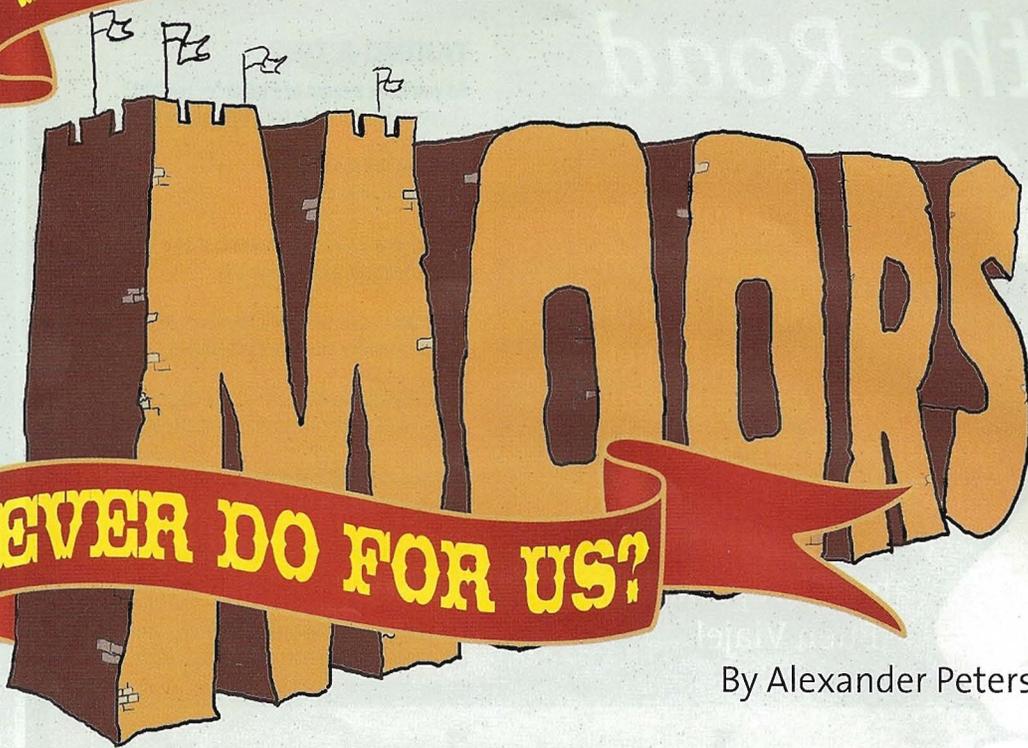


WHAT DID THEY

EVER DO FOR US?



By Alexander Peters

Anyone who has seen Monty Python's *Life of Brian* will remember one of its characters, Reg, provocatively asking: "What did the Romans ever do for us?" Hilariously, the revolting rabble in front of him are quickly silenced, as they remember how much the Romans had improved their lives through aqueducts, hospitals, sanitation, roads and even peace itself. But if a similar question was asked today of a Spanish crowd, their response to what the Moors did would be very different.

TO THE SPANISH, the Moors are considered an unwelcome historical fact and one that is best forgotten. Just mention them and a 'Spanish Reg' will no doubt move onto the 'heroic' Christian Reconquista, with his supporters ardently denying that the Moors had more than a fleeting part in Spain's history. Indeed, the achievements and contributions of the Moors are rarely acclaimed by the Spanish - although they made a profound long-term contribution to both Spanish and Western civilisation.

The Moors arrived in Spain in 711 and, with amazing ease, quickly conquered all but a small part of northern Spain, forming a territory called Al Andalus. Whilst the expulsion of the Moors (The Reconquista) began almost immediately, they remained in Spain for 780 years (until 1492), when they were finally forced to leave their last stronghold at Granada. By this time, they had left an indelible mark upon the country.

