

**Imperial Anxieties: Alfonso X and
the Cultural and Political Significance of the
*Libro de Alexandre***

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In memoriam, Simon Barton and Peter Linehan

The exceedingly ample topic I have chosen to explore in this study centers on the larger cultural and political significance of the vernacular Castilian *Libro de Alexandre* within the context of the pursuit of imperial ambitions in the Kingdom of Castile-Leon around the middle of the thirteenth century. Since space is limited, I must paint with a very broad brush. As we know, the date and the authorship of the *Libro* are disputed. The earliest reasonable date posited for it is around 1207 while, more plausibly, some scholars believe it could have been composed later, possibly as late as 1250. Its authorship is unclear. Its meaning, and when and where, and by whom it might have been read are questions that have never really been adequately addressed. The concept of heroic agency is transformed in the *Alexandre* as the discourses of epic are adapted to new chivalric, scholarly, and imperial ideals. The *Libro* remains far more than a philological or belletristic literary artifact to be scrutinized only under the narrow gaze of antiquarians, formalists, source hunters, and historical linguists. I say this because it is arguably a socially engaged, imposing work of art that raises large and vital questions about medieval civic institutions and the cultural logic of thirteenth-century Castile.

Put another way, when confronted with the *Libro*, we must ask if its appearance during the first half of the thirteenth century constitutes a gesture that is intelligible beyond mere positivistic philological particulars, moralistic clichés about didacticism, and commonplaces of literary history? Might we be able to discover in it a larger significance and explain the work in terms of the civic and political horizons of contemporary Castile; and might it further our understanding of the rapidly changing institutions which seem to be the focus of its interest, namely scholarship and science, sovereignty and kingship, conquest, territory, cultural differences, and finally the wages of empire? These are pertinent questions which students of the *Alexandre* have only begun to pose in any significant way. The *Alexandre*, as I shall argue, lends itself both to an ethical and a political reading within a discrete historical milieu and marks the thoughtful inscription of empire in Castile and León in a long tradition of Iberian vernacular texts that will continue to dwell on the risks and possibilities of emperors and empire in shaping political hegemonies.¹

In an article published in 1956-57 that still resonates today, as he laid bare the learned foundations of the *Libro de Alexandre* and its propinquity to the medieval schools, Raymond Willis proposed in passing that the work might have been written as “a monument to the saintly Fernando III . . . or Alfonso el Sabio . . .” by a poet who was “evidently a partisan of the old imperial Latin-European tradition” (223). It is my contention that the *Libro* encompasses just this possibility and

¹ In her global overview of the *mester de clerecía* Uría Maqua characterizes the *Libro* as a wholly moralistic work, representing the prevailing critical responses to it. As she fails to see the work’s immediate relevance to the larger political and social issues of monarchical power, empire, and territorial expansion to the historical moment and the culture that produced it, she finds only a moral lesson, one “que se extrae de la derrota del protagonista: el hombre que había conquistador ambas la fama y la gloria, que tenía en sus manos el dominio del mundo y a quien todos los pueblo le rendían homenaje, cayó en el pecado de soberbia y murió envenenado por sus hombres” (2000, 206).

at the same time marks a tectonic shift in the political imaginary and the cultural landscape of Castile, but particularly in the context of the Castilian monarchy as a social and political force. This is so because through close reading and archival research it is possible to tie it to the formal and political learning of Alfonso the Wise, and because in the *Alexandre* we see at work the budding discourses that are the stuff, to borrow a phrase from Benedict Anderson, of the “imagined community” of empire: the territorialization of ideology; the decline of archaic kingship; the integration of widely diverse kingdoms under one sovereign, overarching crown; and the propagation and legitimization of these notions through the glorification and institutionalization of scholarship and of texts. The work, I think, constitutes a celebration of, and an admonition for, a youthful, vigorous leader whose ambitions were limited only by his moral horizon, and that it was probably composed with Alfonso in mind before his marriage to Violante in 1249, likely between 1230 (the date of the death of Alfonso IX of León and Castile’s reunion with León under Fernando III, which propitiated serious thought of a claim to the Crown of the Holy Roman Empire) and 1249, that is between Alfonso’s ninth and twenty-eighth year. I also believe that it was read and put to use at court well beyond those dates, and that there is evidence for this in MS O Vit-5-10 of the Biblioteca Nacional de España. The *Alexandre* embodies a realignment of the powers that shape civic existence: as it tells the tale of the Macedonian emperor in the Castilian vernacular and fashions a cultural politics from a new alliance between the intelligentsia and the state, where the intelligentsia is both instrumental and placed at the service of constructing, and critiquing, the mythologies of power for a monarchy with imperial aspirations. The book seeks to underscore the fertile union of court and clergy, of political authority and of learning, but not without admonishing about the reformation of the old imperial *auctoritas*. The concept is captured symbolically when the narrative surveys the array of legions on the battlefield where Alexander challenges Darius:

Bien avié diez mill carros de los sabios señeros,
que eran por escripto del rey consejeros,
los unos eran clérigos, los otros cavalleros,
quiquier los conocrí que eran compañeros (853)

The entire curia, composed of both clerks and warriors, takes to the battlefield in what can only be a compelling, emblematic vision of a new coalition between arms and letters.

The work represents a conflation of a large community of texts that provides a further measure of the *Alexandre* poet’s erudition and propinquity to power and to the curia, in addition to late-twelfth- and early thirteenth-century university learning. The themes of empire, education, and knowledge in the *Alexandre* are responsible for producing the disconcerting uniqueness of the work as it suggests a hybridization of two literary modes--epic and romance--and points to the impact of literacy, higher lay learning, and the Schools upon the making of both politics and vernacular fiction. The presence of these elements, which I wish to underscore in the *Alexandre*, place the work at a fundamental crossroads of sophisticated communal values and ideals in thirteenth-century Castilian culture.

