

Spanish Kings Can't Keep It in Their Pants

[Of course, they aren't the only men for whom this is true!]

I kid you not, there really is a Wikipedia page "Illegitimate children of Spanish monarchs"! Look it up. There are twenty-six illegitimate children listed on this page. And Spanish kings haven't been able to keep it buttoned up since there were monarchs in the peninsula, from the Visigothic king Aleric II (c. 460–507), who fathered the ill-fated Gesalec, to the Asturian king Alfonso I (c. 693–757), who fathered Mauregatus the Usurper supposedly with a Moorish serf, to the still living former King Juan Carlos, who at least four people have claimed to be his illegitimate child. (All of the paternity suits against Juan Carlos have been dismissed by Spanish courts and the Royal Household has not confirmed any of the claims. Juan Carlos abdicated in 2014 amid a series of financial scandals.) At least a dozen of the mothers of the attested illegitimate children of Spanish kings were noblewomen, but there was also a concubine, an actress, and two singers.

I am not going to delve into all of the bawdy, sordid details of every one of the illegitimate children of Spanish monarchs, nor will I focus on the reigns of those kings. Rather, I am going to look at two of these illegitimate children who have crossed my path as an expat living in Spain, taking detours to examine the lives of their mothers.

The first illegitimate kid I want to talk about is Urraca Alfonso (1133–c. 1179), also known as Urraca the Asturian (not to be confused with the earlier Urraca of Zamora (1033–1103), the daughter of Ferdinand I the Great, or Queen Urraca (1081–1126), who had been Queen of León, Castile and Galicia and was the mother of King Alfonso VII).

Urraca the Asturian was born in 1133. Her mother, Gontrodo Pérez (1110–c. 1186), an Asturian noblewoman, became the mistress of King Alfonso VII when the king came to Oviedo in 1132 to put down the rebellion of Count Gonzalo Peláez. As a noblewoman in Oviedo, Gontrodo probably would have been introduced to the king (who was the first Spanish ruler to style himself as Emperor of All Spain), and even though he was married (to Berenguela Berenguer) and she seems to have been married to an Asturian feudal lord, they had an affair.

Gontrodo Pérez's relationship with Alfonso VII may have helped secure her position, but she also established a lasting legacy in Oviedo. In 1153, she founded the Monastery of Santa María de la Vega, just outside the walled center of Oviedo. Although Gontrodo was not the abbess of the monastery, she served as the administrative head of the community, and she was buried there after her death in 1186. The monastery underwent a major reformation in the

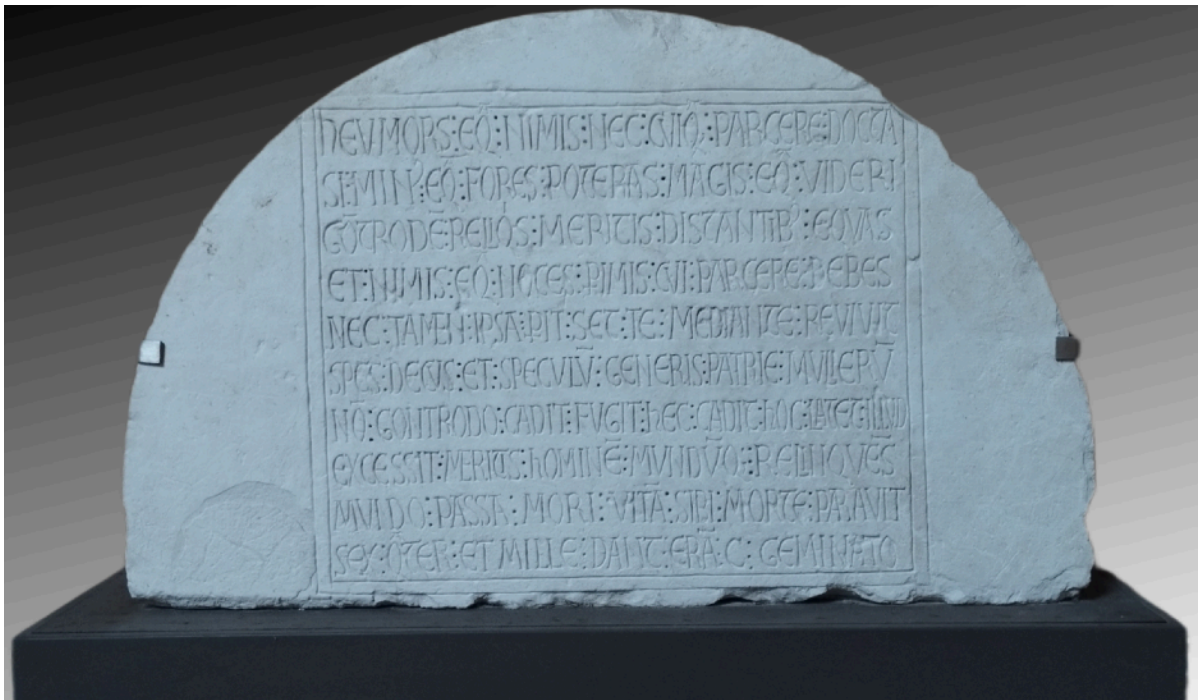
mid-17th century, and, after the Monastery of Santa María de la Vega was converted into the La Vega Arms Factory in 1857, the tomb of Gontrodo Pérez was transferred to the Museo Arqueológico de Asturias.

