Between Latin and the Vernacular: The Medieval Transmission of the Proverb 'Love Me, Love My Dog.'[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the early history and medieval transmission of the proverb commonly known in English as *Love me, love my dog.* The study focuses on the presence of the saying in medieval Latin texts and its relationship to vernacular proverbial traditions. Particular attention is given to the formulation attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090/91–1153), who refers to the expression in a sermon for the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel and describes it as a *common ancient proverb*. Bernard's testimony is significant because it suggests that the saying circulated in vernacular speech before appearing in Latin written sources. By analyzing the context in which Bernard employs the proverb, the article shows how vernacular proverbial material could be integrated into theological discourse and used as a rhetorical device in medieval preaching. The study also considers a later example from the 13th century, in which Robert de Sorbon incorporates the proverb into a sermon, demonstrating its interpretative flexibility. Finally, the article surveys early attestations of the proverb in several vernacular languages, highlighting its wide circulation.
Keywords: Paremiology. Paremia. Proverb. Bernard of Clairvaux. Robert de Sorbon.

Título: «Entre el latín y las lenguas vernáculas: la transmisión medieval del proverbio 'Quien me ama, ama a mi perro'».
Resumen: Este artículo examina la historia temprana y la transmisión medieval del proverbio conocido en inglés como *Love me, love my dog*. El estudio se centra en la presencia de este dicho en textos latinos medievales y en su relación con las tradiciones proverbiales vernáculas. Se presta especial atención a la formulación atribuida a Bernardo de Claraval (1090/91–1153), quien menciona la expresión en un sermón para la fiesta de san Miguel Arcángel y la describe como un proverbio antiguo y común. El testimonio de Bernardo es significativo porque sugiere que el dicho circulaba en el habla vernácula antes de aparecer en fuentes escritas en latín. Mediante el análisis del contexto en el que Bernardo emplea el proverbio, el artículo muestra cómo el material proverbial de origen vernáculo podía integrarse en el discurso teológico y utilizarse como recurso retórico en la predicación medieval. El estudio también considera un ejemplo posterior del siglo XIII, en el que Roberto de Sorbon incorpora el proverbio en un sermón, lo que demuestra su flexibilidad interpretativa. Por último, el artículo examina testimonios tempranos del proverbio en varias lenguas vernáculas, destacando su amplia difusión.
Palabras clave: Paremiología. Paremia. Refrán. Bernardo de Claraval. Robert de Sorbon.

Titre : « Entre le latin et les langues vernaculaires: la transmission médiévale du proverbe ' Qui m'aime, aime mon chien ' ».
Résumé : Cet article examine l'histoire ancienne et la transmission médiévale du proverbe connu en anglais sous la forme « Love me, love my dog ». L'étude se concentre sur la présence de cette expression dans les textes latins médiévaux et sur sa relation avec les traditions proverbiales vernaculaires. Une attention particulière est accordée à la formulation attribuée à Bernard de Clairvaux (1090/91–1153), qui

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mentionne l'expression dans un sermon pour la fête de saint Michel archange et la décrit comme un proverbe ancien et commun. Le témoignage de Bernard est significatif, car il suggère que ce proverbe circulait dans la langue vernaculaire avant d'apparaître dans les sources écrites en latin. En analysant le contexte dans lequel Bernard utilise le proverbe, l'article montre comment le matériel proverbial vernaculaire pouvait être intégré au discours théologique et employé comme dispositif rhétorique dans la prédication médiévale. L'étude considère également un exemple postérieur du XIII[e] siècle, dans lequel Robert de Sorbon incorpore le proverbe dans un sermon, illustrant ainsi sa flexibilité interprétative. Enfin, l'article passe en revue les attestations précoces du proverbe dans plusieurs langues vernaculaires.
Mots-clés : Parémiologie. Parémie. Proverbe. Bernard de Clairvaux. Robert de Sorbon.

INTRODUCTION

I am confident that most readers will be familiar with the proverb addressed in this contribution, which continues to be widely used not only in English. *Love me, love my dog* is an idiom that, as is well known, expresses the idea of unconditional acceptance: to love a person without reservation entails accepting that person's faults and irritating habits as well.[2] The proverb is frequently invoked to suggest that anyone wishing to enter into a relationship with another person must be prepared to accept that individual in their entirety. Numerous attestations of the idiom can still be found in contemporary usage.

