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*Interior of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, built A.D. 786-787 by 'Abd al-Rahman I and enlarged three times by his successors. The double-tiered arches (right) and cupola (above) gave birth to an utterly new, and seemingly limitless, concept of space.*

*This sketch of Islamic culture's influence on Europe in the early part of the Second Millennium, is excerpted from a longer work on Islamic poetry, language-culture, and philosophy, which appeared in the Third Quarter 1994 issue of Ibykus, the German-language sister publication of Fidelio.*

# Andalusia,

by Muriel Mirak Weissbach

In Dante's *Commedia*, the poetical masterpiece which ushered in the Golden Renaissance, Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, is consigned to the Ninth Circle of *Inferno*. He is condemned by the Christian poet, not because he is considered a heretic, but because the religious movement he inaugurated was considered schismatic. Dante placed the Muslim philosopher and scientist Ibn Sina in Limbo, in the august company of Plato and Socrates, and Salah al-Din, the Muslim leader who recaptured Jerusalem in 1187.

One of the most famous paintings of the early Renaissance (c. 1340), by Francesco Traini, depicts Saint Thomas Aquinas stomping a figure under his feet, as if it were a snake depicting satan. The figure under his feet is the Twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd, known more commonly as Averroes, who was largely responsible for reintroducing Aristotle into Europe. Was Aquinas, then, a crusader against the infidel Saracen? Or Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, whose ecumenical efforts at the 1439 Council of Florence forged the union of Christendom on the basis of an image of man which was to spark the Renaissance? Cusa, whose *Cribatio Alcoranus* was a theological critique of Islam, was yet the same man who defined the parameters for an ecumenical

# Gateway to the Golden Renaissance



EIFRNS/Michael Weisbach

understanding among all faiths, including Islam, in his *De Pace Fidei*.

Islam, for medieval Christian Europe, was not an abstract religious faith. It was the lifeblood of a vibrant culture which flourished on European soil, in Al-Andalus, from the coming of the Arabs to Spain in 711 until their expulsion under Ferdinand and Isabela in 1492. Andalusia, particularly from the Ninth to the Thirteenth centuries, was a beacon of learning, in a Europe languishing, for the most part, in the shadows of ignorance and economic-social backwardness. Islamic culture had flourished as well in the teeming metropolises of Baghdad, Damascus, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Cairo, but it was Moorish Spain which most affected Europe.

How Christian Europe was to relate to this relatively superior culture, would determine the course of later human history. Contrary to the myths associated with the Crusades, those few, most enlightened Christian leaders of Europe, whose work was to be decisive for future events, did not respond with a hostile commitment to wipe out that culture. Rather, they faced the challenge presented them much in the same way that a great musical composer, such as Beethoven or Brahms, faced the challenge presented by the revolu-

tion in music effected by Haydn and Mozart: They investigated what had generated such cultural excellence, and developed it, in specifically Christian terms of reference, as the driving force for the Renaissance. Rather than insistently hammering out a contrary theme, opposing Christian doctrine in a scholastic form to Islam, as their Aristotelian counterparts did, they sought out and identified the underlying universal strains of the two traditions, and, often utilizing Islamic motifs, further developed those strains, to assert their teaching of Christianity.

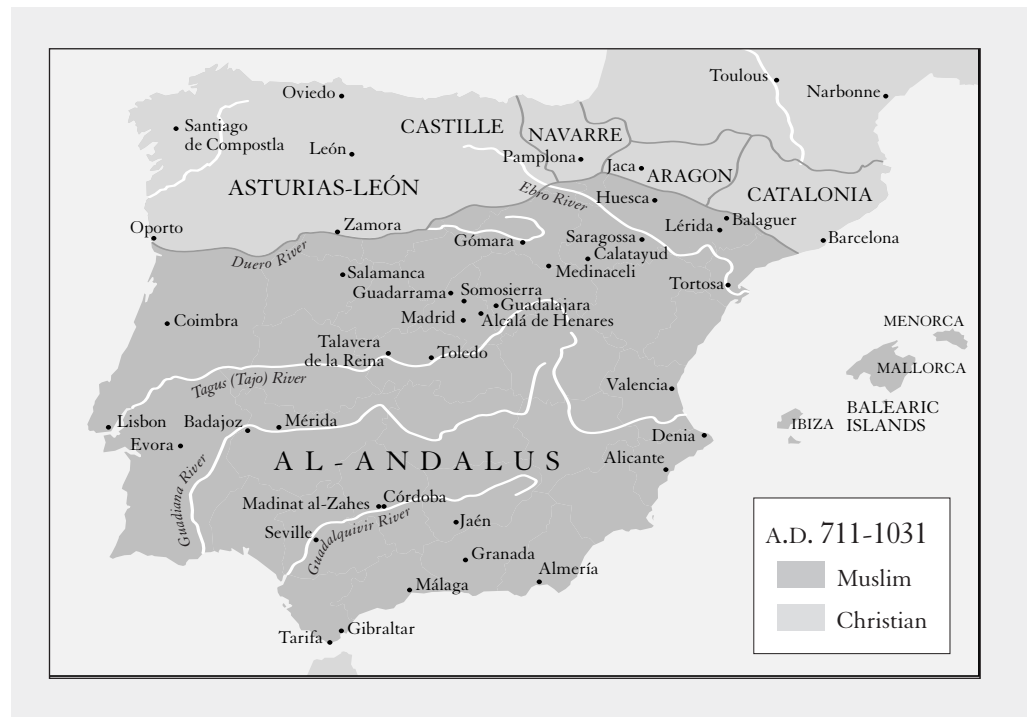
Islamic-Arab civilization, as it developed on European soil in Spain, provided the impetus for the Golden Renaissance. It did this, not, as historical accounts are wont to assert, only by transmitting through Arabic translations the works of the Greeks and Indians, but also by building a scientific, economic, and artistic culture of unprecedented power. This culture surpassed that of the Merovingians and Carolingians, largely because of the revolution in language on which it was built. (Charlemagne's great failure, in fact, was his adherence to the artificial Latin and his reluctance to elevate the vernacular into a national language.) The Arabic language-culture prompted the development, as in a dialogue, of the great poetical traditions of France, Spain, Italy, and Germany—all the illustrious vernaculars of Europe, which were the precondition for the later establishment of nation-states.

