

Conservation not Confrontation

By Richard Mawrey

Spain spearheads a movement towards a new appreciation
of Islam's horticultural heritage.

Spain was the only country in Western Europe to undergo a prolonged period of occupation by Islamic rulers. In the century following the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632, his followers conquered a mighty empire which stretched from modern Pakistan to the Pyrenees. Most of the Iberian peninsula came under Muslim control in the early 8th century but had to spend the next seven centuries fighting against the Christian attempt at reconquest which led to the foundation of the Kingdom of Portugal (1139) and the various kingdoms eventually united as the Kingdom of Spain in the 15th century. This proved to be a losing battle, with the final Muslim state (Granada) being incorporated into Spain only in 1492.

It is therefore particularly fitting that, at a time when the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds are increasingly polarised, a Spanish organisation has taken the lead in establishing a programme of cooperation for safeguarding the rich Islamic heritage of parks and gardens.

La Fundación de Cultura Islámica (FUNCI) was created in 1982 by the Islamic academic and humanist Cherif Abderrahman Jah, who is still its President, and Julio Caro Baroja. Baroja (1914-1995), originally a Basque specialist, became an expert in North African anthropology, history and sociology and was famous for his studies of folk magic and witchcraft. Based in Madrid, FUNCI is registered as a non-governmental organisation with the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, and also as a private Cultural Foundation in Spain. FUNCI's members and partners are for the most part cultural NGOs, educational establishments and the like, and it is funded by contributions from members, cultural publications and activities, such as running courses. FUNCI concerns itself with all aspects of Islamic culture and its educational courses cover areas such as the history of the expansion of Islam, the traditions and celebrations of the Muslim world, its religious customs,

artistic expressions, and understanding of nature. Its relevance to garden heritage lies in its Med-O-Med programme (www.medomed.org) which has initiated a series of garden conservation and restoration projects throughout the Muslim world.

The impetus for the idea was the fact that Islam had a rich and varied history of parks and gardens but lacked the organisation, the expertise and, in many cases, the money to evaluate and conserve them. As the Arab Spring so vividly highlighted, most of the countries of North Africa and the Near East were run by harsh dictatorships or were riven with sectarian strife. The Arab Spring itself has done away with several of those régimes but the consequence has necessarily been a period of turmoil and uncertainty – and several of the more oppressive governments still remain in power.

Left to themselves, all these countries would give very low priority to any part of their heritage not needed for immediate political purposes. Indeed, much of value has



Above: Orchards in the Agdal Gardens, Morocco.

recently been destroyed. Thus a secondary consideration has been to build cultural bridges between the Islamic nations and Europe at a time when political bridges are being enthusiastically burned (often from both ends).

Intelligently, one of Med-O-Med's first tasks has been to try and compile an inventory of historic Islamic parks and gardens. This has not been easy, particularly with countries whose governments are hostile to the outside world. One of Med-O-Med's successes has been to persuade the Iranians to come on board, and the inventory now includes the 19th-century Shazdeh Garden in north-east Iran and the 16th-century Bagh-e-Fin garden in Kashan (traditionally the home of the Three Magi of the Christmas story), which was the subject of reports by Rory Stuart in *HGR* 22 and 23.

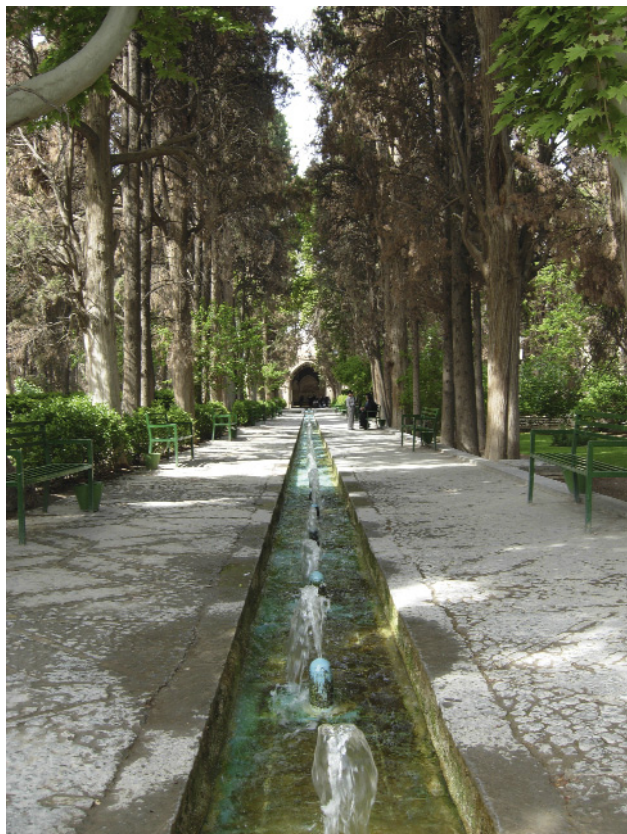
Secondly, Med-O-Med is establishing networks in the region, each dealing with a different subject. These include the Network of Botanic Gardens in the Mediterranean and Middle East, affiliated to BGCI (Botanic Gardens Conservation International). This is not simply a passive logging of existing botanic gardens; Med-O-Med has worked to have several gardens recognised as serious botanic gardens, a recent example being the Estación Biológica Torretes in Alicante, Spain, which specialises in old varieties of plants (particularly medicinal plants) and holds several Spanish national collections of species.