The available written evidence indicates that this proverb has a history spanning more than a millennium. It already appears in medieval Latin texts as early as the twelfth century. The phrase is most commonly associated with the Cistercian abbot and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, who is believed to have employed it in one of his Latin sermons. In the present contribution, we examine the historical development and usage of the idiom, together with variants displaying slightly different wording, in the Middle Ages in both Latin and vernacular languages, with particular attention to their transmission into the early modern period.

1.THE PRESENCE OF A VERNACULAR PROVERB IN MEDIEVAL LATIN SERMONS

The history of this proverb can be traced back to the Middle Ages; the earliest secure written evidence probably dates to the twelfth century.[3] The origin of the expression *Love me, love my dog* is commonly attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090/91–1153), who used the idiom in one of his sermons. In Bernard's formulation, however, the phrase appears as "he who loves me also loves my dog," accompanied by an additional remark concerning its provenance, namely that it was a "common vernacular proverb."[4]

Although the surviving evidence is relatively concise, the information provided is nonetheless highly significant. In his *Sermon on the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel*, in

[2] Cf. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/love-me-love-my-dog (last accessed 15 March 2026).

[3] Rigg (1999[2]: 569-573) provides a clear overview of the existence of proverbs in the Middle Ages. Taylor (1992: 19-35) gives a survey of the proverb genre in medieval western Europe, with the focus on texts written wholly or partly in Latin.

[4] In the original Latin (Bernard from Clairvaux, *In commemoratione sancti Michaelis*, I: 662) the passage reads: *Dicitur certe vulgari quodam proverbio: Qui me amat, amat et canem meum.*

which this reference occurs, Bernard explicitly states that he is quoting an already existing proverb. He further suggests that the saying originated in a vernacular language and therefore must have had a considerably longer history prior to its appearance in Latin written sources.

Bernard refers to this proverb in the context of discussing angels and their love for humanity in his *Sermon on the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel*, celebrated on 29 September (Bernard from Clairvaux, *In commemoratione sancti Michaelis*, I: 658-667). The sermon itself, however, is not devoted exclusively to Michael but rather addresses angels more generally, with particular emphasis on their role as guardians. Bernard begins his sermon by outlining several reasons why angels protect and love human beings, and he employs the proverb to illustrate the nature of their affection for humanity. In his reflections, Bernard emphasizes the causal relationship between human beings, angels, and God in the following way:

> Because Jesus Christ loves us, angels love us too. It is truly said in a common proverb: *he who loves me also loves my dog*. Bernard then continues with the following explanation: "We are, Holy Angels, the dogs of your Lord whom you love so devotedly—little dogs who desire to feed on the crumbs falling from the table of the Lord, which are you." (Bernard from Clairvaux, *In commemoratione sancti Michaelis*, I: 662).

Bernard's reflection alludes to a passage in the New Testament (Mtt 15:27) describing Christ's encounter with the Canaanite woman who begs him to heal her daughter. In this episode, both the image of dogs and the metaphor of crumbs falling from the table play an important role, motifs that Bernard also incorporates into his own interpretation. In the biblical narrative, the pagan woman approaches Jesus and asks for mercy. Jesus initially tests her faith and compares pagans to dogs. The woman accepts the comparison and responds that even dogs are allowed to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. In doing so, she becomes an exemplary figure of faith: she demonstrates deep confidence that even a small portion of Christ's blessing may suffice to heal her daughter, profound humility in accepting the comparison to a dog, and considerable wisdom in the manner of her response.[5]

Bernard interprets this episode in relation to the central theme of his sermon. By invoking the parallel, he encourages his audience to place their trust in angels and to seek their assistance in all matters. In Bernard's formulation, believers are invited "to feed on the crumbs from the Lord's table," that is, to benefit from the closeness of angels to God.

