

SPANISH EMPIRE—RECONQUISTA

750 to 1400

CALIPHATE OF CORDOBA TO POGROMS OF 1391

Era Summary—Reconquista

Moorish Rule in Spain—Christians lived under Moorish rule in Spain for hundreds of years but their fortunes improved over time. For the first three centuries, the Cordova Caliphate was dominant but once it began to decline the Christian kingdoms in the north were able to reclaim much territory. There were at least five distinct phases of Moorish rule. The 'Reconquista' unit will focus on the middle three periods.

711-755	Moorish Conquest of Spain
755-929	Rise of Cordova Caliphate: Golden Age of Moorish Spain.
929-1031	Decline of Cordova Caliphate: Age of Viziers and Civil War
1040-1248	Almoravid and Almohod Emirates: breakup of Moorish kingdoms.
1230-1492	Emirate of Granada: vassal state to Kingdom of Castile.

Cordova Caliphate (755-929) — Forty years after the Moorish conquest of Spain there was a Moslem Civil war over leadership of the Caliphate in Damascus. After treacherously murdering most of the royal family, the Abbasids succeeded in overthrowing the Umayyads. One Umayyad Prince, however, escaped the massacre and fled to Spain. [Abderrahman I](#) was declared emir of Spain made his capital in Cordoba. For over two hundred years that city thrived as the commercial and cultural capital of Moorish Spain.

The Golden Age of the Cordoba Emirate in Spain (755-950) corresponded the the Dark Ages in Europe. In the early years the Franks ruled territory in northern Spain and [Charlemagne](#) made numerous forays into Moorish territory. But do to Viking raids throughout Europe and the collapse of the Frankish Empire the fortunes of Christendom were at a low ebb. Meanwhile, the Caliphate of Cordova, under the rule of Arab princes and Jewish merchants, was the most prosperous region in Europe.

During this period there remained a large population of Christians living within the caliphate who paid special taxes while being denied full rights of citizenship. But most Umayyad rulers were not inclined to take aggressive measures against them and tolerated the Christian kingdom to the north. Unfortunately, the fanatical Berbers that later came to power were less tolerant than the Arabs and forced Spanish Christians to defend their rights.

Almanzor, Almoravids, and Almohads (929-1250) — As the authority of the Caliphate waned over the centuries a great Moorish general arose by the name of [Almanzor](#). He consolidated Moslem influence and pressed his armies far into Christian territory. During his period of influence (970-1002 A.D.), Moorish power reached its greatest extent. Because of the common

threat, the Christian kingdoms united and successfully reclaimed some of their lost territory. But Almanzor's usurpation of power had strained Moslem unity and when he died without a clear successor, the Moorish states fell into civil war. The Cordova Caliphate collapsed entirely in 1031, and this opened the door for significant Christian gains against the disunited Moorish kingdoms.

In order to defend themselves against the Christians, the Moorish princes called upon the Almoravid Berbers, a move they soon regretted. Great armies of Berbers crossed into Spain but they were of little help in reconquering Christian territory. Instead they deposed the Moorish rulers who had called for their aid. The Almoravids, like the Alhomads who followed them, were desert warriors of a stern faith who despised the luxury-loving and religiously indifferent Moorish nobles. The prosperous trading culture of Al-Andalus declined quickly under the new leadership and many inhabitants preferred Christian rule to that of their new overlords.

With the Moorish government in perpetual disarray and warring factions in both Spain and Africa the Mohammedans continued to lose territory. Eventually in 1212 they were utterly defeated at Las Navas de Tolosa. In this cataclysmic battle the united Christians defeated an enormous army of Spanish Moors and Moslem Berbers. This effectively destroyed the power of the Moors and by 1300 the Spaniards controlled the entire Iberian Peninsula save only the vassal state of Granada.

Rise of the Christian Kingdoms (711-1000) — Several Christian kingdoms arose in the north of Spain in the centuries after the Moorish conquest but they were of little importance until after the fall of the Cordova Caliphate. The legendary leader of the exiles that fled north after the battle of Guadalete was [Pelayo](#), a Visigoth prince. The kingdom of Asturias that he established, however, was composed of Basques, Celt-Iberians, Roman Spaniards, Suevi, and Franks, as well as Visigoths. And it was not an independent kingdom, but rather, a vassal state of the Frankish Empire.



