In the foreword to the Breve compendio de nuestra santa ley y sunna, a treatise on the Muslim faith written in the early sixteenth century, we are introduced to a Morisco known as the Mancebo de Arévalo. He is ‘a young Castilian student, from Arévalo [province of Ávila], very expert and trained in reading Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin; and very skilled in Aljamía [i.e. in Spanish].’ On the basis of this description, we might assume that the Mancebo (‘Young Man’) could have been a student trained in one of the great European universities where the teaching of Oriental languages was supposed to be put into effect in the years following the Council of Vienne (France) in 1311–1312. Or, being Castilian, he could have been an alumnus who attended the courses of the Chair of Arabic at the Trilingual College of the University of Salamanca, which was mainly focused on the teaching of the Biblical languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

The Mancebo, far from being an example of a situation commonly found in Spain, turns out to have been an exception. We actually only know of very few scholars with a fair knowledge of Arabic in early modern Christian Spain and there do not seem to have been any others at an earlier date. None of them appear to have been taught this language at a university.

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A century later, in an undated letter from the Marqués de Mondéjar, Gaspar Ibáñez de Segovia Peralta y Mendoza (1628–1708), to the scholar Tomás de León (1613–1690), we find a clear reflection of the lack of experts in Oriental literature in Spain: ‘I confess that I value your opinion more than that of anyone else that I know and communicate with in Spain. I respect them all for their professional knowledge, but it is extremely rare to possess such breadth and depth of understanding of Oriental languages, which is the key to true wisdom’.5

The situation of early modern Spain is paradoxical. Throughout the sixteenth century a series of prohibitions concerning Arabic reached a peak with the Pragmatic Sanction of 1567, which decreed that all Moriscos had to stop speaking and writing in Arabic within three years and all books in Arabic had to be handed over to the authorities for inspection.6 These books seized by the authorities were burned in public bonfires, or simply disappeared in the inquisitorial prisons.7 However, it was in this very century that, at the oldest universities of the Peninsula, the teaching of Arabic received the strongest support, first in Salamanca and later in Alcalá de Henares. Scholars interested in Arabic and in scientific knowledge transmitted through this language were constantly looking for books in Arabic that could help in their research. This is attested in a letter by the Flemish humanist scholar and traveller Nicolaes Cleynærts Beken (Nicolaus Clenardus or Nicolas Clénard, 1495–1542), professor of Greek and Hebrew, who went to Salamanca hoping to learn Arabic at the university. The letter was written on 17 January 1540 and was addressed to the Emperor Charles V, whom Clénard begged to give him all the Arabic books that were being burned in Spain: ‘Because we need books for this purpose, in which the mysteries of the sect are contained, and many that would help us

