

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 59  
Alfonso of Aragon, Zaragoza

Hello again. Last time we saw Queen Urraca swing back and forth between victory and defeat. Her lowest point came in August of the year 1121, when a Church Council convened by the Papal Legate and the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela decided that the Kingdom of Leon and Castile was to be placed under an interdict, due to the actions of Queen Urraca who had recently placed the Archbishop under arrest in an attempt to limit his power. However, this indication of Rome's disapproval of Queen Urraca's rule wasn't actually Rome's disapproval at all, but an overreach by the Legate and the Archbishop. Once Pope Callixtus was made aware of the decision he reversed it, leaving Urraca free to carry on her duties as Queen and leaving the Papal Legate and Archbishop Gelmirez of Santiago de Compostela in the naughty corner for having exceeded their authority. The person who emerged from this episode least tainted by the events was Archbishop Bernard of Toledo, who used his increased influence to elevate the fortunes of the ruler of Toledo, young Alfonso Raimundez. When we left the last episode, Queen Urraca had acceded to a request by Toledo for the armies of Leon and Castile to launch a campaign to the north-east of the city. The successful outcome resulted in the acquisition by Toledo of three strategically important fortresses guarding the road traditionally used by Cordoba to move goods and people into the Taifa of Zaragoza. The conquest also acted as a handy shield against any incursions by Alfonso of Aragon from his newly acquired territory in Zaragoza into Toledo.

Talking of Alfonso of Aragon, it's high time we caught up with him, so let's see what he's been doing. We last left Alfonso of Aragon in Episode 56, following the surrender of the city of Zaragoza to him in December of 1118. You might recall that Alfonso had indicated that following his victory he intended to push the Christian forces all the way to the Mediterranean coast before heading southwards and taking Valencia. Once Valencia had been added to his list of conquests, Alfonso then expressed a desire to take his army to the Holy Land, where he would conquer Jerusalem.

Now, it became clear pretty quickly that Alfonso's ambitions to keep conquering territory all the way to the Mediterranean coast were going to have to be placed on hold for a while. His focus in the months, and in fact years, immediately following his defeat of the city of Zaragoza was to consolidate his gains around the city so that when the Almoravids came to take it back, which they inevitably would, Alfonso of Aragon would be in a position to successfully defend his claim to it. To this end, he marched a force to Tudela, which surrendered to him in February of 1119. He then attacked a number of nearby towns, all located in the Ebro River Valley, until by summer of the year 1119 most of the upper and middle reaches of the Ebro River valley were in his hands. This basically meant that the territory inside the Taifa of Zaragoza which lay closest to the Christian north, near the borders with Navarre, were now under his control.

At the same time, Alfonso of Aragon also directed his forces to conquer land further to the west inside the Taifa, near the borders of Castile. Once this was done, Alfonso's focus turned to possibly his most important target, conquering the route along the Jalon River valley. The Jalon was a tributary of the River Ebro, and it flowed from a region near the territory of Toledo where a bunch of fortresses, including Sigüenza and Medinaceli are located, all the way to the city of Zaragoza. It was the route traditionally travelled by armies

from Seville, Granada, and Cordoba, who wished to travel to the city of Zaragoza, and it was the route most likely to be taken by the Almoravids if they sent a force to reclaim the city of Zaragoza. You might recall from the last episode that the region around the fortresses of Sigüenza and Medinaceli was also of interest to Toledo. Anyway, by spring of the year 1120 Alfonso of Aragon had already advanced a considerable distance down the Jalon River valley and was in the process of besieging the town of Calatayud, which was located around halfway between the city of Zaragoza and the start of the river near Sigüenza.

While the siege of Calatayud was taking place, Alfonso had diverted some of his forces along a tributary branching off from the river Jalon, which swung to the south and headed towards the town of Daroca. Unknown to Alfonso, an Almoravid army under the command of one of the brothers of the leader of the Almoravids, the current governor of Seville, a man called Ibrahim Ibn Yusuf, was also heading towards Daroca from the opposite direction. The Almoravid army had been joined by reinforcements from Valencia, Murcia and Lerida, and was slowly making its way northwards, intent on reclaiming Zaragoza for the Almoravids.

Now I should probably emphasize at this point that, while Alfonso of Aragon has conquered the city of Zaragoza, he hasn't managed to secure the entire Taifa of Zaragoza. The Taifa of Zaragoza, or more accurately the former Taifa of Zaragoza, covers a substantial chunk of the Iberian peninsula. To its north it borders Catalonia, Aragon and Navarre. Sloping down to the west it borders Castile. Then, if we keep moving in an anti-clockwise direction, it shares its southern borders with Toledo and Valencia. Ideally, Alfonso of Aragon would have liked to have secured all the territory across the region of Zaragoza before the arrival of the Almoravid forces, but he hasn't managed to do this. He has forced the area between the city of Zaragoza and the borders of Navarre into submission, and he has just commenced work on subduing the region between the city of Zaragoza and the southern area of Zaragoza towards Toledo, but that's it. As a consequence, when the Almoravid army marched up through Valencia into the former Taifa of Zaragoza and made its way towards Daroca, it was essentially travelling through friendly Muslim territory, a part of the region of Zaragoza which had not yet been forced under the thumb of the new Christian ruler.

The fate of the entire former Taifa of Zaragoza was at this moment balanced on a knife's edge. The defeat of Alfonso's forces by the Almoravids would likely result in the Muslims quickly rolling back all of Alfonso of Aragon's recent territorial gains, including the city of Zaragoza, re-securing the territory for the Muslims. However, a victory by Alfonso of Aragon would make it easier for the Christian King to continue his efforts to establish Christian rule across the entire region of Zaragoza. So to put it another way, this upcoming clash between the Almoravid forces and the armies of Alfonso of Aragon was going to be important, really important.

