

A MILITARY ASSAULT ON A MUSEUM IN CATALONIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. ANALYSIS OF THE FACTS IN THEIR CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The Crown of Aragon, made up of a sum of territories, internally cohesive and institutionally autonomous under a single sovereign and later diluted within different nation-states, has bequeathed a fragmented and dispersed memory. On this basis, the unusual entry of the armed forces into a museum in Catalonia in 2017 under court order, to seize works of art claimed by the neighbouring region of Aragon, encourages an analysis of how the material patrimony and revisionism and distortion of the history of the medieval past of the Crown of Aragon are used, in the 21st century, by the regional authorities to seek cohesion within the region by provoking clashes with the neighbouring one, so breaking bonds of institutional, social and economic collaboration maintained since the 12th century.

KEYWORDS

Crown of Aragon, Revisionism, Museum, Memory, Heritage.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Corona Aragonum, Revisionismus, Museum, Memoria, Haereditas.

In 2017 a surprising event took place in a southern European city: in the early morning, armed forces entered a museum and took away 44 works of art. In this article we present the facts and, to understand them, we place them in a context that today looks like the public appropriation of history. It is a good example of how in the 21st century the promotion of a regional identity does not favour research into the past but promotes a revisionism that replaces historical reality with a discourse that is powerfully sustained by public institutions and the media, seeking a strong grassroots impact and appropriating tangible and intangible heritage.¹

1. The facts: paramilitary police seize works of art from a museum in the small hours of the morning

In the early morning of 11th December 2017 some twenty vehicles of the *Guardia Civil* (the Spanish paramilitary police) surrounded the museum in the Catalan city of Lleida, where the works of art of the region and the diocese are kept. A few minutes later —at 3:21am to be precise— about eighty men in military formation and assault gear (bulletproof vests and helmets) carrying automatic weapons marched into the museum and deployed there; by opening all the doors of the museum, they set off the alarms. The museum staff, aware that this might happen, were in the building and opened the front entrance; they did not put up any resistance or hostility, making the presence of armed soldiers entering an empty art museum like this and occupying the rooms in the middle of the night even more absurd. Then more men, members of the judicial police and several officials from the neighbouring region of

1. Images of the Spanish paramilitary police (*Guardia Civil*) entering a museum in the small hours of the morning to remove the pieces and speed them off to a nearby location were broadcast around the world by numerous surprised media. I suppose that because I lecture in medieval history at the university in the city where the events took place (in fact, at a university that has its headquarters just next to the museum entered by the *Guardia Civil*), many colleagues and media from the whole world asked me about the subject in the following months. In 2019 *Écrire l'histoire* journal asked me to place the events in context to make them easier to understand. There was a mixture of political and social interference with heritage and history that made it possible to talk about a public appropriation of history, something paid special attention by this publication. While I tried to do this in few words, the text was too long for the space available in the journal, where finally a briefer version was published (Sabaté, Flocel, "Saisie d'oeuvres dans un musée, révisiennisme historique et identités régionales", *Écrire l'histoire*, 20-21 [2020-2021]: 233-237). My sincere thanks go to my colleague and friend Piroška Nagy, professor at the University of Quebec in Montreal, for reading and rereading the text, and helping me to say a lot in a short space. However, I feel that the longer version offers analysis worth disseminating about the manipulation of historical facts by current authorities and political and social leaders through the use of tangible and intangible heritage. As the journal *Imago Temporis Medium Aevum* has a specific section for this subject, it seemed the ideal place to publish this research. As this made me think about my connection with the journal, I asked the editorial committee and the secretariat to take the necessary precautions to make sure the text would be treated with the same rigorous parameters as any original submitted for consideration for publishing in *Imago Temporis Medium Aevum*. All that remains is to offer my sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their attentive reading and suggestions, which have enriched it.



Aragon, entered the museum. They did not have an administrative court clerk with them, but did have a legal warrant authorising them to seize forty-four works of art.

Once inside the museum, the dialogue between the director and the officer in charge turned off moments of tension, like when at first the officials from Aragon tried to go about a museum they did not know by themselves, and when some police officers took photographs of themselves carrying off the masterpieces, as if these were trophies of war. It was not possible to avoid that the occupiers were concerned to control only the photographs taken by museum staff; an Aragonese regional politician walking around smirking; and officials and experts from outside the region making strange comments about the conservation of the pieces. While the works of art were being transferred, the usual protocols and timings were ignored in order to move fast, which meant delicate pieces were not kept under proper conditions of humidity and temperature or, in some cases, were inappropriately packed.²

Escorted by the armed forces on land and in the air, with the aid of a helicopter, the two lorries drove 65 kilometres to Sixena. Nothing happened on the way, though the judge feared an attack on the lorries to burn the pieces, as he explained later in an interview to the leading daily paper of Aragon³. Thus the works were taken from a public museum in ideal conditions (with new modern facilities opened in 2007) and taken to a private convent, without museum facilities, where the Aragonese government has made a considerable investment to fit out a former dormitory as an exhibition room, but which has been difficult to keep open and has been closed to the public for long periods.

What was it about these works that meant they had to be seized from a public museum by paramilitary police in the middle of the night to take them several dozen kilometres to a private convent, newly converted into an emergency museum?

It should be mentioned at the outset that the quality of the works varies, including some Gothic masterpieces, while most are from the modern period and are of poor quality. Consequently, of the 44 pieces, only seven were on permanent display in the museum, while the other 37 were kept in the museum stores. All of them came from the convent of the order of St. John of Jerusalem founded by queen Sancha in 1188 in Sixena, at the western edge of the diocese of Lleida (in Catalonia), on Aragonese territory. The borders between Catalonia and Aragon were shifted in favour of the latter in the 14th century,⁴ and the diocese of Lleida straddled the two regions until 1998. Thus, over the centuries the Catalan city of Lleida was the seat of

2. Del Campo, Marga; Pou, Josep. *Operació trasllat Art de Sixena*. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2018: 24-93.

3. Villanueva, María José. "Antonio Martín González: 'Temí por los bienes de Sixena, hasta hubo amenazas de prender fuego al camión'". *Heraldo de Aragón* (11th December 2019): <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/aragon/huesca/2019/12/11/antonio-martin-gonzalez-temi-por-los-bienes-de-sijena-hasta-hubo-amenazas-de-prender-fuego-al-camion-1348315.html#:~:text=Yo%20sobre%20todo%20tem%3C3%ADa%20por,el%20museo%20y%20el%20traslado%3F>.

4. Sabaté, Flocel. *El territori de la Catalunya medieval. Percepció de l'espai i divisió al llarg de l'Edat Mitjana*. Barcelona: Fundació Salvador Vives Casajuana, 1997: 291-310.



a diocese that had most of its parishes in Aragon,⁵ forming a geographically coherent area⁶ where human relations naturally mixed across the border between Aragon and Catalonia, with their popular traditions similar to other parts of Catalonia and linked to the social and economic capital in Lleida.⁷ In the middle of the 20th century, the inhabitants of Villanueva de Sijena in Aragon, where the convent of Sixena is located, considered the Catalan city of Lleida as their main market, in line with a social and economic environment that showed *el desbordamiento y lo ficticio de la divisiones administrativas provinciales*.⁸ It is therefore not surprising that, when the convent was seriously damaged by a fire started by local anarchists in 1936,⁹ its frescoes were saved by officials from the Catalan national art museum in Barcelona;¹⁰ nor is it surprising that, after intermittent attempts to resume convent life on the site, the nuns decided to leave Sixena because of the difficult living conditions. They went to the convent of the same order in Barcelona¹¹, as had already been proposed in 1970, signed in 1972 and gradually executed from 1971 onwards.¹² Since 1974, the Barcelona community has built a new convent on the outskirts of the city, in Valldoreix, which was formally opened in 1976,¹³ including the nuns of Sixena, who left their former residence for good in 1980. Consequently, as early as 1970, the nuns had placed the works of art in the museum in Lleida,¹⁴ and after they moved to Catalonia they transferred all their patrimony, consisting of 53 pieces held in the Catalan national art museum in Barcelona and 44 others in Lleida, all Catalan property since the regional government had purchased it in three

5. Colomer Preses, Ignasi M. “Les fronteres catalanes a les terres de Lleida”, *Les terres de Lleida en la geografia, en l'economia i en la cultura catalanes*. Barcelona: Cercle Comarcal Lleidatà de Barcelona – Editorial Pòrtic, 1971: 232-236.

6. Iglésies i Fort, Josep. “L'encaix espacial del cercle econòmic del Segre”, *Les terres de Lleida en la geografia, en l'economia i en la cultura catalanes*. Barcelona: Cercle Comarcal Lleidatà de Barcelona – Editorial Pòrtic, 1971: 148-153.

