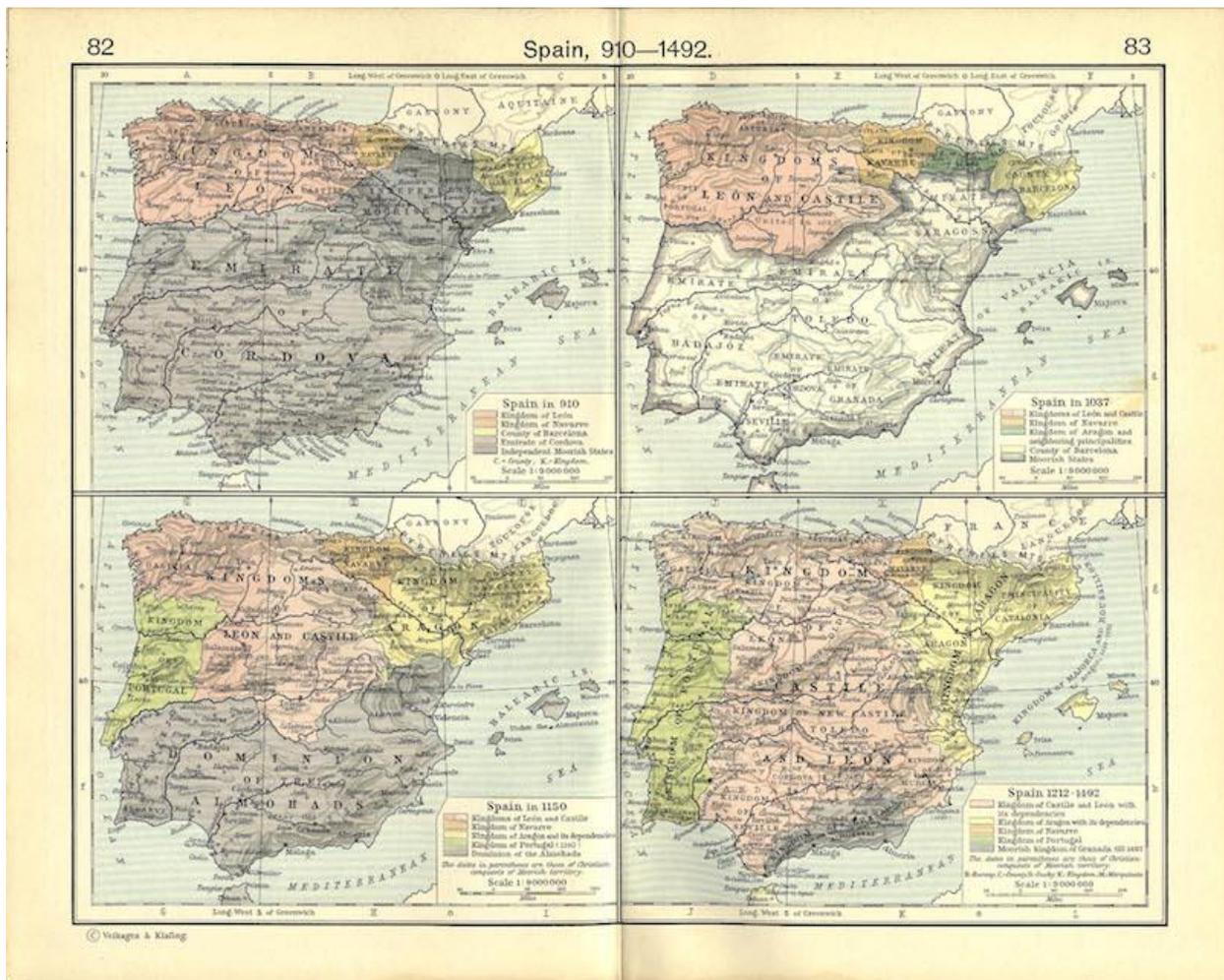


Why study medieval Spain? Viewing our modern challenges through the lens of the past.

