

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 63
Exit Alfonso of Aragon

Hello again. Last time, we saw Alfonso of Aragon and Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara distracted by events in France. The death of Viscount Gaston of Bearn, fighting in support of Alfonso of Aragon in Spain, made it likely that Alfonso of Aragon's enemy, the Duke of Aquitaine, would move in and take Bearn, meaning that territory directly controlled by the Duke of Aquitaine would extend all the way to the borders of Alfonso of Aragon's lands. To prevent this from happening, Alfonso of Aragon besieged the port of Bayonne, but Bayonne is proving a difficult nut to crack, and Alfonso of Aragon and his armies are now bogged down in a lengthy siege. Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara popped over to Bayonne during the siege and challenged Alfonso Jordan, the Count of Toulouse, to a joust, which Count Pedro lost and which ended his life.

So, without him having lifted a finger, two of Alfonso VII's rivals are now out of the picture: Alfonso of Aragon temporarily, at the siege of Bayonne, and Count Pedro Gonzalez of Lara permanently, on account of being dead. Is King Alfonso VII going to take full advantage of this turn of events? Yes, he absolutely is.

The headquarters of Alfonso of Aragon's holdings in Castile, and in fact the westernmost fortress held by Alfonso of Aragon in Castile, was the fortress of Castrojerez. In May of the year 1131 young King Alfonso VII moved his army to Castrojerez and besieged it. The garrison of the castle sent word of the attack to Alfonso of Aragon at Bayonne, but in an indication of just how badly the siege of Bayonne was going at that point in time, Alfonso of Aragon decided that he couldn't spare any men at all to go to the assistance of Castrojerez. Left to their own devices, the defenders of Castrojerez held out for five months before surrendering to King Alfonso VII in October of 1131. The surrender of Castrojerez prompted a raft of other Aragonese and aligned fortresses in Castile to also raise the white flag and pledge allegiance to Leon and Castile, leaving Alfonso of Aragon's holdings in Castile reduced to a bunch of fortresses in the east.

In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley notes that, around the same time, King Alfonso VII managed to gain a foothold into Alfonso of Aragon's territory in Zaragoza. It's a bit tricky trying to pin down exactly what took place, but it seems that an Almoravid nobleman who had been expelled from the city of Zaragoza when it was conquered by Alfonso of Aragon had been granted territory in the strategically important Jalon River valley by Alfonso of Aragon. You might remember that this valley leads down towards Toledo from the former Taifa of Zaragoza, and was the route traditionally taken by Muslim armies travelling up from the south towards the city of Zaragoza. During Alfonso of Aragon's absence at the siege of Bayonne, young King Alfonso VII scored a diplomatic coup by convincing the Muslim nobleman to switch allegiance from Alfonso of Aragon to himself. In exchange for granting the nobleman some extra territory in the Kingdom of Leon and Castile, that particular section of the Jalon River valley then came under the direct vassalage of Leon and Castile instead of Zaragoza.

By the middle of the year 1131, Alfonso of Aragon was sensing that the siege wasn't really progressing, and he was beginning to consider lifting it and withdrawing from France. By

late summer, he had moved some troops from the siege and was campaigning nearby. It's unclear exactly when the siege was lifted. All we know is that when Alfonso of Aragon drafted his will in October of the year 1131 the siege was still in place, but by Christmas the Royal Court had returned to the Kingdom of Aragon, so the siege was lifted sometime between October and December of the year 1131.

The next year, Alfonso of Aragon was busy campaigning in the borderlands between Zaragoza and Castile. He then switched direction and worked to secure the opposite border of Zaragoza, near the coast in the borderlands between Zaragoza and Valencia. As part of this campaign, Alfonso of Aragon wished to secure Lerida, a town guarded by a hilltop fortress whose allegiance had tended to switch between the Almoravids and Catalonia, depending on whichever one was strongest at the time. Alfonso of Aragon's goal from the beginning of the year 1133 onwards was to besiege Lerida and force it to capitulate. The easiest way in which to supply his forces, should the siege be put in place, would be to float the supplies directly from the city of Zaragoza down the Ebro River, then up to Lerida.

With Alfonso of Aragon's recent experience of sieges having taught him that they can last for extended periods of time, he was keen to set up a solid method of supplying his troops before putting the siege in place. This meant first securing the strongholds along the river route leading to Lerida. The first of these was the fortress of Mequinenza, which lies at the junction of the Ebro River and the River Segre, the River Segre being the river which flows past Lerida. Mequinenza fell to Alfonso of Aragon's forces relatively easily, so he then switched his attention to the nearby fortress of Fraga.

Now Fraga, like Lerida, was a place which frequently switched allegiance between Catalonia and the Almoravids, but at the moment, also like Lerida, it considered itself to be under the protection of the Almoravids. Once the siege had commenced, Fraga sent word to Lerida requesting assistance. Realising the strategic importance of Fraga to its own fortunes, Lerida sent word of the siege to Valencia, requesting the governor of Valencia to send men to attack Alfonso of Aragon's forces. Now, the current governor of Valencia isn't the governor who defeated Viscount Gaston of Bearn in battle and had his head sent to Grenada. That particular governor had been promoted after the Viscount-head-on-a-stick incident, and was now the governor of Seville. The new governor of Valencia though, was of a similar disposition to the previous governor. He was energetic, proactive and more than happy to send men to Fraga. In January of the year 1134 the governor sent some forces to Fraga, but they were defeated by Alfonso of Aragon's men and were forced to withdraw.

