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978-0-521-56325-3 - The Village and the Outside World in Golden Age Castile: Mobility and Migration in Everyday Rural Life

David E. Vassberg

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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### THE MYTH OF THE IMMOBILE VILLAGE

The world has seen so many changes over the past two centuries that many people have come to believe that not only technology, but also family organization, human relationships, and geographical mobility must have been drastically different in pre-industrial times. A tenacious myth of the modern world is that pre-industrial villages were essentially stable communities whose inhabitants rarely ventured beyond their own territory, and that most rural people remained in the village generation after generation.

Historical myths attempt to understand the present by interpreting the past.<sup>1</sup> The immobile village myth, like all successful myths, contains some truth. Most of the world's population before the Industrial Revolution were peasants living in village communities where farming and animal husbandry were the major occupations. Rural families in these villages tried to produce for themselves as much as possible of what they needed, to avoid cash outlays. And villagers used mainly local products, because it was expensive to transport goods from the outside world. Thus the stereotypical pre-industrial village was largely self-sufficient. Historians have reinforced the stereotype, and have nurtured the myth by placing great emphasis on the economic autonomy and isolation of the traditional village community. General texts of Western or World Civilization contain sections describing the "small, narrow, and provincial" world of the European peasant. They explain that in the early medieval period, peasants were "serfs, bound to the land and the village for life."<sup>2</sup> One scholar opens the first chapter of a book about peasants by quoting (without comment) the commonplace that "they are bound to the ground or chained to the soil." Another entitled a section of a book on peasant life "Imprisoned in the Village." Unquestionably villages like that did exist, but it is highly misleading to use them as the basis for generalizations about the entire medieval period. What is worse, even the best texts rarely bother to modify this view of village life, as the narrative moves beyond the Middle Ages. And even historians specializing in the early modern period often

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perpetuate the notion of the village cut off from the rest of the world: a well-known scholar in a recent book writes that the outside world “did not impinge on the daily life of [typical seventeenth-century] villagers”; a historian of early modern Germany asserts that inter-village movement was not very great;<sup>3</sup> one of the best studies of early modern rural France is entitled *The Immobile Village*;<sup>4</sup> and a respected specialist in rural history concludes that the village was “essentially a self-contained, a self-maintained and a self-reliant entity, remote from the outside world.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we should not be surprised if our students – or even our colleagues – often visualize the early modern European rural community as a closed, timeless, unchanging institution with an essentially immobile population.<sup>6</sup> It may be argued that the immobile village myth is a discarded cliché that nobody believes any more. After all, the myth undeniably has been thoroughly debunked by recent scholarship documenting the geographical mobility of past populations.<sup>7</sup> But unfortunately, not everyone has assimilated the meaning of this recent scholarship. Consequently, the immobile village myth remains a widespread misconception among the general population, and even within the academic community, as the foregoing examples prove. One reason for this is that historians too often have become glued to an outdated stereotype of the peasantry, and they have been unwilling to give up a distorted idea of the “closed corporate peasant community.” Perhaps some of this stereotyping is influenced by Marxist ideology, which regards peasants as hopelessly reactionary, and hostile to the goals of socialist society.<sup>8</sup> Another reason for historians’ outdated image of the peasantry is that they have not kept up with developments in the social sciences. Anthropologists and economists a generation ago arrived at a refined definition of the peasantry that has become the social science standard: peasants are rural people who possess (even if they do not own) the means of agricultural production. They are integrated into the structures of the state and surrounding society, and are partially engaged in the marketplace. In this social science categorization, the peasant *by definition* has numerous contacts with the world outside the village. In its relationship with the outside world, the peasantry occupies a position between primitive tribal societies and modern farmers. Whereas tribal societies are far more isolated and autonomous, modern farmers are nearly totally dependent upon the marketplace and the outside world.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps another reason for the widespread acceptance of the immobility myth is that our twentieth-century mentality has difficulty grasping the concept of large-scale population movements before the existence of modern rail, automotive, and air transportation. And finally, it may be that the image of the stable traditional rural community is an illusion created by middle-class city dwellers nostalgic for stability, which they erroneously ascribe to rural communities of a bygone era. The unchanging village is a vision of peace, order, harmony, and security. The idealized traditional village, then, may be

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regarded as an urban myth.<sup>10</sup> The myth has great symbolic appeal, but the truth is quite different. Far from being static, the early modern village community was surprisingly dynamic, continually in the process of transformation by migration to and from the village, and by changes within the village as well. It turns out that the notion of a stable rural community is seriously flawed. And, in fact, it has been convincingly refuted. But the myth has such emotional power that it must be repeatedly disproven.

