

Spain's Centuries of Crisis

1300–1474

Teofilo F. Ruiz

Spain's Centuries of Crisis

A HISTORY OF SPAIN

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To Sofia Rose

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Writing the history of Spain in the late Middle Ages, as I will reiterate in the first chapter, is not an easy task. The diversity of political players and entities, the endless conflicts between noble factions, urban oligarchies, and the Crown, the numerous and violent challenges to royal authority, and severe social and economic crises stood in sharp contrast to vigorous and innovative cultural transformations, linguistic changes, and signal administrative reforms. All of these components paved the way for Spain's later primacy of place among western European powers in the early modern period.

In attempting to reconstruct the history of the two most important realms in the peninsula – the kingdom of Castile (Castile-León) and the Crown of Aragon – from around 1300 to the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1469 and Isabella's ascent to the throne in 1474, I have placed that troubled history and the general evolution of political, administrative, and cultural life within the context of the long-term crises that plagued most of the West from the late thirteenth century to the end of the Middle Ages. By emphasizing crises and the demands they placed on Spanish women and men, I have also sought to see administrative, political, religious, and cultural innovations as responses to, as well as shaped by, the general late medieval crises. These developments had also their counterparts in growing antagonism against religious minorities and the end of religious pluralism in the peninsula. They were also paralleled and influenced by vigorous and novel cultural production.

Chapter 1 provides a general view of the Spanish realms in 1300 and seeks to place the events of that year and the next century and a half within the long sweep of Spanish medieval history. A brief foray into the geographical features of the peninsula and the links between topography and political life leads us to chapter 2. In that chapter I describe the different aspects of Spain's social, economic, political, and structural crises from the late

thirteenth century into the late fifteenth, with emphasis on the impact of the crises on political institutions and practice.

Chapters 3 to 5 offer a chronological narrative of Spanish political life, highlighting the ebb and flow of peninsular conflicts and territorial expansion and contrasting the different paths followed by Castile and Aragon. In chapter 6 I turn to those administrative, fiscal, and institutional changes that, while the crises raged, set the foundations for either stronger royal authority in Castile or formal “constitutional” arrangements in the Crown of Aragon. True “sinews” of power, these institutional innovations provided the framework for new ways of articulating power. Chapter 7 focuses on the intertwined histories of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. I would argue that the clear deterioration of these relations in the period after 1300 reflected, to a large extent, the shifting context in which different religious groups interacted. The crises of late medieval society had, on the whole, nefarious consequences for Jews and Muslims, and the Christians’ (or at least some Christians) growing hostility towards them was also a complex and perverse response to the general crises affecting the peninsular realms. Finally, the last chapter examines cultural production – mostly literary culture, festivals, and other cultural artifacts – as paralleling and emerging from the troubled climate of the age.

Were I to list all those to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, the list would be so extensive as to duplicate the length of this book. The sparse notes and the more extensive bibliographical essay do not begin to reflect the large number of scholars and students whose works and comments have informed these pages. Angus Mackay, a historian of rare understanding and insightfulness, and a generous friend, was to have written this volume originally. The reader, I fear, will be short-changed. No matter how very hard I have tried, this book would never match that which Angus Mackay would have written. That this particular volume is preceded by Peter Linehan’s book, *Spain, 1157–1312*, in Blackwell’s History of Spain series and is followed by John Edwards’ *The Spain of the Catholic Monarchs* honors me greatly. I could not think of more distinguished company, and their contributions to Blackwell’s History of Spain have been a very strong incentive to attempt to make a contribution worthy of their distinction as scholars. I have known Peter Linehan for many years and have greatly benefited from his insightful comments and exceedingly generous friendship. John Edwards’ work has also been an enduring source of inspiration and a model for my own.

