

Colin Smith. *Christians and Moors in Spain. Volume I: AD 711-1150*. Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips Ltd.

(Reviewed by: María Rosa Menocal, Yale University)

Colin Smith "Deconstructs" Castro, Christians, and Moors: Round One

"A few years ago this book might have been titled 'Texts of the Reconquest of Spain,' and it is true that this term, and 'Reconquista,' are still widely used and are incapable of being misapplied. (v) (emphasis mine)

It is with this puzzling and seemingly conciliatory statement that the indefatigable Colin Smith begins the first volume of what will be three volumes of primary texts *cum* translations — primary texts, as the book's title indicates, all dealing with aspects of relations between Christians and Moors. Throughout the introduction, as well as in the selection and editing of texts, Colin Smith is engaged in a remarkably apologetic and defensive (or is it merely clandestine?) version of the anti-Castro polemic. The brief but telling introductory comments outline the ways in which virtually all the texts provided depict not the *convivencia* "which has . . . captured great interest since the publication in 1948 of Américo Castro's *España en su historia* . . ." (v-vi) but rather the whole range of hostilities that the editor clearly believes have ceased to hold much water in current scholarship — despite, he proclaims with some puzzlement, the "evidence": "There can be no doubt that Castro, Sánchez Dragó,¹ and many others who have written in the same vein are right at least in part, but to prove it requires an immense effort to 'deconstruct' the virtually unanimous written record of the times." (viii)

One does not have to be a certified "deconstructionist" — by which Smith seems to mean someone who sees the opposite of what is "obviously" there — to understand that Smith in fact finds no basis at all for the position(s) of Castro *et al* and, moreover, is somewhat mystified and/or irked by his perception that versions of the Castrista position are nowadays more in vogue than the older "reconquista" views. In the final analysis (and not surprisingly) this anthology and its theoretical underpinnings are unmistakably of the same "school" as the work on the epic for which the author is famous, work unshakably rooted in the belief in the straightforward literalness of texts, their authors, their material truths. If it says Per Abbad wrote it, then obviously Per Abbad wrote it, and if it is

the only manuscript that survives then . . . well, then only a deconstructionist would maintain that in fact there were endless other versions — the same kind of deconstructionist, no doubt, who would not, at face value, take official church or state propaganda of the 12th century (or the 20th, for that matter) to reflect any direct “truth about a state of affairs five centuries earlier.”²

The most extraordinary and — I believe — distorting of the editorial decisions made by Smith in assembling this volume of readings is mentioned almost casually: “Texts are ordered — after some doubt about which might be the better method — according to the date to which they refer, not in order of their composition.” (v) *Punto*. End of explanation. Thus, a series of readings ordered in an apparently chronological fashion, clearly meaning to give a kind of “narration” of the history of Christian-Muslim relations from 711 on, begins with a reading on “The Origins of Islam” from the late 13th century (the *Primera crónica general*, to be exact)! The second extract, labelled “The prophecy of the fall of Spain (711),” is from Jiménez de Rada, writing in 1243 — the author, lest we forget, was Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain. And so forth. This strikes me as being a bit like doing a narration of the French revolution and starting out with an accounting or recounting of the events of 1789 written by partisans of the Bourbon restoration in the 19th century. In part, this decision indicates a weighty imprecision about the task presumably at hand, that of providing “contemporary” views of the situation, the “written record of the times” that Smith says scholars such as Castro have “deconstructed” in order to arrive at their views. Are the “Middle Ages” — or medieval Spain, for that matter — so hegemonic, so eternal, so standardized that there is negligible or no difference between the perspective of texts four or five hundred years apart? Or is it that historiography was that much less contingent in those days, so much more “accurate” that a thirteenth-century text is somehow “contemporary” with the events of 711? (One also cannot help but note that it is a particularly odd decision for Smith, of all scholars, to have made: in epic scholarship the issue of a text’s date — and the belief that it is that date alone (and not a fluid, far earlier one) that is “relevant” for that text — is one of the trademarks of the “individualist” posture of which Smith is undoubtedly the most eloquent spokesman.³)

Indeed, in what is perhaps a kind of “trickle-down” effect, the little introductions that precede each selection are often confusing on the issue of the date of the text about to be read, with by far the greatest emphasis (including, of course, the title of the

selection) being on the date or purported date *about which* the document is written — and the date of the document itself, infinitely more important from the point of view of the sort of “perspective” we are supposedly after, often tucked away. In more than one case I had to read exceedingly carefully several times before being sure I had understood which document from which century was actually being cited⁴ — it is clear, however (even allowing for some error on my part) that the overwhelming majority of texts given in this volume covering “711-1150” are in fact post-1150 texts, 12th- and 13th-century texts, many of them Alfonsine. Only seven of the thirty six extracts are from the 11th century or earlier, and, even if we allowed a rough difference of something like fifty years, quite generous I should think, for what would make a document “contemporary” with the event(s) described, a very small number of the total would qualify.

