

THE *FINIS TERRAE* AND THE LAST FRONTIER. ON *LA EDAD MEDIA DE CHILE* (‘THE MIDDLE AGES OF CHILE’)

JOSÉ A. MARÍN
PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE VALPARAÍSO
CHILE

Date of receipt: 8th of January, 2019
Final date of acceptance: 9th of May, 2019

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes, first, a revision of the concept of frontier as concerns *limen*, “threshold”, going beyond the concept of *limes*, or boundary. It is proposed that this threshold extends chronologically beyond the 15th century, surpassing the contours of Europe in its American projection, from Mexico to Chile. Secondly, the publication of G. Guarda’s book *La Edad Media de Chile* (The Middle Ages of Chile) gives us the opportunity to reflect on this last frontier and its characteristics. Finally, in a path that Guarda does not explore, this essay proposes that the tradition of *Canto a lo Humano* in Chile, part of the identity of the peasant communities of the Central Valley region, has “medieval echoes”.¹

KEYWORDS

Threshold, Frontier, *Finis terrae*, Middle Ages, Chile.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Limen, *Limes*, *Finis terrae*, *Medium Aevum*, *Chilia*.

1. *Limes and Limen. The Middle Ages as a liminal space*

A frontier may be understood through *limes*, delimiting space geographically (and sometimes also culturally). It is a demarcation line that separates “zones of relative identity”, definitional and relational places that in one way or another we conceive of as “our house” and the comfortable stillness of home, from that other “exterior world of absolute foreignness”, as says Marc Augé.² A frontier may also be a wide area of diverse exchanges, a place of transition between two spaces,³ a region of ambiguity in which, imperceptibly, one may move from one being to another, partially abandoning one identity to gradually reach another (at times, indiscernibly quickly), because such transitions may operate across both space and time.

We are thus facing a space of transfiguration in which the characteristics of the new phase are gradually acquired, without leaving the previous phase completely behind. For the same reason, it is also a place of both alienation and initiation, as can be seen from the works of Arnold Van Gennep⁴ and Victor Turner,⁵ whose cultural studies⁶ on liminality decisively influenced twentieth century historiography and its own conceptualization of *frontier*. That influence has not been kept from medievalism.

A frontier is, then, an area, more than a line; more than a geographical phenomenon, a social phenomenon —as O. Lattimore explains.⁷ A frontier, depending on proximity, may or may not separate very similar or very dissimilar

1. A preliminary version of this work was presented at the International Seminar “*Las Fronteras en la Edad Media Hispánica (siglos XIII-XVI)*”, organized by the Facultad de Geografía e Historia de la Universidad de Sevilla, Spain, on 26 October 2017.

2. Augé, Marc. *Los “No Lugares”. Espacios del anonimato. Una antropología de la sobremodernidad*. Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, 2000: 49 and following.

3. Urbina, Ximena, *La frontera de arriba en Chile Colonial*. Valparaíso: Editorial Universitaria, 2009: 27 and following. See also: Herzog, Tamar. *Frontiers of Possession. Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2016, and the bibliography cited there. I thank Dr. Urbina for providing me with several texts cited in this paper.

4. Van Gennep, Arnold. *Los ritos de paso*. Madrid: Alianzas, 2008: 31 and following.

5. Turner, Victor. *El proceso ritual*. Madrid: Taurus, 1988:101 and following.

6. It is necessary to mention, certainly, the oft-cited (and also criticized) work of Turner, Frederick J. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921. See Chapter I: “The significance of the frontier in American History”, which reproduces the text of 1893, read in Chicago before the American Historical Association. There is a Spanish version published by the CSIC in Turner, Frederick J. “El significado de la frontera en la historia americana”, *Estudios (nuevos y viejos) sobre la frontera*. Francisco de Solano, Salvador Bernabeu, eds. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1991: 9-44. Turner drew attention at the time to the formative role of the borderlands in North American society; incidentally, the study is often cited, but not always read directly, as sometimes it is not noticed that America, there, means the United States, and nothing else; and not necessarily are its approaches transferable to other historical situations. Remarkable is the severe criticism of Burns, Robert. “The significance of the Frontier in the Middle Ages”. *Medieval Frontier Societies*, Robert Bartlett, Angus MacKay, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011: 307 and following. See also Owen Lattimore’s comments on Turner’s study in the work Lattimore, Owen. “The Frontier in History”, *Studies in Frontier History. Collected Papers 1928-1958*. London: Oxford U. Press, 1962: 489 and following.

