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The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) in the Memory of the Christian West: Propaganda, Historiography, and Iconography of Victory

Summary: This article examines the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) not primarily as a military event, but as a dynamic construct of collective memory within the Christian West. Drawing on a wide range of Latin and Iberian sources — including papal correspondence, Cistercian narratives, and Castilian historiography — it analyses how the victory was interpreted, transmitted, and reconfigured across different ideological and cultural contexts. Particular attention is given to the contrasting perspectives of the papacy, which framed the battle as a universal crusading triumph, and Iberian authors such as Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, who emphasised the autonomy and providential role of the Spanish kingdoms.

The study further explores the processes of sacralisation and political appropriation of the victory, including its incorporation into royal memory, chancery practices, and symbolic culture. It also considers the role of material and visual media — such as war trophies, monastic foundations, heraldry, and iconography — in shaping and perpetuating the memory of the battle. Finally, the article traces the gradual transformation of crusading ideology in 13th and 14th century Castile, where it was increasingly absorbed into the local narrative of the Reconquista and used to legitimise monarchical authority and construct political identity.

By situating the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa within the broader framework of memory studies, the article demonstrates how medieval societies actively reinterpreted historical events to serve evolving religious, political, and cultural needs.

Keywords: Las Navas de Tolosa, crusade, collective memory, Reconquista, medieval Iberia



The battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, fought on 16 July 1212, is widely regarded as one of the most significant events in the history of the Reconquista and a pivotal moment in the development of the crusading idea in Western Europe. Although formally it was a campaign initiated by Innocent III, its reception and remembrance varied significantly across different parts of Latin Christendom. This article seeks to analyse these diverse narratives — ranging from the curial and Cistercian to the Iberian — in order to demonstrate how the memory of the 1212 victory was embedded in local ideological, political, and cultural contexts.

The event's historical weight, its symbolic significance, and the richness of preserved source material make it one of the best-documented and most frequently studied military encounters of medieval Western Europe. Among the key primary sources concerning the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa are the letter of Arnald Amalric,¹ *De rebus Hispaniae* by Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada (1170–1247),² the *Chronicon Mundi* of Lucas de Tuy,³ and the account of Abbot Alberic of Trois-Fontaines.⁴ In recent decades, these and other testimonies have been subjected to intensive source-critical analysis, focusing on their propagandistic nature and their role in shaping collective memory.

Particular scholarly attention has been devoted to the narrative of Jiménez de Rada who, as both a participant and a witness of the battle, established a lasting interpretative framework centred on divine intervention and the transformative significance of the Christian victory.

Among the significant Latin texts is also the *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*, which presents models of royal authority and the ideology of warfare against Islam,⁵ as well as the *Crónica Latina de los Reyes de Castilla*, written within the circle of Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, archbishop of Toledo and participant in the 1212 campaign. This narrative, one of the earliest testimonies to the events, foregrounds the Castilian perspective, emphasising the role of Alfonso VIII of Castile and the significance of the victory in strengthening the Castilian monarchy within the broader framework of the Reconquista.⁶

1 Alberic of Trois-Fontaines G.W. (ed.), 1698, 461; Alberico de Trois Fontaines. 1844, 224; also in: Ambrosio Huici Miranda. 2011, 216–220, 224.

2 Jiménez de Rada R. 1987.

3 Lucas de Tuy. 2003; also: Rodríguez de la Peña M.J. (ed.), 2009; Ambrosio Huici Miranda. 2011, 222–223.

4 Alberico de Trois Fontaines. 1783; Ambrosio Huici Miranda. 2011, 224.

5 *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*, 1990, 109–248. The chronicle was composed within the circle of King Alfonso VII's court and constitutes a key testimony to the ideology of royal power and the early models of warfare against Islam on the Iberian Peninsula. Its narrative combines panegyric elements with the vision of the crusading mission of the Christian monarch, making it an essential context for later interpretations of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. On this source see: Reilly B.F. 2015, 56–72.

6 *Crónica latina de los reyes de Castilla*, 1984. Written in the milieu of Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, a direct participant in the campaign, it is regarded as one of the earliest and most reliable accounts of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Its narrative, emphasising the Castilian

The state of research on the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa is today characterized by a considerable diversity of methodological and thematic approaches. Foundational studies — notably the monographs by Francisco García Fitz⁷ and Miguel Álvira Cabrer⁸ — offer a synthetic account of the event, both in military and symbolic terms. These works draw on an extensive corpus of Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew sources, including chronicles as well as diplomatic documents. García Fitz interprets the battle as the culmination of a long military and political process on the Christian-Muslim frontier and, in his most recent work, as a *batalla del castigo* — an act of divine punishment and discipline directed against Islam. Álvira Cabrer, on the other hand, analyses the battle as an *actum liturgicum* — an event of ritual and symbolic significance, subordinated to the logic of the sacralisation of power and war, and at the same time a key element in the construction of the Christian West's collective memory.

An analysis of the course of the battle itself does not exhaust the complexity of the Las Navas de Tolosa campaign. Equally important are the tactical, organisational, and logistical dimensions, which shed light on the actual capabilities of Christian and Muslim armies and on how these forces were prepared and deployed. These aspects have been explored in numerous detailed studies by scholars such as Bernabé Jurado Gómez,⁹ Juan Eslava Galán,¹⁰ and Ángel Soler del Campo,¹¹ who reconstruct the structure of the Castilian army and allied forces, pointing to the growing importance of heavy cavalry and the crucial role of alliances with the kingdoms of Aragon and Navarre. At the same time, scholars attempt to reconstruct the broader mobilisation base of the campaign by performing analyses of the so-called *fonsadera* — the military obligation (either in terms of military service or a tax paid in its place).¹²

Detailed research by Damian J. Smith demonstrates that the campaign of 1212 was fully classified by Innocent III as a crusade, with an appropriate system of indulgences, mobilising documents, and crusade liturgy. This clearly illustrates the central role of papal propaganda in the spiritual and political preparation of the expedition,¹³ as well as in shaping its liturgical framework, spiritual mobilisation, and relations with the military orders.¹⁴ Of particular importance are Smith's studies on the role of Innocent III in defining the campaign as a crusade, as well as the analyses of Carlos

perspective and the role of Alfonso VIII, is interpreted both as a factual source and as a text with a strong dimension of dynastic propaganda. See: Reilly B.F. 2015, 56–72.

