

Abstract:

This study examines the role of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, the last ruler of Granada of the Nasrid dynasty, in the fall of Granada in 897 AH / 1492 CE, through a critical reanalysis of historical narratives that attribute direct responsibility for the end of the Islamic presence in al-Andalus to him. The study proceeds from the premise that such narratives reflect a flawed form of historical reductionism, relying on a moralised interpretation of defeat while disregarding the long-term structural trajectory of political, military, and economic decline that had preceded his reign by decades.

The study employs an analytical historical method and discourse analysis, alongside a structural approach that links individual action to its historical conditions. It concludes that Abu Abdullah was a politically constrained actor who operated within a narrow margin of choices imposed by internal divisions, strategic isolation, and Castilian superiority, and that the Treaty of Granada constituted a forced option within the context of a prolonged collapse rather than a deliberate act of betrayal. The study underscores the need to reconsider the concept of historical responsibility when examining moments of political collapse.

Keywords: Granada, Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, Fall of al-Andalus, structural collapse, historical narratives, Treaty of Granada.

**Abu Abdullah
Muhammad XII and the
Fall of Granada:
Between Betrayal
Narratives and
Structural Collapse**

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Introduction

The fall of the Kingdom of Granada in 897 AH (1492 CE) marked the end of the Islamic presence in al-Andalus. It represented a pivotal moment in both Islamic and European history. In Andalusian historical memory at the time, as well as in much of modern Arabic historiography, this event has been closely associated with the name of the last Nasrid ruler, King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, known as al-Ṣaghīr. He has often been portrayed as the primary figure responsible for the fall of Granada, reduced to the image of a weak ruler—or even a traitor—who willingly handed the keys of the city to the Catholic monarchs of Castile and Aragon, Ferdinand V and Isabella.

Despite the prevalence of this portrayal, it reflects, at its core, a simplified moral narrative rather than a rigorous critical historical analysis. The moment of Granada's surrender has frequently been detached from its broader structural trajectory, while the profound political, military, and economic transformations that had shaped al-Andalus since the fall of Toledo in 478 AH (1085 CE) have been largely overlooked. These developments initiated a process of internal structural decline, strategic isolation, and a fundamental power imbalance.

A return to Andalusian sources such as *Nafh al-Tīb* by al-Maqqarī reveals a discourse saturated with pain, bitterness, and lamentation, written in the aftermath of the shock of defeat. In these works, historical description is intertwined with value judgments, and responsibilities are often assigned to King Abu Abdullah that exceed his actual capacity and political position. For example, while al-Maqqarī records the events of the surrender, he does so from the perspective of civilizational mourning rather than causal historical analysis.

This study is based on the premise that attributing the fall of Granada solely to Abu Abdullah constitutes a flawed form of historical reductionism. Such an approach overlooks a prolonged period of structural decline that preceded his reign, severely limiting his political options. Accordingly, the study aims to reassess his role by situating it within its actual historical context—as a ruler operating within a collapsing structure rather than as the architect of the downfall of a state still endowed with real sources of power.

Second: Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond the logic of condemnation or exoneration toward an analysis of the mechanisms through which historical blame is produced. It reopens the question of responsibility in the context of state collapse by distancing itself from direct moral explanations and instead adopting a structural approach that situates events within their extended historical context. Its importance also derives from addressing the shortcomings of some existing studies, which have uncritically accepted the narratives of early historians without subjecting them to systematic critical scrutiny. This tendency has led, in particular, to the persistent attribution of blame to King Abu Abdullah, while overlooking the long-standing crises that afflicted al-Andalus since the fall of Toledo—as if decline had begun only with his accession to power.

Third: Research Problem

The reign of Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII and the fall of Granada during his rule constitute one of the most debated periods in Andalusian history, marking the end of an era and the conclusion of Islamic rule in al-Andalus. His role has generated extensive controversy regarding his

responsibility for the collapse of the Nasrid state, with most Arabic historical sources accusing him of negligence and assigning him moral responsibility for the loss. Yet this judgment often reflects a considerable degree of bias, as if historians assessed his actions according to the standards of their own time rather than within the context of his historical circumstances.

