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Contesting Sacred Space in the legend of John the Baptist

In this paper I want to propose that the Spanish legend of John the Baptist offer different readings of religious identity in the early Middle Ages. As part of a larger project on shared saint veneration, I would like to offer some suggestions today about the ways in which the legend of John the Baptist inverted the directionality of cultural borrowing.

My suggestions touch on earlier debates on social norms and Mediterranean studies. Rather than considering the opposition between “monolithically –conceived cultures”, I am interested in seeing how the field of Mediterranean studies places emphasis on cultural contact and the formation of a fluid identity, stretching from the confinements of religious *convivencia* to the nuances of religious *conveniencia*.¹

Placing emphasis on the social aspect of religious experience benefits our understanding of medieval identity and suggests questions like, how do foundational legends shape the representation of social landscapes? What are the possibilities of this approach for the social connection between Christianity and Islam?

A good example of this relation is described by the anonymous *Crónica general de 1344*. Commissioned by Don Pedro Alfonso, count of Barcelos, the *crónica* tells how Hercules built a temples in Toledo: a magnificent, round palace of multicolored stone situated over four large metallic lions.²

After he became was elected, King Rodrigo descended into the palace and broke the seven bolts on its door. He then found a chest and within it a piece of cloth representing a series of Arabs: The cloth had letters on it that said that once it had been unsewn, men of that appearance would seize Spain and become its lords.³

The ways in which foundation legends foretell and justify the arrival of the new order can also be found in the legend of the discovery of John’s head in the great mosque of Damascus.

Writing in the onset of the Abbassid revolution, the Baghdad-born writer Al-Mas‘ūdī’ (c. 896–956) reports that when the Islamic mosque was under construction, Muslims workers found a tablet written in Greek language. Christians and Jews were unable to decipher the words on the tablet, the inscription was then handed to Wahb Ibn Munabih,

¹ Brian Catlos, "Contexto social y 'conveniencia' en la Corona de Aragón. Propuesta para un modelo de interacción entre grupos etno-religiosos minoritarios y mayoritarios." *Revista d'Història Medieval* (Valencia), 12 (2002): 220-235.

² *Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344*, ed. L. Cintra. (Lisboa, 1951-1961)

³ Ibn Abd-el-Hakem, *History of the Conqziest of Spain*, trans. John Harris Jones (Gottingen, 1858), 18-22.

who recognized it as an inscription from the time of Sulayman ibn Dawud. The inscription said:

Oh son of Adam, if you knew what amount of living is left to you, you would diminish your desire and stratagems. You will regret if you slip your foot and if your family dismissed you and your servants turned away from you and the friend went away from you and your kin. At that point you will be full of regrets and you won't answer and you will not return to your people. And you will not increase your work. Benefit from life before death and strength before it vanishes and before you are seized with anger preventing you from any action.⁴

In both legends, the descent of the political ruler into a cave frames their actions within a pattern of sin that reunites the ruler with a mythical past. Just as Walid decides to take on the custody of the religious site, King Rodrigo's fault signals the advent of the Muslim invasion. In both cases, the creation of the new space hinges on the depletion of the old order and a sense of religious succession. Keeping and exposing the relics of John the Baptist justifies the ruler's divine mission to defend common memory.

The safekeeping of John the Baptist seems to have played a determinant role in the invention of Al-Andalus and its insertion within the divine paradigm of salvation.

Already in the 4th century, Flavius Josefus told how King Herod Antipas and his wife were exiled in the city of Lugdunum, now identified with monastery of Saint Bertrand de Comminges. Citing dubious sources, Robert Graves places their death site in Bolonia, right next to Gibraltar. Another legend recorded by Al Tabari tells how Salome was born in the Andalusian town of Italica, near Seville. Another legend from the 17th century tells how Salomé found her death in the town of Lerida, while she was iceskating in the river. The ice then broke causing her body to be submerged. Her body sunk, the ice closed and she choked to death. Finally, a legend in Bermeo tells how John the Baptist came to preach in Spain and left three-foot prints in a church of Bermeo. Finally, the Moroccan tribe of the Oudi Yahia claim to be descendants of John the Baptist who, feeling old and close to death wandered through the desert on a camel and was later interred with the 12 apostles.⁵

The dissemination of legends of John the Baptist marks the intersection of land and history and informs the way in which this connection takes place. This combination of narratives achieves two things: narratives of John the Baptist emphasize the interconnections and interrelations between Muslims and Christians around the Mediterranean. On the other hand, they also help inserting the territory of Al Andalus into eschatological tradition, and to frame the Islamic rule as part of the divinely-ordained plan.

⁴ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Les prairies d'or*. Trans. C. Bareir de Meynard & Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1861-1877, 5, 632). The same story is told in Abu al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Rabā'ī al-Mālikī, *Faḍā'il al-Shām* (Damascus, 1951), pp. 34-35.

⁵ For a discussion of this episode, see Adriano Duque, "La légende de Salomé dans la Péninsule Ibérique", *O-Scholars*, 13 October 2015 <<http://oscholars-oscholars.com/special-issues/contents/duque/>>

In as much as they built bridges between the ancestors and the present, the narratives of John the Baptist allowed for the emergence of a series of rituals that involved the participation of Muslims and Christians.

We now know that on the feast of John the Baptist, Muslim and Christian women took on to eat olives for certain sacred trees in Granada and Guadix. Other rituals involved putting cabbage leaves under the bed, participating in horse races, or eating fried dough sweets like *almojábanas* or *alfinges*.⁶

Writing in the 13th century, the King of the North African Abyu l-Qasim al-Azafi city of Ceuta complained bitterly about how Muslims had taken on the celebrations of Christians. This indiscipline, he said, caused men to relinquish their work and made students miss their school instruction:

If we consider that the seat of knowledge in the West is in Al-Andalus, and the most prominent people in the Maghrib are aware of this, and Córdoba has the same authority as Medina, how come the most grounded ulemas and judges and most stern judges have not come to disprove this innovation with admonitions and warnings pronounced at all times.⁷

Al Azafi's account of this coexistence is typical of the literature against innovation and the Andalusian struggle for religious orthodoxy that emerged in the 12th century. At the same time, Azafi's complaint intensifies the self reflective attitude that foreground the constructedness of religious identity. Note the way in which the credits the religious practices as properly Christians. Seizing a model close to what Jeremy Cohen calls the hermeneutical Jew, al Azafi uses Christian religion to gauge the deviation from orthodox practice and proposes a new set of innovations which include the implementation of the feast of the birth of the prophet, the *mawlid*.⁸

Along the lines of the argument made in the legend of John the Baptist –spaces have to be described and told in order to exist- the adoption of the legend of John the Baptist carries a sense of possibility allowing to insert the space of Al Andalus within religious memory but also to establish a sense of sacred topography where the political and religious spheres intersect in new and meaningful ways.

⁶ F. de la Granja, "Fiestas cristianas en Al Andalus 2, *Al-Andalus* 35 (1970): 122. Al Aazafi indicates that some of the sweets were formed in the shape of citadels. Cf. La Granja, "Fiestas cristianas en Al Andalus 2, *Al-Andalus* 1, 34 (1969), 34. Cf. D. M. Freudenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley 2011), 6.

⁷ La Granja, "Fiestas cristianas en Al Andalus 2, *Al-Andalus* 1, 34 (1969), 37.

⁸ Cf. La Granja, "Fiestas cristianas en Al Andalus 2, *Al-Andalus* 1, 34 (1969), 34.