

Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa

The July 16, 1212 **battle of Las Navas de Tolosa** is considered a major turning point in the history of Medieval Iberia. The sultan Caliph al-Nasir (Miramamolín) led the Almohad army, made up of Muslim armies from the African side of the Almohad empire., which included Tunisia, Algeria, Senegal, Morocco, Mauritania and Muslim armies from the southern part of the Iberian peninsula. Miramamolín crossed the straits in May 1211. From Córdoba he marched northward along the road which had led his father to Alarcos in 1195, (Alfonso VIII of Castile had been defeated by the Almohads in the so-called Disaster of Alarcos. After this victory the Almohads had taken important cities as Trujillo, Plasencia, Talavera, Cuenca and Uclés.) Miramamolín stopped in July to besiege the castle of Salvatierra, the chief seat of the knights of Calatrava since the loss of Calatrava itself in 1195. Set in the heart of a region held by the Muslims, Salvatierra was a symbol of Castilian determination to undo the effects of Alarcos. An ever-present challenge to the Muslims, it was, according to the caliph, the "right hand of the lord of Castile," and he hoped to cut it off. For two months the knights valiantly defended the castle until Alfonso VIII, unable to relieve them, authorized them to surrender. Since the summer was at an end, Miramamolín decided to return to Córdoba, preferring to resume the campaign in the spring.

The threat was so great for the Iberian Catholic kingdoms that the Pope Innocent III called European knights to a crusade. The forces of King Alfonso VIII of Castile were joined by the armies of his Catholic rivals, Sancho VII of Navarre, Afonso II of Portugal and Peter II of Aragon in battle. During the octave of Pentecost a cosmopolitan army began to assemble at Toledo. The Christian army set out from Toledo on 20 June 1212, it was divided into three sections. **Diego López de Haro, lord of Vizcaya**, led the vanguard composed of the troops from beyond the Pyrenees; then followed Pedro II of Aragon and the count of Ampurias, and finally the rearguard under the command of Alfonso VIII, accompanied by Archbishop Rodrigo Jeménez, the other bishops, and the masters of the military Orders.

To reach the plateau was the problem before Alfonso. The Moslems held the ground, and occupied in force the pass of Losa, nature's highway to the plain. No other pass was known and no easy way out of the quandary at first appeared, but a way was found, by miracle, a shepherd of the region knew of another mountain-pass. This man, Martin Halaja, renamed **Cabesa de Vaca** for the cow scull used to mark the entrance to the little known pass, had grazed his flocks in that vicinity for years. He told the king of the pass unknown to the enemy, which led to the tableland, he led **Lopez de Haro** and another through the Despeñaperros Pass. It was difficult but passable, the army was put in motion and traversed it all night long, and on the morning of the 14th of July the astonished eyes of the Mohammedans gazed on the Christian host, holding in force the borders of the plateau, and momentarily increasing in numbers and strength. Ten miles before the eyes of Alfonso and his men stretched the plain, level in the centre, in the distance rising in gentle slopes to its border of hills, like a vast natural amphitheatre. At the Navas de Tolosa 50,000 Christians faced a Muslim army 125,000 strong.

The Christians arose after midnight, the hour at which Christ, whom they worshipped, rose up victorious over death. Archbishop of Toledo, Rodrigo Jeménez de Rada exhorted the crusaders and absolved them of their sins, after hearing the solemnities of masses, and being renewed by the life-giving sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our God, they fortified themselves with the sign of the cross. They quickly took up their weapons of war, and with joy rushed to the battle as if they were invited to a feast. Neither the broken and stony places, nor the hollows of the valleys nor the steep mountains held them back. They advanced on the enemy prepared to die or to conquer. In the first rank at the side of the glorious king of Aragon was his noble, faithful, and powerful vassal **Diego Lopez de Haro** his son, **Lope Diaz**, and with him, Sancho Fernandez, son of Fernando, king of Leon, and his other relatives, friends and vassals, he had Sancho VII of Navarre on his right and Pedro II of Aragon on his left, with Garcia Romero commanding the first rank, while Alfonso VIII and the military Orders held the rear.

