WHERE DOES NAME OF CATALONIA COME FROM ?

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Note : to be clear and consistent throughout the document I will be using the catalan versions of the terms "Catalonia" and "Catalan" i.e "Catalunya" and "Català".

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WHERE DO NAMES OF COUNTRIES COME FROM ?

The ancient dilema "...what was first, the egg or the chicken ?" can also be formulated in another situation: "...what was first, the coronimus or the ethnic name ?" , in other words, "do places give name to its inhabitants or is it the other way round ?". The difference here, is that, while the egg/chicken dilema remains unresolved, the coronimus/ethnic dispute has really just one winner : the ethnic name. Human history has proven that this is so in 99% of the cases.

So, bearing in mind that the name of a country is derived from the name of its inhabitants, let's see now, how the various names of countries can be distributed :

a) Names which define the geographical position of the land with respect to a phsycal characteristic attribute: Extremadura, Navarra, Vallès ...etc

b) Names which define the geographical position of the land with respect to another land : Osterreich, Anatolia, Austrasia ...etc

c) Names defined by physical characteristic attributes: lots of ice (Iceland), large forests (Ardenes, Savoia), water flows (Bosnia, Senegal), big mountains (Balcans), natural resources (Costa Ivori, Argentina).

d) Names derived from the inhabitants name which live or lived in that land : Andalusia, France, England, Deutschland ... etc

e) Names derived from an existing place : a city (Potugal, Marroc, Egypt), a castle (Castilla, Tirol).

f) Names derived from a political resolution: Provença, Palatinat.

g) Finally, names derived from the names of great men or from a dinasty : Lorena, Filipines.

In the case of Catalunya it looks like only cases d) and/or e) would apply.

HOW WAS CATALUNYA NAMED BEFORE ?

The name of Catalunya is documented since 1070, but, how was it named before ? - A variety of other names had been used to name this land:

The romans named it first "Hispania citerior", although some decades later they renamed it for "Tarraconense". The land under this name would comprise todays territory of Catalunya and Aragon.

In 711ac, the arabs invaded the iberian peninsula and they renamed the Tarraconense province with the name "Sarkosta" (Zaragoza). But the fact is that this part of the peninsula was never really under full control by the arabs, which had to face continuous wars with the local people (helped by the Francs). The borders changed from day to day, and this is why the arabs would very often use the word "Afrany" (arabic word which means "border region to France") when referring to this part of the Iberian peninsula.

During the the IX century, with the start of the "Reconquesta" (the holy war to reconquer the territory occupied by the arabs), the catalan land was the first to recover its territory from the arabs, and for almost two centuries was the only region in the entire iberian peninsula not being under arab accupation. This fact gave the region the name of "Marca Hispanica" (Spanish Mark).

During the XI century, the region saw the growth of some properous countys structured in castles, which lead by the powerful county of Barcelona, defeated the arabs and extended their dominations south, up to the river Ebro. It was during this time (1070), when the people started using the term "Catalunya" for naming this land of countys.

THE THEORIES BEHIND THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME

Various theories have been trying to explain where did the name of Catalunya come from, but only the three summarized here have, in my opinion, some credit to be accepted:

1) The figure of Otger Cathaló

This is the olderst theory and one of the most popular ones , although historians argue that it is not scientifically acceptable since it is based on an unproved assumption : the existence of the legendary figure of Otger Cathaló. According to several historic-literature books from the medieval ages, the great captian Otger Cathaló and its nine barons (baron of Montcada, of Pinós, of Mataplana, of Cervera, of Cervelló, of Alemany, of Anglesola of Ribelles and of Erill) came from the south of France to fight the arabs in the name of God. After several victories and having pushed the arabs back into the peninsula, the captain died in the siege of Empúries. The loss of the great captain made his army to step back to the Pyrennes mountains where they fortified themselves and asked for help to Carlemany. Some years later, with the help of the King of France, the arabs were expelled from Barcelona and from most of the current territory of Catalunya.

The story of this legend can be clearly read in a manuscrit dated in 1418 which can be found in Valencia's university library.

The army men and the followers of Otger Cathaló were called cathalons, and that's what gave name to the land they conquered: Cathalonia.

From the liguistic point of view this theory is totally acceptable. If we take cathalo and we lose the non-pronunceable "h" we have cataló. And if we think that the sound "ó" of the catalan speaking people of the Roselló (region in the south of the France) is equivalent to the vowel-sound "à" in the rest of the catalan speaking territories, then we will have català, the ethnic and language name. In the case of the name of the country, it is also very easy to think how the name Cathalonia would derive to Catalunya.

2)The name of Catalunya and the Kathalaunic fields

The Kathalaunic fields, located in the Belgium Gal-lia, became famous during the V century for some great battles that were fought on them. Many medieval documents have been found which, for some reason or the other, they reference this place. One of these documents is a manuscrit, dated in the XI century, from a judge of Barcelona named "Bonsom". In this manuscrit we can read "... Theodoricus, rex Francorum, cum esset Kathalaunia ..." (Theodoricus, king of France, coming from Kathalaunia...).

Another important document found, related to this theory, is an Italian chronicle from the XIII century that describes the lengend of Atila marching through Chalons-sur-Marne, previously known as <>.

