

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 87
Alarcos

Hello again. Last time we saw the new elderly pope, Pope Celestine III, attempt repeatedly and unsuccessfully to switch the focus of the Christian kings of Spain from fighting each other to fighting the Almohads. Finally, by the end of the last episode, in the year 1194, it looked like the Pope might have been on the verge of achieving his goal. With the truces the Christians had negotiated with the Caliph about to expire, the kings of Castile, Leon and Aragon shook hands and agreed to a peace deal. The stage was now set for the Christians and the Muslims to clash once again in Al-Andalus.

As soon as the truces between the Caliph and the Christian kings expired, the Christians went on the offensive, raiding deep into Muslim territory. The most successful of these raids was conducted by the Archbishop of Toledo. Meanwhile, Alfonso of Castile was busy constructing a new fortress at the southernmost point of his border. This impressive fortification was located at Alarcos, and the King of Castile intended to use the stronghold as a base from which to launch future invasions into Al-Andalus. This new phase of Christian aggression couldn't go unanswered by the Caliph, who rolled his eyes and ordered his army to begin preparations for another campaign on the Iberian peninsula. The Caliph landed at Tarifa with a large force in June of the year 1195. He proclaimed a holy war against the Christians, then marched to Seville and on to Cordoba.

Now, unlike his previous campaign, the focus of the Caliph's military response this time around was not Portugal but Castile. It's likely that the Caliph was irritated by recent raids into Al-Andalus from Castile, but his main concern lay in the construction of Alarcos. Should the work on Alarcos be finalised King Alfonso VIII of Castile would have a very handy stronghold at the southernmost point of his realm from which he could easily push into Almohad territory, so the Caliph's priority was to drive Alfonso of Castile away from Alarcos, thereby reducing the likelihood of future invasions into Al-Andalus from Castile. To assist him in his campaign against Castile the Caliph managed to obtain the services of Pedro Fernandez de Castro. Pedro Fernandez de Castro was a member of the powerful Castro family, and was actually related to both the King of Leon and the King of Castile. As he is about to place his exclusive inside knowledge about the internal defences of Castile in the hands of the Almohads, let's take a closer look at him.

At this point in time Pedro is aged in his mid 30's, and is one of the most powerful noblemen in Castile. Born into the Castro family, his mother was an illegitimate daughter of King Alfonso VII of Leon and his mistress Urraca Fernandez de Castro, which made him first cousin to both Alfonso of Leon and Alfonso of Castile. Pedro's mother was murdered by his father in the year 1180 after he wrongly accused her of being unfaithful. When Pedro's father died five years later Pedro inherited a vast amount of titles and property, including the lordship of Trujillo, which consisted of a bunch of castles and towns in a strategically important region in the south-western borderlands of the Kingdom of Castile, over towards the Kingdom of Portugal near the border with Al-Andalus. Pedro initially pledged his full support to King Alfonso of Castile, declaring himself to be vassal to Castile and sealing the deal by gifting Trujillo to King Alfonso. In a savvy move, the King of Castile re-gifted Trujillo, transferring it to a military order which had been established 20 years earlier, the Order of Santiago, so that the knights from the order could guard Trujillo and keep it safe from attack. But get this, the Grand Master of the Order of Santiago was

actually Pedro Fernandez de Castro himself. So, in effect, Pedro had handed Trujillo to King Alfonso of Castile, who had, by gifting it to the order of Santiago in effect, handed it straight back to him.

Anyway, for reasons which are unclear, Pedro had a falling out with his cousin King Alfonso of Castile in the year 1189, and ended up leaving the Kingdom of Castile and switching his allegiance to Leon, pledging his support to Alfonso of Leon. It seems that his dislike of Alfonso of Castile was greater than his loyalty to Alfonso of Leon, as Pedro repeatedly left the court of Leon to join with the Almohads to undermine the interests of Castile. So it's easy to see why, when the Caliph arrived in Al-Andalus intending to launch a major campaign against Castile, his first move was to gain the support of Pedro to assist with his campaign.

For Alfonso of Castile's part, as soon as he heard that the Caliph and his army had left Cordoba and were mobilising towards the southern boundaries of Castile, he raced southwards from Toledo, intending to establish himself at his new fortress at Alarcos, from which he would run his campaign against the Caliph. Now, while he was at Toledo, Alfonso of Castile had received pledges of support from both Alfonso of Leon and King Sancho of Navarre, who promised to send men to Toledo to join the Castilian forces. However, concerned that the Caliph may invade before the troops from Leon and Navarre arrived, Alfonso of Castile left Toledo without them, deciding to set himself up in Alarcos where he could attack the Caliph as soon as he entered Castilian territory.

The Caliph did enter Castilian territory in July of 1195, setting up camp on the plain of Salvatierra to the south of Alarcos near Calatrava. A contingent of knights from the castle at Calatrava engaged the Caliph's forces but were resoundingly beaten. The Caliph then gave the order to advance northwards to Alarcos.

Now, unfortunately, we don't have a huge amount of information about this battle. Caliph Yaqub's dislike of scholarly pursuits and his refusal to employ scribes to record his exploits means that we lack a lot of detail about his campaigns. Nevertheless, from what we can gather, the battle went something like this.

The Caliph divided his army into two groups. The first consisted of local Andalusian troops, the archers, and some northern African fighters, including the Caliph's own men. The second contingent was made up of the Berbers, other fighters from northern Africa, and the Arabs. Both sections of the army then advanced slowly towards Alarcos, with the second contingent following along quite some distance behind the first. Understandably, the first contingent was the first to arrive outside Alarcos. As the Almohads slowly organised themselves into battle formation, King Alfonso of Castile is said to have been disconcerted about the number of Almohad fighters. What he didn't realise, of course, was that this was just the first half of the Muslim army. Alfonso of Castile, pushed his misgivings to one side and ordered his knights, who numbered some thousands of men, to charge the Almohad forces on the open plains in front of the fortress at Alarcos. The order was carried out, and the cavalry charge by the Christians was initially quite successful, resulting in a high number of Muslim casualties.

