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The Influence of Arabic Literature on European Thought during the Middle Ages .

تأثير الأدب العربي على الفكر الأوروبي خلال العصور الوسطى.

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Abstact :

With the advent of Islam and the expansion of Islamic conquests across the East and West, the Arabs exerted a profound influence on neighboring civilizations—particularly the Persians, Indians, and Byzantines. Following the conquest of al-Andalus by Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād, Spain—and Europe more broadly—came under significant Arab cultural influence across various domains, especially literature. This cultural exchange led to the emergence of new literary forms previously unknown in Europe, such as troubadour poetry, which was inspired by the Arabic *muwashshaḥāt* (strophic poetry) that originated in al-Andalus in the 3rd century AH / 9th century CE.

From this perspective, the present study seeks to examine Arab-European relations during the Middle Ages and their cultural ramifications. It investigates the manifestations of these interactions in order to address the following research question: What were the most prominent aspects of literary influence and exchange between Arabs and Europeans during the Middle Ages? And how were Arab-European relations shaped, particularly in the literary and intellectual spheres?

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الملخص:

مع ظهور الإسلام وتوسع الفتوحات الإسلامية شرقًا وغربًا، مارس العرب تأثيرًا عميقًا على الحضارات المجاورة، ولا سيما الحضارات الفارسية والهندية والبيزنطية. بعد فتح الأندلس على يد طارق بن زياد، خضعت إسبانيا – وأوروبا عمومًا – لتأثير ثقافي عربي كبير في مختلف المجالات، وخاصة الأدب. أدى هذا التبادل الثقافي إلى ظهور أشكال أدبية جديدة لم تكن معروفة سابقًا في أوروبا، مثل شعر التروبادور، المستوحى من الموشحات العربية (الشعر المقطعي) التي نشأت في الأندلس في القرن الثالث الهجري/التاسع الميلادي.

من هذا المنطلق، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى بحث العلاقات العربية الأوروبية خلال العصور الوسطى وتداعياتها الثقافية. وتستقصي مظاهر هذه التفاعلات للإجابة على سؤال البحث التالي: ما هي أبرز جوانب التأثير الأدبي والتبادل الأدبي بين العرب والأوروبيين خلال العصور الوسطى؟ وكيف تشكّلت العلاقات العربية الأوروبية، لا سيما في المجالين الأدبي والفكري؟

Introduction :

One of the key features of vibrant societies is their refusal to remain isolated, and their eagerness to learn about other nations. This openness leads to interaction, influence, and mutual exchange, which in turn contributes to the development of nations and their civilizational, linguistic, and cultural growth. Historically, it has been established that Roman civilization was built upon the ruins of Greek civilization, and that the Romans benefited from Greek culture, philosophy, and literature, adapting it into what became Roman literature. This marked one of the earliest foundations of historical relationships that would later, in the 19th century, be known as comparative literature.

And if the relationship between Greek and Roman civilizations represents an early model of cultural influence, then the European Middle Ages witnessed a new wave of cultural interaction—most notably, Europe's engagement with Arab-Islamic civilization, which at the time was a global center of science and intellectual life. While Europe was experiencing a period of intellectual and scientific stagnation, the Islamic world flourished across various fields of knowledge, including philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, literature, and translation. This intellectual heritage became a starting point for reshaping European consciousness and played a key role in the emergence of the Renaissance.

From this standpoint, our study aims to explore the literary relations between Arabs and Europe during the Middle Ages. The goal is to demonstrate that the Arabs were a dominant power and civilization in the Mediterranean basin, and that historical ties serve to elevate the value and advancement of nations across various fields. Moreover, the intellectual, scientific, and cultural

Renaissance in Europe owes much to the Arabs, their civilization, sciences, and literature. In accomplishing this, we have relied on the historical method, drawing on original sources to clarify historical and literary facts, with the aim of highlighting the significance of the literary relations between Arabs and Europe.

What was the state of Europe before the advent of Islam? What were the most prominent forms of influence and cultural exchange during that period? And what were the outcomes of these interactions?

