

# A History of Islamic Spain

BY W. MONTGOMERY WATT AND  
PIERRE CACHIA



A History of  
Islamic Spain



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# A History of Islamic Spain

BY W. MONTGOMERY WATT AND  
PIERRE CACHIA

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1965 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © 1965 by W. M. Watt and P. Cachia.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2006048049

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Watt, W. Montgomery (William Montgomery)

A history of Islamic Spain / W. Montgomery Watt and Pierre Cachia.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-202-30936-1 (alk. paper)

1. Spain—History—711-1516. 2. Muslims—Spain—History.

I. Cachia, Pierre. II. Title..

DP102.W38 2007

946'.022—dc22

2006048049

ISBN 13: 978-0-202-30936-1 (pbk)

## FOREWORD

In 1939 the prospect of a war which would involve many Asian nations made men in positions of responsibility in Britain suddenly aware of the meagre number of our experts in Asian languages and cultures. The Scarbrough Commission was set up, and its report led to a great expansion of Oriental and African studies in Britain after the war. In the third decade after 1939 events are making clear to ever-widening circles of readers the need for something more than a superficial knowledge of non-European cultures. In particular the blossoming into independence of numerous African states, many of which are largely Muslim or have a Muslim head of state, emphasises the growing political importance of the Islamic world, and, as a result, the desirability of extending and deepening the understanding and appreciation of this great segment of mankind. Since history counts for much among Muslims, and what happened in 632 or 656 may still be a live issue, a journalistic familiarity with present conditions is not enough; there must also be some awareness of how the past has moulded the present.

This series of "Islamic surveys" is designed to give the educated reader something more than can be found in the usual popular books. Each work undertakes to survey a special part of the field, and to show the present stage of scholarship here. Where there is a clear picture this will be given; but where there are gaps, obscurities and differences of opinion, these will also be indicated. Full and annotated bibliographies will afford guidance to those who want to pursue their studies further. There will also be some account of the nature and extent of the source material.

While the series is addressed in the first place to the educated reader, with little or no previous knowledge of the subject, its character is such that it should be of value also to university students and others whose interest is of a more professional kind.

The transliteration of Arabic words is essentially that of the second edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London, 1960, continuing) with three modifications. Two of these are normal with most British Arabists, namely, *q* for *k*, and *j* for *ḏ*. The third is something of a novelty. It is the replacement of the ligature used to show when two consonants are to be sounded together by an apostrophe to show when they are to be sounded separately. This means that *dh*, *gh*, *kh*, *sh*, *th* (and in non-Arabic words *ch* and *zh*) are to be sounded together; where there is an apostrophe, as in *ad'ham*, they are to be sounded separately. The apostrophe in this usage represents no sound, but, since it only occurs between two consonants (of which the second is *h*), it cannot be confused with the apostrophe representing the glottal stop (*ḥamza*), which never occurs between two consonants.

W. Montgomery Watt

GENERAL EDITOR

## CONTENTS

Introduction:		
The Interest of Islamic Spain	xiii	
Chapter 1	The Muslim Conquest	
1.	The conquest as a phase of Arab expansion	1
2.	The weakness of Visigothic Spain	5
3.	The course of the invasion, 711–716	8
2	The Province of the Damascus Caliphate	
1.	The organisation of the province	12
2.	The end of the advance	15
3.	Internal tensions of the province	20
3	The Independent Umayyad Emirate	
1.	The establishment of the emirate	24
2.	The crisis of the emirate	28
4	The Grandeur of the Umayyad Caliphate	
1.	Umayyad Spain at its zenith	32
2.	The economic basis	40
3.	Social and religious movements	43
4.	The ruling institution	48
5	Cultural Achievements under the Umayyads	
1.	Intellectual life—the religious sciences	52
2.	Intellectual life—poetry and belles-lettres	58
3.	Art	65
4.	The source of Moorish culture	67
6	The Collapse of Arab Rule	
1.	The ‘Āmirid dictatorship and the breakdown	70
2.	The reasons for the breakdown	74
3.	The “party kings” (1009–91)	78

Chapter 7	The Berber Empires, The Almoravids	
	1. The foundations of the Almoravid state	82
	2. The Almoravids in Spain	84
8	The Berber Empires, The Almohads	
	1. Ibn-Tūmart and the Almohad movement	89
	2. Spain under the Almohads (to 1223)	91
	3. The progress of the Reconquista from 1223 to 1248	95
9	Cultural Greatness in Political Decline	
	1. Poetry	97
	2. Prose literature and philology	105
	3. The religious sciences and history	110
	4. Philosophy and mysticism	118
	5. The art of the eleventh and twelfth centuries	125
10	The Last of Islamic Spain	
	1. The Naṣrids of Granada	127
	2. The Muslims under Christian rule	130
	3. Literature in a period of retreat	134
	4. The art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries	140
11	The Significance of Islamic Spain	
	1. The Arab and Islamic colony	143
	2. The stimulation of Christian Spain and Europe	147
	3. The intrinsic greatness of Islamic Spain	150
	Notes	153
	Bibliography	162
	Index	168