7. Morell i Rosell, Ramon. “Les relacions econòmiques per sobre de les administratives”, *De fronteres i mil·lenis: la Franja, any 2001*. Barcelona: Ramon Sistac i Vicén, ed. Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2003: 139-149.

8. “The overflowing and fictitious meaning of the provincial administrative regions”. Casas Torres, José Manuel. “Lérida, vista desde Aragón”, *Les terres de Lleida en la geografia, en l'economia i en la cultura catalanes*. Barcelona: Cercle Comarcal Lleidatà de Barcelona – Editorial Pòrtic, 1971: 298-299.

9. Arribas Salaberri, Julio. *Historia de Sijena*. Lleida: Instituto de Estudios Ilerdenses, 1975: 73-181; Velasco, Alberto. “El cas del monestir de Santa Maria de Sixena: els litigis pels béns artístics i la manipulació històrica”, *Pseudohistòria contra Catalunya. De l'espanyolisme a la Nova Història*, Vicent Baydal, Cristian Palomo, eds. Vic: Eumo editorial, 2020: 179-180.

10. Barral i Altet, Xavier. “El Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya i l'art romànic català. Història d'una gran col·lecció”, *Catalunya Romànica*, Antoni Pladevall, ed. Barcelona: Enciclopèdia catalana, 1994: I, 216.

11. Pauli, Antoni. *El Real Monasterio de Ntra. Sra. de Alguaire y San Juan de Jerusalén de Barcelona*. Barcelona: Bartrés, 1951: 41-79.

12. Canosa Farran, Francesc. *Sixena: la croada de la memoria*. Juneda: Fonoll, 2018: 80-87.

13. Palacios Sánchez, Juan Manuel. *La sagrada, soberana e ínclita orden militar de San Juan de Jerusalén (Orden de Malta) y sus monasterios de religiosas en España*. Logroño: Editorial Ochoa, 1977: 32-33.

14. Puig Isidre. “Sepulcre de Francisquina d'Erill i Castro”, *Catàleg Exposició Pulchra*, Ximo Company, Isidro Puig, Jesús Tarragona, eds. Barcelona: Departament de Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 1993: 107.



blocks (1983, 1992 and 1994), for about 50,000,000 pesetas (nearly €300,000). The Catalan government then decided to carry on investing money in their restoration and conservation. Later on, in 2007, all the nuns left the convent in Valldoreix because, due to a lack of vocations, they had chosen to concentrate their three existing communities in Spain in the convent at Salinas de Añana, in the Basque Country. On the other hand, nuns from other orders occupied the former convent of Sixena until 2018.¹⁵ In 1997 the government of Aragon claimed the works from Sixena owned by Catalan museums, declaring that they belonged to the cultural heritage of Aragon. The legal proceedings reached the highest court in Spain, the constitutional court, which in 2012 rejected the Aragonese claims.

Then, when the question seemed closed, the government of Aragon opened up a new front in 2012 by lodging a claim before an ordinary court of first instance for the annulment of the purchases by the Catalan government. Thus, in 2016 a simple court of first instance annulled the sales, interpreting the fact that the convent of Sixena had been declared a national monument in 1923, and from that time on none of the items kept in there could be taken away, and if they had they must be returned. This is why the next year, in 2017 an interim judge—who had only been in his position for a month—authorised the *Guardia Civil* to remove the pieces from the museum in Lleida.

However, the argument put forward by the judge is highly questionable: all existing jurisprudence says the opposite, as numerous Spanish museums possess works of art removed from monasteries after they had been listed as national monuments. Above all, the decision of the judge of a court of first instance was subject to an appeal to a higher court, a situation which, in all previous cases, meant prudence in not moving delicate items like works of art properly conserved in museums until the verdict is final.

The question is therefore a pressing one: if this is the decision of a court of first instance being appealed against in a higher court, in particular in the case of delicate materials like medieval works of art, how can it be that an interim judge of first instance orders the pieces to be taken from a public museum where they are not in danger and where professionals can take good care of them until a final decision is reached, to take them to a private convent just 65 kilometres away, with more precarious human and material resources and far worse facilities than a museum? Was it actually necessary to proceed in this manner? Without taking the care and time necessary to move works of art in accordance with the conservation needs of each piece imposed on those responsible for them, but in haste, in the hands of people other than those who usually look after the pieces, with ostentation and intimidation by the armed forces and, what is more, at night? The answer certainly goes beyond justice and the conservation of heritage. The issue must therefore be placed in the Aragonese context.

15. Palacios Sánchez, Juan Manuel. *El real monasterio de Sijena. Introducción a la historia del monasterio*. Huesca: Diputación de Huesca, 1994: 66.



2. The Aragonese context: works of art and revisionism to create a regional identity

The works from Sixena claimed in this case represent only a small part of the artistic heritage Aragon demands from Catalonia. The bishopric of Lleida was the principal institutional indicator of the society sharing a common identity between Aragon and Catalonia. But what had been a source of richness over the centuries was becoming a problem at the end of the 20th century, to the point where in 1995 and 1998 the Aragonese parishes were separated from Lleida. In 1997, the Aragonese diocese of Barbastro-Monzón claimed the works of art originating from there and held in the diocesan museum in Lleida. This initial claim was based on the pieces identified as being of Aragonese origin in the catalogue of the 1993 exhibition commemorating the centenary of the creation of the museum in 1893.¹⁶ This museum was founded by Josep Meseguer, bishop of Lleida from 1889 to 1905 who, attempting to follow the instructions of Pope Leo XIII, collected 434 pieces through purchases, exchanges or donations made by the parishes, to stop works of art being sold to dealers, which was happening at the time. The bishop carefully recorded these acquisitions in his journal¹⁷ and in many letters between himself and the parishes, so bearing witness to the legitimacy of the acquisitions, as stressed in the doctoral thesis written about him.¹⁸ However, this did not stop the Aragonese bishopric from demanding the pieces from 1997 onwards, leading to a long ecclesiastical process, stunningly disrespectful in tone towards the rights of Lleida¹⁹ and also to a claim before a civil court by the diocese of Barbastro-Monzón against its counterpart in Lleida, involving the two Catholic bishops in a public confrontation in the media in 2020.²⁰ In any case, in the long court proceedings a strategy similar to the one used for Sixena is used to back the claim: having the documents of acquisition of the pieces declared invalid.

And there is a third demand, for the murals saved during the Spanish civil war (1936) and carefully installed in the Catalan national art museum in Barcelona. In this case, all the experts agree that it would be impossible to remove them from their

16. Company, Ximo; Puig, Isidre; Tarragona, Jesús, eds. *Catàleg Exposició Pulchra*, Barcelona: Departament de Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 1993.

17. Berlabé, Carmen; Puig, Isidre. "El dietari del bisbe Josep Meseguer", *El dietari del bisbe Josep Meseguer i el Museu Diocesà de Lleida*, Carme Berlabé, Isidre Puig, eds. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2009: 93-282.

18. Berlabé, Carme. *Del Museu Diocesà al Museu de Lleida. Formació i legitimitat del seu patrimoni artístic*. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2018: 39-154.

19. Aznar Gil, Federico R.; Román Sánchez, Raúl, eds., *Los bienes artísticos de las parroquias de la Franja: El proceso canónico (1995-2008)*. Saragossa: Fundación Teresa de Jesús, 2009. Also revealing: Fité, Francesc. "Francesc Xavier Ciuraneta, bisbe de Lleida, i el conflicte de la Franja". *El Pregó eclesial d'informació i opinió*, unnumbered (May 2021): 4-7.

20. Bisbat de Lleida. "Nota de premsa del bisbat de Lleida sobre el litigi de les obres d'art sacre". *Bisbat de Lleida* (12th November, 2020): <http://www.bisbatlleida.org/ca/content/nota-de-premsa-del-bisbat-de-lleida-sobre-el-litigi-de-les-obres-dart-sacre>.



current location without damaging them irreparably,²¹ but despite this Aragonese politicians are demanding the application of two sentences given in Aragon in 2016 and 2020 that they must be transferred.

A point to bear in mind regarding this insistence on moving Aragonese works of art is that only the pieces located in Catalonia are demanded. In the case of Sixena, nobody has even considered claiming the works from this convent which are held in other museums in Spain, such as the Prado in Madrid, or elsewhere in the Aragon region in Huesca or Saragossa. The *Guardia Civil* carried off a 16th-century altar screen from the museum in Lleida to Sixena, but nobody is claiming a fragment of the same screen kept in Saragossa. It is the same with documentation: the few records of Sixena conserved in the Catalan national art museum are claimed, but nothing is said about the convent records that were taken to the Huesca provincial archives in 1936.