1. The State of Europe Before Islam

Following the fall of Rome in 476 CE, the world during the Middle Ages was broadly divided into three major civilizations. The first was the Byzantine civilization, which occupied the eastern portion of the former Roman Empire. Its capital was Constantinople, and Christianity served as its official religion.

This society encompassed a diverse range of peoples, including Asians, Africans, Slavs, and other populations from North Africa and Western Asia.
The second was the Western European civilization, which emerged in the western part of the former Roman Empire. It comprised remnants of Roman culture along with various groups that arrived through migration and Germanic invasions. These elements gradually blended to form a new society that initially adhered to Arian Christianity, before eventually embracing Catholicism. Politically and religiously, it looked to Rome as its center, though Rome's influence waned over time.
During the early Middle Ages, Europe experienced a prolonged period of hardship, characterized by widespread ignorance, stagnation, and obscurantism. Oppression and disorder were prevalent throughout the continent.

The French historian **Joseph Renaud** described the condition of Europe before the advent of Islam in stark terms: «***At that time, Europe overflowed with vices and sins; it had abandoned cleanliness and care for humans and their environment. It was filled with ignorance, chaos, and backwardness, along with widespread injustice and persecution; illiteracy was rampant***.»[1]

This widespread moral and social decline gave rise to bloody conflicts and deepening instability. Grousset further stated: «***A dark night had fallen over it… a night that grew ever darker and blacker. The barbarism of that era was even more horrifying than that of ancient times, for it resembled the corpse of a once-great civilization that had decayed. The features of this civilization were obliterated, and it was doomed to vanish. The great countries that had once witnessed the zenith of this civilization—such as Italy and France—became prey to destruction, chaos, and ruin***» .[2]

The third major civilization was the Islamic civilization, which emerged with the rise of Islam and expanded from the Arabian Peninsula to various parts of the world—eastward into Persia and

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[1] Joseph Renaud, *History of the Invasions of Europe*, p. 295.

[2] Iman Library, Mansoura, Egypt, -, Al*What Did the World Lose by the Decline of the Muslims?*Nadwi, -Abul Hasan Al undated, no edition specified, p38.

westward into significant territories of the former Roman Empire, including the Levant, Iraq, Asia Minor, North Africa, and Spain. The expansion of Islam into Europe would later play a pivotal role in sparking the European Renaissance, as will be discussed throughout this paper.

When attempting to define the Middle Ages by linking it to a specific date or event, scholars and historians face considerable difficulty due to the period's extensive duration—spanning nearly fifteen centuries. Over such a long era, European society underwent substantial transformations, making it impossible to assign uniform characteristics to the entire period.

To facilitate historical analysis, historians have divided the Middle Ages into three distinct phases:[3]

The first phase extends from the beginning of the Middle Ages in the 4th century CE to the 10th century CE. It was marked by the decline of the Roman Empire, the intensification of Germanic invasions, the rise of Islamic conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries, and the Viking incursions of the 9th century. This period was characterized by widespread insecurity, largely due to the inability of political authorities to defend their territories and protect property.

The second phase, spanning the 11th to the 13th century, witnessed a relative degree of stability and security. During this period, Europe entered a formative stage that laid the foundations for the early Renaissance. Feudalism became firmly established, accompanied by the rise of a chivalric culture and its associated ideals. Urban centers and universities began to emerge, and notable advancements were made in the arts and architecture.

The third and final phase took place in the 14th century and was marked by a significant intellectual shift, largely driven by increasing contact with the Islamic East—particularly through al-Andalus, Sicily, and the Crusades. Arab civilization provided Europe with a vast wealth of knowledge and scientific innovation.

European scholars were deeply influenced by leading Muslim thinkers across diverse fields:
al-Bīrūnī in mathematics, astronomy, and geography;
Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in philosophy;
Ibn al-Bayṭār in botany;
Ibn al-Nafīs in medicine;
and Ibn Ṭufayl in both literature and philosophy...

