

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 61  
King Alfonso VII

Hello again. Last time we saw King Alfonso of Aragon attempt to secure the southern portion of the Iberian peninsula. His attempt to take Granada from the Muslims was ultimately unsuccessful, but it did result in large numbers of Mozarab Christians relocating to the former Taifa of Zaragoza.

Alfonso of Aragon's campaign into southern Spain ended in spring of the year 1126 and he arrived back in Aragon in June of that year. Once in Aragon, he would have been scrambling to catch up with events, as some major political shifts had recently taken place in the Christian north, triggered by the death of Queen Urraca a few months earlier, in March of 1126.

As we all know, there had really never been a dull moment during the reign of Queen Urraca. If she wasn't feuding with her sister Queen Theresa of Portugal, or knocking heads with key figures in her territories such as Archbishop Gelmirez of Santiago de Compostela, she was busy trying to secure her hold over Galicia and expand its territory into Portugal, while also supporting her son Alfonso Raimundez of Toledo. The truce in place between herself and her estranged husband Alfonso of Aragon, had prevented her from taking territory from Alfonso of Aragon, although Urraca did wield some influence in Castile due to her relationship with a nobleman from Castile, Pedro Gonzalez de Lara, with whom she bore two children.

You might recall that, at times, Pedro Gonzalez had boasted that one of his children with Queen Urraca, and not her eldest son Alfonso Raimundez, would inherit the throne of Leon and Castile, so let's take a closer look at him. Pedro Gonzalez was born into an old Castilian noble family, which held land around the town of Lara in Castile. He served at the court of King Alfonso VI when he was a young man, and may have travelled to the Holy Land with Raymond of Toulouse during the First Crusade. His big break came when he became the lover of King Alfonso's daughter Urraca, and he managed to grow the fortunes and power of both himself and his brother Count Rodrigo Gonzalez de Lara until, at the height of his power, he was arguably the most powerful person in the Kingdom of Leon and Castile who wasn't a monarch, styling himself as the "Count of all Castile" and boasting that the son he had born with Queen Urraca would one day rule as king. So when Queen Urraca died in the year 1126 Count Pedro and his brother scrambled to oppose the rise to the throne of Alfonso Raimundez.

Now, clearly Alfonso Raimundez had a pretty solid claim to the throne, which could only be countered if there was huge support amongst the nobility of Leon and Castile and the armies they could muster for an alternate monarch, that monarch being the illegitimate Castilian-based son of Urraca and Count Pedro, who was named Fernando Perez de Lara, and who was the handy age of 19 at the time of his mother's death. It was always going to be a bit of a long shot to place Fernando Perez on the throne, but the two Castilian Counts gave it their best shot, gathering supporters from across Castile and occupying a tower inside the city of Leon.

It was all to no avail though. Alfonso Raimundez was crowned as King Alfonso VII in March of the year 1126. Unsurprisingly, one of King Alfonso's first acts as monarch was to

force the Counts of Castile to come down from their tower in Leon and submit to him as their monarch. They did so, albeit reluctantly, then made their way back to Castile to review their options. Interestingly, Count Pedro Gonzalez de Lara and Count Rodrigo Gonzalez de Lara would probably be disappointed to learn that their family's traditional seat of power, the town of Lara, is now tiny. It still exists in the region of Castile in Spain, but according to Wikipedia, at the current point in time it only boasts a total of 26 residents.

Anyway, back in the year 1126 the new king, King Alfonso VII, was also reviewing his options. The truce between Urraca and Alfonso of Aragon had died with Urraca, and with Alfonso of Aragon currently occupied in the south of the peninsula it seemed like an excellent time for the new King to take the opportunity to consolidate his hold over the entire Kingdom of Leon and Castile. At this point in time, the exact extent of King Alfonso VII's realm was unclear. His power-base had been predominantly in Toledo. He had been crowned as the King of Galicia back in the year 1111, and with his mother's passing his claim over her territory in Galicia was pretty solid. However, Alfonso of Aragon likely considered himself the King of Leon and Castile, and Alfonso of Aragon's support base in Castile may well have been enough to uphold his claim to that region. So, basically the new young King needed to consolidate his hold over as much of the northern section of the peninsula as possible, and he needed to do this before Alfonso of Aragon returned from his campaign against the Almoravids.

Young King Alfonso first travelled to the town of Zamora, which was in the Kingdom of Leon but close to the regions of Galicia and Portugal. The leading noblemen from Galicia, along with Archbishop Gelmirez of Santiago de Compostela, travelled to Zamora and pledged allegiance to the new King, ensuring that Galicia was now under his control. From Zamora the new King rode into Portugal and met with his aunt, Queen Teresa, formulating a truce between the Kingdom of Leon and Castile and the Kingdom of Portugal. With everything packaged up nicely in the west, King Alfonso VII then focused on his next priority, defeating Alfonso of Aragon's claims to parts of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile.

As we've mentioned, Alfonso of Aragon's strongest claims lay in the Kingdom of Castile, where he enjoyed support amongst some influential noble families. With Alfonso of Aragon now heading back northwards, young King Alfonso VII was mindful that to beat Alfonso of Aragon on the battlefield he was going to need as much assistance as possible. Despite his recent failure to secure Granada, Alfonso of Aragon still had a formidable and entirely justified reputation as a highly successful military commander, with years of experience behind him and a string of victories to prove it. Alfonso of Aragon also had the ability to summon a large army to his side, although many of those men were exhausted from their recent exploits and needed a decent break before commencing another extended campaign. Alfonso of Aragon also had a new bunch of Mozarab fighters he could likely call upon, plus a bunch of trusted allies over the Pyrenees mountain range in France.