## VILLAGES IN CASTILE

This book is about villages in early modern Castile. I have to confess that before researching the topic, I had accepted the classic notion that Spain – and Castile in particular – suffered from a tragic curse: it was so traditionalist<sup>11</sup> that it was incapable of responding adequately to the various challenges that it faced. According to this cliché, rural Spain exemplified the very worst tendencies of Iberian society: it was reactionary, unchanging, isolated, and immobile. The image of an unchanging rural Spain has been reinforced by numerous scholarly works,<sup>12</sup> that have encouraged historians to believe in the correctness of the cliché. A reputable history of agricultural technology perfectly reflects the prevailing Black Legend about sixteenth-century rural Spain when it insists that “the only changes since classical times had been introduced by the Moors.”<sup>13</sup> A prize-winning work by a respected Spanish scholar describes the “sedentary rural inhabitant,” the “peasant-farmer glued to his piece of land,” living in a rustic setting characterized by “immobility ... with its unappreciable or nonexistent change.” And a beautifully illustrated recent popular work designed to inform the general Spanish readership about daily life in Spain’s Golden Age presents a veritable caricature, asserting that the famous conquistadores and adventurers of the day were aberrations, and that for the rural masses “the norm was absolute sedentarism.”<sup>14</sup> Whereas I once would have accepted this view, I now know that it is erroneous. Early modern Spanish villages were very much like rural communities in other parts of Western Europe: they were not isolated, but rather were surprisingly integrated economically, socially, and politically into the outside world.<sup>15</sup> And the rural inhabitants of early modern Spain, like their northern European counterparts, showed great ingenuity and flexibility, and they enjoyed a substantial degree of geographical mobility.<sup>16</sup>

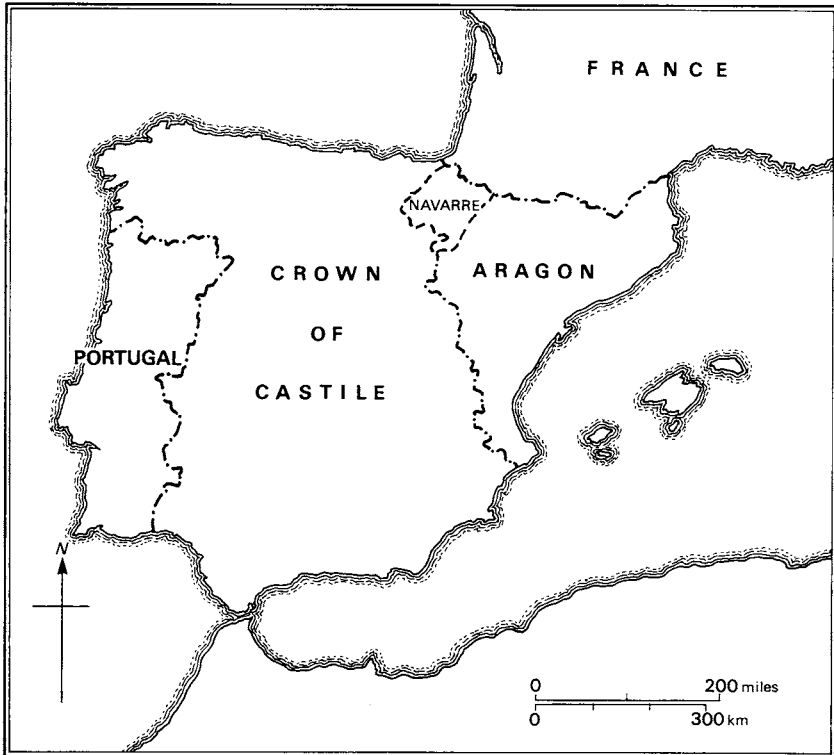
The failure of historians to appreciate the full measure of the dynamism of early modern Spanish society is only partly the result of clinging to myths and to the misconceptions of outdated scholarship. It is also the consequence of a void in Spanish historiography. Despite a proliferation during the past twenty-five years of excellent studies dealing with the rural world, existing scholarship has been overwhelmingly concerned with

