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"Those who were bound together": illuminating Almoravid imperial entanglements

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the imperial Almoravid dynasty was an important catalyst for social, political and cultural change in the archaeological record of medieval North Africa. At the height of their power, the Almoravids controlled a very extensive territory centred around present-day Morocco and stretching from southern Mauritania to northern Iberia. Their takeover of al-Andalus and their military successes against the Christian kingdoms proved vital for the continued presence of Muslim rule in the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula and illustrates a rare instance of African powers exerting territorial control over European soil. The control of trans-Saharan trade networks where West African gold flowed northwards, along with a desire to sustain the spread and strict adherence to Islamic religious ideology, were important drivers of Almoravid expansion. Control of bodies, souls and resources was also a fundamental dimension of imperialist expansion. This paper examines Almoravid material culture, particularly gold coins, as an unrivalled avenue with which to map archaeologically the interlinking imperial processes between Africa and Europe in which these artefacts were enmeshed by illustrating the complex relationship between gold sources, Almoravid coin minting localities and Western museum collections.

RÉSUMÉ

L'essor de la dynastie impériale almoravide constitua un important catalyseur de changements sociaux, politiques et culturels dans les données archéologiques de l'Afrique du Nord médiévale. À l'apogée de leur puissance, les Almoravides contrôlaient un très vaste territoire, centré autour du Maroc actuel et s'étendant du sud de la Mauritanie au nord de la péninsule ibérique. Leur conquête d'al-Andalus et leurs succès militaires contre les royaumes chrétiens se sont avérés essentiels au maintien de la domination musulmane dans la moitié sud de la péninsule ibérique, et ils illustrent un rare exemple de puissances africaines exerçant un contrôle territorial sur sol européen. Le contrôle des réseaux commerciaux transsahariens, par lesquels l'or d'Afrique de l'Ouest affluait vers le nord, ainsi que la volonté de soutenir la

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diffusion et le strict respect de l'idéologie religieuse islamique, furent des moteurs importants de l'expansion almoravide. Le contrôle des corps, des âmes et des ressources constitua également des dimensions fondamentales de l'expansion impérialiste. Cet article examine la culture matérielle almoravide, en particulier les pièces d'or, qui offrent une voie inégalée pour cartographier archéologiquement les processus impériaux interconnectés entre Afrique et Europe au sein desquels ces artefacts étaient imbriqués. Nous illustrons la relation compliquée entre sources d'or, localités de frappe de pièces almoravides, et collections des musées occidentaux.

Introduction

The social, political and economic legacies of imperialism across Africa are overwhelming. Violent colonialism and associated exploitative resource extraction have decisively shaped many of these realities. Their ramifications extend well beyond the geographical confines of the African continent (Frank and Gills 2000; Gosden 2004) and have fundamentally redefined the identities and ontologies of the colonisers in the process (Said 1978). Colonialism involves the establishment of power structures designed to funnel wealth, in the form of raw materials and associated labour, from its source to the imperial core for its conversion into currency. This metamorphic scramble generally unfolds through the sale of luxury goods and other products to avid consumer markets, which play a decisive role in maintaining such exploitative dynamics. For one precious raw material, however, this transformation is direct and explicit.

This paper aims to discuss the prestigious allure of gold coinage and its intersection with core themes of imperial entanglements: entitlement, extractivism, authority, power and display. Our focus is on the social biography of Almoravid coins as a lens through which to illustrate the dynamics of Almoravid imperialism in Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, as well as the imperial backdrop of museum collecting practices in Europe. In this paper, we discuss the ideological foundations and supra-regional dynamics of Almoravid coinage through a combination of archaeological, historical and numismatic sources, with a focus on:

a) the role of territorial conquests and the control of the West African gold supply chain in the expansion of coin production and the establishment of new mints;
b) the strategic interaction of coin iconography, scale of production and fiscal policy in the consolidation of political legitimacy and widespread popular support; and
c) the acquisition sources and methods underlying the presence of Almoravid coinage in different museum collections across Spain, France and the United Kingdom, including the bequests or sales from private collectors, auctions and archaeological discoveries.

The Almoravids

The Almoravid dynasty was an imperial polity that rose to power in southern Morocco during the eleventh century AD. Encompassing a territory from the western part of the

Sahara to al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), the empire it controlled contributed to interweaving the shared histories of the Western Mediterranean for over a century. Almoravid dominance over a vast region spanning both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar was sustained by control of trans-Saharan trade networks and by a predatory military regime rooted on income streams from territorial expansion.

The socio-political landscape of western North Africa at the time was characterised by intricate power dynamics among various Berber tribes. The Zanāta held influence in the northern regions, while the Maṣmūda resided in the Atlas Mountains of central Morocco and the Ṣanhāja inhabited the southwestern Sahara and the eastern Maghreb. The Almoravids emerged as a Berber community affiliated with the western branch of the Ṣanhāja tribal confederation, also known as Zenaga or Aẓnag (plural Iẓnagen) in Amazigh. This confederation encompassed various groups such as the Gazzūla, dwelling in the Draa valley and the foothills of the Anti-Atlas range, the Massufa of southwestern Algeria and the Lamtūna and Guddāla of present-day Mauritania (Kennedy, 1996). Berber communities in the region embraced the Islamic faith and probably converted to Islam between the ninth and eleventh centuries AD (Abun-Nasr 1987; Valérian 2011).

The origins of the Almoravid religious movement can be traced back to ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsin. Inspired by the Prophet Muhammad, he sought to unite the Berber people and wage a war of conquest based on a strict Maliki interpretation of Islam, emphasising righteousness and the correction of injustices (Messier 2010). ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsin was eventually welcomed by the heads of the Banū Targūt clan of the Lamtūna tribe, whose desire for power propelled the Almoravids to embark on a series of military campaigns (Kennedy 1996). Initially, the Almoravids inhabited the arid plains between the southern cultivated regions of Morocco and the settled plains of the Senegal and Niger River basins. Their subsistence and political economy relied on small livestock herds. Their rise to regional hegemony correlates with a series of intermittent dry periods that North Africa experienced in the eleventh century (Maley and Vernet 2015), which may have resulted in more volatile regional socio-economic conditions. Western North Africa also served as a vibrant centre for trans-Saharan trade networks, facilitating connections between Mediterranean polities and the wealth of West Africa. These socio-political and economic conditions set the stage for the rise of the Almoravids as a formidable political and cultural entity (Bennison 2016).

