

A2. Muslim World and Spain during the “Golden Age” of Cordoba 912-1027 CE

Muslim-dominated Spain (al-Andalus), as part of the medieval Islamic world, was among the most advanced civilizations in medieval times. Through contacts with the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, new agricultural crops and methods came to Spain as well as new forms of architecture and advanced scientific thought.

Spain's prosperity was built on an agricultural revolution ('Green Revolution'), which included the introduction of widespread irrigation, new farming techniques, and new crops (such as sorghum, citrus fruits, rice, spinach, figs, cotton, sugar cane, etc.). The resulting increase in wealth drew many scholars and scientists from throughout the Islamic world to Spain.

A number of cities became important in al-Andalus – Cordoba, Toledo, Seville, and Granada; however, in the 10th and 11th centuries, the city of Cordoba was the most prosperous city in Europe and probably the most populous city in the world. It included over 70 libraries, 700 mosques (including the magnificent Great Mosque of Cordoba, now a cathedral), 3,000 public baths, rich palaces, and paved roads lit by lanterns.

In this era about 75% of the population of the city was Muslim though most were Spaniards, not immigrants from the Arab world. (Note that Muslims did not force Christians or Jews to convert; people chose to do so – sometimes out of conviction, sometimes because it seemed to be the modern thing to do, sometimes to have the advantages of being part of the dominant class.) Christians and Jews were not exactly equals, but were not mistreated or forced to change their religion. This was a period of “convivencia” (coexistence) in which cultural exchanges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims within Spain and throughout the Islamic world enriched civilization. Arabic became a common language of business, art, and learning for people of all religions – though, of course, Spanish was still widely spoken. (Note that Spanish became heavily influenced by Arabic. Today the Spanish language includes 4,000 words of Arabic origin as well as 2,300 place names derived from Arabic.)

Al-Andalus became a center of ideas and knowledge. Native-born scholars often traveled to centers of learning in the Middle East (such as Baghdad and Damascus), and scholars from other parts sometimes came to Spain. Science, math, and medicine were more advanced in the Muslim world during this era, and Spain participated in this exchange of ideas as well as transmitted them to Europe. Astronomers like Al-Zarqali (11th century), whose work on astronomical tables was important in navigation, and Al-Zahrawi (Abulcasis) who wrote a 30-volume medical encyclopedia were two of the many important figures.

Assignment: Imagine you are a Spanish Muslim living in Cordoba in 1000 CE. 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, describe your city and your culture. Think about what great ideas have come to Cordoba from the Muslim world. (Be sure to look at a picture of the great mosque –today a cathedral – in Cordoba and describe its important features.)

--In another diary entry, you have had the chance to study under Maslama al-Majriti in Cordoba. What is he working on? What other scientific information and people are you hearing about in Spain? What ideas are coming into Cordoba and from where? Where would you travel if you were to continue your studies in another city? (Where were the great centers of Islamic learning at this time?)