

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 67
The Decline of the Almoravids

Hello again. Last time we concluded our episodes on the fallout from Alfonso of Aragon's will. Alfonso of Aragon may have been interested to learn that it took us three entire episodes to sort through the mess resulting from his bonkers decision to leave his territories to three military orders in the Holy Land. Anyway, the chaos has now finally been put to rest, and as at the year 1143 Christian Spain had sorted itself into four kingdoms: the Kingdom of Leon and Castile; the Kingdom of Aragon / Catalonia; the Kingdom of Navarre; and the Kingdom of Portugal. So we are all set to proceed to the next stage of the Reconquista.

We are going to switch our focus now from the Christian parts of the Iberian peninsula to the Muslim south, as we've neglected that region for a while and a major shift is about to take place there. So let's catch up on what's been going on.

Since the defeat by the Almoravids of the Muslim Taifas, way back in Episode 47, our focus has been on the Christian parts of the peninsula. From Episode 47 until now, we've seen the Christians make inroads into the Muslim south: Zaragoza has fallen to the Christians; the Muslims have failed to retake Toledo; and Alfonso of Aragon even launched an audacious campaign to take Granada back in the year 1126, which we covered in Episode 60.

So, have things been going well in Almoravid Spain? No, they have not, and unrest against the Almoravids has been steadily rising. Why has anti-Almoravid sentiment been building in Muslim Spain? Well, it predominantly has to do with the Almoravids failing to live up to their promises. You might remember, if you cast your minds all the way back to the Almoravid conquest of the Taifas, that their rise to power was built on a foundation of bringing a more austere and strict form of Islam to the peninsula, and pushing back against Christian encroachment into southern Spain. The Almoravid pitch was that the Taifan Kings had become too soft, too wrapped up in their luxurious lifestyles, and too distracted by life's pleasures, to take the fight to the Christians, so the battle-hardened, desert-tough, austere and super-strict Muslims from northern Africa needed to come to the Iberian peninsula to put things right and reclaim the peninsula for Islam. Well, during the past forty or so years of Almoravid rule, the tough, no-nonsense men from northern Africa haven't been able to push the Christians from Al-Andalus. On the contrary, not only have they failed to push them out of Toledo and out of Portugal, the Christians have actually made significant inroads into Muslim territory, taking Zaragoza and raiding into the border regions. Ironically, the hard men from the desert seem to have been seduced by the pleasures and easy living on offer in the Iberian peninsula. Just like the rulers of the Taifas before them, they seemed to be increasingly reluctant to leave their gorgeous palaces and pleasure gardens to wage extended military campaigns against the Christians.

On top of all of this, a new sort of us-and-them vibe had begun to spread across the Christian and Muslim sections of the Iberian peninsula. Spurred on by the recent crusading movement, Muslims were increasingly being viewed in the Christian parts of the peninsula as enemies of God who needed to be defeated and eliminated on behalf of the Christian Church. Likewise, the tolerance in Muslim Spain for the large numbers of Jews and Mozarab Christians living in Al-Andalus and taking active roles in civic life seemed to be on

the decline. We saw, following Alfonso of Aragon's military campaign to Granada, large numbers of Mozarab Christians from the Muslim south deciding to leave their homes and relocate to the Christian north. This turned out to be a wise move, as in response to concerns that Mozarab Christians were acting as so-called fifth columnists who were willing to work with the Christians of the north to undermine Muslim rule, just about the entire Mozarab population of Al-Andalus was relocated to northern Africa, where the Almoravids could keep a closer eye on them, and where they wouldn't be tempted to collude with the Spanish Christians.