Medieval Islamic numismatics

Islamic coins of the early/classical period, i.e. prior to the twelfth century, were textual documents in both their obverse and reverse, with religious phrases and detailing up to five names in the political hierarchy of power: from the local governor up to the caliph, as well as the mint town and date, sometimes even to the month and day (Heidemann, 2010). The inclusion of a ruler's identity in the coinage (*sikka*) and the Friday prayer (*khuṭbah*) were conscious and deliberate acts of public communication of authority within a context of adherence to Islamic principles, with coin minting representing a more tangible and durable record than the transient nature of prayer (Kassis 1987; Heidemann 2010; Figure 1). Almoravid gold coins were therefore representative of wider trends across the Islamic world, showcasing clear stylistic parallels with ʿAbbāsid dīnārs in particular.



Figure 1. Almoravid gold dinar of Yahya bin ʻAli (known as Ibn Ghaniya) dated to AH 543 (AD 1148–1149 and minted at Madinat Qurtuba (Córdoba, Spain). The coin's dimensions are: height 29 mm, width 29 mm, die axis 20°, weight 3.98 g. It forms part of the Grierson Collection (accession number: CM.PG.7805-2006) of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

There were two main but separate currencies in Islamic economies: one comprised high-value money, usually of gold or pure silver coins, used for wholesale and long-distance trade, the administration of state expenditure and the storage of wealth, while petty coinage, usually consisting of debased silver, billon alloy or copper coins, was used for daily purchases in urban contexts, such as the market (*suq*; Heidemann 2010). The market value of petty coinage fluctuated greatly, with demand generally outstripping insufficient supply (Cipolla 1956). Meanwhile, high-value money was generally bound to the metal content of the bullion, especially once legal prescriptions for money during the ninth century became better established, as Islamic law forbids illegitimate profit and the different valuation of two equal amounts of precious metal in the same transaction (Udovitch 1970). Nevertheless, contexts of political unrest, such as the collapse of the ʿAbbāsid empire in the tenth century, sometimes led to the debasement of newly minted coinage, characterised by lower proportions of silver content (Noonan 1988). In the face of scarce monetary supply, and the lack of long-term value stability of both petty coinage and newly minted coins, the continued use and/or fragmentation of already circulating precious-metal coins were alternative strategies employed for

meeting the needs of different scales of monetary exchanges across the Islamic world and beyond (Heidemann 2010).

Almoravid jurisprudence is very relevant in contexts of exchange, with the famed jurist Ibn Rushd arguing that debts incurred in gold dinars cannot be repaid with gold jewellery because of the 'intolerable level of uncertainty' regarding any potential inconsistency in quantity above or below the owed amount, resulting in a lack of equivalence, as well as the difference of uses (*ikhtilāf al-aghrāḍ*) between gold bullion and minted gold currency; on the other hand, debts incurred in one type of gold currency could be repaid with other standard gold currencies (Gómez-Rivas 2015: 60–62). These principles, alongside a political economy with a fundamental focus on the transformation of gold into coinage, led to a considerable political interest in achieving a high degree of standardisation in the weight and designs of Almoravid coins. Similarly, this legal framework provides a relevant historical and socio-economic background for the continued relevance of Almoravid coinage in different parts of the Mediterranean world well after the political disintegration of this imperial polity.

West African gold and Ghana

West African gold comes from the alluvial deposits of goldfields along the upper Niger and Senegal Rivers. This precious metal was held in exceptional regard in the Mediterranean world for nearly two millennia, well before the consolidation of trans-Saharan trade routes during Islamic times. The first account of West African gold reaching the Mediterranean shores is attributed to the Carthaginian expedition led by Hanno in the fifth century BC, with the Romans engaging in the first systematic trade for gold and other desirable commodities from the African continent, such as ivory, ebony and Sahelian fauna. Camel caravans increased the success rates of long-distance trade across the desert, as well as the quantity of goods that could be transported in any one trip (Insoll 2003). By the end of the first millennium AD, the rich ceramic assemblages in workshops and households from Tegdaoust (Tamchakett, southeastern Mauritania) included wares from Ifriqiya, the Maghrib and al-Andalus that illustrate yet greater connectivity between West Africa and the Mediterranean (Robert 1970; Mitchell 2005). As further evidence of the interconnectivity of both trans-Saharan trade nodes, it is estimated that 55% of the glazed ware assemblage at Tegdaoust was produced in Sijilmasa, Morocco (El Hraiki and Erbati 1995; Holl 2006).

Gold was in high demand across the Islamic world from the eighth century onward for minting coinage and the elaboration of luxury goods, such as jewellery, embroidery and manuscript illumination (Bovill 1958; Messier 1974). It was obtained by exchanging it for highly prized rock salt, as well as glass, copper and coral beads, in marketplaces under the sphere of influence of the Ghana empire, a large and durable kingdom with a hereditary male ruler, most likely of Soninke ethnicity, that controlled a number of smaller polities and that had a political economy centred around cattle and gold (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000; MacDonald 2013; Gestrich 2019). The kingdom of Ghana appears to have gradually converted to Islam, in a process associated with a considerable level of commercial and political interactions and even co-operation between Ghana and the Almoravid empire (Insoll 2003),

although this religious change was perhaps not coercively imposed through direct Almoravid conquest (Conrad and Fisher 1982).

