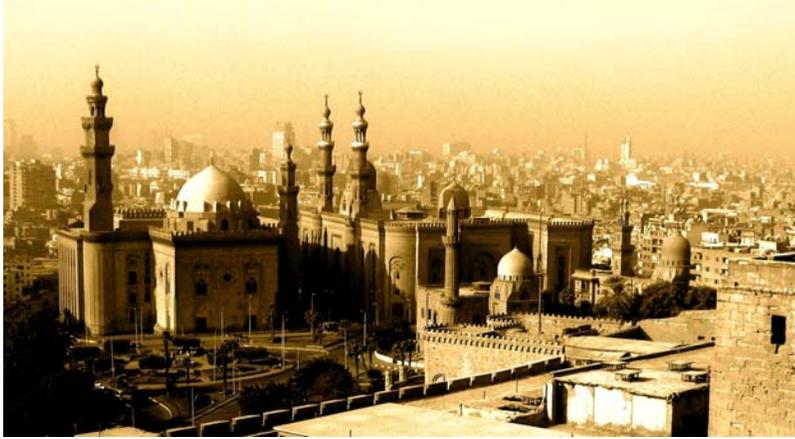




Volume VIII

2005-2006



McGill Journal of  
Middle East Studies

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Revue d'études du  
Moyen-Orient de McGill

**MCGILL JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EAST  
STUDIES**

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**LA REVUE D'ÉTUDES DU MOYEN-  
ORIENT DE MCGILL**

A publication of the McGill Middle East Studies  
Students' Association

Volume VIII, 2005-2006

ISSN 1206-0712

Cover photo by Torie Partridge

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The McGill Journal of Middle East Studies is registered with the National Library of Canada (ISSN 1206-0712). We have regularized the subscription rates as follows: \$15.00 Canadian per issue (subject to availability), plus \$3.00 Canadian for international shipping.

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Please address all inquiries, comments, and subscription requests to:  
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Montreal, Quebec  
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The editors would like to thank the following organizations for their financial assistance:

- The Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University
- The McGill Middle East Studies Students' Association
- The Middle East Studies Program Committee, McGill University
- The Inter-University Consortium for Arab and Middle East Studies, McGill University/Université de Montréal
- The Arts Undergraduate Society, McGill University
- The Political Science Students' Association, McGill University

Thank-you to the following people for their contributions:

- Chloe de Preneuf
- Mélanie Hugron
- Lydia Kasparian
  
- Marilyn Berger and Cynthia Leive of the McGill University Libraries

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# The Survival of Nasrid Granada during the Reconquest

— Marcel Abou-Assaly

On the surface, history is no more than information about political events, dynasties, and occurrences of the remote past, elegantly presented and spiced with proverbs. The inner meaning of history, on the other hand, involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events.”<sup>1</sup>

- Ibn Khaldūn, The Muqaddimah

## Introduction

Islamic Spain is often cited as the peak of Islamic cultural development, representing a vibrancy and openness previously unseen. After the year 1252, however, no more than a single Islamic political entity remained, centered around the city of Granada within the mountainous regions in the southern portion of the peninsula. Ruled by the Nasrid dynasty, the Nasrid kingdom of Granada managed to survive and go on to thrive for two and a half more centuries. Indeed, Granada is an anomaly in the history of the Iberian Peninsula. Major reasons will be cited and discussed, with the intention of clarifying the factors contributing to Granada’s impressive resistance in the face of Christian advances from the North and the stated intention of unifying the entire Iberian Peninsula under the banner of Christianity.

The factors to be discussed are numerous but can be simplified by grouping them into the following major categories: geographic, social, demographic, military, economic and political. Geography had a direct impact on Granada’s survival through such factors as the natural defense provided by the Betic Cordillera mountain range in which the kingdom was nestled, as well as the geographic difficulties encountered by the North regarding consolidation of conquered lands, and the close proximity of North Africa. Social conditions in Islamic Spain differed from those in the North and the

presence of a refuge for emigrants from newly conquered lands was important in order to reduce political and religious friction. Tied to social factors were demographic considerations such as the low population density in the Christian North, which limited the potential to adequately administer and populate newly acquired territories. Political fortunes are often tied to military capacity and the relative military strength of Granada allowed it the ability to defend itself against changes in the political balance of the region. The economic state of Northern Spain was weak and the economic potential of newly conquered lands was squandered due to a lack of the necessary skills to reap maximum benefit from these lands. The imposition of tribute payment provided significant economic advantage while avoiding the high cost of war. Finally, political factors such as change in the perception of Granada as a threat reduced the urgency for its defeat, while a lack of unity among the Christian kingdoms and repeated political manipulations through changes in allegiance allowed Granada some flexibility.

## Historical Background

With the crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar by the Muslim general Ṭāriq bin Ziyād and his troops in 711, Islam was introduced into the Iberian Peninsula as a religious, cultural and political force. By the year 750, political forces associated with the Umayyad Caliphate occupied the majority of the peninsula (756-1009), including its most important cities. Although Islamic civilization in the region quickly suffered from political fragmentation, breaking up into smaller independent kingdoms during the period of the *Mulūk aṭ-Ṭawā'if* (1009-90), or 'Party Kings', Islamic culture continued to flourish. Islamic political disunity resulted in minor losses of peripheral territory to the North over the next 300 years.

