

To what extent did Medieval Spain, from the Umayyad Caliphate to the 1492 expulsion of Jews, provide a 'Golden Age' for Jews and people of Jewish origin?

To some, Medieval Spain is the 'Ornament of the World', a time of thriving multicultural society, brimming with prosperous trade, poetry and the growth of philosophical and scientific ideas amongst a largely tolerant *Convivencia*. And yet for others, Medieval Spain's reputation is tarnished by its expulsion of Jews and Muslims and the Spanish Inquisition against *Judeoconversos*, highlighting not only a religious intolerance but also a partly- racialized one. This poses the question: how can it be that such a seemingly progressive multicultural hub became known for one of the most prominent examples of antisemitism since the birth of Christ? From the Umayyad ruled Al-Andalus to the newly post-Reconquista, Christian ruled Spain, can it be said that there was a gradual decay from a supposedly 'utopian' Cordoba (the cultural Capital of Andalusia) to an intolerant, aggressive Spain or were there always cracks in the foundation of this multicultural society. Furthermore, this creates greater speculation over the status of Jews and people of Jewish origin in Medieval Spain: could the earlier Muslim-ruled Andalusian years really be considered a 'Golden Age' for Jews and overall, to what extent was Medieval Spain as a whole a 'Golden Age' for Jews and people of Jewish origin? Certainly, comparatively to the oppressive Visigoth rule where the Jews were an enslaved people, Jews initially enjoyed large amounts of freedom, climbing the ranks in cultural and ideological advancement as well as in government. Furthermore, Jews finally had religious freedom. However, equality was never quite achieved for Jews under either Christian or Muslim rule and underlying religious tensions soon came to the surface in Andalusia, slowly resulting in the loss of new-found rights for Jews. Therefore, while medieval Spain certainly left its positive marks on the whole Jewish community, to deem it a utopia would be to deny the Jewish people of the oppression they faced during this period.

Pre-Umayyad caliphate, Jews had been subject to the notoriously cruel persecution of the Visigoth rule with historian Bernard Blumenkraz saying that from 589, the Visigothic persecution was 'the most tragic episode in Jewish history during the early Middle Ages.'¹ Comparatively, the Umayyad rule of Spain afforded far more rights to Jews (as well as Christians and Zoroastrians) because they were considered 'dhimmi' or 'people of the book' and therefore were subject to the 'dhimma' protection pact which granted them religious freedom as well as allowing them to contribute economically and societally (with regulations). This law legally defined them as respectable, holy individuals, something which the Jews no doubt greatly celebrated after years of dehumanising Visigothic rule. In fact, both Muslim and Catholic sources showcase the Jews support of the Muslim conquest (once the Muslims captured a city they left the Jews to defend them i.e after the capture of Cordoba circa 711). Not only does this demonstrate Jewish support for Muslims, but also a period of mutual trust between the two religions. For the Jews of Spain the establishment of Al-Andalus was an instrumental turning point for their way of life; they could earn money and own property as well as become involved in the society of the time. For some Jewish individuals this enabled them to become extremely successful and resume important roles. Perhaps the most notable of these figures is Hasdai Ibn Shaprut who was a physician, a Jewish scholar and an important diplomat who was active around the mid-900s in Spain. Using his medical knowledge, he became physician to the Umayyad Caliph of the time and acted as vizier (despite not technically being the vizier.) He was deeply involved in foreign policy and in 949 helped Spain form a diplomatic treaty with the Byzantine

¹ Bachrach, Bernard. 'A Reassessment of Visigothic Jewish policy, 589-711', *The American Historical Review*: 11

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empire. Beyond this, Hasdai was a strong advocate for his community, using his legal power to ask the Byzantine empire for better treatment of their Jewish community. Furthermore, he was a patron for other influential Jewish figures such as Dunash ben Labrat. Also operating in the mid-900s, Dunash came to Cordoba (Andalusia's capital) inspired by Sa'adia Gaon (a Jewish head of a Babylonian academy). Sa'adia Gaon was upset at Jews who had lost Hebrew to the language of their place of exile, saying 'the sacred speech..... has been removed from our mouths.'² This slow loss of Hebrew certainly applied to the Spanish Jews who were taught Arabic as their mother tongue under Muslim rule. Dunash sparked the beginnings of a reformation in Hebrew-that took place in Spain-as he observed Jews love of Arabic (a poetic and emotive language whereas Hebrew had become a language of prayer and unemotive formality) and began to encourage the Spanish Jews to 'arabize' (i.e add Arabic aspects such as meter) their Hebrew instead of forgetting it. Therefore, not only did Andalusia's liberal attitude towards Jews allow individual Jews to gain influence but this helped the wider Jewish community as Jews with political and economic influence could advocate and aid the wider Jewish community. Also, having important political Jewish figures and cultural icons, no doubt made the Spanish Jews appear respectable and educated.

