



The Legend of Ibn Marwân and Judith

Al-Andalus - Spain

Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhâmmad ibn Marwân ibn Yunus al-Yiliqi al-Maridi had too long a name, like many other people of his time, the 9th Century. But people knew him simply as Ibn Marwân al-Yiliqi; that is to say, ‘the son of Marwân, the Galician’, which was much easier to memorize.

It is true that a Galician from the Northern Hispania, from the Christian Hispania, was Ibn Marwân’ father. This man was a *muladí* – convert to Islam– who settled in Merida and ended up becoming *walí* – governor– of Merida by Muhammad I himself, the Umayyad Emir of Cordova, which was, at that time, the capital of Al-Andalus.

It did not take long for Ibn Marwân to stand out for his intelligence, bravery and cunning, both on the battlefield and in politics and he was to become captain of the royal guard of the Umayyad Emir. But such brilliance does not go unnoticed, and it often attracts the envy, suspicion and hostility of those who fear losing their privileges. This is how Hassín, *hajib* –prime minister– of the emir, had it in for him, to the point that, one day, when both of them were in a meeting of viziers, Hassín took advantage of his superior rank to insult and hit in the face Ibn Marwân saying ‘You are worth less than a dog’. This is a grave insult in the Islamic world.

This affront impelled Ibn Marwân to return to Merida and become a nuisance for the one who had previously been his lord, Muhammad I, because he would end up rising up against the Cordovan armies. Soon

after, he became the lord of the middle and lower course of the Guadiana River and the south of present-day Portugal.

But, beyond the historical character of Ibn Marwân, a legend has been passed down the centuries, from generation to generation, which was about his love affair with Judith, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant from Merida.

According to legend, the lovers met at a party. Judith was a young woman of extreme beauty with emerald eyes and a long black hair. She had a rebellious and independent character and was endowed with a keen natural intelligence. Of course, a woman of such qualities did not go unnoticed by the young leader who had recently arrived from Cordova. Nor did he go unnoticed by her, since his charisma and prestige were matched by the great height and athletic complexion of Ibn Marwân, and the golden skin that many hours of sun in the mountains bestowed on the warriors of the time.

Not surprisingly, they soon declared their love for each other. However, given the strict moral standards of the century regarding relationships between young people from different religions, they had no choice but to meet in secret, under the sympathetic shelter of the stars and, of course, with the complicity and the help of the maids who tended to Judith.

But, inevitably, their secret romantic encounters ended up raising the suspicions of her father, the rich Hebrew merchant, who, enlisting the help of his most trusted servants, ordered them to follow Judith and report later about what had happened.

Once their love was discovered, Judith had to suffer the relentless harassment of her father, who forbade her to see the handsome Ibn Marwân again. Then, in the face of her refusal to stop seeing him, he locked her in the highest room of his palace, one of the tallest palaces in the town.

Not content with that, the merchant went to the Merida authorities demanding that they order the captain of their armies to stop seeing his daughter. So, the rulers obeyed, as they feared the merchant's economic power and influence. But Ibn Marwân refused to

obey, even in the face of the threat of dismissing him as captain of the Muslim armies of Merida.

Seeing no alternative, Ibn Marwân gathered his fiercest and most loyal warriors, explained the situation to them, and he asked if they would be willing to follow him. None of them refused, so they devised a plan and, a few days later, released Judith from the high room in her father's palace and all of them set off together in their flight. This occurred, it is believed, in the year 875 C.E.

The group of rebels found a village on a hill next to the Wadī Ana River –currently Guadiana– a suitable place to take refuge and a little less than twelve leagues from Merida. There, other supporters of Ibn Marwân came with their families to build what, over the years, would become the city of Batalyaws, the present-day Badajoz.

Over time, the rebels would build a castle with a high tower, and they would wall the city, building houses, markets and public baths, and creating gardens, fountains and pools, and even modest palaces. And, of course, they built mosques, synagogues and churches, so that its inhabitants, whatever their religion, could feel free to worship without fear of reprisals and without having to suffer social rejection. How could it be otherwise, when the lord of the city was a Muslim of Christian descent and the lady was Jewish?

