

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 24
Al-Mansur, Part 2

Hello again. Last time we tracked the rise to power of an ambitious palace official, al-Mansur. Leveraging his military success against the Christians in the north of the peninsula, al-Mansur managed to convince both the boy Caliph and his mother Subh that he, al-Mansur, was the man they could rely on for protection. The form of protection which al-Mansur provided was effective imprisonment and isolation of the young Caliph inside a sumptuous new palace which al-Mansur had ordered to be constructed near Cordoba. Al-Mansur then arranged to have the Caliph's top administrative official, Ja'far al-Mushafi, imprisoned and later killed. Now the only person standing between al-Mansur and total control of the Caliphate was his elderly father-in-law, the military commander Ghalib.

By this time, it was pretty clear to anyone with a working brain what al-Mansur was attempting to do and, not surprisingly, those unimpressed by al-Mansur's blatant power grab began work-shopping ways to prevent him from seizing control of the Caliphate. This was easier said than done. Al-Mansur had worked tirelessly since the death of al-Hakam II to consolidate his power-base, and he had loyal supporters in almost every section of the administration, men who could report any instances of disloyalty back to al-Mansur and work to stamp out any spot-fires of rebellion.

The most successful of the anti-al-Mansur insurrections occurred in the year 978. A group of top ranking palace officials, along with some members of the religious elite, decided that the only way to rid the Caliphate of al-Mansur would be to first rid the Caliphate of the Caliph. Young Hisham II was now twelve years old and was clearly completely under the thumb of al-Mansur, who kept him cloistered inside his palace, only letting him out for ceremonial occasions. The group of insurrectionists decided that one of their supporters, a eunuch, would murder the Caliph, while the remaining members of the group would work to remove al-Mansur from power. However, the attempt to kill the Caliph was thwarted by one of al-Mansur's loyalists. The eunuch drew his knife in the presence of the young Caliph, and was about to move forward and stab the boy, when the loyalist tackled then disarmed him.

Al-Mansur was advised about the assassination attempt. He ordered those directly involved to be put to death immediately, then singled out one of the plotters, a highly respected judicial officer, to be publicly crucified.

Deciding that the failed assassination provided an excellent opportunity to clear out the rest of his opponents from the administration, al-Mansur then turned his attention to the military. His main target was a man called Abd al-Rahman al-Rumahis. a loyal ally of Ghalib who was in command of the caliphate's navy. Al-Rumahis was stationed not in Cordoba but in the Mediterranean port city of Almeria, where the caliphate shipyards and naval fleet were located. As such, he was not under al-Mansur's control, and had in fact recently expressed concerns about the number of Berber and Christian mercenary forces which al-Mansur had hired to bolster the army.

Unfortunately for al-Mansur, al-Rumahis was a powerful and well-respected naval commander, and his removal was going to have to be carefully planned. Late in the year 979 al-Mansur travelled to Gibraltar at the head of some troops who were on their way to

northern Africa to quell an uprising. While stationed in Gibraltar, al-Mansur invited al-Rumahis to visit and dine with him. Al-Rumahis accepted the invitation, but one of the dishes he was served was sugared chicken, with the sweetness designed to disguise the vast quantities of poison which had also been mixed into the dish. An unwell al-Rumahis departed from Gibraltar the following day and died shortly after arriving back in Almeria. Al-Mansur wasted no time in taking advantage of the situation. He quickly stripped the deceased naval commander of his wealth and assets, then placed his own loyalist in command of the Caliphate's naval fleet.

The fact that al-Mansur had poisoned the Caliphate's most senior naval commander, effectively eliminating him, and replacing him with his own man, became common knowledge in military circles. As such, the overall commander of the Caliphate's military forces, Ghalib, was no longer able to ignore the actions of his son-in-law. In an attempt to address the issue, Ghalib summoned al-Mansur to the fortress where Ghalib was currently based. Al-Mansur complied and the two men met inside the castle. Now, unfortunately, few details are available about exactly what took place at this meeting. One thing we do know is that it ended badly, with the elderly Ghalib apparently losing his temper and attacking al-Mansur with his sword, an action which resulted in al-Mansur losing a couple of fingers and sustaining a nasty cut to his face. The wounded al-Mansur managed to escape from the castle without incurring any further injuries, but the battle lines were now drawn. The two men were now determined to defeat and, if necessary, kill the other.

Ghalib's stronghold was called Medinaceli, and it was located in what was known as the Middle March region, kind of halfway along the borderlands of Al-Andalus, near the Pyrenees, close to Zaragoza. Ghalib immediately began rustling up some troops, and shored up his defences preparing for a possible invasion. He was right to do so. Back in Cordoba, al-Mansur was preparing a sizable force of his own. Consisting largely of Christian and Berber mercenaries who were loyal to their paymaster al-Mansur, as well as some Muslim troops loyal to the young Caliph, al-Mansur marched his army northwards late in the year 980.

Having heard of the size of the force which was heading in his direction, Ghalib decided that he needed some reinforcements. With his options limited, he approached the Christian rulers in the north for assistance. The current kings, Ramiro III of Leon, Sancho II of Navarre, and Garcia Fernandez the Count of Castile, were happy to help, perhaps sensing that a civil war breaking out in Al-Andalus could only be a good thing so far as they were concerned.

