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The land and its early inhabitants



The Iberian Peninsula occupies several crucial crossroads, providing connections between Europe and Africa, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and Europe and the Atlantic world. Spain's connections with Africa date from prehistoric times. When Muslim rulers controlled most of Spain during the Middle Ages, the close relationship with the North African world intensified. Today, Spain is the destination of choice for African would-be immigrants to Europe. Spain's connections with the rest of Europe are powerful as well, defined by history and geography and enhanced by the ties of the European Union. Spain's connections with Latin America date from the period of exploration and empire-building in the late fifteenth century. In our times, Spain provides an important link between Europe and Latin America, with the greatest number of flights between the two continents, the largest investment in Latin America of any European country, and the most Latin American immigrants in Europe. For the world as a whole, Spain is a major center of tourism. In 2007 Spain ranked second in the world in the number of tourists, according to the World Tourism Organization. In that year, some 59.2 million tourists entered the country, compared to a Spanish population of about 45 million, a clear indication of Spain's continuing importance as a nexus of travel, transportation, and exchange.

A Concise History of Spain

This is a concise history of Spain, which we understand to mean a modern country that shares the Iberian Peninsula with Portugal. All of those geographical terms have a complex history, however. The Greeks called the whole peninsula “Iberia,” and the Romans called it “Hispania.” Between the end of the Roman Empire and the eighteenth century, “Spain” was more a term of convenience than a political reality, and other terms have come and gone to describe the land and its peoples. When the Muslims held Spain, they called the part they controlled “al-Andalus,” an area that varied in geographical extent as the area under Islamic control waxed and ultimately waned. Medieval Jews called the country “Sefarad.” Christian Spain in the Middle Ages contained a number of kingdoms and smaller entities. Castile and Aragon were the most prominent of those kingdoms and, by the end of the Middle Ages, controlled a large portion of the peninsula. The marriage of their rulers Isabel of Castile and Fernando of Aragon marked the origin of the modern definition of Spain. Since the eighteenth century, the political geography of Spain has remained more or less constant: the Iberian Peninsula with the exception of Portugal, Andorra, and Gibraltar. In modern times, most writers employ the Greek word “Iberia” to refer to the peninsula and a descendant of the Roman word “Hispania” to refer to Spain. In other words, Spain and Iberia are not equivalent, although they were both equivalent and coterminous in Greek and Roman times, referring to the peninsula as a whole.

That Portugal developed as an independent kingdom was also a product of history and happenstance. In the later Middle Ages, the western part of the peninsula was

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developed mainly by conquerors and settlers from Galicia in the northwest, whose overlord was the king of León. In the twelfth century, Afonso Henriques, count of Portugal, worked to secure papal recognition of Portugal's independence and of his status as its king. Nonetheless, Portugal could have been joined with Spain on several occasions. A Castilian invasion failed in the fourteenth century. Isabel and Fernando in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries secured marriage alliances with the Portuguese ruling house that could have led to a unified peninsula, but the deaths among the marriage partners ended that effort. Felipe II of Spain secured the Portuguese throne in 1580, and Spain and Portugal had the same Habsburg rulers until 1640. In that year, a revolt began that eventually restored Portuguese independence and enshrined resistance to Spain as a part of Portugal's national identity. In short, Spain has rarely been identical to Iberia and, for most of its long history, Spain itself was a theoretical concept or a term of convenience overlaid on a patchwork of kingdoms and regions with shifting boundaries. In the present day, leaders of regional political movements contest the notion of Spain as an indivisible entity, instead looking back to ancient and medieval antecedents for their modern self-definition.

As part of this regional complexity, Iberia has always been multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural. One way to trace modern regionalism is to examine the peninsula's different languages, both historic and current. Most of the languages of the peninsula are so-called "Romance" languages derived from Latin, a legacy of the centuries-long Roman occupation and control of Hispania. The language spoken by the greatest number of present-day

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Iberians and Spanish-speakers throughout the world is Castilian, the descendant of the language of medieval Castile. Most non-Spaniards call this language “Spanish.” It was exported to the Spanish Empire in the Americas and the Philippines, and is the language with the third-highest number of speakers in the world today, following Chinese and English. The regime of Francisco Franco in the mid twentieth century tried to make Spanish or Castilian the only language of Spain, but linguistic identity persevered and provided a strong component of regional struggles for increased recognition and autonomy during the regime.

Among the other Romance languages in the peninsula, Portuguese is the official language of Portugal, and its close cousin Gallego, the language of Galicia, is seeing a revival in northwestern Spain, spoken and written on local radio and television stations and in the publishing industry. The Catalan language is prominent in education and the media as the mother tongue of many residents of Catalonia. Catalan is intimately related to the medieval language of the south of France, the *langue d’oc* or Occitan. In medieval times, Catalans took their language to Valencia and the Balearic Islands in the course of conquering those areas. Today the languages in those regions are somewhat different from but closely related to Catalan.

