

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 56
Zaragoza

Hello again. Last time we saw the County of Portugal morph into the Kingdom of Portugal at the instigation of its ruler Theresa of Portugal, who is now fully enjoying her new title of “Queen of Portugal”. Meanwhile, Theresa's sister Queen Urraca, had a bad day at the office in Santiago de Compostela, when her plan to thwart the ambitions of Bishop Gelmirez resulted instead in the Bishop becoming the sole unopposed ruler of Santiago de Compostela, and also resulted in Urraca being utterly humiliated in a degrading and public way, which I am pretty sure she would prefer us to never mention ever again. Queen Urraca will be relieved to note that we are leaving the Kingdom of Leon and Castile behind for a while, because we are about to head westwards to Zaragoza, where some epic action is about to kick off.

Now, before we zoom down into Zaragoza, we are first going to pop over to Catalonia, as we've been neglecting this part of the peninsula for a while and we need to catch up on some recent events.

While Queen Urraca and King Alfonso of Aragon have been knocking their heads together in the Christian north for the past decade or so, down in Barcelona Count Ramon Berenguer III has been diligently working to raise the status of Catalonia and expand his power base. He achieved this primarily by strengthening ties between Barcelona and territory in southern France, just over the other side of the Pyrenees mountain range. In the year 1112 he married the heiress to the region of Provence. Much of the territory which now forms part of southern France shared cultural connections to Catalonia, including a mutual love of troubadour traditions.

Count Ramon Berenguer however, didn't just confine himself to reaching over the Pyrenees into wider Europe. He also began to explore maritime opportunities out in the Mediterranean Sea. Now, unlike many of the other Christian kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula, Catalonia was focused on international trade, primarily maritime trade using its port at Barcelona, which had been a trading hub since Roman times. Problem was, much of its trade was being disrupted by Almoravid pirates operating from ports located on two islands off the coast, Majorca and Ibiza.

In fact, the pirates were so effective that it wasn't just trade from Barcelona which was being disrupted. Even some of the giants of the Mediterranean trading system, including Pisa and Genoa, were facing losses due to Muslim pirates. As a consequence, the Republic of Pisa came up with a plan to sail a fleet to Majorca and Ibiza, attack the Almoravids, and expel them from the islands. They approached Pope Paschal II with the idea, and Pope Paschal granted crusading indulgences to everyone who wished to participate in the campaign. With the full endorsement of Rome, the Pisans set sail in the year 1113 and stopped off in Barcelona to see if Count Ramon Berenguer wished to join the venture.

In fact the Count of Barcelona won't just be participating in this maritime crusade, he will end up leading it. As Joseph O'Callaghan notes in his book “A History of Medieval Spain”, it is in the chronicles of this naval crusade that the word “Catalonia” appears for the first time to describe the County of Barcelona, with Count Ramon Berenguer III being given the

title of “Catalanicus Heros” in one of the chronicles, which of course means “Hero of Catalonia”. Anyway, the combined Catalan and Pisan fleet set sail from Barcelona in the year 1115 and defeated the Muslims in both Majorca and Ibiza. In an attempt to distract Count Ramon the Almoravids attacked Barcelona, but they were driven away.

Count Ramon left the islands in the year 1115, along with most of the Christian forces. The Almoravids were then able to retake both islands. Count Ramon, however, was optimistic that the islands could be re-conquered, and he promptly journeyed to Pisa, Genoa, and Rome to drum up support for another naval mission to the islands. Which is why, as the field of battle on the Iberian peninsula switches to Zaragoza, the County of Barcelona won't be involved, as its Count is 100% focused on ending the occupation of Mallorca and Ibiza by the Almoravids.

Now, as we discussed back in Episode 54, one of the reasons why King Alfonso of Aragon was interested in signing a truce between himself and Queen Urraca in the year 1117 was his desire to head back to the battlefield. The conflict between himself and his estranged wife and the associated effort needed for him to hold on to the throne of Leon and Castile had taken up all of his time, with the result that he had been seriously neglecting his original realm, the Kingdom of Aragon. The last time he had been able to spare time to work for the Kingdom of Aragon's interests, and the last time he had been able to meet the Muslims on the battlefield, was back in the year 1110, when Alfonso had fought and defeated the King of Zaragoza, al-Mustain.

