

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 27
Sanchuelo

Hello again. Last time we saw the demise of al-Mansur and the rise to power of his son and chosen successor, Abd al-Malik. Abd al-Malik stepped straight into his father's shoes, taking the role of puppet-master ruling on behalf of the puppet Caliph Hisham II. However Abd al-Malik was less interested in the finer points of governance than his father had been, and instead spent most of his time on campaign with the Caliphate armies. To everyone's surprise, Abd al-Malik died unexpectedly while returning from one of his many military campaigns. Abd al-Malik's son and chosen successor was only five years old at the time of his father's passing, so the Caliph appointed Abd al-Malik's 25 year old half-brother as his successor, a man called Abd al-Rahman, who we shall call by his nickname "Sanchuelo", or "Little Sancho".

Now, as we mentioned in the last episode, Sanchuelo's mother was a concubine from the Basque region, who was apparently the granddaughter of King Sancho Garcia II of Pamplona, a fact which she revealed regularly to anyone who would listen. As a result, her son gained the nickname "Little Sancho" after his regal ancestor, and it's safe to say that the 25 year old Sanchuelo believed himself to have been born to rule.

Al-Mansur had been very careful to maintain the fiction that the Caliph was the ruler of Al-Andalus, while he, al-Mansur, was delegated by the Caliph with the tedious role of actually ruling the Caliphate, and his son and successor Abd al-Malik was able to continue to maintain this facade. Sanchuelo, though, convinced that the kingly blood cursing through his veins meant that he no longer needed to continue this pretence, decided that the era of Umayyad rule in Al-Andalus was over. It was time to set the stage for the emergence of a new ruling dynasty, a dynasty which would commence with its founder, the man born to rule, the man with the blood of the Kings of Navarre running through his veins: Little Sancho.

So what was Sanchuelo's plan here? How did he envision setting aside centuries of rule by the Umayyad dynasty and the Arab elite of Al-Andalus? Well, to Sanchuelo, the solution was a simple one. He didn't need to maintain the delicate balance between placating the Arab elite while promoting his own loyalists inside the army and the administration, as both al-Mansur and Abd al-Malik had managed to do. No, the pathway forward, so far as Sanchuelo was concerned, was much easier. He just needed to get the Caliph to appoint him, Sanchuelo, as the Caliph's successor. Once that was done, when Hisham II died then the Umayyad family would be outside the line of succession, the Arab elite would all be sidelined and he, Sanchuelo, would be the founder of a new ruling dynasty of Al-Andalus. It all sounded so easy, and Sanchuelo perhaps wondered why the talented politician and accumulator of power al-Mansur had never come up with this excellent idea himself. It probably never occurred to the supremely confident, but not so smart, Sanchuelo that al-Mansur likely had considered this idea but had dismissed it out of hand on the ground that it would never work. Still, let's see how this plan works out for Sanchuelo.

It all started very promisingly. With a swagger in his step, Sanchuelo reached out to the puppet Caliph Hisham and began spending lots of time with him. Hisham was 33 years old at this point in time, and had likely been intimidated and bullied by his last two

puppet-masters, so having his new puppet-master Sanchuelo ply him with compliments, talk to him man to man, and wax lyrical about the grand plans Sanchuelo had for Al-Andalus was like a breath of fresh air. Hisham, you would have to say, had never been an assertive character, nor did he possess any of the political judgement or wisdom needed to counteract the ambitions of al-Mansur and Abd al-Malik. Hisham had also failed to produce any sons, so when his new best buddy Sanchuelo suggested that Hisham formally appoint him, Sanchuelo, as his successor, Hisham couldn't see anything wrong with the plan.

Only one month into his period of rule, Sanchuelo found himself formally invested as the next Caliph of Al-Andalus, with his period of rule as Caliph to commence after the death of the current Caliph Hisham II. Sanchuelo then adopted some fancy titles for himself to reinforce his awesome new status, one title being "Victor for the Dynasty" and another being "Protected by God". He high-fived himself, basked in his own glory for a short while, then headed off to the north to beat the Christians into submission.

Now, if Sanchuelo had possessed an ounce of political sense, he would have immediately spotted some problems with his proposal to ascend to the position of Caliph after the death of Hisham. The first and most obvious issue was the fact that the Caliph had always been able to prove his direct descent from the prophet Muhammad. The Umayyad dynasty, from whom the current line of Caliphs had been drawn, possessed this quality. Sanchuelo, who was descended not from the Prophet but from a Christian King of Navarre, could not. He attempted to address this issue by referring to Hisham as his uncle, which according to Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", was likely less meant to indicate that Sanchuelo was somehow a blood relation of the Umayyad dynasty and more a reference to rumors that Hisham wasn't fathered by the Caliph who preceded him, but by al-Mansur. No matter how flexibly Sanchuelo viewed the ancestry of both himself and Hisham though, there was no getting around the fact that Sanchuelo couldn't clear the first hurdle in the requirements needed to become Caliph. He simply didn't possess the bloodline of the Prophet.

The second issue about which Sanchuelo ought to have been aware was the fact that, despite having been sidelined during the past two administrations, the Arab elite of Al-Andalus were still powerful people, who were unlikely just to sit idly by and watch the end of a dynasty which they had helped to create and which had served Al-Andalus well for the past three centuries. In fact, just prior to his departure for the north, anti-Sanchuelo sentiment had been building in Cordoba, with outrage about his ambitions mixing with rumors and intrigue, including the allegation that Abd al-Malik had not died of natural causes but had been poisoned by Sanchuelo.

