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Muslim Europe's last act

The decade of gruesome warfare, high drama and power struggles that brought 700 years of Moorish Spain to a close

HISTORY

Dan Jones

The Moor's Last Stand How Seven Centuries of Muslim Rule in Spain Came to an End by *Elizabeth Drayson*
Profile £17.99 pp224

Each year on January 2, a parade takes place in Granada in southern Spain. The great and the good of the city march through the streets waving a royal flag and a medieval sword. This is the *Fiesta de la Toma* (the Festival of the Capture) and it celebrates events in 1492, when the keys to the city of Granada and the Alhambra palace were handed over to Spain's joint Catholic rulers, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The man who did the handing over was known (to them) as Boabdil. His real name was Abu Abdallah Muhammad XI and he was the last Islamic ruler to wield power in western Europe.

No one who visits southern Spain with their eyes open

can ignore the fact that, for seven centuries in the Middle Ages, Islam was the dominant religion. In the 8th century great Muslim armies swept from Arabia through North Africa, crossed the Gibraltar strait and conquered all that lay in their path. Successive Islamic dynasties put down deep roots. They established kingdoms ruled by warlike emirs, converted local people,

traded and intermarried with Christians and Jews, and imported medieval Islam's glorious scholarship and architecture, which can still be glimpsed in cities such as Cordoba, which once outstripped Paris as the most sophisticated city in the West.

By the late 15th century, however, Iberian Islam was in retreat, beaten back by four centuries of Christian military campaigns, which were granted the status of crusades and known collectively as the Reconquista. When Boabdil was born in the Alhambra between 1459 and 1462 the Reconquista was almost complete and there was just a

rump state left for him to inherit. The emirate of Granada, which sat between the Mediterranean coast and the Sierra Nevada mountains, was isolated, fractious and ripe for conquest.

Elizabeth Drayson's short but lively biography is the first full modern account of Boabdil's life and troubled reign, and rounds out the character of a man often dismissed as a vulgar and faintly ludicrous tyrant.

Drayson teaches Spanish and Portuguese at Cambridge University, and her most recent book was about the Lead Books of Granada, strange religious tablets that were dug from a hillside in the region. Her new work has populist ambitions and she revels in the high drama and spectacular gore of Boabdil's story, which are in plentiful supply.

His life began as it would go on, amid violence and intrigue. As a child, court astrologers nicknamed Boabdil "El Zogoibi", the unlucky one. He was certainly



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unfortunate with his family, the long-ruling Nasrid dynasty. He was no more than five years old when his grandfather invited a rival clan to the palace as dinner guests and had every one of them murdered. Shortly afterwards Boabdil's father, Abu l-Hasan Ali, organised a coup and claimed the throne for himself. His rule was

“Spectacular gore is in plentiful supply

neither politically stable nor kind on his children.

On taking control, he promptly abandoned Boabdil's mother and married a 12-year-old Muslim convert, who bore him a new set of children and made it her mission to see them elevated in the succession. Abu l-Hasan Ali's rule was divisive and unsuccessful, and as soon as Boabdil came of age he followed family tradition: in 1482 he launched his own bid for power, toppling his father and announcing himself as the 23rd Nasrid sultan.

What followed was a decade of bitter, and at times tragic, infighting. To the north, Christian Spain had been united with the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella, whose resources, political acumen and zealotry intensified the pressure on Boabdil and the Nasrids, who did nothing to help themselves.

Boabdil attempted to rule first in opposition to his displaced father, and

subsequently to his uncle, known as El Zagal. All the while Ferdinand and Isabella exploited the political chaos to their advantage. In 1483, Ferdinand's men captured Boabdil at the battle of Lucena, when he rode his white horse into a river and became stuck in the mud. He was released, but under terms that made him appear, with some justification, to be a puppet for the Christians.

Nine years of intermittent and extremely gruesome warfare ensued. Drayson describes one episode in 1487 when an assassin recruited from Tunisia was sent to kill Ferdinand and Isabella outside Malaga. He failed and was killed by guards, his body chopped into pieces and hurled into the Muslim city with a catapult. The besieged citizens sewed the corpse

back together with silk thread and buried it, then killed a Christian prisoner and sent the body back out to the enemy camp, tied on the back of an ass.

Boabdil and the Nasrids fought ferociously, but by 1491 it was clear the game was up.

The sultan chose graceful retreat to annihilation, and on January 2, 1492, personally surrendered the keys to his capital and the Alhambra, after which he left for exile in north Africa.

For Christian Spain, 1492 was a watershed. The Reconquista was complete, the kingdom was united and expeditions to the Americas were about to begin. Whether the loss of Granada mattered much to the Islamic world at large is less certain: Granada was a fringe territory miles from the heartlands of Arabia and Persia. All the same, Boabdil's story marks the end of the last

Islamic state in western Europe: a fractious and bloody episode with obvious resonance today. ■

AMYSTERIOUS END

Mystery surrounds Boabdil's exile in north Africa after he surrendered Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella. One plausible version claims he died soon after in Tlemcen in Algeria. Another, possibly more fanciful one, insists that he ended up in Fez, where he built a palace and lived to the ripe old age of 72. His descendants were said still to be present in Fez in 1627, 'though some said they were beggars living on alms'.



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Closing a chapter Boabdil, the last Muslim king of Granada surrenders the keys of the city