

WATER IN THE MEDIEVAL HISPANIC SOCIETY

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THE PROBLEM OF PRECIPITATION IN CASTILE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES (THROUGH THE CHRONICLES)

MARÍA ISABEL DEL VAL VALDIVIESO

In order to ensure its survival, every human group must guarantee that it can avail itself of a sufficient supply of drinking water. Rivers, springs, lakes, and underground sources from which water is drawn by making wells have provided mankind with this vital resource throughout history. Yet at certain times of the year or in exceptional circumstances, such as during times of war, there may also be a lack of water. As a result, the need occasionally arises to seek the means of storing water in order to use it when required.

Together with the water found on the surface or underground, people have for centuries also sought to supply themselves with the water provided by precipitation, which has forced them to seek ways to collect and store it for everyday use or when the need arose. Due to the importance of water, and given the frequent problems involved in making sure it was available, examples of this desire to benefit from water are found in many places, since a shortage thereof could arise even where rainfall was abundant throughout the year (Rey Castelao 2012). In this regard, one example may be found in the central years of the Middle Ages. I am referring to the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, as presented by Jacques de Vitry who, in his work, highlights how the capital, since it was unable to draw on sufficient fluvial currents to supply the town, resorted to a system of tanks that collected rainwater (Greif 2018: 6, 13). These tanks, which were filled by rainfall, were found in many places. One example closer to home was in the town of Yecla, in the south-east of the Iberian Peninsula, in what is today the province of Murcia, an area that suffers from a severe lack of water (Morales Yago 2004: 306; Segura Graíño 2015). Another example is the island of El Hierro in

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the Canaries where, according to Andrés Bernáldez, because of its lack of fresh water, the locals collected and stored rainwater in tanks, which were then used to supply the townsfolk and the livestock (Bernáldez 1953: LXIV, 612b).

However, the importance of rainwater goes beyond this. For a society based on agriculture, in which precipitation proves crucial for securing a good harvest, rain is an uncontrollable phenomenon on which the very survival of the whole population largely depends, yet which they cannot draw on at will, added to the fact that precipitation may at certain times of the year hinder communications.

All of this enables us to understand how, initially, rainfall may be viewed as a necessary and beneficial phenomenon for society as a whole. Yet, as with everything related to water, it also has its drawbacks when it becomes a threat and poses a serious danger, particularly when in excess, but also when there is a shortage of it, when it falls with extreme force, as occurs during storms, or when it appears in the form of hailstones.¹

Given the uncontrollable strength of the forces of nature, which can cause destruction and ruin, the only recourse left is to resort to supernatural power, divine intervention or ancient magical rites. The former is brought to us through the chronicles. Such is the case of the narration of the siege of Baza (1489) in the chronicles of Andrés Bernáldez. During the War of Granada, one key moment that would ensure the advance of the Castilian troops was the siege of Baza. Here, the Nasrids, who were defending the town, were confident that the winter cold, and above all the snow that was common in the area, would force those attacking to give up their enterprise. Nevertheless, in the view of the chronicler, divine intervention bestowed favourable weather conditions on the assailants, such that they were spared from having to face a harsh winter, thus enabling the town to be conquered (Bernáldez 1953: XCII, 635b). In other words, God supported the Christian troops against the Muslims by bestowing favourable weather upon them.

Throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, periods of drought and excess rainfall, with the subsequent flooding, were no doubt seen as disasters that could bring with them hunger, disease and death due to crops being lost and, as a result, the essential resources needed to survive. Faced with such grave threats, the men and women of the Middle Ages did not merely stand by. Quite the opposite, they came up with imaginative means to ward off such dangers. This was the case of those who claimed to possess the power to cause storms or to keep them

¹ I have addressed this topic on other occasions (del Val Valdivieso 2017). See also Jiménez Rayado 2015.

at bay. Prominent in this regard in the 9th century was the work of Agobardo, Bishop of Lyon, who fought against a belief in those who professed that they were able to provoke hailstorms or to prevent them (Agobardo de Lyon 2018).

