

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 32
The Taifas

Hello again. Last time we concluded our catch-up episodes on the Christian regions inside the Iberian peninsula, when we shone the spotlight on the Christian north and looked at Galicia, Leon, and Castile. Now, back to Al-Andalus.

While the Christians of the Iberian peninsula were busy forging their identities, brushing themselves off, and getting themselves together, the opposite of this was taking place in Al-Andalus.

Now, to me at least, the collapse of the Caliphate and the rise of the taifas was a pretty strange occurrence. Al-Andalus under the Caliphate had been hugely successful according to just about every marker used to judge political entities. It had flourished economically, politically, diplomatically, and culturally, and yet, by the time the last Caliph left Cordoba in 1031, the Caliphate came to an end with a complete whimper instead of a bang. There was no declaration that Umayyad rule had come to an end, or that the Caliphate itself was no longer in existence. The Caliph simply left the city, and that was that.

Due to the decades of instability which had wracked Al-Andalus prior to the departure of the Caliph though, out in the regions local rulers had emerged to fill the power vacuum. Remember how, back when we were discussing the rise of Al-Andalus, we talked about how power was consolidated in Cordoba, and the further you went from Cordoba the more diluted that power became? Well, now the opposite was happening. Over in the march regions, in places where Cordoba had always struggled to assert full control, local leaders had been accustomed to ruling themselves and, even before the Caliphate had come to an end, local rulers in these regional centres had already declared themselves to be independent self-ruling entities. Really, in these border regions, life continued on pretty much as usual. The only thing that changed was that the local ruler no longer had to concern himself with the possibility that an army from Cordoba might rock up and attempt to establish control. As word spread, though, that the Caliphate was no longer, and that it was now a game of everyone-for-themselves, all sorts of places popped their heads up over the parapet and declared themselves to be independent self-ruling entities. These independent self-ruling entities were called “taifas”, a term which can loosely be described as meaning “regional kingdoms”.

In the years following the collapse of the Caliphate there were as many as 30 taifas across Al-Andalus. In Cordoba itself, no single ruler attempted to assert control. Instead, following the departure of the last Caliph, a city council was established, made up of the city's most prominent residents. The council ruled over Cordoba, and the city slowly began to heal, with the stability the ruling council provided encouraging economic growth and a degree of prosperity. For Cordoba though, its glory days were behind it. The city will never again rise to the prominence it once enjoyed.

As Brian Catlos states though, in his book “Kingdoms of Faith”, and I quote “If Cordoba's light had dimmed, those of the provincial cities flickered to life” end quote. It was now the turn of the march regions, in particular, to shine.

The northern portion of Al-Andalus had, for some time now, been loosely known as comprising of three border, or march, regions.

The Upper March, which was nestled in the base of the Pyrenees mountain range around the valley of the River Ebro, had the Christian regions of Castile, Navarre, Aragon and Catalonia on its borders. The leader of Zaragoza, the most powerful city in the Upper March, declared himself to be a king following the collapse of the Caliphate. However, he was killed in the year 1039, and Zaragoza was then ruled by one of the king's former governors, a man named Muhammed Ibn Hud. Muhammed Ibn Hud boasted an impeccable Arab lineage, and his descendants will successfully rule the Upper March for generations, defeating and annexing a few neighbouring smaller taifas to their territory.

The Middle March region was dominated by the city of Toledo. As soon as the Caliphate collapsed, the wealthiest citizens of Toledo banded together and established a ruling council similar to the one about to pop up in Cordoba. However, unlike in Cordoba, the citizens of Toledo were concerned that their city and region may be defeated and annexed by Zaragoza or another of their powerful neighbours, particularly Castile, which lay just over the border to the north. Deciding that they needed an army and a military commander in charge to prevent this from happening, the council invited a Berber general to move in and govern them.

With Zaragoza and Toledo getting themselves under control, the remaining march region, containing the cities of Merida, Lisbon, and Badajoz, gathered itself together. Known as the Lower March, it shared a northern border with Galicia and Leon, and its territory stretched all the way to the Atlantic coastline, encompassing what today is the country of Portugal. In the struggle for power in the Lower March, Badajoz emerged as the winner. The governor of Badajoz declared himself to be king of the Lower March and was later succeeded by his wazir, or chief political adviser, a man called Abdallah Ibn Aftas, who was a member of an established Berber clan. Abdallah Ibn Aftas will go on to establish a ruling dynasty in the Lower March, a line of kings known as the Aftasids.

Similar plays for power were taking place across Al-Andalus, but eventually the thirty or so new kings who declared themselves to be heads of new taifas will be culled down, as more powerful taifas attacked and annexed less powerful ones. As pointed out by Brian Catlos, some of the taifas which emerged following the fall of the Caliphate were only tiny, and were little more than a town and its immediate surrounds. The kings of these smaller taifas were soon conquered and absorbed by their more powerful neighbours. Once the dust settled, in addition to Zaragoza, Toledo, and Badajoz, which we have already mentioned, the cities of Seville, Granada, and Valencia emerged as new centres of power.

As these freshly-minted taifas and their equally new kings settled themselves into their new roles they began to flourish, economically and culturally. Artists, scholars, poets, and musicians who had previously frequented the royal court at Cordoba instead made their way to the taifas, establishing new scientific and artistic communities far away from Cordoba.