## Al-Andalus, 'Bright Jewel of the World'

As early as the Ninth century, Andalusia had become one of the wonders of the world. The Arabs, who arrived on Spanish shores in 711, set to the task, in the following century, of building an urban-based society, modelled on the example of Baghdad, the "city of peace," which, built from scratch in 762, was to become a thriving center of industry, agriculture, trade, science, and the arts, whose influence radiated out to the East as

far as India and China. Although at its inception, Andalusia was dependent on the Emir of North Africa, who appointed a governor with the approval of the Caliph Walid ibn 'Abd al-Malik, of the Omayyad dynasty in Damascus, Arab Spain soon became independent. The Omayyad 'Abd al-Rahman fled Baghdad for Spain when the former came under the rule of the rival Abbasid dynasty, and in 756 proclaimed an independent emirate. It was under the rule of 'Abd al-Rahman III (912-961), who declared himself Caliph of Spain in 929, that Andalusia flourished as a nation, reaching its high point under his successor al-Hakem II (961-976) and his military leader Muhammed ibn Abi Amir, known as Al Mansur.

The unity of the caliphate ended in 1031, but Andalusian culture continued to flourish, in some cases reaching new achievements, under the "party kings" who ruled over the city-states of Seville, Almería, Badajoz, Granada, Toledo, Málaga, and Valencia. The break-up of the caliphate weakened the city-states politically, however, leaving them vulnerable to the military pressures of Christian rulers. Toledo fell in 1085 to Alfonso VI, and Valencia was taken temporarily by the Cid in 1094. Berber Muslim tribesmen from North Africa halted the Christian onslaught and established the Almoravid dynasty (1095-1149) and the Almohad dynasty (1149-1248). In 1236, Ferdinand III had taken Córdoba, the capital of Andalusia, and twelve years later, conquered Seville. In the latter half of the Thirteenth century, Muslim rule was limited to the



kingdom of the Nasrids, which ruled over Granada, Almería, Málaga, and Algeciras.

Under ‘Abd al-Rahman II (822-852), Andalusia had grown to support a population of 30 million, who lived in hundreds of cities, manufacturing centers where textiles were produced, and trade and education flourished. The capital city, Córdoba, was the largest city in the West, with 130,000 households within its walls, 3,000 mosques, and 28 suburbs, with villas, palaces, and splendid gardens.

Using the same technologies and applying the same fiscal and credit policies which had been introduced by the Baghdad caliphate in Iraq, Andalusia built up an advanced agricultural sector. Islamic legislation did not recognize primogeniture, but favored family farming, facilitating the distribution of land to all offspring. Farmers who took advantage of irrigation techniques, financed through taxation, paid only 5 percent rather than 10 percent of their yield in taxes. Dams, irrigation canals, and pumps contributed to productivity levels which far outstripped those in Northern Europe for centuries to come. The textile industry, which employed 13,000 persons out of the 130,000 households in Córdoba, produced cotton, linen, wool, and silk. State as well as private textile mills were equipped with spindles and horizontal looms.

In the Ninth century, Andalusia’s cities were the marvel of chroniclers: “One sings praises to the golden threaded silk of Almería, Málaga, and Murcia, whose faultless quality arouses the delight even of Oriental observers. In Abadilla they produce those rugs that bring such high prices in the Orient. Granada delivers the especially gloriously colorful silk dresses, of the type known as ‘velvet shimmer.’ . . . Murcia produces wonderful inlaid bedsteads, marvelous fabrics, metal wares, like goldplated knives and scissors . . . which reach North Africa as frequent export articles. From Murcia, Almería, and Málaga come costly glass and gold porcelain. Al-Andalus also knows the production of various kinds of mosaics.”<sup>1</sup>

## Education in Islam

The greatest wonder of Andalusia, however, was the advancement of learning. None of its wealth in industry and trade would have been possible without a conscious state policy promoting science, as the driving force behind technological progress and overall economic growth. As with the policy pursued under the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Andalusian rulers promoted learning and patronized the arts as a means of raising the cultural level of the population. ‘Abd al-Rahman I started building the great mosque in 785, an immense public-works project, which established the religious and educational

center of the capital. It was enlarged and extended by his successors ‘Abd al-Rahman II and ‘Abd al-Rahman III, and completed by al-Hakem II.

Since the time of Mohammed, the mosque had functioned as “the Islamic educational institution *par excellence*.” Mohammed was primarily a teacher, who gathered his followers into a circle (the *halqah*), to tell them about the new faith. In the second and third centuries after Mohammed, as the mosque flourished as a school, other educational institutions were introduced: the *kuttab*, for elementary education in reading, writing, arithmetic, and in the Koran, as well as some poetry and sayings. Much stress was placed on developing the capacity for memorization. In addition, the homes of learned men (*ulama*) and of paper merchants (*warraqun*) were turned into school rooms.

In the Ninth-Tenth centuries, the mosque schools evolved into universities, the first in Europe, which flourished in every city, drawing Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars and students like magnets, from all over the world. Finally, there were the academies, separate from the mosques, the most famous of which were the House of Wisdom (*Dur al-Hikmah*) and the House of Science (*Dur al-‘Ilm*), which were libraries, translation centers, and astronomical observatories. In the Tenth and Eleventh centuries, the *madrasah*, a state-sponsored educational institution, appeared in Persia and Baghdad, as well as in Andalusia.

Elementary education was generally organized as a family matter, with the parents coming to some agreement with the teacher regarding payment.

Hakem II extended education to the needy, by building 27 elementary schools in Córdoba for children of poor families. Three of these were located near the great mosque, and the remaining 24 in the suburbs “to impart free education.” One chronicler reports that in Córdoba alone, there were 800 schools. In addition, a large orphanage was built in Córdoba, as in many other towns. Thus, “the majority of Muslims could read and write.” The German philologist Gustav Diercks remarked that “there were even in the smallest villages, public schools and schools for the poor in such numbers, that one has good reason to assume that under al-Hakem II, at least in the province of Córdoba, no one was ignorant of reading and writing.”

Al-Hakem was himself a scholar, who had read many of the 400,000 books which filled his famous library, as indicated by his marginal notations. Books originally written in Persia and Syria, became known first in Andalusia. The city produced 60,000 books a year, facilitated by the use of paper, an invention the Arabs had taken from the Chinese, and developed in factories in every major city. Córdoba, the pearl of Andalusia, was

renowned throughout Europe. In her poem on the martyrdom of Saint Pelagius, written in the Saxon cloister of Gandersheim, the Abbess Hroswitha had glowing words for Córdoba, the “bright jewel of the world, the young, marvelous city, proud of her power of resistance, famous for the delights which she embraces, beaming in full possession of all things.”

