

Al-Andalus within Modern Spain. Notes on an Problematic Interdisciplinarity

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What a culture is depends on who is looking at it, and from where. Here I shall attempt to illustrate this proposition by considering a few ideas about the culture called al-Andalus.

On January 21st 2003, the head of Spain's Constitutional Court argued that Andalusia, the southern part of contemporary Spain, should have the same rights as the parts that were medieval kingdoms. His reasoning referred to history: "In the year 1000, we Andalusians had water running from several dozen outlets, in different colors and at different times of day, when some of Spain's so-called 'historical communities' [Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country] didn't even wash on weekends" (*El País* 22 January 2003). What is of interest here is not particularly the frequency with which people washed themselves. More intriguing would seem the way in which this Spaniard, at the top of his country's legal profession, identifies with the splendor of medieval al-Andalus ("teníamos...", he says, "we had running water ..."). With what right or delusion does he lay claim to the past of what could be another country?

Al-Andalus might broadly be identified as the Islamic culture of the Iberian peninsula, from the beginning of the caliphate of Cordoba in 711 through, perhaps, to the fall of Granada in 1492. For all of us, it is in the past. For Islamic cultures today, it is perhaps over there, within Europe, as a glory that Europeans should well be reminded of. For many Europeans, it is down there, to the south, in an historical eclipse that is all but forgotten. For me, in my house in the village of Calaceit (*Kalat-Zeyd*, the castle of Saïd, I am told), it is also down there, literally under my feet, beneath the house, as a few old stones occasionally remind me. But then, my village is in the north of Spain, in what was one of the small fiefdoms or *taifas* that lined the border with Christendom, without the glory of the grand southern structures, nor the pretensions of modern Andalusia. Was that also al-Andalus? Who should say?

For modern Spain, the nature of al-Andalus is rather more problematic than simple definitions. Al-Andalus is not just in the past, to the south and under one's feet. It might also be part of what one is, as would seem to be the case for the head of the Constitutional Court. When Western or Oriental tourists see the Alambrah in Granada, the Great Mosque in Cordoba, or, if they are adventurous, the irrigation systems of the Guajares, they are duly impressed by the works of the other. When people from Islamic countries see the same, they might marvel at the achievements of a kind of self. However, when Spaniards stand before the same monuments, how are they to react? On the one hand, these are the works of a different religion, a different mode of social organization, a different culture. On the other, the monuments are in Spain, here in the place of the self, and they are what many come to see as a part of Spain. In a sense, al-Andalus still survives as something passably Spanish, and not only for the purposes of tourism. The other is not just there, as a palpable object, but is also surrounding where

one stands, and perhaps within the self, just as a good deal of Arabic is within the Spanish language, and the genes of deserts roam within Spanish blood.

Some might be surprised that the integration of al-Andalus into Spain is even a question. One might expect this to be yet another case of Orientalism, in the sense of a western mythology that simplifies and distances the other (cf. Said 1978). But Spain was also the “Orient” for Europe; it was part of Romanticism’s “Near East” (for those who want to explain today’s “Middle East”). Spaniards cannot so easily exercise dis-identification.

Here I would like to survey just a handful of the ways this problem has been dealt with by historians and assorted polemicists. In doing so, I am most interested in the range of observations, the disciplines and prejudices that have been brought to bear on the one problematic object.

Al-Andalus as a new beginning

In 1150 Alfonso VII of Castile proclaimed himself “king of the three religions”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A century later the inscriptions on the tomb of Fernando III were in Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, and Castilian. Such details are sometimes taken as fragments of a multicultural conquest, the integration of Islamic and Jewish culture into the foundations of Spain. On this view, al-Andalus would represent a profound break with the previous cultures of Hispania (Iberian, Roman, Visigothic) in order to produce a Semiticized Hispania. This ideological integration can be dated from the French historian Dozy (1861) but is more commonly associated with the Spanish historian Américo Castro (1948).

This view tends to emphasize the superiority of al-Andalus over the Christian cultures of the day. Greek knowledge (philosophy, medicine, astrology) came into Hispanic culture from Arabic, as did Arabic mathematics and architecture. Arabic words entered the Latin-based languages simply because new ideas and new things were moving in the same direction. Pasta and paper, inventions of the Chinese, entered Spain through al-Andalus, not from Marco Polo or the like. The philosophical disputation and the residential college entered via the same route, affecting not only what knowledge existed but also the way it was produced and the discourses, literary as well as learned, in which it was expressed. The translators affecting these transfers were often Jewish. We thus find a Semitic mix, identified with the most advanced technologies of the day, moving into the roots of Hispanic culture, potentially making it too the most advanced of its day. The rest of Europe could then learn from Spain, or so would run this view of history.

