

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 1
Introduction

Hello. I'm Sharyn Eastaugh, from the History of the Crusades Podcast, and you are listening to the first episode in a new podcast series, which aims to cover the Reconquista.

Actually, we're not just covering the Reconquista. This podcast aims to track the establishment of Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus, which began in the year 711, and then we'll move on to the gradual winding back, or reconquest, of Islamic Spain by the Spanish Christian kingdoms, a process which concluded in the year 1492 with the fall of the last Muslim outpost, the Kingdom of Granada. Just because covering the best part of 1000 years of history isn't nearly enough, we will then continue on to cover the Spanish Inquisition, which for those of you who have listened to the History of the Crusades series, will tie in neatly with the Inquisition against the Cathars, which we examined at the end of our series on the Crusade against the Cathars.

So consider yourselves warned: this is going to be a long series. Episodes will drop fortnightly, so look out for a new episode every second Friday on your favourite pod-catching site, or you can download the episodes directly from our website, which you can find at crusadespod.com. This new podcast series is supported by all the generous listeners who are my patrons. Patrons get a bonus episode once a fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and those episodes would drop in the alternate week to this series. So, to put it another way, I will be releasing an episode once a week: one to the free feed, which is this one, and the next week to the subscription feed for patrons. Should you wish to sign up to be a patron, you can do so at patreon.com, and in return for a contribution of \$1 a month, you will get access to the subscription feed, and your contribution will mean that I can bring this series to everyone ad-free. So thank you so much to all the patrons who have made producing this series possible.

Now, before we begin, we should start by shining a spotlight on the arena where all the action will be taking place. You may remember from the History of the Crusades Podcast that we started in the Middle East, then jumped over to what is now southern France for the Crusade against the Cathars, then we headed northwards to the Baltic region for the Baltic Crusades. This time, for the entire series, we will be staying put in one place, that place being the Iberian peninsula, the region in Western Europe which is currently home to the countries of Spain and Portugal. I imagine you all probably know where I'm talking about, but just in case you don't, the Iberian peninsula is a roughly square-shaped piece of land which is connected to the rest of Europe by the Pyrenees Mountains. In fact, if you imagine a square with its upper right hand corner lopped off, and you imagine a mountain range running along the cut line, well that's pretty much the Iberian peninsula. To the north and west of the square is the Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea runs along the bottom of the square and up its east side. Over the Pyrenees Mountains you will find the country of France.

In fact, it's a very neat piece of land, a lovely squarish piece of Europe, neatly separated from the rest of the continent by a mountain range, so it's no wonder that for most of its history, its rulers aimed to conquer and govern it in its entirety. Interestingly, not many people have managed to do this. The first rulers who managed to force the entire peninsula into submission were the Romans, who named the place Hispania, and ever

since the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the history of the peninsula has pretty much been the history of rulers trying to once again get the whole place under their control.

Now, it's very tempting to call the peninsula "Spain" and then discuss Islamic or Muslim Spain, then medieval Spain, then modern Spain, but of course things are more complicated than that. To call the peninsula "Spain" today, for example, sidelines an entire country, the country of Portugal, which is located along the western coast of the peninsula, and it also distresses some inhabitants who view their heritage as being independent from Spain in a manner of speaking: those from Catalonia, for example, and those from the Basque region. So instead of calling the region "Spain", I will be reminding myself to call it "the Iberian peninsula". But if I trip up occasionally, I hope you will forgive me.

I also hope you will forgive my pronunciation. The History of the Crusades Podcast provided me with the opportunity to mangle a variety of languages, and in this series, Spanish and Arabic are at my mercy. Contrary to popular belief, I do try to pronounce things correctly, and wherever possible I look to web sites such as forvo.com for guidance. But to be honest, pronunciation isn't one of my strong points, so apologies in advance.

Okay, now that all the preliminaries are out of the way, let's get down to business.

