

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Cordoba, the Fall of

The Fall of Cordoba

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The word "Crusades" immediately conjures up among Muslims visions of Jerusalem and Salahuddin. While Jerusalem was indeed the focus of the First Crusade, a broader view of this civilizational confrontation between medieval Christianity and Islam must include the events in Spain and North Africa. While the Muslims did hold their own in West Asia and recovered Jerusalem, Medieval Europe gained a decisive advantage in Spain and Portugal. This loss had a profound impact on the subsequent unfolding of global history.

Under the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba (929-1032), Spain had become a cultured, urbanized society and was a world leader in the development of art, science and culture. Urbanization led to the loss of the very qualities-courage, virility, energy, spirituality, leadership and solidarity that had helped it survive and prosper against the Christian threats from the north. Decay set in and the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba disintegrated in 1032. Spain split into several principalities-Saragossa, Toledo, Seville, Malaga, Granada, Almeria, Denia and Valencia, each ruled by a petty emir, the disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate was a signal to the Christian Crusaders to expand their operations to the south. A free-for-all followed and in the medley, Toledo the ancient Visigoth capital of Spain, fell to Alfonso VI of Castile in 1085.

The key to Andalus lay in North Africa. Muslim Spain continued to benefit from successive reformist movements in the Maghrib and from the infusion of new blood through the Berbers and the Slavic (Mamluke) bodyguards. In the 11th century the Murabitun revolution swept through northwest Africa and carried itself into the Andalusian peninsula. Murabitun intervention in Spain followed. Under Yusuf bin Tashfin, the Muslims regained much territory and re-established their rule over most of Andalus. However, events in North Africa once again profoundly influenced Spain. Following the loss of Jerusalem during the First Crusade (1099), new reformist movements arose in the Maghrib. The Al Muhaddithin displaced the Murabitun during the decade of 1130-1140 and established themselves in North Africa. The turbulence in the Maghrib was a signal to the Crusaders. Pope Eugene III declared a Second Crusade (1145-1146) with a three-pronged military thrust against Damascus in Syria, Tripoli in North Africa and Andalus in Europe. Damascus and Tripoli held but Lisbon (Arabic Hishbunah) fell and the Crusaders captured northern Portugal in 1145.

The Al Muhaddith held the Christians at bay for fifty years. Following the recapture of Jerusalem city by Salahuddin (1187), there was an upsurge of military confidence and cohesiveness in the Muslim world. In the east, Muhammed Ghori captured Delhi in 1192. In the west, the Al Muhaddith inflicted a crushing defeat on the Crusaders at the Battle of Alarcos in 1196. This cohesion, however, did not last. Soon after the Battle of Alarcos, North Africa was beset with further convulsions. In the first decade of the 13th century, petty emirates supplanted the Al Muhaddith in southern Morocco. As a result, the Al Muhaddith lost their supply of men and material from the African hinterland. The Christians were waiting for just this kind of opportunity. In 1212, the combined armies of Leon, Castile, Portugal and Aragon, reinforced by Crusaders from France and Germany, won a decisive victory over the Al Muhaddith at the Battle of Las Novas de Tolosa.

The situation in Asia also took a turn for the worse. Genghiz Khan devastated Central Asia and Persia region (1219-1222) and Baghdad itself was threatened. The destruction of the principal cities of Asia meant a significant dilution of the military capabilities of Muslims and their ability to help each other. Sensing an historic opportunity, the Christian powers openly sought an alliance with the Mongols against the Muslims. Representations were made to the Mongol Khan Kuyuk seeking such an alliance. John de Plano Carpini, a Franciscan, reached the Mongol capital Korakorum in 1245 and came back with promises of military help. While Genghiz Khan was devastating Samarqand and Bukhara, a German army invaded Egypt (1218-1221). The Muslim world was thus faced with a two-pronged invasion from a Mongol-Crusader axis. The onslaught was total, with the avowed intent of capturing Muslim lands and extirpating Islam.

After the Battle of Las Novas de Tolosa, Muslim political power in Andalus declined rapidly. The double hammer of Mongol devastations and Crusader invasions had taken its toll on the Muslim world. No help was forthcoming from the east to relieve the increasing pressure of the Crusaders. By 1230, Mongol horsemen were riding into eastern Anatolia and knocking at the gates of Delhi. In Spain, political disintegration led to a free-for-all with local emirs seeking alliances with Christian powers against each other. The Crusaders were only too willing to provide military help in return for military cooperation against other Muslim princes. The principalities of Castile, Aragon and Portugal carved up what remained of Muslim Spain for assault and subjugation. Valencia was taken in 1200. The Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean fell in 1230. Southern Portugal was lost in 1231. Cordoba, the seat of the Umayyad Caliphate fell in 1236. The conquest was complete with the fall of Seville in 1248. Only Granada remained in the hands of Ibn Ahmar, a prince of the Nasirid tribe from Saragossa who managed to retain his possessions only by becoming a vassal of Castile.

To grasp the full extent of the damage inflicted on the Islamic world one must juxtapose the events in Spain with those in Asia. Between 1219 and 1260, the Muslims lost more than half of their dominions. The lands that today constitute the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Azerbaijan, Sinkiang, Persia, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Georgia, Russia and the Caucasus were ravaged. Spain was occupied. Samarqand, Bukhara Herat, Ghazna, Isfahan and Baghdad were destroyed. The Crusaders had formed a geopolitical alliance with the Mongols with the avowed intent of eliminating Islam. By the year 1260, the combined armies of the Mongols, the Crusaders and the Armenians stood at the gates of Jerusalem with only Egypt and Hejaz before them. The hour was dark indeed.

While the loss of Spain was a tragedy for the Muslims, it was of tremendous benefit to the Christians. It was through Spain and Sicily that Islamic learning, which had internalized and added to the wisdom of Greece, India and ancient Persia, was transmitted to Europe. One can chart out the intellectual transformation of Europe following the fall of Toledo (1085). In 1126, Archbishop Raymond established

the School of Translation in Toledo. In 1132, Roger II invited Muslim scholars into Sicily. The famous geographer al Idrisi worked at the Sicilian court. In 1150 the University of Paris was founded and in 1167, the University of Oxford was established. Cambridge followed in 1200. In 1204 the Chartres Cathedral in France was completed. In 1215, the University of Salamanca was established. In 1258 Roger Bacon taught at Oxford. Thus it was that the learning that had been cultivated in Baghdad, Cairo and Samarqand was passed on to Christian Europe through Toledo and Palermo.

The loss of the Andalusian Peninsula was a major milestone in the history of the world. Until the expulsion of the Muslims in 1492, Europe was bottled up from the southwest. The conquest of Spain and Portugal freed up the energies of Europe and it was now poised to venture out into the Atlantic. Beyond the blue waters of the vast ocean lay the gold coast of Africa, the route to the Americas and the riches of the Indian Ocean. The loss of Andalus was to reverberate through the centuries in the European discovery of America, the slave trade from West Africa and the colonization of Asia. The hour for Europe had arrived.

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