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Again

The Asturian Kingdom

Chroniclers and Kings, 791–910

By the end of the eighth century, the small Christian kingdom in the Asturias appears to have been securely established. Its monarch, Alfonso II (791–842) would reign for over half a century, and the recently created town of Oviedo would remain its capital and benefit from the patronage of successive rulers until the early tenth century. King Alfonso, we are told, “set in place the whole order of the Goths, as it had been in Toledo, as much in the church as in the palace.”¹ Quite what was meant by this has given rise to scholarly debate for many years, as this brief statement has been seen as representing our best clue as to the cultural aspirations of the Asturian monarchy, and thus a guide to the way it represented itself and even to the stylistic influences on its architecture. A rather different interpretation will be suggested here, but this requires a prior understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence for the history of the kingdom.

Asturian Sources

For our knowledge of the events of his reign, the social organization of his kingdom, and its cultural aspirations under his long rule, we depend almost exclusively on the all too brief testimony of three short chronicle texts that received the form we have them in today several decades later. They testify to the perceptions of the age of King Alfonso III (866–910) and his sons far more than to that of Alfonso II. At a simple factual level, some

¹ *Chronica Albeldensia*, XV. 9: ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 174.

of their narrative can be shown to be wrong, particularly when it concerns the outcome of conflicts with al-Andalus, for which we have the alternative accounts of the more detailed Arabic sources. While these are no less likely to be prejudiced in their verdicts on the outcome of battles and raids, they can be sometimes be shown to be more accurate in their description of such episodes than the Asturian chronicles.

For purely internal matters within the kingdom, there are few such checks on the chroniclers' accounts, though the gradually increasing body of documentary evidence forms an additional source. Here, too, problems of reliability arise. From the early twentieth century, when they first began to receive critical scholarly treatment, the question of the authenticity of many of the Asturian charters of this period has been a matter of contention. Some historians have taken a minimalist position, doubting the trustworthiness of almost anything that cannot be proved positively to be authentic, while others allow a much wider degree of confidence in most of them.² Part of the problem is that few of the documents survive as original or "single sheet" charters, and even these do not *ipso facto* have to be reliable. When a cartulary was compiled the institution creating it often then seems not to have bothered to preserve the individual documents of benefaction, sale or exchange that had been copied into it.

Cartularies are essentially a product of the later eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and in the absence of originals there is no way of being certain that the monastic and cathedral scribes who compiled them copied the texts accurately or did not effect alterations, for various motives, so as to make the documents better reflect what was felt to be the institution's rights.³ Critical study can detect the existence of certain anomalous features in any such document, but if they do not deviate too far from the norms of equivalent texts from the same period, it is hard to be certain whether or not they have been slightly "improved" during copying – or for that matter at some earlier stage, as originals were also copied as single sheet documents when they were in danger of fading or had suffered other damage, and thus might have their contents altered in the process.

Fortunately, such tampering with earlier texts, or even their complete fabrication, was not always performed with great subtlety. One of the earliest and, in appearance, most grandiose, of the cartularies of the northern Spanish kingdoms is the *Liber Testamentorum* or Book of Bequests of the cathedral of Oviedo, which was compiled by Bishop Pelayo of Oviedo in 1109. As well as a few papal bulls, this contains an impressive collection of

² Barrau-Dihigo, "Étude."

³ Morelle and Parisse.

deeds of gift to and confirmation of the property and rights of the cathedral by successive Asturian and then Leonese kings. However, it has been shown that hardly any of the documents are completely genuine; some are outright forgeries and the majority significantly interpolated with spurious material.⁴ Virtually all of the royal charters fall into the category of complete forgeries, having been fabricated by Bishop Pelayo for very specific purposes relating to his efforts to secure the independence of his see from control by either the archbishopric of Toledo or that of Santiago, and for the promotion of Oviedo as a pilgrim destination. While this is an extreme example, it typifies the problem of charter authenticity.

While the Asturian chronicles, our main narrative source, have never been seen as later fabrications – though forged histories have bedeviled the study of some periods and topics in Spanish medieval history – their origins and compositional processes remain debatable.⁵ These chronicles, few in number and short in length, were all written up to a century after the time of Alfonso II, and attempts to prove the existence of earlier versions of them closer to his time have so far proved unsuccessful. There are essentially only two proper chronicles, though the existence of two versions of one of them adds a complication. What was taken as a separate third work, known as *The Prophetic Chronicle*, is best seen as a component of a larger compilation of historical texts.⁶

The earliest of these works, of uncertain origin, is the one that is known as the *Chronicle of Albelda*, taking its name from a monastery in the Rioja where a very brief history of the kings of Pamplona covering the years 906 to 976 was added to its narrative sometime around 980.⁷ The original version of the chronicle may have been compiled in 881, but, along with a continuation for the years 882 and 883, it provides the most substantial account of the first eighteen years of the reign of Alfonso III. Where it was originally written is not clear, but Oviedo is the most probable location, at or near the royal court. In form, the chronicle consists of a series of separate sections strung together to produce an overall chronological narrative that starts with the Creation, but including a number of geographical and other excursuses. Thus it commences not with Adam but with a listing said to have been made by four “very wise men,” Nicodosus, Didim(ic)us, Teudotus, and Policlitus, “in the time of Julius Caesar,” of the dimensions of the world

⁴ Fernández Conde, *El Libro de Los Testamentos*, 103–372 for a study of each text, and 373–376 for the overall assessment.

⁵ Godoy Alcántara for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forged chronicles.

⁶ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 187–188.

⁷ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 188. This is only found in two manuscripts.

and the number of seas, islands, mountains, provinces, towns, rivers, and peoples to be found in the different parts of it. There follow short extracts from Isidore of Seville and other sources on the name *Spania*, the number of Spanish provinces and their principal cities, the names and lengths of the major Spanish rivers, “the Seven Wonders of the World,” the characteristic features of various peoples, the best products of Spanish regions, and the letters of the alphabet, before we reach the first chronological computation, which ends in AD 883, “the eighteenth year of the reign of Alfonso, son of the glorious King Ordoño.”⁸ There is also a list of episcopal sees and the names of the bishops occupying them from the same period.

More strictly secular historical records come in the form of a list of the succession of Roman kings and emperors, with their reign lengths, extending up to Tiberius III (698–705). From the time of the emperor Maurice (582–602), these are paralleled by the names and regnal years of the Visigothic kings. A full listing of the Gothic kings, from Athanaric to Roderic follows as the next section, with brief mention of some events of their reigns. Only three of the manuscripts of the chronicle then extend this by recording the names of the “Catholic kings of León,” from Pelagius to Ramiro III (966–985).⁹ Then comes the part of the work that has attracted the most attention as a source of original historical information: a narrative chronicle of the kings from Pelagius to the year 883, written in more detail than anything that has preceded it.

The work ends in some of its manuscripts with sections devoted to Islamic history and chronology. A genealogy of the Prophet Muḥammad starts with Abraham and then extends to the Umayyad dynasty, concluding with “Muḥammad (I) who is now king in Córdoba,” but referring also to two of his sons, Al-Mundhir and ‘Abd Allāh, who succeeded him in 886 and 888 respectively.¹⁰ The next section opens with a few lines on the conquest of Spain by the Arabs, here dated to November 11, 714, and continues with a list of the names of the governors and the lengths of their tenure of office. Then comes another list of the Spanish Umayyads up to 883 that ends with a prophecy attributed to Ezekiel about the confrontations between Ishmael and Gog. This is interpreted in a concluding section as prophetic evidence for the imminent expulsion of the Arabs from Spain.

⁸ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 154–156.

⁹ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 172. One of the three only goes as far as the inauguration of Ramiro II in 931, but includes full regnal lengths that are lacking in the others.

¹⁰ That these two alone of his many sons are thus included implies the text as we have it must actually date from no earlier than 888, even if the rest of its narrative does not extend as late as this.

It is clear that this is a compilation of different sources, representing some that must have originated in al-Andalus – the genealogy of the prophet Muḥammad and the lists of governors and Umayyad amīrs – and others, such as the chronicle of the kings of Oviedo, that can only have been composed in the Asturias. Some sections dealing with the preceding Visigothic period could have come from either. This has led, not least, to the final sections of southern material, including the spurious prophecy attributed to Ezekiel and its claim of imminent freedom from Arab rule, being treated as forming a separate work that has been called “The Prophetic Chronicle,” which was incorporated wholesale into the Asturian “Chronicle of Albelda.”¹¹

There are various problems with such a view. For one thing, the year 883 apparently features as the end point for both the Asturian and the Umayyad narratives. The preservation of the text in later manuscripts, several of which contain continuations of some of the sections that incorporate not just Leonese and Pamplonan information but also Umayyad dynastic details, makes it difficult to reconstruct its original state. There is also a question as to how and when the sections relating to Andalusī history made their way to the Asturias. A substantial collection of books from Córdoba, possibly his own library, may have accompanied the body of the martyr Eulogius, executed in 859, when transferred to Oviedo in 884 following diplomatic negotiations, though this is not attested to in any source. But it has been argued that a list of these books is what has been preserved on the final folio of a manuscript formerly in Oviedo Cathedral and now in the library of the Escorial (MS R. II. 18).¹²

Even if that be the case, nothing in that list of books corresponds to the historical collection forming the so-called Prophetic Chronicle, and in any case the compiler was, by his or her own account, working in 883, a few months before the arrival of the relics of St Eulogius in Oviedo in November 884. We face the prospect of having to argue that, coincidentally, two separate chroniclers were at work in 883, one in the Asturias and the other in al-Andalus, both of whom ended their work in that year. The text of the southern author then migrated rapidly northwards into the hands of the northern author, who incorporated it wholesale into his own compilation, despite the fact that the prophecy of the imminent collapse of Arab rule in al-Andalus had already proved false. It is probably simpler to assume that a single compiler was working in 883 in the Asturias, most likely in Oviedo,

¹¹ Manuel Gomez Moreno, “Las primeras crónicas,” 622–628. This edition omits all the non-historical sections entirely.

