

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 4  
Securing Muslim Rule

Hello again. Last time we saw the Muslim commander Tariq defeat King Roderic in the Battle of 711. Determined to follow on from his victory, Tariq and his forces went on to defeat the towns of Cordoba and Toledo. Back in northern Africa, Tariq's overlord Musa ibn Nusayr flew into a rage at the greed and insubordination exhibited by the all-conquering Tariq, and took an army to Spain. Having now done a fair bit of conquering himself, Musa and Tariq received word that the Caliph in Damascus was outraged at their greed and insubordination. Tariq and Musa obeyed the Caliph's order for them to travel to Damascus and explain themselves. However, upon arriving in Damascus, they discovered that the Caliph had died. The new Caliph stripped both men of their honours, and they lived the rest of their lives in obscurity without ever returning to the Iberian peninsula.

So with both Tariq and Musa out of the picture, the question we need to ask ourselves is: what is currently happening on the Iberian peninsula? Well, as we mentioned in the last episode, before leaving the peninsula to journey to Damascus, Musa appointed his son Abd al-Aziz as the governor of Spain, and after his father departed with Tariq, Abd al-Aziz continued where his father had left off, extending the Muslim conquests to the city of Pamplona and Barcelona near the Pyrenees, before turning his forces westwards and doing a pretty good job of subduing the western section of the peninsula, across the region which is nowadays the country of Portugal.

And you would have to say that the manner in which Abd al-Aziz carried out his subjugation of the region indicated that he was in this for the long haul. He didn't want to just defeat an area, plunder it of its riches, and move on. No, he wanted to conquer in a way which would ensure that he could successfully govern the region long after his armies had been stood down. How did he do this? Well, he reached out to local Christian lords and leaders as he approached a city or region with his army, and inquired whether that lord would like to surrender instead of facing the might of the Muslim forces. Why would a Christian lord want to surrender in this way? Well, because in return, Abd al-Aziz would guarantee not only that the Lord retained his position and his wealth, but that he would enjoy a degree of autonomy in the governance of his region, so long as he acknowledged the overall sovereignty of Abd al-Aziz. In this way, in the same manner in which Tariq had formed an alliance with the brothers of Akhila and had allowed them to rule their ancestral lands following their abandonment of King Roderic during the Battle of 711, Abd al-Aziz created numerous alliances with the local Christian lords, allowing them a degree of autonomy, while also ensuring their submission, and their tax returns, would be placed squarely at the feet of their new Muslim conquerors.

You might be interested to know that an agreement formulated between Abd al-Aziz and the Visigothic lord Theodomir of Murcia in April of 713 has survived the passing of the years, and although it is rather lengthy I think it's worth recounting in full, so we can see exactly how Abd al-Aziz is proceeding with his conquests. Okay, here it is, and just a note here, the Muslims call Theodemir "Tudmir ibn Abdush" in this document. And I quote. "In the name of Allah the Clement, the Merciful, letter addressed by Abd al-Aziz ibn Musa ibn Nusayr to Tudmir ibn Abdush. The latter receives peace and the promise, under the guarantee of Allah and of his Prophet, that there will not be any change in his situation nor in that of his people, that his right of sovereignty will not be contested, that his subjects will

not be injured nor reduced to captivity, nor separated from their children, nor their wives, that they will not be disturbed in the practise of their religion, that their churches will not be burned nor despoiled of the objects of the cult found in them. All this, so long as he satisfies the charges we impose upon him. Peace is granted to him on condition of the surrender of the following seven towns: Orihuela, Baltana, Alicante, Mula, Villena, Lorca, and Ello. In addition, he will not give shelter to any person who may flee from us or who may be our enemy, nor will he do injury to anyone who may be protected by our friendship, nor will he keep secret information relative to the enemy which may come to his attention. He and his subjects will have to pay each year a personal tribute of one dinar in specie, four bushels of wheat and four of barley, four measures of malt, four of vinegar, two of honey, and two of oil. These imposts will be reduced by one half for slaves." End quote.

So there you have it. In return for a high degree of autonomy and religious freedom, Theodomir agrees to treat the enemies of Abd al-Aziz as his own enemies, and the friends and allies of Abd al-Aziz as his own friends and allies, and to hand over a bunch of produce from himself and his subjects personally to Abd al-Aziz each year.

