

Jews in Medieval Spain (3 credits)

Medieval Spain, with its vibrant Muslim and Jewish populations, was one of the most complex and culturally rich European societies of its time. It served as a bridge for intellectual, artistic and scientific imports from the East to the European north. Its experiment with convivencia—“the living together” of three different religions within the same society—was unheard of in pre-modern Europe.

This course will investigate the cultural history of Spanish Jews (the Sephardim), from the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 until the Expulsion of 1492. With convivencia as our lens, we will examine the possibilities and limitations of multi-cultural tolerance by studying the socio-political and cultural trajectory of the Sephardim and their Christian and Muslim neighbors. The texts for this course include a wide range of Sephardic writing that includes: the poets of the Andalusian Golden age, the neo-Aristotelian philosophers and scientists, travel diaries, converso dramatists, and the music of the Aljamas as preserved in Ladino ballads.

Course Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Develop textual and analytical skills through careful engagement with primary sources
2. Think critically, creatively and personally about the texts and their historical context
3. Challenge assumptions about religion and society in the medieval world
4. Examine the complexities and ambiguities of culture, society and identity
5. Deepen appreciation of Sephardic history

Topics (subject to change):

- Jews in Spain before Muslim conquest
- Islam, Arabic and a New World Order
- Al-Andalus: Islamic Spain and the rise of a New Jewish Society in Iberia
- Poet and Prince: Shmuel HaNagid
- Heartache: the Yehuda Halevi and the Seduction of Sefarad
- The Geniza world: Jewish life in the Medieval Mediterranean
- The Reconquista: Jews navigate a changing Iberian landscape
- Jews as subject and author in Christian Spain
- Can these stones speak? Architecture and what it can tell us
- 1391: violence, forced conversion and new Sephardic landscape
- Conversos, Heresy and Jewish Renewal
- The Expulsion: Causes and Impact
- Sephardic afterlife

Assessment:

This course utilizes a mix of engaging discussions, collaborative review of readings, analyzing and reflecting upon important historical resources, knowledge checks, and journaling to assess students understanding and ability to apply newly acquired knowledge to the world in which they live. Students will use Web 2.0 technology to map the journey of Jews in Spain and privately synthesize their own journey through the topics and discussion with the Professor.