

The Iberian Peninsula (Al-Andalus) on the Eve of the Islamic Conquest :A Reading of the Political Landscape and Social Structure

شبه جزيرة إيبيريا (الأندلس) قبيل الفتح الإسلامي: قراءة في المشهد السياسي والتركيبية الاجتماعية

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Abstract:

This study examines the condition of the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Islamic conquest through an analysis of its political circumstances and social composition. It focuses on the manifestations of fragmentation that affected the central authority as a result of struggles over power, as well as on the nature of a society characterized by social stratification and religious and ethnic diversity. These conditions paved the way for the historical transformation experienced by the region following the arrival of Muslim forces in 92 AH / 711 CE, after which the peninsula came to be known in Islamic sources as al-Andalus.

Keywords: Iberian Peninsula; political conditions; society; Islamic conquest; al-Andalus.

ملخص:

يعالج هذا البحث واقع شبه جزيرة إيبيريا قبيل الفتح الإسلامي من خلال استعراض لأوضاعها السياسية وتركيبها الاجتماعية، حيث يركّز على مظاهر التفكك التي أصابت السلطة المركزية نتيجة الصراعات على الحكم، وعلى طبيعة المجتمع الذي اتسم بتعدد طبقاته وتباين مكوناته الدينية والعرقية، هذه الظروف التي مهدت للتحول التاريخي الذي عرفته المنطقة بدخول المسلمين سنة 92هـ/711م، لتُعرف شبه الجزيرة لاحقاً في المصادر الإسلامية باسم الأندلس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شبه جزيرة إيبيريا؛ الأوضاع السياسية؛ المجتمع؛ الفتح الإسلامي؛ الأندلس.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 92 AH / 711 CE was unlike other conquests; it was not an ordinary event, but rather a decisive historical turning point for both the Christian West and the Islamic East. In order to explain the rapid consolidation of Muslim rule in the region, it is essential to shed light on the general conditions that preceded the conquest.

Throughout its history, the Iberian Peninsula witnessed the succession of multiple civilizations. However, Visigothic rule exerted the most significant influence during the period preceding the Muslim entry. Under Visigothic authority, the peninsula experienced a state of political instability due to recurrent conflicts and competition for the throne, in addition to

evident social fragmentation manifested in sharp class disparities. Collectively, these circumstances contributed to preparing the ground for a profound historical transformation at the end of the first century AH / the beginning of the eighth century CE.

Accordingly, the following central research problem may be formulated: What was the political and social landscape of the Iberian Peninsula prior to the arrival of the Muslims? From this main question stem several subsidiary inquiries, most notably: What were the major political developments experienced by the Iberian Peninsula? and What were the defining features of the social structure of Iberian society?

2. Iberian Civilizations before the advent of Islam:

Throughout the centuries, numerous peoples and civilizations succeeded one another in the Iberian Peninsula. In the eleventh century BCE, the Celts—of Indo-European origin—invaded the region. The Romans referred to them as the Gauls. They settled primarily in the northwestern parts of the peninsula and intermarried with the Iberians, who are believed to have migrated from North Africa. From this interaction emerged a new population identified by ethnologists as the Celtiberians¹

The peninsula also witnessed Phoenician presence. In the tenth century BCE, the Phoenicians established several colonies along the eastern and southern coasts, such as Cadiz and Malaga, which they used as commercial stations along their maritime trade routes². Subsequently, the Greeks founded a number of colonies and designated the coastal areas by the name “Iberia,” a term that was later extended to the entire peninsula. From the fifth century BCE onward, however, the region came under

Carthaginian control. During this period, the city of New Carthage (Carthago Nova) flourished and was adopted as their capital.³

A major turning point in the history of the peninsula occurred in 205 BCE, marking the beginning of the Roman conquest. This development brought an end to Carthaginian presence and terminated their dominance over the region. From that date forward, the peninsula entered a new phase, as it was formally incorporated into the Roman Empire and became one of its significant provinces. The Romans gradually extended their authority over vast territories through military strength and advanced administrative organization, enabling them to subdue the population and secure full control of the peninsula. They also integrated the region into the broader imperial structure and divided it into five provinces.⁴

The period of Roman rule in the Iberian Peninsula was characterized by notable economic prosperity, strong political influence, and a distinct Latin-European intellectual and cultural impact. Roman presence contributed to the dissemination of Latin culture and the consolidation of administrative and legal systems, which in turn positively influenced the development of economic and social life in the region.⁵

