

History of the Crusades.
Episode 139.
The Crusade Against the Cathars.
King Peter II of Aragon, Part 1.

Hello again Last week we saw Simon de Montfort emerge victorious from the northern part of southern France. Having conquered all of the Agenais, except for the town of Montauban, it seemed that Simon may have, for the first time, managed to wrestle the whole of Languedoc into submission. By the end of last week's episode, the town of Toulouse and a smattering of strongholds in the mountainous regions of the County of Foix where the only places holding out for the rebels.

It is now, with Simon de Montfort seemingly victorious, that we're going to leave the land of the Raymonds and take a closer look at the land of the Alfonsos. More specifically, we're going to concentrate on a man who has been absent from our narrative for a while, King Peter II of Aragon. But we can't really understand King Peter without also taking a closer look at the Kingdom of Aragon, and we can't really understand the Kingdom of Aragon without understanding medieval Spain as a whole. And of course, we can't really understand medieval Spain without knowing some of what came before. To prevent this from turning into a lengthy sub-series all of its own, we are going to have to summarize and leave a lot out. Still, by the end of this next couple of episodes, you should have a deeper understanding of King Peter II of Aragon and his kingdom.

Right where to start. Well, Spain occupies most of the Iberian peninsula, which for any of you who don't know, is a box-shaped piece of land jutting out of the southwest corner of Europe. The northern part of the peninsula is surrounded by the waters of the Bay of Biscay; the western part looks out into the Atlantic Ocean; while the southern and eastern sides border the Mediterranean Sea. The northeastern corner of the box is attached to Europe with the Pyrenees mountains, which conveniently run all the way from the Bay of Biscay on one side of the peninsula to the Mediterranean Sea on the other, forming a natural border between Spain and the rest of Europe, or, more specifically, between Spain and France.

With the Iberian Peninsula being so clearly separated from Europe by the Pyrenees mountains, the history of Spain is predominantly the history of people striving to occupy the entire peninsula. The first people to occupy the entire peninsula under one cohesive government were, unsurprisingly, the Romans, who named the region "Hispania." Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Germanic Visigoths filled the power vacuum. They managed to beat off the Byzantines and the Franks, who also showed some interest in the peninsula. The Visigoths created a kingdom ruling over the entire peninsula, and in the 6th century A.D., the King of the Goths converted to Catholicism, with the Catholic religion becoming the official religion of Visigothic Hispania.

Things were all well and good until an event occurred far away from Hispania, in the Middle East in the year 632. That event, of which the King and residents of Hispaniola were likely totally unaware, was to have massive implications for the history of Spain and the history of the Western world. That event was, of course, the death of the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of the Islamic religion.

Following the death of their prophet, the Arab converts to the new religion united, and began a series of conquests starting in the Middle East but extending out through northern

Africa and beyond. A mere thirty years after Mohammed's death, Muslim Arabs reached Europe, launching attacks on the island of Sicily. At the start of the 8th century, Hispania, or the Kingdom of Toledo as it's sometimes called, was a relatively well ordered, stable Catholic, Visigothic kingdom. That all changed in the year 711, when invading Muslim Arabs arrived in the southern part of the peninsula from northern Africa. With apparent ease, the Muslims conquered the entire peninsula, creating an administrative center in the city of Cordoba, and using Hispania as a springboard for their expansion into Europe. The Muslims renamed Hispania "Al-Andalus", meaning "the Land of the Vandals."

However, Muslim Europe wasn't to be. The advancing Arab army crossed the Pyrenees, attacked Aquitaine and went on to occupy Narbonne and Carcassonne, but was confronted, challenged and ultimately beaten back by the Frankish King, Charles Martel, or Charles the Hammer, at the Battle of Tours in 732. The Muslims retreated back over the Pyrenees, and contented themselves with consolidating their rule over the small section of Europe they possessed, the Iberian peninsula. The many Christian and Jewish residents of Al-Andalus were allowed to retain their faiths and the Spanish Muslims, or "Moors" as they were sometimes known, created one of the strongest and most stable states in Europe at that time.

But of course, the Christian kingdoms of Europe were none too happy to have a Muslim state in their midst. Almost as soon as Al-Andalus was created, a movement began to expel the Arab Muslims from the peninsula. The neighboring Franks, in particular, had an interest in seeing the peninsula for once again under Catholic rule. In the year 778, Charlemagne launched a military campaign against Al-Andalus. With his Frankish army streaming over the Pyrenees, Charlemagne pushed the Muslims back as far as the city of Zaragoza before retreating. In an attempt to halt any further Muslim advance, he established four militarized buffer zones: the March of Gascony, the March of Toulouse, and the March of Gothia on the French side of the Pyrenees, and the March of Hispania on the Iberian side.