However, this isn't to suggest that Andalusian Muslims viewed the other Abrahamic religions as equals. The 'dhimma' came with restrictions, and dhimmis were limited in their freedoms as they couldn't build new places of worship, show most public signs of worship and were prohibited from proselytizing to Muslims. Furthermore, they had to pay an annual poll tax called 'jizya' which Muslims didn't have to. Nonetheless, these were only slight restrictions for the Jews (especially considering it generally wasn't in the Jewish faith to proselytize) certainly not counteracting the positive advancements the 'dhimma' provided of ushering in a new age of success for Jews.

While Andalusia seemed like the beginnings of an ever-increasingly tolerant society, these restrictions highlight the inequalities already present in the foundation of Muslim Andalusia, suggesting the beginnings of a partial reason for the Convivencia's later downfall and even further the flaws in a state dominated by religious ideas that led to the downfall of Jews.

After the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031, several independent Muslim kingdoms (taifas) developed. Initially, under these taifas, many Jews continued experiencing the tolerance they'd been afforded in Cordoba and continued to succeed, if anything creating even stronger Jewish communities. The most prominent example of this is Granada, which despite being a Muslim kingdom, came to be known around this time as 'Granada of the Jews.' Here, lived one of the most influential Spanish Jewish figures of the Medieval ages, Samuel Ibn Nagrilla. Samuel became vizier (like a prime minister) c.1038, giving him control of Granada as well as control of the Muslim army. Again, this gave the Jews a new level of credibility and respectability and he was so well-loved amongst his community that he was made the 'nagid' or the religious leader of the Spanish Jews. Furthermore, he continued Dunash ben Labrat's idea of 'arabizing' Hebrew and his published poetry contained a new, revolutionised Hebrew which inspired many generations of Hebrew poets and increased Jews' pride and love for Hebrew. Not only did Hebrew poetry become important to the wider Jewish community but the era of Hebrew poetry he inspired became integral to poetry as a

² Cole, Pete. *The Dream of The Poem*, Princeton University Press, 2007:9

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whole to this day. An example of this is Moses Ibn Ezra, a Jewish poet but also philosopher and rabbi, born in Granada, whose collections of poems 'Tarshish' are the first ever example of homonymic rhyme.

However, despite this progression of Jewish culture under the Taifas, tensions increased between the Abrahamic religions who experienced increased cultural competition. The economic success of Jews also found them subject to hatred (and not for the last time) when Muslim hostility towards the thriving Jewish community in Granada came to light. In the 1066 Granada massacre, angry Andalusian Muslims killed roughly 4,000 Jews including Joseph Ibn Nagrilla (the Jewish vizier/leader) causing great losses to the Jewish community but also the loss of an incredibly important figurehead for Jews. This is one example of Muslims destroying newly thriving Jewish livelihoods. Another around this time was when Samuel Ibn Nagrilla lost his role as an important advisor to the Berber Ziri ruler because they were upset at the growing influence and riches that some Jews in Spain now enjoyed. Infact, Berber Muslims often chastised the Spanish Muslims for their allowance of integration amongst difference religions and promotion of Jews to high positions. This became another issue for Jews around this time as in 1090, Almoravid Berbers took control of al-Andalus. After this, many Jewish communities were destroyed and so was the short-lived 'Granada of the Jews' with many Jews (including Moses Ibn Ezra) choosing to emigrate to Northern Christian kingdoms. Therefore, while in many ways Jewish culture was undergoing a reformation around this time and Jews gained even more power, around the mid-1000s came the first big outward signs of Muslim hostility towards the Jews and a much drearier looking climate for future Jews under Muslim rule.

