BETWEEN ACCULTURATION
AND CONVERSION IN ISLAMIC SPAIN
THE CASE OF THE BANŪ ḤASDAY∗

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Abstract
The High Middle Ages in Islamic Spain (al-Andalus) is often described as a golden age in which Jews, Christians and Muslims lived in harmony. The attested dynamics of conversions to Islam disturb this idyllic, static picture, revealing the religious and social pressures exerted on the religious minorities. The different reactions of the Jewish and Christian communities of al-Andalus to these pressures allow us to refine our understanding of conversion in the Medieval Islamic world. A close examination of the Jewish family of Banū Ḥasday shows more nuances and ambivalence than ‘conversion’ normally suggests.

Key Words
Coversion, acculturation, convivencia, al-Andalus, dhimma, Ibn Ṣā’id al-Andalusī, Ibn Ḥasday.

Conversion is often used to describe a single dramatic event: a person had one specific identity and through a transformative experience, as if by the waving of a magic wand, this person has been transformed into another: the pagan became a Christian, the Christian became a Muslim, the skeptical philosopher was converted into an orthodox theologian.1

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Our main source of knowledge regarding conversion, however, lies in stories: stories presented as personal narratives, stories embedded in archival material and in historiographical, legal, or other types of literature. These stories, even those which intend to convey a very decisive, transformative picture of the conversion-event, reveal a complicated, dynamic conversion process.\(^1\) The vast and quickly growing scholarly literature devoted to religious conversions highlights, beyond the personal, spiritual or experiential paradigm of conversion, other aspects of this phenomenon: social, economic or legal.\(^2\) These aspects, the consideration of which renders even the conversion of individuals anything but a one-dimensional events, tend to take priority when we observe the conversion of whole societies.

In what follows I will first broadly describe in general terms the cultural and religious situation that prevailed in the Islamic Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula. I will also deal with conversions to Islam in this context, and then present one specific case of conversion from Judaism to Islam.

When the first Muslim conquerors entered the Iberian peninsula, in 92/711, the vast majority of the peninsula’s inhabitants were Christians (with perhaps small groups of pagans still lingering in the northern, mountainous areas).\(^3\) The minuscule Jewish community was on the verge of extinction, due to the Visigoth persecutions and forced conversion; and obviously, at this point the Muslim

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\(^3\) For an overview of this literature, see, for instance, Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, pp. 14-17; Papaconstantinou, ‘Introduction’, pp. xv–xxxvii, especially note 5.

conquerors themselves made up only a very small part of the population, as conquering armies do. We do not know exactly how the process of conversion to Islam advanced from this point of departure. We may assume that, in many ways, the conversion process in al-Andalus followed similar patterns to the conversion to Islam across the Muslim world, where the small community of Muslims lived at first in garrisons, separated from the rest of the population, on which they did not impose the adoption of Islam. The process of conversion was probably not steady and linear, and in many cases we can see a pattern of uncertain, unstable conversions, where individuals and even small communities converted, then repented and returned to their original religion. But with the passing of time, the religious profile of the conquered areas changed, and the indigenous population gradually became predominantly Muslim. Genuine religious change of heart and true conviction in the veracity of the new religion must of course be taken into account as the primary drive for many conversions to Islam. But other considerations seem to have played at least as important a role: fiscal and agricultural policies which imposed higher taxes on non-Muslims; social practices which, together with conversion, attached the convert to an Arab tribe and family, promising to facilitate networking and perhaps the entrance to the ruling classes; and occasional discriminatory laws and practices which (gently or not so gently, depending on the specific regime) put pressure on the local populations to convert to Islam.\footnote{See Uriel Simonsohn, ‘Conversion, Apostasy and Penance: The Shifting Identities of Muslim Converts In the Early Islamic Period’, in Papaconstantinou et al., Conversion, pp. 197–218, especially, p. 196.}

Be that as it may, in the Iberian peninsula as in the rest of the Islamic world, a relatively short time after the dust of the conquests settles (that is to say, one or two centuries later), we find that the conquered area which came to be known as al-Andalus has become Muslim: under firm Muslim rule, with Islam as the dominant religion, and perhaps even more importantly, with Arabic as the predominant administrative and cultural language. Statistics regarding this period are very conjectural, and we cannot say with any amount of certainty at what point the majority of the population did become Muslim. But it seems safe to say that, by the tenth century, the Muslims of al-Andalus felt and behaved as an undisputed ruling majority.

The High Middle Ages in al-Andalus are often described as a golden age of inter-religious convivencia or harmonious symbiosis between the different communities, where Judaism, Christianity and Islam — las tres culturas — lived harmoniously under the aegis of Islam. Much has been written to explain the development of the terms used in this description and to correct the historical validity of their rosy interpretation, and we need not go into it here. Suffice it to

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7 This, as well as the observations regarding language in the following pages, is of course a crude, static and simplified summary of a very complex and shifting linguistic situation. For a summary of (some of) the complexities, see Robert I. Burns, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the crusader kingdom of Valencia: Societies in symbiosis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 172–179; and see further below, n. 24.


9 As examples for the many discussions of this topic, see Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings*, p. 225; Manuela Marín and Joseph Pérez, ‘L’Espagne des trois religions’ du mythe aux
say that, to the extent that this description reflects some reality, as it does, Islamic Spain is only one of many examples of the inter-cultural effervescence under medieval Islam, across the Islamic world. And yet, while Islamic Iberia was as a rule more tolerant to its minorities than medieval Christian Europe, or even more precisely: than medieval Christian Spain, its presentation as a model of tolerance is highly anachronistic: in 459/1066 Islamic Granada was the scene of one of the rare anti-Jewish pogroms under medieval Islam, and the first expulsion from Spain, affecting both Jews and Christians, happened already in the twelfth century, under Islam.10

The attested gradual conversion of most of the conquered Christian population to Islam casts a shadow over the ‘golden age’ idyllic, static picture. The conversions reflect the religious and social pressures exerted on the subordinated Christians, pressures without which many if not most of them would probably not have converted.