7. Lattimore, Owen. “The Frontier in History”...: 469 and following.



populations, an area which may constitute “border communities”. These are ambiguous and sometimes open, and often socially but not institutionally recognizable; their ambivalent loyalties —sometimes— can even lead to the closing of the border and to the dismantling of that frontier society, which can be diluted in the face of an isolating militarized front.⁸ It is precisely the overseas European borders, whether first in the Mediterranean and the Middle East at the time of the Crusades, or later as a result of Atlantic expansion, that forged borderland areas of wide cultural circulation, with spaces for interaction of varying intensity.⁹ In the English language it is easy to differentiate one thing from the other, when we speak of *frontier*, where civilized society confronts barbarism, a concept whose paradigm is constructed, as Linda Darling explains, among others, on the basis of F. J. Turner’s postulates,¹⁰ and *borderland* when it comes to a wider space where societies overlap and mix, whose paradigm would derive, according to the same author, from the proposals of Oscar J. Martinez and his study of the context of U.S. border policy with respect to Mexico. Characteristics of *borderland* zones, normally crossed by a *frontier*, are the tensions produced by the parties interested in culturally homogenizing the zone, at the same time as the multiculturalism of that space.¹¹ It is this dimension of the border, cultural and not only political, and as broad as the Mediterranean with its Levantine and Atlantic projections, that we are now interested in.

Thus, borders can be places of disagreement and separation, as well as places of synthesis, creation and encounter; zones of historical harmony, Héctor Herrera would say.¹² When we conceive of borders not as lines that separate but as broad swaths or border spaces, we no longer speak of *limes*, but of *limen*,¹³ of “threshold”; of this “crossing the threshold”, notes Van Gennep, “is to unite oneself with a new world”.¹⁴ This threshold then becomes an area of cultural *transgressions*. These *transgressions* are sometimes also *aggressions*, perhaps because they are areas of *ingress*, as well as of *egress*, *progress* and *regress*, i.e. regions of transits and transfers. These thresholds can also *congregate*, even if they have been *disaggregated* in their always

8. I cannot help but evoke, as I write these lines, the powerful image of border and border life presented in the novel *Waiting for de Barbarians* (1980), by J. M. Coetzee, as well as *Il Deserto dei Tartari* (1940) by Dino Buzzati, and the powerful images of the 1976 film of the same name directed by Valerio Zurlini.

9. See Darling, Linda. “The Mediterranean as a Borderland”. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 46/1 (2012): 54 and following.

10. See note 6.

11. Darling, Linda. “The Mediterranean...”: 54-60, who quotes and comments on the work of Martínez, Oscar. *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S. – Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 1994. This work, although it focuses on a specific case, contains an interesting general reflection on the border, in the first part, and in the case study itself, the complexity of border life is well expressed; the characterization of borderlands as places of *liminality* seems to us very appropriate and in line with what we will comment later on.

12. Herrera, Héctor. “Res Privata-Res Publica-Imperium”. *Semanas de Estudios Romanos*, 1 (1975): 128-136, reedited in: Herrera, Héctor. *Ensayos sobre el Mundo Medieval*. Viña del Mar: Ediciones del Instituto de Historia de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 2018: 29-37.

13. Ernout, Alfred; Meillet, Alfred. *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des Mots*, Paris: Klincksieck, 2001: 359.

14. Van Gennep, Arnold. *Los ritos...: 37*.



mobile boundaries at the beginning. All these words derive from *gradus*¹⁵ at their root, of Latin, “to walk”. Thresholds are created and crossed on foot, and as one steps forward, space is *gradually* appropriate and integrated into an identity; and the further one advances, and the deeper one penetrates the other side of the threshold, the more perceptible are the original features of the new integrated spaces.