The point here is that these demands only for the pieces kept in Catalonia are based on an agitation by politicians hoping to stoke strong, passionate grassroots feeling. The military intervention in the museum in Lleida is surrounded by things like this. First of all, in the case of the judge who authorised the paramilitares to seize the works of art from the museum: in an interview in the leading daily newspaper in Aragon, he gave thanks for *el inmenso cariño que me demostraron los aragoneses*, as he was delighted to have received numerous letters of thanks from Aragonese citizens who were identified emotionally with the seizure by force of these works from Catalan museums.²² Secondly, the political context in which the assault on the museum in Lleida was ordered must be taken into account: the military action was authorised by the Spanish minister of culture, after taking over the functions of the Catalan department of culture following the suppression of regional government—and the imprisonment of most of its members, except especially for those who went into exile—for having organised an independence referendum two months before.

At the same time, certain politicians, with the aid of the press and friendly writers, were spreading revisionist historical discourses, with no documentary backing but setting out to create a specific identity-based narrative regarding the historical roots of Aragon. The historical facts can be completely turned upside down by ignoring existing records: the steps taken by the Catalan cultural authorities in 1936 to save Aragonese heritage were described as pillage, creating a narrative that was spread despite contradicting actual records. Thus, politicians like the mayor of Villanueva de Sijena, Ildefonso Salillas, with the support of like-minded authors

21. Àrea de Conservació Preventiva del Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, *Sixena: ni pintura mural ni pintura sobre tela*, <www.museunacional.cat/sites/default/files/uploaded/pdfs/sixena_ni_pintura_mural_ni_pintura_sobre_Tela_cat_2.pdf>.

22. "The immense affection the Aragonese have shown me". Villanueva, María José. "Antonio Martín González...": <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/aragon/huesca/2019/12/11/antonio-martin-gonzalez-temi-por-los-bienes-de-sijena-hasta-hubo-amenazas-de-prender-fuego-al-camion-1348315.html#:~:text=Yo%20sobre%20todo%20tem%20C3%ADa%20por,el%20museo%20y%20el%20traslado%3F>.



(one of them, Guillermo Fatás, a Professor of ancient history writing here about contemporary history) revealed that it was anarchists from Barcelona, in collusion with the president of Catalonia, who burnt the convent, so that those in charge of the museum could take the paintings,²³ and even that the fire might have been simulated in order to steal the works of art and carry them off to Barcelona²⁴ —all in bizarre tones and forms contradicting the records, quite the opposite to what the rigorous work of a historian should be.²⁵

In this ideological climate, when the two lorries with the pieces taken from the museum in Lleida arrived at the convent of Sixena, the so-called “treasure of Sixena” was welcomed by a fervent crowd amid *cantos, vítores y aplausos* and numerous declarations by various cultural figures in Aragon who considered this an historic day.²⁶ At the same time, while it would have been easy to prove that the pieces had been well conserved, some of them in specific humidity and temperature conditions that they would not have in their new place, the regional culture minister of Aragon, Mayte Pérez, had no hesitation in strongly criticising the museum that had kept the pieces in Catalonia, declaring that they were *en un estat molt, molt, molt deteriorat i algunes seran difícils de recuperar*.²⁷ The very next day, the president of the Aragon region, Javier Lambán, visited the convent in Sixena and made similar declarations about the *evidente negligència de algunes institucions* (“obvious negligence of certain institutions”), responsible for having *permitido que se deterioraran de manera absolutamente culpable* (“allowed the pieces to deteriorate in a wholly culpable way”). In reality public money had clearly been spent to restore and conserve them, but this public representative was more interested in making combative and incendiary statements. This leads to the deduction that there was something more at stake than the good condition and conservation of the pieces, from the tweet he sent himself at the time, concentrating on exalting the triumph

23. Fatás, Guillermo. “Sijena y el Gobierno catalán en 1936”, *Heraldo de Aragón* (26th August, 2012): <<https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/sijena-y-el-gobierno-en1936/>>; Orte, Valentina. “Sijena: Historia, arte y barbarie”, *Religión en Libertad* (7th June, 2012): <http://www.religionenlibertad.com/sijena-historia-arte-y-barbarie-23064.hym#_ftn-ref5>.

24. Puértolas, Patricia. “Sixena estudia una demanda millonaria contra la Generalitat por daños en las pinturas murales”. *Heraldo de Aragón* (28th March, 2012): <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/aragon/huesca/2018/03/28/sijena-estudia-una-demanda-millonaria-contra-generalitat-por-danos-las-pinturas-murales-1232355-2261127.html>.

25. The most serious case is that of a book containing stunning statements, unfounded insults inappropriate to an academic work, the lack of a basic critical approach and several errors of methodology that surprisingly passed the academic selection criteria of a university publisher: Menjón, Marisanchó. *Salvamiento y expolio. Las pinturas murales del Monasterio de Sijena en el siglo XX*, Saragossa: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2017. Since 2019, the author has been director general of heritage for the Aragonese regional government, and therefore has been responsible for management in this area.

26. “Chants, cheers and applause”. Villanueva, María José; Velasco, José Luís. “El tesoro llega a Sijena”, *Heraldo de Aragón* (11th December, 2017): <https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/aragon/2017/12/11/los-tecnicos-terminan-embalar-las-piezas-losalmacenes-1213148-300.html>.

27. “In a very, very, very deteriorated state and some will be difficult to restore”. Montañés, José Ángel. “Les obres d’art de Sixena arriben a Aragó”. *El País* (11th December, 2017): https://cat.elpais.com/cat/2017/12/11/cultura/1512970378_659177.html.



for the dignity of Aragon, because the transfer of the pieces was *éxito de Aragón, que había situado en la recuperación de los bienes la defensa de su dignidad*.²⁸

It was precisely this concern for the dignity of Aragon that led Javier Lambán, who had presided over the region since 2015, to take special care to promote specific content relating to regional history in order to recover a glorious past, unknown because it had been usurped by Catalan manipulation. In 2019, in the guise of an institutional gift, he funded an attractive calendar in which every month contained a regionalist slogan retracing history through quotes from authors in agreement with his ideas: in May the calendar explained that the Crown of Aragon could not be referred to as the “Catalan-Aragonese Confederation”, an invention of a “controversial” 19th-century Catalan historian; in August, that all the kings should be referred to by their Aragonese numbering, because anything else was due to “Catalanist historiography” and, in September, that all the members of the Crown of Aragon, including Catalans, Valencians and Majorcans, were known as Aragonese until the 19th century. This is a case of revisionism without any historical basis: all the historians of Sardinia, Sicily, Rome, Dubrovnik, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Epirus and the many other places where travellers from the Crown of Aragon are recorded agree that they were described as Catalan, even if they came from other territories of the Crown of Aragon.²⁹ The 14th-century kings did in fact present themselves according to the Catalan numbering (the king himself ordered *que ab bones letres e grosses sie escrit: ‘Aquesta és la libreria del rey en Pere III’*,³⁰ and ordered the drawing up of the *Ordinacions fetes per lo molt alt senyor en Pere Terç, rey d’Aragó*³¹), because according to the custom of the time they believed the line to be transmitted through

28. “The achievement of Aragon, which had made regaining the items a question of dignity”. “Lambán califica de ‘lamentable’ el estado de los bienes de Sijena”. *El Plural* (12th December, 2017): https://www.elplural.com/autonomias/cataluna/lamban-califica-de-lamentable-el-estado-de-los-bienes-desijena_115855102.

29. Among others: Rubió i Lluch, Antoni. *Diplomatari de l’Orient català (1301-1409). Col·lecció de documents per a la historia de l’expansió catalana a Orient i dels ducats d’Atenes i Neopàtria*. Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, Barcelona, 1947: 140, 158, 162-163, 225; Fejić, Nenad. Шпаници у Дубрвнику у средњем веку. Belgrade: Prosbeta, 1988: 114-276; D’Alessandro, Vincenzo. “Spazio geografico e morfologie spaciali nella Sicilia del basso medioevo”, *Commercio, finanza, funzione pubblica. Stranieri in Sicilia e in Sardegna nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Marco Tangheroni, ed. Naples: Gisem – Liguori, 1989: 7; Batllori, Miquel. *La familia de los Borjas*. Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1999: 164; Pachymérès, Georges. *Relations historiques*. Albert Failler, ed. Paris: Institut Français d’Études Byzantines, 1999, (*Livres X-XIII*): IV, 437; Fodale, Salvatore. “Naciones mercantiles y patriado urbano en Palermo entre los siglos XIV y XV”, *El mediterraneo medieval y renacentista, espacio de mercados y de culturas*, Jaume Aurell, ed. Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 2002: 64; Jacoby, David. “L’état catalan en Grèce: Société et institutions politiques”, *Els catalans a la Mediterrània Oriental a l’edat mitjana*, Maria Teresa Ferrer i Mallol, ed. Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, 2003: 95-97; Maltezou, Chyssa A. “Attività catalana in Creta veneziana (XIV sec.)”, *Els catalans a la Mediterrània Oriental a l’edat mitjana*, Maria Teresa Ferrer i Mallol, ed. Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, 2003: 114-115; Zečević, Nada. *The Tocco of the Greek realm: Nobility, Power and Migration in Latin Greece (14th-15th centuries)*, Belgrade-Sarajevo: Makart – Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Eastern Sarajevo, 2014: 117-130.

