

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 29
The Kingdom of Navarre

Hello again. Last time we saw the end of the Caliphate in Al-Andalus as, after decades of chaos and instability, the last person to be appointed Caliph, Hisham III, was expelled from Cordoba in the year 1031 and wasn't replaced. In this episode, we will start to take a look at how each of the Christian kingdoms in the peninsula have been faring in recent times, something we have neglected to do while we've been concentrating on the downfall of the Caliphate.

First up is the Kingdom of Navarre. Now, annoyingly, there is very little information available about the history of Navarre at this point in time, which is an absolute shame, particularly as it features a man who will become instrumental in the establishment of two new Christian kingdoms which are about to emerge: the Kingdom of Castile and the Kingdom of Aragon. That man's name is Sancho Garces III, also known as Sancho el Major, or Sancho the Great, and he ruled the Kingdom of Pamplona, as it was then known, from 1004 to 1035.

Why is there so little information available about the Kingdom of Navarre at this time? Well, Roger Collins, in his book "Caliphs and Kings of Spain", reports that there are very few documents currently in existence generated inside the Kingdom of Navarre before the 12th century. As such, most of the knowledge we have about Navarre during this time comes from Christian texts created outside the Kingdom of Navarre, from documents penned at much later dates, or from references to Navarre in Arab sources. As a result, knowledge about Navarre during this period is, in the words of Roger Collins, and I quote "sketchy in the extreme" end quote. Despite the sketchy nature of what we have to work with, we are going to attempt to piece together at least an outline of the history of Navarre up until the end of the Caliphate in the year 1031. First, let's recap what we already know.

The last person we focused on from the Kingdom of Navarre was Queen Toda, who we mentioned back in Episode 20. You might remember from that episode that Queen Toda married Sancho Primera Garces, also known as Sancho Garces I, who became the King of Navarre in the year 905. Queen Toda, who you might also recall was related to Abd al-Rahman III, who was her nephew, went on to establish a royal dynasty, with Sancho Primera Garces generally being recognised as being the first King of Pamplona, or the first King of Navarre, in a line of kings which will last for the next few centuries.

Sancho Primera Garces died in the year 925, when the couple's son and heir, a boy named Garcia, was still a child. Queen Toda ruled on her son's behalf, but when he became old enough to rule in his own right he reversed many of his mother's policies, causing conflict between his Kingdom and neighbouring Al-Andalus. When we last left Queen Toda she had successfully propelled her grandson Sancho the Fat onto the throne of the Kingdom of Leon, following Sancho's adherence to a strict weight loss programme devised by Hasdai Ibn Shaprut. You might remember that Hasdai Ibn Shaprut had been sent to advise King Sancho following a request made by Queen Toda to Abd al-Rahman III. In appreciation for all the assistance he had provided, Queen Toda and King Sancho travelled to Cordoba to bend their knees to Abd al-Rahman in the year 960, with Abd al-Rahman dying shortly afterwards.

Now, Queen Toda's son ruled Navarre as King Garcia Sanchez I until the year 970, which meant that he was on the throne for nearly 50 years. Unfortunately though, we really don't know much about him, other than the fact that after having been put back in his place by Abd al-Rahman, the Kingdom of Navarre pursued policies of peaceful coexistence with al-Andalus for the remainder of King Garcia's reign, while he also, like his mother Queen Toda, became involved with the internal politics of the Kingdom of Leon, with a number of marriage ties between the kingdoms of Navarre and Leon being established. Interestingly though, the marriage ties between Navarre and Leon hadn't included King Garcia's son and heir, Sancho Garces, who ended up being married to the daughter of the Count of Castile. When Sancho Garces became King Sancho Garces II in the year 970, he ruled Navarre alongside his brother Ramiro, before Ramiro was killed in battle in the year 981. King Sancho Garces II died in the year 994, after what Roger Collins describes as, and I quote "a long but poorly recorded reign" end quote.