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Map 1. Iberian kingdoms in the 1500s and 1600s.

impersonal economic forces, institutions, and social structures. These are crucially important aspects of history, and we are indeed fortunate to have scholars interested in them. But somehow, the *human* element – the lives of ordinary rural people who made up the great bulk of the population of the day – has been largely bypassed by existing scholarship. Perhaps it is normal for historical studies to flesh out the institutional framework before turning to individuals operating within that framework. And, certainly, it is far easier to find and analyze data about institutions than about persons, especially when those persons are illiterate peasants. But for whatever reason, the present stage of early modern Spanish scholarship makes it exceedingly difficult to reconstruct the life story of the average villager four or five centuries ago. We will have to have more family histories, more investigations into life-course transitions, and more studies of family cycles before we can begin to understand how an ordinary villager might have spent his life. Fortunately, there is considerable interest in historical demography in Spain these days, and we can hope that many of our questions will be answered before long. But for now, we have to operate

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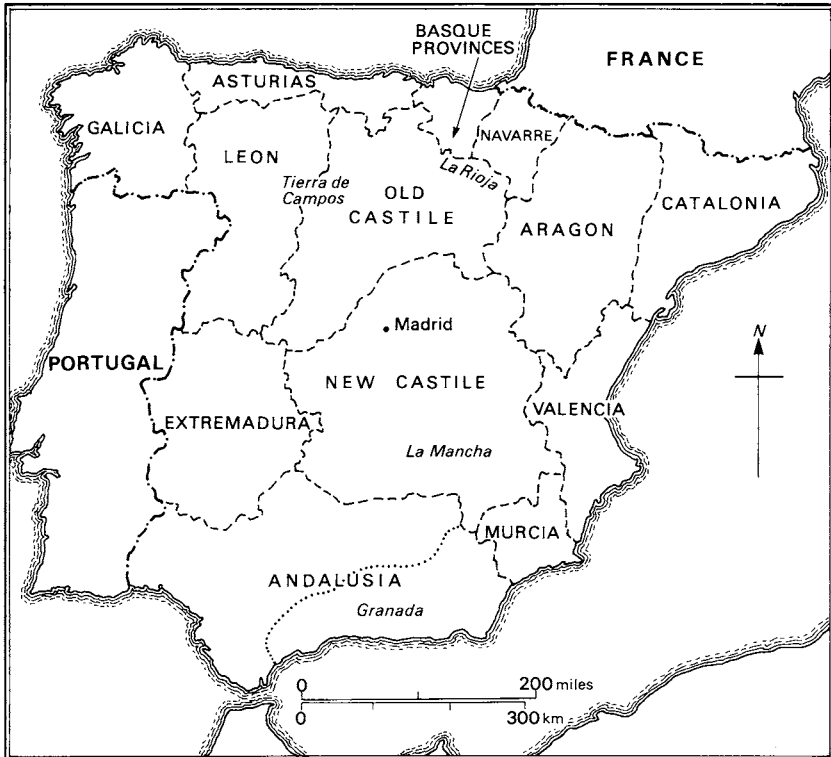
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Map 2. Traditional provinces and regions of Spain.

within the existing historiographical setting that lacks both a comprehensive vision, and the necessary local studies to understand fully the kinds of relationships over time that early modern Spanish villagers had with each other, and with the world beyond the village.<sup>17</sup>

In a recent review article James Amelang identified yet another reason for the relative backwardness of early modern Spanish historiography. That is the “pronounced insularity” of Spanish history – an excessive tendency of Spanish historians (and foreign Hispanists, as well) to limit their study to Spain itself, without comparing their findings with developments in other countries.<sup>18</sup> This geographical insularity, along with the disciplinary seclusion that I mentioned previously, has given many otherwise excellent monographs an inordinately restricted perspective. Fortunately, despite the difficulties inherent in widening one’s geographical and disciplinary perspectives, the most recent scholarship increasingly brings Spanish history into the mainstream of European historiography.

