

THE JEWEL OF THE WORLD

Philip K. Hitti

It was in 750 that the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus was overthrown by the Abbasid family; and accession of the Abbasids to the caliphate was signaled by a ruthless extermination of every member of the defeated house on whom the victors could lay their hands.

Among the very few who escaped was a youth of twenty, Abd-al-Rahman, a striking young man, tall, lean, with sharp, aquiline features and red hair – a youth of exceptional nerve and ability. It was he who made his way to Spain, fought his way to mastery, and kept in power there the Umayyad dynasty which was wiped out in the East.

The story of his escape is dramatic. He was in a Bedouin camp on the left bank of the Euphrates River one day when horsemen carrying the black standards of the Abbasids suddenly appeared. With his thirteen-year old brother, Abd-al-Rahman dashed into the river. The younger brother, evidently a poor swimmer, became frightened, heeded the reassurances shouted from the bank that he would be unharmed if he returned, and swam back. He was killed. The older boy kept on and gained the opposite bank.

Afoot, friendless and penniless, he set out south-westward, made his way after great hardships to Palestine, found one friend there, and set off again toward the west. In North Africa he barely escaped assassination at the hands of the governor of the province. Wandering from tribe to tribe, always pursued by the spies of the new dynasty, he finally reached Ceuta, five years later. He was a grandson of the tenth caliph of Damascus, and his maternal uncles were Berbers from the district of North Africa. They offered him refuge.

In the south of Spain, across the strait from Ceuta, were stationed Syrian troops from Damascus. He made his way to them and they accepted him as leader. One southern city after another opened its gates to him. It took him some years more to bring all of Spain to subjection, but he persisted. The Abbasid caliph in Baghdad appointed a governor of Spain to contest his rule; two years later that caliph received a gift from Abd-al-Rahman: the head of his governor, preserved in salt and camphor and wrapped in a black flag and in the letter of appointment. "Thanks be to Allah for having placed the sea between us and such a foe!" was the caliph's fervent rejoinder.

In the process of subduing his adversaries Abd-al-Rahman developed a well-disciplined, highly trained army of 40,000 or more Berbers. He knew how to keep their favour by generous pay. In 757, he discontinued the Friday sermon hitherto delivered in the name of the Abbasid caliph, but did not assume the caliphal title himself. He and his successors down to Abd-al-Rahman III contented themselves with the title "amir". Under Abd-al-Rahman I, Spain had thus been the first province to shake off the authority of the

recognized caliph in Islam.

With his realm consolidated, Abd-al-Rahman turned to the arts of peace, in which he showed himself as great as in the art of war. He beautified the cities of his domain, built an aqueduct for the supply of pure water to the capital, initiated the construction of a wall round it and erected for himself a palace and garden outside Cordova in imitation of the palace built by an ancestor in north-eastern Syria. To his villa he brought water and introduced exotic plants, such as peaches and pomegranates. To a lonely palm-tree in his garden, said to be the first imported from Syria, he addressed some tender verses of his own composition.

Two years before his death in 788 Abd-al-Rahman founded the great Masjid of Cordova as a rival to the two masajid of Islam in Jerusalem and Makkah. Completed and enlarged by his successors, it soon became the shrine of western Islam. With its forest of stately columns and its spacious outer court, this noble structure, transformed into a Christian cathedral in 1236, has survived to the present day under the popular name "La Mezquita", the masjid. Besides the great masjid the capital could already boast a bridge, over the Guadalquivir (corrupted from an Arabic name meaning "the great river"), later enlarged to seventeen arches. Nor were the interests of the founder of the Umayyad regime limited to the material welfare of his people. In more than one sense he initiated the intellectual movement which made Islamic Spain from the ninth to the eleventh centuries one of the two centres of world culture.

Caliph Abd-al-Rahman's court was one of the most glorious in all Europe. It received envoys from the Byzantine emperor as well as from the monarchs of Germany, Italy and France. Its seat, Cordova, with half a million inhabitants, seven hundred masajid and three hundred public baths, yielded in magnificence only to Baghdad and Constantinople. The royal palace, named al-Zahra, with four hundred rooms and apartments housing thousands of slaves and guards, stood north-west of the town overlooking the Guadalquivir River. Abd-al-Rahman III started its construction in 936. Marble was brought from Numidia and Carthage; columns as well as basins with golden statues were imported or received as presents from Constantinople; and 10,000 workmen with 1,500 beasts of burden laboured on it for a score of years. Enlarged and beautified by later caliphs, al-Zahra became the nucleus of a royal suburb whose remains, partly excavated in and after 1910, can still be seen.