Importantly, the Moors' initial control over Spain coincided with the Golden Age of Islam (750 - 1258), when the Islamic world was at its most dynamic and creative. Strange though it may appear today, this was a time when the Arab world was renowned for its sophistication, advanced technology and scholarship. The Prophet Muhammad had urged the importance of learning upon his followers, stating that 'knowledge is required of every Muslim'. Scholarship had therefore become a divine responsibility and Arab rulers from Baghdad to Córdoba vied with each other to have the most advanced societies and greatest intellectuals. The ruling Umayyad Moors (756 - 1031) in Spain were no exception.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Córdoba (the capital of Moorish Spain) was an astounding, world-class city of 500,000

THE MIGHTY MOORS



**Muhammad**  
570 - 632

- Prophet
- Founded the religion of Islam
- Promoted the importance of learning and scholarship



**Abd al-Rahman**  
731 - 786

- Reigned 756 - 786
- Founder of Umayyad dynasty that ruled Iberia for 300 years
- The 'Falcon of Andalus'
- Started construction of Córdoba's Mezquita

people (200,000 more than today) in which there was street lighting, 50 hospitals (with running water), 300 public baths and 70 libraries - including one that had some 400,000 books. All of this when London had a largely illiterate population of 20,000, who had long since forgotten the advances brought to Britain by the Romans!

More impressive still was the urge to encourage learning, whether based upon philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, agriculture, hand crafts or medicine. Ancient texts from Egypt, Greece, Rome and China were sought out and translated into Arabic. These

manuscripts were studied and commented upon, stimulating innovative thought and thus vastly improving upon knowledge that had been discarded for centuries. For a while, Arabic in fact became the language of international scholarship.

From Spain emerged three of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages: Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Arabi and the Jew, Moses Maimonides. These extraordinary men were to have, in their separate ways, a stunning effect that was to last to the present day. The work of Ibn Rushd, in particular, had an incredible impact upon Western

“the achievements of the Moors are rarely acclaimed by the Spanish”

thought. Translating and commenting upon the works of Aristotle (perhaps the greatest thinker the world has known), he revitalised the crucial importance of logic and intellectual rigour.

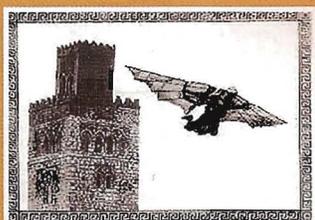
Meanwhile, at almost the same time, Ibn Arabi's radical thinking and writing articulated and developed Sufism, the Islamic tradition of mysticism, still vital now.

Maimonides, on the other hand, was writing seminal works on Jewish philosophy, law and ethics, which have made him one of the religion's most important Rabbis. ▶



**Abbas Ibn Firnas**

- 810 - 887
- Born in Ronda
- Scientist, musician and inventor
- The first man to try flying scientifically



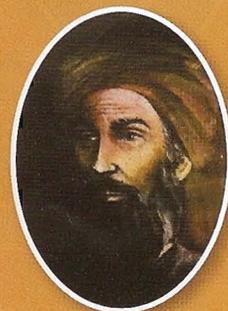
**Abd al-Rahman III**

- 891 - 961
- Reigned 912 - 961
- First Caliph and greatest Umayyad ruler
- Helped Córdoba become the greatest centre of learning in Europe