In fact, Alfonso didn't only defeat the King of Zaragoza, he was killed in the fighting, which eventually had the unintended consequence of handing Zaragoza to the Almoravids. While King Alfonso of Aragon had to leave Zaragoza in a hurry to put down a rebellion in Galicia, al-Mustain's son and heir Abd al-Malik was forced out of the city of Zaragoza by Almoravid fighters, and on the 31st of May in the year 1110 the northern African Almoravid Governor of Valencia arrived in Zaragoza to take possession of the city on behalf of the Almoravids.

Now, in between fighting the rebels in Leon and Castile and fighting with Urraca, Alfonso of Aragon had done his best to oust the Almoravids from Zaragoza. In his spare moments, he raced back to the Taifa of Zaragoza, where Abd al-Malik had holed himself up in a fortress 35 kilometres to the west of the city of Zaragoza. For the remainder of the year 1110 and for most of the year 1111, Alfonso of Aragon combined forces with Abd al-Malik and, whenever they could, the two allies attempted to force the Almoravids out of Zaragoza. However, by the year 1112 Alfonso of Aragon was completely preoccupied with the civil war now raging between himself and Queen Urraca. Left to his own devices, Abd al-Malik was able to do little more than shelter in his fortress and protect himself from Almoravid attacks.

It was then the turn of the new Almoravid governor of Zaragoza to go on the offensive. He pushed the Almoravids into the territory of the Kingdom of Aragon, and in the year 1114 the governor of Zaragoza led his forces westwards, in the attack on Barcelona which we referred to earlier. Without the check provided on its movements by King Alfonso of Aragon, Zaragoza under Almoravid control seemed unstoppable. But then disaster struck. The talented governor of Zaragoza was ordered to travel to Cordoba to push back against an attack by the Christians from Toledo, and he died in the fighting. A replacement governor was dispatched to Zaragoza, but he died unexpectedly in the year 1117 without having achieved much of note. The Almoravids were in the process of choosing the next governor of Zaragoza when King Alfonso of Aragon launched his assault on the city.

Now Alfonso of Aragon knew that taking Zaragoza would be a difficult task and that he would need all the assistance he could get his hands on. Luckily, an obvious solution to his need for extra manpower and equipment presented itself almost immediately. The truce between Alfonso and Urraca had been fully supported by the Papacy, with Pope Paschal II holding the view that it was time for the Christian monarchs of the Iberian peninsula to stop fighting amongst themselves so they could instead fight the Muslims. Pope Paschal died early in the year 1118, but his successor Pope Gelasius II was equally, if not more, enthusiastic about the prospect of King Alfonso of Aragon taking the fight to the Muslims of the Iberian peninsula. King Alfonso sent an envoy to Rome, with the result that Pope Gelasius declared King Alfonso's proposed attack on Zaragoza to be a Crusade, a move which made King Alfonso's efforts to recruit volunteers to fight in the upcoming campaign much easier. Pope Gelasius helped out further by promoting the upcoming campaign against Zaragoza at a Church Council in Toulouse in autumn of the year 1118. However, that will be the end of assistance coming from Pope Gelasius because, unknown to Pope Gelasius, he will die in six months time at the monastery at Cluny, after falling ill in January of the year 1119.

Anyway, the raising of the upcoming campaign against Zaragoza to the level of a Crusade by Rome had a spectacular effect on Alfonso's efforts to recruit men to fight with him. Alfonso had already leveraged ties between the Kingdom of Aragon and its allies in France to attract a number of fighters from Normandy, including Alfonso's cousin Count Rotrou of Perche. The raising of the campaign to a Crusade now drew a number of experienced campaigners from other regions around France, many of whom had travelled to the Holy Land on the First Crusade. King Alfonso of Aragon was very interested in the stories from those veterans of the First Crusade, and it was his dream to go to Jerusalem on Crusade himself one day.

