

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Social Life of Wax in the Premodern Maghrib

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Abstract

Between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, large quantities of wax were exported from the Maghrib to Europe. In the Maghrib, both raw wax and wax candles were involved in various social interactions that transcended mere environmental and economic considerations. For some Muslims, wax came to index Christianity, and its significance during the celebration of the Prophet's birthday was critiqued as a corrupt innovation. At the same time, to prevent the facilitation of Catholic devotion—and because wax was deemed war material—the sale of wax to Christians was forbidden. Nevertheless, wax remained a profitable product sold to Christians in significant quantities. The anxiety surrounding the movement of wax and the attempts to regulate it indicate that for Muslims, wax served as a religious boundary marker. Christians too utilized the substance to reinforce communal boundaries. Catholics in the Maghrib—captives, clergy, and merchants—used wax to establish and express confessional divides, aiming to deter Catholic captives from converting to Islam. Priests distributed blessed candles to captives, who in turn donated wax to the clergy. Moreover, priests gifted candles to Algerian dignitaries, a practice opposed by the papacy. Wax formed invisible, often unintended connections between Muslim theologians and rulers, Catholic and Muslim captives, slaves, wax makers, merchants, and redeemers. These entanglements sparked anxiety, a sense of impurity, and a drive to reinforce religious boundaries. This article explores a fragmented history of these connections and relationships and argues that the failed attempts to regulate this circulation fostered new entanglements.

Keywords: wax; early modern; medieval; Maghrib; Spain; Mediterranean; religion; commerce

In a recent essay on wax, philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman noted that “wax is the material of all resemblances,” to the point that it was perceived as “almost alive.”¹ The substance's “multiplicity of physical properties,” as he puts it, means that it lends

¹Georges Didi-Huberman, “Wax Flesh, Vicious Circles,” in *Encyclopaedia Anatomica: A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes* (New York: Taschen, 1999), 64–74.

itself, with hardly any resistance, to any form of technique. It is effortlessly melted and cast in a mold, smoothly sliced, easily warmed up in the hand, and reshaped by the fingers. In short, wax is “the unstable material par excellence,” and this instability manifests itself in the contradictory physical properties it embodies. This ability to incorporate alleged oppositions, I suggest, also characterizes its medieval and early modern Maghribi history. A similar opposition is found in the tension between prohibitions against the exchange and use of wax and its artifacts and the violations of these prohibitions. A second such opposition lies in the contrast between the distinct identity of Islamic manuscripts or Catholic devotional objects and the ambiguity of the religious identity of raw wax or even candles.² A third opposition is in the contrast between the rarity of extant artifacts, partly due to the ephemeral nature of wax, and the abundance of archival references to its exchange and use.³ This documental wealth shows that despite or perhaps because of these tensions, wax stood at the heart of numerous discourses and practices involving Muslims and Catholic Christians in the premodern Maghrib.

Between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period wax was one of three main commodities exported in mass quantities from the Maghrib to Europe. Massive Catholic demand for wax was met through Maghribi supply. Several factors accounted for the Maghrib’s ability to satisfy the European need for wax. First, wax was a byproduct of honey, a substance that bees produced to store the honey in their hives. The environmental conditions of the central and western Maghrib were conducive for beekeeping and thus wax production. A number of fatwas (unbinding legal opinions issued by muftis) on honey and geographical treatises suggest that wax and honey were produced abundantly across the region’s southern mountain ranges and those in the north overlooking the Mediterranean. Second, Maghribi consumed significantly more honey but far less wax than Catholics. Maghribi primarily used wax and candles during the Mawlid celebrations, but the quantities they consumed on this Islamic holiday were incomparable to Catholic use of the substance. Finally, Maghribi sold wax to Christians directly and via Jewish intermediaries.⁴

In the premodern Maghrib, wax was one of several commodities that stood at the heart of reversed religious restrictions and permissions on mobility, use, and exchange. I argue that the anxiety around the movement of wax and the attempts at regulating it suggest that wax functioned as a religious-boundary marker for

²Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Ross Brann, *The Compunctious Poet: Cultural Ambiguity and Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991).

³The earliest surviving wax votives are from mid-fifteenth century England. See Ittai Weinryb, “Introduction: Ex-Voto as Material Culture,” in Ittai Weinryb, ed., *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016), 9.

⁴For an illuminating analysis of these overlapping processes, see Alexandra Sapoznik, “Bees in the Medieval Maghreb: Wax, Honey and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Western Mediterranean,” *Medieval Encounters* 27, 4–5 (2021): 434–55. For analysis of religious consumption of wax in England and in Catalonia, see Lluís Sales I Fava and Alexandra Sapoznik, “The Production and Trade of Wax in North-Eastern Iberia, XIV–XVI c. The Case of Catalonia,” in D. Wallace-Hare, ed., *New Approaches to the Archaeology of Beekeeping* (Archaeopress, 2022), 172–85, and Alexandra Sapoznik, “Bees in the Medieval Economy: Religious Observance and the Production, Trade, and Consumption of Wax in England, c. 1300–1555,” *Economic History Review* 72, 4 (2019): 1152–74.

Muslims.⁵ Paper was another such commodity, one to which a fourteenth century mufti dedicated a long fatwa concerned with the importation of European paper to the Maghrib and its use by Muslims. In a revealing article on the fatwa, Leor Halevi has historicized it by focusing on the mufti's "balancing act" between economic exchange and the need for ritual purity.⁶ Focusing on wax and honey, Alexandra Sapoznik has contextualized such prohibitions within the specificities of the environment in which the commodity or substance is produced and the religious diversity in the region. Centering on wax's materiality, instability, and transformability, I explore how these qualities lent themselves to multiple social uses and cultural borrowing, produced an elusive religious identity, and helped wax candles work ritually.⁷

In the premodern North Africa, raw wax and wax candles contributed to multiple interactions and formed relations among Christians and between Christians and Muslims irreducible to their environmental and economic aspects. For some Muslims, wax came to index Christianity. As a result, its centrality in Islamic holidays was denounced as a corrupting appropriation. Indeed, Muslims adapted Catholic elements to the celebrations of the prophet's birthday. In parallel, to avoid facilitating Catholic devotion (and because wax was deemed war material), several muftis forbade the sale of wax to Christians. Yet wax was also a profitable commodity that Muslims sold to Christians in mass quantities.

While Christians never perceived wax as inherently Islamic, they too used the substance to activate communal boundaries and prevent their crossing. Catholics in the Maghrib—captives, free ecclesiastics, and merchants—used wax for forming and performing confessional boundaries in order to deter Catholic captives from converting to Islam despite the trial of captivity. Priests distributed blessed candles to captives; captives donated wax to priests; Moriscos, Spain's Muslims forced to convert to Christianity and their descendants, sometimes contributed wax alms to claim membership in the confessional community that they allegedly betrayed upon conversion; finally, priests in Algiers also gifted candles to local dignitaries, a practice which the papacy opposed.

Wax connected in invisible, often unintended, threads Muslim theologians and rulers, Catholic and Muslim captives and slaves, Muslim and Christian wax makers, and Christian merchants and redeemers.⁸ These entanglements often generated anxiety, a sense of impurity and drive to purify, or perform religious boundaries as if they were intact. This article charts a fragmentary history of these and other connections and relations. By reconstructing attempts to regulate the cross-boundary movements of wax and the failure of these efforts, I argue that these efforts paradoxically led to new entanglements between Christians and Muslims in the premodern Maghrib. Following the wax trail brings to light socialized links connecting taverners, friars, and local Moriscos within the entanglements of wax

⁵Daniel Hershenzon, "Captive Objects: Catholic Artifacts Across the Early Modern Western Mediterranean," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* (2024): 1–29.

⁶Halevi, Leor. "Christian Impurity versus Economic Necessity: A Fifteenth-Century Fatwa on European Paper," *Speculum* 83, 4 (2008): 917–45.

⁷On olive oil in the classical and European world, see Anne Meneley, "Oleo-Signs and Quali-Signs: The Qualities of Olive Oil," *Ethnos* 73, 3 (2008): 303–26.

⁸Ian Hodder, "The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View," *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 19–36.

with grape production, booty, the salaries of the Janissaries, the Ottoman local army units, and the pasha, the governor of the Ottoman province of Algiers, who paid them. These entanglements also took place on a regional scale when northbound wax crossed the Mediterranean connecting Maghribi cities with European ones.