Almoravid imperial dynamics in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula

Almoravid cultural identity was influenced by their traditional pastoral lifestyle and adherence to Islam, transcending tribal affiliations, through overarching epithets such as *al-murābiṭūn* (i.e. 'those from the *ribāṭ*', a small fortification which housed military volunteers), which made reference to their aspiration to band together for fighting, or *al-mulaththamūn* ('the veiled ones'), which made reference to their practice of wearing veils (Levtzion 1978; Kennedy 1996). Nonetheless, leadership and military authority remained concentrated among Lamtūna tribal leaders (*shaykhs*) throughout their imperial history. This centralised power structure provided unquestioned stability but also entailed a limited external participation in decision-making processes, which reduced their political and strategic creativity when addressing some of the emergent complex socio-political issues in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural imperial landscapes. To further consolidate their authority, the Almoravids founded Marrakech as their capital, which became a centre for governance, trade and cultural development (Deverdun 1959; Gómez-Rivas 2015) as they became recognised by the ʿAbbāsid caliphate (Lévi-Provençal 1955).

Under the secular leadership of Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar (died 1056), Marrakech served as a base for the northward military expansion of the Almoravids over key urban centres such as Fez, Tlemcen and Tangiers (Levtzion 1978). The control of important nodes along the main trans-Saharan trade routes, such as that linking Sijilmasa in Morocco to Awdaghust in present-day Mauritania, was also a highly coveted priority for Almoravid leaders due to their role as crucial arteries for resource distribution and cultural exchange (Messier 1974; Miller 2001). The relevance of this conquest cannot be overstated since 'without Sijilmasa there would have been no Almoravid movement to begin with' (Gómez-Rivas 2015: 26). Sijilmasa was the cornerstone of wealth for medieval Morocco and the city developed many relevant features that became paradigmatic of Almoravid urbanism, such as city walls, a great mosque and irrigation systems (Miller 2001).

The extent to which the southward military expansion of the Almoravids reached Ghana has, as already noted, been questioned by authors such as Conrad and Fisher (1982), with the West African archaeological record lacking any signs of rapid change and destruction associated with presumed Almoravid military conquests (Insoll 2003). Lange (1996) tentatively mentions that some extent of systemic disturbance may nevertheless still have happened, as Ghana experienced a decline and the Almoravids clearly had a considerable influence over the trading and minting of West African gold supplies (Burkhalter 1992). In any event, an emerging pattern is that northern Sahelian centres, such as Tedgaoust and Essouk-Tadmakka, started to evolve from primary marketplaces to provisioning stations within trans-Saharan caravan trade, while southern marketplaces, such as Gao or Koumbi Saleh, became more relevant, perhaps as the Almoravids fostered more direct trading connections with Ghana and other gold-producing polities (Nixon 2009; Monroe 2013).

The Almoravid military expansion into the Iberian Peninsula is much more explicitly recorded in numerous historical documents and material culture. Their first intervention

was directly preceded by a major expedition by Alfonso VI of León-Castille (reigned 1065–1109) southward into the territories of the Islamic Taifa kingdoms. Alfonso VI's military campaign was driven by the inadequacy of *parias* payments from al-Mu'tamid, the ruler of Seville (Lagardère 1999). The Taifa kingdoms of the eleventh century were fragmented and had a serious inherent economic weakness, as they relied on professional paid armies (Kennedy 1996). Payment of these *parias* to their Christian counterparts therefore compromised their defence capabilities, which represented an existential threat. This desperate situation enticed them to plead with the Almoravids, who had recently conquered Ceuta in 1083, to enter the Iberian Peninsula. The Battle of Sagrajas in 1086 witnessed a decisive victory of the Almoravids, in alliance with Andalusī forces, over Alfonso VI, although they did not fully capitalise on this situation, as the majority of the Almoravid forces subsequently returned to Morocco (Kennedy 1996). This retreat enabled Alfonso VI to continue his territorial advances, including the capture of Toledo and the menacing of Valencia by El Cid. Upon their return, which was requested by the notables (*wujuh*) of the eastern Iberian Peninsula, the Almoravids effectively seized control of all the remaining Taifa kingdoms in a matter of a few years (1090–1094; Lagardère 1999). The swift subjugation of well-established and cultured polities by a state force that the former considered to be 'barbarians' highlights the vulnerabilities of the Taifa kingdoms and their dependence on external support. The Almoravids were warmly received by local élites, including the *fuqahā* (Islamic jurists) and *qāḍīs* (judges). This support played a crucial role in their ability to establish and maintain control over the conquered territories, at least temporarily. Gathering support from urban élites, such as Mālikī religious scholars (*'ulamā'*), and participating in intellectual and aesthetic circles became important dimensions of legitimisation across their domains (Bennison 2016).

The Almoravids pursued a systematic approach of confiscating treasuries from conquered Taifa kingdoms and accumulating spoils from victorious encounters with Christian forces that compensated for their lower fiscal pressure in state finances. Some of this extractive activity included the conscious appropriation of architectural features and other heavy ornaments, including marble *minbars* (mosque pulpits), from abandoned Umayyad monumental spaces such as Madīnat al-Zaḥrā' near Córdoba, which were transported over long distances for display in mosques and palaces in the imperial capitals at Fez and Marrakech as part of the material constitution of Islamic imperial legitimacy and power in the western Mediterranean (Rosser-Owen 2014). The wealth-generation potential gained through this military expansion, coupled with control of trans-Saharan trade networks and the associated availability of gold for minting coinage, enabled the Almoravids to sustain an ambitious taxation policy, which only stipulated the *'ushr* (tithe) as a required contribution to state revenue, effectively resulting in the termination of the onerous set of *maghārim* (non-Quranic taxes) imposed by the previous Taifa rulers (Kennedy 1996; Lagardère 1999).

