

[1–2022]

history – theory – criticism

dějiny–teorie–kritika

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**E. MICHAEL GERLI, RYAN D. GILES (edd.),
*The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion
to Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity,***

London 2021, Routledge, 668 s.,
ISBN 978-11-386-2932-5

Hispanic Studies Companion to Medieval Iberia is a large-scale work with complex objectives, not only because of the academic demands involved but also because the structure of the work makes it difficult. The work is part of a larger book series, which is made up of three other volumes and deals with Hispanic history, from the Middle Ages (the volume reviewed here), through the Enlightenment, Modern History (which includes the Colonial period of Latin America and the Caribbean) until reaching the Spanish 19th century. This volume, in particular, not only focuses on the Hispanic world but also aims to cover the kingdom of Portugal and the Muslim history within the peninsula. The broadening of the territorial limits has a good reason since the guiding and cohesive thread of the work is multiculturalism and the interrelation between the different ethnic and religious groups that inhabited the peninsula, so the move beyond the Hispanic word is the most consistent option.

The book was edited by E. Michael Gerli and Ryan D. Giles, but the individual chapters were written by 37 different experts, most of them scholars based at the universities in the United States and the United Kingdom, except for 5 historians, one in Argentina, another in Mexico and three in Spain. The author selection is a point to highlight because they are recognized experts in the field, who throughout the chapters of the book develop suggestive and useful interpretations of the Iberian medieval world, such as the complexity of a multi-ethnic and multicultural space, in which, simultaneously, there are interactions between social groups, genders and the environment. A good example is the study by Núria Silleras-Fernández, which explains the existence and impact of queen-ship power, in opposition to traditional interpretations of women's roles, and focuses on both discourses and practices, taking into account not only the differences and similarities between the noble Christian women but also Muslim noblewomen. In summary, the chapters provide a general background to the period but they are also thought-provoking and stimulate academic debate.

Taking into account that the volume is a collection of chapters, the objectives of the work do not focus on demonstrating specific points, but rather on how history is approached and on the structure of the work itself. The first three

objectives are about perspective, namely, that the different chapters address the peninsula from a plurality of viewpoints and that the authors recognize the vital role of multiculturalism and multiconfessionality in medieval Iberia; The second is that the interpretations are new interpretative proposals that invite debates and new reflections; and, the third, that the reading of the past is a reading from the present and for the present. This wants to move beyond the concept of the philosophy of history in which every narration of the past is told from a perspective of the present, but rather it resolutely intends that those questions about the past should be made from conscious questioning of the present.

On the other hand, there are two more objectives, one of form and another of function. As for the form, the book, although it is a compilation, aims to be a well-interconnected single work in itself, that does not feel like a mere collection of studies, but as a work that contains enough coherence and cohesion so that the reader takes it as such. In terms of function, the editors sought to build a scholarly work, one that serves as a far-reaching introduction and reference work for scholars, students, and the general public.

The book is the first volume of the four that make up the general Book series. Internally, it is divided into 37 chapters, which are grouped into seven sections. In fact, from my point of view, this division is the main obstacle to achieving the objectives that the work itself proposes. The sections are extremely generic, to the point that a chapter could oftentimes be easily placed in a different section and anything would not change, that is the case of, for example, the studies *Re-reading* “the conquest of Iberia” and “Toledo and beyond”. On the other hand, the sections that are dedicated to traditional themes of History are those that have a greater number of chapters. For example, the section „Societies, Politics and Governments“ has seven chapters, „Histories“ five and „Languages“ and Literatures” fourteen. While the “Environment”, “Gender” and “Visual Culture” parts have one, two and three chapters respectively. A work that aims to bring new visions of the past, new ways of making History and a History sensitive to topics that touch the present should not give a secondary space to central interdisciplinary issues.

Furthermore, the main problem in this regard is that due to the vague delimitation and the no-coherence in the sections, the work feels precisely like a collection of articles on Medieval History. This lack of common thread can also be seen in the fact that not all the chapters address the issue of multiculturalism, or others only mention it very tangentially, without any real weight in the argument of the article. In this sense, the work loses interpretive and compositional unity.

The first section, with the chapter “Humans and the Environment in Medieval Iberia”, is an exquisite appetizer that represents everything that the work

should be: It addresses a tremendously current theme, with a fresh perspective and takes into account the complexity of the Iberian multicultural world, and how it affected the interactions of humans with the environment. One specific example of this is the irrigation system, which suffered significant changes during both the Muslim and Christian conquests of the Iberian Peninsula and produced profound transformations in the relationships between humans and their environments. Furthermore, it breaks with the myth that medieval people were totally subject to the environment and natural disasters, without seeing the possible impact of these interactions. It is a pity that this section only has one chapter, precisely the one that best embodies what the editors had proposed.

