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FROM MAŶRĪT TO MADRID

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman knew the attack would come from the north. In the ninth century, the emir of Córdoba was the most powerful ruler in Spain. His dominions stretched across most of the Iberian Peninsula and covered a large swathe of the modern states of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The emirate of Al-Ándalus, the Arabic name for Andalucía, was a land of splendour in every sense, with its fields of olive groves extending to the horizon, the cooling breeze of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada peaks to the south, and the vast acres of vineyards and orchards, watered by sophisticated irrigation systems imported from North Africa.

In 711, the Berber chieftain Tariq ibn Ziyad led an army of 16,000 warriors across the Strait of Gibraltar,[1] the narrow body of water that separates Spain from Morocco, taking advantage of a dynastic civil war between Christian Visigoth pretenders, who three centuries earlier had themselves conquered Roman Hispania when that empire began to crumble. The Moors, as the North African invaders were collectively known, displayed a remarkable tolerance towards their new subjects, Christians and Jews alike. Córdoba, the capital of the Arab-Muslim emirate of Al-Ándalus, became a beacon of multicultural enlightenment, a glittering, bustling city of poets, mathematicians, philosophers and musicians. It is estimated that in those days there existed in France some 700 books worthy of the name, while the library of Córdoba, at the peak of its glory, held more than 100,000 volumes.