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Edited by Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

VISIONS OF AL-ANDALUS

Maria Rosa Menocal

GRANADA

Come, spend a night in the country with me,
 my friend (you whom the stars above
 would gladly call their friend),
 for winter's finally over. Listen
 to the chatter of the doves and swallows!
 We'll lounge beneath the pomegranates,
 palm trees, apple trees,
 under every lovely, leafy thing,
 and walk among the vines,
 enjoy the splendid faces we will see,
 in a lofty palace built of noble stones.

Resting solidly on thick foundations,
 its walls like towers fortified,
 set upon a flat place, plains all around it
 splendid to look at from within its courts.
 Chambers constructed, adorned with carvings,
 open-work and closed-work,
 paving of alabaster, paving of marble,
 gates so many that I can't even count them!
 Chamber doors paneled with ivory like palace doors,
 reddened with panels of cedar, like the Temple.
 Wide windows over them,
 and within those windows, the sun and moon and stars!

It has a dome, too, like Solomon's palanquin,
 suspended like a jewel-room,
 turning, changing,
 pearl-colored; crystal and marble
 in day-time; but in the evening seeming
 just like the night sky, all set with stars.
 It cheers the heart of the poor and the weary;
 perishing, bitter men forget their want.
 I saw it once and I forgot my troubles,
 my heart took comfort from distress,

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my body seemed to fly for joy,
as if on wings of eagles.

There was a basin brimming, like Solomon's basin,
but not on the backs of bulls like his –
lions stood around its edge
with wells in their innards, and mouths gushing water;
they made you think of whelps that roar for prey;
for they had wells inside them, wells that emitted
water in streams through their mouths like rivers.

Then there were canals with does planted by them,
does that were hollow, pouring water,
sprinkling the plants planted in the garden-beds,
casting pure water upon them,
watering the myrtle-garden,
treetops fresh and sprinkling,
and everything was fragrant as spices,
everything as if it were perfumed with myrrh.
Birds were singing in the boughs,
peering through the palm-fronds,
and there were fresh and lovely blossoms –
rose, narcissus, saffron –
each one boasting that he was the best,
(though we thought every one was beautiful).
The narcissuses said, "We are so white
we rule the sun and moon and stars!"
The doves complained at such talk and said,
"No, we are the princesses here!
Just see our neck-rings,
with which we charm the hearts of men,
dearer far than pearls."
The bucks rose up against the girls
and darkened their splendor with their own,
boasting that they were the best of all,
because they are like young rams.
But when the sun rose over them,
I cried out, "Halt! Do not cross the boundaries!"

(from Ibn Gabirol, "The Palace and the Garden,"
trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin)

As you stand in the astonishing gardens of the Generalife, there seem to be an unlimited number of vistas before you. First there are the layered views that take in every fine detail of the gardens themselves: the terraces and the courtyards, water visible and audible everywhere. At many turns you come upon the panoramas that are the dramatic views from the palaces themselves: the snow-capped mountains, the vivid city below. And occasionally, in crucial places scattered throughout this complex, you necessarily look out at the out-

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croppings of the great palaces, and understand immediately that while the Generalife may indeed have been the most splendid of summer retreats, the other great service it provided was to let you look at the Alhambra itself, from that vantage point half-hidden, on the other side of a ravine.

These inward and outward visions, all from this edenic promontory, capture all sorts of views of this pinnacle of the culture of al-Andalus. And just beyond the gardens what awaits the visitor is the Alhambra itself, that often breathtaking palatine city of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada, the locus, since Washington Irving, of the romantic Western vision of “Moorish Spain,” as well as a powerfully evocative emblem, among Muslims and Arabs, of a precious moment of cultural dominion, subsequently lost. The complexity of the problem of vision was understood in crystalline fashion by the builders of the Alhambra, who dotted palaces and gardens alike with “*miradores*,” as the carefully chosen and laid out lookout points are called, from the Spanish *mirar*, “to look.” And those half-views of the Alhambra from the retreat of the Generalife can certainly trigger a version of that emotionally charged reaction, that blend of exhilaration and sadness in the student of al-Andalus, the object of this volume.