Islamic Objections to Wax and Candles

Medieval Muslim rulers and legal scholars sought to regulate the exchange of wax and wax candles with Catholics. The first objection to such exchange was based on Islamic identification of wax and candles with Catholicism: theologians claimed that consumption of wax by Muslims might facilitate adoption of Catholic forms of worship involving candles and lead to religious impurity. The second reason was not uniquely Islamic, as some Christian rulers, for example, the king of Portugal, too banned the sale of wax to Muslims.⁹ Since wax had uses as war material used for the maintenance of ships, neither Muslims nor Christians wanted to supply it to each other and potentially strengthen their military might. Attempts at regulation, however, never gained more than temporary support, and all ultimately failed. Muslims exchanged wax with Catholics and did indeed incorporate Catholic religious elements into the Mawlid, the celebrations of the prophet's birthday.

Attempts at Regulation

The use of wax and candles stood at the heart of two legal conversations. The first concerned the Mawlid and the appropriation of religious forms suspected as Christian. Partly due to its late introduction into the Islamic holiday calendar, elements of the Mawlid were always suspected as adoption of Christian forms of cult and illicit innovation. The first to introduce the feast to the Islamic world were the Fatimids of Egypt at some point after 1037.¹⁰ Soon after, the celebrations spread across the Islamic world. The first city in the Maghrib to adopt the holiday was thirteenth-century Ceuta, but from there it spread across North Africa. The rise of Moroccan Sharifian dynasties went hand in hand with the institutionalization of the Mawlid. Members of the Saadi and Alaouite dynasties used the feast as a tool of political legitimization on the basis of which they founded their claim to be Sharifs, or descendants of the prophet, and "heir[s] to the prophetic caliphate."¹¹ As a result, in the Maghrib, the holiday of the prophet's nativity gained such importance and seconded only the canonical holidays, Eid al-Fitr (The Feast of Breaking the Fast) and Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice).¹²

⁹Giuseppe Marcocci, "Trading with the Muslim World: Religious Limits and Proscriptions in the Portuguese Empire (ca. 1480–1570)," in Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, and Cátia Antunes, eds., *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 91–107.

¹⁰N. J. G. Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 7–30.

¹¹Stephen Cory, *Reviving the Islamic Caliphate in Early Modern Morocco* (London: Routledge, 2013), 171; Pessah Shinar, *Modern Islam in the Maghrib* (Jerusalem: The Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation, 2004), 371–413, 377.

¹²Shinar, *Modern Islam in the Maghrib*, 398.

The festivities varied between locations and periods, typically including some combination of suspension of labor, processions, music, dancing, recitation of panegyric poetry, banquets, distribution of food, especially sweets, and almsgiving; but the lighting of and processions with elaborated wax candles and chandeliers were an element common to all or nearly all Mawlid celebrations in the Maghrib. Multiple sources attest to that. A few examples illustrate the ubiquity of candles in the feast. In *The Correct and Fine Traditions About the Glorious Deeds of our Master Abu 'l-Hasan*, a laudatory biography of Marinid Sultan Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī (d. 1351), scholar Muḥammad ibn- Marzūq recalled how large amounts of leftover wax were distributed among poor travelers.¹³ In his renowned *Description of Africa*, al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Fasi, known in Europe as Leo Africanus, recounted how in the second decade of the sixteenth century, schoolboys in Fez used to bring their teachers expensive, colorful candles decorated with wax fruits. The candles were lit until their consummation, and then the wax fruit was distributed among the children.¹⁴ The importance of the Mawlid, as well as of the role wax candles played in the celebrations, reached its peak during the reign of the powerful Saadi Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr, from 1578 to 1603. During the holiday, large candles mounted on copper trays were carried around in his capital, Marrakesh, so that “their ascending into the sky appeared like minarets.” On the festival’s last day, al-Manṣūr led a procession with candles to his father’s tomb. The candles were placed in branched handlebars carried upon curtained couches like brides taken to their bridegrooms’ houses, or in the words of historian, poet, and court secretary Abd al-aziz al-Fishtālī (d. 1621), like “virgins, strutting in splendid clothing, gorgeous and glorious as they are carried upon their litters.”¹⁵ When the procession arrived at the palace, the candleholders were arranged at the exterior of the courtyard like date palms.¹⁶ In eighteenth-century Blida, members of the wax sellers’ corporations manufactured multicolor wax structures for the holiday.¹⁷ The association between the holiday and candles was so strong in the Maghrib that in the early eighteenth century, the Mawlid was called “the Feast of the Candles.” Burning colorful, elaborated candles and candle processions came to visually epitomize the feast of the Mawlid al-nabi.

Yet, despite the ubiquity of candles in the celebrations, some Mafghrebi muftis, rulers, and ordinary people believed that the use of candles had to be eradicated. Their conversations about the appropriateness of the holiday reveal an anxiety regarding its presumably Catholic origins, although they disagreed about the holiday’s roots and the legitimacy of its outward celebratory forms. The disagreement was partly the result of the similarities between the Mawlid and Christmas—both were birthday celebrations of their religion’s founders of Islam and Christianity, and the candles

¹³Ibn Marzūq, *El Musnad: Hechos memorables de Abū l-Hasan sultán de los Benimerne*, María J. Viguera, trans. (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-árabe de cultura, 1977), 134.

¹⁴E. Épular, “La procession des cierges à Salé,” *Hespéris* 35 (1948): 192. According to Antonio de Sosa, the custom was also common in late sixteenth-century Algiers, where on the Mawlid schoolboys brought “highly polished candles ... with many branches, and flowers, and colors” to school. See Antonio de Sosa, “Topography of Algiers,” in María Antonia Garcés, ed., *An Early Modern Dialogue with Islam: Antonio de Sosa’s Topography of Algiers (1612)* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 209–15, 215.

¹⁵Cory, *Reviving the Islamic Caliphate*, 299 and 301.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Shinar, *Modern Islam in the Maghrib*, 393.

that had become a central element of the celebration were perceived as Christian.¹⁸ Another disagreement stemmed from the late creation of the Mawlid, centuries after the death of Muhammad and without scriptural basis.¹⁹ The lack of scriptural grounding led the holiday to be considered *bid'a*, an innovation without precedence.²⁰ The question was whether it was a bad innovation or a good one. Jurists' attempts to control the use of candles failed, and designed candles continued to light the city streets gaily during the Mawlid. But a few scholars continued to argue that certain elements of the actual celebrations could lead to promiscuous acts.

These conversations began as early as the early thirteenth century in Ceuta and continued at least until the 1980s.²¹ Treatises and fatwas were the main battlefields on which the Mawlid's status and origins were debated, but the controversy bled out of the written page to public debates in political courts. In the second half of the fourteenth century, an unknown fatwa seeker requested an opinion from the mufti of Fez, Aḥmad al-Qabbāb (d. ca. 1378), concerning the custom of schoolchildren giving candles to their teachers. The mufti was categorical in his opinion that all such innovations be terminated.²² His contemporary, the Sufi master Abu 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad B. Ibrāhīm ibn 'Abbād (d. 1390), took the opposite stance. While rejecting some aspects of the Mawlid such as mixed crowds of men and women, he wholeheartedly supported the holiday, in which he saw an expression of joy, enhanced by the viewing of beautiful burning candles.²³ Another round of the debate took place at the turn of the fifteenth century at the initiative of the Hafsid Caliph, who summoned scholars to his capital of Tunis to discuss the importance of the Mawlid in comparison with the Night of Decree, when according to the tradition the verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the prophet. Another participant of the debate, Al-Burzulī (d. 1438), mufti of Tunis and imam of the city's Friday mosque, supported "Qur'an recitations, reading of the prophet's popular life story, qissa, and the chanting of religious poems" as part of the birthday celebrations, but he was opposed to "features which were felt to be unorthodox or of foreign (esp. Christian) origin, such as music, dancing, candlelight processions, parties and fairs."²⁴ His contemporary from Tlemecen (northwestern Algeria), ibn Marzūq al Ḥafid (d. 1439), grandson of his namesake and one of Al-Burzulī's teachers, fiercely objected to the use of candles in the celebration. In fact, he succeeded in eliminating the custom from Tlemecen, but after

¹⁸In his *Topography of Algiers*, Antonio de Sosa, held captive in the city in the 1570s, pointed out the similarities he noticed between the Algerian celebrations of the Prophet's nativity and the feast of the Candelaria he knew from Portugal. On the Mawlid, he wrote, "the candle-makers tend to make highly polished candles for that occasion, with many branches and flowers and colors, just as they do in Christian lands for the Candelaria." Sosa, "Topography of Algiers," 214–15.