Theoretically, the same pressures were brought to bear on Jews and Christians alike, and thus should have affected Jews and Christians equally. But in al-Andalus as elsewhere in Islamic territory, notwithstanding a continuous phenomenon of individual Jewish conversions to Islam, the Jewish communities survived for centuries, whereas the Christian communities progressively shrank.

10 There are several possible explanations for Spain’s special place in modern historiography, prominent among them the fact that Spain is a European country. When Spain is associated with the non-European world, the European prejudice can have the opposite effect. Sylvain Gouguenheim, for example, who attempts to prove a direct link from Athens to Christian Europe, hardly mentions Spain in his discussion of medieval philosophy; see his Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel: Les raisons grecques de l’Europe chrétienne, Paris: Le Seuil, 2008); and see Jean-Christophe Attias, ‘Judaisme: le tiers exclu de l’Europe chrétienne’, in Philippe Bütting, Alain de Libera, Marwan Rashed, and Irène Rosier-Catach (eds.), Les Grecs, les Arabes et nous: Enquête sur l’islamophobie savante, Paris: Fayard, 2009, pp. 213–222, at p. 213.
in some areas up to their total disappearance. This difference is forcefully presented by David Wasserstein, who says that, if one considers what he calls 'the indeterminate amorphous mass of the community as a whole', one can observe that 'it is this group that, taken in its totality, converted to Islam among the Christians and it is this group, among the Jews, that seems not to have converted'.

One conspicuous example of this difference, in the vicinity of al-Andalus and under a political rule that also controlled al-Andalus, will suffice. In the twelfth century the Berber dynasty of the Almohads took hold of North Africa and al-Andalus. The Almohads’ peculiar religious interpretation of Sunni Islam is notorious for its deviation regarding the place granted to the religious minorities. As is well known, orthodox Islam — both Sunni and Shi’ite — normally recognizes the Jews and the Christians as ‘people of the book’, that is to say, monotheists following revealed religions, and as such allowed to enjoy a state of protection (dhimma) as subordinated, tolerated religious communities. The Almohads, on the other hand, abolished the state of protection and compelled the local Jews and Christians to convert to Islam or go into exile.

Many of the Jews and Christians living under Almohad rule converted to Islam


under these conditions, but the long-term effects on the two communities were drastically different. For the Christian communities of North Africa this forced conversion meant a death warrant, and they were effectively wiped out. The Jewish communities, on the other hand, by and large survived the persecution. Jews managed to preserve their religious identity while simulating conversion, and even before the formal abolition of Almohad rule in 1230, the Jewish communities of North Africa surfaced again.\(^\text{13}\)

The difference in this respect between these two groups becomes even clearer in the Iberian peninsula itself. Apart from their shared status as ‘subordinated religions’, the Jews and Christians of al-Andalus present two drastically different communities in their social fabric and consequently also in their religious behavior. The Jewish community was mostly made up of immigrants or their descendants. These immigrants came from the Orient or from North Africa and settled in al-Andalus, usually in the cities, after the Muslim conquest.\(^\text{14}\) The number of Jews who made up these urban Jewish communities could not have been very high, but they seem to have been well integrated economically and culturally.\(^\text{15}\) The Christians, by contrast, constituted at the beginning of this period, as mentioned above, the vast majority of the population, and the


\(^{14}\) The urban character of the Jewish population was not uniform over time, and at least after the 13\(^\text{th}\) century, and under Christian rule, Jews (who were still principally city dwellers) nevertheless owned land; see Jonathan Ray, *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia*, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 36–42.

\(^{15}\) This situation is summarized by Wasserstein (‘Islamisation and the Conversion of the Jews’, p. 55) who states that ‘Islam did... arrive and saved the Jews.’ Wasserstein (‘Islamisation and the Conversion of the Jews’, pp. 55–56) argues that ‘[t]he conquests brought virtually all the Jews of the seventh-century into a single political system and made them part of a single cultural unit. They made possible contact between different parts of the Jewish world from Iran to Andalus, contact which would have been unimaginable before the rise of Islam’. On the size of the Jewish community in al-Andalus, see also S. D. Goitein, ‘Jewish Society and Institutions under Islam’, in H.H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettinger (eds.), *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 170–184, at p.173. Goitein estimates that Jews ‘did not amount to more than one percent of the total population — with the important qualification that in the cities and towns... they formed a far higher percentage of the inhabitants’. Regarding the various Jewish communities in the cities of al-Andalus, see already Henri Pérès, *La poésie andalouse en arabe classique au XI\(^\text{siècle}: Ses aspects généraux et sa valeur documentaire*, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1937, pp. 264–268.
character of the community did not change drastically when their numbers began to shrink: they were mostly indigenous; and most of them lived in rural communities.\textsuperscript{16}

One could have expected the big, ancient and well-established local Christian community to be more resilient to the pressure to convert to Islam than the small, newly established Jewish community. Furthermore, one would have expected the presence of the bordering Christian kingdoms in the North of the peninsula to serve as a source of religious strength, that could help keep the Christians under Muslim rules, known as the Mozarabs, from converting to Islam. In fact, the opposite occurred. The existence of the Iberian Christian kingdoms, and the ongoing state of war between them and the Muslims, exposed the Mozarabs to the suspicion of being a fifth column. Their typical profile as rural, and thus often religiously poorly educated, communities may have been also a source of vulnerability.\textsuperscript{17} Mikel de Epalza thus suggested that the Christian rural population, isolated from the guidance of the urban clergy, converted more easily to Islam.\textsuperscript{18} The opposite argument is put forward by Wasserstein, who cautiously says that 'it seems not unlikely that retention of Christianity may have been stronger in the rural areas and in the more isolated parts of the peninsula', and that 'much of the literate class of Christians in al-Andalus went over to Islam'.\textsuperscript{19} But whether more in the cities or more in the countryside, the overall picture remains that conversion was a widespread phenomenon among the Christians, whereas among the Jews it seems to have remained restricted to individual cases.

