

## Arabic Place Names in Spain

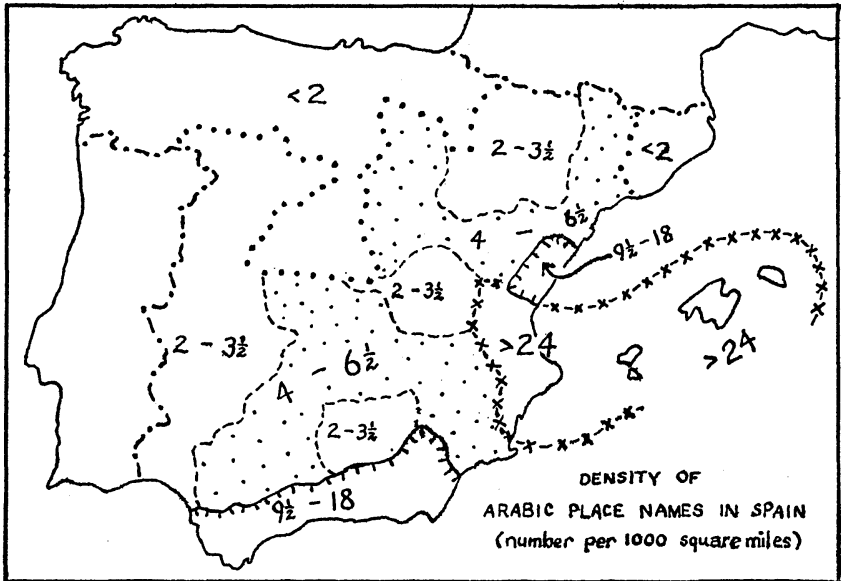
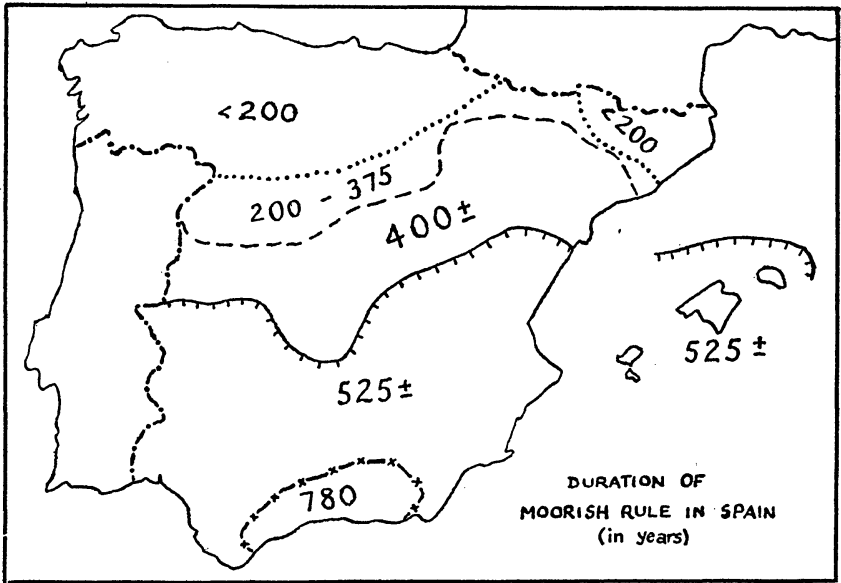
DAVID E. SOPHER

**G**EOGRAPERS, HAVING A SPECIAL INTEREST IN PLACE NAMES, may themselves make worthwhile contributions to toponymic study. For one, local geography must provide confirmation of etymological derivations. In the study of Spanish place names, Alijar and Guadalupe may be cited as illustrative cases. The Arabic names which have been suggested as their original forms are descriptive terms referring to characteristics of their sites, but the derivations remain uncertain, in part because the validity of the descriptions has not been checked locally.<sup>1</sup>

