

*Constructing an Identity:
Castile in the XIIIth and XIVth Centuries**

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Abstract: This short essay examines the factors that led to the construction of a national identity in mid-thirteenth century Castile. Although there are many different reasons for the emergence of a sense of regional identity, this essay examines those issues of territoriality, textual production, and religion that contributed to the emergence of a Castilian identity in the late middle Ages, as well as the nature of that self-representation and representations of others.

Keywords: Castile; Identity; Representation.

Resúmen: En este breve ensayo examino la forma en que una identidad nacional fue construida en Castilla a partir de mediados del siglo XIII. Aunque los factores que llevaron al comienzo y formación de identidades regionales son numerosos y complejos, mi ensayo se limita a cuatro de estos factores en particular: la producción de textos ideológicos que formaron la fundación intelectual de este proyecto, las nuevas concepciones de la tierra y de fronteras, la religión, y finalmente los procesos de representación de uno mismo y de la tierra, así como representaciones contra otros.

Palabras-clave: Castilla; Identidad; Representación.

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The formation of national identities or even regional ones has always been a complex process. The diverse elements that contribute to the construction of an identity are closely imbedded into specific contexts and uneven historical developments. Although the different elements that contribute to the formation of regional or national identities are usually fairly similar, yet, they do not always lead to the same results. For example, religion, which we see in the Middle Ages as a critical component for the making of collective identity or multiple and overlapping identities, may also in some cases function as a deterrent to the progression from regional identity to national ones. The recent example of Syria, Iraq, and a good number of African nations — all of them emerging from the post-colonial arbitrary organization of their respective territories — are places where sectarian beliefs threaten to break up national structures. How then can we define and explain the process by which a country constructed what Benedict Anderson’s paradigmatic study calls “imagined communities.” A note of caution for medievalists is that Anderson’s study focus on the nineteenth century and on a non-western example.

“Imagining a community” is a long term development which, as many would argue, does not occur fully until the nineteenth century and the emergence or further consolidation of nation states in western Europe.¹ While the formation of national identities has been discussed and theorized widely over the last three decades, it is not always clear what are the mechanisms or stages which allowed for the construction of what one may call today a national identity. Traditional historiography has looked to the Middle Ages for the embryonic beginnings of the state and of national identities. My own mentor at Princeton, Joseph R. Strayer, wrote a celebrated short essay, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, in which he traced the rise of the nation and national identities in France and England to their respective medieval monarchies. He was not alone in choosing those two nations, the most important winners in imperial and colonial expansion in

¹ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London & New York: Verso, 2006.

the nineteenth century, as paradigmatic for the formation of the modern state with compulsory education (which promoted patriotism and love of the country as part of a clear ideological construction of the nation), conscription, and taxation.²

Few today would accept these teleologies that lead directly from the Middle Ages to our present. In fact, we know such standard concepts as absolutism, centralized states, and the like have shown not to be immutable or as stable as we once thought. Throughout the modern world we see the forces of local allegiance re-asserting themselves very powerfully and leading to the fragmentation of political structures. The Spanish case and the claims of autonomous regions in the Iberian peninsula, or the experiences of Scotland, Sardinia, the former Soviet Union, and many other examples point to the fragile nature of the nation state.

In spite of these reservations, it may be a good idea to test these assumptions against one specific case study. Although Strayer's views are not fully accepted nowadays, it is clear to most medievalist that important changes occurred towards the end of the Middle Ages, and that these changes had important consequences for political developments later on and for the construction of a national and/or regional sense of self as being different from the identity of others, whether within the realm itself (Jews, Muslims), or outside one's borders. Castile is a very good example of how an embryonic sense of the realm and the people who lived within the realm began to emerge in the later twelfth century and continue to develop in succeeding centuries in spite of setbacks and crises. In examining Castile and the making of a regional identity, I wish to focus on those categories that were crucial in creating a sense of being a Castilian, different from, as mentioned above, those who lived in other realms nearby and, far more important, different from those people who lived within the emerging territorial boundaries of the realm of the castles and the lions. Such a topic

² Joseph R. Strayer. *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1970. See also the classic work by Ernst H. Kantorowicz. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1957.

would require one or more lengthy books. Here I offer, because of the limitations of space, a brief discussion of some very specific developments. Thus, this short dossier serves more as a guide for further research than as a complete formulation of this *problematique*. Clearly, not everything can be studied, and I limit myself to a handful of issues which were crucial in triggering new awareness of self as part of the kingdom of Castile. These categories were: religion, territoriality, discourses of identity, and literary representations of the land and of the self. Not discussed here, but as equally important were such obvious developments as the rise of a bureaucracy, warfare (which in the Middle Ages was an important part of religion), festivals (a topic that I have examined elsewhere), and myriad of other themes too long to list here.

