

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 90
Salvatierra

Hello again. Last time we saw the elevation of Pope Innocent III to the Papacy. Pope Innocent quickly learned though, that enforcing Papal policy on the Christian kings of the Iberian peninsula was no easy matter. While the Christian kings had, due to Papal pressure, all formally declared peace amongst each other, everyone pretty much agreed that there was little point launching a crusade against the Almohads due to the current state of personal discord between the Christian kings. The only king to take a different path was the young King of Aragon and Barcelona, King Pedro II. Pedro travelled to Rome and pledged his kingdom to Pope Innocent, who decreed that King Pedro rule his land as vassal to Rome.

King Pedro was absolutely intent on initiating a crusade against the Muslims, his preferred target being the Muslim territory of Majorca. Clearly though, he was going to need naval assistance if his campaign were to be successful. King Pedro himself didn't possess a sizeable navy and his lobbying of Pisa and Genoa to supply a fleet for his crusade had come to nothing, so by the year 1205 he was forced to abandon his plans for a crusade against Majorca, but he was still absolutely 100% committed to launching a crusade. It was just a matter of picking a target and finding allies who would join him on his mission.

Pretty much the only Christians on the Iberian peninsula at this time who were as keen as King Pedro to go crusading were the military Orders. The military Orders located in Castile were particularly enthusiastic. They were itching to get back into the field and revenge their losses to the Almohads at Alarcos, but they had been limited in what they could achieve due to the truce currently in place between the King of Castile, King Alfonso VIII, and the Caliph. Two of the Orders though, the Calatravans and the Order of Santiago, did everything they could within the limits of the truce to re-establish themselves and prepare for future campaigns against the Muslims.

The Calatravans had lost Calatrava and a number of neighbouring strongholds to the Muslims following the battle of Alarcos in the year 1195. By 1198 though they had elected a new master, and had established themselves in their new headquarters at Salvatierra Castle. The interesting thing about Salvatierra Castle was that it was actually located inside Almohad territory. From this Christian outpost inside Muslim territory knights from the Order raided Muslim villages, and made observations from the watch tower of the castle, looking out for Muslim armies, and taking notes about the size and composition of the forces. Likewise, the Order of Santiago had been busy rebuilding and strengthening itself in preparation to take the fight once again to the Muslims. Having lost nineteen knights at the Battle of Alarcos, it had its status as a military Order reconfirmed by Pope Innocent, and then set about acquiring a number of new estates and castles, while strengthening its numbers.

Pope Innocent had given permission for both the Calatravans and the Order of Santiago to join King Pedro's crusade against Majorca, but neither Order had access to any ships, and without ships King Pedro's crusade was dead in the water. Both Orders then considered joining a proposed crusade to the Holy Land in the year 1206 before deciding against it, choosing instead to wait and see what would happen when the truce between Castile and the Almohads expired in the year 1210.

Meanwhile, King Pedro was busy preparing for his crusade, despite the fact that he hadn't been able to convince anyone to join him. In November of the year 1205 he decided to fund his crusade by imposing a property tax against noblemen inside his realm. This, as it turned out, was a terrible idea. The barons of Aragon and Catalonia were already fuming about the fact that Pedro had made them all vassals to the Pope. This sudden imposition of a tax for a crusade which made no sense and had no support was too much. The barons put their collective feet down and uniformly opposed the tax. King Pedro was forced to back down and put his crusading dreams on ice for the next five years.

Finally, by the year 1210 things looked promising once again on the crusading front. In February of the year 1210 Pope Innocent contacted the new Archbishop of Toledo and urged him to lobby King Alfonso VIII to attack the Almohads. King Alfonso of Castile was by this time aged in his mid fifties, and it's possible that following his massive loss at Alarcos his desire to launch major military campaigns had diminished. He secured a couple of strongholds from the Muslims at this time, but there is no indication that he was keen to embark on a major crusade.

His son, though, held different views to his father. Fernando of Castile, King Alfonso's eldest son and heir, was currently aged 21 and was keen to prove himself on the battlefield. He wrote to Pope Innocent expressing his desire to go crusading against the Muslims. Pope Innocent fully supported this move and wrote to a bunch of Spanish bishops and senior clerics from across the Iberian peninsula, urging them to lobby their kings to support Prince Fernando of Castile in his crusading endeavours.

While all this was happening, in the summer of the year 1210 King Pedro finally launched his crusade, not against Majorca but against his neighbours the Almohads. He mobilised southwards into Valencia, capturing and securing three Muslim strongholds. Although it wasn't the full scale crusade which Pedro had likely set his heart on, it was a modest but important beginning for future Aragonese conquests in Valencia.

By the beginning of the following year, so in 1211, both King Alfonso VIII of Castile and his son Prince Fernando seem to have committed themselves to launching a crusade against the Almohads, and Pope Innocent warned the other Christian kings on the Iberian peninsula that they risked excommunication if they attacked Castile while King Alfonso and his son were occupied fighting the Muslims. It was at this point that the Caliph decided he'd better return to Al-Andalus to prepare for the upcoming campaign.

Now we last checked on the new Caliph, Muhammad al-Nasir, at the beginning of the last episode when he rose to power in the year 1199 aged seventeen. During the past decade or so he has been kept very busy in northern Africa. At the start of his rule, the Muslim King of Majorca, Abdallah, attempted to expand his territory at the new young Caliph's expense. This prompted a series of conflicts between Majorca and the Almohads, which ended in the year 1203 when the Caliph's forces defeated the Majorcans and killed Abdallah. Refugees fleeing the Almohad takeover of Majorca then destabilised Tunisia. However, the Caliph was able to subdue Tunisia as well by the year 1206.

