THE CAPTURE OF LISBON

by John E. Slaughter

Lisbon, a great city, an ancient city of Europe, is not only the capital, but the heart of Portugal. Indeed, the real beginning of Portugal as a viable nation can be said to have dated from the capture of Lisbon in 1147 by Afonso Henriques, the first king of Portugal.

Historians, especially foreign historians, tend to attribute the capture of Lisbon to a single circumstance, i.e. the fortuitous and almost casual alliance between the king and a band of passing crusaders from the north of Europe. Such versions are so inexact and so incomplete as to form a mythology of oversimplification; it is far more accurate to say that the siege of Lisbon was in preparation for more than a dozen years prior to the actual fall of the city. Probably the crusaders were essential to the successful outcome of the siege, but without the preceding achievements of the Portuguese themselves in their movement south, there could not have been an effective siege. The Portuguese, in settling and holding Leiria and in capturing Santarém, had already effectively secured the land routes south to Lisbon and virtually isolated it from all assistance from other Moslem cities to the south and east.

Portugal as an entity is old; in the reign of Afonso III, about 870 A.D., a diploma mentioned "Provintiae Portucalensis..." for the first time after the Arab conquest in 711. But it became a Christian entity, and has remained one since 1064, when Fernando el Magno of Leon retook Coimbra from the Moors. At that time Portugal extended from the Minho River south to the Mondego, and perhaps some 110 miles inland from the coast.

About 1095, Alfonso VI of Leon gave this county of Portugal to his daughter, Teresa, and her husband, Count Henry of Burgundy as their hereditary possession. In 1128, their son, Afonso Henriques, dispossessed his widowed mother with her amante, and began his rule of this small county. At the time, based on scanty data, there may have been some 400,000 people living in Portugal.

Following the conquest of Coimbra in 1064, the Portuguese began to move cautiously into the fertile lands just south of the Mondego River. By the year 1100 the settlement had moved about 6 miles south, the towns of Soure, Condeixa, Penela and Miranda had been settled, and a castle of sorts erected at each place. In 1100 Count Henry gave a charter (foral) to Soure to encourage growth and settlement. 1

Henry died in 1112, and in 1116, Teresa had to face the resurgent Almoravides whose army came north, taking the castles of Penela and Miranda, then tightly besetting Coimbra for three weeks. Soure was abandoned by its settlers and the other settlements made since 1064 were largely swept away. Seven years later, Soure was re-established under its parish priest, St. Martin, and in 1128, Teresa and her son each issued a diploma giving Soure to the Templars as their first post in Portugal. 2

After seizing ruling power in Portugal, Afonso Henriques realized that his county was too small and under populated to endure. It was then somewhat larger than Galicia in area, but only one-fourth the size of the combined kingdoms of Leon and Castile. Its population may have been proportionally even smaller since it was the most recently regained from the Moors. There was a danger the Saracens might retake it, or that a king of Leon and Castile might reassert sovereignty and reduce
Portugal again to the status of a part of Galicia. The only solution to these problems was expansion to a viable size, for the larger Portugal would become, the more its opponents would diminish.

The task was not easy. To the east of the Entre Minho and Douro lay the harsh mountainous uplands of Tras-os-Montes, still among the most desolate regions in Iberia, and little able to support a numerous population.

To the north was Galicia. There, the Minho region was fertile, rich, and inhabited by Christians who spoke the same language and who could become reliable subjects. The Galicians could also be made to furnish levies to fight the Moors in southward expansion and, as important, could provide colonists to settle and hold new lands taken from the Moors.

To the south, the lands were held by the fierce Moors who seemed more inclined to retake Portugal than to surrender other lands. These were the Almoravides who had taken over Moslem Spain. They were Berber fanatics and unbending enemies, who sharpened the religious distinctions between Christians and Moslems in the same manner as the crusaders had done.

Thus, for the first few years of his rule, Afonso Henriques turned most of his attention to the north of Portugal, where he repeatedly attempted to seize and hold territory in the Minho region, near the city of Tuy. He made several invasions into this area, but could make no lasting conquests. South of Coimbra and the Mondego, little was done beyond the small effort to resettle Soure and to move back into the lands overrun in the invasion of 1116, and not much seems to have been done to spur further efforts in the south.

