

Al Andalus: Spain Under Muslim Rule

The Iberian Peninsula, modern Spain and Portugal, has had a long and diverse history. At the far West of the Old World, it had come under the control of a number of peoples, from the Carthaginians of North Africa in the 6th century BCE, to the Romans after their victory in the Punic Wars, and after the fall of Rome in the 5th century CE, to two Germanic groups, the Vandals and then Visigoths, who soon converted to Christianity. However, the religion of Islam was growing in the East, and the expansion of the Muslim World would come to include Spain for the next 800 years. It was during this period, when the rest of Medieval Europe was in relative decline, that Spanish Muslims, Jews, and Christians produced vast amounts of scholarship and numerous cultural achievements. While it was never a perfect harmony, this society is remembered as an example of uncommon tolerance in an otherwise intolerant period in Europe.

As the Arab Muslims expanded into North Africa, many of the indigenous North Africans, known as Berbers, converted to Islam and joined the Muslim armies as they continued West. At the same time, the Visigothic rulers of Spain were engaged in a civil war, and were not very popular among the Spanish community, especially persecuted religious minorities like Jews and Arian Christians. Seizing the opportunity, a combined Arab and Berber force, representing the Umayyad Caliphate under the general Tariq ibn Ziyad, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from North Africa into Spain. From 711 to 716 CE, they battled against the Visigoths until all of Spain was under Muslim rule. Greatly outnumbered, the Muslim armies benefitted from the support of the people in Spain, especially the Jews, who had lived in Spain for centuries but were treated poorly by the Visigoths. Accounts from both sides tell of the Jews of Toledo opening the gates for the Muslim armies. Some Jews even fought alongside the Muslims, and when the Muslim forces moved on to further conquests, they left the Spanish Jews to hold control.



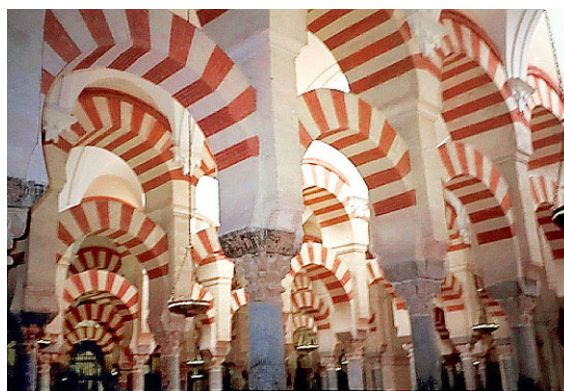
However, once the conquest was complete, the Muslims began fighting among themselves. The Berbers, who were treated as second-class citizens, began to revolt against the Arab rulers. Fortunately, a new leader emerged to unite the two peoples. In 750, the Umayyad Dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids, who established a new Caliphate and killed all members of the Umayyad ruling family. The only survivor was an Umayyad prince named Abdul Rahman I, who tells of his escape in his own words:



"...We reached the bank of the Euphrates, where I met a man who promised to sell me horses and other necessities; but while I was waiting he sent a slave to find the Abbasid commander. Next we heard a noise of the troop approaching the farmhouse; we took to our heels and hid in some gardens by the Euphrates, but they were closing in on us. We managed to reach the river ahead of them and threw ourselves into the water. When they got to the bank they began shouting 'Come back! You have nothing to fear.' I swam and my brother swam..."¹

Although his brother was captured and killed, Abdul Rahman I escaped to North Africa and finally made his way to Spain, where he united the people and led a successful rebellion against the corrupt rulers. As the new leader at the capital city of Cordoba, he ordered the construction of the Great Mosque, or *La Mezquita de Córdoba*, the red and white arches of which are the most famous symbol of Al Andalus.

In 929, his descendant, Abdul Rahman III, declared himself the true Caliph, or successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and brought greater unity to Andalus, beginning a Golden Age in Spain, not only for Muslims, but for Jews and Christians as well, who were protected under the Caliphate. Arabic became more widely spoken, culture flourished, and scholarship grew.



¹ Abdul Rahman I, Akhbar Majmu'a (a contemporary chronicle)

While some Christians became Muslims, many remained Christian but adopted Arab culture and language. They were called Mozarabs, meaning “Arabized.” Christian visitors from elsewhere in Europe came to study at the many universities. This period was also seen as the Golden Age of Judaism, as Jews excelled in scholarship and reached high positions in many parts of Spanish life. Unity, tolerance, and economic prosperity had allowed Al Andalus to become the light of Dark Age Europe.

