

The Castilian Context of the Arabic Translation Movement: Imagining the Toledo of the Translators¹

MARIA ROSA MENOCA (Yale)

This presentation began its life with a rather different title: „Do Styles Have Religion? The Problem of *mudéjar* in Our Understanding of Medieval Culture.“ I have changed it not so much because I will not be tackling those subjects: I will, in fact, end up asking the questions about styles and religion, and I will try and make the case that the now-venerable concept of *mudéjar* – a term used to describe Muslims living under Christian dominion, but also, then, some of the artistic styles of the same Christians – obscures the dynamics of cultural interaction between Muslims and Christians during the first centuries of Castilian expansion into Islamic territories. But it seems more productive, given the range of scholars and scholarly interests of this conference, to focus these larger matters of styles and their terminology on the question of ‚local conditions‘ and ask a series of pointed questions related to the translation movement specifically: What is the Castilian culture of the time and place during which the Arabic library was translated into Latin? What were the sounds and sights and smells of the new Castilian capital of Toledo, the city that was, after all, the ‚setting‘ for the cosmically transformative Arabic-Latin translation movement? Scholars of that movement have by and large devoted themselves to the intellectual and textual history at hand, but it seems vital also to consider the immediate cultural *gestalt* (as we say in English) of this place, since even scholars, as these translators indubitably were, are sometimes aware of their surroundings, and perhaps even affected by them.

The basic political context is well-known, but worth rehearsing in its roughest contours: in 1085 the venerable old Taifa of Toledo fell to the Castilian king Alfonso VI and the complex sequence of events that followed directly from this – notably the arrival of the Almoravids – put an end to the chaotic era of independent and mostly warring Taifas. By the beginning of the twelfth century, when we also get a glimpse of the first substantial signs of something like systematic translation activity, the landscape of what had long been al-Andalus had been dramatically redefined. And what replaced the essential unity of the Umayyad caliphate, a century after its collapse, is what is commonly called

¹ This paper is drawn from work currently being completed in collaboration with Jerrilynn Dodds and Abigail Krasner, to appear as a book with Yale University Press entitled ‚Out of Arabic: Conversion, Translation, and Memory in the Invention of Castilian Culture, 1085–1369‘.

the *Reconquista*, a tag that on its own already carries all sorts of heavy-handed suggestions about the ideological frame of mind. The pervasive assumption, even among scholars of the period aware of the innumerable events and attitudes that contradict such a global view, is that this was a prolonged state of crusade-like warfare pitting an expansive Christianity against a defensive Islam. But in fact most aspects of what the great scholar Américo Castro called 'la realidad histórica' – the historical reality on the ground – were far from ideologically single-minded; and the single-mindedness, when it existed, was the product of the ideologues who were rarely the men who led armies or ran cities.

There is no denying that it was a period of rivalry, and especially so between the kingdom of Castile (sometimes combined with its on-again off-again mate, Leon) and the two successive Berber regimes that, after 1085, made what remained of the Islamic territories their colony. This struggle reached an apogee in 1212, at the famous battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the singularly crusader-like confrontation of the era. But Las Navas was in significant ways an exception and in any given other year – beginning but not ending with 1085 – and in many of the battles and alliances that shaped the volatile political landscape, Muslims and Christians were as likely to be allies as not, and especially so against their correligionists, a fact that, among other things, drove several Popes to despair. But the Roman Church, as well as the Cluniacs and other 'Latins' who began to arrive in Toledo after 1085, were often incomprehending of the Castilians and their fledgling culture².

As I think we are, all too often. Wittingly or not, we reflexively remember the Castilians from that perspective that has cast them as either the villains or the heroes (depending on your own perspective in these matters) in that drama imagined as being overwhelmingly the story of the centuries-long and single-minded drive to reclaim the peninsula from the 'Moors', which is of course the most basic assumption behind the term 'Reconquest'. But the Castilians were infinitely more complex than that term allows, or than we give them credit for, and at some level that most basic fact of Toledo's becoming the nonpareil center of Arabic studies in Europe should tell us that this was so, *prima facie*. When, and why, does a given culture translate the libraries of those with whom they are at war – and, especially, when what is at stake is the sort of implacable ideological war that is so near-universally assumed to be the *Reconquista*? Although Charles Burnett correctly notes that the Castilians were not the 'patrons'

of translations in more conventional direct ways, it should surely be understood that the climate they created – a climate in roughly equal measures political, religious and cultural – in what was, after all, the very heart of their expanding realm, served as a vital form of benefaction and promotion. Is it not, in fact, necessary to acknowledge the Castilians as the engineers of the most basic conditions of their polity (the people and their languages, to begin with) without which the translation movement, in the vigorous forms it achieved in the second half of the twelfth century, could not have taken place?

