

## Article

# Early Modern Imperial Philologies: Ahmad al-Hajarî and the Lead Books of Granada

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**Abstract:** The Morisco polymath Ahmad ibn Qâsim al-Hajarî (c.1569–c.1640) was a diplomat, writer and translator. His engagement with philology, i.e., the edition, annotation and translation of texts, especially the Lead Books of Granada, is an important part of his work. This article examines his philological practices and how he deployed them in order to defend Islam and Islamic powers, and to counter the hegemonic claims of the Spanish Catholic Empire.

**Keywords:** Ahmad al-Hajarî; empire; philology; Lead Books of Granada; Moriscos

## 1. Introduction

In the early modern Mediterranean, the ideologies of empire often had religious and millenarian underpinnings. This, in turn, made the reading and interpreting of religious texts essential, and philological skills had important political repercussions. This phenomenon took on particular significance in the frontier between competing civilizations and empires that nevertheless shared beliefs and tropes. The work of the Morisco writer Ahmad al-Hajarî will help us understand the interaction of philology and politics in the Western Mediterranean of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries on the border between Islam and Christendom.

A defining moment in the history of the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean region was the expulsion of the Moriscos, the descendants of Muslim converts to Catholicism, that was decreed by Felipe III in 1609. Even before that time, many Moriscos had already left and relocated in Islamic countries. One of them was Ahmad al-Hajarî. Born in Spain, he escaped to North Africa, where he pursued a successful career as a translator, writer, diplomat and important intercessor between cultures. A steadfast defender of the Morisco diaspora in the Maghreb, this former subject of the Spanish Empire rejected and countered its imperial pretensions and their religious underpinnings. The present study will show how this polymath drew on his experience working between tongues and cultures and on his strong interest in languages and textualities to undermine the Spanish Empire claims of hegemonic Catholicism. It will furthermore delineate a global intellectual horizon for understanding Hajarî's enterprise beyond the Morisco predicament, and even beyond the Mediterranean, and connect his work with global trends in philology and in a millenarian understanding of empire.

## 2. A Morisco Diplomat, Translator and Writer

Ahmad ibn Qâsim ibn al-Shaykh al-Hajarî was one of the many well-connected Moriscos who, in the late sixteenth century, fled Spain to rebuild his life and career in North Africa (Zhiri 2023). He was born around 1569, and he was known in Spain as Diego Bejarano. He also had a Muslim name that he used in North Africa and with which he signed his main texts. He sometimes employed hybrid names that combined the Spanish and the Arabic. He left a decade before the 1609 decree of expulsion. When the order came, he was settled in Marrakesh and belonged to the chancery of the embattled Moroccan Sultan Mûlay Zaydân (d. 1627) of the Sa'dî dynasty. Thanks to his mastery of both Arabic



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and Spanish, he was employed as a translator of diplomatic correspondence. He also, throughout his career, Arabized European cultural texts, mostly in the fields of geography, astronomy and technology. An important episode in his life comprised his travels to Europe in the years 1611 to 1613. In France, he represented Moriscos who had been robbed by French ship captains, and he later visited the Dutch Republic. This trip helped him further his knowledge of the cultures of Europe and gave him the opportunity to enter in religious debates with many Christians and a few Jews, and to befriend distinguished members of the European Republic of Letters. At that time and later, in Europe and in Morocco, he engaged in deep intellectual exchanges with prominent representatives of the field of Orientalism, which was beginning to lay down institutional bases in universities and in the publishing world. His career in Morocco ended in 1634, when he left to perform the hajj and to spend some time in Egypt. There, he became friends with a famous scholar, Alī al-Ujhūrī (c. 1559–1656), who held a chair at the prestigious college of al-Azhar in Cairo and who encouraged him to write about his polemical encounters. Hajarī went beyond his wishes and wrote a comprehensive autobiography cum travelogue, now lost, which he summarized in a book that fortunately survived, titled *The Supporter of Religion against the Infidels* (al-Hajarī 2015).<sup>1</sup> This remarkable document memorialized his life, travels, religious debates and the culture of the Morisco diaspora in North Africa. He spent the later years of his life in Tunis, where he continued to be intellectually active, revising his main book and translating religious and technical texts between Spanish and Arabic, in both directions, and where he died sometime after 1640.

Hajarī did not master some prestigious fields of Arab culture, such as theology, Qur’anic exegesis or rhetoric, and his proficiency in Classical Arabic was limited. He was however quite well read in more technical fields, especially cosmography and geography, and as we shall see, his engagement with languages and textualities was serious and deep, especially through translation. Moreover, his time in Spain, where he was raised, and his later travels in France and the Dutch Republic, as well as his professional experiences in the field of diplomacy, opened to him the opportunity to observe and reflect on the relations between Christian and Muslim powers, between Europe and North Africa and the Middle East. In his service to the Moroccan court, he was often tasked by the sultans with their relations with European powers, as is recorded in many extant documents (García-Arenal et al. 2002, pp. 337–39 and 367–76; de Castries 1911, pp. 451, 458, 46–66).

