

Global Interaction, Transformation and Stagnation in Spain

Between roughly 200 BC and 300 AD, Spain was an important part of the Roman Empire, although only scattered physical evidence remains from that period. The ruins of one of the greatest Roman amphitheaters are located at Italica, outside of present day Seville. Starting around 275 AD, Spain was repeatedly invaded by Germanic tribes from the north. One of the tribes, the Visigoths, established effective control over the Iberian peninsula in early fifth century. Spain formerly converted to Catholicism along with the rest of the Roman empire during the fourth century and the Visigoth king converted in 589 AD. Between 700 and 1500 AD, Spain was one of the major battlegrounds around the Mediterranean Sea between Islamic and Christian civilizations. In 711 AD, Tariq, the governor of Tangier, and approximately 7,000 soldiers routed the Visigoth army. Within a decade nearly the entire Iberian peninsula was under Islamic control. The conquerors called this land “al-Andalus.” Islamic rulers were tolerant of difference, promoted the arts and sciences, established universities in a number of cities and encouraged the growth of Christian and Jewish communities. In 1000 AD, Cordoba, an Islamic center in southern Spain, was probably the largest city in Europe.

Division among Islamic leaders, the relatively small size of the Islamic population in Spain, and increasing unity among Roman Catholic nobles, contributed to the gradual reconquest of the peninsula by Spanish forces. By 1500, Muslims and Jews remaining in Spain faced conversion, expulsion or death. Little remains today of Islamic “al-Andalus” other than the ruins of isolated forts, churches and cathedrals that were converted from mosques and retain elements of their original Islamic style, Arabic sounding names and words, and the widespread use of mosaic tiles with geometric patterns.

The final defeat of Islam in Spain coincided with Columbus’ voyages to America. An unanticipated consequence of the expulsion of Muslim and Jewish scholars, merchants, bankers and craftsmen from Spain was the weakening of the country’s economic infrastructure. The gold and silver looted from the New World poured into a society with little idea how to utilize it for development. Commerce was relegated to Dutch, and later English middlemen and those countries prospered while Spain remained trapped in a feudal past. An interesting account of travels through Islamic Spain, *Tales of the Alhambra*, was written by American author Washington Irving and published in 1832. — Alan Singer. **Sources:** *The Rough Guide to Spain* (New York: 2004); Menocal, M. *The Ornament of the World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).



The Seville Cathedral was built between 1402 and 1506 on the site of a former Islamic mosque. All that remains of the mosque is the Giralda. Originally the minaret, it was converted into a bell tower. The Cathedral also houses the tomb of Christopher Columbus. The Spanish government brought what they believed to be his remains here from Cuba in 1902.



The Guadalquivir River runs from the Atlantic Ocean through Seville and was navigatable as far inland as Cordoba. Islamic rulers built a fortified tower to control passage on the river. After Columbus’ voyages to the Americas, the Torre D’Or became a gigantic safe deposit vault for storing the gold and silver of Mexico and the Andes.



The altar of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Seville. It is covered with gold leaf – wealth taken from Mexico.



The Cathedral door continues to be decorated with Islamic designs and passages from the Koran.



In 1492, Granada was the last Islamic city to fall to Roman Catholic forces. The Alhambra on a hillside in Granada includes the Royal or Nasrid Palace, the palace gardens, and the fortress or Alcazaba. It is believed that Columbus met with Fernando and Isabel in the Alhambra before leaving on his first voyage to the Americas. Fernando and Isabel made Granada their capital and they are buried there in a tomb attached to the cathedral.



The Mezquita in Cordoba was once the third most holy site in the Islamic world after Mecca and Jerusalem. It was a cosmopolitan city that was the birthplace of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides in 1135 AD. After the capture of the city by Roman Catholic forces in 1236 AD, a Gothic cathedral was built in the middle of the mosque, but its Islamic design was retained for much of the building.

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Incas: A Cultural History (Grade Levels 6-9, J-508). One of the greatest empires ever developed from its origin to its conquest by a small army of Spaniards. Students look into the Incas’ culture, government, religion, and amazing social and physical achievements. The contents of this Jackdaw feature: Inca architecture and road System. Pre-Inca and Inca Art. Machu Picchu.

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