

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 97
Too Many Caliphs

Hello again. Last time we saw the new young King of Castile, Fernando III, go crusading in Al-Andalus. His crusading mission was wildly successful, partially due to the fact that he had allied himself with the Governor of Seville, al-Bayassi. Al-Bayassi had declared himself to be the new Caliph, but he had been getting absolutely pummeled by the other contender for Caliph, the Governor of Murcia, al-Adil. In a desperate attempt to keep his leadership aspirations alive, al-Bayassi threw his support behind King Fernando, a move which paid off spectacularly for King Fernando but which resulted in al-Bayassi being killed by his subjects in spring of the year 1226.

Now, at the time of al-Bayassi's death, the sole surviving member of the original three Caliph contenders from our last episode, al-Adil, was in Morocco attempting to consolidate his hold on power. He clearly needed to remain at the Almohad seat of power in Marrakesh if he wished to secure his position as leader, but he also needed to be in the Iberian peninsula, trying to place a lid over the hot mess which was currently Al-Andalus. Unable to be in two places at once, al-Adil delegated to his brother, the new governor of Seville, a man called Abu Ala, the tricky task of looking after al-Adil's interests in Al-Andalus. I'm guessing that al-Adil assumed his brother would push back against Christian incursions, forcing King Fernando and the Castilians out of Almohad territory while also stepping into the vacuum left by al-Bayassi and, well, basically wrangling all of Al-Andalus into submission, before boxing it all up, tying a pretty ribbon around it, and handing it all back to al-Adil.

I guess it probably won't surprise you to learn that this wasn't what happened at all. Abu Ala did go on the offensive and was pretty effective. He apparently requested men and resources from Morocco to assist him in what was a pretty significant and costly venture. No assistance, though, was forthcoming. As Abu Ala's conquests increased, so did his self belief and ego until, in September of 1227, he proclaimed himself Caliph in Seville, taking the title of al-Ma'mun. Al-Ma'mun was quickly recognised as Caliph by the ruler of Valencia, but most other rulers in Al-Andalus just threw their hands into the air and looked confused.

So now we are back to having two Caliphs: al-Ma'mun in Seville and al-Adil in Morocco. But not for long. The courtiers and power-brokers in Marrakesh, upon hearing that Governor Abu Ala of Seville had now proclaimed himself to be Caliph al-Ma'mun, reacted to the news by assassinating al-Adil.

So does that mean we are back to one Caliph, al-Ma'mun? No, it doesn't at all, because the courtiers in Marrakesh didn't throw their support behind Caliph al-Ma'mun. No, they elevated a new person to the position of Caliph in Morocco, a sixteen year old boy called Yahya, who was the brother of the former Caliph Yusuf II, of gored-to-death-by-pet-cow fame.

So are you confused? Well, you're not alone. Confusion followed by unrest and general dissatisfaction with Almohad rule, and the fact that there were just way too many Caliphs who kept coming and going faster than anyone could keep up with them, swept across Al-Andalus.

One of the people to take advantage of this tide of discontent was a man called Ibn Hud.

Now Ibn Hud was a soldier serving in the forces at Murcia. But according to Ibn Hud he wasn't just a humble common soldier. No, he had the blood of kings running in his veins. Ibn Hud in fact claimed to be a direct descendant of the last Taifa ruler of Zaragoza. The King of Zaragoza, from whom Ibn Hud claimed descent had been deposed by the Almohads back in the year 1110, and according to Ibn Hud the time was ripe for him to rebel against the Almohads and reclaim his lost inheritance. In May of the year 1228 Ibn Hud led an uprising in a region to the north west of the city of Murcia. His anti-Almohad platform proved to be a popular one, and pretty soon he was joined by a bunch of new followers keen to join Ibn Hud in his pledge to kill as many Almohads as he possibly could.

As more and more Almohad leaders across the countryside around Murcia fell victim to Ibn Hud and his growing band of followers, the rulers of Murcia, Valencia, and Cordoba began to become nervous. They were right to be worried. Ibn Hud's popularity was snowballing. In addition to his platform of booting the Almohads out of Al-Andalus, Ibn Hud claimed that the true Caliph of Al-Andalus wasn't al-Ma'mun in Seville, nor was it young Yahya in Marrakesh. No, the actual Caliph was the current Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. To show his support for the Abbasid Caliph, Ibn Hud began dressing in black and he sent a message to Baghdad letting the Abbasids know that he was intending to kick the Almohad heretics out of the Iberian peninsula, and was aiming to rule Al-Andalus as King on behalf of Baghdad. This again proved popular. In August of 1228, after having won the support of some key officials inside the city, Ibn Hud managed to capture the city of Murcia. He detained the Governor of Murcia and proclaimed himself King.

Now, this was very bad news for Caliph al-Ma'mun. Caliph al-Ma'mun's priority at this point in time was to eliminate the other Almohad Caliph, Yahya. To do this, though, he needed to travel to Morocco, but if he travelled to Morocco now he risked losing Al-Andalus to either King Fernando of Castile or Ibn Hud. To put it simply: prior to travelling to northern Africa al-Ma'mun needed to deal with both Ibn Hud and King Fernando. So he gathered his army and attacked Ibn Hud's forces in Murcia. According to D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", al-Ma'mun defeated Ibn Hud in battle. Despite not having killed, captured, or injured Ibn Hud he decided he was no longer a threat, so he turned his attentions to his next opponent, the King of Castile.

Now, despite al-Ma'mun's confidence in his own abilities, he was enough of a realist to see that defeating King Fernando in battle was going to be extremely difficult, so instead of confronting him al-Ma'mun decided to make peace with him. He negotiated a truce with Castile for the period of one year, then he sailed for Morocco taking with him the corps of his own army plus 500 Christian mercenaries. Ominously, in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy describes al-Ma'mun's departure for northern Africa in October of 1228 as the point which marks, and I quote "the effective end of Almohad rule in Al-Andalus" end quote.

