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PSU Western Civilization 101

Language as a Tool: The Use of Arabic in Spain Under Islamic Rule

The term Dark Ages came from Petrarch in the 1330s, as one of the first humanists of the early Renaissance. He defined the time between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity in the fourteenth century as dark and lacking. Progression and development halted in Christian societies throughout much of the fallen Roman Empire. The European Early, High and Late Middle Ages were grouped as one, even though within that time frame there is evidence of prosperity. Trade, education and development throughout the Islamic Empire thrived and under Islamic Rule in the Middle East. The epitome of this, Medieval Spain, flourished into a multiethnic, multi-religious education and trade center where Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted and lived in tolerance. The use of Arabic as a common language of trade, education, poetry, style and culture in Islamic Spain, from the ninth through eleventh centuries, benefited Christians, Jews and Muslims, and led to the establishment of a diverse, tolerant and prosperous society.

Iberia (modern day Spain and Portugal) is one of the first places humans migrated to from Africa. Published by the Oxford University press, journalist John Gill chronicles the origins of the human in Iberia. Fragments of human and animal bone, as well as primitive tools recently discovered near Granada, give evidence that *Homo erectus* migrated around 1.8 million years BCE (Gill 3). Iberia's first monotheistic settlements were the Sepharads: Jews who lived in Spain. According to Jane S. Gerber, professor of Jewish Studies at City University of New York,

legend dates the origins of the Sephards to the biblical story of Noah's Arc (Gerber 2). A great migration of Jews throughout Western Europe occurred from 200 BCE to 200 CE during the Roman Diaspora. The Sepharads established a strong history and pride in Iberia and though geographically spread out, remained connected to Israel and Jewish tradition. Before and during Roman rule of Spain, small Jewish communities did well economically. Ten percent of the Roman population followed Judaism, a legal religion (Gerber 3). Jews were alienated from Roman society, but allowed to have high status, land, and wealth, as long as they kept to themselves.

The fall of the Roman Empire meant the fall of Spain's economy and prosperity, causing the land to truly enter a Dark Age. Chris Lowney, MA, records that plague, invasions, inflation, overtaxation, over extended military commitments, and inept leadership left Spain vulnerable to conquest (Lowney 25). The conquest of Spain came circa 426 when the Iberian Peninsula was overrun by disorganized Visigoths monarchs, Christian barbarians from Germany, and Iberia entered one of the most unstable periods in its history (Gill 61). Throughout the Visigoths' three hundred years of rule, the population of four to five million was sparse and illiterate; there were no formal forms of education outside church rituals (Lowney 15). Christianity dominated the region only small Jewish settlements forced into hiding. Conversion to Judaism was a capital crime and being Jewish meant the loss of ones land and becoming a slave (Gerber 5). From 426 to 711, Spain was in chaos, leaving the land vulnerable to conquest again.

The conquest brought the third major monotheistic religion into Iberia, Islam. With Jews and Christians living in constant opposition under disordered rule, the end of the Dark Age came unexpectedly. In 711, roughly 7,000 Muslims invaded Spain from North Africa. The Muslims, once established in Iberia called Moors, drove the Visigoths out of Iberia and established the on-

lyEuropean Islamic State, al-Andalus, which would last 100 years (Gill 31). The takeovers of Iberia's history by the Jews, the Romans, and then the Christians left power struggles and segregated communities to be united by the Moors.

Iberia's geography made it ideal for Islamic rule and the prosperity that followed. The Pyrenees Mountains formed a clear physical barrier between Spain and the rest of Europe to the North; though it limited Moorish expansion, it also protected Iberia from Christian settlements. The Moors concentrated their efforts on Iberia and making the state great rather than expanding. The Mediterranean Sea to the East, and Africa to the South provided efficient access and trade to the other lands of Islamic rule in Africa and the Middle-East. Published by the Oxford University Press, E. W. Bovill writes that the Moors were able to control part of the Trans-Sahara trade routes between West and North Africa, and Europe (Bovill 208). Iberia itself was described as "rich, abounding in rivers, springs, and aqueducts; a land of corn, oil and wine [...] and fruitful trees of every kind," by a Jewish political leader, Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-970) (Gerber 31). Exotic fabrics, fruit and wine were high trade exports. The balance of protection and connection was the foundation for the success that Iberia would again become under Islamic rule.

