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HEAD OFFICE

P.O. Box: 22743, Riyadh 11416 K.S.A. Tel: 00966-1-4033962/4043432 Fax: 4021659

E-mail: darussalam@awalnet.net.sa, riyadh@dar-us-salam.com Website: www.dar-us-salam.com

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U.A.E

Darussalam, Sharjah U.A.E

Tel: 00971-6-5632623 Fax: 5632624

Sharjah@dar-us-salam.com.

PAKISTAN

Darussalam, 36 B Lower Mall, Lahore

Tel: 0092-42-724 0024 Fax: 7354072

Rahman Market, Ghazni Street, Urdu Bazar Lahore

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U.S.A

Darussalam, Houston

P.O Box: 79194 Tx 77279

Tel: 001-713-722 0419 Fax: 001-713-722 0431

E-mail: houston@dar-us-salam.com

Darussalam, New York 486 Atlantic Ave, Brooklyn

New York-11217, Tel: 001-718-625 5925

Fax: 718-625 1511

E-mail: darussalamny@hotmail.com

U.K

Darussalam International Publications Ltd.

Leyton Business Centre

Unit-17, Etloe Road, Leyton, London, E10 7BT

Tel: 0044 20 8539 4885 Fax: 0044 20 8539 4889

Website: www.darussalam.com

Email: info@darussalam.com

Darussalam International Publications Limited

Regents Park Mosque, 146 Park Road

London NW8 7RG Tel: 0044- 207 725 2246

Fax: 0044 20 8539 4889

AUSTRALIA

Darussalam: 153, Haldon St, Lakemba (Sydney)

NSW 2195, Australia

Tel: 0061-2-97407188 Fax: 0061-2-97407199

Mobile: 0061-414580813 Res: 0061-2-97580190

Email: abumuaaz@hotmail.com

CANADA

Nasser Khattab

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Tel: 001-416-418 6619

Islamic Book Service

2200 South Sheridan way Mississauga, On

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Tel: 001-905-403-8406 Ext. 218 Fax: 905-8409

MALAYSIA

Darussalam

Int'l Publishing & Distribution SDN BHD

D-2-12, Setiawangsa 11, Taman Setiawangsa

54200 Kuala Lumpur

Tel: 03-42528200 Fax: 03-42529200

Email: darussalam@streamyx.com

Website: www.darussalam.com.my

FRANCE

Editions & Librairie Essalam

135, Bd de Ménilmontant- 75011 Paris

Tél: 0033-01- 43 38 19 56/ 44 83

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SINGAPORE

Muslim Converts Association of Singapore

32 Onan Road The Galaxy

Singapore- 424484

Tel: 0065-440 6924, 348 8344 Fax: 440 6724

SRI LANKA

Darul Kitab 6, Nimal Road, Colombo-4

Tel: 0094 115 358712 Fax: 115-358713

INDIA

Islamic Books International

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Dongri, Mumbai 4000 09, INDIA

Tel: 0091-22-2373 4180

E-mail: ibi@irf.net

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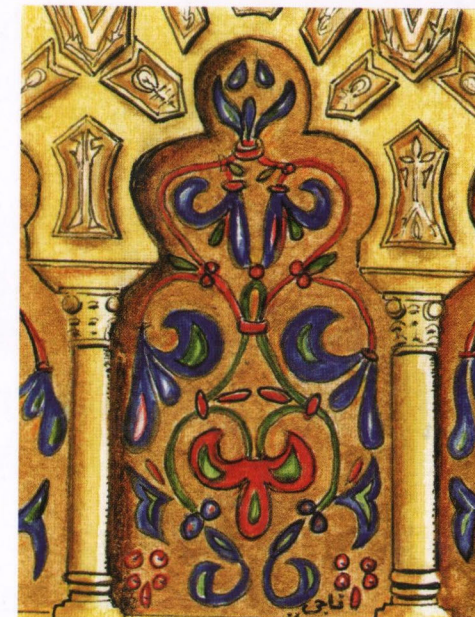
Islamic Da'wah Movement (IDM)

48009 Qualbert 4078 Durban, South Africa

Tel: 0027-31-304-6883 Fax: 0027-31-305-1292

E-mail: idm@ion.co.za

The Most Beautiful MIHRAB



WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
LUQMAN NAGY



DARUSSALAM
GLOBAL LEADER IN ISLAMIC BOOKS

Introduction

Even five hundred years after the loss of Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) to the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, the sad event is still remembered by Muslims the world over. The cultural legacy of the eight hundred years of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula is a strong one. Christian, Jewish and Muslim poets, historians, scientists and artists have all left us written records of this period in history when multi-cultural tolerance permitted a flowering of civilization that has rarely been surpassed.

