

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 108
King Alfonso X of Leon and Castile, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we saw an ambitious new king, King Alfonso X, rise to power in the Kingdoms of Leon and Castile. He hit the ground running, keen to expand on the extremely successful rule of his father, King Fernando III. His first move as monarch was to resettle territory and consolidate Christian rule in the region around Seville. This sparked a short war with the Kingdom of Portugal when King Alfonso realised that Portugal had expanded into regions considered part of Castile. We saw at the end of the last episode that this dispute was resolved when King Alfonso of Portugal agreed to marry King Alfonso of Castile's young, illegitimate daughter Beatrice, with the idea that the disputed territory would be held by Castile until any son which Beatrice might bear in the future turned seven years of age, when the territory would be handed over to Portugal.

With his dispute with Portugal having been resolved, King Alfonso of Castile turned to the next subject on his to-do list, the Kingdom of Navarre. The Kingdom of Navarre had appeared on King Alfonso's radar due to the fact that its king, King Thibaut I, had died in the year 1253. You might remember that King Thibaut of Navarre was actually a Frenchman. He ruled both Navarre and the County of Champagne and spent most of his reign travelling back and forth between his two territories. The good news for King Thibaut was that when he died he did have a son and heir ready to ascend to the throne, who incidentally was also named Thibaut. The bad news was that young Thibaut was only fourteen years old when he rose to power, meaning that he was too young to rule on his own behalf, so his mother ruled Navarre as regent for the first few years of her son's reign, with the assistance of the ruler of Navarre's neighbour Aragon, King James.

King Alfonso of Castile decided to muscle in on this arrangement. He wanted to elbow Aragon out of the way and convince the young King of Navarre and his mother to agree that Navarre should become a vassal state of Castile. In support of his claim, King Alfonso pointed to an event over 100 years earlier, when the then ruler of Navarre, Garcia Ramirez, pledged fealty to then King Alfonso VII of Castile. Unsurprisingly, the young King of Navarre didn't share King Alfonso's view that Navarre should bow down before Castile. When Castilian troops began massing on the border between Castile and Navarre, the young King of Navarre and his mother appealed to King James of Aragon, who was happy to back Navarre militarily, which eventually forced King Alfonso to recall his troops and to drop his ambition to annex Navarre to Castile.

A frustrated King Alfonso then explored potential conquests to the north of Navarre. The Duchy of Gascony was located on the northern border of the Kingdom of Navarre and occupied a chunk of land over the Pyrenees and up the coastline of what today is the southwest region of France. For the past 100 or so years, Gascony had formed part of the territory of the English crown, and at the moment the noblemen of Gascony were none too happy with their overlord King Henry III of England. King Alfonso sensed an opportunity. His great grandmother had been Eleanor of England, daughter of King Henry II of England. Deciding this gave him the right to challenge the King of England for the rulership of the Duchy of Gascony, King Alfonso contacted disaffected members of the nobility inside Gascony and began making plans. King Henry of England realised what was happening and quickly moved to block King Alfonso's efforts. Eventually the two monarchs settled the dispute via a treaty formulated at Toledo in 1254 whereby Alfonso transferred

his claims to Gascony to his sister Eleanor, who in turn agreed to marry Edward, the son of King Henry and heir to the English throne. Thirteen year old Eleanor promptly married Edward at the monastery of Las Huelgas in November of 1254, and she will later become Queen of England as the wife of King Edward I.

Anyway, with Alfonso's ambitions to the north now thoroughly thwarted, it was time for him to turn his attentions southwards. You might remember we mentioned in the last episode that King Alfonso had begun planning a major campaign in northern Africa, a campaign based upon his father's idea to invade northern Africa, a campaign which was still in the planning stages when King Fernando died. In true Alfonso style though, the current plans were much more ambitious than those formulated by his father. King Alfonso's plan was to launch a crusade into northern Africa with a view to claiming a portion of it for Christendom and annexing it to the Kingdom of Castile. Fortunately for King Alfonso, the political situation inside Morocco was becoming increasingly fractured and confrontational, and to King Alfonso's mind it was just a matter of him building up his navy, his armed forces, and his logistics planning while waiting for an opportunity to intervene to present itself.

The opportunity came in the year 1260, when the Moroccan city of Sale reached out to King Alfonso and requested his assistance. Basically what had been happening across northern Africa was that a clan of Berbers from the Western Sahara, known as the Banu Marin, or the Marinids, were sweeping across the region, filling the power vacuum left by the decline of the Almohads. There was still a handful of Almohad rulers clinging to power though, one of them being the governor of Sale. Incidentally, the governor of Sale had ties to the Iberian peninsula. He was actually one of the sons of Abu Zayd of Valencia. Anyway, he sent a message to King Alfonso requesting Castilian assistance to defend Sale against the Marinids, offering as an incentive to convert to Christianity if King Alfonso sent troops to Sale. King Alfonso leapt at the offer, believing that once he had secured Sale and claimed it for Christianity he could use it as a base for a wider crusade across the region.