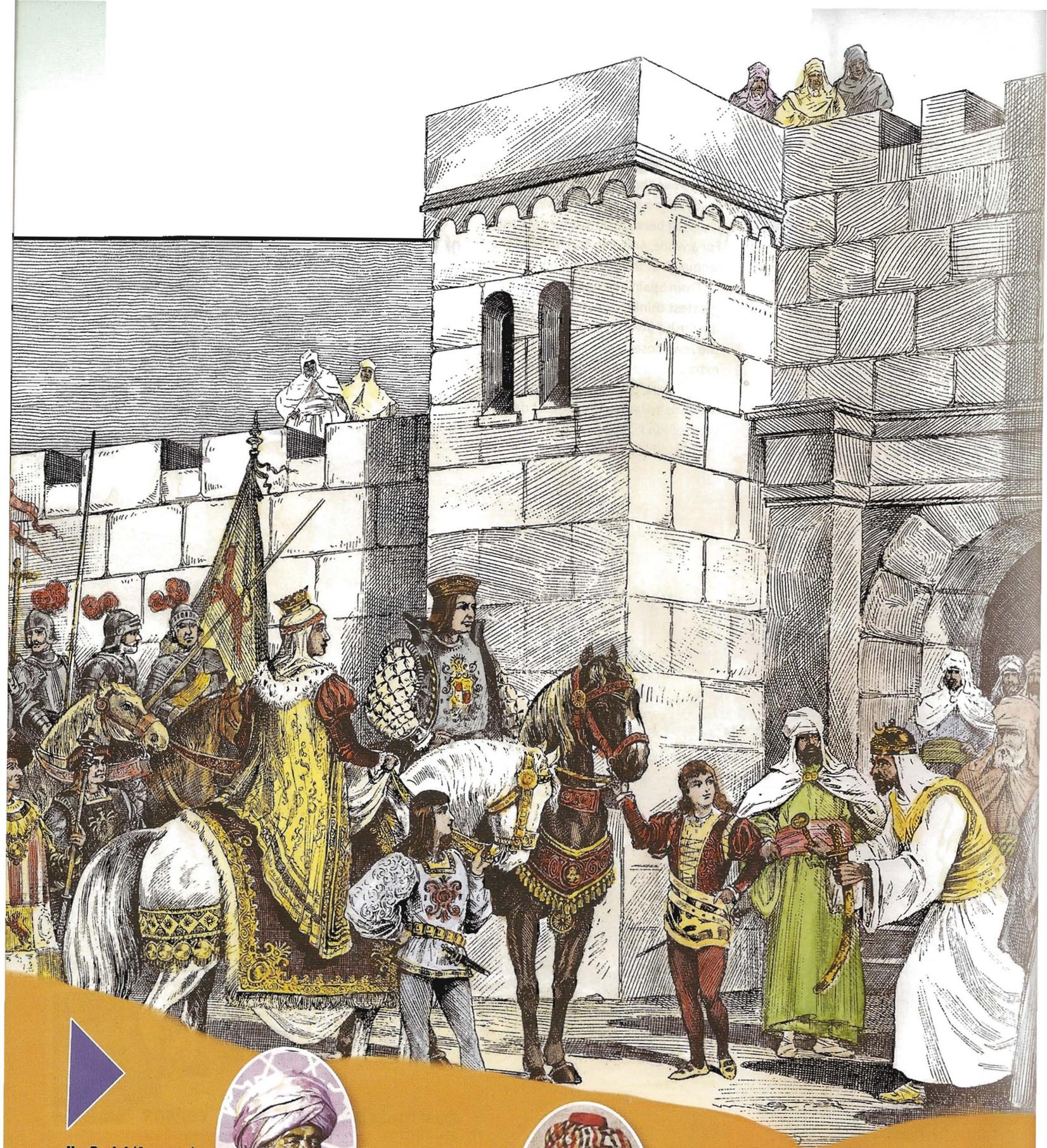
**Abu al-Quasim (Al Zahrawi)**

- 936 - 1013
- Born in Córdoba
- Father of modern surgery
- Influenced medicine for 500 years
- Designed new surgical instruments and techniques



**Al Zarquali (Arzachel)**

- 1028 - 1087
- Lived in Toledo
- Mathematician, astronomer and inventor
- Contributed to the Tables of Toledo
- Influenced the re-birth of mathematical astronomy



**Ibn Rushd (Averroes)**

1126 - 1198

- Born in Córdoba
- 'The Commentator'
- Father of secular thought in Western Europe
- Brought Aristotle's thinking back to the West



**Moses Maimonides**

1135 - 1204

- Born in Córdoba
- Jewish scientist and philosopher
- Considered the greatest doctor of his time



**Ibn Arabi**

1165 - 1240

- Born in modern day Murcia
- Philosopher and mystic
- Wrote some 800 works
- Exerted a huge influence on Islamic spiritual thought



◀ Of course, the Moors were not restricted to merely intellectual matters. Born in Córdoba, the immensely gifted Abu al Quasim (Al Zahrawi) is considered the 'father of modern surgery', whilst Ibn Zoar (Avensoar) 1091 -1161, from Seville, was practising as one of the greatest physicians of the Middle Ages. He used inhaled anaesthetics, was an expert on anatomy and wrote books that, when translated into Latin, lasted until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Of his contemporaries, al-Bayta wrote on drugs and medicinal plants, whilst al-Nafis was the first person to discover the pulmonary circulation of blood.

