

The General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic Conquest (92 AH / 711 CE)

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Abstract:

This study presents a historical and geographical investigation of the general conditions prevailing in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) prior to the Arab-Islamic conquest in 92 AH/711 CE. The study is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the structure of public life through an analysis of the origins of place names and geographical boundaries, as well as the political conditions under the Visigothic Kingdom, which was characterized by instability and recurrent struggles for the throne. It also explores the economic system, which was dominated by feudalism and forced labor, in addition to the social and religious conditions marked by fragmentation, class discrimination, and the persecution of minorities, particularly the Jews. These circumstances created a favorable internal environment that facilitated the advance of the Muslim conquerors.

The second section provides a comprehensive geographical and historical overview of the seven emerging Christian kingdoms in northern and eastern Spain—Asturias, Catalonia, Navarre, León, Castile, Aragon, and the County of Portugal. It highlights the influence of their rugged terrain, natural fortifications, numerous castles and rivers, and harsh climate on shaping the austere character of their inhabitants. Furthermore, these regions served as secure refuges for the remnants of the Visigoths, particularly in places such as Covadonga and the Rock of Pelayo, thereby becoming the first line of defense and the principal nucleus from which the Christian Reconquista would later emerge during periods of Muslim weakness.

Keywords: Iberian Peninsula, Visigoths, Roderic, Christian Kingdoms, Asturias, Reconquista.

INTRODUCTION

The Iberian Peninsula represents a unique geographical and historical entity within the context of medieval history, serving as a major arena of both interaction and conflict between the Islamic world in the southern Mediterranean and the Christian world to the north. The study of the “General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic Conquest (92 AH/711 CE)” is of considerable importance in historical scholarship, as neither the rapid success of the Muslim armies nor the subsequent political and social transformation of al-Andalus can be fully understood without examining the structure of the Visigothic society that dominated the peninsula on the eve of the Islamic invasion.

On the eve of the conquest, Spain was experiencing a profound historical crisis that affected nearly every aspect of life. Politically, the Visigothic Kingdom, whose capital was Toledo, suffered from the fragility of an authoritarian political system based on elective kingship and intense rivalry among the nobility and the clergy. These tensions gave rise to destructive civil wars and persistent instability, particularly following violations of the electoral principle and attempts to establish hereditary succession. The crisis reached its climax with the removal of the legitimate heir and the accession of the usurper King Roderic to the throne.

The social situation was equally troubled. Society was divided into distinct ethnic and social classes, characterized by discrimination between the ruling Visigoths and the indigenous Iberian population. The common people and Jewish communities were deprived of many of their rights, subjected to the confiscation of property, and, in some cases, compelled to abandon their religious beliefs. These structural imbalances contributed to severe economic deterioration, as the feudal system, heavy taxation, and compulsory labor practices dominated economic life and imposed harsh conditions

upon peasants and serfs.

First: General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic Conquest (92 AH / 711 CE)

1. Nomenclature and Boundaries

The name *al-Andalus* was applied to the Iberian Peninsula. It is a foreign term that was not known to the Arabs before the Islamic conquest but came into use thereafter. The peninsula was formerly known as *Iberia* and was later referred to as *Baṭīqa*. The designation *Ishbāniya* (Spain) has been attributed to a ruler named Ishbān who was said to have governed the region in ancient times. Another tradition maintains that the name originated from the Ishbān people who inhabited the territory during the earliest periods of its history. Medieval Arab historians reported that the peninsula was first called Iberia, then Baṭīqa, and subsequently Ishbāniya, either after the ruler Ishbān or after the people who settled there in ancient times.

Alternative accounts concerning the origin of the name Spain were recorded by Muslim historians. According to one tradition, the inhabitants of the region were known as Andalus, and after the Islamic conquest of 92 AH/711 CE, the Arabs adapted the name into the form *al-Andalus*. Christian inhabitants, however, continued to refer to the country as Ishbāniya. Other narratives attribute the name to a person called Ishbāns who was crucified there, while some associate it with King Ishbān ibn Ṭītus. Yet another account traces the origin of the name to Japheth, the son of Noah, who was believed to have been the first to settle and cultivate the region after the Flood.