In connection with the angelology presented by Bernard of Clairvaux—in which angels are described as mediators of the relationship between humanity and God, protecting human beings and guiding their actions—it has been suggested that, perhaps under the influence of the unsuccessful crusade, their role as a positive mediating force was later somewhat diminished. This development can be observed in Bernard's treatise *De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam* (*Consideration for Pope Eugene*, I: 611-841), as well as in some of his later sermons, where the mediating role traditionally attributed to such spiritual agents receives less emphasis. In these

[5] Mtt 15:22-28: "And a woman of Canaan came out from those parts, crying and saying, have pity on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is greatly troubled with an unclean spirit. But he gave her no answer. And his disciples came and said to him: Send her away, for she is crying after us. But he made answer and said: I was sent only to the wandering sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and gave him worship, saying Help, Lord. And he made answer and said: It is *not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs.* But she said, yes, Lord: *but even the dogs take the bits from under their masters' table.* Then Jesus, answering, said to her: O woman, great is your faith, let your desire be done. And her daughter was made well from that hour."

texts, the believer is encouraged to seek God within the soul, accessible through prayer and contemplation, while angels are presented primarily as models to be imitated in the human relationship with God rather than as direct guardians and guides of human action.[6]

The use of proverbs within the context of sermons is by no means exceptional; on the contrary, it represents a characteristic feature of Bernard's writings. As noted by Árpád Steiner,[7] the abbot of Clairvaux refers to vernacular proverbs and proverbial expressions in at least twenty instances, not only in his sermons but also in his treatises and letters, most frequently, however, in his sermons.[8] Indeed, Bernard explicitly draws attention to the use of vernacular proverbial material in the aforementioned treatise *De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam*, where he employs a similar rhetorical strategy.[9]

Other contexts in which the proverb *Love Me, Love My Dog* was used

The manner in which Bernard of Clairvaux incorporated this proverb into his sermon was not the only possible one. Robert de Sorbon (1201–1274), the founder of the University of Paris, also employed the same proverb in a sermon, though in a different context.[10] He addressed his sermon to the students and masters of the university where he taught and preached, basing it on the New Testament passage *Cuius est imago haec et superscriptio* (Mtt 22:20) (Diekstra, 2008*:* 369-370).

Following the tradition of biblical and patristic figurative language (Diekstra (2008*:* 345), Robert employs the imagery of the penny to describe the distinctive characteristics of the wicked in contrast to those of the virtuous. In his interpretation, anyone who observes God's commandments is a true penny of the Lord, whereas those who fail to do so are described as bad pennies. A penny may be considered defective when it is of inferior quality, whether with respect to its material, shape, weight, or size. As the third of eight reasons for why a penny may be regarded as bad, Robert characterizes sinners as deficient pennies in the following way:

> Third, a bad penny is deficient in quantity, that is, when it is too small. Charity makes this penny large. As the apostle Paul says: 'Being rooted and founded in charity,' etc. People often say: 'Who loves me loves my dog.' In the same way, if you love God, you

[6] As formulated by Wagner (2013: 340): "Bernard reaffirmed his belief in the omnipotence of God. This is not to infer that Bernard had not always considered God to be above all, but rather that intercession by others, be they human or angelic, no longer weighed heavily in his theology. This process also compelled Bernard to modify his previous angelology. As intercessory beings in a unique realm between humanity and God, their level of control over humanity was reduced in his later writings. Indeed … angels depended on God for their assignments and duties, rather than being capable of autonomous choice."

[7] Steiner (1944: 37): "The fact that mediaeval Latin writers used proverbs in their works is known well enough, and it is no less well known that mediaeval preachers liked to embellish their Latin sermons with vernacular proverbs."

[8] Steiner ibidem (in other writings of Bernard from Clairvaux we can find proverbs such as: "the healthy do not know what the sick feel and the full do not trust the hungry" or "there's a big difference between talking and doing", which are still used today).

[9] Bernard from Clairvaux, *De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam*. I. *Sed et (notabere) vulgari proverbio: Qui hoc facit quod nullus, mirantur omnes*.

[10] As Diekstra states (2008: 390): "many of Robert's sermons are not Robert's authorised texts but redactions or *reportationes* of Robert's actual delivery–whether in French or Latin we cannot always be certain–made by others in Latin."