Church reform and an increased political unity in the Christian North encouraged military action against Islamic Spain and Toledo was lost to the forces of King Alfonso VI of Leon (1065-1109) and Castile (1072-1109) in 1085. Unlike previous losses, losing Toledo had an immediate impact as it was a key cultural center, was located in the center of the Peninsula, and was deep in Islamic territory. The *al-Murābiṭūn* (1090-1147), a fundamentalist reform movement from North Africa, reacted by moving into the peninsula and maintaining the political distribution between Islamic and Christian forces. In 1147, the *al-Muwaḥḥidūn* (1147-1212), another orthodox reform

movement, replaced the al-Murābiṭūn as the primary military force in the Iberian Peninsula. A lengthy period of Northern disunity followed and the presence of the al-Muwaḥḥidūn ensured that political boundaries were maintained relatively unchanged.

In 1212, the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa marked a turning point for Islam in the peninsula. An unprecedented unity was achieved between a host of Northern forces to defeat the al-Muwaḥḥidūn. Strong Northern kings such as Alfonso VIII of Castile (1158-1214), Jaime I of Aragon (1213-76), known as the Conqueror, and Ferdinand III of Castile (1217-52) and Leon (1230-52), known as the Saint, undertook military advances that captured major centers such as Mallorca in 1229, Cordoba in 1235 and Seville in 1248. Simultaneously, the al-Muwaḥḥidūn were replaced as rulers in Morocco by the Banū Marīn (1217-1465), who continued the tradition of political and military involvement in the peninsula but to a lesser degree than their predecessors. Islamic Spain had flourished for five centuries but, in less than 40 years, the remaining Islamic kingdoms were lost one by one. Although the presence of the Banū Marīn in North Africa provided a minor counterbalance to Northern Christian dominance, the huge gains by the North in so short a time period transformed the political landscape of the Iberian Peninsula.

## Geographic Factors

The impact of geography on historical development is often overlooked. The history of the entire Iberian Peninsula is intimately tied to its particular geographic character. This landmass is characterized by a number of different mountain ranges of varying heights and climatic conditions. Many, such as the Pyrenees in Northern Spain, influenced the development of the various civilizations that have populated the Peninsula. This historical significance can often be linked to the capacity of such mountain ranges to act as natural barriers. The south eastern portion of the Iberian Peninsula is distinguished by the Betic Cordillera, a mountain range that played an essential role in the natural defense of the kingdom of Granada.

The Betic Cordillera is a chain of mountains ranging in height from about 1,800 meters to over 3,350 meters, many of which number among the highest mountains in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> A comparison of the geographic

layout of the Betic Cordillera and the political boundaries of Nasrid Granada reveals a clear correlation between the two.<sup>3</sup> The political boundary outlining this kingdom closely followed the outline of the northern fringes of this important mountain range. The complex series of ranges that constitute this belt provided a strong defense by sheltering the major cities of the Granadan kingdom and making any military advance from the North very difficult.<sup>4</sup> In order for any advancing Northern army to reach important Granadan cities such as Guadix or the capital city of Granada, it would have had to contend with the difficulties imposed by a wide range of natural conditions. The alternative to the nearly impossible prospect of moving directly over the mountains was traveling along roads and over mountain passes. However, such a strategy was limited by the difficulty of the roads and heavy fortification of the mountain passes.

Beyond the mountain ranges of Southern Spain, the rest of the Iberian Peninsula had to be brought under control and consolidated by the Northern Christians before pondering the incorporation of Granada. The Northern Christian states were confronted with a host of practical problems in consolidating and effectively administering the expansive entity that they sought to create. Several geographic factors acted as serious obstacles to the administration of the Iberian Peninsula as a single political unit.

The Iberian Peninsula is a very large landmass of almost 518,000 square kilometers and is bordered on all sides by natural boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Within this significant land mass, geographic and climatic conditions vary considerably - it has been described as a "patchwork of widely differing elements"<sup>6</sup> in what is "one of the most broken terrains in Europe."<sup>7</sup> These contrasts are evident in its varying geographical zones: the coastal areas of the north and north-west, the meseta or central plateau, the valley of the Guadalquivir and Guadiana plains and the Mediterranean coastal lands.<sup>8</sup> Due to the lack of a strong center, peripheral regions tended to remain that way, separated from one another and developing relatively independently. This was due, in part, to the practical difficulties of communication and travel over such a wide and varied terrain. In order to overcome these centrifugal tendencies, a powerful ruler with both political and military strength was required to exercise full control over the whole Iberian Peninsula.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning with the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 and extending to the period when Granada remained the single Islamic political entity in the Iberian Peninsula, Christian Spain had not been able to effectively consolidate and assimilate its rapid military conquests.<sup>10</sup> Because of the poor state of communications and travel at the time, the lack of any strong leader or unified Christian force, and the unforeseen difficulties of administering such a physically extensive and varied geographical zone, the final conquest of Granada was indefinitely postponed. The effort, cost and military and political organization required for an assault on Granada were diverted to the urgent matter of assimilating the already conquered peripheral regions of the Iberian Peninsula.

