

# The Great Library of Cordoba

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Hakam\\_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Hakam_II)

Al-Hakam II, the Caliph of Cordoba in *Al-Andalus* (Moorish Iberia), was fond of books and learning, and amassed a vast library that may possibly have contained over 400,000 books, though this number cannot be substantiated, and may well be far greater than what was actually held in the library. During his reign a massive translation effort was undertaken, and many books were translated from Latin and Greek into Arabic. For this project he formed a joint committee of Arab Muslims and Iberian Mozarab Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The catalogue of the royal library "alone consisted of forty-four volumes. Under Al-Haim II (961-976) this library was reported to have given employment to over 500 people.... Elsewhere at Moslem Spain there was a total of seventy libraries in the 10th century, several in Toledo. In addition to the royal library, these included libraries in universities in Cordoba, Seville, Malaga, and Granada, among others, and in numerous mosques. Private libraries flourished in Moslem Spain, and it was said that Cordoba was the greatest book market in the western world in the 10th century" (Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World* 4th ed [1999], 81).

**Al-Hakam II (al-Ḥakam II ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III;** (January 13, 915 – October 16, 976) was the second Caliph of Córdoba, in Al-Andalus and son of Abd-ar-Rahman III (al-Nasir) and Murjan. He ruled from 961 to 976.

## ***Early rule***

Al-Hakam II succeeded to the Caliphate after the death of his father Abd-ar-Rahman III in 961. He secured peace with the Catholic kingdoms of northern Iberia, and made use of the stability to develop agriculture through the construction of irrigation works. Economic development was also encouraged through the widening of streets and the building of markets.

## ***Patron of knowledge***

Hakam himself was very well versed in numerous sciences. He would have books purchased from Damascus, Baghdad, Constantinople, Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Kufa, and Basra. His status as a patron of knowledge brought him fame across the Muslim world to the point that even books written in Persia, which was under Abbasid control, were dedicated to him. During his reign, a massive translation effort was undertaken, and many books were translated from Latin and Greek into Arabic. He formed a joint committee of Muladi Muslims and Mozarab Catholics for this task.<sup>[1]</sup>

His personal library was of enormous proportions. Some accounts speak of him having more than 600,000 books. However, Hitchcock (2014: 91-92) argues that any number in excess of 600 is "inconceivable."<sup>[2]</sup> The catalogue of library books itself was claimed to be 44 volumes long. According to Hitchcock (ibid.), this may be because "volume" and "page" were confused. Of special importance to Al-Hakam was history, and he himself wrote a history of al-Andalus.<sup>[1]</sup> Following his death, *Hajib Almanzor*<sup>2</sup> had all "ancient science" books destroyed.<sup>[3]</sup>

The mathematician Lubna of Córdoba was employed as Al-Hakam's private secretary. She was said to be "thoroughly versed in the exact sciences; her talents were equal to the solution of the most complex geometrical and algebraic problems."<sup>[4]</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Mozarabs were Iberian Christians who lived under Moorish rule in Al-Andalus. Their descendants remained unconverted to Islam, but did however adopt elements of Arabic language and culture. They were mostly Roman Catholics of the Visigothic or Mozarabic Rite.

<sup>2</sup> Abu Aamir Muhammad bin Abdullah ibn Abi Aamir, al-Hajib al-Mansur (c. 938 – August 8, 1002), better known as *Almanzor*, was the de ruler of Muslim Iberia (al-Andalus) in the late 10th to early 11th centuries. (see below)

The famous physician, scientist, and surgeon Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi (Abulcasis) was also active in Al-Hakam's court during his reign.

### ***Construction projects***

His building works included an expansion of the main mosque of Córdoba (962–966), the Mezquita, and the completion of the royal residence Medina Azahara (976), which his father had begun in 936.

### ***Military conflict in North Africa***

Whilst the internal administration was left increasingly to the Berber vizir Al-Mushafi, general Ghalib was gradually gaining influence as leader of the army. He was chiefly preoccupied with repulsing the last Norman attacks (966, 971), and with the struggle against the Zirids and the Fatimids in northern Morocco. The Fatimids were defeated in Morocco in 974, while Al-Hakam II was able to maintain the supremacy of the caliphate over the Catholic states of Navarre, Castile and León.

### ***Homosexuality***

In his youth his loves seem to have been entirely homosexual.<sup>[5]</sup> He was known to have openly kept a male harem.<sup>[6]</sup> This exclusivity was a problem, since it was essential to produce an heir. A resolution was reached<sup>[7]</sup> by his taking a concubine, [Subh](#), who adopted the physical appearance of a *ghulam* or young man - having a short haircut and wearing trousers. Al-Hakam supposedly gave her the male name of Ja'far. The approach worked and Al-Hakam fathered a son, Hisham, by Subh.<sup>[8]</sup>

### ***Death and succession***

Al-Hakam II suffered a stroke near the end of his life that curtailed his activities and may explain why he was unable to properly prepare his son for leadership.<sup>[9]</sup> Modern scholars have speculated that, based on the historical descriptions of his death, it was another cerebrovascular stroke, possibly brought on by the cold weather, that claimed his life in October 976.<sup>[10]</sup> He was succeeded by his son, Hisham II al-Mu'ayad, who was 11 years old at the time and was a nominal ruler under Almanzor.

### **References**

1. Najeebabadi, Akbar (2001). *The History of Islam V.3*. Riyadh: Darussalam. p. 145. ISBN 978-9960-892-93-1.
2. Hitchcock, Richard (2014). *Muslim Spain reconsidered*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 91–92. ISBN 978-0-7486-3960-1.
3. Ann Christy, *Christians in Al-Andalus:711-1000*, (Curzon Press, 2002), 142.
4. Scott, Samuel Parsons (1904). *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe Vol. 3*. Lippincott. p. 447.
5. Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilisation*, Harvard, 1990
6. *Homosexuality*, Daniel Eisenberg, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Iberia*, ed. Michael Gerli (New York: Routledge, 2003), 398–399.
7. Évariste Lévi-Provençal, *Histoire de l'Espagne musulmane*, Paris, 1950
8. Ibtissam Bouachrine, *Women and Islam*, Lexington Books, 2014
9. Al-Hakam II, Caliph of Cordoba, Marilyn Higbee Walker, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Iberia*, ed. Michael Gerli (New York: Routledge, 2003), 377.
10. Arjona-Castro, A. (February 1997). "Cerebrovascular stroke, the cause of the death of the caliph al-Hakam II." *Neurologia* 12 (2): 78–81.