

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 74
Christian Progress Slows

Hello again. Last time, we saw the Christians take the port city of Almeria in southern Al-Andalus, as well as the entire Ebro River valley region, including the town of Tortosa.

There is now a three-way tussle for power taking place on the Iberian peninsula. The Christians, in the form of King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile and Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Aragon and Barcelona, are pretty confident that they can leverage the recent Crusading movement in Europe to conquer all of Al-Andalus. They are so confident of this fact that they have already divvied up Al-Andalus between them, with Ramon Berenguer taking Murcia and Valencia, which he will annex to the Kingdom of Aragon, the County of Barcelona and the former Taifa of Zaragoza, all of which are now under his control. He will hold Murcia and Valencia as vassal for King Alfonso VII, who will take the rest of Al-Andalus, becoming in effect the King of all Spain. Standing in the way of these ambitions are the Almohads, who are off to an admittedly slow start in their ambition to conquer all of Al-Andalus. They are currently focusing on securing their territory in northern Africa, and on building a naval fleet which they intend to use to expand their conquests on the Iberian peninsula. Many local residents of Al-Andalus, however, don't want to be ruled by either the Almohads or the Christians. They want to maintain their own rule, and some independent Muslim warlords have set themselves in place and are getting ready to defend their territory against both the Christians and the Almohads, so there's a three-way conquest for power brewing in Al-Andalus. To achieve their goals, each party has to defeat, or at least successfully defend itself against, the other two. So, in order to take Al-Andalus, the Christians have to defeat the Almohads and the local Christian warlords. Likewise, the Almohads, who want Al-Andalus for themselves, have to force both the Christians and the local warlords out of the region; while the warlords need to effectively defend themselves against incursions from both the Christians and the Almohads in order to remain in power.

Now, the person in this mix who is likely the most worried about his immediate future is the current ruler of Murcia and Valencia, the independent Muslim warlord Muhammed Ibn Mardanish, whom the Christians have named the "Wolf King". Now, if you take a look at a map of the Iberian peninsula, you can see why he might be nervous. The former Taifas of Valencia and Murcia, which the Wolf King currently holds, cover a sizeable chunk of the Iberian peninsula, a chunk which is coastal, fertile, and highly desirable. The Wolf King's large and lush domains are surrounded on all sides by his enemies. To the north, Valencia borders the former Taifa of Zaragoza, which is now under the control of the Count of Barcelona. To the west his lands border Toledo, which of course is under the control of another christian, King Alfonso VII. His southern borders connect with Muslim territory, which is firmly in the sights of the Almohads.

Now, the Wolf King was a sensible man and a very savvy ruler. He knew that there was no realistic way in which he could defend Valencia and Murcia against both the Christians and the Almohads, so he was going to need to compromise somehow. Fortunately for the Wolf King, he was, as we mentioned at the end of the last episode, a charismatic, larger-than-life figure. He likely had some sort of Christian heritage, and he was fluent in the early form of Spanish currently being spoken by the Christian rulers. So he reached

out to Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona and Aragon, to see if they could come to some sort of arrangement.

Fortunately for the Wolf King, the Christian rulers were absolutely open to forming an alliance with him. With the departure of the Genoese fighting fleet and the Crusaders back to their respective homelands, the Christians were in no position, at the moment, to make another play for the coastal towns of Al-Andalus, so the vast regions of Valencia and Murcia weren't currently on the Christian hit-list. King Alfonso VII, in fact, was much more interested in utilising the Almohad's current focus on their lands in northern Africa to take some Almohad territory to the south of Toledo, and an alliance with the Wolf King would leave the Christian rulers free to focus on attacking the Almohads. A deal was quickly struck between the Wolf King and Barcelona/Aragon that in return for the payment of the eye-watering sum of 100,000 gold dinars every year the Christians would not invade Valencia or Murcia. Instead, the Christians would supply men and military aid to the Wolf King if his region was attacked by the Almohads.

