



## Spain: From Its Beginnings to the Fifteenth Century

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Spain in 1492 was the end product of a process of more than two thousand years. The creation by the Catholic Kings (Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragón) of a national state—the first in Europe—constituted, politically, the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. Because Spain's history to this point in time had been neither easy nor simple, it should be reviewed briefly before crossing the Atlantic and observing that other great historical process: Spain's involvement in the New World.

Our interest lies primarily in culture, although it is obligatory to mention some historical facts. We do not pretend to offer a brief history of Spain, but only to show the great phases of a millenary process and underscore the most significant phenomena. The Spanish culture that spread throughout the Americas—carried by Conquistadors, missionaries, royal officials and colonists—was in the sixteenth century the product of many geographic and historical factors with which we should become acquainted. Only with this knowledge can we understand the nature and functioning of this cultural system with regard to both the colonial and the present-day national societies.

A glance at the antecedents of sixteenth-century Spanish culture is very convenient for two methodological reasons. On the one hand, the facts presented here will reinforce the argument that all great socio-cultural phenomena are universal because they are essentially human. Namely, that the actions of Spain in America and the attitudes and behavior of the Spaniards were within the framework of universal history, even when in Spain's case there were many peculiarities that we will stress in another chapter. On the other hand, there are surprising coincidences between the history of the Iberian Peninsula and the colonial history of North America, if we understand the latter as the history of Mexico or New Spain, that indefinite space with a northern frontier which vanished in territories comprised today by the United States. We are

speaking of matters such as ethnic diversity, invasions and cultural clashes, colonialism and forced acculturation, coexistence of ethnic groups and racial interbreeding, the creation of empires, the existence of borderlands and a state of hostilities among rival nations. These coincidences support the argument in favor of making an acquaintance with Spain's ancient past. This knowledge will render more familiar the phenomena that took place in America during the centuries of Spanish administration.

### Geographic Factors

Spain occupies the major part of the Iberian Peninsula. It also includes the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. Its total surface is a little over half a million square kilometers or 194,900 square miles. These figures imply an area larger than that of California and smaller than Texas. In relation to the rest of Europe, Spain is one of the largest countries. With the exception of Russia—a special case because it straddles both Europe and Asia, and for other reasons—, Spain is the second largest country in Europe, second only to France. In approximate figures, Spain is double the size of England (that is, of all the United Kingdom), much larger than Italy and larger than a united Germany.

No relationship exists necessarily between area and other variables. However, this relationship together with other natural factors play an important role in the history of nations. Comparative data serve, besides, to clarify images and correct stereotypes which render difficult the understanding of historical processes. In this context, it is proper to mention that Spain is larger than all of the following countries put together: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Portugal and Switzerland. The Canary Islands, so Hispanic and important yesterday and today in Spain's relations with the Americas, are at such distance from the peninsula that they are in

a different time zone. They are as far from Madrid as San Antonio, Texas, is from Los Angeles, California. In some cultural aspects, the Canaries are closer to the countries and peoples of the Caribbean than to many regions of the peninsula. As a matter of fact, these islands were crucial for communication between Spain and the New World.

In comparison with other European countries, Spain is not densely populated. The causes for Spain's demography, both in historical times and at present, are complex. A combination of natural and human factors can be mentioned, such as topography, climate, political history and the historical constant of emigration. The phenomenon of Spanish migration must be considered in relation to natural or geographic factors and to the Spaniards' enterprise of populating the New World. After three centuries of colonization, the Spanish migratory flow to the Americas continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This country of over half a million square kilometers has today a population of about 40 million. Meanwhile much smaller countries like Germany, England and Italy surpass that figure by far. The high number of inhabitants per square kilometer of small countries such as Belgium and Holland makes of Spain a European country with a low density and a very uneven distribution of population. The metropolitan areas of Madrid and Barcelona constitute one-fifth of the country's total population. The United States, on a much larger scale, is in a similar position when the density of population of New England is compared to that of the Midwest or the Southwest.

There are several basic geographic factors that have influenced the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, long before the two states that occupy it today, Spain and Portugal, were constituted. These factors can explain, at least in part, the historical and cultural processes that have taken place in the peninsula. In spite of the fact that geography does not determine the fate nor the destiny of nations, it is evident that it conditions and influences, sometimes powerfully, their cultural history. Nations are the offspring of geography and history, although the same set of parents can produce very different offspring. By the same token, offspring can alter the course of time and have an influence upon their own parents. Similarly, mankind is, to a great extent, the product of geography and history, and these in turn are the products of mankind. Mankind's articulation with space and time is a way of explaining and understanding the historical process, that is, the culture of each individual nation and its evolution.

This fact is particularly evident in the context of the Iberian Peninsula and the people that have inhabited it

for thousands of years. But this fact is paradoxical and filled with apparent contradictions that require clarification. As a means of approaching this subject, let us assume two extreme and mutually contradictory positions with respect to the cultural influences which have operated in the Iberian Peninsula and have shaped its cultural traditions in the course of the centuries. This simple dialectic exercise will serve to underscore something that has much to do with *culture* as it is understood by anthropologists, namely, with all that is *human*, such as the relativity of events, concepts, judgments and even scientific explanations.