## The Miracle of Arabic

Northern Europe gazed at the marvel of Al-Andalus in awe, not without a tinge of suspicion, wondering what the secret behind the brilliance of Arab Spain could be. Although some conjectured that sorcery was what was taught in the halls of Toledo’s academies, the truth is that Islamic Spain was a humanist culture which had been founded on a crucial scientific discovery: the Arabic language.

Mohammed, whom Muslims consider the last prophet in a series beginning with Abraham, was an illiterate, who received the revelation, contained in the holy book of the Koran, with the injunction by God: “Read! Recite!” The miracle which gave birth to the new religion was therefore the miracle of language, whose appearance to Mohammed echoed the act by which God had given the gift of speech to the first man, Adam. It was not language in general, but the Arabic language, based on that spoken by the Quayrash clan in Arabia, but elevated through the poetry of the Koran to a literary tongue. It was what Dante would later call an “illustrious vernacular,” a language spoken by the people, but forged through the transmission of universal ideas, in this case divine revelation, into a vehicle capable of transmitting the most profound ideas regarding man and the universe.

This emphasis on the written word, on the power of language, which comes directly from the religious worldview embodied in the Koran, was crucial to developing the society of Andalusia. Ironically, this same society did *not* succeed in developing a nation-state at that time (although there are Arab and Islamic nation-states today, created through a different process). It did *not* succeed in elaborating those institutions which would create a nation around this language-culture, for reasons which have to do with the relationship between the idea of the community of believers (*Umma*) and the nation, as it evolved geographically and historically. And, in a sense, the tension in Arab and Islamic societies between the *Umma* and the nation, has continued to the present day.

The Koran itself is considered by Muslims to be what one might call a unique experiment; although the validity of the ideas it contains is to be taken on faith and is susceptible to rigorous proof by Reason, yet an oft-cited test

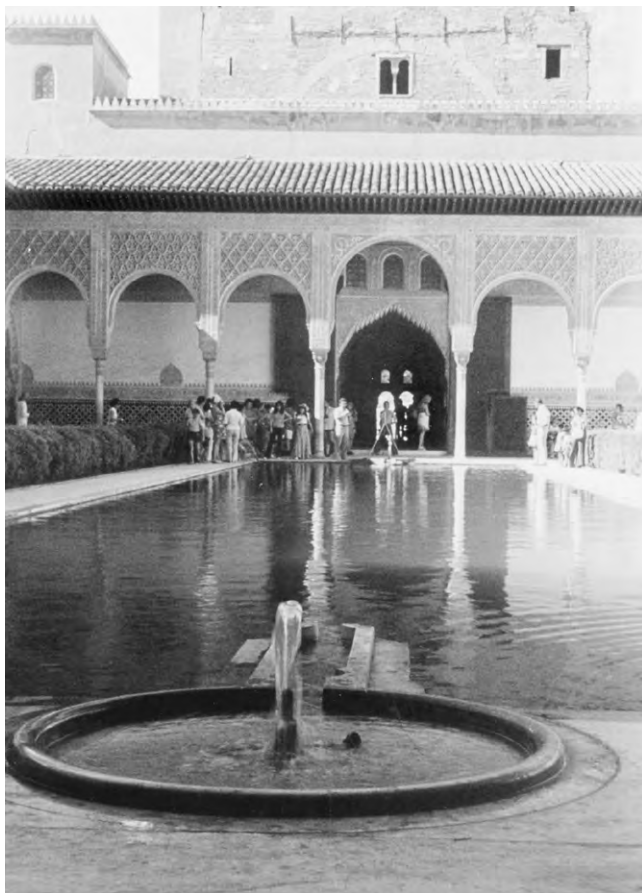


*Entrance to the Great Mosque of Córdoba.*

of its validity is in the very form of its expression. This means, that were one to attempt to express the same thought contained in any of the Koran’s verses, in another form, it would be impossible. Thus the poetical text stands for Muslims as a scientific proof.

The role that the language has come to play in every facet of Arab culture is unique. Since it is incumbent on Muslims to read and recite the Koran in Arabic in daily prayers, believers who were won over to the faith had to learn to speak, read, and write the language of the Koran. Its expansion was tantamount to a literacy campaign. As Islam spread like wildfire through non-Arab populations, to the East through Persia and India up to China and southeast Asia, as well as westward across North Africa and into Spain, care had to be taken to maintain the purity of the language, easily corrupted by non-native speakers. Thus, the first improvements introduced by the early Caliph ’Uthman included revising the script so as to fix the values of sounds.

The systematic treatment of word-formation was crucial to the monumental translation efforts, begun under the Abbasids in Baghdad, and continued throughout the Arab world, notably in Córdoba and Toledo in Spain.



*Interior courtyard of the Alhambra in Granada, built in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries.*

To render ideas expressed in Greek philosophy and science, new Arabic terms had to be coined, and the language grew through this process into an extraordinarily flexible vehicle of expression. Arabic translations were given highest priority by the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (764?-809) in Baghdad, who, embodying the oft-cited Muslim maxim, “Seek knowledge even if it were in China,” would send emissaries to Byzantium and other parts of the world in search of ancient manuscripts, to be translated, with the help of Syrian Christians at his court, into Syriac, and thence into Arabic, or directly into Arabic. Under Caliph al-Mamun (813-833), translation work was transformed into a highly organized activity, in the House of Wisdom, a complex which became a translation center, an academy, an astronomical observatory, and one of the richest libraries in the world. Directing a team of ninety translators was the Nestorian Christian Hunayn ibn-Ishaq (809-877), who introduced the method of conceptual rather than literal translation. All the works of Classical Greece which could be found were rendered into Arabic, from the medical works of Hippocrates and Galen, to the philosophy of Plato and

Aristotle, to the science and geometry of Ptolemy, Euclid, and Archimedes. An effort of the same magnitude was undertaken in Muslim Spain, where institutions modelled on the House of Wisdom grew up in Córdoba and Seville.

