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Beyond Decline and Failure: Preserving the Spanish imperial presence and authority in the North-African borders (Oran and Mers el-Kébir from 1670s to 1700s)

Introduction

To engage oneself in a research about the Spanish *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir at the turn of the 17th and the 18th centuries means to investigate a border quite neglected by most of the scholar views on the Early Modern Spanish Empire, even if some renowned historians, such as Fernand Braudel himself¹, have dedicated some fundamental studies about it. It means also to confront oneself with a yet predominant historiographical trend that locks our interpretations up into the paradigms of the decline, the failure or the obsolescence². All these pejorative terms describe both the global situation of the Hispanic Monarchy and that of its borders, in particular the North-African *presidios*. Nothing really encouraging therefore...

Nevertheless, the investigations other scholars and I have been leading since some years in the Spanish archives and libraries, namely the *Archivo General de Simancas*, the *Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid*, the *Archivo de la Corona de Aragón*, the *Biblioteca Nacional* and some others connected to the Early Modern provincial and municipal institutions or to the Spanish noble families, tend to point out a more nuanced panorama of the Spanish Empire and its *presidios*. Indeed, the documentation provided by the monarchic councils and the provincial institutions, or some more personal letters, suggest another interpretation about the engagements and the investments of a weakened but resilient empire. A *presidio* such as Oran and Mers el-Kébir would not have been abandoned by the Spanish Crown and its own situation would not have been really worst than other Iberian or American *presidios*. One of the first issues in this investigation is to identify and delimitate what belongs to ethical or historiographical filters.

Actually, most of the investigations about the Early Modern Iberian experiences in the North-African frontiers of the Mediterranean world suffer some distortion or narrowness due to the comparison with other two major European colonial experiences, the first engaged

¹ Fernand Braudel, « Les Espagnols et l’Afrique du Nord de 1492 à 1577 », *Revue africaine*, n° 69 (1928): 184–233, 351–410.

² Braudel, 377; Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « La vida en los presidios del norte de África », in *Relaciones de la península Ibérica con el Magreb (siglos XIII-XVI)*, ed. by Mercedes García Arenal and María Jesús Viguera Molins (Madrid: CSIC, Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1988), 561–90; Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « La presencia española en el norte de África : las diversas justificaciones de las conquistas en el Magreb », *Aldaba: revista del Centro Asociado a la UNED de Melilla*, n° 25 (1995): 15.

contemporaneously and the second occurring later. Indeed, lots of scholars cannot have prevented themselves from comparing it with the Early Modern European expansions in the Atlantic world and in the Indian Ocean and Asia³, or with the later colonial conquests in 19th and 20th century Africa⁴. By analyzing and judging the Early Modern Iberian experiences in North Africa in contrast to those European expansions, historians tended to draw a pessimistic and frankly negative image of a failed, anachronistic and obsolete undertaking. Such a point of view has contributed to establish the historiographical paradigm of the “*occupation restreinte*”⁵, that is to say a confined and isolated occupation which could only be continued thanks to a great cost in human lives and material contributions... quite a huge problem for the worldwide Hispanic Monarchy.

This academic sanction may be even more problematic that it deprives these Iberian undertakings of their embedding in the very context of the Early Modern Mediterranean world and of the forging of the Early Modern Iberian Empires. The established historiography defends that the European modernity and innovation only reached the Atlantic or the Asiatic horizons and that the only successful and suitable ways to develop European influence or domination in North Africa were those taken by the Modern Era expeditions and conquests. By the way, it seems that neither the trials and errors nor the failures of the other two colonial undertakings have been truly considered.

To open and correct our views concerning the Early Modern Iberian border experiences in North Africa, we should focus on the recent progresses achieved among the Mediterranean studies and among the renewal of the studies about the Early Modern Iberian monarchies, in which the imperial field, global history and connected studies have played a decisive part⁶. Following this way, it brings us to consider these North-African experiences through some new perspectives. First, it is necessary to link the Iberian border undertakings in North Africa to the more general Mediterranean context,

³ Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « La conquista del Norte de Africa y el descubrimiento de América : dos empresas paralelas en el siglo XVI », *Revista de Indias* 45, n° 175 (1985): 225–35.

⁴ Henri-Léon Fey, *Histoire d’Oran Avant, Pendant et Après La Domination Espagnole* (Oran: Typographie Adolphe Perrier, 1858), 121–39; Crispín Jiménez de Sandoval, *Las Inscripciones de Orán y Mazalquivir : Noticias históricas sobre ambas Plazas, desde la conquista hasta su abandono en 1792* (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Arabe, 1867), 57–71; Ernest Mercier, *Histoire de l’Afrique Septentrionale (Berbérie). Depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à la Conquête française (1830)*, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions Ernest Leroux, 1868), 332–36; Henri-Delmas De Grammont, *Histoire d’Alger sous la domination turque, 1515-1830* (Paris: Editions Ernest Leroux, 1887), 271–74.

⁵ De Grammont, *Histoire d’Alger sous la domination turque, 1515-1830*; Braudel, « Les Espagnols et l’Afrique du Nord de 1492 à 1577 »; Robert Ricard, « Le problème de l’occupation restreinte dans l’Afrique du Nord (XV^e – XVIII^e siècles) », *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, n° 8 (1936): 426–37; Robert Ricard, « Les établissements européens en Afrique du Nord du XV^e au XVIII^e s. et la politique d’occupation restreinte », *Revue africaine*, n° 79 (1936): 687–88.

