

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 96
The Crusade of King Fernando III

Hello again. Last time, after a few years of crusading across the Iberian peninsula which coincided with the Fifth Crusade in the Holy Land, we saw the death of the young Caliph in Marrakesh, who came to an unpleasant end after having apparently been gored by his pet cow. The young Caliph was dispatched by his cow in January of 1224 and by June of 1224 we had two people declaring themselves to be the next Caliph: the Governor of Seville, who was known as al-Bayyasi; and the Governor of Murcia, a man called al-Adil.

As we saw at the end of the last episode, the original man chosen to become the new Caliph, an elderly uncle of the deceased Caliph, had been killed by the same courtiers who had anointed him after they switched their support to al-Adil. Now, in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy views this move, that is the killing of the appointed Caliph, as a turning point in the history of the Almohads, and the moment at which their decline truly began. Hugh Kennedy points out that, since the time of the first Almohad ruler, Abd al-Mu'min, the Almohad empire had been a hereditary dynasty. The new Caliph had always been selected from the family members of the previous Caliph, and right up until the year 1224 there had never been any open succession disputes. Now though, the man duly appointed to be Caliph had been killed off in favour of another contender. This basically opened the door to any one of the numerous family members of the dynasty contesting the position of Caliph at any time in the future, resulting in instability and a lack of cohesion. There was now an incentive for ambitious family members to spend their time not supporting the current Caliph, but building their own power bases, in order to either take a shot at elevating themselves to the position of Caliph or at the very least positioning themselves so as to be able to manoeuvre quickly into a favourable position should an opportunity arise. This unsurprisingly, was bad news for the Almohads moving forwards.

In fact, it wasn't just bad news for the Almohads moving forwards, it was bad news right now. By the middle of the year 1224 the Almohads were facing unrest in northern Africa due to the ongoing effects of the recent famine, but there was no Caliph in northern Africa. Both contenders for Caliph were in Al-Andalus, and neither was able to turn his mind to events in northern Africa. Instead, each Caliph was focused on eliminating his rival.

While the Almohads were turning their swords on each other, the young King of Castile, Fernando III, decided to go on the offensive. The Fifth Crusade had ended back in the year 1221, with its aim of reclaiming Jerusalem and conquering the Holy Land by first taking Egypt having ended in failure. As a result, crusading zeal had sort of gone off the boil across most of Europe. Bucking this trend though was the King of Castile.

Back in April of 1224 the Court of Castile in Toledo had been visited by the King of Jerusalem, a man called John of Brienne. This was the first time a King of Jerusalem had visited Europe, and King John seems to have done so for two reasons: firstly as a sort of damage control measure after the failure of the Fifth Crusade; and secondly to find a wife.

It's safe to say that King John of Jerusalem had had a tumultuous few years. He had been one of the leaders of the Fifth Crusade, and so was the face of its failure. He had also reportedly beaten his wife to death in the year 1220 after discovering that she had attempted to kill her step-daughter, Isabella, who was King John's daughter and was the

heir to the crown of Jerusalem. King John only had a right to rule Jerusalem due to his daughter's claim. He was, in fact, ruling as regent on her behalf, so to find that his wife had tried to dispatch young Isabella in order to elevate one of her own children caused John to apparently murder her. In order to atone for his transgressions, King John undertook a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and it was while he was in the Spanish kingdoms that he turned his attention towards acquiring a new wife. There are suggestions that his first inclination was to marry the eldest daughter of King Alfonso IX of Leon, a child he had produced with his first wife, Teresa of Portugal. However, upon hearing about this development, and concerned that it might affect the future prospects of her son to one day govern both the Kingdom of Leon and the Kingdom of Castile, Berenguela swung into action. She seems to have embarked on a sort of charm offensive, wooing the King of Jerusalem away from the Kingdom of Leon and towards the Kingdom of Castile, inviting him to Toledo, and convincing him to switch preferences to one of her own daughters with King Alfonso of Leon, Berengaria. Berengaria was the full sister of King Fernando of Castile and was currently 20 years old, more than 30 years younger than King John of Jerusalem, who was aged in his fifties. The deal was sealed, and the marriage took place at Burgos in May of 1224.

It's likely that while King John was in Castile he talked to King Fernando about the Holy Land and about Crusading. Shortly after the wedding had taken place King Fernando, in the presence of his mother and his court, pointed out that the Almohads were currently in a state of disarray and that this would be the perfect time to launch a Crusade against them. Berenguela had a reputation as a peacemaker and of being reluctant to green-light military campaigns, but at the urging of her son she consulted the leading nobleman in Castile and found them to be overwhelmingly supportive of the idea. A decision was made that the armies of Castile ought to prepare themselves to mobilise out of Toledo in September of 1224. In his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan concedes there is no solid evidence available to prove that the participants of this campaign made Crusading vows. Despite this, Joseph O'Callaghan notes that four of the military orders took part: the Orders of Calatrava; Santiago; the Templars; and the Hospitallers; and he decided there was enough anecdotal evidence that vows were made for him to label the campaign as the First Crusade of Fernando III, and that's what we are going to call it as well.

The first target of the Crusade was a Muslim stronghold 20 miles to the south east of Ubeda. The stronghold was captured, with King Fernando riding back to Toledo with much booty and a number of captives. The Castilians had destroyed the walls of the fortress before they left, but soon after they departed the Muslims moved back in and retook it.