Outside of Cordoba, farmers had continued to work and harvest their fields, and merchants had continued to ply their trades despite the crumbling of the central political system. Now, with the establishment of the taifas, economic boom-times hit many of the regional centres. Brian Catlos points out that the small port of Denia, which had been on

hardly anyone's radar during the years of Umayyad rule, declared itself to be a taifa. Instead of being swallowed up by neighbouring Valencia, as you might have expected would happen, the volume of trade coming through the port of Denia meant that its ruler was able to fund an army, which went on to conquer the island of Mallorca, and even had the confidence to launch an invasion of Christian Sardinia. So, due to its trading successes, Denia was able to maintain its independence, becoming a durable taifa.

Now you would think that, with centralist power having collapsed and the focus instead switching to regional cities, that widespread civil conflict may have erupted, with people taking on new identities and viewing others without that identity as their enemies, so people from Toledo, believing Toledo to be the best place on the planet and viewing their neighbours from Badajoz, Zaragoza, and Valencia to be lesser beings, for instance. Interestingly, though, this didn't seem to happen. Brian Catlos states that, despite the effective breakup of the political entity which was Al-Andalus, the idea of Al-Andalus prevailed, as did the sense of a national, Al-Andalus-based, identity and pride. Just about everyone in Al-Andalus viewed themselves as Andalusis first, and as a resident of a particular taifa or follower of a particular religion, second.

According to Brian Catlos, religious discrimination also seems to have been all but eliminated during this time. Brian Catlos states that, by the end of the Caliphate, most Christians inside Al-Andalus had converted to Islam, but the few that had held on to their faith experienced little or no disadvantage due to their religion. The same was true for the Jewish communities living in Al-Andalus. People of all three religions had been completely assimilated into virtually every aspect of civic, military, and economic life. The only exceptions to this were proponents of non-mainstream Islamic theologies, such as those of the Shia faith and Islamic mystics, who were viewed by conservative Muslims in Al-Andalus as being dangerous non-conformists whose faith threatened the power structure inside the taifas. Interestingly, in the absence of a Caliph on the Iberian peninsula, other Caliphs - the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad and the Fatimid Caliph in Cairo - were ignored. Islamic law still prevailed inside each taifa, but each taifa operated its own court system, its own administration, and its own army.

While the Arab elite still viewed themselves as such, to most other ethnic groups inside the taifas, things had become much more egalitarian. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley states that, by the time of the fall of the Caliphate, people of Berber descent had been fully integrated into the social structure of Al-Andalus and were no longer considered inferior, as they had been for a number of centuries. The same applied to the descendants of slaves who had been imported into the peninsula during the tenth century. By the time of the establishment of the taifas, being of Berber heritage or being the descendant of a slave was not considered to be an impediment to political, military, or social advancement. Bernard Riley estimates that around 10,000 people were the descendants of slaves and around 20,000 people identified as Berber. Since the population of Al-Andalus as a whole numbered around six million, these groups comprised only a small portion of the population, yet Berbers in particular were over-represented amongst the upper echelons of the military, and frequently formed part of the local elite inside the taifas.

A larger minority group inside Al-Andalus at this time were the Jews. Bernard Riley estimates that there were around 60,000 Jews resident in Al-Andalus at the time of the rise of the taifas, meaning that Jews numbered around 1% of the total population. The Jews in the peninsula were highly educated, and were considered to be the scholastic elite of

society. While the Jews in continental Europe at this time were struggling and subjected to intolerable levels of discrimination, as described in my current Patreon series on the Jewish experience of medieval Europe, the Jews of the Iberian peninsula were thriving. Their high levels of education, their wealth, their mercantile and commercial skills, and their ties to Jewish trading communities in continental Europe and the Middle East, made them highly valuable members of the elite inside the taifas. However, as Bernard Riley notes, while Jews were frequently seen in the upper levels of the bureaucracy, they didn't tend to ascend any higher than being the chief adviser or right-hand-man of a ruler. Bernard Riley points to this fact as showing that, despite their acceptance within the ruling elite, Jews were still vulnerable to a degree, and were careful to never attract a large number of followers or develop leadership ambitions of their own, for fear this would lead to a backlash, not just against that particular person but against Jews generally. Still, in marked contrast to what was happening in France and Germany at this time, Jews in Spain were able to operate within elite levels in the bureaucracy and in commerce.

Now I should point out at this stage that, while Brian Catlos has stated that most Christians inside Al-Andalus had converted to Islam by the fall of the Caliphate, Bernard Reilly holds the opposite view. He states that there were large communities of Christians inside Al-Andalus, so large in fact that they actually formed the majority of the population. The reason for this large discrepancy in views is that Christians inside Al-Andalus during the rise of the taifas were all but invisible. While many historians, Bernard Riley included, assumed that they were there but were a silent majority about whom nothing was written and little was known, the current view is that the Christian majority was silent due to the fact that it didn't exist. Most Christians had in fact converted to Islam by this time, and those who hadn't had either moved to the Christian states inside the peninsula or kept to themselves, staying outside the halls of power.

So, Al-Andalus under the taifas sounds like a pleasant, egalitarian sort of place, doesn't it? Well, yes it was, but unfortunately it wasn't to last. Brian Catlos states that, under the taifas, and I quote, "Al-Andalus entered a new age which might be described as one of dynamic instability or creative destruction. Culturally, Islamic Spain would reach new heights of sophistication, economically, it would continue to thrive, and yet politically it would fail." End quote.

One of the reasons for this failure was a man called Fernando, who we've already met. We will return to the Christian north and the activities of King Fernando in the next episode. Until next time, bye for now.

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