

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 3
The Battle of 711

Hello again. Last time we saw a Muslim fighting force under the command of Tariq ibn Zayid leave Tangier and make its way to a place on the southern coast of Spain, which will later be called Gibraltar. When we left the last episode, Tariq had spread his army around the bay which lies adjacent to Gibraltar, while King Roderic had mustered his armies at Cordoba and was heading southwards towards Gibraltar.

Now I would absolutely love to take you through a detailed blow-by-blow account of the massively significant battle which is about to take place, but unfortunately I can't. Just like we discovered when looking at the final years of the Visigoths in the last episode, there is an irritating lack of dependable source material about this event. In fact, even to this day, historians aren't able to agree on the rather basic fact of where exactly the battle took place. Most famous battles take their names from the place where the fighting played out, but by the fact that this battle is generally known only as "The Battle of 711", you can see that even this is unclear. But luckily we do know some facts, and we can make some educated guesses about the rest. So with a huge disclaimer about the accuracy of all of this, here is a rundown of the Battle of 711.

Now, as we saw in the last episode, King Roderic's rise to the throne was opposed by Akhila, who had been promised a hereditary crown following the death of his father. There has been speculation over the years that Akhila and his allies had been in communication with the Muslims across the strait in northern Africa about seeking their assistance to overthrow Roderic and place Akhila on the throne.

In addition to this, there is another man we also need to discuss, that man being the mysterious Count Julian. Count Julian is mentioned in many of the Muslim sources, but doesn't rate a say in any of the Christian ones, so he's a hard man to pin down. The legends surrounding him over the centuries include the story that he was the father of a daughter who had been raped by King Roderic and was therefore set upon avenging his daughter's honour. Some Muslim chroniclers describe him as being a Byzantine governor from Northern Africa, but in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos speculates that Count Julian may have been a Visigothic nobleman who had been a contender for the throne but who, along with Akhila, had lost out to Roderic, and actually, this version makes more sense. In Brian Catlos' view Count Julian had been the Lord of Cadiz, which is an important port city just up the coast to the west of Gibraltar. Brian Catlos contends that in the year 710 Count Julian had lent some ships to Tariq, who had been his trading partner for some years, so that Tariq could, and I quote "probe the Visigothic kingdom's defences" end quote.

Once Tariq and his army had established themselves near Gibraltar, Count Julian decided to back him to the hilt, pledging his entire fleet of ships and offering logistical and intelligence support to Tariq by filling him in on the state and size of the Visigothic forces and the undercurrents and leverage points inside the kingdom's court. There is also speculation that Count Julian was the go-between man, linking Tariq to dissidents inside the Visigothic royal court, and that even before the battle some military leaders who would like to see Roderic overthrown had been intriguing with Count Julian and Tariq to swap sides once the fighting commenced.

So what happened during the actual battle? Well, what we know is that by the time the Spanish armies had assembled in Cordoba the force was impressively large. Contemporary sources list the size of the army as being between 40,000 and 100,000 men strong, but this is likely an exaggeration. In his book, "Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of Al-Andalus", Hugh Kennedy states that the size of King Roderic's army was more likely under 30,000 men, perhaps between 24,000 and 30,000. Still, this was a large fighting force, and Hugh Kennedy states that Roderic's army was most likely significantly larger than Tariq's force.

However, despite being larger, Roderic's army faced two significant disadvantages, the first being that Tariq's army had effectively chosen the battleground. The Muslim forces had plenty of time to arrange their defences and organise their strategy around the terrain they had chosen. Once they had done this, the Muslim forces just had to sit tight, relax and wait for the Visigothic army to appear over the horizon. Which brings up the second significant disadvantage. It was the month of July, in the height of the Spanish summer. In short, it was hot, dry, and not the sort of weather where you want to be riding or marching long distances, but this was what the men in Roderic's army were forced to do. They all had to make their way as quickly as they could inland down the coast to confront the Muslim forces. As a result, by the time the armies finally came together, Roderic's forces were hot, exhausted and travel-weary, while the Muslim forces were fresh and fully prepared for the confrontation.

