CONCLUSION

THE MEANING OF CONQUEST

The idea of conquest and reconquest that encodes and abbreviates the historical trajectory of medieval Spain has been shown in this study to encapsulate a number of different perspectives that challenge the application of this historical diptych to the literary context of medieval Castile without a large degree of caution. It is a lesson in separating theory from practice, and avoiding the temptation to look for uniformity, that is well exemplified in Peter Linehan’s description of the situation at the Islamic frontier more broadly: “In theory, the very idea of frontier convivencia is inconceivable. Crusade and co-existence comprise a confessional oxymoron if ever there was one. But in fact, people aren’t like that” (2003, 53). Here he follows Norman Housley’s scepticism about historians’ approaches to the medieval frontier: “Perhaps, seeing the high premium which was placed on uniformity in the Middle Ages, they have assumed that it corresponded to reality. But in practice the inconsistencies of human behaviour and belief were probably as deep as in any age” (1996, 115).

The thirteenth-century chronicles, the Estoria de España and the Crónica de veinte reyes, are profoundly interested in the history of the Islamic peoples and polities that inhabit the Iberian Peninsula after the conquest and represent this as a complex sequence of human events with much didactic value and common interest for a Christian audience. The Estoria upholds and structurally embeds the idea of an Islamic señorío in its narrative, investing it with meaningful associations for a Christian audience within a broader context in which the matter of Spain, el fecho dEspaña, is a history of waves of occupation and annihilation. Although a work from the “centre” insofar as it was written by a king and would-be Holy Roman Emperor, the work illustrates that the dynamics of center and periphery, inside and outside, are porous, and that “defining inside/outside divisions in social activity may be of less significance than recognizing different
scales and hierarchies of relations operating at different levels of geopolitical resolution” (Rowlands 2009, 4). The Crónica, with its narrower focus on Castile yet more expansive narrative style, represents the conquest within a historiographical framework where epic legends, written accounts, and eye-witness encounters are all grist to the mill. In this setting, where the “truth” of history is not necessarily an empirical one, the Islamic conquest is not accounted for as the uniform or “factual” course of events but as a means of provoking the imagination into seeing history as saying more than the sum of its words, of possessing of a secondary, foundational meaning that is “not so much ‘constructed’ as ‘found’ in the universal human experience of a ‘recollection’ that promises a future because it finds a ’sense’ in every relationship between a past and a present” (White 1997, 53). The Crónica sarracina, although not strictly historiography, connects with the earlier chronicles in its questioning of truth in the context of historical narrative. Its later, self-consciously fictive, stance makes it even harder to interpret the conquest as historical “fact” or “event”; instead, we are encouraged to regard it as the setting for a world turned inward on itself, where there is no stable position from which to distinguish the self from the other but rather a contingent, relational, introverted set of circumstances where even caballería is in crisis. The poems of the mester de clerecía, meanwhile, although produced during the so-called Great Reconquest of Fernando III, and in monasteries, draw attention to the elusive and at times contradictory notion of the frontier in a way that confines any ostensibly triumphalist content to the realm of mere rhetoric. In these poems, conquest is synonymous with crossing, mediation, and intercession between open and closed spaces, inviting us to consider that there are two basic functions of space: space as a limit, which exerts pressure on forms within it, and space as an environment, as a receptive realm into which form can expand (Grinnell 1946, 147). The presence of both of these forms of space in the poems suggests that their conception of reconquest is not so much uninhibited outward movement into space, but a pattern of expansion and contraction, advancing and retreating into oneself, which is symptomatic of their overriding concern with olvido and the borderline between memory and oblivion.

The set of events that constitutes the Islamic conquest is distinctively plotted and analyzed in each text but there is an order of meaning to be taken from them when viewed collectively. All of the narratives encourage us to move away from the historical particularities of the Islamic invasion and toward the idea that the conquest, in its barest essence, is a lesson in how all things are subject to change. In this sense, they are more about life than history. Thus, señoríos are innately time bound, cities change hands, frontiers blur, power is precarious, bonds are broken,