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Myth, history, and the origins of al-Andalus: a historiographical essay

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ABSTRACT

This essay juxtaposes two recent efforts to demythologize the history of the origins of al-Andalus. Alejandro García Sanjuán has called into question the continued usefulness of *reconquista* as a historical model, while Emilio González Ferrín has gone further, challenging the very notion of an “Islamic conquest,” which he regards as another misleading holdover from the past. Considering these two approaches side by side allows for a deeper appreciation of the challenges of demythologization in relation to the study of medieval Spanish history.


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José Ortega y Gasset once quipped, “I don’t understand how a thing that lasted eight centuries can be called a reconquest.”¹ As he saw it, the process whereby Iberian Christians took control of what had once been Islamic Spain simply took too long for it to be thought of as a single “thing” (*cosa*). I am not aware of similar qualms on his part about using the term “conquest” in reference to the events that led to the establishment of Islamic Spain in the first place. But it would not have been out of character for someone in the 1920s to have challenged the use of that term on the opposite grounds: “I don’t understand how a thing *that happened that fast* can be called a conquest.”² The underlying answer to both of these implicit questions is that the dominant narrative of Spanish history at the time Ortega y Gasset was writing demanded that there be a Christian *reconquista*, no matter how slow it was, which in turn presupposed an Islamic *conquista*, no matter how fast it was. Today both of these terms are being called into question as expressions of an inherited historical memory that continues to influence how one approaches the Iberian past. Leading the scholarly charge against *reconquista* is Alejandro García Sanjuán, a medieval historian at the University of Huelva. His much lonelier counterpart, struggling to unseat *conquista* from the vocabulary of medieval Spanish history, is Emilio González Ferrín, an Islamicist at the University of Seville. Though in full agreement that the myth of *reconquista* must be exorcised from the historical memory of Spain, the two scholars diverge dramatically

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¹“Yo no entiendo cómo se puede llamar *reconquista* a una cosa que dura ocho siglos,” Ortega y Gasset, *España invertebrada*, 129. All translations from Spanish to English in this paper are my own.

²The fact that Spain was the only European kingdom absorbed into the Umayyad “empire” was a source of shame for some Spanish scholars of Ortega y Gasset’s generation. The apparent effortlessness of that process continues to be noted by scholars of medieval Spain. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 359.

when it comes to the continued viability of the term *conquista*. The heated debate that has ensued between this historian and this philologist is different than the one between Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz and Américo Castro that dominated the middle decades of the twentieth century, but the stakes are similarly high. That being the case, it seems appropriate in a volume dedicated to the “conquest of 711” to consider the work of these two self-described demythologizers in an effort to appreciate their very different ideas about how far such historical revision ought to go. The point of this essay will be to see what might be learned about the origins of al-Andalus as well as the challenges facing modern scholars on this subject, by juxtaposing García Sanjuán’s and González Ferrín’s very different approaches and conclusions.³

In an recent issue of the *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, Alejandro García Sanjuán published a paper on that distinctively Iberian form of historical memory rooted in the idea that the *reconquista* is fundamental to Spanish identity. The essay, “Rejecting al-Andalus, Exalting the *Reconquista*: Historical Memory in Contemporary Spain,” is primarily concerned with the implications of this *reconquista* narrative for the perceived legitimacy of al-Andalus as a historical agent in medieval Spanish history.⁴ In the process García Sanjuán provides an insightful history of the myth of *reconquista* over the last two hundred years as well as a sampling of its most recent manifestations.

García Sanjuán sees the myth of the *reconquista*, in its most mature form, as a product of the pan-European nationalist movement, during which Spanish conservatives identified Catholicism as a key ingredient of Spanish national identity. Between the Constitution of 1812 and Franco’s death in 1975, Catholicism was – with a few brief yet significant exceptions – the official religion of Spain and it was precisely during this period that the *reconquista* held sway, dominating virtually every attempt to understand medieval Spanish history. As García Sanjuán explains, the notion of a Christian reconquest was particularly attractive to a Catholic sense of nation because it allowed the “catastrophe” of the Islamic “invasion” to be turned into an opportunity for redemption, a God-given chance for the “Spanish nation to demonstrate its determination to achieve reunification” both politically and religiously.⁵ The more this notion of *reconquista* came to dominate the historical narrative, the more the Muslims of al-Andalus seemed like interlopers, inevitably playing an antagonistic role in this Christian drama, whether as a “scourge” or an “epic foil.” Even Ortega y Gasset, one of the few scholars of this time to question the notion of *reconquista* (though, as we have seen, for very different reasons), concluded that the Muslims should not be considered “an essential ingredient in the genesis of our nationality.”⁶ As García Sanjuán shows, Franco’s Spain offered particularly fertile ground for the perpetration of

³This essay has grown out of my review of García Sanjuán’s, *La conquista islámica*. Wolf, “La conquista islámica.” I am grateful to Maribel Fierro, for recommending me for what turned out to be such an interesting assignment, and to the co-editors of this special issue, Hussein Fancy and Alejandro García Sanjuán, for inviting me to contribute this essay, thus bringing the debate to the attention of a larger, anglophonic audience. It should be noted at the outset that many historians of medieval Spain, particularly Spanish ones, did not welcome the essay I wrote for the *Revista de Libros* and there is every indication that they will not appreciate this one either. At the root of their criticism is my willingness to entertain González Ferrín’s ideas about what happened in 711, giving them equal billing with the much more mainstream conclusions of García Sanjuán. I leave it to my readers to decide for themselves if there is value in this historiographical exercise.

⁴García Sanjuán, “Rejecting al-Andalus,” 127–45. See also García Sanjuán’s contribution to a conference in Chile, commemorating the 1,300th anniversary of the conquest: “Al-Andalus en la historiografía del nacionalismo españolista (siglos XIX–XXI),” 65–104. A similar argument can be found in the first part of García Sanjuán’s book, *La conquista islámica*, 35–55.

⁵García Sanjuán, “Rejecting al-Andalus,” 129.

⁶Ortega y Gasset, *España invertebrada*, 140.

the idea of *reconquista* and its recycling at the hands of the National Catholic propagandists. Conservative historians like Ramón Menéndez Pidal and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz followed suit in their own scholarly work, building their monumental reconstructions of medieval Spain on the sand of this pervasive fiction. Sánchez-Albornoz is particularly interesting to García Sanjuán in this regard because in his attempts to counter Américo Castro – who famously argued that “Spanishness” was predicated on the coexistence of Christians, Muslims, and Jews in medieval Spain – he vociferously asserted the Catholic monopoly on Spanish identity: “without the *reconquista*, our modern history would be inexplicable.”⁷ This did not, García Sanjuán reminds us, keep Sánchez-Albornoz from laying claim to the intellectual achievements of Andalusí Muslims, who, as he saw it, were merely channeling “an eternal Spanish identity” that was, for all intents and purposes, fully formed before the Muslims ever arrived. Such back-handed compliments that effectively deprived figures like Ibn Hazm and Ibn Rushd of their religious identities only served to affirm García Sanjuán’s thesis: that a historical memory that gave pride of place to the *reconquista* necessarily involved the rejection of al-Andalus as a legitimate peninsular presence.

Having traced the evolution of *reconquista* up through the Franco years, García Sanjuán turns to the real focus of his essay: to show how contemporary Spanish conservatives – particularly in the wake of 9/11 and 11-M⁸ – have appropriated this historical memory as a way of framing modern tensions within a primordial Iberian narrative. Whereas in the first part of his essay García Sanjuán divides his time between political and academic expressions of the *reconquista* discourse, in the second half he roams more freely among political figures, journalists, popular movements, and, to a lesser degree, academics. José María Aznar understandably gets top billing in the political category for widely publicized remarks made during two different addresses delivered in the United States. Shortly after he was voted out of office in the wake of the Atocha bombings, Aznar contextualized the terrorist attack for his Georgetown audience by invoking the earliest stages of the *reconquista*, “when a Spain recently invaded by the Moors refused to become just another piece in the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity.”⁹ Using Atocha as a lens allowed Aznar to frame the conquest of 711 not as the debut of a new western Mediterranean power, but – using García Sanjuán’s words – as a “proto-terrorist act” against the legitimate rulers of Spain. Two years later at the Hudson Institute, Aznar defended Benedict XVI, wondering aloud why the pope was being pressured to apologize for disparaging Islam: “I do not hear any Muslims asking me for my forgiveness for having conquered Spain and [staying] there for eight centuries.”¹⁰ García Sanjuán offers up César Vidal and José-Javier Esparza as the most prominent examples of *reconquista* apologists operating in the realm of popular journalism. On the more academic side he singles out Serafín Fanjul, professor of Arabic literature at the *Complutense* in Madrid and author of the aptly named *Al-Andalus contra España* (2000), who has embraced “the idea of a radical opposition between Spain and al-Andalus,” dismissing any suggestion that al-Andalus was religiously tolerant.¹¹ The less

⁷García Sanjuán, “Rejecting al-Andalus,” 131; from Sánchez-Albornoz, *De la Andalucía Islámica a la de hoy*, 14.