Not dissimilarly, as Isidoro de Sevilla would say,¹⁶ did the Romuleian power possess Hispania. When the great geographer Strabo¹⁷ wrote of the province of *Baetica*, the native language had ceased to be spoken to give way to imperial Latin; yet it could not prevent in the long run that their particularisms branched away from the trunk, creating new borders and prodigious thresholds. Accustomed as we are to living in the modern territorial State, we sometimes forget that borders, in historical perspective, have been for a long time more mobile than fixed, and that this status is relatively recent.

Somehow, the whole medieval epoch (beyond the cliché itself of time as the *Middle* of two eras) can be conceived as a threshold in itself,¹⁸ since it is an epoch of transit between one civilization (Ancient) and another (Modern). As an example, let us think that at the beginning of the Middle Ages we do not recognize Europe either in the political map or as consciousness of an identity; however, already in its final stage we can recognize a Europe that has not only been configured incorporating new populations, but has forged and consolidated an identity.¹⁹ The Hispanic Middle Ages was made of “barbarian nations of pilgrim languages” as Antonio de Nebrija said;²⁰ paradoxically, in his *Gramática*, the author sketched it thus in 1492 as a linguistic *limes*, at the same time that he tried to demolish all frontiers by prescribing Castilian as the imperial language.²¹ As a concept, the *Great Frontier* (the lands conquered since the 16th century) is essentially mobile, temporary and transitory, as is that of *Metropolis* to refer to the European community as a whole. The way in which Walter Prescott Webb uses these concepts are applicable —*mutatis mutandis*—

15. Corominas, Joan. *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico*, Madrid: Gredos, 1984: I, 76-77; III, 188-189; V, 712-713.

16. Isidoro de Sevilla. *Las historias de los godos, Vándalos y suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla*, ed. C. Rodríguez Alonso. Leon: Centro de Estudios e Inv. San Isidoro, 1975: 168 and following.

17. Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, 8 vols., ed. H. L. Jones. Cambridge (Mass.)-London: Harvard University Press-William Heinemann LTD, 1919: II, 58-59; Estrabón, *Geografía. 2, Libros III-IV*, eds. María José Meana, Félix Piñero. Madrid: Gredos, 1992: 74.

18. Fritsch-Rössler, Waltraud. “Frontier, Transgression, Liminality”, *Handbook of Medieval Studies. Terms-Methods-Trends*, Albrecht Classen, ed. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2001: II, 1507.

19. See Lewis, Archibald. “The Closing of the Mediaeval Frontier 1250-1350”. *Speculum*, 33/4 (1958): 475: “This is a surprising fact, for few periods can be better understood in the light of a frontier concept than western Europe between 800 and 1500 A.D.”. Cf. Burns, Robert. “The significance...”: 313 and following.

20. Antonio de Nebrija. *Gramática Castellana*. Salamanca: Juan de Porras, 1492: 7-8 [pages numbered as per *la Biblioteca Digital Hispánica*].

21. See Alonso, Amado. *Castellano, Español, Idioma Nacional. Historia espiritual de tres nombres*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1958: 20.



here, in the sense that, in the New World, frontiers are transitory and temporary.²² That *threshold* to which I refer, is, in the temporal and historical sense, the Middle Ages; spatially, the extension of Western Civilization from Spain; chronologically, beyond the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and geographically, surpassing the contours of Europe in its American projection, from New Spain to the *finis terrae* of Chile. To paraphrase Angus MacKay—and perhaps unfairly taking advantage of his words—the frontier became the threshold when *Reconquista* Spain overflowed the Iberian Peninsula and became the Empire of the *conquistadores*.²³

2. *La Edad Media de Chile: A Short Review*

The publication of the book *La Edad Media de Chile*,²⁴ by Gabriel Guarda O.S.B., gives us the opportunity to reflect on this frontier. It is not the first time that the problem of the “medievality” of the Conquest is raised, as Luis Weckmann addressed very completely in the case of Mexico;²⁵ it is indicative that his first treatise to the subject was published three decades before in 1951 in *Speculum*, a magazine of medievalists, and not of Americanists.²⁶ More recently, Flocel Sabaté²⁷ returned to the subject of New Spain, in a well-achieved summation, which now allows us to exempt ourselves from a state of ignorance. In Chile, and for many years now, Luis Rojas, both medievalist and Americanist, has also highlighted the theme of the medieval conquest of America, pointing out cultural, religious, institutional and ideological continuities. “I am convinced,” says Rojas, “that the process begun at the end of 1492 cannot be understood in all its multiple aspects if the history of the *orbis christianus* is not taken into account (...) in the Iberian reality as a permanent frontier society”; and later, he maintains that “the great historical fact of the Discovery of America constitutes a medieval event. It is, therefore, a subject corresponding to the Middle Ages, and as such it must be studied in order to be understood”.²⁸

