



Muslim Invasion of Spain, 711 AD

Iberian Uniqueness in the Arab Invasion of Spain

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In the spring of the year AD 711, the Visigothic kingdom of Iberia was invaded and conquered by an army from the nearby Muslim Empire. This invasion and the ensuing conquest of the region the Arabs called Al-Andalus were only small portions of the aggressive Islamic expansion which was taking place across the known world. Although there were obvious similarities between the events of Arab conquest which took place in Iberia and those in other regions, Spain stands out in several dramatic ways. This paper will discuss five specific areas of the eighth century conquest and occupation in which one finds certain facets of Iberian uniqueness: 1) The composition of the Muslim invasion force; 2) Some Arab occupational policies; 3) The rebellion of Abd al-Aziz against the Caliph; 4) The formation of the realm of Asturias; and 5) The transformation of Al-Andalus into the Umayyad Caliphate.

Before beginning a discussion of the events, though, it is important to take a look at the sources from which much of this material comes. The two main sources which this paper references on this subject are the anonymous *Chronicle of 754* and the work of the Arab historian,

Ahmed ibn Mohammed Al-Makkari. Both of these chronicles, for reasons which will be explained later, can provide very valuable insights and information for a discussion of this topic.

The *Chronicle of 754* (also called *The Mozarabic Chronicle*, the *Chronicle of Isidore of Beja*, and *The Anonymous Rhyming Chronicle of Cordoba*¹) is the most useful source when considering the invasion and subsequent happenings because it is more contemporary to the period than any other. It is of Spanish Christian origin and significantly predates the earliest surviving Arab accounts. The author by and large treats the Arabs as valid rulers despite their difference of religion and generally bases his evaluation of them on how well they promote peace and civil stability.² He makes no comment on the religion of the conquerors, never mentioning Islam nor making any references to heresy or paganism. Roger Collins points out in his book, *The Arab Conquest of Spain*, that this author, because of both the treatment of Mohammed and the direction of his prophesy, was clearly not a Muslim himself, and does not need to be considered anything other than Christian.³ An account of this nature from a Christian author which is virtually devoid of any religiously-motivated criticisms of the Muslim conquerors shows a reasonable balance of perspective. This balance, as well as the

¹ Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989), 26.

² Olivia Remie Constable, ed. *Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 29.

³ Collins, 62-63.

chronicle's nearness to the events it covers, lends it much credibility as a source. As Collins puts it, ". . . the *Chronicle of 754* offers really very good evidence in that it is both close in time to the events that it describes, and presents an account that is intrinsically credible both in terms of historical methodology and common sense."⁴

The histories of Al-Makkari do not possess quite the level of testimony as the *Chronicle of 754* but are useful nonetheless. His work is a seventeenth century compilation of many earlier sources, and is thus removed quite far from events. This fact can be deceptively damaging to Al-Makkari's credibility until one considers that the sources which he compiled were mostly historical writings from much earlier which have since been lost. The main reason this paper references Al-Makkari, despite the source's sometimes questionable accuracy, is that his account provides a suitable Arab perspective to complement the Christian *Chronicle of 754*.

The record of the rise of the Islamic Empire is truly the record of a rising comet. What had previously been a patchwork of nomadic tribes raiding the fringes of greater nations had become a vast empire over the course of a century. This explosion of power was made possible by the organizing authority of Islam. Neither the Sasanian nor the Byzantine empires were prepared for such a radical turnaround and by the time of the 711 invasion, the Muslim Empire stretched from modern Pakistan in

⁴ Ibid., 36.

the east to the North African shores of the Atlantic in the west.⁵

It was from the region of “Ifriqiya” (modern-day Tunisia), which had been recently conquered in 705 and was headquartered in Kairouan, that the Muslim army attempted to extend the reach of the empire even further. The obvious target for this expansion would have been the Visigothic kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula. Under the rule of Roderic, who had recently usurped the throne from the previous king,⁶ the region had become splintered with civil conflict and would have been ripe for absorption into the blossoming Muslim empire.⁷

As mentioned before, the invasion itself was not especially remarkable or unique among its counterparts in other areas of the Empire, except perhaps in regard to the relative ease of conquest. A Muslim force under orders from Musa ibn Nusayr, the governor of Ifriqiya, set out for the Iberian Peninsula, landing there in April of 711.⁸ A major battle was fought in the Transductine Mountains in which the Visigoths were soundly defeated by an Arab force under the command of Musa’s lieutenant, Tariq ibn Ziyad.⁹ Collins mentions that shortly after this battle, which basically constituted the entirety of the Visigothic

⁵ John Haywood, et al. *Atlas of World History* (New York: Fall River Press, 2009), 3.13.

⁶ *Chronicle of 754*, 52.

⁷ Collins, 28-29. See also *Chronicle of 754*, 52 (note 99).

