

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 34
King Fernando I of Leon and Castile, Part Two

Hello again. Last time we saw Fernando, the young Count of Castile, begin his rise to power. A strategic marriage alliance saw him crowned as the King of Leon, and his policy of raiding into the taifas of Al-Andalus, then collecting funds in the form of tribute to stop the raids, saw a draining away of wealth from Al-Andalus into the coffers of Leon and Castile. After defeating his brother the King of Navarre on the battlefield, King Fernando was acknowledged as the most senior and most powerful of the Christian kings on the Iberian peninsula, with the other Christian rulers eventually acknowledging his supremacy.

When we left the last episode, the policy behind the constant raids and exacting of tribute had been uncovered, with a Christian envoy letting it slip to the King of Granada that the idea was to weaken Al-Andalus and deplete all the taifas of both money and men until Al-Andalus could be invaded and reclaimed by the Christians with little difficulty. Now, the statement of the envoy was reportedly made in the year 1074, nearly a decade after the death of King Fernando, but it clearly summarised a policy which was definitely being pursued by Fernando near the beginning of his reign.

During the 1050s though, King Fernando ramped things up a little and decided to go on the offensive. His first campaign involved pushing the borders of Galicia southwards down the western coast of the Iberian peninsula, into the Taifa of Badajoz, covering territory which today comprises the country of Portugal. King Fernando marched his army to the Galician coast in the year 1055, then headed southwards towards the commercial port of Porto.

Today, Porto is the second-largest city in Portugal and has a beautiful historic centre which has been proclaimed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. Back in the mid-11th century, it was an important trading centre, which had been flipping back and forth between the Christians and the Muslims. Porto lies at the mouth of the Duero River. The Duero River commences inland to the east of Porto at a place called Lamego. In the year 1055 Lamego was heavily fortified and under Muslim control, with the Duero River being seen by the Taifa of Badajoz as a kind of buffer zone between itself and the Christians. Put another way, if the Christians managed to seize the Duero River, that would open a pathway to the Taifa of Badajoz. As a consequence, the Muslims of Badajoz were intent on using Lamego as a defensive stronghold to protect the Duero River and prevent it from falling into Christian hands.

King Fernando occupied the town of Porto at the mouth of the river and used it as an outpost, while his armies gradually made their way inland up the river. Eventually, they managed to travel the 100 kilometre distance upriver to Lamego and on the 29th of November in the year 1057 Fernando's army took the fortress of Lamego, meaning that the Duero River was now in Christian hands.

Having secured Lamego, Fernando's army then headed directly southwards until they arrived at the basin of another lengthy river, the Mondego River. Deciding that it would be handy to secure this river in addition to the Duero, the Christian armies captured the town of Viseu, which controlled the middle reaches of the river, in July of 1058. The next step in

securing the river was to capture the hilltop fortress town of Coimbra, which guarded the lower reaches of the river. Unlike the relatively straightforward conquests of Lamego and Viseu, taking Coimbra was going to be rather tricky.

Today, Coimbra is the fourth largest city in Portugal and is home to the oldest university in Portugal, an institution which dates back to the year 1290. Back in the mid-11th century Coimbra was a formidable place. It had been used as a defensive outpost guarding the Mondego River since Roman times, and the whole town, which was located on a hill, was surrounded by defensive Roman walls. Even if the walls were breached, the town itself boasted a number of defensive structures, including a fortified castle.

Realising that taking Coimbra was going to prove quite a challenge, Fernando took a breather. He made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela to pray for assistance from Saint James, spent a while planning his strategy, then in the year 1064 his armies besieged Coimbra, completely encircling it. After a siege lasting six months, Coimbra surrendered to King Fernando. According to Derek Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", the city held out until battering rams destroyed part of its Roman wall. The citizens of Coimbra then negotiated a surrender, on the condition that they be allowed to leave the city along with some of their possessions. A hard core group of defenders though, refused to surrender. After their hold-out inside the fortress of Coimbra was stormed though, the resisters were mostly killed, with the survivors forced into slavery. King Fernando then declared the Mondego River to be under Christian control.

At this point, King Fernando ceased his southwards push into the Taifa of Badajoz and instead installed a local Christian military commander as the ruler of Coimbra, with instructions to hold both Coimbra and the Mondego River for the Christians.

Now this man, whose name was Sisnando Davides, is rather interesting, so let's take a closer look at him. As a young man, Sisnando had been captured in a raid conducted into Christian territory by the forces of the King of Seville. He then served as a slave in the royal court of Seville, where he was given an extensive education and became fluent in Arabic. Despite never converting to Islam, Sisnando rose rapidly in the royal court of Seville, being appointed to a position of command in the militia of the city and serving as a royal counsellor and ambassador to the royal family of Seville. This all ended in the 1060s though, when Sisnando pledged his services to King Fernando. According to Derek Lomax, it was Sisnando who advised King Fernando to besiege Coimbra, and his advice was instrumental in the defeat of the city. King Fernando appointed Sisnando as the count of Coimbra, and Count Sisnando Davides will rule the city, on the King of Leon's behalf, for nearly five decades, until the Count's death in the year 1091.

Now, just as Sisnando rose to prominence under the rule of the King of Seville, he will also flex his muscles under the rule of the King of Leon. He established a Christian administrative system inside Coimbra, and occasionally acted as judge, adjudicating disputes on behalf of the King of Leon. He appointed the first Bishop of Coimbra, and as his skills gradually became apparent, he began to serve as an ambassador to King Fernando, with his extensive knowledge of the inner workings of the taifas, his contacts in the royal courts of many of the regional Muslim kingdoms, and his fluent Arabic all proving useful assets. In fact, Count Sisnando Davides will prove so effective as an envoy that he will rise to become the Kingdom of Leon's chief envoy, visiting taifas across the peninsula and utilising his skills to extract the highest possible levels of tribute from the various regional kings. But that's a little way into the future.