Religious education in their own tradition may have been one reason for this difference between the two communities. A relatively high level of literacy among Jews, which meant a relatively high level of familiarity with the tenants of

\textsuperscript{16} See Wasserstein, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings}, pp. 224–46.

\textsuperscript{17} The continuous impact of the profile of Visigoth Spain on the Christian ability to adapt to the cultural shock of the Muslim conquest is also noted by John Tolan, \textit{Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination}, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 85–87.


\textsuperscript{19} Wasserstein, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings}, pp. 229–230 and p. 237. The predominance of provincial communities in preserving religious tradition is attested also in the Genizah documents, according to the analysis of which, as noted by Goitein (\textit{Mediterranean Society} I, p. 15), ‘Hebrew lingered on in the smaller towns of Egypt longer than in the larger centers’.
their own religion, and a strong, cohesive community, may well have strengthened the ability of Jews to withstand the pressures to convert to Islam. But a more relevant difference between the two communities seems to be found in another aspect of their education, regarding not their own tradition but that of the surrounding society.

From the eighth century onwards, across the world of Islam, Arabic became the common language of the various ethnic and religious communities, used both for everyday life and for intellectual pursuits. The ubiquity of the use of Arabic created a common culture, covering everything from science and philosophy to belles lettres and personal correspondence. In the Orient, Jews and Christians preserved their religious language, and Hebrew and Syriac continued to be used in limited religious contexts. But both Jews and Christians also fully participated in the common Arabic culture, adopting the Arabic language both as a vernacular and as a cultural language. This meant that, more often than not, Arabic was their own mother tongue, and that they employed it also for their respective religious writings (although often retaining their own script). Christians in the Orient played a decisive role in shaping this Arabic cultural koine or common culture, transmitting to the Muslims the philosophical and scientific Greek heritage and translating it to Arabic. From the ninth century onwards, Jews too participated in this common culture and made it their own. Jews developed, in Arabic, new literary genres and new forms of Jewish religious expression. Biblical and Talmudic exegesis, Jewish philosophy, theology, mysticism, Jewish pietistic literature and Jewish law were developed in Arabic, using the same concepts and patterns of thought as their Muslim rulers used for Koran exegesis or for Muslim law.

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20 See Haim Beinart, 'Hispano-Jewish Society', in Ben-Sasson and Ettinger, Jewish Society, pp. 220–238, at p. 221. According to Beinart, 'the Jewish public in the communities of Moslem Spain... kept to themselves, whether in matters of organization and social structure or in those outward form of life that they adopted in Spanish lands'.

21 On the linguistic aspects of this culture, see Joshua Blau, The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaean-Arabic: A Study of the Origins of Middle Arabic, Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1981; Sidney H. Griffith, The Bible in Arabic: the Scripture of the 'People of the Book' in the language of Islam, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). See also David J.Wasserstein, 'A Family Story: Ambiguities of Jewish Identity in Medieval Islam', in Benham Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland (eds.), Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 498–532, at pp. 511–514. See also Elaine R. Miller, Jewish Multiglossia: Hebrew, Arabic and Castilian in Medieval Spain, Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2002, whose main focus is on later periods, under Christian rule. Miller’s statement that Jews ‘did not study classical Arabic’ is probably correct as a general observation regarding the community as a whole. But the educated elite, which did study classical Arabic, may well have included not just courtiers and philosophers, but quite a few others. See also Esperanza Alfonso, Islamic Culture through Jewish Eyes: Al-Andalus from the Tenth to Twelfth Century, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 9–33.
In the Iberian peninsula, however, the difference which we noticed between the two communities, regarding the social-fabric of the communities and their patterns of behavior regarding conversion, is evident also in their level of acculturation.²² Jews living in al-Andalus, as elsewhere, adopted Arabic and developed their own, Jewish version of Arabic culture. This applied to all levels of the Jewish community, with the community leaders, who often carried not only political but also religious authority, taking the lead in this process. Jewish intellectuals were active participants in the court culture. A creative Andalusian JudaEO-Arabic culture flourished, and even Hebrew poetry in al-Andalus was shaped in the mold of Arabic poetical styles. The Christians of al-Andalus, on the other hand, unlike their brethren in the Orient, played only a relatively marginal role in the intellectual, cultural and political life in Arabic (with the exception of medicine).²³ Adoption of the Arabic high literary culture in general among the Andalusi Christians seems to have been a more protracted and tortuous process.²⁴

²² ‘Acculturation’ in this article refers primarily to the literary and verbal expression of culture, those associated with the use of the Arabic language; compare below, note 24.