This doesn't mean, though, that there wasn't any cross-cultural collaboration between the Muslims and the Christians on the Iberian peninsula. There are two examples of Muslims and Christians moving into opposing camps around this time which are worth zooming in on. The first involves a Muslim man whom we have come across already, a prominent Muslim leader who was vassal to King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile, whose name was Sayf al-Dawla. Sayf al-Dawla's father, Abd al-Malik, had aligned himself with the Christians of the north after being ousted as the ruler of Zaragoza by the Almoravids in the year 1110. It seems that his son inherited his father's anti-Almoravid sentiments, and in return for being granted some land near Toledo, Sayf al-Dawla embarked on military campaigns on behalf of King Alfonso, which included accompanying him on campaigns against the Almoravids. Sayf al-Dawla wasn't at all shy about his allegiance to King Alfonso and apparently attended the lavish ceremony in Leon in the year 1135 where King Alfonso was crowned as emperor. As the Almoravids hold on power in Al-Andalus becomes increasingly shaky Sayf al-Dawla will play an important role, undermining Almoravid rule in the south and helping to spread anti-Almoravid propaganda across the peninsula.

On the other side of the coin we have a nobleman from Catalonia known as Reverter. During the early 1130s Reverter was Viscount of Barcelona, before being captured by the Almoravids on the battlefield. It seems that Reverter must have hit it off with his captors, because instead of being ransomed back to Catalonia, which would have been the normal course of events, he instead offered to work for the Almoravids as a mercenary. He was very successful in his endeavours, fighting not against Christians but against the enemies of the Almoravids in northern Africa. He was killed in northern Africa around the year 1145, fighting on behalf of the Almoravids.

In his book "Moorish Spain", Richard Fletcher reports that Reverter's widow returned to Catalonia after his death and was eventually buried in the stunning Girona Cathedral. In fact, not just the Cathedral of Girona, but the whole town of Girona, which lies inland to the north of Barcelona in Catalonia, is stunning. It is so stunning, in fact, that the town of Girona was one of the locations where the Game of Thrones series was filmed, and the Cathedral of Girona ended up playing the role of the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing. Anyway, the tomb of Reverter's widow lies inside Girona Cathedral and bears inscriptions in both Latin and Arabic. Her two sons kind of exemplified the two paths taken by their father, Reverter. One son converted to Islam and, like his father, spent his life working in military service in northern Africa. The other son returned to Spain with his mother following his father's death, and served in the court of Count Ramon Berenguer IV before reportedly spending his later years in the military order of the Knights Templar. So there you go. Despite a general spreading of an us-versus-them sentiment between Christians and Muslims at this time, there were some exceptions to the rule.

Now, as we've already stated, in recent times there had been growing resentment against Almoravid rule. The focus of the Almoravids since moving to the peninsula had always been not on the peninsula itself or towards wider Europe, but to northern Africa, Morocco

in particular. Trade between Al-Andalus and the Christian north had decreased under the Almoravids, and Spanish Muslims began seeing many of their taxes and much of their trade heading southwards to Africa. This would have been less of a problem had the local residents of Al-Andalus been satisfied with the quality of the administration by the Almoravids, but it was sorely lacking in a number of respects. We've already stated that the austere form of Islam brought by the Almoravids to the peninsula had been diluted to such an extent that the Almoravid rulers were behaving very much like the Taifa kings which they had deposed, luxuriating in their palaces and gardens, happy to sit around doing nothing, surrounded by women and other diversions. The promise of the Almoravids to drive the Christians out of Toledo had come to nothing, and to make matters worse, even more territory had been lost to the Christians since the Almoravids moved in, most notably the wealthy and large former Taifa of Zaragoza.

It didn't help that the Almoravids didn't make much of an effort to assimilate with the locals. They tended to look down their noses at the local Muslim population and held many Jews and Mozarab Christians in contempt. This view of Northern African ways being better in all respects than those of Al-Andalus was seemingly shared by the leader of the Almoravids, Ali Ibn Yusuf. Ali Ibn Yusuf was based in Marrakesh and rarely made the effort to visit Al-Andalus. He only ended up travelling there a total of four times in his nearly 40 year long reign.

It might come as a bit of a surprise for you to hear, then, that the eventual downfall of Almoravid rule in Spain didn't have its origins on the Iberian peninsula. No, while the Almoravids were undeniably on rather shaky ground by the year 1140 the real threat to the Almoravids wasn't on the Iberian peninsula at all. It was in northern Africa and came in the form of a man called Muhamed Ibn Tumart.