The central question addressed by this study is: **To what extent can Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII be held responsible for the fall of Granada, given the political and military conditions that preceded his reign and constrained his choices?**

This main question gives rise to several ancillary questions:

1. How did the narrative of betrayal emerge in historical writings about King Abu Abdullah?
2. What were the political and military conditions of the Kingdom of Granada before his accession?
3. Was the Treaty of Granada an act of betrayal or an attempt to minimise losses in the context of an imminent collapse?
4. What are the limits of individual agency in moments of comprehensive historical collapse?

Fourth: Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Analysing how the narrative of betrayal is formed in historical writings about King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, clarifying its psychological, cultural, and methodological contexts, and revealing the foundations upon which it rests in historical sources.
2. Diagnosing the political and military conditions of the Kingdom of Granada in the period preceding Abu Abdullah's ascension to power, by tracing the manifestations of internal collapse, strategic isolation, and the imbalance of power with neighbouring Christian kingdoms.
3. Re-evaluating the Treaty of Granada's surrender by analysing it within its political and military context, and determining whether it represents a deliberate act of betrayal or a forced choice within the logic of minimising losses during a phase of near-inevitable structural collapse.
4. Defining the limits of individual action and Abu Abdullah's responsibility during moments of comprehensive historical collapse, by discussing the relationship between the individual decision and the political, military, and economic structures that constrained that decision.

Fifth: Scope of the Study

1. **Spatial scope:** The study focuses on the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada.
2. **Temporal scope:** The study covers the period from 891 to 897 AH (1486–1492 CE), corresponding to the reign of Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII.

Sixth: Methodology

This study adopts a multi-level historical–analytical approach aimed at reassessing the role of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII in the fall of Granada within its long-term structural context, moving beyond reductionist moral interpretations. It employs three integrated methodologies:

1. **Analytical historical method:** Used to trace the cumulative process of political, military, and economic decline in al-Andalus since the fall of Toledo in 478 AH (1085 CE), treating this process as an explanatory temporal framework rather than a mere narrative background. Accordingly, the historical method is understood as a research approach based on the study of the past through reliable sources and the analysis of events within their temporal and causal contexts. It aims to interpret historical phenomena while adhering to principles of source criticism and avoiding context-free normative judgments (Carr, 1961).
2. **Historical discourse analysis:** Aimed at deconstructing how the image of King Abu Abdullah was formed in late Andalusian sources, with particular attention to the overlap between lamentational narrative and value judgment, as well as to the mechanisms through which responsibility for collapse was attributed to him. In this sense, historical discourse analysis examines discourse as a linguistic–social practice conditioned by its historical context, revealing the mechanisms through which meaning, power, and ideology are produced in the interpretation of historical events (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 1995).
3. **Structural approach:** This approach interprets the fall of Granada as the outcome of interacting structural constraints, including geographic isolation, dynastic conflict within the Nasrid house, Castilian military superiority, and the absence of external support. These constraints limited the scope of individual political action and transformed royal decisions into what may be described as “forced choices.” Accordingly, the structuralist approach analyses political and social phenomena by revealing the underlying structures that shape them, interpreting political behaviour as a response to pre-existing structural conditions (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

Methodologically, the study distinguishes between moral responsibility and historical responsibility, arguing that the evaluation of a ruler’s actions during moments of collapse cannot be separated from the actual limits imposed by existing political and military structures. Consequently, the study does not seek to absolve or condemn a historical figure, but rather to recalibrate the tools of historical analysis in order to achieve a more balanced understanding of the complexity of political collapse.

It should be noted that this study does not adopt the traditional narrative style commonly used in historical writing. Instead, it moves toward political analysis, based on the premise that moments of historical collapse cannot be understood in isolation from their political and structural contexts. Accordingly, the combination of historical and political analysis employed here does not represent a departure from historical methodology, but rather a response to the nature of the subject itself and to the interwoven character of its dimensions.

At a general conceptual level, this study also draws on a methodological idea previously addressed by the researcher in an independent study currently under peer review. This idea centres on

balancing the relationship between will—whether individual or collective—and the temporal dimension of history, including long-term accumulations and critical moments, as well as the role of structural constraints in narrowing the scope of political action. However, the present study does not constitute a direct application of that framework, nor does it aim to develop it theoretically; rather, it employs its general interpretive logic in a manner that serves the specificity of the Andalusian case under examination.