Ibn al-Shabbāṭ suggested that the term *al-Andalus* was derived from *Vandalus*, referring to the Vandals who had settled the peninsula. The name eventually came to designate all the territories comprising modern Spain and Portugal, collectively known as the Iberian Peninsula. Situated at the southwestern extremity of the European continent, the peninsula may have derived its name either from the River Iberus (Ebro) in the northeast or from the Iberian tribes that inhabited the region and gave their name to the entire territory.

In 92 AH/711 CE, Arab-Muslim armies advanced toward Spain as part of the broader process of Islamic expansion. Following the conquest, the name *al-Andalus* became the standard designation for the Iberian Peninsula in Arabic sources. Several forms of the name appear in historical records, including *Andalush* and *Andalus*, terms that some scholars have linked to the Vandals.

The evidence suggests that *al-Andalus* became the Arabic designation for the territories conquered by the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. The term appears frequently in early Islamic historical and geographical writings. Among the earliest references is that of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, who mentioned al-Andalus in his account of the Islamic conquest. Likewise, Yaqut al-Hamawi provided one of the most detailed descriptions of the name, noting that *al-Andalus* was a foreign word that had not been used by the Arabs before Islam. Some scholars have argued that the name originated from the Germanic Vandals, who entered Spain from the north during the fifth century CE and settled in its southern plains, leaving their name attached to the region before it was subsequently Arabized as *al-Andalus*.

Geographically, the Iberian Peninsula is triangular in shape and occupies the southwestern corner of Europe. It is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the east, and the Strait of Gibraltar to the south, which serves as a natural link between the peninsula and North Africa. The Pyrenees Mountains separate it from the rest of Europe. Medieval Muslim geographers considered the peninsula to lie partly within the Fourth Climatic Region and partly within the Fifth, describing it as a land rich in cities, agricultural resources, and natural wealth.

The Iberian Peninsula may be divided into three principal regions: Spain, which includes Andorra and Gibraltar; Portugal; and Andorra, which is situated in the eastern Pyrenees Mountains.

2. Political Conditions

Before the Islamic conquest of 92 AH/711 CE, the Iberian Peninsula was ruled by the Visigoths, who

The General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic Conquest (92 AH / 711 CE)

had inherited many aspects of Roman political and administrative traditions and established Toledo as the capital of their kingdom. The Visigothic system of government was based on an elective monarchy, whereby the king was chosen by the nobility and clergy. However, repeated attempts by rulers to transform the monarchy into a hereditary institution generated continuous political tensions and succession disputes.

During the late Visigothic period, conflicts between the monarchy, the nobility, and the clergy intensified, leading to frequent rebellions and civil unrest. The reigns of Egica and his successor Wittiza were marked by political instability, particularly due to efforts to secure hereditary succession and to centralize royal authority at the expense of influential aristocratic groups. These developments deepened divisions within the kingdom and weakened its political structure.

The election of Roderic as king further aggravated internal rivalries, as several factions contested his legitimacy. Opposition groups, including dissatisfied nobles and segments of the Jewish population, resisted his rule and sought alternatives to the existing political order. Consequently, Visigothic Spain entered a period of severe fragmentation and instability on the eve of the Muslim invasion.

These political divisions significantly undermined the kingdom's ability to defend itself and constituted one of the principal factors that facilitated the rapid success of the Arab-Islamic conquest under Tariq ibn Ziyad in 92 AH/711 CE.

3. Economic Life

Despite the abundance of natural resources in the Iberian Peninsula, the economy of Visigothic Spain was largely dominated by the feudal system. Agricultural land was concentrated in the hands of nobles and wealthy landowners, while peasants and serfs bore heavy tax burdens and were often subjected to forced labor. Many small landowners gradually lost their properties and became dependent on powerful aristocrats in exchange for protection, leading to the emergence of a socially and economically dependent class.

Agriculture constituted the backbone of the economy, whereas trade benefited from Spain's geographical position and its commercial connections with neighboring regions. Industrial activities also flourished in certain sectors, particularly shipbuilding, metalworking, and the production of colored glass.