The region south of Asturias was Leon. Christians gained tentative control of this strategic region early on, and expanded due largely to Christian migration from Moorish domains. In 910 the Austarian king moved his capital to Leon and claimed more territory to the south. Castile, which rose to great importance in later years, was a duchy of Asturias that was "declared independent" by Fernan Gonsalez in 932 with its capital in Burgos.

Other Christian kingdoms in the north were Navarre, which became independent of the Frankish empire in 837, and Aragon, which split from Navarre in 1035 and expanded its borders to the south. Far to the west were Galicia and Portugal, vassal kingdoms of Leon. By the tenth century, the Christian kingdoms of Leon, Castile, Navarre, Aragon, Galicia and Portugal together controlled all of Northern Spain.

Victories against the Moors (1000-1184) — The Christians kingdoms of the north were able to gain significant territory even while the power of the Cordoba Caliphate was at its height mainly because the regions they dominated were poor and sparsely populated. The Moors controlled the cosmopolitan and prosperous coastal regions, and cared little for the undeveloped hinterlands of the north. In the late 900's, the Moslem general Almanzor briefly retook Christian territory but could not hold it. The Cordova caliphate collapsed shortly thereafter and divided in to warring Moslem kingdoms (called Taifas).

Soon afterward the breakup of the Cordova caliphate, Ferdinand I of Leon united Galicia and Castile under the Crown of Leon. Upon his death his son [Alfonso VI](#) gained control of all three kingdoms under the Crown of Castile. It was during this period that the famous [El Cid](#), a knight loyal to Alfonso's vanquished brother, was banished from Castile. Eventually, however, Cid and Alfonso were reconciled and in 1085 they reconquered the old Visigoth capital of Toledo, a terrific blow to the Moors. It was the fall of Toledo that inspired the Moorish princes to call upon the Almoravid Berbers, a development with disastrous consequences that only weakened the Moslem hold on Spain.

During this period Christian vs. Moslem wars were common, but so were palace insurrections and civil war. Various claimants in both Christian and Moslem courts would align themselves with *infidel* enemies of their rivals to better their own situations. Overall, however, the tide was in favor of the Christians. It was during this era that the great Spanish hero [El Cid](#) lived and his conquest of Valencia was a turning points in the struggle for Christian control of Spain. The 'Song of El Cid', a ballad written in his honor, is considered the first great poem in the Spanish language.

Rise of Castile and Aragon (1184-1350) — The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw more dramatic losses in Moorish territory. The Almohads replaced the Almoravids as the ruling dynasty and raised their capital in Seville but they never succeeded in uniting the Moors or reversing Christian advancements. They brought an enormous army of over 500,000 Berbers from Africa but were utterly routed at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. After this disaster the Moors were everywhere on the defensive and in the years following the Christians gained nearly the whole Peninsula.

The Christian victories against the Moors continued throughout the thirteenth century, especially under the kings of Aragon and Castile. [James I of Aragon](#), who reigned over sixty years, added the prosperous coastal region of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands his domains. In the far west Afonso Henriques, rose to power and established the kingdom of Portugal. And the greatest Christian warrior of all, [St. Ferdinand III](#) of Castile (St. Ferdinand), conquered the Moorish strongholds of Seville and Cordoba. He also brought Dominican and Franciscan orders to former Moorish territory to help re-Christianize southern Spain.

By 1236 Granada, the last Moorish kingdom in Spain, became a vassal state of Castile. And in spite of its precarious situation, over two hundred years passed before this last community of Moors was driven from the Iberian peninsula.

Trastamaras and the Riots of 1391—The Trastamaras were the royal house of Castile from which both Isabella and Ferdinand descended. They rose to power in the fourteenth century following the unpopular reign of 'Pedro the Cruel' of Castile. He was a widely-hated tyrant who murdered several family members, instigated civil wars, allied himself with Jewish usurers and impoverished his country. He was eventually overthrown by his illegitimate half-brother [Henry Trastamara](#) who founded the Trastamara dynasty.

