

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 83  
The Rise of the Young Alfonso's

Hello again. Last time, we saw the Almohad Caliph conclude his five year stint in Al-Andalus and return to Morocco. Although he declared his trip to have been a resounding success, it actually wasn't. His initial dream of conquering Christian Spain remained unfulfilled, and all he had really managed to do was maintain the tenuous hold by the Almohads over Al-Andalus. Now, while we've been concentrating on the Caliph and his adventures in Al-Andalus, the Christian leaders have been making waves of their own, so we will pop back over to the Christian parts of the peninsula to catch up on events there.

We last zoomed in on Christian Spain in Episode 80, so here's a brief summary of the situation at the time of the arrival of the Caliph in Al-Andalus around the year 1172. The most senior of the Christian kings is Alfonso I of Portugal, who is aged in his fifties. King Alfonso is limping around and is unable to ride a horse due to a leg injury he received during a battle against his son-in-law, the King of Leon, King Fernando II. King Fernando of Leon is aged in his thirties and is keen to extend the boundaries of his kingdom southwards into Al-Andalus and eastwards into Castile. Castile is currently being ruled by the new teenage king, King Alfonso VIII. There is another teenage Alfonso in the mix, the ruler of Aragon and Catalonia, who is ruling as King Alfonso II of Aragon and Barcelona. Completing the set is the king of Navarre, King Sancho VI. Although Navarre is only a small place, the ambitions of its king are huge.

Just so you are aware of the dynamics of the situation, young King Alfonso VIII of Castile is the nephew of both of the kings who share his borders to the north, the King of Leon and the King of Navarre, and far from being kindly uncles both uncle Fernando of Leon and uncle Sancho of Navarre seem eager to take advantage of their nephew's youth and inexperience by annexing some of his territory. But they shouldn't get too confident about dividing Castile between them because, of all the kings currently on the chess board in Christian Spain, young King Alfonso VIII is the one to watch.

Now it's safe to say that King Alfonso VIII didn't have a promising start to his reign. Orphaned while he was a baby, he was the subject of a power struggle between the two most powerful families in Castile, with the Laras eventually prevailing. So at the start of his reign, the young King of Castile faced a number of challenges, firstly, how to wriggle out from under the thumb of the Laras and assert his own authority and then, more importantly, how to force his uncles, the kings of Leon and Navarre, to keep to themselves and stop encroaching on his territory. As we mentioned back in Episode 80 he did this by forging an alliance with King Henry II of England, an alliance which he sealed by marrying one of King Henry's daughters, Eleanor, when she was nine years old and he was fourteen. This was a very savvy move.

While having the powerful English King at his back may have made his uncles from Leon and Navarre raise their eyebrows, his next move may have had them blinking in surprise. In order to secure his hold on Castile and to ensure that his uncles would remain inside their kingdoms and not feel inclined to expand into Castile, King Alfonso VIII decided to form an alliance with the other teenage Alfonso king, King Alfonso II of Aragon.

Before doing so, though, King Alfonso VIII decided to put Uncle King Sancho of Navarre back in his box. King Sancho had taken advantage of the instability in Castile prior to King Alfonso coming of age by annexing territory in the borderlands between Castile and Navarre, and King Alfonso VIII wanted it back. Cleverly, he proposed that the dispute be settled not militarily but by arbitration. Who, though, had the authority to decide a dispute between two kings? Well, an even more senior king, that's who, so looking around Europe to see who was senior enough to have the authority to adjudicate between the Kingdom of Castile and the Kingdom of Navarre, well, let's see. Ah, what about the King of England, King Henry II? Everyone nodded and agreed that yes, King Henry II of England did have the authority to act as a judge in this matter. I'm sure the fact that the King of England was King Alfonso's father-in-law and his new chief ally had nothing to do with the fact that the King of England ruled in Castile's favour. King Sancho of Navarre was forced to give back all the land he had seized, although to be fair King Alfonso was ordered by his father-in-law to pay a sizeable amount of compensation to the Kingdom of Navarre in return for the territory.

