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N E W Y O R K

EUROPE AND THE WORLD OF ISLAM:  
STANDING IN EACH OTHER'S  
SHADOW

Europe and the Islamic world are two vastly grown trees planted close together whose branches have constantly intertwined throughout their growing history. During this process their branches got so intermingled that it became impossible to tell which branch is casting a shadow on which.

With these shadows I do not mean the usual ones that are well known to people who study the transmission of Arabic scientific and philosophical material from the Islamic world to Europe during the Middle Ages, such as the shadow of the Arabic numerals, the mathematical and astronomical concepts, such as Algebra and the like, nor do I mean the reversed shadows of the European presence in the Islamic world during the Crusades and thereafter, nor do I mean the recently discovered connections between the Islamic world and Renaissance Europe, about which I said something at the last Variantology meeting [*Variantology* 4]. What I am referring to here are the more subtle shadows that were cast by one civilisation on the other. The shadows in question are the ones whose edges are very difficult to define; they have become part of the fabric of the civilisation upon which they were cast, and are almost indistinguishable from the rest of the fabric.

As I have limited time and space here to explore these mutual intermixtures of shadows, I will restrict myself to a few examples as case studies and mostly indicating the much richer contacts that are yet to be explored. What better place to start than with an Arabic astronomical text, still kept at the Vatican Library — Arabo 319 — in which we clearly see the intermarriage of the two cultures on the same page (Fig. 1a).