According to the first of these two positions, we can affirm that the Iberian Peninsula is an isolated and marginal territory; in other words, *isolation* is one of the most evident factors of peninsular geography. A "peninsula" is always almost an island. By merely glancing at a map we can see that the Iberian Peninsula is the most definite and conclusive of the three southern European peninsulas, all of them surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. The Balkan Peninsula (Greece) and the Italic Peninsula (Italy) are connected to the continent, each by a wide isthmus. The Iberian Peninsula, on the contrary, is actually *separated* by a relatively narrow isthmus overrun in its totality by a formidable mountain range, the Pyrenees. Iberia, until the advent of modern means of transportation, aviation especially, was virtually an island. The Iberian Peninsula in the European geographic complex occupies, additionally, an extreme and marginal position, the land most to the south and to the west of the entire continental mass. The city of Tarifa in the province of Cádiz, is the southernmost point of the peninsula and is below the latitude of the city of Tunis in Africa. Valencia, a city considered Oriental or Levantine, is further west than London. The Iberian Peninsula is, moreover, the land furthest away from the birthplace of Mediterranean civilization. However, the cultural tradition of the Iberian Peninsula is a keystone in the history of a civilization that Spain transformed into a western and Atlantic civilization.

Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans considered, and for a good reason, the Iberian Peninsula as the end of their world. Beyond the straits that we today call Gibraltar, an immense, unknown and gloomy sea commenced. Myths and legends filled a vacuum created by the absence of knowledge. Ancient writers imagined, they merely imagined, that there might be other lands on the other side of the water. Classical authors placed the "Columns of Hercules" near the present city of Cádiz and in their descriptions they added the expression: "Non plus ultra" ("No further"). A cape in the northwest of the peninsula in Galicia still bears today the name of Finisterre or "The End of the Earth."

But the marginality and isolation of the Iberian Peninsula is rather relative in spite of all these strong and objective arguments. Let us now consider—or defend, as one wishes—the opposite point of view: the Iberian Peninsula as a land so strategically located that it becomes a bridge and a magnetic pole for other nations with which it has for centuries been in communication. As a matter of fact, upon the shores of the Mediterranean basin of which the Iberian Peninsula is part, nations of extraordinary historical dynamism and brilliant cultural development have lived. The expansion and communication among these nations were carried out mainly by coastal navigation through the Mediterranean. In other words, the sea did not separate, but instead, it united the different peoples of the Mediterranean civilization, among them the peoples of the Iberian Peninsula, who were able to participate in a fruitful exchange from a very early date. Iberia was far, but it was easily accessible thanks to the Mediterranean Sea.

There are additional factors in favor of the communication the Iberian Peninsula has sustained and the role as *bridge* it has played in history. The Mediterranean Sea—which as its name indicates is a sea in the midst of lands—is almost entirely enclosed. Were it not for the Strait of Gibraltar, which constitutes a small door to the Atlantic, it would be a huge lake. The Mediterranean is a sea between two different lands—actually between two continents (Europe and Africa), without disregarding a third constituted by Asia Minor or the Near East. Between Europe and North Africa there are important differences, both geographical and cultural. Europe is Christian and Mediterranean Europe is, for the most part, Catholic. Mediterranean Africa is Muslim, an elongation of one of the richest branches of Near Eastern civilization. The Mediterranean Sea brings together, consequently, two worlds, two civilizations that have maintained intense though not always cordial relations.

Here we see again the historical uniqueness and importance of the Iberian Peninsula. Western Europe, to which the Iberian Peninsula belongs without question, is so near Africa that some people have remarked that “Africa begins at the Pyrenees.” While this is a gross exaggeration of historical and cultural realities, it is true that Iberia is a bridge between Europe and Africa. On clear days one can see Africa from some points in the province of Cádiz. By the same token, one can see the Iberian Peninsula from Africa, and this vision was so attractive to the Moors that they spent eight centuries on this side of the Gibraltar Strait. At their narrowest point the straits are only 14 kilometers, a shorter distance than the span of some avenues in New York or Los Angeles.

Looking at a geographic framework wider than the Mediterranean basin, the Iberian Peninsula gains prominence on the Atlantic Ocean. Its Atlantic coast line here is even longer than on the Mediterranean (a great part belonging to Portugal). The Iberian Peninsula, consequently, also opens out into the great ocean. When we look at the map of Europe, the histories of Spain and Portugal become clearer and we can better understand how important the peninsula becomes in its position as an outpost. The fact of being located in the extreme southwest of Europe transforms it into a land *naturally* aimed towards Africa and the Americas. Between Europe and the American continents there are several archipelagos which for centuries have been part of Spain (Canary Islands) or Portugal (Cape Verde Islands, the Azores and Madeira). By the time the world had become *round* (after the around the world Magellan-Elcano expedition of 1519-1522), the Iberian Peninsula already served as the stepping-stone or great sea port of Europe. From here ships and men sailed around Africa and arrived in India or China; crossed the Atlantic and explored the New World on foot; navigated along the American coasts of the Pacific and established a regular sea lane between the ports of Acapulco, Mexico, and Manila in the Philippine Islands. “The land at the end of the world”—the last and most remote corner of the Mediterranean for the ancient Greeks and Romans—became in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the *center* of the Old World, the navel of the earth, if we accept the common ethnocentric view of the great ancient civilizations. Also, about that time, the Incas of Perú considered their city of Cuzco the *navel* of the earth.

