

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 42
A serpent in the basket

Hello again. Last time we saw a struggle for power between the Mozarab Christians and the mainstream Catholic Christians following the annexation of the Taifa of Toledo by the Christian north, a contest from which team “mainstream Catholic” emerged as the victor. At the conclusion of the last episode, we saw King Alfonso VI camped outside the walls of the city of Zaragoza with the armies of the Christian north, keen to see whether he could follow up his annexation of the Taifa of Toledo with the annexation of the Taifa of Zaragoza. Surprisingly, we also learned that the man tasked with defending the city of Zaragoza against the invading northern Christians was none other than Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, later known as El Cid. How did everyone's favourite hotheaded-loose-cannon-in-exile find himself in charge of the defence of the Muslim Taifa of Zaragoza? Well, to answer that question, we need to backtrack a little.

Now, we mentioned back in Episode 40 that the impressive ruler of the Taifa of Zaragoza, al-Muqtadir, died in the year 1082, after a highly successful four decades on the throne. Under al-Muqtadir's rule the Taifa of Zaragoza had thrived. Not only did al-Muqtadir embark on an impressive infrastructure program which included the building of an extremely imposing fortified palace known as the Palace of Pleasures, or the Aljafaria Palace, he was also an enthusiastic patron of science and culture, attracting many scholars to his Taifa.

Incidentally, the Aljafaria palace is still in existence today and according to Trip Advisor, a visit to the palace is ranked number 12 out of 210 things to do in Zaragoza. It has a rating of 4 ½ stars on Trip Advisor and looks to be well worth a visit. A word of warning though: the palace complex currently houses the parliament of the autonomous region of Aragon, and when parliament is in session the palace closes to the public, so be sure to check whether or not it's open before you go. Although seriously, if you are in Zaragoza it looks like an absolutely stunning place to visit.

Anyway, where were we? Ah yes. Al-Muqtadir not only commissioned the building of this extremely impressive palace, which is still serving as an administrative centre for the region nearly a millennia later, he also poured money into the arts, music, and science. The resulting intellectual and cultural climate not only attracted Muslim scholars but many Jewish scholars as well. In fact a famed Jewish poet, musician, astronomer, and mathematician named Abu Fadl ibn Hasdai was a favourite inside al-Muqtadir's royal court. If his name sounds familiar, it's because he's the grandson of the great Hasdai ibn Shaprut, who he met in Episode 21. Fortunately for all the scholars, poets, and intellectuals who graced the royal court of Zaragoza, al-Muqtadir's successor, his son Yusuf al-Mu'taman, was also a solid supporter of culture, science, and the arts. In fact, Yusuf al-Mu'taman himself was a talented and notable mathematician.

Things in Zaragoza generally, though, weren't so rosy under Yusuf's rule, as he struggled to maintain his grip on power and tried desperately to prevent the powerful Taifa of Zaragoza from unravelling due to a toxic and volatile mix of domestic infighting and intrigue.

Into this toxic mess sauntered Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar in the year 1081. Now, as soon as he was exiled from the Kingdom of Leon and Castile by King Alfonso VI in the summer of the year 1081, Rodrigo headed to Catalonia, where he tried and failed to gain employment with the Count of Barcelona. With his options diminishing Rodrigo decided to re-acquaint himself with the ruler of Zaragoza, al-Muqtadir, whom he had first met nearly twenty years earlier, way back in the year 1063.

Fortunately for Rodrigo, he arrived at the perfect time. Al-Muqtadir was elderly and in poor health and had delegated the tasks involved in ruling Zaragoza to his two sons. He allocated the western half of the Taifa, which included the city of Zaragoza, to his son Yusuf al-Mu'taman, while the eastern half, which included the coastal regions and the cities of Lleida, Tortosa, and Denia, to his son Mundir al-Hayib. Now, with all due respect to al-Muqtadir, this was a terrible plan. The two brothers had never seen eye to eye, and had always been fiercely competitive with each other, with Yusuf being seen as the more stable, scholarly sort of type, while Mundir was known for being impetuous and aggressive. Anyway, it wasn't terribly unusual for Christian fighters to show up in Zaragoza seeking employment, and the elderly al-Muqtadir put Rodrigo to good use, employing him as a field commander and military adviser, and sending him to Yusuf, who planned to dispatch him into the field.

