

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 2
The Final Years of the Visigoths

Hello again. Last time, in our first episode, we tracked the history of the Iberian peninsula all the way from Roman rule to the time of the Visigoths. In this episode we will be looking at the final days of Visigothic rule.

Ideally, I would now zoom down to the peninsula in the year 700 and set out in detail the events of the next decade or so, but there's a problem with this. The problem is that no one really, at that time, was chronicling the events which were taking place, or if they were those records have now been lost. In fact, most of the source material which exists on the final years of Visigothic rule was written decades or longer after the events took place, and unfortunately, those chronicles weren't created with the aim of recording accurately what transpired. No, those chronicles were written with the aim of putting a spin on past events to serve the narrative that the chronicler was attempting to establish in their own era. In effect, the recent past was mythologised in order to explain current events. This, of course, poses a problem for anyone trying to faithfully reconstruct the events of the early 700s, as much of what has survived is in the form of legend, or at least partially fictionalised accounts, which are probably only loosely based on fact.

I guess then that it's only appropriate that we start our examination of this period with one of the more popular and enduring legends to survive from that time. I'm going to quote Richard Fletcher's description of the legend as set out in his book "Moorish Spain". Richard Fletcher describes the legend as having been recorded in both Christian and Muslim sources covering the final years of Visigothic rule. Okay, so here is the legend, and I quote:

A king of Spain in ancient time built a tower in which he deposited a secret. He sealed the tower with a mighty padlock, and laid upon his successors the obligation, each by turns, to add an extra padlock so as to preserve, evermore inviolable, whatever was concealed within. Twenty six kings came and went, respecting his wishes. Then there succeeded a rash and headstrong young king named Roderic. Resolved to penetrate the tower's secret, against the advice of all of his counsellors, he had the 27 padlocks opened, then he entered the chamber within. On its walls were painted Arab horsemen, scimitars at their belts, spears brandished in their right hands. In the middle of the room stood a table made of gold and silver set with precious stones, upon it carved the words "This is the table of King Solomon, son of David, upon whom be peace." There was an urn on the table which was found to contain a scroll of parchment. When this was unrolled, the following words were revealed. "Whenever this chamber is violated and the spell contained in this urn is broken, the people painted on these walls will invade Spain, overthrow its kings, and subdue the entire land." End quote.

Okay, so the shorter version of this legend is that everything was fine until an idiot called King Roderic came along and paved the way for the invasion of Spain by Islamic horseman. So the question we clearly need to ask ourselves is: who was King Roderic, and what exactly did he do?

Well, to understand the elevation and rule of Roderic, we have to go back to the year 680 the rise to power of the Visigothic king Erwig. According to a chronicle written in the 9th

century, King Erwig had administered a drug to the previous King, King Wamba, an elderly but respected and competent nobleman who had reluctantly been elected to rule Visigothic Spain eight years earlier. The drugs secretly given to King Wamba caused him to lose consciousness for a lengthy period of time. Convinced that he was dying, his courtiers shaved his head and dressed him in the clothing of a monk. When the drug wore off though, King Wamba woke, and would have been perfectly able to continue ruling except for the highly inconvenient fact that there was actually a law in place preventing anyone who had a shaved head from being king. So King Wamba retired himself off to a monastery, and renounced the throne in favour of Erwig, totally unaware of the fact that Erwig had engineered the whole series of events.

Unsurprisingly, King Erwig encountered quite a bit of resistance to his rule, and rumours that he had acquired the throne via devious means rightly plagued his entire reign. In an effort to mend fences and build bridges, he married his daughter to King Wamba's nephew, a man called Egica, and named Egica as his successor. When Erwig died, Egica did in fact find himself elected king, and as soon as the feast was being packed away following his coronation, he split with Erwig's daughter, apparently on the advice of the former King Wamba, who was dabbling in politics from his monastery. Then, apparently also at the urging of former King Wamba, King Egica decided to go on a revenge-seeking demolition of all of King Erwig's relatives. Once he had confiscated the property of a goodly number of King Erwig's family members and forced them into exile, he seemingly took a liking to the whole confiscate-property-and-send-people-to-their-doom policy. So, with the support of the kingdom's bishops, he accused the Jewish people living on the peninsula of conspiring with the Muslims of Northern Africa in a treasonous manner. He then confiscated their property and reduced them all to slavery.

