

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 35
Succession

Hello again, and welcome to another year of podcasting. If you stretch your memories back to our last episode, you might recall that we waved goodbye to the epically successful King Fernando, the King of Leon and Castile. By the time of his death, at the age of 50 in the year 1065, King Fernando was acknowledged to be the most senior and most powerful of all the Christian kings on the Iberian peninsula. During his reign, he instituted a policy of raid-and-tribute across the taifas of Al-Andalus, raiding into every one of the Muslim kingdoms, and collecting tribute from many taifas in return for protection or in return for holding off on the raids. As we mentioned in the last episode, by the time of his death, King Fernando effectively controlled the Christian north, comprising the top one-third of the Iberian peninsula, and had managed to subjugate the middle one-third of the peninsula, which contained the powerful taifas of Badajoz, Toledo and Zaragoza, which was a pretty impressive feat.

Now, the good news was King Fernando was the father to three adult sons at the time of his death, and in December of 1063, two years before his death, he set out his succession plans, dividing his kingdom amongst his three sons. As such, when he died, his succession plans kicked into action and his kingdom was divided as follows. To his eldest son, Sancho, he bequeathed the Kingdom of Castile, along with the right to collect tribute from the Taifa of Zaragoza. Included in this parcel was a kind of overlordship over the Kingdom of Navarre, which was currently ruled by Sancho's cousin. The second eldest son, Alfonso, inherited the heart of King Fernando's kingdom, comprising the Kingdom of Leon and the current seat of power for the Kingdom of Leon, the city of Leon. This territory also included the old lands of Asturias and the old Asturian capital of Oviedo. Alfonso also inherited the right to receive tribute from the Taifa of Toledo. Fernando's youngest son, Garcia, received Galicia and the lands Fernando had conquered to the south of Galicia into modern day Portugal, along with the right to collect tribute from the neighbouring taifa, Badajoz.

King Fernando also had two daughters, Elvira and Urraca. As was the tradition at the time his daughters didn't inherit any territory, but they didn't emerge empty-handed. No, in return for the promise that neither of them would marry, Elvira and Urraca received, drum roll please, monasteries. Yes, the consolation prize for the daughters of King Fernando was that they inherited control over all of the monasteries in the three territories held by their brothers.

Anyway, back to Fernando's sons. Now, while it was nice that all three boys inherited a slice of the pie, it was all but inevitable that, at some stage, one or all of the sons would make a move against his brothers in an attempt to seize a greater share of the pie, or in fact, all of the pie. Fortunately for everyone, the boys' mother, Queen Sancha, was able to keep them in line and prevent them from squabbling, at least while she was alive, but Queen Sancha only outlived her husband for a further two years.

The year after her death, the year 1068, saw the first clash between the brothers. The conflict was initiated by the eldest son, Sancho, who believed that he had received the raw end of the inheritance deal. In Sancho's view, it would have been a whole lot easier if he,

Sancho, had inherited all of his father's lands, as had been the tradition when the Visigoths had ruled the peninsula. At the very least, thought Sancho, he, as the eldest son, should have been given the core of his father's kingdom, the Kingdom of Leon. Instead, Sancho had ended up with the barren and slightly weird land of the castles, a territory devoid of large cities, full of castles and cranky, independent-minded people who tended not to be too fond of whomever was attempting to rule them.

Perhaps recalling that Fernando himself had inherited Castile from his father and had managed to expand it out over Leon and Galicia, Sancho decided it was time to make a move. He gathered his men and launched an attack on neighbouring Leon. The attack was countered by his brother, Alfonso. The two brothers clashed on the battlefield in the year 1068 with Sancho eventually declaring victory, although it wasn't much of a victory, as Sancho didn't manage to actually score any territory for Castile.

