

The Moorish Influence In New Mexico

One morning in July 711, a battle took place that decided the fate of Spain for more than seven centuries. Tarik, the military governor of Tangier, encouraged by the enemies of Visigothic King Rodrigo, sent a small army across the Strait of Gibraltar. They met a much larger Visigothic force near present Tarifa and Rodrigo was defeated. Another Moslem army followed and within a few years most of the Iberian Peninsula had been occupied by the invaders.



Direct Moorish influence, in the form of religious and political power, was finally removed from Spain in the same year Christopher Columbus made his first voyage to the New World. It is clear that many if not most of the cultural trappings the Spanish brought with them to the New World were either touched or directly inspired by the culture that had dominated their country for nearly 800 years. From the cloth they wore to the beasts they rode and ate, the Spaniards carried the Moors with them to the Americas. And in that strange way people have of gravitating to the places on the globe that remind them of home, they found a place so fitting they named it New Andaluz. One of the tiny group of explorers who were the first Europeans to see New Andaluz was described as a "Moor." These first Europeans carried with them — for the most part unconsciously — the sum total of Western culture to that date, heavily bolstered and patterned by the tastes, political and economic forms, language, and scientific knowledge of the Far and Near East.

The world of Moorish Spain was the farthest western outpost of the vast empire of Islam which at its height stretched from China to Spain, and through which any Muslim could travel without passport or restriction, and any Christian or Jew could travel by the presentation of a certificate from the tax inspector showing he had paid a small tax and was therefore exempt from military service. Being at the far end of this world of Islam, with its trade and tremendous cross-cultural movements, Spain benefitted from all that had come before and all that was going on in the

great centers of the world such as Baghdad, Cairo and Constantinople. The inhabitants of the Spanish peninsula, who had been living in a semi-barbaric state of left-over Romanism and rudimentary Christianity before the Moors, became the inheritors of the best the world could provide. When the Christian rulers from the north succeeded in evicting the last Muslim power from Granada in 1492, they only threw a small part of the baby out with the bathwater. (The bathwater they *did* throw out, causing almost all the plentiful baths of the Moors to be destroyed.) Along with at least 40% of their language, they kept the scholarship, scientific knowledge (except what was in conflict with the Church), agricultural practices, governmental systems, animal husbandry, engineering, geographic understanding, music, poetry, food and dress of their previous rulers, who had become in fact a part of themselves. They took all this with them and eventually deposited the bones of it, if not the beautiful lace ruffles, on the bare soil of New Andaluz.



The golden plain of Santa Fe, Spain was a sea of activity. Thousands of tents surrounded and protected the large, colorful encampment of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. The air was choked with campfire smoke and the dust from the feet of 50,000 soldiers and their horses. Overlooking them in the distance loomed the Alhambra, the red palace of Boabdil, the Moorish ruler of Granada.

This might have been the scene of January 2, 1492 as the Spanish royalty prepared to accept the surrender of the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, the City of Granada. Thus the way was paved for the voyage of Christopher Columbus to the New World. It is said that Columbus was present when the Spanish

blockade finally ended Moorish rule on the plain of Santa Fe. By the time Spanish families began settling the Rio Grande Valley and Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Moorish culture was their own.

Islam's influence can be seen in many aspects of life in New Mexico.

Two favorite saints were associated with the Moorish occupation. Santo Niño de Atocha, who is depicted with a gourd canteen and basket of bread, achieved sainthood by feeding Christian prisoners in Moorish jails with an endless supply of bread and water. Santiago Matamoros, or St. James, Killer of Moors, was called upon often in battle and is credited with many victories. In Spain he is shown on his white horse, trampling the enemy. Although his statues are generally more subdued in New Mexico, the Santiago on the Cristo Rey Church reredos retains the Moorish association.



Popular in Spain since the 12th century, *Los Moros y Cristianos* is the re-enactment of a battle between the Spanish Christians and the Moors. It was first performed in New Mexico in 1598 by Don Juan de Oñate's men at San Gabriel near the present San Juan Pueblo. The play was an important teaching tool for the missionaries because, no matter how fierce the battle, the Christians always won! Today it is performed on horseback by colorfully costumed residents of Chimayo, and in various forms in villages throughout Spain and Mexico.

Los Matachines, as performed in New Mexico, is a blend of the old and new world. It is believed to have been a Moorish morality play with the name coming from an Arabic word for "to assume a mask."

The Conquistadors' horses were barbs, the large, Roman-nosed horses of the Moors. Spaniards pre-

ferred riding them "a la jineta," in the style of the Zenetes, a powerful North African Berber tribe. Even alfalfa, called "al-safasa" in Arabic, was introduced into Spain by the Moors. The Arabs call it "king of herbs."

Major contributions to New Mexico culture were architectural. Spanish Colonial architecture was a blend of their own and the Pueblo Indians. But the Spanish brought two techniques unknown in the New World. Adobe bricks — from the Spanish "adobar," to daub, by way of the Arabic, "at-top," sun-dried brick — would become the most typical building material in New Mexico. Even the horno, or beehive-shaped oven, was an Arab invention, based on the concept of the dome. Apparently the ovens originated in Egypt and are still common in Libya. Today in New Mexico they are known as Indian ovens.

Other local architectural features have Islamic origins. The placita house, without exterior windows but with doors and windows opening on to the central enclosed area, is a defensive, desert building style which brings communal activities into an area protected from blowing dirt as well as hostile neighbors. Roof parapets with a crenelated line have always added a decorative (and defensive) touch to Arab buildings. At one time they were common in Northern New Mexico, but the design is rarely seen today. Even building interiors show a relationship in vigas, decorative latias and corbels; decoration on lower walls; and built-in banco seating.

Gardening and agricultural techniques originating in the Arab deserts helped to make Spain fruitful and were easily transferred to dry New Mexico. Although the Pueblo Indians had primitive irrigation systems, the Spanish learned from the Moors about water rights and how to run a ditch system. Their organization was so good it is still legal today. Many of the fruits, vegetables and plants we know were native to North Africa, such as garlic, garbanzos, lentils, rice, sugar cane, apricots, St. John's Wort, poleo and one of New Mexico's favorite flowers — the hollyhock.

The Arabs were so adept at interpreting and assimilating Greek and Chinese knowledge that their contribution is suggested in many areas other than those touched upon here, including the astronomy that founded the New World in the first place. It is a subject worthy of more consideration.

Even though the Spanish hated the conquering infidels and many Spanish devoted their lives to driving the Moors from their country, the Arab culture made a lasting contribution to the culture of Spain. Consequently, the Conquistadors and settlers could not help but bring it with them to New Spain. The Moorish influence is apparent in the lives of early Hispanic New Mexicans and is still with us today.

— Louann C. Jordan

EL RANCHO DE LAS GOLONDRINAS
Santa Fe, New Mexico