

War and Horror in Modern Spanish Theatre: The Sieges of Numantia and Saguntum as *Lieux de Mémoire*

Today, I will explore two episodes of Roman history in the Iberian Peninsula and their modern reconfiguration as symbols of national sacrifice. In particular, I will talk about how the sieges of Saguntum and Numantia became major landmarks in Spanish literary and theatrical expression. First, let's have a quick look at the historical episodes that created these new insights into the Spanish national narrative.

[Slide] The siege of Saguntum took place in 218 BCE in the modern Spanish city of Sagunto near Valencia, and it was a battle between local Saguntines and Carthaginians, during Hannibal's military conquer of Iberia. The siege and capture of Saguntum by the Carthaginian forces eventually escalated into the Second Punic War between the Romans and Carthage due to the Roman interest in the area. In particular, after the massacre of the local population, the city of Saguntum was left in ruins, but Hannibal had conquered a significant spot in the Iberian Peninsula.

A similar episode took place during the siege of Numantia, about 80 years later, when the Celtiberian fortified settlement of Numantia, located near the modern Spanish city of Soria, had to defend its territory against the Roman Empire (134-133 BCE). The siege lasted many months and concluded with the subjugation of the few surviving locals to the will of the Roman Empire.

In later times, the sieges of Saguntum and Numantia were incorporated into Spanish national history and became landmarks of collective sacrifice. They held a symbolic place in the national narrative as heroic battles against invaders that sought to illegitimately conquer national territory.

In these terms, according to modern Spanish historiography and literature, the two sieges were emblematic actions that proved the unity and collective courage of the local population. Saguntum and Numantia were the two national battles in which the Spanish proved their perseverance and unity. And, despite that, in the case of Spain, social engagement with the Graeco-Roman culture was not strong and ideological identification with classical antiquity was minimal, these myths were incorporated into the 19th century's national perception of past glory. For instance, they became significant pieces of history in the work of historiographer Modesto Lafuente and his multivolume work *Historia General de España desde los Tiempos Primitivos hasta Nuestros Días*, published between 1887 and 1890.

In addition, Saguntum and Numantia were known as the two national battles in which the Spanish population collectively suffered the horrors of war. These battles showcased the desperate struggle of a nation against external invasions and demonstrated Spanish national unity before death.

To examine how the national appropriation of these two battles was consolidated, I will focus on two literary works that theatrically recreate the two episodes, Miguel de Cervantes' *El Cerco de Numancia* (1585), written at the end of the 16th century, and José María Pemán's and Francisco Sánchez-Castañer's *La Destrucción de Sagunto*, written in 1954. These two theatrical pieces use a historical base to create a patriotic and religious story that exalts the national glory. Spanish historian and philologist, Angel Valbuena Prat, made this national identification clear in the magazine *Insula* by claiming that 'Numantia is Don Quijote of an impossible heroism, made possible by Spanish people' (Numancia es el Don Quijote de un heroísmo imposible, hecho posible por españoles' (*Insula* 15 September 1948, 8).

Cervantes' play belongs to the Spanish Golden Age drama, which remained the foundation stone of Spanish national culture in the later centuries. This is why, the concept of classical literature in 19th and 20th century Spain encompassed not only Graeco-Roman literature, but also 16th and 17th-century Spanish playwrights, such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, and of course Cervantes.

The two plays share an interesting point. It was Cervantes' Numantia that inspired Pemán to narrate the national struggle of Saguntum. In fact, in the first section of Pemán's play, the author cites Cervantes' words from Numantia: "let my clear voice extend, / And, with its sweetest, most melodious sound, / To every soul an ardent longing lend / To make this deed eternally renowned!". Also, many literary elements and the whole sequence follow Cervantes' play. We will see more of these in a minute. In a way, Pemán used Cervantes' tragedy to recreate a national story in a different context.

However, Pemán did not fail to exalt Saguntum's precedence over Numantia as the Saguntines defended the European identity that the Roman Hispania forged and imparted to the Spanish territory. And, as in Saguntum, there was a battle between barbarians (Carthaginians) and locals, for Pemán this episode constituted a legitimate and glorious defense of European values.

I analyze these two physical spaces, Saguntum and Numantia, and the military episodes that took place there as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989), a term used by Pierre Nora to describe a place or object that contains collective memory in a way that is significant for the memorial heritage of a community. In these cases, locals' resistance became a model for the late Spanish intellectuals who wished to exalt these acts as part of collective memory. In particular, the two episodes became significant for the Spanish public discourse in the late 19th century, when they became an integral part of the Spanish national imagination.

Yet how did these tragedies use horror to create a new perspective for the national narrative? The plays use a series of elements of horror to exemplify national suffering. Elements and symbolic figures or motifs traditionally related to the expression of horror and death are recurrent themes in both tragedies. These not only reproduce historical facts as literary exempla of the horror of war but also create an eerie context that merges patriotic sacrifice and collective glory with the faith for an honorable future.

These elements include sorcerers that perform magic spells and predict the future, daemons that appear through fire, acts of bringing back to life a corpse of a dead soldier, suicides, horrendous prophesies of the fall of the city, and the personification of emotions and abstract ideas that intensify the aesthetics of horror. For example, the appearance of Death, Envy, Misery, Hunger, War, and Sickness among others, in the two plays enhances horror emotion, as these ideas become real in front of the eyes of the audience and exercise a more direct influence on the plot and the protagonists.

