

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 10
The Early 800s: A Snapshot

Hello again. Now, before we commence the narrative this week, I need to point out an error from the last episode. My transcript provider, Mark Suters, also moonlights as a fact checker, and he pointed out that I mentioned that King Alfonso II began his reign in the year 783. That may well have caused a few of you to scratch your heads, as I had mentioned only a few moments before that Silo died in the year 783. He was replaced by an illegitimate son of one of Alfonso I's brothers, who himself was replaced by Vermudo, who ruled until 791. It was only in the year 791 that Alfonso II took the reins of power. So why did I say that King Alfonso II began his reign eight years earlier, in the year 783? Well, I've got no idea. The best I can come up with is a statement in Roger Collins' book "The Arab Conquest of Spain", which describes Alfonso II's rule as having ought to have been commenced in 783, which I likely mis-read. So correction. When I stated in the last episode that Alfonso II's rule began in 783 that was incorrect. It actually began in the year 791. Thank you so much Mark for saving my bacon. Anyway, back to Episode 10.

Last time we took a look at the Kingdom of Asturias, a small, independent, Christian kingdom which emerged in the centre of the northern coastal region of the Iberian peninsula. When we left the last episode, King Alfonso II was well into his epic fifty year reign. He had moved the capital of his kingdom to the town of Oviedo and was widely publicising the discovery of what he described to be the remains of St James the Apostle, at a site in the northwestern corner of the peninsula in Galicia, a site which, over the centuries, will develop into Santiago de Compostela, the destination point for one of the most famous and popular pilgrimage routes in Christianity, the "Camino de Santiago" or the "Way of St James". Back in Episode 8, we discussed the Muslim Emir al-Hakam. So, with al-Hakam ruling Al-Andalus from Cordoba in the south, and with Alfonso II ruling his little independent Christian Kingdom of Asturias in the north of the peninsula, we are going to take a step back, zoom out, and take a look at how everyone on the peninsula was faring in the first couple of decades of the ninth century.

Now, there are some external pressures impacting on Al-Andalus at this time, mainly in the form of the Franks, who are pushing over the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula, more specifically, into the regions which will later become Catalonia and Aragon. The Franks are also making diplomatic overtures to King Alfonso and are reaching out to the Basques in the north-eastern part of the peninsula. We will discuss them shortly, but first, let's take a look at Al-Andalus, how 100 years or so of Muslim rule has changed life on the peninsula, and how this has impacted upon its infrastructure and its inhabitants.

At this stage in our timeline, so in the early 800s, the Muslims are in effect a ruling minority. Just as the Germanic Visigoths had invaded the peninsula to impose their rule over the Hispanic population, as we saw back in our first episode, the Muslim invaders had pretty much established themselves as the minority rulers over a population which was linguistically and culturally different to themselves. We saw with the Visigoths that the Visigothic minority established themselves as rulers by, in effect, adopting much of the culture and even the religion of the people of the peninsula, but clearly this hasn't happened under Muslim rule. The Muslim rulers were, 100 or so years since their invasion, still distinctly Arab and Berber in culture, and were still clearly of the Muslim faith. They

hadn't watered down their cultural practises or changed their religion to align with the majority population on the peninsula.

So how has this affected life on the peninsula? Well, Al-Andalus at this time was divided into administrative centres or provinces, with each province having a major town at its core. The town which formed the administrative centre of the province was ruled by a governor, who was appointed directly by the Emir in Cordoba. The rule of the governor was backed by a Muslim military force based in the town, commanded by a prefect. The governor collected taxes in his province, some of which were sent to Cordoba and the remainder of which stayed within the province. Generally speaking, the further the province was from Cordoba, the more independent it was from the Emir. An extreme example of this was in the marches, or borderlands, near the Pyrenees. Now you might remember that when land was allocated to the Muslim conquerors following the Battle of 711, the Berbers scored the mountainous regions and the region's furthest from the administrative centre of Cordoba. While the Berbers have now largely been expelled from their former lands in the north of the peninsula, they still hold land near the Pyrenees, in regions which are regarded as border regions, or marches, by the Emir.

