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Tayeb Tabarkane*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6610-4686>

Badi Abbes**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3791-2189>

The Norman Invasion of the North African Coasts in the Middle Ages

Orta Çağ'da Normanların Kuzey Afrika Kıyılarını İstilas

Abstract

This study examines the Norman expansion along the North African coasts during the medieval period and analyzes the role of the Hammadid and Almohad naval forces in confronting Norman maritime influence in the western Mediterranean. The research focuses on the political and military conditions that facilitated Norman intervention in the Maghreb, particularly during the decline of regional powers and the fragmentation of authority in Ifriqiya. It also explores the strategic importance of the Hammadid fleet in supporting the Zirids during the crisis that followed the Norman attacks on coastal cities and islands such as Djerba, Mahdia, Tripoli, and Béjaïa. Particular attention is given to the naval blockade associated with Mahdia, which reflected the growing significance of maritime organization, naval logistics, and military mobilization in the central Mediterranean. Although the Hammadid fleet was unable to permanently halt Norman expansion, these efforts represented an important stage in the development of organized naval resistance in the Maghreb. The study further examines how the Almohads later consolidated and expanded regional naval capabilities, eventually restoring control over major coastal centers and reducing Norman influence in North Africa. The research concludes that naval power played a central role in shaping political stability and maritime security in the medieval Mediterranean world.

Keywords: Hammadids, Almohads, Norman expansion, naval warfare, Maghreb, North African coasts

Öz

Bu çalışma, Orta Çağ'da Normanların Kuzey Afrika kıyılarına yönelik yayılma faaliyetlerini incelemekte ve Batı Akdeniz'de Norman deniz gücüne karşı Hammadîler ile Muvahhidlerin üstlendiği askeri ve siyasî rolü analiz etmektedir. Araştırma, Norman müdahalelerini mümkün kılan siyasî parçalanma, bölgesel iktidar mücadeleleri ve İfrîkiye'deki otorite zayıflığı üzerinde durmaktadır. Özellikle Cerbe, Mehdiye, Trablus ve Bicâye gibi stratejik merkezlere yönelen saldırılar karşısında Hammadî donanmasının Zirîlere verdiği destek, bölgedeki denizcilik kapasitesinin gelişimi açısından önemli bir aşama olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Mehdiye kuşatması etrafında şekillenen deniz ablukası ise Orta Çağ Mağrib'inde deniz lojistiği, askeri seferiyat ve deniz organizasyonunun ulaştığı düzeyi göstermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, Muvahhidlerin mevcut

*Dr., Department of History, University of Skikda, Skikda, Algeria, t.tabarkane@univ-skikda.dz

**Dr., Department of History, University of Skikda, Skikda, Algeria, badiabbes@gmail.com

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denizcilik mirasını geliştirerek Kuzey Afrika kıyılarında yeniden siyasî ve askerî denetim kurduklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak araştırma, deniz gücünün Orta Çağ Akdeniz dünyasında siyasî istikrar ve bölgesel güvenliğin şekillenmesinde belirleyici bir unsur olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Hammadîler, Muvabhidler, Norman yayılması, deniz savaşları, Mağrib, Kuzey Afrika kıyıları*

Introduction

The twelfth century witnessed a major transformation in the balance of power across the Mediterranean Sea, as the strategic center of influence gradually shifted from the Islamic south to the Christian north. This transition became evident through a series of decisive naval confrontations that reshaped political and military influence throughout the Mediterranean basin. Along the northern shores, Norman naval power, based in southern Italy and Sicily, emerged as a significant force. The Normans benefited both from the relative political vacuum in several Mediterranean regions and from their own expansionist momentum. At the same time, the Islamic south experienced profound political and military changes. The Fatimid state entered a prolonged phase of decline after centuries of influence, while the Almoravid state began to suffer from internal fragmentation that ultimately accelerated its collapse. In parallel, the Almohad movement rose in the Maghreb as a new and ambitious political power, later developing into the principal Islamic naval force in the western Mediterranean.

