

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain
Episode 9
The Kingdom Of Asturias

Hello again. Last time we examined the lengthy reign of al-Hakam, and the changing nature of Christian power under al-Hakam's rule. We introduced the region of Asturias to the narrative, and in this episode we will be taking a closer look at this little Christian kingdom.

Now, according to legend, the origins of the Christian Kingdom of Asturias began with a single man, and that man was a fellow called Pelagius. So far as we can gather, Pelagius was a Christian man, either a local from the region of Asturias, or a Christian refugee from the Muslim-controlled lands to the south. While initially Pelagius had submitted to the Muslim overlord in the region, at some stage in the decades following the Battle of 711 he decided to rebel. He gathered some troops, and in a mountain valley in Asturias called Covadonga he defeated a Muslim fighting force. After the battle, the Muslims withdrew from the region and left him to rule what would become a small, independent Christian principality.

Unfortunately, much of the history around Pelagius is hard to pin down. In his book "Kingdoms of Faith", Brian Catlos points out that, centuries after the death of Pelagius, monk chroniclers attempted to link Pelagius to the previous Kingdom of the Visigoths, to establish a sort of unbroken chain of Christian rule. In attempting to forge this link, they embellished the life and times of Pelagius to such a degree that they described his victory at Covadonga as being an epic battle, which saw Pelagius and a handful of fighters defeat an army of over 100,000 Muslims, aided by the timely intervention of the Virgin Mary. In his book "The Arab Conquest of Spain, 711 to 797", Roger Collins goes into a huge amount of detail, taking apart subsequent claims to link Pelagius to the line of Visigothic kings. I won't go into those details, but Roger Collins basically takes a blowtorch to the traditional legends surrounding Pelagius, and in the end, to be honest, we are left with not knowing much at all about the actual historical figure which is Pelagius. He may well have simply been a Christian rebel with a knack for military insurrection, who proved just too difficult for the Muslims to defeat. Instead of throwing scarce resources at trying to subdue this man, in faraway, difficult to access Asturias, the local Muslim commander may well have just thrown his arms into the air and decided to leave this small place to its own devices.

One thing we do know about Pelagius is that, due to his actions, Muslim oversight and governance withdrew from Asturias, and from there Asturias pretty much evolved into an independent, self-ruled entity.

Now, historical chronicles written about Asturias indicated that Pelagius died in the year 737, an assertion that Roger Collins states is credible. They also state that Pelagius ruled Asturias for nearly two decades before his death. What happened after the death of Pelagius? Well, his son Fafila took over, but unfortunately he was killed by a bear only two years later, a turn of events which Roger Collins reports earned Fafila unanimous rebuke from all the chroniclers who collectively rolled their eyes at Fafila departing the stage so early in his reign, and for such a daft reason. Being killed by an animal apparently wasn't an appropriate way for you to exit your life in the eighth century.

Luckily for everyone, the man who stepped into Fafila's shoes was more than up to the task. His name was Alfonso, and he was Fafila's brother-in-law, due to the fact that he was married to Pelagius' daughter. Alfonso, who will later be known to history as Alfonso I, was a talented military commander, and immediately set an aggressive agenda for Asturias, capturing a number of towns and settlements to the south of the region. Oddly though, it seems he didn't do this with a view to extending the boundaries of Asturias, but more to create a sort of de-populated buffer zone to the south. Chronicles describe Alfonso killing the Muslims in the towns he conquered and taking the Christian citizens back to Asturias. This meant that, early on in Alfonso's nearly twenty year reign, Asturias became a protected, isolated Christian outpost, surrounded not by towns and settlements but by a barrier border zone, containing exactly no people whatsoever.

Now, around about the time Alfonso was undertaking this buffer-creating venture, the Berber revolt occurred, and as we mentioned in the last episode, the Berber revolt saw many Muslims leave the northernmost regions of the peninsula, an event which obviously would have decreased Muslim presence in the regions around Asturias even further, and would have complimented Alfonso's policy in an unexpected sort of way.