More than a rhetorical dialectic between different forms of poetry, there is more importantly a vindication of learning and a distinctive moral and ethical vision of it at work in the *Alexandre* poet’s assertion that his “mester es sen pecado.” Much more than an allusion to perfect scansion and regular rhyme, this characterization of the poet’s immaculate craft calls attention to the fact that the message he bears is both worthy and righteous, impeccable. To be sure, it is the

poet's—indeed, the intellectual's—ethical obligation to share generously of his knowledge:

deve de lo que sabe omne largo seer,
si non, podrié en culpa e en riebto caer (1c,d)

In a significant reversal, knowledge from the outset of the *Libro* is thus preeminent and redeemed from its ancient biblical stigma--its legacy of shame--, just as the poet points to the important role it will play in the book that is about to unfold.

Throughout the hero's portrayal, the poet points to the crucial importance of knowledge and to an ethical contrast that undermines the political aims of a tradition of epic texts whose sense and peripetia remained circumscribed by violence and an exclusively regional and partisan design, a vision absent of a wider compass of learning, scholarship, and purpose, and devoid of a larger and deeper understanding of political power in a wider world. In the *Alexandre*, education and wisdom are revealed as the guiding forces that both privilege and justify an imperial vision as they transform its pagan hero into a secular saint who, at the height of his authority the poet notes, “Se non fuesse pagano de vida tan seglar/deviélo ir el mundo todo adorar” (2667).

The book is in fact a mirror of princes that displays a critical reflection of its youthful protagonist in a way that would doubtless have caught an adolescent or young Alfonso's attention, as for example, when Aristotle prompts his pupil to recall that:

Fijo eres de rey, tu has grant clerezía,
en ti veo aguçia qual para mí querría
de pequeño demuestras muy grant cavallería,
de quantos hoy biven tú has grant mejoría (52)

Although little of anything specific is known about Alfonso's youth and formal education at court, he was doubtless exposed at a very young age to the best tutors, scholars, and jurists available. Everything points to this (see Martínez, 2003, 53-101). News of his scholarly pursuits, for example, shows him still very young revising al-Zarqali's astronomical tables, which were themselves not insignificantly based on the ancient ones developed by Claudius Ptolemy, a Macedonian Egyptian who himself claimed to descend from Alexander. Like the young protagonist of the *Alexandre*, in addition to war and statecraft, Alfonso was a youth eager to learn the Seven Liberal Arts and he was especially fascinated by astronomy.

In the opening stanzas of the *Libro*, Alexander boasts of how he was educated in the Seven Liberal Arts, reflecting the intellectual formation that one would expect of a prince like Alfonso, conceived, and raised by his parents and his tutors to be something more than king. His knowledge and dominion of the curriculum is absolute, to where he cannot be taken in by error:

Sé de las siete artes todo su argument;
bien sé de qualidades de cad'un element;
de los signos del sol siquier del fundamento,
nos' me podría çelar quanto val'un açento (45)

Notably, Alexander's study of the Quadrivium in the description of his education (38-46) fails, however, to mention mathematics and geometry, highlighting in their place medicine, specifically *pulsos*, or arterial palpation, and *judgo orinal* (uroscopy), the diagnostic tools of Islamic physicians

of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who practiced medicine based on Galenic medical theory.

The *Alexandre*, I would contend, merges the well-known Alfonsine imperatives of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii* in the person of the young Macedonian emperor and makes plain a cultural blueprint designed to guide and educate his modern Castilian incarnation to enable him to seize and define political and cultural hegemony over his realms. More than a decayed epic or a high romance of antiquity the *Alexandre* is all this and considerably more. It is, in fact, an extended *speculum principum*, or a book of kingly advice minutely fleshed out like an adventurous romance of antiquity, just as it constitutes a thoughtful reflection and admonition on the fatal risks of empire. It remains grounded firmly in a prescriptive dynastic design aimed to portray the education and career of Alexander of Macedon, one of Alfonso's paragons and putative progenitors and a crucial role model in the medieval imagination's fabrication of the universal history of empire.

Alfonso X's imperial pretensions have been scrupulously studied by Rico (1972), Fraker (1996), and Martínez (2003). These three scholars have made clear how the production of Alfonso's historical works especially, in fact his entire cultural project, corresponds to the king's quest to be Holy Roman Emperor (to what Alfonso called *el fecho del imperio*), and how the king's claims are bolstered through a family pedigree laid forth in these histories. In them Alfonso explicitly connects his physical person, his political identity, and his dynastic contentions directly to a larger teleology of *translatio imperii* leading back through Alexander to mythological times. In the *General Estoria*, for example, Alfonso's ancestry is conspicuously sketched starting in the pantheon of the pagan gods up to his immediate ancestor and intellectual paragon, his maternal uncle Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, who ruled in Sicily and in all Christian Europe as Holy Roman Emperor from 1220 to 1250. As Fraker notes, Alfonso's tracing of the imperial "line runs from Jupiter through Alexander the Great and the Caesars" (5) down to his mother's immediate forebears, the Hohenstaufen. In fact, even when looked at from another imperial perspective--the Hispanic tradition that depicted the kings of León as successors of the Visigoths and, therefore, the agents answerable for the recuperation of the lost Visigoth Iberian empire--coupled with Alfonso's father's expressed wish to recover the title of *Imperator* as set forth in the *Setenario* (Márquez Villanueva, 1994, 22), the *Libro de Alexandre* points to its composition in a civic and dynastic milieu steeped in the dreams and expectations of imperial rule.

As he portrays a kingdom that seeks to fulfill its greater promise, the poet's description of the young Alexander's impatience for conquest evokes a series of puns that heraldically allude to the youthful Alfonso, heir to his father's proclamation of a reinvigorated Leonese empire issued in the year 1230:

Contendí el infant en este pensamiento,
 amolava los dientes como león fanbriento;

 Avía en sí'l infant a tal comparación
 como suele aver el chiquiello león
 quando yaz'en cama e vee venación:
 non lo puede prender, bátele'l coraçón. (28-29)

The *Alexandre*'s core gravitates around the portrayal of a lettered lion-like—Leonese--prince that provides the intellectual and ideological basis for the elaboration and justification of a theory of imperial domination and prerogative anchored in high learning and the moral education

of the ruler as developed in Aristotle's counsel to the young Alexander. As we know, Aristotle's exhortations gravitate from commentary on the personal to the communal virtues and the civic comportment of kings. They offer detailed instruction on everything from the public administration of justice to regal magnanimity, the manner which monarchs should choose words carefully and seek discretion in good counsel, and how the king should conduct himself both in love and war.