“...Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in peace. Because several Christian and Jewish prophets, including Adam, Abraham, and Moses, are named in the Qur’an and because the Jewish Torah and Christian gospels are recognized as revelations from Allah, the Muslim rulers called Christians and Jews “people of the Book” and permitted them much religious and personal freedom. Jews, especially, enjoyed many liberties, and many Jews distinguished themselves in science, the arts, and government. Convivencia, a Spanish word meaning “living together,” helped make tenth-century al-Andalus the most civilized country in Europe...”²



During this period, a fascinating man known as Ziryab (“Blackbird”) grew in fame among Andalusians. Originally a court musician of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, he traveled to Spain and became a cultural icon and trendsetter, leaving a tremendous cultural impact on Al Andalus and the world. He established a music conservatory where he taught the musical style of Baghdad and contributed to the development of the guitar. He also initiated ideas about fashion, such as dressing in colors to match the seasons, which may be the origin of the modern fashion rule to avoid wearing white after Labor Day. He even introduced to Spain the concept of eating meals in courses, the use of toothpaste, and bangs for women.

During the 11th century, however, civil war led to the collapse of the Caliphate, causing a lack of political unity. Al Andalus split into small independent kingdoms called Taifas that were not strong enough to defend themselves against the growing power of the Christian kingdoms of Northern Spain. In a desperate move, the Andalusí rulers sought help from the Almoravids, Berber rulers of North Africa, who took the opportunity to conquer all of Al Andalus themselves. The Almoravids were soon replaced by another Berber group, the Almohads, who had an overly strict interpretation of Islam that contradicted the teachings of the religion. While previous rulers had honored the Islamic requirement of protecting Jews and Christians, the Almohads began a persecution of non-Muslims. Those who did not convert were killed or forced to leave Spain. Among them was the famous Jewish scholar Maimonides, who had lived and studied peacefully under the Almoravids, but now was forced to flee. Even Muslim scholars with



unorthodox religious views, such as the philosopher Ibn Rushd, were also oppressed by the Almohads.



“In the 1100s, Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroës), who lived in Córdoba, was criticized for trying to blend Aristotle’s and Plato’s views with those of Islam. However, Ibn Rushd argued that Greek philosophy and Islam both had the same goal: to find the truth. Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides), a Jewish physician and philosopher, was born in Córdoba and lived in Egypt. Like Ibn Rushd, he faced strong opposition for his ideas, but he came to be recognized as the greatest Jewish philosopher in history... Maimonides produced a book, The Guide for the Perplexed, that blended philosophy, religion, and science.”³



² “Al-Andalus: Islamic Spain,” Lawrence Houghteling, Calliope Magazine

³ “Muslim Culture,” Roger B. Beck, Linda Black et al., *World History: Patterns of Interaction*

The harsh attitude of the Almohads was in part a response to the increasing threat from Christian Europe, which was involved in the Crusades, religious wars against Muslims in the Middle East. The Crusading spirit had affected the Christian kingdoms to the North, who were more determined than ever to reclaim Spain from the Muslims. They united to defeat the Almohads in 1212, and Al Andalus again broke into small, weak kingdoms. Christian and Muslim kingdoms continued to battle for the next three centuries until 1492, when the Christian monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella united to defeat Granada, the last territory controlled by the Muslims. They soon expelled the Jews, and then the Muslims, and created the Spanish Kingdom, but it would forever owe a debt to Al Andalus.

“When Christendom was deep in its Dark Ages, Muslim Cordoba was rearing men, evolving ideas, writing books, erecting buildings, and producing works of art that constituted a unique civilization. In the West it had one peer in Constantinople and in the East another, Baghdad. At no time before or after did any Spanish city enjoy such distinction...”⁴

About the Author- Peter A Casey teaches Global History at the prestigious Classical High School of New York City (Maspeth High School). He is a graduate of the City University of New York, Queens College, and is currently completing a graduate program in History with a focus on ancient and medieval history. In his spare time he enjoys searching for cool fonts to include on his worksheets, eating clementines, and

Questions

1. What different groups have controlled Spain?
2. Who were the Berbers?
3. Why were the Muslim armies able to conquer Spain?
4. Who was Abdul Rahman I, and why was he seen as the perfect leader to unite Al Andalus?
5. How do you think the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad felt about Abdul Rahman III? Why?
6. During the Caliphate of Cordoba, how were Jews and Christians treated? Why?

⁴ Philip K. Hitti, *Capital Cities of Arab Islam*

7. How did Ziryab contribute to modern Western culture?
8. Do you think seeking help from the Almoravids was a smart idea? Why or why not?
9. How were the Almohads different from previous rulers of Al Andalus?
10. What did Ibn Rushd and Maimonides have in common?
11. What were the Crusades, and how did they influence the Christian Kingdoms of Northern Spain?
12. Should Al Andalus be held up as an example of a tolerant society? Why or why not?