Thus, the final stage of the Middle Ages represented a period of profound transformation across political, social, linguistic, cultural, and religious domains.

One of the primary factors contributing to Europe's scientific stagnation was the rudimentary state of its mathematical knowledge and the inefficiency of the Roman numeral system—particularly in performing basic arithmetic operations such as addition. The introduction of Arabic numerals (originally of Indian origin) in the 12th century CE had a transformative impact, allowing

[3] Amr Abdel Aziz Mounir, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, pp. 13–28 (adapted), eBook from the site: file:///C:/Users/2015/Downloads/90253_تاريخ%20أوروبا%20في%20العصور%20الوسطى_Foulabook.com_.pdf

scholars, merchants, and financial professionals to perform calculations with greater accuracy, simplicity, and efficiency.

During the same century, trigonometry was introduced and applied in Europe, and several valuable astronomical instruments were adopted from the Arab world. Among these were the quadrant—a device used in astronomy and navigation to measure the altitude of celestial bodies, consisting of a quarter-circle arc divided into 90 degrees. Europeans also adopted astronomical tables, cross-staffs, and the astrolabe, an instrument extensively employed by Arab scientists to determine prayer times and the qibla (the direction of Mecca).[4]

2. The Arab-Islamic Presence in Europe and Its Consequences

The Arab-Islamic presence in Europe began with a series of military conquests, most notably the Umayyad campaign in Spain in 710 CE, followed by the conquest of Sicily in 827 CE, Palermo in 831 CE, southern Italy in 837 CE, Messina in 842 CE, and Syracuse in 878 CE. These events marked the beginning of a gradual process of cultural integration between the Arab-Muslim conquerors and the native European populations—a process that would eventually extend into other parts of the continent. Muslim rulers and princes often forged political alliances through intermarriage with European women, thereby strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering mutual influence.

Islamic Spain reached its cultural and political zenith under the rule of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–961 CE), whose reign was marked by remarkable advancements in governance, urban development, and intellectual activity.

Diplomatic ties were also forged between Charlemagne, king of the Franks, and Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd in Baghdad, as well as between Charlemagne and the Umayyad ruler in Spain—his rival. These diplomatic channels facilitated the transmission of Arab scientific and intellectual achievements into Europe, paving the way for a broader cultural and scholarly exchange.

The Arab-Islamic presence in Spain and Sicily from the 8th century onward, along with European interactions with the Islamic East during the Crusades, facilitated a dynamic and multifaceted cultural exchange. Western Europeans adopted various elements of Islamic culture, particularly Arab expertise in commerce, trade, and market regulation. These economic interactions played a vital role in the transmission of Islamic cultural practices and the dissemination of goods and products beyond the boundaries of the Muslim world.

Over time, both Spain and Sicily came to reflect the outward manifestations of Islamic civilization, gradually incorporating aspects of Arab culture into their social and material life. The Arab-Muslim population in Spain, seeking to recreate the refined lifestyle they had experienced in Damascus, significantly influenced local Spanish customs. The native population, impressed by the sophistication of Arab culture, endeavored to emulate its external features—especially in terms of luxury, dress, architecture, and domestic comfort. This cultural admiration eventually spread to other European regions that had contact with the Islamic world.

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[4] Maurice Bishop, History of Europe in the Middle Ages, trans. Ali El-Sayed Ali, Supreme Council of Culture, 1st ed., 2005.

Historical accounts highlight the Arabized lifestyles of monarchs such as Roger II and Frederick II, both of whom adopted Arab dress and courtly customs. Frederick II[5], in particular, played a prominent role in fostering intellectual and scientific exchange. He studied under Arab scholars and supported the instruction of Arabic sciences at his court in Palermo. He also authored several works in Arabic, some of which were later translated into Latin. In 1224 CE, he founded the University of Naples with the goal of advancing the study of Arab sciences and literature. This institution became a vital center for the translation of Arabic knowledge and attracted European students who later contributed to the dissemination of this intellectual legacy across the continent.