¹² On which see Díaz y Díaz, *Manuscritos visigóticos*, 64–69.

and put together the various items at his disposal, including materials of southern origin, and that it was he too who devised the prophecy of Ishmaelite doom.

The other chronicle source for the history of the Asturian kingdom is less complex in construction but possesses a particular difficulty of its own: it survives in two distinct versions, both of which are close in date. The work itself is known as the Chronicle of Alfonso III, as the preface found in one of the two versions suggests that it was the king himself who was the author. This preface takes the form of a letter to a certain Sebastian. In the early twelfth century Bishop Pelayo of Oviedo (1098/1101–1130) claimed that this Sebastian had been both a bishop of Salamanca and also the compiler of the chronicle, but there is no indication of this in the prefatory letter, or that its recipient was a bishop or indeed any other kind of cleric.

The two versions of this text, which differ in language and content to a surprising degree, have headings that suggest that the original title was “Chronicle of the Visigoths from the time of King Wamba up till now,” but with the “now” being qualified in one case as the reign of Ordoño, son of King Alfonso, and in the other as “the time of the Glorious King García, son of Alfonso of Holy Memory.”¹³ These kings are normally identified as two of the sons and successors of Alfonso III, Ordoño II (914–924) and García I (910–914) respectively. The text in both versions ends with the death of their grandfather, Ordoño I (850–866) and the accession of their father. So, the headings do not necessarily indicate the respective dates of compilation or that one version necessarily precedes the other.

The two versions enjoy markedly different manuscript traditions, in that the one containing the prefatory letter to Sebastian together with the heading referring to King García, only survives in copies made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of earlier manuscripts now lost. On the other hand, the version associated with Ordoño II is preserved in two early manuscripts as well as in some later copies. The earlier of the two of these codices is dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century. It is known as the “Roda Codex,” as it once belonged to the Pyrenean cathedral of Roda de Isábena, although it was probably compiled for bishop Sisebut of Pamplona (988–c.1000).¹⁴ As a result, the version of the Chronicle of Alfonso III that it contains has been called the *Rotense*, while the other one is normally referred to as the *ad Sebastianum*, thanks to its prefatory letter.

There have been various arguments over why the two versions differ as much as they do, and indeed why two variant forms of a single work should

¹³ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 114–115.

¹⁴ Ruíz García, 393–405.

have come into existence so close to the probable date of composition of the original, which has to be sometime in the reign of Alfonso III. There is also debate as to whether or not it was that king himself who composed the work in its first form, and over what that earliest text may have contained. On the latter question, it has been suggested that the royal original was little more than a narrative of the reign of the king's father, Ordoño I, to which material was added to link it to the historical accounts of the Visigothic kingdom. In the variant headings and in the text itself in both versions, the starting point is the death of Recesuinth and the accession of Wamba in 672. This may seem a little odd, in that the continuous recording of the history of the Gothic kingdom had in practice ended with Isidore's Chronicle and his *History of the Goths*, both of which extend their coverage no later than the 630s. It is the latter work of Isidore in particular that the Chronicle of Alfonso III is trying to continue. However, there seems to have existed a third version of Isidore's *History of the Goths* that was put together after his death which combined elements from both of the two original versions he composed and also extended its chronological coverage to the reign of Wamba, though by no more substantial a means than by a list of kings and their reign lengths.¹⁵ It was this post-Isidoran version of c.672 that was continued by the Chronicle of Alfonso III.

Scholarly opinion has long been divided over the compositional history of this chronicle in its two forms. In 1932, in the earliest modern edition, it was suggested that the Roda text represents the earlier form, with the *Ad Sebastianum* being a later revision, rewritten to make certain ideological points as well as improve the literary style.¹⁶ A more recent suggestion is that both versions derive independently from a shorter original chronicle, no longer extant, written in the reign of Alfonso II, and thus one is not a revision of the other.¹⁷ The precise nature and extent of this lost original remain debatable. Although much of the information contained in both versions used to be accepted almost literally, it is now recognized that an ideological agenda underlies some of the narrative of all these chronicles, most obviously in the *Ad Sebastianum*.¹⁸ For example, this version of the chronicle describes Pelagius explicitly as being of royal descent, while the Roda text depicts him as the sword-bearer of the last Visigothic kings, and thus no more than a member of the higher nobility. In general, the *Ad Sebastianum* version highlights supposed continuity between the Asturian

¹⁵ Collins, "Ambrosio de Morales."

¹⁶ Gómez Moreno, "Las primeras crónicas," 562–623.

¹⁷ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 102; *Die Chronik Alfons' III*, ed. Prelog, clvi.

¹⁸ *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. Gil, 79.

monarchy and aristocracy and their Visigothic predecessors. This affects, not least, the question of the supposed depopulation and subsequent repopulation of the Meseta, the high plateau in the center of the northern half of Spain, in the mid-eighth and later ninth to tenth centuries respectively.¹⁹

For the history of the Asturian kingdom in the ninth century, it is these chronicles that provide the main narrative framework, though the Chronicle of Alfonso III has no more to say after 866 and the Albelda Chronicle ends in 883. Thereafter, the historiographical situation becomes even more complicated, and the quantity and value of the information available even more limited. No chronicle sources are known to us as having been written in the tenth century in the Asturias/León any more than in Navarre/Pamplona. It is not until the first quarter of the eleventh century that a contemporary chronicler can be found at work. This was a man who may have been called Sampiro, and indeed is generally so named by historians of the period, but this, again, is largely on the authority of the testimony of that arch deceiver, Bishop Pelayo of Oviedo.

We have already encountered the bishop as the forger or interpolator of the great majority of the charters he put together in his *Liber Testamentorum* or cartulary of the cathedral church of Oviedo in 1109. But this was not his only literary project. He also compiled a historical narrative from the Creation up to the reign of Alfonso VI (1072–1109) by running together a number of earlier works and adding an original chronicle of his own at the end. This received its final form c.1132, after the bishop had been deposed from his see and forced into a lengthy retirement. To each of the individual components of his collection of chronicles Pelayo attributed an episcopal author, including “Isidore Junior, Bishop of *Pax Iulia* (Beja),” Julian “Archbishop” of Toledo, “Sebastian, Bishop of Salamanca,” and “Sampiro, Bishop of Astorga.” Although there seems to have been a bishop of Astorga called Sampiro around the years from 1027 to 1035, this in itself is not sufficient ground for trusting Pelayo’s attribution, not least because he was, to put it mildly, more than a little inventive, both in his own historical writings and in the way he altered those of his predecessors, some of whose identities he distorted or created, as we saw in the case of Sebastian and the Chronicle of Alfonso III. Modern attempts to flesh out Sampiro by additionally identifying him as a notary in the service of some of the last Asturian kings have only made matters worse as this has extended his career, more than a little improbably, back into the early 980s.²⁰

¹⁹ For a controversial interpretation of the role of these texts in the development of a neo-Visigothic ideology of Asturian and then Leonese kingship see Deswarte, *De la destruction*.

²⁰ Pérez de Urbel, *Sampiro, su crónica*, 11–89.

Even if we accept Pelayo's assignment of the authorship of a chronicle to a certain Sampiro, whether or not bishop of Astorga, the work itself is equally problematic. For one thing it does not survive as an autonomous historical text. Much of what Pelayo calls the Chronicle of Sampiro also appears in an anonymous twelfth-century compilation known as the *Historia Silense* or "Silos History." In the light of the convoluted origins of all the other works previously discussed, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that this was not actually written at, let alone about, the monastery of Silos, and was instead most probably compiled in León or the monastery of Sahagún. Its anonymous author said that he intended to record the life and deeds of Alfonso VI, but his narrative fails to extend beyond the reign of the king's father, Fernando I (1037–1065).²¹ However, the fact that he included much of the text of what Pelayo called the Chronicle of Sampiro is particularly helpful, as the *Historia Silense* version can be compared with that given by the bishop in his own collection of chronicles. In so doing it immediately becomes apparent that yet again Pelayo has been taking liberties as his text of Sampiro's work contains several interpolations and alterations.²² These insertions support Pelayo's idiosyncratic interpretation of the history of the diocese of Oviedo and its sacred relics and are clearly the product of his fanciful but purposeful imagination.

Overall, our narrative sources are strongest in dealing with the middle of the ninth century, and disappointingly thin for all of the tenth, although it is clear that this was a period of considerable instability. At least for the tenth century the quantity of charter evidence increases greatly, and there are generally fewer problems of authenticity than is the case with those from earlier periods. As a result we can find some historical references, and can also use the more abundant documentation to confirm and to enhance the chronicle evidence relating to the order and chronology of the kings. More important still is the fact that the increased quantity of royal charters, which are almost always witnessed by members of the king's court, can provide us with information about those in attendance on the monarchs. Although there is only a limited stock of personal names in currency it is also possible to employ charter evidence more widely to reconstruct the genealogies of many of the leading noble families of the kingdoms. The presence or absence of members of these noble lineages at court can offer useful political indications, for example, of those families that supported rival monarchs

²¹ On the *Historia* see Wreglesworth, but see also Fletcher, "A Twelfth-Century View."

