



JEWISH POETRY AND CULTURAL COEXISTENCE IN LATE MEDIEVAL SPAIN

by
GREGORY B. KAPLAN

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For Nuria and Andrew

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Map of Spain. (Map data © 2019 Inst. Geogr. Nacional, Google)



Cloister of the Colegiata (Collegiate Church) of San Martín de Elines.
(Photo by Gregory B. Kaplan)



Thirteenth-century tomb in the cloister of the Colegiata (Collegiate Church) of San Martín de Elines. (Photo by Gregory B. Kaplan)



Close-up of a scallop shell carved on a thirteenth-century tomb in the cloister of the Colegiata (Collegiate Church) of San Martín de Elines, which is evidence of medieval Compostelan pilgrimage in Valderredible. (Photo by Gregory B. Kaplan)



Close-up of a seemingly medieval wooden roof over the interior of the Church of the Cross (in Carrión de los Condes), which was a synagogue in the Middle Ages. (Photo by Gregory B. Kaplan)

ABBREVIATIONS

b.	born
BCE	Before Common Era
ca.	circa
CE	Common Era
d.	died
ed.	edition/editor
fl.	flourished
intro.	introduction
n.p.	no publisher
no.	number
r.	reigned
St.	saint
trans.	translated by
v.	verse/verses
vol.	volume
vols.	volumes

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are my own.

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK OFFERS a ground-breaking perspective on Judeo-Christian coexistence in medieval Spain, in particular on the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James), one of the most important pilgrimage routes in Europe. The concept of peaceful, parallel religious societies in medieval Spain was first described by the Spanish historian Américo Castro.¹ Castro envisioned a utopian period of cultural interchanges, but did not make an adequate case that an interconfessional Utopia surfaced in the writings of the period. In reaction to this overarching depiction of coexistence, David Nirenberg “questions the very existence of an age of peaceful and idyllic” relations by arguing that anti-Semitic violence “was a central and systemic aspect of the coexistence of majority and minorities in medieval Spain.”² Similarly, Mark Cohen writes of “the gloomy position” of Castilian Jews during the Middle Ages.³ While the historical records examined by Nirenberg and Mark Cohen expose the non-monolithic character of abutting belief communities, these scholars fail to take into account literary testimony of cooperation between Christians and Jews. In this book, I uncover new evidence of Judeo-Christian cooperation in Castilian monasteries on the Camino de Santiago. My book reveals that a collaborative climate endured in these monasteries as demonstrated by the transmission of *cuaderna vía* poetry from Christians to Jews.

I focus on poems written by Jews in Castilian (Spanish) during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that illustrate a progressive mastery of *cuaderna vía* poetry. This metrical form began to take shape within twelfth-century French monastic circles as an outgrowth of a renewed appreciation for Classical Antiquity. Much attention was paid to the Greek ruler Alexander the Great (b. 356–d. 32 BCE), whose life was recounted by clerics from the order of Cluny in narrative poems which comprised dodecasyllabic alexandrine verses. During the early thirteenth century, Castilian *cuaderna vía* poetry was created by clerics working at Castilian monasteries on the Camino de Santiago, who were influenced by French Cluniac monks invited to teach at their monastic schools. The Castilian monasteries that received Cluniac monks sought integration within Catholic Christendom by practising customs popularized by Cluny, such as the versification of liturgical hymns.⁴ Castilian clerics also had an economic motivation for adapting French metrics, namely, the familiarity of alexandrine verses to French pilgrims travelling along the Camino de Santiago might encourage them to make donations.

In chapter 1, “The Birth of Castilian *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry,” I explain the process by which Castilian clerics learned to adapt the rules of French versification while studying under Cluniac monks in monastic schools. At a time when Castilian was a nascent literary language, motivation for clerics to imitate French norms emerged organically as they crafted fresh compositions of alexandrine verses grouped in rhymed quatrains

1 Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History*, 221–29.

2 Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 9.

3 Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 199.

