

Gibraltar to Granada

800 years from Tariq to Boabdil

By Arshad Gamiet

بهو السباع، قصر الناصر، الحمراء، غرناطة.
Court of Lions, Nasrid Palace, Alhambra, Granada.

If you travel in Southern Spain, from Gibraltar to Granada, you cover about 200 miles of Andalusia. But you also cover nearly 800 years of Islamic history in the Iberian Peninsula. Those eight centuries were arguably the most dazzling and beautiful period in the entire history of Europe. Not only did the Muslims of Al-Andalus create the most beautiful architecture that seemed to defy gravity, and preserve for future generations the knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but they also fostered a climate of diversity, of intellectual discourse and debate, of social harmony and religious tolerance that even today, a millennium later, would be the envy of the world. ➤

For centuries, Western historians, who were more concerned with promoting a Eurocentric view, neglected much of that history. The average westerner has therefore been left largely ignorant of the rich legacy left to them by the Muslims in Spain. Only recently has a more open and honest approach become more evident. Muslims left behind so many important contributions that made our modern technological civilization possible. This article touches on a few tantalising moments of Islám's long and illustrious presence in Southern Spain.

Gibraltar needs no more than a day trip to see what's on offer. It's a huge limestone outcrop on the southern tip of Spain, overlooking Morocco, just 12 miles away. 'The Rock' is a natural fortress, honeycombed with gun emplacements and other military installations. It offers a tax haven for the wealthy, and is also home to several families of Barbary Apes, found nowhere else. The area is so small that as you enter the territory from La Linea in Spain, you have to cross the airport's main runway between landings and takeoffs, in order to reach the city centre. Gibraltar's name is derived from the Arabic, Jabal Tariq, The Mountain of Tariq. And it is here that our journey, 200 miles of geography, and 800 years of history, begins.

In the year 711 of the Christian era, [just 92 years after Hijra], Tariq ibn Ziyad came from North Africa, to free Spain from many years of cruelty under the Visigoths. King Roderick was so oppressing his people, that Count Julian, his Governor in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on the North African coast, approached Musa Ibn Nusair, the Governor of North Africa, and invited the Muslims to liberate them.

12,000 Mujahids faced 60,000 Spaniards at the battle of Medina Sidonia, near Gibraltar. Tariq and His army were outnumbered 5:1. But their Taqwa and Iman, their consciousness of Alláh and their Faith more than outweighed their smaller numbers.

As the huge army of King Roderick was assembled before them, Tariq displayed the qualities of leadership that carried Islám to the far corners of the world.

In one of the most beautiful, eloquent and inspiring speeches in history, Tariq appealed



The Alcazaba.

حي القصبه.

to his men to stand firm, to remember Alláh, and to fight till Alláh delivered them victory, or death. But he did not merely offer empty words. Like the very best of leaders, he led from the front. He chose to lead the cavalry charge right into the middle of the mighty Spanish army.

When he asked his men, who would be prepared to follow him into battle, every single soldier rose to the challenge. In a brilliant psychological move, Tariq then

ordered that his men should 'burn their boats.' Today the English language has been enriched by this phrase, to burn your boats. It means, you are so determined to carry on, that you have permanently closed the option of giving up or turning back. This dramatic gesture had 3 benefits: It convinced his men that they had no means of escape. It focussed their minds more sharply on the battle. They had everything to lose, and everything to gain. And thirdly, in sent ➤



حي البيسين من قصر الحمراء، غرناطة.
View of the Albaicin from the Alhambra Palace, Granada.



صخرة جبل طارق.
The 'Rock' of Gibraltar from La Linea, Spain.

shudders of panic through the ranks of the Spanish army. What madmen were these, to burn their boats when they were so heavily outnumbered?