⁶ For example: Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010); Eric R. Dursteler, « On Bazaar and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts », *Journal of Early Modern History*, n° 15 (2011): 413–34; Pedro Cardim et al., *Polycentric Monarchies: How Did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony?* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2014); Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita, eds., *A Companion to Mediterranean History* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Blackwell, 2014); Monique O’Connell and Eric Dursteler, *The Mediterranean World: From the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Napoleon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Brian A. Carlos and Sharon Kinoshita, *Can We Talk Mediterranean? Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, 2017).

underlying the eventful panorama of the antagonistic and synergetic connections between societies, cultures and powers. The frontier experience perceptible around the *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir was in many ways a Mediterranean one. Then, the expansion of the Hispanic Monarchy and the development of its imperial influence, specifically on its borders, relied on a panel of resources and possibilities, in which the negotiation, the integration and the dealing with the cultural and juridical plurality played a function as fundamental as the violence, the subjugation or the coercion⁷. In a word, the Spanish imperial influence varied from a soft to hard presence. In front of the recurrent difficulties, cumulated from the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 18th century, the Spanish Empire proceeded to a slow and vast reconfiguration whose results only appeared at the very end of the Habsburg dynasty⁸. Therefore, it may be more interesting to investigate about the decisions, the initiatives and the investments that were engaged to preserve, at any cost, the imperial frontiers and reputation during the supposed harsh 17th century. In this way, I'm trying to connect the historiographical approach of the *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir to a history without complex, that is to say, beyond the traditional decline and failure paradigms.

1. The Mediterranean “Far West”: a bustling frontier at the edge of the 17th and 18th centuries

Beginning with a Mediterranean scope to investigate about the *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir helps us to apprehend in a better way the border situation and the border connections that formed the environment of the *presidio* itself. Besides, it prevents us from falling into the narrowness or the bias of the national or nationalist discourse. Therefore a Mediterranean approach of the question gives us a useful key to understand the complex and unstable frontier into which they were inscribed.

1.1. Connectivity and cohabitation through antagonisms

The present-day Mediterranean studies suggest some decisive ideas about what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell have called the “*Corrupting Sea*”⁹. Far from a world strictly divided into two opposite and different cultural and religious blocks, a Christian and European part distinct from

⁷ José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez et Sylvie Rab, « Théories et pratiques de la souveraineté dans la Monarchie hispanique : un conflit de juridictions à Cambrai », *Annales* 55, n° 3 (2000): 623–44; José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez, « Introducción », in *Las vecindades de las Monarquías Ibéricas*, ed. by José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez (Madrid: FCE, 2013), 9–42; José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez, « Les acteurs de l'hégémonie hispanique, du monde à la péninsule Ibérique », trans. by Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, n° 4 (2014): 927–54.

⁸ As the bibliography increases, we can focus on: Bartolomé Yun Casalilla, « Del centro a la periferia : la economía española bajo Carlos II », *Studia Histórica. Historia Moderna*, n° 20 (1999): 45–75; Christopher Storrs, *The Resilience of the Spanish Monarchy 1665-1700* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2006).

⁹ Peregrine Horden et Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: a Study of Mediterranean history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

an Islamic part, the Mediterranean Area consisted both in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era in a universe of a dense connectivity and of informal or formal cohabitations through multiple antagonisms¹⁰. The Mediterranean “Far West” –a frontier region extended from the Iberian Peninsula to the Maghreb coastal regions, from the near Atlantic shores to the East of the Alboran Sea– has been perceived as a perfect example of the Mediterranean complexity. Since the Arab-Berber conquest of a great part of the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the 8th century, a structural and plural border was born and had been influencing during centuries the development of the societies, cultures and religions which rooted in the Peninsula and in the coastal Maghreb.

During the Middle Ages, a renewed border regional system arose in the North-African and Iberian areas, expanding what scholars of the Prehistoric Era and the Antiquity call the “*Círculo del Estrecho [de Gibraltar]*”. This border regional system has sometimes been idealized, especially with the paradigm of the “*convivencia*”, or religious cohabitation, in the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, it had been generating a tradition and an experience of the frontier among the societies and the cultures in contact. They consisted in recurrent agreements and negotiations between nearby but different communities, the genesis of hybrid societies and cultures born from the border exchanges, a violent but redistributive economy of the raids, captivities and ransoms performed both on land and on shores, some official or unofficial warfare in which the religion and the political merged and in which the interests of the Crown or the Emirate had to bargain with those of the locals or the foreigners such as the mercenaries¹¹. In a nutshell, it was an experience of the frontier in which the imperative of the political and religious dogmas might manifest in a more spectacular way and in which the daily necessity led the people to transgress the limits and the codes¹².

The present-day fundamental question relies on establishing whether or not this border regional system survived the transition to the Modernity and the progressive formation of a more culturally uniformed Spanish society through the universalist theories and programs of the Catholic Monarchs and then the Habsburg dynasty. The recent studies about the cross-cultural experiences in the Mediterranean “Far West” from the 16th to the 18th century suggest that an attenuated version of the medieval border regional system had persisted¹³. Moreover, the rich histories about the

¹⁰ Dominique Valérian, « The Medieval Mediterranean », in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, ed. by Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Oxford: Wiley, Blackwell, 2014), 77–90; Molly Greene, « The Early Modern Mediterranean », in *A companion to Mediterranean History*, ed. by Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Oxford: Wiley, Blackwell, 2014), 91–106.

¹¹ Pascal Buresi, « La frontière : laboratoire des mythes dans la péninsule Ibérique (X^e-XV^e siècle) ? », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, n° 86 (2013): 237–56.

¹² Jean-Frédéric Schaub, « Lecture II », in *Les sociétés de frontière. De la Méditerranée à l'Atlantique (XVI^e-XVIII^e s.)*, ed. by Michel Bertrand and Natividad Planas (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2011), 139–145.

