El Cid: History and Legend

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Abstract

Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar El Cid Campeador¹ is the greatest hero in Spanish history: to the Christians he is the epitome of what a servant of god is, to the Muslim of Al-Andalus, he was and admired ally and also their foremost enemy. The sources however, both Muslim and Christian alike praise and criticize the figure of the man who damaged Al-Andalus greatly, and enabled the Spanish Reconquista to take hold in Iberia. Although in the 11th century northern Iberia had long been under a movement of Christian resurgence and *reconquista*², El Cid provided a much needed stepping stone for the emerging Christians who wanted to reclaim the land of the Visigoths, which they held as ancient territories of their race.

This paper will focus on the times prior to El Cid’s exile; since, despite our many versions of the story, there seems to be little to no evidence of the situation surrounding the knight’s birth and of what ancestry he came. Literature depicts our hero as the poorest of the poor, at the very least a very unimportant knight, who rises to the uppermost levels of power only to be dashed down by the evil king Alfonso VI. However the evidence available to us does tell a different story; the story of a man who was born in high society, who had the backing of the powerful families from which he came and who was trained early and for a long time into the art of combat, as well as educated in all other skills of the knights of his time.

¹ The complex name denotes El Cid’s life in full detail. Deeds worth singing about and writing of in epic poetic form “El Cantar”. El Cid is a hero made for all of Spain since “mío”, lit. mine, give us a sense of ownership. Finally he was known as “The Lord”, in Arabic, “Sayyid”. “The singing of my Lord” them, is a title worth a paper in order to have it explained in depth.
² Spanish. Lit. Re-conquest.
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“What you do is against the will of God; even if you were thirteen times thirteen I would not be alone.”

The picture of El Cid that we will obtain then, is not one of a knight devoted only and solely to God and who has little or no land, but of a much more human hero; one that despite the odds and vicissitudes of fate chose to remain loyal to his king not because of god and country, but because he knew no other way. Legend, it would seem, gave us a picture of El Cid that would make him easy for us to feel identified with, although in the process we may have lost the essence and greatness of the real hero of Spain.

El Cid’s birth and Ancestry

We have no easy way to interpret evidence of the origins of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. However, Spanish tradition in and around the X century dictated that a man should be called after the name of the city from which he had been born, especially if he was of some renown. Hence, in accordance with much other evidence, and in agreement with most scholars, we find that his city of birth may have been “a village about six miles north of Burgos named Vivar” (Fletcher, Richard The Quest for El Cid, p.107) which was located in the municipality of Quintanilla de Vivar. A little known source named historia roderici along with another in Castilian Mocedades de Rodrigo state El Cid was born in 1043 to Diego Laínez who may have been Lord of Vivar. The text reads:

3 El Cid’s signature, obtained from http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Firma_del_Cid.jpg, the Latin reads “I Rodrigo” and was lifted from an official document.
4 Chartlon Heston, El Cid, 1961.
5 From Latin, Lit. Account of Rodrigo (all translations, unless otherwise stated, are the writer’s).
6 Lit. Deeds of Rodrigo.
Diego [F]Lainez [de León], se ovo casado con doña Theresa Núñez,
Filla del conde Ramón Álvarez [de Castilla] de Amaya e nieta del rey de
León, E fizío en ella un fijo quel’ dixieron el buen guerreador Ruy Díaz.  

There is however, a tradition that El Cid arose from poverty to the utmost
heights of power as the ruler of Valencia. His destierro⁸ and the subsequent
conquest of Valencia for the king of Castile was a sign of his chivalry.
Although recent research shows a man in conflict with his own family and
distrusted by his king, Alfonso I, for apparent valid reasons which we
shall now see in detail.

According to Margarita C. Torre Sevilla-Quiñones de León in her article
El linaje del Cid⁹, “Durante este primer tercio del siglo XI… cuatro eran las
familias más poderosas del noroeste hispano: los Fláñez,… los Beni
Gómez,… los Alfonso,… [y] los Ordóñez de Asturias” (p. 10).¹⁰ It would
seem the ancient text Historia Roderici confirms this statement. In her
translation of the document, E. Falque reads the name of Diego Fláñez, a
little-known member of the high-born family and of Rodrigo Álvarez a
man rich in lands and possessions.