Deciding that forming alliances with the Christians was his best way forward, the Wolf King then reached out to Pisa and Genoa. In January of the year 1149 he secured an agreement from Pisa that it would not attack any of the ports within the Wolf King's realm. In return, the Wolf King allowed Pisa to establish trading centres in both Valencia and Denia. Six months later he struck a similar deal with Genoa. Astonishingly, both these arrangements will operate successfully for the next ten years. The Wolf King's alliance with the Christian rulers of the Iberian Peninsula will prove equally as enduring. The Wolf King will eventually come to be viewed as a vassal of both Count Ramon Berenguer IV and King Alfonso VII, and will even end up supplying troops to the Christian kings in their future conflicts with the Almohads.

Talking of King Alfonso VII, it's a good thing that conflict with the Wolf King is now off the table, as that leaves King Alfonso free to rally his resources for an attack on the Almohads. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley notes that it's likely that the substantial campaign against Almeria in the year 1147 had depleted both King Alfonso's resources and the appetite of his subjects for further military campaigns, so he wasn't in a position to go on the offensive against the Almohads until the year 1150.

In the intervening period, between 1147 and 1150, King Alfonso met with his vassals from across the Christian north to assess their capacity for an attack on Almohad territory to the south of Toledo. It's likely that as a result of these meetings King Alfonso realised that he needed more men, because towards the end of the year 1150 the Bishop of Lisbon, Bishop Gilbert, whom you might remember from Episode 72 had been an English crusader prior to his elevation as the new Bishop of Lisbon, was dispatched back to England with orders to raise a Crusading fleet and army which would be sent to Al-Andalus to assist King Alfonso VII.

While he was waiting for Bishop Gilbert's recruitment mission to yield results, King Alfonso, along with forces from the Kingdom of Navarre and men under the Count of Urgell, decided to besiege Cordoba. Unfortunately for King Alfonso though, the Almohads were able to send a sizeable force to the relief of Cordoba, forcing King Alfonso to lift the siege and withdraw eastwards, where he appears to have besieged the town of Jaen, the strategically important gateway which guarded the mountain route to Grenada. Once again though, Almohad fighters forced the Christians to lift the siege. Eventually, King Alfonso returned to Toledo without having achieved anything much at all.

He wasn't deterred though. Optimistic that a sizeable Crusading fleet would soon be coming to his aid from England, he made plans to return to Almohad territory in the summer of 1151. His plan was to once again lay siege to the town of Jaen, while over to the west King Alfonso I of Portugal would raid into Muslim territory from the Kingdom of Portugal, hopefully splitting the Almohad forces in two. Eagerly anticipating a successful campaign, King Alfonso VII did besiege Jaen for two months in July and August of 1151, and the King of Portugal did launch his invasion, but unfortunately things didn't go quite to plan. King Alfonso I of Portugal managed to besiege a Muslim stronghold to the south of Lisbon, but not only did he fail to take the town, the Almohads didn't bother sending any reinforcements to the garrison's assistance. Instead, they sent all their available manpower to Jaen, forcing King Alfonso to lift the siege.

King Alfonso was then planning to hang around the southern coast of Al-Andalus to await the arrival of the fleet of Crusaders from England which he was intending to use for an assault on Seville. However, unbeknownst to King Alfonso, Bishop Gilbert's recruiting efforts in England have come to nothing, so there was actually no Crusading fleet setting sail. By October of the year 1151 King Alfonso was forced to concede that it looked like no one was coming to his party, so he packed up and returned to Toledo.

The next year, King Alfonso VII decided to curb his ambitions and instead attack just a tiny place, the little settlement of Guadix, which was located high on a plain in the northern foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Despite being small, Guadix was strategically important as, like Jaen, it was on one of the key travelling routes, which led over the mountains down to Almeria on the southern coast. Incidentally, although Guadix was only small, it had been an important settlement since Roman times, and there are indications that it may even have been occupied as far back as the Bronze Age. Anyway, King Alfonso decided that, after his lack of success the two previous seasons, he would get things rolling in the right direction again with an easy victory over Guadix. He mobilised his forces and besieged Guadix during July and August.

