

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 84
A Bunch Of Deaths

Hello again. Last time we took a look at the new kids on the block in Christian Spain, the two young Alfonso's: King Alfonso VIII of Castile and King Alfonso II of Aragon. The two young kings seemed to hit it off, and by the end of the last episode had combined in a couple of successful military campaigns and had forged an alliance. Also by the end of the last episode, the Christians of the Iberian peninsula had resumed their offensive against the Almohads. The elderly King Alfonso I of Portugal had conducted a number of successful raids, venturing as far south as Seville. King Fernando II of Leon had pushed southwards into Al-Andalus, and young King Alfonso VIII of Castile had managed to capture some strongholds around Cordoba and in Valencia.

This forced the Almohad Caliph Yusuf into action. He recalled the Almohad army from Tunisia, and in May of the year 1184 set sail for Seville, intent on pushing back against the pesky Christians. The Caliph arrived in Seville in June of the year 1184 and met with the Almohad military commanders, dismissing the most senior and experienced commander due to concerns about his health. You might remember that during his last venture into Christian Spain, the Caliph had settled on the city of Toledo as his target, a goal which he soon realised was much too ambitious. This time, his target was to be the city of Santarem in the Kingdom of Portugal. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy describes Santarem as being a sensible choice. Santarem was located, and still is for that matter, to the north of Lisbon, inland on the banks of the Tagus River. The Portuguese fighters who had recently menaced Seville had been based in Santarem, and unlike the city of Toledo, it seemed like an ambitious yet achievable target. Should the Caliph be able to secure Santarem, it would provide a handy foothold for further assaults on the Kingdom of Portugal and the Kingdom of Leon. It would also be a morale-booster for the Almohads. King Alfonso I had taken Santarem in the year 1147, after centuries of Muslim rule, and the Almohads were understandably keen to get it back. The Caliph's army left Seville and marched to Badajoz. From there it swung westwards, arriving at Santarem on the 27th of June.

Now Santarem enjoyed a number of defensive advantages. To take the city, the Caliph's army first had to cross the River Tagus. The river at this point is wide but contains some shallow sections, so the Caliph was able to ford the river with his army without too much drama. The city of Santarem consisted of a citadel high on top of a rocky hill, which was protected by walls. Some of the suburbs of the city had expanded beyond its walls, and the Caliph's first target was one of those suburbs. Initially, things seemed to go pretty well. The Caliph and his army set up camp on the northern bank of the river and took the suburb adjacent to the walls. King Alfonso I of Portugal, led the defence of Santarem from its citadel, and both sides settled in for a siege.

Now, things didn't go as well as the Caliph had hoped during the siege. A contingent of Almohad fighters who embarked on a foraging expedition were killed, and according to D.W. Lomax in his book "The Reconquest of Spain", one of the senior Almohad preachers defected to the Christians. Then word came in that King Fernando II of Leon was on his way to Santarem to relieve the city. As had happened at the siege of Huete back in 1172, news that the Christians were on their way sent the Caliph into a bit of a panic. Worried that the Almohad army would be stranded on the northern bank of the river, effectively

trapped between the river and the city walls, he gave the order to retreat back over to the other side of the river.

Now, incidentally, according to Joseph O'Callaghan in his book "A History of Medieval Spain", King Alfonso of Portugal wasn't entirely happy to hear that King Fernando was coming to his assistance. As we've seen already, the two men had quite a back-story, and the King of Portugal was still limping around from an injury he had sustained when the two kings had clashed in a previous battle. King Alfonso was apparently concerned that King Fernando might not be saving Santarem for Portugal, but might be claiming it for Leon.

Still, regardless of this, news that the armies from Leon were not far away caused the Caliph to lift the siege and withdraw back over the river. Well, sort of withdraw back over the river. The river crossing seems to have taken place in a rather panicked, chaotic way, and in the haste and confusion the Caliph, his tent, and a small contingent of his men were still on the northern bank of the river and hadn't yet managed to cross over by the time the relieving Christian army arrived. Now this, of course, was a bad situation for the Caliph to be in. The bulk of the Almohad forces were now on the other side of the river from Santarem and were able to set themselves up into a defensive position, but their commander, the Caliph, was stuck on the other side of the river. The arrival of the Christian army meant there was not enough time for the Caliph to be able to safely ford the river and join his army. To make things even worse, the Caliph's tent was bright red, to enable it to stand out in the Almohad camp, so the Caliph was now exposed, isolated, and attempting to take shelter inside a bright red target. It's not too hard to guess what happened next. The Christian archers took aim at the bright red tent, and one of their arrows hit home, seriously wounding the Caliph.

Now, the good news for the Caliph was that his men were able to somehow get him back over the river to join the rest of the Almohad army, and he was able to accompany them on their retreat towards Seville. The bad news was he didn't make it to Seville. He died from his wounds during the journey. Now, the Caliph was around 49 years old when he died, and his death was unexpected, so his chief advisers needed to act with discretion and caution to ensure a smooth succession. The Caliph's death was therefore kept a secret. For the rest of the journey to Seville his bright red tent was erected every night, as had been the case when he was alive, and servants came and went from his tent in a display of normality.

Once the army arrived back in Seville, a hasty meeting was called by the senior figures in the Caliph's court, and as a result of that meeting one of the Caliph's sons, who was currently aged in his mid twenties, a man called Abu Yusuf Yaqub, was chosen to become the new Caliph. It wasn't until Yaqub had met with the key people in his late father's administration and had obtained their oaths of allegiance that he announced his father's death.

