

7: The Geography of the Islamic Empire and Al-Andalus

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Overview and Purpose of the Lesson:

The purpose of this set of lessons is to help students get a clear picture of the locations and environments that helped shaped the story of Al-Andalus. Students first look at the vast territory spanned by the growing Islamic Empire and examine its environments to explain why Spain would have been considered such a rich prize. Spain’s unique geographic location is also studied to understand its role as independent Caliphate and transmitter of knowledge to Europe. Students then examine a time-series of maps illustrating the stages of Spain’s medieval history. (Note: Although a lesson is described below, the maps provided on this website are intended to be a sort of kit from which teachers can design their own lessons and presentations.)

Performance Objectives:

- Locate Spain within the Islamic Empire.
- Explain how the environment of Spain made it attractive to invaders.
- Locate major political features of medieval Spain.
- Describe the stages of medieval Spain’s history.

Materials Needed:

- Map Sets: A large variety of possible maps and combinations of maps have been provided on the website at www.islamicspain.tv. The intent is that teachers will select the sets of maps that best suit their student’s needs and teaching situation. For example, black and white maps can be used if a teacher decides to Xerox class sets. Color maps could be used to create transparencies or make PowerPoint presentations.
- Student Handout 7a: “Al-Andalus: The Iberian Prize” for each student or small group of students.
- Student Handout 7b: “Climates of the Mediterranean Region” chart for each student or small group of students.

Time: one class period (will vary with procedure chosen)

Procedure:

1. Introduce the activity by explaining that in order to understand what happened in Islamic Spain, it is helpful to understand the “stage” on which the story was played out. Where was Spain in relation to the rest of the Islamic world? What special roles did it play because of its location? Why was Al-Andalus considered “special?”
2. Distribute Student Handout 7a: “Al-Andalus--The Iberian Prize” to students.
3. Distribute or display map sets for tasks 1, 2, and 3. (Maps of the Mediterranean region)
4. Distribute Student Handout 7b: “Climates of the Mediterranean Region” charts.
5. Have students work independently or in small groups to complete the first three tasks.

6. When students have completed the first three tasks, hold a debriefing discussion during which students can share their ideas.
7. Distribute or display map sets for task 4 (Maps of medieval Spain)
8. **NOTE:** this segment of the lesson has been extracted as a separate lesson #3 in the Tier One Set, where it features an extension correlating with the Timeline Activity (#4). The maps illustrate stages of medieval Spain's complex history, and each question follows a brief description of what happened during that stage. This task can be completed stage by stage in conjunction with viewing the video or as a pre-viewing activity.

Possible Assessments:

- Include a map section on a unit assessment.
- Have students place untitled versions of the map sets in chronological order.
- In an essay, have students explain the role of geography in shaping the medieval history of Spain.

Student Handout 7a: Al-Andalus--The Iberian Prize Map Study

Task 1:

The 7th Century Bishop, Isidore of Seville described Spain this way:

“Of all the lands from the west to the Indies, you Spain, oh sacred and always fortunate mother of princes and peoples, are the most beautiful! You are the pride and jewel of the world – the most illustrious part of the earth!”

Use your maps to locate Spain and the rest of the Islamic Empire. Read the climate chart and locate each of the climate regions described.

Using what you have learned, explain why Isidore of Seville would have considered Spain to be so special. Support your answer with specific evidence from the maps and chart.

Task 2:

In 822 the Arab musician Ziryab moved to Cordoba from Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic Empire. Brian Catlos of UC Santa Cruz says of Ziryab:

“He brought as a package...all the newest fashions of the East. Not so much just a style of music, but really a style of acting – a style of being. He revolutionized cooking, he revolutionized hair styles, and music – the way the aristocracy acted. And this was a culture that the Muslim elite of Al-Andalus really looked up to. They were kind of... the hillbillies of the Islamic world. They were way out in the west in the middle of nowhere, far from the center of power, far from the center of learning.”

Study the maps showing the growth of the Islamic Empire and its major cities. Use the scale of miles to note the distances between different parts of the Empire, particularly between Cordoba and the other major centers such as Baghdad.

Use specific facts from what you have learned to explain why Ziryab’s move to Cordoba was an important event for Al-Andalus.

Later, Al-Andalus would serve as the place where knowledge from the Muslim world would be transmitted into Europe, helping to spark the revival of learning in Europe known as the Renaissance.

