

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 81
The Caliph's Campaign, Part One

Hello again, and welcome to another year of podcasting. Back in our last episode for 2023 we saw the Almohads finally achieve their goal of conquering Al-Andalus. Following the death of the Wolf King in the year 1172, the Wolf King's son and heir surrendered all of his father's territory to the Almohads, and to seal the deal the Caliph of the Almohads, Yusuf, married one of the Wolf King's daughters. However, as we saw during the last episode, Yusuf wasn't content to sit back and relax following his victories in Al-Andalus. No, Yusuf now wishes to achieve something which his father, the Almohad Caliph Abd al Mu'min, had been unable to accomplish during his lifetime: the defeat of Christian Spain.

Now, in anticipation of this new campaign, the Caliph Yusuf had made his way from Morocco to Seville in June of the year 1171. This was actually the first time that Yusuf had travelled to Al-Andalus, and it's likely that the delay was caused by the fact that he wanted to make sure that his seat of power in Marrakesh was secure enough for him to leave Northern Africa for a lengthy period of time without fear of someone seizing the throne in his absence. The Caliph will actually remain in the Iberian peninsula for the next five years, so it was critical that his position in Morocco was watertight prior to his departure.

His departure, and the departure of his fighting force from Morocco, was carefully planned. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy reports that in January of 1171, after the troops who would accompany the Caliph to Spain had gathered in Marrakesh, parades and gatherings were held, and a massive feast was hosted by the Caliph for 3,000 guests. This was intended to encourage unity between the Caliph's Arab and Almohad fighters, and was designed as a show of force to ensure the people of Morocco remained loyal to the Caliph and the Caliph's family and the Almohad elite during his absence.

Encouraging the Arab and Almohad fighters to embrace each other as brothers in arms fighting for the same side was going to be particularly important moving forward, but you would have to say that there were some obvious missteps made by the Caliph which probably drove a wedge between the Arab and Almohad fighters before they had even left Northern Africa. Fortunately for us, a Muslim man from the Iberian peninsula named Ibn Sahib al-Salat travelled to Marrakesh at this time and chronicled the events. Usefully, he will also accompany the Caliph on his military campaigns in Spain, so we have him to thank for the detail we have about the campaigns and the preparations made for them.

Ibn Sahib al-Salat noted that, prior to departing from Marrakesh the troops, numbering around 10,000 Arab fighters and 10,000 Almohad fighters, were paid by the Caliph. However they weren't all paid at the same rate. A fully equipped Almohad horseman was paid 10 dinars; a partially equipped Almohad horseman was paid 8 dinars, with 5 dinars going to each fully equipped foot soldier, and 3 dinars going to the less equipped or completely unequipped Almohad foot soldiers. The Arab fighters however were given much more. A fully equipped Arab horseman was given 25 dinars, more than twice the rate paid to their Almohad equivalent, while the partially equipped Arab horsemen secured 15 dinars, which was higher than the rate paid to their fully equipped Almohad counterparts. Each Arab foot soldier was given 6 dinars. The Arab tribal leaders who were to lead the Arab forces in battle were handsomely rewarded, while to top off the spoils

given to the Arabs, 3,000 horses were provided to the Arab troops, along with cloth and turbans for the Arab commanders to distribute as they saw fit.

Now this was probably done to ensure the loyalty of the Arab fighters, who had only recently been incorporated into the Caliph's army, but did it sow resentment between the two sides? Yes, I think it's fair to say that it did. As stated by Hugh Kennedy, and I quote "Ibn Sahib al-Salat records that there were violent quarrels between the rank and file of the Arabs and the Almohads. The Arabs showed none of the customary awe and respect for the Caliph, and he, for his part, turned a blind eye to their unruly behaviour. It did not bode well for the future campaign" end quote.

The large but slightly dysfunctional fighting force accompanied the Caliph to Al-Andalus in March of the year 1171, and just over a year later, in June of 1172, with the defeat of the Wolf King and with the consolidation of Al-Andalus finally accomplished, the Caliph and his army left Seville intent on conquering Christian Spain. The army marched to Cordoba, then saw its first action at Vilches, which is located to Cordoba's east. The castle at Vilches had been handed over to the Christians by the Wolf King following his split with Ibn Hamušk, and the Caliph's army was keen to flex its muscles and eject the Christian garrison from Vilches. It took less than a day to achieve this. With the castle now restored to Muslim rule, the army set off again, heading in a northeasterly direction towards the stronghold of Alcaraz. The Christian garrison at Alcaraz surrendered, and the army then entered Christian territory, crossing into the southernmost portion of the Kingdom of Castile.

Now, it seems likely that the Caliph's ultimate goal was to take the seat of power of the Kingdom of Castile, the city of Toledo, but Toledo, of course, was a major city, nothing like the small fortifications which the army had defeated so far. So for his next target the Caliph chose something a little bit more challenging, the settlement of Huete. Although a step up from the single strongholds which the army had just defeated, Huete was still a small place, nowhere near as large or formidable as Toledo. It consisted of a castle, which was located on top of a hill, and a small town, which lay at the base of the hill next to a small river. The town itself was only partially fortified, and Huete enjoyed none of the natural defences of the city of Toledo, so in theory conquering it should have been pretty straightforward.

On the 12th of July the Caliph ordered an assault on Huete to commence. The township around the hill was quickly taken, forcing residents to flee up the hill to the castle. Just when it looked as if the castle might be overrun, the momentum faltered, with reinforcements failing to arrive to support the attack. One of the Almohad commanders of the attack later complained to our chronicler, Ibn Sahib al-Salat, that he was busy fighting the Christian defenders in the castle when he realised that none of his co-commanders had joined the fight. He withdrew, then personally sought out the Caliph and told him that if he ordered reinforcements to be immediately dispatched to the castle, then the stronghold could be taken. However, according to the commander, the Caliph didn't answer him and instead ignored him. One of the Caliph's advisers then pulled the commander aside and had a brief conversation with him. The commander stated that, following the conversation, and I quote "I realised that the intention of the jihad had been corrupted and that the expedition had failed. I returned despairing a victory, and very preoccupied and thoughtful" end quote.