Similarly, throughout the *Alexandre* we see the exaltation of chivalry and its transformation into royal qualities, the coalescence of arms and letters, in the quest for political and social goods whose ends are the attainment of both civic and cultural hegemony. Departing significantly from Gautier's *Alexandreis*, the poet's main Latin source, the vernacular Castilian *Alexandre* (and I stress *vernacular*) takes pains to elaborate on the young prince's early education in both arms and letters and to invoke Hercules, another genealogical antecedent claimed by Alfonso and his alleged Visigoth forbears:

A cab de pocos años el infant fue criado,
nunca omne non vio niño tan arrabado,
ya cobdiçiaua armas e conquerir regnado,
semejava a Hércules, itant era esforçado! (15)
El padre, de siet' años, metiólo a leer,
dióle maestros honrados, de sen e de saber,
los mejores que pudo en Greçia escoger,
quel en las siete artes sopiesen esponer (16)

From this alone, it is clear why the *Alexandre* might have been destined, and have held an arresting interest, for a youthful Alfonso X: in addition to diversion, the work in a substantial way holds forth a series of reflective readings and meaningful admonitions on the education of an imperial prince; on good government, the nature of kingship, the moral and mortal limits of human aspirations, and on a justification of his ambitions in order to grasp and energize his family's claim to the imperial crown. It is clear the *Alexandre* offers a great deal with which the young Alfonso could identify and make his own.

In the *Alexandre*, kingship, knowledge, and the disposition of empire are in fact the sovereign themes. Royal power is portrayed there as something determined by, in addition to the law, the practice of virtue and perseverance tempered by worldly learning subordinated to ethics and to religious truths. In this way, the book represents empire and territorial expansion as institutions shaped at the nexus of monarchy and the pious learned, active man. Empire is portrayed as an institution molded from civic prerogative and personal moral worth perfected through education and knowledge. As a work which draws heavily upon the tradition of the *specula principum*, the *Alexandre* thus integrates into the fiction of the tale political theory with ethical principles and scholarship to codify, teach, and legitimize the nature of imperial power and authority. If placed within the political and intellectual coordinates of Alfonso X's youth and seen through his eyes, the *Alexandre* acquires a new symmetry and a meaning that transcends the bare philological facts that it is a liberal rewriting of Gautier's *Alexandreis* and a formal touchstone of *clerecía* texts. When we imagine that Alfonso the Wise might have been--indeed most likely was--the intended reader or recipient of this work, the *Alexandre*'s counsels take on immediacy and an obvious pertinence to a discrete historical setting steeped in institutional change and vast political objectives. They provide singular insight into a cultural mindset that integrates learning, kingship and conquest that speaks volumes about the political and cultural aspirations of the royal personage

who doubtless was both its intended reader and inspiration. When viewed from this vantage point, the *Libro de Alexandre* resonates with a distinct historical personality and a politics absent from any other text in the *clerecía* repertoire, perhaps with exception of the later *Poema de Fernán González*. It becomes the site where an inexperienced, yet scholarly ruler could be offered both adulation, instruction, and inexorable admonition on how to avoid the errors and fate of his ancient imperial forebears, as well as be led to contemplate the regal and chivalric virtues that could secure the recuperation of a lost ideal while guaranteeing his personal, political, and eternal fame and salvation.

Quite aside from its prescriptive princely advice and the portrayal of the higher schooling of princes, the *Alexandre* encompasses a tale that holds forth the hope of dynastic regeneration through the cultivation of wisdom, knowledge, and the study of texts. From this perspective, the *Alexandre* constitutes an imperial *Familienroman* that doubtless served as a powerful model for and exhortation to the ambitious scion of Fernando III. To be sure, we know from studies by, among others, Spiegel (1993), Legge (1963), and Mason (1984) that one of the chief modalities of composing and reading romances in the late Middle Ages encompassed an appeal to a genealogical or ancestral interpretation of a story which often might allude to a family through “oblique references to a glorious past, and . . . hold up a kind of distorting mirror to a family’s fortunes” (Legge, 197).² The messages of tenacity and the triumph of virtue tempered by wisdom and learning take on a distinct significance, then, when situated in the context of the early imperial designs of Alfonso X, whose self-fashioned likeness in later works seems always to portray a modern emperor’s struggle for recognition, legitimacy, and transcendence through the mastery of politics and the control and propagation of the foundational discourses of power and the institutions of culture: the law, science (including Astronomy), historiography, and the arts (music, poetry, even leisure and games).

Strategies of military conquest and civil dominance coupled with the acquisition of high learning merge in the *Alexandre* to reflect the profile of a highly literate ruler shaped by the imperatives of a new politics profoundly influenced by secular clerical culture. Rico has drawn a neat portrait of the practitioners of the so-called *mester de clerecía* and insisted upon their lettered, secular character. Citing Diego García de Campos, who was chancellor to Alfonso VIII of Castile the grandfather of Alfonso X, Rico has shown how the authors who practiced this art shared a common ethos that can be succinctly characterized as belonging to “*scolares quidem sunt clerici*” (1985, 7). Not cloistered clerics but educated, worldly clerks: individuals who usually took only minor orders, shunned the cloister, were formed in universities and who sought to have an influence on society, ‘in mundo . . ., in agone . . ., in lucta,’ by bringing their bookish education to bear “in saeculum.”

To be sure, in his quest to delineate these *clerici*, Rico draws a parallel between the common purpose of both the *Alexandre*’s hero and the narrative voice that relates it: “el autor infunde a su héroe el mismo afán de conocer y esparcir conocimientos que determinan la composición de la obra entera”, a desire that is “inseparable del afán de gloria que jamás abandona el protagonista” (13).