[NOTE: Chapters 5, 2; 9, 1; 9, 2 and 10, 3 are by Dr Cachia]

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### *Plates*

*following page 64*

- 1 Door and blind arches in the western façade of the mosque at Cordova
- 2 Red and white striped arches of the mosque at Cordova
- 3 Stone lattice and foiled arch in the mosque at Cordova
- 4 Arches in one of the main halls, possibly the throne room, at the Palace of Madīnat az-Zahrā'
- 5 Detail of ivory casket from the time of the caliphate at Cordova (V. & A.)
- 6 Oil lamp in wrought bronze (Alhambra Museum, Granada)
- 7 Detail of delicate ivory work on a casket fashioned in Cordova (V. & A.)
- 8 Torre del Oro, Seville
- 9 The Giralda, Seville

*following page 104*

- 10 Arched entrance to the Sala de los Embajadores in the Alcázar, Seville
- 11 Some of the roofs of the Royal Palace of the Alhambra, Granada
- 12 Slender columns in the Patio de los Leones at the Alhambra
- 13 Detail of stucco on the walls of the Patio de los Leones
- 14 Tile mosaic and stucco wall decoration in the Salón de los Embajadores, Alhambra
- 15 Stucco wall decoration in the Patio de los Leones, Alhambra
- 16 Pool of the Partal and the Torre de las Damas, Alhambra
- 17 The Dome of a chapel at the Mosque, Cordova

### *Maps*

- 1 Showing varying extent of Islamic influence A.D. 700-1400 17
- 2 Main trade routes and products in Spain in the Middle Ages 39



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Plates 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 are reproduced from *Moorish Spain* by Enrique Sordo by kind permission of the publishers, Elek Books, Ltd. Photographer: Wim Swaan. Plates 5 and 7 are reproduced by kind permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## INTRODUCTION

### THE INTEREST OF ISLAMIC SPAIN

For many centuries Moorish Spain has stirred the imagination of Europe. Ballads gave glamour to the courageous stand of Roland in the pass of Roncesvalles, while legends surrounded the figure of the Cid and made him a great hero. Nor was it merely the struggle against the Moors which caught the imagination. The better-informed inhabitants of the rude Christian kingdoms and dukedoms of western Europe realised that south of the Pyrenees was a land of higher culture, where amid material luxury men enjoyed the delights of music and poetry; and they gradually took over what they could of this culture. With the romantic movement something of the old admiration was revived, and it is doubtless through the influence of Washington Irving that "Alhambra" has become a familiar word to many who know nothing of the fourteenth-century palace.

Even for the prosaic scientific historian, who speaks of Islamic Spain—strictly, "Muslim" applies only to persons—the subject is not without its fascination. Here an oriental culture has entered Europe and left behind magnificent architectural remains. It offers an important example of the close contact of diverse cultures, and one that has contributed to making the European and American historian what he is. The chief monuments of this culture are relatively easy to visit, and in most seasons the visit is delightful. Moreover the study of Islamic Spain gives answers to questions regarding the general nature of historical processes. Such questions will guide the treatment of the subject in the present work, and may be briefly indicated here under three heads.

Firstly, Islamic Spain must be looked at in itself. It is commonly regarded as having great and magnificent achievements to its credit. But in what did its greatness consist? The loveliness of the buildings it has left? Works of pure literature that are major contributions to the world's store? Philosophical, scientific, or religious writings with a secure place among

the classics of the "one world" into which we are moving? Or is this image of Islamic Spain largely dependent on the contrast between its luxury and the bareness of contemporary life in the rest of western Europe, and on the fact that it was the channel through which elements of higher culture, both material and intellectual, entered Europe?

Secondly, Islamic Spain must be looked on as a part of the Islamic world. It shared in the culture of a vast area, and the character of its links with the heartlands must be looked at. How did it keep in touch? Was it mainly a passive recipient or did it make any distinctive contribution to Islamic culture as a whole? May it be regarded as an active cell in the body-social of Islam? On the other hand, how far had it become adapted to the special circumstances of the Iberian peninsula, such as climate, geography and the mingling of religions? Did it manage to integrate the various racial and social groups into a unity, and to impregnate the whole society with its values? A subordinate question is that of the relation of Spain to North Africa, especially the part which is now Morocco and Algeria. How far were the two regions a single cultural area dominated by Spain?