However, this is not the focus of our attention over the coming pages. Nor shall I be dealing with the history of the weather, although it should be remembered that this period lay at the dawn of what has come to be known as the “mini ice age”.² Rather, what I shall be focusing on is how such meteorological phenomena were perceived in Castile in the late Middle Ages. For this purpose, as a source of information I shall use some of the Castilian chronicles dating from the second half of the 15th century, taking references from them that concern how rainfall was viewed, how the main actors reacted to the events related to such meteorological phenomena and what value they attached to them, whether positive or negative. We shall examine this through the chronicles of Henry IV and the Catholic monarchs, as well as through those of two of the leading figures of the time; Álvaro de Luna and Cardinal Pedro González de Mendoza. This latter chronicle was written in the 17th century but contains news from contemporary writings referring to events which the author felt relevant vis-à-vis exalting the man who was the leading figure of his narrative. In this regard, it should be highlighted that he pays virtually no attention to the topic which interests us.³

It is true that such chronicles entail certain drawbacks, the most notable of which is undoubtedly the purpose with which such accounts were written, and that can be summed up in the desire to praise the figure of the main character, although on certain occasions the aim was to offer a contrast to the grandeur of their successors, as occurred in some of the chronicles dealing with the reign of Henry IV. Moreover, this circumstance, coupled with the general characteristics and mindset of society at that time, meant that sources of this kind attach a great deal of importance to events related to military action, thereby conferring too much weight to the issue of water when related to warfare. Indeed, most of the news referring to rainfall revolves around armed conflicts. There are, however, other kinds of reference, particularly in the chronicles of Andrés Bernáldez,⁴

² A recent study of the topic that provides a comprehensive and updated bibliography may be found in Camenisch & Rohr 2018. For the specific case of Spain, see Alberola Romá 2014. One specific example for the late Middle Ages is Vera Yagüe 2016.

³ For information on the chronicles of the period, see Gómez Redondo 2007; 2012.

⁴ Known as the “priest of Palacios”, Bernáldez wrote his work on the Catholic monarchs in the early part of the 16th century; he was chaplain of Diego de Deza (bishop of Seville, teacher of the children of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon, and confessor to Queen Isabella).

and which, amongst other news, allude to incidents related to the weather that occurred in those years, and which serve as a contrast to what was reported by other authors, as we shall now see.

Hail, Snow, and Rain in the Castilian Chronicles

Despite having no effective means of combating the forces of nature, rainfall was generally felt to be a gift of nature, and was viewed as positive and beneficial, given that it only proved to be disastrous on rare occasions and because of the sometimes extreme need to find water for human or animal consumption and to make the fields fertile. Yet the chronicles sought to report major or unusual events such that, when they spoke of rainfall they tended to do so in order to describe some negative occurrence, although some favourable episodes were also narrated, as shall be seen over the next few lines.

The chronicles chosen focus mainly on the latter half of the 15th century, since those of Andrés Bernaldez run into the early 16th century, and those of Álvaro de Luna, who died in 1453, deal with earlier years, although news related to rainfall relates to the middle part of the century. These works only occasionally address the topic of rainfall although there are sufficient references to provide us with an idea of how said phenomenon was viewed at the time. It should first be pointed out that they mainly refer to rainfall, and only on rare occasions is mention made of hail and snow. Clearly, there is more rain than snow or hail, which explains why it is the most common subject of the three. However, it might also be felt that the authors of these works, who were educated men, did not allow themselves to be impressed by the most adverse weather phenomena, and shied away from the superstitious attitudes fought against in treatises combatting the practice of magic, such as that of Brother Martín de Castañega (de Castañega 1994; Bazán Díaz 2014).

On the few occasions when we do find references to hail, said phenomenon serves to heighten the negative aspect of the situation, whatever this may have been. It seems to have been used to highlight adversity, and at times to accentuate the action of the main character involved. Such is the case in the chronicle of Álvaro de Luna when he narrates how, at night and in atrocious weather (heavy rain, hail, wind, and great darkness), in February 1449 he set out for Cuenca with a large group of armed men to help the town (*Crónica de Don Álvaro de Luna*, pp. LXXVII, 198).