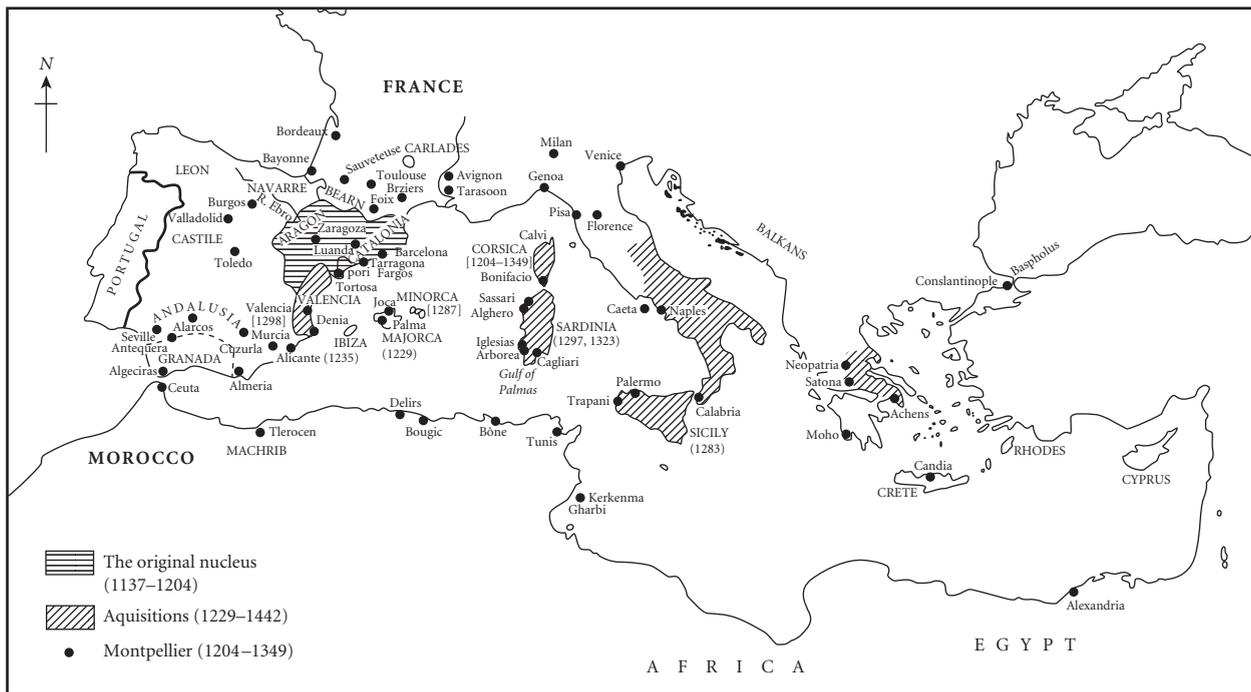
At UCLA, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, Ron Mellor, David Myers, David Sabeau, Arch Getty, Patrick Geary, Muriel McClendon, Steve Aron, Kevin Terraciano, and Geoffrey Symcox have provided the scholarly community in which it has always been a pleasure to do research and writing. Graduate and undergraduate students have provided me with vigorous critiques and helpful comments. I have learned much from the work of Gregory Milton, Claudia Mineo, Jenny Jordan, and Bryan Givens. In the United States Paul Freedman, David Nirenberg, William C. Jordan, Olivia R. Constable, and Daniel Smail have always given their unreserved support.

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Map 1 Spain in the late Fifteenth Century

Source: based on Edwards, J. *The Monarchies of Ferdinand and Isabella* (Historical Association pamphlet), p. 4



Map 2 The Crown of Aragon and the Western Mediterranean in the late Middle Ages
 Source: Bisson, T. *The Medieval Crown of Aragon: A Short History* (Oxford, 1986), p. 91

