

MEMOIRS OF A PARTY KING:

THE TIBYAN OF `ABD ALLAH AND ITS INTERPRETATION

HELEN STEELE

At the end of the tenth century CE, the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba controlled the great territories of al-Andalus. In the Muslim world, it was one of the most powerful centralized states. Within a few years, however, it had crumbled. Instead of one state, there were a myriad of small states, known as *Taifas*, vying for power and resources. Scholars have traditionally seen this as the beginning of the end for Muslim control of al-Andalus, a waning of the romanticized high culture of Cordoba. Nevertheless, sources from the period can bring insight into the fluid fortunes of the 'party kings' and the culture and politics that surrounded them. In particular, the memoirs of `Abd Allah, the ruler of Granada, known as *The Tiblyan*, provides information not only upon the formation of and politics within the *taifas* but also upon the complex relationships within them. `Abd Allah illuminates interactions by Granada Muslims with Jews and Christians, as well as within the larger Muslim community. In this paper, I shall consider how different scholars consider `Abd Allah's *Tiblyan* as a historical and cultural resource, both on its own and in comparison with other contemporaneous sources.

In 1008, the Caliphate of Cordoba exploded into a civil war, a *fitna*, between rivals for the Caliphate. As Hisham II and Sulayman fought, their Berber troops went on the rampage in Cordoba and throughout al-Andalus. The Caliphate struggled on in name only, through the death of Sulayman in 1016 to a final death in 1031. The Caliphate of Cordoba was no more. In the wake of the *fitna*, there was a power vacuum. Although the Caliphate had struggled to hold onto power in its last days, it had been a centralizing force. Now, small statelets emerged. These tended to be based around individual cities and their agricultural hinterlands, and were ruled by amirs.

Historians have called these men the Taifa or Party Kings, as they were each a member of a party or faction.¹

On such faction centered upon the statelet of Elvira in the South East of al-Andalus. In 1014, Sulayman, Caliph of Cordoba, granted the city of Elvira to a Berber general called Zawi ibn Ziri. He soon moved his center of power from Elvira to a new city, Granada, which was more defensible. Zawi's family managed to hold Granada throughout the eleventh century until `Abd Allah, the great-great-grandson of Zawi's younger brother was deposed in 1090. As well as being the ruler of Granada during this turbulent time, `Abd Allah was also an author. In exile in Morocco following his deposition, he wrote the *Tiblyan*, a memoir of his time in power and a history of his family. Once thought lost, a French scholar rediscovered the manuscript in a Moroccan mosque in 1932.² Since then, it has provided a unique insight into the times of the party kings.

Several works of scholarship discuss or reference the *Tiblyan*. Both Richard Fletcher, in *Moorish Spain*, and Jan Read in *The Moors in Spain and Portugal* have written general histories of al-Andalus that use the *Tiblyan* as a source.³ However, while Read concentrates upon what `Abd Allah can tell us about the problems of `Abd Allah own time, Fletcher expands his scope to examine `Abd Allah's description of the formation of the *Taifa* states themselves. Other general studies of Islamic Spain, including W. Montgomery Watt's seminal *A History of Islamic Spain* and Bernard Reilly's *The Medieval Spains* do not use the *Tiblyan* as a historical source, although the

¹ Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 79–80.

² *Ibid.* 82.

³ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* and Jan Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

latter does consider the work as a cultural phenomenon.⁴ This may not be because these scholars dismiss the *Tibyan*. Watt does not provide the specific sources that he used to write his work. Reilly covers the Cordoban caliphate and barely covers the *Taifa* period before considering the history of the Christian kings, thus diminishing the importance of the *Tibyan* as a source. The more focused work of David Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, however, considers `Abd Allah in a similar manner to Fletcher and the comparison between these two works is most interesting.⁵ Finally, even more specialized works can use the *Tibyan* as a source. Frederick Bargebuhr has used the *Tibyan* to bring insight into the commissioning and construction of the Alhambra Palace in Granada.⁶

Of course, the *Tibyan* of `Abd Allah is not the only source available to scholars. Despite, or perhaps because of, the turbulent nature of the times, scholarship and art flourished in the Taifa period. `Abd Allah was not the only ruler who wrote. Others, such as al-Mu'tamid of Seville, were accomplished poets. These amirs also sponsored scholars such as Ibn-Hazm and Ibn-al-Labbana.⁷ While much of the work of these poets is romantic, idealized, scholars can also glean more information from these works to complement that from `Abd Allah.

