

A3. Spain and the Transmission of Knowledge from the Islamic World to Europe, 711-1492 CE

Muslim-dominated Spain (al-Andalus), as part of the medieval Islamic world, was among the most advanced civilizations in medieval times. While most of Western Europe was in the midst of the 'Dark Ages,' a period of invasions, fragmented political power, subsistence farming, and widespread illiteracy, Spain and the rest of the Islamic world were flourishing. Through contacts with the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, 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 than in Europe during this era. Spain participated in this exchange of ideas and transmitted them to Europe.

Local Christians and Jews played an important part in the development and transmission of ideas. 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. The flow of ideas at this time was mainly southeast to northwest, with scholarship originating in the Middle East (though sometimes based on earlier European sources) and traveling across North Africa into Europe. Spanish Jews played an important role in the transmission of knowledge as scholars and as linguists who often translated works from Arabic into European languages (especially Latin). Christian scholars and merchants then brought these works from Spain to the rest of Europe. This process continued even as Al-Andalus was shrinking in size with the growth of European political/military power.

An important example concerns the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Although their works had been generally forgotten in the West, copies – in Arabic translation – existed in the Arab world. Muslim scholars in Spain, such as Ibn Rushd (called "Averroes" by Europeans), analyzed ancient Greek works extensively, while Jews assisted in translating the works into European languages. Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle came to the attention of the important Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas in Italy, whose work had a major impact on European thought and Catholic theology.

Assignment: Imagine you are living in Granada in the 13th century 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, you are living in Spain in the early 1200s. Some scholars have been translating the work of Ibn Rushd into Latin. (Look up who Ibn Rushd – called

'Averroes' by Europeans – is and why he is important.) Your father is a Christian merchant, who will take the translated writings – along with goods he wants to sell – into Europe. Think about why people in the West might be interested in this work. (Didn't Aristotle come from Greece? So why wouldn't other Europeans know of his work?) And reflect on why Spain is important in the spread of ideas.

--In another diary entry, you are the great-grandson of the previous diary writer, living in the 1270s. You are interested in philosophy and Catholic theology, so you have heard of Thomas Aquinas. Reflect how Ibn Rushd and others like him have influenced Catholic theology and European thought.