

Muslim Spain (711-1492)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/spain_1.shtml

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Introduction

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The Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Spain ©

Islamic Spain was a multi-cultural mix of the people of three great monotheistic religions: Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Although Christians and Jews lived under restrictions, for much of the time the three groups managed to get along together, and to some extent, to benefit from the presence of each other.

It brought a degree of civilisation to Europe that matched the heights of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance.

Outline

In 711 Muslim forces invaded and in seven years conquered the Iberian peninsula.

It became one of the great Muslim civilisations; reaching its summit with the Umayyad caliphate of Cordovain the tenth century.

Muslim rule declined after that and ended in 1492 when Granada was conquered.

The heartland of Muslim rule was Southern Spain or Andalusia.

Periods

Muslim Spain was not a single period, but a succession of different rules.

- The Dependent Emirate (711-756)

- The Independent Emirate (756-929)
- The Caliphate (929-1031)
- The Almoravid Era (1031-1130)
- Decline (1130-1492)

The conquest

The traditional story is that in the year 711, an oppressed Christian chief, Julian, went to Musa ibn Nusair, the governor of North Africa, with a plea for help against the tyrannical Visigoth ruler of Spain, Roderick.

Musa responded by sending the young general Tariq bin Ziyad with an army of 7000 troops. The name Gibraltar is derived from Jabal At-Tariq which is Arabic for 'Rock of Tariq' named after the place where the Muslim army landed.

The story of the appeal for help is not universally accepted. There is no doubt that Tariq invaded Spain, but the reason for it may have more to do with the Muslim drive to enlarge their territory.

The Muslim army defeated the Visigoth army easily, and Roderick was killed in battle.

After the first victory, the Muslims conquered most of Spain and Portugal with little difficulty, and in fact with little opposition. By 720 Spain was largely under Muslim (or Moorish, as it was called) control.

Reasons

One reason for the rapid Muslim success was the generous surrender terms that they offered the people, which contrasted with the harsh conditions imposed by the previous Visigoth rulers.

The ruling Islamic forces were made up of different nationalities, and many of the forces were converts with uncertain motivation, so the establishment of a coherent Muslim state was not easy.

Andalusia

The heartland of Muslim rule was Southern Spain or Andalusia. The name Andalusia comes from the term Al-Andalus used by the Arabs, derived from the Vandals who had been settled in the region.

Stability

Stability in Muslim Spain came with the establishment of the Andalusian Umayyad dynasty, which lasted from 756 to 1031.

The credit goes to Amir Abd al-Rahman, who founded the Emirate of Cordoba, and was able to get the various different Muslim groups who had conquered Spain to pull together in ruling it.

The Golden Age

The Muslim period in Spain is often described as a 'golden age' of learning where libraries, colleges, public baths were established and literature, poetry and architecture flourished. Both Muslims and non-Muslims made major contributions to this flowering of culture.

A Golden Age of religious tolerance?

Islamic Spain is sometimes described as a 'golden age' of religious and ethnic tolerance and interfaith harmony between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Some historians believe this idea of a golden age is false and might lead modern readers to believe, wrongly, that Muslim Spain was tolerant by the standards of 21st century Britain.

The true position is more complicated. The distinguished historian Bernard Lewis wrote that the status of non-Muslims in Islamic Spain was a sort of second-class citizenship but he went on to say:

Second-class citizenship, though second class, is a kind of citizenship. It involves some rights, though not all, and is surely better than no rights at all...

...A recognized status, albeit one of inferiority to the dominant group, which is established by law, recognized by tradition, and confirmed by popular assent, is not to be despised.

Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, 1984

Life for non-Muslims in Islamic Spain

Jews and Christians did retain some freedom under Muslim rule, providing they obeyed certain rules. Although these rules would now be considered completely unacceptable, they were not much of a burden by the standards of the time, and in many ways the non-Muslims of Islamic Spain (at least before 1050) were treated better than conquered peoples might have expected during that period of history.

- they were not forced to live in ghettos or other special locations
- they were not slaves
- they were not prevented from following their faith
- they were not forced to convert or die under Muslim rule

- they were not banned from any particular ways of earning a living; they often took on jobs shunned by Muslims;
 - these included unpleasant work such as tanning and butchery
 - but also pleasant jobs such as banking and dealing in gold and silver
- they could work in the civil service of the Islamic rulers
- Jews and Christians were able to contribute to society and culture

The alternative view to the Golden Age of Tolerance is that Jews and Christians were severely restricted in Muslim Spain, by being forced to live in a state of 'dhimmitude'. (A dhimmi is a non-Muslim living in an Islamic state who is not a slave, but does not have the same rights as a Muslim living in the same state.)

In Islamic Spain, Jews and Christians were tolerated if they:

- acknowledged Islamic superiority
- accepted Islamic power
- paid a tax called Jizya to the Muslim rulers and sometimes paid higher rates of other taxes
- avoided blasphemy
- did not try to convert Muslims
- complied with the rules laid down by the authorities. These included:
 - restrictions on clothing and the need to wear a special badge
 - restrictions on building synagogues and churches
 - not allowed to carry weapons
 - could not receive an inheritance from a Muslim
 - could not bequeath anything to a Muslim
 - could not own a Muslim slave
 - a dhimmi man could not marry a Muslim woman (but the reverse was acceptable)
 - a dhimmi could not give evidence in an Islamic court
 - dhimmis would get lower compensation than Muslims for the same injury

At times there were restrictions on practicing one's faith too obviously. Bell-ringing or chanting too loudly were frowned on and public processions were restricted.

