



# Doctor, Philosopher, Renaissance Man

A man can be adopted by a civilization other than his own and can there become a symbol of something very different from that which he signifies to his own civilization. This was the case with **Abu 'I-Walid Muhammad ibn Rushd**, who came to be known to the West as **Averroës**. And just as the medieval Arab world and the medieval European world knew him by two names, so did they value two different aspects of his scholarship: In the Arab world, he is remembered primarily as a medical pioneer, while the West esteemed his philosophy.

WRITTEN BY CAROLINE STONE



# Ibn Rushd

was born in Córdoba, in southern Spain, in 1126. His family was one of those dynasties with a multigenerational tradition of learning and service to the state that were so much a part of the Arabic-speaking world. The Crusades had begun, and when Ibn Rushd was young, Jerusalem was a Crusader state.

Al-Andalus—as Muslim Spain was called—was splintered into numerous petty principalities and local kingdoms, independent but vulnerable, known as the “*taifa* kingdoms” (from the Arabic *ta’ifah*, meaning “party” or “faction”). Weak as they were, many of them were nonetheless admirable cradles of learning and the arts, as each ruler tried to outdo the others in the magnificence and prestige of his court and the caliber of the scholars he could attract to it. From the north, however, the newly unified Christians had embarked on the reconquest of Spain from the Muslims that would finally conclude in 1492. The *taifa* kings urged two successive North African dynasties to support the Muslims of Spain against the resurgent Christians. The resulting northward influx of people and puritanical ideas—secular learning, science and music were increasingly viewed with suspicion—along with the consequent social upheavals and greatly increased contacts with Morocco would all be of consequence to Ibn Rushd.

The Christian-Muslim rivalry also took peaceful forms, symbolized by the impressive construction activity of this time. The great Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain, the third most important pilgrimage site in the Christian world, was completed in the year that Ibn Rushd was born. During his middle years, working in Marrakech, he must have watched the construction of that



Renaissance paintings, in which the location of figures is often symbolic, offer clues to the extent of Ibn Rushd’s fame in the West. In this detail (left) from Andrea di Bonaiuto’s 14th-century “Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas,” a pensive Ibn Rushd is the central figure, the bridge between “the ancients” of Greece and the European Renaissance. Previous spread: A statue of Ibn Rushd stands near the Puerta de Almodóvar in Córdoba’s old city wall. His likeness is conjectural, for no portrait of him is known to have been made. Insets: An Arabic edition of Ibn Rushd’s *Talkhis Kitab Aristutalis fi al-Shi’r* (*Epitome of the Poetics of Aristotle*), edited by Dr. Muhammad Salim Salim and published in Cairo in 1971, and a Latin edition of Ibn Rushd’s commentaries on Aristotle, published in 1562 in Venice.

culture made of the other’s works, and the rising awareness that sciences, such as mathematics, medicine or astronomy, could be a terrain where exciting and productive work could be done and differences of faith at least briefly forgotten. This attitude was very different from the confident intellectual curiosity of ninth-century Baghdad that had triggered the first wave of translations from the classics into Arabic, preserving many of them in the only form we have today. Those efforts established the roots, while the works of al-Andalus were fundamentally new creations, new intellectual ventures. They were the shoots, and their ultimate blossoming would be the time we call the Renaissance.

Despite its fractious politics, the 12th century was also a time when thoughtful men of different faiths, searching for intellectual common ground, found the sciences a fruitful area of endeavor.

city’s most famous mosque, the Kutubiyyah, or Booksellers’ Mosque. As an old man in Seville, he would have witnessed, rising from its foundations, the Giralda, still the symbol of the city to this day. During his lifetime, two of the three cities he loved best, and to which he was most closely linked, were building their greatest monuments.