Aside from the Romance languages, other languages have also figured prominently in Spanish history. The most unusual is the Basque language, Euskerra, one of Europe’s oldest spoken languages, going back to prehistoric times. With the language in decline by the nineteenth century, Basque intellectuals revived its use and developed a written form, which it had formerly lacked. Since then, the use of Euskerra has been associated with

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Basque nationalism and the quest for various degrees of autonomy from the Spanish government. The most extreme element of the nationalist movement, known as ETA, from the Basque phrase “Homeland and Freedom,” aims at total independence from Spain and has waged a campaign of terrorism and extortion since 1968.

The Arabic language came to Iberia with the Islamic conquerors in the eighth century and remained the language of the political elite of al-Andalus. In parts of Spain, Arabic remained current into the seventeenth century. It strongly influenced Castilian and the other Romance languages in the peninsula and eventually contributed variants of nouns from “algebra” to “zenith” to languages throughout Europe. Arabic is coming back into Spain with the immigration of Muslims from North Africa and elsewhere in the Islamic world, and with the contemporary conversion of some native Spaniards to Islam and their exposure to the language of the Qur’ān.

For centuries, Hebrew was the common language of the flourishing Jewish communities of medieval Spain. It influenced and was influenced by both Arabic and the Romance languages. Largely extirpated or driven underground by the expulsion of the Jews at the end of the fifteenth century, Hebrew has returned to Spain from the mid twentieth century onward with the establishment of communities of Jews from Morocco and other parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

The various historical languages of Iberia serve as a potent reminder of other facets of regional difference. Underlying everything is the geology of the peninsula, comprising a diverse series of zones from glaciers in the high northern mountains to a small area of true desert in

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the southeast near Elche. Iberia's mountain ranges, which were formed millions of years ago, separate and define Spain's distinctive regions. In the northeast, the Pyrenees divide Spain from France with peaks that reach to over 11,000 feet. The valleys and low mountains of the Basque country connect the Pyrenees with the Cantabrian Mountains (Cordillera Cantábrica), with a maximum height of some 8,500 feet, which stretch across most of the rest of northern Spain, separating a narrow coastal strip of land from the interior of the peninsula. At the western end of the Cantabrian range is Asturias, with its daunting coastal cliffs and mountainous interior. The coastal mountains and valleys of Galicia in the extreme northwest of Spain are similar to those of Asturias. Galicia's coastline is dominated by *rías*, fingers of the Atlantic Ocean probing into the interior between hills, similar to the fiords of Scandinavia, though less dramatic.

South of the western edge of the Cantabrian ranges, the mountains of León slope southward onto a huge plateau called the Northern Meseta, with an average altitude of 2,300 to 2,600 feet. To the east it is bounded by the Iberian Mountains (Cordillera Ibérica), with peaks as high as 7,500 feet. Farther eastward lie the Ebro River valley in Aragon and Catalonia and the rich plains of Valencia near the Mediterranean coast. The southern edge of the Northern Meseta meets the Central Mountains (Cordillera Central), a mountain chain north and west of Madrid whose ranges include the Somosierra, Guadarrama, and Gredos.

Farther south, the Southern Meseta has an average altitude of 2,000 to 2,300 feet. The high plains of the

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two Mesetas, comprising about 36 percent of the Iberian Peninsula, are isolated from one another. They are high enough and large enough to give Spain a mean altitude of nearly 2,200 feet, second only to Switzerland in Europe and double the European average. Over 56 percent of the surface area of Spain lies between 1,300 and 3,300 feet. In many places, a traveler can descend from the high plains into impressive mountain ranges before reaching plains at lower altitudes. Madrid, in the center of the country, has the highest elevation of any European capital, with its airport almost exactly 2,000 feet above sea level.

The Southern Meseta's eastern edge lies between the mountains of the Cordillera Ibérica (which also borders the Northern Meseta) and the even more daunting Baetic Mountains (Cordillera Bética), which separate the southeastern desert and coastal plain from the Southern Meseta. The Sierra Morena mountain range marks the southern border of the Southern Meseta. South and west of the Sierra Morena, the Guadalquivir River valley, a broad and rich agricultural plain, slopes southwestward toward the Atlantic Ocean. Farther east, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, south of Granada and the other southern ranges, rise to peaks ranging from 3,300 to 11,500 feet. As their name implies, the mountain-tops of the Sierra Nevada are snow-capped all year, providing a stunning contrast with the hot plains and coastal areas in the rest of Andalusia.

