

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 43  
The Almoravids

Hello again. Last time we saw King Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile hurriedly raise his siege of the city of Zaragoza and prepare his armies to march southwards to face a new threat, that threat being the invasion of the Almoravids. Basically, the leaders of the taifas, desperate to push back against the danger posed by the all-conquering Christian king in the north, had decided to invite another all-conquering force, the Berber Almoravids of northern Africa, to Al-Andalus, in the hope that the Almoravids would out-conquer the Christians, meaning that Al-Andalus would remain in Muslim hands.

Now, the arrival of the Almoravids was a seismic event in the history of the Iberian peninsula, so at the start of this episode we need to continue to answer the question we posed at the end of the last episode, that question being: who were the Almoravids? Well, the Almoravids were a relatively recent phenomenon. They had first appeared only fifty years earlier when a Berber Muslim man named Abdallah Ibn Yasin attempted to bring a radical form of Islam to the Berber clans of the Saharan Desert. He gathered together a small group of followers and established a sort of fortified monastery on an island in the Niger River. His followers eventually became known as the Almoravids, and distinguished themselves by wearing a blue veil over their faces. Their other distinguishing factor was their adherence to a strict form of militant Islam, and their ability to attack and defeat any tribes who rejected their teachings. Gradually, more and more Berber clan members were forced to accept the austere and strict way of life imposed by the Almoravids, and the influence of the Almoravids spread northwards across the Saharan Desert all the way to Morocco.

Actually, the speed and extent of the conquest by the Almoravids is almost as impressive as those of the original Islamic conquest of the seventh century, but unfortunately we don't have a huge amount of information available about it. It seems that not an awful lot was written about the conquests to start with, then in the twelfth century, after the Almoravid empire collapsed, a deliberate effort was made to erase all references to the Almoravids from history. Fortunately though, there are some things that we do know. We know that an important factor in their rise to dominance was the fact that they managed to control the trans-Saharan gold trade. We also know that the Almoravid fighters were tough, formidable people. Hardened by the brutal conditions of sub-Saharan Africa, by their observance of a strict, disciplined, and aesthetic form of Islamic orthodoxy, and by their unforgiving nomadic, spartan lifestyle, these were men honed by hardship and austerity into ruthless, tireless fighting machines. Unsurprisingly, the Almoravids looked down their noses at the Muslims of Al-Andalus, viewing them as a bunch of soft, lazy lovers of luxury and excess, who didn't take the religion of Islam anywhere near seriously enough. Also, unsurprisingly, the Muslims of Al-Andalus looked down their noses at the Almoravids, viewing them as a bunch of uncivilised, uneducated barbarians tainted by a slightly disturbing fanatical religious adherence.

Now the Almoravids had consolidated themselves into the formidable fighting force and political powerhouse they were in the middle of the 1080s, under the leadership of a man called Yusuf Ibn Tashafin, who had been the head of the Almoravids for the past decade or so. Under his leadership, the Almoravids had conquered Morocco and western Algeria before setting up headquarters in a new capital Yusuf created called Marrakesh. Having

conquered his way northwards right up to the Strait of Gibraltar, Yusuf ibn Tashafin had then allowed his gaze to settle on the rich and currently seriously dysfunctional region of Al-Andalus.

Now, I think it's worth emphasising the point that the very fact that the rulers of the taifas were even considering inviting Yusuf Ibn Tashafin to Al-Andalus was a sign of extreme desperation. In effect, the rulers of the taifas were attempting to kill the serpent in the basket by inviting another serpent into the basket. Whichever serpent killed the other one, there was no guarantee that the remaining serpent would then leave the basket and return from whence it came. I guess what I'm trying to say here is that in inviting the Almoravids to the peninsula to defeat King Alfonso, there was every likelihood that once that mission had been accomplished the Almoravids would settle in, and consider themselves to be the new rulers of Al-Andalus. Militarily, the combined forces of the taifas were no match for the Almoravids. The Almoravids knew that, and the rulers of the taifas knew that, so there was a good chance that the rulers of the taifas would simply be swapping serpents. However, it was a risk they were prepared to take. As the ruler of Seville, al-Mutamid is alleged to have said when asked about the threat posed by Yusuf ibn Tashafin, and I quote "Better to be a camel-driver for Yusuf than a swine-herd for Alfonso" end quote.

So the decision was made. The rulers of Seville, Granada, and Badajoz sent an envoy over to northern Africa formally requesting military assistance from the Almoravids. Now, King Alfonso did get wind of this plan. In response, King Alfonso also sent an envoy to northern Africa carrying a letter for Yusuf ibn Tashafin. The letter was written in Arabic, and in it King Alfonso invited Yusuf to meet him in battle at a place of his choice, either in Northern Africa or on the Iberian peninsula. At this battle, King Alfonso promised to soundly defeat the Almoravids. According to Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Yusuf didn't bother responding to this letter, instead telling the envoys words to the effect, and I quote "You'll see what will happen" end quote.

And while Yusuf didn't respond to King Alfonso's letter, he absolutely did respond to the request by the taifas' rulers. Telling them that "Yes, of course, he was interested in popping over to the Iberian peninsula to cleanse Al-Andalus from the Christian scourge", he began organising his forces and sent a demand back to the taifas. Yusuf had decided that the best place for him to land his forces would be the town of Algeciras, which is in the Taifa of Seville, just across the bay from Gibraltar. The demand he made of the King of Seville was that the town of Algeciras ought to be completely evacuated and cleared of residents prior to the arrival of the northern Africans, to give the Almoravids a secure and safe landing point.