The fact that Hunayn ibn-Ishaq would receive for each book translated, its weight in gold, testifies to the value placed on knowledge—and the diffusion of knowledge—in Muslim culture. As Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi wrote in the Tenth century, knowledge and its spread through education are “the pillars upon which rests the axis of religion and the world. They distinguish man from the beast, and the rational from the irrational being.” The Andalusian poet and philosopher Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) exalted the role of knowledge in developing virtue, and condemned those who were greedy with their knowledge. The best means for disseminating learning, said Ibn Hazm, was through books, the possession of which in private libraries became the hallmark of the learned man.

Such attitudes reflect a love of knowledge which is fundamental to Islam. Among the prophetic traditions included by Ibn Khayr in his *Farasah*, are the following:

There is nothing greater in the eye of God than a man who learned a science and who taught it to people.

A Muslim cannot bestow on his brother a better gift than a word of wisdom. If the brother hears, grasps, then transmits it, God will guide him, and divert him from evil, since the word of wisdom leads to the uplifting of the soul.

Scholars and teachers are partners in reward, and there are no better people than they.

The knowledge that is not used is like a treasure from which nothing is spent. Its possessors labored in collecting it, but never benefitted from it.

And God directs you to one single man [who is learned], it is better for you than the whole world and all in it.

Such was the spirit that pervaded Andalusia. “In no country and in no other cultural epoch was the drive for such extensive scientific travel so widespread, as in Muslim Spain, from the Tenth century on. It was perfectly commonplace for inhabitants of the peninsula to make their way across the monstrous stretch on the North African coast, to Egypt, and from there to Bukhara or Samarkand, in order to hear the lectures of a famous scholar.”<sup>2</sup> This was the spirit that gave rise to public schools for needy children, as well as splendid public libraries, seventy of which were still open in the Thirteenth century, and to such high literacy rates that “almost everyone could read and write, whereas this was a privilege restricted to the clergy in northern Europe.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Poetry of the Koran

The driving force behind the quest for knowledge, through translations, books, and education, was the Koran, a poetical text which urged the believer to increase his knowledge as a means of praising the Almighty. The Koran stood as the cornerstone for further edification of the language-culture. Although pre-Islamic poetry flourished in Arabia, it was the birth of Islam that gave the poetry its greatest impetus.

Poetry was the heart of Andalusian culture. An anthology of Andalusian poetry from the Tenth century compiled by Ibn Ferradsch, *The Garden*, had two hundred chapters, and each of them a hundred double verses. Poetry was a part of life. Not only were statesmen cited for their poetical productions, but “every peasant was obsessed by the gift of improvisation, and even the farmer behind the plough, would make verses about any subject whatsoever.”<sup>4</sup> Chronicles report that poetry was an indispensable tool for every aspect of social and political life. “Poems, which wound around columns and walls, in various intertwinings, constituted a major decoration in the palaces, and even in the government chancelleries, the art of poetry played a role. . . . Men from the humblest condition rose to the highest, honored positions, to royal consideration, solely through their poetical talent; verses gave the signal for bloody combat and disarmed again as well the rage of the victor; poetry had to lay its weight in the balance, in order to lend more energy to diplomatic negotiations; and a happy improvisation often broke open the jail gates for a prisoner or saved the life of one condemned to death.”<sup>5</sup>

The poet held a position at court as cherished as that of the translator and the teacher, and as richly rewarded. When in 822 ‘Abd al-Rahman II ceremoniously welcomed the famous poet Ali ibn Nafi, known as Zirjab of Baghdad, to his court in Córdoba, he offered him 200 gold pieces per month, abundant goods in kind, 2,000 gold pieces in gifts per year, and the use of various houses, fields, and gardens worth 14,000 gold pieces. Zirjab brought with him from Baghdad the wealth of Oriental customs, dress, and culture, above all poetry and music. Zirjab knew 20,000 songs by heart, and would call in women of the court, themselves accomplished musicians, to take down in writing the songs he had composed in the night. Zirjab brought with him as well the knowledge of musical instruments and theory current in the East, and introduced an innovation to the lute (from the Arabic *al’ud*) by adding a fifth string. In the years thereafter, Seville would become the renowned center of production of musical instruments, from lutes and guitars, to flutes, copper trumpets, tambourines, and others.

Zirjab was not only a practical musician and poet, but a learned man, who spent hours conversing with ‘Abd al-Rahman about poetry, history, astronomy, science, and art.

Poets at court were an institution from the earliest caliphs in Spain. The poet Yahja, nicknamed “al Gazal” (the gazelle) because of his good looks, served his caliph, ‘Abd al-Rahman II, well, as a virtual ambassador, who overwhelmed the Emperor in Constantinople with his improvised verses celebrating the beauty of the empress. The poets Ibn ‘Abd Rebbihi and Mondhir Ibn Said at the court of ‘Abd al-Rahman III became legendary figures, thanks to the power of their poetry.

## The European Vernaculars

What kind of poetry did these masters sing? In addition to the classical poetical form known as the *qasida*, a long composition with a single rhyme and quantitative stress which Islamic Spain inherited from the Arabs in the East, a new poetical form was born in Andalusia which was to have the most profound effects on the successive course of European culture. This was the song known as the *muwashsha*, invented in the Ninth century. It was a strophic poem, the predecessor of the *canzone*, a strophic poem whose poetic form is shown in Figure 1. The form of the stanza is organized as follows. It begins with two lines which rhyme: “*ah̄lar, tazhar.*” Then, three lines with a different rhyme: “*gam̄alu, diḡālu, šimālu.*” And last, a final line, which rhymes with the opening lines: “*yanawwar.*” The Arabic names for the parts of the stanza are: first, *markaz*; second, *gusn*; and last, *simt*.

Figure 2 shows an example of a *muwashsha* in Arabic script, transliterated into the Roman alphabet, and translated into English.

The *muwashsha* form was a new development in the history of the Arabic language. Classical Arabic poetry had a continuous rhyme, without this internal division, this

FIGURE 2. Arabic poem in *muwashsha* form by the Eleventh-century

الأَرْضُ قَدْ مَدَّتْ بِسَاطًا أَخْضَرَ  
وَالْأَقْحَوَانُ يَفْتَحُ ، وَالدُّنْيَا تَرْهَرُ  
حَدَّثَ عَنِ السَّوْسَنِ وَامْدَحَ جَمَالَهُ  
وَالْوَرْدُ لَا تَنْسَاهُ وَامْدَحَ دَجَالَهُ  
وَجَلَسَ النَّرْجِسُ عَلَى شِمَالِهِ  
وَأَغْفَلَ عَنِ الْيَاسْمِينِ حَتَّى يَنْوَرُ

FIGURE 1. Poetic form of the Arabic *muwashsha*.