The focus of much of the scholarship of the period is the mechanisms for the downfall of the Caliphate of Cordoba and the formation of the Taifa states. Certainly there seems to be little consensus on the exact nature of the changes occurring during this period. Watt maintains that the individual rulers of the cities throughout al-Andalus were “virtually compelled to take authority into

⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965) and Bernard F. Reilly, *The Medieval Spains*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁵ David Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings: Politics and Society in Islamic Spain 1002–1086* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁶ Frederick Bargebuhr, “The Alhambra Palace of the Eleventh Century,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19:3–4 (1956),

⁷ Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 119.

their own hands.⁸ Wasserstein, citing the *Tibyan*, sees the men who became the first Taifa kings as being rather more active than does Watt. He quotes `Abd Allah, “every leader revolted in his own city, and fortified himself in his castle... and they contended with one another for the world, and each of them was covetous of the rest.”⁹ However, he argues that `Abd Allah can be interpreted erroneously. Firstly, `Abd Allah suggested that the new amirs of the Taifa Kingdoms essentially took over full control of lands in which they had already held power under the Caliphate. This did occur in cities such as Toledo as attested to in other primary sources. These cities had held virtual autonomy even before the fall of the Caliphate.¹⁰ In other cities, the succession from governor or magnate to Taifa King was not so clear-cut. In Elvira itself, before `Abd Allah’s ancestor took control, there was a period without any ruler.¹¹ Secondly, Wasserstein refutes `Abd Allah’s conclusion that these amirs were “for the most part little more than people who were already of local political significance.” He argues that other sources suggest that many of the Taifa Kings were Amirid refugees from Cordoba.¹²

Richard Fletcher in *Moorish Spain* echoes Wasserstein’s interpretation of the formation of the Taifa states. He too differentiates between the local Amirid administrators who emerged from the wreckage of the Caliphate to rule cities such as Badajoz and those such as the Zirids who took land during the *fitna* to which they had no existing ties.¹³

Both Fletcher and Wasserstein examine `Abd Allah’s *Tibyan* for clues to the manner in which Zawi ibn Ziri took control of Elvira and reach different conclusions. `Abd Allah wrote, “When the people of Elvira saw the dissention among the princes of al-Andalus... they wrote to Zawi, explaining their position... ‘There are lives to save, a country for you to

⁸ Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, 91.

⁹ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 99

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 104

¹¹ *Ibid*, 105.

¹² *Ibid*, 104.

¹³ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 83.

defend, and glory to redound to you! We will share with you our lives and possessions; we will give you property and dwellings, and in return we shall have a claim to your protection and defense.’ The Berbers agreed to this.”¹⁴ In `Abd Allah’s account, therefore, he is clearly stating that the people of Elvira invited in the Berber Zirids to bring stability to their city. However, Fletcher argues that this “strains credulity”. He maintains that given the Berbers had been rampaging around the countryside, extorting money from the people of the cities, including Elvira, the citizens would hardly have looked to their oppressors for salvation. He suggests instead that Zawi took Elvira in a coup and demanded acknowledgement from a weakened caliph after the fact.¹⁵

While acknowledging that `Abd Allah’s account has a “rosy glow”, Wasserstein, however, admits that there may be something of the truth in `Abd Allah’s account. According to the `Abd Allah, the situation in Elvira was very dire indeed, with a complete breakdown of law and order and a deep fear of an unknown force taking control of their city. The Sanhaja Berbers, of which Zawi was the head, had decided to leave al-Andalus for North Africa. Wasserstein suggests that the people of Elvira had decided to call upon Zawi as someone they knew rather than an unknown. As internecine strife in Morocco prevented many of the Sanhaja from leaving, they remained in Elvira as a compromise.¹⁶

It would seem that these two scholars differ primarily because they date the request of the people of Elvira to different periods. Fletcher clearly dates the request to the time of Sulayman (1009–1016). Certainly, Sulayman ceded control of the city to Zawi in 1013 and the request detailed in `Abd Allah can thus be interpreted as a sugarcoating of the initial coup. Wasserstein interprets `Abd Allah differently. He dates the request to around 1019-1020 when Zawi left Elvira for North