The story of the Alhambra, told in the fullness of its complexity, is a maze of superimposed memories that is a fitting emblem for the powerfully paradoxical and often unexpected cultural history of al-Andalus as a whole. Little is known about the original fortifications on the hill, although references to a “Red Castle” appear from as early as the end of the ninth century. It is not until the middle of the eleventh century that significant palaces and gardens are first built on the citadel: the first building on the site was begun by Samuel Ibn Nagrila (Samuel the Nagid), the powerful Jewish vizier of Granada, whose family had fled from Córdoba to Granada at the time of the overthrow of the Umayyads, in 1013. The construction was subsequently continued and elaborated by the Nagid’s son, Joseph, and whereas the Nagid apparently rebuilt the fortifications of an original castle to protect the adjacent Jewish neighborhood, his son Joseph built on a more grandiose scale, perhaps working principally on elaborate gardens.¹ The layers of memory and exile are thick here, from the outset: the first real traces of the monument we see in Granada today were sketched out by members of an elite Jewish community in a common exile from the much-lamented Córdoba of the caliphate, and the sacked palaces of the Umayyads. And despite the fact that it is merely wishful thinking to see in Ibn Gabirol’s poem – quoted above – a historical description of the unique fountain in the Court of the Lions, the intimately shared aesthetics of Hebrew and Arabic poetry, not just in this poem but throughout Andalusian letters, reveals many shared visions, among them that of Solomon as quasi-magical prince par excellence.²

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If these foundational details are largely not remembered it is because the attention of all guidebooks – and in this category one can certainly include most general historical presentations – is per force, and with very good reason, turned to the Granada of the Nasrids, which between 1273 and 1492 was the last Muslim city-state of the peninsula. As this last outpost of what had been a brilliant civilization, during those last 250 years of Islamic dominion, the independent kingdom of Granada achieved the cultural and artistic heights manifest in the unrivaled Alhambra. But there is also an ill-remembered epilogue that, like the prelude, that story of the Ibn Nagrila family's first cultivation of a palatine complex where the ruined Red Castle had been, is hard to explain smoothly. And yet, without this long postlude we might hardly be able to see this memory palace, let alone name it the pinnacle of Islamic culture in Spain: in 1492, immediately upon taking control of the city from the last of the Nasrids (poor Boabdil, whose infamous "last sigh" is remembered as a sign of his pathetic inability to hold on to this precious place), Ferdinand and Isabella proclaimed the Alhambra a *casa real*, or royal residence, which it in fact remained until 1868. And whether this act of appropriation was simply to flaunt this trophy of the Christian conquest over Islam (as is normally maintained) or for more complex reasons as well, the undeniable effect of the royal protection and patronage was to keep the Alhambra relatively well preserved over the centuries. Paradoxically, and despite the much reviled Renaissance palace of Charles V that sits uncomfortably at the entrance of the Alhambra complex (which itself may be a part of the paradox), its absorption into the royal treasuries of the Catholic monarchs played a crucial role in making it a better preserved medieval palace than any other in the Islamic world.

But what might be paradoxes and juxtapositions in other historical or cultural circumstances are very often the bread and butter of al-Andalus. Thus, both the beginning and the end of the story of this Red Castle are powerful attestations to the unusually strong and complex relationships among the religions of the children of Abraham in this land. The role played by the Jewish community in the early chapter of the Alhambra speaks eloquent volumes: the telling intimacy of the Jews of Granada sharing power as well as that yearning for a lost homeland, where the layer of Córdoba and a sacked Madīnat al-Zahrā' would have mingled with others. And at the end, we see that Catholic preservation of the Alhambra after the end of the Reconquest, and throughout the period of the Inquisition, while countless Arabic manuscripts were destroyed (most notoriously in Granada), and while the descendants of the Muslims who had built the Alhambra were being forcibly converted, persecuted, and eventually expelled. The adoption of the palaces and gardens, in such a context, is perhaps a more complex phenomenon than

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is normally acknowledged: the reflection that the Islamic arts were immoderately admired, quite independently of religious and political ideologies, an attitude that will account for the wide range of surprising “mixed” forms so characteristic of al-Andalus, from the muwashshahs in literature to the Mudejar architecture of so much of post-Reconquest Toledo to the continued and continuous use of mosques as Catholic churches. I return shortly to all of these issues, and to the ways in which this volume is concerned with the details of these typically “mixed” Andalusí forms. But for the moment I want to reflect on the middle part of the story, the one that is most often told, for it is the one that has the most bearing on the picture we carry in our heads of al-Andalus.

