ALSO BY MARÍA ROSA MENOCAL

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage

Writing in Dante’s Cult of Truth
from Borges to Boccaccio

Shards of Love:
Exile and the Origins of the Lyric

The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature:
Al-Andalus (COEDITOR)

The Ornament of the World
HOW MUSLIMS, JEWS, AND CHRISTIANS
CREATED A CULTURE OF TOLERANCE
IN MEDIEVAL SPAIN

María Rosa Menocal
For un hombre sincero de donde crece la palma...
my father, the intrepid Enrique Menocal,
who has lived in lifelong exile
from his own land of the palm trees

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A Brief History
of a First-Rate Place
THE MOMENTOUS EVENTS OF EIGHTH-CENTURY EUROPE WERE first set in train by the death of Muhammad, the Prophet who bore the Revelation of submission to God that is Islam. The story of Muhammad's transformation, from ordinary citizen of Mecca to charismatic military leader and radical founder of a religious and civil order, played itself out in a corner of our ancestral world about which we know precious little. The Arabs of the steppes and deserts of the Arabian peninsula were more or less settled in the oases that provided what scant water there was to be had. Some few were traders, serving as connections between one settlement and another. The most powerful were the nomads, the Bedouin. The desert culture of these peoples—who also had historic connections with the adjacent cultures of the Fertile Crescent—was itself strongly marked by two features that gave distinctive shape to the religion
that Muhammad's revelations brought into existence. On the one hand, the pagan and idol-worshiping religions of the desert were the target for this new and utterly uncompromising monotheism, which begins with the starkest possible declaration on the matter: "There is no god but God."* On the other hand, not only conserved but fully appropriated from the culture whose ritual center was Mecca was the loving cultivation—some would say adoration—of language, and of poetry as the best that men did with the gift of language. Muhammad's revelation, preserved in the Quran, embraced the poetry-besotted universe of his ancestors and contemporaries, and thus ensured the survival of the pre-Islamic poetic universe, with its many blatant contradictions of what would become normative Islamic belief.

The vexed question at the heart of the story we are following, the one that will take us to Europe's remarkable transformations in the medieval period, lies not in Muhammad's life but in his death. (The Islamic calendar hinges neither on Muhammad's birth nor on his death, but on the turning point in the story, in 622, when Muhammad and his followers moved from Mecca to Medina, a journey known as the hijra, or hegira.) Muhammad had died in Medina in 632 without an obvious successor. He had left behind, first and foremost, a powerful revelation, a combination of tradition and revolution. Islam was nothing less than the return to the pristine monotheism of Abraham—abandoned or misunderstood by Jews and Christians alike, the revelations asserted, and unknown altogether to the benighted pagans of the desert. All this came forth not in Muhammad's own words but through his transmission of the direct language of God, his

*One of the inappropirate and alienating ways we speak about Islam in English is to use the Arabic word Allah, God, as if it were a proper name, creating the false impression—ironic and horrifying for a Muslim—that this is some different god. I will invariably use the word "God" for the God of the three monotheistic religions, whose different languages use, of course, different words for the same being.

"Recitation"—the word Quran means "recitation"—of what God was revealing and dictating to him.

Alongside that relatively straightforward revelation, however, and inextricably intertwined with the essentially spiritual reorientation he urged, Muhammad had also created a community with distinctive social-civil-moral values, one that was already a military and political empire in the making. But there were no clear guidelines for how that empire should be organized or ruled, and Muhammad's death left an inevitable vacuum. No question in Islam is more fundamental and shaping than this one, a source of political instability and violent dispute from the beginning, as it remains to this day. Who could, after all, succeed a prophet who was also a dominant statesman? In that highly contested succession lie the origins of many of the major shapes and terms of Islam that are mostly unknown or puzzling to non-Muslims: Shiites and Sunnis, caliphs and emirs, Umayyads and Abbasids, all of these crucial internal divisions. One of the earliest chapters of this struggle within Islam for legitimate authority was the one that transpired in 750, the bloody massacre of the Umayyad royal family that led to the foundation of a rival Islamic polity in southern Europe, and the origins of that story lie in the moment directly following the Prophet's death, over a century before.

The simplified version of the succession to the Prophet is that the initial four caliphs—from the Arabic khalif, or "successor"—were chosen from among Muhammad's contemporaries, from the community of his companions and close relatives. The last of this foursome (called the Rightly Guided by many Muslims) was Ali, a cousin of Muhammad who was married to the Prophet's daughter Fatima. But Ali ruled for a mere five years before his caliphate came to a bloody end with his assassination in 661. This was barely thirty years after the Prophet's death, yet this fateful event began a new act in the drama of the ever-expanding Islamic empire. The Umayyads,
the new dynasty that came to power, were both Arabs and Muslims, and they symbolized the original fusion of a culture—and especially a language—with a revelation, a fusion that was the very soul of a new religion and civilization. But they moved their capital from the provincial and dangerously factional Medina to the more open and friendly spaces of Damascus, and in coming out of the isolation of the Arabian desert and making Syria over into the new homeland, and in the conversions of people far removed from Mecca and Medina, the Umayyads’ Islam forged a new culture that added generously to the Arab foundation. Transplanting the heart of the empire out of the Arabian peninsula and into Syria, which had its own mixed cultural legacy, was the first significant step in creating the ill-understood, crucial distinction between things Arab and things Islamic, a distinction that is particularly relevant to our story.

The Umayyads presided over this expansive period from their central and accessible caliphal seat in Damascus, a cosmopolitan and venerable city, in its previous lives Aramaean, Greek, Roman, and, most recently, Christian. There and elsewhere they began building new defining monuments in places where the remains of other cultures were still visible. The Great Mosque of Damascus was not built out of blank clay but with the bits and pieces of a Roman temple and a Christian church. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was built on the ruins of the Temple Mount and around the natural rock where Abraham’s sacrifice of his son was mercifully rejected by Abraham’s God. The building was thus erected by the Umayyads as a monumental version of the Quranic understanding that this is the One God, and that the Muslims are also, and now preeminently, among the Children of Abraham.

The borders of the Islamic empire continued to spread, and by 711, armies of recently converted Berbers, led by Umayyads from Syria, moved into Europe. Within and around the Mediterranean basin, from the Taurus Mountains in the north-east (the border with Anatolia) to the Pyrenees in the northwest (the border with Gaul), the new empire filled almost exactly the bed left by the old Roman empire: a map of the Mediterranean territories of the nascent Islamic empire—the Umayyad caliphate—in the seventh and eighth centuries corresponds remarkably to the Mediterranean center of a map of the Roman world in the second century. In our usual acceptance of the notion that there is some critical or intrinsic division between Africa and Europe, we are likely to neglect just how central this southern shore of the Roman world was. But if we reexamine the stretch of North African coastline as it was plotted out geopolitically in the second- or third-century Roman world, and then in the eighth, we can see the relative inconsequence of small stretches of water such as the Strait of Gibraltar and the baylike line of blue between Carthage and Sicily, as well as the obvious underlying unities and orders.

The Islamic transformation began to remake the entire ancient Near East, including Persia and reaching as far, already at the time of the Umayyads, as northwestern India. The virtue of this Arab-Islamic civilization (in this as in other things not so unlike the Roman) lay precisely in its being able to assimilate and even revive the rich gifts of earlier and indigenous cultures, some crumbling, others crumbled, even as it itself being crafted. The range of cultural yearning and osmosis of the Islamic empire in this expansive moment was as great as its territorial ambitions: from the Roman split that would appear as the distinctive capitals on the columns of countless mosques to the Persian stories that would be known as The Thousand and One (or Arabian) Nights, from the corpus of translated Greek philosophical texts to the spices and silks of the farthest East. Out of their acquisitive confrontation with a universe of languages, cultures, and people, the Umayyads, who had come pristine out of the Arabian desert, defined their version of Islam as one that loved its dialogues with other traditions. This was a
remarkable achievement, so remarkable in fact that some later Muslim historians accused the Umayyads of being lesser Muslims for it.

The Umayyads themselves did not survive to see the pattern of growth and acculturation they had established come to fruition, at least not in their adopted Syrian home. This change of leadership in the Islamic world is the beginning of our narrative of medieval European culture. The Abbasids, who overthrew the Umayyads in Damascus in 750, had different claims to caliphal legitimacy; indeed, they claimed something resembling direct descent from the Prophet, by way of the Prophet's uncle Abbas, whose name became their own. But, as with other ruling groups before and since, establishing their own authority seemed to require eliminating rival, and especially previous, claimants, which is why they massacred the Umayyads at their family estate in Rusafa and abandoned Damascus. The capital of the Abbasid Islamic empire was moved away from the Mediterranean basin to Iraq, which had been the center of the Abbasids' support and armies. Baghdad, the circular “City of Peace,” resembling nothing so much as a fortress, was made the new capital, and the familiar setting of many of The Arabian Nights. The sole survivor of the massacre at Rusafa, Abd al-Rahman, went west and became the first of the Umayyads in a place we too often relegate to being a “corner” of Europe but which became Europe's veritable center for centuries thereafter.

The Iberian Peninsula, much like the rest of post-Roman Europe in the eighth century, was a culturally and materially dreary place. Rome had governed there for nearly six hundred years, beginning about 200 B.C.E., when it followed in a long line of Mediterranean settlers and cultures—Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Greeks. During the years of both republic and empire, Hispania flourished from the material and cultural benefits of the Romans and sent native sons to the centers of power and into the annals of Latin letters. But that became a distant memory—or, rather, something like no memory at all—forgotten during the long period that in European history is most paradigmatically the age of “barbarians.” The cataclysmic upheavals, the pan-European migrations of the Germanic tribes, in the third and fourth centuries C.E., led to the decline and, if not the fall of the Roman empire, at least the loss of both the civil order and the long-term continuity from classical Greece that constituted the heart of our cultural heritage. Rome had replaced Greece in part by self-consciously absorbing Greek culture and history and by building its own civilization on the foundations of its ennobling predecessor, with whom it had a naturally rivalrous relationship.

The collapse of Rome's northern and eastern frontiers and the assumption of power by various Germanic tribes ruptured Europe's connection with its own cultural past, an event that would shape the West's consciousness of itself. Among the tribes that dismantled and then resettled what had once been the Roman empire, the Visigoths played a notorious role. This tribe, infamous for the sack of Rome in 410, eventually ended as the overlords of the former province of Hispania, although not without centuries of destructive battling over the territory with the Vandals and then among themselves. As elsewhere among the ruins of the Roman empire, and among the mobile Germanic tribes, Christianity was rather imperfectly adopted, from the perspective of the Catholic (“Universal”) Church. Not until 589 did the Visigoths join the Roman Church, disavowing their own deviant version of Christianity. Although there were important Church seats in Visigothic Hispania, Toledo notable among them, paganism was far from unknown throughout the countryside, where the once Romanized rural population had little to do with either Visigoths or Christianity, and where the Jewish communities that had arrived with the Romans lived in nearly enslaved squalor.
The bright lights during the long twilight that had begun in the fifth century were few and far between, and a lonely figure like Isidore of Seville stood out conspicuously: a notable churchman, he understood the extent to which some sort of Christian order had to fill the terrible vacuum left by the collapse of Roman civil institutions. His most revealing and influential political work, *In Praise of Spain*, was an attempt to bring the ruling Visigoths into the fold of the cultural continuum that they had ruptured by conceiving their history as a continuation of the Romans' own. Much more famous is Isidore's still quite readable masterpiece, the *Etymologies*, an unrivaled intellectual effort during those centuries to preserve and transmit the tattered remains of the knowledge of the ancient world to the still uncertain future. Despite Isidore's brave attempts to make the Visigoths out to be a regime worthy of the Roman succession, they were not remotely up to it. As a result there was very little center to hold when, shortly after the turn of the eighth century, the next wave of conqueror-immigrants came knocking forcefully on the door.

Like the Romans long before and the Germanic tribes more recently, the Muslims were seduced by the fat and nearly round peninsula that hangs at the western end of the Mediterranean. Hispania was ripe for the picking, since the Visigothic kingdom that the newly minted Muslims from North Africa coveted, and then rather easily overrun and settled, was all the things one might expect from hundreds of years of civil discontinuity: politically unstable, religiously and ethnically fragmented, culturally debilitated. Even the Christian mythology surrounding the events of 711, stories elaborated many centuries later to tell how the old Christian Spain had been lost to the Muslims, hinged on the utter political disarray, moral corruption, and decadence of the last of the Visigothic kings. By the time Abd al-Rahman arrived, less than fifty years after the first Muslim armies had ventured across the Strait of Gibraltar, nearly all the formerly Visigothic territories as far north as Narbonne, in Aquitaine, had been taken over by Muslims. When the Umayyad prince surveyed this place where he was bound to live out his life in political exile, he must have known that there would be no returning to his native land. This land where he had ended up would be only what he managed to make of it. Yet he could feel sanguine that it had nowhere to go but up, and that he might well make its barren and ruined landscape thrive and bear new fruit.

Over the course of the subsequent three hundred years until roughly the turn of the first millennium as it was calculated in the Christian calendar, the sort of political order and cultural flourishing that had once graced Roman Hispania returned to the peninsula. The Muslims never took and held the entire peninsula, however, and Christian outposts clung to the mountainous regions of the northwest Atlantic coast and the Pyrenees. Yet although the scattered Christian settlements there led to occasional skirmishing along its frontiers, the political history of the Cordoban state is amazingly even. Its very stability might well make it boring to anyone other than an enthusiast: one emir ruling for decades after the next, one addition to the Great Mosque of Cordoba after the next, one damned thing after another, as someone once wittily defined history itself. But within the stability of the long reigns and orderly successions of Abd al-Rahman's sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons, other kinds of revolutions occurred. There was a vast economic revival: the population increased, not just in the invigorated and ever more cosmopolitan cities, but even in the once decimated countryside, where the introduction of new crops and new techniques, including irrigation, made agriculture a prosperous concern; and the pan-Mediterranean trade and travel routes that had helped maintain Roman prosperity, and which were vital for cultural contacts and continuities, were reconfigured and expanded.
Al-Andalus fattened and bloomed with a distinctive identity. The original armies, and the settlers they became or brought with them, had been relatively few compared with the peninsula's population at the time. The newcomers, with their new languages, new customs, and new religion, constituted perhaps one percent of the overall population in the first generation of conquest and settlement. Like Abd al-Rahman, they were already an ethnic mix, part Arab and mostly Berber. Within a few generations, a vigorous rate of conversion to Islam from among the great variety of older ethnic groups, and from the Christian and pagan populations, made the Andalusian Muslim community not only vastly larger, but one of thoroughly intermarried and intermixed ethnic and cultural origins. Whereas the Visigoths, distinguished primarily by their ethnicity, had remained a minority of outsiders during their several hundred years of dominance of Hispania, the Muslims were members of several different ethnic groups. As with the Christians before them, the Muslims' distinctive power and authority resided in a faith to which conversion was not only possible but desirable and encouraged, pragmatically coerced by the range of civil advantages to any Muslim, whether he had converted the day before or descended from the most prestigious Bedouin tribe, the Quraysh of the Prophet himself. And convert the population did, in droves.

The convergence of mixed ethnicity and a religion of converts meant that the ancestors of a Muslim from Cordoba in the year 900 (let alone another two hundred or four hundred years later) were as likely to be Hispano-Roman as Berber, or some measure of each, perhaps with smaller dollops of either Syrian-Arab or Visigothic, these latter two having always been the smaller but politically dominant groups. It was of course the height of prestige to be able to claim, as many would over the years, that one was descended from the original small group of desert Arabs who had first trekked out of the Arabian peninsula or from the Syrians who had led the earliest westward expeditions. Arabness was the most aristocratic feature of ancestry one could want, and Syrian-Arabness was the venerable paternal line of Andalusian culture, both literally and figuratively. But even the emirs, and then their children, the caliphs who were direct and linear descendants of Abd al-Rahman—himself half Berber and half Syrian—were nearly all children of once-Christian mothers from the north, and the pale skin and blue eyes of these Umayyads were regularly remarked on by eastern visitors.

By the same token, all that was Arab was not necessarily Islamic. The other foundation of Andalusian culture, the Arabic language, spilled over the banks of its original religious riverbed and roamed beyond the exclusively religious needs of the Muslim community. This was, after all, the esteemed and powerful language of an empire, and was marked by its vital links to the rest of civilization. As far as the eye could see, and beyond, Arabic was the lingua franca of all save the barbarians—if not the native tongue, at least the pidgin of traders and travelers. Throughout most of the invigorated peninsula, Arabic was adopted as the ultimate in classiness and distinction by the communities of the other two faiths. The new Islamic polity not only allowed Jews and Christians to survive but, following Quranic mandate, by and large protected them, and both the Jewish and Christian communities in al-Andalus became thoroughly Arabized within relatively few years of Abd al-Rahman's arrival in Cordoba. One of the most famous documents from this period is the lament of Alvarus of Cordoba in the mid-ninth century detailing the ways in which the young men of the Christian community couldn't so much as write a simple letter in Latin but wrote (or aspired to write) odes in classical Arabic to rival those of the Muslims.

Of course, one can see this adoption of Arabic by the dhimmi—the Arabic word for the protected "Peoples of the Book," Jews and Christians, who share Abrahamic monotheism
and scripture—throughout the rest of the Islamic world. In principle, all Islamic polities were (and are) required by Quranic injunction not to harm the dhimmī, to tolerate the Christians and Jews living in their midst. But beyond that fundamental prescribed posture, al-Andalus was, from these beginnings, the site of memorable and distinctive interfaith relations. Here the Jewish community rose from the ashes of an abysmal existence under the Visigoths to the point that the emir who proclaimed himself caliph in the tenth century had a Jew as his foreign minister. Fruitful intermarriage among the various cultures and the quality of cultural relations with the dhimmī were vital aspects of Andalusian identity as it was cultivated over these first centuries. It was, in fact, part and parcel of the Umayyad particularity vis-à-vis the rest of the Islamic world. In 929, what had been understood or believed by many since 756 was said aloud: from every mosque in al-Andalus there was read the declaration that Abd al-Rahman III was the true Defender of the Faith, the legitimate caliph of the whole Islamic world, and the religious leader of all Muslims.

This full-fledged declaration of sovereignty on the part of the Andalusians—invoking a great deal more than political independence, since it entailed the public declaration of legitimate stewardship of all Muslims, not just those of al-Andalus—revealed the fatal weaknesses of the Abbasid empire in this first half of the tenth century. No civilization anywhere had been more splendid during the previous two centuries than the Abbasids'. One of the most tenable clichés surrounding the history of Islamic civilization is that this was the very zenith of its accomplishment and influence, these few hundred years following the moment when the Abbasids deposed the Umayyads and settled into their new home in Baghdad. The effects of this adventurous and energetic culture—which, among other things, undertook the project of translating the Greek philosophical corpus into Arabic nearly in its entirety—did reach from Baghdad to Cordoba, as well as to other places within its wide orbit. Despite their move inland, away from the old Roman sea to an ancient spot on the Tigris near where it meets the Euphrates, the Abbasids were the beneficent force of revival in the Mediterranean during these centuries, and quite directly responsible for the return of both material prosperity and intellectual vitality throughout that inland sea.

Chaos in the Abbasid capital had led directly to the declaration of independence and superiority by the Andalusians, who until then had been reasonably content to live with the half-fiction that they were a mere province, no matter how luminous, of the caliphate centered in Baghdad. In 909, the center lost its hold and the almost unthinkable happened: a breakaway group of Shīites, who saw themselves as descendants of the murdered Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, succeeded in taking control of the empire's western provinces. In Tunis—not so far from al-Andalus—these pretenders, led by an imam who claimed direct descent from Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and Ali's wife, proclaimed their breakaway Islamic state to be the legitimate caliphate. From the Andalusian perspective, it had been one thing for the quite reasonably independent Umayyads to pay lip service to the authority of the far-off Abbasids. There had been considerable profit all around from that comfortable arrangement, and free and easy travel back and forth between the rival cities of Cordoba and Baghdad had helped feed the Andalusians' insatiable appetites for every latest fashion from the eastern metropolis. But by the turn of the tenth century, Cordoba, which from the outset had a distinct sense of its own legitimacy, scarcely imagined itself a provincial capital at all.