The next two sections are “Societies, Politics and Governments” and “Histories”. As mentioned, although the quality of the chapters is undeniable, these are two generic sections that could easily be one, since no major difference can be seen among the chapters that are in one or the other. There are even chapters that do not share the interpretive line at all, such as the case of “Fragmentation and Centralization: The emerging political culture of the medieval Crown of Aragon”. In fact, this chapter is the first of several that use Foucauldian interpretations. But, even recognizing that those interpretations are relevant for the academic debate, they are considered as well-established within the human sciences and the historiographical debates, not as new, fresh, or provocative. These two sections bring together varied works, ranging from historiographical debates (such as “Otherness, Identities, and Cultures in Contact and Re-reading the Conquest of Iberia”), to general summaries such as “Mudéjares and Moriscos”, which is the first one with this structure, and it is one of those that stand out for its innovative narrative and its adjustment to the objectives of the book. Also, there are other much more specialized chapters such as „The Law“ which delves into the conceptual structure of the Alfonsine law.

The fourth part, “Philosophy and Spirituality”, is made up of five chapters. Except for the first, “Corporeality and Soteriology in Medieval Spanish Hagiography”, which from my perspective does not fit in this section, since, although it is valuable and a great contribution to the historical disciplines, it focuses on the construction of identity and the relationship between it and the physical body and its representation. On the other hand, the other chapters study martyrdom, the works of Ramon de Llull, the translators of Toledo and the religious debate in the times of Alfonso X.

The fifth section is “Gender” and although it is currently a dynamic field of research, in which there is still plenty to study and learn, it only has two chapters. The first, “Medieval Iberian Women and Gender”, analyzes Christian, Muslim and Jewish women, and their agency during the medieval period. A useful per-

spective that moves beyond the view of women as passive or as victims without any power. The second chapter is „Iberian Queenship“, which analyzes elite women from a Foucauldian perspective, and which covers not only the queens but also the regents and the king’s concubines. Moreover, it offers a brief comparison with the sultanas in the peninsular Muslim kingdoms.

The sixth section, „Languages and literatures“, is the longest and begins with the History of digitization of medieval sources, a relevant topic both at a practical-methodological level and regarding the construction of a History from the present. Subsequently, the section focuses fully on the textual analyses of specific works or groups of works, such as *Celestina*, *Kalila wa-Damna*, *Nodicia de Kesos*, *Libro de Alexandre*. Clearly, in this section, there is also space for chapters that dedicate their analytical effort to traditional debates such as translations and chivalric narratives.

Finally, the last section, „Visual culture“ is made up of three chapters that explore, namely, Marian art in the town of Teruel in Aragon, where Christians lived with a large Mudejar population, which generated a specific type of Marian representations and their meanings. The second study analyses colouring as a new artistic perspective in the culture of León and Castile, especially since the 13th century. The last chapter takes an interesting approach to the pictorial representations of holy women, since the interpretation focuses on the intention of the maker of the image and, at the same time, the author links these interpretations with Maurice Halbwach’s idea of recovering the collective memory.

In summary, the book entails stimulating chapters that contribute to the historical discipline from various angles. It is an ambitious work that fulfils its objective of being both a reference and a summary, which can be consulted by both university students and specialists in the topics. Regarding the three objectives on perspective, the multiculturalism and multiconfessionality, the interpretation that invites debates and new reflections, and the reading of History from the present, in the end, the work falls short due to its breadth. Although many chapters manage to address their research problems from a multicultural, new perspective and with present-minded questions, others do so tangentially, which gives the impression that they mention it briefly to fit the requirements of the book but without a weighty contribution to the central argument of the study. In some passages, it seems that mentioning Muslims or Jews in a cursory manner would suffice to give the necessary multicultural touch to the research, or that using Foucauldian concepts, well established in the humanities, would give that fresh and provocative perspective that was promised. Regarding the last objective, i.e., the unity of the work, I see a considerable lack of thematic unity, clarity in the choice of chapters and, above all, the excessive vagueness of the sections.

The book is rather a collection of studies about the Iberian Middle Ages, ranging from summaries, and fresh historiographic debates, to academic research in a traditional sense.

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