Chapter 1

At the Dawn of a New Century

The Spains around 1300

The dawn of a new century in 1300 was marked in Rome, and elsewhere throughout the medieval West, with lavish celebrations. The Great Jubilee drew thousands of pilgrims to the capital of Western Christianity, and Dante, writing the first lines of his *Divine Comedy* two years later, chose Good Friday 1300 as the date for his fictional encounter with Virgil and the date for the wrenching journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and to his final vision of the Godhead. On November 15, 1300, Ferdinand (Fernando) IV, king of Castile, León, Asturias, Galicia, Toledo, and of the wide collection of other kingdoms and territories that constituted the realm of Castile in the Middle Ages, exempted Don Estebán and his wife, Doña Inés, both citizens of Burgos, from all taxes, except for *moneda forera* (a tax paid to the Crown for maintaining the stability of the coinage), as a reward for Estebán's efforts as a surgeon.¹ That same year, under the authority of the regents, Ferdinand's mother, María de Molina, and his uncle, the Infante Don Henry (Enrique) – for the king was still a minor – the young king granted similar privileges and exemptions to men and women throughout the realm, issued charters to municipalities, made donations to monasteries, and other such examples of royal largesse and power.

In 1300 other extant documents in Castile, the Crown of Aragon, Navarre, and even the Muslim kingdom of Granada reveal mostly the normal and mundane affairs of everyday life. Property transactions, donations, wills, monastic protests against noble encroachment and abuses, and royal attempts – more often than not failed attempts or ignored by a restless nobility – to restore order are similar in many respects to those of preceding and succeeding decades. In the Iberian peninsula, 1300 was not the dramatic watershed that the arrival of the new century marked for other parts of Europe. Yet, though not charged with the symbolic weight that it had in other realms throughout the medieval West, many Castilians, Aragonese,

Catalans, and other people living in Spain had a keen awareness of events transpiring elsewhere. Spaniards, as did many other western Europeans, flocked to Rome in search of indulgences or of the many pleasures (and pains) of medieval tourism in 1300.

For those living in what we know today as Spain, the excitement about the new century must have been a bit disconcerting and a further reminder, despite the great strides made to integrate the peninsula into European affairs from the late eleventh century onwards, of a disconnect with the rest of the medieval West. Throughout medieval Spain the year was identified in the documentation as *era de* (the era of) 1338. The Spanish 1300 had, in fact, occurred in what, for most of the rest of Europe, was still 1262. The real 1300, if we can call calendrical conventions real, thus passed without too many momentous events or without many of those signal watersheds around which traditional historiography has been built. Nonetheless, dramatic transformations were already in the making, and the diverse Spanish realms faced harder and more troubling times in the decades ahead. For one, Castilians, Aragonese, Catalans, and Valencians, though still dating their documents by the old formula that placed the beginning of the Christian era 38 years before Jesus' birth, were increasingly aware of being chronologically out of step with the rest of Europe. Some documents after 1300 noted both the ancient traditional forms of dating and the dating norms in use in other European kingdoms. By the late fourteenth century, all the Spanish realms had abandoned the old style of dating and embraced the rest of Europe, choosing Christ's birth as the appropriate chronological marker.

Regardless of the confusing chronological situation and the absence of dramatic events to mark the year, the Spanish realms, as they faced the dawning of a new century in 1300, did so with the accumulated experiences, institutional developments, and social strife of centuries of political evolution. Before focusing on Spain's historical development in the late Middle Ages, it may be useful to probe the context in which the Spanish realms evolved in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

A Plurality of Spains

Defining what Spain was in the Middle Ages, beyond a geographical concept, is as difficult as it may be today in the age of autonomous regions and recent calls for regional secession or wider autonomy. In 1300 the Iberian peninsula was fragmented into a diversity of realms and political entities. They contrasted with each other in terms of political organization, language, social and economic structures, topography, and history. The peninsula's

political fragmentation reflected the historical developments of an earlier period and the slow emergence of distinct kingdoms after the Muslim invasion. What, then, were the different political entities comprising medieval Spain in 1300?