Another relevant dimension of imperial dynamics that the Almoravid example further illustrates is that of trans-continental biological exchanges, seen here through the transport of animal species of relevance to both domestic and industrial activities. Taxa of North African origin introduced to the Iberian Peninsula include the Egyptian mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*), the genet (*Genetta genetta*) and the dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*). In relation to the latter, its power, meat, milk and skin were highly prized, while

the discovery of a bone anvil manufactured from a right radius-ulna in an Almoravid urban workshop in Seville shows that dromedary bones were even occasionally considered to be useful raw materials (Moreno-García *et al.* 2007). Bone anvils in blacksmith workshops, with large quantities of metal slag and charcoal, have also been documented archaeologically at the site of al-Basra in Morocco, used there for smoothing or burnishing metal (Benco *et al.* 2002). Genets and mongooses, on the other hand, were employed domestically as a generalised pest-control pet, given their ability to target rodents and reptiles (Palomares 1993; Morales 1994). The earliest archaeological example of a mongoose, found at the site of Nerja Cave (Málaga), has been AMS-dated to the Almoravid/Almohad period (Riquelme-Cantal *et al.* 2008). These examples further emphasise the role of archaeological research for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of imperial dynamics and entanglements that unfolded with Almoravid expansion into the Iberian Peninsula.

Under the leadership of ʿAlī b. Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn (reigned 1106–1143), the Almoravids experienced a mixture of triumphs and setbacks. Noteworthy conquests included Uclés, Cuenca, Zaragoza, the Balearic Islands and Coimbra. Yet, their inability to capture Toledo despite a prolonged siege and the ascendance of Alfonso I of Aragón (reigned 1104–1134) undermined their position. Concurrently, internal discontent and uprisings, such as the Córdoba uprising in 1121, contributed to the erosion of the Almoravids' authority (Kennedy 1996). Their capacity to uphold their image as defenders of Islam became increasingly tenuous, thereby challenging their legitimacy. Furthermore, the sustainability of their fiscal system proved fragile during the latter phases of their presence in the Iberian Peninsula, when they were forced to engage in defensive warfare, leading to the perpetration of fiscal abuses that mirrored the very practices they had sought to eradicate (Kennedy 1996).

Concurrently, the Almohads emerged as a formidable force that challenged and ultimately overthrew the Almoravid empire within their Moroccan heartland. Led by Ibn Tumart, the Almohad reformist ideology, emphasising a stricter interpretation of Islam, capitalised on shifting power dynamics and discontent within the region, especially among the Maṣmūda tribes from the Atlas Mountains (Kennedy 1996). The magnitude of this threat necessitated the activation of military personnel and allocation of resources from al-Andalus, posing a significant challenge to the stability and governance of the Almoravid empire in the Iberian Peninsula (Kennedy 1996). Overcoming initial setbacks in 1130, the Almohads gradually expanded their military and socio-political influence, progressively conquering Tāsgīmūt, Sijilmasa and Tāfīlālt before culminating in the capture of Marrakech, the capital of the Almoravid empire, in 1147. Soon after, the Almohads entered the Iberian Peninsula, conquering Seville in 1148 and Granada in 1155, with the Balearic Islands being the last Almoravid territorial stronghold (Kennedy 1996). The decline of the Almoravid empire underscores the dynamic nature of power struggles and the difficulties faced by nomadic empires with revenue streams contingent on continued territorial expansion in sustaining their dominance of settled regions.

Almoravid coins and modern museums: acquisition sources and methods

The historical significance of Almoravid coinage and West African gold extends to the colonial era and its impact on heritage and nationalistic values. As European colonial

powers exerted control over various regions, they often appropriated valuable artefacts, including coins, for their museums and collections. These artefacts held dual roles: they served as symbols of colonial power, displaying the wealth and achievements of the colonised territories under European rule, while also reflecting the historical legacies of those regions. The enduring prestige associated with Almoravid gold dinars transcends the boundaries of time, shaping modern acquisition patterns to procure these coins observed among private collectors and museums alike.

Auction houses and museum collections

Modern acquisition patterns of Almoravid gold coins represent an opaque network of collecting methods. A cursory online look for information about the coins offers more search engine results for auction houses than museums or cultural institutions. Bids for the coins can range from a few hundred to several thousand pounds. They are sought-after coins, valued for their precious metal content and for their rare status in collections of Islamic-period, or more generally European Medieval, coinage. Due to the inscriptions on the coins that detail their production year and the location where they were minted, they have become valued acquisitions to collectors with gaps in their private catalogues. Online auction houses provide detailed descriptions of the coins including their weight, size, condition and even translations of the text, but there is no easily accessible mention of the journey or manner in which the coins came to be under their stewardship.

Even in the early nineteenth century, Almoravid dinars were already a prestige currency for museums and collectors alike, who ardently sought to complete their collections with the rarest and most intrinsically valuable coins, unscrupulously trading, or at times giving away, collection duplicates. This was the case, for example, for a hoard comprising 104 Almoravid coins discovered during routine ground works in a domestic setting in 1827 Córdoba. Spain's Royal Academy of History appointed Francisco Antonio González to examine the hoard and ascertain its importance relative to the institution's existing collection. González identified a coin of singular uniqueness minted in Aghmat in AH 490 (AD 1096–1097) and bearing the name of Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn. The rest of the coins were minted by Alī ibn Yūsuf in various locations throughout the south of Spain, including Seville and Granada, as well as across the Strait of Gibraltar in Marrakech. Following this examination, all the coins deemed valuable were chosen for acquisition, in addition to two coins from each year represented in the hoard, with the explicit intention of using them for a trade if the opportunity ever presented itself. The remaining 58 coins were sold to a distinguished foreigner who is not identified further in the records (Canto García 2012). The figure of the distinguished foreigner shielded in anonymity plays a critical role in the colonial history of collecting and raises profound questions about the lengths to which private collectors, auction houses and museums are willing to venture in their pursuit of heritage acquisition. The fate of those 58 coins, and many others procured by similar means, likely lies in private collections or auction houses.

