

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 25  
Al-Mansur, Part 3

Hello again. Last time we saw al-Mansur achieve his goal. Following the death of his father-in-law Ghalib on the battlefield, al-Mansur became the effective ruler of Al-Andalus, maintaining the pretence that the young Caliph was in charge while actually doing all the governing himself.

As we stated in the last episode, this was easier said than done. Everyone knew that al-Mansur was keeping the Caliph a virtual prisoner, and despite doing his best to appease the elites across the peninsula, al-Mansur's hold on power wasn't as secure as he would have liked. While his network of spies and loyalists were actively reporting any instances of rebellion or discontent back to al-Mansur, who would then deal ruthlessly with the transgressor, there was one rebel whom he couldn't just order to be killed or executed, and that person was the mother of the Caliph, Subh.

Subh, at this stage, was likely kicking herself. She had actively promoted al-Mansur during his rise to power, believing that he could assist her to achieve her ultimate goal, that goal being the elevation of her son to the position of Caliph. Ironically, al-Mansur had been able to do exactly that, but Subh's dream of seeing her son rule over the Iberian peninsula had turned to dust. While her son was Caliph, he had no power or authority whatsoever. He wasn't even allowed any freedom of movement. Al-Mansur kept him secluded inside the royal palace, and by the year 996 it had been years since he had been seen in public.

It was in the year 996 that Subh decided to make her move. While al-Mansur and his administration resided in al-Mansur's palace, Medinat al-Zahira, Subh and her son the Caliph had been moved to the Royal Palace in Cordoba, where they were forced to live in seclusion. Happily though, the Royal Palace in Cordoba was also the location of the Royal Treasury, which basically consisted of the wealth the Umayyad dynasty had accumulated over many generations. As such, Subh came up with a plan. Her plan was to smuggle enough items out of the treasury to create a sort of a war chest to fund a military uprising against al-Mansur. She enlisted the help of her brother, and together they hid gold and silver coins from the treasury in huge jars, which they topped up with honey and other edible items. Disguised as enormous jars of food, the wealth of the Treasury slowly began making its way out of the Royal Palace.

Unfortunately for Subh though, al-Mansur's spies were everywhere. Alerted to the fact that large, extremely heavy jars of honey were making their way out of the Palace, some of al-Mansur's men were sent to intercept the jars and see what was going on. Discovering a horde of sticky coins underneath the layer of honey, the jars were confiscated, and the Treasury itself was then relocated from the Royal Palace to Medinat al-Zahira.

This was pretty much the last straw for Subh. She now had no power, no plans, and no options left to rescue her son from the situation in which she had effectively placed him. Subh died soon afterwards.

Subh's death and the fact that at least one governor had expressed support for her rebellion seems to have caused al-Mansur to alter course. Deciding it was time to drag the young Caliph back out into the spotlight, al-Mansur decked young Hisham II out in gilded

ceremonial clothes and conveyed him in a public procession from the Royal Palace in Cordoba to al-Mansur's palace, Medinat al-Zahira. Riding closely behind the Caliph was al-Mansur and al Mansur's son and chosen successor, Abd al-Malik, followed by all the senior officials in the administration. This was the first time that the young Caliph had been allowed to leave the Palace for many years, and as stated by Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", and I quote "the Caliph's subjects were undoubtedly relieved to know that he was still alive" end quote.

However, upon arriving at Medinat al-Zahira, it quickly became apparent that Hisham's role as puppet and al-Mansur's role as puppet-master were set to continue. At a lavish ceremony, Hisham II was once again formally invested as Caliph of Al-Andalus, and then the Caliph formally invested al-Mansur with the task of governing Al-Andalus, which he was to do in the Caliph's name. From this time onwards, all documents issuing from the administration would be authenticated not with the Caliph's seal, but with al-Mansur's personal seal. In a final blow, the Caliph was moved permanently from the Royal Palace to Medinat al-Zahira, where al-Mansur could keep a close eye on him.

Al-Mansur then began ruling Al-Andalus more overtly than before. He ordered that his name be added to the coinage along with the Caliph, and the name of al-Mansur began to be mentioned in Friday prayers at mosques across Al-Andalus.

Now, I should point out that historians dispute the actual year of Subh's death. Brian Catlos maintains that Subh died a couple of years after the investiture ceremony, while Roger Collins, in his book "Caliphs and Kings of Spain", argues that Subh passed away before the ceremony, and that it was the absence of Subh which paved the way for al-Mansur's relocation of the Caliph to Medinat al-Zahira, and al-Mansur's formal induction as the ruler of Al-Andalus. That makes more sense to me, so I have gone with Roger Collins' take, but you should keep in mind the fact that it's not set in stone.

In the year after al-Mansur consolidated his hold on Al-Andalus by having the Caliph formally invest him with the power to rule the Caliphate, al-Mansur launched an audacious attack against the Christian north. Ever since his rise to power, al-Mansur's policy towards the Christian north had been one of almost constant harassment. He made a point of personally leading military raids into the Christian kingdoms at least twice a year, and these raids came on top of additional attacks carried out by the Caliph's generals and military commanders. The aim of these raids was not one of conquest or subjugation. Instead, the idea was to terrorise and agitate the Christians by looting, pillaging and destroying property inside their kingdoms, in addition to capturing Christian women who would then be taken back to Al-Andalus as concubines or slaves. As a consequence of these raids, the border regions of the northern kingdoms were forced to deal with regular destruction of churches, monasteries and strongholds, as well as significant economic disruption.