Section One: The Theoretical Framework of the Study

Based on the intersection of historical events with politics and sociology, this study adopts a theoretical framework that seeks to move beyond reductionist moral explanations of state collapse—explanations that place responsibility for major historical transformations on individuals, particularly last rulers, while overlooking the structural constraints that define the scope of political action. Instead, the study embraces a balanced approach that links individual agency to historical structure through the concept of the politically constrained actor in moments of collapse.

First: Historical Structure and the Limits of Voluntarist Interpretation

In this regard, the study draws on the historical–structural analysis developed by the American sociologist and political theorist Theda Skocpol, who rejected interpretations that attribute political collapse to elite decisions or moral failure. Skocpol argues that states fall when political and military structures fail to withstand internal and external pressures, rather than due to individual betrayal or personal weakness on the part of the ruler (Skocpol, 1979: 4–14, 285–293). This perspective offers a suitable framework for understanding the fall of Granada as the outcome of cumulative structural failure, rather than an isolated act of will, particularly in light of the power imbalance, resource erosion, and divisions within the ruling elite.

Second: The Actor within Structure (Limits of Capacity, Not the Denial of Action)

Rather than adopting Skocpol’s strict structural determinism, this study relies on the concept of constrained action as developed by the American Historian, sociologist, and political theorist Charles Tilly. Tilly explains that political action takes place within “structures of opportunities and constraints” that predetermine the range of available choices, and that what appears to be free choice is, in reality, a selection among limited alternatives imposed by structural conditions (Tilly, 1978: 49–64, 95–101). In another study, Tilly notes that decaying states lose strategic autonomy, and the decisions of their rulers become forced responses rather than expressions of effective sovereignty—rendering the last ruler a “manager of decline” rather than its architect (Tilly, 1990: 67–75, 96–100).

Third: The Constrained Actor and Forced Choice

On this basis, the study employs the notion of forced choice to interpret the decisions of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, understanding them as responses shaped by a severely limited set of realistic options rather than as expressions of unconstrained sovereign will. Methodologically, the study differentiates between moral responsibility, which judges actions in light of their subsequent outcomes, and historical responsibility, which evaluates actions according to the conditions and limits of possibility that existed at the time they were made.

Accordingly, the study situates itself within an interpretive framework that understands the fall of Granada as the result of a complex interaction between structure and agency. From this perspective, placing sole blame on King Abu Abdullah constitutes a historical projection that ignores the structural constraints shaping his decisions, thereby stripping historical analysis of its causal depth.

Fourth: Historical Responsibility versus Moral Responsibility

In light of the above, the study differentiates between:

1. Moral responsibility, which evaluates actions based on subsequent outcomes or ideal standards; and
2. Historical responsibility, which evaluates actions within the limits of realistic possibility at their specific historical moment.

The study argues that conflating these two levels is what produced the narrative of betrayal in historical writing about King Abu Abdullah, as the consequences of post-conquest policies were projected backwards onto the decision to surrender Granada, without recognising the distinction between the context of negotiation under siege and the context of governance after the loss of political authority.

Based on this analysis, the study positions itself within an interpretive approach that holds that:

1. Political collapse in any polity results from a complex interaction between structure and agency.
2. The last ruler is often a constrained actor managing an end that was largely shaped before assuming power.
3. Analysing historical responsibility requires understanding the limits of decision-making, rather than judging actions solely by their outcomes.

Accordingly, the study does not seek to absolve or condemn the historical figure of Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII. Rather, it aims to recalibrate the tools of historical analysis when examining moments of political collapse, allowing for a more balanced and nuanced understanding of late Andalusian history.

Section Two: The Narrative of Betrayal in Andalusian Historical Writing

Introduction:

The image of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII in Andalusian historical sources did not emerge from a balanced causal analysis. Rather, it took shape within a deeply troubled psychological and cultural context following the fall of Granada. In this atmosphere, historians—especially those writing at a later stage—tended to search for a direct individual actor upon whom

the burden of collapse could be placed, instead of critically examining the political and military structures that had exhausted their capacity to survive decades before 897 AH / 1492 CE ⁽¹⁾.