In Cordoba, the illustrious capital city of the Caliphate of Al-Andalus, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived as tolerant neighbours. Indeed, it was in such a tolerant environment that Islamic culture was so readily transmitted to the Christians and Jews of Western Europe.

The Cordoba of a thousand years ago was a centre of Islamic culture and scientific learning. Scholars from both Europe and Islamic lands met in the city's *madrasahs* and universities where Arabic was the unifying language.

Cordoba's 'golden age' came during the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III (929-961 CE) and continued during the reign of his son, Al-Hakam II (961-976 CE). Al-Hakam's reign was a prosperous and stable one. The caliph welcomed scholars from far and wide to his court, thus making Cordoba a truly

international metropolis. Al-Hakam II himself was learned and a great bibliophile - a lover and collector of books. He, not surprisingly, sent his agents to all major cities of the Islamic and Christian worlds to purchase books for his royal library. He soon had one of the largest libraries of the time: a collection of some 400,000 volumes to which even the public had access.

Al-Hakam also assembled an international team of artists and architects to help him beautify his capital city, and, in particular, the Great Friday Mosque. This book describes the unique story of Muslim-Christian co-operation that resulted in the construction of 'the most beautiful *mihrab* in the world'. That this co-operation occurred a thousand years ago should remind Muslims today of our ancestors' exemplary behaviour when *convivencia* - the unique coexistence among the Muslims, Christians, and Jews of Al-Andalus which led to a culture of tolerance and immense scholarship - was a reality and an opportunity at making *da'wah* (i.e. 'Invitation to Islam') was rarely missed.

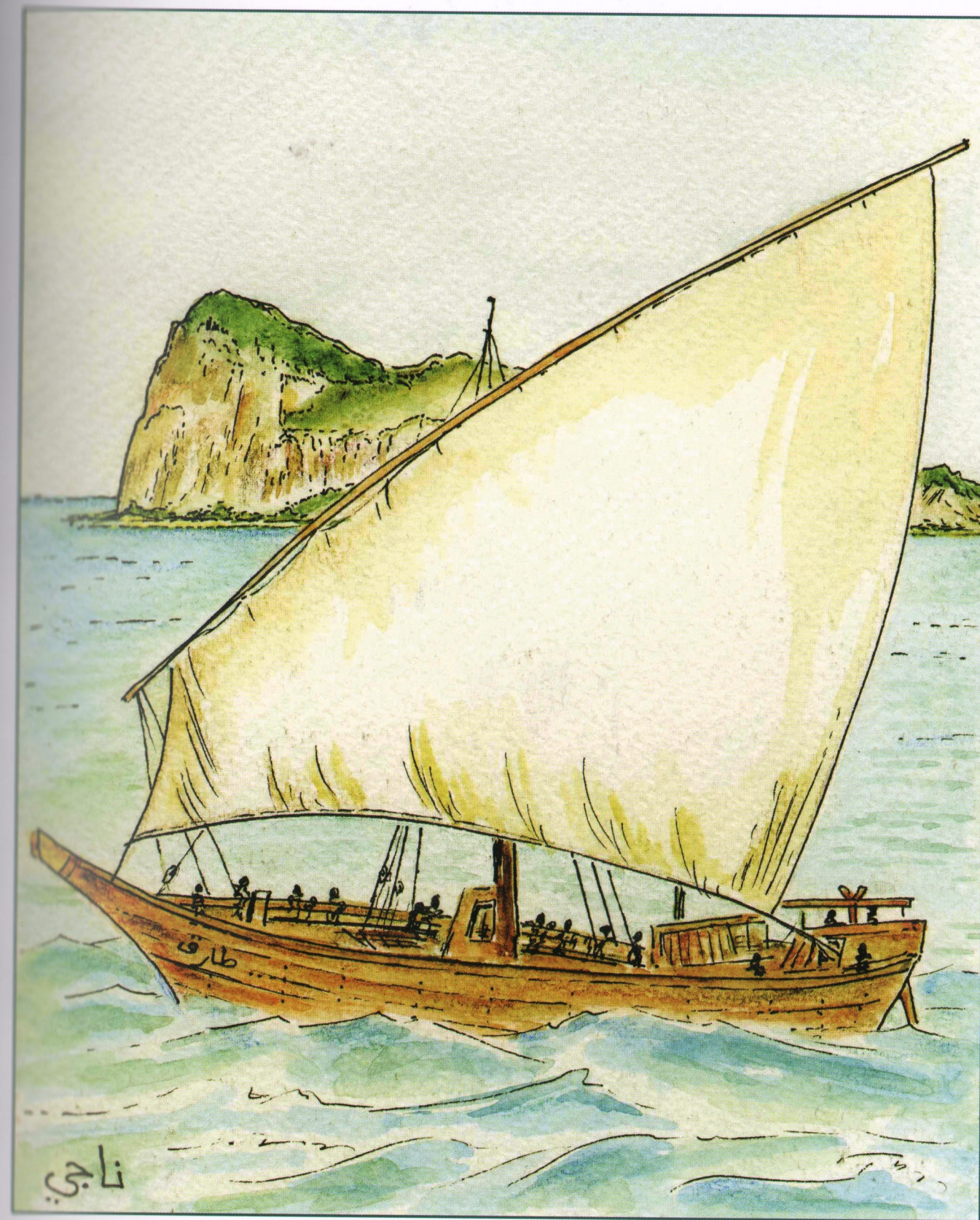
To all readers of this work, my warmest salaams.