It's difficult to tell what happened next. All we know for certain is that Guadix didn't surrender to the Christians and that King Alfonso was back in Toledo by September. In his book "The Contest of Christian and Muslim Spain", Bernard Riley speculates that Guadix did actually surrender during 1152, but not to King Alfonso. The King of Guadix fled to Morocco sometime in the year 1152, and there is evidence that on his way home from Guadix, King Alfonso detoured through Murcia, where he laid waste to a number of settlements. Bernard Riley joined the dots on these two pieces of information to suggest that maybe the Wolf King used his well honed diplomatic and military skills to undermine King Alfonso somehow and seize Guadix for himself, providing a handy blocking point between himself and the Almohads. But we don't know for sure.

At this point in time, King Alfonso VII seems to have reached the understandable conclusion that he was going to need some extra men, in the form of some outside assistance, in order to progress his objectives against the Almohads, so he put his military campaigns on hold and instead embarked on a diplomatic offensive. With the Bishop of Lisbon's recent failure to drum up crusaders from England, King Alfonso scratched England off his list and instead decided to focus on two separate sources of manpower: France, and the Papacy.

King Alfonso's overtures towards France began with a massive diplomatic victory, which must have led King Alfonso to believe that the armies of France would soon be at his

disposal. He opened up negotiations with King Louis VII of France, to see whether King Louis would be interested in marrying King Alfonso's daughter Constance.

King Louis of France was currently in a spot of bother and was desperate for a re-brand, having recently lost both the Second Crusade and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Those of you who have listened to the episodes on the Second Crusade from the History of the Crusades podcast will recall that the young, very religious, monk-like King Louis decided to embark on the Second Crusade with his beautiful, headstrong, young wife Eleanor of Aquitaine. To say things didn't go well for King Louis in the Holy Land is an understatement, with both the military campaign and his marriage face-planting in a spectacular fashion. King Louis subsequently managed to have his marriage to Eleanor annulled, leaving them both free to remarry. Eleanor wasted no time whatsoever and promptly married the dashing Henry Plantagenet, who is currently the Duke of Normandy and the Count of Anjou, but will be crowned as the King of England in two years' time, in the year 1154.

Meanwhile, as Eleanor disappears into the sunset with her poster-boy new husband, King Louis is looking mournfully around Europe with a puppy-dog face, searching for a wife who will produce the son and heir he desperately craves. King Alfonso took the opportunity to throw his daughter's hat into the ring, and King Louis accepted, with the marriage taking place in the year 1154. Unfortunately for King Alfonso though, King Louis's appetite to embark on military ventures on behalf of the Christian Church is virtually nil. After his embarrassing ventures in the Holy Land, conducting crusade-like campaigns is something which doesn't interest him in the slightest, so unfortunately for King Alfonso all he will receive in return for his daughter becoming the Queen of France is an elevation in his prestige amongst the European aristocracy and a promise by King Louis to undertake a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

More productive was King Alfonso's overtures to Rome. A Church Council was held in Castile early in the year 1155. The Council was attended by the Papal Legate Cardinal Hyacinth, who will abandon his flowery name a few decades into the future when he becomes Pope Celestine III. Anyway, it seems that Cardinal Hyacinth was more than happy to lend his support to King Alfonso's campaigns against the Almohads, granting Crusading benefits to all those who joined King Alfonso in his attacks on the Muslims. Cardinal Hyacinth even suggested that he himself might lead a campaign against the Muslims. This didn't end up happening, but the crusading momentum from the meeting of the Church Council generated enough interest for King Alfonso to mount a campaign against the Almohads in the summer of the year 1155. This campaign was moderately successful, with King Alfonso managing to capture a number of strongholds in Al-Andalus, including the strategically important Muslim fortress of Anduja.

Despite these modest gains, it's clear that King Alfonso's mission to secure Al-Andalus isn't going as well as he had hoped. Join me next time as King Alfonso seeks assistance from an unlikely source for his next campaigning season. Until next time, bye for now.

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