Religion

The influential and transformative decisions of the IV Lateran Council (1215) had important repercussions throughout the medieval West, and most certainly in Castile. By defining what meant to be a Christian and what constituted heresy, the edicts of the IV Lateran Council played a significant role in creating discourses of inclusion — who was going to be part of Christian society — and exclusion, that is, who was going to be set aside and marginalized in the new world being constructed by the unholy alliance of kings and Church. As R.I. Moore has forcefully shown, the period marked the beginning of persecutions that transformed the nature of medieval society and how the Church dealt with heretics.³ After all, discourses of self-representation are always discourses against others.

In Castile, this was no different. By the mid thirteenth century the ordinances of the Cortes began a campaign to inscribe in the body of the

³ Robert I. Moore. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, and his recent book: *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe*. London: Profile, 2012.

“other,” meaning Jews and Muslims, signs of difference. Only in a society in which the levels of co-existence (but not *convivencia*, a term which I find extremely problematic) were so widespread would the Crown and Church hope to identify those who were different. This was only possible if they carried special signs on their clothing or cut their hair in special ways as to be able to distinguish them from Christians. The legislation of the Cortes thus sought to identify Jews and Muslims and to separate them from Christians. Jews were required to wear yellow circles. Muslims or Mudejars (Muslims living under Christian rule) were expected to wear their hair in specific fashion. Moreover, although these edicts were often ignored, they were re-enacted at almost every meeting of the Cortes for the next century and a half. Their cumulative impact would have nefarious consequences in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The legislation of the Cortes, propelled by the urban representatives engaged in competition with Jewish money lenders and fiscal agents, also sought to segregate Jews and Muslims from Christian, forbidding the use of Jewish and Muslim nannies for Christian babies and a whole host of other restrictions. Most significant, the ordinances of the Cortes sought to impose a series of fiscal restrictions on Jews that would limit their financial well being and their participation in the realm’s fiscal life.⁴

These measures, while reflecting latent and long standing animosity against non-Christians, served as a first step towards the creation of an identity vis-à-vis others in society. That first identity was that of a Christian or, should I say, a Castilian Christian. It was a form of identity that emphasized membership in a community and that was circumscribed by the administrative and pastoral structure of the Castilian Church and by the close relationship between religion and politics. The Reconquest, that *deus-ex-machina* of Castilian historiography, functioned as well as a locomotive for

⁴ See my *Spain’s Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, chapter 7. On the Cortes’s legislation see *Cortes de los antiguos reinos de León y Castilla*, 5 vols. Vols. I & II. Madrid: Imprenta y Estereotipia de M. Rivadeneyra, 1861-63, I: (1258) # 26 - 30 p. 59 to 77; (1268), # 7 & 8, p. 68-69; (1313), #26, p. 227; (1313), # 34, p. 231; # 42, p. 244-45; et al

the creation of a regional identity. Self representation, as noted earlier, is always constructed against others. We are Christians because we are not Jews or Muslims. We are Christians and therefore we carry on a long battle against Islam to recover those sites that had once being Christians. Jews and Muslims were also seen as an additional threat because of, as David Nirenberg has shown magisterially, the fear of miscegenation.⁵ It ought not to surprise us the long life that an identity based upon religion filiation had in the Iberian peninsula as a whole, in other western medieval realms, and in Castile in particular. As late as the sixteenth century, when Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote his “true history” of the Conquest of New Spain, he always referred to the Castilians as Christians in contrast to the Maya and Nahua people engaged in human sacrifices.⁶

These Christian identity will take on additional characteristics over time, all bound up together as a form of defining one’s identity. One was the claims for Visigothic descent that begins to be advanced in earnest from as early as the ninth century and obtain literary confirmation in this period (see below). The high point to those claims of a Visigothic ancestry and therefore to purity of blood and nobility come to the forefront in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The discourse of cleanliness of blood, as I have argued recently, was also a discourse deeply grounded on Visigothic blood and nobility. In time, that discourse came to be associated with geography. The mountains, already prominently mentioned in *The Poema de Fernán González* (see below) became also associated with purity of blood (the blood of Christians as opposed to the blood of Jews and Muslims) and nobility. This is also evident in the polemical literature against Jews — most obvious in Andrés Bernáldez’s vitriolic attacks against Conversos and Jews — which

⁵ David Nirenberg. *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996); see also T.F. Ruiz & Scarlett Freund. “Jews, Conversos, and the Inquisition in Spain, 1391-1492: The Ambiguities of History”. In: *Jewish-Christian Encounters Over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*. Eds. M. Perry and F.M. Schweitzer. New York: Peter Lang, 1994, p. 169-195.

