

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 16  
The Rebel Of Bobastro

Hello again. Last time we took a look at a new player on the scene, young King Alfonso III of Asturias. While the Emir of Al-Andalus, Muhammad I, was kept busy, stamping out rebellions inside his territory and knocking heads with Banu Qasi in the Basque region, King Alfonso III busied himself embarking on an ambitious programme of expansion. Around ten years into what would become a lengthy reign, King Alfonso's rule had seen the Kingdom of Asturias expand from being a small sliver of territory in the centre of the northern coast of the Iberian peninsula, to an extensive kingdom stretching across Galicia all the way to Porto on the western coast of the peninsula and expanding southwards through the former buffer zone into the northern reaches of Al-Andalus.

While many of the towns taken by Alfonso during the first decade of his reign were small and relatively unimportant, some proved to be the opposite. One of his more consequential early conquests was the ancient Roman town of Leon. Now, the town of Leon lies almost directly south of the capital city of Asturias, Oviedo. Leon is around 90 kilometres (or 55 miles) from Oviedo, and today the two towns are a leisurely 1 ½ hours drive away. When King Alfonso III commenced his reign, Leon was located in the unpopulated buffer zone which separated Asturias from Al-Andalus, but despite the fact that it contained no people, Leon was still a very impressive place.

It had begun its life as a camping site for the Roman legion serving under Caesar Augustus during the final stages of the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, way back in the third century BCE. The site was eventually fortified and used as a permanent Roman military camp, earning the name *Castra Legionis*, or “Camp of the Legion”. The Romans ended up expanding the site until it was an impressively sized town. In the sixth century of the Common Era, the town was taken by the Visigoths, who re-fortified and modernised it. At this stage of its history the name of the town, *Castra Legionis*, had morphed into its current much shorter name, Leon. The town of Leon fell to the Muslim invaders following the Battle of 711, but was later abandoned following the Berber revolts.

When young King Alfonso III was looking to expand his Kingdom southwards, Leon was an obvious target. King Alfonso didn't need to conquer the abandoned city though, he just needed to move in and claim it, which is exactly what he did. The impressive Roman walls which still surrounded the city of Leon, would make it an easy place to defend and - spoiler alert - the city of Leon will become a hugely important place in later centuries, forming the seat of the Kingdom of Leon.

In the same way that he annexed the city of Leon, King Alfonso strode around the top quarter of the Iberian peninsula, extending his territory, conquering, claiming towns, and generally making himself at home. Likely concerned about the rising power of the Banu Qasi in the Basque region, King Alfonso went on a castle building exercise in the eastern section of his newly conquered territory. In fact, he will end up constructing so many castles in this region that it will earn the nickname “The Land of the Castles”, which will later develop into the name Castile.

At the same time as he was embarking on his ambitious campaign of expansion, King Alfonso was engaging in diplomatic relations with the King of Pamplona and the Banu

Qasi, while supporting promising looking rebellions sparking off inside Al-Andalus, and also opening the door to any interested Christians inside Al-Andalus who could be persuaded to relocate to the new territory which King Alfonso had conquered.

By the year 878 the Emir Muhammad I had decided that the behaviour of King Alfonso III had become intolerable. The final straw for the Emir was the Asturian king's support for the rebellion of al-Jilliqi, which we discussed back in Episode 14. Muhammad I mustered a large army and ordered it to march northwards to teach the King of Asturias a lesson. Now unfortunately, not an awful lot is known about the military confrontation which followed, but what is certain is that Asturias emerged victorious, while the Muslim armies were forced to retreat back to Al-Andalus. Even more humiliating for the Emir was the fact that, following the defeat of the Muslim forces, the Emir found himself in the position of having to request a truce from King Alfonso III. Worried that the King of Asturias may follow up his successes by invading Al-Andalus, and stretched thin by the activities of the Banu Qasi and the Muslim rebellions, Muhammad I became the first Emir of Al-Andalus to sue for peace with a northern Christian kingdom.