Now, those of you who have listened to the History of the Crusades series on the Crusade against the Cathars will remember the Kingdoms of Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre. Basically, these kingdoms ran along the Iberian side of the Pyrenees mountains. If you picture the Pyrenees mountains as running along the chopped-off north-eastern corner of the box which is the peninsula, Catalonia lies on the eastern-most section of the regions. It enjoys a Mediterranean coastline, and has Barcelona as its administrative centre. The middle region, Aragon, is landlocked, while the northern-most region, Navarre, has its coastline on the Bay of Biscay. The administrative centre of Navarre is the town of Pamplona. Now, back in the first few decades over the ninth century, these regions existed, but hadn't yet become known as Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we will refer to them using their later names.

Aragon and Catalonia at this time were only loosely under the control of Cordoba. Their Berber administrators were frequently in conflict with Cordoba, and the regions were the subject of frequent raids by the Franks. Navarre, the remaining mountainous region to the north, was not under Muslim control. Like its northern neighbours, Asturias and Galicia, Navarre was an independent Christian region, populated mainly by the Basque people. While King Alfonso II liked to think of himself as the "king of the north", extending his rule out from Asturias and over to Galicia to the west, and the Basque region which would later become known as Navarre to the east, both the Basques and the Galicians viewed themselves as being independent from Asturias, and not under the thumb of King Alfonso.

So in summary, the situation was pretty much as we described in Episode 8. Muslim rule was strongest in the southern parts of the peninsula, with the influence of Cordoba waning the further away from it you went. By the time you reached the northern coastline of the peninsula, there was no Muslim presence whatsoever, as the region was occupied by independent Christian territories. Likewise, the borderlands near the Pyrenees were frequently rising in rebellion, and were only loosely under Cordoba's control, despite being Muslim regions.

Now we've seen in previous episodes that some Christian residents in Al-Andalus had begun to convert to Islam, which increased their ability to play a role in the politics of their region. In his book "Moorish Spain", Richard Fletcher estimates that by the year 800 around 8% of the indigenous population of Al-Andalus had converted to Islam.

Predominantly these converts came from the land-holding class, either from Visigothic Christian families or Hispano- Roman landholders, and their conversion was a means by which they could safeguard their wealth and status, and also their status as slave owners. While the Muslim rulers were tolerant of Christianity and Judaism, they did not allow non-Muslims to own Muslim slaves, and Christian and Jewish residents of Al-Andalus were taxed at a higher rate than their Muslim counterparts. In addition, the ability to speak fluent Arabic was a requirement for any person wishing to hold an administrative position in Al-Andalus, as was the requirement to be a Muslim.

As Brian Catlos notes in his book “Kingdoms of Faith”, Christian citizens of Al-Andalus didn't only convert to Islam for monetary reasons or to serve their political ambitions. Many members of the Arab or Berber ruling elite married local Christian women who, prior to the marriage, would frequently convert to Islam. Often the entire extended family of the women would also convert to Islam and embrace Arabic culture, while also maintaining their ties to their local community. So Al-Andalus is slowly absorbing local Christians into its religion and culture.

Likewise, much of the infrastructure across Al-Andalus has been altered to reflect the Arab conquerors. In fact, in his book “Kingdoms of Faith”, Brian Catlos contends that some of the cities and towns which were Muslim centres of their provinces had altered so much in the 100 years since the Muslim invasion that they would have been unrecognisable to the inhabitants of Visigothic Spain. Many of the old Roman buildings within these towns had been dismantled, and the new layout of the town and its new buildings reflected Arabic and Islamic styles of architecture. Likewise, the wealthy Arab residents of the town tended to construct houses which reflected their traditional living arrangements, so extended families settled in buildings which were cloistered and self-contained, mirroring the lifestyles that they would have enjoyed in the Middle East.

Even the roads had changed. The Roman roads which crossed the peninsula had been highly engineered, wide and straight. They were designed to enable the easy transport of goods on carts. However, most goods in Al-Andalus were transported by camels or pack mules, and the new roads which were constructed reflected this. The new roads tended to follow the contours of the land. Instead of being flat and straight, they curved around hills and followed the lines of rivers, along surfaces which may have proved challenging for a cart but which were ideal for pack animals. As the wealth and prestige of towns and cities increased, rural inhabitants, particularly those who had converted to Islam, made a move to the towns, resulting in the construction of new suburbs to house the new residents.

So, in a nutshell, Al-Andalus is slowly transforming itself. The parts of the Iberian peninsula administered by the Muslims are changing from Roman Christian landscapes to increasingly Muslim spaces, with Arabic culture reflected in the architecture and infrastructure of its towns.

The good news for Al-Andalus was that it was earning itself a reputation internationally as a stable, well-administered power. It is forming diplomatic ties with other powers in the Middle East, and the rulers in northern Africa are beginning to look to Al-Andalus, and not to the Middle East, for guidance and support.

