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BEGINNINGS: THE CONQUEST OF CEUTA

Portuguese expansion into North Africa began in 1415 with a massive military expedition against the Moroccan port-town of Ceuta, a short sea-voyage from Portugal across the narrow Straits of Gibraltar. Various explanations have been offered as to why the Portuguese leadership decided to launch this expedition, the most important of which have been conveniently summarised by Isabel and Paulo Drumond Braga.¹

Firstly, there were alleged strategic objectives such as gaining a degree of control over the Straits, obtaining a port from which to combat Muslim piracy and outmanoeuvring Castile; but there is little to suggest any of these aims was of decisive importance in 1415. A second type of explanation stresses the economic incentive. Ceuta was known to receive exotic trade goods from trans-Saharan and trans-Middle Eastern caravans for which reason it had already attracted attention from the Venetians and Genoese. Perhaps Ceuta was also seen as a potential supplier of wheat – a commodity Morocco produced in some abundance but Portugal needed to import. In any event, merchant interests, particularly in Lisbon, were supposed to have strongly favoured the expedition. Such explanations received wide credence especially in the mid-to-late twentieth century, when the magisterial writings of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho were at their most influential.²

A third kind of explanation sees the Ceuta expedition, which was strongly supported by the service nobility, as primarily an extension of the Iberian peninsula's long tradition of Reconquest. Recent historiography has tended

¹ Braga I M D and Braga P D 1998 pp 27–32.

² See Godinho V M 1962 chs 1–7.

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to lean towards this view – and with good reason. The goal of Reconquest had been integral to Iberian Christian life since well before the emergence of the Portuguese kingdom in the time of Afonso Henriques. Moreover, although Portugal had freed itself of occupation by the mid-thirteenth century, other parts of the peninsula still remained in Muslim hands. Nor had the threat of further invasions from North Africa disappeared. As recently as 1340 just such an invasion had occurred, led by the Marinid sultan of Fez in person. In response, the king of Portugal and much of the Portuguese nobility had combined with their Castilian counterparts to impose a crushing defeat on the invaders at the battle of Rio Salado, fought near Seville. This encounter took place only seventy-five years before the Ceuta expedition, and in 1415 it certainly still remained a vivid memory. Meanwhile, the Muslim kingdom of Granada persisted – a beleaguered remnant of al-Andalus on peninsular soil, and in Christian eyes a standing provocation.

The notion of Reconquest was not confined to the Iberian peninsula only. The kings of Portugal, Castile and Aragon all claimed to be the rightful heirs to an ancient Visigothic North Africa wrongfully taken from their forefathers by Muslim conquerors in the early eighth century. Against this background, a tacit understanding among the three allowed each to claim the region of North Africa nearest to his own kingdom. In the case of Portugal, this meant northwestern Morocco. So it is unsurprising that, in the decades following Rio Salado, prosecuting the war against Islam remained firmly on Portugal's agenda. In fact, as Luís Filipe Thomaz points out, five successive papal bulls were secured by Portuguese kings between 1341 and 1377 formally authorising crusades against Muslims in either Granada or North Africa.³ Only the ravages of the Black Death and repeated wars with Castile prevented these bulls from being acted upon.

However, by the second decade of the fifteenth century, the impact on Portugal of 'plague' had subsided and João I had established himself securely on the Portuguese throne. In 1411, peace had been made with Castile, and Portugal entered upon a period of economic recovery and political renewal. Expeditions against Muslim targets consequently became more practicable – and, from the crown and nobility's viewpoints, had much to recommend them. Launching a major attack against Muslims offered a restless, under-resourced nobility the possibility of gaining honour and booty. The most obvious target was Granada, and the Portuguese leadership at first seriously considered moving against that kingdom. But Granada lay within the king of Castile's zone of conquest and could not be targeted without Castilian co-operation.⁴ Therefore, an alternative was needed – which could be found only in nearby Morocco.

³ Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 47–8, 50.

⁴ Farinha A D 2002 pp 8–9.