As for exactly what happened next, unfortunately we don't know. It seems that part of Roderic's army flipped, and declared for the Muslims during the battle, an act which swung the advantage around to Tariq and which contributed to Tariq prevailing. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan states that two of Akhila's brothers, who had been given command of the wings of Roderic's army, abandoned the battle during the fighting, in a move which was likely pre-arranged with Tariq. As a result, Roderic's army was resoundingly defeated, and Roderic himself was killed. His body was never located though. The only trace of Roderic after the battle was his white horse with its golden saddle which indicated the kingly status of its rider, and the King's golden mantle.

This, I don't need to tell you, was an absolutely disastrous outcome for Visigothic Spain. Its army had effectively been annihilated and its king killed. It was now leaderless and without the cream of its fighting men. As such, it was now utterly at the mercy of the small group of Muslims now camped on its southern shore.

Now, apparently Akhila's brothers, who had allegedly swapped sides during the battle and had cemented the Muslim victory, were under the impression that the Muslim forces would retreat back to northern Africa following the battle, leaving the brothers to claim the Visigothic kingdom. But if that's what they believed, they were both about to be disappointed.

Instead of sailing away from the Iberian peninsula, Tariq immediately moved to expand upon his military success. He sent part of his army to Cordoba to defeat and conquer the city, while he himself set off for Toledo, the royal centre of power for the Visigothic kingdom. As a consolation prize for Akhila's brothers, Tariq granted them their ancestral lands, with the guarantee that they wouldn't be displaced from their holdings by the Muslim forces. Then Tariq set off on his mission to conquer the peninsula.

The forces, which were dispatched to Cordoba encountered stiff resistance. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy reports that the governor of Cordoba, along with members of the city's garrison, managed to keep the Muslim fighters at bay for around three months, before the Muslims managed to enter the city through a hole in the city's walls. After retreating to a church inside the city and holding out there for a while, the governor and garrison eventually surrendered and were all subsequently executed.

Tariq himself had a much easier job of it. Marching northwards up the Roman road towards Toledo, he encountered no significant resistance. By the time he arrived at Toledo he found the city largely abandoned, apart from the local Jewish population who had decided to stay put. Tariq then easily took the abandoned city. Now, the ease with which Tariq was able to march to Toledo and claim it has sparked much debate over the centuries, and has led to speculation that some of the local Hispanic population may not have been overly concerned about the invaders, and had perhaps decided not to block their passage inland. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan speculates that it is possible that many of the local Hispanic people had become dissatisfied with their Visigothic overlords and weren't that displeased about the result of the 711 battle. Joseph O'Callaghan points out that some of the local population, Count Julian included, had actively assisted the Muslim invaders, as did many groups who had suffered under Visigothic rule, such as the Jewish population, which would explain why the Jewish residents of Toledo felt secure enough to remain in their residences as the Muslim army approached.

Many members of the Visigoth ruling class though, and many church leaders, did not share the optimism of their Jewish counterparts and they gathered their worldly goods, or hid those they couldn't carry, and fled away from the approaching army. Someone, or a group of someones, whose names have been lost to history, managed to remove the treasures of both the Visigothic kings and the church from Toledo before Tariq arrived, burying it nearby at a place called Guarrazar. All in all, they managed to bury a total of 26 crowns and gold crosses, many of which were stunning examples of early medieval goldsmithing and artistry, sporting jewels such as sapphires, emeralds and garnets.

The hiding place they chose was a pretty good one. If their plan was to extract the items once things had died down, well, that didn't happen. In fact, the items stayed buried for over 1000 years. They were rediscovered in the year 1857 and were painstakingly extracted from the ground in an archaeological dig which took place over the next few years. If you want to see the items today, the Musee de Cluny in Paris scored three crowns, two crosses and some pendants for its collection, and the Royal Palace at Madrid claimed a couple of crowns and a gold cross, although one of those crowns was stolen in 1921 and has never been recovered. The bulk of the collection, though, ended up at the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid, where the items are on public display. If you can't make it to Paris or Madrid during these virus-ridden times, check out the "Treasure of Guarrazar" Wikipedia page, where you can see photos of the items in all of their glory.