For some time, lost in history in the western Mediterranean, the three Abrahamic religions, were able to coexist and prosper together with mutual respect and tolerance for the beliefs of the others. This was at a time when, in other parts of the world, they fought and slaughtered each other for millennia. If this could be done in the 9th Century C.E., through love, it could also be done, now, through compassion and understanding. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

Since Al-Andalus disappeared in 1492 C.E. with the conquest of Granada at the hands of the Christian armies of Castile, there has been an imperishable, quasi-secret procedure to hide the brilliance of what became the most splendid state in Europe, especially at its peak, in the 10th Century. This was under the reign of Abd al-Rahman III, the Umayyad caliph who, from the other side of the Mediterranean, would dispute the title of prince of the believers to the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad.

During the 10th century, the capital of Al-Andalus, Cordova, rivalled, in power, culture and prestige, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad, and also that of the Byzantine Empire Constantinople. Around 450,000 people walked its streets (it 'may have been larger then than any other European city was to be until the seventeenth century', Bradford de Long and Shleifer, 1993, p. 677). In addition, Cordova had more than a thousand public baths –an indication of the hygienic habits of its inhabitants– and a library with more than 400,000 volumes. In fact, it was in Toledo and Cordova where a major part of the scientific and philosophical legacy of Greece and Rome was saved through the work of their translators.

All this splendour was subjected to forced oblivion, not only in Spain, but also in the rest of Europe (Compier, 2011). It was inconvenient for the Spanish and European ecclesiastical and political powers for the people to know that, in that Europe which they considered exclusively Christian, there had existed a Muslim state which, with all its defects and even with the horrors typical of those times, had been able to house Muslims, Christians and Jews in relatively good coexistence for several centuries. And this is also echoed in the love story of Judith and Ibn Marwân.

As for Ibn Marwân, it should be noted here that he made Hajib Hassín pay dearly for the affront of the abuse, and for comparing him to a dog. Also, in 875, Hassín left Cordova with an army to stop Ibn Marwân's raids in the Guadiana region. However, the rebel would prevail in the battle and would take Hassín prisoner. When everyone thought that Ibn Marwân would make Hassín pay for his affront with death, Ibn Marwân chose to send him, as a prisoner, to his ally Alfonso III of Asturias, who asked the Emir of Cordova for good booty for Hassín.

Hassín would try one more time to punish the man who had humiliated him, but he would be forced to desist in his attack knowing that he would find the rebel well-prepared in Batalyawas (Martínez, 1905).

A little over a century after Ibn Marwân and Judith, after the fall of the Caliphate of Cordova, Batalyawas would end up becoming an independent Taifa kingdom, the Aftasí kingdom, which would reach the Atlantic, occupying much of what is now Portugal.

Sources

- Bradford de Long, J. y Shleifer, A. (1993). Princes and merchants: European city growth before the industrial revolution. *The Journal of Law & Economics*. 36(2), 671-702.
- Compier, A. H. (2011). How Europe came to forget about its Arabic heritage. *Al-Islam e-Gazette*, January 2011. Retrieved on 15 September 2020 from <https://www.alislam.org/egazette/articles/How-Europe-came-to-forget-Arabic-heritage.pdf>
- Durán, E. (2006). Leyenda de Ibn Marwân y Judith [Legend of Ibn Warwân and Judith]. Colegio Público de Gabriel de Gévora. Junta de Extremadura. Retrieved on 5 November 2013 from <http://cpdegabriel.juntaextremadura.net/leyenda.htm>
- Martínez, M. R. (1905). *Historia del Reino de Badajoz durante la dominación musulmana [History of the Kingdom of Badajoz During the Muslim Domination]*. Badajoz: Tip. y Librería de Antonio Arqueros.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble.- To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

Principle 12d: Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

The Way Forward.- Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

The Way Forward.- Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

The Way Forward.- The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership.

