Looking for Interpreter Zero: (13) Merchants, Mudejars, Jews, Mercenaries, Diplomats or Renegades

Bridging the gaps in medieval Iberia and North Africa, where Moslems, Jews and Christians coexisted and there was an on-going need for translators, interpreters and intermediaries.

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“… dy au Sarrazin qui te fait parler …” [1]

The succession of rulers jockeying for position after the 1031 collapse of the Cordoba Caliphate made for a shifting cultural and political landscape as Christian power was slowly asserted against the Almoravid and then Almohar rulers who swept in from the Maghreb in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By 1250, Granada was the only Moslem kingdom left on the peninsula, though there were Moslem communities in the Christian kingdoms. Moslems, Jews and Christians coexisted and there was an ongoing need for translators, interpreters and intermediaries in a region with a long history of exchange as well as conflict. There is a sense in which the linguistic legacy of Cordoba is present in practices that highlight the complicated history of late medieval Iberia.

Most of what we know about that legacy comes to us through the history of translation. In the twelfth century, Raymond, Archbishop of Toledo encouraged ambitious translation projects involving work from Arabic into Latin via Castilian. That work was pursued by Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284) who decreed that Castilian was to be the language of the final versions of the religious, philosophical and scientific texts produced, which was a significant step in the development of that language. The Toledo schools made a marked contribution to Western scholarship by making ancient Greek, Arabic and Hebrew texts available to Western scholars.

Those schools have a clear history. There is much, much less information available on those who took up the role of intermediaries like Hasday ibn Shaprut and Recemund. Roser Salicrú Lluch gives us a sense of the way such men were chosen. When it came to contacts between Christian rulers and the rulers of Granada or North Africa, for instance, priority was given to those who were going to be effective communicators. Christian rulers used intermediaries who were familiar with Moslem traditions: officials who worked in border areas or those who had contact with Mudejars (Moslems who lived in Christian nations)[2]. There were officials in Granada whose job descriptions indicate their familiarity with other communities: the alcaldes entre cristianos y moros dealt with incidents on the borders and the alfaqueques were responsible for arranging for the release of captives. [3]

Christian merchant communities in the Maghreb ports were another source of go-betweens: they spoke Arabic and were familiar with local customs. There was a third – improbable – group: the
Christian mercenaries – known as Frendji (from Frankish) who served the sultans of Marrakesh, Tlemcen, Bugie and Tunis as élite troops.

The importance of the Frendji to the political life of Barbary greatly strengthened the ties which linked Europe and Africa, and ensured to some extent the observance of numerous commercial treaties which from the twelfth century onwards were constantly being negotiated between Christians and Moslems … In this connection the officers of the militia were often required to act as interpreters and as witnesses to the signatures of the plenipotentiaries. [4]

These middlemen had a grasp of language and culture that was valued over status or rank. They were “… merchants, Mudejars, Jews, mercenaries, diplomats but also … captives, slaves and renegades, who may be considered real transverse figures, groups bridging the gap between two worlds or, simply, cross-cultural characters.”[5]

While there are not many individual intermediaries in evidence, we have a rare example of a linguist at work in the archive of the Crown of Aragon. Pere Robert, dragoman to the court of James II of Aragon was responsible for the translation of correspondence from Arabic into the Aragonese Romance vernacular. He annotated his translation of a letter from the King of Granada to King James II to indicate that Granada piracy on the border between the two states was not justified by earlier Christian attacks. He added that “… when the King of Granada was enthroned, he issued a general safe-conduct in favour of all your subjects. You should have its translation in your archive. However, if you do not find it, the merchants of Valencia also have one …” [6]

We have this evidence only because the letter survived. By comparison, there is a wealth of information about another middleman, the renegade Anselm Turmeda (c.1352-c.1423), a Majorcan Franciscan friar who was a writer as well as an interpreter and whose books in Catalan or Arabic were very well-known. Church leaders deplored the number of people who left the Church because they were captives under pressure, impoverished or tempted for other reasons.[7] By his own account, Turmeda converted because he came to believe that Islam was the true religion, that in John 14:16, the words “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you forever” was a reference to the prophet Mohammed. In the autobiographical preface to his polemical 1420 manuscript the Tuhfa - The Gift (to the Intelligent for Refuting the Arguments of the Christians) he describes his decision to abandon his religious studies in Bologna at thirty-five, settle in Tunis and convert to Islam. Four months into his stay, he met Yúsuf, doctor and interpreter for Sultan Abu al Abbas Ahmad who was probably a renegade himself. Yúsuf took him to the palace to meet the Sultan. [8]

The Sultan questioned Turmeda through Yusuf, asking about his age and his background. He then effectively welcomed him to his new faith and life. The Sultan proved to be a strong supporter of Turmeda, as he became his employer and indeed his matchmaker since he was married soon after their meeting. Turmeda’s Arabic name was Abd-Allah at-Tarjuman – Abd-Allah the Interpreter. The Sultan made him a customs official, believing that he would often be called upon to act as an interpreter between Christians and Moslems and would have to learn Arabic, which he reports he did in just one year. (He would have learned the Tunisian dialect at first but years later he was able to write Tuhfa in Arabic.) His responsibilities included accompanying the sultan on military expeditions, helping with troop provisions and translating – presumably Latin, Catalan, French or Italian – correspondence. [9]

There is even some suggestion that his responsibilities to the Sultan of Tunis during the Franco-Genoese 1390 siege of Mahdia involved interpreting during talks with the enemy.[10] Froissart’s account of the siege in his Chronicles refers to the work of the interpreter(s) sent by the
‘Saracens’ to ask the force what they wanted. If it was Turmeda, he was the man for the job as there was religious disputation involved (and if it wasn’t him, it’s a good interpreting story): the invaders’ reply was that theirs was a war of religion against unbelievers who had crucified Christ.

With this answer the trucheman returned without peril or damage and shewed to his masters all as ye have heard. At this answer the Saracens did nothing but laugh, and said how that answer was nothing reasonable, for it was the Jews that put Christ to death and not they. [11]

A second exchange between Saracens and the French camp, between two men named Ciffrenal and Agadinquor, has the dragoman insisting on the superiority of Islam until Ciffrenal invites him to desist and:

… ne parle plus avant de ceste matiere; car à toy n’en appartient point, ne à disputer nostre loy, mais dy au Sarrazin qui te fait parler, que il jure sur sa loy et sur sa créance et affirme la bataille, et il aura dedens quatre heures qui luy furnira. [12]

Like other middlemen, Turmeda was often called upon to interpret in times of dispute or battle. De Epalza even suggests that the conflict between Alfonso of Aragon and Sultan Abu Faris of Tunisia that started in 1424 could well have been at least in part due to the death of the well-known translator and mediator who might have been able to help them negotiate a settlement.

Footnotes

[1] See Footnotes 9 and 11


[6] ibid


[9] ibid. p230


Lublinski-Bodeman p258. “Say no more on this matter; for it is not your place to do so, nor to dispute our law, but tell the Saracen who makes you speak that if he is to swear by his law and his belief and prepare for battle he shall have it within four hours.” My translation – with thanks to Professor Nicolette Zeeman, Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge.