



*King John's Delegation to the  
Almohad Court (1212): Medieval  
Interreligious Interactions and  
Modern Historiography.*

**Ilan Shoval**

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**Review by: Paul Webster**

*King John's Delegation to the Almohad Court (1212): Medieval Interreligious Interactions and Modern Historiography*. By Ilan Shoval. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. ISBN 978-2-503-55577-5. xviii + 213 pp. €75,00.

The focal point for Ilan Shoval's new study of international diplomacy in the early thirteenth century is the mid-thirteenth-century writing of the St Albans monk, Matthew Paris (*c.* 1200-1259), in his *Chronica Majora*. Here, Paris presented a damning account of England's King John (*r.* 1199-1216). Paris claimed that in 1212, the king sent an embassy to the ruler of southern Spain and northern Africa, the Almohad caliph al-Nāṣir (*r.* 1199-1213). The chronicler added that in seeking an alliance between the two rulers, the envoys put forward an offer by John to surrender his kingdom to the caliph, and to renounce Christianity and convert to Islam. Paris claimed to have heard this from one of the envoys Robert of London, the royal clerk.

This account has previously attracted attention; for instance, in articles written by Nevill Barbour, with briefer coverage in work on John's reign by Christopher Cheney, Stephen Church, Nicholas Vincent, and Paul Webster, and in Jenny Benham's study of peacemaking. Paris's description of the king's offer to surrender his kingdom and renounce Christianity has generally been seen as implausible. It has been interpreted as a satire relating to the settlement of John's long-running dispute with Pope Innocent III, although historians have recognised the possibility that such an embassy took place, as the king sought allies in his conflicts in Europe.

Historians considering Paris's words in the context of the history of the kings of England might therefore be surprised that the supposed embassy has attracted a book-length study. This volume promises to test the veracity of the account, and to consider it within the wider context of diplomatic practice, administrative kingship, and interaction of faiths. Ilan Shoval argues that Paris offers "a reasonably coherent view of what might actually have occurred between the parties involved" (xv).

In a wide-ranging study, Shoval locates Paris's account in the context of early thirteenth-century international affairs. In chapter one, he looks at the description itself and its presentation in the historiography of John's reign. He argues that the way that the tale is inserted in the chronicle "shatters the notion that John sought to subjugate England and to convert to Islam" (9), but suggests that this has been masked in polarised histories assessing John as good or bad. Shoval suggests that Paris describes a defensive alliance, characteristic of the Mediterranean world, but couched in terms comprehensible and acceptable to both sides. He discusses the source named by Paris, Robert of London. The portrayal of Robert hints that he may have

been a convert from Judaism, and though Paris describes him as a clerk, Shoval often refers to Robert as a monk, and later seeks to identify him as an Augustinian canon. The chapter's main conclusion (indeed the book's central argument) is that it is plausible that the embassy took place, and that a strategic alliance was agreed, relevant to the political and military situation in south-western France and northern Spain.

The remaining chapters add broader context, and seek to strengthen the argument. In chapter two, focus on the envoys named by Paris is followed by discussion of what the passage reveals about how different faiths perceived one another. Shoval suggests that the account preserves, in words attributed to the caliph, an anti-Pauline Islamic tradition that could not otherwise have been known to Paris, seeing this as further evidence that the embassy took place. Chapter three proposes that the suggested embassy and alliance are plausible in view of the political and military situation facing the kings of Navarre, the Almohad rulers, and the Angevin rulers of England and south-western France. The caliph's perspective is usefully considered alongside that of rulers further north, and parallels for such an alliance are identified. Chapter four looks at circumstances facing John, exploring his changing fortunes as king. The final chapter returns to the historiography, arguing that if we move away from assessing John as good or bad, then "Paris's story helps to work out the puzzles" (158), revealing a politically aware king, innovative in his response to the challenges he faced, especially on his frontiers.

Shoval is fully aware that his argument that the embassy took place runs counter to traditional interpretation. A considerable part of his case is contingent upon the supposition that the embassy actually occurred. Whilst this is plausible, it remains unproven. A number of conclusions offered are ultimately hypothetical. Our only source was penned over twenty years after the supposed event. Much depends on how we see the strengths, limitations, and agenda of the chronicler. Matthew Paris was generally well-informed, but his account of the 1212 embassy is not corroborated, despite sources surviving for other embassies and diplomatic activity, such as letters, texts of agreements, records of expenditure, and (or) remarks by the writers of the day. If the 1212 mission took place, we might expect it to be noted by Paris's predecessor at St Albans, Roger of Wendover. Shoval suggests a solution by arguing that Robert of London did not recount his role until after 1234 (98-9), but the case that he survived until then is not proven. The record corroborates neither his involvement nor that of the other supposed envoys. Could royal officials like Robert of London and Thomas of Erdington leave the royal court on such an embassy, and then return without it being mentioned or recorded nearer the time?

In addition, Matthew Paris had a clear agenda against King John and—whether accurate or not—is likely to have wanted his account to seem plausible. A working knowledge of royal diplomacy and related documentation could have provided much of this. These tensions complicate arguments for the veracity of the description. Shoval maintains that his argument is the most effective interpretation, although he does acknowledge the difficulties—noting that Paris was “a consistent, albeit not necessarily truthful, chronicler of events” (17). The suggestion that Paris’s account was satire is discussed (25-7), yet more attention could be given to parallels with John’s settlement with Pope Innocent III (noted briefly at 146), and with the wider range of agreements Innocent made with rulers across Europe. In addition, Shoval argues (172-3) that if the caliph had won the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, the supposed alliance would have allowed John to hold out against the pope for longer. This is possible, but downplays the domestic threat that the king of England faced in 1212, and the danger posed by a papally-backed French army across the English Channel.

Ultimately, we do not yet have enough evidence to prove that an embassy from King John to the caliph al-Nāṣir took place in 1212. However, what is shown, and as Shoval notes in his Epilogue, is how the account presented by Matthew Paris, when read carefully and with attention to the differing practices that it *may* reveal, can shed light on how a diplomatic encounter between a northern European Christian kingdom and an Islamic north African caliphate *could* occur, and how these thought-worlds might interact. Diplomatic and political networks usually studied in a Mediterranean context may in fact have extended much further north. It is here that scholars may find the book’s most valuable contribution—setting events and descriptions in a wider context than they are often seen.

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