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One possibility was Ceuta, an ancient city located on the southeastern fringe of the Straits of Gibraltar. Ceuta had been briefly occupied by the Visigoths, first in the mid-sixth century and probably again in the early eighth century. In 711, it had served as the springboard for Tariq's expedition against Visigothic Hispania, as it did for subsequent Islamic invasions up to and including that of the Almohads. Ceuta was also one of just three places on the Moroccan side of the Straits that possessed fairly secure anchorages, the other two being Tangier and Al-Ksar as-Saghir. Since 1309 it had been nominally within the sultanate of the Marinids of Fez; but Marinid authority was by this time weak and was exercised only loosely. Ceuta was therefore a semi-autonomous city run largely by its own merchant elite.⁵

After long and careful preparation, João I's expedition against Ceuta was launched in the summer of 1415. The *Cronica da tomada de Ceuta* by Gomes Eanes de Zurara, which was written a generation later in 1449–50 at the request of King Afonso V, is the only literary source that describes the expedition and its background in substantial detail.⁶ Zurara was Fernão Lopes's successor as royal archivist, and his account of the taking of Ceuta was intended as a continuation of Lopes's chronicle of the reign of João I. It is couched in terms of a panegyric of the military nobility who took part and of Prince Henrique in particular. But Zurara's work nevertheless used contemporary documents and was well informed. All modern accounts of the campaign are based primarily on Zurara, although Peter Russell has recently shown that a number of letters written to King Fernando I of Aragon in 1415 by a secret agent in Lisbon are also relevant.⁷

The Ceuta expedition was enthusiastically supported by the three older sons of João I and most of the court nobility. Among its most articulate advocates was João Afonso de Alenquer, the king's *vedor da fazenda*. He allegedly stressed the wealth Ceuta derived from the desert caravans – gold and slaves from sub-Saharan Africa, silks and spices from the East via Egypt – as well as cattle, grain and cloth from its own hinterland. Magalhães Godinho follows António Sérgio in arguing that the Ceuta enterprise was adopted largely on the advice of João Afonso, acting as a spokesman for Lisbon merchant interests. However, both Thomaz and Russell doubt that Afonso ever played such a role, seeing him instead as a nobleman promoting nobles' interests.⁸

The expedition assembled in late July 1415 at the port of Lagos in the southwestern Algarve. It consisted of perhaps about 20,000 men and was

⁵ Cook W F 1994 p 31; Braga I M D and Braga P D 1998 p 15.

⁶ Zurara G E de 1965 p 8.

⁷ Russell P E 2000 pp 30–1

⁸ Godinho V M 1962 pp 109–11; Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 24–5; Russell P E 2000 p 41.

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formally led by João I himself – although operational command was entrusted to his three oldest sons, Princes Duarte, Pedro and Henrique. That so many male members of the royal family participated personally in such a dangerous enterprise was quite exceptional.⁹ The expeditionaries themselves were overwhelmingly Portuguese, but also included contingents of English, French, German and other foreign mercenaries. In August the fleet of over 200 disparate transports crossed to North Africa. However, on arrival off Ceuta it found that the town's governor had already prepared his defences. The expedition therefore temporarily drew off – and the governor, believing the threat had passed, then dismissed many of his men.

A few days later the fleet returned to Ceuta, catching the defenders by surprise. Many fled, there was little resistance and on 22 August the expeditionaries broke into the largely abandoned city and duly sacked it. According to Zurara, the looters destroyed much of value in the warehouses. They sliced open bags of spices, spilling pepper and cinnamon into the street, where they were trodden underfoot and filled the air with their pungent odours.¹⁰ When order had been restored the victors celebrated a triumphant *Te Deum* in the principal mosque that had been swiftly converted into a makeshift church. The three royal princes duly received their knighthoods, and, for all the Portuguese present, it was an occasion resonant with symbolism.¹¹ Later a story gained credence that on the night Ceuta fell a ghostly Afonso Henriques appeared, dressed in armour, to the canons of Santa Cruz in Coimbra – and declared he and his son Sancho had led the Portuguese forces to victory.¹²

After Ceuta had been captured and thoroughly looted King João I convened a council to decide what to do with it. Should the Portuguese occupy the city permanently and use it as a springboard for further North African conquests – or should they merely dismantle its defences and then withdraw? Fatefully, the decision was made that Ceuta be retained. Indeed, this had almost certainly been João's intention from the start. Why otherwise would he have mounted so large and expensive an enterprise?¹³ Dom Pedro de Meneses was selected as captain and governor, beginning a long association between Morocco and the Meneses family – one of the earliest instances of a noble family achieving advancement and profit from overseas service. The king, the princes and most of the expedition then returned to Portugal, leaving behind a garrison of about 2,500 soldiers. The whole operation was over within less than two weeks; but

⁹ Farinha A D 2002 p 17.

