

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 31
Galicia, Leon and Castile

Hello again. Last time we shone the spotlight on Catalonia and Aragon, two Christian entities in the Pyrenees region of the Iberian peninsula. In this episode, we will swing around to the north and get up to speed on the remaining Christian regions, those of Galicia, Leon and Castile.

Now, I've included Galicia in this list, but to be honest, during the time period we will cover in this episode (so from the decline of the Caliphate up until the end of the Caliphate in the year 1031) Galicia wasn't really a separate autonomous region. It may have thought of itself as having a separate and distinct identity, much of it centred around Santiago de Compostela, which was located in Galicia, but the truth was that it was dominated by its more powerful neighbour, the Kingdom of Leon.

The Kingdom of Leon, as we all know, was the powerhouse Christian entity in the north, and pretty much had been since the Muslim invasion of the peninsula. The Kingdom of Leon had begun its life as the Kingdom of Asturias, but had gradually expanded in size and importance, with its seat of power eventually relocating to the city of Leon.

While Galicia hadn't been able to maintain its independence from Leon, Castile had. Castile, like Aragon, is a place you wouldn't bet on if you were trying to decide which of the Christian kingdoms would survive. Like Aragon, it looked likely to be absorbed by one of its more powerful neighbours. Castile is sandwiched between Leon and Navarre and came into existence as a sort of frontier territory. As described by Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Castile started its life as a part of Leon, but its people quickly developed their own identity. Many of the residents of Castile had ties to the Basque region, and they exhibited a similar independent sort of spirit. Joseph O'Callaghan describes them as, and I quote "pioneers filled with a spirit of adventure and self confidence" end quote. Like the Basque people, the people of Castile didn't take kindly to being told what to do, and they operated under laws not dictated by Leon but of their own making. Their customs, language, and literature was completely unique, and distinct from that of neighbouring Leon, taking on a Germanic quality.

Over time, Castile, or "The Land of the Castles", became known for its signature infrastructure. In the absence of large towns or cities, the residents of Castile instead centred their lives around castles. In his book "Caliphs and Kings of Spain", Roger Collins states that few of the original castles of Castile have survived the centuries, and as such, it's difficult to say with any certainty what the castles were like. Still, Roger Collins gives it his best shot. He states that most of the castles of Castile were likely pragmatic, small buildings designed for defensive frontier living. Most were likely rectangular in shape and built with stone. They would have included a square tower in each corner protecting the central space, or bailey. The castles were likely constructed quickly and cheaply, which is why hardly any have survived. Still, Roger Collins points out that they served their purpose. None of them was likely to be subjected to siege warfare, and as such hadn't been built to withstand a lengthy siege or attacks by siege engines. Instead, the castles acted like small forts, defending the region in the surrounding area from raiders, whether they be from Al-Andalus, Navarre or Leon.

Once Castile was castled up, so to speak, and able to defend itself from its neighbours, it didn't take long for Castile to decide that it wasn't really part of Leon at all, but was its own self-governing entity. Successive counts of Castile clashed with the kings of Leon, gradually weakening the ties between the two regions until, by the last half of the 10th century, Castile was generally recognised as being an autonomous territory, separate from Leon. The Kingdom of Leon would continue to attempt to force Castile back under its thumb, but the independent-minded castle-loving people of Castile will end up forging their own path forward.

Now, we last looked in on the Christian regions of the north during the rule of al-Mansur, who repeatedly attacked and harassed them. Al-Mansur showed the Kingdom of Leon who was boss when he sacked Santiago de Compostela and removed the bells from its cathedral. Oddly though, despite the fact that al-Mansur had the Christian north on the ropes, so to speak, he never went for the knockout punch. Even though he likely had the means to do so, al-Mansur didn't seize any territory from the Christians in the north of the peninsula, and didn't move in to annex their land. Instead, he just let them sit in their corner while he repeatedly walked over to them, slapped them, and poked them in their eyes.

A few years prior to the death of al-Mansur, King Vermudo II of Leon brokered a truce between Leon and Al-Andalus. However, shortly after the truce was finalised, King Vermudo died, leaving the throne to his five year old son Alfonso, who became King Alfonso V. The policies of the Christian north towards al-Mansur's successor, Abd al-Malik, can be described, at best, as being completely submissive. The Count of Castile requested a truce from Al-Andalus along similar lines to the one already in operation between Leon and the Caliphate, and when a dispute arose concerning the regency for the child King of Leon, the dispute was resolved not within the Kingdom of Leon but by the Caliphate, with Abd al-Malik sending a judge from Cordoba to Leon to adjudicate the issue.

Abd al-Malik continued his father's policy of conducting regular raids into the Christian north, despite the operation of the truces, and when, in the year 1003 Abd al-Malik demanded that Leon and Castile send troops to assist Al-Andalus in its attack on the Christian city of Barcelona, both Leon and Castile meekly complied.

The Muslim foot came off the neck of the Christian north, though, following the death of Abd al-Malik and the subsequent rapid decline of the Caliphate. Instead of being attacked by Cordoba, the Christians found themselves instead with their roles reversed, literally, as Count Sancho Garcia of Castile agreed to assist the Berbers to defeat the Caliph Muhammad II, also known as al-Mahdi, in November of 1009. The Castilians then joined with the Berbers to plunder and sack the city of Cordoba, and after they had returned to the north it was the turn of the Catalans, who joined with al-Mahdi to attack and plunder the city in June of 1010. Then, as we all know, the wheels pretty much fell off the cart of the Caliphate, and with Al-Andalus descending into internal chaos and destruction, the Christians, for the first time in centuries, were free to do as they pleased.

