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Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem

# Templars and the *Reconquista*

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## INTRODUCTION



## Reconquista

The *Reconquista* was the period in the history of the Iberian Peninsula of about 780 years between the Umayyad conquest of Hispania in 711 and the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada to the expanding Christian kingdoms in 1492. The completed conquest of Granada was the context of the Spanish voyages of discovery and conquest (Columbus got royal support in Granada in 1492, months after its conquest), and the Americas—the "New World"—ushered in the era of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires.

Traditional historiography has marked the beginning of the *Reconquista* with the Battle of Covadonga (718 or 722), the first known victory in Hispania by Christian military forces since the 711 military invasion undertaken by combined Arab-Berber forces. In that small battle, a group led by the nobleman Pelagius defeated a Muslim patrol in the mountains of northern Iberia and established the independent Christian Kingdom of Asturias. In the late 10th century, the Umayyad vizier Almanzor waged military campaigns for 30 years to subjugate the northern Christian kingdoms. His armies, mostly composed of Slavic and African Mamluks (slave soldiers), ravaged the north, even sacking the great shrine of Santiago de Compostela. When the government of Córdoba disintegrated in the early 11th century, a series of petty successor states known as *taifas* emerged. The northern kingdoms took advantage of this situation and struck deep into Al-Andalus; they fostered civil war, intimidated the weakened *taifas*, and made them pay large tributes (*parias*) for protection. After a Muslim resurgence in the 12th century the great Moorish strongholds in the south fell to Christian forces in the 13th century—Córdoba in 1236 and Seville in 1248—leaving only the Muslim enclave of Granada as a tributary state in the south.

After 1491, the entire peninsula was controlled by Christian rulers. The conquest was followed by the Alhambra Decree (1492) which expelled Jews who would not convert to Christianity from Castile and Aragon, and a series of edicts (1499–1526) which forced the conversions of the Muslims in Spain, although later a significant part of them was expelled from the Iberian Peninsula.

The concept of Reconquista, consolidated in Spanish historiography in the second half of the 19th century, was associated with the development of a Spanish national identity, emphasizing nationalistic and romantic, and occasionally, colonialist, aspects.



The **Chronica Prophetica** ("Prophetic Chronicle") is an anonymous Medieval Latin chronicle written by a Christian in April 883 at or near the court of Alfonso III of Asturias in Oviedo. It uses the dating system of the Spanish Era and is essentially an interpretation of the prophecy concerning the fate of Gog found in the biblical *Book of Ezekiel*. To the anonymous Asturian, the destruction of the Emirate of Córdoba is closely linked with the end times. The document stresses the Christian and Muslim cultural and religious divide in Iberia and the necessity to drive the Muslims out.

## Concept

Since the 19th century traditional historiography has stressed the existence of the *Reconquista*, a continuous phenomenon by which the Christian Iberian kingdoms opposed and conquered the Muslim kingdoms, understood as a common enemy who had militarily seized territory from native Iberian Christians. The concept of a Christian reconquest of the peninsula first emerged, in tenuous form, at the end of the 9th century. A landmark was set by the Christian *Chronica Prophetica* (883–884) – see side panel.

Both Christian and Muslim rulers fought amongst themselves. Alliances between Muslims and Christians were not uncommon. Blurring distinctions even further were the mercenaries from both sides who simply fought for whoever paid the most. The period is seen today to have had long episodes of relative religious tolerance.

The Crusades, which started late in the 11th century, bred the religious ideology of a Christian reconquest, confronted at that time with a similarly staunch Muslim Jihad ideology in Al-Andalus by the Almoravids, and to an even greater degree by the Almohads. In fact, previous documents from the 10th and 11th centuries are mute on any idea of "reconquest". Propaganda accounts of Muslim-Christian hostility came into being to support that idea, most notably the *Chanson de Roland*, a fictitious 11th-century French version of the Battle of Roncevaux Pass (778) dealing with the Iberian *Saracens (Moors)*, and taught as historical fact in the French educational system since 1880.

Some contemporary authors consider it proved that the process of Christian state-building in Iberia was indeed often defined by the reclamation of lands that had been lost to the Moors in generations past. In this way, state-building might be characterized—at least in ideological, if not practical, terms—as a process by which Iberian states were being 'rebuilt'. In turn, other recent historians dispute the whole concept of *Reconquista* as a concept created *a posteriori* in the service of later political goals. A few historians point out that Spain and Portugal did not previously exist as nations, and therefore the heirs of the Christian Visigothic Kingdom were not technically *reconquering* them, as the name suggests. However, the term *reconquista* is still widely in use.