The incursions of Afonso Henriques north into the Minho region were severely handicapped by the lack of men. He could not lead an expedition of sufficient size to

Portugal between the Minho River and the Mondego River.
defeat the local forces and then hold the land taken against Leonese reinforcements, because he could only employ a fraction of the men available in Portugal; sizeable numbers had to remain in the south to provide defense against the incessant Moorish raids which kept the frontier in a constant state of alert. If the young ruler went north, he would open a second front on which he could only use a limited number of his troops.

The need for southward expansion must have been apparent, but the difficulties of the undertaking may have been overestimated; later pressures, however, forced a test. The first serious move toward the south came about 1134 when Afonso Henriques started the invasion and settlement of the Ladeia region which stretched from Penela and Rabaçal to Ançã. The torre de Ladeia was located where the village of Alvorge now is, and seems to have been near the middle of Ladeia. 4

To protect these new holdings, Afonso Henriques built and garrisoned the castle of Leiria, located some 50 miles southwest of Coimbra, about 32 southwest of Penela and about 44 northwest of Santarém, the nearest good-sized Moorish stronghold. This was a daring move which announced the determination of the Portuguese to occupy and settle the disputed lands north of Lisbon and Santarém. Occupation of Leiria meant that Saracen raiders moving toward the Mondego region would have to skirt Leiria and would be subject to attacks by its garrison; most of all, it was a long step toward Lisbon.

No record of noteworthy events in 1136 has come down, but 1137 was an active year. Afonso Henriques invaded Galicia and seized Tuy, but his cousin, Alfonso VII of Leon recovered it and constrained him to sign the pact of Tuy in July of 1137. More important, although less spectacular, was a large expedition into the region of Ladeia. Apparently Afonso Henriques marched in with his army, and afterwards settlers came in to establish themselves and hold the lands. This expedition was aimed at

Central Portugal, showing the Ladeia region.
either capturing or expelling the Moslem inhabitants of the region, securing the land for Portuguese settlers, and repelling Saracen efforts to harry and drive out the Portuguese colonists. Toward the end of 1137 there was a disaster recorded in the Chronica Gothorum at Tomar where a Portuguese force was defeated while on a foray into Moorish lands.

According to records, 1138 was also an uneventful year, but the expansion into Ladeia had to proceed, and perhaps it required such an involvement of troops and people as to preclude any raids into Galicia. It is also likely that all attention was concentrated on the south at this time. Since the great expedition to Ourique took place the following year, this was probably a time of preparation. Men and equipment had to be readied for an extended campaign, while guides and scouts had to reconnoiter the regions the expedition would penetrate. The routes, waterholes, pasturage, garrisons and details of the urban and rural areas that were the targets of the expedition had to be seen by the guides, as maps were then virtually unknown, and direct experience was still the best reference. Doubtless there were Mozarabs who knew the region, but unless they could accompany the army, they could only give impressions. This army was too small to be able to afford errors which might let it be trapped or surprised. There may also have been contact with Alfonso VII so that Afonso Henrique could have been aware that his cousin intended to besiege Oreja (Aurelia) some 40 miles east of Toledo during the next summer, at the same time he himself intended to raid the south of Portugal.

Alfonso VII began the siege of Oreja in April 1139 and continued it until the castle surrendered that October. The Chronica Gothorum dates the battle of Ourique as July 25, 1139. After Ourique, Afonso Henrique seems to have thought the Saracens were either cowed or so wasted that they could do little, for he again went north to seize lands in the Minho. While engaged in operations there, he received word that the Saracens had stormed the castle of Leiria and killed or captured the garrison. He hurried south, but the enemy had left the castle in ruins.

In September 1141, Alfonso VII invaded Portugal to emphasize his determination to end his cousin's invasions of Galicia. The brief encounter and tourney of Val de Vez took place, and the two cousins made a final peace between them. This endured, past the death of Alfonso VII, until about 1161 when Afonso Henrique again attempted to seize the Minho region.