A map showing the distribution of certain classes of place names may help to judge the merits of alternative derivations. A Germanic and an Arabic origin have been suggested by different writers for "Valdomar," a name found in the Galician provinces of Lugo, Orense and Pontevedra. The general distribution of both classes of place names makes the Germanic origin by far the more probable in this case. The name "Madina" belonging to five settlements in the small Basque province of Guipuzcoa must be removed, on similar grounds, from the list of Arabic place names prepared by Asín Palacios.<sup>2</sup>

Distribution maps of place names may disclose linguistic-historical relationships. A Portuguese study of the distribution of "Aldeia" shows it occurring chiefly in northern Portugal, but south of the Douro, indicating that the word, which has come to mean 'village' in Romance languages, was used early in the post-reconquest period, when many small settlement units came into existence in that area.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently a geographer wishing to understand the morphogenesis of cultural landscapes should not neglect the form and distribution of place names. As a crude measure of the imprint of suc-



cessive cultures, the distribution of place names has a special interest. As early as 1905, Elisée Reclus, one of the pioneers of modern anthropogeography, attempted to map the occurrence of place names of Arabic origin in the Iberian peninsula, despite the inadequacy of the linguistic data then available.<sup>4</sup> More recently, another geographer, Hermann Lautensach, has made a detailed distributional study of Portuguese place names, including those of Arabic origin,<sup>5</sup> and in a masterly monograph on economic life in Spain under the Berber dynasties, Dubler found that much supplemental information could be gleaned from the examination of place names.<sup>6</sup>

Asín Palacios' work on Spain, giving the province in which each Arabic place name found by him occurs, makes possible a consideration of the general distribution of these names. It is desired to show, on the basis of modern survivals, the extent to which place names of Arabic or partly Arabic form were given in the Moorish domain by Arabs, Berbers and Mozarabs. This requires the exclusion of the "Aldea" names and others (e.g. Acenia: 'watermill'; Atalaya: 'watchtower'; Arrabal: 'quarter' or 'suburb') which, like "Aldea," were most probably given after the reconquest, when the Arabic words had become a living part of Romance languages spoken in the Christian territories.

With the elimination, by rather crude empirical methods, of such names of probable post-reconquest origin, the distribution of the remaining Arabic names has here been considered in terms of their density (number per thousand square miles) in each province (see fig. 1). The highest densities (above 30) are found on Mallorca and in the southeastern coastal province of Alicante. With the exception of Murcia (61½) and Valencia (24), the remaining provinces along the coast from Cadiz to Castellón have densities of 9½ to 18. Most of Spain, including the core of Moslem Andalusia, namely the provinces of Seville and Córdoba has a thin, uneven sprinkling of Arabic names, with provincial densities ranging from 2 to 6 per 1000 square miles. In the north, Galicia, northern Leon, Old Castille including Madrid, the Basque provinces and the north-eastern Catalan provinces (Gerona and Barcelona) have densities of less than 2.

The correlation between density of Arabic place names and duration of Moorish rule (see fig. 2) is very loose. It fits best in the

areas occupied only for a brief period by the Moslems: here naturally the fewest Arabic names are found. For the rest of Spain, other significant variables relating to the giving and retaining of place names affect their density. These will now be considered.

1. *Changed names.* The nature of cultural contact affects the degree in which new names replace existing ones. Ignorance of indigenous names or a disinclination to use unfamiliar sounds may lead to substitution of a new name in the language of later arrivals, and then to the complete displacement of the older name (e.g. English names replacing Indian names in seventeenth century New England). Antipathy toward the native culture group intensifies this process. So does the conscious desire to emphasize cultural distinctions (as in the case of Christian names—saints' names, etc.—of Spanish-American colonial towns superimposed on pagan Indian names), and the wish to mark symbolically changes in culture (e.g. New York for New Amsterdam; in Spain: Gibraltar, 'the mountain of Tariq,' after the Arab conqueror, replacing ancient *Calpe* and the earlier Arabic *Jabal Farsi*; also, perhaps, Valladolid, 'the town of Walid,' replacing an older name?).

