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La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and  
Cultures, Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2017, pp. 267-275 (Article)



Published by La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures,  
and Cultures

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cor.2017.0012>

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# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

REFLECTIONS ON, AND ECHOES OF, THE  
REIGN OF PEDRO I OF CASTILE

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In choosing a name for an heir to the Castilian throne, a well-established medieval tradition would select the name of an honored and admired predecessor –which explains the number of Sanchos, a few Enriques and Fernandos and the multiple Alfonsos. Yet there has been only one Pedro, Pedro I of Castile, the focus of this critical cluster in *La corónica*. This was no accidental oversight. The circumstances of his reign, and the passions and animosities he unleashed, assured that his name and memory would not be honored by this convention, sparing future monarchs of the taint of Pedro's tumultuous reign.

Not coincidentally, Pedro I of Castile has also enjoyed the dubious historical distinction of having earned two separate and seemingly contradictory sobriquets, the Cruel and the Just (el Cruel and el Justiciero). Most sobriquets, both in Iberia and elsewhere –Pepin the Short, Alfonso the Wise, Philippe the Bel, Ivan the Terrible, and Peter the Great come readily to mind– originated for legitimate if reductive reasons. The assigned name, whether contemporaneous or posthumous, was intended to capture a salient quality of the person’s character and/or reign and help encapsulate and preserve, somehow, a ruler’s legacy. Political considerations and partisanship no doubt played a role in this name-calling and colluded, likely inadvertently and in unforeseen ways, with how future generations would come to know an individual’s reign.

Sobriquets have proven useful in other ways. They help us keep apart the many Alfonsos, for example, and render Juana quite memorable for having been tagged “la Loca.” Furthermore, sobriquets have had a not inconsiderable effect in the ways in which the rulers’ policies have been interpreted and understood. Castilian history is especially rich in monarchical sobriquets; notwithstanding this tradition, Pedro I is especially noteworthy for having earned two, the Cruel and the Just.

Understandably, in the case of Pedro I, his enemies labeled him the Cruel and his supporters –or those who sympathized with his plight and/or opposed the usurpers– opted for the Just. The jury remains out on declaring which name is more deserved, and the matter should be decided only after a careful and nuanced examination of his record of accomplishments and goals. To elucidate these more fully, however, more work still needs to be done.<sup>1</sup> This critical cluster in *La corónica* is an excellent effort in that direction.

Given the seemingly dueling sobriquets, it is tempting for historians to come down largely on the side of one or the other, since reconciliation may appear unachievable. And yet, is it not possible to argue that the behaviors and traits associated with cruelty and with justice actually represent two

<sup>1</sup> My book, *Pedro the Cruel of Castile, 1350-1369*, was published in 1995. It provides a comprehensive look at Pedro’s reign. Certain areas can and should be explored further.



complementary and not mutually exclusive facets of the qualities deemed desirable in a king as understood in the fourteenth century? After all, are both not aspects of the same broad medieval definition of kingship and royal prerogative? A king needed to be fierce and decisive (Cruel) and to mete out punishment swiftly and effectively (Just). Can any great insights –much less “truths”– about Pedro’s reign be gleaned from accepting or choosing one of these sobriquets over the other? Both are reductive in the extreme; yet, do they continue to have any merit in helping us understand Pedro’s reign, and more importantly, Castile in the mid-fourteenth century? Is it productive to suggest, that colorful as the sobriquets are, have they outlived their historical utility as tools for understanding Pedro reign? If so, I would like to suggest several other themes that might refocus attention on Pedro by looking into matters that have remained both crucial and elusive into our own day.

