

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 68
The Arrival of the Almohads

Hello again. Last time, we saw the Almoravids encounter push-back to their dominance of northern Africa in the form of a new sect of Berber fighters from the mountain regions, who became known as the Almohads. By the year 1138 the Almohad problem had become so serious that the leader of the Almoravids, Ali Ibn Yusuf, summoned his son Tashafin Ibn Ali, who had been governing Seville in the Iberian peninsula, to northern Africa, where he combined forces with the Catalan mercenary Reverter to campaign against the Almohads. Despite throwing just about everything at the problem though, Ali Ibn Yusuf just couldn't seem to make any inroads into Almohad advances. In fact, the opposite was happening. More and more tribes were joining the Almohads and they were becoming stronger and stronger.

One of the effects of Ali Ibn Yusuf focusing so strongly on eliminating the Almohads in northern Africa was a draining of military resources from Al-Andalus. Basically, anyone whom the Almoravid hierarchy believed to be effective on the battlefield was uplifted from Al-Andalus to northern Africa in the hope of driving the Almohads back. However, this draining of military resources and leadership from Al-Andalus left it vulnerable to revolt. We saw in the last episode that dissatisfaction with Almoravid rule in Al-Andalus had been building, and increasingly it seemed that the Muslims of Al-Andalus were unhappy with their Almoravid overlords.

At the same time, the Almoravid rulers were becoming antagonistic with their Muslim subjects in the Iberian peninsula. An interesting example of this rise in discord can be seen from a letter which was sent, back in the year 1129, from the leader of the Almoravids, Ali Ibn Yusuf, to the Muslims of Valencia, expressing his discontent about a defeat they had suffered at the hands of Alfonso of Aragon. In the letter, the leader of the Almoravid writes, and I quote "Sons of a disgraceful mother, you fled like wild asses. How long will critics expose your shame and a single horseman drive you back? There should be sheep being milked in the harnesses of your horses. We will punish you so that you do not cover your faces with veils, and drive you back to your desert and purify the peninsula of your filth." Ouch!

The sentiments expressed in the letter were so offensive that they had the opposite effect of what was intended. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal" Hugh Kennedy reports that a Muslim chronicler at the time stated that the insults in the letter were memorised by many Muslims from across the Iberian peninsula and were used to fuel their discontent with the Almoravids.

The first rebellion against Almoravid rule in Spain had broken out back in the year 1119 in Cordoba. Spot-fires of rebellion appeared during the 1120's, but during the 1130's they became more serious. Anti-Almoravid feeling increased to the extent that by 1133, when Sayf Al-Dawla raided near Seville he was approached by some local Muslims who wished him to pass a message to King Alfonso VII. You might remember Sayf Al-Dawla from our last episode. He was the Muslim son of the former ruler of Zaragoza, who had pledged his services to King Alfonso VII. What was the message which the Muslims of Seville conveyed to Sayf Al-Dawla? Well, according to a chronicle reported by Hugh Kennedy, it was this, and I quote "Speak with the King of the Christians, and with him free us from the

hands of the Almoravids. We will give the Leonese King parias, or tribute, larger than our fathers gave to his fathers, and we will serve you, and you and your sons will reign over us.”

While neither Sayf Al-Dawla nor King Alfonso were able to act on this request, it does show the extent of anti-Almoravid feeling which was spreading across Al-Andalus, sentiment which was spreading at the same time as Ali Ibn Yusuf was moving military resources from Al-Andalus and transferring them to Northern Africa, a move which, of course, left the peninsula vulnerable to further rebellion. King Alfonso VII took advantage of these new vulnerabilities by raiding all the way to the outskirts of Cordoba in the year 1133, and by doing the same near Cadiz in 1137. In the year 1139 King Alfonso VII laid siege to the Muslim fortress of Colmenar de Oreja, a strategically important outpost which had been used by the Almoravids to threaten Toledo. Despite the best efforts of the governors of Cordoba and Seville, the fortress eventually fell to the Christians. In the year 1142 King Alfonso repeated his feat, this time against the strategically important fortified Muslim town of Coria, from which the Almoravids had threatened to one day launch a large scale invasion of Christian territory. Again, the vital town fell to the Kingdom of Leon and Castile.