> will love all people because of him. But the penny of some people is so small that they love no one except those who bring them some advantage.[11]

Robert de Sorbon thus employs the proverb in his sermon as part of an explanation, though in a context different from that of Bernard. As the examples above demonstrate, the proverb offered considerable potential for interpretative application in connection with biblical texts. Whereas Bernard used the saying in a sermon discussing the benefits that angels bring to humanity, Robert de Sorbon employed it—also in a sermon—to illustrate his vivid figurative language drawn from the imagery of the marketplace, thereby strengthening the rhetorical persuasiveness of his message (Diekstra (2008: 343-344). In both cases, the authors may have intended to enhance the effectiveness of their sermons by incorporating a widely known saying in order to capture the audience's attention and make the sermon more engaging.

Although no recommendations concerning the use of proverbs in preaching survive from the twelfth century (or at least none have been preserved), later sources indicate that the use of proverbial expressions was eventually discussed on a theoretical level. As noted by Franco Morenzoni, it was only toward the end of that century—and especially from the thirteenth century onward—that a number of treatises began to address this topic (Morenzoni (2009: 132). By drawing on a proverb, a preacher could develop a brief reflection fulfilling the rhetorical function of *captatio benevolentiae* and thereby introduce the opening prayer of the sermon.[12]

According to the Franciscan author Jean de Galles (†1285), the use of a *vernaculare proverbium* was particularly appropriate when addressing simple believers. Morenzoni also notes that proverbs could serve as one of several possible means of introducing the sermon proper, provided that the proverb chosen corresponded in content to a biblical or other authoritative source.[13] As we have seen, this was precisely the case in the preaching of Bernard, who connected a popular proverb with a passage from the New Testament. For a long time, preachers made wide use of common folk proverbs, some of which were taken directly from the Holy Scriptures.

These sayings could even be incorporated into sermons that had already been written, which is evidenced for example by the manuscript by Robert de Sorbon or in other texts as well (Buridant (1984: 31). In these works, the margins include translations of sentence fragments and French proverbs, added later by another hand to help preachers communicate more effectively

[11] English translation by Diekstra (2008: 370). Latin text ibidem: *Tercio peccat in quantitate, cum scilicet parvuus est. Caritas facit hunc denarium magnum. Apostolus [Eph. 3:17]: In caritate radicati, etc. Dicitur: „Qui amat me, amat canem meum." Sic si tu diligis Deum, diliges omnes homines propter ipsum. Sed aliqui habent hunc denarium ita parvuum quod non diligunt aliquos nisi illos eis benefaciunt*." Diekstra (2008: 370, note 59) also draws attention to other text of Robert de Sorbon (*De consciencia*, redaction A, p. 102, BnF. Lat. 3218, 171va), where the popular proverb is strikingly juxtaposed with the book of Proverbs from the Bible (8:17).

[12] Negoi (2020: 210-233) discusses the phenomenon of bilingualism in medieval sermons by focusing on fourteenth-century Catalonia and also addresses the use of vernacular proverbs.

[13] Morenzoni (2009: 132-133) provides information from the preaching environment at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries when proverbs have a function similar to that of observations that can be made by observing natural facts, moral maxims, dicta of saints or certain biblical authorities close to a proverbial expression. As he further states "The proverbs must indeed allow for the introduction of the general idea from which it is possible to proceed with the division of the thematic verse in order to establish the main points of the sermon."

with ordinary people.[14] When focusing on written traces of medieval preaching in thirteenth-century France, such as *reportationes* (student notes taken during sermons) (Bériou, 2020), these texts, typically composed in a hybrid of Latin and the vernacular, do not provide verbatim records of oral delivery but rather reconstructed summaries shaped by memory and scholarly practice. They provide valuable insight into the dynamics of medieval religious communication, particularly the interaction between Latin (as the authoritative language of Scripture) and the vernacular (as the medium of popular understanding). Preachers strategically employed bilingualism, integrating biblical exegesis with elements drawn from everyday language, such as proverbs[15] and familiar imagery, in order to make their message accessible to lay audiences.

The increasing popularity of this proverb is further evidenced by the Latin variations that appear in a range of genres and text types from the thirteenth century onward (Singer (1998, VII: 465-466).