The places where Yusuf decided that Rodrigo could be of most assistance were in the hot-spots of his territory, basically the northern sections which bordered the Kingdom of Aragon, and the eastern regions which were in danger of being invaded by his brother Mundir. Mundir had, worryingly for Yusuf, entered into alliances with both the King of Aragon (Sancho Ramirez) and the Count of Barcelona, so to put it mildly Yusuf needed all the military assistance he could get his hands on. He welcomed Rodrigo with open arms and promptly dispatched him to the hottest of the hot-spots within his territory, a region called Ribagorza which started just north of the town of Barbastro and stretched up into the Pyrenees mountain range. This region had long been coveted by both the Kingdom of Aragon and the County of Barcelona, and during the current unsettled times, as the life of al-Muqtadir drew to a close, it was coming under attack from Aragon. In fact, not only had King Sancho of Aragon sent his armies into the region, his forces were being supported by Yusuf's brother Mundir. Rodrigo found himself in command of the Zaragoza forces in the region, and successfully repelled advances from both the armies of Aragon and the armies of Mundir.

Yusuf then ordered Rodrigo to fortify a strategically important castle called Almenor located towards the east of his territory, which Rodrigo promptly did. Then, apparently under his own initiative and not due to any direct orders, Rodrigo rode away from Almenor and headed to the south, capturing and fortifying another castle. It was while he was at this castle that Rodrigo received word that Mundir and the Count of Barcelona had just captured Almenor. Rodrigo hurriedly sent word to Yusuf, then rode to meet personally with Yusuf at a town near Almenor. At the meeting Yusuf suggested that Rodrigo take his men and attack the forces at Almenor with a view to retaking it. According to Richard Fletcher in his book "The Quest for El Cid", Rodrigo was seriously reluctant to do this, pointing out the size of the Christian army and suggesting to Yusuf that he instead treat with the Christians and attempt to buy Almenor back. Yusuf rejected this suggestion and ordered Rodrigo to attack Almenor. Rodrigo obeyed.

To everyone's surprise, Rodrigo succeeded. In fact, he didn't just succeed, he managed to capture the Count of Barcelona and his retinue of knights. Rodrigo handed the captives over to Yusuf who ransomed them back to Barcelona for a large sum of money. Yusuf

wasn't the only person to enrich himself following this event. Yusuf showered gifts, money and treasures from the Count's baggage train onto Rodrigo, who found himself not only wealthy but the man of the moment in Zaragoza.

Once al-Muqtadir passed away and Yusuf rose to power, Rodrigo's employment as a military commander inside Yusuf's court was pretty much guaranteed. Which is why, as the armies of the Christian north lined up outside the city of Zaragoza in the year 1086, Rodrigo found himself tasked with the defence of the city.

Now it's safe to say that during the past four years, since Yusuf had become ruler of Zaragoza, Rodrigo had risen to become one of Zaragoza's most trusted military commanders, and there was plenty to keep him busy. Yusuf's hold on the throne was tenuous to say the least, and not only Yusuf's close family members, but the neighbouring Christian regions of Aragon and Catalonia were doing all they could to see him fall from power. So, when Yusuf faced the most severe threat to his power to date, in the form of a massive invasion by the all-conquering King in the north, it fell to Rodrigo to protect the city of Zaragoza.

But this placed him in a bind. Despite having been exiled for making poor choices, Rodrigo still considered King Alfonso to be his overlord, and the fact that his current employer and patron had sent him to face off against his actual King and Lord was more than a little awkward. So what will Rodrigo do? How will the siege of Zaragoza pan out?