Unfortunately, the reign of the son of Sancho Garces II, who ruled as King Garcia Sanchez II, was even more poorly recorded. Little is known about him other than the fact that he was known as Garcia the Tremulous, which perhaps suggests that he may have suffered from a nervous or neurological disorder. There are no references to him at all after the year 1002, and he is believed to have died a few years after this, with his son Sancho Garces III commencing his reign around the year 1004.

Now Sancho Garces III, or Sancho the Great, is the man we want to focus on, and thankfully there is comparatively more information available about his reign. Under the rule of Sancho the Great, Navarre flourished. In the words of Bernard Riley in his book "The Medieval Spains" and I quote "The tiny kingdom had, under Sancho el Major, briefly overshadowed all of Iberia" end quote.

To be fair, Sancho the Great did ascend to the throne at a time when the Caliphate was about to face-plant. When Sancho is generally believed to have commenced his reign, in the year 1004, the caliphate was halfway through the reign of Abd al-Malik, so for the next almost three decades Al-Andalus will be rocked by poor governance and internal strife, and won't be concerning itself at all with the expansionist activities of the newly-minted young King of Navarre. Happily for Sancho the Great, the dominant kingdom in the Christian north, the Kingdom of Leon, will also hit a rough patch, and will be rocked by division and infighting. Will Sancho the Great take full advantage of these two bits of good fortune? Yes, he absolutely will.

Only a few years into his reign, King Sancho began pursuing a policy of expansion, annexing land to the east of his kingdom along the Pyrenees, and marrying the daughter of the Count of Castile. At this time, King Sancho was only young. Exactly how young is unclear, but it's likely he was only aged in his early teens, but both these decisions, particularly the decision to marry the daughter of the Count of Castile, proved to be very sound ones.

Indeed, over the years, King Sancho will strengthen his ties to the County of Castile, culminating in him being named as the Protector of Castile on behalf of its new under-aged ruler in the year 1017. The name of the new, under-aged ruler of the County of Castile was Garcia Sanchez, and ten years later, young Count Garcia Sanchez will become betrothed to the daughter of King Alfonso V of Leon, a move which was strongly opposed by King Sancho of Navarre. Why did King Sancho fail to give his blessing to this marriage? Well,

because it would likely see the powerful Kingdom of Leon become even more powerful by moving to annex the County of Castile.

The wedding was set to take place in Leon, but as the Count of Castile arrived in Leon, he was assassinated, which prompted King Sancho the Great of Navarre to resume his Protectorship over the County of Castile, and effectively annex Castile to his tiny Kingdom of Navarre, even going so far as to declare his son Ferdinand to be the next ruler of Castile. And yes, in case you are wondering, King Sancho of Navarre was a suspect in the plot to assassinate the Count of Castile, but nothing was ever proven.

King Sancho clearly had big plans for his son Ferdinand, who wasn't even the eldest of King Sancho's sons. That distinction went to his son, Garcia. Still, King Sancho negotiated for Ferdinand to marry the sister of King Bermudo III of Leon, a move which he hoped would one day result in Ferdinand being the ruler of the Kingdom of Leon in addition to the County of Castile. In fact, King Sancho won't have to wait that long to extend Navarre's influence over the Kingdom of Leon. He declared war on King Bermudo III of Leon some years later, and aided by the combined forces of the County of Castile and the Kingdom of Navarre he defeated King Bermudo in battle and declared himself to be the King of Leon.

So you might be thinking "That's pretty impressive. King Sancho, the third of Navarre, is now the ruler of territory stretching all the way from the Kingdom of Leon across the County of Castile and into Navarre." Actually, though, it went much further than that. At the height of his powers, King Sancho actually ruled the Christian north in addition to territory all the way across the Pyrenees to Barcelona. But wait, there's more. His domain also extended over the other side of the Pyrenees into Gascony, in what today is the country of France. How, you might ask, did all this come about?