²² Although no complete modern edition of Pelayo's collection as a whole yet exists, the texts of his version of Sampiro and that to be found in the *Historia Silense* can be compared in Pérez de Urbel, *Sampiro*, 275–346.

or were seemingly in or out of royal favor in a particular reign. While a little arid when compared with the wealth of details about personalities and politics that can be culled from large-scale narrative histories, these charter-based studies of royal and seigneurial alliances and enmities are the best resource available for the historian of medieval Christian Spain, not just in this period but also for the two centuries or more that followed.²³

Kings and Would-be Kings

Pelagius, or Pelayo (for clarity's sake we will refer to him as Pelagius), was a successful regional rebel. His revolt in the Asturias, possibly in 718 or 722, gave rise to a monarchy that would eventually present itself as the heir to Gothic kingdom of Toledo. But this was certainly not how these events were seen at the time.²⁴ Almost all that we know about the emergence of the Asturian kingdom comes from the evidence of later periods, as just discussed. The earliest document to bear the name of one of its rulers was the donation made on August 23, 775 by Silo (774–783), which survives in the archive of León Cathedral as a very early copy of the lost original.²⁵ This charter contained a grant of land made to three priests and a group of other monks to enable them to found a monastery. One remarkable feature of the document, in the light of the traditional view of the history of the Asturian monarchy, is that Silo bears no title. The text opens simply with his name "Silo," and is signed by him in person, without any reference to his rank or status: "Silo this deed of gift in my [own] hand X."²⁶ At the bottom of the charter there is a later confirmation by "Adefonsus," almost certainly Alfonso II, but again without a royal title attached to the name.

The records of the Visigothic period are relatively few in number, but royal documents, like the coinage, always emphasized the king's status and included his title along with his name. Documents more generally were dated by reference to the year of the reign of the current monarch. This was also standard practice in the Frankish kingdoms throughout this period, as

²³ See the reconstruction of the politics of the period c.1065 to 1109, which has to be largely charter based, in Reilly, *Kingdom of León-Castilla* and the same author's books on Queen Urraca and Alfonso VII.

²⁴ Hillgarth, 57–81.

²⁵ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 1, doc. 9, pp. 66–71, with photograph of the document. Doubt has been cast on its authenticity in García Leal.

²⁶ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 1, doc. 9, p. 68. Discovered in the cathedral by one of the canons in 1788, the charter was first published in *España Sagrada*, but the editor, Manuel Risco, altered the opening invocation to read "Domnus Silo": vol. 38 (Madrid, 1793), app. 1, p. 301.

well as those of the Lombards and the Anglo-Saxons. So it is surprising to find that most of the Asturian private charters, written for both clerical and lay donors and beneficiaries, generally do not use Asturian regnal years as a means of dating. Nor do they often include any other mention of the king, as in the phrase “while X was ruling in Y,” which became standard practice in tenth-century Castile, for example.

This may be the product of a distinctive Asturian diplomatic tradition. However, the same apparently deliberate omission of a royal title can be found in the earliest known church dedication in the nascent kingdom. This is recorded in an inscription from Cangas de Onis, the residence of Pelagius’s son Fafila (737–739), who, together with his wife Froiliuba, built a church dedicated to the Holy Cross. The church no longer survives but the inscription itself was recorded and studied by several scholars in the decades preceding its own destruction in the Spanish Civil War.²⁷ Here too perhaps the most perplexing feature of the text is the lack of any mention of the two donors’ status, despite the fact that Fafila was, according to the chronicle narratives, the second king of the Asturias, and the inscription recorded his building of a church in his new capital that had a very significant dedication. We know that a relic of the cross was one of the most treasured possessions of the Asturian monarchs in Oviedo under Alfonso II, and it may previously have been housed here.²⁸ The church in Cangas was also the setting for important liturgical ceremonies, which might have included those of kingship itself.²⁹

Faced with both of these pieces of evidence, the suspicion arises that the rulers of the Asturias did not call themselves kings at this time.³⁰ Certainly, looking at the strictly contemporary sources of information, it is not possible to detect the explicit existence of a monarchy in the Asturias before the time of Alfonso II at the earliest. This is less surprising than it might seem. The traditions of the Visigothic kingdom on the processes of king-making were very specific: a legitimate monarch had first to be elected by the palatine nobility and then had to receive unction in Toledo. Neither of these conditions could be met after 711. Furthermore, since the Late Roman period western monarchies had been ethnic in their self-definition, that is

²⁷ The best discussion and reconstruction is now to be found in Díaz y Díaz, *Asturias en el siglo VIII*, 31–41 and plate 1.

²⁸ Manzanares Rodríguez, 6–11; see in general García de Castro Valdés, “Las primeras fundaciones.”

²⁹ For aspects of Visigothic royal liturgy and the role played in it by certain key churches in Toledo see Roger Collins, “Julian of Toledo,” item III, 17–19.

³⁰ Pelagius is only referred to as *princeps* or prince in Alfonso II’s charter of 812 confirming the possessions of the church of Oviedo; see Hillgarth, 65–66.

to say they presented the kings as rulers of a specific people – for example, the Franks or the Lombards. After 711, nobody could claim rulership of all the Goths. So the nature of kingship itself in the Iberian peninsula had to change from something that was based on exclusive authority over a whole *gens* or people, to something more limited in not just territorial but also ethnic extent.

All in all, it is not so surprising that the emergence of a new monarchy in the Asturias was hesitant. There was clear discontinuity with the Visigothic kingdom, whose destruction was interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure with the sins of its rulers.³¹ There was also no memory of any distant “kingdom of the Asturias” to be revived in the way that some of the post-Roman monarchies in Britain based their identity on those of pre-conquest tribal units. In any case, the influx of refugees and the territorial expansion from the mid-eighth century onwards into Basque and Galician lands made it impossible for the inhabitants of the emerging kingdom to coalesce around a common Asturian identity. Indeed, there is very little explicit mention of the *Astures* after 711. So we should not be surprised that it took time for the local warlords in the Asturias to take the title of king. It may be, therefore, that the notoriously ambiguous statement in the Chronicle of Albelda that Alfonso II “established in Oviedo the whole order of the Goths, as it had been in Toledo, both in church and palace,” which has generated so much scholarly debate, actually refers to the formal establishment of a new monarchy in his day.³²

He was certainly the first to be found being referred to as *rex*, or king, in an authentic charter of the period.³³ There was still the problem of the entity of which he was the monarch. No new ethnic descriptor emerges, as the kingdom did not have an ethnically unified population, and the label “Gothic” remained unclaimed.³⁴ Instead, we find Alfonso and his successors adopting what may be called “residential” titles, as, for example, in a charter of 863, which refers to Ordoño I as “our lord, residing in the Asturias.”³⁵ The influence here may be Frankish, as while Charlemagne (768–814) used the title of *Rex Francorum* or “King of the Franks” (until his imperial coronation in 800), after the division of the Frankish Empire, kings began referring to

³¹ Hillgarth, 57 and 60–65.

³² *Chronica Albeldensia*, 9, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 174.

³³ Floriano I, doc. 30 of November 18, 822, recording the foundation of the monastery of Tobiellas, 156–158. Earlier relevant documents are false or interpolated.

³⁴ Though the *Chronica Albeldensia* did list the Asturian kings as *Ordo Gotorum Obetensium Regum*, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 173. But this style is not found elsewhere.

³⁵ *imperante principe domno nostro Ordonio residente in Asturias*: Floriano, *Diplomática*, 1, doc. 79, p. 320.

themselves territorially. Thus, Louis the German (817–876) used the style “King in Eastern Francia.”³⁶

The idea that the Asturian regime took the best part of a century to turn itself into a fully-fledged, self-proclaiming monarchy may still seem perplexing. Historians of the Middle Ages tend, unintentionally, to adopt a centrist stance, taking it for granted that territory not forming part of one particular kingdom or state must necessarily belong to another. Thus, in the case of Spain after 711, whatever on the map is not colored red (for example), as being part of the Umayyad amirate, will be painted blue as belonging to the kingdom of the Asturias. But it took nearly three decades for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān I to make himself master of all of al-Andalus, and far longer for the rulers of the Asturias to do the same for what became the core territories of their realm. In the same way, our ingrained respect for centralized authority makes us instinctively assume that virtually everyone alive in these centuries must have had a monarch or ruler of whatever title, whether or not they recognized his or her authority in practice. Simply put, if someone seems to be saying to us “I am the king of Spain,” we tend to believe them without asking to see their credentials. But again, in the early Middle Ages this is not a wise thing to do, least of all when it comes to the Iberian Peninsula. Many parts of it got along quite well with their own forms of independent regional self-government in the period between the end of Roman rule over *Hispania* in the early fifth century and the final establishment of Visigothic royal control under Leovigild in the late sixth.³⁷ The same would happen again, as will be seen, in many parts of al-Andalus at several points in the Umayyad era and became institutionalized in the succeeding Ta’ifa period.

