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Reconquest and Conquest: The Iberian Peninsula in the Dark Ages

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Introduction

This book explores a peninsula in motion. Far from a static “Dark Age,” Iberia between the late sixth and early tenth centuries witnessed the unraveling of imperial frameworks, the experiment of Visigothic rule, and the rapid emergence of an Islamic order anchored in Córdoba. Reconquest and conquest were not singular events but long processes of negotiation, violence, and adaptation; they shaped identities, institutions, and landscapes in ways still legible today. Our aim is to track these processes from the last glimmers of late Roman administration to the consolidation of an Islamic emirate, while attending to the everyday lives of those who inhabited the frontier.

We begin by reconsidering the term “Dark Ages.” Rather than a verdict on cultural worth, it is a heuristic for a period of fragmentation and reconfiguration. The collapse of older political structures did not erase memory or skill; it redirected them. Visigothic kings relied on councils and law to build authority, even as their grip on towns and countryside remained uneven. When Muslim forces crossed into Iberia in the early eighth century, they encountered not a blank slate but a patchwork of elites, communities, and legal habits that proved remarkably resilient and adaptable.

Coexistence—of Muslims, Christians, and Jews—was neither a timeless harmony nor an unbroken chain of persecution. It unfolded in markets and workshops, in tax registers and courtrooms, in monasteries, mosques, and synagogues. The book attends closely to law because legal regimes articulate power and possibility: Visigothic codes, Arabic jurisprudence, and communal norms all framed how people married, inherited, traded, and prayed. Legal pluralism did not merely reflect difference; it produced it, organizing social boundaries while furnishing tools to cross them.

Urban life offers another lens. Iberian cities contracted and revived, shifting their centers of gravity from decayed forums to new congregational spaces, from aristocratic townhouses to mercantile quarters. Under the emirate, irrigation, craft specialization, and long-distance trade reoriented economies and reshaped daily routines. Markets linked mountain valleys to riverine hubs; coinage and credit practices evolved; and municipal infrastructures—walls, bridges, baths, and waterworks—signaled both ambition and anxiety on a contested frontier.

Cultural fusion was as tangible as stone. Horseshoe arches, vegetal ornament, and calligraphic aesthetics conversed with older building practices; monastic scriptoria adapted and resisted in equal measure; Hebrew poets and Arabic adab writers navigated shared intellectual currents. Linguistic contact among Latin, emerging Romance vernaculars, Arabic, and Hebrew fostered translation, borrowing, and

innovation. Yet synthesis was never automatic. It grew out of asymmetries of power, pragmatic cooperation, and the creative work of artisans and scholars.

Methodologically, this study moves between macro and micro scales. We read chronicles alongside charters, coins, and ceramics; we juxtapose court cases with irrigation channels; we pair the political history of emirate formation with the social history of households, captives, and slaves. Case studies—from Toledo to Mérida and Zaragoza—anchor broader arguments in the textures of place. Throughout, we resist teleologies that project modern nationhood backward or reduce centuries of change to slogans of “reconquest” or “convivencia.”

The chapters that follow proceed in a loose chronology. We move from late antique landscapes and Visigothic institutions to the eighth-century conquest and the consolidation of al-Andalus; we then expand outward to frontiers, law, economy, and culture, before returning to memory and environment and concluding with the emirate’s legacy. If there is a throughline, it is that Iberia’s so-called Dark Ages were bright with experimentation: in politics, in belief, and in the arts of living together—and apart—on a shifting edge of the Mediterranean world.

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CHAPTER ONE: Iberia after Rome: Landscapes of Late Antiquity

The Iberian Peninsula that staggered out of the Western Roman Empire's collapse was not a wasteland; it was a patchwork of survival. In towns, the old forums still stood as stony reminders of imperial routines, even if the statues that once celebrated emperors were being repurposed as ballast or lime. In the countryside, estates and villages adjusted to new rhythms of labor and exchange, often with a shrug toward the distant capitals that no longer sent reliable tax collectors. It was an age of improvisation, where continuity dressed in the cloak of change.