⁸“11-M” is the colloquial Spanish way of referring to the Atocha bombings of 11 March, 2004.

⁹García Sanjuán, “Rejecting al-Andalus,” 133.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 134.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 136.

dramatic but no less telling tendency on the part of other Spanish academics to simply ignore the role of al-Andalus in their histories of medieval Spain has prompted other more progressive ones – like Eduardo Manzano and Antoni Furió – to rethink medieval Iberian history in more inclusive ways. This sort of academic push-back against the resurgence of the *reconquista* narrative and its implications for al-Andalus comes at a time, García Sanjuán reminds us, when progressives have been calling for the “normalization” of Spain’s relations with its own Islamic heritage. Inspired by the efforts to “welcome home” the descendants of the Sephardic Jews exiled from Spain in 1492, advocates for the descendants of Muslims expelled in 1502 and the Moriscos who followed in 1609 have struggled to elicit anything like the same sympathy in light of widespread concerns about Muslim immigration. The current debates surrounding the commemorations of the pivotal Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) and the *Toma* of Granada (1492) are equally symptomatic of a historical memory in which the idea of *reconquista* continues to loom large whether used as a reactionary rallying cry or derided as a relic of the past.

García Sanjuán ends his essay with a “call for the greater involvement of scholarly specialists in rebutting the myths, prejudices, and distortions associated with the notion of *reconquista*, in order to promote a more balanced reading of the medieval Iberian past.”¹² Given that myths, by their very nature, run much deeper than data, it is by no means clear that such a strategy will actually work. As García Sanjuán observes elsewhere, historical myths by definition are grounded in the sociology of collective memory much more than in the actual historical record.¹³ “Society creates [myths] because it needs them,” not because it is all that concerned about “getting the record right.” As a result, he concludes, “one myth can really only be counteracted by another.”¹⁴ And this provides a convenient segue into the work of our second demythologizer.

Equally committed to exposing myths that he believes have skewed our understanding of Spanish history is Emilio González Ferrín. But unlike García Sanjuán, who has limited himself to dismantling the idea of *reconquista*, González Ferrín has taken on *conquista* as well. He has been defending this controversial position for the past twelve years, ever since the publication of his *Historia General de Al Ándalus: Europa entre Oriente y Occidente* in 2006.¹⁵ For the sake of this exercise, I will be using as my point of departure a paper González Ferrín delivered in Mérida in 2013 titled “La antigüedad tardía Islámica: crítica al concepto de conquista.”¹⁶ Not only does this essay fit the theme at hand, but it was written long enough after the appearance of *Historia General de Al Ándalus* for it to be used to respond to the criticism that the book elicited.

González Ferrín sees the *conquista* of Spain as part of a much bigger historical problem: the meaning of the “rise of Islam” in the Mediterranean and the Near East as a whole. From his perspective, traditional approaches to the subject have erred in two ways. First, they tend to imagine a fully formed Islam as the driving force behind everything that ultimately led to Islamic dominance of the eastern, southern, and western shores of the Mediterranean over the course of the century following

¹²Ibid., 141.

¹³García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 25

¹⁴Ibid., 94.

¹⁵González Ferrín, *Historia General de Al Ándalus*.

¹⁶González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 31–52.

Muhammad's death.¹⁷ Second, they tend to treat the "rise of Islam" as a "sudden disaster," a "counter-historical alteration by means of which the organic progress of history was cut short," effectively terminating antiquity and ushering in the Middle Ages.¹⁸ As González Ferrín sees it, this traditional understanding of the "rise of Islam," one that is inevitably linked to a *conquista islámica*, effectively dispossesses Islam by casting it as a violent interloper in the Mediterranean theater. From González Ferrín's perspective, "such an alienating interpretation is fostered by historical presentism, a reading of the past in a later, anachronistic key," which in this case tends to infuse early medieval history with deep modern preoccupations about the "struggle with Islam."¹⁹ That is what qualifies the *conquista islámica* narrative as a myth, a form of "augmented reality,"²⁰ no less problematic, in González Ferrín's mind, than *reconquista*.

In response to such embedded historiographical tendencies, González Ferrín proposes a more "continuist" paradigm for understanding the "rise of Islam," one that he claims is based on the prioritization of truly contemporary sources and a determination to take them at face value.²¹ This has led him to propose an alternative chronology for the "rise of Islam," one that posits a four-century gestation period – lasting from 400 to 800 CE – within which (counter-intuitively enough) Muhammad emerges only at the mid-point. The second half of this period, from Muhammad to the rise of the Abbasids, is what González Ferrín refers to as "proto-Islam." It is defined as the time that it took for Islam to achieve consciousness of its own distinct religious identity. The fact that this period encompasses the entire first wave of political expansion helps account for González Ferrín's suspicions about the notion of a *conquista islámica*, which to his mind must be anachronistic if Islam as we know it (and as people at the time knew it) did not really exist until that early phase of expansion was over. The first half of this formative period – that is, from 400 to 600 – is what González Ferrín refers to as "paleo-Islam," a foundational stage that ultimately allowed for the emergence of what would later become Islam. As far as González Ferrín is concerned, Muhammad and his early followers were simply one expression of a centuries-old "reformulation of monotheism" already evident in the fifth century in the agendas of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).²² For González Ferrín such a revised periodization has the advantage of reframing the "rise of Islam" as an integral part of late antiquity rather than a catastrophic departure from it. Hence his use of the term "Islamic late antiquity" in reference to that four-century period.²³ And hence the big question with which González Ferrín opens his paper: "Was it really Islam that provoked the collapse of various political powers

¹⁷González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 31–2, 35. González Ferrín parses this essentialist, monolithic view of Islam to reveal three very different elements that only came together much later: Islam as a religion, Islam as a "civilizing system," and Arab culture. *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸For González Ferrín, the "Middle Ages" as a historiographical construct is essentially defined in terms of a "dichotomy, Christianity vis-à-vis Islam." González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 32; cf., 34. Though he does not specifically invoke the work of Peter Brown and Garth Fowden (*et aliorum*) in this article, González Ferrín's general conception of Late Antiquity as the context for the "rise of Islam" is consistent with their more expansive and inclusive interpretations of this pivotal historical period. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*.

¹⁹González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 32. Hence "the 'medieval presentism' of crusade versus jihad, [is] transported to an improbably earlier time." *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 34.

²¹*Ibid.*, 35.

²²*Ibid.*, 47.

²³*Ibid.*, 35.

around the Mediterranean or was Islam in fact a later civilizing order that imposed itself after centuries of institutional disintegration?”²⁴ His working hypothesis is that “a wide range of unexplained and unconnected catastrophes”²⁵ – among them, for instance, the destruction of the ancient dam of Ma’rib in Yemen in the year 570 – set in motion a period of unusual instability and large-scale migration in the Middle East, which had religious implications in that it prompted contemporaries to imagine that the end of the world was at hand.²⁶ When the dust finally settled in the ninth century, a new political order had emerged in the form of the Abbasid Caliphate, whose historians understandably felt compelled to see the hand of God at work behind its rise to prominence.²⁷ Looked at from this perspective, the *conquista islámica* is effectively reduced to a retrojection of a ninth-century reality onto the previous two centuries of “Islamic history,” one that not only spawned a self-congratulatory narrative that “made sense” of the Abbasid achievement, but obscured for modern historians the complex confluence of nomadic migrations and competing monotheisms that supplied the historical foundation for the eventual Islamization and Arabization of the bulk of the Mediterranean basin.²⁸

Why, asks González Ferrín, have generations of historians been so quick to interpret the “rise of Islam” as the “cause” of the political transformation of the Mediterranean world rather than its “result”? The answer, he contends, is that historians of Islam put too much interpretative weight on those Abbasid-era narrative histories, which not only post-date the “conquests” by more than a century, but were written with the expressed intention of depicting them as a sign of God’s favor.²⁹ The effect of investing such late and irredeemably narrativized texts with interpretative authority, he contends, has been to retroject a fully developed ninth-century version of Islam onto a formative period during which, González Ferrín argues, Islam did not yet exist. This in turn makes it seem as if the driving force behind the conquests was Islam, perpetrating the pervasive myth that Islam was spread by the sword.³⁰ In the special case of Spain, these mythic aspects of the “rise of Islam” have only been enhanced by the *reconquista* narrative with its redemptive implications. As González Ferrín puts it, the term *conquista islámica* “contains within itself, by means of a compact symbol system, the narrative of a distinctive mythic ‘history of salvation,’” one that inevitably invests the Christians with peninsular legitimacy at the expense of the Muslims.³¹ And again: “the *conquista islámica* of the

²⁴Ibid., 31; cf., 33.

²⁵Ibid., 49.

²⁶Ibid., 46–7.

²⁷In other words, the Arabic narrative histories “reflect less of what actually happened and more of what Muslims much later wanted to be remembered as having occurred.” González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 39; cf., 49.