From the beginning of the second century CE, the Roman Empire exhibited clear signs of erosion and fragmentation, as manifestations of weakness began to emerge at various political, military, and economic levels, rendering its borders increasingly vulnerable to intrusion. This decline was particularly evident in the successive waves of Germanic tribal migrations, as these groups crossed the frontiers of the Rhine and Danube rivers and

penetrated deep into Roman territories, exploiting the empire's growing frailty.⁶

As Rome's capacity to secure its frontiers and defend its lands diminished, Germanic tribes spread across vast regions of the empire, imposing their rule by force. Among the most prominent of these groups were the Vandals, who in 406 CE crossed the Rhine River and entered Gaul. Their settlement there, however, proved short-lived⁷. They soon resumed their southward movement, crossing the Pyrenees Mountains in 409 CE and invading the Iberian Peninsula. These movements ultimately enabled the Vandals to establish control over large parts of Iberia.⁸

Vandal rule in the Iberian Peninsula continued until 429 CE, when they were compelled to abandon the region following the advance of the Visigoths, themselves a Germanic people. The Vandals subsequently moved toward North Africa. Thereafter, the Visigoths expanded their influence and consolidated their authority over the peninsula through a series of wars against other Germanic tribes⁹, enabling them to firmly entrench their rule and secure control over its various territories.

3. Visigothic Rule in the Iberian Peninsula:

Following the elimination of the Vandals, the Visigoths established full control over the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the sixth century CE. They succeeded in unifying its various regions under their authority, thus bringing an end to the period of political fragmentation and inaugurating a new era characterized by the consolidation of centralized rule. For the first time in its history, Spain appeared as a unified political

entity under the dominion of a single governing power, as the Visigoths extended their influence over most of the peninsula. The Visigoths initially selected the city of Mérida as the first capital of their kingdom during the reign of King Agila (549–554 CE)¹⁰, owing to its administrative and cultural significance inherited from the Roman period. However, this choice was not without challenges. The Visigoths faced clear opposition from the local population, particularly the Romans, who remained attached to their cultural and political legacy, as well as to their Catholic faith, in contrast to the Visigoths' adherence at the time to Arianism. This ethnic and religious divergence intensified tensions between the new rulers and the local population¹¹, ultimately culminating in a conflict that ended with Agila's defeat and subsequent assassination by rebellious factions among the Visigoths themselves.¹²

Following Agila's death, governance passed to Atanagild (554–567 CE), a noble Visigoth who made the historic decision to designate Toledo as the capital. He chose Toledo for its central geographic location and strategic importance¹³, transforming it into the royal seat and administrative center of the kingdom¹⁴. He was succeeded by Leovigild (567–586 CE), under whose reign the foundations of the Visigothic kingdom were solidified and the Visigoths' dominance over state affairs was firmly established. During this period, the Visigoths exercised sole control over governance and implemented a new administrative system, relying on coercion in dealings with the local Hispano-Roman population, whose subjugation intensified tensions due to religious differences.¹⁵

During the reign of Reccared (586–601 CE), son of Leovigild, the Visigoths converted from Arianism to Catholicism¹⁶. This religious shift facilitated reconciliation between the Visigoths and their subjects, contributing to a degree of political stability in the Iberian Peninsula¹⁷. After Reccared's death, several Visigothic kings ascended the throne, whose reigns were marked by ongoing conflicts and internal disturbances, resulting in periods of chaos. A brief improvement occurred during the rule of Wamba (672–680 CE), who managed to impose a measure of stability and restore order to the state. However, this improvement was short-lived, as Wamba was later deposed, and following his era, the Iberian Peninsula again descended into political turmoil, marked by disputes over succession and localized revolts in various provinces.¹⁸

Under the successive reigns of Ervigio (680–687 CE) and Egica (687–701 CE), the royal court shifted from serving as an administrative center to becoming a stage for intrigue and personal conspiracies. This transformation eroded the authority of the central government and diminished its influence over the kingdom.¹⁹

4. Intensification of the Struggle for Power and Escalation of Turmoil on the Eve of the Islamic Conquest:

period of escalating political turmoil, which became particularly evident with the accession of Witiza to the throne in 700 CE, succeeding his father Egica. The beginning of his reign was marked by a strained relationship with the nobility, as he faced strong opposition from the leading nobles and clergy.²⁰

The situation became more complicated when Witiza appointed his young son, Akhila (referred to as Waqla (وقلة) in some Arabic sources)²¹, as heir apparent. This decision provoked widespread dissatisfaction, deepened divisions within the Visigothic court²², and weakened the cohesion of the state at a moment when stability was most urgently needed. These internal conflicts later contributed to further intensification of political strife, ultimately affecting the fate of the kingdom.