¹⁰ Zurara G E de 1965 p 98.

¹¹ Lopes D 1937 pp 131–3; NHEP vol 2 pp 237–45; Braga I M D and Braga P D 1998 pp 17–25.

¹² Mascarenhas J de 1918 p 96.

¹³ Godinho V M 1962 p 117; Farinha A D 2002 p 17.

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it started a Portuguese commitment in Morocco that would last in one form or another for 350 years.

THE ERA OF NEO-RECONQUEST

After 1415 every Portuguese ruler from João I to Manuel I became deeply enmeshed in North Africa. The least involved was João I himself, who never re-visited Morocco; but he was firmly committed to retaining Ceuta, which in 1419–20, with the help of a relief expedition commanded by Prince Henrique, withstood a major counter-attack by the Marinid Sultan Abu Said Uthman III (1399–1420). For the rest of João's reign action was limited, the Portuguese remaining confined to Ceuta and its immediate environs. This lull can be partly explained by the assassination of Sultan Abu Said in 1420 and his subsequent replacement by an infant son, Abd al-Haqq II (1428–65). Moreover, Portugal needed time to recover from its earlier exertions and was distracted by renewed tensions with Castile.¹⁴ By the time a new Luso-Castilian peace had been signed in 1431 João I was in his seventies and understandably had less enthusiasm for overseas adventures. Nevertheless, even before the king's death two years later, the possibility of sending another expedition to North Africa, this time against Tangier, was being vigorously debated at court.

The leading advocates of a Tangier campaign were Prince Henrique, always an ardent champion of crusading ventures, and his youngest brother, Prince Fernando, who wished to win his spurs – like the older princes had done at Ceuta. Most of the service nobility, many of whom were impoverished and desperately eager to seize any opportunity to replenish their fortunes, likewise supported the idea. However, the Tangier enterprise was opposed by several important magnates, including Prince Pedro, Prince João and the king's illegitimate half-brother Afonso, count of Barcelos. They argued that crusading in Morocco was too costly, required manpower and resources Portugal could not sustain and might even displease God.¹⁵ The bourgeoisie was divided: Lisbon, Porto and the Algarve ports were pro-expansionist; but most other towns took a contrary view. These internal divisions were fundamental and persisted in one form or another for many years.

King Duarte finally gave his approval for an expedition against Tangier in 1437, placing Henrique in command with Fernando as his deputy. But the force with which they eventually set sail for North Africa late that summer was significantly under-strength. Moreover, Tangier had received plenty of notice and was well prepared to defend itself. There was therefore no repeat

¹⁴ Cook W F 1994 p 93; Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 70–1.

¹⁵ Godinho V M 1962 pp 104–6; Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 97–8; Russell P E 2000 pp 137–46.

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of the quick success of 1415, and Henrique had to undertake a full-scale siege, for which his army was ill equipped. He built a stockade outside Tangier's walls; but it was soon surrounded by Marinid forces that converged on the town from the interior, cutting off the besiegers' access to the sea. Five weeks later Henrique's army was in dire straits – and he had little alternative but to ask for terms. Eventually he was granted safe passage to his ships, but, in return, had to promise to surrender Ceuta, meanwhile leaving Prince Fernando as a hostage in the hands of the Marinids.¹⁶