²⁸Though not the focus of his article (nor of the present essay), González Ferrín is as troubled by the notion of a unified “Arab conquest” as he is by that of an “Islamic conquest.” What we refer to retrospectively today as the Arab conquest is, as he sees it, better understood “in real time” as a multi-ethnic product of nomadic expansion and opportunism, not a coordinated conquest.

²⁹González Ferrín pointedly incorporates a quotation from a 1993 article by Maribel Fierro in which she asks:

If the arabo-islamic literary sources that have been preserved (none of which is contemporary with the conquest) represent to a large extent a back projection of later religious, theological, and political elaborations, is it valid to have recourse to those sources to reconstruct the ‘history’ of the first two centuries of Islam?

His answer to this question is, however, quite different from hers. “El paso de la Antigüedad Tardía al Islam Temprano,” 488–98.

³⁰González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 49.

³¹Ibid., 31; cf., 43.

Iberian peninsula is actually necessary – from a National-Catholic point of view, anyway – because the comforting notion of a salvific *reconquista* depends on it.”³² Without it, it would be hard not to blame the Visigoths for letting Spain slip so easily through their fingers.³³

True to his philological training, González Ferrín has determined that the best way to dismantle the myth of a *conquista Islámica* is to get back to basics, advocating an “inter-textual deconstruction of all the materials” that historians have relied on to understand the earliest phase of “the rise of Islam.” Such texts, in particular the *futūḥ* accounts of the ninth century that were designed to tell the story of the rise of the Islam as if it were the manifestation of God’s will, need to be appreciated for what they are: narratives steeped in historiographical retrojection.³⁴ As such they should yield their traditional – and, by his reckoning, undeserved – place of honor to the dozens of more contemporary sources that have survived in practically every Middle Eastern language but Arabic.³⁵ González Ferrín also insists on closer attention to the actual terminology used in the extant texts so that what in reality were a “dozen social movements ... do not end up being rendered unrecognizable because of today’s homogenizing translators.”³⁶ Whether a function of outright manipulation or simple ignorance, the effect of such scholarly “correcting” of these source materials – for instance, the indiscriminate rendering of “Chaldean,” “Saracen,” “Arab,” “Hagarene,” “Ishmaelite,” “Moor,” and “Berber” as “Muslim” – is to reinforce a distinct religious identity for Islam that it did not have until later.³⁷ Once these texts have been subjected to this kind of contextual and linguistic scrutiny, prescribes González Ferrín, they should be the focus of an “imaginative and unhurried reflection,”³⁸ free of all preconceived notions and inherited paradigms. González Ferrín is convinced that such an approach will ultimately vindicate his notion of an “Islamic Late Antiquity” so that one day “we will no longer think of Islam as responsible for the breakdown of the late antique [world] but as something that was born in that period.”³⁹ He acknowledges this will take time because the traditional view is not only the “foundational root of an essentialist, National Catholic Spain that was born in the face of Islam, but the presupposed point of departure for the majority of works about the history of Islam itself.”⁴⁰ In other words, the “official history”⁴¹ that has enshrined the notion of a *conquista islámica* is simply too entrenched, from González Ferrín’s perspective, for it to cede its dominant position anytime soon.

Ever since the appearance of his *Historia General de Al Ándalus* in 2006, González Ferrín has been defending his approach and his conclusions from criticism by mainstream medieval historians and Arabists in Spain. To date, however, no one has taken him to task to the extent that Alejandro García Sanjuán has. His 2013 book, *La conquista islámica de la península ibérica y la tergiversación del pasado*, is, for all

³²Ibid., 43.

³³Ibid., 45, 49.

³⁴Ibid., 48.

³⁵Ibid., 38; cf., 40.

³⁶Ibid., 32–3.

³⁷Ibid., 35, 36, 48.

³⁸Ibid., 36.

³⁹Ibid., 33.

⁴⁰Ibid., 37.

⁴¹Ibid., 37.

intents and purposes, an extended critique of González Ferrín's thesis ostensibly designed for the kind of general reader that might be tempted to entertain it. In a nutshell García Sanjuán contends that González Ferrín's efforts to demythologize the "rise of Islam" in Spain amount to the creation (or at least the resurrection) of a myth of his own, a myth that he calls "negationism" (*negacionismo*): denying that the Islamic conquest ever took place.⁴² In his effort to expose negationism as a myth – and, indeed, a "historiographical fraud"⁴³ – García Sanjuán employs two basic strategies, one that has to do with what actually happened in the past, and the other with González Ferrín's credibility as a scholar.

García Sanjuán devotes the greater part of his book to a careful consideration of all the extant evidence, both textual and material, related to the end of Visigothic rule in Spain, confident that the facts will speak for themselves. He organizes this part of his book around three questions inspired by key aspects of the negationist thesis. The first asks whether there is, in fact, any truly "reliable historical evidence regarding the conquest."⁴⁴ This is a vitally important question, not only because García Sanjuán believes the sources corroborate his own view of the conquest, but because, as we have seen, González Ferrín exploits both the paucity of truly contemporary sources and the "taintedness" of the later ones when arguing against the idea of a *conquista islámica*. From García Sanjuán's perspective, such hypercriticism of the sources simply goes too far. First of all he rejects the notion that the data are, in fact, all that scarce. Moreover he brushes aside González Ferrín's concerns about the inherent bias of the later sources on the grounds that historians are trained to recognize it and adjust accordingly.⁴⁵ García Sanjuán also exploits the simple fact that, regardless of the circumstances surrounding these sources – whether they originated in the west or the east, whether they were recorded fifty years after the fact or a hundred and fifty years, whether their authors were Christian or Muslim – they all end up "telling the same story: that of the conquest of the peninsula carried out by Berbers and Arabs beginning in 711."⁴⁶ Finally, García Sanjuán contends that even if one were to discount the written record altogether, the material evidence would support the idea of a bona

⁴²It is important to recognize that "negationism" is not a term that González Ferrín uses in reference to his own work, but one that has been applied by scholars who are unsympathetic to this understanding of the "rise of Islam." At the risk of oversimplifying González Ferrín's overall thesis, I use the term in this essay primarily because it is a convenient way of referring to those aspects of his work that impinge most directly on the subject at hand: the "Islamic conquest" of Spain. It should also be noted that from González Ferrín's perspective, it is misleading to focus so much attention on this one aspect of his thesis. "To sum up this book saying that it's about the lack of an Islamic conquest is like saying that the novel *Anna Karenina* is about trains." González Ferrín, "Prólogo a la cuarta edición," 17. As he sees it, the bigger contribution of his book has been to provide a place for al-Andalus in European history, as the "the first European Renaissance." Hence his choice of subtitle of the book: "Europe between East and West." Nevertheless, admits González Ferrín, "it pleases me to be one today who is leading the way in rejecting of the idea that al-Andalus was created by a supposed Islamic conquest." *Ibid.*

⁴³"Negationism is not a heterodox albeit legitimate reading of the past Rather it is the product of a gross historiographical fraud, a combination of falsehoods and absurdities based on a manipulation of the historical evidence." García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 252. As García Sanjuán sees it, the *catastrofismo* narrative that originated in the discourse of "the conquered" and the *triumfalismo* narrative that is rooted in the discourse of "the conquerors" are two sides of the same coin, both having evolved naturally out of the earliest known narratives about the conquest, and both having "providentialist connotations." He sees *negacionismo* as a "third way," albeit one that is unconnected to any early narratives and detached from any source-based reading of the past. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 70–3.

⁴⁴García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 149.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 172–88 (Latin sources), 188–233 (Arabic sources), 237–53 (criticism of negationists' approach to these sources).

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

fide conquest, particularly the Iberian coins that feature *hegira*-based dating beginning in 713–714.⁴⁷

The second of the three questions that García Sanjuán poses – “who were the conquerors?”⁴⁸ – is aimed at getting at their religious and ethnic identities. This is key because from the negationist perspective what the later literary sources describe as an Arabic Islamic conquest is better understood either as a series of disconnected raids from North Africa or as the result of the enlistment of Moroccan allies on behalf of one Andalusian faction against another.⁴⁹ Moreover, because the negationists do not recognize the existence of Islam before the ninth century, they reject the idea that any “conquest” of 711 could ever be a *conquista islámica*.⁵⁰ To counter these claims, García Sanjuán sets out to prove, on the one hand, that Islam as a religion was “fully formed” before 711, and on the other, that the conquerors of Spain were bona fide Muslims. To demonstrate the former, García Sanjuán predictably focuses his attention on the reign of Abd al-Malik (685–705), which not only produced the Dome of the Rock (691) but introduced telling changes in coinage,⁵¹ both of which testify to a heightened sense of confessional identity on the part of the regime that distinguished itself from Christianity and Judaism. With regard to the religious identity of the actual conquerors of Spain, García Sanjuán relies primarily on numismatics (in particular a locally-minted, bilingual dinar from 716–717 featuring the phrase “*Muhammad rasul Allah*,” which graces the cover of García Sanjuán’s book) as well as literary evidence (especially the half-dozen mentions of “Mammet” in the two earliest Iberian-Latin chronicles that refer to the conquest) to show that Muhammad figured into the identity of the new regime from the very beginning.⁵²

García Sanjuán’s third and final question is: “why were the conquerors victorious?”⁵³ The point of this is to counter the negationist claim that the ease and speed with which Visigothic Spain fell proves that there was no conquest in the first place. García Sanjuán admits that few scholars treating the subject have failed to notice how quickly the Visigothic regime folded and how little resistance the conquering forces encountered as they made their way across the peninsula.⁵⁴ As a corrective, he reminds his readers that the conquest of Spain was not significantly quicker or easier than the Muslim conquests in the east, which netted Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt in record time. In any case, García Sanjuán argues that it makes more sense to attribute the lack of any effective resistance in Spain either to divisions within the Visigothic ranks or to strategic errors on the part of their leaders.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he is adamant that what happened in the wake of 711 was a bona fide coordinated conquest, not just a series of raids, and that this conquest was a violent one.⁵⁶ Fully aware that negotiated surrender may have played a

⁴⁷Ibid., 159–68. Beyond such numismatic evidence, recently discovered lead seals establish the existence of an administrative apparatus used for the distribution of property in the wake of the takeover. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 168–72.

