

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 28  
The End of the Caliphate

Hello again. Last time we saw the demise of the supremely confident but not so smart Sanchuelo, who set in place plans to make himself the next Caliph of Al-Andalus and the founding member of a new dynasty, but who ended up instead being killed following a backlash against his plans. A member of the Umayyad dynasty, a man called al-Mahdi, then seized power and produced a body, reportedly that of the former Caliph Hisham II. His moves to water down Berber influence inside the military, however, sparked a Berber uprising, with the Berbers selecting their own Berber-friendly Caliph, a man named Sulayman, whom they recognised as the true ruler of Al-Andalus. When no one else recognised Sulayman as the true Caliph, the Berbers went on the attack, forcing al-Mahdi to flee from Cordoba and take refuge in Toledo. Yes, things are an absolute mess, and unfortunately the chaos is only just beginning.

Now, just to recap, as at the end of the year 1009, the former Caliph Hisham II is apparently dead, and Cordoba is currently under the control of the Berbers, who are occupying it with their Christian allies from Castile. The Berbers have installed their man Sulayman as Caliph. Al-Mahdi is in Toledo with his military general, who is also the governor of the Middlemarch region, a man called Wahdi. What happens next? Well, al-Mahdi wants to march on Cordoba and seize it back from the Berbers, but General Wahdi tells him that they need more men. Luckily for al-Mahdi, General Wahdi, being the ruler of a vast area near the Pyrenees, has connections with the Christians, not from the north but from Catalonia, and he is able to negotiate with the current Count of Barcelona, Ramon Borrell I and his brother, the Count of Urgell, to bring their armies to Toledo.

Al-Mahdi, General Wahdi and the Catalans then marched down to Cordoba, where they managed to defeat the Berbers and their Castilian allies in June of the year 1010. Unfortunately for the long-suffering residents of Cordoba, who have just endured the plundering of their city by the Berbers and their Christian allies from Castile, the city was now plundered once again by a new set of Christians, the men from Catalonia. Unsurprisingly, the Catalans were loathed by the residents of Cordoba.

Al-Mahdi reinstalled himself as the Caliph, with the idea that General Wahdi would handle the administrative and military side of things, but the two men found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. They could only maintain their grip on power with the assistance of their military forces, but those military forces themselves, particularly the extremely unpopular Catalans, were causing them to lose the support of the people of Cordoba. After a short period of attempting to rule while ignoring the discontent of their subjects, al-Mahdi finally decided that the Catalans needed to go.

Unfortunately for al-Mahdi, General Wahdi then used the unrest and turmoil caused by the departing Catalans to stage a coup. With the support of some local military commanders, Wahdi accused al-Mahdi of being the source of conflict and discord inside the administration. Al-Mahdi was arrested on the 23rd of June in the year 1010, was placed on trial, found guilty, then executed.

This left a power vacuum at the top of the administration, with the Caliphate now needing a Caliph. Luckily for everyone, there was a Caliph somewhere out the back, hiding in a dusty cupboard. Who was this mysterious, dust-covered Caliph? Well, it was none other than Hisham II who, contrary to all previous reports, wasn't actually dead after all. Hisham though, as we all know, lacks one crucial attribute required by the ruler of Al-Andalus, and that attribute was the ability to actually rule Al-Andalus. Hisham was used to more powerful men ruling Al-Andalusia on his behalf, while he stayed inside whatever palace he was told to stay inside and did precisely whatever he was told to do. So to cut a long story short, if the people of Cordoba were hoping that Hisham would now unite the Caliphate and lead them out of the deep, dark hole they currently found themselves in, well they were about to be disappointed.

One group of people who weren't disappointed by this turn of events though, were the Berbers. When they had been forced out of Cordoba by al-Mahdi and the Catalans, they hadn't dispersed and scattered across the peninsula. Instead, they had all retreated to the south, to the mountains of Andalusia, where they had regrouped and had begun plotting their comeback.

Their comeback took the form of a blockade, or siege, of Cordoba, which began late in the year 1010 and which would last for the next three years. The siege of Cordoba was terrible news for the citizens of Cordoba, who had already been forced to endure the plundering and destruction of many buildings in their town by two separate armies. General Wahdi had been tasked with negotiating a way out of the siege with the Berbers but his efforts were unsuccessful, and by November of the year 1011 conditions had become so dire inside Cordoba that Wahdi decided to attempt to escape from the city. He was intercepted while doing so and was executed for his efforts by his own allies.

So who was in charge of Cordoba now? Well, officially, Hisham II was in charge, which was bad news for everyone. Unofficially, though, it was pretty much everyone for themselves.

For the next eighteen months, Cordoba and the residents of Cordoba truly suffered. Much of the city was destroyed during this time, either by desperate residents, by Berber raids, or by defenders attempting to break the siege. To pile misery upon misery, the city was also ravaged by a combination of severe floods and fires. By May of the year 1013 everyone had had enough. The garrison of Cordoba agreed to make one final attempt to break the siege. They did so, and it failed. Their only option now was to reach out to the Berbers to try and reach some sort of agreement.