Hail must have had a terrible reputation at the time and on occasions been perceived as almost a divine curse. Indeed, this is how this particular phenom-

enon of the weather is portrayed in the Bible. When the Jews are in conflict with Egypt over the right to leave the country, God says to Moses that he must speak to the pharaoh to explain to him what evils the Egyptians will face should they fail to accede to the Jews' demands. Amongst these threats, God says:

tomorrow at this time I will rain down a hail so great, the like of which has not been seen in Egypt since the day it was founded (Exodus, 9.18).

When reading the 15th century chronicle of Enríquez del Castillo, we find that the mention of hail is accompanied by the remark that no living soul at the time had ever seen such a terrible hailstorm. He was referring to the arguments between the king of Castile, Henry IV, and the king of Aragon, John II, and which led the king of Castile to undertake a journey to Alfaro, a town close to the kingdom of Navarre. While there, according to the chronicler, a terrible storm blew up and raged for about an hour, with him describing the hail as "immense and furious". He noted that by the time the storm had abated it had left everything covered in a white blanket (as if it had snowed) and that some of the hailstones weighed over a pound. The chronicler is clearly trying to impress the reader, whilst also seeking to endow the phenomenon with an aura that will allow him to extol the figure of the king and so justify one of the setbacks that clouded his reign. This enormous hailstorm not only ruined the crop for that year but also meant that "for almost two years no fruit could be harvested" in the area. This led the king to display his generosity towards the inhabitants by exempting them from paying two taxes (*alcabalas*⁵ and *tercias*⁶) for three years.

As already mentioned, the hailstorm was also seen as a premonition of an extremely unfortunate event that was to have fatal consequences for the king. In the same chapter, in the following paragraph, the chronicle narrates the accident that led to the queen's pregnancy coming to an abrupt end: a blunder caused her hair to catch fire and such was her panic that she lost her child when six months into her pregnancy. At that time, the royal couple only had one daughter (born in February 1462), and having a new child would have avoided the problems that Henry IV was later to suffer. Without going into speculation, the dismay and sadness which, according to the chronicler, afflicted the king as a result of this event was aggravated by the desolation brought about by the storm at Alfaro. At the same time, there seems to be the insinuation that forces alien to human will are at work, triggering the two events, and that the king reacted correctly

⁵ Royal taxes levied on commercial transactions.

⁶ These were two-ninths of the tithes that corresponded to the Crown; they were collected in the same way as the *alcabalas*.

in both instances: firstly, by showing dismay at the loss of his much-awaited offspring, and secondly by compensating those affected by the ruined crops through granting them temporary and partial exemption from paying taxes. Indeed, the chapter concludes by stating that many prominent figures in the kingdom interpreted these phenomena as a portent of the problems that would later emerge (in reference to the civil war and the struggle to succeed to the throne) (Enríquez del Castillo 1997: XLII, 187).

The chronicles also report a great storm in October 1470 during the second proclamation of princess Joanna of Trastámara as heiress to her father Henry IV and her betrothal to the Duke of Guienne, brother to the king of France. Diego de Valera sees the “great clouding darkness, rain and hail” that was unleashed once the ceremony had taken place as a bad omen. Confusion gripped the members of the company since each sought shelter as best they could without a thought for the rest. In the midst of the chaos, princess Joanna was left alone with a footman who protected her under an oak tree, where she remained until the storm had passed (de Valera 1941: LVII, 177). In this instance, the inclemency of the rainfall and the hail are used as a narrative element which serves to highlight the poor behaviour of the king and his retinue as well as the fate and adverse position of Joanna.

It should be stressed that the chroniclers do not agree with regard to exactly what fell on that day. We are unable to say for certain whether or not there was a hailstorm at that moment, although what does seem clear is that hail is far more damaging and, therefore, more hostile than snow, leading us to suppose that the version given by Diego de Valera is much more critical of the king than the version provided by his official chronicler, Diego Enríquez del Castillo. This particular chronicler also reports the episode, but in a far more favourable light for the king, the princess and the court, and which does not, moreover, speak of hail but of snow. Today, it seems more likely that it would have snowed in that area and at that time of year (late October), although whatever the case, and despite the serious consequences it would have had, snowfall appears to be viewed as less damaging than hail. According to Enríquez del Castillo, once the act had been held, in an area close to the town of Segovia, the company set off for the town. It was then, when traversing a mountain pass, that “a great blizzard of snow, wind and rain” broke out in which several people lost their lives. It was not until three days later that they were able to set out once again for Segovia. In other words, snow emerges as a serious problem that can cause death and block communications, but which is not used as an excuse to vilify the king and his court (Enríquez del Castillo 1997: CXLVII, 361–362).

