

THE MOOR'S LAST STAND

How Seven Centuries of Muslim Rule
in Spain Came to an End

Elizabeth Drayson

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Illustrations



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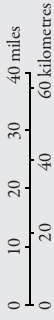
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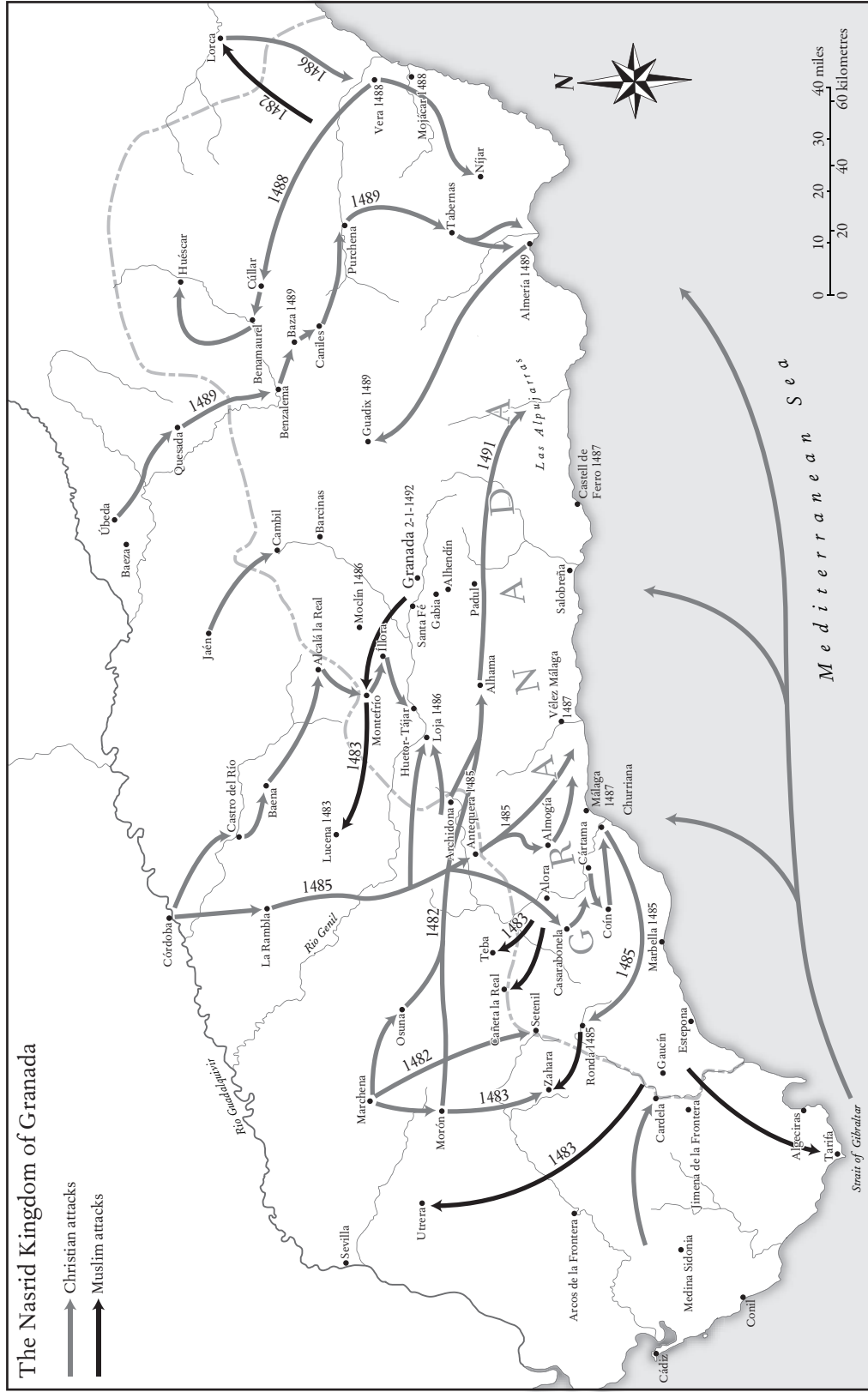
Map of Arab Granada
(after *Luis Seco de Paredes, 1910*)



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Mediteranean See

↑ Christian attacks
↑ Muslim attacks



Preface



This book sets out to bring to the fore a man who has not received the historical attention he deserves, and who has certainly never been regarded as a conventional hero. As a raw youth of twenty who had barely left the confines of the Alhambra palace except to go hunting, and who had no experience of the world outside his dysfunctional family, he rose to the throne as the twenty-third and last sultan of the Nasrid dynasty of Granada. In the ensuing ten years this exceptional man defeated his treacherous father and uncle and fended off the attacks of the indomitable Christian army with courage, bearing the inescapable loss of his Islamic kingdom and his consequent exile from Spain with dignity. He lived at a unique and crucial moment in history, at the climax of the clash between the Christian and Muslim civilisations of medieval Spain, and this book is the first full-length account of his life and times.

