

The Moriscos in Tunisia

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Traditional historiography has maintained almost unanimously that Tunisia was one of the principal destinations of the Morisco exile of the early seventeenth century, and this assertion appears to be true. All the sources point to a significant Morisco presence in Tunisia, and above all to a major contribution by persons of Hispanic heritage to the social and economic life of that country.

In stating that Tunisia was one of the preferred destinations of the Morisco exile we should think not only of their numbers (which were not trivial, if we accept the proposed figure of more than fifty thousand¹) but particularly of the conditions of their reception – fairly exceptional and generally favorable, by all accounts – and of the remarkable contributions that the Moriscos made to the development and formation of modern Tunisian society. Thus the influential Morisco writer Ahmed Bejarano (Aḥmad al-Ḥaḡarī), decades after having left Spain and toured a great part of the Mediterranean, could claim that Tunis was at the time “el mejor puesto para los de la nación [the best place for people of (our) nation]”.²

1 The figures offered to date, which are never definitive, vary among different scholars between 50,000 and 80,000 Moriscos. Latham repeated the figure of 80,000 proposed by H.H. Abdul Wahab, but countered cautiously with 50,000: he was calculating first on the basis of a contemporary account by a captive English captain (Ellyatt, 1609–1613), and second on a 1628 report by the slave Marcelo Attardo, addressed to the Commander of the Order of Malta, which mentions the Morisco contribution to the Algerian-Tunisian conflict of the time. John Derek Latham, “Contribution à l’étude des immigrations andalouses et leur place dans l’histoire de la Tunisie,” *Recueil d’études sur les Moriscos Andalous en Tunisie* (Madrid-Tunis: Dirección General de Relaciones Culturales), 1973, 30–31.

2 At first, however, he had held as the most “desgraciados a los que fueron a Túnez que, según escribe Mármol en su Discripçion de Africa, es lugar donde no se abrán hartado los pobres de agua dulce y porque tienen dos plagas, la una de alarues y la otra de intolerables renegados y turcos” (“unfortunate those who went to Tunis, which [as Mármol writes in his *Discripçion de Africa*] is a place where the poor creatures could scarcely find enough fresh water, and where they have two plagues, one of Bedouins and the other of intolerable renegades and Turks”): Luis Bernabé Pons, “La nación en lugar seguro: los moriscos hacia Túnez,” *Actas del Coloquio Internacional “Los Moriscos y Túnez,” Cartas de La Goleta 2* (Tunis: Embajada de España), 2009, 108.

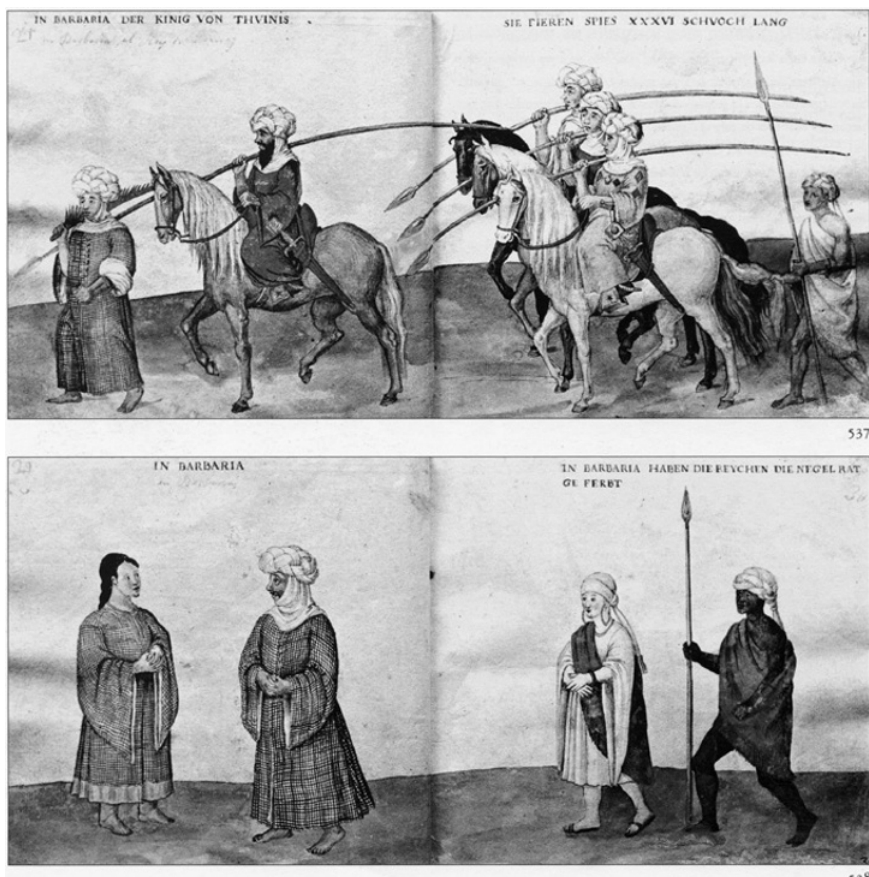


FIGURE 14.1 *Representations of inhabitants of Barbary in the Códice Madrazo-Daza, ca. 1540, Biblioteca Nacional de España.*
<http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000052132&page=1>.

We shall attempt in these pages to shed light on certain questions, although we lack sufficient documentation to provide definitive answers. We will draw on published sources, mostly by European historians, and on non-documentary ones, both physical (e.g., buildings) and cultural, which will inform us in particular about the Moriscos' "afterlife," the imprint and heritage that they left in Tunisia. The physical sources are not exclusively archaeological, since that field in Tunisia has developed slowly and rests on very limited historical research; the sources yield little on certain topics (for example, those of our first and second sections), but much that is