

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 23
Al-Mansur, Part 1

Hello again. Last time we saw trouble brewing inside Al-Andalus in the form of an ambitious palace official named al-Mansur. Al-Mansur had originally been employed inside the palace as a tutor to one of the Caliph's sons, but by the time the Caliph died, aged 61 in the year 976, al-Mansur had established himself as a major political player inside the administration. He had secured a number of lucrative and prominent positions both inside the bureaucracy and inside the military forces, and had cultivated a vast network of contacts and supporters.

The Caliph, al-Hakam II, had been ill for some time prior to his passing, so he had set out in some detail his succession plans. He wished his 10-year-old son Hisham to rule after his death with the assistance of the two men who had effectively ruled Al-Andalus during al-Hakam's tenure: the military commander Ghalib; and Ja'far al-Mushafi, his childhood friend, right hand man, and effective chief of staff. This was a sensible plan which might have actually worked, save for the machinations and ambitions of various palace officials, chiefly al-Mansur.

Things started off on the right foot. The day after the death of al-Hakam II, a ceremony took place formally investing young Hisham as the new Caliph. The 10-year-old new ruler of Al-Andalus was then presented to the chief officials of the administration who duly recognised him as Caliph.

However, almost immediately whispers of discontent began to circulate. The Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad had stumbled then fallen into decline after having installed a child as Caliph, and palace officials began speculating that perhaps, to prevent Al-Andalus from suffering a similar fate, the new Caliph should be replaced with an adult. Ironically, the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate occurred because palace officials in Baghdad took advantage of the fact that a child was on the throne to intrigue against the interests of the Caliphate. This fact appears to have been lost on the palace officials in Cordoba, who appeared set to do exactly the same thing.

Anyway, the whispers grew into rumours that the boy Caliph's mother Subh, possibly with the assistance of Ja'far, was plotting to seize power, a concern raised mainly amongst Arab officials inside the administration. The rumours and plotting began to destabilise the regime, and a group of eunuchs decided to take advantage of the situation. The faction was led by two eunuchs who had been loyal and devoted supporters of the recently deceased Caliph. They were powerful men in their own right, having served in a number of prominent positions inside the administration, as well as commanding the Royal Guard. The two men had kept a personal vigil beside al-Hakam's death bed and were devastated by his passing. One of the reasons why they were so devastated was the fact that they were set to be completely sidelined by the new administration. Taking the initiative, they reached out to one of al-Hakam's brothers, who happened to be the ideal age of 27 years old and who agreed to step into the role of Caliph. They then approached Ja'far, with the proposal that ten-year-old Hisham be quietly assassinated so that an adult, the 27-year-old brother of al-Hakam, could be placed into power. Ja'far pretended to agree with their proposal, but instead called an urgent meeting with Ghalib, al-Mansur, and a bunch of other highly ranked officials, at which he revealed the plot. It was decided at the meeting

that the best way to unpend the plot would be to kill the man whom the plotters intended to place on the throne, so al-Mansur volunteered to confront the late Caliph's brother and kill him. He managed to carry out this task, then ordered that the man's corpse be hung from a roof beam inside the palace, to give the impression that he had killed himself out of grief at his late brother's passing. The remaining conspirators were either arrested and sent into exile or were killed.

In recognition of the role he had played in bringing down the plotters, al-Mansur was rewarded by being appointed as the commander of the Palace Guard. The boy Caliph and his mother Subh were then cloistered away in a secure position inside the palace "for their own safety" (in air quotes), while Ja'far and Ghalib commenced the business of actually running Al-Andalus.

It was at this moment that al-Mansur made his move.

In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos notes that, by this point in time, al-Mansur had developed strong networks of patronage and support inside the palace, across the financial sectors inside Al-Andalus, and out into the regional areas extending as far as Northern Africa. What he lacked in his skill set, though, was experience in military command. You might remember from the last episode that al-Mansur had accompanied Ghalib on his successful military campaign in Northern Africa. Al-Mansur's role though, had been confined to logistics. While he had risen through the ranks to effectively become Ghalib's quartermaster, he hadn't actually engaged in any active military service. In the year 971, al-Mansur spied an opportunity to take a shot at leading the Caliph's forces, not in northern Africa, which was Ghalib's chosen field of battle, but in the Christian north.

The last time we visited the Christian north was shortly prior to the death of the first Caliph of Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman III, who had accepted the submission of Queen Toda of the Kingdom of Navarre and King Sancho the Fat of Leon, meaning that the entire Iberian peninsula was effectively under the control of Cordoba. The submission of the rulers of the Christian north to the Caliphate continued during the reign of al-Hakam II. King Sancho of Leon died in the year 966, possibly as a result of poisoning, leaving his 5-year-old son to rule Leon as King Ramiro III. Having a child on the throne doesn't tend to place a kingdom in a strong position, so it's not surprising that young King Ramiro was happy to bend his knee to Cordoba. Perhaps more surprising though, was the fact that during the rule of Al-Hakam II, all the other players in the Christian north were happy to follow suit. The other players in the Christian north at this time were the current King of Navarre, King Sancho Garces II, and Garcia Fernandez, who had succeeded his father as the Count of Castile. To round up the Christian players on the Iberian peninsula, Count Borrell II of Barcelona also made the journey to Cordoba to pledge allegiance to the Caliph.