Some sort of an agreement was reached, with the Berbers apparently agreeing to let everyone inside Cordoba walk free following the payment of a massive amount of money. The massive amount of money was duly handed over, but the Berbers reneged on their side of the agreement, letting most of the ordinary citizens of Cordoba walk free from the city, but hunting down and killing many of the military men as well as a number of bureaucrats and scholars. Then, to place the cherry on top of their victorious pie, the Berbers set fire to the city, meaning that many buildings not already destroyed were burned to the ground. The royal palace was destroyed at this time, as was Madinat al-Zahra. To be fair, Madinat al-Zahra had been abandoned and had been subsequently raided for building materials over many years by this time, but the Berbers made sure that its destruction was complete. According to Roger Collins in his book "Caliphs and Kings of Spain", in the ruins of Madinat al-Zahra which survive to this day, you can see splashes of

molten metal on the floor of the audience chamber, which was caused by the destruction of the roof of the chamber after it was set on fire by the Berbers.

So you might be wondering, amidst all this chaos, what was happening to the Caliph? Well, Hisham II was captured by the Berbers and was accused of breaking the promise he made when the Berber's Caliph Sulayman was installed in the year 1009. Now, unfortunately, I haven't been able to discover exactly what this promise was, but it seems to imply that Hisham was involved in the staging of his own fake death and had likely agreed to stay fake dead on a permanent basis. Hisham II, being Hisham II, of course completely agreed with the Berbers that he had failed to live up to this expectation (pun intended). Hisham then publicly apologised to the people of Cordoba and agreed, once again, to abdicate the throne.

Hisham then may have become actually dead. One source reports that he was strangled by Sulayman's son, Muhammad, while other sources have him being imprisoned, then dying shortly afterwards. There are indications, though, that Hisham II may have agreed to another round of fake death. Various sources report that Hisham simply disappeared and was never seen again, while, entertainingly, there is at least one report of him resurfacing many years later: Roger Collins states that a person claiming to be Hisham II served as a front for the rulers of Seville a few years after the fall of Cordoba.

Anyway, whether it was at the fall of Cordoba or some years later, we will now wave goodbye to the Caliph Hisham II, a tragic, forlorn, hopeless occupant of the throne who doesn't even really deserve to be called a ruler. He does get a few points though, for his on-again, off-again exiting of the stage. Is he dead? Yes, he is. Wait. No, he isn't. Yes, he is now. Or is he? I guess for a man who could never make up his mind about anything, he died as he lived, so points for that.

With the final exit of Hisham II, the Caliph Sulayman was now the official ruler of the Caliphate. Sulayman realised that he was only in power due to the Berbers having placed him in that position, so Sulayman decided, probably correctly, that the only way for him to remain in power would be to make sure the Berbers were happy. Making sure the Berbers were happy basically involved letting them run rampant around Cordoba, doing whatever they liked, and punishing people whom they deemed to have supported any anti-Berber leaders while attracting no consequences whatsoever for any of their actions. In an attempt to further appease the Berbers, or perhaps to get the Berbers to move out of long suffering Cordoba, Sulayman awarded a bunch of governorships of regions across the peninsula to powerful Berber military commanders.

However, all this appeasement of the Berbers didn't really work out so well for Sulayman, who was killed by a Berber general in the year 1016, after only three years of rule.

For the next fifteen years or so, a dizzying array of Caliphs came and went, most of them ineffectual leaders who served as the puppets of more powerful men. Most met violent ends, and some were only Caliph for a short period of time, the record being just 47 days. I won't go into the details about all of these Caliphs, as information about them is scant, and the ins and outs of their brief and ineffective periods of rule isn't important for our overall narrative. All you really need to know is that most of the Caliphs could boast some link to the Umayyad dynasty, although interestingly, there were some Caliphs who linked their bloodlines to the Prophet not via the Umayyad family, but through the Idrisid dynasty in northern Africa, who could trace their ancestry back to the Prophet through their descent

from the Quraish. Anyway, none of these Caliphs were able to exhibit the leadership qualities needed to unite the fractured Caliphate. The final Caliph, Hisham III, was expelled from Cordoba in the year 1031. He was not replaced. The Caliphate has now come to an end.

But don't panic. While the Caliphate has come to an end, Al-Andalus itself will endure. It will, in fact, fracture into a number of autonomous regional centres ruled by kings called "taifas". We will examine the rise and operation of the various taifas in future episodes.

Next time, though, we will be leaving Al-Andalus and travelling to the Christian kingdoms. We have neglected them in recent times while we have been tracking the demise of the Caliphate, so we will take a look at each of them in turn to see how they have been travelling, starting with the Kingdom of Navarre. Until next time, bye for now.

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