2.THE EVIDENCE OF THE PROVERB *LOVE ME, LOVE MY DOG* IN VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

If we now examine the evidence of the proverb in vernacular languages, we can corroborate the assertion of Bernard of Clairvaux that the saying had already existed in popular tradition and was well known to his audience. The earliest written evidence in Old French appears to date from the late twelfth century, although the proverb must have circulated much earlier in oral tradition. This observation corresponds to a common pattern: vernacular proverbs were often first recorded in Latin texts, which served as an important channel for their dissemination, and only later were they included in collections that preserved their original vernacular forms.

One of the earliest attestations of the proverb in a vernacular language appears in a collection of Old French proverbs dating from the period 1174–1191, where the saying occurs in the following forms:

> *Qui moi aime, mon chien.*
> *Qui m'aime, si aime mon chien.*
> ("He who loves me [also loves] my dog.") [16]

[14] Ibidem Buridant (1984: 31): *Habitum truncatum portare.* En marge: *«Scilicet mantel de piece et de morciaux, seu de truant.» «Qui se humiliât exaltabitur».* En marge: *«Petit chastel doit on en haut lever».*

[15] As Bériou (202: 179) observes: "Given the task of communicating a religious message, preachers relied, in fact, on the ordinary, everyday language of the listeners, whose vocabulary was a rich resource to be exploited. Preachers were quick to make use of proverbs, a form of folk wisdom whose succinct phrases may be compared with the citation of certain verses from Scripture. They took inspiration from the book of nature and from all kinds of social acts, which were familiar to the public. Pride of place is regularly given to the vocabulary of customs, habits, rituals, and common objects, words for which equivalents or analogies could be found in the Bible. Such equivalents, by creating links between daily life and the biblical subject matter, become heuristic tools, rendering the message more efficient."

[16] The proverb is attested in *Proverbes au vilain*, a medieval French collection of popular sayings and moral maxims, cf. Singer (1998,VII: 465); Schulze-Busacker (2011: 289). The old French proverb *"Ki volentiers fiert vostre chien, ja mar crerés qu'il vos aint bien"* is attested in medieval sources associated with Marie de France (Lai de Graelent) and demonstrates an early vernacular form of the sentiment later expressed by *"Qui m'aime, aime mon chien."*

Another Old French example of the proverb, this time associated with Arthurian literature, occurs in the description of the childhood and youth of the Knight of the Round Table Sir Gawain in *Les enfances Gauvain* (c. 1200). In this context, the proverb is adapted to the setting of knightly culture and applied to the relationship between knights and their servants:

> *Por la chierté des chiveliers Doit on servir les escuiers. Mout fu saiges et mout dit bien Qui dit: ki mi aime et mon chien.*
> ("For the love of knights, their squires should be served. Very wisely spoke the one who said: 'He who loves me loves my dog as well.'") (Singer, 1998, VII: 465).

Further attestations in Old French can be found in a considerable number of sources (Singer (1998, VII: 466).

Similarly, an old English version written before 1500 emphasizes not only the parallel between affection for the master and affection for his dog but also the importance of goodwill toward the master's servants.

> *In olde termys it is fownd: He, that lovythe me, lovythe my hound And my servant also*.[17]
> ("He who loves me likewise loves my dog and my servant.")
>
> Evidence of the proverb's occurrence can also be found in Germany before 1500 (Singer (1998, VII: 466).

Alongside this variant, adaptations of the proverb appear both in Latin and in the vernacular languages, such as: "He who loves a friend also loves that friend's friend" (Singer,1998, VII: 466), "Quien bien quiere la rosa, aunque se pinche, no se enoja"; "Si quieres la col, quieres las hojas de alrededor" (J. Sevilla & Zurdo, 2009).

The Iberian Peninsula and the variants of the proverb

If we consider other variants of this popular saying, it becomes apparent that a particularly large number of different formulations are found on the Iberian Peninsula. One Spanish version of the proverb, probably dating from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century—though clearly reflecting an older tradition—uses a personal name instead of a general pronominal reference. As its editor Bernard P. Bourland observed (Bouland, 1910: 648-686), the author of the collection *Relaçion a las señoras e grandes dueñas de la dotrina que dieron a Sarra* Pérez de Guzmán (1376–1460) "drew primarily on ancient Spanish proverbs"[18]:

> *Ca quien de Beltran fuere amador*
> *Sienpre a su can avra buen amor* (Ballesta, 1990: 162)

[17] The proverb is attested in a Middle English narrative poem *Jack and His Step-Dame*, cf. Singer (1998,VII: 466).

