

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 14
Muhammad I

Hello again. Last time we examined how the exodus of the Mozarab Christians from Al-Andalus during the rule of Abd al-Rahman II brought Arabic influences to Galicia and Asturias. We also zoomed down to take a closer look at the Basque region. Due to its location on the northern coast of the Iberian Peninsula, adjacent to the Pyrenees mountain range, the home of the Basques found itself fending off attacks from all directions. By the end of the episode, we saw the King of Pamplona align himself with the Banu Qasi, in an attempt to import some extra muscle into the Basque territory, to protect it from its aggressive neighbours.

Now, as we've seen from the last couple of episodes, the rule of Abd al-Rahman II ushered in a sort of golden age for Al-Andalus. But as we all know, the good times never last, and the big test for Al-Andalus was always going to come when the Emir Abd al-Rahman II died. Unfortunately, for the last three years of his life, Abd al-Rahman II was seriously ill, and unable to fully partake in the day to day business of governing. In addition to having to delegate the various tasks involved in ruling Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman was also unable to be actively present at his court during this time. This opened the floodgates to a huge amount of palace intrigue and in-fighting. Abd al-Rahman had sired an impressive total of more than forty sons, and while he was confined to his bed during his illness, court eunuchs, promoting their favourite sons, jostled with one another to get their favoured successor into prominent positions.

Abd al-Rahman's chosen successor was his son Muhammad, and when the Emir finally passed on, the court faction supporting Muhammad was able to smuggle him into the palace in secret, by disguising him as a woman. As a result, Muhammad successfully took power in the year 852, and was able to successfully stamp out attempts by his brothers to seize the throne.

The conflict inside the Emir's family and court, however, won't be the only challenge Muhammad I, as he became known, will have to face. While his father had presided over a golden age, Al-Andalus was still an incredibly diverse place. Not only were three religions being openly practised inside Al-Andalus, conflict frequently erupted between the more fundamentalist proponents of those religions and their more moderate counterparts. In addition to rival religious groups and affiliations, there were also an abundance of rival ethnic and cultural groups inside Al-Andalus, ranging from the Visigoths to Berbers, Arabs and Muwallads. Without deft leadership, conflict between these different groups was always a possibility.

In addition to internal challenges, Muhammad I also faced external threats, in the form of Viking raids, incursions by the Franks, and aggressions from the Christians in the north of the peninsula, predominantly the Asturians.

So how did Muhammad fare in facing down all of these challenges? Well, fortunately for Muhammad, the exodus of the more fervent Christians from Al-Andalus to Galicia and Asturias during his father's reign meant that most Christians remaining inside Al-Andalus were happy to keep their heads down and live under the Emir's rule.

However, it wasn't all rainbows and unicorns. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos provides an example of how religion could get in the way of personal ambition. He cites the experience of a man called Qumis ibn Antunyan, who was a highly respected and well educated Christian man who had served as a scribe, translator and adviser to Abd al-Rahman II. After Mohammad rose to power, Qumis was singled out for promotion into the position of chief scribe in the royal court, but he was taken aside and told that it would be super awkward for the Emir if he were to have a Christian as his chief scribe. Qumis took the hint and converted to Islam. He was duly promoted, but endured constant bullying and taunting from his co-workers that he was a false Muslim who still secretly practised Christianity. The situation eventually became untenable, and Qumis was forced out of the royal court. Not content that Qumis was now out of a job, the Emir bowed to pressure from within his court, and confiscated Qumis' property, so that it couldn't be passed down to his children. So, while on the whole conflict between Muslims and Christians had settled down, it still made its presence felt on the micro level.

Interestingly, Brian Catlos reports that there is no evidence of any significant conflict between Jews and Muslims in Al-Andalus at this time.

However, there was significant conflict between Al-Andalus and the Christians in the north. The current King of Asturias was a man called Ordoño. King Ordoño's reign commenced in the year 850, two years before Muhammad became the Emir of Al-Andalus. Ordoño had spent his childhood in the court of King Alfonso II, of established-the-pilgrimage-site-at-Santiago-de-Compostela fame, who we met back in Episode Nine. King Alfonso II had died in the year 842, following an impressively successful reign spanning more than fifty years. Despite King Alfonso's many achievements, one thing he hadn't been able to do was to father any legitimate sons. Consequently, when he died, Asturias found itself plunged into a succession crisis.

Prior to his death, King Alfonso had named his successor as the son of Alfonso's predecessor, King Vermudo, a man called Ramiro. However, other contenders for the throne challenged Ramiro's candidacy, the main contender being King Alfonso's son-in-law, Nepotian. Nepotian set himself up in Oviedo, the capital of the Kingdom of Asturias, which prompted Ramiro to seek military assistance from neighbouring Galicia. He led an army into Asturias from Galicia and defeated Nepotian in battle, becoming King Ramiro I in the year 842. He had a short but very busy eight year reign, which saw him fending off attacks from the Vikings, in addition to various internal struggles. Upon his death, his crown passed to his son, Ordoño, who, as we've mentioned earlier, became the King of Asturias in the year 850.

One of the first crises in Ordoño's reign brought him into direct conflict with the Basque people. As we noted in the last episode, the ruling family in Pamplona had teamed up with the Banu Qasi, and the head of the Banu Qasi, a man named Musa, had married into the royal family. Musa had been engaging in a campaign of territorial expansion on behalf of the Basque people and had, as a result, extended his reach to the west. King Ordoño viewed this as a threat to the Kingdom of Asturias, and managed to defeat Musa in battle. Deciding that some territorial expansion of his own might not be a bad idea, King Ordoño began repopulating the land to the south of the Kingdom of Asturias, land which, you might recall, had been left vacant as a sort of a buffer zone between Asturias and Al-Andalus. Muhammad I viewed this as a threat to Al-Andalus, and he sent a succession of military commanders into the region to harass, disturb and terrify the newly relocated inhabitants of the buffer zone.