While Sisnando Davides was settling into his new role as the Count of Coimbra, King Fernando left the west coast of the Iberian peninsula and turned his attentions instead to the east, or more specifically, to the Taifa of Valencia. While King Fernando no doubt fancied the idea of forcing Valencia to submit to Christian rule, he wasn't the only ruler to be eyeing off Valencia as a worthy prize.

The King of Toledo, a man called al-Ma'mun, had been kept very busy since the death of King Fernando's brother, King Garcia of Navarre, back in the year 1054. Now, al-Ma'mun, the King of Toledo, was the same King of Toledo we mentioned in the last episode, who had requested military assistance from the young Count Fernando, only to receive a belligerent negative response from him, telling him in effect, to go back to northern Africa and leave Toledo to the Christians. The King of Toledo then successfully sought military assistance from King Fernando's brother and rival, King Garcia of Navarre, only to have that alliance go southwards after King Fernando defeated King Garcia in battle. A now exposed and friendless al-Ma'mun was left to bite his fingernails as his powerful neighbours, the taifas of Badajoz and Zaragoza, looked set to capitalise on the situation by invading Toledo.

This forced the King of Toledo into an alliance with the King of Seville. However, the people of Toledo were worried that the King of Seville would end up dominating Toledo. In fact, they were so worried that civil unrest began to break out. Fearing attacks from Badajoz and Zaragoza, and no longer able to lean on Seville for assistance, al-Ma'mun was forced into a humiliating back-down. He went cap in hand, so to speak to King Fernando, begging him to come to the aid of Toledo and plying him with gifts and other bribes to win his favour. It worked. King Fernando provided military support to Toledo, which prevented attacks from its neighbours, while al-Ma'mun even went so far as to provide troops to assist in King Fernando's invasion of the Muslim Kingdom of Granada.

It appears that al-Ma'mun was involved in the planning of King Fernando's next venture, an invasion of the Muslim Kingdom of Valencia, but shortly after launching his campaign, King Fernando fell ill. He called off the invasion and instead made his way back northwards to Leon. Deciding that this was too good an opportunity to pass up, al-Ma'mun decided to invade Valencia himself, which was a touch awkward - not because that effectively meant knifing his chief ally, King Fernando, in the back, but because the current King of Valencia was actually al-Ma'mun's son-in-law. Anyway, neither of these concerns were enough to dissuade al-Ma'mun from his ambitious plan to take Valencia, and he launched his invasion, successfully conquering Valencia and booting his son-in-law off his throne.

And al-Ma'mun won't stop there. Eight years later he joined forces with the King of Seville to attack Cordoba. The initial attack was successful, but as the armies of Seville entered Cordoba, the King of Seville double-crossed al-Ma'mun, shutting the city's gates as soon as the forces from Seville were safely inside and refusing entry into the city of the army from Toledo. A furious al-Ma'mun will take another six years to force Seville out of Cordoba and take the city for Toledo.

The wealth obtained from al-Ma'mun's programme of expansion, made its way back to Toledo and was used to attract scholars, poets, and musicians to the city. Al-Ma'mun used some of the funds to construct a sprawling country villa for himself outside the walls of Toledo, complete with very impressive and very large gardens which boasted ponds,

fountains and pavilions. Scientists were invited to study the properties of plants in the King's gardens and texts written by pharmacologists while studying at the villa formed the basis for texts found in libraries across Europe right up until the 16th century. Al-Ma'mun also held legendary parties at his villa, including all-night wine and poetry-reading evenings, and celebrations where guests from courts across al-Andalus were given handfuls of gold coins as party favours.

Anyway, while the King of Toledo is having a blast at his garden villa, things are not going so well in the Christian north. The good news was that by the time al-Ma'mun took Valencia in the year 1065, King Fernando I of Leon and Castile had pushed Christian territory down into what today is Portugal and had subjugated the large and powerful taifas of Badajoz, Toledo, and Zaragoza. If you think of the Iberian peninsula as a square with the top one third of the square being territory controlled by the Christian north, well the middle third of the peninsula was pretty much covered by the taifas of Badajoz, Toledo, and Zaragoza, so in effect, King Fernando now had two-thirds of the peninsula under his control. The bad news was King Fernando didn't have long to live. Having called off his invasion of Valencia because he felt unwell, he made it back to Leon, but then died of his illness on the 27th of December in the year 1065. He was around fifty years old at the time of his death.

How will the death of the mighty King Fernando affect the politics of the Iberian peninsula? Well, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until next year to find out. Summer has landed in Australia, and I'm taking my annual summer break. Episodes will recommence in February of 2022.

If you are after something to listen to during the break, well, you can pop over to Patreon, where I have just started a new series on everyone's favourite topic, the Hussites. You can access the episodes for \$1 per month, and by signing up, you also gain access to the extensive back catalogue, meaning you can listen to episodes on topics ranging from Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War to the Jewish experience of medieval Europe. It will be like all your Christmases have come at once, and as a bonus you will be supporting me and my work, so thanks so much to everyone who has already signed up. It's much appreciated.

Talking of Christmas, all that's left for me to do is to wish all of you who celebrate a very merry Christmas, and I wish all of you happiness and good health for the new year. Stay safe, everyone, and I'll see you all in 2022. Until then, bye for now.

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