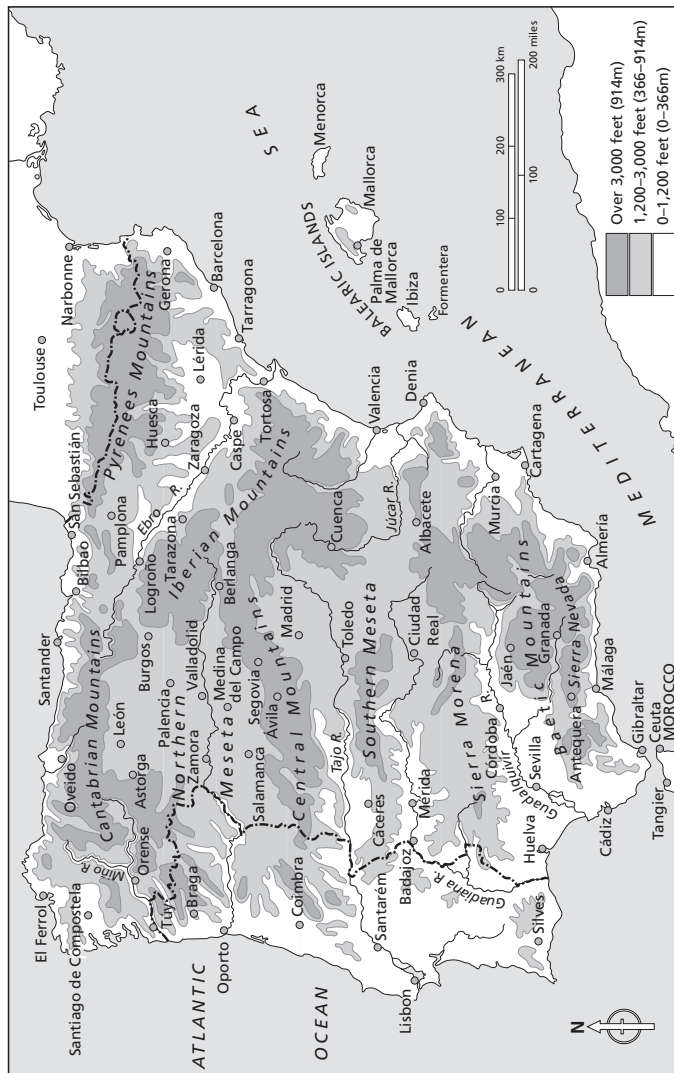
Over the centuries, the difficult topography of Spain has limited agriculture and hampered long-distance transport, separating seaports from inland plains and cities and hindering commercial development. Before the advent of

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Excerpt

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MAP I. I Physical Iberia, showing major cities, rivers, and mountain ranges.

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the railroads, topography put a premium on goods that could be easily moved, or better yet that could move themselves, such as livestock.

The rivers of the peninsula provide little opportunity for transport by boat or barge. They tend to make short, rapid descents from their origins in the mountains, and most suffer from variations in flow according to erratic and unpredictable rainfall. Many Spanish rivers, even those with considerable volume, flow through steep banks that make them very difficult to use as sources for irrigation.

Despite these limitations, before the nineteenth century Spanish rivers carried considerable boat traffic along their navigable stretches. In modern times, roads and railroads supplanted the rivers as thoroughfares, with the exception of the lower reaches of the largest rivers. Nonetheless, the major rivers of Spain help to define the regions through which they flow and have been the scenes of important historical developments. One historian has even suggested that we might best understand the medieval history of Spain by tracing the changes in political control of the major river valleys.

Only one of the largest Spanish rivers flows into the Mediterranean: the Ebro, rising in the Cantabrian Mountains, flowing through the valleys of Aragon, and reaching the sea 565 miles from its source, after traversing the delta it created. In Roman times the river had a significant seaport at Amposta, then located on the Mediterranean coast and now located, due to silting and the formation of the delta, about 16 miles from the sea. Historically, the Ebro formed the spine of a series of routes into the center of the peninsula. The city of Zaragoza has been, since its

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Roman foundation, the principal inland crossing point of the Ebro, a fact that assured the city's prominence.

The northernmost of the major rivers that flow into the Atlantic is the Duero, rising in the Sierra de Urbión and flowing through the grain- and wine-producing regions of Old Castile and northern Portugal. The Duero and its valley formed a frontier zone between al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms in medieval times, as Christian forces began to wrest control of the peninsula from the Muslims. In the eighteenth century, the Duero and some of its tributaries in Old Castile served as the nexus of a major effort at canal-building. The canals still remain but fell into disuse when the railroads came in the nineteenth century. The Duero is navigable for only a short distance before it reaches the Atlantic at the Portuguese city of Porto. The lower Duero (Portuguese Douro) today supports a system of barge carriers for wine and other goods.

Farther south is the Tajo River ("Tagus" in English), rising in the Sierra de Albarracín and flowing around the tall hill that defines Toledo, a military strongpoint since its founding by the Romans. Its conquest from the Muslims in 1085 by Alfonso VI of Castile marked an important step in the Castilian move into central Iberia. A favored residence of medieval kings, Toledo housed an important Jewish community whose synagogues still stand as a tourist destination. During the Spanish Civil War, Toledo was the scene of a famous siege, an event more important for propagandistic than strategic reasons. From central Spain, the Tajo flows into Portugal, where it is called the Tejo, and farther on forms the great estuary upon which Lisbon is located.