

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 103
Christian Expansion

Hello again. Last time we saw King James of Aragon conquer Valencia, a feat which had been on the wish list of rulers of Aragon, and in fact Christian rulers from across the peninsula, since pretty much forever.

By securing Valencia, King James raised his status and power to a significant extent. The Kingdom of Aragon now occupies a considerable portion of the Iberian peninsula, extending across Aragon, Catalonia, and Zaragoza, then down southwards past the city of Valencia. Had the kingdoms of Leon and Castile remained separate, the newly expanded Kingdom of Aragon would have been larger than Leon, although not quite as big as the Kingdom of Castile. The kingdoms of Leon and Castile, though, were now ruled by a single monarch, King Fernando III, and if you viewed the combined kingdoms of Leon and Castile as a single entity it was bigger than Aragon. Still, King Fernando seems pretty keen not to let Aragon expand much further.

Interestingly, back in the year 1179 Alfonso II of Aragon and Alfonso VIII of Castile had negotiated a treaty named the Treaty of Cazola, which divided Al-Andalus into separate zones of conquest. Basically, the idea was to set out in advance which parts of Al-Andalus could be conquered by Castile and which could be conquered by Aragon, to save conflict arising between the Christian kingdoms over who gets what. Although the treaty had been negotiated by Alfonso II and Alfonso VIII, two kings who were now deceased and no longer in power, it was designed to operate in perpetuity, binding the future kings of both Aragon and Castile to its terms.

The bad news for Aragon was that, following its conquest of Valencia, it had pretty much reached the limits of what it was allowed to conquer under the Treaty of Cazola. The further bad news for Aragon was that the city of Murcia and the surrounding region of Murcia lay tantalisingly close, just down the coast from Aragon's newly extended boundaries, and King James really wanted to conquer Murcia.

Murcia itself had been struggling under a sort of leadership vacuum since the death of Ibn Hud. The recently expelled former leader of Valencia, Zayyan, had decided to fill this vacuum. He strode into Murcia after the fall of Valencia and arrested, then executed, the ruler of Murcia, a man whom Brian Catlos describes in his book "Kingdoms of Faith" as a popular but ineffective leader. In a startling failure to read the room, Zayyan then declared himself to be aligned with the supporters of Almohad rule. Unsurprisingly, this went down like a lead balloon. Zayyan was able to restore law and order to Murcia, but he soon realised that he didn't possess the degree of popular support needed to sustain his rule.

Failing to read the room for a second time, he decided the best way to hold on to power would be to form an alliance with the Christians. Worried about losing Murcia to King James of Aragon, Zayyan reached out to King Fernando III of Leon and Castile, proposing an alliance between Murcia and Castile against Aragon. When word of this proposal reached the ears of the citizens of Murcia, they were outraged. They overthrew Zayyan and forced him out of Murcia. In fact, he ended up leaving the Iberian peninsula altogether, fleeing to Tunis in northern Africa.

With a power vacuum once again emerging in Murcia, the man invited to fill it was an uncle of Ibn Hud named Baha' al-Dawla. Baha' al-Dawla though didn't seem confident about his ability to defend Murcia against the people who wanted to annex it, mainly Ibn al-Ahmar, the Christian Kings of Leon, Castile, and Aragon, and even the Emir of Tunis, who might send Zayyan back to conquer Murcia on his behalf.

The biggest threat to Murcia at this time was arguably the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. King Fernando's son and heir Alfonso had been active in the region, and had managed to take a number of towns around the city of Murcia. Perhaps it was this which led Baha' Al-Dawla to decide to accept King Fernando of Leon and Castile as the overlord and protector of Murcia. Murcia dispatched envoys to the Christian north with an offer of submission, but according to Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", King Fernando was ill when the envoys arrived. So Prince Alfonso was ordered by his father to travel to Murcia to formally receive the submission of the city of Murcia and of other main towns in the region.