30. “That it be written in good big letters: ‘Here is the library of King Peter III’”, Jocelyn Nigel Hillgarth, “La personalitat política i cultural de Pere III a través de la seva crònica”. *Llengua & Literatura*, 5 (1992): 44.

31. “Ordinances given by his majesty lord Peter III, King of Aragon”. *Ordinacions de la Casa i Cort de Pere el Cerimoniós*, eds. Gimeno, Francisco M.; Gozalbo, Daniel; Trenchs, Josep. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009: 51.



the males,³² that is the lineage of the Counts of Barcelona.³³ The duality between Catalans and Aragonese was respected by all monarchs from the 12th century onwards (when they were joined by dynastic union), reason why they spoke of their court as Catalan-Aragonese: in the words of Alphonse the Chaste in 1169, they acted *cum consilio et voluntate baronum curie mee scilicet Catalanorum et Aragonensium*.³⁴ The calendar ends in December by talking about the works of art supposedly stolen from Sixena by the Catalan authorities just after the burning of the convent in 1936 by anarchists from Barcelona and still in its possession.³⁵ This involves several falsehoods, starting with the fact that it is not true that the fire was caused by individuals from Barcelona, as we know from subsequent court records which have been the object of several historical studies.³⁶

The obsession with making the Catalans the source of all evil while on the other hand suppressing anything positive about them, in 2019 led the regional government of Aragon to order the banning of school history books if they still used the expression “Catalan-Aragonese”, accusing them of “manipulating history”.³⁷ This is a much more radical approach than the one used under the Franco dictatorship. In fact, history books published under the dictatorship in the capital of Aragon, Saragossa, exalted the Spanish nation by listing its glories including the “Catalan-Aragonese Reconquest.”³⁸

32. Jacquart, Danielle; Thomasset, Claude. *Sexualidad y saber médico en la edad media*. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1989: 54-56.

33. Sabaté, Flocel. “L’invisibilitat del re e la visibilitat della dinastia nella Corona d’Aragona”, *Il principe invisibile*, Lucia Bertolini, Arturo Calzona, Glauco Maria Cantarella, Stefano Caroti, eds. Turnhout-Mantua: Brepols – Centro Studi Leon Battista Alberti, 2015: 35-44.

34. Sánchez Casabón, Ana Isabel. *Alfonso II Rey de Aragón, Conde de Barcelona y Marqués de Provenza. Documentos (1162-1192)*. Saragossa: Instituto Fernando el Católico (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), 1995: 119.

35. The convent of Sixena *incendiado y saqueado en agosto de 1936 por milicias procedentes de Barcelona, ese mismo verano la Generalitat se llevó los frescos del gran refectorio a la Ciudad Condal, donde siguen, a pesar de reiteradas reclamaciones. Se suma a ello el despojo de otros bienes artísticos, asimismo expatriados de Aragón, no obstante ser el cenobio con sus bienes monumento nacional desde 1923* (“burnt and looted in August 1936 by militias from Barcelona, that same summer the Catalan government took the frescoes from the main refectory to Barcelona, where they remain, despite repeated claims. Added to this is the removal of other works of art, also removed from Aragon, even though the convent with its goods had been a national monument since 1923”).

36. Regarding the documentation: Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica de Salamanca, Causa General, 1412, exp. 32; Arxiu Diocesà de Lleida, Relación de los hechos ocurridos em las parroquias del obispado, O-Z, carpeta 3. Among other studies: Ibarra, Martín. *La persecución religiosa en la diócesis de Barbastro-Monzón (1931-1941)*. Saragossa: Arzobispado de Zaragoza, 2011: I, 333-335; II, 531-533; Velasco, Alberto; Berlabé, Carme. “Violència i estralls contra el patrimoni artístic lledatà durant la Guerra Civil espanyola”, *La Guerra Civil al territori. Lleida, Tarragona i Girona*, Jaume Sobrequès, Oriol Dueñas, Josep Lluís Martín, eds. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017: 171-245.

37. “El Gobierno de Aragón retira un libro de texto catalán por ‘manipular la historia’”. *El Periodico* (12th January, 2018): <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20180112/el-gobierno-de-aragon-retira-un-libro-escolar-catalan-por-manipular-la-historia-6549479>.

38. *Con (...) Jaime I empieza el tercero y más glorioso período de la Reconquista catalano-aragonesa (1213)*. *Historia de España. Segundo grado*. Saragossa: Editorial Luis Vives, 1945: 89.



All this suggests the poor and bad memories about the Crown of Aragon. Norman Davies had already noticed this: “Memories of the former Crown of Aragon have in effect been carefully compartmentalized. People remember only what they want to remember. They suffer from a lack of benevolent but impartial concern; and quarrels can be easily provoked.”³⁹ One must begin by recalling that the name of the Crown of Aragon does not refer to the region of the same name, but to the dynasty, as the king of Aragon ruled a series of highly autonomous territories: Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia and Majorca.⁴⁰ Merchants, noble and kings took part in expansion across the Mediterranean to Sicily, Sardinia and parts of Greece, culminating in the humanistic court of Alphonse the Magnanimous based in Naples in the mid-15th century. The alliance between royal power, culture and the Catalan language played a key role in this dynamic.⁴¹ In any case, the king was very weak, lacking the legal basis and sufficient revenue, which stopped all his domains being centralised and, on the contrary, encouraged the separate cohesion of each of these territories.

Thus, the historical context facilitates tension between the regions, on which current revisionism is based. However, it might appear surprising that this revisionism, which it contradicts the work of all historians, is not contested but on the contrary is gaining ground in society today, thanks to the support of the media and public spending, including, as mentioned above, the ideological direction of school books. What interest might there be in imposing a new narrative of the past now?

To answer this, one must first appreciate the need to create a cohesive identity discourse for the region of Aragon. When the Franco dictatorship ended at the beginning of the final quarter of the 20th century, Aragon lacked a cohesive urban network and had an ageing, declining population.⁴² The arrival of democracy coincided with major economic shocks,⁴³ while the new Spanish structure of government included regional governments that had not existed previously, allowing the new authorities to seek roads to cohesion more easily. The lack of internal cohesion in Aragon was striking in the east. Here, administrative borders with Catalonia did not really exist in social and economic terms, as described by the geographer Higuera Arnal: *La ‘frontera’ oriental, sobre todo, es la menos precisa de todas, y su localización concreta obedece a la coyuntura de potencial económico y de capacidad*

39. Davis, Norman. *Vanished Kingdom. The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*. London: Penguin books, 2012: 224.

40. Sabaté, Flocel. “Maison et Couronne d’Aragon”, *Histoires, femmes, pouvoirs. Péninsule Ibérique (IX^e-XV^e siècle). Mélanges offerts au Professeur Georges Martin*, Patricia Rochwert-Zuili, Hélène Thieulin-Pardo, eds. Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2018: 763-777.

41. Sabaté, Flocel. *Percepció i identificació dels catalans a l’edat mitjana*, Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans. Barcelona, 2016: 97-102.

42. Mensua, Salvador. “El Valle del Ebro: Aragón, Navarra y Alto Ebro”, *Geografía Regional de España*, Manuel de Terán, Luís Solé Sabarís, eds. Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1978: 202-205.

43. Biescas, José Antonio. “La economía aragonesa durante el franquismo”, *Historia de Aragón. II Economía y sociedad*, Saragossa: Institución Fernando el Católico (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), 1996: 232-33.



*de organización de las comarcas situadas a uno y otro lado de la misma.*⁴⁴ Turning this permeable strip of territory into a frontier was a basic goal in order to fix an identity-based area coinciding specifically with the region. It is therefore not surprising that the diocese of Lleida, which had showed the permeability of the territory since the 12th century,⁴⁵ has been amputated of the most of its parishes at the end of 20th century. Connivance in shadowy relations between politicians and churchmen outside Catalonia led to the boundaries of the diocese being changed to match the regional administrative ones in 1995 and 1998.⁴⁶ This has ended up in a dynamic involving the consolidation of an Aragonese identity based on the exclusion of any Catalan features,⁴⁷ despite the fact that the eastern part of Aragon is traditionally Catalan-speaking, though this has no institutional support.⁴⁸ Making relations between Aragonese and Catalans “problematic” contributes to this region-building. Of course, human relations suffer from this, as Ramon Sistac pointed out in 2006:

*El constant soroll mediàtic dels conflictes de veïnatge entre Aragó i Catalunya contribueix a aprofundir les fronteres identitàries mentals, per un cantó i per un altre. En aquest sentit, caldrà valorar la repercussió negativa que haurà tingut, per exemple, la polèmica sobre la propietat de les obres d'art dels territoris que han canviat de diòcesi*⁴⁹

But there can be no doubt that in Aragon, through the split with the diocese of Lleida, the claims for works of art and historical revisionism against “Catalan abuse”, territorial cohesion and the region’s self-esteem have grown together. It is also true that this option has been preferred to accepting and promoting the value of mixing and coexistence between neighbours that have characterised this territory for centuries.