This distinguished career as a courtier and an envoy left its mark on Hajarī’s work as an author and translator. However, even before it began, his experiences since childhood made him acutely aware of the politics of language. Hajarī came from al-Hajar al-Ahmar, also called Hornachos, a small town in Extremadura populated by Moriscos. Like other Hornacheros, his family, made of his parents and a sister, were secret Muslims who spoke Arabic despite the decree promulgated in 1567 that forbade the use of the language in much of the Spanish territory. He spoke colloquial Arabic from childhood, and a family member taught him the rudiments of reading and writing the classical form, despite his parents’ fear that this forbidden knowledge would get him in trouble with the authorities. During his time in Spain, he also learned Spanish so well that he could pass as an Old Christian. This mastery of the two languages would mark his whole life and career.

His translating career began while he was still in Spain, when he obtained an official license to translate between Arabic and Spanish, which placed him among the native speakers who could proudly display their knowledge of Arabic in a country where the political consequences of knowing this language “could be devastating” (Gilbert 2020, p. 2). Initiated early on, his complex and multifarious engagement with languages and with textualities was developed later, when he collaborated with European Orientalists. This important part of his legacy was also situated in the contact zone between cultures, societies and religions. It began in Paris, when he worked with the physician and Arabist Étienne Hubert (1567–1614). Archives also kept traces of his collaboration with other French Orientalists. Most importantly, Hubert introduced him to Thomas Erpenius (1584–1624), a Dutch student who would write an Arabic grammar that remained a standard textbook in

Europe well into the nineteenth century. Collaborating with several European Orientalists, Hajarî performed for them philological work, copying, explicating and commenting on texts.

Most importantly, Hajarî helped Jacob Golius (1596–1667), a student of Erpenius who traveled to Morocco in 1622–1624, acquire manuscripts. One of them, still held in the library of Leiden University, is a famous book on plant remedies, Ibn Baklârish's *Musta'inî*. The manuscript demonstrates Hajarî's ability to perform complex editorial work. In a letter to Golius dated 2 February 1624, he describes the work he has done: "In connection with what you said about the manuscript that we had copied of the book entitled *al-Musta'inî*, I did my best to do this in a perfect way, as will be clear to you from the translations in it, as I have translated most of the simple medicines into Spanish, which should facilitate your comprehension of it, and I have collated it with another copy, an additional one to the copy of our friend, the doctor. From these two we corrected your copy." (Witkam 2008, p. 78; Villaverde Amieva 2023).

Indeed, despite his modesty, Hajarî was transmitting to the students he was mentoring the editorial practices of the Arabic Republic of Letters, and he was also likely learning something of the European philological methods. Examining Ottoman manuscripts owned by early modern Orientalists, philologist Paul Babinski noted that they introduced Europeans not only to Eastern texts but also to foreign practices of reading, collating and glossing. He strikingly proposed that these manuscripts "form a kind of philological contact zone . . . between distinct 'republics of letters'" (Babinski 2019, p. 237). This astute remark can help situate Hajarî's contribution within the philological exchanges between languages and civilizations and within the larger trends of world philology, which has been attracting the attention of scholars in recent years (Pollock et al. 2015). Hajarî's collaborations with European Orientalists were not unrelated to politics, as they occurred when both he and they were often, at the same time, representing state powers as envoys, diplomats and interpreters. However, it is in another work that he most clearly connects philology with politics and especially the imperial rivalries of the contemporary Mediterranean world.

### 3. Hajarî and the Lead Books Affair

Indeed, one of his most notable philological achievements, as well as his first engagement with translation, began before he left Spain. It concerns a collection of texts that is also situated between Europe and the Arab world, and between Christianity and Islam, and belongs in the history of Orientalism: the Lead Books or *libros plúmbeos/plomos*.<sup>2</sup> Most accounts of the culture of the Moriscos in Spain in the late sixteenth century focus on this extraordinary religious and political incident, in which Hajarî played a minor role but which he considered to be one of the most significant events of his life.

On 19 March 1588, in Granada, during the demolition of a tower that would become known as the Torre Turpiana, workers found a lead chest that contained several relics, including bones and a piece of cloth identified as the handkerchief of Mary, and a parchment written in Arabic, Latin and Spanish containing a prophecy about the end of the world by Saint John. During the years 1595–1599, treasure hunters also discovered more bones and ashes and, most importantly, discs of lead in caves located in the hillside of Granada, soon to be called the Sacromonte or the holy mountain. These tablets bore engraved texts in Arabic and other languages, such as Spanish and Latin, as well as undecipherable letters, that were ostensibly ancient Christian writings. The objects and texts were first identified as dating from the beginning of Christianity in Spain, written in Arabic by Saint Ctesiphon and by Saint Caecilius (or Cecilio), a missionary who was, according to legend, ordained by Peter and Paul to evangelize Southern Spain. The local ecclesiastical authorities embraced the holy relics, and they became the focus of intense popular devotion. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, there was controversy over their authenticity. Some defended the finds as authentic Christian documents and objects. Others were convinced that these were contemporary forgeries and pointed to the obvious anachronisms contained in the texts and to several indisputably Islamic statements that they conveyed. While the Crown and