The stone sarcophagus of Gontrodo Pérez is a remarkable example of late Romanesque art. The lid of the tomb has carved animals and birds peeking out from interlaced arabesque scrolls; one side of the lid has another set of animals in interlaced scrolls and an inscription: *(H)ic req(u)iescit famula Dei Gontrodo. Era MDDXXIII* [sic] (Here lies the servant of God Gontrodo, Year of the Lord MCLXXXVI).



Sarcophagus of Gontrodo Pérez, with details. Museo Arqueológico de Asturias.*

* The sarcophagus and laudatory epitaph of Gontrodo used to be housed in the San Vicente cloisters of the Archaeology Museum, but they have recently been taken off view in preparation for a new display of funerary monuments. I am very grateful to the Librarian of the Museum, Sofía Díaz Rodríguez, for supplying me with the photographs of these monuments.



Epitaph of Gontrodo, Museo Arqueológico de Asturias.

The separate laudatory epitaph of Gontrodo's tomb, which presumably had been placed in a niche next to the sarcophagus in the Monastery of Santa María de la Vega, presents an unusual eulogy in Latin:

1 Heu mors eq(u)ā nimis nec cuiq(u)ā(m) parcere docta;
 si min(ūs) eq(u)ā fores, poteras magis eq(u)ā uideri.
 Go(n)trode(m) reliq(u)īs meritis distantib(ūs)equas
 et nimis eq(u)ā nocēs, p(er)imis cui parcere debes.
 5 Nec tāmen ipsa p(er)it, set te mediante reuiuit,
 spes, decus et speculu(m) generis, patrie, mulieru(m).
 No(n) Gontrodo cadit; fugit hec, cadit hoc, latet illud:
 excessit m̄eritis homine(m) mundu(m)q(ue) relinque(n)s,
 muñdo passa mori, uita(m) sibi morte p̄rauit.
 10 Sex q(u)āter et mille dant era(m) C geminato.

1 Alas, death—so just, yet wise in showing no regard for anyone.
 If you were less just, you might seem more just.
 You make Gontrodo equal to the rest, though she stands far above them in merit,
 and you act most justly by harming her—you take the one you ought to spare.
 5 And yet, she alone does not perish; rather, thanks to you, she lives on,
 the hope, honor, and mirror of her lineage, her homeland, and all women.
 Gontrodo does not fall; this one flees, this one falls, that one remains latent: she
 surpassed man in merit, and upon leaving the world—resigning herself to die for
 the world—she secured life through death.
 10 Six times four and a thousand make an era, with a hundred doubled.

The child of Gontrodo Pérez and the Emperor Alfonso VII, Urraca the Asturian, led a remarkable life. Raised in León by her paternal aunt, the Infanta Doña Sancha, Urraca was married at age 11 to the much older King García Ramírez of Navarre, a dynastic union designed to strengthen Alfonso VII's claim to rule Navarre and Leon.[†] After an elaborate wedding ceremony held in León, Urraca moved with her husband to Pamplona, where she stayed for six years and gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Sancha, after her aunt. Three years after García Ramírez died in a hunting accident in 1150, her father Alfonso VII entrusted Urraca with the governance of Oviedo in Asturias. There she ruled as *regina* and lived in the former palace of Alfonso II the Chaste. In 1163, Urraca entered into her second marriage with the nobleman Álvaro Rodríguez, with whom she had a son named Sancho Álvarez. While in Oviedo, Urraca made donations to the Cathedral, the Monastery of San Pelayo, and to the Monastery of Santa María de la Vega her mother had founded. Álvaro Rodríguez and Urraca seem to have led a separatist rebellion against her half-brother Ferdinand II, the ruler of León and Galicia. Failing to make Asturias an independent kingdom, Urraca and her husband fled to Palencia, where she died. Although Urraca stipulated in a document dated February 24, 1161 that she be buried in Oviedo Cathedral alongside the kings of Asturias, she was ultimately laid to rest in the Cathedral of San Antonio in Palencia.[‡] [Some of my Asturian friends are still outraged that the remains of Urraca the Asturian are not in the Cathedral of Oviedo!]