Africa. In the wake of his departure, amid the fitna, newly autonomous Elvira must have been very vulnerable to external pressure. The request they made according to `Abd Allah therefore would be rather more reasonable. This difference in interpretation brings the problem of sources such as `Abd Allah into sharp relief. Few scholars would argue that `Abd Allah is an unbiased source. The history in the *Tibyan* is the history of `Abd Allah’s own family. However impartial the author might try to be, it is inevitable that some preconceptions would slip in. In addition, in the case of `Abd Allah, he may have wished to justify his own position and that of his family in the wake of his deposition by the Moroccans. However, scholars need to ask how many primary sources are likely to be balanced and unbiased. Each author comes with a set of ideas about the world and has to write within a particular paradigm. Scholars of the Umayyad period use the *History* of al-Tabari as an important primary source, yet al-Tabari wrote during the Abbasid caliphate when there was a determined policy of denigrating the Umayyads. Scholars must examine the text in the context of the times and of other texts. Only then should they determine for themselves what is reliable, what is debatable and what is clearly fiction.

In the case of the *Tibyan*, Wasserstein has clearly accepted some parts of the text while rejecting others; Fletcher has rejected the same passage Wasserstein accepts. However, in the example of the request from Elvira, the disparity seems to come not from arguments over bias but rather from a difference in opinions over dating. In the *Tibyan* as in other sources of the time, the authors do not use dates with the same attention to detail as modern historians. Reading a passage from the *Tibyan*, `Abd Allah uses no dates.¹⁷ This leaves the scholar to interpret the dates from the context of the surrounding material. While usually the context will be apparent

¹⁴ *The Tibyan: Memoirs of 'Abd Allah b. Buluggin, Last Zirid Amir of Granada*, translated by Amin T. Tibi (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1986), reproduced in Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 82.

¹⁵ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 82.

¹⁶ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 140–141.

¹⁷ *The Tibyan: Memoirs of 'Abd Allah b. Buluggin, Last Zirid Amir of Granada*, translated by Amin T. Tibi (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1986) 130–135, reproduced in Olivia Remie Constable, ed., *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 103–107.

enough for scholars to agree, clearly this is not always the case.

Despite the difficulties inherent in a text such as `Abd Allah's the *Tibyan*, however, scholars still view it as an important source. Fletcher, who has hitherto rejected `Abd Allah's interpretation of the taking of Elvira, suggests that `Abd Allah tried to obfuscate the truth but was not clever enough to do so all the time and that the memoirs are "evocative" of the times of the Taifa Kings.¹⁸ According to Fletcher, the "sheer imperative of survival" characterized these times. The *Tibyan* agrees, with its description of the move from Elvira to the new city of Granada and its characterization of the Taifa Kings as covetous and at odds with each other. Fletcher suggests that the *Tibyan* is "as good an introduction as any" to the turbulent nature of the period with `Abd Allah's description of the military conflict and diplomatic maneuverings necessary for the maintenance of the state.¹⁹

Wasserstein further argues that `Abd Allah can be used to suggest the nature of the class system in Granada. He maintains that there was a *khassa*, an elite in each city including Elvira. The *khassa* in Elvira would have been the group that sent out the request to Zawi in the absence of one of their own capable of rule. In other cities, a member of the *khassa* took power.²⁰ After the accession of the Taifa Kings, this elite remained a potent force. When `Abd Allah's grandfather died, a group of "viziers" approved the old ruler's choice of successor. Thereafter, `Abd Allah was extremely solicitous to these men. Wasserstein thus uses the *Tibyan* to suggest that the rule of the Taifa Kings was not as autocratic as it might first appear, but that others could rise to positions of influence in the kingdoms.²¹ Read finds similar evidence in the works of al-Mu'tamid and of Muhammad ibn-`Ammar. Al-Mu'tamid was the ruler of Seville and ibn-`Ammar his vizier. Both were accomplished authors and their verses

have given scholars insight into the close working relationship between ruler and vizier.²² In particular, the later verses of ibn-`Ammar ridiculing al-Mu'tamid and his wife suggest a deep rift that is confirmed by other sources.²³