The campaign started well. A fleet of 37 Castilian ships set sail for Sale, arriving there safely in September of 1260. Instead of defending the city and assisting it to shake off the Marinids though, the Christians went on a plundering, murderous rampage. In the words of Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith", and I quote "the Castilian fleet arrived at the Moroccan port in 1260, but rather than defending the city, the troops who disembarked brutally sacked it, killing many men and old women, plundering homes and shops, and defiling the main mosque by raping the women and girls they had corralled within its precinct. Some 3000 captives were carried back to the slave market of Seville" end quote.

Clearly there had been some sort of communications breakdown between King Alfonso and his commanders. Whereas King Alfonso had envisaged the Castilians arriving, securing the city for Christianity, then holding it as a future base from which Christian crusaders could conquer northern Africa, the commanders on the ground seemed to view the campaign as a smash-and-grab mission. Once they had looted the city and filled their ships with slaves they returned to Castile, abandoning Sale to its fate and ending King Alfonso's dreams of African conquest.

Likely feeling increasingly frustrated by his thwarted ambitions, the next target chosen by King Alfonso was more modest and easier to achieve. While the Kingdom of Granada remained vassal to the Kingdom of Castile, there were two much smaller Muslim kingdoms just to the west of the Kingdom of Granada, which had previously sworn fealty to King Fernando III, but now that his son Alfonso was in power had decided to shake off their Christian ties. The two kingdoms were Jerez de la Frontera, which was located on the

southern coastline next to the Kingdom of Granada and which contained the port of Cadiz, and the Kingdom of Niebla located just up the coast to the north, with its capital at Huelva. King Alfonso was particularly keen to secure the port of Cadiz in order to expand Castile's access to the coast. In fact, in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan contends that King Alfonso may have occupied Cadiz some time during 1260, and that the fleet which set sail for northern Africa may actually have departed from Cadiz.

First up was the Kingdom of Jerez. King Alfonso's troops attacked and captured the fortress at Jerez. The ruler of Jerez decided to flee rather than surrender. He sailed to Morocco along with all the members of his court. With Jerez and its port of Cadiz now under Christian control, King Alfonso then besieged the city of Niebla. Unlike the fortress at Jerez, the city of Niebla was strongly fortified and much easier to defend. As a consequence, King Alfonso found himself involved in an extended siege of the city. Nearly ten months later Niebla finally capitulated, quickly followed by all the other towns under its control, including the port of Huelva. Like the ruler of Jerez, the Muslim ruler of Niebla fled to Morocco. King Alfonso was keen to populate the region with Christian inhabitants, but by this stage Spanish Christians keen to relocate to Al-Andalus were thin on the ground. Just about everyone who had wanted to shift southwards had already done so. So instead King Alfonso informed the Muslim residents of Niebla and Jerez that they could remain where they were so long as they submitted to Christian rule.

Pleased that he was finally getting some wins on the board, King Alfonso then looked around for more conquests in the region, and his eyes fell upon two key ports located just around the coastline from his new acquisitions, the cities of Gibraltar and Tarifa, which currently formed part of the Kingdom of Granada ruled by Ibn al-Ahmar. Since the kingdom of Granada was a vassal state to Castile, I guess King Alfonso might have believed that if he just asked politely for these two vital sea ports, well Ibn al-Ahmar might just nod and hand them over.

That didn't happen though. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan writes that, although Ibn al-Ahmar was taking his duties as vassal seriously, he was still paying his annual tribute, and travelling to Seville once a year to bend his knee to the Christian King, he realised that handing Gibraltar and Tarifa over to Castile would be a grave mistake. Why? Well, because if King Alfonso controlled those two ports, he would effectively be able to exercise control over the entire length of the Strait of Gibraltar, cutting off access between the Kingdom of Granada and northern Africa. This in turn would mean that Granada would be blocked from calling on Morocco or Tunisia for military assistance, which as a result increased the likelihood of Castile moving in to fully annex Granada and turning it into a Christian province of Castile. So Ibn al-Ahmar stood his ground and refused to give up his ports. Since that meant he was making a stand against his overlord King Alfonso, Ibn al-Ahmar sensibly decided to quietly ask around for support.

Ibn al-Ahmar quickly found out that King Alfonso had managed to make a lot of enemies since his rise to power. The recently exiled rulers of the tiny Muslim kingdoms of Jerez and Niebla raised their hands to make a stand against King Alfonso, as did the Marinids from Morocco, and the Tunisians. Closer to home, many towns in Christian occupied Al-Andalus expressed interest in joining a mass uprising against Christian rule.

A few months into the year 1264 firm plans were in place, and the plans were rather audacious. The idea was that at the end of May in the year 1264, 3000 Marinid warriors would arrive in Al-Andalus from northern Africa and would participate in a general uprising against Christian rule, with towns pledging to kill their Christian garrisons, seize the towns

for themselves, and kill or drive out the recently arrived Christian settlers. The Muslims of Seville were tasked with a special mission of their own. Their job was to kidnap King Alfonso X, who was expected to be present in Seville at the end of May. With the King of Leon and Castile in Muslim custody, Ibn al-Ahmar would formally break his bond of vassalage and seize back Al-Andalus with the assistance of the northern African troops.

Oh dear. How did the revolt pan out? Well, you'll need to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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