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Lectio praecursoria

The Good Noblemen Who Conquered the Kingdom: Islam, Historiography, and Aristocratic Legitimation in Late-Medieval Portugal

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University of Turku, 25.11.2022

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Learned Custos, my esteemed Opponent, honourable members of the audience,

The history of the High Iberian Middle Ages learned in schools, conveyed in popular culture and popular publications is not so different from the late medieval narratives I analysed in my dissertation. The general background is as follows: after Roman dominion came the Germanic invasions. The Goths succeeded in dominating all of Spain, with the most powerful of these people being those that had inherited the legacy left by the Romans. Gothic rule, in turn, came to an end in the fateful year of 711, when Muslim armies invaded the Peninsula, quickly overthrowing Gothic and Catholic rule.

All of Hispania is occupied. All? No – one group stubbornly holds out against the invaders in the mountains of Asturias, surrounded by Muslim armies. They are led by Pelayo, a caudillo with Gothic background, who fends off the overwhelmingly larger Muslim armies. This focal point of resistance in the mountains of Asturias would be the embryo from where the eight-century long process of Christian expansion in the Iberian Peninsula was born, the conventionally (and problematically) named *Reconquista*, during which the medieval kingdoms of Castile-León and Portugal emerged.

This overarching narrative provides the background for all subsequent historiography about this period. Each epoch appropriates the narratives according to the requirements of their social and political circumstances, building upon this narrative substratum and adding a new layer.

To understand modern perspectives of the medieval past one needs to study the genealogy of ideas through a method of textual archaeology. The way in which the current population views the past is influenced by those same views. What is even more important, and that which has guided me in my dissertation, is that these narratives were constructed in favour of centres of power and have been utilised by them ever since, including in modern and contemporary eras. Moreover, aspects of modern ideas about the past originated in a time period when there was no centralised state in the modern sense of the word; therefore, disparate centres of power produced different versions of historical events from the royalty to the ecclesiastic and monastic institutions to the lay nobility, that is, the landowning, warrior, chivalric aristocracy (which was an utterly heterogeneous class).

Scholars have already studied representations of war against Muslims in Portuguese royal and ecclesiastic/monastic narrative sources during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Portugal's origin as an independent kingdom had come into being by then. Wars against Muslims were central

to reinforcing its position through expansion and to legitimise it through cultural production. The texts of this period written in favour of the monarchy were authored by clerics, who, besides the Crown and the king's entourage, profited the most from conquests over Muslims.

My interest is in the lay nobility: how they viewed the past, their place in it, and how these views related to royalty and the rest of society. Was war against the Muslims, and memories of these wars, as important to the aristocracy as they were to the royalty? There were no written aristocratic sources from the twelfth century, but we have quite relevant data from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

I performed a careful reading of all known aristocratic historiographic works from medieval Portugal up until the end of the fourteenth century. These are chronicles and genealogical compilations, the so-called 'books of lineages', lists of members of the most important Portuguese and Castilian families interspersed with short narratives. These narratives were pivotal in my analysis since they convey traditions that circulated among the most powerful Portuguese families.

I observed that military activity against Islam was the building block for the identity of the medieval Portuguese aristocracy: its very consciousness of itself as a social group with historical roots was set against the Muslim Other. I noted that war against Muslims was depicted among the aristocracy mostly as a political and territorial war, sometimes as a question of chivalric ethics, but very rarely as a religious conflict. Muslim otherness was derived from ethnic and religious differences, but Islam was the main enemy, the main Other, due to it being a political power on the Peninsula — a power with lands and resources to conquer, and from whom the Christian lands and resources must be defended.

The most important social role was ascribed to the warrior aristocracy, a role upon which the very existence of Christian societies was dependent. Harmony within Christian societies was attainable only through a state of permanent warfare against the Muslims. We understand from the sources that the ideal of Christian noblemen was to serve the Crown by battling Muslim armies and the Crown lavishing riches upon them in reward for their services. Paradoxically, that ideal remains in the sources precisely as that: an *ideal* in the background, because most often the reality described in the narratives is that of conflicts among Christian noblemen and monarchs. The Muslims are usually in the background as the identity-defining Other.

I argue that the aristocracy attempted to build its symbolic power, to secure recognition of the rightfulness of its privileged social status, through the remembrance of its alleged role in past conquests over Muslims. The sources state that the whole kingdom was conquered by the founding Portuguese lineages, the barons from the north, from the region of Entre-Douro-e-Minho. The definitive conquest of the current Portuguese territory, as far south as Algarve, had been completed just a few decades prior to the composition of the sources, only a couple of generations back in time. It is ironic that those great lineages were mostly indifferent to the expansion in the south during the foundation of the kingdom, other than individual magnates performing duties in the royal army. The ecclesiastic nobility was, of course, very much interested in the expansion, but the lay upper aristocracy was mostly minding their holdings and quarrelling among themselves. Yet, that did not prevent them from unashamedly claiming the laurels of victory a mere few decades later.

War was not the only way of integrating Muslims into aristocratic traditions to enhance the

families' prestige and symbolic power. Let us not forget that, in genealogical texts, prestige is built first and foremost through familial relations to prestigious individuals or lineages. There are a few Muslim converts—that is, Muslims who converted to Christianity—in the Portuguese and Castilian aristocratic traditions. The most powerful Portuguese and Castilian families, the Maia and the Lara, respectively, were founded by Muslim converts and the descendants of those families conveyed those traditions with pride. However, the social standing of their ancestors was more relevant than their ethno-religious background.

I affirmed that in the sources there existed a historical ideal upheld by the medieval Portuguese and Castilian aristocracies. This ideal is that of a dual Iberia, an Iberia that was Christian and Muslim, but first and foremost, aristocratic. The texts propose a mode of Christian-Muslim coexistence based upon a state of virtually permanent war, an everlasting political and territorial conflict that contributed to safeguarding social harmony within the Christian kingdoms. This idealised Iberian Peninsula was menaced at the time my sources were being composed. By the fourteenth century, the Muslim Other had disappeared from the Portuguese border, and the aristocratic Self suffered an identity crisis. These texts were a way to bring back the Muslim Other to the fore.

In the case of Count Pedro of Barcelos, one of the most important literary figures of medieval Portugal, whose chronicle and book of lineages were the main sources for my studies, a connection is established to the old Goths. The Count argues that the ruling monarchies were no longer 'Gothic'. The Castilian-Leonese monarchy, and the Asturian-Leonese monarchy before it, represented totally different political structures. The Iberian nobility, on the other hand, was an heir of the old Goths by blood and by social rank. Count Pedro of Barcelos appropriated the Castilian neo-Gothic ideal but turned it on its head: neo-Gothic Spain was not political, but social and genealogical; it was, above all, chivalric and aristocratic.

This thesis provides a systematic analysis of medieval Portuguese aristocratic identity in relation to Islam. It builds upon recent scholarship, historical as well as philological, to bring new evidence into view and integrate data from different sources into a comprehensive whole. This allows the reconstruction of the historical imaginary that underpinned the aristocracy's political arguments against the process of monarchical centralisation and provides a better understanding of these conflicts.

I respectfully ask you, esteemed Professor Simon Doubleday, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Turku for the public defence of my doctoral dissertation, to present your criticisms of my doctoral dissertation.