

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 20
The Caliph, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we saw Abd al-Rahman III, Caliph of Al-Andalus, construct an extremely impressive and gigantically large palace for himself outside Cordoba. Described as the “Versailles of the Medieval Era”, the Caliph’s new residence and seat of power must have been a truly magnificent structure. Unfortunately, all that is left of the palace today are some ruins, which are still very impressive and provide an idea of the scale of the building. The site is currently named Madina Azahara and (subject to Covid restrictions) you can visit the site and the adjacent archaeological museum if you happen to be near Cordoba. In fact, it’s pretty fortunate that the remains of the palace have been uncovered and identified, because the whole structure was very nearly lost to history. It was destroyed early in the 11th century (sorry about the spoiler) and over subsequent centuries it was regularly pillaged and looted, with large amounts of stone and marble being removed from the site to be used elsewhere. Over time, what was left was reclaimed by nature and buried. It wasn’t until the 19th century that its location was rediscovered by archaeologists, and excavations on the site began just prior to the First World War.

Anyway, back to the Caliph. At the conclusion of the last episode, we saw Abd al-Rahman try and fail to curb the expansionist activities of the new King of Leon, Ramiro II (Leon, of course, being the new name for Asturias). Fortunately for Abd al-Rahman, King Ramiro’s incursions into Al-Andalus ended up dropping down his list of priorities, in preference to trying to prevent the Count of Castile claiming independence for his county.

Having examined Abd al-Rahman’s interactions with the Kingdom of Leon, we will now turn to his dealings with the remaining northern Christian kingdom, the Kingdom of Navarre.

Now, to understand the newly emergent Kingdom of Navarre at this time, it might be useful to take a look at one of the most influential women to hold power on the Iberian peninsula during this era, Toda Aznarez, also known as Toda of Pamplona. Toda married a man called Sancho Garces, who ended up, with the assistance of King Alfonso III, ousting the King of Pamplona, becoming King Sancho I Garces, in the year 905. Sancho Garces was able to successfully seize the throne largely due to the impressive bloodlines of his wife Toda, who was the grand-daughter of the previous King of Pamplona. Sancho and Toda managed to remove the remaining relatives of the former King of Pamplona from the line of succession until their rise to power was secure, with Toda becoming Queen Toda of Pamplona.

The rise to the throne of this power couple heralded a major shift in the politics of the region, with the new King and Queen gradually sidelining the Banu Qasi, and instead increasing bonds between the Basque region and its neighbours in the Christian north. They founded a royal dynasty which will remain in power for a number of centuries, and Sancho I Garces is generally seen as being the first king of the Kingdom of Navarre.

Now, Toda’s impressive bloodlines weren’t just limited to the Basque region. She was also the aunt of the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III, as Queen Toda’s mother had been married to the Emir Abdullah. Not content with being related to the rulers of Navarre and Al-Andalus, two of Toda’s grandsons will later end up ruling the Kingdom of Leon.

Following the death of her husband King Sancho of Navarre in the year 925, Queen Toda took over the governance of Navarre, ruling as Regent for her young son Garcia. Keen to secure her son's succession, Queen Toda travelled to Cordoba and was granted a personal audience with her nephew Abd al-Rahman III, who agreed to recognise young Garcia as the rightful heir to the throne, reducing the likelihood of deposed relatives of the former King of Pamplona making a play for the crown.

Once he became of age however, King Garcia of Navarre reversed his mother's alliance with Al-Andalus, and supported rebellions against Abd al-Rahman, a move which prompted Abd al-Rahman to successfully put young King Garcia back in his place by mounting a number of attacks on the city of Pamplona, until King Garcia was forced to back down.

Queen Toda also ended up successfully utilising her relationship with Abd al-Rahman III in relation to the Kingdom of Leon. The Caliph was probably not so sad to hear of the death of the successful and energetic monarch of Leon King Ramiro II early in the year 951. He perhaps sat back and chuckled as the Kingdom of Leon was subsequently wracked by internal disputes and a succession crisis. Immediately following the death of Ramiro II, his son and heir Ordono seized the throne, becoming King Ordono III. Soon afterwards though, he was challenged for the crown by his half-brother Sancho, whose bid for the throne of Leon was backed by the Kingdom of Navarre. King Ordono III managed to push back against Sancho's claims and happily ruled Leon for the next five years, until his unexpected death. Sancho then re-emerged to claim the crown, becoming King Sancho I.

One of the challenges faced by Sancho was his weight. He was so overweight that it was difficult for him to move around, and things that active kings usually did, like riding a horse so as to lead his troops into battle, were beyond him. Even if Sancho had been able to find a horse strong enough to carry him, mounting the horse was something he was simply unable to do. Despite these setbacks, Sancho threw himself into his new role, with one of his first actions being to repudiate a peace treaty which King Ordono III had signed with Abd al-Rahman. Al-Andalus then pushed back against the Kingdom of Leon, prompting a group of noblemen inside Leon to decide that maybe having Sancho as their king wasn't such a good idea after all. They backed a bid for the throne by a son of King Alfonso IV. You might remember from the last episode that King Alfonso IV had been blinded by King Ramiro II after abdicating the throne, retiring to a monastery, then attempting to re-elevate himself into power. This particular son of King Alfonso IV was confusingly named Ordono. He managed to eject Sancho from the throne, becoming King Ordono IV, also known to history as Ordono the Bad. As Ordono the Bad was busy carrying out the deeds which would earn him his nickname, the power-broking noblemen were starting to think that maybe Sancho hadn't been such a bad king after all. Happily for everyone, but not of course for Ordono the Bad, Ordono the Bad died only two years into his reign.