-----	a	<i>markaz</i>
-----	a	
-----	b	<i>gusn</i>
-----	b	
-----	b	
-----	a	<i>simt</i>
-----	c	
-----	c	<i>gusn</i>
-----	c	
-----	a	<i>simt</i>
-----	c	
etc.		

organization into thought-objects, so to speak. This revolution was introduced into the Arabic language in Spain and in Arabia more or less at the same time, in the Ninth century. From there, it spread like wildfire throughout the courts of Europe, through the troubadours, through the German minstrels (*Minnesänger*), and so on.

Figure 3 shows some examples of the *muwashsha* form in the languages which were emerging as vernaculars in Europe at that time, including Spanish, Italian, Provençal, and German.

In the Spanish poem beginning “*Vivo ledo con razon*,” for example, you can see that the stanza is organized into the same parts, with Spanish names for the corresponding Arabic ones.

The Italian example, which begins “*Morte villana, di pietà nemica*,” comes from Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. This is exactly a *muwashsha* stanza, the exactly same form that you find in the Arabic. It demonstrates that Dante knew the Arabic *muwashsha* form directly.

Most of the poems in Andalusia, in this tradition, were poems of courtly love. They were poems that praised the qualities of the damsel, of the lady, the beloved. Some of them, however, were ironical; some of them were social-critical, polemical; and some of them were epigrammatic. For example, from the Thirteenth century, the following poem by Ibn al-Khabazza is called “The King Who Died Young”:

Your life was of the order true  
Of Arab eloquence:  
The tale was brief, the words were few;  
The meaning was immense.<sup>6</sup>

Another, called “Mutability,” is by one of the greatest poets in Andalusia, Ibn Hazm, who lived in the late-Tenth and early-Eleventh centuries:

Let not my jealous foes  
Exult in my disgrace;  
For Fortune comes and goes  
Nor tarries in one place.  
  
A free man is like gold  
Now cast for hammering,  
But presently, behold!  
A crown upon a king.

Among the religious poets, who were a large number in Andalusia, the mystics in Islam, there was a poetical form that developed, which was a form of a dialogue between the believer and God. And the idea behind this poetry was to try to reach oneness—unity—with God. This is the poetry that particularly influenced Ramon Llull (Raimundus Lullus) (c.1235-1316), who in fact wrote an entire series of poems based on this model, called *The Book of the Friend and the Beloved*, in which he develops what he calls spiritual metaphors—365, one for each day of the year—between himself, the friend, and the beloved, God.

Andalusian poet Ibn Guzman.

Transliteration:

Al-arḍu qad maddat bisāṭan aḥḍar  
Wa ’l-aqḥuwān yaftaḥ, wa ’d-dunyā tazhar:

Ḥaddat ’an as-sūsān w’amdah ḡamālu  
Wa al-ward lā tansāh w’amdah diḡālu  
Wa ḡalas an-narḡas ’alā šimālu

Wa ’ḡfil ’ani ’l-yāsmīn ḥattā yanawwar!

English translation:

The earth spreads out a green carpet,  
The daisies open up and the world blossoms:

Speak of the white lily and praise its beauty,  
And forget not the magnificence of the rose,  
And place the narcissus on the left.

And mention not the jasmine, until it blooms.



FIGURE 3. *Arabic muwashsha poetic form, as used in early European vernaculars.*

### Spanish

Vivo ledo con razon Amigoes, toda sazon.	estribillo	I live in joy for a reason, friends, every moment.
Vivo ledo e sin pesar, pues amor me fizo amar a la que podré llamar	mudanzas	I am gay and without sorrow, for love has made me love her whom I would call
mas bella de cuantas son.	vuelta	the loveliest of them all.
Vivo ledo e veviré pues que de amor alcancé que servire' a la que sé	mudanzas	Happy I am, and shall be, for love has granted me to love her who I know
que me dara galardón.	vuelta	shall requite me.

### Italian

Patre beato, per tua caritade, Ensegnaci a fare la tua bontade.	Blessed Father, for thy charity Teach us to do thy good.
Benigno Patre, per tuo gran dolcezza, Contra li vizii danne fortezza, Che nostra carne per suo fragilezza	Benevolent Father, for thy sweetness, Against vices, give us strength, As our flesh, being weak
Sempre ne cessa da tua amistade.	Always ceases with thy friendship.
Spesso superbia a noi abbonda, Che ne fa perder tuo grazia giconda. Dolce Signore, nostra menta fonda	Often pride abounds in us, Which makes us lose thy lovely grace. Sweet Lord, thrust our spirit
Sempre in perfetta umilitade.	Always in perfect humility.

### Provençal (*Troubadour*)

Farai chansoneta nueve  
ans que vent ni gel ni plueva;  
ma dona m'assai' e.m prueva  
quossi de qual guiza l'am;  
e ja per plag que m'an mueva  
no.m solvera de son liam.

Thou wilt fashion a new song  
Before the cold and rain arrive;  
I am put to such great tests  
The sparks fly from my soul;  
Despite the pain that moves me  
These bonds will not dissolve.

### Middle High German (*Minnesänger*)

Got hat wonders vil gewundert  
manich tuset manich hundert  
eynes han ich uz gesundert  
das is wunderbare.

God hast wrought full many wonders  
Many thousand many hundred  
One alone from these I've chosen  
Who is wonderful.

### Italian

(*from Dante's Vita Nuova; first stanza only*)

Morte villana, di pietà nemica,  
di dolor madre antica,  
guidicio incontestabile gravoso,  
poi che hai data matera al cor doglioso  
ond'io vado pensoso,  
di te blasmar la lingua s'affatica.

Villainous Death, enemy to pity,  
ancient mother of pain,  
incontestable grave judgment,  
since thou hast given substance to the grieved  
heart  
which is why I am engulfed in thought,  
my tongue grows weary of censuring thee.

