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What's in an ethnonym? Arabic-named Christians on the Frontier of Tenth-Century Spain

1. Historical Background

In the year 711, as many of you may know, Roderick, king of the Visigoths of Spain, was defeated by the Berber and Arab army of Tariq ibn Ziyād, which began the process by which much of the Iberian peninsula would be a Muslim territory for the next seven centuries or so. If you know that much, however, you probably also know that not all of Iberia was taken over; along the north coast of Spain, the areas of Galicia, Asturias and Cantabria were brought under Muslim control only briefly, if at all. By 900 or so the legend was that a duke named Pelayo had revolted against the Muslims and led the Asturians against them, defeating a hugely superior Muslim force at the Battle of Covadonga. In Spanish popular history this story is as deeply rooted as the English one of King Alfred and the cakes, though it has rather better foundation.¹ It was especially elaborated under Alfonso III, who like Alfred was a scholar-king who added a deal of territory to his crown that had never before been part of it. So much did he add that when his sons jointly deposed him in 910, they split his realms in three, the old core of Asturias, Galicia, and the new frontier kingdom of León, which is as far as I'm concerned where the story really starts.²

2. The Charter Evidence

After Alfonso's reign we have an increasingly large body of charter material. These are not official documents as we now understand the term, but private records of transactions, court hearings and so forth, made for the beneficiaries.³ They are thus winner's records, and cannot be taken as straightforward statements of what happened.⁴ They do, however, provide lists of persons who were associated in the transactions, as participants, witnesses and so on. To this extent they are a databank of personal connections. With the shift of power to León, moreover, the evidence

¹ For background Roger Collins, 'Spain: The Northern Kingdoms and the Basques, 711-910' in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History Vol. II: c. 700-c. 900* (Cambridge 1995), pp. 272-89. On Covadonga the current last word is David Hook, "[?]" in *idem* (ed.), *From Orosius to the 'Historia Silense': four essays on the late antique and early medieval historiography of the Iberian Peninsula* (Bristol 2005), pp. [?]-?. On Alfred and the cakes, see Simon Keynes & Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and other contemporary sources* (London 1983), pp. 197-202.

² For the following period background can be found in Bernard F. Reilly, *The Medieval Spains* (Cambridge 1993).

³ See for an introduction to the milieu, historical and documentary, Wendy Davies, *Acts of Giving: individual, community and Church in tenth-century Christian Spain* (Oxford: OUP 2007), pp. 1-35.

⁴ Jonathan Jarrett, "Pathways of Power in late-Carolingian Catalonia", unpublished Ph. D. thesis (University of London 2005), pp. 27-71.

increases both in sheer amount of survival and in geographical coverage, as areas deep into the once-Muslim zones now became connected to the institutions that preserve our material.

3. The Arabic Names and their Owners

One of the most interesting things that come out of this extra visibility is a substantial body of persons with both Arabic and Christian names.⁵ A witness list from 923 gives the idea: "*Recemirus qui et Abolfeta testis. December, filius de Abolfeta, testis. Abzulaman testis. Sisebutus testis. Abaiub de Sancto Marcello. Adulfus diaconus. Bazarius Vuiliefredi testis*".⁶ Here Gothic and Arab names stand next to each other in apparent equality. These people are not necessarily to be seen as Muslims, not least because many appear to have been in Christian holy orders.⁷ Some plied more humble professions, and most do not leave this kind of clue of themselves, but they seem to have been operating in a milieu where both Arabic and Christian names were acceptable.⁸ Where the scribes also identified these people's parents, we find that they were as likely to bear Christian names given by an Arabic-named parent as vice versa.⁹ Families used names from both heritages in one generation: in a document from 932 we see four siblings giving land to a monastery whose names were Cristóbal, Maurota, Amar and Alían, of which the first is Christian but the other three Arabic.¹⁰ They could serve at court: a charter of King Ordoño II from 916, for example, was written by a deacon called Muhammad!¹¹ There was no apparent stigma attached to these names

⁵ Catalogued in exhaustive detail for the area around León itself in Victoria Aguilar Sebastián & Fernando Rodríguez Mediano, "Antroponimia de origen árabe en la documentación leonesa (siglos VIII-XIII)" in *El Reino de León en la Alta Edad Media VI* (León 1994), pp. 497-633.

⁶ Emilio Sáez (ed.), *Colección Documental del Archivo de la Catedral de León (775-1230): I (775-952)* (León 1987), doc. no. 58. Documents from this edition and its continuation, *idem* & Carlos Sáez (edd.), *Colección Documental del Archivo de la Catedral de León (775-1230): II (953-985)* (León 1990), are referred to as León + editor's number in what follows.

⁷ The difficulties carefully stressed by Victoria Aguilar, "Onomástica de origen árabe en el reino de León (siglo X)" in *al-Qantara* Vol. 15 (Madrid 1994), pp. 351-363 at p. 363: "La relación que guarda la antroponimia de origen árabe con las poblaciones mozárabes de León es tan incierta como lo son estas mismas poblaciones. Los datos onomásticos no se ocultan, pero su significado resuelta más oscuro, ya que no manifiestan sus practicas religiosas ni su procedencia de origen."

