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## ***The 1412 Caspe Arbitration: Justice, Plebiscite, or Manifest Destiny?***

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# THE 1412 CASPE ARBITRATION: JUSTICE, PLEBISCITE, OR MANIFEST DESTINY?

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## I. THE HISTORICAL FACTS

In 1387, King Pere III died in Barcelona, having reigned fifty-one years over Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands. His first wife, Leonore of Sicily, had given him two sons, the future kings Joan I and Martí I, and a daughter, Leonore. The daughter married Juan I of Castile, to whom she bore Enrique and Fernando. Pere's marriage with Sybil of Fortià brought forth Isabel, married later to Jaume, Count of Urgell, grandson of a brother of Pere III.

Pere was succeeded by his son Joan, twice married to noble ladies from France. Ten of his children died in infancy. Only Louis II of Anjou grew to adulthood, and became the father of Louis III, Duke of Calabria. Joan wore the nickname "the Hunter," of tragic foreboding: he died in a hunting accident in 1395.

His brother, Martí I, inherited the crown. Martí's son, also named Martí, was given in marriage to Maria of Sicily, and then became king of that island. In March 1409 the crown-prince won a decisive battle over Sardinia, but died three days later. He left behind one infant son, Frederic, borne by a concubine.

The widowed King Martí was pressured to remarry. He had his grandson Frederic accepted by the Sicilians as their new king and started proceedings to have him legitimized as heir of the Crown of Aragon. But in late March 1410, in Barcelona, Martí fell sick with the plague. At eleven o'clock of his last night, a somewhat irregular delegation from the parliament of Catalonia came to him with the question: "Is it your wish that... the succession go to the person to whom it rightfully belongs?" ("Plau-vos que la successió... pervinga a aquell que per justícia deurà pervenir?," Soldevila 35, cf. Pidal 39). The dying king agreed, uttering just one word, for whatever reason in Provençal: "Hoc."

This "Hoc" led to the people being told that the king's last wish had been that the parliaments of the four parts of the kingdom meet in a General Assembly to determine the rightful heir to the crown. However, it quickly became obvious that there was no hope that, without a king, *cortes generales* would come together. The procedure which was suggested instead was, that each of the three parliaments—the Balearic Islands, never invited, did not wish to participate—select

a small number of delegates, who would designate nine honest men, to be charged with the final decision. That "Committee of Nine" should then meet in Caspe, listening to the emissaries of the six contenders to the throne, before selecting the rightful heir to Martí's crown. Their decision from June 1412 came to be known as *Compromiso de Caspe*, not because there was any "compromise" involved, but because all participating regional parliaments had given their word —*estaban comprometidos*— to accept the arbitration of the nine supposedly unprejudiced genealogists.

The Catalan parliament moved to Tortosa, to be closer to where the politicians of the two other regions were gathered. The Valencians were divided, three different factions holding meetings in various towns. The parliamentarians of Aragon were not united either. Still, the group assembled in Alcañiz took the lead in the proposed procedure and, in February 1412, compiled a list of all nine arbitrators and sent it to Tortosa. The Catalan parliament wanted to make just one substitution, but it was rejected out of hand by the Aragonese ambassador. And so, *ad evitandum rapturam que alias non poterat evitari*, ("in order to avoid a break-up, which otherwise would have been unavoidable," cit. Soldevila 120), the Catalans agreed to the original list. The nine men settled into the castle of Caspe on March 29th. On June 28th they announced their decision. The rightful successor to King Martí was declared to be Fernando of Antequera, son of Juan I of Castile and of Martí's aunt Leonore, the brother of King Enrique of Castile.

Fernando lived only till 1416. He was succeeded by his first son, Alfonso V, who, in 1458, passed on the crown to his brother Juan II. Juan's son from his second marriage, called Fernando like his grandfather, became king in 1479. He married Isabel, the daughter of his father's cousin, who became Queen of Castile in 1474. It was only with this couple, the "Reyes Católicos," that the crowns of Castile and of Aragon were federated.

## 2. THE INTERPRETATION OF THESE FACTS BY RAMÓN MENÉNDEZ PIDAL

My summary of the historical events surrounding the Caspe Arbitration took only two pages. Of course, the same story can be told in lengthy monographs, by adding details, explanations and interpretations. Which historical materials, among the great many they can choose from, historians select and which ones they omit depends on their personal preferences.

