

*Essays in Medieval Studies 6*

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**page 88****Diego de Valera's *Crónica Abreviada*****Curtis Blaylock**

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The University of Illinois Library owns a copy of what must rank as one of the early best-sellers among printed Spanish books. It is the *Crónica abreviada* of Mosén Diego de Valera, steward (his Spanish title was *maestresala*) to the Catholic monarchs. The book was first issued in Seville in 1482 by Alonso del Puerto for Michael Dachauer and Garcia del Castillo. Since Lambert Palmart's edition of the *Obres o trobes en lahors de la verge Maria* had appeared a scant eight years before, this represents one of the early examples of the printer's art on the Peninsula; and it provides, in addition to the abbreviated chronicle, a concise summary of the Spaniards' knowledge of world geography toward the end of the Middle Ages. It also offers some helpful evidence to refine our grammatical descriptions of late fifteenth-century Spanish.

The *Crónica valeriana*, as it quickly came to be called, was printed in 184 folios in gothic type, with spaces being left for capitals to be filled in by hand.<sup>1</sup> In the University of Illinois copy red ink was used to supply the capitals, as well as to insert paragraph markers and to highlight certain passages with double tick marks. Yellow ink was used for seemingly nothing other than a decorative purpose to fill in the blank spaces in certain letters, especially r's and the coordinating conjunction, whether represented by y or &.

The book must have achieved an instant popularity, for it appeared in nine more incunable editions. In addition to the princeps, there are two editions from Burgos (1487 and 1491), five from Salamanca (1493, 1495, 1499, 1499/1500, and 1500), one from Zaragoza (1493), and one from Toulouse (1489).<sup>2</sup> In the course of the sixteenth century at least ten more editions appeared, despite the fact that the explosive expansion in geographic knowledge at the end of the previous century had in several respects rendered its cosmography quite obsolete.

One distinguishing feature of the *Crónica abreviada* is to be sure its somewhat unusual combination of two well-known medieval encyclopedic genres. The chronicle proper relies heavily on the *Primera Crónica General* of King Alfonso for the period up through the reign of Alfonso's father, Ferdinand III, known as the Saint. It abstracts material from succeeding official chronicles for the next two centuries, but con-

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cludes with some fairly circumstantial accounts of events during the reign of John II, including many details and documents which derived from Valera's personal experience.

Valera has been called the last Castilian chronicler of the Middle Ages. He was born in Cuenca in 1412, the son of the court physician Alfonso García Chirino and his wife, Violante López. He was a page, first to King John II and later to Prince Henry. He participated in the battle of Higuera (1421) and the siege of Huelma (1435). In 1437 he went to France and to Bohemia, where he fought against the Hussites and was honored by King Albert. By late 1438 or 1439 he was once again in the service of Prince Henry. He was mayor of Palencia in 1452, and he died, apparently not long after the publication of his *Crónica*, in Puerto de Santa Maria, where he had been warden of the castle for the Duke of Medinaceli since 1472.<sup>3</sup>

He authored the *Memorial de diversas hazañas*, which is a chronicle of the reign of Henry IV, and the *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, as well as the now-lost *Crónica de la casa de Estúñiga*.

At times Valera displays an almost childish credulity and seems to delight in recounting improbable tales based on hearsay or superstitious legend. In this he is simply imitating the fashion cultivated so successfully in the preceding

century by Sir John Mandeville, which reached its apogee perhaps in sixteenth-century Spain with the publication of Antonio de Torquemada's *Jardín de flores raras y curiosas* (Salamanca, 1570).

Juan de Valdés, the sixteenth-century humanist, when asked his opinion of the style of the royal chroniclers, replied that he was willing to recommend none; then he specifically criticized Valera for verbosity and prevarication ("Mosén Diego de Valera, el que scrivió la *Valeriana*, es gran hablistán, y aunque al parecer lleva buena manera de dezir, para mi gusto no me satisfaze, y téngolo por gran parabolano"). Valdés elaborated, saying that Valera was overly fond of his own words and frequently inserted irrelevant remarks that could very well be omitted. Then he chided him for including patent mistruths in his accounts. He offered as examples Valera's attribution of the construction of Segovia's aqueduct to Hispan, the nephew of Hercules, despite the Latin inscriptions plainly indicating it was built by the Romans, and his tale of how La Coruña was taken by the Almonides, who camouflaged their armada with branches so that the inhabitants of the city, when they saw it reflected in the mirror of their tower, thought that it was an island. But then Valdés continues in a somewhat milder vein, saying that if someone wishing to make excuses for Valera alleges that he invented none of these stories but merely copied them from his sources, then he would be willing to charge Valera not with prevarication but with imprudent and uncritical judgment.<sup>4</sup>