Unlike Iraq, however, where the Abbasids lived, Tunis was practically around the corner, and the Fatimids, as they were called, thus represented a dangerous rival for the Andalusians. It was quite another thing, then, when the Fatimids proclaimed not just independence but rival authority, a rival
claim to represent what an Islamic state was and should be. The Umayyad counterclaim, that the authentic leadership and very center of the Islamic world resided in Cordoba, was thus made very loudly and very publicly that day in 929 by the young Abd al-Rahman III, a fitting heir to his ancestor and namesake. Cordoba, and not just from the obviously prejudiced view of the Cordobans, was probably justified at that moment in believing it was the center of the known universe. But that public declaration, as satisfying as it may have been, helped trigger particularly hostile and rivalrous reactions, from both the Christian north and the Islamic south. Resentful rivalries would come to haunt the golden city on the Guadalquivir. But let us not go quite yet to the undoing of the great caliphal capital of Europe, not until we have lingered a bit in the short century of its deserved celebrity.

CORDOBA, by the beginning of the tenth century, was an astonishing place, and descriptions by both contemporaries and later historians suffer from the burden of cataloguing the wonders, much like the counting off of Don Juan’s conquests by the dozens and hundreds: first the astounding wealth of the caliph himself and of his capital, then the nine hundred baths and tens of thousands of shops, then the hundreds or perhaps thousands of mosques, then the running water from aqueducts, and the paved and well-lit streets... The cultivated nun Hrotswitha of Gandersheim was involved enough in the diplomatic and social circles of the court of Otto I that she wrote a glowing account of the Muslim city based on her conversations with one of the emissaries to Otto’s court sent by the caliph Abd al-Rahman in 955. “The brilliant ornament of the world shone in the west, a noble city newly known for the military prowess that its Hispanic colonizers had brought. Cordoba was its name and it was wealthy and famous and known for its pleasures and re-

splendent in all things, and especially for its seven streams of wisdom [the trivium and quadrivium] and as much for its constant victories.”

But Cordoba was luminous not just by virtue of a necessarily inveterate comparison with those lands to the north, barely progressed, materially or culturally, beyond where they had been in the eighth century. Renowned Arab chroniclers and historiographers were also responsible for Cordoba’s image throughout the rest of the Islamic world—where running water and libraries were part of the familiar landscape—and they left a powerful vision and memory of that city as “the highest of the high, the farthest of the far, the place of the standard.” Not just Cordoba shone, of course, but the whole of al-Andalus over which its caliph presided. In the end, it would be al-Andalus’s vast intellectual wealth, inseparable from its prosperity in the material realm, that made it the “ornament of the world.”

The rich web of attitudes about culture, and the intellectual opulence that it symbolized, is perhaps only suggested by the caliphal library of (by one count) some four hundred thousand volumes, and this at a time when the largest library in Christian Europe probably held no more than four hundred manuscripts. Cordoba’s caliphal library was itself one of seventy libraries in a city that apparently so adored books that a report of the time indicated that there were seventy copyists in the book market who worked exclusively on copying Qurans. In one of the dozens of pages he devotes to Cordoba, the historian Edward Gibbon describes the book worship of the Islamic polity he so admired (and found incomparably superior to what he saw as the anti-book culture of medieval Christianity) using a somewhat different measure: the catalogues alone of the Cordoba library ran to forty-four volumes, and these contained the librarians’ information on some six hundred thousand volumes. Islam was indeed a clerisy: its privileged elites were the religious lawyers who studied the sacred texts and the scribes and bureaucrats who
staffed the royal chanceries. But beyond that considerable segment of the population, these libraries were the monuments of a culture that treasured the Word, built by rulers who had the resources to enshrine it. Many of the volumes they housed, it is safe to assume, were on subjects of little concern to visitors who were not Muslims or Arabophiles: works on religion and on language played a dominant role in the Islamic library. But there was a great deal more, and there were books that would have astonished any Christian visitor, with his necessarily vague knowledge of the classical world. The Andalusians, thanks to their regular intercourse with Baghdad, which had made translation of the Greeks a prized project, also housed the libraries of crucial traditions long lost to those in the rest of the Latin West, and unknown to them still, in the tenth century. Hieron's fragment about the marvels of Cordova (including, centrally in her description, the knowledge of the trivium and quadrivium) was, tellingly, not a Muslim but a Christian, and none other than Racemundo, the bishop of Elvira, the metropolitan see of all of Andalus. Hieron's description of Cordova also speaks to the sensation no doubt created by the Latin- and Arabic-speaking Christian who came from a place where they not only knew the long-forgotten Greeks but where the bishop was an esteemed member of the caliph's diplomatic corps.

Cordova's libraries were a significant benchmark of overall social (not just scholarly) well-being, since they represented a near-perfect crossroads of the material and the intellectual. The sort of libraries built in Cordova—unseen and unimagined for hundreds of years amid the intellectual spolia of the Roman empire—ultimately depended on a vigorous trading economy throughout the Mediterranean. This in turn encouraged energetic technological innovation, so that at some fundamental level what allowed those libraries to exist, and on such a previously unimaginable scale, was a paper factory in Jativa, a town near the prosperous coastal city of Valencia. Paper was dramatically cheaper and thus more plentiful than old-fashioned parchment, which was still being used in less developed places. Just as essential to the social and cultural project embodied in those libraries was a series of attitudes about learning of every sort, about the duty to transmit knowledge from one generation to another, and about the interplay between the very different modes of learning that were known to exist—modes that might contradict each other, as faith and reason did, and do now. These sat happily in those libraries, side by side, unafraid of the contradictions, first-rate.

In the eyes of the Christians who lived in the territories of Galicia and Asturias in the northwest, and in the uplands north of the Ebro River valley in the northeast, it was unambiguously the Iberian Peninsula that had most successfully recovered, well before the turn of the millennium, from the economic and cultural depressions that had followed the fall of the Roman Empire. The glorious city of Cordoba, and the polity of al-Andalus of which it was the capital, had filled the black hole of cultural, material, and intellectual well-being in the West. Within the first century after the year 1000, all sorts of byways would open up, and notice would start to reach the outer corners of the lands on its far northern outskirts about what life could be and what a culture could achieve. Intellectual as well as material traffic between the hungry markets of the north and the prosperous merchants of the south would begin in earnest and eventually expand everyone's horizons. But in the meantime, there sat fat, complacent, and conceited al-Andalus, sure of itself and its own superiority vis-à-vis not just the northern Christians but all other Muslims. After the Abbasid hiatus of nearly two hundred years, the Cordobans, the Andalusians, were unembarrassed to reclaim the Umayyads' rightful place on the center of the world's stage.
In some ways the caliphate of Cordoba was a victim of its own prosperity and its own successes, and what came with them. Despite every cliché, this story is far from that of a simple conflict between infidels and believers. Provocative and damaging raids against Christian strongholds in the north had been undertaken during the late 900s by a notorious vizier named al-Mansur, who had become more powerful than the young and feeble caliph whose protector he was supposed to be. But at the turn of the millennium these raids and tauntings of the northern kingdoms were not the cause for the collapse of central caliphal power.

Bitter civil wars among the rival Muslim factions of al-Andalus began in earnest in 1009, and for the subsequent two decades they tore apart the “ornament of the world.” Appalled contemporary observers rather poignantly called those self-destructive years the fitna, “the time of strife.” A culture that not long before had been at the peak of its powers was being brought low not so much by barbarians at the gate as by all manner of barbarians within—within its own borders and within the House of Islam. On the one hand, internal arrogance and the excesses that came from extraordinary wealth began to color the caliphate in the late tenth century. At the same time, the cocksureness of Abd al-Rahman III in declaring the Andalusian caliphate had incited other pretenders to authority and, at precisely the moment when other powerful Islamic polities, hostile to the idiosyncratic Umayyads on both ideological and political grounds, were on the rise in North Africa.

The violent destruction of Madinat al-Zahra, the Versailles of Cordoba, in 1009, just after the beginning of the civil wars, is as good a marker as any of the end of the political well-being of an Islamic polity in medieval Europe. That lavish palatine city on Cordoba’s outskirts was one of the most fabled architectural and urbanistic achievements of the Islamic world. Although to this day the lost city is only partially excavated, what is now visible, combined with the written accounts of what there once was, reveals breathtaking levels of architectural sophistication. Madinat al-Zahra had been built in the early tenth century by Abd al-Rahman III, and this architectural complex was part of the declaration of worthy rivalry to the Abbasids. But when this monumental Umayyad site was sacked, less than a century later, it was not by the Christians with whom the caliphate had been sparring on its frontiers. Rather, the destruction was perpetrated by other Muslims, marauding and rampaging Berbers ferociously venting all manner of resentments. These soldiers were part of the mercenary armies brought into al-Andalus by the last desperate rulers of the caliphate to help keep the peace. That devastation of 1009, not at all unlike the Goths’ sack of Rome of 410 in its symbolic freight, was the sign of a civil society that had lost control of itself and whose erstwhile order had been left to foreign armies. The ruins of the palaces and gardens of Madinat al-Zahra became the touchstones in Andalusian memory for human grandeur—and its ultimate fragility.

In part, too, the destruction of Madinat al-Zahra reveals the dramatic divisions among the various communities of Muslims that were part of the struggle to carve out both political and religious legitimacy, and that had been visible a hundred years before, when the Andalusians had declared themselves the true caliphs. Particularly ferocious were the divisions between Berber Muslims from North Africa, traditionally far more conservative, even fundamentalist, and the Andalusians. Many Andalusians were, of course, descendants of Berbers who had first settled the peninsula in the eighth century, when there were already destructive ideological and political rivalries between the Arab-Syrian leadership and the Berber hlioloi. But in the end, their Andalusian identity had been decisively shaped during those subsequent 250 years as a quasi-mythical Umayyad polity in exile; and the citizens of al-Andalus, even those descended from the original Berber settlers, were in many ways at cross-purposes
with the Berbers across the Strait of Gibraltar. As a viable political entity, al-Andalus ended under conditions not unlike those under which it began, as one more chapter in the bloody struggle within Islam for legitimate authority, the intense and often rancorous competition for the succession to Muhammad.

The full and official dissolution of the Cordoban caliphate came in 1031, slightly more than a century after its optimistic and triumphant proclamation. And although Madinat al-Zahra would never recover, a phoenix of sorts did rise from the ashes of the caliphate in the taifa, or party, kingdoms. In Arabic taifa means "party" or "faction," and in this case it means a splinter party, a breakaway from the mainstream. In the aftermath of the fragmentation of the caliphate of Cordoba, individual cities and their hinterlands became independent or quasi-independent states and began years of struggle among themselves to acquire the prestige and authority that had once belonged to the now ruined Andalusian caliphal capital. In the early years there were some sixty states of differing sizes and differing political provenances. Some of these were dominated by Umayyad loyalists, others by the old tribal groups who saw themselves as the true Arab aristocracy, others still by Berbers, or even disgruntled military adventurers. As time went by, incessant warfare among these rival cities winnowed the survivors down to a powerful few.

A vital part of this cultural landscape in full bloom at this time was the Jewish community. As was the case with many other well-off Cordobans, whole sectors of the prosperous and well-educated Jewish populace left the ruined and dangerous former capital. Emigrating to newly formed taifas, many Jews resumed the influential roles they had enjoyed in Cordoba. The taifa of Granada, to take but one conspicuous example, recruited a gifted young man whose family had led Cordoba and settled in nearby Malaga. Samuel ibn Nagrila succeeded, as his employers had hoped, in bringing his Umayyad-Cordoban refinements
to this backwater, and he quickly became vizier, or prime minister. At the same time, he became the first nagid, or head, of the Jewish community—and, as one of the most accomplished of the new Hebrew poets of the Golden Age, is remembered by his Jewish honorific, Samuel the Nagid.

Precisely at this point also, the northern Christian territories began to consolidate as unified and increasingly powerful kingdoms. Expanding slowly southward throughout the eleventh century, the Christian-controlled cities were in the same general melee of competition for territories and widespread leadership and cultural prowess as the Muslim cities. The Cid, an ambitious military adventurer (who would enjoy a long career in Spanish myth and legend), lived and led his various armies into all manner of battles at this time, when religious rivalry was more an ideological conceit than any kind of determining reality. Rodrigo Diaz, known by his Arabic epithet—El Cid comes directly from al-sayyid, meaning “the lord” in Arabic—had military successes chronicled admiringly by Muslim as well as Christian writers, just as he fought in the service of Muslim and Christian monarchs alike. Likewise, Muslim cities at times paid tribute to more powerful Christian neighbors, just as Christian kings at times found their most loyal allies among Muslim princes or emirs.

The rivalry for ascendancy among the various taifa cities of the peninsula, militarily and socially destructive as it was, is often likened to the jockeying for power, coupled with cultural exuberance, that was so distinctive among the Italian city-states during the Renaissance. Many of the most characteristic and influential Andalusian cultural forms came into their own in one or another of the many independent city-states that dotted the landscape, and many of them came as part and parcel of the rampant mixtures of people produced by the splintering of the caliphate. During the eleventh century, the fallout from the crash of a centralized and powerful state meant the constant reshifting of political borders and considerable resettlement of many who had once been subjects of the Cordoban caliph. Muslims now found themselves living in Christian cities—these were the Mudejars, as their Christian sovereigns called them—along with Arabized Jews and yet another hybrid group, the Mozarabs. The Mozarabs were those Arabized Christians who, during the three hundred years they had lived in an Islamic polity, had become a community dramatically distinct from their coreligionists in the rest of the Latin West. There was movement in the other direction as well, of course, and Romance-speaking Christians from the north were also suddenly traveling in and out of—even settling in—areas that were perhaps just beyond their own borders geographically. These new and previously unseen places may as well have been different planets culturally. But only for a short while: the pell-mell fraternizations soon enough produced familiarity with the sounds, smells, and colors of every kind of neighbor.

The commingling of languages, religions, and styles of every sort—food, clothes, songs, buildings—took place not only within the Iberian Peninsula, although certainly most vigorously there, but with increasing intensity far beyond the Pyrenees. The much more promiscuous and transformative interaction between Andalusian culture and the rest of Europe still lay ahead, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although its beginnings became obvious during the last half of the eleventh century and were enhanced by the mobile culture of the vigorously competitive city-states, Muslim and Christian alike. But another crucial turning point reshaped the cultural and political landscapes of Europe in the first century after the millennium: the expansion and invasions of the Normans.

The outcome of the encounter between the Norman Christians and the Muslims of Sicily—Sicily, too, had been an Islamic polity since the eighth-century expansion that had created al-Andalus—is in its own way a parable for the complex
shift of power and the cultural absorption of the times. In 1072, after thirty-four years of effort, Palermo, the capital of Islamic Sicily, fell to the invaders and became the center of the Norman kingdom of Sicily. Yet over the course of the subsequent century and a half, the Arabized Normans ended by becoming near-captives of the culture they had conquered. This case speaks volumes about the complicated and often paradoxical relationship between politics, ideology, and military history on the one hand and culture on the other. Though the Church had maintained a hostile attitude toward Islam from the beginning—the entire Eastern patrimony was swept under Muslim sovereignty in the seventh and eighth centuries—it was never in a position to call for a taking-up of arms against that ideological enemy. But in 1095 at Clermont, in France, Pope Urban II summoned Western Christendom to a Crusade to win the Holy Land back from the infidel Muslims; and from our perspective the times often seem stamped principally by this act of aggressive religious intolerance. Yet, these were also the times during which some of the vast holdings of Cordoba’s spectacular libraries came to be read, translated, and in effect canonized as part of the Western tradition, as often as not by men who were part of the hierarchy of the same Church promoting the Crusades.

Within the Iberian Peninsula, the tumultuous period of the independent Muslim cities of al-Andalus came to an end with an event characteristic of the times. Alfonso VI of Castile, a politically astute and highly ambitious Christian monarch and long-time protector of the critically important Islamic taifa of Toledo, consolidated his power and took overt and official control of that ancient city in 1085. Victor over Christian and Muslim adversaries alike in his bid for leadership over broad territories, Alfonso made Toledo his new capital. He also made it the heir apparent to some of the lost glories of Cordoba and al-Andalus. Alfonso and his line of influential successors became the patrons and proselytizers of much of Arabic culture, and of the vast range of intellectual goods that were subsequently made accessible to the Latin West. Toledo was made over as the European capital of translations and thus of intellectual, especially scientific and philosophical, excitement.

But to the south, Toledo’s takeover by a powerful Christian monarch who was a real contender, not just another strongman of some minor city, provoked a historically fateful military reaction. Alfonso’s defeated and dismayed rival for control over Toledo, the equally ambitious and accomplished Mutamid, based in Seville, asked for military help from the Almoravids, the fundamentalist Muslim regime that had recently taken control of Marrakech and established the polity we know as Morocco. The Almoravids were Berber tribesmen who had been building a considerable empire in North Africa. These fanatics considered the Andalusian Muslims intolerably weak, with their diplomatic relations with Christian states, not to mention their promotion of Jews in virtually every corner of their government and society. But the somewhat deluded Mutamid of Seville cared little about their politics, and imagined he could bring them in to help him out militarily and then send them packing. The Almoravids thus arrived ostensibly as allies of the weak taifas and quickly succeeded, in 1086, in defeating Alfonso VI. These would-be protectors, however, stayed on as the new tyrants of al-Andalus.

By 1090, the Almoravids had fully annexed the taifa remnants of the venerable al-Andalus into their own dour and intolerant kingdom. For the next 150 years, Andalusian Muslims would be governed by foreigners, first these same Almoravids, and later the Almohads, or “Unitarians,” an even more fanatic group of North African Berber Muslims likewise strangers to al-Andalus and its ways. Thus did the Andalusians become often rambunctious colonial subjects in an always troublesome and incomprehensible province. They had irretrievably lost their political freedom, but the story of Andalusian culture was far from over: although bloodied, the Andalusians were unbowed, and
their culture remained their glory — viewed with suspicion, yet often coveted by all their neighbors, both north and south.

The twelfth century in Europe opened with a series of ironic juxtapositions and then ran with them. While Latin Europe began to reap the material and intellectual rewards of contact with Andalusian progressiveness, what had once been al-Andalus was itself an increasingly repressive place. The Crusades, a term understood to mean the religiously motivated warfare between Christians and Muslims, have come to symbolize the political history of that moment. But at the same time, destructive intrareligious disputes within both the Christian and the Muslim communities were shaping broad social and cultural developments at least as much. Perhaps the most transforming of these was the great rebellion of the new vernacular languages against Latin, which marks the beginning of the road leading, through many twists and turns, to Dante and Cervantes and Shakespeare and all the others who would use the individual vernaculars of Europe instead of the older, unchanging, and universal language of the Church and of the long-vanished Roman empire.

This period is also the beginning of the end of hundreds of years of open Islamic and Jewish participation in medieval European culture. The years of colonial status, from the Almoravids' 1090 annexation of the Spanish Muslims. The Almoravid attempts to impose a considerably different view of Islamic society on the Andalusians provoked relentless civil unrest: in 1109, not even twenty years after these newcomers had been invited in as allies, anti-Almoravid riots broke out in Cordoba following the public book-burning of a work by al-Ghazali, a legendary theologian whose humane approach to Islam, despite its orthodoxy, was too liberal for the fanatical Almoravids. Such violent disagreements about the nature of Islam were far from unique. Equally striking was the resistance against various Almoravid government attempts to control and even persecute the Sufis. mystics deemed far too heterodox by the Almoravids but much admired by the Andalusians.

The generally turbulent religious climate in al-Andalus drastically changed the composition of Muslim cities. A significant flight of the dhimmis, the Jews and Christians who had been a vital part of the vivid and productive cultural mix, now began. Regrettable as all this was, still worse was to follow: an even more repressive Muslim Berber regime overthrew the Almoravids in North Africa, and kept al-Andalus as its own colony. The Almohads' brand of antisecular and religiously intolerant Islam was at irreconcilable odds with many Andalusian traditions, and they ultimately failed in their attempts to "reform" their colonized Muslim brethren. Nor were they able to achieve anything like the sort of ideologically based political unity they demanded among Muslims, a failure with grave political consequences.