The conflict between the two sides kicked off in spring of the year 981, when al-Mansur's forces attacked a town in the Middle March region. Ghalib's forces emerged victorious. Al-Mansur's troops were forced to retreat after suffering a large number of casualties, and after several of his top commanders were captured by Ghalib's men. A couple of months later, al-Mansur's army went on the attack once again, and this time it was successful. Their target was a fortress around fifteen miles to the west of Ghalib's personal stronghold Medinaceli. The elderly Ghalib personally led his troops into battle, managing to break the left and right flanks of al-Mansur's forces. However, when gathering his men to launch an attack on the central column, the section personally commanded by al-Mansur himself, disaster struck. Without having suffered any injury, the elderly Ghalib, who after all was in his eighties at this stage, died.

As pointed out by Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", it's unclear whether Ghalib died due to exhaustion or old age, but the shock of seeing their commander drop dead on

the verge of victory meant that the troops under his command broke their lines and began milling around in confusion. Al-Mansur rallied his forces into attacking the bewildered and leaderless men from Ghalib's army, which caused them to flee in a chaotic and disorderly retreat. Al-Mansur then ordered his army to pursue, attack, and kill members of the disintegrating army without mercy. The death toll from Ghalib's forces was immense. Among the losses was King Ramiro III of Leon. Ghalib's body was recovered from the battlefield, and in a move both bizarre and grotesque, al-Mansur ordered his father-in-law's corpse to be stuffed in a sort of taxidermist manner. More specifically, he was skinned, then cotton was stuffed into the skin. The gruesome result was then ordered by al-Mansur to be hung on a crucifix, which was then affixed to the main gate of al-Mansur's new palace near Cordoba.

With this stomach-churning act, al-Mansur had achieved his goal. He had eliminated all his main enemies and was now free to rule over Al-Andalus without any limitations, taking for himself the title of "al-Mansur", which means "the Victorious", a name which we have been using for him since the beginning.

Al-Mansur set himself up in his palace, Medinat al-Zahira, and began his rule of Al-Andalus. Now, this was easier said than done. Al-Mansur's primary, or perhaps only, goal was to maintain his grip on power, but to do this required a delicate balancing act. To maintain legitimacy, he needed the facade of the Caliphate. His plan was to encourage the pretence that the young Caliph Hisham II was the ruler of Al-Andalus, a fallacy which everyone knew to be exactly that. The flimsy facade, though, was enough to keep a lid on the rumbling discontent of the Arab elite of Al-Andalus. To prevent this discontent from bubbling over, al-Mansur appeased the Arab upper classes and religious elite with grandiose gestures. He embarked on a massive expansion project at the Great Mosque at Cordoba, nearly doubling the size of the prayer hall. However, as noted by Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", there was a gaudy and superficial quality to the work which was undertaken. Similar to the recent construction of his palace, Al-Mansur seemed to prefer quantity over quality. Much of the work overseen by him lacked the craftsmanship and finesse of earlier constructions, and al-Mansur appeared to favour cheap building materials and shortcuts.

While the Arab and religious elite were distracted by the glitzy baubles al-Mansur was dangling in front of them, al-Mansur worked to undermine their influence and authority. He reversed the tradition of promoting Arab commanders in the military and instead favoured Berber troops and leaders, men whose loyalty al-Mansur could rely upon. As more and more Berber men were promoted across the military and within the civil administration, their higher status began to be reflected in fashion trends, as turbans, a piece of clothing identified with the ethnicity of Northern Africa and previously frowned upon by the Arab elite as being crude and uncivilised, began to be worn by officials inside the inner circle in the palace.

Al-Mansur attempted to continue the scholarly traditions of the previous Caliph al-Hakam II, by inviting academics and poets to his new palace, while simultaneously purging al-Hakam's vast library of any literature which al-Mansur deemed to be offensive. These included Christian texts and anything which could be seen to be supportive of pagan traditions, such as ancient philosophy, astrology, and non-Islamic science.

Away from Cordoba, al-Mansur encouraged independent rule by governors whom he believed would continue to support his authority, something which no doubt seemed to be a good idea at the time, but which in the long run set the scene for the eventual political

fragmentation of the peninsula. He installed loyalists and spies in key positions in the administration and across wider Al-Andalus, while gradually transforming the bureaucracy to focus less on Umayyad rule and more on the new style of rule by al-Mansur. As stated by Brian Catlos, and I quote "By 980 the power of the Caliph may have been nothing more than a fiction, and widely regarded as so, but everyone knew that maintaining the illusion of Umayyad authority was crucial to the stability of Al-Andalus" end quote.

So, is the rule of al-Mansur going to proceed smoothly with everyone smiling and pretending that the Caliph was in charge while bending the knee to al-Mansur? Well, no, unfortunately for al-Mansur there will be some push-back, firstly in the form of the caliph's mother, Subh, and less predictably by the Christian kingdoms in the north. Join me next time to see how al-Mansur deals with these challenges. Until next time, bye for now.

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