

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 79
The Wolf King and Geraldo the Fearless

Hello again. Last time we saw the Caliph of the Almohads Abd al-Mu'min assemble a massive army in northern Africa. This huge fighting force, which may have contained over 100,000 men, was waiting to be collected and dispatched to the Iberian peninsula when the Caliph died unexpectedly. The assembled army packed up and went home, then a new Caliph was installed, one of Abd al-Mu'min's sons and the former ruler of Seville, Abu Yaqub Yusuf.

Now, before we proceed to discover how the rule of the 25 year old new Caliph will affect the situation in Al-Andalus, we should just take a minute to reflect on what may have occurred had Abd al-Mu'min not died when he did. As we mentioned in the last episode, Abd al-Mu'min's plan was to attack the Christians of the Iberian peninsula on four fronts, by invading Toledo in Castile, the city of Leon in the Kingdom of Leon, Barcelona, and Coimbra in Portugal. Abd al-Mu'min was fresh from leading his armies to victory in Tunisia, and the Christians of the Iberian peninsula were fractured and more vulnerable than they had been for generations. Of the four Christian kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula, all of which would have come under attack had Abd al-Mu'min's plans come to fruition, three were being ruled by inexperienced, untried leaders, two of which were children named Alfonso. The sole experienced Christian king who may have been able to successfully face off against a massive Almohad attack was King Alfonso I of Portugal, so if Abd al-Mu'min had lived a bit longer and had launched his four-pronged attack on Christian Spain he may well have been successful, and the Reconquista would have played out quite differently. But Abd al-Mu'min did die, his invasion was cancelled, and a new Caliph is now ruling from Marrakesh.

So how did the new Caliph Yusuf deal with the problems in Al-Andalus? Well, he won't get around to addressing the Al-Andalus issues for a couple of years. Yusuf and his brother Umar, who was his key adviser and almost a co-ruler, had their hands completely full trying to consolidate their hold on power in northern Africa. It wasn't until early in the year 1165, nearly two years after his rise to power, that the new Caliph felt secure enough to dispatch some of his fighting men to Al-Andalus.

The Caliph didn't travel to Al-Andalus himself, but sent Umar in his stead. Number one on Umar's to-do list was to obtain pledges of loyalty from the current Almohad rulers in Al Andalus. You might remember that Abd al-Mu'min had placed his various sons in positions of power across Al-Andalus. As a result, many of the rulers had equal claims to power to that of the new young Caliph Yusuf, so Umar needed to be sure that the new Caliph's brothers were going to be loyal to him and not make a play for power behind his back. To encourage the pledges of loyalty, Umar took with him 4,000 Arab horsemen and a raft of senior Almohad figures from Marrakesh. Umar landed at Gibraltar and waited for the Almohad leaders from Al-Andalus to journey to Gibraltar to pledge themselves to the new Caliph. Happily, all of them did, and a fortnight of celebrations and festivities were held to mark the occasion. Umar then returned to Marrakesh, taking his half-brother Uthman, the former ruler of Granada and the current ruler of Cordoba, with him. The 4,000 Arab cavalry men and their commanders were ordered to remain in Al-Andalus to bolster the Almohad forces. 500 of them were sent to Badajoz, while the bulk of them were dispatched to Cordoba.

The reason why 500 Arab horsemen were needed in Badajoz was due to the recent military successes of a Portuguese fighter who has become known to history as Geraldo the Fearless, who was a kind of Portuguese version of El Cid. Geraldo wasn't directly in the employ of King Alfonso of Portugal, but was a sort of self-funded adventurer. He had managed to raise a private army and for the last year or so had proved resoundingly successful at taking strongholds and even towns from the Almohads in the region around the city of Badajoz. His strategy was unique, but as I've just stated, highly successful. He preferred to launch his attacks at night time, during terrible weather. The stormier, the rainier, the windier, the snowier it was the better. He and his men would construct tall wooden ladders high enough to reach to the top of the defensive walls of whatever town or stronghold he wished to conquer, then in the dark, with the rain and wind obscuring his approach, Geraldo would climb a ladder and emerge onto the defensive wall. His usual strategy was then to surprise a guardsman or sentry who would likely be sheltering out of the nasty weather. He would then force the sentry to give the all clear, the Almohad equivalent of the Medieval watch-cry of "All's well", before the rest of his army would climb the ladders, then launch their attack on the unsuspecting garrison. By the end of the year 1165 Geraldo had managed to take three Almohad towns in this manner: the town of Evora, which lay half way between Lisbon and Badajoz and even more alarmingly, two towns to the north of Badajoz.

Geraldo's successes in pushing Portuguese territory out to the east into regions held by the Almohads was not just causing alarm bells to ring in Cordoba, Badajoz and Marrakesh. King Fernando II of Leon was also none-too-pleased about these developments. He had his own ideas about what should happen in this region. In his view, Portugal had no claim at all to the territory around Badajoz. Instead, it rightfully belonged to the Kingdom of Leon. King Fernando was keen to push the boundaries of Leon southwards, to swallow up Badajoz and the surrounding countryside. Geraldo was now upsetting those plans. Of course, at this point in time, the Almohads don't care a bit about King Fernando's wishes, but they are very keen to make sure Badajoz doesn't fall to Geraldo, so 500 Arab horsemen were sent to shore up its defences.

The bulk of the Arabs though, were dispatched to Cordoba. Why? Well, because the Wolf King, and not Geraldo, was considered by the Almohads to be their primary threat. The urgency of the Wolf King problem was made clear by the fact that almost as soon as Umar and Uthman arrived in Marrakesh, they turned around and headed back to Al-Andalus, more specifically to Cordoba, to supervise the Almohad offensive against the Wolf King.

