

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 37
Barbastro, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we examined the emergence of cross-cultural exchanges between the Christians of the Spanish kingdoms and their French neighbours. We also saw the death of Ramiro I of Aragon following his defeat by combined Castilian and Zaragozaan forces at Graus, a town which Ramiro had besieged in his effort to seize some territory from the Taifa of Zaragoza. The death of the King of Aragon at Graus had the surprise effect of mobilising a Christian army, comprising forces from Burgundy, Normandy, Aquitaine, Italy, Catalonia, and Aragon. At the end of the last episode, this cosmopolitan force was making its way to its destination, the town of Barbastro in Zaragoza.

Now Barbastro, at that point in time, was a walled town in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountain range, which was being ruled by the brother of the King of Zaragoza. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos states that many members of the Christian army had been motivated to join the expedition due to the promise of loot and booty, and Brian Catlos states that this was augmented by a pledge from Pope Alexander II that any Christian fighting the infidel Muslims would have their sins forgiven. The Christian army lined up outside the walls of Barbastro and besieged it, however the quick victory they were expecting didn't eventuate, as the people of Barbastro mounted a staunch defence of their town.

Forty days later negotiations opened up between the two sides, and it was eventually agreed that the Christians could enter and occupy the town in return for letting all of the residents leave with whatever they could carry. However, the sight of lines of townsfolk carrying their riches with them was too much for some of the Christians who, after all, had been promised loot, and were shielded from the consequence of any sins they might commit.

The lines of departing townsfolk came under attack. Most of the men were killed, while the women and children, along with the riches scored in the attack, were carried back to the town of Barbastro. Once in Barbastro, the conquering Christians set themselves up in the homes of the men they had killed, while the women and children were used as slaves and concubines. Rape, violence, destruction, and looting then spread across the town. Gifts of plunder extracted from Barbastro was sent by the Normans to the Byzantine emperor, and those who wished to do so returned home to their regions in France and Italy, where they displayed their loot.

And the thing was, Barbastro wasn't a large or important town. Across France, and beyond, eyebrows were raised as powerful men pondered the riches which might be extracted from other, larger, wealthier Muslim cities in the Iberian peninsula.

Those Christians who had decided not to return home luxuriated in the homes they had seized in Barbastro, waited on by slaves and concubines. A Jewish traveller who passed through Barbastro following the Christian conquest reported that the Christians who remained there were living lives of, and I quote "oriental luxury" end quote.

Unsurprisingly, news of the manner in which Barbastro was taken, and the behaviour of its Christian occupiers, scandalised Muslims across Al-Andalus, and the king of the Taifa of Zaragoza, al-Muqtadir, was able to raise a sizeable army, comprising men from across all the taifas, to seek vengeance. Just in case the taifas didn't contain a sufficient supply of men, King Fernando, who was now just one year away from his death, also sent a contingent of knights to join the battle. The size of the army meant that the outcome was easy to predict. Barbastro was easily surrounded by the attacking force and was then easily overrun. Barbastro was then restored to Muslim rule, and the Christian conquerors remaining in the town were put to the sword. So, by the year 1064 everything had returned back to normal.

But the seizure of Barbastro by the Christians had two long-lasting effects. Firstly, it showed the brutality with which Christians could act while fighting Muslim opponents. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain" Joseph O'Callaghan points out that the men who initiated the attack on the line of departing residents were Christians who had had no previous contact with Muslims. Fighters from Aragon and Catalonia, who had lived alongside their Muslim neighbours, tended to treat them with respect, while the fighters from France and Italy seemed to view Muslims as people with whom they had nothing in common, and who could be treated poorly with no compunction. As Joseph O'Callaghan states, and I quote, "the crusade of Barbastro contributed nothing of permanence to the Reconquest, though it did point up the possibilities of spiritual and material gain awaiting those French men who chose to take part in future peninsula wars. The massacre of the defenders of Barbastro also exemplified the difference in attitudes of those Christians who had continual contact with Muslims and those who did not. The zeal and fanaticism displayed by the latter contrasted sharply with the comparative tolerance of the former" end quote.

Another consequence of the conquest of Barbastro was a little more unexpected. Brian Catlos describes how the Duke of Aquitaine returned from Barbastro to his homeland before the Muslims retook the town. He returned laden with booty in the form of silks, furnishings, gold, silver, and most importantly, women, whom he either kept for himself as slaves in Aquitaine or sent far and wide as gifts, to the Pope or to other lords across France. Brian Catlos states that some of these women were slaves who had been trained in the arts of music, singing, and high culture. They introduced Arab and Andalusian musical traditions into Aquitaine and neighbouring regions, which may have laid the foundations for the troubadour culture which would later spread out from Aquitaine across southern France.

Now, clearly the expulsion of the Christians from Barbastro was a setback for the newly minted Crusading movement, if that's what it was. For the next twenty years, the King of Aragon, Sancho Ramirez I will attempt repeatedly, without any real success, to score land from Zaragoza. In the year 1068, four years after the defeat at Barbastro, Sancho Ramirez took a pilgrimage to Rome. He also took the significant step of surrendering the Kingdom of Aragon to the Papacy, receiving it back as a fief over which he ruled under the authority of the Pope.