Among the most significant outcomes of Islamic intellectual influence on Europe was the advancement of various fields of knowledge. While the following examples are not exhaustive, they serve to illustrate the depth and breadth of this influence[6]:

1. In the Field of Medicine:

European historians acknowledge that early medieval medicine in Europe was largely based on folk practices, often carried out by herbalists, bonesetters, and at times by sorcerers or soothsayers. In monasteries, it was common for a designated monk to perform rudimentary medical procedures, such as bloodletting. Structured medical knowledge began to take root in Western Europe with the translation of foundational Greek and Arabic texts, particularly those authored by Galen and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), during the 11th century CE.[7]

This translation movement marked the beginning of more formalized medical education in Europe. One of the earliest and most notable institutions was the medical school in Salerno, Italy, which became a beacon of medical enlightenment. Similar schools later emerged in Bologna and Montpellier, further spreading medical knowledge inspired by Islamic sources

The role of Arab scholars and translators in this intellectual transmission was pivotal. Particularly important was Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (808–873 CE), a renowned physician and translator who rendered numerous Greek works—often via Syriac—into Arabic, laying the groundwork for their eventual transmission to Europe.

The French city of Montpellier rose to prominence as a major center for the study of Arab sciences, particularly in medicine and astronomy. One of its notable figures was Arnaldus de Villanova (d. 1313), a scholar fluent in Arabic who translated numerous medical texts, including the works of

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[5] William Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam in Medieval Europe*, trans. Sarah Ibrahim Al-Dheeb, Jusoor for Translation and Publishing, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 2016, p59.

[6] Mohamed Abassa, *Cultural Relations between Arabs and Franks during the Middle Ages*, *Annals of Heritage*, Issue 13, University of Mostaganem, Algeria, 2013, p. 240.

[7] Maurice Bishop, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 296.

Ibn Sīnā and al-Kindī, into Latin, thereby introducing Arab medical knowledge to a broader European audience.[8]

2. In the Field of Commerce:

Arab commercial activity exerted a profound influence on the development of European trade. The orientalist W. Montgomery Watt observes that commerce in Western Europe had reached a nadir by the end of the eighth century, but began to recover and expand following the establishment of trade relations with the Arabs. This economic engagement contributed significantly to the revitalization of European markets and trade routes.

The Arabs introduced substantial advancements in maritime technology to the Mediterranean world, drawing upon their extensive experience in the Indian Ocean. One of the most significant contributions was the introduction of triangular sails—commonly known as lateen sails—which enabled ships to tack against the wind, thereby improving navigational efficiency. These innovations had lasting implications for European maritime commerce and shipbuilding.

The orientalist **Montgomery** affirms that Arab trade had a profound impact on the peoples of Europe. He notes that «**commerce was at its lowest point throughout Western Europe at the end of the eighth century, but after the establishment of trade relations with the Arabs, commerce gradually developed**.»[9]

The Arabs significantly benefited the Mediterranean countries in terms of maritime equipment, drawing from their extensive experience in the Indian Ocean. They constructed ships with triangular sails—being the first to introduce them to the Mediterranean—due to their superior ability to sail against the wind.

Montgomery[10] further emphasizes Arab contributions in maritime navigation and terminology. The linguistic legacy of this influence is evident in numerous nautical terms adopted into European languages. For instance, the English word *admiral* derives from the Arabic *amīr al-baḥr* ("commander of the sea"). Other examples include *cable*, *sloop* (from *shallop*), and *barque*—all with etymological roots traceable to Arabic.

The influence of Arabic on European languages extended beyond maritime vocabulary to fields such as agriculture and irrigation. Spanish terms like *acequia* (irrigation canal) and *noria* (water wheel) are of Arabic origin. Furthermore, the names of several agricultural products in European languages—including *sugar*, *lemon*, *artichoke*, and *cotton*—also derive from Arabic, reflecting the transmission of both terminology and cultivation techniques.

