʿīd ʿUthmān. Although Ibn Abī Zarʿ’ s chronicle begins with the earliest Islamic dynasties in the Maghrib in the eighth century CE, the opening sections rely heavily on earlier authors, and he is considered an original and valuable historical source mainly for the thirteenth century and for the urban history of Fez.⁵

TREES AND KINGS

Ibn Abī Zarʿ was clearly fascinated by the physical object of the tree itself, which makes it a good starting-point for this discussion. How did the Genoese ambassadors acquire their

2. Ali b. Abī Zarʿ, *Al-Anīs al-Muṭrib bi-Rawḍ al-Qirtās fī Akhbār Mulūk al-Maghrib wa tārikh madinat Fās* [“the Delightful Companion to the Garden of Pages of Reports of the Kings of the Maghrib and the History of the City of Fez”] (henceforth: *Rawḍ al-qirtās*).

3. H. R. Idris, “Ibn Abī Zarʿ,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 25 August 2019 (http://dx.doi.org/libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0311).

4. Maya Shatzmiller, *L’historiographie mérinide: Ibn Khaldun et ses contemporains* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 24–26; Amira K. Bennison, “Drums, Banners, and *Baraka*: Symbols of Authority during the First Century of Marīnid Rule, 1250–1350,” in *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*, ed. Amira Bennison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251; Maria Dolores Rodríguez-Gómez, “Ibn Abī Zarʿ,” *Christian-Muslim Relations 4* (1200–1350), ed. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 815–819.

5. Shatzmiller, *L’historiographie mérinide*, 18–23.

golden tree *automaton*? At least two possibilities present themselves. The object could have been designed and built in Genoa itself, or it could have been acquired elsewhere and used as a diplomatic present by the Genoese commune in 1292.

If the object was manufactured in Genoa, it would represent the earliest textual evidence of an *automaton* produced by Latin Christians in Europe during the Middle Ages. As Elly Truitt has pointed out, western Europeans had long encountered or imagined *automata* as emblematic of the wealth and power of Byzantine and Islamic societies, where Hellenistic texts on mechanics were well-known already by the eighth century, and where people possessed the practical knowledge needed to construct them. Such objects ran the gamut from relatively simple devices designed to provoke wonder and amusement, such as self-filling cups, to more complex *automata* designed to mimic human or animal forms—even mechanical musicians or servants who played music or poured drinks. These were sometimes described in Arabic sources as “tricks” (*hiyāl*), as in the famous ninth-century book by three brothers known as the *Banu Mūsa*, the *Kitāb al-Hiyāl* (“Book of Ingenious Devices,”) and the twelfth-century *Kitāb fī mā rifat al-hiyāl al-handasiya* (“Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices”) by the Egyptian author al-Jazarī (d. 1206 CE).⁶ Some of the most imposing of these devices were designed to augment the glory of a ruler, whether emperor or caliph, at court. In particular, they were intended to overawe visiting dignitaries and ambassadors by impressing them with the power and secret knowledge possessed by their host. Famously, the Lombard cleric Liudprand of Cremona left a detailed description of an *automaton* at the court of Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos (r. 920–959 CE) in Constantinople. He described it as a mechanical throne that rose into the air, with lions that roared and moved their tails, and a golden tree filled with birds that sang “each according to its various species” (*secundum species suas diversarum avium*).⁷

Both Byzantine Christians and Muslim Arabs and Persians employed the device of the golden tree with its singing birds. This was part of a common visual language of kingship, as Allegra Iafrate has shown. It consciously echoed the rule of Solomon, who was famous for his wisdom and command of metallurgy and magic within the Muslim world, and also recalled older, pre-Islamic motifs of kingship common in Iran.⁸ The Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861 CE) built an entire palace at Samarra, the so-called *Dār al-shajara* or “House of the Tree,” to showcase his own golden tree and birds, which stood in the middle of a pool whose bottom and sides were made of silver. The caliph’s tree remained famous throughout the Muslim world even after his successor had it melted down and turned into bullion, as evidenced by its recollection four centuries later and several

6. See Donald Hill, “The Banu Musa and their Book of Ingenious Devices,” *History of Technology* 2 (1977): 39–76; and his “Medieval Arabic Mechanical Technology” in his *Studies in Medieval Islamic Technology: From Philo to al-Jazarī – from Alexandria to Diyār Bakr* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 222–237.