Castile

The largest in terms of territory and population was the kingdom of Castile. It extended over most of the central and northwestern areas of the peninsula, with borders on the Bay of Biscay in the north, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean in its southern frontier, Portugal in the west, and Aragon, Navarre, and Granada in the east, north, and south respectively. The kingdom of Castile was itself a composite of numerous other kingdoms and territories added either by conquests or familial alliances over the course of the Reconquest, that is, over a period running effectively from the early tenth century to the fourteenth. Its rulers were never described simply as kings of Castile, but their long and often repeated titles articulated the sense of an amalgam of what had once been independent realms, now brought together under the power of one king (or queen). Asturias, León, Galicia, Castile, Toledo, Córdoba, Seville, Murcia, the lordship of Molina, and the Basque homeland were among some of the most important holdings constituting the late medieval kingdom of Castile-León. And the diversity of these realms was great indeed. From their geographical and climatic differences to their peculiar historical developments, patterns of cultivation and rural life, rights of the peasantry, and the role of regional nobilities in the running of the realm, the kingdoms and territories that formed Castile were, in many respects, as distinct from each other as Castile was from other Iberian realms. And matters could become even more complicated when we consider religious plurality and antagonisms that flourished in Castile, as they did elsewhere in the peninsula, during the late Middle Ages.

The Crown of Aragon

If Castile was a complicated polity, the Crown of Aragon was infinitely more so. At least most of the Castilian realm enjoyed some linguistic unity – with the exception of parts of the Basque country and Galicia, where significant parts of the population remained faithful to their original regional languages. The Crown of Aragon was also a collection of realms, but unlike its powerful Castilian neighbor, each of its main components or political units – the kingdom of Aragon, Catalonia (in its many different incarnations

as the county of Barcelona or Principality, but never a kingdom), and the kingdom of Valencia (conquered by James [Jaume] I in 1238) – retained its political autonomy, representative assemblies, and distinct linguistic and cultural identity. The Crown of Aragon was, in fact, a federation of realms, and the unfortunate kings of these polities had to deal with each of them individually and, one should add, carefully. As will be seen in greater detail in later chapters, the social, economic, and political structures of Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia were quite different from each other and, often, to the chagrin of their collective master, at odds with each other. In the best of circumstances, the Crown of Aragon foreshadowed the European Union. In the worst of circumstances, it was a contentious arrangement, with each of the units jealously defending its rights and privileges. Ruling the Crown of Aragon was an art, and a very difficult art at that.

An expansive realm in spite of its political fragmentation, in 1282 the king of the Crown of Aragon gained control of Sicily. In the early fourteenth century, a dependent kingdom, that of Majorca (with its capital in Perpignan in southern France and enjoying control of the Balearic Islands), came into being. Aragonese and Catalan outposts prospered in the former lands of the Byzantine empire in the east. Thus, throughout the period under study, a great deal of the political and commercial history of the Crown of Aragon was defined by the relation of its original and permanent core (Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia) to its outlying regions and kingdoms – southern France, the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, Sicily, and Naples. And by the end of the fifteenth century, these long historical ties drew Spain inexorably into Italy.

Navarre

Perched on both sides of the Pyrenees, the ancient kingdom of Navarre had been the hegemonic political power in the peninsula in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and the progenitor of a series of Iberian realms (Aragon, Castile). Culturally and linguistically diverse (because of the large Basque presence in some regions of Navarre), the kingdom wavered uncertainly between French and Iberian ruling houses, and its identity, as either French or Spanish, was not fully defined until the early sixteenth century. Ironically, if the kings of the Spains in the eleventh century were the children or descendants of Sancho the Great (1000–35) of Navarre, Juan Carlos, the present ruler of Spain, is the descendant of Henry of Navarre (Bourbon) who became king of France in 1589 and kept his claims to his ancestral lands alive in the face of the Spanish annexation of the kingdom in the early sixteenth century.