The regional president who has been the most vocal in this respect, Javier Lambán, is opposed not only to Catalans in their relations with Aragon, but also

44. “The eastern ‘frontier’ in particular is the vaguest of all, and its specific location reflects the current economic potential and organisational capacity of the regions on both sides”. Higuera Arnal, Antonio. “Síntesis geográfica de Aragón”, *Conocer España*, Juan Salvat, Ricardo Martín, Jorge de Navascués, eds. Pamplona: Salvat, 1973, VII: 279.

45. Ubieta, Antonio. “Disputas entre los obispos de Huesca y Lérida en el siglo XII”, *Estudios de la Edad Media de la Corona de Aragón*, 2 (1946): 187-239.

46. Casanova, Eugeni. *El complot. La trama en la segregació del bisbat de Lleida i el litigi de les obres d'art*. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2008: 13-312.

47. Canales, Marta. “La segregació de les parròquies de Lleida per l’Opus Dei”, *L’Opus Dei enfronta Catalunya amb l’Aragó. L’art sacre de Lleida en joc*. Barcelona: Llibres de l’Índex, 2006: 27-92.

48. Pallarol, Juli. “La inferioritat jurídica de la llengua catalana. La situació jurídica a Aragó”, *De fronteres i mil·lenaris: la Franja, any 2001*, Ramon Sistac, ed. Institut d’Estudis Catalans, Barcelona, 2003: 115-129; Chacon, Guillem. “La defensa de la cultura catalana...”: 23-33.

49. “The constant media noise of the neighborhood conflicts between Aragon and Catalonia contributes to deepening the mental frontiers of identity, on one side and on the other. In this sense, it will be necessary to assess the negative repercussion that, for example, the controversy over the ownership of works of art in the territories that have changed dioceses will have had.” Ramon Sistac, “La darrera frontera d’Europa”, *L’Opus Dei enfronta Catalunya amb l’Aragó. L’art sacre de Lleida en joc*. Barcelona: Llibres de l’Índex, 2006: 127.



to them in themselves for their culture. In 2018, he gained notoriety for a tweet saying that “nearly all great Catalan writers” do so in Spanish, so scorning those who use their own —Catalan— language⁵⁰. Both in this respect and in his historical revisionism, he is widely applauded by most of the Spanish media, in particular the Madrid-based majority. Consequently, to understand the whole story of these works of art and this historical revisionism we need to look more closely at another context, that of Spain.

3. The Spanish context: the difficult road to a narrative of national cohesion

After the dynastic union between the crowns of Aragon and Castile in 1479, there was a cultural shift towards Castilian language, as the king found the most convenient basis for reinforcing his power in Castile⁵¹. In the 16th century, the king preferred to treat the territories of the Crown of Aragon separately,⁵² as a “periphery”,⁵³ keeping a physical and conceptual distance as, strictly speaking, according to Jesús Lalinde, the period saw *la disolución del Rey de Aragón en el rey de España, metamorfosis del Rey de Castilla*.⁵⁴ The conflicts in 16th- and 17th-century Europe between the participative models inherited from the Middle Ages and the new, politically centralised models⁵⁵ thus tied in with this scenario, leading to tensions against the monarchy in Aragon and above all in Catalonia, where a war of secession broke out between 1640 and 1652.⁵⁶ Finally, following the War of the Spanish Succession (1700-1714), the Spanish crown passed into the hands of the Bourbons, the institutions of the Crown of Aragon were abolished and the European territories outside the Iberian peninsula were lost (except for certain of the Balearic Islands).⁵⁷

50. Redacción. “Lambán desata la polémica con un comentario sobre su lectura ‘de un autor catalán en español’”. *La Vanguardia* (10th November, 2018): <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20181110/452830019005/javier-lamban-polemica-lectura-eduardo-mendoza-espanol.html>.

51. Belenguier, Ernest. *Fernando el Católico*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1999: 113-190.

52. Pérez Latre, Miquel. “Pervivència i dissolució. La Corona d’Aragó en temps de Felip I (II)”, *Història de la Corona d’Aragó*, Ernest Belenguier, ed. Barcelona, Edicions 62, 2007: II, 214-218.

53. Salvador Estebán, Emilia. “Integración y periferización de las coronas de Aragón y de Portugal en la monarquía hispánica. El caso valenciano (1580-1598)”, *Las sociedades ibéricas y el mar a finales del siglo XVI*, Fernando Checa, ed. Madrid: Comisaría General de España en la Expo de Lisboa’98, 1998: 166-180.

54. “The dissolution of the king of Aragon into the king of Spain, a metamorphosis from the king of Castile”. Lalinde, Jesús. “La disolución de la Corona de Aragón en la monarquía hispánica o católica (sec. XVI-XVII)”, *XIV Congresso di Storia della Corona d’Aragona (Sassari-Alghero, 1990)*. Sassari: Carlo Delfino, 1993: I, 156.

55. Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, ed. *Le Gouvernement mixte. De l’idéal politique au monstre constitutionnel en Europe (XIII^e-XVII^e siècle)*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne Jean Monnet, 2005.

56. Simon, Antoni. *1640*. Barcelona: Rafael Dalmau editor, 2019.

57. Jose Juan Vidal, “Los reinados de Felipe V y Fernando VI”, *Historia d España. Historia moderna. Política interior y exterior de los Borbones*. Tres Cantos: Istmo, 2001: 96-1323; 209-220.



Spain then embarked on a search for a national discourse of cohesion.⁵⁸ In the 19th century, the debate on how to adapt the heritage of the crowns of Aragon and Castile culminated in 1875, when a centralised, conservative and Castilian model was imposed.⁵⁹ It was the time of the nation-state model in Europe. This, in the words of Patrick Geary, meant that the “suppression of cultural diversity in states such as Spain, France and Turkey made Basques, Catalans, Bretons, Armenians, Kurds and other minorities ‘disappear’ from nation-states.”⁶⁰ Under this approach, all Catalan cultural and identity features has been considered a threat to the cohesion of Spain, ensuring permanent latent tension which came out in all the conflicts in Spain in the 20th century.⁶¹

After a bloody three-year civil war, the long dictatorship of Franco (1939-1975) insisted on stigmatising the Catalan culture and language belonging to the most of the territories of the Crown of Aragon (Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands).⁶² This why the dictatorship and the unitary vision of Spain it imposed collapsed together, giving way to an acceptance of a plurality of ways of being Spanish. The regional government set up in Catalonia in 1977 represented all these hopes, to such a point that at the time the pro-independence option did not even gain parliamentary representation. But, like the Procrustean bed in which what does not fit the official norm must be chopped off, one particular vision of Spain remained surprisingly powerful at the end of the 20th century, both in most of the Spanish media and among many politicians, especially the conservatives.⁶³ At the beginning of the 21st century, the economic centralisation encouraged by the Spanish government with the specific intention of reducing the influence of Catalonia might wield at home and in neighbouring territories,⁶⁴ the curtailment of its autonomy by a constitutional court of unusual composition in 2010⁶⁵ and the total lack of empathy for Catalan identity in most Spanish media⁶⁶ led to a polarisation, with many Spaniards believing that Catalan cultural traits were

58. Dedieu, Jean-Pierre. “Comment l’État forge la nation. L’Espagne’ du XVI^e siècle au début du XIX^e siècle”, *Le sentiment national dans l’Europe méridionale aux XIX^e et XVII^e siècles*, Alain Tallon, ed. Madrid : Casa de Velázquez, 2007: 68-69.

59. Álvarez Junco, José. *Mater Dolorosa. La idea de España en el siglo XX*. Madrid: Taurus, 2001: 119-464.

60. Geary, Patrick J. *The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003: 39.

61. Figueres, Josep Maria. *Història de l’anticatalanisme. El diari ABC i els seus homes*. Tarragona: El Mèdol, 1997; Ferrer i Gironès, Francesc. *Catalonofòbia. El pensament anticatalà a través de la història*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2000: 135-310; Casassas, Jordi. *Cataluña y la España plural. Discursos políticos del siglo XX*. Barcelona: Àurea Editores, 2006.

62. Solé i Sabaté, Josep Maria; Villarroya, Joan. *Cronologia de la repressió de la llengua i la cultura catalanes 1936-1975*, Barcelona: Curial, 1993.

63. Ainaud de Lasarte, Josep Maria. *El llibre negre de Catalunya. De Felip V a l’ABC*. Barcelona: Edicions La Campana, 1995: 101-125; Hugué, Josep. *Cornuts i pagar el beure*. Barcelona: Columna, 1999.