The bad news is that there are some pressure points which Al-Andalus, will need to keep an eye on moving forward. The first is one which we've covered already, namely the fact that the northern coastline of the peninsula is not under Muslim rule and is occupied by independent Christian territories.

The other pressure point concerns increasing aggression by its neighbour over the Pyrenees, the Christian Franks. By the year 800, the Frankish leader Charlemagne was at the height of his power. He was anointed as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope on Christmas Day in the year 800, and by that time his territory extended out, not only over most of the region which today is the country of France, but also over much of modern day Germany and Italy. It's safe to say that, if Charlemagne had his way, he would like to extend his conquests over into the Iberian Peninsula and include Al-Andalus in the long list of states which had succumbed to his aggression.

Now, there is a river called the River Ebro, which runs kind of parallel to the Pyrenees mountain range, on its Iberian side. It runs all the way from the Basque region in the north across the length of the peninsula, passing through Zaragoza, before emptying out into the Mediterranean Sea at Tortosa. This, I can't stress enough, is a massive river. All up, it covers nearly 1000 kilometres, and as I said, it handily runs kind of parallel to the Pyrenees. It seems to have been Charlemagne's goal to push the Franks over the Pyrenees, and for the Franks to occupy the territory between the Pyrenees and the River Ebro, as the first step to conquering the peninsula.

So, by the year 800, how was Charlemagne faring with this project? Well, unfortunately for Charlemagne, he had encountered a number of road-blocks. Things had started well enough back in the 770s, when he was approached by the governor of Zaragoza for assistance. The governor of Zaragoza was keen for his city to split from Cordoba and become an independent entity, and he had in fact been approached by representatives from the Caliph in Baghdad, offering military assistance to Zaragoza in its bid for independence. However, not wanting the Caliph to gain a foothold on the peninsula, Abd al-Rahman had sent a large army to Zaragoza to quash the rebellion.

Deciding that he needed a closer and better equipped ally than the faraway Caliph, the governor of Zaragoza hit the road and travelled all the way to the court of Charlemagne in Saxony, where he offered Zaragoza as the vassal of Charlemagne, if Charlemagne could send a force to liberate the city from Cordoba. To Charlemagne, this sounded like an ideal way to commence his expansion into the Iberian peninsula, so he agreed to the proposal, and in the year 778 he led a Frankish fighting force through a mountain pass called Roncesvalles, in the Pyrenees, into Basque territory, in the region which will later be known as Navarre. He made his way to the main town in the region, Pamplona, and the people of Pamplona swore fealty to him. He then made his way to the town of Huesca in the neighbouring region of Aragon. Again, the people of Huesca offered homage to the Christian Frankish King.

It was after this though, that Charlemagne's luck ran out. He arrived at Zaragoza, only to find the gates of the city barred against him, with the governor apparently having had difficulty convincing the garrison of the town to turn it over to the Franks. Charlemagne settled in for a lengthy siege of the town, only to be notified that the Saxons had risen up in rebellion against his rule. Deciding that Saxony was a higher priority than Zaragoza, Charlemagne lifted the siege and began the long journey back to Saxony, with the governor of Zaragoza apparently accompanying him as a prisoner. However, as Charlemagne was travelling back over the mountain pass at Roncesvalles, disaster struck. His rear guard was attacked by local Basque people and suffered huge losses. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan reports that the massacre of the Franks at Roncesvalles became the subject of the first great epic of French literature, the *Chanson de Roland*, although in the story the attack on the Franks was initiated not by the

Basques but by the Muslims. Joseph O'Callaghan points out that some Muslims may have indeed been involved in the fighting, as the governor of Zaragoza was liberated during the battle and managed to make his way back to his city, where he was promptly killed by a member of his own garrison, who then pledged the city to Cordoba.

Following this defeat, which was one of the few suffered by Charlemagne during his rule, Charlemagne seemed to lose interest in personally defeating the peninsula. Instead, he delegated the task of securing Barcelona, and the regions which will later become Catalonia and Aragon, to his son Louis the Pious, who was the King of Aquitaine. As we leave our review of the Iberian Peninsula in the early 800s, King Louis of Aquitaine is doing his best to do exactly that.

So there you have it, an overview of the Iberian peninsula as it was in the early 800s. Join me next time as we continue our narrative. Until next time, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to patreon.com and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, crusadespod.com, and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End