

# Marginalia

## 100% Pure History from Concentrate

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My own interest in Middle Eastern medieval history began with a paper I wrote in 1993 for the first International Medieval Congress in Leeds, examining the influence of Arab poets on the work of troubadours in Aquitaine. Shortly after, I wrote a novel set in the Middle East, *Looking for the Mahdi*, which also required a good deal of research on Muslim history. What became apparent very quickly was the disparity between the amount of reference work available on medieval Muslim history to a western scholar, in a European language, to that of European history in the same lands and the same time. Even with the benefit of L'Institut du Monde Arabe just down the street from where I lived in France, I still found many of the sources I might have been interested in were in Arabic, which I unashamedly admit I can't read. Except for other Arabists, neither can many other medieval historians, academic professionals or enthusiastic lay readers

Happily the past decade has seen a substantial interest in Muslim medieval history aimed less at specialists and more toward a general readership. Hugh Kennedy is Reader in Medieval History at the University of St. Andrews, and the author of a previous work on the early Islamic Near East, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*. His newest book, *Muslim Spain and Portugal* (Longman, December, 1996, £15.99 paperback, £44.00 cased), covers the entire history of the Muslim occupation of Spain and Portugal from the first Muslim invasion in 711 to the fall of Granada in 1492, all in 342 pages. The sheer ambition of the work is admirable, taking the risk of becoming a Reader's Digest version of nearly eight centuries boiled down to a "broad-brush history" of Muslim al-Andalus.

Luckily Kennedy not only knows his stuff, he knows how to present it as well. The general tone of lively enthusiasm diffused throughout the text I suspect echoes his course lectures, and I was

encouraged that his first sentence in his Notes was: "I have tried to make this book user-friendly to non-Arabists while remaining faithful to the evidence".

By and large, he has succeeded admirably. Condensing history into so short a work is an arduous enough task, and although Kennedy does attempt to provide more than simply tales of rulers and battles won and lost with an examination of the structures underlying political events, he himself admits that this work is far too limited in scope (and pages) to include an intellectual or cultural history of al-Andalus. Moreover, the amount of primary sources varies from dynasty to dynasty, which have created Swiss cheese holes in the narrative flow. So where the period between 961 and 976 is well documented in the court chronicals of al-Razi, the years between 1184 and 1210 are abysmally barren.

Kennedy has drawn on classical secondary histories, primarily Levi Provençal and Ambrosio Huici Miranda, and the more recent works of J. Bosch Vila and Rachel Arie. But he has also drawn together work by numerous Spanish, French and other scholars into one volume to provide as complete and modern an overview as possible, useful, hopefully, to Arabists, western medievalists or just interested general readers such as myself.

The book is divided chronologically into chapters which follow the fortunes of Muslim dynasties, and each chapter divided further mostly by the reigns of individual rulers. Kennedy begins his official history with Tarig b. Ziyad crossing the Straits of Gibraltar in the summer of 711 with a mainly Berber army of around 10,000 men and defeating Roderick's Visigoth army nearly three times larger, while first carefully outlining the land, the rulers and the background of the Iberian peninsula before its occupation by the Muslims. Eight hundred years later, he ends the saga with an almost wistful farewell to al-Andalus and its fall from greatness. In between, the book is packed with battles and dates and family dynasties and power struggles with a cast of literally thousands. There are substantial quotations from original sources, maps, genealogical charts, appendices, and footnotes.

The sheer amount of facts packed into this book can sometimes feel a bit daunting, particularly for anyone who isn't already at least

somewhat conversant in more medieval Arab history than simply Charlton Heston's *El Cid*, and the text is often overburdened with historical figures who appear on stages for only the briefest of moments, as this passage demonstrates:

...Abd Allah b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, known as al-Hajar (Dry Stone, because of his avarice)... was supported by Abd al-Rahman b. al-Mutarrif al-Tujibi, lord of Zaragoza and the Upper March, and al-Mansur's own son, also called 'Abd Allah, who had been staying with the Tujibis in Zaragoza. 'Abd al-Rahman persuaded him that he was much braver and more intelligent than his brother 'Abd al-Malik (later to succeed as al-Muzaffar), who was being favoured by his father. They agreed that al-Andalus should be divided, with 'Abd Allah b. Al-Mansur taking Cordoba and the \*hadra\* and the Tujibi taking the Marches. They are said to have been supported by a group of leading soldiers (sic) and palace servants in Cordoba, but the plot was discovered while al-Mansur was on the \*sa'ifa\*. 'Abd al-Rahman was accused of embezzling his troops pay and executed, while 'Abd Allah al-Hajar and 'Abd Allah son of al-Mansur took refuge with the Christians. Al-Mansur's son was surrendered to his father by Garci Fernandez, Count of Castile, and executed, and al-Hajar remained in prison for the rest of the reign. (p. 115)

Phew! But more often than not, Kennedy does attempt to endow these fleeting personages with some individuality and humanity:

...a rebellion by the Guddala... was a major threat to the Almoravids, for if they lost control of the Sahara they would lose... control of the salt and gold trades which provided so much wealth. Faced with this challenge, Abu Bakr decided to go south to meet it. He left in charge in Marrakesh his cousin Yusef b. Tashf'in, who was given charge of the Almoravids north of the Atlas and, apparently, told to marry Abu Bakr's beautiful and shrewd wife Zaynab. Ibn Tashf'in, slightly built with a sparse beard, black eyes and aquiline nose, was probably half negro. He was also ascetic in his behavior and highly intelligent, as can be seen from the skill with which he developed his desert policy...