Medieval Spain, roughly cover the time period from 600 C.E. (the common era, or A.D.) until 1500 C.E., and includes the majority of the Iberian Peninsula of Western Europe. This is a history that is exceptional.

Maps of Medieval Spain, 910 to 1492. [[View larger](#)]

Below you will see four maps of medieval Spain that characterize it's political and religious divisions from 910 to 1492.



Source: University of Texas Libraries. *The Historical Atlas* by William R. Shepherd, 1926.
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Spain is Exceptional (and it is not)

Historians are loath to use the term "exceptional." Why? Precisely because human experience across history tends to include reoccurring, perennial characteristics like cultural and linguistic norms and tastes, family and social relations, religious traditions, political relations and governance, and economic and trade relations, to name just a few items. Yes, different human groups approach life in various ways but what is consistent is that all individuals and groups tend to relate to each other in response to these issues.

When we speak of exceptionalism or the notion that a people are unique and special, we invite significant biases into our thinking and approaches to history. Why? Well, the process of defining a human group, and for that matter a particular history, and giving them a privileged place in our minds invites bias. We may unconsciously place what we see as exceptional groups on a higher pedestal than other groups. This may actually simply reflect our own familiarity with them, our personal interests, and our own cultural norms. Exceptionalism is dangerous to history -- it distorts our view and our interpretations and invites unfounded speculation.

So, what do I mean when I argue positively that medieval Spain is exceptional? I believe it is an unusual place and era that shares remarkable characteristics with our own 21st century. Its "privileged" place in history is because of its similarity to our own age and global human environment.

- Today, like medieval Spain, and across the world we struggle and experiment with different forms of governance that draw upon different political, cultural, and religious traditions. The social-egalitarian values expressed in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have come to inform our European Enlightenment ideas about democratic rule and basic human rights. And yet, the ancient idea of kingship, theocracies, and communal-governed associations still persists in the 21st century. Around the world, as in medieval Spain, people struggle with how to address governance, religious and ethnic conflicts, mass migration.
- Similarly, as in medieval Spain, today a key question is what it means to be a part of a human group ("us") versus an outsider ("them"). What constitutes us and them -- religious, national, ethnic, or regional identity? Do all of them?
- Much like medieval Spain, we are simultaneously uncomfortable and intrigued by human differences. What types of variation do we welcome and which forms do we view as dangerous and transgressive? When must we enforce boundaries around food, personal and family relations, financial affairs, religion and language? As in the past, we very much worry about cultural and religious contamination that may lead to social degeneration or the loss of identities?

Medieval Spain is our mirror, our doppelgänger. Yes, Jews, Christians, and Muslims during the Spanish Middle Ages were quite different from us, but we also share much in common with them. Moreover, we can learn how their successes and failures resulted in workable forms of cultural and religious coexistence or tore that coexistence apart.

Medieval Blending - Aljafería Palace, 11th Century C.E. (Zaragoza, Spain)

The Aljaferia Palace is a particularly beautiful Islamic palace first built during the 11th century during the period of the independent Taifa Kingdoms (or "Party" Kingdoms). By 1118 C.E., Christian King Alfonso of Aragon reconquered the city of Zaragoza and made it his royal palace. Christians continued the practice of incorporating Islamic design and aesthetics in the building's architecture that came to be known as the Mudéjar style. In this manner, the palace is a blending of several cultures.



Source: Roger L. Martinez-Davila, 2017. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

Contemporary Blending -- Puerta de Sol Plaza (Madrid, Spain) - December 2016

A contemporary example of humans blending in our present-day world.



What is coexistence (convivencia)? It is positive, negative, and ambivalent.

Defining Coexistence

Coexistence in medieval Spain can be defined as the sum of all relationships among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and their hybridized descendants. Yes, coexistence includes friendly, productive, collaborative, and mutually-beneficial relationships that allowed Iberians to work and live together. It can include amity, harmony, acceptance, intermingling, and interchange. However, coexistence is also about conflict, violence, animosity, discrimination, and suspicion. In its simplest form coexistence is the simultaneous occupation of physical, intellectual, cultural, and religious space.

