

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 17
Abd-Allah

Hello again. Last time we saw the expansion of the Kingdom of Asturias under the rule of King Alfonso III, the departure of the Emir Muhammed I, and the rise of a powerful rebel inside Al-Andalus, Ibn Hafsun, the rebel of Bobastro. At the end of the last episode, we saw the sudden and largely unexplained death of Muhammed I's son and successor al-Mundhir during the siege of Bobastro. One of al-Mundhir's brothers, and a suspect in his death, Abd-Allah raced to Cordoba without informing anyone of his brother's death, and had himself installed as Emir. So the current situation is: it's the year 888 and we have a new Emir in Cordoba, Abd-Allah, whose current challenges are the expanding Kingdom of Asturias in the north of the peninsula, the ongoing aggression of the Banu Qasi in the Basque region, and the growing strength of rebels inside Al-Andalus, notably al-Jilliqi and Ibn Hafsun.

Now, one interesting point worth noting about Abd-Allah is the fact that, for the past twenty years or so, he has been married to a Basque woman, and not just any Basque woman but the daughter of the man next in line for the throne in Pamplona. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos points out that throughout this era the upper levels of the aristocracy across the peninsula were engaging in diplomacy, which extended to interfaith marriage alliances. In this way, King Alfonso III had sent his eldest son and heir, Ordono, to the Basque region to spend some time with the Muslim Banu Qasi, and other members of the royal family at Pamplona sent their young sons to Cordoba to be raised in the Emir's court. Despite the fact that most of these moves were undertaken with a view to blocking or decreasing the influence of rival groups, it meant that lines between Christian and Muslim rulers in the Iberian peninsula were not as stark as they would appear if you were merely tracing the conflict between the different entities. Behind the scenes, the divide between the Christian north and Muslim Al-Andalus was kind of blurry, with high degrees of interpersonal relationships and understanding between the rulers of the warring states.

Anyway, back to Abd-Allah. Now we've pointed out that at the commencement of his reign, Abd-Allah was faced with a raft of serious challenges, all of which required his attention to some degree. So did Abd-Allah throw himself energetically into his new position, racing around Al-Andalus, playing whack-a-mole with the Muslim rebels while also keeping the Banu Qasi and Asturias in check? Well, no. Abd-Allah, in fact, was almost the polar opposite of the two Emirs who had preceded him, in so far as personality and ruling style were concerned. While Muhammed I and al-Mundhir had both expended large amounts of effort in attempts to resolve the many conflicts inside the peninsula, Abd-Allah could only really be described as a low energy sort of a person. He was deeply religious, quiet, and highly suspicious of everyone around him. If examined by a psychologist today, he may well have been diagnosed with clinical depression. He didn't seem to enjoy being the Emir one little bit, despite having likely killed his brother to obtain the position. He wasn't particularly interested in military matters, and preferred to leave the fighting to his generals without offering any leadership himself - save for one exception which we will come to in a minute. In fact, as stated by Hugh Kennedy in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of Al-Andalus", just about the only time the new Emir left his palace was to visit the neighbouring mosque, and even then he ordered a covered walkway to be constructed between the palace and his chosen place of worship, so that he didn't have to see or speak to anyone on the way. For most of his reign Abd-Allah was reclusive, and seemed to highly resent any intrusion into his personal space.

Family members who crossed him, though, found him to also be completely ruthless and without mercy. Three years into his reign he arranged for the murder of his eldest son and heir. Who did Abd-Allah arrange to be the murderer, the person who would take the life of his eldest son? Well, Abd-Allah chose another one of his sons to be tasked with murdering his older brother. The murdering son himself was murdered, also on the orders of his father, four years later, after rumours circulated that he had conspired with some rebels in Seville. Not being content with having killed two of his sons, Abd-Allah also arranged for the death of two of his own brothers, with the family death toll during his reign being unmatched in the history of Al-Andalus to date.

