
In 1588, as the minaret of the old mosque of Granada was being demolished in order to complete the cathedral, a lead box was discovered, in it a bone, a piece of cloth and a folded parchment roll. The parchment, with texts in Latin, Arabic and Castilian, contained an account, in Latin, by a priest named Patricio who claimed to have received the relics from St Cecilio, subsequently martyred and allegedly the first bishop of Granada; a text in Arabic signed by Cecilio; and a Castilian translation of a prophecy attributed to St John the Evangelist concerning the end of the world. The cloth had supposedly been used by the Virgin Mary to dry her tears during the passion of Christ and the bone was said to have belonged to the martyr St Stephen. Just over six year later, in 1595 on a hill close to Granada which came to be known as Sacromonte, a further series of texts written on lead tablets started to come to light and continued to do so until 1599. These too were written in Arabic and were connected with St Cecilio. The so-called ‘lead books’, the *libros plumbeos* or *plomos*, are at the origin of a polemic which stretched deep into the eighteenth century and involved some of the greatest orientalists of the time. They are also, Mercedes García-Arenal and Fernando Rodríguez argue in their enthralling book, *Un Oriente español*, at the origin of oriental studies in early modern Spain.

That the *plomos* were forgeries was immediately obvious to the better scholars who studied them. Benito Arias Montano, possibly the greatest Biblical scholar in Spain, proclaimed their falsity. He was followed by Pedro de Valencia, the Italian Diego de Urrea and the Kurdish Christian Marco Dobelio. Their conclusions were fully endorsed by the distinguished committee of orientalists, including Filippo Guadagnoli, Antonio dell’Aquila, Giambattista Giattini, Athanasius Kircher and Ludovico Marracci, who passed sentence on them in 1682 after copies had been dispatched to Rome in 1645. The Spanish Inquisition too remained sceptical.

Yet the idea that the *plomos* were authentic served many interests. Their discovery coincided with that of other spurious material elsewhere in Spain which was used to certify the antiquity of Spanish Christianity brutally interrupted by the Islamic occupation. In Granada, however, the issue was particularly sensitive. The last Muslim stronghold in Spain, its conquest by the Catholic Kings had been welcomed throughout Christendom in 1492 and the city had been honoured accordingly. In 1554 the emperor Charles V had demanded to have his tomb in the cathedral next to that of his empress Isabella of Portugal, buried in 1539. Maria of Portugal, the first wife of Philip II, was also buried there, as were the infants Juan and Fernando in 1540. In 1558, however, Charles V
changed his mind in favour of Yuste, and in 1572 the decision was taken to transfer the four royal bodies to the Escorial. The former Arab kingdom had suffered from the wars of the Alpujarras, the second of which lasted from 1568 to 1570, and the deportation of part of its morisco population. In contrast to Cordova and Toledo, moreover, Granada was sorely lacking in evidence of a continuity of bishops or even of a constant Christian presence such as the relics so valued elsewhere in Spain. The plomos seemed a miraculous answer to these problems. Allegedly dating from the first century of the Christian era, they proved that Arabic had been spoken in Spain long before the arrival of the Arab armies, that it had been spoken by Christians, and that Granada, with Cecilio as its bishop, had one of the first Christian communities in the peninsula. The supporters of their authenticity were consequently both numerous and powerful. They were first headed by the archbishop of Granada Pedro de Castro. They were soon joined by Adan Centurión, marqués de Etapa, and, later, by the learned Gaspar Ibañez de Segovia, marqués de Mondéjar and the Irish Jesuit who went under the name of Tomás de León (but who was originally called Thomas Dillon). As the dispute dragged on into the eighteenth century the authenticity of the tablets was sustained by local historians such as Vicente Pastor de los Cobos, Diego Nicolás de Heredia Barnuevo, Francisco de Viana and José Juan de Laboraria.

Pedro de Castro was strongly supported by two scholars of morisco descent whom he commissioned to translate the texts—Alonso del Castillo and Miguel de Luna. Were these, the authors of Un Oriente español wonder, perhaps even the devisers of the forgeries? Miguel de Luna, certainly, was far from averse to falsification as he proved with his Historia verdadera del Rey don Rodrigo attributed to a fictitious Arab chronicler named Tarif Abentarique. But although the identification of the forgers remains an open question there is no doubt that the plomos were the work of moriscos eager to salvage their reputation in a Christianised Spain. The information that García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano provide about the vast morisco community, many of whose members were perfectly assimilated in Christian society, is fascinating. Moriscos joined the clergy, intermarried with the highest aristocracy, and those whose ancestors had converted voluntarily to Christianity before 1492 could even claim to be Old Christians, hidalgos. The moriscos excelled as doctors—both Alonso del Castillo and Miguel de Luna were physicians—and produced a community of intellectuals much in demand as interpreters. Under the threat of expulsion from the former kingdom of Granada, moreover, a large group of moriscos settled in Pastrana, close to Guadalajara in Castile, taking with them Arabic manuscripts and, as textile workers, contributing greatly to the town’s prosperity.

The history of the moriscos in sixteenth-century Spain together with the long debate about the plomos forms the background of the unsteady development of