A final geographic feature that played a critical role in discouraging Christian advances was the proximity of North Africa to Granada, both by land across the Straits of Gibraltar and by sea to important Mediterranean Granadan ports such as Almunecar and Almeria. The Straits of Gibraltar, less than 30 kilometers across at their narrowest, provide quick access from North Africa. Although key cities surrounding the Straits were lost to the Christians before the final surrender of Granada, and though ships from North Africa would have to consider the potential military threat of Christian naval forces, Granada was still accessible through its important ports.

Granada represented a bridge between Christian Spain and North Africa.<sup>11</sup> With strong North African states willing and militarily able to assist the Granadans or even make independent incursions for their own political ends, the proximity of Africa was a threat to the Christian North. With the absence of strong North African states, or the existence of states that were not willing or militarily able to look to the Iberian Peninsula, the proximity of North Africa became much less of a concern to the Christian North. An example of both of these situations is found in the political relationships of Granada with the Banū Marīn of Morocco (1217-1465). At first, the Banū Marīn were a threat to the North due to their frequent military aid to the Granadans. Near the end of Granada's lifespan, the Banū Marīn became absorbed in their own internal affairs and problems in North Africa.

Regardless of the presence of potentially hostile Muslim states in North Africa, the geography of the peninsula's southern coast provided the Christian North with a much needed buffer-zone.<sup>12</sup> The maintenance of such a

zone was a very practical defense while they struggled with internal problems and attempts at consolidation of previously conquered Muslim lands. The Northern kingdoms were under internal pressures and did not have enough military, financial or demographic resources to concern themselves with the constant threat of invasion from North Africa, which would have been on their doorstep had they conquered Granada. Any possible gains in Granada may have been quickly reversed had the Christians decided to devote a huge amount of economic and military resources towards such a conquest.

### **Social Factor – Refuge for Emigrants**

The bulk of Reconquest victories for the Christian kingdoms occurred in a time frame of less than 40 years. The consolidation of such an extensive territory was a long and difficult process, both from a geographic and social point of view. The land that was to be consolidated into the future nation of Spain was populated by Muslims, Jews and Mozarabs living in a social environment significantly different from those of the Christian North.

The successful and smooth incorporation of such a large number of inhabitants with different beliefs and lifestyles was challenging and, at times, proved to be impossible. Population displacements, whether voluntary or involuntary, resulted in tens of thousands of political refugees, including intellectuals, scientists and artisans,<sup>13</sup> resettling in both North Africa and Granada. Estimates are that about 100,000 refugees settled in the city of Granada.<sup>14</sup> With a population of about 400,000 in the 14<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>15</sup> it is clear that this influx was very significant.

The huge volume of refugees and the presence of discontented Muslims and Jews living in newly Christian lands made the preservation of one Muslim zone in the Iberian Peninsula useful as a destination for such refugees.<sup>16</sup> The likely intention of such a short-term strategy was to allow the North to temporarily relieve itself of potentially unstable and dangerous political and religious elements from newly incorporated lands while it built up its military, political, and economic strength. Once the process of consolidation became more effective, the Northern kingdoms could finally expel the Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula altogether, which their successors eventually did.

## Demographic Factor

Even if the Christian North had wanted to quickly consolidate the newly conquered lands, they would have been unable to do so due to demographic considerations. Effective consolidation of the Iberian Peninsula required manpower, for both military and economic pursuits. Military superiority was crucial to enable defense against internal or external attacks and to maintain political power. Economic manpower was fundamental to ensure the continued prosperity of the economy or, at the very least, the basic functioning of economic activities. Even at the time of the fall of Toledo in 1085, more than a century before the major victories of the Reconquest, the Christian kingdom of Castile did not have sufficient demographic resources for resettlement.<sup>17</sup> Without resettlement, the rulers of the Christian North would be foreigners governing a native population or near empty land, abandoned by fleeing Muslims and Jews. The policy of the North was heavily in favor of resettling conquered lands with Christian colonists from the North;<sup>18</sup> in fact, “reconquest and resettlement were firmly linked since extensive territorial gains could not be held without efficient locally based defense forces.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus the policy of resettlement was the theoretical ideal pursued by the Christian kings, while the practical application of such a policy was limited by demographic factors. The reality was that the population density of Christian Spain was very low in relation to the rest of Europe, and indeed in relation to many of the formerly population-dense regions of Islamic Spain.<sup>20</sup> The unusually low population density resulted from many interrelated factors. However, a single event reduced the already low population level significantly: the rapid spread of the Black Death throughout Europe in 1348. It is estimated that between one quarter and one half of the population of Western Europe died as a result.<sup>21</sup> The direct problems associated with such wide-scale death were compounded by a general panic and the inability of traditional authorities to maintain order. The collapse of the established order and subsequent internal struggles in the Christian kingdoms of the North were to take years to rectify and even longer to recover from.<sup>22</sup>