Within this broader regional context, the Hammadid navy, centered in present-day Algeria, occupied an important position in the western Mediterranean. Hammadid maritime policy was generally characterized by caution and a predominantly defensive orientation. Its rulers primarily sought to secure coastal territories and maintain the stability of their maritime sphere without becoming deeply involved in conflicts beyond their immediate strategic interests. This approach largely defined the naval policy of the early Hammadid rulers.

Nevertheless, this defensive orientation underwent a notable transformation when the Hammadid state abandoned its relative isolation and intervened directly in the naval conflict between its Zirid allies in Ifriqiya and the expanding Norman forces. The intervention came in response to Zirid appeals for assistance and reflected growing concerns regarding Norman expansion along the central Mediterranean coasts and its broader implications for regional security. This episode represents an important moment in the evolution of Hammadid naval strategy and offers valuable insight into the changing nature of political and military power in the medieval western Mediterranean.

Significance of the Study

This research examines a critical phase in the history of the Mediterranean by exploring how the emergence of naval power under the Hammadid state contributed to reshaping the balance of power in the western Mediterranean. In particular, the study highlights the growing strategic role

of the Hammadid fleet in confronting the expanding Norman presence, which increasingly affected the political and military stability of the Maghreb region. The analysis further demonstrates how internal political fragmentation in North Africa and the central Mediterranean created opportunities for Norman expansion, while regional naval forces simultaneously emerged as influential actors within the broader geopolitical landscape.

The study also emphasizes the defensive role played by the Hammadid navy in protecting maritime routes and coastal territories in the western Mediterranean basin. Particular attention is given to the later development of Almohad naval power, which benefited from existing maritime experience, military traditions, and naval infrastructure established in earlier periods. In this context, the consolidation of naval resources under a more unified political authority became an important factor in limiting external military pressure and restoring a degree of maritime stability in the region. The research additionally illustrates how naval organization, military adaptation, and accumulated maritime expertise contributed to strengthening regional defense capabilities.

More broadly, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of power relations in the central Mediterranean during the twelfth century. Rather than interpreting the period solely through narratives of political fragmentation or decline, the research approaches it as a dynamic phase marked by strategic adaptation, regional resistance, and the gradual development of maritime defensive capacity. It also underlines the long-term importance of naval preparedness and maritime awareness in shaping the security of coastal regions and influencing political stability across the Mediterranean world. In doing so, the study situates the Maghreb, particularly the Hammadid sphere, within the wider history of Mediterranean naval transformation.

Literature Review

While the text does not explicitly present a separate literature review section, it implicitly engages with historical discussions concerning Norman expansion, the decline of the Zirid and Hammadid dynasties, and the rise of the Almohads. References to events such as the siege of Mahdia, Norman exploitation of regional rivalries, and Almohad naval campaigns indicate that the study is situated within broader scholarship on Mediterranean maritime conflicts and the political structures of Maghrebi states during the twelfth century. The analysis appears to draw on both primary sources, including chronicles and accounts of military campaigns, and secondary studies dealing with Norman Sicily, Almohad military organization, and political rivalries in North Africa.

Hypothesis

The study assumes that the expansion of Norman naval influence in the western Mediterranean during the twelfth century was closely linked to the political and military fragmentation among the major Islamic powers of the region, including the Hammadids, Zirids, and Almoravids. The absence of coordinated military strategy and the persistence of regional

rivalries created conditions that enabled Norman intervention along important coastal centers. The study further argues that limiting Norman expansion became possible only with the rise of the Almohads, whose more centralized political authority and organized naval structure strengthened maritime defense and altered the balance of power in the western Mediterranean.

Method

The study adopts a historical-analytical approach based on the reconstruction of political and military developments through both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include chronicles, accounts of military campaigns and sieges, and reports concerning diplomatic and political relations in the medieval Mediterranean. In parallel, the research engages with modern historical studies addressing Norman expansion, Maghrebi political structures, and naval conflict in the twelfth-century Mediterranean.

