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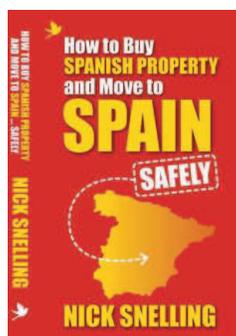
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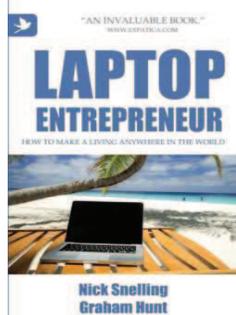
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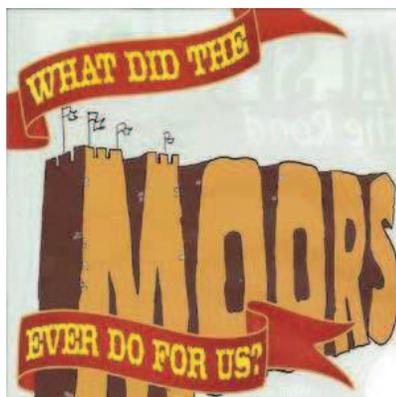
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WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US?



BY NICK SNELLING

One of the curiosities of Spain is the seeming denial by the Spanish of the past existence of the Moors in their country. Certainly, much is made of the 'heroic' Christian Reconquista, but rarely is the Moorish invasion of Spain looked upon as having provided any intrinsic benefit. In fact, apart from a few scintillating buildings, such as the [Alhambra](#) and the Cordoba Mezquita, it would be easy to imagine that, during their 780 years presence, the Moors contributed nothing of consequence to Spain.

In fact, the Moors had a profound influence not just upon Spain but the whole of Western Europe. Indeed, it has been said that they laid the foundations of the Renaissance that brought Europe out of the intellectual and physical gloom of the Middle Ages.

In the 10th Century Cordoba, for example, was not just the capital of Al Andalus (Moorish Spain) but also one of the most important cities in the world, rivalling Baghdad and Constantinople. It boasted a population of 500,000 (200,000 more than now) and had street lighting, fifty hospitals (with running water!), three hundred public baths, five hundred mosques and seventy libraries – one of which held some 500,000 books. All of this, at a time when London had a largely illiterate population of around 20,000 and had forgotten the technical advances of the Romans some 600 hundred years beforehand.

More importantly, the Moors brought enormous learning to Spain which, over the coming centuries, would percolate through to the rest of Europe. In fact, it was the intellectual achievements of the Moors that were to have a lasting effect, well beyond their more prosaic contributions towards construction, irrigation systems and agriculture. Indeed three of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages emerged from Moorish Spain: Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Arabi and the Jew Maimonides.

Strange though it may seem now, Islam actively promoted learning and scholarship during its Golden Age (750 – 1258) with rulers across the Arab world vying with each other to develop and patronise great centres of learning. This was totally consistent with the teaching of the founder of Islam, Mohammad, who believed that 'the scholar's ink is holier than the martyr's blood' and that 'seeking knowledge is required of every Muslim'.

So dynamic was Islam during its Golden Age, that Arabic became both the international language of scholarship and the language into which original, and often ancient and nearly forgotten, manuscripts in Greek, Latin, ancient Egyptian and Chinese were translated. The vast body of work created was of the first importance, as it preserved ideas and thoughts from previous ages and amalgamated them into a form capable of rigorous study. In turn, this nurtured an environment that generated great intellectuals, who were able to expand upon a range of vital matters from philosophy to astronomy through to medicine, the development of higher mathematics, navigation and dramatically new farming techniques.

The Umayyad Moorish rulers of Spain ardently wanted their Al Andalus possessions to equal that of Baghdad in both splendour and learning and, in Cordoba, actively sought out and patronised scholarship. By the time Abd al-Rahman III had established a formal Caliphate, Cordoba had become a magnet for scholars from both the East and Western Europe, irrespective of religion. This tradition reached its apogee during the reign of his son Al Hakim, before the Umayyad dynasty collapsed and Al Andalus descended into anarchy.

However, by good fortune, the libraries of Toledo, in particular, survived the conquest of that city by the Christian King Alfonso VI in 1085 and Toledo quickly became a European centre for the translation of Arabic

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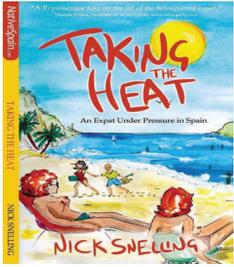
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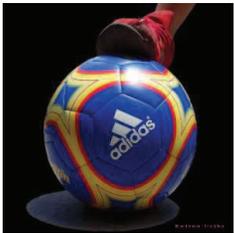


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texts into Latin – the universal, educated language of Western Europe. Under some enlightened rulers, most notably Alfonso X (The Wise), the scientific and philosophical works of the Moors were translated and their knowledge dispersed around Europe.

