

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 52
Alfonso of Aragon and Urraca

Hello again. You might notice that my voice sounds a little bit different today. Well, there's a reason for that. I have a cold. But don't worry, it's not Covid, and I'm not contagious, so we will just proceed as best we can.

Last time, we saw King Alfonso VI attempt, once again, to resolve his succession issues, which kept rearing their ugly heads and forcing King Alfonso to beat them back like a dynastic game of whack-a-mole. King Alfonso's plans for his illegitimate son Sancho to succeed him came to nothing when Sancho was killed in battle in the year 1108. With Sancho out of the picture, the new leading contender for the next ruler of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile was King Alfonso's legitimate daughter Urraca, who handily had a legitimate son and heir of her own, a boy also named Alfonso. However, King Alfonso apparently held some misgivings about the ability of the widowed Urraca to rule the kingdom on her own, so he arranged for her to marry the current King of Aragon, a man (annoyingly) also named Alfonso. As all the Alfonso's are jockeying for position, let's see how the race pans out.

Now, as we stated in the last episode, the decision by King Alfonso VI to select King Alfonso of Aragon to marry Urraca was quite possibly the worst decision of his long reign, so why did he make the decision? Well, it looks like it was all about curbing the ambitions of the Burgundians, who for many years now had believed that a Burgundian would eventually sit on the throne of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Queen Constance of Burgundy, who was married to King Alfonso and was Urraca's mother, was, of course, Burgundian, and Urraca's betrothal to Count Raymond of Burgundy over twenty years ago had been a ploy to secure much-needed military assistance from Burgundy. Since then, another Burgundian, Count Henry, had also joined the Royal Court at Leon, due to his marriage to King Alfonso's illegitimate daughter Theresa. Count Raymond was now out of the picture, but Burgundian hopes were pinned upon the rise to power of Urraca and Count Raymond's son, baby Alfonso, or the ascendance of Count Henry of Portugal.

There were powerful political forces behind the Burgundian push for the throne, in the form of the influential monastery at Cluny and some major players in the Catholic Church, including the Bishop of Santiago de Compostela. King Alfonso seems to have formed the opinion that, should Urraca be left to rule the Kingdom of Leon and Castile, either in her own right or as regent for her son baby Alfonso, then she would be easily manipulated by the Burgundians. The only way to prevent this from happening, in King Alfonso's view, was to arrange for Urraca to marry a non-Burgundian man; not just any old non-Burgundian man, but someone with enough power and influence to keep the Burgundians in check, and the only person on the Iberian peninsula who seemed to meet those specifications was King Alfonso I of Aragon.

So, in the city of Toledo, in June of the year 1109, King Alfonso formally proclaimed Urraca to be heir to the Kingdom of Leon and Castile, conditional on her marriage to King Alfonso I of Aragon, which was set to take place in October of 1109, so in four months time.

A notable absentee from the formal proclamation in Toledo was Theresa and her husband Count Henry, who decided to stay at their residence in Coimbra in Portugal and not travel

to Toledo for the important announcement. This was likely intended to signal their disappointment about the decision, because Theresa and Count Henry were, of course, staunch supporters of Team Burgundy, and Urraca's upcoming marriage to Alfonso of Aragon would deal a bad blow to Team Burgundy. But they also had another excuse, that excuse being that Theresa was currently heavily pregnant with her third child. She already has two daughters with Count Henry, but Theresa will in fact give birth to a boy sometime in the year 1109, a boy whom, of course, she will name Alfonso.

So now there are a dizzying array of Alfonso's, with their eyes all on the throne of Leon and Castile, but one Alfonso is about to exit the scene. Having returned to Leon following the announcement of his daughter Urraca's betrothal, King Alfonso travelled to Toledo a couple of weeks later, following reports that the Almoravids were intending to launch an invasion of Toledo. Due to his advanced age he travelled to Toledo not on horseback but in a litter. He was not around to oversee the defence of Toledo nor to see the marriage of Urraca, as he died in Toledo on the 1st of July, after a long, successful, and eventful reign spanning more than four decades.

You might be interested to know that, just as King Alfonso spent most of his life on the move, constantly travelling across his large realm, his remains haven't exactly stayed put either. Prior to his death, King Alfonso had requested that his body be interred in the Royal Monastery of San Benito, so as per his request, following his death, his remains were placed in a stone sepulchre which was then placed at the foot of the church of the Royal Monastery. However, in the 13th century, one of King Alfonso's descendants decided that his remains should be moved and placed inside the church. This was done, and the stone sepulchre containing the remains of King Alfonso remained in place until a fire destroyed the tomb in the year 1810. The remains were then collected and stored in the abbey chamber of the Royal Monastery until the year 1821, when they were placed in a box by the abbot of the monastery and moved to an archive, where they were intended to remain for a short time while a proper sanctuary was built for them. However, the Royal Monastery itself was dissolved before the sanctuary could be built. King Alfonso's remains, still in their box, were then placed in the home of a relative of one of the monks for safekeeping. The box remained there until the year 1902, when they were rediscovered by an academic.

Currently, King Alfonso's remains are housed inside a stone sepulchre covered with marble in the monastery of the Benedictine nuns of Sahagun, which is located near the ruins of the former Royal Monastery, and the remains of four of his wives have been placed in an adjacent sepulchre, so that's nice. If you happen to be in Sahagun, which incidentally is not far from the city of Leon on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, you can pop in and have a look.

So, it is here that we bid farewell to King Alfonso VI. He first made an appearance in this podcast in Episode 35, and is now departing the podcast in Episode 52, so that's a pretty impressive run.