Forty years after the first Islamic invasion, the Umayyad Islamic family rose to power and united the land through Arabic language. Under the Umayyad dynasty, Iberia again grew into a prosperous state. During 750, in what is modern day Syria, the ruling Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids for The House of Islam Empire. The conflict turned into a slaughter and Abd al-Rahman became the Umayyads' sole survivor. He fled from Damascus to the far western ends of the Islamic Empire, records María Rosa Menocal, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Yale University (Menocal 5). Five years later, Abd al-Rahman I crossed the Strait of Gibraltar

from Northern Africa into the blossoming al-Andalus (Menocal 9). Umayyad rule swiftly established laws and control there and because of him, the Umayyads not only survived, but became the ruling force of the al-Andalus bringing Spain out of the Dark Age and into enlightenment.

When the Moors conquered Al-Andalus it was not uninhabited, but a multicultural disaster. Unlike the Visigoths, the Umayyads did not persecute the other religions as directed by Quranic injunction, which states that Muslims must tolerate Jews and Christians living among them (Menocal 30). Being a Christian or a Jew did not carry a harsh punishment, only a tax (Menocal 67). Compared to Visigoth rule, life for the Jews dramatically improved and they were able to own property, trade and travel, which led to their own Golden Age (Gerber 61). Jewish poetry, philosophy and prosperity reached the apex of its development from the ninth to the eleventh century. Anti-Semitism did not dominate interactions and Jews were not forced into slavery. Though hundreds of Jews and Christians rushed to convert to Islam, many did not (Gerber 79). Both Jews and Christians preserved their religion and culture while embracing the positive and secular aspects of Islamic rule through the Arabic language.

Arabic was the unifying language throughout Islamic rule in the Middle-East, Africa and Al-Andalus with laws, rules, and decrees written and pronounced in it. Before Islamic rule Christians did not have a unifying language. Latin was very limited and only used in religious services. In Cordoba, circa 855, few Christians could speak Latin proficiently let alone read or write. The people who knew it, used their vernacular languages rather than Latin (Menocal 68). These mother tongues were not developed languages, but Romantic vernacular as recorded by Menocal, Jerrilynn Dodds, and Abigail Balbale, professors at Yale University (Dodds 78).

Latin, reserved for the church, paved the way for Arabic: a language that was versatile in daily life. As Paulus Alvarus (ca 800 - 861), a Christian scholar in Cordoba, reflects, “They [the Christians] had forgotten their own language” (Menocal 68). Arabic filled in the holes which Latin could not, with an ability to express love, passion, poetry and business. Though Arabic was connected to Islam it had a separate identity from religion unlike either Latin or Hebrew. Christians were able to learn and use Arabic without betraying their faith. Father Sidney H. Griffith, a professor of early Christian studies, explains a term was developed for these now literate in Arabic Christians: Mozarabs (Griffith 153). They were Christians who adopted Arabic and Arab culture and integrated into the society.

The Sepharads grew to use Arabic similarly to Christians. Sepharads spoke Judeo-Spanish, a dialect of Hebrew mixed with Spanish. The language was limited because it was unable to be used with outside communities. Both the Islamic and Jewish communities valued a strong and expressive language, particularly in poetry. Like the Christians, Arabic met the requirements for a secular business language. Both societies used and studied Arabic language and poetry (Gerber 45). By accepting the language and not fighting Islamic rule, Jews were not persecuted like they were during Visigoth rule, and their communities grew and prospered in commerce.

Now used by all three major religions Arabic became the language of “shared poetries, ancient philosophy, science, agriculture, medicine, and the most modern of technologies” (Dobbs 4). It grew to be the paramount connection between the three religions. Jim Al-Khalili, British theoretical physicist, explains Cordoba’s scientific developments. The capital of Islamic rule became almost equal to Baghdad in riches, cultures, size, and most importantly, its libraries (Al-Khalili 189). Public Arabic libraries established throughout the Empire brought back the Greco-

Roman ideas of Plato and Aristotle, as well as Greco-Roman and Arabic sciences and mathematics. Along with Christian scripture and Jewish poetry, all texts were translated all into the common language of Arabic (Menocal 75).