Granada

After the great Christian conquests of most of southern Spain in the early thirteenth century, the kingdom of Granada, one of the kingdoms of *taifas* that had emerged from the demise of the Cordoban Caliphate in the 1030s, became the last outpost of Islam in the peninsula. From 1300 until its final surrender in 1492, Granada remained the touchstone defining Castile's, and to a much lesser extent other Christian realms', political actions in the peninsula. Although a tributary kingdom, paying large sums to the kings of Castile throughout most of this period, Granada was a prosperous realm and an important center for learning and the arts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Through its great maritime outlet at Málaga (southwest of the city of Granada itself), Granada and its hinterland maintained important commercial and cultural links to North Africa and to the vast commercial networks of Dar-al-Islam (the lands of Islam). Blessed with a hard-working and thrifty population, Granada exported silk cloth and other luxury items. Islamic foreign travelers, such as Ibn Batutah and Abd al-Bāsīt, commented on the economic and cultural vigor of the region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Granada's Nasrid rulers could engage in great architectural projects, such as the incomparable Alhambra, even while paying heavy tribute to the Castilian kings. When the end came in the late fifteenth century, Granada withstood the Christian onslaught for more than a decade before its surrender.

Portugal

Though not part of the story told in this book, Portugal was the other peninsular realm. Emerging as an independent kingdom only in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, the Portuguese chose very different paths from those followed by their Iberian neighbors. The Portuguese advance into Muslim territory in the peninsula came to a close in the mid-thirteenth century. By 1300, the Portuguese were already poised for their great and successful gambit in the Atlantic and southward along the coast of Africa, but though they looked outward for their expansion, Portugal's history remained inextricably bound up with that of other Iberian realms, above all, Castile.²

Geography, Climate, and Languages

Iberian political fragmentation mirrored its geographical, climatic, and linguistic diversity. Although geography does not entirely dictate historical

developments, one cannot deny the enduring impact which the rough topography and climate (in specific parts of the peninsula) had in the making of Spain. Historians, John H. Elliott and Fernand Braudel most notable among them, have long emphasized the role which poor and thin soils, scant rain, high mountains, and meager rivers have had on the evolution of Spain as a political entity and on the transportation networks necessary for the economic well-being of the peninsula.³ Large sections of Spain provided little return for the peasants' endless toil. The land yielded its fruits only by intense and exhausting work, and late winter storms, of which there were too many for comfort, could swiftly wipe out all the year's labor.

Politically, the Spains fractured along the spines of mountain ranges crisscrossing the peninsula. After all, there are few places, with perhaps the central Castilian plain (which itself rises to a very high altitude) as an exception, in which mountains do not loom on the horizon. If topography dictated the emergence of particular political entities, climate also shaped different types of agriculture and organization of the soil. The abundant rain falling on most of northern Spain led to specific types of agriculture, village organization, and relations between villagers and their royal, ecclesiastical, or secular lords. The plains of Old and New Castile – the dominant geographical feature of the peninsula – generated other patterns of organizing rural spaces and peculiar ties between town and countryside, between free peasants and their lords. Iberia's southern region, with its different ecology, irrigation patterns, and the influence of an ancient Islamic heritage and husbandry, yielded yet another type or types of social, economic, and political organization.

One must be cautious, however, about reducing Spain to a series of neatly stacked geographical areas. The reality and impact of Spanish geography and climate on political communities were far more complex than the heuristic categories deployed in travel guides or general books such as this. Regions overlapped. Small ecological niches – where social and economic structures and development over time did not follow well-laid-out patterns – can be found in abundance. Human agency, millennia old, was always at work, transforming the topographical and climatological realities of the peninsula.