The new Caliph, Caliph Yaqub, was nearly the polar opposite of his father. While the late Caliph was a thinker rather than a fighter, a scholar who had created an extensive library and a court which patronised leading academics and philosophers, his son Yaqub was interested in military, not scholarly, pursuits. He abandoned his father's practise of inviting scholars to his court, and as a result there are few contemporary accounts of his reign, with no one paid to observe and write about the Caliph's exploits for posterity. Once his hold on power was secure, the new Caliph packed up and ordered his army to accompany him back to Morocco so he could establish himself at the Almohad centre of power in Marrakesh.

Now, if the Christians of the Iberian peninsula were rubbing their hands together at their good fortune once they heard of the Caliph's demise, they shouldn't be too smug, as the same is about to happen to them. Around eighteen months after the Caliph's death, in December of the year 1185 the senior statesman of the Christian kings, King Alfonso I of Portugal died. The man who created the Kingdom of Portugal and who, according to the *Chronica Gothorum* and I quote "protected the whole of Portugal with his sword" end quote, left his kingdom in such a secure condition that it managed to defy the intentions of its neighbours and remains intact until today, which is pretty impressive. The late King's eldest surviving son Sancho, who was aged 31 when his father died, was crowned in Coimbra shortly after his father's death.

King Alfonso I's remains were entombed inside the Santa Cruz monastery, where they were revered as the bodily remains of the man who had pretty much founded the country which is now known as Portugal. In fact, the King's remains are so revered still today that when his tomb was set to be opened in the year 2006, so a scientific examination of his body could take place, there was widespread outrage and the plans were later abandoned due to, according to Wikipedia, and I quote "the importance of the King in the nation's heart and public thought" end quote. I'm sure King Alfonso I would be chuffed to know that he is still revered and still present in the minds and hearts of the Portuguese people, more than eight centuries after his death.

The next king to depart the scene was King Fernando II of Leon, who died three years later in January of 1188. Now the late King Alfonso I of Portugal was probably quite happy to hear that his former son-in-law, King Fernando of Leon, only outlived him by three years. One person who definitely wasn't pleased to see the early exit of the King of Leon, though, was his eldest son, a seventeen year old boy unhelpfully named Alfonso. Why? Well because young Alfonso is the son of the King of Leon's ex-wife and daughter of King Alfonso I of Portugal, Urraca. The reason why this is a problem is because of the ambitions of the late King's current widow.

Now, as we've pointed out previously, the King of Leon's marriage to the King of Portugal's daughter hit a rocky patch after King Alfonso was seriously injured following a battle between the two kings. The marriage ended up being annulled in the year 1175 on the basis that Fernando and Urraca were second cousins. The annulment was granted despite the fact that the royal couple had borne a son, Alfonso, who was four years old at the time of the dissolution of the marriage. A couple of years later, King Fernando married Teresa Fernandez de Traba, a move which cemented an alliance with the powerful Lara family, despite the fact that Teresa was arguably more closely related to Fernando than his first wife Urraca of Portugal had been. He was first cousin once removed to Teresa, and in the complex web of interrelations in the Christian kingdoms, Teresa was technically the niece of King Fernando's first wife, Urraca of Portugal. Anyway, poor Teresa gave birth to a son in the year 1178, who died, then died herself giving birth to her second son in 1180, with her baby also dying shortly after his birth, so once again King Fernando was in need of a wife. At that stage, the son from his first marriage, Alfonso, was his only surviving legitimate child.

Now we welcome to the narrative King Fernando's mistress, Urraca Lopez de Haro. Urraca had already borne King Fernando a total of three sons. Two had died in infancy, but one, Sancho Fernandez, was a couple of years old by the time Urraca convinced King Fernando to marry her in the year 1187. Urraca's firm view was that the marriage between herself and the King of Leon gave her son Sancho retrospective legitimacy. She also held

the view that King Fernando's eldest son, Alfonso, was illegitimate due to the fact that the marriage between his mother and King Fernando had subsequently been annulled.

Now, Urraca married King Fernando the year before his death, and it was pretty clear to everyone that King Fernando's health was failing and that he should work to ensure his succession was planned and secure. Under pressure from Urraca, King Fernando banished his eldest son Alfonso from the royal court, giving Urraca the impression that her infant son Sancho would be crowned as the King of Leon following King Fernando's death. But that didn't happen. No one really wanted the instability of being ruled by a two year old boy when a perfectly capable seventeen year old was waiting patiently in the wings, so following Fernando's death Alfonso, not Sancho, was crowned, becoming King Alfonso IX of Leon and Galicia.

This understandably made Urraca absolutely furious. She took her anger out on the corpse of King Fernando. King Fernando had been undertaking a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela when he died, and it was his express wish to be buried at the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. So Urraca ensured that he wasn't. She took possession of his remains, as was her right as his widow, and ordered them to be buried instead in the city of Leon. After he was crowned King Alfonso IX used his powers as King to transfer his father's remains to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in accordance with his wishes, and ordered a statue in the likeness of his father to be commissioned laying down on his tomb. You can still see it there today.

So with the bunch of departures which have occurred in this episode, the power balance between the Christian kings in the Iberian peninsula has once again been upended. The new kings better hit the ground running and sort out their differences because the new Caliph, Caliph Yaqub, is planning a new invasion of Christian Spain, and unlike the previous Caliph, Caliph Yaqub is a talented military commander. Join me next time as the Christian kings, most of whom are now named Alfonso, knock heads with one another and jockey for supremacy. Until next time, bye for now.

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