That left young King Alfonso VII scratching around, looking for desperately needed allies of his own, and the region he settled upon as the source of an alliance was the only Christian region in the Iberian peninsula not inside the Alfonso of Aragon circle, that region being Catalonia. King Alfonso VII immediately sent an embassy southwards to Barcelona to see whether he could forge an alliance with Count Ramon Berenguer III. In the meanwhile, while Alfonso of Aragon and his army were still recovering from their expedition to Granada, King Alfonso VII led his forces into Castile, conducting raids into lands belonging to allies of Alfonso of Aragon. Some of these raids were successful, and by April of the year 1127 young King Alfonso had scored a couple of significant wins in the region. He had managed to secure the key town of Burgos and even more importantly, one of Alfonso

of Aragon's key supporters and allies, a man called Count Bertrand de Risnel who was also Alfonso of Aragon's cousin, had been persuaded to flip sides and declare for King Alfonso VII, a move which saw a significant chunk of Castile switch to the King Alfonso VII side of the board. This was something which Alfonso of Aragon couldn't ignore. He mustered his forces, and in summer of the year 1127 he led his army into eastern Castile and prepared to face the new King in battle.

The two armies met near Burgos, but before any fighting commenced, a truce was negotiated by two Castilian noblemen on behalf of the two monarchs. The exact terms of the truce aren't known, but it seems to have involved Alfonso of Aragon agreeing to surrender a number of towns and strongholds which had formed part of the lands King Alfonso VII was to inherit from his grandfather, King Alfonso VI, and for Alfonso of Aragon to cease describing himself as the King of Leon and Castile. This left Alfonso of Aragon with the sole title of the "King of Aragon", although he still laid claim to some land in the north-east of Castile and some neighbouring Basque regions, so not all of the territory which had formed part of the realm of King Alfonso VI was surrendered by Alfonso of Aragon. Still, enough of Castile was now under the new king's control that he felt he had secured his hold on power. So the two Kings laid down their swords and King Alfonso of Aragon made his way back to Zaragoza, intent on using his army to secure the borders of the former Taifa. Around the same time, King Alfonso VII cemented his alliance with Catalonia by marrying Berengaria, the daughter of the Count of Barcelona.

Despite the fact that he now had a solid ally in his corner in the form of his new father-in-law the Count of Barcelona, young King Alfonso's hold on power was by no means assured. He faced three problems at this point in time. Alfonso of Aragon lay at the core of his first two problems.

The first problem was Castile. While most of Castile was technically under his control, patches of it were still loyal to Alfonso of Aragon, and to make matters worse the Counts of Lara, his mother's former lover and his brother, were now working with Alfonso of Aragon to undermine the new King's hold over Castile with a view to elevating their own influence in the region and keeping alive their fading dream of placing Fernando Perez of Lara on the throne.

The second issue involved Alfonso of Aragon's territorial conquests in the centre of the peninsula. While he likely had assured the young King that he was only protecting his newly acquired territory against reconquest by the Muslims, Alfonso of Aragon was actively campaigning in the border region between Zaragoza and Toledo. He approached so close to the strategically important fortress of Medinaceli during the year 1128 that its garrison appealed to the young King for assistance. King Alfonso VII then led a small force of fighters to Medinaceli, which eventually resulted in Alfonso of Aragon backing off. King Alfonso VII then reinforced the garrison at Medinaceli, before moving his men back to Castile to quench spot-fires of rebellion in that region.

The third main problem faced by young King Alfonso VII arose in the west. He had formulated a truce between himself and his aunt, Queen Theresa of Portugal, but in the year 1128 Teresa's son, Alfonso Enrique, decided it was time to overthrow his mother and joined the other Alfonso's on the throne. Queen Teresa, unsurprisingly, had no wish to abdicate and hand the throne to her son, so Alfonso Enrique raised an army and faced his mother and her lover, Count Fernando Perez of Galicia (not to be confused with Fernando Perez of Lara, who is Queen Urraca's illegitimate son) in battle. Queen Theresa was ultimately defeated by her son, and Theresa and her lover were forced out of Portugal into

Galicia, where she remained in exile until her death two years later. Alfonso Enrique then assumed leadership of the Kingdom of Portugal, styling himself as the “Count of Portugal” not, at this stage at least, as the “King of Portugal”, due probably to the fact that his mother was still alive and because of the questionable status of Portugal as a kingdom.

So, was Alfonso Enrique, the new young ruler of Portugal, going to bend the knee to his cousin Alfonso Raimundez, the new young ruler of Leon and Castile? Apparently not. Young King Alfonso VII was currently busy campaigning in Castile and in the borderlands between Toledo and Zaragoza, but the new Count of Portugal let it be known that he didn't consider Portugal to be part of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile. Instead, he intended to continue on where his mother left off, protecting Portugal's right to maintain its own identity and its own rule without submitting to neighbouring Leon.

So it's safe to say that at the commencement of his reign young King Alfonso VII had quite a lot on his plate. Join me next time as he attempts to forge his own path forward. Until next time, bye for now.

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