Fresh from this victory, which incidentally occurred in the year 1176, the young King of Castile decided to pal up with the other young Alfonso, Alfonso II of Aragon, for a fun raid against the Caliph's forces in Cuenca.

Now, if you think things have been difficult for the teenage Alfonso of Castile, they have been equally, if not more, difficult for the teenage Alfonso of Aragon. The territory Alfonso of Aragon had inherited was massive, incorporating not only the traditional Kingdom of Aragon and the County of Barcelona, but the former Taifa of Zaragoza and a bunch of territories over the Pyrenees in southern France. It was the territories in southern France which were likely causing the most sleepless nights for the young Alfonso of Aragon. The King of France had formed an alliance with the Count of Toulouse, and the now very powerful Count of Toulouse was greedily eyeing off the French regions ruled by the young, inexperienced monarch from the Iberian peninsula. Incidentally, young King Alfonso of Aragon fully embraced these territories over the Pyrenees and had no wish whatsoever to relinquish them. The troubadour culture of southern France had been adopted by the young monarch, and apparently he even personally participated in the activity, with T. N. Bisson in his book "The Medieval Crown of Aragon", describing young Alfonso as and I quote "no mean dabbler" (end of quote) in the art of singing the lyrical songs of courtly love. Anyway, troubadouring aside, the politics of southern France was complex, toxic, and a total headache, so it's likely that when his fellow teenage Alfonso, the King of Castile, suggested that they might want to go and wave their swords at the Caliph and the Almohads, young Alfonso of Aragon was super keen to participate.

Now at this stage, which was during the year 1177, the Caliph was part-way through his ambitious campaign to conquer Christian Spain. The wheels had not yet come off the Caliph's campaign, but they were starting to wobble. He was currently besieging the town of Huete, an event which we described back in Episode 81, and it wasn't going very well. Huete was inside the Kingdom of Castile, near its southern border with Al-Andalus, and you might remember that the Caliph's plan was to take Huete as a first step towards striking the more ambitious target of the city of Toledo. When rumours began to circulate that the armies of Castile were advancing towards Huete though, the Caliph gave the order to lift the siege and retreat eastwards to the Muslim town of Cuenca.

Now, Cuenca was a target of great interest not only to Castile but to Aragon. As we mentioned back in Episode 81 it was a Muslim stronghold in a sea of Christian territory. It was sort of located near the borders of three different territories: Castile, the former Taifa

of Zaragoza, and Valencia. King Alfonso of Castile was keen to annex it to Castile, King Alfonso of Aragon was keen to annex it to Zaragoza, and the Caliph was keen to preserve it as an outpost which he could use to push back against Christian aggression towards Valencia.

Of course, we all know what happened next. Without any fighting actually taking place, the Caliph withdrew from Cuenca into Valencia and King Alfonso VIII of Castile moved into Cuenca and claimed it. King Alfonso flipped Cuenca from being a Muslim town to a Christian one. He even installed a bishop in the town. As stated by Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", and I quote "the acquisition of Cuenca assured the defence of Castile's eastern frontier and also encouraged Aragon's southwards expansion" end quote.

So, all in all, it was a successful pairing up by the two teenaged Alfonso's. It was so successful in fact that the two Alfonso's decided to form an alliance. As a reward for the assistance he had provided, the King of Castile released the King of Aragon from a number of obligations which had been owed by his father, Ramon Berenguer IV, as vassal to the then Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Back then, Ramon Berenguer had held Zaragoza as vassal to King Alfonso VII. King Alfonso VIII of Castile released King Alfonso II of Aragon from this bond, meaning that Aragon now held Zaragoza in its own right.

The two Alfonso's high-fived each other, and King Alfonso of Aragon returned to his court to address the pressing issue of how to prevent a bunch of his vassals over the Pyrenees defecting to the Count of Toulouse. The powerful Viscount of Beziers had recently flipped over to Toulouse, and Alfonso was left scrambling, trying via diplomatic, military, and political means to secure his alliances with Foix, Bearn and Bigorre in such a manner which would enable him to keep his hold over Provence. For those of you who have listened to the "Crusade Against The Cathars" series from the "History of the Crusades" podcast, in this part of the narrative we are currently about thirty years away from the crusade against the Cathars kicking off, but the complexity of the politics of southern France is pretty much as it was at the beginning of that Crusade, so it was complicated, messy, and dominated by big personalities.

