

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 86
Confrontations

Hello again. Last time we saw the launching of the Third Crusade. While Pope Clement III did extend the reach of the Crusade to cover campaigns by the Christian kings of Spain against the Almohads it didn't produce the results Rome was hoping for. Rather optimistically, Pope Clement had encouraged the Kings of Spain to pledge not to take up arms against each other, a move which would have led them to focus all their military efforts on defeating the Almohads rather than fighting amongst themselves. While this didn't happen, there was one major achievement arising from the launching of the Crusade, which occurred when a fleet of ships sailing for the Holy Land joined forces with King Sancho I of Portugal to capture the important Muslim town of Silves in 1189. When we left the last episode, Caliph Yaqub was working on plans to travel to Al-Andalus to retake Silves from the Christians.

Now, it will take the Caliph a while to gather all his troops and set sail for the Iberian peninsula. He won't actually leave Northern Africa until the beginning of the year 1190, so while he's busy making all of his preparations we will take the opportunity to examine the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the Christian kings. King Alfonso of Castile has been throwing his weight around and alarming the other kings with his ambitions and his aggression. While Portugal was busy working with the Crusaders to take Silves, Alfonso of Castile had allied himself with the Muslim King of Majorca to deal some additional blows to the Almohads. They had joined together on some raiding missions around Seville and Cordoba, then they switched their focus to the region of Murcia, capturing the Almohad fortress at Calasparra before returning to Toledo in September of 1189. In his book "The Reconquest of Spain", D. W. Lomax speculates that King Abdallah of Majorca may have spotted an opportunity to increase his influence over the coastal regions of Al-Andalus opposite his island kingdom by loosening Almohad control over the Wolf King's former territories, an enterprise which the King of Castile was more than happy to assist him with.

While all of this was taking place King Alfonso of Leon was making plans to attack, not the Muslims of the peninsula, but the land of his neighbour and effective overlord Alfonso of Castile. Five years earlier, taking advantage of the failing health of King Fernando of Leon, Alfonso of Castile had captured a bunch of castles in the borderlands between Leon and Castile, and Alfonso of Leon had decided that his priority was to get them back. Realising that he would need all of his manpower and resources if he were to be successful in taking on his powerful cousin the King of Castile, Alfonso of Leon arranged truces with his other neighbours, King Sancho of Portugal and Caliph Yaqub.

It was around this time that the Caliph landed in Al-Andalus. Arriving at Tarifa at the southernmost point of the peninsula on the Strait of Gibraltar, the Caliph sent word to the governors of Seville and Granada that they were to march their armies to Silves, where they would join with the Caliph's forces to retake the town. The Caliph arrived at Silves on the 6th of June in the year 1190 and began to besiege it. Silves, though, proved a difficult nut to crack. A month later, extra reinforcements had arrived in the form of a fleet of Almohad ships carrying siege engines and other military equipment, but it was all to no avail. The Caliph was unable to make a dent in the defences of the town, and eventually he lifted the siege and withdrew to Cordoba.

Now, it was the Portuguese who had taken Silves, and it appears that while at Cordoba the Caliph decided to make the Kingdom of Portugal the focus of his upcoming military campaign. As we've mentioned, the Caliph had already negotiated a peace treaty with Leon. While at Cordoba he concluded a similar treaty with Castile. This meant, in effect, that Portugal was now isolated. If the Caliph launched an attack against Portugal, its powerful Christian allies, Leon and Castile, would now be unable to come to its aid, so the Caliph did exactly that. Although before he left Cordoba to attack the Kingdom of Portugal he did something really interesting: he visited the ruins of the magnificent Umayyad Palace, Madinat al-Zahra, which had been destroyed by the Berbers over a century ago. Apparently, the Caliph was a bit of a history buff. He had visited an ancient and crumbling mosque during his campaign in Tunisia and had ordered repairs to commence on the structure. I'm guessing that the ruins of Madinat al-Zahra were too far gone to warrant a restoration attempt, but it is notable that the Caliph was interested enough in the history of the building to visit the site.

Anyway, sightseeing aside, the Caliph led his army westwards from Cordoba into the Kingdom of Portugal, destroying crops before slashing and burning his way northwards until he arrived at his destination, the small Portuguese settlement at Torres Novas, just to the north of the town of Santarem. The Portuguese governor of Torres Novas requested terms, and it was agreed that the governor and the garrison would be allowed to leave the fortress, which would then be destroyed. It's interesting that the Caliph seemingly had no intention of garrisoning Torres Novas and holding on to it to use as a base for a campaign against Santarem, which appeared to be his ultimate target. Instead, his strategy was to destroy it to prevent the Christians from using it. Having destroyed Torres Novas the Caliph then marched his army northwards to the Portuguese stronghold of Tomar, which he attempted to besiege.

Now, as we've just mentioned, the Caliph's likely strategy here was to destroy all the strongholds in the vicinity of Santarem before launching an attack on Santarem itself, but his plan hit a snag at Tomar. Tomar was being defended by knights from the Templars, and it was heavily fortified. The Muslims began a siege of Tomar, but they soon became troubled by supply issues. It was high summer. The supplies the army had brought from Cordoba had run out, and the Muslims were encountering all sorts of problems trying to find food and water in the parched and ravaged countryside around Tomar. Desperate to alleviate their thirst and hunger, the Muslims must have distributed contaminated food or water as just about the entire army, including the Caliph himself, was struck down with dysentery. The Caliph ordered the army to lift the siege and retreat to Seville.