In this essay, or more specifically in this longitudinal 20 plus-year reflection on the subject of Pedro I of Castile, I would like to suggest the importance of examining some equally contested and polarizing themes from this period. A number of deep fissures became apparent during his reign, the effects of which have resonated into our own day. Since these matters have baffled, divided and inspired students of Castilian history, they may allow us to approach Pedro’s reign from a different set of perspectives. There are numerous topics from which to choose, among them frontier politics, economic development and trade, urban vs rural interests, foreign alliances, relations with the Papacy, and gender/marital politics. For the purposes of this essay, and given my personal interests, I have selected four: peninsular ambitions, civil war, relations with the Muslim world, and ennobler of Jews and Moors.

Pedro’s protracted war with Pere III of Cataluña (Pedro IV of Aragón) is known as the “Guerra de los Dos Pedros.” When the Castilian monarch declared war on Aragón in 1356, he was incited by several historical and complicated personal grievances, among them unsettled frontier issues resulting from overlapping and rival inheritance claims, competing territorial rights, broken alliances, personal ambition, perceived slights, and real or imagined grievances. These factors, some generations-old, contributed to a climate in

which war was a perennial possibility between the two neighboring states, while at the same time helping to explain the frequency of territorial clashes in Iberian medieval history here and elsewhere.

The date of the war's end is less clear –peace treaties notwithstanding– as it eventually devolved into a chapter of the larger conflict known as the Hundred Years War and a Castilian civil war, and Pedro's futile attempt to save his throne and his life. The details of the peninsular conflict need not be dealt with here. What is important is that the war made manifest both the vulnerability of Aragón-Cataluña with regard to Castile and the two kingdoms' relative weakness and vulnerability in relation to their European neighbors/allies.

Did Pedro entertain peninsular ambitions beyond seeking redress from Pere? There is little question that Pedro I came as close as any medieval monarch to subduing, by force of arms, the then kingdom of Aragón-Cataluña. Though not without precedent, since Alfonso VI had projected such a prospect in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Pedro attacked Aragón in pursuit of a deliberate strategy of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of his Christian neighbors. Unlike his father Alfonso XI, whose bellicosity was aimed at leading military campaigns against the Muslims in Gibraltar and across the Strait –he famously promised the Pope to “conquer Africa”– Pedro showed no interest in his predecessors' more conventional Reconquest aims. Aragón-Cataluña enticed him instead. He was eager to expand Castile's frontiers, in particular Castile's access to the Mediterranean coast through disputed territories in the former kingdom of Murcia. In the early stages of the war, Pedro nearly succeeded in his aims. While Pedro's goals were limited to territorial gains and settling some old scores, and did not include a vision of “castilianization” and suppression of other peninsular kingdoms, his campaigns do serve as a fourteenth century precursor to Philip II's dreams of establishing Castilian hegemony over the Iberian Peninsula. Pedro's campaigns against Aragón-Cataluña demonstrated the vulnerability of that kingdom and the potential consequences of deploying Castilian resources in pursuit of territorial expansion at its expense. The resistance of Aragón-Cataluña to Pedro's incursions, while proving quite costly, remained a recurrent feature of its



history and has echoes into our own day.

Then, there is the matter of the so-called three-year war (1366-1369) between Pedro and his half-brother Enrique, which became conflated into the conflict above and ended with Pedro's death, the usurpation of the Castilian throne and the establishment of a new dynasty, the Trastámaras. The rivalry between the two brothers and the armed conflict that resulted has been legitimately treated as a civil war. Here again we may ask, what's in a name? Nomenclature is important. A civil war generally refers to an internal conflict within the frontiers of a specific territory fueled by deep-seated and seemingly irreconcilable ideological, political, economic divisions between two or more factions and fought in defense of or in opposition to the principles behind them. During its three-year course, the war's participants coalesced around the two principal adversaries, Pedro I and his half-brother Enrique de Trastámara. Were their respective ideologies of kingship so diverse as to justify their bloody clash? Is there any significance –albeit symbolic– in the fact that both the fourteenth and the twentieth century civil war each lasted three years? Did Pedro represent a progressive vision of an urban, mercantile, internationalist Castile while his half-brother Enrique favored the more traditional interests of a new landed aristocracy and a more provincial focus –as was suggested a couple of generations ago when the experiences of the more recent civil war served as a model? Was Pedro's disregard of papal reproaches, especially when it came to his treatment of Blanche de Bourbon, the French princess he married and abandoned, marred Pedro's relations with the Papacy and revealed an insufficient religiosity on the king's part that sparked dissension among his subjects? Did Pedro's presumed lack of piety and his cordial relations with the Muslim kingdom of Granada contribute to the conflict? Is the notion of a civil war, then, an acceptable/useful way of looking at this period? Is the term civil war even justified? Did it engage the hearts and minds of wide sectors of the population to render the conflict into more than a dynastic struggle? Was Pedro progressive in any way to justify some mid-twentieth century "liberal" historians' views of him? Great uncertainties remain with regard to many of the above questions. One of the few certainties that emerge out of the

