

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 88
Castile in the Crosshairs

Hello again. Last time we saw the Christians of the Iberian peninsula suffer their worst military defeat in over a century when Caliph Yaqub completely annihilated the Castilian army at Alarcos. The response of the Christian kings on the Iberian peninsula to the Muslim victory must have come as a shock to the Christians of wider Europe. Instead of uniting to attack the Caliph and his forces, they instead joined with the Caliph to launch a three-pronged attack on King Alfonso VIII of Castile. The armies of Castile had all been wiped out during the recent battle, and the Caliph dangled the prospect of territorial gains in front of both Alfonso of Leon and Sancho of Navarre, who took the bait. The scene is now set for Castile to be assaulted from nearly every direction, with the Almohads attacking territory to the south, while Leon raids from its western borders and Navarre attacks from the east.

Now this, I guess I don't need to tell you, is very bad news for Castile. In fact, you can't really overstate the threat Castile was under here. It was at grave risk of being wiped from the map. Fortunately for Castile, the worst doesn't come to pass. Castile does manage to survive this crisis, but only due to a whole lot of luck and interventions from both Alfonso of Aragon and Pope Celestine III.

The whole lot of luck, which swung in Castile's direction, included the decision by Alfonso of Castile not to engage any of his attackers in the field. To be fair, he really had no army at this point in time, so even if he had wanted to do so he probably wouldn't have been able to meet any of his foes in a pitched battle. Instead, each of the Castilian strongholds which was attacked was kind of left to its own devices. As a result, while the Caliph was able to take a number of Castilian possessions in the Tagus River valley to the west of Toledo, including Trujillo, he wasn't able to deal a death blow to Castile or take Toledo itself. A combination of the summer heat and supply issues forced the Caliph to retreat back to Seville in August of 1196. While he described his campaign as having been a resounding success, in reality he had made no impact whatsoever on his primary target, the city of Toledo. All he had managed to do was to spend ten days raiding around the outskirts of Toledo, attacking fields, crops and vineyards before withdrawing.

The second factor in Castile's favour was King Alfonso II of Aragon. Alfonso of Aragon had made a point of not being involved in the combined assault on Castile, and in fact, while the leaders of Leon and Navarre were busy planning the assault on Castile, Alfonso of Aragon embarked on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The good news was, perhaps as a result of musings made on his pilgrimage, Alfonso was intent on acting as a sort of peace broker between the Christian kings, trying via diplomatic means to convince Leon and Navarre to scale back their aggression towards their Christian neighbour. The bad news was King Alfonso II of Aragon was unable to advance his peace plan to any great extent due to the fact that he died unexpectedly in April of the year 1196, aged only 39.

Now, luckily for everyone, although Alfonso of Aragon had died at a relatively young age he had two sons who were willing and able to step into his shoes. Possibly in recognition of just how hard it was to govern Aragon's extensive holdings in southern France in addition to the regions of Aragon, Catalonia and Zaragoza in Spain, Alfonso of Aragon's

final wish was to split his kingdom in two, with most going to his eldest son Pedro, while Provence and some of its neighbouring territories in southern France were allocated to his younger son Alfonso.

Many historians view this as a missed opportunity. They argue that had Alfonso of Aragon left his realm intact there was a chance that Aragon may have been able to establish a separate and permanent southern French state. Instead, the splitting of the realm's French possessions made it easier for Aragon's enemies to conquer and absorb the French Aragonese territories.

Anyway, regardless of the wisdom of his decision, the bulk of Alfonso of Aragon's realm is now in the hands of its new young King Pedro, who is in his early twenties and will rule as King Pedro II. Now this is the same King Pedro who will feature in the Crusade against the Cathars. For those of you who have listened to the "Crusade against the Cathars" series from the "History of the Crusades" podcast, I Anglicised Pedro's name to Peter in that series, calling him King Peter II. However, I'm going to stick to the Spanish version of his name for this series, so despite being King Peter II in the "History of the Crusades" podcast, here he will be called King Pedro II. Sorry about any confusion. Anyway, quite understandably due to his youth and inexperience, young Pedro II has decided to follow his late father's policies on the peninsula, so he has pledged his support to Alfonso of Castile and he will not be joining either Navarre or Leon in their attacks on their Christian neighbour.

The final factor in Castile's favour came in the form of various actions taken by Pope Celestine III. Now it's safe to say that the Pope was absolutely furious about the events which had taken place during the year 1196. It was bad enough that the Christians had taken a huge hit from the Muslims at the Battle of Alarcos in 1195, but what made Pope Celestine really really angry was the fact that, instead of uniting in a Christian bloc to confront the victorious Muslims, the Christian leaders of Navarre and Leon had been persuaded by the Muslim Caliph to attack Christian Castile. It was bad enough that King Sancho VII of Navarre, had been convinced to attack Castilian strongholds in the borderlands between Navarre and Castile, but the full force of papal wrath was directed at King Alfonso of Leon. Alfonso of Leon hadn't just been persuaded by the Caliph to attack Castile, the Caliph had actually provided him with money to fund the campaign. And in a move which likely completely outraged Rome, Alfonso of Leon had even incorporated a contingent of Muslim soldiers into his army, soldiers supplied by the Caliph who would be used to attack the Christian Castilians.