Interestingly, Hugh Kennedy asserts that the reason for the high death toll was unrest and discontent inside the ruling family about the manner in which Abd-Allah was ruling Al-Andalus. Apparently, being disinterested in the actual process of governance and just wanting to be left alone was doing nothing for his popularity inside his family, or inside Al-Andalus for that matter, a situation about which Abd-Allah was likely aware. So when the inevitable discontent looked like spilling over and becoming something more serious, Abd-Allah reacted by discovering the identity of the person fomenting the dissent, then arranging to have that person killed, despite the fact that the victims were frequently his own family members.

So, how did Abd-Allah's unorthodox approach to ruling Al-Andalus affect the many conflicts inside the Iberian peninsula? Well, to say things didn't go well is an understatement. King Alfonso III continued his expansion, which included raids into Al-Andalus itself. Abd-Allah didn't even try to place a lid over the Banu Qasi, and the rebels inside Al Andalus, well they spiralled out of control.

One of the most serious rebellions occurred in the city of Seville, which at this point in time was the second largest city in Al-Andalus after Cordoba, and was of vital economic importance, being the main trading port between the Iberian peninsula and northern Africa.

The power within Seville centred around four main families, two of which were Muwallad and two of which were Arab. These families seemed to have been living in relative harmony until the beginning of the reign of Abd-Allah, when one of the Arab families decided to take advantage of the lack of leadership in Cordoba by making a play for the overall control of Seville. The leader of the family set himself up in a stronghold outside Seville, made some alliances with other rebels, including al-Jilliqli, then launched an ambitious military campaign which resulted in the death of the Umayyad governor of Seville. The other three powerful Seville families decided to make some moves of their own, which led to a sort of stalemate over the struggle for the city. A decade later, the conflict still hadn't been resolved, and the body count amongst the various members of the four warring families was rising. While Cordoba stood by and did nothing, the leader of the Arab family which hadn't sparked the initial uprising decided to make a decisive move. He held a dinner party, in air quotes, for his rivals and managed to kill them all in the process, becoming the undisputed leader of Seville.

Astonishingly, the new leader of Seville then reached out to Cordoba and asked Abd-Allah for a deal. As a result of the negotiations which followed, the new leader of Seville was recognised as the King of Seville by Cordoba, in return for a promise not to provide any assistance to the Emir's enemies. The new King of Seville went on to establish a tiny Kingdom around the city, minting his own coins, establishing a standing army for his Kingdom, and inviting Islamic scholars to patronise his court. Amazingly, the little Kingdom

of Seville prospered and remained peaceful until its King died, shortly before Abd-Allah's own death in the year 910.

While Abd-Allah may have been happy to sit back and let the second most important city in Al-Andalus be ruled by a rebel king, the one rebel he couldn't ignore was Ibn Hafsun, whose rise to power we covered in the last episode. While everyone else was taking advantage of the leadership vacuum in Cordoba, Ibn Hafsun decided to take things a step further, by attempting to attack the city of Cordoba itself. Now, by this time, Ibn Hafsun was a powerful man, who presided over an impressively large chunk of the southern part of the Iberian peninsula.

In the year 891, three years into the reign of Abd-Allah, Ibn Hafsun established a forward post for himself at a stronghold near Cordoba. He then sent his forces into the field, raiding the countryside around the city, with his men advancing right up to the walls of Cordoba itself. This finally galvanised Abd-Allah into action. For the first and last time of his twenty-four year long reign, Abd-Allah led his army out from Cordoba, defeating Ibn Hafsun and capturing his forward-post stronghold. However, Ibn Hafsun merely retreated back to his base at Bobastro and continued ruling his rebel empire.

Ibn Hafsun's influence did begin to wane though, after the year 899. This was caused not due to any action by Abd-Allah, but because Ibn Hafsun made the surprise announcement that he was converting to Christianity. It's not exactly clear why Ibn Hafsun switched religions, but it turned out to be a bad move. While it no doubt increased his popularity amongst the Christians inside his territory, many Muwallads abandoned him completely. Apostasy was taken very seriously in the Muslim world, and most rebel Muslim fighters now wanted little to do with the ex-Muslim Ibn Hafsun. He managed to form an alliance with the new King of Seville, and renewed his contacts with King Alfonso in Asturias, but despite his best efforts, his influence and support took a nose-dive.