the Vatican monitored developments, many scholars were asked to examine, translate and interpret the parchment and the lead discs. The relics were transferred to Rome in 1643, where they were again examined by experts and eventually condemned in 1682 by Pope Innocent XI, who sided with the opponents of the Lead Books or *plomos*, as the finds were generically called, and declared them to be heretic artifacts created by Muslims in order to undermine the Christian faith. Only in the year 2000 were they returned to Granada.

Indeed, it seems obvious that the *plomos* were forgeries perpetrated by Moriscos. Critics have proposed different approaches to assess how these falsifications negotiated the connection between Islam and Christianity in Granada, analyzing the parts played by the many constituents involved in the examination of the evidence, including the Morisco community, the ecclesiastical and political authorities of Granada, the Crown and the papacy. One main point was that, by counterfeiting documents that celebrated Arabic as a Christian language and emphasized the points of agreement between Islam and Christianity, the forgers pursued the goal of creating “a heritage that would have guaranteed Morisco cultural survival by merging the separate pasts of the two communities.” (Harris 2007, p. XV). From the perspective of the forgers, this was an effort to integrate Arabic and Arabic-speaking people into the polity of Spain, while efforts to eradicate all remnants of the culture of Islamic Iberia were underway.

Hajarí’s involvement offers a rare assessment of this episode from the point of view of a Morisco of the diaspora. He was acquainted with some of the scholars invited to examine the parchment. When the Christians learned about his proficiency in Arabic, he was introduced to Archbishop Pedro de Castro (1534–1623), who asked him to translate the parchment. As a result of his performance, he was granted a license to translate between Arabic and Spanish. His most important contribution to the examination of the *plomos* was his 1598 translation of the parchment, still extant in the archives (Boyano Guerra 2008). His version became part of the dossier sent to Rome by the ecclesiastical authorities of Granada. This experience in mediating officially between linguistic, cultural and religious systems foreshadows many later episodes when Hajarí would do the same, both in North Africa and in Europe. Hajarí kept reflecting on the finds until his later years, and the impact of this affair on his own religious and intellectual thinking was considerable. Long after he had left Spain, he remained eager to learn more and to spread information about the *plomos*. He sought people who could provide him with versions and copies of the documents in North Africa. He also mentioned the finds to Sultan Ahmad al-Mansûr, discussed their import and meaning with other Morisco exiles, and described their discovery in a manuscript he copied in Paris for Étienne Hubert. Most importantly, he included some of these documents and information about them in his main extant work, the *Supporter*, especially the first chapter.

The study of the Lead Books affair has taken a crucial step very recently, thanks to a critical edition of the original mostly Arabic texts accompanied with a lengthy and invaluable introduction by van Koningsveld and Wiegers (2023). This is the culmination of decades of work by these two scholars, who had already published many important studies of the Lead Books. Van Koningsveld and Wiegers’s introduction offers a group portrait of the many scholars, translators and commentators, including Hajarí, who worked on the finds in the early decades. These critics entertained a long controversy concerning the documents, their datation and their meaning. Van Koningsveld and Wiegers summarized thusly the two main opposing theories: the first theory was that the Lead Books were “authentic early Christian documents.” The second theory was that they “were Muslim forgeries.” (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023, p. 106). No modern scholar accepts the first theory any longer. The second is being rethought and refined depending on what critics consider to be the main goal of the forgers. Van Koningsveld and Wiegers propose the hypothesis of a two-pronged goal: “First to persuade the Moriscos to accept Christian domination outwardly... Second to promote an inclusive view of Iberian history among the entire population, including the Moriscos” (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023, p. 107). As for Hajarí, they portray him as a defender of the first, now discarded, theory: “He

believed the Lead Books to be ancient Christian documents, but Christian documents that agreed with Islamic teachings” (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023, p. 106).

I concur with this assessment and will further argue that Hajarí’s presentation was strongly influenced by the circumstances of his writing about them: contrary to the Morisco scholars who participated in the controversy while still living in Spain, Hajarí was offering his own conclusions after he had left the Iberian Peninsula and was a Muslim subject of Islamic countries. This study will focus on his reading of the finds and on his philological strategies and will argue that he drew political conclusions that reflected his new situation and even his closeness to circles of power, as well as more general trends in the Mediterranean. Indeed, the disagreements among the readers of the documents at the time of their discovery and in the decades that followed were strongly connected to religious doctrine and, at the same time, carried political implications. Hajarí’s firmly held religious views are very much in line with his accounts of later polemical encounters when he defended Islam against Christians and Jews and are obviously relevant to his view on the *plomos* affair. The present article will, however, mainly focus on the philological methods that he relied on to support his reading and his analyses and on the political opinions he drew from them.