Although these buildings physically proclaimed the differences between the faiths, the intellectual activities of these years often took a far less competitive direction. This was a time when thoughtful men were searching for areas of common ground where they might escape destructive fanaticism from either side. Hence the many translations that each



The political disturbances of Ibn Rushd's years would also lead to the dispersal across Europe of learned men from southern Spain who, as they moved, scattered new ideas, new techniques and new books like seeds. These would be nurtured especially in the new, relatively secular institutions of learning called "universities" that had been founded at Bologna, Oxford and Salerno. There students were taught the works of the great scholars—many of them Muslims—together with the Greek learning at their roots. Among those scholars, Ibn Rushd was one of the most admired, perceived by the West as a bridge between two faiths and between past and present. The ultimate fruitfulness of the many individual hardships that must have informed this intellectual diaspora can perhaps be compared to the extraordinary flourishing of American science in the wake of the disruptions of World War II. Certainly this period of dissemination and cultural cross-fertilization definitively shifted the balance of intellectual initiative from south to north.

A good deal is known of Ibn Rushd's family background, but very little about his own life or upbringing. His grandfather was a well-known jurist of the Maliki school of Islamic law. One of the most prestigious of the positions he held was that of *qadi*, or chief justice, of Córdoba. Ibn Rushd was appointed to the same position in 1180 and earlier served as *qadi* of Seville in 1169. These were appointments of great importance, for the *qadi* held a three-fold responsibility: he was the religious authority, the representative of the ruler and the upholder of civic order. That Ibn Rushd held the position in not one but two cities indicates the respect in which he was held and testifies to the soundness of his legal training. But he moved on: In addition to his service in law, Ibn Rushd studied medicine, and it is for this aspect of his learning and writing that he was most esteemed in the Islamic world.

In 1148, the North African Almohad dynasty began its—initially welcomed—takeover of al-Andalus. The Almohad capital was at Marrakech, in today's Morocco, a city founded only some 80 years earlier and which the Almohad ruler was anxious to make a center of the arts and scholarship. To this end, he encouraged education,

## The Life and Times of Ibn Rushd

- 1125** **1126 Ibn Rushd born in Córdoba;** Adelard of Bath translates al-Khwarizmi's ninth-century *Astronomical Tables*.
- 1137 Geoffrey of Monmouth writes *History of the Kings of Britain*, a source for King Arthur, Merlin, Lear, Cymbeline, etc.
- 1140 St. Gotthard Pass opens as a commercial route through the Alps.
- 1141 Peter of Toledo translates al-Kindi's *Risalah*, an account of Islam.
- 1135** 1143 Robert of Chester and Hermann the Dalmatian translate the Qur'an into Latin.
- 1144 Robert of Chester translates Jabir ibn Hayyan's ninth-century work on alchemy; the following year he translates al-Khwarizmi's *Algebra*, written in 850.
- 1145 Construction of Friday Mosque in Isfahan begins.
- 1146 St. Bernard proclaims the Second Crusade.
- 1145** 1147 Construction of Kutubiyyah Mosque in Marrakech begins.
- 1148 Almohads enter al-Andalus; Second Crusade ends.
- 1150 Construction of cathedrals in Angers, Le Mans, Lisbon, Pécs and Stavanger begins.
- 1153 Ibn Rushd travels to Marrakech and begins work on astronomy.**
- 1155** 1154 Al-Idrisi's planisphere and *Roger's Book*, written for Roger II of Sicily, completed.
- 1157 Munich founded; University of Bologna founded.
- 1162 Ibn Rushd completes Compendium of Medical Knowledge.**
- 1163 Construction of Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris begins.
- 1168 Toltec Empire destroyed by Aztecs and others.
- 1165** **1169 Ibn Rushd appointed qadi in Seville.**
- 1170 Thomas à Becket murdered in Canterbury Cathedral.
- 1170–1175 Ibn Rushd writes major works on Aristotle.**
- 1172 Construction of Great Mosque begins in Seville.
- 1173–1174 Saladin conquers Damascus.
- 1175** **1178 Ibn Rushd in Marrakech writes On the Nature of the Universe.**
- 1179 Hildegard of Bingen completes *Physica*.
- 1180 Ibn Rushd appointed qadi in Córdoba.**
- 1181 St. Francis of Assisi born.
- 1184 Ibn Rushd completes Incoherence of the Incoherent Philosophy of al-Ghazali;** construction of Giralda begins in Seville.
- 1185** 1185 Oxford University founded.
- 1187 Saladin conquers Jerusalem; death of Gerard of Cremona, who with others translated more than 70 Greek and Arabic scientific works into Latin.
- 1188 Portico de la Gloria completed at Santiago de Compostela; Nizami finishes Persian epic *Layla and Majnun*.
- 1189 Third Crusade proclaimed.
- 1195** **1190 Ibn Rushd completes his commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics and On the Soul.**
- 1191 Ibn Rushd finishes Commentary on Plato's Republic.**
- 1193 Richard the Lionhearted defeats Saladin.
- 1195–1197 Almohad authorities banish Ibn Rushd, burn his books.**
- 1205** **1198 Ibn Rushd dies in Marrakech.**



