

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 45
Another Interlude

Hello again. Last time we examined the interlude between the Almoravid invasion of the year 1086 and the return of the Almoravids in the year 1088. We saw how King Alfonso VI had garrisoned the fortress of Aledo with Christian men, a move which effectively blocked the route between the Taifas of Granada and Seville to the eastern taifas. We also saw Mundir al-Hayib combine with the forces of the Count of Barcelona to attack Valencia, which was in a state of unrest due to the incompetence of its new king, al-Qadir. Rodrigo Diaz de Viva, later known as El Cid, sprang into action after al-Qadir requested Christian assistance, and the invading forces were effectively repelled.

These activities sparked concern amongst the leaders of the taifas of a Christian resurgence, so al-Mutamid of Seville travelled to northern Africa and requested assistance from the Almoravids. Yusuf Ibn Tashafin agreed to the request and made plans to take his forces back to Al-Andalus in the summer of the year 1088. When the northern African forces arrived in Al-Andalus they were met by the leaders of the Taifas of Seville and Granada and their armies, along with forces sent by the Taifas of Almeria and Murcia. The combined Muslim forces then marched to the fortress of Aledo and besieged it.

Now, unfortunately for the Muslims, the siege of King Alfonso's eastern garrison was marred by some serious infighting between the leaders of the taifas. Perhaps hanging around Aledo with nothing to do while the siege dragged on resulted in conflict and the airing of old grievances, but whatever the cause things got so bad that Yusuf Ibn Tashafin requested a formal adjudication of a dispute between al-Mutamid of Seville and the king of the Taifa of Murcia. The adjudicators found in favour of Seville and recommended that the king of the Taifa of Murcia be arrested and dispossessed. This led most of the fighters in the army from Murcia who were at the siege to pack up and head home.

As four months of futile siege warfare had now passed with Aledo being no closer to surrendering, as the armies of the taifas were constantly quarrelling and clashing with each other, and as word came in that King Alfonso himself was marching a relief force towards their position, Yusuf decided to abandon the siege and take his forces back home to northern Africa.

The failed siege of Aledo had two main consequences. Firstly, it provided a confidence-booster to King Alfonso who, once the Almoravids returned to northern Africa, amped up his demands for tribute. He sent an envoy to Granada and was able to force the Taifa of Granada to agree to crippling and humiliating terms. King Alfonso then began to exert pressure on al-Mutamid of Seville.

The second and more ominous consequence of the failed siege of Aledo was that it caused Yusuf Ibn Tashafin, to conclude that it was no longer in his interests to cooperate with the taifas of Al-Andalus. Yusuf decided instead that if he ever returned to Al-Andalus it would be on his own terms. He simply was no longer interested in sharing leadership roles in military campaigns with the kings of the taifas. To put it another way, if Yusuf ever returned to the peninsula, it would be as the leader of his own military campaign, following his own goals and his own agenda, which is exactly what ended up happening in the year 1090.

Now, in the interlude between his departure from Al-Andalus in the year 1088 and his return in the year 1090, Yusuf busied himself laying the groundwork for his change in policy. He opened channels of communication with conservative Muslim jurists across Al-Andalus, and listened to their complaints about the self-indulgent and immoral behaviour of the rulers of the taifas, the exorbitant taxes which were levied on the Muslims of Al-Andalus, and the subservience of many of the rulers of the taifas to the Christians. Yusuf Ibn Tashafin then set about establishing legal grounds to justify asserting himself as the new ruler of Al-Andalus. He sought the opinion of leading conservative Muslim jurists in Al-Andalus and across the wider Muslim world, about the failings of the rulers of the taifas and the obligation of himself as a devout Muslim leader to relieve the taifan kings of their posts. He formally revoked all the treaties he had signed with the taifas and listened to representatives of Muslims from the taifas, particularly Valencia, as they described the incompetence of their rulers. In the end, Yusuf believed he possessed the appropriate authority to act, both from conservative Muslim theologians who were urging his intervention and from ordinary Muslim citizens of Al-Andalus to whom Yusuf had pledged to reduce taxes, correct injustice, and spread Islamic righteousness. Yusuf prepared his forces, and in the year 1090 the Almoravids arrived back in Al-Andalus. This time they were intending to stay.

Now, while things were in a state of conflict and unrest inside the taifas, King Alfonso was experiencing some problems of his own. When the Almoravids and the Muslims of Al-Andalus had besieged Aledo in the year 1088, King Alfonso had called for assistance from the Christians of the peninsula. In particular, King Alfonso had sent word to his new ally Rodrigo, ordering him to gather his army and come to the aid of the northern Christian forces. Basically, the idea was that Rodrigo's forces would meet up with King Alfonso's forces, then the combined army would march to Aledo, attack the Muslims, lift the siege, and relieve the garrison. Now, unfortunately, Rodrigo didn't make the rendezvous as planned. His army simply failed to turn up. King Alfonso's forces continued on towards Aledo alone. Militarily, the absence of Rodrigo had no real consequence, as the Muslim forces had abandoned the siege by the time the northern Christian army arrived at Aledo.

But the no-show did make King Alfonso extremely cross. Rumours were circulating that Rodrigo's absence was deliberate, and in his book "The Quest for El Cid", Richard Fletcher states that it was likely that King Alfonso believed these rumours. Furious that the man upon whom he had recently bestowed so many gifts and inducements to secure his loyalty had apparently abandoned him in his time of need, King Alfonso confiscated all of Rodrigo's property, and even briefly imprisoned his wife and children.

