Scale Change on the Border: The County of Castile in the Tenth Century

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This chapter focusses on one specific historical process — the incorporation of the Duero valley into the county of Castile, early in the tenth century — as a laboratory within which the explanatory capacity of the notion of scale change can be tested. In the first part, two different aspects of scale change — space and time — are discussed. The first needs little by way of demonstration, as Castile’s territorial expansion is a frequently visited subject for historians. Much less attention has been paid to the relevance of the temporal scale at which the whole process took place. The Castilian expansion can be described as a case of sudden scale change, as a dramatic increase in extent and complexity which occurred within the limits of human experience — that is, a generation. Related to this latter theme, issues of perception and agency are examined in the second part of this chapter.

This paper has been developed in several stages. It was presented to and discussed by the FES Project group and we are grateful for their input. Part of the argument was presented by one of us at the Medieval Communities AD 500–1200 Conference at University College London in 2007; other elements were presented in seminars at the Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales-CSIC (Madrid), Universidad de Salamanca, and Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma-CSIC. We thank all who were present at those events and made comments and suggestions. Finally, we have benefited from suggestions and criticism made by colleagues who read draft versions of this paper, namely: Wendy Davies, Isabel Alfonso, and Andrew Reynolds. To all of them we would like to express our gratitude while stating that, much as we owe to their input, they cannot be blamed for any of our shortcomings.
The quality of the evidence that can be used is irregular. There is a limited number of narrative texts, Latin and Arabic and mostly not strictly contemporary with the events described, and a substantial body of charters, but few originals. Moreover, the geographical and chronological distribution of charters is very uneven, as it depends on the development of the major monastic houses in whose archives they were preserved later on. Archaeology is rather underdeveloped in the region, but a few excavated sites provide interesting insights, while in a broader context, early medieval archaeological research has a promising future. As a consequence, very little can be said about this period and region that is conclusive. Our aim is, instead, to test how far scale change and related notions can help make sense of the available evidence and to build models with which to orientate future research.

Scaling the Castilian Expansion: Space and Time

Space

The county of Castile experienced remarkable territorial growth between the ninth and tenth centuries. In the mid-ninth century, when it begins to feature in written sources, Castile was but a small frontier territory on the eastern side of the Asturian kingdom. A passage of the Chronicle of Alfonso III (written in the 880s) listing the territories north of the Cantabrian mountains that were under the control of the kings of Oviedo in the mid-eighth century refers to this area as ‘Barduliae que nunc appellatur Castella’ (Bardulias, which is nowadays named Castile). The name Barduliae — deriving from the Varduli, a pre-Roman ethnic group — can be considered as an antiquarian term and not necessarily accurate. The word Castella instead can be confidently accepted as a ninth-century innova-

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1 A general overview of the written sources for early medieval Castile in Gonzalo Martínez Díez, El Condado de Castilla (711–1038): La historia frente a la leyenda, 2 vols (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 2004), II, 749–66.


tion that emerges almost simultaneously in Latin (Castella) and Arabic (al-Qila’) sources, in both cases meaning literally ‘the castles’. Having turned into a frontier territory in the context of increasing military pressure from Al-Andalus, Castilian society probably experienced intense militarization reflected in the adoption of a new name that highlighted its defensive function. Similar developments may have taken place in the neighbouring territory of Álava, east of Castile, which seems to have come under Asturian rule later in the ninth century with a lesser degree of integration in its political structures.

Castile’s transformation into the much larger polity of the tenth century must be seen as an aspect of the overall territorial expansion of the Asturian monarchy under Kings Ordoño I (850–66) and Alfonso III (866–910), who extended their realm from the mountainous north down to the fertile plains of the plateau (Map 14).

Map 14. The Asturian kingdom’s expansion in the Duero plateau, eighth to ninth centuries.

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This created the conditions for a similar process on the eastern periphery. A first phase in the 880s, when Count Diego extended his rule down to the city of Burgos,6 was followed by a more significant move in the next generation: in the shaky years following the death of Alfonso III, the main strongholds on the upper Duero valley were controlled by three different aristocrats (Map 15).7

After what looks like a confused period of competition among aristocrats, these new territorial extents were consolidated by 930 and the river Duero became an active military front line for the rest of the tenth century and beyond.8 By contrast, the situation in the north remains unclear, as it is largely ignored by the narrative sources. Álava seems to have been brought under Castilian rule around 930, but retained a separate identity across the comital period and beyond. As for the northernmost lands down to the Cantabrian sea, it is commonly assumed that they were incorporated into Castile in the first phase of expansion (whatever the intensity of their subjection), but the evidence for this largely rests on references to the Count of Castile in charter dating clauses that appear to acknowledge political incorporation into Castile.9

6 The main sources for this early expansion are the Chronicle of Albelda (Crónicas Asturianas, ed. by Gil Fernández, Moralejo, and Ruiz de la Peña, pp. 151–88) and the so-called First Castilian Annals, which mention Count Diego’s control of Burgos and Ubierna. The latter were named Anales Castellanos I by their editor Manuel Gómez Moreno, in Anales Castellanos, ed. by Manuel Gómez Moreno (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1917); the very recent new edition by J. C. Martín, however, proposes to change their name to Older Castilian Annals (José Carlos Martín Iglesias, ‘Los Annales Castellani Antiquiores y Annales Castellani Recentiores: Edición y traducción anotada’, Territorio, sociedad y poder: revista de estudios medievales, 4 (2009), 203–26). In this text we shall keep to the traditional naming. On the Annals more generally, see Francisco Bautista, Breve historiografía: Listas regias y Anales en la Península Ibérica (siglos VII–XII), Talia Dixit, 4 (2009), 113–90. We thank Isabel Alfonso for drawing our attention to this important work.

7 The First Castilian Annals ascribe those events to the year 912: ‘In era DCCCCL [= 912 AD] populaverunt commites Monnio Nunniz Rauda et Gundesalbo Telliz Hocsuma et Gundesalbo Fredenandiz Aza et Clunia et Sancti Stefani iusta fluvius Doyri’ (In the era 950 [AD 912] count Munio Núñez populated Roa, Gonzalo Téllez Osma and Gonzalo Fernández Haza, Clunia and San Esteban, by the river Duero) (Annales Castellanos I, s.a. 912), but there are reasons to suspect that the Annals squeezed into one single entry three separate initiatives, maybe spanning several years; see Escalona, ‘Military Stress’.

8 Escalona, ‘Military Stress’.

Map 15. The Castilian expansion on the eastern Duero basin, ninth to tenth centuries.