

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 19
The Caliph, Part One

Hello again. Last time we saw the new Emir Abd al-Rahman III slowly, carefully, and methodically force Al-Andalus to accept control by Cordoba. One by one, every rebel stronghold was overcome and destroyed. Abd al-Rahman III simultaneously reformed the military forces in Al-Andalus by injecting new, loyal, non-Arab fighters into the army, and creating a new naval force. At the conclusion of the last episode, we saw Abd al-Rahman III place the cherry on top of his ruling pie when he had himself declared Caliph of Al-Andalus, in the year 929.

So, I hear you ask, was this a big deal? Yes, it absolutely was a big deal. In fact, it's difficult to overstate just how massive a big deal this was. Since the death of the Prophet Muhammad the Muslim world had been led by a succession of caliphs, or religious and political leaders recognised as the successor of the Prophet and as having the authority to rule over people of the Islamic faith. Up to this point in time, pretty much all of the caliphs had been located in the Middle East and, prior to the year 929, the Emir in Al-Andalus had exercised his authority not on his own account but on behalf of the Caliph, with Abd al-Rahman III answering to the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad.

However, the Abbasid Caliphate had recently hit a bit of a rough patch. Twenty or so years before Abd al-Rahman's bold move to elevate himself to the position of Caliph, palace officials in Baghdad had manoeuvred a child onto the throne, a move which was likely designed to increase the power of the palace officials, but which actually destabilised the entire Caliphate. One of the many unintended consequences of this move was the rise to power of opposing factions across the Muslim world. One of the more consequential of these were the Fatimids, a Shia sect whose imams claimed to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. Proponents of this sect had been forced to flee from the Middle East and had taken up residence in northern Africa, where they had developed an impressive following amongst a number of Berber tribes.

Interestingly, one of the early supporters of the Fatimids was the rebel Ibn Hafsun, who welcomed two Fatimid envoys to Bobastro and approved the Fatimid goal of attempting to overthrow what they viewed as the illegitimate regime in Baghdad. Around the year 909 the Fatimid Imam declared himself to be Caliph, and Ibn Hafsun ordered that his name, and not the Caliph in Baghdad, should be read out during Friday prayers inside his rebel territory.

In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos contends that the declaration by the Fatimid Emir that he was Caliph undermined Abd al-Rahman's authority in Al-Andalus, and was a major factor, along with the collapse of the Abbasid regime in the Middle East, in Abd al-Rahman's decision to raise himself to the position of Caliph. Brian Catlos describes al-Rahman's decision as being extraordinary, shocking, and bold, but he also states that it was kind of inevitable. While the power of Baghdad was declining, Abd al-Rahman's own power and authority was on the rise. With the Fatimid faction across in northern Africa having produced a Caliph, it wasn't a huge leap for Abd al-Rahman, who was a member of the Umayyad Dynasty, which in turn claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad, to claim the title of Caliph for himself.

While the title of Caliph had political consequences, it also had deep religious connotations. Having been proclaimed as Caliph, Abd al-Rahman was no longer just the emir of a country, ruling under the authority of a distant power. Instead, as Caliph, Abd al-Rahman himself possessed the divine right to rule. As Brian Catlos states, and I quote “Like the Fatimid Caliphs he (meaning Abd al-Rahman III) would now cultivate a messianic, almost semi-divine public persona. Claiming imperial status also put him on the same level of prestige as the other great sovereigns of the West: the Byzantine Roman Emperors in Constantinople and the self-proclaimed Frankish Roman Emperors of post Carolingian Europe” end quote.

Put simply, the status of Caliph elevated Abd al-Rahman III to dizzying heights. While his power as Emir within Al-Andalus had been absolute, now he was accepted as possessing a total authority over not just secular matters, but spiritual ones as well. He was now the defender of the religion of Islam within Al-Andalus, and the interpreter of divine will.

In recognition of his new lofty status, Abd al-Rahman commissioned work to commence on a grand palace a few miles outside the city of Cordoba, which would eventually house himself and his family and also the core of the bureaucracy. He also took the bold step of minting gold coins, an act which only caliphs were entitled to do. This coinage, in fact, ended up being of uniform high quality, and became the standard currency across the western Mediterranean.