We must not take it for granted that everyone was worried about who or what was the legally constituted authority in their neck of the wood, let alone desperately anxious to have someone to whom they could pay their taxes. A recent *Marxisante* analysis has suggested that these post-Roman centuries were, in some parts at least, a never-to-be-repeated golden age for the peasantry, free of the need to deplete their hard-won surpluses or waste their labor in the payment of rents and dues and the rendering of services.³⁸ Whether or not such conditions ever existed in reality, the principal that social groups did not always need to be part of a fully

³⁶ For the first time in 833: Glansdorff, 123. His previous title, from 817, of King of the Bavarians made perfect sense as he was their only ruler.

³⁷ Roger Collins, “Mérida and Toledo.”

³⁸ Wickham, 536–550.

hierarchical sociopolitical system in order to function efficiently and in their own best interests can be applied more widely in this period.

As the examples given above suggest, the expulsion of the Berber garrisons from the central Asturian region, probably following a battle of whatever scale in the vicinity of Covadonga, did not automatically have to lead to the establishment of a kingdom. Indeed, that would have been hard to do. As we have seen, the Gothic kingdom was discredited, and in any case could not easily be replicated as a unitary ethnic identity just in the Asturias, and there seems to have been no local indigenous tradition to resurrect. Hardly any of the other successful regional rebels of these centuries claimed to be replacing the central authority they had just defied. Loose local forms of governance seem to have been preferred.

It may be objected that in the case of the Asturian revolt there was also a religious divide. However, there were very few Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula in the early eighth century, and we do not know to what extent the Berbers yet featured amongst them. There is no evidence beyond the accretion of later legends in the Covadonga story that there existed any awareness of a difference in religious belief between the new conquerors and the conquered at this time, or that it would have mattered had there been one. Pelagius, unlike many others in these centuries, got away with it. A subsequent ideological rewriting of history in the age of Alfonso III turned his achievement into the creation of a Christian monarchy born in the defeat of alien Muslim overlords, and thus into the first step on the road to Reconquista.

In any case, the line of rulers initiated by Pelagius may either not have been of Asturian origin, or perhaps had not been so for long. The two versions of the Chronicle of Alfonso III, while giving different accounts of his ancestry, agree that Pelagius came to the Asturias as a refugee in the aftermath of the Arab invasion. The Chronicle of Albelda tells yet another story, presenting him as a Gothic noble expelled from Toledo by Wittiza, and thus starting his Asturian exile before the conquest. We may prefer to suspect that he was actually an indigenous regional potentate, but there is no proof either way. All that is certain is that the later chroniclers had inherited no clear account of his origins and career.

Even more obscure may be the circumstances in which his dynasty was replaced, in the year 739 according to the logic of the later regnal lists. According to both versions of the Chronicle of Alfonso III, Pelagius's son and heir, Fafila, was killed by a bear "while he was larking about."³⁹ He was

³⁹ *Quadam occasione levitates ab urso interfectus est* (unless Ursus is a personal name!): *Adefonsi Tertii Chronica* 12, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 130–131.

succeeded by his brother-in-law, Alfonso I, son of Peter, *Dux* of Cantabria. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that the inscription previously mentioned, recording the foundation of the Church of the Holy Cross in Cangas de Onis by Fafila and his wife Froiliuba, also indicates that they had children, of whom no more is ever heard.⁴⁰ While it became standard practice, as had also been the case in the Visigothic kingdom, for a new ruler to be elected by the leading members of the court aristocracy, there exists the alternative possibility that Alfonso only married Fafila's sister Ermesinda after his accession, in order to strengthen his position, and therefore that the events of 739 mark a seizure of power in the tiny Asturian state by the Cantabrian rulers.

The modern autonomous region of Cantabria is on the Biscay coast, east of the Asturias, and centered on Santander. However, the geographical term had a much wider application in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, referring to the upper valley of the Ebro, including much of what would now be called the Rioja.⁴¹ It was this broader region to which the chroniclers were referring. As there is no reference to a "Duke of Cantabria" in the Visigothic period, we cannot know if Peter and his son Alfonso belonged to an established line of holders of this office, though this is likely. The eastern regions remained of particular interest to the new ruling house, as Alfonso I's son and successor Fruela I "the Cruel" (757–768) married Munia, whose family came from the Basque-speaking region of Alava. This may be the first manifestation of what becomes a major political dynamic of the kingdom of the Asturias and of its Leonese successor: different branches of the royal dynasty tended to make alliances with the nobility of either Galicia or the Basque regions, sometimes switching from one to the other. Many examples of this will emerge from a survey of the history of the ninth and tenth centuries.

Winners and Losers

If the brief, Asturian chronicles are best understood as retelling the history of the kingdom from the perspective of the very late ninth and early tenth centuries, and so are not always a safe guide to the realities of earlier periods;

⁴⁰ . . . *cum Froiliuba coniuge ac suorum prolium pignera nata*: Díaz y Díaz, *Asturias en el siglo VIII*, 32.

⁴¹ This was first shown to be the case by Florez in the lengthy introduction to vol. 24 of his *España Sagrada* (Madrid, 1768). This is reprinted with introduction and commentary in Teja and Iglesias-Gil.

little is left on which to rely for a narrative of events. But in a few cases an episode described can be identified with one also recounted in one or more of the Arab sources, as, for example, the Battle of Lutos. Unfortunately, as in this instance, the evidence can be contradictory and not easily reconciled. Both versions of the Chronicle of Alfonso III state that Alfonso II won a great victory at Lutos in the third year of his reign, which would be 793/4. In the battle, the Arab commander *Mugait* (*Mukehit* in the *Ad Sebastianum*) was killed, apparently along with seventy thousand of his men.⁴²

On the other hand, Ibn 'Idhārī, following Ibn Ḥayyān, whose original work on this period is lost, refers to a campaign in the summer of 793 led by 'Abd al-Mālik b. Wahīd b. Mugit, which returned home with the heads of forty-five thousand Christians and much loot. But this expedition seems to have been directed against the Frankish March in former Visigothic Septimania, and Narbonne is mentioned in particular. He also describes another expedition, in 795, led by 'Abd al-Karīm b. Mugit. The initial target of this was Astorga, and the chronicler records that the Arab general raised contingents from the Basques amongst others, who took part in his ensuing victory over the Asturians, in the course of which "their bravest warriors perished and a great number of others who fell into our hands were put to death after the battle on the orders of 'Abd al-Karīm."⁴³ Alfonso is said to have taken to flight, pursued by the Umayyad forces, "not without burning all the buildings they encountered and carrying off all the loot," including some of the Asturian king's treasure.

While the figures for casualties given by both Christian and Muslim chroniclers are clearly nonsensical, and there is a minor disagreement over chronology, there is an absolute contradiction in the stated outcome of this battle. But it can easily be resolved in that there are copious other references in the *Muqtabis* of Ibn Ḥayyān to 'Abd al-Karīm b. Mugit, who went on to serve as *ḥajīb* under al-Ḥakam I (796–822) and into the opening years of the reign of his successor, 'Abd al-Raḥmān II. He last appears leading another of his many military expeditions in 823.⁴⁴ So, if the Asturian chronicles are wrong about his death in the battle of Lutos in 793/4 (*recte* 795), then little faith can be placed in their version of whose victory it had been. It is worth noting, though, that they incorporate an abbreviated but comprehensible form of Ibn Mugit's name, suggesting the survival of some kind of authentic record in the Asturias from the time.

⁴² Ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 138–139.

⁴³ Ibn 'Idhārī, *al-Bayān*, II, ah 177–179.

⁴⁴ Ibn Ḥayyān, *al-Muqtabis*, II.1, ah 208, f. 176v of the MS.

Most of the scanty details in the Asturian chronicles have no way of being similarly cross-referenced to other sources and must stand or fall on their own inherent probability or lack of it. In a very small number of instances an event they mention may leave a trace of itself in a contemporary charter. These are legal documents recording sales, gifts, and exchanges, along with a smaller number of others that contain judicial decisions. All relate to property, mainly land, and to a much lesser extent livestock, but can also include the unfree or members of the servile population, usually to record the failure of an individual's legal attempt to challenge his or her dependent status. Relatively few have survived from the eighth or early ninth centuries, and many of these are either later forgeries or have had their text interpolated, for example, to try to support claims to ownership of much more than the property designated in the original. Thus, hardly more than fifty such documents are known from the period from 711 to the death of Ramiro I in 850, and of these only one may survive as an original; the rest are later copies, mainly in cartularies.⁴⁵ Of these less than half are authentic; the others being either completely fabricated or so heavily interpolated as to make it impossible for the reliable elements in their content to be extracted. Not all scholars are agreed as to precisely which documents fall into which categories, and some have condemned a far higher proportion of them as spurious or suspect.⁴⁶

The rate of survival of charters rises dramatically in the second half of the ninth century, with at least another 150 datable to the years before 910. The cartularies in which most of these Leonese, Galician, and Castilian charters are now to be found generally date from the late eleventh or twelfth centuries and are themselves a form of conscious historical composition. This is firstly because they contain numerous micro-histories, that is to say, the documents recording acts of giving, sales, and legal disputes, each of which records specific events in some detail, along with the names of participants. In some cases the previous processes of acquisition of the property now being sold or donated are also described.

While the sales and exchanges are relatively straightforward, the dispute records often describe processes that required several stages separated in time, sometimes involving different persons, and, in many cases, actual reported speech.⁴⁷ Secondly, the ordering of the contents of cartularies is always the subject of choice of whether to organize the materials

⁴⁵ Martínez Díez, "Instituciones."

⁴⁶ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 1, docs 1–52, with commentary on each. Barrau-Dihigo, "Etude," condemns a larger number as forgeries or being interpolated.