Historians seem to be moving more and more comfortably across the *threshold* that connects Europe and America, either in one direction or the other. Thus, longtime Americanists, especially tracing the origins of the New World’s legal system, have

22. Prescott Webb, Walter. “The Frontier factor in Modern History”, *The Great Frontier*. Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986: 1-28.

23. See MacKay, Angus. *Spain in the Middle Ages. From Frontier to Empire, 1000-1500*. London: MacMillan, 1977: 1 and following; 212 and following.

24. Guarda, Gabriel. *La Edad Media de Chile. Historia de la Iglesia. Desde la fundación de Santiago a la incorporación de Chiloé, 1541-1826*. Santiago: Ediciones UC, 2016. In 2011 a first edition of the book was published in several fine exemplars, but never reached bookstores.

25. Weckmann, Luis. *La herencia medieval de México*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996.

26. Weckmann, Luis. “The Middle Ages in the Conquest of America”. *Speculum*, 26/1 (1951): 130-141.

27. Sabaté, Flocel. “Fin de Mundo y Nuevo Mundo. El encaje ideológico entre la Europa medieval y la América moderna en Nueva España (siglo XVI)”. *Divulgata*, 4 (2011): 5-78.

28. Rojas, Luis. *España y Portugal ante los otros*, Talcahuano: Ediciones UBB, 2002: 22 and 471; see also Rojas, Luis. *Para una meditación de la Edad Media*, Talcahuano: Ediciones UBB, 2009: 383 and following.



gone astray on the road to Medieval Spain, discovering in the process known as the *Reconquista* the school of the *Conquista*. “The Spanish crown made use of its frontier institutions already tested during eight centuries in the Iberian Peninsula against the Moors”, affirms Patricia Cerda-Hegerl, to add that “the Spanish-American colonial frontiers were a reflection and consequence of the organization of all the Spanish society of the time”.²⁹ On the other hand, medievalists are increasingly encouraged, as the 16th century displaces the 15th as a chronological barrier, to look beyond the traditional European horizon. Precisely, by pushing the chronological frontier towards the 16th century, the spatial frontier inevitably widens and the New World is inevitably incorporated into that process which is both modern and medieval.³⁰ It is a time in bidirectional tension.

The novelty of Gabriel Guarda’s book (who, unlike Weckmann, Sabaté or Rojas, is an Americanist, and not a medievalist) is therefore not in recognizing some echoes of the Middle Ages on American soil, but in the audacity to unambiguously speak of a Middle Ages in Chile. It is an audacity as well as a provocation. In 1961, by publishing an article entitled “Forms of devotion in the Middle Ages of Chile. The Virgin of the Rosary of Valdivia”,³¹ Guarda, then a little over thirty years old, was severely criticized for abusing historiographic terminology, consecrated by usage and which, as demanded by convention and consensus, should be respected so as not to cause confusion in the reading public. In other works, Guarda analyzed medieval influences in Chile, as in his study on Thomas Aquinas and native american urbanism,³² but dared not speak again of “Chile’s Middle Ages”. It took more than fifty years for the author—now with a long trajectory and recognized prestige among historians of his country—to return to the concept, justifying its use in the period covered by the book, because “the centuries of the Spanish period, or colonial periods, visualized from the history of the Church, have all the characteristics of the regime that, in that context, has been called ‘of Christianity’”.³³ While Guarda speaks of a Middle Ages transplanted from Spain, involving social, economic, political, and institutional aspects, etc., adapted to the new indigenous reality, the key for Guarda is the mentality and spirit present. That is, faith was the essential component that permeates everything. The *régimen de cristiandad* of Guarda is none other than the extension of the *Christianitas Occidentalis* on American soil.