After this setback Duarte called the *cortes* to advise what should be done. Counsels were again divided; but powerful figures among the nobility, including the count of Barcelos – soon to be made duke of Bragança – urged that Ceuta be kept and Fernando left to his fate. This advice was supported by the representatives of Lisbon, Porto and the towns of the Algarve coast, who considered it would serve their economic and defence interests. Predictably, Prince Pedro and the *procuradores* of most of the other municipalities disagreed, advocating the abandonment of not only Ceuta but the whole Moroccan enterprise. However, the church authorities in the person of the archbishop of Braga insisted that Ceuta, having been conquered under the auspices of the Holy See, could not be surrendered without papal consent. Duarte himself prevaricated, then suddenly died of 'plague' in September 1438 before the issue had been settled.¹⁷ Although various attempts were subsequently made to negotiate a ransom for Fernando without returning Ceuta, the Marinid-Wattasid leadership rejected every overture. In 1443 Fernando himself died, still a prisoner in Fez. An unwilling martyr, he became popularly known in Portugal as the 'holy prince'. His death ended the agonising debate over Ceuta – and the opportunity for Portugal to make an early exit from Morocco was passed up.

During Prince Pedro's regency the neo-Reconquest was not pressed. However, when Afonso V came of age in 1446 he moved to resume campaigning with vigour, strongly supported by the service nobility. Meanwhile, the Moroccan capacity to resist was weakened by an internal power struggle between the young Marinid sultan of Fez, Abd al-Haqq, and his Wattasid regents. This meant that in the middle to later years of the century conditions favoured Portuguese intervention. Seizing his opportunity, Afonso V crossed the Straits in 1458 and easily captured Al-Ksar as-Saghir.¹⁸ Some thirteen years later in 1471 he returned at the head of a huge expedition of reportedly 30,000 men and 400 ships to attack Asilah, which he duly captured and looted. Among the

¹⁶ Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 99–100; Russell P E 2000 pp 178–85; Farinha A D 2002 pp 23–4.

¹⁷ DHDP vol 1 pp 413–15; Thomaz L F R 1994 pp 100–2.

¹⁸ Diffie B W and Winius G D 1977 pp 109–10; SHP vol 2 1980 pp 82–5; Cook W F 1994 pp 93–8.

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prisoners taken were two wives and a son of the Wattasid leader Muhammad ash-Shaykh, much of whose treasury also fell into Portuguese hands.¹⁹ This expedition is graphically depicted in a splendid fifteenth-century tapestry now in the museum of the Colegiata church in Pestrana, which was possibly designed by the great Portuguese painter Nuno Gonçalves.²⁰ After the fall of Asilah most of the inhabitants of nearby Tangier fled, deeming their city to be undefendable. The Portuguese then promptly occupied it, so gaining control of virtually the whole southern shore of the Straits of Gibraltar.²¹ It was following these developments that Muhammad ash-Shaykh accepted a treaty of peace with the Portuguese, conceding to Afonso in 1471 both Asilah and Tangier. This freed the Wattasid leader to concentrate on winning Fez, which he successfully accomplished the following year, duly becoming sultan.

For more than four decades after the Luso-Wattasid agreement of 1471 Portugal's power and influence in Morocco continued to grow.²² Afonso V had been accompanied on the Asilah expedition by his fifteen-year-old son, Prince João, and it was this prince who in the course of the 1470s increasingly assumed responsibility for Portuguese military activity in North Africa. As ambitious as his father but considerably more capable and far-sighted, João began to focus more on Atlantic Morocco south of the Rif Mountains. First he directed Portuguese attention to the ports which gave access to the Gharb plains round Fez, then towards the rich, alluvial Sus valley south of the Central Atlas. This shift was linked to the contemporaneous development and growth of Portuguese trade with Guinea, of which João was also the principal sponsor. For through Safi, Azemmour and other Moroccan Atlantic ports, the Portuguese could access the wheat, horses and textiles they needed for the West Africa market.

By the late fifteenth century there were therefore two distinct zones of Portuguese activity in Morocco: in the north fringing the Straits of Gibraltar and in the southwest along the Atlantic coast.²³ Portuguese intrusions into the southwest of Morocco were carried out mainly by sea but also through a series of inland probes. As early as 1469 Afonso V's younger brother, Fernando, had led a daring pioneer raid southwards from Al-Ksar as-Saghir, attacking and sacking Anafé (Casablanca).²⁴ The coastal towns and communities of Atlantic Morocco, aware the sultan at Fez could do little to protect them against such

¹⁹ Cook W F 1994 p 98; Farinha A D 2002 p 25.