The integration of al-Andalus might be a self-interested appropriation. Yet literary historians like Juan Vernet, who write unblushingly about “Islamic Spaniards”, are on strong ground when tracing a heritage that others overlook. A more polemical application of this vision is formed by Miguel Asín Palacio’s studies on the *Escala de Mohama* (1929, 1984). This was a thirteenth-century translation (into Spanish, then French and Latin) of the Prophet’s ascent into heaven, describing the levels that then reappear, says the literary historian, in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. The greatest poem of the age was thus of Islamic inspiration, learning from Spain well prior to any influence on Spain.

The various avatars of this view include the idea that, because of these inputs, Spanish culture was not and is not a fully European culture, nor should it aspire to such status. A Francoist Spain could justify its lack of democracy in such terms (“Spain is different”). Indeed, the same Asín Palacios who tracked the influence on Dante also

took time out to explain why Moroccans fought on the side of Franco: they shared the same mistrust of democracy and left-wing ideas (cf. Manzano Moreno 2000). The idea of a new beginning, of a fresh cultural mix, certainly has its justifications, but it has not always led along comfortable ideological paths.

Al-Andalus as interlude

Opposed to this view, we find historians who see al-Andalus as a more or less unfortunate interlude in the development of properly Hispanic culture. This vision goes back to the nineteenth-century erudite Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, who built the tradition of Spanish culture based on Classical (Roman) and then Christian origins. Much is made here of cases like Seneca, an illustrious Roman who happened to have been born in Cordoba. Menéndez y Pelayo constructed the corresponding literary tradition by publishing a huge anthology of poems that were defined as “Castilian” (i.e. Spanish without anything Islamic, let alone non-Castilian Spanish) (1890-1916). Faced with the inevitable presence of what he saw as non-Spanish thinkers in the Spanish past, Menéndez y Pelayo compiled a similarly extensive “library of Spanish heterodoxies” (1880-81), in which numerous translators, including those who worked from Arabic, were lined up as unfortunate souls who had suffered foreign influence.

This general view became a history of sorts under the pen of Claudio Sánchez Albornoz (1962). Reacting against the Semiticized Spain of Américo Castro, Sánchez Albornoz insisted that a Hispanic Christian identity existed prior to al-Andalus, continued within al-Andalus, and was restored to dominance after al-Andalus. This schema finds ample justification in ecclesiastical history, since the Visigothic church did indeed function prior to Islamic domination; the Christian liturgy was indeed permitted under much of Islamic rule; and Christianity was of course restored to its dominant position. The vision also incorporates the ideology, which would seem to have circulated in medieval justifications, that the second invasion (of al-Andalus by Christians) was in order to liberate the Christian church from Islamic hands. Such was the *reconquista*, the “re-conquest” of Christianity over Islam: the term itself implies that one conquest was met with another, tit for tat, and that was that.

The many problems facing this view of history include a few well within the ecclesiastical realm. For example, the fact that the Visigothic churches continued to function in one way or another under Islamic rule suggests that any liberation must have been quite ambiguous. Or again, the fact that the French-dominated church following the *reconquista* did not allow the Visigothic liturgy to be used would suggest that a more radical discontinuity was at stake. More generally, the fact that Christian conquerors ideologically rejected the Mozarabs (Christians who had lived under Islamic rule) seems scarcely compatible with the idea of recuperating the past.

The “unfortunate interlude” idea thus flounders even in the ecclesiastical fields where it was first formulated. Even for those most actively involved in its application, it created peculiar problems. Cardinal Cisneros set about burning between four and five thousand books following the fall of Granada in 1492, in order to liberate his land from the “perverse and bad sect” called Islam. But not all the books: he had the texts on medicine taken to his university in Alcalá, just in case (cf. Pym 2000: 166-167). One could destroy the other, yet save the advances.

More decisive arguments against the “interlude” idea have come from sociological analysis. Guichard (1973) finds that Roman-Visigothic culture was profoundly influenced by Islamic social structures in the first two centuries of Islamic

domination, thus definitively undermining the idea of al-Andalus as minor pause in Hispanic development.

Al-Andalus as historical continuation

An intriguing variation on the above is the idea that al-Andalus actually grew out of Visigothic Hispania, as a logical extension of previous societies.

In 1969 Ignacio Olagüe presented this view in a book called *Les Arabes n'ont jamais envahi l'Espagne* (the Arabs never invaded Spain). This was translated into Spanish as *La revolución islámica en Occidente* (the Islamic revolution in the West), since there are some things that cannot be said too loud. Olagüe's book is widely discredited, a farrago of conjecture, and great fun to read.

For example, he argues that the military invasion across the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 was militarily impossible. We are told that the invading force comprised 7,000 Berbers and 18,000 Arabs, and that they crossed in four boats. If each boat held 50 soldiers, and if it took one day to get across and another to get back, Olagüe calculates the Islamic force would have required 70 days to land in Hispania. And in that time, any Visigothic force could have mustered itself and defeated the invaders on the beaches.