The analysis also employs a comparative perspective in examining the differing political and military approaches of the Hammadids and the Almohads. Particular attention is given to the contrast between fragmented regional responses and more centralized forms of political and naval organization. In addition, the study considers the broader geopolitical environment of the Mediterranean, including Norman-Sicilian expansion and wider regional conflicts, in order to explain shifts in the balance of power during the period. The method further relies on the critical reading of historical narratives alongside the analysis of political, military, and economic factors connected to maritime competition in the western Mediterranean.

Research Problem

This research examines the origins and consequences of the Norman–Hammadid maritime conflict during the twelfth century, with particular attention to its impact on the security of the Maghrebi coasts. The study investigates the factors that facilitated Norman naval expansion, including political fragmentation among regional powers and the strategic conditions that shaped Mediterranean competition during the period. It also considers the limitations of Hammadid naval organization and leadership that contributed to their inability to effectively confront Norman maritime pressure. In addition, the research analyzes the broader consequences of Norman expansion for the cities of the Maghreb and traces the transformation of regional power relations until the rise of the Almohads.

The central problem of the study lies in understanding the causes and consequences of the Norman–Hammadid maritime conflict and explaining the political and military conditions that shaped its development. The limited naval capabilities of the Hammadids reduced their ability to resist sustained Norman attacks, which subsequently enabled repeated raids on several coastal centers in the central and lower Maghreb. Accordingly, the study raises several main questions: What was the nature of the naval conflict between the Hammadids and the Normans? What were

its regional consequences? To what extent did this confrontation contribute to forms of interaction between Islamic and Christian powers in the Mediterranean?

The ambitions of the Almohads during the reign of 'Abd al-Mu'min were not limited to recovering Tunisia but also extended to Mahdia, one of the most important fortified cities under Norman control in the Maghreb. Contemporary accounts describe the city's fortifications as exceptionally strong, enabling prolonged resistance during the Almohad siege, while reinforcements continued to arrive from Sicily. As the siege continued, shortages and rising prices affected the city's population and weakened the Norman position. Eventually, negotiations led to an agreement permitting the Norman forces to withdraw and return to Sicily under the protection granted by 'Abd al-Mu'min. Following the Almohad entry into Mahdia, additional cities previously under Norman authority, including Gabès and Tripoli, as well as territories associated with the Zirids such as Tozeur, Qafsa, Nafta, and al-Ḥamma, came under Almohad control.

The Almohads subsequently succeeded in removing Norman influence from the occupied Maghrebi cities and consolidating their authority across a wide geographical area extending from Tripoli to Souss, in addition to territories linked to al-Andalus. Medieval narratives also describe the difficult conditions experienced during the siege of Mahdia, including food shortages and the eventual evacuation of Norman forces. Some sources further report that severe winter conditions affected part of the withdrawing fleet on its return journey to Sicily.

Despite subsequent Norman attempts to restore their naval position after these defeats, Almohad naval resistance continued to strengthen. In 554 AH/1159 AD, a major Norman fleet reportedly advanced toward Mahdia. However, the Almohad fleet and army prepared to confront the attack near the coast, leading to a naval engagement in which the Norman fleet was repelled and several ships were captured. This confrontation is regarded in many historical accounts as one of the last major naval conflicts between the Normans and the Almohads, reflecting the growing maritime strength achieved under Almohad rule.

The Emergence of the Hammadid Navy

The formation of the Hammadid state was accompanied by a growing awareness of the need for military organization and defensive preparedness. Under the leadership of Ḥammād ibn Buluggīn, the ruling authority sought to strengthen its political position within a highly unstable regional environment marked by rival powers and recurring tribal conflicts. Geographically situated between the Zirids in the east and the Almoravids in the west, the Hammadids were compelled to balance internal security concerns with external political pressures. At the same time, increasing maritime activity in the Mediterranean, particularly the expansion of Norman naval influence, created additional challenges for the stability of the central Maghreb. These conditions encouraged

the gradual development of defensive military structures that later contributed to the emergence of a more organized maritime presence along the North African coast.

