

Exploring the Islamic influence on Spanish culture and language

INTRODUCTION

While religion in Spain may be characterised by the predominance of the Catholic Church, between 711 and 1492 (a span of some 700 years), Spain and Portugal were ruled by Islamic North Africans and Berbers (sometimes collectively referred to as 'Moors') and it was called Al-Andalus. Today, Spain has a culturally very rich identity, and this is due to the fact that many different groups of people have made it their home at different points in time in the past. A scientific study that was carried out in 2008 found that a large number of Spanish people had Sephardic Jewish and North African ancestry in their DNA. (A link to that research can be found at the end of this resource.)

Here, we explore some aspects of the history that will help you to understand better the multicultural profile of modern-day Spain.

BACKGROUND

When the first North Africans arrived in Spain through the Strait of Gibraltar, Spain was made up of independent Christian kingdoms, such as the Visigoth kingdom. This period of Islamic expansion through the Umayyad Empire is known as the Islamic Golden Age because it was also a time of cultural, scientific and economic innovation. Al-Andalus was considered one of the great Muslim civilisations, a beacon of learning and a centre for cultural and scientific exchange between the Christian and Muslim worlds. However, this period was also characterised by centuries-long warfare between Christians and Muslims as the Christian kingdoms fought to reconquer the peninsular (*la Reconquista*). This period of fighting ended with the fall of the Emirate of Granada in 1492.



711 or 712 AD; The Battle of Guadalete at an unidentified location between the Christian Visigoths of Hispania under their king, Roderic, and an invading force of Muslim Arabs and Berbers under the Berber commander Tariq ibn Ziyad. It marked the beginning of the Islamic conquest of Hispania.



The Taifa kingdoms in Spain, 1065 AD. A taifa was an independent Muslim-ruled principality; usually an emirate formed in Al-Andalus (Moorish Iberia) after the final collapse of the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba in 1031.

There are features of this period of colonial rule that are similar to the period of European colonial rule that happened centuries later with the expansion of the British, French and Spanish empires in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. For example, the society of Al-Andalus was hierarchical based on ethnicity, and privilege was afforded to Arab Muslims who were at the top of the social scale, followed by Berbers, *Muladies* (Muslims of Iberian origin), *Mozarábies* (Christians) and Jews at the bottom. Slavery existed in both Muslim Al-Andalus and in the Christian kingdoms during this time, with Muslims enslaved in the Christian kingdoms and Christians enslaved in Al-Andalus. Christian slaves were also imported from Eastern Europe and were forced to work in kitchens and workshops, as well as in the palaces of Al-Andalus. There were harems, in which thousands of slave concubines were imprisoned. There was also forced conversion of Christians to Islam.

Reflection

- Is anything surprising to you about this period of history?
- What are the similarities and differences between this period of colonisation and others that you have learned about?



8th century. Conquest of Visigoth Hispania by the Muslims. Musa Ibn Nusair (born ca.640-d.716) whips Tarik ben Yihab's face for disobeying his orders in Talabaira (Madinat al-Talabayra, Talavera de la Reina at present).

Now that you have some context to explain how Spain came to be shaped by its Islamic history, we will explore some aspects that highlight the Islamic influence on Spanish culture and language.

LANGUAGE

You may already be aware of some of the similarities between the Spanish language and other so-called 'Romance' languages, such as French, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian. These languages all have Latin roots. What makes Spanish different from these languages is the quantity of Arabic aspects due to this period of colonisation. There are around 4,000 Arabic and Arabic-derived words in the Spanish language. Go to the language task section at the end of this document to see some examples!

All of the place names on this map of modern-day Spain have Arabic origins.



Guadalquivir River came from *wadi al-kabir* (great river).

Mulhacén, (mountain in peninsular Spain) is named after Ali Muley Hacén Abu al-Hasan, Sultan of Granada in the 15th century.

Pico Almanzor (a mountain in Central Spain) is named after Al-Mansur Ibn Abi Aamir, 10th century ruler of Al-Andalus.

Cape Trafalgar came from Taraf-al-ghar.

Albufera came from al-buhayrah (lagoon).

Gibraltar came from Jabal Tariq (mountain of Tariq). Tariq ibn-Ziyad was the first General to arrive in the Iberian Peninsula.

Albacete came from *al-basit* (plain).

Axarquía came from *Ash-sharquía* (eastern region).