Margarita C. Torre also writes that, “En 1039, de nuevo en otro original,
reaparece este personaje, Rodrigo Álvarez, junto a varios condes y a [sic]
caballeros Fláñez” (p. 12).¹¹ Thus El Cid was coated on both sides of his
birth lineage with members of high nobility. Through his mother he
carried the standard of the Fláñez so important in León; and through his
father a lesser, yet still powerful connection to the nobility of Castile in
the Díaz name. Interestingly, even the Díaz were related to the Fláñez,
albeit distantly, but this fact would later justify the marriage of El Cid to
the daughter of another Fláñez family distant member, Doña Jimena,

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⁷ Mocedades de Rodrigo, Lines 310-13. Lit. Diego Lainez [of León] was married to Teresa
Nunez de Amaya/ daughter of count Ramon Alvarez [of Castile] and niece of the King of
Leon, / and within her he made a child whom they called Ruy [Rodrigo] Díaz, the good
fighter.
⁸ Spanish, Lit. Banishment.
⁹ Spanish, Lit. The Cid’s Lineage.
¹⁰ Spanish, Lit. During the first third of the XI century… the four most powerful families
of the Hispanic Northeast were: the Fláñez,… the Bení Gómez,… the Alfonso,… [and] the
Ordóñez de Asturias.
¹¹ Spanish Lit. In 1039, yet another original [document shows] Rodrigo Alvarez reappears,
along with various counts and knights of the Fláñez [family].
daughter of Diego Fernandez. El Cid would have been trained in Vivar in culture and the martial arts of his time; thus debunking the myths of a humble and poor vassal rising to the top of the ruling world of Valencia, and the heights of fame in modern times.

The Flaínez Rebellion and its mark on El Cid

Based on the important lineage of El Cid and documents of the period which include Historia Roderici, Margarita C. Torre defends that the legions of the Leonese were always commanded during the reign of Alfonso VI by a family member of our hero. However it would seem that around the death of Diego Flaínez, father of El Cid (CA. 1058), there is unrest in the upper caste of the family and some are forced to flee to the mountainous areas of the kingdom of León for safety. Only a few of the family members would regain their power after this rebellion; but the more distant members of the lineage would never be able to regain their fame. The reasons for the revolution itself are unknown, but the records show a temporary lapse of the Flaínez name from the court records from 1046 to 1070.

It would seem then that by the time El Cid was knighted by Sancho II of Castile he was already well versed in war and educated in the cultural and spiritual aspects of any other man of high birth. Fletcher states that this knighting was to mark the end of El Cid’s apprenticeship, and that he was given a knight belt to mark the occasion and distinguish him as a member of the high cast surrounding the king (p. 110). Erich Von Richthofen, in his article The Problem of Fiction Alternating with Historical Documentation in the Cid Epics and the Castilian Chronicles estimates that El Cid’s knighthood took place around the year 1060, while the young trainee was only 17 years old and five years before king Ferdinand would have died, resulting in the kingdom being divided between Sancho II (heir to Castile) and Alfonso VI (heir to León). Frank Calcott, in his work The Cid as the history records him agrees with this statement estimating the age of El Cid at “sixteen or seventeen” when he was sent to the king’s court (p.43).

12 Margarita C. Torre, p. 25.
13 C. Torre, p. 21.
14 The author claims his death may have come as late as 1060-65 in order to better fit the rebellion argument.
15 C. Torre, p. 22.
Richthofen also states that our young knight fought alongside Sancho “in the battle of Graus (Pyrenees, year 1063)” while the knight was only 23 years old, already a trusted member of the inner court of Sancho. We have to wonder at Sancho’s reticence to name amongst his most loyal subjects a man whose family name had caused so much trouble in León that it warranted banishment or, at the very least, an exclusion from the court to the point of the loss of their name from the records. But it would seem the young king trusted El Cid fully. Fletcher states that *Historia Roderici* confirms the hero’s rise to power culminating with El Cid being called the Alférez of the king in or around 1971; thus being responsible for the crown’s home militia, “who formed the kings escort and were the nucleus of the royal army”. El Cid is then placed at the helm of all other knights attempting to gain fame and glory amongst the close relations of Sancho II, making him a target for envy and jealousy.