Precipitation in the form of snow is generally perceived as a serious problem, although not as damaging as hail. In 1476, when Queen Isabella was travelling from Valladolid to Burgos, Diego de Valera reports how, although at that moment there was in the town “much snow and bad weather” she was received with dignity and joy, as befits the arrival of a queen. The journey was undertaken during the War of the Castilian Succession with which Isabella I began her reign, and was a journey principally designed to ensure the loyalty of the town and strengthen her hold over the *alcázar*. Aside from the military vicissitudes, what the chronicler appears to be seeking by mentioning the snow and the cold is, on the one hand, to highlight the queen’s courage by showing how, despite the adverse weather conditions, she showed no hesitation in travelling to Burgos when deeming it necessary to her cause and, on the other, to highlight the town’s loyalty, rejoicing as they did at their queen’s visit, and in honour of which games were organised, songs sung and no expense spared in expressions of joy, and which the chronicle describes as “a splendid thing” (de Valera 1927: XVI, 54).

On occasions the presence of snow is used when narrating armed conflicts. In these cases, the two contrasting sides of the same phenomenon can be seen: favouring some, while proving detrimental to others. This is evident in the chronicle of Diego de Valera, when he refers to the French siege of Elne in November 1474 during the war between John II of Aragon and the king of France for control over the land to the north of the Pyrenees, in Roussillon. In this context, he notes how the king of Aragon believed that the French could not take Elne, not only because of the forces defending it, but also because of “the great snowstorms and ice” that beset the area at the time (de Valera 1941: LVII, 177).

In the early 16th century, during the conquest of Navarre by the troops of Ferdinand II of Aragon that would eventually annex said kingdom to Castile, Andrés Bernáldez mentions the calamities and dangers the invaders had to face due to the conditions of the terrain as well as the snow, in addition to the cold and hunger (Bernáldez 1953: CCXXXVII, 764).

Over and above hail and snow, the phenomenon most often referred to is rainfall, which is deemed to be beneficial, particularly because it helps seeds to grow and leads to a good harvest. Yet it may also be seen as detrimental due to the damage it can cause. First and foremost, the chronicles reflect its negative side and the dramatic consequences stemming from there being too much or too little of it. As expected, the chronicles relate unusual occurrences, such that although they do occasionally point out that the right amount of rainfall fell for

the time of year, they tend to refer to the matter when there is too much or when there is a drought, thereby stressing the negative effects of rainfall.

In September and October, the right quantity of rain is needed to achieve proper seeding (Bernáldez 1953: XCII, 635b), after which it must rain at the right times in order to ensure a good harvest. Should this fail to happen as expected, problems soon appear, as occurred in the harvest of 1473 in Andalusia, when it proved impossible to sow until the end of the previous year, after which it did not rain in spring (according to the chronicler, there was no rain in February, March, April or May), leading to a shortage of bread (Bernáldez 1953: V, 573b).

Andrés Bernáldez provides ample further information on this issue in his chronicle. Amongst other news, he reports the disaster that struck Lisbon in 1506, when the townspeople were beset by plague and hunger at a time of severe drought. He narrates how the people of Lisbon held processions “imploring God for mercy and water” (Bernáldez 1953: CCVI, 726a). In Castile, it was also a year that witnessed the loss of the crops, since the pattern of rainfall changed. As a result, the fields were sown late. Afterwards, when the spikes had sprung up, there was too much rain in May, which was then followed by a heat wave that dried out the crop before it had seeded (Bernáldez 1953: CCIX, 728b–729a).

