

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 11
Abd al-Rahman II

Hello again. Last time we zoomed out and took a look at how the Iberian peninsula was tracking in the early 800s. We saw that Al-Andalus was thriving. Its culture and its character were changing from a Roman-Visigothic entity into an Arabic-Muslim one. Around 8% of the Christian population had converted to Islam, and the crumbling Roman infrastructure was gradually being replaced with distinctive Arabic buildings, dwellings and roads. However, there are some factors to keep an eye on moving forward. The northern coastline of the peninsula is currently occupied by independent Christian principalities. In addition, the Franks, who lived across the Pyrenees, were stepping up their efforts to annex towns on the Spanish side of the mountain range.

Following the overview in our last episode, it's now time to resume our narrative. We shall take it up in the year 822. It was in this year that al-Hakam died, after having ruled Al-Andalus for 26 years. The good news for al-Hakam was that he had plenty of time before he died to choose his successor, and the further good news was that he had plenty of contenders to choose from. During his lifetime, al-Hakam managed to father an impressive total of 21 sons and 17 daughters. If you are thinking that amongst the 21 sons there should be at least one person who possessed the necessary qualities for a successful Emir, you would be right. In addition to providing a varied pool from which a suitable ruler could be selected, his large number of offspring enabled al-Hakam to form alliances with powerful family groups across Al-Andalus, as he married his vast selection of children into noble families from a variety of locations across the peninsula, strengthening bonds between the regions and Cordoba, and providing a large network of family groups with direct ties to the Emir.

So who was the lucky son who beat twenty other contenders to get the nod from his father to succeed him? Well, it was a 30 year old man with a familiar name: Abd al-Rahman. Abd al-Rahman succeeded his father in the year 822, becoming known to history as Abd al-Rahman II.

Abd al-Rahman II, you would have to say, was almost the perfect candidate to become the Emir of Al-Andalus. He was strikingly good looking, and tall, with dark hair and blue eyes. He was accustomed to make himself even more striking by using black eyeliner around his eyes, which made the contrast between his blue eyes and dark hair quite startling. He also had a long beard, which he stained with red and black henna. He had already gained the reputation as a competent military commander, so he possessed the ability to lead the armies of Cordoba into battle, but unlike many military leaders, he wasn't an uneducated or uncultured man. In fact, he was quite the opposite. Apparently possessing an enquiring mind, he was interested in innovations, inventions and the latest in cutting edge culture and the arts.

Abd al-Rahman II made his impact felt on the administrative structure of Al-Andalus almost immediately. While his father had taken the approach of facing any threats to his rule head-on, and viciously stamping out any rebellion or opposition to his rule with merciless effectiveness, Abd al-Rahman took a completely different approach. His preferred method of dealing with dissent was to effectively assimilate the dissenters into his administration, a method of governance which brought new ideas and viewpoints to his inner circle, and

which expanded his own influence well beyond usual family boundaries. A salient example of this is provided by Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", when he states that when Abd al-Rahman II confronted the leader of a Berber rebellion, instead of punishing the man he admitted him into his inner circle as a religious adviser.

Abd al-Rahman II also imported a large number of castrated slaves from Eastern Europe. He decided to replace the traditional palace guards with these eunuchs who, since they were far from home with no local connections or family ties, would be 100% loyal to the Emir. The castrated slaves proved to be so successful that they were rolled out to cities beyond Cordoba. The most talented and hardworking of these slaves were singled out for favours, and were promoted to prominent positions inside the Emir's household.

In fact, you would have to say that Abd al-Rahman II had quite a knack for spotting talent and promise amongst his subjects, then assimilating that person into his ruling structure. This was helped by the fact that Abd al-Rahman II vastly expanded his father's bureaucracy, creating positions both within the royal household and across the administration, in the areas of defence, finance, and economic development. Abd al-Rahman II plucked promising members of notable families from across Al-Andalus and plonked them down in positions of power and influence inside his bureaucracy. All of these newcomers were required to answer personally to the Emir. In this way he created and strengthened ties and bonds of allegiance between himself and powerful families, an act which brought new blood and new ideas into the administrative structure, and which gave ambitious people an outlet to wield power and influence on behalf of Abd al-Rahman instead of against him.

Abd al-Rahman II's method of selecting promising individuals and assimilating them into his power structure wasn't just limited to selected noble family groups. No, the growing power of the religious elite inside Al-Andalus was harnessed when Abd al-Rahman II appointed ambitious religious scholars as magistrates, where they could use their influence as respected and wise members of the community to adjudicate disputes within that community. Interestingly, he also absorbed a number of leading Christian and Jewish figures into his administration, strengthening their ties to the Umayyad regime.

