

6-1-2014

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## Recommended Citation

Wolf, Kenneth Baxter, "Negating Negationism" (2014). *Pomona Faculty Publications and Research*. 394.  
[http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona\\_fac\\_pub/394](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_fac_pub/394)

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# Negating Negationism

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[Review essay: Alejandro García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica de la península ibérica y la tergiversación del pasado: Del catastrofismo al negacionismo* (Marcial Pons, 2013). The original Spanish version of this essay was published in *Revista de Libros* (June, 2014: <http://www.revistadelibros.com/articulos/la-conquista-islamica>). It is with the permission of the editors of the *Revista de Libros* that I offer this English version here].

There was a time in the not so distant past when the history of Spain as practiced by Spanish historians was haunted by the quest for a distinct Spanish national identity, one that was forged in the past yet could make sense of the present. In those days historians of Spain who were not trained in Spain tended to watch from the sidelines, quietly working away on their own projects without weighing in on these intramural debates. But every once in a while one of them would offer up some words of wisdom, in an effort to break the hold that this spell had on Spanish historiography. In 1959 it was P. E. Russell who, from his vantage point in Oxford, challenged Spanish historians like Claudio Sanchez-Albornoz to set aside the poisonous “Nessus shirt” of their own nationalistic discourse and stop wasting their time trying to pinpoint the origins of that “shadowy concept of the collective temperament of the Spanish people.”<sup>1</sup> In 1969 Thomas Glick and Oriol Pi-Sunyer weighed in from the other side of the Atlantic, suggesting the concept of “acculturation” as a way out of the same historiographical logjam.<sup>2</sup> In 1977, Pierre Guichard applied anthropological models to shed new light on the effects of Near Eastern and North African social structures on Andalusian society.<sup>3</sup> Of course much has changed since the 1970s and the state of Spanish historical studies has never been healthier. Still, in my effort to come to terms with the present volume, I cannot help but feel a bit like Russell or Glick or Guichard must have felt, trying to appreciate, from the outside looking in, the complex and fascinating historiographical context that gave rise to a book like this.

Much of this volume is dedicated to a careful and commendable assessment of the sources upon which any understanding of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian peninsula must be based. But the driving force behind this sober investigation of the evidence is a surprisingly impassioned call to arms against the “*tergiversación*” of the past, a “distortion” that the author associates with two modern myths surrounding the conquest of 711. The first is the idea that the Muslim presence in the peninsula was a fundamentally alien, even illegitimate, one, the result of a “catastrophic” twist of fate that placed a large part of what was “properly” Christian Spain under Muslim rule. The second myth contends that the Muslim conquest never really happened; that the changes traditionally associated with 711 were in fact part of a long-term transformation of southern Spain that involved the Arabs and Islam only as secondary agents. The problem with both of these interpretations, as García Sanjuán observes, is that they depend less on their fidelity to actual historical data than on their consonance with self-serving collective memories, and so they end up distorting our understanding of the what actually happened in 711 and beyond. Though García Sanjuán acknowledges that the vast majority of professional historians of Spain subscribe to neither of these myths, he nevertheless takes seriously the potential threat that such *tergiversaciones* pose, not only to popular interpretations of the past but to academic ones as well. Taking up the banner of “scientific history,” García Sanjuán is determined to speak out against such ideologically-driven fabrications. As he puts it, “...the task of the professional historian has three dimensions: the production

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<sup>1</sup> P. E. Russell, “The Nessus-Shirt of Spanish History,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 36 (1959), p. 225.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Glick and Oriol Pi-Sunyer, “Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept in Spanish History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (1969), pp. 136-154.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Guichard, *Structures sociales “orientales” et “occidentales” dans l’Espagne musulmane* (Paris: Mouton, 1977)

of historical knowledge, its transmission to society, and its preservation, in particular with respect to any effort to distort or manipulate it regardless of its origin.”<sup>4</sup> Because “the desire to distort the past turns out to be timeless,” conscientious historians must remain vigilant, ready to perform the third of these tasks whenever circumstances demand it.

