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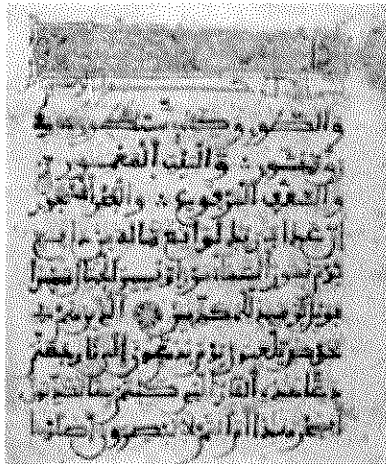
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Throughout medieval Europe Arabic had a far more powerful impact on the transformation and shaping of culture than most narratives of our history reveal. This was true not only in Spain, where Arabic was the lingua franca of educated people of all three religions for many centuries, but far beyond. The new and often revolutionary cultures of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe were often provoked or shaped by an Arabic culture that traveled throughout Europe in many guises, in translations of a hundred varieties, in attitudes about culture, or in songs that were sung and

heard and then played again in a different language. It would even be fair to say that European culture from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries is a culture of translation whose monuments are not only new texts in a new language but, no less, the memory of the older language and civilization.

I did my Ph.D. in Romance philology and was originally interested in the texts and culture of the Provençal troubadours, and their successors in Sicily and Italy. I only began to study Arabic when it became obvious to me that the universe in which those troubadours lived was one saturated with the many trappings of the rich material cultures of al-Andalus, which was the Arabic name for the Islamic polities of the Iberian peninsula. After the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba at the beginning of the eleventh century (the result of catastrophic civil wars among the Muslims themselves, an episode which marks the beginning of the tragic rise of fundamentalist Islam as a dominant force in the peninsula) and throughout the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, this "Andalusian universe" was, for the Christians of what we call "northern Europe" or "Latin Christendom," not a separate and inaccessible world—either geographically or linguistically. On the contrary, these groups were more and more linked by dozens of new avenues of cultural commerce, which ran the gamut from trade itself to the intermarriages with the royal families of Christian kingdoms, themselves profoundly Arabized.

So I learned Arabic--and I am amused, many years later, at my own naiveté--so that I could "prove" that the poetic revolution of eleventh- and twelfth-century Languedoc had its roots in the flourishing bilingual Andalusian song traditions of more or less the same time period. The first article I ever published was on the much-disputed etymology of "troubadour"--which in fact has a perfectly plausible Arabic etymon, perhaps two. The apparent mystery of where the Provençal "trobar" comes from--this was one of the classic unsolved etymologies in the field of Romance philology--is not so great a mystery if the Arabic *taraba*, "to sing, to entertain by singing," is considered.

But it is hugely difficult to reconstruct an episode in our cultural memory that was purposefully annihilated when the great libraries of Arabic books, hundreds of thousands of them, were nearly completely destroyed by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Nor should we forget that this burned library was not exclusively, nor perhaps even predominantly, "Islamic" but rather one that had for so long been considered the shared patrimony of both Christians and Jews--and, in the Toledo that was the capital of translations of medieval Europe, this library was the principal wealth of the Castilians of all three religions. Not only did uncounted and uncountable texts perish but, at least as important, so did the broader and more diffuse memory of a significant Arabic past. In our commonplace assumption that the Umayyad heritage was cultivated only by Muslims--and, concomitantly, that the Christian culture that triumphed at this time was culturally anti-Arabic as well as politically and ideologically anti-Muslim--we perhaps inadvertently accede to the violence done to historical and cultural memory during the century that those libraries were burned. It is only through the act of restitution of a different kind of memory, a different sense of the cultural texture of the time, and not through any kind of textual proofs, that we can ultimately decide that it might be just as plausible to discuss Ibn Hazm as Ovid when we speak of the culture of courtly love. And to do this not because any of those long-haired singers of love had ever necessarily read either one--they were a bit more like rock stars than like scholars--but rather because of what we can assume about the ambient culture, what was "in the air."

