Muslims in Medieval Europe

The place of Muslims in Medieval Europe is fascinating and varied. Key areas saw significant Muslim populations and one famous explorer, Ahmad bin Fadhlan, gave a unique first-hand account of the Kievan Rus. Muslims had special roles within their European communities, which would often change depending on the locality. Most famously perhaps, Muslims controlled much of Spain from 711. The Umayyad caliphate remained in Spain long after the conquest of the Abbasids and formed a powerful and prosperous kingdom. In Hungary, most of the Muslim communities were merchant colonies, accepted by the Hungarian king for their tax and tariff benefits. They were a point of fascination for travelers, yet they were generally well-received by their neighbors. Sicily was the point at which the Muslim and Christian worlds most closely intertwined, especially under the rule of Frederick II. Although war was endemic in Sicily, the Muslim communities typically received decent treatment alongside their Jewish neighbors. The cosmopolitan nature of Southern Italy allowed for Islamic medical knowledge to form the basis of the curriculum at the most prominent medical school in medieval Europe, Salerno. While war was a common facet of European relations with the Islamic world, many European Muslim communities witnessed a very different side of their Christian brethren.

The Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 would have a drastic effect on the subsequent history of Europe. What had been an ancient heartland of the Roman Empire, declared at one point to have been more Roman than Rome herself, was suddenly seized by an almost completely alien power. Much of Western and Central Europe had been free of Muslim raiding parties until the middle of the eighth century. The battle of Tours gave Europe some breathing room, but it was clear that the newcomers would not be pacific. The power of the Spanish

Umayyads would aid them in withstanding the continuous assaults of the Christian kingdoms who emerged from the ashes of the old Visigothic order, as well as against the behemoth Carolingian empire. The proceeding centuries saw a mixture of great cultural achievement and brutal political divides. The line between Christian kingdoms and Muslim potentates would ebb and flow like the tide for over seven centuries. Because of this constant turmoil, political ties in Spain were quite unusual for most of Europe and would only see a similar degree of interconfessional relations in the twelfth-century Levant.

The only similar situation was to be seen in Sicily. As early as the seventh century, Muslim forces had raided the western Mediterranean almost constantly. The emir of Tunisia invaded in 827 and, although disparate Byzantine strongholds would hold out until 865, by 902 the Emirate had complete control of the island. This situation would remain until the early eleventh century, which saw no fewer than four separate Muslim kingdoms wrest control of Sicily from one another. The turmoil caused numerous local powers to sprout up and vie for control amongst each other. It was into this political cacophony that the Normans made their way in 1061. In 1091, after decades of mostly indecisive battles, the Normans gained control of Sicily and southern Italy. However, rather than ousting the old order completely, the Normans allowed for the majority of the Muslim population to remain. Over the centuries, Muslim and Christian (the Jews tended to be more isolated as a cultural group) mingled and married, to the point that more conservative Muslims decried the lack of Arabic or knowledge of proper Islamic practice. Muslims were allowed to attain high positions of government and were allowed public access to Mosques. Salerno was particularly open, as Muslims were allowed to make the public call to prayer without harassment or extra tax.

Hungary had enclaves of Muslims who had made their way into Pannonia mostly for mercantile prospects. Even as early as the Tenth Century, Muslim historians and geographers made trips to Hungary and created ethnographies of this "good-looking" people they had discovered. Abu Hamid recorded that he found "innumerable" Muslims in the Carpathian basin and Géza II recruited Muslim Alans from the Steppe. From the twelfth through the middle of the Fifteenth Centuries, Hungary was one of the most powerful and wealthy kingdoms of Medieval Europe and was perfectly placed as a central point of trade routes. Much of the administrative footwork -coin-minting and book-keeping- was done by Muslims and Jews. One thirteenth-century Arabic geographer, Yakut, was informed by traveling students that there were still at least 30 Muslim communities in Hungary. Muslims had made themselves invaluable to the Hungarian crown's purse.

There were social and political tensions between Christians and Muslims, even if there was a typically congenial atmosphere. Dario Fernandez-Morera of Northwestern University is perhaps the most recent of a number of scholars whose work has demonstrated that the old tale of an Andalusian paradise of multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and tolerance in general bears little semblance to the sources. While non-Muslims were tolerated, it was only as second-class citizens, *dhimmi* (protected), that they were allowed to remain in an Islamic territory and practice their faith. Christians and Jews were segregated in Muslim cities, frequently abused (although not by the government), and given little chance for advancement in society or careers. The Christian lords of Spain did nothing different and were quite free in making alliances, first with Christians and then with Muslims, so that they might attain whatever private ambitions they had. In Sicily, Muslims were forced to pay a poll-tax, similar to the *jizyah* they had required of non-Muslims before the conquest. While they were allowed for centuries after the Norman take-over

to attain high office, they had to keep their religious affiliations secret or risk being forced out by popular ire. The kings of Sicily were often on the blacklist of the Papacy, and while this was often because of their own recalcitrance and wars against other Christian powers, it was not helpful to their reputation that they had so many Muslim governors. The relative peace of Hungarian Muslims was violently interrupted from 1215 through the middle of the century. After the Fourth Lateran Council, the Papacy demanded that the Hungarian crown force Jews and Muslims to wear distinctive clothing and bar them from royal financial positions. After the Mongol invasion, there is no more record of Greek monks or Muslim communities, although Jewish communities were still mentioned.

---JR Morrel

See Also:

Further Reading:

Bruce, Scott G. *Cluny and The Muslims of La Garde-Freinet: Historiography and the Problem of Islam in Medieval Europe*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell university Press, 2015.

Fernandez-Morera, Dario. *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews Under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016.

Engal, Pál. *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary, 895-1526*. Translated by Tamás Pálosfalvi and edited by Andrew Ayton. London: IB Tauris, 2001.

Matthew, Donald. *The Norman Kingdom in Sicily*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.