Geography shaped the script. Mountains and rivers divided Iberia into distinct zones: the green Atlantic fringes of Galicia and the northwest; the broad plateaus of Castile and León; the fertile valleys of the Ebro and Tagus; the humid littorals of the Cantabrian and Mediterranean coasts; and the sun-struck south with its rich soils and long histories of urban life. These landscapes did not vanish with Rome; they redirected trade and political power. Roads that once carried imperial couriers still connected towns, but their maintenance now fell to local elites and bishops rather than distant officials.

The climate in the fifth and sixth centuries was capricious. Pollen studies and literary hints point to cooler, wetter intervals in the north and persistent aridity in parts of the south. Agricultural strategies adapted, with olives and vines holding fast in the south and cereals and pasturage shifting in the interior. Water management—cisterns, small canals, and reused Roman irrigation—remained critical. These environmental realities influenced settlement patterns, taxation capacity, and even the capacity to endure shocks like disease or crop failure.

The Roman infrastructure did not evaporate, but it degraded. Aqueducts in cities like Mérida and Tarragona fell into partial disrepair, and some urban baths ceased functioning as public amenities, turning into private or semi-private facilities. City walls gained renewed attention, as raids and insecurity made defense a local priority. Bridges and roads survived where communities valued them, often maintained by guild-like associations or wealthy families. This selective upkeep reflected not a wholesale retreat from urban life but a pragmatic focus on what kept communities viable.

In the late fourth and fifth centuries, the Western Empire's administrative framework withered. Dioceses and provinces were gradually reinterpreted by new powers, whether local magnates, bishops, or incoming groups seeking accommodation. The

authority once embodied by the imperial court found echoes in royal and ecclesiastical settings. In Iberia, the Visigoths who eventually established themselves in Toledo inherited a landscape where Roman legal norms, municipal customs, and administrative habits remained recognizable, even if the chain of command had snapped.

Ecclesiastical structures stepped into the vacuum. Bishops, especially in cities like Seville, Toledo, and Tarragona, assumed civil responsibilities—overseeing grain supplies, mediating disputes, and managing urban charities. Monasteries, beginning in the late fifth century, became reservoirs of learning and land management. Their growth in the northwest and interior reflected both religious fervor and economic need: monasteries offered stability, organized agricultural labor, and sometimes preserved manuscripts and technical knowledge that secular powers neglected.

Urban contraction was uneven. Some provincial capitals, such as Narbo (Narbonne) across the Pyrenees, lost prominence, while others, like Emerita Augusta (Mérida), retained symbolic and administrative importance. Smaller towns often persisted as market centers for local agricultural zones. Rural villas—large estates with workshops and housing—transformed into fortified nodes or proto-seigneurial centers. The countryside, in many ways, became the spine of survival as the urban aura of empire dimmed.

The arrival and settlement of non-Roman groups reshaped the political map. The Sueves established themselves in the northwest, the Vandals briefly in the south before crossing to North Africa, and the Visigoths moved from Aquitaine into Iberia in the early sixth century. Rather than a clean break, settlement often involved negotiation, intermarriage, and legal cohabitation. Romans and newcomers shared space, and the lines between “native” and “barbarian” blurred through everyday interaction and the pragmatic blending of legal customs.

Economic life adapted to reduced horizons. Long-distance trade continued, particularly along the Mediterranean coast and through the straits to North Africa, but it thinned. Local production—pottery, textiles, metalwork—supplied most needs. Coinage became scarce in some regions, with barter and token currencies resurfacing. This “de-monetization” was not uniform; ports like Cartagena and Tarraco kept closer ties to Mediterranean circuits than the interior, where the rural economy dominated and small-scale exchange thrived.

Law became a key instrument of integration. The Theodosian Code continued to guide practice in some circles, even as new legal codes appeared. The Visigothic Code of Euric (late fifth century) applied to Romans and Goths in many regions, marking a significant step toward a unified legal regime. Later, under King Reccared, the Breviary of Alaric (a compilation of Roman law) circulated as well. Law did not simply regulate relations; it constituted identities, signaling who belonged and how power would be

exercised.

