

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 85
A Bunch Of Alfonso's

Hello again. Last time we saw a bunch of exits from the narrative. The first to depart was Caliph Yusuf, who died from injuries he received during an unsuccessful Almohad military campaign against Santarem. Around eighteen months later the elderly statesman of the Christian kings, King Alfonso I of Portugal also died, followed three years later by King Fernando of Leon. King Fernando's seventeen year old son Alfonso has been crowned as the new King of Leon, ruling as King Alfonso IX.

Now, as we mentioned at the end of the last episode, Alfonso of Leon's rise to power was not smooth, so his priority at the start of his reign was to secure his hold on the throne. In order to achieve this he held a highly unusual meeting of his court in Leon in April of the year 1188. This meeting was unusual due to the fact that he didn't just summon all the usual collection of noblemen, power brokers, and senior church officials; he extended the attendance list to include representatives from the town councils of major cities in his kingdom, and apparently this was the first time that such a democratic move had been made by a Western monarch. In the words of Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", and I quote "this assembly has an exceptional significance because, for the first time in the history of Christian Spain, and indeed in the history of Western Christendom, representatives of the towns were summoned to attend the King's court, together with the bishops and magnates. With the assembling of these three elements of society, it can be said that the medieval "cortes", or "parliament", had come into being at an earlier time than elsewhere in Europe" end quote. To be clear though, young King Alfonso of Leon may not have been aware that he was laying the foundations for the later development of parliamentary democracy. Instead, he was probably just attempting to secure broad support amongst his subjects. Still, it was a good idea and a significant achievement.

Later in the year 1188 young King Alfonso of Leon was summoned to attend the court of his cousin, King Alfonso VIII of Castile, where he pledged fealty to Castile and effectively declared Leon to be vassal to its neighbour.

Now it's safe to say that young Alfonso of Leon was not happy that he was made to pledge homage to Castile. Since Alfonso of Leon was young, inexperienced, and new to the throne it made sense to place himself under the thumb of his neighbour, the King of Castile, and had he not done so there is every likelihood that King Alfonso of Castile would have invaded Leon and annexed it. Still, Alfonso of Leon was unhappy about the fact that he was forced to bow down before the King of Castile, and he will in fact hold an enduring grudge against Alfonso of Castile for forcing him into what he viewed as a humiliating position.

Since we have a bunch of new kids on the block, let's do a quick whip-around the peninsula as at the year 1188 to see who the new power players are. Starting in a clockwise direction from the Kingdom of Portugal, ruling Portugal as its new king is King Sancho I. King Sancho I of Portugal, was 31 years old when he was crowned in Coimbra, back in 1185, and is currently aged in his mid 30s. Sancho is married to the younger sister of King Alfonso II of Aragon, and has already fathered seven children, five of which have

survived infancy and three of which, usefully, are boys. Of course, there are no prizes for guessing the name of his eldest son. That's right, it's Alfonso.

Incidentally, with so many Alfonso's occupying the narrative at this point in time, I'm going to shorten their titles for convenience. From now on, King Alfonso IX of Leon, will be referred to as Alfonso of Leon, King Alfonso VIII of Castile will be called Alfonso of Castile, and King Alfonso II of Aragon and Barcelona will be known as Alfonso of Aragon.

Anyway, back to Sancho of Portugal. Unlike his father, he doesn't seem overly concerned about fighting against Leon to gain more territory for Portugal in Galicia. Instead, the focus of his expansionist policies will be in the south, where he will work to push the boundaries of his kingdom down into land currently claimed by the Almohads.

Next up is Alfonso of Leon. As we've just discussed, he is a teenager who is currently concentrating on consolidating his hold over his kingdom. Due to this focus, he apparently has no expansionist aims, and he has been forced, much to his displeasure, to pledge fealty to his neighbour Castile, which is being ruled by his cousin Alfonso of Castile.

