

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 51  
Yes, Another Episode About Succession Issues

Hello again. Last time, we saw a continuation of clashes between the Muslims and Christians on the Iberian peninsula, and sensed a shift in the perceptions of the fighters, with previous levels of interaction and cooperation between Muslims and Christians receding into the distance. We left the last episode in the year 1106, with King Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile having reached the ripe old age of 69, and with Yusuf Ibn Tashafin having recently died of old age.

Now, as we stated in the last episode, Yusuf Ibn Tashafin died in September of the year 1106, with his succession plans already securely in place, his son Ali having been proclaimed as his heir.

Things weren't quite so clear cut, though, for King Alfonso. As at March in the year 1106, the situation regarding his succession was as follows. We mentioned in the last episode that King Alfonso took a new wife back in the year 1093, a woman from Italy. Well, she died in January of the year 1100 without having produced any children. Wasting no time. King Alfonso remarried in May of the year 1100 to a French woman named Elizabeth. As at March in the year 1106, Elizabeth had borne him a further two daughters but no sons. King Alfonso's preference, as at March of 1106, is for his illegitimate son Sancho to succeed him. Sancho is now aged 13, and is being educated by his father in the ways of command and kingship.

This, of course, is terrible news for the other main contenders for the throne, King Alfonso's legitimate daughter Urraca and her husband Count Raymond the Count of Galicia, and his illegitimate daughter Theresa, who is married to Count Henry the Count of Portugal. Both Burgundian cousins, Henry and Raymond, were keen to elevate themselves to the throne. Each winter, Count Raymond and Urraca, and Count Henry and Theresa, would travel to the Royal Court at Leon and reside there, returning to Galicia and Portugal respectively when the weather warmed. As pointed out by Bernard Riley in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", this encouraged court politics and intrigue, a situation which only increased in the year 1105, when Urraca gave birth to a healthy son. This meant that King Alfonso's legitimate daughter now had a legitimate son, so King Alfonso now had a legitimate grandson who could be placed on the throne. To underscore this point, Raymond and Urraca named their baby boy Alfonso.

Did this make King Alfonso happy? Apparently not. His clear favourite to succeed him was still his illegitimate son Sancho, whose chances of rising to power had now been dealt a serious blow by the birth of baby Alfonso. What did King Alfonso do about this situation? Well, in March of the year 1106 he sprang into action. He arranged for his marriage to Elizabeth to be annulled and reportedly married Sancho's mother, his Muslim mistress, Zaida, thus strengthening Sancho's claim to the throne. Just so everyone was crystal clear about his succession plans, in May of the year 1107 a great council was held at Leon, and in front of all the leading noblemen of his realm King Alfonso officially proclaimed Sancho to be his heir.

Only four months later, in September of the year 1107, Count Raymond died unexpectedly following a short illness. King Alfonso likely assumed that Count Raymond's death would

put an end to the ambitions of the now-widowed Urraca and her baby son Alfonso, but he was wrong. Some of Count Raymond's relatives from Burgundy, including his uncle, Archbishop Guy of Vienne, who would later become Pope Calixtus II, raced to Leon to attempt to shore up baby Alfonso's claims, but King Alfonso put a lid on their manoeuvrings.

In December of the year 1107 King Alfonso held another council at Leon, at which he decreed that Urraca, as the widow of Count Raymond, would rule Galicia for the remainder of her lifetime, unless she remarried in which case her claim to Galicia would pass to her son, baby Alfonso. The noblemen of the realm and, most importantly, the noblemen of Galicia, the Bishop of Santiago de Compostela, and the visiting Burgundians, all accepted King Alfonso's directive, and King Alfonso likely then sat back, relieved that his succession issues had finally been put to bed.

But since we've already had two episodes covering King Alfonso's succession issues, you might be thinking that he shouldn't be too confident that things had been completely resolved. And if you thought this you would be exactly right. But for the moment, King Alfonso believes it has all been put to rest, and that's a good thing because the Almoravids are about to go on the offensive.

Now, as we mentioned, Yusuf Ibn Tashafin died in September of 1106, and his son and designated heir Ali succeeded him as the ruler of the Almoravid territories. The good news for the Almoravids, so far as the Iberian peninsula was concerned, was that they controlled all of Al-Andalus, save for Zaragoza and Toledo. The bad news for the Almoravids was that they hadn't scored any victories against the Christians on the peninsula since they reclaimed Valencia back in the year 1102.

Ali will lead the Almoravids for nearly four decades, so let's take a closer look at him. As at the time he assumed power, Ali was aged in his early twenties. His mother was a Christian slave, and he seems to have been brought up almost solely in the royal court at Marrakech. Unlike his Father Yusuf Ibn Tashafin, there is no indication that Ali had lived the harsh life of a desert nomad, or had even visited the ancestral Almoravid heartlands in the Sahara Desert. He was clearly well educated, and his competence justified his father's choice of him as his successor, but he was very much a citizen of urban Morocco. He seemed reluctant to travel to the Iberian peninsula, and in fact will only set foot there four times during his entire lengthy period of rule. Still, as I said, he was a competent ruler, and there were many men willing and able to stand up and wield power on Ali's behalf.

One of these men was Ali's brother, Tamim, whom Ali tasked with ruling the Almoravid territories in Al-Andalus. Tamim set up headquarters in Granada and made Granada his effective capital. Two of Yusuf Ibn Tashafin's former trusted military commanders set themselves up in Seville and Valencia, and between the three of them they looked for ways in which to extend Almoravid power in the peninsula. This, of course, meant going on the offensive and scoring some victories against the Christians, so in the year 1108 the first post-Yusuf Ibn Tashafin Almoravid military campaign was launched.