Back in our century, Giulano Bonfante in 1944, wrote an article about the name of Catalunya. The theory he wrote is based on the proven fact that the french army helped the locals to fight and expel the moors from the north east corner of the Iberian peninsula. Bonfante then says that " ... it happened that the soldiers of this french division were all from Chalons-Sur-Marne, previously known as Kathalaunia, and to honour the land they had just conquered they named it with their ancient name: Kathalaunia. In fact, most of this soldiers, having seen the beauty of the weather and the fertility of the land, decided to settle down on it, and became known by the local people as the Kathalauns, which is fonetically identical to Catalans, the current ethnic word for naming the people that live in the land of Catalunya".

Analyzing this theory in more detail, we have to say, that no written proof of any kind has been found to support the first part of the theory : the importance of an event such of giving a name to a land should be reflected in an official document sign by the King of France.

On the other hand, the second part of the theory could very well be the real story, since it satisfies two crucial aspects: firstable it is acceptable from the linguistic point of view, and secondly, it satifies the globally accepted rule which says that "...the name of the inhabitants of a land is first; and it's this name which then gives name to the land".

3)Catalunya: land of castles

This new theory, derived by the historian Balari, is based on the following fact: the enormous amount of castles that were build during the "Reconquesta", the big war to expel the moors from the catalan land. Many historical documents from the XI century describe the necessity of building fortified castles along the conquered land in order to have better defenses against arab counterattacks. Nowadays, most of this castles still exist, and have become a natural part of Catalunya's lanscape.

The fact is, that most of the castles were owned by only a few men. For better organisation, these men would then lend their castles to its vassals; a vassal with a castle was known as a "castellanus". According to Balari, the low level of latin would make this expression to change to "castlanus", with its variants "castlà" and "catlà" . Balari then says, that during the following decades, the people from the border countries like France, knowing that this land was full of "castlanus", started naming its people "catlans". From here, says Balari, it is easy to derive the current ethnic word "catalans".

This theory, although being historically solid, it is not liguistically acceptable. Linguists argüe that, there's not a single case in the history of our language in which the phoneme "st" would end up in "t" by any means. A similar case can be seen in our neighbours land name "Castilla", which still preserves the "s".

4 & 5)Two arabic theories on the origin of Catalunya's name

Lately, some arabic historians have also given their opinions on this matter, and I have to say that it could well be that the origin of the name Catalunya has its roots in the arabic culture. Two main theories have been derived.

The first one, from professor Vernet, is based on the existence of a place named Talunia. Vernet built his theory after having read a book of an arabic geographer named <> which was born in Almeria in 1002ac. The book is called "Tarsi-al-Ajbar" and is a description of the major walking pathways in the peninsula. One of these paths is the one that joins

Saragossa with Lleida, and in its description the following can be read : "... from the city of Zaragoza, up to the city of Lleida, located in the east, there are 117 miles. From Zaragoza to Burch-al-Rumi, 35 miles. From Burch-al-Rumi to Huesca, 12 miles; from Huesca to Talunia, 35 miles; from Talunia to the city of Lleida, 35 miles ...". The problem is that, nowadays, there is no such place named Talunia. The interesting thing, though, is that around the area where Talunia should be, one can find lots of toponims like "Torre de Castro", "Punta de Castro", "el Cascallar", "la Resala", "la Alcantarilla", which indicate a possible previous existence of towers and castles in that area. It is then possible that one of this castles was called Talunia, and then ,since"castle" in arabic is "calà" , and the abbreviated form is "ca", we have that the arabic form of "Castle of Talunia" would be "Ca-Talunia". This would not be the first time that a castle would give name to a land, since we have the examples of Castilla and Tirol.

In any case, this theory has two drawbacks: there is no physical evidence of the existence of this castle and secondly it goes against the globally accepted rule which says that "...the name of the inhabitants of a land is first; and it's this name which then gives name to the land".

The second arab theory, recently derived by Enric Guiter, is, once more, based on the amount of castles that were built, during the X and XI, with the idea of being powerful defenses against arab counterattack wars. According to Guiter, the arabs fighting at the front line would start calling this territory "land of calats" (land of castles), and they called its people, "calatans". In fact, there are many other places in the peninsula which contain the the term "cala" in its name, like Calataiud, Calatrava, Alcala, Calaceit ...etc. As part of his study, Guiter asked 1000 students from the Montpeller University to repeat the word "Calataiud". Surprisingly, around 70% of the students said "Catalaiud" instead of "Calataiud".

Guiter concludes his theory by saying that in those times, very few people could read and write, and most of the knowledege was passed from father to son by word of mouth; therefore it is very possible that the word "calatans", by confusion, and by word to mouth, became "catalans".

This theory, could well be the right one, since it is liguistically acceptable, it has a historical background and the ethnic name appears first, hence satisfying the globally accepted rule. However it has one drawback : a conqueror sets the name of its defeated enemy's land ; not the other way round.

CONCLUSION

The controversy about the origin of the name "Catalunya" has been going on for ages, and still no one has been able to prove that this theory or that theory is the right one. This document just tries to offer you the chance to think about this interesting and unresolved matter.

If I had to choose between these five theories, I would probably go for theory number two, the one about the "Kathalaunic fields". But what about you ? which theory do you think could be the right one ?