7 García Fitz F. 2005; García Fitz F. 2024.

8 Álvira Cabrer M. 2012.

9 Jurado Gómez B. 2012–2013, 12–13, 65–84.

10 Eslava Galán J. 1981, 39–53.

11 Soler del Campo Á. 2012, 67–70.

12 García Fitz F. 2005, 161–164.

13 Smith D.J. 2011, 157–178; Gómez M.D. 2011, 237–260.

14 Ayala Martínez C. 2007; Forey A.J. 1992.

de Ayala Martínez, which explore the participation of Iberian military orders and their integration into the structures of monarchical power. The issue of the participation of northern European knights — especially French and ultramontane forces („ultramontanes” were the foreign crusaders who came to the Iberian Peninsula from northern Europe), as well as Normans and Anglo-Normans — and their religious, financial, and political motivations has been examined in the context of broader research on the crusading movement in the 13th century. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the contribution of Norman and Anglo-Norman contingents to Iberian campaigns, which they increasingly perceived as part of a universal crusade. This interpretation is emphasised by Lucas Villegas-Aristizábal in his study of their participation in the Reconquista (c. 1018–1248).¹⁵

Research on the memory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa also takes into account the broader cultural context related to the functioning of the idea of crusade in Iberian societies of the 13th and 14th centuries. In her chapter on the memory of crusades in the context of the Reconquista, Ana Rodríguez López analyses how the experience and narratives of crusading were transformed and adapted to meet the needs of local communities.¹⁶ She highlights the complex relationship between crusading ideology and narratives concerning Las Navas — both in their textual and symbolic dimensions. The battle of 1212 thus emerges not only as a military event but also as a component of the culture of memory, reshaped and reinterpreted in line with the political and religious needs of later generations.

The last decade has also witnessed a significant development in studies on the reception of the battle and its place in collective memory. Particularly relevant are works examining liturgical rituals, the construction of the “shepherd-guide” myth, and the sacred iconography of victory.¹⁷ Scholars emphasise that the narrative of Las Navas de Tolosa was not only a political and religious construct but also part of a broader symbolic culture, serving to legitimise monarchy, military orders, and the Church. An important complement to previous research is the commemorative collective volume *Las Navas de Tolosa 1212–2012. Miradas cruzadas*, edited by Patrice Cressier and Vicente Salvatierra.¹⁸ Published to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the battle, this volume comprises a broad range of interdisciplinary studies encompassing military history, archaeology, defensive architecture, iconography, written sources, and historical memory. Thanks to contributions from scholars representing various disciplines and research centres, this publication constitutes a key reference point for contemporary analyses of the battle, considering it not only as

¹⁵ Villegas-Aristizábal L. 2007.

¹⁶ Rodríguez López A. 2016, 202–215.

¹⁷ Peinado Santaella R.G. 2015, 439–454; Gómez M.D. 2011, 237–260.

¹⁸ Cressier P., Salvatierra V. (eds), 2014.

a military event but also as a phenomenon deeply rooted in the cultural, symbolic, and political landscape of medieval Spain.

Against this rich historiographical background, the present article adopts a complementary perspective: shifting the focus from reconstructing the event itself to its reception and reinterpretation, from the battlefield to the field of memory. Therefore, the analysis aims not only to answer the question of what happened at Las Navas de Tolosa in July 1212, but also to explore how this event was remembered, described and utilised in different historical contexts.

Particular attention will be paid to the diversity of these narratives: from the papal and monastic perspectives to the dynastic interests of Castile and León, as well as to local visions of heroism, holy war, and victory interpreted as a manifestation of divine intervention. The article will also reflect on the *longue durée* of these narratives, examining their presence in rituals of power and commemorative practices during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. It will also explore their role in the foundational myth of the Castilian monarchy and their representation in modern historiography, where the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa is often presented as a symbol of unity of the Christian West.

In this way, the article is situated within the current research on the culture of memory, the narrative character of historical sources, and the mechanisms of power legitimisation. The campaign of Las Navas de Tolosa will be presented not only as a major military event but above all as a dynamic construction of collective memory — subject to reinterpretation, ideological transformation, and enduring presence within the imaginary of the Christian West.

However, to better understand the significance attributed to this encounter in subsequent decades and centuries, it is first necessary to outline its basic course as well as the main forces and actors involved in the conflict.

Outline of the Battle

The battle of Las Navas de Tolosa represented the culmination of a crusading campaign against the Almohad Empire, which exercised dominion over the southern region of the Iberian Peninsula during the early 13th century. The Christian forces, under the command of Alfonso VIII of Castile, with the support of Sancho VII of Navarre and Peter II of Aragon, as well as contingents of knights from southern France, comprised approximately 12,000 to 15,000 men. The opposing army was that of Muhammad an-Nasir (known to Christian sources as *Miramamolín*). Contemporary sources and historians estimate the size of his army at between 20,000 and 30,000 soldiers. It was deployed in a strongly fortified position near the Despeñaperros pass.¹⁹

19 Gozalbes Cravioto C., Gozalbes Cravioto E. 2014.

The Almohads adopted a defensive stance on a hill reinforced with palisades, trenches, and a system of tents shielding the centre of their formation. The caliph himself was positioned at the epicentre, protected by an elite bodyguard composed of Black slave soldiers chained together — a symbolic element intended to emphasise the inviolability of the ruler's position. Following a strenuous march through the mountainous terrain of the Sierra Morena, under the guidance of local scouts, the Christian army launched a surprise assault employing three distinct divisions: a central force commanded by King Alfonso VIII, a left wing led by the Navarrese forces, and a right wing under the command of the Aragonese.

The breakthrough came following a frontal attack by Castilian forces, which disrupted the first defensive lines of the Almohads. Sancho VII's troops then executed a flanking manoeuvre, allowing them to break into the heart of the camp and destroy the caliph's personal guard. According to tradition, it was the Navarrese warriors who broke the chains surrounding the tent of the Almohad ruler — a scene that soon became one of the most recognisable motifs in the iconography and narratives of the victory.