⁴⁸Ibid., 255.

⁴⁹Ibid., 261–6.

⁵⁰Ibid., 266–77.

⁵¹Ibid., 285–93. For an exhaustive review of the pre-Abd al-Malik documentary evidence of Islamic identity, see: 278–85; for the non-Arabic sources, see: 293–301.

⁵²Ibid., 301–23.

⁵³Ibid., 359.

⁵⁴Ibid., 359–60.

⁵⁵Ibid., 363–84.

⁵⁶Ibid., 385–400.

much larger role than violent campaigns,⁵⁷ García Sanjuán reminds his readers that such capitulations would have never come about without the threat of force. “Thus, both the actual application of force and the threat of doing so constitute arguments that permit the characterization of the process by which Islamic authority was imposed as a military conquest.”⁵⁸

This detailed rehearsal of the historical record designed to show exactly where and how the negationist claims fall short, is only part of García Sanjuán’s strategy for debunking González Ferrín’s thesis. The other is to call into question González Ferrín’s methods, conclusions, and motives, going so far as to impugn his scholarly credentials for having written such a book in the first place.⁵⁹ García Sanjuán’s principal concern is that, despite its title – *Historia General de Al Ándalus* – the book is not a work of history but a kind of philosophical essay that operates independently of the historical data.⁶⁰ If this were not reason enough to ignore this book, García Sanjuán invokes its author’s heavy reliance on the thesis of a widely discredited, amateur historian operating in the third quarter of the twentieth century named Ignacio Olagüe (d. 1974). Here a brief detour on Olagüe’s thesis is in order.

A Basque conservative whose adult life was conterminous with the Franco regime, Olagüe felt that Spain needed a new history to free its citizenry from a kind of “decadence” that, as he saw it, fostered a dangerous kind of fatalism.⁶¹ A central component of his revisionist project involved denying that the conquest of 711 ever happened, a position to which Olagüe was drawn because it allowed him to dispense with the embarrassing notion that his fatherland had actually succumbed to a “Semitic conquest.” Though inspired by the same nationalistic prejudices that motivated other conservatives of his generation, Olagüe parted ways with many of them by questioning their blanket exclusion of Islam from the discussion of Spanish identity. He argued instead for an “integrating sense of Spanish identity” (*un españolismo integrador*) that would allow al-Andalus to be fundamentally Spanish despite its Arabic and Islamic trappings. In his *Les arabes n’ont jamais envahi l’Espagne* (1969) – an expanded version of which appeared in Castilian five years later under the title *La revolución islámica en Occidente* (1974) – Olagüe argued that, far from being the product of an invasion, Al-Andalus was the result of an Arian-based revolution against the Trinitarian Visigoths, one that, due to supposed similarities between Arian “unitarianism” and the radical monotheism of Islam, set the stage for Muslim missionaries who found in Spain a receptive audience of militant monotheists. The result was not so much a conversion to Islam as a convergence between it and indigenous unitarian tendencies in the south. Thus emerged al-Andalus, a decidedly “Indo-European” entity with a “Semitic” veneer, the Arab and Muslim elements serving only as the “leavening” for what was otherwise a purely Spanish efflorescence, the likes of

⁵⁷Ibid., 400, 417, 421.

⁵⁸Ibid., 423.

⁵⁹Ibid., 116–28.

⁶⁰In his original review of the book, García Sanjuán suggests that in future editions González Ferrín should “take the word ‘history’ out and change the title to *General Philosophical Essay on Al Ándalus*.” García Sanjuán, Review of *Historia general de Al Ándalus*, 332. Elsewhere he writes: “In reality *Historia general de Al Ándalus* amounts to fraud from its very title. The author defines his own work as a ‘historiological essay,’ which has nothing to do with the title.” García Sanjuán, “La tergiversación del pasado y la función social del conocimiento histórico: Una réplica a Kenneth B. Wolf,” par. 22.

⁶¹For a convenient summary of Olagüe’s biography and thought, see: García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 73–90. For more on González Ferrín’s sense of “historiology,” see: González Ferrín, “Prólogo a la tercera edición,” 25–6; and “Prólogo a la cuarta edición,” 18.

which were to be found nowhere else in the world. Simply put, Olagüe posited a “contingent” sense of Andalusian history as opposed to a “rupturist” one, and rejected the whole idea of a “conquest” in 711 as a conspiracy aimed at embarrassing and discrediting Spain. In the process, he effectively deprived al-Andalus of its distinctive Islamic identity. But at the same time he found a way to bring Islam into the conversation of Spanish historical identity that was not centered around the notion of a violent *conquista islámica*.

Olagüe’s book, as García Sanjuán is quick to point out, was immediately and summarily panned by scholarly reviewers, including both Pierre Guichard (“*un thèse insoutenable*”) and James Monroe (“not a scholarly work”).⁶² It would likely have become a dead letter had it not struck a chord with the Andalusian Nationalist movement, which opted to see the events of 711 as a “liberation” of the south from the oppressive Catholic Visigoth regime to the north.⁶³ To counter the idea of *reconquista* with its implicit sense of Islam as an alien intruder, the *andalucistas* developed their own myth about an Andalusian “golden age” that was ultimately extinguished by hegemonic Castilian expansion in the later middle ages. Though there would have been no love lost, politically speaking, between Olagüe and the *andalucistas* of his own day,⁶⁴ his “inclusive” sense of *españolismo* appealed to those whose regional identity was based on the idea that Andalucía had been a willing and contributing partner in the greater Islamic world. Among these were Spanish converts to Islam (the so-called “New Muslims”) who were intrigued by the notion that Andalucía might, in some sense, have been destined to become Islamic by its own internal historical trajectory. The timing of *La revolución islámica en Occidente* (1974), which appeared right after Olagüe’s death and right before Franco’s, meant that the book was well-positioned to benefit from the attention of the newly unfettered *andalucistas* and the growing number of New Muslims. Thirty years later, in 2004, *La revolución islámica* was reprinted by the Córdoba press, Almuzara.⁶⁵ Two years later, the same press published González Ferrín’s *Historia general de Al Ándalus*, which unapologetically repurposed a number of Olagüe’s most controversial arguments.⁶⁶ From García Sanjuán’s perspective, it was precisely the fact that González Ferrín, a professional academic, had embraced Olagüe’s thesis that forced him to respond as he did; he would never have bothered to write such a book had negationism never risen above the popular, “armchair historian” level.⁶⁷

Though González Ferrín’s clearly had very different reasons than Olagüe for questioning the idea of *conquista islámica*, García Sanjuán exploited the reliance on that “Basque pseudohistorian”⁶⁸ to paint González Ferrín’s book as “an authentic historiographical

⁶²García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 128–44. Guichard, “Les Arabes ont bien envahi l’Espagne,” 1483–513; Monroe, “Review of Olagüe, *Les Arabes n’ont Jamais Envahi l’Espagne*,” 347–8.

⁶³García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 73–7, 90–112.

⁶⁴Maribel Fierro draws attention to this odd “marriage” when she writes:

I must confess that the fact that the work of a Spanish nationalist of Basque origin, who seems to have been drawn to Spanish fascist theorists, has been transformed into a book of distinction for Muslim converts and *andalucistas* makes the reading of this curious book more interesting.

Fierro, “La historia islámica de la península Ibérica,” par. 4. Cf. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 28.

⁶⁵Olagüe, *La revolución islámica en Occidente*.

⁶⁶González Ferrín, *Historia General de Al Ándalus*.

⁶⁷“In spite of the fact that ‘there is no better form of disregard than not to give any regard at all,’ in my judgment that position is not acceptable within the professional world of historical investigation.” García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 143.