However, this didn't mean that Abd al-Rahman II was not 100% committed to Islam. On the contrary, he expanded the mosque at Cordoba by doubling the floor size of the magnificent prayer hall constructed by his namesake, Abd al-Rahman I. He also commissioned a number of mosques to be constructed in towns far away from Cordoba, including Seville and Zaragoza. Interestingly though, Abd al-Rahman II was careful to distance himself to a degree from the Caliph in Baghdad, and from the complete "Arabisation" (if that's a word) of the peninsula. Al-Andalus was definitely a Muslim power, but Abd al-Rahman II wanted to make sure that everyone knew that, under his rulership, Al-Andalus wasn't going to be a mere carbon-copy of the caliphate back in the Middle East. No, Abd al-Rahman II was working hard to ensure that Al-Andalus maintained its own distinct identity, a sort of a Spanish flavoured identity forged on top of the Arabic and Berber culture already taking root on the peninsula.

To reinforce this notion, he minted coins for use inside his regime. Although silver wasn't exactly easy to get hold of, he ordered the silver coins which were minted to be of a high quality and of uniform purity. This enabled the expansion of trade and commerce between Al-Andalus and northern Africa, as well as with the Byzantine Empire. Interestingly, at this time, currency wasn't the top priority for other countries in Europe. Even the powerhouse Kingdom of the Franks had no need for currency. Instead, goods were bartered for other

goods. Through the use of this bartering system, silk and leather made its way out of Andalus into Italy and the land of the Franks, in exchange not for coinage but for slaves and furs.

Now, happily, for Abd al-Rahman II, whom we have already noted was an intellectually curious ruler with a liking for cutting-edge developments in culture and technology, the Abbasid Islamic world in the Middle East had just entered a golden age, and Abd al-Rahman II would be able to import many of the innovations and ideas currently circulating around the Abbasid Caliphate into his own regime. Advancements in mathematics, science, theology and medicine seeped out of Baghdad and made their way to the court of Abd al-Rahman II in Cordoba. Abd al-Rahman became known for his generosity in showering intellectuals and men of learning with gifts and cash, so Cordoba became a magnet for travelling scholars who were bringing the latest innovations from Baghdad to the wider Islamic world. In fact, Abd al-Rahman II not only encouraged scholars and men of learning to visit his court, he actively participated in some intellectual pursuits himself, taking a keen interest in theology and the study of astrology.

Unfortunately for Abd al-Rahman II though, it wasn't all parties and intellectual advancements. During his reign, he not only had to deal with the independent Christian states inside the peninsula and incursions over the Pyrenees by the marauding Franks, he also faced a completely novel threat not encountered by any of his predecessors, that threat being the Vikings. Vikings had never before brought their pillaging and plundering ways to the Iberian peninsula, and it's safe to say that their arrival came as a bit of a shock. In the summer of the year 844 a fleet of longboats put into one of the many beaches along the rugged coastline of Asturias, but ended up being successfully repelled by the Asturian king. The fleet pulled back out to sea and continued its journey along the northern coast, before reaching the far left corner of the square that is the Iberian peninsula. The fleet then pulled to the left and sailed down the peninsula's west coast. Their next port of call was the Muslim settlement at Lisbon, in modern day Portugal. They raided Lisbon for a total of thirteen days, before once again heading back to their longboats. Sailing southwards, they came ashore at Cadiz, before heading inland to the city of Seville.

Now Seville, at this point in time, was heading into a period of prosperity. Surrounded by fertile agricultural land, Seville not only grew produce such as olives, figs and grapes, it also acted as a marketplace for the surrounding regions, with farmers and traders bringing their excess produce to the city's bustling marketplace. The city was handily located on a river which, if you sailed up-river took you to Cordoba, and if you sailed downstream deposited you in the Atlantic Ocean, where trading ships could make the journey to northern Africa or the Mediterranean Sea. As a nod to its growing wealth and prominence, Abd al-Rahman II had commissioned a mosque to be built in Seville.