⁸ Pascual De Gayangos, appendix to *Nafhu-t-Tib Min Ghosni-l-Andalusi-r-Rattib wa Tarikh Lisanu-d-Din Ibni-l-Khattib* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1840), appendix E xci.

⁹ *Chronicle of 754*, 52. See also Collins, 28.

kingdom's resistance¹⁰, Musa himself arrived in Cadiz and "is said to have proceeded to Toledo and pacified the adjacent regions."¹¹

The first facet of Spanish uniqueness can be seen in the makeup of this Muslim invasion force: the majority of the common warriors in the army were actually Berber rather than Arab. Al-Makkari cites several sources which mention the composition of Tariq's host, and each number indicates the same pattern. One account states that Tariq was given by Musa "the command of an army of seven thousand men, chiefly Berbers and slaves, very few only being genuine Arabs."¹² Another source mentions the number to be twelve thousand, again almost completely Berbers with few Arabs. Then in the same section of entries, Al-Makkari mentions the chroniclers Ibnu Hayyan and Ibnu Khaldun having recorded quantities of seven thousand (mostly Berbers), and three hundred Arabs with ten thousand Berbers, respectively. While these figures may be slight exaggerations, they nonetheless demonstrate a clear pattern of Berber majority during the invasion.

The Berbers had been the inhabitants of North Africa roughly since the days of the Phoenicians until AD 702 when they were conquered by the Arabs.¹³ The garrison and occupation requirements of

¹⁰ Collins, 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 29.

¹² Ahmed ibn Mohammed Al-Makkari, *Nafhu-t-Tib Min Ghosni-l-Andalusi-r-Rattib wa Tarikh Lisanu-d-Din Ibni-l-Khattib*, Translated by Pascual De Gayangos (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1840), 4.2.

¹³ Heywood, sections 1.23, 3.13.

this campaign (which was conducted at the farthest western reaches of the Muslim empire) most likely used up all the available troops, evidently forcing the Arabs to begin recruiting large numbers of Berber mercenaries for the purpose of quickly invading Iberia.¹⁴

Although most Berbers were generally used to fill subordinate rank-and-file positions, accounts of certain tribesmen being given more privileged stations also exist. Al-Makkari mentions a Berber freedman of Musa's, Tarif Abu Zar'ah, leading a sizable raiding expedition into Iberia prior to the invasion.¹⁵ Tariq, Musa's second-in-command and leader of the first wave of the 711 invasion, was himself a Berber, and possibly the governor of the city of Tangiers in Ifriqiya.¹⁶

Despite the fact that this large-scale mercenary recruitment proved extremely effective for the purposes of the invasion of Iberia, it was not repeated on any significant scale in Al-Andalus itself. This may have been because the local inhabitants of Spain did not possess the tribal organization of the Berbers. Without that structure, "the mobilization of Spanish resources of manpower, as in the case of those from many other parts of the Arab Empire, would have required a more complex form of integration into the society of the conquerors."¹⁷ The society of the Berbers seems to have provided a unique and satisfactory

¹⁴ Collins, 98.

¹⁵ Al-Makkari, 4.2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.1.

¹⁷ Collins, 99.

solution to the Arab's military shortage which was duplicated nowhere else on that scale.

Another element of distinctiveness can be seen in some of the policies which the Arabs implemented during the conquest and occupation of the peninsula. Many of these practices were common to other Muslim conquests, but a few notable exceptions exist. General procedure when a Muslim army invaded new territory was for all the major cities of the region to be offered "a large measure of local self-government and religious toleration"¹⁸ in return for immediate capitulation. An example of one such treaty between Theodemir, the ruler of Murcia, and Abd al-Aziz ibn Musa, a Muslim governor, gives an idea of what might be a standard arrangement. Theodemir is given control of seven cities, religious freedom, civil equality, and promise of protection in return for fealty and tribute.¹⁹

This arrangement allowed for very rapid conquest as the Arab forces moved quickly through the area, securing oaths of fealty, exacting promises of tribute, and expanding to the next targets. By leaving local organizational structures intact, Muslim armies were able to continue their expansion without having to whittle away at their own numbers by leaving behind garrisons at every hostile city. For this main reason, a relatively light disruption of local routine was apparently a frequent

¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹ Al-Dabbi, *Kitab bughyat al-multamis fi ta'rikh rijal ahl al-Andalus*.

characteristic of Muslim conquests, Spain being no exception this time.

Even tax amounts were often kept the same, meaning the only change as far as the native populace was concerned was to whom the taxes were being paid. In fact, some Mediterranean regions recently conquered by the Arabs simply adopted the existent forms of Byzantine levy policies as templates for their own taxation procedures. In Iberia, it might be that since the items specified as tribute in treaties with local rulers were unlike what would have been expected from the conquered inhabitants of regions like Egypt and Syria, that those items “may have been closer to the norms of the Visigothic monarchy.”²⁰ In the midst of these typical procedures, which were carried out in Al-Andalus as in nearly every other land under Islamic rule, one noteworthy exception becomes apparent.

