

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 98
Christian Conquests

Hello again. Last time we saw a non-Almohad Muslim rise to power in Al-Andalus. That man was Ibn Hud, who declared that he was intending to reclaim his lost inheritance and rule as King in Al-Andalus on behalf of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. Ibn Hud ended up being wildly successful in his bid to take Al-Andalus from the Almohads due to the fact that Almohad rule had all but collapsed in the Iberian peninsula, with the two contenders for the position of Almohad Caliph having transferred their fight for supremacy to northern Africa. While the Almohads weren't proving too much of a problem for Ibn Hud though, the Christians were. When we left the last episode it was the year 1230 and Ibn Hud had conquered most of Al-Andalus. Now we need to catch up on what has been happening in all of the Christian kingdoms while we have been focusing on Al-Andalus.

We began by looking at Aragon. By the time we left the last episode it was September in the year 1229 and the nineteen year old King of Aragon James had just launched his first crusade with his target being the Muslim kingdom of Majorca in the Balearic Islands. Now, for those of you who aren't familiar with Spanish geography, the Balearic Islands lie off the coast of Spain in the Mediterranean Sea. Today, the three main islands in the group - Majorca, Minorca and Ibiza - are tourist hot-spots, but back in the year 1229 they were being ruled by an unpopular Muslim King, with the island of Minorca lying off the coast of Catalonia, Majorca in the middle being situated across from Zaragoza, and Ibiza to the south being off the coast of Valencia.

Now, for some time the ruler of these islands had been the source of great irritation to both the Almohads and the Christians of the Iberian peninsula. The islands had been a thorn in the side of the Almohads as they were frequently used to foment unrest in northern Africa. The islands had been of concern to the Christians for a different reason. They contained pirates who frequently disrupted trade by attacking Christian ships attempting to sail between the Iberian peninsula and other ports across the Mediterranean. It was for this reason that the young King of Aragon chose the islands as a target for his Crusade. Merchants from Catalonia, in particular, were keen to expand their trade across the region, but the risk of their heavily laden ships being attacked and stripped of their goods by the Muslim pirates of Majorca made trade a risky business. Should the pirates be eliminated though, the opportunities for expansion of the Catalonian export market were huge, with associated benefits for the local economy.

As we discussed in the last episode, the other option for King James was to make Valencia the target of his campaign. While Valencia would be a rich prize, and while the noblemen from Aragon were desperately keen to secure themselves a slice of Valencia, Valencia itself currently posed no risk to the Kingdom of Aragon. On the contrary, it was paying an annual tribute to King James and was 100% focused on trying to maintain its status as an Almohad hold-out against the advances of Ibn Hud, so King James turned a deaf ear to the pleas of his Aragonese noblemen and instead heeded the calls of the barons of Catalonia to attack Majorca.

What King James was perhaps unaware of was the fact that the current King of Majorca was a cruel, unpopular ruler who didn't enjoy the support of the majority of his subjects. The Majorcan King's decision to allow Majorcan pirates to plunder Christian ships at will

had left the island vulnerable to attack, and his method of dealing with dissent over the many unpopular decisions he made was to execute anyone who opposed him. In fact, in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy states that the King of Majorca had been in the process of overseeing the execution of 50 of Majorca's leading citizens when the sails of the fleet carrying the Crusaders were spotted heading towards the island. The King then hastily pardoned the 50 men and ordered them to return to their homes and prepare to defend the island. In the words of a chronicler, and I quote, "accordingly they all went home and were received by their families as if they had just risen from the tomb" end quote. I guess it's not hard to see why the King of Majorca wasn't the sort of man whose subjects were willing to lay down their lives for.

Regardless, the defence of Majorca by its residents was pretty impressive. The Crusaders under the command of the King of Aragon arrived in Majorca in September of 1229, on board 150 ships which were carrying 800 knights and several thousand foot soldiers, most of whom were from Catalonia and some of whom were from other coastal trading centres which had an interest in eradicating piracy, including Marseilles, Pisa, and Genoa. A storm blew up during their arrival, but by the night of the 8 September conditions had eased sufficiently for a landing to be made in the Bay of Palma. The Crusaders besieged the city of Palma and occupied other parts of the island.

A few months later, the city and the island were still holding out, so a decision was made to storm the besieged town. On the last day of the year 1229 the Crusaders attacked the city of Palma and breached its walls, capturing the city after an unusually violent and merciless assault. The King of Majorca was captured during the fighting and died soon after. A few months later the entire island of Majorca surrendered to the Christians, with residents who had no wish to live under Christian rule shifting to northern Africa or to one of the other Balearic islands. This mass exodus of Muslim residents left a significant number of vacant properties on the island, which Catalan residents ended up occupying. The pirates were eradicated and Barcelona was granted freedom of trade with the island. Genoa, Pisa, and Marseilles were also granted trading privileges, and some crusaders from these regions took up possession of some of the vacant houses. King James remained in Majorca for the rest of the year 1230 during which the Catalan language and law was introduced to the island. The Muslims of Majorca recognised the King of Aragon as their overlord and agreed to pay him tribute in return for a large degree of self governance. After King James departed from Majorca he granted the island to Portugal in return for the title to Urgell. The island of Minorca surrendered to King James in 1231, and in 1235 the island of Ibiza was captured by the Archbishop of Tarragona.