⁶⁸García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 82.

fraud,⁶⁹ that is, as a “reading of the past that claims to adopt the appearance of a rigorous and scientific analysis, but which in reality bases itself on the manipulation and distortion of the evidence and the sources.”⁷⁰ That González Ferrín, a philologist, would be drawn to the work of an amateur like Olagüe⁷¹ opened the door for García Sanjuán to present himself as a paragon and defender of “scientific” history. As he put it,

The elaboration of historical knowledge is a specialized, scientific activity. Historiographical practice constitutes a professional task, demands specialization, and is incapable of improvising itself. In my judgment, the task of the professional historian has three dimensions: the production of historical knowledge, its transmission to society, and its preservation, in particular with respect to any effort to distort or manipulate it regardless of its origin.⁷²

Because “the desire to distort the past turns out to be timeless,” conscientious historians must remain vigilant, ready to perform the third of these tasks whenever circumstances demand it. That is why García Sanjuán considered the “refutation” of negationism to be such “an unavoidable obligation.”⁷³ But García Sanjuán goes beyond simply refuting González Ferrín’s brand of negationism. By treating the book as a deliberate “manipulation,”⁷⁴ he explicitly impugns González Ferrín’s professionalism as a scholar: “If there were in Spain a truly serious, rigorous agency of research, it would exclude those who get involved in such anti-scientific behavior from academic circles and relegate them to one that better suits such enthusiasts of esotericism.”⁷⁵ This is consistent with the relentlessly disdainful tone of the review of *Historia general de Al Ándalus* that García Sanjuán wrote for the journal *Medievalismo* in 2006 shortly after the appearance of González Ferrín’s book.⁷⁶ And that review followed the lead of Maribel Fierro, a prominent scholar of Middle Eastern studies at the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 73. In his opinion, Olagüe’s book cannot be dismissed as a simple “ideological or emotional reading of the past, because it grounds itself in the conscious and intentional manipulation of historical testimony.” García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 29.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 350; cf., 24–5. Elsewhere García Sanjuán clarified what he means by fraud: a manipulation of history involving three discrete practices: first, the distortion of the meaning of certain texts through readings that are totally incompatible with their actual significance; second, the sidestepping of evidence or testimony that supports something contrary to what the negationists argue; and third, the formulation of gratuitous, unjustified, and nonsensical affirmations.

García Sanjuán, “La tergiversación del pasado y la función social del conocimiento histórico: Una réplica a Kenneth B. Wolf,” par. 17. Hence

negationism is not just a simple conjunction of erroneous propositions nor a heterodox albeit rigorous reading of the past, but something much more serious. It is about deception (*impostura*), an authentic historiographic fraud conceived in anything but an innocent manner.

García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 143.

⁷¹González Ferrín is open about sharing Olagüe’s “Illuminating theory”

about Islam as a profession of faith that emerged within a context of sincere opposition to trinitarian Christian dogmatism. It involved a religion enlightened by a distinct revelation – a Qur’anic one – but one that grew out of a confrontation between unitarians – the ineffable *hanifs* of the Qur’an, plus a fusion of Jews, neo-Muslims, and non-dogmatic Christians [who followed] Nestorianism, Arianism, Donatism, Priscillianism . . . – and trinitarians, the Council of Nicea, a Christian dogmatism imposed by force of arms on the above-mentioned heresies.

González Ferrín, *Historia general de Al Ándalus*, 82.

⁷²García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 21–2.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 252–3.

⁷⁶García Sanjuán, “Review of Emilio González Ferrín, *Historia general de Al Ándalus*,” 327–32.

in Madrid, who unleashed a similar critique of Olagüe's scholarship and thesis when his *La revolución islámica en Occidente* was reprinted in 2004.⁷⁷

Not surprisingly, such a full-blown assault on both his thesis and his scholarly reputation prompted immediate rebuttals from González Ferrín, and this brings us back to his "Islamic Late Antiquity" essay, which, although it never mentions García Sanjuán by name outside of the bibliography, was clearly written with his book in mind. The strategy that González Ferrín chose for his defense involved neither a systematic review of the evidence nor a rehearsal of his own scholarly credentials.⁷⁸ Instead he set out to question the overall logic of García Sanjuán's position and to paint him as a spokesperson for an academic establishment in Spain that effectively stifles creative approaches and new paradigms.⁷⁹

González Ferrín's appeal to logic in his effort to counter what he sees as the misguided "positivism" of his opponent is evident in his summary dismissal of García Sanjuán's painstaking assessment of the evidence.

Numerous circumstantial proofs are taken out of context to create a self-referential system that operates under its own inertia; a vicious circle without any original grounds, according to which the Arabic chronicles, dating from the middle of the ninth century on, are used to date coins, burials, and buildings that are much earlier, thus decontextualizing them; ... all of these elements are located in relationship to alleged prior orthodoxies (which, in reality, were neither "prior" nor "orthodoxies") and thus "the Islamic" ends up operating as a self-contained being that is explained in reference to itself, either as a disaster survived, when seen from an orientalist perspective, or as proof of a miracle, when seen from the point of view of the official Islamic historical narrative.⁸⁰

Beyond using it to expose what he sees as the inherent circularity of the traditional notion of an Islamic conquest, González Ferrín also appeals to logic when wondering aloud why he should be challenged to prove his thesis when such an effort would entail proving "something that does not exist: an 'Islamic un-invasion/un-conquest.'"⁸¹

How is one to confront in a rational way the fact that, having demonstrated the non-existence of any contemporary sources that might have proved a planned invasion/conquest, not to mention the non-existence of something called Islam before the year 800, allusions to the traditional oral memory of the peoples are offered up as proofs of the existence [of the *conquista islámica*]? How is one to accept circumstantial proofs like coins with Arabic that only indicate some level of Arabization, given that coins in Greek and Latin are still being minted by the central authorities? How is one to accept that archaeology can actually distinguish between war and invasion? How is one to continue believing that burials should be dated by virtue of their positioning in accordance with what later chronicles tell us rather than applying chemical procedures for dating and filiation? How is one to qualify as Islamic something indistinguishable from Jewish/Christian sectarian movements that were in large part Arabized but still not literate? Why not speak of a Jewish conquest, for example, given

⁷⁷Fierro, "La historia islámica de la península Ibérica." Fierro later contributed a prologue to García Sanjuán's book, which dismisses Olagüe's work as the product of "chaotic fabrications ... lacking any academic validity." García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 13.

⁷⁸For his actual analysis of the evidence, González Ferrín refers his readers to *La angustia de Abraham*, beginning on page 345. González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 46.

⁷⁹González Ferrín recounts how he was once accused by Pierre Guichard of "putting logic before the meaning of history." His response: "Even if he didn't mean it to be a compliment, I want to thank him for understanding perfectly the meaning of these pages." González Ferrín, "Prólogo a la cuarta edición," 19.

⁸⁰González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 32.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 37–8.

that some of the chronicles of that period attribute the destruction of some cities to Jewish nomads? And so a thousand and one question marks, the clarification of or answers to which are denied without further ado by arrogant *academicista* rejection.⁸²

This passage serves as a good segue into the second of González Ferrín's strategies: challenging what he sees as a Spanish academic monopoly on historical interpretation, which he refers to as *academicismo*.⁸³ This is one of his favorite weapons, made all the sharper by the fact that García Sanjuán went out of his way to suggest that González Ferrín should have his license as a scholar revoked for perpetuating Olagüe's "crude historiographical fraud."⁸⁴

González Ferrín defines *academicismo* as "the corporate degeneration of the university, of its intellectual context, which, out of fear of the new, the original, and the imaginative, resorts to a closed, tradition-based kind of pride."⁸⁵ "Proud, closed, fearful," it does not serve the truth but rather reinforces the "official position," which "denies all possibility of debate with regard to this and so many other questions, and limits itself to that most Spanish practice of [simply] 'putting things in their place;' that is to say, it imposes and it silences."⁸⁶ As González Ferrín sees it, *academicismo* achieves this in two different ways. The first is by "recourse to authority – 'as has been demonstrated by so-and-so ...' – so that the aura of the achievements of historian so-and-so can stifle [all further questioning] even without having offered any consistent proofs." The second *academicista* tactic involves "injecting ideological noise" into what should be a purely "scientific debate." The example that González Ferrín gives is grounded in another principle of logic, the so-called "fallacy of affirming the consequent," by which he had been damned by association with Olagüe.

Years ago a man named Ignacio Olagüe denied the idea of "Islamic conquest," substituting for it "revolution" in a truly imaginative way. Given that this man would seem to have been a falangist and that he denied the invasion, it follows that anyone who denies the invasion must be a falangist. Taking this "fallacy of affirming the consequent" a bit further, it would seem that because this same Olagüe created the first "cine-club" in Spain, anyone who denies the concept of invasion must also be a theater buff.⁸⁷

But González Ferrín is only getting started with his assault on Spanish *academicismo*. At one point he derides Iberian medieval studies as being "caste-like,"⁸⁸ a form of "*hidalguía*"⁸⁹ that "imposes more than exposes."⁹⁰ Elsewhere he accuses it of being a slave to that "Mandarin and corporate aspiration that science should reach a single definitive explanation," only to end up suffering the "narcissist's wound" whenever that explanation is challenged.⁹¹ In another place he calls attention to that "dense interpretative inertia" that makes it almost impossible for Spanish scholars to think outside the box.⁹² He is

⁸²Ibid., 38.

