

Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Europe 500 to 1500

Week 6 | Medieval Spain and the Limits of Coexistence

Central question: How did religious communities live together in medieval Iberia, and how did conversion, changing political authority, and anxieties about communal boundaries reshape the possibilities for coexistence?

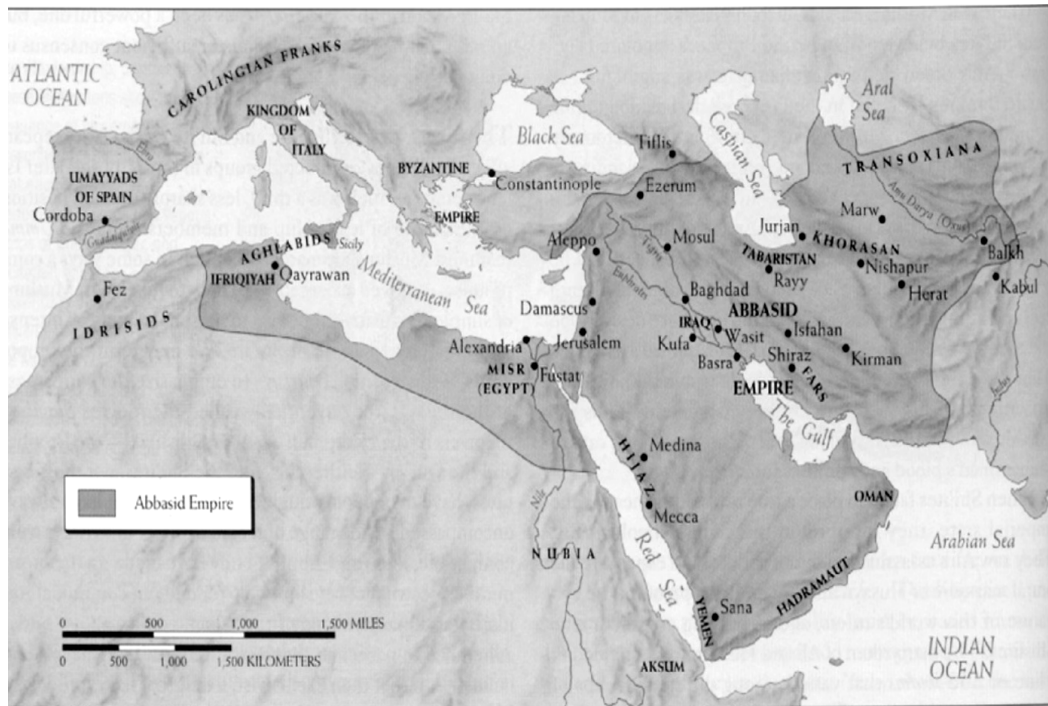
Overview

- The Iberian Peninsula was religiously and politically diverse. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities shared institutions and cultural practices while occupying unequal positions.
- As Christian rulers acquired territories formerly under Muslim rule, existing Jewish and Muslim communities became minorities under new authorities.
- The violence of 1391 transformed the position of Iberian Jews through mass baptism and the emergence of large converso communities.
- Purity of blood exclusions and the Spanish Inquisition addressed different alleged problems: ancestry on the one hand, and suspected religious misconduct by baptized Christians on the other.

Chronology

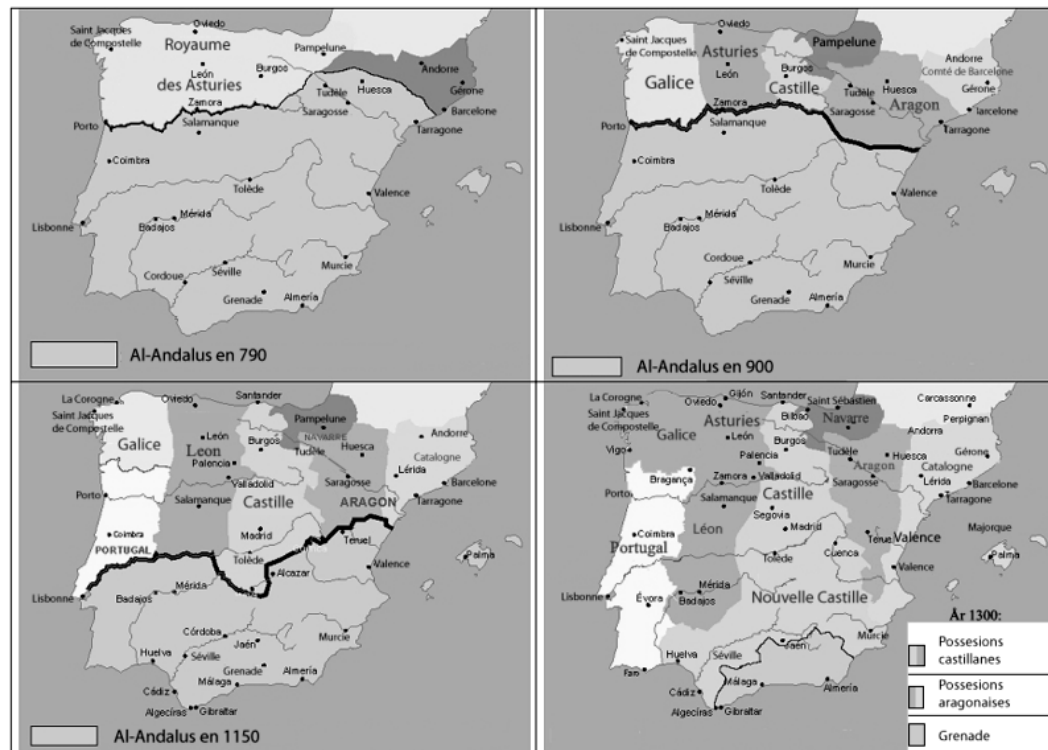
711	Muslim conquest of much of the peninsula begins.
756	Abd al-Rahman I establishes the independent Umayyad emirate at Córdoba. (
929 to 1031	Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba; successor Muslim polities emerge after its collapse.
1085	Toledo captured by Alfonso VI.
1212 to 1248	Christian conquests accelerate; Córdoba falls in 1236 and Seville in 1248.
1391	Anti-Jewish attacks across Iberian towns; killings and many coerced conversions.
1449	Toledo issues a contested statute excluding conversos from some offices on grounds of descent.
1478	Papal bull authorises the Spanish Inquisition under royal initiative.
1492	Granada falls; Ferdinand and Isabella promulgate the expulsion edict against Jews.
1502; 1525 to 1526	Compulsory conversion or departure imposed on Muslims in Castile and later the Crown of Aragon.
1609 to 1614	Expulsion of Moriscos from Spain.