In addition, what is common in these tragedies is the presence of fire as an element of horror, pain, and sacrifice. Fire plays a central role in creating an uncanny atmosphere that either invokes some of the metaphysical characters or prepares the audience for the great destruction that will follow. Fire, for instance, is used to bring back to life a dead body in Cervantes' tragedy. The body enraged foresees the disaster and death: "The friendly hand, with homicidal knife, / Will slay Numantia, and will give her life." In this case, sacrifice and death is the only way to achieve eternal glory for the nation. A little later, we read the words of a Numantine about the same issue: "They now have raised within the public square / A monstrous, greedy, all-consuming fire, / Whose flames, replenished by our riches rare, / Assail the very heavens in their ire. / To this, with quickened speed, pricked on by care, /

Or else, with timid feet, which sufferings tire, / Come all, as to a holy sacrifice, /
And feed its flames with all the wealth they prize.”

Fire is also used as a symbolic device that gruesomely resolves the siege at the end of the play. Locals burn their valuable property and throw themselves and their families into the flames. Under this prism, fire becomes the redemption of the local population, who prefer to sacrifice themselves and follow the will of the gods to avoid being enslaved by the Romans. In the case of Saguntum, fire is also a recurring theme that dominates the tragic end, as locals appear bearing torches that use in their last moments for the ultimate sacrifice. In these final scenes, the ritual purpose of torches is apparent. And even Diana, a young protagonist from Saguntum, chooses to heroically throw herself into the fire causing the horror of the chorus, even though she has the option to survive.

Connecting supernatural elements with the glory of a nation allowed the authors to create a story that introduces a symbolic heroic myth in the early conception of the Spanish nation. Cervantes and Pemán create a dire atmosphere in which the horrors of war will produce national heroes who are ready to sacrifice themselves and their families for the eternal glory of the nation.

Considering the prophecies about a glorious national future and the dramatic end of the two tragedies, I believe they aim to display how death, horror, and ultimate sacrifice are indispensable for creating a modern nation. And even more, they mark which elements a modern nation needs for creating its national myth. Sacrifice and horrendous death, thus, become collective memories that modern nations desperately need to reaffirm their glorious historical landmarks.

The two tragedies were repeatedly staged in the 20th century to showcase how war and death forged the Spanish identity. As they are patriotic plays that exalt

national struggle, unified resistance against external enemies, and sacrifice, they smoothly fitted with the public discourse that emerged in Spain just before and during the Second World War. In particular, when Francisco Franco's dictatorship, which was established in 1939 after a coup and a 3 year-civil war, needed a new narrative about a homogenized population that could legitimize the regime.

Under these circumstances, we can view the staging of the historical sieges that provoked starvation and death as a theatrical reflection of Franco's economic policies of national autarky and self-sufficiency that led to an acute social and humanitarian crisis at least during the 1940s in Spain. Intellectuals close to the regime, such as Pemán, were thus eager to rewrite history and appropriating the horror of collective sacrifice and incorporating it into the mythological fate of the nation and the legendary heroic resistance against external enemies.

Even more, Pemán reproduced the discourse of Franco's historiography, according to which the Spanish peninsula imposed its cultural tradition on the Roman Empire and provoked the *hispanization* of Rome. At the same time, using Cervantes' tragedy, a play from the Golden Age period of Spanish literature, Pemán created a feeling of ideological continuity from the Saguntine sacrifice to the Spanish Empire of the 16th century and Franco's authoritarian state. More specifically, the staging of the two tragedies during the dictatorship reflected a nationalized perception of culture and indicated the powerful ideological influence of Franco's regime on theatre. More importantly, Golden Age drama fitted the nation's traditional Catholic morals and projected the image of a unified new Spanish Empire.

Let's see a clip from the state-controlled series of newsreels NO-DO (Noticiario y Documentales) from the Radio and Television Corporation of Spain, which significantly contributed to the state propaganda by projecting audiovisual

reports since the early 1940s. In this case, it is newsreel footage of a production of *La Destrucción de Sagunto*, performed at the Roman theatre of the same city in 1954. We can observe the use of fire and the director's aim to create a dire atmosphere, where lights, music, and eerie movement offered the serious and epic elements that such an episode would require.

Moving to another recurring theme, while Cervantes' patriotic aims become apparent in the personification of *España* who predicts a glorious future for the Spanish nation, Pemán's tragedy offers a new perspective of classical antiquity that reflects the sociopolitical reality of Franco's Spain. And while it is the personification of Glory that in Cervantes' tragedy appears to exalt the collective sacrifice of the Numantines, saying: "What fear and envy, O beloved Spain, / Shall bear to thee the nations strange and brave; / Whose blood shall serve thy flashing sword to stain, / O'er whom thy banners shall triumphant wave!", in Pemán's play it is again *España* who predicts the future glory that can only be achieved through pain and death: "What valour, in the ages yet to be, / Shall dwell within the sons of mighty Spain, / The heirs of such ancestral bravery!".

The intertextual motif of the ritualistic appearance of *España* is what creates a feeling of continuity between the two plays, as Pemán used the idea of the glory of the Spanish Empire, following Franco's national objectives. At that period, some sectors of the regime attempted to engage with the archaeological record to create a symbolic national heritage following state propaganda that exalted the glory of Spain since the Roman times.

Finally, literature uses collective myths to reconfigure the memory of national sacrifice and heroism. As national myths were indispensable for creating the European modern nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries, collective memory was invoked by appropriating significant elements from the national heritage. And

considering death and collective sacrifice as the national legacy of a state, these elements, filtered through the literary production, were used to create new insights into the national identities and the perception of symbolic landmarks.