¹⁹Whereas premodern Maghribi scholars and contemporary students of the Maghrib trace resemblances between the Mawlid and Christmas, some Mashreqi medieval and contemporary theologians and scholars trace the source of the holiday and use of candles to Iranian holidays.

²⁰J. Robson, "Bid'a," in P. Bearman, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1393.

²¹Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 170–71.

²²Kapteijn, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival*, 113; Vincent Lagardere, *Histoire et société en occident musulman au Moyen Age: Analyse du Mi'yār d al-Waṣarīṣī* (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1995), 471–2.

²³Katz, *Birth*, 105; Lagardere, *Histoire et société en occident*, 475.

²⁴Shinar, *Modern Islam in the Maghrib*, 376.

his death it was reintroduced.²⁵ Regardless of the various positions scholars and others took on the matter, the debates established an association between the third most important Islamic holiday in the Maghrib and Christmas, and between the holiday's most common visual element—candles and candle processions—and Christianity.

In addition to considering the adaptation of Christian forms of devotion, legal scholars also discussed the regulation of the sale of wax or candles to Christians. One of these was the Granadan jurist Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388). About the mid-fourteenth century he issued a fatwa introducing a general prohibition on selling wax to Christians because “it is known that they [Christians] fashion [candles] for their gods, therefore [wax] or candles should not be produced for them or sold to them.”²⁶ But the rest of his opinion qualified this sweeping prohibition. This was the case, for example, with selling the raw substance or its products to druggists. The problem with producing and selling candles to druggists was that they often sold them on to Christians (and wine-drinking Muslims). Fearing that candles sold by Muslims to druggists would then be sold to Christians, who would use them for worship, and unwilling to collaborate with Christian religious practice, the jurist determined that such sale was reprehensible, though not prohibited. The validity of this legal opinion applied to those who sold wax and candles to druggists, but not the druggists themselves, of whom the mufti had little expectations and seemed to believe it was useless and impossible to prevent from selling candle wax to Christians.

Finally, al-Shāṭibī's fatwa also participated in a broader and longer discussion about trade with the infidel, especially in Dar al-Harb. The main concern of muftis writing on the matter was the sale of various substances and objects that Christians could use to fight against Muslims. Wax was one of them, as it was used in the maintenance of galleys. A number of Maliki fatwas on the topic were issued between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries. Adjudicators justified their objections on two independent grounds. First and most common was wax's status as a material of war.²⁷ Thus, already in the eleventh century, Tunisian jurist al-Lakhmī listed the substance alongside other materials that should not be sold to *harbis*. In a fatwa about trade with the infidel included in two early modern fatwa compendia, the twelfth-century Tunisian jurist Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Māzarī (d. 1141) repeated the prohibition because Christians “need it for boats and other [war-related purposes].”²⁸ The latter fatwa, particularly the prohibition on selling wax, was quoted by al-Shāṭibī. A sixteenth-century jurist from Tlemcen, Abū al-Qāsim b. Khajjū, stated that “wax is also used in some implements of war” as grounds for the prohibition on its sale. The question remained relevant in the nineteenth century, as is suggested by the fatwa on the topic by the Maghribi jurist al-'Alī b. 'Abd al-Salām al-Tasūlī, who quoted several of the earlier fatwas.

Some contexts required comprehensive prohibitions—such as the case with wax as war materials—but in others it was enough to define the transaction in question as

²⁵One could continue this sketch by examining the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries influence of the fatwa on the topic issued by the famous al-Suyuti, as in Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival*, 44–68.

²⁶Josie Hendrickson, “Is al-Andalus Different? Continuity as Contested, Constructed, and Performed across Three Mālikī Fatwās,” *Islamic Law and Society* 20, 4 (2013): 371–424, 415–417.

²⁷For example, in royal ordinances from the beginning of the sixteenth century, the king of Portugal shared the last set of prohibitions that were not directly related to religion. See Marcocci, “Trading with the Muslim World,” 91–107.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 414.

reprehensible yet permit it (selling wax to druggists) to facilitate the trade on which the local economy relied. The few muftis who wished to regulate the circulation of wax and candle wax wished to do so in both directions: preventing wax and candles from entering Islamic holy spaces and preventing their movement outside to the Catholic world in order not to facilitate Christian worship.

Most scholars referenced so far were muftis who issued fatwas in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet, due to their inclusion in the most influential fatwa compendium in the Islamic west, Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Wansharīsī's (d. 1513) *al-Mi'yār al-Mughrib* (*The Clear Standard*), they enjoyed centuries long professional careers, especially the few cited and manipulated by later muftis. In other words, to varying degrees, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legal scholars still had these medieval fatwas in mind when considering the adoption of wax candles to the Mawlid or the exchange of wax with Christians.²⁹

Islamic Borrowing of Elements of Christmas

The Maghribi Mawlid provides us with at least two examples of failed regulation, the first from the holiday's inception in Ceuta. The earliest echoes of the idea that the Mawlid had its roots in Christmas were heard in thirteenth-century Ceuta, where Abū'l-'Abbās al-'Azafi (d. 1236), the city's qadi, authored a study about the holiday, encouraging its celebration.³⁰ The work was edited and completed by his son, Abū'l-'Qāsim al-'Azafi (d. 1279), who became the local ruler, and who officially introduced the feast in the city. The latter Al-'Azafi justified his decision pragmatically rather than theologically. By encouraging the celebration of the Mawlid he hoped to uproot the habit of celebrating Christmas among the "Muslims of the straights," presumably Andalusians. The ruler claimed that this religious-boundary crossing was the result of long-term commercial contacts between Andalusians and Spaniards and of interactions between Muslim slave owners and their Christian slaves—highlighting the role of slaves as cultural brokers. To this end, Al-'Azafi openly appropriated elements from Christmas—the idea of nativity celebrations and, more specifically, music, dancing, and candles—to control a popular appropriation over which he had either lost or never had control. The case of Ceuta demonstrates how moves for or against the Mawlid were not restricted to theological discourse, or rather that claims about religion could be couched in more pragmatic discourses. At least a few politicians introduced the holiday as a way of counterbalancing the very same traits scholars objected to in the Mawlid. These moves imply that the Mawlid was similar enough to Christmas that it could, when necessary, become a substitute for it.

²⁹Jocelyn Hendrickson, *Leaving Iberia: Islamic Law and Christian Conquest in North West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).

³⁰James A. O. C. Brown, "'Azafid Ceuta, Mawlid al-Nabī and the Development of Marīnid Strategies of Legitimation," in Amira K. Bennison, ed., *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib* (London: Proceedings of the British Academy, 2014), 127–51; Fernando de la Granja, "Fiestas Cristianas En Al-Andalus. (Materiales Para Su Estudio). I: Al-Durr Al-Munazzam De Al-Azafi," *Al-Andalus* 34, 1 (1969): 1–53; Shinar, "Modern Islam in the Maghrib," 376; Victorien Loubignac, "La procession des cierges a Salé," in *Hespéris: Archives berbères et bulletin de l'institut des hautes études marocaines*, Vol. 33 (Paris, 1946), 27; Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival*, 76–96.

Appropriating Catholic Maritime Ex-votos

Scholars have estimated that between 1450 and 1850, at least three million Muslims and Christians lost their freedom on land and at sea. Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian fleets and corsairs (the Mediterranean term for “privateer”) captured and enslaved Portuguese, Spaniards, French, Italian, and Maltese and vice versa. More than a million Christians were enslaved in the Maghrib; a similar number of Muslims were enslaved on the northern shores of the Mediterranean.³¹ Due to the Mediterranean’s small size, and thus in contrast to the Atlantic world, Mediterranean captives communicated with kin and home rulers, embassies, and churches to regain their freedom. Yet, few captives found success through captive swaps or the payment of hefty ransoms, not to mention flight. The majority remained slaves who became inseparable from their enslaving society.³² This world of mass human trafficking was the context in which wax and wax candles became so central in the lives of Muslim and Christian captives.

