

The Fight for Status and Privilege in Late Medieval and Early Modern Castile, 1465–1598. Michael J. Crawford.

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“Poderoso caballero es don dinero” (“Mr. Money is a powerful knight”): Quevedo’s pithy statement is not quoted in this book, but it neatly summarizes how wealthy Castilians used both wealth and connections to achieve noble status (*hidalguía*), together with tax exemptions and other privileges that such status conferred. Yet as this study suggests, their efforts to do so did not go unchallenged. Opposition came from many quarters — from other, more established noble families resentful of upwardly mobile parvenu; from municipalities eager to maintain their tax base; and, starting in the sixteenth century, from the Habsburg monarchy whose judges in the *salas de hidalguía*, attached to the royal chancery courts in Granada and Valladolid, were tasked to review lawsuits in which nobility was at stake with an eye toward protecting the royal fisc. Such

lawsuits were expensive, often protracted, and commonly entailed false witness and other kinds of fraud. On the other hand, they left in their wake a long paper trail that provides the basic source base for this book.

Notwithstanding its expansive title, this monograph focuses almost exclusively on disputes relating to *hidalguía* in Seville. This important port city — gateway to the Indies after 1492 — was a magnet for migrants from northern Spain, many of whom claimed to be *hidalgos de linaje* (nobles by blood) but who lacked the royal patents to prove it. The factional disputes and family rivalries that characterized Seville's civic life provided additional grounds for challenges to individuals claiming noble status. Then too, and as Fernando de Rojas suggested in *La Celestina*, first published in 1499, the city harbored a sizeable number of wealthy converso merchants of Jewish origin who deployed marriage and other strategies to achieve noble rank.

Advancement and assimilation, however, did not go uncontested. Starting in the late fifteenth century, both resulted in increased pressure on the monarchy to limit access to *hidalguía* and also to issue new laws defining the privileges nobility entailed. They also helped spawn a new genealogical industry associated with the infamous *linajudos*, genealogists ready to fabricate family histories proving *hidalguía* for clients willing to pay. More ominously, *linajudos* were also prepared to expose and even to blackmail newly ennobled noble families with converso blood. Unfortunately, save for a short and somewhat unsatisfactory introduction to the efforts of Gonzalo Argote de Molina in *Nobleza de Andalucía* (1596) to provide hundreds of Andalusian families with an illustrious past, the genealogical dimension of the “fight for status and privilege” in Seville does not figure in this book.

Instead, it zeroes in on cases of disputed nobility and how they were eventually resolved. Of key importance here is Crawford's analysis of 387 lawsuits that began in Seville and were eventually adjudicated in Granada's chancery court. Analysis of these cases provides important insights into the often-imperfect workings of the Castilian judiciary during the sixteenth century. In addition, they enable the author to expand on the history of several prominent Sevillian families whose nobility was in doubt. One such family — the focus of chapter 4 — was the Sanchez Pañeque, whose bid for noble status, following years of litigation, eventually failed. Other families, however, emerged from the *sala de hidalguía* with their nobility and attendant privileges intact. Crawford finds it difficult to explain why some families won their cases while others lost, but these case studies, together with his discussion of one ambitious royal official who set out to challenge the false nobility of some eighty Sevillian families, constitute the most original and valuable aspects of the book.

Otherwise, the book disappoints. The prose is cumbersome throughout and the presentation cluttered with endless non sequiturs and unnecessary repetition of basic information and ideas. Key arguments, moreover, frequently go unsubstantiated. And while reference is made to “distinct discourses” on the meaning of nobility put forward by “sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatise writers” (126), no effort is made to identify these writers or explain what they wrote. I could go on, as there are

numerous other shortcomings, many of which belie the absence of adequate copyediting and firm editorial control. Together these limit the overall value of a volume that, to the author's credit, tackles one of the key issues that early modern Castilian society had to confront.

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