Some basic data of peninsular geography will lead to a better interpretation of Spanish culture, as it relates to its ancient origins, its recent past and its present. The 504,782 square kilometers or 194,900 square miles that constitute the Iberian Peninsula are varied and complex. Its location at one extremity of Europe, almost touching Africa, and its position between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean allow no room for generalizations regarding its nature. However, there are some outstanding factors and certain features that are of help in defining its identity in geographical terms. For example, most of its area is constituted by a large plateau, which, because it is divided by a mountain chain that runs from east to west, allows us to speak of a northern plateau—which essentially coincides with Old Castile—and a southern plateau, basically corresponding to New Castile. There are few plains and lowlands in the peninsula, most of them within the Atlantic watershed. All the important rivers flow to the Atlantic, with the exception of the Ebro, the longest of them which empties in the Mediterranean. In addition to this large plateau there are a series of

mountain ranges, namely, the Cantabric Range that extends into the Pyrenees; the already mentioned Central Mountains, that divides the plateau; the Sierra Morena, on the southern edge of the plateau, beyond which the great depression of the Guadalquivir River valley begins; the Betic ranges, framing the southern edge of the peninsula and, in a sense, establishing a barrier in the south similar to the Pyrenees in the north. All these mountain ranges run from east to west, more or less, establishing a succession of obstacles for any traveler that attempts to cross the peninsula from south to north or from north to south. Only one great mountain range, the Iberian, runs on a northwest-southeast axis, in keeping with the above mentioned Ebro River.

The Iberian Peninsula is quadrangular in shape. A plateau, that has been compared to a fortress or a castle of difficult access, rises in the interior. This central mountainous mass is surrounded by peripheral ranges, which also hinder transportation. The rivers of the peninsula are not navigable at all. Not even in ancient times could light crafts use them as penetration routes. Only the lower course of the Guadalquivir, which flows through one of the widest and richest plains in the peninsula (Andalusia), is navigable. From time immemorial, it has served as an important means of communication between Seville and the sea. This factor, and others, warranted Seville the title in the sixteenth century of "Puerto y Puerta de las Indias" (Port and Door of the Indies).

As far as topography is concerned, Spain is the second country in Europe in terms of average elevation, surpassed only by Switzerland. Although there is a humid Iberia in the north, most of the peninsula is dry. One of the most scarce and least dependable of the natural resources is water. This factor bears an enormous importance for agriculture, the economy and the cultural history. Lack of rainfall or its irregularity have acted upon the rural population, determining their migrations and affecting popular religiosity. Appeals to the powers of the Virgin or the saints to offset the negative effects of droughts are commonplace.

## The Prehistory of the Iberian Peninsula

There is abundant evidence of human presence in the Iberian Peninsula dating hundreds of thousands of years. We know this extremely long period in human history as the Paleolithic. Some 40,000 years ago, the first representatives of the species *Homo Sapiens* to which, regardless of racial differences, the present human population of the earth belongs, appeared in Western Europe. The most impressive and significant

cultural features of those inhabitants of the peninsula were their magical-religious beliefs and their *art*. Of the latter, they left many samples. Paintings on cave walls in the northern part of the peninsula are spectacular proof of their ideological and esthetic capacity. The most famous paintings are in the cave of Altamira, in the province of Santander. The technological specialization of these Upper Paleolithic people, their unique adaptation to nature and the splendor of their art ended coincidentally with the ice ages. This was for both the Iberian Peninsula and the rest of Western Europe the conclusion of the longest and least known period in the history of mankind.

Between the end of the Paleolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic there is a period of about 5,000 years that archaeologists call the Mesolithic (10,000 to 5,000 years before Christ). While Western Europe was fully engaged in the Mesolithic, new cultural phenomena began to take place in the Near East, placing this area at the forefront of the world's technological and intellectual development. It involved, briefly speaking, two successive revolutions evinced by the emergence of agriculture and the domestication of animals (Neolithic Revolution) and the emergence of cities (Urban Revolution). Several other phenomena, such as the utilization of metals and the invention of the alphabet, allowed these oriental cultures to reach the level of *civilizations*.

Influences from this oriental center of civilization traveled to Europe by means of the Danube River and the Mediterranean Sea. The eastern end of the Mediterranean was the stepping-stone from which these influences spread and reached the opposite end, namely, the Iberian Peninsula. The interests and needs of these oriental nations, the mineral wealth of the peninsula and the existence of a sea that facilitated communication coincided in enabling the lands furthest away from the original civilization center to be affected earlier and with greater intensity than other intermediate lands. The great technological and economic innovations originating in the eastern Mediterranean inaugurated a new cultural period in the peninsula, placing some regions on the threshold of civilization. During the fifth and fourth millennia, agriculture and animal husbandry were introduced. By the third millennium metallurgy appeared, on the basis of rich deposits in the southern part of the peninsula.

## Colonizations from the Mediterranean: Phoenicians and Greeks

Phoenicians expanded throughout the Mediterranean at the beginning of the first millennium before

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### Peoples that migrated to the Iberian Peninsula over the centuries and left their cultural imprint.

Christ. Their objective was trade. With this purpose in mind they established factories and colonies and, sometimes, authentic cities on carefully selected Mediterranean islands and continental coasts. The Phoenician presence in the Iberian peninsula at least by the eighth century is a proven fact. Their principal foundation was *Gadir*, today the city of Cádiz.