Goodness. So what happened?

Well, al-Ma'mun's campaign in Morocco started promisingly. He defeated his rival Caliph Yahya in battle and forced him to retreat into the mountains. He didn't manage to kill him, though, and will spend the next four years racing around Morocco trying to eliminate Yahya, who will stage repeated comebacks and will even manage to retake Marrakesh. In October of 1232 al-Ma'mun will die, but not before making one truly momentous blunder.

In an attempt to expand his support base in northern Africa he allied himself with a tribe which was new to the political scene, then began to alienate the traditional Almohad power base. Declaring that Ibn Tumart's doctrines were no longer sound, al-Ma'mun switched his allegiance to Sunni Islam and then attacked and massacred the leaders and members of two tribes who had been stalwart supporters of the Almohad empire since its inception, effectively, in the words of Hugh Kennedy, destroying the credibility of the Almohads in their own heartland.

Now, while al-Ma'mun and his armies were spending all their time and resources attempting to defeat Caliph Yahya, and effectively undermining the support structures of Almohad rule in the process, the citizens of Al-Andalus were left to their own devices. With the core of the Almohad forces occupied in northern Africa, Ibn Hud was able to go on a conquering rampage, defeating Almeria, Granada, Jaen, Cordoba and Malaga. In October of the year 1229 the city which had traditionally been viewed as being the seat of Almohad power in Al-Andalus, Seville, opened its gates to him. By the end of the year 1230 Ibn Hud had come very close to realising his dream of conquering all of Al-Andalus. The only places which held staunchly on to their Almohad governors and resisted his efforts to flip them over to side with himself and the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad were the governors of Valencia, Majorca, the town of Niebla near Seville, and some territories to the south of Portugal.

A bigger concern to Ibn Hud than these pockets of Almohad resistance though were the Christians. While Ibn Hud has been taking advantage of the Almohad succession crisis by going on the offensive, the Christians have been doing the same. Not only Castile, but Aragon, Leon, and Portugal all made significant gains while the Almohads were focused on attempting to shore up their rule in northern Africa. To give you an idea of just how much of a challenge Ibn Hud was now facing, we will go through all the Christian advances one by one, starting with Aragon.

Now, the young King of Aragon has had a very busy childhood. Last time we left young Jaime, he had been reluctantly handed back to Aragon by the man who had killed his father, Simon de Montfort, and was being raised by the Knights Templar with his care being entrusted to the head of the Knights Templar in Aragon and Provence.

Now, incidentally, at this point in the narrative, I'm going to switch back to the English version of Jaime's name, and I will be calling him King James from this point onwards. I would have preferred to pronounce his name the way he would have himself, but I find the Catalan version of his name tricky to master, so instead of causing all you Catalan and Spanish speakers to wince every time I say his name, I'm switching to James. Sorry about that.

Anyway, from quite a young age, James developed an interest in politics, which was fortunate as the politics of Aragon were complex and tricky to navigate, especially for a child, even a child who had the might of the Knight's Templar at his back. In fact, the Kingdom of Aragon was such a hot mess of warring noble families who were competing with Rome and the Knights Templar for supremacy within the kingdom that it's a wonder it stayed together. But stay together it did. In the year 1214, when James was six years old, the Papal Legate for the Kingdom of Aragon, acting in the young King's name, summoned the heads of all the noble families across Aragon and Catalonia to Lerida, where they were required to swear fealty to King James and to endorse new laws enforcing peace across the Kingdom. This turned out to be a stroke of genius. In his book, "The Medieval Crown of Aragon", T. N. Bisson states that, prior to this meeting, many of the noblemen had been

disgruntled and some had been in full blown revolt, but their combined declaration of loyalty to their boy King at this meeting seems to have forged a sort of political solidarity and combined sense of purpose amongst them. A truce was drawn up between Aragon and the Almohads, and between them the Templars, the King's Regent and the Papal Legate all worked to preserve the integrity of the Kingdom.

By the time he was twelve years of age James was actively involving himself in the politics of his realm. T. N. Bisson describes twelve year old James immersing himself in the internal conflicts between the barons of Aragon, while learning to create factions of his own, and to play his rivals off against one another. In the words of T. N. Bisson and I quote "James learned how to fight and how to negotiate in Aragon, and men learned to respect him there" end quote.

By the time he had reached the age of seventeen James had experience in overseeing clashes between the men who were ruling the Kingdom on his behalf - the Regent, the Knights Templar, and the Papal Legate - and turning the conflict to his advantage. He had also commanded troops in battle and was adept at managing fiscal policy, along with general administrative tasks. He had also managed to get himself a wife, Eleanor, the daughter of King Alfonso X of Castile, whom he married in 1221.

By the year 1228, when he was nineteen years old and had taken full command of his Kingdom, King James decided to launch a Crusade against the Muslims of Al-Andalus. He called a meeting of his advisers at Barcelona to pick an appropriate target. The pros and cons of two different locations were discussed: Valencia and Majorca. The barons from Aragon lobbied extensively for Valencia to be the target, mainly due to the opportunity it presented for them to score land and wealth. In the end though, the barons from Catalonia prevailed, successfully arguing that pirates from Majorca had been obstructing trade routes between Barcelona and Alexandria, Tunis, and other Mediterranean and northern African ports. King James then formally declared his intention to launch a Crusade against the Muslims of Majorca, taking the cross in April of 1229 and commencing his campaign five months later.

Join me next time as King James of Aragon launches his stellar career by invading the Balearic Islands. Until next time, bye for now.

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