## Medieval Iberia

The Muslim Moors, based in North Africa, had conquered most of the Iberian peninsula, then controlled by the Visigoths, in the early 8th century CE. By the 11th century CE, the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain were strong enough to attempt to retake some of the lost territories; an ambition greatly helped by the civil wars within the Cordoba Caliphate in 1031 CE. The five Spanish states involved were Aragon, Catalonia, Castile, León, and Navarre, while Portugal was an independent state from the 1140s CE. As these states battled the Muslims and, occasionally each other, Spain became a complex web of small kingdoms, including those set up by independent adventurers who took advantage of the political turmoil for their own ends. The most famous such figure was Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, El Cid (c. 1043-1099 CE), who eventually established his own short-lived kingdom based at



## Almoravid

The Almoravid dynasty was an imperial Berber Muslim dynasty centered in Morocco. It established an empire in the 11th century that stretched over the western Maghreb and Al-Andalus. Founded by Abdallah ibn Yasin, the Almoravid capital was Marrakesh, a city the ruling house founded in 1062. The dynasty originated among the Lamtuna and the Gudala, nomadic Berber tribes of the Sahara, traversing the territory between the Draa, the Niger, and the Senegal rivers. The term "Almoravid" comes from the Arabic "al-Murabitun", which is the plural form of "al-Murabit"—literally meaning "one who is tying" but figuratively meaning "one who is ready for battle at a fortress". The Almoravids were crucial in preventing the fall of Al-Andalus to the Iberian Christian kingdoms, when they decisively defeated a coalition of the Castilian and Aragonese armies at the Battle of Sagrjas in 1086. This enabled them to control an empire that stretched 3,000 kilometers (1,900 mi) north to south. However, the rule of the dynasty was relatively short-lived. The Almoravids fell—at the height of their power—when they failed to stop the Masmuda-led rebellion initiated by Ibn Tumart. As a result, their last king Ishaq ibn Ali was killed in Marrakesh in April 1147 by the Almohad Caliphate, who replaced them as a ruling dynasty both in Morocco and Al-Andalus.

Valencia in 1094 CE. The melting pot was made a little thicker with the arrival of a new group on the Muslim side, the Almoravids, an austere fundamentalist sect based in Morocco who began to extend their interest to Spain in the 1080s.

Not all campaigns in Spain were crusades, but those that were backed by the popes benefitted from the full works of mass preaching to find recruits, the raising of church taxes to fund armies, the bearing of crosses on the battlefield, and the promise of a direct route to heaven for those who gave their lives to the cause.

## Expansion

In the High Middle Ages, the fight against the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula became linked to the fight of the whole of Christendom. The *Reconquista* was originally a mere war of conquest. It only later underwent a significant shift in meaning toward a religiously justified war of liberation. The papacy and the influential Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy not only justified the acts of war but actively encouraged Christian knights to seek armed confrontation with Moorish "infidels" instead of with each other.

From the 11th century onwards indulgences were granted: In 1064 Pope Alexander II promised the participants of an expedition against Barbastro a collective indulgence 30 years before Pope Urban II called the First Crusade. Papal interest in Christian-Muslim relations in the peninsula was not without precedent – Popes Leo IV (847–855), John VIII (872–882) and John XIX (1024–33) are all known to have displayed substantial interest in the region. Not until 1095 and the Council of Clermont did the *Reconquista* amalgamate the conflicting concepts of a peaceful pilgrimage and armed knight-errantry. But the papacy left no doubt about the heavenly reward for knights fighting for Christ (*militia Christi*): in a letter, Urban II tried to persuade the *reconquistadores* fighting at Tarragona to stay in the Peninsula rather than joining the armed pilgrimage to conquer Jerusalem, saying that their contribution for Christianity was equally important. The pope promised them the same indulgences that he had promised to those who chose to join the First Crusade.

Alfonso I of Aragon (r. 1104-1134 CE) gave huge estates (in fact most of his kingdom as he had no heir) to the Knights Hospitaller and Knights Templar, both military orders of professional warrior-monks who would make themselves indispensable to the defense of the Crusader States in the Middle East. The lure, although later reduced by Spanish nobles, eventually worked, and both orders would commit knights to the *Reconquista*; the Templars in 1143 CE and the Hospitallers in 1148 CE. In addition, the Iberian peninsula would see the formation of its own local military orders, starting with the Order of Calatrava in 1158 CE, the knights of which famously wore black armor. The 1170s CE proved to be a busier decade for new military orders with the formation of the Order of Santiago (1170 CE), Montjoy in Aragon (1173 CE), Alcantara (1176 CE) and, in Portugal, the Order of Evora (c. 1178 CE). The big advantage of these local orders was that they did not need to send a third of their revenue to a headquarters in the Middle East like the Templars and Hospitallers. A great deal more warriors would soon be on their way to help the Christian Spanish rulers, too, as the riches on offer in southern Spain attracted professional adventurers from other parts of Europe but especially northern France and Norman Sicily.