Having settled into his new exalted position, Abd al-Rahman initiated diplomatic exchanges with other world leaders. Over the next decade or so, envoys from the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople would travel to Cordoba, as would ambassadors from the Kings of Germany and Italy. It appeared that Al-Andalus had now arrived on the world stage as a major player.

Now, the Caliph’s palace, named Madinat al-Zara, or “Resplendent City”, took around a decade to build and was absolutely enormous. It was built on the foothills of the Sierra Morena mountain range, and the sloping terrain enabled the palace to be constructed in three parts. Essentially, there were three enormous connected palace buildings, one below the other, each with its own extensive gardens, descending down into the valley.

The uppermost palace, which boasted views all the way over to the nearby city of Cordoba, was the private residence of the Caliph and his family. If you are thinking that this meant a small family group was bouncing around in the large building, you would be completely wrong. This part of the palace, the Caliph’s private residence, was home to literally thousands of people, possibly as many as 10,000 people, if you included the thousands of male and female slaves. Basically, the Caliph lived here with his many wives, his many children, and hundreds of concubines, along with extended family members, household staff, and many slaves.

Further down the hill lay the second palace, which served as the administrative wing of the complex. This was where the Caliph met with ambassadors and dignitaries, and where ceremonies were carried out. Again, this was a massive place where thousands of courtiers and government officials, along with their families, resided. In his book “Kingdoms of Faith”, Brian Catlos notes that many of these government officials were Christians and Jews, who lived alongside their Muslim co-workers within the palace complex. There was also a wing housing rooms for visiting dignitaries.

As you might imagine, these top two palaces were constructed from the finest and most luxurious materials available, designed to showcase the Caliph's power and status. Multi-coloured marble was used to line the floors and walls, with the palace all up containing more than 4000 marble columns, many of them reclaimed from Roman ruins across the Iberian peninsula. Elaborately carved wooden screens adorned the windows, while silk brocade hung from the walls.

The Audience Hall, where visiting dignitaries would sit prostrated before the Caliph's jewelled throne, contained two marble fountains and a large basin filled with liquid mercury, which, when moved, would cause waves of light to shimmer around the room. Now the giant bowl of mercury was a very popular installation in the palace, and you might be wondering why we don't have giant bowls of mercury on display in public buildings today. There's actually a very good reason for this, that reason being that mercury is actually a highly toxic substance, and although it is super interesting to view a large bowl of the dense silver liquid and gasp in delight as light is reflected off its undulating surface, mercury emits a vapour which is highly toxic and easily absorbed into the lungs. Overseers at the palace may have had an inkling that their bowl of mercury was not exactly a benign part of the display, as visitors were encouraged not to touch the mercury. Instead, slaves gently rocked a stone platform underneath the bowl, with the motion causing the toxic but very pretty liquid to ripple and move, refracting waves of light around the room.

If the fountains and mercury bowl weren't enough to hold your attention while you were waiting for the Caliph to appear, you could browse the many curiosities and relics which were displayed around the chamber. They included sumptuous gifts sent from world leaders, such as a large pearl gifted to the Caliph by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII, and mementos from Abd al-Rahman's victories on the battlefield.

Of course, a fancy palace has to have fancy gardens, and Madinat al-Zara certainly had those. The lush gardens sporting elaborate fountains, water features, and statues were extensive enough to house the Caliph's collection of wild animals, including peacocks and lions.

The final, third palace, at the bottom of the complex, wasn't as elaborate as the top two palaces, but was more functional, housing the ancillary staff, gardeners, craftsmen, and palace workers, but it was just as large as the other two buildings, housing many thousands of workers and their families.

Just to give you an idea of how big this complex was, the three palaces and their gardens were surrounded by a defensive wall, complete with numerous towers. The wall was nearly one mile long and half a mile wide. Some historians have labelled Madinat al-Zara as the "Versailles of the Middle Ages", and it's not hard to see why.

