

The Life and Death of an Historiographical Folly: The Early Medieval Depopulation and Repopulation of the Duero Basin

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One must always remember that, even if interpretations have moved on, traditionalist archaeological views were very often based upon knowledge of the material evidence that was and is second to none.¹

1 National Histories and Historical Labels

All European historiographies are marked by one kind of cliché or another. Some of these clichés are so powerful that they dominate not only the national 'grand narratives' familiar to the general public, but also the perceptions of specialists, who are often just as ready to repeat inherited paradigms rather than subject them to criticism. Medieval Spain is no exception. Depending on their specific interests, many historians find themselves marooned in 'Convivencia Country' or 'Frontier Country', or, quintessentially, 'Reconquista Country'. Such clichés often go far back in time (although often not as far as their proponents suggest), and the reason for their entrenchment and endurance is that between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they became key components of the collective identity promoted by the nation-state, especially after History earned recognition as a formal academic discipline in the later nineteenth century. This 'canonization' fosters a tendency towards the formation of 'tags' or 'watchwords', used so as to trigger associations between discrete historical phenomena and an overarching narrative to which such phenomena are said to belong. For that reason, when it comes to criticizing or rejecting a 'grand narrative', it is unhelpful to do so by critically redefining its labels. In any given study, no matter how many pages are devoted to clarifying the term *Reconquista*, the mere appearance of the word will have a considerable impact upon the audience, evoking the network of meanings with which it is unconsciously associated, hindering any further attempt to alter it. For the same reason, we shall argue here that no matter how alive we are to the need for nuance,

1 G. Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur* (Oxford, 2013), 108.

to describe the settlement patterns of central Iberia in the Middle Ages by deploying the terms ‘depopulation’ and ‘repopulation’ does nothing but buttress and strengthen Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz’s general theories about the history of Spain, further consolidating their ideological potency.

This chapter will briefly review the origins of the depopulation theory and try to explain how it was formed, why it became so successful and how it produced its devastating effects upon the development of Spanish medievalism. But above all, this chapter is an appeal to medievalists: it implores them not only to bury once and for all a theory that is long since deceased, but also to dispense forever with the distorting vocabulary that supports and facilitates its persistence, even if this vocabulary is already becoming marginal in academia (if not in publications for the general public, where scholarly advances and developments are adopted piecemeal and often with considerable delay).

Before proceeding any further, however, it must be noted – in light of the quotation from Guy Halsall with which this chapter opens – that it is important, as well as fair, to remember that in the eyes of the modern historian, the figure of Sánchez-Albornoz has two radically different faces. On the one hand, the vast majority of his work reveals a historian of great stature, possessed of excellent knowledge of Spanish and European history, expertise in modern and ancient languages, a mastery of the textual sources, especially legal and narrative texts, and an unrivalled command of analytical techniques. His many pages devoted to the critical study of documents and chronicles continue to impress by the clarity of their vision and the complexity of their arguments. His knowledge of medieval law and institutions could successfully challenge that of any current scholar in the field. The way he incorporated the Arabic sources into his heuristic armoury also marked a turning point in Spanish medievalism.

But then there is the other Sánchez-Albornoz, the one that emerges from his most ambitious works on the Spanish Middle Ages or the history of Spain as a whole, culminating with his hefty *España, un Enigma Histórico*.² Beyond its aggressive, polemical tone (Sánchez-Albornoz wrote this work as a counterblast to the rather literary and somewhat idyllic vision of medieval Spain

² C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico*, 2 vols (Buenos Aires, 1957) repr. Barcelona, 1985. On Sánchez-Albornoz’s personality and thought, see R. Pastor, ‘Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, historiador, maestro y militante’, in *eadem* (ed.), *Sánchez-Albornoz a debate. Homenaje de la Universidad de Valladolid con motivo de su centenario* (Valladolid, 1993), 9–19; *eadem*, ‘El problema del feudalismo hispánico en la obra de Sánchez-Albornoz’, in *En torno al feudalismo hispánico. I Congreso de Estudios Medievales* (León, 1989), 9–19; *eadem*, ‘El feudalismo en la obra de Sánchez-Albornoz y las interpretaciones actuales’, in *Giornata Lincea per il centenario della nascita di Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz* (Rome, 1995), 19–30.

conjured by Américo Castro), the most striking aspect of his *magnum opus* is actually its very idiosyncratic view of history.³ Sánchez-Albornoz personalized Spain, treating it as a quasi-living historical subject, endowed with a ‘personality’ forged through the centuries which had acquired its main features through two interrelated processes: reconquest and repopulation. Concerns about the meaning and essence of Spain were common among intellectuals of Sánchez-Albornoz’s generation, such as José María Hinojosa, Rafael Altamira, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, or Castro himself, who shared the ‘regenerationist’ agenda of Spanish *noventayochismo*.⁴ The lack of a strong, unified Spanish identity of the French or American sort, in conjunction with the tangled web of atavisms that continued to find expression in Spanish politics during the formation of the nation state at the end of Spain’s troubled nineteenth century, provoked an extraordinary series of meta-historical essays about the essence of Spain. It was during the nineteenth century that the concept of *Reconquista* emerged in Spanish historiography, first to challenge and then to replace the traditional term of ‘restoration’, a term more faithful to the idea propounded by the Asturian monarchy itself.⁵

The contribution of Sánchez-Albornoz in this respect was crucial. It helped to consolidate a vision of the Spanish nation based upon the identification of Spain with Castile. This region had been the principal agent in the formation of the Spanish nation, and following this logic, its decline led to the crisis of national identity that marked the intellectual ambience of Sánchez-Albornoz’s youth. Equally significant was the idea that there exists a ‘collective spirit’ in Spain – which Sánchez-Albornoz often calls ‘race’ – which developed over the centuries and determined the essence of ‘Spanishness’.⁶

If for the modern historian Sánchez-Albornoz’s scholarly studies continue to appear insightful, one should never forget that the more technical facet of his work is functionally subordinated to his ideological objectives. The second of these twin pillars of his work dominates and to some extent influences the first, to the point of imposing a very noticeable bias even on the empirical details of his work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the relationship between his concepts of depopulation and repopulation and the historical

3 A. Castro, *España en su historia: moros, judíos y cristianos* (Buenos Aires, 1948).

4 J. Portolés, *Medio siglo de filología española (1896–1952). Positivismo e idealismo* (Madrid, 1986).

5 M.F. Ríos Saloma, *La Reconquista. Una construcción historiográfica (siglos XVI–XIX)* (Madrid, 2011).

6 See an early example of this line of thought in Sánchez-Albornoz’s first lecture to the general public, in 1919, much later published as C. Sánchez-Albornoz, ‘Vindicación histórica de Castilla’, in his *Mis tres Primeros Estudios Históricos (Iniciación de una vocación)* (Valladolid, 1974), 101–42.

process that Sánchez-Albornoz considered 'key to the history of Spain': the *Reconquista*.⁷ As he put it himself, in typically strident prose: 'The depopulation of the Duero valley is the basis of my entire thesis on the institutional and human history of Castile and Spain.'⁸

2 Birth: From Herculano to Sánchez-Albornoz

To track when and how Sánchez-Albornoz's depopulation theory was formed is no easy task. His most programmatic work on this question, *Despoblación y Repoblación en el Valle del Duero*, published in 1966, was not a starting point, but rather a resolute statement of first principles, delivered – no doubt – with an accompanying fist on the table, in typical Sánchez-Albornoz style. The book's aim was to establish the theory's validity and forever silence the voices of those who were reluctant to accept it, particularly Menéndez Pidal.⁹ The theory was already well known to specialists because Sánchez-Albornoz had been using it as an argument for decades, and was happy to admit as much, stating that 'I have defended many times since 1924 the reality of that emptying'.¹⁰ With these words Sánchez-Albornoz was probably alluding to his first major work, *Orígenes de la nación española*, for which he won the Covadonga Award. This extensive monograph – a turning point in the academic career of its author – remained unpublished for nearly fifty years, and when it finally appeared it was with so many changes that, in the absence of first-hand research by scholars on the manuscript that was originally submitted, it is difficult to know which parts are original and which the result of subsequent revisions.¹¹ In fact, *Orígenes* has much in common with the later *España, un*

7 Sánchez-Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico*, *passim*.

8 'La despoblación del valle del Duero es base de todas mis tesis sobre la historia institucional y vital de Castilla y de España' [translation our own], which appears in C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *Despoblación y Repoblación en el Valle del Duero* (Buenos Aires, 1966). See also, J.Á. García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Sánchez-Albornoz y la repoblación del Valle del Duero', in Pastor, *Sánchez-Albornoz a debate*, 33–44.