⁶ Bernal Díaz del Castillo. *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. Ed. Miguel León Portilla Madrid: Historia 16, 1984.

decried the Conversos' urban status and glorified the countryside. This identification with mountains and countryside as places not corrupted by Jewish and Muslim blood is mocked by Cervantes when he put into Sancho Panza's mouth the idea that he could be a duke because he was born on a farm and was an "Old Christian."⁷ Thus, to be a Christian in 1250 was already a step in defining one's identity against the presence of large religious minorities. It was a mechanism and a category not present elsewhere in the western Middle Ages, except perhaps in Sicily in an earlier period.

The Kingdom as a Territory: Boundaries

This is a complicated topic about which I can only contribute the most perfunctory summary in these pages. The middle of the thirteenth century and the century afterward saw the rise of new ideas about territoriality. What I mean by this is that the traditional sense of the land, in this particular case, the land in Castile as a jumble of confusing and overlapping jurisdictions became to be slowly replaced by a new sense that the realm had boundaries that were easily definable (a river, a mountain range, or other topographical features). Moreover, those emerging boundaries became dotted with custom houses, fortifications, and other symbols of royal and local authority that began to define the land as a measurable and specific territory. To be born within this now recognizable territory — inscribed in documents, legislation, and in a new understanding of the concept of frontier — meant that one belonged to this territory or realm, that one was a Castilian, subject to a king and to a law (the royal *fueros*, the *Fuero real* and other legislation of the second half of the thirteenth century. The term frontier (*frontera*) is one that begins to be deployed in earnest in the documentation of the thirteenth century and

⁷ "Discourses of Blood and Kinship in Late Medieval and Early Modern Castile." In: *Blood and Kinship. Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present*. Edited by C.J. Johnson, B. Jussen, D.W. Sabeau, and S. Teuscher. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013, p. 105-124.

afterwards, The administrative office of the *adelantado de la frontera* became one of the most important positions in Castile.⁸

As Ariel Guance has already pointed out, in the monarchical and administrative discourses of the period the word land, *tierra*, begins to have a valence that was dramatically different from that of previous century. The impetus towards boundaries and defining property as occupying specific amount of land emerged from below and was already present in numerous transactions and exchanges of property in the early thirteenth century. When the idea of territoriality emerged fully in Castile — and one must caution the reader that this was not a clear lineal development, but that it took a great deal of time and suffered numerous setbacks in the troubled fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — it did so not just as a physical or fiscal development, but also as an ideological one. Kantorowicz and Strayer have already alerted us to the manner in which royal agents in France began to voice their willingness to die for the fatherland (*pro patria mori*). In Castile, kings ascended to the throne with the ritual cry of “Castile (Castilla), Castile for the King. The symbols of Castile, most significantly, the royal banners were also raised for new kings, accompanied by the traditional cry that marked the acceptance of magnates, clergy, and people in general of a new ruler. Since these were “public” performances, it is obvious that those who carried out these performances and those who witnessed them understood the fact that there was an entity named Castile, that it had a physical existence, and that the monarch became identified with that territory. Far more important, those who swore fidelity to the new king or queen, those who acclaimed and “elected” the new king also understood that they were part of Castile, that they were Castilians.⁹

⁸ Ariel Guance. “To Die for Country, Land, or Faith in Castilian Medieval Thought”. *Journal of Medieval History* 24 (1998), 313-32; T.F. Ruiz, “Límites: De la comunidad a la nación en la Castilla bajomedieval”. *Annuario de estudios medievales*, 27/1 (1997), 23-41. Published in late 1998. T. F. Ruiz *From Heaven to earth. The Reordering of Castilian Society, 1150-1350*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2004), chapter 4 et al.

