

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 15
King Alfonso III of Asturias

Hello again. Last time we saw the rise to power of the Emir Muhammad I. While Muhammad inherited a revitalised, culturally enriched, and thriving Al-Andalus from his father, Abd al-Rahman II, the main challenges he faced came in the form of Muslim uprisings. The uprisings were predominantly initiated by non-Arab Muslims in towns under the control of Cordoba. Muhammad I needed to stamp these uprisings out before they escalated and drew in support from outsiders such as the Basque people or the Kingdom of Asturias. Stamping the rebellions out often involved Muhammad forming alliances with local non-Arab power groups, a strategy which will have some major ramifications further down the track.

Now, Muhammad I would no doubt have been disappointed to learn that his reign isn't going to get any easier. In fact, his challenges are only just beginning. The Muslim uprisings across Al-Andalus during the remainder of his reign will increase in number and severity, and he will face a new opponent in the form of a king who is about to rise to power in Asturias, the formidable King Alfonso III.

King Ordone of Asturias died in the year 866, having ruled Asturias for sixteen years. Although he was only aged in his forties when he passed on, King Ordone had fathered six children, one of whom was his teenage son, Alfonso. Ordone had named young Alfonso as his successor prior to his death, but a number of other contenders emerged for the throne. When Alfonso was crowned as King Alfonso III, he was around seventeen or eighteen years old, so he wasn't a helpless child, but that didn't stop other, more experienced, ambitious men in the region from deciding to have a crack at defeating the young king and seizing the throne for themselves.

Amongst those keen to push young Alfonso off the throne was Count Fruela of neighbouring Galicia. Count Fruela decided to have a red hot go at seizing the throne of Asturias, and he very nearly succeeded, forcing young King Alfonso to flee from the capital of the Kingdom of Asturias, Oviedo. However, while Count Fruela was in the process of settling himself into Oviedo and preparing to declare himself the new King of Asturias, he was assassinated, paving the way for King Alfonso to return and resume his reign.

This rocky start to his period of rule may have resulted in Alfonso becoming more aggressive and more assertive. For the remainder of his 47 year long reign King Alfonso won't be running away when confronted with threats to his rule. In fact, he will be actively hunting down any such threats and nipping them in the bud before they reach Count Fruela-type dimensions. Worryingly for the neighbouring powers, this includes threats not just from Al-Andalus, but from other Christian entities in the north of the peninsula. In fact, King Alfonso, once he finds his feet, will embark on an impressive campaign of expansion, and by the end of his lengthy reign, the Kingdom of Asturias will expand in both territory and importance to a degree likely not even dreamt of by his predecessors. As a result, King Alfonso III will later become known as Alfonso the Great.

All of this, of course, was very bad news for the current Emir of Al-Andalus, Muhammad I. Now, we saw in the last episode that Muhammad was kept busy putting down numerous Muslim rebellions, which kept on popping up across Al-Andalus. Well, in his book "Muslim

Spain and Portugal: A Political History of Al-Andalus”, Hugh Kennedy offers an interesting reason for why this might be happening. As we all know, the reign of Muhammad's father, Abd al-Rahman II saw a flourishing of culture and learning across Al-Andalus, and by the end of his reign, the people of Al-Andalus had a new, more confident identity. They were dressing in fancy bright clothes, listening to cutting-edge music, learning new ideas, and even eating new food. One result of this golden age, states Hugh Kennedy, is that record numbers of Christians converted to Islam during Abd al-Rahman's rule. In fact, Hugh Kennedy states that by the time of Abd al-Rahman's death, nearly 50% of the residents of Al-Andalus identified as Muslim, with that number being even higher around Cordoba, at 70%.

Now, while this seems like an excellent turn of events and a cause for celebration within Al-Andalus, it actually had two significant drawbacks. The first was financial. Jewish and Christian residents of Al-Andalus paid higher taxes than their Muslim counterparts in return for being able to freely practise their religions. With so many Christians converting to Islam, the tax revenue of the Umayyad regime plummeted. In fact, the income drawn from non-Muslim residents inside Al-Andalus fell to such an extent that Hugh Kennedy states that it weakened the Muslim governing apparatus and undermined its entire fiscal system. While that sounds really bad, and it was really bad, the next unintended consequence of mass conversion posed even more danger to Cordoba. The ruling system in Al-Andalus centred around elite Arab Muslims. To put it bluntly, the Arab Muslims were in charge, and all other Muslims (the Berbers, the descendants of Visigothic families who had converted to Islam a century ago, and newer converts) all had to sit back and do whatever the Arab Muslims told them to do. The spate of new converts to Islam by the start of Muhammad's rule didn't expand the existing Arab ruling minority. It instead swelled the ranks of the non-Arab Muslims. Those non-Arab Muslims now found themselves with a bunch of possible new supporters who might assist them to wrestle some power from the ruling Arabs. And this was why poor Muhammad I found himself racing around Al-Andalus stamping out embers of Muslim rebellion against Arab rule.