The purchase of Almoravid dinars from auction houses has, in other cases, been used as a tool to return cultural heritage to its place of origin. In 2020, the Museu de Mallorca in Spain, spent over €35,000 bidding on two Almoravid coins which had been minted in

Mallorca in 1172 (Malagamba 2020). Since this modern-day Spanish island is the locality of origin of the Islamic cultural material, this bid clearly represents a different acquisition strategy from the other museums discussed. At the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Madrid, the rationale for this acquisition was deeply imbued with a centralising nation-building agenda that had no qualms in uprooting cultural artefacts from regions of origin, while in museums in the United Kingdom a sense of entitlement to any foreign item of material culture emerged as part of wider imperialist attitudes.

The two coins in question had previously been part of the extensive catalogue of Andalusian coinage of the private Japanese Tonegawa collection and the Majorcan museum sprang into action when they went on sale. Their acquisition has been the cause of much celebration at the museum, as it can now contribute to the display and safeguarding of local cultural heritage. However, not all museums will have the financial means to bid successfully for the repatriation of their cultural heritage in this way.

Making matters of provenance research and repatriation more complex, online museum catalogues do not always display the acquisition source for these coins, either because the documentation does not exist or because the relevant records have yet to be digitised. According to the British Museum's (2023a) online catalogue, its collection holds ten Almoravid dinars acquired during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only four of them, i.e. those acquired as a result of the archaeological intervention of the Salcombe Cannon shipwreck (discussed below), have a known provenance. The remainder lack any information on their acquisition source other than two that mention London-based auction houses. It is interesting to note that none of these coins are currently on display despite their great state of preservation and research potential, which puts into question the strategy and intention behind their acquisition.

Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam Museum prominently positions cabinets across the several floors of the building that display gold coins that span centuries and vast geographical distances. One of these cabinets holds an Almoravid gold coin minted in Córdoba, Spain in 1148–49 (AH 543) under the rule of ʿAli ibn Ghaniya, the Almoravid governor of Andalusia from 1146 to 1148. The acquisition source of this singular item is noted as belonging to the Grierson Collection. Although this information can be invaluable for the beginnings of extensive provenance research, it is still insufficient since a single coin devoid of the archaeological context in which it is found tells us little by itself (Margariti 2021). This extensive private collection of medieval coinage was developed by historian and numismatist Philip Grierson, former fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Built up over the course of sixty years of collecting, his catalogue held more than 20,000 coins that he both donated and bequeathed to several museums (Brooke and Stewartby 2008). Grierson was able to establish the foundations of his collection through the direct purchase of coinage from London auction houses in the 1940s who found themselves with an influx of numismatic material following the bequest of John Richard Brinsley Norton, fifth Baron Grantley. Lord Grantley is known for having amassed one of the finest collections in England of coins from the European continent (Blunt 1942).

Similarly, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (MAN) in Madrid, Spain, boasts one of the largest numismatic collections of Andalusi coins in the world. The museum's holdings were bolstered by the 1896 purchase of the Vives y Escudero Collection of Iberian coins. The records state that this was the most important and sizable collection of coins,

second only to that of the museum itself (Alfaro Asins 1992), yet most of the collection lacked archaeological information. Antonio Vives y Escudero (1859–1925) was a prominent historian and avid collector of antiquities. His vast collection of Andalusi coins was identified as having the potential to complete the gaps in the museum's own holding so they proceeded to purchase it for 113,000 pesetas (Grañeda Miñón 2009), equivalent to €483,814.74 of purchasing power in 2023. Despite going to great lengths to obtain his collection, the museum later traded many of the 'duplicate' coins to other institutions and private individuals alike in the 1940s and 1950s. This approach to the management of material culture in which it is exploited to extract the maximum benefit for the institution, with little regard for its historical context, reflects an entitled behavioural pattern displayed across museums and auction houses with a mission to amass and centralise international objects.

Archaeological interventions

Archaeological excavations can provide fascinating contextual evidence of the location spots where Almoravid dinars have been found (Figure 2). Notable examples include the six Almoravid dinars found in the Cueva del Tesoro in Málaga (Guzmán *et al.* 1994) and the single dinar minted in Marrakech but found in Pavlopetri, Greece, in 2011 (Margariti 2021). The hoard of coins found in Cluny Abbey, France, in 2017 represents an example of prestige objects being taken out of circulation for safekeeping. It is also further evidence that the regard in which Almoravid coins were held extended beyond their sphere of territorial influence and religious affiliation. This assemblage includes over 2000 silver deniers and obols, as well as a separate package containing 21 Almoravid gold coins, a signet ring and other gold objects. Analysis of the dinars identified three minting locations on the Iberian Peninsula (Seville, Almería and Granada), as well as Nul Lamta in southern Morocco, located near modern-day Guelmin, although the exact location of that mint has been lost to time (Baud *et al.* 2018).

The seventeenth century maritime wreck of Salcombe Cannon was found off the coast of Devon in the southwest of the United Kingdom in 1992. According to the Historic England official list entry, at the time the divers from the South-West Maritime Archaeology Group simply identified the wreck and it was not until 1995 that systematic excavations were undertaken. No part of the vessel remained so it is not certain where the ship may have originated but the cargo was recovered, offering exciting insights. The ship contained the largest shipment of Moroccan gold ever found in Britain. The assemblage, now in the British Museum (2023b), includes gold earrings and ingots, as well as 400 gold coins. Most of these coins were minted in Marrakech under the Sharifian Saʿdī Dynasty between the 1570s and 1630s. However, nine stand out for their age and rare status within this assemblage. Five of these are Marinid gold coins, two of them dating to the thirteenth century and three to the fourteenth century, while older still are the four Almoravid dinars present — two minted at Sijilmasa, one at Marrakech and one from an under-represented mint at Nul Lamta. This shipwreck demonstrates Almoravid coins were still in circulation hundreds of years after the end of the Almoravid period. Seventeenth-century Dutch ceramics were also recovered from the wreck and, while this neither clarifies the ship's origin nor its destination, it does suggest, along with the uppermost date of the Moroccan coins, that it may have sunk in the 1640s. Coins