Fundamental in his justification of the use of the term is the crusader mentality of the Spanish *conquistador*, recognizable from Mexico to Peru and, obviously, in

29. Cerda-Hegerl, Patricia. *Fronteras del Sur*. Temuco: Ediciones de la Universidad de Temuco, 1997: 11-12.

30. “There was, in fact, a strong element of continuity between ‘medieval’ Spain and ‘early modern’ Spain and its Empire. The lust for gold was as strong as it had ever been and the *conquistadores* continued to invoke the help of Santiago in battle”. MacKay, Angus. *Spain in the Middle Ages...*: 212.

31. Guarda, Gabriel. “Formas de devoción de la Edad Media de Chile. La Virgen del Rosario de Valdivia”. *Historia*, 1 (1961): 152-202.

32. See Guarda, Gabriel. “Santo Tomás de Aquino y las fuentes del urbanismo indiano”. *Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia*, 32/72 (1965): 5-50; Guarda, Gabriel. “Influencias medievales en la ciudad indiana”. *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, 48-49 (1987): 381.

33. Guarda, Gabriel. *La Edad Media de Chile*: 18.



Chile, where their remnants found a place to express themselves even as late as the Arauco War, Guarda says.³⁴ Though uncited by Guarda, in a legendary doctoral thesis of 1956 (published only in 1997), Alphonse Dupront had already drawn attention to how conquest by means of the religious values associated with war had displaced towards the *Indias*.³⁵ In effect, for Dupront, the Crusades of the Middle ages extend beyond them, as its Immanence, into all modern history. It stands to reason—he says—since every great event of collective being is precisely linked to a notion of unity, including that of the Americas as projected from Europe: Christianity.³⁶ The expression imposed on the *Indias*, then, is that of *conquista*, spiritual and temporal, which centers and encloses the missionary sense of holy war, under the sign of the Cross. Although clearly distinct from the concept of crusade as tied to the war against the infidel in the framework of the Mediterranean, this does not prevent that, in the American mentality, the war conserves the spark of the spirit of the crusades.³⁷ Charles Gibson, furthermore, had in 1966 already pointed out that the evangelizing and civilizing effort made by Christians throughout the borderlands were reminiscent of the *Christianitas* that still lived in the heart of Spanish imperialism. At that time, the frontier was a place of interaction as well as of conflict, creating a space of peace and order, the *régimen de cristiandad* of Guarda, preserved by force.³⁸ In another sense, Sergio Villalobos also stressed the religious spirit that gave the war its crusade-like character. It was present in the Spanish mentality of the *reconquista* and was extended into the business of the *conquista*.³⁹ Indeed, Guarda says,⁴⁰ the idea of “holy war” was much prolonged in Spain, up until the very discovery of the Americas. In the sixteenth century, war was justified by evangelization, the fight against infidels, and victories were interpreted as Providence. The medieval ideals of the *milites Christi*, expressed in chivalric or monastic ideals, settled on the site of the New World and found a propitious breeding ground there for its notions of conquest, evangelization, and even Carolingian ancestry. Mediating between the Old and the New Worlds, the Spanish crown, where the spirit of crusade was still alive in the 16th century, found in the Turk its definition of enemy, extended through antonomasia.⁴¹

34. Guarda, Gabriel. *La Edad Media de Chile...: 62.*

35. Dupront, Alphonse. *Le mythe de Croisade*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997: II, 793 and following.

36. Dupront, Alphonse. *Le mythe de Croisade...: 765.*

37. Dupront, Alphonse. *Le mythe de Croisade...: 794.*

38. Gibson, Charles. *Spain in America*. New York: Harpercollins College Div., 1966: 201.

39. Villalobos, Sergio. *Para una meditación de la conquista*, Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1977: 19 and following.

40. Guarda, Gabriel. *La Edad Media de Chile...: 70 and following.*

41. Dupront, Alphonse. *Le mythe de Croisade...: 791 and following.*



3. Medieval Echoes in Chile. A proposal

The conquerors brought with them not only a certain institutionality with roots in medieval times, but also a certain way of seeing the world reflected in their customs⁴² and in their literature. These were not only religious in character (e.g., auto-de-fé, hagiographies), but could also be profane (such as the epic or the *romancero*). In this sense, I want to propose another way to address the problem related to literature, oral traditions, and identity. To paraphrase Paul Zumthor,⁴³ since the 16th century, there is culturally installed in the Americas both “lyric” and “voice”; the former can be associated —although not absolutely— with elite social groups, while the latter also allows us to come into contact with popular social groups. There are various examples of these literary voices, as is the case of the *Fiestas de Moros y Cristianos* (“Moors and Christians’ feasts”), documented in various places in Latin America. The case of Peru, for example, documented and studied by Milena Cáceres, is exemplary, as it shows that in peasant circles traditions that go back to the Spanish Golden Age have been preserved through the centuries —even referencing the Twelve Peers of Charlemagne, an issue that, as we shall see, is especially interesting for our proposal.⁴⁴