Anyway, three months after his death, King Alfonso's daughter Urraca dutifully married King Alfonso I of Aragon. So, did Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon have a long and happy marriage, complete with children who could serve as Burgundian-free heirs to the throne of Leon and Castile? No, they did not.

Why? Well, to start with, it seemed that Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon were completely incompatible on a personal level. Urraca was 29 years old. She had been ruling Galicia for the past couple of years since the death of Count Raymond, and apparently had no

intention of being sidelined by her new husband. She had been a political player before her marriage to King Alfonso, albeit not a terribly effective one, and intended to continue to be a political player.

Alfonso of Aragon was a man also accustomed to getting his own way. Having lived most of his life as a freelancing, dashing, eligible bachelor, before being unexpectedly elevated to the throne of Aragon, he was an adept and competent military commander, used to giving orders and having them obeyed. Now, however, he was kind of the underdog, King of the small Kingdom of Aragon who had been inserted into the politics and intrigue of the much larger court of Leon and Castile.

And to say that the court of Leon and Castile was a snakes-den of infighting and factionalism was probably an understatement. The man who had been the biggest fan of Alfonso of Aragon and had most wanted the union to succeed, King Alfonso VI, was now out of the picture, and the court seemed to be full of people who didn't want the union to succeed and who spent most of their waking hours trying to see how they could drive a wedge between the newly married couple. Supporters of Urraca's son, the now five-year-old baby Alfonso, seemed to be gathering influence inside the Royal Court. Not only the traditional supporters of baby Alfonso, the Burgundians and the noblemen and clergy of Galicia, but also the influential Archbishop of Toledo and other senior officials from the Catholic Church were beginning to voice concerns, about whether the marriage had breached the Church law of consanguinity due to the fact that Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon were distant cousins, as they both shared the same great grandfather, Sancho the Great. In a pointed snub to her sister, Theresa of Portugal and her husband Count Henry of Portugal failed to make the journey from Portugal to the Court at Leon following Urraca's marriage.

All in all, it wasn't a promising start to the union. Although to be fair, many arranged marriages during this era weren't exactly happy couplings. Many incompatible spouses were forced to just hold their noses and go through with the marriage with the aim of producing children who would stabilise the realm. And here we come to the crux of the problem. As the months passed, it soon became apparent that this marriage would be unlikely to produce any children whatsoever. How was this conclusion reached? Well, it's difficult to say exactly, but it was probably due to the reluctance of one or more of the royal spouses to engage in the process of producing royal offspring. It may have been caused by Urraca's reluctance, but many commentators have pointed to the fact that Alfonso of Aragon, despite being a man in his thirties, had never married, and in fact had never really had a relationship of note with any woman, and had never produced any known illegitimate offspring, a surprising fact for a dashing, popular, high-born public figure.

Anyway, who knows? What we do know is that, after just a few short months of marriage, the wheels were seriously falling off the union between Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon, and the reason for continuing the marriage - the production of children - looked like being a non-starter.

With the royal marriage having failed to launch, what else could go wrong? Well, the Almoravids could invade Toledo, that's what. Taking advantage of the death of King Alfonso VI and the rocky start to the reign of Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon, Ali Ibn Yusuf, the new ruler of the Almoravids, did exactly that. As Bernard Riley points out in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", the timeline around the Almoravid invasions is a bit sketchy and difficult to pin down, but it seems that the Almoravids attacked and overran parts of Toledo soon after the death of King Alfonso VI, while Count Henry of

Portugal was also kept fully occupied trying to defend the County of Portugal from the Almoravids.

Not to be outdone, Zaragoza also went on the offensive, but less successfully than the Almoravids. Zaragoza had, of course, been the traditional enemy of Aragon, so King Alfonso of Aragon volunteered to lead the forces of Aragon, Leon, and Castile against the attackers. He did so successfully. So successfully, in fact, that he managed to kill the current leader of Zaragoza, al-Mustain, in battle in the winter of 1109 to 1110. When Alfonso returned victorious from the campaign, he collected Urraca and they travelled together to Aragon so that Alfonso could introduce her as the new Queen of Aragon, Leon, and Castile.

This, of course, meant that the royal couple were both absent from the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. In Galicia, supporters of baby Alfonso decided to take advantage of the absence of the royal couple by raising baby Alfonso's standard, in direct defiance of the King and Queen. The royal couple returned to Leon in May of the year 1110, then King Alfonso invaded Galicia, intending to teach the revolting Galicians a lesson. Actually, both Alfonso and Urraca were meant to travel to Galicia, but they had some sort of falling out and Urraca left and returned to Leon.

Things didn't go very well for King Alfonso after that. He enjoyed limited success against the rebels, which is kind of understandable given the fact that King Alfonso was unfamiliar with the mountainous territory he was campaigning in, while the rebels, in contrast, knew all of the hiding places and ambush points. His failure to fully quash the rebellion seemed to encourage others to voice their displeasure, and King Alfonso found himself locked out of the town of Astorga, a traditional resting place for pilgrims travelling to Santiago de Compostela. The King intended to stay there on his way back to Leon, but the town closed its gates and refused to let him in.

When he eventually arrived back in Leon, it was to some devastating news. During his absence, Rome had officially condemned his marriage to Urraca on the grounds of consanguinity. The Archbishop of Toledo and the Bishops of Leon and Oviedo had all urged Urraca to agree to dissolve the marriage and separate from Alfonso of Aragon, and she had agreed to do so. So King Alfonso arrived back in Leon to the news that his marriage was over and that Urraca had effectively kicked him out of the palace.

King Alfonso's response to all of this probably wasn't what everyone was expecting. Join me next time as King Alfonso makes it clear to everyone that he is going precisely nowhere. Until next time, bye for now.

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