## Christian Princes and Arab Culture

Two courts of Christian princes are exemplary of the rich dialogue that ensued with Islamic Spain, those of Alfonso the Wise, and Frederick II Hohenstaufen of Palermo. In Ninth-century Andalusia, Arabic was the universal language, also among the Christians. Thus, when Christian forces took Toledo in 1085, the culture remained Arab. The kings of Castille and Aragon took Arab women for their wives, among them Alfonso IV, Alfonso VII, and Alfonso the Wise (1221-1284). Arabic works were rapidly rendered into Latin in the translation schools, like that of Archbishop Raymond in Toledo, and not only Greek Classics, but also the Koran, were translated. Under Alfonso, translations were done into *Lengua Romana*<sup>7</sup> and French, as well as Latin. It was largely the Mozaraber—Christians who had lived under Arab rule—and the Morisken, or Mudejaren—Muslims living under Christian rule—who mediated the language and the culture to the new Christian leaders. Alfonso set up a school where the Arab philosopher Muhamed al-Riquiti was to teach Arabs, Christians, and Jews. He also founded a “general school of Arabic and Latin” in Seville, where Christians and Muslims taught science and philosophy. Alfonso commissioned Arab navigators and astronomers to work with him on compiling the “Astronomical Tables,” and authored a history of Spain. His *Cantigas de Santa María* also shows the strong Arab influence [SEE Box, page 32].

Then there was Hohenstaufen Sicily, a Christian Arab culture. From the conquest of the Normans in 1091, through the reign of the Hohenstaufen, everything was assimilated from the previous Muslim rulers, from the language, to the architecture, music, poetry, and science, to the habits of dress. Roger of Sicily by 1140 had introduced strict legislation controlling the certification of doctors, along the lines of what Baghdad had done. Frederick II (1215-1250), who grew up with Arabic as his native language, called Baghdad scientists to his court, along with musicians and poets. He was so thoroughly Arabized (he was even buried in Arab dress), that Pope Innocent IV accused him of being a crypto-Muslim. Both Frederick and Roger II (1101-1154) came to be known as the “baptized sultans of Sicily.” His “crusade” to Jerusalem particularly outraged the Papacy, because, instead of waging war to regain territories, Frederick negotiated with the Muslims, and dedicated his time to philosophical discussions with their scholars. Later, Frederick addressed a series of questions regarding the nature of God to the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Sabin, whose answers were published as the “Sicilian Questions.” He founded the University of Naples in 1224, on the model of the Andalu-

sian centers of study. Enjoying a royal charter, the university offered a program in Oriental studies, one which Thomas Aquinas, among others, took advantage of. Significantly, Frederick II also continued the Muslim fiscal system, which the Normans before him had adopted. Frederick’s son Manfred, who was an accomplished geometer, continued his father’s policies. His liberal approach to Muslims who filled his court earned him and his brother Conrad a Papal condemnation.

Thus, at the same time the Aristotelean Averroes project was being implemented in Paris and Venice, the jewels of Arab culture were being admired and polished in Toledo, Seville, and Palermo, to be passed on to those who would lay the groundwork for the Florentine Renaissance. The two most significant influences in this process were Ramon Llull and Dante Alighieri. Both rejected Islam, but assimilated the Arab culture it had engendered.

## Faith Based on Reason

Ramon Llull was born in Majorca in 1232, just after it had been conquered by the Christians, and grew up in a thoroughly Arab culture. After a personal crisis, he abandoned family and position to dedicate his life to missionary work, specifically to converting the Muslims to Christianity. His mentor, the Dominican Raymond Penyfort in Barcelona, dissuaded him from studying in Paris, telling him that Paris could not provide him the knowledge he required for the task. Llull did go to Paris later to take a prominent role in the anti-Averroes fight, but in 1265 he followed Penyfort’s recommendation and secluded himself for ten years in Majorca, with a tutor, an Arab freed slave. Llull mastered Arabic and plunged into study of the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato, and the neo-Platonists (from both the Christian and Muslim traditions), in particular Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He also read the works of the Andalusian mystics, like Ibn Hazm of Córdoba, Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), and Ibn Sa’bin of Murcia (d. 1269/71).

Although thoroughly steeped in the teachings of the Church fathers, Llull placed special emphasis on acquiring Islamic science, which he deemed necessary to the task he had set for himself: to convert the Muslims, by showing them what he believed to be the superiority of Christianity in their own terms. In an anecdote related several times in different works by Llull, he tells the story of the Sultan of Tunis, who was being asked to convert to Christianity. The Sultan asked the learned Christian who had introduced him to the faith, why he should believe in Christianity rather than in Islam. When the Christian replied, that it was a question of “faith,” the Sultan retorted: “Why should

# Alfonso the Wise: ‘King of the Three Religions’

Alfonso X, el Sabio (the Wise) (1221-1284) was King of Castille and León from 1252 to 1282. Like his uncle, Frederick II Hohenstaufen, who ruled in Sicily, and all of Christian Europe, as Holy Roman Emperor from 1220 to 1250, Alfonso was among the political rulers of his age who took the first steps to establish sovereign nation-states in Europe. And, like his uncle Frederick II’s Palermo, Alfonso’s Spain experienced an ecumenical flowering of scientific and artistic development, based on the cross-fertilization of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities living under its protection.

Alfonso’s central project of government was to make the Iberian peninsula—at the time, only partially reconquered from Islam—a unified kingdom, and its inhabitants a literate and cultured citizenry. He sought to create a nation-state (Spain) by creating a national language (Castilian), where neither yet existed. His *Cantigas de Santa María* song-poems were the first literary works in the Iberian peninsula to be written in the vernacular Castilian. His *Siete Partidas*, also in the vernacular, was Spain’s first legal code for the kingdom as a whole, establishing a national system of law where only local “fueros” (statutory rights) had held force previously. And, Alfonso authored the first general history of Spain, the *Crónica General de España*, before Spain as such even existed as a nation.

To accomplish these tasks, Alfonso sponsored a major scientific and translation center in the city of Toledo, building on the Twelfth-century achievements of Bishop Don Raimundo of Toledo, and Bishop Don Rodrigo Ximénez de Rada. Toledo became the world’s most important crossroad of the three great monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Not only did they live in peace under Alfonso, but he set each to cooperate with the others around their common humanist heritage, in an exemplary ecumenical alliance—even at the height of the Christian Reconquest of Spain from the Moors, a centuries-long war in which Alfonso personally participated as a youth. It was this outlook that caused Alfonso to dub himself the “King of the Three Religions.”

