

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 93
A Bunch Of Deaths

Hello again. Last time we concluded our two part examination of the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, a Crusading campaign by the Christians which ended in a stunning victory for the effective leader of the campaign, King Alfonso VIII of Castile.

Now, the Christians of the Iberian peninsula were unable to significantly press their advantage against the Almohads, and the Almohads were unable to recoup their losses following the battle, due to a bunch of deaths which occurred during a period of five years or so following the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, deaths which will see the political landscape across the Iberian peninsula completely upended. The first bunch of deaths which occurred were amongst ordinary people.

The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa took place in the middle of the year 1212, and King Alfonso VIII of Castile launched himself into the year 1213 with the ambitious goal of using the momentum from his victory to take more territory from the Almohads. It wasn't only the King of Castile going on the offensive at the beginning of the year 1213. Late in the year 1212 King Alfonso of Castile had managed to patch up the differences between himself and his neighbour and cousin King Alfonso IX of Leon. Alfonso of Leon had acted contrary to the directions of Pope Innocent and had attacked a number of Castilian strongholds while the armies of Castile had been away on Crusade, but Alfonso of Castile was keen to overlook these transgressions. The three Christian kings ruling in the centre and west of the peninsula, the Kings of Leon, Castile and Portugal, met at Coimbra in November of 1212 and negotiated a truce, promising to quit fighting each other and instead focus on gaining further territory from the Almohads. This not only left the King of Castile free to go on the offensive early in the year 1213, it meant that the King of Leon was also able to mobilise his forces southwards, where he successfully captured the fortress of Alcantara on the Tagus River, a fortress which would later become the headquarters of the Order of Alcantara.

While the King of Leon was pushing southwards into Almohad territory from his kingdom, King Alfonso of Castile pressed southwards from his own kingdom, keen to create a wedge of Christian territory inside Al-Andalus from which he could conduct future campaigns. He successfully captured Dueñas castle and handed it over to the Calatravans, who renamed it Calatrava la Nueva and transferred their headquarters to their new possession. King Alfonso then captured another stronghold, which he handed over to the Order of Santiago, before turning his attention to the stronghold of Alcaraz, which was located in a strategic position on the crossroads of two major routes: the road from Toledo to Murcia and the road leading from Valencia to Cordoba.

Now, during the Castilian siege of Alcaraz, a sort of duel of minds and strategy seems to have taken place between King Alfonso and the castellan and defenders of Alcaraz. The first blow was struck by the defenders who managed to arrange for King Alfonso's siege tower to be burned down. According to D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", the engineer from Toledo who designed the siege tower was actually a Muslim, and he succumbed to pressure from his fellow Muslims inside Alcaraz by assisting the defenders to burn the siege tower to the ground. King Alfonso responded with some subterfuge of his own. He sent a man described by a chronicler as being and I quote "of

sinister appearance with fair hair and blue eyes” end quote into Alcaraz on a fact-finding mission. The sinister looking blonde Christian's mission was to pretend to flip sides to the Muslims. Instead of supplying the defenders of Alcaraz with inside information about the attackers though, he was instead tasked with assessing the situation inside the fortress. He managed to report back to King Alfonso the fact that food and water was becoming dangerously scarce inside Alcaraz.

King Alfonso was able to use this information to force the defenders to capitulate, on the condition that the Muslim residents could take whatever possessions they could carry with them out of Alcaraz, with the Christians even providing them with pack animals which they could use to carry their possessions to Jaen. In addition, the Christians offered to buy anything of value offered to them which they wished to purchase from the residents before they left. According to D. W. Lomax, the castellan of the stronghold was still mightily unhappy about the situation and refused to kiss King Alfonso's ring, as was the custom following the surrender. King Alfonso took this show of pride in good spirits, reportedly handing a horse and some weapons to the castellan for his trouble.

Despite these victories though, things didn't go all the Christians' way, with Portugal failing to take two strongholds which it besieged, and Castile failing in its attempt to take Baesa.

The campaign season of 1213 though was cut short by the bunch of deaths we referred to at the beginning of the episode. The winter of 1212 to 1213 was unusually cold and harsh. Usually farmers and residents would bounce back from a tough winter the following spring, but the spring of 1213 was a complete disaster. The spring rains failed to materialise, and instead much of the peninsula was hit by a drought. With crops failing to grow, by summer famine hit much of the peninsula. Over the coming months peasants left their villages around Toledo and people from across Christian Spain began dying of hunger, with some reportedly resorting to cannibalism in an attempt to survive. King Alfonso of Castile did what he could to distribute food to the people most affected, but the widespread famine and sickness meant that the offensive against the Almohads had to be placed on hold. As a result, King Alfonso ordered his Jewish ambassador to travel to northern Africa to formalise a truce with the Caliph.

While the numerous deaths from famine caused peace to break out between the Christians and the Muslims, a single more consequential death occurred in September of 1213. King Pedro II of Aragon, fresh from his victory at Las Navas de Tolosa, became embroiled in the Crusade against the Cathars in southern France. Keen to best his opponent, Simon de Montfort, King Pedro made some rookie mistakes, possibly due to an excess of confidence arising from his participation at Las Navas. The cost of these mistakes was high, with the King of Aragon losing his life on the battlefield. I'm not going to go into detail about the Battle of Moret, which is the Catalan pronunciation, or “Muret”, if you prefer the French pronunciation, and how King Pedro lost the battle and his life, as I covered it extensively in the Crusade Against the Cathars series in the History of the Crusades Podcast. The Battle of Muret is covered in Episodes 145 and 146 if you are interested in tracking down the History of the Crusades Podcast and hearing about King Pedro's final battle.

