

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 38
Toledo, Part One

Hello again. Last time we concluded our look at a couple of early crusading ventures by the Christians of continental Europe, who had the Taifa of Zaragoza in their sights as a possible target for conquest in the name of Christianity. The campaigns, though, were ultimately unsuccessful, with the town of Barbastro recaptured by the Muslims in the year 1064, and with the expedition which departed in 1073 leaving nothing of note, either in the historical records or in terms of territory gained. However, one big takeaway from the crusading attempts was the fact that Pope Gregory VII made it clear that, in the view of the Papacy, the entire Iberian peninsula was a Christian region, which if reclaimed from the Muslims could only be ruled on behalf of Rome.

Okay, now we will leave the Pyrenees region for a bit and return to the north of the peninsula, where the victorious player in the succession battles of Episode 35, King Alfonso VI, is beginning his epically long and epically successful period of rule. King Alfonso began his reign carefully and prudently. Following the imprisonment of his brother Garcia in a monastery in the year 1073, Alfonso was effectively brother-less and was free to rule over the lands that his father, King Fernando, had claimed. He sought, and was given, the submission of bishops and noblemen across Galicia, Leon, and Castile to his rule, but just to be safe, over the next two years, he will tour all of the provinces within his domain, meeting all the power-brokers across his realm, renewing and forming contacts, soothing any upsets, and doing his best to consolidate his hold on his vast new Kingdom. After that was done, he was free to turn his attentions to his Christian neighbours and to Al-Andalus. He managed to convince King Sancho Garcia IV of Navarre to accept the supremacy of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Then it was time to cast his eye over the complex politics of the taifas in Al-Andalus, and see how best to extract as much tribute as possible from them.

But before he turns his attentions to the taifas, there is something else occupying Alfonso's mind at this point in time. Alfonso was aged in his thirties, was the new king of an impressive realm, and was in need of a wife. The woman he chose was Ines, a daughter of Duke William VIII of Aquitaine. Ten years ago, Duke William of Aquitaine had experienced the Iberian peninsula firsthand via the conquest of Barbastro. The Duke had sensibly taken his plunder back to Aquitaine rather than remaining in Barbastro, so had not been personally affected by the Muslim re-conquest of the town. The experience though, had piqued his interest in the riches to be had across the Pyrenees, so when word went out that the new King of Leon and Castile was looking for a wife, the Duke of Aquitaine enthusiastically entered into negotiations.

Another party which was enthusiastic about the match, and in fact may have been the go-between, conducting negotiations between Aquitaine and Leon about the proposal, was the monastery at Cluny. Recently, King Alfonso had made his first annual financial donation to Cluny, and while the amount provided would never reach the hefty contributions made by King Fernando, it was clear that Alfonso wished to establish ties with the powerful French monastery, ties which Cluny was keen to strengthen via a marriage to an eligible French woman. Pleasingly for Alfonso, the formalisation of ties between Leon and Aquitaine would likely also weaken the bond between Aragon and Aquitaine, something which King Alfonso was keen to do. By the middle of the year 1074,

all the formalities had been covered, and the Kingdom of Leon was now ruled by King Alfonso VI and Queen Ines.

So with that all finalised, it's now time for King Alfonso to focus on the taifas. For the remainder of the 1070's, Alfonso's policy regarding the taifas was not one of territorial expansion, but rather one of extracting as much tribute as possible. In order to do this, he kept his finger on the pulse of the rivalries and weak points within the different taifas, and on conflict between the various kingdoms. Once he had spotted an opportunity to extract some tribute, King Alfonso would send one of his many diplomats into the particular taifa, as an envoy to negotiate payment in return for military assistance or in return for a promise not to invade. The diplomats chosen by Alfonso for this task ranged from noblemen from the Christian north to Jewish scholars to bishops and southern Christians such as Sisnando Davides, who we met back in Episode 33. He also employed the services of Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, later known as El Cid.

The amount of tribute which King Alfonso managed to extract from the taifas was staggering. Unfortunately, few records exist of the exact amount of tribute raised, but we do know that in the year 1074 the King of Seville paid 50,000 dinars to King Alfonso to secure the military assistance of Leon and Castile against the Taifa of Granada. Then, when Granada waved the white flag, the King of Granada was forced to pay 30,000 dinars to Alfonso to stop the invasion, along with an annual payment of 10,000 to ensure peace for the future.

As you can see, Alfonso was deftly playing both sides, with the end result being that vast sums of money were flowing out of the taifas to the Christian north. This understandably led to unrest amongst the citizens of the taifas, whose taxes kept being raised to keep up with the payments. Still, the rulers of the taifas seemingly just couldn't bring themselves to stop using Alfonso and his impressive military forces in support of their clashes. So in the year 1075 King Alfonso assisted al-Mamun of Toledo to conquer Cordoba, for a price of course, then assisted the King of Seville to retake Cordoba only two years later, again for a hefty price.

What did Alfonso do with all of the money which was flowing his way? Well, he invested it in his military forces, in public works such as the building of churches, and to fund diplomatic donations outside the peninsula, such as payments made to Cluny in France.

However, during the 1070's, cracks began appearing in the financial and social structures of Al-Andalus, due to the flood of wealth leaving the region. Unrest over high rates of taxation grew, and the coinage in some taifas began to be debased. Something had to give, and what gave was a fracturing of the political structures inside the Taifa of Toledo. Now, as we all know, the ruler of Toledo was al-Mamun, of "impressive garden villa" fame. Alfonso and al-Mamun knew each other personally, due to the fact that Alfonso spent time in exile at the court of Toledo while his brother Sancho occupied the throne of Leon.

