

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 92
The Crusade of Las Navas de Tolosa, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we saw Christians from across the Iberian peninsula and southern France mobilise out from Toledo in June of the year 1212 under the command of King Alfonso VIII of Castile. As the Crusaders made their way southwards, the Caliph Muhammad al-Nasir mobilised his forces from Seville.

By the end of the last episode, we saw the Caliph set his army up in a defensive position on the plains of Las Navas de Tolosa. This was a smart move, as the Christians would need to pass through a canyon to get to the plain and the Caliph's forces had the canyon completely covered. A local shepherd, though, has come to the rescue. He pointed out a little used pathway via which the Christians could access a neighbouring canyon. Once in the neighbouring canyon, the Christian army would then head down the canyon, emerging onto the western part of the plain of Las Navas de Tolosa. The Christian forces packed up their camp and the Crusaders made their way out of the canyon via the secret pathway. Muslim scouts who observed this reported back to the Caliph that the Christians had retreated.

To the surprise of the Caliph's forces though, the Christians later emerged as planned on the western side of the plain. The Caliph immediately ordered his troops into battle formation, but the Christians had decided to rest for the remainder of the day. The Christian leaders met to decide their strategy, and the Crusaders were informed that at midnight a mass would be held at which the Christians could confess their sins and take communion. At dawn the following day, which was Monday the 16th of July, the battle against the Caliph's forces would commence.

The midnight mass took place as planned and by dawn everyone was in position, King Pedro II of Aragon commanding the left wing, King Sancho VII of Navarre commanding the right wing, the centre led by the Castilian nobleman Diego Lopez de Haro, who commanded most of the Castilians and members of the military orders, while King Alfonso VIII of Castile led the rear guard. Over on the Caliph's side the Muslim battle formation involved a front line of light skirmishers consisting of Arab and Berber fighters on horseback. The main force of Almohad and Andalusí fighters lay behind this thin line of cavalry. At the rear of the Caliph's army sat the Caliph himself. According to D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", the Caliph sat on a shield inside his bright red tent, wearing a black cloak which had once belonged to Abd al-Mumin, with both a copy of the Koran and a sword within his reach. His tent was surrounded by a force of well-armed black slaves who had been chained together to prevent them from running away.

The battle commenced when Diego Lopez ordered his forces to attack the line of Muslim horsemen. They were easily pushed aside, enabling Diego Lopez to advance forward to confront the main force of Muslim fighters. The left and right wings of the Crusader armies under King Pedro and King Sancho then engaged, and the fighting began in earnest. The sides seemed pretty evenly matched. Then the balance appeared to tip in the Muslims' favour when the Caliph ordered some of his rear guard to join the fight. This prompted King Alfonso to launch his rear guard into the fray. The fresh Castilian troops under the able command of King Alfonso were devastatingly successful, and when the Muslim fighters saw the fighting beginning to favour the Christians, many of them decided to flee.

At first, it seemed that local Andalusí fighters were the only ones deciding to cut their losses and withdraw from the fighting, but as more and more Muslims exited the battlefield many Almohads decided to join them. As more and more Muslims withdrew, the Christians were able to push closer and closer to the Caliph's tent at the rear of the Muslim army.

It all became too much for the Caliph, who raced from his tent, mounted his horse, and fled. Embarrassingly for the Caliph, he didn't just leave the battlefield. He raced as fast as he could all the way to Jaen, stopping only once to swap his exhausted horse for a fresh one. Unsurprisingly, the sight of the Caliph careening off on his horse resulted in the complete collapse of the Muslim forces, who scattered and fled, with the Christians reportedly chasing them and cutting them down for a distance of 12 miles.

The end result of the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was a massive victory for the Christians and a massive loss for the Muslims. Here is how King Alfonso VIII described the extent of the victory in his report of it to Pope Innocent III, and I quote. "On their side 100,000 armed men or more fell in the battle according to the estimate of the Saracens we captured. But of the army of the Lord, incredible though it may be, hardly 25 or 30 Christians of our whole army fell. Oh, what happiness! Oh what thanksgiving! Though one might lament that so few martyrs from such a great army went to Christ in martyrdom." End quote.

