

The Arabs in Spain

Although the Umayyads were decisively defeated by the already in 750, they obtained a surprising lease on life – in the Iberian peninsula, on the western-most frontier of the Arabic world. As the caliphate in Damascus was about to fall, a branch of the Umayyad family fled across North Africa and established itself in the city of Cordoba, in present-day Spain, or in what the Arabs referred to as “al-Andalus.” The Arabic incursion into Spain had started already in 711, with a small party of raiders, predominantly Berbers, making their way from Morocco to Gibraltar – or *Jabal Tariq* as they called it, “the mountain of Tariq,” named after their commander. Quickly overrunning the Iberian peninsula much as they previously had overrun the Middle East and North Africa, the forces of the caliphate made it as far as the Loire Valley, in the heart of France, before they met serious resistance. In the end all of present-day Spain and Portugal were occupied, except for a few provinces close to the Pyrenees in the north. In 756, the Umayyads established an emirate at Cordoba. The Umayyads brought the authority and expertise of the caliphate’s court to these provincial outposts and connected the Iberian peninsula to the centers of civilization. They were greeted as saviors by the Jewish community who had suffered from persecution under the Visigoths, the previous rulers, and by many ordinary people too who had suffered under heavy taxation.

The Caliphate of Cordoba, 929-1031 CE, was the highpoint of Arabic rule in Spain. This was first of all a period of great economic prosperity. The Arabs connected Europe with trade routes going to North Africa, the Middle East and beyond, and industries such as textiles, ceramics, glassware and metalwork were developed. Agriculture was thriving too. The Arabs introduced crops such as rice, watermelons, bananas, eggplant and wheat, and the fields were irrigated according to new

methods, which included use of the waterwheel. Cordoba became a large and rich city, one of the largest and richest in the world. It was a cosmopolitan city too with a large multi-ethnic population of Spaniards, Arabs, Berbers, Christians, and a flourishing community of Jews. In Cordoba, much as in the rest of the Arab world, the *dhimmi* were allowed to rule themselves as long as they stayed obedient to the rulers and paid their taxes. The caliphs were patrons of the arts and fashion and their courtiers took up civilized habits such as the use of deodorants and toothpaste. [Read more: Ziryab, deodorants and the origin of the flamenco] But Cordoba was an intellectual center too. The great mosque, completed in 987 and modeled on the Great Mosque of Damascus, was not only a place of religious worship but also an educational institution with a library which contained some 400,000 books. The scholars who gathered here did cutting-edge research in the medical sciences, including surgery and pharmaceuticals, and they reacted quickly to intellectual developments which simultaneously were taking place in Baghdad and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Since the Umayyads were the sworn enemies of the Abbasids, Arab Spain established itself as an independent political entity, yet here as elsewhere it proved difficult to keep the state together. In the first part of the eleventh-century, the caliphate fell apart as rivalries, a coup, and a full-fledged civil war – the *fitna* of al-Andalus – pitted various factions against each other. In 1031, the Cordoba caliphate disintegrated completely and political power in the Iberian peninsula was transferred to the *taifa* – the small, thirty-plus, kingdoms which all called themselves “emirates” and all were in varying degrees of conflict with one another. This was when the Christian kingdoms in the north of the peninsula began to make military gains. Christian forces captured Toledo in 1085, and the city soon established itself as the cultural and intellectual center of Christian Spain. [Read more: The Toledo school of translators] This is not to say that the

various Christian kingdoms had a common goal and a common strategy. Rather, each Christian state, much as each Muslim state, was looking after its own interests, making wars with other kingdoms quite irrespective of religious affiliations. Thus some emirs were allied with Christian kings, while kings paid tribute to emirs, and they all employed knights in their respective armies who killed on behalf of whoever paid them the best. Quite apart from the military insecurity of the taifa period, this competition had positive side-effects. In order to bring glory to their courts and to outdo each other, the taifa kings encouraged the sciences and arts. This is how small provincial hubs such as Zaragoza, Sevilla and Granada came to establish themselves as cultural centers in their own right.

Enter the Almoravids. The Almoravids were a Berber tribe, originally nomads from the deserts of North Africa, who had established themselves as rulers of Morocco, with Marrakesh as their capital, in 1040. After the fall of Toledo, they invaded al-Andalus and already a year later, in 1086, they had defeated the Christian princes and successfully occupied the southern half of the Iberian peninsula. However, they never managed to take back Toledo. In 1147, at the height of their power, the Almoravids were toppled and their king killed by a rivaling coalition of Berber tribes known as the Almohads. The Almohads were a religious movement as well as a military force, started by Ibn Tumart, a spiritual leader who considered himself a *mahdi*, the "guided one," who would rid the world of evil and prepare the way for the return of the Messiah. Ibn Tumart was opposed to all literal readings of the Quran; in particular he insisted that God was a unity entirely devoid human attributes. As such God could not really be described but was instead best contemplated through the tools of philosophy. [Read more: Ibn Rushd and the challenge of reason] The rule of the Almohads followed strict Islamic principles: they banned the sale of pork and wine and the mixing of men and women in public, and they burned books –

including Islamic tracts – which did not agree with their views. By 1159 the Almohads had conquered all of North Africa and by 1172 all of al-Andalus. Their rule in Spain was short but it was to have a profound impact. Uniquely, the Almohads refused to give the *dhimmi* a protected status, and instead they insisted that Christians and Jews convert to Islam on the pain of death. Since the converts made in this way were unlikely to be genuine, the Almohads forced non-Muslims to wear special clothes – robes in black and dark blue – which made them easy to identify and thereby easy to keep under surveillance. Under these circumstances many Christians and Jews preferred to flee – the Christians to the north, to Toledo in particular, while the Jews generally fled east to Cairo and the Abbasid Caliphate, where rules were far more accepting of the members of other religions. [Read more: Mosheh ben Maimon]

Yet Almohad rule in al-Andalus did not last long. In 1212, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the Christian princes managed, for the first time, to put up a united front against them. Cordoba fell to the invaders in 1236 and Sevilla in 1248. From this time onward it was only the Emirate of Granada, together with associated smaller cities such as Malaga, that remained in Muslim hands. Here, however, the multicultural and dynamic spirit of al-Andalus continued to thrive, under the Nasrid rulers, for another 250 years. Wisely, after Navas de Tolosa, the Nasrids had allied themselves with the Christian state of Castile, and when Cordoba and Sevilla were captured, Granada provided military assistance to the Christian alliance. Although this friendship occasionally broke down, the Emirate of Granada as it came to be known continued to pay tribute to Castile in the form of gold from as far away as Mali. Today the most visible remnant of Nasrid rule is the Alhambra, the fortress and palace complex famous for its court-yards, its fountains and its roses, which served as the emir's residence. Yet in 1492, Granada too finally fell to the Christians who were greatly

aided by internal conflicts among the Nasrid elite. Ten years later the last emir of al-Andalus – Muhammad XII, known as “Boabdil” to the Spaniards – was forced out of Spain. The Christians, much as the Almohads, were on a mission from God, and they ruled the territories they had conquered in a similarly draconian manner. As a result of the Alhambra Decree, issued three months after the fall of Granada, some 200,000 Muslims left for North Africa, while an equal number of Jews preferred to settle in the Ottoman empire to the east. In 2014, it was reported that Spain’s legislature was considering granting Spanish citizenship to the descendants of Spanish Sephardim who request it. A similar law is under consideration in Portugal.