That is why two historians, even though they agree on the

authenticity of the documents available, can present the same facts in two quite different lights.

The two historians with book-length studies of the Caspe Arbitration I am alluding to are Ramon Menéndez Pidal and Ferran Soldevila. Pidal wrote his essay *El compromiso de Caspe, Autodeterminación de un pueblo* as Introduction to volume XV of the *Historia de España*, published under his editorship; Soldevila answered Pidal with a book issued the following year, entitled *El compromiso de Casp. (Resposta al Sr. Menéndez Pidal)*. Soldevila, fifty years earlier, had been a student of Don Ramón. His admiration for the ninety-four year-old grand master can be seen in the restraint he uses in his "counter-attack."

Let us start with an example of what kind of details Pidal resurrects from old documents. The decision announced by the Nine in Caspe, the "happy news" ("feliz noticia," Menéndez Pidal 128), was carried by a rider to the Catalan parliamentarians waiting 95 kilometers away in Tortosa in just seven hours; that is, with an average speed of over 13 km per hour. Why should Pidal bother to calculate the average speed of the messenger? Does he want to justify his describing the rider as "bursting with enthusiasm" ("rebotando entusiasmo," *ibid.*), or is he insinuating that this was a miracle? Indeed, the official letters sent to all major towns, extoll "the miraculous harmony" ("la miraculosa concordia") with which the nine experts had reached their conclusion. It is quite possible that in 1412 many people believed their preachers who told them that God had spoken through the nine honest men in Caspe. While Pidal's catholicism was not strong enough to make him believe in direct divine intervention in human politics (see Pérez 1991), his belief that Fernando's access to the crown of Aragon was just one more step in the unstoppable rebuilding of the Visigothic kingdom has many aspects of a religious conviction.

According to Pidal's account, the news from Caspe was also received with general rejoicing in Valencia. However, he then relates how, half a year later, saint Vicent Ferrer, the most famous man on the Committee of Nine and its spokesperson, arrived in Valencia with forty other friars and gave sermons "defending the miraculous agreement reached in Caspe and in praise of the king elect" ("en favor del milagroso acuerdo de Caspe y en elogio del Rey elegido," Pidal 131). Ferrer was obviously aware that many Valencians would have "voted" –to use an anachronism Pidal invites by calling the Arbitration an "autodeterminación de un pueblo"– for their own Duke of Gandia, Alfons, great-grandson of King Martí's great-grandfather, or else for Jaume of Urgell, or else for young Frederic of Sicily. Saint Vicent ridicules the followers of that unlucky boy for chanting "like birds: Frederic, Frederic!" ("les aus ho dien: Frederic,

Frederic!," *ibid.*). He defends the election of Fernando of Castile, son of Martí's sister, by pointing out that King Salomon had been crowned by his mother, and that Jesus Christ had inherited the kingdom of David from his mother Mary.

I have no doubts that Saint Vicent had used the Bible in this way already in discussions among the Nine in Caspe. But I can not believe what Pidal implies in several passages (for instance p. 122): that Ferrer advocated abolishing the regional tradition of dynastic succession by male lineage only out of a concern for Christian justice, because he was an early defender of women's rights. Ferrer went to great lengths to show that Fernando was not really a foreigner in King Martí's domains. "He is actually half Aragonese, half Valentian," he declared; "his father, Juan I, was conceived when his parents were travelling in the Kingdom of Valencia..., where he then grew up" ("es aragonés y valenciano... Su padre, Don Juan de Castilla, fue concebido en el Reino de Valencia... y criado en este Reino," Menéndez Pidal 131). And as Ferrer had already done in a speech in Caspe, he defends also in a sermon in Valencia Ferrando's election by alluding to his qualities of character. "He keeps no concubines," he affirmed, obviously alluding to Frederic's illegitimate birth, "and when he got married he was still a virgin" ("no tiene amigas; fue virgen al matrimonio," *ibid.*