The end result of the Crusade was a massive win for the young King of Aragon, who in one single campaign managed to expand his kingdom, raise his prestige, and set Catalonia on a path towards a rapid expansion of its trade and export capabilities. With Majorca now under his thumb, King James was able to turn his attention to Valencia, managing to capture a number of castles in the year 1233.

And it wasn't all bad news for the Muslims of Majorca. The death of their unpleasant king during the assault on the city of Palma paved the way for the rise to power of a more popular leader who presided over a scholarly court. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal" Hugh Kennedy states that under the ruler's wise and learned leadership the island of Majorca, and I quote "even became something of a centre of Muslim culture" end quote.

With the young King of Aragon having flexed his crusading muscles, what were the other Christian kings up to? Well, while King James was busy fighting the Muslims of Majorca, the rest of the Christian rulers were busy wrestling with Ibn Hud for territories in Al-Andalus. One of the busiest and most successful campaigns was overseen by King Alfonso IX of Leon.

When we last checked in with King Alfonso it was back in Episode 95. It was the year 1223 and he had attempted unsuccessfully to take the town of Caceres, after having nearly taken it the year before but withdrawing on the promise of receiving a huge sum of money from Caliph Yusuf II, money which never came. You might be pleased to hear that, four years later in summer of the year 1227, King Alfonso finally did manage to take Caceres, and he followed up his victory by besieging Merida. Now, his opponent at this point in time is no longer any of the Almohad caliphs, but Ibn Hud. Ibn Hud did ride to the relief of Merida but suffered a defeat at the hands of the Christians near a town to the south west of the city. He then changed his mind about coming to Merida's defence. With no Muslim forces coming to its aid, Merida surrendered to the King of Leon in March of the year 1230. Merida was a huge prize, but the King of Leon wasn't content to stop there. He continued westwards and besieged the city of Badajoz, which eventually surrendered to him. King Alfonso declared Badajoz to now be a Christian city and established a bishopric there.

You would think that King Alfonso would be satisfied, having pushed the boundaries of his kingdom into a considerable chunk of Al-Andalus and having netted himself two significant Muslim cities, but deciding that fortune was favouring him and wishing to ride his wave of victories further he decided to aim big, telling his military commanders that his next target would be the city of Seville. Before heading to Seville though, King Alfonso decided to travel back northwards to Santiago de Compostela to give thanks for his victories and to pray for further success.

It was on the road to the famous pilgrimage destination though that his luck ran out. He died on the 24th September of the year 1230 on the way to Santiago. He would have been pleased to hear that his bodily remains did make it to the pilgrimage site. He was granted the honour of a full Christian burial at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella, having fully redeemed himself in the eyes of the Church. Having once been more inclined to ally himself with the Caliph rather than the Pope, and having once been the subject of a crusade, King Alfonso ended up dying as a crusading hero, having conquered the strategically important cities of Merida and Badajoz.

Now, King Alfonso of Leon was aged in his fifties when he died, and somewhat surprisingly had never publicly settled the issue of who was to succeed him. The front-runner was his son King Fernando III of Castile, but he wasn't the only contender. The King of Leon had fathered two daughters with his first wife, Theresa of Portugal before welcoming into the world his son with his second wife, Berenguela. Both of these marriages had later been annulled on the grounds of consanguinity, but the laws of succession in Leon didn't preclude women from rising to power, so it was arguable that King Alfonso's daughters had a stronger title to the crown than Fernando. In the end, the issue was settled by the mothers of the contenders. Theresa of Portugal sat down with Berenguela of Castile, and in the end they thrashed out a deal which pleased everyone. King Alfonso's daughters agreed to renounce their claims to the throne in favour of King Fernando, who in return granted them both generous pensions and properties from the royal treasury. So the Kingdoms of Leon and Castile were once again set to be ruled by a single monarch.

King Fernando of Castile received the news of his father's death while he was besieging Jaen. Fernando was intent on taking Jaen and had put in a lot of work to secure the city, capturing a bunch of nearby towns and settling in to force Jaen into submission. The news that the throne of Leon was now vacant meant that he quickly abandoned the siege and instead raced northwards, intent on securing his claim to his late father's kingdom. As we've just mentioned, King Fernando will succeed in claiming the Kingdom of Leon and was crowned in December of 1230, becoming the first monarch since Alfonso VII back in the year 1157 to rule both Leon and Castile. That was the good news. The bad news was that for the next few years, King Fernando will be occupied securing his hold over the Kingdom of Leon and will not be in a position to go on the offensive against the Muslims.

While King Fernando himself was unable to push further into Al-Andalus, that didn't mean that other Castilians had to stay away from the battlefield. Concerned that some eastern coastal regions in Al-Andalus had been retaken by the Muslims, King Fernando informed the archbishop of Toledo, Archbishop Rodrigo, that he could keep the town of Quesada in Al-Andalus and all the villages surrounding it if he could retake it for the Christians. The Archbishop threw himself into this challenge wholeheartedly and ended up conquering not just Quesada but fourteen villages, strongholds, and towns nearby. Likewise, King Fernando gave the green light to one of his brothers and Alvar Perez de Castro to go on the offensive against Ibn Hud, which they did with enthusiasm.

Join me next time as King Fernando sorts his domestic issues out and is finally ready to go on the offensive once again, this time against the city of Cordoba. Until next time, bye for now.

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