

The tulip entered Europe through al-Andalus five centuries before believed

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The tulip was described as a 'Macedonian onion with a cube-shaped flower'.
Photo: Worf Katagh/SINC

A new study carried out at the University of Cordoba and the School of Arabic Studies provides information on the arrival of the flower to Europe. Contrary to what was thought up until now, the first bulbs could have arrived to Holland, where today the tulip is the country symbol, through 11th century al-Andalus, five centuries before what was believed.

Researchers attempted to reconstruct the diversity of the [flora](#) present in the medieval period in al-Andalus (territory which today would be divided between Andalusia, Castilla la Mancha and areas of eastern Spain and southern Portugal) through the study of all known texts by

Andalusian agronomists. This was when they discovered what appeared to be, for Esteban Hernández Bermejo and Expiración García, directors of research and researchers at the University of Cordoba and the School of Arabic Studies (Superior Council of Scientific Research), “the first historic reference to tulips”.

In the Umda (Umdat al-tabib), a botanical work attributed to Abu I-Jayr and dated from between the 11th and 12th centuries, the ornamental use of this flower in the Iberian Peninsula's territories under Islamic domain is indicated. It is probable that a known 11th century agronomist from Toledo, Ibn Bassal (“the onion-vendor's son”) played a protagonist role in the introduction and the first cultivation of the tulip in Iberian territory.

The study, brought to light by the magazine Economic Botany, a publication promoted by the New York Botanical Garden, overthrows the traditionally accepted version that the tulip arrived to Holland from the Ottoman Empire, passing through central [Europe](#).

According to the new theory, the ornamental origin of the flower is in Byzantium, and arrived to Europe by means of the Seljuq Turks, through what today is Andalusia. “We cannot be categorical with this, but we defend the proposed hypothesis and we give fairly solid arguments,” explains Hernández Bermejo to SINC.

The groups directed by Hernández Bermejo and García Sánchez have spent more than 20 years “studying the texts and contributions of Andalusian agronomists and botanists to agriculture, the world of ornamental plants and medicinal plants, and the knowledge of our wild flora”.

“The existence of representations of tulips in the Temples of Konya (Turkey) which date from the 11th century, and the mention of al-Andalus in the Umda, point towards the introduction of tulips into the

European ornamental world some 500 years before the references known up until today, " indicates Hernández Bermejo to SINC. Previously, their expansion into Holland was situated at the end of the 16th century.

The tulip is the national flower in Iran and Turkey, in addition to the Netherlands, where its cultivation has been traditionally important for more than four centuries. But already by the 13th century, Turkish poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi defined the tulip as, "the most sad smile of them all".

Up until today, numerous theories have refuted the tulip's arrival to Europe from the Ottoman Empire by way of the Hapsburg Empire until reaching Holland. One of the more popular indicates that Ogier Ghislain of Busbecq, the ambassador of Ferdinand of Hapsburg I in Suleymán's court, was the first to alert the Western world as to the beauty of these bulbs, "which the Turks know as tulips", in 1554.

However, and in spite of the fact that Abu I-Jayr's agricultural document analyzed by Hernández Bermejo and García Sánchez precedes Busbecq's testimonies by various centuries, the tulip's Andalusian route has not been proven at this time. For the researchers, one of the reasons for this is that, "despite the feverish fad known as 'tulip mania' which began in Holland in the 17th century; no testimony was gathered in our country".

The authors of the study examined the book *Agricultura de Jardines* (Agriculture of Gardens) without finding a trace of tulips, a manual written in 1604 by Gregorio de los Ríos, an expert gardener who Philip II later made Chaplain of the Casa de Campo. The monarch himself, affirm Hernández and García in their study, "was a connoisseur of botany and wrote about ornamental bulbs in the letters to his daughters, mentioning narcissuses, but not tulips".

The value of agricultural documents

The Umda, by Abu I-Jayr, is the most important contribution to the knowledge of wild flora in al-Andalus and the western Mediterranean, but it is not the only testimony gathered by the study to reinforce this new model of the history of tulips.

One century later, Ibn al-‘Awwam wrote his Kitab al-Filaba, one of the few Andalusian agricultural documents still conserved in its totality. The value of this encyclopedia on rural economy includes a multitude of citations from Andalusian and Oriental texts, which justifies its great historical and testimonial value.

About tulips, Ibn al-‘Awwam (who denominated the flower as a “Macedonian onion”) says the following: “It is a type of yellow narcissus and comes from Macedonia, province of Alexandria. Its flower is yellow inside and pink outside, shaped like a cube. Another beautiful and aromatic flower is found in its interior. It grows in moist and mountainous places and is cultivated like the yellow narcissus”.

At the beginning, the description of this “Macedonian onion with a cube-shaped flower” was confusing and did not allow scientists to identify it as the tulip. It was upon collating this text with the Umda -especially the morphological descriptions of the flower, its leaves, its roots and its flowering period- when the team realized that they were before the first historical evidence of the presence of tulips in Europe.

Now, the research team is about to complete, along with scientists such as Julia Carabaza from the University of Seville, a complete work on Andalusian Agricultural Flora.

More information: Hernández Bermejo, Jacinto Esteban; García Sánchez, Expiración. “Tulips: An Ornamental Crop in the Andalusian

Middle Ages”. *Economic Botany* 63(1), 60-66, 2009.

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