

# Valladolid: Etymology and Folk-Etymology

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SOME HUNDRED-FIFTY KILOMETERS northwest of Madrid lies the ancient city of Valladolid, in the province of the same name. It is a proud and venerable city, for it was once the seat of the Spanish royal court when Philip II decided in 1600 to return to the place of his birth. Columbus died there. It possesses three magnificent paintings by Rubens, one of the oldest universities in Europe (early Thirteenth Century), several notable statues by Berruguete, and a wide assortment of churches, monasteries, convents, chapels and seminaries, each with its own ecclesiastical history. It has watched first the Roman legions, then the Gothic hordes, then the Moorish invaders and finally the Spaniards of the *Reconquista* march across its face. Many volumes have been written on its intricate history. But its very name has never been fully explained.

## I. The Folk-Etymologies

Small wonder, then that Valladolid presents such a temptation to the folk-etymologist – for folk-etymologists are a breed of incurable romantics quite spiritually attuned to the aura of mystery which surrounds this toponym.

Their suggestions have been many and varied. The *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada*<sup>1</sup> lists the following explanations offered from time to time: *Vallesoletum*, which it does not explain etymologically, but which Sangrador Vítóres<sup>2</sup> derives from *valis-oletum* < (oleo-oles) because of the supposed abundance of flowers and aromatic plants in that region; *Valle de olores*, ‘valley of fragrances’; *Valle de olivos*, ‘valley of olive trees’; *Valle de lides*, ‘valley of battles’; and *Valle de Olit* or *Ulit*, ‘valley of Olit.’ (This, as we shall see, is at least partly on the right track.) Still another suggestion comes from

<sup>1</sup> Vol. LXVI, p. 1020. Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Matías Sangrador Vítóres, *Historia de la muy noble y leal ciudad de Valladolid*, M. Aparicio, Valladolid, 1851. Vol. I, pp. 8–9.

J. J. Martín González<sup>3</sup>: *Valle tolitum*, 'valle de aguas,' from the Celtic for 'water,' because of the fact that the Esgueva and Pisuerga Rivers converge at this point.

Now let us examine these folk-derivations one by one. What we must bear in mind is the fortuitous resemblance of some elements within *Valladolid* to some very common words in Spanish. In this regard, we shall postpone a consideration of Sp. *valle*, 'valley,' until we have examined the other elements.

*Vallesoletum* is, obviously, a late latinization having nothing whatever to do with fact or reason. It is merely characteristic of the old scholarly tendency to ascribe Latin equivalents to just about everything. We see the results of this tendency in *Toletum* and *Tagus*, referring to the city of Toledo and to the river Tajo respectively. Neither Latin word has any meaning of its own, aside from the place in Spain; they were simply invented by persons writing in Latin, for purposes of consistency and perhaps for that of giving the appearance of erudition. (And we ourselves need not smile; how about, for example, *homo neanderthalensis*?) *Vallesoletum* is a perfect example of the result of an imagination run amok. It is difficult to see how anyone, however anxious he be to supply an etymology, could derive intervocalic *-d-* (a voiced linguo-dental stop in medieval Spain) from *-s-* (an unvoiced fricative). Languages change, to be sure; but *d < s* is not a change; it is a cataclysm.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, if the ending were really *-etum* in Latin, the best we could hope for would be *-ido*, involving voicing of intervocalic *-t-*. Final *-o < -um* does not disappear in Spanish, either prior or subsequent to the voicing of a preceding consonant. Consequently terminal *-id* would be impossible from the source suggested here. (Yet so popular has been the influence of this "etymology" that the

<sup>3</sup> *Guía histórico-artística de Valladolid*, Imprenta castellana, Valladolid, 1949, p. 19: "Son varias las explicaciones que se han dado del origen de Valladolid. Para unos su nombre procede de la palabra 'Valle de Olit,' o 'Valledolit,' de un moro así llamado que poseyera el valle y la ciudad; para los más, de la expresión 'Vallis olivetum' o sea 'Valle de los olivos,' por el hecho de que existieran en aquellos notables tiempos cantidades de ellos. Modernamente se ha formulado una tesis que tiende a buscar un origen más antiguo . . . de la expresión céltica 'valle tolitum' (Valle de aguas) . . ."

<sup>4</sup> It also ignores the fact that *vallis* is a Latin nominative, whereas Spanish was developed on the accusative case. If anything, the word would have been *vallem* not *vallis*.

inhabitants of Valladolid are known throughout the Spanish-speaking world as *los vallesoletanos*.)

*Valle de olores* suffers from just about as many defects of phonology. First, it is impossible to derive *-i-* of *-olid* from the *-o-* of *olores*. Second, it is impossible to derive terminal *-d* (linguo-dental stop) from *-r-* (trilled alveolar). And third, final *-es* of *olores* would remain.