⁸³González Ferrín seems to be responding to the *negacionismo* label by coining his own "*ismo*."

⁸⁴García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 252.

⁸⁵González Ferrín, "La antigüedad tardía Islámica," 33.

⁸⁶Ibid., 37.

⁸⁷Ibid., 37.

⁸⁸Ibid., 35.

⁸⁹Ibid., 43.

⁹⁰Ibid., 31.

⁹¹Ibid., 41.

⁹²Ibid., 34.

particularly critical of what he sees as Spain's "taxonomical obsession," which, as he sees it, yields a siloed, disconnected, disciplinary-specific approach to subjects – like the "rise of Islam" – whose complexity requires as many different perspectives as possible to get at what really happened.⁹³ It is because of this Iberian propensity for the "hierarchical distribution of disciplines," contends González Ferrín, that all the important work to date on the "rise of Islam" has been done by scholars hailing from other countries – beginning with Ignác Goldziher (Hungary) and Theodor Nöldeke (Germany), followed by John Wansbrough (United States), Michael Cook (England) and Patricia Crone (Denmark)⁹⁴ – all of whom approached with healthy skepticism both the "official history" of the "rise of Islam" and the Arabic sources upon which that notion is based; a skepticism that, he claims, could never have taken root in Spain. "Here there is no mixing of specializations nor do [scholars] disrupt things; anyone who does is regarded as being motivated by ideological fallacies."⁹⁵ In another place González Ferrín describes the members of the Spanish *academicista* guild as "decorators" and "illustrators"⁹⁶ more than historians, in so far as they create so much "official history" out of so little historical fact. Hence his "house of cards" metaphor.

Affirmation of [the official history] requires a mandatory, unshakeable historiographical faith, because the thousand and one details on which generations of Arabists and medievalists have constructed their exuberant narratives regarding such a conquest—lists of names and interpretations of these lists that are then used to provide the grounding for other similar ones—[constitute] an enormous house of cards growing in geometric progression. All [of these scholars] without exception, drink from Arabic sources compiled at the very least a century and a half after the events they relate!⁹⁷

As González Ferrín sees it, such a house of cards cannot stand up to the "fresh air" that rushes in when someone like him dares to open the window.⁹⁸

As far as González Ferrín is concerned, he is the real scientist, not García Sanjuán, because the scientific method is based on the idea that preconceived notions should be regularly challenged by posing new hypotheses and testing them. "The sciences do not advance by mere doctrinal acceptance, but by means of trial and error."⁹⁹ A truly scientific approach is grounded in "the constant recognition of one's partial ignorances and the overcoming of the same."¹⁰⁰ This appeal to the scientific method allows González Ferrín to position his thesis as more of a working hypothesis, emphasizing its provisional nature. Quoting Patricia Crone, he presents his work as a "pioneering expedition through some very rough country," not a "guided tour" of some full-blown alternative orthodoxy.¹⁰¹ Presenting his revisionist conclusions as a working draft allows him to deflect some of the criticism while at the same time further exposing the ossification that he regards as characteristic of Spanish *academicismo*. "The positivist training of a historian should never be as important as an open mind, whose imagination allows for the

⁹³*Ibid.*, 40; cf., 41.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 39, 44.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 40.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 43; cf., 41.

¹⁰¹Crone and Cooke, *Hagarism*, vii.

possibility of ‘understanding’ things before claiming to ‘know’ them.”¹⁰² Truly scientific historians should engage in the perennial reconsideration of the evidence in new ways, shedding “new light on past events.”¹⁰³ They should strive to comprehend with their imaginations the big picture of history “in motion” rather than getting caught up in single moments.¹⁰⁴ Rather than succumbing to the “old Aristotelian obsession with not mixing genres or scientific specialties,”¹⁰⁵ they should cultivate “a creative imagination capable of connecting different specialties.”¹⁰⁶ In short, the true scientific historian should be “in large measure relativist, certainly skeptical, and above all iconoclastic.”¹⁰⁷

González Ferrín takes heart, rhetorically speaking, in the fact that he is not the first Spanish academic who has met such resistance going against the *academicista* grain. He specifically invokes the career of Américo Castro, also a philologist, recounting his epic struggle with the historian Claudio Sánchez Albornoz. From González Ferrín’s perspective, Castro embodied precisely the kind of interdisciplinary approach that he is himself advocating, “treating history and philology as the same discipline, calling for the ‘figurative interpretation’ of historical moments,” and the “contemplation of history through, for example, works of literature from that time.”¹⁰⁸ González Ferrín goes so far as to present Castro as a veritable martyr of such iconoclast thinking, facing “that National-Catholic whip wielded by Sánchez-Albornoz, who understood our history precisely in juxtaposition to Islam: that ‘plague of locusts,’ that ‘tragic moment in the history of the world.’ etc.”¹⁰⁹ The way that Sánchez Albornoz treated Castro, one would think that the latter had launched a new “sect” not just a “change in paradigm.”¹¹⁰ Of course González Ferrín’s opponent is anything but a perpetrator of Sánchez Albornoz’s brand of *reconquista*-inspired history. But by painting himself as a Castro *redivivus*, the implication is that García Sanjuán somehow represents the new face of reaction.¹¹¹

Despite their mutually uncompromising dismissals of each other’s scholarship, García Sanjuán and González Ferrín are in some ways more alike than they are different. First of all, there is significant overlap in how they position themselves and their theories, academically speaking. As we have seen, García Sanjuán presents himself as a practitioner of “scientific history,” which manifests as a self-professed commitment to data-based interpretations of the past¹¹² and a determination to protect the historical profession from fraud. For his part, González Ferrín sees himself as the true scientist, posing real hypotheses and testing them without regard for prevailing orthodoxies.¹¹³ As a corollary

¹⁰²González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 44.

¹⁰³Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 43.

¹¹¹As noted earlier, González Ferrín’s essay never directly mentions García Sanjuán or his book outside of the bibliography. The only critic that González Ferrín identifies by name is Maribel Fierro. González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 45, 43. By singling out Fierro in this way, González Ferrín would seem to be “lowering his lance” a bit in the midst of his joust with García Sanjuán, giving his opponent some credit for not simply dismissing his arguments out of hand. But that does not change González Ferrín’s opinion of García Sanjuán’s book, which, from his perspective, expends more energy trying to silence him than it does honestly entertaining anything he has to say.

¹¹²He describes his book as “a work of research carried out from an academic foundation, in which documentary evidence occupies a central position.” García Sanjuán, *La conquista Islámica*, 22.

¹¹³González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 40–3.

to this, both García Sanjuán and González Ferrín claim to be exposing the deleterious effects of long-standing myths, though González Ferrín goes further in his revision of the “official history” than García Sanjuán does. In both cases, their demythologizing efforts have ruffled feathers, García Sanjuán challenging conservative Spanish historians who see no reason to jettison *reconquista* from their historiographical vocabularies, and González Ferrín challenging conservatives and moderates alike who see no reason to steer clear of *conquista*. At the same time both of these scholars seem to welcome the notoriety that comes with their iconoclastic projects. García Sanjuán actually accuses González Ferrín of reviving Olagüe’s negationist thesis simply for the attention it would bring him,¹¹⁴ but in a less dramatic way García Sanjuán has made a name for himself by calling out the pundits who have gained such traction in the post-11-M world by emphasizing the oppositional nature of Christian–Muslim relations in medieval Spain.

Second, both García Sanjuán and González Ferrín are faced with the same basic problem of sources: neither has the data he needs to make a definitive case for his particular take on the emergence of al-Andalus. García Sanjuán professes to have what he needs to support the idea of a *conquista islámica*,¹¹⁵ and most scholars of the early Middle Ages, accustomed as we are to working in a field that is “data challenged,” would agree with his assessment. But clearly the extant data is not enough to keep González Ferrín from proposing a different interpretation or to keep García Sanjuán from revisiting all the sources to show how they in fact support the traditional interpretation. For his part González Ferrín tries to turn this paucity of sources to his advantage, arguing *ex silencio* against the idea of a *conquista islámica*.¹¹⁶ One might be tempted to interpret his wholesale rejection of the later Arabic narrative sources as a strategy for adding to this silence in the service of his iconoclastic argument. Indeed García Sanjuán dismisses González Ferrín’s scruples in this regard as at best a kind of “mental laziness” and at worst a crime against history, setting him apart from hard-working professional historians who have learned how to read all kinds of sources with reasonable confidence.¹¹⁷ Of course it is one thing for González Ferrín to challenge a prevailing thesis on the grounds that the evidence is either sparse or tainted, and another to offer an alternative thesis that does a better job of accounting for the data that do exist. Thus when it comes to actually grounding his particular notion of “Islamic Late Antiquity” in the sources, González Ferrín finds himself scrambling for evidence to support it, as in the case of the connection he posits (à la Olagüe) between Arian Christianity and Islam in Spain. The problem of evidence on both sides of this divide helps explain why García Sanjuán and González Ferrín move so easily between interpreting the past on the one hand and questioning their opponent’s scholarly credentials on the other. García Sanjuán’s hyperbolic accusations of professional malfeasance and González Ferrín’s withering critique of Spanish *academicismo* are, in the

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We have here a clearly opportunistic improvisation, designed to satisfy shameful personal ambitions. Is there a better to get oneself known in a profession, when one is not a member of it and yet desperately hopes to attain prominence within it, than to proclaim nonsensical ideas that go against the grain? Notoriety is thus assured, because it permits one to adopt the position of a victim, marginalized and ignored by the ‘mandarins’ of the profession.