and Marrakech, like Córdoba, was already famous for its bookshops and libraries when Ibn Rushd traveled there in 1153. He received his first official appointment as inspector of schools there.

Ibn Rushd was to produce more than 100 books and treatises in his lifetime, and it was in Marrakech that he began his first philosophical work, sometime before 1159. This

was quickly followed by his substantial *Compendium of Philosophy* (*Kitab al-Jawami' al-Sighar fil-Falsafa*) with its sections on physics, heaven and earth, generation and corruption, meteorology and metaphysics—some of the main interests that would occupy him the rest of his life.

It has been suggested among scholars that Ibn Rushd's work may have been inspired by the desire to prove that man is rational and can learn, that nature is intelligible and its interpretation a legitimate task of man, and that ultimately science and divine revelation need not be at odds. Part of this philosophy is derived from the Greeks, especially from Plato and Aristotle, whom Ibn Rushd admired and on whose works he wrote numerous commentaries and paraphrases—books that to a large extent won him the respect he enjoyed in the West, where the struggle to reconcile science and faith still goes on.

The other major work which he produced during these years at Marrakech was the first draft of his *Compendium of Medical Knowledge* (*Kitab al-Kulliyat fil-Tibb*). Written

at the request of the sultan, it is divided into seven books: anatomy, health, disease, symptoms, food and medicines, preservation of health and treatment of illness. Excellently arranged, though not on the whole the fruit of original research, this compilation brought together the work of the best physicians from both the classical Greek and the Islamic traditions,

Testament to the tri-cultural *convivencia* of al-Andalus, Ibn Rushd's works survive in Arabic, Latin and Hebrew. This 17th-century Arabic *naskh* manuscript (left) is a copy of Ibn Rushd's commentary on a medical text written by the 11th-century physician and theologian Ibn Sina.

Opposite: In his 1510–1512 fresco “The School of Athens,” Italian painter Raphael included Ibn Rushd at the lower left foreground, wearing a turban, looking over the shoulder of a seated, bearded Pythagoras. At the center of the painting, Aristotle and Plato walk together. Ibn Rushd's placement may be an understatement, for his commentaries on both Aristotle and Plato were philosophical works in their own right, and instrumental in the western rediscovery of Greek thought.

and became a standard text for generations of physicians in both East and West. As Averroës, Ibn Rushd appears, along with many of his main sources, in the list of authorities used by Chaucer's doctor in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*—a measure of the extent to which he had become a household word in England 200 years later:

Well knew he the old Esculapius  
And Dioscorides and also Rusus,  
Old Hippocras, Hali and Galen  
Serapion, Rasis and Avicen,  
Averrois, Damascene and Constantine,  
Bernard and Gatesden and Gilbertine.

It is to the *Kulliyat* and other medical works that Ibn Rushd owes his fame in the East today, where he is remembered as a great doctor. His philosophical works, which fascinated and influenced the West, were of relatively little interest to the Muslim world outside Al-Andalus. In a way this is surprising, for Islam too has been concerned since its beginning with the vision of a perfect society, albeit one based on the *shar'iah*, or holy law, as revealed in the Qur'an. The Islamic rejection of Ibn Rushd as a philosopher is no doubt partly because of the criticism that he subordinated religion to philosophy, suggesting that scientific research could teach people more than the revelations of faith—a criticism also leveled at him by the Catholic church in the West.

The *Kulliyat*, however, was a great success for Ibn Rushd. (Indeed, versions of it were still appearing on medical school

reading lists around Europe as recently as 100 years ago.) In 1168, his teacher Ibn Tufayl, a scholar of Aristotle and follower of Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna), introduced Ibn Rushd to the new Almohad ruler, Abu Ya'qub Yusuf. The following year, Yusuf appointed Ibn Rushd *qadi* of Seville, and Ibn Rushd returned to al-Andalus.