Of course, this whole turn of events had the non-Muslim neighbouring powers (the Franks, and the Christians in the north of the peninsula) looking on with interest, wondering how they could leverage the unrest to their advantage. Fortunately for Muhammad, the Franks at this point in time aren't much of a problem. Following the death of Charlemagne's son and heir Louis the Pious in the year 840, the empire of the Franks had split into three chunks: West Frankia; Middle Frankia; and East Frankia, each of which was ruled by one of Louis's sons. Charles the Bald found himself the King of West Frankia, which comprised most of what today is southern and western France. Unfortunately for Charles, he wasn't terribly popular, and was forced to spend most of his time clinging desperately to power and fending off attempts by various family members to boot him off the throne. As a result, the policy of his father and grandfather, to push Frankish territory over the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula, was all but abandoned during this period, so we can strike off the Franks as an external threat which Muhammad will need to concern himself with.

That just leaves the Banu Qasi and their Basque allies up north near the Pyrenees, and King Alfonso III of Asturias. Of these two threats, King Alfonso was to prove the most vexing. After the rocky start to his reign, it didn't take long for King Alfonso to grasp the fundamentals of ruling. Once he had grasped these fundamentals, he decided to flex his muscles a little and test himself against the neighbouring powers.

Only a year into his reign, he successfully put down a Basque rebellion. Then, over the next couple of decades, King Alfonso III extended the boundaries of Asturias eastwards,

westwards and, most concerning for Al-Andalus, southwards. We saw in the last episode that King Alfonso's father, King Ordoño, had begun settling Christian residents into the vacant buffer-zone which lay between Asturias and Al-Andalus. Well, King Alfonso decided to take this policy to a whole new level. In the year 868, only two years after he had been crowned as King, Alfonso successfully seized the important port city of Porto from Al-Andalus. Today, Porto is the second largest city in Portugal and is located on the Atlantic coast. Back in the ninth century, Porto was a thriving trading centre, and in fact had operated as an important port since Roman times.

The annexation of Porto must have sent shock-waves not only all the way southwards to Cordoba, but across Galicia as well. Why? Well, because Porto was way outside the traditional boundaries of the Kingdom of Asturias. If you remember back to previous episodes, the Kingdom of Asturias at the commencement of King Alfonso III's reign was just a small, narrow region in the centre of the northern coastline of the Iberian Peninsula. Porto isn't on the northern coastline of the Iberian peninsula. In fact, it's nowhere near the northern coastline of the Iberian peninsula. It's located on the western side of the square that is the Iberian Peninsula, underneath the region of Galicia, which occupies the northwestern corner off the peninsula. In fact, Porto is so far underneath Galicia, so to speak, that it is in Al-Andalus. Well, it was in Al-Andalus, but now, apparently, it's part of Asturias. If onlookers had observed that the signal this was sending was that King Alfonso intended to expand the Kingdom of Asturias all the way westwards across Galicia, then southwards into Al-Andalus, well yes, that's exactly the signal that King Alfonso was sending.

Interestingly, if you look at the location of Porto on a map, it's around three quarters of the way up the western coast of the peninsula. Now I wouldn't be at all surprised if, having seized Porto for the Kingdom of Asturias, the brash young King Alfonso took out a ruler and drew a line from Porto all the way across the Iberian Peninsula from west to east. The line would have split the peninsula into two parts: the lower three quarters, and an upper quarter. Now there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that Alfonso did this, but I can't help thinking: What if Alfonso looked at the top one quarter of the peninsula and thought, "Why don't we have a crack at spreading Asturias all the way across this region?" So, all across the northern coastline and all the way down south to Porto in the west and Tortosa in the east. That would mean that King Alfonso would find himself ruling over not a tiny sliver of land in the centre of the northern coast of the peninsula, but over a massive chunk of land, incorporating Galicia, all of the Christian regions to the north, and a goodly chunk of northern Al-Andalus. Now I must emphasise that there is no evidence of this; it's just pure speculation on my part, but if the ambitious teenage King did decide to shoot for the stars, and expand his kingdom to this degree, what would be his next move? Well, the obvious next step would be to extend the boundaries of the Kingdom of Asturias southwards to the imaginary three-quarter line. Strangely, that's kind of what King Alfonso did.

While the Emir Muhammad was occupied darting around Al-Andalus, stamping out Muslim rebellions and knocking heads with the Banu Qasi, young King Alfonso embarked on an ambitious plan to resettle and occupy the main towns in the buffer zone between Al-Andalus and the Christian north. Around ten years into his reign, King Alfonso's expansion plans were coming along nicely. He considered Galicia to be under Asturian control, and he had managed to secure a goodly portion of the top quarter of the Iberian peninsula for Asturias. In fact, maybe half of the top quarter of the peninsula, the western and central half, was now loosely under Alfonso's control, which was pretty impressive. Some of the towns taken by Asturias were old Roman settlements with impressive

fortifications, and the expansion of Asturias was increasingly becoming a reality that Muhammad could no longer ignore.

Join me next time as the Emir of Al-Andalus confronts the young Asturian King on the battlefield. Until next time, bye for now.

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