7. *Antapodosis*, 6.5 (Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Medievalis 156). For more on the use of *automata* to impress foreign diplomats, see T.M.P. Duggan, “Diplomatic Shock and Awe: Moving, Sometimes Speaking Islamic Sculptures,” *al-Masaq* 21:3 (2009): 229–267.

8. Allegra Iafrate, *The Wandering Throne of Solomon: Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 268–270.

thousand kilometers away by Ibn Abī Zarʿ.⁹ The Sicilian Muslim poet Ibn Ḥamdis (d. 1135 CE) also mentioned a golden tree and birds in Bijāya, the capital of the Banū Ḥammād.¹⁰

Latin Christians encountered these objects when they ventured into Byzantine and Islamic lands, but they also were familiar with them from literary sources, such as the *chansons de geste* that became popular in the twelfth century. In these texts, such items were often associated with supernatural power, or at least with the spectacular wealth and ingenuity associated with foreign rulers in the East.¹¹ It was only in the thirteenth century that Western Europeans began to take the first steps toward constructing *automata* of their own—what Truitt called “the reappearance of mechanistic thinking” in the medieval West.¹² The notebook of the Picard engineer or architect Villard de Honnecourt (fl. 1230 CE) preserves designs and line drawings of relatively simple examples, such as moving statues, angels, and animals. It is worth mentioning, also, that William of Rubruck claimed to have met a French goldsmith, Guillaume Boucher, living at the court of Möngke Khan (1251–1259 CE), who had designed a fountain in the shape of a tree, with moving lions and serpents, which dispensed mare’s milk, wine, mead, and rice wine to guests at court.¹³ However, Truitt argued that the park of Hesdin, in Artois, built for Robert II of Artois around 1300 CE, represented the first clear example of *automata* that were actually built, rather than imagined, in Western Europe by Western Europeans. These objects included mechanical monkeys, birds, and human statues.¹⁴ Over the next century and a half, Robert’s heirs as counts of Artois expanded their collection of *automata*. Eventually, the dukes of Burgundy maintained a massive collection of statues and devices at Hesdin that were used to amuse but also confuse and even humiliate their guests by spraying water and flour or striking them for the amusement of the ducal court. The golden tree of the Genoese ambassadors, if built in Genoa or elsewhere in Latin Europe, would slightly pre-date the *automata* of Hesdin. At the same time, however, it would represent a very late example of a mechanical and artistic tradition that was well-known in the Islamic and Byzantine worlds. It was a gift that consciously recalled the glories of past caliphs and honored Abū Yaʿqūb Yusuf by associating them with his rule.

It is possible, of course, that the Genoese did not manufacture the tree themselves but obtained it elsewhere. By the 1290s, Genoese merchants had thoroughly established themselves in the Black Sea and Aegean, in Cilicia, and they had only recently been evicted from Acre in 1291 CE.¹⁵ They might easily have encountered artisans and

9. See discussion by Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: the Rise and Fall of Islam’s greatest dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 154; *Rawḍ al-Qirtas*, 382.

10. Ibn Ḥamdis, *Diwān ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Abī Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ḥamdis al-Ṣiqillī al-Sarqūs*, ed. Celestino Schiapparelli (Rome: Casa Editrice Italiana, 1897), 472–473.

11. Elly Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 12–39.

12. Truitt, *Medieval Robots*, 11.

13. Iafate, *Wondering Throne of Solomon*; for more on Guillaume Boucher, see Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher: A French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946)

14. Truitt, *Medieval Robots*, 117–118.

15. For a useful discussion of changing investment patterns in Genoese trade, see Antonio Musarra, *In partibus ultramaris: i genovesi, la crociata e la Terrasanta (secc. XII-XIII)* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo,

engineers capable of designing the object in Egypt, Syria, or Constantinople. Alternatively, the commune of Genoa might have received the tree as a gift or even acquired it through war or piracy. In the fourteenth century, a tradition existed that Frederick II (r. 1198–1250 CE) had owned a gold or gilt tree with singing birds, which he either received as a gift from the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, al-Kāmil (r. 1218–1238 CE) or gave to the sultan. It was one of a collection of precious objects apparently exchanged between the two rulers as part of the diplomacy leading up to the treaty of 1229. One source described the tree as “of gilt silver, twelve *bracce* in length, fitted together, with leaves like a nut tree, filled with diverse birds that sang when the wind stirred them.”¹⁶

