

# THE RECONQUEST OF MEDIEVAL SPAIN: A MYTH OF MYTHS

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## Introduction

In 711, a group known as Muslims, followers of Mohammad and Islam, a very new religion that was birthed in the caves of Arabia, accompanied by a group of Berbers, a tribe known throughout Northern Africa as being particularly war inclined, first set foot on the coasts of Iberia. The group was led by Tariq ibn \*\*\*, for whom the Strait of Gibraltar gets its name. Tariq had been mandated to survey the territory on the opposite side of the Mediterranean sea by Musa ibn Nusayr. In addition to simply surveying the unknown territory, Tariq took on the mighty task of sacking the majority of Iberia, which up until his arrival had been ruled by the Visigoths. The coup was largely made possible by the fact that King Roderic, ruler of the Visigoths, was not even in the capital city of Toledo when Tariq arrived on the shores of Iberia. Roderic, with his army was posted in the north of Spain, in the Pyrenees working to squash a rebellion by the Basques, another militant and in addition reclusive group. By the time Roderic returned to Toledo, Tariq quickly felled him in battle and claimed Iberia for the Muslims. Despite the unforeseeable success of Tariq in Hispania, his lord Musa was not pleased with the stealthy victory.

There were several outcomes to the takeover of the Moors. Mostly likely, the majority of the Jews stayed in the area, and also it is highly probably that they assisted the Muslims in their take over, as written into Islamic law is the mutual respect for all believers of the same faith \*\*, as in Christians and Jews. While the Muslims would require tribute from the Jews and Christians who chose to remain in their newly earned region, the treatment was far superior to that of the previous Christian Visigothic rulers. Similarly many Christians remained in the area, and a good number of them over time would convert to Islam. But a few groups of Christians would flee to the hills of the Pyrenees. Due to the cold and harsh climate, the Christians were spared from the expansion of the Muslims and Berbers who were accustomed to the warmth of North Africa and Arabia and not eager to advance into the mountains after the few deserters.

Regardless of all responses to the overtake, the Muslims arrival began what would later be termed the Reconquest, a process in which the remaining Christians primarily in the region of Asturias, would over 700 years battle to take control from the Muslims. As noted by historian Derek Lomax, “the reconquest was not an artificial construct created by modern historians to render the history of medieval Spain intelligible, but rather ‘an ideal invented’ by Spanish Christians soon after 711 and developed in the ninth-century kingdom of Asturias.”

(O’Callaghan 3) The ideology and mythology of reconquest under various prominent proponents would evolve over several successive generations, until it had attained the shape that we currently understand of the term. Specifically, this understanding is that the word “reconquista” conveys several attributes which the kingdom of Asturias et. al. attached to the action of militarily dominating the Iberian peninsula. First, they labeled the expansion and eventual control of the Iberian peninsula a reconquest, where they were taking back control of the land that belonged to them by birth right (a supposed inheritance from the previous Visigoth rulers). Secondly, the conquerors, like most groups before them, claimed an ordination vested by God that entitled them to the land. From these two beliefs began a series of myths that would fuel this military movement. In this essay, I will be exploring the myth of the reconquest, first by explaining what

actually happened during the Reconquest period via facts and most accepted theories from historians. Secondly, I will be analyzing the various myths that fused to form the myth of “reconquista” and that at least from the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> century most likely played a major role in motivating the kingdoms of Asturias, Navarre and Leon to take full control of the Iberian Peninsula.

So what really happened? There are three sources of evidence documenting the events immediately following the takeover of the Arabs and Berbers. The first is the Chronicle of 754, whose unknown author is believed to be a cleric in the Catholic Church in Toledo. The chronicle received its name because 754 was the last year contained within its pages. The Chronicle of 754 is believed to be the most accurate account of the events of the Muslim conquest, as all later accounts had already begun to mythicize the events. In this chronicle, the author describes a series of raids by the Arabs and Berbers that took place in the beginning of the 8th century. As a result of these raids, several provinces were completely devastated, and “many” Christian lords were either murdered or fled to the hills of the Pyrenees. The Chronicles also describe the aforementioned account of Tariq invading Spain under orders of Musa ibn Nusayr. In 711, the governor of North Africa, Musa ibn Nusayr, sent an army under Tariq. The archbishop of Toledo fled his post. By the next year, a battle between Roderic, Visigothic king of Spain, and Tariq ensued, leaving Roderic felled and Tariq free to continue his conquest further north. Musa murdered several prominent people in Toledo and devastated the region. Rejoined by Musa, the Arab army, continued onto the northeast and eventually into France where they were stopped by \*\*\*. Several Christian lords fled to the Pyrenees, a land where coincidentally the Arab and Berber armies had no desire to traverse due to insuitability of the environment. Both Arabs and Berbers were peoples accustomed to warm climates and abundant fertile lands. According to the Chronicles of 754, all lands held previously by the Visigoths were under the control of the Muslims, including Septimania, parts of the Pyrenees and until Provence in France.

