

Spain's "Moor-slaying" Ethos

by Guido Mina di Sospiro (June 2018)



Santiago as the Wanderer, artist unknown (from the Museum of the Cathedral of Astorga)

I am published in Spain with various books in translation from the English, to which I contribute by working alongside the translator(s); I speak Spanish (Castilian) fluently and have been interviewed on Spanish national radio and television, as well as by the country's major newspapers; my wife is of Spanish descent (Basque, Galician and Cantabrian) and Spanish is her mother tongue; I am a Grandee of Spain (a title bestowed upon an ancestor of mine by Charles the Fifth); I avidly read books in Spanish, particularly in a burgeoning revisionist subgenre that recounts Spain's military feats down the centuries; and I have traveled across Spain more than across any other country in Europe, Italy included. Having said that, in this essay I have endeavored to offer to the anglophone reader a distillate: a few aspects, more or less famous, or notorious, that are emblematic of a certain Spanish spirit.

Two huge buses have just pulled up and parked near the sanctuary. I turn to my wife and say, "The Chinese are here! Quick, let's go pay our respects to the Virgin while we've got the place ourselves." And what a place: Our Lady of Covadonga is a Marian shrine devoted to the Virgin Mary at Covadonga, Asturias, in north-west Spain. Asturias is strange region that for most people does not call to mind stereotypical Spain: a mix between the Dolomites and Ireland, it is very green because it is very rainy, sparsely populated except for its two main cities, Oviedo and Gijon, and very beautiful. It was here that, at the outset of the 7th century, the Visigothic nobility retreated after being defeated by the Moors, who were conquering the entire Iberian Peninsula. Pelagius, or Pelayo, founded the Kingdom of Asturias and four years later led what was left of the Visigothic army against the advancing Moors,

and met them at Covadonga; a small statue of the Virgin Mary had been secretly hidden in one of the caves above the waterfall (Cova Donga, from the Latin Cova Dominica, i.e., Cave of the Lady). Miraculously, King Pelayo and his men managed to defeat the Moors, and every Visigoth believed it was thanks to the aid of the Virgin. It was 722, a date that is celebrated all over Spain as the beginning of the *Reconquista*, the Re-conquest, which, after eight hundred centuries of constant fighting, led to the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula.



King Pelayo (L) and The Virgin of Covadonga (photos: Stenie Mina di Sospiro)

As it turned out, the buses were not full of Chinese tourists, but of Spanish elementary school children. They were there on a pilgrimage that unites nationalism with Marianism. We overheard their teachers tell them about Pelayo and the Virgin who helped him, and nascent Spain, against the all-conquering Moors; next they explained that the *Reconquista* was born there; finally, not without pride, they elaborated about the eight glorious centuries that followed, rich in battles, resulting in the expulsion of the Moors, in unified Spain, and in the beginning of the *Conquista*, and that is, the Spanish Empire. As a capsule of history *and* metahistory (the end of

the *Reconquista* coincides almost preternaturally with the beginning of the *Conquista* in the year 1492), one would have thought that it might be overwhelming for the children, but they took the information in stride. They were quiet, and listening. The place itself, at the end of a long tunnel dug into sheer rock, over a waterfall above a precipice, is stunning. And the little statue of the Virgin of Covadonga, which some may qualify as kitsch, seemed to work her magic on the children (and on my wife and me, but that's beside the point).

We asked one of the teachers if taking the children to Covadonga was something done only by Asturian schools; she replied, "No, school children are taken here from all over Spain. It's a national monument. The Moors were defeated here for the first time; this is where the *Reconquista* began."

Extremadura, in Western Spain at the border with Portugal, is a land of Conquistadors that produced more famous (or notorious, depending on one's view) *Conquistadores* than any other region in Spain. Trujillo is today chiefly remembered for two of its sons: Francisco Pizarro, who conquered the Inca Empire; and Francisco de Orellana, the first to navigate the entire length of the Amazon River, at first named Rio de Orellana: 4,345 miles into the unknown. But well before their time, Trujillo contributed also to the *Reconquista*.

While Alfonso VIII began to test the resistance of the Moors in the area, it was Fernando III "el Santo" the monarch who, in 1232, re-conquered Trujillo to the Christian faith thanks to a supernatural intervention: the Virgin, holding baby Jesus in her arms, appeared above the walls of the Moorish castle situated at the highest point in town, and thereafter the

battle was won by Fernando III's soldiers. From that moment on, the whole army addressed the Virgin with the title "La Victoria" (The Victory), as the patron saint and advocate of the *Reconquista*. She was enthroned on top of the main door that leads into the castle, and a chapel in it was created for her.