While rebellions were breaking out in Al-Andalus and strategically important fortresses and towns were falling to the Christians, things were looking even worse for the Almoravids in northern Africa. By the early 1140's, the Almohads were threatening the Almoravid seat of power in Morocco. Tashafin Ibn Ali and Reverter were doing their best to defend central Morocco against the growing Almohad tribes, but in January of 1143 the elderly Almoravid leader, Ali Ibn Yusuf, died. Tashafin Ibn Ali was declared to be the new leader, but he had his hands completely full desperately trying to hold on to the crumbling Almoravid empire. Instead of installing himself as ruler in Marrakesh, Tashafin was racing around Morocco, doing his best to stem the Almohad tide. His fortunes took a turn for the worse when Reverter was killed in battle in 1144. A year later, a year which consisted of almost endless desperate fighting, Tashafin himself was killed. Other contenders rose to the position of leader of the Almoravids, but there wasn't really much to lead. As more and more territory fell to the encroaching Almohads, the Almoravids lost most of central Morocco, until in March of 1147 Marrakesh itself fell. The remaining contenders for Almoravid rule were killed in Marrakesh. A year later, the last remaining outposts of Almoravid rule in northern Africa, including Tangier, fell to the Almohads. Almoravid rule in northern Africa had officially come to an end.

Unfortunately for the Muslims, while Muslim rule on the Iberian peninsula is descending into chaos, the opposite is happening in the Christian regions. In the year 1142, Ramon Berenguer IV signed a peace treaty with the Kingdom of Navarre, ending the only contested relationship outstanding amongst the Christian leaders. In September of 1143, nine months after the death of Ali Ibn Yusuf, a great council was hosted by King Alfonso VII. At this council the Papacy, via its legate who attended the gathering, officially recognised the status of Portugal as a kingdom, confirming Alfonso Enrique's entitlement to rule as King Alfonso I of Portugal. The council resolved a number of minor issues between the Christian rulers, and the new era of unity and cooperation between the four Christian kingdoms was cemented in mid 1144 when King Garcia Ramirez IV of Navarre married Urraca, an illegitimate daughter of King Alfonso VII.

While the Christians were playing happy families in the north, the political situation in Al-Andalus was beginning to fracture. While Almoravid rule in northern Africa was entering

its doom spiral, political players in Al-Andalus attempted to leverage the power vacuum to their advantage.

The first person to make a serious play for power was a man called Ibn Qasi, who had been employed as a tax collector for the Almoravids. A follower of the same type of mystic Islam which had influenced the philosopher al-Ghazali and Ibn Tumart, he declared himself to be the Mahdi, or the chosen one, and seized a fortress near Silves in 1144 from which he attempted to gather a bunch of followers. By this time, central Almoravid power in Al-Andalus had pretty much collapsed, and a raft of different players were attempting to make their moves and rise to prominence. Ibn Qasi was in a pretty good position. He managed to raise quite a few followers, enough to march on Seville. However things would have gone much better for him had he managed to win the support of his fellow mystics, the Almohads. He had in fact attempted to do this, but his overtures to northern Africa had been rebuffed due to the fact that he had the affront to name himself "Mahdi". The Almohads only recognised one "Mahdi", their founder Ibn Tumart, so Ibn Qasi's appeals for recognition and military assistance had gone unanswered. That being the case, his attempt to take Seville was ultimately unsuccessful, although not completely unsuccessful. Seville did actually fall, but it wasn't just due to the actions of Ibn Qasi and his followers.

A number of military commanders had marched, not only on Seville but on Almoravid strongholds across the south western portions of the peninsula. By the end of 1144 Almoravid rule in this part of Al-Andalus had virtually ceased. From then on, Almoravid rule across the rest of Al-Andalus collapsed like a row of dominoes.