In virtually every other conquest, proper practice had been for the existing center of culture or government to be demoted in favor of a completely new city built by the conquerors. This pattern can be seen in the cases of Ctesiphon, which was replaced by Basra; Khorasan and Carthage, supplanted by Merv and Kairouan respectively;²¹ and Alexandria, which was overshadowed by Fustat (which later became known as Cairo). This pattern was unrepeated in Spain.

Although a cultural and administrative hub can be seen in the

²⁰ Collins, 41.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

existence of Toledo, there was no pressure to reduce in rank this or any other important municipality in favor of an Arab construction. Instead, the center of Muslim government took up residence in some of the chief cities already in existence: first Seville, and eventually Cordoba. The latter of these two is distinctive even today because of the bountiful attention upon which its Islamic masters lavished it during their five centuries of occupation. One of Cordoba's chief landmarks is an eighth century mosque which was turned into a Catholic church in 1238. The structure has more than one thousand pillars of granite, onyx, jasper, and marble supporting its arches.²²

Why would this normal practice be abandoned in here? The answer is simple, and is actually what lies at the heart of all the aspects of Iberian uniqueness mentioned in this paper. Spain was a novelty among Islamic provinces in that it was not only separated from the Caliph's seat in Damascus by miles (which numbered nearly two thousand), but also by geography. The Mediterranean and the strait of Gibraltar effectively carved out a secluded corner for Al-Andalus. In spite of this division, Iberia was not considered a separate province, but was most likely under the authority of Kairouan which would have in turn answered to Damascus.²³ This could easily explain why a new Arab cultural center was not established in Spain, because it would have been

²² Walter C. Langsom, "Cordoba" (*The World Book Encyclopedia* (1970)) 831.

²³ Collins, 125.

redundant to the center already existing in Kairouan and would probably have been seen as superfluous for such a backwater prefecture.

The next feature of uniqueness which sets Al-Andalus apart from the rest of the Arab Empire is the attempt in 715 by Musa's son, Abd al-Aziz to "throw off the Arab yoke from his neck and retain the conquered kingdom of Iberia for himself."²⁴ The hold of the Damascus Caliph was tenuous indeed in the years immediately following the conquest, and the time may have seemed opportune for an assertion of independence. As mentioned before, the Muslim armies would often, in the interest of maintaining a rapid conquest, leave some areas to their own devices, only a few garrisons remaining in certain turbulent areas to keep the peace. This lack of universal military presence, not to mention the fact that the number of Arabs and Berbers still constituted a decided minority of the overall population, both combined to make the region quite fractured as far as loyalty to the Caliphate was concerned.

It was at this time (around 718) that the Caliph, Umar II, having just experienced a costly loss at Constantinople, voiced his possible decision to abandon the fledgling conquest altogether, and Al-Aziz may have been intentionally taking advantage of this receding interest for Al-Andalus in his bid for power. Secondary to any question of whether or not that is true, though, is the fact that he made a bid at all, whatever his motivation. It is notable that in all the extensive Arab conquests of the

²⁴ *Chronicle of 754*, 59.

seventh and eighth centuries, only in Spain can be found such a plot to “throw off the Arab yoke.” Ironically, it was Al-Aziz’s attempts to break the power of the Caliph in Spain and cement his own position that eventually brought an end to the splintered state of affairs in the peninsula and solidified the Caliph’s hold over the region.

Even though Al-Aziz’s bid for power came to an abrupt conclusion with his assassination at the hands of his companions in 715,²⁵ the mere fact that the attempt was made at all lends credence to the idea that Iberia’s separation from the Islamic “mainland” has given rise to some unique situations. Perhaps a connection can be made between the only major Arab province completely cut off by water and the only major attempt by an Arab governor to make that divide permanent.

The fourth example of the distinctive status of Al-Andalus can be seen in the establishment of the kingdom of Asturias in 718/19. This tiny Christian realm in the north of the peninsula represented the first concentrated resistance to the Muslim conquest since Roderic’s defeat, a resistance which most likely succeeded only because the Islamic army was too preoccupied to fully deal with it.²⁶ In fact, the whole survival of Asturias seems to have depended on a series of coincidences and special circumstances from the very beginning. The Arabs would periodically make attempts to bring down Asturias, but every time they would seem

²⁵ Collins, 37.

²⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

to get distracted by more pressing matters.