The battle ended in a complete defeat for the Muslim army. The Almohad forces were routed, and the caliph fled the battlefield. The victory at Las Navas de Tolosa had decisive strategic significance: it undermined Almohad power in Al-Andalus and paved the way for the further advance of the Reconquista into the south of the peninsula. Even more important, however, were its symbolic and ideological consequences — the event was quickly interpreted as a triumph of Christianity and a sign of divine intervention.²⁰

The Papal Vision and the Universalist Ideology of Crusade

From the perspective of the papacy and Western European monastic circles, the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was presented as a triumph of all Christendom — made possible through divine intervention and the spiritual leadership of the pope. In his congratulatory letter to Alfonso VIII of Castile, Pope Innocent III wrote: "This victory, without a doubt, was not the work of man but of God; and the sword of God, not of man — or rather, of the God-Man — has devoured the enemies of the Lord's Cross."²¹ This interpretation served to emphasise Rome's role as the centre of spiritual mobilisation,

²⁰ Alvira Cabrer M. 2012, 45–51.

²¹ "Ista enim victoria procul dubio non humani operis extitit, set divini; et gladius Dei, non hominis, immo verius Dei hominis inimicos crucis dominice devoravit." Innocent III, letter to Alfonso VIII, October 1212, Mansilla D. (ed.), 1955, No. 488, 520. See also: O'Callaghan J.F. 2003, 72. O'Callaghan presents Innocent III as the architect of crusading ideology, who saw Las Navas as evidence of divine intervention and a triumph of Christianity over Islam. He incorporated this victory into a broader plan of salvation, using it both to strengthen papal authority and to further mobilise support for papal aims. The letter to Alfonso VIII and its public reading were among the main acts of crusading propaganda of the age.

thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the crusade as an institution. In his letter, Innocent III consistently employed sacral language: the victory did not come *from human strength* (non humani operis), but was *without doubt the work of God (divini)*. This is a paradigmatic example of a theological interpretation of history, which prevailed in medieval assessments of political and military events: success was a sign of divine grace, while defeat was interpreted as a form of retribution for sin.

Of particular significance is the phrase *gladius Dei, non hominis, immo verius Dei hominis* — “the sword of God, not of man, but rather of the God-Man.” This construction reveals Innocent’s characteristic logic of combining a military metaphor with Christology: not only did God intervene, but Christ himself, as the God-Man (*Deus homo*), annihilated the enemies of the cross. This is no accidental formulation — *inimici crucis dominicae* is a phrase drawn from the New Testament (see: Philippians 3:18) and was used in reference to heretics and infidels. In this context, it denoted Muslims, especially the powerful Almohad Empire, which only a few decades earlier had achieved significant military successes (e.g. the battle of Alarcos, 1195).²²

The letter not only reinforced the position of Alfonso VIII as a *Christian prince* fighting in the name of faith but also served to sustain the authority of the papacy as a spiritual institution controlling the legitimation of war. Innocent III — as the architect of the concept of both internal and external crusade — established a linkage between the events occurring on the Iberian Peninsula and the idea of a universal struggle for the Cross, in a manner analogous to the crusades in the East and against the Albigensians.

This letter should thus be regarded as both an expression of the piety characteristic of the era and as a form of propagandistic crusade, inscribing the Reconquista into a similar conceptual framework as the expeditions to the Holy Land. In the perception of Innocent III, Castile and its allies were regarded as instrumental in a salvific mission, serving as instruments in God’s hands. The success of this mission was perceived as a confirmation of the justice of their war and their special election.

Cistercian and French Narratives — Miraculous and Apocalyptic Elements

In Cistercian and French accounts, the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was situated within the broader context of the Church’s struggle against heresy and Islam. Arnaud Amalric,²³ archbishop of Narbonne, compared the battlefield called *Tolosa* to the city of Toulouse, suggesting that the same fate would befall the Albigensian heretics:

22 On this battle see: Alvira Cabrer M. 1996, 249–264; García Fitz F. 1996, 265–282.

23 Arnaud Amalric (also known as Arnaut Amaíric, Amaldric or Arnaldo Amalarico), a Cistercian from Catalonia, began his remarkable career at the Poblet Abbey. He soon became head of the Cistercian Order and, shortly thereafter, took command of the crusade against the Albigensians

Erat quippe quoddam castrum Maurorum quod Tolosa nuncupatur, quod nunc in potestate nostra per Dei gratiam est redactum, ut indignationem Dei timeant similiter, nisi poenituerint, haeretici Tolosani.²⁴

In the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesarius z Heisterbach, it was even claimed that the Almohads had come from Africa at the request of the Albigensians to jointly conquer all of Europe:

He came from Africa [Muhammad an-Nasir, called Miramamolín by the Christians — A.N.] to Spain with an incredible multitude of people, hoping to seize the whole of Europe. He even ordered Pope Innocent to convert the portico of St Peter's Basilica into a stable for his horses and to hoist his banner on its summit.²⁵

Similar motifs of miraculous intervention and eschatological interpretation appear in the chronicles of the abbeys of Saint-Denis and Savigny, which mention a vision of Christ appearing to a knight during the battle.

Spanish Reinterpretation of the Victory — Autonomy and Proto-Nationalism

In the Iberian sources such as the *Crónica Latina de los Reyes de Castilla*²⁶ and *De rebus Hispaniae*²⁷ by Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, emphasis was placed on the independence and agency of the Spanish kingdoms. Rodrigo wrote that after the departure of the ultramontane contingents: "Only the Spaniards, with a few from beyond

as papal legate in Occitania. Elected Archbishop of Narbonne in March 1212, he joined the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa crusade and played a significant role in it. He subsequently provided a detailed account of his experiences in a letter to the Cistercian General Chapter. This letter by Arnaud of Narbonne contributed to spreading the news of the battle through the "Cistercian channel." See: Gómez M.D. 2011, 45–61.

24 "...in a place called Navas de Tolosa, because nearby there was a Saracen castle named Tolosa, which now, by the grace of God, is in the hands of the Christians — to instil fear and serve as a warning to the heretics of Toulouse, should they fail to repent." Arnaud Amalric, letter to the Cistercian General Chapter, 1212, quoted in: Alvira J. 2010, 117; Huici Miranda A. 2011, 219.

25 "Qui de Affrica in Hispanias cum tam incredibili multitudine venit, ut totam Europam se obtinere posse speraret. Mandavit etiam Innocentio Papae, quia equos suos in porticu ecclesiae beati Petri deberet stabulare, et super illam vexillum suum figere." See: Caesarius Heisterbacensis. 1851, 303.

26 *Crónica latina de los reyes de Castilla*. 1984. This anonymous Latin chronicle was written at the Castilian court between 1236 and 1239, most likely at the behest of factions associated with the royal administration of Ferdinand III of Castile. It covers the history of the Castilian monarchy, extending from the reign of Alfonso VI of Castile to the 1230s; a notable attention is given to Alfonso VIII of Castile and the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa.