The Saracen activity must have continued, for in the next year, 1142, Afonso Henrique built the small outpost-castle of Germancelo near the towns of Penela and Rabaçal. The ruins of this structure stand on a solitary hill, and clearly show the emergency nature of the castle. The walls of unmortared stone are about six and a half feet thick and ten and a half feet high; there is no cistern, tower or any sort of interior division. There is no record of attacks against this tiny outpost.

In this same year, a fleet of crusaders from northern Europe, traveling to the Holy Land by sea, put into Gaia at Porto; their aid was solicited by the king for an attack on Lisbon. Afonso Henrique then marched overland to Lisbon with his army and the crusaders sailed to the city. The attack failed, and little is known of it, but it illustrates the king's thinking, his awareness of the critical shortage of men and the need to find assistance for so large an enterprise. It also indicates his flexibility and ability to improvise and take advantage of circumstances without delay.

As a measure of progress made in resettlement in this time, we have the foral that Afonso Henrique gave Leiria and the one given Germancelo about the same time. Both charters fix imposts, taxes and fines, but they also give boundaries for the territories belonging to these two places. The foral of Leiria designates Ourem and Alco-
baça as its limits. Alcobaça with its small castle was then in Moorish hands, and from there down to Lisbon was largely a wooded wasteland.

The fact that the king found it necessary to build the small castle of Germanela in 1142, some 32 miles northeast of Leiria, 2.2 miles southeast of Rabatça and 2.5 miles southwest of Penela shows that Saracen raids from the southeast were still able to penetrate almost to the Mondego. The foral given Germanela indicates the importance attached to this small work, and the one given Leiria illustrates the king’s determination to hold the lands they had settled.

It is evident that the regions south of Soure and Penela were thinly populated, and that these lands did not fill up for many years. Even today, this part of Estremadura is only moderately populated. The basic, emergency, even rudimentary character of the castles built in this region at the time confirms the lack of population.

Toward the end of 1143, Afonso Henriques met with Alfonso VII and a papal legate in Zamora. There the king presented his letter placing Portugal under the suzerainty of the Holy See. This, in effect, severed any allegiance that he might have owed Alfonso VII, or that Alfonso VII may have thought he was owed. In any case, there must have been a notable degree of success in the settlement of Ladeia and Leiria to encourage the king. Had the settlements in the south failed or been driven out, it is doubtful that Afonso Henriques would have taken this step at this time.

Sometime in 1144, a force of Saracens raided north from Santarém to Soure, where the Templars engaged them. St. Martin, the parish priest who had established Soure, went out to battle with the Templars. In their defeat, he was taken and subsequently died a prisoner in Córdoba on January 31, 1145. This brief, tragic vignette shows the trying, saddening aspects of the reconquista and the burden it meant for all levels of society.

In this same year, Leiria was rebuilt—or possibly rebuilding was completed—underscoring the king’s realization of the vital role of this castle in the struggle to move southward.

The Almohades, reformers who, like the Almoravides had arisen in Africa, had been struggling since 1130 with the Almoravides. By 1145, Tashine ibn 'Ali, last ruler of the Almoravides was defeated. He died shortly thereafter, and in 1147 his empire fell to the Almohades and vanished. As the Almoravide empire began to falter, the various rulers in Islamic Spain had revolted and set up rule on a local basis. In June 1146, the Almohades sent over an army to bring Al-Andalus under their control. Although some cities offered their submission, the Almohades marched into southwest Spain and subdued Niebla, Serpa, Beja and Silves and occupied Mertola, the latter having offered submission before they arrived. In January and February of 1147 they besieged and captured Seville, yet rebellions and uprisings in both Africa and Al-Andalus plagued the Almohades for another 30 years. This disunion among the Moslems was a great help to the Christians in their drives to recapture Spain, for there was little coordinated resistance or united Moslem effort during these troubles.

With the restoration of Leiria began a period of intensive raids by Afonso Henriques against the various Moorish cities and lands of western Spain. The Chronica Gothorum says the rulers of these cities sued for peace, among them, Santarém and Lisbon. In addition, we have from De Expiatione Lyxbonensis, a message to the ruler of Evora and his reply that he was at peace with Afonso Henriques and therefore could not aid the Lisbonenses.

