

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 8
Al-Hakam

Hello again. Last time we examined the short but successful rule of Abd al-Rahman's successor, Hisham. However, in the year 796, after only having ruled the Iberian peninsula for eight years, Hisham died. Prior to his departure, he had named his successor as his 26 year old son, al-Hakam, whose mother was a Frankish woman. The good news was that al-Hakam's reign was lengthy. He ruled for the first couple of decades of the ninth century, from 796 to 822. The bad news was that it was a reign full of chaos, troubles and discord.

As so often happens, al-Hakam was almost the polar opposite of his father. While Hisham had been scholarly and pious and had ruled with thoughtful consideration, al-Hakam was a hot-headed young man who enjoyed wine, women and song, and had a tendency to lose his cool very quickly if things went wrong, and things often went wrong.

The first challenge he faced was the return to the Iberian peninsula of his uncles Sulayman and Abd Allah. You may recall from the last episode that al-Hakam's father Hisham had thrown a large pile of money at his two brothers and had ordered them to go spend their time in northern Africa. The two men had kept their side of the bargain while Hisham was alive, but after his death, having seen the train-wreck potential of young al-Hakam, the two men decided to return to Al-Andalus and boot their nephew off the stage, allowing them at long last to take their place as rulers.

Now, we saw from the last episode that the younger of those two men, Abd Allah, was never really considered to be ruling material, and it seems that this hasn't changed. Al-Hakam realised that the main threat came from his uncle Sulayman, and it was Sulayman who became the focus of al-Hakam's attentions.

For four years, Sulayman travelled around the peninsula, attempting to build up enough support to remove his nephew from power. He concentrated his attentions on the Berber population in the south, but each time he raised an army, young al-Hakam was there to oppose him. After a number of skirmishes and small rebellions, Sulayman was finally captured by al-Hakam's forces. He was escorted back to Cordoba and taken before his nephew, who ordered him to be executed. He was then beheaded, and his head was mounted on a pike and paraded around the streets of Cordoba. After this indignity, al-Hakam ordered his uncle's body to be interred in the royal mausoleum alongside Hisham, because after all Sulayman was family and a member of the Umayyad dynasty.

So with Sulayman safely dispatched, what was the remaining uncle, Abd Allah, up to? Apparently not possessing the skills of a military commander like his brother Sulayman, Abd Allah attempted to gain supporters in a number of places, including Zaragoza. This didn't really work, so Abd Allah journeyed to the royal court of Charlemagne in Aachen, to see if he could get outside assistance from the most powerful man in Europe. But this didn't work either, and Abd Allah eventually found himself establishing a base at Valencia, on the east coast of the peninsula.

Now, Valencia at that time was only loosely under the control of Cordoba and had not ever really been on the radar of the Muslim rulers. Abd Allah was able to leverage this fact to his advantage. In the year 802 he approached his nephew with a proposal which was

eventually accepted. The proposal was that, in return for an annual salary, Abd Allah and his sons would work to bring the area under Muslim control. Abd Allah's main task was to keep the local Christians and the Christians in the north of the peninsula in check on behalf of his nephew. The arrangement worked well, and eventually Abd Allah even became known as "the Valencian".

Now, it's a good thing that al-Hakam is using every resource he can within the extended Umayyad family to keep the residents of the peninsula under control, because under al-Hakam's rule the residents of the peninsula were, on the whole, pretty unhappy. The chief cause for their unhappiness was the tax burden, which just seemed to keep increasing under al-Hakam's rule, and which didn't seem to result in any discernible benefits for the people paying the taxes. Had you pressed al-Hakam for the reason why so many taxes had to be collected, he may well have said that he was attempting to place Al-Andalus on a sound administrative and military footing, and that may well have been the case, but the heavy and unrelenting tax burden caused unhappiness and unrest amongst the population, to the extent that occasionally even al-Hakam's closest supporters were beginning to think that enough was enough. All this unhappiness meant that rebellions and armed insurrections would regularly break out, and al-Hakam showed no hesitation in putting down these rebellions with brutal force.