The complex truth (often obscured by our acceptance of the language of *Reconquista*) is that Castilian culture, in the first several centuries after the conquest of Toledo, readily shaped itself in the image of the flourishing and sophisticated Taifa of which it was in some ways an avatar. Vitally, for the translation movement as well as for this medieval Christian culture more generally, the Castilians granted what was in effect *dhimmi* status to both Jews and Muslims, another practice (along with considering rival Christian kingdoms as legitimate enemies as any Muslim comes) that puzzled and frustrated the Church. It remains an underappreciated fact that by the second half of the twelfth century – that is to say at the height of the Latin translation movement, and during the lifetimes of the great Andalusian philosophers Ibn Rušd and Ibn Maimūn (Maimonides) – the Castilian capital was a remarkably 'Andalusian' polity. With its populations of practising Muslims and Jews, as well as a still-vigorous community of Mozarabs (the Arabophone Christians who had lived within the Islamic polity for centuries) Toledo was far more polyglot and multi-religious than contemporary Almohad-controlled cities such as Cordoba and Seville, where there were increasingly fewer *dhimmi* left. There is more than one irony involved in recognizing that when the Almohads began anti-Jewish campaigns it was to the Christian kingdoms (long held in some contempt by the cultured Arabized Jews of Andalus) and especially to the great metropolis of Toledo, that the Andalusian Jews turned for refuge. And it is thus that in Toledo, with its Castilian version of protection for the other Peoples of the Book, one of the notable professional involvements of the Jewish community was with the translation industry, which began its true boom shortly thereafter.

The accommodation of *dhimmi* through that granting of second-class citizenship was only one of the features of Andalusian life that the Castilians attempted to reproduce, with greater and lesser success – and with greater and lesser opposition from the Church. Although the notion of *Reconquista* (as well as our remarkably stubborn Hollywood-esque image of what 'Christians' and 'Moors' might have looked and spoken and acted like in twelfth-century Spain) virtually demands that we understand this as a universe of implacably opposed cultural types, the social and intellectual ethos that made it possible for the translation movement to flourish in post-1085 Castile was based, instead, on a cultural symbiosis that grows, rather than retreats, when the Castilians encounter their first real Islamic metropolis. If you look closely at Toledo after 1085 what is most conspicuous is the unrelenting adoption – appropriation, adaptation, ac-

² The recent book by Lucy Pick (*Conflict and Coexistence: Archbishop Rodrigo and the Muslims and Jews of Medieval Spain*, University of Michigan Press, 2004) provides a detailed picture of the struggle of Toledo's infamous Reconquista architect, Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada, to mount an alliance of the combined Christian armies, getting the Castilian kings to stop their own intractable struggles with their Christian enemies. At the same time Pick's book lays out the often surprising ways in which the Archbishop attempted to find theologically acceptable ways of accommodating Jews and Muslims into the framework of a Christian polity, a reality he understood was the long-term policy of the Castilian kings.

culturation, every kind of symbiosis and, yes, translation itself – of an Arabic culture that, as the Castilians had rapidly discovered, was not uniquely that of the Muslims. *Au contraire*, from architectural to poetic styles, from foods eaten (and not eaten) to formulaic greetings and notarial practices, the culture of the dominant religious community was obviously also a communal and shared culture, a part of the daily life and aspirations of the Jewish community, as well as of the rather distinctive culture of the group with which the Castilians would have some of the most serious political difficulties, the Mozarabs³.

But it was not so much the culture or presence of that old Arabized Christian community of Mozarabs, an ultimately doomed minority under the Castilians, that lay at the heart of that Christian intimacy with the Arabic culture of the Muslims that seems, logically, the *sine qua non* of Toledo's translation movement. It is, rather, the post-1085 Arabization that was explicitly voluntary (as opposed to the arguably involuntary acculturation of the Christians of Islamic polities) and, also explicitly, the direct product of the Christian conquest. Arguably, the most problematic analytical concept in the study of medieval Spain is *mudéjar*, which begins its life as a description of a religious community, the Muslims who 'remained behind' when their cities were taken by Christians⁴. (And implicit in the existence and, indeed, in the political and cultural importance of the *mudéjares*, is another of those facts on the ground that would seem to contradict the basic assumptions of the *Reconquista* paradigm: large communities of Muslims did choose to remain in Christian territories, even when there were adjacent Islamic territories to which they might have migrated.) But *mudéjar* is also widely used to describe an aesthetic style, not only in architecture but also in literature, almost always defined as the 'Islamic' (or 'Moorish') style when it is used by Christians or Jews. In such a notion we readily glimpse the profound misreadings that follow from assuming that identity is necessarily subservient to confession.

