

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 5
Shifting Power. The Years 740 to 750

Hello again. Last time, we saw the Muslim conquerors consolidate their hold on the Iberian peninsula. While the Muslim invasion of neighbouring southern France, or Septimania, ended up being a relatively short-lived event, the Muslim conquest of Spain endured, aided by the Roman infrastructure already in place, dissatisfaction with the recent years of Visigothic rule, and the wave of recently arrived immigrants who made the journey from northern Africa to the peninsula to settle on lands awarded to the Muslim fighters.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing, and the first storm front which hit Muslim ruled Spain came in the form of a revolt by the Berbers. As we've seen in previous episodes, the Muslim conquest of northern Africa was made possible in part by the assistance of the native Berber population, which provided manpower for the all-conquering Arab armies in return for a share of the booty gained and land conquered. However, around the year 740 that arrangement came to a grinding halt.

The Muslim expansion across northern Africa was now pretty much complete, and the aim of the governor of northern Africa was now to place the region on a footing which would ensure its long term financial viability. One of the core policies put in place to meet this goal was the levying of a land tax across northern Africa, with this tax obligation falling upon many Berber fighters who had been gifted land in return for their military service.

This outraged many Berbers, who pointed out that the annual payment of taxes on their land was never part of the original deal. So, with the realisation that the Berbers were many while the ruling Arabs were few, the Berbers decided to rebel against Arab rule. This of course was very bad news for the Arab rulers. Not only were the angry Berbers dominant numerically, they also had received military training from the Arabs. As such, they were fully aware of all the Arab fighting techniques and all the Arab weak points. Within a worryingly short period of time, the whole of northern Africa was rising up against the Arabs, who were seemingly at a loss to quell the rebellion. Desperate for an influx of fighters to counter the disaffected Berbers, men from Egypt and Syria were hastily recruited, and they made their way to northern Africa to help out.

Meanwhile, over on the Iberian peninsula, the governor of Muslim Spain, or what we shall from now on call Al-Andalus, was getting nervous. News of the Berber uprising had reached the peninsula, and everyone was aware of the fact that exactly the same situation could occur there. Like in northern Africa, the Muslim population of Al-Andalus had a Berber majority with a ruling Arab minority, and like in northern Africa, the Berber population wasn't being treated on an equal footing with the Arab population, as we saw in the last episode when the allocation of conquered land in Spain had favoured the Arabs, who had ended up with the fertile, prime land around the coast and river valleys. To add insult to injury, the Arab governor of Al-Andalus decided in the year 741 to implement the same land tax which had sparked the rebellion over in northern Africa. Worried that this might lead to a rebellion in Spain, the governor was pressured, then forced to resign, and was replaced with a man seen as being more sympathetic to the Berbers.

However, this move was seen as being too little too late by the Berbers, and in the autumn of 741 the Berbers who had settled in the northwestern region of the Iberian peninsula

revolted, forcing the Arab Muslims out of the area. The rebels then turned their attentions southwards and headed towards the Muslim capital of Al-Andalus, Cordoba.

The situation in Al-Andalus now looked like it was set to mirror the uprising in northern Africa, so the governor of Al-Andalus began desperately searching around for fighting men who could be transported to Spain to assist with the Arab pushback against the rebels. Fortunately for the governor, he was in luck. A sizeable army of Arab fighters from Syria had been marching into northern Africa when they had been confronted by, and then defeated by, an army of Berber rebels in Morocco. Far from their homelands and with nowhere to go, the 10,000 or so Syrian fighters were now trapped near the Moroccan coast. They were tired, they were running out of food, and they had few options available to them. When the governor of Al-Andalus suggested that they travel over to Spain and fight the Berber uprising there, the men jumped at the chance. In fact, so eager were they to board the ships that were sent over for them to make the short journey over to Spain that they agreed to fight pretty much on the condition that they were well fed for their efforts. So a deal was struck that the Syrian army would be transported over to Spain, they would fight on behalf of the Arab governor, they would be well fed and well treated, and once the fighting was over they would be returned back to Morocco. This really seemed like a win-win situation for everyone, everyone that is except for the Berbers.

