

## Group A

### **Migrations of People and Ideas in Al-Andalus – Muslim-Controlled Spain: 711-1492 CE**

The Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal), located in the southwestern Europe, was under the rule of the Roman Empire for 600 years. Both countries spoke 'Romance' (from 'Roman') languages based on Latin, and by 711 CE, the people were mainly Christian. Germanic invaders had taken over from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century; by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, much of the peninsula was under the rule of the Visigoths.

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 point of origin in Arabia. Soon Muslim Arab armies had conquered large parts of Asia and all of 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 soldiers who were Amazigh ('Berbers,' the indigenous people of North Africa) 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/Portugal 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. The Jews enjoyed a higher social position and endured less prejudice than previously.

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. In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the city of Cordoba was the most prosperous city in Europe and probably the most populous city in the world at that time. 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.)

At a time when 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 in science, math, medicine, and philosophy. 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. Al-Zarqali (11<sup>th</sup> 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.

Local Christians and Jews played an important part in the development and transmission of ideas. 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 Islamic 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.

Throughout the course of seven centuries, Islamic Spain played an important role in the migration of ideas from the MENA region into Europe.

## Research Topics

1. Why/how were the Muslim armies able to take over Spain? Look at: the quality of the Muslim leadership, their goals in taking over Spain (and how those goals unified a culturally/linguistically diverse army), the weaknesses of Spain under the Visigoths (and of Europe, in general).
2. What transformations within the Iberian Peninsula occurred within the first centuries of the Islamic conquest? In other words, how was Spain different in 1000 CE than it was in the year 711? Consider issues of language, economy (agricultural productivity, trade), and culture (dress, customs, artistic style).
3. What were the great architectural/artistic achievements of Islamic Spain? How were these different from earlier times? What impact did the style have on later Spanish architecture?
4. Who were some of the great Muslim thinkers who lived and worked in Islamic Spain? Why were they important/influential?
5. What was the role of Andalusian (medieval Spanish) Jews in the creation and transmission of knowledge? What role did Jews (and Christians) play in the spread of knowledge from the Muslim world to Europe?
6. What impact did Muslim thought have on Europe, and why was Spain an important area for the transmission of knowledge from one culture to another?
7. In what ways have Muslim ideas, art, and culture affected Latin America – and how is that influence related to Spain?