I hasten to note that what is amiss here is nothing intrinsic to the publication of such documents in and of itself. On the contrary, there is a variety of valuable functions served from this or another similar effort — I will return to this shortly. But there is a serious problem that derives almost totally from the “packaging” involved: both direct and indirect indications that we are getting a contemporary taste of what the (evolving) relations between Christians and Muslims were like in Spain from the first few years of the Conquest through the seven centuries of “Reconquest,” a progressive narrative of the attitudes of the Christians (in this volume and the next, at least — the third volume, as advertised, will presumably give us the same from the Arab perspective). In fact, what we get is far better described as (with a handful of exceptions) post-1150 canonical views of the conquest and of a number of other conflictive situations. The discrepancy between the package and the surprise inside is crucial, of course, and the problem lurks in the fact that because of the multiple naivetés that abound about the medieval period, many of them perpetuated and reinforced here, a reader, almost undoubtedly an undergraduate or other non-specialist,⁵ may well not see the huge difference and may well believe that the content is what the covers tell us, that, for example, Jiménez de Rada’s views of the events of 711 are the “written record of the times.”

[In passing I note that a number of the conflictive situations are “recounted” in openly literary and/or hagiographical texts — largely or wholly fictional, of course — texts such as the *Chanson de Roland*, (for example, selection no. 7) which, the blurb on the back cover assures us, “the medieval mind” would not have

distinguished from any other kind of text, including those that appeared to make bona fide attempts at what we might, in a naive moment, call historical accuracy. It is certainly true that the "medieval mind" (like the "modern mind," one hastens to add, particularly those "deconstructionists" who believe all texts have complex relations with "truth," particularly that which lies most simply at the surface) would reject any facile and clear-cut distinction between literature and other kinds of discourse. This hardly means, however, as both the blurb and the structuring of the edition imply, that those simpletons knew no epistemological or ontological distinctions, that one text was just like any other — just as, presumably, one century was just like any other, the late 13th no different from the "times" of the 8th or 9th or 10th.]

Smith notes at the outset that the sorts of texts ("data") "upon which Castro based his work are mostly not of the sort which could be reproduced in a book of the present kind. . . (vi) and proceeds to lament the supposed absence of all manner of texts (at least "of the sort which could be reproduced. . .") that would give any credence to Castro's views: there are, we are told, no "contemporary" texts about Toledo in the 12th century or in the 13th, to quote Peter the Venerable's amazement "would take only a few words." It might be unfair, under other circumstances, to quibble with an editor about a given selection of texts in an anthology but in this case the editor is claiming that this selection is — or is representative of — "the virtually unanimous written record of the times" (vii) and that those who have believed otherwise have been "deconstructing," conjuring something from nothing. Moreover, the fact that all these accusations are cast in an excruciating and apologetic politeness, an unctuousness that is almost palpably ironic — "he is undoubtedly in part right — although there is no evidence, of course" — in no way mitigates the highly polemical nature of this project. Thus, it has to be asked why, for example, Smith did not quote at length the very contemporary (and very famous) passage from Alvarus of Cordova (which attests excruciatingly to a remarkable degree of cultural assimilation) or why he considers the *Roland* the text to quote on the subject instead of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, say, where an Arab princess marries an aristocrat from southern France. Without going on to ask the hundreds of other like questions that might be asked I can perhaps merely point out here that this work of picking and choosing — like all such work — is both contingent on a certain a priori view of the "world" to be represented and calculated (consciously or unconsciously, of course, and it makes little

difference) to buttress that view. What disturbs here is the claim, explicit and implicit, that this is indeed the record rather than a record — and given that what is at stake is a rather major view of a major period, the claim cannot go unchallenged.

