

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 64  
Succession Drama Part 1

Hello again. Last time we saw the death of Alfonso of Aragon as a result of wounds he received during a battle at the siege of Fraga. Then, in a plot twist no one saw coming, Alfonso of Aragon's will left his territories not to a person who would become the next king of Aragon, but to three military orders who, he decreed would jointly rule the Kingdom of Aragon and his other holdings, including the former Taifa of Zaragoza. This was surprising for many reasons, not least of which was the fact that the skill-set of the members of the three military orders, who incidentally were all located far away in Jerusalem, didn't include administrative oversight of large territories or the command of armies. No, Alfonso of Aragon had just apparently placed his kingdom in the hands of men whose talents were limited to arranging church services and looking after sick people.

While much hand-wringing over this state of affairs is currently taking place in Aragon, we are going to first switch our focus to a place which is keen to take advantage of the crisis caused by the death of Alfonso of Aragon, that place being one of the current enemies of the Kingdom of Aragon, its neighbour Catalonia.

Now, as we've seen previously, the man who effectively created Catalonia out of the County of Barcelona was Count Ramon Berenguer III. At this point in our timeline Count Ramon Berenguer III has just died. Well, to be more accurate, he died a couple of years before Alfonso of Aragon, in the year 1131 to be exact, while Alfonso of Aragon was besieging Bayonne. As Count Ramon Berenguer III is such an important figure, let's just do a quick round up of some of his greatest hits.

Count Ramon Berenguer became the Count of Barcelona back in the year 1097 when he was only fifteen years old. The County of Barcelona back then was quite a small place, and its future as a regional power was far from assured. The Almoravids were keen to annex it, and in the year 1107 and again in 1114 Muslim forces attacked the County of Barcelona, advancing all the way to the gates of the city of Barcelona itself. The Count of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer III was determined not only to keep the Muslims from absorbing his territory, but also to expand the boundaries of Barcelona out beyond the territory surrounding the city of Barcelona, and he did this via a number of novel ways. He secured the County of Girona, the neighbouring region on the north-eastern borders of the County of Barcelona, by marrying his seven year old daughter Maria, to the elderly widowed Count Bernat III of Besalu. The elderly count of Besalu was in poor health and Count Ramon made it a condition of the marriage that, should the marriage fail to produce any heirs, on the death of the elderly Count the County of Besalu would be absorbed into the County of Barcelona. Four years later, the elderly Count obligingly died, leaving eleven year old Maria a widow, and the County of Besalu was added to the County of Barcelona. Six years later, Count Bernat Guillem of Cerdanya died. Cerdanya was located next to Girona and since the Count of Cerdanya died without leaving any heirs, Count Ramon Berenguer III moved in and absorbed it into the County of Barcelona.

In this way, during his reign Count Ramon Berenguer gradually pushed the borders of his county out until it occupied a nice chunk of land around the coast and up into the Pyrenees mountain range, and he was constantly raiding into surrounding regions controlled by Aragon and the Almoravids, securing his territory and working to expand it even further.

He also worked to raise the international profile of Catalonia. He forged an alliance with the powerful Duke of Aquitaine and embarked on a series of campaigns with mariners from Genoa and Pisa to attack Almoravid strongholds in Majorca in the year 1114, which we discussed in Episode 56. Around the same time, he secured a foothold over the French side of the Pyrenees by marrying the heiress to the region of Provence, making him the eventual regional rival of King Alfonso of Aragon's ally, Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse.

Put simply, Count Ramon Berenguer III is viewed, quite rightly, as the founding father of Catalonia, so his death in the year 1131 had the potential to be a destabilising event.

Fortunately, like Alfonso of Aragon, Count Ramon Berenguer III had made a will before he died. Unlike Alfonso of Aragon, though, the Count of Barcelona's will was sensible and to some extent predictable. Handily for Ramon Berenguer, at the time of his death he had two sons. His eldest son, also called Ramon Berenguer, was under the terms of the will left with the core of his father's territory, the expanded County of Barcelona, which was now commonly referred to by its more recent name, Catalonia. To his second son, the confusingly named Berenguer Ramon, the Count of Barcelona left his territories in Provence over the Pyrenees. Back in the year 1125, the Count of Barcelona had come to terms with his rival in southern France, Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse. The agreement stipulated that Provence would be split between Barcelona and Toulouse, with the section claimed by Barcelona to be severed from Catalonia upon the death of Count Ramon Berenguer III. So in effect, upon his death, his eldest son became Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona, while his second son became the ruler of part of Provence.

Only three years into his rule Count Berenguer IV was faced with his biggest challenge to date, when the death of Alfonso of Aragon plunged the region into chaos and uncertainty. Ironically, Alfonso of Aragon's fatal injuries had been sustained during his attempt to annex Lerida to Aragon. Lerida had also been in the sights of Catalonia and had on occasion been claimed by Barcelona before inevitably flipping back under Muslim control. Alfonso of Aragon's death opened an opportunity for Catalonia to move in and reclaim Lerida and a bunch of towns in the neighbouring region.