²³ Wasserstein, The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings, pp. 244–245, says that Christians scarcely participated in Islamic political life, and attributes it to the fact that they lacked the necessary skills to do so. ‘The majority of those who did acquire them seem to have ended up as converts to Islam’, and the others probably entered the Church. See also Pérès, La poésie andalouse, p. 264, who points out that the Jews ‘apprécièrent mieux que les Chrétiens les avantages d’être soumis à de nouveaux conquérants’, and that, although many Jews have surely converted to Islam, their favorable place in the Muslim courts must have slowed down the conversions.

community, in the first half of the ninth century, the community’s religious leaders panic and react with alarm. The Church’s resistance to Arabisation, and its attempts to reaffirm a genuinely Christian Latin culture, are evident in the writings of clergymen like Alvarus, Eulogius and Samson.\footnote{The anxiety caused by the accelerated pace of Arabisation is clearly expressed by Alvarus; see, for example, Francisco Javier Simonet, Historia de los Mozarabes de España, Madrid: Turner, 1983, vol. II, pp. 369–371; Sidney H. Griffith, The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 152; Tolan, Saracens, pp. 86, 95–96.}

The differences between the Jews and Christians of al-Andalus, and the connection between their respective level of acculturation and their respective level of conversion, have of course been noticed by scholars. Wasserstein points to the emergence of a distinct Judeo-Arabic culture and argues that, across the Islamic medieval world,

‘it was the possession of a distinct and separate culture that gave the Jews an identity which enabled them to retain their distinct religion and to avoid absorption into the broader society’.\footnote{Wasserstein, ‘Islamisation and the Conversion of the Jews’, p. 57.}

David Abulafia addressed this issue specifically regarding the Iberian peninsula, noting the fact that ‘Jews in al-Andalus and elsewhere did not follow the same path as the Mozarabic Christians in Islamicizing themselves. Or, more simply: the Jews Arabized but did not Islamize.’ For Abulafia,

‘the rather open society of Muslim Spain managed to undermine Christianity, while... strengthening Judaism. ... The mystery of why the Jews acculturated but did not assimilate to Islam, as did many Christians, finds its answer in the existence of [the] common ground that existed between Judaism and Islam in this society.’\footnote{David Abulafia, ‘What Happened in al-Andalus: Minorities in al-Andalus and in Christian Spain’, in Sadeghi et al., Islamic Cultures, pp. 533–50, at pp. 540–541. Abulafia adds another explanation, which relates to the different character of Islam and Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. According to him, ‘perhaps Christianity was less resilient because in the early Middle Ages it provided a spiritual and ritual framework, but did not provide a detailed code of religious practice to determine conduct hour by hour’. The central role played by steadfast intellectual identity and by having a common ground with Islam (or the lack thereof) is also noted by Thomas Burman (Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs). Another explanation for the disappearance of Christian communities and the survival of Jewish communities is offered by Goitein (Jewish Society and Institutions under Islam’, pp. 174–75), who points out ‘the ecology of Jews under Islam, i.e. their topographical distribution’. Goitein, however, focuses on the example of Yemen, where the Jewish population was widely dispersed, and where the Christians were concentrated in the cities. In al-Andalus, as mentioned above, the opposite was the case. Another major difference between the two minority communities in...}
Up to this point, we focused on the conversion and acculturation patterns of the two communities as a whole. Putting it, again, bluntly: the Christians of al-Andalus converted to Islam, the Jews of al-Andalus became culturally arabicized but did not convert. Communities, however, are made of individuals, and when we examine individuals, we find that the dichotomy between conversion and acculturation cannot be so neatly delineated. As noted in contemporary immigration studies,

‘acculturation is something akin to conversion, i.e. a departure from one group and a discarding of signs of membership in it, lined to an attempt to enter into another.’

The boundary blurring that occurs in this process creates blurred cases, and each such case deserves to be examined separately. The valiant attempts to offer statistics and draw curves that describe the conversion process cannot, I believe, replace the close examination of individual cases. This is so not only because of the reservations expressed by various scholars regarding the reliability of quantitative methods in our present state of knowledge. Even if the quantitative method could rely on a larger relevant database than it currently does, individual, anecdotal cases highlight nuances that the quantitative method by its very nature obscures. It is one such case, or rather a cluster of cases, on which I would like to focus now.

This is the complex case of five generations of one Jewish family, five men all of whom can be considered to have belonged to the intellectual and social elite of the community. Although much has been written about them as individuals,
their very description as five generations of a single family is not unanimously agreed upon. As we will presently see, some scholars do not identify all five as belonging to the same family, while others skip one generation or identify two members as being one and the same person, thus telescoping the five generations to four or even three.\textsuperscript{31} The family prided itself of being direct decedents of the Prophet Moses.\textsuperscript{32} The first member of the family that concerns us here is the physician and statesman Ḥasday ibn Shaprūṭ (ca. 910–ca. 970).\textsuperscript{33} Born into a wealthy and respectable Jewish family from Jaén, which then moved to Córdoba, he served as the court physician and vizier of the first Umayyad Caliph, ‘Abd al-Rahmān III, as well as of his son al-Ḥakam II. Due to Ibn Shaprūṭ’s multilingual aptitude and political talents, he was employed in the Caliphs’ service carrying out delicate diplomatic assignments, as well as in more specific academically oriented missions, such as the massive importation of books from the Orient, or the translation of Dioscorides’ \textit{De Materia Medica} into Arabic.\textsuperscript{34} He was also the

\textsuperscript{31} See below, nn. 32-33, 41.