There were, however, prayers offered in the Palencia Cathedral to the soul of Urraca, with bishopric decrees of 1388 and 1420 requiring that they be offered by the chaplain of Chapel of Santa María Magdalena in the Cathedral. When the chapel was renovated in 1532, Urraca's naturally mummified remains were discovered and were reburied inside a gilded wooden chest with a glass lid adorned with paintings of the coats of arms of Castile and León held by angels.

[†] Alfonso also arranged dynastic marriages with his legitimate daughters—Sancha with Sancho VI of Navarre and Constance with Louis VII of France.

[‡] Urraca had further stipulated that if her body were buried elsewhere, an annual memorial mass (*misa-responso*) be held in her honor at the Oviedo Cathedral; at present, no anniversary services are held for Urraca in the Oviedo Cathedral, although such an annual mass is held for the Asturian king Alfonso II the Chaste, who is buried in the church.



Tomb of Urraca the Asturian, Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene at the Palencia Cathedral.

The 16th-century Latin epitaph of Urraca's tomb in Palencia, which may or may not be an accurate copy of the original, curiously omits the latter part of the queen's life, presenting her only as the *regina* of Navarre and the wife of her first husband, Don García Ramírez:

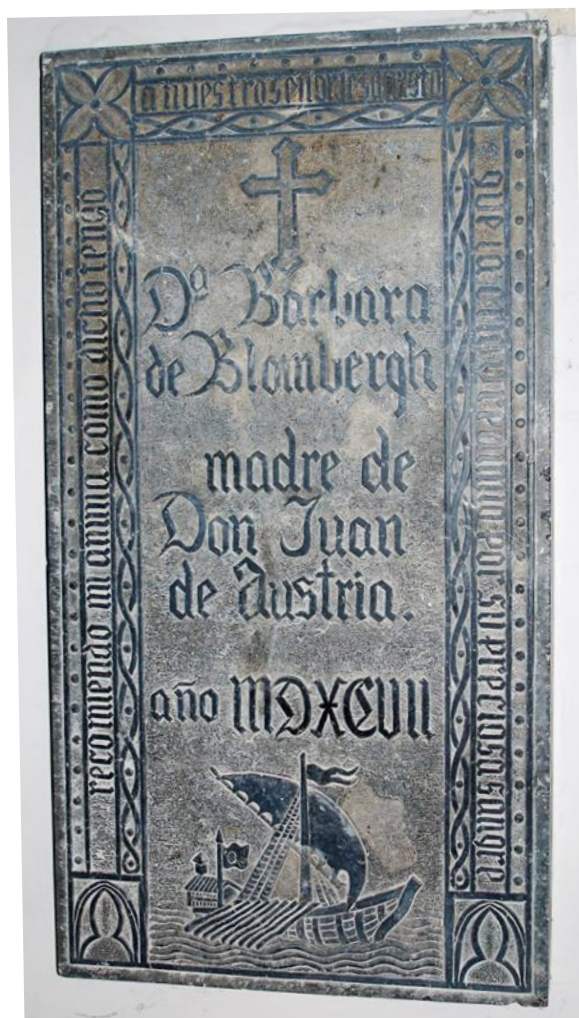
*HIC REQUIESCIT DOPNA URRACA REGINA NAVARRE UXOR
DOPNI GARSIE RAMIRI REGIS NAVARRE, QUE FUIT FILIA
SERENISSIMI DOPNI ALFONSI IMPERATORIS HISPANIAE QUI
ALMERIAM OBTINUIT, QUE OBIIT IIII^o YDUS OCTOBRIS ERA
M^oCC^aXX^aVII*

Here lies Doña Urraca, Queen of Navarre, wife of Don García Ramírez, King of Navarre, who was the daughter of His Most Serene Highness Don Alfonso, Emperor of Spain, who conquered Almería, and who died on the fourth day of the Ides of October in the year one thousand two hundred twenty-seven

[We should note that, later in his reign, Alfonsos VII had another illegitimate kid, this time with the widow Urraca Fernández. This child, Stephanie (1148–1180), is known as the Unfortunate because she was killed by her jealous husband.]

The other illegitimate love child I want to discuss in this essay is John of Austria (1547–1578), the son of Barbara Blomberg (1527–1597) and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500–1558).

