

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 107  
King Alfonso X of Leon and Castile, Part One

Hello again. Last time we took a look at the last surviving piece of Muslim territory on the Iberian peninsula, the Kingdom of Granada, and we waved goodbye to King Fernando III of Leon and Castile, who died in the year 1252.

Now, the death of King Fernando kind of heralds the end of the golden age of the Reconquista. The great game, of the Christian kingdoms competing to annex Muslim land, is pretty much over for the next couple of centuries, but don't panic, this podcast is far from over, as the Reconquista itself continues all the way to the year 1492 when, spoiler alert, the Kingdom of Granada falls to the Christians. So with the borders of the Kingdom of Granada pretty much staying static until then, are we in for a boring 200 years? No, we are not. There is a lot happening, and we will attempt to cover it all.

We will start by looking at the reign of King Fernando's son and heir, King Alfonso X of Leon and Castile. When Alfonso was crowned in the year 1252 he was thirty years of age and had been married to Violant of Aragon, daughter of King James of Aragon, and his wife Violant of Hungary, for three years. Alfonso and his wife Violant, at the time of his coronation, have no children, which isn't terribly surprising due to the fact that Violant was only twelve or thirteen years old at the time of their marriage. Alfonso, at the time of his coronation, was concerned that Violant may be unable to bear children, and reportedly was even considering having the marriage annulled to ensure that he could produce an heir. But he shouldn't be worried. Violant became pregnant not long after he was crowned, and she will end up bearing him the astonishing total of eleven children, all but one of which, almost equally astonishingly, will survive until adulthood.

But Alfonso's talents weren't restricted to producing vast amounts of children. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's possible that King Alfonso the X of Leon and Castile was the most qualified heir to the throne ever in the history of Spain. As we saw at the end of the last episode Alfonso's father, King Fernando, was one of the most accomplished and successful monarchs in the history of the Iberian peninsula, and he taught his son and heir all that he knew. Since the age of sixteen Alfonso had accompanied his father on his military campaigns. He took to military life like a duck to water, and for the past decade or so he has been taking a leadership role in many military campaigns, conducting them on his father's behalf.

In addition to being a talented and experienced military commander, Alfonso is also versed in the administrative and political skills needed to keep his kingdoms running smoothly. He is also well educated and is very, very smart. How smart, I hear you ask. Well, here's a piece of trivia for you. There is actually a crater on the moon named after King Alfonso. The crater was originally named Alphonsus Rex, meaning "King Alfonso" in Latin, but the "Rex" part of the name was later dropped, so the crater is currently called the Alphonsus Crater. The reason why a crater on the moon is named "Alphonsus" is because King Alfonso developed a keen interest in the field of astronomy. Later in his reign he will assemble a group of scholars in Toledo, not just Christians but several Jewish scholars as well, who will build on the work done by Islamic astronomers to compile a set of computations and data designed to compute the position of the sun, moon, and planets relative to the fixed position of stars. These tables of calculations were known as the

Alfonsine tables, and they were incredibly important and influential in scientific circles. To give you an idea of just how important they were, Nicholas Copernicus, who is known as the father of modern astronomy, purchased a copy of the tables from the University of Krakow in Poland over 200 years after Alfonso's death. Copernicus reportedly went to the expense and effort of getting the tables professionally bound, and some scholars assert that the tables formed the basis for Copernicus's groundbreaking theory that the Earth orbited around the sun.

King Alfonso's intellectual interests weren't restricted to the sciences either. He was active in the fields of literature, history, and law. He introduced a new legal system inside his realm and even attempted to compile a history of the world, a work which was admittedly pretty ambitious and apparently ground to a halt after covering the birth of Jesus Christ. Probably his most impactful legacy arose from the fact that he filled his royal court with scholars, not just from the Christian traditions but from Jewish and Muslim cultures. He sponsored the pooling of a vast amount of knowledge from Latin, Arabic, and other sources inside his court, and ordered a number of works to be translated into the Castilian language, which had a profound impact on the cultural standing of Spain.

Alfonso X, then, was an amazingly accomplished monarch, and you would have to say that his talents were matched by his ambitions. Unfortunately for Alfonso though, he rose to power at the same time as the Reconquista was mostly over. Likely keen to match or exceed his father's accomplishments, Alfonso seemed optimistic that he could flex his muscles not only against the remaining Muslims on the peninsula but against his fellow Christian kings.

In fact, King Alfonso didn't feel his ambitions to be constrained by the geographic boundaries of the Iberian peninsula. Keen to exert Castilian influence over the Pyrenees into wider Europe, he looked for an opening in European politics and found one in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, whom we mentioned back in Episode 104 when he clashed repeatedly with the papacy, died in the year 1250, two years before Alfonso was crowned King. Frederick's son Conrad stepped into the role before he too died, in the year 1254. The next person to put his hand up for the role was William II of Holland, who had been ruling Germany as an anti-king ever since Frederick had been excommunicated by the Pope. But he too died, in 1256.

This left a diminished field of people who were prepared to put their hands up to be elected as Holy Roman Emperor. One of the people who did put his hand up was Alfonso. This was quite a flex. According to Peter Wilson in his book "The Holy Roman Empire", Alfonso had never even visited Germany or any of the regions in the rest of the Holy Roman Empire, but he began lobbying the electors to become their next emperor. You might be asking - if Alfonso had never even been to any of the regions comprising the Holy Roman Empire, why did he think he had a shot at becoming its emperor? Well, in one word, bloodlines. Through his mother Alfonso considered himself to be part of the powerful Hohenstaufen family, the same family which Frederick II had been a part of. Alfonso's mother was Elizabeth of Swabia, who in turn was the daughter of Philip of Swabia, who had been King of Germany and who himself was the son of one of the greatest Hohenstaufen monarchs, Frederick Barbarossa. So, through his mother Alfonso claimed he had enough Hohenstaufen blood in his veins to be elected as Holy Roman Emperor.