## **Military Factor – Military Strength of Granada**

Throughout the political history of Islamic Spain, military strength was often built on political unity and linked to the ability to retain political control. Loss of political unity, throughout the period of the *Mulūk aṭ-Ṭawāʾif* (1009-90) for example, created unfavorable conditions for defense against attacks launched by the Northern Christian states. Conversely, political unity under the dynasties of the *al-Murābiṭūn* (1090-1147) and the *al-Muwaḥḥidūn* (1147-1212) created military strength and the ability to repel Northern attacks. However, when faced with a strong, unified Christian military unit, the ‘Party Kings’ were not adequately equipped to defend their kingdoms. That is not to say that they were militarily weak. Rather, they were relatively strong militarily compared to the fragmented Christian kingdoms.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, while the Christians remained divided, the military strength of the ‘Party Kings’ and, later, Nasrid Granada, was clear.

Nasrid Granada possessed a formidable military capability based on numerous factors. From the beginning of his Nasrid dynasty, Muḥammad Ibn Yūsuf Ibn Naṣr (1237-73) knew that based on past experience, he could not trust the Christian kings. Much of Granada’s military advantage arose as the result of initiatives taken by Ibn Naṣr. Examining the military and political climate of south Spain, he focused his kingdom around a strong nucleus within borders that could be defended.<sup>24</sup> Instead of devoting resources to rule a geographically large but militarily vulnerable kingdom, he chose smaller but militarily superior borders. In addition, even during the early period of cooperation and subservience to Castile, Ibn Naṣr reorganized his military forces, strategically positioning them, and built or repaired countless castles and major fortresses.<sup>25</sup> The placement of fortresses highlights another key factor in Granada’s advantageous military position, the mountainous terrain, which shielded vulnerable towns and cities. Ibn Naṣr reinforced the natural military advantage of Granada’s geography by locating heavy stone fortresses at potentially vulnerable positions,<sup>26</sup> thereby limiting the weak points along Granada’s northern border.

Military infrastructure provided a foundation upon which the defense of Granada could be undertaken. The quality of Granadan troops and fighting techniques enhanced Granada’s defensive capacity. The Granadan troops were courageous and effective, launching furious sorties and commanding the

respect of the Christian kingdoms.<sup>27</sup> They were so effective during key military operations that the Castilians considered withdrawing their own troops due to mounting casualties, even in Nasrid Granada's final years such as during the siege of Malaga in 1487.<sup>28</sup> It is a testament to the military resilience of the Granadan kingdom that even at the very end, without military support from North Africa or anywhere else in the Islamic world, it took Christian Spain more than 10 years and the aid of foreign military specialists from western Europe to force a Granadan surrender.<sup>29</sup> While surrender was finally obtained, the entire military operation resulted in huge casualties and enormous military costs for the Christian North.

## **Economic Factors**

### **Payment of Tribute**

During the peak of Islamic military and political strength in the Iberian Peninsula, the Muslim political leadership was able to pressure the politically and militarily disorganized Northern Christian states to pay tribute. During the final period of Islamic Spain, this pattern was reversed and Granada found itself having to pay heavy tribute to the North.<sup>30</sup>

The costs of constant military preparedness and military activity, combined with equally important internal economic problems such as political instability and social prejudices, resulted in economically weak Northern kingdoms.<sup>31</sup> Political power resulted from military superiority, which could only be maintained through economic strength. The costs of the final war on Granada were to be enormous. Accordingly, the Christian kingdoms could address two problems simultaneously by resorting to a long-standing custom.<sup>32</sup> By imposing tribute on Granada in place of conquest, the North could systematically oppress Granada economically while acquiring substantial financial resources, such as Sudanese gold,<sup>33</sup> acquired by Granada through African trade. Simultaneously, it could drain financial resources out of Granada that could have been put toward militarily strengthening the Nasrid kingdom.

The rationale of this tributary system is unmistakably expressed in a quote attributed to King Ferdinand III of Castile (1217-52) and Leon (1230-52), the Saint, who represented an unusually strong example of crusading zeal: "There is no other way to do this but to weaken your position over a long period of time until when you have no money and no men left, then we shall take it without expense or effort".<sup>34</sup> That this was presumably uttered by one of the staunchest architects of the Reconquest is very telling. The aim of the tributary system in Spain, particularly as applied to Granada, was not merely to amass financial resources. Rather it was to amass financial resources while simultaneously inflicting great economic weakness on the enemy and avoiding the enormous costs associated with military conquest.<sup>35</sup> Even with its considerable resources and superior economy, Granada began to suffer obvious economic distress during the final period of its existence.<sup>36</sup>

### **High Cost of War**

Tribute enabled the Northern kingdoms to postpone the costly conquest of Granada. As long as Granada was subservient and cooperated by paying tribute and avoiding any military advances against the Christians, the rulers of the Christian North were not favorably disposed toward making advances into Granada. This was true even if Granada reverted to payment of tribute after having suspended payment or launching a military offensive, since the North did not feel that the military costs were justified in either human or economic terms. King Alfonso VI of Leon (1065-1109) and Castile (1072-1109), another key figure in the Reconquest, is thought to have said, "If by battle, then my men will die in the process and my wealth will disappear and the loss will be greater than what might be hoped for by winning it",<sup>37</sup> thus illustrating the general attitude of the Christian kings.