Clearly, in order to understand the events of the year 711, which heralded the commencement of Islamic rule, we need to familiarise ourselves with what was happening on the peninsula prior to the year 711, so let's zip all the way back to the days of Roman rule. As I stated earlier, the Romans were the first rulers to conquer the entire peninsula and bring it under one system of government, and this was really an impressive achievement. Prior to Roman rule, the Carthaginians had established themselves in a number of colonies along the southern coast of the peninsula, which had acted as both trading centres and military bases, overthrowing the Tartessians, who had themselves muscled in on Greek and Phoenician conquerors who had arrived centuries earlier. The Carthaginians had big plans for the peninsula, plans which unravelled following the Second Punic War, which took place around the year 200 Before Common Era, while the Carthaginian military commander Hannibal, of crossing-the-Alps fame, was away from the peninsula, attempting to take the fight to the Roman homeland, the Roman commander Scipio decided to take the opportunity to eliminate Carthaginian bases across the Pyrenees. He led his legions to the peninsula, and with the assistance of the local Hispanic people, who were apparently not exactly fans of their Carthaginian overlords, Scipio managed, after quite a lengthy military campaign, to totally destroy Carthaginian rule there.

Unfortunately for the Romans though, just as the locals weren't too keen to submit to Carthaginian rule, they also weren't too keen to submit to Roman rule. After 100 years or so of battling fierce resistance, the Romans finally thought they were getting the upper hand over the feisty locals, but Joseph O'Callaghan reports in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", it wasn't until the time of the Emperor Augustus, whose rule concluded in the year 14 of the Common Era, that the Romans felt satisfied in claiming that, at long, long last, the peninsula was securely under Roman rule. They called the region Hispania, and over the next couple of centuries they set about establishing Roman law and administrative systems over the region.

Trouble was, the local Hispanic population was still reluctant to fully embrace their new status as Roman subjects, and even after a couple of centuries of Roman rule there were still pockets of people who refused to speak Latin and who preferred their own customs

and ways of doing things to those of their Roman administrators. As a consequence, Roman rule in Hispania seemed to consist of regular reshuffling of administrative centres and redrawing of regional boundaries, in attempts to discover the most effective way of bringing this diverse place to heel.

One of the main problems faced by the Romans was the sheer size and geographic diversity of the peninsula. The Iberian peninsula is big. To give you an American reference, it's just a smidge smaller than Texas. To give you a non-American reference, it's about the same size as modern day France. Also, it has mountains, lots of mountains. Not only is it separated from the rest of Europe by the Pyrenees mountain range, within the peninsula itself are no less than five mountain ranges, and much of the land between these ranges is situated at a high altitude, above 1200 feet. In fact, Switzerland is the only country in continental Europe to contain more mountains than the Iberian peninsula. The only low-lying land is really around the coast, so I guess you can see how tricky the whole region would have been to administer.

The peninsula can be divided into three rough economic zones. The first is the coastal regions in the north and west, where the climate is damp and where fishing and the raising of livestock formed the basis of the economy. Staying on the coast, the southern and eastern coastal regions are marked by the fact that their summers are hot and their rainfall is low. The land is fertile, but irrigating the land enough to grow crops is a challenge. This is a region which enjoys a Mediterranean climate, where olive groves and vineyards are common. The final zone is the largely mountainous interior, also known as the Meseta. In this region, the climate is a real challenge. The winters are brutally cold, while the summers are scorchingly hot. The main economy of the interior during Roman times was based around livestock. Most of the plains between the mountains were home to herds of sheep, goats and cattle, which roamed around and were shifted in accordance with the seasons.

As you have probably gathered, most cities from the Roman era were established on the coasts, mostly along the southern and eastern coasts of the peninsula, or along fertile river valleys further inland. Roman roads were established to link the main cities and administrative centres, but particularly in the mountainous interior communication posed a serious challenge. In his book "Moorish Spain", Richard Fletcher speculates that the difficulties of communication inside the peninsula led many cities to look outwards rather than inwards, as particularly for the coastal towns communicating with foreign places via the sea was easier than communicating with their counterparts inside the peninsula. As a consequence, Catalonia in the south formed close ties with their neighbours across the Pyrenees, in what is now southern France, or "Cathar country", if you prefer, while the cities along the north and west coasts interacted closely with the residents of Brittany, in what today is France, and across to the British Isles. There was also close contact between southern Spain and north-west Africa - the Strait of Gibraltar, which separates the peninsula from the African continent, being only 12 miles wide at its narrowest point.

So for all these reasons, it's no wonder that the Roman administrators kept tinkering with the boundaries, redrawing linkages between the different provinces across the peninsula, wondering how on earth they were going to find something which would act as a unifying force across this vast piece of land.

