



# Looking for Interpreter Zero: (12) Hasday ibn Shaprut and Recemund, intermediaries and interpreters in 10th-century al-Andalus

Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III's protracted negotiations with the court of Otto I of Saxony, in which both go-betweens were involved, shed light on language and politics of the time.

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*At his time, Cordoba ambassadors are usually from 'minority groups', Jews or Christians, whose dual culture made into almost 'natural' intermediaries between the Umayyad Caliphate and Christian countries. [\[i\]](#)*

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**Hasday ibn Shaprut**, leader of the Cordoba Jewish community, and **Recemund**, a Christian court official, are the best known of these intermediaries. There was clearly a need for many more:

*"There are many references in the Arabic sources to Christian members of embassies from Cordoba to Europe and Byzantium, but the Arabic historians supply little more than the names of these men, sometimes adding that they acted as interpreters."* [\[ii\]](#)

**Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III** needed intermediaries as he sought to consolidate his rule, and they were almost always non-Moslems. There is some suggestion that by the mid-tenth century the Arab elites in al-Andalus had become closed in on themselves and reluctant to deal with non-Moslems [\[iii\]](#). Be that as it may, the Caliph's protracted negotiations with the court of Otto I of Saxony in which both ibn Shaprut and Recemund were involved sheds some light on language and politics at that time.

There were good reasons for Otto I – future king of Italy and Holy Roman Emperor - to send an embassy to Cordoba in the 950s. Aside from any broader diplomatic ambitions he might have entertained, he hoped that the Umayyad Caliph of al-Andalus might agree to use his influence to discourage the Muslims in Fraxinetum (modern La Garde Freinet), who controlled the mountain passes into Italy and long stretches of the coastline, from harassing travellers, burning monasteries and impeding trade through acts of piracy. The Benedictine monk John of Gorze agreed to travel from his monastery near Metz to Cordoba in 953. He set off with two companions, bearing gifts and letters; they travelled through France to Lyon, sailed first down the Rhône and then on to Barcelona. Abd ar-Rahman III arranged for a safe-conduct for the party and had them housed in a palace near the Church of St Martin in Cordoba.

It was once they were settled that the complexities of the situation became apparent. The pirates of Fraxinetum might have seemed to be a straightforward issue but John of Gorze proved to be a

prickly character. The account we have of his mission to Cordoba comes to us from a tenth-century copy of his life story which was written after his return home. It has to be read in the context of his faith and his commitment to the reform of his Benedictine order, which may explain why he did not seem prepared to “behave in accordance with the customs of the Muslim Court”. [\[iv\]](#)

One of the first people he met was Hasday Ibn Shaprut, the Caliph’s personal physician and trusted representative, who was a prominent figure at court and had served as his intermediary in other situations. In addition to Hebrew he knew Arabic, Andalusí Romance (the dialect descended from Late Latin) and Latin, which we have to assume was the language he used in his unsuccessful attempt to prepare John of Gorze for his meeting with the Caliph. He had reason to fear that the envoy’s letters from Otto I would be deemed offensive to Islam and jeopardise the monk’s mission, but was unable to persuade him not to deliver them. The Bishop of Cordoba also failed to convince him to present just Otto I’s gifts to the Caliph, not the letters.



ABD-AR-RAHMAN III AND HIS COURT IN MEDINA AZAHARA

It was decided to appeal directly to the Saxon court. Abd ar-Rahman III called upon Recemund, an Arabic-speaking Christian who was a court official to do the honours. He set off for Frankfurt in June 955.

*"His origin as a member of the indigenous community of al-Andalus affirms that he was a Latin speaker, and it was, presumably, in this language that he communicated with Otto."* [\[v\]](#)

Recemund was successful in that Otto I agreed to provide him with a letter couched in more moderate tones. He returned with the new missive in June of the following year. Some three years after John of Gorze’s arrival, his embassy was finally received by the Caliph:

*"Soldiers lined the both sides of the road, carrying various kinds of weapons, whilst the cavalry displayed their horsemanship as the ambassadors walked from their residence to the city of Cordoba, and from the city to the Caliphal palace."* [\[vi\]](#)

This display of might, along with conversations between John of Gorze and the Caliph about the nature of power, were the most productive aspects of this long-delayed meeting. Abd ar-Rahman III had no influence over the Fraxinetum community and was unable to help. John of Gorze left Cordoba with some three-years' worth of experience of the Caliphate which may have been useful to Otto I as he consolidated and expanded his power. He defeated the Fraxinetum pirates in 973, perhaps prepared to take military action having learned that they were not loyal to the Caliph. Both he and the Caliph aspired to political and spiritual authority over their subjects and sought support where possible – hence Abd ar-Rahman's good relations with Christian - Byzantium, which shared his hostility towards his rivals, the Fatimid Caliphates the Maghreb. Constantinople was wary of Otto I's rival imperial ambitions, which may have influenced the court's response to John of Gorze in Cordoba. [vii]

It was to strengthen ties with Byzantium that Abd ar-Rahman had welcomed a 949 delegation from Constantinople. The ritual exchange of gifts included a copy of the work of Dioscorides *On Medicine* - on the medicinal properties of plants, which no one could study because it was in Greek. When the Caliphate appealed for help, Thomas, a Greek monk was sent to help with the translation of the text into Arabic. He was assisted by a Greek-speaker from Sicily, who is assumed to have also spoken Arabic as the island had been under Arab control since 830. He and Nicholas expounded the text of Dioscorides to a group of Andalusian scholars which included Hasday ibn Shaprut. [viii]

Some scholars suggest that Thomas taught the team Greek, others that the work was first put into Latin and then into Arabic. Whatever the solution, it was important to have the Umayyad Caliphate seen as taking over from Baghdad in providing Arabic versions of early texts. The team work on Dioscorides set an example to the post-Caliphate era: the celebrated Toledo school might never have developed without the precedence set in interpreting and translation in Cordoba. [ix]

The rather short-lived melting-pot of al-Andalus had a significant linguistic legacy, to be explored at a later date.

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#### Footnotes

[i] Guichard, P. « Les Relations diplomatiques des Omeyyades de Cordoue ». <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25818172> (p247) (My translation)

[ii] Christys, A. (2002). *Christians in al-Andalus*. Routledge, London and New York. (p108).

[iii] Guichard, P. op. cit.

[iv] Hitchcock, R. (2008). *Mozarabs in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*. Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, Vermont. (p43)

[v] *ibid* (p47)

[vi] Abdurrahman A El-H. (1970) *Andalusian Diplomatic Relations with Western Europe during the Umayyad Period (755-976)*. A Historical Survey. Dar al-Irshad. Beirut (p 221).

[vii] Fernández, F. (2013) “De Embajadas y Regalos entre Califas y Emperadores” *AWRAQ* No 7. (p 25)

[viii] Fletcher, R. (1992) *Moorish Spain*. Phoenix, London. (p 69)

[ix] *Translations as Part of Power Semiotics: the Case of Caliphal Cordova*. Working paper published online <http://www.greekarabictransfer.com/>

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