The Hammadid Navy

The Hammadid navy began to emerge during the medieval period, particularly after the transfer of the capital from the inland fortress to Béjaïa. Nevertheless, many aspects of this naval force remain insufficiently documented, as historical sources provide limited information regarding the size of the fleet, the number of ships, and the nature of Hammadid naval engagements. Despite these limitations, the coasts under Hammadid authority remained relatively secure throughout most of the state's existence, while major maritime threats became more visible during the twelfth century. In this context, the Hammadid navy developed into an important factor in maintaining maritime stability along the Algerian coast (Ibn Khaldūn, 1988). The Norman attacks on several Hammadid coastal cities contributed to an important transformation in Hammadid military strategy, especially because of the strategic position of Béjaïa on the Mediterranean coast. This location encouraged greater attention to naval affairs and maritime defense. Béjaïa also possessed important natural resources associated with shipbuilding, particularly timber suitable for constructing ships of different sizes and functions. According to Mármol Carvajal, the region was additionally known for its iron resources, which strengthened local shipbuilding activity (Mármol Carvajal, 1988). Béjaïa was likewise known for its copper resources, another material connected to ship construction. Al-Idrīsī notes that the city contained shipyards dedicated to the building of fleets, ships, and galleys, benefiting from the abundance of timber available in the surrounding mountains and valleys. The city also imported high-quality pitch and tar and had access to iron resources suitable for industrial production. In addition, Béjaïa was recognized for several skilled crafts and manufacturing activities. Al-Idrīsī further describes a nearby river flowing from the west toward the sea, whose mouth could be navigated by ships, although the water level decreased further inland (Al-Idrīsī, 1989). Available evidence suggests that Béjaïa obtained important shipbuilding materials, including pitch and tar, from its surrounding hinterland. The continuity of shipbuilding activity in the port also appears to have depended on a wider local industrial structure that included workshops and supporting crafts linked to maritime production.

Historians have additionally emphasized the strategic importance of the nearby river, which facilitated the movement of newly constructed ships toward the open sea. Ibn Khaldūn records that under Almohad rule, Béjaïa gained prominence alongside Almería as one of the principal ports for the departure and anchoring of ships in the western Mediterranean. This evidence indicates that shipbuilding in Béjaïa experienced notable development in both scale and technical quality, supported by the availability of raw materials and the presence of skilled artisans (Ibn Khaldūn,

1988). Consequently, shipbuilding activity in Béjaïa achieved important quantitative and qualitative development, supported primarily by abundant natural resources and experienced craftsmanship.

The Norman Navy

The Normans emerged in the western Mediterranean during the early fifth century AH/eleventh century CE. Their expansion was shaped by military ambition and a sustained drive to extend political influence across the central Mediterranean. Beginning in 1036 CE, they gradually expanded into southern Italy and succeeded in taking several territories from Byzantine control. Under the leadership of Robert Guiscard, the Normans established a powerful political authority in southern Italy (Durant, 1988).

Under Robert Guiscard, the Norman naval fleet developed into an important military force and achieved an early victory against the Byzantine navy near Durazzo in 1081. However, this success was later challenged after the Byzantines secured Venetian naval support, which altered the balance of power in the conflict (Ibn al-Athīr, 1997). Following earlier campaigns that had begun in 1060, the Norman conquest of Sicily was completed in 1091 under Roger I. Contemporary accounts indicate that Roger I adopted policies aimed at consolidating Norman authority on the island alongside its existing Muslim population (Abbas, 1975). The strength of the Norman fleet reached its height during the reign of Roger II, when Norman naval power became one of the principal military forces in the western Mediterranean. Historical sources describe naval expeditions composed of large numbers of galleys equipped with troops and military supplies, reflecting the advanced organization and operational capacity of the Norman fleet during this period (Ibn al-Athīr, 1997).