9 R. Menéndez Pidal, 'Repoblación y tradición en la Cuenca del Duero', in *Enciclopedia Lingüística Hispánica* (Madrid, 1960) vol. 1, xxix–lvii.

10 Sánchez-Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico*, vol. 2, 17.

11 In the introduction to his *Orígenes de la nación española. Estudios críticos sobre la Historia del reino de Asturias*, 3 vols (Oviedo, 1972–1975), Sánchez-Albornoz made very interesting remarks on the importance of this award and how he was hastily 'encouraged' to compete. The same introduction reveals that the original text was provisional and that immediately after the award the author began making changes to a publication that would not see the light of day for half a century.

enigma histórico and *Despoblación y Repoblación*, so it is probably a misleading guide to Sánchez-Albornoz's early thinking.¹²

This being the case, it would only be possible to reconstruct the evolution of the 'depopulation' theory by means of a detailed dissection of his publications prior to *España, un enigma histórico*, and perhaps even his 1913 PhD thesis, a task beyond the scope of this essay.¹³ It should be noted, however, that several of his works on other, oftentimes seemingly unrelated issues, play an instrumental role in supporting the general theory of depopulation; examples include his study of the end of the Roman city, his analysis of the Asturian chronicles and Arabic sources, and his hypothesis regarding the existence of a lost eighth-century Asturian chronicle, apparently the basis for the late ninth-century historiographical cycle of chronicles.¹⁴

The first systematic and comprehensive formulation of the theory appears in *España, un enigma histórico*, which already contained a section on the 'Depopulation of the Duero valley' (vol. 2, 16–33) and another on 'Repopulation and repopulators' (vol. 2, 33–44). It was those pages that Menéndez Pidal criticized in 1960, which in turn persuaded Sánchez-Albornoz to prepare a meticulous argument with which to counter his former mentor. In his extensive 1966 study, *Despoblación y Repoblación*, Sánchez-Albornoz also discussed the theory's pedigree, claiming that his own role had merely been to refine and perfect an idea whose paternity he credited to Alexandre Herculano and Louis Barrau-Dihigo, two authors whose works he had critically scrutinized down to every detail.¹⁵ The reason why, in the writings of those two authors, the depopulation theory barely had any impact, while in Sánchez-Albornoz's work it grew into an almost untouchable orthodoxy, depends, in our opinion, not so much upon the theory's validity as upon its significance in the whole Albornocian canon, as we shall argue later. Both Herculano and Barrau-Dihigo deemed the depopulation of the Duero region to have been the result of a conscious

12 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 223–37.

13 Similar problems are highlighted by García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Sánchez-Albornoz y la repoblación'.

14 C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *Ruina y extinción del municipio romano en España e instituciones que lo reemplazan* (Buenos Aires, 1943); *idem*, *En torno a los orígenes del feudalismo, II: Los árabes y el régimen prefeudal carolingio. Fuentes de la historia hispanomusulmana del siglo VIII* (Mendoza, 1942); *idem*, *El Ajbar Maymu'a. Problemas historiográficos que suscita* (Buenos Aires, 1944); *idem*, '¿Una crónica asturiana perdida?', *Revista de Filología Hispánica* 7 (1945), 105–46.

15 *idem*, *Despoblación y Repoblación*, 9; A. Herculano de Carvalho e Araujo, *Historia de Portugal (desde o começo da monarchia até o fim do reinado de Affonso III)* (Lisbon, 1875); L. Barrau-Dihigo, 'Recherches sur l'histoire politique du royaume asturien (718–910)', *Revue Hispanique* 52 (1921), 1–360.

strategic decision by Alfonso I, the aim being to create a defensive buffer zone between the kingdom of Asturias and Al-Andalus. Looming large in the work of both authors is the idea that from the very beginning of the Islamic invasion the fight against the Muslims had been the main occupation of the Christian rulers of the north. The improbability of the notion that an eighth-century king could oversee the depopulation of a vast area of some 90,000 km², primarily to protect his much smaller highland realm, posed no challenge to that vision.

For Sánchez-Albornoz it was not as important to present Alfonso I's raids as a purposeful strategy as it was to state a sharp discontinuity between the Roman and Visigothic past and the kingdom of Asturias, thereby highlighting repopulation as a national enterprise, which, along with the fight against Islam, shaped the institutions and the character of the Spanish Middle Ages. The link to the Visigothic period was institutional, cultural and religious, but there was no straightforward continuity in terms of settlement, population, or economic and social structures. By sweeping to one side the plateau's pre-medieval past, the Asturian period could be presented as the territorial projection of a strong monarchy – a monarchy capable of creating *ex nihilo* a group of landowning peasants free from feudal bonds. Created during the same process was a military aristocracy of Gothic origins, controlled by a king whose own authority lay in the enduring Visigothic legal tradition.

To this end Sánchez-Albornoz developed the complex argument that Alfonso I's raids would not have caused the demographic emptying of the plateau, but would have merely delivered the final blow to a region already badly damaged by a long-term process of population loss, starting in Late Antiquity. In support of this idea he collected all possible indications of military and demographic disasters, such as the third- to fifth-century invasions, or the fifth- and sixth-century plagues, and blamed them for both the destruction of the territorial pattern based upon Roman *municipia*, and the dismantling of the rural settlement network, in spite of the impossibility of measuring their actual impact.¹⁶ He stretched to the limit the scarce archaeological evidence available at the time to paint a picture of the total disruption of the Roman settlement network, emphasizing the abandonment of cities and *uici*, the failure to maintain the road network, and the disappearance of many place-names, even for major centres. Archaeology can considerably refine that image today, but there is no doubt that territorial structures in the Duero region underwent a dramatic fragmentation, both in urban and rural areas. However, the same process seems to have affected other areas of the central plateau in the

16 Sánchez-Albornoz, *Despoblación y Repoblación*, 138–48.

fifth century for which it is not possible to identify a radical demographic weakening.

Sánchez-Albornoz attributed similar effects to the Visigothic invasion, which, in accordance with interpretations in vogue when he was writing, he associated with the so-called 'Visigothic cemeteries' and the idea of a 'popular settlement' of free Visigothic peasant groups on the Duero plateau. Such realities, for Sánchez-Albornoz, did not cause an increase in population, but actually provoked even greater depopulation, by putting to flight many of the people who remained in the region: 'an inflow of young blood would have indeed increased the population density in the country, had that settlement in turn not diminished the population in the plateau, undoubtedly forcing many of its former inhabitants to migrate in view of their full occupation of the country and the destruction that their progress would produce'.¹⁷ Sánchez-Albornoz mined the textual evidence assiduously, especially that which described the plagues, droughts and famines that hit the Duero region throughout the sixth and seventh centuries. However, the passages he quotes from the *Chronica Caesaraugustana* or Gregory of Tours relate either to the entire peninsula or to areas outside the Duero region, but Sánchez-Albornoz extrapolated creatively from these texts, proposing that such disasters had a devastating impact in the Duero region, even if these same disasters would not have had the same effect in other areas of Hispania.¹⁸

The story indeed dovetails with the Islamic invasion of 711 (which would have prompted massive migration of natives to the northern mountains), Berber settlement in the Duero basin, and the subsequent withdrawal of these settlers after the famines and revolts of the 740s. Thus Sánchez-Albornoz managed to set out an argument for profound demographic decline even before Alfonso I initiated the sweeping raids that did away with what little was left of the urban network, leading to demographic desertification and, incidentally, a significant increase in population in the Cantabrian north, as a result of the massive influx of refugees from the plateau. Sánchez-Albornoz also introduced nuances, claiming, for instance, that not all of the plateau would have been totally depopulated, what with native groups surviving in remote areas, especially south of the Duero; the essential notion underpinning the above, however, was to propose a complete disorganization of the region, which saw itself

17 *Ibid.*, 146: 'Un juvenil torrente sanguíneo habría en verdad aumentado la densidad demográfica del país si ese asentamiento no hubiese a su vez mermado la población de la meseta forzando, sin duda, a emigrar a muchos de sus antiguos habitantes: ante su ocupación integral del país y por los destrozos que en su avanzar producirían'.