King Witiza died in 709 CE, ushering the Visigothic kingdom into a new phase of political instability²³. He was succeeded by a child king who lacked the capacity to manage state affairs or control the powerful nobles and clergy. As a result, broad segments of the elite declared defiance against the central authority in Toledo, leading to internal revolts that reflected deep disputes over the legitimacy of the throne. Amid this turmoil, several nobles broke away from the capital's²⁴ authority and appointed Rodrigo (commonly referred to as Ludric(لذريق) in some sources), Duke of Córdoba, as king in 710 CE²⁵, attempting to establish a new political reality. However, this appointment did not achieve general consensus; supporters of Witiza's family continued to oppose Rodrigo's rule and refused to acknowledge his legitimacy, perpetuating ongoing conflicts and divisions within the kingdom.²⁶

Rodrigo sought to consolidate his power and confront his opponents through a combination of coercion and political maneuvering. He relied on military force to subdue dissenters while attempting to co-opt some nobles through grants of land, bribes, and promises. Although these measures temporarily

extended his influence, they simultaneously exacerbated corruption and weakened the cohesion of the state. Consequently, on the eve of the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, the Visigothic kingdom had entered a stage of political fragmentation and internal strife, paving the way for its rapid collapse in the face of incoming forces.²⁷

During Rodrigo's reign, the Iberian Peninsula experienced profound political unrest, characterized by intense struggles for power and uprisings led by his opponents, especially the supporters of Witiza's family. These internal disputes significantly undermined the political structure of the state, deteriorated public order, and spread manifestations of division and rebellion across various regions of the peninsula. The ensuing disarray further eroded the authority of the central government and diminished its capacity to enforce stability and assert control.²⁸

Visigothic rule in the Iberian Peninsula was therefore marked by political instability and frequent upheavals, largely stemming from a monarchical policy based on autocracy and the consolidation of power through coercion. These kings sought to secure their dominance via exclusion and violence, generating widespread discontent and internal conflict. The political arena was further complicated by repeated conspiracies and intrigues within the royal family, as factions vied for the throne or sought to retain it, thereby intensifying divisions and weakening state institutions. Moreover, the Catholic clergy played a significant role in political life; their influence extended beyond religious matters, shaping major decisions and participating in policy-

making, making the Church a key actor in guiding the direction of governance.²⁹

Under these turbulent conditions, the stage was set for external intervention. When Muslim forces crossed into the Iberian Peninsula, they encountered a political entity fractured from within, with a central authority debilitated by internal disputes and depleted of military capacity. This structural disintegration greatly facilitated the course of the conquest and accelerated the collapse of Visigothic rule in 92 AH / 711 CE, ushering in a new historical phase in the history of the Iberian Peninsula.

5. Social Structure in the Iberian Peninsula:

Historians differ in their assessments of the social conditions of the Iberian Peninsula during the Visigothic era. Some Spanish historians with nationalist tendencies portray this period as a time of prosperity and an early Christian renaissance in the peninsula. However, such interpretations often reflect ideological exaggeration, aimed at downplaying the significance of the transformations that occurred during the Islamic presence and presenting them merely as a continuation of earlier developments.³⁰

It is noteworthy that when the Visigoths settled in the Iberian Peninsula, they did not implement radical changes to the social frameworks established during the Roman period, but rather maintained most of the existing organizational structures. Visigothic society was characterized by a clearly defined hierarchical structure, with the nobility at its apex. This elite class comprised both the ruling Visigothic aristocracy and remnants of the Roman nobility³¹. Between these two components, a form of concord emerged based on shared interests, aimed at

preserving accumulated wealth, ensuring the continuity of political dominance, and maintaining inherited social privileges. The alliance between the Visigothic and Roman nobility further entrenched social inequalities, as the upper class retained exclusive ownership of land and resources. They enjoyed legal protections that granted their members special exemptions and exceptional rights, reinforcing their status and cementing their dominance over the rest of society³². This elite group also assumed administrative responsibilities in a dual structure: Visigothic nobles oversaw the Visigothic population, while Roman nobles exercised authority over communities of Roman descent. Meanwhile, the general direction of the state and the determination of its high policies remained in the hands of the Visigothic king and his senior officials.³³

In contrast, the remaining segments of the population suffered from marginalization and deprivation³⁴. The visible wealth and privileges of the ruling class became a persistent source of social resentment and envy, fostering a widespread sense of injustice and inequality³⁵. This deepened social divisions and weakened the cohesion of society as a whole.