In al-Zahra the caliph surrounded himself with a bodyguard of "Slavs" which numbered 3,750 and headed his standing army of a hundred thousand men. With their aid the caliph not only kept treason and brigandage in check but reduced the influence of the old Arab aristocracy. Commerce and agriculture flourished and the sources of income for the state were multiplied. The royal revenue amounted to 6,245,000 dinars, a third of which sufficed for the army and a third for public works, while the balance was placed in reserve. Never before was Cordova so prosperous, Andalusia so rich and the state so triumphant. All this was achieved through the genius of one man. He died at the ripe age of seventy-three.

And he left a statement, we are told, which said that he had known only fourteen days of happiness.

As always, under any dynasty, sovereignty in the Muslim world, West or East, was unstable. In Spain the Umayyad dynasty kept the nominal rule from the time Abd-al-Rahman I imposed it; but by the time of the accession of the next outstanding figure in the dynasty, Abd-al-Rahman III, in the year 912, civil disturbances and tribal revolts had reduced the Muslim state of Spain to the city of Cordova and its neighbourhood.

This third Abd-al-Rahman, like his illustrious predecessor, was a young man when he took office, being only twenty-three; and like him also was a youth of intelligence and determination. One by one he reconquered the lost provinces, reduced them to order, and administered them with sagacity and ability. His reign lasted for fifty years, from 912 to 961, an exceptionally long time for that day; it was signalized, politically, by the proclamation by the amir of himself as caliph. With him the Umayyad caliphate in Spain begins. His reign, and that of his two immediate successors, mark the height of Muslim rule in the West. In this period, roughly the tenth century, the Umayyad capital of Cordova took its place as the most cultured city in Europe and, with Constantinople and Baghdad, as one of the three cultural centres of the world. With its one hundred and thirteen thousand homes, twenty-one suburbs, seventy libraries and numerous bookshops, masajid and palaces, it acquired international fame and inspired awe and admiration in the hearts of travellers. It enjoyed miles of paved streets illuminated by lights from the bordering houses, whereas "seven hundred years after this time there was not so much as one public lamp in London," and "in Paris, centuries subsequently, whoever stepped over his threshold on a rainy day stepped up to his ankles in mud." Whenever the rulers of Leon, Navarre or Barcelona needed a surgeon, an architect, a master singer, or a dress-maker, it was to Cordova that they applied. The fame of the Muslim capital penetrated distant Germany, where a Saxon nun styled it "the jewel of the world".

Spain under the caliphate was one of the wealthiest and most thickly populated lands of Europe. The capital boasted some thirteen thousand weavers and a flourishing leather industry. From Spain the art of tanning and embossing leather was carried to Morocco and from these two lands it was brought to France and England, as the terms cordovan, cordwainer and morocco indicates. Wool and silk were woven not only in Cordova but in Malaga, Almeria and other centres. The raising of silk worms, originally a monopoly of the Chinese, was introduced by Muslims into Spain, where it thrived. Almeria also produced glassware and brasswork. Paterna in Valencia was the home of pottery. Jean and Algarve were noted for their mines of gold and silver, Cordova for its iron and lead, and Malaga for its rubies. Toledo, like Damascus, was famous all over the world for its swords. The art of inlaying steel and other metals with gold and silver and decorating them with flower patterns, an art introduced from Damascus, flourished in several Spanish and other European centres.

The Spanish Arabs introduced agricultural methods practised in Western Asia. They

dug canals, cultivated grapes and introduced, among other plants and fruits, rice, apricots, peaches, pomegranates, oranges, sugar-cane, cotton and saffron. The south-eastern plains of the peninsula, especially favoured by climate and soil, developed important centres of rural and urban activity. Here wheat and other grains, as well as olives and other fruits, were raised by a peasantry who worked the soil on shares with the owners.

This agricultural development was one of the glories of Muslim Spain and one of the Arabs' lasting gifts to the land, for Spanish gardens have preserved to this day a "Moorish" character. One of the best-known gardens is the Generalife – a word which comes from the Arabic, *Jannat al-arif*, "the inspector's paradise." This garden, "proverbial for its extensive shades, falling waters and soft breeze", was terraced in the form of an amphitheatre and irrigated by streams which, after forming numerous cascades, lost themselves among the flowers, shrubs and trees represented today by a few gigantic cypresses and myrtles.