⁹ See note 8 and also T.F. Ruiz. “Unsacred Monarchy: The Kings of Castile in the Late Middle Ages.” in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual and Politics since the*

Clearly by the mid-thirteenth century, and far more so, in succeeding centuries, Castilians began — aided by the enactment of laws (the Ordenamiento of Alcalá de Henares, 1348, formalization of the Siete Partidas) — by festivities and celebrations (none more significant than the royal ascent to the throne of the kingdom) to understand the very significant connection between king, realm, and identity. This is of course not the national identity of later centuries, but it was an important landmark towards the “imagining of a community.”

Discourses of Identity: Literary Representations of the Land and of Self

From the first half of the thirteenth century onward, there was an ideological construction of Castile in two distinct ways. Both were textual ways of representing Castile and instruments for building a Castilian identity. They worked in different ways and aimed at different audiences, inviting, as these texts did, diverse forms of reading and transmission. One was the law. The ambitious legal programs of Ferdinand III (1217-1252), his son, Alfonso X (1252-1284), and his grandson, Sancho IV (1284-1296) was characterized mostly for the desire to provide Castile with a uniform code of law or laws. Although not always successful and meeting resistance from nobles and middling sorts, these legislative programs when joined by growth in the bureaucracy and in the reach of royal agents helped a great deal in the construction of the realm as a united entity in opposition to other realms.

To be a taxpayer, to be a tax collector, to serve in the urban militias or in the noble hosts meant to acknowledge the existence of a broader entity, the kingdom. We cannot speak yet of nations or even fully of the state, but the Castilian realm was an entity recognized, obeyed (and at times opposed) by the majority of the population. Even the humblest of peasants paid royal

taxes and was aware of those royal agents who came by the village from time to time. It is the king, in the very troubled years at the end of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century, who is seen as the upholder of justice, the preserver of peace. During the minority of Alfonso XI (1315), more than one urban representatives and hidalgos (lesser nobility) rallied to the defense of the minor king and against the excesses of the high nobility. Surely, there was a sense of belonging to something larger than local and regional lordships.

The meeting of the Cortes, held almost annually during the critical thirteenth and fourteenth century, meant a living symbol of the realm and of the divinely inspired division of the realm into orders with the Crown as mediator and interlocutor for the often conflicting interest of these diverse social groups. The Cortes also made laws. The ordinances of the Cortes were sent throughout the realm. Copies were redacted for safe keeping in municipal archives. City procurators from throughout the realm, ecclesiastics, and noblemen traveled across the land as a re-assertion of the shared governance of the realm. All of these institutions were central for the formation of a sense of wider identity than merely the limited allegiance to one's lord, something that overlapped with and complemented in many ways old duties to local centers of power. It is not that the complex network of duty and reciprocal bonds disappeared, but that, in Castile, throughout the thirteenth century, new ways of thinking about the kingdom began to emerge. In time, they will sweep older loyalties and emerge triumphant. The battle for primacy would not be fought until the late fifteenth century and formalized only in the sixteenth, but the way to the supremacy of the Crown was already on the making. And, as I argue, the central position of the Crown was intimately bound up with the emergence of a sense of a kingdom-wide identity.¹⁰

¹⁰ See my *Spain's Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*, chapters, 3, 4, 5 & 9.

Representations of Castile and Castilians (a brief look)

If legal codes, meetings of the Cortes, and the activities of royal agents were fundamental in constructing an identity for the Crown, literary representations of Castile and Castilians, circulating as they did among literary circles, were also an important addition to the developments that led to the formulation of a regional or realm-wide identity. The study of representations of Castile and Castilians is a vast topic which I have already examined in some detail elsewhere.¹¹ Here a few examples of the representations of the land and the representation of Castilians, defined against the representation of other will suffice.

In the mid-thirteenth century, The *Primera crónica general* and the anonymous *Poema de Fernán González* offer a glowing description of Castile. It is a description with a long history, harkening back to Isidore of Seville's panegyric almost seven hundreds earlier. Castile is presented almost as an earthly paradise. The *PCG* begins its description of Spain (Castile) with praise of the Visigoths. The former sought throughout the world for a place to settle, and they "fallaron que Espanna era el mejor de todos." Describing Castile in geographical terms as a castle protected by the mountains, the list of Castile's products and richness is almost utopian. The *PCG* borrows heavily from Isidore's famous description of Spain, but it concentrates on the mountains, the original birthplace of Castile.

Por eso vos lo digo que bien lo entendades:
mejor es que otras tierras en la que vos morades,
de todo es bien conplida en la que vos estades;
dezir vos e agora quantas a de bondades.
Tierra es muy tenprada sin grandes calenturas,
non faze en ivierno destenpradas friuras,
non es tierra en el mundo que aya tales pasturas,
árboles para fruta siquier' de mil naturas.