¹³ For example : Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard A. Wiegers, *Entre el Islam y occidente: vida de Samuel Pallache, judío de Fez* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España, 1999); Eloy Martín Corrales, « Comercio en la frontera. Judíos magrebíes intermediarios en los intercambios mercantiles hispano-norteafricanos (ss. XVI-XVIII) », in *Entre el Islam y Occidente. Los*

Mediterranean privateering, *corso* and piracy, about the European commercial establishments in North Africa or even about the Iberian *presidios* indicate that such a border regional system existed¹⁴. It had a real impact on the development of the regional societies, cultures and economies. For example, the investments or the consequences of the privateering or *corso* reached territories as far as the whole Iberian Peninsula and the northern edges of the inland Maghreb, not only the thin Mediterranean shores of the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea. Another fundamental evolution in the Early Modern border regional system was the failure since the end of the 16th century of a purely dual hegemony shared between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, the two great rivals that had been propelling the frontier dynamics from the beginning of the same century.

1.2. A frontier without any hegemony yet

The European overseas expansions since the 15th century brought a deep change into the Mediterranean Area. Thus, a historiographical tradition, chiefly forged by scholars such as Fernand Braudel¹⁵ and Immanuel Wallerstein¹⁶, has underlined a global crisis among the political and economic Mediterranean powers during the 16th and the 17th centuries. Following their point of view, the Mediterranean powers couldn't compete any longer with the crescent intrusion of Northern and Western powers, such as England, Netherlands or France. It has been defended that the Mediterranean riparian societies –other than France– fell sooner or later in a deep crisis or in an increasing dependence on the Northern and Western European economies and naval powers¹⁷. Recent scholars, such as Molly Greene¹⁸ or Eric Dursteler¹⁹, have proved that the European penetration in the Eastern area of the Mediterranean Sea was not so easy and so absolute than it has

judíos magrebíes en la Edad Moderna, ed. by Mercedes García Arenal (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2003), 253–81; Eloy Martín Corrales, « El comercio de España con los países musulmanes del Mediterráneo (1492-1782) : "eppur si muove" », in *Relazioni economiche tra Europa e mondo islamico, secc. XIII-XVIII. Atti delle Trentottesima Settimana di Studi*, ed. by Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Prato: Le Monnier, 2007), 485–510.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Kaiser, « Frictions profitables. L'économie de la rançon en Méditerranée occidentale (XVI^e–XVII^e siècles) », in *Ricchezza del mare. Ricchezza dal mare, secc. XIII-XVIII*, ed. by Simonetta Cavaciocchi, vol. 2 (Florence: Le Monnier, 2006), 689–701; Wolfgang Kaiser, « Suspendre le conflit : pratiques de neutralisation entre chrétiens et musulmans en Méditerranée (XVI^e-XVII^e siècles) », in *Les ressources des faibles. Neutralités, sauvegardes, accommodements en temps de guerre (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, ed. by Jean-François Chanet and Christian Windler (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 277–90; Michel Fontenay, *La Méditerranée entre la Croix et le Croissant. Navigation, commerce, course et piraterie (XVI^e-XIX^e siècle)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010); Guillaume Calafat et Wolfgang Kaiser, « Le laboratoire méditerranéen. Course et piraterie aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles », in *Histoire des pirates et des corsaires. De l'Antiquité à nos jours*, ed. by Gilbert Buti and Philippe Hrodej (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016), 225–47.

¹⁵ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen au temps de Philippe II*, 3 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014 [1949]).

¹⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. 2 : *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Nabil Matar, « The Maghariba and the Sea: Maritime Decline in North Africa in the Early Modern Period », in *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, ed. by Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (Londres: Tauris, 2010), 117–38.

¹⁸ Molly Greene, « Beyond the Northern Invasion: The Mediterranean in the Seventeenth Century », *Past & Present*, n° 174 (2002): 42–71.

¹⁹ Dursteler, « On Bazaar and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts ».

been established. In fact, the Eastern side of the Mediterranean was still strongly influenced by the Ottoman economic system till the very 18th century, thanks to the dynamism of the Muslim, Greek and Jew communities. In the Western side, studies about Venice and Genoa have exposed a more nuanced decline²⁰. As for the Iberian and North-African societies, the present-day trend is to underline their fundamental supplementary papers in the increase of the Northern and Western European powers in the Mediterranean²¹. It suggests that both Iberian and North-African societies had tried during the 17th century to incorporate the changes in the region and to proceed to a reconfiguration according to those changes. Anyway, both Iberian and North-African shores and markets were highly sought-after by the English, the Dutch and the French, because they represented some bright outlets. That's maybe why some scholars, like Faruk Tabak²², prefer to investigate about the reconfigurations and the transitions due to a major socio-economic and environmental change in the Mediterranean Area from the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century.

Was the Mediterranean “Far West” exposed to a clear domination by the Northern and Western Europeans at the edge of the 17th and 18th century? The global crisis faced by the Iberian Empires and the situations of the Moroccan sultanate and the Ottoman Regency of Algiers during the 17th century may guide us to think that way. Nevertheless, more localized investigations, mixing micro-history and connected histories, have revealed the paper played by the Iberian and the North-African actors in the economic exchange or in the regional power balance²³. For example, some specialists conclude to a more successful part of the Maghreb actors in their resistance or confrontation with the aggressive economic or military expansions of the Northern and Western Europeans. According to them, the repeated intents by the European to make apply some commercial treaties with the Maghreb powers might not express a clear European domination. On the contrary, the fragile and transitory nature of

²⁰ Maria Fusaro, « After Braudel: a Reassessment of Mediterranean History between the Northern Invasion and the Caravane Maritime », in *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, ed. by Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (Londres: Tauris, 2010), 1–22; Bernard Allaire and Maria Fusaro, « Litiges maritimes et disparités légales en Méditerranée 1610-1659: Les gens de mer nordiques face à la justice marseillaise », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, n° 94 (2017): 257–84.