In the early 1070s, two attempts were made by the European Christians to make some inroads into Muslim Zaragoza. Both were different in nature and neither was successful. The first involved an attempt by some Christians from France to convince the king of the Taifa of Zaragoza to abandon Islam and convert to Christianity. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information available about this move to switch Zaragoza from a Muslim to a

Christian territory by means of conversion not warfare. However, it appears that two monks, one of whom may have been Abbot Hugh, the abbot of the monastery at Cluny, travelled to Zaragoza to personally deliver a letter to al-Muqtadir. The letter began very politely addressing al-Muqtadir as, and I quote “Beloved friend, the noble King” end quote. However, the letter then went straight to the point and declared Islam to be an invention of the devil. The letter concluded by inviting al-Muqtadir to convert to Christianity.

Now this was a pretty flimsy attempt at conversion, and it was pretty clear to most people that it was seriously unlikely that al-Muqtadir was going to read the letter, throw his hands into the air, and decide to switch religions. Brian Catlos points out though, that in addition to not really setting out any convincing reasons which would sway the reader to convert, the letter reveals that the Christians of continental Europe misunderstood the nature and role of Islam in Al-Andalus. In the unlikely event that al-Muqtadir had read the letter then converted to Christianity, this would have had little or no effect on religion across Zaragoza as a whole. It would merely have meant that the Taifa of Zaragoza was being ruled by a Christian. There was no obligation for the Muslims of Zaragoza to mass convert to Christianity to follow the lead of their King. In effect, the Frankish Christians didn't appreciate the fact that the citizens of Al-Andalus were free to choose whatever religion they wished to follow, and were not obliged to follow the same religion as their King. So anyway, the attempt to convince the King of Zaragoza to convert to Christianity failed.

The next attempt to turn Zaragoza into a Christian territory came by way of another crusade. As a bit of background, King Sancho Ramirez of Aragon was married to the sister of Count Ebles de Roucy, who also happened to be the daughter of Ermengol III, the count of Urgell. Urgell, you might recall, is a county in Catalonia, while Roucy is in northern France. Now, sometime after Sancho Ramirez pledged the Kingdom of Aragon to the Papacy, the brother-in-law of Sancho Ramirez, the Count of Roucy decided to lead a military expedition to Zaragoza, along the same lines as the multinational force which had descended upon Barbastro. This expedition, though, would consist predominantly of northern and southern French forces, and its participants would also be granted remission of their sins by Pope Alexander II. However, Pope Alexander died in the year 1073, shortly before the expedition was due to set out. A new pope, Pope Gregory VII, was elected, and Pope Gregory wholeheartedly approved of the venture, urging Papal legates from across southern France to give the campaign their full support.

There was, however, some important small print in the Papal endorsement of the campaign which the participants needed to be aware of. Basically, Pope Gregory viewed the entire Iberian peninsula as a Christian territory, which legally belonged to the Papacy. Pope Gregory wrote to all of the leaders of the military campaign pointing out this fact. In his letter, Pope Gregory stated, and I quote “We believe that it is not unknown to you that the Kingdom of Spain belonged from ancient times to Saint Peter in full sovereignty, and though occupied for a long time by the pagans, it belongs even now, since the law of justice has not been set aside, to no mortal, but solely to the Apostolic See”. End quote.

Basically, so everyone was clear, Pope Gregory declared that Spain belonged to the Papacy. Sure, you can go over there and conquer it, but the bit you conquer won't belong to you. No, it will belong to the Church, to Rome, to me, Pope Gregory. I, of course, will let you rule those lands if you succeed in conquering them, but just be clear that you will be doing so as my vassal, because, let me just say this again, Spain belongs to the Papacy. Once everyone was clear on this point, the expedition departed, with Zaragoza as its target.

What happened next? Well, unfortunately, no one really knows. If any records were made concerning the outcome of the campaign, they have since been lost to history. The Abbot of Saint-Denis near Paris reported that the Count of Rousy led a great army into Spain, and that's pretty much where the records end. There is little mention of the arrival of the army in Muslim sources inside the Iberian peninsula, and there is no indication that the army managed to conquer or hold any territory on behalf of the Papacy. The only thing we can say for certain is that Sancho Ramirez spent the summer of 1073, when the French expedition was meant to be attacking the Taifa of Zaragoza, also attacking the Taifa of Zaragoza, although without a large army to back him up Sancho Ramirez was restricted to sending raiding parties into the border regions and generally harassing and taunting the Muslims from Zaragoza. But again, no territory was gained from the Muslims.

So you would have to say that, so far, the reconquest of Zaragoza by the Christians is off to a rocky start. But you might be interested to know that the Reconquest is about to get a major boost in the form of the new king in the north, the victorious son of King Fernando, who at the same time as the crusade to Zaragoza is fizzling out to nothing, is busy settling into his new role as King Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile. Join me next time as King Alfonso decides to conquer part of Al-Andalus, and not just any part, but the wealthy, powerful city of Toledo. Until next time, bye for now.

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