⁴⁷ Collins, "Sicut lex."

chronologically or by some other system that may prioritize a geographical over a chronological structure. Sometimes the order chosen is clearly aimed at providing a history of the monastery in terms of its acquisition of property, divided up by the tenures of office of its abbots. Very rarely, as in the case of the Aragonese cartulary of Alaón, passages of historical narrative and secular genealogy are deliberately included.⁴⁸ Not all such decisions are self-evident in their intention, and we have to try to work out what the organizing principles of a particular cartulary consist of and to deduce what the reasoning behind them might have been.

Alfonso II (791–842)

In the early parts of this period there was probably far less enthusiasm for Asturian rule than the chronicles would like their readers to think. There was no pan-Christian resistance to Islamic conquest or even a general northern dislike of rule from the center. Brief eighth-century chronicle references show that much effort by the kings in the Asturias was put into expanding the territory under their control both eastwards and westwards. These were into areas about which we know virtually nothing until the faint light of Asturian historiography touches upon them, but it is certain that they were not under Umayyad rule and were more likely to have been dominated by rival landed families, who, after Asturian conquest, became the nobility of their particular regions. Involvement in larger scale institutions and potentially profitable military ventures may have reconciled some of them to the loss of independence. Some of these new regional aristocracies in Galicia and the Basque regions were drawn more fully into the politics of the Asturian kingdom itself through intermarriage, not least with the royal dynasty.

The mother of Alfonso II, Munia, is described as coming from Alava, and it was in this Basque-speaking region close to the western Pyrenees that her son took refuge when denied the throne in 783. His father, Fruela I, had faced a major revolt against his rule amongst the Galicians, which had been savagely repressed. So it is perhaps no surprise that they later supported other branches of the royal house. On Alfonso's death in 842 his successor, Ramiro I (842–850), took power, legitimately or not, with the support of an army from Galicia. Unfortunately, we do not know if Ramiro's branch of the royal line already enjoyed close contacts with the Galician nobles, but it is clear that from 850 onwards some branches of the family could

⁴⁸ Serrano y Sanz, *Noticias y documentos*, 56–62.

call on Galician backing in their attempts to take or retain the crown. As will be seen, other rival dynastic offshoots enjoyed similar support from the main families in the eastern, essentially Basque, regions of the kingdom. The tension between these two sets of alliances explains much of the politics of the Asturian and Leonese monarchies in the ninth and tenth centuries, at least as far as we can now interpret them.

One complication in trying to make sense of the genealogy of the royal dynasty in these years comes from a mention in the work of the Andalusi historian Ibn Ḥayyān of a victory won by an Umayyad army in 816, in which a certain “García son of Lupus” was captured. Further genealogical details are added in the phrase “son of the sister of Vermudo, maternal uncle of Alfonso.” It is reasonable to accept that it was Lupus who was the son of the unnamed sister of Vermudo, and that the “Alfonso” mentioned here is Alfonso II. But is the “Vermudo” his short-reigned predecessor, Vermudo I (788–791)?⁴⁹ The implications of believing this to be the case would place Alfonso and Vermudo two generations apart, and also make Alfonso II’s mother, Munia, a member of the dynasty in her own right, as well as by marriage to Fruela I. While the latter objection is not overwhelming, the former is, since it would require Vermudo I both to belong to the generation of Alfonso II’s own grandfather, Alfonso I (739–757), and at the same time have a son, Ramiro (842–850), who would succeed him. It is more likely that Lupus was Alfonso’s uncle and sister of his mother, Munia, and that all the persons mentioned were members of his maternal kindred from Alava.

The long reign of Alfonso II is surprisingly sparsely recorded in both chronicles and charters.⁵⁰ The attempt to overthrow him in the eleventh year of his reign (801/2) was apparently short-lived, but he must have been deposed as we are told that he entered a monastery, which from its name has been located in the center of the Asturias. He was restored after the killing of the usurper in a counter coup. As the dynasty seems to have enjoyed an exclusive right, it is likely that this unnamed ruler who replaced Alfonso was another member of his own family. After this episode, the exact dates of which are not known, very little more is reported about the reign in Asturian sources. Some military activity is described in our Arab sources, but these knew little and probably cared less about purely internal events in the still small Asturian kingdom.

Even the diplomatic contacts made between Oviedo and the Frankish kingdom in 797 do not seem to have been renewed, though in his *Vita*

⁴⁹ Martínez Díez, *Condado*, 1: 102–104.

⁵⁰ Of the thirty-one documents (vol. 1, nos. 15–45) from the reign edited by Floriano, only sixteen are classed as fully authentic.

Karoli, or “Life of Charles,” written in the 820s, Einhard claims that “when he [Alfonso II – who is here called “King of Galicia and Asturia”] sent letters or emissaries to Charles, he ordered that in Charles’s presence he was only to be referred to as his subject”⁵¹ Whether this was in the context of the exchanges of envoys in 797 or in the aftermath of Charlemagne’s imperial coronation in 800 is not stated, and Einhard’s other claims in this part of his work are certainly exaggerated to greater or lesser degree. So, the very idea that the Asturian king saw himself as subordinate to the Frankish ruler should not be taken at face value. However, some rare but definite contacts between the kingdom and various religious institutions in Francia continue throughout these centuries. Thus, the burial of Fruela I is recorded in a liturgical book from Limoges, dating to c.900.⁵² While Alfonso III wrote to the Abbey of St Martin’s in Tours, to try to acquire a crown.⁵³

The twelfth-century historiographer and forger, Bishop Pelayo of Oviedo, began the practice of giving nicknames to some of the Asturian and Leonese kings, so as to distinguish one from another when so many shared a small pool of names. Thus he seems to be the first to refer to Alfonso II as “Alfonso the Chaste,” a reflection of the fact that we have no record of his marrying; no queen of his is mentioned in any of his not very numerous body of charters, and he apparently had no children. This is unusual in any medieval monarchy, as securing the succession for the ruling house or a particular branch of the royal dynasty was normally a primary concern. The absence of heirs threatened instability or worse on the death of the monarch, and personal preference was rarely permitted to be a factor. Alfonso II’s lack of wives and offspring is not unique in that several of the mid-tenth-century kings of Wessex, between Athelstan and Eadred, were similarly unmarried.⁵⁴ In their case it has been suggested that, with the throne passing between several brothers, some kind of family compact had emerged to prevent the creation of rival branches of the family, each with some claim to the throne, in subsequent generations. If so, it was surprisingly self-denying of the successive kings to adhere to it, without even apparently producing illegitimate offspring.

In the case of Alfonso II, it is clear that strenuous efforts were made by various interested parties, unidentified in our sources, to prevent him inheriting the throne of his father, Fruela I. Even allowing for the fact that

⁵¹ Einhard, ed. Halphen, 44–46; trans. Dutton, 25.

⁵² Mundó, “El cód.” and Rupin, 47 and n. 1.

⁵³ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 2, doc. 185, pp. 339–345; see Fletcher, *St. James’s Catapult*, 317–323.

⁵⁴ Stafford, 40–44.

he was no more than a child, he was denied the succession four times, and must have been well into his twenties before obtaining the throne in 791. The details of the later event are obscure, as the chronicles refer to Vermudo I, who had just suffered a major defeat by an Umayyad army, voluntarily abdicating. It is possible that this process involved an agreement that while Alfonso would become king the succession was guaranteed to Vermudo's son, Ramiro, as would eventually become the case in 842. Alternatively, we know that in the short-lived coup against him in 801/2, Alfonso was relegated to the monastery of "Ablania," a location which has been identified as Ablaña, in the Asturian district of Mieres. It may be the enforced monastic vows then taken that prevented him from subsequently marrying.⁵⁵ Neither explanation is entirely convincing, as his, not Vermudo and Ramiro's, was the main branch of the royal line, and if he was able to be freed from monastic vows to take the throne, then why not also to produce heirs? Ultimately, there is no way of knowing, but the fact that he was also the first of the Asturian and Leonese monarchs to be expelled from office, albeit briefly, suggests that his tenure of the throne was not secure, and that powerful interests remained opposed to him.

Ramiro I (842–850)

At the time of Alfonso's death, aged at least seventy-four or seventy-five, Ramiro son of King Vermudo "the Deacon" was absent from court in "Vardulia," an old term for a region of Cantabria, being re-married. This enabled a certain Nepotian, who held the office of Count of the Palace, to take the throne. In the Chronicle of Alfonso III, Ramiro was "elected to the throne," though it is not easy to see how this could have happened in his absence and with someone else on the spot actually acquiring it.⁵⁶ The claim does at least underline the way that the Asturian monarchy retained the electoral character of its Visigothic predecessor, though at the same time seemingly being able to restrict the potential candidates to the members of a single family. In some cases the election may have been no more than a formal ritual, but in others, when rival claimants existed, the decision was obviously of central importance. We do not know, but may guess, that, as in Visigothic times, the electorate in practice was confined to a palatine aristocracy, attending the royal court. But the much smaller size of the

⁵⁵ *Cronica Albeldensia* XV. 9, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 174 and 248 n. 241.

⁵⁶ Chronicle of Alfonso III, ch. 23, ed. Gil, *Crónica asturianas*, 142–143.

Asturian kingdom must have made it easier for regional potentates to be involved, or to resent being excluded from the process.