The fate of Frederick’s tree, if it existed as described, is unknown, although it could well have served as a model for the Genoese version. In fact, it is even possible—though impossible to prove—that it was the very same tree. The emperor lost much of his treasury during his defeat before Parma in 1248 CE. This included his imperial throne, or faldstool (*faldastorium*), made of gold and studded with pearls and precious stones. The throne came into the possession of several noble families in Genoa, who used it as collateral in a number of loans made in June 1251 CE before Manfred, Frederick’s heir, finally redeemed it two years later.¹⁷ If the Genoese had come into possession of Frederick’s throne, could they not have also acquired his tree? Such a conjecture surely strains the boundaries of possibility, but it should not be dismissed out of hand. The thought is too tempting not to indulge, however skeptically: an object constructed in Egypt, taken to Sicily as a gift, stolen or sold to Liguria, and sent to Morocco as another gift.

KINGSHIP AND DIPLOMACY IN MOROCCO

Ibn Abī Zarʿ lived at a time of shifting political fortunes across the Maghrib. In the late twelfth century, the entire region had been united under the rule of the Almohads, a coalition of Maṣmūda Berbers based in the High Atlas Mountains of south-central Morocco. The Almohads claimed legitimacy through their successful prosecution of *jihād* in defense of Muslim al-Andalus and their adherence to the idiosyncratic reformist Islam of their founder, Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130 CE). They styled themselves as caliphs, like the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Fatīmids before them. However, in the wake of their defeat by Iberian Christian armies in 1212 CE at Las Navas and weakened by civil war within the ruling house, they lost control of most of their territory by the 1240s. In their place, new ruling dynasties asserted themselves in al-Andalus, Ifrīqiya, and the central and eastern Maghrib.

2014), esp. 649–658. Musarra’s work builds upon the still-foundational work of Michel Balard, *La Romanie génoise: (XIIe - début du XVe siècle)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1978), 533–587.

16. “. . . un albero di ariento dorato, di lunghezza di dodici braccia, il quale si commettea, e le foglie fatte come di noce e tutto pieno di diversi uccellini i quali sempre fischiavano ma toccando di sotto o traesse vento,” cited in Michele Amari, *Altre narrazioni del vespro siciliano*. The accounts of Frederick’s tree appear in two Florentine manuscripts: Biblioteca Nazionale VIII.1375 and Laurenziana 40.42. These are Italian translations of Brunetto Latini’s *Liure du trésor*, and both date to the mid-fourteenth century. Both passages are additions by an unknown author to Latini’s French text, which does not mention the tree. However, while the author of Biblioteca Nazionale VIII.1375 alleges that Frederick received the tree, the author of Laurenziana Plut 40.42 writes that the *emperor* sent the tree to al-Kamil.

17. Luigi Belgrano, “Rendiconto dei Lavori Fatti dalla Società Ligure di Storia Patria,” *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria* 3 (1864): lxxix.

The Marīnids or Banū Marīn, a group of Berber tribes in northern Morocco who had once served the Almohads, took advantage of their weakness to assert their autonomy beginning in the 1210s. In 1269 CE, the Marīnids killed the last Almohad caliph in battle before the walls of Marrakesh and established their dominance across the western Maghrib, even penetrating into al-Andalus, where they held several fortresses against the Christians.