His years in Seville were apparently happy and productive. He wrote numerous works on

### The Philosopher at Table

As is usual in the Muslim world, Ibn Rushd tells us nothing of his private life. From his medical writings, however, a certain amount can be learned of the everyday life of al-Andalus and perhaps even of his own personal tastes. He liked barley water and rice pudding. He considered figs and grapes the best of fruit, and he had a fondness for eggplant, especially when fried in olive oil with mincemeat—a kind of moussaka, perhaps?

In the section of the *Kulliyat* that deals with diet, he wrote the following.

When [oil] comes from ripe, healthy olives and its properties have not been tampered with artificially, it can be assimilated perfectly by the human body. Food seasoned with olive oil is nutritious, provided the oil is fresh and not rancid. Generally speaking, all olive oil is excellent for people and for that reason in our country [al-Andalus] it is the only medium needed for cooking meat, given that the best way of preparing it is what we call braising. This is how it is done: Take oil and pour it in a cooking pot. Place the meat in it and then add hot water, a little at a time, simmering it without letting it boil.

# Ibn Rushd the Jurist

WRITTEN BY GREG NOAKES

For centuries, Ibn Rushd has been known to Muslim scholars in northwestern Africa primarily for his writings on *fiqh*, or jurisprudence. There are four “schools” of law, or systems of legal thought, in Sunni Islam, and the western part of the Muslim heartland was (and still is) dominated by the Maliki *madhhab*, or school. Ibn Rushd ranks among the most important Maliki scholars.

Ibn Rushd devoted himself to a broad continuum of intellectual subjects, as did many of his contemporaries: The workings of the human body, the movement of the stars, the relationship of reason to religion, and the logic of the law were all suitable subjects of inquiry for a Muslim man of letters. Ibn Rushd refers frequently to the Qur’an and the *hadith*—the traditions, or reports of the Prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds—in his works on natural science, while echoes of his philosophical works can be found in his legal writings.

Given his family history, it was perhaps inevitable that much of Ibn Rushd’s life would be devoted to the law. His grandfather is also a major figure in Maliki thought; indeed, many a careless reader has confused the two, since both had the same names, both served as *qadi*, or judge, in Cordoba, and one died the year the other was born. Ibn Rushd’s father was also a judge, and since Ibn Rushd himself heard cases in Seville and Cordoba, jurisprudence was not just an academic matter, but a family *métier*.

By his own account, Ibn Rushd took 20 years to produce *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid*, his primary work of *fiqh*. The book is intended not for the layman, but for Ibn Rushd’s learned peers. Eschewing partisan polemic, Ibn Rushd goes beyond quoting the Maliki position on various legal questions. Instead, he tackles each issue by first describing the areas of agreement among the *madhhabs*, then outlining the points disputed by the various scholars, and finally discussing the reasons for these differences. What emerges is a detailed exposition of the principles of Islamic law, their use in each school of jurisprudence, and their practical application in the daily lives of Muslims.

Ibn Rushd demonstrates that legal differences result from each school’s distinctive intellectual process. Though they differ in other respects, the Shafi’i and Hanbali *madhhabs* both base their rulings squarely on the *hadith*, even if this means relying on an isolated, uncorroborated report of the Prophet’s behavior. In such cases the Hanafis uphold *istihsan*, or the preference for whatever solution is judged most appropriate to the situation. The Malikis refer to the consensus of the early Muslim community in Madinah, arguing that Muslims who had observed the Prophet Muhammad first-hand would not deviate from his example. *Bidayat al-Mujtahid* also makes frequent reference to the Dhahiri school, which accepted only the most literal interpretation of the Qur’an and *hadith*. This *madhhab* had a

strong presence in al-Andalus, but the school’s rigidity ultimately led to its extinction.