During the height of its Golden Age in the tenth century, Cordoba rivaled Baghdad as a scholarly city and was “now a vast and glorious city: the largest, most prosperous, and certainly the most cultured, in Europe” (Al-Khalili 192). More than seventy libraries, and the Caliphal Library holding approximately four hundred thousand volumes, Islamic education surpassed the small libraries found throughout Christian Europe (Menocal 33). The mid-ninth to the tenth centuries scholars—Muslims, Christians and Jews alike—knew and studied in Arabic (Menocal 75). Scholars across Europe and the House of Islam flocked to Cordoba and were unified, not by religion or ideal, but by language and information. Arabic became the medium for these three religions to work, develop, and acquire knowledge together.

Research was not only expressed and shared through Arabic, but also the music and arts. Abd Al-Rahman I’s great-grandson, Abd Al-Rahman II (r. 822-52), “devoted himself to attracting the very best scholars his generous patronage could buy in the hope of rivaling Baghdad as a center of learning” (Al-Khalili 191). He hired the inventor Ziryab (789-857), who brought with him from Iraq a new flavor of music, cosmetics, clothing, and cuisine (Dobbs 18). Once a slave, the accomplished musician faced death threats by jealous rivals in the Baghdad caliph’s court. He fled to al-Andalus and reached Cordoba in 822 where the society of Cordoba accepted him, willing to progress and develop into a higher quality of life.

Ziryab is credited with invention and cultural development of Cordoba and al-Andalus. He established the first music conservatory in Spain and invented many popular items such as a

primitive bleach and underarm deodorant (Lowney 66). Generations later, a Muslim commentator reflected that Christians in Northern Spain, “[did] not wash their clothes once they [had] put them on until they fall to pieces on them” (Lowney 66), showing the comparison of the developed country and elsewhere. Ziryab’s creativity and talent made him an icon. Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike, peacefully flocked to the city in al-Andalus, witnessing and enjoying the sophisticated culture (Gill 85). All three religions were united through the Arabic language.

Arabic allowed for all in al-Andalus to benefit from trade under the *Pax Islamica*. By 732, Islamic rule spanned from the Atlantic Ocean to Northwest India (*The Spread of Islam TimeMaps*). Arabic was the key language for trade. Though naval travel at the beginning of Islamic conquest was weak, the Umayyad Dynasty developed high tech naval vessels and lighthouses to make trade by sea safe and efficient (Dobbs 7). Trade was not limited and patrons from all religions could participate and profit from transactions. Jews, Muslims and Christians participated through Arabic. Families from the different religions formed business friendships with each other for mutual benefit (Gerber 67). The free trade world through Arabic not only created tolerance between the oppositional religions, but allowed them to thrive by working together.

The unity of the three religions and cultures is truly exemplified on the thirteenth-century Tomb of Ferdinand III. Buried alongside his wife Beatrice in the cathedral of Seville, Ferdinand III (r. 1217-1252) was the Christian King who united the kingdoms of Castile and León in Northern Spain and defeated Islamic Spain in Seville in 1248 (Dobbs 279). What is remarkable about this sight is not that it marks the end of Islamic rule in Spain, but how the legacy of the three religions there is still present. One of the last acts of religious tolerance in Spain was this represen-

tation. Inscribed upon the surface of the tomb is a text translated into Latin, Arabic, Hebrew and Castilian (Dobbs 199):

Here lies the most honorable King Don Ferdinand, lord of Castile, Toledo, León, Galicia, Seville, Cordoba, Murcia, and Jaén, conqueror of all of Spain. He is the most loyal, truthful, and forthright; the strongest, most handsome, and most illustrious; the most modest; the most humble and God-fearing. He is God's greatest servant. He destroyed all of his enemies and honored his friends. He conquered the city of Seville, capital of Spain, and died there on May 31, 1215 (Trans. Sarah Pearce).

There, upon stone, the language of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are represented, as well as Castilian, the developing language that became modern Spanish. For the almost 800 years of Islamic rule, all three languages and cultures survived because they developed the religious tolerance, proved by their representation at the end of a Golden Age and Arabic was the glue that held this society together.

