Nebuchadnezzar’s Jewish Legions: Sephardic Legends’ Journey from Biblical Polemic to Humanist History

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Hebrew Antiquities

There was no love lost between the Enlightened antiquarians Francisco Martínez Marina (1754–1833) and Juan Francisco de Masdeu (1744–1817).

Though both were clerics – Martínez Marina was a canon of St Isidore in Madrid, and Masdeu a Jesuit – and voracious epigraphers, their lives and careers diverged in profound ways. Masdeu was an outsider in his profession: expelled from the Iberian Peninsula along with his fellow Jesuits in 1767, he spent most of the last fifty years of his life in Rome. There, substituting the descriptions and sketches forwarded by sympathetic amanuenses in Spain for the ancient remains he would never see firsthand, he continued to pursue his research in Iberian antiquities in open opposition to the state-sanctioned projects conceived and carried out by the prestigious Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid. Martínez, in contrast, was the consummate insider, inhabiting the very centers of power denied to Masdeu: a member of the liberal parliament of 1820–23, he was also an early member, and eventually two-time president, of the Real Academia which Masdeu scorned. It was almost certainly as a staunch defender of the Real Academia’s massive research projects – especially its official catalogue of ancient Iberian inscriptions, which Masdeu proposed to better with his own inventory – that Martínez Marina acquired his palpable distaste for Masdeu, his methods, and his ideological commitments.


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Martínez Marina was especially skeptical of the orientalist dimension of Masdeu's scholarship, and particularly of his handling of the ‘ancient’ Hebrew inscriptions which the Jesuit claimed could be found throughout the Peninsula – including, most famously, a pair of fragmentary tomb inscriptions unearthed in the late fifteenth century near the Jewish cemetery in the Aragonese town of Morvedre. While Martínez Marina was inclined to date the Morvedre inscriptions to the Middle Ages, Masdeu (who may have been in the majority) claimed to have proof that they were quite a bit older – indeed, that they dated back to the tenth century BCE and the reign of the biblical king Solomon, demonstrating that Iberia's Jewish population was the oldest in the world outside of Palestine. For Martínez Marina, such claims were emblematic of Masdeu's gullibility; for Masdeu, Martínez Marina's refusal to accept them smacked of snobbery.

Their rivalry finally boiled over in 1799, when Martínez Marina published a scathing review of Masdeu’s *Historia crítica de España* (20 vols., 1783–1807) in the Real Academia’s annual *Memorias*. In the course of some 150 pages, Martínez Marina accused his exiled counterpart – as well as the Cordoban franciscans Pedro and Rafael Rodríguez Mohedano, co-authors of a popular *Historia literaria de España* (10 vols., 1769–91) – not only of misreading the Morvedre inscriptions, but also of willfully misinterpreting the Bible, falsifying material evidence, and corrupting the very moral fabric of Spanish history with ‘puerile stories and the crudest fables’ lifted from medieval Jewish propaganda. Masdeu and the Mohedanos, Martínez Marina fumed, had done more than try to pass off some medieval Hebrew inscriptions as proof that Solomon had established tributary settlements in the peninsula. Channeling ‘the ridiculous tales of fifteenth-century Spanish rabbis’ like Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), they had tried to make the whole of ancient Iberia into a Jewish colony, positioning that the city of Toledo itself – the spiritual capital of Spanish church and

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3 Juan Francisco de Masdeu, *Historia crítica de España, y de la cultura española en todo género* (Madrid: Antonio de Sancha, 1783–1807).
5 Rafael and Pedro Rodríguez Mohedano, *Historia literaria de España*, (Madrid: García, 1769–91).