When payment of tribute was finally bluntly refused by Nasrid amir Abu l-Hasan 'Alī, the newly united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon decided that it was time to conquer Granada. This decision was partly driven by newfound political unity and partly by extreme religious zeal on the parts of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand V of Aragon.<sup>38</sup> The massive costs of taking Granada are exemplified by the fact that, even after benefiting from significant tribute paid by Granada over more than two centuries, enormous sums of money had to be borrowed from abroad and locally. These loans were necessary in order to pay for such military necessities as wages of the

Spanish troops and the aforementioned Western European military specialists, in addition to the basic requirements of building roads and bridges and acquiring the tools of siege warfare.<sup>39</sup>

### **Lack of Skills for Consolidation of Land**

Military expenditures drained the resources of the Northern kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula but newly conquered lands represented huge economic potential. However, Christian advances towards the South had caused massive population displacement. Much of the skilled population fled and took with them the extensive knowledge that had been developed over hundreds of years of agriculture and commerce in the southern portion of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>40</sup> The Christians of the North did not have the required knowledge or skills to maintain the complex and prosperous economic systems that the Muslims had developed.

From their arrival in 711, Muslims and those within the Islamic sphere of influence had inherited and perfected techniques inherited from pre-Islamic civilizations and peoples in the Iberian Peninsula, including the Romans and the Visigoths. In addition, they made huge leaps forward through their expertise in fields such as applied botany, agronomy, pharmacology, and medicine.<sup>41</sup> Specialized agriculture required a high level of labor, fertilization, irrigation and pesticides.<sup>42</sup>

During the early period of the Reconquest, the costs of war and the poor state of the Northern economies encouraged Northern kings to settle on a practical compromise in order to maintain the lucrative economic resources of captured lands. When Muslims were tolerated and allowed to remain, it was precisely because their knowledge was so central to the highly developed economy of what was formerly Islamic Spain.<sup>43</sup> When massive numbers of Muslims emigrated to Granada or North Africa however, administrators from the Christian North had to assume the responsibility for heavily populated lands with a very developed and sophisticated economy. Lacking the fundamental knowledge of crafts, plants and irrigation systems necessary to maintain the existing economy,<sup>44</sup> let alone to continue to nurture its development as the Muslims had been doing, their task was exceedingly difficult. The reason for the inevitable decay of the economy lay squarely on

the fact that such expertise in terms of information and skilled personnel simply did not exist on the necessary scale in the Christian North, even with the incorporation of Christian Mozarabs.

The economic results were catastrophic as the economies in the newly consolidated regions immediately declined.<sup>45</sup> This exacerbated popular dissatisfaction and led to further emigration. Many new landowners decided to sell their land cheaply and move back to the North,<sup>46</sup> while others no longer cultivated their land at all. Cattle grazing took place on what was previously some of the most fertile and productive land in the Iberian Peninsula. Other land was left to suffer from soil erosion and was soon no longer suitable for agriculture,<sup>47</sup> while irrigation systems were left to degrade. The potentially significant economic benefits that were possible when highly productive land was captured by the North never materialized due to the neglect and incompetence of Northern political leaders and by the new Spanish land owners.

### **Source of Trade**

The final economic factor in the survival of Granada is its important role in trade. Islamic Spain had, at its height, been an extensive source of trade goods. This was true both in its capacity as a producer of such goods and as a mediator and distributor of trade goods coming from the rest of the Islamic world and beyond. A wide range of products, including silk, saffron, olive oil and dye-stuffs were traded for goods from the North such as slaves and furs, and traded for eastern products such as textiles, indigo, pepper and other spices.<sup>48</sup> Trade relations existed with North Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, as well as Syria, Greece, Italy, India, China and the central areas of Africa, as the result of merchants who maintained extensive associations through various business partnerships and lines of communication.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence also exists of an informal religious segregation in trade. Often, religious groups formed distinct trading groups and focused on different trades, with Muslims forming close commercial ties to their co-religionists throughout North Africa and the near east.<sup>50</sup> This would have been impossible for Northern Christians to achieve. Granadan merchants and their associates acted as intermediaries between Northern Spain and markets in the Islamic world and beyond.

The existence of such extensive trade relationships in Islamic Spain as compared to the much less significant trade taking place in the North suggests that it was financially and socially beneficial to maintain Granada as a source of international trade. The economic incentives of trade and tribute were great enough that the fervor for a rapid and complete conquest of the Iberian Peninsula was tempered. Without the trade relations that had been cultivated by Spanish Muslims over centuries, Northern Spain would have needed to find alternative sources of trade goods, many of which were exclusive to these distant nations. Alternatively, Northern Spain had the option of pursuing a policy of developing direct trade relations with each of these nations. However, it was not in a strong position to do so during its frequent and lengthy periods of political and economic instability. These powerful trade incentives became less important late in the life of the Nasrid dynasty. With the establishment of new trade routes directly between Western Europe and North Africa and the increasing role of Christian shipping in the Mediterranean,<sup>31</sup> the significance of Granada's role as an intermediary and trading partner in the Iberian Peninsula was considerably diminished.

