

# THE WORLD OF THE WISE KING: REVISITING MEDIEVAL SPAIN

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## A DISTANT MIRROR

Medieval people may have imagined the world in ways that are seem alien to us: but just as often, when we read medieval chronicles or examine manuscript images like the scene below, we experience a jolt of familiarity. The delicate balance between continuity and change is one of the elements that makes the study of history compelling.

My research draws on the idea that we have much to learn from the medieval period: far from having progressed uniformly from a 'dark age', we can see ourselves in a new light by revisiting Europe in its formative period between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. I recently co-edited a book (*Why the Middle Ages Matter. Medieval Light on Modern Injustice* (Routledge, 2011) asking how medieval history can make us rethink contemporary issues such as prisons, sexuality, torture, race, and women's rights.

Medieval Spain—the area in which I specialize—was a society which in many ways resembled our own. Characterized by its intermixture of cultures (Muslim, Christian, and Jewish), its major urban centers – Seville, Córdoba, Toledo – foreshadowed the Renaissance and shared the dynamic creativity of modern western cities. At the same time, it was characterized by powerful forms of militarism and colonialism. It was, to borrow Barbara Tuchman's phrase, "a distant mirror" to our own times.



## ALFONSO THE WISE

Alfonso el Sabio "the Wise", king of the twinned Spanish realms of Castile and León (1252-84), was one of the most learned of all medieval rulers. Although he came to power at the height of the so-called Reconquest of Spain, in which Christian armies attempted to put an end to Muslim authority in the south, he drew great inspiration from Arabic culture. He inherited, in a particular, a view that was prevalent in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain): the notion that the ruler of a people should be an *intellectual* leader, and not just a commander-in-chief.

My current book project looks specifically at Alfonso as a "mirror" for modern readers, and focuses on the realm of the emotions. A prolific writer and patron of the arts, the Wise King has a great deal to say about emotional themes that matter a great deal to us: among them, friendship; family; anger; manners; even fun and games. Despite the sobriquet (*el Sabio*) which he acquired in the generations after his death, Alfonso was not always wise in the realm of emotions, but he brought his powerful intelligence to bear on the search for personal and collective happiness.

My sources for this project include royal chronicles written during—and about—Alfonso's reign; his Book of Games (in which he interprets the world through the prism of a chess board); and the vast corpus of satirical and holy songs, which have miraculously survived to the present day and are still widely recorded. The *Cantigas de Santa María* [Songs of Holy Mary] offer a particularly intimate insight into everyday life and cultural ideals at the heart of medieval society.

## CANTIGA DE SANTA MARIA 47

The forty-seventh *cantiga* tells us of a monk who usually observed all the rules of his monastic order, but once consumed so much wine that he became very drunk. Tottering around the monastery, he is tormented by the Devil in various guises: a raging bull, a Wild Man, and finally a lion.... It is only the personal intervention of the Virgin Mary that saves the monk from disaster:

*When the monk entered the church, the Devil appeared to him in the shape of a Lion; but the Holy Virgin hit it with a stick, saying "Get away from here, infamous creature – disappear right now!"*

*After Holy Mary rescued Her monk, as I have told you, and quieted his fears caused by the Devil and the wine which had addled him, She told him "Be careful from now on, and do not misbehave!"*

On one level, the tale is a pious narrative of devotion to the Queen of Heaven; Alfonso sets himself up as her personal troubadour. But on another level, the story suggests a love of life, an embrace of human weakness, and a general good humor, which are far removed from our preconceptions about the Middle Ages. In fact, medieval attitudes towards drink (as to sex) were sometimes significantly more tolerant than modern attitudes have been.



## ABOUT ME

B.A. Cambridge University (1988)  
Ph.D. Harvard University (1996)

## BOOKS

2011: *Why the Middle Ages Matter. Medieval Light on Modern Injustice*, ed. with C. Chazelle, F. Lifshitz, A. Remensnyder (New York: Routledge, 2011).

2008: *In the Light of Medieval Spain. Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past*, ed. with D. Coleman (New York: Palgrave, 2008)

2008: *Border Interrogations: Questioning Spanish Frontiers*, ed. with B. Sampedro Vizcaya (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008)

2001: *The Lara Family: Crown and Nobility in Medieval Spain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

*Please contact me at [simon.r.doubleday@hofstra.edu](mailto:simon.r.doubleday@hofstra.edu) if you have any questions about the Middle Ages, about Spain, about studying history at Hofstra, or about the Study Abroad in Spain program, which I will be directing in 2013.*