Map 1: Iberia within the wider Islamic world



From the Week 6 slides: Abbasid realm and the politically independent Umayyads of Iberia.
Reproduced in greyscale.

Map 2: political transformations in Iberia



From the Week 6 slides: approximate political boundaries in 790, 900, 1150, and 1300. Greyscale version of the lecture map; historical borders are schematic.

Convivencia??

The term convivencia (“living together”) is often invoked to describe interaction among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in al-Andalus. Cultural exchange, scholarship, translation, diplomacy, and shared urban space were real. So were hierarchies, religious restrictions, political competition, and violence. A useful account avoids both an idealised golden age and a story of uninterrupted sectarian antagonism. María Rosa Menocal emphasises the cultural creativity that coexistence made possible. Brian Catlos and other scholars stress shifting coalitions and interests. David Nirenberg’s central intervention is that everyday coexistence and episodes of violence need not be historical opposites.

David Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence*

- Violence could reinforce communal boundaries and regulate relations between groups rather than simply end coexistence.
- Religious identities were continually negotiated through social interaction, economic relations, politics, sex, and conflict.
- Specific episodes require careful attention to local conditions. They should not automatically be treated as symptoms of inevitable, steadily increasing hatred.

From persecution to conversion: 1391

Anti-Jewish agitation associated with Ferrand Martínez preceded the violence of 1391. Attacks spread from Seville and affected Jewish communities elsewhere, leading to killings, destroyed property, and large numbers of baptisms, some under coercion. Precise numbers of conversions and deaths are debated. This introduced a new problem within Christian society: converts and their descendants were Christians in law but were not necessarily accepted as such in social practice. Old Christian and New Christian became increasingly important labels.

The changing responses of the fifteenth century

- Local restrictions and communal separation: authorities tried to curtail contact between Jews and Christians, particularly newly baptised Christians. Separation was explicitly ordered at the Cortes of Toledo in 1480.
- Purity of blood statutes (limpieza de sangre): the Toledo statute of 1449 excluded conversos from specified offices on grounds of ancestry. This local measure was controversial and became a precedent for later exclusions.
- Spanish Inquisition: established under papal authorisation in 1478, it initially concentrated on Christians of Jewish ancestry suspected of Judaizing. As a tribunal dealing with baptized Christians, it did not ordinarily prosecute openly practising Jews merely for being Jews.
- The expulsion edict (31 March 1492): ordered Jews in the monarchs’ territories to depart or convert. Its own rationale accused Jews of leading Christians, especially conversos, away from Christianity.
- Muslim subjects: the category mudéjar described Muslims who remained under Christian rule. Following compulsory conversions, morisco referred to Christians of Muslim ancestry, many of whom were later suspected of retaining Islamic practices. The Morisco expulsions occurred in 1609 to 1614.

Selected scholarship and recommended reading

David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Little, Brown, 2002; paperback 2003).

Brian A. Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain* (Basic Books, 2018).

Maya Soifer Irish, *Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence, and Change* (Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, 4th ed. (Yale University Press, 2014).

David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Jewish Publication Society, 1996; reprint University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

Olivia Remie Constable, ed., *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, 2nd ed. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Primary sources: read the authorities in their own words

Ferdinand and Isabella, *Alhambra Decree / Edict of Expulsion* (31 March 1492). Read the justification carefully: the decree explicitly links expulsion to alleged contact between Jews and conversos. Full English translation hosted by Florida Atlantic University.

Olivia Remie Constable, ed., *Medieval Iberia*, 2nd ed. Selected Muslim, Jewish, and Christian chronicles, courtly writings, and laws in translation.