

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 73
Christian Conquests

Hello again. Last time we saw the Kingdom of Portugal take Lisbon from the Muslims following a lengthy siege which took us four episodes to cover. Now, as we mentioned back in Episode 69, King Alfonso I of Portugal wasn't the only Christian monarch in the Iberian peninsula keen on leveraging the military campaigns around the Second Crusade to his advantage. While Portugal was busy besieging Lisbon, King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile had his sights set on Almeria, a port on the south-eastern coast of Al-Andalus.

Like Lisbon, Almeria was one of the key ports for the Muslims of the peninsula. It was handily located opposite the coast of northern Africa and was a major centre of trade between Al-Andalus and the African continent. In addition to being a focus for legitimate trade, it was also a hub of illegitimate trade, with the port holding a notorious reputation as a safe haven for pirates. The pirates operating out of Almeria, had disrupted maritime trade for the wealthy merchants operating around the Mediterranean, and the city of Genoa in particular found its activities adversely affected by the pirates. Consequently, when King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile began putting feelers out seeking outside assistance for an attack on Almeria, the Genoese were only too happy to help, for a price.

The Genoese had actually attacked Almeria earlier in the year 1146, but after having been paid off by the pirates they had withdrawn. They were now regretting having done so, and in mid-1146 negotiations began between King Alfonso (who incidentally was currently besieging Cordoba) and Genoa, whereby King Alfonso would pay Genoa in return for their assistance in an assault on Almeria. The treaty was concluded and signed, whereby Genoa would supply a fleet of ships, troops, and siege equipment, which was to be ready by May 1147. For his part, King Alfonso would pay 10,000 gold dinars to Genoa within a month and then another 10,000 at Easter. Should the attack on Almeria prove successful, the port would be handed over to King Alfonso, but the Genoese would retain one third of a share in the booty scored from the town, and would also enjoy trading privileges and an exemption from merchant tolls across all the territories controlled by Leon and Castile.

Interestingly, this two-way deal between Genoa and Leon and Castile ended up morphing into a three-way deal which included Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Aragon and Barcelona, apparently at the instigation of Genoa. The signing of the original treaty by Genoa was made conditional upon an additional treaty being signed with Ramon Berenguer, under which Barcelona would join in the attack on Almeria. Then, once Almeria had been defeated, the Genoese would sail their ships and troops further up the Mediterranean coast to Tortosa, where they would assist Ramon Berenguer to take it from the Muslims. This was a deal which suited everyone. It increased the likelihood of success in the campaign against Almeria, and it defrayed the enormous cost to the Genoese of sending so many ships and men to Almeria by enabling them to secure extra booty on the way home at Tortosa.

So how many Genoese ships are we talking about here? Well, in summary, quite a lot. The fleet which set sail from Italy and which arrived in Almeria in July of 1147 contained 63 galleys and 163 other ships, giving the total of an astonishing 226 vessels, all of them fully crewed and containing foot soldiers. The Count of Barcelona, Ramon Berenguer,

contributed one ship and 53 knights, while King Alfonso arrived without any ships at all, but with 400 knights and 1000 foot soldiers.

Now, one of the reasons why the Genoese were able to supply so many men was that, in addition to monetary rewards, Pope Eugenius I had also made it clear that the campaign against Almeria and Tortosa would attract spiritual rewards. As crusading zeal exploded across Europe in the lead-up to the Second Crusade, Rome extended crusading privileges to campaigns by “the King of the Spains”, by which he meant King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile, against “the Saracens”, meaning the Muslims of the Iberian peninsula.

In his book “Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain”, Joseph O’Callaghan reports that the extension of crusading privileges to campaigns against the Muslims in the Iberian peninsula was granted after the presentation of a royal petition. Joseph O’Callaghan contends that this means that King Alfonso personally lobbied the Pope to extend the Crusade to campaigns in the Iberian peninsula, a move which would increase the likelihood of Genoa’s involvement.

Also joining in on the attack on Almeria were another couple of King Alfonso’s vassals, King Garcia Ramirez IV of Navarre, and Count William of Montpellier.