Such feelings may have affected the outcome in 842, when it is possible that it was Nepotian who had been the choice of the entourage of Alfonso II, and quite possibly of the recently deceased king himself. His reign may have lasted longer than is normally allowed, as the record of a legal dispute in the cartulary of Santa María del Puerto (province of Santander) in 863 refers to an earlier stage in the process in the time of “the lord Nepotian.”⁵⁷ However, his support proved insufficient. Although he had been in the east of the kingdom when Nepotian took the throne, Ramiro was able to move to Galicia in the west, which was where his support was strongest. Here he began gathering an army in the former Roman fortress town of Lugo, preparatory to invading the Asturias. The result was a civil war, with Nepotian, who had the backing of Asturian and Basque forces, being defeated by Ramiro in a battle on a bridge over the river Narcea. He was captured in flight by Counts Scipio and Sonna, blinded, and then forced into monastic life. Although the chronicle narratives concur in describing Nepotian as a usurper who seized the throne “tyrannically” he appears in the Asturian regnal lists in some manuscripts of the Albelda Chronicle as a legitimate monarch.⁵⁸ He is also described as the *cognatus* or close relative of Alfonso II, giving him as much a claim to the throne as Ramiro.

Ramiro I's eight-year tenure of the throne, from 842 to 850, proved uneasy, despite his claimed victories over both Muslim and Viking raiders.⁵⁹ He faced rebellions led by two more Counts of the Palace: firstly a certain Aldroitus, and then his successor Piniolus. Although both were unsuccessful, Ramiro's reactions became harsher. While Aldroitus, like Nepotian, was blinded, Piniolus was executed, along with his seven sons.⁶⁰ It may be this succession of revolts that led Ramiro I to build a new palace on the slopes of Monte Naranco just outside of Oviedo.

We lack detailed information on the inner workings of the Asturian court, but it is likely that its office of Count of the Palace was similar to that of the Frankish monarchy in the late Merovingian period. The count was responsible for the daily running of the royal palace and household, second only to the monarch. As Oviedo was the main royal residence, this office was normally in the hands of members of the Asturian nobility, and in the case of the future Alfonso II during the reign of his uncle Silo (774–783)

⁵⁷ AHN, Sección de Códices, 1001B, ff. 1v–2v, with a later copy on f. 17v.

⁵⁸ *Nomina Regum Catholicorum Legionensium*, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 172.

⁵⁹ On the Viking raids of 845 see Ibn 'Idhārī ah 230. See also Allen, 1–13.

⁶⁰ Chronicle of Alfonso III ch. 24 (both versions), ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 144–145

it was given to the heir apparent.⁶¹ Its holder was also likely to be left in charge of the administration during the king's absence on campaign. This is what gave the office such potential for treachery, especially if the monarch was one who was not favored by the Asturian aristocracy. In the case of Ramiro, as we have seen, he was forced upon the kingdom essentially by the Galicians.

Ordoño I (850–866)

The continuing undercurrent of opposition to Ramiro I in the Asturias does not seem to have extended itself into the reign of his son, Ordoño I. However, on his succession he was faced by a major revolt amongst the Basques in the east of the kingdom, which was successfully suppressed. As with Galician opposition to Alfonso II and support for Ramiro I, this may have been less of a popular rising against alien rule than a continuation of the political conflicts within the dynasty that attracted rival regional backing. We do not know, however, how far the previous divisions amongst the lines of the ruling house survived at this time, as the chronicle sources are firmly supportive of the descent line from Vermudo I via Ramiro I to Ordoño I and Alfonso III. Parallel branches would reappear clearly in the royal dynasty in the tenth century, but none are recorded in the second half of the ninth.

Ordoño also had the advantage of facing an increasingly divided and weakened al-Andalus, with frequent regional revolts in the three marches creating local regimes, some of which looked for Asturian support, thereby interposing themselves between his kingdom and the rulers of Córdoba. For the first time the Christian realm began playing a more active part in the politics of the south, and with relative impunity.

The Chronicle of Alfonso III, in both versions, begins its narrative of the new reign by claiming that Ordoño occupied the "cities of Leon, Astorga, Tuy and Amaya," which had long been abandoned. He is said to have fortified them with new high walls and gates, and repopulated them with a mixture of his own people and immigrants coming from *Spania*, meaning al-Andalus.⁶² It is thus a little surprising to read in Ibn Ḥayyān that León had been sacked by an Umayyad army in 846, when its walls had proved too strong for the conquerors to destroy.⁶³ León had clearly been inhabited from before the reign of Ordoño, and it preserved its Roman walls, parts of

⁶¹ Chronicle of Alfonso III (*Rotense* version only), ch. 18, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 136.

⁶² Chronicle of Alfonso III, ch. 25 (both versions), ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 144–146.

⁶³ Ibn Ḥayyān, *al-Muqtabis* II. 1, ah 231 (ad 845/6).

which may still be seen, in defensible order. The same may be equally true of Astorga, which retains an even more complete circuit of Roman walls, and Amaya, on the rio Pisuerga, is very similarly located, but to the east of the other two. It may be that under Ordoño what occurred was a more substantial occupation and restoration of these former Roman towns. The *Ad Sebastianum* version in particular stresses that their Muslim population had been expelled by Alfonso “the elder,” meaning Alfonso I, leaving them deserted, but our evidence relating to León at least shows this was far from being as simple and clear cut as the chroniclers suggest. However, the combined evidence of both the Asturian chronicle and of Ibn Ḥayyān imply this region south of the Cantabrian mountains and along the northern edge of the Meseta was taking on a strategic and economic importance it had lacked for the past century or more.

The other town mentioned in the chronicle, Tuy, is on the rio Miño close to the Atlantic coast. It was of Roman foundation, and according to the Chronicle of Alfonso III it had served as the residence of the Visigothic king Wittiza for some of his period of co-rule with his father Egica (i.e., c.692/4–c.701), though the reality of this is confirmed by no earlier source. The mention of it here indicates that the whole valley of the Miño, long a disputed frontier zone, was by now part of the Asturian kingdom, and being repopulated. However, as with León, this process may have been under way for some time.

It is certainly confirmed by some of the few charters that date to this period, which also testify in some cases to the role played by migrants coming from the south. A good example is the earliest document preserved in the cartulary of the Galician monastery of Samos, dated to 857. In this, King Ordoño I gives an existing monastery on the river Sarría, dedicated to saints Julianus and Basilissa, to two monks, Vincent, a priest, and Audofredo, both *cordovenses* – coming from Córdoba. The grant included several estates and churches, including some in the Miño valley. Although the text is damaged at this point, there is an indication that a previous donation had been made by the king’s father, Ramiro I.⁶⁴

It is not certain whether or not the monastery and properties thus being granted were of Visigothic origin. In a small number of cases it has been possible with a combination of archaeological and documentary evidence to show that a church of Asturian date was on the site of or was a restoration of one of Visigothic date – as, for example, with Santa Comba de Bande in

⁶⁴ *Tumbo de San Julián de Samos*, ed. Lucas Alvarez, doc. 1, pp. 61–62, with discussion of authenticity and dating.

the province of Orense.⁶⁵ It is clear in the case of Samos that the monastery and its extensive network of properties predated the reign of Ordoño I. In the case of the towns supposedly newly restored by him, archaeological evidence been unable to demonstrate continuity of occupation since the Arab conquest, or to prove the discontinuity claimed by the chronicle.

Most of the narrative of the reign of Ordoño I in the Chronicle of Alfonso III is devoted to his campaign against Mūsa b. Mūsa of the Banū Qasī, who is described as a rebel against “the king of Córdoba,” who “partly by the sword and partly by deceit” made himself master of Zaragoza, Tudela, Huesca, and finally Toledo, where he installed his son Lupus (Lubb) as governor. He is said, again “partly in battle and partly by deception” to have defeated, captured, and imprisoned two Frankish dukes, Sancho and “Epulo” (Ebles?), and also to have taken prisoner, aided by his son Lupus, two “great tyrants of the Chaldaeans”: Ibn Ḥamza of the Quraysh and “Alporz,” along with the latter’s son “Azet.” After this string of victories he is said to have ordered his followers to refer to him as “the third king of Spain.”⁶⁶

For some of the episodes here described the chronicle is the sole source. No Frankish annals record the defeat and capture of two counts; one of whom could conceivably be the Sancho Count of Gascony who betrayed Pippin II of Aquitaine to the West Frankish king Charles the Bald (840–877) in 852. Nor do the two Muslim rulers – probably regional potentates similar to, and rivals of, the Banū Qasī appear in our more limited Arabic sources for these years, but there is no reason to dismiss the chronicle’s narrative as mere fiction, especially if it were being written by or for Ordoño’s son, Alfonso III. Some of the conquests of Mūsa ibn Mūsa are vouched for elsewhere, and he and his family clearly dominated much of both the Middle and Upper Marches in the later 850s and early 860s, making them the main threat to Asturian expansion in the northern Meseta in the same period.

The ensuing conflict focused on a fortress that Mūsa had recently built at Albelda, near Logroño in the Rioja. This had the potential to control access from Alava, the easternmost territory of the Asturian kingdom into the Ebro valley, and so was besieged by Ordoño in 859. Mūsa attempted to lift the siege, in alliance with his brother-in-law García. The latter is not explicitly identified in the chronicle, but must have been García Iñiguez, the king of Pamplona, whose small realm was threatened by the eastwards expansion of the Asturian monarchy. In the ensuing battle on Monte Laturce, close to Albelda, Mūsa was defeated, losing valuable treasures in the process, some

⁶⁵ Luis Caballero Zoreda, and José Ignacio Latorre Macarrón, *La iglesia y el monasterio*, 545–587.