4 On these hymns, see Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny*, 103–7.

nicknamed *cuaderna vía*, or fourfold way. The transmission of the alexandrine verse from native speakers of Old French to native speakers of Castilian is confirmed by the treatment in early Castilian *cuaderna vía* poems of linguistic features of Old French. Castilian clerics also found appealing the *medial caesura* within the alexandrine verse, which provided a natural syntactic and respiratory pause that facilitated the recitation of lengthy narrative poems. These clerics reveal that they assimilated Old French norms to Castilian versification in their production of fourteen-syllable, rather than twelve-syllable, alexandrines. It is instructive to point out that this evolution of clerical *cuaderna vía* poetry suggests that Castilian clerics, as they came to Castilianize *cuaderna vía* techniques, also became teachers of *cuaderna vía* norms to Castilian clerics, which occurred contemporaneous to the decline of Cluny during the thirteenth century.

As scholars have established, Castilian *cuaderna vía* poems were routinely recited aloud at monasteries to pilgrims. In his critical edition of *Vida de San Millán de la Cogolla* (Life of St. Emilian Cucullatus), by Gonzalo de Berceo (b. ca. 1196–d. ca. 1260), Brian Dutton discusses this manner of public dissemination. Berceo was a cleric at the monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla, which lies today in the Spanish province of La Rioja but which was part of a thirteenth-century Castilian kingdom whose frontiers extended eastward until the Basque Country. Public readings of *Vida de San Millán* occurred not only at San Millán de la Cogolla but, as Dutton asserts, also at the many smaller churches and hospitals that were overseen by the monastery as a means of magnifying its importance to Compostelan pilgrims.⁵

Cuaderna vía poems include popular discourse as well as vignettes that highlight social mores, which indicates that the clerics who composed and recited these poems interacted with pilgrims travelling on the Camino de Santiago as well as with local populations. This interaction has been studied by scholars such as Simone Pinet, who describes *cuaderna vía* poetry as a vehicle for the “transmission of knowledge” from Christian clerics to lay people.⁶ Scholars have overlooked interaction between clerics and Jews at key Castilian pilgrimage monasteries along the Camino de Santiago, a potential avenue of research that has been obscured by the sporadic appearance in *cuaderna vía* poems of anti-Semitic libels, that is, accusations that Jews were involved in heretical acts.

Well known examples of such vilification are found in *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* (Miracles of Our Lady), which was composed by Berceo around 1250 and which he or another cleric read aloud to pilgrims as M. Ana Diz posits.⁷ *Milagros* is a *cuaderna vía* poem consisting of nine hundred and eleven mono-rhymed quatrains, in which Berceo narrates twenty-five episodes that communicate the importance of Marian devotion in attaining Salvation, in particular for those who commit the sins (such as fornication and theft) depicted in these episodes. Jews appear several times as figures who are religious outsiders and thus the objects of ridicule and violence. In one episode, “Cristo y

5 Berceo, *La “Vida de San Millán”*, 185–86. Fernando Gómez Redondo, “Origen y formulación de la lectura moderna,” 82, posits that Berceo’s other works were also recited aloud to pilgrims.

6 Pinet, *The Task of the Cleric*, 3.

7 Diz, *Historias de certidumbre*, 42, 47, 211–12.

los judíos de Toledo" ("Christ and the Jews of Toledo"), Jews are caught in the act of crucifying a wax figure of Christ and are subsequently massacred. This event is not historical and, like the other episodes involving Jews, is a retelling of a libel that circulated throughout Europe. In the case of Berceo's "Cristo y los judíos de Toledo," the episode centres, as Joshua Trachtenberg explains, on "[o]ne of the commonest charges against the Jews [...] [and one that originated in the] doctrine of transubstantiation [...] established at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215."⁸

There was an economic motive for the inclusion of anti-Semitic libels that was tied to the historical evolution of pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, which increased dramatically during the twelfth century. In response to growing competition for donations, *cuaderna vía* poetry was refined as a tool for drawing greater numbers of pilgrims to monasteries. As a component of their education, Castilian clerics learned how to cast a wide net by composing *cuaderna vía* poems in which the vilified figures (such as the Devil, Jews, lepers, Muslims, and sorcerers) were familiar to pilgrims arriving from throughout Europe. This is confirmed by fictional episodes that depict these figures in similar terms in Castilian clerical *cuaderna vía* poems and in texts in other languages by clerics from pilgrimage centres across Europe, which indicates widespread awareness of the propagandistic value, and by extension the potential monetary benefits, of weaving invective into publicly recited works.

