

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 91
The Crusade of Las Navas de Tolosa, Part One

Hello again. Last time we saw the now elderly King Alfonso VIII of Castile finally agree to embark on a large scale crusade against the Almohads, something which successive Popes had been urging him to do for decades. During the latter months of the year 1211 Christians from across not only the Iberian peninsula but France and further afield into wider Europe were being encouraged to drop whatever they were doing and make their way to Castile to join the Crusade.

Now, one thing which would boost recruitment numbers for the Crusade to very healthy levels would be if some big names made their crusading vows and pledged to join King Alfonso's campaign. Specifically, if the Kings of England and France signed on to the Crusade, then it would be expected that a whole raft of Englishmen and Frenchmen would follow their Kings into battle. But it looked like neither of these men were keen to be involved. In fact, King John of England appeared to be more interested in aligning himself with the Caliph than with Castile.

Let's take a quick look at King John. Anyone who has listened to the History of the Crusades Podcast will remember King John of England as being a horrible person and an even worse King. Or perhaps that should be the other way around. A terrible King and an even worse person. Either way, the only real thing achieved by King John was a place in history as the worst monarch to ever rule England. At this point in time, King John was at war with France, and had been at war with France for nearly ten years. This war had been going very, very badly for King John. He has managed to lose the core of Angevin territory in France, including the jewel in the crown, Normandy, which fell to France in the year 1204. At the moment, the only territory in France which King John has managed to hold on to is his mother Eleanor of Aquitaine's possession, the Duchy of Aquitaine. King John has also clashed with Pope Innocent, who ended up excommunicating him back in the year 1209.

By the year 1211, when the Crusading recruitment drive was in full swing, well, King John of England couldn't have been less interested in taking part. The English forces had been decimated by their repeated losses to France, and all that King John cared about was holding on to the Duchy of Aquitaine and trying to get Normandy back from King Philip II of France. Oh, and also trying to prevent King Philip from invading England and defeating it entirely, a scenario which was looking more and more likely to happen.

Which is why, after the Caliph arrived at Seville in the year 1211 to prepare his response to the Crusade, King John decided to send an embassy to the Caliph to see whether they could form some sort of alliance which would reduce the likelihood of a French invasion of England and which may even assist King John to win back some of the vast amount of territory he had lost. Now an English chronicler from this time a man called Matthew Parris, asserts that he personally overheard one of the English royal ambassadors state that, in an attempt to seal the deal between himself and the Caliph, King John had offered to pay the Caliph an annual tribute, and had even flagged that he might convert to Islam. Apparently though the Caliph had formed the completely reasonable view that King John was an idiot, so he broke off negotiations without any deal having been reached. Now, many historians have questioned whether King John did actually offer to convert to Islam.

In his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan points out that the chronicler Matthew Parris absolutely despised King John and that his observations may have been coloured by this fact. Anyway, regardless of what did or didn't happen between representatives from the King of England and the Caliph, the upshot of it all was King John of England didn't manage to ally himself with the Caliph, but neither was he going to pledge himself or the English royal forces to join a crusade against the Caliph.

As for the involvement of the King of France in the Crusade, well King Philip of France's military priorities at this point in time were to take the Duchy of Aquitaine from King John, then take England from King John, so he declined all invitations for him to participate in the Crusade, despite the fact that the Archbishop of Toledo personally travelled to the French royal court to lobby King Philip and urge him to take crusading vows. Many other French noblemen, though, were interested, and perhaps due to the fake news circulating spruiking the dangers of the Caliph claiming the Iberian peninsula then sending his Muslim forces over the Pyrenees into southern France, which we mentioned in the last episode, many noblemen and common fighting men from regions such as Gascony, Poitou and Provence did decide to join up.

The Crusade was all set to launch from Toledo in the year 1212. Ready at the starting line with their armies were King Alfonso VIII of Castile, King Pedro II of Aragon, the Archbishops of Narbonne and Bordeaux, a bunch of counts and viscounts from southern France, and members of a number of military orders, including Calatrava, the Order of Santiago, the Knights Templar and the Hospitallers. King Sancho VII of Navarre had been persuaded to join despite his deep dislike of the King of Castile, but the Kings of Leon and Portugal had decided to sit this expedition out, although Joseph O'Callaghan points out that, despite the fact that the Kings of Leon and Portugal stayed home, many of their subjects decided to join the Crusade.

King Alfonso of Castile was not only the effective commander of the campaign, he also ended up financing most of it. Contemporary sources describe King Alfonso as agreeing to pay the expenses of 2,000 knights, 10,000 mounted fighters, and 50,000 foot soldiers who made the journey to Toledo to join the Crusade. If true, that's an enormous financial burden which he has agreed to take on. He also agreed to pay the expenses of his young ally, King Pedro II. King Pedro was so strapped for cash that King Alfonso had to pay the Aragonese troops before they even started out on their journey to Toledo, and he agreed to pay Pedro a daily amount during the Crusade. Joseph O'Callaghan reports that many French fighters had travelled to Toledo without suitable horses or pack animals, so King Alfonso dug into his treasury and supplied them with the animals they required. In order to balance the Castilian books King Alfonso demanded that the clergy within his kingdom hand over half their annual revenue to the royal treasury. Apparently, the Church grumbled quite a lot about this, but since the expedition was a Christian venture and since Alfonso of Castile had been very generous with his finances most of the clerics did hand over the requested amount.

