

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 99
The Conquest of Cordoba, Part One

Hello again. Last time we caught up with the Christian kings of the Iberian peninsula. While Ibn Hud had been busy annexing parts of Al-Andalus from the Almohads, the Christians had also gone on the offensive, with King James of Aragon conquering Majorca, King Alfonso IX of Leon taking Merida and Badajoz, and King Fernando III of Castile attempting to seize Jaen. The campaigns of King Alfonso and King Fernando were cut short in the year 1230 though, when King Alfonso died on his way to Santiago de Compostela, which resulted in his son King Fernando being crowned as the King of Leon in December of 1230, becoming the King of both Leon and Castile. When we left the last episode King Fernando had spent a couple of years securing his claim to the crown of Leon and was ready to once again take the fight to the Muslims.

In January of the year 1233 King Fernando mobilised his forces and headed southwards with an ambitious plan to conquer Ubeda. Forces from both Leon and Castile besieged the Muslim city, which eventually surrendered six months later, in July of 1233.

Now, while King Fernando is settling into his siege of Ubeda, we need to catch up on the political situation in Al-Andalus. As we've seen, Ibn Hud has been astonishingly successful in his bid to conquer Al-Andalus. At the height of his success, in the year 1230, he had conquered all of Al-Andalus except for Valencia. His repeated failures to defeat the Christians and to prevent Christian advances into his territory, though, has seen him steadily lose support. The loss of Badajoz to the King of Leon seems to have been the last straw for many of his supporters, who began to look elsewhere for a successful leader.

It was pretty clear that there was little point appealing to Marrakesh for assistance from the Almohads. The good news for the Almohads was that finally al-Ma'mun has succeeded in his quest to become the sole undisputed Almohad Caliph in Morocco. The bad news was that, in doing so, he managed to undermine and damage the traditional Almohad power base to such an extent that it looked like civil war might break out. Civil war did actually break out when al-Ma'mun died in 1232 leaving his young son as heir to the position of Caliph.

With infighting and power struggles erupting across Morocco, it was pretty clear to everyone that the Almohads wouldn't be returning to Al-Andalus, so the Muslims of Al Andalus began looking for a local ruler to support in place of Ibn Hud. The man who emerged to fill this need first rose to prominence in the year 1232. He instigated a revolt against Ibn Hud and, following a groundswell of support for his stance, within a relatively short period of time he found himself proclaimed as the acknowledged ruler of Jaen, Carmona and Cordoba. This man's name was Muhammad Ibn Yusuf Ibn al-Ahmar, and he is definitely a man to watch as he will, spoiler alert, end up founding a dynasty which will establish the Kingdom of Granada, which will last until the year 1492. Muhammad Ibn Yusuf Ibn al-Ahmar's name is usually shortened to Ibn al-Ahmar. Al-Ahmar means "the red" in Arabic, and Ibn al-Ahmar emphasised this by wearing red clothes and carrying a red banner. He is described by D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain" as, and I quote "perhaps the most skilful Spanish politician of the century" end quote.

But it seems that it took him a while to acquire these skills. Initially, at least, he seemed adept at conquering cities and fortresses, but he was less proficient at winning enough hearts and minds in the regions he had conquered to consolidate his rule. An example of this emerged in the year 1234. By this time, Ibn al-Ahmar was the acknowledged ruler of Jaen and Cordoba, and he had his eye on Seville. Seville, though, had settled on a different leader. While it had thrown off the rulership of Ibn Hud, it didn't seem to want Ibn al-Ahmar. Instead, one of the members of the city council of Seville, a man called al-Bajji rose to lead the city. Ibn al-Ahmar reached out to al-Bajji and convinced him to join forces with the armies of Cordoba and Jaen to seize more territory from Ibn Hud. However, Ibn al-Ahmar back-stabbed al-Bajji, using his forces instead to capture Seville. As soon as Seville was secure, Ibn al-Ahmar killed al-Bajji, but this treachery was too much for the citizens of Seville and Cordoba, who forced Ibn al-Ahmar out of Seville and Cordoba and instead welcomed back Ibn Hud. Ibn Hud and Ibn al-Ahmar will continue to fight each other for supremacy in the region for the next five years.

You might remember that Ibn Hud made a habit of dressing in black to emphasise his allegiance to Baghdad. With Ibn al-Ahmar dressing in red clothes, there is going to be a sort of black and red battle going on for territory in Al-Andalus.

Anyway, there has also been a change of leadership in Valencia. We saw in the last episode that Valencia was the only region in Al-Andalus which remained under Almohad rule. Its Almohad governor negotiated a treaty with King James of Aragon in 1226, whereby Valencia would send Aragon an annual payment in return for Aragon, leaving the region alone. The terms of the treaty were extremely generous, with the amount being paid to Aragon amounting to a fifth of Valencia's annual revenue. This likely did little to endear the Almohad governor of Valencia to his subjects, and early in the year 1229 they rose up against him. The Almohad governor, and in fact most of the remaining Almohads living in Valencia, fled towards Aragon. They ended up settling in the border region between Valencia and Aragon as vassals to King James.

The man who became the new ruler of Valencia was a descendant of Ibn Mardanish, a man called Zayyan. Like Ibn Hud, Zayyan acknowledged the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. Unlike his predecessor, Zayyan will not send tribute to or make peace with his neighbour, King James, so Zayyan is going to be kept very busy trying desperately to protect Valencia from both Ibn Hud and the King of Aragon.