Despite their military success, the Marīnids needed to legitimize their rule. Unlike their predecessors, they lacked a coherent ideological message to justify their control, and they found powerful Muslim rival regimes to their east and north, in addition to the persistent threat of the Iberian Christian kingdoms. Historians have sometimes characterized the Marīnids as “opportunists,” lacking a political *raison d’être* beyond successful military power.¹⁸ Whatever the fairness of this assessment (one might point out that ideology and opportunism are not mutually exclusive), the new dynasty took a keen interest in promoting itself through carefully controlled dynastic histories and by acquiring symbols of legitimacy associated with previous Islamic governments in the Maghrib and elsewhere. In this project, popular chroniclers like Ibn Abī Zar’ played a critical role by presenting the dynasty’s rulers as defenders of Islam and guarantors of order and stability.

As Amira Bennison has shown, the Marīnids adopted different strategies to project legitimacy and authority in a variety of Maghribi contexts. In the cities, they patronized religious establishments; founding *madrassas*, mosques, and *zāwiyyas*, and also constructed new palatine cities alongside older urban centers such as at Fez under Abū Yusuf Ya’qūb (r. 1259–1286 CE). The dynasty also sponsored literature that associated the ruling family with holiness, or *baraka*, and embraced both Sufi brotherhoods and new religious traditions such as the *mawlid* festival for the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. In the countryside, however, the Marīnids favored more easily portable symbols of authority, such as special banners, drums, and complex military processions (*ḥarakāt*) to display their power among potentially restive tribal groups. One particularly precious item involved in these ceremonies was an ancient Qur’ān, believed to have been written by the third Islamic caliph, Uthman (r. 644–656 CE).¹⁹ Brought to al-Andalus by the Umayyads in the eighth century CE, the Qur’ān had been used by the caliphs at Cordoba, by the Almohads, and was given to the Marīnids by Muhammad II, ruler of Granada, to seal an alliance against Castile in the autumn of 1293 CE. Ibn Abī Zar’ recorded the arrival of the Qur’ān with the Granadan embassy at Tangiers in great detail along with Abū Ya’qūb’s journey from Fez to take possession of the sacred book.²⁰ The Qur’ān, with its illustrious pedigree, was a valuable tool for a regime keen to burnish its Islamic credentials.

Decades after they had vanquished the Almohads, the Marīnids still faced persistent challenges to their authority, even in the region of Fez itself; their capital city. When the

18. Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103–104; Amira K. Bennison, “Drums, Banners, and *Baraka*,” 252.

19. Other medieval Maghribi historians, including Ibn Khaldūn, disagreed on the exact provenance of the Qur’ān prior to its arrival in Tangier. See discussion by Travis Zadeh, “From Drops of Blood: Charisma and Political Legitimacy in the *translatio* of the ‘Uthmānic Codex of al-Andalus,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 39:3 (2008): 321–326; and Amira K. Bennison, “Drums, Banners, and *Baraka*,” 267–268.

20. Ibn Abī Zar’, *Rawḍ al-Qirtas*, 383–384.

Genoese ambassadors approached Abū Ya‘qūb, his reign was six years old, but he had already faced rebellions led by his cousin and his own son. This formed part of a pattern in which leadership of the Marīnids was contested within the immediate family descended from the dynasty’s founder, ‘Abd al-Haqq (d. 1217 CE). In fact, Abū Ya‘qūb was at Tazūṭa in order to besiege it; earlier that year the fortress had been surprised by ‘Umar b. Yahya al-Wattasī, who seized and held it against the sultan. Abū Ya‘qūb’s initial attempt to retake Tazūṭa had failed, and he had been forced to arrive in person to lead the siege. Even more embarrassing, the sultan had allowed ‘Umar’s brother ‘Amir to enter the fortress in order to persuade his brother to surrender; instead, ‘Umar had stolen all the treasure and escaped during the night, which induced ‘Amir to do the same several weeks later, fearing the sultan’s anger. The sultan eventually stormed the fortress and massacred its defenders, including ‘Amir’s son, who was crucified at Fez.²¹

It was during this tense and violent episode that the Genoese arrived, dragging their golden tree. The *Rawḍ al-qirtās* does not specify when exactly the meeting took place, beyond “while [the amīr] was at Tazūṭa (*wa-huwa bi-tazūṭa*),” but one can imagine the ambassadors entering the besieging camp or perhaps the fortress itself after its fall. The logistics are fascinating but also hard to imagine: did the ambassadors bring the tree in pieces and simply have it assembled at Tazūṭa? What route did they take over the Rīf Mountains to the fortress? Did the tree stay there, or did it go to Fez, surely a more fitting court environment? The golden tree with its singing birds was a relatively widely-known artifact, but almost every extant description of one includes it as a fixture of palace architecture—hardly a portable object.²² Indeed, they often featured in diplomatic receptions by rulers, seeking to overawe visiting ambassadors; that in this case it was the ambassadors who brought the tree is a startling reversal of a well-established trend.²³