Despite the objections of a few medieval muftis, candles remained a definitive feature of the Mawlid. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of Algiers authored by friars posted in the city provide further examples of the borrowing of a Christian practice and its assimilation into the Mawlid celebration. Captive-turned-redeemer Melchor de Zúñiga and the Trinitarian Francisco Ximénez, two keen observers who documented Algiers in the 1630s and 1710s, respectively, offer brief yet vivid descriptions of the celebration of the Mawlid in Algiers. According to Zúñiga’s treatise on Algiers:

The *pasqua* of the Mauluto (Mawlid), which [commemorates] the birth of Muhammad, they [Algerians] celebrate with great joy. They make a large block of wax in the shape of a castle built on a lavish large candle with many kinds of embroidery and flowers made of the same wax; a Moor carries it on his shoulders, and to the din of [musical] instruments and accompaniment of

³¹According to Robert Davis, more than 1,000,000 Christians were enslaved in the Maghrib between 1530 and 1780. See Robert Davis, “Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast,” *Past & Present*, 172 (2001): 87–124. If we add the Christians enslaved in Istanbul or other regions of the Ottoman Empire, the figures would be much higher. Alessandro Stella estimated that between 1450 and 1750, around 1,100,000 African, Ottoman, and Moroccan slaves passed through Portugal and Spain. When adding the slaves born on Iberian soil, the Balearics, and the Canary Islands, the number rises to 2,000,000. See Alessandro Stella, *Histoires d’Esclaves dans la Péninsule Ibérique* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2000), 78–79. See also Salvatore Bono, “Slave Histories and Memoirs in the Mediterranean World: A Study of the Sources (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries),” in Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omro, eds., *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean, Braudel’s Maritime Legacy* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2010), 97–115, 105. In Italy, around half a million were enslaved between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the eighteenth. See Raffaella Sarti, “Bolognesi schiavi dei ‘turchi’ e schiavi ‘turchi’ a Bologna tra cinque e settecento: Alterità etnico-religiosa e riduzione in schiavitù,” *Quaderni Storici* 107 (2001): 450.

³²On slavery and captivity in the medieval Mediterranean, see Hannah Barker, *The Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves (1260–1500)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). On the early modern Mediterranean, see Daniel Hershenzon, *The Captive Sea: Slavery, Communication, and Commerce in Early Modern Spain and the Mediterranean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Joshua M. White, *Piracy and Law in the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); and Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

children they walk through the entire city. ... There is a road by the Babaluet gate. It is customary to buy all the candles there on that day, curious [candles]. ... *With these candles they build galleys with their ornaments, slaves rowers, ships, windmills, and other forms.*³³

Some of what Zúñiga observed has also been recorded in Maghribi descriptions of the Mawlid celebrations. For example, the decorated wax castle carried in a festive procession through the city resembles early-twentieth-century descriptions of the holiday in Salé (Morocco).³⁴ The description of detailed, figural wax models of galleys and their crews is unique, and the only other reference to it is found in the chronicle authored by Ximénez, the administrator of the Trinitarian hospital in Algiers between 1718 and 1720. On 2 Feb. 1719 (the precise date of the celebrations that year—12 rabi' al-awwal 1131), the Trinitarian wrote: "Today, the Turks and the Moors celebrate the feast of the birth of Muhammad, called among them the feast of the Molut (Mawlid), and also called the feast of the candles ... *They also place candles in many parts of their homes, and they craft ships and galleys and other inventions (invenciones) out of wax, so that they will burn on that day* ... They also adorn the same way the barbershops and stores of other artisans, and more specifically the schools where the boys learn to read and write."³⁵

The next year, on 23 Jan. 1720, Ximénez added: "On the way, I run across three Qur'anic schools which are well adorned with brassfoil (oropel), *galleys back lanterns (fanales) made of wax, little ships, galleys and other curious inventions.*"³⁶ Like the description of Zúñiga, some of the elements Ximénez documents are reported in other Maghribi Mawlids—for example the bit about the schools—and others, like the report of "ships and galleys and other inventions," are novel.³⁷

^{33a} "La pasqua del Mauluto, que es la del nacimiento de Mahoma, celébrasse con muncha alegría. Hácese vna gran caja de zera con munchas labors y flores de la mesma zera, a modo de Castillo, que va fundada sobre un zirio muy vizarro; éste se le pone vn moro en ombros, y con grita de ynstrumentos y acompañamiento de muchachos le passaeen por toda la ciudad. ... Ay también carrera en las puertas de Babaluet. Tienen por costumbre comprar todos candelas aquel día, muy curiosas. ... Fundan en ellas galeras con su paramento y chusma; nauios; molinos de viento, y otras echuras," Celdrán Gomariz Pancraccio, ed., *Judíos, moros y cristianos en la ciudad de Argel (según un manuscrito inédito de Melchor de Zúñiga, 1639)* (Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 2012), 181. Emphasis added.

³⁴ Loubignac, "La procession des cierges à Salé."

^{35a} "Oy celebran los turcos y los moros la fiesta del nacimiento de Mahoma, llamada entre ellos la fiesta del Molut y también llaman la fiesta de las candelas. ... En esta fiesta blanquean y limpian muy bien las casas, y especialmente la letrina, a quien llaman en esta tierra venda, y en ella encienden luces con mucho ascco y costa, y la adornan de ramas de cintas, y otras cosas. ... También ponen luces en muchas partes de las casas, y hacen navíos galeras y otras invenciones de cera, para que arda en este día. ... También adornan de la misma suerte las tiendas de los Barberos y de otros oficiales, y con más especialidad las escuelas de los muchachos donde aprendan a leer y escribir..." Francisco Ximénez, *Viaje de Argel de Fr. Francisco Ximénez de la inclita y celestial religión de la SS. Trinidad Redención de cautivos cristianos* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1717. Mss. 9-27-7-E-193). Emphasis added.

³⁶ Ibid. 331.

³⁷ Ximénez's description draws on observation and information obtained from Algerians or Christians employed in local households, as well as on Christian traditions of discussing Islam, its holiday, and the prophet. For example, in order to explain the custom of lighting candles in the latrine ("In this feast, they polish and clean their homes, especially the latrine [which they call in this land 'vanda'] very well, and in the latrine they light lights with great care and costs, and they adorn them with banded branch wreaths [*ramas de Cintas*] and other things"), Ximénez writes, "Some say that it is because Muhammad was born in a latrine" (54v). This

The two accounts concur on the practice of carving, presenting, and burning small ships and galleys of wax in the private space of the household, but also in more public spaces such as Qur'anic schools, barbershops, and other stores. Moreover, Zúñiga hints at the vernacular dimension of the custom. The maritime models were not carved by masters of the wax chandlers' guild, who in principle prepared the decorated wax structures for the annual celebration, but rather by nonskilled ordinary people who bought candles they then used to carve the wax ships. Yet they were figurative enough that Zúñiga and Ximénez recognized them for what they were.³⁸

The crafting, display, and burning of wax maritime models could have been partly an expression of the importance of maritime trade, privateering, and fishing in Algiers. The years Zúñiga spent in Algiers in the 1630s were still close to the period described by Fernand Braudel as "The Second Brilliant Age of Algiers" (1580–1620), when Algerian corsairs brought prosperity to the city.³⁹ If by the early eighteenth century Algerian corsairs had lost the reputation they enjoyed a century earlier, they continued to play a major role in the city.⁴⁰ In addition to the prizes corsairs captured, local and foreign merchant ships loading and unloading goods always filled the city's port, along with cabotage commerce carried by smaller vessels and fishing boats. The sea was the main source of the city's wealth, and many of its residents secured their livelihood in maritime professions or knew someone who did.

bit that locates the prophet's birthplace at the *vanda* is taken from Francisco Antonio Silvestre's *Fundacion historica*, a text with which Ximénez was well acquainted and which he openly cites in other sections of his diary. However, Ximénez's source of this story, incredible from a Muslim perspective, is hard to trace. Elsewhere in his work, Silvestre employs a framework John Tolan calls "Trickster and Heresiarch" to plot the life of Muhammad, but he makes no mention of a latrine. See John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perception of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). The Trinitarian might have picked it from Dante's image of Muhammad in his *Inferno* (28, 25–7): 44–72. Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 28, 25–27: Tuscany's Evil Seed," *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2018). In a conversation with Ryan Szpiech, for which I am grateful, he suggested that the Trinitarian could have picked that up from Dante's image of Muhammad in *Inferno* (28, 25–27):

Between his legs were hanging down his entrails;
His heart was visible, and the dismal sack
That maketh excrement of what is eaten.