Likely composed for Alfonso’s perusal and edification sometime after Castile’s definitive union with Leon in 1230 under the aegis of Fernando III, the *Libro* thus signals a clear alliance

² Legge (1963, 174) uses the term ‘ancestral romance’ to classify certain Anglo-Norman romances that were written for, or referred to, a particular family, the heroes of which were portrayed as the family’s founders, and which may also have been produced in religious houses patronized by the families in question. See Mason (1984) also.

between secular clerical and monarchical territorial expansionist ideals. As Arizaleta notes, the book marks an uninterrupted imperial rhythm outward from its starting point as “Alexandre marche toujours vers l’extérieur, qui deviant centre lorsqu’il y laisse l’empreinte de sa puissance—c’est lorsqu’il cesse d’avancer et s’installe à Babylone qu’il meurt” (1999, 230). As it does this, the *Libro* inscribes by analogy the significance of the affiliation of culture, politics, high learning, and territorial conquest in charting the emergence of empire in thirteenth-century Castilian civic life.

Alexander’s conquests as portrayed in the *Libro* are more than personal, political, and territorial. In the tradition of empire, they are deeply cultural. The idea of an empire based solely on personal domination is rejected as despotism. The world of learning and education, reading, writing and interpretation, become the tools for a new concept of heroic agency and political hegemony in the book. Although military conquest is important, it is ultimately ancillary to the larger conquest of the customs, ways of life, and variegated cultural formations of the many realms an emperor must rule. Although the *Alexandre* does posit a struggle between civilization and barbarism, to borrow a phrase from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, there is room for the classical imperial notion of unity in diversity (*utraque unum*) within its vision. Adumbrating the very politics that Alfonso would actively pursue when he became king, the poet understood that force could not be the lasting guarantor of empire and hegemony. He knew that language, culture, law, and custom were the only arms that could ultimately vouchsafe imperial conquest. For this reason, appealing to the authority of writing, rather than the practices of experience, Alexander counsels caution and deliberation regarding the conquest of Persia in the following terms:

Vagar doma las cosas --dizlo la escriptura--,
doma aves e bestias bravas por su natura,
la tierra que es áspera, espacio la madura;
entender eso mismo de toda criatura.

Los que no se nos rindieron por derecho temor,
si entre nos e ellos non oviere amor,
quando nos traspongamos avrán otro señor,
seremos nos caídos en tanta mala error.

Vayamos con aquellos algunt poco faziendo,
irán nuestros lenguajes, nuestro fuero sabiendo,
de nuestra compañía irán sabor prendiendo;
después podremos ir alegres e ridiendo. (1847-49)

The counsel offered here reflects the cultural politics Alfonso would, in fact, pursue as he consciously adopted measures that were inclusive to win the consent to be governed of the newly conquered and create an environment where cultural and linguistic divergence could, with time, ultimately lead to full acculturation conducive to the exercise of lasting imperial power. He understood that tolerance and cooperation between different groups in a single society was the key to peaceful co-existence and durable change. Alfonso consciously opted to develop new and innovative approaches to society that would draw not just on the learned sources available to him, but on the human strengths of all the cultural and religious groups that comprised his realms (See Márquez Villanueva 1995). In that sense Alfonso’s concept of dominion was the same as the one for his model of culture: it was eclectic and drew upon the broadest spectrum of human resources, just as it concurred with the politics of conquest advised by the *Libro*.

Yet all is not affirmative in the hero and in the world portrayed in the *Libro*. The book is in fact laden with anxieties. As the narrative progresses, the relationship between knowledge and power is shown to become complex, fraught with ethical considerations and confounded by the character of those who exercise and possess them. In the end, the poem is not simple imperial propaganda as it does not fail to offer an unproblematic image of empire and the emperor, since it is the very quest for knowledge and authority that destroys Alexander and the empire he has forged. In this way, the *Libro* comprises a potent admonition to those who fail to recognize the human limits of authority and seek through the acquisition of profane knowledge to equate themselves with God.

In the *Libro* Alexander meets his end because God wills it. Nature denounces the Macedonian emperor before God for having dared to invade her kingdom and scrutinized her secrets. Aggrieved by the transgression, God pronounces judgment on Alexander and brands him a “lunático” (2329). This episode is absent from the poet’s main source, the Latin *Alexandreis* of Gautier de Chatillon, and it is recorded testimonial in Castilian for the use of the term lunatic. The word developed in a highly specialized lexical environment—astrology and medicine—to designate a form of human madness attributable to the influence of the heavens upon individual behavior. God’s emphatic words, spoken with irony and displeasure, underscore the Almighty’s contempt for Alexander—who could be taken for Alfonso X—a man whose sights are alleged to fail to transcend the empirical universe and the notion of a self-sufficient Nature (*natura naturans*). God punishes Alexander for his pride (*soberbia*) and condemns him to death. All of which points to a crucial conceptual distinction in the *Libro*: one which marks the existing tension between emerging natural philosophy and Aristotelian Science in the thirteenth century and a resistant Christian theology, precisely the moment when the efficacy and utility of both were being debated by the Scholastics in the universities and the *studia generalia* across all Christendom (see Gerli 2018 and Riva 2019).

Alfonso X’s reputation for the production, use, and dissemination of profane knowledge as well as his demonstrated preference for scientific or “natural” over theological knowledge, was denounced to the pope by a group of Castilian bishops. The Castilian episcopate complained that unlike the kings of old, Alfonso did not look to them for guidance and that he had replaced them with evil counselors who encouraged the king to commit heresy. According to Peter Linehan, “the Castilian episcopate’s complaint [claimed] that astronomers, augurs, and ‘aisperiti’ held sway at Alfonso X’s court, denying the existence of God (‘asserentes Deum non esse’) and concerning themselves not with the Godhead (*natura naturans*) but with the creation (*natura ab ipso naturata*)” (1993, 435-36). The New Science, plus negative assessments and condemnations of it, Aristotle, Aristotelian natural philosophy, politics, and curiosity thus form part of the immediate cultural milieu and intellectual horizon of both the *Libro de Alexandre* and the Alfonsine court.