[18] According to Bourland (1910: 653): the author demonstrates a discernible attraction to popular culture, and he frequently draws on various aspects of it. As Ballesta (1990: 174) further notes: "La veta folklórica del refranero…se ve magnificada y elevada a la categoría de autoridad, concepto importantísimo en una mente considerata profundamente medieval. El refrán, y el folklore en general, vienen a ser tan importantes en la *Relaçion*, que inspiran aspectos valiosos del contenido e impregnan el tono, el estilo y la misma textura de la composición."

In other variants, the names Beltrán or Pedro appear, apparently chosen in part for their rhyme with the words *can* or *perro*:

Quien bien quiere a Pedro, bien quiere a su perro.
Quien bien quiere a Beltrán, bien quiere a su can.
Ca quien de Beltrán fuere amador, siempre a su can avrá buen amor.
("He who loves Pedro/Beltrán also loves his dog.")

These and other variants of the proverb in late medieval collections are presented systematically by O'Kane (1959: 72). As Ovejero states, the exchange of names sometimes responds to the modernization of the proverb, as in the binomial *Beltrán/can* in the older proverb collection, where the archaic character of the second element prompts its replacement with *perro*, simultaneously motivating the presence of *Pedro* in the first element (Ovejero, 1986: 20-21).

Further instances of usage can also be found in *La Celestina*, in the wor of Sebastián de Horozco (1510-1579) who do (cumented the adaptation of the proverb later in the sixteenth century,[19] or in Cervantes.[20] The proverb was also employed for promotional or marketing purposes and was included in the coat of arms of Roa de Duero[21] in Ribera del Duero in Spain.[22]

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of vernacular proverbs in medieval collections confirms Bernard's assertion that the saying had already existed in popular tradition. The earliest written evidence in Old French dates from the late twelfth century, although the proverb must have circulated much earlier in oral transmission. This pattern corresponds to a well-known phenomenon: vernacular proverbs were often first recorded in Latin texts and only later appeared in collections that preserved their original vernacular forms. These Latin texts thus served as an important channel for the subsequent dissemination of such sayings.

As demonstrated above, the proverb also offered considerable interpretative potential in connection with biblical texts. Bernard of Clairvaux used it in his sermon to illustrate the benefits that angels may bring to humanity, while Robert de Sorbon employed the same proverb in another sermon, demonstrating the richness of his figurative language and rhetorical strategy. Together, these examples provide evidence of the prevalent contemporary usage of proverbs

[19] Hernandez (2005[2]: 225): "Quando querer bien a alyen/amor natural nos mueve/por consiguiente tambien /amamos a lo que tien /por lo que al tal se le deve/Por esso dice el refran/antiquo de esta manera/el que bien quiere a Beltran/tambien quiere bien a su can/y es cosa muy berdadera."

[20] References to both works are provided in Bizzarri (2015: 59-61). In discussing the use of the proverb in Miguel de Cervantes, it is noted that it appears here in the sense of "tener las cuentas claras."

[21] I am deeply grateful to María del Carmen Ugarte García for kindly providing this information.

[22] Although the proverb *'Quien bien quiere a Beltrán, bien quiere a su can'* incorporates the historical name *Beltrán*, linguistic and paremiographic evidence indicates that its functions as a generic folk saying expressing that genuine affection encompasses what belongs to a person. There is no authenticated historical evidence that the proverb originated specifically from the real-life figure Beltrán de la Cueva or from a particular event in his life. The shared name appears to be a convenient linguistic motif rather than a direct historical reference.

within sermons, a usage further substantiated in subsequent theoretical works addressing the topic.

The extensive dissemination of the proverb within vernacular languages also attests to its later popularity, which in Spain gave rise to numerous variations; even today, the saying continues to appear as a motto in Ribera del Duero in Spain.

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