This severe and often violent internal discord within the tattered remains of al-Andalus coincided with the power and influence of Pope Innocent III, who ran roughshod over much of Europe during his years as pontiff, 1198 to 1216. Al-Andalus was only one of Innocent's many targets of crusade, both within and beyond Europe, and within and without Christianity. Christian civil wars had been going full force throughout the twelfth century and into the beginning of the thirteenth; the Crusade against the so-called Albigensians, a starkly puritanical heresy, also decimated the social and political structures of the once flourishing courts of Provence, the same courts, with intimate ties to those of northern Spain and al-Andalus, where the troubadours had wrought the first canonical secular literature of the modern Western tradition. Sung in defiance of the previously omnipotent Latin written tradition and often performed on a range of new instruments that challenged the traditional sounds
of religious music, their songs of impossible love flourished throughout the twelfth century as the cultural chic of the times. So it is yet another paradox that this first full flower of modernity—arriving, as it did, at the very height of the medieval period—should come to an end by the mid-thirteenth century with the destruction, during the Crusade against the Albigensians, of the Provençal courts that had supported and encouraged these revivals of secular culture.

Once again, in a parallel to the events within al-Andalus that led to the destruction of the once vibrant Islamic society, the enemies here were as often within as without. With his grandiose visions of universal dominance over political enemies (Christian heretics and Muslim infidels alike), Innocent was a pope of unrivaled political reach who provoked wide-ranging changes in Europe's cultural and ideological landscape. Innocent's iron fist was also directed at what seemed to him a motley crew indeed, the Christians of the various and sundry kingdoms south of the Pyrenees. Here was a collection of disunited and all too heterodox Christians so lackadaisical in their faith that they permitted Jews to live indistinguishable from them in their midst, eventually even ignoring the 1215 decree of the Fourth Lateran Council, over which Innocent presided, that stipulated that Jews wear distinctive clothes or other external markers of difference. These were Christians who, most of the time, would just as soon fight each other as wage crusade against their Muslim enemies next door.

But one exceptional moment made all the difference. In 1212 the disunited Spanish Christians took full advantage of the offers of northern European military help against the Almohads, and this led to the second crucial turning point in the history of al-Andalus, much as the first, in 1086, had been the outside military help sought by the then disunited Muslim city-states. A pivotal military moment but also a rarity, the battle at Las Navas de Tolosa was about ideology as a fairly abstract thing, and one of the few real incidents of "Reconquest," fought with crosses and papal banners on one side and nothing but Muslims on the other. The resounding Christian victory was the clear beginning of the end; virtually nothing but further Muslim losses and retreats followed this disastrous Almohad defeat. Like dominoes, the grand old cities fell to the Christians one by one: Cordoba in 1236, Valencia in 1238, and finally Seville, the lovely orange-tree-filled city the Almohads had made their capital. Seville was taken in 1248 by Ferdinand III of Castile, the first of many generations of Castilian monarchs who would prefer Seville above all other cities. When Ferdinand died a few years later, his son Alfonso—who would be called "the Learned" and be the great patron of translations and thus of the transfer of the Arabo-Islamic fortune into the treasury of Christendom—built for his father a tomb to sit in the Great Mosque of Seville, which had been reconsecrated as the splendid cathedral of the new Castilian capital. Alfonso had the tomb inscribed, in the spirit of the age, in the three venerable languages of the realm—Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin—as well as in the upstart Castilian that only poets and other revolutionaries were writing in just yet.

But the world within which Ferdinand's tomb made sense, that first-rate world in which all those languages sat comfortably next to each other carved on the tomb of a Christian saint, was eventually destroyed, along with the mosque that originally housed it, and inside which not only Ferdinand but his successors prayed until well into the fifteenth century. The fateful dismantling of that universe, the hows and whys of the disappearance of this first-rate European culture is really a different history from the one that concerns this book, and it is a long and often treacherous road that winds from Ferdinand III's Seville in 1248 to Ferdinand V's Granada in 1492. Ferdinand III had, in effect, created Granada as the last Islamic polity on the Iberian
Peninsula: it had been the reward given to one Ibn Ahmar, of the Nasr family, in return for much-needed military assistance in the battle for Cordoba that the Castilians had waged against the Almohads in 1236. The Nasrids, the descendants of Ibn Ahmar, survived the Iliad-like 250-year siege that followed, not as Andalusians proper but rather as keepers of the memory of al-Andalus and, increasingly, as the builders of its final sepulchral monument, called the Alhambra. On a spot already inlaid with layers of memories, the Alhambra ultimately became the setting for the highly charged scenes that set the stage for the true end of the Middle Ages in 1492: Muhammad XII, the last of the Nasrids, known as Boabdil, handed the keys of his family’s royal house to the descendant of Ferdinand III and Alfonso the Learned, Queen Isabella of Castile, and her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon. Some recounts of that story say that the Catholic Kings were dressed in Moorish clothes for the occasion, and perhaps they were also dressed that way just a few months later, when they signed the decree expelling the Jews.
The Mosque and the Palm Tree

Cordoba, 786

Abd al-Rahman was an old man of fifty. A lifetime had passed since he had first arrived in the once remote hinterland of Cordoba, an ambitious young man, the sole surviving heir to a caliphate brutally stolen away in Syria. The universe had changed in those years, partly of its own accord, partly under his direction. From the outset, he had resigned himself to the permanence of exile in al-Andalus, despite the sadness that came from knowing he would never see his beloved homeland again. With that acceptance had come determination, energy, and purpose as he learned to harness what might have been crippling bitterness against the Abbasid pretenders who had destroyed his family. The Abbasids had abandoned Damascus soon after Abd al-Rahman had: by 754 their second caliph, named al-Mansur, had moved to the East, where he had a spanking-new city built to escape the very memory of
the Umayyads. Baghdad was indeed a marvelous and magical place from the moment it arose, a circular city, perfectly concentric and perfectly secure on the banks of the Tigris. But Abd al-Rahman, whose enemies begrudgingly called him “the Falcon of the Quraysh” (the Quraysh was the tribe of the Prophet himself), had survived to make sure that, despite the Abbasid turn in history, the memory of the Umayyads and of Damascus would not be lost. For thirty years he had been laying the foundations for a defiantly new Umayyad polity.

In Iberia the Visigothic settlements that the Muslims had moved into were far from well tended. But part of the Umayyad tradition, developed in Syria when they had first arrived there, was to know how to take advantage of what they found lying about, especially when it came to the abundant remains of the Roman past. What could be salvaged was salvaged and reused; what had to be newly invented was. Bridges and roads were built or repaired; and water was brought to the land so new kinds of plants could be cultivated. In many cases these were themselves the fruits, both literal and metaphorical, of the eastward Islamic expansions, to places such as Persia and India, whose many riches became Umayyad staples. Many later historians, Abbasids as well as others seeking to justify the end of that glorious moment in Islamic history, would point disapprovingly to the way the Umayyads had absorbed and adapted the spolia and trappings of the civilizations they found as they spread throughout the world. To such purists, the open-hearted and eclectic syncretism of the Umayyads seemed a defect.

Like other exiles and immigrants in every generation and from every culture, Abd al-Rahman yearned for the small tokens of the old country a favorite fruit, the look of a childhood home. But in this case, the man who craved the tastes, sights, and sounds of a native land to which he could not return was a caliph in all but name, with the wherewithal to have plants brought across the breadth of North Africa, and to have buildings built to remind him of Syria. Because he was not only a powerful ruler but the founding father of the Umayyads of al-Andalus, his memories and nearly everything he did to satisfy his cravings ultimately bore more significance than the personal nostalgia of one man forever exiled from a beloved maternal home. And these were the essential building blocks, shining with the patina of tradition and legitimacy, of this new commonwealth.

The first Muslim armies had ventured to the far northern reaches of Iberia, beyond the deep and snowy mountains they called al-Baranis, the Pyrenees, and into a place called Gaul. The farthest drives north had taken place years before Abd al-Rahman had even dreamt of al-Andalus, while the Umayyads were still running things from Damascus. Armies had moved far up the Rhone valley, and well into Burgundy, and for a number of years it looked as though the extended Muslim territories in Europe would include considerable lands north of those rugged mountains. But a different and far worthier adversary lay in wait. When, in 732, the far-ranging Muslim armies ventured as far as a settlement called Tur—barely 150 miles from Paris—the ruler of the Franks was provoked to defend his territories. On the outskirts of the modern city of Tours, on the plains south that lead to Poitiers, Charles Martel stood up against the Muslim forces, and the battle that ensued became legendary on both sides. The Franks routed the Muslims, killing the general at the head of their army and so many men that Muslim historians ended up calling the killing fields “the Plain of the Martyrs.” For historians of Europe, the Battle of Tours, sometimes called the Battle of Poitiers, would always represent the iconic end point of Muslim advances into northern Europe. This crucial turn in European history elicited Edward Gibbon’s striking remark in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that, had the battle gone differently,
“perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and the truth of the revelation of Mohammed.”

The brutal loss forced the would-be settlers to retreat to the area that would later be called Provence, where they stayed on for about another quarter-century. But the Franks were not the Visigoths, and their determination to claim these lands for their own continued. Pepin, son of Charles Martel and father of the far more famous Charlemagne launched a long and ultimately successful campaign to take the land north of the Pyrenees, and by 758, just a few years after Abd al-Rahman had established himself in Cordoba, the northernmost Muslim armies and settlers had been pushed back south of the Pyrenees. This did not occur readily, however, and the many battles and long sieges—of the city of Narbonne most famous of all—ended up providing much of the material, part historical and part legendary, for the vast epic tradition that would become the bread and butter of medieval French literature.

The Battle of Tours and its aftermath determined the linguistic and religious makeup of northern Europe, in effect limiting the expansion of Islam to the Iberian Peninsula instead of allowing it to reach nearby Paris and the Rhine. Yet a different and far less historically decisive battle only a generation later takes pride of place in the literary and mythological tradition of modern Europe. No epic is more central to that tradition than the Song of Roland, and the raw material for this chanson de geste (“song of deeds,” as the Old French oral epics were called) comes from the years during which center stage was occupied by two great and ambitious rulers, each determined to create a vast and unified polity. The Umayyad almost-caliph Abd al-Rahman and the king of the Franks (and eventual Holy Roman Emperor) Charlemagne were neighbors whose territories rubbed against each other, at times seductively, at times abrasively, all along the Pyrenees. The Battle of Roncesvalles, which was later immortalized in the epic tradition, was triggered in part by the Franks’ land lust. Their success, under Pepin, against the advancing Umayyads had whet their own expansive appetites and they had begun to dream of the lands south of the Pyrenees, much as the southerners had dreamed about settling to the north.

The opening to the lands of the south came, as these things so often did, because of civil strife and treacheries. From the beginning of his reign, in 756, Abd al-Rahman appeared determined to avoid the errors of earlier governors, and especially to eliminate the chaos that had characterized much of al-Andalus’s short history. Abd al-Rahman realized that Berber and Syrian rivalries would be the enemy of a large and prosperous state, and he vigorously and uncompromisingly administered al-Andalus while refusing to play the games of tribal loyalties. In the long run his strategy succeeded brilliantly, and the result was (among other things) a thriving, powerful, and well-organized state, which he passed on to his heirs, and they to theirs, for a quarter of a millennium. But in the early years, predictably, tribal and factional leaders felt they and their age-old traditions of political patronage had been betrayed.

In 777, the twenty-second year of Abd al-Rahman’s rule, a number of aggrieved local Muslim nabobs approached the king of the Franks for help. Though Charlemagne was himself heavily involved in his own ongoing struggles against the Saxons, he spent the next year campaigning with his Muslim allies throughout the lands south of the Pyrenees, struggling over cities from Barcelona, on the Mediterranean coast, to places like Pamplona, closer to the Atlantic shore. This was an unhappy venture, as it turned out. Military successes were few and far between, and by the summer of 778 the thirty-six-year-old king could no longer maintain his siege of the city of Saragossa, which sits on the Ebro River. Charlemagne may have
been summoned back by yet another Saxon uprising, or perhaps he may have understood that: Abd al-Rahman was not about to give in to the rebels from within his own house. In either case, Charlemagne began a long withdrawal of his Frankish army from Saragossa. But as his defeated and exhausted troops struggled back northward, they were attacked again, this time by a fighting force of highly territorial Basques, whose mountain passes they were crossing—and trespassing. The retreating army’s rear guard was entirely destroyed, including its commander, the count Roland. Little more than an account of what happened survived the massacre. That report became the very stuff of early French national mythology in the twelfth century, imaginatively transformed into the most canonical of medieval epics and eventually into a story completely unrelated to its own historical moment: one of Christian versus Muslim, of religious animosity and crusader zeal.

Despite these and hundreds of other successes, military as well as civic, political as well as artistic, and despite the stability and prosperity that was his from early on in Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman waited until nearly the end of his life before he finally seemed ready to begin his most vital project, the one that would proclaim most loudly, in years to come, who he was and what he stood for. The venerable old church of San Vicente was the largest in Cordoba, and it had been built on the ruins of a Roman temple. The traditions cultivated by historians of al-Andalus record an account that would have sounded surprisingly familiar to those who knew the story of the building of the Umayyads’ Great Mosque of Damascus more than a century before, in the 640s. When the Muslims first needed a substantial place to pray in that city, half the Damascus cathedral was bought and in effect became a shared house of worship, the relatively newly arrived Muslims praying in one half; the older Christian community in the other. Years later, when the caliph was ready to build a mosque worthy of his family and his heritage, he bought out the Christian half, demolished the older church structure, and on that same site began building a “Friday mosque”—as Muslims call the mosque at which the whole community prays on Fridays—for his now stable and flourishing capital.

The retelling of this story—how the newly arrived Umayyads approached building their first great cathedral mosque when they arrived in Hellenized and Christian Syria, and then how the prince in exile ended up building the first great cathedral mosque of al-Andalus—reveals the extent to which the whole project of Cordoba and al-Andalus was regarded as a conscious continuation of what had been destroyed in Syria. It is also very much about the Umayyads’ care not to destroy the multiethnic and religiously pluralistic state. The aesthetics of the new Cordoban mosque, to which Muslims from far and wide throughout history would forever write odes, was typically Andalusian from the start: part adaptation of local, vernacular forms and part homage to Umayyad Syria, forever the source of hereditary legitimacy. Even the most mysterious idiosyncrasy of the great building is best understood in terms of that yearning to remake in the new land what was lost in the old: the qibla of this mosque—the orientation that in all mosques points the faithful toward Mecca when they pray—is not in the direction of Mecca but something more like due south, as it would be if the mosque were indeed in Damascus.

The Cordoba mosque continued to be built, and added to, for the next two hundred years, until nearly the year 1000, but the characteristic look of the place, the horseshoe arches that sit piggybacked on each other, themselves dizzyingly doubled in alternations of red and white, was established from the start. It is futile to try to describe the nearly kinetic energy of a powerful monument like this; the effort would be akin to paraphrasing a poem. Indeed, the visual poetry of the Great Mosque antici-
pates from the outset the culturally hybrid sung poetry the Andalusián invented about the time of the proclamation of the caliphate, nearly two hundred years later, a mixture of old and new, classical and vernacular, called “ring songs.” The mosque’s look was crafted in great part out of the landscape of this new place; the columns and capitals were all recycled, borrowed from the ruins of the traditions that were being replaced, whether Gothic churches or Roman buildings. The singular new look is also a distinct and loud echo of the earlier forms of this land and its characteristic styles: the horseshoe arch that has come to seem to us prototypically Islamic was representative of the indigenous church-building tradition of pre-Muslim Spain, and the doubled-up arches, with their distinctive and almost hallucinatory red-and-white pattern, are visible in Roman aqueducts, one prominent in Merida, no great distance from Cordoba. Like the Christians to the north, the Muslims in Hispania used old Roman columns and capitals and made new ones resemble the old. They continued the Roman construction methods that involved alternating brick and stone, a method whose most memorable example turns out to be this magnificent mosque.

Stylistic openness, the capacity to look around, assimilate, and reshape promiscuously, was chief among the cardinal virtues of Islamic style, and had come west as a key part of the Umayyad aesthetic. In casting about in this alien landscape to find the building blocks for his monuments, and in taking from them freely, whether they were part of the language of the Christians or the Romans, the homesick Umayyad prince knew he was following in the tradition of his Syrian forefathers. The Great Mosque of Cordoba, with its unmistakable gestures of respect and longing for the most important Umayyad sites of the old world, became as lovely an example as one might want of living dialogue with the past, a way of bringing the past to life, or of rewriting it so that it is intelligible in the present.

In old age, aware that he would die far from his native land, Abd al-Rahman wrote a lovely, heartbreaking little poem, an ode to a palm tree. He had been a daredevil young man and a vigorous and powerful sovereign, a man who had survived the vicious rout of his family and spent three decades turning a once wild outpost, rife with internecine violence, into a prosperous and civilized world capital. He had triumphed as a warrior and a pioneer, and in his final years his greatness as a builder was every day more visible, as a mosque to rival all others, past and present, grew in Cordoba, row after row of red and white. But at the end of the day, Abd al-Rahman shared with his Arab ancestors an unembarrassed and manly love of poetry. Although he was not himself a brilliant writer, Abd al-Rahman’s legacy is as crucial as the Great Mosque itself, his poetic tradition a palace that houses the memories of the oldest ancestors.

Islam had emerged from the desert with its foundational vision and the will to establish a wholly new society. But it was also armed with a body of sophisticated Arabic poetry that would continue to be recited and lovingly cultivated despite its palpable pagan, pre-Islamic, provenance and qualities. Perhaps nothing is more central to understanding the inherent complexity of medieval culture than the basic relationship between Arabic, as a language with a powerful pre-Islamic poetic tradition, and the Islamic order that springs from the same place—and whose scripture is written in the same language. This is the moment in which the distinctive taste for a complex notion of identity that
allows (or, more likely, encourages) contradictions is born. Since this story colors everything around it in the same light, it is worth pausing to tell.

Much of the history of pre-Islamic poetry (the era is referred to in Arabic by the half-poetic, half-theological characterization al-Jahiliyya, “the Age of Ignorance”) is lost in the desert sands. Shards do survive, however, of a particularly refined oral poetic tradition. “Traces of an abandoned campsite mark the beginning of the pre-Islamic Arabian ode. They announce the loss of the beloved, the spring rains, and the flowering meadows of an idealized past. Yet they also recall what is lost—both inciting its remembrance and calling it back.” So begins the presentation of some of the surviving examples of this body of poetry by their foremost translator in our times, Michael Sells. The poems themselves are usually referred to as odes—or, more revealingly, as the “suspended” or “hanging” odes, a curious expression deriving from a most telling anecdote about them.

The story told is that the many Arabian tribes would hold an annual poetry competition when they congregated in Mecca. The winning poems would be embroidered in gold on banners and then hung on display at the ancient shrine called “the House of God,” which holds the impenetrable black rock at the heart of the city. The Ka’ba, as it is called, would eventually become the symbolic heart of the new religion as well: Muslims pray in that direction, and a central part of the pilgrimage to Mecca is the circumambulation of the Ka’ba. When Muhammad came in from the desert and stood in that town, pronouncing the Revelation he had received from God, he was a Prophet whom God had instructed to “recite.” The Quran is the near-contemporary recording of Muhammad’s recitations (al-Quran means “the recitation”), one of Islam’s singular features is its relationship to its own founding language, Arabic, which is understood to be the language of God himself, and thus of His revelations to His prophet.