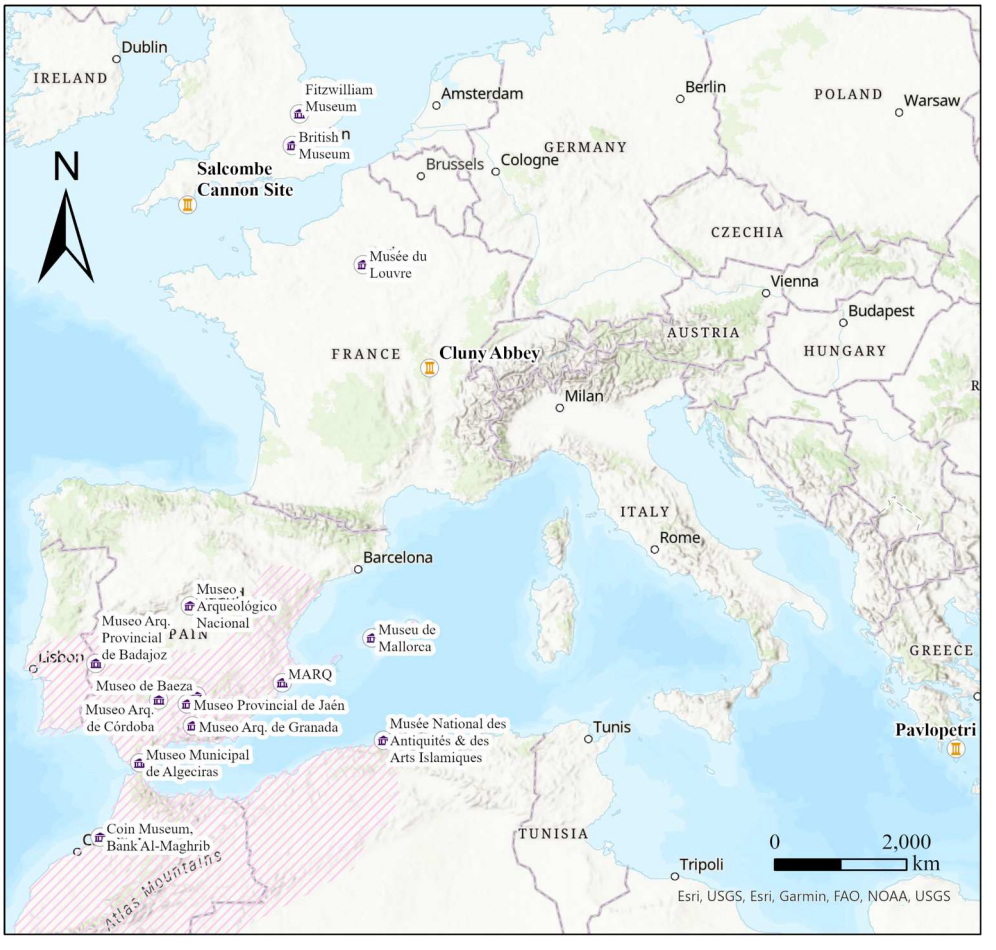


Figure 2. Map illustrating the distribution of museums with Almoravid dinars in their collections mentioned in the text (MARQ stands for Museo Arqueológico de Alicante), as well as archaeological findspots of Almoravid dinars beyond the territorial extent of their empire (in bold).

excavated in shipwreck sites, whether isolated finds or in small groups, usually represent money that was in circulation at the time of deposition, as opposed to coins found in closed groups at land sites that are often 'treasures' or hoards, i.e. monetary instruments withdrawn from circulation and amassed for their bullion value (Margariti 2021). The last date of issue of the coins minted in the late 1630s provide a *terminus post quem* for the shipwreck.

As stated on Collections Online, the British Museum (2023b) bought the entirety of this ship's cargo from the Receiver of Wreck in 1999 with assistance from the Art Fund (then known as the National Art Collections Fund), the British Museum Friends (previously the British Museum Society) and the Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund, even though the latter was established for the 'sole use of the Department of Asia'. Today the coins are under the stewardship of the museum's Coins and Medals Department, while the rest of the cargo, despite its North African and northern European origins, is in the Middle East Department.

Even when coins are found through archaeological interventions, their deposition in museums has not always kept them safe from mismanagement. This is the case, for instance, with a hoard of 39 coins found in Loma de la Buitrera in Jaén, Spain, during the first half of twentieth century (Pinero Jiménez 1955). Twenty-one of these are Almoravid dinars and were catalogued prior to their 1968 deposit in the Museo Provincial de Jaén. In 2002 when the collection was reassessed, however, it was noted that only nineteen of them were still present (Campos López 2002).

The presence of Almoravid gold coins in museums and private collections, the opaque networks through which they were acquired and the manner in which they have been used to bolster the prestige of their catalogues reflects an imperial entitlement to the amassing of wealth markers to be displayed or traded at will. The minimal regard for their historical context also poses a long-term hindrance to academic research.

Discussion

The deep historical dynamics and imperial entanglements surrounding Almoravid gold coins can be further subsumed into two core themes, namely entitlement to extract value and the display of authority. Entitlement to gold is reflected both in the desire of museums and private collectors to acquire coins using any available medium, as well as in the underlying impetus behind direct territorial expansion by the Almoravid empire to control the West African gold supply chain of the time. The value of this gold for the Almoravids lay in the tangible ways in which the minting of coinage funded their military expansionism and sustained the management of other areas of state expenditure. Within Medieval Europe, Almoravid gold dinars then had value as repositories of wealth, tokens with high purchasing power that enabled direct engagement in international trade networks. In relation to museums and private collectors, these coins still fetch high valuation in auction contexts. The display of authority is another key aspect of gold coinage, originally providing a prestigious material venue for Almoravid rulers to assert their social and political legitimacy and that of their imperial system, something further accentuated by the textual references to Islamic precepts as a way of ensuring adherence from their subjects. More recently, the ownership of coins by museums and private collectors provides an avenue for Almoravid dinars to stay entangled in displays of authority, sometimes explicitly, through their visibility in museum galleries and associated institutional narratives.