²⁰ DIHP vol 2 p 267.

²¹ Lopes D 1939 pp 341–2; SHP vol 2 1980 pp 87–8; DHDP vol 2 p 1016.

²² Farinha A D 2002 pp 38–9.

²³ Ricard R 1955 pp 85–105

²⁴ Sanceau E 1961 p 235.

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incursions or from the ravages of Iberian Christian corsairs more generally, mostly accepted peace on Portuguese terms. João, who became king as João II in 1481, was able to induce the rulers of Azemmour and Safi to become Portugal's tributaries and to agree to the establishment of Portuguese fortresses and *feitorias* on their territory.

By the late 1480s most of the towns and tribes of the Atlantic coast had made peace with the Portuguese and were busily trading with them, and João therefore began to turn his attention to the nearby interior.²⁵ He made the bold decision to construct a fortress on an island in the River Loukkos, fifteen kilometres inland from Al-Arish. Called Graciosa, this fortress marked a bold new step in Portuguese North African expansion, for it was located beyond the reach of direct seaborne supplies. Pre-fabricated materials were prepared and delivered on site in July 1489, and construction was duly commenced. But news of Graciosa greatly alarmed Sultan Muhammad ash-Shaykh, who decided it had to be stopped. He therefore gathered a large army and descended on the half-finished structure. Although the Portuguese held out against his first assaults, they did so with considerable difficulty – and it soon became evident the whole project was fatally flawed. Contrary to João's original understanding, the site was swampy and malarial and the river almost dried up in summer, greatly complicating the task of delivering supplies and reinforcements. Graciosa therefore had to be dismantled and abandoned. This was a significant setback, for the king had harboured great hopes for it, both as a prestige project and as a practical base for Portuguese inland penetration.²⁶

Meanwhile, in 1479 Portugal's 'right' to conquer the kingdom of Fez had been formally recognised by Castile at the treaty of Alcaçovas. This was important, for Castilian attacks and raids against Moroccan targets had been increasing, presenting the Portuguese with some serious competition. Later, in the treaty of Tordesilhas (1494), Castile acknowledged that the Portuguese zone for making conquests in Morocco extended west and south from Melilla; conversely, the area east of Melilla plus a short stretch of mainland coast opposite the Canaries were recognised by Portugal as Castilian preserves.²⁷ Boosted by this agreement and by papal endorsement of Portugal's 'right' to conquer the kingdom of Fez, Portuguese involvement in Morocco deepened in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Manuel I, who succeeded João II as king in 1495, saw himself as a man of destiny specially chosen by God to complete the neo-Reconquest. He envisioned subduing both Fez and Marrakesh,

²⁵ Cook W F 1994 pp 116–17.

²⁶ Sanceau E 1959 pp 265–70; Mendonça M 1991 pp 284, 410; NHEP vol 2 pp 291–3; Cook W F 1994 pp 117–18.

²⁷ Sanceau E 1961 pp 236–7; DHDP vol 1 pp 42–4; NHEP vol 2 p 95; Farinha A D 2002 p 27.

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bringing all Morocco's coastal lowlands under Portuguese control and creating an 'Algarve beyond the sea'. This was to be accomplished by first strengthening existing fortresses and garrisons and systematically annexing unsubdued coastal towns as far south as the Sus valley. Then Manuel would make his moves against Fez and Marrakesh.

Manuel devoted a substantial proportion of his kingdom's resources to this visionary enterprise, which, for most of his reign, was clearly his priority overseas commitment. To encourage participation by the service nobility he created additional *comendas* in the Order of Christ which were reserved for those who served meritoriously in Morocco.²⁸ The Manueline effort in North Africa was greatest during the decade 1505–15. At the start of this period, the key fortress of Santa Cruz do Cabo de Gué was founded near Agadir, in order to dominate a key strategic route into the Sus valley. A short-lived fort was also established at Mogador (Essaouira) in 1505–10 and another at Agouz on the mouth of the River Tensift. In 1508 the Portuguese *feitoria* at Safi was converted into a fortress, and later the town itself was annexed. Azemmour was seized in 1513 and a fortress built at nearby Mazagão.²⁹ Towards the end of this remarkable decade, the Portuguese captain of Safi, Nuno Fernandes de Ataide, brought into formal submission a considerable proportion of that port's hinterland. Then in 1515, after fruitless efforts to persuade Marrakesh, the southern capital, to acknowledge Manuel's suzerainty, Ataide led a 3,000-man army composed largely of Berber auxiliaries to the gates of that ancient Almoravid city.³⁰