²¹ Nabil Matar, « Morocco and Britain during the War of Succession », *Hespéris-Tamuda* 48 (2013): 9–23; Eloy Martín Corrales, « El comercio de la bahía de Cádiz con el Norte de Africa (1492-1767) », in *El sistema comercial español en la economía mundial (siglos XVII-XVIII)*, ed. by Isabel Lobato Franco and José María Oliva Melgar (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2014), 259–81.

²² Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean, 1550–1870: A Geohistorical Approach* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2010).

²³ Some examples: Juan Ignacio Pulido Serrano, « Consentir por necesidad. Los judíos de Orán en la Monarquía Católica durante los siglos XVI–XVII », in *Entre el Islam y Occidente. Los judíos magrebíes en la Edad Moderna*, ed. by Mercedes García Arenal (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2003), 201–22; Colin Heywood, « A « forgotten frontier »?: Algiers and the maritime frontier from the French bombardment (1682) to the Algiers earthquake (1716) », *Revue d'Histoire Maghrébine* 31, n° 114 (2004): 35–50; Colin Heywood, « A frontier without archaeology? The Ottoman maritime frontier in the Western Mediterranean, 1660-1760 », in *The frontiers of the Ottoman world*, ed. by A. C. S. Peacock (Oxford: Oxford Press for the British Academy, 2009), 493–508; Matar, « Morocco and Britain during the War of Succession ».

these treaties might reveal the European limitation face to the Maghreb societies²⁴. By the way, their penetrations in North Africa only consisted in restricted ways, with some major failures such as the French defeat in Jijelli in 1664 or the English evacuation of Tangiers in 1684, and the uncertain outcomes during their repression of the “Barbary” privateers and pirates. The three French bombardments of Algiers in 1682, 1683 and 1688 were not really conclusive. At the same time, the Moroccan Sultanate and the Regency of Algiers proceeded to a greater projection in their inlands to strengthen their domination and authority in indomitable inland Maghreb, mainly mountainous and semi-barren lands occupied by Arab-Berber tribes and sedentary communities.

As a consequence, the keeping of the *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir at that time was quite strongly influenced by the eventful and uncertain frontier of the Mediterranean “Far West”. Nonetheless, the regional higher instability should be found in the very hinterland of the *presidio* itself: the blurry and volatile border between the Ottoman Empire and the Moroccan Sultanate.

1.3. The Western “Algeria”: a blurry and volatile border between the Ottoman Regency of Algiers and the Moroccan Sultanate

The Western part of the present-day Algeria during the Early Modern Era is not the best known and investigated part of the Maghreb region²⁵. Indeed most of the information known concerns the period before the end of the 16th century and the period after the Ottoman conquest of Oran in 1708²⁶. Therefore, what happened and who were the protagonists of the events of the 17th century are still valid questions to rise for historians. Defining this border environment of Oran is fundamental to understand the Spanish presence in that *presidio* and its safeguard till the beginning of the 18th century. For my part, I’m trying to give some hypotheses by comparing the results of my own investigations in the Spanish archives and libraries with the studies mainly achieved with

²⁴ Guillaume Calafat, « Les interprètes de la diplomatie en Méditerranée. Traiter à Alger (1670-1680) », in *Les musulmans dans l’histoire de l’Europe*, ed. by Jocelyne Dakhlia et Wolfgang Kaiser, vol. 2 : *Passages et contacts en Méditerranée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013), 371–410.

²⁵ Pierre Boyer, « Historique des Béni Amer d’Oranie, des origines au Senatus Consulte », *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 1, n° 24 (1977): 39–85; Nora Lafi, « L’Empire ottoman en Afrique : perspectives d’histoire critique », *Cahiers d’Histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, n° 128 (2015): 59–70.

²⁶ Paul Ruff, *La domination espagnole à Oran sous le gouvernement du comte d’Alcaudete 1534-1558*, ed. by Chantal de la Véronne (Paris: Editions Bouchène, 1998 [1900]); Andrew Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier. A history of the sixteenth-century Ibero-African frontier* (Chicago, Londres: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); Chantal de la Véronne, *Oran et Tlemcen dans la première moitié du XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1983); Ismet Terki Hassaine, « Historiographie et nécessité de la recherche historique sur l’Algérie du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle », in *Actes du séminaire international sur les sources espagnoles de l’histoire algérienne*, Archives Nationales, Numéro Spécial (Actes du séminaire international sur les sources espagnoles de l’histoire algérienne. Oran, 20-22 avril 1981, Alger: Archives Nationales d’Alger, 1984), 43–54; Mahfoud Kaddache, *L’Algérie durant la période ottomane (1700-1830)* (Alger: OPU, 1998); Ismet Terki Hassaine, *Relaciones políticas y comerciales entre España y la Argelia otomana (1700-1830)* (Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 2011); Latefa Mous, « Estudio del manuscrito árabe de Mustafa Ibn Abd Allāh Al Dahāwi sobre la liberación de Orán en el siglo XVIII » (Université d’Oran, 2013).

European sources and some Arab and Ottoman sources during the colonial era and the present days. That's why the following reflections are still at the hypothetical and suggested stage.

As a frontier between the Moroccan sphere of influence and the Ottoman Empire, the Western "Algeria" was indeed a pivotal region but certainly not a "no man's land". First, it should not be compared to the present-day closed border between the Moroccan and Algerian States. In fact, some circulations may be observed despite of the harsh geographical conditions and the relative scarcity of the fertile lands. Both the seasoned migrations of many tribes and the majority of the raids or the expeditions organized for the tributes and the nominal subjugation, such as the Moroccan or Ottoman *mahalla*, targeted those fertile lands in which agriculture and breeding were more productive. In fact, the surroundings of Oran were dotted with such fertile lands as the el-Zeidour plateau, the Mleta plain and the flood plain around the Sig and Habra wadis²⁷. These territories were subject to a fierce rivalry between the Spanish, the Ottoman, the Moroccan and the local tribes and communities. Another example of the circulation in the Western Algeria was the deadly outbreaks such as the recurrent plagues²⁸. Between 1677 and 1678, Oran and Mers el-Kébir lost almost 3 000 of their people.

