

Retelling Christian-Muslim Relations: Christian 'Fascination' with Moors in Medieval Iberia



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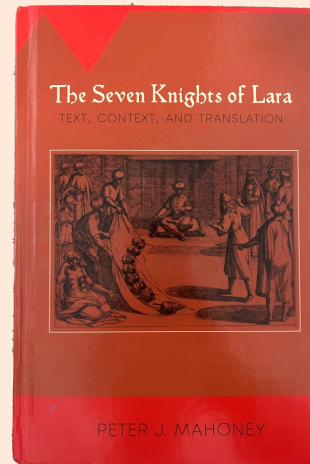
Summary

My research analyses the ambiguous Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages, using the medieval Iberian legend *Los Siete Infantes de Lara (SIL)*. It analyses complex and ambiguous Christian sentiment towards Moors, which often contains contradicting attitudes and emotions. Such contradicting sentiment towards Moors, from respect to suspicion, can be described as Christian 'fascination' with Moors. The research identifies three key elements of the 'fascination': admiration, Maurophobia and Maurophilia. The research compares and contrasts the two versions of the legend, the older version from *Estoria de España* and the newer version from the *Crónica de 1344*. It will discuss how the 'fascination' amplified curiosity to know more about Moors, as Moors were often considered mysterious and intriguing. The influence of editing will be discussed in the final part of the essay, identifying Menéndez Pidal's ambiguous attitude towards Moors. The ambiguous Christian-Muslim relations and Christian 'fascination' with Moors produced various retellings of Moors in medieval Iberia, some depicting Moors favourably and some exotically. The research concludes that recognizing various retellings of Moors reminds contemporary readers of the varying attitudes towards Moors, including the positive attitude towards Moors that is sometimes forgotten. The retellings prove the very existence of Moors in medieval Iberia, challenging the common yet erroneous idea of white Christian Europe in the Middle Ages. Studying the retellings can influence the public perception of the European Middle Ages, by identifying the diversity that existed in medieval Europe.

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The research is based on the English translation 'The Seven Knights of Lara' by Peter J. Mahoney.

Christian 'Fascination' with Moors

The mixed, complicated feelings towards Moors can all be described as 'fascination'. Respect, approval, wonder, curiosity, bewilderment, otherness, doubt, suspicion and horror; Christian sentiment towards Moors is diverse and sometimes contradictory. The word 'fascination' encompasses the multi-dimensional nature of the Christian attitudes towards Moors.

Admiration

SIL includes numerous depictions of Christian admiration for Moors. Especially, SIL depicts Moors are moral figures, as most notably illustrated in Almanzor. Almanzor's generosity, righteousness and compassion are evident in SIL, as well as his economic prosperity and institutional power that reflect Moor's prosperity in medieval Iberia.

Maurophobia

Despite the numerous examples of admiration, SIL contains many signs of Maurophobia. Mudarra, a half-Muslim and half-Christian hero, is depicted favourably in both versions of SIL. However, he is still portrayed as an outsider, and he converts to Christianity at the end of the story in *Crónica de 1344*. This legitimatises Christianity by implying that the 'perfect' ending requires a great hero's conversion. Moreover, Mudarra's action in *Estoria de España* goes beyond King Alfonso X's legal parameters. In *Crónica de 1344*, on the other hand, Mudarra respects the law. This allows him to be a national hero of Castile, in contrast to *Estoria de España* in which he remains a hero only within his family.

Maurophilia

Even the favourable depictions of Moorish characters can be seen as Maurophilia. Almanzor, the supreme moral figure of SIL, is depicted as a 'knight' despite his Moorish origin. He also fosters Mudarra and eventually dubs Mudarra a knight. This is a form of cultural appropriation of Moorish figures to Christian custom. Mudarra also demonstrates a sign of Maurophilia. As a liminal character who is neither fully Christian nor Muslim, he demonstrates a remarkable ability and personality. The combination of his liminality and outstanding capability creates an idealised, exotic and extraordinary character.

Menéndez Pidal's Contribution

The complex Christian-Muslim relations have been made even more complex through Pidal's work. Due to the wave of nation-building in 19th-century Spain, SIL was likely to be tailored in a way most aligned with Spain's nationalism discourse. [1] Since the presence of Moors could be either beneficial or harmful for Spain's nation-building movement, SIL contains various depictions of Moors.

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing me with this great research opportunity. Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Victoria Turner for offering me kind support. Finally, I would like to demonstrate gratitude to Dr Rebecca de Souza for helping me understand the literature and its historical background.

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[1] Information kindly provided by Dr Rebecca De Souza during an interview of 24/7/2023