Many scholars use the *Tibyan* of `Abd Allah to gain insight into the relationship between Jews and Muslims in al-Andalus. Two of the most important characters in the memoir are Samuel and Joseph ibn Naghrela. They served as vizier to the amirs of Granada. Despite the Koranic injunction against employing Jews, Joseph and his father Samuel were clearly too important to the Taifa Kings of Granada to ignore.²⁴ Fletcher notes that `Abd Allah refers to Samuel especially in respectful terms as Abu Ibrahim or 'son of Abraham' and evidently accepted his position of power in the city.²⁵ However, Wasserstein notes that other sources including Ibn Hazm, took a far more negative view of the Jews in Granada than did `Abd Allah.²⁶ He explains the discrepancy in tone to the differing points of view of the authors. `Abd Allah, as ruler, had been reliant upon the Jewish *Nagid*. Samuel was not only a scholar but also a military commander and effective administrator. Even with hindsight, `Abd Allah saw the man as an ally not a rival. Ibn Hazm however, was a scholar, and his relationship with Samuel ibn Naghrela was one of not-so-friendly rivalry.²⁷ Both Wasserstein and Fletcher agree, however, that the early period of the Taifa Kings was a high point for Jews in al-Andalus. Presumably, the Taifa Kings were so intent on gaining and retaining power that they were open to using Jewish help, notwithstanding the religious consequences.

Despite their usefulness to the Taifa Kings, Jews like Joseph ibn Naghrela in powerful positions also made themselves targets. Part of `Abd Allah's memoirs includes a long tirade against Joseph ibn Naghrela, whom

¹⁸ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

²⁰ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 142.

²¹ *Ibid*, 145.

²² Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 115.

²³ *Ibid*, 117.

²⁴ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 205.

²⁵ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 96

²⁶ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 199.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 201

he refers to only as “The Jew”. `Abd Allah accuses Joseph of terrible crimes including culpability in the death of `Abd Allah’s father Buluggin.²⁸ In her introduction to this passage in the *Tibyan*, Olivia Constable asserts that these are a direct result of Joseph’s exalted status.²⁹ Wasserstein seems to support this, suggesting that some of this tension comes from the manner in which Joseph inherited the role of vizier from his father. He claims it was “unusual in the extreme” for a Jewish son to follow his father in a bureaucratic role.³⁰ Presumably, he is implying that resentment built up against Joseph who had assumed a position of power over Muslims through his family and not through personal abilities. Frederick Bargebur goes further. He believes the *Tibyan* in its description of a plot by Joseph to build the Alhambra palace to hide in during a possible coup.³¹ While Wasserstein acknowledges that the growing unease about the Jewish influence in Granada is clear in `Abd Allah’s memoirs, both he and Fletcher draw upon another source, Abu Ishaq, to illustrate the underlying anti-Semitism of many Muslims.³² Abu Ishaq, a Muslim politician who felt the Jews had wronged him, wrote an ode of hatred to disseminate his views. The virulent poem succeeded as propaganda and led to a pogrom in which Muslim mobs murdered Joseph and thousands of Jews.

As `Abd Allah sheds light on the position of Jews in Granada, he can also bring insight into the position of Christians in al-Andalus, both within Granada and as external forces. Fletcher notes that while `Abd Allah does not talk specifically about his Christian subjects in his memoirs, he does refer to Christian communities in such a casual manner as to suggest that their presence in his realm was of no great importance.³³ Fletcher takes this to mean that Christian communities existed relatively unbothered by their Muslim rulers.

²⁸ *The Tibyan*, trans. A.T. Tibi, 62–75, reproduced in Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, 91–96.

²⁹ Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, 91

³⁰ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 205.

³¹ Frederick Bargebur, 192.

³² Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 96.

³³ *Ibid*, 95.