The battle itself lasted four days. Four days that decisively changed the history of Europe, and indeed, the history of the world. Tariq himself led the main charge. When King Roderick was killed, the Spanish forces were so demoralised that, despite their numerical advantage, they broke up in disarray. Some gave up the fight and others joined the Muslims. This victory opened the way for the Golden Age of Spain, and this golden age led to the Renaissance in Europe. Spanish Islam had a profound influence on world history. It was here in Cordoba and Granada, as in Damascus, Baghdad and other imperial Islamic cities, that learning flourished, at a time where other societies were gripped by superstition and fear. And while much of Europe persecuted Jews and enslaved the poor, the Muslim conquerors not only protected religious minorities, but by adopting a policy of leadership of the most talented, they harnessed the full potential of their human resources. On his northward sweep, Tariq delegated Jewish and Christian governors to many towns and cities.

According to Stanley Lane-Poole, when the Muslims conquered Spain, they approached a town defended by a Visigoth named Theodomir, one of King Roderick's best

commanders. This town had no soldiers left, all had gone to the battlefield elsewhere. So Theodomir got all the women he could find, gave them helmets, and asked them to tie their long hair round their chins to look like beards. That evening, as the Muslim army approached the town they saw silhouetted against the setting sun, lines of what appeared to be soldiers on the city walls, so they decided it was too dangerous to attack immediately. They would do so next morning. But before the attack, Theodomir approached the Muslim camp to negotiate with their leader. He offered to surrender the town without a fight, if the Muslims would allow everyone to go free. The Muslims agreed. But, when the city gates opened, instead of soldiers, they were astonished to see long lines of women walking through the gates. The Muslim commander was so amused and impressed with this daring bluff, instead of being angry, he offered Theodomir to be the new Governor of the district. This was how our noble ancestors treated their most talented subjects, even those defeated in battle. This was Meritocracy in action, 1300 years ago.

Eight centuries after Tariq's victory, the Muslims of Spain were reduced to a low period of Taqwa and Iman, and they paid dearly for it. In 1492, Boabdil, the last ruler of Muslim Spain, retreated in shame and humiliation, handing over the keys of Granada and ending the most glorious and dazzling period of Spanish history.

Boabdil was not only a weak ruler who collaborated with his enemies. He also murdered members of his family whom he feared would seek to overthrow him. Allāh gave him the distinction of being remembered for everything a good leader should not be.

Tariq ibn Ziyad has earned a noble place in the history of Islam, and in the hearts of all Muslims. His life and his achievements are worthy of further study.

Why was Muslim Spain a brilliant beacon of light at a time when European historians described their own period as the 'Dark Ages'? What was the ethos of this civilisation, committed to religious freedom, cultural diversity, academic excellence and nobility of character? What beliefs and values informed this culture of leadership based on talent, rather than tribalism or religion? Here we find a real meritocracy before the word was even invented. Perhaps a clue to the answer was in the Arabic inscription above the entrance portal of the University of Granada:

"The world is held up by four pillars: The Wisdom of the Learned; the Justice of the Great; the Prayers of the Righteous; and the Valour of the Brave."

Wisdom, Justice, Faith and Bravery. Every day, as the students entered the University, they were greeted by these noble and inspiring words. What a wonderful way to start your day on campus! These were the ➤