The title *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid* holds a clue to Ibn Rushd’s ultimate purpose. A literal translation might be *The Beginning of the Independent Jurist and the End of the Mere Adherent to Precedent*. A *mujtahid* is one who undertakes *ijtihad*, defined by *fiqh* scholar Taha Jabir al-Alwani as “striving and self-exertion; independent reasoning; [or] analytical thought. *Ijtihad* may involve the interpretation of the source materials, inference of rules from them, or giving a legal verdict or decision on any issue on which there is no specific guidance in the Qur’an and the *sunnah*,” the example of the Prophet. In addition to knowledge of the Qur’an and *hadith* and fluency in Arabic, a *mujtahid* must possess a thorough understanding of the principles of Islamic law and their application—which is exactly what Ibn Rushd seeks to provide in his text.

Arguing in favor of *ijtihad* and independent reason-



ing, Ibn Rushd uses a simple analogy. Most jurists, he writes, believe that “the one who has memorized the most opinions has the greatest legal acumen. Their view is like one who thinks a cobbler is he who possesses a large number of shoes, rather than one who has the ability to make shoes. It is obvious that even someone who has a large number of shoes will one day be visited by someone he cannot fit. This person will then go to a cobbler who can make shoes that suit his feet.”

Despite his enemies’ charges to the contrary, Ibn Rushd did not attempt to subvert religion using philosophy, but rather used analytical methods to better understand the message and tenets of Islam. Far from being irreconcilable opposites, Ibn Rushd saw revelation and reason as complementary, God-given gifts to mankind. 🌐

**Greg Noakes**, an American Muslim, is a staff writer for Saudi Aramco.

natural science and philosophy there, many of which—though they are paraphrases or commentaries on classical texts—need to be understood not as derivative but as truly original works. They were perceptive “updates” of some of the greatest thinkers of the classical world, men who provide models for how we think about things and study them even today. It is fascinating to compare Ibn Rushd’s versions with the originals.

Ibn Rushd’s great importance to western thought lies in his making available many of the philosophical works of ancient Greece, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, but his most notable work is his commentary on Plato’s *Republic*. It was this book, with its idea that society is perfectible and its discussion of how society can and should be changed, that worried some secular rulers no less than the Muslim *‘ulama* and the Catholic theologians, all of whom were inclined to see the order of the world as preordained and immutable. The Almohad rulers of al-Andalus, however, were more relaxed than the earlier Almoravid dynasty, and they allowed discussion of these questions—up to the limit of challenging their authority. It was thus largely Ibn Rushd’s texts that inspired the thinkers of the Renaissance, such as Tomaso Campanella and Sir Thomas More, to produce their theories of utopia, or the

Seville’s Giralda tower stands out in this cityscape, engraved in 1572. The Giralda was dedicated as the minaret of one of the world’s largest mosques in 1176, when Ibn Rushd was living in the city.

## The Scientist Observes

*In one of his works on natural history, Ibn Rushd describes an earthquake in Córdoba.*

Aristotle relates that in a certain country, on one of the Liparian Islands, there was a mountain which did not cease growing until a great wind came out of it, bringing a vast quantity of ash, and all the earth was burnt. Anyone who was present in Córdoba at the time of the earthquake, which took place about the year 566 [AD 1170–1171], was warned of what was happening by the great rumbling and thundering. I was not in Córdoba then, but when I went, I heard the noises which preceded the earthquake. The people noticed that the noise came from the west and the quake generated a strong wind, which also came from the west. These violent quakes continued in Córdoba for about a year and did not die away completely until some three years had passed. The first quake killed many people when their houses collapsed. They say that near Córdoba the earth opened up at a place called Andújar and gave forth something similar to ashes and sand. He that saw it was convinced of the truth. The earthquake was generally felt all over the western part of the peninsula, but it was strongest in Córdoba and the surrounding area. To the east of Córdoba it was more violent than in the city itself; whereas in the west it was weaker.

—*Kitab al-Atar al-‘Ulwiya*, page 64

ideal state. The notion that this ideal is something definable, and that it can be attained through human endeavor and wise leadership—rather than only as a matter of God’s grace or mere good luck—has inspired reformers and socially conscious governments to the present day. Though his name—once a household word—is barely known in the West today, and though his works are now largely unread, the impact of this man’s thought remains immeasurable.