The first of García Sanjuán’s two *tergiversaciones*, the myth of the “conquest as catastrophe,” is by far the more deeply rooted, fueled as it was by nineteenth and early twentieth-century handwringing over the sense that Spain had not kept up with its European neighbors as it entered the modern world. This *catastrofista* myth had the advantage of being grounded in a medieval one, one that was forged by the earliest Christian chroniclers faced with the unanticipated challenge of describing the displacement of the Catholic regime by a Muslim one. One of these Christian historians, writing anonymously under Muslim rule in 754, set the pace for his successors with his lament for the destruction associated with the conquest, referring to it as the “ruin of Spain.” The Asturian chroniclers of the 880s would push this *catastrofista* interpretation further, giving it a “providencialist” twist. From their perspective, God had raised up the Arabs as a scourge to punish the sinful Visigoths, thus setting the stage for their future redemption: the successful *reconquista* of Spain by the chastened Asturian heirs of the Visigoths. This early medieval “discourse of the vanquished” would prove amazingly durable, not only providing a convenient ideological framework for the Castilian monarchy in its medieval struggle against the Muslims of al-Andalus and North Africa, but, with minor alterations, informing the nationalist *españolista* ideology that would come to dominate nineteenth-century Spanish historical discourse and ultimately to inspire the National Catholicism of the Franco era. Its central premise—“the exclusive and absolute identification of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Spanish’”<sup>5</sup>—meant that al-Andalus, the antithesis of Christian Spain, could never have been anything but an interloper, a fundamentally illegitimate peninsular presence. Lafuente, Saavedra, Simonet, and Sánchez-Albornoz stand out as the paradigmatic exponents of this “catastrophe” perspective. But, as García Sanjuán is quick to point out, this *españolista*-driven discourse remains a significant force in Spain today, informing the historical research of Serafín Fanjul, the popular writings of César Vidal, and the ecclesiastical pronouncements of Cardinal Cañizares Llovera, to name a few. The popularity of Samuel Huntington’s notion of the “Clash of Civilizations” (1993)—not to mention the effects on popular opinion of 9/11 and the Madrid bombings of 2004—has only reinforced *catastrofista* interpretations of 711 by locating them within a global discourse about the inevitable conflict between Islam and “the West” in the wake of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond simply exposing *catastrofismo*, García Sanjuán advocates two changes in nomenclature that might, over time, help erode this long-standing myth. The first is to dispense once and for all with the term “Reconquista.” As García Sanjuán explains, “the term was consecrated by nineteenth-century historiography when it identified the Muslim conquest of 711 and the subsequent process of reconquest as the defining factor in the formation of [Spanish] national identity.”<sup>7</sup> Implicit within the notion of “Reconquista” is the out-moded idea that the Christian “loss” of Spain to the Muslims amounted to a perversion of its national destiny centered around the idea of a unified, Catholic Spain first fashioned by the Visigoths in 589. The second word that García Sanjuán would have us eschew is a less obvious candidate for exclusion from the historian’s vocabulary: “invasion.” As he sees it the word “contains within it the connotation of an abnormal or irregular occupation,”<sup>8</sup> as if the Muslims were “pathogenic agents” that had to be purged from Spain. In place of “invasion,” with its *catastrofista* implications, García Sanjuán proposes the less loaded “conquest.” This would have the added advantage, from his perspective, of promoting more consistency in historical terminology. Why, for instance, describe what

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<sup>4</sup> Alejandro García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica de la península ibérica y la tergiversación del Pasado: del catastrofismo al negacionismo* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), 22-49.

<sup>7</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 36.

the Muslims did to Spain as an invasion if we don't use the same term to describe what Cortés and Pizarro did to Mexico and Peru?

It turns out, however, that “conquest” is itself not all that neutral, and that brings us to the second of García Sanjuán’s myths, *negacionismo*, the idea that the Muslims never really conquered Spain. Although a relative newcomer when compared to *catastrofismo* and nowhere near as significant a feature of the current Spanish historiographical landscape, “negationism” actually elicits a far more lengthy, systematic, and passionate rebuttal from the author of this book. While García Sanjuán largely excuses *castastrofismo* as a simple case of “ideological distortion,” he blasts negationism as a veritable crime against the discipline of history, nothing less than “a veritable historiographical fraud” based on what he regards as a deliberate “manipulation of the historical records.”<sup>9</sup> García Sanjuán goes so far as to place the perpetrators of this fraud in the same category as deniers of the Holocaust despite the fact that denying the conquest de 711 has never elicit anything like the scholarly “blow back” that denials of the Holocaust instinctively trigger. A more appropriate comparison, given the subject of his book, is the contrast the author draws between the reaction of scholars to the recent “mythologizing” of Franco in the *Diccionario biográfico español* and their virtual silence in the face of negationism. It is precisely the absence of a systematic rebuttal of negationism that inspired García Sanjuán to write this book. “In spite of the fact that ‘there is no better form of disregard than not to give any regard at all,’ in my judgment that position is not acceptable within the professional world of historical investigation. On the contrary, I consider the refutation of negationism to be an unavoidable obligation....”<sup>10</sup>

The original perpetrator of the negationist thesis, or at least the first to argue it systematically, was Ignacio Olagüe (1903-1974), a Basque paleontologist and amateur historian who, like so many others in his day, sought answers to the problems facing Spain by delving into its past. For Olagüe, this meant rewriting Spanish history in the hopes of freeing Spain from the “decadence” that, he feared, was promoting a dangerous kind of fatalism in its citizens. A central component of this revisionist project was the denial that the conquest of 711 had ever happened, a position that allowed Olagüe to dispense with the uncomfortable notion that Spain had ever been subject to a “Semitic conquest.” Though clearly inspired by the same nationalistic prejudices that motivated so many in his generation, Olagüe actually parted ways with many of his peers by rejecting their exclusion of Islam from the discussion of Spanish identity. Instead he argued for an “integrating sense of Spanish identity” (*un españolismo integrador*) that would allow him to consider al-Andalus as being fundamentally Spanish despite its Arabic and Islamic trappings. Though Olagüe began exploring these topics in *La decadencia española* (1950-1951), it was *Les arabes n'ont jamais envahi l'Espagne* (1969)<sup>11</sup>—an expanded Castilian version of which appeared five years later under the title *La revolución islámica en Occidente* (1974)—that became the *locus classicus* for the negationist thesis. *La revolución islámica en Occidente* argues that, far from being the product of an invasion, Al-Andalus was the result of an Arian-based revolution against the Trinitarian Visigoths, one that, due to supposed similarities between Arian “unitarianism” and the radical monotheism of Islam, set the stage for Muslim missionaries who found in Spain a highly receptive audience of militant monotheists. The result was not so much a conversion to Islam as a convergence between Islam and indigenous unitarian tendencies in the south. Thus emerged al-Andalus, a decidedly “Indo-European” entity with a “Semitic” veneer, the Arab and Muslim elements serving only as the “leavening” for what was otherwise a purely Spanish efflorescence, the likes of which were to be found nowhere else in the Islamic—or Christian—world. Simply put, Olagüe posited a “continuist” sense of Andalusian history as opposed to a “rupturist” one, and regarded the whole idea of a “conquest” in 711 as an historiographical conspiracy aimed at embarrassing and discrediting Spain.