⁸ Aguilar & Rodríguez, "Antroponimia", pp. 587-598 is a breakdown of their sample by title, where persons therein bore one. Such persons are less than a tenth of their total sample (269 of 2750, culled from 4121 documents), but the vast majority of them (174) were priests, and *fratres* and deacons are the second and third most substantial groupings. A '*carpentario*' is recorded once, in León 157, but how often did such persons gather and construct documents?

⁹ On what follows see Aguilar & Rodríguez, "Antroponimia", 541-3 and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano, "Acerca de la población arabizada del reino de León (siglos X y XI)" in *al-Qantara* Vol. 15 (Madrid 1994), pp. 465-472 with English abstract p. 472. Comparanda from Galicia can be found in at Richard Hitchcock, "Arabic Proper Names in the *Becerro de Celanova*", in David Hook & Barry Taylor (edd.), *Cultures in Contact in Medieval Spain: historical and literary essays presented to L. P. Harvey* (London 1990), pp. 111-126, e. g. pp. 117 ('*Iohannis Marvaniz*' and '*Karim Marvaniz*') & 118 ('*Zamarius Quiriaci*').

¹⁰ José Maria Mínguez Fernández (ed.), *Colección Diplomática del Monasterio de Sahagún (siglos IX y X)* (León 1976), doc. no. [hereafter Sahagún] 18.

¹¹ León 40 (*Mahamudi*).

at this time.

4. The Historiographical Debates

This is somewhat at odds with the traditional view of Spanish medieval history, as distilled by Hollywood into the Charlton Heston film *El Cid*, in which the Spanish Middle Ages were a story of Muslim occupation and then glorious *Reconquista*.¹² The Arabic-named population has therefore usually been seen as part of a supposedly substantial immigrant group, either fleeing Muslim rule in the south or resettled by Christian sweeps into occupied territory for people with whom to man its frontier. There are a host of problems with this which we don't have time to explore,¹³ but one charter serves as an example of them, an unusually large gathering whose record was preserved by the monastery of Sahagún, south-east of León in the borderlands, in which the many witnesses were grouped by their respective villages. Many of these villages bore the names of their founders, suggesting recent establishment, but a quick examination shows that that does not determine the villages' name-stock as we might assume. Those from *villa de Graniera* (las Grañeras) included the Arabic names Asea, Nazar, Aje and Halafe. Those from *villa de Abomala*, however, bore no hint of Arabic nomenclature. The last village on the list would seem to record settlers from the Muslim south, for it was called *villa de Cordobeses*, but though one of its witnesses was called Iuzife (ambiguous, but spelt as if Arabic by the scribe), the others were Ariulfo and Vidal. Another of the villages was however called *villa de Asturianos*, and its representatives had purely Occidental names.¹⁴ Settlers of several sorts and from several directions therefore seem to be indicated, as well as some populations who need not have been settlers at all.¹⁵

¹² Derived ultimately from Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *L'España del Cid* (Madrid 1929, many later editions); another notable contributor Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, with *España: un enigma histórico* (Buenos Aires 1956, many reprints), 2 vols, transl. Colette Joly Dees & David Sven Reher as *Spain, a historical enigma*, Publications of the Spanish University Foundation: Hispanism 2 (Madrid 1975), 2 vols, and *Despoblación y Repoblación del Valle de Duero* (Buenos Aires 1966). On this historiography and correctives to it see Richard Fletcher, "Reconquest and Crusade in Spain c.1050-1150" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th Series Vol. 37 (London 1987), pp. 31-47, reprinted in Thomas Madden (ed.), *The Crusades: essential readings* (Oxford 2004), pp. 51-68; Eduardo Manzano Moreno, "Christian-Muslim Frontier in al-Andalus: idea and reality" in Dionisius Agius & Richard Hitchcock (edd.), *Arab Influence upon Medieval Europe*, Middle East Cultures 18 (Reading 1994), pp. 83-96, esp. pp. 93-95; Ann Christys, "Christian-Muslim Frontiers in Early Medieval Spain" in *Bulletin of International Medieval Research* Vol. 5 (Leeds 1999), pp. 1-19; and Manzano, "The Creation of a Medieval Frontier: Islam and Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula, eighth to twelfth centuries" in Daniel Power & Naomi Standen (edd.), *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian borderlands, 700-1700* (Basingstoke 1999), pp. 32-52. Inside Spain positions are more entrenched: see J. J. Larrea, "Villa Matanza" in Hélène Débax (ed.), *Les sociétés méridionales à l'âge féodal (l'Espagne, Italie et sud de France X^e-XIII^e s.)*. *Hommage à Pierre Bonnassie*, Méridiennes 8 (Toulouse 1999), pp. 223-228 at pp. 227-228.

¹³ See Hitchcock, *Mozarabs, passim* but for our period esp. pp. 55-64; cf. Peter Linehan, *History and the Historians of Medieval Spain* (Oxford 1993), pp. 88-94, or Ann Christys, *Christians in al-Andalus 711-1000* (Richmond 2002), pp. 91-94.