Alongside the nobility, another influential group emerged during this period: the clergy, who represented the institutional religious authority. The power of religious leaders, particularly the senior clergy, was both significant and effective, at times surpassing even royal authority. Their influence stemmed from popular religious devotion, which granted them broad spiritual authority and enabled them to shape laws and legislation in ways that reinforced their status and preserved their privileges.³⁶

The clergy's role extended beyond religious matters into political and military spheres, allowing them to control substantial financial resources through extensive ownership of agricultural lands. This accumulation of property and wealth strengthened their influence and deepened their impact on the economic structure of society. However, it also provoked growing resentment among the general population³⁷. The clergy made little, if any, effort to improve the conditions of ordinary people or to defend them against exploitation, nor did they oppose the abuses and excessive exploitation of the lower classes by the nobility.³⁸

Following the clergy in the social hierarchy was the class of merchants, farmers, and small landowners, often referred to as the free or middle class. However, their numbers were very limited. The Visigoths frequently confiscated the lands of many free farmers and settled in them, compelling the original landowners to work the fields. In response to this situation, some small- and medium-scale farmers sought protection from the major landowners in exchange for ceding part of their property. Under this new dependency, they were subjected to heavy taxes and fees, forced to perform arduous labor such as digging irrigation canals, constructing aqueducts, and preparing roads, in addition to bearing a significant share of public burdens. These demands further deteriorated their economic and social conditions.³⁹

At the lowest level of the social hierarchy were the peasants, or serfs, who became bound to the land and subjected to the authority of large landowners⁴⁰. This group constituted a vast portion of the population, with the nobility and major

landowners controlling thousands of them as if they were part of their personal wealth. These laborers lived under harsh conditions, deprived of any legal rights, and were unable to demand improvements to their situation or resist the obligations imposed upon them.⁴¹

of Iberian society. Jews were distinguished by their significant economic and social role⁴², particularly in agriculture, trade, crafts, and various professions, which granted them influence and status within the social fabric⁴³. Nevertheless, under Visigothic rule, Jews were subjected to various forms of persecution. Kings enacted strict laws that forced them either to convert to Christianity or face exile, often accompanied by the confiscation of their property and wealth⁴⁴. This persecution and expulsion of Jews caused a notable setback in the economic life of the Iberian Peninsula, given their vital role in financial and commercial activities.

6. CONCLUSION

From this study, the following conclusions can be drawn: Throughout its history, the Iberian Peninsula witnessed the succession of multiple civilizations, beginning with the Iberians and Celts, followed by the Carthaginian presence, Roman rule, the arrival of Germanic tribes, and finally the settlement of the Visigoths. These successive waves of influence contributed to the formation of a diverse cultural fabric prior to the Islamic conquest.

Visigothic rule in the Iberian Peninsula represented a historically significant period, serving both as an extension of the Roman legacy and as a new political and social transformation. In the

early years of their reign, the Visigoths preserved many Roman administrative and legal systems. However, the kingdom quickly entered a cycle of internal conflicts and competition for the throne, which weakened central authority and undermined societal cohesion.

The final years of Visigothic rule were characterized by evident disintegration of centralized power and escalating struggles over succession among Visigothic families and high-ranking nobles. The process of royal selection became a field of intense rivalry and intrigue, weakening political stability and diminishing the central authority's ability to govern the provinces. By the eve of the Islamic conquest, the Visigothic kingdom had become a fragile political entity, exhausted by internal conflicts.

The social structure of the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Islamic conquest was marked by pronounced stratification and diversity in ethnic and religious composition. The Visigoths dominated political power, while Roman nobles retained influence. The clergy exercised broad political and spiritual authority, whereas the weakest segment of society comprised peasants and artisans, who lacked legal rights. The Jewish community played an active role in economic and commercial life, despite experiencing oppression and restrictions during the late Visigothic period. This social diversity contributed to marked class disparities and internal divisions.

It is noteworthy that the political instability and social fragmentation that characterized the Iberian Peninsula in the late Visigothic era played a direct role in facilitating the Muslim conquest. The incoming Muslim forces encountered a society and political system weakened by internal disputes, which

allowed them to advance rapidly and establish control over most of the peninsula in a relatively short period of time.

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- ³⁸- R. Dozy, op. cit, pp. 22–23.
- ³⁹- Al-Sayyid ‘Abd al- ‘Aziz Salim, op. cit, p 64.
- ⁴⁰- Muhammad ‘Abduh Hatamleh, op. cit, p 263.
- ⁴¹- Al-Sayyid ‘Abd al- ‘Aziz Salim, op. cit, p 65.
- ⁴²- Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh ‘Inān, op. cit, p 30.
- ⁴³- Suhayl Takkoush, op. cit., pp 26-27.
- ⁴⁴- R. Dozy, op. cit, pp 26,29.