27 Jiménez de Rada R. 1989. Also known as *Historia gothica*, this text is regarded as one of the most important historical works of medieval Spain. The author — Archbishop of Toledo, scholar, and advisor to Ferdinand III of Castile — presents the history of Spain from ancient times up to his own day (around 1240).

the mountains (i.e. beyond the Pyrenees), set out on the road that leads to the Lord's war."²⁸ In this statement, the author clearly underscores the exceptional role of the Spaniards in this "war of the Lord," portraying them as the only true participants in the holy war, accompanied by merely a handful of warriors from beyond the Pyrenees. In doing so, he deliberately understates the role of the wider European knight-hood, even though contingents from southern France, Languedoc, and other regions are known to have joined the campaign.

This rhetoric is far from accidental. Rodrigo constructs an image of Castile (and, more broadly, of Spain) as a people chosen by God, destined to liberate lands from Muslim rule. His use of the phrase *bellum Domini* ("the Lord's war") serves to reinforce the religious dimension of the entire enterprise, granting it the status of a crusade.²⁹

From the autumn of 1212 until the death of Alfonso VIII of Castile in October 1214, almost every document issued by his chancery was dated with reference to this triumph.³⁰ The formulas of these miniature written commemorations varied. At times, they were very direct and even boastful — for example, with an addition after the date of the document: "in the year in which I, the aforementioned King Alfonso, defeated Miramamolín, king of Carthage, on the battlefield."³¹ Over time, however, under papal influence, the language of these formulas became more humble: the victory was attributed to divine mercy and the support of vassals.³² This way of dating documents constituted not only a form of commemoration but also a propaganda tool designed to perpetuate the significance of the victory in collective memory and to present it as a turning point in the history of the Reconquista.

Not only the royal chancery but also other ecclesiastical and political institutions made reference to the triumph at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in their documents, often portraying it as the work of divine providence—a notion that manifested itself particularly in Castile. This form of narrative served both a political and ideological purpose. On the one hand, it legitimised the authority of the Castilian monarchs as instruments of God; on the other, it embedded the Reconquista within a universal salvific framework. In this perspective, the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was commemorated not merely as a great military victory but as the moment when Spanish Christians became the foremost defenders of the faith — even more so than their brethren from northern Europe. As a participant and witness to these events, Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada had both personal and ideological reasons to portray them in this way.

28 "soli Hispani, cum paucis ultramontanis, perrexerunt per viam quae ducit ad bellum Domini." Jiménez de Rada R. 1989, 266.

29 Kagay D.J. 2020, 131–142.

30 Gómez M. 2019, 143.

31 „eo videlicet anno quo ego predictus Aldefonsus rex Almiramomeninum regem Cartaginis camp-estri prelio superavi". Mansilla D. (ed.), 1955. III. No. 903, 580–581.

32 „non meis meritis set Dei misericordia et meorum auxilio vassalorum". Mansilla D. (ed.), 1955. III. doc. 905, 584–585.

The *Crónica Latina de los Reyes de Castilla* also states: “Wonderful are the works of God, who bestowed such great grace upon Spain, and especially Castile, that — the ultramontanes having departed — the glory of victory may rightly be ascribed to the Spaniards.”³³ This text reflects the emerging political consciousness and sense of Castilian distinctiveness, presenting the Reconquista as a mission with a national character. This is a representative example of a medieval providential interpretation of history, in which military victory is depicted as the direct result of divine intervention. This view is fully consistent with the theological conventions of the period.

At the same time, this passage illustrates the process of appropriation of the memory of the battle by local traditions and political discourse. The emphasis placed on the special distinction of Castile as the privileged recipient of divine grace reflects an effort to reinforce its role as the primary agent of the Reconquista. This perspective resulted in the marginalisation of the “ultramontanes” and to a symbolic shift in the meaning of the battle from the universalist idea of crusade to the glorification of Spanish arms.

The narrative of the *Crónica Latina* thus aligns with a broader trend of reinterpreting the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa of 1212 not as a triumph of the universal Christian community, but above all as a victory of “the Spaniards”. This is indicative of the growing need to consolidate the political and cultural identity of the individual Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula.

Ideologization of the Crusade and the Reinterpretation of Victory

In this process, the Iberian Christians fully assimilated the ideology of the crusade. If the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was the first event on the Iberian Peninsula to be explicitly described as a crusade, it was certainly not the last. The term *cruzada* — a noun denoting a specific form of holy war — in conjunction with the adjective *cruzado/a* and the corresponding verbal nouns, appears in the Castilian sources of the early 13th century as a relatively widespread concept. Although not yet ubiquitous, its use attests to the gradual internalisation of the crusading idea within the political and religious consciousness of the Iberian monarchies. This is confirmed by both chronicle accounts and early documentary as well as literary evidence. The earliest documented instances of the term *cruzada* are found in the *Annales Toledanos I* and *II*, where the expression *fazer cruzada* — “to make a crusade” — is recorded.³⁴ The last two occurrences in *Annales Toledanos I*, dated to 1218 and 1219 respectively, refer to military campaigns undertaken for religious reasons. The first entry relates to the joint

33 “Stupenda sunt opera Dei, qui tantam gratiam contulit Hispaniae, et specialiter Castellae, quod, relictis ultramontanis, victoriae gloria Hispaniis merito tribuatur.” *Crónica Latina*, 80–81.

