

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 21
Al-Hakam II

Hello again. Last time we saw the end of the epically successful rule of Abd al-Rahman III, who over a period spanning nearly fifty years had taken Al-Andalus from a struggling entity which was on the verge of collapse to an internationally recognised powerhouse. Shortly before his death, Abd al-Rahman received King Sancho of Leon, formerly known as Sancho the Fat, and his aunt Queen Toda of Pamplona, who both formally acknowledged Abd al-Rahman as overlord of the two northern Christian kingdoms of Leon and Navarre, meaning that Abd al-Rahman was the effective ruler of the entire Iberian peninsula.

One of the reasons why King Sancho and Queen Toda felt so indebted to the Caliph was the fact that Abd al-Rahman had been instrumental in helping Sancho to lose weight, a factor which enabled him to finally hold on to the throne of Leon. As we mentioned in the last episode, the man responsible for the successful weight loss program was one of the most respected physicians in Abd al-Rahman's court, a Jewish man named Hasdai ibn Shaprut.

So, before we begin to take a look at Abd al-Rahman's successor, we're going to detour for a moment to take a closer look at Hasdai ibn Shaprut, and the wider role played by Jewish people inside Al-Andalus. Now, subscribers to the History Of The Crusades Patreon feed will know all about the existence of Jewish communities at the current point in time in the regions which are now the countries of France and Germany. The Jewish communities in these regions predated Christianity, and many can be traced back to the Roman era. Why do Patreon subscribers know this? Well, because we are currently in the middle of a series exploring the effect of the Crusades on the Jewish populations of medieval Europe. So for those of you who are not subscribers, feel free to check those episodes out. You can do so for \$1 per month at [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com).

Anyway, while we have mentioned previously that Jewish communities were also present inside the Iberian peninsula at this point in time, we haven't discussed them in much detail, and there's a reason for that, the reason being that there is very little historical material available on Jewish communities inside Al-Andalus prior to the establishment of the Caliphate under Abd al-Rahman III. Happily though, we do have a raft of information on Jewish communities during the time of Abd al-Rahman and beyond, and much of this is down to the efforts of one man: Hasdai ibn Shaprut, because Hasdai wasn't just a physician able to treat instances of obesity in Christian kings, he was also a celebrated Jewish scholar, diplomat, and high ranking official inside the court of Abd al-Rahman III.

Historians are able to say with a degree of certainty that there was a significant Jewish presence inside Al-Andalus prior to the Caliphate, and that the explosion of wealth and prestige inside Al-Andalus during the reign of Abd al-Rahman III resulted in a number of learned Jewish scholars travelling to Al-Andalus, and in some cases settling there.

This was good news for the young Hasdai ibn Shaprut. He had been born in the year 915, so a few years after Abd al-Rahman's rise to power. Hasdai's father was a wealthy prominent Jewish resident of Cordoba who was able to provide his son with an impressive education. The education he received was designed to make him at ease operating in two worlds, so to speak. He studied Hebrew and biblical scholarship so that he would be confident in the company of learned Jews and rabbis. But he also studied subjects which

would enable him to converse with both Arab and Christian scholars, with the result that he became fluent in the languages of Arabic and Latin, and was also able to speak the local version of Latin, which would eventually develop into the Spanish language. He was across the latest advancements in medicine, and was familiar with philosophy and recent scientific discoveries from the Middle East. Put simply, his impressive education meant that he was comfortable in all three cultures of Al-Andalus (Arab, Jewish, and Christian) and was able to fully engage in intellectual and scholarly discourses with anyone of virtually any background.

I guess it's not surprising that Hasdai soon appeared on the radar of the Caliph. Family connections enabled Hasdai to take up a position inside the Caliph's court, and he rose through the ranks until he became a trusted advisor and confidante of Abd al-Rahman III, while also acting as his personal physician.

One of the many positions Hasdai held inside the administration was that of a diplomat, and just to emphasise the cosmopolitan nature of Al-Andalus at this point in time, we are going to zoom in and take a look at just one of Hasdai's diplomatic undertakings.

In the year 953 King Otto of Germany, a man who would later become the Holy Roman Emperor, was increasingly put out by the actions of Muslim rulers in some territories located adjacent to lands controlled by Otto near Italy. Deciding that Abd al-Rahman III might be able to put a stop to the frequent raids undertaken by the Muslims, King Otto sent an envoy to Cordoba, to deliver some gifts to the Caliph along with a letter of demand. The envoy, a monk named John, arrived safely in Cordoba and was intercepted by Hasdai, who asked to see the contents of the letter prior to it being shown to Abd al-Rahman. John refused, saying that he had strict instructions from King Otto not to show the letter to anyone but the Caliph himself. Hasdai then instituted a raft of delaying tactics, inventing excuse after excuse as to why John couldn't yet meet with the Caliph, while at the same time engaging in a sort of charm offensive, trying to convince John to show him the contents of the letter.

Eventually, John decided that he had no option other than to open the letter. When he did just that and showed Hasdai the contents, they both realised that Hasdai had been right to insist on seeing it, as the letter contained a number of clumsily worded phrases and other language that the Caliph might have viewed as being blasphemous or insulting. Convinced that no good would come of showing the Caliph the letter, Hasdai tried to convince John to give the gifts to Abd al-Rahman without showing him the letter. However, John was adamant that orders were orders, and that he couldn't leave Cordoba without having given the letter to the Caliph.

A desperate Hasdai even arranged for the Bishop of Cordoba to speak to John. The Bishop attempted to convince John that the letter may result in the Caliph reacting badly to the King's demands, and might even lead to John being executed. However, John remained unmoved.