The story of Barbara Blomberg and John of Austria reads like a fantasy novel that one could hardly believe was non-fiction.§



Tomb of Barbara Blomberg, Monastery of San Sebastián de Hano

Barbara Blomberg came across my path when my wife and I were exploring the region around Laredo in Cantabria. We drove down to the Monastery of San Sebastián de Hano and saw a sign saying that it contained the tomb of Barbara Blomberg. “Who in the

§ And, in fact, several novels and plays have been written about this mother and son: Patricio de la Escosura Morrogh’s 1837 Spanish-language play *Barbara Blomberg: drama en cuatro actos en verso*; George Ebers’ 1897 German-language novel *Barbara Blomberg: ein historischer Roman*; Luis Coloma’s 1902 Spanish-language novel *Don Juan de Austria o Jeromín*; Alice Goldberger Liebling’s 1934 English-language play *An Emperor's Great Love (Barbara Blomberg)*; Carl Zuckmayer’s 1949 German-language play *Barbara Blomberg: ein Stück in drei Akten*; Heinz Schauwecker’s 1953 German-language novella *Die Sternstunde der Barbara Blomberg: Novelle um die Geburt des Don Juan d’Austria*; and Teresa Alvarez’s 1999 Spanish-language novel *La pasión última de Carlos V*.

world was Barbara Blomberg and how did she come to be buried in a monastery in Cantabria?” we thought. The plaque next to Blomberg’s tomb, which is located in a side niche in the church, has a prayer written in Latin around its edge, a Spanish inscription announcing that Doña Barbara Blomberg was the mother of John of Austria, and the date 1597; below is a carving of a Spanish galley—an appropriate image for a woman who lived quite a peripatetic life.



Willem Geets, *Emperor Charles V and Barbara Blomberg*, before 1919. Oil on panel, 88 x 65 cm. Private collection.

Barbara Blomberg was born to burgher parents in 1527 in Ratisbon, Germany. Reputed to be a great beauty, Barbara became a singer and met the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V when he came to Regensburg in 1546 for a meeting of the Imperial Diet and she, aged nineteen, was singing at the Golden Cross Inn where the king was staying. Charles V had been widowed after the death, in 1539, of his beloved Isabel, Queen of Portugal, who was the mother of seven of his children (of whom only three survived infancy—Philip II, Maria, and Joanna of Austria). For several months, Barbara had an affair with Charles, and after the Emperor left Germany in 1547 she gave birth to a son, John of Austria, who was called Jeromín as a boy. Perhaps through the intercession of the Emperor, shortly after giving

birth to his son, Barbara Blomberg was married to an imperial official, Hieronymus Kegel, and in 1551 they moved to Brussels where Barbara bore him three children.

The Emperor was clearly aware of his son with Barbara Blomberg, and in 1551 he ordered that the four-year-old boy be brought to Spain. In 1554, Jeromín, now seven years old, was taken to the castle of Charles' majordomo, Luis de Quijada, in Valladolid where he was raised by de Quijada's wife, Magdalena de Ulloa. In 1556, in ill health and unable to walk due to his gout, Charles returned to Spain after having spent most of his reign outside of the country fighting wars, and, after a months-long journey from Laredo to the Extremadura, settled in the Monastery of Yuste. In the summer of 1558, Charles ordered de Quijada, de Ulloa, and John to relocate to the village of Cuacos de Yuste so that he could meet his son. Over the next several weeks, Jeromín, now eleven years old, was taken to the Monastery of Yuste to meet Charles, who supposedly was impressed by the demeanor of the young man but never revealed to him the fact that he was the Emperor's son.



Eduardo Rosales, *Presentación de don Juan de Austria al emperador Carlos V, en Yuste*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 76.5 cm x 123.5 cm. Museo del Prado.

Towards the end of his life, the Emperor Charles V took the unprecedented step of abdicating, leaving his Habsburg Austrian holdings (but not his title) to his younger brother Ferdinand and his Spanish domains to his son Philip II. In September, 1558, Charles died at the Monastery of Yuste, succumbing to the malaria endemic to the region that Philip had warned him about. In the codicil of his will, Charles recognized John of Austria as his son.

Philip II's treatment of his half-brother and Barbara Blomberg is a less familiar but remarkable part of this story. It was Philip who told Jeromín that they were brothers, and while Philip recognized John as a Habsburg and gave him the income bequeathed to him by his father, he did not allow John to be addressed as “Your Highness” but only to use the aristocratic title of “Your Excellency”. And when Barbara Blomberg’s husband died in Brussels in 1569 and she fell into reduced financial circumstances, it was Philip II who arranged for her to receive a pension. Later, in 1576, Philip arranged for Barbara to come to Spain; she settled in a convent in Castile, where she saw her son John for the first time since he was a baby. And two years later, after the death of John, Philip allowed Barbara to purchase an estate in Cantabria, where she lived for nineteen years until her death at age ninety—buried in the Monastery of San Sebastián de Hano where I first encountered her.