Luqman Nagy
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia
Ramadhan, 1426 AH
(November 2005)

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in Madinah in 632 CE, the Islamic Empire grew at an astonishing speed. Muslims moved out of Arabia and spread their religion, Al-Islam, to all peoples – even those living as far away as Central Asia and North Africa.

In northwest Africa (in present-day Morocco) most of the local people – the Berbers – had become Muslims. In 711 CE, the famous Berber commander, Tariq ibn Ziyad, led his army across the stretch of water separating North Africa from Christian Spain in Europe and within a few short years, most of Spain had become part of the Islamic world. The small mountain, near the site where Tariq entered southern Spain, is still known as ‘Tariq’s Mountain’, or Gibraltar (from the Arabic *Jabal Tariq*).

Many Spanish cities and towns both large and small, were now controlled by Muslims. As more and more Christians chose to live and worship as Muslims, the need for mosques increased all over the country. The beautiful city of Cordoba soon became the capital of Muslim Spain and the first large mosque was built there.

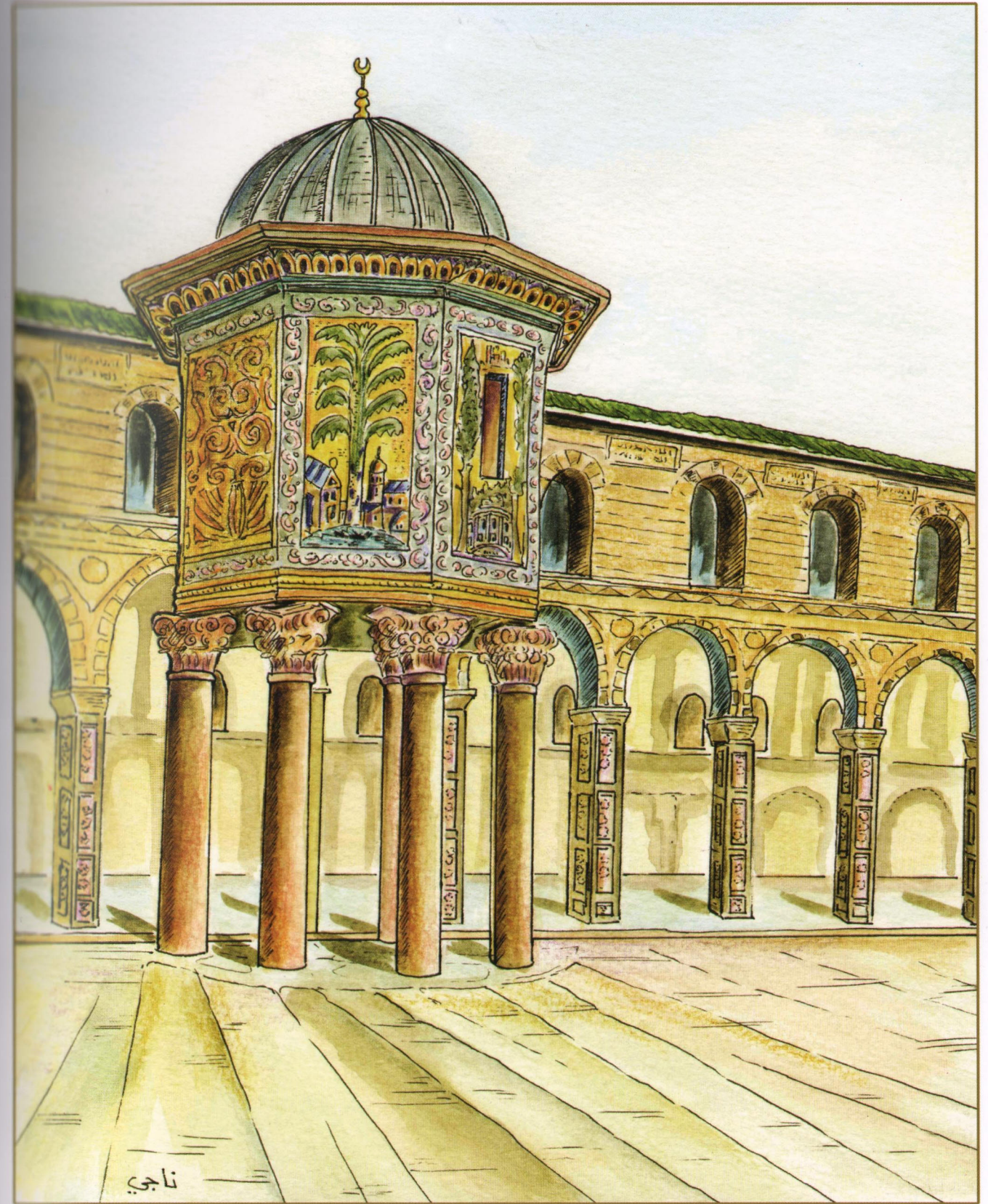


The small mountain, near the site where Tariq entered southern Spain, is still known as ‘Tariq’s Mountain’, or Gibraltar (from the Arabic *Jabal Tariq*).

The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (Syria) is one of the oldest and most important mosques in the Islamic world. The caliph, Al-Walid I, began its construction in 705 CE. Like the Dome of the Rock (*Al-Qubbah al-Sakhra*) in Jerusalem – built by Al-Walid's father, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan – the Umayyad Mosque has mosaic-covered walls.

Al-Walid had artisans from all over the world come to Damascus to work on his new mosque. He wanted it to be the grandest in the world. Teams of Byzantine mosaicists (mosaic experts) came from Constantinople to create the magnificent mosaics that cover the inside and outside wall surfaces.

The Ancient Romans had used cut marble and stone to make their famous floor mosaics. But the Byzantines introduced a new type of mosaic: very expensive glass cubes some even covered with gold leaf or slivers of mother-of-pearl. As a result, these mosaics glistened brightly and impressed all who saw them. In their mosaics, experienced Byzantine craftsmen used a wide range of colours: blue, green, purple, yellow white and black. The wall mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque show wonderful scenes of gardens, rivers and imaginary cities.