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<sup>9</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> Ignacio Olagüe, *Les Arabes n'ont jamais envahi l'Espagne* (Bordeaux: Flammarion, 1969).

As García Sanjuán notes, Olagüe's book, which was immediately and summarily dismissed by both Pierre Guichard ("un thèse insoutenable") and James Monroe ("not a scholarly work"),<sup>12</sup> would have become a dead letter had it not been dusted off by the Andalusian Nationalist movement. Blas Infante (d. 1936), the "*padre de la patria andaluza*" and a martyr to the *andalucista* cause, had actually advanced his own version of negationism when he depicted the conquest of 711 as a "liberation" of the south from the oppressive Catholic Visigoth regime to the north. To counter the idea of "Reconquista" with its implicit sense of Islam as an alien intruder, the *andalucistas* developed their own myth about an Andalusian "golden age" that was ultimately extinguished by Castilian expansion in the later middle ages. Though there was no love lost between *españolistas* like Olagüe and the *andalucismo* of his own day,<sup>13</sup> his "inclusive" sense of *españolismo* appealed to those whose regional identity was based on the idea that Andalucía had been a willing and contributing partner in the greater Islamic world. Among these were Spanish converts to Islam (the so-called "New Muslims") who were intrigued by the notion that Andalucía might, in some sense, have been destined by its own internal historical trajectory to become Islamic. The timing of *La revolución islámica en Occidente* (1974), which appeared right after Olagüe's death and right before Franco's, meant that the book was well-positioned to benefit from the attention of the newly unfettered *andalucistas* and the growing number of New Muslims.

García Sanjuán would no doubt agree that the *andalucista* endorsement of *negacionismo* is as understandable in its own context as the *españolista* predilection for *catastrofismo* is in theirs. Both have more to do with the workings of collective memory than with the scientific interpretation of historical data. As García Sanjuán puts it: "*Españolista* myths forming around the 'Pelayos' and 'Covadongas' of the *Reconquista*, are thereby supplanted by another myth, no less false and deforming, that of the *negacionistas*, proof that one myth can really only be counteracted by another."<sup>14</sup> Yet, as already noted, García Sanjuán devotes far more attention to the negationist thesis in his book, presumably because it has been receiving so much attention of late, primarily from *andalucistas* and New Muslims. Not only was Olagüe's *La revolución islámica en Occidente* reissued in 2004, but two years later Emilio González Ferrín, head of the Department of Integrated Philologies at the University of Seville, published his *Historia general de Al Ándalus: Europa entre Oriente y Occidente* (2006), in which he explicitly adopted a number of Olagüe's most controversial arguments. As García Sanjuán sees it, González Ferrín's book is essentially a reprise of *La revolución islámica en Occidente*, though from a *andalucista* point of view as opposed to a *españolista* one. At the same time García Sanjuán seems to regard González Ferrín's book as a greater threat because it was written by Arabist with a university appointment and *andalucista* tendencies rather than an amateur historian with a nationalist agenda.<sup>15</sup> It is González Ferrín's academic status that leads García Sanjuán to accuse him of "a true lack of respect towards history as an academic and scientific discipline."<sup>16</sup> Hence the scathing review that García Sanjuán wrote for the journal *Medievalismo* in 2006, shortly after the publication of González Ferrín's book.<sup>17</sup> Hence the hefty *La conquista islámica de la península ibérica y la tergiversación del pasado*, a book that aspires once and

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Guichard, "Les Arabes ont bien envahi l'Espagne. Les structures sociales de l'Espagne musulmane" *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 29.6 (1974), pp. 1483-1513; James T. Monroe, [review of Olagüe, *Les Arabes n'ont Jamais Envahi l'Espagne*] *International Review of Medieval Studies* 6.3 (1975), pp. 347-348. With the reissue of the book in 2006, Maribel Fierro añadió her voice to this chorus: "La historia islámica de la península Ibérica," *Revista de Libros* 109 (enero, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> "Olagüe es, ante todo, un nacionalista español, no es ni filo-musulmán ni nacionalista andaluz." Maribel Fierro, "Al Andalus en el pensamieto fascista español: la revolución islámica en occidente de Ignacio Olagüe," *Al-Andalus/España. Historiografías en contraste, siglos XVII-XXI*, ed. Manuela Marín (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2009), p. 336.

<sup>14</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Manuela Marín would locate González Ferrín in "the school of Spanish Arabists" who seek to "'hispanicize' al-Ándalus by means of converting its inhabitants into Spaniards." *Al-Andalus/España. Historiografías en contraste, siglos XVII-XXI*, ed. Manuela Marín (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2009), p. xii.

<sup>16</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Alejandro García Sanjuán, Reseña del libro de Emilio González Ferrín, *Historia general de Al Ándalus: Europa entre Oriente y Occidente, Medievalismo* 16 (2006), pp. 327-332.

for all to set the record straight about 711 and to expose the negationists, past and present, as perpetrators of “an authentic historiographical fraud.”<sup>18</sup>

The first lengthy chapter, which attempts to answer the *historiographical* question why the conquest has found itself subject to distortion (and which informs most of what I have said so far), is followed by three more, each of which seeks to answer a specific *historical* question inspired by negationist claims.

