

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 22  
Trouble Brewing

Hello again. Last time we shone a light on the Jewish population of Al-Andalus, in particular the highly influential Hasdai ibn Shaprut, who became one of the Caliph's senior advisers. We saw that Abd al-Rahman III's court was cosmopolitan and inclusive, with both Jews and Christians occupying senior positions in his administration, a practise which was continued by Abd al-Rahman's successor, al-Hakam II. One feature of al-Hakam's administration which hadn't transferred over from his father's period of rule was al-Hakam's reliance on two of his advisers, the military commander Ghalib and his chief offsider Ja'far al-Mushafi.

Now, I should point out that there is really no basis to criticise al-Hakam II for choosing to delegate many of his responsibilities to these two men. Between the three of them they governed Al-Andalus in a competent and effective manner, which enabled the caliphate to transition seamlessly from Abd al-Rahman's rule. However, we need to keep in mind the fact that al-Hakam was aged in his forties when he became ruler of Al-Andalus, and that he had spent decades preparing for this role. Ja'far had been his childhood friend and had acted as his personal secretary and right-hand man for many years prior to al-Hakam becoming Caliph, so the two men knew and trusted each other implicitly. Both Ja'far and Ghalib were entrusted with high levels of responsibility and power during al-Hakam's rule, but neither abused their positions, nor took advantage of the power, or wielded it for their own gain. Instead, as I've already mentioned, the system worked really well, and freed up al-Hakam to pursue his scholarly studies.

The delegation of the Caliph's power though, did make many ambitious courtiers and palace officials sit up and take note. No ruler of Al-Andalus had ever allowed so much of his authority to be exercised by his staff, so, some of them wondered, wouldn't it be a great thing if this practise continued after al-Hakam's rule? In fact, thought the palace officials, there's no real reason why a great deal of the ruler's powers couldn't be delegated to palace officials. The precedent has been set, so let's see how far we can take this.

Unfortunately for everyone, in the year 974, when al-Hakam II was aged in his fifties, he suffered a stroke, which resulted in partial paralysis. Even more unfortunate was the fact that at this point in time, al-Hakam's chosen successor, his son Hisham, was only ten years old. To make the situation even worse, one of the government officials who had been pondering the new power arrangements, and whether they could at some time in the future be leveraged to his advantage, was young Hisham's tutor, and he was in the perfect position to take full advantage of the current turn of events. The name of this ambitious man was Ibn Abi Amir, although he will later become known as "al-Mansur", so that's what we will be calling him.

Let's take a look at al-Mansur, and how he has worked his way up through al-Hakam's court in such a way that he is now in a prime position to take advantage both of al-Hakam's ill health and his son's young age. If you are wondering why we're taking time out to track the rise of this lowly palace official, well it's because by the year 985, just over a decade from the time when al-Hakam II suffered his stroke, al-Mansur will effectively be ruling Al-Andalus. So let's track his rise to power.

As a young man, al-Mansur was already harbouring the ambitions which will one day see him wield an almost unimaginable level of power. As such, he left his village and made his way to Cordoba to further his studies in Islamic jurisprudence and literature. Possibly leveraging the connections of his well respected tutors, al-Mansur managed to land himself a position inside the palace Madinat al-Zahra. From there he managed to bring himself to the notice of the most influential person inside the harem of al-Hakam II, a Basque woman named Subh, who was al-Hakam's favourite concubine and mother to his two sons, the eldest named Abd al-Rahman and the baby boy Hisham, who were front-runners to become the next ruler of Al-Andalus.

Al-Mansur began working for Subh as her private secretary, but quickly made himself indispensable. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos reports that al-Mansur made himself extremely popular inside the harem, providing gossip, gifts, and flowery conversation to the women of the harem, while also working his way up through the bureaucratic rungs inside the palace.

In the year 967 he was made Master of the Mint, placing him in charge of the production of coinage for Al-Andalus, while also acting as the chief administrative and financial adviser to Subh, and as tutor to her eldest son. After his appointment as the man in charge of the coinage, the gifts he distributed to selected members of the harem became more extravagant, resulting in accusations that he was embezzling funds. To counter this charge, al-Mansur didn't actually deny the accusations, but took the unusual step of commissioning a local craftsman to construct a tiny model of the palace made entirely out of silver. Apparently, the tiny silver palace was a dazzling triumph of artistry and design, and when al-Mansur presented it to Subh as a gift, she then likely used her influence over al-Hakam to make the charges against al-Mansur quietly go away.

Subh's influence also resulted in al-Mansur gaining a number of influential administrative positions in addition to his one heading up the Mint. These included oversight of the police and intelligence services, and acting as a judicial overseer in Seville. As Brian Catlos points out, these positions not only added to al-Mansur's personal wealth and prestige, they also enabled him to cultivate a network of patronage outside the palace, through the distribution of favours and gifts.

However, establishing networks of influence outside the palace didn't mean that al-Mansur was neglecting his networks inside the palace. On the contrary, he spent so much time with Subh that rumours began to circulate that the relationship between them had progressed to inappropriate levels. Rumours that al-Mansur and Subh were having an illicit affair didn't seem to affect al-Mansur's prestige or standing, nor his level of trust with the Caliph.