Then the Caliph ordered his archers to surround the knights in a counter attack. At this stage, the fighters from the second half of the Caliph's army were just beginning to arrive on the scene and were readying themselves to join the battle. In his book "The Reconquest of Spain", D.W. Lomax describes what happened next, and I quote "Alfonso prepared to throw in his rear guard. Then he realised that only part of the Muslim army was actually

fighting, whilst those under the Caliph's orders were still waiting over on his right, though beginning to sound their drums and trumpets. The Christians were hopelessly outnumbered and, though Alfonso dashed into the fighting, he was dragged away by his men and forced to flee. He rode into Alarcos castle through one gate and out through another and went directly to Toledo with only twenty knights accompanying him. The others died on the field, or were captured, or took refuge in neighbouring castles” end quote.

The victory by the Caliph was overwhelming. Muslim sources describe Christian casualties as numbering around 30,000, compared to only 500 Muslim deaths. While this is likely an exaggeration, it was still a massive victory for the Almohads and a massive defeat for the Christians. The castle at Alarcos formally surrendered a few days after the battle, with Pedro Fernandez de Castro overseeing negotiations for the surrender of the fortress on behalf of the Caliph. Along with Alarcos, four other nearby Castilian fortresses were taken by the Almohads, including Calatrava, where the Caliph oversaw the conversion of the church in Calatrava to a mosque. The victorious army went on a few raiding missions towards Toledo, then returned to Seville on the 7th of August for a well deserved victory parade and round of celebrations.

Now this victory by the Caliph came as a massive shock to the Christians. Alfonso of Castile had been on a winning streak until this time, and the utter collapse of his forces and their almost complete annihilation by the Muslims must have sent him reeling, and must have dealt a huge blow to his confidence. But for wider Christendom, the Muslim victory may not have been so surprising. The Christians in the Holy Land had been on a losing streak since the Battle of Hattin in the year 1187, in which a Muslim army under the command of Saladin had pretty much wiped out the Christian forces of the Crusader States, prompting Rome to launch the Third Crusade. The Third Crusade itself was also a bit of a flop. While it did succeed in recapturing the cities of Acre and Jaffa, it failed to take Jerusalem from Saladin, which was its primary goal. The Third Crusade had ended in the year 1192, only three years before the Battle of Alarcos, so the Christian military failures in the Holy Land would have been fresh in the minds of many European Christians, although you would have to say that in recent times the Christian rulers in Spain were more accustomed to winning their battles against their Muslim counterparts than losing them. In fact Joseph O'Callaghan points out in his book “Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain” that the loss by the Spanish Christians at Alarcos was the worst they had suffered in a century or so.

That was the bad news for the Christians. The good news for the Christians was that their loss at Alarcos didn't have a huge strategic impact. While it definitely dealt a blow to Alfonso of Castile's ego and decimated the Castilian fighting force, his city of Toledo remained intact. From a strategic point of view, all the loss of Alarcos and surrounding strongholds meant was that the southernmost portion of Castilian territory shrank a little, and the ability of Alfonso of Castile to raid into Al-Andalus from his southern holdings was diminished.

So what was the wider reaction to the Battle of Alarcos? Well, the reaction across wider Europe was in the form of a sort of collective freak-out. By the time word of the defeat of the Christian army made its way over the Pyrenees, the truth had been dramatised and exaggerated. In his book “The Reconquest of Spain” D.W. Lomax reports that a group of English Cistercian monks heard about the defeat from reports circulating in France, and by the time they arrived in England they were convinced that an army of northern African Muslims numbering around 600,000 men was on the verge of invading and conquering

continental Europe. Similar rumours prompted Richard the Lionheart and King Philip of France to consider joining forces to confront the Almohads, but it soon became clear that the Caliph's military ambitions didn't extend much further than Toledo, so such plans were abandoned.

Closer to home, the reaction of the Christian kings of Spain was not to combine forces to attack the Muslims, but to combine with the Caliph to collectively kick Alfonso of Castile while he was down. Caliph Yaqub reached out to King Sancho of Navarre and dangled the prospect of Navarre being able to claim a number of strongholds in the borderlands between Castile and Navarre in front of the King, who took the bait and agreed to combine with the Muslims against his fellow Christian King. Now I should point out that this King of Navarre is a new kid on the block. Elderly King Sancho VI of Navarre, died in the year 1194 and was replaced by his eldest son, who was also called Sancho, who is now ruling as King Sancho VII of Navarre.

With King Sancho of Navarre on board, the Caliph dispatched Pedro Fernandez de Castro to Leon with a proposal that the Caliph would send a bunch of Muslim troops and some cash to Leon so that Alfonso of Leon could join in the attack against Alfonso of Castile. Alfonso of Leon accepted the Caliph's proposal, so the stage was all set. The Caliph proposed a three-pronged attack on the seriously depleted Kingdom of Castile. The Caliph and his army would head directly north from Seville, enter the southern portion of the Kingdom of Castile and attack Trujillo. At the same time, the Muslim fighters dispatched to Leon would mobilise out of Leon under the command of Alfonso of Leon, and work with the Leonese troops, crossing over the border into neighbouring Castile. With Castile being attacked from the south and from the west, the King of Navarre would then launch an attack on Castile's eastern borders, hoping to annex a bunch of Castilian strongholds for the Kingdom of Navarre.

Oh dear, how will Alfonso of Castile manage to fight on so many fronts and do so without an army? Well, you'll have to join me next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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