One of the most transformative introductions was that of paper. The Abbasid vizier Yaḥyā al-Barmakī established the first paper mill in Baghdad around 800 CE, marking the beginning of paper production in the Islamic world. From there, the technology spread to Syria, North Africa, and

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[8] Mohamed Abassa, *Cultural Relations between Arabs and Franks during the Middle Ages*, p. 241.

[9] William Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam in Medieval Europe*, pp. 41, 47, 49, 54.

Ibid., pp. 47, 49. [10]

eventually to Islamic Spain. Roger II of Sicily was among the earliest European monarchs to use paper, documented as early as 1090 CE. Through Spain and Sicily, paper gradually became widespread across Western Europe, significantly enhancing administrative, commercial, and scholarly practices.[11]

3. The Literary Influence of Arab Culture in Europe During the Middle Ages

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Greek and Roman literary heritage continued to dominate, and literature generally retained a popular oral character. It was largely shaped by religious themes, particularly hymns and chants. European literature during this period reflected the political, religious, and cultural transformations of the time—especially the pervasive influence of the Church. The Church played a central role in shaping literary themes and content, with texts expressing core Christian values and beliefs such as heaven, sin, and hell.

As a result of encounters with the Islamic East, new literary genres emerged that glorified national identity, most notably popular epics. A prominent example is *La Chanson de Roland* (*The Song of Roland*), a French epic that appeared in the 11th century CE. It embodied the ideal of heroic valor through the figure of Roland, an epic character who epitomized loyalty and martial courage. The work clearly emphasized the theme of confronting Muslims during the Crusades, portraying Roland as a folk hero devoted to patriotism and the defense of the empire.

In the Provençal region during the 11th and 12th centuries, a new poetic form emerged—distinct from the previously dominant traditions. Stimulated by significant economic and cultural developments, the Provençal people became the first Europeans of the era to cultivate a literary language. This poetic expression served as an influential model for other European societies. It gave rise to a refined lyrical tradition that embodied the ideals of a nascent chivalric culture—one rooted in aristocratic knightly values and characterized by courtly etiquette, noble upbringing, and devoted homage to noble ladies.[12]

In the realm of poetry, the lyric poem emerged from a fundamental human impulse for singing, dancing, and the rhythmic repetition of joyful expressions. These compositions adhered to specific structures of line, stanza, syllabic pattern, and rhyme—carefully crafted for aesthetic and emotional resonance. While the structural innovations of Provençal poetry can be traced to Roman popular verse, they were also undeniably influenced by Arabic and Hebrew poetic traditions, as well as by early Spanish poetry.[13]

A new poetic form subsequently emerged in Europe that bore striking resemblance to the Arabic-Andalusian *muwashshah* tradition. This form—known as troubadour poetry—originated in Provence, where troubadour poets introduced major innovations in the development of European literary history. Drawing on lyrical elements from the Arabic tradition, they composed passionate

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Ibid., pp. 54. [11]

[12] Fouad Al-Murai, *Introduction to European Literatures*, University of Aleppo Publications, Faculty of Arts, Directorate of Books and Publications, 2nd ed., n.d., p. 98.

[13] Maurice Bishop, *History of Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 307.

love poetry that conveyed deep emotional longing and reverence for all that is pure and virtuous, including the idealized praise of beautiful women.

From a rhythmic and prosodic perspective, European poetry was unfamiliar with the use of rhyme until the early 12th century, when it was introduced by troubadour poets. Rhyme had not previously appeared in classical Latin or Greek poetry and made its first significant entry into European verse through Occitan poetry (*poésie occitane*), composed by troubadours in Provence, southern France. One of the most prominent troubadour poets was William IX (1074–1127), Count of Poitiers and seventh Duke of Aquitaine, who is regarded as the first southern French poet to introduce various forms of rhyme into European poetic tradition.

The Provençal poets experimented with rhymed verse, paired lines, and diverse strophic structures—forms that were novel to European poetry at the time and were clearly influenced by Arabic poetic traditions. Moreover, Occitan poetry incorporated poetic dialogues and debates modeled after the Arabic *mujādalah* (contests of wit) and literary disputations. William IX even employed Arabic words at the beginning of some of his poems—for instance, the term *khalīlayya* ("my friend"):[14]

Compaino, non puosc muder qu'eo no m'effrei
De novellas qu'ai auzidas e que vei

English translation
"My companion, I cannot help but be disturbed
By the news I hear and see."