Despite the increased struggles against religious persecution many Jews faced as a result of the Berber rule, many of them emigrated up to Northern Spain into Christian cities that (under Alfonso III of Castille) would accept them and allowed them to resume their influential positions and continue their cultural growth. One example of this is Toledo, which was birthplace to one of the next great Jewish literary and philosophical figures, Judah Halevi. Halevi was mentored by Moses Ibn Ezra (another example of Jews using their status to help one another) and went on to write a famous book called 'Kuzari' which was so successful that it was influential in the use of dialogue form for religious argument in literature. His book was one of philosophical debate but also highlighted the special nature of the Jews as the 'chosen people.' The flourishing of Jewish literature in larger medieval society was one that established the Spanish Jews of the time as 'bourgeois'.

Spain's cultural growth (largely cultivated by Jews) had a larger reach in Europe as a whole. For example, the literary knowledge that converso, Petrus Alfonsi, brought to England (circa 1116) is thought to have inspired the notoriously famous English work 'The Canterbury Tales.' Another example of the freedoms Jews enjoyed under these early Christian kingdoms can be seen in the building of the Santa Maria synagogue in Toledo in 1180, highlighting that under Christian rule around this time Jews still largely enjoyed religious freedoms like they had under the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba (perhaps even more as under the 'dhimma' they weren't meant to build new places of worship). Even further, around this time (1192) the Christian Spanish king, Alfonso VII, exempt all Jews (and Moors) from paying royal taxes as they were already paying their share of town's revenue. While the new Berber rulers were often cruel and intolerant, in the late-twelfth

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century, Jews instead found haven in the tolerance of Christians. Jewish financial support for the Christians in battles against their once saviours (the moors) highlights Jews changing favour towards Christians as they increased their tolerance.

Furthermore, there was another influential Spanish Jew around this time (though not living in Christian Spain and largely not even Spain at all): Maimonides (born 1138), a Jewish philosopher. Maimonides' was incredibly influential particularly to the Jewish community and most likely saved many Jewish lives when encouraging them to convert to Christianity over being killed for being Jewish and martyred.

During this time, however, Jews faced backlash on two fronts:

Firstly, religious hatred towards them continued to increase, now from both Christians and Muslims. The Berber Almohads takeover of al-Andalus (c.1150) saw a reign of even more fundamentalist, anti-integration ideology and they exiled many Jews (including Maimonides himself, who left Cordoba in 1148). Many Christians didn't maintain a neutral position towards Jews either. Soon after the emigration of large amounts of Jews up North, the first Crusade took place (1095-1096), which ended up targeting thousands of Jews throughout Europe despite not being a direct attack on Jews. Clearly, this established an attack on the Jewish religion as 'unholy' that would show itself again in the second Crusade (1147-1149) and continued to worsen in the 13th century.

The second point of hostility for Jews were members (and ex members) of their own community. Opening the literary platform to Jews and people of Jewish origin meant their internal disputes became widely publicised. For example, the aforementioned 'Kuzari' criticises Spanish Jewry for its arabized ways and argues against the coexistence of philosophy and religion. However if anything, Jews' newfound arabized ways actually strengthen their community and appreciation of Judaism (I.e through Hebrew) instead of taking away from it. Furthermore, 'Kuzari' was hardly an attack on Judaism as a whole, unlike converso Petrus Alfonsi's 'Dialogue against the Jews' (published c.1109) which was written as a response to the backlash he received from the Jewish community for converting to Christianity, which helped stir up anti-Jewish feeling amongst Christians.

It may also be noted that many Jews who became culturally significant came from prominent families and therefore those opportunities weren't necessarily open to the poorer Jews. For example, Maimonides father was the student of respected scholar Ibn Migash and a Jewish dayyan (judge) himself. Out of the roughly half a million Jews in Medieval Spain, a few figureheads remain prominent and many of them appear to have ties to one another. Nonetheless, the wider Spanish Jewry still benefited from their success even if not directly (as aforementioned.)

Overall, the late 11th century and 12th century oversaw some incredible developments in Jewish culture, mostly in Christian Spain. However, this cultural importance gave them less leverage and respectability amongst their non-Jewish peers than before as we also see an increasingly hostile climate towards Jews from both Christians and Muslims. Certainly, by the end of this century, there is a definite end for Jews hoping to find the tolerant, culturally thriving place they once enjoyed.

