

[The City of the three Mosques: Ávila and its Muslims in the Middle Ages](#)

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'Mudejar' is the traditional technical definition of those Muslims who, in the course of the Middle Ages, came under Christian domination in the Iberian Peninsula. It will not be employed in that way in the present book, because we believe that the term only manipulates the cultural characteristics of these individuals and distances them from what they must have been in reality. Therefore we will use the words 'Mudejar,' 'Muslim,' and 'Moor' – the latter being the only one that occurs in Castilian documents of the period – without any differentiation of meaning.

The dialectic between the concept 'Mudejar' and what we might call 'Islamic culture' arises whenever there is an attempt to explain the existence of a Muslim population under Christian rule in the Iberian Peninsula. For some specialists in the Islamic world these Muslims can scarcely be considered part of the *umma*, because Muslim religious authorities objected strongly to their living in non-Islamic territory. Nonetheless we must define, from the outset, the concept of 'Islamic culture,' what needs to be present before one can be considered to possess it, and whether the religious element is the only one that marks this population.

The construction of a cultural identity takes place through the dialectic of the inclusion of certain individuals in a group, or their exclusion from another subgroup. Therefore it will contain elements of integration into, and others of differentiation from, surrounding social groups. Social conventions are present in the relationships that are established between persons, and in the means of acceding to those relationships; this is why we can speak of 'society.' The latter has been defined, for the classical period of Peninsular Islam, as 'a society whose most distinctive markers were the Islamic religion and Arabic culture,' and it has therefore come to be called Arab-Islamic.¹ This type of society may be defined by a series of cultural indicators that distinguish it from other groups, not necessarily in the following order:

- a) Acts of political and civil life regulated and, where necessary, legitimized by Islamic law.
- b) Creation of an individual group identity – the Andalusí – in contrast to the communities of other Islamic territories, and in opposition to the emerging powers – which were Christian – in the northern Iberian Peninsula. Use of the Islamic calendar and celebration of its religious festivals.
- c) Practice of the Islamic precepts summarized in the five pillars of Islam, which come to be considered an unavoidable 'religious minimum.'
- d) An onomastic system with names that come from several sources belonging to the Arab concept of genealogy.

¹ Manuela Marín, *Individuo y sociedad en al-Andalus*, Madrid: Mapfre, 1992, p. 12.

- e) A system of kinship and conjugal relations determined by Islamic law.
- f) Daily rituals and customs.
- g) The use of the Arabic language in both speaking and writing.
- h) Preservation and practice of a scientific, literary, and artistic heritage with given characteristics, related directly to what was practiced elsewhere in Islamic lands.

Without a doubt, one decisive factor in defining an identity or a personality is religion: the implicit existence of an ethical ideal of how humankind ought to be, based on some conception of the existence of God.

The subject that I will explore here raises several questions that I will attempt to answer in the book. How are exclusion and assimilation carried out, and on the basis of what factors are they decided? How are certain groups marginalized? Should we rather speak of the 'supposed' marginalization of Muslims who lived in the Christian realms of the Iberian Peninsula? Was there true *convivencia* or harmonious coexistence? Or should the situation be considered part assimilation, part self-isolation, and part a structure created so that the majority could affirm itself?

Mudejars have often been thought of as a minority social group to which preconceived models of marginality have been applied; but these would correspond only to certain members of the group in a late period of its existence. To place the existence of this minority, and its development in the Middle Ages, into a proper perspective it is better to begin our study of the Castilian Mudejars at the time when Muslims were a majority in the Peninsula. If they were not a marginalized minority, why were they allowed to remain there? To fulfill the need for settlers? To move the Muslim population away from their places of origin but to settle them far from the frontier, where they would be less dangerous?

In the specific case of Ávila we shall see how the Muslims cannot be considered immigrants in the early period, because they did not move there naturally or voluntarily but because they were captured and reduced to slavery. We do not believe that Ávila can serve as a paradigm for the formation of other *aljamas* or Muslim communities in the Iberian world, and therefore we never suggest that it is a 'model,' but merely an example of a set of causes that could be extremely varied. Ávila's special status arises from the fact that it is one of the few Castilian cities where we can trace the evolution of an Islamic population from the twelfth century up to its conversion in the sixteenth, including while that population lived under Christian rule. This chronological sweep is not often available to students of Castilian Muslims; it is therefore of great interest and can open lines of research into the true situation of this group in other cities of the kingdom. The creation of the local Muslim community, its size, and the occupations of its people may or may not have been similar to those of other Castilian towns; we do not even know if customs were transmitted from one city to another, until we learn more about how Muslims led their lives in other places.

The city of the three mosques

The first part of the book, 'The Creation of a Minority,' covers the formation of the Islamic minority in Ávila from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. It is the story of how these people, uprooted by captivity, reestablished their common ties and cultural referents in a geographic area very different from the one they came from. Little by little, after they gained their freedom and through concessions that allowed them to establish themselves in their place of residence, their presence came to be both necessary and tolerated. The continuous arrival of new groups, first of slaves and then of immigrants, kept them from losing their identity and assimilating to the Christian majority through conversion, as had happened with many captives who were sent to Galicia and Asturias.

In the second part, 'The resistance of Islamic structures,' we consider in detail whether these Muslims fulfilled the conditions that we have called 'cultural indicators'; that is, whether theirs is still an 'Islamic culture' in spite of having developed under an authority that was external to *dār al-Islām*. With this in mind we shall sift through several of the themes we have proposed, while presenting the other cultural indicators horizontally throughout the discussion. We believe that the reader, by the end of the book, will agree with us that the Muslims of Ávila not only were members of that wider community to which they claimed to belong, but also contributed to the construction of the Castile of their time a cultural and personal patrimony that has continued to our own day. Among the legacies they have left us are the great literary achievement of the Mancebo ('Young Man') of Arévalo; the magnificent castle of Coca in Medina del Campo; the inscribed tombstones of their cemetery; their documents preserved in the archives; and their ceramic art, which has survived up to the present in some parts of the Peninsula.

As is common in studies of the Mudejars, we face a series of formal problems in writing about this minority. The names of Muslims are reproduced as they appear in Castilian form in the documents, except in the few cases in which they occur in an Arabic source and can be quoted in that language.