## Alfonso VII

Alfonso VII (March 1, 1105 – August 21, 1157), called the Emperor, became the King of Galicia in 1111 and King of León and Castile in 1126. Alfonso, born Alfonso Raimúndez, first used the title Emperor of All Spain, alongside his mother Urraca, once she vested him with the direct rule of Toledo in 1116. Alfonso later held another investiture in 1135 in a grand ceremony reasserting his claims to the imperial title. Alfonso was a dignified and somewhat enigmatic figure. His rule was characterized by the renewed supremacy of the western kingdoms of Christian Iberia over the eastern (Navarre and Aragón) after the reign of Alfonso the Battler. Though he sought to make the imperial title meaningful in practice to both Christian and Muslim populations, his hegemonic intentions never saw fruition. During his tenure, Portugal became *de facto* independent, in 1128, and was recognized as *de jure* independent, in 1143.

# The Second Crusade & Siege of Lisbon

The Second Crusade (1147-1149 CE) was primarily concerned with recapturing Edessa in Upper Mesopotamia, but it did have additional objectives in Iberia and the Baltic, with both these campaigns also being backed by Pope Eugenius III (r. 1145-1153 CE). The Papacy had already backed crusades to the Iberian peninsula in 1113-14 CE, 1117-18 CE and 1123 CE. The 1147 CE campaign was to be even bigger and better. The Second Crusaders who were to sail from Europe to the Middle East had to delay their departure in order for the armies travelling there by land to make their slow progress to the Levant. The sea route was much quicker, and so it was advantageous to put these soldiers to good use for Christendom in the meantime. A fleet of some 160-200 Genoese ships packed with crusaders sailed for Lisbon to assist King Alfonso Henriques of Portugal (r. 1139-1185 CE) capture that city from the Muslims. On arrival, a textbook siege began on June, 28 1147 CE and, with massive siege towers and catapults reportedly firing up to 500 stones each hour, it was ultimately successful, the city falling on October, 24 1147 CE.



Figure 1 Siege of Damietta, 1218-19 CE

Some crusaders successfully continued the war against the Muslims in Iberia, notably capturing Almeria in northern Spain (October 17, 1147 CE) guided by King Alfonso VII of León and Castile (r. 1126-1157 CE) and aided by the Genoese who were promised one-third of the city. On the hill, known in Muslim times as Monte Laham, there are seven towers, three square Muslim towers and four semicircular Christian towers. These were built by the Templars of Alfonso VII, who constructed a strong-chapel following the Christian conquest of the city under the command of the troops of Alfonso VII in 1147.

Tortosa in eastern Spain was next to fall on December 30, 1148 CE, this time directed by the Count of Barcelona but again with Genoese aid. In 1152, Tortosa was handed to the Knights Templar, who used it as a military headquarters. They engaged in some major building projects, constructing a castle with a large chapel and an elaborate keep, surrounded by thick double concentric walls. The Templars' mission was to protect the city and surrounding lands, some of which had been occupied by Christian settlers, from Muslim attack. The city of Tortosa was recaptured by Saladin in 1188, and the main Templar headquarters relocated to



## The Almohad

movement was founded by Ibn Tumart among the Berber Masmuda tribes of southern Morocco. Around 1120, the Almohads first established a Berber state in Tinmel in the Atlas Mountains. They succeeded in overthrowing the ruling Almoravid dynasty governing Morocco by 1147, when Abd al-Mu'min al-Gumi (r. 1130–1163) conquered Marrakesh and declared himself Caliph. They then extended their power over all of the Maghreb by 1159. Al-Andalus soon followed, and all of Islamic Iberia was under Almohad rule by 1172. The Almohad dominance of Iberia continued until 1212, when Muhammad III, "al-Nasir" (1199–1214) was defeated at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in the Sierra Morena by an alliance of the Christian princes of Castile, Aragon and Navarre. Nearly all of the Moorish dominions in Iberia were lost soon afterwards, with the great Moorish cities of Cordova and Seville falling to the Christians in 1236 and 1248 respectively. The Almohads continued to rule in Africa until the piecemeal loss of territory through the revolt of tribes and districts enabled the rise of their most effective enemies, the Marinids, in 1215. The last representative of the line, Idris al-Wathiq, was reduced to the possession of Marrakesh, where he was murdered by a slave in 1269; the Marinids seized Marrakesh, ending the Almohad domination of the Western Maghreb.