Now, although King Alfonso estimates the casualties from the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa as 100,000 dead on the Muslim side while only 30 Christians perished, this you won't be surprised to hear is likely an exaggeration. It's difficult to tell the exact numbers with any degree of accuracy, but current estimates place the Christian casualties at around 2,000 dead or wounded out of a total fighting force of between 12,000 and 14,000 men, while the Muslim casualties, while very high, aren't in the vicinity of 100,000 men, more like 20,000 out of a total fighting force of between 22,000 and 30,000 men, which is still a devastating defeat.

So, the question needs to be asked. Why were the Muslims defeated so resoundingly? In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy notes that, while there are quite a few contemporary accounts of the battle from both Muslim and Christian sources, none of them provide an adequate explanation as to why the Caliph's forces performed so badly. Hugh Kennedy provides his own explanation, pointing the finger squarely at the Caliph Muhammad al-Nasir. His first mistake, asserts Hugh Kennedy, was his failure to include any heavy cavalry in his army. He had a smattering of light cavalry, which made up the first line of his defences, but they were no match for a charge by the heavy cavalry forces of the Christians. Secondly, Hugh Kennedy alleges that many men in the Caliph's army were unhappy about aspects of his leadership. Apparently, the Caliph had a bit of a temper and could act quite rashly in the heat of the moment, making snap decisions, such as ordering the execution of governors whom he believed had disobeyed him, which left many of his commanders and administrators rattled. Even during the current military campaign, the Caliph had cracked down extremely harshly on officials who had failed to provide enough supplies for the army's baggage train. This didn't exactly endear the Caliph to many of his fighters, particularly the local Andalusí, many of whom also held the view that the Caliph failed to take into account the views and opinions of experienced local Andalusí commanders when making his decisions.

Recent actions by the Caliph which had been called into question included him ordering the execution of the commander of the Muslim garrison at Calatrava, a man called Ibn Qadis. You might remember from the last episode that Calatrava was besieged by the

Crusaders and surrendered to the Christians only one day into the siege, with the 70 men in the Muslim garrison handing over the fortress in return for being able to leave with their lives, their possessions, and 35 horses. A Muslim chronicler, whom Hugh Kennedy admittedly describes as being unreliable, states that Ibn Qadis, as leader of the garrison at Calatrava, had on a number of occasions sent word to the Caliph about deficiencies in the fortress' defences and requesting backup. According to the chronicler, these messages were destroyed by the Caliph's advisers before he viewed them. Regardless, though, the execution of the commander was seen by some local men in the Caliph's forces as being unjust and heavy handed.

To make matters worse, al-Nasir had been slow in paying his troops. According to Hugh Kennedy, Caliph Yaqub had been meticulous in paying his fighters their salaries every four months, however his son al-Nasir had been less careful and was frequently late with his payments, especially during the current campaign. Which was why, when the Christians looked like they might be getting the upper hand in the battle, many Andalusí fighters began questioning whether they wanted to lay down their lives for the Caliph and instead attempted to flee the battlefield. Once the lines of Andalusí fighters began fracturing, many Almohads decided to follow suit, which led to the collapse of the Muslim forces, the flight of the Caliph, and the slaughter of the fleeing men.

So what did the Crusaders do following their victory? Well, their first task was to divvy up the booty they gained, which was actually pretty impressive. It was handed out to the Crusaders, with the Aragonese, who seemed to be the fighters most in need of funds, getting a bigger portion than everyone else.