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Valera's knowledge of geography probably compared quite favorably with that of his contemporaries, but it seems more dependent on hoary legends and inaccurate tradition than would appear strictly necessary. He divides Asia into twenty-five regions, including--somewhat to our surprise Albania, Macedonia, Thessaly, Amazonia, Crete, Egypt, and Ethiopia, but he mentions nothing east of India. Similarly, his acquaintance with Africa was evidently limited to the regions north of the Sahara. He enumerates fifteen regions, classing as African the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus, the Cyclades, Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica. Given the secrecy enshrouding Portuguese explorations of his time, it is not surprising that he should have remained ignorant of the discoveries achieved under the sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator. Indeed, only a year after the publication of our chronicle, the Portuguese discovered the Congo, but they were a good deal more reticent about their exploits than the explorers of America would be a short time later.

For Europe Valera adopts a scheme presented in a Volume entitled *General Estoria* by someone he calls Juan Teotonico. In the early thirteenth century there was a famous professor of canon law at Bologna who was known simply as Johannes Teutonicus, although his family name was Zemeke. His literary output, however, seems to have consisted almost entirely of glosses on canon law. His best-known work is a commentary on Gratian's *Decretum*, and I have to date found no reference to any general history he might have written.<sup>5</sup> Valera's authority may very well have been altogether a different person. The name seems hardly distinctive, but then the equally simple appellation of Marie de France evidently generated no ambiguity about her identity.

Juan Teotonico had divided Europe into five great regions: Germany, Greece, Italy, France, and Spain. Valera decided to omit those territories likely to be well known to Queen Isabella. Accordingly, no mention is made of the geography of the Iberian peninsula. The most interesting section of the sketch of European lands deals with Scandinavia. Valera probably borrowed heavily from his model for descriptions of the Nordic countries, although he had himself paid a visit to Lübeck, then the capital of Denmark. King John II, Isabella's father, had sent Valera in 1442 to call on his maternal aunt, the sister of Queen Catherine. That lady, a daughter of John of Gaunt, had unfortunately died by the time Valera reached the Danish capital, and Valera went on to England.

It is not altogether clear whether Valera was aware that Iceland was an island. He describes it as a large country, with a vast coastline, at the edge of Europe to the north of Norway. According to him its northern shore faces a frozen sea. He believed the region was inhabited by polar bears that could break through the ice with their claws and thus feed on fish. He describes the land as very sterile with only a few valleys where oats and some trees can grow. For lack of other cereals the natives rely on

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deer and fish for food, and they dress in animal skins since the climate is too cold for sheep-raising.

Valera treats Denmark (which he calls Dacia), Sweden, and Norway in successive chapters (27-29), prefacing his commentary on the region with the observation that in ancient times each province had its own king, but that in his

time they were all subject to one monarch known as the king of Denmark. He quotes Isidore as saying that they had in earlier times subjected Britain, Normandy, and many other islands. He describes the inhabitants as being peaceful and cheerful among themselves but ferocious and cruel toward their enemies.

Sweden, he says, is a huge province, formerly called Gothia, in the farthest reaches of Scythia. By way of contrast with Iceland and Norway, he describes it as being a land with many meadows, abundant in livestock as well as wild game, and possessed of rich silver deposits, and with a copious production of wheat and barley. Though he notes without further comment that grapes don't grow there, one might draw the conclusion that, like any person steeped in Mediterranean culture, he would experience great difficulty in adapting to life in a country without wine. He observes that in former times Sweden had held sway over vast regions of Asia and Europe and that the great Alexander shied away from invading its territories and Julius Caesar, after conquering Gaul and much of Germany, feared to enter the province. For this he quotes the authority of both Isidore and Orosius.

Valera thought that Norway was almost completely surrounded by water, although he was aware that it bordered on Sweden, and he states that the Albia river formed the border. Since, as he says, the great cold of that region prevented the cultivation of grains and grapes, the people lived mostly from hunting, fishing, and furring. He remarks on the abundance of fur-bearing animals, including sable, grey squirrel, ermine, and two others that I haven't been able to identify (*suynas* and *bardas*). He also comments on the long summer days and the long winter nights of the northern latitudes and on the abundance of hawks and falcons. His one really naive assertion is that Norway possessed miraculous springs such that a log or hide thrown into them would turn to rock. But then, he had related an even more unbelievable tale about England, a country he had actually visited. There, he said, one could find a certain tree, the leaves of which if they fell on land would turn to birds, and if they fell in water would become fish.

On balance his knowledge of Europe represents a huge advance beyond that depicted, for instance, in the thirteenth-century *Semeiança del mundo*.<sup>6</sup> And his awareness of Scandinavia, especially, is surprisingly broad considering that the chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus and the works of Johannes and Olaus Magnus had not yet been published.

