

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 75  
Exit King Alfonso VII

Hello again. Last time we saw King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile struggle to pursue his goal of conquering Al-Andalus. While King Alfonso and Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Aragon and Barcelona, were initially very optimistic about their chances of securing the entire Iberian peninsula for the Christians, their aim to split Al-Andalus between them has come crashing up against the hard rock of reality. After a few seasons of failed campaigns and limited successes against the Almohads, King Alfonso has reached the conclusion that he needs more manpower to accomplish his goals. So far though, his efforts to secure more men have come to nothing. His idea to dispatch the Bishop of Lisbon to England to secure a fleet of ships full of English crusaders yielded exactly zero results, as did his plan to marry King Louis VII of France to his daughter Constance. King Louis did end up marrying Constance, who is now the Queen of France, but King Louis's aversion to all things even slightly crusadey in nature meant that he will be sending no troops in King Alfonso's direction.

A Church Council was held in the year 1155 which yielded a lot of enthusiasm from the papal legate Cardinal Hyacinth, and the momentum from that Council saw King Alfonso achieve some small gains, but by the beginning of the year 1156 King Alfonso was getting a little desperate. By this time, not only had France and England expressed no desire to be involved in any of King Alfonso's campaigns against the Muslims, his fellow Christian rulers on the Iberian peninsula, King Alfonso of Portugal, the King of Navarre, and even Count Ramon Berenguer had all turned down King Alfonso's repeated requests for military assistance. In desperation, King Alfonso turned to a rather unlikely source of possible manpower: his neighbour to the south and recent ally of Barcelona, Genoa and Pisa, the Wolf King.

In February of 1156 King Alfonso and Muhammed Ibn Mardanish of Valencia and Murcia, also known as the Wolf King, signed a treaty. Under the terms of the treaty, the Wolf King would become a vassal of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. The Wolf King handed the fortress of Ucles to King Alfonso as part of the deal, and King Alfonso returned to Toledo for the summer, to plan a joint military campaign with the Wolf King against the Almohads.

Unfortunately though, in late June of the year 1156 disaster struck. King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile was struck down by illness and became seriously unwell. He was so unwell in fact that, not only was he unable to campaign or plan for any future campaigns for the remainder of the year, his life must have been thought to be hanging in the balance, as both of his daughters, who are now queens in their own right, Queen Constance of France and Queen Sancha of Navarre, made the journey to his court at Toledo to pay respects to their father.

In an unfortunate piece of bad timing, while King Alfonso was out of action, the Almohads began to assert their power on the Iberian peninsula.

Now, it's been a while since we checked in with the Almohads in any detail, so let's see what's been going on. If we roll the clock back eight years, to the year 1148, the Almohad advance across Al-Andalus had come to a grinding halt after they had managed to secure Cordoba, Seville, Badajoz, and most of the south-western portion of the Iberian peninsula.

The reason why the campaign in Al-Andalus had ground to a halt was the fact that a massive revolt against Almohad rule had broken out amongst the tribes of the West Atlas Mountain range over in northern Africa, so the focus of the leader of the Almohads, Abdul Mu'min, switched to northern Africa. In fact, the rebellion which broke out proved to be so serious that not only were the Almohad troops in Africa solely focused on suppressing the uprising, men from Al-Andalus were actually sent to northern Africa to bolster the Almohad forces. By May of 1148 things were finally looking like they were getting back under control. The rebel leader had been defeated and executed, and Abdul Mu'min ordered that a purge of rebels and their supporters be carried out across the region. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy reports that a staggering 30,000 executions were said to have been carried out against mainly Berber tribesmen who were accused of supporting the rebellion.

While this harsh crackdown did serve to consolidate Almohad rule in northern Africa, it had the opposite result in Al-Andalus. As word of the massacres and executions filtered over to the Iberian peninsula, local Muslim warlords who had decided to sit on the sidelines and accept Almohad rule began to have second thoughts. Worried that Al-Andalus might begin to slip through his fingers, Abdul Mu'min sent a large army of Almohads over to Al-Andalus which, after a concerted and successful campaign, managed to subdue unrest from the local Muslims and consolidate their hold over their territory.

It was at this time, though, that they faced aggression from the Christians in the form of King Alfonso VII, who staged repeated attacks on Cordoba. The Christians were pushed back from Cordoba largely due to the assistance of a number of regional Muslim warlords, who joined their forces to those of the Almohads to force King Alfonso to back away. It appears that after this Abdul Mu'min realised that the key to holding Almohad territory in Al-Andalus was the cooperation of the local Muslims, so he invited the most influential Muslim warlords who had assisted in the action at Cordoba to travel to Morocco in the year 1150 to meet with him personally at Salé. As a result of this meeting, the leaders were formally accepted into the upper levels of the Almohad hierarchy and were given privileges and favours, on the condition that upon their return to Al-Andalus they surrender control over their various territories, and pledge themselves instead to the Almohad governor of Seville. This template will serve as the future model for the subjugation of the territory on the Iberian peninsula by the Almohads. Where possible, they will work with local warlords and gradually incorporate them into the Almohad power structure, extending Almohad influence by a combination of conquest and cooperation.