Medieval literary culture is in general terms--even without the problem of the Arabic connection--susceptible to historical invisibility in many of its incarnations. And how much truer this is for that rich culture of translation of the middle ages that runs the gamut from the scientific and technological materials with which the translation movement from Arabic to Latin began in the early twelfth century to the translations of so much of the imperial culture of *Adab* (the vast "genre" in Arabic traditionally translated as "belles lettres" but perhaps better understood as "humanistic study") into Castilian at the end of the thirteenth century--and which ended up including works like a version of the *mi'raj*, the apocryphal narrative of the Prophet's ascent to Heaven and descent to Hell whose connection to Dante is still bitterly disputed.

I am a little less naïve now, I think, than I was when I thought that by learning Arabic I could prove that the songs of William of Aquitaine were a part of a canon of songs that included those of the

Taifas of eleventh-century Spain, and I am certainly not going to try to prove to you that Dante did read one of the translations of the *mi'raj* that were made while Brunetto Latini was in Toledo, although in fact I believe both of these things to be true. This is, instead, a "quixotic" matter, and the real task is to be able to evoke the looks and smells and sounds of the libraries, both literal and metaphoric, that were destroyed, and to conjure a vision of how things we already know but that we keep in separate spheres of our memory were more likely interwoven. How, for example, the repeated bans on the teaching of Averroist propositions issued in thirteenth-century Paris reflect a certain intimacy with still-Arabic Toledo of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, among other things because translations are not value- or culture-neutral.

Translation was at the heart of a great deal of the vigor of early Islamic culture, and although I cannot do it much justice here it is necessary to begin with an evocation of the remarkable translation projects of the seventh through ninth centuries for which the Abbasids are justly famous. While the Umayyads of both Damascus and Cordoba were culturally voracious and syncretistic, it was not they but the Abbasids of Baghdad--and in Baghdad--who sponsored the astonishing multigenerational project to translate major portions of the Greek philosophical and scientific canon without which, arguably, much of that canon might have been permanently lost. This establishment of a scientific and philosophical tradition is far more complex and deeply engrained in Islamic culture than the word "translation" conveys, since these texts ended up in Cordoba's libraries--and later Toledo's, and thus Paris's and Bologna's--because they became so central to a tradition of commentary and exegesis. This powerful intellectual and overtly rational tradition is iconic of this chapter in the history of Islamic culture: imperial in its capacity to both absorb and internalize and recycle so many of the cultures it encountered. It also plays a crucial role in making the culture of Arabic so much more than Islamic, and thus ultimately so accessible to Christians and Jews, beginning with those who worked in the incomparable libraries of Cordoba, which were legendary throughout Europe already during Umayyad times.

But Cordoba, unlike Baghdad, had no culture of translation at all, and the Cordobans themselves could not read Greek. They didn't have to, and in fact by the time they got those texts they were already a part of a scholarly tradition that lived in Arabic. It also never seems to have occurred to anyone in Cordoba to translate anything into Latin. And why should they have? Every civilized person--including the Jews and Christians who were citizens of Cordoba--could of course read Arabic, and the uncivilized people who lived to the north, beyond the mountains, well, after all, it was up to them to come and learn Arabic if they wanted to be able to read real philosophy or if they were curious about how astrolabes could so radically alter navigation. And a handful did. But mostly they did not.

It is not, in fact, until Toledo becomes the Castilian capital and--not coincidentally--that the Castilian monarchy brings the monastic empire centered in Cluny, France, into the picture, into Spain quite vigorously and intimately, that there is any real translation activity in the West to speak of. The venture that begins at that point is not

unlike its antecedent in Baghdad, a complex project of intellectual renewal and cultural enrichment. Part of what we see in these developments is that the economy of a translation culture is predominantly one of demand, not supply--and just as in Baghdad the movement was driven by Muslims who wanted to read the Greek texts but couldn't read the language in which they were then available, in Europe the movement is driven by Christians, many from outside the peninsula, who could not read Arabic but were profoundly interested in the riches of what was at that point a distinctly Arabic library.