Since Pidal finds space to enliven his essay with details like these, his omitting much more important facts becomes a serious matter. He very much avoids giving his full due to the true kingmaker: Pedro de Luna, the Aragonese anti-pope Benedict XIII. When in 1409 the French withdrew their allegiance from Pedro, the Castilian and Aragonese kings were the only supporters he had left. Young Frederic of Sicily, once legitimized, was of interest to the Pope because he could have educated the lad according to his own designs. But after Martí's death Pedro had to reevaluate what his situation would be under each of the pretenders to the Crown. In June 1411, while Pope Luna was under siege in Avignon, Fernando sent an ambassador to him with an offer to dispatch soldiers to his rescue, in exchange for three promises: that a specific person become archbishop of Saragossa, that Pedro support him as successor to King Martí, and that he prevent a certain bishop from participating in meetings concerning the succession (letter and commentary in Perarnau 1986a). But the anti-pope had to flee Avignon and take refuge in the fortress of Penýíscola, north of Valencia. He now had to prevent the Crown of Aragon from going to a contender with leanings towards France. Pedro de Luna, still a powerful figure in Spain, threw his full support behind Ferrando.

Fernando—who had not shown much optimism as long as he thought that a General Assembly of all regional parliaments would elect Martí's successor—now sensed his chance. He put Berenguer de



Bardají, the most influential lawyer in the Aragonese parliament, on his payroll. With the Pope Luna's help it became possible to engage the charismatic Vicent Ferrer, who at the time was preaching in Castile, including, twice, at Fernando's court. Friar Vicent, more preoccupied by the imminent coming of the Antichrist than by politics, was acceptable to all as arbitrator. The honour to go first in declaring his vote went to him, upstaging an archbishop and the bishop of Huesca. After Vicent had spoken in favor of Fernando, five of the other eight electors—one being Vicent's brother, prior of a convent near Valencia, from where came also a second elector—limited themselves to saying: "Me too" (Pidal 119). The sixth, the Archbishop of Tarragona, stated that he considered Fernando the most "useful" (*útil*) of the candidates, but that from a strictly legal point of view he would have to vote either for Jaume of Urgell or for Alfons of Gandia, both related to the defunct king by strictly male lineage. The seventh genealogist, a lawyer from the Catalan parliament, was in favor of Jaume of Urgell, but added that his gout and other pains had prevented him from giving the matter sufficient thought. The last elector, finally replacing a member from Valencia too senile to attend meetings, abstained from voting (for details see Soldevila 141, Menéndez Pidal 119).

If a woman can transmit the right to inherit a crown—as had happened often in the history of Castile, but not in that of the Crown of Aragon—Fernando was indeed the closest relative of Martí of legitimate birth. Saint Ferrer offered the electors a biblical justification for disregarding the regional tradition of dynastic succession by male lineage only. However, their decision can not be called an "autodeterminación de un pueblo." The people did not vote, the regional parliaments did not vote, and the nine arbitrators were expected to decide the question according to their best legal knowledge. Even if their decision *did* coincide with the *vox populi*, it can not be called a plebiscite. The genealogists' decision could have been very much at odds with the personal preferences of politicians and of the people. To claim, as Pidal does in the dithyrambic last words of his essay, that that "autodeterminación" was realized "por un pueblo en evolución, que se desfeudaliza..., un pueblo que se muestra consciente de sus derechos y de sus deberes, penetrado de su unitario destino hispánico" (164), is, in my opinion, not only bad rhetoric, but also false. There is no historical basis to suggest that King Martí's subjects "had evolved to the point of wanting to free themselves from feudalism, conscious of their rights and duties, feeling deep down that their destiny lay in an united Spain."

In all three scenarios—plebiscite, election by representative parliamentarians, and arbitration by a committee—the cards were stacked in favor of Fernando. Not only was he Martí's closest relative