Anyway, all of this left young King Alfonso of Aragon thinking that it would be really good if he didn't have to worry about events in the Iberian peninsula, which would then leave him free to concentrate on his territories in France, so in March of the year 1179 he concluded a set of treaties with King Alfonso VIII of Castile called the Treaties of Cazola. By the time the treaties were finalised, both Alfonso's were no longer teenagers but were in their early twenties. King Alfonso of Castile was 24 and Alfonso of Aragon was 22, although their youthful eagerness is still kind of evident in the terms of the treaties. Like his uncle Fernando of Leon had done when he was a fresh-faced king and had sat down with his brother the King of Castile to divide the peninsula between them, the Treaties of Cazola were very similar. Both young Alfonso's were heartily sick of the antics of the King of Navarre, so under the terms of the treaty they decided to conquer Navarre and split it between them. They then divvied up the southern and eastern portions of Al-Andalus. Valencia and Denia would go to Aragon, and interestingly King Alfonso of Aragon would hold these territories in his own right and not as vassal to Castile. The King of Castile retained the right to conquer all of Al-Andalus to the south of Castile, but interestingly the treaty allocated Murcia to Castile, not Aragon, which was notable as all of the Wolf King's former territories in Valencia, Denia and Murcia had always been tagged by Aragon, but now Aragon was forfeiting its future claim to Murcia.

As soon as the treaties were concluded, King Alfonso of Aragon was required back over the Pyrenees, where all hell had just broken loose. Alfonso's arch-enemy, Count Raymond V of Toulouse, had arranged the assassination of the ruler of Provence, who was Alfonso's younger brother. The Count of Toulouse then joined forces with Genoa in a bid to conquer Provence. To counter this move, Alfonso of Aragon formed an alliance with Genoa's arch-enemy Pisa, which had the effect of forcing Toulouse to back down.

While Alfonso of Aragon is being kept busy over in France, the kings of Castile, Portugal, and Leon decided to go on the offensive against the Almohads. Caliph Yusuf was currently on campaign in Tunisia, so for the next few years the Christian kings took advantage of his absence by repeatedly attacking and raiding into Al-Andalus. The elderly King Alfonso I of Portugal led repeated advances into Al-Andalus, despite his dodgy leg, with some of his raids pushing as far south as Seville. In response to this aggression and perhaps concerned about the safety of his beloved library in Seville, the Caliph ordered two naval attacks on Lisbon in 1179 and 1180, but neither of these served to stop Portuguese aggression.

Not to be outdone, King Alfonso VIII of Castile attacked Cordoba in the year 1182, and raided repeatedly and successfully around Malaga, Algeciras and Granada. In his book "The Reconquest of Spain", D.W. Lomax notes that these raids destroyed so many crops that prices for food rose steeply in the markets of Seville. The young King of Castile even managed to seize two castles in the region between Cordoba and Seville. He ejected their Muslim garrisons and filled them with Christian fighters, with a view to using them as bases for further assaults on Cordoba and Seville.

In the year 1183 King Alfonso VIII of Castile signed a treaty with his uncle King Fernando of Leon, in which Leon and Castile promised to combine forces to launch an attack on Al-Andalus the following year. Wasting no time at all King Fernando, with the assistance of knights from the Templars and Hospitallers, besieged Caceres in January of 1184, a stronghold in Al-Andalus to the south of Leon, and a couple of months later King Alfonso VIII seized and garrisoned the fortress of Alarcon in Valencia.

This seems to have been the last straw for the Caliph. He pulled the Almohad forces out of Tunisia, and in May of the year 1184 set sail for Seville. Join me next time as the Caliph and the Christian kings clash swords once again in Al-Andalus. Until next time, bye for now.

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