With the conspicuous exception of the translation of the Quran commissioned by Peter the Venerable, the first generations of translators and the texts they translated from Arabic into Latin were scientific and technological in their makeup. These men weren't translators in any mechanical or detached sense; we would understand them and their culture better if we called them the scholars and the public intellectuals of their time. Robert of Ketton, to whom the Abbot of Cluny was forced to pay exorbitant sums before he would agree to translate anything as completely uninteresting to him as the Quran, was a mathematician at heart and was the man responsible for the translation of al-Khawarizmi's great work of algebra (*al-jabr*). He was a key player in the introduction of the number system that would revolutionize computation in the west and make all modern calculations possible, what in English we call the Arabic numerals.

The great age of philosophic commentaries and translations follows on the heels of the years when science and technology were the major interests, and it coincides with that moment when the greatest of the Andalusian philosophers lived and wrote, and when their Aristotelian contemplations of the variety of questions we refer to as "faith versus reason" provoked such intellectual upheaval throughout Europe. By the time Averroes and Maimonides were writing their mature works, at the end of the twelfth century, the "schools" of translation of Toledo and the rest of the network for getting these works out of Arabic and into Latin were so sophisticated and developed that they were being read in the major intellectual centers of Latin Christendom almost as soon as they were available in Arabic. A century after its becoming a Christian rather than a Muslim city, Toledo was perhaps the most cosmopolitan city in Europe, its population that legendary mix of Christians, Jews, and Muslims whose principal commerce was what we would call intellectual property. The language of that international community and of the library, both ancient and modern, that was the source of Toledo's wealth, was unambiguously Arabic, by then nearly two centuries removed from being principally the language of an Islamic polity.

In Toledo Arabic was the lingua franca of an international community of scholars, many of whom came from the farthest corners of Europe to study both the great language and its great texts. And there it was not only the academic language but also one of several languages spoken by most of the ordinary citizens of the city: the considerable Muslim community that had never left, the substantial and in fact increasing Jewish population, the old Mozarab Christians, who had lived there since the time of the Caliphate, and even many of the

new Christians there, the Castilians. It was not just spoken but also seen in most of the city's architecture and heard in its music and instruments, in sum an integral part of an eclectic cultural fabric. Toledo's citizens also shared the Romance vernaculars, and especially, as time went by, the one brought from the north by the new rulers: Castilian. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Castilian would take center stage in the third and final phase of Toledo's two centuries as the world's preeminent center for the dissemination of Arabic learning and culture.

This great cultural revolution--the vernacular revolution that would establish the new languages of Europe as the legitimate languages for high culture, lyric poetry first and foremost--began in the Iberian peninsula in the eleventh century, in an astonishing combination of political maelstrom and cultural flourishing. The political story is itself quite revealing, since the caliphate was succeeded by a number of city-states, the Muluk at-Tawaif, which were at great odds with each other and competing, often ferociously, for the succession to Cordoba, a competition to some extent political and military, but just as ferociously cultural. But now there is a Christian dimension to all of this, since some of the Christian kingdoms to the north--both to the east and to the west--enter this competition for the Cordoban succession. It is in this competition that Toledo comes out on top and thus begins its translation enterprise. This is in many ways a moment shockingly--for us anyway--nonideological, quite different from how we have come to imagine this age of "crusade" or "reconquista": any given battle in the eleventh century was far more likely to be between two Islamic Taifas than between an Islamic and a Christian one. The most decisive political events of the eleventh century, leading up to the taking of Toledo, were the murder of Sancho of Castile, a political assassination most likely engineered by his brother Alfonso VI, and the assassination of the great al-Mamun of Toledo, probably engineered by his rivals in Seville. But there is far more than mere lack of true ideological division here, there is also a shared cultural universe. At the end of the day all those Christian and Muslim warriors and kings were all likely to be interested in listening to the same thing, the whole range of new Andalusian songs that were the rage throughout the peninsula--and the Jews too are a vital part of this remarkable picture.