The Greeks arrived on the heels of the Phoenicians. From their bases on the islands of the Aegean, they demonstrated a great initiative in their commercial relations with the Mediterranean world. The products preferred by these two colonizing nations were metals. They loaded their vessels with copper, gold and silver in exchange for a variety of products that appealed to the natives—textiles, perfumes, glass and, later on, money in the form of coins, that became an ordinary tool for commerce. Phoenicians and Greeks limited their direct presence to the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula, showing no interest in the inland territories.

By the time the Phoenicians initiated their contacts with the native Iberian population, an Indo-European population—whose most immediate place of migration

was lands comprised by today's Germany—began its penetration by land across the Pyrenees. Germanic newcomers were an important racial and cultural contribution to the ethnic composition of the Iberian Peninsula. Therefore, by the first millennium before Christ, one may speak in general terms of a population of *Iberians*, of Mediterranean filiation, homogenized by the Phoenician influence, spreading through the Spanish Levant and continuing to the south with the Tartesians in what is today Andalusia. Indo-European populations were distributed in the north and the west where the density of the native population was less. This allowed the newcomers to introduce their cultural traits with greater ease. This population has been known traditionally as *Celtic*. In the interior of the peninsula, in the plateau, there was an area of contact or borderland between Iberians and Celts of which *Celtiberia* is the result. This was the general picture of the Iberian Peninsula a few centuries before Christ, when it was about to become the stage where the rivalries between Carthaginians and Romans would take place.

### Romanization of the Iberian Peninsula

In the third century before Christ, two states, Rome and Carthage, were fighting to gain control over the Mediterranean. The latter was established centuries before in what is today Tunis (North Africa) by the Phoenicians from the city of Tyre. The incentives that the Iberian Peninsula held for the two great rivals were its natural and human resources and an excellent strategic position for their policies of expansion and control over the Mediterranean Sea. Iberia was at that time a conglomerate of peoples, of different socio-cultural levels, governed by petty kings or simple tribal chieftains. The presence of Rome came about during the second war between Rome and Carthage (218-204 B.C.), a conflict that ended with Rome defeating the Carthaginians. The latter had previously settled in the southern part of the peninsula where they founded *Carthago Nova* (Cartagena). From this date forward, Rome set forth on a conquest of the entire peninsular territory which ended two centuries later.

For the first time, an alien people undertook the systematic control and annexation of a territory rather than simple commercial relations or exploitation of natural resources. The peninsula became an integral part of the Roman Empire under the name of *Hispania*, from which the proper noun *España* (Spain) is derived. After the Roman army conquered the peninsula, the destiny of the Hispanic population was tied to the destiny of Rome. For seven centuries, Hispania was part of the Roman Empire. Consequently, it is pertinent

to emphasize the process undergone by the heterogeneous peninsular population during this period. This process of *romanization* set the foundations of what centuries later would be known as Spanish culture. Latin was the language spread by Rome throughout the peninsula. Christianity, a religion of Eastern origins, gained access into Hispania about the same time as in the metropolis. Many Hispanics were martyred for their new religion, just as in Rome. When the Empire became officially Christian as a consequence of the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), Hispania was officially unified in terms of religion as it was already unified in terms of language.

The romanization of Hispania was so intense and effective, especially in regions such as Betica in the south that it succeeded in contributing noteworthy figures to Roman literature, philosophy and science. Two future emperors, Trajan and Hadrian, were born in the city of Italica, founded by Rome, next to the city of Hispalis or Seville. Emperor Theodosius was born in Coca (Segovia). Seneca, the distinguished philoso-

pher, was born in Córdoba. It can be stated that a perfect symbiosis occurred which allowed the metropolis to receive nourishment from her Hispanic provinces and vice versa. When the days of decadence and crisis arrived, Hispania suffered along with Rome.

## The Germanic Presence

In the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, there were a number of nations whose inhabitants were known as “barbarians” or aliens, and who on several occasions had made incursions into Iberia. Beginning with the third century, the decadence of Rome enabled these activities, which, in turn, aggravated the critical situation the Empire was experiencing. Several of these Germanic peoples, among them the Suavians and the Vandals, arrived in Spain in the year 409 by way of the Pyrenees. Shortly afterwards, the Visigoths entered from their base in southern France. The degree of romanization achieved by the Visigoths was superior to what other Germanic peoples had attained, and, a consequence of their relations with the powers of Rome was that they acted as assistants to the Empire when confronting the abuses of other invading peoples.

A state of antagonism and ethnic discrimination towards the Hispanic-Roman people, a homogeneous population of four million, unified within the Empire, was created by the attitudes and behavior of the Visigoths. The small Visigothic population was concentrated in the plateau where they managed to establish their capital in Toledo, far from the more populated and developed regions of Roman Hispania and distant from the coast which could pose a threat to their own safety. The Visigoths succeeded in dominating the other Germanic groups, achieving a certain degree of unity within a state that, with the passing of time, became independent from Rome.