In a nutshell, unlike his father before him and Tariq before that, Abd al-Aziz is setting himself up not just to conquer the Iberian peninsula, but to govern it. In case anyone had any doubts that this was the situation, Abd al-Aziz decided to move the capital city of Spain from Toledo to Seville. He set himself up nicely in a residence in Seville, and then decided to marry a local woman, not just any local woman, but the widow of King Roderic.

If you think that this move set alarm bells ringing amongst the Muslim followers of Abd al-Aziz, that he was styling himself in the manner of a Christian king and acting in ways contrary to the religion of Islam, well this wasn't helped by the fact that rumours began circulating that Abd al-Aziz had managed to get his hands on one of the Visigothic crowns, and that his new wife was encouraging him to wear the crown on occasions. The alarm bells sounded so loudly that they could be heard all the way back in Damascus, and as a consequence, Abd al-Aziz ended up being murdered in Seville in the year 716, allegedly on orders from the Caliph.

By this time, the Caliph was apparently thinking that this newly conquered region was proving to be a bit of a headache for him, and was considering just abandoning it and ordering all the Muslims who were currently in the Iberian peninsula to withdraw back to northern Africa, but this particular caliph, Caliph Umar, died before he had the chance to make a final decision on the matter. Subsequent caliphs decided to let the administration of this far-flung region fall under the jurisdiction of the governor of Northern Africa, and in practise, this meant that the governor of Northern Africa would generally appoint a governor to rule over the Iberian Peninsula in the Caliph's name.

For the next forty or so years, a rapid succession of governors would rule over Spain, some of them competent and some of them terrible, from the new capital of the region, Cordoba, the capital having shifted from Seville after the death of Abd al-Aziz.

Now, although none of these rulers lasted long enough to leave their own permanent mark on the system of rule in the peninsula, and although, as we've just said, some of them were incompetent and not suited to their jobs, Islamic rule in the Iberian peninsula did ultimately prevail. The question many historians have asked themselves over the centuries is: Why? Why, after one single battle, did the Muslim invaders managed to establish themselves in this region without a huge deal of pushback from the locals?

Actually, while we are confining our narrative in this podcast to the Iberian peninsula, I should point out that by the year 720 not only was the Islamic subjugation of the peninsula virtually complete, but the Islamic forces had also conquered the neighbouring Visigothic kingdom known as Septimania. Septimania was pretty much equivalent to the Cathar region we covered in the Crusade against the Cathars. It extended from the Pyrenees across to Carcassonne, then extended all the way eastwards to the river Rhone encompassing the towns of Beziers and Narbonne. In fact, in the year 720 the city of Narbonne became the administrative centre of Muslim Septimania.

As you can appreciate, this is a significant Muslim incursion into continental Europe, and must have raised grave concerns about the safety of the entire region of Europe. These concerns would have been heightened had the Europeans known that in the year 720 the Muslim governor of Septimania was making plans to attack the city of Toulouse, and from there extend Muslim rule into the province of Aquitaine. However, the Muslim conquest hit a road-block at the Battle of Tours in the year 732, when Charles Martel scored a victory over the Muslim forces, with the Emir of Septimania dying on the battlefield. Over the following decades the Muslims were gradually forced out of southern France and back over the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula.

But unlike in France, the Muslim occupation of the peninsula was no short-lived event. In his book "Moorish Spain", the historian Richard Fletcher provides his views as to why the Muslim conquest of Spain prevailed, and I think it's worth exploring his arguments. As Richard Fletcher points out, the Muslim conquest of the peninsula was astonishingly quick. It took just a single battle and a few years of military campaigns, and - Bang, the Peninsula was essentially theirs. As Richard Fletcher states, and I quote "the invaders did in four years what it had taken the legions of Rome two centuries to encompass" end quote.