Let me tell you about the general of the armies and vizier of the Taifa of Granada, a city founded shortly after the sack of Cordoba by the Zirid dynasty from Morocco. Ismael Ibn Nagrila was an extraordinarily gifted young man who, with his family, had fled from Cordoba during the years of the Fitna, one among thousands of refugee families who carried their memories of Cordoba--and much Cordoban culture--with them far and wide. The Nagrila family, merchants, settled in the old port city of Malaga. But the young Ismael was a prodigious scholarly and literary talent, and at some point he was apparently discovered by the far less cultured member of the new Zirid court a little ways inland in this new place called Granada (Madinat Gharnata) and was hired to write the letters and other documents that the vizier was supposed to be writing.

But one day the king, Badis, discovered the truth of the matter, got rid of the old vizier who had been passing off Ismael's superb

Cordoban education and Arabic style as his own, and brought the young man himself to court to be the vizier of this new and still rough place. Now, Ismael was in fact a Jew. In the original settlements in the area near the river Darro where the Zirids created their new city there was a substantial Jewish community, at the top of the dominant hill, called Gharnatat al-Yahud, "Granada of the Jews." But this had little to do with Ismael's success at the court, although it did give him a religious community he would also lead. At the Zirid court he succeeded because he was a Cordoban who could bring that cultural luster to this rough new place and, most of all, because he was a superb writer of Arabic. Before too long, to his duties and achievements as a man of letters were added military triumphs. As the head of King Badis's armies he led many a successful campaign against other Muslim Taifas and wrote sometimes breathtaking poetry about these exploits, calling himself-- in one famous poem about his triumph in a series of battles against Granada's rival Taifa of Almeria--the David of his age.

Ismael is indeed well remembered in the history of the Jewish people and of Hebrew letters, known there as Shmuel ha-Nagid, his Hebrew name, a name that pays honor not only to his Jewishness but also to the fact that he became the nagid, or the head, of that old and substantial Jewish community of Granada. Perhaps not surprisingly, he is remembered not so much as the military champion of a Muslim army but rather as the first of the series of poets of this tumultuous eleventh century who reinvented Hebrew poetry. But both aspects of his life are integral to the complex culture here: the Jew as the leader of a Muslim state and army, as well as the towering poetic father, the David of a brand-new Hebrew poetry, the first since the other David to use Hebrew beyond the liturgy for poetry that could speak of love, and illicit love, as well as all other aspects of human life beyond the synagogue.

This is in fact a story that speaks iconically to the ways in which Arabic--in ways that far transcend its attachments to Islam--plays the expansive and revolutionary role that it does, and how Jews and Christians had understood themselves to be, in the first place, Cordobans; and then, after there was no more Cordoba, legitimate heirs to their versions of the culture that had been created and nourished by the Umayyads. The eleventh century is also one of the many historic moments that reveal that exile can lie at the heart of great cultural achievement. Curiously, even classical Arabic poetry reaches its peak at this moment, so that in Andalusian letters the great achievements of the "classical" period are contemporaneous with the literary counterculture, the poetic avant-garde that crystallizes throughout the peninsula in the eleventh century. So the truth is that the Cordoban exile Shmuel ha-Nagid is part of an entire landscape overrun with poetic experimentation, nearly all of which is attached to Arabic in some way, and which ultimately needs to be understood--no matter what the "surface" language--as the offspring of that great poetic culture of Arabic.

The case of the new Hebrew poetry is perhaps the clearest and worth dwelling on. The Andalusian Jews had long been not only Arabophone but comfortably a part of the literate elite, and what the complexities of Arabic letters and especially poetry revealed to them was a

universe of poetic and linguistic tolerance. At some very profound level a pious Jew could unashamedly recite a pre-Islamic ode or a homoerotic poem because a pious Muslim could. Poetry and piety were not to be confused with each other, and this was at the heart of the great power of Arabic as a literary culture (and at the heart, too, of Alvarus's lament that young Christian men were in love with Arabic poetry). The new Hebrew poetry was thus born not out of "translation" in any conventional way but out of that intimate understanding, gleaned directly from the use of Arabic as a religious and a secular poetic language, and born not in the comfort of Jewish society of Umayyad Caliphate but rather in the exile of the Taifas. There, for the first time in a thousand years, Hebrew was brought out of the confines of the synagogue and made as versatile as the Arabic that was the native language of the Andalusian Jewish community and, almost miraculously, it was once again used as the language of a vibrant and living poetry. Listen to that voice as it has been rendered by one of the master translators of that new Hebrew in our own time, Peter Cole:

