

# Andalusia: A Historical Overview

Historical Background to Islamic Spain  
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Islamic presence in the Iberian peninsula began in 711 A.D. when Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Straits of Gibraltar with a force of Arab soldiers and a substantial contingent of Berber recruits from North Africa who were new converts to Islam. The conquest of the Iberian peninsula represented one of the later stages of the expansion of Islam. In just under a century, all of the territories which had formerly belonged to the Roman empire, along with large parts of Persia and India, had been reconstituted into a new empire, this time under a state and a religion which were barely a hundred years old. Those who participated in the "fath", or conquest, of the Iberian Peninsula encountered surprisingly little resistance on the part of the local Christians and Jews as they advanced their way northward from Gibraltar, a place-name which derives from the Arabic "jabal Tariq", to be translated as "Tariq's mountain".

Although Toledo had been capital to the Visigoths, the new Muslim rulers of the Iberian peninsula chose Cordoba for theirs. The Muslim soldiers who settled in al-Andalus, [the Arabic word henceforth referring to parts of the Iberian peninsula under Muslim rule] were a very small minority in comparison to the vast number of subjects over whom they proposed to rule. It is thus remarkable that by the end of the 10th century, Islam was the religion of the majority of the population inhabiting the Iberian peninsula. Arabic quickly became the language common to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Cultural fusion between the Muslim and Christian elements of the population was facilitated by the intermarriage of Muslim men with Christian women, and by the granting of percentages of conquered land to soldiers as payment for services. Several waves of Muslim immigration from the central parts of the Islamic empire also took place during the generations immediately following the conquest. Upcoming changes in the central lands of Islam came to influence events in Andalusia as well. A dramatic revolution replaced the Umayyad dynasty with the 'Abbasid one and moved the caliphal capital from Damascus to Baghdad. The last

remaining Umayyad prince, ‘Abd al- Rahman I, fled to the furthest reaches of the world known to him: al-Andalus. Al-Andalus eventually became an emirate [something like a governorship] of the powerful ‘Abbasid empire.

On the basis of his connection to the Umayyads of Syria, ‘Abd al-Rahman III declared al-Andalus to be an Umayyad caliphate and himself to be its caliph in 929 A.D. ‘Abd al-Rahman was an astute political leader, and under his rule al-Andalus’ political and economic powers reached their highest level. Despite the caliphate’s early brilliance, Abd al-Rahman’s son al-Hakam was the second and last caliph to rule with any success over al-Andalus. His son, Hisham II, was only a boy when he ascended to the caliphal throne. He was manipulated and perhaps even killed by the minister al-Mansur. Al-Mansur successfully sequestered the boy at the palace-city of, Madinat al-Zahra’. Al-Mansur then adroitly stepped into the role of caliph and almost succeeded having his son, al-Muzaffar, declared Hisham’s legal successor.

It was during the first decade of the 11th century A.D. that the period of civil war began. Following the death of al-Muzaffar, the introduction of a series of caliphs of Berber origin or sympathies served to gravely discredit the caliphate as an institution. In 1031 A.D., a group of powerful nobles simply voted to put an end to the caliphate, thus making official a situation which had already existed for a number of years.

In a word, the caliphate had broken down, or had been broken down, into a large number of small political and territorial units. Most of these states came under the rule of former territorial governors, deputies, or palace officials who had served the troubled caliphate during its final years. These independent kingdoms, similar in size and structure to the young Christian states of the northern part of the Iberian peninsula, are referred to as taifa states. The taifa courts were home to many of the most brilliant philosophers, linguists, poets and thinkers of the 11th and early 12th centuries. Many of these great thinkers were Jews and some were even Christians.

Throughout most of the 11th century, an uneasy balance existed along the northern frontier, between Islamic and Christian powers. Many of the taifa states were at times hostile toward one another, as well. It is becoming increasingly clear that the frontier cultures were very similar in Christian and Muslim sectors, and that both Muslim and Christian members of this

Andalusian frontier culture sustained long-term interactions on many levels with the feudal culture of Provence.

The process of Christian "Reconquest", or the "Reconquista", was one of the most important forces in the shaping of culture in 12th and 13th-century Spain and al-Andalus. Given that these centuries were also those of the Crusades in the Holy Land, the Spanish Reconquista eventually acquired, for its participants and its observers, an aura of Holy War. Indulgences and pardons similar to those available to the Christian soldiers who volunteered to risk their lives for the cross in the Holy Land were offered by the church to European Christians who would go to the aid of the Christian monarchs of Spain in their fight against the <sup>a</sup> infidel.

In 1212 A.D., Islamic armies suffered a crippling defeat at the hands of Christian forces in the battle of "Las Navas de Tolosa", a blow from which the Muslim state never really recovered. By the beginning of the 14th century, Muslim possessions in the peninsula had been reduced to the kingdom of Granada, an area only slightly larger than that which had belonged to the taifa state of Granada in the 11th century. The Christian kingdoms were in positions of ever-increasing political and economic power.

The Nasrids were in place as sovereigns of the area around Granada by the middle of the 13th century. By 1243, however, the Nasrids were already paying tributes to Christian sovereigns such as Alfonso X. Although many anecdotes exist concerning the friendship between the a Christian king and one of the Nasrid sovereigns during the 14th century, such alliances and moments of understanding were not enough to postpone the inevitable. On 2 January of 1492, Boabdil was exiled, and the "Catholic Kings" Ferdinand and Isabella took possession of his sumptuous palace, the Alhambra. A lament pronounced by Boabdil as he looked down over his beloved city of Granada echoes down through time in the wistful verses penned by modern Arab poets.