In the great vaulted chamber of the library of El Escorial monastery, a man is sitting at a desk, his quill pen poised in his hand. The strong, elegant strokes of the Arabic script he has been writing show that he is a man of erudition, an unusual man, for few can write Arabic in Spain in 1573. He is not in the first flush of youth, as his greying hair and the crow’s feet round his eyes reveal. But his face bears more than the traces of middle age. The expression in his eyes conveys an impression of someone who has borne long suffering, with the merest trace of fear mixed in. He puts down his pen, stretches his back and gets up from the desk stiffly, as if he has spent long hours at his work. The light is beginning to fade outside, and he asks the attendant to light the candles, which cast uneven shadows into the recesses of the magnificent ceiling, brightly painted with Italian frescoes. He pauses to glance up and around at the spectacle, and shakes his head as if in amazement to find himself in such glorious surroundings. For he has seen such terrible things, such unspeakable evil, that he can hardly believe his luck now, seated in luxury in the monarch’s buildings, and in the employment of King Philip II himself. The man’s name is Alonso del Castillo.¹

Alonso’s work in the El Escorial library marks one of the high points of a life which had humble beginnings. He must have been born in Granada at the end of the 1520s, the son of a Morisco, very probably Hernando del Castillo el Acahal,² a chemist in the parish of San Nicolás. He was married, with a daughter, and had a brother, García, who lived in Jerez and himself had a son called Alonso del Castillo, whose profession was to mend fractures and straighten bones. The environment in which Alonso grew up was familiar to many Moriscos and converted Jews who worked in the field of healing medicine, a field in which medicine and magic were closely linked. Healers hung amulets or magic
symbols round the necks of patients, or sewed them into their clothing to ward off illness. Many of these were inscribed with words written in Hebrew or Arabic, in apparently archaic lettering, often strange and arcane, a number of which were preserved in the records of the Inquisition, and which bear a remarkable similarity to the figures and signs that appear on the Sacro Monte texts. It seems very likely that the young Alonso would have been familiar with these forms of healing and with such amulets, since both his father and nephew were involved with curing the sick, and he was attracted to the profession himself. But popular methods do not seem to have cut the mustard for him, because around 1540, when he would have been about 20, he went to the University of Granada to study medicine, and was eventually awarded his degree, referring to himself in written documents as ‘licenciado’ [graduate].

One of the most important deeds of King Charles V of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor, was to found the University of Granada in 1531 with the stated aim of assimilating the newly converted Moriscos into Christian culture and life, and in this respect the new university provided an excellent opportunity for Alonso. Medicine was such a popular profession among Moriscos because it allowed access to the privileged classes and to honours otherwise unattainable without being subject to the strictures of the limpieza de sangre [racial purity] statutes. It was also a profession that could be practised anywhere in the Peninsula as well as abroad, an aspect which did not escape the attention of a community of people who feared some kind of exile from Granada itself.

Alonso del Castillo practised as a physician throughout his life. We know this and many other details of his second profession of translator from his *Cartulario* [Cartulary], a record of the Spanish translations of letters he wrote in Arabic, or translated from Arabic during the Alpujarras war, and from his *Diario* [Diary], also a record of his activities as a translator of letters from the Moroccan Chancery. In these documents he shows a direct knowledge of medical works by Arab authors which only circulated in Arabic, and he quotes Hippocrates and Galen. His records also reveal that he had a good knowledge of Latin and some of Greek. His command of Arabic was quite clearly an expert one; he knew the dialect of Arabic spoken in the first half of the sixteenth century in Granada, because it shows at times in his writing in Castilian, which was obscure and diffuse, surprisingly lacking in style. However, Alonso states that in addition he learned classical Arabic from the famous humanist and philologist Nicholas de Clénard, who visited Granada. He was in contact with books in Arabic all his life, and his diary shows significant erudition, particularly in relation to Islamic