All major translations at the Toledo School were executed by teams of two scholars working simultaneously—one whose mother tongue was the language of the document to be translated; the other being a native speak-

er of the target-language into which it was to be rendered. One of the earliest Toledo translations was of the Koran into Castilian, done by teams consisting of an Arab and a Christian. The same was done with the Hebrew Talmud.

At its height, Alfonso’s Toledo School of Translation had an incredible 12,000 students learning from the masters of European culture. One of the most distinguished Italian visiting professors, for example, was Brunetto Latini—the later teacher and mentor of Dante Alighieri.

## The Common Good

The kind of kingdom Alfonso wished to make of Spain is best reflected in his famous legal code, the *Siete Partidas*, issued over the period 1251-1265, but not actually implemented until almost a century later. The stated objective of the *Siete Partidas* was to organize society not for the benefit of the few, but for the common good—a revolutionary proposal at the time: “The Law-Maker should love God and keep Him before his eyes when he makes the laws, in order that they may be just and perfect. He should moreover love justice and the common benefit of all.”

Alfonso emphasized the connection between such justice, and scientific knowledge: “He should be learned, in order to know how to distinguish right from wrong, and he should not be ashamed to change and amend his laws.” As opposed to such a just ruler, tyrants “prefer to act for their own advantage, although it may result in injury to the country, rather than for the common benefit of all.”

Presaging later developments in the emergence of the nation-state, Alfonso proclaimed that the only true authority to govern comes from the ruler’s dedication to the common good: “If [the ruler] should make a bad use of his power . . . people can denounce him as a tyrant, and his government which was lawful, will become wrongful.” In the midst of stratified European feudal society, Alfonso el Sabio explained what he meant by “the people”: “The union of all men together, those of superior, middle, and inferior rank, was called the people; for all are necessary, and none can be excepted for the reason that they are obliged to assist one another in order to live properly and be protected and supported.”

—Dennis Small

I give up my belief for another, on grounds of faith—*credere pro credere?* No,” he said, “I shall believe only that which Reason tells me—*credere pro vero intelligere.*”

Llull relates the anecdote time and again. Rejecting outright any notion of forced conversion, he started from the assumption that the individual human mind endowed with reason, upon being presented intelligibly the superiority of Christian teaching, could and would, through an act of love, make the sovereign decision to embrace the faith. Thus he sought out and addressed the most learned among the Muslims as his interlocutors. His way of bringing them the Christian message was to argue it philosophically, as opposed to the scholastics, without reference to “authorities.” He argued according to what he termed “necessary reason” or “right reason,” developed in terms of the cultural matrix of his listener. The reason why he believed mastery of Arabic and the Muslim philosophers to be crucial, was that he intended to make his God intelligible to them by adopting the philosophical method which they acknowledged to be the means of seeking truth. Only in so proceeding, he thought, would a convert be a true believer.

That Llull failed in the task as he had defined it—that he did not convert masses to Christianity despite his repeated missions to Muslim lands and died a bitter man—does not detract from the magnitude of his accomplishment. For, by seeking to supercede Islamic thinking from a Platonic Christian standpoint, so to speak, “from within” the matrix of the most advanced contributions made by the Arabs, he succeeded in elaborating a new philosophical method which was to bear its fruits in the work of Cusa and, later, Leibniz. Dialogue, in Llull’s experience, was not the exchange of positions and the ascertainment of similarities and differences; it was the process of epistemological confrontation, through which epoch-making progress in knowledge is achieved. The work in which he developed the ecumenical dialogue most brilliantly was *The Three Sages and the Pagan* (1274-76), known to Cusa (whose library in Bernkastel-Kues still contains the largest single collection of Llull’s works).

Llull’s influence on ecumenicism was profound. Most immediately, owing to his efforts, the Catalan king established a school for the training of missionaries in Majorca, called Miramare, which embodied Llull’s approach. Run under the auspices of the Franciscans and endorsed by Pope John XXI in 1276 (the same who ordered the refutations of Averroes in Paris), it was the first school to offer missionaries studies in the languages of the other religions, who then would be “entering into union with and getting to know strangers and friends.” Llull campaigned for other such schools, through petitions to the Popes and to the Vienne Council of 1311; the canons of the council

welcomed his proposals, and deliberated to establish five schools: in Rome, Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Salamanca (which were founded only centuries later). These schools were to teach Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Greek. It was due to such efforts that not only the philosophical works of the Arabs, but also the Koran itself, were actually read, and eventually translated, so that Christians as well as Jews could find out what Islam was.

As a Catalan Christian, Llull recognized the need to forge a Catalan language of the same power as Arabic, and did so, largely by using Arabic syntax and morphology to shape the new vernacular as a literary tool.

## Dante’s Debt to Islam

The greatest achievement in this regard, however, was Dante’s, and it came as a direct result of the work done in Seville and Palermo. In his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, his seminal work on the vernaculars, Dante lamented the fact that there were other vernaculars superior to Italian; although he does not identify them, the only ones current



*The Thirteenth-century Catalan philosopher Ramon Llull (1232-1315) established a dialogue based on reason between Christianity and Islam.*

in Europe were Hebrew and Arabic, and Arabic was overwhelmingly more widespread. In seeking the raw material out of which to shape Italian as a national language, he pointed to the Sicilian dialect, and to Frederick's Palermo, as the birthplace of the Italian language. At the same time, Dante identified the Spanish poets and the Provençal troubadours, their literary relatives, as the couriers of a new poetry and language, which had been shaped on the Arabic poetic models. Dante's teacher, Brunetto Latini, as he relates in the *Commedia*, was the Florentine ambassador to the court of Alfonso, who, after spending time in his rich library full of Arabic works, composed the *Tesoro*, a work that, for Dante, represented the summary of scientific knowledge.

What was Dante's relationship to Islam? The much maligned Spanish Christian priest-scholar Miguel Asín Palacios did groundbreaking work in the early years of the Twentieth century on the influence of Islam, as mediated through Moorish Andalusia, on Dante. His work provoked turmoil in the ranks of the "Dantisti" in Europe, who slandered it as an attempt to "de-Christianize" Dante, until further serious scholarship finally had to admit that he was right. Palacios showed that the *leit motif* of the *Commedia*, the ascension of man (Dante the pilgrim) to Paradise, springs from an episode in the life of Mohammed, barely sketched in the Koran, which was the subject of several lengthy Arabic poems. The episode in Arabic literature is known as the Mi'raj, which relates the ascent of Mohammed from Jerusalem to Paradise, an episode well known in Spain (translated by Alfonso) and Italy of the Thirteenth century, and recounted by Brunetto Latini in his *Tesoro*.