It is frequently suggested that the Western "Algeria" fell into political anarchy after the fall of the Zayyanid dynasty of Tlemcen in the middle of the 16th century²⁹. What is true is that a sort of *status quo* emerged between the Spanish, the Ottoman and the indigenous Arab-Berber forces at the end of the 16th century. Nevertheless, a *status quo* does not signify immobility or a static history in the following century. The Western "Algeria" was a friction zone between the competing Ottoman and Moroccan powers and the necessary hinterland for the keeping of the Spanish *presidio* of Oran. The frictional situation came to a peak during the last quarter of the 17th century. Indeed, the Regency of Algiers proceeded to a "continental turn" and tried to invest better the western inlands and to conquer definitely Oran and Mers el-Kébir³⁰. Whereas, from the East, the Alawite dynasty,

²⁷ Luis del Marmól Carvajal, *Descripción general de Africa*, 1573^e éd. (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Africanos del Patronato Diego Saavedra Fajardo del CSIC, 1953); Mohamed El Korso and Mikel De Epalza, eds., *Oran et l'ouest algérien au 18^e siècle d'après le rapport Aramburu*, trans. by Mohamed El Korso and Mikel De Epalza (Alger: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978). For the authentic Aramburu's document: AHN, Estado, leg. 3380. "Razón del territorio y jurisdiccion propria que tenian las Plazas de Oran [...]" by José Aramburu, Oran, 25/01/1741.

²⁸ Sadok Boubaker, « La peste dans les pays du Maghreb : attitudes face au fléau et impacts sur l'activité commerciale (XVI^e–XIX^e siècles) », *Revue d'Histoire Maghrébine*, n^o 79–80 (1995): 311–42; Farid Khiari, *Vivre et mourir en Alger. L'Algérie ottomane aux XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles : un destin confisqué* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

²⁹ For example: Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord : des origines à 1830* (Paris: Fayot, 1952).

³⁰ Lemnour Merouche, *Recherches sur l'Algérie à l'époque ottomane*, vol. 2: *La course, mythes et réalité* (Paris: Editions Bouchène, 2007).

embodied by Moulay Imsail Ibn Sharif, intended to extend their power and authority in those territories the Almoravid and Almohad Caliphate once conquered³¹.

To explain that eventful balance of powers, I tried to figure out the part played by the Arab-Berber communities themselves and the part the imperial powers had attributed to them. Therefore, I'm considering the relations between the tribes and the imperial powers at the light of the anthropological and historiographical studies about the Arab and the Berber tribe itself³². The political instability in Western "Algeria" at that time seemed to result from the articulation of a macro scale balance of powers and a micro scale negotiation of agreement and support. That articulation was constantly renewed. The agrarian and pastoral calendars were not strange to that phenomenon. Besides, the frontier situation provided good opportunities for the ambitious men of the frontier and consolidated their local influence, sometimes at the expense of the legal but foreign powers. Spanish, Ottoman and Moroccan could rely on their own border actors or on those men of the frontier to obtain the tributes and the support of the local tribes, both in their individual and confederate forms. Finally, it was a bustling and complex frontier that surrounded the *presidio*.

2. Out of Africa or into Africa? New perspectives on the insertion of a Spanish *presidio* in the Early Modern Maghreb

Considering the previous remarks, some new perspectives on the *presidio* of Oran and Mers el-Kébir should be added to the paradigm of the "*occupation restreinte*" or the idea of an obsolete presence during the Early Modern Era. A few years ago, Spanish scholars, such as Beatriz Alonso Acero and Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra³³, have been suggesting a more connective approach of the situation of Oran, now mainly described as a "border society". Here come some of my hypotheses to get further.

2.1. A Spanish Kingdom centered on Oran?

³¹ Auguste Cour, *L'établissement des dynasties des Chérifs au Maroc et leur rivalité avec les Turcs de la Régence d'Alger, 1509-1830* (Paris: Editions Ernest Leroux, 1904).

³² In particular: Jacques Berque, « Qu'est-ce qu'une tribu nord-africaine ? », in *Hommage à Lucien Febvre. Eventail de l'Histoire vivante offert par l'amitié d'Historiens, Linguistes, Géographes, Economistes, Sociologues, Ethnologues*, vol. 1 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953), 261–71; Jacques Berque, *L'intérieur du Maghreb, XV^e–XIX^e siècles*, Gallimard (Paris, 1978); Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Pierre Bonte and Edouard Conte, « La tribu arabe : approches anthropologiques et orientalistes », in *Al-Ansâb, la quête des origines. Anthropologie historique de la société tribale arabe*, ed. by Pierre Bonte et al. (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1991), 13–48; Laroussi Amri, *Pour une sociologie des ruptures. La tribu au Maghreb médiéval* (Tunis: Université Tunis I, 1997); Pierre Bonte, « Tribus, hiérarchies et pouvoirs dans le nord de l'Afrique », in *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*, ed. by Hosham Dawod (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 81–114; Hosham Dawod, « Introduction », in *Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d'Islam*, ed. by Hosham Dawod (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 9–16.

³³ Beatriz Alonso Acero, *Orán y Mazalquivir, 1589–1639 : una sociedad española en la frontera de Berbería* (Madrid: CSIC, 2000); Beatriz Alonso Acero and Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « Introducción », in *Orán : historia de la Corte Chica*, ed. by Beatriz Alonso Acero and Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra (Madrid: Polifemo, 2011), 1–12.