Opponents of the Umayyad regime in Cordoba not only flourished inside Al-Andalus, but outside of it as well. In the north, King Alfonso continued his policies of expansion almost unchecked. Not only did he continue to entice Mozarab Christians to leave Al-Andalus and settle in his newly re-populated buffer zone, he made a number of successful raids deep into Al-Andalus itself, attacking Seville, and collecting tributes from residents in Toledo. However, in the same way that Ibn Hafsun's ambitions were checked, not by Cordoba but by his decision to convert to Christianity, King Alfonso's ambitions were checked, not by Cordoba but by some truly dysfunctional family infighting between Alfonso and his sons. We will get to that sordid affair in the next episode.

Another Christian to benefit from Abd-Allah's rule, or the lack thereof, was the excellently named Count of Barcelona, Wilfred the Hairy. Taking advantage not only of a lack of interest from Cordoba but also the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire over the Pyrenees, Wilfred the Hairy busied himself with creating what would eventually become known as Catalonia. Using Barcelona as the seat of his power, he broadened his territory to include an impressively large chunk of land. Unfortunately though, when Wilfred the Hairy died, he divided his domain amongst his surviving sons, turning what was essentially Catalonia back into a bunch of smaller counties. Still, Wilfred the Hairy pretty much takes the prize for being the founding father of Catalonia.

With Asturias expanding and Catalonia popping up, what's been happening in the Basque region? Well, just like Wilfred the Hairy made his move down south, becoming the founding father of Catalonia, the man whom many consider to be the founding father of the

Kingdom of Navarre is currently making his move in the Basque region. Sancho I Garcés muscled himself into power in Pamplona with the assistance of King Alfonso from Asturias, who no doubt thought that it would be a handy move to curb the power of the Banu Qasi in the region and place his man, so to speak, on the throne instead.

With so much going on, and with just about everyone in the Iberian peninsula thriving except for those in Cordoba, you might be wondering: How did Al-Andalus survive the twenty-four year long rule of Abd-Allah? Well, according to Hugh Kennedy, credit for the survival of Al-Andalus at this time goes to a small, dedicated band of Umayyad Arab families and some members of the ruling family in Cordoba, who were able to keep the wheels turning despite an apparent lack of interest from the Emir. Still, the damage done to Al-Andalus was considerable.

Towards the end of Abd-Allah's reign, much of the system of governance had broken down. While inside the city of Cordoba itself things were running relatively smoothly, beyond the city walls taxation wasn't being collected, and many governors in many towns were no longer ruling on behalf of Cordoba, but on behalf of themselves. With taxes not being collected to fund the upkeep of armies in towns across Al-Andalus, many members of the armed forces turned into brigands, roaming the countryside, pillaging, and extorting the locals in an attempt to feed themselves and their families. Major towns, such as Toledo, simply lost interest in being ruled by Arab governors and instead relied on local rebel groups for support.

Zaragoza was another example of a town which threw out its governor and installed someone new, although in the case of Zaragoza it was with the Emir's support. For reasons unclear to anyone even now, Abd-Allah appointed one of his close friends to rule the city, displacing the Umayyad governor who had successfully defended Zaragoza against the Banu Qasi for many years. This radically altered the power structures in the region, and in fact the descendants of the man installed by Abd-Allah will rule over Zaragoza and the surrounding region for well over a century.

Now, at this point in time, you are probably thinking that dark days are ahead for Al-Andalus, and it is completely understandable that you would form this opinion. However, if you thought that we are starting to see the beginning of the end of Al-Andalus, you would be completely wrong, because surprisingly, the exact opposite happened. Al-Andalus is in fact about to enter a golden age. To find out how on earth this came about, you'll have to tune into the next episode. Until next time, bye for now.

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