Scholars also use the *Tibyan* to illustrate first hand the dangers that came from both the Christian Kings and rival Taifa Kings. Indeed, this appears to be the focus of much of the scholarship on the *Tibyan*. `Abd Allah was writing at a point when the tide had turned and the Christian armies of the *Reconquista* had made some inroads into Muslim lands but the Kingdom of Seville was also on the rise. Indeed, one of the reasons for his own downfall was his inability to deal with either effectively. In addition, these were events he took part in, not merely related. Buoyed by the collapse of the Caliphate of Cordoba, the Christian Kings would often demand tribute called *parias* from the Taifa Kings in what Fletcher describes as a “protection racket.”³⁴ Although Fletcher provides other, drier sources, it is the memoirs of `Abd Allah that provide a better understanding of the intricacies and dangers of these dealings. Read uses `Abd Allah as the basis of a narrative account in which the young and naïve ruler refuses to pay tribute to Alfonso VI of Leon-Castile. In the wake of this refusal, ibn-`Ammar, vizier of Seville, paid Alfonso to join with him in taking Granada.³⁵ Fletcher suggests however that `Abd Allah was not so much foolish, but rather was constrained by his finances from acceding to ridiculous demands.³⁶ Finally, the two rulers decided to meet and Alfonso approved of a reduced tribute of 30,000 dinars. Although Read had accused `Abd Allah of being naïve, both Read and Wasserstein agree that `Abd Allah understood all too well the cunning of the Castilian King. `Abd Allah knew that Alfonso, recognizing the underlying instability of the Taifa states, was intent on setting them against each other until they were weak enough for him to pick off.³⁷ However, Wasserstein suggests that rather than coming at the time, `Abd Allah’s insight may only have come when he was in exile, and thus been too late.³⁸

³⁴ *Ibid*, 98.

³⁵ Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 108

³⁶ Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 100

³⁷ Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 109.

³⁸ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 276.

Threatened by the Christians, `Abd Allah describes the despair felt by many Muslims in powerful terms. Upon the fall of Toledo to the Christians in 1085, Wasserstein quotes `Abd Allah, “The fall of Toledo sent a great tremor through al-Andalus and filled the inhabitants with fear and despair of continuing to live there.” To him, `Abd Allah voiced the fears of many that made them turn to desperate measures.³⁹ The Muslims summoned support from North Africa. Read describes this as a terrible mistake, releasing a “veritable genie” from a bottle.⁴⁰

Almoravid “fundamentalists” swept into al-Andalus to discover a culture that had inexorably slipped from the ideals of Islam. Wasserstein uses sources including Ibn Hazm to illustrate this phenomenon.⁴¹ Fletcher, however, sees examples of this fall from grace not only in Ibn Hazm but also in the *Tibyan* itself. The position of Jews described by `Abd Allah was certainly against Islamic law, as was the payment of tribute to Christian Kings. In addition, he finds many other minor breaches. `Abd Allah described his interest in astrology and used his work to defend the practice condemned by orthodoxy. Fletcher finally notes the undercurrent of hedonism in the *Tibyan*. Such behavior as excess drinking must have shocked the incoming Almoravids.⁴² Ultimately, the Almoravids deposed the Taifa rulers including `Abd Allah and al-Mu’tamid of Seville. Read uses the poetry of Ibn-al-Labbana to evoke the sadness of al-Mu’tamid’s exile, “How many the tears that rained into the water! How many the broken hearts those merciless galleys took.”⁴³ `Abd Allah was taken, a captive, into exile, and his story ends.

Fletcher is not alone in considering the cultural information within `Abd Allah’s work. Bargebuhr analyzes the *Tibyan* for insight into the building of the Alhambra and the cultural paradigm in which it was conceived.⁴⁴ Bernard Reilly uses both `Abd Allah and al-Mu’tamid as examples of the “brilliant” cultural accomplishments of the Taifa rulers.⁴⁵ However, while Fletcher, Read and Wasserstein clearly feel comfortable using the literature of the period as primary sources, Reilly does not. Perhaps this is because of the type of book he was writing, but he appears to rely upon sources that are more factual and less evocative. This, however, ignores the value of a source such as the *Tibyan*. Although its author was undoubtedly subjective and its facts sometimes are hard to decipher, scholars can still learn much from this memoir. From the mind of a Taifa king, they can begin to make sense of a turbulent world, to understand the complex interactions of Muslims, Jews and Christians and comprehend the feelings of those that lived during this time.

³⁹ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 279.

⁴⁰ Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 109.

⁴¹ Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, 280.

⁴² Fletcher, *Moorish Spain*, 109.

⁴³ Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, 118.

⁴⁴ Frederick Bargebuhr, 192–258.

⁴⁵ Bernard F. Reilly, *The Medieval Spains*, 121.

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