Book Reviews

Katrina B. Olds

Forging the Past. Invented Histories in Counter-Reformation Spain, Yale University Press, 2015, 422 pgs. ISBN: 978-0-300-18522-5.

From the mid–sixteenth century onwards, Europe produced a new historiography which can be described as “proto–national.” One of its features was an “anti–Roman” reaction to Italianate humanism, which had cast Italy as the pre-eminent European nation on account of its Roman past. At the same time, the Judeo-Christian tradition was elevated in opposition to the achievements of classical antiquity, thereby robbing the latter of its pretensions to cultural superiority. This new ideology produced a notable outpouring of idealization and forgery, in a context wherein false chronicles took on increasing importance. The most influential exemplar of this new trend was the Italian scholar and forger Annio da Viterbo, who claimed to use as his sources the unpublished works of ancient authors, and whose own work constituted an integration of the Old Testament with pre-Greco–Roman cultures. Countries, towns, cities, and dynasties were thereby made to find, or to create, a mythical ancestry, independent of classical myths. “Ancient” and “sacred” became two overlapping concepts. In the course of this antiquarian quest, which unearthed both fake and real archaeological remains, early modern Spanish historians showed a special weakness for the forgeries of Annio da Viterbo, which dramatically linked the history of Spain with the mythology of the Great Flood and the genealogy of Noah. Yet Iberia also posed special difficulties for this sacred past: both the Arabo-Islamic period and the presence of a large population of Jewish and Muslim descent necessitated inclusion in this new historiographical view.

Forging the Past scrutinizes and explores this new ideology in Spain through the work of one of its most influential forgers, the Toledo Jesuit Jerónimo Román de la Higuera. In 1594 Higuera announced that he had received from the monastery of Fulda in Germany a copy of four long-lost historical texts, or chronicles, which he himself had forged. Through his intimate familiarity with late antique and medieval texts, and his profound understanding of what

true histories looked and sounded like, Higuera was able to shape these false chronicles and create an illusion of verisimilitude. Deploying modern tools of archaeological, historical, and philological erudition, the findings created an enormous impression on contemporary intellectual milieus and were accepted as “true” by the foremost Spanish historians of the period. *Forging the Past* delves into the social, political, and cultural settings in which Higuera wrote, as well as his own erudition and intellectual context, in order to explain how and why his texts were written and received. Or, to put it differently, the book analyzes the chronicles from the point of view of what they were supposed to be—Roman and medieval historical chronicles—and what they really were—the writings of a late sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit—to explain why they were written in the first place. In fact, as Katrina Olds remarks, the whole affair transcends the great success of the forgeries. Following Arnaldo Momigliano and Anthony Grafton, she shows how Higuera’s production enables us to tackle in depth the issue of “forgery” as a historiographical problem which, in turn, leads us to explore the limits of discursive systems; the processes of the social construction of truth; and the establishment of collective identities based on complex historiographical investigations that turn out to be myths. Although contested by some almost from the time of their appearance, the chronicles altered the sacred landscape and historical imagination of Spain forever. This is what may well be the principal asset of the book: its focus on Higuera as the main contributor to the creation of a new local religion.

The first part of *Forging the Past* is dedicated to the “creation” or “invention” of the forgeries, in the double sense that the word then denoted in Spanish: both discovery and creation. The most important of these alleged findings was the chronicle attributed to Flavius Lucius Dexter, lost in the early Middle Ages, which narrated the very beginnings of Christianity in Iberia and provided details about the Roman period for which virtually no text remained. Other “discoveries” by Higuera included works by another Roman historian, Marcus Maximus, as well as the Lombard author Liutprand, Bishop of Cremona. All these known authors were supposed to have written histories of the early Church in Hispania that Higuera himself was now producing. They constituted the base of Higuera’s own historical writings on the history of Toledo and of the Church in Iberia, both of which he penned in his own name, making use of the chronicles, but also of archaeological remains and of hagiographic legends. Higuera was a prolific writer and a very influential one; and while none of his works were printed during his life time, they circulated widely in manuscript. He was an eccentric and multifaceted character whose controversial interpretation of the past won him admirers, but he also antagonized his Jesuit superiors and other learned contemporaries such as the bishop of Segorbe

Juan Bautista Pérez (Chapters 1 and 2). The forgeries also show Higuera's enormous erudition—well documented in Chapter 3 of Olds's book—dedicated to the authentic sources of the false chronicles. It was Higuera's profound knowledge of modern standards in historical criticism that enabled him to address several controversial questions connected to the early history of Christianity in Spain, such as the role of Jews and their descendants as well as the defence of another contemporary forgery—the apocryphal Arabic texts known as the Lead Books of Granada (Chapter 4). For his history of his own city, Toledo, Higuera forged letters written by Jewish inhabitants to the Holy Land prior to Christ's death, asking to be informed about the new Gospel and presenting themselves as his followers. Other leading players in the history of Toledo included the Mozarabs: Arabized Christians who had remained as such during the Islamic invasion and had guaranteed the continuity of the city's bishops. Olds refers to all these aspects, but she is less interested in how the presence of people with Muslim or Jewish ancestors complicated matters and exacerbated the genealogical mentality behind Higuera's work. In my opinion, the question of the inclusion of religious minorities in the Christian sacred past of Spain can be best grasped in the Morisco (converted Muslim) forgery: the Lead Books of the Sacromonte, which presented other martyrs, the first Christians to arrive in the peninsula, as Arab disciples of Saint James and repositories of an apocryphal revelation of the Virgin Mary dictated to them in Arabic, which presented a version of the Early Church and the tenets of early Christianity compatible with Islam. Illuminating in this respect is Higuera's relations with one of the forgers of the Lead Books, the Morisco physician Miguel de Luna—author of another, very successful false chronicle, the *Verdadera historia del rey Don Rodrigo*, which was presented as a translation of a Medieval Arab chronicle—describing the Islamic conquest of Spain in which the Muslim conquerors appeared as liberating Iberia from the Visigoths' corrupt and tyrannical power. Luna's activities, as shown by Olds, emphasizes the common genealogical, social, and intellectual problems faced by Higuera, but also by all those who endeavoured to write (or rewrite) the early modern history of Spain.

