

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

4-1-1995

Review Of "The Medieval Spains" By B. F. Reilly

Stephen P. Bensch

Swarthmore College, sbensch1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Stephen P. Bensch. (1995). "Review Of "The Medieval Spains" By B. F. Reilly". *Speculum*. Volume 70, Issue 2. 417-419. DOI: 10.2307/2864945

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/117>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Medieval Spains*. by Bernard F. Reilly

Review by: Stephen P. Bensch

Source: *Speculum*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 417-419

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2864945>

Accessed: 27-09-2017 19:12 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Speculum*

the rise of Genghis and the functioning of his court. That Nestorianism would be so downplayed by this author is puzzling (see, e.g., pp. 197–98). Further, while Ratchnevsky fleetingly mentions, without reciting, the tales of the “heavenly mandate” that Genghis received (pp. 40–41), he later presents contrasting interpretations to demonstrate that Genghis had more limited goals, not of world conquest, but of regional domination (pp. 120–21), “determined by the prevailing political and military alignments.” At the same time Ratchnevsky admits that “Genghis believed that his actions were justified by his predestination for greater things,” that this idea occurred early in his rise to power, and that he remained steadfast in his belief that heaven had invested him with the mission to be the supreme ruler, from sea to sea, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. For this belief there is ample evidence, and especially Genghis’s adoption of the designation of “Chinggis Khan,” which implies “Oceanic Khan” (p. 160). In sum, Ratchnevsky’s argument for only regional domination is not convincing; and as he notes (p. 212), scholars still raise the question whether Genghis’s rule was progressive. Genghis did create a universal empire, but one that was dependent on the conquered people.

Although the title of the book stresses the life and legacy of Genghis Khan, only pages 198–213 sum up his legacy. Ratchnevsky analyzes this aspect in the generations subsequent to Genghis, approaching the generation of Marco Polo. The topics are hurriedly passed over and do not do justice to the text as a whole. Among the topics, Ratchnevsky stresses the high degree of morality existing among the Mongols, their lot of falling into destitution and slavery after the passing of Genghis, their dedication to military and public service, and their involvement in international trade. Their government, notes Ratchnevsky, was distinguished for cohesion, was notable for centralized authority, and possessed a division of authority into subordinate units that remained loyal to the center. He, lastly, passes over the decline of Nestorianism and is more concerned with the rise of Taoism, Buddhism, and Islam among the Mongols.

One could take issue with a number of Ratchnevsky’s interpretations, but this is a good study that merits the attention even of serious scholars. The translation is clear and understandable, and, apart from the deletion of footnotes, remains true to the original German work. The sloppy editing (e.g., p. 178) is disturbing, however, and the numerous typographical and grammatical errors are all too obvious. The book is richly supplemented with endnotes, a glossary of Mongol terms, a listing of main personalities, dynastic tables, a chronology, and bibliography.

WALTER K. HANAK, Shepherd College

BERNARD F. REILLY, *The Medieval Spains*. (Cambridge Medieval Textbooks.) Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 228; 4 maps. \$54.95 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

Despite the evident merits of the individual volumes published in the series Cambridge Medieval Textbooks, few in fact present the broad scope, manageable proportions, and introductory information of a textbook. Bernard Reilly, however, has taken his assignment literally. The result is a taut, well-paced, and basic grounding in an Iberian world still all too foreign to many English-speaking students of medieval history. In its coverage and length this book fills an obvious lacuna in the available materials for undergraduate instruction and for general readers. Although a number of specialists have produced attractive syntheses of recent research on different geographical and chronological segments of the peninsular realms, surveys in English of medieval Iberia as a whole are rare. The growth of regional scholarship and new historiographical interests in post-Francoist Spain have made the task of compression particularly problematic. Although Reilly has

devoted his career to the investigation of Castile in the high Middle Ages, he resolutely refuses to turn the history of medieval Iberia into a redemptive odyssey beginning with a fall from Visigothic unity and culminating in an inevitable resurrection under the centralizing force of Castile. As announced in his title, the emergence of distinctive regional societies forms the main theme of the book.

Political history provides the skeleton of the narrative, but well-balanced sections on ecclesiastical, intellectual, and social life flesh out the story. The first three chapters are devoted to the early Middle Ages and make up slightly less than half the text. It is refreshing to see such weight placed on these formative but obscure centuries. The complex interaction of regional societies is presented as a long-term problem of peninsular history, not just as an unintended result of the ebb and flow of Christian-Islamic conflict. In a succinct opening chapter, the geographical factors fragmenting the peninsula into separate ecological zones are set against the unifying civilization imposed by the Romans. The transformations of late antiquity and the arrival of the Visigoths are treated as part of a broad shift affecting the entire Roman world, which would lead to the emerging importance of areas peripheral to classical culture. Throughout the book, the dynamics of peninsular history emerge from the tensions between the unifying forces from other parts of the Mediterranean or beyond the Pyrenees and the stubborn peculiarities of regional communities. This perspective has distinct advantages in granting the Visigothic kingdom its due and in avoiding an overly simplistic presentation of the consolidation of Islamic al-Andalus. Rather than a corrupt realm deserving castigation at the hands of Tariq, the Visigothic kingdom exhibited considerable creativity and potential. Although Roman and Visigothic elites increasingly entrenched themselves in a narrow localism (a phenomenon hardly peculiar to Iberia), the Visigothic monarchy managed in spite of numerous dynastic ruptures to spread and enforce a formidable code of written law while the church laid the foundations for a durable Christian culture through an impressive series of general provincial councils. These foundations survived to form a basis for the isolated Christian realms of the north as well as a means of cultural resistance for the Christian population that came to live under Muslim domination. The advent of Islam at first intensified elements of local control and political decentralization. Rather than fall prey to treating peninsular history as a struggle between two unified blocks after 711, Reilly stresses the insecurity and incessant feuds of the invaders. Only with the introduction of new technologies, demographic growth, and material prosperity did Islamic civilization finally reach its culmination in tenth-century Cordova.