Roger Collins points out that Alfonso's unique policy of not extending the borders of Asturias, but instead extending its defences by surrounding it with a de-populated buffer zone, was radical, far-sighted, and remarkably successful. Roger Collins speculates that, had Alfonso done what everyone had expected him to do, and extended the borders of Asturias into neighbouring regions, the little Kingdom may well have collapsed and faded away, as it would have posed a bigger threat to Muslim rule and would have drawn attention to itself, leaving it vulnerable and exposed. Instead, Alfonso gathered all the Christian inhabitants in the surrounding region and drew them into Asturias, increasing his pool of manpower. The wide buffer zone he created then enabled Asturias to quietly work away at turning itself into a rebel Christian enclave without having to worry too much about what the neighbours were doing. As Roger Collins points out, none of the Muslim chronicles around this time mention Asturias or Alfonso I at all. Either they didn't realise what was happening in this tiny place, way up on the northern coast of the peninsula, or it was just too small and insignificant to make it onto the Muslim radar. The end result of this is that during the reign of Alfonso I, he never had to face any outside threats to his Kingdom from the Muslims of Al-Andalus. This left him able to spend most of his time strengthening his Kingdom from within, and you would have to say that he did a pretty good job of this.

Alfonso I is generally considered by historians to be the person who established the Christian Kingdom of Asturias, but the test for any young kingdom comes when its founder dies, and that test was definitely apparent when Alfonso's son and successor Fruela took over the rule of Asturias in the year 757. Fruela later became known as Fruela the Cruel, due to an act which he perpetrated near the end of his rule, which we will discuss in a moment.

Despite having earned himself a nasty nickname, Fruela did enjoy some successes during his ten year reign. Most notably, he fought the first battle waged between the Kingdom of Asturias and outside forces, when he took on and defeated a large Muslim force which had been sent by Abd al-Rahman to invade and defeat the pesky little rebel kingdom to the north, which by now had made its way onto the Muslim radar. A chronicle at the time, admittedly written by a Christian, so it may have been prone to exaggeration in favour of Fruela, reported that Fruela and his Asturian army managed to kill 54,000 Muslims in this battle, while also capturing and executing the Muslim battle commander. As I said though,

this may have been an exaggeration, and in fact Roger Collins reports that the battle isn't even mentioned in any of the Muslim chronicles from the period.

In addition to dealing with Muslim opponents to his rule, Fruela also faced opposition and rebellions from nearby Basque residents, who were based along the coast to the east of Asturias, and also from the Galatians, who were located along the coast on the opposite side to the west. Unfortunately, we don't know much about these rebellions, or why Asturias seemed to be copping it from all sides, but what we do know is that Fruela must have managed to place a lid on the trouble, as the unrest simmered down, Asturias survived, and in fact Fruela ended up marrying a Basque woman, a move which may have gone some way to quelling the unrest.

The reign of Fruela ended on a sour note, though, when he murdered his brother with his own hands. Again, we don't have much information about this killing, but it must have been a shocking event, as it earned Fruela his enduring nickname, "Fruela the Cruel", and resulted in Fruela's own murder shortly afterwards, when his own men turned on him and killed him, presumably in retaliation for the murder.

Now, at the time of his murder, Fruela did have a son and heir, a little boy named Alfonso, but he was only a few years old at the time of his father's death. The manner of Fruela's passing, and the dysfunctional in-fighting it must have caused amongst surviving family members, made Asturias a dangerous place to be for Fruela's widow, so she grabbed little Alfonso and fled eastwards, away from Asturias to her homeland in the Basque region.

The person who won the battle to become the next ruler of Asturias was the late Fruela's cousin, a man called Aurelius. Aurelius ruled for six years before dying of natural causes, and his reign appears to have been relatively drama free. There are no reports of any great battles or internal insurrections, apart from a minor peasant revolt likely brought on by the unfortunate peasant farmers of Asturias having to maintain the amount of tribute they paid to their overlords, despite the fact that the region was hit by drought followed by a famine. Apart from the revolting peasants the reign of Aurelius passed smoothly, and following his death in the year 774 the throne passed to a man called Silo, who was the son-in-law of Alfonso I. Like the reign of Aurelius, Silo oversaw a period where there were no invasions by the Muslims and no significant internal troubles.