This context contributed to the formation of an accusatory narrative that reduced the fall of the Kingdom of Granada to the person of its ruler, stripping the event of its complex historical dimensions in favour of a moral explanation based on binary oppositions such as betrayal versus loyalty or weakness versus steadfastness, without examining the objective conditions that rendered defeat closer to inevitability than to contingency.

First: The Psychological and Symbolic Roots of the Accusatory Narrative

Most historians who recorded the fall of Granada wrote under the impact of a profound civilizational shock, clearly reflected in their language and descriptions. The fall was not merely the loss of a city, but the collapse of the last Islamic political entity in al-Andalus. This context explains the tone of lamentation and blame that dominates many texts, particularly in the works of al-Maqari, who presents the events of surrender imbued with a deep sense of civilizational loss. His narrative recounts the exile of Muslims, the violation of agreements, and the persecution of the population in a manner that transforms the moment of surrender into the climax of a comprehensive tragedy, without a clear distinction between historical narration and moral judgment (al-Maqari, vol. 4, 1968: 526–535).

This blending of lamentation and historical writing contributed to transforming King Abu Abdullah into a symbol of defeat—not because he caused it, but because his name became attached to its final moment. Such a pattern is common in the historiography of political collapses, where the end is projected onto the last actor while the long prehistory leading to it is largely erased.

Second: Abu Abdullah in Primary Andalusian Sources

When consulting historical sources closer in time to the events, it becomes clear that the image of King Abu Abdullah was not always presented in a simplified manner. Ibn al-Khatib of al-Andalus, despite his criticism of the political conditions in Granada—and although not a contemporary of Abu Abdullah's reign—highlights internal structural decay and dynastic conflict within the Nasrid family as decisive factors in weakening the state. He notes that political authority in Granada during its final decades was fragmented and driven by competing personal interests rather than governed by the logic of a coherent state (Ibn al-Khatib, 1956: 511 ff.).

Other narratives similarly indicate that the surrender of Granada resulted from a prolonged siege and the city's comprehensive exhaustion, which rendered it incapable of military resistance, particularly in the absence of any effective external support. This situates the decision to surrender within the logic of political necessity rather than that of deliberate betrayal (Anan, vol. 4, 1997: 216–264).

Third: The Inflation of Individual Agency in Later Writings

¹- Historical examples of indiscriminate accusations of betrayal are numerous, as illustrated by the case of the Mamluk commander Jan Birdi al-Ghazali. Although some sources accused him of treason during the Battle of Marj Dabiq in 1516, the historical record demonstrates that these claims are unfounded. He remained alongside the son of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri in Syria and did not align himself with the Ottomans until after the fall of Egypt and the execution of Sultan Tuman Bay, at which point he recognized the definitive collapse of the Mamluk Sultanate (Abu Nahel, 2003).

As Andalusian historiography spread to the eastern and western Islamic worlds, and as historians became increasingly distant in time from the events, the image of King Abu Abdullah hardened toward condemnation. He came to be treated as a fully autonomous actor capable of altering the fate of an entire state. This assumption ignores the realities of Granada in the late ninth century AH (fifteenth century CE) (Bin Rashash, 2024).

This tendency is particularly evident in writings that adopt a moralising or didactic view of history, in which defeat is interpreted as a form of punishment requiring a clearly identifiable human bearer. In such narratives, the figure of the last ruler serves as a convenient explanatory device, simplifying a complex historical process by attributing it to a single name (Khuris, 2025).

Fourth: The Methodological Problem of Assigning Responsibility

The core methodological problem in the narrative of betrayal lies in projecting modern concepts of responsibility onto a fundamentally different historical context. The Nasrid state in Granada was neither a modern centralised polity nor did its ruler enjoy absolute authority that would allow him to impose major strategic choices independently of internal and external balances (Harvey, 1990: chs. 15–16). This narrative also overlooks the reality that Granada, on the eve of its fall, was geographically besieged, economically exhausted, politically isolated, and plagued by chronic dynastic conflict. Under such conditions, holding the last ruler solely responsible for the collapse represents a form of historically ungrounded projection (Baloup, 2020: 441–460).

In light of the above, it becomes clear that the narrative of betrayal did not arise from neutral historical investigation. Rather, it was shaped within a disturbed psychological and cultural environment, reinforced by the lamentational nature of post-defeat writing, the temporal distance from the event, and the desire to find a moral explanation for defeat. Consequently, any serious reassessment of King Abu Abdullah's role requires moving beyond this narrative and adopting a structural analysis that situates individual action within its realistic historical context.