An essential element of the whole controversy was that the disagreements among the readers were couched in philological terms: the debate centered around linguistic assessments, reading strategies and modes of interpretation. Many scholars were called to translate and evaluate the documents, including some of the most distinguished academics of their time in the fields of theology, Biblical studies and Oriental languages, as Mercedes García-Arenal and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano have shown in extensive detail (García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano 2013). Over the years, they produced collectively a voluminous corpus of commentary and translation. They argued for and against the authenticity of the finds and tried to assess their alignment with Catholic doctrine or their closeness to Islamic views. They used new advances in Oriental studies in Europe and in the close examination of texts, including Scripture, for the purposes of publication and inquiry. The documents themselves were not only polyglot but also deeply hybrid and thus necessitated the recourse to scholars of varied backgrounds. Indeed, the finds, as well as the commentaries they were subjected to, need to be placed along a horizon of comparative or even world philology. The goal of the present article is to examine how Hajarí’s work is situated within the space of contested philological practices opened by the reading of the *plomos*.

Since a full appraisal of Hajarí’s multidimensional involvement in the *plomos* affair is beyond the scope of this study, I will focus on the way he frames his own understanding of the documents. The goal is not to assess how accurate Hajarí’s philological work regarding the parchment and Lead Books is (including translation, transcription and interpretation) but rather to analyze his textual strategies and their political aims. Indeed, for him and for others, the Lead Books affair was as eminently political as it was religious, and one of its important stakes was the fate of the Morisco minority within the culture and society of Catholic Spain. Their destiny hinged on the reading and interpreting of these texts. The *plomos* affair highlights the deeply political nature of philology.

#### 4. A Philological Defense of the Authenticity of the *plomos*

Hajarí’s account begins as a historiography of the finds. The first chapter of the *Supporter* narrates the discovery of the parchment on 19 March 1588 and the first efforts to decipher it, which, according to Hajarí, were not entirely successful. He cites the names of two of these translators, both Moriscos, the king’s interpreter Alonso del Castillo, whom he calls al-Ukayhil, and Lorenzo El Chapiz. A new episode in the story began on 21 February 1595, when the first lead discs were found by a treasure hunter, and then many others over the following two years. Hajarí’s story then becomes autobiography, when he tells how the new series of discoveries reignited interest in the parchment, and he was asked to join the already substantial group of Arabists, including Moriscos, who were helping in the

interpretation of the document. He probably became involved thanks to his acquaintance with El Chapiz's grandson, the physician Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-'Asī (Coullaut Cordero 2019). According to the description by Gerard Wiegers and Pieter van Koningsveld, the one-page parchment "presents itself as a number of *squares and rectangular spaces with legends in Latin and Arabic script, alternately in brown and red ink*. These squares and rectangular spaces are encompassed by *marginal notes, most of them written in Arabic, one written in (a different) Latin script*" (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2003, p. 330).<sup>3</sup> The Arabic is usually devoid of diacritic points and of vowels. Three languages, Arabic, Latin and Spanish, appear, as well as mysterious letters. The forms of the letters, and the presence of fantastical scripts, testify that the authors made a deliberate effort to make the document look ancient and difficult to understand through "a conscious process of *mystification*." (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2003, p. 330).<sup>4</sup>

As for the content, the Spanish parts of the parchment are a prophecy about the End Times, which is commented on in Arabic verses. This text belongs to a vast corpus of "apocalyptic prophecies known as *jofores* [that] circulated in the Muslim and crypto-Muslim Morisco communities of the Iberian Peninsula" (Green-Mercado 2019, p. 3). As a result of the intentional obscurity of the text, and of its multilingual complexity, the translator appears as a central figure, whose intervention was more important than usual (Boyano Guerra 2008, p. 140). By imbuing their text with an aura of mystery, the writers of the parchment gave greater agency and importance to translators and interpreters, to the point that they could be considered as second authors.