Our Lady of the Victory (La Virgen de la Victoria) at Trujillo (Stenie Mina di Sospiro)

Ferdinand III "the Saint" (el Santo)—King of Castile from 1217 and King of León from 1230 as well as King of Galicia from 1231—was one of the most effective military leaders in the *Reconquista*. He was also a pious man, ever willing to ascribe his victories against the "infidels", be they military or diplomatic, to God or, as illustrated, to the Virgin. Centuries after his death, Pope Clement X canonized him. The San Fernando Valley, near Los Angeles, in Southern California, is named after him.

The patron saint festivities in honor of Our Lady of Victory

are held to this day in Trujillo between the end of August and the beginning of September. At the same time, there are festivals of music, dance, and theater. The small town comes alive and attracts visitors from all over the region. 786 years after Our Lady of Victory helped the Spaniards defeat the Moors and re-conquer the city, her memory lives on in a very tangible way. An outsider would think of either Pizarro or de Orellana as being chosen by the town to sing its own glory. To be sure, much is made about them and the Conquistadors, but the chapter pertaining to the *Reconquista*, with the intervention of Our Lady of Victory, no less, still is the one that is celebrated, and felt, the most.

Like Trujillo, Zamora, in Castilla y León on the banks of the Duero, is another town unlikely to be visited by hordes of tourists speaking mysterious languages. When we were there, we only came across Spanish visitors, and a very few from nearby Portugal. And yet, Zamora is both a gem and a highly emblematic oddity. It numbers twenty-four churches from the 12th and 13th century, all in Romanesque style, as well as some other non-religious buildings in the same style. No other city in the world is graced with as many Romanesque churches—they are everywhere. There is even a diminutive one (not quite) in the center of the plaza mayor.



Some of the many Romanesque churches in Zamora (Stenie Mina di Sospiro)

During the centuries of Moorish rule in the Iberian Peninsula, Zamora, then at the periphery of the Kingdom of Asturias, became a strategic stronghold for the Christians' *Reconquista*. From the early 8th century to the late 10th century it was a city changing hands from Christians to Moors through fierce military engagements; defensive buildings and all sorts of fortifications were built. During the 12th century, the fighting intensified. The city, by then part of the Kingdom of León, was finally re-conquered from the Almoravids and the Almohads. It was then that it was decided to populate the city with Christians from other towns, and build an impressive number of churches, all more or less at the same time and therefore all in the then current style, the Romanesque. The stunning, large and extremely composite cathedral was built in only twenty-three years.



Catedral de Zamora

As one journeys from north to south, churches in Spain become more “recent”, as the latter region was re-conquered later. Nowhere more than in Zamora is it evident that church-building was more than a religious statement; it implied, quite explicitly, triumph over the “infidels” and nation-building. By liberating city after city from Moorish domination, Spain gradually became Spain. With the exception of a few pre-Romanesque churches in Asturias, almost every church in Spain is a testament to the *Reconquista*. Visigothic Spain was Christian (at first Arian; then, after Reccared, the Visigothic king in Toledo, converted to Catholicism in 587AD, there was a never completely successful attempt to Catholicize the entire Iberian Peninsula) and did produce some churches. But then the Moors either turned them into mosques or tore them down, so, once the territory was re-conquered, most churches had to be built from scratch, or mosques would be converted into churches.



Catedral de Santiago de Compostela

Galicia, a vast and green sub-region of mountains, hills, *rías* (i.e., inlets, estuaries, fiords), ocean, Spaniards of Celtic heritage and bagpipes, is where Santiago de Compostela is



found. In my book *The Metaphysics of Ping-Pong* I note: "To celebrate my fortieth birthday and go to a mythical place I'd always wanted to see, I too had embarked on the pilgrimage to St James's Cathedral, in Santiago de Compostela, with my wife. It'd been an incredible fifty yards, from the hotel straight to the cathedral, nonstop and all on foot despite the inclemency of the weather: a drizzle." Notwithstanding my levity, Santiago de Compostela is one of the most important shrines in Christendom, and far and away the most celebrated pilgrimage in the

western world. Tens of thousands of pilgrims of all nationalities and all faiths (including none) trudge every year along the Camino de Santiago, from France, or Portugal, or elsewhere in Spain, hundreds of kilometres on foot. If they make it, they eventually reach the Praza do Obradoiro (the Square of the [completed] Work of Gold, an appellation with distinct alchemical overtones), where the grandiose Cathedral stands. Many if not most pilgrims are shocked when, once inside the cathedral, they come across a statue of Santiago (St. James) mounted on a white horse and wielding a sword. Little do they know that behind the greenery providentially placed there by decision of the Catholic Church, are the statues of writhing Moors on the ground being slaughtered by the saint. The iconography of Santiago all pilgrims become familiar with along the way is that of the prototypical wandering hippy, bearded and understandably a little dishevelled, with a walking stick, a large hat and the distinctive scallop on it (which the French call *coquille Saint-Jacques*, precisely). He looks straight out of a hippy commune in the late 1960s. Inside the cathedral, on the other

hand, the contemporary pilgrims meet with that *other* Santiago–Matamoros, literally, St. James the Moor-slayer.