⁶⁶ Chronicle of Alfonso III, ch. 25, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 144–146.

of which Ordoño sent as a gift to Charles the Bald. Although not recorded in any Frankish source, this gesture shows that the Asturias remained aware of, and in contact with, at least some parts of the rest of western Christendom throughout this period.

Seven days after the victory Albelda itself fell and, as the chronicler proudly recorded, “all its warriors were killed by the sword and the place itself was destroyed down to its foundations.”⁶⁷ Mūsa was wounded in the battle and died not long after, in 862/3.⁶⁸ Soon after, Mūsa’s son Lubb, governor of Toledo, apparently submitted himself to the Asturian king for the rest of Ordoño’s reign.

Other victories are more briefly reported, but these included ones over the “king of the people of Coria” (in the province of Caceres), called “Zeiti,” and against “the city of Talamanca and its king by the name of Muzeor.” The latter has been identified as Talamanca del Jarama near Madrid, and if true this implies that in the 860s Ordoño was not only the dominant power on the Meseta but was raiding with great success across the Sierra Guadiana, eliminating or obtaining the submission of the local Muslim potentates and Umayyad governors.⁶⁹ Admittedly, some early Castilian annals attribute the capture and sack of Talamanca to the count of Castile, Diego, but, if so, he was subject to Ordoño, whether or not he was acting on royal orders.

In the cases of Coria and Talamanca, the chronicler reports that all their warriors were killed, while the non-combatant males together with their wives and children were sold into slavery. It is not known whether they became part of the servile population in the Asturian kingdom, whose presence is recorded in some of its charters, or were exported.⁷⁰ In his last years Ordoño was incapacitated by gout; he died on May 27, 866, early in the seventeenth year of his reign, and was buried with his predecessors in the church of Santa María in Oviedo.

This impression of confident Asturian expansion across the Meseta and beyond in this period is not confirmed by what the Arab sources have to tell us. In Ibn ‘Idhārī, largely relying on Ibn Ḥayyān, there is mention of Asturian conflict with the kingdom of Pamplona around 860, but there is no reference to a battle at Albelda, and Mūsa b. Mūsa is described as being fatally injured in a failed attack on Guadalajara and its governor Ibn Salim

⁶⁷ Chronicle of Alfonso III, ch. 26, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 146–149.

⁶⁸ *Cronica Albeldensia* XV. 12, ed. Gil, *Crónicas asturianas*, 176.

⁶⁹ *Cronica Albeldensia* XV. 12 and Chronicle of Alfonso III, ch. 27, ed. Gil, *Crónica asturianas*, 176 and 148–149. Sánchez-Albornoz, *Orígenes de la nación española*, 3: 167–169 and 317–319.

⁷⁰ Sánchez-Albornoz, “Los siervos”; reprinted in Sánchez-Albornoz, *Viejos y nuevos*, 1525–1611.

in 862. In 863 an Umayyad army under one of the amīr's sons is said to have destroyed the fortresses of Alava and massacred their occupants, as well as burning trees and ravaging fields. A counterattack led by Ordoño's brother, a person never mentioned in Asturian narratives, was then defeated "in a great massacre," in which no less than nineteen counts were killed. A second expedition into Alava in 865 proved almost a repeat of the first, with the remaining Christian strongholds being destroyed and a counterattack led by "Rodrigo, prince of the fortresses" (count of Castile?) ending in yet another "horrible massacre," marked by the taking of 20,472 heads; a sign of special divine favor for the Muslims. A third expedition in 866 left the region in the most pitiable state, but this time provoking no resistance, thanks to the great losses in men and property suffered by its inhabitants in the previous year.⁷¹

For the reader perplexed by the seemingly total lack of fit between the Latin and the Arabic sources for these events, and with no obvious way of deciding between their respective claims, it seems that neither should be taken too literally. We have already seen that the Asturian chronicles can be faulted on matters of detail, and the same is true of some features, especially involving specific numbers, of the Arabic ones. The two societies were not particularly interested in or well informed about each other, and had no interest in recording losses they suffered or victories gained by their opponents, especially when success or failure in war was seen as a signifier of divine support and approval. In the case of the campaigns of the age of Ordoño I, it is noteworthy that the Asturian and Arabic sources refer principally to different regions: ones in the west and center of the peninsula in the case of the former, and those further east in the latter. By combining the two we arrive at a slightly fuller picture of the pattern of events, rather than outright contradictions.

Alfonso III (866–910)

Chronicle sources do not tell us that the succession of Alfonso III was contested, but following the death of Ordoño I on May 27, 866 the throne was seized by a Galician count called Froila. The thirteen-year-old Alfonso was forced to take refuge in Castile until his followers succeeded in killing the usurper in Oviedo. This "son of perdition," Froila (Fruela), may, from his name, have been a member of the ruling dynasty, and is probably to be identified with a count of that name who presided over a legal hearing

⁷¹ Ibn 'Idhārī, *al-Bayān*, II, ah 249–252.

in 861.⁷² He himself had been in a legal tussle over land with the see of Santiago, confiscating the disputed estate when he seized the kingdom. It was returned in a document issued by the restored Alfonso III in January 867, suggesting that Froila's rule had been brief.⁷³

For a reign of such length and significance, that of Alfonso III is for many parts of it surprisingly poorly recorded. Numerous private and several royal charters survive from its four and a half decades, which, as in the case just quoted, can provide incidental details about wider events, but the narrative sources are overall very thin, especially after the ending of the Chronicle of Albelda in 883.⁷⁴ Most of the reign thereafter lacks near-contemporary reporting, and the next major chronicle, relatively speaking, that of Sampiro, would not be written until well into the eleventh century. However, it has been argued that there exists an early tenth-century continuation of one version of the Chronicle of Alfonso III, covering the reigns of Alfonso himself and of his two immediate successors, García I and Ordoño II: thus, the years from 866 to 924. Like Sampiro's chronicle it does not survive independently, but only in the form in which it was incorporated into the anonymous twelfth-century *Historia Silense*. In this continuation García's reign (910–914) is passed over in two sentences, and it may have been included just to assure the reader that the king chose his brother, Ordoño, to succeed him when he realized he was mortally ill. Ordoño's subsequent ten-year-long rule is described in considerable detail but ends with his death, at which point this text ends.⁷⁵ It would seem likely, therefore, that it was written in the time of one of Ordoño II's sons, Alfonso IV (925–932) or Ramiro II (931/2–951).

Greater closeness in date does not, however, always equate to a higher degree of reliability. The Continuation, as we shall call it, stresses that Alfonso was the only son – *filius unicus* – of Ordoño I, while Sampiro's chronicle, contained in the same compilation, refers to his brother Froila plotting to assassinate him and fleeing into Castille. Froila was then captured and blinded, along with other brothers named Nuño, Vermudo, and Odoario. One of these, Vermudo, subsequently escaped from Oviedo and ruled in Astorga for seven years with the aid of the "Saracens." When eventually dislodged from Astorga by his brother, Alfonso III, he took refuge in al-Andalus.⁷⁶ We are given no dates for any of these episodes, but if, as seems

⁷² Sampiro, ch. 1, in *Historia Silense*, ed. Pérez de Urbel and González, 159.

⁷³ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 2, doc. 86.

⁷⁴ For charters of the reign see Floriano, *Diplomática*, 2, which contains 120 of them.

⁷⁵ *Historia Silense*, chs. 39–47, ed. Pérez de Urbel and González, 149–159.

⁷⁶ *Historia Silense*, chs. 39–47, ed. Pérez de Urbel and González, 149 and 160.

most likely, Vermudo witnessed two deeds of gift made to the church of Santiago de Compostela by his brother the king in 885 and 893, his revolt must have taken place sometime after the latter.⁷⁷ The discrepancy between Alfonso being the only son of Ordoño I and being one of five brothers may arise from the “airbrushing out” of the two rebels and the other two blinded siblings from the historical record in a court-centered source written so close in time to these events.

Alfonso III's reign coincided almost exactly with that of the amīr ‘Abd Allāh (888–912). The Arabic sources are unusually brief regarding ‘Abd Allāh's reign and throw little light on events in the Christian north, especially when it comes to the failure of Umayyad military efforts there. However, it is clear enough that the considerable territorial expansion of the Asturian kingdom under Alfonso was largely made possible by the collapse of Umayyad control over many parts of al-Andalus at this time. It is notable that while the amīr Muḥammad and his commanders campaigned quite frequently in the Ebro valley, including making attacks on the kingdom of Pamplona between 870 and 880, there is little mention of “Jilliqiya” or the Leonese kingdom.⁷⁸ One reason for this was the disturbed state of both the Lower and Middle Marches, where campaigns were needed to try to repress revolts in Toledo, Mérida, Soria, and elsewhere. By the end of the decade revolt in the kura of Málaga opened a new front and intensified the crisis faced by the Umayyad regime. This was why the amīr Muḥammad I (852–886) was willing to begin negotiating a treaty of peace with the Asturian king in 882, concluded two years later, in the course of which the body of the Cordoban martyr Eulogius, executed in 859, was sent to Oviedo as a diplomatic gift. It may well have been accompanied by part or all of his book collection, as the only known manuscript of his writings was discovered in Oviedo Cathedral library in the sixteenth century and copied – before disappearing completely.⁷⁹

Our fullest account of the military activity of the reign of Alfonso III is to be found in the Chronicle of Albelda, although this only extends as far as the year 883. For 882 and 883 in particular the reporting is clearly contemporary and very detailed. This section of the chronicle, which is added on to a core text that ends in 881, is probably the fullest of any Spanish Latin historical

⁷⁷ Floriano, *Diplomática*, 2, docs 133 and 144.

