In 1592 the Jesuit historian Juan de Mariana (1536–1624) articulated a devastating and lengthy critique against scholars who employed etymological proofs to trace the origins of people.\(^1\) He took issue with the idea that the names of places contained immutable traces of their founders. It was incorrect to assert, for instance, that the Portuguese region of Setubal was first established by the Biblical king Tubal, the grandson of Noah, on the basis of the name alone. ‘What else is it’, Mariana asked, ‘but nonsense and error, to reduce the origins of Spain to Latin derivation and in this way tarnish its venerable antiquity with lies and nonsensical dreams as these [scholars] do?’\(^2\) His contemporary, the grammarian Bernardo de Aldrete (1565–1645), also expressed his disapproval disparaging the etymological method as a ‘risky business’, since placenames, like languages, were always subject to unpredictable change.\(^3\) Indeed, by the early seventeenth century doubts emerged in Spain regarding the reliability of the study of etymologies and their uses in historical writing. Detractors, like Mariana and Aldrete, condemned the practice, arguing that the corre-

\(^{1}\) ‘Lo mismo me parece ha acontecido á muchos historiadores asi de los nuestros como de los estranos: que donde faltaba la luz de la historia, y la ignorancia de la antigüedad ponía uno como velo á los ojos para no saber cosas tan viejas y olvidadas, ellos con deseo de ilustrar y ennoblecen las gentes cuyos hechos escribían, y para mayor gracia de su escritura, y mas en particular por no dexasr interpolado con lagunas el cuento de los tiempos, antes esmaltallos con la luz y lustre de grandes cosas y hazañas, por sí mismos inventaron muchas hablillas y fabulas’; Juan de Mariana, *Historia general de España compuesta enmendada y añadida, por el padre Juan de Mariana; con el sumario y tabla* [Lat. 1592; Spa.1601] (Madrid: Joaquin de Ibarra, 1780), vol. 1: book 1, ch. VII, pp. 13–14.


\(^{3}\) ‘es negocio lleno de riezego, i peligro tratar desto porque se camina con solo indicios, i pruebas inciertas, dependientes de palabras tan ligeras de mudarse’. Bernardo de Aldrete, *Del origen y principio de la lengua castellana, ó Romance que oy se usa en España* (Rome: Carlo Vulliet, 1606), book III, ch. III, p. 284.
spondence between toponyms, like Toledo, Cordoba, or even the appellation *Hispania*, and the intention of their earliest makers was impossible to prove.

This represented a significant shift. Only a few decades earlier and throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, etymologies constituted an important, and hotly contested, source of knowledge about the history and culture of the Iberian Peninsula. The method was a serious pursuit that struck at the core of some of the most controversial aspects of Spanish history and self-understanding. Scholars in various genres used etymological derivations to further a particular understanding of their region’s ancient and more recent past, especially in cases where histories were not extant or the testimonies recorded in surviving accounts were incomplete or dubious. The Basque chronicler Esteban de Garibay y Zamalloa (1533–1600), for instance, declared without a doubt in 1571 that ever since the first age of the world the founders of a region would confer upon their territories their own name. This practice, which Garibay believed was amply attested in the writings of the most ancient authorities, allowed the historian to definitively trace back, through the study of toponyms, the origins of all people.

While the etymological approach was common, to some degree, throughout Europe – among the most famous and prolific of early modern etymologists was the Frenchman Jean Bodin (1530–96) – Spanish writers stood apart in the extent to which they sought to marshal etymologies to overcome or assimilate a problematic historical and religious heritage which threatened to relegate Spain to a lesser status among her more purely ‘European’ rivals. The history and languages of early modern Spain bore the indelible imprint of centuries of Arabic and Hebrew habitation. Consequently, Iberian scholars’ need to grapple with the history of populations of non-Christian origins, and to weigh their future integration into an ever more repressive old-Christian mainstream cul-

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5 ‘Es cosa antiquíssima, começada dende la primera edad del mundo, y usada en estos tiempos, y continuada hasta los nuestros, poner de ordinario, o lo menos muchas veces, los fundadores y pobladores de las naciones, provincias y pueblos, sus nōbres a las tales naciones y regiones y poblaciones, como d'esto hallamos muchos exemplos de los padres de la segunda y tercera edad del mundo;’ Esteban de Garibay, Los XI libros d'el compendio historial de las chronicas y vniuersal Historia de todos los reynos de España (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin, 1571), book IIII, ch. VI, p. 95. On Garibay see: Julio Caro Baroja, Los vacsos y la historia a través de Garibay (Madrid: Caro Raggio, 2002), pp. 174–89.