34 Goñi Gaztambide J. 1958, 151; Ayala Martínez C. 2013, 77–93.

expedition of Castilian and Leonese warriors, members of the military orders, as well as forces from other realms — including the renowned knight from Poitou, Sauvary de Mauleón³⁵ — against the town of Cáceres (province of Cáceres). The siege, which lasted from mid-November until Christmas 1218, ended in failure due to heavy rainfall:

The crusade was undertaken by the brethren (of the military orders) from Spain together with the men of the king of Castile and the king of León, as well as from other realms, as many as wished to come; and also Savaric de Mallen with numerous men from Gascony. They marched to besiege Cáceres (province of Cáceres) and began the assault, but they did not capture the town, for such heavy rains fell that they could not remain there. This was in mid-November and lasted almost until Christmas, after which they withdrew. Year 1256 of the Spanish era (i.e. 1218 AD).³⁶

A year later, in 1219, Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada led his own crusading expedition in the Aragonese region, capturing three castles, although the siege of Requena (province of Valencia) ended in failure and heavy losses:

Archbishop Rodrigo of Toledo undertook a crusade and gathered more than two hundred thousand infantry and cavalry. On the feast day of Saint Matthew the Evangelist, he entered Moorish lands from Aragon and captured three castles: Sierra, Serresuela, and Mira. Then, on the feast of Saint Michael, he laid siege to Requena (province of Valencia) — they fought with siege engines (*almajanequis*), armed assaults (*algarradas*), and bombardments (*delibra*), destroying towers and fortifications...³⁷

These references not only document the early use of the term *cruzada* in the context of religious warfare but also reveal its deep embedding in local practices of historical memory. In the chronicle narratives, these events are depicted as a direct continuation of the crusading idea inaugurated at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, thereby contributing to its consolidation as a specifically Castilian sacral-military legacy.

Moreover, by the late 13th century, the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was already being referred to in these terms in the redactions of chronicles compiled at the court of Alfonso X the Wise, even though Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, upon whose

35 Runciman S. 1997, 158.

36 "Ficieron Cruzada los Freyres de España con las gientes del Rey de Castiella, e del Rey de Leon, e de los otros Regnos quantos quisieron venir y, e Savaric de Mallen con muchas gientes de Gascoña, e fueron cercar Cancies, e lidiaronla, e non la prisieron, que facia tan grandes aguas que non pudieron y durar. Esto fue mediado November, e duro hasta cerca de Navidad, e tornaronse ende, Era MCCLVI." *Annales Toledanos I*. 1993, 189.

37 "El Arzobispo D. Rodrigo de Toledo fizo Cruzada, e ayunto entre peones e Caballeros mas de ducentas veces mil, e entro en tierra de Moros de part de Aragon dia de S. Matheus Evangelista e priso tres Castiellos, Sierra, e Serresuela, e Mira. Despues cerco a Requena dia de S. Miguel, e lidiaronla con almajanequis, e con algarradas, e con delibera, e derrivaron..." *Annales Toledanos I*. 1993, 189–190.

testimony later accounts relied, never used the word *cruzada* in this context.³⁸ Nevertheless, in the *Crónica de Castilla* and *Crónica de Veinte Reyes*, the 1212 campaign was fully conceptualised as a crusade, as evidenced by the mention that Archbishop Rodrigo “left Spain to request the crusade” — which should be understood as a reference to his journey to the pope to seek the blessing and spiritual support for the expedition.³⁹

This process of reinterpretation and appropriation of the crusading idea by the emerging Iberian states was closely linked to the political legacy of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. Although many of the combatants did not live to witness the fruits of their victory, their successors — Ferdinand III of Castile in Castile and James I of Aragon in Aragon — fully exploited the new balance of power that emerged from it. Following his capture of Córdoba (1236) and Seville (1248), Ferdinand III by 1252 had already secured his control over the entire Guadalquivir Valley.⁴⁰ During this period, the Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula was reduced to the residual emirate of the Kingdom of Granada, which from then on was a nominal vassal of Castile.

In Aragon, James I conquered Valencia (1238) and the Balearic Islands, transforming his kingdom into a major Mediterranean power.⁴¹ Barely forty years after Las Navas de Tolosa, the *Reconquista* had been essentially completed in its strategic dimension.

In this context, the reinterpretation of the victory at Las Navas as a “Spanish” crusade and a manifestation of divine grace granted to Castile acquired an almost prophetic character. The idea that God had predestined the Spaniards to play a special role in the history of Christendom — as defenders of the faith and a chosen nation in the struggle against Islam — became firmly rooted in the historical, theological, and legal discourse of the late Middle Ages. Las Navas became significant not only as a military breakthrough but also a turning point in the formation of a Castilian (and, more broadly, Spanish) collective identity.

Monarchical Memory of Las Navas de Tolosa: Between Crusade and Reconquest

Although the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 was in many respects an event inscribed in the ideology of crusade — owing to the indulgences granted by Innocent III, the preaching campaigns in France, and the presence of French troops⁴² — in later Castilian

38 Jiménez de Rada R. 1989, 266.

39 Brea A. (ed.), 1997, 56–64; *Chronica Latina Regum Castellae*. 2003, 141–189; Campa Gutiérrez M. de 2003, 141–189.

40 Ladero Quesada M.Á. 1998, 607–662.

41 Burns R.I. 1967. I, 1–30.

42 Rodríguez A. 2017, 210. Papal documents make no reference either to the Holy Land or to indulgences connected with the Eastern Crusade. In January 1212, Innocent III granted absolution to Alfonso VIII of Castile, while advising him to accept a truce if offered and to wait for a more favourable moment to strike. See: Mansilla M. 1955, 500–501.

narratives its papal–crusading interpretation gradually faded. It was replaced by a narrative centred on the role of the monarch and the internal mobilisation of Iberian forces.⁴³

The correspondence between Alfonso VIII of Castile and the papacy, written in the aftermath of the battle, already suggested a desire to distance the Castilian crown from its dependence on Rome. The king expressed dissatisfaction with the weak commitment of ultramontane knights, emphasised his personal financial contribution to the campaign, and declared his willingness to dedicate himself *pro fide*. In these letters, military strategy, divine assistance, and the capture of prisoners later used as monastic labour were presented as evidence of the effectiveness of royal — not papal — power.⁴⁴

This interpretation was comprehensively developed in the narrative of Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, Archbishop of Toledo, who in *De rebus Hispaniae* described the battle as a collaborative effort of the Iberian armies, with the French forces playing a marginal role and the papacy being entirely omitted.⁴⁵ Furthermore, he did not even mention his own preaching in France or his attempts to involve Philip II Augustus, despite the explicitly crusading nature of these actions. In the *Chronica Regum Castellae*, compiled at the court of Ferdinand III of Castile, this interpretation was further reinforced: the Archbishop of Toledo was presented merely as an instrument of the Castilian monarchy, while indulgences and Rome were not mentioned at all.⁴⁶

The glory of the victory was attributed entirely to Castile, with the chronicler suggesting that the French forces departed due to the heat, which was interpreted as divine intervention allowing the Castilians to claim the full spiritual and political reward.⁴⁷ At the same time, the campaign was financed almost entirely by the revenues of the Castilian Church and royal funds, which further strengthened the model of monarchical independence.⁴⁸

Thus, the victory at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa became the basis for a monarchical memory of the Reconquista, in which the king was no longer a participant in a papal project but rather emerged as an autonomous leader of Christendom.⁴⁹ As the analysis of *Chronica Regum Castellae* and *De Rebus Hispaniae* demonstrates, the crusade

43 Mansilla M. 1955. No. 470, 500–501.

44 Mansilla M. 1955. No. 488, 519–521.

45 Smith D.J. 1999, 487–513.

46 Brea A. (ed.), 1997, 56–64.

47 The *Chronica Regum Castellae* even includes an ironic remark that the *ultramontani* (the French) withdrew from the campaign because of the heat, which the chronicler interprets as divine intervention in favor of Castile. This is a characteristic example of the “Castilianisation” of the narrative, in which Castile alone claims the victory.