Really, it was all too much, and Pope Celestine decided something needed to be done. In October of 1196 he directed the Archbishop of Toledo to excommunicate both King Alfonso IX of Leon and Pedro Fernandez de Castro, on the grounds that both men had allied themselves with a Muslim power against their fellow Christians. The Kingdom of Leon itself was placed under interdict, and to make sure that everyone realised the seriousness of the situation, Pope Celestine even extended crusading indulgences to any Christian fighting against the King of Leon, and told the people of Leon that they were no longer required to obey their King or be faithful to him if he persisted in using Muslim soldiers.

With the King of Leon now firmly seated in the papal naughty corner, the Papal Legate was directed to travel to Navarre to meet with King Sancho to direct him to withdraw from Castile. King Sancho obeyed this direction and was informed that he could wipe his slate clean of the sin of fighting against his fellow Christians if he went on the offensive against the Almohads.

Due to the Pope's actions, when the campaigning season of 1197 rolled around, Alfonso of Castile found himself fighting on only one front, not three. Although it wasn't for the want of trying on the part of the King of Leon. In his book "The Reconquest of Spain, D. W. Lomax reports that in the spring of 1197 Alfonso of Leon travelled to Seville to seek the Caliph's assistance in his campaign against Castile. Nothing seems to have come from this meeting, though, and shortly afterwards, following even more pressure from the Pope, King Sancho of Portugal lent his support to Alfonso of Castile and Pedro of Aragon, who used their combined authority to back the King of Leon into a sort of diplomatic corner. Following a mountain of pressure from all sides, Alfonso IX of Leon, eventually agreed to marry Alfonso of Castile's daughter, Berenguela, who brought as part of her dowry a number of the borderland strongholds which Leon had been intent on securing,

Anyway, as I've said, the upshot of all of this was that the only adversary which Alfonso of Castile found himself facing in 1197 was the Caliph Yaqub. In April of 1197 the Caliph left Castile and travelled to Cordoba, where he was delayed for a while at the trial of the philosopher Averroes. Averroes had fallen out of favour with the Caliph, and the tribunal ended up condemning Averroes and his teachings. They exiled the famous philosopher from Cordoba to the nearby province of Lucena. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy speculates that the action taken against Averroes may well have been political, with the Caliph attempting to encourage enthusiasm for his jihad against the Christians amongst conservative religious leaders via his prosecution of Averroes.

Anyway, after the trial had wrapped up, the Caliph mobilised his forces and resumed his campaign where he had left it the year before, in the Tagus River valley to the west of the city of Toledo. Now in a similar fashion to the campaign he had used the year before, the Caliph's main strategy seems to have been to race around attacking Castilian strongholds and attempting to draw the Castilian forces into a pitched battle, with a view to winning yet another stunning victory, like the one he had scored at Alarcos. Like the previous campaign though, King Alfonso of Castile and his ally, young Pedro of Aragon, didn't take the bait. They just kind of sat back, observed the Almohad army from a distance, and gave whatever support they could to towns which came under attack.

The main town to come under attack during this campaign was Madrid, which was successfully defended. Having failed to take Madrid, the Caliph's forces moved to the nearby town of Guadalajara. The defenders of Guadalajara also prevailed against the Almohads. In fact they not only successfully defended their town, they struck a blow against the Muslims, seizing the army's baggage train, which had been left unguarded while the army was out foraging. This was actually a big deal. As pointed out by Hugh Kennedy in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", the biggest challenge currently facing the Caliph was that of supply. Unless he could work out a way of adequately provisioning his army there was no way he could mount a siege of the duration needed to take a major city like Toledo. In the absence of a proper supply train, all the Caliph could really do was to attack Castilian strongholds and towns, then withdraw if the attack was unsuccessful.

After the loss of much of his baggage train at Guadalajara though, the Caliph realised that his campaign was effectively over. He turned southwards and travelled past Huete and Cuenca. You might remember that Cuenca had once been a Muslim town which had stood like an island surrounded by Castilian Christian territory. Well, at the time the Caliph travelled past it on his way back to Seville, it had been in Christian hands for twenty years. The Caliph arrived back in Seville on the 19th of August and spent the winter in Seville,

wrapping up loose ends in Al-Andalus and completing work on a mosque and some other buildings.

Now, while the Caliph was enjoying some downtime in his palaces over the winter months he probably wouldn't have been too happy to learn that Almohad power on the Iberian peninsula has actually reached its peak. This is as good as it's going to get. It's pretty much all downhill from here. Caliph Yaqub though, of course, is unaware of this fact. In fact, it's quite possible that he is optimistic about his chances of extending Al-Andalus into Castilian territory.

But further campaigns against Castile will have to wait, though. The Caliph has now been away from Morocco for nearly three years, and in March of 1198 he decided it was time to return to Northern Africa. Almost as soon as he arrived back in Marrakech though, his health took a nosedive and he ended up dying early in the year 1199. Caliph Yaqub's seventeen year old son, Muhammad al-Nasir, who had been groomed as his father's successor since he was nine years old, stepped neatly into his shoes.

How will the arrival on the scene of a new young Caliph affect the situation in Al-Andalus? Well, you'll have to tune in next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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