Finally, Islamic Spain was in close contact with its European neighbours. What exactly did it contribute to Europe? In how many spheres can we trace its influence, and see where Europeans have learned from Spanish Muslims? Again, Europe has clearly been influenced by reacting against Islamic Spain. The crusade is in part a retort to the *jihād* or holy war of the Moors; and the Reconquista was a major formative element in the making of modern Spain. The answer to these last questions belongs to the history of Europe and of Christian Spain, but some indication will be given of the lines along which the answers must go.

# A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC SPAIN



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# I

## THE MUSLIM CONQUEST

### 1. *The Conquest as a Phase of Arab Expansion*

To the inhabitants of Spain the Arab conquest in the years from 711 to 716 came as a bolt from the blue. For the Arabs themselves, however, the overrunning of Spain was merely one phase in a long process of expansion.<sup>1</sup> It was an eminently profitable and successful phase, and the success came very rapidly; but in the process of expansion which had begun at least as early as 630 there had been comparable phases. During the reign of the caliph 'Umar (634-44) the embryonic Arab state—at this time an alliance of many, but not yet all, of the tribes of the Arabian peninsula—had defeated the Byzantine empire and wrested from it the provinces of Syria and Egypt, and had dealt such a crushing blow to the Persian empire that it ceased to exist, leaving what we now call Iraq and Persia to be occupied by the Arabs as soon as they could find men to hold them securely. And this was only a beginning. For about a century the Arabs continued to move onwards and outwards. One line of expansion was north-east along the golden road to Samarqand and beyond, and another south-east into the Indus valley, while in the west they progressed through the coast-lands of North Africa. The advance was not gradual but rather by a series of jumps. There were periods of quiescence and consolidation, when the Arabs paused in the face of some serious obstacle or in order to deal with internal tensions.

To understand how this amazing expansion was possible it is necessary to go back to the career of Muḥammad. Muḥammad was both prophet and statesman—a combination which modern man with his compartmentalised religion finds difficult to understand. As a statesman he was interested in Arab unity; but he may also have felt that political unity was implicit in the fact that his mission as a prophet was to the

Arabs in general and not simply to the men of Mecca. Unity, however, was virtually impossible without expansion, because of the nature of nomadic life. The main economic basis of this life was the breeding and pasturing of animals, with irregular movements from those areas where pasture was abundant after rain to those where there were permanent wells. When they were in a position to do so the nomads exacted payments for the safe conduct of men and merchandise. Life was never easy in the Arabian desert, however, and a normal feature of it was the raid or *razzia*, which was usually aimed at driving off an enemy's animals but occasionally involved loss of human life. Deaths in the *razzias* and other fighting must have done something to reduce pressure on the limited food supplies. At some point in Muḥammad's career it must have become clear to him that, if there was to be a political unity of the Arabs, fighting and *razzias* would have to be suppressed; but this would increase the pressure on the available food. How could this difficulty be surmounted?

It is in this context that the Islamic conception of the *jihād* or holy war must be considered. It was never a purely religious phenomenon but always at least in part a political instrument. It was indeed a transformation of the nomadic custom of the *razzia*, immediately relevant to the conditions when Muḥammad controlled only Medina and a few allied tribes. The ordinary tribe might carry out a *razzia* against any tribe or family with which it was not for the moment on friendly terms. The little state of Medina functioned in many ways as a tribe. Among the nomadic tribes of the region it had its allies and friends and likewise its enemies. At least in the latter part of his career Muḥammad insisted that those who wanted to be full allies must become Muslims and accept him as prophet. In this situation the conception of the holy war meant that the raiding propensities of Muḥammad's followers were directed against non-Muslims; but as more of the tribes near Medina became Muslims it also meant that raiding parties had to go farther afield. There are indications that Muḥammad was aware that the growth of his alliance, by stopping raiding between the members of the alliance, was increasing the pressure on food supplies, and that he made preparations for more extended *razzias* into Syria, the

nearest comparatively rich country. Certainly his successors, as soon as they had regained control over some disaffected tribes, directed large raiding expeditions against both Syria and Iraq.

It is a common misapprehension that the holy war meant that the Muslims gave their opponents a choice "between Islam and the sword". This was sometimes the case, but only when the opponents were polytheists and idol-worshippers. For Jews, Christians and other "people of the book", that is, monotheists with written scriptures—and the phrase was very liberally interpreted—there was a third possibility; they might become a "protected group", paying a tax or tribute to the Muslims but enjoying internal autonomy. A member of such a group was known as a *dhimmī*. Within Arabia the nomadic tribes were nearly all idolaters, and were therefore forced to become Muslims. Outside Arabia, however, the local inhabitants were expected to become "protected groups". There was no pressure to become Muslims, but rather to remain as they were. Movable booty captured on expeditions could be divided among the participants in the expedition, but when the Arab Muslims began to conquer land, they had no desire to divide it up among themselves and to settle down to an agricultural life. It was more advantageous to allow the existing cultivators to continue to cultivate, while the tribute and rents, divided among the Muslims, enabled them to be a full-time expeditionary force.