What Bernáldez most often refers to is the effects of excessive rainfall, probably because, except in very extreme cases, its consequences tend to be more dramatic and always more immediate than those brought about by drought. He relates news from Rome, specifically concerning the tremendous floods of December 1495, pointing out how the water reached the windows of the houses and how, in the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, it rose to one elbow’s length above the altar, with the damage caused being estimated at over a million ducats (Bernáldez 1953: CXLIX, 689a).

When referring to the previous decade, he sets out in some detail two critical moments. The first was in 1485, when he reports that it rained non-stop from November 11 until Christmas, for so long and with such force that nobody had ever seen the like, nor could they recall flooding on the scale caused by the rains. This occurred during well-known floods in which the River Guadalquivir burst its banks, sparking widespread destruction on its course between Cordoba and Seville, where it broke into the shipyards and even destroyed houses, whilst on the opposite bank it caused major damage in Triana and the Monastery de las Cuevas. So great was the flooding that, according to the chronicles, the town was cut off for three days. Yet the disaster was not only confined to that area, according to Bernáldez. Throughout Castile many people and animals perished,

estates were ruined (specific mention is made of trees and vineyards) and many houses collapsed (Bernáldez 1953: LXXVIII, 621b–622a).⁷

Three years later another catastrophic situation was to occur. The Guadalquivir floods were not as serious as those of 1485, which might explain why, more than the devastation caused, Bernáldez now stressed the shortage and subsequent high prices of crops brought about by the excess rainfall in the autumn of 1488 and January 1489 and which wreaked havoc in that year's crop (Bernáldez 1953: XCI, 634a).

Another of the negative aspects of rainfall concerns travelling. In times of too much rain, journeys became more difficult and even hazardous, such that they were best avoided. This was the case in the chronicle of Álvaro de Luna when, in the context of the internal power struggles (with the children of King Ferdinand I of Aragon who held possessions and had interests in Castile) there were clashes in Palenzuela (1452), a small town close to Burgos, and where the king and Álvaro de Luna were at the time (*Crónica de Don Álvaro de Luna*, pp. XCI, 238). On this occasion, because “the weather was very rainy”, don Álvaro advised John II to remain in the town while he himself would set out to the scene of the fighting. The monarch ignored the advice. Other considerations aside, however, what the news does show is how the extremely heavy rainfall proved to be an obstacle to travelling and a danger to the safety of the travellers.

In times of armed conflict, such drawbacks could have unexpected consequences, since they could hinder the march of the army and even alter the course of military action. In the case of the War of Naples, and related to what happened at Roccasecca, Bernáldez highlights this setback when in October 1503 the troops of King Ferdinand II of Aragon were unable to reach the French troops due to the tremendous rainfalls and accompanying strong winds that prevented the Great Captain, who commanded Ferdinand's troops, from advancing at the desired pace (Bernáldez 1953: CLXXXVIII, 710a).

A little over 25 years earlier, in 1475, the battle of Toro took place, which saw the armies of Castile and Portugal pitted against each other during the War of Castilian Succession. According to the chronicles, it was fought on a day with much rain, which must have affected the outcome, or at least its final scenario since, after the battle, the Castilian army pursued the Portuguese troops but were forced to give up the pursuit because of the colossal rainfalls (Salazar y Mendoza 1625: XLVIII, 155; Bernáldez 1953: IV, 573b). Later, during the War of Granada, the chronicles refer to a number of occasions when the heavy rains played a key

⁷ The “most official” chronicler of the Catholic monarchs, Hernando del Pulgar, also refers to the problems caused by too much precipitation in 1485 (del Pulgar 1780: LIV, 169).

role, such as during the Castilian army's march towards Velez-Malaga, which was thwarted because of the rain (de Valera 1927: LXXI, p. 216).