Sanchuelo himself though, seemed to be oblivious to these issues and the dangers they posed. He happily departed from Cordoba in February of the year 1009 and headed northwards to attack the Christians. Almost as soon as Sanchuelo left the city members of the Arab and Umayyad elite sprang into action. Assisted by the mother of Abd al-Malik, who had believed the rumor that Sanchuelo had murdered her son, the rebellion was led by a man called Muhammad ibn Hasham, who was a grandson of the first Caliph Abd al-Rahman III, and whose father had been executed by Abd al-Malik. Interestingly, Muhammad appeared to have the whole-hearted support not only of the Arab elite and Umayyad family inside Cordoba, but also of ordinary residents of the city, who were by now totally fed up both with their useless Caliph and with the overconfident upstart who had just seized power.

The overconfident upstart himself, Sanchuelo, was at this moment completely unaware of the fact that the capital city of Al-Andalus had risen up against him, and he continued his journey northwards in blissful ignorance.

With such a large proportion of the population supporting the uprising, and with very few people willing to lay down their lives for the Caliph and Sanchuelo, the rebels went on a rampage, attacking and looting the long since abandoned Madinat al-Zahra and then more alarmingly the currently-in-use palace Madinat al-Zahira, which contained the Caliphate's treasury. The terrified Caliph Hisham II was then convinced by Muhammad to abdicate the throne. A triumphant Muhammad was then installed as the new Caliph. Muhammad then announced that Hisham II had died, and to prove this fact a body was briefly produced then buried with full honours.

It was at this stage that word of the uprising reached Sanchuelo. He had travelled nearly half of his intended journey northwards, and was resting up in Toledo when he received the bad news. Now, Sanchuelo immediately began making plans to turn his army around and retrace his steps back to Cordoba, where he would confront the new Caliph Muhammad II and defeat him in battle. However, his army had other plans. Proving that both his popularity and his all-round awesomeness were things that were only really true inside his own head, Sanchuelo's own bodyguards attacked him shortly after he set out on the road back to Cordoba. He was first taken prisoner, but after his entire army of mostly Berber troops turned against him, Sanchuelo was killed and beheaded, with his body later crucified and mounted on one of the gates of the Alcazar, or fortress, of Toledo, while his head was mounted on a spear and paraded around.

So after being the ruler of Al-Andalus for a few short months, and the Caliph of Al-Andalus for exactly no time whatsoever, the ambitions of Little Sancho failed to launch, and pretty much crashed into a smoking pile of hubris and overconfidence.

So, what does all of this mean for Al-Andalus? Will things return back to normal? Well, no. Unfortunately for everyone, the era of normality is over for the time being, and the unlucky citizens of Al-Andalus have twenty years of chaos, instability, and discord ahead of them.

To be fair, the new Caliph Muhammad II did do his best to hit the reset button and return everything back to the golden days of Umayyad rule. He took for himself the name al-Mahdi, a title which implied that he intended to restore a true and legitimate form of Islamic governance. He followed up by selecting members of the Umayyad family to fill key roles in the administration, then less convincingly embarked on a recruitment drive for the military, targeting ordinary citizens and residents of Cordoba. This was likely intended to water down the Berber influence inside the army, but it sparked a backlash from the Arab elite, who didn't like the optics of the Caliphate's army being stocked with common riffraff.

While a competent, strong leader may have been able to hold the administration together, al-Mahdi was not that man. Almost immediately, members of the Arab elite who hadn't been selected for prominent positions and who disagreed with the military recruitment drive began intriguing and looking for options for a replacement Caliph. At the same time, the new Caliph's anti-Berber stance began to spread to the wider population, leaving many powerful Berber warlords, military commanders, and fighting men also seeking out options for a new leadership team. Pretty soon al-Mahdi found himself ruling not over a united

Al-Andalus, but over a bunch of disaffected warring parties, each of which was trying to outdo the other in a scramble for power.

The group which did the most scrambling was the Berbers. Realizing that if al-Mahdi had his way, all the advancements the Berbers had made since the time of al-Mansur would be wiped out, the Berbers selected a Berber-friendly member of the Umayyad dynasty, a descendant of Abd al-Rahman III called Sulayman, as their pick for Caliph. While the Berbers recognized Sulayman as the legitimate Caliph, no one else did, least of all the current Caliph al-Mahdi. The only way for the Berbers to successfully install Sulayman as the Caliph would be to defeat al-Mahdi and the Caliphate's army in battle, and to do this the Berbers needed more fighting men. They sent requests out for new allies across Al-Andalus and beyond, and eventually scored a hit in the form of Count Sancho of Castile, who agreed to send military aid to Sulayman and his Berber supporters, in return for Al-Andalus handing a bunch of strongholds on its borders over to Castile.

The fighters from Castile, the Berbers, and a bunch of other recruits, including some supporters of Sanchuelo who believed this to be an opportunity to avenge his death, joined forces and all marched on Cordoba. This was all a bit much for al-Mahdi and his army of ordinary residents of Cordoba, who ended up deciding that running away was the best option. Al-Mahdi made a rapid and discreet exit from Cordoba, making his way to Toledo, where he was welcomed by the governor of Medinaceli and the Middlemarch region, who had also served as al-Mansur's deputy in Northern Africa, a man called General Wahdi. Together, al-Mahdi and General Wahdi put their heads together and work-shopped a way to come up with a plan to gather an army and boot Sulayman out of Cordoba.

Is it a mess? Yes, it's a total mess, and unfortunately it's only going to get worse. Join me next time, as the chaos truly begins. Until next time, bye for now.

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