Diet and material culture reveal continuity and change. Olive oil and wine remained staples in the south and center, while animal husbandry expanded in the north and interior. Grain varieties adapted to local conditions, and legumes provided essential protein. Archaeology shows continued use of late Roman ceramics in many contexts, though local fabrics proliferated. Textile production, crucial for both daily wear and prestige, expanded within households and workshops. The culinary landscape was modest but resilient, anchored by seasonal cycles and regional specialties.

Language reflected layered histories. Latin remained the language of administration and high culture, but spoken forms evolved into early Romance varieties across the peninsula. In the northeast, contact with Gaul fostered some linguistic distinctiveness. The arrival of Gothic communities introduced Germanic speech, but its imprint on everyday language remained limited, concentrated in names and legal terms. For most people, language was a practical tool shaped by place, trade, and religion rather than ideology.

The landscape of belief was complex. Christianity spread widely, with bishops and councils shaping doctrine and practice. Arianism, associated with many Gothic elites, coexisted with Nicene Christianity for a time, creating theological and social tensions. Jewish communities, present in cities and countryside, had deep roots and engaged in agriculture, trade, and crafts. Pagan practices persisted in rural areas, gradually fading under ecclesiastical pressure. Religion both unified and divided, offering identity and sparking conflict.

Social structures centered on patronage. Large landowners protected smaller farmers in return for labor, dues, and loyalty. This system, rooted in late Roman patronage, found new expression in the Visigothic era, where legal norms and local power intertwined. Kinship networks mattered, too, and households were often extended, with multiple generations sharing labor and resources. The community—whether urban neighborhood, rural village, or monastic estate—provided a scaffold for survival amid political flux.

The role of women in this landscape varied by status and region. In urban contexts, wealthy women could own property, manage estates, and exercise influence through religious patronage. In rural areas, women's labor was central to agriculture and domestic production. Law codes recognized certain rights, particularly in inheritance, but also imposed constraints. Religious roles—nuns, benefactors—offered avenues for autonomy, while household responsibilities shaped daily life across social strata.

Military organization evolved with the times. Rome's frontier defenses in Iberia, like the rest of the Western Empire, weakened, and local militias and noble retinues took on greater importance. Fortified settlements increased, and hills previously

uninhabited saw new watchtowers or refuges. The Visigoths, a military elite by tradition, gradually integrated into Iberian society, but the emphasis on local defense persisted, especially in coastal areas vulnerable to raids from sea and land.

The impact of epidemics is visible but uneven. The Justinianic plague of the mid-sixth century likely reached Iberia, though its demographic effects varied. Some regions suffered severe depopulation; others show continuity in settlement. Disease left a mark on economic and social structures, accelerating shifts toward more resilient rural strategies and reinforcing the role of ecclesiastical institutions as centers of care and stability. Mortality, in this sense, reshaped labor, landholding, and priorities.

Craft production and technology were pragmatic. Metallurgy continued, with iron tools and weapons produced locally. Building techniques mixed Roman stone masonry with timber and mud-brick, especially where resources were scarce. Glass and pottery industries adapted to demand, and small-scale kilns appear in both urban and rural contexts. The “high technologies” of Roman times—public water systems, amphitheaters—were not entirely lost but repurposed or limited to places with sufficient resources and security.

Artistic expression blended styles. Mosaics and frescoes, once hallmarks of Roman luxury, persisted in ecclesiastical settings and elite homes, though often simpler in design. Christian iconography—biblical scenes, saints, and symbols—gained prominence, sometimes overlaying or replacing classical motifs. In the north, stone carving displayed a mix of late antique and local styles, foreshadowing what would later be called “Mozarabic” art. This visual language was less about novelty than about continuity in new forms.

Trade routes, while reduced, were not dead. The Mediterranean coast kept connections with southern Gaul and North Africa, especially for luxury goods and religious artifacts. Overland routes linked the interior to ports and river systems, facilitating the movement of grain, salt, fish, and wool. The Ebro valley was a crucial corridor, connecting the northeast to both the coast and the interior. These networks were fragile but essential, knitting together regions with different economic profiles.

