The Arthur of the Iberians is the long-awaited eighth volume in the Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages series published by Wales University Press and edited by Ad Putter. Those of us Iberianists who have been making do with the seminal but badly outdated study of Thomas (1920) and the more recent (in medievalists’ terms) Entwistle (1975), must now do a happy dance, for David Hook has come to make all our Iberian-Arthurian dreams come true. No longer must we bear the scorn of our colleagues in Welsh, English, German, French, Scandinavian, Latin, and Italian, who, on the quads and in the pubs, tauntingly bandied about the series’ volumes dedicated to their fields —yes, you all remember; finally we have a respectable collection of well-curated panoramic essays on Arthuriana to call our own. And massive and well-curated it is: the book consists of no fewer than twelve essays, several of them substantial, divided mostly by region (Iberia, Portugal, Galicia, Aragon, Castile, extra-Peninsular), by textual group (Post-Vulgate, Lancelot en prose, Tristan, Amadí de Gaula), or by discipline (codicology/paleography, literary history). Hook does an admirable job of marshaling these scholars, and while there is some duplication of material (as is inevitable when toggling between categories such as “Spanish” (Alvar), “Iberia” (Gracia, Cuestatorre, Zarandona), “Peninsular” (Lucía Megías), “Portugal” (Gutiérrez Gracia.), “Galicia” (Lorenzo Gradín), “Aragón” (Soriano Robles) “Hispanic” (Contreras), and “Hispanic and Portuguese” (Hook), this detracts little or not at all from the volume’s appeal, which is considerable.

Now for a brief overview of the contributions: Paloma Gracia, “Arthurian Material in Iberia” (11-32) provides an overview of documented Arthurian themes and texts in poetic and literary production in Latin and Iberian Romance languages from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries.

José Manuel Lucía Megías, in “The Surviving Peninsular Arthurian Witnesses: A Description and an Analysis” (33-57), analyzes the very scanty manuscript tradition of Arthurian material in Iberia, placing it in the context of the codicological and literary economics of the times. He points out that the great success of Arthurian titles in early print editions may have contributed to the scarcity of the manuscript tradition.

Santiago Gutiérrez García, “Arthurian Literature in Portugal” (58-117), is a very sophisticated and rigorous analysis of the propagation and diffusion of the Arthurian tradition in Portugal. Gutiérrez García pays special attention to how nationalisms and other political considerations have shaped textual production, diffusion, and the modern interpretation of the medieval evidence.

In “The Matière de Bretagne in Galicia from the XIth to the XVth Century” (118-61), Pilar Lorenzo Gradín analyzes the Arthurian references in the Galician-Portuguese troubadour corpus, the Alfonsin Cantigas de escarnho e maldizer, historiographical texts, and the fragments of the Livro de Tristan.

Lourdes Soriano Robles, “The Matière de Bretagne in Aragón” (162-86), gives an overview of the Arthurian manuscript tradition in the Crown of Aragon but also writes a cultural history of Arthuriana that extends to the plastic arts (frescoes, tapestries), folklore (Arthurian-themed stories, Arthurian themes used as propaganda for saints’ festivals).
She details how books containing Arthurian-themed texts spread from the courtly milieu to the bourgeoisie beginning in the late fourteenth century, and how Aragonese authors wrote their own literary and historiographical texts featuring Arthurian themes beginning in the mid-fifteenth century.

Carlos Alvar, “The Matter of Britain in Spanish Society and Literature from Cluny to Cervantes” (187-270) contributes a comprehensive and insightful study of Arthurian themes and texts in medieval Castilian literature and culture. He includes explorations of the specific reception and development of Arthurian themes in Castilian literature, especially in the chivalric novel (El libro del Caballero Zifar, Amadís de Gaula), the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century novela sentimental of Italian inspiration, the cancionero poetry, the romancero, and historiography (among other genres). There are also sections on the later development of Arthurian themes in such iconic Early Modern writers as playwright Lópe de Vega and Cervantes, and a survey of the presence of Arthurian-themed texts in medieval libraries in Castile.

In “The Post-Vulgate Cycle in the Iberian Peninsula” (271-288), Paloma Gracia writes a thoughtful and subtle study of the manuscript and textual histories of the ‘Post-Vulgate’ cycle of Arthurian texts in Iberian languages. Gracia, like Gutiérrez García above, does an excellent job explaining how the complicated web of witnesses and external evidence passes through the politicized process of academic study in which nationalisms and personal relationships shape the interpretation of the evidence.

Antonio Contreras Martín, “The Hispanic Versions of the Lancelot en Prose: Lanzarote del Lago and Lançalot” (289-308). Contains an interesting section on what is to be learned about the work’s origins and development from the internal evidence (divided by the author into literary terminology, narrative structure, focalization, chronology, geography, and various aspects of chivalric culture). He concludes that the Iberian prose Lancelots are in effect “manuals which offer models of conduct” (306), or chivalric handbooks in narrative prose for the ladies and knights of the time.

María Luzdivina Cuesta Torre, “The Iberian Tristan Texts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance” (309-63) contributes an extremely detailed and comprehensive history of the Castilian manuscript and print edition witnesses to the Tristan tradition, placing it in its broader Iberian and European contexts.

In “Amadís de Gaula” (364-81), Rafael Ramos provides an introduction to what he calls “the first great work of fiction in Spanish literature” (365). In this chapter, Ramos provides a thorough accounting of the work’s textual history in manuscript and print editions, its relationship to the Arthurian storyworld, and the work’s importance in the cultural life of the Spanish empire during the sixteenth century. During this time Amadís, together with its numerous sequels and translations, became a franchise on a par with today’s Star Wars, and in Ramos’ words, “an unavoidably necessary point of reference to describe any extraordinary or marvellous event” (377).

David Hook, in “Arthur Goes Global: Arthurian Material in Hispanic America and Asia” (382-407) describes the transmission of Arthurian texts, themes, and personal names to Spanish and Portuguese colonial lands in the Americas, the Subcontinent, and the Philippines. He includes a quantitative study of the personal and family names of emigrants from Spain and Portugal to the new world, a collection of references in texts written in the New World to Arthurian themes, and a brief but fascinating note on

translation of Iberian Arthurian texts into languages indigenous to Iberian colonial lands such as the Philippines.

Rounding out the collection, Juan Miguel Zarandona, “The Contemporary Return of the Matter of Britain to Iberian Letters (XIXth-XXIst Centuries)” (408-445) seeks to fill the gap in Norris Lacy’s The New Arthurian Encyclopedia (1996) in terms of the modern reception of Arthuriana in Iberia. Lacy’s definitive reference work included sections on England, French, German, and Dutch, and here Zarandona contributes, ex post facto, a study on the Iberian material. The first section deals with Iberian rescensions of works by English and German novelists and librettists (Scott, Tennyson, Wagner), the second with the nineteenth-century of Romantic nationalist folkloric discourse of a Celtic Galicia, and the third (and most extensive) section is dedicated to “Neo-Medieval Revivals” of Arthurian themes novels, poetry, film, television, comics, and children’s literature by Iberian authors.

All in all, the book is a delightful romp. The contributions are well-written, organized, rigorous, and engaging. There is something for everyone: the bibliographer, the cultural critic, the historian, the LAPer looking to put an authentic touch on their Amadís persona. My only reservation is that the cumulative bibliography makes it difficult to teach individual chapters (one must reproduce the entire bibliography in order to make available references for a single chapter), but this may be an issue for the University of Wales Press rather than for Prof. Hook, who as I have said at least once, acquits himself admirably both as editor and as contributor. Run out and buy it!

Works cited


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