Nevertheless, economic development remained limited due to social inequality, excessive taxation, political instability, and the persecution of productive social groups, especially the Jewish population. These factors contributed to economic stagnation and weakened the overall prosperity of the kingdom on the eve of the Islamic conquest.

4. Social Life

Visigothic society was characterized by deep social divisions and a rigid class structure. Society was broadly divided into free individuals and dependent classes, with the nobility and clergy occupying the highest social ranks and enjoying extensive privileges, landholdings, and legal exemptions. In contrast, peasants, serfs, and slaves constituted the majority of the population and were subjected to various forms of economic and social exploitation.

Ethnic and social discrimination further intensified societal fragmentation. The Visigoths maintained their privileged status as the ruling elite and did not fully integrate with the indigenous Iberian population. Consequently, social cohesion remained weak, and tensions between different groups frequently emerged.

The Jewish community formed an important component of Spanish society and played a significant role in commerce and agriculture. However, Jews were subjected to restrictive legislation, economic discrimination, and social marginalization. Such policies increased dissatisfaction among various social groups and contributed to the weakening of internal unity within the Visigothic state.

By the end of the seventh century CE, social problems had become increasingly evident, while the ruling authorities proved incapable of addressing them effectively. As a result, widespread discontent, instability, and recurrent disturbances further undermined the foundations of the kingdom.

5. Religious Life

Christianity was the dominant religion in Visigothic Spain, with Catholicism serving as the official faith of the kingdom. Although the Visigoths initially adhered to Arian Christianity, they gradually converted to Catholicism, a development that strengthened the unity between the monarchy and the Church. The conversion also enhanced relations with the Papacy and increased the political and religious influence of the Church within Spanish society.

Despite this religious unity, non-Catholic groups, particularly the Jews, faced severe persecution. Various ecclesiastical councils and royal decrees imposed restrictions on Jewish religious practices, property rights, and social activities. In some cases, Jews were compelled to convert to Christianity or face confiscation of their property and other penalties. These measures created widespread resentment among Jewish communities and contributed to their opposition to Visigothic rule.

Religious intolerance, combined with political instability and social inequality, weakened the cohesion of the kingdom. Consequently, many marginalized groups viewed the Muslim advance as an opportunity to escape persecution and improve their circumstances, thereby facilitating the success of the Islamic conquest.

Second: A Geographical Overview of the Christian Kingdoms

The Christian kingdoms that emerged in northern Spain played a crucial role in the subsequent history of the Iberian Peninsula. Their geographical location, mountainous terrain, and relative isolation enabled them to preserve their independence and later become the nucleus of the Christian Reconquista. These kingdoms developed in regions characterized by rugged landscapes, dense forests, narrow valleys, and strong natural defenses, which hindered military campaigns and provided secure refuges for local populations.

1. The Kingdom of Asturias

The Kingdom of Asturias was the earliest Christian kingdom to emerge in northern Spain following the Islamic conquest. Located in the northwestern part of the Iberian Peninsula, it was bounded by the Cantabrian Mountains to the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the north. The region was characterized by mountainous terrain, deep valleys, abundant rivers, and a harsh climate marked by heavy rainfall and long winters.

These geographical conditions contributed to the formation of a resilient and independent population whose economy relied primarily on agriculture and livestock breeding. The difficult terrain also provided natural protection against military incursions and enabled Asturias to become a refuge for Visigothic remnants after the Muslim conquest. Consequently, the kingdom became the first center of Christian resistance and laid the foundations for the Reconquista.

Among its most important cities were Oviedo, which served as the political center of the kingdom, and Astorga, an important historical and economic center. The region also included strategic strongholds such as Covadonga, where the first organized Christian resistance against 2. **Catalonia**

Catalonia developed in northeastern Spain and occupied a strategic position between the Pyrenees Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. Owing to its geographical location, it served as an important frontier region between the Islamic and Christian spheres of influence. The region was characterized by mountainous terrain, fertile plains, and several rivers that supported agriculture and settlement. Its proximity to the Frankish Kingdom facilitated political and military cooperation, enabling it to become one of the principal centers of Christian resistance. Major urban centers included Barcelona and Girona, both of which played significant political, economic, and military roles throughout the

medieval period.

