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The Lost Garden

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Matias Costa for The New York Times

The mosque of Córdoba, Spain.
By ERIC ORMSBY
Published: January 6, 2008

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The Umayyad dynasty of Spain, which dominated the Iberian Peninsula for almost 300 years, remained, for all its high cultural sophistication and sheer military might, an empire rooted in nostalgia. Like its founder, Abd al-Rahman I, who composed poignant lyrics evoking the palm groves of his youth in the summer palace of Rusafa, in distant Syria, its poets and chroniclers looked yearningly eastward. They lived in Granada or Seville among feuding Berber tribesmen and conquered Visigoths, but when they wrote their pens flew home to the lost gardens of their origins. When Abd al-Rahman I was proclaimed “amir,” or ruler, of the dynasty on May 15, 756, he was not quite 25 years old, but he had already had long training in the backward glance. He, and the dynasty he created, were fortuitous survivors of a long succession of hairbreadth escapes.

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GOD'S CRUCIBLE

Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 to 1215.

By David Levering Lewis.
Illustrated. 473 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$29.95.

Abd al-Rahman was the sole Umayyad prince to elude the assassins of the victorious Abbasids when they swept to power under their black banners in 749 and overthrew the tottering kingdom of the Syrian Umayyads. Abd al-Rahman saw his younger brother cut down on the banks of the Euphrates. He managed to swim the river and, staying one step ahead of his pursuers, hid out for five years, first in [Palestine](#), then in Egypt and finally in North

Africa among the Nafza, the Berber tribe into which his mother had been born. When he crossed the straits into Spain, on Aug. 14, 755, he had earned the Arabic sobriquet “al-Dakhil”; the term means not merely “immigrant,” as usually translated, but also “a guest among strangers” — in effect, an alien. He would eventually go on to reign for 32 years, establishing a state that would not only rival, but recreate, the splendor of his

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stolen birthright.

In “God’s Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 to 1215,” his fast-paced and provocative new study, David Levering Lewis, the author of a much-acclaimed Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of W. E. B. Du Bois, provides a fascinating account of “this hunted survivor of an illustrious dynasty,” as he aptly puts it; and yet, he may read too much into the man. He views Abd al-Rahman’s vicissitudes as the source of “a unifying vision of community” that the enlightened young ruler brought to his newly won territories, a principle of “civilized coexistence that might have served as a model for the continent.”

But Lewis’s own examples show that civic harmony in Umayyad Spain was more the result of shrewd statecraft and common sense than of some vague and anachronistic ideal of “tolerance.” In a highly stratified society, composed of unruly and often incompatible elements, religious and ethnic — not only Muslims, Christians and Jews but Arabs, Berbers and Slavs, as well as quarrelsome tribal factions — the assignment of strictly defined roles, with their attendant rights and responsibilities, was essential.

Thus, as Lewis notes, “sumptuary laws required that non-Muslims display badges and that clothing worn by *dhimmi*s be distinguished from that worn by Arabs.” Non-Muslims were not allowed to ride on horseback without a permit, or to bear arms. Moreover, for sound fiscal reasons, conversion to Islam was not warmly encouraged since non-Muslims who converted were no longer required to pay the head tax on which state revenues depended. Though well aware of the overly rosy picture often painted of Muslim Spain, Lewis sometimes accepts it himself. Nowadays, we know all too well that the enforced wearing of badges to signify religious affiliation is hardly a sign of tolerance. That was true in Muslim Spain too.

Lewis’s narrative turns on a constant play of contrasts. In the first sentence, he writes, “Islam rose when Rome fell.” Such broad juxtapositions propel his account throughout. In his preface, he urges us “to resist the eschatologies of the cultural and political simplifiers”; yet, despite his best intentions, the story he tells remains one of a long, drawn-out “clash of civilizations,” lasting nearly half a millennium. Of course, there were, as he is at pains to point out, moments of muted confluence between Christian Europe and Muslim Spain, especially in the arts and sciences. Nevertheless, even these were rarely instances of what he simplistically calls “interfaith collaboration.”

Lewis has a penchant for awkward turns of phrase. In discussing the translation of ancient texts into Arabic, for instance, he refers often to the “Toledo conveyor belt,” making the slow, meticulous translation of Greek treatises into Arabic sound like something carried out at an Ohio auto plant. Occasionally he goes even farther astray; in discussing the Prophet’s views on women, he writes, “Muhammad’s comparatively enlightened ideas (as explained by Allah) about gender roles positively distinguished the Koran from its misogynistic Mosaic and Pauline analogues.” It’s hard to know what disturbs more here, the factual inaccuracies or the personal opinions inserted under cover of jargon.

Lewis is not a historian of Islam. This gives him the freedom to pursue big questions with impunity — and he does this quite well. But it also leads him into many surprising errors. For example, no Shiite Muslim would call the first three caliphs *rashidun*, or “rightly guided.” In fact, Shiites consider them usurpers and to this day curse them in their mosques. Lewis cites the acerbic Spanish Muslim theologian Ibn Hazm as an advocate of “love Platonic, exquisite but unrequited,” although in Ibn Hazm’s delightful book “The Ring of the Dove,” his descriptions of the pleasures of sexual intercourse are quite unrestrained. Since Lewis wishes to show that medieval Muslim culture was overwhelmingly superior to its contemporary European counterpart — and certainly it was — a more scrupulous attention to the details of that culture would have strengthened his case.

In the end, these errors do not seriously mar the powerful thrust of his narrative. His



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darting juxtapositions of dynasties and of cultures give a vivid sense of the furious complexities of the age. He describes the simmering state of tribal relations in the region as constituting "a flammable symbiosis," but the phrase has wider scope. To judge from his account, that symbiosis was more pervasive than we usually realize, and not merely flammable, but dangerously combustible.

Eric Ormsby is the author, most recently, of "Ghazali: The Revival of Islam."

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