These tendencies to change run counter to the conservatism and, possibly, uninventiveness of most social groups, as a result of which large numbers of place names are taken over, more or less intact, by new cultures from preceding ones, if the nature of the contact between the two cultures permits it.

The Arabs in Spain appear to have been tolerant of existing settlement names. Hence, in Andalusia, where the basic pattern of present settlement was probably in existence during the period of Roman domination, cities and towns in which Moorish culture flourished so grandly continued to bear their pre-Moorish names. A study of Andalusian town sites has shown that 38 of the 42 towns with more than 8000 inhabitants are on or near the sites of Roman settlement;<sup>7</sup> only three of these towns have Arabic names.

The Arabs were less reluctant to give new names to physical features like mountain ranges and rivers, displacing older names. The abundance of river names with the element "Guad-" (*wādī*) is remarkable. Asín Palacios lists 92 of Arabic form, excluding such names as Guadiana and Guadix, in which the prefix has simply been added to the pre-Moorish name (Guadiana: 'river Anas'; Guadix: 'river Acci'). Possibly the use of the Arabic generic term

became so common in Mozarabic Spain as to induce by analogy a preference for names having this form, and so ousted the older names to the advantage of Arabic epithets which may originally have been used side by side with them (e.g. Guadalquivir, from *Wādī al-kabīr*, 'the great river'; alternatively *Wādī al-Qurtuba*, the river of Cordoba; Roman *Baetis*). Perhaps, also, more than one local name had been in use for different sections of rivers or for parts of mountain ranges; the geographically more sophisticated Arabs might then have been obliged to give new names to the topographic units. The existence of regional names of Arabic origin like La Mancha (from Arabic *manja*, 'high plain') makes this all the more plausible. The distribution of "Guad-" names is very different from that of the total of Arabic place names, which are predominantly names of settlements. The "Guad-" names occur mainly in Andalusia and the southern Meseta, with a very few on the coastal plains of the Levante; the provinces of the Guadalquivir basin, for instance, have 32 per cent of the "Guad-" names, but only 7½ per cent of all Arabic names.

2. *Names of new places.* Most of the new settlements made by the Moslems in Spain were rural settlements. Many of these accompanied the great elaboration and expansion of irrigation in the Levantine provinces, which made possible an intensive oasis agriculture in favored places along the coast. This economy was characterized by a dense population, closely dispersed in single farmhouses and hamlets around the trade centers and ports. The numerous Arabic names in these provinces and on Mallorca are a reflection of this Moslem contribution to Spain's economy and settlement geography. The density of Arabic names decreases sharply with the decreasing density of population inland from the margins of the *huerta* zone of irrigation.

Many of the Arabic names in the Levante have a special character. The immigrant rural population was Berber, the Arabs like the Jews being almost exclusively town-dwellers; the earlier Berber population was substantially augmented by immigration from Morocco under the Almoravids. In the Levantine area, characterized by small peasant holdings, hereditary ties to particular parcels of land were strong, and farms and hamlets were often designated by personal names, not only of individuals, but very often of families. More than half of the Arabic place names in Valencia

and Alicante are family names, many of them Berber (e.g. Benjama, from *Banī Jamā'a*; Benifató, from *banī Fathūn*; Benisano, from *Banī Sahnūn*).

The paucity of Arabic names in the Guadalquivir basin is partly due to the persistence and intensification in Moorish times of the earlier population pattern of a small number of large agglomerations. The highly developed Moorish city culture produced a noticeable rural-urban migration, perhaps accelerated, as Ibn Khaldun implies, by the antagonism of herders toward sedentary farmers. Purely agricultural settlements were predominantly compact villages of considerable size associated with large land holdings (*latifundia*). Thus, few occasions arose for the giving of Arabic names to new rural settlements in this area.

