

Enduring  
contributions of the  
moors to spanish  
culture history essay



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“ TO THE traveller imbued with a feeling for the historical and poetical, so inseparably intertwined in the annals of romantic Spain [...] How many legends and traditions, true and fabulous; how many songs and ballads, Arabian and Spanish, of love and war and chivalry, are associated with this oriental pile! It was the royal abode of the Moorish kings, where surrounded with the splendours and refinements of Asiatic luxury, they held dominion over what they vaunted as a terrestrial paradise, and made stand for empire in Spain.” [1]

In the 19th century, as a contribution to his work about Spain, Washington Irving wrote about the Alhambra, one of the most significant symbols of the Muslim presence in Spain. He depicted, in an extraordinary way, the Muslim legacy in the Iberian Peninsula, and his work is relevant to be able to understand the importance of this event in history, nevertheless, before turning one's attention to the Muslim influences on the Spanish culture and life, it is worth making a brief introduction and context of this historical period.

The Islam, from its birth in the seventh century onwards, had been spreading to the Asiatic East and North Africa when in 711, Berber and Arab Muslim troops led by Tariq crossed the Strait of Gibraltar on their way to Toledo, the capital city of Spain at the time. Toledo got under siege and King Rodrigo's kingdom fell. In few years' time, the Muslims took over most of the Iberian Peninsula with no relevant resistance by the Spanish. The cause of this was the internal discords between the Visigoths and the passivity of the peninsular population, these contributed to the lack of opposition to the conquest. Consequently, the Islamic presence would last for almost a

thousand years, making Al-Ándalus one of the greater civilisations in history leaving a marvellous legacy that is still present in the actual Spain.

There is no doubt that the long Islamic presence in Spain influenced the Spanish culture and life enormously, being the social structure one of the main changes in the new Al-Ándalus. According to the author Anwar G. Chejne, there were two main social distinctions: Muslims and Non-Muslims.

On the one hand, the Muslim population, which started as the minority of the Spanish population, little by little began to grow and expand all over the country overcoming the number of Christians and Jews. Immigration, adoption and intermarriages with native people permitted the increase of the Muslim population that found their strength in their Arabic language and culture. As a consequence, the Arabs began to represent the ruling class, enjoying a predominant position in the social, economic and political life. They owned large territories where they imposed their language, culture and religion, the Islam.

Furthermore, it is also important to point out the presence of the Berbers in the Muslim society; as their beliefs did not exactly matched the Arab ones, they were not completely integrated. Nevertheless, as time passed, they grew in number and started to emulate the Muslim language, religion and outlook, therefore, they started to identify themselves as Arabs to be integrated in society.

On the other hand, the non-Muslim population represented the minority in the Islam Empire. Christians and Jews, with the purpose of not being distinct from Muslims, were arabized, this way they were granted protection of the <https://assignbuster.com/enduring-contributions-of-the-moors-to-spanish-culture-history-essay/>

religious law and entered society, nevertheless, they had to pay taxes so they were allowed to practice their religion. Furthermore, the Jews had a notorious presence in Muslim society given the fact that the Jewish intellectuals that had adopted the Arab language for self-expression.

In addition, it is possible to distinguish three more groups inside the non-Muslim society: the Mozarabs, Moros and Mudéjares. The Mozarabs were represented by the native population which had embraced the Islam, though a group of them remained faithful to Christianity but adopted the Arabic language and culture. After some time, the term ' Moro' started being used to refer to the Muslims living under the Christian rule -being used nowadays in Spain with a negative connotation; also the ' Moriscos' which referred to the Muslims that were forced to convert to Christianity and the ' Mudéjares' who were those that remained faithful to their religion. It is important to mention the remarkable accommodation and tolerance between Muslims and Christians for a long time, but after the eleventh century, there were two different attitudes toward Islam: the peaceful coexistence and harmony, and the intolerance and persecution mainly noticed with the Inquisition of Granada.

This great social diversity was kept alive thanks to the interaction of people and ideas, and the most important of all was pilgrimage. At least once in a lifetime, the faithful had to pilgrimage and search for knowledge to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Moreover, culture, the Arabic language and the Islamic religion played an important role as well in order to keep that mixture of people and cultures.

Once this being said, one could better understand and analyse other influences of the Moors through the social structure because it was the canal through which the Arabs contributed to the Spanish culture.

In addition, one need only take as an example the construction of the Alhambra, its location, distribution, architecture and decoration that perfectly depicts every enduring contribution of the Moors to Spanish culture and life.

One of the greatest wonders of the Alhambra is its inscriptions, that are not only religious, but they also tell stories about the construction of the different palaces itself. And when constructing the Alhambra, as in every building, there had to be a base, a start from the bottom to the top. In the case of a population or a kingdom, the base or the start would be education, and that is where the Arabs began their conquest.

In 711, the Iberian Peninsula was not only conquered, it also meant the beginning of a new cultural period in history. With the spread of the Arabic language over the population, emerge of literature and translations of Arabic works into Latin and Romance, a relevant and direct impact on the Spanish culture and thought was made.