In the end, the *Alexandre* poet’s fable points toward the need for the construction of a reformed imperial *auctoritas*, one that envisions a broad cultural purview which justifies and stabilizes the nature and uses of political power based on knowledge in the secular world, but also one necessarily mitigated by piety, personal virtue, and humility before the Mysteries of Creation. Although it would be an overstatement to call the poet reactionary in his anti-Aristotelian and scientific propensities since he does not espouse a spirituality or a politics that favor an unquestioning return to the *status quo ante*--the previous spiritual and political order of society--, he does not fully accept a completely secular politics, philosophy, or political philosophy; even as he expresses a nostalgia for something absent in his portrayal of Alexander’s pagan civilization. The *Libro de Alexandre* seeks to advance both a model of knowledge and a norm for its civic uses,

as it builds upon the ancient Christian taboos of self-sufficient knowledge and *vana curiositas* to construct a scheme in which knowledge can be legitimated, but only in so far as it might serve God and a higher moral order. In his apologia for knowledge the poet thus also reveals its dangers and ambiguities, especially when the utility of knowledge is in and manipulated by the hands of the powerful, as he proposes a new imperial ideal that recognizes its efficacy but calls for its accommodation to piety and faith.

In the *Alexandre*, knowledge, education, and wisdom are the guiding forces that may privilege and justify monarchy and an imperial vision capable of transforming a pagan into almost a secular saint: “Se non fuesse pagano de vida tan seglar/deviélo ir el mundo todo adorar” (2667). Yet the wisest king without Christian virtue, humility, Grace, and respect for the Mysteries of God is nothing but a fallen, pagan man whose potentiality for righteousness can never be achieved. The *Alexandre* in this way exposes what Ian Michael calls an “inbuilt tension” that constitutes both “an inspiration and a warning to contemporary rulers” (1970, 286).

The *Alexandre*'s plot is richly nuanced by the dark forces of worldly ambition, complicating the vision of the formation of the Iberian expansionist imaginary and its apology for empire. The work is saturated with, and undermined, by hesitation, punctuated by an attendant gloom that points to the existence of an epistemological break marking an insuperable rift between empire, ambition, and virtue, an attitude marked by melancholy, that points to an disquietude about betrayal and death as the final wages of imperial aspirations. In short, as Weiss has noted (2006, 109-42), there is a fundamental ambivalence that complicates the affirmative rhetoric which depicts conquest and hegemony. As the exaltation of the conjunction of empire and learning progresses, we hear an undertone of restiveness and resistance in the *Libro* as it depicts the ethical effects on the person of the acquisition of unlimited supremacy. There appear feelings of apprehension and anxiety which subvert the assertions of ascendancy and patterns of order and constraint, even at those moments in the poem when this negative posture seems to be disciplined and domesticated. Yet, even as the undercurrent of uncertainty is contained in the poem, the containment proves little more than a deferral, a postponement of an inevitable confrontation with inexorable death set in motion by the very agentive imperial gestures and ambitions of the hero.

To be sure, Amaia Arizaleta and María Rodríguez Porto have established a material textual link between the Hohenstaufen family and MS O of the *Libro* (Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vit. 5-10). Held by BN since 1886, MS O dates from the second half of the thirteenth century and suggests that it was intended for a royal audience, indeed most probably for Alfonso X himself as I shall argue. One of the illuminations in it depicts Alexander's rescue from his disastrous immersion in the River Cydnus, a moment between life and death, in which his attendants lift him up from his near-fatal adventure in a pose clearly calculated to suggest Christ's deposition or entombment. Indeed, the image is so striking that the authors note “la tonalité christologique de la scène du Cydnus nous frappe” (261). In fact, it is possible to read the picture as an allegory of life and death, where we have living people suspended over a tomb, somewhere between life and death. In the middle, acting as a barrier between the two, is the figure of a Jesus-like Alexander, illustrating the belief that only by having faith in Christ can death be avoided, and one can ascend into heaven. Like the sacrificed Christ, Alexander appears nearly naked, vulnerably human and exposed, at the lowest moment of his mortal powers, suggesting that the MS was confected to be used in a courtly clerical environment and to resonate with inferences of both mortality and messianic empire. As Arizaleta and Rodríguez Porto put it, MS O comprises a work that seeks to convey “la representation complexe d'un roi laïque et pécheur, transfiguré en image christique” (267).