While the speed and ease of Tariq's conquests were causing alarm bells to ring across the Iberian peninsula, they were also causing alarm bells to ring in northern Africa. Tariq's overlord in the ruling hierarchy back in his homeland was a man called Musa ibn Nusayr, who was in effect the governor of Northern Africa. While you would think that Musa would be rubbing his hands together at the thought that one of his underlings had gone on a successful conquering spree into non-Muslim lands, he actually wasn't. Musa had been directly appointed to his position by the Caliph Abd al-Aziz and in turn, Musa had been instrumental in bringing Islam to northern Africa. Tariq had actually been a prisoner of war

before being freed by Musa and elevated to the lofty heights of the governor of Tangier. Tariq therefore owed his position entirely to Musa, and under the complex system of patronage which governed the Arab-dominated Muslim political system of northern Africa, Tariq should have been operating under the close control and direction of Musa. But Tariq hadn't done this. Instead of sending a message back to Musa following his victory over King Roderic and waiting for instructions before proceeding, Tariq had seized the initiative and had gone on an all-conquering rampage into the heart of the Iberian peninsula without Musa's knowledge, let alone his permission. So instead of celebrating the success of his protegee, Musa was left raging at his insubordination. Gathering his two sons and a crack force of Arab fighters, Musa set sail for Spain with the dual aim of stamping his own print on the conquered lands and teaching the upstart Tariq a lesson.

While Tariq had settled down in Toledo, intending to spend the winter there, Musa and his force of Arab fighters landed on the southern coast of the peninsula and made their way inland to the fortress of Carmona. The heavily fortified town of Carmona was located on a commanding position on a ridge overlooking the countryside, partway between Seville and Cordoba. Neither Tariq nor his men had attempted to take Carmona, and Musa was only able to do so with the help of Count Julian, who along with some of his men pretended to be local Hispanic people fleeing from the Muslim forces, and were therefore admitted into the town. Count Julian then managed to let Musa and his forces into the town, which was quickly overrun. Musa and his army then made their way to nearby Seville, which eventually surrendered to the Muslim fighters after a siege which lasted for some months. Having subdued the region around Seville, Musa turned his army northwards to the city of Merida. The city eventually fell to the invaders, and the Muslim chronicles were able to note the splendour of the Roman remains in the city.

Following the fall of Merida, Musa turned his army eastwards towards Toledo. Tariq was advised that his commander was headed in his direction, so he ventured out and met him on the road. Apparently when Tariq went over to greet his overlord, Musa struck him on his head with his riding crop and yelled at him, dressing him down for his greed and his insubordination. However, the two men must have patched up their differences, as they journeyed together to Toledo, where they settled in for a few months of rest and recuperation, with Musa taking the opportunity to write to the Caliph in Damascus, letting him know what had transpired.

After their period of rest and recuperation, Tariq and Musa left Toledo in the spring of the year 714 to go on a conquering mission across the peninsula. They headed eastwards from Toledo towards Zaragoza. Musa then stayed in the region around Zaragoza, while Tariq took his forces further eastwards, towards the Pyrenees, into the region which would later be known as the Kingdom of Aragon.

It was while he was in Zaragoza that Musa received an alarming message from the Caliph. Just as Musa had been outraged at the greed and insubordination exhibited by his underling Tariq, the Caliph was apparently now outraged at the greed and insubordination exhibited by his underling Musa. Disturbed by the way in which Musa was apparently conquering a goodly amount of territory without the permission of or oversight from the Caliph, the Caliph ordered Musa to down his weapons and travel immediately to Damascus, where he was to explain himself to the Caliph in person. Tariq and Musa most likely rolled their eyes, but an order was an order, so in the summer of the year 714 they headed back to northern Africa and made the lengthy journey to Damascus, arriving there in February of the year 715. However, upon arriving in the city, they discovered that the Caliph was dead and that there was a new Caliph they needed to answer to. The

answering to did not go well. Musa was charged with embezzlement, was stripped of the profits he had made during his period of governorship of northern Africa and subsequently died in obscurity. There is no record of what happened to Tariq. The Muslim chroniclers simply never mention him again, so I guess we can probably surmise that neither man returned to the Iberian peninsula.

Despite the fall from grace of the two men who had been pivotal in commencing the conquest of Spain in the name of Islam, the conquest of Spain in the name of Islam is still continuing apace. Before leaving the peninsula, Musa appointed his son Abd el-Aziz as governor of Spain, and in the next episode we will see how he is faring as the first Islamic ruler of the partially conquered territory. Until next time, bye for now.

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