Perhaps the most frustrating silence by Ibn Abī Zar‘ is on the purpose of the Genoese embassy. What mission was felt to require the aid of this costly and complicated present? For their part, the Genoese city chronicles contain numerous mentions of embassies dispatched by the commune in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including many to Maghribi rulers. However, Jacopo Doria, a chronicler from 1280–1294 CE, does not mention the mission to the Marīnids under his lengthy entries for the years 1291 and 1292, nor have any related treaty documents from the embassy survived at Genoa in the *Archivio Segreto*.²⁴ By contrast, Latin versions of near-contemporary treaties signed by Genoa with the Ḥafṣid caliphate of Tunis (1287) and the Naṣrid emirate of Granada (1298) have survived to the present. In some cases, Genoa’s abundant notarial records preserve oblique evidence of treaties signed with Maghribi rulers that have not survived elsewhere, such as a treaty signed with the Banū ‘Azafī rulers of Ceuta in 1250.²⁵

21. Ibn Abī Zar‘, *Rawḍ al-Qirtas*, 381–382.

22. See above, 4–5.

23. See Duggan, “Diplomatic Shock and Awe,” 265–267.

24. *Annales Ianuenses* MGH SS 18: 335–351. For the *Archivio Segreto*, see Pasquale Lisciandrelli, ed., *Trattati e Negoziazioni Politiche della Repubblica di Genova (958 1797): Regesti* (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1960), 93–96.

25. Archivio di Stato di Genova, *Notai Antichi* 29 (Bartolomeo Fornari), 241v.

Is it possible to reconstruct the goals of the Genoese embassy? There are several clues to what these might have been. In general, European treaties with Maghribi rulers aimed at securing the most favorable possible conditions for their merchants. The four surviving Genoa-Tunis treaties in the thirteenth century certainly fit this pattern. All of them guaranteed the Genoese security in their persons and goods, rights to their own physical space in Tunis (the *fondaco*), and a limited set of tariffs on a list of agreed-upon merchandise. Treaties also provided for mutual aid between Tunisians and Genoese, and some included specific grievances, such as redress for merchants who lost property to corsair activity.²⁶

The Genoese ambassadors to Abū Yaʿqūb may have come asking for these or similar concessions for merchants trading in Maṛīnid-controlled territory. However, there are several complicating factors to consider. For one thing, by the 1290s Genoa's trade with Morocco seems to have dwindled almost to insignificance. In the early thirteenth century the western Maghrib, and Ceuta in particular, hosted significant populations of Genoese and attracted a substantial share of the city's foreign trade. However, after the 1260s, trade with Ceuta suffered a steep decline due to a combination of factors, including more attractive investment opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean and increased competition from Catalan and Castilian merchants in Morocco. A few Genoese continued to trade with Ceuta, but in the 1290s that city was still under the control of the Banū ʿAzafī, who, although they acknowledged Maṛīnid authority, kept the practical administration of the city in their hands.²⁷