Section Three: Granada before the Accession of Abu Abdullah

The fall of Granada at the end of the ninth century AH (fifteenth century CE) cannot be understood by focusing solely on the years of King Abu Abdullah's reign. Modern research in Andalusian studies demonstrates that Granada's collapse was the logical outcome of a long process of structural decline that had undermined the political, military, and economic foundations of the Nasrid kingdom well before Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII came to power.

Foreign scholarship, in contrast to much traditional Arabic historiography, emphasizes that Granada did not fall suddenly. From the fourteenth century onward, it entered what has been described as a phase of "anxious survival," during which it transitioned from an active state into a besieged polity dependent on fragile balances and enforced truces (Harvey, 1990: 248).

First: Geographic Isolation and the Imbalance of Power

After the fall of major cities—Córdoba in 1236 and Seville in 1248—the Kingdom of Granada became an isolated Muslim enclave in southern al-Andalus, surrounded by Christian powers superior in both numbers and military capacity, and lacking the strategic depth necessary for sustained maneuvering (Harvey, 1990: 233–240; Alawneh, 2019). This vulnerability was further compounded by Granada's heavy reliance on mountainous terrain, fortifications, and the payment

of tribute. While such measures could provide temporary resilience, they were insufficient to ensure long-term survival in the context of the evolution of early modern European warfare, particularly the increasing use of heavy artillery in sieges (O’Callaghan, 2003: 201).

Second: Internal Structural Collapse within the Nasrid Dynasty

Foreign studies agree that dynastic conflict within the Nasrid household was among the most significant factors undermining Granada’s capacity for resistance. Political authority became a continuous arena of struggle among competing branches of the ruling family, often resolved through appeals to Castilian Christian support, which further deepened political dependency.

Brian Catlos notes that the conflicts between Abu al-Hassan Ali and his brother Abu Abdullah Muhammad, known as al-Zaghal (the Brave), and later between al-Zaghal and his nephew King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, were not isolated incidents but part of a recurring pattern of politicized familial division within the Nasrid state (Catlos, 2018: 390–395). This assessment is also supported by al-Maqari and Hattamleh in their documentation of internal Nasrid conflicts (al-Maqari, vol. 4, 1968: 511–517; Hattamleh, 1977: 33–42).

This internal structural breakdown deprived Granada of unified political decision-making, cohesive military leadership, and the confidence of the local Granadan population—factors that were decisive in moments of existential struggle.

Third: European Military Transformation and Granada’s Technological Lag

Modern military studies indicate that the fifteenth century witnessed a revolution in European warfare, particularly in artillery and systematic siege techniques—developments that Granada was unable to match technologically or logistically. By the late fifteenth century, Castilian armies were no longer merely feudal forces but had become increasingly semi-professional, supported by centralized financial resources, which granted them decisive superiority in prolonged warfare (Elliott, 2002: 28–32).

By contrast, Granada continued to rely on relatively small forces due to internal divisions and limited recruitment capacity (Harvey, 1990: 275–276), while its financial resources deteriorated under the heavy tribute imposed by Castile (O’Callaghan, 1975: 642). Moreover, the Catholic Monarchs implemented a gradual economic blockade through a network of fortresses that constrained Granada’s economy (Kennedy, 1996: 292–293). As a result, Granada’s military resilience remained temporary rather than strategically sustainable (Lane-Poole, 1887: 218–220).

Fourth: The Absence of External Islamic Support

Historically, al-Andalus had relied for centuries on external Islamic support—particularly from North Africa—to confront Christian powers, drawing successively on the Almoravids, Almohads, and Marinids (*Attiyat*, 2012: 111). This reliance extended the Islamic presence in al-Andalus beyond what could have been sustained by internal strength alone. With the interruption of this support and the decline of external assistance, the fate of Granada became increasingly inevitable.

Most foreign studies note that Granada’s fall coincided with the preoccupation of major Islamic powers with their own internal crises:

1. The Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria was in decline and approaching its end.
2. The Ottomans were focused on expansion in Anatolia and the Balkans.
3. Morocco was engulfed in its own internal conflicts.