Most of the historiographical studies about Oran and Mers el-Kébir during the Spanish occupation speak only about a *presidio* or a *plaza*, which means a fortified border position³⁴. However, in a significant number of archives, we can observe the mention of a “*reino*” (kingdom) of Oran, Tlemcen and Ténès. This political and juridical denomination may be a key to open new considerations about the *presidio* of Oran. Indeed, that terminology refers to the initial step of the Spanish conquest of Mers el-Kébir (1505) and Oran (1509). Before the Ottoman, called by the Barbarossa brothers, put a tangible end to it, the recently united Hispanic Monarchy strove for making the declining Zayyanid Sultanate of Tlemcen a vassal kingdom. Conceptually, Oran was the head of a Castilian kingdom inserted in North Africa, a primordial horizon of the first Spanish expansion in the Early Modern Era³⁵. *Mutatis mutandis*, the kingdom of Oran shared some common points with the medieval experience of the *Reconquista*, in which the Christian kingdom often privileged the vassalage and the dependence to submit Muslim territories. Thus, there were “*moros de paz*” who benefit from the rights and duties as Muslim subject of the Spanish monarch and, to the contrary, there were “*moros de guerra*” who were considered either rebels to the Crown or enemies. A Jewish community in Oran was placed under the protection of the Crown until their expulsion in 1669³⁶. Obviously, this proclaimed Spanish authority and government over non-Christian people and territories was a mirage. It was more often conceptual than tangible.

In my point of view, the negative opinion on the Spanish policy in the surroundings of Oran relies on an excessively territorial approach of the monarchical or imperial power. It is worthy to consider in what consisted a kingdom and an influence beyond the borders in the Early Modern Era. That is to say to better focus on the human beings themselves and the relational matter than the strict territorial control. It is a saying in the Early Modern Europe that there is no wealth but men. And that was particularly true for Oran and its hinterland: the limited Spanish population implied the support of the Arab-Berber people to grow wheat and barley and, if possible, to shield against the Ottoman or the Moroccan and their respective allies. Investigating on the Ottoman presence in the central Maghreb, Farid Khiari has underlined a fundamental principle to secure domination in North Africa, a region crossed by powerful mobile populations: the control and the influence on people were far more important than a strict control and possession of the lands³⁷. Studies about the past societies help us to detach ourselves of the present-day Nation-State model of expansion and

³⁴ See for example the most recent Spanish publications: Enrique Martínez Ruiz, Magdalena De Pazzis Pi Corrales, and José Antonio Pérez Gimena, *Los presidios españoles norteafricanos en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, 2016); Beatriz Alonso Acero, *España y el Norte de Africa en los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2017).

³⁵ Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « El marco ideológico de la expansión española por el norte de Africa », *Aldaba: revista del Centro Asociado a la UNED de Melilla*, n° 26 (1995): 113–33; Beatriz Alonso Acero, *Cisneros y la conquista española del norte de Africa : cruzada, política y arte de la guerra* (Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, 2006).

³⁶ Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Les juifs du roi d'Espagne. Oran 1509-1669* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1999).

³⁷ Khiari, *Vivre et mourir en Alger*: Chapter 8.

domination³⁸. Some years ago, Daniel Power has suggested that past empires were more often interested in consolidate networks of dependence and bonds in their borders and beyond³⁹. This argument has been strengthened by the José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez's study about the development of the Early Modern Iberian imperial influence in their vicinities⁴⁰.

As such, the *presidio* of Oran and the Spanish policy in its surroundings were neither really an anomaly nor an obsolete solution to extend an imperial influence in a bustling and quite indomitable frontier.

2.2. Beyond the rupture: continuities and grafts at the edge of the Dār al-Islām

Andrew Hess demonstrates in a well-known study about the Iberian and North-African border the rupture occurred during the 16th century⁴¹. From a primordial frontier, the region declined into a “*forgotten frontier*”. The historian suggests that the centuries-old the frontier *modus vivendi* collapsed and gave birth to an opposite and fragmented world, without the interactions observed during the Middle Ages. However, recent investigations with both Muslim and Christian testimonies uncover a resourceful interactive frontier between the Iberian *presidios* and the North-African inlands and, more generally, between the Christian shores and the Muslim shores of the Mediterranean “Far West” from the 16th to the 18th century⁴². The recent focus on the individual or collective circulations, beyond the absolute control of the official policies in the region, the interest on the cross-cultural adventures or the intercultural brokers have revealed a more complex frontier world at the gates of the North-African *Dār al-Islām*. Moreover, I cannot have helped myself wondering how such a so-called vulnerable Spanish position could have survived so much time in a quite hostile surrounding. A more attentive reading of the Spanish archives uncovers some possibilities of continuity, insertion and even inclusion of the *presidio* of Oran into its North-African surroundings. Therefore, I think that we should better consider the pattern of the graft than the paradigm of rupture to understand the longevity of the *presidio* of Oran.

³⁸ Héloïse Hermant, « Introduction. Le pouvoir contourné. Réflexion sur l’institutionnalisation et la cohésion des sociétés modernes », in *Le pouvoir contourné. Infléchir et subvertir l’autorité à l’Age moderne*, ed. by Héloïse Hermant (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), 10–15.

³⁹ Daniel Power, « Introduction. A. Frontiers : terms, concepts and the historians of medieval and early modern Europe », in *Frontiers in Question : Eurasian Borderlands, 700-1700*, ed. by Daniel Power et Naomi Standen (Houndmills, New York: Macmillan Press, St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 1–12.

⁴⁰ Ruiz Ibáñez, « Introducción ».

