The fall of the Kingdom of Granada in 1492 and its interpretation by the Arab-Muslim historians

by

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Introduction:

In this presentation I will try to explain how the Arab historians have mentioned and interpreted the events of the fall of the Kingdom of Granada in 1492. It’s a brief comparative study of old as well as recent historical texts and reports, written by the Arabs after 1492.

First, I will present the difficulties I encountered during the literature search on the subject, because; of emblematic, I found a remarkable rarity (even in the recent historical publications) in Arabic literature concerning the events of 1492 in Granada. As an introduction to the topic, I would like to introduce verses from the famous Al-Rundi’s poem “Lament for the fall of Seville” (1267), which is considered as the oldest Arabic report of the fall of Moorish Andalusia. There is to consider some aspects that could be applied in the case of the Kingdom of Granada. It follows a short presentation of one of the most significant historian of Andalusia: Mohammed Ibn Khaldun. Although he has not experienced the reconquest of Granada (he died in 1406), he reported in his masterpiece “Almuqaddima” several aspects from the Granada’s Life at the end of the XIV century.

In the fourth chapter we look at the two main works, on which my study is based: “Nafh Attib” by the Algerien historian Ahmed ben Mohammed Tilimsani (1578 - 1631) as the oldest arabic historical study in the contrast with the recent book “The history of Andalusia” (1988) written by the Iraqi historian Abderrahman Hajji. The purpose of this comparison is to know, if the Arabic vision on the events of 1492 have changed or developed and if there has been an evolution in the interpretation of the fall of Granada, the last Islamic bastillon in Europe, in the collective Arabic memory. The results of this comparison will illustrate the conclusion of my work.
I. Difficulties and problems in the research

To the bibliographical research on the topic “The fall of the kingdom of Granada in 1492 and its interpretation by the Arab-Muslim historians” I have used to criteria:

- The headings should be written by Arabs, because it is about the Arab view of the events of 1492.
- Treated texts should be written as possible after 1492, in the hope that you will find reviews or reports about the downfall of the Moorish Granada.

The results were not spectacular. I have in the accessible libraries, but also in internet just to little writings, texts or articles, that meet those two criteria. This finding has led me to ask such questions like: Why the Arab historians (also the contemporary) they have to little written about the events of 1492 in Granada, while the Arabic historical literature is sufficiently filled with studies and reports about the “golden age” of the Arabic existence in Andalusia in X and XI century? Have the Arabs to this day ousted the downfall of Granada as a great defeat of the Arabic world?

However i found 3 important books from different eras, which can more or less retrace the historical mindset of the Arabs regarding Granada:

➢ « Almoqaddima » by Ibn Khaldun in 1362
➢ « Nafh Attib » by Mokri Tilimsani in 1629
➢ « The History of Andalusia » by Abderrahman Hajji in 1988

II.„Lament for the Fall of Seville“ (1267) by Al-Rundi

But before we look at the views of those 3 historians, I would like to present some verses from the famous Arabic poem “Lament for the Fall of Seville” (1267) by Al-Rundi: (very popular in the Arabic world, this poem is studding in elementary schools until today). Here we can clearly consider some aspects and characters of the sinking of the Moorish Spain. The poem was written in the hope of gaining aid from the Muslims in North Afrika (Morocco) to help battle Christian armies.
Although the fall of Seville (1248) is its topic, the text was later written in 1267, after the Nasrid ruler Mohammed Ibn Al-Ahmar surrendered several cities to Alfonso X. The poem is too long for this presentation. That is why I tried to pick out the verses that are important for the topic:

1. "Everything declines after reaching perfection, therefore let no man be beguiled by the sweetness of a pleasant life

2. As you have observed, these are the decrees that are inconstant: he whom a single moment has made happy, has been harmed by many other moments

3. Therefore ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia; and where is Jativa, and where is Jayan? Where is Cordoba, the home of the sciences, and many a scholar whose rank was once lofty in it?

4. Where is Seville and the pleasures it contains, as well as its sweet river overflowing and brimming full?"

These first verses speak of the “perfect life” in the Moorish Andalusia. However Al-Rundi means that because this political economical and cultural “perfection” has reached its peak, it was time for a fall. They describe beyond the unfolding of the Islamic Andalusia in many fields (science, literature, religion...) but they also regret the loss of this “civilization” during the reconquest.

5. They are capitals which were the pillars of the land, yet when the pillars are gone, it may no longer endure!

6. In which the mosques have become churches wherein only bells and crosses may be found.

7. What means this severing of the bonds of Islam on your behalf, when you, 0 worshipers of God, are [our] brethren?

8. Yesterday they were kings in their own homes, but today they are slaves in the land of the infidel!

Here the verses describe the religious turn during the reconquest, that the mosques turned systematically into cathedrals and that Arabic kings become slaves. The two last verses illustrate the social suffering of the Arabs (the social aspect):
9. Alas, many a mother and child have been parted as souls and bodies are separated!

10. The heart melts with sorrow at such [sights], if there is any Islam or belief in that heart! (Translated from Arabic by James T. Monroe)

Although the poem “Lament for the fall of Seville” was written 200 years before the downfall of Granada, it shows how the Moors were helpless and powerless against the Christian reconquest. It shows also how this situation was acerbating and bitter for them. The same situation has repeated itself in case of Granada.

III. Ibn Khaldun’s reports of Granada in the “Muqaddimah” (1362 - 1365)

Mohammed Ibn Khaldun (1332 - 1406) was an Arabic Muslim historiographer and historian, regarded to be among the founding fathers of the modern sociology, historiography and economics. He is best known for his book The Muqaddimah (known as Prolegomena in Greek). The book influenced 17th-century Ottoman historians like Ḥajjī Khalīfa and Mustafa Naima who used the theories in the book to analyze the growth and decline of the Ottoman Empire. 19th-century European scholars also acknowledged the significance of the book and considered Ibn Khaldun as one of the greatest philosophers to come out of the Muslim world.

