

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 26  
After Al-Mansur

Hello again. Last time we saw al-Mansur reach the peak of his power. The Caliph of Al-Andalus, Hisham II, who had been a virtual prisoner of al-Mansur for the entirety of his period of rule, formally invested al-Mansur with the power to govern Al-Andalus on the Caliph's behalf.

In addition to ruling over the Caliphate, al-Mansur made a point of continually harassing and attacking the Christian north, culminating in an attack on the most revered Christian holy site on the peninsula, Santiago de Compostela, which resulted in the destruction of the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela and the seizure of its bells.

A few years after this victory though, in the year 1002, al-Mansur died unexpectedly, aged in his sixties, on his way back to Cordoba from a successful campaign against the County of Castile. The exact cause of al-Mansur's death is unknown, but he had been ill for some time, possibly as a result of gout. His condition meant that he was unable to ride a horse, so he had been transported to Castile on a portable couch carried by African slaves.

Now, al-Mansur is a major figure in the history of the Caliphate, which is why we've spent the past three episodes on him, so let's examine the effects of his twenty year long period of rule. Probably the main legacy of al-Mansur's dominance of the past two decades was the undermining of the prestige of the Caliph and the Caliphate. Under the Umayyad dynasty, Al-Andalus had risen to become, in the words of Richard Fletcher in his book "Moorish Spain", and I quote "the richest, the best governed, the most powerful, the most renowned state in the Western world" end quote.

The public and political face of this success had been the Umayyad Emir of Al-Andalus, who since the time of Abd al-Rahman III had also taken the title of Caliph. The Umayyad dynasty had provided an unbroken line of rulers, promoting a sense of continuity and unity across Al-Andalus. This whole system of governance had taken a massive hit under the current Caliph Hisham II, who wielded exactly no power whatsoever, and who had been forced to yield all his authority to al-Mansur, who kept the Caliph as a virtual prisoner while he, al-Mansur, ruled the Caliphate. The once all-powerful Caliph had been reduced to the role of a weak puppet under al-Mansur. This did irreparable damage to the brand of the Caliphate and set the stage for the eventual end of Umayyad rule in the peninsula.

Not only did al-Mansur undermine the whole structure of governance under which Al-Andalus had prospered for a number of centuries, his method of rule also ensured that men with any talent or flair for administration were kept well away from the halls of power. Al-Mansur ruled as a sort of dictator and usurper, whose authority could easily be undermined by questions of legitimacy. As such, he was forced to secure his hold on power through the recruitment of officials and administrators who all shared one main trait, that trait being complete and unwavering loyalty to al-Mansur. His vast network of spies and informants meant that anyone in the bureaucracy displaying less than 100% enthusiasm for al-Mansur was quickly weeded out and shown the door, as were any officials showing any talent for original thought, and anyone who looked to be building a personal following, or showing a talent for leadership. While this policy achieved its

objectives in the short run, in the long run the ramifications for the Caliphate were disastrous, as it meant the only bureaucrats with any long term experience by the end of al-Mansur's rule were largely talent-less sycophants.

The second major effect of al Mansur's rule was a change in the nature of the military forces inside Al-Andalus. In order to secure his hold on power, al-Mansur needed to alter the structure and composition of the Caliphate's military forces. Prior to al-Mansur's rise to power, the military forces were overwhelmingly run by commanders taken from the ranks of the Arab elite, people who enjoyed strong ties to the Umayyad rulers of Al-Andalus. This of course posed a risk to al-Mansur, so over time he removed Arab loyalists from command positions and replaced them with men loyal only to al-Mansur himself, while also importing vast numbers of recruits from northern Africa and the Christian north, a move which further diluted Arab influence inside the armies of the Caliphate. Again, this worked well for al-Mansur in the short run, but again will spell trouble for Al-Andalus in the long run.

The final effect of al-Mansur's period of rule involved his relationship with the Christian north. As we stated in the previous episode, al-Mansur's policy towards the Christian kingdoms was one of constant attack and harassment, with al-Mansur himself personally leading at least two raids into the region during every year he was in power. The aim of this approach seems to have been to keep the northern Christians on the ropes, so to speak, while also encouraging the Muslims of Al-Andalus to view al-Mansur as a sort of warrior of Islam, scoring hit after hit on the hapless Christians, whose territory was attacked and plundered and whose people were captured and taken back to the Caliphate as slaves.

The strange thing about al-Mansur's strategy towards the Christian north though, was that it didn't seem to extend to territorial conquests, or a plan to defeat the Christian kingdoms once and for all and extend Al-Andalus all the way to the northern coastline of the peninsula. Had al-Mansur wished to pursue this strategy, he may well have been successful. He certainly scored some major hits against the Christians. Not only did he destroy the city of Barcelona and the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela as we mentioned in the last episode, in the year 995 a Muslim raiding party managed to capture Count Garcia Fernandez himself while on a mission inside the County of Castile. The Count of Castile was taken captive and the plan was to escort him back to Cordoba. However, he died on the way. His captors then beheaded him and took just his head back to Cordoba to be presented to al-Mansur.

