

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 94
The Crusade Of Alcaccer do Sal

Hello again. Last time we saw a bunch of consequential deaths occur with the Caliph Muhammad al-Nasir, Pope Innocent III, King Pedro II of Aragon and King Alfonso VIII of Castile all departing the scene. As a result, Al-Andalus, Aragon and Castile all found themselves being ruled by children, or more accurately, by regents or advisers ruling on the children's behalf. By the end of the last episode though, the Kingdom of Castile had suffered a double blow, after its 13-year-old young king, Enrique I, was struck by a rock on his head while playing with friends and died.

Now this, I guess I don't need to tell you, was a complete disaster for the Kingdom of Castile. Young Enrique, being only 13 years old when he died, had not fathered any heirs, although strangely this was not from want of trying. Back in the year 1215, when he was just 11 years old, he married the daughter of King Sancho I of Portugal, only to have the union annulled a year later by Pope Innocent on the grounds of consanguinity. Undeterred, later that same year, aged 12, Enrique became betrothed to Sancha, the eldest daughter of King Alfonso IX of Leon, whose mother was King Alfonso's first wife, Teresa of Portugal. But all plans for marriage and succession came to nothing due to young Enrique's untimely death a year later, so the Kingdom of Castile finds itself facing a succession crisis.

At the time of his death, King Enrique was in the custody of Count Alvaro Nunez de Lara, the man who had prevailed in the guardianship battle over the custody of Enrique between himself and Enrique's older sister, Berenguela. Count Alvaro did his best to keep the death a secret, but it's hard to keep news that explosive under wraps for long, and Berenguela was soon made aware of her brother's demise.

She immediately sprang into action. As the eldest surviving child of King Alfonso VIII and Eleanor of England she had a solid claim to the throne. Unlike the neighbouring Kingdom of Leon, which had prohibited female succession, the fact that she was a woman didn't preclude Berenguela from claiming the throne. Following Enrique's death Berenguela had no surviving brothers, and with her experience and her status as the eldest daughter of King Alfonso she was in a commanding position. However, it seems like she didn't enjoy popular support amongst the people of Castile, and importantly had managed to alienate the most important and influential noble families in Castile during her battle for guardianship over her late younger brother. Berenguela, being a savvy political operator, was well aware of this fact, so discreetly, and without informing her ex-husband, King Alfonso IX of Leon, she sent word for her son with the King of Leon, Fernando of Leon, to quietly extract himself from the Royal Court in Leon and make his way to Castile. Without letting his father know about the death of Enrique or about the summons from his mother Berenguela, Fernando made the appropriate excuses and travelled from Leon to Castile.

Now Fernando, at this point in time, is around 18 years old and his mother Berenguela is summoning him to Castile because she means to hand him the crown. Why is she doing this? Well, basically, because she knows that if she is crowned as Queen of Castile she would be facing internal conflict, as the noble families would likely rise up to oppose her rule, while her ex-husband, the King of Leon, may well take advantage of Castile's troubled domestic situation by invading it and attempting to annex it to Leon. If her son

Fernando was crowned though, those problems, if not eliminated, would be easier to manage. The Castilian noble families would be less likely to rebel under male rule, and the King of Leon would also be less likely to invade Castile if it were being ruled by his son. So in a sort of regal sleight of hand, Berenguela claimed the throne of Castile, but at an assembly held on the 2nd of July in the year 1217 she yielded her rights to her son, who was promptly crowned as King Fernando III of Castile.

When he was informed about what had just taken place King Alfonso of Leon was absolutely furious. Count Alvaro, keen to reassert his hold on power, travelled to Leon to lobby King Alfonso to invade Castile and boot Fernando off the throne. Astonishingly, King Alfonso did exactly that. He mobilised his forces across the border into Castile and did his best to whip up opposition to Fernando's rule. Trouble was, despite the claims made by Count Alvaro, there wasn't the degree of opposition to Fernando's rule of the extent needed to secure Leon's rights to the throne. So by the end of summer King Alfonso of Leon had decided to let his son rule Castile, and he withdrew his forces back into Leon.