King Egica seemed to be enjoying the power and wealth his new position afforded him, so he decided to take a crack at installing a system of hereditary kingship within Visigothic Spain, by declaring that his son Witiza would be the next king. To enforce this declaration, he entered into a sort of power sharing arrangement with Witiza. When King Egica died in the year 702, Witiza did indeed become king, and he followed the hereditary kingship policy started by his father by declaring that his son, Akhila, would be king after him.

King Witiza, though, was neither a competent nor a popular monarch. He was a notorious womaniser and was accused of encouraging priests and other Church officials to take mistresses and wives, a move which caused a backlash against his role by conservative Christians.

The result of all of this was when King Witiza died in the year 710, there was a general reluctance and unease about crowning his son and successor, Akhila. In fact, an alternative candidate for king was put forward, a monarch who would be elected to the position and whose elevation to the throne would signal an end to the ill-conceived experiment with hereditary monarchy. That candidate was (you guessed it) Roderic.

So who was this Roderic chap? Well, he was a man of noble birth, a duke in fact, whose father had been blinded on orders from King Egica. The candidacy of Roderic for the throne was gaining widespread support, particularly around the seat of power in Toledo. In fact, his support base was so strong that those who preferred the hereditary candidate Akhila were left with only two options: they could either abandon Akhila and throw their support behind Roderic; or they could attempt to force Roderic from the throne.

Trouble was, if they decided to force Roderic from the throne, they were going to require outside assistance. There was just not enough military backing for Akhila inside Spain to provide any realistic chance of success. So Akhila's family members reportedly sent some envoys across the strait to Northern Africa, to seek Muslim assistance to overthrow Roderic.

Now, back in the year 710, the Islamic religion was a relatively new phenomenon, and to say that it was “trending” across the Middle East and northern Africa at this time was an understatement. The Prophet Muhammad had laid the foundations of the religion less than 100 years earlier, and it had spread like wildfire. The Arabian peninsula, or Arabia, around the time of Muhammad, was composed of tribes who spent most of their energy fighting each other. However, as the teachings of Muhammad spread across Arabia it became a unifying force, until eventually, to the shock and horror of the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire, the two most powerful regional forces in the Middle East at that time, the fighting men of Arabia stopped fighting each other, and looked beyond Arabia for other lands to conquer and other people to bring their new religion to. A mere 30 years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic religion had spread out from the Arabian peninsula into Byzantine and Persian territory in the Middle East, and had even extended over northern Africa, firstly to Egypt and then further west into the lands of the Berber people.

Prior to the arrival of the Muslims, the region of northern Africa which is today occupied by the countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, was governed by the Byzantines and the local Berber people. By the time the Arab Muslims invaded the region a few decades after the death of Muhammad, the Byzantine presence was limited to a handful of heavily fortified trading ports, most notably the cities of Carthage and Tripoli. The vast majority of the region was held by the Berbers. The Berbers were a tribal people who, while having a language in common, were otherwise very diverse, and they ranged from Christianised, urbanised Berbers who lived near the coast and who interacted with the Byzantines, to pagan Berbers who resented Byzantine presence in the region.

The conquest of the region by the Arab invaders occurred gradually, and was assisted by the cooperation of a number of anti-Byzantine Berber tribes who teamed up with the Islamic fighters. A major breakthrough came in the year 694 when the Caliph Abd al-Malik sent an army of Syrian troops to attack the last remaining Byzantine outpost, at Carthage. Prior invasions by the Arabs had been largely successful and had brought huge benefits to the local Berber tribes, who had converted to Islam and had aligned themselves with the conquerors. The converted Berbers shared in the spoils of victory with the Arabs, and in some instances joined with the Arabs in ruling the conquered areas. The alliance between the Arabs and the Berbers worked to the advantage of both parties, with the Berbers providing the bulk of the fighting men, who then shared the proceeds of victory, while most of the conquered regions were administered by Arab overseers with the assistance of local Berber leaders.

Now, an important feature of the new Arab-Berber arrangement in northern Africa was that the Berber fighters didn't receive any direct payment from their Arab military commanders. Instead, each fighter received a share of the booty from the conquered regions. This meant, in effect, that the conquered territory needed to be continually expanding, so that the Berber fighting force could be paid. If everything came to a standstill, and no more land and people were defeated, then the unpaid Berbers may well drift away from their Arab overlords, so there was a need for the armies to be continually on the move, continually conquering new places.