Henry Trastamara reigned for ten years, and during that time one of his closest advisors was a Jewish tax-collector, Joseph Pichon of Seville. Pichon was popular with Christians for his leniency and unpopular with Jews because of his favor with the king. Shortly after Henry died the Jews of Seville arranged the execution of Pichon. This act of treachery set into motion a process of retaliation between the Trastamara kings and Spanish Jews that led to a widespread massacre of Jews in 1391, the most notorious pogrom in Spanish history.

Anti-Jewish riots began in Seville after the "accidental" death of John I, the Trastamara king who had stripped the Jews of their privileges. Goaded on by anti-Jewish preachers, the Jewish quarter in Seville was burned and thousands were massacred throughout Spain. Thousands others sought to save their lives by conversion to Christianity, but such forced conversions created more problems than they solved. This was one of many instances when the whole Jewish community in Spain paid a heavy price for the malicious actions of a few of their numbers.

Recommended Reading—Reconquista

Book Title	Selected Chapters (# chapters)
CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS	
Ober - Spain: A History for Young Readers	The Western Califate to Kings of Castile and Aragon (4)
Horne - Story of the Greatest Nations: Spain	Rulers of Spain to Rise of the Christian Kingdoms (2)
SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS	
Bonner - A Child's History of Spain	Abderrahman the First to The Moors at Granada (11)
Abbott - The Romance of Spanish History	The Moors and Christians to Chivalry and Crime (3)
Morris - Historical Tales: Spanish	Adventures of a Fugitive Prince to Peter the Cruel (5)
Wilson - The Story of the Cid For Young People	<i>entire book</i>
Florian - A History of the Moors in Spain	<i>entire book</i>
Irving - Irving's Alhambra	<i>entire book</i>

Timeline—Reconquista

CALIPHATE OF CORDOVA

- 755 **Caliphate of Cordova** established by [Abderrahman I](#), last Umayyad prince.
- 778 First Frankish raid into Moorish Spain by [Charlemagne](#) and his Frankish knights.
- 800 Charlemagne returns to Spain. Franks gain control of Barcelona, later Catalonia.
- 824 Franks defeated at by treachery at Roncevalles Pass, subject of Song of [Roland](#).
- 837 Kingdom of Navarre in the Pyrenees gains its independence from the Franks.
- 859 Eulogius and other Martyrs of Cordoba executed for Christian faith.

RISE OF LEON and CASTILE

- 910 Leon united with Asturias, becomes predominant Christian kingdom in Spain.
- 912 [Abderrahman III](#) Caliph of Cordoba, leads Moorish armies against Christians.
- 932 Fernan Gonsalez establishes the independence of Castile, capital at Burgos.
- 939 Ramiro II defeats [Abderrahman III](#) at *Simancas*, gains territory for Castile.

ALMANZOR AND CIVIL WAR

- 976 First conquest of [Almanzor](#), who mastered nearly all of Spain; ruled until 1002.
- 1002 Death of Almanzor at the *Battle of Calatanazor*.
- 1010 Beginning of Civil War between rival claimants to the Caliphate of Cordova.
- 1031 After 20 years of war, the Moorish empire breaks up into "tarifs" (Taifas).

ALFONSO VI AND ALMORAVIDS

- 1035 Ramirez I establishes the Kingdom of Aragon.
- 1072 [Alfonso VI](#) becomes king of both Leon and Castile. Quarrels with [El Cid](#).
- 1085 [Alfonso VI](#) captures the Moorish stronghold of Toledo and much of central Spain.
- 1086 **Almoravids arrive in Spain**, defeat Christians at *Battle of Zalaka*.
- 1094 Almoravides defeat Moorish princes and set up Emirate at Cordova.
- 1095 [El Cid](#) captures Valencia; rules over both Moorish, Christian subjects.

ALFONSO VIII AND ALMOHADS

- 1137 Catalonia united to the Crown of Aragon under Ramon of Aragon.
- 1139 [Afonso Henriques](#) defeats [Yussef](#) at *Ourique*, founds kingdom of Portugal.
- 1144 Alfonso of Leon defeats the Almohads at Cordova.
- 1184 **Almohads defeat last of the Almoravids, make their capital at Seville.**

1212 [Alfonso VIII](#) lead Christians to victory over Almohads at *Las Navas de Tolosa*.

