



IN MEDIEVAL ANDALUSIA, THE BOOK WAS A KEY MARKER OF A PERSON'S STATUS IN SOCIETY

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Abstract. *This article examines the place of books and libraries in medieval Andalusia (711–1492) and shows how, in Cordoban society, the possession of books and the building of personal libraries became an important marker of a person's social status. Drawing on the patronage of the Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus especially al-Hakam I, Abd al-Rahman II, and al-Hakam II it describes the founding of the great library of Cordoba, the work of the book-collectors (warraqun) and copyists (nussakh), and the broad culture of book-collecting that distinguished the people of al-Andalus.*

Keywords: *al-Andalus, Cordoba, library, book culture, Umayyads, al-Hakam II, manuscripts, al-Maqqari, social status.*

INTRODUCTION

The Iberian Peninsula, where the present-day states of Spain and Portugal are situated, was called by the Arabs in antiquity "Jazirat al-Andalus" (the Island of al-Andalus). As a large empire, Andalusia was governed by Muslims for nearly eight centuries. Al-Andalus was at first a province within the Umayyad state of Syria; in 756 an independent emirate, with its capital at Cordoba, was established here. The glorious eight-century history of al-Andalus is divided into the following six important periods: the period of conquest and governors (711–756), the Umayyad period (756–1031), the period of the Muluk al-Tawa'if (the party kings, 1031–1090), the Almoravid (Murabitun) period (1090–1147), the Almohad (Muwahhidun) period (1147–1228), and the period of the Emirate of Granada (1238–1492).

MAIN PART

During the reigns of such members of the dynasty as al-Hakam (796–822) and his son Abd al-Rahman II (822–852), and of Caliph al-Nasir and his son al-Hakam II (961–976), the interest in science and education in Andalusia rose to especially high levels, and internal and external diplomacy, trade, and learning flourished. Al-Hakam resembled



neither his father nor his grandfather; he was an utter devotee of poetry and hunting. During his rule, the participation of the jurists (fuqaha) in the administration of the state was somewhat restricted, and they were directed mainly toward the comprehensive development of the fields of science. Abd al-Rahman II invited scholars from all over the world even from the centre, Baghdad to al-Andalus. In Cordoba he had a library built that met the new, modern requirements; in size it was second only to the academy in Baghdad. Commerce and the exchange of goods also developed greatly in the state, and magnificent buildings, gardens, and palaces were erected. According to the historians, during his rule no poor person could be found in the streets of al-Andalus.

During the reign of al-Hakam, one of the dynasty's early members, the foundation was laid for one of the largest libraries of the Middle Ages. He sent book-collecting agents to many cities of the world and filled al-Andalus with the rare books of the age, managing to gather hundreds of thousands of books in the library of Cordoba. He gathered in al-Andalus not only books but also many of the leading scholars of his time. He also thoroughly reformed the activity of the Cordoba congregational mosque, turning it into a major centre of learning, and opened vocational schools of various kinds for the children of the helpless poor. Valuing the services of their teachers (mudarris), he assigned them good salaries from the public treasury (bayt al-mal). In a word, none of the rulers of al-Andalus served learning and books as much as al-Hakam did.

The reason that special importance was attached to the question of books and libraries in al-Andalus lay in the people's genuine love of books, which became one of the distinctive virtues of the people of al-Andalus in history. In the country, learning was regarded as one of the lofty duties in everyone's eyes, and the book became a thing more precious than any jewel; at the same time, this feeling was not foreign even to an ordinary citizen. For this reason, the books of the world flowed ceaselessly into al-Andalus in that period; a great quantity of text-books was written there, and works considered rare were copied again and again by scribes. As a result, many personal libraries belonging to statesmen, scholars, and other strata of the population were established. Libraries of this kind could be observed in almost every household, and it became an ordinary thing for the master of a house first of all to show his bookshelves as a courtesy to visiting guests. With this regard, scholarly consultations and discussions were arranged among close acquaintances and relatives, and books were exchanged with one another for reading.



The first and largest library founded in al-Andalus was the library of Cordoba, built in the time of Abd al-Rahman II (822–852), whose books reached 400,000 in the time of al-Hakam II (961–976). The leading scholar of his age, al-Maqqari, writes the following concerning the library of Cordoba: “The library contained 400,000 books, and when it had to be moved, the task lasted nearly six months.” In the time of Caliph al-Hakam, 500 people were employed in this library. The library was indeed so vast that the catalogue consisting merely of the titles of its books was gathered into forty volumes. At that time, the library of Saint Gall in Switzerland considered the largest book centre in Europe held only 600 books (Hillenbrand, 1992:121).

In the time of Caliph al-Hakam II, persons called “warraq” were sent to various centres of learning around the world to collect books; they bought up the valuable books there and brought them to al-Andalus. In addition, there were also people called “nussakh” who were engaged in copying books. They made copies of books that could not be bought in such cities as Cairo, Baghdad, Alexandria, and Damascus, and sent them to Cordoba (Emin, 2017:38).

Al-Hakam, a major statesman and patron of science, competed with the Abbasid caliphs in supporting the writing of new books and scholarly activity; to this end he sent his special servants, their purses full of money, several times a year to various lands to collect books. Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani author of the work “Kitab al-Aghani,” which came into being as the fruit of fifty years’ labour and which had few equals among the Arabs was a contemporary of this Umayyad caliph al-Hakam; he too was originally a member of the Umayyad house. Al-Hakam sent a special messenger to al-Isfahani, asking him to send the said book to him before presenting it to the Abbasids, and gave him a thousand dinars in return (al-Maqqari, 1968, 1:180). If we take into account that the salary of the chamberlain (hajib) the highest office-holder in the state at that time was eighty dinars, we may grasp how greatly al-Hakam valued books. In the time of his follower and fellow dynast al-Hakam II as well, interest in reading and book-collecting spread widely in al-Andalus; during his caliphate, seventeen major libraries were in operation in al-Andalus, advancing even beyond the previous centuries (Lerner, 2002:71).

CONCLUSION

Thus, for the people of Cordoba, book collections were an important means of determining their status in society. Even people who possessed no learning at all set up libraries in their homes and conducted their own “scholarly trade.”



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