Not all Christians fled to the Pyrenees. In fact, some Christians remained on their lands as well as some Jews. An administrative document was found, although it is only a later copy that survives, but it is still believed to be authentic and reliable). This document contains the text of treaty made between ‘Adb al Aziz and Theodemir, a Christian lord who owned seven named towns in the southeast of Spain, Alicante and places in the hinterland such as Lorca and Orihuela. In the treaty, dated the 4<sup>th</sup> day of Rajab in the 94<sup>th</sup> year, in Christian time known as April 5, 713, Theodemir agrees to not assist deserters or enemy armies in exchange for his and his peoples personal safety and the freedom to practice their own religion. The Christians were also required to pay a tax, in part monetary (dinar) and in part agricultural, for example set measurements of wheat, barley, must, vinegar, honey or oil. (Fletcher, ch 2) Treaties of this kind were no unlikely, as the Iberian nobles and magnates of the time had already been alienated by their Visigoths rulers. The Visigoths had no law for hereditary monarchy, meaning that after one warlord died, all desiring to serve as successor would have to fight for rule. According to Fletcher, the odds of natural death hovered slightly below fifty-fifty.” As an example, seventh century Wamba refused to succeed to the throne until he was forced at sword point.

In fact, in addition to the Christians who created treaties with the Muslims, it is believed that the Jews also could have assisted on the side of the Muslims because it was known that in Muslim law one had to respect the brethren faiths of Judaism and Christianity. Under Visigoth rule, Jewish citizens had been alienated. The Visigoths forced them to convert, flee or be slaves.

Similarly they did not recognize Jewish holidays, forced circumcision, mutilated female noses, and would not allow Jews to marry Christians or own Christian slaves.

The third source of evidence that historians rely on to get a picture of Iberia at the time of the Arab and Berber invasion is the archeological finds. Ruins that have been excavated demonstrate “signs of violent destruction at a period which can be dated by the evidence of coins to about 711-713.” (Fletcher, Moorish Spain, 18) There is also evidence that the Archbishop of Toledo, who was said to have fled, was in residence at a church council in Rome several years later.

According to Teofilo Ruiz, the reconquest had another root, is essentially to be found south of the mountain areas of the north as they became in fact empty, the lands are slowly settled by peasants in search of empty lands. In a sense the reconquest began not as an ideological program, not as a way to in a sense take lands from the Muslims, but as a slow social process in which peasants settled the land. And it is only much later that it will acquire its ideological existence.” (Ruiz, Reconquest, Pilgrimage and Repopulation).

Muslim rule in Iberia was total and complete for about the first five centuries. It was not until the . According to Ruiz, because the “reconquest” against the militarily superior Arabs was an ever vacillating process, both sides maintained basic rights for the losers. These rights included the ability to practice one’s own religion, the ability to leave the region if desired.

The myth of the Visigothic legacy and reconquest began immediately following the Muslim rule in Spain. In the Chronicle of 754, although the author does place blame on King Roderic for losing Visigoth rule, he frames his account through a biblical framework.

\*\*According to Ruiz, the ideological change occurs in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### Myth of the Goths

The myth of a Visigoth inheritance is one of the key components of the reconquista mythology. Before Spain becomes even an actual entity, a lot of written text deals with this legacy. Not only can references be found in literature, but also in public documents where “the use of phrases such as ‘to be of Gothic descent,’ ‘to come from the Goths,’ ‘to pretend to a Goth’ (ser de los godos, venir de los godos, hacerse de los godos), which were so common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”(Castro, 181) Carlos Clavería who has documented the use of these phrases explains that they “are derived from the nostalgic memory during the Middle Ages of the Spanish Visigoth kingdom.” (Castro, 181) Castro explains that “the collective dimension of a human group depends on a social form and not a latent, enduring biological and psychic substance;” so, despite the claims of this genetic inheritance, Castro clearly states that Spanish pride in their Visigoth origin “does not mean that the Goths were Spaniards, but that the Spaniards were not sufficiently satisfied with their present or their most recent past neither the so called Middle Ages or the imperial epoch.” (181) The legacy is simply an “optical illusion.”