To modern readers, it might seem rather odd that the Arabs would allow such a small kingdom, which certainly posed no threat, to exist right under their collective noses. After all, the existence of Asturias leaves the conquest of Spain incomplete, so why did the Muslims not just, as we would say, finish the job? Just as people today would have thought it strange if the United States had stopped its expansion at the border of Oregon, so too with the Arabs in Spain. There are several possible reasons for why the Islamic forces did not “finish the job,” the two foremost of which are Arab perspective and mountains.

Perspective was an obstacle for the conquest of Asturias because in the Arab mind, the Iberian Peninsula was not a natural geopolitical entity, but rather the outer fringes of an empire which was already slightly overstretched. After the conquest of North Africa, the Arab sentiment seemed to be that if further expansion were easy and cheap, it would be embraced, and if not, it would be abandoned. The conquest of Al-Andalus, as previously mentioned, had encountered little to no resistance, and was consequently successful. The Islamic effort to subdue Asturias, as well as the later push into Frankish territory in the 720s, seem to be continuations of the “Try-it-and-see-what-happens” campaigns. Unlike the conquest of Spain, though, these attempts were defeated: the former in an ongoing cycle of setbacks throughout the Arab

kingdom's existence, and the latter in 732 at the battle of Poitiers.²⁷ In the Arab perspective, these defeats were probably just gambles that did not pay off. The conquest of Asturias was not seriously pursued because it was most likely considered to be unnecessary.²⁸

The second major reason for the Muslim army's inability to tame Asturias was the mountains. Collins points out time and time again that everywhere they encountered mountains, the Arabs had difficulties: "In general the Arabs proved incapable of extending their control into new territory divided from their main bases by major mountain chains."²⁹ This proved true in North Africa, where the Berbers were able to put up a very determined resistance for quite a long time, and it proved true again in Al-Andalus (even though the Arabs brought Berbers with them that time). In fact while the Muslim king, Abd ar-Rahman, was attempting to eliminate resistance to his young reign, some Berbers gave an encore performance of their previous activities by revolting, retreating to the mountains, and holing up in fortified hideouts. It is mentioned here again that the Berbers were suited to mountain warfare because of their experiences in North Africa while the Arabs seemed to always have difficulty. These mountains apparently provided a solid barrier of protection for the Asturians as well. It seems that campaigning in mountainous conditions may have been awkward and uncomfortable for

²⁷ Heywood, section 3.13.

²⁸ Collins, 156.

²⁹ Ibid., 98.

the Islamic forces, thus making a conquest of Asturias a very low priority.³⁰

The founding of the kingdom of Asturias is significant because it represents an occurrence unique to Al-Andalus among other regions of the Arab Empire. Instances can be found in other areas of peoples eventually rising up, throwing off Muslim rule, and founding new independent countries, but Asturias is unique among these examples in that it was an original survivor of the conquest. Other nations threw off the yoke, but Asturias never actually wore it. Few other examples of so small a kingdom successfully resisting conquest can be found anywhere else. In fact, the establishment of this kingdom is considered by some to be the commencement of the history of modern Spain and the foundation of Spanish national identity.³¹

The final manifestation of Iberian uniqueness can be seen in the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in 756. The Umayyad ruler in Damascus had been overthrown by the rival Abbasid dynasty six years earlier, encouraging the Umayyad governor of Al-Andalus, Yusuf ibn Abd ar-Rahman, to make himself a kind of independent “king.” Yusuf had been in power for nearly a decade when a member of the Umayyad royal family arrived on Spanish shores.³² The name of this man was Abd ar-Rahman and, after forcibly pushing Yusuf from power, he began a

³⁰ Ibid., 156.

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Ibid., 119.

campaign to reunite the peninsula which had been splintered by rebellions and civil wars during the preceding few decades. The end result of his work eventually came to be known as the Umayyad or Cordoba Caliphate.

This caliphate was unique in that it was the first and most significant of the territories to peel away from the former Muslim Empire during the following fifty years. Again it can be seen that the unusual location of Al-Andalus relative to the rest of the Muslim world have allowed for unusual circumstances. Unlike the other caliphates and emirates which would form in the following years, the Cordoba Caliphate had clearly defined boundaries, and when one looks back on these events it makes sense that the only region which ever produced a rebel governor (Abd al-Aziz, as mentioned earlier) would be the first region in which a governor broke totally from the rule of Damascus.

This paper has discussed five characteristics which make the Muslim invasion, conquest, and occupation of Al-Andalus unique from actions of the same nature in other regions of the Arab Empire: the ratio of Arabs and Berbers making up the invading army; the establishment of Cordoba as capitol of the peninsula as well as various other practices of conquest; the rebellion of Abd al-Aziz; and finally, the founding of both the realm of Asturias and the Cordoba Caliphate. If the record of the rise of the Islamic Empire is the record of a rising comet, then the account of the events in Al-Andalus are the brightest sparkle in the tail.