Six months later though, the siege of Fraga was still in place, and the governor of Valencia decided to have another crack at it, this time with a great deal more success. The forces from Valencia managed to get word to the defenders inside Fraga about the attack, and the arrival of the Almoravids was timed to coincide with an attack launched from Fraga. As Alfonso of Aragon's men were focused on repulsing an assault by the men from Fraga, the army from Valencia caught them by surprise, attacking them from the rear, surrounding them, and trapping them between the Fragans and the Almoravids. The men from the army of Alfonso of Aragon panicked, scattered, and fled, but not before large numbers of Christians were killed, wounded, or captured. Numbering among the dead were two bishops and another viscount from France, this time Viscount Centule of Bigorre. Another bishop, Bishop Guy of Lescar, was taken prisoner and sent to Valencia.

Alfonso of Aragon escaped, but was wounded. Two months later, on the 7th of September in the year 1134, King Alfonso of Aragon died from wounds he had received in the battle. Now, while his death probably wasn't being mourned in the Royal Court of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile, it came as a serious blow to the Kingdom of Aragon. For the past thirty years, Alfonso of Aragon had been working to cement the Kingdom of Aragon's claim as a regional power, and he had done really well. Aragon's influence now extended over neighbouring Navarre, and its borders had expanded over into the former Taifa of Zaragoza. Alfonso of Aragon's involvement in the politics of southern France ensured that, while he was alive at least, Aragon was a serious and influential player in the politics of the entire region.

Now, however, that looked to be at risk of falling apart. The main reason for this was the fact that Alfonso of Aragon had no heirs. Not only had he failed to father any children from his marriage to Queen Urraca, he hadn't remarried, so he had no legitimate children. In fact, oddly for the time, he didn't seem to have fathered any illegitimate children either. Alfonso of Aragon, at the time of his death was, so far as anyone can gather, completely childless. He had, of course, been aware of this fact. At a time when monarchies were hereditary, the crown needed to pass to someone after the death of a king, so during the siege of Bayonne, back in the year 1131, Alfonso of Aragon had drawn up a will, outlining his intentions about what was to happen to the Kingdom of Aragon and the other territories he held after his death. So there could be no argument about his intent, he reaffirmed his will of 1131 a few days before his death.

So, who did Alfonso of Aragon leave his Kingdom to under the terms of his will? Well, he didn't leave it to anyone. No, in a move which had just about everyone scratching their heads and wondering what on earth was going on, Alfonso of Aragon divvied up his territory between a variety of religious orders. The three religious orders which, according to Alfonso of Aragon's last wishes, were to jointly rule the Kingdom of Aragon and his other territories were the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, the Knights Templar, and the Hospitallers. If you are thinking that this is a bit of a strange move and are wondering how a kingdom could be jointly ruled by three military orders, well it gets even weirder upon closer examination.

The first military order appointed by Alfonso of Aragon to jointly rule his Kingdom is described by Bernard Riley in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain" as, and I quote "an association of secular canons, which served that shrine in Jerusalem in a liturgical and administrative function" end quote. In other words, it was composed of men with no military experience or experience in running kingdoms, whose sole job it was to look after the day-to-day running of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Well, that's OK, I hear you say, the Knights Templar are a bunch of highly experienced military men with wide-ranging skills in administration who successfully established one of the first international banking systems. They should have the skills to run a kingdom on the Iberian peninsula. Well, actually, further down the track, the Knights Templar will be all those things and more, and may well have possessed the skills to run a kingdom, but that's way off into the future. Unfortunately, at the time of Alfonso of Aragon's death, the Knights Templar had only just been formed. They were a completely novel creation, and no one really knew what they were about or what they could and couldn't do.

The remaining order, the Knights Hospitaller, had been fully established by the time of Alfonso of Aragon's death, but they were fully occupied caring for wounded and sick Christians in the Holy Land. They hadn't yet morphed into the military-based order which they would later become.

So, to put it simply, Alfonso of Aragon had just handed the rule of his Kingdom over to a bunch of monks in Jerusalem who were quite good at looking after sick people and organising church services, but had nothing remotely approaching the kind of skill set needed to keep the Kingdom of Aragon functioning, let alone the former Taifa of Zaragoza, which was likely to flip back to Muslim rule without a steady hand on the wheel.

So why did Alfonso of Aragon do this? Well, no one knows. Various historians have speculated over the centuries, and there is a theory that Alfonso of Aragon developed a burn-it-all-down attitude towards the end of his life, but there's really no universally accepted explanation. As stated by Bernard Reilly, and I quote "if such an explanation (ie the one about burning everything to the ground) does not entirely suit us, surely no explanation was adequate to meet the outrage of his contemporaries" end quote. In other words, if we are wondering what on earth possessed Alfonso of Aragon to do this, well that's nothing compared to the outrage and confusion which occurred at the time of his death.

So, the death of Alfonso of Aragon has left a massive big question mark hovering over the Kingdom of Aragon. One of the territories keen to take advantage of the situation is the Kingdom of Aragon's neighbour and adversary, Catalonia. Happily for Catalonia, it currently has a new, energetic young ruler in the form of the latest Count of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer IV. Join me next time as we catch up on events in Catalonia and assess the fallout from Alfonso of Aragon's death. Until next time, bye for now.

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