Precisely in peasant circles such as those of the Central Valley of Chile, one can still perceive, despite the centuries that have passed, the resonances of that *voice*, coming into contact with those medieval echoes in their *cantos*.⁴⁵ To read the traditional peasant literature of Chile is to perceive the last expansion of the frontier of the *finis terrae*. An interesting question with respect to the origin of this *voice* (which is not, in any case, the subject of this essay) is to determine whether it effectively dates back to the time of the conquest or whether it refers to later traditions; whether it is explained only by its oral traditions, or whether a written tradition intervenes and intertwines with that one.

42. Notable is the case of the “chivalrous tournaments” as described for the Peruvian case in the seventeenth century by Villalobos, Sergio. *Para una meditación...*: 112 and following.

43. Zumthor, Paul. *La letra y la voz de la literatura medieval*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1989.

44. Cáceres, Milena. *La fiesta de moros y cristianos en el Perú*. Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2005: 23; 132 and following; Cáceres, Milena. “Teatro del Siglo de Oro en Los Andes del Perú: ‘El cerco de Roma por el rey Desiderio’ en Huamantanga”. *Hipogrifo. Revista de Literatura y Cultura del Siglo de Oro*, 6/1 (2018): 11-30. The phenomenon is not exclusive to Peru: see also Ricard, Robert. “Contribution à l’étude des fêtes de ‘moros y cristianos’ au Mexique”. *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, Tome 24, N° 1 (1932): 51-84; Catalá-Pérez, Daniel. “La Fiesta de Moros y Cristianos: herencia cultural compartida entre España y América Latina”. *América Latina, globalidad e integración*, Antonio Colomer, ed. Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 2012: I, 420 and following.

45. A type of sung poetry in Chile, an oral tradition in the Central Valley, commonly with religious, human, or comedic themes.



The presence of medieval themes in Chilean peasant literature is a proven fact, as can be seen, among others, from the work of Humberto Olea,⁴⁶ regarding the case of *the History of Charlemagne and the Twelve Peers of France*.⁴⁷ Indeed, in 1894 Rodolfo Lenz had already identified it as the only medieval epic theme to be found in the repertoire of Chilean popular poets.⁴⁸ The case is surprising, no doubt, with the likely origins of this tradition in a book printed in Seville in 1521 (the translation by Nicolás de Pimentel) —its popularity led to the publication of many pocket editions, suitable for circulation in the hands of travelers, which facilitated its dissemination and circulation in peninsular and overseas territories.⁴⁹ In Spain there were numerous editions between the 16th and 18th centuries; and eventually editions made in Chile in the 19th century: in 1890, in Santiago; 1892, Valparaíso. These texts strengthened the already-installed oral tradition going back to the time of the Spanish conquest.⁵⁰ Returning to the subject at hand, in 1912, Julio Vicuña transcribed texts compiled from the rural areas of the Central Valley of Chile, insisting on the value of oral transmission.⁵¹ Illustrative is the case of *cantor* José Antilef Gatica, who, according to an interview recorded by Yolando Pino on his famous 1966 work,⁵² recognizes that he had previously read the lyrics he sings. As such, the *cantores* of today acknowledge having read texts; the *lyrics* of yesteryear became the *voice*. In the 19th century, the oral tradition was reinforced by the various editions of Pimentel's text, so that the *voice* was able to persist

46. Olea, Luis Humberto. "La Historia de Carlomagno en el desarrollo del Romancero a la décima espinela". *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 78 (2011). Abril. 6 June 2012 <<https://revistaliteratura.uchile.cl/index.php/RCL/article/view/11021/11437>>.