In this context, Harvey concludes that Granada, in its final years, was politically isolated and no longer a strategic priority for any major Islamic power (Harvey, 1990: 267).

Fifth: Granada as a State in Decline before 1486

These factors indicate that Granada had effectively entered a phase of structural collapse before Abu Abdullah's accession. In particular:

1. The balance of power between Granada and Castile had decisively shifted. By the mid-fifteenth century, Granada had become a tributary state of Castile, paying annual tribute, and the balance was fully settled before 1482 (Levi-Provençal, 1953: 412–415). After the marriage and union of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1479, Castile emerged as a centralised power capable of mobilising forces far exceeding Granada's capacity (Lapidus, 2014: 383).
2. The authority of the ruling family disintegrated internally, as factionalism and rivalry intensified in the late Nasrid period (Ibn al-Khatib, 1956: 289). Indeed, internal division within the Nasrid house proved more damaging than Castilian pressure itself (Levi-Provençal, 1953: 420).
3. Granada's military capacity shrank to a minimum. By the late fifteenth century, its forces numbered only about 4,000–6,000 troops, compared to 40,000–70,000 on the Castilian side (Harvey, 1990: 292–295). Granada relied more on mercenaries and fortifications than on a standing army (Lapidus, 2014: 384).
4. External support disappeared entirely. Morocco was consumed by conflict between the Marinids and Wattasids and was unable to offer assistance (Harvey, 1990: 301), while the Ottoman Empire was preoccupied with Balkan wars and could not intervene in al-Andalus (Lapidus, 2014: 385).

Accordingly, the reign of King Abu Abdullah was not the cause of Granada's collapse but rather the management of its inevitable end, a conclusion supported by recent scholarship (Bin Rashash, 2024).

King Abu Abdullah was subjected to harsh criticism by many historians and described in the most severe terms. He was even accused of weeping as he departed Granada, accompanied by the oft-quoted remark attributed to his mother: "Weep like a woman for a kingdom you did not know how to defend like a man." Leonardo Bellina has shown that the biographies of King Abu Abdullah and some members of his family contain deliberate distortions, arguing that these accounts were fabricated by Bishop Antonio de Guevara of Cádiz and Mondoñedo in the summer of 1526 to

enhance his standing before Emperor Charles V, who was then present in Granada ([Bin Rashash, 2024](#)).

In light of the above, a structural reading grounded in foreign scholarship demonstrates that the fall of Granada was the outcome of a long historical trajectory shaped by intertwined geographic, political, and military factors. Assigning sole responsibility for this collapse to the last ruler, King Abu Abdullah, ignores the reality that the state had lost the foundations of its survival long before he assumed power.

Section Four: King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII and the Politically Constrained Actor

Analysing the role of a ruler at moments of state collapse constitutes a critical test of historical methodology. It is often easy to assign blame to a single individual, while far more difficult to unpack the structural constraints that limit political action. In the case of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, recent studies show that his choices did not stem from unconstrained sovereign will, but were shaped within a narrow field of political possibility imposed by harsh internal and external conditions beyond his capacity to overcome.

First: Dynastic Conflict as a Decisive Constraint on Political Decision-Making

Foreign scholarship agrees that conflict within the Nasrid household was not merely a backdrop to the fall of Granada, but a structural factor that obstructed the formation of a centralised authority capable of managing war or negotiating from a position of strength. Abu Abdullah assumed power amid an open struggle with his father, Abu al-Hasan Ali, and later with his uncle al-Zaghal. These conflicts drained resources, fractured loyalties, and undermined political legitimacy.

Catlos notes that Abu Abdullah did not inherit a unified state, but rather an arena of internal struggle in which rival factions employed Castilian support as a tool to tip the balance in their favour ([Catlos, 2018: 392–394](#)). In this sense, forced alignment with Castile was not a free choice, but a direct consequence of internal political deadlock.

Second: Political Dependency and the Loss of Strategic Autonomy

Documents from the period indicate that, in its final years, Granada had lost full strategic independence and had become a subordinate polity seeking survival through appeasement and the payment of tribute. Harvey emphasises that Nasrid rulers, including Abu Abdullah, pursued a “politics of survival,” offering temporary concessions to delay collapse rather than to prevent it altogether ([Harvey, 1990: 259](#)).