⁷⁸ Ibn ‘Idhārī, *al-Bayān*, II, ah 254–267.

⁷⁹ The edition made by Ambrosio de Morales for Bishop Pedro Ponce de León of Plasencia, *Divi Eulogi Cordubensis opera* (Alcalá de Henares, 1574), was prepared from the manuscript, which the bishop had borrowed, but unfortunately Morales “corrected” Eulogius's Latin, to make it more classical, denying us knowledge of the authorial original.

source between antiquity and the thirteenth century, and we can only regret that it could not be continued on such a scale. The information contained is especially detailed about conflicts and diplomacy involving the heirs of Mūsa b. Mūsa of the Banū Qasī, including events in the Ebro valley, suggesting that this section of the chronicle was being written somewhere in the eastern parts of the kingdom, possibly Castile.

The preceding part, covering the years 866 to 881, describes the expansion of the western frontier of the kingdom in Galicia into what is now Portugal, with the capture and repopulation of Braga, Oporto, Lamego, and Coimbra amongst other settlements, though no chronology is provided. A number of towns are also known to have been taken in middle Duero valley, including Zamora and Simancas, though not until 893 and 899 respectively. In 878 “Abuhalit” (Abū Walid?), described as “Consul of Spain and counsellor of King Muḥammad” was captured in a failed raid on Galicia. He had to leave two brothers and a son as hostages while he collected a ransom of “one hundred thousand *solidi* on gold.” What this meant in practice is uncertain, as there was no minting of gold between the early eighth century and the proclamation of the Umayyad caliphate in 929.

The same year of 878 saw the most substantial assault, led by Al-Mundhir (“Almundar”), son of the amīr Muḥammad I, on the new frontier region in the middle of the kingdom, centered on the reoccupied towns of Astorga and León. The expedition consisted of two columns, according to the chronicle: one from Córdoba and the other comprising contingents from Toledo, Talamanca, and Guadalajara. The latter was decisively defeated at *Polvoraria* (modern Polvorosa in the province of León) on the river Orbigo, with the loss of thirteen thousand men. The other detachment withdrew, opening the way for a three-year period of peace. In 881, however, Alfonso III took the offensive, leading an army deep into the Lower March (or Lusitania, as the chronicler calls it, using Romano-Gothic territorial divisions), crossing the Tagus to approach Mérida. Ten (Roman) miles from the city the Asturian army crossed the river Ana and fought a battle against an Umayyad army on “Mount Oxifer.” This was a victory for Alfonso, with fifteen thousand of his opponents killed. He returned home, apparently to devote himself to rebuilding the churches of Oviedo and constructing one or more palaces (*aulas regias*) for himself.⁸⁰

It is interesting to see how other sources, both Christian and Muslim, present the events of these years from 866 to 881. The Continuation of the Chronicle of Alfonso III only describes military activity of a single year, in which the “king of Toledo” was defeated in an attack on the Asturian

⁸⁰ *Chronica Albeldensia*, 15: 12, ed. Gil., *Crónicas asturianas*, 176–178.

frontier regions, losing 416 of his men in the opening charge of the decisive battle. This victory was followed by another one in the same year when the “barbarians tried to devastate Castile with fire and sword.” In this encounter 3,575 “Chaldeans” were killed, and much spoil and many captives taken. Alfonso, now aged twenty-one (i.e., in 874 according to the logic of this text), celebrated his *annus mirabilis* by marrying Jimena “from the royal nation of the Gothic people,” with whom he would have six sons.⁸¹ Sampiro, however, suggests that she was “a cousin of King Charles,” probably meaning the West Frankish king Charles the Bald. It is usually thought that she was a member of the ruling dynasty of Pamplona.

The Chronicle of Sampiro goes into the king’s martial exploits in rather more detail than the Continuation, and also mentions a revolt against him in Alava led by a count called Gilo, who was brought to Oviedo loaded with chains after its suppression. An attack by “the host of the Ishmaelites” led by “Imundar” and “Alcatenatel” is said to have been defeated, with the loss of thousands of men on their side. Another expedition “around the same time” consisting of an army from Córdoba acting in conjunction with one formed in Toledo of detachments “from other cities of Spain” and aimed “at the destruction of the Church of God” came to an even more spectacular end, according to the chronicler. The army of mixed contingents was ambushed at *Polvoraria*, with the stated loss of twelve thousand of its number, while the retreating Cordoban force was pursued into the valley of the *Niora* (Valdemora) and totally obliterated, except for ten men, covered in blood, who hid amongst the corpses of their fellows pretending to be dead.⁸² Surprisingly, neither Sampiro nor the Continuation refer to the victory on “Monte Oxifer” described by the Chronicle of Albelda.

The reflection of these conflicts in the Arabic sources is even more muted. Ibn al-Athīr mentions an expedition in 878 directed at “the city of Jilliqiya,” almost certainly Léon, which culminated in a battle in which both sides suffered significant losses.⁸³ Ibn ‘Idhārī’s version is even more circumspect. He says a *sa’ifa* led by Al-Barra b. Mālik, and consisting of levies from the west of al-Andalus, approached via Coimbra. For Ibn ‘Idhārī the raid was complete success, with “everything of value destroyed,” but no battle mentioned. Neither Arab author mentions the capture of a leading member of the Umayyad court on the Galician frontier or any involvement by Muḥammad I’s son and heir, Al-Mundhir, in campaigns against the Asturian kingdom in 878.

⁸¹ *Historia Silense*, 49: 150–151. (*Annus mirabilis* not a quote!)

⁸² Sampiro, chs. 1 and 5, in *Historia Silense*, 49: 159–161.

⁸³ Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn ‘Idhārī, both ah 264.

Instead they describe al-Mundhir as commanding an expedition into the Ebro valley that year.

Ignoring figures for casualties, which are totally unreliable, it is clear that the battle of *Polvoraria* enjoyed particular importance in the Asturian-Leonese historical tradition. The supposedly more dramatic one on Monte Oxifer in 881 is not even mentioned by the two later texts, and may not have been as significant as has been suggested.⁸⁴ The Continuation's lurid second victory in 878 in Valdemora is explicitly contradicted by the account in the Chronicle of Albelda, and so it is unlikely to have taken place. *Polvoraria*, however, would seem to have been a definite Asturian victory, whether or not al-Mundhir b. Muḥammad was commanding the Umayyad forces, and perhaps the young Alfonso saw his victory on the Orbigo as his Covadonga. This may also have been at the start of the process of exalting the significance of that earlier battle.

Both the Chronicle of Albelda and that of Sampiro associate Alfonso III's victories in this early period of his reign with his program of church building in Oviedo, and, according to the Albelda Chronicle, with the construction of one or more palaces (*aulas regias*). Some buildings of his reign survive more or less intact, and it is possible that earlier ones, such as San Julián de los Prados in Oviedo, received their distinctive aniconic fresco decoration at this time, as there are clear stylistic similarities between it and the less well-preserved traces of fresco in other churches that he built, such as San Salvador de Valdedíos.⁸⁵

Clearly indicative of the king's interest in the founding battle of the Asturian kingdom is his commissioning in 908 of a gold and bejewelled cross to house a much older wooden one long venerated in Oviedo. This is the "Cross of Victory" in the Camara Sancta in Oviedo Cathedral, which, in a legend first attested in the sixteenth-century, was said to contain within itself a cross that was carried before Pelagius at Covadonga.⁸⁶ Recent Carbon14 analysis suggests that this wooden core was actually no older than the gold casing, which is to say, late ninth century in date, suggesting that Alfonso III was the main promoter of the legends surrounding Covadonga, both in the chronicle bearing his name and possibly through this supposed relic of the battle.⁸⁷ Making adjustments to the past for the purposes of the present was

⁸⁴ Sánchez-Albornoz, "La expedición Monte Oxifer," in his *Orígenes de la nación Española*, 3: 709–727.

⁸⁵ Collins, "Doubts and Certainties"; on San Julián see also Jerrilynn D. Dodds, *Architecture*, 27–46.

⁸⁶ Manzanares Rodríguez, 12–18.

⁸⁷ García de Castro Valdés, *Arte prerrománico*, 160–162.

clearly a well-established practice in Oviedo long before the time of Bishop Pelayo “el fabulador.”

Alfonso III faced more difficulties in the last part of his reign, including an attempt by “a great army of Arabs” led by a prophet called “Alhaman” to take Zamora in 901, the revolt of his brother Vermudo in Astorga, and various obscure plots against his life or throne, including one in which his eldest son García was involved. His capture and imprisonment in chains of García seems to have precipitated a wider revolt by all of his sons, leading to his enforced abdication. According to Sampiro, he asked García to let him lead one last expedition against “the Saracens,” and died in Zamora after returning successfully from it. His body was taken to Oviedo for burial.⁸⁸ The Continuation confirms his death in Zamora on December 20, 910, aged fifty-eight, but makes no mention of the circumstances surrounding it.

⁸⁸ Sampiro, ch. 15 in the *Historia Silense*, ed. Pérez de Urbel and González, 152.