This request set all sorts of alarm bells ringing across the taifas, but before the King of Seville could formulate his response it was too late. The Almoravid advance force of around 500 fighters landed at Algeciras in July of 1086. The town hadn't been evacuated and was still full of people, but it was effectively taken by the Almoravids with no resistance. The local Muslims had been told that the Almoravids were coming to save them from Christian aggression, so the men from northern Africa were greeted with open arms. The bulk of the Almoravids fighters, numbering around 12,000 men, arrived at Algeciras soon after the advance force. Yusuf then marched his large army to Seville, where they were joined by the army of the Taifa of Granada. Then the combined forces of northern Africa, Seville, and Granada marched to Badajoz, where they were joined by al-Mutawakkil and his forces.

Meanwhile, King Alfonso had lifted his siege of Zaragoza. He arranged for his wounded fighters to be transported back to the Christian north, then sent messages far and wide, calling for assistance. He then headed to Toledo, arriving there towards the end of September in the year 1086. He was joined in Toledo by his troops from Valencia, fresh from hoisting al-Qadir onto his new throne, and by an army from Aragon sent by Sancho Ramirez I. The combined Christian army then left Toledo and headed eastwards down the Tagus River valley before then turning southwards and heading towards Badajoz.

The combined Christian army ended up clashing with the combined Muslim army to the northeast of Badajoz in what became later known as the Battle of Sagrajas. Now unfortunately, there is not much known about this battle. There were two eyewitness reports made, but one was scant on detail, and the other was very brief. The most comprehensive account of the battle was written 200 years after it took place. But keeping in mind these challenges here is what may have occurred.

It appears that King Alfonso's forces, numbering around 750 heavy cavalry, 750 light cavalry, and 1000 foot soldiers, so around 2500 men all up, came across the gathered army of the Almoravids and the taifas. While the armies of the taifas would have appeared familiar, the Almoravid forces were anything but, comprising veiled Almoravid fighters, Berber warriors, and African slaves. Some of the Northern African fighters were on horses and there were some elephants, but most were on foot. It's estimated that the combined Muslim army outnumbered the combined Christian army around three to one.

Despite being outnumbered, King Alfonso decided to go on the offensive, with his plan being to attack the hopefully undisciplined northern African forces with his heavy cavalry, sending them scattering and fleeing. However, that's not how things worked out. After initially taking a pummeling from the cavalry charge, the Almoravids quickly regrouped. The Christians who had been recalled from Valencia attacked the armies of the taifas, and many of the taifan fighters fled, except for those under the command of al-Mutamid, the King of Seville. Despite being wounded, al-Mutamid refused to leave the field and seems to have fought back bravely and effectively against the Christian forces. Yusuf then sent a contingent of Moroccan fighters to support al-Mutamid, while he personally led some Saharan regiments around the battle and then attacked the rear of King Alfonso's army, managing to capture King Alfonso's baggage train in the process. This put King Alfonso in a tight spot. Fighting on two fronts and in danger of being surrounded, things then got even tighter for King Alfonso when Yusuf directed his African guard, armed with Indian swords and hippopotamus skin shields, to fight their way into the melee, ordering them to head directly towards King Alfonso. By this time, it's likely that King Alfonso had given up all thought of victory and was concentrating on extracting himself and as many of his men as he could from the dire situation in which they found themselves. The desperate fighting continued until nightfall.

Sometime during the battle, King Alfonso took a really nasty wound to one of his legs. According to Bernard Reilly in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", the wound was so deep that it left a scar on one of his leg bones which was still visible when his remains were exhumed 900 years after the battle. Anyway, likely reeling from blood loss and delirious with thirst and exhaustion, King Alfonso eventually managed to break free. Riding through the night, the Christian fighters who were capable of doing so retreated northwards, finally resting around sixty miles later, near the Tagus River valley.

Back at the battlefield, the heads of the defeated Christian fighters were separated from their bodies and loaded onto carts. The cart loads of Christian heads were then dispatched

across Al-Andalus and over to Northern Africa as proof both of the extent of the victory and of the fact that the Christians were by no means unbeatable.

Despite the fact that King Alfonso and the Christians had been resoundly beaten, and despite the fact that the Battle of Sagrajas was a significant event, in the immediate aftermath of the contest nothing much changed. King Alfonso remained in control of the Taifa of Toledo and was still the undisputed leader of the Christians on the peninsula. As for the Almoravids, well they didn't hang around Al-Andalus checking out the real estate and sizing up the luxuries and wealth on offer. No, they headed straight back to northern Africa. It seems that Yusuf's eldest son died around this time, and Yusuf decided to head back to Marrakesh to ensure that no one made a bid to oust him from power.

Despite having little immediate impact, the Battle of Sagrajas will change the politics of the Iberian peninsula permanently moving forward. From this time, the Christians of the peninsula will view their most deadly enemy as the Almoravids of northern Africa, whereas to the Muslims of Al-Andalus the Almoravids will undergo a complete brand change. No longer will they be viewed as uncouth, undisciplined, violent barbarians, but instead as talented, tireless, fearsome fighters who were prepared to lay down their lives for the Muslims of Al-Andalus.

Join me next time as we take a look at the events which took place in the years following the Battle of Sagrajas. Until next time, bye for now.

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