Eventually, a way forward was agreed between John and Hasdai. Hasdai would arrange for an envoy to travel to King Otto's court to explain the situation. The envoy would aim to obtain permission for John not to hand the letter to the Caliph, or would obtain a new letter which omitted the offensive bits. The envoy chosen was a Christian man from Cordoba named Reccemund. The trip ended up being highly successful. Not only did Reccemund manage to obtain a new amended copy of the letter, he made a bunch of new friends and contacts from both King Otto's court and from the Frankish realm. Leaving his new buddies

with some books from the Iberian peninsula, he managed to establish a line of communication between the Christians of Al-Andalus and influential Christians in France and Germany. In recognition of his achievements, Reccemund was later made Bishop of a region near present day Granada.

Reccemund made his way back to the Iberian Peninsula with the amended letter and presented it to John. Hasdai then set a time for John to present both his gifts and the amended letter to the Caliph.

Now, between the time John had first arrived in Cordoba and the time when he was ushered into the magnificent throne room in the Caliph's Palace to present his gifts and letter, three years had elapsed. John didn't seem to be concerned about the delay, nor did he blame it on Hasdai. As Brian Catlos reports in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", John the Monk was later heard to comment that he had, and I quote, "never seen a man of such subtle intellect as the Jew Hasdai" end quote.

In case you are wondering about the outcome of the exchange, it was all for nothing in the end. The only common ground between the Caliph and the Muslims who were the subject of King Otto's complaint was the fact that they were all of the same faith. Abd al-Rahman had absolutely no authority over the distant European Muslims, and even if he had told them to stop raiding into King Otto's territory, they likely wouldn't have listened.

Hasdai's talents didn't just involve averting diplomatic gaffes. In addition to being the Caliph's personal physician, diplomat, and foreign affairs adviser inside the Caliph's court, Hasdai had a massive impact on the status of Jewish communities inside Al-Andalus. He personally reached out to scholars in Jewish communities across Europe and the Middle East and invited them to Cordoba. In doing so, he simultaneously created long-lasting ties between the Jews of the Iberian peninsula and Jewish communities across the known world, while also initiating a flourishing of Jewish scholarship inside Al-Andalus. Eventually, the Jews of Al-Andalus would be confident enough in their Judaic and Hebrew intellectualism that they will break from the Hebrew schools of thought in the Middle East and forge their own path forward, paving the way for a Jewish golden age, so to speak, in the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries. This side project of Hasdai's was undertaken with the full support of the Caliph, who viewed the raising of Jewish prestige inside the Iberian peninsula as reflecting positively on the Caliphate.

Fortunately for Hasdai and for the Jewish communities of Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman's successor al-Hakam II maintained his father's cosmopolitan court, and supported his father's policies regarding intellectual and cultural pursuits. By the time Abd al-Rahman died in the year 961 his chosen successor, his son al-Hakam, was 46 years old. He was installed as Caliph, becoming al-Hakam II.

Al-Hakam II had been groomed as his father's replacement since he was a child, so he had plenty of time to accompany his father on military campaigns, observe the administration of the government, and prepare himself to continue his father's extremely successful period of rule. Consequently, the fifteen year long reign of al-Hakam II was marked by political stability and a distinct absence of crisis and drama. He pretty much continued exactly where his father had left off, relying on the same personnel and pursuing the same policies and directions as his father.

There was one main diversion point though, between al-Hakam and his father. While Abd al-Rahman III had played an active role in all facets of his government, al-Hakam was

fortunate enough to have two close companions and advisers to whom he was able to delegate much of the day-to-day drudgery of ruling while he, al-Hakam, pursued his main passion, that being intellectual studies. Al-Hakam established an impressive library, containing manuscripts on important subjects sourced from across Europe and the Middle East. Like his father, he maintained a cosmopolitan court, which encouraged scholars from communities across Europe and the Middle East to visit Cordoba and share their learnings.

So who were these two men who shouldered much of the Caliph's responsibilities? The first was a general known as Ghalib. Ghalib had started his career as a soldier in the frontier territories near the Pyrenees and had risen through the ranks to become a military commander. Al-Hakam was content to leave the defence of Al-Andalus in Ghalib's capable hands. Ghalib ended up leading a number of successful campaigns in northern Africa on behalf of the Caliph.

The second right-hand-man in al-Hakam's administration was his childhood friend Ja'far al-Mushafi. Ja'far had been the son of al-Hakam's childhood tutor, and the two boys had grown up together. By the time al-Hakam was installed as the new Caliph, Ja'far had had a range of experience in a number of administrative positions, while also acting as al-Hakam's personal secretary. In the new Caliph's administration, Ja'far acted as a sort of chief of staff, filtering all the information which went through to the Caliph and delegating anything which didn't require the Caliph's personal attention. He also stage-managed all of the ceremonial occasions in the royal court, and acted as a sort of in-house lawyer who could draft and advise on legal documents.

Between the three of them, al-Hakam II, Ghalib and Ja'far managed to keep the ship of Al-Andalus in perfect shape and guided her expertly through waters, both calm and choppy. However, the three men would have been surprised to learn that Al-Andalus had already reached its apex of greatness, and that, following al-Hakam's death in the year 976, the fortunes of Al-Andalus would proceed only in a downhill trajectory. They would have been even more disappointed to learn that their system of rule, whereby the ruler delegated much of his power to a couple of advisers, would be one of the reasons behind Al-Andalus' decline.

Join me next time as we begin to see the fraying of governance inside Al-Andalus. Until next time, bye for now.

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