الترجمة العربية:
خليلي، لا أستطيع أن أظل ساكناً،

فقد أقلقني ما أسمعه وأراه من أخبار.

4. The Legacy of Islamic Presence in Europe

Montgomery affirms that during the Middle Ages, European writers constructed demeaning and distorted images of Islam. However, in the modern era, with the rise of ideals promoting Arab-Islamic coexistence and intercultural dialogue, such portrayals have become increasingly objective and balanced.

He states: *«**We Europeans remain largely unaware of the debt our culture owes to Islam. Sometimes, we belittle the depth and significance of Islamic influence on our heritage. At other times, we ignore it entirely. To build good relations with Arabs and Muslims, we must fully acknowledge this contribution. Denial is nothing but false pride**.»*[15]

However, one of the consequences of the cultural intermingling between the Islamic world and Europe was the emergence of evident hostility, particularly among Christians and Europeans more

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[14] Mohammed Abbassa, *Andalusian Muwashshahat and Zajal and Their Impact on Troubadour Poetry*, Dar Al Kitab Publishing and Distribution, Mostaganem, Algeria, 1st ed., 2012, p. 280, citing: A. Jeanroy, *Les chansons de Guillaume IX*, p. 3.

[15] William Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam in Medieval Europe*, pp. 13–14.

broadly. This resentment led many to distort the image of Islam in European contexts as a way to compensate for their perceived sense of inferiority. For instance, some translators refrained from citing the original names of Arab authors when rendering their works—either attributing them to themselves, leaving them anonymous, or altering and Latinizing the Arabic names. Moreover, certain translators, often employed by the Church specifically to engage in polemical efforts against Muslims, frequently misrepresented Islamic teachings and incited hostility among Europeans toward Islam and its adherents.[16]

Conclusion:

Arab culture spread throughout Europe—particularly in its western regions—through commercial interactions and the political presence of Arabs in Spain and Sicily. Accordingly, Arab contributions to Western Europe primarily enhanced material life and its foundational institutions. Europeans were often unaware of the Arabic and Islamic origins of many of the aspects they adopted. The luxurious lifestyle of the Arabs, coupled with their rich poetic imagination that captivated European minds, significantly influenced the literary creativity of the Romance peoples and served as a major source of inspiration.

In *The Legacy of Islam*, **Baron Carra de Vaux** remarked that the Arabs made significant achievements in science: they were the first to use zero, transformed algebra into a precise and highly developed discipline, laid the foundations of analytical geometry, and were unquestionably the founders of both plane and spherical trigonometry—fields absent from Greek knowledge. Arabs also made valuable contributions to astronomy. This acknowledgment underscores the profound impact of Arab contributions on the development of European sciences.

Society in Islamic Spain gradually transformed into a harmonious Hispano-Arabic society, in which the Arabic language became familiar to both Christians and Muslims. Under Muslim rule, Christians adopted nearly all aspects of their rulers' culture—except for religion.

The development of European poetry in particular, and literature in general, resulted from a rich intermingling of various cultures, languages, and religions. This cultural synthesis ultimately contributed to the emergence of a European civilization grounded in a multifaceted heritage—Roman, Greek, Islamic, Christian, and others.

Prose, too, was part of this evolutionary process; chivalric tales and pastoral romances appeared in forms reminiscent of Arabic storytelling.

European poetry was notably refined through contact with Arabic poetry, especially in its lyrical and chaste expression of love.

Footnotes and References:

Arabic Books:

[16] Mohamed Abassa, *Cultural Relations Between Arabs and the Franks During the Middle Ages*, p. 239.

1. Abul Hasan Al-Nadwi, *What Did the World Lose by the Decline of the Muslims?*, Al-Iman Library, Mansoura, Egypt, undated, no edition specified.
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