Rodrigo, for his part, vehemently denied that he had ignored the order to mobilise. Instead, he maintained that his failure to reinforce the royal army was a result of a simple miscommunication. He stated that King Alfonso had altered the route the royal army intended to take to the agreed rendezvous point. Rodrigo and his army waited on the road to the rendezvous point, but the royal army didn't show up, because it had taken a different route which didn't pass Rodrigo's position. By the time Rodrigo realised what had happened, the siege had already been lifted and King Alfonso and his army were on their way back to Toledo. Rodrigo was so certain of his defence that he offered to swear an oath attesting to it, and even offered to test the truth of his assertions by a trial by combat. King Alfonso may have been at least partially persuaded by Rodrigo's insistence that he had not abandoned his King, as he released Rodrigo's wife and children from custody.

Unfortunately though, the incident signalled a reversal of the recent reconciliation between the two men. Rodrigo spent Christmas of the year 1089 with his wife and children, then sat down to plan his conquests for the coming year. Deciding that he could do with some booty, Rodrigo decided to focus on securing plunder from Mundir al-Hayib in Denia, before seeing what he could squeeze from al-Qadir in Valencia. His campaign against Mundir went well, with Rodrigo scoring some riches from a stronghold belonging to Mundir. Richard Fletcher speculates that Mundir then paid Rodrigo a sum of money to get him to go away, a conclusion reached by the fact that Rodrigo met with Mundir in Easter of the year 1090 before, and I quote “agreeing peace” end quote, which is generally taken to mean a payoff for withdrawing forces.

Rodrigo and his army then headed to Valencia where he managed to extract from al-Qadir, and I quote here from the “Historia Roderici” and I quote “very great and innumerable gifting of money”, end quote. Apparently satisfied with the booty he had managed to score, Rodrigo then set himself up in a position on the coast between Valencia and Barcelona and sat back to see what would happen next.

What happened next was the arrival of the consequences of his recent actions. The fact that Rodrigo had effectively taken tribute from both Mundir and al-Qadir stepped on the toes of their protectors, or to put it another way, Mundir and al-Qadir were already paying tribute to Count Berenguer of Barcelona and King Alfonso respectively, and the Count of Barcelona and the King of Leon and Castile were going to be rather displeased to hear of Rodrigo's exploits.

The first person to spring into action was the Count of Barcelona. Al-Mundir had messaged the Count as soon as Rodrigo had left his territory, and had let him know what had taken place. Count Berenguer gathered his army and prepared to march to Rodrigo's position. As soon as he received word of this, Rodrigo gathered his forces and marched them inland towards the mountains. He set up camp in a position which he decided would be easy to defend, then waited for the army from Barcelona to arrive. The Count of Barcelona did arrive and set up camp on some level ground downhill from Rodrigo's position.

The two leaders then exchanged a number of taunting letters, the texts of which are recorded in the “Historia Roderici”. Basically, in the letters, the Count accused Rodrigo of treachery, alleged that he had violated churches during his military campaigns, and mocked him for placing trust in auguries, in particular omens drawn from the flight of birds. For his part, Rodrigo accused the Count of Barcelona of cowardice and hinted that he might be guilty of fratricide. Basically, these letters were designed to provoke the receiver into breaking camp and going on the offensive, which in Rodrigo's case would mean him heading down the mountain to the Count's position, and for the Count it would of course mean heading up the mountain to Rodrigo's easily defended outpost.

In the end, the Count of Barcelona broke first. He ordered a contingent of men to climb up past Rodrigo's position under cover of darkness, then secure the ground above Rodrigo's camp. At dawn, the remainder of the Count's forces proceeded up the mountain and attacked Rodrigo's camp, while the forces stationed above him also went on the attack, meaning Rodrigo and his men were pinned between two attacking forces. Rodrigo gathered his men and began to defend his camp. He must have chosen his position well, as despite being caught off guard by the double-headed attack and despite the fact that during a cavalry charge Rodrigo himself was unhorsed and was then wounded as he struggled to get up from the ground, Rodrigo's forces won the day. In fact, not only did they win, they managed to take the Count of Barcelona and his leading noblemen hostage, and

also plundered the Count's camp. The Count and his noblemen were subsequently ransomed back to Barcelona for considerable sums of money.

After the Count and his noblemen had returned to Barcelona, Rodrigo headed up the Ebro River valley towards Zaragoza, but was forced to take some time out on the road while he recovered from a bout of sickness, either caused by illness or as a result of the wound he received in the recent battle. The delay ended up working to Rodrigo's advantage. By the time he arrived in Zaragoza, Count Berenguer of Barcelona was already in the city and had been engaging in talks with Yusuf al-Mutaman, the King of Zaragoza. The upshot of these exchanges culminated in a meeting between the Count of Barcelona and Rodrigo, in which the Count proposed an alliance with Rodrigo. In return for Rodrigo pledging his friendship to Barcelona and undertaking to keep the peace with Catalonia, the Count of Barcelona agreed to surrender to Rodrigo claims of overlordship from the taifas which had accepted Barcelona as its protector and receiver of tribute.

Why did the Count of Barcelona make such a generous offer to Rodrigo? Well, because the Count's main ally Mundir al-Hayib, brother of the current King of Zaragoza, had just died. Catalonia now wished to withdraw from attempting to dominate the taifas and concentrate on matters closer to home, so it was happy to hand the overlordship of the taifas which it had managed to dominate to Rodrigo, who was happy to accept them. In celebration, Rodrigo rode to Valencia, where he collected more tribute from the hapless al-Qadir, then showered his supporters and soldiers with gifts, including a very generous wage rise to his troops.

Rodrigo shouldn't get too comfortable, though. Not only does King Alfonso have unfinished business with Rodrigo, a much bigger threat faces the peninsula. Join me next time as the Almoravids return to Al-Andalus in the summer of 1090, and this time they mean business. Until next time, bye for now.

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