64. Aznar, José María. *El compromiso del poder*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2013: 154-155.

65. De Montagut, Tomàs. “Uniformització legislativa espanyola contra el dret propi català”, *Vàrem mirar ben al lluny del desert. Actes del simposi ‘Espanya contra Catalunya. Una mirada històrica (1714-2014)*, Jaume Sobrequés, dir. Barcelona: Departament de la Presidència de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2014: 387.

66. Gómez, Daniel. *Insults i disbarats contra l’Estatut de Catalunya*. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2006: 11-71.



dangerous to the unity of Spain and, on the other hand, the Catalans disillusioned about receiving any support from the Spanish government for their economic and cultural development.⁶⁷ This led to the emergence in Catalonia for a grassroots preference for the option of independence which, in a particular political context, led to the unilateral referendum on independence in 2017.⁶⁸

Faced with this challenge, the main media and the Spanish government fell back on populism, appealing to defend the nation against those who wanted to destroy it, so criminalising a public option and seeking a solution not through political dialogue, but through police and judicial repression. The historical revisionism and the demands for works of art by Aragon, both accusing “the Catalans”, arose at the same time and, for most of the population, within the same conceptual framework. Certain Aragonese politicians have insisted on mixing up these issues, always attempting to gain the support of a population by stoking the flames. To commemorate the first anniversary of the entry of the *Guardia Civil* into the museum in Lleida, on 17th December 2018, a celebration was held next to the convent of Sixena, in the course of which the local mayor, Ildefonso Salillas, again fed unfounded suspicions about Aragonese heritage that “finished up” in Catalonia.⁶⁹ At the same event, the mayor accepted the presentation of bottle number 155,000 from an Aragonese manufacturer of cava (Spanish sparkling wine), in an explicit allusion to article 155 of the Spanish constitution, used by the government of Spain to suspend the autonomy of Catalonia in 2017. The owner of the company committed himself to regional glory, announcing that he would be making a line of cava called “Kings of Aragon”, as people were to feel proud of being Aragonese (“*tenemos que sentirnos orgullosos de ser aragoneses*”), a phrase the newspaper reporting it printed in bold.⁷⁰

67. Bel, Germà. *Anatomía de un desencuentro. La Cataluña que es y la España que no pudo ser*. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 2013.

68. Amat, Jordi. *La conjura de los irresponsables*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2017; García, Lola. *El naufragio. La deconstrucción del sueño independentista*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 2018; Alvaro, Francesc-Marc. *Assaig general d'una revolta. Les claus del procés català*. Barcelona: Pòrtic, 2019.

69. *El Monasterio de Sijena fue fundado por la reina aragonesa Doña Sancha, después fue Corte, Panteón Real de los reyes aragoneses y el único lugar donde estuvo el Archivo de la Corona de Aragón antes de acabar en Barcelona, ha dicho el alcalde* [“The convent of Sixena was founded by the Aragonese queen Lady Sancha, then it was the court, royal tomb of the monarchs of Aragon and the only location of the Archives of the Crown of Aragon before they were taken to Barcelona” stated the mayor’]. This is once again a case of intoxicating public opinion with arguments lacking in any historical rigour, as none of these functions he attributes to the convent is true and, with regard to the archives known as “Archives of the Crown of Aragon” since the 18th and 19th century, these are the royal archives normally created around the king in Barcelona, in the organization of which at the beginning of the 14th century arrived documents hitherto kept in various repositories, especially in residences of the orders of the Temple and Saint John of Jerusalem, like notably Sixena, which is why in 1308 a box from this convent entered to the new royal archives. Udina, Federico. “Formación del archive”, *Guía del Archivo de la Corona de Aragón*, Federico Udina, ed., Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 1986: 21-29; Conde y Delgado de Molina, Rafael. “Los archivos reales o la memoria del poder”, *XV Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón. El poder real en la Corona de Aragón (siglo XIV-XVI)*. Saragossa: Departamento de Educación y Cultura de la Diputación General de Aragón, 1996: 124.

70. Sierra, Álvaro. “Un cava aragonés celebra su botella 155.000 junto a los bienes de Sijena”. *Hoy Aragón* (14th November, 2018): <https://www.hoyaragon.es/noticias-aragon/bodegas-langa-aragon/>.



More explicitly, and with great institutional responsibility, shortly after the *Guardia Civil* had seized the pieces from the museum in Lleida and deposited them in the convent of Sixena, regional president Javier Lambán made an official speech to his citizens as a new year greeting at the end of 2017. This was broadcast on the regional public television channel from the convent of Sixena. He was filmed beside the pieces he had managed to bring back from Catalonia, so showing off his achievement and portraying him as a victorious leader. He said explicitly, after some comments about the political situation in Catalonia, that bringing back the pieces had reinforced the self-esteem (*autoestima*) of the Aragonese.⁷¹

This leaves no doubt that the absence of long periods of democracy in the history of Spain in which views tolerant of otherness might have taken root explains the language and tone used by many politicians and the conservative and national point of view shared even by certain judges. This is how eminent jurist José Antonio Martín Pallín put it:

El tic autoritario se ha consolidado durante los cuarenta años de dictadura, pero (...) tengo la impresión de que Franco no hizo más que aprovecharse de estos resabios históricos, que arrancan de la llamada guerra de la Independencia y que se han ido consolidando con los sobresaltos (...) a lo largo de más de dos siglos.⁷²

4. Two epilogues...

After these words were written at the beginning of 2021, two events took place that complement the events presented here. First, as the first epilogue, on 13th January 2021 the Spanish supreme court ruled on the works of art confiscated from the museum in Lleida in 2017 by the *Guardia Civil*. The sentence criticises the arguments of the Aragonese judge, but accepts that the pieces had to be handed over to Aragon because of a minor technicality: the document on the merging of the nuns from Sixena and Vallldoreix is not considered valid (as it was not filed with all the church and civil instances) and consequently, though the mother superior of the latter handed over the works to the Catalan government, she had no power to do so. This is certainly a rather forced argument to authorise the handover of the works of art, showing that the outcome could easily have been different. As Alberto Velasco underlines, *Quan un problema patrimonial de gran calat polític i àmplia repercussió social, incloent-hi l'entrada de la Guàrdia Civil al Museu de Lleida, es resol*

71. Ortega, Javier. "Lambán pronuncia su discurso de Fin de Año desde Sijena: 'Ha reforzado nuestra autoestima como comunidad'". *El Mundo* (31st December, 2017): <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2017/12/31/5a48ef19e5fdea115e8b45b7.html>.

72. "The authoritarian tic was consolidated during the forty years of dictatorship, but (...) I have the impression that Franco did no more than take advantage of these bad historical habits, which go back to the war against Napoleon and have become entrenched with different conflicts over more than two hundred years". Martín Pallín, José Antonio. *El gobierno de las togas*. Madrid: Catarata, 2020: 227-231.



*jurídicament per un defecte de forma, es posa de manifest que l'artilleria de raons desplegada des d'Aragó no era tan evident. And if everything depends on such a small technicality, questions remain: Quantes comunitats de monges s'han fusionat recentment a Espanya? Totes van complir aquest tràmit? O és que s'ha buscat la mínima esletxa per invalidar les vendes?*⁷³

This sentence leads on to the second epilogue: in the Aragonese town of Barbastro, a judge in the lower court ruled the same way on the 111 pieces in the museum claimed by the bishop of Barbastro-Monzón as the previous one had with the items from the convent of Sixena. First he stated, with regard to the notes taken by bishop. Meseguer, that there was insufficient documentation to acquire items of this kind and, moreover, he ordered that despite the fact that the other side had appealed to higher instances, the works should be removed from the museum in Lleida from February 2021, and this was immediately done.

In this case, the alliance between the political authorities, represented by the regional government of Aragon, and the ecclesiastical ones, represented by the bishop of Barbastro-Monzón, who in 2016 had taken his counterpart, the bishop of Lleida, to court, should be underlined. As in the previous case in 2017, the Aragonese authorities, both civil and ecclesiastical, made efforts to mobilise the population with emotive appeals. Rather than this, what is striking is the passivity of the other side: the works were handed over quietly, political leaders made a great effort to calm any popular reactions and did not pursue legal channels such as enquiring into the legal contradiction between obeying the order by the judge of Aragonese lower court and Catalan law, which prohibits catalogued pieces from being removed from the region. Because of this defeatism, whether due to strategy or indifference, the issue became secondary for the Catalan press, politicians and authorities, in striking contrast with what was happening in Aragon.⁷⁴

73. "When a heritage issue with major political impact and social repercussions, including the *Guardia Civil* entering the museum in Lleida, is legally settled on the basis of a technicality, it is clear that the battery of reasons deployed from Aragon was not so strong.": "How many religious communities have recently merged in Spain? Have they all followed this procedure? Or has the most minimal reason been sought to invalidate the sales?": Velasco, Alberto. "Sixena i ara, què?". *El País* (20th January, 2021): https://cat.elpais.com/cat/2021/01/20/cultura/1611172553_276557.html>.