The Crusade officially kicked off on the 20th of June in the year 1212, when the Crusaders mobilised out from Toledo, while the Caliph set off from Seville with his forces two days later. The Crusaders marched in three separate groups. The vanguard was comprised of men from over the Pyrenees. Next came a contingent of men led by King Pedro of Aragon, and the rear guard was commanded by King Alfonso of Castile. They headed directly southwards towards Almohad territory, arriving at the Muslim fortress of Malagon, which lay 45 miles to the south of Toledo on the 24th of June. They slaughtered the garrison and took the castle.

Now, at this very early stage of the campaign, the French troops were beginning to get grumpy. It was high summer, it was horribly hot, and the French were becoming increasingly unhappy, with many of them considering leaving the Crusade and heading back towards the coolness of the Pyrenees. The Spanish Christians managed to convince the French fighters to continue on at least to Calatrava. They went on their hot and dusty way, arriving at Calatrava on the 27th of June and besieging it.

Calatrava had a number of impressive defensive advantages. It was located on a river bank and contained a wall, ditches, and towers, which were protected by archers and siege engines. It was defended by 70 Muslims who watched as the Calatrava Knights, King Pedro and his men, and some French fighters attempted to take one of the riverside towers of the fortress on the 30th of June. They were unsuccessful, but strangely the Muslim defenders agreed to surrender the fortress the next day, in return for being allowed to leave with their lives, their clothes, and 35 horses. The Caliph later executed the captain of the garrison for cowardice. The castle was then returned to the Calatravans, and some booty was shared between the Aragonese and the French.

It seems that the French weren't terribly happy when they were given their share of the booty. It's likely that they had been convinced to stay with the Crusaders on the basis that their efforts would be rewarded by the booty they would score at Calatrava, but apparently this wasn't the case. I imagine that since the castle was immediately restored to its original custodians, the Calatravans, they were understandably reluctant for the whole place to be ransacked and stripped of anything of value. Anyway, whatever the cause, most of the French Crusaders at this point ripped off their crusading crosses from their clothes, called it a day, and headed back to Toledo. If they were expecting a period of rest and relaxation in Toledo before heading back home though, they were about to be disappointed. D. W. Lomax states that the city of Toledo closed its gates to the French fighters and refused to let them into the town, shouting down insults from the city walls, calling them traitors and excommunicates. Back at the Crusade, only 130 French knights and one French Archbishop had elected to remain with the expedition, although apparently morale amongst those who were left was much better. The constant complaining and griping from the French fighters who had now left had really begun to get on everyone's nerves.

While morale had lifted inside the Christian army, news of the departure of most of the French fighters also lifted the morale of the Muslim fighters when the news made its way to the Caliph. The reinvigorated Muslim army left Jaen and headed northwards, intent on setting themselves up in a defensive position which could effectively block the Christian advance.

The Crusaders at this time were still quite a way to the north of the Caliph's forces and seemed less intent on riding speedily towards the Muslim army and more intent on stopping to take strongholds. The army, under the command of King Alfonso of Castile, managed to take Alarcos back from the Muslims, along with a number of neighbouring fortresses, including Cacaruel and Benavente. They were keen to retake Salvatierra as well, but news reached the army that the Caliph's forces were moving steadily northwards, so they decided to leave Salvatierra in Muslim hands and made their way southwards to meet the Caliph's army.

Now, as the Crusaders moved southwards they passed from dusty, dry plains into more hilly, rocky, woodland type territory. It was amongst these hills and canyons that the Caliph's army had assembled to await the arrival of the Christians. The Caliph had chosen

his defensive position well. His army had formed a camp on the plain of Las Navas de Tolosa. The usual way to approach this plain if you were heading southwards was via the Losa Canyon, and the Caliph's men had this canyon completely covered, with men standing guard on both the highest and narrowest points of the canyon. To put it another way, the only way the Crusaders could confront the Caliph's forces at Las Navas de Tolosa was by passing through the canyon, and if they passed through the canyon they would be vulnerable to an attack by the Muslims.

The Christians arrived at the entrance of the canyon on the 13th of July. They quickly spotted the Caliph's men stationed around the canyon and realised if they proceeded into the canyon they would be trapped. The Christians set up camp, and later that night King Alfonso held a war council inside his tent to discuss their options. Basically, the two options on the table were to proceed into the canyon or to retreat. The members of the war council, comprising of the three Kings, two Archbishops and a handful of noblemen, couldn't agree on the best path forward, so the war council was dismissed and everyone went to bed without having made a decision.

The following day a local shepherd begged an audience with King Alfonso, saying that he had a solution to the army's dilemma. Being a shepherd, the man knew all of the hidden paths and shortcuts in the area, and he told the King of Castile that there was a little-known pathway which the army could use to cross over into a neighbouring canyon, which led out to the western part of the plain upon which the Muslims were camped. A group of soldiers was ordered to follow the shepherd as he guided them over the secret path. It ended up that the shepherd was exactly right. The path was serviceable and led exactly where the shepherd had promised it would. The war council reconvened and agreed that the following day the army would follow the shepherd's path and surprise the Caliph's forces. According to legend, the shepherd vanished soon after and was never seen again. It was later assumed that the shepherd was in fact Saint Isidore, the patron saint of Madrid.

Join me next time as the Christians follow the pathway of the shepherd (Saint Isidore) and confront the Caliph in the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Until next time, bye for now.

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