\textsuperscript{32} This ancestry is mentioned only regarding Abū’l-Faḍl Ḥasday, the third generation of the family; on the identity of his father and grandfather, see further below. Wasserstein regards the claimed Mosaic lineage as a mistake, the result of Ibn Ṣāʿid’s presuppositions regarding what a noble Jewish line should be. Wasserstein further suggests that Moses should be corrected to David, since the claim for belonging to a Davidic line is by far more common in Jewish genealogies. As in the best practice regarding the edition of manuscripts, here too the rule of lectio difficilior should be adopted. In additions to this technical argument in favor of the name Moses, we should take into account Ibn Ṣāʿid’s close connections with Abū’l-Faḍl Ḥasday, Ibn Shaprūṭ’s grandson; see below, note 33. These connections make it more than probable that he knew the family well and was familiar with the family tradition of its Mosaic ancestry. Furthermore, it seems that, perhaps in al-Andalus in particular, Moses’s name was invoked rather fondly. Thus Ibn Daud says about Joseph Ibn Megash that ‘his personal traits testified that he was of the seed of our master Moses... since he was the most humble of man’ (in reference to Num. 12.3); see Abraham Ibn Daud, \textit{The Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-Qabbalah)}, ed. Gershon D. Cohen, Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society, 1967, p. 86. What appears to be the rather unusual name given to Moses Maimonides should perhaps also be seen in this context; see I. Yuval ‘Moses Redivivus; Maimonides as the Messiah’s Helper’, \textit{Zion} 72/2 (2007), pp. 161-188 (in Hebrew).

\textsuperscript{33} Wasserstein, who mentions the Ibn Ḥasday family of Saragossa as one of two rare cases where we have records of Jewish dynasties in al-Andalus, does not connect them to Ḥasday Ibn Shaprūṭ; see David Wasserstein, ‘Jewish Elites in al-Andalus’, in Daniel Frank (ed.) \textit{The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society and Identity}, Leiden: Brill, 1995, pp. 101–110, at p. 109. For that matter, nor does Ibn Ṣāʿid, who does not mention at any point a family connection between Ḥasday Ibn Shaprūṭ and the Saragossan descendant of Moses, Abū’l Faḍl Ibn Ḥasday. But as noted by Wasserstein, Ibn Shaprūṭ is the only Jew outside of Saragossa mentioned by Ibn Ṣāʿid. This fact is best explained as reflecting the information he had received from the young Abū’l Faḍl regarding his family, and, by the same token, corroborates Abū’l Faḍl’s connection to Ibn Shaprūṭ.

\textsuperscript{34} On the role of Jews in medieval international diplomacy, see Nikolas Jaspert and Sebastian Kolditz, ‘Christlich-muslimische Aussenbeziehungen im Mittelmeerraum. Zur räumlichen und
recognized head (nassi) of the Jewish community, and he used his international connections on behalf of Jewish communities across the Mediterranean. Hasday ibn Shaprut is thus an emblematic acculturated Jewish dignitary of al-Andalus, navigating at ease in the Muslim corridors of power and intellectual salons, and at the same time deeply rooted in his own tradition. Ángel Sáenz-Badillos thus describes him as ‘one of the personalities... [who] contributed most directly to the emergence and rapid maturation of a genuinely Andalusí Jewish culture’.

After Hasday ibn Shaprut’s death, and after the disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba, the family left Cordoba and moved, via Granada, to Saragossa in the north of the peninsula. Ibn Shaprut’s offspring seem, at first sight, to follow in his footsteps, integrating the two worlds in which they lived. His eldest son, Abū al-Walīd Hasday, replaced him as head (ru‘iṣ) of the Talmudic academy in Lucena. Another son, Abū ‘Amr Yūsuf, served at the courts of Granada, then Sahla (Albaracín) and finally Saragossa, and is also known to have been a talented Hebrew poet. Ibn Shaprut’s grandson, Abū l-Fadl Hasday ibn


Yūsuf, was thoroughly trained as a philosopher, and was also an accomplished poet in both Hebrew and Arabic; but he also attended the court of the Banū Hūd of Saragossa, serving al-Muqtadir ibn Hūd (r. 438/1046–475/1082–83) as well his son al-Mu'tam (r. 475/1082–478/1085) and grandson al-Musta'ın (r. 478/1085–503/1110) after him. His own grandson, (the great-great-grandson of Ibn Shaprūt), Abū Ja’far Yūsuf bn. Āhmad bn. Ḥasday, immigrated at some point to Egypt, from whence he kept a close correspondence with a Muslim friend, the Saragossan philosopher Ibn Bājja (d. 533/1138). This Abū Ja’far is known to have specialized in the study of medicine, and was asked by al-Ma’mūn al-Ḥaštāʾī, who served between 515/1122 and 519/1125 as the vizier of the tenth Fatimid Caliph, al-Āmir bi-aḥkām Allāh (d. 524/1130), to write commentaries on the writings of Hippocrates and Galen. The record of the family members thus clearly testifies that they followed the example of their ancestor Ḥasday ibn Shaprūt in their cultural refinement and their interest in things intellectuals as well as in their connection to the Muslim ruling class.

But the religious identity of Ḥasday ibn Shaprūt’s descendants is anything but clear. On the one hand, they are designated as Jews, by both Muslim and Jewish sources. On the other hand, for each one of them we also have sources reporting

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Joseph as Ḥasday’s son, is a slip of the pen, and should of course be corrected to Samuel ha-Nagid’s son.


40 See Wasserstein, The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings, pp. 211–212.


or modern scholars arguing, that he was the one who broke away from Judaism and converted to Islam. It is not only that they themselves, despite their supposed conversion, continue to be designated as Jews, or as of Jewish origin.\textsuperscript{45} What is really puzzling is the fact that despite their supposed conversion, their offspring, for three generations, are also said to have taken at some point the step of converting, implying that they were born and raised as Jews. Conversion in this family thus does not look as a one time transformative event, nor even as a process in the life of the individual that at some point reaches its end, but rather as a perpetuum mobile.