³ More fairly, we should say that of the various groups contemplating the changing of the political guard in 1085 none were more wary, and justifiably so, of the ascendancy of the Castilians than the Mozarabs, who understood the threat involved to their liturgy, as well as to their way of life in general, with the opening of the city to both Rome and Cluny. Indeed, it is one of the many delicious and mostly hidden-away facts about the so-called 'Reconquest' that a number of these Christians chose to leave the city with the deposed al-Qadir, knowing what their protected status held for them under Islamic rule, all they had known for hundreds of years, and fearful of what might be in store for them under a Christian rule that saw them as inadequately Romanized. Although that is a story that falls a little outside the central focus of this paper it seems worth remembering precisely because it reveals the extent to which we are misled by our reflexive assumption that religion is the *sine qua non* of identity.

⁴ The 'Encyclopedia of Islam' defines *mudéjar*, from the Arabic word *mudaǧǧan* as tributary or 'one who remains behind'. This is consistent with the first known written use of the Arabic term, in Ramón Martí's thirteenth century glossary, which defined *mudaǧǧan* as 'persons allowed to remain'. In the Spanish context, the definition is more specific, in the words of one of the canonical twentieth century scholars of Spain and its architecture, 'the *mudéjar* is, thus, the Moor who is vassal to the Christians and who maintains his religion and his customs' (L. Torres Balbas, 'Arte Mudéjar', in: *Ars Hispaniae* IV, 1949, 237).

Or, to put it only a little differently, we are confronted here rather directly with a mildly uncomfortable question: we know that religions can have styles, but can styles themselves really be said to have religion? And what happens to them if they convert?

The cultural substance of a city like Toledo, both before but especially after the Castilian conquest, reveals that even in circumstances as ideologically overdetermined – or so we are always led to assume – as the *Reconquista* of medieval Spain, the answer is that style can in fact have only the most tenuous of attachments with both religious and political ideology. In some explicitly secular areas – the culinary and the sartorial, the musical and the linguistic – this is likely less confounding than seeing it manifest in the most explicitly religious contexts, such as houses of worship. But the *mudéjar* style flourished precisely in the church-building of Castilian Toledo, a city with dozens of churches built in a style unembarrassedly the extension of the aesthetics of the little mosque of Bab al-Mardun, hard by the city-gate still celebrated as the one through which the conqueror Alfonso VI (and, in some versions of the legend, the Cid, al-*Said*, himself) entered into Tulaytula. And as many present certainly know, the two surviving synagogues of the city are in two different 'Islamic' styles: 'Santa María la Blanca' in a relatively austere style long assumed to be Almohad, and the fourteenth century 'Tránsito' in that same style called 'Nasrid' whose most famous exemplar is the Alhambra, but which was no less the style of the Castilians of that moment, and whose Alcazar in Seville is a kissing-cousin of the Nasrid palaces of Granada.

So what could it possibly mean for us to say that these styles, when used by the other religious communities were Islamic? Doesn't such critical language reify that notion of bedrock opposition and polarity, of essentially religious identity, that is so blatantly contradicted by the phenomenon at hand? If Christians imagine their universe as little more than the struggle against Islam, under what circumstances would they not only sing their songs but build their houses of worship in the style of their enemy? Is it not self-evidently the case precisely that, despite our many assumptions about the bedrock importance of faith, and the dominant power of institutionalized religions in this period (and, as always, the stereotype is that it was all exponentially more so in Spain, constantly conjured up as the land of unrelenting religiously-based animosity, the struggle for domination of the peninsula), the religious component of virtually every kind of stylistic identity can be minimal, or even nonexistent? And that what we make sound strange and idiosyncratic via a term like *mudéjar* might instead be more simply called 'Toledan'?