*Valle de olivos* is no better. To derive *Valladolid* from this, we should have to assume first that a voiced bilabial fricative (*-v-* of *olivos*) could become a linguo-dental stop in popular speech. Second, we should have to suppose that final *-os* would disappear, which does not happen in Spanish popular development. The name was suggested because of the supposed abundance of olive trees in that area at the time it received its name. Yet, even dismissing the above-mentioned technical difficulties, common sense tell us that it is the south of Spain – Andalucía, Granada – that is known for its olive trees, and not the high barren plains of Castile.

*Valle de lides* appears at first blush to be more rigorous in its adherence to scientific principles. The adherence is more apparent than real; *-dolid* < *de lides* is absurd. First, the *-o-* would have to come from *-e-*, which would involve the opening (!) of a vowel to remote and wholly surprising regions of the mouth. Second, as we observed in the case of *olores*, final *-es* remains in Spanish popular development. *Lid* was the common Spanish word for ‘battle’ in the Middle Ages, and occurs frequently in Spanish epic poetry. It would therefore have an appeal for those romantic etymologists who enjoy diluting their science with a massive dose of unfettered imagination. The fact is, if it first occurred in the plural (*lides*), it would remain plural.

*Valle tolitum* is, superficially, the best phonological possibility so far. The only trouble with *tolitum* is that final *-itum* would, as we noted, become *-ido* and not *-id*. But there is another fallacy here – in this case a logical rather than a phonological one:

*Tolitum* comes from a Celtic root meaning ‘water.’<sup>5</sup> Celtic was pre-Romance, of course. While there are numerous pre-Romance toponyms and hydronyms in Spain (cf. R. Menéndez Pidal, *La toponimia prerrománica hispana*), it is stretching our credulity a bit to

<sup>5</sup> Martín González, *op. cit.*

ask us to accept the idea of L. *vallem* > *valle* in proclisis upon a Celtic root.

But there is still another objection here, of a morphological nature. I refer to Sp. *valle* in proclisis. Consideration of this point has been postponed until now because it occurs in all the proposed etymologies so far mentioned, as well as in *Valle de Olid*, which we have yet to discuss. (In this regard, there is no objection on phonological grounds to *-dolid* < *de Olid*; this is a completely normal development. In Spanish place names the reduction of the preposition *de* > *d'* before a vowel sound is perfectly regular. It just happens not to apply here because, as we shall see, intervocalic *-d-* of *Valladolid* does not come from the preposition *de*.)

It will surely have been observed that there exists a general and unquestioning acceptance of the presumed relationship between initial *valla-* of *Valladolid* and *valle* < *vallem*, 'valley.' None of the folk-etymologists has sought to challenge this, yet the scientific inconsistencies are immediately apparent upon examination.

In the first place, *valle* in proclisis invariably becomes *val-* in Castilian, not *valla-*. (Compare *Valverde*, *Valparaiso*, *Valdemoros*, *Valbuena*, and hundreds of other examples available in any list of Spanish geographical names.) This shortening of the generic element is common: *mon* < *montem*, as in *Montserrat*, 'the serrated mountain'; and *fon* < *fontem*, as in *Fonseca*, 'the dry fountain.' Furthermore, the process of deriving *valla-* from *valle* would involve the opening (!) of *e* > *a* in the presence of a palatal. The reverse is what actually happens.

Thus, on the basis of what we know about the rules of phonological and morphological change in Spanish, the etymologies we have examined so far would become, respectively, \**Valsoledo* (Valle-soletum); \**Valdolores* (Valle de Olores); \**Valdolivios* (Valle de Olivios); \**Valdelides* (Valle de Lides); \**Valdolido* (Valle tolitum); and \**Valdolid* (Valle de Olid).

## II. Toward a Scientific Etymology: The Term *vali*

However, we are stuck with *Valladolid*, no matter how much we might wish for a less exasperating problem. Since we obviously cannot explain it by any of the means just examined, we may at least consider one other possibility before giving it up as a lost cause.

In this regard, we should recall the fact that some people have associated the place name *Valladolid* with someone named Olid. Olid was, in fact, a Moor who governed Valladolid, city and province, until he died at the hands of Ordoño II some time between A.D. 914 and 924, during the Reconquest.<sup>6</sup> At this point we must pay proper respect to don Miguel Asín Palacios, the dean of Spanish Arabists, who derives Valladolid from the Arabic meaning "the city of Walid."<sup>7</sup> This explains *-olid* satisfactorily, but he does not attempt to analyze *vallad-*.