Cordoba fell in January of 1145. A man called Ibn Hamdin had led the overthrow of the Almoravids in Cordoba, and he invited Sayf al-Dawla to establish rule in the city. Sayf al-Dawla accepted the offer and seized control of Cordoba. However Ibn Hamdin then appeared to have second thoughts about the whole situation and forced Sayf al-Dawla out of Cordoba. Ibn Hamdin then declared himself to be not only the ruler of Cordoba but the ruler of Al-Andalus. However, not many people took notice of him.

Sayf al-Dawla raced to Jaen, where he took control of the town and installed one of his nephews as ruler, before moving rapidly to Granada, which he managed to seize control of in mid-1145. However, Sayf al-Dawla clearly needed to work on his leadership style. After only a few months in power, the people of Granada decided they had had enough of him. He was overthrown, but undeterred he made his way to Murcia where, you guessed it, he seized power, only to be, you guessed it, toppled after a brief time. Sayf al-Dawla was on the move, looking for more places to conquer and then be expelled from, when he was killed in February of 1146 during a brief skirmish with forces from the Kingdom of Leon. This was a surprise to everyone as Sayf al-Dawla had been a long time ally of King Alfonso VII. It's unclear to this day exactly what happened, but it may well have been the result of a mix-up, with Sayf al-Dawla just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Over in the eastern regions, Almoravid rule in Murcia and Valencia had now completely collapsed, and power was seized by a man called Ibn Mardanish, who proclaimed himself King of Valencia. However, none of the rulers who had risen to power in the vacuum created by the Almoravid collapse was strong enough to dominate the other contenders, so as the various rebel rulers vied with each other for supremacy the Almoravids then made a last desperate grab for the spoils. The man who attempted to hold the Almoravid line was the governor of Seville, Ibn Ghaniya, who booted Ibn Hamdin from Cordoba before also seizing Granada.

With Grenada, Cordoba, and Seville securely under his control, Ibn Ghaniya looked like he was on a roll and perhaps even had a chance of restoring Almoravid rule, until King Alfonso VII decided to intervene. Having been ousted from Cordoba, Ibn Hamdin had requested assistance from the Christian king. Deciding that this was an opportunity too good to pass up, King Alfonso marched his army southwards all the way to Cordoba. He conquered the outer parts of the city, but Ibn Ghaniya managed to cling to power in the inner sections of the city. Then in May of the year 1146 came some terrible news, news which Ibn Ghaniya had likely been dreading and which had him reaching out to King Alfonso for terms. What was this terrible piece of news? Well, the all-conquering Almohads had just landed in Al-Andalus from northern Africa, and were intent on taking all the former Almoravid territory on the Iberian peninsula, with the assistance of their new ally, the mystic Ibn Qasi, who had apparently ditched his claim to be Mahdi, and instead had recognised the leader of the Almohads, Abd al-Mumin, as Caliph. Worried that, as the only surviving Almoravid leader, he was going to be the first ruler on the Almohad hit-list, Ibn Ghaniya offered to become vassal to King Alfonso, in return for an annual tribute and military protection. King Alfonso readily accepted and departed from Cordoba, taking more territory to the west of the city before moving northwards and capturing the vital hilltop fortress of Calatrava, which guarded the main travelling route between Al-Andalus and Toledo.

The Almohads won't in fact bother Ibn Ghaniya in Cordoba for another year or so. They began their annexation of Al-Andalus in Tarifa and Algeciras, just across from northern Africa, on the Straits of Gibraltar, the same place where the Muslims had begun their invasion of the peninsula way back in the year 710. From there they moved up the west coast, conquering a number of key towns before securing Badajoz. They then felt confident enough to turn their attentions to Seville, which ended up surrendering in January of 1147. It was at this stage that they decided to turn their focus to Cordoba. With King Alfonso away to the north, Ibn Ghaniya was no match for the Almohads. He was forced to surrender Cordoba to the invaders before seeking refuge in now independent Grenada.

So the last of the Almoravid rulers has been forced from his position and the Almohads have officially arrived. We will leave the Almohads to attempt to consolidate their rule in the south-western parts of the peninsula, as next time we will be switching our focus to the Kingdom of Portugal, where something very interesting is happening. Until next time, bye for now.

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