The Norman Naval Invasion of the North African Coasts

The emergence of the Hammadid–Norman naval conflict in the western Mediterranean began during the fifth century AH/eleventh century CE, a period that coincided with the political and military prominence of the Hammadid state. The Hammadid navy, which developed under al-Nāṣir and later expanded during the reign of al-Manṣūr (1088–1104 CE), contributed to maintaining relative maritime stability along the Algerian coast, with few major naval confrontations recorded against European, Andalusian, or Maghrebi forces during this period. Nevertheless, the vulnerability of coastal regions remained evident, as demonstrated by attacks such as the Pisan raid on Bône in 1034 (Lewis, 1957).

The Normans emerged as a major force in southern Italy during the eleventh century CE and gradually expanded at the expense of Byzantine authority under leaders associated with the Hauteville family. Roger and Robert Guiscard succeeded in consolidating Norman influence through military campaigns and political agreements that strengthened their position in the region despite Byzantine resistance. They subsequently extended their ambitions toward Sicily because of

its strategic importance and received support from the Papacy during campaigns directed against the island and its surrounding territories (Bakri & Khelfat, 2020).

Several factors contributed to Norman expansion toward the North African coast. Following their consolidation in Sicily and southern Italy, the Normans sought to extend their influence toward the central Maghreb through maritime raids and military intervention. This expansion benefited from the political fragmentation and economic difficulties affecting parts of the region during the period. Their objective was not limited to military expansion but also included the control of strategic coastal cities and commercial ports that possessed both economic and military significance (Bakri & Khelfat, 2020).

Béjaïa represented one of the important coastal centers targeted by Norman ambitions because of its strategic and economic value. Historical accounts describe the city as rich in natural resources, particularly timber and other materials associated with shipbuilding and maritime activity. Its port also occupied an important position within Mediterranean commercial and naval networks (Al-Bakrī, 2003).

Economic considerations also played a major role in Norman expansion. The central Maghreb provided access to commercial resources that were important for Sicily and southern Europe, including grain supplies and trans-Saharan trade routes connected to the circulation of gold and regional commodities. The ports of the central Maghreb therefore occupied an important place within wider Mediterranean exchange systems (Al-Ḥamawī, 1977).

At the same time, the growth of Almoravid naval power in the Maghreb and al-Andalus influenced Zirid efforts to strengthen relations with the Almoravids in response to increasing Norman pressure on their coasts. These relations were facilitated by earlier political and tribal connections that linked the two powers. Historical narratives further indicate that Norman intervention in regional affairs intensified after local rulers, including the governor of Gabès, sought external support in the context of ongoing political rivalries (Ibn 'Idhārī, 1985).

Norman Campaign on the City of Mahdia

Roger II's Norman campaign against the city of Mahdia in 543 AH/1148 AD reflected a calculated exploitation of the political fragmentation and weakening authority of the Zirid state in Ifriqiya. Through this campaign, the Norman kingdom of Sicily sought to strengthen its influence over strategic maritime routes and key Mediterranean passages, while benefiting from the preoccupation of major Islamic powers, including the Almohads and the Fatimids, with internal political and military challenges. The capture of Mahdia enabled the Normans to transform the city into an important center for their political, commercial, and naval presence in the central Mediterranean.

The Norman occupation also affected the regional balance of trade, as control over major coastal ports contributed to the expansion of Norman and Italian commercial activity and reduced the relative role of local Muslim merchants within Mediterranean exchange networks. At the same time, the occupation of Mahdia represented a significant challenge for the emerging Almohad state in the Maghreb. Following the consolidation of Almohad authority in Morocco, increasing attention was directed toward the liberation of the North African coasts from Norman control. In this context, the recovery of Mahdia acquired both political and symbolic importance for the Almohad leadership. Norman rule in Mahdia lasted for approximately eleven years. In 555 AH/1160 AD, the Almohad caliph ‘Abd al-Mu’min ibn ‘Alī launched a major land and naval campaign that succeeded in recapturing the city and restoring Almohad authority over the Tunisian coasts, leading to the withdrawal of Norman forces from North Africa.