Now, Alfonso of Castile is the one to watch. He is arguably the most powerful of the current batch of Christian kings, although instead of this being a factor in his favour moving forward this is likely to work against him, as the other kings work to reduce his influence.

Moving clockwise, next up is Navarre. King Sancho VI of Navarre, is currently the elder statesman of the Christian kings. Aged in his late fifties in the year 1188, he has been ruling Navarre for nearly 40 years. He has been married to Sancho of Castile for around 35 years, and they have three adult children, one of whom is heir to the throne of Navarre, and he's also named Sancho. Now, although King Sancho of Navarre is the oldest and most experienced of the Christian kings, he hasn't been able to take advantage of this fact. The small Kingdom of Navarre is effectively encircled by territory ruled by two of the Alfonso's: Alfonso of Castile and Alfonso of Aragon, and while these two Alfonso's haven't been able to progress their goal of defeating Navarre and splitting it between them, they have been able to confine King Sancho of Navarre to his current boundaries.

Talking of Alfonso of Aragon, he is up next. We discussed him extensively back in Episode 83 so we don't need to go into detail, other than to remind you that he holds an extensive amount of territory on the Iberian peninsula, not as vassal to Castile or Leon but in his own right, territory which includes the Kingdom of Aragon, the County of Barcelona, and the former Taifa of Zaragoza. He also controls territory over the Pyrenees in southern France, although holding on to his French possessions is proving a challenge.

Last up on our list is the new Calif Yaqub, who claims the region of Al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain, on behalf of the Almohads. Yaqub is currently around 30 years old and is described by D.W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain" as, and I quote "stocky, swarthy, brave, eloquent and generous" end quote. As we've mentioned previously, Yaqub was more a fighter than a scholar. He is currently occupied in northern Africa, consolidating his hold on power. Interestingly, Yaqub seems to have been a bit of a lad in his youth. In the few years since he has become Caliph though he has turned over a new leaf. Gone are the days of partying and pleasure seeking. Yaqub is now quite pious. He has turned his back on many of the things he had previously enjoyed. He has forbidden wine, music, fancy clothes, and even syrup in his court.

So there you have it, that's our round up, and as you may have gathered the leaders to keep your eyes on moving forward are Alfonso of Castile and Caliph Yaqub.

Before they start hogging the limelight though, events have intervened and the spotlight is about to shine on the new King of Portugal. In the year 1189 the Third Crusade was launched in a joint attempt by King Philip II of France, Richard the Lionheart of England, and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa to recapture Jerusalem following its fall to Saladin in 1187. As part of the Crusading effort, two fleets set sail from Europe full of men heading for the Holy Land to join the Crusade. The first fleet, consisting of between 50 to 60 ships carrying around 10,000 men from Denmark, Germany, the low countries, and England, sailed past the Portuguese coastline, then turned eastwards once it reached the tip of the Iberian peninsula, heading for the Strait of Gibraltar. Before it reached the Strait of Gibraltar though, it pulled into the small port of Alvor, which was in Almohad territory. The Crusaders attacked Alvor, then plundered it and killed many of its residents. Eager to continue on to the main field of action in the Holy Land, they didn't secure Alvor, but popped back on to their ships and continued their voyage.

A few months later, the next fleet of mainly English crusaders stopped off in Lisbon on its way to the Crusade. As his father had done forty years earlier, King Sancho of Portugal negotiated with the Crusaders for them to embark on a side mission, joining with the Kingdom of Portugal to attack a Muslim possession. The target the leaders settled on was the town of Silves.

Now Silves at this time was one of the most important towns in western Al-Andalus. It was located around ten kilometres inland from the southern coast on the banks of a navigable river. The entrance to the river was on the Mediterranean coastline, adjacent to the recently defeated port of Alvor.