On the one hand, as we are aware, the culture that came to the peninsula and flourished with Islam was anything but inimical to the other children of Abraham, even at the worst moments of conflict. Jews were successfully Arabized during the Umayyad period and clung to that culture as their own even after they were a part of Christian polities. And the Mozarabs themselves, even when they were involved in ferocious and martyr-producing struggles to main-

tain their religious identity in the Umayyad polity, were famously culturally Arabized, as the famous lament of Alvarus of Cordoba so unambiguously testifies⁵. Indeed, the vast intellectual background of the translation movement was itself one of the most eloquent testaments of a ‚vernacular‘ culture whose most important texts and concepts overrode all narrow concepts of confession and were always at the edge (or over it!) of conflict with religious authority of all three of the monotheistic establishments. But we are less likely to imagine the *Reconquista* period and ethos as characterized by that kind of give and take, and it is commonplace – in both serious scholarship and hackneyed tour guides – to hear the *mudéjar* style explained as the product of Muslim workmen, i. e., as existing not because there was any significant embrace of a series of cultural goods by the Castilians – a notion that would be difficult to square with the presumed *Reconquista* polarities of which we are so enamored – but rather because they were the passive recipients of what was made for them by the natives.

But the cultural texture of Castilian Toledo during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries reveals that the Castilians, who unlike the Mozarabs had never been subjects of an Islamic polity, were in the process of greedily absorbing and converting into their own everything in sight, from the brick-work of small neighborhood mosques to the kufic-covered robes of the wealthy. These cultural trappings were hardly foisted on them, and if we weren't so attached to the notion that hard-core religious ideology trumps everything else we would see that throughout the period that is also (I would argue not coincidentally) the golden age of translation, the Castilians were explicitly neo-Umayyad, in both senses of the word *neo*: they wanted to be more like them culturally, as well as to replace them politically.

The translation movement from Arabic to Latin is thus born and flourishes in an immediate context of remarkable cultural self-creation, a bringing to life of a new Castilian culture very much out of Arabic. The ‚transmission‘ of the Graeco-Arabic philosophical and scientific canon – which as Dimitri Gutas notes was in fact, in the library assembled by the Latins, a distinctively Andalusian one – was part of a broader and often diffuse dynamic of cultural-imperial continuity, much of it through imitation. The Castilians have been frozen in the historical imagination as the villains of 1492 and beyond, and it is in such an imaginary that we indulge in the fantasy that if they used ‚Islamic‘ styles it was because they were helplessly dependent on their workmen, or else crassly indulging in a species of trophy-ism. But in the moment with which we are concerned they were quite capable of grasping those more complex notions of cultural

⁵ Much quoted, but worth remembering here: „The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas! All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their own language. For everyone who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there

continuity through absorption and symbiosis characteristic of their most successful predecessors in the peninsula's history, the Romans and the Umayyads. A lot of lip-service was paid to the Visigoths as the iconic ancestors of the new Christian regime of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but that was in the highly charged ideological literature, most of it written by churchmen like the Archbishop Jimenez de Rada. On the ground, however, the behavior of the Castilians in everything from their adaptation of the *dimma* to their use of Arabic writing on church walls, suggested their real models were others.

It seems not very surprising to note that the local Christian culture within which the translation movement found its capital was hardly the implacable enemy of the culture of Islam it is so routinely assumed to be. The Castilians were no more the political enemies, at any given moment, of Islamic polities, than they were of the Crown of Aragon, say, or any other group that stood in the way of their political, rather than religious, ambitions. These are not the Castilians who would be the burners of Arabic books; rather, in vital ways – some direct, as many more indirect –, they were their guardians, the masters of the singular city to which European scholars traveled to study Arabic, and to exploit the Arabic libraries housed there. Indeed, from a certain perspective (and this will be clearest by the middle of the thirteenth century) this was a Christian culture anxious to join a continuum, and ultimately to replace Latin (seen increasingly as an aggressive culture of outsiders who understood them very poorly) with a Castilian culture itself created from translations out of Arabic. In such a context the Umayyads and the Arabic culture that was their legacy were tacitly understood to be far more than just Muslims or just an enemy; they were rivals, and they were neo-Romans, something eminently visible in Old Castile where the pre-Umayyad horseshoe arches of Visigothic churches were still visible. And the intellectual movement that makes Latin and Christian the body of thought and the library of books that had once been so vital a part of the Umayyad universe is one that can scarcely be imagined in a setting other than this Castilian one, which for hundreds of years considered Arabic culture explicitly a part of its own legacy.

are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.“