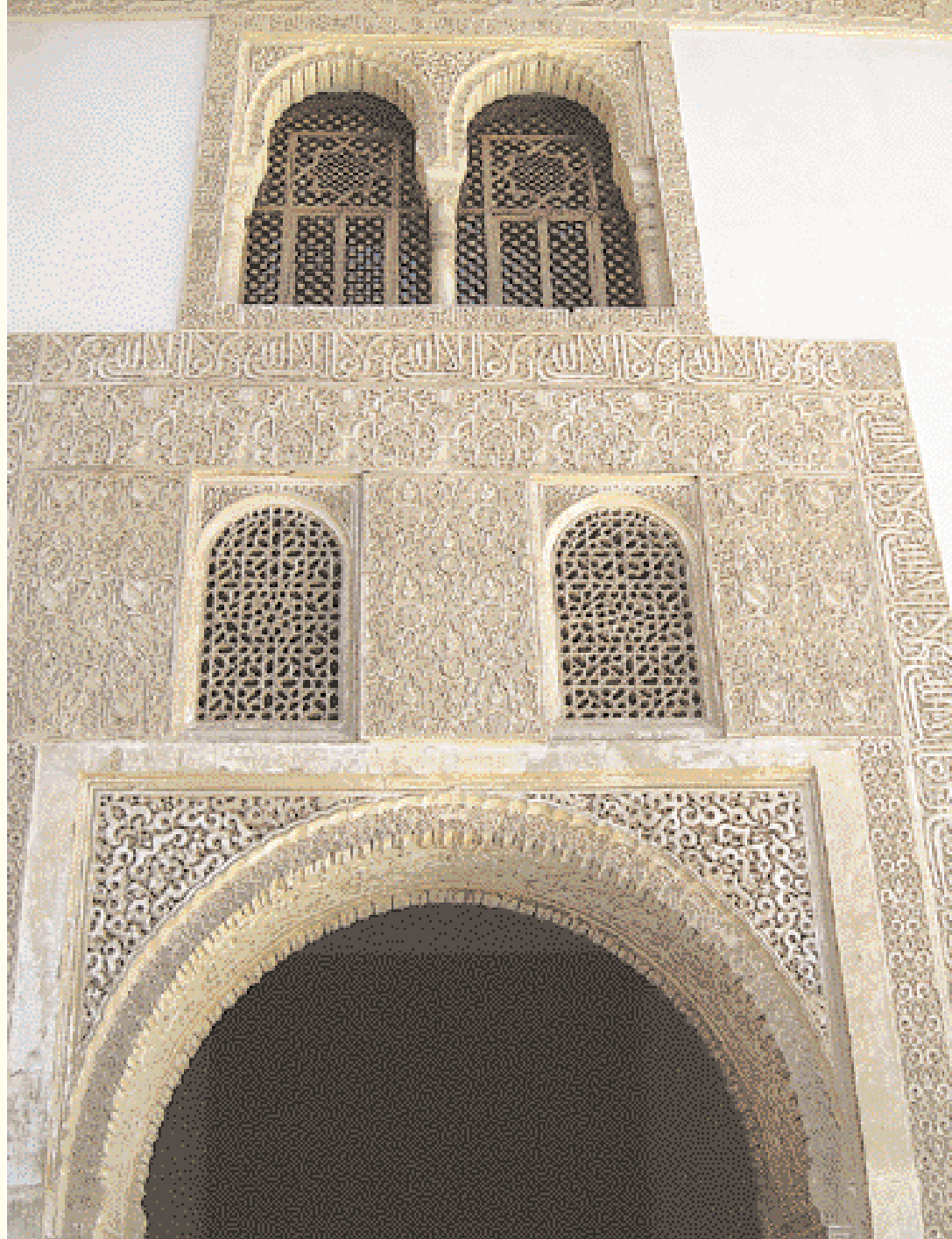
strong foundations on which Muslim Spain was founded. These were the core values that underpinned the most dazzling and advanced civilization of its time. Here scholars like Ibn Hazm al Andalusi sat with Jewish Rabbis and Christian thinkers. They engaged in the most penetrating intellectual discourse. Moses Maimonides was a very famous Jewish philosopher, employed in the Caliph's court. Being fluent in several languages, Ibn Hazm could critically analyse and discuss manuscripts, written in Arabic, Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Imagine the stimulating experience, to listen to the debates on philosophy, religion and logic. Here, a thousand years ago, was a model of religious tolerance, intellectual freedom and cultural diversity that was, and still is, the envy of the world But, sadly, it was not to last. By the time King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Aragon and Castile joined forces at the end of the 15th Century, Muslim Spain had shrunk to a tiny kingdom around the city of Granada, at the foot of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada Mountains. The last ruler of Granada was Boabdil (shortened from Abu-Abdallah), a man who had none of the qualities of Wisdom, Justice, Faith and Bravery of his ancestors. Boabdil was no Tariq ibn Ziyad. He killed members of his own family, he collaborated with his enemies who later betrayed him, he was publicly humiliated and finally driven out of Granada into exile. Even his mother had contempt for him. As their horse-drawn carriage reached the last bridge above the city, now known as 'The Bridge of Sighs,' Boabdil looked back over his shoulder, and wept. His mother's bitter words are remembered to this day: "it is well that you should weep like a woman for city you would not defend as a man!"