Over the next few centuries, following much shuffling around, the mixture of Visigothic and Frankish residents in the March of Hispania and the northern part of the peninsula pushed back against both the Muslim influence from Al-Andalus and the Frankish influence from beyond the Pyrenees, and arranged themselves into the so-called "Five Kingdoms". These kingdoms stretched across the top northern quarter or so of the peninsula, starting with Leon, in the top left hand corner bordering both the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Bay of Biscay to the north, then Castile, which bordered the Bay of Biscay. The remaining three kingdoms shared their northern borders not with the Bay of Biscay but with Languedoc. Navarre shared the corner of the coastline of the Bay of Biscay, then extended eastwards; the middle Kingdom of Aragon was landlocked, with its northern borders in the Pyrenees; and finally the County of Barcelona, sometimes called Catalonia, extended to the Mediterranean Sea. The southern part of the peninsula was still occupied by Muslim Al-Andalus, which was sometimes known as the Caliphate of Cordoba. While just to be thorough, we should mention that Portugal occupied land to the west of the peninsula bordering the Atlantic Ocean, the territory it still occupies today; and the tiny principality of Andorra high in the Pyrenees, also stood independent of the kingdoms, and it also remains an independent principality today.

Now it must be said that at this time there was no shared "Spanish" identity across the five kingdoms. Each kingdom developed its own separate identity, its own culture and even its own language. In fact, at this time the County of Barcelona had more in common with

Languedoc than it did with its fellow Spanish kingdoms. The troubadour culture was strong in Catalonia, and the Catalan language was closer to the Occitan spoken in Languedoc, than to the languages spoken in the other Spanish kingdoms.

If you were a betting person and were told to predict which kingdom wouldn't last the distance at this point in time, your money would likely be placed on the Kingdom of Aragon. Why? Well, firstly, it was landlocked. The other four kingdoms each possessed a coastline which made international trade more viable and facilitated communications and maritime defense. Secondly, the climate and landscape of Aragon was challenging: scorching in summer and absolutely freezing in winter, crops were hard to grow high in the mountains, and fertile land was hard to come by. So, from the outset the Kingdom of Aragon had a battle on its hands.

The kingdoms didn't unite to stand against the Muslims on their respective southern borders. No, they were fierce competitors. As Norman Davis points out in his chapter on the Kingdom of Aragon, in his book "Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe", it was a case of devour your neighboring kingdom or be devoured yourself.

This left the Kings of Aragon with a dilemma. Either be aggressive and try to expand your borders into the neighboring kingdoms, which of course risked the other kingdoms uniting against you and eliminating you entirely; or be passive and try not to attract too much attention, which of course risked you being invaded by your more aggressive neighbours. Successive Kings of Aragon tried to walk a middle line, by attempting to form alliances with Navarre, then Castile, then finally and more successfully Barcelona. Now I should point out that it was no walk in the park being a King of Aragon. In fact, to say the Kings of Aragon had a lot on their respective plates is an understatement. As well as battling their fellow kingdoms, they also, of course, had to keep one eye on their southern border. Al-Andalus was continually looking to push northwards into the kingdoms, and the kingdoms were continually looking to push southwards into the caliphate. Also, particularly for the three kingdoms bordering the Pyrenees, there was the rest of Europe to contend with.

Aragon bordered the County of Foix to the north, and the Counts of Foix seemed interested in pushing their border southwards, while of course, the Kingdom of Aragon would also be interested in pushing north into the County of Foix. Busy times. The long-term existence of the Kingdom of Aragon was finally secured in the year 1137, when the infant heiress to the Kingdom of Aragon, Petronilla, was betrothed to the 24-year old Raymond Berenguer IV of Barcelona. Fourteen years later, the now 15 year old Petronilla and the 39 year old Raymond were married, with Petronilla retaining the title of Queen and Raymond becoming Prince of Aragon and Count of Barcelona. Their son became King Alfonso II of Aragon and Count of Barcelona, and his son King Peter II also became King of Aragon and Count of Barcelona. The union ensured the Kingdom of Aragon's long-term survival. The mountain stronghold now had access to a significant Mediterranean coastline, with all the commercial and maritime benefits that that entailed. The two kingdoms, however, kept their separate identities. Each retained its own laws, its own parliament, and its own language.