conflict is that Pedro's enemies were stronger –and perhaps luckier– than his friends. His opponents prevailed, and to the victors went the spoils –not just the crown of Castile but the right to write the history of the reign. In doing so, the chroniclers faced the great challenge of justifying regicide, a rare occurrence at best, and one of medieval political theory's most threatening and dangerous tenets at worst.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between Castile and the Muslim states in the western Mediterranean during Pedro I's reign offer us another glimpse at the singularity of his reign. Pedro and his contemporary Muhammad V of Granada (1354-59; 1362-1391) enjoyed unparalleled cordiality that extended to a level of military cooperation between Christians and Muslims unprecedented since the days of El Cid. In many important ways, Pedro's Castile was ideally poised to vanquish Granada and enlarge its Mediterranean frontiers at Muslim rather than Aragonese expense. With a population at least ten times larger than Granada's and military and economic resources to match, Castile's might was, instead, used to help Muhammad V regain the throne after his half-brother had usurped it through a successful coup, only to be overthrown himself shortly thereafter. Muhammad V, in his nearly thirty year second reign, steered Granada through perilous times. His sagacity and good judgment assured Granada's survival by repelling serious threats from multiple fronts: Post-petrine Castile, Aragón-Cataluña, Morocco, various North African rivals, as well as European knights/mercenaries brought into the Peninsular conflict to fight on behalf of Pedro, Enrique and/or Pere but were not averse to deploying their "crusading" spirit by gaining territory and fame at the expense of Muslim Granada.

Traditional medieval Castilian historiography has tended to treat the survival of Granada as a quasi independent kingdom for 250 years following the great territorial gains resulting from Christian Reconquest efforts (from mid-thirteenth to 1492), as a type of failure on the part of Christian –read Castilian– rulers to finish the job both in the Peninsula and across the Strait. And while there is some merit to this view –Alfonso XI's premature death

<sup>2</sup> For a full treatment of this subject see C. Estow, *La legitimación de lo ilegítimo: López de Ayala y la historiografía medieval*. Madrid, Ediciones Clásicas, 2006.



from the plague during the siege of Gibraltar with victory nearly in hand being a case in point– this approach is so focused on Christian missteps or shortcomings, as in Pedro's case, as to underestimate the role played by the policies and agency of rulers such as Muhammad V and his coreligionist rulers across the Strait. The king of Granada understood the challenges of his surroundings, both Christian and Muslim, in a masterful way. He excelled at diplomacy. His ability to navigate the realities of his and his kingdom's predicament can help us better understand Iberian medieval history and Pedro's contributions/shortcomings.

If Pedro had adversaries among his Christian subjects and neighboring rulers, Muhammad faced similar conditions among his own coreligionists. Unity was just as elusive for Muslims as for Christians.

What is clear is that within the context of Iberian, Western European and papal politics of the mid-fourteenth century, Pedro's pursuit of a foreign policy that did not have Granada and Islam as its main focus was bound to rankle. At the same time, Muhammad V proved himself so adept at seizing opportunity and repelling threats, as much from Christians as from Muslim rulers, that he deserves credit both for the unprecedented length of the second part of his reign but also for the survival of Granada as a Muslim kingdom for one more century.