Not all the Murcian towns were happy about this though. Joseph O'Callaghan reports that the towns of Lorca, Cartagena, and Mula were initially reluctant to bend the knee to Prince Alfonso. And this was kind of understandable. In addition to being ruled by Christian overlords, they were required to offer half of their town's revenue to Leon and Castile. In return though, King Fernando was happy to allow a high degree of independence and self-rule, the Muslim governors of the town were allowed to remain in place, and the administrative apparatus of the towns were allowed to carry on as usual, with the region of Murcia becoming a sort of Muslim territory under the umbrella of Christian sovereignty. Eventually the renegade Murcian towns saw the benefits of the arrangement and duly submitted to Prince Alfonso, scoring a huge win for the Kingdom of Leon and Castile.

Buoyed by his victory Prince Alfonso decided to launch a campaign to take the towns of Alzira and Jativa, which were to the north of the region of Murcia, just to the south of the city of Valencia. The trouble with this move was that these particular two towns fell clearly within the region reserved for conquest by Aragon under the terms of the Treaty of Cazola. King James objected strenuously to King Fernando, but his protests were ignored. So King James decided to respond by attacking, then occupying, three towns within the region reserved under the treaty for Castilian expansion.

So began the series of conquests known as "The Great Game", a duelling contest of expansion into Al-Andalus by both Aragon and Leon and Castile, a competition which lasted most of the 1240s. In the year 1244, the rules of the battle were once again contained within a treaty. The Treaty of Almisra pretty much repeated the terms of the earlier Treaty of Cazola, but was signed by the current kings, King James of Aragon and King Fernando of Leon and Castile. The forces of Aragon withdrew from the areas set aside for Castilian conquest, and Prince Alfonso withdrew from Alzira and Jativa, enabling King James to move in and take both towns.

This was pretty much the last move in the great game by Aragon. Not so though for Leon and Castile. From the year 1244 to the year 1248 King Fernando launched a series of violent and destructive military campaigns across the regions surrounding the Guadalquivir River. Brian Catlos points out that, in contrast with the conquests made by Aragon, there was no effort to acquire these lands slowly while ensuring as little disruption as possible for the Muslim residents. In the words of Brian Catlos, and I quote "The countryside was ravaged. Muslim peasants were taken prisoner or put to the sword and, one by one, the towns of the south fell. Little quarter was shown. The slave markets swelled as masses of

Muslim captives were sent northwards, while in the south, the larger towns were purged of their native inhabitants who were banished to the countryside, if not condemned outright to exile” end quote.

The harsh campaign though proved successful, and it was clear by the end of the 1240s that Leon and Castile had won the great game. It had secured a larger chunk of Al-Andalus for itself than Aragon had managed to do.

Muslim residents, though, were on the move, not only across the lands conquered by Leon and Castile but also across the region of Valencia. During the 1240s, vast numbers of Christian settlers had poured into the region, with settlers from Catalonia mainly moving to the coastal regions, leaving the mountains to be settled by Aragonese newcomers. The city of Valencia also contained a growing population of Christian settlers. Displaced Muslims drifted towards the countryside, choosing for the most part to remain in the region. Now this, as we've seen from previous episodes, was the outcome which King James had wanted. He had intentionally conquered the region in such a manner so as to encourage Muslim residents to remain, to preserve the output and the wealth of the region.

It did have its drawbacks though. Not all displaced Muslims were happy with their new circumstances, and insurrections and rebellions against Christian rule were common across Valencia. The most successful of these rebellions was led by a man called al-Azraq. We've had “Team Black” under Ibn Hud, and “Team Red” is still going strong under Ibn al-Ahmar in Granada. Al-Azraq is now leading “Team Blue”. Al-Azraq actually translates from Arabic as “the blue”, and al-Azraq may have earned the nickname because he had blue eyes. Anyway, al-Azraq will be a thorn in King James's side throughout the 1240s and the 1250s, leading a number of rebellions against Christian rule, reportedly at times with financial backing supplied by the Kingdoms of Leon and Castile.