if female lineage was allowed, not only did he appear—in the words of saint Vicent—“born to be king” (“era de tanta dignidad en su rostro y aspecto que parecía nacido para reinar,” Pidal 130), he also had the Aragonese pope on his side. And, finally, he had his soldiers stationed in Aragon and Valencia. Pidal does not hide this fact, but he finds nothing wrong with it. Jaume of Urgell also had troops patrolling those two regions, but Pidal calls the Castilians “police for justice” (“policías de la justicia”) and states that “el conde de Urgel invade y Fernando defiende” (61; cf. Soldevila 114), which I am tempted to translate as “The soldiers of one candidate attempted to disturb the free elections; but the other candidate volunteered his men so that the people could vote in peace.” Fernando had kept his soldiers outside the borders of Aragon until the Archbishop of Saragossa was ambushed and murdered by a lawless clique of adherents of Jaume of Urgell. Only then did Fernando, “with good and saintly intentions” (“buena y santa intención,” Menéndez Pidal 75), send fifteen hundred Castilian soldiers into Aragon, “to help their parents and friends who were avenging the murder of the Archbishop... They limited themselves to stopping those who tried to block the democratic process” (“las gentes castellanas que entraron en Aragón son parientes o amigos de los que persiguen a los matadores del Arzobispo... No hacen sino contener a los que quieren estorbar la acción de los Parlamentos,” Menéndez Pidal 85). So much naiveté in a historical essay is disarming. Worse, in my opinion, is the internal contradiction in Pidal’s thinking. He considers Fernando justified in letting his subjects uphold the archaic tradition of family vendettas, while considering the Caspe Arbitration proof that the people in King Martí’s domains had evolved away from medieval feudalism and anti-feminism. (According to J. Vicens Vives (1956), the Eastern Peninsula was indeed ahead of Castile in its social and economic evolution, making a political union with the center advantageous.)

Pidal is on somewhat more solid ground when he claims that the unification of the Peninsular kingdoms was an enduring dream of the kings of Castile, who believed that there had been once a strong and united Hispania under the Visigoths in the seventh century. However, he goes too far in stating that “the Trastámara dynasty of Castile was especially interested in rekindling and consolidating the idea of the unity of Spain” (“Los Trastámaras de Castilla tuvieron como particular preocupación el avivar y reafirmar la idea de la unidad hispana,” 157). José-Luis Martín, in an article from 1975, exposes the weakness of Pidal’s arguments. For instance, he shows that it is not true that every one of the nine royal marriages concluded in the years between Enrique II and Enrique IV was planned in order to tie the other four Peninsular kingdoms to Castile. In my opinion, the rather sudden

push by Fernando to gain Martí's crown could have been a consequence of Castile having lost the battle of Aljubarrota in 1385, which led to the peace treaty from 1411, which reaffirmed Portugal's independence. The expansion in the East compensated Castile for this loss in the West.

While it is doubtful that Fernando was guided in his actions by the Visigothic myth, it is unbelievable that the people of King Martí's domains were even aware of it. But it would be equally anachronistic to suggest that they shared a strong sense of forming a distinct Catalan-speaking society. Pidal's obsession ("idea fija," Martín 360) with his dogma of the "Spanish-ness" both of the Romans living in Hispania—for instance the philosopher Seneca!—and of the Visigoths, grew out of a psychological need to believe in twenty centuries of glorious past for the Spanish nation and in Castile's mission to rebuild that one great whole (see p. 75).

Pidal's messianic wishful thinking reminds me of the doctrine of "manifest destiny," the belief that it was preordained that America should become one great nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The geographic compactness of the Iberian Peninsula must have caused many a person to think that it, too, should form a political unit. Seeing in the ephemeral Visigothic kingdom the first incarnation of an eternal Hispanic national spirit is just as absurd as trying to prove that the "reyes católicos" descended from those ancient kings. A whole book could be compiled with historical statements about Castile's "right" to whatever territory was believed to have belonged to the Visigoths, but one example must suffice. In 1478 Rodríguez de Almela wrote: "Portugal belongs by right to our King and Queen... May we see them one day monarchs of the whole of Hispania... just as once were the illustrious Gothic kings, their ancestors!" ("El dicho regno de Portugal pertenece de derecho a los dichos... rey e reina, nuestros señores... E los veamos reyes e señores monarcas de toda España... como lo fueron los nobles reyes godos de España pasados, sus progenitores," see Mackenzie 26). In 1580, when Portugal entered, for sixty years, their "Babylonian captivity" under Spanish rulers, many an exulting Castilian speaker belabored the theme that the historical, logical, just, ineluctable, self-evident, etc., political unity of the whole Peninsula had finally been reestablished.