He wasn't the only contender though. There was another outsider running for the position, Richard the Earl of Cornwall, from England. Handily for Richard, his sister had been married to Frederick II, so he was brother-in-law to a Hohenstaufen. He had also been on

crusade, was the brother of the current King of England, and was gobsmackingly rich. In fact, he was considered to be the richest man in Europe. Also working in his favour was the fact that he had actually visited Germany and other parts of the Holy Roman Empire. In the election for Holy Roman Emperor which was held in 1257 both men scored well, and in a shock move, both ended up being named as Holy Roman Emperor, sharing the title jointly. Richard travelled to Aachen in Germany to be crowned as Emperor, but Alfonso decided to continue his policy of not travelling to anywhere in the Holy Roman Empire, so he stayed put and was never formally crowned. As you might imagine, trying to remain the joint ruler of an empire you have never set foot in will be quite a tricky business, and it is generally thought by historians that Alfonso's ambitions over the Pyrenees distracted him from domestic politics and gains he could have been making on the Iberian peninsula.

Anyway, enough of Alfonso's wider ambitions. What were his intentions so far as the Iberian peninsula were concerned at the beginning of his reign? Well, according to Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", when King Alfonso set his agenda for his proposed military conquests at the start of his reign he picked three separate targets: the Kingdom of Portugal; the Kingdom of Navarre; and the Muslims of northern Africa.

As part of his planning against Northern Africa he decided to continue to enact his late father's plan to invade the region, although, in true Alfonso X style, he decided on a campaign much more ambitious and much more risky than the one originally decided upon by King Fernando III. Basically, with the assistance of his vassal, the ruler of Granada Ibn al-Ahmar, King Alfonso has decided to launch a crusade against the Muslims of northern Africa, with a view to conquering part of northern Africa and bringing it under Castilian control. That ambitious crusade into northern Africa is still in the planning stages.

The first campaign of King Fernando's reign was against his fellow Christian kingdom and neighbour, Portugal, so let's see how that panned out. Now, to be fair to King Alfonso, he didn't wake up on the first day of his reign and decide to attack Portugal. No, actually, during the early days following his rise to power he sensibly focused on consolidating the gains his father had made in the regions around Seville. He encouraged settlers from across the Christian parts of the peninsula to relocate to the region, offering them incentives such as land, houses, olive groves, and vineyards. As was to be expected, there were pockets of Muslim resistance throughout these newly conquered territories, and they took advantage of King Fernando's death to attempt to throw off their new Christian ruler. The most serious of the uprisings occurred in the town of Jerez, which is located to the south of Seville near the mouth of the Guadalquivir River. King Alfonso was forced to travel to Jerez and besiege it. In the end, the Muslim residents of Jerez agreed to recognise King Alfonso as their overlord, on the condition that they be allowed to retain their houses and their lands. King Alfonso lifted the siege once the terms were finalised, and this prompted a bunch of other towns in the region, who had also refused to recognise King Alfonso's sovereignty, to throw up their hands and surrender on the same terms.

It was likely while he was in this region that he noticed that the Kingdom of Portugal had shifted its boundaries into territory which he, King Alfonso, considered to be part of Castile. The central part of the dispute concerned territory to the east of the Guadiana River. King Alfonso of Castile argued that, nearly 100 years ago, King Fernando II of Leon and King Alfonso I of Portugal had agreed that the border between the territory of Leon and Portugal should be drawn along the river. In more recent times though, King Sancho II of Portugal had crossed the river and had conquered territory along its eastern banks, territory that King Alfonso viewed as forming part of Castile. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain"

Joseph O'Callaghan reports that the war between the two Alfonso's limped on until the year 1253, when the matter was resolved on quite unusual grounds.

You might remember we mentioned back in Episode 104 that prior to becoming the King of Portugal Alfonso had married a French countess named Matilda, the Countess of Bologna. Well, despite being still married to Matilda, in order to resolve his conflict with Castile, Alfonso of Portugal agreed to marry Alfonso of Castile's eleven-year-old illegitimate daughter Beatrice. The idea was that, once the newlywed couple had a son, and once that son turned seven years of age, the disputed territory would be handed over to Portugal, which would hold it in full sovereignty. Until that time though it would be under the control of Castile.

There were clearly a number of problems with this proposal. Aside from the fact that Beatrice was only eleven years old while her new husband was aged in his early forties, the King of Portugal already had a living wife and just wasn't free to take a new one. This didn't stop him though. He did marry young Beatrice, and in the year 1255 Matilda of Bologna appealed to Rome, accusing King Alfonso of Portugal of bigamy. It took Pope Alexander IV three years to rule on what looked like a pretty cut-and-dried case. In 1258 he placed King Alfonso of Portugal under interdict on the grounds of adultery, for in effect taking a new wife when he already had one. Pope Alexander ordered King Alfonso to return the dowry he had claimed from Matilda upon their marriage, but before anything took place Matilda died, which sort of resolved the problem. Despite an outcry from many Portuguese noblemen, who thought he had gotten the raw end of the deal with Castile, and despite the huge age gap, the marriage between Alfonso and Beatrice ended up being pretty successful. She did produce a son and ended up being respected and loved by the Portuguese people.

Anyway, the good news for Alfonso of Leon and Castile was that the settlement of his dispute with Portugal meant that he could now move to the next item on his to-do list. Join me next time as King Alfonso X turns his attention to the Kingdom of Navarre. Until next time, bye for now.

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