It is quite possible that it was during this period that Afonso Henriques raided all the way to Cape St. Vincent as alleged in the legendary account of the foundation of
the Monastery of St. Vincent. 12

The events of 1145 must have been favorable to Portugal, because in May 1146 Afonso Henriques married Matilda de Savoy. He evidently thought of himself as established, and felt that he should provide an heir for this small kingdom. This marriage cannot be attributed to an increasing prosperity, but the reverse might well have precluded a foreign wedding.

The internecine struggles between the Almoravidse and the Almohades did not escape the attention of the king. His cousin, Alfonso VII may well have communicated his plan to besiege Almeria in 1147. In addition, it is possible that near the end of 1146 or early in 1147, Afonso Henriques received some word that a group of crusaders from northern Europe would be coming by sea, and would stop at Porto. 13 This route had been followed by the crusaders in 1142, and since the Portuguese knew this group was coming, it is possible that they could have been informed through merchant contacts in England or on the continent.

From all previous experiences and campaigns, which included that of besieging Lisbon, Afonso Henriques must have realized that Santarém was the key to Portugal north of the Tejo, and to Lisbon. On the map it can be seen that the Tejo River flows to the southwest from the town of Barquinha down to Lisbon where it turns west into the Atlantic. On the coast, the land runs south and southwest from Nazaré to Peniche and to the mouth of the Tejo. In effect, this forms a finger-shaped peninsula with the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Tejo to the east.

Any move toward Lisbon from the north faced the danger of being cut off or attacked from the rear by forces from Santarém. The city was the junction point for all Moorish traffic from Badajoz, Seville, Evora, Beja and Silves. From Santarém, the Moors could launch attacks toward Coimbra and the north at will, and might well have
been able to hamper or interrupt a siege of Lisbon. With its active population, its extensive fortifications and its strong natural citadel, and with the great river beside it, Santarém was almost impervious to attacks by any besieger, as demonstrated by the failure of the Almohade to retake it in 1184.14

Using Leiria as a base, Afonso Henriques was able to raid east to Santarém or south to Lisbon, but to maintain a sustained siege of Lisbon, he had to have Santarém. Thus, he decided to attack the city. However, to take it by either a direct assault or by a long siege was out of the question, since both these alternatives were beyond his means and neither offered any hope of success. There remained only stealth and surprise.

What influenced his timing is not known for certain, but knowledge that the crusaders were planning to stop in Portugal may have been a factor; the possibility of achieving surprise by an attack in March, well before the usual season for such operations may also have occurred to him. Normally operations in late Fall, Winter or early Spring were avoided because of the rigors of the weather, lack of pasturage for animals, and the frequently low state of food stocks in those seasons. Late Spring was the traditional time for the fossado (raids).

Having decided on an attempt on Santarém, the king sent a capable reconnaissance officer to determine the best point for placing scaling ladders; the men raised on these ladders could then overpower the sentries and open a city gate to the remainder of the force. After the point was found, the king selected 120 of his best men for the expedition. Under great secrecy, they marched out of Coimbra. From the account, it is implicit that spies and information leaks were well known at that time.

The small force moved south by stages, as though heading for the Lisbon area. At the second halt, the king sent an officer to Santarém to announce that at the end of three days the peace treaty would end. On this third day, the force lay concealed near the city. That night, the soldiers placed a scaling ladder on the roof of a house which abutted on the city wall, and despite an accidental clatter, reached the top of the wall and struck down the sentries. After a short, savage fight, the city fell intact into the hands of Afonso Henriques on March 15, 1147.

Following the capture, numbers of frightened Moors left the city for Lisbon and the south. They were permitted to leave or stay as they pleased, both because a policy of tolerance toward Moslems was not unusual, and because it was advantageous for a king who needed people to retain as many as possible of these industrious and talented people whose commerce and manufacturing exceeded that of northern Portugal.

After Santarém had been taken, Afonso Henriques had to garrison the city with a sizeable force of his own army. This garrison had to remain until the city became politically reliable. To aid in this, he donated the church in Santarém to the Templars in April. This meant that the Templars would have to establish a chapter of their armed knights there for the defense of their church properties and of the city itself.

