

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 77  
Setbacks All Around

Hello again. Last time we welcomed two new young kings to the narrative, King Sancho III of Castile and King Fernando II of Leon. With the powerful Kingdom of Leon and Castile having been split between the two sons of the late King Alfonso VII, we left the last episode with the two young kings meeting together to forge a path ahead for their kingdoms, with their optimistic goal being to basically conquer the entire Iberian peninsula and split it between them.

This meeting between the two brothers took place in the middle of the year 1158. Unfortunately their ambitious plans came crashing down in a heap when the King of Castile, and the eldest brother, Sancho III died unexpectedly a couple of months later, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August. Now King Sancho III did have a son and heir, who was usefully named Alfonso, and normally this would be a good thing. But to be honest, it kind of wasn't. Had Sancho died without an heir, his Kingdom of Castile would likely have reverted to his brother, King Fernando of Leon, meaning that the two kingdoms would have been united once again. But this didn't happen because the heir to the Kingdom of Castile was not 21 year old Fernando of Leon, but 2 year old baby Alfonso.

Poor baby Alfonso found himself immediately dragged into a tug of war between the two most powerful noble families in Castile, the Laras and the Castros. Unfortunately for baby Alfonso his mother had died a few years before his father, so he was an orphan, he was a baby, he was totally clueless, and completely at the mercy of the power struggle going on between the two families, because really, whomever won baby Alfonso and gained the right to raise baby Alfonso within their household pretty much controlled the Kingdom of Castile, so the stakes were high.

Now you might ask, why didn't King Fernando of Leon muscle in, take baby Alfonso into his care, and annex the Kingdom of Castile to the Kingdom of Leon? Well, he sort of tried to do exactly that, but it didn't work. The late King Alfonso VII had raised his two sons with a plan to split his Kingdom between them seemingly in mind, so Sancho had been raised in Castile, learning the politics and intrigues of that part of the Kingdom, while Fernando had been raised in Galicia with his education centred around the internal politics of the Kingdom of Leon and not to what was happening over the border in Castile. As a consequence, it is probable that King Fernando had little idea of how to play the Laras and Castros off against each other to his advantage, or of how to dominate and subdue both families and take Alfonso into his care. As a result, initially at least, Fernando just sat back and watched to see what would happen in Castile.

What happened in Castile was a predictable power struggle between the Laras and the Castros, with baby Alfonso in the middle. When it seemed pretty certain that the Laras were going to prevail in this struggle, the Castros sent word to King Fernando requesting his intervention. King Fernando did end up marching into Castile, and he went so far as to install a garrison at Toledo, but he wasn't able to gain custody of his nephew, baby Alfonso. The closest he would come to influencing Alfonso was becoming his tutor a few years down the track, but that was it. For the next decade or so, until Alfonso gains his majority and can rule by himself, the powerful Kingdom of Castile will be ruled by the Lara family, in particular two brothers, Manrique of Lara and Nuno of Lara, who will clash

repeatedly with both King Fernando of Leon and various members of the Castro family and will prevail over both of these foes, managing to restrict King Fernando's influence in Castile and managing to force the Castro family out of Castile altogether.

The good news for the Christians of the peninsula and their wider battle against the Almohads was the two powerful and experienced Christian monarchs still shared borders with Almohad territory and were prepared to take the fight to the Almohads: King Alfonso I of Portugal and Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Aragon and Barcelona. The bad news was that Count Ramon Berenguer IV died aged in his late forties in the year 1164. The good news was that Count Ramon Berenguer IV had a son and heir, but the bad news was that his son and heir was only 7 years old when his father died, so now we have yet another child in a position of power in the peninsula.

The late Count Ramon Berenguer's son was also named Ramon Berenguer, so 7 year old Ramon Berenguer decided to change his name to make things less confusing. This sounds like a great idea until you find out what he changed his name to. Yes, you guessed it, he changed his name to Alfonso, probably as a nod to King Alfonso of Aragon and as a bid to assure his new subjects in the Kingdom of Aragon that he was Aragonese as well as Catalan in his orientation. So now we have two children, both named Alfonso, in charge of kingdoms in Christian Spain.

Now you would think that all of this would be great news for the Almohads, who would take full advantage of the tiny Alfonso's and go on the offensive in the Iberian peninsula. But this didn't happen. Instead, the Almohads briefly found themselves on the back foot. In the absence of the late King Alfonso VII the fight against the Almohads was taken up by the King of Portugal, by Muhammad ibn Mardanish, also known as the Wolf King, and by a man called Sancho Jimenez, who was the captain of the militia of the town of Avila in the Kingdom of Castile.

Sancho Jimenez seemed to be especially keen to clash swords with the Muslims. According to D. W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", he led an astonishing total of 26 campaigns against the Almohads, including a very successful one in the year 1158 in which he defeated the Almohad governor of Seville. Not to be outdone, the Wolf King also went on the warpath against the Almohads. Anti-Almohad sentiment was rising across the southern part of the Iberian peninsula and the Wolf King took full advantage of this, annexing Jaen, Ubeda and Baeza to his realm of Valencia and Murcia. He then went on to besiege Cordoba and Seville.

The obvious question we need to ask is "what were the Almohads doing while these offensives against them were taking place"?