Pidal is aware that he can not use the myth of Spanish unity under the Visigoths as justification for Castile's expansionist ambitions in the *Eastern* Peninsula without explaining why Portugal should have remained independent. In one of the most disappointing passages of his essay he writes: "Portugal rejected Castile... and lived in constant fear of being reabsorbed by Castile, while the County of Barcelona united fraternally with the Kingdom of Aragon—that is, the center of



the Peninsula (*sic!*)— and lived in permanent brotherly bilingualism with Aragon, as part of the great Toledan Monarchy, which was about to be rebuilt. This is why in the libraries of Pere III and Martí I we can find some books about the Goths, and many more about the history of Castile” (“Portugal... repeliendo a Castilla... temiendo siempre ser reabsorbido por Castilla; mientras el Condado de Barcelona se asoció fraternamente al Reino de Aragón, esto es, al centro peninsular, y vivió siempre en hermandad bilingüe con él, como parte de la gran Monarquía toledana en trámite de reconstrucción: de ahí el recuerdo de los Godos y la preponderancia de Castilla en la colección historiográfica de Pedro IV y Martín I,” 152). In other words, Pidal concludes from the fact that Pere and Martí owned a few books about the history of Spain that they —and their subjects!— shared Castile’s dream of reestablishing an united Peninsula on the Visigothic model.

I agree with Pidal that many nineteenth-century Catalan historians distorted the facts surrounding the Caspe Arbitration in their romantic fantasizing about how Catalonia’s history would have been different had Jaume of Urgell inherited Martí’s crown (see bibliography in Dualde 263–279). But their excesses were not repeated by historians of Pidal’s time. The fact that most of Pidal’s Catalan colleagues did not hide their feeling that the regional tradition of dynastic succession by male lineage only should have been maintained, does not discredit them as objective historians.

Pidal, on the other hand, believes that the end, the reestablishment of that presumed glorious “Spanish” nation under the Visigoths, justified all the means of dubious legality employed by Fernando. His blind belief that this myth was the driving force behind Castilian politics in the Middle Ages led Pidal not only to confuse cause and effect, but to commit a historian’s worst sin: exercising prejudice in the selection and interpretation of documents. It is to be regretted that his Introduction to volume XV of the *Historia de España* was ever printed. This is also the conclusion of José-Luis Martín in his article “El método histórico de Menéndez Pidal y el Compromiso de Caspe.” He states: “I sincerely believe that, had Menéndez Pidal lived a few more years, that essay would have turned out to be totally useless and unnecessary” (“Creo sinceramente que de haber vivido Don Ramón Menéndez Pidal unos años más este artículo habría resultado absolutamente inútil e innecesario,” 366). But I do not share the view that an even older Pidal would have seen the weakness of his essay on the Caspe Arbitration. Pidal liked writing those popularizing Introductions to the big volumes of the *Historia de España*, having published his first one as early as 1935. The one he added to volume 3, where he wrote about *La España visigoda*, was strongly criticized by his friend Américo Castro, who told Pidal in two letters in 1944 and

1945: "Once again: I regret to see that you waste your time with your Introductions... / Do not think that your historical introductions convince anyone. Write on (linguistic topics) and forget prehistory!" ("Vuelvo a lamentar lo de sus prólogos perdedores de tiempo... / No piense que con prólogos de historia va a convencer a nadie... Dénos (follow examples of linguistic topics)... y olvídense de la prehistoria!", quoted in Pérez 363).

But in 1996 Pidal's essay on the "autodeterminación de un pueblo" was reprinted, without the slightest preliminary *caveat lector*. Pidal himself had considered the topic "materia muy batallona" (see letter in Pérez 495). By this he meant not so much that the topic was controversial, but that he was spoiling for a fight. In my opinion, the "people" Pidal refers to—that is the citizens of Aragon, Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands—were right in rejecting his tendentious interpretation of their history, and they would be justified today to consider the reprint of the essay from 1964 a gratuitous provocation. However, the reprint is probably just yet another example of official and bureaucratic carelessness concerning the feelings of citizens of regions with a self-perception distinct from the one of the majority. It is comparable to the insensitivity of the government which kept coins honoring Franco in circulation for twenty-two years after the dictator's death; until 1997—when they were replaced with coins showing Felipe V, the king who abolished the traditional laws and rights of Catalonia and Valencia.