One of the most influential Moors was the philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) who was born in Cordoba. He translated the largely lost works of Aristotle (perhaps the greatest thinker the world has known and someone committed to logic and intellectual rigour) whilst commenting upon the texts. These had a lasting effect upon Western philosophy, were taught in universities for the next four hundred years and were highly commended by St Thomas Aquinas himself.

Meanwhile, an almost contemporaneous philosopher, Ibn Arabi, born in Murcia was to have a possibly greater impact on the Muslim world. A prolific writer of some 800 texts, Ibn Arabi was a radical thinker and teacher who is still revered today for his articulation and development of Sufism, the Islamic tradition of mysticism.

Finally, in this hot-house time for philosophers, Moses Maimonides, a Jew from Cordoba was writing seminal works on Jewish philosophy, law and ethics. So influential were his writings that even today he is considered one of the foremost Rabbi's and thinkers of the Jewish religion. Somehow, at the same time, he also managed to rise to such pre-eminence as a doctor that he was also considered to be the greatest medical practitioner of his era.

But, of course, the Moors did not just support great translators and developers of ideas and cerebral concepts. Moorish Spain was nothing if not diverse and produced a range of important practical advances, particularly in the field of medicine. Spurred on by Mohammad's order to: 'make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it...' a real urgency to improve medical care occurred throughout Muslim controlled territories.

In Spain, the 'father of modern surgery', Abu al-Quasim (Al Zahrawi), was born in Cordoba. During a practice that lasted fifty years, he developed a range of innovative and precise surgical instruments, whilst writing a text book that was to be a cornerstone of Western medical training for the next 500 years.

Around the same time Ibn Zuhr (Avensoar) 1091 – 1161, from Seville, was practising as one of the greatest physicians of the Middle Ages and using inhaled anaesthetics on his patients. He was the first person to describe diseases caused by parasites, was an expert in anatomy and wrote books that, when translated into Latin, were used until the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, al-Baytar (died 1248) wrote authoritatively on drugs and medicinal plants, al-Nafis (1213 – 1288) was the first to discover the pulmonary circulation of blood and Ibn Hasim tackled medical ethics and hygiene (a concept virtually unknown in Western Europe).

The Moors in Spain were also famous as astronomers and mathematicians. Indeed, algebra comes from the Arabic al-jabr and the previously unknown, and critically important, Eastern concept of zero (probably originating from Babylonia) was introduced to Europe via Spain. Certainly, the Moors had a keen interest in mathematics and in al-Zarquali (Arzachel) from Toledo they produced a man of prodigious gifts who contributed to the Toledan Tables (a compilation of astronomical data). He also developed a flat astrolabe, precision astronomical instruments and compiled tables of latitude and longitude.

The Moors scientific curiosity had even extended to flight with the polymath Ibn Firnas making the first scientific attempt to fly, in a controlled manner, in 875. This evidently worked, although the landing was less successful.

Of more practical daily use, was the introduction by the Moors, into Spain, of new food crops such as rice, hard wheat, cotton, oranges, lemons, sugar and cotton. Importantly, along with these foodstuffs came an intimate knowledge of irrigation. This was complemented by sophisticated metalworking and weaving techniques and complex interior design skills that took buildings to new heights of intensive and intricate decoration. Paper making was also brought to Spain, allowing the growth of books and, thereby, the accurate preservation and dispersal of knowledge – with Xativa, in Valencia, having the first paper factory in Europe.

Of course, now, much of what the Moors achieved has been lost in time and largely appears to be restricted to a few ostentatiously gorgeous buildings. However, we still meet traces of the Moors in the language of Spain, as it is peppered with Moorish words. Hola derives, from the Middle Eastern greeting of 'Allah', Ojala from 'in sha'Allah', Madrid was Majrit (water channel) and Beni, which is used in many place names, is Moorish for 'son of'. Perhaps, they should act as daily reminders of the past importance of Moorish influence and make us a little more tolerant of Islam's current dangerously hysterical intellectual insecurity.