The first of these chapters (that is, chapter two) asks whether “there is any reliable historical evidence regarding the conquest.” This is a vitally important question not only because García Sanjuán must rely on such sources to make his case for the reality of a conquest in 711, but because the works of Olagüe and González Ferrín both seek to exploit the absence of truly contemporary literary sources and challenge the traditional reliance on later sources that they regard as hopelessly tainted by the political agendas of their authors. García Sanjuán challenges this “pessimism” vis-à-vis the sources in a number of ways. First of all he contests the blanket claim that there simply are no contemporary literary sources by pointing to an entry in the *Liber Pontificalis* that was clearly based on a lost letter that Duke Eudes of Aquitaine addressed to the pope right after his victory over Al-Samh in 721. Second, he accuses the negationists of a kind of “mental laziness” disguised as scruples that has kept them from applying the kind of source criticism that regularly allows professional historians to use later sources with confidence.<sup>19</sup> Third, he shows that, regardless of the circumstances surrounding each of these sources— whether it came from the peninsula or elsewhere, whether it was recorded fifty years or a hundred and fifty years after the fact, whether its author was Christian or Muslim—all “tell the same story: that of the conquest of the peninsula carried out by Berbers and Arabs beginning in 711.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, García Sanjuán argues that even if one were to discount the written record altogether, there would still be plenty of material evidence to support of the idea of such a conquest. Coins were being minted by the new regime in Spain within a year of their arrival, and within another five they were sporting *hegira*-based dating (beginning in 713-714) and Arabic references to Muhammad (beginning in 716-717). Beyond such numismatic evidence, recently discovered lead seals—that were used to confirm the division of booty, to establish pacts, and to regulate taxation— attest to the existence of an administrative apparatus for processing conquered territory from the very beginning.

The next chapter (chapter three) poses the question “who were the conquerors?” with the intention of proving that they were in fact both Muslim and Arab. From the negationist perspective, what the (tainted) literary sources describe as a conquest was in fact either a series of disconnected raids from North Africa or the result of the enlistment of Moroccan allies on behalf of one Andalusian faction against another; in neither case did these interventions involve Arabs or Muslims. In order to maintain this position and still explain how al-Andalus became an Arabic speaking, Muslim country, Olagüe—as we have seen—posited an “Islamic revolution” that saw a disaffected remnant of Arian Christians, whose theology made them more sympathetic to the radical monotheism of the Muslims, rebel against Trinitarian Toledo and eventually convert to Islam. The Islamization of al-Andalus is thus presented as the final chapter of a continuous religious evolution from unitarian Arians, to proto-Muslims (distinguished by their dedication to radical monotheism), to fully-formed Muslims (distinguished by their reliance to the Qur’an and their devotion to Muhammad), an evolution that would not be complete in Spain until the mid-ninth century. Thus the idea of a *Muslim* conquest of Spain is problematic for Olagüe because, from his perspective, there simply were no fully-formed Muslims at the time to carry out such a feat. To counter this claim, García Sanjuán turns to the evidence looking for clear indications, on the one hand, that Islam as a religion was “fully formed” before 711, and on the other, that the conquerors of Spain in particular were indeed *bona fide* Muslims. To demonstrate the former of these two propositions, García Sanjuán reviews

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<sup>18</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 244.

<sup>20</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 151.

the data pertaining to the rise of Islam in the east. The extent to which the earliest followers of Muhammad can be considered a distinct religious group has been hotly debated for almost forty years.<sup>21</sup> Happily for García Sanjuán's thesis, most scholars today agree that by the time of Abd al-Malik (685-705)—who was responsible for the Dome of the Rock (691) as well as for some equally revealing numismatic reforms—Muslims had assumed a self-conscious confessional identity that explicitly distinguished them from Christians and Jews. Turning back to the peninsula, García Sanjuán revisits both the coinage (in particular a bilingual dinar from 716-717 featuring the phrase "*Muhammad rasul Allah*," a photo of which graces the cover of his book) as well as literary evidence (especially the six mentions of "Mammet" in the two earliest Latin chronicles that refer to the events of 711) to show that Muhammad figured into the religious identity of the new regime from the very beginning. García Sanjuán is especially critical of the negationist claim that prior to the 850s (the time of Eulogius and the Córdoba martyrs' movement), there is no indication that Andalusian Christians regarded Islam as a separate religion. In fact the evidence shows that by the early 800s there were at least three Latin texts that directly challenged Islam or disparaged its prophet. García Sanjuán also exploits the complete absence of evidence pertaining to the existence of Arian "hold outs" in Spain after 589, when the Visigothic monarchy officially embraced Catholicism.