With the assault having failed, the Muslims settled in for a siege. A quarter of the army was sent to forage for food and supplies, while the rest were kept busy constructing siege engines and towers, and ensuring that no supplies of food or water made it into the castle.

Then the weather turned bad. Although it was the middle of summer, a storm blew in on the 14th of July, which destroyed many of the tents housing the Caliph's forces. Two days later a violent thunderstorm erupted over the area, and an assault ordered by the Caliph had to be postponed due to the heavy rain. The next day the assault finally took place, but it didn't yield any significant results. At this point the Caliph retired to his tent and didn't emerge for a number of days, possibly suffering from one of his episodes of depression. On the 19th of July the Christian defenders managed to launch an attack on a contingent of Berber fighters, who fled instead of holding their position. While the Christians retreated back into the castle without doing much physical damage, the damage to morale was fully evident. To make the spirits of the besiegers plunge even further, on top of the fact that their Caliph had disappeared into his tent and seemed not to want to come out, food was becoming scarce.

Then came the hammer blow. News filtered in that the armies of King Alfonso VIII of Castile were on their way to relieve the defenders of Huete. This seems to have seriously rattled the Caliph, who ordered the siege towers and engines which were under construction to be destroyed, and that the bells of the church in the suburb which was overrun in the first day of the attack be loaded onto a wagon ready for evacuation. The next day, to the confusion and disbelief of many of the Muslim fighters, the Caliph ordered the drums to sound out to signal a retreat. After a siege lasting less than two weeks the Caliph's army withdrew in disarray, heading eastwards towards the closest Muslim town of Cuenca.

Now, during the march to Cuenca the army shuffled itself back into a resemblance of order, and discipline was restored, but nothing could hide the fact that the attack on Huete had been a complete shambles. Decisive leadership from the Caliph and his close advisers seems to have been wanting, resulting in a lack of overall co-ordination, meaning that supply issues weren't addressed, the siege ended up being carried out in a piecemeal fashion, and the various commanders of the different forces didn't seem to know what the others were doing. This was exacerbated by communication difficulties amongst the various fighting units. The Arabs, the northern African Almohad fighters, and the Muslim fighters from Al-Andalus struggled to overcome language barriers, and Ibn Sahib al-Salat points out that most of the effective fighting seems to have been carried out by the local Andalusí Muslims, with everyone else just sort of looking on.

The army arrived safely at Cuenca, but the town wasn't a safe haven. While the town itself was Muslim, it was currently surrounded by Christian territory. The region had previously formed part of the Wolf King's realm, and he had handed much of the territory around Cuenca to the Christians, so Cuenca was now a sort of a Muslim island in a Christian sea. Despite the fact that Cuenca enjoyed a number of natural defensive advantages and was surrounded by a formidable set of walls, the 700 Muslim residents of the town were understandably quite anxious about the town's long term viability. To make matters worse, the Christians had been conducting a sort of loose blockade of the town for some time, meaning that supplies were difficult to obtain and communication with the outside world posed a challenge. To make the residents of Cuenca feel a little happier about their situation the Caliph and a number of his key advisers and courtiers, including our chronicler, rode into the town and met with some of its residents. Following the meeting the Caliph ordered a cash splash inside the town, with dinars being provided to every resident. The town then received 70 head of cattle, which was all the army could spare from its own supplies, and some weaponry.

On the following day, which was the 26th of July, word came in that the army of King Alfonso VIII was heading towards Cuenca. Cuenca lies on the banks of the river Jucar, and the Caliph ordered the army to break camp and cross the river, putting the fast-flowing mass of water between themselves and the approaching Christians. By the following morning, the Christians had arrived on the other side of the river, and the Caliph held a war council to decide the best way forward. At the council, the Andalusi Muslims and the Almohads both urged the Caliph to attack the Christians, while the Arab leaders urged the Caliph to wait until the armies were in more open country, which would better suit the skills of the Arab horsemen. The Caliph decided to fight, so he ordered a small contingent of Almohad and local Muslim fighters to attack immediately, while the rest of the army readied itself for a full scale battle the following day. By the following day, though, the Christians had packed up and withdrawn. Instead of giving chase, the Caliph ordered the Muslim forces to mobilise and move eastwards.

The Caliph had by now abandoned his ambitious goal of attacking the city of Toledo, and had switched to focusing on the Wolf King's former lands, deciding instead to consolidate the Almohad hold on Murcia and Valencia. In an ominous sign, not long after the Muslim army headed off in the direction of Valencia, the Christians returned and under the command of King Alfonso VIII took the town of Cuenca.

Can things get any worse for the Caliph and his army? Oh yes they can. Join me next time as the Caliph's army runs out of food and water on its way to Valencia.

Now, before we go, I'd like to promote a map of the Crusader States created by Mapmaker Adomas Klimantas. While the map isn't of Spain, I'm guessing that many of you who are listening have listened to the History of the Crusades podcast, and if you are interested in purchasing a map of the Crusader States, well I have exactly what you are looking for. It's detailed, historically accurate, and absolutely gorgeous, in a sort of vintage Victorian style. I have one hanging on my study wall. If you are interested in purchasing one of these lovely maps, you can do so via the link on the extras page at crusadespod.com. As an extra bonus, listeners score 15% off, so if you want to treat yourself to a gorgeous map of the Crusader States, I heartily recommend that you do so. Until next time, bye for now.

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