

## Theme 2.5, Transmission of Traditions, Islamic Spain

### Historical Background

Arab and Berber armies conquered the Iberian Peninsula between the eighth and fifteenth centuries CE. After conquest, Islamic culture was spread through military might, intermarriage between conquerors and indigenous peoples, and immigrant Muslims who brought their traditions with them. By the late eleventh century, small Christian communities who had resisted Islamic conquest began the *reconquista*—the Christian reconquest of Spain. The reconquest took 500 years to accomplish, and in 1492 the last of the Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Though some Jews and Muslims continued to live in Spain, pretending to convert to Christianity, most of the forced migrants settled in North Africa or in the Ottoman Empire at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. In cities from Palestine to Bosnia, Jewish communities settled and lived in peace and harmony with their neighbors. And they brought with them their traditions from Spain: their music, their language, and their community structure. In North Africa, the Muslims from Andalusia had a similar effect, settling in cities from Morocco to Tunisia and bringing with them their traditions from Spain. So, the tragedy of 1492 proved to be a means of spreading a rich culture from Spain to other parts of the world.

### Gardens and Architecture

The first Muslim ruler of Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman, a native of Syria, built mosques and gardens planted with imports from the Middle East and North Africa. By the tenth century, many new plants were introduced: citrus fruits, rice, sugar cane, cotton, pomegranate, roses, lilies, and herbs.



Mosque in Cordoba, Spain demonstrates a blend of Roman arches and Islamic geometric schemes.



GARDEN OF THE  
ALCAZAR, CORDOBA (n.d.).  
Courtesy of Oregon Public  
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### **Libraries and Scholarship**

Pilgrims from Spain traveled to Muslim holy sights, and both migrants and travelers from the Islamic world traveled to Spain. In each case, such people spread Islamic learning and ideas throughout the Iberian Peninsula. The great centers of learning in the western region of Afro-Eurasia were Cairo, Basra, Baghdad, and Timbuktu. The Muslim pilgrims returned from their journeys with books and built libraries. The library of Cordoba housed some 400,000 volumes. This was at a time when the typical European library contained about 500 books, and when literacy was not yet valued among the ruling elite in northern Europe. Jews and Christians in Islamic Spain also encouraged the spread of Islamic culture by translating Arabic works into European languages—including some of the most important scientific texts of the era.

One of the most famous examples is the twelfth-century Jewish physician and philosopher Moses Maimonides, who was born in Cordoba. He wrote a number of famous works including a commentary in Hebrew on the Mishneh (a comprehensive code of Jewish law) and the *Guide to the Perplexed*, written in Arabic, which elucidates the ideas in the Torah in the context of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Ironically, the Jewish community was under attack during his lifetime, so he and his family moved to Cairo where he became the physician to the Sultan Saladin, the military commander who defeated the Crusaders. Below is Maimonides' *Oath for New Physicians*—created to be an alternative to the Hippocratic Oath.

The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love for my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children. May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain. Grant me the strength, time, and opportunity always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend domain; for knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend indefinitely to enrich itself daily with new requirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he can obtain a new light on what he thinks himself sure of today. Oh, God, Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; here am I ready for my vocation and now I turn unto my calling. (Moses Maimonides, *Oath of Maimonides*, c. 1200.)

Two generations after Christian armies captured Toledo, Bishop Raimundo created a school of translators there to re-write Arabic works into Latin so that educated people in northern Europe could read them. Some of the most important scientific texts of the early twelfth century that were translated were the writings of the eleventh century Muslim philosopher and physician Ibn Sina. A Persian, Ibn Sina—known in later European medical texts as Avicenna—expanded on some of the medical ideas of the ancient Greeks. Europeans considered the Latin translation of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* to be the most important source of medical knowledge until the sixteenth century.

### **Music**

Poetic rhyme and meter in Arabic—and subsequently Arabic music—became increasingly popular by the ninth century. Aided by the technology of paper manufacturing, Arabic poetry and music became widely disseminated, and deeply influenced musical styles in Islamic Spain. Troubadors (*tarrab* means minstrel in Arabic) then spread this music throughout northern Spain and southern France.

**Analyze this information so you can make generalizations about the causes, transmission systems, impacts, and adaptations when a new set of traditions is introduced into a region.**