The fall of Mahdia to the Norman fleet in 543 AH resulted in the establishment of temporary Norman authority over several Tunisian coastal cities. Roger II introduced extensive fiscal and commercial measures that expanded Norman economic influence in the region and altered existing commercial relations along the coast. Nevertheless, this occupation also contributed to strengthening Almohad efforts toward political and military consolidation in the Maghreb (Toumi, 2022).

Roger II's Campaign on the City of Iqlibiya

Roger II's campaign against the city of Iqlibiya, known today as Kelibia, formed part of the broader Norman expansion in the sixth century AH/twelfth century CE. Following the capture of Mahdia in 543 AH, the Norman fleet expanded its operations along the Tunisian coast, benefiting from its naval capabilities and from the political fragmentation affecting the region at the time. The city subsequently came under Norman authority, which enabled the Normans to strengthen their control over an important coastal port and extend their influence across surrounding maritime routes. Norman administration in the city included the imposition of taxes and the consolidation of political and commercial control over the port. This situation continued for nearly twelve years until the Almohad caliph ‘Abd al-Mu’min ibn ‘Alī launched campaigns that restored Almohad authority over the Tunisian coasts in 555 AH. The recovery of Iqlibiya formed part of the wider Almohad effort to end Norman influence in the region and reinforce political unity along the North African coast.

Norman Attempts to Control Tripoli

The city of Tripoli, located in present-day Libya, witnessed two major Norman attempts to establish control during the sixth century AH/twelfth century AD as part of the wider Norman expansion along the North African coasts following the capture of al-Mahdia.

The first attempt took place in 537 AH/1142–1143 AD under the leadership of the Norman commander George of Antioch. During this campaign, the Normans besieged the city and engaged in fighting with its inhabitants and surrounding tribal groups that resisted the attack. Despite continued military pressure, the Normans were unable to penetrate the city's defenses because of the strength of its fortifications and the resistance of the local population. Consequently, the siege was lifted, and the Norman forces returned to Sicily, leaving behind part of their military equipment and supplies (Zayed, 2023). A second Norman attempt followed in 539 AH/1144 AD. However, this expedition was more limited in scope and appears in historical accounts primarily as a maritime raid aimed at plunder rather than long-term occupation or direct political control.

The situation in Tripoli became more unstable during 540 AH/1145–1146 AD, when famine and internal political divisions affected both the city and neighboring regions. Contemporary accounts describe severe economic hardship that led to population displacement and intensified political tensions among local factions. Rival groups within the city supported different political and religious alignments associated with the Fatimid sphere. The resulting conflict ended with the predominance of one faction, which appointed a figure connected to the Almoravids to administer the city during this period of instability. Ibn al-Athīr later referred to this individual among those captured by the Normans after the occupation of Tripoli, suggesting that his authority had emerged within the context of efforts to confront growing maritime threats (Zayed, 2023).

Invasion of Jijel City

In 537 AH/1143 AD, the Normans launched an attack on the city of Jijel, prompting many inhabitants to leave the city and seek refuge in the surrounding countryside and mountainous areas. Ibn al-Athīr records that the Norman forces entered the city, captured a number of its inhabitants, and caused extensive destruction before returning to Sicily (Ibn al-Athīr, 1997). Following the expansion of Norman naval activity along the North African coasts from 517 AH/1123 AD onward, military raids increasingly extended toward the eastern regions of the central Maghreb. Within this context, several coastal cities, including Jijel, became exposed to repeated maritime attacks and political instability associated with Norman expansion in the Mediterranean.

Colonization of Bône City

After Roger II succeeded in occupying the city of Bône in 543 AH/1148 AD, alongside Sfax and Sousse during the same period, he attempted to consolidate Norman authority along the North African coast through a combination of military control and political accommodation. Historical accounts indicate that Roger II issued assurances of protection to the inhabitants of the region in an effort to maintain stability under Norman administration. During the same period, a Norman fleet was dispatched toward the fortress of Iqlibiya, although the campaign did not achieve its intended objective and the fleet later returned to Mahdia (Ibn 'Idhārī, 1985).