## **Political Factors**

### **Change of Perception in the Christian North**

The battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in the year 1212 was a key event in the reversal of fortunes in the Iberian Peninsula. A new trend of decline for Islamic Spain and advance for the Christian kingdoms of the North began to emerge as a result of this battle and subsequent military manoeuvres by the Christian North.<sup>32</sup> Granada was left alone, the single Islamic political entity in the Iberian Peninsula. Immediately after this decisive victory, the perception of Granada changed, affecting the way in which it was handled politically and militarily. Perceiving Granada as a negligible military threat, King Alfonso X of Castile and Leon (1252-84) left Granada to struggle and exhaust itself, after which it could be taken with minimal efforts. Tribute was so attractive and the perceived threat from Granada so insignificant that Castile repeatedly refused Portugal's offers of military aid to eliminate Granada.<sup>33</sup> The Christians were caught up in their own internal problems and were in no rush to struggle with the consolidation of another Islamic kingdom. The historian Charles Edward Chapman summarizes the perceptions towards Granada succinctly, as follows:

‘the state of Granada was of very slight political importance in this period...it was a mere political accident, annoying to the Christians at times, but as a rule not worthy of serious consideration as an enemy’.<sup>54</sup>

While the conquest of Granada lacked urgency, it was perceived as inevitable. The founder of the Nasrid dynasty himself, Ibn Naṣr, knew that he could not indefinitely defend Christian advances and chose the practical option of entering into a relationship of vassalage with Castile.<sup>55</sup> Geography and politics cut off Granada from the rest of the Muslim world, with the exception of North Africa. While Granada was not without military and political options, the virtual completion of the Reconquest in so limited a period of time, and the prevailing intolerant attitudes of the Christian North, guaranteed that Islam was to continue its political decline in Spain.

### **Lack of Unity among the Christian Kingdoms**

The battle of Las Navas de Tolosa can be distinguished from preceding battles by the degree of political and military unity that was achieved by the Northern Christian kingdoms. The military force was not put forward by a single kingdom or by a minimal coalition of kingdoms. For this key battle, a temporary political and military unity was achieved by Alfonso VIII of Castile, Sancho VII the Strong of the Navarese, Peter II the Catholic of Aragon, troops of Don Diego Lopez de Haro, Lord of Vizcaya, along with Leonese, Galician and Portuguese knights.<sup>56</sup> Political leaders with long-term goals were able to set aside differences for the perceived good of all the Christians of the North. This degree of unity was not again achieved until more than 200 years later.

Due to this loss of unity by the Northern kingdoms, minor military gains were made and losses incurred over the course of the next two and a half centuries. After the period of rapid Reconquest between 1212 and 1252, key figures of Christian unity and strength such as Jaime I of Aragon (1213-76), the Conqueror, and Ferdinand III of Castile (1217-52) and Leon (1230-52), the Saint, were replaced by leaders that endured repeated problems with succession, dissent and civil war.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the Granadans and their North African sometime allies, the Banū Marīn, were not able to take advantage of the Christian disunity because the Nasrid dynasty suffered a political decline, particularly near its end.<sup>58</sup> As the political unity of Granada

deteriorated in the face of disputes of succession and clashes between important political figures, an event occurred in the Christian North that was to spell the end of Granada and all of Islam in Spain: the marriage of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand V of Aragon in 1469.

The unity of the new Spanish kingdom provided the potential for effectively channeling resources towards the conquest of Granada instead of dissipating energy in struggles with other Northern Christians or internal power plays. The new royal couple displayed an unusual religious fanaticism,<sup>59</sup> which motivated them to address the final conquest of Granada and the unification of the Iberian Peninsula under one religious banner, that of Catholic Christianity. The new political and military unity of Aragon and Castile was harnessed to remove the Islamic rulers of Granada, and eventually resulted in the eradication of Islam and Judaism from the peninsula. The effectiveness of the military victories that were achieved in 1212 and 1492 directly correlates with periods of strong political and military unity among the Northern kingdoms and highlights the important relationship between these two factors.

### **Repeated Changes in Allegiance**

The status of Granada as a buffer zone between North Africa and Northern Spain resulted in pressure on Granada, but also left it in a strong position to manipulate its relationship with each of these groups. Such manipulation usually had the aim of maintaining Granadan independence and security while preventing any external power from significantly interfering in its internal affairs.<sup>60</sup>

The period immediately following the battle at Las Navas de Tolosa saw many Muslim kings become vassals of Castile. With the significant exception of the Nasrid kingdom, this new political arrangement only briefly delayed the eventual fall of these kingdoms to Castile. The founder of the Nasrid dynasty of Granada, Ibn Naşr, recognized the turning tide of events in the Iberian Peninsula and the strong position that the Christians were creating for themselves. Consequently, he made decisions that would have lasting effects on his kingdom and which would form a model to be followed by subsequent Nasrid rulers. Ibn Naşr became a vassal of Castile, to the extent that he provided them with military support against other Islamic kingdoms

when required to do so by Castile, as a condition of vassalage.<sup>61</sup> He was recognized as a useful vassal meriting special treatment,<sup>62</sup> a factor explaining why he remained relatively independent after the other vassals had been conquered. The possibilities for external military support were limited as the al-Muwahhīdūn had grown weak and were no longer a significant military force.