The plan was for the ships carrying around 3500 crusaders to sail to Silves and besiege it, while King Sancho marched the Portuguese forces southwards overland to join the siege. The crusaders arrived at Silves on the 20th of July in the year 1189, and not only besieged the town but managed to attack and capture the lower part of it, after successfully attacking its walls by using ladders to climb them. The Crusaders were busying themselves constructing siege engines when the Portuguese forces arrived.

The Almohad governor of Silves attempted to defend his town, but according to Hugh Kennedy in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", he was inexperienced and had failed to maintain the town's defences. The combined Portuguese and Crusader forces were numerous enough to ensure the town was completely surrounded. A few failed attempts to destroy the town's walls with siege engines and by under-mining were made, but the town was eventually starved into submission. Following a three month long siege and suffering greatly from a lack of food and water, negotiations for the town's surrender commenced at the beginning of September. As Hugh Kennedy notes, during those three months no Almohad armies came to the town's defence. Even the governor of Seville seems to have made no attempt to relieve Silves, and Hugh Kennedy views this as an indication of just how weak the Almohad military defences in Al-Andalus had become.

On the 3rd of September the town was handed over to King Sancho, who agreed to allow the Crusaders to plunder it. The Crusaders eventually set sail for the Holy Land, laden with booty. King Sancho then garrisoned Silves with his men. Keen to follow up on his success, King Sancho managed to conquer a number of strongholds around Silves before returning to Portugal.

Now, one of the reasons why the Almohads in Al-Andalus had been unable to come to the defence of the town of Silves during the three months in which it was being besieged was the fact that Portugal was not the only Christian kingdom to go on the offensive. When he launched the Third Crusade a couple of years earlier, in the year 1187, Pope Gregory VIII seemed to be almost solely focused on reclaiming Jerusalem from the Muslims. However, Pope Gregory will only last a few months as Pope, and the man who succeeded him, Pope Clement III, took a broader view of the Crusade. In 1188 he singled out the Christian kings of Spain for special mention. He lamented the discord which appeared to exist between the Christian kings on the peninsula, and he urged them all to work together for the sake of Christianity. To this end, Pope Clement proposed that the Christian kings of Spain agree to stop fighting each other. Pope Clement's preferred position would be for the Christian Kings of Portugal, Leon, Castile, Navarre, and Aragon to agree to a permanent peace, in effect to agree to never take up arms against each other. Pope Clement himself, though, may have thought this to be a little optimistic, so he stated that if a permanent peace was unachievable, the least the kings could do would be to agree to a ten year long truce. A decade long truce would free the Christian kings to focus on fighting the Muslims instead of each other. As a sweetener to encourage the Spanish Christians to take up this proposal, Pope Clement guaranteed that Spanish Christians fighting the Muslims of Al-Andalus would receive the same remission of their sins as that offered to Crusaders who were travelling to the Holy Land to fight in the Third Crusade.

In his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan notes that the decision by Pope Clement to extend Pope Gregory's crusading papal bull to Spain is highly significant, as it's the first time in which the mission of reconquest, that of conquering all of Muslim Spain in the name of Christianity, was linked to the concept of a crusade.

So, did the Christian kings on the peninsula embrace each other, declare peace amongst themselves, and ride off to fight the Muslims? Ah, actually no. Pope Clement wrote a letter to the senior bishops and archbishops of Spain requesting details about the issues between the Kings so that Rome could adjudicate a settlement between them. Joseph O'Callaghan notes that it looks like the Archbishop of Toledo suggested that a meeting take place to discuss the issue, but apparently the clerics were unable to agree on a time for the meeting, so it never actually happened. And neither did the peace treaty. Instead, just one of the Christian kings took up the Pope's suggestion and joined King Sancho of Portugal in attacking the Almohads. The Christian king in question was Alfonso of Castile, who led raids around Cordoba and Seville.

What does Caliph Yaqub think about the loss of Silves? Well, he's not impressed. Join me next time as Caliph Yaqub returns to Al-Andalus, intent on reclaiming the town of Silves. Until next time, bye for now.

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