With the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate, the focus of subsequent chapters turns to the consolidation and expansion of the Christian realms of the north. The military successes against Islam are attributed to the new human and agricultural resources available to the kings of Castile, León, Aragon, Navarre, Portugal and the counts of Barcelona and to the emergence of new institutions to organize them. The engine driving the *Reconquista* forward therefore does not derive from the reemergence of early-medieval forms of order suppressed and marginalized by Islam but from the creation of distinctly new institutions. These structures are outlined in masterly fashion for Castile. Local institutions such as the municipal militias, military orders, bishoprics, and monasteries provided the rugged, durable cells for colonization, while kings of León-Castile gradually established mechanisms for an effective, but loosely governed, territorial state.

The distinctive constitution of other regions, however, does not always emerge with the same clarity. The insurrection against public authority in eleventh-century Catalonia, the difficulties of repopulating the southern Meseta and Andalucia, and the turbulent resistance of the Aragonese baronage to the count-kings all produced distinctive political configurations, but those developments tend to be passed over in favor of tracing the stages of territorial expansion. In each of these cases, the feedback from the frontier as

well as internal developments deeply affected the older Christian realms. The assertion (p. 173) that population pressures on marginally productive land in the Duero and Tajo valleys (and presumably in Catalonia) provided the impetus for the resettlement of the recent conquests in al-Andalus in the mid-thirteenth century may be overly optimistic about the ability of the Christian population to absorb earlier acquisitions. In any case, the stresses created by expansion provide the key for understanding the instability in late-medieval Castile, a subject covered briefly but effectively in the concluding chapter.

The strengths of the book are many and derive from a heightened interest in the past generation in social and economic history and in non-Castilian elements of medieval Iberia. Yet Reilly does sidestep one question that has haunted historical writing in the field: is Spain different from the rest of Europe? Even with the integration of Spain into the EEC in the post-Francoist era and growing confidence in its "Europeanness," it may well be useful to readers in an introductory text to highlight such themes as frontier liberties, incomplete feudalization, an inflated nobility, and the contested sacrality of monarchy. Although those topics are now at issue, Spanish historians have traditionally invoked them to mark off Iberia's distinctive past. The complex interactions of Muslims, Jews, and Christians add another special quality to medieval Iberian life, and Reilly traces the terms of coexistence. Although attention is certainly given to the various religious and ethnic groups that were subject to foreign rulers, the account is more convincing in terms of analyzing the expansion of the dominant political and military forces than in exploring the multiple levels of interaction, syncretism, and rejection. Given the small number of Arab and Berber invaders, for instance, the ability of the conquerors to survive with their own religious and ethnic identity has puzzled historians. Polygamy and booty, as well as the importance of Arabic as a sacred language, are suggested as possible reasons for the growing number of Muslims, but the distinctiveness of Arab and Berber family structure, a theme explored by Pierre Guichard, is ignored. Similarly the question of conversion to Islam does not take into account Richard Bulliet's work, which also provides an important background to the martyrs of Cordova.

These weaknesses, however, reflect uncertainties and changing attitudes in current scholarship toward cultural interaction. In the realms of political, social, and intellectual history Reilly provides a sure guide. His survey should provide an ample gateway to medieval Iberia for American and English students, who can now readily explore numerous byways of Spanish history rather than be rushed along a highway to the Catholic Monarchs.

STEPHEN P. BENSCH, Swarthmore College

MARÍA LUZ RÍOS RODRÍGUEZ, *As orixes do foro na Galicia medieval*. (Monografías da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 174; Publicacións en Historia Medieval, 16.) Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1993. Paper. Pp. 279; map, tables, and graphs.

Galicia, like the rest of the medieval West, was transformed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by improved agricultural productivity, population growth, and substantial clearance of new land. As the agricultural economy became more productive, it fell increasingly under the control of nobles and the church. Cathedrals and monasteries, often assisted by the monarchs of Castile-Leon, acquired huge new estates. While church institutions administered some of their lands directly, most land was exploited indirectly through the *foro*, a contract between lord and agricultural worker in which the lord granted use of his land in exchange for rent and some degree of personal submission.

Using archival sources from a number of monasteries and from the cathedral of Lugo,