This book examines the contacts between villagers and the outside world in Castile’s Golden Age – a period roughly embracing the sixteenth

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and the first half of the seventeenth centuries. Spanish villages throughout their history were continually exposed to outside influences. Spaniards had – and maintain to this day – a reputation for intense loyalty to the place of their birth, even calling their home town “*mi patria*.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, early modern Spanish villagers were not rooted to the place where they were born, because they responded eagerly to opportunities to migrate to new areas when economic factors, the marriage market, the housing situation, or other conditions indicated that they might better themselves.

The traditional village system of values held stability to be preferable to mobility. A Golden Age Castilian proverb extolled remaining in one’s native village:

*Cada uno donde es nacido*      (Where you are born  
*Bien se está en su nido.*<sup>20</sup>      You have a comfortable nest.)

But the ideals of stability did not correspond to historical reality, and were continually modified through emigration and through other contacts with the outside. We should avoid thinking that rural people were so bound by local conditions that they had no freedom of choice. Early modern villagers were not unthinking robots only responding to the actions of their landlords or rulers, nor did they react brutishly to natural forces. Rather, these rural people were intelligent beings who were fully capable of seizing opportunities when they appeared, even if that meant breaking with customary practices and attitudes.<sup>21</sup>

The outside world was never beyond the reach of early modern rural Spaniards. In the first place, they could usually *see* other villages. An analysis of the *Relaciones topográficas* (answers to questionnaires sent by the royal government to all towns and villages in Castile in the 1570s) shows that another village – or villages – lay only a couple of leagues away from the typical rural settlement. In the province of Madrid over 93 percent of the *Relaciones* villages were situated within two leagues of another town or village. In the province of Cuenca it was more than 76 percent, and in Toledo province over 85 percent.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, rural society was never hermetically sealed off from the towns and cities. It is tempting to view the city as the antithesis of rural life. But the idea of an urban–rural dichotomy is highly misleading. As Teofilo Ruiz observes in his recent book, “in Castile the boundaries between rural and urban were often vague, at times nonexistent.” In fact, rural elements extended even into the largest early modern Spanish cities. Typically, these had gardens, orchards, livestock, and even fields deliberately interwoven within their urbanized area as a safeguard in times of siege or other difficulties. And village life throughout the Mediterranean world – quite in contrast to most other culture areas – possessed a certain “urban” quality. Furthermore, many “cities” and “towns” had large popu-



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lations of resident peasant farmers and rural laborers who went out to work the surrounding fields. The distinction between urban and rural was so hazy that Braudel characterized the entire Mediterranean world as an “urban” region.<sup>23</sup>

There was considerable interaction between villages and cities, making it all the more difficult to separate the “rural” from the “urban.” Large cities and their surrounding villages were profoundly interrelated, socially, economically, and politically. In most cases, the urban oligarchies based their power and prestige upon their rural holdings in surrounding areas. Wealthy city folks often spent part of the year on their rural estates, or even decided to live there; while members of the village elite often moved to the city.<sup>24</sup>

Even in their strictly rural activities, Spanish villagers often became exposed to neighboring areas because of the existence of supra-municipal (or inter-municipal) commons. These lands, usually for pasture, originated during the medieval Reconquest, when certain territories were shared by several settlements under the jurisdiction of a powerful city, bishop, military commander, or noble lord. The towns and villages that participated in these inter-municipal arrangements had their own commons restricted for the exclusive use of the *vecinos* of that particular place. But there were other commons that were shared by the people of two or more places. In some areas of early modern Spain there were veritable federations of municipalities organized to guarantee intercommunal rights. There was one in the province of Avila that embraced over three hundred villages. Rural people of the day were keenly aware of their citizenship rights, locally and in federations. For example, in 1542 a villager testified that he was a native of La Bóveda, but was currently a *vecino* of Villaureña, and of the Tierra of the city of Toro (Zamora), where he had certain rights.<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the existence of such associations encouraged geographical mobility beyond the limits of one’s own village, to seek pastures, arable land, firewood, lumber, and other benefits of the system.