In fact, the death of Alfonso of Aragon and his failure to appoint a sensible successor left open so many possibilities that the new Count of Barcelona and other regional players must have been scrambling to get their heads around the situation. Over the Pyrenees, the loss of Alfonso of Aragon left Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse without his main ally and protector, opening the possibility of Barcelona moving further into Provence. It strengthened the hand of Aragon's enemies, the Duke of Aquitaine and the Almoravids, the Almoravids of course being keen to reclaim the former Taifa of Zaragoza. It also left an opening for the Kingdom of Leon and Castile to move in on territories left by Alfonso of Aragon that it wanted for itself: Navarre, Zaragoza, and maybe even Aragon if it played its cards right. Just about everything was up in the air and everything was up for grabs. It was just up to the players on the ground as to who could move first and move fastest and smartest to claim the best of the spoils.

Unsurprisingly, men inside the Royal Court of Aragon were the first to make their move. Perhaps keeping Alfonso of Aragon's death quiet for as long as they could, while they digested the complete mess which was Alfonso of Aragon's will, they decided to act as though the will didn't exist. Clearly, having three military orders from Jerusalem ruling the Kingdom of Aragon was ridiculous and unworkable. It was so ridiculous and unworkable

that if it were allowed to proceed it risked the very existence of the Kingdom of Aragon, so best to ignore the fact that it was ever made.

Had Alfonso of Aragon died without making a will his crown would have passed to his closest male relative. Alfonso's closest male relative was his younger brother, Ramiro Sanchez, who was in good health, was of sound mind and was currently aged in his late forties. The question many of you might be asking is: if Alfonso of Aragon had a younger brother who was healthy and sane, why didn't he name him as his heir? Well, there was a very good reason why Alfonso didn't name his younger brother Ramiro as his heir, because his younger brother Ramiro was a monk. The trouble with leaving your kingdom to a monk is that the monk would be unable to provide any heirs to pass the kingdom to, so he might end up doing something completely crazy, like leaving it to a bunch of military orders. A monk would also be unlikely to possess the skills ordinarily needed by a successful leader: the ability to lead armies into battle and to successfully administer and rule over a kingdom. Alfonso of Aragon's brother, in fact, probably had the same deficits in his skill-set as, say, a bunch of clerics from military orders in Jerusalem. The big advantage Ramiro the monk had over the military orders who were the beneficiaries of Alfonso of Aragon's will was that he was familiar with Aragon and the politics of the Iberian peninsula; he was a single person and not three organisations; and he was a blood relative of Alfonso of Aragon, so the power-brokers inside the Aragon Royal Court made their decision. The next King of Aragon was going to be the monk, Ramiro Sanchez.

Ramiro was duly contacted and made his way with all due haste to Jaca, the traditional royal seat of the Kingdom of Aragon, where he was hailed as King by all the dignitaries present, styling himself as King Ramiro II of Aragon in September of the year 1134. From there he hurried off to Zaragoza, keen to assert his claim to it and prevent it from reverting to Muslim rule.

Unfortunately for King Ramiro II though, he wasn't the only person racing to proclaim himself King of Alfonso of Aragon's territories. Further to the north, in Navarre much hand-wringing was also taking place following the death of Alfonso of Aragon. Navarre had no real wish to continue as part of the Kingdom of Aragon. It had long been searching for an opening to regain its status as a kingdom in its own right, and the contested inheritance of Alfonso of Aragon seemed to provide exactly that opportunity.

The hand-wringing was taking place over exactly who would be the person recognised by the nobility of Navarre as the new king. It had to be someone both with a genuine claim to the title and someone who was skilled enough to keep the Kingdom of Navarre out of the clutches of its powerful neighbour Aragon. Way back in the year 1076, King Sancho IV of Navarre had been murdered by his siblings, with the result that the Kingdom of Navarre had been effectively dissolved and split between its neighbours, Castile and Aragon. The tricky thing now, and the current task faced by the nobility of Navarre, was to locate one of the descendants of King Sancho and assess his suitability for the kingship.

The first person to put his hand up for the job was a man called Pedro de Atares, who wasn't strictly a descendant of King Sancho, but instead claimed the title by virtue of being a grandson of an illegitimate uncle of King Alfonso of Aragon. A meeting of the bishops and noblemen of Navarre was convened at Pamplona to determine Pedro's suitability for the throne. Unfortunately, Pedro's enthusiasm for the position came across as arrogance, and his complete lack of diplomacy and humility made the attendees think that perhaps remaining under the umbrella of the Kingdom of Aragon wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Fortunately, for everyone except Pedro, another candidate is currently racing towards Pamplona, keen to be considered for the position, and this candidate possessed an actual blood claim to the crown of Navarre. His name was Garcia Ramirez, and his grandfather had been an illegitimate son of King Garcia Sanchez III of Navarre. To further boost his credentials, his mother was the daughter of El Cid. Garcia Ramirez was currently ruling a region around Tudela, and as soon as he heard of the death of Alfonso of Aragon he raced to Pamplona to stake his claim to the throne.

After the car-crash presentation by Pedro, Garcia Ramirez was welcomed with open arms by the bishop and noblemen of Navarre. He accepted the crown and styled himself as King Garcia Ramirez IV.

So does that conclude the succession drama following the death of Alfonso of Aragon? No, we're not even close. As Bernard Reilly points out in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", it's likely that, from his new throne in Pamplona, Garcia Ramirez IV viewed himself not as the King of Navarre but as the King of Aragon and Navarre. And to make the situation even more interesting, King Alfonso VII is also heading towards Aragon at the head of a large army to stake his claim to the thrones of both Aragon and Navarre. Join me next time, as the succession drama continues. Until next time, bye for now.

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