Muhammad’s arrival at the heart of pagan Mecca to preach, to recite verses, many of them powerfully poetic and even hermetic, was also clearly part of the public poetic tradition that had hung banners with poems embroidered on them in the village square. Even as the Prophet’s message veered away from the pagan universe of those poems and into the spiritual domain, it never had the effect of repudiating the virtues of poetry itself, not even the poetry of the pagan world of “the Ignorance.” The unusual reverence that speakers of Arabic have for their own language can be explained, and usually is, by noting that it is for Muslims, as Hebrew is for the Jews, a sacred language, God’s own utterance. But there is nothing intrinsic about the original reverence for the language of Muhammad’s Revelation, which was explicitly meant to be spread universally and to be readily intelligible by all men—a revelation not at all meant to belong to a circumscribed ethnic community.

Love of the language itself was certainly part of the pre-Islamic Bedouin culture that first received and shaped the new religion. These desert warriors were also poets, and great lovers of poetry of extraordinary delicacy and sentimentality. As the story of “the hanging odes” illustrates, nothing was prized more highly than the language of poetry; nothing was worthier of being turned into gold and then placed at the center of Mecca. Muhammad’s uncompromising monothelism stripped that pagan place of its idols but, perhaps incongruously, left what might have been the most powerful idol of all, poetry itself. Poetry not only survived the coming of Islam but flourished. Indeed, the pre-Islamic odes were collected by Islam’s first generation of scholars and canonized as the only interpretative key capable of unlocking the linguistic treasures of the Quran, Islam’s single inimitable book. So it is not all that surprising, a century and a half after Islam’s foundation, to find Abd al-Rahman, warrior on one hand, religious head of the community on the other, writing an ode to a palm tree.
Arabic became the language of Islam, permitting no other in which to be a Muslim, which meant, historically, that Arabic spread as rapidly and as far as the Islamic empire. It became the language of religion, and quite often a second or third language for those converts from the dozens of far-flung cultures, many of them ancient and already literate themselves, from the Pyrenees to the Chinese border. The language of religion never completely quashed the older secular Arabic of the poets, the language that had never tired of reciting profoundly secular poems of love and longing, and of heroes and battles. For a long time there reigned the broad and profound appreciation that Arabic should also be at the head of an empire of profane letters. As the Islamic empire expanded, many came into the Arabic-speaking fold not as Muslims but as citizens of an Islamic polity. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians all developed profound attachments to the many benefits and seductions of Arabic as a secular language.

Among the memory palaces built by the exiled Umayyad prince in al-Andalus, none was more personal and poignant than a place called Rusafa. In Syria, south of the Euphrates, far out on the Syrian steppe, there had been an ancient and mysterious walled city. The Umayyads had turned it into their family retreat, and it was especially beloved by Abd al-Rahman’s grandfather, the caliph Hisham, last of the Syrian Umayyads. It was there that the family was found and murdered by the Abbasids; and just outside Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman built his new Rusafa, a retreat for himself and his new family, and a botanical garden as well, a place where he could collect and cultivate the living things that had been so central to beauty and delight in Syria. With the highly advanced irrigation techniques that had been brought from Syria, all sorts of things would grow here now. Among the plants Abd al-Rahman most loved, and which he made part of the landscape he and his children and his children’s children would look out on, were the palms of his native land.

As the years went by, Abd al-Rahman spent more and more time at his garden retreat filled with palm trees. He eventually stopped living in Cordoba proper, and his descendants followed suit, even as the capital became more luminous. The new Rusafa had become the beloved family home of the Andalusian Umayyads. Abd al-Rahman died there in 788, among his beloved palm trees.
Mother Tongues

Cordoba, 855

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 every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.

This is the voice of Paul Alvarus, outspoken and widely respected Christian luminary of Cordoba, in the mid-ninth century. It was almost exactly a hundred years since Abd al-Rahman had arrived in that old Visigothic city, now so transformed visually and socially. Cordoba was all bustle, a prosperous boomtown, new construction of every sort every-where, its peoples, cultures, and languages reshuffling themselves along with the changing landscape. Perhaps the best contemporary witness to these changes is the decidedly partisan Alvarus, whose famous polemical book, The Unmistakable Sign, quoted above, gives us a snapshot of the culture wars of his time. Though he himself was a layman, Alvarus shared his horror at the spectacle of a world transformed with a small but highly visible group of conservative Christians.

The transfigurations that Alvarus’s generation observed with increasing pessimism were not a simple matter. First, there was the staggering expansion of the Muslim community. Some of this increase came from new immigrants; a great deal of it came from among the numbers of the once dominant Christians, who were converting by the hundreds. Every day, the tide of converts moved from the Church toward this new religion of those who were fully and powerfully in control. Among the losses of the Christian community were the children of the countless mixed marriages. Even when the Christian brides remained Christian, or at least did not appear to have converted, and even when they brought up their children speaking their maternal tongue—the old local language of the Christians that was no longer Latin but still had no name of its own—the children were almost invariably, inevitably in the eyes of Islamic law, raised as Muslims. The example, if one was needed, was set by the caliph himself. From the time they had arrived in old Hispania, the Umayyads had mixed their bloodline with women from the old Christian families of Iberia, or from beyond the frontiers to the north. The most powerful and respected of the Muslims, the Umayyad princes descended from the caliphs of Arabia and Syria, were also visibly their mothers’ sons, the often fair-haired heirs of their indigenous Iberian forebears.

There were also now many more mosques than churches, and the cathedral mosque, overflowing beyond capacity on Fridays, was being expanded once again. But Alvarus, whose
ally the in the resistance to the new religion were mostly the representatives of the embattled Church, knew that religion was only half the problem. The other half, directly laid out in those lines from The Unmistakable Sign, was that vast realm of culture intimately tied to faith and yet separate from it. The Muslims had brought to Hispania something that the half-crumpled Visigothic province could scarcely remember it had once had: a language that spoke with power and elegance about all the powerful human needs that lie outside a faith. Alvarus’s own words make the case unflinchingly: the Latin the young people were abandoning in droves was the tradition of commentaries on the Scriptures. But the Arabic they were embracing was not only that of prayer, but no less the one that had allowed Abd al-Rahman to write an ode to a palm tree to express his profound loneliness in exile, and which had since then been the language of a hundred years of love poetry—songs sung in Baghdad as well as in Cordoba.

“They have forgotten their own language,” Alvarus plaintively remarks, because the Christians of Cordoba, like the Jews of Cordoba, had found in Arabic—not in Islam—something that clearly satisfied needs that the language of their own religion, Latin, had failed to meet. Arabic beckoned with its vigorous love of all the things men need to say and write and read that not only lie outside faith but may even contradict it—from philosophy to erotic love poetry and a hundred other things in between. The prosperous and influential Jewish community’s romance with Arabic did not provoke Alvarus-like reactions, since Jewish communities had already been in exile for a near eternity and had long spoken the language of others while keeping their own faith intact. Furthermore, a century of Umayyad rule had spectacularly improved the Jews’ everyday lives and social status: a community not long before reduced to squalor and slavery was upwardly mobile now, hallaway toward the day when a Jew would be the grand vizier of an Umayyad caliph.

The Christians were a different matter. They had not only their disconsolate Alvarus but a core group of radical rejectionists who detested the combination of religious and cultural conversions they perceived to be disastrous for their community and its future. The irony, however, is that most of the Christian community of Cordoba must have felt quite as the Jews did, that their adoption of Arabic was not at all a betrayal of their faith, and eventually the Christian liturgy, the Gospels, the Prophets, the Apostles, all the texts that Alvarus could imagine only in Latin, existed also in Arabic. Already assimilation—Arabization—was taking place, and at the highest levels. Alvarus’s own book is full of attacks against the “traitors” within the clergy, and even the Church hierarchy, who worked with Muslim authorities and believed in accommodation and coexistence, men whose use of Arabic was a graver matter than the dalliance with mere poetry. Someone like Alvarus probably could not have conceived that one day the liturgical rites of the Arabized Christians of Cordoba would be the most resistant to any kind of reform in Western Christendom.

Even more appalling and painful for Alvarus and his cohorts would have been the foreknowledge of the name forever after used to describe Christians of the Umayyad polity: the term “Mozarab” originally meant “wanna-be Arab,” and it was most likely the disparagement that Alvarus himself would have used to insult those young men so in love with Arabic elegance and poetry. It was surely a derogatory epithet first used by those Christians who believed that the language of the Muslims could and should never be countenanced by a Christian, and who believed that dramatic and violent public resistance was the only acceptable response to the Muslim dominance over their lives. But the name stuck and Mozarab was eventually used to indicate all Christians living in the Islamic polity, and those Arabized Christians, along with their name, became the very symbols of the endurance of Christianity alongside Islam. That militant
vision of a purely Latin Christianity was, even at the time of Alvarus, the dream of a minority: “For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, here are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance.”

In 853, a small number of the most radical opponents of the conversion of their Christian and Latin world openly sought martyrdom. One by one, they indulged in conspicuous public declarations of the deccits of Islam and the perfidies of the Prophet; and although Islam was elastic in matters of doctrine, particularly when it had to do with Christians, they had zero tolerance for disparagement of their Prophet.* The would-be martyrs thus knew for a certainty that they were forcing the hands of the authorities of the city by expressly choosing to vilify Muhammad. Leaders on both sides made every attempt to head off such radical behavior and its fatal consequences—in vain. The virulent public attacks continued and the offending Christians were beheaded in public. After about fifty of these gory executions, a spectacle that horrified and enthralled Cordobans of all religions, it was over. The passions of the moment passed and life went on as it had before in this city of thriving religious coexistence. The widespread civil unrest feared by both the Muslim and Christian hierarchies as the violent events were unfolding did not come to pass.

But the young men and women who had provided this spectacle of self-immolation would not be forgotten: they were eventually transformed from a thorn in the side of a Church struggling to adapt and find its way in a complex, changing world, into the “Mozarab martyrs.” These fifty-odd Christians, incongruously and ironically remembered by the name that described their opposite, eventually became the near-sainted symbols of a cause that served the purposes of Christian chroniclers and analysts of later periods as an easy enough touchstone: brave Christians resisting the forced conversion “by the sword” that conventional history tells us was the way Islam spread, and suffering death for their heroism.

This was not quite as fabulous a transformation as that which turned the slaughter of Charlemagne’s rear guard by Basques into a Christian-Muslim holy war. But it was misleading nonetheless, since the evidence suggests that these voluntary and mostly adolescent martyrs were viewed as wild-eyed, out-of-control radicals by other Cordobans, both Christians and Muslims. By the middle of the ninth century, the Church had come to rather successful terms with the Islamic polity within which it lived. It is very possible, indeed, that many of those churchmen were still reading Isidore of Seville, whose In Praise of Spain had strained to put the best face on a Visigothic presence that was, for all its Christianity, still unincorporated on the peninsula. But the Mozarabic martyrs enjoyed very good press down the road: they had been followers of Alvarus, who wrote a whole book full of laments about the loss of Christian autonomy in an uncompromising style and from a purist perspective. They were also followers of a later sainted monk named Eulogius, himself the author of The Saints Commenrated, a book about the destruction of churches by the Muslims. Most important of all for the cult of these Cordobans, Eulogius eventually wrote another book that spun out their story in great (and obviously partisan) detail. His Apologia for the Martyrs became something of a best-seller, with its vivid descriptions of each martyr’s death, which he
explicitly compares to the heroic deaths of the early Christians. But were they at all like the early Christians, testifying their faith openly and thus putting their lives on the line? And was the Umayyad polity, this all-but-declared caliphate, really destroying their churches, coercing conversions, making Christianity untenable?

From its beginning, Islam explicitly recognized its special relationship with Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad had been asked to perform miracles like earlier prophets, but he refused. For him, and for the believers, the Quran, the book of God’s revelations, was the ultimate and undeniable miracle. He understood that it was the existence of this book that made Muslims the scriptural equals of Jews and Christians, who had their own sacred books. In the Quran’s understanding, and so a fundamental part of Islamic belief, Moses and Jesus both been given books, which became the foundations of their communities. Thus it was that the expression “Peoples of the Book” came to be used of Jews and Christians, a phrase that is itself an explicit recognition of the genuineness of those earlier revelations. Indeed, while pagans were treated mercilessly by the Muslims and were required to convert to the new faith, Jews and Christians were dealt with under the special terms of a *dhimma*, a “pact” or “covenant” between the ruling Muslims and the other book communities living in their territories and under their sovereignty.

The *dhimmis*, as these covenanted peoples were called, were granted religious freedom, not forced to convert to Islam. They could continue to be Jews and Christians, and, as it turned out, they could share in much of Muslim social and economic life. In return for this freedom of religious conscience the Peoples of the Book (pagans had no such privilege) were required to pay a special tax—not Muslims paid taxes—and to observe a number of restrictive regulations. Christians and Jews were prohibited from attempting to proselytize Muslims, from building new places of worship, from displaying crosses or ringing bells. In sum, they were forbidden most public displays of their religious rituals.

Not surprisingly, in any given historical case these relatively abstract and general provisions of the dhimma could and did materialize as either a genuinely tolerant and even liberating arrangement or, at the other extreme, a culturally repressive policy within which religious freedom is a hollow formality. The Umayyads, whose ethics and aesthetics were the very well-springs of Andalusian culture, had more often than not been extraordinarily liberal in their vision of the dhimma, and their social policies were largely commensurate with their aesthetic vision, whose generous and absorbing attitudes about the past and about other cultures created the Great Mosque of Damascus—and that of Cordoba. Beyond the specific policy issues vis-à-vis the Peoples of the Book, the Muslims had transformed the cultural landscape in ways that were both inclusive and, by almost any measure, vast improvements over the half-ruined place they had found. Unlike the much resented Visigoths who preceded them, the Muslims did not remain a ruling people apart. Rather, their cultural openness and ethnic egalitarianism were vital parts of a general social and political ethos within which the dhimmi could and did thrive. As time passed, the perceived need to keep visible and distinct the Umayyad articulation of Islam, with its cultural eclecticism, became more pronounced, as the Abbasids and eventually other rivals for leadership in the House of Islam established their own competing political and cultural visions.

The positive consequences of newfound religious freedom and cultural openness on the Jewish community contrast with their effects on the Christians. As the Jews’ civic and political status improved dramatically within the Islamic polity, that of the Christians declined. From ruling majority the Christians had
initially been demoted to being a majority governed by a minority of Muslims; from there, soon enough (and clearly by the time of Alvarus), their status had declined further, to the point where they were an ever-diminishing minority. Whereas Jewish ritual had long been, of necessity, a private and even domestic exercise, Christianity had long before expanded out of catacombs and house churches and into the public domain — and expected as a matter of course to exercise far more than mere freedom of conscience. Little wonder, given these differences, that the restriction on public displays of religion, while of small consequence to the Jews, had a seemingy catastrophic impact on the Christians.

Most difficult of all to Christian partisans was the less analyzable matter of conversions, which certainly took place within the Jewish community but were fewer than those of Christians and did not adversely affect the community’s general size and well-being. By Alvarus’s time, a century after the establishment of the Umayyad polity, it would have seemed that Christians were abandoning the Church right and left. The majority Muslim community was growing, mainly thanks to the high rate of conversion. Most who remained Christian were content, eager even, to be Arabized — and thus Alvarus’s lamentation. Not only was his flock thinning rapidly, but the few loyal sheep that remained were so enamored of the wolf that they all wanted to dress in his clothing.

Alvarus could not quite bring himself to say aloud what he knew to be true: how thin the line might be between the seduction of a vital secular culture, of a language alive and powerful enough to speak to God and to a man’s beloved, and the religion to which such a language and culture were so intimately tied. “They study the Arab theologians and philosophers,” Alvarus wrote, “not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic.” But he knew full well that “correct and elegant Arabic” was often a far greater temptation than the truth of any theologian. In Hispania, Arabic itself had been the first bewitchment and corruption, and many conversions of faith were inextricably tied to the cultural conversions that had preceded them. But just why had Arabic cast such an extraordinary spell? Why did even the faithful Christians love the language of their religious adversary so much that they were willing to re-create their ancient liturgy in it? What charms, in sum, did Arabic have that Latin did not?

Part of the answer we have heard already, from Alvarus himself: “They gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention.” Christian texts were pretty much all the Latin literature that anyone had read or studied or passed on to young men as their cultural heritage for a very long time. But Arabic brought with it treasures that had little to do with religion. Though intimately tied to Islam, it was also the passageway and access to an already extraordinary canon of works that, from the poetical to the philosophical, could nourish the intellectual and aesthetic hunger that in Hispania had not been fed, or fed well, for centuries. In 850 or so, when Alvarus was observing the cultural desolation from his perspective, the “immense libraries” that were the flames to the young Christian moths were just beginning to be built. By the time the Umayyads got around to officially declaring the caliphate, less than a hundred years later, both the size and quality of Cordoba’s libraries had expanded many times over. The clever young men of that generation, Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike, all knew Arabic, and the prominent Christians knew it well enough by then that the Mozarab bishop of Elvira of that generation was part of the highest levels of the diplomatic corps and served as the caliph’s envoy to the German court. They could all thus read the demigods of the ancient world — Plato and Aristotle among others — authors about whom someone like Isidore of Seville could only have dreamed, and for whom, it is a fairly sure bet, that sainted churchman would eagerly have learned Arabic himself.
But it was not just about Arabic. Latin, at this same time, was losing its hold everywhere. The language of Rome was itself disintegrating hundreds of years after the dismembering of its empire. No one in Cordoba at the time of Alvarus could possibly have known, but in 842, in the far-off city of Strasbourg, Latin suffered a blow at least as devastating as it was suffering at the hands of Cordobans who were abandoning it for Arabic. In that Frankish city, an official document was executed that recorded the mother tongues of Charlemagne's various grandsons. The Oaths of Strasbourg, as we know this small but significant record, was the written version of a public oath of reconciliation and allegiance among the feuding brothers who had inherited Charlemagne's domain. This was a kingdom that did not include any part of al-Andalus, as Charlemagne had once dreamt it might, but it was extensive nonetheless. The circumstances of the oaths are described in serviceable, boilerplate Latin. Then the document proceeds to transcribe faithfully what each said and swore out loud—this not in Latin but rather in the mother tongues of two of the three rival brothers, one Germanic, the other Romance.

Lovingly, we call the languages we grow up speaking “mother tongues,” since we learn them not from books or schools but from the society of women who raise us. Sometimes these languages are the same as the ones used in the larger institutional world of our fathers, and sometimes not. The dramatic changes in the linguistic terrain of mid-nineteenth-century Cordoba—which languages were spoken by whom, and what conversions, cultural and religious, they led to—are not at all isolated. They reveal the seismic cracks that existed all over the European landscape, the ruptures that appeared when it started to become clear that Latin had become a stranger in the house, no longer the language of the songs women sang to their children at night. In every corner of what had once been an empire unified linguistically by Latin, new local differences, old and new, gained strength. As long as those ever-increasing and ever more striking differences were only in the ways people spoke, while what they read and wrote was still the old and unchanging Latin, no one called it by any other name. Yet the everyday “Latin” spoken in Paris was more than halfway to being as different from the “Latin” of Florence as French is from Italian today. And these still-unnamed mother tongues that were already “Romance,” the languages of the Romans' children, were every day more different, not only from each other, but from unchanging Latin, which had become more a memory than a living thing.

Alvarus himself wrote and spoke in Latin in formal and public settings. As the liturgical language of Christianity, Latin was, of course, neither unique nor even first—Jesus spoke Aramaic, and the New Testament is written in Greek—but in Cordoba in 850, Latin was synonymous with the older religion and its ways. And Latin here, as elsewhere in the former western provinces of the Roman empire, had become largely ossified. That once vigorous instrument that had served Rome's great poets, historians, and orators was now almost completely frozen in place. Those mother tongues, on the other hand, what people had been speaking for hundreds of years, had been changing inexorably, though still with little consciousness (and little need of such consciousness) of its being substantially different from what was written by everyone from the great Roman writers to the papal secretaries of the seventh century.

