

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 76
The Kingdom of Leon and the Kingdom of Castile

Hello again. Last time we saw the long reign of King Alfonso VII of Leon and Castile end when he died in August of 1157 on his way back from the battle for Almeria. In a spot of bad timing, King Alfonso's exit from the scene occurred at the same time as the Almohads had begun to reap the rewards from setting in place a new military system and a new system of governance on the Iberian peninsula. As we stated at the end of the last episode, in a shock move King Alfonso had decreed that his Kingdom be split in two after his death, with one of his sons ruling as the King of Leon and the other ruling as the King of Castile.

Now this, I probably don't need to tell, you will have a huge impact on the reconquest of Spain. For the last century or so, the driving force behind the move to conquer Al-Andalus and turn it into a Christian territory had been the King of Leon and Castile. From Ferdinand I to Alfonso VI, right up until the recently departed King Alfonso VII, the main goal which drove all of their policies and military campaigns was the expansion of the influence of Leon and Castile across the Christian parts of the peninsula, then down into Muslim Al-Andalus. Will splitting the mighty Kingdom of Leon and Castile into two parts negatively affect this long running goal? Yes, it absolutely will. In fact, spoiler alert, it will result in a resurgence of the Almohads and will place Christian Spain back on the defensive. As stated by Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", and I quote "the second half of the 12th century was one of the most critical times in the history of the reconquest" end quote. The reason for this setback and the reason why the second half of the 12th century will be so critical for the Christians, is pretty much the fact that the mighty Kingdom of Leon and Castile is no more, and is now functioning as two smaller kingdoms.

So the obvious question is: why did King Alfonso VII do it? Why did he decree that following his death his eldest son wouldn't inherit the entire Kingdom, but only half of it? Well, it's difficult to know for sure, but it's probably got something to do with the fact that being the King of Leon and Castile was actually a really challenging gig. The late King Alfonso VII was a solid administrator and a talented military commander, with the result that the Kingdom of Leon and Castile was now a really big place. It spanned over 250,000 square kilometres in fact, with its territory stretching all the way down past the city of Toledo in the centre of the peninsula. If you take into account the alliances which King Alfonso VII had forged, the fact that Navarre, Aragon, and Catalonia were vassals of Leon and Castile, and that the Wolf King who ruled Valencia and Murcia had also pledged allegiance to Leon and Castile, the Kingdom of Leon and Castile dominated around three quarters of the peninsula. And of course there were solid plans in place to extend this influence further, for the Kingdom of Leon and Castile to in fact conquer the rest of the peninsula and assert Christian rule over the entirety of Iberia, with the King of Leon and Castile effectively becoming the King of all Spain.

This, King Alfonso VII, would have been aware, would be a huge task for just one person to achieve. King Alfonso VII would have known this better than anyone. He was only in his fifties when he died, and while the exact nature of the illness which killed him is unclear, it's likely that the poor man was exhausted. To expect one of his sons to take over the administration of the enormous Kingdom of Leon and Castile and drive its further

expansion into Al-Andalus likely led King Alfonso to the not unreasonable realisation that this was just too big a job for one man to take on.

Fortunately for King Alfonso, he had two adult sons, both of whom were competent and would make solid rulers. King Alfonso's reasoning was likely: why risk the future of the Kingdom of Leon and Castile at such a critical point in the Reconquista by overloading his eldest son with a task so huge and all-encompassing that it was likely to lead to burn out and bad decision making? Instead, why not split the Kingdom down the middle, meaning that his two sons could share the load and forge a path ahead together? It was a pretty reasonable decision made on a sound basis but unfortunately, had King Alfonso been able to look into a crystal ball and gaze into the future before making his decision, he would likely have changed his mind and kept his Kingdom in one piece. But King Alfonso didn't have the benefit of hindsight, and he did split his Kingdom between his two sons, so let's take a look at both of King Alfonso's sons and see which parts of the Kingdom they inherited.