In Steven Nightingale's romantic homage to his adopted city, *Granada: The Light of Andalucía*, published in 2015, the author writes of 'the ludicrous Boabdil', who, he says, 'would bear down on Granada with the full weight of his fear and vulgarity and hasten the end of the city by his useless quarrelling and confusion'. This recent perception of the sultan is representative of the negative view of him which began to circulate in the early sixteenth century and

which has persisted despite the more balanced and positive fictional reinventions of his life which evolved from the nineteenth century onwards. The contemporary historical biographical accounts which form the basis of this book present a different picture, one that supports the revision of various popular preconceptions of his character. The main fifteenth-century sources were written by Christian historians, with just one Arab source in existence from this time. They contain many eyewitness accounts and include the written and spoken words of the sultan himself.

The terms 'king', 'sultan' and 'emir' are all used in contemporary sources to refer to Boabdil's status as Muslim ruler, and Spanish historians favour the Christian term 'king'. These three terms are used interchangeably in this book. The term 'Moor' appears in source materials of this time, and is often employed by Christians to convey hostility, and by Muslims with a sense of pride. It refers originally to people of north African origin, but it can be imprecise. Boabdil is at times described in early Christian writing and by posterity as a Moor, yet he was a native of Spain, of Arabic descent. For us today the terms 'Moor' and 'Moorish' convey an aura of exoticism, and are associated with an architecture and culture representative of the Islamic civilisation in Spain which Boabdil evokes.

These examples show how the conflict between two major cultures in the Iberian peninsula in the Middle Ages was reflected in the vocabulary used to describe it, and permanent traces of Spain's Islamic heritage remain in the high proportion of words of Arabic origin existing in the Spanish language. Yet Islamic, Arabic-speaking Granada and the life of its last ruler have often been marginalised in history and poorly understood. The relations between the Islamic world and the West, and the tumult of recent years, suggest that the time is right to bring Boabdil's story fully into the light of day, as a history not of decline and defeat but of a courageous defence of religious and cultural identity and of a way of life. It is my hope that this book will draw wider attention to the events of his life and to their implications for the religious and cultural issues of our time.

The Nasrid Dynasty of Granada



A king sits motionless astride his jet-black horse and waits. His black velvet robes flutter slightly in the cold breeze of an early January day and his horse paws the muddy ground impatiently. The man's bearded face betrays profound grief, though his bearing is dignified, and his sorrow is echoed in the faces of the handful of retainers watching on foot behind him. Another king and his queen are mounted face-to-face with him, their lavish clothes embroidered in red and gold, their richly caparisoned horses and vast host of attendants striking a sharp contrast with his modest, sober attire and retinue. There is utter silence. Taking one foot from the stirrup, the king bows his head slowly, then leans down to hand the bunch of magnificent keys he is holding to a page, who takes them and gives them ceremoniously to the king dressed in red. He in turn bows solemnly, and presents the keys to his queen. On seeing the joy in their faces, the vanquished king and his followers are unable to hide their pain and sadness, and the silence is broken by a sound of weeping as he turns his back on the city of Granada and leaves it for the last time. The king dressed in black is Abu Abdallah Muhammad b. Ali, or Muhammad XI, known as Boabdil, the last Moorish sultan of Granada, and head of the Nasrid dynasty. His dramatic act of handing over the keys of the city of Granada to the Christian

Monarchs, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, on 2 January 1492 marked a crucial moment in a centuries-old clash between two great religions and cultures. It symbolised the epoch-changing transition of the kingdom of Granada from Islamic state to Christian territory, a moment which set Spain on a course to become the greatest power in early modern Europe.