¹⁴ Sahagún 87.

¹⁵ Aguilar & Rodríguez argue, additionally, that the numbers of such persons are just too large to be

5. The Nature of the Project

These persons, edge cases in several ways, are therefore a fascinating way to tackle the question of what the expansion of control southwards into once-Muslim Spain actually entailed. As yet, however, they have only been studied from the point of view of linguistics and a full quantification of their presence in the evidence has only been made for the area around León proper.¹⁶ The project for which this paper is an advertisement therefore intends to record in a database the extent of this material over both time and space all along the Spanish frontier during the supposed era of Reconquista. This is a fairly huge undertaking, involving thousands of charters, and so the project waits until I have a base from which I can launch a funding bid, but in the meantime I have been putting together exploratory and exemplary studies that aim to construct models that help to explain who these people were and what we can hope to learn from studying them. The rest of this paper will demonstrate one paradigm of many that illustrates the complexity, and the interest, of the phenomena involved.

One of the things that the spread of this project will show is the benefits of a macro-scale approach, but a micro-scale approach also has much to tell us, and each micro-scale case will more correctly nuance the greater picture. Here is one. The settlement of Villobera first appears in 935, in the first of a small cluster of documents from the monastery of Saints Cosmas and Damian de Aguilar, in which Arabic names feature strongly. These names are tabulated here.

Document	Date	Arabic/non-Arabic	Details
León 103	935	3/19	Neighbours Abbiscam and Mahomat, witness Corescey
León 104	935	2/20	Neighbour Mahomat and witness Corascei, here identified as a priest
León 105	935	3/23	Witnesses Coraisce, Abkal and Muza
León 106	936	5/27	Transactors Abolcacem & Humar, neighbour Mahomat & witnesses Corasce <i>presbiter</i> & Muza
León 113	936	4/14	Neighbour Mahomat, witnesses Coresce <i>presbiter</i> , Hauiue & Haze
León 116	937	0/14	
León 132	939	2/13	Witnesses Coraisce <i>presbiter</i> & Abocalde
León 135	939	3/16	Witnesses Abcalde, Coraisce <i>presbiter</i> & Muza; donor's wife's name never filled in

explained by immigration: Aguilar & Rodríguez, “Antroponimia”, pp. 504-6; Rodríguez, “Acerca de la población arabizada”, pp. 470-2; Aguilar, “Onomástica”, pp. 351-2. For the older school of historian however such numbers merely provide evidence of the royal power that was able to relocate them. Both cases are thus arguments from unproven assumptions.

¹⁶ Aguilar & Rodríguez, “Antroponimia”.

León 136	940	1/11	Neighbour in next village, Maruan
León 275	954	1/32	Witness Abdella

Table 1: the charters from Villobera and their Arabic-named participants

These documents are all but one sales or exchanges to the monastery.¹⁷ It appears therefore that we see the village largely because a certain group engaged in relations with the monastery. This group were not themselves Arabic-named, but they dealt with those who were, most especially the priest Coraisce, who was also connected to León.¹⁸ It seems, however, that when this group was not involved directly the Arabic-named did not appear, and it seems that Villobera's citizens quickly stopped being concerned with the monastery through whose archives we know them. This disappearance is therefore not because of pressure from the centre smoothing out local culture, but because of that local culture's own abstinence from dealing with the centre.

The Arabic-named here, furthermore, do not appear themselves as transactors, suggesting that they were themselves disinterested in interaction with this new power in their area. It may be that these people were tenants of the leading family of the village, and thus it is not their own disinterest that kept them out of the record after their patrons left it, but the disinterest of those patrons.¹⁹ There is no way to distinguish the cases from the evidence that remains, but many other parallel cases which could be explored in future.

6. Conclusions

A detailed picture of these people will need all of these techniques of interpretation and whatever others can be devised. We may expect different levels of involvement, social stratification, immigrants and non-immigrants, and evidence that the Arabic name was as much a flag of convenience as a deeply-felt ethnic marker. All of these phenomena are however detectable and interpretable, and with the models that obvious cases allow us to build we can make suggestions about others. The picture that results will be a more varied, more human and, I think, more interesting one than the old ones of monolithic and ineradicable Spanishness or long Iberian continuity, of mass immigration by learned clerics and aggressive resettlements by vigorous kings. Instead, we will find evidence for individuals making choices, and see in a new range of ways the peculiar ingenuity of the social human being in his or her historical context.

¹⁷ In the exception, León 116, one of SS Cosmas & Damian's monks received half of certain properties as the result of a judgement in his favour against their owners.

¹⁸ Coraisce, whose name appears to derive from Quraysh, the name of the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad and held to indicate claimed Arabian descent (Aguilar & Rodríguez, "Antroponimia", p. 533), also occurs in León 181, 188 & 189 as witness.

¹⁹ The group identified themselves as the family of the village founder, see León 106: "... *concedimus uobis terra ibidem in villa auii nostri Beranis...*".