The Diverse Geographies of Spain

Green Spain

In this rough and brief sketch of Spain's geography and climate, one could easily posit a series of distinct Spains, following not the artificial boundaries

resulting from historical circumstances but the unalterable dictates of topography. First, in a broad band running throughout most of northern Spain – from the Atlantic coast in the west to the Mediterranean in the east – lies Green Spain, a region of abundant rain, moderate summers and winters (except in the eastern parts close to the Pyrenees), high mountains and small villages dotted across the countryside. The economy of the region emphasized fruit trees, dairy farming, livestock raising, fishing (on the Basque, Cantabrian, and Asturian coasts), and other agricultural and maritime activities associated with mountain regions and the sea. The Pyrenees and their offshoots constituted the dominant feature of the region. Rising majestically, from the Bay of Biscay in the west to the Costa Brava (the Mediterranean shore of Catalonia) in the east, the Pyrenees served as a natural border with France, though mountain passes all along the range provided easy access for pilgrims, merchants, and armies. Liminal regions – the val de Aran, Andorra, and Navarre itself – shifted political loyalties, depending on the course of events and the relative strength of realms on either side of the mountain range. The spurs of the Pyrenees (among them the impressive Picos de Europa range in Cantabria) dug deep into the northern areas of Aragon, Catalonia, the Basque country, Cantabria, and Asturias. Traveling from Andorra to La Seo d’Urgell (in northern Catalonia) and from La Seo toward the Mediterranean shore, one is struck by the ruggedness of the territory and the difficulties in negotiating even today, with modern roads and tunnels, an easy transit from one region to another.

Green Spain did not of course constitute a single geographical unit, nor did it develop into a single political entity. In the northwest, the mountains of Galicia, though they did not rise as high as mountains did east of Villafranca del Bierzo (the natural gateway into the region), marked a natural frontier with Asturias and León. By 1300, land tenancy in Galicia had been spectacularly fragmented. It was a region of predatory and unruly lordships, and peasant grievances against lordly abuses would explode in open rebellion in the late fifteenth century in the rebellion of the *Hermendiños*.⁴ With temperate climate and abundant rain well suited to livestock and some forms of agriculture, Galicia, with an extensive shoreline on the Atlantic and magnificent and well-protected harbors (*rías*), also developed a strong maritime tradition – fishing, trading, and seafaring. From La Coruña and other estuary (*ría*) harbors, Galician merchants and seafarers maintained steady relations with English and Flemish ports. In the countryside, its ancestral language, Galician, remained alive, as did a poetical tradition which had flourished in the twelfth century, that of the *cantigas*, though this was beginning to wane under the impact of Castilian in the fourteenth century.

Further east, the regions of Asturias, Cantabria, and the Basque coast also enjoyed a temperate climate and high rainfall. Through the Asturian ports of Gijón and Llanes, the Cantabrian coastal towns of San Vicente de la Barquera, Santander, Castro Urdiales, and Laredo, and their Basque counterparts, Bermeo, Fuenterrabía, San Sebastián, and Bilbao, the region offered many entry points for a robust traffic with England, Flanders, and southern France from the mid-thirteenth century onwards. From there, goods were carried south to the great mercantile distribution center of Burgos on the northern Castilian plains, or to Victoria and Logroño, gateways to Navarre and further east to Aragon. Green and humid, the peasants of this sub-region of northern Spain held their lands on long-term or life-lease contracts or owned them outright. Villages in the region had long gained substantial concessions from their lords and the Crown.