The industrial and agricultural products of Muslim Spain were more than sufficient for domestic consumption. Seville, one of the greatest of its river ports, exported cotton, olives and oil. The exports of Malaga and Jaen included saffron, figs, marble and sugar. Through Alexandria and Constantinople Spanish products found markets as far away as India and Central Asia. Especially active was the trade with Damascus, Baghdad and Makkah. The international nautical vocabulary of the modern world contains not a few words which testify to the former Arab supremacy on the seas — admiral, arsenal, average, cable.

The government maintained a regular postal service. It modelled its coinage on Eastern patterns, with the dinar as the gold unit and the dirham as the silver unit. Arab money was in use in the Christian kingdoms of the north, which for nearly four hundred years had no coinage other than Arabic or French.

The real glory of this period, however, lies in fields other than political. Al-Hakam, Abd-al-Rahman III's successor, was himself a scholar and patronized learning. He was generous to scholars and established twenty-seven free schools in the capital. Under him the University of Cordova, founded in the principal masjid by Abd-al-Rahman III, rose to a place of pre-eminence among the educational institutions of the world. It preceded both Al-Azhar of Cairo and the Nizamiyah of Baghdad, and attracted students, Christian and Muslim, not only from Spain but from other parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. Al-Hakam enlarged the masjid which housed the university, conducted water to it in lead pipes and decorated it with mosaics brought by Byzantine artists. He invited professors from the East to the university and set aside endowments for their salaries.

In addition to the university, the capital housed a library of first magnitude. Al-Hakam was a lover of books; his agents ransacked the bookshops of Alexandria, Damascus and Baghdad with a view to buying or copying manuscripts. The books thus gathered are said to have numbered 400,000, their titles filling a catalogue of forty-four volumes, in each one

of which twenty sheets were devoted to poetical works alone. Al-Hakam, probably the best scholar among Muslim caliphs, personally used several of these works; his notes on certain manuscripts rendered them highly prized by later collectors. In order to secure the first copy of the "Aghani", which Al-Isbahani, a descendant of the Umayyads, was then composing in Iraq, Al-Hakam sent the author a thousand dinars. The general state of culture in Andalusia reached such a high level at this time that the distinguished Dutch scholar Dozy went so far as to declare enthusiastically that "nearly everyone could read and write" — all this when in Christian Europe only the rudiments of learning were known, and that chiefly by a few churchmen.

NOTES

Words Explained:

extermination :	destruction of all
nerve :	quality of facing danger well
aquiline :	like an eagle, hooked nose
heed :	give attention to
refuge :	place of shelter from danger or trouble
assassination :	putting to death violently
contest :	dispute with arms
consolidate :	make position strong
aqueduct :	structure for taking water from one place to another
exotic :	coming from another country
forest :	here, large number of pillars
transform :	change, make great changes in
initiate :	get started; introduce
nucleus :	middle
excavate :	dig out, get old buildings free from earth covering it
sagacity :	wisdom
proclamation :	a public announcement
penetrate :	pass through, here it means, reach
thrive :	do well, quick in growth, prosper
emboss :	make pictures of, or on, in relief
Valencia :	a province of East Spain
proverbial :	here, well known

amphitheatre :	circular building with seats rising behind and above each other, round and central open space
nautical :	of ships, seamen
average :	here it has been used in the sense of duty upon goods
Al-Azhar :	a university at Cairo in Egypt
endowment :	act of giving property producing regular income especially to organizations
magnitude :	size, degree of being important
manuscripts :	books written by hand, not printed
Aghani :	a book on music
rudiments :	first steps or stages in some branch of knowledge

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. Give an account of the early career of Abd-al-Rahman I, his dramatic escape and his adventures in Africa.
2. How did Abd-al-Rahman deal with the governor appointed by the Abbasid caliph to contest his rule?
3. What did the Abbasid caliph say on receiving the head of his governor?
4. What did Abd-al-Rahman do to make himself strong and to beautify his capital?
5. Give an account of the all-round progress made by the Arabs under Abd-al-Rahman III.
6. What did Al-Hakam do to promote learning and scholarship in his kingdom?

PART - II