

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 30  
Aragon and Catalonia

Hello again. Now, before we get started I have a correction to make from the last episode. When talking about Sancho the Great's son Fernando, I incorrectly called him Ferdinand for the first half of the episode. I'm not sure why that happened, but eventually I heard the drums and switched him back to his correct name, Fernando. So just to make sure we're all on the same page. His name is Fernando, not Ferdinand. Sorry about that. Now back to this episode.

Last time, we tracked the expansion of the Kingdom of Navarre under the rule of King Sancho Garcés III, or Sancho the Great. Taking full advantage of internal disruptions inside Al-Andalus and the Kingdom of Leon, Sancho the Great extended the influence of the tiny Kingdom of Navarre, right across the northern part of the Iberian peninsula, then across the Pyrenees and down to the Mediterranean Sea. After his death, King Sancho's territory was divided amongst his sons, with the end result being that his son Garcia became King Garcia III of Navarre, his son Fernando became the King of Leon and Castile, and his son Ramiro became the first King of Aragon. Now, our focus to date, so far as Christian ruling entities in the Iberian Peninsula are concerned, has been on the Christian north and the rise of Galicia, Leon, Castile and Navarre. In this episode we will turn the spotlight onto the Pyrenees mountains, and the emergence of two additional Christian regions, Aragon and Catalonia.

Now, those of you who have listened to the Crusade "Against the Cathars" series from the "History of the Crusades" podcast will be familiar with Aragon and Catalonia. Basically, by the time of the Crusade against the Cathars, which took place during the 13th century, three Christian kingdoms shared the territory along the Pyrenees mountain range and adjacent territory on the Iberian side of the mountains. If you go back to think of the Iberian peninsula as a square with its upper right corner lopped off, the cut made along the lopped-off corner is lined with mountains known as the Pyrenees mountain range, and the other side of the mountain range is occupied by various French territories. By the 13th century, the northern part of the Pyrenees contained the Kingdom of Navarre, whose territory stretched to the northern coastline of the Iberian Peninsula. In the middle of the Pyrenees mountain range was the landlocked Kingdom of Aragon, and the southernmost part of the mountain range was claimed by the Kingdom of Catalonia, which had the city of Barcelona as its capital and which also held territory along the Mediterranean coast. We covered the Kingdom of Navarre in the last episode, so now we will take a look at how the other two kingdoms emerged, starting with Catalonia.

Now today, the city of Barcelona is home to around 1.6 million people and is the capital of the region of Catalonia in Spain. However, historically Barcelona predates Catalonia, and the history of Catalonia is pretty much the history of the establishment of Barcelona and the expansion of territory out from Barcelona into neighbouring regions.

Historians dispute the actual time and circumstance of the founding of Barcelona, but it first appears definitively in the historical record as a Roman military camp in the year 15 B.C.E. Its excellent harbour and its handy location on the Mediterranean coast meant that Barcelona quickly expanded to become a wealthy trading port, which minted its own coins

and boasted a number of impressive public buildings. Barcelona was conquered by the Visigoths in the fifth century, and they were so impressed by the town that they briefly made it the capital city of the entire Iberian Peninsula.

Barcelona fell to the invading Muslims in the eighth century, but as power in Al-Andalus became centralized in Cordoba, distant Barcelona became part of the “march” region, or the borderland territory, claimed by Cordoba but frequently annexed to the Christian Frankish realm. Charlemagne conquered Barcelona and claimed it for the Franks in the year 801 and installed a ruler who was known as the Count of Barcelona. Charlemagne decreed that Visigothic laws would govern Barcelona and its surrounds, and the Franks at this stage viewed Barcelona and the regions around it as a sort of Christian buffer zone, known as the March of Spain or the March of Barcelona, protecting France from Al-Andalus.

Following the death of Charlemagne, Barcelona seems to have become caught in a tug-of-war between Cordoba and various ambitious men on the French side of the Pyrenees. Christian rulers from Frankish realms such as Septimania and Toulouse would move in and claim Barcelona, only to be pushed back by Muslim advances ordered from Cordoba. The first man of the early medieval era to rule Barcelona on behalf of the people who lived in Barcelona is thought to have been the excellently named Wilfred the Hairy, who we have mentioned in previous episodes.

Wilfred was installed as the Count of Barcelona in the year 870 by the King of West Frankia, Charles the Bold. However, Wilfred would go on to rule not on behalf of the Franks, but on behalf of the people of Barcelona and its surrounds. He forged a sense of cultural identity amongst the people across the Spanish march regions, and in the process pretty much created the region of Catalonia. The descendants of Wilfred the Hairy will rule Catalonia on and off for the next five centuries. Those descendants, who generally took the title of “The Count of Barcelona”, acted initially as vassals of the Frankish kings, calling on military assistance from the Franks to defeat attacks from Cordoba.

This was pretty much the situation up until Count Borrell II of Barcelona, who turned his back on France and instead ended up brokering a treaty with al-Mansur, a position he was pretty much forced into by the fact that al-Mansur's forces had launched a highly successful and devastating attack on Barcelona in the year 985, which destroyed much of the city and killed many of its residents. We discussed this raid briefly in Episode 25 but we didn't discuss the ramifications of the raid for the County of Barcelona. It meant that, as we've just stated, Count Borrell II was forced to bend his knee to Cordoba, an act which had unintended consequences so far as the Caliphate was concerned. This was due to the fact that, by effectively submitting to Cordoba, Barcelona was no longer reliant on the Frankish realm, as had been the case for the past century.

Free from French influences and French patronage, the County of Barcelona focused inwards and forged its own ecclesiastic culture and its own independent path forwards. Bishops and abbots were appointed in regions across Catalonia, all of which attempted to outdo each other in promoting and enriching their own congregations. As a result, many became centres for scholarship and learning, some of them gaining enough prestige and confidence for them to reach out across the Pyrenees and form relationships with other Church communities in France and Italy.