All this goes to show that, had al-Mansur decided to do so, he very well could have secured all or part of the Christian north for Cordoba. However, he didn't do this. Why? Well, we'll probably never know.

The effect of al-Mansur's policy of dealing blow after blow to the northern Christians, while allowing their territories to remain intact, was to ensure that resistance to Al-Andalus inside the Christian north fermented and grew. The constant harassment and humiliation dealt out by al-Mansur to the Christians meant that just about every Christian warrior in the north dreamt of better days ahead, when they could finally rise up and deal some serious blows back to Al-Andalus in revenge for all the misery and damage they had suffered. As you can imagine, this will also come back to haunt Al-Andalus in the not-too-distant future.

In the immediate future though, what happened following the death of al-Mansur? Well, his twenty-seven year old son and chosen successor, Abd al-Malik, stepped into his father's shoes and continued to rule the Caliphate where his father had left off. The Caliph Hisham II, having outlived his puppet-master, then became the puppet of Abd al-Malik, who would wield power on the Caliph's behalf for the next six years.

Abd al-Malik, however, was not the same person as his father, al-Mansur. While al-Mansur had taken a hands-on approach to administration and was clearly a talented politician and bureaucrat, Abd al-Malik had little interest in politics or governance. His main focus was the military, and it was here that he spent most of his time and energy. Abd al-Malik was a competent soldier and commander, who enjoyed military life and who particularly enjoyed drinking and carousing with his men. The tedious aspects of governing and the immense amount of effort involved in overseeing the vast bureaucracy of the Caliphate wasn't something which interested Abd al-Malik one little bit, and he was more than happy to delegate all his obligations in this regard to members of the upper levels of the bureaucracy. This meant that ambitious men inside the administration, who had been kept in check by al-Mansur, were now free to flex their muscles, extend their influence, and begin to build power bases for themselves, much in the same way that al-Mansur himself had done under al-Hakam II.

With the boring and time-consuming work involved in governing Al-Andalus being handled by others, Abd al-Malik was free to engage in the activity he enjoyed the most, which was attacking the Christians. Following his father's policy of almost continual harassment of the Christian territories inside the peninsula, Abd al-Malik's attacks against Leon, Navarre, Castile, and the Christian regions in the Pyrenees were overwhelmingly successful, save for a defeat he suffered in a campaign against Navarre in the year 1006. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos notes that this defeat, along with the fact that his extended absences from Cordoba were resulting in an increase in palace intrigues and conspiracies, seems to have rattled Abd al-Malik. He immediately decided to drink less alcohol and spend less time clinking tankards in army camps with his men, while spending more time in Cordoba overseeing the governance of Al-Andalus. This reform of his character, however, didn't last very long. In the year 1007, Abd al-Malik once again hit the road with his men, setting out on another campaign against Navarre. This time the campaign was successful. Abd al-Malik raised his tankard once again and joined in the victory celebrations.

However, the fun times weren't to last. Despite the fact that Abd al-Malik was only aged in his thirties, he suffered from periods of ill health. It's unclear what caused these setbacks, but they ended up being serious, and in the year 1008, while on his way back to Cordoba from a campaign in Castile, he suffered another bout of illness, then died. As you might imagine, this was a bit of a disaster. Abd al-Malik had intended his son Mohammad to succeed him, but at the time of Abd al-Malik's early and unexpected passing, Mohammad was only five years old.

The puppet Caliph Hisham II, who had now outlived two of his puppet-masters, ended up appointing a twenty-five year old half-brother of Abd al-Malik as his successor. The half-brother's name was Abd al-Rahman, which was more than a little awkward, but luckily he had a nickname and everyone ended up addressing him by that nickname, which was entertainingly "Sanchuelo", or "Little Sancho". Sanchuelo's mother was a Basque concubine who happened to be the granddaughter of Sancho Garcia II of Pamplona, a fact

which she no doubt regularly pointed out. When her son was born he became known as “Little Sancho” after his illustrious great grandfather.

So Sanchuelo, with an impressive connection to the ruling house of Navarre, is about to swagger into the position of the ruler of Al-Andalus, on behalf of the still very-much-a-puppet Caliph. The good news is that Sanchuelo will only have his hands on the reins of power for a very short time. He will in fact be assassinated in the year 1009. The bad news is that Sanchuelo, a young man full of ambition but lacking the qualities needed to achieve those ambitions, will pretty much be the nail in the coffin of Umayyad rule in Al-Andalus.

Join me next time, as we examine the short but disastrous period of governance by Little Sancho. Until next time, bye for now.

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