"Emerging before us... is a palm tree, far, in this Western land, from the home of palm trees; I said: Like me is it in my expatriation and my yearning...

--attributed to ‘Abd al-Rahman I
(Founder of the Umayyad Amirate in Andalusia, 756-788)

Sometime in the late 9th/ early 10th century, a practice began in the Middle East of illustrating geographical texts with maps. The result was the so-called "Atlas of Islam," which contained 21 images: one of the world and twenty regional. Prominent among these, is a map know as the "Surat al-Maghrib," "Picture of the West"--ie. North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

One is struck immediately by the contrast between the forms: the perpendicular and phallic North African coast vs. the circular and breast-like Iberian peninsula with an oddly-shaped Mediterranean intervening. The image appears asymmetric and unbalanced as the eye is drawn to a multitude of conflicting central points: Cordoba, Sijilmasa, and the island of Sicily, vie with each other for attention. Taken together they form an obtuse triangle of gaze laid upon the basic template of the image, amidst an oppositional balance of mountains and other site markers.

This is an image of conflict and confusion; of love and hate; of male vs. female; of desire vs rejection. It is by far the most conflicted and therefore one of the most interesting images in the pack of Muslim maps. Whereas all the other images (especially those of the Mediterranean as a whole) display a veneer of harmony and balance, this one is--by deliberate design--conflicted. It is about these conflicts inlaid within the images of the Maghrib that I speak. The intention
being to go beyond the "carto-" on the surface to the graphic behind, which conceals within it a whole host of subliminal messages.