18 *Ibid.*, 146–48.

turned into a 'no man's land' interposed between Al-Andalus and the Asturian realm. This rupture would have affected not only the territories of the Duero, but also southern Galicia and northern Portugal, between the rivers Miño and Limia. The survival of the population in northern Galicia, however, would have facilitated the continuity of Visigothic 'proto-feudal' political and social structures, in stark contrast to the Castilian world of small freeholders that would ultimately define the characteristic social landscape of the Central Middle Ages.

As far as sources are concerned, Sánchez-Albornoz put to use a truly overwhelming amount of data, including narrative texts (both Latin and Arabic), charters, inscriptions, archaeology and place-names – this latter a subject to which he devoted considerable time, since Menéndez Pidal's objections of 1960 leant especially on toponymical data. However, a critical reading immediately reveals that the strength of his argument rests primarily on two pillars: first, the discourse of the late ninth-century Asturian chronicles, which describe very explicitly how Alfonso I fell upon the region, killing Muslim settlers and taking Christians to the north; second, the relatively numerous diplomas from the reign of Alfonso III (866–910), which describe the Asturian monarchy's expansion over the plateau in terms of the occupation and repopulation of a deserted space. All other evidence has the function of reinforcing or confirming what those two pillars of the Albornocian thesis are said to prove, or of providing parallel arguments with which to demonstrate their validity. Sánchez-Albornoz also offered relentless criticism of those who, like Barrau-Dihigo, questioned the diplomatic authenticity of the documents on which he based his thesis.

3 **The Making of an Orthodoxy**

Sánchez-Albornoz's training in the German historicist school is evident in his careful analysis of texts, in the predominant role he assigns to law and institutions, and in his choice of the nation as the paramount object of study, although he conceded that great political actors were figureheads in moments of collective action. However, his political ideology and experience are equally important in explaining the trajectory of his historical writing. Throughout the 1930s he enjoyed a hugely successful academic career which led him to assume the directorship of the History Department of the Instituto de Estudios Medievales at the Centro de Estudios Históricos, and, in 1932, the position of Rector of the Universidad Central de Madrid. In addition, he was elected to the Parliament of the Second Spanish Republic, serving in Manuel Azaña's

Acción Republicana party between 1931 and 1936, and he even served briefly as Minister of State in 1933. Coming from a family of Ávila livestock breeders, his political ideals were those of classic conservative liberalism. A strong defender of private property, for Sánchez-Albornoz the principal agents of Spanish history were not the industrial bourgeoisie, but rather the small- and mid-scale landowning farmers from the Castile and León region. In his view, large numbers of peasant proprietors and ranchers, created in the process of the medieval repopulation, were the true originators of the Spanish nation, the unity of which he defended with characteristic zeal from the burgeoning peripheral nationalisms – notably in the Catalan and Basque regions – of his time. His parliamentary speeches, typified by one famous effort of 1932 which addressed the pressing issue of agrarian reform, contain an interesting hybridization of contemporary politics and medieval scholarship.¹⁹

Involvement in the politics of the Second Republic obliged Sánchez-Albornoz to enter into exile at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and finally to settle in Argentina at the end of 1940. From there, his writings continued to reach – with many restrictions at first – Spanish historians, among whom he enjoyed great prestige despite the political demonization he suffered.²⁰ It was then that the idea of the depopulation of the Duero basin, a fragmentary component of many of those articles, became familiar and took root in the vocabulary of specialists. What is more, while in this embryonic form, it rarely encountered opposition. Only after the first systematic formulation, in *España, un enigma histórico*, did Menéndez Pidal publish the objections that triggered Sánchez-Albornoz's bitter reply in 1966. But by then the theory had been widely accepted and many authors – whether favouring or opposing Franco's regime – already interpreted the Iberian early Middle Ages in terms of 'reconquest and repopulation', if not 'depopulation and repopulation', and not only in the Duero basin, but all over the peninsula.²¹ From the 1950s the depopulation theory became commonplace in Spanish historiography, although few delved critically into Sánchez-Albornoz's arguments. Most scholars thought – rather uncritically – that Sánchez-Albornoz's arguments rested upon empirically demonstrated fact, and so they shaped their own research in response to what was in fact already an historiographical cliché. As a result, the theory snowballed into an unshakable orthodoxy that lasted well

19 J.L. Martín Rodríguez, 'Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz ante la reforma agraria', *Anuario de Historia del Derecho Español* 63–64 (1993–1994), 1123–34.

20 Pastor, 'Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, historiador, maestro y militante'. See more generally J.L. Barona Vilar (ed.), *El exilio científico republicano* (Valencia, 2011).

21 See, for instance, the proceedings of the colloquium *La reconquista española y la repoblación del país* (Zaragoza, 1951).

into the 1970s.²² Moreover, Sánchez-Albornoz's nuanced arguments, and the detailed knowledge of the sources he deployed, were bypassed by most authors, who not only failed to elaborate or build upon them, but even simplified and exaggerated his views, producing more or less cartoonish versions that would have appalled Sánchez-Albornoz himself. For example, Herculaño's belief – rejected by Sánchez-Albornoz – that depopulation was a strategic move designed to create a defensive buffer against Al-Andalus became constantly repeated. Why so? Perhaps because for most people a simplistic explanation of an historical and political nature was more palatable than complex Malthusian arguments.

One of the most interesting aspects of the dispersion of the depopulation theory was the way it spread beyond the northern plateau. Sánchez-Albornoz had formulated a general theory for the whole Duero basin – more than 90,000 km² – while recognizing that human groups could have survived in specific areas. But the general idea was undoubtedly convenient for a legion of local historians who addressed the analysis of much smaller areas, even localities, starting from the first principle that, as their respective localities had been uninhabited, it was therefore pointless to deal with awkward issues of continuity and change: the distant Roman and Visigothic past had nothing to do with early medieval settlement. The never-ending repetition of the argument at the local level served to establish a widespread unanimity with regards to the new orthodoxy. In the long run, this in turn had an impact upon the theory itself: consider, for example, that Julio González's work on repopulation reinforced the axiom of the eighth-century depopulation, but also defined a whole new way of working in historical geography regardless of any connection to the pre-medieval past. This work, moreover, had the 'value' of expanding the same approach to the southern plains of present-day Extremadura and Castilla-La Mancha.²³ Moreover, Sánchez-Albornoz's model also spread to other areas, such as the Spanish March, that is, the Catalan counties under Carolingian rule. Thus, the devastation of the plains of Vic after Aizón's revolt in 827 was used by Ramon d'Abadal to enhance the figure of Count Wifred the Hairy (Guifré lo Pilòs). According to this view, Wifred unified some of the counties, exercising a political hegemony over the area, and, above all, took decisive steps towards building a separate sovereign power against the backdrop of

22 S. de Moxó, *Repoblación y sociedad en la España cristiana medieval* (Madrid, 1979).

23 See, for instance, J. González González, 'Repoblación de la Extremadura leonesa', *Hispania* 12 (1943), 195–273; *idem*, 'Reconquista y repoblación de Castilla, León, Extremadura y Andalucía (siglos XI al XIII)', in *La reconquista española y la repoblación del país*, 163–206; *idem*, 'La Extremadura castellana al mediar el siglo XIII', *Hispania* 34 (1974), 265–424; *idem*, *Repoblación de Castilla la Nueva* (Madrid, 1975–76).