It was in this way that the Arabs were able to expand so rapidly and to keep on expanding. The full citizens or Muslims received a stipend from the treasury and were able to devote themselves almost wholly to soldiering. Since their stipend could be increased by a share of any booty captured, they were eager to go on expeditions which promised to be lucrative and not too arduous or dangerous. Where the raided populations submitted and became "protected", however, it was necessary to plan expeditions that went further afield, and also to leave garrisons in the main cities of the territories that had submitted to the Muslims.

The Arab expansion westwards had begun almost as soon as they had obtained a lodgement in Syria. From Syria an expedition had gone south-west into Egypt and between 640

and 642 brought the country under Arab control. Almost immediately afterwards there had been exploratory expeditions along the coast into Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. An attempted Byzantine come-back and their own preoccupations elsewhere slowed the progress of the Arabs, but in 670 they were able to found the city of Cairouan in Tunisia. Here again the advance was halted, chiefly because of the resistance of the Berber tribes, though the city of Carthage also remained in Byzantine hands. By playing on the rivalries between the Berber tribes, especially that between the nomads and the sedentary tribes, the Arabs were eventually able to establish themselves securely in Tunisia, while most of the Berbers accepted Islam. In 698 the Byzantines were finally driven from Carthage, and soon after 700 expeditions of Arab and Muslim (probably nomadic) Berbers began to penetrate through Algeria into Morocco and the Atlantic seaboard. The resistance of the sedentary Berbers of these regions was crushed, and they were forced to acknowledge Arab suzerainty. The closing stages in this advance to the Atlantic were the work of Mūsā ibn-Nuṣayr, who is said to have been appointed independent governor of Ifrīqiyya (i.e. Tunisia) in 708, responsible directly to the caliph in Damascus; previously the head of the administration in Cairouan had been subject to the governor of Egypt.

After these successes in north-west Africa it is conceivable that the Arabs might have continued southwards. In some directions at least there was terrain of the kind to which they were accustomed. Undoubtedly, however, the desire for booty was an important motive with the rank and file of the Muslims; and it must soon have become clear that the rewards of pushing further south-west or south would be meagre. On the other hand, there must have been rumours and half-reliable reports of the great wealth and wonderful treasures of Spain; and it is therefore not surprising that the Muslims decided to risk the entirely novel and distinctly hazardous operation of crossing the strait in order to discover what substance there was in the reports. The expansion into Spain was thus entirely in keeping with the previous extension of Arab power in North Africa, and might well have come about even had there been no factors in the local situ-

ation (such as the attitude and interests of Count Julian) to encourage them and give them an opening.

While the chief control remained in the hands of men of Arab race (reckoned solely on the male side), after the submission of the Berbers of Tunisia and eastern Algeria about 700, much of the man-power in the expeditions was Berber. Without this accretion of man-power the conquest of Spain would have been impossible. It is thus more correct to speak of Muslim expansion than of Arab expansion. Yet the distinction between Arabs and Berbers did not disappear when the latter became Muslims, and was to prove a grave source of internal tension in Islamic Spain.

## 2. *The Weakness of Visigothic Spain*

The Spain which was conquered so easily by the Muslims suffered from grave internal weaknesses. Not merely for an understanding of the conquest, however, but also for a proper appreciation of the whole cultural development of Islamic Spain, it is necessary to look at the condition of the Iberian peninsula in the early years of the eighth century.<sup>2</sup>

The Visigoths first entered Spain in 414 and occupied the north-east of the country—the Roman province of Tarraconensis. Thereafter they maintained their hold under various political arrangements, but there was no real unity because the Visigoths adhered to the heretical Arian form of Christianity, while the majority of the indigenous population was Catholic. An important change took place, however, in 589, when the king and the leading Visigoths abandoned Arianism for Catholicism. This helped in the establishment of a stable and unified kingdom embracing the whole Iberian peninsula and the province of Septimania in the south of France. By the beginning of the eighth century the Visigothic aristocracy and the Hispano-Roman nobles seem to have been fused together in a single privileged group which may be referred to as the “upper classes” (*clases elevadas*). There were party divisions within the upper classes, but they do not seem to have followed strictly racial lines. To the upper classes belonged the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The archbishops and