

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 82
The Caliph's Campaign, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we saw the Almohad Caliph Yusuf embark on his much anticipated campaign to defeat Christian Spain. The campaign began in June of the year 1172 with the ambitious goal of taking the city of Toledo. Following a bunch of missteps though, this goal has now changed, with the Caliph settling for the more modest aim of consolidating Almohad control over Murcia and Valencia. When we left the last episode, the Caliph's army had mobilised out of the Muslim town of Cuenca and was heading eastwards towards Valencia. In an ominous sign of things to come, not long after the Caliph left Cuenca, Christian forces under the command of King Alfonso VIII of Castile moved in and took the town.

Now, on a map the distance between Cuenca and Valencia doesn't look too challenging. Trouble was it was late July, high summer on the Iberian peninsula, and the terrain in this part of the peninsula is particularly punishing. It's elevated, rocky, dry, and sparsely populated, so provisioning the 20,000 or so strong army is going to be a challenge. Which is why it's a little difficult to understand how, on the first day of the march to Valencia, the army's baggage train disappeared. Well, to be more accurate, it didn't disappear, but it became separated from the army, and the army continued its march without the supplies of water and food carried on the baggage train. Pretty soon, men and horses began suffering from thirst and from a lack of food. Then they began to die. Now, there were some supplies in the camp, but they weren't being distributed according to need. No, they were being sold to whomever could afford them. The prices were out of reach for many of the foot soldiers, so the Caliph attempted to remedy the situation by distributing cash to everyone. Each foot soldier was paid two dinars and each horseman five dinars. Of course this didn't magically increase the supply of food. All it did, kind of predictably, was to send prices skyrocketing, so the poorer members of the army were once again unable to afford to buy food. One of the local Andalusí commanders who was familiar with the terrain was ordered to travel to Valencia as quickly as he could and return with supplies, while the rest of the army continued struggling to make its way along the hot, narrow roads and the steep inclines.

Finally, on the 6th of August, after a journey of 150 dusty, hot kilometres, the Caliph's army arrived at the castle of Buñol on the edge of the plain of Valencia. This appears to have been designated by the Caliph as the new endpoint for his campaign. Fighters from Al-Andalus who were in the army were given leave to make their way back to their homes, and the chronicler of the campaign, Ibn Sahib al-Salat, reports that he attempted to buy some food at Buñol. All he could find, though, were some overpriced, unripe figs, so he decided to press on to Valencia, where he happily discovered plenty of produce available to purchase from the city's extensive orchards. After three days in Valencia, our chronicler travelled back to Buñol to rejoin the Caliph and what was left of the army.

The Caliph then made his way to Murcia and was back in Seville by October, where leaders from across the region visited his court to congratulate him on his campaign. To be fair, though, there really wasn't much which deserved congratulation. A handful of strongholds had been taken from the Christians, but that was all. No towns or cities had been conquered, while Cuenca had fallen out of Muslim hands. The Caliph's lofty goal of conquering Christian Spain had not been realised. Instead, the overall impression of

Almohad control was one of military weakness, shambolic leadership, and questionable decision making.

Now the Caliph will remain in Al-Andalus for the next three years, returning to Morocco in March of the year 1176. However, his ambitions to conquer Christian Spain seem to have been placed on hold. He will lead no offensive military campaigns during the rest of his time in Al-Andalus, and conflicts between the Muslims and their Christian neighbours will take the form of skirmishes, raids, and counter-raids. Fortunately for the Caliph, the Christian kings were unable to take advantage of Almohad weakness at this time as they were mostly preoccupied with their own internal conflicts and power-plays, a topic which we will cover in the next episode.

Our chronicler, Ibn Sahib al-Salat, had a bunch of relatives and friends living in the small Muslim town of Beja. The fortunes of Beja during the remainder of the years the Caliph spent on the peninsula can be viewed as a sort of microcosm for the insecurity and dysfunction felt in many parts of Al-Andalus at this time, so let's zoom down and take a closer look at Beja.

Beja today is about a two hour drive from Lisbon. It's located inland to the south east of Lisbon in the middle of what, until relatively recently at any rate, was safe Muslim territory. Early in the year 1172 a new Almohad governor was appointed to rule the town. Unfortunately, the new governor was a corrupt, almost universally disliked figure, whose main goal seemed to be to line his pockets rather than to serve the people of Beja. One of the many ways in which he had redirected the town's funds into his personal coffers had been to siphon off the pay allocated to the garrison who patrolled the town's walls. Since they were no longer being paid, most of the sentries had, by the summer of the year 1172, abandoned their posts. Accordingly, when the town became the target of a surprise attack by the forces of King Alfonso I of Portugal and Geraldo the Fearless they were quickly able to take control of the walls and fortress guarding the town. In the resulting panic, many of the residents of Beja were killed, many were taken prisoner, while some, including the governor, managed to escape. The Christians decided that too many resources would be needed to hold the town, so instead they destroyed it, setting it alight and leaving it to burn. Its residents scattered far and wide, mostly resettling in other parts of Al-Andalus, although in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy reports that some residents were later found to have travelled as far away as Marrakesh, looking for work and for somewhere to live.