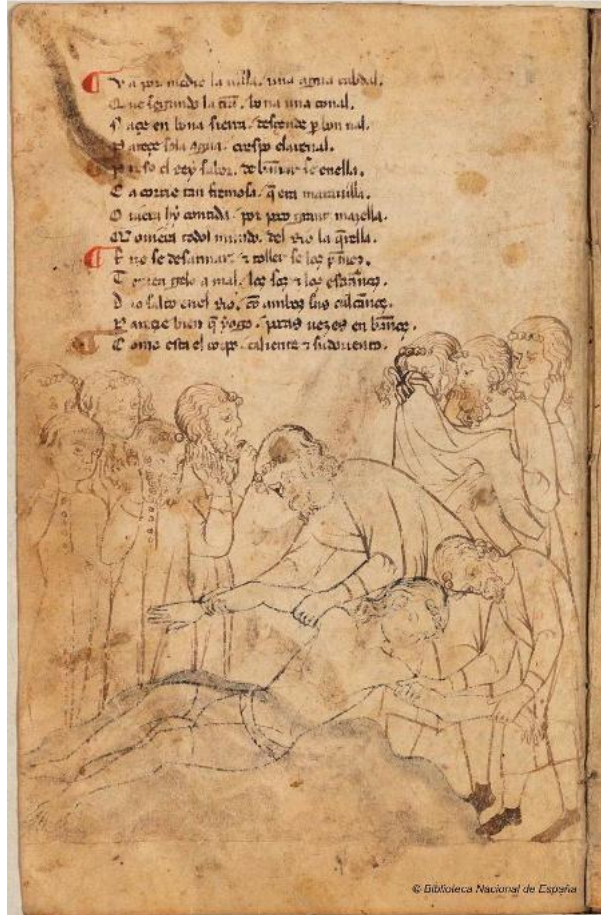


Figure 1 With permission, Biblioteca Nacional de España

Arizaleta's and Rodríguez Porto's analysis of the illuminations in MS O suggests that the images were conceived in the spirit of *translatio imperii* "tout en développant visuellement la chevalerie et la clergie du roi" and "la dimension géopolitique du mythe d'Alexandre" (261), just as all signs in them point to Alfonso X, the likely intended reader of the text and beholder of the pictures. The images insinuate a clear genealogy of empire designed to evoke visually a symbolic line of continuity stemming from Christ to Alexander, and then to Frederick Barbarossa in a discourse of atemporal, universal dominion. Connected imaginatively to a long iconographic tradition depicting the drowning of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in the Saleph River (the Göksu River in contemporary Turkey) on June 10, 1190, as seen in for example an illumination found in Petrus de Ebolo's *Liber ad honorem Augusti*, which culminates in nineteenth-century Gothic Revival renderings of the scene like the one by F. Tietmeyer in Figure 2 below, the image in O reveals a convincing pictorial palimpsest conjoining Christian sacredness, the Hohenstaufen emperor and the current Castilian pretender to the Crown of the Romans; a family bond that would easily have been recognized and appreciated by all members of the court especially since the Ghibelline Republic of Pisa based its recognition of Alfonso as King of the Romans and Emperor on his descent from the Dukes of Swabia (see Martínez 150-51). The Castilian-Leonese monarchy was, of course, closely related both by blood and marriage to the Hohenstaufen, but especially Alfonso X who for the better part of his life aspired to the Imperial Crown, and whose mother was Beatrice (née Elizabeth) of Swabia, one of Barbarossa's granddaughters (Arizaleta, Porto 264).



Figure 2 Wikimedia Commons

Another of the images in MS O (in fol. 45v) depicts Alexander in Troy at the tomb of Achilles, to whom under the auspices of Athena Polias he consecrated his arms before setting off on the conquest of Asia in the pursuit of his empire (See Figure 3).³

³ In 334 BC Alexander crossed the Hellespont and went directly to Troy. There he dedicated his arms to Athena and laid a wreath at the tomb of Achilles, the Greek champion of the Trojan War. The act was said to have prefigured Alexander's role as the new Achilles when he liberated the Greek cities of Asia Minor from Asiatic rule.



Figure 3 With permission Biblioteca Nacional de España

Surrounded by his troops, descendants of the Greek heroes of the War, Alexander has just narrated the ancestral story of Troy to them. The illustration has been studied from the rhetorical perspective of ekphrastic composition by Ross and Pascual-Argente, yet the illumination is this and something more since it serves as a complex visual *lieu de mémoire* that affirmatively projects itself into the intended readerly presence--mid thirteenth-century Castile--and tells us significantly more about its meaning when approached from a mythic point of view, the discourse of empire, and the idea of the manuscript page as a pictorial mirror, or *speculum*--as a space for contemplative reading and looking. In it we find a matrix of simultaneously commingled temporalities—ancient and modern, i.e., Antiquity and the medieval moment--that connect two imperial figures across history and time: the archetypal Emperor-protagonist of the book, Alexander the Great, and the would-be contemporary emperor who sees himself as both Alexander's and Achilles's descendant and heir, and was likely the intended reader of the work, Alfonso X. We can deduce this because of certain key pictorial features and artifacts in the illumination which serve deliberately to collapse these figures into one. These are the coloring in the image, the crown on Alexander's head, and the medieval sword held up to the Emperor by one of his minions arrayed, as are the others in the

image, in contemporary thirteenth-century chainmail.

Both Ross and Pascual-Argente have remarked on the presence of coloring in what is an overwhelmingly monochromatic brown-ink image (84, and 88-89 respectively). They note that the figure of the emperor in the illustration is traced in blue, yet they fail to address the meaning or significance of the reasons for this coloring. The coloring was sufficiently important to the illustrator of MS O so as to have him take pains to include the detail in the nearly all-monochromatic illustration of the manuscript. The bluish-purple outline of the king and one of his followers is meant to evoke Tyrian purple. Tyrian purple (known also as Royal purple, Royal blue, or Imperial purple) is a kind of dye extracted from the murex (a shellfish) and was first produced in the Phoenician city of Tyre during the Bronze Age. Its difficulty of manufacture, its striking purple-to-blue-to-red color spectrum, and its resistance to fading made Tyrian purple clothing highly desirable and expensive. Alexander the Great, too, was said to have come across 5,000 talents in weight of purple cloth at Susa, likely acquired through tribute and kept as a permanent deposit of high value. Tyrian purple was an important status symbol from Antiquity to the present and is used to symbolize power, prestige, and wealth (See Elliott 2008, especially 177-82). In Antiquity only the emperor or those fortunate enough to receive his favor could wear the bluish-purple silk garments known as *kekolumena*, while foreigners were not permitted to purchase them (For the technical and cultural history of Tyrian purple, see Edmonds 2000). The coloring in the image of MS O thus marks Alexander's imperial identity and Hephaestion, also outlined in blue, as his likely successor, just as it also reflects the imperial ambitions of the work's intended reader, Alfonso who is often depicted with a bluish-purple cloak, tracing, or surrounding (as in Figure 4 below). Notably, one of Alexander's soldiers, whose pointing hand serves as a manicule, or a pointing device in the shape of a hand used to draw attention to a section of text, points backward into the narrative above, while another, the single figure outlined in purple---presumably Hephaestion--points forward into the remaining unfolding parts of the story corresponding to the conquest of Asia. Among the remaining accompanying figures some glance back into the past as others gaze toward the future. The illustration thus marks a key pause in the perusal of the MS and a contemplative pictorial place in it that visually exhorts the reader-looker to reflect upon the past and look forward to the future.