There were positives for the 13th and 14th century Spanish Jewry and in fact, Jews internationally. After the Crusades, many Jews emigrated to Catalonia and mixed with the older Jewish populations

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living there and it was there, in the mid-1200s, in a place called Gerona, a seat of Kabbalism (Jewish mysticism) formed. Here, many great Jewish Kabbalists lived, such as Nahmanides. Catalonia was also the birthplace of Moses of Leon who likely inspired by the kabbalism surrounding him every day published 'The Zohar' (c.1280). 'The Zohar' was a kabbalistic work with commentary on Jewish mystic tradition that appealed to imagination over the direct interpretation of Jewish scripture. It became a canonical text for Jews globally, read alongside the Torah and Bible amongst many different Jews in the diaspora and is still widely read to this day.

Another positive, of these centuries was the rule of 'Peter of Castille' who had pro-Jewish sentiment (for someone at the time at least-c.1360) and allowed his Jewish treasurer Samuel Ha-Levi to build the 'Synagogue of El Transito' despite bans on building synagogues at the time.

Nonetheless, the attitude towards Jews from Muslims and Christians during this time was overwhelmingly negative as laws against Jews increasingly persecuted them and denied them of their freedoms. Also, the oppressive and strictly religious (anti-philosophy) Almohad reign mixed with the increasingly oppressive rules of the Christian kingdom in the 13th century explains why the prevalence of Spanish Hebrew poets and literature begins to fade away in this period, highlighting not only the legal persecution Jews faced during this time, but how this stifled and brought an end to their cultural development.

While Spanish Jews in Christian Kingdoms reached relative success, the Spanish Reconquista was becoming increasingly more prevalent, and along with that their hatred for anything 'Moorish' (which the Arabic-speaking, non-Christian Jews came to be seen as) and 'unholy' (which the Jews were also seen as because they 'killed Jesus'). Thus, despite many wealthy Jews supporting Christians against the moors, in 1212 the crusaders began a 'Holy War' in Toledo by robbing and killing Jews. Things worsened around 1215, after the death of a king who was relatively liberal to the Jews in 1214, Alfonso VIII, and an advocacy from the Pope in 1215 that all Jews and Muslims should be forced to wear distinctive badges, which certainly would've cemented the different and dangerous nature of Jews for many Spanish Christians. Somewhere between 1256-1265, Alfonso X implemented the 'Siete Partidas' which greatly restricted the rights of Jews with harsh punishments implemented for breaking the rules. Jews could be punished to death for converting a Christian to Judaism or committing any anti-Christian act. Furthermore, the document only served to further highlight Jews as 'untrustworthy' suggesting you shouldn't take medicine from them. Increased persecution of Jews meant many of them converted but if not became more separated and created 'aljamas' (self-governing communities). While the reign of 'Peter of Castille' provided some relief for the Jews, his half-brother and rival to the throne, Henry of Trastamara used his tolerance of Jews to rile up hate for Peter, branding him with the name 'Peter the Cruel' and increasing antisemitic sentiment to gain power. When he managed to overthrow Peter in 1369, incredible violence was put in place towards Jews (such as the instigation of pogroms which saw anti-Jewish riots and force conversions from 1370-90). After this gradual build-up of antisemitism, came the 1391 Massacre of Jews with up to 50,000 supposed victims.

Overall, the 13th and 14th century in Medieval Spain was a time of increasing intolerance towards Jews from Christians. As Christians began to focus on purging anything they viewed as 'unholy' Jews slowly went from being attacked illegally and having small freedoms removed to having become victims of legalised attacks. Small amounts of tolerance were short-lived for the Jews and if they

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found themselves in Muslim territory (which gradually disappeared) they faced similar discrimination. Furthermore, there was an obvious lack of cultural development in this time. All in all, this was a horrific period of persecution for the Jews, a steep decline that was only about to worsen.