Visigothic domination of the peninsula was superficial and weak in spite of the fact that it lasted three centuries. Visigoths were always a minority within the Hispanic-Roman population. The latter never identified themselves with the invaders. On the other hand, the Visigoths brought no important innovations in the area of culture because they were rather romanized themselves. Latin continued as the language of Hispania. Catholicism managed to overcome the Arian heresy of the “barbarians.” Consequently, many historians look upon the Visigothic period as an epilogue to the long Roman period, a continuation within a phase marked by decadence and characterized by a general stagnation of the economy and the culture with a pronounced downgrading of urban life.

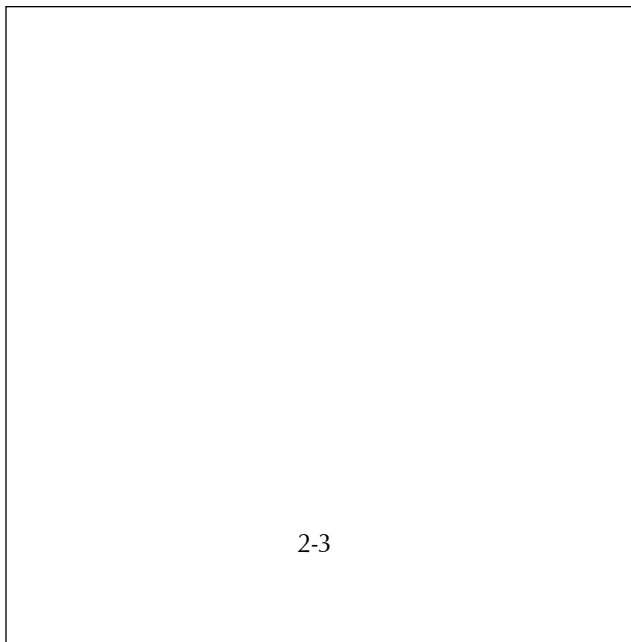
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**Statue of the Roman emperor Trajan (c. 53-117), born in Itálica, southern Spain. (Courtesy of the Museo Arqueológico Provincial, Seville, Spain.)**

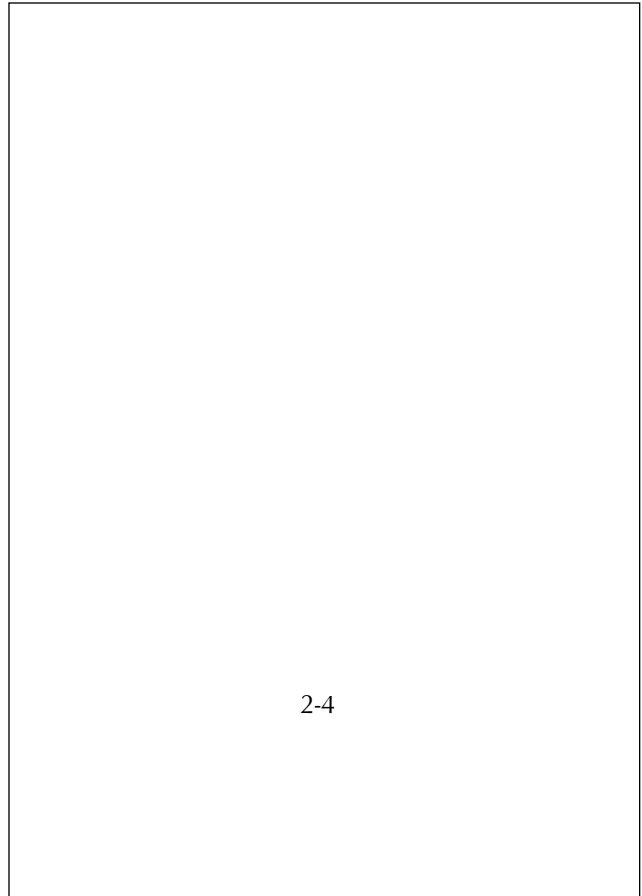
## The Arabs in the Peninsula

The Visigothic period ended with the invasion of another political power. Still operative was the millenary curse or blessing represented by invaders who would make important contributions to the future cultural tradition of Spain. This time, the intruders arrived from the south, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. It had all begun in Arabia with a religion preached by the prophet Mohammed. The new religion—which profoundly impregnated the life of the faithful and operated as a culture or way of life—was Islam. It is also known as the Muslim religion. Although its founder and first followers were Arabs in the ethnic sense of the word, soon other non-Arabic peoples from the Near East and also from North Africa accepted the new religious doctrine. The difficulty in finding a single term that would globally embrace such a diverse group of people was solved by the Spanish with the popular term of “Moros.” The fact is that the army that invaded Spain was constituted by a few Arabs supported by troops recruited in North Africa from among the new and fanatical converts to Islam. The invasion, which meant the hasty destruction of Visigothic power, took place in 711.

The internal fragmentation among the Visigoths themselves facilitated the operations of this first Arab contingent and, within a short period of time, the peninsula was dominated by people of a non-Christian faith and a different language. With the Arab invasion



Islamic Spain (shaded area).



### La Giralda, the tower of Seville's cathedral which unites Islamic and Christian styles.

of the peninsula in 711 began a period of almost eight centuries, labeled for simplistic reasons in many Spanish history texts as “la Reconquista,” or Reconquest. The complexity of the process defies its being encompassed by one single term. It is true that almost immediately there was resistance from the northernmost provinces of Spain. It is also true, however, that those people had never been completely dominated by either the Romans or the Visigoths. The difficult geography of those lands and their economy, based chiefly on shepherding, had kept these people outside the processes of political and cultural integration.