Ibn Khaldun was also a traveller; he was born in Tunis (North Africa). He studied in Egypt, travelled in Telemcen (Algeria) than in Syria before he lived three years in Granada between 1362 and 1365. He could be sure of a positive welcome there, since he had helped the sultan of Granda Mohammed V regain power from his temporary exile in Fez (Morocco). In 1364 Mohammed V entrusted him with a diplomatic mission to the king of Castile “Pedro the cruel”, to endorse a peace treaty. Ibn Khaldun successfully carried out this mission and politely declined Pedro’s offer to remain at his court and have his family’s Spanish possession returned to him. Later came Ibn Khaldun quickly into competition with
Mohammed’s vizier “Ibn Al Khatib”, who saw the close relationship between Mohammed and Ibn Khaldun increasing mistrust. He was sent back to North Africa.

In The Muqqadimah, his masterpiece, Ibn Khaldun tells of a city (Granada), in which the peak was reached in various aspects and fields such as philosophy, literature, medicine, architecture etc... For him, the reason of this prosperity in Granada was clear: By the reconquest, the Moors have lost more and more areas and the Arabic scholars, artists and poets fled from the Christian areas to get and condense in Granada, the last Muslim City. Therefore, almost all knowledge of Muslim Andalusia found in Granada them. Although Ibn Khaldun has not lived the Fall of Granada, I found important to mention him in this work because he represent special kind of Arabic historians, unlike “Tilimsani”, which we get to know later.

Ibn Khaldun revolutionary views have attracted the attention of Muslim scholars as well as Western thinkers. In his study of History, he was a pioneer in subjecting historical reports to the basic criteria of reason social and physical laws. He pointed out the following four essential points in the study and analysis of historical reports:

- relating events to each other through cause and effect,
- drawing analogy between past and present,
- taking into consideration the effect of the environment, and
- Taking into consideration the effect of inherited and economic conditions.

If the two historians (Tilimsani and Hajji) have meet some objectivity in their analysis of the events of 1492, that is was we will see in the next chapter.

1) “Nafh Attib”:

It is the oldest study about the history of the Moorish Spain after 1492. “Naft Attib” was written in 1692 by the Algerian Historian Mohammed Tilimsani (1578 - 1631). This work is until today considered in the Arabic academies as one of the main sources and references for the historical study of the Islamic Andalusia. It’s contains a detailed description of the diverse events that have marked the history of Andalusia since the Arab Conquest in 711 till the Christian reconquest and the fall of the Moorish Granada in 1492.

Furthermore Tilimsani describe all the important cities of Andalusia and make the family tree not only of the Moors dynasties (such as the Nasrid dynasty in Granada), but also of the great families of the Andalus Oligarchy. The book speaks in the most chapters of the life of Moorish people and their love for sciences, architecture and literature. One chapter discusses in details the fall of Granada. In reading it, we find often phrases and expressions like “catastrophe”, “disaster” or “earthquake”, that reaches not only Andalusia, but also all the “Oumma” (It is a notion for the Arabic-Islamic World). As a Historian Tilimsani gives some reasons why the Moors have lost their battles against the Christians (or as he calls them: “the misbeliever”).
In my opinion, Tilimsani’s reasons were not conclusive: On the one hand he puts the blame on the Christians, they have tried with every means to weaken the authority in Granada (for example: to create dispute between the members of the Nasrid family). On the other hand Tilimsani was of the opinion, that because the lords of Granada went away from the principals of the Koran and because they prefer to practice a “decadent” life instead of the “Djihad” against the Christians, they have deserved the loss of Andalusia. For me this analysis is more theological and subjective than historical and objective.

2) “The history of Andalusia”:

The Iraqi author of “The history of Andalusia” (written in 1988) Abderrahman Hajji has considered a chapter about the Granada’s history. By his research of the different historical phases of the kingdom of Granada he expressed immediately his surprise at the fact that the “little Andalus” has survived more than 200 years, because all ready at the 13th century, Granada was practically surrounded by the Christian forces and the berbers of Morocco have stopped to support the Moorish
Lords. Despite that Granada has not only resisted but Granada people have demonstrated an ability to develop arts, architecture and sciences.

Hajji, the professor for Islamic history at the University of Bagdad in Irak is the opinion, that the fall of Granada was expectable and planned sooner or later and that the internal crisis into the Nasrid Family as well as the reconquest were the direct factors of the “disaster”. Her describe also in this chapter the suffering of the moors after 1492 in spite of the famous contract between Boabdil (The last Nasrid king of Granada) and Ferdinand and Isabella. The Moorish people were obliged to renounce officially their religion, were humiliated in many kinds before they were forced definitively to live Spain to North Africa. In his Description of the suffering of the moors (they later after 1492 called “los moriscos”) Hajji used almost the same emotional vocabulary and a nostalgical language as well as Tilimsani in the historical analysis.

V. Conclusion:

As a conclusion for this short report about the interpretation of the events of 1492 in Granada by the Arabic historians I want to resume in the following points that:

➢ There are too little analysis and studies concerning this topic and paradoxaly a lot of reports for the prosperity age of the Islamic Andalusia. The Lebanese professor of History Abdellah Fahmi reports in one of his articles, that in the entire Arab universities, there is not even a chair or department for studding the history of Andalusia.

➢ The contemporary historian Adberrahman Hajji stil have a emotional approach in his studding of the Fall of Granada (as well as Tilimsanis language)

➢ In the collective Arabic memory, the fall of Granada still a kind of taboo, which can explain the emotional and pseudo scientifical approach of the historian Arabs concerning Andalusia.