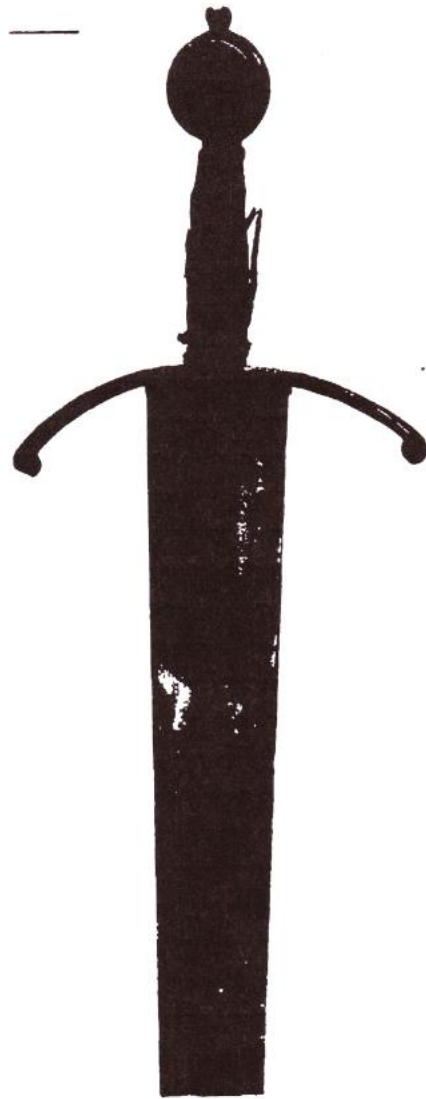


Figure 4 Wikimedia Commons

Although the figure in the illustration of MS O is primarily intended to portray Alexander at the tomb of Achilles, Alexander does not wear the traditional imperial wreath of laurel leaves but the Crown of the medieval House of Ivrea, the Burgundian dynasty of Germanic origin to which Alfonso belonged.⁴ With its distinctive acanthus leaves (see Figures 3 and 4 above), it is a dominant feature in nearly all the portraits of Alfonso which have come down to us (especially in the *Cantigas*) and appears regularly in contemporary images of his immediate Castilian-Leonese forebears, Alfonso VII, VIII, IX, and Fernando III, whose mummified body in the Cathedral of Seville still wears the crown of the dynasty to this day. Similarly, the hilt of the medieval sword that is displayed, also heavily outlined in MS O, is meant to evoke either Alfonso's sword (held now in the Real Armería of Madrid, see Figure 5) or Fernando III's *Lobera*, the legendary blade

⁴ The House of Ivrea was also known as the House of the Palatinate Counts of Burgundy, whose origin could be traced to the County of Oscheret. The Palatinate was, of course one of the Elector States of the Holy Roman Empire. The House of Ivrea ascended to the Throne of Leon in the eleventh century after the marriage of Raymond of Burgundy, son of William I of Burgundy, to the Infanta Urraca (later Queen Urraca I of Leon) daughter of Alfonso VI. Raymond's and Urraca's son, Alfonso VII, wore the Crown of Ivrea and claimed the title of Emperor of All the Spains when he was crowned *Imperator totius Hispaniae* in Leon in 1135 (See Bartlett, 65-68, and Alfonso VII's image in Codex Tumbo A of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela).

closely associated with this king's conquest of Seville (1248), kept in the cathedral and still used since Fernando III's death in 1252 after Alfonso X had ordered it to be displayed during the annual commemorations of the conquest of the city by his father (See Figure 6).



(Figure 5. Sword of Alfonso X. Croke y Navarrot 1898, 204, fig. 120)



Figure 6 La Espada Lobera (Wolfslayer), sword of Fernando III. Wikimedia Commons

The kind of pictorial symbolism and temporal simultaneity we find in Figure 2 allowed medieval dynasties to create new kinds of civic authority through iconographic representation by collapsing time and space in pictorial images to extend political ancestries beyond history into the days of myth. Far from being part of a jumble of *atrezzo*—of objects and props—the things portrayed in the image of Alexander at Achilles' tomb form a network of signs that have an ontological and historical dimension and convey meaning to the reader-looker as they propitiate the imposition of the present onto the past. Here in Figure 2 the imperial antecedents of the House of Ivrea are depicted through them as they stretch not just back to Alexander the Great but beyond to Alexander's own legendary heroic forebear, Achilles. The illustration thus serves as a crucial element in linking Alfonso and his dynastic claims to the universal history of Empire and to his legendary ancestors and was probably created by some artist very close to the court.

Alfonso's explicit entitlement to the Holy Roman Empire is visually manifested in the following image (Figure 7), which depicts the King's reception of Bandino di Guido Lancia and another of the Ghibelline ambassadors of Pisa, who brought news to Soria on March 17 1256 of Alfonso's election as Emperor.



Figure 7 *Fuero juzgo*. With permission

Here in full regalia Alfonso wears the Crown of Ivrea and the livery of Castile and Leon as he grasps the *orbis terrarum* (the traditional symbol of the Christian identity of a monarch's realms) attached via the rod of authority to the *Reichsadler* above it, the Eagle of the Holy Roman Empire depicted against a Royal blue background.⁵

⁵ The histories and legends on the birth, life, and death of Alexander are filled with prodigious signs and events. A significant number of them allude to the color of his eyes starting with the third century *Historia de preliis* in which Alexander is said to have one brown eye and one blue eye, considered to be a mark of destiny in the popular imagination. This rare biological phenomenon, which exists in a very reduced sector of the human genome, is called *heterochromia iridum*. The *Libro* describes the two colors of the emperor's eyes, although with significant chromatic changes. In the book one eye is green and the other red: "El un ojo ha verde e el otro vermejo" (150 a). The change is significant because it connects the image of Alexander to a long tradition of Mediterranean superstitions regarding red- and green-colored eyes associated with evil, sin, and witchcraft, and in this way helps us partially to recuperate the way Alexander was meant to be seen by the anonymous clerical author of the work. More importantly, the poet's change in eye color was sufficiently noteworthy to compel the illustrator of MS O to include the detail in the almost wholly monochromatic illustration that appears on fol. 45v of the manuscript. Although limits of space prevent me from developing the significance of this in the MS here, it is the subject of a forthcoming article: "Los ojos del Emperador: *Libro de Alexandre* 150 a-b y las ilustraciones del MS O (Vit. 5-10) de la BNE". *Actas del XXI Congreso*