Yet Higuera, as Olds argues, was doing more than that: he was also synthesizing identity through the creation of a new Counter-Reformation local religion. This is the point that interests her most and where she is most persuasive and innovative. Higuera was also an indefatigable letter writer. His forgeries reflect his diligent research and scholarly communication with other enthusiasts of the history of Spain and of Catholic Europe, what Olds calls a "sacred Republic of Letters" (Chapter 5). He also corresponded regularly with local priests and authorities in a quest for pious traditions, lives and remains of saints, and tales of miracles and wondrous events (Chapter 6). One of the assets of the excellent

book under review is that it intertwines Higuera's erudite works and sources with other forms of hagiographical or historical invention and, in so doing, enlarges our comprehension of how the false chronicles came into being and why they continued to be used as important sources of information for so long. On the basis of Higuera's correspondence painstakingly gathered by Olds in the archives (and I say painstakingly because Higuera had a very small, very difficult handwriting, and he wrote an amazing amount of material), *Forging the Past* draws a rich panorama of local religion, thereby revealing the moral and exemplary intention of Higuera's endeavour. For this reader, Chapters 5 and 6 are specially original and innovative. Therein Olds argues that the invention and writing of these Latin chronicles was intended to demonstrate that certain pious traditions of the utmost importance for the religious history of Spain (many of which were being dismissed by the Vatican at the time, through the new Breviary of cardinals Bellarmino and Baronio) were grounded in historical truth. As Olds argues convincingly when she elucidates why Higuera was writing what he wrote, Higuera targeted both Protestants and Cesare Baronio. With this agenda in mind, he made abundant use of a remarkable privilege granted to Spain by Pope Gregory XIII entitled *Pastoralis officii*, which stipulated that saints not included in the Breviary could still be commemorated as objects of cult and devotion—if they were patron saints of a diocese or if “notable” relics of this saint remained in the diocese. That enabled Higuera to mobilize the assistance of eager local priests and erudite scholars, from whom he obtained local traditions, beliefs, legends, bones, and relics. Moreover, the chronicles forged by Higuera confirmed a vision of Spanish Christianity identical to that represented by Spanish Catholicism in the decades following the Council of Trent. In Higuera's rendition, the beliefs, practices, and traditions of the primitive Church according to these false Roman chronicles were those of his own branch of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. They presented Spain as of central importance in early Christianity and therefore, as of central importance in present-day Europe. For Higuera, the early Church was decidedly Iberian. In Higuera's Spain, the remains of saints or churches, the bones of martyrs, and the ruins of buildings which appeared in a host of villages and cities were “discovered” as a way both of linking Spain with sacred history and of presenting Counter-Reformation Catholicism as being already there, pack and parcel, in the Early Church. The creation of local sacred histories with their own martyrs made it possible to include Spain in a sanctified history, one that stretched back to the Orient of the Bible and even to Babylon and Egypt, well-springs of a wisdom and prestige that surpassed those of Greece and Rome. The discovery of such vestiges sought to prove the continuity of the Christian

past throughout a long martyrdom imposed first by the Romans and later by the Muslims, both of which are presented as belonging to a single common class of enemies and cruel persecutors. The idea was that the blood of Christian martyrs had irrigated this soil which by rights was theirs, sanctifying it for all eternity and thus creating a sacred geography for a sacred history.

The second and shorter part of the book is dedicated to the “reception” of the forgeries including contemporary discussions about their authenticity, truth, moral and exemplary “poetics,” as well as the politics in Madrid and Rome regarding the chronicles. Because he was not operating in isolation from other similar trends and intents, Higuera had an enormous impact on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spain and beyond: Spain’s proto-Enlightenment scholarship developed many of its critical tools precisely by confronting these *falsos cronicones* and their implications for Spanish history, as Olds skilfully shows.

Forging the Past is a fascinating and rich book, so much so that it is difficult to reflect in the brief space of a review. It is also an important book, a brilliant contribution to the study of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and early modern historiography. Meticulously researched and admirably learned, its readers will enjoy a fluent and elegant text without being overwhelmed by the enormous amount of work and erudition at its core.

Mercedes García-Arenal

CCHS-CSIC, Madrid

mercedes.garciaarenal@cchs.csic.es