

MEM Awards

**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2019 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
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I am very honored and extremely grateful to be the 2019 recipient of the Middle East Medievalists Lifetime Achievement Award.

This is an award that comes with age and offers me the opportunity to look back in time and reflect on my trajectory. As with some of the prior recipients, my path started outside the American academic system, but unlike them, it has continued in the same manner, except for brief periods when I had the pleasure of being hosted by the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and by the universities of Stanford, Chicago, and Harvard. Academic worlds are all similar in many ways, but also different, and these differences may strike an outsider as odd. This works both ways, and I can only hope that what I am going to discuss here will be of some

interest for you, just as the American academic system is of interest to me. In what follows, I will mention some of the previous recipients of this award with whom I had direct contact at some point or whose work is related to mine.

I began my studies at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid in 1973, a year that cannot be forgotten by many of my generation because of the coup d'état against Salvador Allende in Chile. I mention this because when I was in college, politics interested me more than study did. In Spain we were living the last years of the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, and events like those in Chile were easily translated into our own concerns, in this case as another reminder of the power of the army—the army being one of the major dangers that we all knew we would

have to face in the transition period that was to unfold after the dictator's death and that would, we hoped, lead to democracy.

Before and after Franco's death in 1975, what I remember of my years at the university has little to do with books or debates about scholarly matters. What remains most vivid in my mind are the armed police inside university buildings, the almost daily students' demonstrations that usually ended with being chased by those armed officers, and widespread political activism aimed at putting an end to the glaring dissonance between what most people—especially young people—desired and sought and what the official propaganda of the regime claimed we desired and sought. That period has given me a permanent reluctance to equate official, standard, or normative statements regarding a specific society with the realities on the ground, a reluctance that I have always found rewarding when I have applied it to the countries I have visited, including those on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

I said that my memories of college have little to do with books or scholarly debates; dictatorships are very bad news for scholarship and for academic life in general. They stifle the free exchange of ideas, they suffocate innovative thinking, and they promote servile attitudes in every area of life. During my five years as an Arabic and Islamic studies major, I do not recall having attended a single seminar or lecture that gave rise to debate. I was taught "facts" to memorize, not ideas to ponder and discuss. The classes in general were quite boring, with some exceptions because there are always, even in the worst of circumstances, individuals who somehow manage to preserve areas of

intellectual freedom and integrity that, however small, remain exemplary and set a model to follow. My supervisor, Fernando de la Granja, taught me to respect the Arabic language and María Jesús Rubiera surprised me with her innovative ideas. Teresa Garulo and Emilio Tornero were always supportive and inspiring.

But as I said, the classes were for the most part dull and uninspiring, all the more so because I was the only Arabic and Islamic studies major in my graduating class, which meant that in some courses I sat alone with the teachers in the classroom. Under these circumstances, some of my teachers were tempted to transform the class into a conversation—usually a monologue—about their own concerns. I recall one who was obsessed with the petty aspects of academic life and spent most of our class time enumerating them. His case alerted me to the danger of letting such aspects gain the upper hand in your life as a scholar. Later experiences confirmed that academic grievances, when nurtured, have damaging effects on both personality and scholarship.

If I was unlucky in not having classmates (which, on the other hand, also meant having no competitors), I was extremely lucky in meeting two older students, Luis Molina and María Luisa Ávila, who befriended me and helped me in a myriad of ways, as they still do today. Luis Molina's knowledge of Arabic is superb, and I still consult him when I know that I do not understand a text, and I am never disappointed by his guidance. María Luisa Ávila, initially trained as a mathematician, has spent most of her academic life building an extremely useful online resource, the *Prosopography of the Scholars of al-Andalus*, which now

comprises more than 11,000 entries. I still remember the computer she was using in 1985 when she wrote her PhD dissertation on demographics in al-Andalus through an analysis of the biographies of scholars. They both introduced me to ulamology and to the thought-provoking work of Stephen Humphreys and Richard Bulliet.