The sudden and unexpected loss of the King of Aragon dealt a major blow to the Reconquista. King Pedro had been young, energetic, and extremely keen to take the battle to the Muslims. His gains over Almohad territory in Valencia had looked like being just the start of a long and successful set of military conquests by Aragon against the Almohads, but it wasn't to be.

King Pedro's son and heir was only five years old when his father died. Named Jaime, Pedro's son had actually been reared in the household of the man who killed his father, Simon de Montfort. At the moment, Simon de Montfort is holding on to young Jaime, refusing to let him leave southern France. Lobbying from the Kingdom of Aragon to Rome will result in Pope Innocent demanding that Simon de Montfort release little Jaime and let him return to Aragon. Jaime will in fact be handed over to a Papal Legate in mid-1214, who will in turn send him to the regional head of the Knights Templar in Provence and Aragon. He won't return to Aragon until the year 1217.

If you are concerned that this troubled start to young Jaime's life might affect his capacity to rule, there's no need to trouble yourself at all. Jaime will eventually rule as King Jaime I of Aragon, also known as Jaime the Conqueror, and will enjoy the longest reign of any of the Christian kings of Spain, coming in at a very impressive 62 years. Importantly, not only will his reign be long it will be extremely successful, with Jaime generally being remembered as the best king to have ever ruled Aragon and arguably one of the greatest Spanish kings of all time.

But that's all in the future. At the present point in our narrative, five-year-old Jaime is stuck at the court of Simon de Montfort in southern France, who is holding on to him and refusing to hand him over to the Kingdom of Aragon, while the Count of Roussillon is attempting to rule the Kingdom of Aragon as regent until young Jaime returns to Aragon and comes of age.

During the following year, 1214, while the Christians of the Iberian Peninsula were still coming to terms with the death of King Pedro, another death set them reeling. On the 5th of October in the year 1214 the elderly statesman of the Christian kings, King Alfonso VIII, died aged in his late fifties, followed less than a month later by his faithful Queen Eleanor of England, who had during the course of their marriage borne him an astonishing eleven children. Only four of these children had been sons, and two of them had died in infancy. The couple's eldest son and heir, Fernando, died back in Episode 90, predeceasing his parents. This left the couple with only one surviving son, their youngest child, a boy named Enrique, who was only eleven years old when his father died. Following the death of his mother Queen Eleanor, poor Enrique found himself in the midst of power struggles over who would rule Castile as regent until he came of age. So by the end of the year 1214, both the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon found themselves being ruled by children.

But wait, more deaths are to come. The Almohads weren't immune to the spate of untimely deaths of leaders, with Caliph Muhammad al-Nasir dying in December of 1213. The Caliph was only 32 years old when he died and his death was suspicious, with rumours abounding that he had been assassinated by his own courtiers who were appalled by his failure to remedy the loss he had suffered at Las Navas de Tolosa. The courtiers declared that prior to his death, the Caliph had nominated his ten-year-old son Yusuf to be his successor. Again, this may not have been true. Poor Yusuf was not only a very young boy, he was also shy, timid and pliable, allowing the courtiers to rule on his behalf. Reports are that the young Caliph, Yusuf II, never left Marrakesh. He was happy to stay in the background while leaving the onerous duties of ruling Al-Andalus and his territories in northern Africa to a small group of courtiers and his close relatives.

Thankfully for the Christians of the Iberian peninsula the Caliph's advisers had no wish to go on the offensive at this time. The drought which had hit the Iberian peninsula had

extended to northern Africa, and the Caliph's advisers were kept busy trying to subdue unrest arising from the resulting famine.

So, for those keeping count, so far the high profile deaths have included two kings and a caliph. Now we are about to add a pope to the list. In November of the year 1215 Pope Innocent convened the Fourth Lateran Council, which is generally viewed as being the most important Church Council of the medieval period. One of the many things decided at the Council was a declaration that the Fifth Crusade to the Holy Land would be launched in the year 1217. In preparation for this event Pope Innocent travelled to northern Italy in spring of the year 1216 in order to lobby the cities of Pisa and Genoa to put aside their differences and work together for the good of the Church. It was while he was engaged in this endeavour that Pope Innocent died unexpectedly in July of 1216, after an extremely busy and consequential 18 year stint as the leader of the Catholic Church and, in Pope Innocent's view, the effective leader of the entire Western world.

So, as at the end of the year 1216 we are down two kings, a caliph and a pope.

But wait, there's more. Back in Castile, during the years 1215 and 1216 poor young King Enrique found himself in the middle of a power struggle between two powerful figures who wished to rule Castile as regent on his behalf. The first contender for regent was his older sister, Berenguela. Now, while young Enrique was the youngest child of King Alfonso and Eleanor of England, Berenguela was the eldest. She was aged in her early thirties at the time of the death of her parents. Berenguela, you may remember, had been married to King Alfonso IX of Leon before being forced to annul the marriage on the grounds of consanguinity. With experience under her belt ruling neighbouring Leon, Berenguela was the obvious candidate to take up the regency. Not so, though, according to a bunch of influential noblemen inside Castile, who likely didn't want to be ruled by a woman and would prefer having someone in charge who would continue the aggressive military policy favoured by the late King Alfonso VIII. Count Alvaro Nunez de Lara emerged as the head of this faction and he demanded that Berenguela release her younger brother from the guardianship she had asserted over him. In the end Berenguela relented, transferring custody of Enrique over to the Count, on the condition that he not declare war or make any decisions regarding the property of the crown without her consent. The Count agreed, but by the year 1217 he was frequently breaching those conditions.

In June of 1217 disaster struck, young King Enrique was struck on the head with a rock while playing with some of his friends, dying a few days later. So now the tally is three kings, one caliph and one pope.

Oh, dear. How will Castile recover from this mess? Well, you'll need to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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