Even after Arabic arrived, the Cordobans—all the Cordobans, the Christians, the Muslims who were the children of Christian women, and many of the Jews—never discarded the ancestral mother tongue of their city and their community. The vernacular that was the child of Latin in that part of the world, first cousin to those spoken in Paris and Florence, was thus
reared alongside Arabic from the eighth century onward. We now sometimes call it by the technical name of Andalusi Romance, which reveals its kinship with the other Romance languages as well as its ancestral home, al-Andalus. But its older and more familiar name is, ironically, Mozarabic, because it was, indeed, the other language of those Arabized Christians who lived under Islam. While Latin was disappearing even among the Christians, its Mozarabic daughter and heir thrived as the language of the nurseries, passed on generation after generation by many Cordoban mothers, Muslim as well as Christian. Mozarabic, the Romance of the Christians of al-Andalus, lived inside the House of Islam, rubbed shoulders with Arabic, exchanged words with it constantly. Arabic itself was what Latin had been long before, the language of literature that was not very far from the language of the streets, despite its ties to the immutable Quran and to all the layers of commentary accumulated around that book over several hundred years. The songs sung by mothers in Arabic, itself a language heard in nurseries and children's playgrounds, were not so far removed from the songs that were the poems of the courts, nor so foreign-sounding to the young men who were learning to write letters and read commentaries—and write love songs.

A Grand Vizier, a Grand City

Cordoba, 949

Let it be known to you, my lord, that our land is called Sefarad in the Holy Tongue, while the Ishmaelite citizens call it al-Andalus, and the kingdom is called Cordoba.

One of the most prominent mid-tenth-century Cordobans made this proud proclamation in a letter he was writing to a perhaps mythical king of a far-off land. By way of introduction, he had identified himself as “Hasdai, the son of Isaac, the son of Ezra, from the sons of the Jerusalem exile who now live in Sefarad.” But Hasdai was much more than this modest identification of family and tribe revealed: he was the nasi, the “prince,” of his own religious community. At the same time, he was a vizier, the right-hand man to the ruler of “the Ishmaelite citizens,” the caliph Abd al-Rahman III. This Abd al-Rahman, who ruled successfully between 912 and 961, was the descendant of his namesake founder of that homeland called, as Hasdai indicated, Sefarad in Hebrew and al-Andalus in Arabic. The extraordinary prosperity of spirit, intellect, and power these men shared with each other glows from every page of Hasdai’s
The caliph had elevated Hasdai to higher and higher offices throughout his lifetime largely because Hasdai spoke and wrote with elegance and subtlety, and because the vizier possessed a profound knowledge of everything in Islamic and Andalusian culture and politics that a caliph needed in his public transactions. So it was that the prince of the Andalusian Jews had become the prestigious and powerful foreign secretary to the caliph. And this was no small-time, would-be caliph: during the lifetimes of Abd al-Rahman III and Hasdai, the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba made its sweeping and plausible claim to absolute primacy within the House of Islam. Although for us it may seem astonishing that one of the most public faces of this Islamic polity, at its peak of power and achievement, should be a devout Jewish scholar, famously devoted to finding and aiding other Jewish communities in their scattered, worldwide exile, such suppleness was a natural part of the landscape of this time and place.

Since 756, the Umayyads, in their new home in al-Andalus, had acknowledged the caliphate of Baghdad in the Friday prayers in their mosques. And while technically and formally it was nothing more than a "province"—the emirate of al-Andalus, its rulers no more than emirs, or "governors," subservient to the caliph in Baghdad—for 173 years Cordoba had in fact been a functionally independent and distinctly Umayyad polity. Abd al-Rahman's public proclamation of 929 was first and foremost an oral declaration of what everyone had always known: that the Umayyads of Cordoba did not serve at the pleasure of the Abbasids of Baghdad, that they were not mere governors, and that the House of Islam had not been under a truly single rule since the moment Abd al-Rahman I had claimed his birthright in exile.

There were other powerful emirs in Islam—the governor of Egypt, for one—but the voice that was heard that Friday in Cordoba spoke not from power or arrogance. Abd al-Rahman I had carried his legitimacy in his blood, from Damascus to Cordoba, where it passed from generation to generation, discreetly but well tended. Now Abd al-Rahman III was shouting it from the rooftops. His pronouncement made clear that the head of the House of Islam in al-Andalus had claims far beyond that independent polity's frontiers. All sorts of questions cry out here: Why, just now, this provocative declaration of independence and superiority? Did Abd al-Rahman really believe he was on the brink of wielding the sort of political power and moral authority that would make him truly a caliph to all the world's Muslims—a leader on the far western margins of an empire that extended as far as the frontier of Sinkiang and the source of the Indus? What would a Cordoban have thought on that day when the city echoed, from one end to another, with that unexpected Sabbath eve announcement? Could Hasdai himself, an impressively educated young man, proficient in all the languages of his native city—Latin, Mozarabic, Arabic, and Hebrew—a pious Jew and...
budding physician and philosopher, possibly have imagined what it might mean to him?

The Abbasids had created a brilliant civilization in Baghdad. Perhaps they did not wield direct political control over the Andalusians, but that would have mattered precious little to the political and cultural empire that knew itself to be unrivaled in wealth and accomplishments worldwide. While Charlemagne in his halting and stultified Latin was being crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the Abbasid caliphs were already well into the monumental translation project that brought the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition into Arabic. Continuous traffic between Cordoba and Baghdad meant that the Andalusians were soon enough reading the same things and eagerly keeping up with the latest innovations, fashions, and products, and, eventually, capable of sending their own back in return. Despite their sometimes quirky ways—quirky by normative Abbasid standards—the Andalusians were profoundly indebted to and appreciative of the material, intellectual, and artistic emanations from the luminous eastern capital. The long first Umayyad century in al-Andalus was thus predicated on a healthy respect for the murderous, usurping Abbasids, for their political prowess and stability as well as for their cultural leadership.

In more recent years things had begun to fall apart in Baghdad. By 909, the political and military center had lost its hold to the extent that the almost unthinkable had happened. At the turn of the tenth century the Shiites, another legitimist group of Muslims, had successfully taken control in the North African provinces of what had been the Abbasid empire. The Shiites were supporters of Ali’s descendants—Shiite means “of the Party of Ali,” the Prophet’s murdered son-in-law—as the divinely appointed and thus legitimate heir to the leadership of the House of Islam. From Tunis, the Arab Ifriqiyya, or “Africa,” these pre-
entailed was open to contest. The Commander of the Faithful was the arbiter, in some fundamental sense, of the way Islam was to be correctly lived. And the Andalusian Abd al-Rahman surely believed that way to be as the Umayyads lived it.

"It is a fat land full of rivers, springs and stone-cut wells," wrote Hasdai in his letter to the king of the Khazars. Hasdai had heard fabulous accounts of an entirely Jewish kingdom, Khazaria, an alleged fifteen-day journey from Constantinople and to the northeast of the Black Sea. As he introduced himself to a correspondent he could only hope existed, Hasdai described his Andalusian homeland, alluding modestly to his own role there:

It is a land of grains, wines and purest oils, rich in plants, a paradise of every sort of sweet. And with gardens and orchards where every kind of fruit tree blossoms, and those with silkworms in their leaves. . . . Our land also has its own sources of silver and gold and in her mountains we mine copper and iron, tin and lead, kohl and marble and crystal. . . . The king ruling over the land has amassed silver, gold and other treasures, along with an army the likes of which has never been amassed before. . . . When other kings hear of the power and glory of our king they bring gifts to him. . . . I receive those offerings and I, in turn, offer them recompense.

Hasdai ibn Shaprut was born in Cordoba in 915 into a world brightly lit for Jews. In the previous 150 years of Umayyad rule, the Jews of al-Andalus had become visibly prosperous—materially, to be sure, and culturally even more so. To say they were thoroughly Arabized is to acknowledge that they did a great deal more than merely learn to speak the language of the rulers, something they no doubt did in the same several first generations, alongside Berber Muslims, Slavic slaves, and Visigothic converts. Under the dhimma brought by the Muslims, the Jews, who in Visigothic Hispania had been at the lowest end of the social and political spectrum, were automatically elevated to the covenanted status of People of the Book (alongside the Christians, for whom it was, instead, a demotion), which granted them religious freedom and thus the ability to participate freely in all aspects of civic life.

This freedom meant virtually unlimited opportunities in a booming commercial environment. Suddenly, the once economically moribund peninsula was frenetic with activity: trading across the Mediterranean and importing products from the Far East, it had also dramatically altered its own agricultural base, embarked on dozens of large and ambitious building projects, and a great deal more. The Jews' improved status also meant that they were able to join the educated classes, which they did with alacrity and, as the life and career of Hasdai reveal, with manifest success. And, of course, at the heart of the Jewish community's prosperity lay an enthusiastic attitude about Arabization, which meant full cultural assimilation.

The Jews' often loving relationship with Arabic culture contrasted from the outset with the attitude of the hierarchy and leadership of the Christian community, whose resistance to what they regarded as unbearable cultural oppression led to the crisis of the Mozarab martyrs. There were obvious and foundational reasons for the critical differences in attitude: the Christians were adjusting to the loss of ruling status, and then of wholesale conversions that meant, just after the time of Alvarus's famous complaint, they were a shrinking minority in al-Andalus. The Jews' position under Muslim rule, on the other hand, was in every respect an improvement, as they went from persecuted to protected minority. The results of these different attitudes may well have contributed to the paradoxical social and cultural outcomes clearly visible by the turn of the tenth century. There was a surviving Christian community, but it was smaller and more discrete than it had been even at the time of Alvarus, a stubborn
group of Mozarabs who believed they could use Arabic and be devout Christians, and in fact by now their scriptures and rites were all in Arabic. But the once-majority Christian community had been decimated at least in part by that Alvarus-like all-or-nothing attitude that seemed to push people to one extreme or the other: conversion to Islam, on one hand—the majority—or voluntary exile to the handful of Christian enclaves in the far northwest of the peninsula, on the other.

The Andalusian Jews universally embraced a third option: they assimilated into the Islamo-Arabic culture of the Umayyads and remained a devout and practicing religious community, with its religious language intact. Hasdai, growing up as the child of a prosperous (but not culturally unrepresentative) Jewish family, was thoroughly educated in two separate but complementary spheres: that of an observant Jew, learned in Hebrew and its biblical and exegetical traditions, in order that he might be at ease in the company of rabbis, or be a rabbi himself; and that of an intellectual at ease in the most cultivated Islamic society. Hasdai was a scion of a Jewish intellectual class so successfully assimilated within the sparkling Umayyad culture of al-Andalus that they had themselves become prominent contributors to it. These men were visible and significant participants in the flourishing of letters that, by the time Abd al-Rahman III was caliph and Hasdai his vizier, had made Cordoba as serious a contender as Baghdad, perhaps more so, for the title of most civilized place on earth.

The Jews understood themselves to be Andalusians and Cordobans, much as the German Jews of the late-nineteenth century—Marx and Freud most prominent among them—considered themselves Germans, or the American Jews in the second half of the twentieth century, who helped define the intellectual and literary qualities of their time, never thought twice about calling themselves Americans. But unlike many later European and American Jews, the Andalusian Jews had not had to abandon their orthodoxy to be fully a part of the body politic and culture of their place and time. The Jews of al-Andalus were able to openly observe and eventually enrich their Judaic and Hebrew heritage and at the same time fully participate in the general cultural and intellectual scene. They could be the Cardoza and the Trillins and the Salis of their times because they were citizens of a religious polity—or rather, of this particular religious polity. The Umayyads, much like the Abbasids who devoted vast resources and talent to the translation of Greek philosophical and scientific texts, had created a universe of Muslims where piety and observance were not seen as inimical to an intellectual and "secular" life and society.

So it was that the rich and varied cultural and intellectual Arabophone universe that was the House of Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries provided the backdrop for the Umayyad vision. The Andalusian scene, where a man like Hasdai could occupy center stage, was accessible to the Jewish community in far more than just a technical or linguistic way; indeed, it was a vital part of their identity and in no way at odds with their Jewishness. At the same time, the broader culture partook of their presence and contributions, and Jews added to the everyday-expanding Arabic library in areas ranging from science and philosophy to poetry and Arabic philology, this last the queen of the sciences in an Arabic tradition in love with its own language. This thoroughgoing assimilation would have all sorts of long-term effects down the road, when the Umayyad caliphate was gone and much lamented. But those are later stories.

In 949, Hasdai ibn Shaprut was at the head of the delegation representing the caliphate of Cordoba in delicate foreign negotiations. The caliph, who twenty years before had broken with Baghdad, was interested in a strategic alliance with the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Greek-speaking Eastern Christendom and Arabic-speaking Muslim al-Andalus had a
common enemy in the Abbasids of Baghdad, who were a menace to both. The historic and colorful encounter between the representatives of these two powers with seats at either end of the Mediterranean took place in the most lavish of Andalusian settings, the new palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra. "The City of Zahra" was a fairy-tale-like series of palaces and gardens, still in the making, that Abd al-Rahman III had begun building outside Cordoba a dozen years before, ostensibly in honor of one of his beloved concubines, and named for her. Legendary in its own time as a wonder of the world, it would eventually become one of the most powerful and enduring monuments of the caliphate, second only to the Great Mosque as an iconic memory. For these delicate and potentially momentous talks in the innermost enclaves of Cordoban power, no man was better suited than Hasdai, who was thirty-four at the time. He had risen meteorically through the capital’s intellectual and political ranks, beginning as a gifted physician whose invaluable specialty was antidotes to poison, soon enough becoming a central player in the diplomatic corps attending the caliph.

Because prominent Christians also figured in these caliphal foreign policy circles, it is probable that Hasdai worked closely at this time with the Mozarab bishop of Elvira, Racemundo, who in 949 figured prominently in the caliph’s diplomatic representation to the court of Constantinople. Half a dozen years later, in 955, the bishop, known in Arabic as Rabi ibn Zayd, would end up as the caliph’s envoy to the court of Otto I, where he would meet the nun Hroswitha and give her the materials for both her life of the Mozarab martyr Pelagius and her enduring description of Cordoba’s marvels. Among the gifts that Rabi ibn Zayd

*They also had common Christian enemies, a fact that would emerge vividly during the time of the Crusades, when Byzantine cities—Constantinople chief among them—in 1204—were sacked and looted by Crusaders. These four famous bronze horses that grace and even seem to define the look of Piazza San Marco in Venice were taken from the hippodrome of the capital of Eastern Christendom.

brought back from Constantinople was a green onyx fountain adorned with human figures that ended up in the newly built Madinat al-Zahra.

Another of the gifts from the Byzantines presented to the caliph by Constantine VII—whose official title, Autokrator Romaion (Autocrat of the Romans), belied his mixed political heritage—was a fundamental Greek medical work until then known only in a poor Arabic translation, itself based on a mangled Greek original. Here was a real treasure, and an opportunity for Hasdai: the Greek original, in an early version, of an invaluable resource, Dioscorides’ On Medicine, complete and lavishly illustrated. This gift spoke to the intellectual and cultural interests and pursuits shared by the two would-be allies. But it also immediately revealed, ironically, the extent to which the Andalusians had relied on the very Abbasids against whom they were at that moment conspiring. Cordoba had benefited from the vast translation enterprise in Baghdad, where the Greek library had been translated and then passed on to the rest of the Arabophone world—and the Cordobans had been eager, even greedy, recipients, as the impressive Cordoban libraries attested. But Cordoba itself, like the rest of Europe, had no Greek readers, and thus no way to make immediate use of that extremely desirable present.

Again, it was Hasdai who seemed to be able effortlessly to shift gears from the political negotiations to the even weightier task of making this medical encyclopedia available to the distinguished libraries of Cordoba. He set to work at the head of a team of experts put together for the purpose, a group of men that included a monk sent from Constantinople, once it became clear that help was needed to even begin to translate the Greek into Arabic—although it was Hasdai himself who, reportedly, had the last hand in crafting the Arabic version (after it had been through several relays of translators), he being both a physician and an exquisite stylist. The immediate task was accomplished
The Gardens of Memory

Madinat al-Zahra, 1009

South of Cordoba.
but they were real enough, and symbol enough of what those soldiers had been sent to destroy.

The Umayyad caliphs lived here, removed from the citizens of the great capital, which in recent years had fallen prey to terrible chaos. To these hired Berber troops, North African foreigners in al-Andalus, its lavish splendor was an embodiment of an old order that had to be extinguished. The Berber mercenaries sent to attack the stronghold had been hired by one of the many claimants to the caliphate at that moment of ferocious in-fighting in 1009. But the violence that destroyed this iconic monument exceeded what mere paid soldiers would have inflicted. Its destruction was also fueled by deep resentments these foreign Muslim troops harbored against the Umayyads and everything they stood for. By the time they had done their work, the whole city of palaces and pools and wonders was in utter ruins. It was never restored or put back into use, nor has it ever been fully excavated. As a ruin it served for centuries as a romantic and complex touchstone, an image of a once glorious Umayyad past.

Abd al-Rahman III had built Madinat al-Zahra as part and parcel of his declaration of the caliphate, and in some ways it was his loudest statement. This first official Andalusian caliph understood thoroughly that beyond political and military successes, and far beyond Friday-mosque declarations, it was conspicuous cultural achievement and display that made one place, and not another, the center of the universe. During the latter part of his long and steady reign, he devoted his energies and vast wealth (nicely described by Hasdai in his exploratory letter to the Khazars) to the intellectual, material, and aesthetic show of his kingdom's accomplishments. The setting in which Hasdai and his entourage of diplomats received the delegation from Constantinople depended for its power and ability to impress everyone—from the Eastern Christians then to us now—on the Andalusians' cultural bearing.

Construction on Madinat al-Zahra had begun in 936, not long after the official proclamation of 929, and remained the caliph's personal obsession for the rest of his life. Extant accounts of the project depict Abd al-Rahman III's involvement as so all-absorbing that it even led to his public chastisement by a ranking Cordoban jurist when the caliph failed to attend prayers at the Great Mosque for several consecutive Fridays. This perhaps apocryphal story speaks to later concerns about the turning of caliphal attention away from the political capital, which was, in fact, the Achilles' heel of the whole Andalusian enterprise. But only later historians could know that a catastrophic turn in the road lay just ahead, and during these years in the mid-tenth century, awe and pleasure were the effects of this multi-tiered and many-gardened creation. Madinat al-Zahra, like the Andalusian caliphate itself, looked out proudly onto the surrounding world from its stepped levels, proclaiming its command over the then lush valley of Cordoba and beyond. Even more so, it looked inward, in toward every courtyard and cunning garden, to revel in its own self-contained beauty. In 961, the half-century reign of the man who not only proclaimed but thoroughly believed he had made Cordoba into the true heart of the House of Islam came to an end. His son and successor, al-Hakam II, inherited both the title of caliph and the achievements and ambitions that came with it. Al-Hakam took over the last stages of the extensive construction of Madinat al-Zahra, and under his direction it received its final lavish touches. Al-Hakam also carved out for himself a different but equally expansive and iconic building project, which he announced the minute he became caliph: the expansion of the Great Mosque of Cordoba.

Under his father's direction, an unusually tall minaret had been erected. Quite likely the first true minaret to grace the mosque, it no longer stands in full; only its base survives beneath
the bell tower. The language of minarets in the fractured and competitive Islamic world of the tenth century was symbolic of the sectarian and political divisions of the day (much as the very different styles of Christian churches during the Reformation would be in the seventeenth century), and the new and exceptionally tall minaret of the mid-tenth century spoke clearly to the ascendance of the House of Umayya, as nearly everything that Abd al-Rahman III did.

Al-Hakam had designs beyond that lofty minaret, and beyond mere enlargement, for the congregational mosque that had become too small for the needs of Cordoba’s booming population. The mosque was now the center of a distinctive Muslim community, and its transformation was central to its leadership role. Al-Hakam’s legacy, his addition to the landscapes and skylines of Umayyad ascendance, was to make the Great Mosque a different order of great, not simply to enlarge it, as had been done several times before. His vision of how to take the already striking mosque to the next level, a level commensurate with the claims of primacy of the young caliphate, was creatively traditional, very much in the Umayyad style. The moving simplicity of the repetitive rows of the eighth-century mosque was strengthened: the forest of columns with their red-and-white crowns continues on and on, affirming the founding vision, bay after new bay, row after row; innumerable more horseshoe arches sitting on leftover Roman columns and capitals—or, now, on newly built imitation Roman columns and capitals.