Basically, doing as they pleased involved attempting to repair the damage done to Leon and Castile during the rule of al-Mansur and Abd al-Malik, and knocking heads with each other.

The first person to engage in a spot of head-knocking was Count Sancho Garcia of Castile. He was the uncle of the child King of Leon, Alfonso V, and he decided that it would be a brilliant idea if he, the Count of Castile, acted as regent for his young nephew. This didn't end up happening, but Castile took advantage of the fact that the King of Leon was a child to annex quite a bit of territory in the border region between Leon and Castile, an act which would result in ongoing conflict between Leon and Castile well into the future.

Luckily for everyone, King Alfonso V came of age in the year 1008 and began ruling in his own right. Instead of taking advantage of the chaos in Al-Andalus and working to extend the borders of his kingdom southwards, and instead of going on the offensive to reclaim the borderlands recently annexed by Castile, King Alfonso was forced to concentrate on internal matters. Many cities in his kingdom, including the capital city Leon, had been extensively damaged by Muslim raids, so King Alfonso concentrated on repairs to buildings and infrastructure, while also working to attract settlers back to the regions in the south of his kingdom which had been depopulated during decades of Muslim incursions. He only felt comfortable enough to go on the offensive towards the end of his reign, but his decision to attack territory inside Al-Andalus backfired when he died in battle in the year 1028.

History then looked like repeating itself, as Alfonso's son and successor Vermudo was only nine years old when his father died, so for only the third time in its history, the Kingdom of Leon had a child on its throne when Vermudo was crowned as King Vermudo III in 1028. Unfortunately for young Vermudo and for the Kingdom of Leon, the man currently occupying the throne of nearby Navarre, was Sancho Garces III, also known as Sancho the Great, who we met back in Episode 29. Sancho the Great's sister Urraca was now effectively ruling the Kingdom of Leon, due to the fact that she was the mother of young King Vermudo and the widow of King Alfonso V. Just to complete the cosy family ties across the Christian north, the current ruler of Castile, Garcia Sanchez, was Sancho the Great's brother-in-law.

Right, so just to complete the picture of the current state of Christian rule in the peninsula, the Kingdom of Navarre has expanded out to encompass a large amount of territory along the Pyrenees, including the County of Aragon, and the current Count of Barcelona, Berenguer Ramon I considers himself to be a vassal of Navarre. So at this current point in time, Sancho the Great, not without reason, considers himself to be the effective ruler of the entire Christian population of the Iberian Peninsula.

However, in the year 1029 the Count of Castile, Count Garcia Sanchez, decided to attempt to shake off the overlordship of Navarre and forge an alliance with Leon, with the idea that once King Vermudo came of age, Leon and Castile would be able to unite and push back against Navarre. To advance this proposal he arranged a marriage alliance between himself and King Vermudo's sister, sealed by the promise that, as her dowry, his new wife would gift some strongholds in the borderlands which King Alfonso had managed to win back from Castile. This all seemed like a fabulous plan, but the plan was completely upended when Count Garcia was murdered on his way to attend the wedding. We mentioned back in Episode 29 that Sancho the Great was a prime suspect in this assassination, but the crime was never solved. Anyway, after the assassination, King Sancho of Navarre annexed the County of Castile to his kingdom, but in order not to cause too many waves, he decreed that his son Fernando would be the next Count of Castile.

Having placed Castile firmly under his thumb, King Sancho then turned his attention to the Kingdom of Leon. Now, the Kingdom of Asturias, which subsequently evolved into the Kingdom of Leon, had been the jewel in the crown of the Christian north since the rise of Al-Andalus, so it's not surprising that King Sancho the Great of Navarre fancied getting his hands on the crown of Leon. The speed bump on the road to King Sancho being crowned as the King of Leon was the annoying fact that someone was already occupying the throne, that someone being King Vermudo III.

By the year 1034, King Vermudo was 19 years old and able to rule in his own right. Clearly the older, more experienced, more successful Christian king, Sancho the Great believed that he, and not the young, untried, teenage Vermudo should be known as the King of Leon, and by using a quick sleight of hand, King Sancho managed to make this happen. How did he do this? Well, he declared King Vermudo to be not the King of Leon, but just the Emperor of Galicia. Since Sancho the Great was very obviously the most powerful Christian ruler on the Iberian peninsula at this stage, no one was about to argue with him. As a result, King Sancho occupied the city of Leon and began calling himself "Rex Dei Gratia Hispania rum", which can be translated from the Latin as "By the grace of God, King of Spain". Sancho the Great, King of Spain, then issued some coinage from Leon depicting himself and his fancy new title, but he wasn't able to enjoy his lofty position for long, as he died the following year. King Vermudo then returned from Galicia and placed himself back on the throne of Leon.

That pretty much concludes our examination of Christian Spain at the time of the fall of the Caliphate. While Al-Andalus was busy fragmenting and unravelling, the Christians of the Iberian peninsula were doing the opposite: they solidified; they straightened themselves up; and worked out who they were. They then drew boundaries around themselves and morphed into the kingdoms which will shortly begin to push back on Al-Andalus in the form of the Reconquista.

Join me next time as we leave the Christians and return to Al-Andalus, to witness the rise of the Taifas. Until next time, bye for now.

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