Let us now turn to how Hajarí exercised his own agency by analyzing his description of his own work and his presentation of the document. As seen earlier, he viewed the parchment and the *plomos* in general as authentic, venerable early Christian relics, the ultimate meaning of which was to announce the coming of Islam, the last Revelation that would supersede all others. He deployed specific strategies to defend these conclusions. After giving the context of the discovery, Hajarí focuses on his own translation of the parchment. His explanations and his text allow the reader to understand and analyze the philological principles on which he based his work on the parchment. Elucidating how he came to the translation he rendered to the archbishop, Hajarí quotes a marginal note on the document: "O student of the riddle, you must combine! If you do not combine, you shall not fully grasp the mystery!" (al-Hajarí 2015, pp. 92e, 29a).<sup>5</sup> He understood this injunction as giving him the method to decipher the meaning of the parchment: when translating, he should connect between the Spanish text and its Arabic commentary. He could thus use each one to understand the other, "because combining is the bringing together of two separate things" (pp. 92e, 29a). He was proud of this method, especially because, he said, previous translators focused only on the commentary.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his presentation of his work on the parchment shows that he was well aware that many others had been and were being asked to examine the document, and at several junctures, he compares their work, which he probably had the opportunity to read, to his. He was very much cognizant that there were disagreements and even competition among commentators, asserting proudly that his translation of the parchment was better than his predecessors'. Hajarí expresses another principle of his translation in response to a query by the "priest" (probably Archbishop Castro): "I translate each single word for you, so that [the translation] correctly represents what the text says." (pp. 94e, 33a). His *verbatim* translation seeks, he says, to express closely the meaning of the original.

While in Spain, Hajarí translated into Spanish the Arabic parts of the parchment, but his philological work about the finds did not stop there. Much later, in his autobiography, he took on the role of editor and transcribed the Arabic texts of the parchment. These include some introductory lines: "The mysterious book of the evangelist John concerning the destruction of the universe" (pp. 90e, 27a).<sup>7</sup> Hajarí also proposed his paraphrase of the text, telling the story of how the author of the document, Cecilio, obtained John's prophecy during a journey, was cured from blindness by a veil that had belonged to Mary and translated the prophecy to Spanish from a Greek version. He furthermore transcribed

parts of the poetic commentary of the prophecy that insist on the eschatological vision of a “king who will dominate the whole world until Doomsday” (pp. 93e, 31a).<sup>8</sup> He then offered his interpretation, explaining that the king here mentioned “was in fact the Prophet” (pp. 91e, 33a).

To support his readings of the text, he relied on authoritative references, including a manuscript dictionary by the famed lexicographer Ismâ’îl al-Jawharî (fl. 11th c.) that he obtained from his Christian patrons (pp. 90–91e, 27a). The priests let him consult the Medici print edition of the geography by Muhammad al-Idrisî (1100–1165) to try to find which city the poetic Arabic commentary calls the City of the Sea (pp. 96e, 36a). Hajarî also quoted the astrologer ‘Alî ibn Abî al-Rijâl (d. after 1040) (pp. 94e, 32a). Hajarî added annotations, again emulating a well-known philological method. Some paleographic notes highlighted the unusual forms of the Arabic letters, which, in his view, proved that the document was very old. This antiquity provided, in the minds of the defenders of the finds, conclusive evidence of their authenticity (pp. 97e, 38a). In fact, Hajarî echoes here arguments proffered by others, including the Morisco translator and author Miguel de Luna, one of the most important figures in the Lead Books story (see [van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023](#), p. 189). Furthermore, Hajarî intervened about the Arabic word “*al-jânî*”, knowing that the commentators diverged on its meaning. He said he agreed with the interpretation of the word proposed by “al-Jabbis” or El Chapiz, who quoted the Quran to explain it (pp. 94e, 32–33a). In sum, Hajarî, when he was in Spain, through his involvement with the translation of the parchment, a particularly difficult text, learned or at least honed his philological skills. To understand and translate the document, he relied on methodological principles, compared his reading to the ones offered by others, proposed glosses and analyses and used reference books to elucidate the texts. Much later, in his own work, he edited, described, paraphrased and commented on some of the Arabic parts of the document that he was very eager to disseminate, since he was convinced of its authenticity and sanctity.

As for the so-called Lead Books proper, he apparently was not officially asked to participate in their analysis while in Granada but nevertheless keenly sought information about them. His book memorialized the finding of the discs (pp. 85–87e, 18–22a). He was even able to see and touch some of them, which made a great impression on him. Later, in his memoir, he took on the task of the editor to transcribe and comment on some passages. He collected these texts from different people, who had brought to North Africa copies of transcripts made by Alonso del Castillo, one of the main scholars called to study the finds in Granada. His work testifies to the dissemination of the *plomos* in the Maghreb. In Marrakesh, a court official named Fâris ibn al-’Ilj, who had obtained a copy of Castillo’s work, showed a transcript of the Maxims of Saint Mary to Hajarî, who cites one maxim *verbatim* (pp. 99e, 41a). This quote, excerpted from the Lead Book no. 14 found on 4 September 1597, describes a savior that was yet to come. Hajarî discussed that text in Tunis with the prominent Morisco writer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rafî’, who commented that many of the descriptors were phrases that were traditionally applied to the Prophet Muhammad, bolstering his central belief that the Lead Books announced the advent of Islam.

