

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 40
Toledo, Part Three

Hello again. Last time, we saw the young King of the Taifa of Toledo, al-Qadir, returned to power with the assistance of King Alfonso. The price al-Qadir paid for this assistance was high. Not only did he pledge to pay a bucket-load of money to King Alfonso in the form of future tribute, he also handed two strategic military bases inside Toledo over to the Christian King. King Alfonso was to man these garrisons with fighters from the Christian north, and was to use the strongholds to ensure that Toledo was protected from external attack by neighbouring taifas. At the end of the last episode, we also saw Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, later known as El Cid but currently known to this podcast as Rodrigo, exit the scene after he was expelled from the Christian north by King Alfonso after having undertaken a couple of unauthorised military ventures.

Now, King Alfonso's plan in relation to the Taifa of Toledo at this stage appears to have been to prop up al-Qadir and let him rule Toledo, if not as a puppet of King Alfonso then as a compliant and obedient young ruler, who would do as King Alfonso told him to do and who would send vast amounts of tribute to the King in the north throughout his reign. For this scheme to work, al-Qadir needed to consolidate his hold over his throne and eliminate all domestic threats to his rule. He had been unable to achieve this previously, as he kept being distracted by the aggression of neighbouring taifas, who repeatedly raided into the Taifa of Toledo. Now though, the role of protecting Toledo against external threats had been taken up by King Alfonso, so theoretically al-Qadir could now spend all the time he needed asserting his authority at home and defeating his opponents inside Toledo.

So, how did al-Qadir fare in his mission to consolidate his hold on power? Well, not particularly well. He did his best, and gave the whole thing a solid go, but it was like a game of whack-a-mole. With vast amounts of wealth leaving Toledo under al-Qadir's rule, and with northern Christians encamped in Toledo's key military strongholds, there was always going to be a lot of discontent inside the Taifa. As soon as al-Qadir discovered a plot to undermine his rule by one of his opponents inside Toledo and stamped it out, another one would pop up and need to be whacked. Of course, neighbouring taifas were doing all they could to gain a foothold into Toledo. While they were deterred from actually invading the taifa by the presence of King Alfonso's forces, they took every opportunity to reach out to the opponents of al-Qadir inside the Royal Court and support them in their efforts to undermine and overthrow the young King.

As al-Qadir struggled to maintain his grip on power, King Alfonso was keeping a close eye not only on unrest inside Toledo, but on the politics of the other leading taifas, particularly Zaragoza, Valencia, and Seville, weighing up his options and deciding how best to play the whole situation to his advantage. In the year 1082, three separate events combined to push King Alfonso into thinking that perhaps the best way forward would be to oust al-Qadir altogether, and take Toledo for himself.

The first event to occur had the potential to substantially alter the state of play across Al-Andalus. After a very successful stint lasting nearly four decades as the King of Zaragoza, al-Muqtadir became seriously ill during the year 1082, then died. His death sparked a mad scramble amongst neighbouring powers, particularly Aragon and Catalonia, to take advantage of the situation and seize some territory. While various

factions inside Zaragoza attempted to rise to power, the powerful taifa itself was effectively sidelined, and all its expansionist policies were placed on hold, leaving King Alfonso free to concentrate on securing Toledo, if that's what he decided to do.

The second event occurred in May of the year 1082 and came in the form of an uprising in the city of Toledo. This was the most significant attempt to oust al-Qadir from power since his return to the throne, and al-Qadir, to his credit, did manage to stamp out the flames of rebellion. Al-Qadir's forces chased the rebels out from the capital city northwards to the town of Madrid, which was located near the border between the Taifa of Toledo and the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Al-Qadir's men besieged Madrid and eventually defeated the rebels. While al-Qadir did manage to deal with the uprising all by himself, without military support from King Alfonso, the incident did show that his position on the throne was still rather precarious, and that discontent amongst the citizens of Toledo could quickly escalate into a full-blown revolt.

The final event came later in the year 1082, in the form of an envoy sent by King Alfonso to the Taifa of Seville. It's difficult to pin down exactly what took place but it appears that, in addition to requesting the usual payment of tribute, an additional request was made by the envoy on behalf of King Alfonso, a request which was turned down by the King of Seville. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Reilly speculates that the request may have been in the form of an attempt to secure the neutrality of Seville should King Alfonso make a play for the Taifa of Toledo. With Zaragoza currently in a state of disarray, Badajoz and Seville were the most likely of the taifas to push back against the annexation of Toledo by the Christian north, so King Alfonso's moves to ensure that Seville, at least, would sit on its hands if Toledo looked to be taken by Leon and Castile made sense. In the end though, the move was unsuccessful, with Seville rejecting the offer. As Bernard Riley points out, though, the approach by the envoys to the King of Seville means that, by the end of the year 1082, it was likely that King Alfonso had made his decision.

In what would be the biggest play by the Christians since the rise of Al-Andalus, King Alfonso was going to move to secure Toledo. Since this was going to be a rather risky venture, to say the least, King Alfonso proceeded carefully, slowly, and prudently.

His first move wasn't against Toledo at all, but against the "I-refuse-to-be-neutral" King of Seville. In the summer of the year 1083, King Alfonso led his army in a major offensive against the Taifa of Seville, invading and marching all the way to the city of Seville itself. The army of the Christian north camped outside the royal seat of power of Seville for three days, before then marching southwards all the way to Tarifa, which is the southernmost point of the Iberian peninsula on the Mediterranean Sea, just near Gibraltar. In a spectacular display, which was meant to send shock-waves across the taifas, King Alfonso rode his horse into the surf at Tarifa, likely then turning and holding his sword high, signalling his mastery over the peninsula. With hopes that this display of dominance would prevent any large scale opposition to the move he was about to make in Toledo, King Alfonso turned his armies back to the north.