### 3. TWO VISITS TO CASPE IN 1993

I would like to add a postscript. On October 21, 1993, I was in Barcelona when the King and Queen of Spain made a visit to Caspe. No journalist explained how that event was justified. I could not avoid a suspicion that there were some dark forces at work, maybe a plot to provide the King with a platform from which to reaffirm Spanish unity. The newspapers I consulted gave only brief descriptions of the visit, but mentioned that the presidents of the Catalan and Valencian autonomous regions, cordially invited, did not attend.

I wanted to find out more about all this. Why should the royal couple visit Caspe on a cold October day in a year which was not even a centenary of 1412? A couple of weeks later I took a slow train to Saragossa and got off at that sleepy town in the Ebro valley. At the small public library I was handed a folder with newspaper clippings about the memorable event. The regional newspaper, La Comarca, had all the information I needed.

On May 20th 1990, the city fathers of Caspe had decided to invite

the royal couple. The letter of invitation gives three reasons why the King should consider visiting them. 1. He should remember that it was in Caspe that the great transformation of the country began from which all people under Juan Carlos' crown now profit, "while the good burghers from Caspe have never received any thanks for it" ("sin que nuestro pueblo haya recibido ningún gesto de reconocimiento"). 2. Caspe was always a faithful supporter of the Bourbon dynasty. 3. Caspe, fallen on hard times, could profit from the prestige of a royal visit, which would help attract industries and tourism, while raising the morale of the "caspolinos."

So much for my suspicion that behind the visit of the King of Spain to Caspe there were dark forces at work. The trip was just a demonstration that the King cares about his loyal subjects. The speeches were pretty much of the recyclable variety, and what was said about the 1412 Arbitration can be read in any Spanish schoolbook. What turned out to be the King's most memorable phrase was: "Spain is strong when her towns, cities and autonomous regions are strong" ("España se hace fuerte cuando sus pueblos, ciudades y comunidades son fuertes").

The mayor of Caspe seemed to have used the original letter of invitation quoted above as the basis for his allocution. He echoed Pidal in mentioning the "ideales utópicos de fraternidad, solidaridad y amor" which, he said, were at work in 1412, but then he got carried away when he called the Arbitration "the first unifying and federal Constitution, in which Aragon showed her own personality" ("el primer Estatuto, con carácter integrador y federal, con el que se propuso a Aragón como pueblo con personalidad propia").

The President of the Aragonese Autonomous Region took advantage of the occasion to announce that Aragon will forever defend the unity and prosperity of Spain, while always standing up for her own rights. He ended his speech repeating that "the sons of Aragon will be the first to defend solidarity, but they insist on receiving all the rights and privileges of home-rule granted by the Spanish Constitution." I have gone to some lengths summarizing the speeches made in Caspe in October 1993, to show how times have changed. What animated the nine arbitrators in 1412 were, in my opinion, considerations which were pragmatic at best – Fernando as the most "useful" king –, selfserving or mercenary at worst. None of the Nine was guided by a vision of a resuscitated Visigothic kingdom, no one was hoping that the election of Fernando would lead quickly to the integration of the crowns of Aragon and Castile. Pidal, who as a boy had seen the first restoration of the monarchy, would have enjoyed watching a King being welcomed in Caspe. But, having opposed the concept of autonomous regions during the second Republic in 1931 (see

Pérez 322), he would have hated the speeches. His need to believe in a strong and united Spain seems to me to be related to certain psychological processes. Reconstructing a glorious past for the Spanish nation, or idealizing the possibilities of an united Spain, is a comprehensible compensatory reaction during depressing times. Pidal, born in 1869, lived through the national spiritual crisis after the loss of Cuba, Spain's last possession in America. The myth of a better past, as a model for a better future, could also be an element in a self-healing process after the Spanish Civil War.

The belief in the myth of Castile and in the "absolute righteousness of her mission" (Díaz-Plaja, quoted by Hess 75; cf. Pérez 106) stimulated Pidal throughout his long and fruitful life and explains many aspects of his work. Recently, Catherine Brown has shown convincingly that behind Pidal's reconstruction, to the point of (re)invention, of Spain's "lost" medieval epic there lied a desire to create unity out of fragments, the need to prove that Spain was never inferior to France in literature. But if rearranging literary data is a harmless academic exercise, manipulating historical facts can become dangerous demagoguery.

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