Ibn Naṣr bided his time, acting as a vassal and paying tribute to Castile while reorganizing and consolidating the military position of his kingdom. Simultaneously, the Banū Marīn became the dominant force in Fez, providing Granada with a source of external support. Thus began a long process, whereby Ibn Naṣr and the Nasrid amirs that followed him would adopt a policy of flexibility, floating between truces when Northern Christian opponents were strong and attacking them when they were affected by dissension, while retaining the option of calling for the help of the Banū Marīn when he was not able to adequately defend Granada alone.<sup>63</sup>

Though the basis for Granada's political strategy was a careful mixture of force and diplomacy - as dictated by changing circumstances - it must be emphasized that this was not a simple political game. The kingdom came close to ruin several times, either under the threat of relatively unified Christians in the North, or the threat of being politically absorbed by the Banū Marīn and becoming the first element of an extension of the Marinid dynasty within the Iberian Peninsula. Sometimes, it was saved by chance occurrences like the death of King Alfonso XI of Castile (1312-50) from the Black Death when he was in a position to advance on Granada and the Banū Marīn were not in a position to assist.<sup>64</sup> At other times, amirs found themselves left with very restrictive political situations by their predecessors but always managed to restore the delicate balance. An excellent example is Muḥammad V al-Gḥanī bi-llāh (1354-59 and 1362-91), who began his rule in the face of hostility directed from Castile, Aragon and the Banū Marīn but persistently and relentlessly made overtures for peace and eventually achieved it.<sup>65</sup> More often than not, Northern Christian disunity and absorption in internal affairs presented Granada with the opportunity to establish truces and delay the Christian advance. At times, the political history of Granada may give the impression of seemingly arbitrary changes of alignment but these changes were carefully manipulated to allow Granada the best possible position in the face

of frequent and unforeseen changes in the political dynamics of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa.

## Conclusion

Having conducted a brief survey of key geographic, demographic, social, military, economic and political factors, one can finally answer the following question: Why was Nasrid Granada able to persevere for two and a half centuries as the only Islamic political entity in the Iberian Peninsula? Certainly, the factors outlined above are numerous. In reality there was no single, fundamental factor, though certain factors proved to be more significant than others at given points in time. Indeed, any hierarchical organization of factors would represent a mere snapshot of the circumstances of a given time period of Nasrid rule.

The relative influence of factors changed as the Nasrid dynasty matured in Granada. At its beginning, the key factors were political, economic and geographic, in particular vassalage, tribute and the challenges posed by the harsh mountain ranges of Granada. During the middle of Granada's existence, numerous political, economic, geographic, and social factors were key, such as the constant switching of alliances, the lack of prolonged unity among Christians, difficulties experienced in administering new lands, the proximity of North Africa and the availability of a refuge to encourage emigration of possibly unstable elements from the Christian North. Near its end, before the unification of the Christian North, economic and political factors such as trade, the high costs of war, and lack of Christian unity, proved to be the key factors. In every case, the other factors cited remained significant to varying degrees, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of the situation. All of the factors mentioned contributed to creating an environment in which Granada could survive in the worst of times, and thrive in the best of times. The Nasrid amirs manipulated changing factors at different times to allow for both their own political survival and the continuation of Spanish Islamic culture. When the final Nasrid amirs lost the ability to successfully manipulate these factors, the fall of Granada became inevitable.

## Appendix: Maps

### The Spanish Kingdoms 1030



“Maps of Iberia.” Medieval Atlas Medieval Atlas. 2005. “Maps of Iberia.”  
20 Mar. 2005.  
<<http://www.historymedren.about.com/library/atlas/blatiberdex.htm>>. 2005.

### The Spanish Kingdoms 1210



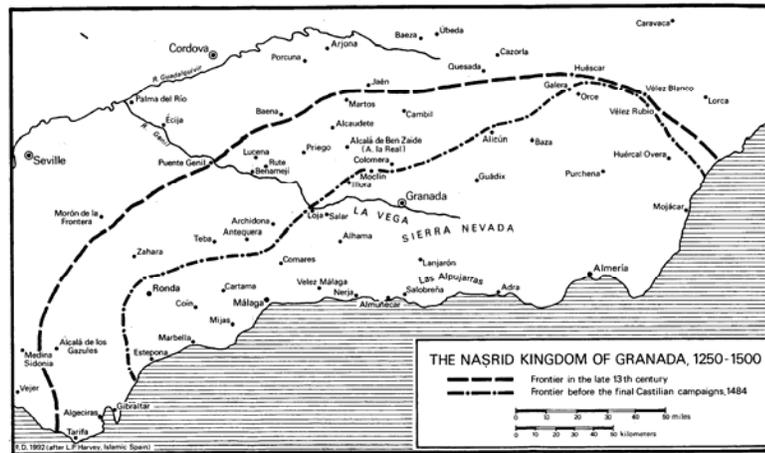
"Maps of Iberia." Medieval Atlas. 2005.

