Hisdai Ibn Shaprut Encyclopedia Article

Hisdai Ibn Shaprut

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Hisdai Ibn Shaprut

c. 915-c. 975

Jewish Spanish Physician

An influential figure in the court of Caliph 'Abd ar-Rahman III, Hisdai ibn Shaprut helped bring on a golden age of Jewish learning in Muslim Spain. Among his many specific contributions to medical scholarship was his translation of a pharmacological treatise by the Greek physician Dioscorides (c. 20-c. 90) into Arabic.

Hisdai, whose full name was Hisdai Abu Yusuf ben Isaac ben Ezra ibn Shaprut, had the good fortune to be born in a land controlled by Muslims rather than Christians. Jews had fared poorly in Spain prior to the Muslim invasion in 711, and few of their number living in Christian Europe had an opportunity to excel as scholars. In Muslim Spain, by contrast, it was possible that a Jew might not only engage in acclaimed intellectual pursuits, but also occupy a position of great political influence.

Such was the case with Hisdai, who became the caliph's court physician. (The Umayyads, escaping the Abbasid Caliphate's takeover in the Middle East in 750, had established a rival caliphate ruling Spain and Morocco.) In time Hisdai became a sort of untitled vizier (executive official), greatly valued for his linguistic versatility—he knew Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, and Greek—and for his sensitivity in diplomatic matters.

At one point, 'Abd ar-Rahman (891-961) used Hisdai to negotiate a treaty with the Byzantine emperor, who sent the manuscript of Dioscorides to Spain as a token of good will. By translating that text into Arabic, Hisdai made the knowledge it contained available throughout the Arab world, the culture that was making the greatest advances in scientific learning at the time.

Hisdai also acted as intermediary in a dispute between the Christian kingdoms of León and Navarre, and carried on a correspondence with the ruler of the Khazar Khanate, a Jewish kingdom in what is now Russia. After the death of 'Abd ar-Rahman in 961, he continued to serve the latter's son and successor, al-Hakam II.

Using his influence to advance the cause of his people, Hisdai gathered learned Jewish scholars around him such as the grammarian Dunash ben Labrat (c. 920-c. 990) and the lexicographer Menahem ben Saruq (c. 910-c. 970). He also greatly encouraged the study of the scriptures and the Talmud, a rabbinical commentary on the latter. Because of his influence, Spain became a recognized center of Jewish culture, rivaling other centers such as Iraq in importance.