Abd al-Rahman III: Caliph of Córdoba

Abd al-Rahman (891–961) ruled the emirate, or kingdom, of Córdoba from A.D. 912 to 961. During his 50 years of rule, Córdoba became a military and political power and a great cultural center.

Abd al-Rahman III was the emir, or prince, of Córdoba in Spain. He was born in 891 and inherited his right to become emir from his grandfather, Abd Allah. Both rulers belonged to the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyads came to power in 661 and ruled the Muslim Empire for close to one hundred years. By 750, however, the Umayyads had been driven from power. All the Umayyad leaders but one Abd al-Rahman I had been killed. He managed to escape to southern Spain, where he established the Umayyad dynasty at Córdoba.

Abd al-Rahman III became emir of Córdoba in 912. He was 21 years old. Described as handsome, thickset, and short-legged, he was renowned as a warrior and a horseman. His 50-year rule was one of conquest and prosperity.

**Subduing the Rebels** On becoming emir, Abd al-Rahman III at once began to strengthen his power. He sought out rebel groups who had challenged his grandfather’s reign. He undertook almost continuous attacks on their strongholds. During the first year of his reign, Abd al-Rahman III captured rebel 70 forts. However, the rebels refused to yield and the fighting went on for several years. In 928, he finally succeeded in storming Bobastro, the center of the rebellion. Some five years later, he captured Toledo, the last Muslim territory to resist his rule. Abd al-Rahman now controlled all of Muslim Spain.

In 929, during his struggle for complete control, Abd al-Rahman III took the title of *caliph*. In the Muslim world, the caliph is the spiritual leader of his people. Taking this title had the effect of adding to his power and importance. As caliph, Abd al-Rahman III chose to be known as *an-Nasir li-Din Allah*, meaning, “He Who Fights Victoriously for the Religion of God.” This name was appropriate, for he faced major challenges from non-Muslim.

**Christian Foes** During the summer of 913, forces from the Christian kingdom of Léon in northern Spain invaded Muslim territory. They massacred the Muslim population in Talavera. Since Talavera was considerably north of Córdoba, Abd al-Rahman did not take action. However, in 920, when Christian forces began to move south, he launched a series of counterattacks. This campaign resulted in the defeat of the armies of Léon and its ally, Navarre.

For a while, the northern borders of Abd al-Rahman’s territories were secure. In 932, however, Ramiro II became king of Léon. He immediately undertook attacks on Muslim territory. After a seven-year campaign, he defeated Abd al-Rahman’s forces. In the final battle, the caliph barely escaped with his life.

Surprisingly, Ramiro II did not drive home his advantage. And after Ramiro’s death in 950, the Christian territories began to fight among themselves. Abd al-Rahman saw that a Christian civil war could work to his advantage. He mounted another military campaign and soon regained his losses. His victory was so complete that several Christian leaders traveled to Córdoba to pay their respects to him.

**Fatimid Rivals** Not all Muslims believed that Abd al-Rahman III had the right to serve as caliph. The Fatimids, a rival clan in North Africa, claimed descent from Fatima, one of Muhammad’s daughters. This, they claimed, gave them the right to the position of caliph. The Fatimids posed a serious threat to Abd al-Rahman, for their power was considerable. Fearing that they would gain control of North Africa, Abd al-Rahman began sending naval
expeditions against their cities. In 931, he established a stronghold in North Africa at the city of Ceuta. This stopped the Fatimid advance. Even so, the Fatimids continued to pose a threat. The struggle between the Umayyads and the Fatimids continued long after Abd al-Rahman III’s death.

**Umayyad Prosperity** Abd al-Rahman III’s success in unifying Muslim Spain brought great prosperity. This was especially true in the capital city of Córdoba. Abd al-Rahman expanded and upgraded the royal palace and the city’s Great Mosque. In addition, he built more libraries and public baths in the city. As a result, Córdoba blossomed into the greatest European center of culture and learning of its time.

Abd al-Rahman built a mint that issued coins of gold and silver. He also created Madinat al-Zahara, a new royal city in the hills outside the capital. Built at great expense, its name means “Flower City.”

Abd al-Rahman was particularly skilled at controlling the government of his vast kingdom. He often changed the governors of his territories so that none of them could become too powerful. He merged the systems of tax collection, military service, and law. He also demanded complete loyalty and did not permit any exceptions. When one of his sons plotted against him, Abd al-Rahman had him executed.

In matters of religion, Abd al-Rahman was more tolerant. Córdoba contained thousands of mosques. Yet Christians and Jews were allowed to practice their religions freely. Under Abd al-Rahman, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together in harmony. Indeed, Córdoba developed into a seat of Jewish learning during his reign. A noted Jewish scholar and doctor named Hasdai ben Shaprut was one of his closest advisers.

Other rulers held him in high esteem. For example, ambassadors from other parts of the world, including Germany and Byzantine Empire, traveled to Córdoba to honor him. When Abd al Rahman III died in 961, he left a kingdom that was strong, unified, and well respected by its neighbors.

**Review Questions**

1. Who established the Umayyad dynasty in Córdoba? Why?

2. What was the religion of the Umayyads?

3. Why did Abd al Rahman III take the title of caliph?

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Summarizing** What military threats did Abd al-Rahman III face?

5. **Drawing Conclusions** How would you evaluate Abd al-Rahman III as a ruler? Explain your answer.

6. **Making Inferences** Why might Abd al-Rahman III have chosen to call himself “He Who Fights Victoriously for the Religion of God”?