Of course, such value depended on latent anti-Semitism among the European populace, and this well-documented historical animus was certainly felt by lay people as well as by clerics. While clerics tapped into this anti-Semitism in order to reap economic benefits, the poems analysed in the present volume demonstrate that some Christian clerics collaborated with Jews in Castilian monasteries on the Camino de Santiago. These poems, as I demonstrate in the cases of anonymous works in chapter 2, "Early Jewish *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry," reveal that during the thirteenth century Jews began to compose *cuaderna vía* poetry, which could only have occurred through study in monastic schools with Christian clerics, who were conduits of written culture and the sole individuals capable of instructing others in this verse form. Jews living close to Castilian pilgrimage monasteries would have been aware that *cuaderna vía* poetry was recited publicly, and this motivated their interest in exploiting that medium. The fact that Jewish *cuaderna vía* poems appear in medieval and early-modern Jewish prayer books reveals why some Jews learned to compose a type of verse that was only taught in monastic schools, namely in order to produce liturgical texts that could be recited aloud.

In chapter 3, "Proverbios morales, the Epitome of Jewish *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry," I focus on *Proverbios morales* (Moral Proverbs), one of the most important works of medieval Castilian literature. *Proverbios morales* was written around 1350 by Sem Tob de Carrión (b. ca. 1290–d. ca. 1369). Few biographical details on Sem Tob have been uncovered, although it is known that he lived in Carrión de los Condes, a frequently visited stop on the Camino de Santiago. Sem Tob's nearly flawless Castilian *cuaderna vía* versification indicates a period of extensive study with Christian clerics. Sem Tob criticism has yet to focus on the manner by which he learned *cuaderna vía* norms, and I advance the theory

8 Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 109.

that he studied at the Cluniac monastery of San Zoilo, which was the first Castilian Cluniac monastery established on the Camino de Santiago and which owned lands on which the Jews of Carrión de los Condes lived. My theory is based on historical documents that reveal the unique position of Jews living near this monastery, who were granted the same royal privileges as Christians in 1220. Inevitably, these Jews, including Sem Tob, would have interacted with their clerical patrons.

After serving during turbulent times at the court of Alfonso XI (r. 1312–1350), Sem Tob dedicated *Proverbios morales* to Alfonso's successor on the Castilian and Leonese thrones, Pedro I (r. 1350–1369). The only poem dedicated by either a Jew or Christian to King Pedro, Sem Tob's *Proverbios morales* advocates for sensible policies and toleration toward Jews. Sem Tob also lived at a critical juncture in the history of peninsular Jewry, when the continuation of royal protection of Jewish subjects was threatened not only by the spread of anti-Semitism but also by a rise in Jewish sectarianism. This internal dispute concerning the limits of rabbinic authority intensified majority prejudices against Jews insofar as the image of a splintered Jewish faith was considered flawed compared to a supposedly unified Roman Catholicism. In calling for toleration toward Jews and an end to Jewish sectarianism, *Proverbios morales* speaks to Christian and Jewish publics. Sem Tob's composition of this poem according to *cuaderna vía* norms speaks to his involvement in an interconfessional collaborative culture that supplied him with the tools for voicing his ideas on multiple levels.

In chapter 4, "The Legacy of Jewish *Cuaderna Vía* Poetry," I examine texts from the fourteenth century onwards, including original works such as the "Coplas de Yoçef" (Couplets on Joseph) as well as fragments of thirteenth-century texts that have circulated orally outside of the Iberian Peninsula until modern times. When these poems and those analysed in previous chapters are considered together as they are for the first time in this book, they form a unique corpus of Jewish poetry whose origins are grounded in a collaboration between Christians and Jews that has not been recognized in previous scholarship. Readers will find a perspective that challenges the presumption that medieval coexistence was always "predicated upon violence," as Nirenberg asserts.⁹ My analysis reveals that, in Castilian monasteries on the Camino de Santiago where *cuaderna vía* poetry was cultivated, interconfessional toleration was built on a dialogue involving Christian clerical poets writing in tandem with their Jewish counterparts. Judeo-Christian coexistence was predicated on cooperation between Jews and clerics who shared their intellectual formation over a period of time that, as demonstrated by the poems I study, was sufficient enough in length to allow for the process of education to occur repeatedly.

⁹ Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 245.

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