48 The same chronicle also contains references to the Castilian churches allocating half of their annual revenues, while the king covered the remaining costs from the royal treasury. This is consistent with the letter of Alfonso VIII of Castile to the pope (see: Mansilla M. 1955. No. 488, 519–521), but the *Chronica* deliberately emphasises Castilian self-sufficiency and independence from the papacy.

49 Rodríguez A. 2017, 210–212. The author analyses the process of the “Castilianisation” of the memory of the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa as an instrument of royal legitimacy and its gradual detachment from the universal project of the papal crusade.

underwent a process of “Castilianization” in meaning: the crosses and the language of holy war remained, but the central role of the papacy disappeared.⁵⁰ The war against Muslims was no longer regarded as part of the universal mission of the Church. Instead, it began to function as an instrument for consolidating monarchical authority and forging Iberian identity.⁵¹

In the context of the memory of Las Navas de Tolosa, it is worth recalling the observation of Jessalynn Bird that crusade preaching not only motivated participation in holy wars but also “actively constructed and preserved the memory of earlier expeditions as examples of virtue, sacrifice, and collective Christian action.”⁵² As Bird observes, crusade memory did not constitute a passive recollection of events but a tool for reactivating their spiritual significance in new political and religious contexts, both in the Latin West and on its peripheries. While the author’s analysis is primarily concerned with the crusades to the Holy Land, these mechanisms can be successfully applied to the Castilian context after 1212, when the narrative of Las Navas de Tolosa — reinforced by authors such as Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada — began to function as a local counterpart to the memory of Jerusalem, embedding the victory within a universal history of Christian struggle against non-believers. In this manner, the Reconquista was “coupled” with crusading memory — not as its supplement, but as a continuation of the crusading idea in a new geographical and political context.

In the memory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, a particularly significant role was played by Alfonso VIII of Castile, whose participation in the 1212 campaign became not only a military fact but also a central element of a long-lasting historical and symbolic narrative. As James Naus and Vincent Ryan emphasise, medieval kings who took the cross exposed themselves to considerable risks but, in return, could gain immense prestige and a lasting place in collective memory, regardless of the ultimate military outcome.⁵³ In the case of Alfonso VIII, the rewards were exceptional: his role as leader of the victorious Christian coalition was framed as retribution for the fall of Hispania after 711, and he himself was remembered by posterity as a national hero and saviour of Spain. As Miguel Gómez observes, “the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa became a semi-legendary episode of great significance for the collective memory of

50 See: Smith D.J. 1999, 487–513. The author demonstrates that Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, in *De Rebus Hispaniae*, deliberately omits the role of the papacy in both the preparations for and the interpretation of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, despite its formal crusading character. See: A. Brea (ed.), 1997, 56–64. The text focuses exclusively on the Castilian monarchy, while entirely disregarding the crusading dimension; although the symbolism of the cross is present, it is subordinated to a local ideological narrative.

51 See: Rodríguez A. 2017, 210–212. The author shows the ideological transformation of the narrative of Las Navas towards the legitimization of royal power. See: A. Brea (ed.), 1997, 56–64. The text completely marginalises the papal dimension of the crusade, focusing on the king as the central figure of the campaign.

52 See: Bird J. 2017, 24.

53 See: Naus J., Ryan V. 2017, 145–146.

Christian Spain,” and Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada made it the climax of his *De Rebus Hispaniae*, with the intention of exalting the reputation of Alfonso VIII.⁵⁴ The monarch himself, as already mentioned, celebrated this victory in all chancery documents issued during the last two years of his life.⁵⁵ This memory was not confined solely to chronicles but also entered early modern cultural forms, where the image of the “crusader king” remained vivid. The example of Alfonso VIII thus demonstrates how the Reconquista and crusade could overlap in the realm of memory, producing a unified narrative of holy war and royal heroism.

Over the two centuries separating the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) from the time of Don Juan Manuel, the ways in which this event was remembered underwent a significant transformation. As Ana Rodríguez argues, the memory of the crusade faded in Castile as a first-hand military-religious experience and was converted into a component of post-memory — an idealised historical legacy detached from direct references to the actual crusading campaigns.⁵⁶ The crusade became a vehicle of moral symbolism, a literary topos, and an instrument of legitimising royal power, rather than a concrete obligation to fight in the name of faith.⁵⁷

This process of reinterpretation is particularly evident in the works of Don Juan Manuel, author of *El Conde Lucanor* (1330–1335), which includes, among other things, a story of knights accompanying their lord on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land — not as combatants, but as exemplars of loyalty, virtue, and penance. In this way, the crusading motif was transformed into a narrative of chivalric honour and personal expiation, as opposed to a tale of fighting for the Holy Land.⁵⁸ This marks a significant departure from the 12th century vision of crusaders as defenders of Christendom.

Concurrently, the royal court’s narrative appropriated the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, wherein Alfonso VIII of Castile became the central protagonist. In both the *Chronica Regum Castellae* and the *De Rebus Hispaniae*, the emphasis was placed on the role of the Castilian monarchy as an independent actor that organised and financed the victorious campaign, instead of highlighting papal blessings or the idea of holy war.⁵⁹ Even Alfonso VIII’s letter to Pope Innocent III, sent after the victory, focused on logistical expenses and the difficulties of mobilising the army, rather than on the spiritual dimension of the campaign.⁶⁰

In this manner, the memory of Las Navas de Tolosa was integrated into the establishment of royal legitimacy, while papal involvement, despite its formal presence,

54 See: Gómez M. 2019, 143–144.

55 See notes 34–36.

56 Rodríguez A. 2017, 202–203.

57 Rodríguez A. 2017, 202–203.

58 Rodríguez A. 2017, 203–204.

59 *Chronica Regum Castellae*. 1997; Jiménez de Rada R. 1989.