The work on the mosque had in fact just been finished, when 54 boatloads of hairy, blonde, axe-wielding Vikings stormed into Seville, looking for goods and people to pillage, plunder and loot. It's safe to say that the fighting men of Seville had never seen anything quite like the Vikings, and were at a loss to know how to deal with them. As the Vikings rampaged through the town, smashing, yelling, and setting things on fire, the garrison retreated to the safety of a fortress inside the city, while the unfortunate citizens of Seville grabbed what possessions they could carry and fled to nearby Carmona. Fortunately for the city's garrison, Cordoba is less than 150 kilometres from Seville, so urgent messages were sent to the Emir, telling him that the Vikings had over-taken the town and requesting military assistance to eject them.

Now the arrival of the Vikings was a serious issue, and Abd al-Rahman II wanted to gather as large a force as possible, so that he could eject the Norseman from the Iberian peninsula once and for all. So, while the Vikings finished their plundering of Seville and set up camp for themselves further down the river, Abd al-Rahman sent word out across the southern part of the peninsula that men were needed to confront and defeat the invaders. Abd al-Rahman's call to arms was answered. In fact, Brian Catlos reports in his book "Kingdoms of Faith" that, even some governors who had opposed Abd al-Rahman II put aside their differences and rode to Cordoba with their armies, to join the fight against their common enemy.

The forces which rode out from Cordoba to confront the Vikings were ultimately successful. While the confrontation may have been a more even battle had the Muslim forces confined themselves to hand-to-hand fighting, they possessed two advantages that the Vikings did not, namely cavalry and Greek fire. The result of this was that the Vikings themselves were run down and ambushed by the Muslim cavalry forces, while their longboats were attacked with Greek fire. You may remember, from the history of the Crusades podcast, that Greek fire was a devastating weapon developed by the Byzantines. Its exact composition remains a mystery, but Greek fire was a liquid which, once ignited, was almost impossible to extinguish, and was particularly effective in naval battles, as once the liquid was ignited aboard a wooden ship, no amount of water could extinguish it.

Anyway, on the 11th of November in the year 844 the Vikings, who were already seriously rattled by the cavalry forces and the Greek fire, gave up and fled back out to sea on their remaining vessels, after Abd al-Rahman II ordered that the Viking prisoners be publicly slaughtered in front of their countrymen. Although the Vikings would occasionally return in the following years, they will never gain a permanent foothold in Al-Andalus.

I should note that there were persistent rumours that a bunch of Vikings remained behind after the raid in Seville and became cheese-makers on a farm outside the city. However, according to Brian Catlos, this story is incorrect, with a misunderstanding coming about due to the misreading of an Arab chronicle.

Now, one of the military commanders who excelled himself in the battle against the Vikings was an interesting man called Abu al-Fith Nasr. Nasr had been castrated by Abd al-Rahman's father, to punish Nasr's father, who was one of the ringleaders in an uprising in Cordoba. A novel method of punishment enacted by al-Hakam was to castrate the sons of rebel leaders, then force the boys to serve as workers in the royal palace. Young Nasr had risen to prominence inside the royal household and had actually befriended the young Abd al-Rahman II. After playing a pivotal role in the victory against the Vikings, Nasr rose even higher inside the court, gaining enough wealth and power to construct an impressive mansion for himself outside Cordoba.

However, for Nasr this wasn't enough. As a eunuch, he had been entrusted with the oversight of the royal harem. He exercised a great deal of influence over the wives and concubines inside the harem, many of whom were highly ambitious for themselves and their children. Nasr plotted and played them off against each other, and in the late 840s decided to make his move. Nasr decided to poison Abd al-Rahman II and kill him. He then planned to arrange for the son of one of Abd al-Rahman's wives to become the next Emir, instead of the heir already chosen by Abd al-Rahman II. But unfortunately for Nasr, his power inside the harem wasn't all-encompassing. One of the Emir's other wives

discovered the plot and informed Abd al-Rahman about it, so when Nasr presented Abd al-Rahman with a potion which he said was a medicine prepared by the royal physician, Abd al-Rahman II insisted that Nasr drink it himself. Nasr had no option other than to do so. He drank the poison, then died soon after.

That was the end of Nasr, and that is the end of our episodes for this year. It's summer in Australia, and I'm about to take my annual break, so I wish you all the best in waving goodbye to the particularly unpleasant year of 2020, and I'm sure you'll all join me in hoping that 2021 will be a vast improvement. So, take care everyone, and I'll see you all in February of 2021. In the meanwhile, if you would like to listen to more episodes, consider joining my Patreon feed. It only costs \$1 per month, and you'll find a backlog of over 100 episodes to listen to, to fill in the time between now and February. So until 2021, bye for now.

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