In the same chapter one, Hajarî mentions and describes one of the most intriguing of the finds, the Lead Book no. 17 titled *The Essence of the Gospel* and called by the translators the “dumb book” because several lines of text were written in a cryptic script that remained undeciphered (see [van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023](#), p. 348). Hajarî heard from the archbishop that it would only be understood in the End Times. He transcribed the only legible part of the Lead Book, a Seal of Solomon, as the star of David was often called in Islamic circles, a symbol that appears on many of the Lead Books ([van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023](#), pp. 115–20) and which is the topic of the Lead Book no. 11. Hajarî also copied the poetic text that accompanied the Seal of Solomon in the “dumb book” (pp. 101–102e, 44–45a) and indicated that its verses could be read in four different orders. Toward the end of chapter one, he transcribed a long excerpt of Lead Book no. 2, that he presents as a

unitarian creed, as well as some other Seals of Solomon drawings and captions from the same book (pp. 103–105e, 47–50a; see [van Koningsveld and Wiegiers 2023](#), pp. 393–95). He informed his readers that the alleged author was Tasfiyûn ibn al-‘Attâr, a companion of Cecilio, who wrote the parchment.<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, Hajarî edited as an appendix to his memoir the complete Lead Book no. 18, called the *Book of the Gifts of Reward*, discovered on 11 May 1599 (pp. 279–284e, 310–334a). In his introduction to the appendix, he informed the reader that he had seen, read and translated some of the Lead Books found near Granada. The copy with which he was working had been made by al-Ukayhil/Alonso del Castillo and had been brought to Tunis by a Morisco named Yûsuf Qalbu al-Andalusî, identified as Juan Calvo Navarro, a king’s scribe ([van Koningsveld and Wiegiers 2023](#), pp. 63 and 154–55). Hajarî used Castillo’s notes to inform the reader about the books, how they were brought to Spain and the role of Mary in the story. Although Hajarî does not make explicit the reasons why he chose this particular book to edit, his commentary offers several elements for understanding his motivations. Mary is one of the main protagonists in the *plomos* as a whole. They present her as a prophetess, who received revelations that are recorded in some of the Lead Books. Most importantly, she was the recipient of *The Essence of the Gospel*, the so-called “dumb book”. Hajarî was very much interested in this book and transcribed its legible parts. He also asked the archbishop to let him try and decipher it but was told that the time to understand the mysterious text has not yet come: “He knew this from the book entitled *Book of the Gifts of Rewards* by Saint Mary” (pp. 102e, 46–47a). The *Essence of the Gospel* can be considered the most crucial of all the Lead Books, as it recorded an essential revelation to Mary and is “conceived as identical to the Quran” ([van Koningsveld and Wiegiers 2023](#), p. 139). Indeed, it connects with key ideas of Islamic mystical philosophy, and the concept of “the *Essence of the Gospel* in the Lead Books is to be understood as a ‘counterpart’ or ‘precursor’ of the Islamic mystical concept of *al-Haqîqa al-muhammadiya* (the Muhammadan Reality)” ([van Koningsveld and Wiegiers 2023](#), p. 134).

No wonder Hajarî was so fascinated with this book and was interested in editing the *Book of the Gifts of Reward*, which is directly connected to the *Essence of the Gospel*. It consists of a series of eight questions posed to Mary by the apostle Peter after the *Essence of the Gospel* had been revealed to her. Her responses touch upon some themes very dear to Hajarî in his reading of the *plomos* and in his polemical encounters after he had left Spain. In a concluding note after the edition of the text, he adds that “the statements of the Book of the Gifts of Reward about the essence of the Gospel are apparently contradictory to the Gospel they possess nowadays and to the unbelief and the trinitarian doctrine of the Christians. But it is in harmony with [...] the Noble Qur’an” (pp. 293e, 333–34a). Again, he reaffirms his strong conviction that the Lead Books announced the supersession of Christianity by Islam, as well as his belief that he stated more than once in the polemical parts of his memoir that Christians had altered their Scripture. Other essential themes that appear in Mary’s responses are the excellence of the Arabs and the Arabic language, as was noted by Harvey, who examined another manuscript of Lead Book no. 18 ([Harvey 1986](#)). Another topic of Mary’s answers to Peter is the End Times. Interestingly, one of the questions posed by Peter concerns those “who will translate and those who will write commentaries” (pp. 286e, 322a). This theme might have attracted Hajarî, who was well aware that the labor of translation and commentary was of paramount importance in the dissemination of religious truth or falsehoods. He, like many others, worked at rendering the *plomos* legible, not only as one of the official translators of the parchment but also as an historiographer, an editor of some of the documents, an annotator and a very engaged commentator. Furthermore, he was well aware that, if the readings of these religious documents were based on the philological method, they were also eminently political.