74. Among the few reactions to be found on the Catalan side is the decision taken by the history and archaeology section of the Institute for Catalan Studies, which has a role in cataloguing works of art, which expressed surprise at the departure of the pieces, though on 25th February it decided that the president of the institution should contact the regional culture minister urgently to ask that *es cerquin les vies per abordar el conflicte jurídic i jurisdiccional existent abans de continuar amb el lliurament de les obres d'art* ("ways be found of settling the current legal and jurisdictional conflict before handing over the works of art."). (Institut d'Estudis Catalans. Secció Històrico-Arqueològica, sessió ordinària, 18 de febrer de 2021).



5. ...and some conclusions

We therefore start out from rulings by courts of first instance that ensure, on the basis of very weak, debatable arguments, that works of art are removed from public museums by methods involving a show of strength and ostentatious intimidation and humiliation, but which are very difficult to understand and force us to look at the context which surprisingly shows how many public gestures play with historical arguments in 21st-century Europe. Following this thread leads to some highly thought-provoking conclusions:

5.1. Bizarre court decisions

We have long been in the habit of discussing claims on works of art in museums, by indigenous people⁷⁵ or by the country that had their heritage taken away, generally in the colonial period.⁷⁶ In other circumstances, it is not unusual for museums and the places of origin of pieces to reach agreements on their temporary or permanent transfer. What we see in Spain, on the other hand, is surprising: a conflict between two neighbouring regions to move pieces over very short distances, less than a hundred kilometres, decided very quickly by certain courts where right from the first instance very weak arguments are used to annul rights of possession of works located in the neighbouring region to order the items to be moved immediately. The arguments being so weak, it is probable that the decisions of judges of first instance will be appealed against, which makes it even harder to understand why these judges of first instance order the pieces to be moved despite the obvious risk of having to move them back if the appeal is accepted.

In fact, all the experts have made statements about these rushed transfers of works of art. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) clearly stated its disagreement on two occasions, in 2017 and 2021, on purely technical grounds. The ICOM could not accept that pieces which were at no risk, being properly conserved in Catalan museums, should be moved on the grounds of legal proceedings that were still under way and not yet final.⁷⁷

This is unusual behaviour, but the same goes for the legal action, surrounded by strong popular emotions stoked by the political authorities who take legal action using their lawyers and fan public feeling with the flames of identity, all duly paid

75. Brown, Kate. "People Across the Globe Want Their Cultural Heritage Back. Canada May Offer a Blueprint for How to Get There". *Artnet News* (25th June, 2018): <https://news.artnet.com/artworld/canada-restitution-indigenous-culture-1307060>.

76. Cuno, James. *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

77. Icom Espana. "Comunicado sobre el traslado de las obras de Sijena". *Icom* (14th December, 2017): <https://www.icom-ce.org/2017/12/14/comunicado-sobre-el-traslado-de-las-obras-de-sijena/>; Icom España. "Comunicado sobre el traslado de las colecciones del Museu de Lleida". *Icom* (12th March, 2021): <https://www.icom-ce.org/2021/03/12/comunicado-sobre-el-traslado-de-las-colecciones-del-museu-de-lleida/>.



for from the public purse. This is a context which is so intense that it envelops and affects the legal decisions.

5.2. *Social cohesion by forcing a change from a permeable strip to a frontier*

With the death of the dictator Franco in 1975 and the need to draw up a new political and administrative model for Spain, pressures from regions with a strong historical identity like Catalonia led to the choice of agreeing on “autonomy” for every region in Spain. Thus, from 1978, Aragon was organised with its own parliament and regional government, and one of the biggest challenges facing it was to build its own social and economic cohesion. Apart from building up its own network of transport links and provincial towns, a choice was gradually made to close the region off from its eastern neighbour. Its permeability in human terms from the Middle Ages⁷⁸ to the end of the 20th century made it easier to find historical arguments for fostering social strategies based on collaboration and mixing. However, there can be no doubt that building a kind of wall, like the “mental frontiers of identity” mentioned above, to borrow the words of Ramon Sistac,⁷⁹ lead to greater internal cohesion, at the expense of relations with the neighbours on the other side of the wall.

The judicial annulment of the cession of the pieces from the parishes to the diocese of Lleida means they are once again the property of the parishes, but these have signed a document transferring them to the diocese of Barbastro-Monzón, so the pieces will never return to their original parishes, but are transferred from Lleida to Barbastro. To explain this strategy to parishioners, the church hierarchy must include this internal ideological wall so that the population will accept the preference for Barbastro, especially because in many cases this town is further away than Lleida and has no tradition as a capital for services.

78. Over the centuries, every study of the everyday life of the region's inhabitants has shown a picture of mixing both ways over the line between Aragon and Catalonia. For example, looking at an olive oil merchant based in Lleida in the 14th century naturally takes us to both Catalan and Aragonese territory. Sabaté, Flocel. “Olio e mercati nella Catalogna del basso medioevo”, *Ars Olearia. I. Dall'oliveto al mercato nel medioevo*, Irma Naso, ed., Guarene: Centro Studi per la Storia dell'Alimentazione e della Cultura Materiale 'Anna Maria Nada Patrone'-CeSA, 2018: 171-175.

79. Sistac, Ramon. “La darrera frontera d'Europa...”: 127. About the concept of mental frontiers or mental borders, see, among others: Paasi, Anssi. *Territories, boundaries and Consciousness: the Changing Geographies of the Finnish-russian Border*, London: John Wiley&Sons, 1999; John Agnew, “Borders on the mind: re-framing border thinking”, *Ethics & Global Politics*, 1/4; Vaishali Raghuvanshi, *Re-imagining Border Studies in Asia*, London- New York: Roudletge, 2020: 99-110.



5.3. *Rewriting the past as slogans and imposing them by wielding political and administrative power*

The political leaders and media of Aragon impose a specific revisionist narrative about the past. They even impose it legally, with an interventionism that restricts freedom in a way that is alarming in western Europe, as we have seen with the tampering with school history textbooks so that for example it is not legal to talk about the “Catalan-Aragonese Crown”. An official doctrine has been generated, to be followed regarding the name of the country, the numbering of its kings and the exploits on the Middle Ages, despite the fact that historical research contradicts it⁸⁰—the slogan is enough, and no other justification is needed. The official doctrine is summed up in a calendar given away by the president of the region since 2019, which is the sum of twelve slogans in relation to identity. There is not even any attempt to come up with a history to refute academic history books.⁸¹

Wiping memories to impose a new narrative about the past is a feature of all changes of regime, as in eastern Europe.⁸² An apparent regime change facilitates the upending of narratives, as with Mongolia’s rediscovery of Genghis Khan or, above all that of Uzbekistan with Timur.⁸³ In Aragon, however, there has been no real updating of the discourse, first because it rests only on slogans which are imposed and repeated, but above all because the strategy centres on recovering what the Catalans are supposed to have appropriated. The rediscovery of the region’s glorious past relies on recovering what the Catalans “took”: the name of the country, the numbering of the kings, glories like the Mediterranean empire, pre-eminence within the Crown or even works of art.

In this approach, the social propagation of blaming the neighbouring region is inevitable. In fact, the starting point is not clear: did the politicians create a simple discourse to appeal to the population, or did they take it from the grassroots? In any case, the politicians who have chosen to promote these narratives before the population are always leaders aiming to strengthen their own position on the basis of primitive feelings that already existed to some extent, such as mistrust of neighbours. In fact, great care is taken over language addressed to the population in order to subtly generate a certain climate of opinion: the insistence, for example, on “returning” the works of art to Barbastro, the Aragonese town where they

80. These interventions ignore scholarship on the numbering of the kings and the name of the territorial confederation that can be summed up in certain recent recapitulative studies: Riera, Jaume. “La correcta numeració dels reis d’Aragó i comtes de Barcelona”, *Afers, fulls de recerca i pensament*, 69 (2011): 485-521; Palomo Reina, Cristian. “Denominaciones históricas de la Corona de Aragón. Balance crítico e historiográfico”, *eHumanista/IVITRA*, 16 (2019): 160-180.

81. Some books have been written in the same vein, but instead of new arguments they offer the biased views of a position that is neither critical nor scholarly. A good example of this: Corral, José Luis. *La Corona de Aragón. Manipulación, mito e historia*. Saragossa: Editorial Doce Robles, 2014.

82. Snyder, Timothy. *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2003: 202-214.

83. Checa, Antonio. *Uzbekistán. Tamerlán desplaza a Lenin*. Valencina de la Concepción: Editorial Renacimiento, 2015: 32-37.



are planned to be installed, even though these pieces have never in fact been in Barbastro.