³⁸The popular presence of figurative art further supports recent scholarship that has revised the idea that Islam was univocally opposed to this form of representation. As Christiane Gruber has demonstrated, most Islamic theological prohibitions did not refer to images per-se but rather to their uses and forms of display. See Christiane Gruber, "Idol and Figural Images in Islam: A Brief Dive into a Perennial Debate," in Christiane Gruber, ed., *Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World* (London: Gingko, 2019), 9–29. Gruber shows how, to promote their dynasties and courts, caliphs commonly surrounded themselves with sculptures and two-dimensional representations of humans, including naked women, and animals. However, because such images could potentially be used as idols, they were almost always kept out of mosques and public spaces (ibid.). Perhaps the fact that the wax maritime models were burnt, leaving no trace but molten wax just a few short hours after their initial display, made the practice more permissible than the human statues Gruber studied. See also Finbarr Barry Flood, "Idol Breaking as Image Making in the 'Islamic State,'" *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 7 (2016): 116–38.

³⁹Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), II, 882.

⁴⁰Tal Shuval, *La ville d'Alger vers la fin du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Cnrs Éditions, 2002), 51.

While the evidence we have for the practice that the Christian chroniclers documented is direct and solid, their accounts leave many unanswered questions. To begin with, the archive provides no Islamic precedent to the use of such figural artifacts—either in terms of the theme or the public display of the models—in the Mawlid celebrations or anywhere else. In fact, visual representations of maritime vessels were not common in Islamic art.⁴¹ In contrast, visual representations of all sorts of ships were extremely common in the Latin Mediterranean, at least from the Middle Ages. One finds three-dimensional models of maritime vessels hanging from church walls or ceilings in France, Catalonia, Italy, and Istanbul.⁴² Paintings that documented such models suggest they were made of wax, wood, and precious metals.⁴³ Textual evidence records ship models made of wax from as early as the mid-twelfth century.⁴⁴ Whereas most of these sculptures were small enough to be held by one person, several were six feet long and a few even longer and carried annually in public processions.⁴⁵ In Malta, in addition to such sculptures one finds dozens of ship graffiti incised into the stone walls of the local churches, the Inquisitorial Palace, and the Old Prison.⁴⁶ Ship graffiti can also be found on the walls of the Inquisitorial Palace in Sicily.⁴⁷ Maritime models were so common in Christian communities that one could find a little silver ship statue serving to minister incense in one of the prisons of Algiers.⁴⁸

⁴¹One finds this motive in two distinct schools of pottery. In the fifteenth-century Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, the element of a round ship was not unknown, but the fact that the sails of the ships painted on these plates and bowls carried Portuguese insignia suggests the main markets for these items were Catholic royal households, and it is unlikely that such plates circulated widely in early modern Algiers. See Tim Stanley, Mariam Rosser-Owen, and Stephen Vernoit, eds., *Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Middle East* (London: V&A Publications, 2004), 120; Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, eds., *Schätze der Alhambra. Islamische Kunst aus Andalusien* (Berlin: Skira Editore, 1992), 253, ill. 129; A. W. Frothingham, *Lustreware of Spain* (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1951), 91–3, ill. 56–7; J. D. Dodds, ed., *Al-Andalus. The Art of Islamic Spain* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 361, cat. no. 114; and A. Caiger-Smith, *Lustre Pottery: Technique, Tradition and Innovation in Islam and the Western World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 84–125. The motif of three-mast or lateen-rigged ships also appears on tankards, bottles, and bowls made by artists belonging to the famous school of pottery of Iznik from 1555 to 1700. See Arthur Lane, *Later Islamic Pottery: Persia, Syria, Egypt, Turkey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 58; and Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby, *Iznik: the Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London: Alexandria Press, 1989), 115, 254, and 256, ill. 335, 527–29. Illustrations of maritime vessels also appear in a small number of Islamic manuscripts and maps, the most famous of which is the early-sixteenth-century world map drawn by the Ottoman admiral Piri Reis, but the circulation of such expensive and non-serial objects was also limited. See S. Soucek, “Islamic Charting of the Mediterranean,” in J. B. Harley and D. Woodward, eds., *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), vol. 2, book 1, 263–72. Not only is it unlikely that these artifacts were common in early modern Algiers, but the formal, material, and conceptual differences between them and the wax maritime statues are significant. None of these material and visual traditions can explain the emergence of wax statues in Algiers.

⁴²Hannah Baader, “Vows on the Water: Ship-Ex-Voto as Things, Metaphors and Mediators of Communality,” in Weinryb, *Ex Voto*, 217–45, 221.

⁴³Ibid., 223, 227–8.

⁴⁴Ibid., 224–5.

⁴⁵Such a procession is documented in Messina. Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶Joseph Muscat, “Ship Graffiti—A Comparative Study,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 9, 1 (1999): 74–105.

⁴⁷Giovanna Fiume and Mercedes García-Arenal, “Introduction,” *Quaderni storici* 1 (2018): 3–14. Guillaume Calafat, “Enfermement et graffiti: Des palimpsestes de prison aux archives murales (note critique),” *Annales HSS* 78 (2023): 735–59.

⁴⁸Bonifacio Porres Alonso, “Loa hospitales trinitarios de Argel y Túnez,” *Hispania Sacra* 48 (1996): 666.

Commonly, ship sculptures and graffiti were ex-votos, religious offerings placed mostly in churches as a form of seeking divine grace or giving thanks.⁴⁹ This class of objects was defined by linking the act of giving to either pledge-making or a fulfillment of a vow, rather than by the objects' materiality, form, content, or origin.⁵⁰ Maritime ex-votos, like other ex-votos, were offered to God by mariners, corsairs, or travelers who faced a long and dangerous sea voyage, or by their anxious family members. The vows could have been given before the voyage or after its successful completion. On the most basic level, maritime ex-votos were representations of maritime vessels. But they simultaneously embodied the vows offered, as well as the hopes and fears of those depositing them. The vows were also attempts to bind God in a transactional relation between the physical and divine worlds.⁵¹ This kind of offering was extremely common among Europeans who traveled at sea, especially those of them who fell captive during their travel. In fact, Ximénez describes distributing blessed candles to captives to be used as ex-votos in time of storms. The ex-votos used by captives in those cases were not maritime, but rather simple, though blessed, candles.

The ubiquity of the practice of maritime ex-votos in the European Mediterranean itself cannot, of course, explain the Algerian wax ship models Zúñiga and Ximénez recorded. For the former to be the source of the latter, one would need to trace Algerians who could serve as cultural brokers transmitting and promoting back home a practice belonging to infidel, enemy communities. While the accounts of Zúñiga and Ximénez fall short of identifying such brokers, we have enough circumstantial evidence to develop a hypothesis. The only group in Algiers that was highly mobile on a regional scale, and members of which were taken captive and enslaved by European privateers and on occasion fleets, were corsairs, ship crews, and fishers. A few had visited cities along the European Mediterranean, and even fewer returned home with new knowledge of the cities they had left.⁵²

It is not just that these seafarers were there in the Catholic Mediterranean. Like all Muslims, these seafarers and their relatives were familiar with the practice of ex-votos and recognized the reciprocity and transactionality at its basis, which must have made the adaptation of maritime ex-votos easy.⁵³ Moreover, seafarers had a

⁴⁹Weinryb, "Introduction."

⁵⁰These objects do not exhaust representations of ships in early modern Europe. These could be found in paintings dedicated to maritime battles, maps, and more.

⁵¹Baader, 218–19.

⁵²Scholars have highlighted the role slaves, renegades, and corsairs played in cultural brokerage across the Mediterranean. Braudel has suggested that Moriscos and renegades transmitted military technology to the Maghribi cities that became their homes. More recently, Gerard Wiegers has pointed at the role played by Moriscos and renegades in framing theological debates. On the role of Muslim slaves in teaching medieval and renaissance orientalist Arabic and Turkish, see Ryan Szpiech, "Prisons and Polemics: Captivity, Confinement, and Medieval Inter-religious Encounter," in Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, eds., *Polemical Encounters: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Iberia and Beyond* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019), 271–303 and Pierre Mathia Tomassino, "Bulghaith al-Darawi and Barthélemy d'Herbelot: Readers of the Qur'an in Seventeenth-Century Tuscany," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20, 3 (2018): 94–120.