How the density of Arabic names varies with the density of settlements may be illustrated by comparing the provinces of Seville in the Guadalquivir basin and Soria in eastern Castille. Arabic names comprise 19 per cent of *ayuntamiento* (township) names in Seville compared to 7 per cent in Soria, but rural settlements in Soria are so much more numerous, and at the same time much smaller, than in Seville that both provinces have the same density, 5 per 1000 square miles of Arabic names. Of new settlements made by the Moors, a large number were established for military purposes. More than a fifth of the Arabic place names contain a reference to fortifications or some other feature of military organization (e.g. Alcázar: Arab. *al-qasr*, 'castle'; Borja: Arab. *burj*, 'tower'; Alcalá: 'fortress'; Alcolea: 'small fort'). Berbers were also prominent in this aspect of settlement building. Dubler has shown that Berber individual and family names were given to military establishments in the march lands contested by Christians and Almoravids from the middle of the tenth century to the middle of the eleventh. Toledo, Guadalajara, Soria, and Teruel have slightly higher densities (5 to 6 per 1000 sq. m.) than provinces to the south, perhaps because of the number of fortified stations of Berber warrior-monks (*murābitūn*) established in those provinces. Dubler mapped the distribution of a small group of place names like Almonacid, Miravete and Ravita, all of which refer to establishments of the Moslem Berber military-religious orders, and showed that the largest concentration of these names is in the former border area; a smaller concentration occurs in Granada, where the

Moslems resisted conquest for two and a half centuries after the loss of the major part of Andalusia.<sup>8</sup>

Towns built by the Arabs were few, and records of their founding are fragmentary. Murcia is a rare example of such a town, having been founded and named by order of one of the Omayyad rulers.<sup>9</sup> Several names applied to newly built residential and administrative suburbs of older towns now survive in the names of farms and hamlets (e.g. Ruzafa in Córdoba and Valencia, from *rusafa*: 'pleasure park'; Zahara, from *zahrā*: 'brilliant,' a residential quarter of Córdoba). One writer categorically states that the Arabs, though urban, founded no towns in the Guadalquivir basin.<sup>10</sup>

An area of exceptional character in this respect was the Kingdom of Granada, which for 250 years before the final act of the reconquest was an asylum for Moslem refugees from the lands retaken by the Christians. In turn the Christian population of Granada moved to Andalusia and the Levantine provinces; a well-defined border, recalled in place names like Jimena de la Frontera, Jerez de la Frontera and Morón de la Frontera, separated Christian Spain from Moslem Granada, which had ceased to constitute a real threat to the former. In the Moslem territory, settlements swelled by refugees grew into populous fortified towns, many of which, particularly those located in mountain valleys on the eastern slope, carried Arabic names.<sup>11</sup>

3. *Lost Names.* Arabic place names were probably accepted without difficulty by the Christians of Moorish Spain, many of whom became bilingual; no doubt they, too, had a hand in giving names of Arabic form to new places. On the other hand, the reconquest of Moorish Spain by the Christian kingdoms sometimes brought a sharp hiatus in cultural continuity, during which place names were not uniformly transferred from one culture to the other.

Arabic names of rural places would be lost if the settlements were destroyed or remained depopulated for some length of time. This happened in Castile, where Moslem villages were razed, the border towns suffered greatly in the long military campaigns and destruction of the economy of conquered areas was such that Avila and Segovia were said to have been repopulated only after the fall of Toledo. Arabic names are less conspicuous in Madrid, Avila and Segovia than in the provinces to the east. In Estremadura, war ravages, the dominance of a pastoral economy over a once-flourish-

ing agriculture and a heavy emigration to the New World in subsequent centuries contributed to the disappearance of many settlements; here also the veneer of Arabic names is remarkably thin. In Andalusia, too, many of the estates which formerly had been carefully cultivated, were converted into great sheep runs, empty of human habitation.

Where rural settlements survived, their former names were nevertheless occasionally displaced. Existing farmsteads and hamlets were distributed to the feudal subjects of the Christian kings, and this change in ownership was often accompanied by name changes. The frequent occurrence of "Villanueva" in Andalusian place names does not mark the founding of a new settlement, but the reorganization of the ownership of an existing one, like Villaverde, in Seville, on the site of a Moorish *alquería* whose earlier name has been lost.<sup>22</sup>

Removal of Arabic names simply because of their origin was certainly not deliberate; such an origin was hardly suspected and the meaning of the names but dimly known, as witness post-reconquest tautologies like Rio Guadalquivir and Puente de Alcántara.