La Mancha came from *la'a Ma-anxa* (no water).

View of Gibraltar's beach and port.



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View of Mulhacén and Veleta, the two highest peaks of the Iberian Peninsula.



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SCIENCE, MEDECINE, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY IN AL-ANDALUS

Jabir ibn Hayyan (also known as **Geber**) was an Islamic Spanish alchemist who is credited by some as being the 'Father of Chemistry'.

Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi wrote a medical encyclopaedia which was one of the most important medical texts for doctors and medical students for many hundreds of years following its publication around the year 1000 AD. The book was helpfully entitled *The Arrangement of Medical Knowledge for One Who is Not Able to Compile a Book for Himself* (*Kitab al-tasrif li-man 'ajiza 'an al-ta'alif*).

The numbers that we use in English (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) are also known as '**Arabic numerals**'. Arabic speakers of North Africa brought these digits to Al-Andalus (and Europe) in the 10th century.

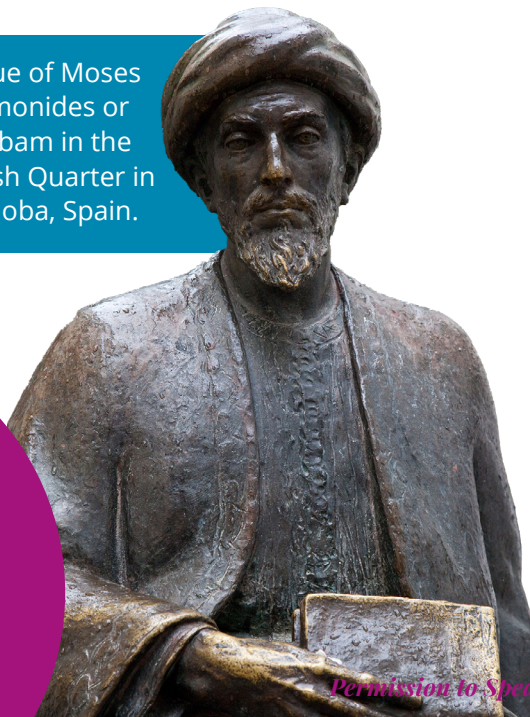


Jabir ibn Hayyan [Geber] teaching chemistry at the School of Edessa.



Abu al-Qasim Khalaf ibn al-Abbas al-Zahrawi al-Ansari, popularly known as Al-Zahrawi, was an Arab Muslim physician, surgeon and chemist who lived in Al-Andalus. Considered the greatest surgeon of the Middle Ages, he has been described as the father of surgery and is pictured here in his hospital in Cordoba.

Statue of Moses Maimonides or Rambam in the Jewish Quarter in Cordoba, Spain.



This period was a time of great advancement in science, medicine, mathematics and philosophy

The philosopher **Aristotle** was very important in early Islamic philosophy and Islamic scholars like **Ibn Rushd** (also known as **Averroes** and the 'Father of Rationalism') reintroduced his work to Europe. **Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides)** was a Sephardic (Hispanic Jewish) philosopher who adopted Aristotelianism from the Islamic scholars. Maimonides' work was completed outside of Al-Andalus because he fled persecution and is a fundamental tenet of Jewish scholastic philosophy.

CULTURE IN AL-ANDALUS

Flamenco

Spain's most well-known type of music, flamenco, was influenced by the musical forms that Islamic North Africans brought to Al-Andalus. Some modern flamenco has lyrics in both Spanish and Arabic and the *kamanjeh* (Moroccan violin) is commonly found alongside the guitar.



Circa 1930. Chleuh (Shilha, Shluh) musicians, a Berber sub-group of Morocco. One man is playing a violin, while two others have percussion instruments.

Architecture

Some of Spain's most famous monuments demonstrate Arabic influences, characterised by courtyard gardens, geometric motifs and tilework. One of the most famous examples is the **Alhambra** (from the Arabic *Al-Hamrā*, literally 'The Red One'), a palace and fortress in Granada, Andalusia.

The Mosque–Cathedral of Córdoba is another important monument in the history of Arabic architecture and is an UNESCO world heritage site. This mosque was converted into a Cathedral during the *Reconquista*.



Arabic calligraphy and geometric patterns are seen throughout the interior of AlHambra.

Mosque-Cathedral on the Guadalquivir River in Cordoba, Spain.



Granada, Spain. Ancient Arabic fortress of Alhambra.