With the Muslim rulers in Al-Andalus once again fighting each other, King Fernando took the opportunity to go on the offensive. As we saw at the beginning of this episode, Ubeda surrendered to Castile following a six month long siege, in July of 1233. King Fernando was unable to capitalise on his defeat of Ubeda though, as plotting by a group of his barons forced him to head back to the Christian north. Scheming by noble families within his realm will keep him occupied for the next couple of years, but bands of Christians from the various Christian kingdoms will roam around Al-Andalus during this time, attacking Muslim fortresses, towns and even cartloads of goods being transported by mules, without direct oversight by any of their kings. This will occur more frequently in the border regions, but the Christian raiders will occasionally venture as far south as Cordoba.

By the year 1235 King Fernando was ready to go campaigning once again. He travelled southwards to the region around Ubeda and Jaen and ended up negotiating a treaty between himself and Ibn Hud. Ibn Hud was at this time busy fighting both Ibn al-Ahmar

and another local ruler who had declared independence from him. Understandably, Ibn Hud had no wish to add King Fernando to the list of men he was currently clashing swords with, so he handed over a hefty sum of money to the King of Leon and Castile in return for a truce lasting until May of 1236. D. W. Lomax points out that, soon after he signed the treaty, King Fernando destroyed the harvests of a number of towns around Jaen which were under Ibn al-Ahmar's control, perhaps to maintain a sort of balance between the two main Muslim factions. King Fernando then besieged and captured a Muslim stronghold from which fighters had been attacking travellers using the Ubeda and Baeza roads. He then returned back northwards to his kingdoms.

It was while King Fernando was at Benavente in the Kingdom of Leon that a Christian raiding party scored an unexpected breakthrough in Cordoba. Cordoba at this time was beset by unrest and internal divisions. The city had endured a number of different leaders, many of whom had been overthrown or had become too preoccupied with fighting other Muslim leaders to quell dissatisfaction inside the town. As such, a number of different factions had emerged inside the city, each fighting the other for supremacy. A band of Christian fighters who had been raiding the countryside around Cordoba just happened to be at the right place at the right time. They were approached by the leader of one of the factions inside Cordoba to see whether they would be interested in capturing one of the suburbs of Cordoba, held by a rival Muslim faction. The Christian raiders jumped at the chance and were assisted by their new Muslim allies to scale the city walls under the cover of darkness. As agreed, they attacked the guards on the city walls, stormed the suburb, took it, and defended it against the rest of the citizens of Cordoba, with the assistance of their new allies.

Now safely ensconced inside Cordoba, although restricted to a single suburb, it occurred to the Christians that with the assistance of other Christian fighters they might have a shot at taking the whole town. They sent urgent messages northwards to other bands of Christians fighting near the borderlands, one of whom was Alvar Perez de Castro. One of the Christians who received the request for assistance was actually one of King Fernando's household knights. He then sent an urgent message to King Fernando at Benavente, urging him to come to the assistance of the Christian fighters inside Cordoba.

Now, the chance to secure a major city of the importance and prominence of Cordoba was likely something King Fernando would jump at. But as pointed out by D. W. Lomax there were a number of challenges he needed to overcome. Firstly, it was January. King Fernando was currently in the north of the peninsula, in the kingdom of Leon. Benavente is, in fact, just to the south of the city of Leon. Even today, the journey from Benavente to Cordoba is pretty lengthy. It will take you over five hours to drive there by car. Of course, back in the thirteenth century, there were no cars. King Fernando would need to travel this vast distance on horseback, through snow and inclement weather. According to D. W. Lomax the weather was so bad at that time of year that many of the roads were deemed to be impassable. The second challenge was the citizens of Cordoba themselves. They were renowned for their fighting spirit, and while most of them had been pre-occupied in recent times fighting each other, King Fernando was pretty certain that they would quickly unite to fight a common threat, that common threat being of course the King of Leon and Castile. The final issue centred around the fact that Cordoba was a major prize. As such, it was likely that King Fernando would find himself fighting not just the citizens of Cordoba but other local warlords and leaders who wished to secure the city for themselves. The city was ostensibly under the loose control of Ibn Hud at the current point in time, and he

would likely come to its aid, while Ibn al-Ahmar, who had recently lost Cordoba to Ibn Hud, would probably also jump at the chance to win it back.

These challenges, though, were not serious enough to dissuade King Fernando. He grabbed a group of close followers and rode south to Zamora, where he gave a speech urging fighting men to follow him to Cordoba. He mobilised further southwards to Salamanca, where he collected supplies including weapons and extra horses, then he sent a message northwards to his mother, Berenguela, instructing her to send funds to any knights who wished to follow him to Cordoba. Then he raced southwards, crossing from the Kingdom of Leon into Al-Andalus and sparing neither his men nor his horses as they pushed across flooded rivers, icy countryside, and traversed muddy roads on their way to Cordoba.

Waiting for him outside the walls of Cordoba were the bishops of Baeza and Cuenca, along with the sons of the Lara brothers, and a bunch of other noblemen. D. W. Lomax points out that travelling with King Fernando were the sons of the Castro family, so for the first time, descendants of the Lara and Castro families were actually united, both fighting under the banner of the same monarch, instead of fighting each other.

A decision was quickly made to besiege the city to prevent it from receiving reinforcements. King Fernando took 200 knights and set up camp south of the Guadalquivir River, opposite the bridge of Alcolea on the road leading to the town of Ecija. Ecija lies around 60 kilometres to the south west of Cordoba, and it was on the road from Ecija that reinforcements were likely to arrive. The rest of the Christian forces set up camp around other parts of the city and the siege began.

Meanwhile, both Christian and Muslim reinforcements are preparing to travel to Cordoba. Ominously for King Fernando, word came in that Ibn Hud was massing a considerable army at Ecija. Join me next time as we see how the conquest of Cordoba pans out. Until next time, bye for now.

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