The third question, prompting a third and final chapter (chapter four), is "why were the conquerors victorious?" Its point is to counter the negationist argument that the ease and lightning speed of the "conquest of 711" is, in and of itself, a good indication that there was no conquest in the first place. García Sanjuán has to admit that few scholars treating the subject have failed to notice how quickly the Visigothic regime folded and how little resistance the forces of Tariq ibn Ziyad and Musa ibn Nusayr encountered as they made their way across the peninsula. As a corrective García Sanjuán reminds his readers that the conquest of Spain was no quicker or easier than the Muslim conquests in the east, which netted Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt in record time. And just as in the east, the initial blitz did not translate into immediate and complete political domination. It took more than two centuries—that is, until the time of Abd ar-Rahman III and the declaration of an independent Córdoba caliphate in 929—before the Umayyad regime achieved effective control over al-Andalus as a whole. As García Sanjuán sees it, it makes more sense to explain the absence of any worthy confrontation between the Visigoths and the Muslims in terms of divisions within the Visigothic ranks and/or strategic errors on the part of their leaders, than to posit the lack of a conquest. Whatever one thinks of the veracity of the Latin and Arabic sources, not only do they all concur that the change of regime was a violent one, but they consistently attest to the beginnings of Christian military resistance in the north. Fully aware that references to negotiated surrenders outnumber the known sieges and pitched battles, García Sanjuán reminds his reader that such capitulations would have never come about were it not for the *threat* of force. "Thus, both the actual application of force and the threat of doing so constitute arguments that permit the characterization of the process by which Islamic authority was imposed as a military conquest."<sup>22</sup> García Sanjuán also cautions the reader against taking later references to capitulation agreements at face value, given the fact that it was in the interests of any given land owner to claim that his property had been secured by means of a capitulation agreement rather than by outright conquest; to admit otherwise would have opened the legal door to greater economic and political intervention on the part of the central authorities.

We noted at the outset that García Sanjuán identified three responsibilities that properly fall to the professional historian: "the production of historical knowledge, its transmission to society, and its preservation, in particular with respect to every effort to distort or manipulate it." If we were to hold him accountable for how well he executed each of these three tasks in this book, we would have to applaud him for the first, having delivered on his promise to provide "a work of research conducted from an

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<sup>21</sup> Ever since the publication of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 423.

academic foundation in which documentary evidence occupies a central position.”<sup>23</sup> By assembling and carefully considering each of the extant sources—both literary and material—he has provided his reader with a case study in how the historian as scientist plies his craft. In the process he also underscored the shortcomings of Olagüe and González Ferrín, neither of whom uses historical evidence in a conventional way. As for the second task—the transmission of his subject to “society”—García Sanjuán also deserves credit. The clarity with which the book is written is consistent with his promise to “reach as wide a public as possible.”<sup>24</sup> Again, this is implicitly contrasted with González Ferrín’s book. More of an extended essay than a work of history per se, it “reveals a conceptual ponderousness of such density that it ends up being incompatible with the dissemination of historical knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> It is in the execution of the third task—protecting history from distortion or manipulation—where, in my opinion, García Sanjuán’s book falls short, ironically, by going too far. In his effort to “preserve” history from manipulation, the author launches an all-out offensive against *negacionismo* that is so disdainful of Olagüe and González Ferrín that it leaves this reader wondering about the purity of the author’s motives.

It is certainly within the bounds of professionalism for García Sanjuán to conclude that “the guiding principle of Olagüe’s discourse clearly reveals the *modus operandi* of all revisionism; that it is based on *a priori* reasoning, subordinating historical knowledge to preconceived ideological premises.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of criticism not only lets a reader know exactly where the critic stands, but provides contextual information so that the reader can appreciate why the critic feels the way he does. Unfortunately this is one of the more restrained of the author’s characterizations of Olagüe’s thesis, which he describes elsewhere as “childish and, in some cases, ridiculous,” producing “a mix of sentiments that oscillate between shame, hilarity, and indignation.”<sup>27</sup> Here, it seems to me, García Sanjuán has crossed a line that it behooves all professional historians to respect regardless of how they feel about someone else’s work. More problematic are the regular accusations of “fraud” that punctuate this volume. As far as García Sanjuán is concerned, Olagüe’s book cannot be dismissed as a simple “ideological or emotional reading of the past; instead it grounds itself in the *conscious and intentional manipulation* of historical testimony.”<sup>28</sup> To level this kind of an accusation without providing clear evidence of such conscious manipulation is difficult, to say the least. Despite its pretensions to scientific status, history as a discipline relies on the creative interpretation of data, which inevitably produces differences of opinion. To accuse someone who looks at the data differently of deliberate manipulation as opposed to, say, “incorrect interpretation” or “incomplete interpretation” or “ahistorical interpretation” makes one wonder what, beyond “science,” might be driving the accusation. The frequent *ad hominem* characterizations of Olagüe, particularly aimed at his status as an amateur, are consistent with the loose accusations of fraud. Over and over again Olagüe is presented as un “notable falsifier” and a “Basque pseudohistorian,”<sup>29</sup> who “...lacks professional ties to the discipline of history,”<sup>30</sup> as if membership in the guild of historians ever guaranteed the quality of anyone’s insights or research.

While Olagüe is a convenient punching bag for García Sanjuán, his real target is, of course, González Ferrín, whose arguments he similarly dismisses as “*delirios*.”<sup>31</sup> As far as García Sanjuán is concerned, González Ferrín’s “sins” against history as a discipline “raise serious doubts as to the credibility of his philological work,” and his approach to the sources reveals “a lack of respect for historical understanding.”<sup>32</sup> Even García Sanjuán’s half-hearted efforts to provide some context for González

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<sup>23</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> García Sanjuán, Reseña, *Medievalismo*, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 29. Emphasis my own.

<sup>29</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 82.

<sup>30</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 253.

