The Most Noble of People

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Conclusion

*Ethnic and Religious Identity*

The Muslim elite in the Umayyad period, in both al-Andalus and in the Middle East, connected being Arab with being Muslim and believed that Arab Muslims deserved a higher social status than either non-Arab Muslims or dhimmīs. In al-Andalus, however, the Umayyad ideal of a “unitary state dominated by Arabs,” to use Thomas Glick’s phrase, was always a shaky one, given the relatively small number of Arabs attempting to rule over a large non-Arab subject population. The ideal became even less viable as time went on, for several reasons.

Membership in the army had traditionally been an important source of Arab prestige. By the time of ʻAbd al-Raḥmān III, however, the Arab army had been largely eliminated, as new waves of Berbers were brought in to fight in the caliphs’ army, along with ṣaqālibah from eastern Europe. The use of Berbers led to the Umayyads’ downfall in a direct way, in that Berber soldiers led periodic revolts in the capital in the early 1000s. In a less direct sense, however, the loss of the Arab army weakened Umayyad legitimacy, which was based in part on the family’s claim to lead an Arab social and military aristocracy. The dismantling of the diwān system that the ʻĀmirid chamberlain al-Manṣūr completed did away with an important site of Arab privilege.

The porous nature of Arab identity also, in the long term, undermined the significance of that identity, since the ability to trace Arab bloodlines was only one factor in being Arab. Because adopting Arabic culture did not
require one to be biologically Arab, it was possible for Arabic written culture to spread to educated elites throughout al-Andalus. Vernacular Arabic, along with Romance, became a standard spoken language and developed characteristics distinguishing it from other dialects by the tenth century. In a sense, everyone, or at least a large part of the population, became culturally Arab. When everyone is Arab, the distinction loses its significance.

Finally, change came about because of al-Andalus’s increasingly strong identity as an Islamic society. The growing importance of Islam meant not only that a majority of the population converted to Islam, as it probably did by 950 or 1000. It also meant that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, when he took the title of caliph, decided to base his legitimacy more on his role as commander of the faithful than as the leader of an Arab aristocracy. The deepening of Islamic identity can also be seen in the spread of Mālikī jurisprudence and the widespread use of Sharī‘ah courts. Although the Quran and, to a lesser extent, the ḥadīths grew up in an Arab environment, Sharī‘ah did not on the whole support the idea of Arab superiority. Ibn Ḥazm’s ambivalence about Arab prestige is telling. The Jamḥarab celebrates Arab families, but even in that work he admits that Islam acknowledges religious virtue over ethnic identity. In his religious and legal treatises, he emphasizes that Islam does not give precedence to any ethnic or economic group, and in his theories about language and grammar he gives no special place to Arabic as a sacred language.

As the nature of the army changed, the amīr became the caliph, and more Iberians converted to Islam, the line between Arab and non-Arab grew increasingly less clear. By the end of the Umayyad regime, Arab lineage was no longer an accurate marker of high social status, nor was being Muslim as strongly associated with being Arab. The Party or Taifa kingdoms that replaced Umayyad rule were all ruled by Muslims, but by Muslims who variously identified themselves as Arab, Berber, or ṣaqlabī, and the distinction between Arab Muslims and muwallads seems to have broken down. The cultural side of Arab identity survived; Andalusīs spoke Arabic (in addition to Romance) and the Taifa courts supported Arabic poetry and literature. Membership in an identifiable Arab lineage, however, became less important.

**Gender Identity**

Changes in women’s status and ideas about gender do not correspond neatly with the political shift from Umayyad rule to the Taifa system. There were,
however, some shifts in gender relations that were part of the general cultural changes in the Umayyad period. Christian women whose families converted to Islam would have found themselves subject to Shari'ah's personal status regulations. Some of those regulations, particularly regarding marriage, were not all that different from Visigothic law. Islamic inheritance law, however, would have represented a step down for women in their ability to inherit and transmit property, and other Islamic cultural norms, in particular middle- and upper-class ideas about feminine modesty and veiling, probably led to greater restrictions for women moving from Christianity to Islam.

For Muslim women, the increasing influence of Shari'ah courts was beneficial. Although Mālikī inheritance law sometimes privileged agnatic over cognatic relatives, it did not support the patrilineal Eastern family pattern that Guichard identifies, instead seeing the individual as part of a kindred, in which both mother's-side and father's-side relatives were important. And while Mālikī Shari'ah unquestionably gave women a subordinate position in society and in marriage, it also guaranteed women property rights in the form of inheritance, including the inheritance of land. It also guaranteed married women a dower and the right to financial support from their husbands.

CULTURAL FLUIDITY

One feature of Umayyad-era society I have tried to emphasize was its cultural instability and the possibilities that instability created for individuals to change their religious and ethnic identity. Dhimmīs converted to Islam. Men became Arab, either through fictive genealogies or by reinventing themselves culturally. Some strict gatekeepers, like the Umayyad mawlā Hāshim ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, tried to hold the line, regarding converts and non-Arabs as suspect, although the super-purist Ibn Ḥazm might in turn have questioned Hāshim’s credentials as an Arab. In a period of rapid conversion and Arabization, however, the demographic realities made such distinctions increasingly irrelevant.

That cultural fluidity and opening of opportunity can be contrasted with some of the more rigid social systems that prevailed in later Andalusī and Christian Spanish history. The Almoravids, the Berber group who controlled al-Andalus from the late 1000s until 1163, were much more hostile to dhimmīs than the Umayyads or Taifa kings were, regarding non-Muslims as enemies of Islam and not as potential converts. The Christian rulers who
had conquered most of al-Andalus by 1212 initially treated Muslim and Jewish subjects in ways analogous to Muslim treatment of dhimmis. Alfonso VI, after conquering Toledo in 1085, allowed Muslims freedom of worship, and Alfonso X’s thirteenth-century Siete Partidas spells out both legal disabilities and legal rights of Jews and Muslims. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Spanish Christians continued to accept the idea that conversion of Jews and Muslims was possible and desirable, and the thirteenth-century Spanish Church regarded religious conversion as its major mission. Raymond Penafort, who became minister general of the Dominicans in 1238, supported the founding of language schools to teach Arabic and Hebrew in order to facilitate the work of Christian preachers. By the mid-fifteenth century, however, an essentialist theory of religion had evolved, holding that someone who was born Jewish or Muslim would always in some sense maintain their former religious identity, even after baptism. Many city statutes from the mid-1400s, for example, prohibited conversos (converts from Judaism to Christianity) from holding any high office, implying that conversion did not finally change one’s core identity. The authors of those statutes, who saw themselves as protecting Christian society’s purity of blood, or “limpieza de sangre,” perceived religion as a fixed, biological reality in a way that offers a sharp contrast with earlier medieval thought.

All of this is not to say that Umayyad al-Andalus was a paradise of multiculturalism. It was as much a period of violence and social upheaval as a period of tolerance. The shifting nature of religious and ethnic identities, however, did make that time an unusually rich environment for social mobility and change.