Well, King Sancho had strong ties to the Duchy of Gascony and the Duke of Gascony, Sancho VI. Duke Sancho VI of Gascony, in addition to sharing the same name as King Sancho, was also related to him. In fact, Duke Sancho of Gascony spent a great deal of time at the royal court in Pamplona, and as King Sancho delved deeper into the politics of the ruling authorities over the Pyrenees, establishing diplomatic relations with Aquitaine, Blois, and Champagne, Sancho of Gascony began to view himself as a vassal of King Sancho of Navarre, a view which King Sancho of Navarre whole-heartedly encouraged. After the death of Duke Sancho in the year 1032, King Sancho made it official and declared himself to be the new ruler of Gascony.

It appears that another result of King Sancho's involvement in French politics was the submission of Berengar Raymond I of Barcelona to Navarre. While Berengar of Barcelona was also the vassal of the King of France, Barcelona and Navarre shared a common enemy in the Count of Toulouse, and it may well have been in Barcelona's best interests to submit to the might of Navarre as a protector against possible incursions by Toulouse into Barcelona.

So there you have it. King Sancho el Major, or Sancho the Great, definitely earns his title by managing to extend the influence of the tiny Kingdom of Navarre right across the Christian north, down, across, and over the Pyrenees, all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea at Barcelona.

Two other achievements of note by King Sancho the Great was the fact that he relocated the royal court from Pamplona to the town of Najera, which was located in a valley across the River Ebro, an indication that his power base no longer lay in the Pyrenees mountains but in a more European style court, in a pleasant river valley in the Iberian peninsula.

Secondly, he instituted a number of infrastructure projects across his vast domain, probably the most significant of these being the improvement of the roads linking the Duchy of Gascony with the Kingdom of Leon. This led to an increase in the number of pilgrims crossing the Pyrenees into the Iberian Peninsula on their way to Santiago de Compostela, and is considered to be one of the cornerstones of the establishment of the Camino de Santiago, the famous European pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela.

Probably the most impactful and long-lasting legacy of King Sancho, though, came about as a result of his death. King Sancho decreed that upon his death, his territory be divided amongst his four sons as follows. The eldest son, Garcia, inherited the Kingdom of Navarre, which had expanded from the tiny kingdom it had been at the commencement of the reign of Sancho the Great, and now included some territory annexed from the County of Castile as well as three additional Basque provinces. Garcia ended up ruling Navarre as King Garcia III.

The next son to inherit was Fernando, the son most likely tagged by his father as being the most promising. To Fernando went the County of Castile.

The next son to inherit was an illegitimate son named Ramiro, and he was given the County of Aragon.

The final, youngest son, Gonzalo, was awarded territory to the east of Aragon in the Pyrenees. However, Gonzalo was assassinated a decade later and his territory was annexed to the neighbouring County of Aragon.

In case you are wondering about the Kingdom of Leon, well, that was claimed not by any of King Sancho's sons, but by the defeated King Bermudo III, who reclaimed his throne following King Sancho's death. However, King Bermudo shouldn't get too comfortable, as two years after reclaiming his throne King Bermudo will be defeated and killed in battle by Fernando, who will then have himself crowned as the King of Leon.

In fact, all three surviving sons will end up becoming the king of his realm, signalling the commencement of the Kingdom of Aragon and the Kingdom of Castile.

So as you can see King Sancho III of Navarre had quite an impact. Not only did he take advantage of the decline of both Al-Andalus and the Kingdom of Leon to expand his influence across the Christian north and down, over, and across the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean Sea, the distribution of his territory following his death in the year 1035 saw the establishment of the Kingdom of Aragon and the promotion of Castile from a county to a kingdom. This is where we see the beginnings of the creation of the five Christian Spanish kingdoms we saw during our series on the Crusade against the Cathars in the History of the Crusades Podcast, those kingdoms being Leon, Castile, Navarre, Aragon and Catalonia.

Join me next time as we zoom down to the Pyrenees and take a closer look at the development of two emerging powerhouses: the Kingdom of Aragon and the Kingdom of Catalonia. Until next time, bye for now.

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