

A1. Muslim take-over of Spain, 711-718 CE

The Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal), located in the southwestern corner of Europe, was under the rule of the Roman Empire for 600 years. Both areas spoke ‘Romance’ (from ‘Roman’) languages based on Latin, and the people were mainly Christian. Germanic invaders took over from the early 5th century. Much of the peninsula was under the rule of the Visigoths by the 8th century.

Meanwhile, to the south and east, a new power was arising: Islamic civilization. From the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, the Muslim religion had expanded rapidly from its origin in Arabia across southwest Asia and North Africa. Soon Muslim Arab armies had conquered North Africa, bringing them within 9 miles (by sea) from Europe. In the area that is today Morocco, a Muslim army gathered, preparing for the invasion of southern Europe. The army was mainly comprised of Amazigh (or ‘Berber,’ the indigenous people of North Africa) soldiers, with some Arab leaders. In 711 CE, they crossed into Spain. Within seven years, they had conquered the entire peninsula.

The Muslim take-over of Spain brought many changes. Muslim ideology and practice was that “peoples of the book” – Jews and Christians, people who worship the one God and have a scriptural tradition respected by Muslims – were not forced to convert and could freely practice their religion. Although the Christians resented losing their political power, they continued living in their homes, practicing their livelihoods, speaking Spanish, and attending the Catholic Church. Jews already living in Spain rather liked the Muslim take-over. They enjoyed a higher social position and endured less prejudice than previously.

Assignment: Imagine you are living during this time period. Write 2 diary entries, each at least one double-spaced page long. Choose names for your characters that are authentic. Also, include at least 5 facts or factual details drawn from the history/geography of the area. (Be sure to look up additional information in addition to the information found in this reading.) Underline the pieces of information you include in each of your diary entries.

--In one diary entry, you are an Amazigh from northern Africa, and it is 711 CE. You are relatively new to the Muslim faith. What are your feelings about joining the army and invading Spain? Why did you do it? Looking at a map, where do you think your ship left from and where did it land? Was it a long crossing? Also look at pictures of southern Spain (to see what the land looks like) and look at pictures of military equipment (to see what warfare was like). Describe your experiences, your reaction to the people you encounter, and their reaction to you.

--In another diary entry, written about 718 CE, you are a Spanish Christian living in southern Spain just a few years after the Muslim armies came through. How do you feel about the invasion? What changed and what didn't change? What do you fear losing?

What surprises you about the conquest, now that life is somewhat returning to normal after the fighting?