King Alfonso's eldest son was born around the year 1133 and was around 24 years old at the time of his father's death. His name was Sancho. His other son, Fernando, was about three years younger than Sancho, so the two men were both in their twenties and in their prime when their father passed away. Strangely, King Alfonso had decreed that his eldest son, Sancho, should inherit the Kingdom of Castile, becoming King Sancho III of Castile. I called this decision strange because Castile had traditionally been seen as being the rocky, inhospitable, poorer sibling of its wealthier neighbour Leon. Leon, of course, also included the seat of power for the Kingdom of Leon and Castile, the city of Leon. But times had changed. Castile was now seen as the powerhouse of the Kingdom, due in no small part to the fact that Aragon and Catalonia were seen as being vassals to Castile itself, rather than to the combined Kingdom of Leon and Castile.

Also important was the fact that Sancho was intimately familiar with the Kingdom of Castile. He had been raised in the household of Guter Fernandez of Castro, one of the most powerful magnates in Castile, so he was aware of the internal politics of Castile and of the various noble families which competed for influence inside the territory. He also enjoyed close ties to Castile's neighbour, the Kingdom of Navarre, due to the fact that he had married Blanche of Navarre, daughter of King Garcia Ramirez of Navarre. Tragically though, Blanche had died in the year 1156, a year before King Alfonso and nine months after having given birth to her first and only child, a son who was named Alfonso. So upon his ascension to the throne of Castile, Sancho was a widower and father to a baby son.

Possibly in recognition of the fact that Sancho was the eldest son and therefore entitled to the best of the spoils, when King Alfonso drew the boundaries between the two new Kingdoms of Leon and Castile, Castile found itself containing much of the territory which had traditionally been thought to have belonged to Leon. Not only did the Kingdom of Castile include the city of Toledo and all of the southern portion of the former Taifa of Toledo, all the way down to the town of Calatrava, which was so far south that it was just to the north of the town of Jaen, it also extended westwards over the traditional boundaries of the Kingdom of Leon, encompassing the towns of Palencia and Avila.

So what was left to the new King of Leon? Well, 21 year old King Fernando II of Leon's realm included the traditional seats of power of Oviedo, and of course Leon, as well as the towns of Zamora and Salamanca, which lay directly to the south of the city of Leon. The Kingdom of Leon also included Galicia, so King Fernando also inherited the pilgrimage town of Santiago de Compostela and all the territory in Galicia down to its border with the

Kingdom of Portugal. This was a good fit for Fernando, who had been raised in the household of Fernando Perez of Galicia, the dominant nobleman in Galicia, who you will probably remember as being the former lover of Queen Theresa of Portugal. Careful not to limit young Fernando's contacts to just Galicia, it seems that, later in his childhood and into his life as a young adult, Fernando spent time with noble families from across Galicia and Leon.

So, as at the end of the year 1157, this was the current state of play. King Sancho III ruled the Kingdom of Castile from his seat of power, the city of Toledo. Bordering the Kingdom of Castile to its east were his vassals, the Kingdom of Navarre and the Kingdom of Aragon/Catalonia. To the south-east, his kingdom shared a border with the territories of Valencia and Murcia, both of which were currently ruled by the Wolf King. To its south and south-west, the Kingdom of Castile bordered the lands of Al-Andalus, which were currently ruled by the Almohads. The neighbouring Kingdom of Leon, which was ruled by King Fernando II, was smaller and shared most of its border on its western and southern sides with the Kingdom of Portugal, although it did share a small border with the Almohads to the south.

Now, before we turn our attention to the manner in which the two brothers began ruling their respective kingdoms, we will take a quick detour and zoom down to the Kingdom of Portugal, as it's been a while since we checked in on King Alfonso I. When we last left King Alfonso I of Portugal, back in Episode 72, he had just succeeded in taking the Muslim port of Lisbon with the assistance of fighters from the Second Crusade. Since that time, he has been kept busy consolidating his newly expanded Kingdom.