In this manner, warfare between two parties on the battlefield is a type of "negative" coexistence, or ultimately even the negation of coexistence if one group is eliminated or expelled. Similarly, blended artistic methods, such as Mudéjar ironwork (Christian adaptations of Islamic forms), might be considered another form of "positive" coexistence.

Mudéjar Door Knocker (Circa 1475 CE)



Mudéjar was not a single, unchanging style but, rather, an artistic approach that enjoyed the presence of Islamic elements. Mudéjar constantly reinvented itself, and different influences can be detected clearly in different centuries. In the fifteenth century as Gothic styles were increasingly introduced and Renaissance styles in the sixteenth, these styles also blended with the Mudéjar. What occurred was an art form that was heavy with detail and rich in decorative designs that helped soften the austerity of Christian ornamentation. Specific Moorish inheritances within the Spanish Mudéjar resulted in an interesting combination of motifs and patterns that included iron grilles, elaborate door knockers, and escutcheons. In this door knocker with a dragon, the ironworker has made two screen-like sheets of pierced iron, the uppermost composed of purely European Gothic trefoil and organic motifs, while the underneath unit maintains a network of paisley-shaped holes responding to the Gothic design but also creating an overall abstract pattern typical of Mudéjar design.

Source and License: Door Knocker, Spain, circa 1475 CE, Unidentified artist, Wrought iron. The Hispanic Society of America (R111). Used with permission from the New Mexico History Museum's 2016 *Fractured Faiths: Spanish Judaism, the Inquisition, and New World Identities* exhibition.

Coexistence in medieval Iberia was a deeply ambivalent experience. What are we to make of the substantial conversions of Christians to Islam after the initial Muslim conquest of Visigothic Spain in the 8th and 9th centuries? Or, what about Christians who lived under Islamic rule but who adopted Arabic as their language as well as Islamic customs? Are these positive, negative, or more complicated types of coexistence?

Similarly, Jews converted to Christianity (conversos) and Muslims who converted to Christianity (moriscos) as Christian kingdoms regained portions of the Iberian Peninsula during the Spanish Reconquista (711-1492 CE). If these conversions were not forced and were freely adopted, was this a positive or negative form of coexistence? Or more likely, was the cultural and religious environment in late medieval Christian Spain so weighted against religious minorities that any conversion was problematic and not totally voluntary? Clearly, the historical circumstances, and one's perspective will impact the perception of conversions.

In sum, coexistence is all of these permutations of relationships among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Coexistence in Islamic al-Andalus (Spain)

Positive forms of convivencia in Islamic al-Andalus can be observed in the tenth century under the auspices of Abd-al-Rahman III (912-961 CE) and the Caliphate of Cordoba (929-1031 CE). Caliph Abd-al-Rahman III, like his father before him, “pursued an ethnically and religiously inclusive policy dedicated to the pacification and unification... [of] al-Andalus.” Abd-al-Rahman III showered support on the arts and sciences and “sparked a general cultural efflorescence.” In addition, he encouraged minorities to pursue their own intellectual interests by providing them with a model of how to proceed.

Català: La civilització del califat de Còrdova en temps d'Abd-al-Rahman III by Dionisio Baixeras Verdager (1862–1943).

In this painting, Caliph Abd-al-Rahman III receives an ambassador.

Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_civilitzaci%C3%B3_del_califat_de_C%C3%B2rdova_en_temps_d%27Abd-al-Rahman_III.jpg. License: Public Domain.

Fortunate for Abd-al-Rahman III and his brethren, Islam was uniquely positioned to incorporate Christians and Jews into its societal structure due to their shared religious history. **According to the theological constructs of Islam, Jews and Christians were ahl-al-kitab (People of the Book) and thus a protected minority.** These **dhimmi (protected people)** were to be tolerated, although they did not enjoy the same societal benefits as Muslims and were required to pay religious poll-taxes.

