

Andalusia: political decline, cultural flourishing

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At the beginning of the eleventh century, the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate coincided with political fragmentation. It was in this unusual context, soon to be exacerbated by Christian incursions from the north and Berber incursions from the south, that this part of the Muslim world experienced a flourishing culture.

Reviewed: Emmanuelle Tixier du Mesnil, *Savoir et pouvoir en al-Andalus au XIe siècle* (Knowledge and Power in Eleventh-Century Andalusia), Paris, Seuil, 2022. 416 p., 24,50 €.

The cultural history of Spain in the eleventh century is a subject that historians--as opposed Arabists--rarely examine. It is the focus of this new study, which seeks to resituate eleventh-century Andalusia in the broader history of the Islamic world by connecting politics and culture. The eleventh century was a genuine turning point. Emmanuelle Tixier du Mesnil revisits the sources from this well documented period to explain the cultural flourishing of *al-Andalus* at a moment when it was politically divided and growing weaker vis-à-vis neighboring Christian and Berber states. The study begins with the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate (929-1031) at the conclusion of a long civil war that gave birth to many principalities or *taifas*. The latter disappeared, in turn, around 1090, as they were gradually conquered by the Berber Almoravid dynasty.

The myth of *al-Andalus*

The Andalusian myth is a fixture of the historiographical imagination, a lost paradise in which the three monotheistic religions (Islam, Christians, Jews) lived in a state of mutual tolerance amid beautiful palaces and gardens, cultural refinement, a high level of intellectual achievement, and a nearby Orient, with all the nostalgia it inspired. Hence the importance of showing the different stages by which this Andalusian paradigm of tolerance--a term that Tixier du Mesnil refrains from using--was constructed, from its origins to the present.

It is to this end that the book evokes the controversy (which now seems a thing of the past) that, from the 1950s to the 1980s, pitted Américo Castro against Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz over the role that coexistence between Christians, Muslims, and Jews during the Middle Ages played in the definition of the "Spanish Man". For Castro, the distinctive characteristics of Spanish identity came together in the medieval period. Its distinctive feature was a symbiosis between the three cultures--Jewish, Christian, and Muslim--that allegedly coexisted, for the most part peaceably, on the Iberian Peninsula. Challenging Castro's method, sources, and his conclusions, Sánchez-Albornoz replied that Spanish traits were forged as far back as Roman *Hispania* and that they resisted foreign influence at the various periods in Spain's history when it was dominated.

The two scholars also sought to identify and explain the origins of Spain's "backwardness" in relation to other modern countries. For Sánchez-Albornoz, the Muslim and Jewish presence lasted too long, resulting in a Christian obsession with war. The emphasis on military affairs over several centuries so consumed the Spanish that it detracted them from economic development, even as it became a preoccupation of other European countries. For his part, Castro, to explain Spain's decline, emphasized the expulsion and forced conversion of the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Without reopening this settled debate and by adopting a more innovative approach, Tixier du Mesnil shows how this paradigm was reborn in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when it was reinterpreted as the medieval genesis of multiculturalism and a model of living together. The revival of this paradigm also gave some polemicists an opportunity to deconstruct this myth and condemn medieval Islam. Tixier du Mesnil refutes these claims, highlighting their contradictions through a methodical examination of sources. This first step is indispensable for grasping the

topic's historiographical stakes and it represents a useful reminder--an appropriate one given the current context--of the historians' tools and methods. For example, it is because the concept of tolerance emerged in modern times that it cannot explain medieval behavior. Applying it to the Middle Ages is completely anachronistic.

A political history of eleventh-century taifas

Before shedding light on cultural change, it is first necessary to define the complicated context of Andalusia in "the wonderful eleventh century" through an interpretation of political events that draws on Arab sources, including Ibn 'Idhari, Ibn Khaldun, and the memoirs of Abd Allah, the last Zirid emir of Grenada. Tixier du Mesnil makes several bold claims: while the century began with a civil war occurring between 1009 and 1031 known as the Fitnah, which sowed disorder and ended the caliphate, it was characterized primarily by a crisis of the state and the military, tied to the recruitment of Berber and Christian troops. Muslim authors mostly emphasized the ethnic character of the conflict between princes. This perspective was embraced by historians specialized in Andalusia, such as Évariste Lévi-Provençal, who, in the 1940s was already dividing the taifas into three groups: Andalusian taifas governed by families of Arab origin that arrived at the beginning of the Muslim conquest; *esclavon* taifas, whose masters were former top civil servants who had once been slaves; and Berber taifas administered by princes of Berber origins.

Tixier du Mesnil shows that these three types of principalities were primarily Andalusian and emerged during the civil war of the first third of the eleventh century. It was during this delicate period that Andalusians constructed a distinct identity based on high culture, intellectual achievement, and the inability to wage war. Indeed, faced with threats from the Berbers to the south and from the Christian princes to the north, who imposed tribute payments, engaged in conflicts between Muslim princes, and annexed territory as part of the *Reconquista*, many intellectuals wondered about their future and their land's. Andalusia's Arab identity thus became an issue and an act of defiance, particularly in the second half of the eleventh century. This identity expressed itself in the form of dense and varied cultural production that made this period an "intellectual golden age." Underscoring this paradox, Tixier du Mesnil observes: "power and vulnerability can go hand in hand" (p. 183).

Cultural production amid political division

The effervescence of Andalusian cultural production at the time of the taifas period illustrates the richness of the period's intellectual life: geographers like al-Bakri, historians such as Ibn Hayyan, polygraphs like Ibn Hazm, and scholars, poets, and men of letters of all types produced work to which the eleventh century owes its status as the zenith of Andalusian culture. The study considers culture at many different levels in order to grasp the changes underway in the cultural and political realms. Far from being a simple attribute of the caliphate, culture lay at the heart of the Muslim principalities' political project. Encouraging the arts, science, and letters was a way of acquiring legitimacy by aligning oneself with Umayyad ideology, which remained a model. It was also a way of remaining an Arab and Muslim center despite political and military difficulties--and, most importantly, in response to them.

This rich intellectual life contributed to the construction of an Arab and Andalusian identity that was intended precisely to show that Andalusia would not die with the Umayyads and would continue to exist despite the eleventh century's political disorder. The book's final part consists of portraits of several intellectuals and their journeys through different taifa courts. The most famous eleventh-century Andalusian intellectual, Ibn Hazm (994-1064) took advantage of the rivalry between Muslim principalities to write with a degree of freedom and to put forth ideas that were very controversial for their time.

By proposing a typology of learned courts, Tixier du Mesnil calls attention to the division of intellectual activity in the Andalusian taifas, which, like northern cities such as Toledo and Saragossa, seemed to emphasize mathematics and astronomy. She very logically explains this phenomenon by referring to the Umayyad caliphate's cultural legacy following the Fitnah and the sovereign's desire to identify himself with imperial ideology. It is worth recalling that no principality had the means to centralize the period's intellectual achievement the way the Umayyad capital once did.

The abundance of references and examples is evidence of this study's care and erudition, which is now essential to the literature on eleventh-century Andalusia. By combining political and cultural history, the book makes it possible to grasp the complexity of the social worlds of the Andalusian taifas, in which Arab identity remained closely associated with scholarly and sedentary culture. The Iberian Peninsula is portrayed as a land where great political inventiveness was deployed to fill the void left by the Umayyad caliphate's disappearance.

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