





The Medieval World

Al-Andalus

(8th-15th Century)

Islam, a religious movement born on the Arabian Peninsula, spread to other geographical regions after the Hijra (622), when its founder, Muhammad, migrated from Mecca to Medina. In a short time Muhammad's successors conquered a vast territory stretching from central Asia to the Atlantic. In the Mediterranean, they occupied North Africa and reached the Iberian Peninsula in 711, sweeping up and over the Pyrenees to Poitiers, where their advance was finally halted by the Franks in 732.

Al-Andalus was how the Muslims referred to the Iberian territory under their control, whose borders shifted repeatedly in the following centuries until the end of Muslim rule on the peninsula in 1492.

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In the early years (711-756), Al-Andalus was a province of the Umayyad Empire governed by an emir who answered to the caliph at Damascus. In 750 the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids, but one Umayyad prince, 'Abd al-Rahman, survived and conquered Córdoba (756), proclaiming himself emir and founder of the Umayyad dynasty of Al-Andalus. The capital of 'Abd al-Rahman II and various objects that still display the late Hispano-Roman and Visigothic traditions date from this period.

In 929 'Abd al-Rahman III established the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba, a state in its own right with no ties of dependency on the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad, and founded the palatial city of Madinat al-Zahra, a symbol of Umayyad power and splendour. Córdoba, the capital, grew into one of the largest cities of the period. Displayed beneath the scale model of the Great Mosque of Córdoba are emblematic caliphate objects such as the Zamora pyxis and the doe from Madinat al-Zahra, as well as capitals, reliefs, pottery from the court workshops and the basin of Almanzor from the lost city of Madinat al-Zahira.

The dynamic economy and trade activity of the Islamic world contrasted with the situation in Christian Europe. The growth of its cities facilitated





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^ Panelled ceiling (Palace of Alfonso XI, Córdoba)

trade, with major routes connecting Al-Andalus to North Africa, the Near East, Byzantium, Italy, France and northern Europe.

The Muslims were expert farmers, renowned for their irrigation systems, and olive oil became the main commodity of Al-Andalus. Luxury objects and raw materials like ivory were imported, as well as manufactured products such as pottery from North Africa, Fatimid rock crystal from Egypt and bronzes from the Iranian region of Khorasan.

The Muslims had preserved the knowledge of classical Antiquity and eastern cultures, and they actively pursued scientific and technological knowledge, research and philosophy. They devised complex scientific instruments, such as astrolabes and quadrants, and Hispano-Islamic science had countless practical applications, benefitting fields such as the metalwork industry, pharmacopeia and medicine, and alchemy, thanks to which dyes were obtained.



^ Jewish bilingual capital

Another important legacy is the Arabic language. The population learned the Arabic alphabet carved on tablets made of animal bones such as scapulae, several examples of which have survived.

The collapse of the caliphate in 1031 led to the disintegration of power in Al-Andalus and a number of small independent kingdoms called *taifas* emerged. The most important of these were Toledo, Seville and Zaragoza, where the Aljafería Palace was built.

This fragmentation made it easier for the Christian states to expand their borders southwards, and it also paved the way for the invasion of the Almoravids (1086), a North African Muslim dynasty. They were followed in 1146 by the Almohads, who made Seville their capital.

Despite the conflicts, this was a prolific period for culture in which all branches of knowledge, literature, science, technology and art flourished. In Cuenca ivory workshops proliferated, continuing the tradition of the crafts-

manship developed in the Córdoba caliphate with works such as the casket from the Cathedral of Palencia.

Cemeteries, or *al-maqabir*, were located outside the city walls and the simple graves were marked with stones. Tombs of wealthier citizens were distinguished by stone markers and stelae bearing religious references related to the hope of paradise. The main types of memorial monuments were the cylindrical stone markers of Toledo with inscriptions indicating the dead person's name and date of death, tombstones adorned with Kufic or Naskh inscriptions, the Almoravid stelae of Almería, whose structure may derive from the *mihrab*, and the trapezoidal *maqabriya*, whose surface was covered with inscriptions.

After the fall of the Almohad Empire, only the Kingdom of Granada, which occupied the modern-day provinces of Málaga, Granada and Almería, resisted the Christian pressure from north and the Maghreb advance from the south. After two and a half centuries of existence (1231-1492) and a string of territorial losses, Granada was conquered by the Catholic Monarchs on 2 January 1492.

78 Nasrid Granada grew into a great city and work began on the splendid palatial complex of the Alhambra. The great lamp from the Alhambra mosque is on display, while the famous gold lustreware is represented by two «Alhambra» vases, probably made in Málaga. The Bentarique and Mondújar hoards exemplify the gold and silver objects made during this period.

The gradual southward expansion of the Christian borders was a central factor in the transformation of the territory. The new rulers allowed the Muslim population to stay on, preserving their religion, language and separate legal system. They were known as the Mudejars. Islamic monuments were given to new uses, the *alcázares* or Moorish castles became palaces, and the mosques were turned into churches and cathedrals.

Specialised Hispano-Islamic craftsmen went to work for the Christians, perpetuating their plasterwork, carpentry and pottery techniques. This blend of the Islamic and Christian cultures resulted in the birth of Mudejar art. Fine examples are the arch from the Palace of the Monarchs in León and various ceiling elements from the Cathedral of Teruel.

Spanish society was made up of Muslims, Christians and Jews, and the latter culture is represented by a number of objects in the exhibition, including a bilingual capital from Toledo.