As with other activities, rain might not only prove to be a drawback during a war but might also provide an advantage,⁸ since it allows armies to advance or to engage in action at unexpected moments or because it puts the enemy in difficulty. This can be seen on various occasions during the War of Granada,⁹ with one instance being the siege of Gibralfaro during the conquest of Malaga in 1487. In this case, those besieged were confident that the rains, which were common at that time of the year, would force the attackers to give up (de Valera 1927: LXXX, 247). Yet if the chronicles are to be believed, the rains favoured the Castilian troops, as highlighted by Valera when he reports how during the siege of Malaga, between May and August, it did not rain, allowing the siege to continue and eventually leading to the town's surrender (de Valera 1927: LXXXVIII, 275). This he attributes to divine will favouring the cause of the Castilian monarchs

Divine will being manifested through rainfall seems to have been generally accepted practice: on occasions it favoured the Castilians or whoever happened to be championing the just cause, depending on the chronicler in question. Yet it might also be the manifestation of great and widespread misery or malaise, which goes hand in hand with a major misfortune. This is what Andres Bernádez seems to be suggesting when describing what for him are the two key events of 1504; the death of Queen Isabella I in November, and the great rains that prevented the fields from being sown that year and which, coupled with the droughts and consecutive changes in rainfall patterns in 1506 and 1507, plunged Castile into a period of hardship, specifically famine and plague (Bernádez 1953: CCI, 722a), thereby compounding the difficulties involved in governing following the queen's death.

Conclusions

It seems clear that references to rainfall are introduced on occasions as a narrative resource that allows certain nuances, which the author wishes to include, to be highlighted. Prominent in this regard is the use of these references to underscore the virtues, almost heroic at times, of the main actor, or to accentuate the evil of the person whom the author wishes to vilify, as has been seen in the preceding pages. Yet such references also reflect how the world and nature were perceived

⁸ In the chronicles of Alfonso de Palencia and Hernádo del Pulgar, which are not dealt with here, there are numerous references to this matter. For this question, see the unpublished doctoral thesis of Hidalgo (Hidalgo Crespo 2015). See also Hidalgo Crespo 2019: 98–101.

⁹ On the War of Granada, see Ladero Quesada 2001.

by the author and his contemporaries, whilst also mirroring those aspects which aroused greatest concern amongst the people of the time.

If hail appeared in the Bible as one of the seven plagues of Egypt, its dire reputation continued in the mind of late Middle Age Castile, as reflected not only in the chronicles consulted but also through other news, particularly concerning the rites aimed at warding off storms and which were still being practised at the time (see footnote 1).

Despite the problems it caused, snow, on the other hand, seemed to strike less fear into people's hearts. This appears to be the conclusion to emerge from the way it is dealt with in the chronicles but also by the way in which weather conditions are treated when narrating the events of October 1470 after the second proclamation of princess Joanna of Trastámara as heiress. Whilst Diego de Valera, a supporter of Queen Isabella, speaks of hail, the official chronicler of King Henry IV, in addition to presenting the scene in a less abrupt manner, refers to snow, giving the impression of less violent albeit extremely adverse conditions.

Rain is the type of precipitation most often referred to in the chronicles. The works consulted tend to refer to it highlighting three aspects: the problems it can cause for traffic and travelling, in particular the journeys undertaken by the leading figures of the chronicles; the dire financial consequences caused by there being too much or too little of it throughout the kingdom, triggered by the loss of crops and subsequent increase in price as well as the ensuing hunger, coupled with the loss of livestock, farms, and human lives; and its impact on military action, vis-à-vis how it sometimes favoured the cause of those in question whilst at other times proving detrimental to their interests.

In all cases, although particularly in times of war, the presence of precipitation is often perceived as the intervention of divine will, aiding the cause of one of the sides involved, namely the one under the command of the main figure of the chronicle. In this regard, it should be highlighted that in a deeply Christian society, in which everything is seen from the perspective of the relationship with God, punishment and divine reward, natural phenomena that cannot be controlled may only be explained through divine intervention. Such a way of thinking favours a belief in seeing precipitation as the clear expression of divine will manifesting itself in certain extremely important circumstances. It may, however, also be interpreted, as in the case of Andrés Bernáldez, as being part of a kind of connection between human and natural events, linking the death of a beloved queen, Isabella I, who did much good for the kingdom to changes in rainfall patterns at the time and in the years that followed. Nature is seen to be reflecting

the loss; in other words, when a good governor dies not only does human trade enter a crisis but also mother nature herself.

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