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Chapter 1 : Ibn Hamdis - Wikipedia

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Everything was dry and withered. It was the dryness that scared me. Every time I placed my hand on a part of my body, it was as if I had placed it on a piece of damp wood. By the third day after I had been blindfolded, it seemed to me that I was one of the walking dead. I began to notice that my body was becoming frighteningly emaciated. I continued to deteriorate as a result of the torture, and was constantly dizzy. As soon as I woke up and touched my body, I felt like collapsing again. I disappeared into slumber and woke up to the sound of scratching underneath my bed of cardboard. The sound began to move from under this bed, directly to my ear. I jumped up violently, and with considerable effort. I pulled the cardboard up from where it lay and shook it a little, hoping that the source of the scratching sound would fall from one of its folds. I got down on the floor to look at some of the holes in the walls. In the right hand corner, I discovered a burrow. I threw myself violently to the opposite corner. There was a tail curling up into it as fast as a flash of lightning. I held my breath. The tail turned over and the head appeared. It was a mouse! With what remained of my strength, I rushed to the door and proceeded to bang on it. I was screaming at the top of my lungs when the Hadj entered my cell with keys in hand. Nor did I know what I was expecting of myself after all of this screaming. Finally, I surprised him with a request to use the toilet. Had I revealed the truth, I would have handed them a point of weakness on a golden platter. The distance between my cell and the toilet was quite long, and it was necessary to walk between two facing rows of cells. I pushed the door open and went in. Perhaps if I took my time, the mouse would leave and go someplace else. The problem with the hole was that there was the possibility that another could appear at any time. The Hadj knocked twice and yelled: My steps were heavy when the Hadj pushed me forcefully back into my cell. He locked the door and left, while I remained standing on my tiptoes, my back pressed up against the door. The other kids used to insist that I join them and when my turn came and I closed my eyes, they would take the opportunity to grab hold of any small soft piece of cloth, a piece of wool, or some other piece of material, tie it up in a knot and throw it at my face. I would scream with all my strength. I would cry, and when I got wise to the fake "mouse" that they threw at me, I would tell them to get lost, filling my hands with rocks, and the alley with screams. My God, the mouse is here after all this time. I got tired of standing; there was no point. I moved the cardboard a little in the direction of the door in order to sleep as far as possible from the mouse hole. I began to convince myself that he could do me no harm, comparing his size to mine. What could he do to me compared to what the agents do? Could I handle all of that, yet kneel down before this silvery-gray mouse? I tried to cover my eyes, but it was in vain that I tried to distance myself from him. Three days of rolling right and left in a fitful sleep out of which the slightest scratching would wake me-the jangling of keys; one of the comrades heading to the toilet; another one crying out because of his wounds. I was like a clock, wound up by the slightest noise. The room became even gloomier. I kept my eyes open until they bulged. Perhaps I would catch a glimpse of him. He was dark gray when I saw him in the daytime. Perhaps he left and another, or others, came in his place. I never knew that there was something called "morning" in here. However, the presence of this silvery-gray mouse forced me to make it out, or at least to imagine I had. It was only then, in the morning, that it was possible to see the hole, and to distinguish between the one that went in, and the one who came out. The Hadj opened the door accompanied by two nervous-looking agents who dragged me to the "hospitality" session. The judicial police accompanied us, even to the district attorney and the investigating judge. They would use our bodies as ashtrays, and as practice dummies for their cravaches. I learned from the prison doctor afterward that with us nine, he could not figure out why our wounds kept appearing anew despite our transfer to this location more than three months ago, whereas the wounds and scars on the rest of the comrades had stopped bleeding and appeared, relatively speaking, to be healing. While the question of my position on the inclusion of the Kida region in our nation