The Arab political might that established itself in the peninsula was at first an offshoot or vanguard of a political force that had its capital to the East, in the city of Damascus. The representative in the peninsula of that distant power was an emir or governor whose capital was Córdoba. The rapid expansion of the Arabs throughout the peninsula should not detract from the fact, however, that divisions and tensions existed among the invaders, nor from the various forms of adaptation and resistance offered by the Christians in

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**The Lions Patio, Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain, exhibiting Islamic artistic style. (Photo by Michelle Deschamps.)**

facing this new situation. During these eight centuries, numerous and complex military, political, social, economic and religious phenomena took place. We will point out only the most critical events and tendencies that left their imprint on the history of eight centuries.

Abderrahman I governed between the years 756 and 788, declared himself emir independent of Damascus, and paved the way for future Arab splendor in the peninsula. In fact, Abderrahman III (912-961) at the beginning of his rule founded the Caliphate of Córdoba. This decision completed the separation and independence of Córdoba from the original seat of power in Damascus carving out in the peninsula an Arab state endowed with military, economic and intellectual powers superior by far to the levels attained by Western Christian Europe. This state was Al-Andalus and its power was felt both in North Africa and by the Christian kingdoms in the northern part of the peninsula.

Examining the situation from the vantage point of the Christians (from the north), we find that a seat of power, which considered itself to be the *legitimate* representa-

tive of the invaded Christian nation, was established in the Asturian mountains. The first resistance and counterattacks took place here. In the course of this resistance against Islam, several kingdoms—Asturias, León, Castile, Navarra, Marca Hispánica or Cataluña—emerged. They maintained a precarious and moveable frontier between Christian Spain and Al-Andalus or the Islamic state. Relations among the Christian kings were unstable and ambiguous, a hindrance in their fight against their supposedly common foe.

The Arabs likewise endured a diversity of circumstances. After the years of splendor of the Caliphate, the state dissolved and a number of small kingdoms, *taifas*, emerged, products of a critical process of decomposition. This offered new opportunities to the Christian kings who no longer confronted a unified and powerful state. By the end of the eleventh century, there was another invasion by the Almoravides of Sahara, marked by a heretofore unknown fanaticism. Half a century later, in 1146, the Almohades, also from North Africa, repeated this action and managed to reestablish a limited Islamic power from their dual capitals, one in Seville and the other in Morocco. War was now clearly defined as religious in nature. A crusade of reconquest emerged among Spanish Christians, and their actions placed them on equal footing with the other European kingdoms that were involved at the time in the reconquest of the Holy Places. The armies of the Christian kingdoms defeated the Arabs in 1212 in the battle of Navas de Tolosa. In a few years the reconquest of great cities, which were integral parts of Al-Andalus, took place as follows: Córdoba, 1236; Jaén, 1246; Seville, 1248; Cádiz, 1250. Yet the *Reconquista* was nowhere near over. As it was, the kingdom of Granada continued under Muslim rule for two and a half centuries more.

Meanwhile, the political map of the Christian domain of the peninsula was reshaped and simplified. Beginning with the twelfth century, Portugal became independent from the kingdom of Castile. The latter constituted most of the peninsular territory, and continued to be occupied with the Reconquest until the end of the fifteenth century. The Kingdom of Aragón, another of the great Christian states, held within its borders dynamic Cataluña. Political and economic interests compelled it to change its course of action, swiftly and forcefully, from the peninsula to the Mediterranean.

The fall of Granada—capital of the last Muslim kingdom in Spain—took place during the first days of 1492. This meant the end of Arab power in the peninsula, but only of political and military power. Eight centuries of a variety of contacts—which we could qualify in present-day terms of hot war, cold war and even of

peaceful coexistence—left their imprint on Spanish culture. Human and cultural contacts between Christians and Moors were long and intense. They were expressed in every conceivable manner: biological interbreeding, acculturation or modification of the two cultures out of reciprocal interactions, mechanisms of adaptation that both groups had to develop in order to conquer or merely to survive. There were other populations besides the two great ethnic groups of “Christians” and “Muslims” that dwelt at either side of a political frontier, namely, *Mozárabes*, or Christians who lived in Arab territory; *Mudéjares*, their counterparts as Muslims who remained in Christian territories; *Renegados*, Christians who had converted to Islam; and *Moriscos*, who more or less sincerely had converted to Christianity. Rendering this ethnic mosaic more complex still, the Jews, not a numerous group, but one that controlled the areas of taxation and finances, were another significant element of Medieval Spain.

## Birth of the Spanish State

The slow and uneven assault of the Christian kingdoms upon the Moors shaped what was to become the political map of the peninsula by the end of the fifteenth century. Portugal put a swift end to their war of reconquest and opened herself to the sea routes that would lead her, at an early date, to Africa and Asia. The Crown of Castile held almost two-thirds of the peninsula and comprised seven million out of a total population of a little over 10 million. Regardless of her size and the diversity of the kingdoms within her boundaries, in Castile there was virtually no juridical differentiation. In other words, significant political and administrative uniformity existed under one rule. With the defeat of the Moorish kingdom of Granada, Castile was able to utilize its demographic potential and its spirit of conquest and crusade in a new enterprise which was the natural outcome of its Atlantic orientation—the discovery, conquest and colonization of the New World. The Canary Islands, incorporated into Castile a century before, served both as a source of experience and a bridge for the new expansion.