Carolingian crisis. The repopulation carried out in the late ninth century would mark the strength of this new power, by turning the lands south of the Llobregat River into a defensive buffer zone against Al-Andalus. Alfonso I now had a matching Catalan *alter ego*.²⁴

However, the success of the depopulation theory cannot be explained away by the intellectual apathy of those seeking an aprioristic interpretive shortcut that would spare them from having to deal with more complex issues. The real reason that Sánchez-Albornoz's theory gained such great acceptance was fundamentally ideological. The depopulation/repopulation thesis was nothing if not an apparently empirical cornerstone of a teleological conception of Spain's entire past: it was therefore, with not a little irony, perfectly primed to succeed in Franco's Spain. One of Sánchez-Albornoz's most interesting contradictions is precisely that despite his personal commitment to the Second Republic and his very explicit opposition in exile to Franco's dictatorship, his thinking as a medievalist, and more generally as an historian, was adopted by the academic and intellectual establishment of Franco's regime, especially after the publication of *España, un enigma histórico*. The obvious explanation for this is that after the initial phase of rampant fascism and the dissemination of the regime's official propaganda, what prevailed among the ruling classes of Franco's Spain was a traditional, Catholic, anti-Marxist ideology, fully compatible with Sánchez-Albornoz's own views. What indeed happened is that many of his ideas were replicated and exaggerated by the mediocre academic establishment of Francoism. A good example of the tension that this provoked can be seen in the way that the Benedictine abbot Fray Justo Pérez de Urbel, the Falange's 'official medievalist', who had a long history of personal animosity with Sánchez-Albornoz, nevertheless adopted most of his doctrines, blending them with his own epic delusions into a peculiar mix of methodological positivism and a decidedly providentialist philosophy of history.²⁵ It is equally interesting to note that the most authoritative voice to disagree with the depopulation theory was none other than that of Sánchez-Albornoz's mentor, Menéndez Pidal. This he did by focusing on arguments of an historical and, above all,

24 R. d'Abadal i de Vinyals, *Els primers comtes catalans* (Barcelona, 1958); and *idem*, *Dels visigots als catalans. Volum Primer. La Hispania visigòtica i la Catalunya carolíngia* (Barcelona, 1969).

25 On Pérez de Urbel, see I. Peiró Martín and G. Pasamar Alzuria, *Diccionario Akal de Historiadores Españoles Contemporáneos* (Madrid, 2002), 485–86. See also C. Estepa Díez, 'La Historia de Castilla y León en la Edad Media: perspectivas y realidades', in *Introducción a la Historia de Burgos en la Edad Media. I Jornadas Burgalesas de Historia* (Burgos, 1990), 31–66; *idem*, 'Las revistas de historia en España: el ejemplo de Hispania', *Revista de Historia, Jerónimo Zurita (La Historia en el Horizonte del Año 2000)* 71 (1997), 297–308.

linguistic nature, and expressing disagreement with the empirical foundations of Sánchez-Albornoz's ideas while accepting his overall vision of the national past, which was in turn fully compatible with his own.

That Sánchez-Albornoz's vision of Spain should triumph in the atmosphere of nationalist fervour of Francoism is not surprising. More shocking is that the depopulation thesis achieved comparable success among many foreign researchers, who in principle should have been less susceptible to the grand narrative of the Spanish nation-state (although it must be admitted that even in the 1960s Spain was hardly the easiest place for a foreigner to carry out first-hand archival research).²⁶ With regard to the international dissemination of the depopulation theory, the obvious first place to look is Portugal, an 'interested party' in the process. Although the idea of depopulation originated in Portuguese historiography, it never became a historiographical paradigm there, and it was in fact a relatively marginal idea. The paradox is even greater if we consider that much of the original Portuguese territorial heartland, the County of Portugal, lay within the Duero basin, and is the setting of some of the earliest evidence of the *presuras*.²⁷

The key to this difference between these two countries (which are, lest we forget, neighbours, albeit neighbours who seem to turn their backs on each other), is again ideological. Sánchez-Albornoz openly credited the idea of depopulation to the Portuguese historian Alexandre Herculano, even though he partially disagreed with his vision. A journalist and liberal politician who represented the Partido Cartista in parliament, Herculano published his first volume of the *História de Portugal* in 1846, with the idea of creating a national history. His ideological inclinations were therefore quite close to Sánchez-Albornoz's own and, like him, he was a prominent public figure. As the founder of the *Portugalíae Monumenta Historica* project, an attempt to follow in the footsteps of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Herculano combined two major influences: first, that of German historicism, and second, that of the French romantic historians like Guizot and Thierry, who understood national history as the history of ordinary people.²⁸

Unlike his twentieth-century successors, Herculano envisaged a distinct discontinuity between the Lusitanian pre-Roman world and the Roman period:

26 We thank Rob Portass for his comments in this respect.

27 A.M. de C. Lima, 'Povoamento e organização do território do Baixo Douro na época da monarquia asturiana', in F.J. Fernández Conde and C. García de Castro Valdés (eds), *Poder y Simbología en Europa. Siglos VIII-X* (Oviedo, 2009), 227–60.

28 J. Barradas de Carvalho, *As ideias políticas e sociais de Alexandre Herculano* (Lisbon, 1971); C. Beirante and J. Custódio, *Alexandre Herculano. Um homem e uma ideologia na construção de Portugal. Antologia* (Lisbon, 1978).

to wit, Portugal was a fully Romanized country whose character was forged amidst the struggles against the Muslims and crystallized in the formation of the Portuguese monarchy under Afonso Henriques (1139–85). Later criticism of Herculano's work by scholars like J.P. Oliveira Martins,²⁹ Alberto Sampaio,³⁰ Damião Peres,³¹ Torquato de Sousa Soares, or Avelino de Jesus da Costa,³² often offered a rejection of depopulation, proposing instead that the eighth century had seen an absence of government, but not the creation of a strategic desert. All of the aforementioned, and others like Pierre David³³ or Orlando Ribeiro,³⁴ based their criticism on a careful reassessment of the textual data, of precisely the sort that Sánchez-Albornoz was undertaking at the same time in order to defend the idea of depopulation.

If this did not triumph in Portugal, it was because the national imagination took a different course. The origins of Portugal were ever more commonly credited to the late Iron Age Lusitanian peoples who, under the leadership of Viriato, faced the Romans in the second century BC. A rupture in the eighth century would not only mean a crucial break in the connection between the contemporary Portuguese and their ancestors; it would also implicitly recognize that the depopulated north of Portugal had been repopulated by people from other, now Spanish, areas, and moreover, by the initiative of the kings of Asturias-León. Given the prominent role of anti-Castilian sentiment in the development of Portuguese identity since the seventeenth century, this was not an option. In Portugal the process of analysing the Middle Ages was tied up with the assertion of an identity of pre-Roman origins. While not all scholars necessarily shared this vision in its entirety, some certainly did,³⁵ and it was well-established by the time it received the backing of Salazar's Estado Novo, which emphasized the distinctiveness of both Lusitanian roots and the work of Afonso Henriques. Not until the democratization of Portugal in 1974 did new historiographical trends play down the pre-Roman identity and stress the

29 J.P. Oliveira Martins, *Alexandre Herculano* (Lisbon, 1967) on texts and letters exchanged by the author with Herculano in the second half of the nineteenth century.

30 A. Sampaio, *Estudos históricos e económicos. Vol. 1: As vilas do norte de Portugal*, 2 vols (Lisbon, 1899–1903; 2nd edn 1923).