My interest was not initially related to the *'ulamā'* and their scholarly and social practices, like theirs was. I was interested in heresy and heretics. This was an interest closely linked to my own family history. My parents had been on the losing side of the Civil War that brought the dictator to power. While growing up in Francoist Spain, I was constantly reminded by the official propaganda that there was only one way to be a Spaniard, the National-Catholic way, and that therefore my parents and I did not quite belong, as we were neither nationalists nor Catholic; hence, we were (labeled as) “outsiders” in our own country. When, later, I was taught Spanish national history, I was fascinated by those who had received this label in earlier periods, among them the Muslims who had lived in the Iberian Peninsula for more than eight centuries. I became very curious about them.

Fortunately, my parents had enrolled me in the Italian school in Madrid, so I grew up knowing that there was no single way to write and understand history. Having learned Italian from the age of three, I developed a liking for foreign languages and, like many Spaniards of my generation, I wanted to go abroad and see other ways of living. When it came time to go to college, I decided to study the most exotic language that the Complutense University had to offer as a way to ensure a good justification to travel to the

countries where this language was spoken. As Hebrew and Arabic fit the bill, I started studying Semitic philology, soon deciding that Arabic was what I really liked.

At the university, I held on to my initial interests in heresy and the history of al-Andalus, but a new and related interest slowly entered the fray, as I became increasingly fascinated by those Muslims who thought differently from other Muslims, who were labeled heretics, innovators, or even infidels by their coreligionists, or who considered themselves *ghurabā'*. Researching these figures proved one of the most enjoyable experiences of my academic life, and I eventually wrote my PhD dissertation on a tract by an early Cordoban scholar, Ibn Waḍḍāḥ (d. 287/900), attacking religious innovations and innovators. My focus has mostly been on the intersection between politics and knowledge: how the authority to determine what is right and what is wrong was constructed and enforced, and by whom, and how it changed over time, along with how violence was used in such processes and how it was checked.

When working on my dissertation, I started to read about early hadith literature, Qur'an, and theology. These were topics that had never been core interests of the Spanish school of Arabists, especially not at the time I was studying. I longed to be able to consult with someone who was familiar with such topics, and I was lucky enough to be granted a British Council scholarship to attend the School of Oriental and African Studies as a “Research scholar.” In 1982 London was an exciting place to be, with its mixture of different peoples and its vibrant cultural life. There my good luck continued, as I was able to establish contact with Michael Brett

and Michael Cook, who were extremely generous with their time and knowledge and helped me make sense of the text I was studying. Cook, in particular, read every single page I wrote, even if it was written in Spanish, and made many critical remarks and suggestions that taught me more in a year than I had learned in five years of college.

Through Michael Cook I came into contact with a group of scholars who attended the “Late Antiquity and Early Islam” conferences organized by Larry Conrad, among others, and the “From Jahiliyya to Islam” conferences held in Jerusalem. It was there that I attended my first international conference in 1987, and I was terrified when Professor Kister invited me to his office, closed the door, produced a manuscript, and commanded: “Read it.” I then met Patricia Crone, whose writings I found provocative and illuminating, and who many years later invited me to write my book on ‘Abd al-Rahman III. I also met Gauthier Juynboll, who pushed me to write my first paper in English. At the time, he was writing his book on early hadith, and he immediately asked me: “Who was the first person to introduce hadith in al-Andalus?” Having come up with an unsatisfactory answer, I decided to work on a better one.

