

400th anniversary of the publication of Don Quixote

Islamic culture leaves imprint on this eternal human work

Madrid. - Kadhim Shamhood Tahir

Spain is blessed with beaches, a warm climate and a sun which welcomes millions of visitors every year. But there is also cultural tourism. The country has mobilized all its energy to enhance cultural centres and artistic museums, and to celebrate the festivals of the pioneers of intellectual, literary and artistic movements.

This year Spain celebrates the 400th anniversary of the birth of the extraordinary world famous work Don Quixote and 2005 has been nominated as Cervantes Year. The state has established cultural tourist centres in the region where the adventures of the novel took place. It is a great extension of Spanish geography, located among five counties: Madrid, Toledo, Ciudad Real, Cuenca and Albacete. One of the most interesting tourist centres is the city of Alcala de Henares, where one finds the house in which Cervantes was born. It has become a cultural museum that is visited by hundreds of people every day. The city is about 35 kilometers northeast of Madrid, amid the valley of the river Henares, that used to be called Guadalajara (the river of the Stones Valley). It is a flat and rich, agricultural land with livestock and small forests along the river. When Muslims conquered Spain, they founded a military base in this, region which they named the Castle of Abdul-Salam. It is surrounded by a deep valley and the Henares river. This made it unassailable and difficult to access. The remains of this citadel are in a bad shape and you can hardly find anything of value - it is a heap of



الكنيسة التي دفن فيها ثربانتس

The church where Cervantes is buried.

stones and earth, except for small portions of the wall and some demolished towers. Spanish sources tell us that in the XX century the wall was blown up and the stones were used to build houses.

When Alfonso VI conquered most of the citadels of the central region, such as Madrid and Salamanca, the Castle of Abdul-Salam remained under Muslim control up to 1120 A. D: then it fell to Christian power. Later on it belonged to the bishopric of Toledo and became an important religious centre.

In Madrid, statues of Cervantes and the two heroes of the novel, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were erected in the Plaza de Espana. There is also the church in Madrid where Cervantes was buried at No 18, Lope de Vega Street. In front of the building are engravings, writings, an image of Cervantes and the date of his death.

The state has published a tourist guide and maps that trace the route followed by the hero of the novel as he crossed dozens of towns and cities in La Mancha. Most of these, including Almanxa, near Albacete, are of Arab origin and their remains are still visible. Among them is Almanxa which could mean the singer. In Almanxa a fort is located on a high rock and resembles a minaret, surrounded by forests and numerous groups of houses. It has a square and a very high tower, which can be ascended through interior stairways. From ➤



كنيسة بيتراغو / مدريد.
Buitrago
Church/ Madrid.



فندق لاريدو / مدريد.
Hotel Laredo/ Alcalá
de Henares.



here one can see the whole region, with its magic landscapes and rivers.

Another tourist city is Chin Chilla whose Arab name was Ghen Ghalet, possibly derived from Ain Jalut. Its old remains are still visible and the town conserves its narrow windy streets, parts of its wall, churches and its great square. Nowadays the citadel has been restored and is visited by tourists and scholars.

The route map of Don Quixote shows his arrival in a beautiful Arab city located in the northeastern part of the current Ciudad Real, called Calatrava (Rabah Castle), which was founded by the Arabs as a military citadel on the orders of the Andalusian caliphate. Later on, it became a defence line for the Muslims against Christian attacks that increased after the fall of Toledo in 1085. The fort is a square shape with high walls behind which are corridors and galleries. They can be reached through interior stairways. There is also a great tower preserved in its original form. It consists of several empty floors but there are beautiful windows and columns that correspond to the Arab style noticeable in Islamic towers,

especially in the tower San Miguel in Madrid. The region is agricultural. It has numerous small rivers and the Guadiana valley, famous for growing grapes and other agricultural products, runs alongside. With his sharp intelligence, Cervantes was able to select the characters for his novel from the inhabitants of these lands - a mixture of Muslims and Christians. In the novel, an Arab specialist has found 35 Muslim characters or characters influenced by Islamic culture. Don Quixote, turns, in his journey, towards an old city of Roman origin, which the Arabs fortified and enlarged. They named it Ahambra (The Red one), because its earth is red. It is located to the east of Ciudad Real. No attempt has been made to preserve it and it is degrading but is still in tact and preserves its old form and extraordinary defensive capacity. It dominates a wide agricultural area of plains and green rivers that have become places of rest and relaxation. Then Don Quixote ascends towards the north, on the way to Toledo that was the Goths capital. Under Arab rule it became one of the most important cultural centres in