The examination of each of these cases shows contradictory information that does not help us clarify the picture. Let us quickly run through these cases:

\textsuperscript{2nd} generation: Ḥasday ibn Ḡaprūṭ’s son Abū ʿAmr Yūsuf is sometimes identified as the addressee of a satirical poem by Abū ʿl-Rabīʿ Sulaimān bn. Ahmad al-Quḍāʾ, directed at a certain Yūsuf al-Islāmī (an appellation that supposedly means ‘the convert’) and referring obliquely to ‘he who joins a religious community.’\textsuperscript{46} Yūsuf’s conversion is supposed to have taken place when he reached old age, along with the conversion of his grown son Abū ʿl-Faḍl.\textsuperscript{47} But the dates do not fit this scenario, since a note by Badawī (written ca. 1048) refers to him with the blessing rahīmahu ʿAllāh, and it thus appears that Yūsuf must have died shortly after this son’s birth.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} As Wasserstein points out, the appellation al-Isrāʾīlī, which is appended to names of Jews, could also be appended to that of converts from Judaism (unlike al-yahūdī, reserved for actual Jews); see D. J. Wasserstein, ‘What’s in a Name? ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿIshaq b. al-Shanāʾa al-Muslimānī al-Isrāʾīlī and Conversion to Islam in Medieval Cordoba’, in Arnold E. Franklin, Roxani Eleni Margariti, Marina Rostow, and Uriel Simonsohn (eds.), Jews, Christians and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times: A Festschrift in Honor of Mark R. Cohen, Leiden: Brill, 2014, pp. 139–154, at p. 146. One should also note that, when the name of a person appears with his patronym or with a longer genealogical line, the epithet asdāy ibn Sha ḩaṣām’s son; [Ashkhabad: Central Asian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1964, p. 319; Abū ʿl-Walīd Marwān Ibn Janāḥ, Kitāb al-luma’, ed. Sarah Stroumsa


3rd generation: That son, the young Abū’l-Faḍl Ḥasday ibn Yūṣūf, is described by the Muslim historian Ibn Ṣā’id (who met him and apparently befriended him, despite their age-difference, in Saragossa) as a brilliant Jewish boy. Ibn Ṣā’id counts him as one of the only three Andalusians in his knowledge who engaged in the study of physics and metaphysics. He further declares that Abū’l-Faḍl’s level in the theoretical sciences was unequalled in al-Andalus. But Ibn Ṣā’id, writing in Toledo in 464/1067, knows nothing (yet?) about his conversion. Another source, however, Ibn Dīhya (d. 633/1235–36), who follows Ibn Ḥaqqānī, says that he did convert, because being a dhimmī was a disadvantage among his Muslim peers. Yet another medieval source, Ibn Bassām, reports that Abū’l-Faḍl converted to Islam because he fell in love with a slave girl; when, however she


‘Maḥallahu min al-‘ulūm al-naẓariyya al-mahall alladhi lā yuṣāri ‘iḍanā fi l-andalus’; Ibn Ṣā’id, Ṭabaqāt al-umam, p. 172. Blachère, Livre des Catégories des Nations, p. 132, understands this last sentence as referring to Abū’l-Hakam al-Kirmānī (d. 458/1066), mentioned shortly beforehand, and translates: ‘Par contre, dans les sciences spéculatives il n’avait point d’éga le en Andalousie’. A similar understanding is reflected in the English translation of Salem and Kumar, Science in the Medieval World, p. 65: ‘He knew him [scil. al-Kirmānī] well and he knew his level as a theoretical scientist’. Both translations thus assume al-Kirmānī’s superior knowledge. But as Ibn Ṣā’id’s previous lines explicitly say, al-Kirmānī’s forte was in the applied sciences, such as geometry and surgery, and not in the theoretical sciences, such as logics and mathematical astronomy. Ḥasday, on the other hand, is one of the only three Andalusians mentioned by Ibn Ṣā’id as students of physics and metaphysics; see previous note.


was given to him after his conversion, he rejected her because he did not want people to say that his conversion was wrongly motivated and disingenuous. Ibn Bassām also recounts another anecdote, in which Abū l-Фaḍl’s rival, the vizier Abū al-Muṭarrif ibn al-Dabbāgh, saw him at some point after his conversion to Islam leafing through a book in the presence of al-Muqtadir, and asked him deridingly if it was the Torah that he was reading. Unfazed, Abū ʾl-Фaḍl answered in the affirmative, and added a hint to his rival’s low ancestry (ibn al-Dabbāgh being the son of a simple tanner). In yet another exchange, the same Ibn al-Dabbāgh asked Abū ʾl-Фaḍl sarcastically if he intended to inherit the office of Qāḍī of Saragossa.

In both anecdotes Ibn al-Dabbāgh obviously alluded to Abū ʾl-Фaḍl’s Jewish origins, but whereas Henri Pérès and López y López interpret these allusions as just that — allusions to his origins, notwithstanding his conversion — Eliyahu Ashtor regards them as a proof that he was still a Jew. For Ashtor, the rumors that he had converted to Islam were the work of Muslim zealots ‘who could not reconcile themselves to the elevation of a Jew to the rank of vizier’.