At the same time as Sancho was clashing with Alfonso, he was also in conflict with the kingdoms of Navarre and Aragon. Confusingly, the kingdoms of Navarre and Aragon were both currently being ruled by cousins of Sancho, both of whom were also called Sancho. The three Sanchos were in dispute about exactly who was entitled to receive tribute from Zaragoza. While Zaragoza did share a border with Castile, it also bordered both Navarre and Aragon, and the Sanchos from Navarre and Aragon decided that Castile shouldn't be entitled to all of the tribute from the wealthy taifa. This unsurprisingly prompted King Sancho of Castile to go on the warpath. He attacked Zaragoza and forced it into submission, then clashed with King Sancho Garcia IV of Navarre, and King Sancho Ramirez I of Aragon, in a conflict known as the War of the Three Sanchos, although maybe to call the conflict the "War of the Three Sanchos" was to talk it up a bit. It was more like a "Series of Skirmishes between the Three Sanchos", which admittedly doesn't have quite the same ring to it. Anyway, King Sancho II of Castile, enjoyed some success against the other two Sanchos, and tribute from Zaragoza continued to flow into Castilian coffers.

Meanwhile, Sancho's younger brother Alfonso was doing some flexing of his own. Deciding that, despite being his father's favourite son and inheriting the premium slice of the inheritance pie, that he could probably do a bit better for himself, Alfonso invaded Badajoz, forcing the ruler of that taifa to pay tribute not to the youngest son, Garcia, but to Alfonso.

Poor Garcia was in all sorts of strife in Galicia at this point in time, so to be honest, his older brother stealing his tribute was actually the least of his worries. The noblemen of Galicia were in open revolt, with a powerful group of them, possibly with encouragement from Alfonso, failing to follow Garcia's orders and causing him no end of headaches. Despite his best efforts, Garcia just couldn't keep the noblemen in line, and was at a complete loss when they refused to submit to his rule. Things came to a head in the year 1069 when one of Garcia's supporters, the Bishop of Santiago de Compostela, was murdered. It was clear that the killing was politically motivated, with a number of bishops and noblemen likely in on the plot. While Garcia struggled to work out how to bring the perpetrators to justice, Alfonso seized the moment and invaded Galicia. This was the final straw for Garcia, who decided to abandon his territory. He fled south to the district around Coimbra, in modern day Portugal, where he sought and was granted shelter.

Alfonso didn't have long to sit back and enjoy his victory though, as over to the east his brother Sancho was absolutely furious at this turn of events. In Sancho's view, Alfonso had

scored the best part of the pie to begin with, and for him to now expand his territory to include Galicia was completely unacceptable. In an effort to keep some sort of hold over his conquest, Alfonso offered Sancho joint control of Galicia, a proposal which was never really going to be palatable to Sancho due to the distance of Galicia from Castile and the fact that Leon was planted in the middle of the two territories. Sancho was in fact so aggravated by Alfonso's annexation of Galicia that he launched a full scale invasion of the Kingdom of Leon in January of 1072. The invasion was a solid move for Sancho, who ended up defeating Alfonso and taking him into captivity at the Battle of Golpejera. Wasting no time at all, on January the 12th, Sancho had himself crowned as the King of Leon.

With Leon and Castile now securely under his belt, Sancho then invaded Galicia and turned his armies southwards, marching all the way down to where his younger brother, Garcia, was hiding out. Garcia put up a fight but was eventually defeated by Sancho's forces, and was subsequently forced to flee further south. Much further south, in fact, to the city of Seville, where he was provided with sanctuary at the court of the King of Seville. With Garcia now safely out of the way in a taifa, Sancho allowed Alfonso to do the same, with Alfonso being granted sanctuary by al-Ma'mun of Toledo, of impressive "garden villa" fame from the last episode.

So, with Sancho now controlling all of his father's former territory and with his brothers cowering in far away taifas in the south of the peninsula, is it time to declare victory for Sancho? No, it absolutely isn't. Almost immediately, Sancho began finding out the hard way that it's one thing to defeat a territory, and it's another thing completely to rule it successfully. While Sancho was pretty good at military conquests, due in no small part to the talents of his chief military commander, a man called Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, his skill set as an administrator and political player was sorely lacking. Sancho's invasion of Leon, and the speed in which he had himself crowned as the new King of Leon, had put many powerful residents of Leon off-side. In fact, in his book "The Conquest of Muslim and Christian Spain", Bernard Riley contends that by the time Sancho had forced both of his brothers into exile in the southern taifas, every single bishop in the Kingdom of Leon, including the influential Bishop of Leon, had refused to give him their support. Sancho had also failed to convince most of the upper levels of the aristocracy in the Kingdom of Leon to recognise him as King. This, of course, was very welcome news for Alfonso.