Because the Moors were important and contributed greatly, ironically, to the development of Christian civilisation in Western Europe. In the Dark Ages, when Europe had descended into medieval ignorance, it was the Moors who kept alive the lost philosophy and analytical powers of reasoning of the Greeks, together with the learning of ancient civilisations. They preserved this knowledge and, through their burning desire for

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scholarship and advancement, greatly improved upon what was then known, across multifarious spectrums. Accidentally, though it was, they kept alive the flame of Western progress when it was most in danger of being extinguished. It was a flame that was, during the Renaissance, to explode the West to the forefront of world civilisation.

TIMELINE

711 Moors cross into Spain. Tariq ibn-Ziyad brings Moorish army
Moors defeat last Visigoth King (Roderick 1 at Battle of Rio Barbate)
719 Moors control almost all of Spain and their control reaches to the Pyrenees
732 Moors defeated by Charles Martel at Poitiers in France – the limit of their northern advance
750 – 1258 The Golden Age of Islam
756 Abd al-Rahman I (Umayyad prince from Syria) makes Cordoba the capital of Al Andalus
912 – 961 Reign of Abd al-Rahman III. Established Caliphate and intellectual tradition of Cordoba
1031 Umayyad dynasty collapses
1031- 1086 Anarchy
1085 King Alfonso VI captures Toledo
1118 Christians capture Zaragoza
1145 Almohad Dynasty come to power
1147 Almohads capture Sevilla and make it the capital of Al Andalus
1212 Moors defeated at the Battle of La Naves de Tolosa by the united armies of Castille, Aragon, Navarre and Portugal
1232 – 1492 Granada is the only Moorish territory on the Iberian Peninsula
1232 King of Granada is Muhammad I
1238 – 1358 Construction of the Alhambra palace (Granada)
1238 Valencia re-captured by the Christians
1492 Moorish rule ends with the fall of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella.

PERSONALITIES

Muhammad 570 – 632

Prophet
Founded the religion of Islam
Promoted the importance of learning and scholarship

Abd al-Rahman 731 – 786

Reigned 756 – 786
Founder of Umayyad dynasty that ruled Iberia for 300 years
The 'Falcon of Andalus'
Started construction of the Mezquita of Cordoba

Abd al-Rahman III 891 – 961

Reigned 912 – 961
Caliph and greatest Umayyad ruler
Patron of the arts and fine administrator
Cordoba became the greatest centre of learning in Europe

Al Hakim unknown – 976

Reigned 961 – 976
Had a library in Cordoba of over 500,000 books
Expanded Cordoba's mesquita

Alfonso X of Castille 1221- 1284

Nicknamed 'El Sabio' (The Learned)
A writer and intellectual
Patronised The School of Translators of Toledo

Abbas Ibn Firnas 810 – 887

Born Ronda
Polymath – scientist, musician, inventor
The first man to try flying scientifically

Abu al-Quasim (Al Zahrawi) 936 – 1013

Born in Cordoba

Father of modern surgery
Wrote a 30 volume medical encyclopedia (Kiyab al-Tasrif)
Influenced medicine for 500 years
Designed new surgical instruments and techniques

Al Zarquali (Arzachel) 1028 – 1087

Lived in Toledo
Mathematician, astronomer and inventor
Contributed to the Tables of Toledo
Influenced the re-birth of mathematical astronomy

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) 1126 – 1198

Born Cordoba
'The Commentator'
Father of secular thought in Western Europe
Intellectual and polymath
Brought Aristotle's ideas of logic and analytical thinking back to the West

Moses Maimonides 1135 – 1204

Born in Cordoba
Jewish scientist and philosopher
Considered the greatest doctor of his time
Greatly influenced by Averroes

Ibn Arabi 1165 – 1240

Born in modern day Murcia
Philosopher and mystic
Wrote some 800 works
Has exerted a huge influence on Islamic spiritual thought

BY NICK SNELLING (www.culturespain.com)

(Noms de plume: Alexander Peters, Elena Suarez, Alberto Diaz)

18 Responses to "WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US?"

1. [WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? Spanish Culture | Valencia Property TV](#) says:

October 4, 2010 at 9:04 am

[...] <http://www.culturespain.com/articles/what-did-the-moors-do-for-us> [...]

2. [Yeebaa Discounts](#) says:

October 4, 2010 at 2:59 pm

That is wonderously informative and detailed – thanks for that! I don't totally agree with the notion that Spain denies it's moorish past as when I grew up here (Torremolinos) during the late 70's & 80's they taught us (at state school) all about the moorish culture and what they'd left, irrigation, mathematics, architecture etc.. However, they (generalising totally here) do seem more opposed to the arabic culture than ever before. But isn't that all of Europe now?