Those lined up in the first ranks discovered that the Moors were ready for battle. They attacked, fighting against one another, hand-to-hand, with lances, swords, and battle-axes; there was no room for archers. The Christians pressed on; the Moors repelled them; the clashing and tumult of arms was heard. The battle was joined, but neither side was overcome, although at times they pushed back the enemy, and at other times they were driven back by the enemy.

At one point certain wretched Christians who were retreating and fleeing cried out that the Christians were overcome. When the glorious and noble king of Castile, who was prepared rather to die than to be conquered, heard that cry of doom, he ordered the man who carried his standard before him, to spur his horse and hasten quickly up the hill where the force of the battle was; he did so at once. When the Christians came up, the Moors thought that new waves had come upon them and fell back, overcome by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the ensuing combat the kings of Aragon and Navarre carried out a pincers movement, and Alfonso VIII rushed forward, breaking the enemy lines.

. " On an eminence which gave an outlook over the whole broad space stood the emperor's tent, of three-ply crimson velvet flecked with gold, strings of pearls depending from its purple fringes. To guard it from assault rows of iron chains were stretched, before which stood three thousand camels in line. A circle of ten thousand Negro slaves formed a living wall chained to one another to guard Miramamolín's tent, their front bristling with the steel of their lances, whose butts were planted firmly in the sand. In the centre of this powerful guard stood the emperor, wearing the green dress and turban of his ancestral line. Grasping in one hand his scimitar, in the other he held a Koran, from which he read those passages of inspiration to the Moslems which promised the delights of Paradise to those who should fall in a holy war and the torments of hell to the coward who should desert his ranks."

Sancho VII of Navarre drove forward, Alvar Nuñez de Lara stole in between the negroes and the camels and with a cheer of triumph raised his banner in the interior of the line. Others followed breaking the defenses. The caliph mounted a mare turned tail and fled, and did not rest until he had reached Jaén; there he wrote to his subordinates trying to disguise with rhetoric the extent of his defeat.

His men were killed and slaughtered in droves, and the site of the camp and the tents of the Moors became the tombs of the fallen. Those who escaped from the battle wandered scattered about the mountains like sheep without a shepherd; wherever they were found, they were slaughtered.

The Christian triumph was complete. Thousands of Muslims were left dead on the field, and the booty was immense. The tapestry covering the entrance to the caliph's tent was sent as a trophy of war to the monastery of Las Huelgas near Burgos, where it still hangs in testimony of the victory. An exultant Alfonso VIII sent Miramamolín's standard and tent, with a detailed account of the crusade, to Innocent III.

On their side 100,000, armed men or more fell in the battle, according to the estimate of the Saracens whom were captured. Of the 2,000 Catholics killed were **Pedro Gomez de Acevedo** order of Calatrava, **Alfonso Fernandez de Valladares** comendador of the order of Santiago, **Pedro Arias** master of the order of Santiago, died of wounds on the third of August, and **Gomez Ramirez** master of the orden del Temple. **Ruy Diaz** master of the orden de Calatrava resigned from his wounds. Before the end of the year 1213, Pedro II of Aragon, who had fought valiantly at Las Navas de Tolosa, met his death on the field of Muret, a victim of the **Albigensian** Crusade. A form of Manicheism, the Albigensian heresy, also known as Catharism, had gained a strong base in Languedoc where the rulers of Barcelona always had had important feudal interests. St. Dominic (Domingo de Guzmán), a canon of Osma, devoted his life to preaching to the heretics and founded the Order of Preachers in 1209 to carry on the work. from [A History of Spain](#) by Joseph F. O'Callaghan and from [The Latin Chronicle of the Kings of Castile](#), translated with an Introduction and Notes by Joseph F. O'Callaghan

O.D.