García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 121.

¹¹⁵García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 443–4.

¹¹⁶García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 270.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 244.

end, both forms of deflection, suggesting that neither García Sanjuán nor González Ferrín is all that confident that the evidence will ever speak for itself in favor of his argument.

Third, both García Sanjuán and González agree that the lingering notion of the *reconquista* obscures our understanding of al-Andalus; that the “redemption” narrative implicit in the idea of a Christian reconquest of Islamic Spain effectively reduces the role of al-Andalus to that of a perennial antagonist in what amounts to a Christian story about the loss and recovery of Spain. The difference between the two is that while González Ferrín is ready to take what could be considered the next “logical” step – impugning the idea of a *conquista islámica* partly on the grounds that it is implicated in the dubious *reconquista* narrative – García Sanjuán stops short.¹¹⁸ In his book García Sanjuán does argue that one of the problems with the idea of *reconquista* is that it promotes the related notion of *catastrofismo*, that is, that the arrival of Islam was a “disaster” for Christian Spain, a perversion of its true destiny. In an effort to counter this myth, he proposes that historians stop referring to what happened in 711 as an “invasion,” a word that “contains within it the connotation of an abnormal or irregular occupation,” as if the Muslims were “pathenogenic agents” that had to be purged from Spain.¹¹⁹ Instead, concludes García Sanjuán, they should call it a “conquest,” which he regards as a neutral way of interpreting the events of 711.¹²⁰ It is here that these two scholars part paths, for while García Sanjuán regards “conquest” as a term that simply describes what happened when the Visigothic regime gave way to an Arab-Berber one, González Ferrín sees it as a trope, an encoded component of that same dubious *reconquista* narrative, no less corrosive to any sense of Andalusian legitimacy than “invasion.” Moreover from González Ferrín’s Mediterranean-wide perspective, the idea of a *conquista islámica* instantly conjures up an essentialized, Christian myth of the “rise of Islam” as a violent process characterized by conversion at the edge of the sword. In the face of this impasse over the continued viability of the word “conquest,” the two avowed demythologizers turn to accusing each other of mythologizing, González Ferrín dismissing García Sanjuán’s *conquista islámica* as an essential component of the same redemptive myth implicit in the notion of a *reconquista cristiana*, and García Sanjuán dismissing González Ferrín’s *negacionismo* as a new (or recycled) myth – a myth to replace a myth¹²¹ – one that emanates from his own presentist quest to bestow some legitimacy on al-Andalus.

When considering these two opposing theories about the origins of al-Andalus, I believe both have something important to add to the conversation. García Sanjuán’s meticulous rehearsal of the evidence for what happened in Spain beginning in 711 is a textbook example in how medieval historians go about processing and interpreting unavoidably

¹¹⁸In is interesting to me that, while García Sanjuán sees the connection between negationism as an *andalucista* myth and *reconquista* as a nationalist one, he does not seem to appreciate the extent to which “Islamic conquest” is an essential part of the “Christian reconquest” narrative. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 29. This is despite his acknowledgement that

the relevance of the conquest in history and in the memory of the Spanish remains obvious in the profound and continuous distortion to which it has been submitted over the course of time, from the most varied and diverse social sectors, both academic and non-academic.

García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 441.

¹¹⁹García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 36, 144–7.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 147.

¹²¹As García Sanjuán puts it: “*Españolista* myths forming around the ‘Pelayos’ and ‘Covadongas’ of the *Reconquista*, are thereby supplanted by another myth, no less false and deforming, that of the *negacionistas*, proof that one myth can really only be counteracted by another.” García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 94.

spotty data in the interests of reconstructing the past. His conclusion: that even if one discounts the later Arabic narrative sources (which he does not advocate doing), the dating of the Dome of the Rock and Abd al-Malik's numismatic reforms make it hard to deny the Islamic identity of the Umayyad court in the 690s, two decades before the change of regime in Spain. And this is consistent with the Iberian evidence, particularly that bilingual dinar of 716–717 featuring the phrase “*Muhammad rasul Allah*” and the six direct references to Muhammad in the Latin chronicles of 741 and 754. As modest as they are, these pieces of what historians have taken to be hard data are difficult to brush aside, and to do so is to risk being accused of discounting evidence simply because it is inconvenient.¹²² García Sanjuán also deserves credit for attempting to neutralize the term *conquista* by decoupling it from its traditional association with the *reconquista*-driven notions of “catastrophe” and “invasion.” His contention that, once stripped of its connections to the Spanish national myth, “conquest” should be retained as a convenient and historiographically safe way to refer to the change of regime is, at face value, a reasonable one. More on that in a moment.

González Ferrín also has something to offer, though more in the realm of logic and creative modeling.¹²³ There is wisdom, first of all, in González Ferrín's assumption of continuity in history; just as there are no leaps in nature, there ought to be none in history.¹²⁴ This is a simple but important corrective to any lingering sense that Islam was an alien force that foisted itself onto Spanish history. Both the short- and long-term success of al-Andalus, politically and culturally speaking, depended on the willingness of the new regime to work with its Christian subjects and vice versa. A second contribution is González Ferrín's tendency to lead with what we know about the “rise of Islam” in the east to understand the “rise of Islam” in Spain. We know, for instance, that long before Muhammad, the Christian world in the east was hopelessly fractured along religious lines. The seemingly endless disagreements in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries that whirled around the Trinity and the Incarnation became convenient rallying points for disaffected Christians who resented Byzantine imperial rule. Most historians of the initial Arab expansion agree that the wholesale collapse in the face of forces loyal to Umar Al-Khattab (634–644) had at least as much to do with the disaffection of Syrian and Egyptian Christians and their willingness to come to terms with the followers of Muhammad as it did with military power. Considering the “conquest of Spain” through the same global lens, it is at least reasonable to ask if a similar groundswell of political resentment expressed in religious terms and aimed at the Visigothic regime might explain why the “conquerors” met so little local resistance in Spain. Moreover, some well-respected historians of early Islam have questioned the extent to which the conquests in the east were really conducted by full-fledged Muslims. In his most recent book Fred M. Donner distinguished between the original “Believers,” radical monotheists who gathered around Muhammad and fought for Umar, and the actual “Muslims” of Abd al-Malik's (685–705) time, who promoted clear confessional boundaries between themselves and their

¹²²It must be acknowledged, however, that the standards for what constitutes “hard evidence” are not as easy to pin down as one might think. González Ferrín is as confident about the limitations of the numismatic evidence as García Sanjuán is about its conclusiveness. Moreover the scholarly debate over the very meaning of “Islam” continues unabated, as evidenced by Shahab Ahmed's recent book, *What is Islam?*.

¹²³This is consistent with García Sanjuán's contention that González Ferrín should “take the word ‘history’ out and change the title to *General Philosophical Essay on Al Andalus*.” García Sanjuán, Review of *Historia general de Al Andalus*, 332.

¹²⁴González Ferrín, *La antigüedad tardía Islámica*, 36

Abrahamic neighbors.¹²⁵ Regardless of what one thinks of Donner's thesis,¹²⁶ González Ferrín is clearly imagining a similar distinction when he speaks of the proto-Muslims involved in the "conquest" of Spain and the fully-fledged ones in the ninth century (even if his chronology for the full emergence of Islam does not line up well with Donner's).¹²⁷

Just as each of these approaches to the origins of al-Andalus brings something to the table, so each has its drawbacks. As I just noted, 711 post-dates Abd al-Malik's pivotal reign, and this muddies González Ferrín's contention that the "conquest" of Spain was not an *Islamic* conquest. Furthermore González Ferrín's wholesale rejection of the later Arabic histories, which he bases on the provocative views of revisionists – Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook – dating back to the 1970s, does not take into account how the scholarly assessment of these sources has evolved in more recent decades.¹²⁸ Similarly González Ferrín's contention that Islam has been excluded by scholars of Late Antiquity would have resonated more if he were writing in the 1970s, when Peter Brown was just beginning to argue how rooted Islam was in its late antique, eastern Mediterranean context.¹²⁹ Finally, in the absence of evidence to support it,¹³⁰ González Ferrín's reprise of Olagüe's hypothesis about a coalition of unitarians in southern Spain struggling against the trinitarians of the north violates the "Occam's razor" of historical interpretation. Nevertheless, even if it requires an act of faith¹³¹ to embrace González Ferrín's scenario as a whole, that does not mean there is nothing of value to be found in it. There are elements of the negationist position that simply do a better job of explaining what happened in 711, for instance, the speed of the conquest and the apparent willingness on the part of virtually all the Spanish Christians to come to terms with the new regime. Just as with the conquests in the east, it is awfully hard to imagine such a modest force making the kind of headway it did if the local inhabitants had sensed that their lives – or even their ways of life – were at risk. This simple observation strongly suggests to me that the Islamic conquests, east and west, were conquests with a very small "c." It would be hard to argue that Spain did not experience a major political transformation beginning in 711, but that transformation seems to have been effected more by a mutual willingness to come to terms than by any consistent exercise of force. And here is where García Sanjuán's insistence on the notion of "conquest" becomes a potential liability for his thesis, not only because of the logic that I just laid out, but because of the data-driven conclusions of scholars like Pedro Chalmeta, to wit: "It cannot be said that Spain was conquered; rather it would be better to speak of a surrender by means of capitulations."¹³² In his book, García Sanjuán acknowledges this position as a reasonable one,

¹²⁵Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.