The Syrian fighters were shipped to Spain, where they joined with the local Arabs to inflict a defeat on the rebel Berbers in a battle near Toledo. In return for their services, the Syrians were well fed and treated to the best that Al-Andalus had to offer, which unfortunately meant that by the time the last part of the agreement came to pass (the bit where the victorious Syrians get back on board the ships, wave good-bye to Al-Andalus, and set sail for desolate, barren Morocco) the Syrians dug their heels in.

To cut a long story short, the commander of the Syrian army, a man called Balj Bishr, ended up making moves against the Arab governor of Al-Andalus, which resulted in the Arab governor's death and which saw Balj installed as the new ruler of Al-Andalus, with the backing of his Syrian army.

Unsurprisingly, the established Arabs of Al-Andalus pushed back against this development. However, their attempts to defeat Balj and his Syrian army militarily ended up backfiring in a battle which took place near Cordoba in August of 742. While Balj himself was seriously wounded and later died from his injuries, the Syrian forces overall were successful. The Syrians resumed control of Al-Andalus, and elected a replacement governor from their own ranks. The established Arab and Berber residents of Al-Andalus, who had put aside their differences to form a united opposition to the newly arrived Syrians, sent messages to the Caliph in Damascus, pleading for a resolution to the issue. The Syrians inside Al-Andalus responded to this by selling off a bunch of distinguished men from Arab families across Al-Andalus into slavery.

Back in Damascus though, the Caliph had received the distressed messages from the Arabs of Al-Andalus, and had decided to resolve the issue by sending a governor to the Iberian peninsula to sort the whole mess out. The governor, a man called Abu'l Khattar, travelled to Al-Andalus and actually did a really good job. His first move was to free all the Arab and Berber fighters who had been captured and detained by the Syrians. Then he consulted with local landholders, particularly those from the Visigothic era who had made peace with the invaders, about where best to settle the Syrians.

The plan Abu'l Khattar settled upon for accommodating the Syrians was novel, well researched and surprisingly successful. Clearly, the Syrians weren't keen to leave Al-Andalus, and forcing them to do so would result in another military confrontation, which no-one wanted. So the next question was, where were the Syrians going to settle in the peninsula? Ideally, for the established Arabs and Berber populations, the Syrians would be best divided somehow and allocated to lands far away from the centres of power such as the city of Cordoba. The Syrians however, weren't that keen to be split up and definitely weren't keen to loosen their grip on the political power which their hard-fought battles had gained. So if the Syrians were to be split up and sent far from Cordoba, it needed to be done in a way which would please the Syrians. Actually, if the Syrians believed they had gained more than they had lost from this move, well that would be the ideal outcome.

Impressively, this ideal outcome was exactly what Abu'l Khattar managed to achieve. He split the Syrian army into groups according to the location of their homelands back in the Middle East. Then, after careful consultation with powerful landowners across Al-Andalus, he allocated land to the separate groups of Syrians by matching the best features of the homelands they had left behind to the landscape inside Al-Andalus. So the Syrians from Damascus were settled on land around the city of Granada, with Abu'l Khattar no doubt extolling in flowery language how the beautiful city of Damascus had its echoes in the sun-bleached streets of Granada, with its fertile soils and its potential to create productive orchards and gardens on the scale seen in Damascus. The fighters who had come from Jordan in the Middle East were convinced to settle in a region to the west of Granada, while those from Palestine were allocated land in Medina-Sidonia, a town to the north west of Gibraltar. The only group which had to be divided, due to its large size, were the fighters from Egypt, who were split between land which is now located in the southernmost portion of Portugal and land which was currently overseen by Count Theodemir of Murcia (of written agreement with the Muslim conquerors fame, from back in Episode 4), which was located far away to the east of Granada.

So, in a master-class of conflict resolution and creative problem solving, the new governor of Al-Andalus managed to please everyone. The established landholders now have thousands of fit, healthy workers to help improve their land, the Syrians are now landholders, and with their fellow countrymen on lands spun to remind them of their homelands back in the Middle East, and the established Arabs and Berbers are relieved to see the victorious Syrian army split up and its members kept far away from the centre of power in Cordoba.

