

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 36
Barbastro, Part One

Hello again. Last time we saw a massive amount of succession drama play out following the death of King Fernando I. Basically, prior to his death King Fernando decided that his lands should be divided amongst his three sons, with Sancho taking Castile, Alfonso taking Leon, and Garcia taking Galicia, while his two daughters took control of monasteries across the three kingdoms. Eight years after his death though, King Fernando's middle son Alfonso emerged as the victor, claiming all of his father's lands, while Garcia was imprisoned in a monastery and Sancho was dead. Fernando's daughters, Elvira and Uracca, still had their monasteries, although Uracca had also become a political player, as it was her alliance with Alfonso and the subsequent assassination of her eldest brother, Sancho, at Zamora, which sealed the deal for Alfonso.

Now, in this episode, we are going to swing over to the Pyrenees to catch up on some important events which have been taking place over there, but before that, since monasteries seem to be trending, we are going to take a quick look at the role monasteries are currently playing in the Christian kingdoms, not just across the Iberian peninsula but also in wider continental Europe.

Now, I admit that in the last episode I was a bit dismissive about the fact that the female offspring of King Fernando had received only monasteries as their portion of the inheritance, but I shouldn't have been. Monasteries at this time were small powerhouses, and in the end the daughters' part of the deal worked out much better for them than that of their brothers Garcia and Sancho.

The monasteries of 10th and 11th century Europe were not at all like the caricatures of an isolated community of deeply religious men or women spending their days in devotion and prayer, completely removed from society. On the contrary, monasteries at this time were closely tied not only to the local community but to the wider Christian world, and were often powerful institutions in their own right. People who wished to join a monastery during this era were often expected to make a financial donation to the institution, meaning that monasteries were frequently stocked with men and women from wealthy families. As such, the link between monasteries and the local nobility was strong. These ties were strengthened by the fact that many monasteries boasted patrons or wealthy donors who made regular financial contributions to the monastery. In return for their generosity, the donor would receive prayers for their spiritual salvation, and would be entitled to use the monastery as a sort of hotel whenever they wished, with the monastery providing food and accommodation for the wealthy donor, their horses, and retinue. This arrangement would on occasion turn permanent, as elderly or incapacitated knights or lords would sometimes choose to spend their twilight years living in the monastery they had supported.

Monasteries also provided financial services. Most large monasteries contained secure places where valuables could be deposited for safekeeping, and the wealthier monasteries were able to provide loans to suitable applicants. The abbots of monasteries were generally drawn from the upper classes and were frequently powerful people who could bridge the gap between church and secular authorities. While the abbots were clearly part of the church, they were removed enough from the politics of the church to hold power in

their own right, while their ties with local aristocrats meant that, should they wish to do so, they were equipped to play a role in the wider political scene. King Fernando was well known for his generous donations to the monasteries in his kingdom. By far the biggest chunk of his monastery donation dollars, though, went to a monastery not inside the Iberian peninsula, but outside it, to the monastery at Cluny in France.

Cluny had been founded by the Duke of Aquitaine in the year 910 and included in the original endowment was a mixture of farmland and uncultivated land, vineyards, forests, mills, and waterways. The Duke of Aquitaine stipulated that the monastery ought to provide hospitality to the poor travellers and pilgrims. The fact that the land controlled by the monastery could provide it with its own income and the fact that the Duke of Aquitaine ensured that it was subject only to orders from the Pope in far away Rome and not to local authorities, either church or secular, meant that Cluny was able to set its own rules, and operate with a large degree of independence.

By the time of King Fernando's death, Cluny was on its way to becoming one of the most wealthy and powerful monasteries in Europe and was about to embark on a massive building programme. One reason why it was able to fund this expansion project was largely due to the fact that, during his lifetime, King Fernando had made a point of making an annual payment of 1,000 gold pieces to Cluny, a slice of the wealth he had extracted from the taifas as part of his tribute system. This was an absolutely massive sum. In fact, the annual donation from King Fernando outstripped all the other donations received in an annual period from all other sources combined.

Now, King Fernando sending a massive sum of money over the Pyrenees to Cluny Monastery in France wasn't an isolated event. Cluny was a Benedictine monastery, and the Benedictine version of monasticism made its way to Catalonia around forty years after the founding of Cluny, and from there spread to Aragon, Navarre, and Leon. What this meant in practice was that monks from the Christian kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula would travel to France and stay in various Benedictine monasteries, while French monks would frequently move to the Iberian peninsula and settle in newly established monasteries there. Cluny kept a close eye on any monasteries which were directly under its wing, meaning that the abbot from Cluny would personally inspect every priory in the Iberian peninsula operating in the Cluny tradition every few years. This resulted in a bunch of cross-cultural exchanges and led to the Benedictine way of life spreading out to the wider Church community in the Christian north and around the Pyrenees, as monks from Benedictine monasteries were appointed as bishops or to other lofty positions outside their monasteries. The cross-cultural exchange between Christian Spain and its French neighbours increased via trade, marriage, and other links.

In his book "The Reconquest of Spain", D. W. Lomax states that during the 9th and 10th centuries most of Christian Spain was isolated from the rest of Europe, save for two exceptions: Catalonia maintained its close ties with its French neighbours during these centuries; and the emergence of the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela meant that French pilgrims, including senior members of the French clergy, would make the lengthy trek across the Christian north, carrying news of events in their own region to interested locals and reporting the sights and scenes of the Christian north back to their homeland.