Ferrín's adoption of the negationist thesis are steeped in disdain. Wondering why a trained Arabist would sign on to such an "ahistorical" thesis, he turns to González Ferrín's *curriculum vitae*, noting that prior to the publication of *Historia general de Al Ándalus* in 2006, his scholarly production had been almost exclusively focused on modern Arab and Islamic matters. García Sanjuán's conclusion: "we have here a clearly opportunistic improvisation, designed to satisfy shameful personal ambitions. Is there a better to get oneself known in a profession, when one is not a member of it and yet desperately hopes to attain prominence within it, than to proclaim nonsensical ideas that go against the grain? Notoriety is thus assured, because it permits one to adopt the position of a victim, marginalized and ignored by the 'mandarins' of the profession."<sup>33</sup> As García Sanjuán sees it, just such a contemptible quest for notoriety is what led González Ferrín to endorse and perpetuate Olagüe's "crude historiographical fraud, his collection of falsehoods and nonsense based on the manipulation of historical evidence."<sup>34</sup> On these grounds, García Sanjuán dramatically concludes, "if there were in Spain a truly serious, rigorous agency of research, it would exclude those who get involved in such anti-scientific behavior from academic circles and relegate them to one that better suits such enthusiasts of esotericism."<sup>35</sup> This suggestion that, in a perfect world, González Ferrín would "lose his license" smacks of a different kind of negationism, the kind that squelches dialogue by disparaging idiosyncratic ideas and dismissing their advocates as "seudohistoriadores" or "aficionados al esoterismo."

There are more effective—and professional—ways of challenging an opposing thesis, even a rather outlandish one like negationism. The best book reviews begin with a concise and fair summary of the book in question, one that resists every temptation to judge the book before that summary is complete. The reason for erecting this "fire wall" between summary and evaluation is so that the reader of the review—who typically has not read the book—can begin to appreciate what the author was trying to do before the reviewer reveals how he fell short. A good rule of thumb for writing such a summary is to imagine that the author of the book in question will have to sign off on the summary as a fair précis of his work. García Sanjuán's *La conquista islámica* is not a book review, at least not explicitly. Still I cannot help but think that its author would have accomplished his stated goals more effectively if it had at the outset provided fair summaries of Olagüe's and González Ferrín's books, written as if each of them would have to grant his *nihil obstat* before it went to press.

This simple exercise would without a doubt have led García Sanjuán down a much more promising path than the one he actually took. For one thing, it would have forced him to describe negationism from the perspective of the negationists, and that would have compelled him to admit that for all of its "eccentricities," negationism is not simply a figment of Olagüe's or González Ferrín's imagination; it is—despite its obvious shortcomings—an interpretation of the past that, like all interpretations of the past, attempts to account for the evidence. In the case of early medieval Spanish history, the evidentiary record is a spotty one, to say the least. Hence every modern historian of Spain is forced to confront not only the paucity of sources from the early eighth century, but the tendency of ninth-century (and later) historians to "retroject" (that is, to project backwards) their political agendas onto the events of that era. One could certainly argue, as García Sanjuán does, that the negationist point of departure—with its radically skeptical approach to the sources—is too "pessimistic;" that it throws out the baby with the bathwater. But one should not do so without acknowledging that the opposite tendency—that is, taking medieval historians at their word—has had a much more negative effect on Spanish historical scholarship for a much longer time. Regardless of whether any given historian of medieval Spain believes there was a conquest or not, he must come up with a *convincing* explanations for the suddenness with which the Visigothic kingdom disappeared, the speed with which Arabs and Berbers established their authority over much of the peninsula, the willingness which which Iberian Christians accepted the terms of capitulation

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<sup>33</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 252.

<sup>35</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, pp. 252-253.

offered to them, the tardiness with which Christians responded to the religious identity of the new regime, and the astonishing fact that al-Andalus came to be Islamized and Arabized despite the fact that the Muslims and Arabs were so vastly outnumbered by the native population. Here I emphasize the word “convincing” because despite aspiring to scientific rigor, the modern historian knows he has not “proved” anything until he has “convinced” his reader that his particular explanation makes the most sense out of the data. In this regard the historian is actually more like a trial lawyer than a laboratory scientist. In the end the accused is convicted or acquitted not because the lawyer established what actually happened that night, but because in his closing argument he *told the most convincing story about* what happened that night, a story that the jury found more compelling than that of the opposing lawyer. In this sense history remains true to its roots; the Romans considered it a subfield of rhetoric, useful primarily for providing examples to strengthen a rhetorician’s argument. Despite the many advances made in the study of history, its practice is still predicated on heavy doses of “convincing.” Getting back to the point, every historical interpretation—not just negationist ones—should come with a *caveat emptor*: very few conclusions are in fact conclusive.