In fact, it seemed the years of hanging around in Leon and Castile, spending all of his time fighting political battles instead of military ones, had increased Alfonso's military ambitions. According to D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", Alfonso of Aragon's plan was to first conquer Zaragoza, then push all the way to the Mediterranean coastline and take Valencia. Once this goodly chunk of the Iberian peninsula was under Christian control, well then Alfonso of Aragon would place the cherry on top of his conquering pie by leading his victorious forces all the way to Jerusalem and taking that as well. Woohoo! Anyway, these ambitious plans just go to show that Alfonso of Aragon was a huge fan of crusading, was enjoying hearing about all the exploits of the crusading veterans and their adventures in the Holy Land, and was itching to have a crack at Jerusalem himself.

But before he can set his sights on Jerusalem, Alfonso needs to conquer the Muslim Taifa of Zaragoza. The first step he took was to arrange for the visiting armies from France to have a few practice runs, raiding inside Almoravid territory in the countryside around the city of Zaragoza. The Christians set up their base in a fortress at El Castilla, to the south of the city of Zaragoza, and from this base groups of crusaders from Normandy and Gascon rode out northwards, conquering small towns and fortresses to the south of Zaragoza and disrupting supply lines and trading routes between Zaragoza and its Almoravid neighbours. More and more crusaders joined the mission from various regions across France, along with local Christian fighters from Aragon, Castile, and the County of Barcelona. The raids pushed further and further northwards until they reached the outer suburbs of the city of Zaragoza itself.

By spring of the year 1118 the Christians had surrounded the city and were besieging it. A veteran of the First Crusade, a man called Gaston V of Bearn had been involved in the

construction of siege engines at the siege of Jerusalem, and he was given the task of doing the same around the city of Zaragoza. He oversaw the construction of a number of mobile towers, and a total of twenty catapults which hurled stones at the walls of the city and launched burning objects over the walls into the city itself.

Now, as we've mentioned previously, the city of Zaragoza was leaderless at this point in time and seemed to lack a cohesive plan for its defence. A few attempts were made by the defenders to venture out of the city and attack the crusaders, but they were easily repelled and forced back into the city. It soon became apparent that the Almoravids needed to send an experienced military commander to Zaragoza to take leadership of the defence of the city and keep Zaragoza in Muslim hands. The first man sent to perform this task was Abdullah Ibn Mazdali, the governor of Granada. He led his army out of Granada and set himself up in a fortress at Tarazona, which is around 80 kilometres to the northwest of Zaragoza. He then marched to nearby Tudela, defeating a contingent of Christian fighters on the way. Taking with him some men from the garrison at Tudela, he pushed on towards Zaragoza, managing to elude the besiegers and entering the city in September of the year 1118. As stated by Bernard Riley in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", and I quote "his arrival enormously heartened the defenders of the city and discouraged the Christians in the same measure" end quote. However disheartened they were, Alfonso of Aragon urged the Crusaders to stay the course and the siege continued. It turns out that this was the right decision to make, as the governor of Granada died unexpectedly in Zaragoza two months later, leaving the city once again leaderless.

The second Almoravid military commander to spring into action was Tamim, son of Yusuf Ibn Tashafin and brother of Ali Ibn Yusuf, the current ruler of the Almoravids. We met Tamim back in Episode 51 when he defeated the Christians in the Battle of Ucles, a victory which also resulted in the death of King Alfonso VI's son and heir Sancho. Tamim marched his forces nearly all the way to Zaragoza, but was defeated in a pitched battle just to the south of the city on the 8th of December.

Ten days later, on the 18th of December in the year 1118, the city of Zaragoza surrendered to King Alfonso of Aragon. The triumphant Christians entered the town, and Alfonso of Aragon declared that all the Muslim residents of Zaragoza who wished to leave would be allowed to do so unharmed. All those who wished to remain in the now Christian-ruled city of Zaragoza could do so so long as they paid an annual tax.

So, in a remarkable turn of events, King Alfonso of Aragon had achieved the first mission on his ambitious all-conquering to-do list. Join me next time as we return to the Christian north to see what Queen Urraca has been up to. Until next time, bye for now.

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