JAMES I OF ARAGON AND ST. FERDINAND

1228 James of Aragon captures the Balearic Isles.

1236 [St. Ferdinand](#) captures Cordova, traditional Moorish stronghold .

1238 **Kingdom of Granada founded by** [Mohammed Alhamar](#); pays tribute to Castile.

1248 [St. Ferdinand](#) captures Seville, Almohad capital.

1340 Spaniards defeats last invasion of African Moors at the *Battle of Rio Salado*.

SPANISH JEWS AND CONVERSOS

1212 Crusaders attack Jews of Castilian towns following victory at Navas de Tolosa

1250 Papal bull sets restrictions on Jewish activities. Requires distinctive dress.

1350 Favor shown to Jews by [Pedro of Castile](#) increases animosity and attacks.

1369 Pedro of Castile, patron of Jews, overthrown by half-brother [Henry Trastamara](#).

1380 St. Vincent of Ferrer encourages thousands of Jews to convert to Christianity.

1391 Massacres of Spanish Jews starting in Seville. Thousands of deaths and forced conversions.

1391 Conversion of Solomon Ha-Levi, prominent Rabbi of Burgos, powerful family of Castile.

Characters—Reconquista

EARLY CHRISTIAN HEROES

Bernardo Carpio ~ 800	Legendary Spanish hero during the era of Charlemagne who battled both Moors and Franks.
Charlemagne 742–814	First Holy Roman Emperor. Unified most of Western Europe into a Frankish Empire.
Roland d. 778	Nephew of Charlemagne and legendary hero of his wars. Died at Roncesvalles.
Theodomir ~ 711	Visigoth general who used a ruse in order to make peace with the Moorish conquerors.

CORDOBA CALIPHATE

Abderrahman I 731–788	Last surviving Umayyad prince, escaped to Spain, became Emir of Cordova
Abderrahman III 912–961	Powerful, long serving Emir who declared himself Caliph of Cordova.
Almanzor 938–1002	Renowned Moorish general. Leader of Moorish Spain at the height of its power near 1000 A.D.

ALMORAVIDS AND ALMOHADS

Yussef
d. 1184

Almohad Caliph of Africa who invaded Moorish Spain and set up a kingdom in Seville.

GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS

Alfonso VI
1040–1109

King of Castile who with his great warrior El Cid, reconquered Toledo and much other territory from the Moors.

El Cid
1040–1099

Legendary Spanish hero of chivalry. Loyal to Alfonso VI in spite of treachery. Conquered Valencia.

Afonso Henriques
1109–1185

Founder of the Kingdom of Portugal. Defeated the Moors and declared Portugal independent from Leon.

Alfonso VIII
1155–1214

Led the victorious Christians against the Saracens at the decisive *Battle of Navas de Tolosa*.

St. Dominic

Founded Dominican Order of scholars, theologians, and teachers.

James I of Aragon
1208–1276

Long reigning warrior king who expanded the dominions of Aragon to include the Balearic Islands and Valencia.

St. Ferdinand III
1199–1252

King of Castile who conquered Seville and Cordoba, and brought Dominican and Franciscan orders to southern Spain.

Raymond Penyafort
1175–1275

Spanish Dominican who served as confessor to James I of Aragon and compiled first official set of Canon Laws for the Church.

UNITED SPAIN

Henry Trastamara
1334–1379

Illegitimate son of Alfonso XI who usurped the throne of Castile from his half-brother, Peter the Cruel after many conflicts.

Pedro of Castile
1334–1369

King of Castile with reputation as dishonorable, murderous tyrant. Eventually deposed by half-brother Henry Trastamara.

Joseph Pichon
1330–1371

Jewish counsellor of Henry Trastamara, highly esteemed Christians. His execution by jealous Jews greatly worsened Jewish-Christian relations in Seville

Paul of Burgos
1351–1435

Leading Spanish Rabbi of Castile who converted to Christianity and became an archbishop and Chancellor. Original name was Solomon ha-Levi.

Vincent Ferrer
1350–1419

Dominican Preacher from Valencian who gained acclaim as a missionary and was especially noted for encouraging Jewish conversions.