Sancho, who by this time was known as Sancho the Fat, found himself back on the throne of Leon. But his weight problems hampered him once again, so once again he found himself being challenged for the crown, this time by the Count of Castile, who took his bid for an independent Castile to eye-blinking lengths by seizing the throne of Leon. Realising that having the Count of Castile on the throne of Leon could very well see the Kingdom of Leon being split into two parts, Queen Toda decided that Sancho the Fat needed to re-ascend to the throne. However, she also realised that Sancho wouldn't be able to hold the throne for very long unless he lost weight. The best medical advisers on the Iberian peninsula were located in Cordoba, so Toda reached out to Abd al-Rahman III to request assistance to place her grandson, Sancho the Fat, on some sort of weight loss program.

Abd al-Rahman obliged, and ordered his top Jewish physician, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, to travel to Pamplona to treat Sancho for his obesity.

The treatment worked. Sancho lost his excess weight and gained back his kingdom. In return for this favour, both Toda and the re-crowned King Sancho of Leon were required to journey to Cordoba to present themselves to the Caliph, and to acknowledge Abd al-Rahman as the effective overlord of both the Christian kingdoms in the north. Toda and King Sancho were received at the Caliph's palace with great honour, pomp and circumstance, but everyone knew that their submission to the Caliph meant that, for the first time ever, Cordoba now enjoyed effective control over the entire Iberian Peninsula.

Unfortunately though, it wasn't to last. Queen Toda and King Sancho travelled to Cordoba in the year 960. Not long after they had made their way back to the north, Abd al-Rahman III died in his palace at Madinat al-Zahra. He had ruled Al-Andalus for nearly fifty years.

The rule of Abd al-Rahman was so astonishingly successful that it's worth taking a look at the contrast between Al-Andalus when he first rose to power and Al-Andalus at the end of his reign. You may recall that when Abd al-Rahman ascended to the position of Emir of Al-Andalus, he found himself in charge of a country on the verge of collapse. Central rule had all but vanished, and outside Cordoba taxes were no longer being collected, chaos reigned, and rebels were largely in control. Cordoba itself was just a struggling provincial town.

By the time of Abd al-Rahman's death, the population of Cordoba had exploded to over 100,000 inhabitants. Cordoba was now a bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis, and a number of major infrastructure projects had been undertaken at the direction of the Caliph, to support the city and its expanding population. A large aqueduct had been constructed to ensure an adequate supply of water, and a number of public buildings had emerged, including public baths, communal ovens, schools, hospitals, mosques and inns. The Great Mosque at Cordoba and the city's iconic marketplace had both been expanded and redecorated. While all of these projects were undertaken at the direction of the Caliph, other privately sponsored works also emerged, with Arab noblemen constructing villas, public libraries, and salons, while Christian and Jewish leaders arranged for the construction of churches and synagogues inside the city.

Cordoba itself developed a reputation as a place where you could buy luxury goods from across the known world, and steady streams of foreign dignitaries and diplomats visited Cordoba and the nearby palace of Madinat al-Zahra, with displays and parades marking the arrival of the more important visitors. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos states that when the Caliph and his household journeyed from Madinat al-Zahra to Cordoba, a distance of only a few miles, the procession often took several days. The Caliph made his stately journey from the palace to the city with hundreds of attendants, servants, and guards, and would often favour the owners of luxury villas whose residences were located between the palace and the city with an overnight stay during the journey.

The transformation of Cordoba, and of Al-Andalus as a whole, during the reign of Abd al-Rahman III was nothing less than extraordinary, although the advancement of the Iberian peninsula under his rule seems to have caused no end of stress and toil to the Caliph himself. In the words of Brian Catlos, and I quote: "In sum, Cordoba was transformed over the course of the half century of Abd al-Rahman III's rule from a struggling provincial city to a bustling cosmopolitan capital, a place of encounter and exchange for merchants, travellers, scholars, officials, immigrants, visitors, captives, and

seekers of fortune from every corner of the Caliphate and across the Mediterranean, as well as Europe, Africa, and the Near East. It was in this era that the reputation of Al-Andalus as an earthly paradise was established by the poets and panegyrists, who sung the praises of the Caliph and characterised the land as prodigiously fertile, a land of unprecedented richness and bounty. For all of this, the Caliph himself was somewhat more circumspect, claiming in his later years to have enjoyed only fourteen days of happiness.”
End quote.

Despite the Caliph’s complaint about his lack of down-time, looking back over his nearly fifty year long reign, you would have to hope that he viewed all his hard work as having been worth the effort.

But of course, one of the more important indicators of success is whether you have established a structure of governance which will endure after you have departed the stage, so join me next time as we take a look at the rule of Abd al-Rahman's son and heir, al-Hakam II. Until next time, bye for now.

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