A few months later, it was clear that Fernando enjoyed widespread support in Castile and that his hold on power was secure, so King Alfonso of Leon decided it was time to patch things up between himself and his son. The appropriate diplomatic overtures were made, culminating in an agreement drawn up between Leon and Castile in August of 1218, an agreement cementing an alliance between the two Kingdoms and a further pledge to unite in the future against the Almohads.

With peace having broken out between her ex-husband and her son, Berenguela now turned her hand to finding an appropriate wife for Fernando. She ended up settling on the orphaned Elizabeth of Swabia from the mighty German house of Hohenstaufen. Elizabeth was the daughter of the former King of Germany, Philip of Swabia. Tragically, Elizabeth's father, Philip of Swabia, had been murdered a decade or so ago, while her mother had previously died in childbirth, so young Elizabeth and her sisters were placed under the guardianship of the King of Sicily. Along with solid ties to the royal houses of Germany and Sicily, Elizabeth possessed some impressive bloodlines. She was the granddaughter of the legendary Frederick Barbarossa and of the Countess of Burgundy, while her mother was from the Imperial Court of Byzantium, making Elizabeth also granddaughter to the Byzantine Emperor Isaac II. Elizabeth travelled to Castile, changed her name to Beatrice, and married Fernando in 1219, forging ties between Castile and Sicily, Byzantium, Germany, and the wider Holy Roman Empire.

Now, since so many children and young people were in power across the peninsula, truces had been drawn up between many of the rulers, with the Almohads concluding peace treaties between themselves, Castile, and Aragon, a move which reduced the chances of war breaking out on the peninsula.

It didn't eliminate it entirely though, a factor which became apparent when Portugal went on the offensive in the year 1217. The Fifth Crusade had just been launched, and in the time honoured tradition of co-opting ships of Crusaders who poured into Portugal on their way to the Holy Land, some of the Crusaders were convinced by the Portuguese to deal some blows to the Muslims of Al-Andalus before continuing on with their journey. Awkwardly, the King of Portugal, King Alfonso II, had signed a peace treaty with the young Caliph, so the King of Portugal himself was precluded from taking up arms against the Muslims. The wording of the treaty though didn't prevent others from within the Kingdom of Portugal from attacking the Almohads, so the military orders and a bunch of influential Portuguese bishops and senior clerics decided to approach the Crusaders to see if they

would be interested in launching a combined attack against the Almohads. The Crusaders in question consisted of about 300 ships full of men from Frisia and the Rhineland who dropped anchor in Lisbon in July of 1217, after having first stopped off in Galicia to embark on a short pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The Crusaders were under the leadership of Count William of Holland, who was intending to sail to Egypt, which was the launching point for the Fifth Crusade. With King Alfonso of Portugal unable to take part in any negotiations, Bishop Sueiro of Lisbon took the lead, supported by a bunch of other senior Portuguese churchmen along with the Templars, the Hospitallers and a number of Portuguese noblemen.

The Bishop of Lisbon suggested to Count William that the Crusaders accompany the Portuguese in an attack on the Muslim fortress of Alcacer do Sal, which was located on the River Sado, about 40 miles to the south of Lisbon. The fortress had changed hands a number of times over the years but had been under Muslim control since the year 1191. Being located so close to Lisbon the fortress posed a threat to Portuguese security and had been the source of a number of raids into Christian territory. The Bishop mentioned this fact to Count William and offered to provide food and pay the expenses of the Crusaders should they join the Portuguese in an attack on Alcacer. Count William and a number of his commanders weren't expressing the appropriate amount of enthusiasm for the proposal, so the Bishop attempted to get them over the line by mentioning that the Almohads had demanded an annual tribute of 100 Christians, a claim which wasn't actually true but which did serve to secure Count William's support.