Many Christians in Spain assimilated parts of the Muslim culture. Some learned Arabic, some adopted the same clothes as their rulers (some Christian women even started

wearing the veil); some took Arabic names. Christians who did this were known as Mozarabs.

The Muslim rulers didn't give their non-Muslim subjects equal status; as Bat Ye'or has stated, the non-Muslims came definitely at the bottom of society.

Society was sharply divided along ethnic and religious lines, with the Arab tribes at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the Berbers who were never recognized as equals, despite their Islamization; lower in the scale came the mullawadun converts and, at the very bottom, the dhimmi Christians and Jews.

Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude*, 2002

The Muslims did not explicitly hate or persecute the non-Muslims. As Bernard Lewis puts it:

in contrast to Christian anti-Semitism, the Muslim attitude toward non-Muslims is one not of hate or fear or envy but simply of contempt

Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, 1984

An example of this contempt is found in this 12th century ruling:

A Muslim must not massage a Jew or a Christian nor throw away his refuse nor clean his latrines. The Jew and the Christian are better fitted for such trades, since they are the trades of those who are vile.

12th Century ruling

Why were non-Muslims tolerated in Islamic Spain?

There were several reasons why the Muslim rulers tolerated rival faiths:

- Judaism and Christianity were monotheistic faiths, so arguably their members were worshipping the same God
 - despite having some wayward beliefs and practices, such as the failure to accept the significance of Muhammad and the Qur'an
- The Christians outnumbered the Muslims
 - so mass conversion or mass execution was not practical
 - outlawing or controlling the beliefs of so many people would have been massively expensive
- Bringing non-Muslims into government provided the rulers with administrators
 - who were loyal (because not attached to any of the various Muslim groups)
 - who could be easily disciplined or removed if the need arose. (One Emir went so far as to have a Christian as the head of his bodyguard.)

- Passages in the Qur'an said that Christians and Jews should be tolerated if they obeyed certain rules.

Oppression in later Islamic Spain

Not all the Muslim rulers of Spain were tolerant. Almanzor looted churches and imposed strict restrictions.

The position of non-Muslims in Spain deteriorated substantially from the middle of the 11th century as the rulers became more strict and Islam came under greater pressure from outside.

Christians were not allowed taller houses than Muslims, could not employ Muslim servants, and had to give way to Muslims on the street.

Christians could not display any sign of their faith outside, not even carrying a Bible. There were persecutions and executions.

One notorious event was a pogrom in Granada in 1066, and this was followed by further violence and discrimination as the Islamic empire itself came under pressure.

As the Islamic empire declined, and more territory was taken back by Christian rulers, Muslims in Christian areas found themselves facing similar restrictions to those they had formerly imposed on others.

But, on the whole, the lot of minority faith groups was to become worse after Islam was replaced in Spain by Christianity.



The Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Spain ©

There were also cultural alliances, particularly in the architecture - the 12 lions in the court of Alhambra are heralds of Christian influences.

The mosque at Cordoba, now converted to a cathedral is still, somewhat ironically, known as La Mezquita or literally, the mosque.

The mosque was begun at the end of the 8th century by the Umayyad prince Abd al Rahman ibn Muawiyah.

Under the reign of Abd al Rahman III (r. 912-961) Spanish Islam reached its greatest power as, every May, campaigns were launched towards the Christian frontier, this was also the cultural peak of Islamic civilisation in Spain.

Cordoba



Mezquita mosque in Cordoba ©

In the 10th century, Cordoba, the capital of Umayyad Spain, was unrivalled in both East and the West for its wealth and civilisation. One author wrote about Cordoba:

there were half a million inhabitants, living in 113,000 houses. There were 700 mosques and 300 public baths spread throughout the city and its twenty-one suburbs. The streets were paved and lit...There were bookshops and more than seventy libraries.

Muslim scholars served as a major link in bringing Greek philosophy, of which the Muslims had previously been the main custodians, to Western Europe.

There were interchanges and alliances between Muslim and Christian rulers such as the legendary Spanish warrior El-Cid, who fought both against and alongside Muslims.

Muslim, Jewish and Christian interaction

How did Muslims, Jews and Christians interact in practice? Was this period of apparent tolerance underpinned by a respect for each other's sacred texts? What led to the eventual collapse of Cordoba and Islamic Spain? And are we guilty of over-romanticising this period as a golden age of co-existence?

Questions which need answers!

Decline and fall



Toledo fell to Christianity in 1085 ©

The collapse of Islamic rule in Spain was due not only to increasing aggression on the part of Christian states, but to divisions among the Muslim rulers. The rot came from both the centre and the extremities.

Early in the eleventh century, the single Islamic Caliphate had shattered into a score of small kingdoms, ripe for picking-off. The first big Islamic centre to fall to Christianity was Toledo in 1085.

The Muslims replied with forces from Africa which under the general Yusuf bin Tashfin defeated the Christians resoundingly in 1086, and by 1102 had recaptured most of Andalusia. The general was able to reunite much of Muslim Spain.

Revival

It didn't last. Yusuf died in 1106, and, as one historian puts it, the "rulers of Muslim states began cutting each other's throats again".

Internal rebellions in 1144 and 1145 further shattered Islamic unity, and despite intermittent military successes, Islam's domination of Spain was ended for good.

The Muslims finally lost all power in Spain in 1492. By 1502 the Christian rulers issued an order requiring all Muslims to convert to Christianity, and when this didn't work, they imposed brutal restrictions on the remaining Spanish Muslims.