Within this context, the decision to negotiate with the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand V and Isabella, appears as a continuation of a long-standing policy rather than a sudden break with Nasrid political tradition. This continuity weakens the betrayal thesis, which assumes an abrupt and unprecedented departure from established patterns of rule.

Third: Prolonged Siege and the Logic of Minimising Losses

Modern military studies describe the siege of Granada (1491–1492) as a comprehensive war of attrition, marked by the use of heavy artillery, the severing of supply lines, and the gradual collapse

of the city's defensive capacity. The siege has been characterised as one of the clearest examples of early modern warfare in the Iberian Peninsula (O'Callaghan, 2003: 202–204).

The Christian blockade was not limited to military operations; it also involved systematic economic strangulation through the destruction of crops and villages (al-Maqari, vol. 4, 1968: 524; Anonymous, 2002: 37), aimed at tightening the encirclement around the city. In this context, surrender constituted a forced political option intended to minimise human and religious losses rather than a moral concession—especially in the absence of any realistic prospect of military victory or external intervention. Elliott notes that Castilian leadership was fully aware of Granada's exhaustion and that continued resistance would have resulted in total devastation (Elliott, 2002: 31).

Fourth: The Limits of Individual Agency in Moments of Collapse

Comparative historical analysis and studies of political collapse show that last rulers are often judged by standards disproportionate to their actual circumstances. In such cases, individual action is constrained by disintegrating structures, rendering free choice more a theoretical concept than a practical reality. Harvey argues that Abu Abdullah was not the cause of Granada's fall, but rather the manager of its end, and that holding him responsible for the collapse of a state that had long lost its foundations constitutes a moral projection rather than historical analysis (Harvey, 1990: 268).

This interpretation is reinforced by the sustained external pressure exerted on Granada, which exhausted its capacities and drained its resources, making resistance increasingly difficult—particularly as internal conflicts consumed what remained of its strength (al-Hajji, 1981: 516).

Moreover, Abu Abdullah was not the principal decision-maker in negotiating with the Catholic Monarchs. Rather, it was the scholars and notable figures of Granada, having recognised the city's inevitable fate, who pressed for negotiation, prompting him to respond: “Consider what appears best to you, and agree upon what you judge to be in your interest” (Anonymous, 2002: 40–41). This further undermines claims of conspiracy or deliberate betrayal on his part.

In light of the foregoing, it becomes evident that King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII was a politically constrained actor operating within a decaying system marked by dynastic conflict, political dependency, and overwhelming Castilian military superiority. Understanding his role, therefore, requires situating his decisions within a framework of forced choice, rather than judging them according to the logic of absolute sovereign will.

Section Five: The Treaty of Granada (1491–1492): A Critical Political and Legal Reading

Introduction:

The Treaty of Granada is one of the most controversial documents in late Andalusian history. It has often been treated as evidence condemning King Abu Abdullah rather than as a negotiated agreement concluded within the context of an unequal war of attrition. A critical reading of the treaty, informed by modern legal and diplomatic studies, reveals that it was the product of an imbalanced power relationship and was framed according to the logic of minimizing losses rather than that of betrayal.

First: The Negotiating Context and Power Relations

Specialised studies of late medieval diplomacy indicate that treaties of surrender cannot be understood in isolation from their military context. In the case of Granada, the treaty was signed after a prolonged siege that had weakened the city and severed its supply lines, at a time when Castilian forces had completed the encirclement of its vital territory.

By the late fifteenth century, negotiations were conducted from a position of decisive military superiority, with the dominant side seeking to formulate seemingly lenient terms to hasten surrender and reduce the costs of occupation (Ruiz, 2007: 41–43). This explains the conciliatory language of the treaty without implying a long-term commitment to its provisions.

Second: The Treaty's Provisions between Text and Practice

The treaty's core clauses stipulated the following (al-Maqari, vol. 4, 1968: 525–526; Hattamleh, 1977: 55–56):

1. The guarantee of religious freedom and the right to practice Islam.
2. Protection of property and religious endowments.
3. Prohibition of forced conversion.
4. Preservation of Islamic judicial institutions.

