

Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Interaction in Medieval Spain (Al-Andalus)

I. (Slide 1) Introduction

A. Discuss: Why do you think they say “two heads are better than one”? Why can a group often come up with more creative ideas than just one person?

B. During the discussion today, think about how:

1. Border regions are dynamic, creative forces in civilization.
2. The importance of cultural diffusion in history (how groups have learned from each other throughout history).
3. Why was Al-Andalus (medieval, Muslim-ruled Spain) a place where ideas were transmitted from the Middle East/North Africa to Western Europe?

II. Maps – let’s take a quick look at some maps so that we can SEE something about Spain and its connection of cultures.

A. (Slide 2) Looking at this modern map can tell us a few important things.

1. What is at the center of the map? Why is the Mediterranean at the center of the western world in medieval times?
2. What continents come together here? (Europe, Asia, Africa) Why does that make for an important mixture of cultures and the quick spread of ideas?
3. Find Spain on the map. What is interesting about its location? (That it’s in Europe, but less than 9 miles from Africa.) This is important because the Muslims in North Africa and the eastern edge of the Mediterranean (eg. Syria, Iraq) were having a “golden age” when Western Europe was in the “dark ages.”

B. (Slide 3) After the time of the Roman Empire, Spain was under the Visigoths.

C. (Slide 4) In 711 AD, a Berber army (Berbers = indigenous people of North Africa) under Arab leadership invaded Spain from Morocco. Within a very few years, they had conquered most of Iberia, taking over from the Visigoths. (Roderic was the last Visigothic king.) Here’s a great legend: “The Secret of the Tower” – A king of Spain in ancient time built a tower in which he deposited a secret. He sealed the tower with a mighty padlock, and laid upon his successors the obligation each by turns to add an extra padlock so as to preserve ever more inviolable whatever was concealed within. Twenty-six kings came and went, respecting his wishes. Then there succeeded a rash and headstrong young king named Roderic. Resolved to penetrate the tower’s secret, and against the advice of all his counsellors, he had the twenty-seven padlocks opened. Then he entered the chamber within. On its walls were painted Arab horsemen, scimitars at their belts, spears brandished in their right hands. In the middle of the room stood a table made of gold and silver set with precious stones, upon it carved the words: ‘This is the table of King Solomon, son of David, upon whom be peace.’ There was an urn on the table, which was found to contain a scroll of parchment. When this was unrolled, the

following words were revealed: ‘Whenever this chamber is violated, and the spell contained in this urn is broken, the people painted on these walls will invade Spain, overthrow its kings, and subdue the entire land.’” (p. 15 of *Moorish Spain*) Legends similar to these were recorded in both Christian and Islamic sources. Note: To the Christians it gave them a scapegoat, Roderic, who disregarded traditional royal obligation. To the Muslims, it gave them legitimacy as it was their destiny to rule.

D. **(Slide 5)** Cordoba: 912-1009 – “golden age.” The rulers were of mostly Spanish-Bosque descent, but were Muslims, not Arabs. (Note: During the 10th century, Cordoba was the most prosperous city in Europe and probably the most populous city in the world at that time.)

1. Muslims didn’t *force* people who were Jews or Christians to convert to Islam. (They were fellow believers in the one God and “people of the book” with common beliefs, so their religions were respected. AND non-Muslims paid a tax.) However, because of social and economic reasons, people in Spain converted until about 75% of the population of Cordoba was Muslim. Even those who remained as Christians and Jews were often “Arabized” in culture and language.
2. During this time, irrigation led to prosperity and the growth of philosophy and science, making Spain a center of culture in the Arab world.

E. **(Slides 6, 7, and 8)** There was a gradual shrinking of territory of Muslim-ruled Spain in wake of resurgent Christian north. But there were important – and rich – Muslim civilizations in Toledo, Seville, and Granada. *Convivencia* meant cultural exchanges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, which enriched Europe. This ended in 1492 when Spain was unified, and the Muslims and Jews were kicked out.

III. Impact of *Al-Andalus* (medieval Islamic Spain):

A. **(Slide 9)** Spanish language: Even after Spanish rulers “cleansed” Arabic words from Spanish vocabulary after the *reconquista*, Arabic still is the 2nd greatest influence (after Latin) on the Spanish language.

1. About 4,000 Spanish words are of Arabic origin (8% of the lexicon).
2. 2,300 place names (including Gibraltar, Guadalajara, and Guadalquivir) come from Arabic.
3. Lots of last names (Medina, Alvarez, etc.) were originally Arabic.

B. Math/science/technology

1. **(Slide 10)** The “Green Revolution” in Islamic Spain brought new crops (lemons, oranges, figs, rice, spinach, eggplant, and lots more), new irrigation technology **(Slide 11)** and a wider spread of it. The result: increased productivity, WEALTH, and exports.
2. Science, math, and medicine were also more advanced in the Muslim world. Spain picked up these ideas and also produced their own scholars. Because Spain was in Europe, these ideas spread there also.
 - a. Al-Zarqali was an 11th century astronomer (who perfected the astrolabe, developed astronomical tables, created the water clock). His

work was translated into Latin a century later. Why is astronomy important? (because it allowed for navigation across oceans....)

b. **(Slide 12)** Al-Zahrawi (or Abulcasis) wrote a 30-volume medical encyclopedia issued in 1000. These books had a big impact throughout the world.

c. Another important thinker was the Jewish scholar Maimonides (12th century). He was more famous for his work on law/ethics, but he did important work in medicine as well.