¹²⁶See, for instance, Patricia Crone's review of Donner's book: "Among the Believers."

¹²⁷Donner regards the reign of Abd al-Malik as the watershed between "Believers" and "Muslims." Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 194–224.

¹²⁸For an overview and critique of this "skeptical approach," see: Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 5–31.

¹²⁹The final chapter in Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, which focuses on the rise of Islam, is titled, significantly enough, "The New Participants."

¹³⁰In particular it suffers from the lack of any evidence of Arian survival in Spain after 589, when the Visigothic monarchy officially embraced Catholic Christianity. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 325–8.

¹³¹"Contrary to the religious preacher who grounds himself in the supernatural or the artist whose activity is the expression of his individual creative genius, the scientist is obligated to justify his affirmations every step of the way." García Sanjuán, "La tergiversación del pasado y la función social del conocimiento histórico: Una réplica a Kenneth B. Wolf," par. 33.

¹³²Chalmeta, "Concesiones territoriales en al-Andalus (hasta la llegada de los almorávides)," 1–90. García Sanjuán identifies those scholars who have concurred with Chalmeta's assessment. García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 421–2.

but in the end he argues for retaining “conquest” on the grounds that the *threat* of force needed to secure such capitulations was tantamount to the *use* of force.

There is no incompatibility between the predominance of capitulations and the idea of conquest. Therefore I consider invalid [Chalmeta’s] suggestion of “submission” as a way of understanding the origin of the Islamic presence in the peninsula. Whether it was verified by means of acts of force or by surrender treaties, the acquisition of the control of peninsular territory by the Muslims (and, therefore, the origin of al-Andalus) was the product of the actions—direct or indirect—of military contingents, and this obliges one to hold that it was about conquest; any other form of explaining this process ought to be discarded.¹³³

But even if this more nuanced notion of “conquest” might satisfy Chalmeta, it does little to address González Ferrín’s important concerns about narrative and the popular associations between the “rise of Islam” and “violence.” Given that progressively-minded scholars – with García Sanjuán himself leading the way – are now going out of their way to propose language that does not automatically delegitimize Islam as a player in early medieval Mediterranean history, what is to be gained by hanging on to “conquest”? In light of García Sanjuán’s clarion call for purging both “invasion” and “*reconquista*” from the vocabulary of medieval Spanish history, his insistence on retaining “conquest” seems, at face value, inconsistent with his own demythologizing efforts.¹³⁴ If I were as driven as he seems to be to dispense with all language tainted by modern discourse (which, by the way, I am not), I might propose using “change of regime”¹³⁵ instead of “conquest,” borrowing García Sanjuán’s own words to justify myself: “my insistence with regard to this matter does not follow from any proclivity toward ‘political correctness,’ but from an obligation to refine the historiographical analysis, disassociating it as much as possible from an ideological or moralizing connotation.”¹³⁶

Considered from a distance, I believe that this fascinating debate between Alejandro García Sanjuán and Emilio González Ferrín has much to offer when it comes to assessing the meaning of “scientific history” on the one hand and its relationship to conflicting modern narratives about the role of Islam vis-à-vis Europe on the other. Though both García Sanjuán and González Ferrín criticize each other for not respecting history as a science, they both see themselves as embodying different aspects of scientific history that can and must be integrated. There is no question that history as a science requires a meticulous consideration of all the data first by identifying them and second by applying all the most advanced critical techniques to them. The “positivist training” of a historian simply must be as important as an “open mind.”¹³⁷ At the same time, scientific history has to involve the constant posing and testing of hypotheses in the interests of getting a bit

¹³³García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 425; cf. 443. García Sanjuán ends his book with an extended discussion of the extant Arabic documentation pertaining to the distribution of property and how it ought to be interpreted, with particular attention to the theory of Eduardo Manzano Moreno, who argued that later generations might have had an interest in creatively “remembering” conquered territory as having being secured by negotiated surrender, a phenomenon that may have tainted the evidence. *Ibid.*, 425–39.

¹³⁴By arguing for a violent conquest, García Sanjuán risks putting himself in the same epistemological category as the negationists whom he accuses, justifiably so, of *apriorismo*, “the subordination of historical knowledge to pre-existing ideological premises.” García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 86.

¹³⁵“Change of regime” does not imply force to the extent that “conquest” does. Plus it has the advantage of highlighting the political transformation associated with 711 without suggesting any immediate change in the many other dimensions of society.

¹³⁶García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, 147.

¹³⁷González Ferrín, “La antigüedad tardía Islámica,” 44.

closer to the truth. Simply put, the historical work of both of these scholars would benefit greatly if each would take seriously the criticism – minus the rancor – offered by the other. With regard to the relationship between these two theses and the contemporary European conversation about Islam, the remedy is not as easy to identify much less prescribe. The challenge for any twenty-first-century scholar dealing with medieval Spanish history is how to avoid the Scylla of *reconquista*-based narratives without falling prey to the Char-ybdis of theories based on reaction to those *reconquista*-based narratives. Now that we have been made fully aware of the power of myth, it is more challenging than ever to be a “scientific historian,” navigating around potent modern narratives that have nothing to do with the eighth century. González Ferrín is right to question the notion of a *conquista islámica* for being part of the redemptive myth implicit in the notion of a *reconquista cristiana*, just as García Sanjuán is right to challenge *negacionismo* as a myth in its own right, a kind of “civics lesson” for a new generation of Spaniards driven by a desire to legitimize the Islamic presence in Spain.¹³⁸ Neither González Ferrín nor García Sanjuán seems willing to step back and honestly reflect on how his own work is implicated in the broader problem of narrative and history that, in one way or another, affects us all.

Take away the rhetorical bile – whether it be García Sanjuán’s contempt for González Ferrín’s approach or González Ferrín’s excoriation of the Spanish academic establishment – and you have the beginnings of a healthy exchange between a historian and a philologist that helps all of us appreciate the continually evolving nature of what we regard as historical knowledge, particularly as it relates to what happened in 711. The questions that continue to challenge scholars of the “rise of Islam” in the east are, *mutatis mutandis*, the very ones that their counterparts in Spain struggle to answer: the suddenness with which the Visigothic kingdom disappeared, the speed with which Arabs and Berbers established their authority over much of the peninsula, the willingness with which Iberian Christians accepted the terms of capitulation offered to them, the tardiness with which Christians appreciated the religious distinctiveness of the new regime, and the astonishing fact that over time al-Andalus came to be Islamized and Arabized despite the fact that the newcomers were so vastly outnumbered by the native populations. Scholars continue to offer reasonable hypotheses to explain each of these, but the door to new ideas on these subjects – even ideas that question the very foundations of what we think we know – must remain open. Anyone bold enough to enter the world of medieval studies knows going in that the only way to explain a “*cosa*” that has left behind more questions than sources is to do so provisionally.

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¹³⁸In his review of *Historia general de Al Ándalus*, García Sanjuán distinguishes between those today “who demonize Islam” and those “who, doubtless with laudable intentions, try to counteract this rampant Islamophobia, whose arguments are unfortunately far from acceptable.” García Sanjuán, “Review of Emilio González Ferrín, *Historia general de Al Ándalus*,” 328.

have always been rooted in the cultural history of the medieval Latin Church, particularly as it relates to the idea of sanctity on the one hand and the challenge of religious pluralism on the other. He is the author of three monographs: *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2003), *Making History: The Normans and their Historians in Eleventh-century Italy* (Penn, 1995), and *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge, 1988). He has also produced three book-length translations and studies of medieval Latin texts: *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (Liverpool, 1990); *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of His Brother Duke Robert Guiscard* (Michigan, 2005); and *The Life and Afterlife of St. Elizabeth of Hungary: Testimony from her Canonization Hearings* (Oxford, 2011). He has just finished a fourth translation project involving the writings of Eulogius of Córdoba, which will soon be published by Liverpool University Press.

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