## ADDITIONAL PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

In this book I use the term “village” for any organized rural community of modest size, regardless of its jurisdictional status.<sup>26</sup> I have concentrated my attention on villages numbering between 50 and 200 households. A few are even smaller, but only a handful exceed 500 households. Geographically, my villages represent all parts of the lands of the crown of Castile (see Map 1), but the great majority are from the traditional regions of Old and New Castile, León, and Extremadura (displayed on Map 2).

Because most of the villages that I cite are small and unfamiliar places, for the convenience of the reader I have placed in parentheses the name of the province (using the modern boundaries shown in Map 3) following my

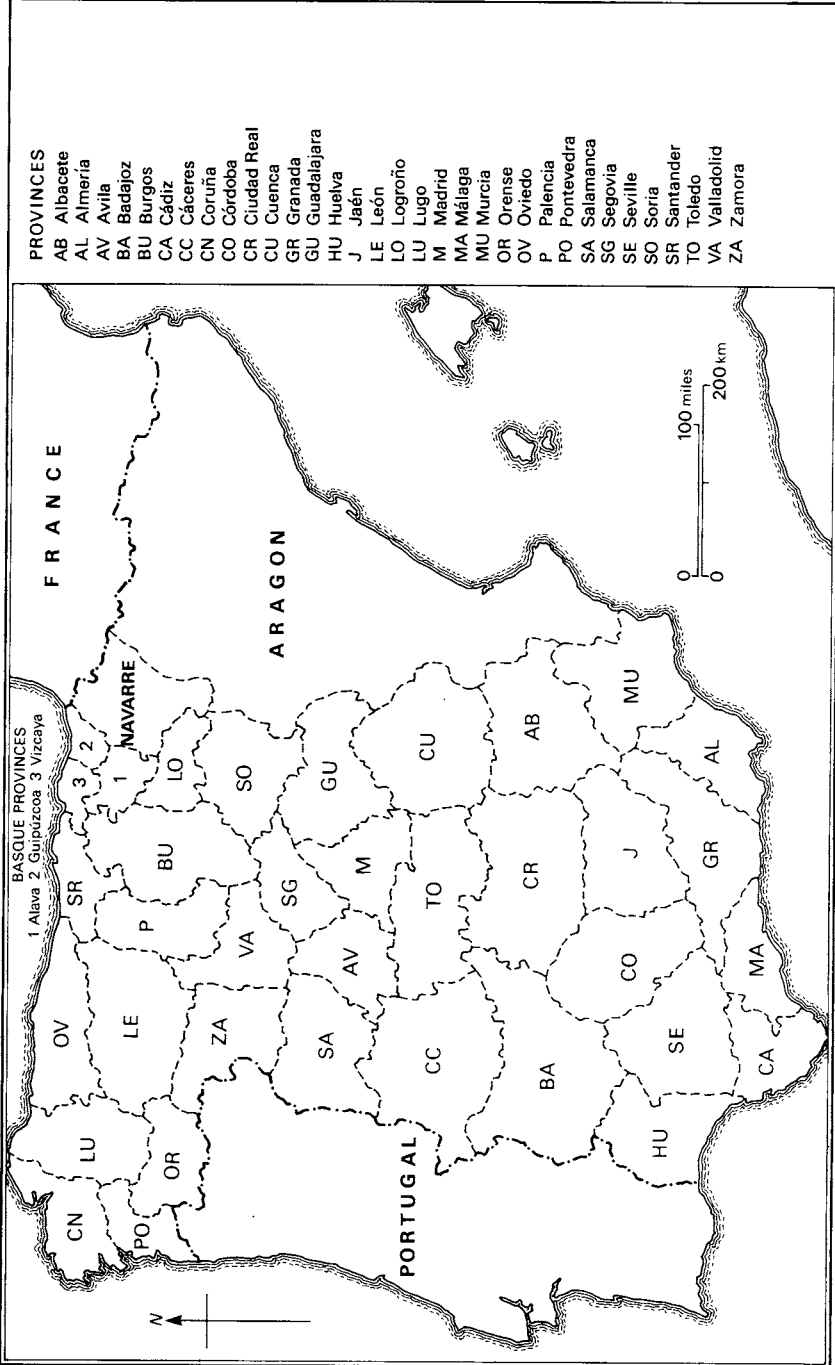
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Map 3. Modern provincial subdivisions, for locating villages mentioned in text.