These provisions were consistent with the norms governing surrender agreements at the time. However, their enforcement depended on the balance of power after the city's occupation rather than on the authority of the text itself (Ladero Quesada, 2000: 89–94). Comparative analysis with other cases of surrender in the Iberian Peninsula shows that violations of such terms were not unique to Granada but constituted a common practice once political control had been consolidated and the need for appeasement had faded.

Third: Breach of Covenants and the Policy of Forced Integration

Modern Spanish studies agree that a decisive shift occurred several years after the surrender, with the adoption of policies of forced religious integration. This shift was linked to the growing influence of the Inquisition and the logic of a unified confessional state, rather than to a sudden or personal breach by the Catholic Monarchs (Kamen, 1998: 52–57).

Accordingly, holding King Abu Abdullah responsible for violations of the treaty after he had lost all political authority constitutes a methodological flaw. It is illogical to attribute to him actions carried out beyond the scope of his legal or political power following the end of his rule.

Fourth: The Treaty as a Forced Option Rather than an Act of Betrayal

From the perspective of historical legal practice, surrender treaties in the late Middle Ages were intended to regulate the transfer of power and reduce violence, not to guarantee permanent rights for defeated parties (Pagden, 1995: 78–82). Within this framework, the Treaty of Granada can be understood as an attempt to protect the population, organize the transition of authority, and gain

political and social time. As such, it represented a rational option within a closed and constrained context, rather than evidence of collusion or treason.

Fifth: Reassessing Historical Responsibility

Comparative readings of the treaty within legal and diplomatic scholarship demonstrate that responsibility for developments following the surrender lay with the logic of the victorious state not with the decisions of the defeated ruler. Projecting the outcomes of later Castilian policies onto the original act of surrender conflates two distinct historical levels: negotiation under siege and governance after occupation (Meyerson, 2004: 16–18).

Thus, when subjected to comparative political and legal analysis, the Treaty of Granada appears as a forced agreement concluded under overwhelming Castilian military superiority. Its subsequent violation reflects transformations within the victorious state rather than moral or political failure on the part of King Abu Abdullah. Using the treaty to condemn him, therefore, represents a retrospective and reductionist reading that ignores the historical logic governing such agreements.

Conclusion

This study set out to reassess the role of King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII in the fall of Granada, moving beyond simplified moral explanations that reduced the end of Islamic rule in al-Andalus to individual failure or betrayal. Structural analysis has demonstrated that the collapse was the outcome of a long cumulative historical process marked by the erosion of political institutions, a decisive imbalance of power, strategic isolation, and internal divisions within the Nasrid household—factors that long preceded Abu Abdullah’s accession to the throne.

First: Key Findings

The study has reached several pivotal conclusions, most notably:

1. **Refuting Reductive Moral Narratives:** The study concludes that the fall of Granada was not the result of individual failure or betrayal by King Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII. Rather, it represented the culmination of a protracted, cumulative historical trajectory of structural erosion and power imbalances that predated his reign by decades.
2. **Deconstructing the Betrayal Construct:** The findings reveal that the accusation of treason was a socio-cultural and psychological construct that emerged post-defeat. This narrative was fueled by elegiac literature (*Rithā*) to rationalise the collapse through moral blame, thereby magnifying individual agency at the expense of the rigid structural constraints that circumscribed Abu Abdullah’s decision-making.
3. **Contextual Validation of the Surrender Treaty:** Contextual analysis of the Treaty of Granada proves that the decision to negotiate was not a free sovereign choice. Instead, it was a necessary response to a total siege, military exhaustion, and the absence of external support. Consequently, labelling this decision as treason is a projective reading that dissociates the event from its actual historical conditions.

4. Will Impotence vs. Temporal Accumulation: The study finds that the fall of Granada exemplifies an acute disequilibrium in power dynamics. The temporal accumulation of structural decline reached a threshold where political will could no longer effect a historical transformation; its role was reduced to managing a conclusion already predetermined by long-term structural decays.

Second: Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Researchers are encouraged to employ a structural constraints framework when studying figures associated with the collapse of states. This involves measuring the actual margin of manoeuvre available for individual agencies against the pressure of accumulated historical circumstances, thereby avoiding biased moral judgments.
2. The study calls for a broader application of equilibrium frameworks in analysing major historical fractures and collapses. Emphasis should be placed on the long-term decline rather than reducing history to critical moments or transient political events.

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