It was however, an arrangement which would permanently alter the political and demographic landscape of Al-Andalus. Prior to this arrangement, the Berbers had formed the bulk of the Muslim population, but now, with a permanent resettlement of the Syrian army, the minority Arab presence has been bolstered. Keeping the new arrivals in groups according to their place of origin in the Middle East may have pleased the Syrians, but it also preserved regional rivalries, and encouraged the Syrians to maintain political ties with their homelands.

Which is why in April of the year 745, Abu'l Khattar found himself defeated on the battlefield by a coalition of Syrian residents. The group of newcomers had been convinced that Abu'l Khattar had been swayed to support the Syrians who had ties to Yemen in the Middle East, and a Syrian named al-Sumayl, a fanatical supporter of the Quarrysh or Qaysi cause, managed to convince a bunch of his fellow Syrians that Abu'l Khattar's support of the Yemenis was unacceptable. Incidentally, the Quarrysh were of the same tribe as the Prophet Mohammad and enjoyed strong ties with the Caliph in Damascus. The Caliph was

from the Umayyad dynasty, who also considered themselves to be members of the Quraysh tribe.

The defeated Abu'l Khattar was removed from power and al-Sumayl, keen to be the power behind the throne rather than to sit on the throne himself, so to speak, arranged for a man called Yusuf al-Fihri to take control of Al-Andalus as governor. Yusuf ended up being a shrewd choice. He was an elderly man who was a direct descendant of one of the early military commanders who had conquered northern Africa. His family were considered to belong to the Quraysh group, but they were not fanatical adherents and had many ties to other political groups, including the Berbers. Yusuf began his rule by ejecting all the Yemenis from the administrative positions they had held under Abu'l Khattar, and when the Yemenis arose in revolt over this move, he defeated them on the battlefield.

Yusuf was just beginning to settle into his new role when a massive power shift in Damascus in the year 750 caused shockwaves to reverberate across the Arab world, shockwaves which extended all the way to Al-Andalus. Prior to the year 750 the Umayyad dynasty had ruled the Islamic world for half a century and had overseen its massive expansion and dominance across the Middle East and northern Africa. However, starting in the year 747, and culminating in the year 750, a revolution arose against the Umayyads. Known as the Abbasid Revolution, it swept the Umayyads from power and transferred the power base in the Muslim world from Damascus to Baghdad. The Abbasids were ruthless in their drive to wipe the slate clean, and they tracked down and killed most of the members of the Umayyad family.

One of the less prominent members of the Umayyad family however, was able to escape. A young man called Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu'awiya, son of the Caliph Hisham who had died in the year 743, was now the sole surviving heir of the Umayyad dynasty. Managing to flee Syria with a few narrow escapes, including at one point having to swim across the Euphrates River to escape his pursuers, he managed to make it to northern Africa. Aware that some members of the Syrian army from Damascus had now settled in Al-Andalus, he sent a message to Yusuf al-Fihri, asking his permission to cross over from Africa to the Iberian peninsula.

Now this, of course, placed Yusuf in a bit of a bind. The good news was that Yusuf, as a member of a family aligned with the Umayyad Caliph, currently felt no obligation to transfer his allegiance to the new Abbasid rulers. As such, he was now technically an independent ruler, no longer under the thumb of the Caliph in Damascus. However, it was also clear that as a supporter of the Umayyad dynasty he had an obligation to assist its last surviving prince, but of course that Prince, young Abd al-Rahman, now posed a direct threat to the power of the now independent governor of Al-Andalus, Yusuf. Desperate for some advice about how best to handle the situation, Yusuf contacted the man behind his rise to power, al-Sumayl. According to Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", al-Sumayl urged Yusuf to be cautious and keep Abd al-Rahman at arm's length, stating, and I quote "Abd al-Rahman is from a family who, if one of them pissed in this land, would drown us all" end quote. Al-Sumayl is clearly a man who doesn't mince words.

So there looks like a power struggle is looming in Al-Andalus. Join me next time to see what happens when Abd al-Rahman arrives in Al-Andalus. Until next time, bye for now.

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