## 5. Hajarî: Philology and Politics

Hajarî’s involvement in the *plomos* affair, more than his collaborations with Orientalists, and even more evidently than his work for the sultans, was deeply political. The whole

incident was obviously political for all protagonists, from the forgers to the archbishop to the interpreters to the papacy. Some of its most important stakes was the fate of the Morisco community and of the Arabic language in Spain, as well as the local Christian history of Granada. In a striking feature of his account of his work on the parchment while in Granada, Hajarî interweaves his narration of his involvement in the *plomos* affair with crucial elements of the context concerning the situation of Arabic in Spain, insisting on his happiness to be included since he would go from not showing to the Christians that he could read Arabic “because of the sentence of punishment they usually passed upon those who appeared to do so” to being awarded by the archbishop a license to translate. This evolution did not happen without concern and even fear, “as the Christians kill and burn everyone on whom they find an Arabic book and about whom they know he reads Arabic” (pp. 88e, 23a). Hajarî’s recounting of his work for the archbishop fittingly keeps present in the narrative the politics of language that prevailed in Spain at the turn of the end of the sixteenth century and that permeates the Lead Books, since the forgers, it has been argued, “wished to prove that Arabic was a Christian language and that there was therefore no reason to ban its use” (García-Arenal and Rodríguez Mediano 2017, p. 141).

After often recalling the legal status of the Arabic language in Spain in his account of the *plomos*, Hajarî, to conclude his narrative, turns to the destiny of the Moriscos themselves. In the very last part of chapter one of the *Supporter*, he recounts his last conversation with the archbishop. This exchange was not concerned with issues of philology or translation but with the fate of the Morisco minority and the hostility they faced from the authorities and the population. This indicates that he was well aware that an important element of the *plomos* was the interaction between the Old Christian community of Granada and the descendants of Muslims, as well as between Christianity and Islam.

Scholars have noted the blend of Christian elements and of Islamic beliefs in the Lead Books and debated whether the word “syncretism” is appropriate to describe their working (Harvey 2005, pp. 268–69). The early commentary on the finds became a contest not only between the defenders of their authenticity and the scholars convinced that they were recent forgeries but also, among the first category, between the interpreters who read them as deeply Christian and the critics who understood them as essentially Islamic. Both camps disregarded in their interpretation the elements that contradicted their position. Pushing their reading toward Christianity was evidently an important part of the work of the scholars who wanted to transform the finds into canonical texts that would help invent a local Christian history for Granada. For this reason, in the words of Seth Kimmel, “the Islamic elements were either purged for the Spanish or Latin translations or circumscribed by a web of commentary.” (Kimmel 2015, p. 98). Hajarî would agree with this assessment; he stated that other translators tended to abusively Christianize documents that, in his view, should be understood as proto-Islamic. He also noted that the “priest” (probably the Archbishop Castro) pressured him to keep a word blank because his translation “contradicts the Gospel we possess!” (al-Hajarî 2015, pp. 95e, 34a). Indeed, a remarkable element of his presentation of his work on the parchment in the *Supporter* is that he describes most of it as a dialogue with the archbishop, the first reader of his version. His portrayal of Castro’s reactions is ambivalent and even contradictory: on the one hand, Hajarî asserts that the archbishop “was extremely pleased with my translation, as he knew it was truthful” (pp. 92e, 30a). On the other hand, he says that Castro was unhappy with part of his translation that implied a corruption of Christianity (pp. 94e, 33a). Through the portrait of the archbishop, Hajarî presents the reactions of the Christian community. The latter would end up rejecting both the reading of the *plomos* that he advocated and the Morisco minority.

However, Hajarî was obviously, in his own editorial work, making choices to support his own pro-Islamic understanding of the texts, sometimes to the point of manipulation. When he proposed an idiosyncratic translation of an Arabic word that the other translators interpreted as referring to the Trinity (a dogma that cannot be reconciled with Islamic insistence on the unity of God), his reading, although biased, could accord with the parchment, given that the Arabic word had no diacritic points (van Koningsveld and

Wiegers 2003, p. 335). However, in other cases, he seemed to simply eliminate passages or elements (such as crosses in the parchment) that he could not gloss away in order to make them support his Islamic reading of the texts (p. 104e, n110; van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023, p. 61).

These elements take on further meaning when Hajarî links the *plomos*, and their eschatological content, more directly with notions of messianic political power. On the one hand, as seen earlier, Hajarî reads the *plomos* as announcing the prophetic mission of Muhammad. On the other, he understood their eschatological content as predicting the imminence of the End Times, which would occur after the triumph of one religion and one ruler—in his view, Islam and a Muslim ruler. When he quotes and analyzes the commentary of the prophecy in the parchment, he connects it directly with contemporary politics: “When the time of Judgment comes, the Easterner will take hold of the City of the Sea absolutely!” No one who heard this passage doubted that the Easterner was the Sultan of the East and that he was in fact the Sultan of the Turks.” (pp. 95e, 35a). He was quite aware of the competition taking place between rulers as to who should be seen as the messianic one. He was even advised to change the passage he interpreted as referring to the Ottoman sultan. Not long after his move to Marrakesh, he showed a copy of the parchment to the Sultan Ahmad al-Mansûr (d. 1603) of the Sharifian Sa’dî dynasty: “On that occasion one of his commanders said to me: ‘Why don’t you change the *qâf* to a *fâ*, so that it reads the *Sharîf* will take hold of the City of the Sea? The Sultan would be happy by this!’ I said: ‘God willing, I shall not change anything!’” (pp. 97e, 38a). This request by Ahmad al-Mansûr’s courtier is not surprising given that the Sa’dî sultan promoted himself as a messianic figure and especially saw the Ottoman ruler as a rival in that regard (García-Arenal 2006, pp. 291–95). Hajarî chose in his text to support the pretensions of the Ottomans. His decision might have been influenced by the place in which he was writing and revising his memoir, in provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