Almoravid imperialism, coinage, and the West African gold supply chain

The Almoravid imperial system represented a decisive transformation of the state-level political economy in the western Maghreb (Boone 1990; Ennahid 2002). The preceding Idrisid dynasty (*c.* AD 789–974) relied primarily on a 'staple finance' economic model of agrarian revenue (see D'Altroy and Earle 1985), structured around a multi-tiered system with Fez at its top and different provincial cities, such as al-Basra, articulating the generation of agricultural surplus in livestock, dairy products and cereals like wheat and barley below (Benco 2004; Fenwick 2020). The conquest of key nodes in trans-Saharan trade, such as Sijilmasa, enabled the Almoravid state to extract surplus derived from long-distance gold trade, fostering a transition to a 'wealth finance' system. To better

control and monitor this new dominant source of revenue, settlement patterns witnessed a decisive focalisation on large inland dynastic capitals, primarily around the newly established city of Marrakech, as well as the old Idrisid capital of Fez (Ennahid 2013). While coastal settlements also experienced an important growth during the Almoravid period with the northward expansion of the imperial regime into al-Andalus, Fez and Marrakech considerably surpassed all other provincial towns within the Almoravid urban network in North Africa (Cressier 1992; Boone and Benco 1999; Ennahid 2002).

This territorial, religious and political presence allowed the Almoravids to leverage their position and authority in North Africa to manage most of the West African gold supply chain (Bovill 1958; Messier 1974). The establishment of highly productive mints in strategic inland locations led to a quantitative shift in coin production that allowed the Almoravids to exert control over the flow of currency circulation within their empire (Messier 1974, 1980), with the mints of Fez, Marrakech, Sijilmasa and Aghmat accounting for approximately 70 per cent of Moroccan gold currency (Ennahid 2002; Figure 3). These coins served not only as a medium of exchange but also as a form of propaganda and a symbol of sovereignty, representing imperial authority and legitimacy within and beyond the Almoravid empire. In this regard, the strategic increase in coin-minting bearing the names of Almoravid leaders, such as Abu Bakr ibn ʿUmar, Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn and Ali ibn Yūsuf, illustrated their desire to portray a rightful claim to leadership and their ability to control social, economic, political



Figure 3. Map depicting the distribution of Almoravid mints across the territorial extent of their empire produced using ArcGIS Pro.

and religious affairs. This was part of a wider legitimising strategy for the implantation of Islamic ideals of statehood, such as the Maliki notion of a 'Commander of Truth and Law' (*amir al-haqq*) within pre-existing socio-philosophical practices of charismatic leadership among the indigenous Berber population of North Africa (Bennison 2014). Almoravid coin production in the Iberian Peninsula peaked during this later phase of their dynastic dominance as well (Figure 3), contributing to the economic and political integration of the different regions under Almoravid rule, albeit this trend proved short-lived, with production declining strongly as soon as the Almoravids lost political hegemony throughout their domains (Messier 1980). In North Africa, the looser grip that the Almohads had on trans-Saharan trade networks led to a considerable decline in the scale of their gold minting efforts, which can further explain the potential for continued circulation of Almoravid coinage.

Prestige of Almoravid gold coinage within Medieval Europe

Gold coinage, in particular, highlights Almoravid control over precious resources and their transport of them across vast distances throughout the African continent, as well as their ability to harness the production technologies required to mint coins. Coin iconography was a tangible medium through which claims to political authority and legitimacy could be expressed, as the visible expenditure of wealth by mobilising highly prized material resources and human capital showcased their willingness to invest in the maintenance of their rule. While these conspicuous acts did not manage to deter potential challengers to Almoravid rule, with the Almohads eventually cutting short their hold on power, the Almoravids' gold coins remained in spheres of prestige on the basis of their intrinsic material properties and cultural legacies.

The global reputation of Almoravid gold dinars as a respected trading currency in markets across Europe and North Africa, by virtue of being crafted from highly esteemed West African gold sources, was also symptomatic of widespread regime and quality control recognition and enabled them to import valuable commodities from long-distance sources (Messier 1980). Even though the purity of gold from Almoravid dinars reported by Messier (1974) was, on average, lower (92%) than those from Fatimid Egypt, the former were directly using gold from source, unlike the latter, which required refining to serve its purpose. A recent assessment of 15 Almoravid gold coins from different mints in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula kept in the Coin Museum of the Bank Al-Maghrib (Bank of Morocco, Rabat) was undertaken using SEM + EDS (Scanning Electron Microscope + Energy dispersive X-ray) analysis (Allouch *et al.* 2022). The results further confirm the unrefined purity of West African gold sources, with gold values ranging from 90.2 to 98.5%, in line with other studies (e.g. Hassar-Benslimane *et al.* 1984) and suggesting an even higher average gold content (94–95%) than previously reported. Throughout the twelfth century, even as the Almoravid empire disintegrated, their minted dinars enjoyed substantial prestige, both within North Africa and in the trade systems of international markets. They even became accepted currency within the Christian kingdoms of Europe, as indicated by historical price quotations denominated in dinars and further illustrated by the preferential place and care afforded to Almoravid coins in the Cluny Abbey hoard. Within the Iberian Peninsula, the Almoravid dinar was explicitly imitated during the second half of the twelfth century, under the name

maravedí (*morabitino* in Portugal). In a fascinating instance of cultural mimicry or hybridity, Alfonso VIII of Castile (reigned 1158–1214) minted a gold maravedí with inscriptions in Arabic, a Christian cross and the letters ALF at the bottom. By the second half of the thirteenth century, maravedíes were the main accounting unit of the kingdom of Castile, even standing for money itself in ordinary language (Manso 2018).