Now, the burden caused by the large amounts of tribute being paid to Alfonso was making itself apparent via a number of domestic disputes inside Toledo. Basically, a section of the religious elite of Toledo was becoming increasingly unhappy about the fact that al-Mamun was spending so much money on his alliance with Alfonso. Deciding not to attack al-Mamun directly, the disaffected group instead tried to bring down one of al-Mamun's leading scholars, a man called Ibn al-Hatim, accusing him of heresy and of mocking the religion of Islam. The religious group managed to get Ibn al-Hatim sentenced to death in Toledo, so he fled to Badajoz, where he was provided with protection at the royal court.

However, when the religious elites from Toledo advised their counterparts in Badajoz of the nature of the charges against Ibn al-Hatim, they pressured the King of Bajajoz to withdraw the protection, which he did. Ibn al-Hatim then fled to Cordoba and was granted protection by the King of Seville. However, the King of Seville at that time was in conflict with al-Mamun, so he executed Ibn al-Hatim to strike a blow against his rival.

The blow ended up being much more effective than Seville likely intended. Al-Mamun was so furious about the death of Ibn al-Hatim that he cracked down hard on the members of the religious elite inside Toledo who had brought the original charges against Ibn al-Hatim. Why did he blame the religious elite inside his own territory for the death, and not the King of Seville? Well, because the King of Seville stated that the religious elite from Toledo had forwarded the death sentence to Seville with a request that it be carried out, and the King of Seville stated that he was merely following their orders.

Now, the crackdown by al-Mamun against his own religious elite caused the city of Toledo to erupt into a full-blown revolt. As a consequence, al-Mamun's position was severely compromised, and in the year 1075 he was assassinated, likely by the King of Seville who apparently bribed al-Mamun's personal physician to poison him.

Following al-Mamun's death, the throne passed to his grandson. Now this was a complete disaster. The grandson, who went by the name al-Qadir, which means "the powerful", was anything but. Instead, he was a young boy who had been raised inside the harem in Toledo, had been protected and pampered throughout his short life, and who had absolutely no experience, education, or ability to prepare him for the role he was suddenly thrust into. With a child, and not a particularly competent child at that, on the throne of the powerful and wealthy Taifa of Toledo, it didn't take long at all for the other taifas to attempt to take advantage of the situation. Almost immediately, the King of Seville, al-Mu'tamid, went on the offensive, managing to wrestle Cordoba from Toledo's control in the year 1076. Seville then turned its attentions towards Valencia and began work-shopping ways in which it could break Valencia out of Toledo's control and annex it instead to Seville.

What, might you ask, was King Alfonso doing at this point in time? Well, he was likely looking on with interest at the chaos spreading out over Al-Andalus, and pondering how best to leverage it to his financial advantage. But, in June of the year 1076, one year after the assassination of al-Mamun of Toledo, King Alfonso's attentions were diverted by another assassination, this time in the Christian north. On the 4th of June in the year 1076, in what Bernard Reilly describes in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain" as, and I quote "one of the more spectacular assassinations of the 11th century" end quote, King Sancho Garcia IV of Navarre was murdered when he was pushed off a cliff. Ultimate responsibility for the assassination is still a little unclear, but it seems to have come about due to a family feud, with his elder brother and sister having engineered his death. Clearly, though, if the brother, whose name was Ramon, and the sister, whose name was Ermesinda, had been responsible for the murder, they hadn't thought things through very well. In the uproar which followed the King's death, Ramon fled to Zaragoza, where he was granted asylum by al-Muqtadir, while Ermesinda passed into the custody of King Alfonso, who promptly married her off to a local nobleman. The two remaining younger siblings also became wards of Alfonso.

Where did this leave the Kingdom of Navarre? Well, it left it in all sorts of bother. King Alfonso immediately stopped what he was doing and made his way to Navarre, accompanied by Queen Ines and the cream of Castilian and Leonese aristocracy. Also on the move was King Sancho Ramirez I of Aragon, who instead of leading a diplomatic party

to Navarre went on the warpath, seizing the city of Pamplona and annexing it and the surrounding countryside to Aragon. He then travelled to Navarre to meet with King Alfonso to decide what should be done about the Kingdom of Navarre.

What they decided should be done about the Kingdom of Navarre was to carve it up between them. Aragon had already gone on the offensive and had taken the seat of power of the kingdom, Pamplona, so King Sancho Ramirez of Aragon also became the King of Navarre, although he was to rule Navarre on behalf of King Alfonso. Keen to get his fair share of the spoils, King Alfonso promptly annexed not only the borderlands between Navarre and Castile, which had loosely been claimed by Castile under his brother Sancho, but a huge 4000 square kilometres of territory inside Navarre. Some of this territory comprised wild mountainous regions inhabited by the Basque people, but most of it was fertile farmland around the Ebro River valley.

So, in one deft move, King Alfonso gained 4000 square kilometres of territory to add to the 128,000 square kilometres of territory already under his direct rule, so his realm at this point in time is about the size of the Kingdom of England. He also now has the Kingdom of Aragon firmly under his thumb. Poor Navarre will now pretty much vanish from the scene for the next sixty or so years. Just as Aragon was once a tiny portion of Navarre, Navarre is now a tiny portion of Aragon. As to the future of the little upstart Kingdom of Aragon, well, watch this space.

Unfortunately, though, you will have to wait a while to watch the Aragon space, as at this point in time we will be focusing on the combined Kingdom of Leon and Castile, which is currently hitting its stride under King Alfonso. Join me next time as King Alfonso takes advantage of internal strife inside the Taifa of Toledo. Until next time, bye for now.

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