31 D. Peres, *História de Portugal*, 9 vols (Barcelos, 1928–54). Criticism of depopulation appears in vol. 1, 437.

32 T. de S. Soares, 'O repovoamento do Norte de Portugal no século IX', *Biblos* 18 (1942), 5–26; *idem*, *O bispo D. Pedro e a organização da diocese de Braga* (Coimbra, 1959).

33 P. David, *Études historiques sur la Galice et le Portugal du VII^e au XII^e siècle* (Lisbon-Paris, 1947), 118–84.

34 O. Ribeiro, *Geografia de España y Portugal* (Barcelona, 1955).

35 T. de S. Soares, *Contribuição para o estudo das origens do povo português* (Luanda, 1970).

emergence of Portugal as another feudal monarchy.³⁶ In general terms, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Portuguese intellectual and political context was not markedly different from that of its Spanish neighbour, but the ideological need to stress differentiation from the dominant Spanish narrative prevented the success of the idea of depopulation in Portuguese historiography.

By contrast, in other countries the key points of the 'depopulation' theory were generally accepted without much controversy, albeit with a significant delay. The argument fitted a widespread vision of medieval Spain as an exotic space, dominated by notions of frontier, colonization and conquest. Interestingly, the heated debate between Sánchez-Albornoz and Américo Castro had no winners or losers at the international level, and Spain became known simultaneously as the country of *Reconquista* and *Convivencia*.³⁷ The depopulation theory became part and parcel of this vision. Such a general acceptance among authors who were in principle 'immune' to the grand narrative of the Spanish nation state may be due to the fact that the depopulation theory ultimately rested on a diffusionist concept of cultural change, dominant among historians and archaeologists in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁸ Cultures at that time were seen as closed ensembles, that is to say, as hermetically-sealed 'bundles' of cultural traits: these were biological (related to races or ethnic groups), technical and artistic (pertaining to material culture) and socio-political (concerning social structures and institutions). Cultural change was understood as the replacement of given human groups by others, hence the extraordinary importance that pre-historians, linguists, anthropologists and historians conferred upon migrations and invasions as the explanation of change.³⁹

As it happens, the putative existence of large-scale unpopulated areas was not an idea applied exclusively to Spain but had been raised in relation to other areas, such as Septimania, Anglo-Saxon England in the invasion period, or the

36 J. Mattoso, *Identificação de um país. Ensaio sobre as origens de Portugal (1096–1325)* (Lisbon, 1995).

37 Sánchez-Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico*, represents an explicit reaction (not without reason in many respects) against the work of Castro, whose *España en su historia* quickly became popular among American hispanists, especially in the field of literary studies if not so much among historians. See J.L. Abellán, 'La polémica de Sánchez Albornoz con Américo Castro', in Pastor, *Sánchez-Albornoz a debate*, 45–52.

38 B.G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge, 1989), 150–54.

39 See, quintessentially, L. Musset, *Les invasions. Les vagues germaniques* (Paris, 1965) and the same author's *Les invasions. Le second assaut contre l'Europe chrétienne (VIIe–IXe siècles)* (Paris, 1965).

Slavic areas at the time of German expansion. The notional depopulation of the Duero basin therefore seemed to tally with a process of more general importance; yet it also had the enormous appeal of creating a kind of medieval 'far West' facing the Islamic world: an idealised exotic periphery in a medieval Europe whose core was then indisputably embodied by France and championed by French historians.⁴⁰ The power of Sánchez-Albornoz's arguments also served to win over international medievalists who were more familiar with the specific Iberian sources and context, even if most did not assume their associated ideological implications.⁴¹

It is no exaggeration to say that the theory of depopulation became an orthodoxy. It not only achieved an unusual hegemony among specialists but also spread among the general public, so much so that even today it is a frequently repeated cliché on internet forums. In academia it became untouchable, with significant consequences. At the ideological level, the most obvious consequence – albeit one that cannot be addressed in detail here – was the consolidation of *Reconquista* as the 'engine' of Iberian medieval history, an idea that only recently has begun to lose traction in the field, as the title of this volume shows.⁴²

Nonetheless, on purportedly more empirical and methodological grounds depopulation made no less of an impact. Hailed by most as proven fact rather than mere hypothesis, the depopulation theory became a major tool with which to evaluate the sources of the early medieval period: this led to a beautifully circular exercise. Charters containing elements that were at odds with the idea were considered false or manipulated, while others were deemed sound because of their relevance to, and apparent support of, the core precepts of depopulation and repopulation. The few medieval archaeological sites studied before the 1980s were interpreted aprioristically in the light of the depopulation theory, and certain cultural traits were dated according not to archaeological criteria but to the need to locate them on either side of the population vacuum. Perhaps the clearest example of this kind of interpretation of archaeological

40 The influence on Sánchez-Albornoz of Turner's notion of the frontier as expressed in F.J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920) is very clear. See García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Sánchez-Albornoz y la repoblación', at 33.

41 See, for instance, J. Gautier-Dalché, 'Châteaux et peuplements dans la Péninsule Ibérique (X–XIII siècles)', *Flaran* 1 (1979), 93–107; A. Mackay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000–1500* (London, 1977); P. Vilar, *Histoire de l'Espagne* (Paris, 1958). There were also dissenting voices, like that of D.W. Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain* (London, 1978), who limited depopulation only to specific towns, and defended the idea that there existed a no man's land, rather than a desert.

42 F. García Fitz, *La reconquista* (Granada, 2010).

sites concerns rock-cut graves, which were until recently considered to be emblematic features of the reality of the Sánchez-Albornoz thesis.⁴³ In parallel, the belief in an eighth-century demographic break also led to disciplinary watersheds. For example, the study of the Visigothic and post-711 periods was divided by the apparent watershed of the Muslim invasion, with the exception of religious, cultural or institutional issues thought to have endured into the Asturian period through ‘neo-Gothicism’; but Visigothic archaeology rested firmly on the side of Antiquity, usually under the ‘Christian archaeology’ tag that was a favourite of the time.

In Art History, the study of Visigothic architecture likewise belonged to the realm of Classical Studies, in contrast to the architecture of later times, labelled ‘Mozarabic’, or, more explicitly, ‘repopulation architecture’, although this formula is a latecomer.⁴⁴ Place-name studies were split between the analysis of ‘pre-Roman survivals’ undertaken by specialists in Indo-European languages – who, incidentally, constantly found pre-Roman linguistic elements up and down the length and breadth of the Duero basin – and the study of ‘*Reconquista* place-names’, interpreted as the vestigial footprints of the occupation of an empty space.⁴⁵ But it was certainly the more grounded studies of economy, society, population and territory that were most influenced by a vision that defined Astur-Leonese expansion as the top-down imposition of a solid institutional system of Visigothic pedigree. This expansion was nothing less than a national effort to recover the territories lost in 711.⁴⁶

4 The End Begins

Until the 1960s, rejection of the depopulation theory was little more than anecdotal. Critical voices appeared here and there, privately expressing suspicion

43 A. de. Castillo Yurrita, ‘Cronología de las tumbas llamadas olerdolanas’, in *XI Congreso Nacional de Arqueología* (Zaragoza, 1970), 835–45. An early denunciation of the negative effects of the depopulation theory on archaeology is F. Reyes Téllez, ‘El problema del despoblamiento del valle del Duero a la luz de los hallazgos arqueológicos’ (MA Thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1979). We thank the author for granting access to his unpublished manuscript. His arguments are summarized in *idem* and M.L. Menéndez Robles, ‘Aspectos ideológicos en la despoblación del Valle del Duero’, in J. Arce and R. Olmos (eds), *Historiografía de la Arqueología y de la Historia Antigua en España (siglos XVIII–XX)* (Madrid, 1991), 199–207.