In the end though, it was extremely fortunate for Muhammad that he had negotiated this peace treaty, as one of the most serious threats to his reign is about to take place, in the form of an uprising by a man called Umar Ibn Hafsun.

Now, the backstory of Ibn Hafsun is a little murky and difficult to pin down, but it seems that he was the descendant of a Visigothic count who had converted to Islam, so he was of Muwallad origin. He had set himself up in the hills south-west of present day Granada, and ran a small holding in a sort of a feudal type manner. This area, despite being way down in the south of the peninsula, was still predominantly Christian and also had a sizeable Jewish population. The Muslims who lived there were largely Muwallads, who also engaged in some Christian practises and celebrated Christian holidays. Now, Ibn Hafsun was a pretty typical ambitious landholder. He used peasant labour to work his land, then used the profits to increase his power and wealth, largely by hiring strongmen to protect his property and to acquire more land and wealth. However, it was while using violence to expand his acquisitions that Ibn Hafsun had his first brush with misfortune. He murdered a rival family member and was forced to flee to northern Africa until things settled down enough for him to safely return.

When Ibn Hafsun eventually did return he had a plan. He decided to base himself at a place called Bobastro, a hilltop fortress inland from the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula. The fortress was ancient and well constructed, having been built in Roman times. Ibn Hafsun set himself up in the fortress and declared that Bobastro was now the capital of a new independent region, free from rule by Cordoba. Ibn Hafsun's message was a tempting one for local Christians and for non-Arab Muslims. Deciding that the tax burden placed on local residents from Cordoba was excessive and unfair, Ibn Hafsun urged local residents to turn their backs on Cordoba, and instead join his merry band of guerilla fighters. Now, later in his lifetime, Ibn Hafsun will be epically successful, and he will control a gob-smackingly large region from his ancient hilltop fortress.

It seems that Muhammad I may have realised the potential threat posed by Ibn Hafsun, as he sent a sizeable force southwards out of Cordoba to bring Ibn Hafsun to heel. Ibn Hafsun was brought to heel by this force in the year 883, and following his defeat was required to move out of his fortress and relocate to Cordoba, along with his family, so that the Emir could keep a close eye on him. For a while, Ibn Hafsun did exactly what he was told, even participating in military campaigns against the Banu Qasi, King Alfonso III, and

Muslim rebels, on behalf of the Emir. However, he clashed repeatedly with one of his commanders, a man called Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz, who we encountered back in Episode 14. Ibn Hafsun eventually deserted his post, gathered his family from Cordoba, and moved back to his fortress at Bobastro.

Now, interestingly, the commander Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz was one of the reasons behind Ibn Hafsun's rise to power in the first place. Hashim was Muhammad I's favourite general, and was well known for his arrogance and disdainful attitude against anyone who had the misfortune not to be an Arab Muslim. As we stated back in Episode 14, Hashim had been captured during the Emir's campaign against Asturias, and King Alfonso kept him in Oviedo, demanding a ransom from the Emir for his release. Now, Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz was the sort of man who was only really popular amongst the ruling Arab Muslims, but Muhammad I decided that every resident of Al-Andalus, non-Arabs included, needed to cough up some sums, in the guise of a new tax, to pay for his favourite general's ransom. Forced to pay money for the benefit of a man whom they despised, and who despised them back, was a big factor in many Muwallads and Christians deciding to support Ibn Hafsun's rebellion, and it looks like Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz was also single-handedly responsible for Ibn Hafsun's decision to return to his rebellious ways.

However, despite the fact that Ibn Hafsun is back in his hilltop fortress, the matter is no longer of concern to the Emir Muhammad I. In fact, nothing is of concern any longer to the Emir, as he died in the year 886. Now, interestingly, Muhammad's successor was his favourite son, a man called al-Mundhir. In addition to being one of the Emir's many sons, al-Mundhir was a talented and experienced military commander, and in fact it was al-Mundhir and his forces who were originally sent from Cordoba to defeat Ibn Hafsun.