I'd give everything I own for that fawn who betrayed me--  
 my love for him locked in my heart.  
 He said to the rising moon:  
 "You see how I shine and dare to be seen?"  
 And the circle was set in the sky like a pearl in a dark  
 girl's hand . . .<sup>1</sup>

This subject, love--and most of all unrequited or betrayed or unfulfilled love--was at the very center of all the new poetries, and love as the ultimate quest and unsatisfiable longing was by far the favorite theme for many singers and poets who, as the eleventh century progressed, were more and more the stars of their times. This would be even more true in the twelfth century. Among the various progeny of classical Arabic poetry the most scandalous--and ultimately most popular--were bilingual songs called *muwashshahat* (or "ring songs"--*muwashshaha* means "sash," "circle," or "girdle"). *Muwashshahat* broke all the rules of classical Arabic poetry and allowed a female voice singing in the vernacular to come inside the song with the classical Arabic male poetic voice. During the last decades of the eleventh century this song form became wildly popular throughout the peninsula--and far beyond it as well. It flaunted Andalusian hybridness, weaving together the "mother tongue"--the Romance vernaculars, first and foremost--and Arabic, the classical and paternal language. And it was performed to rhythmic dance music played on all the new great instruments of the age--drums and guitars and lutes, nearly all new arrivals from the Arabic-speaking empire, nearly all just becoming known to those who had lived beyond the borders of the caliphate. Like the new Hebrew poetic language and its brave new songs richly infused with "Arabness," the new Provençal tradition may have been born not out of "translation" in the strictest (and modern) sense of the word, but rather out of cultural yearning and admiration and exposure. The Pyrenees were far from a restraining frontier, and the language of Barcelona scarcely different from that of Narbonne--so that, finally, the first generation of troubadours of Languedoc were anything but strangers to this land, and could scarcely have avoided knowing about the stunning bilingual ring songs which were the latest

cultural rage--along with all other manner of luxury material goods that were acquired voraciously by Aquitanians.

Part of what needs to be restored in our imagining of these historical circumstances are the material aspects of a moment in which, in the courts of Languedoc, the jewelry boxes of the women who could afford them were engraved in Arabic. The markets of al-Andalus and the Mediterranean were ever more open to the rest of Europe and--once again--what is crucial is not so much a detailed inventory of all the goods then available, the extraordinary level of luxury introduced into northern Europe at this point, but instead the style this introduced, a style associated with the "Arabic" world *tout court*, especially with al-Andalus, a style that involved living well, whether that meant being able to eat well-spiced food or to use luxury fabrics for the clothes one wore--or to hear great music played after dinner, perhaps by singing girls captured in battle. Thus the first great songs of the vernaculars of Europe, those songs which Nietzsche famously said defined the very essence of our culture, were sung in courts also graced with exquisitely carved ivory boxes, perfectly executed and engraved astrolabes, and of course those new musical instruments on which all those love songs were sung. And they were all part of a very Arabic world.

<sup>1</sup> *Selected poems of Shmuel Ha-Nagid* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

"The Culture of Translation" is a translation and adaptation of "La culture des traductions: l'arabisation invisible de l'Europe et l'invention du moderne," one in a series of six lectures given during May and June 2003 at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris. Those curious about the broader historical picture may be interested in the author's recent *The Ornament of the World*, published by Little Brown: ([www.twbookmark.com/books/52/0316566888](http://www.twbookmark.com/books/52/0316566888))

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