

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 33
King Fernando I of Leon and Castile, Part One

Hello again. Last time we examined the rise of the taifas, the regional kingdoms which emerged following the decline of the Caliphate. You might be wondering at this stage whether any of the rulers of the Christian states in the Iberian peninsula were thinking of taking advantage of the decline of the Caliphate to make a move on any of the taifas, and here is where we welcome back to the stage the current King of Leon and Castile, Fernando.

Now you might recall that, of all of his sons, Sancho the Great of Navarre likely believed his son Fernando to be the one most likely to succeed. If he had believed this, he would have been exactly right. Sancho the Great didn't give Fernando any advantage to secure any future success. In fact, if anything, Fernando was given the raw end of the deal following his father's death. While his eldest brother Garcia inherited the now mighty Kingdom of Navarre, all Fernando was given was the region of Castile, which was not even a kingdom. It was merely a county, full of castles, with few towns, and populated by people who didn't enjoy being told what to do. But Fernando made the most of his inheritance. He married Sancha, the sister of King Vermudo III of Leon, and after defeating King Vermudo in battle in the year 1037, Fernando claimed the kingdom of Leon, in his wife's name, and was crowned as King Fernando I, at the cathedral in Leon in the year 1039.

So, only four years after the death of his father, Sancho the Great, Fernando has managed to become king of most of the Christian north, a region stretching from Galicia across Leon and Castile. His main rival is now his brother Garcia, the King of Navarre, who has been raising his eyebrows at his younger brother's rapid expansion across the north. For the next couple of years, Fernando's main focus will be on his brother the King of Navarre, so he won't be taking advantage of the rise of the taifas to expand his territory southwards, as to do so may well open opportunities for the Kingdom of Navarre to begin pushing its territory into Castile. But that doesn't mean that Fernando will be staying out of the politics of the taifas. On the contrary, he will leverage the emerging conflict between the taifas to his advantage.

Now, do you remember, in the last episode, when I stated that, at the time of the establishment of the taifas most people in Al-Andalus still thought of themselves as Andalusis, then as a resident of a particular taifa second? Well, that idea of a unifying nationalism stretching across the Muslim regions in the peninsula is beginning to break down, and conflict is starting to emerge between the taifas. In the year 1038, one year before Fernando's ascension to the throne of Leon, the King of the Taifa of Toledo was preparing an army to march on the Taifa of Zaragoza to teach it a lesson. Why did Zaragoza need to be taught a lesson? Well, because Zaragoza had been ruled by a relative of the King of Toledo, but that particular king of Zaragoza had just been assassinated, and a man called Abdullah was now calling himself the King of Zaragoza. The King of Toledo, therefore had decided to avenge the death of his kinsman, and perhaps seize some territory for Toledo, by marching on Zaragoza. But he wanted to ensure that he had the best chance of succeeding, and in order to give himself the best chance of succeeding he needed to field as large an army as possible.

Prior to the fall of the Caliphate, the Christian north had frequently supplied troops to various rulers in Al-Andalus, so the King of Toledo decided to continue this tradition. Young Count Fernando of Castile had recently defeated King Vermudo of Leon in battle, and looked like he had the troops and the military skills which the King of Toledo required, so the King of Toledo wrote to him requesting military assistance.

To say that the message he received back from the young Count of Castile was not what he was expecting was an understatement. It was inflammatory, it was belligerent, and it shocked the King of Toledo to his core. What did the message from Fernando to the King of Toledo say? Well, it stated, and I quote: "We demand our land, which a long time ago you conquered and which you have inhabited for as long as has been ordained by God. Now he has given us victory over you on account of your wickedness. Depart to your own shores of northern Africa and give our land to us, for there is no good in your living with us any longer, nor will we turn away from you until God has judged between you and us". End quote.

Now, this statement is rather important, as it has been viewed as being possibly the earliest expression of the Reconquista, the idea that Christianity ought to reclaim the Muslim part of the Iberian peninsula. So let's break it down a little. To start with, what does it say? Basically, Fernando is saying here: Okay, so you've asked me to come over to assist you to defeat the King of Zaragoza? Well, my response is: give me Toledo. Your land is rightfully ours, so run back to northern Africa and give the Christians back the land which you have claimed as yours. Clearly, that's an extremely hostile statement.

In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos maintains that this isn't actually what it appears to be. It's not a demand for all Muslims to vacate Al-Andalus. Instead, Brian Catlos states that the call to go back to where you came from, so to speak, was directed not to the Muslims of Toledo but to the King of Toledo personally. To put it bluntly, Fernando was not a fan of the King of Toledo. He knew that the King of Toledo claimed descent from northern Africa, and that he had been living lavishly and decadently as the king of his taifa, so Fernando was telling the King of Toledo, personally, that no, he wasn't going to send the armies of Castile to his assistance. Instead, the King of Toledo could clear all the way back off to northern Africa, and let the Christian rulers back to rule over what was once a Christian land. To back up his claim, Brian Catlos states that in the future, Christian rulers who conquered territory in Al-Andalus would go to great lengths to tempt the Muslim people living in the conquered territory to remain where they were, living as Muslims under Christian rule. Their aim was to conquer then rule, rather than to drive the existing populations away.

Anyway, regardless of the exact meaning of Fernando's statement, it was later seen as the first shot fired in the Reconquista.