44 I. Bango, ‘Arquitectura de la décima centuria: ¿Repoblación o mozarabe?’, *Goya: Revista de arte* 122 (1974), 68–75.

45 F. Marsá, ‘Toponimia de reconquista’, in *Enciclopedia Lingüística Hispánica*, 615–46.

46 See further J. Escalona, ‘The early Castilian peasantry: An archaeological turn?’, *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1 (2009), 119–45.

or doubt, but very few dared to contradict the dominant orthodoxy in written form.⁴⁷ Perhaps most influential were the excavators of the site of El Castellar, who argued in support of continuous occupation during the period in which most rural settlements were supposed to have been uninhabited; however, case-driven criticism such as this could not make a significant dent in the theory as a whole.⁴⁸ Menéndez Pidal's critiques, mentioned above, are an entirely different matter, as they cast doubt on the overall validity of the model, though they did so by examining place-names and other linguistic evidence, thereby attacking only relatively peripheral components of Sánchez-Albornoz's arguments. Nor was it uncommon to hear in those years the pie-in-the-sky idea that only archaeology, were it ever to take off, would be able to clarify whether depopulation occurred or did not; unhappily, such was the dominance of the depopulation theory at that time that it effectively served to block the development of early medieval archaeology in academia.⁴⁹ The whole idea was flawed, of course, because the goal of modern archaeology cannot be to corroborate or refute a historiographical theory through a 'systematic and comprehensive barrage of archaeological tests' throughout the Duero basin.⁵⁰ Spanish medieval archeology in the 1980s, rising from unsure beginnings, was indeed faced with a more pressing task: to settle upon its own objectives of study.

The real turning point did not come from archaeology or local studies but from a critique of the fundamental basis of the theory. In a book whose influence on late twentieth-century Spanish medievalism cannot be overstated, Abilio Barbero and Marcelo Vigil offered the first well-theorized alternative argument to depopulation, which, furthermore, challenged Sánchez-Albornoz's entire interpretation of the history of Spain.⁵¹ Barbero and Vigil comprehensively

47 This was the case of de Moxó in his *Repoblación y sociedad*, who echoed the criticism of depopulation but ultimately accepted its validity.

48 M.Á. García Guinea, J. González Echeagaray, and B. Madariaga de la Campa, *El Castellar (Villajimena, Palencia)* (Madrid, 1963). Cf., for a critical review, R. Bohigas Roldán and A. Ruiz Gutiérrez, 'Las cerámicas visigodas de poblado en Cantabria y Palencia', *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval* 3 (1989), 31–51.

49 J. Escalona, 'L'archéologie médiévale chrétienne en Espagne: entre recherche et gestion du patrimoine', in E. Magnani (ed.), *Le Moyen Âge vu d'ailleurs: voix croisées d'Amérique latine et d'Europe* (Dijon, 2009), 253–74.

50 '...un sistemático y exhaustivo "rodillo" de catas arqueológicas': the phrase is from J.Á. García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Del Cantábrico al Duero', in his edited collection, *Organización social del espacio en la España medieval. La Corona de Castilla en los siglos VIII a XV* (Barcelona, 1985), 43–83, at 61.

51 A. Barbero de Aguilera and M. Vigil Pascual, *La formación del feudalismo en la península ibérica* (Barcelona, 1978). A thorough analysis of the work of Barbero and Vigil, perhaps the most influential in medieval Iberian studies in the late twentieth century, is entirely beyond the scope of the present chapter. Suffice it to note that subsequent criticism has

exposed the shortcomings of the depopulation theory, showing it to be based on a face-value reading of the ninth-century Asturian chronicles. Sánchez-Albornoz had assumed that the passages in the chronicles concerning Alfonso I's raid over the plateau came from a hypothetical eighth-century lost chronicle which was 'closer' to the facts. Barbero and Vigil rejected that idea and demonstrated that the chronicles' account of depopulation, and the charters that allegedly illustrated the repopulation, were part and parcel of one single discourse aimed at legitimizing the Asturian takeover of the Duero and, more generally, promoting the Asturian monarchy's neo-Gothic image. This ideology, far from having inspired the Asturian monarchs from Pelayo, had only been developed since the time of Alfonso III, under whom both the chronicles and the charters that illustrate *presuras* and repopulation were written.⁵² Barbero and Vigil's argument was elegantly devastating because it tore down the very foundations of Sánchez-Albornoz's theory instead of simply arguing in favour of population continuity here or there. Alternatively, they proposed a broad continuity of population based on the models that they had developed for the Cantabrian peoples of the northern fringe, which societies they considered to be 'primitive' and characterized by patterns of social organization that they labelled 'tribal'. Deriving as it did from an approach to anthropological studies that was already outdated, the model of '*pervivencias gentilicias*' ('tribal, or kin-based, traces') was probably the weakest part of their argument.

The chapter of *La formación del feudalismo* devoted to destroying the depopulation theory is possibly the most inspiring in a book the real goal of which was to dismantle the entire meta-historical vision of 'Reconquest Spain', a vision then still dominant in academic circles.⁵³ Adding insult to injury, Barbero and Vigil set about this task from an explicitly Marxist standpoint, the first fully realized one in Spanish medievalism; this fact alone soon provoked a split between those who saw such trenchantly politicized writing as a breath of fresh air and those for whom it was an outrageous and unwelcome novelty. The arguments made by Barbero and Vigil were soon taken up by other scholars. These newly emboldened scholars began to work free of the shackles of depopulation, although the lack of a well-defined alternative model to which all could rally soon became a problem, what with '*pervivencias gentilicias*' themselves becoming something of a cliché in the 1990s.⁵⁴ Moreover, the

revealed numerous empirical and interpretive shortcomings in its arguments, but this does not diminish in the least its impact at the time. More specifically, the section devoted to the depopulation of the Duero basin retains, in our view, its full force.

52 *Ibid.*, 232–78.

53 *Ibid.*, 213–28.

54 For example, C. Estepa Díez, 'La vida urbana en el norte de la Península Ibérica en los siglos VIII y IX. El significado de los términos civitates y castra', *Hispania* 38 (1978), 257–74;

academic orthodoxy of depopulation was so firmly rooted that in the 1980s it proved surprisingly obdurate. To complicate matters further, in addition to the unmistakable political overtones of *La formación del feudalismo*, the book first appeared at a watershed moment in Spanish history – the transition to democracy. The book's dissemination among the academic establishment suffered as a result; many historians, some of whom shared the authors' criticisms, refrained from explicitly aligning themselves with the book's implications.

5 Zombification

And yet Barbero and Vigil's major works appeared at a crucial moment in another respect, for they coincided with a 'generational replacement' in Spanish medievalism, after which outside influences were welcomed and new interpretations developed. Many scholars in the 1970s and 1980s felt the need to insert Iberian history in its wider European framework and to dump the traditional meta-historical discourse that waved the banner of Spain's peculiarity (encapsulated by the unprecedented international success of the 'Spain is different' slogan with which Franco's regime attracted tourism from the 1960s). In this context, depopulation and repopulation became part of the historiographical inheritance in need of revision. Amidst this background, Sánchez-Albornoz ended his four-decade-long exile and returned to a newly democratic Spain, receiving numerous honours for his political and academic career, including the prestigious *Príncipe de Asturias* Communication and Humanities Award in 1984, barely a month before his death in Ávila.

Far from suffering a rapid collapse, in the 1980s the depopulation theory entered a prolonged death spiral, partially supported by a new model which replaced the old concepts of depopulation and repopulation with colonization.⁵⁵ Sánchez-Albornoz himself had distinguished the 'official' repopulation, led by kings and their delegates, from a more spontaneous one led by peasant

J.M. Mínguez Fernández, *El dominio del monasterio de Sahagún en el siglo x. Paisajes agrarios, producción y expansión económica* (Salamanca, 1980), 63; and, later on, A. Isla Frez, *La sociedad gallega en la Alta Edad Media* (Madrid, 1992), 49–70. In archaeology Francisco Reyes's pioneering PhD thesis, supervised by Barbero until his death in 1990, was the first to advance in this direction: F. Reyes Téllez, *Poblacion y sociedad en el Valle del Duero, Duratón y Riaza en la Alta Edad Media, siglos VI al XI: aspectos arqueológicos* (Madrid, 2000) CD-ROM edition.