On a more personal level, there is the mutual regard that Pedro and the great Muslim scholars Ibn al-Khatib (born in Granada, d. 1374) and Ibn Khaldun (born in Fez, d. 1406) enjoyed. It was on behalf of the deposed Muhammad V that Pedro met with Ibn Khaldun in 1364, perhaps for the first and only time, sent from Fez by the then exiled Muhammad to attempt to secure Castilian help in restoring him to the throne.

Pedro's relationship with his Jewish subjects –and his reputation for Judeophilia– remains an intriguing feature of his legacy. Equally intriguing is the role played by the civil war as a catalyst for the end of *convivencia*. How real or imagined was this concept of peaceful religious co-existence? Did Pedro's reign represent the last stage of this idyllic arrangement, to be followed by persecutions, mass conversions and by the eventual expulsion



of Jews and Muslims from the Peninsula starting at the close of the fifteenth century?

Where does Pedro's reign stand in this debate? He had a Muslim king and kingdom as an ally. He offered to return Ibn Khaldun's ancestral family holdings in Andalusia when the family was forced into exile in the thirteenth century. Pedro employed a Jewish treasurer, Samuel Ha-Levi Abulafia, whose death the king ordered in 1360. These personal attachments, if they can be called so, were instrumentalist in the strictest sense of the word. Pedro was a Christian king, and a pragmatist, and he ruled within that context. Pedro's enemies employed a deliberate strategy of accusing him of showing favoritism to Jews and Moors, of being a lover and ennobler of Jews and Moors, an epithet employed to smear his reputation. And this practice of the Trastamarans, of using hostility towards minorities to strengthen their political agenda, continued through the reigns of their descendants, to the time of Isabel and Fernando.

It must be pointed out that the presence of non-Christian courtiers in the king's employ does not distinguish Pedro from previous reigns –or subsequent ones– but, rather, was based on utilitarian motives. These individuals were selected to perform certain functions based on their particular expertise. This commonplace occurrence would change dramatically following the persecutions of the 1380's and the resulting mass conversions. The mass conversion of Jews, and the ensuing creation of a large cohort of "new Christians" further complicated the cause of religious tolerance. The fact that subsequent monarchs and institutions, beginning in 1440's, established proof of "purity of blood" (*limpieza de sangre*) as a pre-requisite for occupying certain posts, pursuing prestige professions or aspiring to train to perform "elite" tasks indicate a heightened level of suspicion and hostility absent in the mid-fourteenth century.

Regardless of his role in hastening, however inadvertently, the end of *convivencia*, the fact remains that Pedro's enemies sought to discredit him, beginning during his lifetime and shortly after his death, by assigning him bastard origins and Jewish blood. In its own way, *limpieza de sangre* made



an early appearance almost a full century before its official debut as a reason for disqualification for anyone aspiring to higher office, including a king. The bastard origin of Pedro's rival Enrique, was expected to be dealt with by questioning Pedro's own legitimacy! This proved to be a deep vein whose long-term consequences are well known.

The Castilian civil war –as do most wars– increased the hostility and violence against civilian populations, Jews and Moors among them. Medieval society, in the Peninsula and elsewhere, was frequently plagued by acts of violence, some organized, some ritualistic, some spontaneous. Pedro's policies, again, do not deviate from this pattern. In every important respect, he was a typical medieval Castilian ruler. He had the misfortune of losing the war. Pedro's heirs, the female network described in one of the essays in this edition, did a splendid job keeping his cause alive. We should do likewise. Much can be learned from renewed efforts to investigate the reign of Pedro I, of Pedro the Cruel and the Just, Pedro the First and the Last.

This project owes its existence to the brilliant efforts of Rosa Rodríguez Porto and Sacramento Roselló-Martínez. My gratitude for including me.