Had García Sanjuán begun with a fair summary of the negationist positions that he intended to counter, he would likely have avoided conflating Olagüe’s and González Ferrín’s theses. As tempting as it must have been to damn the Arabist by association with the “Basque pseudohistorian,” the fact of the matter is that González Ferrín’s “reprise” of Olagüe’s thesis is selective. It may come as a surprise to the reader of García Sanjuán’s book, but Olagüe’s name is actually mentioned on only ten different pages of the 583 that make up *Historia general de Al Ándalus*. González Ferrín credits Olagüe with a number of specific insights that he admits won him over, particularly those that relate to the slow evolution of Islam out of a pan-unitarian reaction against trinitarian orthodoxy, not only in Spain but in the east. “We share [Olagüe’s] illuminating theory about Islam as a profession of faith that emerged within a context of sincere opposition to trinitarian Christian dogmatism. It involved a religion enlightened by a distinct revelation—a Qur’anic one—but one that grew out of a confrontation between unitarians—the inefable *hanifs* of the Qur’an, plus a fusion of Jews, neo-Muslims, and non-dogmatic Christians [who followed] Nestorianism, Arianism, Donatism, Priscillianism . . . —and trinitarians, the Council of Nicea, a Christian dogmatism imposed by force of arms on the above-mentioned heresies.”<sup>36</sup> Inspired by Olagüe, González Ferrín came to see the history of the Islamification of al-Andalus as a microcosm of this broader, southern and eastern Mediterranean development. Islam “did not install itself by means of a raid. No; the Islamic in *Hispania* followed from the earlier fusion [of unitarian groups] and from the subsequent migration movements that characterized the difficult eighth century, just as it did in most of the corners of the so-called Islamic sphere.”<sup>37</sup> Adopting Olagüe’s terminology and timeline, González Ferrín writes: “from this ‘post-Arian environment,’ pre-Islam was achieved throughout North Africa and Hispania. It had to do with a process that began in the middle of the seventh century—in the 650s—and was concluded two centuries later—in 850.”<sup>38</sup> Like Olagüe, González Ferrín attributes the popular notion that Spain fell victim to a Muslim invasion in 711 to a historiographical sleight of hand. Traditional Catholic historians simply could not bear the thought that Islam might have sprouted more or less naturally from Spanish soil. That explains what González Ferrín identifies as a “strange Christian-Nicean shame that wants to hide all of this natural heterodoxy by means of classic *ex post facto* interpretations of history. From this perspective, it was preferable to be conquered by a miraculous cavalry proceeding from the desert than to recognize the existence of such dissidence in the heart of Christianity.”<sup>39</sup>

When one considers what González Ferrín actually distilled from Olagüe’s thesis, it turns out to be much less idiosyncratic than García Sanjuán would have us believe. First of all, we know that prior to the emergence of Islam, the Christian world in the east was hopelessly fractured. Angry theological debates

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<sup>36</sup> Emilio González Ferrín, *History general de Al Ándalus: Europa entre Oriente y Occidente* (Córdoba: Almuzara, 2006), p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

swirling around the relationship between Christ's divinity and his humanity became convenient rallying points for disaffected Christians who resented Byzantine imperial rule. Most historians of the initial Arab expansion agree that the collapse of imperial hegemony in the face of caliph Umar (634-644) had at least as much to do with the willingness of Syrian and Egyptian Christians to come to terms with the followers of Muhammad as with Arab military power. If one were to consider the "conquest of Spain" in 711 through the same global lens, it might be tempting to posit a similar groundswell of political resentment expressed in religious terms and aimed at the Visigothic regime, and then use that imagined groundswell to explain why the Muslim invaders met so little local resistance in Spain. Secondly, historians of Islam have, since the early 1970s, questioned the extent to which the Muslim conquests in the east were really conducted by full-fledged Muslims. Most recently Fred M. Donner, a moderate voice in this academic debate, distinguished between the "Believers," radical monotheists (including some Jews and Christians) who gathered around Muhammad and fought for Umar, and the actual "Muslims" of Abd al-Malik's (685-705) time, who maintained clear confessional boundaries between themselves and their Abrahamic neighbors.<sup>40</sup> González Ferrín is clearly imagining a similar distinction when he speaks of proto-Muslims at the time of the "conquest" and fully-fledged ones in the mid-ninth century. *Nota bene*: I am not suggesting that this is the most reasonable interpretation of 711 based on the evidence that we have. I am simply pointing out that there is a logic to González Ferrín's negationism that is grounded in more than some *andalucista* "myth." As problematic a thesis as it is, one could (and for the sake of fairness one probably should) argue that negationism is reminiscent of theories about the "rise of Islam" advanced by historians whose reputations are beyond reproach.

Had García Sanjuán offered this kind of fair summary of the negationist theses of Olagüe and González Ferrín, he might then have been inspired to consider in detail the very different—and highly fascinating—intellectual and cultural contexts within which their theories developed. Though he does locate Olagüe's negationism within Spanish *nacionalismo*, he does so primarily to discredit it by association with fascism.<sup>41</sup> In the case of González Ferrín, the reader of this book is provided with very little information about the *andalucista* movement and the influence that it might have on his scholarship. Instead García Sanjuán applies himself to "exposing" the "perfectly defined ideological project" that connects the owner of Plurabelle (the Córdoba press that reprinted Olagüe's book in 2004) and the owner of Almuzara (the Córdoba press that published González Ferrín's book in 2006). To me García Sanjuán missed a real opportunity here, especially for someone seeking to categorize negationism as a myth. If, as García Sanjuán correctly observes, historical myths are grounded in the sociology of collective memory more than in the actual historical record, and if "society creates [myths] because it needs them,"<sup>42</sup> why not take the time to define the community—in particular the *andalucista* one—that "needs" the myth of negationism? Lisa Abend's work on the New Muslims and their "romantic" vision of Andalusian history, and Hishaam D. Aidi's fascinating study of Spain's own "clash of civilizations" in the wake of the Atocha bombings are models for how to consider historical myths within their communal contexts.<sup>43</sup> Here I believe that García Sanjuán's own narrow sense of history as "science" gets in his way. There is no question that a big part of any historian's task is to assemble and interpret evidence the way a scientist would. But another important part is to appreciate how the narratives that historians use to "encode" their data reflect pre-existing patterns in their own minds.<sup>44</sup> When we, historians acknowledge that, even the most idiosyncratic interpretations of the past become worthy of study, if only as culturally determined "artifacts."