In 1171, at age 45, Ibn Rushd returned to Córdoba. There, for the rest of his life, he maintained his main residence and his library. His visits to Seville were frequent and long, and perhaps he was present when, five years later, the Great Mosque, designed to rival that of Córdoba in size and splendor, was inaugurated. He would have enjoyed its nearby Patio of the Oranges, where he would have meditated and debated with his friends.

Those were productive years for him. The ongoing political tensions caused by the Almohad conquest of Al-Andalus and the struggles with the Christians to the north seem not to have much affected the relative peace and prosperity of Seville and Córdoba, and Ibn Rushd produced a stream of works on a wide range of subjects, from his paraphrase of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Kitab al-Akhlaq*), which has not survived intact, to his discussion of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (from the *Talkhis Kitab al-Shi’r*), as well as his *Supplement to Questions on Ancient Science* (*Damima li-Mas’alat al-Ilm al-Qadim*) and further medical treatises. His work on



Right: In Marrakech, where Ibn Rushd wrote some of his most important books, the Almohad ruler raised the Kutubiyyah, or Booksellers', Mosque during Ibn Rushd's lifetime to promote the city's reputation as a center of learning that might rival Córdoba. Far right: The magnificent Giralda tower is all that remains of the city's central mosque, and it is the symbol of Seville to this day. It rises over the walled Patio of the Oranges, where Ibn Rushd likely spent hours in relaxation and conversation.

Writing a commentary on a classical text allowed a medieval scholar to both present the classic anew and propound his own original ideas.

Ptolemy's *Almagest* may also belong to this period.

After another visit to Marrakech, Ibn Rushd was appointed *qadi* of Córdoba in 1180 and personal physician to Sultan Abu Ya'qub Yusuf at the Almohad's new capital in Seville. Between the demands of these two appointments, he found time to write one of his most famous works, his parry of al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, titled *Incoherence of the Incoherent Philosophy of al-Ghazali* (*Tahafut al-Tahafut al-Falasifa lil-Ghazali*).

It was a time of expansion and optimism in the Muslim world. Saladin retook Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187; in Spain, a Christian coalition was routed at Alarcos eight years later. Ibn Rushd's fame was spreading into the eastern Islamic world, and by 1190 his books were available and under discussion in Cairo.

Four years later, he wrote one of his most controversial works, the paraphrase of Plato's *Republic*. While the original implies criticism of the existing social order and studies ways to perfect it, Ibn Rushd's version courageously applied Plato's theories to Ibn Rushd's own times, citing chapter and verse of where the political system had failed. He pointed out, for example, that, strictly speaking, the government of Córdoba should have been considered a tyranny from 1145 onward—that is, since the end of Almoravid rule and the accession of the current Almohad dynasty, whose head was his patron. The following year, complaints were made against Ibn Rushd on various counts. He was briefly exiled, and the authorities burned his books. They forbade him to write on philosophy, politics or religion. It is probably fair to assume that the main reasons for his falling into disfavor were his defense of rationalism and the outspokenness of his social criticism. Perhaps too many people agreed with him.


This period of disfavor, however, did not last long. The ban against him was repealed, but as far as is known, he wrote no

more, though his son began to publish about this time. The questions of how he was inspired to begin his life's work and where he found his texts, as well as many of the most basic details of his personal world, remain largely unknown.

Ibn Rushd died at Marrakech on December 11, 1198. Three months later his body was returned, as he had wished, to rest in his beloved Córdoba. His rival, the mystic Ibn al-Arabi, describes the funeral: "When the coffin with his body was laid upon the bier, they put his works on the opposite side to serve as a counterweight. I was standing there...and I said to myself, 'On one side the master and on the other his works. But, tell me, were his desires at last fulfilled?'" 🌐



**Caroline Stone** divides her time between Cambridge and Seville. She is working on a Gulf-based project to map pre-modern cultural contacts and build a website to teach world history. She has recently returned from Uzbekistan and is also working with Paul Lunde on translations of the Arab sources about the Vikings and peoples of the North and of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's description of Egypt.

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 [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1190Averroës.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1190Averroës.html)

 **Averroës on Plato's *Republic***, Ralph Lerner. 1974, Cornell University Press, 0-8014-9145-2, o.p.

**Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook**, Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, eds. 1972, Cornell University Press, 0-8014-9139-8, \$21.50 pb.