LITERATURE

Al-Andalus had many more female poets than in other European countries at the time. One of the most renowned poets of the time was **Princess Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (994–1091) of Córdoba**. She has been reported to have had the following embroidered into her clothes:

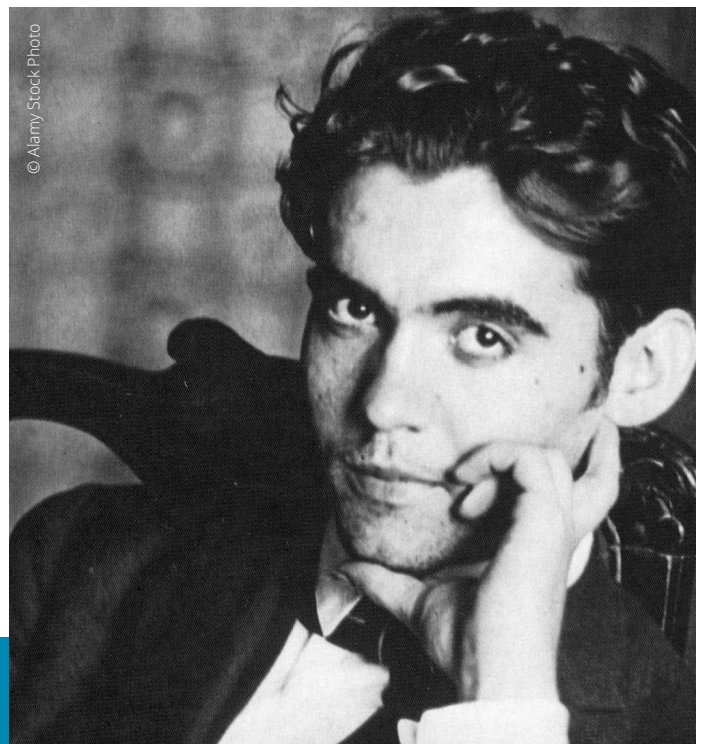
*I am, by Allah, fit for high positions
And am going my way with pride!*



Cordoba, Spain. The sculpture of the hands of poet Ibn Zaydun and Princess Wallada falling in love.

Although homosexuality was not officially accepted, there is an abundance of poetry reflecting love between men. The 20th-century poet and playwright, **Federico García Lorca**, was heavily influenced by Arabic poetry and in his book of poems, *El Diván del Tamarit*, he explores his identities and experience of isolation as a homosexual man.

Circa 1919, Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)
Spanish dramatist and poet.



DISPUTED LAND: Ceuta and Melilla or Sebtah and Melilah?

These cities in North Africa are believed by some to have been where the Islamic conquest of Spain actually started. The ports were captured later by Spain in the *Reconquista*. Today, there is a fence separating these last remaining European territories on mainland Africa from the rest of Morocco.

In Morocco, these cities are called occupied 'Sebtah and Melilah', whereas in Spain (and everywhere else) they are Spanish territories called 'Ceuta and Melilla'. In the summer of 2021, thousands of migrants crossed the border in a single day and this provoked a diplomatic crisis between Spain and Morocco. While Morocco calls for the return of these cities, Spain says that they have been an integral part of Spain for hundreds of years. The return of these cities to Morocco is unlikely due to the fact that the cities' own populations want to remain part of Spain.

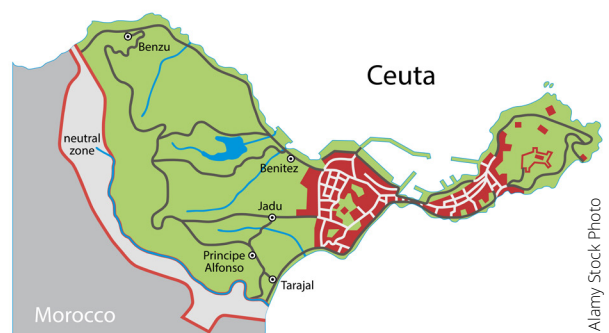
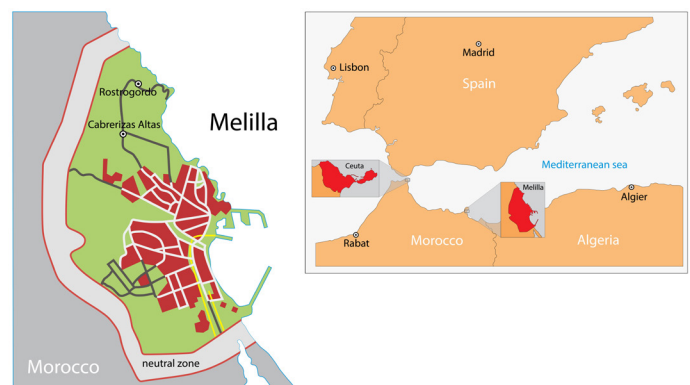