The third great Christian state in the peninsula was the Crown of Aragón. The circumstances of Aragón were very different from those of Castile. Its area was much smaller and its population was around one million. Each of the kingdoms that formed the Crown of Aragón (Cataluña, Valencia, Mallorca and the kingdom of Aragón itself) maintained a clear identity and their particular political and administrative structures, a fact that allowed for great differences among them. How-

ever, if the Crown of Aragón is examined as a whole, her strong orientation toward the Mediterranean, where she came to have important political and economic interests, is evident. Additionally, the Crown of Aragón, and Cataluña in particular, also excelled because of socio-economic structures that fostered commerce, manufacturing and the emergence of a bourgeoisie. To the contrary, Castile, until that time, had based her economic power on the land and, more concretely, on sheep.

The union of the two crowns came about in 1479 through the persons of Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragón who had been married since 1469. With the incorporation of the kingdom of Navarra and the annexation through conquest of the Moorish kingdom of Granada, the Catholic Kings completed the unification of Spain and gave birth to a modern state that brought the Middle Ages to an end. Because of the various kingdoms of which it was composed, the new Spanish state was a complex entity, but, at the same time, it was a territorial unit under the rule of the Catholic Kings, who sought administrative unity in order to offset the power and privileges of the nobility and the cities. Isabel and Ferdinand also sought religious unity in opposition to Jews and Moors who either had failed to convert or had falsely converted to Catholicism.

The unification of the Spanish kingdoms and the absolute character of the monarchy became more evident still during the rule of Charles (1516-1556),

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Portrait of Queen Isabel de Castilla by Bartolomé Bermejo. (Courtesy of the Royal Palace, Madrid.)

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### Portrait of Christopher Columbus.

grandson of the Catholic Kings. He governed Spain under the title of Charles I, but he is better known by his imperial title of Charles V or Charles of Hapsburg, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. With him the royal house of Austria ascended to the Spanish throne. In his day, the great explorations and conquests of American territories took place. Additionally, Spain's human and economic resources were applied to an intensive involvement in European politics motivated by Charles' aspirations to the Imperial Crown of Germany and by his defense of Catholicism in opposition to the Protestants.

His son, Philip II (1556-1598) ruled the remainder of Spain's golden century. During his rule, Spain undertook a multiplicity of activities that today appear incredible. Spanish activities in America continued; Portugal was defeated in a lightning war (1580) and annexed to the Spanish Crown together with her vast colonial possessions in Africa, Asia and America. Philip's policies towards the rest of Europe drew him into situations as contradictory as being the English royal consort, through his marriage to Mary Tudor (1554), and sending the Invincible Armada (1588)

against the same country. Spain bore likewise the greatest burden and the greatest glory in the war between the Christian nations and the Muslims, the Turks posing the greatest threat at that time. The Christian victory in the battle of Lepanto (1571) was one of the great moments in Philip II's reign. His death was followed by a period of political decadence that became increasingly worse in the course of the seventeenth century.

## Some Conclusions

We have sketched in a few pages the great periods and principal events that established the foundation of Spain as a state and a culture. Throughout most of this account we have used the purely geographic term of "peninsula." Only at the end have we spoken of "Spain," because the political entity of this name was only conceived at the end of the fifteenth century. Prior to that date there was no Spain in the modern sense of the word. Rome unified the peninsula under the name of Hispania, and the administrative divisions established by the Romans are still to a certain extent in effect today. For example, Roman Lusitania is an approximation of Portugal; the province of Betica, coincides rather well with Andalusia. Additionally, Rome endowed the peninsula with linguistic unity (Latin) and religious unity (Christianity).

During the short centuries of Visigothic domination, Hispania retained her political unity, but the Arab invasion of 711 divided the peninsula into Christian and Muslim sectors. Eight centuries of war between the invaders and the invaded gave birth to Christian kingdoms, which, until the end of the tenth century, had confronted a united Islamic front. From then on, the Moors split into small kingdoms and lost ground until they were reduced in the fifteenth century to the kingdom of Granada. During this long war between Christians and Moors, the Christian frontier advanced slowly. Political units that took the form of kingdoms emerged from the reconquered territories. Portugal broke off early as an independent kingdom. The rest of the peninsula was united under the Catholic Kings at the end of the fifteenth century. Still, a century later, Philip II used the title in official documents of "King of the Spains and the Indies." Those kingdoms that emerged later as the Christian reconquest advanced were molded much later into "regions" or "provinces." Today Spain is organized into 17 autonomous communities that are formed by a varied number of provinces. These political-administrative communities correspond to a great extent to the medieval kingdoms.

What conclusions can be reached that go beyond the historical events reported in this chapter? What

**The Monasterio Cartujo in Seville where Columbus' body was buried from 1507 to 1526.**

influences and relationships can we establish between the history of peninsular Spain and the processes that took place in Spanish America after 1492? Perhaps the first assertion concerning Spain is that her people and culture are the products of various ethnic contributions and a millenary process. The Spanish people, within certain limits, are *mestizo*. Spanish culture is the result of a mixture of elements of diverse origins and the labor of centuries within a framework of violence. Historical Spain—as well as the Spain of today—is a mosaic that, in spite of everything, is internally coherent and reflects a harmonious image. Spaniards are Catholic and speak Spanish. The policies of the Catholic Kings, of Charles V and Philip II in favor of religious unity—to ensure political unity—and the clear role played by the Spanish monarchs as defenders of the Church of Rome, resulted in a Catholic state. The sum total of the Protestant and Jewish minorities is no greater than a few thousand individuals, in some cases limited to the large cities.