The society was progressive and ahead of its time, but not without conflict. Religious tolerance and peace was not constant throughout Al-Andalus. Christian strongholds throughout the land never embraced or accepted Islamic rule. Upon Islamic takeover of the Iberian Peninsula, Christian kings fled north, never allowing full Islamic conquest of the land (TimeMap n.pag). Christians trapped in al-Andalus wrote to their Christian counterparts elsewhere, begging for *la reconquista* (Dobbs 22). While Mozarabs embraced the change and development given to them by Arab culture, there were also Christians who refused, and long awaited its fall.

While the Jews benefited from Islamic rule, the Muslims remained indifferent to the Jews. Ross Brann, professor of Islamic Studies at Cornell University, argues that low opinions of the Jews from the Islamic community depicted them at times as “a nuisance, an obstacle, a social, economic, or political threat to the prerogatives of the majority in Muslim society” (Brann 5). The religious tolerance that was critical for the Jew was insignificant to the Moors. The Jews were unimportant and unessential to Islamic rule (Brann 7). Though antisemitism was not a dominating force, it still existed. While Jews enjoyed more freedom than previous rulers, they were still a minority overlooked by the larger society.

Despite the indifference to Jews and Christian animosity toward the Muslims, the community of al-Andalus prospered and remained united. The medium for its prosperity was Arabic, which served as the language of trade, education, poetry, style and culture. Nowhere else in Europe, during this time had developed the trade and resources that al-Andalus had; very few places throughout history have developed in a way to allow religious tolerance between the three major monotheistic religions. Through libraries, trade and a sophisticated culture, Arabic was the cohesive of the three monotheistic religions.

The Umayyad dynasty fell roughly 800 years after the beginning of its rule taking with it the cultural of religious tolerance. On January 2, 1492 Queen Isabella and King Fernando overtook Granada, the last Islamic city of Spain. Under the new Catholic rule, the Muslims and Jews were driven out of Spain. The edict of the expulsion of the Jews was issued in late March of that year and carried out by August; Jews were forced to give up their gold and lives in Spain. A few years later Arabic was banned and complete Christian dominance was restored (Brasuell n.pag).

Mosques and Synagogues were converted into Churches (Dobbs 1). Spain was left a shell of the ideals and prosperity from Islamic rule.

The poetic story of the 'Moor's Last Sight' depicts al-Andalus' last Islamic Monarch, Boabdil, as he walks away from his once great city. Alexander Elinson, an author of part of the Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literature, portrays that in 1492, Boabdil wept for himself, the loss of his power, prestige, and wealth, but also for the grand culture of al-Andalus: the once shining state of prosperity and riches (Elinson 2). That same year Columbus set sail to reach India and would find the Americas. Greco-Roman antiquity was rediscovered throughout Europe. The Renaissance glorified western Christian tradition and glossed over the prosperous Islamic history. Spain unified under Catholicism, which can be seen in the modern, predominately Catholic population.

Though Islamic rule in Europe ended in 1492, the ideas and developments from the time extend into the present world. Walking down the street of Upper West Side New York City, one can see synagogues that architecturally, clearly and intentionally allude to mosques. Constructed by devout Jewish Immigrants in the nineteenth century, the story of the Synagogue and the Mosque and their influence on each other can be traced back as part of the legacy left behind by their coexistence (Menocal 10).

All that was achieved during the Golden Age of Islam for peaceful coexistence is critical to understand in the present. Religious tolerance and acceptance is a struggle throughout the world. In the twenty-first century, Christians, Jews and Muslims are full of hate for one another. The Crusade against Islam, particularly in the United States, is fought by the media according to ABC News (Jacinto 1). Jerusalem, a holy city for all three religions, is divided into sections. Re-

ligion, walls and language split a city. Understanding of a time of peace where all learned from each other could lead to a new solution on how to deal with intolerance. Under unique circumstances, during a time where most of western civilization was dark and limited, and with three of the most conflicting religions in the history of humanity, tolerance was reached. Arabic was the language that preserved culture and tradition while it promoted unity. A similar medium in Europe could rise to accomplish the same: the Euro. It is a currency that brings unity to the European Union and honors the individual country, its history and culture.

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