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In the chronicle proper, Valera displays a minimal originality in the early sections, but as he approaches his own times he occasionally offers novel information about events in which he was a direct participant or observer. As a prominent adversary of King John's favorite, Don Alvaro de Luna, he was at times deeply involved in court intrigue, and he reprints *in toto* the text of several pieces of important correspondence between himself and other prominent officials. However, he is always careful to avoid wounding the sensibilities of his patroness by referring to her father only in the most fulsome terms and by refraining from any suggestion that he might in any way have been responsible for the actions of the cordially hated Don Alvaro.

In addition to its historical and literary interest, Valera's chronicle serves as an important source for testimony regarding details of late fifteenth-century Spanish. The exact date of the completion of composition is known, as well as the date and place of publication. Also, we are fairly well informed as to the biographical data of the author. So the text is precisely situated in both time and space and can be used to refine our notions of the chronology of certain linguistic shifts.

The second-person plural verb forms of the present indicative and subjunctive had lost the *-d-* of the Old Spanish desinence in the course of the fourteenth century, but the modern forms were slow to develop. Valera's text from the very outset offers examples of intermediate forms (*podaes*, *mandastes*, *sepaes*, *ayaes*, *tenes*, alongside a *venis*, already modern in appearance [fol. Aii&supr-v;]).

There is a class of verbs which in Old Spanish had preterites with a stem vowel in *-ó-*, such as *ouo*, *touo*, both meaning 'he had', *sopo* 'he knew', *estouo* 'he was', etc. By the middle of the sixteenth century they had all changed their radical vowel to *-ú-*. Our text illustrates with perfect clarity that the change had begun but not been completed by 1482. There is one marvelous example where *ouo* occurs at the beginning of a line, and toward the end of the same line one finds *vuó* ("Sen ouo a asia. Cam africa. Iafet europa. Asia vuó este nonbre de vna Reyna asi llamada, que antigua mente aquella parte señoreo" [fol. Aii&supv;]). Finally, in the passage alluded to above, where Valera relates the tall

tale about the miraculous trees in England, there is what must be one of the earliest examples of an impersonal *se-* construction with an agent expressed by means of a prepositional phrase ("A la parte del leuante en la Ribera del mar *se afirma por muchos* que ay arboles que la foia dellos que cae en la mar se conuierte en pescado & la que cae en la tierra en aues de grandeza de gauiotas" [fol. Di&r;]).<sup>7</sup>

In its language and in its content, this work in many ways represents one of the last echoes of the Spanish Middle Ages. The events of the following decade would mark the dawn of a new era.

Notes

1. According to S. H. Steinberg, printing in Spain began with the most up-to-date roman types available but almost at once reverted, as in this book, to the gothic fonts which were lineal descendants of Spanish manuscript lettering (*Five Hundred Years of Printing* [London: Penguin Books, 1955], p. 67).
2. Konrad Haebler lists a Salamanca edition of 1487 and a Seville edition of 1492, both of which he knew only from dubious second-hand references. See Conrado Haebler, *Bibliografía ibérica del siglo XV* (The Hague: Nijhoff and Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1902), pp. 319-23. For a more complete and accurate record, see Antonio Palau y Dulcet, *Manual del Librero Hispanoamericano* 25 (Barcelona: Antonio Palau Dulcet and Oxford: Dolphin Book Co., 1973), pp. 68-70. However, Palau y Dulcet does not list the 1493 Zaragoza edition, for which Haebler provides ample

documentation.

3. Detailed biographical information appears in Juan de Mata Carriazo's edition of the *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, por Mosén Diego de Valera [= *Revista de filología española*, Anejo 8 (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1927)]. There is also a succinct but informative treatment in Angel González Palencia and Juan Hurtado y J. de la Serna, *Historia de la literatura española*, 3rd ed. (Madrid: n.p., 1932), pp. 204-6.
4. The text of Valera's remarks appears in the editions of the *Diálogo de la lengua* by Jose de Montesinos [= *Clásicos Castellanos*, vol. 86] (Madrid: Ediciones de "La Lectura," 1928), pp. 174-76, and of Antonio Quilis Morales (Barcelona Plaza & Janes, 1984) pp. 207-9.
5. There are entries for Johannes Teutonicus in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 14, rpt. (Berlin: Dunker & Humboldt, 1969), pp. 475-76, and in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), pp. 121-22.
6. See *Semeiança del mundo: A Medieval Description of the World*, ed. William E. Bull and Harry E. Williams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).
7. Although Spanish grammars written for foreigners regularly condemn the construction, many successive editions of the Spanish Academy grammar cited as a model of correct usage the sentence "Las paces se firmaron por los plenipotenciarios." I have collected a number of parallel examples from modern writers in "El *Se* impersonal en el español de America" in *Actas del II Congreso Internacional sobre el Español de America* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1986), pp. 386-87.