The Almohads' first objective was to capture Andujar which was a stronghold located on the westernmost point of the Wolf King's territory. Andujar was in fact only 60 kilometres from Cordoba, and the Wolf King had used Andujar as a staging point for his numerous previous attacks on Cordoba. Andujar fell easily to the Arab forces, and they immediately went on raiding missions in the surrounding countryside, attacking dwellings and seizing livestock and possessions. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy speculates that the raiding undertaken by the Arab horsemen probably indicates that they weren't being paid on a regular basis by Marrakesh, unlike the 10,000 troops which formed the core of the Caliph's army. Instead, the visiting Arabs were expected to provide for themselves, surviving off the booty they scored from successful raids.

Fresh from its victory, the Arab army then made its way towards the Wolf King's headquarters at Murcia. As they neared the city, though, they were confronted by the Wolf King, his army, and men supplied by his Christian allies. A battle then took place between

the two forces. There are no surviving Christian accounts of what took place, but the Muslim sources all describe an overwhelming victory for the Almohads. Despite being defeated, the Wolf King himself escaped unharmed, fleeing to the relative safety of Murcia. The Almohads attempted without success to attack Murcia, then retreated, declaring victory against the Wolf King despite being unable to capture or kill him. Uthman returned to Cordoba and Umar travelled back to Marrakesh with most of the Arab horsemen. Hugh Kennedy states, when they arrived back in Marrakesh the Caliph Yusuf threw a triumphant reception for the victorious Arabs, at which he presented each of them with a turban, a cloak, a length of linen, and twenty gold dinars.

In April of the year 1166 the Caliph dispatched a new ruler to Seville. The new ruler was not one of the Caliph's relatives, but an effective administrator named Abu Abdullah, who was the son of one of Ibn Tumart's key advisers. As described by Hugh Kennedy, and I quote "he was dispatched with drums and banners through the streets of Marrakesh to the Fez Gate at the beginning of the road which led to Al-Andalus" end quote. He was installed as the Governor of Seville in May, then early in the year 1167 he was promoted to the position of Governor of Granada.

Fortunately for the Almohads, Abu Abdullah's talents weren't limited to administration. He was an effective military commander as well. A couple of years after he took up the position in Granada, the Wolf King once again went on the offensive. Raiding out from his base at Guadix, he repeatedly attacked towns and settlements inside Almohad territory, collecting booty, especially livestock, before returning to Guadix. In spring of the year 1168 Abu Abdullah confronted the Wolf King as he was returning from one of his raids. A battle then took place with the Governor of Granada prevailing, while the Wolf King once again evaded capture. Many of the men in his army were not so lucky. Hugh Kennedy reports that of the many prisoners taken, 53 were Christian and they were all executed under the orders of Abu Abdullah.

Over in the West, Geraldo the Fearless was continuing to cause problems for the Almohads. He had managed to take another two towns, and it's possible that he had a lucrative deal going on the side, whereby he would sell the towns he had captured to the Portuguese crown for a hefty sum of money. The city of Badajoz was now surrounded by towns garrisoned by Portuguese men, either Geraldo's fighters or troops sent by the King of Portugal. Finally, in May of the year 1169 the inevitable happened. Geraldo the Fearless managed to breach the defences of the city of Badajoz itself. While the Almohad garrison retreated to a stronghold inside the city and were effectively besieged by the invaders, Geraldo sent word to King Alfonso I to send some Portuguese troops in his direction to assist him to take Badajoz. The King of Portugal not only sent troops but turned up in person to help Geraldo defeat the besieged garrison.

Now, somehow, the garrison managed to get word to the Caliph that Badajoz was at risk of falling to the Portuguese. In Marrakesh, the Caliph assigned one of Ibn Tumart's military commanders the task of travelling to Badajoz with an army to go to the relief of the garrison.

Of course, this was all going to take some time. The distance between Marrakesh and Badajoz is considerable, but luckily for the garrison at Badajoz they had someone else coming to their rescue, someone from an unlikely but closer source. The person currently riding at the head of an army towards Badajoz to go to the assistance of the Almohads is the King of Leon, Fernando II.

Now this is all rather unlikely and more than a little awkward. Fernando has no real desire to assist the Almohads, but what he really, really doesn't want to see is Badajoz falling to Portugal. As we've stated previously, King Fernando believes that Badajoz is rightfully part of Leon, not Portugal, so he's going to ride to Badajoz, attack Geraldo and the Portuguese royal troops, and drive them out of the city. One of the reasons why this is all a little awkward is that four years earlier moves were made to improve relations between Portugal and Leon. As part of this diplomatic reaching out of hands, King Fernando of Leon married King Alfonso I's daughter Uracca, so Fernando is about to go into battle against his father-in-law.

As Fernando and the troops from Leon approached Badajoz, the Almohad garrison managed to assist him to enter the city. A battle then took place between the troops from Leon and the Portuguese fighters, with Leon emerging victorious. To make an awkward day even more awkward, King Alfonso's leg was broken in the fighting, and he ended up, along with a raft of other senior Portuguese commanders, becoming a prisoner of his son-in-law, King Fernando. Awkward. Negotiations took place to secure the release of the prisoners, and in the end they were all released, but only after pledging a bunch of towns in the region to the Kingdom of Leon. Geraldo, for his part, was forced to hand Badajoz over to Leon, and was then made to pledge all the other fortresses he had taken around Badajoz to Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, of all people. A while ago, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro had been exiled from the Kingdom of Castile by the Lara family and in recent times had been plying his trade as a mercenary working for the Almohads.

So, in a slightly unexpected turn of events, Leon now has Badajoz under its control. But not for long. Join me next time as things start to unravel for King Fernando. Until next time, bye for now.

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