The Alhambra is built with the wolves howling mightily at the door: In 1232, in the now obscure village of Arjona, one Ibn al-Aḥmar rebels against the Cordoban Ibn Hūd (a successor to the Almohads) and forms an alliance with Ferdinand III. Indeed, Ibn al-Aḥmar helps Ferdinand III take Córdoba itself, in 1236, in tacit exchange for being able to carve out his newly won territory. The foundation of Nasrid Granada – which Ibn al-Aḥmar enters the next year, in 1237 – as the last Muslim outpost of what had been al-Andalus for half a millennium, is thus rooted in what we might see as a typically unideological act of warfare, with a Muslim in military and political alliance with a Christian.³ One of the many problems with the widely used word “Reconquest” is the suggestion that it means ideologically pure and politically uncompromising stances between Christian and Muslim in this land, and yet even at the most basic diplomatic and military levels, one sees, as late in the day as this, that political alliances in practice often overrode the supposed ideological dividing lines.

Nevertheless, and despite some easy suggestions in these kinds of breaches of ideological frontiers, this was unambiguously the beginning of the end, after all, and even then it was visibly so. This was the beginning of what was to be an Iliad-like 250-year-long siege against the kingdom of Granada. Deep inside their rugged mountain stronghold, the Banū Naṣr, those descendants of Ibn al-Aḥmar whom history calls the Nasrids, turned ever more inward and became progressively more Arabized. They existed culturally in a state of siege, isolated from the other cultures of al-Andalus in ways previously unimagined – it is, for example, the only significant moment in the history of al-Andalus during which an Islamic state exists without noteworthy *dhimmī* communities: scattered pockets of Jews and no Christians. And it is in this corner, and in a state of perpetual defensiveness that was palpably different from the cultural and political universe that had existed before the middle of the thirteenth century, that they build a fitting nearly sepulchral monument for themselves: the Alhambra celebrates what they seem to have always

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known they would lose since, as in the Trojan wars, the Achaeans may have rested or been distracted from time to time, but the lone, encircled city could only survive if the enemy decamped altogether, and permanently.

So it is that when you stand at those precisely built miradores, all of those lookout balconies and belvederes in the Alhambra, and especially so those in the gardens of the Generalife, you are struck by the terrible realization that, at that moment so blithely described by so many as the “heights” of Islamic culture in what was already more than halfway to being Spain, those who looked outward, which is mostly to the north, could see clearly the inevitability of loss. If glory lies behind you, there in the palaces half-hidden in the pine trees on the other side of the ravine, ahead of you, to the north, on the other side of the mountains, lies disaster. There was no good way out: Granada was, from beginning to end, a besieged vassal state. It is true, of course, that the Alhambra was built during the 150 or so years following the entry of Ibn al-Aḥmar into the city, years during which the Castilians, in effect, were still struggling to get their own house in order and the Granadan vassal state might be left essentially alone or might be a pawn in the extraordinarily complex and often brutal struggles that continued among the Christian states. But even then the wolves were always at the door.

In 1369, while Muḥammad V was hurriedly adding the finishing touches to the splendid Court of the Lions and the rest of the parts of the Alhambra that are most of what we marvel at today, Peter the Cruel of Castile was murdered by his half-brother Henry. It was Peter, an important patron of all sorts of Mudejar architecture throughout his kingdom, who had cultivated complex alliances with Granada and thus made available, inadvertently no doubt, the relative peace and financial well-being necessary to finish the building of the Alhambra. But the Grenadine death rattle began shortly after Peter’s murder – an internecine and “interconfessional” act, as were so many of the most crucial violent moments of medieval Spain, including, of course, the sack of Madīnat al-Zahrā’ by Berbers that provides the first building block of memory for the Alhambra. It is not clear, in the end, whether it was because the end had begun that the monument itself could no longer be worked on, or whether it was because the living tomb was finally perfected that the true end could finally proceed.

It was, in any case, precisely at this moment, when the perfection of the palaces coincides with the harshest political revelations of the end at hand, that the soon-to-be-great historian Ibn Khaldūn passed through Granada – indeed, he was centrally involved in a diplomatic mission between Muḥammad V of Granada and Peter the Cruel himself.⁴ It would be easy to speculate that it is there, in that extraordinary moment of Islamic history, when a visibly terminal political decline provoked unprecedented clarity of

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artistic vision, that the historian developed some part of his sense of the moral imperative to explain decline – that same sort of moral imperative that would be so echoed by Gibbon when he came upon the ruins of Rome. But of course unlike the ruined Rome of Gibbon, the plaster on the unparalleled walls and ceilings of the Alhambra was barely dry. So it is that while it is far more commonly ruins that evoke the poignancies of human loss, and stir those who contemplate them to tears or to the writing of the histories of what was lost, or both, the remarkably pristine Alhambra may be one of the only monuments built *avant la lettre* to monumentalize the inevitability of loss, and thus to nostalgia itself. From those miradores at the Alhambra we should be able to look out and see everything that the Nasrids saw, and feel their obligation to remember an al-Andalus already gone.