By and large, Kennedy's *Muslim Spain and Portugal* is a very successful book, not so much as an entertaining read but as a very

thorough outline of every major event and player, as well as quite a number of minor ones, over an eight hundred year span. Carefully read, it gives a clear, prosaic understanding of the events and people that shaped Muslim political society in al-Andalus. Used as a reference work, Kennedy supplies a jumping off point for just about any period along a long, glorious and fascinating history.

David Nicholas, Professor of History at Clemson University in South Carolina, has written a two volume work, *The Growth of the Medieval City; From Late Antiquity to the Early Fourteenth Century* and *The Later Medieval City; 1300-1500* (Longman's History of Urban Society Series April, 1997, £17.99 paperback, £48.00 cased, each volume). His comparative history of urbanization in the Middle Ages is likewise an ambitious attempt, tracing the development of medieval cities and city life over twelve centuries using archeological as well as historical source material, how, where, when, in France, England, and the Low Countries, Germany, Iberia and Italy, with a smidgen of everything left over from the Baltic to the Balkans. Clergy, landowners and nobility, merchants, guildsmen. Politics, economics, transportation, law and government, militias, religion. Women, children, Jews, Muslims, Blacks and Whites (which have nothing to do with race), with a glossary, various appendices, an extensive bibliography, and a plenitude of country maps and city plans for fourteen major medieval metropolises. All in a grand total of 843 pages, counting both volumes together. Less than one page per year.

The two volumes are, in one sense, oddly divided, four hundred some odd pages dedicated to more than a thousand years of history, another four hundred some odd pages devoted to only two hundred. But in *The Growth of the Medieval City* Nicolas traces the survival and slow regeneration of what vestiges of Roman urban life remained after the fall of the Roman Empire, and the formation of new urban centers built from scratch, with even defining the concept of "city" being problematical. Large cities in England, for example, would be small towns in Italy, so it becomes more a difference in function rather than size. Nor, for Nicholas, is the delineation between city and countryside as distinct as Henri Pirenne's classic *Medieval Cities*. And he asks the questions:

...What caused (the city) to appear in given places and at particular times? What did it look like? How did its residents make their living? Who ruled the cities and how did those ruling elites change?

He then answers them, and many others, quite thoroughly. To try to summarize it all in a short review would be impossible; to be able to give as much information and analysis over such a span of time in eight hundred odd pages is incredible enough. But the basic reason between the first volume covering from late antiquity to the early fourteenth century and its much smaller companion work covering the two hundred years between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries is basically landownership. From the second century on, a semi-rural elite of church and nobles who controlled the evolution from small fortified farm markets to extensive commercial centers exporting multifarious goods still drew their power from landownership. It wouldn't be until the very late thirteenth and early fourteenth century that would see the rise of an elite merchant class with power on a more purely commercial base.

Nicholas' writing style is clear, concise, and straightforward, if a bit dry. But it's the organization of his presentation which is excellent, neatly divided into the kind of systematic summary notes I could only envy in my callow college days. I spent several minutes just admiring the Contents page.

Nicholas' work differs heavily from Kennedy's, in that Kennedy relied largely on individual rulers and battles, with his accompanying assessments, on which to hang the frame of his history of al-Andalus. While there is certainly mention of those nobility and elite who politically influenced the fortunes of their cities, Nicholas hasn't ignored individual merchants and artisans who, while less famous, often carried equal weight in affecting the rise of urbanization. But this isn't a story about people so much as a story of the city itself, without many anecdotal references for illustration. Nor does he need it. Just a description of a market place is enough to make it come alive, rich and chaotic:

In places where several trades competed for places on the market, guilds rotated the sections of the square, or the space would be reserved for different products on separate days. At the Rialto in Venice the stalls had numbers, and the places were

rotated among the guilds so that all would have a chance at the choice spots. At Ghent the main square, the Grain Market, extended northwards into the Short Mint and onward into the Fish Market, which in turn gave access to aristocratic streets leading east and to the bridge to the count's castle on the west. The magistrates had barriers erected between these markets. Most moneychangers were in the Fish Market, but some were in the Short Mint. In 1366 the council prohibited sellers of spices, dairy products and fruit from setting up their stalls beyond this barrier, thus in the Grain Market rather than in the Short Mint. The hucksters who had until then sold onions, mercury and other goods in the Short Mint were ordered to take up position in front of the city jail, on the south end of the Grain Market, while those who had sold foods at the count's bridge and the Short Mint were to move to the Grain Market. In 1371, the alderman forbade sellers of poultry, vegetables, and French cheese to block the sides of the street between the count's bridge and the streets on the east side of the Fish Market. The Fish Market was sectioned off for sales of particular fish, and peas were sold at the corner of the Short Mint and the Long Mint. The city police — ten officers that year — patrolled the area and tried to keep confusion to a minimum.

And to think we consider Safeway such a vast improvement!

Both Kennedy and Nicholas have written two very different histories, of two very different cultures, in two very different styles, but with the same concentration of material in a very short number of pages. And both have succeeded admirably.