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Mobility, Mediation and Transculturation in the Medieval Mediterranean.

Migrating Mercenaries and the Challenges of Mixing

Mobility lies at the heart of transculturation, because the basic notion of transculturality is change by contact. There is thus an intrinsic relation between mobility and transculturation which calls for outlining the field of mobility more precisely. The first part of the paper will be devoted to such an attempt.

Before this backdrop the second part of the paper will present a case study. For it will focus on a particular form of motion, namely migration, and on specific border crossers: Mercenaries. Men who fought and killed others for money might not appear to be the best case for transcultural flows; neither are they the most typical example for Mediterranean mobility. Precisely because of this however, medieval mercenaries are arguably a rewarding, though generally overlooked object of research. I will present and discuss cases of Christian stipendiaries from the Iberian kingdoms who were employed at Muslim courts in the Late Middle Ages. These mercenaries active in North Africa are particularly striking examples for a societal group that not only traversed the Mediterranean, but also crossed political and religious borders despite being dedicated to discord and conflict by profession. In different ways and under particular circumstances, they could even act as brokers. At first sight, such warriors of the 13th to 15th centuries appear to highlight the basic axiom of transcultural studies: societies were and are in a constant flux of entangled dynamics that transcend supposedly clear-cut boundaries. However, a critical evaluation of this concept's potential and shortcomings necessarily needs to take opposition to transculturation into account. Put in general terms: Transculturation is not necessarily uncontested or even harmonious.

Therefore, in the third part of the paper I would like to single out two issues that acquired a certain degree of urgency from the 12th century onwards: apostasy and mixing. The discussions about these subjects amongst Christian scholars will be exemplified by analysing a series of treaties of the 14th century dealing with ways to recover Palestine for Latin Christianity. The two cases discussed in this paper – migrating mercenaries and the challenges of mixing in the Medieval Mediterranean – therefor illustrate both the dynamics of brokerage and mobility as well as the criticism such processes triggered.