Olid, it would appear, was the *valí* (Ar. 'prefect,' 'governor,' 'owner') of the land with which Asín Palacios associates his name.<sup>8</sup> Let us recall that during the Reconquest many Moorish administrative terms came into current use in Spain: *Emir*, *Caliph*, *Valí* are good examples. Through contamination with the Latin (a common phenomenon) many such Arabic terms formed variants by adding Latin suffixes. Thus we have *emirato* 'emirate' < Ar. *emir* + L. *-atum*; *califato* 'caliphate' < Ar. *kalif* + L. *-atum*; and *valiato* 'valiate,' < Ar. *valí* + L. *-atum*. These forms all occur in the *Diccionario de la Academia Española*.

The only technical difficulty which the form *valí* is going to present is that it shows the stress on the final syllable, which superficially – but *only* superficially – might lead us to conclude that a shift of accent must have taken place, viz., *valiato* > *valiáto*, when the Latin suffix *-ato* < *-atum* was appended. The situation is not that complicated: let us bear in mind (1) that the normal Spanish stress is penultimate; (2) that the *-a-* of *-ato* is itself penultimate, and received the tonic stress in Latin anyway; (3) that it would continue to receive tonic stress in normal development in Spanish;

<sup>6</sup> M. Asín Palacios, *Contribución a la toponimia árabe de España*, Gráficas Versal, Madrid, 1944. Also *Enciclopedia universal, op. cit.*, p. 1064. Olid's full name was Walid Abul Abbas.

<sup>7</sup> M. Asín Palacios, *op. cit.*: "Valladolid – 'pueblo de Walid,' nombre propio de persona. Cfr. Ibn al-Jatib, p. 380, donde se la cita y localiza . . . Qalqašandi, 228, la registra como 'ciudad de Walid' . . ."

<sup>8</sup> *Enciclopedia universal, op. cit.*, Vol. LXVI, p. 740: "Etim. del ar. uali, prefecto. Gobernador de una provincia en el Estado musulmán. *Valí*: Hist. En el regimen antiguo de Turquía, título de los gobernadores que estaban al frente de una provincia (valiato). Eran nombrados por el sultán y se les consideraba depositarios del poder ejecutivo en todos los ramos de la administración del Estado excepto el judicial y el militar."

and (4) that it would therefore possess, at the very least, equal force with the *-i-* of *valí*. Thus, *valí + atum > valí-átó*. On analogy with all other words of this type in Spanish, then, it is easy to see where the *-á-* would quickly take tonic precedence, and the *-i-* would be relegated to secondary status: *valíáto*.

Supporting linguistic evidence is the existence of the word *validado* < *valí + -atum*, showing normal Spanish stress in spite of the Arabic original. This word (*validado*) occurs contemporaneously with *valiato*.<sup>9</sup> We must therefore assume that the development was *valí + átum > valíáto > validato* (which is easier to pronounce and accords far better with the normal pattern of Spanish stress). *Validado* meant a person of worth or importance, in distinction from the definition given above for *valiato*. (How much contamination exists here between Ar. *valí* and derivatives of L. *valere* is impossible to say.)

Now then, *valiato > \*vallado*<sup>10</sup> is perfectly regular: (1) while intervocalic *-t-* may not always have voiced to *-d-* in official documents, it most certainly did in popular speech (cf. *validado*); (2) palatal (double) *l* in Spanish can, and does, develop from *-li-* as well as from other sources. (cf. Menéndez Pidal, *Manual de gramática histórica española*.) Thus we have no problem in developing *\*vallado*, 'lands or territories governed or owned by a *valí*.'

Then merely by adding the name of the *valí* in question, we come up with the name of the city and province named in his honor:

*\*Vallado + Olid (variant Ualid) > Valladolid.*

This, it seems to me, makes sense. We know that the man *Olid* (or *Ualid*) existed, and that he governed the territory involved; we know therefore that he was a *valí*; we know furthermore that such a territory was a *valiato* in official language; we know that in popular speech *-li-* in this linguistic situation becomes double (palatal) *l*, and that intervocalic *-t-* voices to *-d-*. (And surely the name of a city is a part of the popular daily idiom, subject, obviously, to the influences thereof.)

<sup>9</sup> *Diccionario de la Academia, op.cit.* In this regard, it is also worth noting that there exist the following Spanish names containing the root *valí*: *Valibierna* (in the province of Huesca); and *Valicovo*, a place name near Salamanca.

<sup>10</sup> There is another word *vallado* meaning 'picket fence' or 'area enclosed by a picket fence.' It is not to be confused with the form we are here attempting to derive, for it comes from L. *vallatum* and has nothing to do with the subject at hand.

We therefore have all the elements necessary for a completely scientific derivation:

*vali* + *-atum* + *Olid* > *val'áto Olid* > *valiáto Olid* > *\*vallado Olid* > *Valladolid*, 'the vali-ate of Olid.'

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