Ataide's daring attack on Marrakesh marked the high-point of Portugal's intrusion into Morocco. It also demonstrated just how difficult implementing the Manueline vision was going to be. To operate successfully in the North African context the Portuguese needed the support of their ships and in particular of their naval cannon. Without such support it was all but impossible to sustain a long-term presence in the face of any serious opposition – and expeditions into the interior could never be more than mere raids with a fleeting impact. Like João II before him, Manuel saw the answer to this problem in the construction of a steadily expanding chain of strategically-located fortresses, on the model of the peninsular Reconquest.

In the mid-1510s, Manuel resolved to plant one such fortress at Mamora, near the mouth of the river Sibou. If successful, this move would have plugged the gap between Asilah and Azemmour, so linking the Portuguese possessions

²⁸ Lopes D 1937 p 154; Farinha A D 2002 p 57.

²⁹ Lopes D 1937 pp 154–8; Lopes D 1939 pp 343–8; Sanceau E 1961 231–95; Farinha A D 2002 pp 29–30.

³⁰ Lopes D 1937 pp 158–9; Cook W F 1994 p 148.

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in southwest Morocco with those in the north. It would also have provided Manuel's forces with a convenient base from which to dominate rich surrounding grain lands – and to command the route east towards Fez. To establish the Mamora fortress and an associated settlement, an expedition of some 10,000 soldiers and colonists was despatched to Morocco in 1515 under the command of Dom António de Noronha, later first count of Linhares. A timber fortress protected by a ditch was installed. But the Moroccan response was swift and vigorous: within a month Mamora had been surrounded by a substantial Wattasid army that brought with it several cannon manned by renegade Christian gunners. The timber fort and supporting craft in the nearby river were soon suffering major damage from cannon fire – an ominous warning that Moroccan armies now had effective capability with gunpowder weapons – and the Portuguese were forced into a hasty evacuation by barge.³¹

The failure at Mamora in 1515, along with Ataide's inability to score more than a symbolic success against Marrakesh, stalled Manuel's Moroccan program and dampened Portuguese expansionist optimism. Ataide himself was killed in 1516; Yahya ibn Tafuft, Portugal's chief collaborator in southern Morocco, was assassinated two years later – and it proved impossible to replace him.³² Then the succession to the Portuguese throne in 1521 of João III, who did not share his father's vision for North Africa, ensured that the drive for neo-Reconquest failed to regain momentum.

RETREAT AND STALEMATE

By the early 1520s the Portuguese had, to all intents and purposes, abandoned their expansionist ambitions in Morocco and adopted instead a policy of entrenchment. This change was partly brought on by developments within Morocco itself. Previously the Portuguese had encountered only sporadic resistance from a sultanate – initially Marinid, later Wattasid – based on the northern capital of Fez. However, from the 1520s they found themselves facing more impassioned and determined enemies from the south, who were also increasingly well armed – namely, the Sadian sharifs. Bursting on the political scene in the early sixteenth century and quickly hailed by Sufi religious leaders as standard-bearers of a new spirit of jihad, the Sadians commanded widespread popular support and were soon on course to oust the Wattasids. By 1524 they had assumed control of Marrakesh, and in 1549 they finally took Fez, so extending their rule to most of Morocco.³³

³¹ Lopes D 1939 pp 166–7; Sanceau E 1961 pp 286–90; Cook W F 1994 pp 148–9.

³² Cook W F 1994 p 156.

³³ Hess A C 1978 pp 50–3; Abun-Nasr J M 1987 pp 206–12; Cook W F 1994 pp 167–70.