Well, actually nothing's going to happen. The siege of Zaragoza will be lifted and no actual fighting will take place. Why? Well, because something of much greater consequence has just taken place, something which will permanently alter the political structure of Al-Andalus and which will have King Alfonso scrambling to adjust to the new threat. We will leave King Alfonso to rapidly lift his siege, pack up his camp, and mobilize his armies to the south, while we delve into the background of what is about to take place.

Now, it's pretty obvious that, following the fall of Toledo, most of the remaining taifas in Al-Andalus viewed the aggression of the Christian north as an existential threat. King Alfonso now occupied the north and center of the Iberian peninsula. Using the Taifa of Toledo as a base, every remaining taifa was within reach of the Christian armies. There was in effect nowhere to hide. As the all-conquering Christian army mobilized and set up camp outside the powerful city of Zaragoza, it was clear to the Muslims of Al-Andalus what King Alfonso's strategy would be. He would just pick off the taifas one by one, until the whole peninsula was under Christian rule. A Muslim poet at the time neatly voiced the fears of the Muslims of the peninsula in the following piece of verse, and I quote:

Oh people of Al-Andalus, hasten your horses.
To remain here is folly.
We live with an enemy who does not go away.
How can we live with a serpent in the basket?

(end quote)

Basically, following the fall of Toledo, the rulers of the Taifas of Seville, Granada and Badajoz began frantically work-shopping various ways in which the King Alfonso serpent could be removed from the Al-Andalus basket. Unfortunately, it was pretty clear that their combined strengths alone would be unlikely to do the trick. King Alfonso had easily defeated the mighty Taifa of Toledo and was currently about to have a crack at overtaking

the powerful Taifa of Zaragoza, a plan that may well succeed. What the remaining taifas needed was a massive injection of men, arms, and money, and such a large volume of military assistance could only really be sourced from outside the peninsula.

The good news for the taifas was that a large army of dedicated, militant, Islamic fighters was available, just across the strait of Gibraltar in Northern Africa. The bad news was that these fighters were Berbers of the extremely scary kind. The Kings of the taifas had hesitated to call upon these fighters for assistance against the Christian north to date because, well frankly, they weren't convinced that these northern African men weren't more of a risk to the taifas than King Alfonso. The Berbers in question had a formidable reputation, and there was absolutely no guarantee whatsoever that once they landed in Al-Andalus the Kings of the taifas would be able to control them and force them back to Northern Africa upon completion of their mission.

So who were these radical militant Berbers? Well, they were called the Almoravids, and at the time the taifas were considering requesting their assistance the Almoravids were the undisputed rulers of a vast chunk of Northern Africa, a region stretching all the way from the Mediterranean Sea, across the Sahara Desert, all the way south past Timbuktu, nearly to the region containing the modern day countries of Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

The fact that the Almoravids had managed to control such a vast region was an indication that the foreign policies of Al-Andalus towards their northern African neighbours had failed. The traditional rulers of Al-Andalus had always been careful to play the various warlords in northern Africa against each other, thus ensuring that no one faction could dominate and achieve supremacy. Since the rise of the taifas though, this policy had lapsed, as the kings of Al-Andalus focused less on matters across the Strait of Gibraltar and more on matters closer to home. As a result, the worst-case scenario of the earlier rulers of Al-Andalus had come to pass. One of the Berber clans had been able to dominate the politics of northern Africa, in fact dominate might be too gentle a word. The Almoravid empire currently covered a staggeringly large amount of territory and the Almoravids themselves were unstoppable. They had beaten, intimidated, and slaughtered all of their opponents in northern Africa, and had for a few years now been looking over at the wealthy Iberian peninsula with a degree of interest.

What will happen when the taifas invite the Almoravids to the Al-Andalus basket to attack the King Alfonso serpent? Well, you'll have to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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