The target of the campaign was the fortress of Uclés, which lay within Christian territory to the east of the city of Toledo. Uclés was a Christian stronghold which Yusuf Ibn Tashafin had previously attempted to take, without success. The attack was led by Tamim, who was assisted by Almoravid armies from Murcia, Valencia, Granada and Cordoba. The small town of Uclés was defeated in the fighting, but its fortress, which was located on a rocky outcrop overlooking the town, held out.

King Alfonso sent a force to relieve the fortress. He didn't lead the campaign himself, but delegated the task to one of his trusty and experienced military commanders. Accompanying the army of the Christian north was King Alfonso's now 15 year old son and heir Sancho, in his first military campaign.

On the 29th of May in the year 1108, the Christian and Muslim forces clashed just to the southwest of Uclés, with the Almoravids emerging as the clear victors. Many of the Christian fighters lay dead on the battlefield, including most of its commanders, one of whom was young Sancho. The victory seemed to have gone to Tamim's head. He raced triumphantly back to Granada and immediately composed a letter to his brother Ali in Marrakesh, setting out in exaggerated detail the gloriousness and triumph of his success.

Tamim's forces remained behind in Uclés and attacked the fortress, assuming that with their relieving army having been decimated the garrison would quickly surrender. However, the garrison didn't quickly surrender. In fact, to the amazement and consternation of the Almoravid forces, the soldiers from the garrison didn't surrender at all. Instead, the siege of the fortress looked like it might drag on indefinitely, with the Almoravids unable to break through the fortress' formidable defences.

In the end though, the fortress did fall, not via surrender or conquest, but via trickery. The Muslim armies pretended to withdraw. When the garrison from the fortress left the building, believing the campaign to be over, the Almoravids attacked, defeating the garrison, and taking the fortress.

The defeat of Uclés eventually led the Christians to abandon two further fortresses, which had guarded the entry points into Toledo from Valencia and the coast, leaving the city of Toledo vulnerable to a large scale attack by the Almoravids.

Now, of course, the worst thing about the defeat of the Christians at Uclés, so far as King Alfonso was concerned, wasn't the loss of the fortress but the loss of his son and heir, Sancho. With his succession plans now, once again, completely in disarray, King Alfonso had to quickly formulate a new plan. Clearly, the new leading contender for the throne was King Alfonso's eldest legitimate daughter and current ruler of Galicia, Urraca. However, King Alfonso seems to have had misgivings about Urraca's ability to rule Leon and Castile by herself, so sometime in autumn of the year 1108, King Alfonso came up with a solution. His widowed daughter Urraca would remarry, and her new husband would be the current King of Aragon, a man confusingly named Alfonso.

King Alfonso I of Aragon, thought that this was a splendid plan, and he journeyed to Leon to become the new husband of Urraca and the future King of Leon and Castile. King Alfonso I of Aragon was, by all reports, a decent bloke who was a competent ruler and an experienced and successful military commander. The ascension of the King of Aragon to the throne of Leon and Castile would mean that the kingdoms of Aragon and Leon and Castile, which had frequently clashed over spoils in the Taifa of Zaragoza, would be forced to set aside their differences and instead provide a united front against the Almoravids. As Bernard Riley states, and I quote "it seemed like an eminently sensible choice" end quote. However, Bernard Riley then goes on to state, and I quote "nevertheless, he [meaning King Alfonso] had in fact made the worst decision of his long reign" end quote. Oh, dear.

OK, well, let's take a closer look at King Alfonso I of Aragon. Last time we checked in on the Kingdom of Aragon, it was being ruled by King Pedro, whose father, King Sancho

Ramirez, had died while on his way to assist his ally, El Cid. King Pedro I of Aragon did a pretty solid job of following in his father's footsteps, taking territory from Zaragoza, including the town of Barbastro, which surrendered to Aragon in the year 1100. Clearly deciding that his main role in life was defeating Muslims, Pedro signalled his intention to travel to the Holy Land on crusade. However he was persuaded not to go by the current Pope, Pope Paschal II, who decided that Pedro and the other Spanish Christian kings would be more effective if they remained on the Iberian peninsula and fought the Muslims who lived there. To reinforce this idea, Pope Paschal offered crusading indulgences to all of the Christians on the Iberian peninsula who took up arms against the Muslims.

King Pedro, however, wasn't able to take his fight against the Muslims much further, as he died unexpectedly in the year 1104, aged in his thirties. Tragically, his two teenaged children, a boy and a girl, had both recently pre-deceased him, with his daughter Isabel dying a year or so before her father, and his son Pedro dying six months later. Consequently, King Pedro I died with no living children, so his crown passed to his younger brother, Alfonso.

Alfonso, you would have to say, was a classic younger son of a ruler. He was educated in warfare and had been provided with a number of lordships and territories by his father, King Sancho Ramirez, which gave him enough income to ride around, taking part in battles, and enjoying the single life of a wealthy man with no wife, children, or responsibilities. His life of leisurely fighting came to an end, though, in the year 1104, when he became the King of Aragon, and his life as a single man came to an end in the year 1109, when he married King Alfonso's daughter Urraca.

At the time of his marriage, King Alfonso I of Aragon was aged in his thirties and was a committed bachelor. Despite being a very eligible bachelor, he had managed to remain single for as long as he possibly could. Now, though, as the King of Aragon, he had responsibilities and a kingdom to look after. All he had to do was marry Urraca, and he would become the King not only of Aragon, but of a massive Christian kingdom stretching all the way from Portugal to Galicia across to Leon and Castile, then across Navarre, down to Aragon. Unfortunately though, as a committed bachelor, King Alfonso I of Aragon, was not used to being told what to do by a woman, and unfortunately for everyone, Urraca was used to telling people what to do and was accustomed to getting her own way.

Join me next time, as we discuss the tumultuous and short marriage of Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon. Until next time, bye for now.

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