Spanish soldiers patrol along the barrier which separates Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta from Morocco in Castillejo, northern Morocco.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there were several reports of breaches of fundamental human rights of refugees and asylum seekers (including pregnant women, and children), who are housed in temporary accommodation in Melilla.



3 April 2014. African migrants sit on top of a border fence between Morocco and Spain's north African enclave of Melilla during their latest attempt to cross into Spanish territory. Immigrants from all over Africa regularly dare the razor-wire fences of Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla, which are surrounded by Moroccan territory and sea.



MUSLIMS IN SPAIN TODAY

Nationalism is an ideology which places national interests ahead of individual or other group interests and emphasises allegiance to a particular nation. This has long featured across Spain's political spectrum, and the recent resurgence of support for far-right and populist parties such as 'Vox' in Spain reflects a wider trend across many other countries in Europe. In this climate, many populist leaders strive to appeal to people by avowing the idea that ethnic and religious minorities should assimilate (absorb) Spanish ideas and beliefs, and some have even evoked the language of *Reconquista* to justify the deportation of immigrants and the 'reclaiming' of Spanish identity.



February 7, 2021.
Barcelona, Spain. People waving Spanish flags attend a rally of far-right unionist party, VOX.



June 9, 2018. Granada, Spain. During Ramadan, the Granada Muslim community host a public Iftar (meal to break the fast) in a square to share their traditions and the way they pray with other people of the city.

A report commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to examine racism and xenophobia during the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated an urgent need for intervention, in order to eliminate racial discrimination in Spain. The report highlighted many racial incidents and institutionally racist practices, and found that those who identify as Arab Muslims reported the second largest number of violations (following Black and/or Afro-descendants) in Spain. [You can read the report in full here.](#)

SOS Racismo is a collective of different organisations which aim to fight against the different forms of racism, including Islamophobia (prejudice against Islam or Muslims) in Spain. Among their various activities, the collective organises activities to amplify the narratives of Muslims, improve the representation of Muslims in the media and to counter discriminatory discourses and policies in relation to Muslim women. [You can find out more about SOS Racismo activities here.](#)

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why do you think it is important to learn about the Arabic influence on Spanish language and culture?
- What parallels and contrasts can be drawn between the Arabic period of colonisation and other periods of colonisation that you have learned about?
- What have you already learned about the Arabic influence on Spanish language and culture at school?
- Are you interested in learning more about the connections between Arabic and Spanish cultures and languages?
- What are some of the colonial legacies of other periods of colonisation?
- Do you know about the origins of any other languages?
- Are there aspects of multicultural Spain about which you are interested in finding out more?
- How have your local/national/global contexts been shaped by colonialism?
- Do you know about any anti-racist organisations in the UK?

LANGUAGE TASK

Match up the Spanish word to its classical Arabic origin.

For the purpose of this task, the Arabic has been 'romanised' to make it accessible to non-Arabic speakers. If you are an Arabic speaker and writer, you might choose to write the Arabic in the column on the right. You may have spotted more examples of Spanish words with Arabic origins. Include these in the blank box at the bottom and share your knowledge with your teacher/classmates!

ENGLISH	ARABIC (ROMANISED)	SPANISH	ARABIC SCRIPT
juice	zum		
carrot	safunnárya		
cup	tast		
watermelon	sindiyyah		
orange	nāranġ		
mask	masharah		
lemon	laymün		
syrup (medicine)	šarāb		
guitar	qītārah		
until	hattá		
pillow	mihaddah		
oil	azzayt		
small village	day'ah		
olive	zaytūnah		
dice	a'dād		
giraffe	zarāfah/zurāfah		
coffee	qahwah		
saffron	za'farān		
neighbourhood	barrī		
cotton	qutn		
lime	līmah		
algebra	alġabru		
chance/luck	az-zahr		