The solution, when it arrived, came in the form of the Latin Christian religion. It's not exactly clear just how Christianity was introduced to the peninsula, but once it took hold, it spread like wildfire. By the year 202 in the Common Era, the Roman writer Tertullian

confidently asserted that the entire peninsula had converted to Christianity. This may not have been completely correct. Historians today speculate that pockets of paganism may have existed for the next couple of centuries, particularly amongst the Basque people and inhabitants of remote mountainous communities, but the Christianisation of the peninsula was still a rapid and largely successful event, which did go some way towards unifying and Romanising the people of Hispania.

By the time of the Germanic invasions of the Western Roman Empire, Hispania had enjoyed 600 years of Roman rule and was largely a Romanised Latin Christian region. As such, it must have been a shock for everyone when the Western Roman Empire fell and the barbarians began knocking at the gates. Hispania was a bad place to be in the 5th century, as a number of invaders entered the peninsula and waged war on the local population, with the Hispanic Romans apparently unable to defend themselves. Tribes of Vandals, Alans and Visigoths plundered and fought their way across the peninsula, waging war on the locals and on each other until, by the end of the 5th century, one tribe prevailed over the others, and that victorious tribe was a Germanic people known as the Visigoths. The Visigoths had already established a kingdom in southern France, known as the Kingdom of Toulouse, and now they were intent on doing the same in northern Spain. They settled in Castile and gradually spread their rule over the peninsula, booting out the other barbarians and conquering Roman outposts.

This, I probably don't need to point out, was no easy task. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan estimates that the Visigoths at this point in time only numbered between 200,000 and 300,000 people, while the Roman Hispanic locals numbered between six and nine million. The Visigoths set themselves up as a sort of military elite ruling class, but due to the size of the population and the geographic diversity of the region they were attempting to govern, they were forced to employ many Hispanic administrators and rely on many Hispanic laws and traditions. In fact, in the end, it was not so much that the Visigoths conquered Hispania and forced their Germanic ways upon the local population, but sort of the opposite happened. The conquerors became Hispanised, if that's even a word. What do I mean by this? Well, the Visigoths ended up adopting the Latin language; they largely kept the Roman administrative structure in place; and also ended up adopting Roman laws and customs. So the conquerors ended up being conquered by the people they were conquering, or at least being assimilated into them, which is a strange and interesting turn of events.

The local Hispanic population even managed to convert its Visigothic overlords to the Latin Christian religion. The Visigoths were Arian Christians. You might remember from the Crusade Against the Cathars series, from the History of the Crusades Podcast, that Arian Christianity was one of the many streams of Christianity considered heretical by the mainstream Latin Christians. King Leovigild, who was the second Visigothic king to rule in Spain and was the man who really cemented Visigothic rule there, did his best to convert the inhabitants of the peninsula to Arian Christianity, but they were having none of it. King Leovigild's son, who ruled after his father, converted to the Catholic form of Christianity, a move which did a lot to end the friction which existed between the Visigothic rulers and their Hispanic subjects.

The Visigothic kings established themselves at Toledo, a town which is pretty much smack bang in the middle of the Iberian peninsula, and Visigothic rule extended over the region for the next century or so. Really, for a bunch of barbarian conquerors, the Visigoths did a pretty good job of uniting the peninsula under their rule, while doing their best to eliminate the sources of conflict between themselves and the local Hispanic population.

The Achilles heel of the Visigoths, though, was their form of monarchy. They didn't have a system of hereditary rule, so the crown didn't pass automatically to the king's eldest son when the king died. Instead, each monarch was elected. This sounds great in theory, but in reality it amped up factional infighting and conflict between the noble classes, as there was a constant jostling for position and supremacy underway, so that should the king suddenly die, the noblemen would be placed in the best position possible to secure their election to the throne.

Unfortunately, it was this factionalism and rivalry amongst the power brokers inside Visigothic Spain, which brought about its downfall. Join me next time, as we take a look at the final years of the Christian Visigoths.

Now, just as a footnote, you will have probably noticed that I have just raced through around 800 years of history in a single episode. For those of you who are currently feeling a little rushed, don't worry. I promise the next 800 years will be dealt with in much, much more detail and will go much, much slower. Until next time, bye for now.

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