Now Almeria at this point in time was a sizable town, with a population of around 28,000 people, and with very impressive walls, which according to Bernard Reilly in his book “The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain”, covered 79 hectares. However, as the massive fleet from Genoa sailed up to the town to begin its blockade, all the ships currently moored in the harbour of Almeria took sail and departed, leaving the town to its own devices. With Almoravid rule having recently collapsed and with the Almohads not having conquered this part of the peninsula, it was clear to the townsfolk that no one would be coming to their assistance. A representative from Almeria approached the Genoese commander of the fleet soon after the siege of the town began on the 1st of August 1147 and offered to pay 100,000 maravedis if the Genoese and the forces allied with King Alfonso all withdrew. The offer was rejected and the siege began. The siege ended when the town surrendered on the 17th of October, a week before the fall of Lisbon. Almeria was then garrisoned by men loyal to King Alfonso.

With Almeria now under Christian rule, the field of operation shifted further up the coast to Tortosa. Now, Tortosa had long been on the wish-list of Muslim towns which the Count of Barcelona wished to conquer, and if you look at its location on a map it’s not difficult to see why. Tortosa lies not far from the coast on the River Ebro, kind of at the entrance to the delta of the river before it empties into the Mediterranean. The city of Zaragoza, which is currently part of Aragon and under Barcelona’s control, lies up-river on the Ebro, so conquering Tortosa was the first step in securing the River Ebro for the Christians, a move which would see unrestricted trade and communications access for Barcelona from Zaragoza to the coast.

The campaign took some time to organise, so the siege itself didn’t commence until the summer of 1148. Along with the Genoese and the Aragonese and Catalan fighters serving under Count Ramon Berenguer IV, also at the siege were some members of the Christian military orders, the Templars and the Hospitallers, as well as French fighters under the command of William of Montpellier and Bertrand of Toulouse. Bernard Reilly reports that some veterans from the Siege of Lisbon, who were sailing through the Mediterranean on their way to the Second Crusade, also joined in the siege of Tortosa, which officially commenced in July of 1148.

The siege was lifted six months later when the town surrendered on condition that its Muslim residents be allowed to keep their lives and to their property along with freedom to practise their religion without restraint. These conditions were accepted and the town came under Christian control in December of 1148. A Catalan governor was appointed to govern the town, and future profits from the town were divided up as follows: The Genoese were to receive one third of its earnings; and the Templars were allocated a portion; the final third was a portion to the royal treasury of Aragon and Barcelona, with a third of that portion returning to the town to cover the costs of its administration.

As pointed out by Bernard Reilly though, the town would only begin to realise its full potential and maximise its profits for its conquerors if the entire length of the River Ebro and surrounding territories was under Christian control, meaning that trade could flow freely all the way from Aragon to the coast. With this in mind, the Templars, along with the Viscount of Bearn and the Count of Urgell, joined with Count Ramon Berenguer in a concerted campaign to conquer key Muslim towns along the river. By June of 1149 the towns of Lerida, Fraga and Mequinenza were all under attack. As had been the case with Almeria and Tortosa, the Muslims from these towns knew that they could expect no outside assistance. The Almohads were still struggling to assert their control over the Muslim population of the peninsula and their reach hadn't yet extended to the Ebro River Valley. With no-one coming to their rescue, and with the towns unable to withstand indefinite sieges, all three towns surrendered on the 24th of October in the year 1149, on terms similar to those negotiated at Tortosa. The towns were split amongst the victors, with Bernard Reilly reporting that one third of Lerida was allocated to the Count of Urgell, with two thirds going to Ramon Berenguer IV. Ramon Berenguer then allocated one fifth of his share to the Knights Templar, while also taking for himself the title of the "Marquis of Lerida and Tortosa".

The fall of the three towns to the Christians meant that not only was the entire length of the Ebro River now under Christian control, the entire region of the former Taifa of Zaragoza, which had stretched from the city of Zaragoza to the Mediterranean coast, was now in Christian hands.