The Frisians, though, weren't convinced and declined the invitation to take part. Eighty ships worth of Frisian Crusaders departed for Egypt on the 26th of July. They didn't go straight to Egypt, though. Despite having declined to join Portugal in a crusading venture, the Frisians decided to score a few hits of their own against the Almohads. They attacked and plundered a couple of Muslim fortresses before pulling into Cadiz. The residents of Cadiz apparently all fled at their approach. The Frisians then re-boarded their ships, sailing to Barcelona, then on to Egypt.

In contrast to the Frisians, Count William and the 100 or so ships under his command elected to stay with the Portuguese, mainly due to the fact that Count William had learned that the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, and many of the German princes were still in Germany and hadn't yet mobilised. Deciding that left him plenty of time to spend crusading with the Portuguese, Count William and his Crusaders set sail for Alcacer do Sal, reaching it on the 30th of July. The Portuguese forces arrived a few days later and the siege of Alcacer do Sal began. The main strategy pursued by the besiegers seems to be the undermining of the walls of the fortress. The defenders managed to prevent most of the undermining attempts, although the Crusaders did enjoy some success when a tower partially collapsed on the 24th of August.

In the meanwhile, the defenders of Alcacer had managed to sound the alarm about their plight, and by the end of August, the governors of Seville, Jaen and Badajoz had combined their resources and were in the process of marching an impressively large relief army towards Alcacer. The relieving army and the Crusaders and Portuguese forces clashed outside the fortress on the 11th of September, with the Muslims being resoundingly defeated.

Joseph O'Callaghan reports in his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain" that the Crusaders later attributed their victory to three miracles. The first of these miracles was the appearance, in the evening before the battle, of a giant cross, which the Christians

took to be a sign that they would be victorious. The sense that they would prevail in the upcoming battle was given a boost by the arrival of the second miracle a few hours later. This miracle was in the form of the arrival at Alcacer of the Master of the Knights Templar for Spain, together with a bunch of fresh reinforcements. The third miracle happened during the battle, when the Crusaders reported that a heavenly host of angelic knights, all clad in white, joined the battle and lobbed a volley of arrows at the Muslims.

As they watched their relieving forces fail in their mission to lift the siege and limp back towards their homes, the fighters from Alcacer decided to continue to defend their fortress. However, a few weeks later, with no sign of any further armies coming to their rescue, they decided to surrender and asked for terms. The terms they received were pretty harsh. While they were allowed to leave with their lives, they were not allowed to take anything at all with them. All their possessions were to be left behind. The fortress of Alcacer do Sal was then officially handed over to the Order of Santiago, who decided to make it their new headquarters.

Now, Count William and the Crusaders seem to have had a blast at Alcacer, and were keen to stay in the Kingdom of Portugal and assist the Portuguese to push further south into Muslim territory. So Count William wrote to Pope Honorius asking that they be allowed to remain in Portugal for the next year or so, and requesting that their Crusading vows be transferred from the arena of the Holy Land to the arena of the Iberian peninsula, with the further request that any Crusaders who had fallen ill or had run out of money be allowed to travel back home with a full remission of their sins. Pope Honorius apparently was torn about the best path forward. In the end, he informed Count William that the Crusading vows were only valid for campaigns in the Holy Land, so the Crusaders needed to get back into their ships, leave Portugal, and sail to join the Fifth Crusade. The Pope did, however, make the concession that Crusaders who had fought at Alcacer and, for whatever reason, felt they couldn't continue to the Holy Land, could return home with full remission of their sins. So Count William and his crusaders waved goodbye to their new friends the Portuguese, and sailed off to join the total flop which ended up being the Fifth Crusade.

The Fifth Crusade was, in fact, such a complete failure that its one and only enduring military success ended up being the defeat of Alcacer do Sal, so there you go. Join me next time as we head into the 1220's for more crusading and another consequential death. Until next time, bye for now.

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