During the 11th century, the isolation of the past couple of centuries began to break down. Marriage alliances between ruling families in Navarre and Catalonia and French noble

families were already relatively common, but in the 11th century the practice extended to the Christian north and to distant counties across France. So just to take the example of the Kingdom of Aragon, Ramiro I of Aragon married a daughter of the Count of Bigorre, and two of his daughters married the Counts of Toulouse and Provence. Ramiro's son, Sancho Ramirez, took the bold step of marrying the daughter of a northern French count, a move which opened relations between Aragon and many noble dynasties across northern France. This type of arrangement was reflected across the remaining Spanish kingdoms, meaning that news about clashes between the taifas of Al-Andalus and the Christians of the peninsula was common knowledge in powerful families across France. It was only a short jump from hearing about clashes between Muslims and Christians in the Iberian peninsula to offering to assist in those military clashes, and Ramiro I of Aragon in particular was happy to accept assistance from his French allies in his military campaigns.

At the same time as French influences were being introduced into Christian Spain and Spanish influences were seeping across into France, significant changes were taking place across wider Christendom. The population of Europe was booming, and the healthy economy prompted western European traders, particularly those in Italy, to seek far-flung lands to expand their commercial enterprises. This brought Western Christendom into contact with the wider world, particularly the Middle East. This contact, unfortunately, didn't always lead to hugs, peace, and friendly relations. Instead, the Great Schism of the year 1054 saw the Greek Orthodox Church, based in the great city of Constantinople, clash with the Rome-based Papacy, which resulted in both Churches declaring each other to be heretical. As Western Christendom turned its gaze to lands beyond Europe, it also began to ponder the challenge which Islam posed to the idea that Latin Christianity was a universal religion.

It's against this backdrop that we will now zoom down and take a look at the death of the first King of Aragon, Ramiro I, in battle in the year 1063. Now, of course, we already know that Ramiro I was the illegitimate son of Sancho the Great, who inherited the tiny Kingdom of Aragon after the death of his father. Ramiro wished to expand the borders of his tiny realm, but the only real options were to take territory off the neighbouring Christian Kingdom of Navarre or the giant and powerful taifa down the valley from Aragon, Zaragoza.

Ramiro, not surprisingly, decided to try to gain territory from Zaragoza. Zaragoza, at the beginning of the 1060s was being ruled by a man called al-Muqtadir. Al-Muqtadir had done a fine job of expanding the territory ruled by his taifa. He had managed to conquer the taifa kingdoms of Tortosa and Denia and had absorbed those taifas into Zaragoza. He was currently planning to encircle the Taifa of Valencia and take it as well. Ramiro had managed to take a couple of strategic castles from Zaragoza in the 1050s, and in the year 1063 Ramiro decided to attack the town of Graus, which lay further down the Pyrenees mountains.

Now, at this time, King Fernando I was still alive. He will die in two years time, in the year 1065. King Fernando was taking tribute from Zaragoza, with his ultimate aim being to weaken Zaragoza then take it for himself, so it was in King Fernando's interests to keep the vast territory of Zaragoza intact. When he was advised that Ramiro of Aragon had marched down the mountains and was occupying the town of Graus inside Zaragoza, King Fernando agreed to supply military assistance to al-Muqtadir, to force Ramiro back out of Zaragoza. Fernando ordered his son Sancho to lead a military force to join al-Muqtadir at Graus. Sancho and his trusty general Rodrigo Diaz de Viva, later known as El Cid, did

exactly that, with the end result being that not only was Ramiro forced out of Graus he was killed in the process. Ramiro I was succeeded by his son, who became King Sancho Ramirez I, and King Fernando then turned his attentions away from the Pyrenees, to the west where he launched his military campaign to take Coimbra.

Now, in his book “Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain”, Joseph O’Callaghan speculates that, prior to his death, Ramiro I of Aragon may have formally requested French and Papal assistance for a military campaign against the Muslims of Zaragoza. If this was the case, it would explain what happened next. What happened next was that a large multinational Christian force set out from France with the aim of attacking and capturing the town of Barbastro, a fortified town inside the Taifa of Zaragoza, about 60 miles northeast of the city of Zaragoza. (And just as a side note, the Zaragozian town of Barbastro shouldn’t be confused with the fortification of Bobastro, which was the subject of Episode 16. They sound similar but are completely different places.)

Now, so you can get a feel of just how cosmopolitan this military force was, it contained troops from Burgundy, Normandy, and Aquitaine in France, along with Normans from Italy, and a bunch of Catalan and Aragonese men. It was led by a number of powerful noble figures, including Duke William VIII of Aquitaine, and the Norman military commander Robert Crispin, who was rumoured to be acting with the endorsement and support of Pope Alexander II. If this force looks a bit familiar, if it reminds you of the forces which went marching to the Holy Land in the History of the Crusades Podcast, well that’s because this expedition to Barbastro is considered by some historians to be the first military campaign which can be characterised as a “crusade”.

So how will this crusade fare against the Muslims of Zaragoza? Well, you’ll have to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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