

This August I travelled to Andalusia in southern Spain to enhance my research for my Thesis. My aim was to investigate how the Moors created an inclusive and pluralistic society where religion was important but did not dictate public policy in Medieval Spain. I wanted to gain an understanding of how Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived and worked together to create a culture of tolerance, and how they were part of a broad and unitive culture that incorporated elements of all traditions which all could participate in regardless of their religion.

To achieve this I travelled to Cordoba, the former capital of al-Andalus under the Spanish Umayyads, where I stayed in the Jewish quarter next to the 14th-century Cordoba Synagogue. My visit traced Cordoba's multicultural history from its Roman ruins to the Moorish architecture, and its later churches and Christian palaces. I had access to some of the monastery libraries, spending most of my time at the Library of Caliph al-Hakam II, to conduct my own primary research and attempt text translations using the Arabic I studied during first year.

What I found particularly interesting was the special relationship which existed between Cordoba and Damascus. When the Umayyad dynasty in Syria fell in 750 the one surviving member, Abd al-Rahman I, escaped to Spain and rebuilt Cordoba to reflect his Syrian heritage and Byzantine roots. This influence was apparent in the architecture and ornamentation when I visited the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba and Medina Azahara, as well as the delicious local cuisine. The free exchange of culture, ideas and trade with Baghdad put Cordoba far ahead of any other European city at the time.

Beyond my academic studies I had time to explore the traditional patio neighbourhoods selling handicrafts such as delicate filigree silverware. Many of the pieces for sale imitated the craftsmanship created by artists from the Spanish Umayyad imperial workshops.

I spent the final few days of my trip in Seville gaining a broader understanding of Umayyads' legacy and longevity. I visited the Alcazar of Seville, which begun in the 10th century and then developed into a larger palace complex by the subsequent Abbasid dynasty and the Almohads following the collapse of Umayyad rule. This was a powerful visual reminder of how Theology and History are layered and subject to constant reimagination and revision.