With Islamic civilization in al-Andalus living these religious values, the dhimmi were protected from injury to their persons and property. They were offered freedom to pursue any occupation provided it did not involve authority over Muslims. They were allowed freedom of movement and freedom of religion that included the right to manage the affairs of their own faith community. But as new Islamic groups in al-Andalus, they challenged and sought to restrict these freedoms.

Coexistence in Christian Spain

Later, as the Iberian Muslims were forced into retreat, the Christian kingdoms had to consider how to govern Muslims and Jews, but also Arabized Christians in the southern and eastern portions of the Iberian Peninsula. Some Christians used the fundamentals of the Muslim dhimmi religious contract to form the basis of their ideals relating to inter-ethnic cooperation and coexistence, although Christians were not religiously bound by it. However, in his book, *The Spanish People*, Americo Castro states that the protection offered by the Christian kings was codified so that it would officially sanction what was already local custom. Alfonso X "The Wise"'s legal code, *Las Siete Partidas*, is an example of this codification.

Las Siete Partidas Manuscript



Source: Las Siete Partidas (originally belonged to Alvaro de Zúñiga, first duke of Arévalo, chief justice of the kingdom, who was married to Leonor Pimentel.) Seven-Part Code, World Digital Library. License: Public Domain. Larger images of the entire illuminated manuscript accessible [here](#).

Further, kings like Alfonso X (1252-1284 CE) believed they could divinely rule Jews and Muslims since the Christian god was “the vertex of a triangle in which Christians, Moors, and Jews were united.” Thus it is clear that Christian kings were also taking into consideration their

shared religious tradition with the Jews and Muslims. Americo Castro states that the circumstances for Jews living in the reconquered territories up until the fifteenth century were one of enviable position,

“For the Jews, Spain was a new kind of Zion. At one point they had more than a hundred synagogues, and their power, under the protection of the kings and great lords, was at times quite considerable. They were rich, and they cultivated the arts neglected by the Christians. They controlled the administration of finance, and they milked the humble to fill the king’s treasury.”

Of course, Castro also noted that the Christian kingdoms desperately needed the help of its Muslim and Jewish subjects to compete with the Islamic Caliphate of Cordoba, and later, the Islamic Party Kingdoms (Taifas). Out of necessity, Americo Castro states,

"The Christian states...had to keep themselves ready for war at all times... To subsist, a civil society must have something more than booty. Warfare may bring wealth, but it teaches nothing about how to create it. That is why the Christian population had to turn to using the labor and skill of the Moors and Mozárabes (Arabized Christians from the south.) And it was not long before the Jews likewise became indispensable—as bearers of Arabic culture, as artisans and administrators, and as diplomatic or fiscal agents. For the first three hundred years of the Reconquest—indeed, until the end of the fourteenth century—Christians, Moors, and Jews were compelled to share a common life."

There were limits to the cooperation among the three communities under the rule of the Christian kingdoms. According to Christian teachings, “Jews were to be kept in a debased status because of their refusal to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, and God’s rejection of them as his chosen people.” Latent tensions almost always manifested themselves in rebellions, “some as late as 1568 in the uprising of the Moriscos [Muslims living under Christian rule] of Granada, seventy-six years after the Christians conquered that kingdom.” As in the later Islamic kingdoms, the question of how much tolerance and freedom was to be allowed for others of different religious beliefs was an ongoing source of debate.

The situation of the Jews in Spain was different from that of the Muslims and Christians. They did not have kingdoms or armies of their own and were a religious minority in both the Muslim and Christian kingdoms. For them *convivencia* was a question not just of what freedoms they enjoyed or what restrictions (or violence) they were subjected to, but how to adapt to the ruling cultures and to thrive or even survive within them.

A Mixed Record

The historical record of *convivencia* is a mixed one. Cooperation and conflict among the three religious groups created a fruitful tension. What was produced from the presses of *convivencia* was a fusion of life elements in the subtlest and most intimate manners. Vocabularies, techniques, manners of speech, dress, and diets were all involved in the joint acculturation

process and within the context of long-term, ongoing Islamic-Christian battles for territory and dominance of Iberia.