60 See: letter of Alfonso VIII of Castile to Pope Innocent III, July 1212. Mansilla D. (ed.), 1955. No. 488, 519–521.

was diminished or even omitted. As Ana Rodríguez notes, it was Juan de Osma, the chancellor and author of the *Chronica Regum Castellae*, who most clearly separated the Reconquista from the crusade, portraying the former as an internal Castilian holy war, not subordinated to Rome.⁶¹

Moreover, the crusade as an idea became increasingly detached from concrete military operations. An illustrative example is the 1307 testament of Teresa Gil of Valladolid, in which the noblewoman bequeathed one hundred maravedís “for the crusade” alongside donations for the poor and household servants. The absence of major Eastern campaigns after the death of Louis IX of France in Tunis, makes it difficult to ascertain whether this constituted a contribution to an actual crusade or merely a symbolic expression of religious piety and tradition, devoid of any tangible objective.⁶²

As a result, during the 13th and 14th centuries, a substantial reinterpretation of the crusading idea took place. The concept was assimilated into the local Reconquista narrative, and its association with the Holy Land — although sometimes formally upheld — gradually became more rhetorical than practical. As demonstrated by the Castilian case, the crusade underwent a transformation from a papal call to arms into an internal tool of dynastic politics, chivalric ethics, and historical memory.⁶³

Hence, the crusade — although formally present in social consciousness — was permanently integrated into the local Castilian context, which helps to explain how the Reconquista appropriated its cultural and political functions.

Trophies of Victory and Sites of Memory after the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa

In the process of constructing dynastic memory, Alfonso VIII of Castile engaged in both narrative strategies (as exemplified by chronicles) and material and spatial initiatives. A central element of this process was the foundation of the Cistercian abbey of Santa María la Real de las Huelgas in Burgos, established in 1187 on the initiative of Eleanor of England. This represented the most important attempt to create a royal pantheon and a space of remembrance for the Castilian dynasty, directly inspired by Fontevraud Abbey in Anjou — the necropolis of the Plantagenets, created by Eleanor of Aquitaine. Las Huelgas was therefore not merely the queen’s personal foundation but also a vehicle for transferring the *memoria regis* tradition from the Anglo-French context into Castile.⁶⁴

61 See: *Chronica Regum Castellae*. 1997; Rodríguez A. 2017, 212.

62 See: Rucquoi A. 1992, 305–323. See: Rodríguez A. 2017, 204–205.

63 See: Rodríguez A. 2017, 206–207.

64 Ruiz T.F. 2019, 6–7.

This foundation was intended to replace the previous centre of royal sacred memory (Basilica of San Isidoro in León) associated with the Leonese dynasty. The relocation of the burial place (where Alfonso VIII, his wife, and their children were interred) to Burgos symbolised a shift of power from León to Castile. Burgos thus assumed the role of both political and sacred capital of the united kingdom. The architecture of Las Huelgas, designed in the French Gothic style, served to emphasise the Castilian dynasty's connections to the West and to the universal Latin Church. The abbey functioned as a necropolis, a centre of royal cult, a space dedicated to prayer and penance, a venue for grand ceremonies, and a locus of dynastic prestige, thus merging political, religious, and commemorative functions.⁶⁵

The Christian victory at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was inscribed in collective memory not only through chronicles, chancery documents, and sacred foundations but also through war trophies seized during the campaign. These artefacts were imbued with a profound symbolic significance: insignia of the enemy ruler, elements of the caliph's encampment, banners, spears that became material relics of holy war. Their placement in locations of particular religious and political significance (e.g., at Las Huelgas or St. Peter's Basilica in Rome) legitimised the crusading ideal and reinforced the authority of monarchs.

The account of the trophies being sent to Rome was recorded by the Cistercian chronicler Alberic of Trois-Fontaines, who relied on information circulating within the network of monasteries and royal courts across Europe. According to his *Chronica Alberici Monachi Trium Fontium*, Alfonso VIII of Castile (described as *rex parvus*, the father of Blanche of Castile) and Peter II of Aragon (referred to as *miles probatissimus*) sent to Pope Innocent III, as a sign of victory, the spear and banner of al-Nasir (whom the chronicler calls Mammelinus).⁶⁶ These trophies were to be displayed prominently in St. Peter's Basilica, as enduring testimony to the "grace and mercy of Christ," through which the Christians, despite the enemy's numerical superiority, had achieved victory. Their presence in the most sacred space of the Latin Church gave the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa a universal and supraregional dimension, embedding it within a broader narrative of Christendom's triumph over Islam.

Among the objects transferred to the Santa María la Real de las Huelgas monastery was the textile that had covered the entrance to the tent of Muhammad al-Nasir. Captured during the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa and subsequently deposited in the royal necropolis, it became part of the royal treasury as both a valuable war trophy

⁶⁵ Alonso Abad M.P. 2005.

⁶⁶ See: Alberic of Trois-Fontaines 1698, 461: "King Alfonso, called the Little King, father of Queen Blanche, and the King of Aragon, a knight of the highest merit, who, as a sign of victory, sent to Rome the spear and the banner of Mammelinus — which [trophies] are still located in the Church of St. Peter, placed in the most prominent position — as an eternal memorial of the grace and mercy of Christ, through which He rendered His own — though few in comparison to the enemy — victorious in the aforementioned battle."

and a sacred artefact. In its new context, it acquired a liturgical function, being used in monastic ceremonies and preserved as a relic of Christendom's victory over Islam. The transformation of this Islamic textile into a Christian cult object reflects a broader process of reinterpreting spoils of war as signs of divine intervention and the triumph of the Castilian monarchy. Its long-standing presence in the hallowed precincts of Las Huelgas constituted an integral element of dynastic memory, serving to both commemorate the pivotal victory of 1212 and legitimise the authority of subsequent rulers.⁶⁷

A particularly powerful element of the memory of the battle was the motif of the chains that, according to Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, had surrounded the tent of Muhammad al-Nasir, symbolically marking the perimeter of the caliph's camp. During the assault by the right wing of the Christian army, these chains were famously broken by Sancho VII of Navarre, an episode that in late medieval accounts became one of the defining moments of the battle — a symbolic act of Christian triumph. Fragments of these chains are preserved to this day in Colegiata de Roncesvalles, and their image was transformed into the heraldic emblem of the Kingdom of Navarre: a golden chain on a red field with a green central emerald. This motif functioned not only as a memento of military victory but also as an element of dynastic and regional identity, still present today in the coat of arms of the Navarre autonomous community.⁶⁸

One of the less studied but equally significant aspects of the memory of Las Navas de Tolosa is its iconography, i.e. images and visual representations that transformed the battle into a sacred, political, and national symbol. This process began in the early modern period, when sacred and royal spaces were embellished with iconographic programs that glorified the victory of Christian monarchs.