55 For an early example of a critical voice, see J. Escalona, 'Algunos problemas relativos a la génesis de las estructuras territoriales de la Castilla altomedieval', in *Burgos en la Alta Edad Media. 11 Jornadas Burgalesas de Historia Medieval* (Burgos, 1991), 489–506, esp. at 493–94.

settlers. The colonization model emphasized the role of pioneering farmers who gradually filled the Duero basin with a swarm of village communities, their inhabitants pushing ever southwards the borders of the 'Duero desert'. The model of peasant colonization did not hypothetically preclude the prior abandonment of the region, but it replaced the largely top-down institutionalist approach of previous decades with a social and economic one that owed much to the introduction into Spanish medievalism of the influence of the *Annales* School. The colonization model is best represented by the abundant output of José Ángel García de Cortázar, who rejected Sánchez-Albornoz's meta-historical postulations and proposed instead the notion of the 'social organization of space', a concept that he and his numerous students refined over many years, beginning with a seminal volume in 1985.⁵⁶ Along with García de Cortázar, Pascual Martínez Sopena made a major contribution with his thesis on Tierra de Campos,⁵⁷ which followed a pioneering study of the well-documented village of Villobera,⁵⁸ where instead of repopulation, notions such as peasant settlement, the expansion of arable, and the concentration of property take centre stage. Although hardly representing a radical departure from depopulation, which García de Cortázar marginalized but never fully denied, this new model paved the way for social and economic studies focused upon the dynamics between peasant communities and feudal lords, and was heavily influenced by French models like Georges Duby's 'saltus vs. ager' and 'warriors vs. peasants' vision of early medieval society.⁵⁹ García de Cortázar's model provided mainstream historians with an ideologically more palatable choice than Barbero and Vigil's openly Marxist notion of feudalism. Moreover, it also furnished them with an internationally recognizable framework for the understanding of early medieval settlement that was far more concrete than Barbero and Vigil's vague model, in which tribal village communities underwent a process of disarticulation under feudal pressure. Consider, for example, the impact upon a new generation of medieval

56 García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Del Cantábrico al Duero'.

57 P. Martínez Sopena, *La Tierra de Campos Occidental: poblamiento, poder y comunidad del siglo X al XIII* (Valladolid, 1985).

58 *Idem* and M.J. Carbajo Serrano, 'Notas sobre la colonización de Tierra de Campos en el siglo X: Villobera', in *El pasado histórico de Castilla y León. Actas del I Congreso de Historia de Castilla y León*, 3 vols (Burgos, 1983), vol. 1, 113–25.

59 The agenda included issues such as 'feudalization' or 'forms of spatial organization'. J.Á. García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Las formas de organización social del espacio del Valle del Duero en la Alta Edad Media: de la espontaneidad al control feudal', in *Despoblación y Colonización del Valle del Duero (siglos VIII al XX)* (Ávila, 1995), 13–44, and 'La formación de la sociedad feudal en el cuadrante noroccidental de la península ibérica en los siglos VIII a XII', *Initium* 4 (1999), 57–121.

historians, equipped with *Annales* School training, of García de Cortázar's classification of the work of Barbero and Vigil as 'a society without space'.⁶⁰ At the same time, supporters of colonization rarely dared to refute depopulation and largely ignored, or at least never assumed, the implications of Barbero and Vigil's criticism of its heuristic basis. By the mid-1990s colonization had gained wide acceptance, as evidenced in major meetings, like the Oviedo Congress on Alfonso III, or the Fourth Congress of Medieval Studies of the Sánchez-Albornoz Foundation, entitled *Despoblación y colonización del valle del Duero*.⁶¹

In a favourable political and ideological context, a modern and more flexible model was emerging which significantly changed the historiographical landscape while also granting life support to the retreating depopulation theory. The model even proved useful to explicitly Marxist scholars who reformulated the depopulation/colonization toolkit in terms of modes of production.⁶² If colonization never became as robust an orthodoxy as depopulation had been, it was because, on the one hand, it never produced an aggressively dogmatic formulation in the Sánchez-Albornoz style, and, on the other hand, scholars blended the principles of colonization with an explicit rejection of depopulation. Thus, Ángel Barrios' reassessment of place-names south of the Duero led him to defend the notion that a large proportion of the population continued to live in stable settlements in the eighth century; at the same time, he afforded some importance to waves of spontaneous colonization by peasants from the north.⁶³ Likewise José María Mínguez, using textual evidence, suggested that the Duero plateau remained basically occupied, even if it was not fertile terrain for the development of complex socio-political structures. Peasant colonization acted upon a scarcely organized landscape where the monarchy's role in directing the process of repopulation would arrive later, bringing political and administrative organization to a territory where population growth, expansion of productive spaces and changes in social organization were already underway.⁶⁴ The rejection of the depopulation thesis was

60 García de Cortázar y Ruiz de Aguirre, 'Del Cantábrico al Duero', 35.

61 See F.J. Fernández Conde (ed.), *La época de Alfonso III y San Salvador de Valdediós. Congreso de Historia medieval* (Oviedo, 1994), and in particular the contributions by José Ángel García de Cortázar and Carlos Reglero. See *Despoblación y Colonización*, *passim*.

62 J.J. García González and I. Fernández de Mata, *Estudios sobre la transición al feudalismo en Cantabria y la cuenca del Duero* (Burgos, 1999).

63 A. Barrios García, 'Repoblación de la zona meridional del Duero. Fases de ocupación, precedencias y distribución espacial de los grupos repobladores', *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 3 (1985), 33–82.

64 Mínguez's approaches have since evolved (like those of all authors cited in this section). See J.M. Mínguez Fernández, *Las sociedades feudales, 1. Antecedentes, formación y expansión (siglos VI al XIII)* (Madrid, 1994); *idem*, 'La despoblación del Duero: un tema a debate',

particularly noticeable in Galicia, in both the scholarship of historians and archaeologists.⁶⁵

The rise of the colonization model clearly represents a transitional phase between the general acceptance of depopulation and its total abandonment. As the 1990s unfolded, Sánchez-Albornoz's unconditional supporters became increasingly confined to the history of law and institutions,⁶⁶ whilst most medievalists opted for colonization.⁶⁷ However, the turning point was the emergence of a new wave of studies that not only radically rejected depopulation but also colonization, this latter on the grounds that it was a by-product of the first. From the late 1970s a small group of scholars associated with the circle of Barbero and Vigil – most notable amongst them Carlos Estepa – set out to undertake studies on settlement and territory.⁶⁸ These studies were aimed at developing more complex models of continuity between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, in which neither depopulation nor colonization played any significant role. The incorporation of the meagre archaeological data available

in S. Aguadé and J. Pérez (eds) *Les origines de la féodalité. Hommage à Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz* (Madrid, 2000), 169–82; *idem*, 'Poderes locales en el espacio central leonés durante el periodo astur', in Fernández Conde and García de Castro Valdés, *Poder y Simbología*, 199–214.