4th generation: Of Abū ʾl-Фaḍl’s son we know next to nothing. The Muslim historian al-Maqrīzī calls him ‘al-исрāʾīlī’ and gives his name as Aḥmad, claiming that he converted to Islam (again, although supposedly his father and grandfather had already converted before he was born). According to the theory of Richard Bulliet, converts tend to give their children typically Muslim names (although it is also common for converts to change their own names), which would suggest that this Ahmad was already the son of a convert, and that it was his father, Abū ʾl-Фaḍl, who converted to Islam. But Bulliet’s theory is meant to describe a phenomenon that can be observed when examining developments on a large scale, and not as a categorical rule that applies to all individual cases. There can thus be cases of a convert choosing for himself a more Muslim name. On the other hand, as noted by Wasserstein, ‘in Spain perhaps
more than elsewhere, there is the additional phenomenon of Muslim names appearing among non-Muslims’. 57 Ahmad’s name in itself thus cannot help us determine whether he or his father converted to Islam. From an explicit marginal note by al-Maqrizi, it appears that Ahmad himself was the one who converted. 58

5th generation: The most puzzling case is that of Ahmad’s son, Abu Ja’far Yusuf ibn Ahmad ibn Hasayn (d. 517/1123). The historian of the physicians Ibn Abi Usaybi’ a says nothing about his religious identity, whereas al-Maqrizi describes him as a son of a convert, supposedly born already as a Muslim. 59 Yet for an unknown reason al-Maqrizi’s modern editors decided to add a word to al-Maqrizi’s text, so that in the published text he is said to have converted after arriving in Egypt. 60

The two members of this family mentioned last are not present at all in Jewish sources, which suggests that their ties with the Jewish community were indeed weak, if not totally severed. In the case of those family members who are mentioned in Jewish sources, nothing is said about their undergoing an act of conversion. Jewish sources in general are loth to mention conversion or criticize the converts, especially in the case of forced conversion. But in our case, the silence is not complete: the fifteenth-century Jewish historian Sa’adya ibn Danan (d. ca. 1495) explicitly addresses the claim of the Muslim sources regarding the conversion of Ibn Shaprut’s grandson Abu’l-Fadl, and presents it as a baseless claim of the Muslims. 61 Nor can we neatly divide the sources to Jewish ones, for

57 Wasserestein, The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings, p. 226.
58 See below, note 60.
59 Ibn Abi Usaybi’ a, ’Uyun al-Anbā’, pp. 499–500. Ibn Abi Usaybi’ a lists him immediately after his Jewish forefathers; but while in their case he depends on Ibn Sā’ id, here he seems to have quite a lot of first hand information.
61 This unexplained, and obviously erroneous addition, which was introduced first in the Egyptian 1973 edition of al-Maqrizi (vol. 3, p. 94), was then repeated in Ayman’s newer edition (see previous note). I am indebted to Paul Walker who brought this curious note to my attention, and generously put a copy of the relevant page of the Istanbul manuscript at my disposal.
62 See ‘She’ela ’al dvar ha’anusim’, Fas ve-Ḥakhameha, Jerusalem: Beit Oved, 1969, vol. II, p. 7 (in Hebrew); Ashtor, The Jews of Moslem Spain, pp. 221–222. Wasserestein (The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings, p. 212) dismisses this denial as ‘inspired more… by horror at the idea of a distinguished member of a family which claimed priestly descent converting than by any real evidence to the contrary’. But there were other Jews of distinguished families who converted to Islam (some of whom mentioned by Wasserestein), and whose conversion Ibn Danan did not bother to contest,
whom the persons discussed here remained Jews, and Muslim sources, who maintain that they have converted to Islam. For, as we have just seen, the Muslim sources themselves are full of contradictions in this regard.

There are several possible explanations for this rolling confusion (in addition to the confusing effect of the similar names, what we may call an *embarras de Hasdays*). The simplest is to ignore the confusion and to say that one or another of this second, third, fourth and fifth generations of Arabicized Jews did indeed convert to Islam, in his own specific circumstances and for his own reasons. Conversion, then, becomes the final expression of acculturation and its concluding step. This explanation is the one adopted by scholars like Henri Pérès, García-Arenal, López y López and Wasserstein.

Another explanation of the contradictory information in our sources would be that, in that religious age, the religious identity of the highly acculturated Jewish dignitaries who did not convert to Islam presented a puzzle to their contemporary fellow Muslims or to later historians, and was misunderstood to mean that they actually converted. This is the approach adopted by Ashtor, Abraham Shalom Yahuda and Izhak Baer. If we take this explanatory path, we would have to say that in some cases, conversion is in the eye of the beholder.

Both these explanations assume that some of the sources are right and others are wrong, and that a person can either remain a Jew or convert to Islam, but not both. There is, nevertheless, also a third possibility, which is suggested by the curious hybrid appellation ‘al-Muslimānī al-Isrāʾīlī’ which we find attached to the name of a Jewish physician, a certain ‘Abd Allāh, in Ibn Šāʾid’s *Annales*. ‘Hybridity’ does not necessarily mean ambiguity; as noted by Wasserstein, in this

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66 Ibn Šāʾid’s, *Ṭabaqāt al-umam*, p. 192. The case is discussed in Wasserstein, ‘What’s in a Name?’ pp. 139–154. As noted by Wasserstein (‘What’s in a Name?’ pp. 140, 147–151), as the epithets follow the personal name as well as the patronym, it is impossible to determine whether the convert was the father or the son. The term al-muslimānī, although quite rare, clearly indicates a convert to Islam; see Wasserstein, ‘What’s in a Name? ’, p. 142 and note 9 on p. 146 (following Dozy, Suppléments, I:679). See also Zorgati, *Pluralism*, especially pp. 176–177.
case, the combination of the two appellations is precisely intended to be unambiguous in indicating a former Jew who converted to Islam. But the insistence on mentioning these two appellations together, calling him ‘al-
Muslimānī al-Isrāʾīlī’, probably does not come from the wish to be precise, but rather as a put down. It seems indeed that, when high dignitaries like the Ibn Ḥasday family did convert to Islam, their Jewish origins were not forgotten and their identity remained colored, not to say tainted, by these origins. The contradictory information in our sources can thus reflect the ambivalent attitude, or the uncertainty, regarding a liminal religious identity.