James was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus and is considered the first apostle to be martyred. He is the patron saint of both Spaniards and Portuguese, respectively called Santiago or São Tiago. His myth as a warrior on the side of the Christians against the Muslims derived from what seems to be a fictional battle allegedly fought near Clavijo between the Christians, led by Ramiro I of Asturias, and the Muslims, led by the Emir of Córdoba. In it, Santiago Matamoros (the Moor-slayer) appeared suddenly and helped an outnumbered Christian army to gain victory. The date assigned to the battle, 834, was later changed to 844 to suit more plausible historical details.

Although born out of an incident that is spurious at best, the history of the cult of Santiago goes hand in hand with the history of the *Reconquista*, and incarnates one of most formidable ideological icons in Spain's national identity. “¡Santiago y cierra, España!” and that is, “Santiago and close, Spain!” or “Santiago and at them, Spain!” became the battle cry of Spanish armies when fighting against the Moors (and continued to be used, later on, by the Conquistadors, with Santiago Matamoros morphing opportunely into Santiago Mataindios [Indian-slayer], but that's another story). The *Orden de Santiago*, i.e., the Order of St. James of the Sword, was founded in the 12th century. Its aim was to protect the pilgrims of the *Camino de Santiago*, to defend Christendom, and to expel the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula. Its emblem was the *cruz espada*, the Cross of St. James, and that is, a cross that looks very much like a sword. Lastly, Santiago was a major theme in the arts, in paintings



and sculptures alike, and is found in countless churches, palaces and museums all over contemporary Spain.



Upon entering at long last the overwhelming cathedral of Santiago the Compostela, most pilgrims are astonished to see Santiago transformed from the prototypical wanderer to a sword-wielding Moor-slayer. In 2004, shortly after the Madrid train bombings (or 11-M), the Al-Qaeda terrorist attack that killed 192 people and injured around 2,000, the Catholic Church decided to remove the statue of Santiago Matamoros from the cathedral, not to offend the sensitivity of Muslims (belatedly?). There was a

popular uproar against such a removal, and the compromise was found of covering the slain Moors with greenery, which is kept up to this day. Pilgrims, be they Catholics, agnostics, humanitarians or politically correct hypertolerant globalists feel that nothing could be more contrary to the teachings of Jesus than the idea that one of his disciples would be glorified as a murderer. Nobody must have told them about St. Bernard of Clairvaux's letter to the Templars, or *Liber ad milites templi de laude novae militiae* (*Book to the Knights of the Temple, in Praise of the New Knighthood*), written between 1120 and 1136.

St. Bernard wrote that letter/book for the demoralized Knights Templar, who were having serious doubts about the role of Christian warriors, and especially about the act of killing,

which they deemed unethical. Displaying his eloquence, and starting from the premise of Augustine of Hippo's just war theory (*jus bellum iustum*), St. Bernard introduced in his book the concept of *mali-cidium* (the killing of evil). The *Milites Christi*, the warriors of Christ, could not commit *homi-cidium* (homicide, literally the killing of man), which is forbidden by the fifth commandment. But since the higher good of the eradication of evil demanded it, the *malicidium* within the Muslim "infidel" (the killing of evil inside him) was justified.

In the Middle Ages, all sorts of Christian divinities were recruited for the sake of the Crusades and, in Spain, well before that time, of the *Reconquista*: Santo Cristo de las Batallas (Holy Christ of the Battles, to this day a very followed cult particularly in Salamanca, Ávila, and Cáceres), carried as a statue in battlefields when fighting against the Moors; the Virgin, in various incidents (I have mentioned the seminal one at Covadonga, and another at Trujillo); as well as, of course, Santiago Matamoros.

While the Catholic Church was busy keeping its curtains of greenery around the base of the statue of Santiago Matamoros, there occurred the Barcelona Attacks, that killed 13 people and injured at least 130 others, whose indirect responsibility was attributed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Given its past, given the fact that the *Reconquista* is vividly commemorated to this day all over the country and its fundamental significance inculcated into the minds of all citizens starting with elementary school children, do you find the western political correctness trespassing into tolerance à

outrance well- or ill-suited to Spain?

Guido Mina di Sospiro was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, into an ancient Italian family. He was raised in Milan, Italy and was educated at the University of Pavia as well as the USC School of Cinema-Television, now known as USC School of Cinematic Arts. He has been living in the United States since the 1980s, currently near Washington, D.C. He is the author of several books including, [The Story of Yew](#), [The Forbidden Book](#), and [The Metaphysics of Ping Pong](#).

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