So why was the Muslim invasion so successful? Well, Richard Fletcher points out that under Roman rule, not only had the peninsula been united under one system of governance, a massive amount of infrastructure had been built to facilitate the ease of transport and communication across the peninsula. As we stated back in Episode One, the sheer geographic diversity of the peninsula and its mountainous interior had posed a daunting obstacle for pre-Roman invaders, but under Roman rule, miles of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure made traversing the peninsula much easier. During the era of Roman rule this facilitated trade across the region, making it easier to transport corn, oil and wine to ports where the goods could be exported to other parts of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately though, it also made the peninsula easier to conquer for future invaders.

Just as a side note, much of the infrastructure built under Roman rule was already centuries old by the time the Muslim invaders arrived, but many of the buildings, villas and bridges were seriously impressive. There is one bridge which deserves a particular shout-out. Today it is called the Alcantara Bridge, and it spans the Tagus River near the border between present day Spain and Portugal. This bridge was constructed during the rule of the Roman Emperor Trajan, whose reign ended in the year 117 of the Common Era, so it would have been over 600 years old by the time the Muslims arrived. However, it was still an impressive structure despite its age, and in fact the Muslims was so impressed by it that they named it "The Bridge", and if anybody referred to "The Bridge", everyone knew that they were talking about this particular awesome spectacle of Roman engineering, which spanned the Tagus River. In fact, it's still there today. Granted, it has been repaired, restored and in some sections completely rebuilt over the centuries, but still, the person who designed the bridge and the workers who built the bridge would surely

be pretty chuffed to learn that it's still there, nearly 2000 years later. I'll put a photo of it on the website and Facebook page, for those of you who are interested.

Anyway, where was I? Ah yes, Richard Fletcher's first point is that the infrastructure put in place by the Romans made it easier for subsequent invaders to move their armies across the peninsula and conquer it.

Another reason which contributed to the ease of Muslim occupation of the peninsula, was the nature of the rule by the Visigoths. The final years of Visigothic rule had been chaotic and disruptive, and there were many people who weren't that unhappy to see it disappear into the mists of time. The complete annihilation of the Visigothic army at the Battle of 711 removed the cream of the Visigothic kingdom's fighting men, and many of the men of fighting age who remained from the Visigothic era just didn't feel inspired to place their lives and livelihoods on the line in support of the main Visigothic contenders left standing, namely the brothers of Akhila, who were only alive due to their betrayal of King Roderic. Many noblemen from the Visigothic era were like Lord Theodomir: so long as they were able to retain their estates and the practise of their religion, along with a degree of independence, they were happy to accept the rule of their new Muslim overlords. Visigothic rulers who, unlike Theodomir, pushed back against Muslim rule, were generally ejected from their lands and had their estates confiscated by the Muslims.

The extensive estates of King Roderic and all those defeated alongside him at the Battle of 711 also fell into Muslim hands, which brings us to the final reason why the Muslim conquest was so effective. As we've noted previously, the business model, so to speak, of the Muslim forces was that the fighters who joined the army wouldn't be paid a salary. Instead, they would be rewarded from the conquests made as a result of their fighting. The vast amount of land which fell to the Muslim forces following the Battle of 711 was as a consequence, allocated to members of the Muslim army, who in the majority of cases didn't plunder the land and return back to northern Africa; no, they settled on the land, bringing their families over from Africa to join them. Richard Fletcher states that the most accurate estimate of the number of Muslim warriors who settled in the Iberian peninsula following the conquest is between 150,000 and 200,000 men. If you add to this number the fact that they would later be joined by their wives, children, slaves, and extended family members, you can see that the number of immigrants who settled in Spain from northern Africa at this time was huge.

There were some serious issues, though, with the manner in which the land was apportioned out to the victorious warriors. The vast majority of the Muslim fighters were Berbers, but in the allocation of lands you would have to say that the Berbers got the raw end of the deal. The allocation of the land was done by a sort of lottery, but it appears that it was rigged. The Arab minority were overwhelmingly allocated the fertile coastal lands, while the Berber fighters scored lands in the challenging mountainous regions of the interior, in the north of the peninsula, and up near the borders with the Pyrenees. Will this have consequences down the track? Yes, it absolutely will. In fact, in the year 739 the Berbers of Northern Africa will rise up against their Arab rulers, and that revolt will spread to the Iberian peninsula the following year.

Join me next time as we encounter some road bumps in the early years of Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula. Until next time, bye for now.

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