However the rise of El Cid is halted when in 1072 Sancho II is assassinated while attempting to quell a rebellion in Zamora, city under the protection of his sister Urraca. Alfonso VI, who had lost the throne of León to his brother earlier that same year, now claims his kingdom back and annexes Castile. Sancho’s trusted knights became vassals of the new king, the bad blood between the Flaínez and the crown seems to have troubled the monarch, although not to the point of complete rejection of El Cid; most likely in lieu of the knight’s loyal and unquestionable service of Sancho. However, on the introduction of *El Poema del Mío Cid* we read that even though he had proven himself to be loyal to Alfonso VI during the years the latter was ruler and especially during the collection of the tributary of Sevilla (which will be detailed in the next section), the king still banished El Cid due to having “viejas rencillas contra él”, and especially after being spurred on by the jealous nobles who saw the foremost of nights as a stepping stone to the heights of power in the new court (p.42).

It is now in no doubt that the jealous knights of the court of Alfonso and Sancho, knowing the issues between the crown and the Flaínez, roused the king’s animosity towards the family name in order to have El Cid

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16 Calcott, p.43.
17 Calcott, p. 114.
18 Calcott, p.44.
19 At that time king of León and Castile.
20 Seville or *Isbiliya* to the Arabs.
21 Spanish. Lit, old quarrels against him. Which is quite illustrative once we know El Cid’s family ties.
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banished and therefore out of the way so that they could claim a higher position in power. Little did they know that the offended Spanish hero would not simply leave Burgos and suffer his exile, but also claim Arab territory and show the loyalty of his family through tribute and conquest.

Sevilla, the Toledan incursion, and the Exile of El Cid

El Cid would yet enjoy some years of happiness prior to his banishment. In 1074 he marries Jimena Díaz, daughter of count Diego Rodríguez, cousin to Alfonso VI and sister of count Don Fruela. This marriage is indeed a step up for El Cid, a consolidation of his Flánez lineage and the ties to the crown of León and Castile. However, in 1081 there seems to be a conspiracy against El Cid after a run in with Christian nobles around Seville, finally causing the anger of Alfonso to boil over and resulting in El Cid’s first exile.

Some scholars and sources defend that Alfonso was angry because El Cid had made him swear on a Bible that he had nothing to do with his brother Sancho’s murder. According to Gonzalo Martínez Díez in his book *El Cid Histórico* such claims are a complete work of fiction and should not be taken seriously (p.71/2).

Thus, once our hero is proven a loyal subject to the crown, Alfonso VI commissions El Cid to the collection of the *parias* of Sevilla in 1079. El Cid however, finds out that Almutamiz of Sevilla, payer to Fernando, is being assailed by Almudafar, ruler of Granada, and his Christian allies. These Christian knights are also under orders from the king to collect parias, albeit from Granada; they are Counts García Ordóñez and Fortún Sánchez, related to García, King of Navarre. However the Granadan supporters are overstepping their boundaries in aiding the local ruler to attack Sevilla. Despite the fact that El Cid sent letters asking the Christians nobles to stay away from the city, they taunted the knight and attacked the Sevilla all the same. El Cid then gathered all the forces he could muster “de cristianos et de moros”. Once his small army was