While we've seen the Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Leon and Castile competing with each other for territory in Al-Andalus, you might be wondering: what were the other Christian kingdoms up to? Well, the Kingdom of Navarre isn't taking part in this game. Since the ascension of its new King, Tibhaut, its orientation has been over the Pyrenees towards France. It's simply not interested in conquering land in the Iberian peninsula so far from its borders.

That leaves the Kingdom of Portugal. The Kingdom of Portugal is currently being ruled by King Sancho II, and it's safe to say that his rule has had its ups and downs. His rule had commenced back in the year 1223 following the untimely death of his father, King Alfonso II, at the age of only 37. Now Alfonso II's rule had been pretty successful. He didn't seem that interested in military campaigns or territorial expansion. Instead he was focused on policy and administration, particularly in clawing back some of the excess wealth of the Church and using that wealth for the benefit of the Portuguese people. Unsurprisingly, this led him into direct conflict with Rome, a conflict which resulted in him being excommunicated by Pope Honorius III. Unfortunately, at the time of his untimely death he was still an excommunicate and had not yet resolved the conflict between the Church and the Crown inside his kingdom.

This meant that the new King, Sancho II, was in for a bit of a bumpy ride. The fact that Sancho was only sixteen years old when he rose to the position of King didn't help matters, with the bishops and senior clerics of Portugal intent on exploiting the new King's youth and inexperience to claw back the privileges they had lost during his father's reign. Whereas King Sancho's father had been focused on policy matters and had been

seemingly less interested in military affairs, his son Sancho proved to be the opposite. Likely heartily fed up with the scheming and politicking of church officials and noblemen inside his kingdom he took refuge in military campaigns, and was pretty successful. His attempts to widen his kingdom by expanding its borders eastwards into the regions around Badajos and Merida were successfully resisted by Castile, but he did manage to push his kingdom southwards into Al-Andalus, expanding his kingdom into pretty much the borders of the modern country of Portugal.

In hindsight though, King Sancho should have spent less time expanding his kingdom and more time appeasing his noblemen and the Church. By the time the year 1240 rolled around things were getting a bit out of hand. Furious Portuguese bishops were by now frequently appealing to Rome to secure support for their conflict with King Sancho, and during the 1230s sentences of interdict and excommunication had been imposed on King Sancho, charges which were confirmed by Pope Gregory IX. Pope Gregory though, acknowledging King Sancho's successes in the Reconquista, was not inclined to go so far as to remove King Sancho from power. This inclination though will not be shared by his successor, Pope Innocent IV, who will do everything in his power to secure the downfall of the Portuguese King.

But King Sancho's exit will have to wait, because it's summer in Australia and I'm about to take my annual break. We will leave Aragon with its boundaries now pushed all the way past the city of Valencia, the Kingdom of Portugal with its boundaries now similar to that of modern day Portugal. Navarre is keeping to itself up in the north, and Leon and Castile, well, that's the one to watch, with Castile eyeing off Jaen and the city of Seville as its next conquests. But as I just mentioned, that will all have to wait until February.

If you would like something to listen to in the meanwhile, take a look at the History of the Crusades' Patreon page. You can join for \$1 per month and, once you have joined, you can access the entire back catalogue of episodes, which includes a series on the Hussite Wars in the Kingdom of Bohemia. We're also nearly to the end of a highly entertaining series covering the Munster Rebellion in Germany in the 16th century, in which a group of Anabaptists took over the city of Munster to prepare for the Second Coming and the end of the world, crowning one of their own King, not just of Munster, not of Germany, but of the entire world. It's quite an astonishing story. If you want to hear what happens, join me over in Patreon. You can find the link at my website, crusadespod.com.

Thank you for listening and I wish a very merry Christmas to all of you who celebrate, and I also wish all of you a safe 2025. Until February, bye for now.

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