The transference of control from Moslems to Christians in the Catalan area of Aragon was effected more smoothly than was the case in the Castilian reconquest. Until the excesses of the Inquisition, Moslems were kept on the land, although often as serfs, and productivity was maintained at the high level it had reached earlier. This was especially true in the Balearic Islands, where, in the post-reconquest period a civilization was elaborated which "successfully integrated elements of Provençal and Judæo-Arabic culture." Mallorca became a flourishing center of the Catalan commercial empire, reaching a peak of economic well-being in contrast to the sharp decline in so many parts of Spain.<sup>23</sup> Under these conditions Arabic place names enjoyed good chances of survival, as their present distribution shows. On the mainland, a painful dislocation of the economy took place much later, with the expulsion of the Moriscos, the imperfectly assimilated Moslem population, but cultural continuity, involving also the survival of place names, had by then been effected.

The same orderly transfer of authority took place in Granada. Its conquest at the end of the fifteenth century, though long awaited, was an anticlimax; harem intrigues and Moslem dissension allowed



the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella to clear the Peninsula of Moorish power. The Moorish population remained, encouraged to do so by a few initial years of intelligent self-interest on the part of its new rulers; when the Moriscos were summarily expelled 70 years later, the towns had become occupied predominantly by Christians; the country, however, was in many places desolated in consequence of the expulsion. Names given by the Moors to the urban places they had founded continued to be used: 40 per cent of *ayuntamiento* names in the province of Málaga are of Arabic origin and the proportion is yet higher in Granada.

The foregoing notes indicate the kinds of geographically varying conditions which may affect any distribution of place names. They also suggest, tentatively, results which may be expected from thorough etymological and historical investigation of all Spanish place names thought to be of Arabic origin. Further detailed investigation would help to explain some perplexing features of the distribution of Arabic names, such as the relative scarcity of these names in the province of Murcia. For the cultural geographer, the particular significance of the distribution of Arabic place names as described above is its general correspondence with the distribution of enduring Moorish innovations in the settlement pattern of Spain.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Asín Palacios. *Contribución a la toponimia árabe en España*. 2nd ed. Madrid, 1944. pp. 64, 110. Oliver Asín. "‘Alijar,’ ‘Alijares,'" *Al-Andalus*, 7(1942). 153-164. Gutierre Tibón "The name of Guadalupe," *Names*, 1(1953). 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> Asín Palacios. *op. cit.* p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Lautensach, H. "Die Portugiesische Ortsnamen; eine sprachlich-geografische Zusammenfassung," *Volkstum und Kultur der Romanen*, 6(1933). 136-165. For a general discussion, see Dahl, S. "Geografi och ortnamnsforskning," *Ymer*, 65(1945), 94-102.

<sup>4</sup> Reclus, E. *L'homme et la terre*. Paris, 1905, v. 3, p. 454.

<sup>5</sup> Lautensach, H. *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Dubler, C. *Ueber das Wirtschaftsleben auf der Iberischen Halbinsel vom XI zum XIII Jahrhundert*. Zurich, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Niemeier, G. "Siedlungsgeografische Untersuchungen in Niederandalusien," *Hamburgische Universität Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiet der Auslandskunde*, 42, ser. B (1935).

<sup>8</sup> Dubler, C. *op. cit.*, p. 114. See also the same author's "Ueber Berbersiedlungen auf der Iberischen Halbinsel," *Romanica Helvetica*, 20 (1943). 183-196, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Asín Palacios. *op. cit.* p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Niemeier, G. *op. cit.* p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> In southwestern Málaga, for instance, in the upper valley of the Rio Genal, 60 per cent of the place names on the modern 1:250,000 map are of Arabic origin.

<sup>12</sup> Niemeier, G. *op. cit.* pp. 41, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Sorre, M. "Espagne," *Géographie Universelle*, 7:1(1934). p. 153.