⁴¹ Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier*.

⁴² For a stimulating North-African perspective: Mohamed Mezzine, « Les relations entre les places occupées et les localités de la région de Fès aux XVI^{ème} et XVII^{ème} siècles à partir de documents locaux inédits : les nawazil. », in *Relaciones de la península Ibérica con el Magreb (siglos XIII-XVI)*, ed. by Mercedes García Arenal and María Jesús Viguera Molins (Madrid: CSIC, Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1988), 539–60; Elise Voguet, *Le monde rural du Maghreb central (XIV^e-XV^e siècles). Réalités sociales et constructions juridiques d’après les Nawāzil Māzūna* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014).

It is now well established that the *presidio* was a “border society”, and much more than a fortified wall between Christendom and Islam⁴³. Indeed, Oran was still an open city which could receive more than a thousand comings from the Arab-Berber vicinities a day. This porosity was even attested in war time: “*moros de paz*” refugees or allies coming into the *presidio*, renegades in search for redemption and intending a coming back to Spain through Oran, etc. That *presidio* was not cut from its surrounding; neither the Spanish policy from Oran searched the rupture with the Muslim country. On the contrary, a *modus vivendi* was consciously practiced by both Christian and Muslim neighbors.

First, we can underline continuities or adaptations between the medieval Muslim urban sites of power and the Early Modern Spanish ones. There was a spatial and symbolic continuity. The “*Real Alcazaba*”, from which the Spanish governor wielded his authority, was nothing but a prolongation of the *Qasbah* and the *mashwar* where sat the Muslim *wāli*. The Spanish market of Oran re-used the former Muslim *souk*. The Spanish *matamar* to store grains was the equivalent of the Arab *matmura*. In some degree, the Spanish Oran was an inverted *funduq* in which Muslim merchants were hosted inside the city walls and inside some designated houses. Then, the analogy with the Muslim past may also be found in the Spanish relations, considerations and rankings of the Arab-Berber tribes. It is relevant to compare the Spanish dialectic between “*moros de paz*” and “*moros de guerra*” and the Moorish dialectic between the *maḥzen* tribes and the *silbā* tribes. In addition, some pragmatic hybridities emerged to guarantee the respect of the hierarchies and the people honor. The Spanish were able to deal with the foreign but comprehensible Muslim etiquettes by qualifying the bearers of the Muslim *ḡāh* as “*moros caballeros*” and by acknowledge the rank and the status of the sheikhs. Those Muslim leaders were recurrently summoned nearby the Spanish governor in the “*Real Alcazaba*”, just like during the Muslim domination in Oran. They also managed to recycle and hybridize some fiscal Muslim tributes, giving birth to the “*romias*” and the “*temines*”⁴⁴. Those tributes proceeded from a negotiation and a conversion between the Castilian measuring system and the North-African Muslim one. At the end, it was quite similar to the Muslim tax of the *ʿashūr*, namely one tenth of a household’s or a tent’s harvest, and inferior to the Algiers’ *ḥammā*.

For all this reasons, it seems that the Spanish occupation of Oran and Mers el-Kébir did not finally represent a sharp rupture for the Arab and Berber rural communities. It was, after all, an urban project of domination over a semi-nomadic or nomadic country, which inevitably led to a complementary and negotiated balance of powers and an economic interdependence. To some extent, it was similar to the domination the Almoravid, the Almohad and the Zayyanid tried to secure

⁴³ Luis F. Fé Cantó, « La grande famine de 1750 dans l’Oranais : d’autres voies vers la captivité et l’esclavage », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, n° 87 (2013): 275–80.

⁴⁴ Alonso Acero, *Orán y Mazalquivir, 1589–1639*.

from their urban positions, such as Tlemcen, Oran, etc. Some improved studies must be led to establish whether or not the Western “Algeria” consisted during the Early Modern Era in a truly “middle ground”⁴⁵ between Muslims, Christians and Jews, Spanish, Ottoman and North-African people.

2.3. How to influence without any possible hegemony? The alternative ways of the overseas Spanish influence in the region of Oran

By no means, the Spanish Empire could claim a hegemonic position in Western “Algeria” since the middle of the 16th century. In fact, the main challenge was to maintain the occupation of Oran and Mers el-Kébir and a more or less loose influence over the nearby North-African tribes to secure the basic supply of the *presidio* and to protect it against the assaults of the Ottomans of Algiers or the Moroccans. Because since the beginning of the undertaking in North Africa the Spanish Crown never engaged a territorial expansion, nor projected it⁴⁶, an alternative path had been chosen to prolong the occupation of Oran and Mers el-Kébir. For sure, it was not as glorious as the American expansion; but as I have been suggested it, the context and the frontier environment were different. The following hypotheses claim to contrast the historiographical paradigm of the “*occupation restreinte*” and match with Luis Fé Cantó’s studies about the situation in the 18th century⁴⁷.

The military hegemony was not the monarchic councilors’ and agents’ preoccupation, as a defensive strategy had been chosen since the middle of the 16th century⁴⁸. Nevertheless, this option allowed Spanish garrison and inhabitants to use violence and force to dissuade or to subjugate their Muslim neighbors only for a determined time or for a precise purpose. This option was known as the “*jornada*”, a particular kind of border raid. First, this kind of violent influence should be inscribed in the more extended Mediterranean economy of the ransom, the hostages and the slavery⁴⁹. As an old Mediterranean custom and as well-know activities in the Arab-Islamic world⁵⁰, such violence might not bring systematically the nearby Muslim people against the Spanish Christian in a more or less claimed jihad. The main challenge for the Spanish “*jornadas*”, and their only success, consisted in

⁴⁵ Richard White, *Le Middle Ground. Indiens, empires et républiques dans la région des Grands Lacs, 1650-1815*, transl. by Frédéric Corron (Toulouse: Anacharsis, 2009 [1991]).