Cultivating the memory of al-Andalus from a wide variety of miradores, and for a wide variety of viewers, is the principal purpose of this volume, and it is undertaken with a distinct consciousness that al-Andalus itself has always been a powerful token of nostalgia.⁵ This is done in an academic and intellectual context that is not exactly a vacuum, but that affords surprisingly few sight lines for viewing al-Andalus. And this despite the recent heightening of consciousness about its existence brought about by a disparate range of circumstances: the explosion of international tourism, and its spread to modern Spain in the post-Franquist era, that has made of places such as the Alhambra and the Great Mosque of Córdoba regular stops; the publication of nonacademic books that evoke it (Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*); and a variety of cultural and political circumstances that on occasion suggest there is a historical parallel for the existence of communities of Muslims in late twentieth-century Europe and America.

One of the causes for the relative scarcity of good miradores is almost certainly also one of the causes of its particularly poignant nostalgic power, for everyone from the seventeenth-century Arab historian al-Maqqarī to the nineteenth-century American Washington Irving: the cultural displacement, that special configuration of “European” and “Middle Eastern” elements it represents and evokes. If within an “orientalist” tradition this has meant the implicit conjuring of an exoticized version of the Arab within Europe itself, for Arabs, and for non-Arab Muslims, it has also represented that moment of cultural superiority over Europe, and the nostalgia that the loss of that necessarily represents, for poets and historians alike. And for Jews it is both more complex and more explicitly powerful a touchstone: Sefarad, the Hebrew name for al-Andalus, is the ultimate symbol of a certain exalted level of social well-being and cultural achievement. In all of these cases, of course, specific views are more nuanced and the values and judgments that accompany them vary widely, even wildly. (There is a particularly virulent strain of Spanish

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historiography that has viewed the Andalusian chapter as the cause of subsequent Spanish social ills, and much of the xenophobia of this view survives in Spanish culture to this day.) But in revealing the existence of this fundamental tripartite divvying up, these rival claims to some sort of heritage, we can immediately perceive the most fundamental problem of “vision”: al-Andalus, by and large, has been divided along the single-language lines, derivative of national canons, that are in fact inimical to the Middle Ages in general and extravagantly noxious to al-Andalus.

If other volumes in this Cambridge series have been intended and written overwhelmingly for a public of fellow Arabists, this volume explicitly is not. This is not another reference volume for those who can already read the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, nor is it another mirador that can look into the Alhambra only if the viewer can already decipher the writing on its walls, all the intricate court poetry as well as the verses from scripture, tokens of the limpid purity of this embattled Arabism, carved in heartbreakingly beautiful plaster. It is a joy, as well as a special sorrow, to stand in those courts and be able to read and recite. But to believe it is merely about that is to participate, at this historical remove, in the encircling and isolation of that place. Instead, we also embrace the fundamentally mixed linguistic and cultural makeup of so much of al-Andalus that preceded the Nasrids and that they are, there and then, memorializing. And we also believe it crucial to recognize the special historical circumstances that make al-Andalus central in the course of medieval history far beyond the confines of traditional Middle Eastern studies.

Clearly, fundamental scholarly material on Andalusī literary culture should be available to a range of readers that includes but ranges far beyond fellow Arabists, and indeed, our most idealistic goal is perhaps to make those now disparate academic communities less so. But even if we fall far short of that, we have tried to make this volume a useful and enjoyable resource for colleagues in widely disparate fields: from the French medievalist whose interest has been aroused by notices of Hispano-Arabic culture having some interaction with Provençal to the specialist in Hebrew poetry who may want to understand the Jewish Golden Age in its fullest context, from graduate students in European medieval studies who will not necessarily learn Arabic but will need to understand something of this central culture to the Ottomanist interested in the makeup and history of so many refugees in the sixteenth century. And a great deal in between.

Fellow Arabists will indeed find here essays on individuals and topics about which they may already know something or even a great deal (Ibn Ḥazm, the maqama, the Great Mosque of Córdoba) but many more on topics (Petrus Alfonsi, the Mozarabs, Judeo-Arabic) that are distinctly Andalusī – and yet

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VISIONS OF AL-ANDALUS

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traditionally fall outside most Arabists' purview. Indeed, a number of our fellow Arabists will no doubt protest that the object of our attention, or at least some of the objects of our attention, pace the title of the series, are not really "Arabic" literature at all, but something else altogether. But, that, indeed, is the vital question here: just what is "Arabic" in that extended, influential and much lamented historical moment? And isn't a great deal of what is lamented, what provokes the extraordinary and almost universal nostalgia for an Andalus that from the start was partially imaginary, rooted in its being a summary of the varieties of exile that explicitly leaves "nations" by the wayside? And is the literary culture and history of al-Andalus, even if we were to leave aside the question of its enduring nostalgia, really usefully understood in the single-language terms of modern national paradigms?