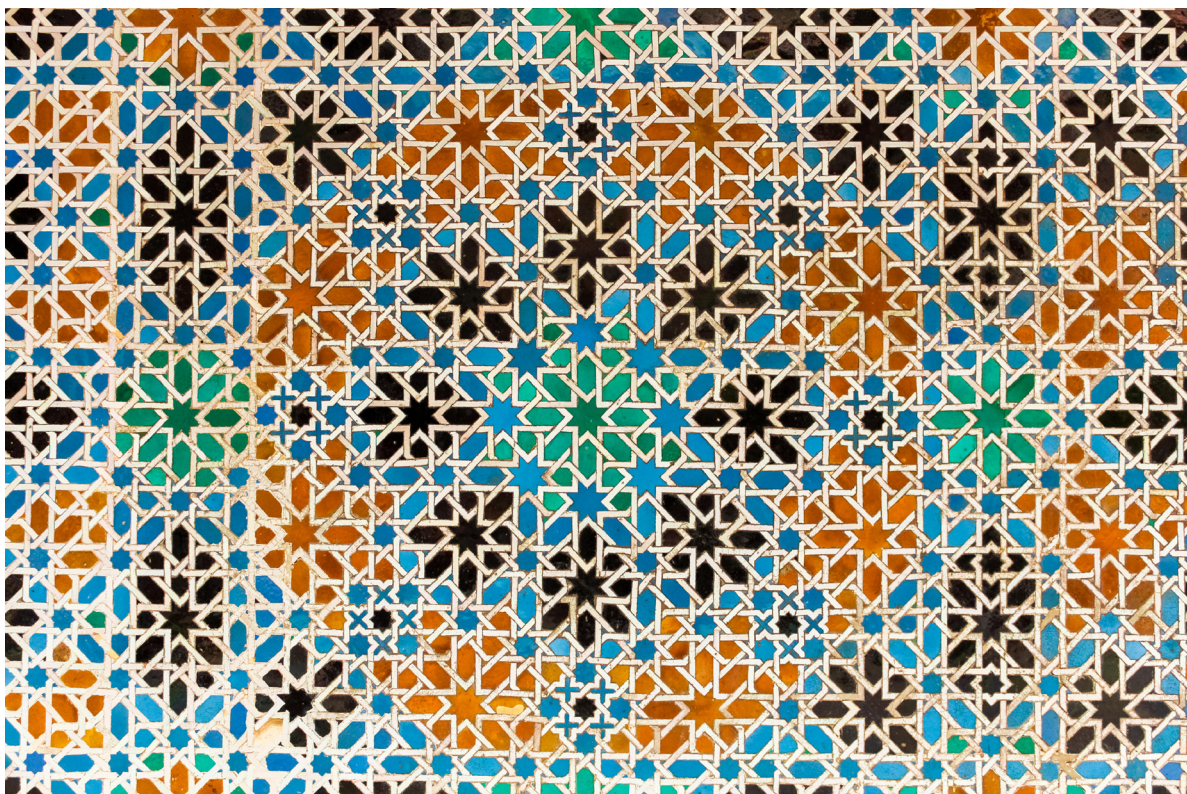
azar
sandía
lima
algodón
barrio
limón
guitarra
jirafa