This illusion did not simply stem from a frustration or lack of satisfaction in their history, but also enveloped a strategic guideline for planned takeover. The Goths as mentioned before were known as a military people, and had planned for a united Goth empire. According to Isidore of Seville, the *Monarquia Hispaniae*, or the Visigothic realm, extended over all of Spain and Mauritania in North Africa, which amounted to the complete Roman diocese of Spain. The legacy of the Goths therefore became a critical military component because it defined the region which the Asturians and later the Navarrese and Leonese would take control. Furthermore, the

desire to reestablish and continue the Monarquía Hispaniae in the form of the kingdom of Asturias, “whether actual or imagined, had a major influence on subsequent development of the idea of reconquest.” (O’Callaghan, 6) Factually, of course, the Visigoths never controlled this entire region.

It would appear that the myth of the Visigoths began even before Muslim conquest in the region as we have seen in the last paragraph. The Visigoths in their time like any other invader were not welcomed visitors. The Basques, as they had done with the Romans and previous invaders, continued to fight against the unwanted newcomers. They were accepted as rulers in the region because the area had become accustomed to Roman rule. It certainly was not a hindrance that the Visigoths had already adopted many Roman customs before ever taking control of the region. The change for Visigoth acceptance came in \*\*\* when King Reccared converted to Catholicism. Previously, the Visigoths followed the beliefs of Arius in North Africa. Arius placed Jesus in an in-between level where he was neither man nor God. This minor difference in beliefs created major conflict between the Visigoth rulers and the Christian population. To get a sense of how massive the conflict between Arianism and Catholicism, one has only to reread the history about the Council of Nicea, where the Catholics united in response to the espousing of Arius to fix permanently the tenants of the faith. Visigoth King Reccared converted formally to Catholicism, a purely political gesture. With the changing politics, St. Isidore of Hispalis, considered in this day and region to be the most learned man of Iberia, began writing his *History of the Goths*, which served as a kind of pro-Gothic propaganda. He praised the efforts of the Goths to create Gothia. This initial text, which would continue to be printed for centuries later, would serve as the seed of Visigoth lore in Spain.

According to O’Callaghan, the “idea of the reconquest first found expression in the ninth-century chronicles written in the tiny northern kingdom of Asturias.” (4) These chronicles, the *Prophetic Chronicle*, the *Chronicle of Albelda*, and the *Chronicle of Alfonso II*, were written with the intent to perpetuate the beliefs (propaganda/mythology) purported by the History of the Goths by Isidore of Seville. These chronicles were later used by medieval Spanish historiographers thereby eliminating any further need for proof in subsequent centuries. In addition, with the efforts of the humanist to spread literature, “the image of an illustrious past became familiar and accepted by all.” (Castro, 176)

## Reasoning

Why the Christians created such an elaborate myth regarding their right to rule is hard to fathom. There are two factors that Andrew Wheatcroft has given us to consider. The first factor is that the “ability to ‘construct’ enemies, to make them demonic in their power, all embracing in their antagonism, unsurpassed in the malevolence, permeated Western Europe” (Wheatcroft, 37) during this time. So essentially this ability to demonize and create myth was a pre-existing social coping mechanism which allowed in this case the fleeing Christians the ability to maintain a sense of self-determination. This is especially true when considering Wheatcroft’s second factor which is that the rapidity of the Muslim dominance onto the European continent took all of Christendom by surprise. Even the Visigoths had not accomplished such a complete and quick control. For starters, the Visigoths never held the entire region of Iberia under their control. \*\*\* Next, the Visigoths were originally welcomed into Iberia, 100,000, during Roman rule as a means to impede other barbarians from sacking the northern edge of Roman territory. This move

by \*\*\* was most likely out of desperation, as the Roman empire at the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was under numerous pressures, including plague, \*\* and invasions by the Germanic tribes on the west. The Visigoths did push to create on large realm of Gothia, which was to succeed Romania, a dream which was abruptly ended by the Muslims; but unlike the Muslims, the Visigoths eventual conquer of Hispania was done with the help of the former rulers, which was clearly not the case with the Muslims.

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