In fact, in order to keep his increasingly unruly subjects in line, al-Hakam allied himself with some pretty interesting locals. While we mentioned in the last episode that al-Hakam's father Hisham had used Muwallads, or local Christians who had converted to Islam, to assist him to quell unrest, al-Hakam went one step further. He not only used the Muwallads, he also formed alliances with Visigothic Christians, a move which sparked outrage amongst some of the Muslims of Al-Andalus.

Just to give you an example of the type of unrest which occurred during al-Hakam's rule, I'll relate just one of many, many such incidents. This particular incident occurred in Cordoba in the year 805. Al-Hakam had begun to use the services of a local Christian and had commissioned that Christian to supply him with his own personal bodyguards. The fact that the Emir of Al-Andalus was using a Christian to supply him with military men, and the fact that the Emir was surrounding himself with those Christian-sourced bodyguards, was the last straw for some of the Muslim military elites in Cordoba. They approached al-Hakam's cousin with a view to staging a coup, aiming to oust al-Hakam and place his cousin on the throne. However, the coup instigators had not prepared their ground work very well, and after the leaders approached him with their plan, al-Hakam's cousin decided that he best go to al-Hakam about the plot. Al-Hakam managed to get a spy into the room where the conspirators were placing the final flourishes on their plan. The spy recorded the names of all of the plotters and reported back to al-Hakam. The conspirators were then unmasked and were treated mercilessly, with 72 of them being executed.

Now, while al-Hakam is being kept busy taxing the living daylights out of his subjects, making new Christian friends, and viciously putting down rebellions, we are going to leave him to it and zoom away from Cordoba all the way to the north of the peninsula, because something very interesting has been happening in a little region called Asturias.

Now, Asturias is located on the northern coast of the Iberian peninsula. If you think back to our original description of the peninsula as looking a bit like a square, well Asturias is located on the top of the square towards the left corner. If you think of the city of San Sebastian as being located in the far upper right corner of the square, near the border between Spain and France, and if you think of the famous pilgrimage site of Santiago de

Compostela being located in the opposite top corner, so the far left hand corner, well the region of Asturias is to be found just to the right of Santiago de Compostela. The town of Santiago de Compostela is located in the region of Galicia, and the region next to Galicia, if you move eastwards along the northern coastline, is Asturias.

Now, one thing you should note about Asturias is that it is quite a thin, narrow region. In fact, it's actually pretty small, only about 10,000 square kilometres in size. To give you an equivalent, it's about the same size as the island of Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea, or the country of Lebanon in the Middle East.

Despite being small, it packs a big punch when it comes to scenery. The coastline of the region of Asturias is described in my copy of "The Lonely Planet Guide to Spain" as being wild and dramatic. It's basically rocky shorelines and craggy cliffs interspersed with lots of small beaches - hundreds of small beaches in fact. Behind the coastline are rolling hills. Then we come to a dramatic mountain range. Today, Asturias is known for its excellent local cheeses and ciders, and it sounds like my sort of place, but back in the early medieval era its rocky coastline and the dramatic mountain range behind the coastline made it a difficult place to get to. In fact, in the pre-Roman era, Asturias was settled predominantly by Celtic people, and the Celtic ties to Brittany in France and the British Isles persisted throughout the Roman and Visigothic eras. In fact, again according to my Lonely Planet Guide, there are some people living in Asturias today who play the bagpipes, which is interesting. Why am I telling you all this? Well, to point out the fact that Asturias was a relatively isolated place, protected from the rest of the peninsula by a mountain range and by its rocky coastline.

Due to its isolation, the people of Asturias tended to be only loosely under the control of whomever was ruling the peninsula at any particular time. To put it another way, if you are looking for a place to base a Christian Resistance movement which could operate under the radar of the Muslim Emir in Cordoba, well Asturias would be a pretty good place for the headquarters of that resistance. I guess you can tell where I'm going with this, but before we take a closer look at the establishment of the Kingdom of Asturias and the rise of Christian resistance in the region, we will need to zoom out and take a wider look at the current state of Christianity inside the Iberian peninsula.