When I returned to Spain after my SOAS experience, I was again lucky in that I found a job almost immediately, first at the Universidad Complutense and afterward at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), a national research institution. Although I could have stayed in both, I finally opted for the CSIC. The reason was the CSIC’s proactive approach to the opportunities offered by the new political situation

following the 1978 Constitution, which transformed Spain into a democracy. The CSIC actively worked toward convergence with the academic standards of the European Community, which Spain joined in 1986. In order to get a job at the CSIC, it became mandatory to first carry out a long research stay abroad: exposure to other academic cultures and ways of doing things was considered the only way to overcome the shortcomings and perversions introduced to our academic culture during the dictatorship period. I also had the good fortune to overlap at the CSIC with two colleagues with whom I shared a vision of what needed to be done. They were Manuela Marín and Mercedes García Arenal, with whom I have worked closely since then—and in spite of which we are still friends. Together we tried to open up opportunities for students at the doctoral level and to offer them the possibility of contact with scholars from abroad, leveraging our limited resources to bring to Madrid scholars such as Wadad al-Qadi and Fred Donner. We also developed fruitful relations with our French colleagues thanks to a French institution located in Madrid, the Casa de Velázquez, which has played a crucial role in advancing the study of al-Andalus. I have learned a great deal from French scholarship, and it saddens me that today many scholars, especially the younger ones, ignore anything that is not written in English. In more recent times, I have been given the opportunity—thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt foundation—to get to know the German academic context better, an experience that has enriched my own work in many ways. Traditionally, in Spain, our contact with the Arab and Islamic worlds has mostly been via North

Africa. I have a longstanding love of both Tunisia and Morocco and have always felt at home in these countries, whether looking at manuscripts in their rich collections or through my contacts with professors such as Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi and Halima Ferhat.

I have enjoyed every minute of my time at the CSIC, and I will continue enjoying it as I still have some years ahead of me before retirement. There have been difficult moments, especially the awful blow that we were dealt in the 2008 economic crisis, which erased much of our progress toward convergence with our more advanced European neighbors. With Manuela Marín, I have pursued a shared interest in the political and intellectual history of al-Andalus, a topic dealt with by Sam Gellens in his seminal study of the *riḥla* practices of the Andalusis. I have written extensively on political, religious, and intellectual developments in al-Andalus, more in Spanish than in English, though sometimes these writings do get translated into English. We Spanish scholars are well aware that anything written in Spanish is very rarely read outside Spanish-speaking contexts and that to exist in the global academic world one must write in English, even if it means an extra effort for those of us who have learned English late and imperfectly.

Although I continue to work on Andalusí topics, several decades ago my interest expanded to encompass North Africa, as it became clear to me that I could not study the one without the other, especially when dealing with the Cordoban Umayyad caliphate and with the Almohads. It may sound silly, but in Spain al-Andalus has traditionally been studied in and of itself

as something unique and almost self-explanatory. The first Spanish Arabists tried to legitimize the study of al-Andalus within the framework of Spanish national history by rebranding al-Andalus as “Muslim Spain.” The way we name things is related to the way we conceive of them, in turn influencing how we study them. The choice of terms has always fascinated me, and it was by tracing the history of a term that I made my first incursions into studies that transcended al-Andalus. An early Andalusí rebel was called al-Fāṭimī, and this led me to study how that term was used in Arabic sources inside and outside al-Andalus. While searching for Fatimids, I came across some rebels referred to as al-Aṣfar, sparking research that led me to conclude that some of the Arab conquerors had painted their faces yellow, thus offering another explanation for the term *Ṣufrīs*. I am presently doing research on the sacrifice of she-camels, a practice that I first encountered when studying the rituals of the Fatimids in North Africa and that has now led me to Safavid Iran, passing through Norman Sicily. It is exhilarating to venture outside al-Andalus while at the same time never losing sight of it. I abhor nationalism, but I do love Spain and thus I love al-Andalus.

Along the way I have met many scholars, of different ages, both inside and outside Spain, who have been extremely generous with their knowledge and time. I have also been fortunate in having contact with younger scholars, whose enthusiasm and vocation have helped me to keep my own alive. If I have been able to offer them help at all resembling the help that I myself have received from others throughout my academic life, I will be

satisfied. I only hope that in the troubled and troubling times in which we now live, they will be not exposed to the kind of context in which I started my career back

in 1973, and that those who live and work in dictatorial contexts will be as fortunate as I was in eventually finding themselves in better times.