

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 105
The Fall of Jaen and Seville

Hello again. Last time we saw the demise and then the death of King Sancho II, who was replaced as King by his younger brother Alfonso in the year 1248. We also saw Ibn al-Ahmar from Team Red push back against recent Christian gains. Ibn al-Ahmar took advantage of the fact that King Fernando III had fallen ill to seize two towns under Castilian rule. Unfortunately for Team Red, the Castilian King recovered from his illness, and when we left the last episode, he was taking revenge on Ibn al-Ahmar, ravaging the countryside outside one of the key cities controlled by Team Red, Jaen.

Now, interestingly, prior to his illness King Fernando had been absent from the battlefield in Al-Andalus for three years. Ibn al-Ahmar had used that three year window to push back against Christian expansion. When King Fernando returned to Al-Andalus in the year 1244, after recovering from his illness, he seemed to possess an intensity, an energy, and a focus that had been absent from his campaigns for many years. King Fernando spent a year punishing Team Red by destroying crops and plundering regions under Muslim control. By the year 1245, King Fernando had managed to capture six key towns from Ibn al-Ahmar. While King Fernando concentrated on the region around Jaen, he sent his son Prince Alfonso further south to the plain of Granada, where he conducted raiding missions deep inside Ibn al-Ahmar's territory. Worryingly for Ibn al-Ahmar, the Muslim forces seemed powerless to stop the Castilian advances, and Team Red's attempt to retake the town of Martos was easily repelled by its Christian garrison.

Then, in January of the year 1246, King Fernando began a siege of Jaen. Now this isn't a new experience for King Fernando. Astonishingly, this is the fourth time he has attempted to take Jaen, with his first unsuccessful attempt having taken place nearly twenty years earlier in 1225. There were reasons why Jaen was so difficult to defeat. The city of Jaen was dominated by a fortress which was virtually impregnable. The fortress was located high on a hill overlooking the city, while the city itself was surrounded by well-built walls. The only feasible way to defeat Jaen was to starve it into submission, so that's what King Fernando intended to do. His forces had already destroyed crops and produce in the countryside around the city. Now they cut off all avenues of supply into the town and settled in to wait for its citizens to surrender. Ibn al-Ahmar attempted on a number of occasions to break the siege by secretly transporting supplies into the city, but he failed on every single attempt.

In March of the year 1246, Ibn al-Ahmar had a change of heart. He requested a meeting with King Fernando and at that meeting he offered to surrender the city of Jaen in return for a twenty year long truce. In addition to the truce, Ibn al-Ahmar offered to become vassal to the Christian King. Now this seems like a shocking capitulation on the Muslim ruler's part. As vassal to King Fernando he would be required to send troops to serve under the Christian King if requested to do so. He was also required to attend the Royal Court once a year and to pay an annual tribute into the Castilian royal treasury. Realistically though, this was actually a good deal for Ibn al-Ahmar. It meant that he was able to keep the core of his territory, which centred around the cities of Granada, Malaga, and Almeria. In effect, it will enable Ibn al-Ahmar and his descendants to reign over their Muslim Kingdom of Granada for the next couple of centuries, and for most of this time, the Kingdom of Granada will be a vassal kingdom to Christian Castile. So both rulers in effect

got what they wanted. King Fernando scored Jaen on his fourth attempt to do so, while Ibn al-Ahmar laid the foundations for a long-lasting Muslim dynasty.

Once the surrender of Jaen was formalised it became a Christian city. As Muslim residents who didn't wish to live in a Christian town packed up and left, the vacated properties were distributed by the Castilian king to new Christian residents. The mosque of Jaen was converted into a cathedral and was placed under the auspices of the Bishopric of Baeza.