was drawing its bloody lines on my body, and placing electrical charges and cigarette burns all over me and on my genitals, I remained obsessed with that mouse. Did he enter his hole? Did he leave it? For the first time, I was distracted from the torture with other things. My responses to their questions remained limited. Discussions among us only concern general principles and planning. This issue has not been put forth yet. And eradicating illiteracy and meeting with workers and posters and announcements. I felt heat where a rivulet of blood flowed from my nose I often had nosebleeds during torture sessions. I heard the cravache smack the ground all of a sudden. I was prepared to prolong my time anywhere-in the toilet with its awful smell, in the torture room with its gloomy colors and whips, in this cement hallway. The important thing was to not go back to the cell, where waiting for me were that hole, fear. The fear that lurked, waiting for me when I entered the cell, was not the same as when I entered the torture room. A shivering overtook my entire body as I threw myself inside. Come look at your son now. The Hadj locked the door behind me and I stood there whimpering in a strangled voice. I imagined that if they knew of my fear of the mouse, and my complete collapse in front of it, they would organize a celebration for intelligence units worldwide. The upper echelons of these organizations would review their programs, and they would give supplementary lessons to their units aimed at seeking the weak spots of a detainee-just as we were able to drive Haydaoui the carpenter out of his mind when we were little, with the single word "honey," which we would lob at him while running away; or as we used to be able to do to Abdelghani ibn Elhai who would be reduced to hysterical laughter when we tickled him on his sides, or under the armpits. As for me, it was enough for them to throw me a mouse. I mulled over these fears, and noticed that I was still standing. I stretched out on the floor a little, and sat with my legs out in front of me. I put my hand on the ground and leaned my head back, placing it on the wall. No sooner had I placed myself in such a position that I felt a movement. I jumped up immediately and fixed my gaze upon the hole with my eyes shooting out like darts. Then he appeared, but I had neither the power nor the strength to face him. Even if I did possess such courage, I was barefoot. I remained thus, in a crouching position. He came out and began to poke around his hole. I held my breath lest the slightest movement turn him back to his silver-gray color, which would definitely bring him toward me. He continued to walk to the center of the cell which I had for so long considered so small. But now he made me look at it in terms of corners, a middle, and sides. He got to the center and stopped, pausing, while I remained holding my breath. He made himself into a ball in his place, tracing a circle on the floor and sitting in the middle of it as if performing some sort of yoga movements. I swallowed my breath once again, nearly bursting with laughter. Would Youssef ever believe that I had sat face to face with a mouse? He moved a little, then returned to where he was without disturbing me at all. Oh God, what is it he has discovered? Is it possible for you to leave me alone? Or is it possible that we become friends? I told him the reason for my discomfort, rather, my fear of him came from the time when he bit the hand of my father, the neighborhood holy man, the fqih. My father had put his hand inside the hole next to the bench where he hid his Quran I was studying with him-he had sat me in the first row, and when he took his hand out of the hole blood flowed from his finger, and he threw the Quran away. The other kids screamed out of pain for their fqih, my father. The grocer, Bajloul, came and killed the mouse. When he saw the frightening pallor that my father had taken on, he informed us that it was not a normal mouse, that it was poisoned. This was confirmed with a visit to the neighborhood doctor.

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His poetry displays a thorough mastery of the Arabic poetic canon, as well as a sophisticated linguistic knowledge, which points to an elite education. It is probable that Ibn Hamdis was raised in a prosperous family, likely landed gentry, who settled the Val di Noto early after the Muslim conquest of Sicily in the 9th century. Ibn Hamdis enjoyed the benefits and reaped the fruits of such privileged upbringing. However, the prosperity of the Muslims of Sicily was not to last. In the second half of the 11th century the political stability of Muslim Sicily had been severely compromised by decades of internecine struggle. The Kalbid court of Palermo and its ephemeral splendour had long been effaced by squabbles between contender warlords, who had partitioned the island into three fiefdoms. The Normans were taking advantage of this political weakness, and advancing steadily in their conquest of the island. Ibn Hamdis was about five years old when the Norman armies, aided and abetted by the Sicilian Arab warlord Ibn al-Thumna, disembarked at Messina and moved westward to Palermo. When the city fell in, the hopes for a revival of Muslim sovereignty on the island began to wane, and a diaspora of Muslim Sicilians began. Ibn Hamdis, like so many others, set sail with his wife and sons to North Africa, to reach some of his relatives in Sfax. The poet spent thirteen years in al-Andalus, participating in the political events that involved the taifa kingdoms; the Christian onslaught coming from the North, and the looming Almoravid conquest. Ibn Hamdis elected to leave again. After a perilous sea-journey, in which his boat was shipwrecked, causing his beloved slave-girl, Jawhara, to drown to her he devoted some of his finest elegies, the poet settled once again in North Africa. He found new patrons at the Zirid court of Mahdiya, in modern-day Tunis. He also praised the Hammadid al-Mansur ibn al-Nasir at Bijaya modern-day Algeria although his exact movements between the two courts are not clear. He may have been buried close to his old friend of the Seville brigade Ibn al-Labbana d. The first copy is kept at the Vatican Library, Rome. The second is preserved in the Asiatic Museum in Saint Petersburg. Beirut, Cambridge, University Press, Beirut,

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Alexander Elinson is Associate Professor of Arabic at Hunter www.nxgvision.com book entitled Looking Back at al-Andalus: the poetics of loss and nostalgia in medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature is published by Brill.