The additional grandeur lay, however, beyond this relatively straightforward enlargement, which made the mosque roughly one-third larger than it had been. Using the visual language of the old mosque, the expanded mosque achieved an unprecedented level of luxury. Sumptuous elaborations characterized the spaces reserved for royal prayer. Dizzingly multilobed and interlaced arches—all red-and-white, all horseshoe—were placed to create a breathtaking malkasa (the separate royal enclosure), clearly marked off in front of the mihrab (the traditional prayer niche). The mihrab, repositioned in the heterodox Damascus orientation of Abd al-Rahman I’s eighth-century mosque, itself became a separate room, with its own dome; dome, room, and even the front wall surrounding the entrance to this exquisite space were thickly decorated with sparkling mosaics.

At first glance it might seem that al-Hakam’s turn from the relatively distant concerns of Madinat al-Zahra’s splendors to the more civic project of expanding the Great Mosque was a return to an investment in the Cordoban community per se. But the additions themselves tell a somewhat different story, and in the end it is an unhappy one. The spaces carved out, with unprecedented lavishness, for the caliph’s own prayers were understood correctly, as an expression of distance from the community. This mihrab was a separate room, the room itself set apart by the malkasa, clear indications of the extraordinary standing of those who worshiped beyond the fancier arches. As was the case with the now completed palace city that lay just beyond Cordoba itself, the Cordobans’ pride in the conspicuous displays of extraordinary wealth was tainted by a sense of the inappropriateness of the distances being created between the community and the caliph.

The Syrian Umayyads had in fact been criticized not only for their eclectic adoption of multiple cultural forms but also for their tendency to move toward forms of government more characteristic of “kingship.” The enormous expenditures on the mosque apparently provoked open protest—and the establishment of “higher” space within a mosque strongly suggested a violation of the fundamental precept of equality before God that is enacted in the distinctively open architectural spaces of mosques. For neither the first nor the last time in history, heady success sowed some of the seeds of its own demise, and what had been a court that proudly displayed its community’s wealth and superiority began to be perceived as a self-indulgent and
narcissistic court unwilling or unable to tend directly to the governance of that community.

And for neither the first nor the last time in history, the lack of a viable succession or a vigorous heir had dire consequences. The era of the long reigns of the Andalusian Umayyads was at an end: al-Hakam, who was already forty-five when he inherited the caliphate from his long-reigning father in 961, died fifteen years later, leaving only an eleven-year-old son, the new caliph Hisham II, to succeed him. In a story that is archetypal and literary in nearly all its details, actual power was seized by an evil chamberlain who at first pretended to play the role of regent but whose own tyrannical control grew over the years, until the young man who was the rightful ruler ended as a powerless prisoner within his own palace walls. The caliphate was mortally wounded by this unpredictable turn of events, and by the havoc wreaked during the quarter-century of dictatorship and often bloodthirsty military rampages of that pretend regent, Ibn Abi Amir, infamously known as al-Mansur, “the Victorious.”

There would be other nominal caliphs, and other pretenders to the succession of the Umayyad line, as well as al-Mansur’s own successors, who bore his dynastic name (the Amirids) and made the regency hereditary. The caliphate itself would not be officially pronounced dead and beyond resuscitation until 1031, nearly twenty years after al-Mansur had died while pursuing one of his many military campaigns, and twenty-two years after the symbolically powerful sacking of Madinat al-Zahra by the Berber troops al-Mansur had brought into al-Andalus. But from the start of al-Mansur’s usurping reign, which straddled the turn of the century, from 976 until 1002, the independent and unified Umayyad polity called al-Andalus, begun by Abd al-Rahman in 756, was in effect finished.

Those last years, however, especially those of al-Mansur’s colorful life and politically momentous reign, overflowed with fateful and future-shaping events. The armies of mercenaries al-Mansur brought into al-Andalus from North Africa became, as the years went by, more and more like foreign policem with little understanding and less love for the Andalusians. Themselves strangers in a strange land, these Berbers were increasingly resented by the Cordobans. But for al-Mansur they were a necessary part of his relentless and exhausting military campaigns against the Christian territories to the north, campaigns that under his leadership acquired a fanatical and ideological pitch scarcely seen before. Al-Mansur even acceded to the request of some that al-Hakam II’s library be purged, and he was said to carry with him while on campaign a Quran he had copied with his own hand.

In 997, al-Mansur led an unprecedentedly destructive raid into Santiago de Compostela, the site of a local cult to the apostle James, whose bones had purportedly been found there in the ninth century. The vicious burning of the city, and the carting away of all the church bells back to Cordoba to be used as mosque lamps, helped catapult Santiago from local to near mythical importance in the subsequent century. The city became the very symbol of Christianity on the peninsula and a legendary pilgrimage site of international proportions, both of which remain largely true today. James himself was eventually transformed from mere apostle of Jesus to the patron saint of what would eventually be called the “Reconquest,” and his name enhanced by the epithet Matamoros, or “the Moor-slayer.” The bells for which so high a price was thus paid—and this gratuitous taking of purely religious trophies was rightly perceived as a very different matter from territorial expansion or defense—were carried back to a Great Mosque that al-Mansur had himself expanded just a few years after al-Hakam’s expansion. These latest and proportionally overwhelming enlargements were done at least in part to accommodate the considerable new population of
Berbers that al-Mansur had been importing to Cordoba. But they were carried out no less, of course, so that this first non-caliph to rule might leave his own mark, a mark that disrupts the carefully crafted symmetries and continuations of the Umayyad caliphs whose political continuity he was also severely (and permanently) disrupting. And of the lost palaces of the time, perhaps none played a more dramatic role than the palatine "City of Flowers," built by al-Mansur to rival Madinat al-Zahra itself. Built on the opposite side of the city, away from the Umayyad palaces, al-Mansur's own Madinat al-Zahra (in English transliteration a nearly identical name, and even in Arabic an echo despite the difference) has never been found.

Al-Mansur was a vigorous old man still out campaigning when he died. His career and life ended in 1002, in a small city named Medina del Cid, which lies about halfway between the far larger and more distinguished cities of Toledo and Saragossa. Medina del Cid, too, is part of the literary quality of al-Mansur's life: it eventually became famous and is remembered today as the hometown of the half-legendary warrior called the Cid, born perhaps some forty years after al-Mansur's death. Unlike the last of the legitimate caliphs, al-Mansur did not die without ambitious and well-prepared heirs. Two of his sons believed they could and should succeed their father in the anomalous role he had carved out for himself—nominally, the caliph's chamberlain but functionally the heavy-handed ruler of the land. Al-Mansur had, in fact, married two different Christian princesses, both of them daughters of Christian monarchs who turned their daughters over to him as part of their treaties. One, Teresa, was from the kingdom of Leon; the other, whose name as a convert to Islam was Abda, was the daughter of Sancho, the prince of Navarre, whose seat was in Pamplona, and she bore al-Mansur the child who would be his final successor, a son named Sanchuelo, "Little Sancho," in honor of his maternal grandfather.

Sanchuelo triggered the final chaos that sent the Berber armies down the road to Madinat al-Zahra in 1009. His older brother had been al-Mansur's first successor, and for a half-dozen years he had shown every sign of being a true heir, always at the head of a powerful and victorious army, until he died suddenly, apparently of natural causes, in 1008. Sanchuelo, whose given Arabic name was (of all things) Abd al-Rahman, succeeded his brother but then committed the fatal, if inevitable, error of trying to make symbolism match a certain reality: he forced the figurehead caliph, blood heir of the Umayyad line that went straight back to Damascus, to designate him—a usurper's son—the true heir to the Umayyad caliphate. It was an extraordinary provocation and very much the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. The Cordobans, it turned out, were still deeply tied to their Umayyad heritage and the many honors, and at that moment of crisis they would prove far more willing to defend the honor of the Umayyad line than would the morally and politically impoverished heir who had signed away all appearance of patrimony.

Without honorable leadership to fill the many vacuums created in more than a quarter-century of illegitimacies, and in a city and countryside also rife with acute and long-simmering civil antagonisms created by the influxes of Berbers hostile to the old Umayyad order, there was no real chance for the restoration of Umayyad legitimacy that so many yearned for. Instead, in 1009, long pent-up chaos was loosed on that world. While one army went off to hunt down and slaughter Sanchuelo, who in the tradition of father and brother had ridden off to the north to wage war, others went off to find the cowardly caliph-in-name only Hisham II, who had already relinquished his birthright. He was hiding in the palaces of Madinat al-Zahra in what must have been a state of abject terror. Unable to find him, the moblike troops turned on the palace structures instead, as stand-ins for the Umayyads they wanted to obliterate. Hisham abdicated to the first of a series of rival cousins and other pretenders, and he
disappears from history, although his death was not announced until a few years later, during the chaos that had continued unabated since 1009.

The Umayyad dynasty and polity ends, for all intents and purposes, the night the troops tore the beauties of Madinat al-Zahra limb from limb. For the next several decades there were claimants and counterclaimants, always someone imagining he would be the next caliph, for as long as that shadow of the old caliphate was a technical reality. Perhaps there even endured vain hopes, in the hearts of the most sentimental and optimistic, that the old order might be restored, that another prince would ride out of the desert to snatch an implausible victory. It was not to be. This was truly, now, the end of the Islamic dynasty that had first left the Arabian desert for the wider world. The Umayyads had escaped destruction in Damascus once, quite implausibly and against all odds, and they had created an enviable second life in this place, their homeland for nine generations. But now the old Andalusian order, with its political unity and cultural grandeur, exploded like a star, and it suffered years of terrible civil wars, sometimes called the Berber Wars and sometimes, more simply and movingly, the fitna, the “time of troubles.” Cordoba itself was sacked by the Berbers in 1013 and left shattered. Of Madinat al-Zahra, only the haunting ruins survived, a forever powerful evocation of the transience of glory, and an icon of the life and death of that unique moment in the history of Islam, when its caliphate was in the Far West.

Victorious in Exile

The Battlefield at Argona,
Between Cordoba and Granada, 1041

The commanding officer of the army, who was also the grand vizier to Badis, king of Granada, thanked God for yet another victory. After only four years at the head of the army of his taifa, his city-state, he was already a prodigious success. Just two years before, in 1039, God had blessed him with a marvelous victory over Seville, the most enduring of Granada’s rivals, even though the enemy army had surprised the Granadans on the battlefield with a force far larger than expected. A year before that, at Alfuent, when he was the freshly appointed vizier, the new leader of the military forces had fought his first battle against the king of Almeria—Almeria, that conceited taifa down on the coast, with its lavish old fortresses-by-the-sea built a century before by Abd al-Rahman III himself. And Almeria was still a wealthy port trying to lord it over the newly settled Granadans, but God had smiled on him that day: the king
Visigothic predecessors had worshiped, and from which they had surveyed their old dominions, the whole of the peninsula, before losing them to the Umayyads in the eighth century.

The first thing pious worshipers saw when they entered their new church was a vivid visual memory of the Umayyads. The wall that dominates the entry is a series of horseshoe arches with alternating red-and-white voussoirs, unmistakable echoes of those of the Great Mosque; these arches are themselves framed by Latin inscriptions all around, while inside the curvaceous horseshoes are painted Byzantine-looking figures, presumably saints. Finally, and most strikingly above the arches sit a series of lovely and delicate interior windows, also decorated with writing—except this is Arabic writing, and the sight of it locates the Latin inscription within an artistic context. The complex uses of writing, a superbly allusive form of visual ornamentation, were (like the red-and-white voussoirs atop the horseshoe arches) the unmistakable decorative signatures of a religion that, quite unlike medieval Christianity, eschewed icons.*

But what in the world are these Muslim echoes doing here, in this church that was a clear marker of the triumph of Christian over Islamic rule? The small concession made to the audacious suggestion that the God of the Christians of twelfth-century Toledo was also the God of the Muslims—an impression one might easily walk away with after a first glance at this sanctuary—was that the Arabic writing itself was made impossible to decipher. It is, on closer inspection, not just a difficult-to-read Arabic script, but an ersatz Arabic, a symbolic evocation of the language of the other God. Yet why, inside this church that (unlike others) was never a mosque, do we find unmistakable

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*The aniconic ("without icons") principle in Islam is far less rigidly observed than most people assume: the vast and luxurious tradition of Persian manuscript illumination is a conspicuous but not unique example of an Islamic art form that violates it, and in other instances it is likely a case of early Islam's accommodation of indigenous traditions.
emulations of the characteristic features of mosques, especially of the Great Mosque that was the spiritual center of the Umayyad caliphate? Why do the conquerors intertwine their own heritage and culture with the most distinctive aspects of the heritage and culture of the conquered? The squared-off arches do not sit in a different chapel or in a different part of the church; they surround the horseshoe arches, the Latin writing alternating with the “Arabic,” the two visually dependent on each other.

In this sacred place, Christians of the twelfth century—who were supposedly engaged in unrelenting religious warfare against the Muslims—paid an unambiguous tribute to the culture of the enemy, and created a space in which to pray that surrounded them with visions of their remarkable intimacies. This was the church built for and by the rough-and-tumble Castilians, who so nakedly aspired to replace the Umayyads, or rather, to triumph over the squabbling children of the Umayyads, the dozens of bickering taifas of the eleventh century. Why did they want their place of Christian worship to speak the languages of worship of that other God so eloquently? What kind of city was this Toledo they had now made the capital, first of the kingdom, then of the aspiring Christian empire?

Toledo was a natural capital city from the outset. In the post-Roman period, this craggy citadel, naturally fortified by the encircling Tagus River, and already noteworthy as an urban center, became the heart of the first independent Visigothic kingdom. After the formal union of the Visigoths with the Catholic Church in 589—the Visigoths had entered Iberia in the beginning of the sixth century as Arians, a condemned version of Christianity that did not accept the full divinity of Christ and saw the Son, Jesus, as subordinate to the Father—Toledo itself was transformed from a secular to a religious center, the seat of what were called the “councils” of Toledo. The councils of Iberian bishops were increasingly powerful during the chaotic last years of the kingdom of the Visigoths, but after 711, and especially after 756, what the Church said and where it sat ceased to matter as much. In the new order of the Umayyad world, Toledo was eclipsed as a political capital, but it was far from forgotten. Some of the old luster and sense of its centrality were never lost, and Toledo lived on as one of the prominent cities of al-Andalus in its prime. When the caliphate disintegrated, just after the turn of the eleventh century, and the peninsula fell into that period of cultural and political rivalry among the taifas, Toledo soon enough emerged as one of the most luminous and powerful of those independent city-states.

From the beginning the taifa of Toledo was ambitious and proud, and its government and leaders were notorious for their luxurious court life and far-flung military aspirations. In 1043, while Granada’s armies were still being led to their battles against other taifas by the Jewish vizier Samuel the Nagid, the leadership of rival Toledo fell to a charismatic and cultured man named al-Mamun. His long reign, during which he filled the city with the intellectual and artistic luminaries of the moment, further polished Toledo’s already bright cultural life and reputation, and al-Mamun seemed to be moving Toledo toward some sort of succession to the peninsula’s Islamic leadership. Toledo’s most powerful rival in this was the huge taifa of Seville, ruled by a series of no less cultivated strongmen called the Abbadids, after the first of that line, Muhammad ibn Abbad. As in the Toledo of al-Mamun, the Abbadids’ military and cultural ambitions were purposefully intertwined, and their Seville became the new haven for poetry in al-Andalus. The Abbadid-sponsored academy of poets played all sorts of important roles in poetic history, attracting poets from inside and outside the peninsula (including the most memorable of the Sicilians, named Ibn Hamdis) and leaving us an important diwan, or anthology, of the poetry of the period. The last of the line of the Abbadid military rulers was
al-Mutamid, a poet ranked among the very best in the whole of the Andalusian canon.

The relentless warfare among all the Muslim-held cities, and the especially ferocious competition between al-Mamun's Toledo and Abbadid Seville, defined political life for decades. Other taifas, as well as the increasingly important Christian-held cities and small kingdoms in the north, were involved in the ever shifting and often unpredictable alliances that dominated the long aftermath of the collapse of central Cordoban authority. It seemed that everyone wanted some version of what Cordoba had once had, and adventurers and the ambitious were everywhere involved in the often chesslike complex of rivalries and battles among cities of every stripe. Alliances and rivalries crossed religious lines every day: Christian cities whose Muslim allies helped them defeat Christian rivals became as commonplace as the Muslim taifas whose Christian allies helped them take other Muslim cities.

The brilliant al-Mamun led Toledo to a series of significant military victories. He took over Valencia, a city of crucial strategic importance, and for a short but delicious period he held the most coveted prize of all, Cordoba. The old capital was far more than a half-ghostly place on the banks of the Guadquivir, although much of it was still in ruins from the brutal rampages that had ravaged it at the time of the Berber wars. Toledo and Seville, the two taifas most intent on making themselves the new capital of whatever phoenix might be coaxed from the ashes of al-Andalus, understood that Cordoba was the repository of the powerful memories of the ancient and legitimate capital. Al-Mamun's symbolic and thus especially sweet triumph when he took Cordoba was, however, as short-lived as most of the other military triumphs and alliances of this period. Cordoba soon enough returned to the orbit of al-Mamun's bitter rivals, the Abbaddis of Seville.

By the eleventh century it must have seemed as if the fratricidal Muslim conflicts would never end. Perhaps, though, this appeared not to matter much, since the material and cultural wealth of the courts inside nearly every city became more conspicuous while political and military chaos reigned. But in fact these small centers could not hold forever, and the great cultural triumphs of the taifas could not, at the end of the day, forestall the heavy price to be paid for the lack of political stability and continuity. At the top of the highest hill in Toledo, in the triumphant Christian church inscribed with its love for the Islamic arts, we can see both the aesthetic victories of the Andalusian taifas and the political price paid for them, the loss of power.

Where does the road to that church in Toledo begin? From among various moments, one might choose the two-year interval of 1065–66 as a snapshot crowded with the sorts of events that would lead to San Roman. In April 1065, Barbastro, which had fallen to the Normans the year before, was retaken by the taifa king of Saragossa, almost certainly with the military help of Ferdinand I, the powerful sovereign of the combined kingdoms of Castile and Leon. That Christian monarch considered a number of the northern taifas his Muslim vassals and allies, whereas he viewed the Christians from Normandy and Aquitaine as enemy intruders.

In 1066, ferocious anti-Jewish riots broke out in Granada. Among the many victims was Joseph, the son of the city's much loved vizier, Joseph, the editor of his father's earthshaking poems in the new Hebrew of the age; Joseph, who had laid out the gardens at the top of the fortified hill, next to the old Red Fortress. There are, as always, conflicting accounts and interpretations of the causes of this relatively isolated Muslim uprising against what had been a warmly favored Jewish community. The taifas were notorious for precisely the sort of intimacy with Christians
sons, rivals for the kingship of Castile, remain obscure historical figures to all but specialists in this period.

The brothers themselves were much like the neighboring Muslim taifas: they were sometimes allies and sometimes enemies, with and against other Muslims, with and against other Christian cities: they were sometimes at each other's throats, and sometimes allied two against the third. Not long after their father's death, Sancho the eldest and Alfonso the favorite were allied, momentarily, to depose their younger brother, García, from his Galician share. But once that was accomplished, Sancho turned against Alfonso and, in 1071, beat him decisively in battle and took him prisoner. The defeated Alfonso was soon enough released, under mysterious circumstances, and went into exile, as had García before him. García had taken refuge not in any of the neighboring Christian courts but in the poetry-mad Abbadid taifa of Seville. Alfonso, however, headed for the rival taifa, al-Mamun's dazzling Toledo, where he was warmly welcomed as the son of Ferdinand, who had often protected the city. In lively and prosperous Toledo, the young Alfonso licked his wounds and, no doubt, plotted his next move against his brothers. Suddenly, the following year, there was a drastic turn of events: Sancho was murdered while putting down an insurrection in a city called Zamora, which lies along the Duero River, due north of Salamanca.

