

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 62  
French Troubles

Hello again. Last time we saw the rise to power of King Alfonso VII. When we left the episode, young King Alfonso had quite a lot on his plate. While King Alfonso VII wished to rule over all the lands previously within the realm of his grandfather, King Alfonso VI, two main barriers stood in his way. These barriers came in the form of King Alfonso of Aragon, who enjoyed widespread support in Castile and was also pushing into Toledo from his newly acquired territory in Zaragoza, and the new ruler of Portugal, Alfonso Enriques, who didn't consider Portugal to form part of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. A further two minor barriers also existed in the form of King Alfonso's late mother's lover, Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara, and his brother Count Rodrigo Gonzalez of Lara, both of whom initially opposed the rise of King Alfonso VII, preferring instead to see Pedro's son with Urraca, Fernando Perez of Lara, rule as the King of Leon and Castile. The Counts of Lara have recently aligned themselves with their old foe, Queen Urraca's estranged husband, Alfonso of Aragon, in a bid to strengthen their opposition to King Alfonso VII's rule.

Now, fortunately for young King Alfonso VII, Alfonso of Aragon and Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara will shortly be completely preoccupied outside the Iberian peninsula in France, leaving the young King free to cement his hold on power in Leon and Castile. Why is the Count of Lara and King Alfonso of Aragon in France at this critical time in the history of Leon and Castile? Well, that's a very interesting question, and to answer it we have to go back to events taking place in Valencia in spring of the year 1129.

In spring of the year 1129 the leader of the Almoravids, Ali Ibn Yusuf, decided it was time to teach Alfonso of Aragon a lesson. As such, he gathered forces from northern Africa, shipped them over to the Iberian peninsula, and joined them to armies from Murcia, Cordoba, and Seville. The large combined Almoravid army then made its way up the coast towards Valencia, intent on marching into Zaragoza and confronting Alfonso of Aragon. Alfonso of Aragon, aware of the army's progress up the coast, decided to meet it on the road. He mustered an army of his own and mobilised it into the southern regions of Valencia, confronting the Almoravid army head-on at a place called Cullera in May of the year 1129. Unfortunately, we don't know much about this battle. Muslim sources state that the Almoravid army was larger than that fielded by Alfonso of Aragon, but in a repeat of the battle at Cutanda the Muslims were soundly beaten by the Christians. They suffered a massive number of casualties and their baggage train was taken by Alfonso of Aragon.

The remnants of the Almoravid forces limped back down the coast, leaving Ali Ibn Yusuf scratching his head about how best to contain, or in the best case scenario defeat, the all-conquering Alfonso of Aragon. His solution was to appoint a new, energetic governor of Valencia, a man who promised to not only strengthen the defences of the Taifa of Valencia to prevent any encroachment by Alfonso of Aragon, but push into Zaragoza, reclaiming some of the territory lost by the Muslims.

The new governor of Valencia took up his position in the year 1130 immediately got to work, sending raiding parties out to attack Christian forces in the region. In May of the year 1130 the governor scored a major victory. Muslim fighters from Valencia had confronted not just a minor bunch of Christian fighters, but a sizeable army led by one of Alfonso of Aragon's French allies, Viscount Gaston of Bearn. The French force was resoundingly

defeated by the Muslims from Valencia. Among the Christian men left dead on the battlefield was Viscount Gaston of Bearn himself. The body of the deceased French Viscount was taken to the Governor of Valencia, who ordered it to be decapitated and the head sent to Granada. Once the head of Viscount Gaston arrived in Granada, it was mounted on a lance and was paraded through the streets of the city.

Now, this event is about to cause all sorts of problems. The politics of southern France at this point in time was volatile and cut-throat, and the tentacles of conflict between the power players in southern France had spread over the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula. Basically, at the time of the death of Viscount Gaston of Bearn, the Duke of Aquitaine, who ruled a goodly chunk of western France and whose territory extended all the way down to the Pyrenees mountain range right up to the borders of Navarre and Aragon, was aligned with the Count of Barcelona. In the opposing corner was the Count of Toulouse and the Viscount of Carcassonne, who were both allied with the Kingdom of Aragon. The Viscounty of Bearn lay within the Duchy of Gascony, which itself fell under the vassalage of the Duchy of Aquitaine, but importantly for King Alfonso of Aragon, the allegiance of Viscount Gaston of Bearn to Gascony and Aragon was to some extent only tokenistic. His money, his time, and his armies had all been pledged in support of King Alfonso of Aragon, the enemy of Viscount Gaston's overlord, the Duke of Aquitaine.

The support of Bearn to Aragon was of vital importance to King Alfonso of Aragon. Although Bearn itself was only quite small, territorially speaking, it was of strategic consequence, situated on the French side of the Pyrenees with its borders located adjacent to Alfonso of Aragon's territory in Navarre and Aragon. The sudden death of Viscount Gaston of Bearn, fighting for Alfonso of Aragon in Spain, caused minor political detonations to reverberate across southern France. The worst-case scenario for Alfonso of Aragon would be for his enemy, the Duke of Aquitaine, to move in and secure Bearn, as would be his right as Bearn was technically vassal to Aquitaine. This would mean that the buffer between Aragon, Navarre and Aquitaine, in the form of Bearn would be removed, with a result that Alfonso of Aragon's enemy would be right at the border of his territory. He clearly couldn't let that happen, so he mobilised a large army, marched it over the Pyrenees and laid siege to the important coastal port of Bayonne in Gascony, adjacent to the Viscounty of Bearn. This siege will remain in place for the next 18 months.