Prestige of gold coins in museum and private collections

Gold coins transcend the utilitarian purpose of coinage and become prestige goods. These are items that communicate the social status, wealth and authority of those who possess and/or display them, due to characteristics such as rarity, investment in manufacture and/or social biographies (i.e. the identity of previous owners or association with significant events).

In modern times, the possession of gold coins in Western museums raises complex questions surrounding heritage, identity and repatriation. For regional museums across Mauritania, Morocco and Spain, these artefacts represent a tangible link to their historical past, offering a chance to reclaim their heritage. Global museums' possession of these coins reflects a colonial legacy that continues to evoke debates about repatriation, as former colonisers are called upon to return cultural material to their localities of origin. Our Almoravid example can be extrapolated to case studies from other regions and time periods.

The detailed inscriptions on the coins may allow us to determine the year and location of their production but that should not be misinterpreted as complete information. The location spots of the coins at the time of rediscovery are just as important as what the object itself may tell us. This contextual information enables us to truly understand the scope of impact of the Almoravid coins. Archaeological discoveries like the Cluny Abbey hoard and the Salcombe Cannon shipwreck offer such unexpected insights. Devoid of their context, the objects lose a significant portion of their research potential and the contextual evidence of the impact of the enduring Almoravid presence in the European continent, a much-neglected aspect of continental Medieval history.

Decolonising the museum

Museums should prioritise provenance research of all existing collections and be not only transparent but also forthcoming with respect to the origin of their holdings. Western museums' treatment of Almoravid coins reveals a troubling continuity of colonial collecting practices that prioritise accumulation over historical accuracy and cultural respect. This is evident in the Fitzwilliam Museum's display of an Almoravid dinar alongside unrelated coins from the Islamic world and in the British Museum's lack of clear acquisition sources for many coins in its collection. The indiscriminate arrangement of these coins reflects a lack of commitment to understanding or communicating their specific historical contexts, flattening complex histories into a generalised 'Islamic world' narrative. This disregard for origins and connections reinforces a colonial worldview in which Western institutions assume the authority to define and display heritage according to their own perspectives, marginalising the voices and histories of the cultures from which these artefacts were taken.

These practices are far from isolated cases; they exemplify a pervasive trend of cultural erasure in which non-Western artefacts are presented as interchangeable and anonymous. This approach undermines the unique histories and identities tied to these objects, reducing them to mere 'shiny' tokens that serve the institutions' desire to display a diversity of possessions rather than to honour the integrity of each individual item's cultural and historical context. Hoarding them also prevents the possibility of establishing new, meaningful relationships between institutions and communities of origin.

The implications of these practices extend beyond Almoravid coins and numismatics as a whole. They reveal a systemic issue in which museums contribute to a narrative of Western cultural supremacy by trivialising non-Western objects through decontextualisation and neglect of provenance. This approach denies the objects' historical significance, effectively relegating them to footnotes in a story centred around Western possession and authority. Museums, by their very nature, are uniquely positioned to bridge cultural divides and foster understanding yet by obscuring the unique value of artefacts like the Almoravid dinars, they perpetuate a legacy of cultural erasure that has far-reaching consequences.

The refusal of many museums to engage with calls for repatriation further reveals an unwillingness to confront the ethical failings of their past and present actions. Despite mounting global appeals for restitution, institutions often require that the rightful owners pay prohibitive sums to retrieve their cultural property, prioritising financial gain over justice. This perpetuates a colonial mentality where Western institutions assume the right to dictate the terms of ownership and access, forcing countries to 'beg' for the return of their own heritage. It is impractical to believe that all museums would be able to raise large sums of money to bring their heritage to their localities like the museum in Mallorca did.

Modern museums must acknowledge their role in this legacy and recognise that repatriation and transparent provenance research are essential steps toward ethical accountability. For too long, museums have prioritised prestige over meaningful engagement with the cultures from which their collections derive. In this context, museums are not passive repositories but instead active participants in a system that continues to marginalise and exploit non-Western cultures. Rather than centres of preservation and education, they become symbols of a colonial structure that prioritises institutional prestige and control over ethical responsibility and historical accuracy. A more just approach would require museums to dismantle these colonial legacies, beginning by viewing themselves not as the custodians of global heritage but as facilitators of dialogue, respect and restitution. Repatriation, transparency and the re-centring of narratives around the objects' origins are not merely ethical imperatives — they are steps toward dismantling a legacy of cultural dominance and beginning to restore equity in the global heritage landscape.

Conclusions

The interdisciplinary study presented here combines historical analysis and archaeological evidence to comprehensively understand Almoravid imperialism in North Africa and al-Andalus, exploring Almoravid cultural origins, imperial expansion, political authority, economic prosperity and decline through the lens of their coinage system. This case-

study provides rich research opportunities for archaeologists studying the complexities of power dynamics, cultural exchange and socio-economic transformations over time in relation to the African continent.

The historical trajectory of the Almoravid empire highlights the relevance of controlling access and distribution of highly prized raw materials along the main trans-Saharan trade routes, particularly gold, given its significance for underpinning the political economy and fiscal policy behind their territorial expansion. Another relevant dimension of trans-continental imperial dynamics beyond flows of material goods is the potential for intentional (and unintentional) biological exchanges through species translocation. Lastly, the decline of the Almoravid empire also underscores the dynamic nature of power struggles and the difficulties faced by nomadic empires with revenue streams contingent on continued territorial expansion in sustaining their dominance in settled regions.

Further archaeological research will offer additional insights into the materiality, identity formation and extent of interactions between the Almoravids and the local population across their territories. Provenance research and adequate documentation of coins already held in museum catalogues will bolster those additional insights and provide the opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of complex collecting practices and the decolonisation of certain museum settings. The current lack of detailed contextual information is both a hindrance to research but also to broader conversations about restitution and repatriation of cultural material, particularly when coins are obtained through opaque means.

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