Interestingly, King Alfonso of Portugal has chosen a different path to that of the other Christian kings in the Iberian peninsula. While the Kingdom of Navarre and the Kingdom of Aragon/Catalonia have fallen into line behind Leon and Castile and had become vassals of King Alfonso VII, King Alfonso of Portugal, had declined to do this. Instead, taking a leaf out of the book of the former Kingdom of Aragon, King Alfonso of Portugal has found a protector outside the Iberian peninsula, in the form of the Papacy. That's right, in exchange for Rome recognising him as a valid King, at the end of the year 1143 King Alfonso I formally surrendered the Kingdom of Portugal to the Papacy, which then ceded the Kingdom back to him, for him to hold as vassal to the Pope.

To further emphasise the fact that King Alfonso's allegiances lay over the Pyrenees mountain range, in the year 1147 King Alfonso married Matilda, daughter of Count Amadeus III of Savoy. The County of Savoy had once been part of the Kingdom of Burgundy. It was now a neighbour of the Kingdom of France and was part of the Holy Roman Empire. Today, its territory is divided between France, Italy and Switzerland, just to give you an idea of its location. There is a bit of a question mark over why the daughter of the Count of Savoy was chosen to become the Queen of Portugal. Count Amadeus of Savoy joined the Second Crusade, where he likely made contacts with people of influence, and there are suggestions that the Papal Legate on the Iberian peninsula may have suggested the daughter of the Count of Savoy to King Alfonso of Portugal, as a suitable match which would come with the endorsement of Rome. The marriage strengthened Portugal's ties to wider Europe and served as a reminder to the other Christian kings of Spain that Portugal's allegiance was not to them, but rather that it was intent on forging its own path forward.

Right, so we are all up to date with Portugal, let's take a quick look at the Kingdom of Navarre. King Garcia Ramirez of Navarre died back in the year 1150, and was interred

inside the cathedral in Pamplona. He was succeeded by his eldest son, Sancho Garcia, who later became known as King Sancho the Wise. As you can guess by his name, King Sancho is a savvy and competent ruler, and to be honest he needs to be. Castile and Aragon both have their eyes on the tiny Kingdom of Navarre and would very much like to divide it up between them. It will basically be due to the deft political manoeuvring of King Sancho of Navarre that Navarre will remain intact as a kingdom.

Usefully for King Sancho of Navarre, while Castile is very much wanting to annex Navarre, Navarre's other powerful neighbour, Aragon/Catalonia, has other things on its mind. Count Ramon Berenguer IV seems happy at the moment with the territory he holds on the Iberian peninsula and doesn't seem to be angling to expand northwards into Navarre or across into Valencia. The treaty enacted between Count Ramon Berenguer and the Wolf King, whereby the Wolf King would pay Count Ramon Berenguer the staggering amount of 100,000 dinars annually in return for Barcelona not invading Valencia or Murcia means that Count Ramon Berenguer is more than happy to pocket the money, and instead concentrate on consolidating his hold over his impressively large chunk of territory, which covers Aragon, the County of Barcelona, and the entire former Taifa of Zaragoza. Like Portugal, Barcelona is keen to extend its influence over the Pyrenees, and Count Raymond Berenguer has taken full advantage of the death of Count Alfonso Jordan of Toulouse on the Second Crusade. By the time of the death of King Alfonso VII, Count Ramon Berenguer had managed to secure the vassalage of Beziers and Carcassonne, over the other side of the Pyrenees, and is fast becoming a major player in the political scene of southern France.

OK, so now we're all caught up to where everyone is at. So returning back to the new Kings of Leon and Castile, what is the first thing you do when you are young, full of dreams, ambition, and optimism, and have just inherited a kingdom along with your brother? Well, you meet with your brother and make plans for the future, that's what you do. In the year 1158 the two young kings met and pledged to support each other. Then they rubbed their hands together and divided the peninsula amongst themselves, perhaps, I'd like to think, while drinking a few ales. They decided to split Portugal between them and the western part of Al-Andalus would go to Leon, while Castile could have the rest. Woohoo!

Now all they needed to do was gather their armies and go a-conquering. Unfortunately, though, a couple of months later all their plans came crashing down in a giant heap. You'll have to tune in next time to find out why. Until next time, bye for now.

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