naranja
aceituna
aldea
zumo
almohada
hasta
café
jarabe

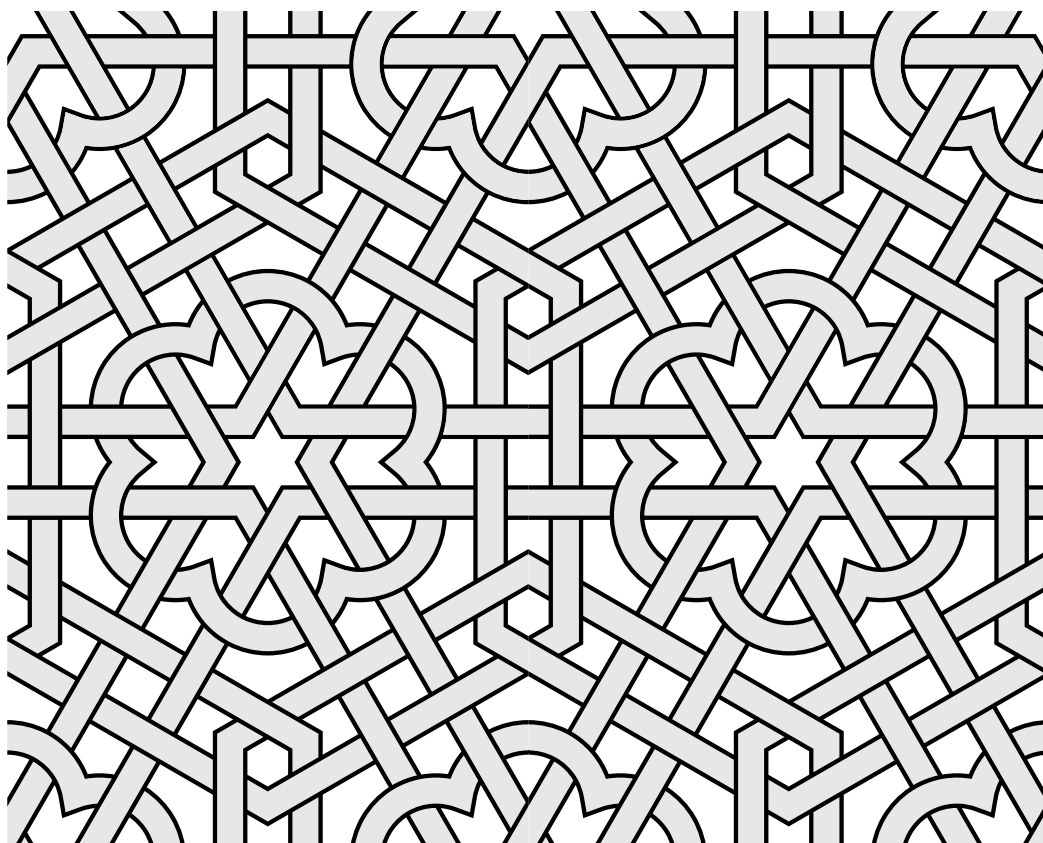
azafrán
máscara
dado
álgebra
taza
zanahoria
aceite

CREATIVE TASK

Look at this patterned tile taken from the Alhambra palace in Granada. The tilework of the Alhambra palace and many other famous monuments in Spain are characterised by their intricate designs and beauty. To create these stunning patterns, the tiles were cut into geometric shapes of different sizes and then fitted together, much like the pieces of jigsaw.



You might like to have a go at designing your own Islamic-influenced pattern, or spend some reflective time colouring in this one!





REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Muslim communities in Spain

[Comisión Islámica de España – Sirviendo a la comunidad desde 1992 \(comisionislamica.org\)](https://comisionislamica.org)

[Muslims in Spain by nationality 2020 | Statista](#)

Medieval Islamic civilisations

[Medieval Islamic civilisations - Medieval Islamic civilisations - KS3 History - homework help for year 7, 8 and 9. - BBC Bitesize](#)

Pre-Islamic Spain

[Movement and settlement - The Roman Empire - KS3 History Revision - BBC Bitesize](#)

Spanish history timeline

[Spain History and Timeline Overview \(ducksters.com\)](https://www.ducksters.com/history/spain/)

The Alhambra palace

[History & Architecture of the Alhambra, Granada \(alhambra-granada-tickets.com\)](https://www.alhambra-granada-tickets.com/en/history-architecture)

The history and origins of flamenco

[History and origins of flamenco - Official Andalusia tourism website \(andalucia.org\)](https://andalucia.org/en/andalucia/history-and-origins-of-flamenco)

Federico García Lorca

[Federico García Lorca | Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/federico-garcia-lorca)

Ceuta and Melilla/Sebtah and Melilah

[Ceuta and Melilla: Spain's enclaves in North Africa - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55888888)

Article

The Genetic Legacy of Religious Diversity and Intolerance: Paternal Lineages of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula [The American Journal of Human Genetics](https://ajhg.org/article/S0002-9270(08)00007-1) 83(6):725-36 DOI:[10.1016/j.ajhg.2008.11.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2008.11.007)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Panford is a Senior Lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham, with over 14 years' experience teaching languages in secondary schools in London. She has studied and worked in Spain and Peru. Lisa is passionate about counteracting discriminatory practices in the secondary MFL classroom and is dedicated to the principle that all pupils should be given an opportunity to appreciate the enriching and transformative experience of studying languages. Lisa is a member of the Council for the Association for Language Learning and the Institute of Modern Languages Research.