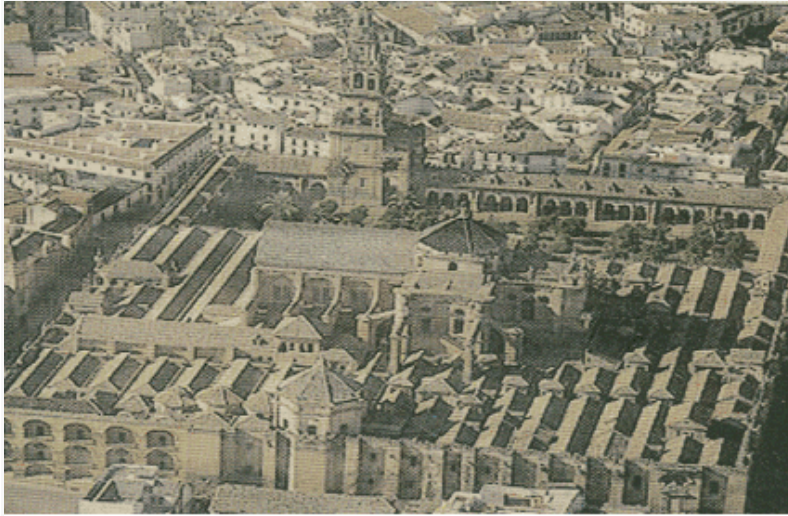


Transmitting knowledge a duty

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UNIQUE SETTING: Cordoba Mosque with a church in its midst.

ANDALUSIAN civilisation reached its apogee in Cordoba where the attitude to learning was just as essential as the Social and cultural dimensions embodied in its rich libraries.

The attitude was about the duty to transmit knowledge from one generation to another and about the interplay between the different modes of learning — modes that might contradict each other, as faith and reason did, and do now.

These sat happily in the libraries, side by side, unafraid of the contradictions.

First-rate, noted Menocal, a Yale professor in Spanish and Portuguese who wrote a fascinating book about Andalusia entitled *The Ornament of the Worlds*.

Librarians had risen to such administrative and cultural power (as they were frequently authors and scientists as well) that such posts were exclusive to the most wealthy and powerful families.

One 10th century account of an Arabic "house of books" runs thus, "...the library constituted a library by itself; there was a superintendent, a librarian and an inspector chosen from the most trustworthy people in the country.

There is no book written up to this time in whatever branch of science but the prince has acquired a copy of it.

The library consists of one long vaulted room, annexed to which there are store rooms.

"The prince had made along the large room and the store chambers, scaffoldings about the height of a man, three yards wide, of decorated wood, which have shelves from top to bottom; the books are arranged on the shelves and for every branch of learning there are separate scaffoldings.

"There are also catalogues in which all the titles of the books are entered."

At about that time, book production in the East blossomed into a vital industry.

Textual materials, translators, scholars and tradesmen all spread throughout the Near East and Mediterranean.

A new sector of the economy was born, specialising in acquiring, duplicating or locating rare books.

The new libraries and colleges of Andalusian Spain were no exception.

The prestige of one's city or royal (caliphal) library led to a spirit of noble competition among the caliphs, viziers and deputies of various provinces, each wishing to attract the brightest scholars and rarest literary talents.

Many in court circles followed the lead of the caliphs and viziers and sponsored translations into Arabic.

The lead taken by the caliphs and viziers in the translation movement was of crucial importance for the acceptability of the newly-discovered learning to the elite of Islamic capitals such as Baghdad and Cordoba.

As one history records: "Andalusia was, above all, famous as a land of scholars, libraries, books lovers and collectors..."

"When Gerbert (of Aurillac) studied at Vich (ca. 995-999), the libraries of Moorish Spain contained close to a million manuscripts..."

"In Cordoba, books were more eagerly sought than beautiful concubines or jewels. The city's glory was the Great Library established by Al-Hakam II... ultimately it contained 400,000 volumes..."

"On the opening page of each book was written the name, date, place of birth and ancestry of the author, together with the titles of his other works."

"Forty-eight volumes of catalogues, incessantly amended, listed and described all titles and contained instructions on where a particular work could be found."

Never more so than during the 10th and 11th centuries could al-Andalus probably boast the highest literacy rate in Europe.

The great Dutch-Arabic historian Reinhart Pieter Anne Dozy (1820-1883) declared that during the days of the Andalusian caliph Abdul-Rahman III (912-961), nearly everyone could read.

Although doubtless this was an exaggeration, it is fair to assume that the country contained an unusually large percentage of literate people.

Early Cordoba, unlike Baghdad, had no culture of translation at all, and the Cordobans themselves could not read Greek.

But this did not hamper learning because by the time they got those texts they were already a part of a scholarly tradition that lived in Arabic.

It also never seemed to have occurred to anyone in Cordoba to translate anything into Latin.

After all, every civilised person, including the Jews and Christians who were citizens of Cordoba, could, of course, read Arabic, compared with those who lived to the north, beyond the mountains.

Although the opportunity to learn the language of knowledge was available to those who lived to the north, through the extensive web of knowledge described previously, most chose not to do so.

Indeed, the many branches of knowledge pioneered by the Andalusians during the mediaeval times provided the necessary link between the ancient and modern civilisations.

The light of knowledge which illuminated the lands of Moors in Spain and Sicily was greatly instrumental in dispelling the gloom of ignorance that had enveloped mediaeval Europe.

Sicily, too, had its golden years as a centre of an Andalusian-Iberian culture, with Palermo as the capital of Islamic Sicily.

Though a hot part of al-Andalus, Sicily stood next to Spain in the diffusion of Arab culture.

Even after the conquest of Sicily, at the hands of the Normans in 1091, it was reported that the superior culture of the conquered race won the hearts of the conquerors.

Thus, Sicily continued to be a great centre of Muslim civilisation long into the Christian era, and played a vital part in the awakening of Europe.

In fact, with its central geographic position, Sicily served as an intermediary between the two cultures, Christian and Muslim, and provided an ideal centre for the dissemination of both cultures.

A classical case is that of the most famous geographer of the period, al-Idrisi, who studied in Cordoba.

After travelling widely, al-Idrisi settled in Sicily and wrote a systematic geography of the world, usually known as the *Book of Roger* after his patron Roger II, the Norman King of Sicily.

The information contained in the *Book of Roger* was also engraved on a silver planisphere, a discshaped map that was one of the wonders of that the age.

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