47. It is no small thing to remember that, according to Angus MacKay, *la poesía épica (tanto escrita como oral) y los romances solían florecer en estas sociedades fronterizas, tal vez por tan militarizadas* ("epic poetry (both written and oral) and romances usually flourished in these frontier societies, perhaps because they were so militarized") and that *en el caso de Rolando, la leyenda se difundía hacia las periferias (...)* ("in Rolando's case, the legend spread to the peripheries (...)"). MacKay, Angus. "Sociedades fronterizas", *Coloquio Almería entre Culturas*. Almería: Instituto de Estudios Almerienses, 1990: 3.

48. Lenz, Rodolfo. *Sobre la poesía popular impresa de Santiago de Chile, Memorias científicas y literarias, separata de los Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, Santiago: Universidad de Chile, 1894: 590.

49. See to the prologue of its electronic edition (2013) of the *Historia del Emperador Carlomagno y los doce pares de Francia y de la cruda batalla que hubo Oliveros con Fierabrás, rey de Alejandría, hijo del gran almirante Balán* ("History of Emperor Charlemagne and the twelve peers of France and of the harsh battle between Oliviers and Fierabrás, king of Alexandria, son of the great admiral Balán"). <<http://www.olea.biz/?p=649>>. Although the theme of Charlemagne and the Twelve Peers is found in the tradition of Moorish and Christian festivals, in the latter there are no references to the work of Pimentel, so it corresponds to different traditions. It does bear mention that the tradition that now occupies us is of recitation, whereas the Moors and Christians festivals incorporate dance and theatricality. On the latter, see the bibliography cited above.

50. See Olea, Humberto. "La Historia de Carlomagno..."

51. Vicuña, Julio. *Romances populares y vulgares. Recogidos de la tradición oral chilena*. Santiago: Imprenta Barcelona, 1912: xxi; para el "Desafío de Oliveros y Fierabrás", see Vicuña, Julio. *Romances populares y vulgares...*: 530 and following.

52. Pino, Yolando. "La Historia de Carlomagno y de los Doce Pares de Francia en Chile". *Folklore Americas*, 2 (1966): 1-29.



(paradoxically, in a round trip reinforced by the written text) that, in some way, was a reflection of the growing literacy of Chilean society.

In general, when the subject of the tradition of the feats of Charlemagne and the Twelve Peers is approached, it tends to lead to the conclusions of Lenz, Vicuña and Pino. This is reinforced by Manuel Dannemann, who maintains that “the feats of Charlemagne and his warriors in defense of Christianity, remembered and transmitted through oral tradition, are heard in Chile predominantly in rural localities of the central zone, both in narrations and in the *cantos en décimas*. Though spread from the time of the Hispanic conquest, the books printed in Santiago in the last decade of the nineteenth century reinforced them”.⁵³

Thus, literary critics have done the work of compiling the texts, and have devised a theory about the origin of the *cantos* with medieval epic themes in the Chilean countryside. The problem of oral and written transmission, from both a literary and folkloric studies point of view, is moderately solved: there is an oral tradition that is lost in time, presumably at the hand of the 16th century conquerors; and the origin of the themes of that tradition would be, as has already been said, in the translation published by Nicolás de Pimentel in 1525, which enjoyed great popularity.

However, since we are clear about the literary and folkloric aspects of this tradition, we still need to investigate some elements that have not yet been considered and that are related to the subject of cultural identity represented by the texts in question. It is necessary to consider the texts from a historical perspective, as they are central to the roots of Chilean peasant cultural identity (for example, in the values identified in the texts). As Olea points out, the fame of the themes are directly related to canon of the society that binds, treasures, transmits, and publishes them. What is the common ground, the shared foundation, between peninsular conquerors and Chilean peasants, so that the songs in question are transmitted from one society to another, take root in one as in the other, and extend the threshold of one over the other, crossing oceans, lands and ages? Gabriel Guarda's *régimen de cristiandad* may be an answer; however, we are faced with traditions that did not exhaust themselves by the time of conquest or colonization, but were rather projected beyond, projected into the nineteenth century, into the nascent Chilean nation, where they took root and perpetuated into the twentieth century and even the twenty-first century. We should recognize, then, long-standing shared identity values that allow us to travel across a broad cultural threshold.