Two years later the Portuguese crown agreed to hand Beja back to the Caliph as part of a truce arranged between the Kingdom of Portugal and the Almohads. From his court in Seville the Caliph wrote to the former residents of Beja, inviting them to travel to Seville to receive some fantastic news. The former residents of Beja were received with great pomp and ceremony at the Caliph's court, and were told that they could now return to their homes. The Caliph promised to send a garrison to Beja to help defend it once the residents were settled in.

Around 200 men and their families ended up returning to Beja, but they returned to a pile of ruins. They initially set themselves up in the fortress and concentrated their efforts on rebuilding and securing the fortress, but that in itself was an overwhelming amount of work for the people involved. They sent out calls for assistance in December of 1174, and in response 500 men arrived from the town of Silves under the command of the Berber governor of Silves to help with the rebuild. This was still, however, not enough manpower

to rebuild the entire town. Instead, the focus was on rebuilding the fortress and the city walls, to secure it from further Christian attacks.

A few months later though, the men from Silves returned home. The repairs and reconstruction work seems to have ground to a halt at this stage, and internal conflict and squabbling broke out amongst the residents of the town. In the end, the governor of Silves was asked to return to the town. He did so and for a few months everything was great. Reconstruction commenced, some houses were even rebuilt, and some crops were replanted. Then disaster struck. Early in the year 1178 the governor launched a raid against the Christians which went horribly wrong. The governor and his raiding party were captured, and the governor ended up being executed. Worried that Beja would be the next target on the Christian hit-list, and with no one now in charge of its defence, the residents of Beja voluntarily abandoned their town. They did not return. The Christians moved in and four and a half centuries of Muslim rule in Beja came to an end. This sorry state of affairs was repeated in many towns across Al-Andalus.

Incidentally, the campaign by King Alfonso I of Portugal and Geraldo the Fearless against the town of Beja was the last recorded time where the two men worked together. Soon after the victory over Beja, Geraldo defected to the Almohads, only to be later executed by the Almohads, who suspected him of selling them out to King Alfonso, an event which we mentioned back in Episode 80.

Anyway, it wasn't all bad news for the Caliph. Over the next couple of years, the Almohads will score some victories against the Christians, but nothing major. The military action which took place wasn't on a large scale, but instead took the form of skirmishes and counter-skirmishes. Finally, in March of the year 1176 the Caliph decided it was time to leave Al-Andalus and head back to Marrakesh. When the Caliph's court embarked on its journey back to northern Africa, it took many of the leading Almohad figures in Al-Andalus with it. Travelling with the Caliph's court was also the Wolf King's former father-in-law, Ibn Hamušk, and the Wolf King's son and heir, who had fought with distinction on the Caliph's behalf during his time in Al-Andalus.

While the Caliph left two of his brothers behind in Al-Andalus to rule on his behalf as the governors of Cordoba and Seville, the absence of the Caliph's court, and of so many prominent and effective leaders and military commanders, left Al-Andalus in a bit of a precarious situation, one which the Christians are about to take advantage of. To make matters worse, soon after the Caliph's court arrived back in Marrakesh, the region was hit with an outbreak of the plague. While the Caliph himself was spared, the plague took the lives of a number of the Caliph's brothers and other leading Almohad figures, further depleting the Almohad leadership team.

Now, if you think that this will all spell bad news for the Muslims on the Iberian peninsula and good news for the Christians, you would be exactly right, but before we leave the Almohads and switch our focus back to the Christians, I should share some good news about the Caliph. Now, as we mentioned back in Episode 78, Caliph Yusuf was better known as a scholar than a fighter, prior to his elevation to the position of Caliph. We've seen over the last couple of episodes his deficiencies as a military leader, but during his time in Seville, his reputation as a scholar blossomed. His collection of books in Seville, which he had begun during his time serving as the governor of Seville, had grown to such an extent that his library was thought to rival that of the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus. The library in Seville attracted scholars from far and wide, and while he was in Seville, the

Caliph hosted a number of influential philosophers and intellectuals who were supported by his patronage.

In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos singles out two figures who benefited from attending the Caliph's court in Seville and whose influence would go on to impact not just the Muslim world but Christian and Jewish intellectual circles as well. The first of the two men was called Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Tufayl. Ibn Tufayl's main claim to fame was writing a novel in which a boy grows up alone on a desert island, constructing for himself ideas about philosophy and the world. The book was the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's later work "Robinson Crusoe", and its impact extended to later European philosophers, including Descartes, after it was translated into Latin in the 17th century.

Another scholar who benefited from the Caliph's patronage was the notable Muslim philosopher from Cordoba, Muhammad Ibn Rushd, who is also known as Averroes. The influence of Averroes on philosophical thought was profound. In the words of Brian Catlos, and I quote "one of the great intellects of the Middle Ages, Ibn Rushd transformed Muslim, Christian, and Jewish thought. His work served as the inspiration for Maimonides' own codification of Jewish law, and reintroduced Aristotle to Latin Christian philosophy, energising the Scholastic Movement which revolutionised European thought and laid the foundation for the scientific revolution".

So while Caliph Yusuf wasn't much of a hotshot on the battlefield, his impact was profound in other areas.

Anyway, while the Caliph is back in Marrakesh, dreaming perhaps of his library in Seville and the lively intellectual conversations he had enjoyed at his court in Al-Andalus, the Christians are about to take advantage of his military shortcomings. Join me next time as we pop back to Christian Spain. Until next time, bye for now.

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