You approach the Alhambra palace through the world famous Generalife Gardens. The name is derived from the Arabic, Jannat al Arif (The Gardens of the guardian). Here, archways are sculpted from Cypress trees and the fountains mirror exquisitely manicured flowerbeds. The sound of running water calms the soul, while the fragrance of myrtle, rose and orange blossom hangs in the air. A few steps down a shaded stone stairway and you enter the Hall of the Ambassadors. How can I describe it? Breathtaking. ➔

Literally. You can actually hear the sudden intake of breath, gasps of amazement as your group enters the hall. Eyes filled with astonishment. Mouths open in awe and wonder as you suddenly realize that you are privileged to be standing in a place of considerable nobility and greatness. Your gaze wanders slowly upward from the intricately carved doorways, walls and niches, upwards to the ceiling. Mocarrah 'Stalactite' plaster mouldings in the corners and decorated archways turn simple architectural details into timeless works of art. In the famous 'Court of the Lions' the dazzling sunlight is reflected upwards from the centre to the covered courtyard, illuminating the intricate carving underneath. It is quite clear that the architects knew precisely how to use the play of light and shadow to illustrate their work to best effect. And everywhere, lavishly, beautifully integrated into the abstract and floral decorations, are verses from The Holy Qur'an. One wall records the 99 Beautiful Names of Allāh, Asma'ul Husna..

The beauty of the Alhambra has been the subject of much poetry, music and literature. American writer Washington Irving wrote a famous book entitled "Tales from the Alhambra." One admirer described the exquisite wall decorations as 'frozen music.' Just as The Holy Qur'an repeatedly alludes to natural phenomena as the Ayaat or Signs of God, so also in the architectural details and decorations, sacred calligraphy is seamlessly integrated with geometric patterns, arabesques and stylised natural motifs like flowers, leaves and tendrils. Every wall, every doorway, every arch and corner, sings a visual song, a sacred hymn in praise of God. The overall effect is to draw our attention from the worldly to the otherworldly, from the here and now to the infinite.

On the return journey I spoke to our tour guide who is a retired lawyer and a very polite. He told us of the most wonderful heritage of the Islāmic period. "You know, the Arabs taught us how to live peacefully and harmoniously," he said. "More than a thousand years ago, they showed us how to govern with justice for all people and all religions. They had three legal systems: Islamic law for Muslims, the Torah for Jews, and the Bible for Christians. And they allowed



“لا غالب إلا الله“ تظهر دائماً في أبنية الحمراء.

"No Conqueror Except Allah" ever present in Alhambra architecture.

everyone to live by their own religious laws." Native Spaniards are slowly coming to terms with the forgotten legacy of their Islamic past. On my first visit to Granada in 1983, I met the first Spanish reverts to Islām, who made their spiritual migration soon after the death of General Franco. Native Spanish Muslims are now a growing community, and just a few weeks ago Granada's saw the opening of its first purpose-built mosque in more than 500 years. It was truly a poignant moment. Visitors to Andalusia can expect a profoundly enriching cultural experience. It can also be spiritually uplifting. You will find much to inspire, and much food for contemplation and reflection. But do go

there prepared with a little reading beforehand. Do not depend entirely on the limited insight of tour guides.

Despite the ravages of history, some remnants of that noble and beautiful legacy of Muslim Spain has survived intact. Like the inscriptions on medieval Nasrid coins, and on the exquisite carvings in Muslim palaces and forts all over Spain, the eternal truth still stands: "La ilaha il-lal-laah. La ghalib ilal-lah." "There is no god, except Allāh; and, there is no conqueror, except Allāh." ■

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