[Discount Guide to Costa del Sol](#)

3. [nicks](#) says:

October 4, 2010 at 3:14 pm



Thank you for your kind comments! In fact, of course, we all owe a debt to Arabic learning and their intellectual achievements of the past. As I think I may have said in the article(?), they kept the flame of knowledge alive (and

expanded upon it) when, in Northern Europe, we were in the appropriately named Dark Ages. I suppose the shock (or shame) is that the evident tolerance of the Arabs has been lost now in a self-destructive dogma... Incidentally, when you have a moment, do look at some of the other articles within Controversies of Spanish Culture (on the main menu). You may also find them interesting? The full published versions are on my personal web site <http://www.nicholassnelling.com>.

4. **WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? Spanish Culture | Devanio** says:
October 5, 2010 at 9:46 am

[...] <http://www.culturespain.com/articles/what-did-the-moors-do-for-us> Share and Enjoy: [...]

5. **Emma** says:
November 27, 2010 at 11:01 am



Just wanted to say thank you so much for this well written and highly informative article. It has helped me a great deal with my research.
Best regards, Emma

6. **Nick Snelling** says:
November 27, 2010 at 11:11 am



Emma, how kind! It was an interesting time and the Moors and Arabic leaning contributed greatly to Western civilisation – although this is little recognised...

7. **WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? Spanish Culture | Valencia Property Blog** says:
December 16, 2010 at 12:33 pm

[...] <http://www.culturespain.com/articles/what-did-the-moors-do-for-us> [...]

8. **Articles and information about Spain** says:
July 22, 2011 at 5:35 pm

[...] WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? – The Moors entered Spain in 711 and left (very reluctantly) hundreds of later. Although they are much reviled now, the Moors in Spain contributed an amazing amount to both Spain and Europe. Without them, would Europe ever have dug itself out of the 'Dark Ages'? [...]

9. **Granada, the best of Spain** says:
August 29, 2011 at 5:09 pm

[...] What did the Moors do for us? – The Moors incredible (and largely forgotten!) contributions to Europe [...]

10. **The Anglo Spanish War of Jenkins' Ear, a curious matter!** says:
November 22, 2011 at 4:15 pm

[...] BIG BANG WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? [...]

11. **CULTURE SPAIN: EL CID (SPANISH NATIONAL HERO AND EXTRAORDINARY SOLDIER)** says:
February 17, 2012 at 6:00 pm

[...] WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? – The Moors entered Spain in 711 and left (reluctantly) hundreds of later. Although they are much reviled now, in fact they contributed an amazing amount to both Spain and Europe. [...]

12. **Holidays in Spain and the top four tourist attractions in Spain!** says:
February 18, 2012 at 7:22 pm

[...] WHAT DID THE MOORS DO FOR US? – The Moors entered Spain in 711 and left (reluctantly) hundreds of years later. Although they are much reviled now, they contributed an amazing amount to both Spain and Europe. [...]

13. **Catalonia, a Cultural History** says:
February 28, 2012 at 5:45 pm

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14. **The origins of the Spanish Civil War** says:

February 28, 2012 at 8:58 pm

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15. **CULTURE SPAIN – TOLEDO IN SPAIN** says:

February 29, 2012 at 11:38 am

[...] INFO. What did the Moors do for us? If you liked this, Subscribe to my RSS feed Posted by Nick Snelling at 9:32 pm [...]

16. **Roger Mooore** says:

April 16, 2012 at 10:40 am

I find this post slightly interesting. Though I have found out there were three distinct periods which governed Spain at that particular time in history. One period that is missing is the Almoravid period. Which was primarily controlled by the Senegal Africans (Timbuktu)- South of the Sahara. Also , many people are using the word Moor and Arab interchangeably. Whereas an Arab was an Arab and a Moor was Black person , Christianized, Jew or Islamic convert. Can you let me have some sources. Thanks Roger moore

17. **Nick Snelling** says:

April 16, 2012 at 5:14 pm



Roger, thank you for your interest! Unfortunately, any article is always limited in its scope and so far too much has to be compressed into a few words. As to further references, I shall try to find my original notes and see if I can guide you further...

18. **Beth** says:

June 9, 2012 at 2:33 pm

Hi!

Thanks for such an interesting article. I am just wondering if you could point me in the direction of any of your sources? I was also particularly interested if you had any more information on Ibn Hasim, the guy who 'tackled medical ethics and hygiene' – I can't find anything more about him!

Many thanks again, it's helped a great deal with my dissertation!

Regards,

Beth

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