- 65 Isla Frez, *La sociedad gallega*; E. Portela Silva, 'Galicia en la época de Alfonso III', in Fernández Conde, *La época de Alfonso III*, 79–95; J. López Quiroga and M. Rodríguez Lovelle, 'Un modelo de análisis del poblamiento rural en el valle del Duero (siglos VIII–X) a partir de un espacio macro-regional: las tierras galaico-portuguesas', *Anuario Español de Medievalismo* 27 (1997), 687–748; J. López Quiroga, *El final de la Antigüedad en la Gallaecia. La transformación de las estructuras de poblamiento entre Miño y Duero (siglos V al X)* (La Coruña, 2004).
- 66 See the work on legal and institutional issues and on historical geography of G. Martínez Díez, including *Génesis histórica de la provincia de Burgos y sus divisiones administrativas* (Burgos, 1983); *idem*, *Las comunidades de villa y tierra de la Extremadura castellana* (Madrid, 1983); *idem*, *Pueblos y alfores burgaleses de la Repoblación* (Valladolid, 1987).
- 67 García de Cortázar's 'social organization of space' actually set the tone for a new research agenda in which depopulation became an increasingly marginal component in relation to other processes. Compare the foundational 1985 volume *Organización social del espacio* with the later *Del Cantábrico al Duero. Trece estudios sobre organización social del espacio en los siglos VIII a XIII* (Santander, 1999), where the role afforded to depopulation has been seriously reduced, and a more recent volume which celebrates the validity of the concept of 'social organization of space', namely, J.Á. Sesma Muñoz and C. Laliena Corbera, *La pervivencia del concepto. Nuevas reflexiones sobre la ordenación social del espacio en la Edad Media* (Zaragoza, 2008). In this latter volume depopulation does not feature.
- 68 C. Estepa Díez, *Estructura social de la ciudad de León (siglos XI–XIII)* (León, 1977); *idem*, 'La vida urbana en el norte de la Península Ibérica'; *idem*, 'El alfoz castellano en los siglos IX al XII', *En la España Medieval (Estudios dedicados al profesor d. Angel Ferrari Núñez, 1)* 4 (1984), 305–42.

at the time was another characteristic of these studies, as was the attempt to find contact points with international debates, such as the one on 'feudal revolution'.⁶⁹ These developments were equally connected to an explicit rejection of depopulation by stressing the fundamentally political meaning of the word *populare* in the written sources, thus demanding a more complex approach to debates hitherto focused on measuring 'indigenous' influence against 'Roman' influence.⁷⁰

One of the most interesting consequences of this shift was that if Sánchez-Albornoz's theory was consigned to oblivion, it must also be recognized that in similar fashion many of Barbero and Vigil's proposals were also rejected, even by their direct disciples. Their exceedingly primitivistic model of supposed 'tribal characteristics' was gradually dismissed by researchers, who came to focus instead upon the analysis of the different ways the Roman world ended in the West and the variety of situations that emerged in its wake.⁷¹ To break free from the depopulation thesis was paramount, but equally so was to establish connections beyond Spanish academe and to make comparisons with processes seen in other early medieval contexts. Tellingly, the first article outlining a pattern of varied regional transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages for the Duero basin appeared in English in the journal *Early Medieval Europe*.⁷² Meanwhile, medieval archaeology slowly found a place for itself in Spanish academia and set out to build a proper archaeological agenda, with the aim of investigating the material dimensions of the complex social, economic, and cultural processes that defined the Iberian north-west in the fifth

69 E. Pastor Díaz de Garayo, *Castilla en el tránsito de la Antigüedad al feudalismo. Poblamiento, poder político y estructura social del Arlanza al Duero (siglos VII–XI)* (Valladolid, 1996), defends a certain continuity of population, but with new patterns of settlement, and a continuity of public political relationships. A different view, emphasizing the endurance of some settlement patterns within a changing socio-political background is found in I. Martín Viso, *Poblamiento y estructuras sociales en el norte de la Península Ibérica, siglos VI–XIII* (Salamanca, 2000); cf. J. Escalona, *Sociedad y territorio en la Alta Edad Media castellana: la formación del alfoz de Lara* (Oxford, 2002), and, for Galicia, López Quiroga, *El final de la Antigüedad en la Gallaecia*.

70 A. Isla Frez, 'Los astures: el *populus* y la *populatio*', in *La época de la monarquía asturiana* (Oviedo, 2002), 17–42.

71 It is fair to note the great influence of the publication of the Spanish translation of Chris Wickham's 'The other transition', *Past and Present* 103 (1984), 3–36, first published in Spanish as C. Wickham, 'La otra transición: del mundo antiguo al feudalismo', *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 7 (1989), 7–35.

72 S. Castellanos García and I. Martín Viso, 'The local articulation of central power in the north of the Iberian Peninsula (500–1000)', *Early Medieval Europe* 13 (2005), 1–42.

to tenth centuries, rather than running tests across the plateau in an effort to refute or confirm depopulation.⁷³

6 The Final Curtain

Since Gonzalo Martínez Díez passed away in 2014, the defenders of depopulation have become almost invisible in academia, and the whole theory has virtually disappeared from the agenda of scholarly projects, conferences and the like. Most scholars have simply decided to ignore it and to engage in the study of processes which can be empirically verified and yield insights into the dynamics of early medieval Iberia in an increasingly internationalized research environment. The model of depopulation survives elsewhere, however, thanks to its former dominance, and the slowness with which academic advances are disseminated among the general public. Witness the Wikipedia entry '*Desierto del Duero*', which (at the time of writing) rather appallingly states: 'depopulation was a notorious fact, despite some authors, mainly Barbero and Vigil, who deny it with no documentary or archaeological support, nor try to refute the theses of Alborno'.⁷⁴ A similar ignorance of recent – and not so recent – historiographical developments is apparent in publications on medieval Iberia from outside Spain which keep uncritically rolling out the notion of depopulation in total disregard of advances in Spanish medievalism. Not everything remains static, though. If in 1989 Roger Collins, a fine connoisseur of Spanish historiography, felt the need to examine different views on depopulation in his book on the Arab conquest of Spain, defining the Duero region as a 'cordon sanitaire',⁷⁵ in his 2012 contribution to the same series, depopulation does not even merit a mention.⁷⁶ Some younger scholars have reflected upon the matters discussed in this chapter and chosen to ignore depopulation, while approaching the period from perspectives which account for developments made elsewhere in Europe.⁷⁷ *Eppur si muove*.

73 See, for example, J.A. Quirós Castillo (ed.), *El poblamiento rural de época visigoda en Hispania. Arqueología del campesinado en el interior peninsular* (Bilbao, 2013). For Galicia, see J.C. Sánchez Pardo, 'Power and rural landscapes in early medieval Galicia (400–900 A.D): towards a re-incorporation of the archaeology into the historical narrative', *Early Medieval Europe* 21 (2013), 140–68.

74 See https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desierto_del_Duero (accessed 16/10/2017).

75 R. Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain, 710–797* (Oxford, 1989).

76 *idem*, *Caliphs and Kings: Spain, 796–1031* (Chichester, 2012).

77 R. Portass, 'All Quiet on the Western Front? Royal Politics in Galicia from c.800 to c.950', *Early Medieval Europe* 21 (2013), 283–306.

The depopulation theory must be studied as an historical artefact in its own right, within the framework of the history of nationalist historiography. The theory's success can only be explained by its specific political and ideological context, and, crucially, through Sánchez-Albornoz's considerable intellectual achievement; furthermore, to reject depopulation should imply no slight toward his many inspiring studies on a huge number of issues of interest to medievalists. However, to keep objecting to depopulation is to suppose it still alive, when it is in fact a ghost, now bereft of its supporters. It is time for the students of the early medieval history of the Iberian north-west to break free from and to reject the millstone of the depopulation theory – a millstone that has slowed the progress of historical enquiry for decades. It now behoves us to keep exploring new and more relevant avenues, as the present volume eloquently shows. It is also time for non-Iberian scholars to rid themselves of clichés that they would deem unacceptable if applied to their own national histories. In fact, all historians would benefit from developing interpretive frameworks which look to overcome the tyranny of the narrow nineteenth-century national histories which reinvented the Middle Ages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷⁸

In the Hieronymites' monastery at Lisbon, one of Portugal's most emblematic historical sites, rest the remains of Alexandre Herculano, along with those of other illustrious countrymen, like Henry the Navigator, Vasco da Gama, Camões, and Pessoa. In the cloister of Ávila Cathedral rest the remains of Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, along with those of Adolfo Suárez, the first prime minister of post-Franco Spain: a fitting parallel for two like-minded men, Herculano and Sánchez-Albornoz, despite their separation in time and space. Both are honoured and remembered, as they deserve to be. But it is now the moment to lay to rest, with full funerary honours, the long deceased notions of depopulation, repopulation and, ultimately, *Reconquista*, which have long distorted our understanding of Iberia's medieval past.

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⁷⁸ P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).

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