In the autumn of the following year, the year 1084, King Alfonso finally put his plan into action. He marched the armies of the Christian north to the city of Toledo and directed them to besiege the city. The siege itself was quite interesting. There appears to have been no attempt by King Alfonso to directly attack the city itself. No siege engines were ever built, and there is no evidence of any significant military engagements taking place during the siege. King Alfonso himself spent most of the winter of the year 1084 / 1085

back in Leon, while his large and impressive army flexed its muscles around the city of Toledo, restricting the movement of supplies in and out of the city, preventing crops from being planted, and generally letting everyone know that, if he had a mind to do so, King Alfonso could crush the city of Toledo like a bug.

This flex was designed to place pressure on al-Qadir to surrender, and when King Alfonso eventually returned back to the siege in March of 1085, he came with generous terms to present to al-Qadir. Should he surrender his kingdom to King Alfonso, al-Qadir would still be King, just not of Toledo. Instead, King Alfonso promised to shift him sideways, over to the Taifa of Valencia, where al-Qadir would be installed as the new King of Valencia. The people of Toledo wouldn't be left empty handed either. The citizens of Toledo were assured that if the Taifa was surrendered to King Alfonso, well, everything would remain pretty much the same. Everyone in Toledo could keep their possessions, their property, and their jobs. All the Muslims of Toledo were required to do was to pay an annual tax to their new Christian King. Any Muslims who decided not to pay the tax were free to leave the Taifa with all of their possessions. The central mosque in Toledo would remain in Muslim hands, but pretty much all the rest of the public assets of the Taifa, including what was left of the Royal Treasury and the Royal Court of Toledo, would become the property of King Alfonso.

Now this, as I've stated previously, was a seriously big play for a Christian ruler to make. The city of Toledo, at this point in time, contained around 28,000 residents, making it significantly larger than any city located in the Christian areas of the Iberian peninsula. That population likely consisted of a Muslim majority, but with a significant Mozarab Christian population around 15% to 25%. At least 15% of the population were Jewish citizens. Despite its recent troubles and the pillaging of its treasury by Badajoz, Toledo was still a wealthy city with a thriving economy. And that's just the actual city of Toledo. The Taifa of Toledo was massive, around 90,000 square kilometres in size, and it covered a significant chunk of the centre of the Iberian peninsula. For King Alfonso to even attempt to take over this rich and massive section of Al-Andalus seems outrageously ambitious and audacious, but he did it.

In the end, al-Qadir agreed to the terms which were offered, and on the 25th of May in the year 1085 King Alfonso made a triumphant entry into the city of Toledo. The first significant blow of the Reconquista had just landed. The Taifa of Toledo was now controlled by the Christian north, if King Alfonso could keep it, that is.

To give you an idea of the size of his latest conquest, the current size of the combined Kingdom of Leon and Castile was around 132,000 square kilometres. Leon and Castile was in itself a large kingdom which would be challenging for any monarch to hold. Now, the King of Leon and Castile was claiming for himself the Taifa of Toledo, which was around 90,000 square kilometres in size, so Toledo was around three quarters of the size of the already impressively large Kingdom of Leon and Castile.

The annexation of the Taifa of Toledo meant that King Alfonso now controlled a sizeable portion of the Iberian peninsula. The big test, though, would be whether he could hold it. Every ruler in the history of Al-Andalus had discovered that the extent of their control diminished according to the distance from their seat of power. Possibly mindful of this, King Alfonso spent the summer of the year 1085 travelling across his new territory, pacifying powerful political players, soothing tensions and fears, and trying to place his stamp on this large and powerful chunk of Al-Andalus. And it was a good idea to do so. Despite likely advising anyone who would listen that things would remain the same and no one needed to worry about anything, the truth was that quite a few settlers from the

Christian north, and even some Christians from as far away as France, would be moving into Toledo, settling into the city and into the northern parts of the Taifa.

As we have stated, this was the first major victory in the Reconquista, and it's difficult to overstate just how significant it was. While it's true that King Alfonso would struggle to control every part of the Taifa, he will succeed in dominating the northern portion of the territory. A mountain range known as the Sistema Central (or the Cordillera Central) runs along the centre of the Taifa of Toledo, and effectively cuts across the centre of the Iberian peninsula itself before veering northwards. Just to the south of this mountain range the Tagus River valley runs through the city of Toledo, and heads westwards before emptying out into the Atlantic Ocean in what today is the country of Portugal. Both these geographic features can be seen as dividing lines, and King Alfonso's territory now ran, unquestionably, all the way from the northern coast of the peninsula to the Tagus River valley, so he had roughly the top half of the peninsula under his direct rule.

As stated by Hugh Kennedy in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal: a political history of al-Andalus", and I quote: "The fall of Toledo marked a turning point in the fortunes of Al-Andalus, especially as military victory was backed up by expanding Christian settlements in the Tagus valley. It meant that Al-Andalus lost its geographical heart, and that its kingdoms were now scattered on the southern and eastern frontiers of the vast domains of the King of Leon and Castile. No part of the country could be wholly secure from Christian raids, and no Muslim force was ever again to penetrate north of the Cordillera Central. It is probably true to say that from the year 1085 Al-Andalus was no longer a viable and self-sustaining political entity." End quote.

What will King Alfonso do next? Well, you'll have to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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