It seems that King Fernando wasn't the only ruler interested in conquering the region around Ubeda. The Almohad Governor of Murcia, al-Adil, had decided to cement his claim to the title of Caliph by capturing all the key cities and strongholds of his rival for the position, the Governor of Seville, al-Bayyasi. By the time King Fernando had returned to Toledo, al-Adil had managed to capture the cities of Jaen, Cordoba and Ubeda.

This left al-Bayyasi effectively on the ropes. Facing complete defeat, he decided on a rather surprising course of action. He sent a message to King Fernando of Castile and arranged to meet with him, eventually forming an alliance with him, an alliance which would see Castile unite with Seville to push al-Adil out of al-Bayyasi's territories, with the ultimate goal of defeating al-Adil completely, enabling al-Bayyasi to become Caliph. This move was pretty much the last card al-Bayyasi had left to play, and was made in a desperate bid to keep himself in the game. What al-Bayyasi wasn't to know was that in the

longer term this alliance would prove fatal to the continued viability of the Almohad empire. In the words of D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain" and I quote "this alliance was to be the lever with which Fernando split the Almohad empire" end quote.

To begin with though, the alliance looked like being a positive one for both Castile and Seville. King Fernando marched his forces into Jaen and laid siege to it, while commanders from the military Orders ranged across the countryside, attacking men from Murcia, managing to kill around 1500 fighters, and taking many captive. King Fernando returned to Toledo before switching his focus to Valencia. By March of the year 1225 the Governor of Valencia had submitted to Castile, declaring himself to be King Fernando's vassal. Feeling like he was getting the hang of this crusading caper, King Fernando then launched a major campaign in June of 1225, moving southwards from Toledo with a sizeable army of knights, noblemen, and members of the military Orders.

It was around this time that al-Bayyasi, too, formally agreed to become vassal to Castile, promising to rule Seville on behalf of King Fernando and promising King Fernando could choose to keep some of the cities and fortresses once he had evicted the Muslims from Murcia from them, including Jaen. The Christians of Castile had wanted Jaen since pretty much forever, so with a renewed vigour King Fernando once again besieged Jaen with a view to taking it and keeping it for Castile. Jaen proved a difficult nut to crack though, and Fernando ended up instead embarking on a series of raiding missions around Jaen and Granada. Most of these raids were devastatingly successful, with King Fernando massacring all those who defied him, while also destroying buildings and orchards and taking considerable numbers of captives, earning himself the reputation of an aggressive and effective military commander. As stated by D. W. Lomax and I quote "his ferocity, though following the rules of war, terrified the Andalusians" end quote. As his reputation grew, citadels and even towns surrendered as he approached. Granada even volunteered to become the vassal of Castile and handed its 1300 Christian captives over to King Fernando simply in exchange for the King of Castile leaving the city alone. Al-Bayyasi promised to hand over a bunch more strongholds to Castile, and in return King Fernando set him up in Cordoba.

Around this time, Fernando also received the submission of Alvar Perez de Castro. Alvar Perez had, like his father, Pedro Fernandez de Castro, been working in service to the Almohads. In fact, Alvar Perez had been in charge of the defence of Jaen, and had successfully prevented King Fernando from taking the town, along with 100 Christian mercenaries who had fought under his command. Now though, Alvar Perez and his 100 Christian knights wished to flip sides and swear allegiance to King Fernando. The Castro family had been anti King Alfonso VIII and anti the Lara family. Now that the Laras had been effectively removed from power and King Alfonso had departed the scene, they were happy to abandon the Almohads and re-pledge themselves to Castile, which they did. They didn't really want to return to Castile, though. In a move which suited everyone, King Fernando appointed Alvar Perez as the castellan of two strongholds in Al-Andalus, then named him as the Castilian royal official for the frontier regions, basically putting him in charge, representing Castile inside the Almohad border regions. King Fernando then returned to Toledo with an astonishing 17,000 Muslim captives.

Now, at the moment it seems like everything is going really well for al-Bayyasi. His alliance with Castile appears to have paid off beyond his wildest expectations. He is now the ruler of Cordoba, and his territories stretched all the way from Cordoba nearly to Seville. His rival for Caliph, al-Adil, seems to have abandoned his efforts to defeat al-Bayyasi and has instead made his way to Morocco. While this does all seem fabulous, it's actually not.

Everyone in Al-Andalus knows that al-Bayyasi's success is just about solely due to his alliance with Castile, and at the moment, across most of Al-Andalus, King Fernando is feared and loathed in equal measure. With al-Bayyasi having lost the respect and loyalty of most of his subjects, he has become ripe for removal.

Prior to his departure to Morocco, al-Adil had handed the responsibility for the defence of his interests in Al-Andalus to his brother, the new Governor of Seville, a man called Abu Allah. Abu Allah is currently leveraging the unpopularity of al-Bayyasi to secure and expand his own power base around Seville.

In the summer of 1225 King Fernando besieged the fortress of Capilla. The fortress was small and isolated but well fortified, and the siege dragged on for months while the defenders hoped for relief from Seville. While Muslims from across the region were admiring the plucky defenders of Capilla, al-Bayyasi was sending supplies not to the fortress but to the besieging Christian army. This was pretty much the last straw for the people of Cordoba. They rose up, and assassinated al-Bayyasi as he attempted to flee the city. His decapitated head was sent to Marrakesh as a trophy for al-Adil.

Does this mean that al-Adil is now the sole undisputed Caliph? No, it doesn't. Join me next time as another contender proclaims himself Caliph. Until next time, bye for now.

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