⁵³In fact, the practice of holding a Mawlid celebration and inviting others to celebrate it shared a similar form of reciprocity to that of ex-votos. See Katz, *Birth*, 75. The ultimate recipient of the act was God, whose divine grace the person holding the Mawlid was seeking to elicit through the festivity. There was a long history of making a vow to perform the Mawlid ceremony if God would protect, or had protected, the person making it. On ex-votos in the Mawlid, see *ibid.*, 75, 95–96; and Christiane Gruber, "Nazr Necessities: Votive Practices and Objects in Iranian Muharram Ceremonies," in Weinryb, *Ex Voto*, 246–75.

specifically personal interest in the practice, which was meant to protect them. In adopting and adapting the practice, Algerian sailors, corsairs, fishers, and their kin were adding to an existing religious repertoire probably shared among seafarers from across the Islamic Mediterranean. Many were members of the Qādiriya Sufi order, whose eponymous founder, Sidi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, was considered the guardian of Muslim seafarers.⁵⁴

Borrowing the practice of ex-votos did not constitute the group from scratch. Rather, it reflected and reinforced its existence. Mariners and their kin probably gathered around the vernacular “inventions” of maritime sculpture to celebrate the Mawlid and pray for divine intercession to redeem those held captive. The shared experience of the gathering—watching the captivating dancing flames consuming the maritime models, which eventually collapsed and disappeared, was at least partly possible due to the material qualities of wax. These qualities made candles extremely effective for forging and maintaining communal bonds. The material qualities of wax also ritually operationalized these maritime models’ work beyond local levels. They linked these local Algerian communities to communities of seafarers transregionally, around and across the Islamic Mediterranean.⁵⁵

What this example shares with the case of the Mawlid in thirteenth-century Ceuta is the centrality of slaves in the transmission and installation of Christian religious elements in the most important non-canonical holiday in Islam. However, by the seventeenth century, the Maghribi Mawlid was fully institutionalized. Despite the inclusion of medieval fatwas opposing the use of candles in the Mawlid in influential early modern fatwa collections, the use of candles became a mainstay, and the appropriation of a new type of figurative candle was barely noticed. Moreover, while in both cases (Ceuta and Algiers) slaves were the transmitters, by the time Algerian seafarers returned home, they were not slaves anymore but rather corsairs who contributed a percentage of their booty to a fund kept in the beylical palace for the ransom of captives and for the local charismatic spiritual leaders. The annual distribution of the share earmarked for these spiritual leaders took place during the Mawlid of the Prophet.⁵⁶

The Economy of Wax

The legal prohibitions on selling wax to Catholics failed to turn into abiding norms. The commerce in wax thrived, with Muslims selling large quantities of wax to Christians. In cities like Algiers wax played a major role in the local economy. Moreover, much of this wax did indeed serve the purposes muftis had hoped to prevent: namely, much of the wax remained in Algiers or elsewhere in the Maghrib serving for Catholic devotion and community building.

⁵⁴Thomas Glesener and Daniel Hershenzon, “The Maghrib in Europe: Royal Slaves and Islamic Institutions in Eighteenth-Century Spain,” *Past & Present* 259 (2023): 77–116, 109; Şen A. Tunç, “Manuscripts on the Battlefields: Early Modern Ottoman Subjects in the European Theatre of War and Their Textual Relations to the Supernatural in Their Fight for Survival,” *Acaib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural* 2 (2021): 77–106, 87–105.

⁵⁵Rupert Stasch, “Ritual and Oratory Revisited: The Semiotics of Effective Action,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 159–74.

⁵⁶A. De Voulx, *Tachrifat. Recueil de notes historiques sur l'administration de l'ancienne régence d'Algier* (Algiers: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1852), 47–48.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth century Jews and conversos (i.e., Jews who had converted to Catholicism and the descendants of these converts) ran the Mediterranean wax trade, buying wax in the Maghrib and exporting it to Spain's Mediterranean ports. Jews, Christians, and Muslims benefited from a tripartite division of labor—Muslims produced and sold wax, bypassing legal prohibitions on selling the substance to Christians by working with Jewish intermediaries; Jews purchased wax in North Africa and sold it in ports such as Barcelona, Valencia, and Cadiz; and finally, Christian demand was met with constant supply.⁵⁷

The Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and of the Moriscos (Spain's Muslims forced to convert and their descendants) between 1609 and 1614 slightly modified the relations between these actors. Muslims continued to produce wax, but the market share of Christian merchants slightly increased at the expense of Jewish traders. Since the latter were at risk of being arrested should they step on Spanish soil, only a few took the chance after obtaining special, hard-to-get travel permits.⁵⁸ The shipping of wax from the Spanish and Portuguese garrisons to Iberia was now in Christian hands. Jews continued to purchase wax directly from Muslims, but they now sold it to European merchants in Christian and Islamic Maghribi cities. The latter shipped it from North African ports to Iberian ones.

To understand the importance of wax in the Maghribi economy, we need to follow the money. One can detect two kinds of shipments of wax, as well as other goods, sent from the Maghrib to Iberia. One, less documented, was run by European smugglers who avoided declaring the commodities they exported to the custom offices, unloading them instead in small ports along the Spanish Mediterranean littoral. On occasion, royal and municipal officers would address their superiors, complaining about the situation and offering remedies, while documenting the traces of an otherwise barely perceptible practice.⁵⁹ This was the case of an unnamed Spanish observer, who in 1604 submitted an account about the smuggling of wax and emptying Spain of its precious metals. According to the author the problem was not only smuggling, but also the fact that the wax smugglers purchased was sold by Jewish merchants from Tetouan, who were paid with gold, silver, and precious stones. However, the profits must have been high enough to be worth taking the chance, as another document from San Lucar de Barrameda from 1611 suggests. Its author, who oversaw the provision of the Peñon garrison, reported about Diego Bargas, resident of Malaga and "a known wax maker," who together with his brother smuggled wax to the peninsula, getting rid of it in Andalusia and perhaps beyond.⁶⁰

Legal trade left many more traces. The rich custom records of Valencia document the legal version of these movements and echo the political upheavals that shaped the

⁵⁷Sapoznik, "Bees in the Medieval Maghreb."

⁵⁸On these mostly merchants, diplomats, and spies and the permit system, see Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, "Judíos de nación y 'profesión,'" in Pablo Fernández Albaladejo, Virgilio Pinto Crespo, and José Martínez Millán, eds., *Política, religión e inquisición en la España moderna homenaje a Joaquín Pérez Villanueva* (Madrid: Autonomous University of Madrid, 1996), 239–52; and Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, "Judíos En La España De Los Austrias," *Nueva Revista De Filología Hispánica* 30, 2 (1981): 609–16.

⁵⁹Archivo General Fundación Casa Medina Sidonia (AGFMS), Leg. 2406, 22.10.1604. I thank Ana Struillou for this reference.

⁶⁰AGFMS, Leg. 4393, 1611. I thank Ana Struillou for this reference. Many of these merchants were French. See Pascual Saura Lahoz, "Los Franciscanos en Marruecos: Relación inédita de 1685," *Archivo Ibero-Americano*, 17 (1921): 87.

trade. In the seventeenth century, the bulk of the wax arriving in the city came from Ottoman Algiers and Oran, Spain's largest colony in North Africa. Until the mid-seventeenth century, Algiers was the largest exporter of wax to Valencia. Forty-two ships carrying wax in their holds arrived in Valencia from Algiers between 1601 and 1654. Some carried multiple shipments belonging to different merchants. In 1659, wax exports from Algiers stopped arriving in Valencia, and Oran became the near exclusive source responding to European demand of Maghribi wax. The initial stop must have resulted from the Revolution of the Odjak that erupted in 1659, transforming Algiers' political structure and creating instability, at least for a while.⁶¹ Order was probably restored shortly thereafter, but by then Oran had proved to be a safer port, and the city monopolized much of the trade it had previously shared with Algiers. Indeed, between 1603 and 1701 fifty-seven shipments arrived from Oran, and only nine from Tetuan, Marrakesh, Agadir, Ceuta, and Tunis together.