Med-O-Med's own network of members now includes botanic gardens in Fez and Rabat (Morocco), Jordan, Zagreb (Croatia), the Al Quds Botanic Gardens (Palestine) and the Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanik Bahçesi in Istanbul, as well as several within Spain itself.

It maintains links with ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), the Fondation Mohammed VI pour la Protection de l'Environnement in Morocco, the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (Jordan), the Syrian Environment Association, and the Bergerie National de Rambouillet in France.

Networks, however, while being useful are no substitute for work carried out on the ground. In the few years of its existence, Med-O-Med has begun to build up an impressive portfolio of projects for the restoration or conservation of threatened gardens.

In *HGR* 26 we reported the agreement signed in June 2011 for the restoration of the Agdal (or Aguedal) Gardens in Marrakech, Morocco. These enormous gardens (400 ha, 4 sq km or 1.5 sq miles) were created in the 12th century by Abd al-Mu'min (1094–1163), the first Caliph of the Almohad Empire. Originally an orchard, they were enlarged and enclosed with walls in the 19th century. Groves of citrus, fig, pomegranate and apricot trees are interspersed with pools, the largest of which is overlooked by a small pavilion, the Dar El Hana. The gardens are irrigated by a



Top: The Shazdeh gardens in Iran.

Above: The Bagh-e-Fin garden, also in Iran.

Below: Bassin in the Agdal Gardens, Morocco.



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complex system of wells, springs, ditches and underground channels bringing water from the High Atlas mountains.

What has happened since the agreement was signed? Med-O-Med set up a small team of experts headed by Dr Julio Navarro of the Arabic Studies School in Granada, and in January 2012 the group carried out a preliminary archaeological investigation of the site and compiled a heritage inventory. The experts said they were astonished at the site's 'richness and complexity', which had 'exceeded expectations'. The results of the first phase of investigation were presented at a conference in Granada in March 2013. As a result of this very positive report the team was expanded and a second phase of archaeological investigation set in train. A multi-disciplinary working team has been formed mainly of Spanish and Moroccan experts, the landscape architects being headed by Carmen Añon, the doyenne of Spanish garden conservators.

The Agdal project is likely to take several years but it has got off to a good start and there is every hope that, as long as Morocco remains one of the more stable countries in the region, it will progress to an actual restoration of these dramatic and important gardens.

This is not, however, FUNCI's first venture in Morocco. Starting in 2009, Med-O-Med created an Andalusian garden for botanical and pleasure purposes in a site forming part of

the Jardin d'Essais Botaniques in Rabat, the first public garden in that city, created by the French designer Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier just before the Great War. The project also restored the early 20th-century Moorish pavilion near the site. The garden was formally opened by King Mohammed VI on 17 June 2013.

This was followed by a project in Jerusalem where FUNCI, as part of the Med-O-Med campaign, is cooperating with the Al Quds University in the creation of a botanic garden, the focal point of which will be another Andalusian Garden which will recreate the collections, philosophy, structures and traditional watering systems of the late-mediaeval period of Islamic rule in Spain. This garden will also focus on preserving Mediterranean, particularly Palestinian, flora. A seed bank, a herbarium and a botanic library specialising in the history of science in al-Andalus (from which we derive the modern Andalusia), are all planned.

In both these gardens there is an emphasis on the use of water as a major garden element that is crucial to the concept of the Islamic garden.

Med-O-Med also encourages conservation of the environment, particularly the urban environment. In 2011 it embarked on a project in the town of Doueir in southern Lebanon in collaboration with the town council, aimed at

Below: Doueir in Lebanon.





Above: The new Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseilles.

Right: The mediaeval monks' garden in the Latomia Quarries in Sicily.

encouraging its citizens, particularly the young, to improve their environment by planting trees and by adopting an ecological attitude to waste and litter. The project secured funding from the European Union and has attracted support from a number of environmental NGOs in Lebanon.

Med-O-Med is not exclusively concerned with Islamic gardens and participated in the recent Gardmed project (2007-2013), the network of Mediterranean gardens. This was a joint Italian and Maltese project to conserve 18 historic parks and gardens in Italy and Malta, some of them botanic gardens. These included the gardens created by mediaeval Capuchin monks in the infamous stone quarries, the Latomia, where the 5th-century BC tyrants of Syracuse in Sicily used to put their prisoners to forced labour.

The Med-O-Med project is very much in line with the upsurge in interest in the Mediterranean as a cultural area. On 7 June 2013 the French Government opened a magnificent new museum, Le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, in Marseilles, traditionally France's main port of embarkation for its North African Empire (another link with the Islamic world) as part of the city's year as European Cultural Capital.

It is early days yet. Med-O-Med has only been up and running for less than six years (though FUNCI itself is now 30 years old) and, clearly, funds for initiatives are not



unlimited. It is heartening that both FUNCI and Med-O-Med have continued not simply to exist but to expand their activities at a time when Spain is undergoing a horrendous financial and economic crisis. It proves that if the will exists to preserve the world's cultural heritage, the means can be found, however unfavourable the financial climate. ❁

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