Right. So now we come to the focus of this episode, King Peter II of Aragon. King Peter inherited the crown of Aragon and the border Counties of Pallars and Rousillon in southern France from his father King Alfonso II of Aragon, who died on the 25th of April 1196. Perhaps not wanting his second-eldest son and namesake, Alphonse II, to be left out of the succession, he bequeathed him Provence, Mieux and Gevaudan, significant

land-holdings in the eastern regions of southern France, with Provence of course falling within the Holy Roman Empire. When he was crowned King, Peter II was a young man in his twenties.

Some eleven years before he was crowned, the first significant push-back by the Christian Kings of Spain against Al-Aldalus had occurred, in the form of the capture, by King Alfonso VI of Castile-Leon, of the Muslim city of Toledo, an event which most historians point to as the start of the Reconquista, or the Spanish Crusades. This was followed, in the year before King Peter came to power, by Pope Urban's call-to-arms for the first Crusade to the Holy Land.

So Crusading against the Muslims of southern Spain was at the top of King Peter's list of things to-do when he assumed power. But it was more complicated than that. He also had to juggle relations with his fellow Spanish Kings and ensure that their power was kept in check, which occasionally would even see the Kingdom of Aragon ally itself with the Moors of Al-Andalus to place a check on the ambitions of his fellow Kings, in particular the King of Castile. King Peter also had to manage his relationship with the Papacy. As we've pointed out in previous episodes, upon his ascension to the throne King Peter dedicated his kingdom to the service of Rome, meaning that the Pope became, in effect, his overlord. He also had ambitions to expand the influence of his Kingdom into Languedoc, to a degree never before attempted by his predecessors.

So to sum up, King Peter's reign involved crusading against Al-Andalus, keeping his fellow Spanish Kings in check, managing his relationship with the Papacy, and expanding his kingdom into Languedoc. King Peter was a busy man.

He showed he was serious about his plans to expand Aragon's influence into Languedoc by choosing to take Dame Marie de Montpellier as his wife in the year 1204. Montpellier was a wealthy city, and its large taxable base of wealthy citizens, along with the city itself, comprised Marie's marriage dowry. The city, however, was a nightmare to administer, with the King of Aragon being forced to share power in the city with the King of France. The rule of the city had traditionally been shared with the local bishops; however, when the bishops sold their share to the French crown, it meant that both the laws of Aragon and the laws of northern France operated within the town, with Aragonese administrators working alongside northern French officials, with even two separate court systems, one based on the Aragon model and one northern French, operating in tandem within the city.

King Peter's son James, who would later succeed his father as King of Aragon and Count of Barcelona and would become known as Jaime El Conquistador, was born at Montpellier and was raised mostly in the household of Simon de Montfort, having been handed over to him by King Peter as a toddler when he became betrothed to Simon's infant daughter.

But as we've seen already, King Peter's influence in southern France was not confined to Montpellier. By the beginning of the Crusade Against the Cathars, King Peter's vassals in Languedoc included the Trencavels, as well as the Counts of Foix and Comminges. When King Peter's sister married Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, his influence spread further.

The Crusade instigated by Pope Innocent III against the Cathars complicated matters enormously. As the Pope's vassal, King Peter was expected to fall in behind the Papal Crusade and provide military support where required. However, one of the first noble families to fall victim to the Crusade was, of course, the Trencavels, vassals to King Peter.

The Counts of Foix and Comminges then found themselves in the firing line, as did his brother in law, Count Raymond, a man whose company he enjoyed and whom he likely looked upon as a friend. One man whose company he didn't enjoy, and who he most certainly didn't consider his friend, was Pope Innocent's man-of-the-moment, the hero of the Church, Simon de Montfort, who King Peter eventually, reluctantly, accepted as vassal.

Well, thankfully for King Peter, he can put the headache that is the political situation in Languedoc to one side for the moment, as it's the year 1212, and one of the most pivotal events of the Spanish Reconquista is about to occur: the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, an event in which King Peter and his fellow Spanish Kings, as well as, surprisingly, the Papal Legate Arnold Amaury, will be heavily involved. Join me next week as we continue to examine the reign of King Peter II of Aragon, and bring him up to speed with the narrative at the end of the year 1212, with his involvement in the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Until next week, bye for now.

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