### The Spanish Kingdoms 1360



"Maps of Iberia." Medieval Atlas. 2005.

## Nasrid Granada 1250-1500



Latham, J. D. "Naşrids." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New ed. Vol. 7 of 11 vols. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-2002. 1020-1029.

## Notes:

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- <sup>2</sup> William Bayne Fisher and H. Bowen-Jones, *Spain: An Introductory Geography*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1958), p. 198.
- <sup>3</sup> Jose Terrero, *Historia de España*, (Barcelona: Editorial Ramon Sopena, 1972), p. 150.
- <sup>4</sup> Julián Marías, *Understanding Spain*, trans. Frances M. López-Morillas, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 125.
- <sup>5</sup> S. M Imamuddin, *Some Aspects of the Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Muslim Spain*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Fisher and Bowen-Jones, *Spain: An Introductory Geography*, p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> J. D. Latham, "Al-Andalus." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New ed. Vol. 1 of 11 Volumes, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-2002), p. 487.
- <sup>8</sup> Imamuddin, *Some Aspects of the Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Muslim Spain*, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> Gabriel Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 90.
- <sup>11</sup> Roger Bigelow Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and New World*, (Norwood: The Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 131.

- <sup>12</sup> Anwar G. Chejne, *Muslim Spain: Its History and Culture*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1974), p. 105.
- <sup>13</sup> Imamuddin, S. M. *A Political History of Muslim Spain*, (Pakistan: Zeeco Press, 1961), p. 174.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. 174.
- <sup>15</sup> Imamuddin, *Some Aspects of the Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Muslim Spain*, p. 7.
- <sup>16</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 148.
- <sup>17</sup> David Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 288.
- <sup>18</sup> Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, p. 150.
- <sup>19</sup> P.E. Russel, ed. *Spain: A Companion to Spanish Studies*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), p. 79-80.
- <sup>20</sup> Fisher and Bowen-Jones, *Spain: An Introductory Geography*, p. 73.
- <sup>21</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, p. 146.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. 146.
- <sup>23</sup> Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings*, p. 250.
- <sup>24</sup> Mahmoud Makki, "The Political History of al-Andalus," in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), p. 78.
- <sup>25</sup> Imamuddin, *A Political History of Muslim Spain*, p. 174.

- <sup>26</sup> Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, p. 148.
- <sup>27</sup> Henry Coppee, *History of the Conquest of Spain by the Arab-Moors*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881), p. 254.
- <sup>28</sup> Makki, "The Political History of al-Andalus," p. 84.
- <sup>29</sup> Louis Bertrand, *The History of Spain*, Warre B. Wells, trans., (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Inc, 1934), p. 198.
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- <sup>31</sup> Fisher and Bowen-Jones, *Spain: An Introductory Geography*, p. 73.
- <sup>32</sup> Bertrand, *The History of Spain*, p. 216.
- <sup>33</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, p. 185.
- <sup>34</sup> Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings*, p. 265.
- <sup>35</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, pp. 88-89.
- <sup>36</sup> Russel, ed., *Spain: A Companion to Spanish Studies*, p. 58.
- <sup>37</sup> Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings*, p. 256.
- <sup>38</sup> Imamuddin, *A Political History of Muslim Spain*, p. 183.
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- <sup>44</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, pp. 86-87.
- <sup>45</sup> Fisher and Bowen-Jones, *Spain: An Introductory Geography*, p. 73.
- <sup>46</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, p. 88.
- <sup>47</sup> Ruth Way, *A Geography of Spain and Portugal*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1962), p. 102.
- <sup>48</sup> Stanley G. Payne *A History of Spain and Portugal*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973,) p. 146, and Stanley G. Payne *Spain: A Companion to Spanish Studies*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973,) p. 99.
- <sup>49</sup> Olivia Remie Constable. "Muslim Merchants in Andalusí International Trade," in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), p. 759.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 767-68.
- <sup>51</sup> Constable. "Muslim Merchants in Andalusí International Trade," p. 768.
- <sup>52</sup> Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings*, p. 217.
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- <sup>54</sup> Charles Edward Chapman, *A History of Spain*, (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 135.

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- <sup>55</sup> Way, *A Geography of Spain and Portugal*, p. 147.
- <sup>56</sup> Marías, *Understanding Spain*, p. 123.
- <sup>57</sup> Jackson, *The Making of Medieval Spain*, p. 130.
- <sup>58</sup> Chejne, *Muslim Spain: Its History and Culture*, p. 101.
- <sup>59</sup> Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, p. 149.
- <sup>60</sup> Makki, "The Political History of al-Andalus," p. 78.
- <sup>61</sup> Chejne, *Muslim Spain: Its History and Culture*, p. 98.
- <sup>62</sup> Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain*, p. 148.
- <sup>63</sup> Makki, "The Political History of al-Andalus," p. 78.
- <sup>64</sup> Imamuddin, *A Political History of Muslim Spain*, p. 177.
- <sup>65</sup> J. D. Latham, "Naşrids." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New ed. Vol. 7 of 11 Vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-2002,) p. 1024.