Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, also known as El Cid, from the Arabic word “Sayyid” or “lord,” and also as the Campeador, from the Latin campi doctor or “master of war,” is best known as the hero of the epic poem Cantar del Mio Cid, or The Song of My Cid, a “song of deeds” like the Song of Roland. Like other “songs of deeds,” the Cantar del Mio Cid celebrates the knightly virtues of the early Middle Ages, such as loyalty to one’s lord, largesse toward one’s followers, and prowess as a warrior. The poem also celebrates the opportunities presented by the circumstances of the Reconquista during the early Middle Ages, when Moorish Spain was often divided into taifa kingdoms, small principalities that emerged whenever central Muslim authority collapsed. Though wealthy, the taifa kingdoms were divided and militarily weak, and the Christian kingdoms to the north began to retake lands lost to the Muslims in the eighth century. This was also an opportune time for intrepid Christian knights, who could sell their services to the taifa as mercenaries, join the Christian kingdoms and be rewarded with land and booty, or simply set out on their own. In the Cantar del Mio Cid, El Cid is portrayed as using his skills as a warrior and leader to successfully navigate the political and military world of early medieval Spain to gain fame, wealth, and power, serving as a model of chivalry for many generations of Spaniards.

The poem is not without historical basis, especially in its depiction of the opportunities open to knights in early medieval Iberia. The poem is in fact quite accurate in depicting knights as rather self-interested; this was not a world of sharply defined and intractable national and cultural identities and loyalties. There was no opprobrium attached to serving Muslim rulers if this proved advantageous or necessary, and neither was it frowned upon to fight other Christians for similar reasons. As shall be seen, the historical Rodrigo Díaz was even more pragmatic and self-interested than his epic counterpart, fighting for or against whoever could give him most advantage.

The historical Rodrigo Díaz was born in the 1040s (possibly 1043) in the Castilian town of Vivar, a few miles north of Burgos and on the frontier with Navarre. His father, Diego Laínez, was an infanzón, or minor nobleman, from a family of some local influence. His mother’s name is unknown, but she presumably came from a more important family: her father, Rodrigo Alva- rez, was a companion of King Ferdinand “the Great” (1017–1065).

When Diego Laínez died in 1058, Rodrigo Díaz’s upbringing was entrusted to Ferdinand the Great’s son, Crown Prince Sancho. His military education was in Sancho’s court, and the prince eventually knighted him. He probably learned something of the law, since he participated in several judicial proceedings later on.

As a companion of Prince Sancho, Rodrigo Díaz fought in the Battle of Graus (1063) against King Ramiro of Aragón. During this time, Rodrigo Díaz also defeated a Navarrese knight named Jimeno Garcés and a Saracen named Medinaceli in formal duels.

Sancho became king of Castile in 1065 and appointed Rodrigo Díaz as his armiger, or arms bearer, which was a combination of chief of staff and commander of the king’s household warriors. As armiger, he participated in the War of the Three Sanchos (1065–1067). Sancho and his brother Alfonso, king of
León, attacked their youngest brother García, king of Galicia, and deprived him of his kingdom. Sancho and Rodrigo Díaz then fought and defeated Alfonso in the Battles of Llantada (1071) and Golpejera (1072). Alfonso was forced into exile and Sancho became the ruler of much of Christian Iberia.

King Sancho was assassinated on October 7, 1072, and was succeeded, ironically, by the brother he had dispossessed, Alfonso, who became King Alfonso VI, “Emperor of All Spain.” The new king took Rodrigo Díaz into his service but did not appoint him armiger. Despite this, Rodrigo Díaz remained in Alfonso’s entourage and served the king by adjudicating two law-suits. Alfonso arranged a very advantageous marriage for him with a noblwoman named Jimena, daughter of Count Diego of Oviedo. Jimena was related to the king and was from a notable family in Asturias. Rodrigo Díaz and Jimena had two daughters, Cristina and María, and a son, Diego Rodríguez.

Around 1079, Rodrigo Díaz was sent with a contingent of knights to collect the paria, or tribute, that was owed to Alfonso by al-Mutamid, ruler of the taifa of Seville. Alfonso also sent another embassy of warriors to Granada for the same purpose. The exact circumstances of what happened next are unclear, but what is known is that both al-Mutamid and the ruler of Granada, ‘Abd Allah, employed the Christian embassies sent to them to fight each other. An engagement was fought in Cabra and Rodrigo Díaz emerged victorious, ransoming some Christian nobles for a considerable sum. These nobles were important personages in Alfonso’s court who subsequently became Rodrigo Díaz’s enemies. Rodrigo Díaz further imperiled his standing in Alfonso’s court when he led a destructive reprisal raid into the lands of a client kingdom of Alfonso, the taifa of Toledo. As a result, Alfonso forced Rodrigo Díaz into exile.

Rodrigo Díaz found employment with the ruler of Zaragoza, al-Mu’tamin, whose situation was particularly pressing since his brother al-Hayib was challenging his claim to the throne. Al-Hayib had allied himself with King Sancho of Aragón and Count Berenguer Ramón II of Barcelona. Rodrigo Díaz was given command of the frontier with Aragón, where al-Hayib was most likely to strike. There, Rodrigo Díaz successfully fought off the Aragónese forces in a series of engagements. These fights culminated in the Battle of Almenar, in which he helped al-Mu’tamin defeat the numerically superior army of al-Hayib and Count Berenguer Ramón II. The king of Aragón was in turn defeated in a battle beside the Ebro River in 1084. Once again, Rodrigo Díaz captured many important nobles and earned a considerable fortune from their ransoms. Because of these victories, Rodrigo Díaz was rapidly becoming known as the foremost warrior in Iberia.

Rodrigo Díaz was recalled by King Alfonso after the latter’s defeat by the Almoravids in the Battle of Sagrajas (1086). Unfortunately, Rodrigo Díaz failed to join his army with that of Alfonso when the Almoravids returned in 1089, and he was once again banished. He no longer associated with Alfonso in any meaningful way thereafter.

In exile once more, Rodrigo Díaz made for Valencia, which he captured after a long siege in 1094. As prince of Valencia, Rodrigo Díaz successfully defended the city against an Almoravid siege before defeating a numerically superior Almoravid army in the Battle of Jativa (1097). He worked toward consolidating his hold on Valencia, but he died in July 1099. His wife Jimena ruled Valencia until 1102, but because of continued pressure from the Almoravids, the Christians eventually abandoned the city. Rodrigo Díaz’s body was interred in the monastery of San Pedro de Cardeña in Castile, and Jimena was buried beside him in 1116.

SEE ALSO: Chivalry; Reconquista (711–1492).
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