Coinage tells a partial story. Late imperial gold and silver issues circulated into the fifth century, but minting declined. In some areas, bronze coins persisted as small change; in others, barter dominated. The Visigothic period saw the introduction of new coinage, but supply was inconsistent. Money remained a tool of power and prestige, used by states, churches, and elites more than ordinary people. In everyday transactions, trust and reciprocity were as important as metallic value.

Urban governance shifted toward bishop-led councils and local magnates. City councils, once the backbone of Roman municipal life, lost coherence, but episodic assemblies of notables still handled local affairs. In many towns, bishops became the

primary urban authority, mediating between populations and higher powers. This was not uniform, and in some places lay elites remained prominent. The picture is one of adaptation: old institutions bending without breaking, guided by practical needs.

The countryside organized around estates and villages. Large estates, sometimes owned by churches or nobles, managed diverse production—crops, livestock, crafts. Smaller farms worked within subsistence and market constraints. Labor systems varied, with free peasants, tenants, and dependent workers coexisting. Villages often clustered around water sources, mills, and churches, forming the basic units of rural society. These rural networks were resilient, absorbing shocks that might have devastated urban centers.

Frontier dynamics mattered even before the Islamic conquest. The Pyrenees created a distinct zone where Basque and other groups maintained local autonomy. The Cantabrian coast faced maritime threats and opportunities. In the south, proximity to North Africa fostered exchange but also risk. These borderlands shaped Iberia's political geography, cultivating a culture of adaptation and defense that would become central in later centuries.

Law and custom interacted continuously. Roman law provided a foundation for property and procedure, while Gothic customs introduced new elements. Over time, elites sought to blend these into coherent systems that could manage disputes, inheritance, and contracts. Legal literacy was limited but real, preserved in monasteries and courts. This slow accretion of norms created a landscape where multiple legal idioms could coexist, setting the stage for later pluralism.

In everyday life, the rhythms of agricultural seasons and religious calendars dominated. Fairs and markets punctuated the year, tied to saints' days or harvests. Craft guilds, where they existed, organized apprenticeship and production. Religious festivals offered community cohesion and moments of spectacle. The social fabric was woven from routine and ritual, ensuring that despite political instability, ordinary life retained its shape and purpose.

Education and literacy were unevenly distributed. Monasteries preserved texts and trained scribes; bishops' schools educated clergy; wealthy families could afford tutors for their children. The majority remained non-literate, relying on oral communication and customary knowledge. Yet the presence of written culture in law, liturgy, and administration meant that literacy mattered for governance and religious life, anchoring authority in documents and formal procedures.

The interface with North Africa was dynamic. Traders, clergy, and travelers crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, bringing ideas, goods, and occasional crises. Ecclesiastical links—such as those involving the influential bishoprics of Tingis and Cartagena—facilitated exchanges of doctrine and practice. This connection would later

provide pathways for military conquest, but in the late antique period it was primarily a conduit for commerce and culture, stitching Iberia into Mediterranean circuits.

Artisans adapted materials and techniques to local conditions. Metalworkers produced tools and weapons; weavers created textiles for daily use and elite display; potters supplied storage and cooking vessels. Small-scale industries thrived near resource nodes—iron ore, clay deposits, and salt pans. Skills were transmitted within families and communities, ensuring continuity of craft traditions. The result was a material culture that was practical, regional, and surprisingly diverse.

The social landscape was not egalitarian. Status determined access to land, justice, and protection. At the top were bishops, magnates, and Gothic nobles; in the middle were professionals, artisans, and prosperous farmers; at the bottom were laborers and slaves. Mobility existed but was constrained. Yet economic interdependence often softened rigid hierarchies: landlords needed tenants; towns needed markets; elites needed skilled workers. These mutual needs shaped everyday negotiations across classes.

