

## ORIGINS OF A CRUSADING MENTALITY

In the 1490s, when Europeans clambered out of their cramped sailing vessels to face indigenous Americans for the first time, the greatest question was how each would react to the other. This was truly a cultural encounter, a clash of values and attitudes. The Spanish and



**MAYAN CULTURAL ATTAINMENTS** are second to none in the Americas—including sophisticated mathematics, expressive sculpture and graphic art, and an evolving form of writing, called *glyphs*, some of which are visible at top right. *Alexandra Draghici/istockphoto.com.*

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Portuguese outlook, along with their crusader rhetoric, had been shaped by the history of the Iberian Peninsula.

Iberia is a rugged, mountainous land. Parts of it are as green as Ireland (very green, indeed), but most of it is dry. On pictures taken from space, southern Spain appears the same color as nearby northern Africa. Historically, Iberia had been a bridge between Europe and Africa, and the narrow Strait of Gibraltar separating the two continents had often been crossed, in both directions, by migrants and invaders. In the year 711, Muslims from northern Africa, called Moors, began to cross heading north and seized most of the peninsula from its



**INCA STONEMWORK.** In the former Inca capital, Cuzco, Peru, the Spaniards incorporated these earthquake-resistant foundations into their own buildings. © *Jeremy Horner/Corbis*.

Christian kings (whose predecessors, generations earlier, had taken it from the Romans, who, in turn, had seized it from the Carthaginians, and so on). For most of the next eight hundred years, Iberia contained multiethnic societies that intermingled but also fought one another. Both activities left their mark.

Along with the practical skills of the Islamic world, the Moors brought with them the learning of the Greeks and Romans, well preserved in the Middle East during Europe's Dark Ages. Christians who lived under Moorish rule or who traded with Moorish neighbors from the remaining Christian kingdoms learned a healthy respect for the cultural achievements of Islam. The Moors were better physicians, better engineers, and better farmers than the Iberian Christians, whose languages gradually filled with Arabic words for new crops (such as basil, artichokes, and almonds), new processes and substances (such as distillation and alcohol), new furnishings (such as carpeting), and new sciences (such as algebra and chemistry)—eventually totaling about a quarter of all modern Spanish and Portuguese words. Although speakers of Arabic, the Moors were darker than Arabs. Shakespeare's "black" character Othello, for example, is a Moor. So the Christians of Iberia had long exposure to a sophisticated and powerful people who did not look European. In addition, on the eve of the Encounter, Iberia had one of the largest Jewish minorities in Europe, and Lisbon and Seville were already home to thousands of enslaved Africans. Not sympathetic to cultural and racial difference, the Iberians were nevertheless well acquainted with it. Spanish and Portuguese attitudes toward other people ranged from scorn to grudging admiration to sexual curiosity—dusky Moorish maidens figure erotically in Iberian folktales. The reign of Alfonso the Wise (1252–84), a noted lawgiver, represents a high point in this tense, multicultural Iberian world. In the end, however, the peninsula's eight hundred years of multicultural experience dissolved in an intolerant drive for religious purity.

The Christian reconquest of Iberia powerfully shaped the institutions and mentality of the Spanish and Portuguese. Iberian Christians believed that they had found the tomb of Santiago, Saint James the Apostle, in the remote northwestern corner

of the peninsula never conquered by the Moors. The Moor-slaying Santiago, pictured as a sword-swinging knight, became the patron saint of reconquest, and his tomb in Santiago de Compostela became Europe's greatest shrine. Reconquest brought the repeated challenges of annexing new territory and subjugating infidel populations. As they pushed the Moors south toward Africa over thirty generations, the reconquering Christians founded new urban centers as bastions of their advancing territorial claims, and individual warlords took responsibility for Christianizing groups of defeated Moors, receiving tribute and service from them in return. The same challenges and the same procedures would be repeated in America. Another effect of the reconquest was to perpetuate the knightly renown and influence of the Christian nobility. For this reason, the values of the nobles (fighting prowess, leisure, display of wealth) lost ground only slowly to the values of the commercial middle class (moneymaking, industry, thrift). In addition, the requirements of warfare led to a concentration of political power to facilitate decisive, unified command. Two of the peninsula's many small Christian kingdoms gradually emerged as leaders of the reconquest. The most important by far was centrally located Castile, whose dominions eventually engulfed much of Iberia and, when united with the kingdoms of Aragon, León, and Navarre, laid the political basis for modern Spain. On the Atlantic coast, the king of Portugal led a parallel advance south and managed to maintain independence from Spain. Portugal was the first to complete its reconquest, reaching the southern coast of Iberia in the mid-1200s. On the Spanish side, the Moorish kingdom of Granada held out for two more centuries before finally succumbing to Castilian military power in 1492.

When Queen Isabel of Castile decided to promote the explorations of Christopher Columbus in the 1490s, she did so in hopes of enriching her kingdom, true enough. By sailing west, Columbus proposed to outflank a profitable Venetian-Arab monopoly on trade routes to Asia. But we should not underestimate the religious mystique that also surrounded the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs.

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Isabel was above all a Catholic monarch. Centuries of reconquest had created a true crusading mentality in Iberia, and the monarchies used this fervor to justify their increasingly absolute power. Moors who had accepted Christian rule, Jews whose families had lived in Iberia for close to a thousand years, and anyone suspected of religious infidelity found themselves objects of a purge. Moors and Jews were forced to convert or emigrate. In fact, in the very year of the surrender of Granada, Isabel expelled tens of thousands of people from Spain because they refused to renounce the Jewish faith. And Moors and Jews who did convert remained subject to discrimination as “New Christians.” The famous Spanish Inquisition was established to impose religious purity.

During the 1500s, Catholics and Protestants began fighting bitterly in western Europe, and the monarchs of a unified Spain led the Catholic side, pouring prodigious resources into the war effort. Recall that in 1588 the Spanish Armada attempted to invade Protestant England. Overseas exploration also took on religious significance. The earlier Christian reconquest in Portugal allowed the Portuguese to extend their crusading activities into Africa ahead of Spain. As Portuguese ships edged down the coast of Africa during the 1400s, bringing back gold and slaves, they found religious justification in tales of a lost Christian kingdom that supposedly lay beyond the Sahara, waiting to be reunited with the rest of Christendom. Isabel’s decision to fund the voyages of Columbus was Spain’s bid to catch up with Portugal. Thus the two Iberian monarchies, strengthened politically by the reconquest, became the first in Europe to sponsor major overseas exploration, and they arrived in the Western Hemisphere neck and neck.

Although the Spanish-sponsored expedition of Columbus arrived in America first, the difference was less than a decade. Let us start with the Portuguese, who had pioneered the navigational skills and naval technology needed to get there. The Portuguese colonization of Brazil exemplifies what happened when the Europeans encountered indigenous people who were not fully sedentary. An initial look at Brazil will help us appreciate the

## THE BRAZILIAN COUNTEREXAMPLE

unique qualities of the very different, and far more famous, encounter of the Spanish with the fully sedentary peoples of indigenous Mexico and Peru.