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This is a published version of a paper published in *La Corónica: a journal of medieval Spanish language and literature*.

Citation for the published paper:

Bergqvist, K. (2012)

"[Review of Ana Echevarría, *Knights on the Frontier: The Moorish Guard of the Kings of Castile (1410-1467)* (2009)]"

La Corónica: a journal of medieval Spanish language and literature, 40(2): 354-358

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Knights on the Frontier: The Moorish Guard of the Kings of Castile (1410–1467) (review)

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La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Volume 40, Issue 2, Spring 2012, pp. 354-358 (Article)

Published by La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

DOI: 10.1353/cor.2012.0010

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ansiedad por contener excesiva información. Estéfano de Sevilla recuerda a sus lectores: “E vemos que el omne sano que teme enfermar, enferma”. El desarrollo de los textos médicos creó una “nueva cultura patológica”, según la cual los lectores aprendieron a reconocer sus enfermedades en términos más específicos desde *Menor daño de la medicina* de Chirino que habla del “dolor de cabeza” o del “dolor de muelas” hasta el *Remedio de cuerpos humanos y silva de experiencias* de Lobera de Ávila que habla de “peripleumonia” o de “hidropesía”.

Resumir en pocas palabras la obra de Salomon es algo que él nos enseña perfectamente, ya que de más de trescientos tratados médicos nos proporciona una clara y valiosa teoría, de gran interés para el futuro de los estudios sobre medicina académica y popular. Lo bueno, si breve, dos veces bueno.

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Ana Echevarría. Knights on the Frontier: The Moorish Guard of the Kings of Castile (1410-1467). The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World 36. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009. 358 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-17110 7

Ana Echevarría presently teaches medieval history at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Madrid. Her research focus has been the relations between Christianity and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. She has published various books and articles on such topics as the situation of religious minorities under Christian rule; the conversion of such minorities; religious and political polemics; as well as legislature, power, social status and structures. These aspects of life in the medieval realms in the Iberian Peninsula are also present in the work currently under review.

Knights on the Frontier was originally published in Spanish as *Caballeros en la Frontera: La guardia morisca de los reyes de Castilla*, in 2006. It is an in-depth study of the Moorish personal guard of the kings of Castile during the fifteenth century, mainly in the period that coincides with the reigns of Juan II (1406-1454) and Enrique IV (1454-1474). Members of this military unit were highly regarded and given many privileges, some of them even enjoying a close personal relationship with the king, because of their high social standing in their societies

of origin, their maintained relationship with the elite across the border, and their proven skill in frontier combat. Another important fact was that these knights, because of their different origin, held no other bonds of loyalty within Castile aside from those that tied them to the king; therefore they would most probably not be used by noble factions opposed to the king in times of crisis.

This study deals, among other things, with the much-debated issue of the *convivencia*, or perceived peaceful co-existence, of different religious groups in medieval Iberia- and adds some new insights into this subject.

The first chapter places the study within a wider historical context, that of the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century, a period during which the two kings mentioned above and their co-regents ruled Castile. During the same period the kingdom of Granada saw the rise and fall of a number of rulers, some of them backed in the violent and stormy struggle for power by the Castilian kings because of their willingness to swear oaths of vassalage to them. Echevarría gives an overview of the political, social, economic and judicial developments within the realms on both sides of the frontier, thus setting the scene for what is to come during the rest of the book. It is all very well done, and an excellent service provided to the nonspecialist reader.

Chapter 2 treats thoroughly the military and political situation of the Iberian Peninsula during the fifteenth century. Echevarría describes the types of campaigns and raids carried out in the frontier region, the crusading aspect, as well as the economic factors and diplomatic relations. She describes the political games and the inherent symbolism with great detail and clear exposition. The chapter goes on to discuss the conversion of soldiers and the switching of sides during violent conflicts and military campaigns in the frontier region. The burgeoning organization of the Moorish guard (which seems to have been well under way in the 1420s) is detailed, and the development of the position of knight of the guard into a sort of hereditary office, complete with the conversion of all the knights, is described. The author points out the increasing importance of the royal guard in times of political turbulence, when troops entirely loyal to the king were scarce. Echevarría moreover takes the time to compare the guard with similar contemporary institutions from other areas in the medieval European and Arabic world.

Chapter 3 depicts the development of the standing royal armies of late medieval European kings and the establishment of personal royal guards within

this framework. Furthermore, this chapter goes more profoundly into the organization of the Moorish guard by discussing the offices upheld within it, its structure, and its military tactics. It analyzes the guard as a court institution, delving into its composition (regarding religion, age, and social position) and the forms of payment made to the knights (salaries and gifts).