Strangely, the seed for the rise of Ibn Tumart and the downfall of the Almoravids was sown decades ago, even before the arrival of the Almoravids on the Iberian peninsula. Ibn Tumart was a smart, curious, energetic boy who was born among the mountain Masmuda Berbers of northern Africa around the year 1075. He showed such promise as a scholar in his early years that he was sent to study under the tutelage of renowned scholars in Baghdad and Mecca. It was while he was studying in Baghdad that he became a student of the famous philosopher al-Ghazali, who was exploring the mystical side of Islam. When Ibn Tumart returned back to the Atlas Mountains in northern Africa, he rejected the Orthodox form of Islam practised by the Almoravids and instead began promoting a more mystical interpretation of the Muslim faith. By the year 1121, three years after the fall of Zaragoza to the Christians, Ibn Tumart set up a base for himself in the Atlas Mountains and declared that he was the Mahdi or the "Guided One", who was descended from the Prophet Muhammad and who was destined to secure the final triumph of Islam. His followers were known as the al-Muwahhidun or the Almohads. He saw it as his mission to defeat the corrupt and impious Almoravids and replace Almoravid rule with his own more pure version of Islam.

Ibn Tumart began his movement modestly enough, gathering followers and expressing the merits of his form of Islam. He even participated in a public debate in front of Ali Ibn Yusuf, the leader of the Almoravids, in Marrakesh. According to Richard Fletcher in his book "Moorish Spain", Ibn Tumart went out of his way to draw attention to himself, and to insult the Almoravids. He insulted Ali Ibn Yusuf frequently, and once pulled Ali's sister off a horse she was riding because she wasn't wearing a veil. It soon became apparent that Ibn Tumart was not only a talented public speaker, he was also an astute politician and a strategist. As the number of Ibn Tumart's followers grew, Ali Ibn Yusuf considered ordering

his execution, after which Ibn Tumart based himself in the mountains, meeting with the leaders of the tribes of Masmuda Berbers and absorbing them into his network of followers, combining a zealous interpretation of the Koran with a drive to destroy the Almoravids, whom he viewed as promoting a heretical version of Islam.

When Ibn Tumart died in the year 1130 his movement was still a mountain-based organisation which hadn't yet had the impact which he had hoped for. During his later years, he had staged two unsuccessful attacks on Marrakesh, but hadn't managed to defeat the capital city of the Almoravids, nor the Almoravids themselves. The leadership of the Almohad movement was taken over by a dedicated follower of Ibn Tumart, who was named Abdul Mumin. For the first ten years of his position as leader, Abdul Mumin concentrated on consolidating his hold on power in the Atlas Mountains. He gradually began working to defeat the Almoravids, and by the year 1140 had made significant inroads.

By this time, Ali Ibn Yusuf had been forced to throw more and more resources at the Almohad problem. During the mid-1130s, Ali had delegated much of his responsibility for pushing back against the Almohads to his trusted Catalan mercenary fighter, whom we mentioned earlier in this episode, Reverter and his crack team of troops. However, by the late 1130s, even Reverter was on the back foot, and Ali had been forced to divert resources away from Al-Andalus to the Almohad problem. In the year 1138 he summoned his son Tashafin Ibn Ali from Al-Andalus, where he had been acting, very successfully, as the governor of Seville. Tashafin and Reverter then combined forces and campaigned tirelessly against the Almohads in central Morocco, but they just couldn't seem to make any inroads into the Almohad advances.

The Almohad situation was now snowballing. As more and more tribes flipped over to the Almohad side, Almohad successes grew, prompting more tribes to declare for the new successful group. As power in northern Africa seemed to be slipping from his grasp, Ali Ibn Yusuf kept diverting resources from Al-Andalus to Morocco in an attempt to turn the rising Almohad tide. This, in turn, undermined the Almoravid position on the Iberian peninsula.

While the Almoravid empire in northern Africa begins to crumble, join me next time as we pop back over to the Iberian peninsula to see the effect of the Almoravid decline in southern Spain. Until next time, bye for now.

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