Indeed, the *plomos*, and the parchment in particular, participated in a vast apocalyptic literature that underpinned imperial ideologies in the Mediterranean and even beyond (Subrahmanyam 2003). Hajarî knew very well that these beliefs in the connection between religion and politics were shared across boundaries, and, far from being confined to Islamic thought, nourished early modern imperial interreligious competition. As a subject of the Spanish Empire, he understood how the Habsburgs explained their place in history based on Scripture and on theology. Moriscos such as Hajarî, thanks to their physical and intellectual intimacies with Spain, were aware of the existence of apocalyptic traditions among the Christians and Jews of Europe and of the ways they helped them make sense of history. Hajarî, who had studied Christian Scripture, presents these traditions to his readers to both adapt and counter them.

Chapter ten of the *Supporter* contains a long quote from the Biblical Book of Daniel, chapter two, and comments on how it was used in Spain to justify their imperial rule. He heard priests deliver sermons that explained that Spain was the last empire referred to in Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s vision. Hajarî rejected this view and opposed a pro-Islamic reading of the text, that he found in the work of the influential Moroccan Sufi scholar Ahmad Zarrûq (1442–1494). Hajarî’s text is only one example of the use of the story of Daniel to bolster apocalyptic prophecies in early modern Christian and Jewish, as well as Muslim, communities. His presentation participated in a shared transcultural and transreligious Mediterranean culture of millenarian tropes (Fleischer 2018). Hajarî countered the views of the Spanish priests by suggesting that the Ottoman Empire, rather than the Habsburg, should be seen as belonging to the lineage of the great monarchies. In chapter one, he had already stated that the Easterner mentioned in the prophecy in the parchment should be understood as being the Great Sultan, and he probably had a similar understanding of a passage of the *Book of the Gifts of Reward*, which refers to a Conqueror who lives in the East, who “is one of the Kings of the Arabs, but he is not an Arab” (pp. 285e, 319a). This interpretation bolsters Hajarî’s strong belief in the eventual victory of Islam and of the Islamic Empire that he expresses through his interpretation of the Lead Books. In

Spain, millenarian beliefs among the Moriscos were an ideology of resistance against the hegemonic claims of the Spanish Empire, but they also promoted the counterclaims made by the rival Ottoman Empire, and Hajarî was undoubtedly even more inclined to advance this tendency in his later years in Tunis.

## 6. Conclusions

Hajarî was born a subject of the Spanish Empire and belonged to a persecuted minority. In the early modern Mediterranean, an acquaintance with rival polities' ideologies was not rare. Furthermore, as a churchgoing outwardly Christian Morisco, Hajarî had an intimate understanding of European and Christian imperial ideologies and of their scriptural and theological bases. When he left Spain, he brought with him in his exile this knowledge. His participation in the *plomos* affair considerably inflected his own views. This episode was a remarkable attempt to make possible the survival of the Morisco minority, and even of their attachment to Islam, within Catholic Spain. It ended in failure, and the Moriscos were dispersed across the Mediterranean. However, for an author such as Hajarî, this incident allowed for a deeper reflection on how to use philology to counter, in his work, the hegemonic claims of Spanish imperialism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The citations to this book will reference the English translation (page number followed by the letter e) and the Arabic original (page number followed by the letter a).
- <sup>2</sup> My book *Beyond Orientalism* retraces Hajarî's life and career and examines at length his engagement with Orientalism, with autobiographical writing and with technical translation. It looks briefly at his participation in the Lead Books affair, including a history of his involvement and a succinct analysis of his views on them in connection with religious polemics (Zhiri 2023, pp. 18–20 and 104–7).
- <sup>3</sup> Emphasis in the original. See also a reproduction of a part of this document in van Koningsveld and Wiegers (2023, p. 109, Figure 10).
- <sup>4</sup> Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>5</sup> For other readings of this marginal note proposed by early interpreters, as well as other passages of the parchment, see (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> In fact, this is not true of all translations. See p. 92e, n51.
- <sup>7</sup> This is not a complete translation. See (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2003).
- <sup>8</sup> See (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2003, pp. 341–44). On the parchment and the transcriptions and translations by different commentators, see (van Koningsveld and Wiegers 2023, pp. 159–228).
- <sup>9</sup> This character's name is usually spelled Tis'ûn.

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