Ties of scholarship and learning were reinforced by trading and economic links with the Christian nations of Europe until, by the time the Caliphate went into decline, Catalonia was well able to stand on its own two feet. By the time the year 1000 rolled around, Barcelona was not only trading with continental Europe, but slaves, weapons, horses and cloth were being traded with the Muslims of Al-Andalus. Not only had trade expanded, so had farming, with new land being settled and cleared, while established farmland was seeing an increase in production due to recent innovations in tools and farming techniques. As the wealth and prestige of Barcelona increased it began to attract new settlers, many of whom made their way down from the Pyrenees Mountains to seek a more favourable existence in the flourishing city.

At this time, the legal system operating inside Catalonia was Visigothic and the administrative system was largely French Carolignian. However, this all changed under the rule of Count Ramon Berenguer I, who rose to power in the year 1035. Gradually, over the course of the next few decades, Count Ramon Berenguer I forced the numerous knights, castellans, lords, and viscounts across Catalonia to swear personal fealty to him, thereby establishing a new feudal order with himself, the Count of Barcelona, at the pinnacle of the Catalanian feudal pyramid. This in turn laid the foundation for the dawning of a golden age of independence for Catalonia, which commenced around the year 1060.

That's pretty much covered Catalonia. What about Aragon? Well, Aragon, as a ruling entity, came into existence much later than Catalonia. As we've already mentioned, the region, which was to become Aragon, was located in the middle section of the Pyrenees mountains, running down into the Ebro River valley. Once it becomes fully established, the Kingdom of Aragon's territory will extend all the way down from the Pyrenees mountain range into the valley and across the Ebro River, encompassing the city of Zaragoza. But that's some time into the future, and we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves,

At the time of its creation in the ninth century, Aragon was only around 600 square kilometres in size, and was located in the Pyrenees around a series of small valleys surrounding the River Aragon. The river Aragon itself commences high in the Pyrenees at a place called Astun, to the east of Pamplona. The river swings back to the southwest towards Pamplona before winding its way through a series of small valleys and emptying itself out 129 kilometres later into the River Ebro near Tudela.

After the Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula, a group of Visigothic separatists mobilised across the small rural settlements around the river Aragon and began calling themselves the Aragonese. They were determined to make a stand against Al-Andalus and also create for themselves a small independent community in the mountains.

Now, you would think that the various Visigothic chieftains who led the Aragonese from the ninth century onwards would have aligned themselves with the Basque people of nearby Pamplona. Strangely though, they didn't do this at all. Initially, the Aragonese formed close ties with the Franks across the Pyrenees, and in his book "The Medieval Crown of Aragon", T. N. Bisson speculates that the early leaders of the people of Aragon may have been of Frankish descent, as they appeared naturally drawn towards the people on the other side of the mountain range and certainly seemed to have been culturally and politically connected to the Franks.

T. N. Bisson notes that the people of Aragon may have sought to maintain ties with the Franks as an insurance against the Muslims, however, as the centuries passed the

Muslims didn't manage to conquer the territories around the river Aragon, and the people of Aragon instead watched with growing interest as the residents further down the valley, and all the way to the River Ebro, began pushing back against Muslim rule. The Aragonese leaders began forming ties both with Christians in the Middlemarch region and with their neighbours to the west in Pamplona.

The kings of Pamplona viewed the rulers of Aragon as being quite a way down the regal ladder, with the leaders being seen at best as being able to claim the title of Count. As the Kingdom of Navarre began to hit its stride, exercise power, and dominate the region, Aragon seemed to be in danger of being swallowed up entirely by Navarre. As a consequence, during the 10th century, the Aragonese attempted to push back against Navarre and assert their independence, with the result that the Kingdom of Navarre annexed territory to the south of the River Aragon and fortified it, preventing Aragon from expanding down into the valley. In fact, things looked to be all over for the Aragonese during the reign of Sancho the Great, and it seemed almost inevitable that the tiny region would end up being annexed to the unstoppable Kingdom of Navarre. But as we all know, this didn't happen. The County of Aragon managed to maintain its distinct cultural and administrative identity, which was markedly Visigothic in nature.

In the year 1015, Ramiro I began ruling Aragon as a vassal of his father Sancho the Great. As we saw in the last episode, King Sancho's territory was divided amongst his sons following his death, with his eldest son Garcia becoming King Garcia III of Navarre, while Ramiro kept hold of Aragon. Ramiro acknowledged the supremacy of his brother, the King of Navarre. As a result Navarre withdrew from the fortifications it had created to the south of the River Aragon, which allowed Aragon to expand its territory down towards the river Ebro and along the Pyrenees mountains. This meant that during the rule of Ramiro I the tiny region of Aragon expanded to cover territory six times larger than its original footprint. Aragon then began being recognised as a kingdom in its own right, although Ramiro refused to accept the title of King, instead referring to himself as just acting as if he were a king and referring to his Kingdom of Aragon as a "kinglet" instead of a "kingdom". Despite the modesty of King Ramiro I, the tiny, unlikely kingdom in the Pyrenees mountains had forged both an identity and a destiny for itself, and over the next few centuries it will develop into a regional powerhouse, more than holding its own against its powerful neighbours Navarre and Catalonia, and extending its influence over the mountains into what today is southern France.

So there you have it. While the Caliphate is busy tearing itself to pieces, we have caught up on the progress of the Christian kingdoms of Navarre, Aragon and Catalonia in the Pyrenees. Join me next time as we visit the Christian regions in the north of the Iberian peninsula: Galicia, Leon, and Castile. Until next time, bye for now.

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