That Dante was conversant with Arab philosophy is amply documented in his own works, whether in the *Convivio* or the *Commedia* itself; Dante's depiction of Mohammed, consigned to the circle of the schismatics, has a wealth of detail regarding the internal factional struggle in early Islam that no one otherwise in Europe was aware of. Furthermore, Dante explicitly acknowledges his debt to great Muslim philosophers like Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al-Fragani, Ibn 'Arabi, and many others in his prose works. It is largely through the Arabs that Dante had access to the Platonic science of Greece.

What is important in Dante's relation to Islam is not the "literary motifs" or "influences," but the approach the poet took to Islamic-Arab culture, an approach similar to, but more enlightened than, that of Lull, whose works Dante also knew.

One should view the *Commedia* as Dante's dialogue-response to Islam. If one thinks of the extent to which Muslim-Arab culture had penetrated Europe in the Thirteenth century when Dante was writing—whether negatively in the fight around Averroism in Paris, or positively

in the enviable achievements of Andalusia and Palermo—one sees that Dante consciously wrote the *Commedia* as a response, so to speak, to Islam. Here was a culture, a Muslim culture, which had reached extraordinary social and cultural excellence in Spain and southern Italy, which had been shaped by a religious worldview transmitted through the Koran, a poem in the Arabic vernacular accessible to, indeed memorized by, most Muslims. Dante, in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, makes clear his intent to compose a poetical masterpiece forging an Italian vernacular which will constitute the epistemological, moral, and religious basis for an Italian nation-state. What better means, then, than to "quote" a motif from the Koran, elaborated in Muslim literature, depicting Mohammed's ascension, and transform it into the ascension of the Christian pilgrim Dante, to Paradise? This is Dante's way of demonstrating his notion of the superiority of the Christian worldview in terms comprehensible to those shaped by the hegemonic Arab culture.

The central theme of the *Commedia* is the Trinity, the concept which separates Christianity from Islam. Not only is the entire poem trinitarian in form, but the process through which the pilgrim Dante (and thus the reader) progresses from the intellectual-moral parameters of Hell, through Purgatory, into Paradise, is the "proof" of the Trinity. It is through the pilgrim Dante's self-perfection process, his successive acquiring of the laws of God's universe, that he gains access to the realm of science which is Paradise. Earthly Paradise (which can be seen as the paradise of the Koran) is shown to be a chimera, at the end of the book of Purgatory, and, in polemical opposition to this, true Paradise unfolds as the progress of the individual mind in comprehension of the laws of God's universe, as science. It is through this process, whereby the human mind progressively approaches the laws of universal creation, through progressive, scientific discoveries, that man proves the coherence between the mind of man and the divine ordering of creation. Dante's poem is the ultimate proof in Christian terms of *imago viva Dei* and of the Trinity, which is the final vision of the last canto.

## The Council of Florence

Dante's poem had the single most important impact on the Renaissance prior to Nicolaus of Cusa's convening of the Council of Florence in 1437-39. Even at the Council, which was held in the church of S. Maria del Fiore, a painting depicting the *Commedia* was on the wall for all to see. Significantly, Dante's poem furnished the poetical vehicle through which the Italian population not only became literate, but was educated in the fundamental concepts of Christianity. It should not be overlooked that at the time of

Dante, the Bible was not accessible to the population at large; yet the *Commedia* became the text which was recited and commented upon in the churches of Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-century Florence—in strikingly similar fashion to the manner in which the Koran was recited and commented upon among the Muslims at the same time in other parts of Europe. Brunelleschi had the *Commedia* on his bedside table. Leonardo knew it by heart. Dante's *Commedia* embodied and transmitted the entirety of Arab science (as he himself acknowledged) either directly, or through the work of Christian Arabists like Roger Bacon and others, in perspective, physics, poetry, and music. But it did so in such a way as to celebrate the power of Christian man, made in the image of God, to acquire such knowledge. Dante's poem is also an implicit response to the works of leading Muslim mystics like Ibn Hazm and Ibn 'Arabi, whom Dante knew and whose works he reflected in the *Commedia*. Whereas they had shown the pathway to God through direct meditation, Dante demonstrated that only the individual mind, retracing and experiencing breakthroughs in scientific discovery, can reach the final vision of light which is God.

It is this emphasis on the concrete, discrete individual as the particular image of the universal God, which pervades the explosion of creative activity in the Italian Renaissance. Here, too, it is not adventurous to hypothesize that the creative excellence particularly in the figurative arts, represented an indirect response to Islam. Although the science of perspective, as Dante among many others attests, was mediated and further developed by the Arabs to Europe, yet it was the Platonic Christian

Renaissance which applied that science of perspective to exalt the position of the human being in universal space. Islam had privileged the spoken word in poetry and song, and architecture, but had not developed pictorial art. The visual representation of the notion of *imago viva Dei* is what Christian Renaissance art seized on (which is utterly lacking in previous Byzantine art, even though it formally depicts the human figure), to render the idea of the universal through the individual.

Thus, the process which unfolds from Ramon Llull and Dante, onward into the Fifteenth-century Renaissance, can well be viewed as a grand dialogue, a "Great Fugue," in which the theme of the relationship between man and God is developed, contrapuntally, by the Platonists of the European Islamic heritage, and their Christian humanist interlocutors. Such should be the spirit of ecumenical dialogue today.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in Franz Wördemann, *Die Beute gehört Allah: Die Geschichte der Araber in Spanien* (Munich: Piper, 1985). The author does not give the source of this contemporary chronicle.
2. Adolf Friedrich Graf von Schack, *Poesie und Kunst der Araber in Spanien und Sicilien* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1877).
3. André Clot, *Harun al-Raschid: Kalif von Bagdad*, quoted in the *Book of Taxes*.
4. Schack, *op cit*.
5. *Ibid*.
6. English translations from A.J. Arberry, *Moorish Poetry: A translation of The Penmans, an Anthology compiled in 1243 by the Andalusian Ibn Sa'id* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1953).
7. The dialect spoken by the Roman soldiers, which became the basis for the various vernaculars of Europe: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese.

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