Fig. 1
The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, fresco, Monasterio de las Huelgas, Burgos. (Public domain)

67 See: Feliciano M.J. 1996, 32–66; Gómez Moreno M. 1927, 3–38; Cabrera Lafuente A. 2003; Martín T. 2013, 1–28.

68 See: Jiménez de Rada R. 1989, 250–252; Martín Duque Á.J. 1966, 5–36; Fortún Pérez de Ciriza L.J. 2012.

In 1594, a monumental painting by Jerónimo Ruiz de Camargo and Pedro Ruiz de Camargo was placed above the entrance to the main nave of Santa María la Real de las Huelgas (Fig. 1).

The work portrays the triumph of Alfonso VIII of Castile, visually sacralising the Christian victory as an event of both religious and dynastic significance. Its presence in the monastic space — the royal necropolis — attests to the lasting place of the battle in the sacred topography of Castilian monarchy.

In the 19th century, the theme of the battle was reinterpreted in a Romantic and national spirit. A painting created in 1864 by Francisco de Paula Van Halen, now held at the Museo del Prado, portrays three Christian monarchs — Alfonso VIII of Castile, Sancho VII of Navarre, and Peter II of Aragon — as triumphant defenders of Christendom (Fig. 2). At their feet lie the bodies of fallen enemies, the Muslim camp, and captured war trophies, forming a visual narrative of the complete triumph of Christianity over Islam. In this Romantic reading, the battle is portrayed as a foundational moment of national pride and heroism.⁶⁹



Fig. 2 Francisco de Paula Van Halen, *The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa*, 1864. Museo del Prado. Public domain (Wikimedia Commons)

⁶⁹ See: Bango Torviso I.G. 1987.



Fig. 3 Relief depicting the three Christian monarchs: Alfonso VIII of Castile, Sancho VII of Navarre, Peter II of Aragon. Facade of Hotel Tres Reyes, Pamplona (Photo: Jialxv, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The battle is also present in the urban symbolic landscape. A notable example is the relief on the façade of Hotel Tres Reyes in Pamplona, which depicts the three Christian monarchs: Alfonso VIII of Castile, Sancho VII of Navarre, and Peter II of Aragon (Fig. 3).

This sculpture represents local and regional pride in Navarre's participation in the victory at Las Navas, as well as an exemplary illustration of the manner in which historical memory can be embedded in a city's architectural and visual cultural heritage.

These examples of iconography provide evidence that the memory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was preserved not only in written source but also through art, heraldry, museums, and urban space. The event proved to be multifaceted in its nature, embodying a combination of triumph, sacrality, propaganda, and identity. Its legacy has endured as a material and visual collective memory that continues to shape local identity and perceptions of the past.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The memory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa was, from the outset, a dynamic phenomenon, subject to continuous transformation and reinterpretation, dependent on political, religious, and social contexts. In papal correspondence and Cistercian exegesis, the victory of 1212 was regarded as a triumph of all Christendom, embedded within the universalist idea of crusade and subordinated to the central authority of Rome. In Iberian historiography — most notably in the works of Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada and in *Chronica Regum Castellae* — the same event assumed a markedly different dimension: it was assimilated into a monarchical and Reconquista-oriented narrative, wherein the emphasis shifted from the universal mission of the Church to the role of Castile as a chosen nation, predestined to wage war against Islam and reclaim lost territories. Consequently, the crusade's universal message became subordinated

⁷⁰ Uranga J.J. (ed.), 1993.

to the objectives of legitimising power, consolidating political identity, and strengthening the monarchy's position.

This process extended beyond the realm of narrative. The memory of Las Navas was also preserved through material and visual means, including sacred foundations such as the monastery of Las Huelgas and the necropolis of the Castilian dynasty; war trophies, including banners, weapons, and the caliph's insignia, were sent to Rome and displayed in places of special religious significance; the motif of the chains from al-Nasir's tent, which was transformed into the heraldic symbol of Navarre; and, finally, works of art and elements of urban architecture, which perpetuated the image of the triumph of Christianity from the Middle Ages through to the 19th century. In this way, the battle was translated into a language of symbols, images, and rituals that fulfilled both commemorative and propagandistic functions.

Throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, the idea of crusade underwent a gradual reinterpretation in Castile. What had originated as a papal call to fight in the name of faith was transformed into an element of local Reconquista tradition, which was then absorbed by dynastic politics and the chivalric ethos. In the literary tradition, as seen in the works of Don Juan Manuel, the crusading motif is characterised by progressive detachment from actual military engagement, becoming instead a pretext for stories of loyalty, virtue, and personal penance. This can be interpreted as a clear indication of the transition from historical experience to post-memory, signifying an idealised heritage severed from its direct associations with real campaigns.

An examination of this process reveals that the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa functioned within the culture of memory not only as a historical fact but also as an ideological construct, repeatedly transformed and adapted to new contexts. Over time, this event ceased to be regarded merely as a turning point in the military history of the Reconquista and became a symbol of universal significance, a tool for communal mobilisation, legitimisation of power, territorial integration, and identity building. The event gave rise to a symbol, from which a ritual derived, and from the ritual, a lasting marker of political and religious identification.

The memory of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa thus evinces mechanisms that are characteristic of medieval societies: the transformation of history into a tool of ideology, the fusion of the sacred with politics, and the linkage of military heritage with a vision of divine election. Rather than merely preserving the past, this memory is selective, specifically oriented, and actively shaped. It is more accurate to say that it assigns new meanings to the past in the service of the present. It was precisely this capacity for continuous reinterpretation that ensured the enduring presence of Las Navas de Tolosa in the imaginary of the Christian West for centuries. Irrespective of its factual accuracy, the image of the battle became one of the cornerstones of Castilian and Spanish historical identity.

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