It was of course presumed that Alfonso himself had engineered the uprising and the murder, from his comfortable exile in al-Mamun's court. Alfonso's supposed ally in the uprising at Zamora—the trap that led to the murder—was the princess Urraca, the sister in the divided family. The other famous participant in the battle of Zamora was Rodrigo Díaz, who, as the doomed Sancho's principal military leader, acquitted himself with great valor. Rodrigo then returned to Castile for the royal burial of the king who was his longtime patron and who had made possible an already distinguished career. But at some point
shortly thereafter, he went into the service of the newly minted king of Castile, the principal beneficiary of his brother’s untimely death, Alfonso VI. The relationship between the new king and the old king’s loyal vassal was highly fraught from the outset; from these tensions, and from the dozens of other whirlwind political events of the ensuing years, were found the raw materials for Spain’s great epic poem named for Rodrigo, whose followers called him “the Cid.” In the Arabic and Arabized lingo of his troops, this honorific, al-sayyid, meant something like “the chief,” “the lord.”

Sancho of Leon, Ferdinand I’s oldest son, was not the only principal player to die of foul play in these closely intertwined tales. Just a few years after the drama at Toledo and Zamora, in 1075, while Alfonso was just managing to consolidate his territories of Castile and Leon, the great al-Mamun of Toledo, who had not so long before protected Alfonso from his own brother, also fell victim to treachery and political assassination. Al-Mamun had ruled Toledo for thirty-three years and made it the cultural showplace of the peninsula. At the time of his murder he had recently succeeded in the military mission that would also have made Toledo politically preeminent among the taifas and perhaps unified them, which was certainly al-Mamun’s ambition: after a lifetime’s effort, al-Mamun had taken the coveted city of Cordoba from his archrivals in Seville. But beneath the superficial similarity of the kings’ murders—the Christian king of Leon and the Muslim king of Toledo—the two situations could not have produced more different outcomes. Whereas Sancho’s death led the various kingdoms over which he and his brothers had feuded out of fratricidal violence and civil wars and into Alfonso’s long, prosperous, and unifying reign, the death of al-Mamun, who had powerfully and profitably guided Toledo to a position of stability and expansiveness, resulted in a series of catastrophically weak and rivalrous successors and a period of bloody civil unrest in Toledo. The possibility that a single taifa might emerge as a unifying leader of al-Andalus was lost.

Among the weak and embattled protagonists angling to replace al-Mamun was a grandson named al-Qadir. When his moment of need arrived, al-Qadir took the perhaps inevitable next step in the back-and-forth cycle of Toledo-Castile protection and turned for help to Alfonso, who by then was king of the reunited kingdoms of Castile and Leon. Ferdinand I, Alfonso’s father, had for years taken tribute from Toledo in return for protection against the city’s Muslim rivals, and later that relationship was reversed. During al-Mamun’s great success and independence, and especially during the years shortly after Ferdinand’s death in the late 1060s, when Alfonso had to seek refuge from his brother, Sancho, he had found it in Toledo. By 1075, the wheel had turned once again, and it was Alfonso who was in a position to provide al-Qadir the help asked for, at a steep price. An embattled Toledo, coveted by other taifas—but especially by archrival Seville—thus came under Alfonso’s protection at al-Qadir’s request, and there it remained for the next ten years.

This was an eventful decade, during which Alfonso continued to expand his territories and consolidate his holdings. These were also years during which Rodrigo Díaz established his reputation as a warrior and earned his honorific “Cid.” The politics of the taifas remained as convoluted and chimeric as ever, marked by all manner of alliance and enmity. The Cid himself was involved in major skirmishes on behalf of the king of Seville against the king of Granada, both powerful Muslim monarchs, each with strong Christian contingents in his army. By the time that this Christian warrior with the Arabic name was leading troops into battles between one Muslim and another, few citizens of the peninsula lived in any sort of innocence of the various languages and faiths that surrounded them. Nor did they have any reason necessarily to assume that the enemy was someone of a different faith, or spoke a different language, since that had not
been the case in recent memory — certainly not in the ten years the Christian king Alfonso served as the protector of Muslim Toledo.

Most fateful of all for Toledo itself, these were ten years during which the various factions within Toledo continued to feud, with dozens of treacherous alliances formed with rivals from other taifas, but without clear resolution. Al-Qadir, who had sought Alfonso’s expensive help, was every year a weaker puppet of his increasingly strong protector. In 1084, the puppet evidently decided that he could not hold his own inside Toledo, where the factions against him had become extremely violent, and he offered direct control over Toledo to Alfonso in return for help in getting him out of the city and into exile in Valencia. This was an offer Alfonso had no reason to refuse and which in any case presented few difficulties and very limited military expenditure.

Toledo had to be besieged for a time, as al-Qadir’s enemies in Toledo had nothing to gain from this transfer of power. But the siege did not last long, and in the spring of 1085, with not a drop of blood shed in battle, Alfonso VI of Castile and Leon entered venerable Toledo, a city he already knew and loved, a city that al-Mamun had spent more than thirty years grooming to be the successor to Cordoba itself. In all sorts of ways, that was exactly what it became, but with the remarkable twist that Alfonso and his successors were Christians, not Muslims. Yet they were the Christians whose descendants, as late as a century or more later, would build the Church of San Roman, with the horseshoe arches that pay loving homage to Cordoba itself, and who would keep other aspects of Cordoba’s legacy alive and well.

The Toledo that Alfonso VI walked into and soon made into the new capital of his kingdom was already a vivacious place with a strong sense of its own cultural superiority. Very little of either the spirit or the particulars of the conviction that Toledo was the center of the civilized world was lost in the transfer of power that made Alfonso a worthy successor to al-Mamun. But precisely because Alfonso’s formidable leadership was evident to all, and because of the obvious danger that Toledo, as a Christian capital, would rapidly succeed in reuniting the peninsula after nearly a hundred years of political chaos, near panic set in among the remaining Muslim taifas.

Alfonso began his expansions almost immediately, and in less than a year he had established poor al-Qadir, who had handed him Toledo, as his puppet in Valencia; he had laid siege to Saragossa, where his former vassal Rodrigo Diaz was probably in charge of the opposing Muslim army; and he did what even the ambitious al-Mamun had not quite dared to do—demand that his only true rival, Seville, submit to him. It must have seemed quite possible that Alfonso could have accomplished this ambitious reunification for which he had obviously developed quite a taste. But he encountered a glitch of extraordinary proportions when a force that he had not reckoned on appeared on the scene. That not only stopped Alfonso in his tracks but also fundamentally changed the character of the peninsula’s old Islamic traditions.

In October 1086, Alfonso’s armies abandoned their siege of Saragossa in order to move south to meet invading armies from North Africa. The Almoravids, a powerful Berber dynasty with a particularly fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, had arrived on the peninsula, to aid their Muslim brethren. It had been one thing to accept the taifalike Christian kingdoms as players on the chaotic scene of a disunited al-Andalus, but quite another for the remaining major Muslim taifas to see the threatened, perhaps imminent, unification of the old Muslim realms by the formidable Alfonso. With considerable trepidation the Andalusians had asked their North African coreligionists to send them military aid. And so it was that on a battlefield not far from Badajoz, a city
about 115 miles north of the Mediterranean coast and just on the modern border with Portugal, the Almoravid army soundly defeated Alfonso and overnight brought his territorial and political ambitions to a skidding halt.

The Andalusian Muslims, the old taifas, were momentarily relieved and returned to their squabbling ways, but not for very long. The Almoravids, once they had gotten a close look at the Andalusians, were filled with contempt for their obvious military ineptness and chaotic politics. At the same time, they appeared seduced, and full of the sort of greedy desire for the still-palpable delights of al-Andalus that had so affected Alfonso. Within a few years of defeating Alfonso and returning to their lands across the strait, the Almoravids came back with the clear intention of staying and making al-Andalus a province, the jewel in the crown of an empire that began on the banks of the Senegal River in Africa. By that time the Andalusians had gotten as much of a taste as they wanted of the rough Fierbers from beyond the Atlas Mountains, barbarians by Andalusian standards. Most of the taifa kings had concluded that Alfonso himself would be a more congenial overlord than those stiff-necked, morally self-righteous, and culturally backward Muslims, and al-Mutamid, the poet-king of Seville, and others ended up appealing to Alfonso for help in opposing the very Muslims they had originally brought in to protect themselves against him. But it was too late. Within a few years, the Almoravids made the shredded remnants of al-Andalus, the remaining taifas, their unhappy colony, while also attempting a radical reform of the Muslim ways of the peninsula.

Toledo, however, which had remained in Alfonso’s hands and became his capital and his home—and that of his successors for generations to come—flourished as never before. This was at least partially the paradoxical result of the reining in of Alfonso’s vast ambitions and of the Almoravids’ harshness and intolerance. Alfonso, who had first lived in Toledo while it was a taifa, and who had only ever lived in the world of the taifas, with their promiscuous intermingling of the three religions and their mixed languages and cultures, kept Toledo as the sort of open city he knew and loved, even as many of the old taifas became closed or hostile to Jews and to Christians. After the momentous turn of events of 1085–86, Toledo became the most important city for many of those Arabized Jews and Christians. The Arabized and, more recently, re-tiebrated Jews were culturally the heirs of Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Cordoba and of Samuel the Nagid of Granada, and the Christians, who arrived with their old-fashioned Catholic liturgy in Arabic, were the descendants of the Mozarabs of Cordoba.

The narrow and winding streets of Toledo, already lined with the elegant buildings and other markers of the rich Islamic cultural legacy of al-Mamun’s taifa, now began to fill up with ever larger communities of the sort that had made Umayyad Cordoba so culturally complex. In 1088, just as the Muslim taifas were being annexed to the Almoravid empire, Alfonso supervised Toledo’s ascendance in the larger Christian sphere, ensuring that his new capital was declared the principal see of the Church on the Iberian Peninsula. Toledo, virtually overnight, went from being a Muslim taifa that few Christians from beyond its borders would have reason to visit, to an archepiscopal center that, conversely, few among the Church hierarchy could afford not to visit. As the Church itself became more mobile, in more intimate contact with the rest of the Latin Christian world, Toledo was the open door to the treasures of the Old World. And so, the old Mozarab community that once produced the martyrs of Cordoba now found itself, perhaps to its own surprise, at considerable odds with the Latin Christian community with whom it now shared the old Visigothic capital. The Mozarabs, some of them natives of Toledo and others immigrants from other Andalusian cities, saw themselves as the Christian old guard. And for them, the new Christians who now began to move into
the city, especially those who represented faraway and foreign Cluny, were a menace to their own traditions, which went back to the times of the Visigoths. The new Christians, who from the outset occupied the most powerful ecclesiastical positions, were a community whose reformed liturgy was, in the eyes of the Mozarabs, corrupted by newfangled notions, while their own rite, kept pristine in its Arabic wrapping and thus unchanged since the eighth century, was by far the more traditional.

But Toledo was not doomed (at least not for a very long time) to be nothing more than a museum of the Islamic culture that had shaped the city for the preceding three hundred years. The rich Arabo-Islamic heritage that the Latin Christian visitors discovered in Toledo was carried on—preserved as a living thing, not merely fossilized—not only by the Muslims who had stayed (as many had, and Alfonso left the city’s mosque open for worship) but also by the Jews and Christians who immigrated there. The generous and often promiscuous Umayyad vision left a living legacy among those non-Muslims, and it is likely that Alfonso himself wrote only in Arabic. The various artistic styles that were used and developed by these communities in exile from their Islamic surroundings are now called Mudejar, and are loosely defined as an Islamic style as understood, reinterpreted, and celebrated by others, by Christians and Jews. This became the signature style of Toledo in every respect for generations, and for nearly every purpose, including synagogues and churches. The church at the top of its highest hill, built at least a hundred—maybe even two hundred—years after Alfonso first made Toledo into a Christian city, was part of that living tradition that declares itself allied with the aesthetics and traditions of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. And this style, and these traditions, were now visible to Latin Christendom.

The great love of Alfonso’s life was reputedly a Muslim concubine, Zaida, who was the widowed daughter-in-law of his old rival, al-Mutamid of Seville. She bore him his only son, who was killed in battle as a young man, and a daughter, named Teresa, who eventually became queen of Portugal. But Alfonso also had a string of politically advantageous marriages, and he added to the rapid internationalization of the city through his many other alliances with princesses who were all from north of the Pyrenees. The first of these, Agnes, was the daughter of William VIII of Aquitaine, the duke who had taken part in the Norman capture of Barbastro, and thus the sister of William IX, first of the Provençal troubadours. Alfonso’s second wife was a Burgundian named Constance who was the niece of the abbot of Cluny. Cluny at this time was rapidly becoming the most powerful of the expanding Christian monastic houses, and with Alfonso’s various blessings it added Toledo and its environs to its sphere of influence. This was just the beginning. The doors of Toledo opened wider and wider as Toledo gained in stature in the Latin Christian world and welcomed more and more northerners, many of whom, among them Church fathers, were as dumb-founded and appreciative as the Normans and Aquitainians had been when they had arrived in Barbastro.

In the long aftermath of 1085, and under the line of Alfonso’s and other descendants of Alfonso VI, Toledo became the radiant intellectual capital of Europe, a Christian city where Arabic remained a language of culture and learning. This was a city with vast libraries of Arabic books, libraries begun long before, during the glorious Umayyad years, and then added to during the years of the ambitious al-Mamun, who sought to remake Cordoba in Toledo. These collections were added to by the Castilian Christian monarchs and all sorts of prelates. Among these, one Raymond, archbishop of Toledo from 1125 to 1151, gave the institutions that had arisen around these libraries the
semiofficial title School of Translators, and it stuck. It was by way of Toledo that the rest of Europe—Latin Christendom—finally had full access to the vast body of philosophical and scientific materials translated from Greek into Arabic in the Abbasid capital of Baghdad during the previous several hundred years. That a Christian city rather than a Muslim one should have played this role may seem unexpected and perhaps even ironic to us. But how surprising can it have been to Christians who prayed at that church at the highest point in the city, under horseshoe arches that echo those of Cordoba’s mosque, and where Latin and Arabic writing together adorn the walls.

An Andalusian in London

Huesca, 1106

I was baptized in the episcopal see of Huesca, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit....
My godfather was Alfonso, glorious Emperor of Spain, who took me from the baptismal font.

—Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogue Against the Jews

O ne day in 1106, in the city of Huesca, no more than thirty miles to the west of Barbastro, in the kingdom of Aragon, a forty-something Jew was baptized. He took his new Latin Christian name from Saint Peter, whose feast day it was, and from his local patron, Alfonso I of Aragon. Alfonso, whose nickname was el Batallador, “the Warrior,” had great imperial ambitions and eventually a hugely successful career consolidating his kingdom by the Pyrenees, although Petrus Alfonsi was exaggerating considerably when many years later he called him the “glorious emperor of Spain.” Alfonso never quite managed to succeed to the throne he coveted, that of Alfonso I of Castile and Leon, the conqueror of Toledo, who died in 1109 without a male heir. The Aragonese Alfonso married but later divorced Urraca, the Castilian Alfonso’s daughter and heiress. After failing to attain Castile by marriage, Alfonso of Aragon
The Abbot and the Quran

Cluny, 1142

Fulfil then, my brother or rather, my lord, what you promised to your sister, or I should say, to your servant. May it please you also under seal an open document containing the absolution of our master, to be hung on his tomb. Remember also, for the love of God, our Astrolabe, so that you may obtain for him some prebend either from the bishop of Paris or in some other diocese.

—Heloise to Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny

One could be forgiven for imagining Cluny as the epicenter of the Latin Christian world in 1142. Here was the newly completed largest church of Christendom, seat of a vast empire of hundreds of religious houses and monasteries. At its head was the formidable Peter the Venerable, the abbot and, indeed, the venerated prince of Cluny for the previous twenty years. Peter was himself heir to a position of extraordinary prestige, since Cluny was founded about 910 by the first William of Aquitaine, the pious ancestor of William IX, that less-than-pious troubadour. In those two centuries Cluny had acquired a wealth and prestige second to none, and it had entrenched itself as the undisputed heart and soul of the monastic
The Great Mosque of Cordoba, eighth to tenth century (Abigail Krasner)

The Church of San Roman, built by the Castilians of Toledo, twelfth century. (H. D. Miller)
The Tomb of Ferdinand III (Saint Ferdinand), Seville, 1252, with inscriptions in Arabic, Latin, Hebrew, and Castilian. (Abigail Krasner)

The Alhambra, built by the Nasrids of Granada, from circa 1250 to circa 1360. (Abigail Krasner)

The Synagogue of Samuel Halevi Abulafia (later known as the Church of the Transito), circa 1360. (Abigail Krasner)

The Palace (Alcazar) of Peter the Cruel, Seville, circa 1364. (Abigail Krasner)
reform movement of the age. Over the years, Cluny's original mission of ecclesiastical reform was more than accomplished, and its clergy had long before ceased to be involved in the sort of manual labor that had made the Benedictine brothers little more than glorified peasants. Instead, the houses of Cluny had increasingly gone down many roads of learning and scholarship, and sometimes they led to difficult places.

In 1140, Peter the Venerable successfully outmaneuvered both his archrival Bernard of Clairvaux, head of the younger, upstart, right-wing militant Cistercians, and the pope himself. Peter had taken under his wing the enfant terrible of the day, Peter Abelard. Abelard was the most famous man of his age by his own reckoning, and certainly something of a controversial celebrity by anyone's reckoning. And he had been the most renowned teacher at the schools of Paris just a few decades before, during the years of infancy of that supremely important intellectual center of northern Europe, not quite officially yet but soon to be the University of Paris. Abelard's charismatic teaching, in both its content and its methods, was crucial in the shaping of the university, but as a member of the clergy (and all the teachers at all the schools and universities of Latin Christendom for many generations to come were clerics), Abelard was often in some sort of trouble, provoked by his combative style as well as by his increasingly passionate attachment to aspects of philosophy, and to a philosophical style, that were difficult for many orthodox churchmen to swallow.

His Parisian teaching years now far behind him, Abelard, a broken man of sixty-one, was still being hounded, and aggressively so, by the righteous Bernard, the head of the more austere

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*Because of the potentially confusing overabundance of characters named Peter in this cluster of stories, I have systematically used “Peter” alone to refer only to Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny; and “Abelard” to refer to Peter Abelard. Petrus Alfonsi, an occasional presence here, is still “Petrus.”*
Cistercians. Abelard was eventually put on trial in Rome on charges of heresy, and in 1140 he was condemned by the pope himself. Bernard was then given license to take Abelard prisoner, but when Abelard appeared at Cluny's doorstep and asked for asylum, the abbot himself granted it, and then some: Peter made Abelard a Benedictine monk of Cluny, wrote the pope the cleverest of letters justifying this peremptory maneuver, and kept Abelard, who was ill, well protected in one of his nearby houses for the next two years. The most famous man of his age and, in his wife, Heloise's, recounting of it, the most famous lover of his age, died under Peter's generous protection in 1142. Peter wrote to Heloise to tell her of the death of her beloved and to report that he had absolved Abelard of his sins. Peter thus made it possible for Abelard to be properly buried, as Heloise had asked, and he was prepared personally to take the body to the convent where Heloise was abbess, a religious house called the Paraclete, established long before by Abelard for Heloise, as her own nunnery.

But the long trip north from Cluny, in Burgundy, to the outskirts of Paris was postponed for several years in favor of a different trip. This would be a long one, too, since it involved Peter's going south of the Pyrenees. Peter the Venerable's trip to Galicia and Castile, undertaken immediately after Abelard's death, was an intellectual adventure. Although there is no record of the meeting in 1144 between Heloise and the recently returned Peter, when he finally fulfilled his promise and delivered Abelard's remains to her, it is easy to imagine that he would have discussed his travels with the woman who had named her own child Astrolabe, after the scientific innovation that so well characterized the complex allure of Islamic Spain. The astrolabe was a mechanical instrument capable of accurate astronomical measurements, which enabled astronomers to calibrate the positions of the stars and, thus, relative time. This allowed for reasonably accurate navigation at sea, which opened up not only the most rudimentary avenues for the transportation of material goods and peoples but all the mental avenues, the visions of the universe, that went with such travel. At the time of Heloise and Abelard's famous affair—which lasted roughly two years, beginning in 1117, when Heloise was seventeen and Abelard her thirty-eight-year-old teacher—the astrolabe was the epitome of something like radical chic, despite the fact that it had been introduced to northern Europe more than a century before. It had not yet lost the allure of a slightly mysterious device from very foreign places, and often with mysterious writing on it.