He spent the rest of the year recovering and preparing in Seville, then launched a new campaign in April of 1191. The focus of this campaign was the small Portuguese town of Alcacer do Sal, which was on the coast just to the south of Lisbon. Now, it seems that the Caliph had learnt from the mistakes he had made during the previous campaign. He began his campaign in the spring, not in the height of summer, and his choice of a coastal town as a target meant that supplies for the besieging army could be brought in by sea if required. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy points out that the town of Alcacer do Sal wasn't of major strategic value, but that didn't mean that the Caliph wouldn't do everything he could to ensure a victory. While the Almohad army launched itself at Alcacer, a total of fourteen trebuchets were shipped over to assist in the assault on the town. It worked. The Caliph took Alcacer, but unlike his conquest of Torres Novas the previous year, it was clear that this time the Caliph intended not to destroy the town but to preserve it as an Almohad town with a Muslim garrison. The Caliph appointed a local Andalusi man to be the new commander of the garrison and promised the Muslim men

who remained in the town to defend it payment of a monthly allowance to compensate them for the danger of being stationed in such an exposed place.

Having secured this outpost, which would serve as a handy base for future attacks on Lisbon and Santarem, the Caliph then headed southwards to Silves, successfully attacking and dismantling two Portuguese castles on the way. Upon his arrival at Silves he besieged the town and ordered work to commence on filling in its moat, while trebuchets were set up which relentlessly pummelled its walls. When one section of the walls collapsed the Portuguese garrison realised they were in trouble. The Caliph allowed them a period of ten days in which to contact their king, Sancho I, for instructions. Then on the 20th of July they surrendered.

With Silves back in Muslim hands the Caliph had effectively reversed the gains made during his absence by the Christians. Likely concerned by the ease with which the Caliph could attack Portuguese cities from his new base at Alcacer, Portugal joined Leon and Castile in forging a peace treaty with the Almohads. Satisfied that the problem of the rampaging Christian kings had now been rectified, the Caliph packed up and returned to Morocco.

Now, almost as soon as he returned to Morocco, the Caliph fell seriously ill. His poor health, and unrest in Tunisia, will occupy him for the next four years. Incidentally, much of the unrest in Tunisia seems to have been fanned by King Abdallah of Majorca, who having worked with Alfonso of Castile to undermine Almohad power in Al-Andalus, now worked to do the same thing in the land-mass on the opposite side of his island kingdom in northern Africa.

Having concluded their peace treaties with the now absent Caliph, the Christian kings focused on fighting each other. Basically, in the year 1191, everyone ganged up against Castile, with the kings of Leon, Portugal and even Aragon promising to work together, and promising, further, not to negotiate any peace treaties between themselves and Castile.

This was all too much for the new pope, Pope Celestine III. Early in the year 1191, Pope Clement III had died and a new pope was elected. The man who was elected was a surprising choice, mostly due to his age. He was 85 when he accepted the position. As observed by John Julius Norwich in his book "The Popes", the Church was currently in crisis. A schism was looming and the aggression of German King Henry VI was threatening to destabilise everything, so the choice of a very old man to take the reins was a bit strange. Apparently this view was shared by Celestine himself, who was very reluctant to accept the position, although he did eventually do so.

Now, despite the fact that the new pope is very old and has a lot on his plate, events in Spain are of great interest to him because the new Pope Celestine III is actually the by now very elderly Cardinal Hyacinth, who had served extensively in the Spanish kingdoms as Papal Legate and knows the political situation and the personalities involved very well. Expressing his disappointment that the Christian rulers of Spain were at peace with the Muslims and at war with each other, he dispatched his nephew, Cardinal Gregory of Saint Angelo, to Spain with a brief to bang the heads of the Christian kings together and get them to stop fighting each other and instead, and I quote "expel the Muslims and drive them from the lands which the Christian people had cultivated for a long time before" end quote.

Basically, Pope Celestine wanted the Christian kings to rip up the peace treaties they had negotiated with the Caliph, forge peace between each other, then move forward together to reclaim the whole Iberian peninsula for the Church, in true Reconquista style. The Third Crusade had recently fizzled out in the Holy Land, so to Pope Celestine III, while the Christians may not have been able to deal a blow to the Muslims in Jerusalem, at least they could score one for the team in Spain. This, however, proved more easily said than done. Cardinal Gregory did his best to mend bridges between the Christian kings, but they took little notice of his efforts, and when he pointed out Rome's desire that they join together and take up arms against the Almohads, they pointed out that they had all signed binding truces with the Caliph which weren't due to expire until the year 1194.

So Pope Celestine tried a different approach. In the year 1193 he ordered the senior clerics and prelates of Spain to lobby their respective kings to terminate the truces they had forged with the Caliph, and to instead make peace amongst themselves. Pope Celestine, getting more desperate, then advised members of the military orders that they weren't bound by the truces signed by the kings of Spain with the Caliph, and he invited them to wage war on the Muslims of Al-Andalus. This doesn't appear to have worked either, with Joseph O'Callaghan pointing out in his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain" that there is no record of the response of the kings or the military orders to this directive.

By the year 1194 though, Pope Celestine must have felt like he was finally getting somewhere. With their truces with the Caliph about to expire, both Alfonso of Leon and Sancho of Portugal had agreed to begin preparations for a Crusade against the Muslims, while the kings of Castile, Leon and Aragon were convinced to sign a peace treaty amongst themselves. Finally, the truces with the Caliph expired, and in response Archbishop Martin of Toledo went on the offensive, attacking Almohad possessions in the Guadalquivir region. Back in Morocco, the Caliph sighed and began preparations for another military campaign in Al-Andalus.

Join me next time as the Christian and Muslim forces clash swords once again. Until next time, bye for now.

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