
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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AL-ANDALUS IN AFRICA. SOME NOTES ON THE TRANSFER OF TECHNOLOGY BY THE 17TH CENTURY SPANISH MORISCO REFUGEES TO NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

When we examine what constitutes cultural exchange and transfer between nations, the exchange or transfer of technology comes high on the list. Technology is relatively easy to transmit: it meets with little resistance, especially when the recipient nation or group wants and needs it and very often initiates the exchange. Of all forms of technological transmission none is more rapidly undertaken — unfortunately — than military technology. The Chinese invented gunpowder and changed the course of history. Within a few decades of its use in the Far East it was being used by the Christian armies of Spain to batter down the last remaining fortresses of the Muslim Kingdom of Granada. The War of Granada of 1481—1492 was one of the first instances of the use of gunpowder in European warfare and without it the Kingdom of Granada might not have been overcome, or may have survived long enough for military assistance to arrive from North Africa or the growing Ottoman Empire, which by 1480 was already besieging Rhodes and pressing on to incorporate Egypt within its borders.

But it was not to be and the Kingdom, or Sultanate of Granada disappeared from the map, being incorporated into the new Kingdom of Spain created by the marriage of Isabela of Castilla and Ferdinand of Aragón. Although the newly acquired Muslim subjects of the Spanish monarchs were initially promised and given religious freedom and toleration this was not to last long. A regime of enforced conversion to Christianity was installed and a campaign of enforced social and cultural assimilation was begun. This is probably best indicated by the destruction of thousands of Arabic manuscripts by the new authorities in Granada, burned to ashes on the grounds that most Arabic manuscripts were copies of the Qurʾān; and if not at least contained heretical doctrines. We shall never know what treasures of history, literature, philosophy went up in smoke with the religious texts that certainly must have constituted the bulk of the bonfire.

The enforced conversion and expropriation of lands and property resulted in first several major revolts by the former Muslim population, now known by the derogatory names as Moriscos, little Moors / Muslims, by which was meant “false Christians” which many — though by no means all — were. The most serious revolt occurred in 1568 in the area around the city of Granada and the area of the Alpujarras mountains and much of the Mediterranean coast to the south was out of the control of the Madrid government for several years. A major campaign under the command of Don Juan de Austria, stepson of Phillip II was necessary before the revolt was put down. Many thousands of Morisco inhabitants at least 60,000 were expelled to other parts of Spain. Other revolts followed in the next half century and in 1609 Phillip III issued the infamous decree which expelled all Moriscos from Spain, estimates of the numbers vary, but probably around one million people were forced to leave between the promulgation of the decree and 1617 [1].

These tragic events did have one positive result and that was the transmission of much knowledge, skill and technology to North Africa and the Sahel. The expelled population contained many artisans and skilled workers of all sorts, but also professional types like doctors, soldiers and sailors.

The Moriscos were not the first inhabitants of al-Andalus (Islamic Spain and Portugal) to travel to North Africa and the Sahel and to leave their mark in the field of progress. One of the most famous was Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Sāhīlī. He was born in Granada in 1290 and died in Timbuktu in 1346. He was a poet, traveller and diplomat who met Mansa Musa the famous ruler of Mali in 1324 and was invited to Timbuktu where he exhibited another talent — that of master-builder and architect. He built an audience chamber for Mansa Musa which so delighted the ruler that he asked him to construct a palace and the Great or Jingreyber Mosque of Timbuktu, which exists until