How Religion Influenced Spain: Defining Who are "Us" and Who are "Them"? Friend or Foe?

Religion was a useful tool to separate populations.

In this history of medieval Iberian perspectives about "us" and "them", we should consider events in Arabia as well as in Spain. To understand how medieval communities framed their distinctive identities, it is valuable to consider that Islamic and Christian political and religious laws demonstrated a need to separate and shape Iberian society along faith boundaries. Islamic and Christian beliefs had their origins outside of Spain and were influenced by events and cultures in the broader Mediterranean and European worlds. Islamic civilization and Jewish culture in Iberia from the eighth through fourteenth centuries served as both as foils and contributors to the formation of a Catholic Spain. Islam, in particular, had a disproportionate impact on the how religious identities came to be structured and appreciated in Spain.

Christian Perspectives of Jews and Muslims

Spanish Christians and their European contemporaries defined their group identity in relationship to “others” whom they persecuted. David Nirenberg’s seminal text, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, is invaluable in terms of understanding this perspective. David Nirenberg discusses the Christian Kingdom of Aragon’s relationship with subjugated Jewish and Muslims in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. The author argues the crown recognized and tolerated Jews as a religious minority group so that they could serve, “as abject witnesses to the truth and triumph of Christianity”. For Nirenberg, Jews in Christian territories served as a tool which Christians used to define themselves and their sense of identity. Analogously, while the crown granted Muslims the authority to practice their own religion in private, Christians set themselves apart from Muslims through the Christian imposition of burdensome taxes, prohibitions on clothing, and restrictions on social interactions with Christians. Further, Nirenberg argues that the persecution of religious minorities, heretics, gypsies, and the physically deformed were defining elements of medieval Christian European culture. For instance, because of issues of intra-religious competition for political authority and economic resources Christians utilized violence against Muslims and Jews to communicate and effect social boundaries. This also reflected their own “collective anxieties” about the polluting effects sexual encounters between groups. Thus, scholars have documented that late medieval Iberia maintained strict religious boundaries that reinforced distinct religious identities.

Similarly, R.I. Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* extends this understanding of religious difference by exploring the underlying role of the Catholic Church and social elites in enforcing the divide between Christians and others. Moore posits that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was a permanent change in European society regarding other religions and ways of life. Persecution, sanctioned and directed by secular and clerical elites, “became habitual” and manifested itself in violence against other religious backgrounds and ways of life. The author believed that such persecution was not accidental, nor a response to increasing numbers of heretics, Jews, and lepers, but was driven by the “zeal” ruling elite. Further, the change in the medieval mindset promoted by the “new, literate, clerical element,” was instrumental in building new governmental institutions that focused on social control, especially “suppressing resistance to authority and legitimating that same authority”.

This “persecuting worldview” was advantageous to the clerical elites in their efforts to gain better positioning than their Jewish rivals for influence. Moore convincingly argues that the enviable positions of Jews in court life, as well as the effective preaching skills of Jewish rabbis, were sufficient to entice clerics to draw clear social boundaries that in turn led to this persecuting worldview. One particularly intriguing point about Moore’s observations is advanced by Miri Rubin. In her review of Moore’s book, Rubin states, “Moore identifies and discusses the cultural and political processes which produced, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, intellectual interests in, and bureaucratic procedures for, the definition, identification, labeling, separation, capture, and punishment of groups of people deemed to be foreign and in some ways harmful to *societas Christiana*”.

Thus, a Spanish Christian legal framework such as *Las Siete Partidas* is a persuasive example of how Moore's persecution framework was institutionalized in Castile. These laws were also likely to provide comfort to the lowest social and political rungs of Christian society—the commoners and laborers—who could claim that their Christian identity at a minimum placed them above the “debased” Jewish and Muslim communities. These fundamental elements of the Spanish Christian social belief systems demonstrate that religious identities were by and large fixed and stable prior to the fourteenth century.