That meant that when the envoys from Spain arrived in northern Africa asking for assistance from the Muslim armies to defeat a usurper called Roderic, in an entirely new wealthy region just across the sea, well the Arab leaders were very interested in this proposal; very, very interested.

Now I should probably once again point out that the facts around the reasons why the Muslims decided to invade are hazy and disputed, with some historians contending that the proximity of the Iberian peninsula to Northern Africa and the expansionist policies of the Muslim leaders in northern Africa meant that an invasion of Spain was likely with or without prompting from supporters of the want-to-be King Akhila.

What is pretty much not disputed though, is the fact that in the year 710 an advance party of Arab and Berber fighters set sail from Tangier in northern Africa in four ships and crossed the ten mile stretch of water, which separates Africa from continental Europe. The commander of this expedition was a man named Tarif ibn Malik, and his force consisted of only around 100 horsemen and 400 foot soldiers. The party landed on a small island which is just a hop, a skip, and a jump away from the Spanish mainland, an island which today is considered to be the southernmost point of continental Europe. Tarif may have been chuffed to learn that the island today is called Isla de Tarifa, presumably named after the commander himself.

Back in the year 710, the people who were living on the island were utterly unprepared for the arrival of the Muslim fighters, and they put up virtually no resistance to their invasion. As a consequence, within a relatively short period of time and for a relatively small expenditure of effort, Tarif and his men were able to fill their four ships with plunder, which they then took back to Tangier.

The success of this small raid and the richness of the plunder which it produced prompted the commander in Tangier, a man called Tariq ibn Zayid, to sit down and do some planning for a bigger, better equipped expedition, which would set out from Tangier in April of the following year. Tariq decided to personally lead this expedition, and he set out in April of the year 711 with a force of 7000 men, and landed, not on the little island which Tarif had disembarked on the previous year, but at a place further around the coast. Sailing eastwards past the island, Tariq and his fleet disembarked under cover of darkness, at the foot of a dramatic looking mountain which arose out of a peninsula which jutted into the sea. In case you haven't guessed already, that dramatic looking mountain is today called "Gibraltar", and interestingly, Gibraltar takes its name from Tariq. The mountain began to be called "The Mountain of Tariq", or in Arabic "Jebel Tariq", which eventually morphed into the name "Gibraltar". The peninsula which contains the mountain forms one side of a large handy bay, so during the course of the following day, Tariq's fighters spread out around the bay and occupied the territory adjacent to its shores.

Now clearly, having thousands of invaders occupying part of the southern coast of your kingdom is far from an ideal situation, so King Roderic was notified of the problem, and he formulated a plan to deal with it. Unfortunately, at the time when he was notified of the invasion, King Roderick and his armies were just about as far from Gibraltar as it is possible to be without leaving Spain. They were in fact in the far northeast of the Iberian peninsula, putting down a rebellion in the Basque region.

King Roderic made his way southwards to Cordoba as quickly as he could, then he began assembling his army. To give you an idea of where Cordoba is, remember when we said

that the royal capital city of Spain, Toledo, was right in the centre of the Iberian peninsula? Well, Cordoba is to the south west of Toledo, roughly halfway between Toledo and Gibraltar.

It seems that Tariq was notified about this, but he decided not to move away from the bay near Gibraltar where his army was currently camped, preferring to stay close to the coast, where he could use his ships to retreat back to Tangier if necessary. Instead, he called for reinforcements to be sent from Northern Africa to bolster his forces.

In the height of summer in July of the year 711, King Roderic led the Visigothic royal forces out from Cordoba and headed towards Gibraltar, intent on confronting the Muslim invaders and driving them out of the Iberian peninsula once and for all. What will transpire is a battle which will change the face of Spain, and lay the foundations for the next 800 years or so on the Iberian peninsula. There are few instances in history where a single battle has a transformative impact on a country. The Battle of Hastings, which took place in England in the year 1066 is one, and the battle which is about to take place in Spain in the year 711 is another.

Join me next time as we see King Roderic face Tariq ibn Zayid on the battlefield, in a showdown which will radically alter the kingdom of Spain. Until next time, bye for now.

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