22 Fletcher, p. 123.
23 Calcott, p.44, *Mocedades del Cid* and Corneille’s *Le Cid*.
24 Spanish. Lit. The Historical Cid.
25 These were taxes that the Taifa kingdoms owed the Christian monarchs for protection.
26 Spanish, Lit. from both Christians and Moors. It is interesting that our hero has no qualms about gathering both moors and Christians to fight at his side. He had also fought on the moors’ side while serving Sancho in the defense of Zaragoza in 1063 at the battle
ready, our hero presented battle to the Granadan alliance in a conflict that lasted three hours, and out of which the victory came to El Cid and his allies from Sevilla. El Cid took the Christian leaders captive but released them after three days’ imprisonment. Once the nobles had been released the knight instructs his vassals to raid the enemy camp and to take any valuables therein (Gestas de Rodrigo el Campeador\textsuperscript{27} p.30/2).\textsuperscript{28}

Although this incident is sure to have given place to animosity between El Cid and the higher caste members of Alfonso’s inner circle (let us remember García was related to the king of Navarra) the crown seems to have enjoyed the service of El Cid beyond this particular episode, fact that the legend of the hero seems to ignore. There will be yet another episode which will mark the final affront for the king and leave him with no choice but the exile of the knight.

Calcott states in his article that the following spring\textsuperscript{29} Alfonso VI was, as it had become customary, ready for his annual raid into Moorish lands. However Rodrigo was sick and was not part of the raiding party. A few weeks later a Moorish ruler slips behind Alfonso and begins to raid Christian lands, unbeknownst to him El Cid, now recovered, had stayed behind; and as duty called he met the moor in combat and routed him. This was all done legitimately, however El Cid made one fatal mistake, he pursued the moor ruler into Toledan territory which, in all technicality was at peace with Alfonso. The enemies of El Cid immediately moved to sue for treason since this move could lead to a unification of the Taifa kingdoms against the Christian powers (p.46). Montaner Frutos, in his online article published for the purpose of chronicling the life of El Cid in an official online site for the Spanish government states that while the move was indeed not out of the ordinary for the knight, the political implications were simply too great. The Taifa kingdoms could have stopped paying \textit{parias} altogether and their unification would have been a disaster for the emerging Christian kingdoms. Calcott further states that the purpose of the nobles was to instigate Alfonso and make him believe that El Cid had acted as he did because if the moors rallied, they could

\textsuperscript{27} Spanish. Lit. Deeds of Rodrigo the Campeador. The nickname was another one widely used by El Cid, and which meant the fighter. In Latin, the original language of the account, the title read: Gesta Roderici Campidocti.

\textsuperscript{28} Calcott, p.45.

\textsuperscript{29} 1080.
have cut off the king while he was raiding, thus defeating him or forcing him to surrender, leaving the knight to rule over Castile and León.  

It would seem this was simply too much for Alfonso and despite the service of the loyal knight since his ascension to power and the actions of Seville and now Toledo in defense of the kingdom of Castile the king banish El Cid. This was definitely a necessary move, after all the claims by the nobles were indeed accurate, at least in practice, and by banishing the knight who had invaded the lands of Toledo while at peace, he would be able to maintain said agreement in the very least until he was ready to invade it himself.

It is then obvious then that El Cid was a preeminent figure on the court of both Sancho II and Alfonso VI whom due to family ties and court intrigues was exiled in 1081, this being when El Cantar de Mio Cid picks up the story in order to tell us of the deed of the hero whom we have all come to know. As history will have it, from 1082 to his death in 1099 El Cid will go on to aid the moors in Zaragoza (1082) as he had done 36 years prior alongside Sancho II. In 1090 El Cid takes Berenguer Ramon II as he is campaigning in lands of Valencia. Later in 1094 Valencia capitulates and the city is surrendered to El Cid. By 1095 The Almoravids attempt to retake Valencia, El Cid defends and keeps it. In 1097 Diego Rodríguez, the only male progeny of El Cid dies in combat; he was fighting alongside Alfonso the VI. By 1099 El Cid dies in Valencia, he was 56 years old, his wife Jimena would manage to maintain the city in Christian hands until 1102, but the city was finally abandoned to Almoravid control. El Cid’s final resting place is in the Monastery of Burgos, next to his wife.

