

# Imperial Government and Authority in Medieval Western Islam (IGAMWI)

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My project is to write a new history of the Almohad Empire (1130-1269). This local dynasty of Berber origins ruled simultaneously over the southern and northern shores of the Western Mediterranean. For the first time in history, the whole 'Maghreb', from Libya to Morocco and from Sahara to the center of Iberian Peninsula, was united under an indigenous authority. This unique historical period witnessed very important process, the political and religious separation from the East through 'Mahdism', and the nearly successful transfer of Islamic prophetic authority from the Arabic core to Western lands.

In order to understand the exercise of power in the largest Western Muslim medieval Empire ever, I intend to use the important but largely ignored letters of the Almohad Chancery (1130-1269 C.E.). There survive 300 documents, some of them partially published, which need a new scholarly edition and a usable translation. While it is well known that the Medieval Islamic world lacks in preserved archives, the review of those 'Letters of victory, defeat, information, counsels, reproaches or of nominations (judges, tax collectors, military governors, administrators)' will provide historians with materials that should allow a rejuvenation of the history of North African medieval land.

The prevailing master narratives of the History of the medieval Maghreb is based on narrative sources. Despite the fact that those texts — often written long after the events they describe — can only offer a partial view of local events and history, they have been systematically used as the foundation for a 'positivistic' history of the Maghreb. The resulting distortions are highly problematic, since it was during those centuries that the Maghreb emancipated itself from the Eastern Islamic and Arabic model. Understanding this development requires tackling the contemporary non-narrative documentary record, which we can find preserved in the chancery documents. Yet the technical difficulties presented by the highly literary and poetic language of these documents — be they either unpublished or too hastily published — have largely barred their use by historians.

This project is a methodical attempt to address this critical problem. The project will have four stages: 1) the taking stock of the unedited administrative documents from North Africa between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.; 2) the editing of the entire corpus; 3) the translation of all these documents; 4) the presentation of a synthetic historical, linguistic and religious analysis through scholarly publications and a dedicated website.