When we last took a close look at the Almohads back in Episode 75, the Caliph of the Almohads, Abd al-Mu'min, had reformed the military and administrative structure of the Almohads and had placed his sons in positions of power across Al-Andalus. Then we saw that in the year 1157 the Almohads went on the offensive, successfully besieging and recapturing Almeria. So what has happened? Why aren't the Almohads pushing back against the current round of Christian advances and attacks by the Wolf King?

Well, because Abd al-Mu'min has once again been distracted by events in northern Africa, that's why. His current focus was not on events in Al-Andalus but on matters which concerned him in Tunisia. Norman fighters from Sicily had recently raided into Tunisia and

had established Norman garrisons in a number of key coastal towns, including the city of Tunis.

In October of the year 1158 Abd al-Mu'min left Marrakesh and hit the road, heading for Tunisia. He arrived outside the city of Tunis nine months later, in July of 1159. As we saw back in Episode 75 the core of the Almohad army travelled with the Caliph wherever he went, so the departure of Abd al-Mu'min for Tunisia meant that no troops were available to be dispatched to Al-Andalus to go to the aid of towns being attacked by Sancho Jimenez and the Wolf King. The city of Tunis surrendered to Abd al-Mu'min shortly after his arrival, so he hit the road again and set his sights on his main concern, the highly fortified city of Al-Mahdiya, which was currently under the control of the Normans. Abd al-Mu'min besieged Al-Mahdiya, and after a six month long campaign the Normans surrendered in January of 1160. Abd al-Mu'min cleared out the few remaining Norman strongholds and, having achieved his objective of clearing the foreign invaders out of Tunisia, he and his army slowly and laboriously made their way back home to Marrakesh.

The Almohads of Al-Andalus probably weren't all that happy to receive a flowery letter from Abd al-Mu'min setting out in glorious detail his victorious campaigns in Tunisia. What they were likely very pleased about, though, was an indication from Abd al-Mu'min that the next focus of his attention, and the attention of his 10,000 experienced and well-seasoned troops, would be the Almohad conquest of Al-Andalus.

This was very welcome news, as in the absence of troops the Almohad rulers of Al-Andalus had been forced to improvise and use subterfuge and other such measures against their foes. A Muslim chronicler wrote of the events surrounding the siege of Cordoba by the Wolf King, stating of the Wolf King that, and I quote, "raving and unhinged by wine, he believed that in the absence of the commander of the faithful, Abd al-Mu'min, he would conquer the Almohads in Al-Andalus" end quote.

Despite the fact that the Wolf King was apparently raving and unhinged by wine, the Almohad rulers were clearly worried that the Wolf King might in fact succeed in conquering Al-Andalus. While the Wolf King was besieging Cordoba, the Almohad ruler of the city was seriously concerned that Cordoba would fall to the Wolf King. The ruler of Cordoba desperately needed the Wolf King to raise the siege and move elsewhere, but with the Almohad forces busy in northern Africa he was going to have to work out a non-military way of achieving this. Unlike Cordoba, the Almohad-ruled city of Seville was very well defended and could easily withstand a siege, so the rulers of Cordoba and Seville came up with a cunning plan to tempt the Wolf King to lift the siege of Cordoba and transfer his army to Seville. They arranged for a man to be disguised as an oil seller from Seville. The fake oil seller was provided with a fake letter from a nobleman inside Seville. The fake letter was addressed to the Wolf King and advised him that, should his army make its way to Seville, well the nobleman would arrange for the city's gates to be opened to the Wolf King and his army. The ruse worked. The Wolf King was tricked by the fake letter into believing that the riches of Seville lay open to him, so he raised the siege of Cordoba and made his way to Seville, only to find the city's gates barred against him and with no sign whatsoever of the friendly nobleman who had promised to let him into the city.

The Wolf King settled in to besiege Seville and the Muslim chronicler reports that the Almohads of Seville became concerned that there might actually be noblemen inside Seville who were in fact not averse to being ruled by the Wolf King, and who might actually secretly let him into the city, just like the fictional nobleman in the fake letter. Just to make sure life didn't imitate art, and the events didn't end up following the narrative set out in the

fake letter, the Almohads rounded up any Muslim noblemen inside Seville who might be thinking of flipping over to the Wolf King, and executed them.

The Wolf King didn't end up taking Seville or Cordoba, but it was clear that the Almohads could use a visit from the Calif Abd al-Mu'min and the Almohad army. Early in the year 1160, on his journey from Tunisia back to Marrakesh, Abd al-Mu'min wrote to his son Uthman, the ruler of Granada, ordering him to travel to Gibraltar with a couple of the peninsula's most renowned architects to commence the construction of a new palace and fortifications at the Rock of Gibraltar. Abd al-Mu'min had decided that when he moved his army to the Iberian peninsula it would be handy if he could base himself at Gibraltar. Gibraltar was just over the strait from northern Africa, meaning that he could travel back and forth between Al-Andalus and Morocco as required. Just as Abd al-Mu'min arrived back in Marrakesh, with "plan a major campaign in Al-Andalus" on top of his to-do list, craftsmen, builders and stonemasons from across Al-Andalus swarmed on Gibraltar, eager to start work on a palace worthy of housing the leader of the Almohads.

Join me next time as Abd al-Mu'min makes his much anticipated journey to Gibraltar in November of the year 1160. Until next time, bye for now.

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