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Narrating the Islamic Conquests and Holy War: Maḥmūd of Ghazna and al-Andalus in the 11th Century

Dr. Javier Albarran, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Spain

In the first third of the eleventh century, Maḥmūd ibn Sebükteghīn, better known as Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1030), became the most powerful ruler of the so-called Ghaznavid empire, and conquered for Islam the Eastern Iranian lands, modern Afghanistan, and the northwestern Indian subcontinent. Moreover, he made the city of Ghazna the capital of a rich territory and one of the most prominent cultural centers of the Islamic world. Nominally subordinate to the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, Maḥmūd became the first ghāzī-sultan, a heroic model of king that leads the holy war against the infidel and that will be remembered over time thanks to an epic literary genre that gained much popularity between the 11th-16th centuries. Future generations of historians used this model as a source of information and inspiration. As Ali Anooshahr has explained (*The Ghazi Sultans and the Frontiers of Islam. A comparative study of the late medieval and early modern periods*, Routledge, 2009), other rulers who also forged an image of ghāzī-sultans, such as Murād II (d. 1451) or Bābur (d. 1530), were inspired by the feats of Maḥmūd, recalled his life and shaped his own existence, at least literary, through the stories of the Ghaznavid sultan. But not only in the East will Maḥmūd be remembered.

In that same eleventh century, in al-Andalus, the other end of the Islamic orb, the famous scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) saw how his world was collapsing. With the disappearance of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba in 1031 and the proliferation of the Taifa kingdoms, the unity of the Umma in the Iberian Peninsula was in danger. As if that was not enough, the Christian kingdoms began to conquer the Andalusī territory, an advance that would eventually take Muslim cities like Toledo. In this difficult context, Ibn Ḥazm set in motion a series of answers, such as opting for the zāhirī school, which we can trace in the dozens of texts he wrote. Among them, a small epistle entitled *Risāla fī jumal futūḥ al-islām*, which contains a summary of the first conquests of Islam, possibly using the work of al-Balādhurī (d. 892), has gone unnoticed. Besides presenting a linear and unbroken image of the expansion of Islam and the leading of holy war, curiously, in the end, Ibn Ḥazm includes a paragraph in which he mentions the conquests of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, contemporary to Ibn Ḥazm's own life, his struggle against the infidel and, strikingly, qualifies him as a zāhirī. What was the image of the great ghāzī-sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna in the eleventh century Islamic West? Why could it be useful to remember his conquests and leadership of jihād? Why did Ibn Ḥazm want to appropriate his memory and figure, and include him in his legal school? As far as possible, this work aims to answer these and other questions.