However, following the Caliph's death, the Christian rulers sensed an opportunity to wriggle out from under the thumb of the Caliphate. Taking advantage of the fact that a child was now ruling Al-Andalus, the Christian rulers began to probe the Caliphate's defences, a move initiated by the ambitious Count of Castile. As the aggression by the Christian rulers of the north became a problem which could no longer be ignored, al-Mansur turned the spotlight upon himself and convinced Ghalib to let him lead the Caliphate's forces against the aggressors. Al-Mansur's proposal was given the green light, and in February of the year 977 he led an army out from Cordoba and marched them nearly 300 miles to the frontier lands in the north, near the border between the Kingdom of Leon and the Caliphate.

He was resoundingly successful, defeating the combined forces of the Kingdom of Leon, the Kingdom of Navarre, and the County of Castile, and securing a massive amount of booty and slaves in the process. He was able to distribute the riches he gained in the campaign to his supporters, both new and old alike, while simultaneously raising his status and profile and adding "victorious military commander" to his growing list of achievements. The victory also strengthened his relationship with Ghalib and renewed his alliance with the Caliph's mother Subh, who began to view him as the man who could protect both her and her son. As pointed out by Brian Catlos though, the irony of this situation was that by earning the respect and gratitude of both Ghalib and Subh, al-Mansur placed himself into a position where he was able to plot to eliminate both of them. In fact, Brian Catlos contends that this paradoxical situation extended to the Caliphate as well. Al-Mansur was able to convince the people of Al-Andalus that he was acting in their best interests, and that he could offer protection and stability in a time where the rule of a child Caliph threatened to undermine the Caliphate. In reality, though, he used this trust to usurp the legitimacy of the Caliphate, and to destabilise it for his personal gain. Brian Catlos points out that from this time onwards al-Mansur's goal will be to establish himself as the power behind the throne in Al-Andalus, effectively working to create a shadow administration behind the facade of Umayyad rule by the boy Caliph. In this he will be overwhelmingly successful.

The first main player to fall victim to al-Mansur's strategy was Ja'far al-Mushafi. As soon as the victorious al-Mansur returned to Cordoba from his military campaign in the Christian north, he began to ingratiate himself with the boy Caliph and his mother Subh, while simultaneously undermining Ja'far's authority, stoking unease about Ja'far's Berber heritage and his lack of Arab lineage, and working his contacts inside the palace and across the wider administration to cast doubts on Ja'far's loyalty and his ability to carry out oversight of the administration of Al-Andalus.

Al-Mansur's marriage to Ghalib's daughter was finalised in March 978, just over a year since his military success, and it was at this point that al-Mansur felt secure enough to act. By this time, Ja'far had lost much of his support inside the administration, to the extent that his only true allies were his family members and close friends.

With the support of Subh and Ghalib, al-Mansur ordered the arrest of Ja'far. Ja'far was interrogated, then thrown into jail. He will remain in prison for the next five years before dying, possibly by strangulation.

With Ja'far removed from the picture, a large power vacuum was created at the very top of the Caliphate, and with the support of Subh and the boy Caliph, al-Mansur graciously moved in to fill all the positions which Ja'far had previously occupied, meaning that al-Mansur was now effectively running Al-Andalus.

If you are wondering whether Ghalib was able to push back against this blatant power grab, the answer is no - he wasn't able to prevent al-Mansur rise to power. By this time, Ghalib was over 80 years old and was effectively under the control of his new son-in-law. In the not so distant future Ghalib will also find himself discarded by the Caliphate he had worked so hard to serve.

Having settled into his role as the effective ruler of Al-Andalus, with Subh and the boy Caliph effectively under his thumb, and with Ghalib quietly staying out of his way, al-Mansur decided it was time to build a fancy new palace for himself. Abd al-Rahman's magnificent palace, Madinat al-Zahra, had been out of use now for some time, and al-Mansur was likely reluctant to move back in due to its strong association with emirate

rule. The obvious solution was to order a new palace to be built, a palace similar to Madinat al-Zahra, but not the same. In fact, it even had a similar name. Constructed just to the east of Cordoba, al-Mansur named his palace Madinat al-Zahira. It wasn't as huge as its predecessor and wasn't quite as sumptuous. Unfortunately, we don't know an awful lot about it because, as pointed out by Roger Collins in his book "Caliphs and Kings of Spain", there's virtually nothing left of it today. The only thing remaining which may have been part of the building is an inscribed marble washbasin. If it wasn't for the washbasin, historians wouldn't even be able to pinpoint its location. What we do know about the palace was that it was highly fortified.

Al-Mansur moved Subh and the boy Caliph into the palace following its construction, no doubt telling them that they would be safe and protected inside its sturdy walls. Once ensconced inside the palace, carefully monitored by men loyal to al-Mansur, the Caliph and his mother were isolated and completely under al-Mansur's control. Even when the Caliph became old enough to rule in his own right, al-Mansur assured everyone that the Caliph's wish was for al-Mansur to govern Al-Andalus, leaving the Caliph free to devote himself to religion.

Join me next time, as al-Mansur embarks on the next phase of his plan: taking control of the military forces of Al-Andalus. Until next time, bye for now.

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