Concerning the coexistence of various religious groups in medieval Iberia, the Moorish guard of the kings of Castile was extraordinary. As Echevarría says,

In all accounts of religious conversion in the 15th and 16th centuries, a change of clothing was recognised by both communities as a symbol of the convert's new status and religion. However, in this case we are confronted with an apparent paradox: the Moorish knights, whether they had converted or not, retained the Muslim style of dress, riding and arms. (137)

This fact naturally had practical reasons (it was the most appropriate equipment for a light cavalry, which the Guard was intended to be), but there were also, according to Echevarría, symbolic ones. By keeping a personal guard of observably Moorish knights, the king displayed his superiority over the Kingdom of Granada.

A closer perspective on the individuals who made up the Moorish guard is attempted in chapter 4. It deals with the conversion of religious minorities in the Iberian Peninsula, pertinently pointing out the strategic focus on converting the elite sectors of these groups by the Christian clergy. The chapter discusses the terms and aspects of assimilation, integration and acculturation by presenting the stories of the individual knights and the histories of their families. Echevarría points out the intermediary function of these knights, who were often in an excellent position to act as negotiators and go-betweens amid the conflict between Granadans and Christians (and were, therefore, sometimes accused of acting as spies). However, in addition to the individual knights who converted to the Christian faith or who, by intermarriage and acculturation, became an integral part of Christian Castilian society, there were also those who resisted conversion. Echevarría insightfully discusses the reasons behind these choices, one of which may have been, for example, the view that the stay in Castile was only temporary.

Chapter 5 describes the processes that led to the eventual dissolution of the Moorish guard, explaining it through the context of civil war and opposition between the king's party and opposing noble factions in Castile. Echevarría puts

much emphasis on the nobles' wish to weaken the position of the king, Enrique, thereby reassessing the importance of accusations of Islamophilia directed at the king, which has been made much of in previous research on the epoch. Echevarría also makes mention of the wills of *conversos* as a source to their final view on matters of religion. The chapter finishes off with some considerations of the further history of the Mudejar community in Iberia up until the beginning of the sixteenth century, after the final defeat of the Kingdom of Granada.

The conclusion to the book is short, a mere three pages. It begins with the statement that the question posed in the very beginning, "whether there had ever existed a historical period during which religious differences had not conditioned the daily life of human groups in Iberia beyond tolerable limits," (211) has now been answered, positively. Echevarría maintains that the study has shown that "such a state of affairs was indeed possible" before the fifteenth century. And indeed, she has satisfactorily proven that no excessive pressure seems to have been put upon these knights to convert. Their steadfastness in the preservation of their religious creeds was apparently respected, and the choice to remain Muslim or Jewish seems not to have influenced their social or economic standing.

However, this is not to say that the same was true for all of society. The institution studied was of the court, closer than most to the inner circle of the monarch, and the people engaged in it were all of high social standing, both in their lives preceding exile and subsequently. The study does thereby not ascribe to the idea of an idealized state of *convivencia*, but rather insists on the role of "political, social and economic *convenience*" in inter-religious relations (211). Though she does not view religion as the sole determining factor in medieval Iberian society, Echevarría appreciates its importance as an identifying factor and as a means of control and coercion, used by the elite against minorities.

The book also contains an appendix consisting of editions of the *razones moriscas* (Moorish allowances) kept in the section Escribanía Mayor de Rentas, Quitaciones de Corte, of the Archivo General de Simancas.

I will say a few words about the book on the whole as a scholarly historical study. Overall, it takes much care to place the Moorish guard studied into a wider context. This is done on a number of levels and regarding a number of different perspectives throughout the book. Echevarría does an excellent job of acknowledging the headway made by previous research, the amount of which

presented and referred to in this study is admirable. If there is any disadvantage in this, it is that the extensive contextualization might be construed as somewhat concealing the original and impressive research conducted by Echevarría, which is more difficult to make out in a book written in this manner, than it would be in a book less marked by contextualization. However, the context gives one invaluable resources for comparison, so I would definitely miss it were it not there.

Echevarría displays a well-developed understanding of the complex comingling of political and religious matters in this period. She does not give any one historical factor, such as politics, economics, or religious concerns, a place apart, but rather weighs them all together, aware of the delicate nuances and apparent paradoxes. The author also, despite a certain focus on the economic and organizational aspects of the Moorish guard and the royal armies, succeeds in highlighting the personal and individual motivations of the real people involved in these historical events, such as we may construe them.

In my opinion, the fourth chapter of the book is the most fascinating and thought-provoking. The topic of conversion is apparently one that fascinates the author and elicits exciting work and interesting analyses from her. It is truly regrettable that no first-person account is known to exist that can tell us what motivated the knights of the Moorish guard to convert (or resist conversion) to Christianity. I am sure Echevarría would have made much of it.

Ana Echevarría's book adds an important new chapter to the ongoing research on relations between the different religious groups of medieval Iberia. It should prove an accessible read to anyone interested in the topic, no matter his or her degree of specialization, thanks to Echevarría's excellent contextualization and presentation of previous research. For specialists, it will most likely prove indispensable.

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