Furthermore, it is also interesting to ask about the presences of the French tradition of exaltation of the hero Roland, or the Spanish tradition of Bernardo del Carpio, whose fabulous feats are also in Chilean *cantos*, as established by J. Vicuña.⁵⁴ The modern Song of Roland (as adapted by Ariosto, Boiardo) fits rather within the parameters of romantic literature; this is not the case of the tradition

53. *Poesía Popular Andina*, Quito: Instituto Andino de Artes Populares, 1983: 329.

54. Vicuña, Julio. *Romances populares y vulgares...*: 9-14.



installed in Chile, which is closer to the original *chanson de geste*, linked to the feats. It may be, then, that the tradition was transferred from *lyric* (Nicolás de Pimentel) to *voice* at a later time, adding to an already-constituted tradition and breathing life into it; but this is a hypothesis that remains to be verified by means of contrasting texts.⁵⁵

Finally, it also seems interesting to relate the themes present in *canto a lo humano* in the Chilean countryside, with the themes of medieval literature in the epic of Roland and the Twelve Peers, and try to establish the differences, as well as the commonalities, with the European tradition – that would elucidate how the Chilean texts consider the legendary tradition of Charlemagne, which began its journey in the ninth century.⁵⁶ Thus, this work does not propose itself as a new study of Chilean folklore; rather, it is a historical-literary investigation of the *canto a lo humano* in relation to the theme of the exploits of Charlemagne and his warriors, and the presence of one of the most important literary topics of the medieval West in the peasant social collective.

The root of these texts in the Chilean peasant society rests, especially, on the values that establish an identity with the Christian West. Charlemagne and his paladins, who fight fiercely against the Turk, are still sung today —and so too are sung the Christian-infidel dichotomy ideal, which supports the construction of a cultural identity. It is interesting that this identity and rootedness has nothing to do with erudite elaboration, since the *cantores* —when observed in the field, as Yolando Pino did⁵⁷— know neither the history of Charlemagne nor that of Roland and the Twelve Peers of France; nor do they care that neither the former nor the latter actually fought the Turks, simply because they were not coeval; and nor, finally, are they aware that neither Admiral Balan nor his son Fierabrás were ever shown to exist. But it does make sense to the *cantores* and their listeners that those who fight Christianity must be punished, and that those who defend the faith against the injury of the infidels deserve respect and admiration, becoming models of moral values and ethical behavior. There is therefore an unconscious cultural identity, if you will, between the population of the Central Valley of Chile and a Middle Ages. Given the values present in the songs to which we have alluded, this identity is a positive one, much in contrast with the negative prejudices against medieval culture so common in Western societies. In fact, the positive image of the Middle Ages that is transmitted orally in the peasant tradition, as opposed to the negative image of formal education, is very notable.

The cultural identity excavated from *primordial* Chile connects this peasant society with the medieval Christian culture, transmitted in a *régimen de Cristiandad*, as Gabriel Guarda would say, throughout the *Edad Media de Chile*. We find ourselves, in sum, facing an epic of Christianity and its defense, the link between that world

55. For some of the literary notions contained here, I am indebted to my conversations with Professor Rómulo Hidalgo, an expert in medieval literature.

56. See Morrissey, Robert. *L'empereur à la barbe fleurie. Charlemagne dans la mythologie et l'histoire de France*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

57. Pino, Yolando. "La Historia de Carlomagno...": 1-29.



and Western Civilization thus established. The roots of identity, belonging and settlement in the American continent are bifurcated —indigenous and western Christian— and intertwined —conversion and *mestizaje*— in the fields of the new frontier.

We are facing another dimension of what the Argentine philologist Carlos Disandro called the “Latin American Magna Grecia”, highlighting the projection of the classic legacy into the New World.⁵⁸ The *Edad Media de Chile* provides, then, that the last frontier is truly in the *finis terrae* of the West.

58. Disandro’s thesis is more than that, by any reading: “Within the great American-Romanesque empire, the Indians must be accepted, as were the Gauls, Thracians and all the other peoples who became part of their ancient empire in Rome”. Disandro, Carlos. “El espacio espiritual de la Romania y América, un sueño americano”, *América Latina y lo clásico*, Giuseppina Grammatico, ed. Santiago: Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación, 2003: 132.