It would be churlish to not recognize the value this anthology of readings does have, a value that would be almost unmitigated, I think, if there were not so great a confusion created about just what these texts are — and are not. Colin Smith has provided an anthology of texts, primarily from Latin but some also from several of the vernaculars, and quite serviceable translations into English, that deal largely with what, indeed, he should have called "Texts of the Reconquista." It can be used fruitfully in courses, graduate and undergraduate alike, to convey a sense of how (and in some ways why) in the 12th and 13th centuries a certain history of earlier medieval Spain began to be written, a version of that history which, clearly, convinces many to this day.⁶ The "deconstructionists" in the crowd (don Américo, where are you?) will, undoubtedly, say it ain't so.

NOTES:

¹ Smith had earlier quoted Sánchez Dragó laughing derisively at those who persist in believing the *reconquista* as such actually existed. It is a quote which includes, among other statements: "Ningún fenómeno tan proclive a la mixtificación como esta larga fiesta de moros y cristianos cuyas recíprocas y fecundas imitaciones suenan más alto que el entrechocar de los aceros."

² It is probably no coincidence that those who have stood and stand against the strongly "individualist" position on the epic most strongly represented by Smith are, in the cases in which they have expressed any opinion, some variety or another of Castrista, at least *grosso modo*. From Menéndez Pidal to Armistead and Silverman, those who have appreciated the richness and complexity — and trickiness, finally — of the oral tradition are — no doubt with some exceptions — equally sensitive to the (predictably) often-veiled richness of the Semitic traditions of what was, finally, an anti-Semitic Spain.

³ I am aware that Professor Smith is leery of critical labels of this sort (as he rather charmingly claims to be leery of and uninterested in polemical discussions) but they are a necessary shorthand in discussions such as these, particularly, where one merely wants to recall a scholar's most general working principles. It is true that labels (as well as polemics, presumably) distort from overgeneralization — but at times one must be general enough to put the reader in the general context before other "refinements" can be made.

⁴ From the introduction to passage no. 9, "The Franks take Gerona (786)": "In 785 or soon after the important town of Gerona . . . passed into Frankish control. [Passage about how Charlemagne was certainly not there but it eventually became hard and fast belief that he had been.] In the 10th century the Latin Fragment of the Hague concerns the siege of a Muslim city which was probably Gerona. . . ."

Many other Latin texts produced in France and elsewhere in the 11th and 12th centuries credit this conquest, together with many others in Spain, to the Emperor The Church eventually placed the massive stamp of its authority on all this [a series of dates of canonization and other such are reviewed.] There was composed a special liturgy for St. Charlemagne, liberator of Gerona, consisting of a prayer and nine lessons. . . . Later the text of the abandoned liturgy was expanded into a *Tractatus de captione Gerunde* composed to justify the tradition . . . [A passage about how peninsular historians of the 12th and 13th centuries objected to the notion that Charlemagne had been their liberator but how the legend remained popular with "church and local people."] In such a context, a few anachronisms hardly matter: in this extract Roland and Turpin evidently survived the slaughter at Roncevaux. . . . The chief concern of the person who composed the liturgy was There is a full study of the texts and the tradition by J. Coulet . . . with the text of the Office (from which the extract is taken) on pp. . . ."

Both before and after looking at the extract, a naive reader (even a fairly savvy one, too) can legitimately be puzzled: is he giving us the Latin Fragment of the Hague, perhaps? (After all, if one has never seen it or read it, there is no indication here that it could not be that.) Or one of the many Latin texts of the 12th and 13th centuries based on it? Is this the "special liturgy" he says "was composed" — if so no date (even a century) is given for it — or is it the later *Tractatus* (also no date)? In fact, it is that "special liturgy" and without going to the cited source for it one has no idea of when the date of composition might be — but I note that in Smith's narrative the implication is that it is post 1345, when one of the nine chapels in the Cathedral of Gerona was set aside for Charlemagne. The "record of the times"?

⁵ The most direct statement about the intended and probable audience of the book is on the back cover: "The purpose is to make these texts available in a form not previously attempted, to all who are interested in this fascinating period but may be unable to read the original languages or may not have access to the published sources — ergo undergraduates and the non-specialist graduate student. The pedagogical mission is apparent throughout — from the relatively inexpensive paperback edition available from the outset to the brief (and wildly erratic) "booklist" at the end of the introduction.

⁶ It might serve, for example, as a useful "preface" of primary readings to the sort of careful study of historiography in James Monroe's 1970 *Islam and the Arabs in Spanish Scholarship (Sixteenth Century to the Present)*, Leyden: Brill.