In light of the evidence presented in the illuminations of MS O and their clear evocation of Alfonso X, the *Libro de Alexandre* must be looked to as a touchstone when tracing the genealogy of Iberian empire--its *regesta imperii*--and how it was imagined and textualized, but most especially confuted by the larger intimations of failure and death interspersed throughout it. The work outlines with clarity the presence and significance of the conflicted literary discourse on the subject of empire in Iberian writing starting at mid-thirteenth century, an attitude that will prevail well into the sixteenth, the Golden Age of Iberian empire, as shown in Vincent Barletta's study of Alexander in the early modern Mediterranean imaginary (2010). Beginning with the *Libro de Alexandre*, the discourses of Iberian empire's triumphalism are countered by frissons of anxiety, an awareness of the ever-present reality of moral and mortal danger, and the persistent dread of failure that circumscribes all human encounters with limitless ambition and the possibilities of unbounded power. As Weiss concludes, the *Libro* arrives at a stalemate, demonstrating that the pursuit of empire is a double-edged sword that leads to an impasse between secular and spiritual ideals since, in the end, Alexander's "attachment to God makes him betray political ideals; [and his] attachment to political ideals is a betrayal of God" (2006, 142).

Whether written for him in mind or not, Alfonso X was surely familiar with the *Libro de Alexandre* via MS O, and like it, when he became king sought to contextualize and reconcile the figure of Alexander in a medieval Christian historical framework (see Michael, 1970), tempering both the figure of the emperor and the notion of empire with Christian ethical constraints (see González-Casanovas, 1997 and Barletta, 2011). Alfonso looked to inscribe this vision in his own historical works, and to exploit it in the development of the ideology of empire and imperial subjects he wished to propagate and exploit as the basis of his own regal ambitions. As Barletta notes, however, Alexander for Alfonso became "un arma tanto poderosa como peligrosa en su programa, al final frustrado, de subir al trono romano y redefinir (en su propia imagen) el imaginario del imperio" (2011, 51). Although clearly intellectually aware of the moral and mortal perils of imperial ambition, the Castilian king appears not to have learned the lesson traced by the anonymous clerk who mapped out not only a theory of empire but the hazardous trajectory of unbridled human ambition. Alfonso the Wise, despite the learned lessons he both received and taught, in the end remained blind to the grievous possibilities of his own aspirations. In this way, the book uncannily foreshadows the potential of all of Alfonso's political objectives and, tragically in its end, all the risks of their inevitable frustration through the estrangement and alienation of those closest to any king who would be emperor.

The study of empire as a category of the social and political imagination of the Iberian intelligentsia from the Middle Ages through early modernity must begin with the *Libro de Alexandre*, then, and in the context of Alfonso X's personal history. Both the *Libro* and Alfonso stand at the head of a long line of texts and rulers that would attempt to theorize empire in the Iberian world. From its very outset and its appearance at the hands of a thirteenth-century clerk, Iberian imperialist literature was not only cognizant of a grand design but also redolent with portents and admonitions of failure. Starting with the *Libro de Alexandre*, the encounters with new worlds, naively conceived as confrontations between the civilized and the barbarous, between righteous Christianity and the fallen heathen since the time of Charlemagne, are transformed into a dialectic in which uncertainty undermines all the possibilities of wholly positive authentication. Conquest and hegemony are transformed in the *Alexandre* not just into a discourse of limitless expansion and virtuous dominion, but into a process of self-examination that, rather than reveal

and affirm righteousness and self-certainty, oblige a rethinking of the medieval ideals of empire, one in which an ascendant Christian Charlemagne, impelled by a type of moral manifest destiny (see McKitterick, 1997, 134, 2004, 278), is displaced by a more ambiguous fallible and human Alexander. The very teleology of the *fecho del imperio* (underscored here with deliberate irony to echo Alfonso's epic characterization of his quixotic quest to be King of the Romans) is outlined with prophetic clarity in the *Libro de Alexandre* as it accentuates a moral ambivalence toward the imperial ideal.

The paradigmatic destiny of empire mapped out in the story of Alexander the Great—as both text and subtext--and its influence on the rhetorical construction, invention, and projection of empire in later key Iberian literary works must ultimately be traced back to the *Libro de Alexandre*. In it, it is possible to uncover the forbidding dialogue between the avatars of ancient and modern empire that will prevail in many of the texts of the sixteenth century, the Golden Age of Spanish conquest and imperialism. From the very beginning, then, both the learned texts and the historical events of Iberian empire resonate with problematic Alexandrine subterfuges: the almost furtive yet ubiquitous undercurrents of fear, failure, mortality, and resistance that surface throughout, and which ultimately shade the somber side of all imperial aspirations as they reanimate the ancient specter, but especially the mortal destiny, of the Macedonian king.

In conclusion, the *Libro de Alexandre* must be evaluated not simply as a didactic romance or as a monument to the erudition of the thirteenth-century *mester de clerecía*, but as cultural artifact that thinks seriously about, and reflects deeply upon, the broader civic and dynastic implications of Castilian-Leonese empire: in addition to its belletristic dimensions it must be perused as much as a political and hortatory work--as the virtual mirror of an actual prince--deeply implicated in the imperial ambitions of the Castilian royal house that imagined itself heir to the legacy of Greece and Rome. More than a romance of antiquity bound to university culture and the schools, the *Libro* offers a profound meditation on the limits of power and ambition aimed at the court, a book fit for a king who would be emperor--Alfonso X of Castile and Leon.

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