Just so you are left with no doubt about the magnificence of the complex, here is a description from Brian Catlos of some of the furnishings in the middle palace, and I quote: "The gilded and bejewelled throne on which the ruler sat as visitors prostrated themselves before him was intended as a recreation of that of the biblical Solomon. The furnishings and fixtures of the palace were no less sumptuous, and included the finest ironwork vessels and lamps, fashioned in the shapes of exotic and mythical animals, furniture of rare woods, and boxes of delicately carved African ivory. The palace also held an immense library, said to contain hundreds of thousands of volumes, representing the knowledge of the Islamic, Byzantine, and Latin worlds, a testament to the worldliness of the Caliph", end quote.

The construction of Medinat al-Zara truly signalled the arrival of Al-Andalus on the world stage.

Now that Abd al-Rahman has secured central rule across Al-Andalus, risen to the status of Caliph, and catapulted himself up the leader-board of European and Middle Eastern leaders, you might be thinking that, for his next move, Abd al-Rahman is going to extend his dominance across the Iberian peninsula and subdue the northern Christian kingdoms once and for all. Well, you would be right in thinking that this was on Abd al-Rahman's to-do list, but you would be wrong in thinking that he would easily achieve this goal. He fared best with the Basque people and their rulers in Pamplona. We will examine his interactions with them in the next episode, but for the remainder of this episode, we will take a look at Abd al-Rahman's attempts to bring the regions of Asturias, Leon and Castile to heel.

Now, when we last left this region King Alfonso III's three sons had forced him from the throne of Asturias. They then divided their father's realm into three kingdoms - Galicia, Leon, and Asturias - and took one each for themselves. However, by the year 925, only fifteen years after raising themselves to the status of kings, their plans were in ruins. All three brothers had died, and a succession crisis was underway in what was now the re-united kingdom. However, the kingdom was now known not as Asturias but as the kingdom of Leon, the capital having shifted to the ancient city of Leon, where the second-eldest of King Alfonso's sons, King Ordone II, had ordered the construction of a magnificent cathedral and a palace worthy of a king.

Following the death of the last son left standing, King Ordone II, in the year 925, one of King Ordone's sons, Alfonso, seized the throne, with the assistance of the current ruler of Pamplona, becoming King Alfonso IV. However, only five years into his reign King Alfonso IV abdicated the throne in favour of his brother Ramiro, who became King Ramiro II. The former King Alfonso then retired to a monastery to begin a life of quiet contemplation. However, a life of quiet contemplation didn't turn out to be to Alfonso's liking, so he decided to seize the throne back by force. He was, however, unsuccessful. He ended up being captured by his brother King Ramiro II, who decided to put an end to any future ambitions Alfonso might hold by blinding him. Then, for good measure, King Ramiro also captured his nephews, the surviving sons of his brother Fruela, and had them blinded as well.

Now secure in his rule, King Ramiro II decided to stir up some trouble in Al-Andalus, which involved him defeating a Muslim force in the north of Al-Andalus, then forcing the governor of Zaragoza to pay tribute. Deciding that the upstart Christian king needed to be taught a lesson, Abd al-Rahman III personally commanded a sizeable army, rode to the north, and faced King Ramiro on the battlefield in August of the year 939. In what must have been a shocking turn of events for the Caliph, the Muslim forces were resoundingly defeated by King Ramiro, who went on to repeat his victory by once again defeating the Caliph's forces a few days later. A furious Abd al-Rahman III was forced to retreat back to Cordoba. The Caliph blamed the defeat on rifts within his army, and subsequently executed the commanders whom he accused of infighting. The whole experience was so unpleasant for Abd al-Rahman III that, from that time on, he never again visited the northern regions of Al-Andalus.

Meanwhile, King Ramiro may have been tempted to run rampant in the north, seizing territory from Al-Andalus and expanding his kingdom, but his ambitions were kept in check

by the rising power of a nobleman inside Castile, a man called Fernan Gonzalez, the Count of Castile. Fernan Gonzalez was intent on turning his county into a kingdom, separate from the Kingdom of Leon, and King Ramiro spent most of the remainder of his reign attempting to prevent the Count of Castile from achieving his aim.

Join me next time, as we see the Caliph tackle the remaining Christian northern power, the Kingdom of Navarre. Until next time, bye for now.

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