A year after making the statement, Count Fernando of Castile was crowned King Fernando I of Leon and Castile, and King Fernando began utilising the conflict between the kings of the taifas to his advantage, by making them pay annual tributes to him in return for Fernando promising that the armies of Leon and Castile wouldn't attack their territory. The first person to throw money in King Fernando's direction was the King of Zaragoza. King Fernando likely let it slip that the King of Toledo had asked the armies of Castile to help him invade Zaragoza, and that Fernando had declined. Of course, Fernando could always change his mind about this and decide to invade Zaragoza

anyway, but if the King of Zaragoza sent regular payments to Fernando, well, then Fernando would ensure that his mind wouldn't change and that he definitely wouldn't be invading Zaragoza anytime soon. In this way, Fernando scored some easy cash in return for doing precisely nothing.

This worked really well until the early 1040s. The residents of Toledo had been taxed heavily so that the Royal Court in Toledo could enrich itself and boast luxuries and refineries which were superior to those on offer in the other taifas. This had led to vulnerabilities and social unrest in Toledo, which by the 1040s had come to the attention of the neighbouring taifas Badajoz and Zaragoza, both of which decided to attack Toledo. Toledo was now desperate for military aid to defend itself. Having already received a very cold shoulder from Fernando, the King of Toledo turned instead to Fernando's brother, Garcia the King of Navarre. King Garcia of Navarre jumped at the chance to come to the assistance of Toledo, deciding that once he had helped Toledo to defend itself from attack, he could then unite with Toledo and go on the offensive against Zaragoza, a move which would strike a blow against his brother Fernando, and may net him some territory which he could annex to Navarre.

This, in turn, prompted Fernando to go on the offensive. He didn't send his army in to attack Toledo, which may have sparked a showdown between himself and King Garcia, which he wasn't yet prepared for. Instead, he instigated a number of raiding missions into Toledo, with small bands of fighters entering the territory of Toledo and making off with whatever they could find: property, livestock, harvests, and prisoners.

As Brian Catlos points out, these raids served a dual purpose. Restless military commanders and knights, who might stir up trouble if left to hang around with nothing to do in Leon, were given a mission and a chance to score booty, while the proceeds of the raids filled the coffers of Fernando's treasury in Leon. In fact, the raids into Toledo proved so successful that Fernando rolled them out into other taifas in the north of Al-Andalus. Over the next few decades, Fernando's treasury was kept healthily full, either by raiding into the taifas or by accepting money from the taifas not to raid.

Fortunately for the taifas, Fernando was reluctant to initiate any full scale military incursions into any of the taifas during this time, due to his conflict with his brother the King of Navarre, but that all changed in the year 1054, when the brothers clashed on the battlefield. King Fernando emerged as the victor, with King Garcia III of Navarre dying in battle. Garcia's son was crowned as King Sancho IV of Navarre, but he acknowledged his uncle's supremacy, meaning that the whole of the Christian north was now effectively under Fernando's control.

This meant that Fernando could now turn his full attention to the taifas. In the year following his brother's death, Fernando commenced his campaign against the taifas, pushing the borders of Galicia down into what today is the country of Portugal. For the next five years or so, Fernando increased the pressure on the taifas, raiding strategically into particular regions, and forcing the rulers of the taifas to make payments to him in return for promising not to launch full scale invasions.

Not only was Fernando cashing in on the raid-and-tribute game, other Christian leaders had seen what was taking place, and were taking their share as well. Ramon Berenguer I of Barcelona, attacked territory in the eastern part of the Taifa of Zaragoza, forcing the payment of tribute to Catalonia, while King Ramiro I of Aragon took things up to the next

level, by launching an ambitious attack on the city of Zaragoza itself. To counter this aggression from Aragon the King of Zaragoza paid Fernando to attack his own brother, King Ramiro I of Aragon, and force him to back away from Zaragoza. Proving that money at this stage of the game trumped both blood ties and religion, Fernando did exactly that, attacking Ramiro's forces at a town which was on the Muslim side of the border between Aragon and Zaragoza. Fernando and his army won the day, forcing Ramiro back over the border into Aragon, and forcing Aragon to acknowledge the supremacy of King Fernando.

During the remainder of the 1050s and into the 1060s, Fernando raided into every major taifa, forcing the kings of the taifas to pay him tribute. Money was, as a consequence, flowing out of Al-Andalus into the Christian kingdoms, weakening the economies and the stability of the taifas.

Did King Fernando of Leon and Castile have an overall strategy here? Well, yes, apparently he did. The idea was to sap the strength and the treasuries of the taifas until they were weak enough to invade and conquer. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos quotes the words of a Christian man who had been sent to collect tribute from the King of Granada. The King of Granada apparently asked the envoy what the whole idea was behind the constant raids and the collection of tributes. The reply given to the King made complete sense, and the King wrote it down. This is what the Christian man stated as being the strategy of the Christian kings, and I quote "Al-Andalus originally belonged to the Christians. They were defeated by the Arabs and driven to the most inhospitable region, Galicia. Now that they are strong and capable, the Christians desire to recover what they have lost by force. This can only be achieved by weakness and encroachment. In the long run, when Al-Andalus has neither men nor money, we will be able to recover it without any difficulty". End quote.

Fortunately for the Christians, their action of slowly draining the taifas of money and men will eventually collide with a major event in the history of Christendom: the calling of the First Crusade. Join me next time as we continue our look into the reign of King Fernando I of Leon and Castile. Until next time, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to patreon.com and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, crusadespod.com, and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End