Tetzel, a German traveling through the region in the sixteenth century, describes it pejoratively as a land where one finds “few hens, eggs, cheese, and milk (because there are no cows) . . . people ate little meat, feeding themselves only on fruits.”⁵ Tetzel’s account, typical of foreign travelers in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, echoes the negative assessments of the Basque and Cantabrian lands and of their people found in the famous twelfth-century pilgrimage guide to Compostela (the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*),⁶ but it stands in sharp contrast to the praise of Spain and, in particular, to the idealization of the mountain region, just a few kilometers south of Cantabria and the Basque homeland, found in the *Primera crónica general* and the *Poema de Fernán González* (both dating to the mid-thirteenth century). The *Primera crónica general* engaged in a general praise of Spain (not just the mountains), drawn from the older panegyric of Spain found in St. Isidore’s work. The anonymous *Poema de Fernán González* zeroed on a small region of northern Castile which ecologically and topographically resembled Green Spain far more than it did the meseta of northern Castile. In exalted tones, the mountains are seen as paradisiacal lands of abundant pasture and livestock, of mild winters and temperate summers.⁷ The truth, as always, lies somewhere between Tetzel’s indictment and Castilian medieval authors’ effusive praise of the land. The land was rich only in some specific areas, surrounded often by waste lands (the *páramos*) and infertile ground. It was not rich enough to support a large population or to generate large surpluses.

Moving eastward, the Pyrenees mountains blocked the benign influence of the sea, rendering the contrasts in temperatures in northern Aragon and northwestern Catalonia far sharper than in Cantabria or the Basque country. The region is far more rugged, less easily open to the rest of the world. Even today, as pointed out earlier, the roads from France to Andorra (an area

under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Urgell in the Middle Ages) and from La Seo d'Urgell, an ancient and important bishopric in northwestern Catalonia (Andorra is around 20 km from La Seo), to Figueras (close to the Mediterranean coast) are difficult and trying ones. Further, if the mountains toward the west were, as Fernand Braudel has argued not always correctly, places of freedom, that is, that peasants were fairly free from lordly abuse, northern Catalonia witnessed the harshest and most enduring form of serfdom in western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁸ Westward from Catalonia into the large county of Ribagorza (in northern Aragon), the preconditions for predatory and violent lordship and for systemic civil war in the sixteenth century were already in place. Thus, although geography and climate were somewhat similar along the broad band of Green Spain, social structures, types of village organization, and relations between peasants and lords varied from west to east. Such diversity was even greater in the high plains that dominated the center of the peninsula.

The Spains of the high plains

The high plains that dominate most of the center of the peninsula constitute Spain's salient topographical feature. The origins of the expansionist kingdom of Castile lay there. It was the great reservoir of soldiers, and, after 1300, it dominated, politically and culturally, most of Spain's history. Cutting a great swath from the Portuguese border in the west – where the high plains began to slope to the ocean – to Catalonia in the east, and from Green Spain in the north to Andalusia in the south, the mesetas of Old and New Castile, as well as the arid plains around Zaragoza in the kingdom of Aragon, rose to impressive average altitudes. In Old Castile and León, the plain rose between 1,800 to 3,000 feet in 66.5 percent of the surface. 31.4 percent reached even higher average altitude, between 3,000 and 6,000 feet, while in the regions of Avila and León more than 50 percent of the territory was over 3,000 feet. Further east in the region of Soria, an area close to the Aragonese border, 70 percent of the land was over 3,000 feet in altitude. These impressive heights dictated the climate and agricultural destiny of the region.

Winters are long and harsh, summers hot and short. Rain and running water were always in short supply during the Middle Ages. The soil is often thin and poor, except for river banks and small ecological niches. In Castile and northern Aragon's stark and emotionally moving landscapes, villages rose next to small rivers, often at a great distance from each other. Foreign travelers or modern poets, Antonio Machado above all, have lyrically

described a countryside often denuded of trees, of villages, and of human habitation. Its proud people – pride is a continual charge in the harsh descriptions of Spaniards in early modern travel literature – worked very hard with meager results. But these seemingly negative impressions need to be modified and corrected by the many exceptions and successes found in Castile and Aragon in spite of its geographical and economic disadvantages. Along the banks of the Ebro river on the outskirts of Zaragoza, thriving large village communities – inhabited often by Mudejars and then by Moriscos – tended the fertile floodplains. The prosperity of these villages, Gelsa, Codo, Pina, and others, stood in sharp contrast with the arid plains which one can still see from the road between Barcelona and Zaragoza, and from the rugged spurs of the Pyrenees, easily visible north of the road.