C. Switch to Powerpoint, Part 2 (document 2b) Muslim art and architecture in Spain had a major impact.

1. **(Slide 13)** The Grand Mosque of Cordoba (later made into a cathedral) was built in the late 8th, early 9th centuries.

2. **(Slide 14)** The Royal Alcazar in Seville was built in the 12th century. (Notice the Islamic style of arches and geometric designs. Note that there are no images of people – because Muslims were afraid that could become idol-worship.)

3. **(Slides 15, 16, and 17)** The Alhambra (meaning “the red one” in Arabic) in Granada was rebuilt in the mid-11th century and converted into a palace in the 14th century. Notice the tile designs (like they have in Morocco).

4. **(Slide 18)** Even after Spain was taken over by Christian rulers, there was a continuing influence of the Islamic style of architecture. Jewish and Christian architecture was often inspired by the Islamic style, and/or buildings were designed (and built) by *mudejars* (Muslims under Christian rule).

5. **(Slides 19-20)** Here are some other lovely works of art originating from Islamic-controlled Spain.

D. Philosophy/ideas/literature

1. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim interaction in Islamic-ruled Spain had a VERY important effect on philosophy and ideas in Europe.

a. **(Slide 21)** For example, why is Averroes (Ibn Rushd), a 12th century thinker, in this painting done in Italy two centuries later? Averroes was a Muslim though he was more popular in the West than in the Islamic world. He was most famous for his 30-year, in-depth study of Aristotle (which he read in Arabic translation). Although Aristotle was from ancient Greece, his work had been almost forgotten in the West. However, some of his writings had survived in Arabic translation, which Averroes read and commented on. Christians and Jews translated Averroes’ work into Latin and Hebrew (and from there into Latin). Scholars in Europe, such as Thomas Aquinas (who specifically cited “the Commentator” 503 times), took the work of Aristotle and reconciled it with Catholic thought. (Thus, the work of Averroes paved the way for secular thought and the European Renaissance.)

b. Solomon Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) was another important thinker. He was a Spanish-Jewish writer, who wrote in Arabic, and brought the ideas of another ancient Greek thinker, Plato, to the Western world.

c. **(Slide 22)** And remember Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish scholar who wrote about medicine? His works on law and ethics were very influential, especially to European Jews.

2. Some great literature came from the Jewish-Christian-Muslim cultural synthesis.

a. Samuel ibn Naghrillah was a Jewish writer, who started a new style of Hebrew-language poetry by applying Arabic styles of poetry to biblical Hebrew.

b. Ibn Hazm, a Muslim, wrote 400 books on many subjects and was read in the West as well as the Muslim world. In the West, he became most famous for his treatise on love and a book on different religions.

c. **(Slide 23)** A Jewish poet, Moses ibn Ezra, became one of Spain's greatest poets.

E. Popular culture (food, culture, everyday life) was enriched by contacts between the Islamic World and Europe.

1. **(Slide 24)** Ziryab, a Kurd, who lived for decades in al-Andalus in the 9th century, was a musician who brought eastern Mediterranean music to the court, added a 5th string to the lute, and introduced the lute into Europe. (The word for "lute" in many West European languages is derived from Arabic). He also introduced new cooking styles, hairstyles, the use of toothpaste, and fashions in clothing. He transmitted eastern Mediterranean cultural ideas to the West.

2. **(Slide 25)** Chess came from India through the Middle East and then to Spain and eventually the rest of Europe. *The Book of Games* was the first encyclopedia of games in European literature. Alfonso X (1221-1284), the King of Castile (Spain), who is in the middle of the picture on the left, commissioned the book. Notice how a Muslim and a Christian are shown playing together.

IV. Conclusions: Was the time of al-Andalus, Muslim-controlled medieval Spain, a perfect time of *convivencia*, when Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived peacefully together and created a dynamic culture that inspired all of Europe? Yes and no. **(Slide 26)**

A. Yes, there was a great sharing of ideas and culture. These ideas were transmitted to Europe and helped pave the way for the Renaissance.

B. However, there was a lot of violence and unrest in Spain too.

1. You saw from the maps how much political change occurred. And such change is always *painful* with wars, death, destruction, and refugees forced to leave their homes.

2. In the cities, the urban elite (who were the educated people) moved back and forth between Muslim and either Christian or Jewish worlds. But the contact was uneasy too – people from different religions often didn't trust each other, and individuals sometimes felt conflicted in their adjustment to other ideas.

C. **(Slide 27)** Overall: Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cooperation in al-Andalus resulted in advances in learning and culture that affected all of Europe.