In the ten years before 1492, the kingdom of Granada was the theatre of one of the most significant wars in European history. The Nasrid sultan's territory was the last Spanish stronghold of a Muslim empire which had originally stretched to the Pyrenees and beyond, and had included northern Spanish cities such as Barcelona and Pamplona. Spanish Islamic society had been a part of the European continent for the best part of 1,000 years. It had existed there from the time of the Venerable Bede and King Alfred, through the reigns of William the Conqueror and the great medieval English kings, the creation of the universities and Gothic cathedrals and the advent of printed books, right up to Tudor times. The fall of Granada was the culmination of that ancient battle between two major and opposing civilisations, which not only settled the cultural fate of a large part of Europe but also established the basis for the discovery of the Americas. The year 1492 is generally seen as a beginning, whether of modern Spain or the discovery of the New World, but what had ended was equally significant. For nearly 800 years the Spanish peninsula had been home to a group of people who came as invaders and stayed to create a unique and sophisticated civilisation which bequeathed to Spain a lasting cultural heritage. The conquest of Granada was one of the most memorable events in Spanish history, yet the pivotal role that Boabdil played in these events has not been the focus of history, although he lives on in legend and fiction. History conspired with myth either to demonise or to romanticise the image of the last Moorish king, while the true nature of Boabdil has proved elusive. This book tells the story of his life and times and reassesses the verdict of history, which has marginalised him and favoured his conquerors. It explores his decisive role in late fifteenth-century Spain, using contemporary historical accounts as well as the views of later historians. It asks how Boabdil's reputation was created and preserved, and how he became the stuff of legend. His story speaks

to us now, as we consider what the relationships might be between Spain's multireligious, multicultural medieval legacy and the conflicts that confront the modern West and the Islamic world.

The tales of invasion and conquest involving first Roderick, last king of the Spanish Visigoths, and then Boabdil, have grown in importance in the light of existing religious tensions between Islam and the West, and important oppositions, such as those between Hispanic and Arabic ethnicities, between Christian and Muslim, history and myth, are fundamental to the story of Boabdil and emphasise its perennial relevance and value inside and outside Spain. We can recognise the crucial role of Spain in the Middle Ages as the meeting point of Europe and the Orient, of Christianity and Islam, set against the negative medieval perception of Islam by Christians, and of Christianity by Muslims. The early medieval Christian image of Islam identified Muhammad as a pseudo-prophet, an impostor and heretic whose followers were men of blood and violence. It was an image that arose from the Christian view of Muslims as conquerors, and of Islam as an aberrant form of Christianity. On the other hand, Muslims had an attitude of lofty disdain towards Christians, believing them to be uncouth and barbaric.

To make sense of Boabdil's life and set it in its cultural and historical context, we need to go back in time as far as the eighth century, to understand how Islam began in Spain and how it managed to survive there against all odds when it seemed to be condemned to obliteration by the rising power of a Christian Reconquest whose roots lay in the Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula. Boabdil's fateful role as the king who lost the last Islamic kingdom in the peninsula has a striking if inverted parallel with the situation of Roderick, who ruled Spain for just two years from 710–711, and lost his own Christian kingdom to the Islamic invaders when his army was defeated by a Moorish raiding party on 19 July 711. Their reigns mark the beginning and the end of Islamic rule in Spain, and the abiding interest in rewriting the lives of both men owes much of its fascination to the ambivalence of their image. In a similar way to Boabdil, Roderick's life became part of fiction and myth as the king on whose watch the Iberian peninsula was conquered by Arab and Berber tribes from north Africa. It gave rise to the founding story

of the Spanish people, in which Roderick's alleged love affair with the beautiful woman known as La Cava, the Whore, was blamed for the Muslim invasion, which established a powerful Arab presence in Spain for nearly eight centuries.

Boabdil's religion had been established as a faith for less than a hundred years at the time of the Moorish invasion of Spain. The earliest Christian to write about Islam was John of Damascus, who composed *A Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian* sometime around 745. The English monk known as the Venerable Bede, also writing in the eighth century, describes the Christian idea of the legendary origin of the Muslims, who were allegedly descended from Hagar, whom the Christians believed to be Abraham's concubine, while Christians came from his lawful son Isaac. Bede's story of origins rendered all Muslims illegitimate, while Christians belonged to the legitimate albeit incestuous blood line, as Sarah was Abraham's half-sister. The issue of lineage and legitimacy to rule was a matter of vital importance to Muslims and it became central to the unfolding of Boabdil's reign. Early Christians also believed that Muslims were inherently violent, because they were the direct descendants of Cain, the murderer. When Muslims invaded the eastern Mediterranean as early as 634, just two years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Christian accounts described it as catastrophic, as the wreaking of the symbolic vengeance of God upon his sinful people. To them the instrument of that vengeance was the bastard line of Abraham, protected by God and yet at an infinite distance from the love of Christ. When King Roderick came to the throne of Spain in 710, Christian prejudice against and fear of Islam was already rife.

