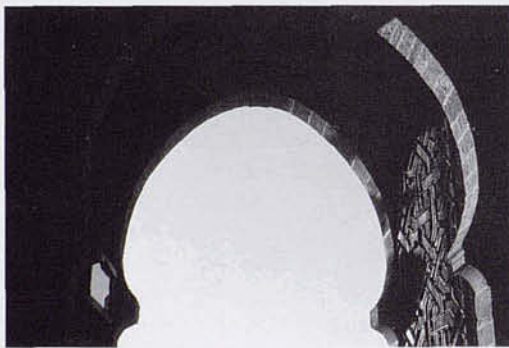




XÀTIVA

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## THE ARAB POETS OF VALENCIA



MANY ARE THE POETS OF THE PERIOD FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THE THIRTEENTH CENTURIES, MANY AND VARIED, BOTH IN THEIR WRITING AND IN THEMSELVES. THIS BRIEF INTRODUCTION PRESENTS THE LIFE AND WORK OF SOME OF THE GREATEST OF THEM.

JOSEP PIERA AUTHOR

**B**etween the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, the time that goes from the fall of the caliphate of Cordova following the death of Al-Mansur (1002) to the conquest of Valencia by King James I (1238) and of Menorca by Alfons the Frank (1287), the Eastern lands of Al-

Andalus went through one of the richest periods of their cultural history, as well as one of the most dramatic and most transcendent.

The literary world of this period is not as well known as it should be, in spite of its historical significance and its importance, since it has come down to us in

the songs and writings of outstanding poets who speak to us of the splendours of a highly cultured civilization and of its tragic fall. It was during this period that the territory making up this rich and fertile Islamic frontier with Catalonia and Aragon changed allegiance and became an active and creative part of



DÉNIA CASTLE

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Christian Europe as part of the Crown of Catalonia and Aragon.

Many are the poets of this splendid period for Arab literature and for Western Muslim civilization; many and varied, both in their writing and in themselves. Unfortunately, however, in many cases almost all we know of them is their name and a few fragments of poetry included in the famous anthologies of Andalusian Arabic poetry. Of a few of the greatest of them, though, we know just enough to be able to put together a rough account of their lives, as well as enjoying their poetic compositions. This brief introduction is devoted to the life and work of these few.

Amongst the most outstanding of the eleventh century, the great century of Andalusian poetry, which had Seville for cultural capital, we find Ibn al-Labbana of Dénia, Ibn al-Yamani of Eivissa and Abu Bakr of Tortosa. Ibn al-Labbana, born in Benissa and brought up in Dénia, was one of the great poets of the literary court of King Al-Mutamid of Seville, the most important of that age. Amongst his most delicately sensual compositions is this one dedicated to some freckles:

She lifted her eyes to the stars  
and they, delighted by such beauty,  
trembled and fell, one by one  
onto her cheek, where enviously  
I watched them turn black, one by  
[one.

Ibn al-Labbana died in Mallorca in 1115, in an attack on the island by a fleet of Pisan-Catalan boats. Of Ibn al Yamani it is said that he was one of the most famous of the poets who travelled the courts of the taifa kingdoms, writing poems and praises in return for money. It is said that he wouldn't write a *cassida* for less than one hundred gold dinars, quite a fortune at that time. The exact place and date of his birth, as well as of his death, are unknown.

Abu Bakr at-Turtuixí (1059-1130), of whom it has been said that "his devotion was greater than his science", was not only a holy man for the Muslims, but one of the great students of the Koran of his time, as well as a life-long traveller. He left Tortosa as a young man and died in Alexandria, where it is said that his grave is worshipped as a place of pilgrimage.

The twelfth century was the high point for Eastern Andalusian poetry, thanks

mainly to two profoundly original poets, the creators of the "Valencian school" which was to last until the close of Arab-Andalusian culture and was famous for its "floral" and almost pagan aesthetics, in which the setting for its metaphors is always a humanized garden, the image of paradise and at the same time of the beauty of young bodies. One of these two great poets was Ibn Khafaja of Alzira (1058-1138), known as "the gardener", whom I cannot help quoting, even if only these two lines:

My God, how beautiful was the river  
[in that bed,  
more delightful to drink from than the  
[lips of a beautiful girl.

The other was his nephew Ibn az-Zaqqaq (died 1135), who was either born in Valencia or Alzira. These two poets are still considered classics of Arabic poetry of all ages and are read and recognized as such. One of their most significant and most famous followers was Ar-Russafí (1144-1177?), born in Valencia, exiled in Malaga in his youth, the author of beautiful love poems dedicated to young boys, which make him a kind of Islamic Kavafis.