Migration, whether voluntary or imposed, influenced demographics and culture. Some regions saw settlements of Goths and other groups; others experienced depopulation and resettlement. Mixed communities arose, especially in urban centers where trade and administration required collaboration. Over generations, intermarriage and shared institutions blurred ethnic boundaries, producing a more hybrid society than the legal categories might suggest. Identity became situational, shifting with context.

Storage and transport were vital concerns. Granaries, cisterns, and storehouses guarded against harvest failures and sieges. River and coastal shipping moved bulk goods more efficiently than land transport. Mule trains and pack animals carried high-value or perishable items over mountain passes. The logistics of food and water shaped the fortunes of towns and armies alike. Infrastructure, even when crumbling, remained a strategic asset worth defending and repairing.

Technology transfer occurred slowly but steadily. Roman engineering knowledge survived in pockets, particularly among builders and clergy who valued durability. Water-lifting devices, mills, and ovens continued in use, sometimes improved with local innovations. Craft techniques—such as glazing or weaving—show continuity with late antique practices. There was no dramatic leap forward, but cumulative small improvements kept economies functioning under pressure.

The role of memory was crucial. People remembered Rome not as a lost paradise but as a living reference point for law, urbanism, and civilization. This memory guided expectations and aspirations, shaping how elites framed their authority and how communities understood order. The past was a toolkit, not a shrine, and Iberians of the late fifth and sixth centuries picked from it the implements that worked for their

circumstances.

Disputes and violence were common but not chaotic. Raids, feuds, and local conflicts punctuated life, often resolved through mediation by bishops, nobles, or assemblies. Legal procedures—though sometimes rudimentary—offered paths to settlement. Violence could be personal, political, or economic; it could also be a means of coercion or negotiation. In this sense, the late antique landscape was not lawless, but law was one of several tools for managing conflict.

Healthcare was largely domestic and religious. Monasteries and churches provided charitable care, and folk remedies circulated widely. There were no large public hospitals in the Roman sense, but communities organized support for the sick and poor. Epidemics tested social solidarity, but they also spurred innovations in charity and mutual aid. The daily work of caregiving, like farming or building, was essential to the fabric of society.

The environment shaped human choices, and humans reshaped the environment. Deforestation and reforestation shifted with population pressures and warfare. Terraced slopes in some regions testified to agricultural adaptation; in others, abandonment led to ecological recovery. Water management—whether Roman-era irrigation or small-scale cisterns—remained critical. Iberia's landscape, diverse and demanding, required constant negotiation between human needs and natural limits.

The peninsula's integration into wider Mediterranean circuits did not cease; it transformed. The decline of imperial tax and military systems reduced certain flows of goods and people, but religious networks—pilgrimage, ecclesiastical correspondence—maintained connections. Merchant communities, though smaller, continued to move. Cultural exchange, including the spread of monastic models and liturgical practices, tied Iberia to broader Christian and Mediterranean worlds even as localism grew.

These conditions set the stage for the Visigothic kingdom's consolidation in the sixth and seventh centuries. They created a political geography of competing centers, a legal culture blending Roman and Gothic elements, an economy anchored in the countryside, and a society used to managing diversity. The landscape after Rome was neither pristine nor ruined; it was a canvas on which new forms of authority and community would be painted, with the pigments of older imperial traditions.

The chapter of late antiquity in Iberia ends not with a decisive collapse but with a slow transition. Urban life persisted in reduced form; rural society remained robust; law and religion provided frameworks of order; elites adapted to new realities. The stage was set for the rise of a Visigothic kingdom, but the setting itself—mountains, rivers, coasts, fields, and towns—conditioned every act. Geography, climate, and inherited infrastructure were the silent partners of politics, shaping possibilities and limits for

the rulers and the ruled.

This was a peninsula learning to live without an emperor. It did so by recycling Roman materials into new structures, by negotiating differences through law and custom, and by anchoring daily life in resilient local communities. The outcome was not a uniform culture but a patchwork of adaptations, each suited to its corner of Iberia. In this patchwork lay the origins of what would come later: a kingdom that tried to unify, a society that knew how to coexist, and a landscape that would test every ambition.

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