King Fernando then held a war council to decide his next move. Although there was a suggestion that the victorious Castilian King might take his armies to northern Africa and attack Sale in Morocco or even that they might venture further afield to attack the Turks in Asia Minor, it was pretty obvious to everyone what the next target would be. Seville at this point in time wasn't just the most opulent city in Al-Andalus; it was described by D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain" as being, and I quote, "the greatest city in western Europe" end quote. This great prize lay to the west of the newly conquered city of Jaen, and the only person who may have been able to effectively defend Seville against a Christian attack, Ibn al-Ahmar, was now a Christian vassal, so it was pretty clear. The next target in the sights of King Fernando was the magnificent city of Seville.

The citizens of Seville had been well aware of this possibility, and following the fall of Jaen and the pledge by Ibn al-Ahmar to become vassal to King Fernando they held out an olive branch, seeking peace with the Christians in return for the payment of tribute. This didn't last very long though. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan reports that a conflict broke out inside Seville between its citizens and a governor sent to the city by the Emir of Tunis. During the dispute, one of the most influential citizens of Seville was assassinated. The assassinated man was not only highly prominent inside Seville, he had contacts across the peninsula, with one of his strongest allies being King Fernando. According to Muslim chroniclers, it was the death of this man which gave King Fernando the pretext to break off peace negotiations and to instead set in place plans to conquer the city.

Now at this point in time, King Fernando is aged in his late forties and has been on the throne of Castile for around thirty years. Despite all his years of military experience, the attack on Seville will be by far the most ambitious and the most complex military campaign he has ever launched. Why? Well, firstly due to the city of Seville itself. Seville was a large city. In fact, it was the largest city in Al-Andalus. It was protected by an imposing fortress and was ringed by thick walls. Impressively, a total of 150 defensive towers were embedded into the walls at regular distances between each other. But the city itself wasn't the only town the Christians would need to contend with, as Seville was surrounded by a ring of fortresses and fortified towns, all of which would need to be conquered by King Fernando before he could even get close to Seville.

It wasn't all bad news for the Christians though. Internally Seville was a hot mess. Over the past couple of decades the citizens of Seville seemingly hadn't been able to agree on whom should govern the city. At various times they had welcomed then rejected Ibn Hud, Ibn al-Ahmar, the Almohads in the form of the Caliph al-Rashid, and more recently the Emir of Tunis. With Ibn Hud dead and Ibn al-Ahmar now siding with the Christians, the people of Seville had all but run out of protectors and allies, with the likelihood of the Almohads or the Tunisians sending weapons or military support to the city remote due to the mixed experiences the northern Africans had had attempting to rule Seville. So, despite having formidable defences and being surrounded by protective fortresses, the city was effectively on its own.

Following the success of his siege of Jaen, King Fernando decided on a similar strategy for Seville. He would defeat each of the protective fortresses surrounding the city, then block all supplies coming into Seville. This was going to be rather challenging as Seville had access to the sea via the Guadalquivir River, so a fleet of ships would be needed to guard the entrance to the river and to patrol the river itself to ensure no supplies could reach it from the water.

King Fernando began his campaign in September of the year 1246 by raiding around Carmona, one of the city's protective fortresses, which lay to the north-east of Seville. Joining King Fernando and the armies of Leon and Castile in the campaign were members of the military orders of Santiago and Calatrava, the militia of Cordoba, and some 300 Christian knights. Ibn al-Ahmar was also present with 500 Muslim knights, fulfilling his new duties as vassal to Castile. The armies launched assaults on all the outer fortresses, and one by one they all capitulated. The first one to fall surrendered in 1246, followed in relatively quick succession by Carmona and eight other fortresses. The Muslim residents of the defeated towns were allowed to remain in their homes, but their fortified towns now fell under Christian sovereignty.