Tragically, Subh's eldest son, Abd al-Rahman died aged only seven, only a couple of years after al-Mansur became his tutor, leaving Subh with only one remaining son, the now four-year-old Hisham, who she desperately hoped would become al-Hakam's chosen heir. Brian Catlos points out that the more power which al-Mansur managed to accrue, the more important it would have become to Subh to maintain her influence over him, in the hope that al-Mansur could smooth the way for her son's eventual ascension to the throne.

However, as we know, the power at this time wasn't just wielded by the Caliph, so to cement his place in the palace al-Mansur also needed to win over the military commander Ghalib and al-Hakam's offside Ja'far al-Mushafi. Al-Mansur's big break came when he was chosen to travel to northern Africa on a military campaign with Ghalib.

Northern Africa had become an arena of focus for al-Hakam II following the transfer of the Fatimids to Egypt in the year 969. This had left a power vacuum in the region and a number of Berber clans began to muscle up, with a view to defeating their rival clans and gaining supremacy in the region. Al-Hakam had, for the past couple of years, managed the situation by playing various warlords off against each other, so that none gained supremacy. However, in recent times the powerful Idrisid dynasty from Fez, which controlled much of the trans-Saharan gold and slave trade, had emerged as the dominant force and, worryingly for al-Hakam, the Idrisids showed no sign whatsoever of being interested in submitting to demands by Cordoba. So it was time to send Ghalib over to teach them a lesson.

Ghalib did manage to teach them a lesson. The Idrisid were defeated and were forced to send their leading family members to Cordoba to participate in a humiliating public ceremony in which they pledged allegiance to the Caliph. When al-Mansur returned to Cordoba in the year 974 alongside the triumphant general and his troops, he was able to share in their glorious victory.

Al-Mansur's role in northern Africa had been as quartermaster and problem-solver for the Caliph's forces. Al-Mansur had carried out his duties effectively, and with a degree of flourish which brought him to the attention of Ghalib, and which also enabled him to cultivate networks amongst influential Berber tribes in northern Africa. In fact, al-Mansur's time serving under Ghalib in northern Africa was so successful that upon his return to Cordoba he was appointed as the chief inspector of the Berber divisions of the Caliph's army in Al-Andalus. It was just after al-Mansur had taken up this lofty position that the Caliph al-Hakam II suffered his stroke.

Now, by the time al-Hakam's health took this serious downwards spiral, al-Mansur had not managed to win over the other power behind the throne, al-Hakam's right hand man, so to speak, Ja'far. However, it's quite possible that even if he had been given ample opportunity, al-Mansur may not have bothered to take this step. Why? Well, because despite Ja'far's lofty position inside the court, he was generally looked down upon by most Arabs inside al-Hakam's administration, including al-Mansur. The reason behind this was simple: Ja'far was not of Arab heritage; in fact, he was from a Berber family. He was the son of a lowly tutor and had managed to reach lofty heights inside the administration, not because of his superior Arab lineage, but because of his knack for administration, his people management skills, and his unwavering loyalty towards his childhood friend al-Hakam. So to many Arabs inside al-Hakam's court, Ja'far was seen as a bit of an upstart, someone who they had to defer to and obey while al-Hakam was in power, but not someone they felt any personal obligation towards.

Now, after al-Hakam's sudden decline in health, there may have been a hope that the Caliph would somehow rally and regain his ability to rule. However, that didn't happen. Concerned that the breezes coming off the mountains surrounding the royal palace were prolonging the Caliph's illness, his physicians advised him to move out of the palace to Cordoba. So the magnificent palace Madinat al-Zahra was vacated and the Caliph, his family, and the entire administration took up residence in Cordoba. The less breezy air in Cordoba didn't provide the cure which everyone had hoped for, so al-Hakam turned the affairs of state almost entirely over to Ja'far, while simultaneously declaring ten year old Hisham to be his successor. Ghalib maintained his hold over the military forces.

At this time, a sort of an understanding seems to have developed that should al-Hakam fail to recover his health, or should he die leaving his child as the ruler of Al-Andalus, then Ja'far and Ghalib would pretty much carry on what they had been doing successfully for many years, so Ja'far would effectively oversee the administration of Al-Andalus, and Ghalib would take care of the military forces. With this in mind, Ja'far proposed that Ja'far's son be betrothed to Ghalib's daughter Asma. This would have the effect of consolidating Ja'far's position to some extent. In the absence of al-Hakam, Ja'far would still be unable to compete with others of Arab heritage, but at least he would have a foot in the door, so to speak, with his son being married to the daughter of the nation's most esteemed general, a man with an impeccable Arab pedigree. The marriage contract was signed, and Ja'far may have sat back in relief, believing that his position within the court was secure. But it wasn't.

Al-Hakam died in October of the year 976, aged 61. Almost immediately, al-Mansur began to make his move. He leveraged his personal relationship with Ghalib, and began sowing seeds of doubt in his mind about Ja'far and Ja'far's son, and more specifically the suitability of Ja'far's son to become part of Ghalib's family via the marriage contract. At the same time, palace intrigue was getting out of hand, and a plot was taking place to install a younger brother of al-Hakam onto the throne, bypassing ten-year-old Hisham.

Now, we will discuss this plot in more detail in the next episode, but in the power-plays which will take place over the next couple of years, one man, al-Mansur, will emerge victorious. By the year 978 Asma will be married not to Ja'far's son, but to al-Mansur, while Ja'far himself will be imprisoned in the royal dungeons. How did this all come to pass? You'll have to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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