CHAPTER SEVEN

CAPTIVITY AND DIPLOMACY IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL CROWN OF ARAGON

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In 1319, as James II of Aragon (r. 1291–1327) prepared to send an embassy to the North African kingdom of Tlemcen, he gave very specific instructions to his envoys. The length of any possible truce with Tlemcen was to be linked to the number of captives released by the Muslim kingdom. James would agree to a ten-year truce if all the captives held by Tlemcen were released, while the liberation of fifty captives would only merit a two- or three-year truce. This is one of the most direct manifestations of the role captives played in the foreign policy and diplomacy between the Crown of Aragon and its Muslim neighbors in the late Middle Ages, but it is far from the only one. This paper examines the taking of captives between Muslims and Christians as more than just a politically disruptive and individually shattering event. It argues that captivity was instrumental to the foreign policy and diplomatic maneuvering of Aragonese kings because negotiations with their Muslim counterparts over captivity created a framework for compromise, dialogue, and even cooperation. The taking of captives and hostages, or even the threat that this could happen, opened channels of communication between competing monarchs, provided imperatives to reach truce agreements, and supplied the tools to implement and maintain treaties.

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2 Some of the ideas expressed here have been influenced by the literature on captivity among the Plains Indians of North America. See, for example, the work of Patricia Albers, “Symbiosis, Merger, and War: Contrasting Forms of Intertribal Relationship among Historic Plains Indians,” in The Political Economy of North American Indians, ed. John Moore (Lincoln, 1993), p. 128; and James F. Brooks, Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands (Chapel Hill, 2002).
Relations between Christian and Muslim polities were dominated by diplomatic exchanges and much of this diplomacy was instigated by the problem posed by captivity.\(^3\) Taking captives was a widespread practice in the medieval Mediterranean as Christians and Muslims both engaged in it with relish. In the process thousands found themselves enchainèd, prompting vigorous efforts by their coreligionists to redeem them. Although families and friends were often at the forefront of such rescue efforts, royal authorities, Christian and Muslim, played a critical role as well, using missives, ambassadors, and intermediaries to entreat, cajole, and even threaten their counterparts to release those who had been captured.\(^4\) I would like to begin by discussing how embassies and other diplomatic missions sent to secure the release of Christian captives often ended up dealing with other matters as well. In these cases, discussions over captives provided an entry point to other issues. Secondly, I will turn my attention to the truces sealed between the kings of Aragon and neighboring Muslim states to argue that concerns over captives influenced the way in which these truces were negotiated, agreed to, implemented, and even maintained when they were in danger of falling apart.

On 20 April 1321, James II sent a letter to Pope John XXII asking permission to send a ship to Egypt to rescue some Christian captives held there. Normally, this would not have required papal permission, but James intended to use the opening provided by the negotiations over the captives to discuss numerous other matters with Sultan Muhammad Ibn Qalawun (d. 1341), although at this point it is unclear if he had already

\(^3\) For a thorough examination of the diplomatic relations between Aragon and the North African kingdoms see María Dolores López Pérez, *La Corona de Aragón y el Magreb en el siglo XIV (1331–1410)* (Barcelona, 1995), notably part I. For relations with Granada, see Roser Salicrú i Lluch, *El sultanat de Granada i la Corona d’Aragó, 1410–1458* (Barcelona, 1998).