In pursuit of broader regional influence, Roger II directed another naval expedition toward the city of Béjaïa in 548 AH/1153 AD under the command of Philip al-Mahdawī. After imposing a siege on the city and benefiting from local alliances, the Norman forces succeeded in entering Béjaïa. Historical narratives describe episodes of plunder and captivity following the occupation, after which local authorities connected to the Banū Ḥammād were appointed within the city (Ibn al-Athīr, 1997). Despite Béjaïa's importance as a center of naval construction and maritime activity, historical sources record limited organized resistance during the Norman attack. Al-Bakrī refers to the city as an important center for the construction of ships and naval vessels used in Mediterranean military campaigns (Al-Bakrī, 2003).

The Impacts of the Attacks

The expansion of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily into the Maghreb during the twelfth century represented an important transformation in the political and maritime balance of the Mediterranean. Benefiting from Sicily's strategic position, Roger II launched a series of naval campaigns that gradually expanded Norman influence along the North African coast. Beginning with the occupation of Djerba in 530 AH/1135 AD, Norman operations later extended toward several important coastal cities, including Tripoli, Sfax, and Gabès between 1143 and 1148 AD. The growing reach of Norman naval activity reflected a broader shift in regional power relations that weakened existing political authorities in parts of Ifriqiya and the central Mediterranean.

A major turning point in this process came with the fall of Mahdia in 543 AH/1149 AD, an event that contributed significantly to the decline of Zirid political authority. Historical accounts indicate that the Normans benefited from conditions of political instability and economic hardship in the region during their campaigns. Following the occupation of Mahdia, the Zirid ruler al-Ḥasan sought support from the Almohads, whose political and military influence was rapidly expanding in the Maghreb. The Norman occupation of several coastal centers also produced important economic and social consequences, affecting regional trade networks, local administration, and patterns of political authority along the North African coast.

Norman expansion in the Maghreb ultimately contributed to the emergence of a broader regional response led by the Almohad state. This transformation culminated in the Almohad recovery of Mahdia in 555 AH/1160 AD, an event that effectively ended sustained Norman territorial expansion in North Africa. Subsequent Norman attempts to redirect military activity toward the eastern Mediterranean, including campaigns associated with Alexandria later in the century, failed to establish comparable influence. The transition from Norman expansion to Almohad consolidation therefore marked a significant reconfiguration of political and maritime power in the Mediterranean during the twelfth century.

Conclusion

The medieval period represented an important stage in the development of naval power in the central Maghreb, evolving from primarily defensive maritime activity into a more organized regional naval presence. The intervention of the Hammadid fleet in support of the Zirids during the Norman crisis, including the prolonged blockade associated with Mahdia, reflected an increasing capacity for naval coordination and maritime mobilization. Although these early efforts did not permanently halt Norman expansion, they demonstrated the growing strategic significance of regional naval forces in confronting changing political and military conditions in the western Mediterranean.

These developments also provided an important foundation for the naval system later strengthened under the Almohads. The transition from Hammadid to Almohad authority represented not a break in maritime policy but a continuation and expansion of existing naval structures and military experience. Through the consolidation of naval resources within a more centralized political framework, the Almohads succeeded in limiting Norman influence along the North African coast and restoring greater stability to regional maritime routes.

More broadly, the evolution of naval organization in the Maghreb during this period contributed significantly to regional political stability and the protection of coastal territories. The resistance to Norman expansion and the later recovery of occupied coastal cities reflected an important shift in the balance of power in the Mediterranean. This historical trajectory demonstrates the continuing development of maritime strategy, military organization, and regional cooperation in the medieval Maghreb, factors that played a central role in shaping Mediterranean political and naval dynamics during the twelfth century.

Author Contributions

Tayeb Tabarkane and Badi Abbes contributed collaboratively to the conception of the study, methodological design, interpretation of the findings, drafting of the manuscript, and subsequent revisions. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to publication.

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