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<sup>40</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Harvard, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Here he relies on the final section of Maribel Fierro's illuminating, "Al Andalus en el pensamieto fascista español," pp. 336-347.

<sup>42</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 25

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Abend, "Spain's New Muslims: A Historical Romance," in Simon Doubleday and David Coleman, eds., *In Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2008), pp. 133-156; and Hishaam D. Aidi, "The Interference of al-Andalus: Spain, Islam, and the West," *Social Text* 87 (2006), pp. 66-88.

<sup>44</sup> Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Johns Hopkins, 1978), pp. 81-100.

Finally, had García Sanjuán offered preliminary summaries of the negationist theses and contextualized them so that his reader could appreciate what motivated Olagüe and González Ferrín to endorse them, he would have been in a much better position to go back over all of the evidence and to show how, *on balance*, the more traditional understanding of the conquest, Islamization, and Arabization of al-Andalus is more consistent with the actual data. Here the numismatic evidence is particularly compelling because—as García Sanjuán shows—it not only testifies to a change in government but establishes that the new regime was both Arabic and Muslim in its self-conception. Almost as damning for the negationists is the deafening silence of the records regarding the continued existence of Arian Christians in Spain after 589. In the absence of such evidence, hypothesizing the existence of some grand coalition of unitarians in the south struggling against the trinitarians of the north violates the “Occam’s razor” of historical interpretation: all other things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the most correct one. But it should be noted that demonstrating how negationism falls short *on balance* does not mean that *every* aspect of the thesis must be discounted. And this is a good thing, because there are elements of negationism that simply make more sense out of the evidence; for instance, the speed of the conquest and the apparent willingness on the part of Spanish Christian to come to terms with the new regime. Just as with the conquests in the east, it is awfully hard to imagine a small Arab force making the kind of headway that it did if the local inhabitants had sensed that their lives—or even their ways of life—were at risk. This simple observation strongly suggests to me that the Islamic conquests, east and west, were conquests with a very small “c;” no doubt there was a change of regime, but it was effected by a pragmatic and strategic balance between the threat of force and the offering of attractive terms. Unfortunately rather than give the negationists some credit for getting this one right (more or less), García Sanjuán sets out to prove that the conquest of 711 was indeed a violent one.<sup>45</sup> In the end, his argument comes across as forced (his opponents might even say *tergiversado*); at the very least, *redolet lucernam*, as the Romans used to say. And that is not the impression that a historian driven by “science” wants to leave, because he risks putting himself in the same epistemological category as the negationists whom he accuses of *apriorismo*, “the subordination of historical knowledge to pre-existing ideological premises.”<sup>46</sup> It is precisely this author’s single-minded determination to discount every aspect of the negationist thesis and to discredit its proponents that tarnishes the image he is trying to project, that of a certified practitioner of the science of history doing battle against ideologically-driven purveyors of myth.

Looking back over the work as a whole, I find myself wondering why, when the entire body of the book is dedicated to exposing and countering *negacionismo*, the author bothers to begin with forty-pages of criticism directed at *catastrofismo*. If I were inclined to give García Sanjuán the benefit of the doubt, I would say that he includes it because he wants to show that, as a “scientific historian,” has declared war against all myths, old ones as well as new ones. But given the undisguised and unmeasured disdain that the author reserves for negationism, it seems more likely that his decision to take on the “straw man” of *catastrofismo* was a strategic one, designed to deflect any countercharge that he himself—wed as he is to the idea of a violent conquest—is motivated by ideological considerations (¿neo-catastrofismo?).<sup>47</sup> By attacking both myths, one to the right and one to the left, García Sanjuán rhetorically positions his own critique of negationism as if it were coming from the “myth-free” center between two ideological extremes. But is his own stance all that different from the *catastrofista* one that he dismisses at the outset of the book? On the one hand, he rejects the affective, sentimental language of the *catastrofistas*, calling for the elimination of both “invasion” and “reconquista” on the grounds that both suggest it was Spain’s destiny to be Christian. On the other, he actually proposes the use of “conquest” as if it were a neutral

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<sup>45</sup> Fred M. Donner argues persuasively that it was in the interests of both Christian and Muslim observers to describe the conquests as more violent than they actually were. “Visions of the Early Islamic Expansion: Between the Heroic and the Horrific,” in Nadia Maria El Cheikh and Shaun O’Sullivan, eds., *Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria* (American University of Beirut and University of Balamand, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica*, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> In a recent response to the criticism elicited by his book, González Ferrín explicitly accuses his detractors of being guided more by ideology than science. Emilio González Ferrín, “Al Ándalus: Europe entre Oriente y Occidente,” in *Judaísmo, cristianismo e islam; tres religiones en diálogo* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2010), p. 196.

term for referring to what happened in 711, despite the fact that the negationists, against whom the book is directed, reject “conquest” by definition! If García Sanjuán had truly subscribed to the three defining “tasks” that he associates with the historical profession—the production of historical knowledge, its transmission to society, and its preservation from distortion and manipulation—he would have begun, not by declaring his allegiance to the idea of “conquest,” but by an act of diplomacy, setting aside—for the sake of argument—what turns out to be a highly divisive term, and asking (without trying to label anything) what actually happened in 711. This would have been a much more effective way of guiding his reader to the inevitable conclusion that 711 witnessed some kind of regime change that involved real Muslims, that this change was not widely contested by the native inhabitants, and that this change was the first step toward a linguistic and religious transformation of the greater part of Spain.