Explain how the geography of Al-Andalus made it a good place for the transfer of Muslim knowledge into Europe.

Task 3:

In 929, Abd al-Rahman III proclaimed himself Caliph, the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad. He also declared Al-Andalus to be independent of the rest of the Islamic Empire.

Use your maps to explain how the geography of Al-Andalus helped make possible this act of defiance by Abd al-Rahman. In other words, how did Spain's location help Abd al-Rahman get away with his declaration of independence?

Task 4: [NOTE: This segment of the lesson is repeated as Lesson 3: Historical Maps]

Use the set of Spain maps to answer these questions about the political story of Al-Andalus.

Al-Andalus reached its greatest height during the Cordoba-based Caliphate begun by Abd al-Rahman III. For most of the 900's, Al-Andalus was unified, independent, and able to hold its own against any would-be adversaries including the Christian kingdoms to the north. But a series of civil wars among Muslim factions beginning early in the 1000's eventually brought an end to the Caliphate. The result was the fragmentation of Al-Andalus into many "taifa" kingdoms. (Taifa is Arabic for "party" or "faction.") At first there were as many as 60 taifa kingdoms. But constant struggles among them for land, power, and prestige gradually reduced their number as the stronger absorbed the weaker.

1. Why would the division of Al-Andalus into taifa kingdoms be an advantage to the bordering Christian kingdoms?

Some taifa kingdoms fought against Christian kingdoms as well as against each other. Sometimes taifa kingdoms made alliances with their Christian neighbors in order to defend themselves against other taifas.

2. Which taifas shown on the map would most likely have both fought against and sometimes made alliances with Christian kingdoms? Explain your answer.

By the late 1000's the Muslim taifas were beginning to have trouble holding off the advances of Christian kings, especially Alfonso VI of Castile and Leon. In 1086 taifa leaders invited a North African Berber dynasty known as the Almoravids into Spain to help them defend against the Christians.

3. What major Muslim taifa city had already fallen to the Christians when the Almoravids were asked to come help defend Spain?

The Almoravids did help hold off the Christian armies. But the religiously conservative Almoravids were offended by the rich, tolerant, and diverse society they found in Spain. They soon conquered the taifas and took control of Muslim Spain for themselves. Around 1150, the Almoravids were succeeded by another even more puritanical Berber dynasty, the Almohads. Meanwhile, the Christian kingdoms continued to chip away at Muslim territory.

4. Which two major Muslim cities had fallen to the Christians by the time of Almohad rule in 1200?

The strict and puritanical Almohads were unpopular with much of the native Andalusian population, whatever their religion. Many fled Almohad rule into territory held by the Christians.

5. Which Christian cities would have been most attractive to refugees from Almohad rule? Explain your answer.

In 1212, the Almohads were soundly defeated by a combined Christian army at the Battle of Las Navas. The Almohads abandoned Spain and returned to North Africa. This left the much-weakened taifas on their own once more. Unable to effectively defend themselves, most of the remaining taifas were quickly overrun.

6. Which Muslim kingdom survived until 1492?

Climates of the Mediterranean Region

Climate	Temperature	Precipitation	Natural Vegetation	Agriculture
Marine	Warm Summers Cool Winters	Wet all year Frequent light rain, fog	Dense Forest	Vegetables, fruits, grain crops, livestock
Mediterranean	Warm to hot Summers Cool Winters	Dry summer Moderate rain in winter	Grassland, bushes, scattered trees, patches of forest	Citrus fruits, vegetables, grapes/wine, olive oil, nuts, grain crops, livestock
Subtropical	Hot, humid Summers Cool Winters	Moderate rain all year	Forest	Vegetables, fruits, grain crops, livestock
Continental	Hot, humid Summers Cold Winters	Moderate all year – snow in winter	Forest	Vegetables, fruits, grain crops, livestock
Steppe	Hot Summers Cool Winters	Dry all year with 10 to 20 inches of rain Prone to droughts	Short grassland, scrubby bushes	Drought resistant grain crops, livestock
Desert	Hot Summers Warm to Hot Winters	Dry all year with less than 10 inches of rain	Scattered grasses and bushes, many areas barren	Livestock (nomadic herding), grain crops only along river valleys
Highland	Varies with elevation Higher = cooler	Varies with elevation and location Windward = wetter	Varies with elevation	Varies with elevation and terrain – mainly livestock