However, in the greater scheme of things, this was just a minor issue. The major threat of Muhammad's reign arose inside Al-Andalus, and came in the form of Muslim rebellions.

The trouble began in Toledo in the year 852, the same year in which Muhammad was installed as the Emir. Perhaps sensing an opportunity to strike while Muhammad was still settling into his new role, the Muwallad families inside Toledo rose in revolt, expelled the governor of the town, and declared themselves independent of Cordoba. Then they decided to take the rebellion to the next level by launching military incursions into regions south of Toledo.

Now, just to refresh your memories, the Muwallad population inside Al-Andalus was made up of non-Arabs who had converted to Islam. To refresh your memories even further, Toledo is the city smack-bang in the centre of the Iberian peninsula. It wasn't one of the border towns over to the east which seemed to be constantly rising in rebellion. So, to put it another way, this wasn't a rebellion which Muhammad could ignore.

The Muwallads who led the Toledo rebellion were mostly comprised of descendants of aristocratic Visigothic families who, while they had accepted Islam as their religion, deeply resented the fact that a bunch of privileged Arabs governed their city and answered to the Emir in Cordoba. Their stance was applauded and supported by some other local social groups, who also resented the extent of Arab power, such as the Berbers. As word of the rebellion spread, it was also given the stamp of approval by the Banu Qasi in the Basque region, and then, even more alarmingly, by King Ordone of Asturias, who pledged to send military support to the rebels.

Now, there has been debate over the centuries as to the exact motives of these rebels, and what outcome they were hoping to achieve. While some historians contend that the revolt came about due to Spanish or Christian nationalism, Brian Catlos contends that current thought is that the rebels had no desire to overthrow the Emir in Cordoba, or to re-establish Christian rule. No, these rebels were Muslim, and their aim is now generally seen as one of positioning the Muwallad Muslims of Al-Andalus into a higher rank inside the system of governance. In other words, the Muwallad Muslims were sick of being ruled by the Arab Umayyad Muslims, and wanted more power for themselves inside Muslim Al-Andalus.

Clearly though, despite the fact that the rebels weren't proposing to topple Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula, Muhammad I needed to stamp out the uprising, and needed to do this quickly, before other players, such as the King of Asturias, were drawn into the conflict, making it a much more serious situation.

Now, unfortunately for Muhammad, this won't be the first Muslim uprising which he will be forced to deal with. In fact, throughout his reign, discontent with local Umayyad Arab governors will see a raft of uprisings take place across Al-Andalus. The tricky thing about those rebellions is, as we've discussed previously, most cities were governed by an Arab leader who answered to Cordoba, and who was forced, to some extent, to govern with the assistance and support of local Muslims who were outside the Arab Umayyad faction. Put simply, the armies of Cordoba couldn't mobilise on behalf of every governor who was having trouble keeping order in his city, so to a large extent, the cooperation of other Muslim groups was necessary for Umayyad rule to survive. The same issue applied to the stamping out of rebellions.

Muhammad really needed to form alliances with local Muslims in and around the rebellious city in order to be sure of defeating the rebels and keeping them out of power. So, in response to the Toledo rebellion, Muhammad managed to gain the support of a network of Berber families who were traditional enemies of the Berbers supporting the Toledo rebels. Muhammad and his forces, with the assistance of the Berbers, were able to nip the Toledo rebellion in the bud, before the involvement of the Basque people and the Asturians. Once normality had resumed, the Berber allies Muhammad had relied upon were placed in prominent positions inside Toledo, and will eventually become powerful enough that they will pose their own threat to Cordoba.

Later in his reign, an almost carbon-copy situation will play out in a region to the north west of Cordoba, which was centred around the city of Merida. The city of Merida had been a seething hot-pot of unrest and dissatisfaction for decades, with conflict often erupting between the Muwallad clans, the Berbers, and the Christians. In fact, at one stage, the Christians had even reached out to the King of the Franks, Louis the Pious, for assistance.

In the year 868, the Umayyad governor of Merida, a man called Abd al-Rahman ibn Marwan, whose nickname was al-Jilliqli, declared Merida to be independent from Cordoba. Troops were sent from Cordoba to Merida, and al-Jilliqli was hauled back to Cordoba for a dressing-down by the Emir. Al-Jilliqli managed to flee from Cordoba, then he and his family locked themselves inside a fortress near Merida. Muhammad sent his forces to attack the fortress, and after a three month long siege a compromise was reached. Al-Jilliqli would be reinstated as the governor of Merida and allowed to resume his rule of the city, with oversight from Cordoba.

However, al-Jilliqli proved to be so troublesome that Muhammad sent one of his generals, Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz, to attack al-Jilliqli and teach him a lesson. This prompted al-Jilliqli to reach out to the King of Asturias for military assistance. The assistance was granted, which resulted in al-Jilliqli defeating Hashim, whom he then sent to Asturias as a gift to the King.

Al-Jilliqli ended up travelling to Asturias and seeking a refuge there for a number of years. He was finally enticed back by Muhammad in return for being able to rule an independent state as a vassal of Cordoba. Al-Jilliqli established his capital in the city of Badajoz, and set about improving and enhancing the city until it was a thriving metropolis. Al-Jilliqli's descendants will rule over the region for three generations and, spoiler alert, it will one day become an independent kingdom after the collapse of Umayyad rule.

Join me next time as we welcome a new king to the throne of Asturias, and continue our examination of the rule of the Emir Muhammad I. Until next time, bye for now.

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