Now, by the early ninth century, the period during which al-Hakam was ruling Al-Andalus, the Muslim presence inside the peninsula had lasted one hundred years, so around three generations. You could safely say that by the early 800's, there would have been few people alive on the peninsula who could recall the days before the Muslim invasion, and if any of those people actually existed, they would have been seriously old. The only mention we've made of Christians since the invasion in this podcast so far is to point out that some of the people who identified as either Visigothic or Roman Hispanic had converted to Islam and were beginning to play minor political roles in the administration of Al-Andalus. In more recent times, under the rule of al-Hakam, some Christians who had not converted to Islam were also able to make their mark on the administration, by forming alliances with al-Hakam or his supporters to provide military assistance or personnel.

To understand the current state of Christianity in Al-Andalus more fully we are going to need to take a step back and assess how Christianity in general has been faring on the peninsula since the arrival of the Muslims one hundred or so years ago. While initially the Muslim conquerors had pretty much subdued the entire peninsula, by the early 800's that was no longer the case. Basically, the Muslim presence and Muslim rule was strongest in the southern portion of the peninsula, but the more you moved to the north of the

peninsula, the less influential Muslim control became. To put it another way, if the Muslim presence was a colour, the colour would be vibrant and strong in the southern half of the peninsula, but as you moved northwards the colour would begin to fade, until when you reached the northern quarter or top quarter of the peninsula the colour would be very pale, and in some places there would be no colour whatsoever. The question we obviously need to ask ourselves is: why has this happened? Well, as we've seen previously, the main Muslim centres of power are in the cities in the middle and southern parts of the peninsula. The city of Cordoba, which is the seat of power in Al-Andalus, is in the south, and other important southern cities such as Cadiz, Seville and Granada are established Muslim cities, as are many cities in the centre of the peninsula such as Toledo, and more recently Valencia. Muslim influence has spread across some more northern cities, such as Tortosa and Zaragoza, but then it hits the mountains and sort of stops. So the regions around the Pyrenees, which will later be known as Catalonia and Aragon, have fading or non-existent Muslim oversight, as has the region along the northern coast of the peninsula.

Much of this is due to the climate. In his book "The Arab Conquest of Spain, 710 to 797", Roger Collins points to the Berber revolt, which we examined in Episode 5, as being a sort of turning point. As we pointed out, the Berbers had been given the raw end of the deal in the allocation of land following the Muslim conquest of the peninsula, and the cold, arid, mountain regions to the north of the peninsula and adjacent to the Pyrenees had predominantly been allocated to the Berbers, while the warmer, more fertile land in the south seemed to fall under the control of the Arab minority. Many Berbers did have a go at settling on their new holdings, but shivering in the north of the peninsula, pondering how they were going to stay warm during the winters and how they were going to support their families on the unforgiving land they had been awarded, was one of the straws which had led to the broken camel which was the Berber uprising. To put it a different way, after the Berber uprising, many Berbers who had tried to eke out an existence for themselves in the cold, mountainous regions of the peninsula threw in the towel. They packed up and headed back to warmer lands, moving either all the way back to northern Africa or to somewhere on the southern portion of the Iberian peninsula.

With the removal of many permanent Muslim residents from those areas, independent Christian rulers began to prevail. The nature of Muslim rule in those northern regions then, and in the regions around the Pyrenees, gradually changed from the clear imposition of Muslim authority to more of a negotiation between Muslims and local Christian rulers, with the occasional bout of conflict breaking out. Some of these local Christian rulers were successful and managed to hold on to power, but in many places their rule was precarious at best, with Christian dominance not really extending beyond the lifetime of individual Christian rulers.

The one simple success story though, in the rising and falling fortunes of local Christian rule in the north of the peninsula, was the small kingdom of Asturias, and it is to that kingdom that we shall turn our attentions in the next episode. Until next time, bye for now.

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