

The Muslim conquest of Iberia: medieval Arabic narratives, by Nicola Clarke, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, x + 243 pp., £71.25 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-67320-4

Books about Moorish Spain and al-Andalus have become increasingly popular in recent decades and it takes an extra effort to surpass some of the more insightful and academic works currently available to students and teachers. Happily Nicola Clarke is very successful here. Historians have long been aware of the serious paucity of Arab sources when recounting the conquest of al-Andalus, and the tendency of extant material to lean towards formulaic myths and legends. Here Clarke demonstrates an enormous degree of critical empathy and intellectual acumen in elucidating the motivation and paths taken by medieval Arab writers who – to modern audiences – seem to have deliberately obscured real historical facts with obviously erroneous data: mundane and supernatural onomatopoeia, fairly obtuse excurses on the possible tribal origins of the Goths (and others), suspiciously unlikely visits to *Ishbaniya* (España) by *Dhul-Qarnayn* (Alexander the Great) and so forth. The blurring of the lines between genuine historical points and *'ajā'ib* (marvels or fantastical tales) is one of the author's main themes, but her real strength is in examining the sophisticated ways in which medieval Arab writers reconstructed the comparatively recent history of Islamic Iberia itself, tailoring well-known traditional narratives to the aspirations and values of later generations.

The Muslim conquest of Iberia contains seven ripping chapters and an excellent conclusion. The substance of the book is revealed in the almost mouth-watering chapter titles – Conceptualizing conquest: the late antique historiographical backdrop; Successors, jurists, and propagandists: reconstructing the transmission history of Spanish conquest narratives; Accommodating outsiders, obeying stereotypes: *mawali* and *muwalladun* in narratives of the conquest; To the ends of the earth: extremes of east and west in Arabic geographical and *'ajā'ib* writings; The Table of Solomon: a historiographical motif and its function; Excusing and explaining conquest: traitors and collaborators in Muslim and Christian sources; and, finally, On the other side of the world: comparing narratives of contemporary Islamic conquest in the east. The 80 pages of Notes and Bibliography reveal a fascinating and bewilderingly rich vein of sources. Most are, naturally, Arabic, but excellent use has been made of Latin and Castilian material as well as much of the recent Spanish research in this field.

Clearly, Clarke has been influenced by Albrecht Noth on recurring *topoi* in Arabic writing (Noth and Conrad 1994), tempered by Chase Robinson's (2004) views that 'a *topos* can be a *topos* and still have a basis in events' (p. 2). Overall, Clarke leans towards a more sceptical approach with respect to traditional Arabic meta-narratives, which represent the 'crystallization of furious debates on issues alien to the seventh century, built upon imaginary ideas of the past, and subject to systemic if not systematic forgery' (ibid.). For example, Clarke reminds readers that the customary accounts of the alleged conflict between the Arab Musa bin Nusayr and his Berber *mawla* (client) Tariq bin Zayid, echoed broader societal themes – scurrilous ethnic tensions, unresolved economic issues and on-going geopolitical matters – within the complex cosmopolitan social milieu of ninth- and tenth-century Moorish Spain, where domiciled Muslims were initially a statistical minority seeking to define themselves and their past on the periphery of the Islamic world. The author very skilfully explains the transition from customary Arab poetical story-telling, the transmission of carefully arranged data and even blatantly contradictory discourses, towards formally prepared *Tārīkh* and *Akhbār* books written for the edification, education or entertainment of specific post-conquest audiences – 'the back projection of an idealized past' (p. 100). It was not until centuries later that politically autonomous Andalusian Muslims took an active interest in the subject, including its conceptual basis and presentation. After 756CE the reconstituted Umayyad regime in Iberia was keen to establish its

domestic prestige, and also political and religious legitimacy. History was merely another tool to be used for that purpose. Ancestors and predecessors who might otherwise have been roundly criticized as poorly disciplined invading bandits, plundering loot without higher authority, were rerepresented as moral crusaders avenging the honour of Count Julian against the usurper Roderic and fighting a supposedly decadent Visigothic corruption of values.

The highlight of the book for me would have to be the giant man-eating ants of Cadiz, a story Clarke uses to demonstrate the interpolation of popular but spurious anecdotes into otherwise respectable historical accounts: 'From behind the trees, ants the size of ferocious lions dashed at them' (p. 77). Certainly 'ants, man-eating' must be one of the more unusual Index entries for a serious history book in recent years. A map of Iberia might have been useful for readers unfamiliar with the geopolitics of early Moorish Spain. Images and pictures would also have been instructive when discussing significant landmarks (or indeed the giant man-eating ants!). Overall, *The Muslim conquest of Iberia* is thoroughly convincing piece of contemporary scholarship and a very welcome asset to any library. Whilst garrulous pedants will assert Clarke's well-documented book is not a definitive account of the Muslim invasion (or liberation, depending on one's personal predilections here), it does in fact come pretty close. This carefully balanced monograph is certainly destined to become the standard text on the subject of the causation, contextualization and evolution of traditional Arab accounts of the Andalusian conquest into later tropes, formats and formulae for differing audiences. It is probably one of the best accounts of its kind since Stanley Lane-Poole's *The story of the Moors in Spain* (1886) and will appeal to quite a broad audience. Anyone with an interest in Spanish, Moorish, Muslim or Mediterranean history will be fascinated, but historians in general will also find this a useful and practical introduction to Islamic historiography of the period. Seldom do historians extrapolate new stories: more often they collect, collate and regurgitate previously published accounts (as the author has ably demonstrated in her subject matter!). Fortunately Clarke has produced something fairly new and exciting here – not yet another discussion of the 711 conquest but rather more precisely a history of medieval historians at work. Above all else, perhaps, Clarke's engaging enthusiasm for her subject – and her sense of humour – resonate through the text and make this book a true pleasure to read.

References

- 1. Noth, Albrecht and Conrad, L. I. 1994. *Early Arabic historical tradition: a source-critical study*, 2, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press.
- 2. Lane-Poole, Stanley. 1886. *The story of the Moors in Spain*, London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- 3. Robinson, Chase. 2004. The conquest of Khuzistan: a historiographical reassessment. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 67: 30–37.