When Silo died in the year 783, after nine years on the throne, everyone expected that the next ruler would be young Alfonso, Fruela's son, who was by now a young man and old enough to rule in his own right. However, in a shock move, an illegitimate son of Alfonso I stormed in and seized the throne by force, possibly with the assistance of the Galatians, forcing young Alfonso to flee back to the Basque region.

Like his predecessors before him, the illegitimate son of Alfonso I ruled uneventfully until his death in the year 788. Again, everyone expected that this would be the moment when Alfonso II would rise to power, but once again everyone was disappointed. The throne was in fact seized by the son of one of Alfonso I's brothers, a man called Vermudo, who ruled uneventfully until his mysterious disappearance in the year 791. There are no completely reliable explanations as to why Vermudo was in power one minute and out of power the next, but Roger Collins speculates that he was beaten in battle by a Muslim force, causing him to undertake a period of self-examination, which resulted in him abdicating the throne, turning to religion, and spending the remainder of his days as a monk.

The decision by Vermudo to re-examine the choices he had made in his life cleared the path for Alfonso II to finally claim his father's throne. He was in fact nominated for the position by Vermudo's wife, and officially began his reign as Alfonso II in the year 783.

Now it really was worth the wait for Alfonso II. He will in fact reign over the Kingdom of Asturias for the next fifty years, and will build on the work initiated by his namesake Alfonso I, turning Asturias into a stable, isolated hub of Christian resistance. Two of the policies he put in place during his rule have lasted pretty much until today. The first of these was his decision to move the capital of Asturias to the town of Oviedo, which was inland, kind of in the centre of the Kingdom of Asturias, and due to its location provided easier access to the regions to the south of the Kingdom. The city of Oviedo remains the capital of the Principality of Asturias today.

The second policy he instituted related to the "discovery" (in air quotes) of the tomb of Saint James the Apostle at a site near the far north-western tip of the peninsula, far to the west of Oviedo. I have placed the word "discovered" in audio air quotes here as there is considerable doubt about whether the remains discovered in northwestern Spain in the year 830 were actually the bones of Saint James. Without going into too much detail, Saint James was likely executed in the Holy Land around the year 44 in the Common Era, so how, might you ask, did his body turn up in Spain around eight centuries later? Well, according to early church tradition, James had preached the gospel in the Iberian peninsula during his lifetime, and after his death his disciples transported his body by sea to Spain, where he was buried. Now there are all sorts of problems with their story from a historical perspective, with some historians questioning whether Saint James ever even left the Holy Land during his lifetime, let alone made his way to Spain.

But all we need to know for our purposes was that, around the year 830, a local shepherd discovered a burial site in northwestern Spain. He alerted the local bishop, Bishop Theodemir, to the find, and Bishop Theodemir declared the bones found at the burial site to be the remains of Saint James. Bishop Theodemir then immediately notified the nearest Christian ruler, who just happened to be King Alfonso II of Asturias. King Alfonso II immediately publicised the fact that the relics of one of the Apostles had been discovered not far from his independent Christian kingdom. The site where the bones were found quickly became the focus of pilgrimages to the area, and would eventually evolve into the magnet for international pilgrims and the end-point for one of the most popular and famous pilgrimage walks, Santiago de Compostela. King Alfonso II himself, in fact, started the pilgrimage trend, embarking on a pilgrimage from his new capital Oviedo, to Santiago de Compostela. That trek, which is around 370 kilometres or 230 miles in length, is now called Camino Primitivo, and is considered to be the original, out of the many different paths originating in both France and Spain which make up the trails of Camino de Santiago, or "The Way of Saint James", the famous pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela. King Alfonso II reportedly commissioned a shrine to be built on the site where the relics were found. He also ordered a number of buildings to be erected in his new capital, some of which still remain to this day, including a chapel which forms the core of the beautiful Cathedral of San Salvador in the centre of Oviedo.

Well, the Kingdom of Asturias has now caught up to our timeline. Join me next time as we zoom out a little, and take a look at how the entire peninsula is faring in the first few decades of the ninth century. Until next time, bye for now.

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