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textual references. Similarly, I have identified the province of larger towns and cities mentioned in the text, except when they are provincial capitals (e.g. Burgos), because in those the name of the province is the same.

This book contains numerous maps and tables which provide graphic evidence of the mobility of early modern Castilian villagers. In assembling the data for these, I have tried to be careful not to over-interpret my sources. For example, it is well known that many immigrants to a new place took the name of the village where they were born as a surname. A villager named Marcos de Rejas, naturalized citizen of Meco (Madrid), will serve to illustrate the point: he had been born in the village of Rejas (also in Madrid province), and as a teenager had gone to work as a shepherd in Meco, about 23 kilometers to the northeast. There people called the young outsider “Marcos de Rejas” (Marcos from Rejas) and he simply took that as his name. This practice was so widespread that scholars have used toponymic surnames to estimate the proportion of immigrants in a community.<sup>27</sup> But I have avoided doing that, because once established in the new community, the immigrant and his family tended to retain the new surname generation after generation. The fossilization of the toponymic makes it impossible when we encounter such a name (in the absence of other proof) to know when the immigration occurred. Since I am primarily interested in recent (in the early modern context) population movements, in this book I do not count a person as an immigrant unless the document explicitly states that he or she came from another place. My cautious approach has undoubtedly resulted in my underestimating the amount of migration during the period of my study.<sup>28</sup> Even so, I find an impressive movement of people in and out of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century villages.

A quarter century ago, when I first became interested in studying early modern rural Spain, one of my most formidable problems was the paucity of scholarly work on the topic. But now the problem is quite the opposite: each year there appears an intimidating profusion of theses, dissertations, journal articles, and books dealing with rural Spain. A scholar living in the US has difficulty discovering what is produced, to say nothing of the challenge of gaining access to it. Thanks to the incomparable bibliographical services of Madrid’s great bookseller Marcial Pons, academics in North America can conveniently learn of, and purchase, the major publications in the field. Nevertheless, operating from the wrong side of the Atlantic makes it exceedingly difficult to stay abreast of the latest research in the field. So I would be surprised if I had not missed some pieces that would have lent support to my argument. But I trust that the reader will find that my combination of primary and secondary sources makes a convincing case.

The first chapter of this book examines the traditional village community, with its customs of local solidarity and of hostility toward outsiders. A reader who progressed no further might be left with the impression that

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the early modern Castilian village was indeed reactionary, stable, and isolated. The remaining chapters, however, offer evidence that the village was linked to the outside world by a myriad of significant relationships. Chapter 2 examines market contacts, while Chapter 3 focuses on village manufacturing and artisanal activities. Chapter 4 is dedicated to migrations in and out of the village, and Chapter 5 examines the impact of population mobility on village families. Chapters 6 and 7 are dedicated to relations with the state, and to villagers' contacts with travelers and with "aliens"; and Chapter 8 deals with miscellaneous other exterior contacts that did not seem to belong elsewhere. I am confident that the reader, long before reaching my Conclusion, will have decided that rural Castile in pre-industrial times was a complex and dynamic society with a surprising range of interrelationships with the wider world.