One possible explanation for the embassy rests rather in Genoese activity in the Straits of Gibraltar, site of confrontations and shifting alliances between the Maṛīnids, Granada, and Castile. The Maṛīnids saw themselves as having inherited the responsibility of defending al-Andalus from Christian encroachment, a task that involved frequent crossing of the straits via Ceuta, Tangier, and Ksar es-Sghir. In 1291 CE, hostilities broke out between Abū Yaʿqūb and Sancho IV of Castile (r. 1284–1295 CE). Abū Yaʿqūb gave orders for a fleet and army to assemble on the Moroccan coast in preparation for a crossing to al-Andalus to raid Christian-held territory. However, the Castilian fleet struck first, in September 1291 CE. In the version of events given by Ibn Abī Zarʿ in the *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, the Castilian ships arrived at Ksar es-Sghīr, where they blockaded the sultan until a revolt broke out among the Moroccan ship crews: “they slew their commanders and stopped the campaign” (*fa-qatala quwādabum wa-qaṭāʾa ghazataba*).²⁸ Although the sultan was eventually able to cross the straits, the expedition was severely hampered by the incident. By contrast, two European accounts credit the Genoese adventurer Benedetto Zaccaria, who was in command of the Castilian fleet, with the decisive action. Jacopo Doria, author of the Genoese civic annals, reported that Zaccaria captured the Moroccan ships at Marsa Mūsa (near Ceuta) before they could transport the bulk of Abū Yaʿqūb's army.²⁹ According to the mid-fourteenth century *Crónica de Sancho*

26. See, in general, Olivia Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 107–157.

27. Halima Ferhat, *Sabta des origines au XIV siècle* (Rabat: Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, 1993), 241–253.

28. *Rawḍ al-qirtās*, 380.

29. *Annales lanuenses*, MGH SS 18: 340.

IV, Zaccaria not only captured the ships but then “towed them away with cables” (*jorrándolas con sogas*) within sight of Abū Ya‘qūb, who was “humiliated and greatly dishonored” (*tóvose por muy quebrantado y muy desonrado*) in front of his entire army.³⁰

Ibn Abī Zar‘ does not mention the role of the Genoese in the attack on the Moroccan fleet, but Zaccaria’s involvement does suggest a motive for the embassy: perhaps the commune wished to reconcile with Abū Ya‘qūb for its role in frustrating his campaign. Despite serving as admiral of Castile, Zaccaria had armed and crewed seven of his galleys in Genoa, and the commune may have feared retaliation against Genoese merchants.³¹ After thousands of Genoese assisted Louis IX’s failed crusade against Ḥafṣid Tunis in 1270 CE, the commune was swift to reconcile with the caliph in 1272 by signing a new treaty. Another intriguing possibility is that the embassy was related to the famous expedition of the Vivaldi brothers, who departed Genoa in May 1291 in two galleys to seek a sea route to the East. Doria recorded their departure in 1291, but noted that no news had been heard of them since they were last seen off Cape Gozora (probably modern Cape Chaunar) in southern Morocco.³² Could the embassy have hoped to obtain news of the expedition’s fate? Seen in this light, the embassy may well have had much more at stake than securing trade concessions.

CONCLUSIONS

Whatever their goals might have been, the Genoese ambassadors certainly succeeded in making an impact on the court. However they came by it, the golden tree of the Genoese represented a symbol of wise kingship that was instantly recognizable to the Moroccan sultan and his entourage, as indeed it would have been to Egyptian, Sicilian, Byzantine, and Central Asian rulers, Muslim and Christian alike. It is easy to see how valuable the episode would be for Ibn Abī Zar‘ in his celebration of Marīnid rule. It brought an echo of the splendor of Abbasid Sāmārra to the Rīf Mountains, just as the Qur‘ān of ‘Uthmān recalled not only the righteousness and religious legitimacy associated with the early caliphate, but also the prestige of Umayyad Cordoba and the Almohads. In this article, I have purposefully taken a broad view of the possible motivations for the Genoese embassy. Although the specific purpose of the Genoese embassy to the Marīnids remains unknown, the ambassadors’ gift represented a powerful and readily intelligible symbol of legitimacy for a dynasty still finding its feet in a time of political upheaval. The golden tree and its birds may not have helped quell rebellions or manage difficult relations across the strait, but it could allow an ambitious young dynasty to claim something of the greatness of times past—a worthy prize indeed. ■

30. *Estudio y edición crítica de la crónica de Sancho IV*, 2 vols., ed. Pablo Saracino (PhD dissertation, University of Buenos Aires, 2009), 2.153.

31. *Annales Ianuenses*, MGH SS 18: 340, 333.

32. See discussion by Jill Moore, “The Expedition of the Brothers Vivaldi: New Archival Evidence,” in *Spain, Portugal and the Atlantic frontier of medieval Europe*, ed. José-Juan López-Portillo (Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2013), 1–18.