But all that needed to wait for a couple of years. Between the years 1151 and 1155 Abdul Mu'min was once again preoccupied by affairs in Africa, including the building of his navy and shipyards and a lengthy campaign in Algeria, at the end of which saw a number of Arab tribes defeated. They were then incorporated into the Almohad power structure in Morocco. In September of 1153 Abdul Mu'min was forced to return to Marrakesh, where rumours were circulating of a plot by the brothers of the founder of the Almohads, Ibn Tumart, to bring down Abdul Mu'min. Abdul Mu'min dealt with the plot by executing all those believed to have been involved, save for the brothers of Ibn Tumart, who were relocated to Fez, where their activities could be closely monitored.

Seemingly rattled by these events, Abdul Mu'min decided to completely overhaul the Almohad command structure. He publicly declared that his son Mohammed would succeed him as ruler, replacing the man formerly favoured to take the position, an influential supporter of the late Ibn Tumart. Cleverly, Abdul Mu'min gained the endorsement of the newly conquered Arabs and other groups outside the traditional

Almohad support base before making this move. At a public gathering in Salé elite members of the Almohads were manoeuvred into accepting Mohammed as the next ruler, but the brothers of Ibn Tumart weren't so easily convinced. They escaped their surveillance at Fez and attempted an uprising in Marrakesh, intending to overthrow Abdul Mu'min. However, the coup was unsuccessful, with the brothers all killed in the resulting unrest.

In the year 1155, Abdul Mu'min further consolidated his hold over the Almohads by placing his sons in positions of power. Fortunately for Abdul Mu'min, he had plenty of sons at his disposal, fourteen of them to be exact, and he gradually moved them into governorship positions across northern Africa and in Al-Andalus, until most key towns, including Seville, Granada, and Cordoba, were all ruled by his sons.

He was careful though not to alienate the existing Almohad elite. He turned the existing elite into a sort of hereditary ruling class, just one rung lower on the ladder than his own sons. The members of this elite group were given the governorship of smaller towns, provided with command positions in the military, and with positions inside the ruling structure. Although, a warning bell needs to sound about the long term future of this set up. As stated by Hugh Kennedy, and I quote "the closed nature of this ruling class may account for its cohesion and civil wars within it were remarkably rare, but it also led to a certain fossilisation and dearth of a leadership talent".

With the new governing structure settling into place, Abdul Mu'min then focused on reforming the military. The core of the Almohad army was comprised of Almohad fighters, 10,000 of which were permanent, salaried soldiers based in Marrakesh, and the rest of which were scattered around the various cities and towns controlled by the Almohads. To this core group, Abdul Mu'min added Arab fighters who were largely recruited from the regions around Tunisia and relocated to Morocco. They fought in tribal units and served under their own tribal commanders. Then a final element was added: Muslim residents of Al-Andalus, who like the Arabs fought in their own units under their own commanders, but unlike the Arabs these units weren't relocated to Morocco. They remained in Al-Andalus, ready to be deployed as required by the Almohads. Most of the Almohad military machine, in particular the 10,000 permanent fighters, moved with Abdul Mu'min, based like he was in Marrakesh and travelling with him as he embarked on his various campaigns. As Abdul Mu'min was currently still preoccupied with events in northern Africa, this meant that only limited forces were available to deploy against King Alfonso in Al-Andalus.

This changed though in the year 1156, while King Alfonso was confined to his bed in Toledo by his illness. During that year, two of Abdul Mu'min's sons were appointed as the governors of Seville and Malaga. The son who scored Malaga, a man called Uthman, seemed particularly keen to score some hits against the Christians of the Iberian peninsula. Uthman's ambitions saw him handed the governorship of Granada, then in the year 1157 Uthman besieged Almeria, which had been taken by King Alfonso a decade earlier.

You might remember that Almeria was a busy port city on the southern coast of the peninsula, completely surrounded by Muslim territory. We flagged at the time that Almeria would be likely difficult for the Christians to hold on to, and the Almohads are now proving this to be true. King Alfonso had recovered sufficiently to lead forces to the defence of Almeria, and his ally the Wolf King also attempted to relieve the city, but it was all to no avail. The Almohads had the city tightly besieged by both land and sea. With no navy to

speak of and with insufficient troops to be able to break the siege, the Christian garrison of Almeria surrendered to the Almohads.

Unfortunately, things are about to get even worse for the Christians. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August in the year 1157, on his way back from Almeria, King Alfonso VII died. King Alfonso had ruled the kingdom of Leon and Castile for over 30 years and back in the year 1135 he had himself invested as Emperor of Spain. His dream of extending Christian rule over the entire Iberian peninsula during his lifetime, though, hadn't come to pass. Strangely, while King Alfonso VII was the driving force behind an effort to unite the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula under one ruler, he also ended up being the person who sounded the death knell for that ambition. This came about because, just before his death, he made the fateful decision not to proclaim his eldest son as his successor to the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Instead, he declared that two of his sons would become kings, one of the Kingdom of Leon and the other of the Kingdom of Castile.

So, just as the Almohads are ramping up their efforts to dominate the peninsula, King Alfonso VII exits the stage, with his impressive kingdom now split in two. How will this impact the Reconquista moving forward? Well, you'll need to join me next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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