We can begin at the end. On the night of 31 December 1066, a Saturday, he was drinking with some of the ruler's slaves. One of them quarreled with his servant and ran outside, shouting “The Jew (our source never refers to him by name, but always calls him “the Jew”) is betraying our king.” People rushed in wanting to kill him. The ruler tried to calm the mob, but to no avail. “The Jew” fled for his life inside the palace, but he was pursued by the populace. He hid in a charcoal cellar, blackening his face, but it did not help. He was found, dragged out and done to death.

For the next day or two, the Muslim inhabitants of Granada, capital of a small independent state in the south-eastern corner of what is now Spain, but was then al-Andalus, conventionally called in English “Islamic Spain,” gave themselves over to rioting and slaughtered the entire Jewish population of the city, estimated by contemporaries at some 4,000 souls, seizing vast quantities of their goods and property.
Thus at least the view of writers, both Muslim and Jewish, at the time. In fact, there were certainly not 4,000 Jews in Granada in the eleventh century—the entire city could not have had more than 20,000 or so inhabitants—and Jews were never so large a proportion as one fifth of the population of any medieval Islamic city. Jewish life in Granada was interrupted, but we find Jews living there again already early in the next century, under the Almoravids, though none functioning there as chief minister to the rulers.

He was just 31 years old. His wife, the learned and pious daughter of a famous rabbi from North Africa (she had not appealed to him greatly as a mate, “inasmuch as she was a dwarf”), together with his very young son, survived and managed to escape to the safety of Lucena. A few more Jews also got away. Like others before and since, the killers understood that their plunder had value: they sold the books that they had stolen and many ended up in the library of a well-known scholar, the rabbi Isaac ibn Albalia, who had been a client of “the Jew.”

The riot can easily be seen, in its unexpectedness and suddenness, its ferocity and thoroughness, its destruction and rapine, its duration and ruthlessness and its sheer bloodletting, as an eerie anticipation of the Christian bestialities in the Rhineland, about a thousand miles to the north, on the way to the First Crusade some 30 years later. Some have seen it also as illustrative of Islamic attitudes towards minorities, Jews in particular. Yet, of course, the character of the riot in Granada, majority Muslims attacking minority Jews, was radically different and more references to the other sources. Also Wasserstein, Rise and Fall, 205–10, and, more picturesquely, Ashtor, Jews of Moslem Spain, 2158–94, with notes at 329–35.

3 For city sizes and the share of Jews in their populations in al-Andalus, Islamic Spain, at this time, see Wasserstein, Rise and Fall, 191, with references in n. 3.

4 His age can be deduced from his own account of his birth date, taken from his father’s “precise records,” obviously made with an eye to a horoscope, at the head of his copy of a collection of his father’s poems. There is a translation at Cole, Selected Poems of Shmuel ha-Nagid, 3.

5 For the wife (whose name is not given in our sources), see Ibn Daud, Sefer ha-Qabbalah, Hebrew text, 57; English translation, 77. For the son, ibid., Heb. text, 60; Eng. trans., 81. It is not clear that they escaped together, though he cannot have been beyond his early teens in 1066. Lucena was at this time part of the Granadan state. Abramson (“From the Works of R. Nissim Gaon,” 52–3), suggests a visit by the bride’s father, R. Nissim Gaon, to Spain for the daughter’s wedding, but, although Cohen (Ibn Daud, Sefer ha-Qabbalah, n. 274), calls the suggestion “plausible” as hinting at the date of the wedding, there is no evidence for such a visit.

6 Among these, the most well known is Rabbi Isaac ibn Albalia, who later on served al-Mu’tamid of Seville as a court astrologer (ibid., Heb. text, 60; Eng. trans., 80–1).

7 For the books, see ibid., Heb. text, 57, 59–60; Eng. trans., 76, 80.