Another conjecture concerns the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Olagüe observes that the inside of the mosque has a forest of arches, which impress the visitor as being typical of Islamic art. However, he notes that the arches do not allow visitors to see one central point, from where a priest or imam could preach. So the structure is unsuited to Islam, says Olagüe, just as it is unsuited to a Christian mass. What could such a building be for? Olagüe argues it was partly of Visigothic inspiration, fruit of a religion that had developed a radical critique of the established church and had actually evolved into a form of "pre-Islam". Somehow, for some reason, that heretic Christianity would be the religion most suited to the arches of Cordoba. And that was the religion of a people that actively invited in the Arabs and Berbers, as partners in the most advanced culture of the day.

Such questions are intriguing. They came to mind when I found similar arches beneath the cathedral of Speyer in Germany. So where was the pre-Islamic Christianity there? Who copied whom? Why?

Many of Olagüe's conjectures fail on the basis of logic, others on the basis of extended comparison, and still other through reference to the fallible and partial nature of historical records of the period. The sociological evidence produced by Guichard should have put an end of to the argument of a non-invasion: whatever happened on the beaches or in the mosques, the tribal structure of the Arabs and Berbers displaced the social structures of the previous groups. Guichard accordingly responded to Olagüe in a text called "*Les Arabes ont bien envahi l'Espagne*", to bury the polemic once and for all. And yet, there it is, Olagüe's book on the Web, in Spanish, now under the title *Los árabes no invadieron jamás España* (the Arabs never invaded Spain), put there by an Islamic Council. Why this curious return? And why, now, the Spanish translation of the original title?

One can only meet conjecture with conjecture: If the Arabs and Berbers were invited into Spain, then so too should their latter-day counterparts, the many immigrants from Morocco and Algeria. Such would appear to be one of the aims of the website in question. If al-Andalus is and always was a part of Spain, so too should be the immigrants of today.

Al-Andalus as a Paradise lost

I once translated a book on irrigation systems in Al-Andalus. The author was Miquel Barceló, at the time Professor of Pre-Industrial History in Barcelona. He insisted on adding a citation to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in the interests of good tone and academic ideology. I tried to suggest that the Satanic fall from grace was perhaps not the aptest of metaphors for Hispanic history, but in this, as in most cases, I lost the argument and remained a humble translator. So *Paradise Lost* it was, in an archeology of Islamic irrigation systems.

As I proceeded with the translation, I realized that the image was more motivated than it had first seemed. First, the techniques of irrigation created gardens in the midst of dry and barren lands. Not by chance did Semitic cultures invest hydraulic technology in the mythologies of Eden. Water brought cultivation, sedentary social organization, numbers for measuring and dividing land, mathematics for calculating angles, in a word, civilization. And all that, with some mathematics picked up from Greek, did indeed come into Hispanic lands through Al-Andalus. The head of the Constitutional Court was by no means amiss when he selected running water as a symbol of cultural superiority.

The image of the garden was also motivated because, as the myth would claim, many of the irrigation systems failed to function a few generations after their Christian conquest. The conquerors, being of a warrior settler civilization, apparently did not know how to repair the channels, to clean the silt out of the *qanats*, or calculate extensions to what had been inherited from al-Andalus. The paradise was thus lost, thanks to the ignorance of the conquerors.

Some years after doing that translation, I got the chance to visit one of the irrigation systems described in the book. In Guajar Faragüit I did indeed find the most beautiful garden hillside, in the midst of bald hills, with the remains of the Andalusí irrigation system. The system was functioning, more or less (at least enough for me to steal some very tasty fruit from the trees). The technology was not entirely lost. The tribes of the north did indeed learn to control water, and eventually even to have weekend baths.

The argument for discontinuity is actually a little more subtle. Barceló distinguishes between the technology itself and the social structures that gave rise to it. He sees Andalusí irrigation systems as the result of small segmented rural communities deciding to develop systems locally, without centralized planning or expertly controlled technology. In this, the systems would differ from Roman hydraulic technology, remains of which can indeed be found elsewhere in Spain. The problem of inheritance was not particularly one of understanding the technology (one farmer can understand the basics as well as another), but the new modes of social organization. The Christian conquerors needed to extract revenue from the farmers; they introduced centralized taxation systems, organized in ways that did not correspond to the social relations for the distribution of water. In one case (actually in fourteenth-century Majorca), the irrigation system ceased to operate not because of ignorance, but because the Crown ceded water rights in a way that changed the direction in which the water had to flow. No amount of centralized taxation can make water flow uphill.