30 Calcott, p.46.
31 In fact this is during El Cid’s second exile. The knight had been back from 1085-88.
32 All dates are confirmed by various sources including Fletcher, Calcott and Montaner Frutos.
How Legend Has Affected Our View of El Cid

There are two major pieces that define El Cid in our minds and give him shape in our thoughts. The first one, *El Cantar de Mío Cid*, gives us an account only of the time when the Cid was in exile and the marriage of his daughters in later years. The second great legendary piece is the movie *The Cid* (1961), directed by Anthony Mann with Charlton Heston as the charismatic Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar.

Both of the pieces idealize the subject of this essay as the epitome of Christian values, the unquestionable low ranking officer who was unjustifiably exiled because of the jealousy and sins of his enemies. In the preserved sections of the *Cantar* we find the phrase “¡Loado sea sea Dios! A esto me reduce la maldad de mis enemigos.” El Cid was blameless, no spot of sin could be found on him, and to suggest otherwise in the epic would be an insult to the memory of the Christian knight.

In our movie, we find *The Cid* even more deified; a saintly version of the historical writings venerated by all who come within the reach of his mantle. The Cid is polarized to be shown as an unquestionable servant of Sancho II who cannot deal with the seemingly proven fact that Alfonso VI is the culprit behind the murder of his brother. As shown above, the scene of an enraged El Cid making the king swear by god and country that he had nothing to do with his brother’s assassination is pure fiction. However, the situation gives the character an unconquerable soul. It is no surprise then, that the end of the film shows our mortally wounded El Cid requesting to be placed on his horse once dead, so that he may thus charge the lines of the moors once more and make himself seem immortal. When dead, his followers heed his command, and a dead El Cid, held in place by a plank to his back routes the moors who cannot believe their eyes.

In the end, these stories have prevailed over the factuality of El Cid’s life, even to the point that they have superseded the real character of the man who fought so hard and so well, albeit with very human flaws and problems, for the furthering of the Christian kingdoms.

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33 Spanish. Lit. Praise be to God! The evilness of my enemies reduces me so. (Poema del Mío Cid p.43).
Conclusion

As seen at the beginning of this essay, El Cid has always been a dualistic figure trapped between the dichotomy of his epitomized Christian life and the roughness of his actuality. However we have seen that El Cid was much more than a poor country knight who happened to wander into king Sancho’s court. His family line was prestigious, although problematic to the crown for a time, and their rebellion and fall away from power from 1046-1070 affected El Cid deeply. Albeit his family line, the knight served king Sancho ever more faithfully, setting up ties with Arabs and Christians alike and attacking anyone who happened to be opposing the side he was defending. El Cid had no problems recruiting moors for his army if they were needed, a fact that seems much avoided in the telling of his legend. Thus El Cid was wrongly epitomized as the foremost example not only of chivalry, but also of Christian devotion and piety. He was used as an example of the struggle between Christianity and Islam that would help justify the Christian knights’ attack of Jerusalem during the various Crusades. We have thoroughly seen the incorrectness of that argument.

Although legend tends to prevail in the end and give us a picture of El Cid that is factually incorrect and historically unproven, one could argue that sometimes it is better to embellish a story in order to give hope to those who believe in the power of heroes. We can tap into the history of El Cid as much as we wish, but the fact remains that the story can inspire us far beyond the realm of factuality and lead us into a world of faith that can help us achieve all we dream in life. I believe this is the true power of El Cid, the reason why our anonymous writer decided to write poetry of him who is our own, the exiled Lord whom even while banished by his own king remained loyal to the bitter end and sought, in the most heroic of ways, to further the kingdom of God. El Cid gives us a model to follow in life, and his legend demonstrates the power of people who despite their lot choose not to give up; not because of riches or gain, but because the honor of a knight of Christendom is the ultimate goal sought by all who aim at the uppermost reaches of human spirituality.

Thus, in the end we see a history much richer and denser than expected, avoided by the writers of legend because it had too many flaws. Indeed it showed a man who simply tried to live his best within the context of his time, so the history of El Cid was bleached in order to show his wanted character. The film El Cid (1961) phrases the events that led us from fact to belief in its closing narration perfectly: “And thus El Cid rode out of the gates of history [at Valencia] into legend...”
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