On occasion, the raids would extend further inland, with larger armies even attacking the cities of Leon and Pamplona. In the year 985, al-Mansur launched a major attack on the city of Barcelona, and as a result the city was nearly destroyed, with many of its residents either being killed or captured as slaves, while the majority of the city's public buildings, including churches and castles, were erased from existence.

Unsurprisingly, relations between the Christian north and Al-Andalus took a nosedive during the rule of al-Mansur, with regular and humiliating journeys by Christian leaders to Cordoba to bend the knee to al-Mansur failing to prevent the exhausting and destructive

raids. With relations at an all-time low, I guess you won't be surprised to learn that the northern leaders were occasionally open to approaches by rebels inside Al-Andalus for assistance in opposing al-Mansur.

Probably the most successful of these was one staged by al-Mansur's eldest son, Abd Allah. Now, as we have stated previously, al-Mansur's chosen successor was his son Abd al-Malik, but Abd al-Malik wasn't the eldest son. That was Abd Allah, and Abd Allah believed that he, and not the younger Abd al-Malik, should have been picked by his father to carry on his legacy after his death.

To show the extent of his dissatisfaction, Abd Allah joined forces with the governors of Zaragoza and Toledo to launch a rebellion against his father. As had been the case with just about every other rebellion against his rule, the plot was uncovered by one of al-Mansur's spies. After having been advised of his eldest son's treachery, al-Mansur summoned Abd Allah and the two governors to Medinat al-Zahira, telling them that he wanted to include them in an upcoming raid into the County of Castile. As the armies were mustering in front of the palace, al-Mansur arranged for one of the governors of Zaragoza's subordinates to publicly denounce him as a traitor. Realising that their plot had been discovered, Abd Allah and the governor of Toledo mounted their horses and fled northwards towards the Christian kingdoms. The governor of Toledo made it to the Kingdom of Leon and was granted asylum by King Bermudo II, while Abd Allah sought refuge with the Count of Castile.

However, the Christian north didn't end up being the sanctuary that both men had hoped it would be. The Governor of Toledo, was seized following a raid into the Kingdom of Leon by al-Mansur's men and was subsequently transported back to Cordoba, where he was imprisoned. Embarrassingly for Abd Allah, his capture didn't even require a raid. Al-Mansur merely sent a stern letter to the Count of Castile, who then meekly handed Abd Allah over to al-Mansur's men, who promptly executed him, sending his head back to his father.

The peak of al-Mansur's aggression against the Christian north took place in the year 997. Somewhat surprisingly, by this time al-Mansur's armies consisted of a number of Christian fighters, in addition to Berber and Arab men. In the year 997, al-Mansur decided to take his war against the Christian north to a whole new level. Wanting to frame himself as a warrior of Islam fighting the forces of Christianity on behalf of the Caliph, al-Mansur decided to lead an army all the way to the northwest corner of the Iberian peninsula, to destroy Santiago de Compostela. This was pretty much a peak jihadist move for al-Mansur, but not surprisingly it didn't sit at all well with many of the Christian soldiers who were under his command. The pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela was currently under the control of the Kingdom of Leon and was central to the Kingdom's view of itself as an emerging Christian powerhouse. A bunch of Leonese soldiers serving in al-Mansur's army heard about the proposed raid and decided to do their best to sabotage it. However, like every other plot against al-Mansur, it was uncovered by al-Mansur's spies and was snuffed out before it had a chance to take hold.

Having cleansed his army of disloyal troops, al-Mansur marched his Muslim and Christian forces westwards to a spot near present day Lisbon in Portugal. He then swung to the north and marched directly to Santiago de Compostela, which he was able to easily overcome. Directing his forces to leave the actual supposed tomb of Saint James untouched, he told them to destroy everything else. One result of this order was the total demolition of the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. Only items which could be plundered were saved from the building. As the victorious army marched back to

Al-Andalus, it carried with it the great wooden doors of the cathedral (which would later be used for ship-building), and the bells from the cathedral (which al-Mansur ordered to be hung inside the Great Mosque at Cordoba). The army was accompanied by a long line of Christian slaves collected from the pilgrimage site. As Brian Catlos succinctly states in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", al-Mansur, and I quote "had grabbed Spanish Christianity by the bells" end quote.

Unfortunately for al-Mansur though, the successful raid of Santiago de Compostela was pretty much the peak of his chest-thumping against the Christian north, and was in fact the pinnacle of his rule. A few years after this event, al-Mansur will die unexpectedly on campaign, and the following few decades will pave the way for the reconquest of the peninsula by the Christian north. Join me next time, as we see al-Mansur exit the stage, with his son Abd al-Malik carrying on where his father left off. Until next time, bye for now.

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