The notion of a lost paradise thus retains some credence, at least with respect to modes of social organization. The water that ran in al-Andalus in the year 1000 possibly did not run quite as well in the year 1500. Despite all the theses of a new beginning, despite all the knowledge and technologies that were transferred, Spanish society cannot really lay claim to the glories of al-Andalus. Spain was indeed different. Perhaps the

most illustrative proof of this is the fate of the Islamic communities following the *reconquista*: neither the Mudejars (Muslims under Christian rule) nor the Moriscos (Muslims who were baptized under Christian rule) integrated into Christian society. They were scarcely invited to do so; they made no visible attempt to do so. In fact, they remained as sidelined as the Mozarabs (Christians who had lived under Islamic rule) and of course the Jews or Conversos (Jews outwardly converted to Christianity). In the Hispanic world after al-Andalus, all these groups remain remarkably separate, with the “New Christians” being radically distinguished from the “Old Christians”. If fragments of paradise remained, and still remain, it was within a complex cultural mosaic.

Al-Andalus as interdisciplinary object

Our survey of viewpoints has touched on quite a few disciplines. The “new beginning” thesis sees al-Andalus in terms of linguistics, literary history and technology transfer. The “unfortunate interlude” view produces an alternative literary history and manipulates ecclesiastical data. Proponents of “historical continuation”, on the other hand, draw on military history, the history of ideas, conjecture about architecture and much else, only to be refuted by sociology and redeemed, perhaps, by immigrants. Finally, the “Paradise Lost” argument integrates hydraulic technology into a mythology of the garden, although it could equally tap deep wells in many corners of art history.

So which of these views is correct? There is a real sense in which they are all equally bad, since there are few criteria on which they might be compared. How can military history be weighed against irrigation systems? Linguistics against architecture? The church against technology transfer?

What a culture is depends on who is looking at it, and particularly on what discipline they are looking through. Each discipline would then be like a special pair of glasses that allows different people to see different things. Between them we should expect no profound or lasting agreement. Interdisciplinarity is not a happy state of affairs.

More recent studies, however, indicate a few tendencies in that might allow mutual blindness to be overcome.

For example, semiotics has given us a wider concept of “text”. In theory, the tools we use of analyze laws and poetry might also be used for irrigation systems and mosques, all of which are inscribed objects, texts. Yet semiotics, as an academic discipline, did not reach the cross-disciplinary glory to which it once seemed destined.

A second positive tendency would be contribution of empirical techniques, first in sociology, more recently in the history of technologies. As might have been clear from the above account, the study of al-Andalus was a collection of myths and linguistic fragments prior to the contributions of Guichard, whose study of social structures radically challenged the general view of at least the first two centuries of al-Andalus. It is this empirical tradition that has extended into archeological studies on many levels, including the research on irrigation systems. Empirical researchers have been able to ask what is there, allowing the answers to go beyond the presuppositions of their questions.

A third positive tendency can then be found within literary and cultural studies, where a certain new empiricism goes hand in hand with critique of the grand conceptual systems. This can be seen in recent conferences and collective publications by the Escuela de Traductores de Toledo (The Toledo School of Translators), focused very squarely on re-assessing relations between Spain and the Islamic world (and forgetting, by the way, its original mandate to include Jewish culture as well). In Larramendi &

Arias (1999) and Fernández Parrilla & Ferial García (2000), for example, we find Arabists writing alongside educationalists, journalists, translators, linguists and literary historians, exchanging a wide variety of insights and ideas. There is also a significant willingness to use current cultural and postcolonial theory to dismantle the traditional schemata of “us” vs. “them”. As the big theories become unfashionable (including Said’s sweeping view of Orientalism), interdisciplinarity leads to a more careful, informed view of what cultures are and the way they interrelate.

This is only to be expected. As we learn more about the other (any other), we individualize and establish more complex relations. The either/or questions thus die away. Al-Andalus both is and is not alive in Spain.

Envoi

So what are we to make of the head of Spain’s Constitutional Court, and his washing-day lesson? He is right, of course, to insist on the greater cleanliness of al-Andalus. Yet he is wrong, I hope, to claim all that glory for himself, as a representative of current-day Andalusia. A spot of interdisciplinarity can score the necessary point. After all, Spain’s three “historical communities” have a special status partly because they have their own languages (Catalan, Basque and Galician), which are co-official in those regions. If we were to give Andalusia the same status, in the name of al-Andalus, then surely we would have to make Arabic co-official throughout the region? The judge would surely have to learn Arabic before opining on the matter. In fact, why not make Arabic an official language in Spain’s Constitutional Court?

Simple comparison reveals something slightly absurd in the self-interested analogies. If we can compare uses of water, why not also compare language policies? The task of interdisciplinarity must be to permit multiple comparisons of this order. Thus, perhaps, might simplification of the other give way to complex understanding of the self.

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