King David and *El Cid*: Two ‘Apiru in Myth and History

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One of the main problems we have with extracting history from the biblical text is that many personages and events are attested in no other source. This applies to the seminal period of the Israelite monarchy’s beginnings, with the reigns of David and Solomon. Not only are there no other written sources, but the archaeology is currently disputed. Without other reliable sources we are thrown back on trying to evaluate the biblical account, with all its problematic features. I propose here to use the story of the medieval Spanish hero known as *El Cid* to illumine the historical process involved in appraising the biblical account.

1 The Story of Rodrigo Díaz (*El Cid*)

We have some sources for the life and deeds of Rodrigo that were written during his lifetime or shortly afterward. This makes them primary sources. The earliest is probably the Latin poem, *Carmen Campi Doctoris*.1 It has not a lot of information, but it was probably written even while the Cid was still alive. The most important source is the Latin chronicle called the *Historia Roderici*.2 The dating is debated, some thinking it was written by 1125 or even earlier, not long after Rodrigo’s death in 1099. There are also some Muslim accounts in

1 The text and a translation, with discussion, are published in Roger Wright, “The First Poem on the Cid—the *Carmen Campi Doctoris*,” in Roger Wright, *Early Ibero-Romance: Twenty-one Studies on Language and Texts from the Iberian Peninsula between the Roman Empire and the Thirteenth Century* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 1994), 221–64.

Arabic that provide some valuable data, especially the writings of Ibn ’Alqama and Ibn Bassam.³

The most famous source is probably the Cantar de mio Cid (or Poema de mio Cid), but this is accepted by modern scholars to be quite unreliable.⁴ It was composed at the latest by 1204 but is probably several decades older. The relationship of this work to history and the historical sources will be discussed at some length in the rest of this paper (referred to hereafter simply as Cantar).

2 Rodrigo’s Life as Reconstructed by a Historian⁵

Rodrigo was born about 1045. He is associated with the town of Vivar, though it is not clear that this is an early datum. He seems to have been of noble origins, though not in the forefront of aristocratic families, even though the Cantar makes him the son of a miller (par. 148, lines 3377–81). He was thus brought up to be a soldier, which was his life’s work. We do not have the details of his training or early experiences, but as a young man he had established a reputation as a military leader and fighter. Sources mention success in a number of single combats. At this time Spain was divided between the Christian north (the old Visigothic kingdom) and the Muslim south, or al-Andalus. The Muslim area had been controlled by an Umayyad dynasty, centering on Córdoba, for 250 years from the mid-eight century. But the Umayyad caliphate declined and collapsed by 1031, and al-Andalus split into a number of small independent states or principalities. Originally perhaps more like city-states (since they were based on the old provinces of the caliphate), a number engulfed others

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³ Not available to me, except for excerpts found in Colin Smith (ed.), Christians and Moors in Spain, Volume 1: 711–1150 (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988). A few short quotes are also found in some of the secondary sources used here (see note 5).


⁵ For this I have consulted especially the Historia Roderici, but for judgment about what data are historical, I am mainly dependent on Richard Fletcher, The Quest for El Cid (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Also useful were Gonzalo Martínez Diez, El Cid Histórico (Divulgación: Biografías y Memorias; Barcelona: Planeta, 1999); Antonio Ubieto Aretata, El “Cantar de Mio Cid” y algunos problemas históricos (Valencia: Anurar Ediciones, 1973); Bernard F. Reilly, The Kingdom of León-Castilla under King Alfonso VI 1065–1109 (Princeton University Press, 1988); and Colin Smith, The Making of the Poema de mio Cid (Cambridge University Press, 1983), especially ch. 5.