

An Investigation of Islamic Spain

Fiona Doherty, 2020

Between the 8th and 15th centuries, Middle Eastern and North African Muslim peoples and their descendants held an important political and cultural foothold in the Iberian Peninsula, or as it came to be known in Arabic, the region of al-Andalus. What began as an invasion of largely Berber forces grew to see the revival of a deposed Islamic caliphate as well as several reconquerings of the peninsula by not only Christian forces but also various Muslim ones. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived side by side in a society at times accepting and at times puritanical, influenced by long seated religious and dynastic politics in Syria and pressure from the Christian north.

The original intent of my research this summer was to investigate the influence of said Muslim presence in Iberia on modern Spanish identity, but with a heavy focus on primary sources it soon transitioned to become a more in depth look at the societies of al-Andalus during the Islamic era.

Over the course of this study, I read from a variety of texts in Arabic from the Iberian Peninsula, ranging from histories and genealogies to poetry and biographical dictionaries. Professor Hopley and I translated excerpts from many writers such as Ibn Hazm and Ibn al-Khatib and analyzed their writings in terms of the historical and social circumstances from which they emerged. Following each meeting I wrote a short essay on the content of each document and its relation to other sources and its own context. As a conclusion for this research I have culminated and expanded my writings on the sources in a comprehensive report. To supplement an understanding of these primary sources, I also studied a variety of books and articles from modern specialists working in English and Spanish. These included histories with focuses on both Muslim and Christian activities from the era as well as more specific investigations on topics such as trade and production or architecture and the arts.

Commonly recurring themes encountered during the survey of the Arabic writings included a nostalgia and at times glorification of the past emergent during times of turmoil. An interest in the prestige of the east is reflected in both a focus on the role of Arab, as opposed to North African, Muslims in histories of al-Andalus and also in the influence on Arabic Andalusian poetry in style and desert related imagery. The presence of religion in daily life became evident whether through casual interjections or direct musings on the nature of God, with mixed levels of reverence.

The research I have participated in this summer has laid a solid foundation for my understanding of the history, social issues, and culture of al-Andalus. In this way it has opened a door for me in terms of potential further investigation into more specific areas in the field and for drawing connections between al-Andalus and contemporary Spain through my further studies in the Arabic and Hispanic Studies departments.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Russell Hopley
Funded by the Barakat Fellowship