The Nasrid dynasty of sultans of which Boabdil was the last did not come into being until 500 years later, in the thirteenth century. To appreciate the historical and cultural circumstances which led from the end of Roderick's Visigothic kingdom to the origins of that dynasty and its demise, we need a sense of the broader picture of life in Spain from the eighth century until the early 1200s. The seventeenth-century Arab historian al-Maqqari describes the history of the Spanish Muslims as simultaneously the colonisation of a green and pleasant land and the end of a great civilisation. Invasion followed by conquest was to become a familiar pattern in the long battle for

the land of Spain and its inhabitants, and religion became the main criterion of allegiance. In 418, in an earlier act of colonisation, the Germanic tribe of the Visigoths had invaded Spain, defeated the Vandals and established a thriving kingdom whose religion was Catholicism. The expansion of the Arab states came 300 years later, corresponding to the rise of Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. By 711 Islam was growing powerful, and Spain's proximity to Africa made it vulnerable to attack. There had already been friendly trading expeditions to Spain from north Africa for some years, and these sorties emboldened the Muslims in their desire to possess the Spanish lands they had glimpsed. Added to this, the newly crowned Visigothic king Roderick was vulnerable from the start of his reign, because of questions concerning his legitimacy to rule. He was not in direct royal line to the throne, and had been presented as a candidate by members of the nobility who were at odds with the sons of the previous king, Witiza. Roderick was perceived by some powerful factions to be a usurper. This weakened his position and exposed his authority to challenges that he attempted to counter with a bold display of fighting prowess.

While he was away flexing his military muscle against the Basques in the north of Spain, disaster struck in the south. Musa ibn Nusayr, the powerful Arab governor of Ifrikiya, as north Africa was known then, sent a militant raiding party to Spain under the command of his former slave Tariq. In panic Roderick hurried south to meet the invaders, who defeated his army in the valley of the river Guadalete near Medina Sidonia. His demise may have been hastened by the betrayal of the usurped sons of Witiza, who deserted their king in his final battle and colluded with the enemy. The battle ended Roderick's reign and the Visigothic kingdom with it. His death is shrouded in mystery. It was not recorded in any reliable accounts, and some believe he escaped to Portugal, though the general assumption is that he died in battle.

Spurred on by this unexpected success, Tariq quickly captured Toledo, and his victories encouraged Musa to follow his lead and capture Seville. The daring invasion and the easy victory of the Arabs took on an apocalyptic quality for both the conquered and the conquerors. The earliest Muslim histories describe premonitory stories

heralding the invasion and the fabulous treasure that the victors acquired afterwards, including the original Table of Solomon, made of gold and silver with inlays of precious stones, which had belonged to King Solomon himself. It had been carried from Jerusalem to Spain and was discovered by the Muslims at a fortress near Toledo. For Islamic historians as well as for Christian writers, the conquest of Spain was an event of overwhelming significance, encouraging the Arabic vision of conquest and victory fostered by the policy of expansion proclaimed by the government of Damascus. The occupation of Hispania, the old Latin name for Spain, was part of a much wider Islamic conquest taking place outside the peninsula and late-Roman empire, and in Arab histories it was not seen as divine punishment for Spanish corruption, as it was in Christian history writing, which portrays it as a catastrophe equal in magnitude to the fall of Troy. For both early Islamic and Christian historians, Roderick was a man of destiny, albeit an equivocal destiny, fundamental to the fortunes and futures of both sides, creating a conspicuous parallel with the destiny of Boabdil. For Christian writers, Roderick was the vessel through which God wreaked punishment upon the corrupt through defeat and invasion, and for Islamic historians he was the instrument of conquest.

The Muslims wasted no time in vanquishing all of Spain, failing only in the northern kingdom of Asturias, and reached beyond the harsh, snowy northern Pyrenees as far as what is now southern France in pursuit of the jihad or holy war, but their defeat in 732 by Charlemagne's grandson Charles Martel at Poitiers put an end to their expansion north, and to the prospect of what would have been a very different Europe under Muslim rule. They soon settled in the southern area of Spain known as al-Andalus, modern-day Andalusia, a term said to derive from Arabic geographers' descriptions of the Vandals who had settled in Hispania as 'al-Andlish'. Between 716 and 756, al-Andalus was ruled by a rapid succession of Arab governors from two tribal groups, one from Yemen and the other from Syria. These tribal groups and the native population intermarried and the local Visigoths and Hispano-Romans were given the choice of conversion to Islam or of pursuing their own religion, provided they submitted to certain rules and paid a tax to do so.