So I guess it won't surprise anyone to learn that one of al-Mundhir's first actions as the new Emir of Al-Andalus was to attempt to defeat Ibn Hafsun once and for all. He did this by using a sort of carrot and stick approach. Letting Ibn Hafsun know that he would be willing to use the entire military might of Cordoba to wipe him off the face of the planet if need be, Al-Mundhir let the rebel leader know that he could remain where he was, in his hilltop fortress, so long as he submitted to Cordoba. In fact, al-Mundhir generously offered Ibn Hafsun the governorship of the region around his fortress, so long as he governed on behalf of Cordoba and not against it. Tempted by this offer, Ibn Hafsun agreed, and swore an oath of allegiance to al-Mundhir.

However, this arrangement didn't last very long. Al-Mundhir ended up being an extremely busy man, who also pushed his generals pretty hard. This wasn't appreciated by Ibn Hafsun's old foe Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz who, having been Al-Mundhir's father's favourite military commander, may not have appreciated having to take orders from his son. Al-Mundhir made a few attempts to bring his father's old general to heel, but then gave up, ordering Hashim to be arrested and executed.

This act caused some consternation amongst the military forces of Al-Andalus, and Ibn Hafsun saw an opportunity to take advantage of it. Despite having recently sworn an oath of loyalty to the new Emir, Ibn Hafsun led a force out from his hilltop fortress and attacked some territory south of Cordoba, with the assistance of some Berber fighters with whom he had formed an alliance. A furious Al-Mundhir decided that it was time to teach Ibn Hafsun a lesson, so he personally led a sizeable military force out from Cordoba towards Ibn Hafsun's stronghold. Once at Bobastro, the Emir's forces surrounded the hilltop fortress and settled in for a lengthy siege.

However, six weeks later, while camped at the siege of Bobastro, al-Mundhir died unexpectedly. Now, historians over the centuries have debated whether al-Mundhir's death was from natural causes or whether he was poisoned, either on the orders of Ibn Hafsun or someone else. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos points his finger at al-Mundhir's brother, Abd Allah. According to Brian Catlos, despite being a very pious man, Abd Allah was also extremely ambitious, and in his later years violent intrigue, and the convenient deaths of family members, was something which kept happening inside Abd Allah's inner circle, so it could very well be that Abd Allah had arranged for the untimely exit of his brother, the Emir. It doesn't help his defence that, having been advised of the Emir's death, Abd Allah managed to keep the event a secret for three days, which was just enough time for him to quickly make his way to Cordoba and have himself installed as the new Emir.

Of course, for Ibn Hafsun, this was a turn of events which he couldn't help but take advantage of. In a short period of time, Al-Andalus had lost its two top generals, the Emir himself, and Hashim Ibn Abd al-Aziz. While all eyes now turned away from Bobastro towards Cordoba, Ibn Hafsun declared himself to be the independent ruler of a vast territory to the south of Cordoba, stretching all the way along the southern coast of the peninsula from Gibraltar to Murcia.

And it wasn't an idle claim. Having already garnered support from Berber strongmen and other non-Arab Muslims living in the region, Ibn Hafsun now went all out to secure the support of Christians in his territory, people who comprised the majority of the population. He built churches, he participated in Christian celebrations, and made vague promises that some of his children would convert to Christianity. He even went so far as to establish a bishopric at Bobastro. Once he was certain that he had enough support to hold his territory, he sent envoys to King Alfonso III of Asturias, the Banu Qasi in the Basque region, and even to his co-rebel al-Jilliqi, letting them know that there was a new kid on the block, and that if they ever needed assistance against their common enemy in Cordoba, well they could rely on him for support.

Join me next time as we see how the new Emir Abd Allah fares against the strengthening forces of enemies both inside Al-Andalus and in the north of the peninsula. Until next time, bye for now.

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