Al-Andalusia, famous for sciences and translations and a centre for the three religions. When it fell into Christian hands, it became the highest religious authority for Christianity in Spain.

Continuing his route, the hero of the novel passes by Alcalá de Henares, Sigüenza, Guadalajara, Comunidad de Calatayud, La Almunia, Dona Godina and Alagon. Then he continues towards the cities of Pedrola, Zaragoza, Alcalá de Ebro, Fraga, Cervera and Barcelona. Following the same route, we find ourselves on a pleasant tourist expedition, during which Cervantes makes it possible for us, in the hero's company, to learn about the traditions, customs, culture and architecture of these towns, through an interesting, humorous but very distinctive writing style.

Let us now learn something about this exceptional literary work through the help of a specialist in Cervantine studies, the Iraqi researcher Dr. Mohsin Al-Ramli. I asked him about the influence of Arab culture on Don Quixote. He told me that during his entire life, Cervantes was constantly in contact with Islamic culture, directly or indirectly. He ➤



Toledo gate/ Ciudad Real.



بوابة توليدو / ثيوناد ريال.

was a prisoner in Algeria for about five years and wrote all his works, with the exception of a few weak poems, after these years in captivity. Islamic culture leaves its mark on all his work and is a main theme - some plays mention this influence in their title, for example The Treatments of Algeria, The Bathrooms of Algeria and The Great Sultana, a short novel. There are also Muslim settings, characters, expressions and even words and signs.

"I have found in Quixote more than 35 Islamic characters among them Sidi Hamed, the main narrator of the novel, as well as more than twenty popular proverbs and 220 words of Arabic origin, in addition to historical, literary and religious influences", Dr Ramli said.

I asked Dr Al-Ramli about the role of Don Quixote in contemporary Spanish tourism, and he told me: "As you know, the Spanish economy is based on tourism. About 50 million tourists visit the country annually. To maintain this tourist movement, Spain has recently decided that it should not be limited to marketing sun, beaches and archaeology, because many countries compete with her in this respect. Therefore, it has ventured into "cultural tourism", and has increased and extended its museums. And since Don Quixote is a well-known work worldwide, representative of Spanish identity, the country has invested in its promotion. It has defined the route that Don Quixote followed

and his adventures, in La Mancha, near Madrid, which attracts a lot of people. Small museums have been opened in the towns visited by Don Quixote and the native city of Cervantes, Alcala de Henares, has become a cultural centre. It preserves and displays everything to do with the author, including the house where he was born. An international institute has also been dedicated to him.

The first edition of the work of Don Quixote saw the light in 1605 and caused a great uproar in the literary movement of the time, when Cervantes was 58 years old. A little before the time of Cervantes, during the era of the Tawaf Kingdoms, many works from the east came to Andalusia. Among them was the manuscript of the Maqamat of Al-Hariri, which was translated into Castilian several centuries before the publication of Quixote. This atmosphere of literary transmissions of oriental and Andalusian scientific and literary works had a positive influence on the culture of the Iberian Peninsula, especially on the works of Cervantes.

The second part of the novel was published in 1615. In it, the author gives a new life to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Cervantes had the brilliant idea of giving the new characters prior knowledge of the hero of the novel by reading his adventures. When Don Quixote meets them, he recounts his expedition and its noble feats.

Nowadays, this novel is a source of



Dr. Mohsin Al-Ramli.

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inspiration for writers and artists, while the route of Don Quixote attracts a lot of people eager to visit these historical regions and enjoy their plains and beautiful landscapes. ■