The Valencian records imply that wax sent from Algiers and Oran to Spain did not originate in these two cities, but rather in a number of unnamed places.⁶² This becomes clear when we look at how the wax was registered in the custom records. On the one hand, all the wax was sold raw, and never as candles. On the other, wax was sold in over twenty different measuring units, and in different qualities—exemplifying what Didi-Huberman defined as “the material of all resemblances.” Measuring units could signify the common measures practiced in the cities where the wax was bought: “A weight of Algiers,” “a weight of Marrakesh,” or “a weight of Valencia”—a reminder that the commerce with North Africa not only enabled the circulation of Maghribi commodities across the middle sea but also that of measuring units. Some units, such as the *arroba* (twenty-five pounds in Spain) or *quintal* (one-hundred pounds), represented weight, others volume (*saddle backs, bundles, boxes, parcels*), and still others form (slices). In addition, wax was sold by its quality, evaluated by its color—white or yellow—or newness—new or used.⁶³ This variety implies local forms of production, packaging, and transport, and perhaps different uses or forms of candle making. That wax purchased in Oran or Algiers came from various localities demonstrates that the substance entwined larger regions of the Maghrib with European markets.⁶⁴

In the Spanish and Portuguese garrisons, it was mainly Jews who sold wax and other commodities to Christian merchants, but in Islamic cities such Algiers or Tetuan, despite religious and security-based objections, Muslims sold large quantities of wax directly to Christians. In fact, wax turned into an important source of wealth for the city of Algiers and its pashas, who carefully regulated

⁶¹On this episode, see John B. Wolf, *The Barbary Coast: Algeria under the Turks* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 84–85; and Lemnouar Merouche, *Recherches sur l'Algérie à l'époque ottomane. Vol. II. La course, mythes et réalité* (Paris: Editions Bouchene, 2007), 228–29.

⁶²Ana Struillou, *Valencian customs records regarding the Maghrib (1530–1640)*, EUI Research Data, 2023, Department of History and Civilization, retrieved from Cadmus, EUI Research Repository, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/75698>; Roberto Blanes Andrés, *Valencia y el Magreb: Las relaciones comerciales marítimas (1600–1703)* (Barcelona: Alborán/Bellaterra, 2010).

⁶³“Cera,” in *Legado Gual Camarena: Vocabulario de comercio medieval* (Universidad de Murcia), accessed at <https://www.um.es/lexico-comercio-medieval/index.php/v/lexico/821>.

⁶⁴Beatriz Alonso Acero, *Oran Mazalquivir (1589–1639): Una sociedad española en la frontera de Berbería* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003), 217, 390.

trade in the commodity. In the list of the pasha's sources of income prepared by Jean-Baptiste Gramaye, captive in Algiers in 1619, wax loomed large.⁶⁵ As had Sosa a little before him, Gramaye noticed that leasing pieces of the monopoly on wax he had in Algiers and its hinterland was one of the pasha's main sources of revenue.⁶⁶ For the exclusive privilege to purchase wax directly from the residents of Collo (314 kilometers east of Algiers), French merchants paid annually 52,000 doblas. Another source of income related to the substance, though not as significant, came from the wax makers. Zúñiga counted more than eighty of them, namely one for every 800 citizens (according to the figures he provides). The owners of each of these wax stores, like the tailors, cloth merchants, and spice sellers, had to pay the pasha four doblas (equal to seven silver real) for the license to sell the goods they specialized in.

The pasha then ran a true financial enterprise that helped him to pay the salaries of the members of the Ottoman militia, and therefore keep them satisfied, a key to maintaining the peace and his power. Controlling the local wax market, whose main clients were Christians, obviously went against the ethical precedents late medieval *mufitis* sought but failed to set. Some of the wax that European merchants purchased must have served in the construction and maintenance of galleys, and its bulk was exported to Iberia, France, and Italy to feed ecclesiastic demand for candles. Worse, much of the wax the pasha sold never left Algiers. It remained in the city, purchased by Catholic captives and priests, thus transformed from an object of economic consumption to a social and religious instrument. This case serves as a reminder of how the same transactions could have seemingly contradicting dimensions, religious, social, or economic. Let us turn now to see the other side of the circulation promoted by the pasha.

The Catholic Economy of Wax in the Maghrib

One of the biggest consumers of wax in Algiers were members of the Catholic and orthodox communities, communities formed in their majority by the aforementioned captives. The Catholics, the larger group of the two, included thousands of members according to the most conservative estimates.⁶⁷ The bulk of the wax that captives purchased and collected came from the pasha's business. If for the pasha wax was a source of revenue, for the captives and ecclesiastics who attended them it was a tool for performing Catholic rites and a way to make communal boundaries that protected its members, while allowing those who had converted to Islam to return to the Catholic fold. Wax and candles were ritually foundational, connecting the community of Catholic captives to the greater Catholic world.

Wax moved in local Catholic networks among Christians and between Christians and Muslims in a variety of forms of giving, each articulating different power relations—donations, offerings, exemptions, bribes, gifts, and alms. On Catholic holidays priests distributed blessed candles to captives, who used them as votive offerings. On their end, captives collected alms earmarked for candles for the local

⁶⁵Jean-Baptiste Gramaye, *Alger, XVIe–XVIIe siècle: Journal de Jean-Baptiste Gramaye, "évêque d'Afrique,"* Abd El Hadi Ben Mansour, trans. (Paris: Éd. du Cerf., 1998), 119–21.

⁶⁶Sosa, "Topography of Algiers," 270.

⁶⁷Robert Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500–1800* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

churches. The taverners, a class of privileged captives who paid for licenses to operate taverns outside of the captives' prisons, also contributed alms for candles and collected the leftovers of wax brought by the Janissaries who frequented the taverns. Even Moriscos gave the priests wax donations, claiming the Catholic identity that they had allegedly given up upon their expulsion from Spain, and there is no reason to assume renegades did not participate in this distribution. The Trinitarians, friars specialized in redeeming and attending captives, gave local dignitaries gifts of candles. Finally, the Spanish king gave the friars posted in the Maghrib tax exemptions on wax. By situating these transactions in specific spaces and relationships we see the breadth of invisible connections between Christians and Muslims created by the circulation of wax.

It is impossible to gauge how much wax circulated as gifts, yet for those participating in and documenting this circulation, the quantities seemed enormous. According to Zúñiga: "During the Holy Week they [the captives] celebrate all the services with the highest punctuality. ... The quantity of wax spent during these days and that of the *Candelaria* (Candlemas), in these churches, is so large that in no city in Spain could it be larger."⁶⁸ João Mascarenhas, a Portuguese captive in Algiers from 1621 to 1626, supports this account. In his captivity narrative, he claims that two out of the four Catholic churches in the prisons in Algiers consumed 640 pounds (twenty *arrobas*) of wax annually. Given that there were two more Catholic churches, a Catholic hospital, and several Greek churches, the total figure for all Christian institutions must have been significantly higher. In fact, the figure Mascarenhas introduced resembles the wax quantities consumed in large European churches. For example, the *Lluminària del Cos Preciós de Jesucrist*, the office at the Barcelona cathedral in charge of managing the Corpus Christi celebrations, purchased on average a little over 617 pounds per year between 1374 and 1589.⁶⁹ The overall quantity of wax consumed at the cathedral was much higher, yet the comparison is instructive, suggesting that a large number of candles exchanged hands in the captives' prisons of Algiers on Christmas and the *Candelaria*.⁷⁰ Wax and candles, as gifts, aids for the services, and as objects with mediative quality, were crucial for community building in Algiers under Islamic rule, a fact that explains the magnitude of wax Catholics in the city and elsewhere in the Maghrib consumed.

Two additional pieces of evidence ground these impressionistic estimates in numeric values. The figures Zúñiga and Mascarenhas provided are in sync with the quantities that Franciscan friars, in charge of the spiritual welfare of the Christians held captive in Morocco, declared necessary for their mission in 1772. In a request to the Spanish King, the friars claimed that they needed roughly six to eight hundred pounds (six to eight *quintales*, each of which was one hundred pounds) of wax for the divine cult in their convents in Morocco. In other words, they consumed similar quantities to those consumed by the church of Algiers, as much wax as those two churches.

⁶⁸"La Semana Santa se hacen los oficios con toda puntualida. ... Es la cantidad que se gasta de zera estos días, y el de la candelaria, en estas iglesias, tan grande que en España no puede ser mayor en qualquier ciudad" (Zúñiga, *Judíos, moros y cristianos*, 214).

⁶⁹Sales I Fava and Sapoznik, "The Production and Trade of Wax."

⁷⁰João Mascarenhas, *Esclave à Alger: Récit de captivité de João Mascarenhas (1621–1626)*, Paul Teyssier, trans. (Paris: Chandeigne, 1993), 63, 74.