3. Navarre

The Kingdom of Navarre emerged in the western Pyrenees and occupied a strategic position between Castile and the eastern Christian territories. Its mountainous environment provided natural defenses that protected it from external invasions and enabled it to maintain a considerable degree of independence. Centered around Pamplona, Navarre gradually expanded southward and benefited from its connections with neighboring Christian powers and regions beyond the Pyrenees.

4. León

The Kingdom of León evolved from the earlier Kingdom of Asturias and became one of the most influential Christian states in northern Spain. It extended from the Bay of Biscay in the north toward the Duero River in the south. León possessed fertile agricultural lands and controlled several important communication routes. Throughout the Middle Ages, its rulers played a leading role in the expansion of Christian territories at the expense of Muslim-controlled regions.

5. Castile

Castile emerged as one of the largest and most powerful Christian kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula. The kingdom derived its name from the numerous castles and fortifications that dominated its landscape and served as defensive positions against Muslim incursions. Initially associated with León, Castile gradually gained political autonomy and expanded its influence. Its strategic location, military strength, and extensive network of fortresses enabled it to become the driving force behind the Reconquista. Burgos served as one of its principal political and administrative centers.

6. Aragon

The Kingdom of Aragon originated in the central Pyrenees and derived its name from the Aragon River. Despite its relatively small beginnings, it acquired considerable political importance due to its control of important mountain passes connecting the Iberian Peninsula with southern France. Over time, Aragon expanded territorially and formed political unions with neighboring regions, particularly Catalonia, creating a powerful political entity that played a decisive role in medieval Spanish history. Its geographical diversity, access to trade routes, and strong military organization contributed significantly to its growth and influence.

7. The County of Portugal

The County of Portugal developed in the western part of the Iberian Peninsula near the mouth of the Duero River and along the Atlantic coast. Although geographically connected to the rest of the peninsula, the region gradually acquired distinctive political and cultural characteristics. Its Atlantic orientation encouraged maritime activities and commercial contacts, while its frontier position stimulated military organization and territorial expansion. These factors ultimately facilitated its transformation into the independent Kingdom of Portugal.

CONCLUSION

The general conditions prevailing in Spain prior to the Islamic conquest reveal a society affected by profound political, economic, social, and religious challenges. Political instability, succession disputes, social fragmentation, economic inequality, and religious persecution weakened the Visigothic Kingdom and reduced its capacity to confront external threats. At the same time, the rugged geography of northern Spain enabled the survival of several Christian centers of resistance, which later developed into powerful kingdoms and became the foundation of the Reconquista. Consequently, both the internal weaknesses of Visigothic Spain and the geographical characteristics of the Iberian Peninsula played a decisive role in shaping the course of medieval Spanish history following the Islamic conquest of 711 CE.

Muslim rule emerged.

CONCLUSION

The present study has demonstrated that the geographical diversity of the Iberian Peninsula endowed the emerging Christian kingdoms with distinct strategic advantages. The mountainous terrain, rugged landscapes, and naturally fortified locations provided these kingdoms with effective defensive barriers against Muslim military campaigns. Furthermore, the widespread presence of castles, fortresses, and natural strongholds enhanced their security and enabled them to preserve their political autonomy during periods of conflict.

These geographical advantages, combined with the survival of Visigothic remnants in the northern regions, created favorable conditions for the emergence and consolidation of the Christian kingdoms. Over time, these kingdoms became the principal centers from which the Reconquista was launched. The success of this movement was further facilitated by the gradual weakening of Muslim political authority in al-Andalus following the decline of the Umayyad Caliphate and the emergence of internal political divisions and instability.

Accordingly, the study concludes that both geographical factors and political developments played a decisive role in shaping the historical trajectory of the Iberian Peninsula, influencing the balance of power between Muslims and Christians throughout the medieval period.

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The General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic
Conquest (92 AH / 711 CE)

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The General Conditions in Spain Prior to the Islamic
Conquest (92 AH / 711 CE)

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