It's a difficult task to find any truly redeeming or positive qualities of the 15th century for Jews and people of Jewish origin. Perhaps the ability of Jewish Isaac Abravnel to change the date of the day of Jewish expulsion from July 31st to 2nd August (a symbolic day of tragedy-being the date of the destruction of the temple) can be the only positive to come out of this final phase; a final bit of influence the Jews wielded over government to cement the mistreatment of the Jews as a tragedy. Or, perhaps the fact people of Jewish origin had the chance to begin again and establish a new life as conversos (Christian converts) where they could even gain governmental roles (i.e. Talavera and Torquemada) could be considered a positive for people of Jewish origin. But considering that the decision to convert was one that involved abandoning your identity and in itself was often still dangerous (because of the inquisition) the ability to convert can hardly be considered a kindness on the Jewish people. Furthermore, those conversos who did manage to gain governmental roles did so at the expense of turning against their origins to gain power and Torquemada ended up being the leader of the inquisition from 1483 despite being of converso origin himself.

In fact, Spain in the 1400s can be characterised as anything but a utopia for Jews. The beginnings of the inquisition, which saw conversos being treated suspiciously because of their Jewish ancestry, meant no one of Jewish origin was safe from persecution and racialized a previously religious hatred of Jews. The 1449 Sentencia established this racial aspect of Jewish identity suggesting Jewish people had original sin and therefore conversos couldn't be part of government unless able to prove four generations of Christian affiliation within their family. Leon Poliakov³ (a historian who specialises in antisemitism) deemed this 'the first example in history of legalized racism.' This suspicion of conversos or 'New Christians' sparked the inquisition which led to hundreds of deaths, removal of property, interrogation and imprisonment for people of Jewish origin. And yet, the alternative option became clear in 1492 with the expulsion decree stating that Jews either had to convert or be expelled and displaced from the home they'd known for generations and built lives around. Therefore, there was no easy option for Jewish people who either had to abandon their identity and most likely still face persecution from 'Old Christians' (non-converts) or leave their livelihoods (and the place some of them even considered the true 'Holy Land') behind. Out of the Jews living in Spain, roughly 200,000 converted and anywhere between 40,000-150,000 left. Clearly, for many the persecution to come was enough to brave as long as they didn't have to leave their homes and livelihoods.

Overall, the 15th century for people of Jewish origin in Medieval Spain was the conclusion to a slow decline of Jewish rights that had been building up for generations. It was entirely the opposite of a 'Golden Age', with basically no cultural developments on account of their legal restrictions. Instead, it was filled with inescapable persecution regardless of whether you followed the Jewish faith or not.

³ Gorsky, Jeffrey, *How Racism Was Officially Codified in 15th-Century Spain*. Atlas Obscura, 2016, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/how-racism-was-officially-codified-in-15thcentury-spain>

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Overall, the tolerance and legal status of Jewish people throughout medieval Spain was tumultuous and oscillated however one thing remained consistent: the Jewish people were always at the mercy of another religion that never legally characterised Jews as their equals. In Umayyad Spain and Northern Christian kingdoms around the 1200s, it could be concluded that the Jews were well-tolerated and had many new opportunities open to them (i.e ability to partake in government). However, even then they faced limitations (such as not being able to build synagogues) which made Spain a place of policed freedoms for Jews. Furthermore, Spain post-1200s certainly can't be deemed a tolerant place for Jews with many riots against them, legal murder of conversos and ultimately their expulsion as well as a massive limitation on their rights. Therefore, medieval Spain was a place of some inconsistent spurts of tolerance towards Jews, a time of some progressive action for the Jews and yet certainly not a consistently wonderful haven of tolerance. Cultural development generally follows the same pattern, flourishing when the Jews were given the most rights and dying out towards the end of the medieval period. However, regardless of the slow decline of cultural development, the era of thriving Jewish culture left a significant marker on not only the Spanish Jews but the wider Jewish community and in fact the wider European cultural sphere. The exile of the Spanish Jews created a new diaspora, the Sephardim, a label which many Jews still proudly identify with today. Incredibly, it's estimated around/ just under 200,000 Jews still speak 'Ladino' today (a language of Judeo-Spain). In the wider Jewish community, the Zohar is still read and Kabbalism inspired in Medieval Spain still taught, as well as the reformed Hebrew from Medieval Spain. Certainly, the period of cultural development in Spain was a major and permanent fixture for Jewish cultural. Overall, while the intolerance shown to the Jews can hardly make the entire period of Medieval Spain a 'Golden Age' for Jews, the earlier years of cultural development added such permanent vibrancy to the Jewish community that certainly, that in itself can be considered a cultural 'Golden Age'.

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Word Count (including footnotes and bibliography) : 3948