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## Review of Teofilo F. Ruiz, *A King Travels: Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*

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**Teofilo F. Ruiz, *A King Travels: Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 356 pp.**

When King Ferdinand III entered the conquered city of Seville through the Puerta de Goles on 22 December 1248, the Castilian ur-festival was born. Subsequent festivals over the next four centuries built on that foundational royal entry, and a festive tradition evolved of meticulously planned events that combined elements conventional and innovative, secular and religious, autochthonous and imported, erudite and popular, all the while maintaining strict hierarchical order. Countless such festivals are brought to life in Teofilo F. Ruiz's *A King Travels: Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*. The book's nine thematic chapters explore the typology and meaning of festivals (chaps. 1-2); royal entries (chaps. 3-5); martial festivals, including the uniquely Spanish *juegos de caña* and mock battles between Christians and Moors (chaps. 6-7); the popular festivals of Carnival, Corpus Christi, and autos de fe (chaps. 8); and non-calendrical festivals marking royal life events from baptisms to funerals (chaps. 9). Ruiz emphasizes the flexibility of Spain's festive traditions, which relied on the "reiteration" of previous events for legitimacy yet always remained open to invention. The author takes festivals seriously as much more than expensive displays of royal authority. Influenced by anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, Ruiz seeks to provide "thick descriptions" of medieval and early modern festivals, which he reads as barometers of a political atmosphere that was often under heavy pressure from challenges to royal authority.

*A King Travels* ranges broadly across time and place, from the fourteenth to the early-seventeenth centuries, from Andalusia to Aragon and outward to Spain's European possessions. But the title refers to a singular "king," and that individual is Philip II, whose travels are at the heart of this book. Ruiz crafts a sympathetic portrait of this reputedly sedentary king who actually spent about ten years away from home experiencing the frequent discomforts and occasional transcendent moments of life on the royal road. We get to know the chivalric Prince Philip who played the heroic knight as he extracted an enchanted sword from a rock à la Amadis of Gaul during the spectacular 1549 festivities at Binche in the Low Countries, and we suffer along with the gouty King Philip who endured watching the entire population of Brihuega, including inmates from the local asylum, process beneath his balcony on a cold, dark night in Guadalajara in 1585. Ruiz uses Philip II's travels to highlight the fractured nature of the Spanish monarchy and to emphasize the limits of royal absolutism, especially in the eastern realms of Iberia. All festivals were carefully designed to promote the ruling power's agenda, Ruiz argues, but things did not always go as they would have wished.

Not surprisingly, the chronicles describing festivals were written by royal or local authorities and favor the elites who commissioned them. Ruiz is quite open about the limitations of his sources, which say very little about the experiences of the people (save the occasional revealing comment: one chronicle described how the gawking citizens of Seville annoyed Philip II during his visit to Seville in 1570, while another reported that guards were posted to keep the masses away from the funeral exequies held for the king in the same city in 1598). One of the main themes of this book is the ever-increasing distance between the ruling elites and the people from the late medieval to the early modern era, a process so complete by the early-seventeenth century that Philip IV passively watched the festivities proclaiming him king while hidden behind a curtained window. Ruiz makes an intriguing argument that the rise of increasingly detailed narrative accounts of festivals was a product of this change as “those in command of the written word ... created a space between their own circle and the masses below” (p. 53). This process is also connected to the revival of elite interest in courtly, chivalric literature. The keen attention to literature and incorporation of literary sources is one of the strengths and pleasures of Ruiz’s book. The visual arts, in contrast, are neglected despite the critical role that they played in the performance and commemoration of festivals. As the anachronistic presence of Goya on the cover suggests, *A King Travels* does not treat art with the same historical sensitivity that is given to literary sources, despite the fact that visual sources would greatly enrich many of the author’s arguments (to give but one example, a discussion of royal portraiture would add depth to an interesting section of the Spanish Habsburg kings’ low-key approach to coronations).

Ruiz is ingratiatingly transparent about his own vacillating reactions to his sources, some of which he finds “enchanted” while others are “excruciating,” and he often apologizes for his own extensive descriptions. This book does sometimes veer into minutia (we learn that Isabel de Valois entered Toledo beneath a canopy held aloft by twenty poles, while Philip II’s canopy had twenty-four), but more often than not it explicates the larger implications of the details through brilliant readings of the events. The decision to structure the material thematically instead of chronologically generates some repetition and creates some confusing gaps for the reader in earlier chapters, as events are mentioned that are not described until later. But *A King Travels* does not purport to be a succinct summary of festival traditions in late medieval and early modern Spain. It is, rather, a highly personal book written by a charming guide who is invariably chivalrous to scholars who came before him. It is a book that reveals the power of festivals to awe and delight centuries after their passing.

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