

MEDIEVAL FRANCE

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

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Garland Publishing, Inc.
New York & London 1995

ARABIC INFLUENCE ON LITERATURE. The nature and depth of the Arabic impact on medieval European civilization are a source of controversy. The rapid conquests of Muslim armies in the 8th and 9th centuries altered the political configurations of southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin; well into the subsequent centuries, even when Muslim-held territories were retrenching, the ethnic, religious, and cultural landscapes were also considerably altered. The Arabic role in the history of the Iberian peninsula and of Sicily is a major area of scholarly inquiry, but the relationship of these European-Arabic cultures with medieval French civilization is far less studied, primarily because Muslim political domination of territories that were to become modern France was brief: the advance of the Muslim armies was arrested by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732. Nevertheless, because national frontiers were far from firmly established, because much of Europe's Arabic culture was in the fluid form of translations or oral tradition and was during roughly the 10th through 12th centuries, at a peak of prestige, and because travel in and out of Muslim-held territories was widespread, for both peaceable and bellicose reasons, medieval French *belles lettres* are best understood in the context of a Europe with an influential Arabic presence.

To a large extent, French epic poetry depends on the epochal events of the Muslim conquests of southern Europe for its inspiration, although the narrations of events and the descriptions of the Arab enemies—in many cases, both at several centuries remove—are often transformed into quasimythological versions, as in a text like the *Chanson de Roland*. Other epic texts reflect the ambiguous relationship with the Saracen enemy in narrative and descriptive detail that is less distant and transformed: the cycle of Guillaume d'Orange, for example, features recognizable historical events and characters. In both cases, a minority of scholars perceive a rich, more directly literary influence from Arabic epic narrations and other literary forms, from themes, images, and characters to such details as the names of swords of the French-Christian heroes. In both cases, too, the rich "background" provided by centuries of interaction with "Saracens," who had become a fixture of the European scene, is manipulated in these literary texts to work out historical-ideological and metaliterary issues. This kind of multitiered interaction can be seen most clearly in a work like *Aucassin et Nicolette*, whose hero has an Arabic-like name, whose heroine is an abducted Saracen, and whose themes reflect historical events and literary issues. The work, moreover, is dependent for its background, as are many others in Old French literature, on the complex and variable relationships between the "French"-Christian and the "Spanish"-Arabic worlds: trading partners, culturally interdependent, yet often in a state of military or ideological conflict.

The most debated "origins" question in Romance literatures concerns the courtly vernacular lyric of Provence. The earliest and, more recently, most controversial of the theories is that it is, at least in part, of Andalusian provenance (al-Andalus being the Arabic name for Spain). While this so-called "Arabist theory" has shown a number of variations since it was first proposed in the 16th century, it cur-

rently centers on the preexistence of an Arabic-Romance courtly lyric with striking thematic and formal affinities with the poetry that would arise in Provence in the late 11th century and transform European poetry thereafter. It is argued that, in the period immediately before the birth of Provençal courtly poetry and through its heyday during the next century and a half, the Hispano-Arabic world was closely linked to it both politically and culturally (Guilhem IX of Aquitaine, for example, was closely involved with al-Andalus in battle and in marriage) and that the innovative Andalusian *muwashshaha*, an Arabic lyric genre whose final half-strophe was often in the Spanish Mozarabic dialect and which was at its peak of popularity, would have been heard in courts throughout the "frontier" territories frequented by the earliest generations of troubadours.

The least disputed area of incursion of Arabic material into northern European culture is that which derived from the translations that proliferated primarily from the 11th through the 14th centuries, with the most famous and productive centers being Toledo and, under Frederick II, Sicily. The earliest major French figure in this vast commerce in the sciences, philosophy, and medicine was Gerbert of Aurillac, who would become Pope Sylvester II. He traveled to Catalonia in the 10th century to study mathematics and astronomy, both areas in which the Arabs were in the vanguard. Also noteworthy is Peter the Venerable, the influential abbot of Cluny, whose trip to Spain in the mid-12th century yielded, among many other riches, a Latin translation of the Qur'an, the first into a language other than Arabic. Much of the intellectual life of Europe at this time is in fact centered on translated philosophical texts. Not only were Plato and Aristotle an integral part of the Arabic tradition that was eventually made available to a Latin West that had long since lost access to them, but so too were the critical works of Andalusian and other Jewish and Muslim philosophers, such as Avicenna, Maimonides, and, most of all, Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Some scholars believe that much of the 12th-century renaissance in France resulted from upheavals in technology, institutional structures, and philosophy brought about by the reintroduction of the Aristotelian corpus that derived from translations from Arabic materials.

María Rosa Menocal

[See also: ARABIC PHILOSOPHY, INFLUENCE OF]

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