Other players in the region also sprang into action. The Count of Toulouse launched a campaign against the Duke of Aquitaine, and King Alfonso of Aragon managed to spare some men in Zaragoza who pushed into Catalonia from King Alfonso of Aragon's territory, taking some land from the Count of Barcelona.

Now, the Count of Toulouse at this point in time, the man who has just gone on the offensive against Aquitaine, is Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse, who has strong ties to northern Spain. Just when you think that we couldn't fit any more Alfonsoes into the narrative, we are going to zoom down for a moment to take a closer look at this French Alfonso, the current Count of Toulouse. Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse, was given the name "Alfonso" after his grandfather, King Alfonso VI, so he is cousin to two of the other Alfonsoes, young King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile and Alfonso Enriques, the new ruler of Portugal. He was given his middle name "Jordan" due to the fact that he was baptised in the River Jordan in the Holy Land. He was able to be baptised in the River Jordan due to the fact that he was born at the siege of Tripoli during the First Crusade, his father being one of the leaders of the First Crusade, Raymond IV of Toulouse, and his mother being Elvira of Castile, an illegitimate daughter of King Alfonso VI and his mistress Jimena, whose full sister was Queen Theresa of Portugal and whose half sister was Queen Urraca.

Young Alfonso Jordan was only two years old when his father died, and he was nine years old when he became the Count of Toulouse and the marquisate of Provence. Two years later, when Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse was only eleven years old, the Duke of Aquitaine invaded Toulouse, keen to annex it to Aquitaine. Basically, from that moment onwards, Count Alfonso Jordan was constantly at war, attempting to secure his territory and his birthright from those keen to take it for themselves. The Duke of Aquitaine did manage to conquer Toulouse, but Alfonso Jordan gradually clawed it all back, finally securing it completely in the year 1123. At the same time, he was fighting against attempts by the Count of Barcelona to annex Provence.

Eventually, by the year 1125 Count Alfonso Jordan had everything pretty much under control. He had secured both Toulouse and Provence, and the troubadour culture was flourishing across his regions. He was even able to take some time out in the year 1126 to travel to Leon for the coronation of his cousin, King Alfonso VII. A slightly awkward factor in the relationship between the Count of Toulouse and his cousin, the new King of Leon and Castile, was the fact that Count Alfonso Jordan was an ally of Alfonso of Aragon, due mainly to the fact that they shared common enemies, those being the Duke of Aquitaine and to the Count of Barcelona. Just how strong the bond was between the two allied Alfonsoes, Alfonso of Aragon and Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse, was demonstrated by the fact that, after Alfonso of Aragon had commenced his siege of Bayonne, Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse marched the armies of Toulouse all the way north to the shores of the Bay of Biscay to assist Alfonso of Aragon in his siege of Bayonne.

Also heading towards Bayonne is Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara. Exactly why the Count of Castile is travelling to meet up with Alfonso of Aragon at the siege is unclear, although there is speculation that Pedro Gonzalez was intending to request assistance from Alfonso of Aragon on the ground in Castile, as things hadn't been going very well for the Counts of Lara in Castile of late. In fact, things had been going so badly that Count Pedro Gonzalez had recently been expelled from Castile by young King Alfonso VII, while his brother Count Rodrigo Gonzalez had been stripped of his lands and titles. This had come about due to the fact that, late in the year 1129 or early in 1130, the Counts of Lara had attempted an uprising in Castile, hoping to oust King Alfonso VII from the region and support the Counts' ultimate ambition of placing Fernando Perez of Lara on the throne. The Counts of Castile had begun their campaign by seizing the town of Palencia, but they had miscalculated both the level of support for the young monarch across Castile and also their own support base.

After a short while, it became apparent that the widespread support to overthrow the current King of Leon and Castile, which the Counts of Lara had depended upon, just didn't exist. Their stand against King Alfonso VII fizzled out and most of the supporters of the Counts of Lara threw in the towel and pledged allegiance to King Alfonso VII. Count Pedro Gonzalez, though, wasn't ready to admit defeat. King Alfonso VII stripped Pedro of his title as the Count of Castile and Pedro fled over the Pyrenees, intent on tracking down Alfonso of Aragon and convincing him to join Pedro in launching an invasion of Castile. Or at least that's the most likely scenario for Count Pedro's sudden appearance at the siege of Bayonne.

However, that's not how things panned out. In fact, things went very badly for Count Pedro at Bayonne. For reasons now unfortunately lost to history, Count Pedro challenged Count Alfonso Jordan to a joust after he arrived in Bayonne. Both Counts lined up their mounts and charged at each other, with Alfonso Jordan scoring the only hit when his lance

connected with Count Pedro's arm, unseating him from his horse. Count Pedro died from the injuries he sustained a few days later.

So the end of this episode finds young King Alfonso VII in a much better position than he was in at the beginning of the episode. His late mother's lover, the annoying Count Pedro Gonzalez de Lara, has died, and his brother has been forced into submission, while Alfonso of Aragon is tied up in a siege over the Pyrenees, which doesn't look like ending any time soon.

Join me next time as King Alfonso VII takes full advantage of the situation by attacking Alfonso of Aragon's holdings in Castile. Until next time, bye for now.

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