According to Ximénez, this wax functioned in two ways: “[On] the Day of the Purification of Holy Mary (Candlemas) ... the [priests] gave candles [*velas*] to all the captives, which the latter kept with much devotion to lighten them in times when there were tempests and thunders, and the sailors [kept them] for when there was a storm at sea. After the blessing of the candles the [captives] formed a procession inside the church. ... They celebrate the same festivity in all the churches of Algiers, where [they] also give candles to all the Christian captives.”⁷¹

The candles the priests distributed were to be marched by the captives in candle processions. The fact that the candles were distributed unlit outside the prisons and only lit when the captives returned to the prison structure indicates either explicit prohibitions against Christians lighting candles and organizing candle processions, or self-imposed cautionary measures devised by the Trinitarians to avoid what might be read as a provocation to the city’s Muslim residents. At the same time, gifted candles were used as *ex-votos*. By blessing them before distributing them, the priests transformed the candle-shaped wax into objects endowed with potential miraculous power that permitted them to intercede on behalf of their owners.⁷² Finally, the description of the context of use of the candles as vows is indicative of the fact that the majority of the captives were sailors, fishers, and navigators.

Much of the wax distributed by ecclesiastics in the form of candles was obtained by alms collected by captives who then donated to priests and friars. The collection of alms for this purpose was customary and took place on specific days of the week.⁷³ The alms of a specific day went to the main church and the Trinitarian hospital; alms collected on other days were distributed among the other churches and local confraternities established by captives. “This is how they have their wax supplies and ornaments and can celebrate with so much solemnity all the holidays,” Mascarenhas explained.⁷⁴ With the alms collected, the friars purchased wax in the market. Some wax was purchased by captives who then gave it to the church; some was purchased directly by priests.

The largest donations of wax and money were overseen by the taverners. In the 1630s, there were 250, the majority of which were in the prisons and run by captives.⁷⁵ The taverners produced some of the wine they sold from local grapes, which were smuggled into the taverns by poor Janissaries in return for a little pay. They also bought wine or liqueur with the booty taken by the corsairs. Most of their customers in these taverns were Janissaries, who came to smoke and drink. They brought food and candles, since like the rest of the prison, the taverns enjoyed only limited natural light. They placed the candles at the center of the high tables that they shared.⁷⁶ The taverners donated both cash and the wax leftovers the Janissaries had left. According to Zúñiga, “[They] were the ones who sustained the churches and the priests, because

⁷¹Ximénez, *Viaje de Argel de Fr. Francisco*, fol. 54.

⁷²Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Sacrality of Things: An Inquiry into Divine Materiality in the Christian Middle Ages,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78 (2013): 3–18.

⁷³Ximénez, *Viaje de Argel de Fr. Francisco*, fol. 55v.

^{74a}“C’est ainsi qu’elles s’approvisionnent en cire et en ornements,” in Mascarenhas, *Esclave à Alger*.

⁷⁵Zúñiga, *Judios, moros y cristianos*, 207. On the captives’ taverns in the Maghrib, see Clara-Ilham Álvarez Dopico, “Vino y tabernas en el Túnez beylical (siglo XVIII) a través de los relatos de viajeros, diplomáticos y religiosos,” *CES* 19 (2009): 205–43.

⁷⁶José Tamayo y Velarde, *Memorias del cautiverio y costumbres, ritos y gobiernos de Berbería según el relato de un jesuita del siglo XVII* (Oviedo: University of Oviedo, 2017), 206.

each church ... and the hospital ... ask for alms once a week from all the taverners, and with these alms as well as with the alms the rest of the Christians give, they buy wax, oil for the lamps, and ornaments for the churches.”⁷⁷ In this way, the pasha who paid the salaries of the Janissaries indirectly supplied the Catholic churches with wax.

At least one subcircuit connecting the pasha directly with the Trinitarians operated in the seventeenth century. According to Ximénez, up until sometime in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Trinitarians gave candles, casted in the Trinitarian Hospital in the city, to local notables, from the pasha to other office holders.⁷⁸ It should be noted that candles do not appear in the lists of gifts Trinitarians and Mercedarians on ransom missions were encouraged to gift to the pasha and local dignitaries—indeed, the friars often described these gifts as mandatory. The candles that Ximénez and the Trinitarians posted in the city formed elements in a gift economy binding the friars to the pasha and others. When describing the exchange, Ximénez uses the language of the gift, of an unsolicited spontaneous exchange. In his telling, the authority seeking to regulate the movement of gifts and favors was not the pasha but rather the Apostolic Vicar (the papal representative in Algiers). The bonds the candle gifted awarded by Ximénez must have been solid, as the Vicar, with whom the Trinitarians had constant struggles over jurisdictional boundaries, forbade the friars from continuing the custom. The problem was not that the candles were blessed—Ximénez highlights that they were not, and the Vicar forbade the giving of even non-blessed ones.⁷⁹ The prohibition, rather, must have been political. The gift economy provided the Trinitarians with influence over the most powerful figure in the city. The Vicar might have felt that this came at his expense and had therefore forbidden the gifts in order to keep the Trinitarians in check.

The king of Spain also partook in a different aspect of the wax economy. In 1722, in response to the request of Franciscans posted in Morocco, a writ (*cedula*) was issued exempting the friars from paying the *milliones* tax on any goods purchased on their way to the Maghrib or on what they brought back with them returning to Spain.⁸⁰ The exemption is indicative. On the one hand, it suggests that at least in the eighteenth century, the friars purchased some of the wax they used either in the Muslim cities where they served or in the Spanish garrisons. On the other, the document highlights the exceptionality and the socialized nature of wax as a commodity.

Conclusion

In the premodern Maghrib, wax and candles were at the heart of an ecosystem connecting Catholics and Muslims by commercial, social, cultural, and legal threads. Their materiality was unstable, transformable, and difficult to define in terms of their religious identity. These material qualities allowed the substance and its product to circulate in a wide range of measuring units—weight, volume, shape, color, purity, and age—that attested to multiple forms of production, packaging, and shipping.

⁷⁷ Zúñiga, *Judíos, moros y cristianos*, 207–8.

⁷⁸ Ximénez, *Viaje de Argel de Fr. Francisco Ximénez*, 198.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁰ J. Rosende, OFM, “Los Franciscanos y los cautivos en Marruecos,” *Archivo Ibero-Americano* I (1914): 242–26.

These very qualities also made candles ideal mediators in both cross- and intra-religious relations, embodied in transactions such as gifts, alms, donations, offerings, exemptions, and bribes, each with its own directionality and positionality.

The combination of instability—or rather, versatility—made adaptation and adoption easy and appealing, especially in a region like the Maghrib, where Islamic and Christian communities coexisted. Indeed, this intermingling generated anxiety about crossing religious boundaries. Elements and models of the other's religion were similar and readily available, making it easy to appropriate and incorporate them into one's existing religious repertoires. This climate prompted attempts at regulation. Muftis issued fatwas prohibiting the use and sale of candles and wax, whose rationale was to control religious boundaries and hinder Christian ritual. However, these prohibitions were often violation-prone, and jurists' legal opinions rarely established a lasting religious normativity. This context allowed for both the Islamic borrowing of specific Christian elements and their incorporation into the Mawlid, and Muslims produced and sold large quantities of wax to Christians held captive in the Maghrib. Christian captives used the wax ritually to establish and reinforce local Catholic communities and to restore links with the broader Catholic world. Conversely, Muslim seafarers borrowed Christian candles—maritime wax sculptures—and used them to forge social bonds with similar communities across the Islamic Mediterranean.

Following the wax trail, both discursively and in practice, reveals that religious mixing was extremely common in the premodern Islamic Mediterranean. If we want to identify and study such crossings, we need to expand the sites of research and focus more intensively on material culture and the struggles over its use and circulation. Such a focus is far from evident. Recent research on religious boundary crossing in the region has tended to center on religious conversion and the figure of the renegade—Christians who converted to Islam during their captivity.⁸¹ Indeed, renegades played a role in this article too. However, the article also, and perhaps more importantly, established that religious mixing runs much deeper than we have assumed, was ubiquitous, and cannot be confined to the case of converts. Wax deeply entangled the lives of Christians and Muslims by constantly moving between these communities and the circuits along which it traveled, continually branching and changing form. As a result, the rituals and prohibitions meant to prevent wax from spilling into the wrong religious classifications multiplied the crossings they were supposed to prevent, further blurring the boundaries.

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⁸¹For a critique of such a focus, see Guillaume Calafat, "Jurisdictional Pluralism in a Litigious Sea (1590–1630): Hard Cases, Multi-Sited Trials and Legal Enforcement between North Africa and Italy," *Past & Present* 242, supplement 14 (2019): 142–78, 169–74; M'hamed Oualdi, *Esclaves et Maîtres. Les Mamelouks des Beys de Tunis du XVII^e siècle aux années 1880* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 23–61.

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