The first news of the marvel had been brought to the Latin world by Gerbert of Aurillac, an adventurous scholar who eventually became Pope Sylvester II at the time of the first Christian millennium. In the last half of the tenth century he had spent years studying in various cities of what was then the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba, still very much in its prime. Gerbert returned to Liege with detailed knowledge of that technological advance and perhaps even with one of the instruments, a precious astrolabe. The book that Gerbert wrote about it, The Book of the Astrolabe, was not only the first on the subject but also a trendsetter: for many years afterward, intellectuals with any pretensions to a grounding in modern science were virtually compelled to write something about astrolabes. Beyond the direct material effects of these mathematical and mechanical wonders, one senses some rather broad cultural fallout, which in some measure explains the oddity of the name of Abelard and Heloise's son, born in 1118, a century after Gerbert's book had first brought it to the lands north of the Pyrenees. Even more astonishing, as late as 1391, by then some four hundred years after Gerbert had returned from his Andalusian sojourn with this extraordinary little instrument, it retained its cultural cachet: A Treatise of the Astrolabe is among the incomplete works Chaucer left behind.
The abbot of Cluny traveled without difficulty to the Pyrenees and beyond, staying at the cozens of Cluniac monasteries on the way. Many of these dotted the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, but above and beyond those, the abbot's own domains spread far, with some twenty-six monasteries south of the mountain passes. The influence of Cluny in Iberian Christian territories had been growing rapidly, especially so after Alfonso VI had taken Toledo and made it the archepiscopal see of the Church—with a Frenchman, a Cluniac monk, as its first archbishop. Alfonso's father, Ferdinand, had already established ties with Cluny, providing the monastic houses with large sums of money that came from the vast tribute he was collecting from his Muslim taifa vassals. But with Alfonso, the Cluniac connections went even deeper, since his second wife, Constance, the mother of Urraca, his heiress, was the niece of the then-abbot Hugh of Cluny, and it was during Alfonso's reign that the controversial reform of the liturgy, the substitution of the Roman prayer book and mass for those that had been used uninterruptedly in Spain since Visigothic times, was imposed.

In Toledo especially, where the large and influential Mozarabic community felt it had been the privileged guardian of the oldest preserved rite in Christendom, there was resistance to these newfangled changes, and to the foreign domination that had imposed it. From the ninth through the eleventh centuries, the Mozarabs had preserved their own way of celebrating the Eucharist, not in Latin, the liturgical language of Western Christendom, but in Arabic. In this cultural and linguistic isolation from other changes in Latin Christendom, the rite thus survived in its most conservative form—but after 1085, its survival was threatened by the Cluniac reform of the liturgy, which sought to universalize the practices of Western Christendom. The tensions between the two groups of Christians there, Mozarabs and “Romans,” would last for hundreds of years and may be broadly understood as symbolic of the conflict between a special indigenous tradition and the foreign-born impositions that were required if Spanish Christians were to be fully integrated with the rest of the Catholic community.

Even if the ostensible purpose of Peter's visit to this new center of the Church was in part diplomatic—to continue the process of convincing the stubborn Arabized Christians that the French (that is to say, the Roman) way of praying was what they needed to adopt—his real mission, and its difficulties, emerged soon enough. The abbot announced that he was looking for translators to work on the sacred book of the Muslims, only to find that there were no volunteers for the job, an unusual one indeed. The abbot of Cluny was undertaking nothing less than the first systematic Christian project to study Islam, and the first translation of the Quran itself, into Latin. Before Peter's remarkable trip of 1142, in fact, the goal of most of the research trips made to the lands where there was access to Muslim learning was far from religious. The prize, for all but the adventurous in this realm, the heirs of Gerbert of Aurillac, was acquisition of the sort of abstract scientific knowledge that, as with the astrolabe itself, often enough yielded up valuable technological benefits. By the turn of the twelfth century, there was a fast-growing body of professionals responsible for the dissemination of most of the pure-research, or high-tech, Arabic materials. Although we normally speak about their work as translation, these men, especially those of the first generation or two, were not translators at all, in our sense of the word. Like Gerbert, they were intellectually ambitious men driven to discover the treasures of their lifetimes, closer to explorers than anything else. They learned Arabic—or at least enough Arabic to allow them to work alongside their multilingual Mozarab and Jewish collaborators—Arabic being the language of the map that led to El Dorado itself.

Eventually, Peter was able to hire one of these explorers, one Robert of Ketton, an Englishman living and working in and
around the libraries of Toledo. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact location of the peripatetic Ketton when Peter found and hired him, and some of the sources suggest it was not in Toledo proper but rather somewhere "in the vicinity of the Ebro [River]," perhaps toward Pamplona, where Ketton eventually settled as an archdeacon. But the collection of texts commissioned by the abbot of Cluny was ultimately dubbed the "Toledan Collection," and the epicenter and source for this sort of work was clearly Toledo. In any event, wherever Ketton was when Peter tracked him down, the man had no interest whatever in working for the abbot, at least not on the job Peter was proposing. It was only when the abbot of Cluny made it worth his while financially that Robert agreed, grudgingly, to put aside his chosen work, his driving passion for the astronomical sciences and mathematics, to become the first "authorized" European translator of the Quran.

For Robert, this project was a small and mostly distracting chapter in a fertile career that included introducing an entirely new branch of mathematics to Latin Europe through his translation of the Algebra (from al-jabar, the term for reduction of an equation through the "Restoration [al-jabr] and Compensation" of its parts), the work of al-Khawarizmi, a ninth-century scholar who had worked in the caliphal Center for Advanced Study in Baghdad. Al-Khawarizmi's own name became the word "algorithm," from the form in which it appears in the very first line of Robert's Latin version of that work: "Dixit Algoritmi..." ("Al-Khawarizmi says..."). The so-called Arabic numeral system also came to Latin Europe in this era, and through many of the same works that were being translated in Toledo by Ketton and others. Itself a Baghdad adaptation of Indian systems—the Arabs themselves call them, more accurately, "Hindi numerals"—it made many advanced mathematical calculations possible with features absent in the Latin system, among them, crucially, the zero (from the Arabic sifr), as well as the use of positional notation, in which the position of the digit represents the magnitude of ten, a system that makes calculations substantially easier than with Roman numerals.* These were heady days for those who had the gumption and wherewithal to mine the magic bookcabinets of cities like Toledo; and many years later, Robert of Ketton eventually wrote his own, inevitable, treatise on the astrolabe.

The makeup and profile of the European intellectual was transformed by the work that Robert of Ketton and many others like him accomplished, even during those several decades immediately after Abelard's death, when what they did amounted to opening the doors just enough to let out the first trickle of the flood of intellectual treasures that would follow soon enough. Abelard himself missed the revolution almost altogether. He was the French Aristotle, as Peter the Venerable called him, in some measure because there was no other, and Peter was in fact still reading "Aristotle" through the fifth-century Latin version by Boethius—thus only the bits of Aristotle that had been known within the early Latin tradition. That meant, until then, very little other than the philosopher's reputation as a logician, author of the Categories and De interpretatione. Even though he was a nearly exact contemporary of Judah Halevi, Abelard was familiar with virtually none of the body of philosophy that Halevi was already attempting to reject, a whole philosophical culture known to the educated throughout the Islamic world for generations.

Abelard had discovered the power of logic as a young man, and clung tenaciously to it throughout his life, even when it was

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*The use of this Arabic system did not, however, become commonplace until it was popularized by the Liber abaci, or Book of the Abacus, written in the early thirteenth century by the famous mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, a thoroughly Arabized merchant from Pisa who had studied accounting methods in North Africa (present-day Algeria), where his father had been a Pisan diplomat.
abundantly clear that he was in dire straits thanks to his notion
that Christian faith itself could and should be subject to logical
scrutiny. He created something he dubbed "theologia" to serve as
the logical and scientific language of Christianity; and he had
developed a dialectical method of dealing with philosophical, exist-
tential, and religious problems, famously called the sic et non, an
open-ended and relentlessly inquisitive "on the other hand." For
Bernard of Clairvaux, the guardian of a very different Christian
tradition from the one that Abelard, and the Cluniacs, cultivated,
all these notions reeked of heresy. Surely, no one could really
imagine that Plato could be made over into a Christian, as
Abelard had suggested.

Ironically, in our memory of the medieval period, that fa-
mous sic et non method of argumentation represents the sort of
pedantic scholasticism that led to the counting of angels on the
head of a pin. While there is some validity to that view—dialec-
tic is about details, after all—the foundation of the method was
something quite different. It was that vision of the universe pre-
cisely reflected in the wonderful name, which is "yes and no"—
not "or," or "instead of," or "not," or anything else that would
suggest that there was a single view, that clear divisions or di-
chotomies existed because one proposition was self-evidently
right or good and the other was to be discarded. For Abelard,
and for many of his students, the possibility, perhaps even the
necessity, of contradiction clearly existed in God's perplexing
and often difficult universe. With his insistence that faith needed
to be subject to rigorous rational scrutiny, a novel and threaten-
ing idea in his circles at that time, Abelard almost uncannily an-
ticipated the intellectual upheaval that came to dominate Europe
a few years later. The Latin Christian Europe, in which Abelard
seemed quite unique (unicus, "the unique one," is how his
learned lover, Heloise, referred to him), could hardly have imag-
ined that in a very few years it would have available the vast
Aristotelian corpus in an accurate Latin translation. Moreover,
that body of work came with the bonus of nearly a thousand
years of close study and notable advancement attached to it, a
trove of intellectual effort that ran the gamut from the com-
mentaries of Aristotle's own students to those of more recent Muslim
and Jewish Andalusians.

Poor Abelard, whose life he himself called a series of
calamities, was still a man of the older universe, no doubt de-
spite himself. The gesture of naming the child Astrolabe was one
of endearing optimism for a world whose intellectual riches he
did not actually know directly but sensed were there, quite liter-
ally around the bend. His discussions, in his wonderful memoirs,
of the rigors of philosophy as a way of life were, just a genera-
tion later, embarrassing in their extreme old-fashionedness.
Abelard's Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian,
almost certainly written late in his life, at the height of his strug-
gles with the orthodox authorities, and during the same years
Halevi was writing his Book of the Khazars, was the near-opposite
number of that antiphilosophical Andalusian work. Abelard's
hero in this exploration of the ways that faith stands up to ra-
tional scrutiny is clearly his philosopher, a character modeled on
some rough idea Abelard had of the Arabophone philosophical
tradition that had brought revelations such as those of the astro-
labe to his universe. And yet, while for Abelard, Seneca was still
the master philosopher he actually knew, already Petrus Alfonsi,
another contemporary, was condescending to pass on to the cler-
ics of Europe the bits and pieces—"as the Arab philosopher
says"—of his perfectly conventioni. Andalusian education, and
he would doubtless have found the notion of Seneca as a master
philosopher risible. It would have amused Robert of Ketton as
well, who at the time of Abelard's death was sitting amid the
golden horde of hard science and Aristotelian splendor begin-
ning to pour out of Toledo.
Peter's translations included not only the Quran, as it turned out, but a whole bundle of different texts that contained the sayings of Muhammad and the lives of the Prophet and his first successors, among other things, all gathered up by the abbot himself, with the advice of his many Cluniac dependents in Spain. Peter the Venerable made clear from the outset why this project seemed so important to him: and, indeed, worth what amounted to a vast investment. To most, it sounded a great deal like the simple maxim of knowing one's enemy, but for a man like Peter, knowing the enemy was not a straightforward proposition, and the political circumstances of the project were complex. The Crusades, which had been launched in France in 1095, loomed large for him, as for many others: they were one of the great causes and great events of Peter and Bernard's generation. Peter's translation of the Quran and the polemical analyses of the failings of Islam that accompany it are often assumed, logically enough, to be part of that same crusading spirit and, in fact, one of the weapons to be used against their Muslim rivals for Jerusalem.

This was a view that Peter himself apparently did not discourage, allowing that sort of facile explanation to circulate to make his efforts seem less suspect. But Peter himself knew better than that. Soldiers taking Jerusalem in the name of Christ scarcely needed a detailed education in the holy books of the enemy, let alone the extra-Quranic niceties of hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Part of the problem was precisely that it was widely known that the abbot of Cluny was opposed to the Crusades and very much a man of peace. This attitude reflected his often-bitter enmity with Bernard and the increasingly militant branch of Christian monasticism headed by his Cistercian rival.

The Cistercians, with Bernard as their gifted spokesman, had found their "pilgrimage in arms" in the First Crusade, which was summoned in a famous sermon of 1095 by a fellow Cluniac and predecessor of Peter's, Pope Urban II. The Crusade had actually succeeded in capturing Jerusalem in 1099, and so provided irrefutable grounds for the assertion that the sword should be taken up against the enemies of Christ and Christendom. Bernard, in so many ways Peter's opposite, perhaps most tellingly in the matter of Abelard, not only preached a Second Crusade but became the patron of the Knights Templar, those monks-in-arms vowed to the Christian "liberation" of Palestine and especially of Jerusalem. These behaviors were despised by Peter the Venerable, who saw the Cistercians' faith in the power of arms and violence as all of a piece with their shunning of secular learning, and especially their disdain for the classics, and thus all manner of rational and scientific thought, which came to a head in the charges of heresy brought against Abelard in 1140. Peter's principled defense of Abelard, accomplished at some risk to himself, revealed the stark divisions within the Christian community that are also evident in the purposes and the accomplishments of the abbot's trip to Christian Spain.

Peter's complex attitudes toward both Jews and Muslims were comparable to those of the Andalusian Christians who had lived and worked in the mixed religious communities of most of Spain. Peter, in effect, understood Muslims and Jews to be "Peoples of the Book," and thus arply open to eventually receiving Christ's grace. Though he believed unambiguously in the truth of his own Christian faith, the abbot of Cluny possessed a particularly Andalusian understanding of the special kinship, scriptural and historical, existing among the Children of Abraham. Before his trip to Spain, and probably also sometime during those dangerous and difficult years when he was defending Abelard against charges of heresy, Peter wrote a book about Judaism. In many ways that book was a preview of his later works about Islam. His Liber adversus Judaeorum inveteratum duritiem almost certainly took its excellent information about Judaism from Petrus Alfonsi's Dialogue, which was widely read
and known by the early 1140s. Unlike earlier anti-Jewish literature, Petrus’s polemic had the virtue of direct access to the real Jewish and Islamic sources. Like the polemical writing about Islam, and indeed, like Alfonso’s own diatribe, the rhetoric of Peter’s tract (“Against the dug-in stiff-neckedness of the Jews”) can sound exceptionally harsh to our ears. But this should not obscure how radically at cross-purposes Peter’s pioneering work in translating and studying the Quran was to the sort of attitudes and behavior advocated and represented by Bernard of Clairvaux at home and by his Knights Templar abroad.

The abbot of Cluny used the translation of the Quran for which he paid so dearly to issue a not-too-subtle direct challenge to his adversary, the abbot of Citeaux. Peter is once again disputing with Bernard on the role of reason, learning, and philosophy in the life and mind of a Christian. He sent Bernard a copy of the Toledan translation of the Muslim scripture, with the following sly provocation as preface: “My intention in this work was to follow that custom of the [Church] Fathers by which they never silently passed by any heresy of their times, not even the slightest, without resisting it with all the strength of faith and demonstrating, both through writings and discussions, that it is detestable.” Yes, of course, faith. But also demonstration, writing, discussion, knowledge—and thus translations, reason, and strength of the intellect. Faith and demonstration, as Abelard had said, were the backbones of Christianity, “the custom of the Church Fathers.” Yes and no are on the table of the true believer, who can be an educated and thinking man.

At different moments in the written explanations he sent to Bernard along with the Latin Quran, Peter laments that Christians had fallen into such a state of ignorance that they knew only their own language and not even that of the Apostles themselves, let alone a language like Arabic, which was already the language of access to philosophy. This was an open rebuke to the Cistercian position on education, which was to oppose anything that went beyond the Latin necessary to read very limitedly, and safely, in monastic libraries. But Peter’s provocations did not stop there: he was sending these materials to Bernard so that Bernard himself would be able to write the great refutation of Islam that surely undergirded his militant posture abroad. Not surprisingly, Bernard never did any such thing, and when Peter himself got around to writing his version of the analysis of the superiority of Christianity to Islam, on the basis of his reading of the Quran as well as the other materials he had gathered, he began with the lament that the task had fallen to him, since no other Christian had come forth to undertake it: “There was not one who would open his mouth and speak up with zeal for Christianity.” The tone, in this context, was something like mock regret, or even slightly veiled sarcasm, directed at Bernard, whose brand of zeal Peter certainly did not endorse.

Peter’s trip to the old Muslim centers of Spain was organized and carried out, at great expense, to procure the information the abbot coveted, and it revealed to him quite directly the untapped possibilities of Toledo, a city already well on the way to becoming Europe’s center for the massive translation enterprise of the subsequent centuries. An avid and curious intellect, Peter already had an appealing taste of what the other religions thought about themselves from the works of Petrus Alfonsi, and especially from his Dialogue, with its detailed textual information about Judaism and Islam. But the abbot of Cluny knew full well that all sorts of things besides theology would whet others’ appetites: from the knowledge of the philosophical tradition of the Greeks to the technological advances of which the astrolabe was a dominant symbol. In a sense, the technology, and then the science that lay behind it, was the bait. The complex trap that lay behind that easy bait—the same attractions Judah Halevi had recently denounced as imetical to the faith of his fathers—was the rigorous application of scientific methods, a far more ad-
vanced form of Abelard's logic, in sum, the entire armory of pagan philosophy, with its potential to undermine faith itself.

The abbot of Cluny lived his life with a powerful sense that knowledge was not anti-Christian, and that to cultivate it was a very good thing, self-evidently more virtuous than arms. He understood, of course, that the Knights Templar were scarcely about to educate themselves in the details of Islam, let alone study the accurate references to the Quran that Peter's new books from Toledo provided, or to substitute reasoned dialogue about the superiority of Christianity for the sword raised against Islam. Could Peter possibly have imagined that after they spent some time in Palestine a significant number of the Templars would go native? The oldest and most famous of the orders of warriors for Christianity notoriously grew wealthy from a network of business connections they cultivated with Muslim merchants, and eventually they did learn enough Arabic — how ironic, from both Bernard's and Peter's perspectives — to have extensive and varied intercourse with the enemy.

During his trip to Toledo, the year after Abelard died, Peter witnessed the shape and challenges of the future for men of faith and learning like himself. There, in that city that was now Christian — indeed, one of the principal sees of the Church, under the control of his own Cluny and now, finally, using the universal Roman rite — men like Robert of Ketton were deeply entrenched, reading everything they could find in Arabic. Who could say how many of those scholars (and there were more every day) might be so fascinated with astronomy and algebra and astrolabes that they might, thus distracted and seduced, lose sight of true Christian faith? At hand, Peter could see, was a battle for the hearts and minds of the next generation of Europe's best intellects.

Michael Scot was one of the Emperor's favorites, and with good reason. Physician, astrologer, necromancer, and expert translator of Arabic and Hebrew texts, he was the epitome of the intellectual that Frederick II — emperor of Sicily, Holy Roman Emperor, and king of Jerusalem — wanted around him, to help shape his own cultural ambitions and legacy. As his name suggests, Michael was by birth from Scotland, but he had left his homeland as a young man and was a product of the very best school for the craft of translation, the century-old intellectual center of Toledo. In the 1220s, when he arrived in Sicily, where he would live out the rest of his life, he already had a reputation as a magician, but what made him most glamorous at Frederick's court — based in Palermo in principle but a very mobile affair in practice — was his fame as a translator during the early thirteenth century, when