Then, in 756, a dramatic and far-reaching event sparked nearly two centuries of brilliant cultural and social development which left the rest of Europe far behind. A member of the ruling Umayyad family in Damascus, Abd al-Rahman, fled to Spain to escape the massacre of his family by the rival Abbasid dynasty, and proclaimed himself emir or temporal Muslim ruler, with his capital at Cordoba. His enforced exile led to an era of unprecedented growth and abundance, and the emir encouraged a firm Islamic orientation in every facet of life. Schools were built, the construction of the Great Mosque was begun, literature flourished and a famous law school was established. The first Spanish emir died in 788 and was succeeded by his peaceable son, Hisham I, followed by the ferocious tyrant al-Hakam I. The learned and pious Abd al-Rahman II (822–856) brought a new outlook, refashioning Muslim society on models from the East, and attempting to rival Baghdad with the splendours of Cordoba. Yet by the end of the ninth century, his authority had grown weak, and rebellions arose. A political and institutional remedy was essential, but it came only much later, in the form of Abd al-Rahman III, who in 929 proclaimed himself caliph of Cordoba (from the Arabic *khalifa*, or successor), not just the temporal, but also the spiritual head of all Muslim believers in al-Andalus. With his reign the century of greatest magnificence and stability for the Muslims of al-Andalus began. The caliph held the vital reins of power, while al-Andalus was divided into territorial districts and many administrative posts were created. This firm basis for government and defence of the state was combined with the flourishing culture of tenth-century Cordoba, which boasted street lights, paving and over seventy well-stocked libraries at a time when London languished amid narrow, muddy, unlit streets. Sadly, the glory of the Umayyad caliphate was short lived: it declined as rapidly as it rose, mainly because of excessive centralisation of power, and finally collapsed in 1031.

Al-Andalus fragmented into twenty small states known as Taifa kingdoms, from the Arabic word for a group or party. While these small kingdoms weakened themselves with internal squabbles and conflict, two powerful enemies were gathering on their frontiers. A strong desire had begun to grow in the members of the Christian community of the peninsula to reassert themselves and regain what

they felt was their native land. That desire manifested itself in the conception of a so-called Reconquest, encouraged by Pope Gregory IX's authorisation of the crusade to recuperate the territories that were perceived as lost to Islam after 711. Christian medieval writers of this time devoted a great deal of energy to reinforcing oppositions between themselves and the Muslims with whom they shared the peninsula and on to whom they projected an image of alienness. The chronicles of the kings of Castile resound with such statements as: 'On our side, Christ, God and man. On the Moors' side, the faithless and damned apostate Muhammad.' Fortified by this militant rhetoric, the Christians in the north mustered their forces, and their first significant victory came in 1085 when King Alfonso VI, ruler of the central kingdom of Castile, captured Toledo. So the Taifa kingdoms were menaced on their northern boundaries by the Christian advance, while in the south, a fearful threat from north Africa was looming.

The twelfth-century Muslims of al-Andalus were overrun by two independent groups of fanatical political and religious zealots and reformers from the north African coast, the Almoravids and the Almohads. The Almoravids arrived in 1090, preaching a strange combination of puritanical Islamic mysticism and practical warfare, and by 1106 they had occupied all the important cities of al-Andalus. Unexpectedly, they quickly succumbed to the wealth and glitter of court life, and to the steadily growing strength of the Christian reconquerors, and were finally ousted in 1145. Shortly after, the inhabitants took a second battering, this time from the Almohads, another group of religiously intolerant and anti-secular extremists. They reached the zenith of their power between 1160 and 1210: their most famous monument is the minaret of the Giralda in Seville. By 1172 they in turn had captured most of the cities of al-Andalus, and tried to stem the Christian Reconquest, but in 1212 they were decisively defeated by the Castilian Christian force at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. With the momentum of victory behind them, the Castilians and Aragonese swept southwards and by 1248 al-Andalus had lost almost all its major cities, including Cordoba and Seville, to the Christians. Spain's history had reached a crossroads – Muslim power was waning and the progress of the Christian Reconquest seemed inexorable.