Now, I think we should take a minute to zoom out a little and look at the main players in the Iberian peninsula as at the end of the year 1149, and see what they have and what they want. As we've just stated, the Christians have now secured Lisbon, which has been annexed to the Kingdom of Portugal; the entire former Taifa of Zaragoza; and the port of Almeria on the southern coast. Of these three conquests, the acquisition of Lisbon and of the regions around the Ebro River valley look the most secure. Both these regions are adjacent to Christian territory and are far away from the spreading influence of the Almohads. Almeria though is a different story. It's located securely inside Muslim territory, and since none of the Christian kingdoms currently possess a sizeable fleet of ships, I think we should flag Almeria as being a possible challenge to hold on to in the future.

As at the end of the year 1149 though, neither King Alfonso VII nor Count Raymond Berenguer seemed to share this view. The Second Crusade had recently collapsed in the Holy Land with the failed siege of Damascus, and both kings were confident that the men from France, Germany and England who had made the lengthy trek to the Middle East on behalf of the Christian Church would only be too happy to embark on a new crusade much closer to home, on the Iberian peninsula. Both kings were so certain that the entire peninsula would shortly be theirs that at the beginning of the year 1151 they signed a treaty in which they split Al-Andalus amongst the two of them, with Count Ramon

Berenguer taking Valencia and Murcia, which he would hold as King Alfonso's vassal, while the rest of Al-Andalus was to go to King Alfonso VII, who viewed himself as the future king of the entire peninsula. In a somewhat cheeky move, the two men also split the Kingdom of Navarre between them. So in summary, you would have to say that at this point in time King Alfonso VII and Count Ramon Berenguer IV were wildly optimistic about the immediate future of Christian rule on the peninsula.

Standing in the way of the ambitions of the Christians, though, were the Almohads and the current Muslim residents of Al-Andalus. The Almohad advance had recently slowed to a crawl. As at the end of the year 1149, the Almohads had only managed to conquer the south-western portion of Al-Andalus, including the key cities of Cordoba, Seville, and Badajoz.

The Almohads are intending to conquer all of Al-Andalus. Basically in the same way as they are securing all of the Almoravid territory in northern Africa they also want to secure all of the Almoravid territory on the Iberian peninsula. However, they are struggling to do so. They have been spread pretty thin by their conquests in northern Africa, and the current focus of the Almohads is to secure their rule over northern Africa, so in the Almohad view their conquest of Al-Andalus will happen but it might take a while. They are currently in the process of securing the former Almoravid fleet of ships and are working to establish a naval base and shipyards at the port of Sale in Morocco, which is on the Atlantic coastline to the north of modern day Casablanca. Once they have a fleet of ships under their control and ready to deploy, they will use it to support the expansion of their territory in Al-Andalus.

Interestingly, the Almohads view the main roadblock to their dominance of Al-Andalus as not the Christians but the local Muslims. A number of local warlords who worked to overthrow the Almoravids are still in power and they have no wish to stand aside and submit to Almohad rule. Most of these warlords have no expansionist aims, but they do wish to push back against both Christian and Almohad encroachment and keep a hold of their territory.

The most notable of the current stock of local warlords is the current ruler of Murcia and Valencia, a man called Muhammad Ibn Mardanish. Muhammad Ibn Mardanish was an ex-Almoravid military commander who actually has Christian ancestry, being descended from someone from Navarre. He is currently having an absolute blast, ruling like a king, minting his own coins, setting up his own trade networks, and building infrastructure in his cities. Christian chroniclers from the 12th century referred to him as "The Wolf King". Since that is a very good name, I think I shall also call him the Wolf King. He is described by Brian Catlos in his book "Kingdoms of Faith" as, and I quote, "a larger than life figure, famed as a gallant and imposing warrior, a copious drinker, and legendary, tireless lover" end quote.

So, all of the players are lined up across the Iberian peninsula, all of them hopeful for the future, and all with conflicting goals. Join me next time as all the players begin to make their moves. Until next time, bye for now.

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