The Caliph then turned his attention to Al-Andalus. Truces were still in place between the Caliph and the Christian Kings, but al-Nasir made a number of new appointments, installing his relatives and allies in key governing positions and encouraging them to update and restore the defences and fortifications of their towns and strongholds in anticipation of future conflict with the Christians. In the year 1210 the Caliph was visited by

a delegation of men from Al-Andalus who sounded the alarm about recent attacks from the Christians, raids from Aragon into Valencia, and gains by Calatrava and the Order of Santiago. He was also informed that the Caliph's closest ally amongst the Christians, King Alfonso IX of Leon, had been warned not to attack Castile as King Alfonso of Castile and his son were about to launch an assault against the Almohads. The Caliph decided that action was now required. He wrote to the governors of Seville and Cordoba, telling them to prepare their armies, to have the roads levelled ready for mobilisation, and to begin stocking supplies for the baggage trains.

In February of the year 1211 the Caliph departed northern Africa for the Iberian peninsula. In his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal", Hugh Kennedy reports that upon his arrival in Al-Andalus the Caliph discovered that the governors of two towns, Fes and Alcazarquivir, had failed to prepare for war as they had been ordered, so they were both arrested and later executed. By the beginning of June in the year 1211 the Caliph had arrived in Seville and had decided on the target for his upcoming campaign. It was to be Salvatierra Castle, the new headquarters of the Calatravans, which was located in Muslim territory.

The Almohad forces marched to Salvatierra and began a siege of the stronghold on the 15th of June. The castle of Salvatierra was garrisoned by 400 knights, but the Almohad forces were large enough to completely surround the stronghold. They then pummeled it with projectiles from siege engines. The only real hope the garrison had of successfully defending the castle would be if a Christian army rode to its defence. The castle's defenders managed to get word to King Alfonso of Castile, but he was understandably reluctant to confront the Caliph's forces so deep inside Muslim territory, so the garrison was informed that they were on their own. After holding out for 51 days, Salvatierra surrendered to the Caliph, who returned to Seville in triumph.

Now, the months of September and October in the year 1211 were terrible ones for King Alfonso of Castile. In September, Salvatierra surrendered to the Caliph. This was now the second time in a row that the Caliph had prevailed over Castile and the loss must have hurt. But a much, much worse loss was just around the corner. A couple of weeks later, the Castilian forces who had been raiding inside Almohad territory during the siege of Salvatierra, were on their way back to Toledo. One of the fighters returning home was Alfonso's son and heir, Fernando. Fernando became suddenly unwell with a fever while he was passing through Madrid. Then the unthinkable happened. On the 14th of October, aged just 22, Fernando died. According to chroniclers, both Alfonso and his wife, Eleanor of England, were inconsolable over the untimely and unexpected death of their adored eldest son.

King Alfonso though managed to pick himself up and throw himself into preparing for a major military campaign against the Caliph, a crusade which he likely hoped would serve two purposes: to avenge the loss of Alarcos and Salvatierra; and to take his mind off the grief he was experiencing over the loss of his son.

Now, the launching of a crusade against the Muslims of Al-Andalus with full papal endorsement following the loss of Salvatierra sparked interest across wider Europe. Recruitment drives for the crusade were assisted by wordplay and puns over the loss of Salvatierra, a fake letter from the Caliph, and songs performed by troubadours. Let's just take a closer look at all of those things.

The word "salvatierra" can loosely be translated from Spanish as meaning "save the earth" or "save the world" so losing the "Save the Earth" fortress to the Muslims was like a

ready-made marketing gift, and pretty soon bishops and clerics from across Europe were using it in their sermons. In his book "Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain", Joseph O'Callaghan notes that a letter supposedly penned by the Caliph dated 8 October 1211 also began circulating. The letter was addressed to, and I quote "all the kings and princes of the Christians, and especially the King of Aragon and Count of Barcelona" end quote. The Caliph purported to taunt the Christians that the Muslims had managed to cleanse Jerusalem of the filthiness of the Christians, while also conquering Salvatierra. The letter urged the Christians of Europe to, and I quote "submit to our empire and convert to our law" end quote. Singling out King Pedro of Aragon, the Caliph's letter complained that the King of Aragon had caused great harm to the Muslims at the urging of the Pope so, stated the letter, the Muslims intended to take the war all the way to Rome itself, where the Pope would be personally targeted. Joseph O'Callaghan points out that this was clearly an early example of fake news and was designed as a recruitment aid to stir Christians to take up arms against the Caliph. Despite being clearly a fake though, Joseph O'Callaghan states that it's likely that had the Caliph been shown the contents of the letter he would probably have agreed with most of it.

Troubadours also fired themselves into action, composing songs designed to alarm listeners with thoughts of Muslim armies pouring over the Pyrenees into France. In one song, a troubadour warns his listeners that the Caliph had boasted, and I quote "French men make room for us. Provence and the Toulousan and everything as far as Puy belongs to us" end quote. The song went on to appeal to the Kings of France and England and the Count of Poitou to join with King Alfonso of Castile to annihilate the Muslim forces. Joseph O'Callaghan points out that, like the fake letter, the sentiments expressed by the troubadours were mostly disinformation. The Caliph hadn't made any statements to the effect that he wanted to conquer France, but again the thought that he might was a very effective marketing and recruiting tool.

We will leave the archbishops, clerics, priests and troubadours of Spain and France to spruik the upcoming crusade and to urge all good Christians in their regions to prepare themselves to travel to Castile to join King Alfonso VIII in a major crusade against the Almohads. Join me next time for the launching of the crusade. Until next time, bye for now.

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