In describing the converts’ position as ‘liminal’ I mean to indicate first of all the fact that their new coreligionists did not trust the sincerity of their conversion. They were treated, in some sense, as being on probation, hanging on the margin of their new community. To be sure, such mistrust of new converts was very common; it is reflected in the anecdote recounted above, regarding Abū ʾl-Faḍḥ Ḥasday’s anxiety lest his conversion be attributed to such base motives as the infatuation with a slave girl. It is also reflected in the insistence of some Muslim sources to clearly spell out the cases in which they did trust the sincerity of the conversion.

The lingering suspicion was particularly clear in the case of mass forced conversions. In the period which concerns us here, a pertinent case is the ninth-century Christian Qūmis ibn Antunyān. Like the Jew Ḥasday ibn Shaprūṭ, Qūmis was a highly Arabicised dhimmī, who reached a high position at court in Cordoba. Unlike Ḥasday, but perhaps like his descendants,
‘when pressed by circumstances, he finalized the process of conversion by a formal profession of Islam’. But typically, when his rivals question his political loyalty, his conversion is either forgotten, or its sincerity is challenged. For Jessica Coope, the characterization of Ibn Antunyan as a Christian even after his conversion suggests that for some of his Muslim rivals, a convert was not a real Muslim, or at least not real enough to be in a position of power. But typically, when his rivals question his political loyalty, his conversion is either forgotten, or its sincerity is challenged. For Jessica Coope, the characterization of Ibn Antunyan as a Christian even after his conversion suggests that for some of his Muslim rivals, a convert was not a real Muslim, or at least not real enough to be in a position of power. Thus, although, as mentioned above, the Jewish and Christian communities of al-Andalus, qua communities, reacted very differently to the pressure to convert, we find that Jewish and Christian individuals who belonged to the same social class confronted the same socio-cultural challenges. In the highly acculturated upper echelons of Andalusian society both Christians and Jews could find themselves in this liminal religious position.

But by describing the religious state of the Banū Ḫasday as ‘liminal’ I do not mean to indicate only that the sincerity of their conversion was held in doubt, but also that there appears to have been some genuine, puzzling confusion regarding whether or not they converted at all. I agree with Arietta Papaconstantinou, that ‘if we want to observe and understand the phenomenon we call ‘conversion’... we need to pay attention to where contemporaries situated the ... break and how they construed it’. It seems, however, that the contemporaries of the Banū Ḫasday, as recorded by Muslim historians or reflected in their writings, did not quite know where to situate the break and how to construe it.

Furthermore, the liminality does not refer only to the way others perceived these converts, but also to the position of the converts themselves (or, at least, what our sources tell us regarding this position). At times, the liminality designates a grey area of near conversion, or of recent but indecisive conversion. In some cases, this grey area could be seen in the ‘shifting conversions’ of one individual, that is to say: conversion, retraction, and (sometimes) then re-

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72 Coope, *The Martyrs of Córdoba*, p. 88. This, too, is not unique to the reception of converts in Islam. Christians, for example, reacted with similar antagonism to Muslim converts in the courts of the Norman Kings of Sicily; see Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*, p. 54.

73 Papaconstantinou, *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam and Beyond*, p. 11.
conversion, as was not unusual in the early stages of Islamic rule.\textsuperscript{74} Such liminal, complex religious identity is attested in other moments in the history of the Iberian peninsula, especially in the case of forced conversions. Thus, after the expulsion of Jews by the Catholic kings, new Christians remaining on Iberian soil continued to have family and business contacts with Jews who had settled elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin and had returned openly to practice Judaism. The latter would be known as ‘new Jews’ when in Italy or in North Africa, but they would resume a Christian identity when trading in Spain or Portugal. Such a double religious identity does not seem to have remained a secret to the Christian authorities, and was also known to the Jewish community leaders. As a result, both Christians and Jews often regarded the ‘new Christians/new Jews’ with suspicion and mistrust.\textsuperscript{75}

In the case of the Banū Ḥṣday, however, we have no evidence of shifting conversions. We do have evidence for some mistrust regarding the conversion of Abūl-Faḍl, if he did convert. But mostly, what we have are reports of a seemingly rolling conversion, repeated over several generations.

Let me conclude on an inconclusive note, as I believe befits our findings. It seems safe to say that Abū Jaʿfar Yūsuf bn. Ahmad bn. Ḥṣday died in Egypt as a Muslim. Beyond that, I admit that I find it impossible at this point to say which member of the Ibn Ḥṣday family converted and when. But the accumulated information regarding their religion and the way their religious identity is discussed, both in the sources and in modern studies, draws the profile of religious liminality.

Between cultural assimilation and religious and social pressures, the choices available to members of the minorities covered a broad spectrum, allowing for more nuances and ambivalence than ‘conversion’ normally suggests. We tend to regard individual conversion as an act of breaking with one’s past and choosing another ‘life’. Whether described as a cutting, sometimes brutal act, or as a lengthy process of coming to terms with the decision to change one’s religion, we expect the process to be over within the lifespan of the individual. The case of the Banū Ḥṣday seems to indicate that individual cases of conversion could also be a protracted gradual move in the life of a whole family. In the context of


dignitaries in a highly acculturated community, as the Jewish community of al-Andalus was, the process that starts with distancing oneself from the old religion and ends with complete integration into the new one, could well span several generations.

List of Abbreviations


Sarah Stroumsa


Perès, Esplendor = Henri Perèrs, Esplendor de al-Andalus. La poesía andaluza en árabe clásico en el siglo XI. Sus aspectos generales, sus principales temas y su valor documental. Translated by Mercedes García-Arenal (Madrid: Hipérion, 1983).


Wasserstein, ‘Where have all the converts gone?’ = David Wasserstein, ‘Where have all the converts gone? Difficulties in the study of conversion in al-Andalus,’ *Al-Qanṭura* 33/2 (2012), pp. 325-342.