The linguistic data are different. Although Castilian is spoken by all Spaniards, Catalán, Gallego and Basque are languages widely used in their respective autonomous communities. Furthermore, and particularly in the case of Cataluña, these provinces are undergoing a process of considerable development. With regard to aspects of Spanish culture, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque art (to name a few styles) are common throughout Spain, but the civil and religious architecture of each region has its own clearly distinct personality. A similar assertion can be made regarding

the annual feasts and manifestations of popular religiosity, such as during Holy Week, pilgrimages and fairs and celebrations of the patron saints of cities and villages. There are one thousand different Virgins in Spain, but the significant common denominator is the Marian devotion of the people and the Virgin-mother complex found in Hispanic culture. Looking at this culture in its totality, one concludes that what makes Spain unique among the other European countries, including her Mediterranean neighbors, is the fact that the nation is a plurality within a basic unit. There is no doubt that this reality is the product of a centuries-old process and of very special and, at times unique, circumstances.

Another fundamental aspect of Spanish tradition is related to geography. The strategic position of the Iberian peninsula and her natural resources attracted other peoples and fostered the encounter or clash of races and cultures. The fact that it was a peninsula—close to other lands, but clearly separated by seas and mountains—made of Spain a microcosm where the processes that molded Spanish culture and society were intensive and far reaching. The ancient Roman and Visigothic Hispania endured eight centuries of frontier strife which was, furthermore, a religious war, an unusual crusade against the invading infidels.

When this microcosm that was Spain at the end of the fifteenth century opened itself towards the Atlantic following the initiative of Castile, there was already a political, religious, juridical, economic and even psycho-social background against which, what was called

the “enterprise of the Indies,” the Spanish adventure in the New World could be enacted. The Spaniards of the sixteenth century carried to the Indies a system of values, ideals, personal objectives and a sense of mission in history. They also carried religious zeal and aspirations of the social betterment they expected to achieve in war or through their services to the Crown. They carried, besides, a discipline and moral and physical energies that were the end result of a long experience of warring against the Moors. Everything in America was immensely bigger and more complex, but for the Spanish explorers, conquerors, missionaries, government officials and colonists the various scales that measured quantity and size were of minor importance.

For a Spaniard who had crossed the high and cold regions of León and Castile, the wide and desolate lands of Extremadura or the torrid fields of Andalusia to sail from the port of Seville and cross an entire ocean, little or nothing could stop him once he had set foot in the New World. Rivers or seas, plains or continents, mountain ranges that put to shame the Spanish *cordilleras*, arid wastelands or jungles were neither obstacles nor reasons impeding advancement. The concept and spirit of the frontier was reborn in this manner. It was a frontier only accepted provisionally, as it was supposed to move forward not unlike the frontier in the Iberian peninsula which advanced during the centuries of fighting against the Moors. For this reason there are many towns and cities in Spain that add the words “. . . of the Frontier” as a surname.

The ethnic diversity of the Americas—although surprising at first because of its extraordinary richness—was not a novelty for sixteenth-century Spaniards, familiar with Moors and Jews, blacks and Turks. The ethnocentrism of a Europe, placed in between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was the basis upon which a Spanish policy of forced acculturation or of programmed integration according to Spanish patterns rested. In particular, the Indians could not be allowed to continue their idolatry, but had to be offered, and voluntarily or by force accept, the benefits of the only true religion which was, additionally, the religion of the state. It was more or less what the Incas and the Aztecs had been practicing in their respective empires about the time Isabel and Ferdinand married and committed themselves to achieving the political and religious unity of Ancient Hispania. However, the coexistence of cultures, languages and religions was also part of the Hispanic tradition. We can find the best example of the latter in the city of Toledo where the Christian king Alfonso X, known as the Wise, established in the thirteenth century the School of Translators to systematically transcribe into the emerging Castilian or Romance language the knowledge of

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**The Monasterio de Guadalupe in Cáceres, Spain, where the Virgin who is considered the Patroness of the Americas is venerated.**

classical antiquity forgotten by Medieval Christian Europe but collected by Arab and Hebrew tradition. Toledo was at that time a tri-cultural city. Centuries later a similar phenomenon of recovering ancient American traditions took place. Bernardino de Sahagún was the most outstanding example of this type of endeavor. In the sixteenth century, he put into operation in Mexico a gigantic project which involved the learning of the Aztec language and the teaching of Spanish and Latin to his Indian informants. They were in turn able to add to the legacy of universal culture a great portion of the knowledge and customs of the Mexicans.

A people such as the Spanish, with a destiny they believed was set by Providence—with territorial rights over the New World sanctioned by the Pope, with a population poor in economic resources but rich in aspirations of nobility—took on in the sixteenth century, simply and without much ado, the greatest adventure that any nation on earth has ever experienced, whether for good or evil. If this were a process not

proven by history and by the living testimony of the Americas themselves, it would be simply incredible.

Translated by Silvia Novo Pena



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