And although Charles V had wanted his illegitimate child John to become a cleric, Philip eventually allowed his half-brother to enter the military, where he had an illustrious career. John of Austria—Don Juan—became commander of the Holy League fleet that fought the Ottoman fleet in the Mediterranean, and in 1571 John led his fleet to defeat the Turkish fleet at the Battle of Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth—one of the major naval battles of the sixteenth century during the Ottoman incursions into Europe.

In 1577, Philip II sent John of Austria to the Netherlands to put down the Protestant rebellion against the Spanish crown. After losing the Battle of Rijmenam, John contracted a fever and died. Fearing that John’s body might be captured at sea by adversarial Dutch or English forces, it was quartered and returned secretly in saddle bags overland to Madrid, where Philip II arranged for it to be buried in the new Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial that he had built to house the tombs of his parents Emperor Charles V and Queen Isabel of Portugal. John of Austria’s tomb in El Escorial, carved in beautiful Carrara marble, presents him without gloves as he did not die in battle; on the side of the tomb is a Latin inscription from the Bible (*John* 1:6): “Fuit homo missus a Deo, cui nomen erat Joannes” (“There was a man sent from God whose name was John”).



Juan Pantoja de la Cruz (attributed), *Don Juan de Austria*, second half of 16th century. Oil on canvas, 223 cm x 118 cm. Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid.



Tomb of John of Austria. Carrara marble. Designed by Ponciano Ponzano and carved by Giuseppe Galeotti, 1579. Royal Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid.

In concluding this essay, we might note that Charles V had five other illegitimate children: Infanta Isabella of Castile (b. 1518), perhaps the daughter of Charles's maternal step-grandmother, Germaine of Foix; Margaret of Austria (b. 1522), the daughter of Johanna van der Gheynst; Joanna of Austria (b. 1522), the daughter of Catalina de Rebolledo; Tadea of Austria (b. 1523), the daughter of Orsolina della Penna (an Italian widow known as "the beauty of Perugia"); and Cornelis de Hooghe (b. 1541), the son of an upper-class Delft mother. And John of Austria also had illegitimate children of his own: Maria Ana of Austria (b. 1568), the daughter of Maria of Mendoza (who was lady-in-waiting to Joanna of Austria, Princess of Portugal); Juana of Austria (b. 1573), the daughter of Diana Falangola; and a child with Zenobia Saratosia that died in childbirth.

But, to end on a positive note, it has been nearly a century since a Spanish king

fathered illegitimate children. The paternity claims against Juan Carlos aside, the last Spanish king to have fathered royal bastards was Alfonso XIII (1886–1941), who is known to have five illegitimate children: Roger de Vilmorin (b. 1905), the child of the married French aristocrat Mélanie de Gaufridy de Dortan; Juana Alfonsa Milán y Quiñones de León (b. 1916), the child of the Irish piano teacher Béatrice Noon; Ana María Teresa Ruiz y Moragas (b. 1925) and Leandro Alfonso Luis de Borbón Ruiz (b. 1929), children of the actress Carmen Ruiz Moragas; and Carmen Gravina (b. 1926), the daughter of another actress, Carmen de Navascués.

And, happily, our current king, Felipe VI, seems to be totally devoted to his wife, Queen Letizia, and their two daughters, Princesa Leonor and the Infanta Sofía. And, as it looks like Spain will be ruled by queens in the near future, it may be some time before another Spanish king can't keep it in his pants.

In addition to my copious use of Wikipedia and consultations with ChatGPT, some of the sources I consulted in writing this essay include:

Lucía Gomez, “Illegitimate daughters exercising power in the twelfth century: The case of Urraca the Asturian,” *Team Queens*, 25 August, 2020.

Yayoi Kawamura, “Fábrica barroca del monasterio de Santa María de la Vega de Oviedo,” *Liño 13. Revista Anual de Historia del Arte*, 2007, pp. 33–55.

Isabel Ruiz de la Peña González, “Dentro y fuera de la ciudad: memoria monástica femenina en Oviedo: siglos XI-XIII,” *As Sociedades Urbanas na Europa Medieval, Urban Societies in Medieval Europe*, Lisbon, 2025, pp. 363–388.

Pedro Manuel Suárez-Martínez, “El epitafio latino de Gontrodo Petri,” *Studii Medievali*, no. 61, 1, 2020, pp. 131–152.