To the Portuguese, the capture meant that the rich fields of the nearby lands would be available for food supply, and that the new settlers in Ladeia and Leiria would be free from the threat of raids out of Santarém. To the Moors, it was a shocking loss of territory, resources and people, although small garrisons still held out in places like Alfeizerão, Alcobaça and Obidos as well as in the Lisbon area.

In May of that year, Afonso VII marched from Toledo to besiege the great city of Almeria on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. This concentrated most of the attention of the Almohades and Islamic Spain on Almeria and spared Portugal repercussions over the taking of Santarém. No
proof of cooperation between the two cousins, Alfonso VII and Afonso Henrique, exists except for these concurrent actions.

While most Moorish attention was focused on Almeria, the king mobilized his army in the north of Portugal and marched to Lisbon. The siege began about the middle of June. This was not an attempt to gain the city at the time, but to initiate the pressures of a siege on an overcrowded city. The refugees from Santarém and from the countryside around Lisbon had fled into the city for protection, and the sooner all these people were bottled up, the sooner the pressures of famine and disease would become manifest.

With both Leiria and Santarém in his possession, the king had few military problems north of the Tejo River. The remaining Moorish-held castles were isolated, and none could block the clear route from the north through Leiria down to Santarém and Lisbon. This was important, since the army besieging Lisbon would have to be fed throughout the siege, and local resources might not have been sufficient for that purpose. The existing peace with Leon made it unnecessary to leave troops in the north to watch Galicia so that all available men could be gathered in the south.

About the middle of June, the crusaders arrived at Porto, and by the end of the month, they had joined the king in front of Lisbon. They made a pact with the king over spoils and shares, and then all turned to besiege the city. After the siege had lasted for about six weeks, the king sent all the Portuguese troops home, keeping only a small bodyguard. The reason for their dismissal is plain: the men had to return home to help with the harvests, which required participation by everyone. Food shortages were then endemic, and as the Portuguese had the crusaders to feed, it was essential to have all available help. Since the king was able to muster sufficient troops to overwhelm unruly crusaders at the end of the siege, they must have returned some time prior to the final attack on Lisbon.

After almost 17 weeks of siege, the Normans and the English were able to push close to the wall a movable tower they had built. This tower, about 83 feet high, could overlook the walls, and had a drawbridge which could be lowered to reach the top of the city wall. Archers and crossbowmen up in the tower could drive off the defenders and the attackers could swarm across the drawbridge and clear the walls to enter the city. Once the Moors saw the tower in place, they surrendered rather than fight to the bitter end, since it was usual in those times for sieges which went on long to end in wholesale massacre of all defenders and inhabitants as well.

Despite the peaceful surrender, there were bitter squabbles over entering the city and the division of spoils. As the Christians were entering the city, the crusaders from Cologne and the Flemings got out of hand, massacre and looting took place, and the Mozarabic bishop was killed, much to the chagrin of the king. Order was finally restored and the city was systematically despoiled to recompense the crusaders for their dead and for their efforts in the siege. The Portuguese received very little, but they kept possession of the city, which was worth far more than all the crusaders were paid.

Once the city was secured, the king offered the bishopric to an English priest, Gilbert of Hastings. He became the first bishop of Lisbon since the Arab conquest.

With Lisbon in hand, it was easy for the Portuguese to take Sintra and then Almada; the garrison at Palmela fled. Later, the king took Arruda, Alenquer, Alcobaça, Alfeizerão, and most likely, Torres Vedras and Mafra as well.

Thus, the capture of Lisbon was not an isolated incident nor a fortuitous happening, but rather the culmination
of a drive which had its inception as far back as 1134 with the beginning movement into Ladeia. Without the possession of Leiria, Santarém might not have been taken, and certainly, without Santarém, Lisbon could not have been forced to surrender.