Cyprus. However, in Tortosa, some Templars were able to retreat into the keep, which they continued to use as a base for the next 100 years. They steadily added to its fortifications until it also fell, in 1291. Tortosa was the last outpost of the Templars on the Syrian mainland, after which they retreated to a garrison on the nearby island of Arwad, which they held for another decade.

## Siege of Al-Dāmūs

In 1210, the Almohad Empire, who controlled the Balearic Islands (conquered in 1203), launched a great incursion into the Catalan coast led by Abubola the Elder. The Muslim forces, being the combined forces from the Maghreb and Al-Andalus, disembarked and began pillaging the countryside seizing much booty and captives in the process.

In March 1210, in response to the Almohad incursion, King Peter II of Aragon, who was at the time in the city of Monzón, gathered an army to attack the Moors of the Taifa of Valencia. Within the objectives of this campaign lay *Al-Dāmūs*, one of the fortresses that formed the defensive net of the Turia River. Al-Dāmūs was conquered with the help of the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar. The offensive continued until the Christian forces finally took the Castle of Serreilla. Pedro del Pomar was charged by King Peter II of Aragon to repopulate all the lands



Figure 2 Ruins of Castle of Serreilla. Pedro del Pomar

won by the conquest with Christians from the surrounding kingdoms. The loss of Ademuz and the devastation caused by the campaign, troubled the Almohades so much that they sent a delegation of nobles from Xarq al-Ándalus to Marrakech to beg Muhammad al-Nasir for reinforcements.

When the idea of liberating the Iberian peninsula received the backing of Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216 CE) in 1212 CE, it was a timely boost to the Spanish kings who had suffered a heavy defeat at the Battle of Alarcos in 1195 CE. The Christians in Spain were suffering from a lack of unity, too. King Alfonso IX of León (r. 1188-1230 CE) had made an alliance with the Muslims, but his strategy brought excommunication from Pope Celestine III (r. 1191-1198 CE), and the even more unusual step of granting any Christian who fought the king a remission of sins. Consequently, Christians were now fighting fellow Christians. There was, in fact, a long tradition of alliances between Muslim and Christian statelets in Spain, trade and economics often superseding differences in religion, and there was certainly not the widespread demonization of the Muslim enemy as seen in the Middle East.

Victory at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 CE by a coalition of three Spanish kings dealt them a blow from which they would not recover. There followed a series of further gains such as the capture of Cordoba in 1236 CE, Valencia in 1238 CE, and Seville after a long siege in 1248 CE. By the mid-13th century CE, only Granada remained in Muslim hands, the Emirate forced to pay tribute for its continued existence (which lasted until 1492 CE). No serious attempt was made to invade Muslim territory in North Africa so that reconquest never became conquest, although there would later be sporadic attacks on the Moroccan coast, notably Tangiers in 1437 CE and Arzila in 1471 CE.



*Figure 3 Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, July 16, 1212 CE*

## Order of Montesa



*Figure 4 Emblem of the Order of Montesa*

With the fall of the Templar Order throughout Europe, in Spain the Knights Templar held out against the king's troops in their castles. In the end, many became part of the Order of Montesa.

The Order of Montesa is a Christian military order, territorially limited to the old Crown of Aragon. It was named after the castle of Montesa, its headquarters. The Knights Templar had been received with enthusiasm in Crown of Aragon from their foundation in 1128. King Alfonso I of Aragon, having no direct heir, bequeathed his dominions to be divided among the Knights Templar, the Knights

Hospitaller, and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, but this bequest was annulled by his subjects in 1131. The Knights Templar had to be contented with certain castles, the chief of which was Monzón. Although the Aragonese branch of the order was pronounced innocent at the famous trial of the Templars, Pope Clement V's Bull of

suppression was applied to them in spite of the protests of King James II of Aragon in 1312.

King James II persuaded Pope John XXII to permit him to regroup the Templar properties in Aragon and Valencia, and to create a new military order not essentially differing from that of the Templars, which should be charged with the defense of the frontier against the Moors and the pirates. The new order was dedicated to Our Lady, and based at Montesa. Pope John XXII approved it on 10 June 1317, and gave it the Cistercian rule.

The order derived its title from St. George of Montesa, its principal stronghold. It was affiliated to the Order of Calatrava, from which its first recruits were drawn, and it was maintained in dependence upon that order.

The first of the fourteen grand masters was Guillermo d'Eril. In 1485, Philip of Viana renounced the Archdiocese of Palermo to become grand master. He died fighting the Kingdom of Granada in 1488. The office of grand master was united with the Crown by Philip II in 1587.



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