New Castile, the lower region of the high plains south of Madrid, was a land of transhumance and vineyards and different in every respect from the northern plain. The northern Rioja region, celebrated without dissent by foreign travelers, was a rich area, producing superior-quality wine and benefiting from fertile, cereal-growing lands. If the land did not always yield great profit, the transhumance did. It was mostly Old Castile taxes, paid by hard-working and suffering peasants and by the transhumance, that provided the resources for the great enterprises of Castile in the fifteenth century and the even more ambitious projects of the early modern Spanish monarchy. Complexity and diversity, and the distinct habitats found abundantly throughout the region, undermine any effort to present a monochrome picture of Spanish topography and resources.

Above all the topography and climate of the high plains of Castile and Aragon fostered the cultivation of cereals and the tending of transhumant livestock. Although in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries villagers still sought to grow as wide a variety of crops as possible – thus we find cereal growing in Green Spain and viticulture everywhere – lack of rain and poor soil conditions determined a great deal of the predominant economic activities. What was grown and how it was grown helped shape social and political life, as it did patterns of population throughout the land. Far more significant, one must always remember that the sharp contrast between Green Spain and the central plains, a contrast that is vividly evident to anyone crossing the mountain passes between northern and central Spain or between central Spain and Andalusia today, placed significant stress on Spanish men and women. Everything changed as you moved from one region to another. How one would work the land, organize the village community, use agricultural tools, or plow the land changed as one crossed geographical boundaries. The types of crops were different. Different cultures and even languages stood as continual challenges to the peripatetic Castilians,

Aragonese, Catalans, and others in the peninsula. And these contrasts were even more pronounced as one crossed into southern Spain.

Southern Spain: the ancient lands of al-Andalus

Deeply imprinted by its Roman and Muslim past, southern Spain, running from the Algarve and the Atlantic coast in the west to the region of Valencia and the Mediterranean in the east, also included a diversity of habitats and a variety of ecological and climatic systems. Within southern Spain one must distinguish between mountains and flood plains, between coastal and interior regions. In western Andalusia, the Sierra Morena divides the sloping plains of New Castile and La Mancha from the fertile areas on the banks of the Guadalquivir and lower Guadiana rivers. Access to the fertile western Andalusian lands could be easily gained through the ancient Roman road, the Silver Road or *camino de la plata*, running from Salamanca through the Extremaduran towns of Cáceres, Badajoz, and finally Mérida, and then by other east–west roads that led from Mérida or Cáceres to Seville and/or Córdoba. This was the road followed by a large group of Navarrese merchants and their servants, traveling from Estella in Navarre to Seville in 1351. Their long and well-documented journey tells us a great deal about communications within the peninsula, about food and road conditions. Their experiences belie the often repeated assertion about the difficulties of traveling across Spain.⁹

Further east from the Silver Road, the mountain pass of Despeñaperros provided a well-traveled gateway from New Castile into the south. Important battles, Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 and Bailén during the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century, were fought in the region. Control of the region was crucial because Despeñaperros and the road going to Jaén and, further southeast, to Granada were in many respects important geographic keys to Andalusia. South of the Sierra Morena in western Andalusia lay a land of irrigation. Its agricultural patterns were distinct from those of the north, with olive trees, vineyards, and produce balancing cereal production. Toward Extremadura and throughout western Andalusia abundant pasture lands became the final destination of ever larger flocks of sheep and other livestock engaged in the great transhumance or Mesta (the seasonal movement of livestock from summer to winter grazing lands) from the mid-thirteenth century onwards.

A land dominated by latifundia, western Andalusia was a region of landless peasants, large villages, and a growing exporter of its staples: wine to England and elsewhere in the peninsula and eventually to the New World, olive oil to the northern parts of the Spanish realms and to trans-Pyrenean