SUPPLEMENTAL: Medieval Jewish Perspectives of Christians and Muslims

Medieval Jewish Perspectives of Christians and Muslims

Scholars studying Sephardic Jewry (Spanish Jews) and conversos offer related arguments pertaining to early medieval identities as defined by religious differences. For example, in 1961, Yitzhak Baer examined the question of the historical trajectory of the Jews in Spain in his text, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*. Specifically, in Castile at the end of the thirteenth century, it is evident that Jews were well integrated into the Castilian royal court, overseeing much of its administration. But this instigated religious competition with the nobility and church.

Continuing this line of thought, Baer argued that from the fifteenth century forward a change occurred in Spanish society. He argued the decline of the Spanish Jewry in Castile in the fourteenth century was definitively tied to growing anti-Semitism toward the Jews due to their positions in court. Baer cites the example of Gonzalo Martinez, made Master of the Order of Alcantara by Alfonso XI (ruled 1311-1350), who planned to “annihilate” Castile’s courtly Jews. An outcome of this change in Christian perspectives of Jews, according to Baer, was a steep rise in conversions. He found that if nothing else is certain about Christian Spain prior the 1400s, religious identity and institutionalized negative perspectives of Jews and Muslims were pervasive facts of Iberian life.

Medieval Muslim Perspectives of Jews and Christians

Because many students in the United States and other Western European nations are unfamiliar with Islamic civilization, I have elected to include an extended analysis of Muslim perspectives on others.

Under the leadership of Islamic Caliph Umar (634-644 CE), the Muslims' pace of empire-building dramatically increased with the conquest of the Fertile Crescent (Iraq), Egypt, and the highlands of western of Iran. These conquests incorporated more of the same diverse populations found in Palestine and Iraq, as well as large faith groups such as Zoroastrians in Iran and Iraq. From 644 to 711, a mere seventy years, the Islamic empire grew under Caliph Uthman (644-656), Caliph Ali (656-661), and the Umayyad Caliphate (661-747) to include southern Spain, North Africa, Transoxiana and Sind (present-day Pakistan), sub-Saharan Africa, Anatolia, the Balkans, and parts of China and India.

Unlike ever before, in terms of sheer geographic and population scale, Islam found itself challenged by significant socio-religious issues that revolved around communal identity. With the rapid Islamic advance into these territories, which were populated by Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, the Muslims found themselves to be a religious minority once again. In Iran, for example, the Muslim population never exceeded 10 percent of the total population during the period (644-747) of the Rashidun Caliphs and the Umayyad Caliphate. The Muslims were also religious minorities in the other territories they conquered in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

As new seventh-century Islamic Iraqi cities like Basra turned into cosmopolitan communities populated by non-Arabs of all types and faiths, Muslims developed a detailed social contract to manage and distinguish Muslims from other communities. In essence, Islamic civilization created and codified how Jewish and Christian identities would be [governed and?] differentiated from Muslim ones. Under the guidance of Caliph Umar in the 730s-740s, Muslims built upon the foundations of the Constitution of Medina by creating an enhanced social contract, the Pact of Umar, with the *dhimmi* (Jews and Christians who were considered "protected people"). The Pact guaranteed protection for Jews and Christians in return for certain religious regulations and the payment a religious poll tax ("*jizya*"). The agreement, which was in practice was extended to Zoroastrians and other places of Islamic dominion, stated that Christians would live in deference to Muslims in return for protection of life, property, and religion. Specifically, Muslim political authorities afforded Christians "safe-conduct" provided that the Christians "show respect toward Muslims," in the form of rising from seats; worshipping their god in private; not repairing or maintaining existing Christian houses of worship; not proselytizing; not worshipping in public; not preventing their kin from converting to Islam; not imitating Muslim dress, hairstyle, or speech; and not aiding the enemies of the Muslims. In return for these specific actions, the Christians could worship their god without fear of forced conversion or the loss of life or property.