Furthermore, in relation with education, Andalusians produced students with a strong tradition for learning and they were very interested in all branches of knowledge, being Cordova the centre of politics and the intellectual al-Ándalus. Moreover, it was only after the coming of the Muslims when al-Ándalus began to evolve sciences such as mathematics, physics, philosophy or astrology. According to Ibn Hazm it was necessary to deal with the <https://assignbuster.com/enduring-contributions-of-the-moors-to-spanish-culture-history-essay/>

education of the individual and then with the division of the sciences according to an Islamic framework. [2] Therefore, this cultivation of the sciences would lead to an “ eternal salvation”. “ Ibn Hazm conceives that the best sciences are those which lead to eternal salvation. The student of these sciences aimed at worldly gains, is amply rewarded. He gives little but he receives the tranquillity of an eternal life”. [3]

By the same token, the strong arabization that was being held in Spain at the time and the emergence of an important literary tradition, as said before, marked the Arabic language as the unifier factor in Al-Ándalus, for both Muslims and non-Muslims. And its development and evolution turned it into a representation of the state, culture and religion. A language which Christian and Jewish intellectuals also used for self-expression.

Such was the impact of the Arabic language on the Spanish culture that, over time, hundreds of Arabic words made their way into the Spanish language and they are even used nowadays; they are characterized by the start of the words with al-. To name just a few: Alhambra, almohada, algebra, almirante or algodón.

Going back to the Alhambra, over 10. 000 inscriptions, as said before, cover the walls of the fortress, they are poems, sentences or texts that belong to the Koran, Islam’s religious text. Therefore, finding these texts in the Alhambra reminds us that it was not only a palace, but also meant the presence of religion in the Muslim Empire.

And just like in the Alhambra, religion played a very important role in the Arabic Empire. It had a huge impact on society as well as on education, <https://assignbuster.com/enduring-contributions-of-the-moors-to-spanish-culture-history-essay/>

being Islamic religion the base of education in Muslim society whose purpose was the search of knowledge. Moreover, even though some social groups kept practising Christianity or Judaism, Islam influenced on them as well, developing a strong religious tradition that promoted different religious rituals.

As for the literary legacy, the Alhambra was subject of stories, poetry, music... Washington Irving or Federico García Lorca were also inspired by the 'red fortress'. And being linked to the literary tradition of Al-Ándalus and the inscriptions found in the Alhambra, it is also worth mentioning the rich historical and geographical legacy left by the Muslim Empire. History was considered very useful when instructing secular and religious life and there is a wide and detailed range of work with relevant geographical data about Spanish topography based on the travels of the Arabs.

The literary legacy is one of the most important and enduring contributions of the Moors, nevertheless, the most visible, obvious and marvellous one is the architecture and artistic legacy. According to Rabah Saoud the Islamisation of North Africa and Spain developed their architecture techniques and transformed them "from poverty and darkness to prosperity and enlightenment". [4]

The Alhambra in particular entails the best expression of the "nazarí" art of Granada. Being characterised by the use of new materials like wood, marble or precious metals, the presence of the fauna and flora and places full of water had a very important meaning in the Muslim art.

Therefore, the mix of cultures gave birth to this new Andalusian art that carried elements from different regions of the world such as North Africa, West Asia or Southern Europe, and its main purpose was to reach the ideal of sublime beauty. This feeling of the beautiful was represented by mosques, gardens, canals, bridges, palaces and promenades trying to represent the Muslim perception of paradise.

Buildings like the Alcázar and the Giralda in Seville and the Great Mosque of Cordova are also products of the Andalusian art. This last one, the Great Mosque of Cordova, was the major centre in religious and educational terms, and it is worth mentioning that after the Christian reconquest, a Christian church was build in the inside of the Mosque.

In addition, singing and music started to take part in this Muslim interpretation of the beautiful, and mainly in Seville, there was an important production of musical instruments. This would be another relevant contribution of the Moors as they participated in the creation of Cante Jondo, the Andalusian music that have survived through centuries and it is known nowadays as Flamenco. F. Herrera y Sánchez describes this singing as “ a plastic expression of music and poetry that springs from the mysterious creative instinct and artistic genius of the andaluz in a spiritual, almost frenzied, lament uttering his sacred and pagan culture”. [5]

All in all, the artistic and musical contribution of the Moors to Spanish life and culture is one of the most enduring ones, and all together with the influences already remarked conform one of the greatest civilisations in history. The remarkable convivencia of Al-Ándalus produces a brand new culture that has



made its way to the present and actual Spain, leaving the most marvellous and enchanted legacy that tried to fulfil the Muslim culmination of the divine revelation.

In other words, just like Richard Fletcher states about Moorish Spain: “Europe’s lead in resourcefulness and creativity, the vital factor in the history of the world for the six centuries preceding our own, was founded in large part on intelligent grasping at opportunities offered by the civilisation of Islam; and that proffer came through Spain. Islamic Spain was not just an exotic bit of orientalia quantity moored in the Iberian Peninsula which has left behind some pretty flotsam for tourists to take photographs of. It played a significant part in the formation of the Old World’s civilisation”. [6]

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