Now, by far the most impressive pieces of booty came from the Caliph's tent. The Caliph had fled in haste, leaving many valuable items behind, which were then taken by the Christians. An extremely impressive and ornate tapestry covered the entrance to the Caliph's tent. This tapestry was sent to the monastery of Las Huelgas, near Burgos in the Kingdom of Castile, where it was displayed with much ceremony in testament to the victory. Astonishingly, it's still there today. The monastery of Las Huelgas is currently still active as a monastery, housing Cistercian nuns. For a modest fee of around \$14 you can take a guided tour of the monastery, during which you can check out the tapestry and a number of royal tombs, including that of the victor of the Crusade of Las Navas de Tolosa, King Alfonso VIII of Castile and his Queen Eleanor of England.

Anyway, other items of interest from the Caliph's tent, including his ornate lance and standard and the actual tent itself, which was made from red silk, was sent to Rome, with Pope Innocent ordering the Caliph's standard to be displayed inside St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to discover whether or not the standard is still on display inside the basilica.

So what happened after the battle? Well, after having divided up the spoils the leaders of the Crusade decided there were enough supplies on hand to continue the campaign. After a couple of days' rest, the Christian armies mobilised once again. They successfully captured the strongholds of Vilches, Ferral, Banos and Tolosa, and garrisoned them with Christian soldiers, effectively ensuring the gateway from Castile into Almohad territory would be permanently open. The following day they arrived at Baeza, to discover that all of its inhabitants had fled. The Crusaders destroyed the walls of the town, cut down vines and other produce, and burned many of its houses. On the 20th of July, they arrived at the town of Ubeda and besieged it. Three days later Ubeda surrendered, with the Christians

rounding up all the inhabitants of the town, which included many of the residents of Baeza who had hoped to find refuge in Ubeda, later selling them into slavery.

Now, Ubeda is less than 60 kilometres from Jaen (around a 40 minute drive today) and only 150 kilometres from Cordoba (about 1.5 hours by car today) to give you an idea of the distance, so the Crusaders were on the verge of being able to deal some massive blows to the Almohads. But it wasn't to be. Following the siege of Ubeda supplies were running low and some sort of pestilence had broken out in the Christian camp, perhaps caused by food spoiled in the summer heat. Keen to get back to Toledo to celebrate his victory, King Alfonso of Castile declared the Crusade over. The armies destroyed the defensive walls of Ubeda and headed back northwards, bumping into Duke Leopold VI of Austria in Calatrava, who had arrived too late with his Austrian forces to be of any help.

Back in Toledo the Crusaders were treated to a victory parade. King Alfonso gifted King Sancho VII of Navarre with some castles to thank him for his participation, then sat back to receive messages of congratulation from across western Christendom.

What did Caliph al-Nasir do? Well, he arrived safely back in Seville on the 31st of July and tried to spin the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa as not being a terribly big deal. He pointed out that the Christians hadn't managed to attack Jaen or Cordoba, and that accordingly Al-Andalus was still under divine protection, with a path to the conquest of Al-Andalus not being opened by the Christians. In the words of Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain", and I quote "in essence, the Caliph tried to pretend that a great disaster had not occurred" end quote.

But despite the best efforts of the Caliph to downplay the outcome, the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was a big deal. In fact, many historians view it as a turning point in the Reconquista, the time at which the pendulum swung decidedly in favour of the Christians. The victory was certainly treated as such in the Christian parts of the peninsula, with chroniclers, troubadours, and minstrels hyping the battle into legendary status so effectively that, according to D. W. Lomax, every noble family in Spain down the years claimed that one or more of their ancestors had fought at Las Navas. The importance of the victory is perhaps best summed up by Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", and I quote "The Christian victory at Las Navas de Tolosa ended once and for all the Almohad threat to Christian Spain and hastened the decline of the Almohad Empire. The equilibrium hitherto existing between Christians and Muslims was upset, and the balance of power was tipped decisively in favour of the Christians. The victory was the greatest ever achieved in the course of the reconquest, and it made possible the subjugation of the greater part of Al-Andalus in the next forty years." End quote.

Join me next time as we examine the aftermath of the battle. Until next time, bye for now.

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