BOOK REVIEW


reviewed by Richard A. Preto-Rodas

The latest in the Harvey House series of bilingual anthologies, Selections from Contemporary Portuguese Poetry: A Bilingual Selection is a collection of 48 poems by 23 writers arranged in chronological order according to date of birth. The translator and compiler, Miss Jean R. Longland, currently curator of the Library of the Hispanic Society of America, has concerned herself with the poetry from the post-Presença period; i.e., from 1940 to the present. For the Anglo-American student of Lusitanian letters, therefore, the selections provide a much needed continuation of the Oxford Book of Portuguese Verse. Indeed, among the initial examples of contemporary Portuguese poetry, the reader will find later poems by such writers as José Régio and Miguel Torga who also appear, although at an earlier state of their literary development, in the Bell-Vidigal collection. In her brief preface, Miss Longland informs us of her four-fold criterion for her choices: literary merit, a possibility of successful translation (the original metrical form has been maintained throughout), variety of moods and suitability for teaching.

In the foreword by Professor Ernesto Da Cal, the newcomer to Portuguese literature is presented with a succinct statement concerning the importance of Portuguese poetry in Iberian letters during the medieval period and its sensitive interpretation throughout the centuries
The Capture of Lisbon


2. PMH, Script, p. 11, Chronic Gathorum. Also, pp. 60-61, Vita S. Martini Sauriensis.

3. A. Botelho da Costa Veiga, "Ourique - Val de Vez," Anais, Vol. I (1940) gives as complete an account of these incursions into Galicia as is possible.


5. DMP:DR, p. 311. A diploma of Afonso Henrique in July, 1139, reads "... quando thamos in illo fossadis de Ladeia...", and another quote by Rui de Azevedo, op. cit. p. 32, note (2). "... aprendimos in tempor de pressúria de Fernando Captivo in loco qui dicitur Ladeia in Rabazal..." Since Fernando Captivo served Afonso Henrique in 1129-1137, this last could not have been later than 1137. The term pressúria was used to mean the taking and occupation of vacant or Moslem-held lands under a royal warrant or grant giving permanent possession of these lands.


7. Jorge das Neves Larcher, Castelos de Portugal, Coimbra, 1933, pp. 235-242, has a photograph of the ruins together with a description. It is overstating the matter to call Germanelo a castle.

8. PMH, Script, p. 13. Also, see Charles Wendell David, De Expugnatione Lyxbonensis, New York, 1837, pp. 102-102, where a crusader mentioning having been there five years before.

9. The surviving ruins indicate clearly the modest size and very simple plans by which most of these structures were built. The castles of Sta. Eulalia and Miranda have disappeared; those of Cóa, Avó and Arganil were small and simple. The first one at Leiria was probably little better than Germanelo. The one at Soure was small with only two towers, and Penela was larger than any of these mentioned. Since all such construction had to be done by the populace in addition to their agricultural work, their very simplicity suggests a sparse population.

10. PMH, Script, Chronic Gathorum, p. 13. Also, Alfredo Pimenta, Fontes Medievais da Historia de Portugal (Fontes), Lisboa, 1948, p. 38. See also, DMP:DR, pp. 211-213, and Nota XXXVII, pp. 671-688.


12. PMH, Script, p. 96. Translatio et Miracula S. Vincentii; "At ubi prefatus rex alfonsus iam tum a puero admodum comendabile, et famose indole adolescentes, sepe uictus hostibus, regibus superatis, ubribus quoque uastatis et captis, mauris esse terrori cepisset, ad locum prenominitum, ut inde secum beatissimum corpus afferret..." Costa Veiga, in his article in Anais, Vol. I (1946) op. cit., thinks that this occurred prior to the capture of Lisbon, and I agree.

13. David, De Expugnatione Lyxbonensis, op. cit., p. 69. "... adventum nostrum se prescissee nobis indicavit..."


15. David, De Expugnatione Lyxbonensis, op. cit. Also known as the Letter of Ocesto, is translated by David and gives a complete description of the voyage to Spain and the siege of Lisbon. On p. 141, the account says the Portuguese king dismissed his men and sent them home and sold the provisions or sent them to Santarém. In a footnote, David mentions some embarrassment of Portuguese historians over the idea that the Portuguese did not bear a full share of the siege, as might be implied in the letter. Onp. 171, the author refers to the presence of Portuguese troops, so they had returned.