⁴⁶ De Bunes Ibarra, « El marco ideológico de la expansión española por el norte de Africa »; Alonso Acero, *Cisneros y la conquista española del norte de Africa*.

⁴⁷ Luis F. Fé Cantó, « Les horizons maghrébins de la monarchie hispanique » (EHESS, 2011) [unpublished].

⁴⁸ Miguel Angel de Bunes Ibarra, « Felipe II y el Mediterráneo : la frontera olvidada y la frontera presente de la monarquía española », in *Felipe II (1527-1598) : Europa y la Monarquía católica*, éd. par José Martínez Millán, vol. 1–1 (Madrid: Parteluz, 1998), 97–110.

⁴⁹ Wolfgang Kaiser, « L'économie de la rançon en Méditerranée occidentale (XVI^e-XVII^e siècle) », *Hypothèses* 10, n° 1 (2007): 359–68.

⁵⁰ Berque, *L'intérieur du Maghreb*, 173; Gianni Albergoni, « Les Bédouins et les échanges : la piste introuvable », *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 1–2, n° 26 (1990): 198–99.

integrate, led and sustain a “*plundering confederacy*”⁵¹ in the surroundings of Oran; in the same way the Ottoman built their power in Anatolia between the 14th and the 15th centuries, according to Heath Lowry. In this way, the Spanish did not build their influence alone and could benefit the border frictions and rivalries in the Western “Algeria”. Such a violent influence repeated the former Muslim urban punitive raids against their rural surroundings, capturing people and cattle or achieving the collect of the tributes.

One of the bigger challenges for the Spanish in Western “Algeria” consisted in facing the more legitimate power of the Ottoman and Moroccan Sultanates. Lacking their ideological advantage, the Spanish Empire still sought to provide a legal authority in Oran and through its “kingdom”. The Crown battled with the local interests and appetites, especially the governors’ and the citizens’ ones, to create a fairly justice towards the “Muslim subjects”, that is to say the “*moros de paz*”. Moreover, thanks to the border bonds, such as friendship and matrimonial unions, the inhabitants of Oran and the royal officers defended their own conception of a fairly and rightful justice towards their Muslim neighbors. Matters like the “*jornadas*”, the captivity, the evangelization of women and children were regular subjects of discord among the Spanish themselves. By showing some flexibility and by investing an arbitrator’s status, the Spanish integrated and sometimes deeply influenced the tribes’ relations and balance.

The Spanish imperial and local authorities managed to develop an authentic relational arsenal to strengthen their bounds with the North-African leaders without occupying a too much binding posture. First, they tried to play a quite successful soft power through diplomacy, assuming an intermediate and apparently looser alternative than the Ottoman leadership or the severe Alawite domination in Western “Algeria”. Indeed, the dual between these two Islamic empires resulted to be painful for the local tribes. Then, the Spanish relied on some sought-after goods in the whole Mediterranean Area, hailed from their American possessions. Since the middle of the 1670s, the Spanish Crown systematically invested numerous “*reales de a ocho*”, an American silver coin, to finance the North-African supply of Oran (an exception among all the other *presidios*). And this was a real investment at that time. North-African and Ottoman people literally starved for these silver coins: the better in the Mediterranean market⁵². Moreover, each agreement, each Arab-Berber tribute or each peace negotiation received from the Spanish some gifts, such as the “Brazilian tobacco”⁵³ or an amount of “*reales de a ocho*”. Finally, it is still to prove that the Spanish imposition

⁵¹ Heath W. Lowry, *The nature of the early Ottoman state* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

⁵² Eloy Martín Corrales, « La saca de plata americana desde España hacia el Mediterráneo musulmán, 1492-1830 », in *Dinero, moneda y crédito en la Monarquía Hispánica*, ed. by Antonio Miguel Bernal (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, Fundación ICO, 2000), 471–94.

⁵³ Beatriz Alonso Acero, « La renta del tabaco en Orán y Mazalquivir: fortuna y fracaso de un estanco pionero. », *Cuadernos de historia Moderna*, n° 17 (1996): 11–39.

and authority on the Arab-Berber communities was more onerous than the Ottoman system. What is undeniable is that the Arab-Berber communities enjoyed much better their tributary relations towards the Spanish: because they benefited a larger room for maneuver and the more vulnerable Spanish positions. As such, the Spanish influence might have been a better and profitable alternative in Western “Algeria”.

Conclusion

In addition to the real efforts consented by the Spanish Empire, mainly from its Iberian parts, the longevity of the Spanish first occupation of Oran and Mers el-Kébir may find an explication with the policies and the presence chosen through the decades. Instead of an expansive and conquering project, which their imperial resources could not bear for too long for the Mediterranean frontiers, the Spanish opted for an alternative way of keeping their influence in the uncertain surroundings of Oran. They managed to graft their position to the specific Western “Algerian” frontier and to secure a defendable position among the eventful frictions between the Regency of Algiers, the Moroccan Sultanate and the resourceful Arab-Berber tribes. As an imperial border matter, the Spanish project around Oran privileged a relational and sinuous influence without any purpose for annexing or evangelizing the Muslim country. Their policies secured the *presidio* until the Ottoman officers of the Western *Beylik* achieved between 1703 and 1708 the decisive rupture of the Spanish connections with the major surroundings tribes. So far, the Spanish presence and policy were quite suitable in this particularly volatile frontier of the Mediterranean “Far West”. If it has not gain the esteem of many historians, for lacking the brilliant aspect of the American colonization, to maintain the Spanish blazon on the doors of Oran was still a quite honorable task for the Catholic King and his subjects. Besides, it provided some real opportunities for both the nobles and the commons.