These are some of the arguments in progress that are the backbone of this volume, and they will arise again and again, implicitly and explicitly. They cry out for further attention here – but not exactly here. These are matters probably better understood if we leave our mirador overlooking Granada, here where we listen to the waters of the melted snows of the Sierra Nevada – and take them up again in a different rocky citadel, in that city that (among other things) was once the benefactor to Europe of all that was Arabic.

TOLEDO

"One day I was in the Alcaná at Toledo, when a lad came to sell some parchments and old papers to a silk merchant . . . and [I] saw in it characters which I recognized as Arabic. But though I could recognize them I could not read them, and I looked around to see if there was not some Morisco about, to read them to me . . . I pressed him to read the beginning, and when he did so, making an extempore translation from Arabic to Castilian, he said that the heading was: History of Don Quixote de la Mancha, written by Cide Hamete Benengeli, Arabic historian . . . I then went off with the Morisco into the cloister of the cathedral, and asked him to translate for me into Castilian everything in those books that dealt with Don Quixote . . . I took him to my house, and there in little more than six weeks he translated it all just as it is set down here."

(from Miguel de Cervantes, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, pt. 1, chap. 9,
trans. as *Don Quixote* by J. M. Cohen)

There are a handful of remaining instances of Arabic writing to be seen today in Toledo, and like the tattered manuscript that Cervantes's narrator finds in the old Jewish quarters of the city, they tell us a great deal about the complexities of "Arabic" here. One of the earliest is in the church that sits at the highest point of the citadel city of Toledo. When you enter San Román, which in recent years has been designated the Museum of Visigothic Culture,

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MARÍA ROSA MENOCAŁ

you are certainly bound to believe that this, like a number of other churches in Spain, was once a mosque, one of those mosques that in turn may itself have once been a Visigothic church and then readapted for Christian worship a second time, after the Reconquest. (And indeed, not far from San Román, at one of the city's gates, there is just such a place: the small "Cristo de la Luz" was, until the end of the twelfth century, the mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, built on the ruins of a Visigothic church.) The interior of San Román is redolent of all the architectural features that those of us who are not experts would assume are, indeed, the traces of a mosque: the distinctive horseshoe arches, for example, and even, most eye-catching of all, fine Arabic script around all the window niches. But on closer inspection it turns out the Arabic writing is fake – and that this building was not only never a mosque but was built as the Church to commemorate the *defeat* of the Muslims in 1085.⁶ It is, of course, quite remarkable that this Catholic church should be adorned in the unambiguous style of the culture whose defeat it is meant to memorialize, and that it highlights that simulacrum of Arabic writing, as if in uncanny anticipation of the sixteenth-century "secret language" that is the "Aljamiado" of the Moriscos evoked in Cervantes's Toledan scene. But no less remarkable is the fact that the most spectacular of the four surviving synagogues of Spain is decorated with something in and of itself the real thing but in a context that is, to say the least, unexpected: the Toledan synagogue now called El Tránsito, built in 1360 in resplendent echoes of the Alhambra, just then being finished, includes real Arabic, along with Hebrew, integrated into the complex stucco ornamentation. And not just any Arabic, nor even some bits of the considerable body of Jewish writing done in Arabic in al-Andalus, but lines from the Qur'an itself.

Within an academic universe that would want to define Arabic in certain ways neither of these examples really counts, of course, although for different reasons – and they are in any case manifestly not the same Arabic as the abundant inscriptions in the Alhambra proper, which include, famously, a classical *qasida* by Ibn Zamrak, as well as the obsessively repeated "wa-lā ghālib illā-allāh" (There is no conqueror but God). And yet, a clean and neat definition of Arabic here would, ironically, severely diminish our appreciation of the extraordinary cultural dominance of what some have suggested might be better called "Arabicate" – a term that is technically appropriate but has, in fact, never acquired widespread acceptance, perhaps because of how inelegant it sounds. To define Arabic *strictu sensu* to mean only that which is Islamic (which is a not uncommon way of defining "Arabic" in the Spanish context) or, as many Arabists might, as what was redacted according to normative models of "classicism," that is, as contemporary grammarians or other arbiters of high culture did – or for that matter as the religious-cultural purists