¹¹ "Representación: Castilla, los castellanos y el Nuevo Mundo a finales de la edad media y principios de la moderna". In: BARROS, Carlos (Ed.). *Historia a debate. Medieval*. Santiago de Compostela: 1995, p. 63-77.

Sobre todas las tierras mejor es la montaña... (22).¹²

The emphasis here is on the land (*tierra*) and on a geographical space where Castile was born: the mountains.

As to the representation of Castilians, in the *PCG*, the courage of the Visigoths — with whom the Castilians had already established a fictitious historical link — is compared to that of the Moors, the enemy in 711 and in the 1250's (310). At the same time, the chronicle advances a dual historical explanation for the defeat and destruction of Visigothic power in the peninsula. The Moors are represented — within the dichotomy Christians-Muslims, Goths-Moors — as inhuman and traitors. Their deeds are not those of noble knights (313). Spain (by which it is meant Castile) has only fallen into the hands of this cruel and irrational foe because of the betrayal of the count Don Julián and because of Visigothic sins. Thus, the official history of Castile proceeds to contextualize the defeat by placing it on the same plane as the fall of Babylon, Carthage, Jerusalem and Rome. Located in such exclusive company, the reader can now reflect upon the unpredictable nature of fortune, the workings of Divine Will, and the historical links of self with an illustrious past.

In the *PFG*, the Goths, although not yet Christians, guided by the Holy Spirit settled in Spain and converted to Christianity. Their glorious rule over Iberia comes to an end, once again, because of Don Julián's treachery and their own sins, but here, as in the *PCG*, the Moors are represented in the same negative terms, including charges of cannibalism.

España la gentil fue luego destruida;
 eran señores della la gente descreída;
 los cristianos mesquinos avían muy mala vida;
 nunca fue en cristianos tan gran cuita venida.

¹² *Primera crónica general*. Estoria de España que mando componer Alfonso el Sabio..., 2 vols. Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1955, I: 311. Hereafter *PCG* and references included parenthetically. *Poema de Fernán González*. Ed. John Lihani. East Lansing, MI, Michigan University, 1991, 5. Hereafter *PFG* with references done parenthetically.

Dentro en las iglesias fazían establías,
fazían en los altares muchas fieras follías,
robavan los tesoros de las sacristanías;
lloravan los cristianos las noches e los días....
Dezian e afirmavan que los vieran cozer,
cozían e asavan omnes para comer;...
matavan a las madres, en brazos a sus fijos...
anadavan con gran miedo muchos enloquecidos (15).

But the Moors are not the only ones employed as a counter-representation to help delineate the martial and Christian persona of both Visigoths and Castilians. France and Charlemagne are also targets for the *PFG*'s historical elaborations. As an answer to the legends spawn by the pseudo-Turpin, the *PFG*, following on the writings of Vicentius Hispanicus and others, presents a different version. Castilian, led by Bernardo del Carpio, defeated Charlemagne and destroyed the rearguard of his army at Ronscevalles. This was a narrative which, as Vicentius Hispanicus argued, was based on historical truth and not on the exaggerations of myth and epic.

There are other ways in which representations of the "other" serve to define one self. As we have seen, from the thirteenth-century onwards, the legislation of the Cortes sought to segregate Jews and Moors from the Christians by their clothing, hair style, and place of residence. Whether these ordinances were enforced or not — in fact, they were often ignored — what is important here is that the negative representations of Moors and, above all, Jews and Conversos (or of some of the Conversos), in the legislation of the Cortes, in the royal decrees, in such literary works as Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* and in Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* were intimately linked to the increasing violence against religious minorities and the definition of a Castilian and Christian persona.

Conclusion

In this brief account, I focus on a period (around 1250 and succeeding decades) when a sense of Castile as a geographical entity with well defined borders began to emerge, both in practical and physical senses (borders, custom houses, and the like) but also in the legislation and literary works. This emerging identity or identities is most often forged against others, by emphasizing the differences between Castilians and those who will not be part of the new construction of a kingdom-wide identity. Much will still have to be done for Castile and Spain to gain a national identity. Even today, in the world of *autonomias* is not even clear that the ambitions of thirteenth century rulers and intellectuals have been achieved or can be achieved, or, perhaps more accurately, should be achieved. Nonetheless, the mid thirteenth century and the period afterwards marks a beginning of that process of nation building that would have nefarious results in the national wars of the early modern period and afterwards.

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