What is Alfonso doing at the moment? Well, he's enjoying a lavish amount of hospitality from al-Ma'mun, although perhaps enjoying is the wrong word. Far from being impressed with the never ending array of parties, poetry reading nights, and social evenings on offer at the garden villa, Alfonso, who was fluent in Arabic, was acting as a sort of spy, poking his head into places where his head wasn't meant to be poked, taking mental notes of the weak points and flaws in Toledo's defences, and observing the complex political machinations inside Toledo's royal court. Later, Alfonso would express disdain about the rulers of the taifas, a view he apparently formed while at the court of Toledo, stating that the taifa kings were, and I quote "clearly all victims of madness, indulging in every manner of vice and iniquity, and passing their lives amongst a host of singers and lute players" end quote.

You may be interested to know that Alfonso was not spending all of his time tut-tutting at the antics he observed in the Royal Court at Toledo. He also had his finger on the pulse of the political situation back in the Christian north. How did he know what was taking place

in the Christian north? Well, because he was in close contact with his sister Urraca. The next question we need to ask, of course, is “What has Urraca been up to?”

Well, Urraca was the eldest of the two daughters of the late King Fernando and was in fact the eldest of all of King Fernando's children. Urraca and Alfonso had always been close, perhaps too close if you listened to some of the sordid rumours doing the rounds at the time, and Urraca hadn't been too impressed by Sancho booting Alfonso off the throne of Leon. While the remaining sister, Elvira, seemed happy with her monasteries, and preferred not to become involved in the massive amount of succession drama which was currently taking place, Urraca decided to join the growing band of powerful players opposed to Sancho's rule.

In the middle of the year 1072, only six months after Sancho had himself crowned as the King of Leon, Urraca gathered some supporters, armed them, and set up headquarters in the fortified town of Zamora, in the southern borderlands of the Kingdom of Leon. From there she established lines of communication with Alfonso in Toledo and with pro-Alfonso supporters in Leon. This, of course, could not be allowed to stand, so Sancho marched his forces southwards to Zamora and besieged the town, until he was assassinated on the 6th of October in 1072.

With Sancho dead and out of the picture, Alfonso broke out of his gilded cage in Toledo, made his way northwards, and was re-crowned as the King of Leon. Since Sancho didn't leave any male heirs, Alfonso declared himself to be the new King of Castile as well. Before accepting him as their new ruler, the nobility of Castile, lead by Sancho's military commander Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, sought and were given assurances that Alfonso had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the assassination of Sancho. Once Alfonso had sworn an oath to that effect, he was allowed to be crowned.

Incidentally, Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar will be later known to history as El Cid, and we will be hearing much more about him later. In case anyone is wondering what happened to the youngest brother, Garcia, well, after Sancho's death, Garcia came out of hiding and moved to modern day Portugal, where he tried to establish a base for himself. Urraca and Alfonso reached out to their younger brother and invited him to attend a conference in the Kingdom of Leon in February of 1073. When he arrived in the Kingdom, though, he was seized and taken prisoner. He was escorted to a monastery in the northern mountains of Leon, where he will remain until his death seventeen years later.

So, the end result of the epic succession battle following the death of King Fernando is: Sancho: dead; Elvira: monasteries; Urraca: powerbroker and monasteries; Garcia: trapped in a monastery; and Alfonso: winner.

While everyone in Leon and Castile is lying around exhausted after the succession shenanigans, events of import have also been taking place in the Christian kingdoms of the Pyrenees. Join me next time as we take a look at those. Until next time, bye for now.

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