Alfonso of Aragon was aware of this, and he did his best to muster as many men as he could. While some of the fighters from France who had assisted with his initial conquest of the city of Zaragoza had returned to their homelands, other French fighters had travelled to the Iberian peninsula to replace them. In addition, it seems that some anti-Almoravid Muslim fighters, including Alfonso of Aragon's ally in recent times Abd al-Malik, had also joined their armies to those fighting under Alfonso of Aragon. In the early summer of the year 1120 Alfonso of Aragon marched his forces southwards from Daroca and headed towards the approaching Almoravid forces, taking them by surprise near the little village of Cutanda.

Now, unfortunately, we know very little about this battle. We do know that it's likely that the armies mustered under Alfonso of Aragon enjoyed a slight numerical advantage over the Almoravid forces. Muslim chronicles described the Almoravids as numbering around 5,000 horsemen and 10,000 foot soldiers, while the armies of Alfonso of Aragon contained 15,000 cavalymen and too many foot soldiers to count. Modern historians however believe that the Almoravids likely had a few thousand horsemen and maybe 5,000 foot soldiers, with the opposing force under Alfonso of Aragon being slightly, but not overwhelmingly, larger.

Now, I stated that the forces fighting under Alfonso of Aragon took the Almoravids by surprise. We don't know this for sure, it's just an assumption due to the almost complete wipe-out of the Muslims which occurred during the battle. Despite enjoying only a small numeric advantage, Alfonso of Aragon completely destroyed the Almoravids in a victory which was so one-sided that Bernard Riley states in his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain" that a saying did the rounds after the battle, a saying to the effect that if you were really unlucky you could be said to be suffering, and I quote "a fate like Cutanda" end quote. Cutanda, in effect, became the benchmark for a complete and utter military disaster.

With the few men left standing in the Almoravid army withdrawing back to the south, Alfonso of Aragon was left to slowly conquer the Taifa of Zaragoza unchecked, which he did. Following the Battle of Cutanda, he bought Daroca and Calatayud under his control, and by the year 1124 he had conquered much of the region right up to the border between the regions of Zaragoza and Toledo, a fact which was raising red flags inside the city of Toledo.

As we saw in the last episode, the ruler of Toledo, Alfonso Raimundez, and his adviser, Archbishop Bernard of Toledo, managed to persuade Queen Urraca to mobilise the armies of the Kingdom of Leon down into Toledo to secure a number of key strategic strongholds in those borderlands, which were designed to block Alfonso of Aragon should he decide to push too far southwards into the region of Toledo. Of course, it also meant that the traditional route used by Muslim armies marching from the coast up into Zaragoza was now blocked, as the fortresses guarding the route were in Christian hands, a move which was of benefit to Alfonso of Aragon as well as to the ruler of Toledo.

From the year 1124 onwards, Alfonso of Aragon's focus was on securing the former Taifa of Zaragoza and setting it up for long term Christian rule. This meant firstly conquering all the main fortresses across the region of Zaragoza and garrisoning them with his own Christian forces. By the year 1124 Alfonso had pretty much achieved this goal. The cities of Zaragoza, Tudela and Tarazona were under his control, as were the fortresses of Calatayud, Daroca and Monreal del Campo.

The second part of securing Zaragoza for long term Christian rule was going to be trickier. Most of the people inside the former Taifa were Muslim. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley estimates that around three quarters of the newly conquered population were Muslim, with the remaining one quarter comprising Jewish people and Mozarab Christians. The realm over which Alfonso of Aragon now ruled was vast. It covered around 40,000 square kilometres and contained around half a million subjects. Put simply, if the Muslim population of Zaragoza rebelled, Alfonso of Aragon would have struggled to maintain control, so he needed to ensure that they didn't rebel.

His two options were the carrot or the stick approach. The stick approach would be to subjugate the Muslims brutally with overwhelming force so that all resistance would be futile. However, Alfonso rejected this approach and instead adopted the carrot method. Basically, all Muslims within the lands conquered by Alfonso of Aragon were now required to pay a 10% annual tax. The payment of this tax would ensure royal protection. This protection meant that Muslims could pretty much go about their lives in the same unhindered manner which they had enjoyed under Muslim rule. They were allowed to maintain their property, they were free to travel and work, and they were guaranteed freedom of worship. Any Muslims who wished to do so could gather their possessions and move to other areas of the Iberian peninsula which were still under Muslim control. Muslim chronicles from the period assert that around 50,000 of the wealthier Muslims living in Zaragoza did exactly that. They sold up and shifted to Almoravid controlled territory.

The Muslims who remained behind were allowed to retain their weapons and weren't subject to compulsory military service. Most Muslims who served in administrative positions before the Christian invasion were permitted to remain in those roles, and an undertaking was made that no Muslims would be harmed or punished in reprisal for any future attacks by the Almoravids. All in all it was, as stated by Bernard Riley, and I quote "a generous settlement for a conquered population" end quote.

And it worked. By the year 1125 Alfonso of Aragon felt secure enough to tick the "Conquer Zaragoza" box on his to-do list. He also felt secure enough to move to the next item on his list, that item being "Securing the Taifa of Valencia". Join me next time as Alfonso of Aragon embarks on an ambitious campaign to conquer more of the Iberian peninsula. Until next time, bye for now.

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