As King Fernando was scoring victory after victory over the protective fortresses, he received some bad news from home. His mother Berenguela had died in Castile. This was a significant loss for the kingdom. Berenguela was extremely capable and had been very active in the administration of both Leon and Castile, acting as regent and ruling on King Fernando's behalf whenever he was away on military campaigns. She had been heavily involved behind the scenes in logistics and in providing troops and provisions for the current campaign. Her death meant that no one was currently in charge of the day-to-day running of the Kingdoms of Leon and Castile. King Fernando seriously considered downing his weapons and returning to the Christian north, but in the end he decided to continue the campaign, sending his brother, who of course was named Alfonso, back to Toledo to deal with their mother's death and to act as regent. Berenguela ended up being buried at Las Huelgas near Burgos, and her tomb is still there today.

Anyway, in summer of the year 1247 King Fernando and his forces arrived outside the walls of Seville, and the siege began. Now the people of Seville were ready, willing, and able to defend their city. In his book "The Reconquest of Spain", D. W. Lomax reports that the city's walls, moats, and defensive towers were in good repair. There was plenty of water available from the city's wells, and they intended to bring food into the city from the plains to the city's west, from boats carrying supplies up the river, and from Triana, which was an outer suburb of Seville which lay on the other side of the river. A pontoon bridge had been built across the river linking Seville to Triana, providing an important route for supplies to enter the city. D. W. Lomax also states that the city possessed a number of good fighting men along with many proud Hispano-Arab families who were intent on keeping their city out of Christian hands. Finally, they had at their disposal shipyards, armourers, and military engineers skilled in the use of mines and Greek fire.

Once the siege was in place, King Fernando sent one of his military commanders back northwards to gather all the ships he could to form a naval blockade of the river. Around a month later the Christians had completely surrounded Seville to its east and north. The supply routes out of the city across the western plains had been cut off, and the only routes of supply or communication into Seville were via the pontoon bridge and via the river. In July of the year 1247 the commander who had been dispatched to collect ships arrived with a fleet of thirteen vessels. The Christian fleet entered the Guadalquivir River

and were attacked by a much larger Muslim force comprising over thirty ships. The Christian fleet prevailed, with three Muslim ships destroyed and another three captured. The Christian fleet sailed up the river to Seville, patrolling to prevent supplies from reaching the city. Muslim defenders from Seville sent a giant raft containing buckets of Greek fire downstream towards the Christian fleet, but the Christians managed, with some difficulty, to fend it off.

For those of you who don't know, Greek fire was sort of an early form of napalm. Once ignited it was almost impossible to extinguish. It didn't respond to water like normal fire, but kept burning even when drenched with sea water. No one to this day knows exactly what was in Greek fire, but it had been developed by the Greeks in the Byzantine Empire, hence its name. It was an incredibly effective and destructive weapon against ships, and its use prompted King Fernando to order Seville's docks to be raided and its stocks of Greek fire to be destroyed.

Early in the year 1248 Christian reinforcements arrived under the command of King Fernando's son, Prince Alfonso, and in May of 1248 the Christians scored a breakthrough when they managed to ram the pontoon bridge using two ships, destroying the access from Triana into Seville. The siege was now tightened and it was just a matter of waiting for the starving citizens of Seville to surrender.

Summer in the year 1248 was an absolute scorcher, and not only the residents of Seville but the Christian besiegers suffered in the relentless heat, with outbreaks of disease making life miserable in the city and in the besiegers' camps. Conditions inside Seville began to become unbearable. Morale plummeted as people began dying of starvation. Chroniclers described residents of Seville staggering around the streets in states of extreme malnutrition, in a manner which resembled drunkenness.

By November, the people of Seville had had enough. Negotiators were allowed to enter the city, and talks around surrender began. The city council eventually agreed to quite harsh conditions. King Fernando insisted that the city be vacated, and in the end that was what was agreed. The surviving Muslims of Seville would have one month to gather their possessions, sell what they could, and leave. On the 23rd of November in the year 1248, the royal standard of Castile was raised over the palace of Seville.

The capital city of Al-Andalus, Seville, had fallen to the Christians. Join me next time as we discuss the fallout from this momentous event. Until next time, bye for now.

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