5.4. *Strange travelling companions*

The mentioned context of a concept of Spanish nationalism with serious difficulties in incorporating Catalan identity shares arguments with the Aragonese regional identity discourse and so affects the population. This type of Spanish nationalism unites all political sensibilities: it spread around Spain in the late 20th and early 21st centuries through the conservatives, but it has been taken on board with all its features by the socialists. The conservatives governed the Aragon region from 2011 to 2015, and losing the government to the socialists in 2015 did not lead to a policy of greater understanding with the Catalan neighbours, quite the opposite.

This shared ideological basis explains the complicity with certain powerful sectors of the Catholic church. The first stage, the struggle to split off much of the territory of the diocese of Lleida, culminating in 1995, involved close complicity with conservative members of the Spanish ecclesiastical hierarchy and particularly vigorous intervention by the political authorities, both conservative and socialist.⁸⁴ The Spanish national and Aragonese regional models make everything that sounds Catalan problematic, and this ended up outweighing the socio-economic reality of the permeable area straddling the border between the Catalan and Aragonese regions, as symbolised by the diocese of Lleida.

The ideological weight of these models, regional in Aragon and national in Spain, was more powerful than any religious feeling. The bishop of Barbastro-Monzón took his counterpart in Lleida to court, displaying a belligerence shown, for example, in a curious war of press releases between the two Catholic bishops in November 2020. This certainly has the support of a majority of the Spanish bishops, especially when, since 2020, the president of the Spanish bishops' Conference has been Juan José Omella who, from 1999 to 2004, was bishop of this same diocese and whose attitude, far from being conciliatory, keeps up a similar bellicose tone against Lleida. However, the zeal of the current bishop of Barbastro-Monzón in pursuing works of art has surprised Catholics, at least Catalan ones. Certainly, two of the pieces claimed were worshipped in a historic parish of Lleida and went from an object of worship to being locked in a display case in a museum in Barbastro; and above all, one bishop taking another to a civil court is a clear breach of Christian doctrine: *audet aliquis vestrum habens negotium adversus alterum, iudicari apud iniquos, et non apud sanctus?*⁸⁵ From the point of view of social-historical analysis, which is the subject of this article, this is a good example of how the nationalist ideological envelope can fit over religious convictions, which is not unusual in other social conflicts of a more serious nature throughout the 20th century.

84. Details of the fit between church and politics: Casanova, Eugeni. *El complot...*: 157-174.

85. 1 Cor, 6.1.



5.5. Action without reaction

Those responsible for the Aragonese revisionist discourse seek to achieve internal cohesion but also external confrontation. The above-mentioned 2019 calendar as a compendium of this historical revisionism with no academic foundation was not only repeated in 2020, but the regional president of Aragon had it sent to every member of the Catalan parliament in an attempt to provoke a confrontation.⁸⁶ But this has not happened: there has been no response. Even though it is very easy to dismantle the Aragonese revisionist discourse with historical arguments, nobody has played this game. One could speak of maturity. But it is also beyond doubt that the discussion about history no longer forms part of the argument of Catalan identity. In fact, for decades now, nationalist discourse in Catalonia has moved on to very elaborate approaches in the social and legal spheres, without relying solely on invoking the country's historical roots,⁸⁷ to the extent that Catalan popular memory does not look back beyond 1714, when their institutions were lost following military defeat.⁸⁸ The so-called historical myths of Catalan identity are most widely known because they are constantly mentioned by Spanish nationalists, who criticise them passionately,⁸⁹ rather than by Catalan nationalists, who surprise some by feeling no need to invoke or even know about their historical roots prior to the 18th century.⁹⁰

On the contrary, in February 2021, as mentioned in the epilogue, the 111 pieces claimed by Aragon were simply handed over by the Catalan authorities with no fanfare. This might well be a mature response to avoid confrontation, but it could also be part of a loss of interest on the part of Catalan society in its own historical roots; as pointed out above, nationalist discourse in Catalonia does not fall back on its historical past. Furthermore, this might also reflect the decline of Catalan identity among the population, in line with cultural indicators like the increasing weakness of the Catalan language, which is showing the symptoms of languages beginning the path to extinction.⁹¹ Consequently, the lack of interest in their language, culture and heritage all goes together and may be indicative of a trend in the development of Catalan society today.

86. Pérez, Roberto. "Lambán manda a Torra un calendario que desmonta las falacias históricas del independentismo". *ABC Aragón* (23rd December, 2019): https://www.abc.es/espana/aragon/abci-lamban-manda-torra- calendario-desmonta-falacias-historicas-independentismo-201912231452_noticia.html.

87. *Cinquenes jornades. El nacionalisme català a la fi del segle XX (Solsona, 1991)*, Barcelona: Edicions de la Revista de Catalunya, 1991; Casassas, Jordi; Termes, Josep. *El futur del catalanisme*, Barcelona: Proa, 1997; Bossacoma i Busquets, Pau. *Justícia i legalitat de la secessió. Una teoria de l'autodeterminació nacional des de Catalunya*. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Autònoms de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2015.

88. Pujol, Claudia, ed. *Catalonia calling. El món ho há de saber*. Barcelona: Sapiens, 2015.

89. Leguina, Joaquín. *Los 10 mitos del nacionalismo catalán*, Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2014: 67-93.

90. Sabaté, Flocel. "Une histoire médiévale pour l'identité catalane", *Intégration et désintégration en Europe centrale et orientale*, Sergiu Mișcoiu, Nicolae Păun, eds. Paris : Harmattan, 2016 : 58-59.

91. Junyent, Carme. "El català, una llengua en perill d'extinció? (vint anys després)", *Revista d'Igualada*, 61 (2019): 25-32.



5.6. Local but part of a local world

We are confronted by a specific scenario on a small scale: two regions of Spain with differences of opinion over works of art, and the invocation by the regional authorities of Aragon of a historical revisionism that seeks to spread through the complicity of the media, while flying in the face of historical rigour. However, neglecting to check the truth of declarations intended to unify the region's populations, chimes with the ease with which in other scenarios "fake news" are accepted and "alternative facts" are evoked. These are very much local issues, but they are still revealing of a form of globalisation, in the sense of parallel strategies in the same time frame.

In this respect, another question should be posed: are these facts worrying or are they part of a temporary trend? We are very probably dealing with politicians who, in a global world with a strong predominance of emotion, opt for the easy path of turning a feeling of tension into rejection in order to cultivate their own constituency. After all, poor relations with one's closest neighbours is quite common. For example, jokes about Ukrainians have always formed part of Russian popular culture⁹². And in the specific case of poor relations between the former territories of the Crown of Aragon, the close collaborative relations over centuries between Catalonia and Valencia⁹³ have also been the target of heavy attacks in the late 20th century, in order to generate a Valencian identity in opposition to Catalonia. Historiography has already pointed out that the Valencian model of generating an identity in confrontation with Catalonia has been exported to Aragon.⁹⁴

However, this is always a dangerous game. In the name of regional identity, historical heritage cherished by the neighbouring region as if it were its own has been confiscated and "mental ideological walls" have been thrown up to establish new frontiers. Francisco Veiga, talking about Yugoslavia, spoke of frontiers that are easy to draw and hard to erase, because blood is difficult to wash away.⁹⁵ They are certainly very different circumstances but, in both cases, a social concept of "identity" has been encouraged, one that involves creating wounds.

92. This commentary, as the entire article, was written before the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine. Regarding the escalation of tension between these countries, we can recommend: Carlos Taibo, *Rusia contra Ucrania. Imperios, pueblos, energía*, Barcelona: Catarata, 2022.

93. Vicent Boira, Josep. "Geografies de l'espai comú. Fragments encadenats d'una anàlisi al voltant de la relació entre València i Catalunya", *Quaderns de vida Cristiana*, 245 (2013): 113-125.

94. Viadel, Francesc. *No nos fareu catalans. Història inacaba del 'blaverisme'*. Barcelona: L'Esfera dels Llibres, 2006: 285-287.

95. *fronteras fáciles de trazar y difíciles de borrar, dado que la sangre tiene mala limpieza*. Veiga, Francisco. *La fábrica de la fronteras. Guerras de secesión yugoslavas 1991-2001*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2015: 377.



5.7. History and heritage, an emotional tool for ideologies

From an analytical point of view, it is also a fine example of the use of tangible and intangible heritage to create identities in the 21st century, with the addition of an outside enemy to blame. The works of art to be removed from Catalonia and sent to Aragon go hand in hand with a revisionist discourse suited to the level of current thinking, as it does not even need any historical basis; the slogan as an “alternative fact” is enough. It is thus a matter of mobilising the population through an emotion to unite the whole of society, totally separate from the “other” and reinforced by a common, specific tangible and intangible heritage, supposedly anchored in the Middle Ages.