As well as propagating huge medical advances, the Moors were also famous as astronomers and mathematicians. Indeed, algebra comes from the Arabic *al-jabra* and the previously unknown Eastern concept of 'zero' was introduced into Europe through Spain. The Moors' keen interest in mathematics produced men like al-Zarquali (Arzachel) from Toledo. Prodigiously gifted, he contributed to the Toledan Tables, developed a flat astrolabe, astronomical instruments and tables of longitude and latitude. The Moors' curiosity even extended to flight, with Ibn Firnas making the first scientific attempt to fly (in a controlled manner) in 875. And fly he did - although the landing was less successful.

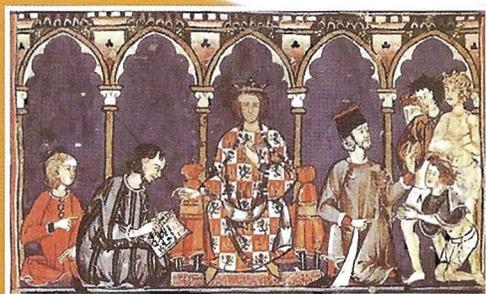
Of course, the Moors were nothing if not practical and also introduced to Spain new crops such as rice, hard wheat, cotton, oranges, lemons, sugar and cotton. Just as importantly, they brought an intimate knowledge of irrigation techniques, together with sophisticated weaving, metal working and paper making. All of this was complemented by the skills required to produce

“ the Moors’ ideas permeated into Western culture and helped to light a fuse that led Europe into the Renaissance ”

staggeringly ornate and complicated interior decoration for buildings such as Granada’s gorgeous Alhambra or Córdoba’s Mezquita.

The Moors’ long-term influence largely derived from the rapid translation of Arabic texts into Latin as the Reconquista advanced. This allowed their accumulated knowledge to be dispersed throughout Europe. Gradually, the Moors’ ideas permeated into Western culture and helped to light a fuse that led Europe into the Renaissance and out of the intellectual and physical gloom of the Dark Ages.

Of course, any denial of the Moors’ importance is difficult for a modern day ‘Spanish Reg’ - who would be reminded of their influence every single day. Even the very words he uses are peppered with Arabic - *hola* (from *Allah*), *ojalá* (from *in sha'allah*) and even Madrid (from *majrit*) to name just a few. So: ‘What did the Moors ever do for us?’ Come on, Reg - we shouldn’t even need to ask ...



**Alfonso X of Castille**  
1221 - 1284  
• Nicknamed ‘El Sabio’ (‘The Learned’)  
• Writer and intellectual  
• Patronised the Toledo School of Translators

# TIMELINE

- 711** Moors cross into Spain and defeat last Visigoth King (Roderick I at Battle of Rio Barbate)
- 719** Moors rule almost all of Spain
- 732** Moors defeated by Charles Martel at Poitiers in France - the limit of their northern advance
- 750 - 1258** The Golden Age of Islam
- 756** Abd al-Rahman I makes Córdoba the capital of Al Andalus
- 912 - 961** Reign of Abd al-Rahman III - established Caliphate and intellectual tradition of Córdoba
- 1031** Umayyad dynasty collapses
- 1031 - 1086** Anarchy
- 1085** King Alfonso VI captures Toledo
- 1118** Christians capture Zaragoza
- 1145** Almohad Dynasty comes to power
- 1147** Almohads capture Sevilla and make it the capital of Al Andalus
- 1212** Moors defeated at the Battle of La Naves de Tolosa by the united armies of Castille, Aragón, Navarre and Portugal
- 1232 - 1492** Granada is the only Moorish territory on the Iberian Peninsular
- 1238-1358** Construction of the Alhambra palace (Granada)
- 1238** Valencia re-captured by the Christians
- 1492** Moorish rule ends with the fall of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella

