

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 60  
Alfonso of Aragon, Valencia and Beyond

Hello again. Last time we saw Alfonso of Aragon work slowly but surely to bring the Taifa of Zaragoza under his control. An attempt by the Almoravids to force Alfonso of Aragon out of Zaragoza failed, with the crushing defeat of the Almoravid army by Alfonso of Aragon at the Battle of Cutanda in the year 1120. By the year 1125 Alfonso of Aragon was the undisputed ruler of the former Taifa of Zaragoza, with its majority Muslim population allowed to pretty much continue their lives unchanged, although they were subject to the payment of an annual tax.

Alfonso's ambitions wouldn't stop with his acquisition of Zaragoza though. Ever since he had embarked on his conquests he had made no secret of the fact that he wished to push all the way to the Mediterranean coast and conquer the wealthy region of Valencia, and when we left the last episode that's exactly what he had decided to do. Clearly, conquering Valencia was going to be easier and faster if Alfonso had a massive army under his command, so he sent word to France calling for men to accompany him on a raid into Muslim lands. Then he set about preparing for his departure.

Now, it seems that around this time Alfonso of Aragon received word from a number of Mozarab communities inside Almoravid territory that they would be interested in joining his army to fight against the Muslims. This was significant, and opened the door to a number of possibilities. As more and more men travelled to Zaragoza to join his army, and more and more Mozarab leaders indicated their willingness to join with the Christian forces as they marched through Muslim territory, Alfonso of Aragon began to dream big. Why limit himself to conquering Valencia when a much greater prize was possibly within his grasp? With the Almoravids still reeling from their complete military collapse at the Battle of Cutanda, and with a sizable portion of the Mozarab population of Al Andalus indicating its willingness to fight for Alfonso of Aragon if he arrived in their region, Alfonso of Aragon made his decision. He wasn't just going to try to take Valencia, he was going to have a shot at taking the whole thing, the complete package, the entirety of Almoravid territory.

The original plan to take Valencia was now shelved and replaced by a new plan. This new plan was incredibly ambitious and audacious. It involved Alfonso of Aragon mobilising out of Zaragoza, continuing past Valencia and marching all the way to Granada, taking it and the southern portion of the Iberian peninsula, then gradually taking all of the territory currently ruled by the Almoravids, in much the same way as he had gradually conquered the Taifa of Zaragoza. This could only be done if Alfonso mustered a huge army, and if the Mozarab populations of southern Iberia joined his forces once he arrived there, but Alfonso of Aragon was confident enough about both these requirements that he decided to proceed with his plan. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September in the year 1125 Alfonso of Aragon departed from the city of Zaragoza at the head of a massive army and headed towards Valencia.

Now, historians are unable to agree on just how large this army was. The only sources which provide any details about the numbers are three Muslim chronicles, which state that the Christian army comprised of between 4,000 and 5,000 horsemen and 15,000 foot soldiers. However, it's likely that these numbers are exaggerated. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley points out that over the next nine months

Alfonso's army will travel to Granada and back again, covering around 3,000 kilometres. To do this, the army will need to travel an average speed of around 10 kilometres per day over some really challenging terrain, including rugged mountainous country. Bernard Reilly believes that it was just not physically possible for thousands of foot soldiers to have made the journey at the speed required, so he believes the more likely scenario was that Alfonso's army was large but not enormous, and was predominantly made up of cavalry, perhaps numbering between 1,000 and 1,500 men. If this was the case, it was imperative that the cavalry would be joined by thousands of foot soldiers once they arrived at their destination. In his book "A History of Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan notes that prior to his departure from Zaragoza Alfonso received word from a Mozarab leader in Granada, promising that if Alfonso arrived in Granada an army of 12,000 Mozarab fighters would be waiting to join him. Joseph O'Callaghan points out that this number was, and I quote "undoubtedly exaggerated" end quote, but it does indicate that significant numbers of Mozarabs were expected to join the fighting once the Christian army had made its way to the southern part of the Iberian peninsula.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> of October in the year 1125 Alfonso's army had travelled the 350 kilometre distance to Valencia. Some fighting and skirmishes took place around Valencia, then at the end of October they mobilised once again, heading southwards down the coast towards Denia. After some minor battles, the army resumed its march southwards, passing through Murcia before heading westwards into the southern Sierra Mountain range, arriving at the town of Guadix on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. Now, Bernard Riley points out that in order to have arrived at Guadix on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, Alfonso of Aragon's forces would have needed to travel an average distance of 28 kilometres per day over some pretty steep, mountainous territory, adding weight to his theory that the entire force must have been mounted on horses. Now, the town of Guadix is only 43 kilometres from Alfonso's destination, the city of Granada, so Alfonso was keen to secure the town and use it as his base. He will spend the next month or so attempting to do this.

It's around this time, though, that the wheels begin to fall off his ambitious plan. For the past couple of months, the Almoravids have been watching Alfonso's progress down the southern coast of the peninsula. They have guessed that he intends to attack the city of Granada, and they have spent the time reinforcing the city's defences, gathering troops from across the southern portion of the peninsula and from as far afield as northern Africa to supplement the city's defenders. They have also been attempting to prevent the region's Mozarab population from joining the invaders.

As for the Mozarab fighters, while sizeable numbers did join up, they were nowhere near the numbers which had been promised. Joseph O'Callaghan reports that when Alfonso of Aragon reached the outskirts of the city of Granada in January of 1126 there was no sign of the 12,000 Mozarab men that he had been promised. According to a Muslim source, Alfonso of Aragon met with a local Mozarab leader and reproached him for his failure to provide enough fighters.

While I'm sure Alfonso of Aragon was bitterly disappointed by the small number of Mozarab fighters who were joining his army, and the complete absence of the wholesale Mozarab uprising which he was led to believe would take place when he arrived at Granada, it's kind of understandable that it didn't happen. The Mozarab Christians, as we've discussed before, were completely entrenched within the communities in which they belonged and had been living in Muslim-ruled Spain for generations. If the Mozarabs joined Alfonso's forces and Alfonso was victorious, the Almoravids would be booted out of the region, and it would then be subject to Christian rule. The Mozarabs would then return

to their homes, communities, and livelihoods, with the only change being that they would now be living under Christian, not Muslim rule. However, if Alfonso of Aragon failed to take Granada and failed to boot the Almoravids out of the peninsula, then the Mozarabs had effectively burned their bridges. Having taken up arms against their Almoravid rulers there was no way they could return to their homes and their old lives. They would have to relocate out of Almoravid territory entirely, which would entail them uprooting their families, leaving behind most of their belongings and everything familiar to them, and shifting northwards into Christian-held territory. Following the Battle of Cutanda, and hearing about the size of the Christian army, the Mozarabs of Granada would likely have seen Alfonso's victory as a safe bet and would have been happy to join the fight. However, by the time Alfonso of Aragon arrived at Granada, much work had been done by the Almoravids to reinforce the defences of the city and to supplement the Almoravid armies with men from northern Africa. Now a victory by Alfonso of Aragon didn't look like a sure thing at all, so many Mozarabs would have shook their heads and elected to remain where they were, deciding against risking everything by throwing their hand in with the Christians, which is why the Mozarab fighting force which greeted Alfonso of Aragon was much, much smaller than what he had been expecting.

Without the thousands of Mozarab foot soldiers that he had been promised, any victory over Granada was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Still, Alfonso of Aragon decided to give it his best shot. In January of 1126 Alfonso led his army around the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, trying to find a gap through which he could approach the city of Granada. Unable to find the opening he was hoping for, he withdrew from the area around Granada and set up camp for the winter near Lucena, to the west of Granada. Now, winters are pretty cold and uncomfortable in this part of the peninsula, and Alfonso's army seems to have spent a miserable couple of months at this camp.

The sources next have him making a move in March of 1126 when he defeated a small Almoravid force a few kilometres to the south of Lucena. Alfonso of Aragon, then marched his army to the Mediterranean coast near Malaga. The army then travelled eastwards up the coast before swinging inland and heading once again towards Granada, this time approaching it from the south.

Once again, the Almoravids successfully blocked the attackers' access to the city of Granada. After five days of heavy fighting, Alfonso of Aragon withdrew back to his original base at Guadix, before retracing his steps all the way back to Valencia, then home to Aragon, arriving in Aragon in June of 1126.

The retreating Christian army came under attack a number of times as it made its return journey. Most of the attacks were just small skirmishes, but some were well-planned major engagements. While the retreating army kept good order and never looked like being defeated, the Muslim sources do assert that it suffered heavy losses as it withdrew. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley states that the Muslim assertion that the retreating army suffered heavy losses is probably correct, with the losses being caused not only by attacks from Almoravid fighters but also due to prolonged exposure to winter snow, rain, and generally unpleasant weather during their months camping in hostile territory.

Now, interestingly, as the Christian army made its way laboriously back to the Christian north, it took with it a considerable number of Mozarab Christian fighters and their families. One Muslim source states that 10,000 Mozarab fighters accompanied Alfonso of Aragon back into Christian territory. While this is likely an exaggeration, it is probable, for reasons

we have already mentioned, that many Mozarabs who took the plunge and fought with Alfonso of Aragon's army had burnt their bridges back in Muslim territory, and were now in need of resettlement, resettlement which Alfonso of Aragon was more than happy to provide inside his new territory in Zaragoza. It is also possible that some of the Mozarabs who made the trek northwards with the Christian forces hadn't fought with the army at all, but had decided to shift northwards regardless, fearful of a general crackdown against Mozarabs across the Almoravid regions.

These fears did come to pass. There is an indication that, after Alfonso's army had retreated from their territory, the Almoravids uprooted some Mozarab communities and transferred them over into Morocco, deciding that leaving them on the Iberian peninsula was too dangerous should the Christians come raiding into the south once again. It's difficult to state the numbers with any certainty, but it's pretty clear that by the summer of 1126 there were far fewer Mozarabs in Almoravid territory in southern Spain than there had been before the invasion by Alfonso of Aragon.

Anyway, it's a good thing that Alfonso of Aragon is back home again, because events of major significance have been taking place in the Christian north during Alfonso's absence, one of those events being the death of Queen Urraca. Join me next time as we wave goodbye to Queen Urraca and welcome the new king in the north, King Alfonso VII. Until next time, bye for now.

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