

The Medieval Review

The Medieval Review 09.06.05

Dodds, Jerrilynn D., Maria Rosa Menocal, and Abigail Krasner Balbale. *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. 395. \$40.00. ISBN: 9780300106091.

Reviewed by:

Norman Roth

University of Wisconsin, Madison
ndroth@wisc.edu

This is an interesting example of a kind of "multidisciplinary" approach to cultural history; in this case, art and architecture to help tell the story of the formation of medieval Castile (in part at least; actually, the focus of the book is almost entirely on Toledo). It hardly need be said that the authors are eminently qualified for the task. The book is lavishly illustrated with full color photographs (an enormous expense and unexpected luxury in today's publishing world, particularly for an academic press). Commendably, the book also includes from time to time texts and coherent translations of representative Arabic, Castilian and some Hebrew documents.

Although written by scholars, this is not a "scholarly" book intended for research but rather for the general reading public. As such, it is well-written and relatively free of pedantic style or technical jargon. On the other hand, this has apparently resulted in a decision to limit endnotes to a bare minimum, and even the general reader would certainly benefit by additional documentation for some statements.

Since the book is limited to early medieval Castile, it is unfortunate, as noted, that the focus is almost entirely on Toledo. The mosque, now cathedral, of Seville receives good treatment, but there is scarcely any mention of other parts of Castile and no reference to the Muslims or Jews even of Seville or Cordoba. An exception is the requisite mention of the legend of the "Cid," the oft-glorified hero of the early reconquest of territories from the Muslims, particularly the kingdom of Valencia (where in fact his record was far from noble). However, the account deals entirely with the famous poem, some of which is translated, with no relation to actual history.

Although promising to be a treatment of Christians, Jews and Muslims, the Jews in fact receive the least attention and most unsatisfactory discussion. Thus, the statement that "many Jews and Muslims left Toledo in the wake of the [first] conquest of 1085" (53) is unsubstantiated and, particularly for Jews, incorrect. This is all we hear of Jews for several chapters, when (145) a passing reference is made to Hebrew poetry, and translations of two of Judah ha-Levy's poems are reproduced (148-50). Of the immensely important Hebrew *muwashshahat* poetry, with final verse in Arabic or Romance, there is not a word, nor any mention of other great poets even from Toledo (such as Judah al-Harizi or Todros Abulafia).

Since the central theme of the book is interrelation between the three cultures, it is astonishing that there is absolutely no mention of Jewish scientists and translators at the court of Alfonso X (the entire corpus of his astronomical work, not only translation from Arabic but original treatises, was the work of Jews). An important article which I have written on this was completely ignored. With regard to scientific accomplishments, only the famous Abraham Ibn Ezra receives brief mention (209); however, he was not born in Toledo, of course, but in Tudela in Navarre and virtually all of his writing was done outside of Spain. On the other hand, famous Jewish scientists who did live and write in Castile are ignored entirely (for that matter, so are Muslim scientists). Nor is there any mention of the Jewish physicians and counselors who attended Juan Manuel, the famous nephew of Alfonso X and author of numerous works. His novel, *El Conde de Lucanor*, contains material borrowed from Jewish sources, and the relationship between Arabic, Hebrew and Spanish literature (again, detailed in articles I have written) is also overlooked in this book.

The "making of Castilian culture" surely should consider the importance of these Jewish contributions, in the case of the scientific corpus at Alfonso's court, the earliest writings in Castilian. The important role of Jews as diplomats as well as translators serving the various monarchs in their dealings with the Muslims is also scarcely mentioned.

The section "Sources and Readings" at the end of the book is very selective and outdated. One reads with amusement that Gonzalez Palencia's *Mozarabes de Toledo* is "of interests to a general reader;" that multi-volume work is an important collection of Arabic, Castilian and Hebrew sources to be consulted only by trained specialists.

However, we are grateful for what this book is more than distressed by what it is not. It is a creative effort to integrate the cultural history, at least of Toledo (with some reference to other parts of Castile), with Muslim and Muslim-influenced architecture and artifacts. From this perspective, it is certainly successful and should be a stimulus for future research. Yale University Press is to be commended for publishing such a lavishly illustrated work at an astonishingly affordable price.