The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (Syria) is one of the oldest and most important mosques in the Islamic world. It has beautiful mosaic-covered walls.

Comprehension Questions

Now, you can test your knowledge of this story by answering the following questions.

Section 1: page 6

- What happened after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)?
- Where did Muslims spread their religion?
- Who are the original inhabitants of northwest Africa?
- What important event happened in 711 CE?
- What is the origin of the English word 'Gibraltar'?
- Who controlled many cities and towns in Spain by the middle of the 8th century CE?
- What was needed as the Muslim population of Spain increased?
- What city became the capital of Muslim Spain?

Section 2: page 8

- Who was 'Abd al-Rahman I?
- Who took control of the Islamic Empire and began to rule from Baghdad?
- For what reason did 'Abd al-Rahman I travel to Spain?
- What did 'Abd al-Rahman I establish in Cordoba?
- What was the population of Cordoba by the 10th century CE?
- What did the city of Cordoba look like in the 10th century CE?
- What was located in the centre of Cordoba?
- What river flowed through Cordoba?
- How long did it take to build the Great Friday Mosque of Cordoba?

- Why was the Great Friday Mosque of Cordoba built?

Section 3: page 10

- What mosque became the largest mosque in the western Islamic world?
- Where was the royal palace located in Cordoba?
- What happened each Friday in the Great Mosque of Cordoba?
- What had Spain (Al-Andalus) become after a few hundred years of Muslim rule?
- What had the Arabs and Berbers constructed in Spain to make the land so fertile?
- What were some fruits introduced into Spain by the Muslims?
- What were the markets of Muslim Spain like?
- Where would foreign travellers arriving in Cordoba stay?
- Where did all Muslim visitors to Cordoba want to pray?
- What had become famous throughout the Islamic world?

Section 4: page 12

- What was the most common coin minted by the Umayyad rulers of Spain?
- What other coins were minted in Muslim Spain?
- Where were many of the silver *dirhams* produced?
- What were such Umayyad coins used for?
- Who was Al-Hakam II and when did he reign?
- What was written in Arabic in the centre of the silver *dirham*?
- How do we know the caliph Al-Hakam II enjoyed reading books?
- What did Al-Hakam II want to do to the Great Mosque?
- What did Al-Hakam II ask the Byzantine emperor for?
- What does a mosaicist work with?