Alfonso X of Castile and Leon is commonly known to Spanish historians as El Sabio, variously translated as "the wise" or "the learned." That appellation is well deserved; as everyone knows, Alfonso X was an erudite man, probably without peer among contemporary monarchs. A poet and scholar, he brought together an equipage of poets, jurists, musicians, painters, scientists, historians, and others, who collaborated with him in the production of a body of literature and scholarship unparalleled in thirteenth-century Europe. One cannot doubt that, in this respect, he merits the title El Sabio. 

Alfonso's achievements as a king, however, have not won high praise. His unsuccessful quest to rule the Holy Roman Empire and the unfortunate denouement of his reign, when his son Sancho deprived him of the powers of government and thus effectively deposed him, have prompted historians to render a negative judgment of his abilities as a ruler. That judgment can and should be nuanced to some extent.

My purpose is to focus attention upon Alfonso X as ruler of a thirteenth-century kingdom and to assess his work. In doing so, I will address the following themes: (1) the government of Castile and Leon, (2) relations with the other peninsular states, (3) the affair of the Holy Roman Empire (fecho del imperio), and (4) the crisis of the succession. I cannot presume to treat each of these themes in the depth that it deserves, but an overview will provide a coherent understanding of Alfonso's activities and will assist in forming a judgment of his accomplishments as a ruler and a statesman.

In beginning this process, certain aspects of the legacy he received from his father, Fernando III (1217–1252), ought to be considered. Fernando won extraordinary renown because of his conquest of most of Andalusia and Murcia. Alfonso evidently admired him and may always have measured himself against his father's achievement; perhaps he ultimately felt somewhat less successful. In the *Estoria de Espenna*, he recorded the words spoken to him by his father on his deathbed:

> My son, you are richer in lands and good vassals than any other king in Christendom. Strive to do well and to be good, for you have the wherewithal. My Lord, I leave you the whole realm from the sea hither that the Moors won from Rodrigo, king of Spain. All of it is in your dominion, part of it conquered, the other part tributary. If you know how to preserve in this state what I leave you, you will be as good a king as I; and if you win more for yourself, you will be better than I; but if you diminish it, you will not be as good as I.

By speaking in this manner, Fernando III, unconsciously or not, placed a burden on his son's shoulders, as he implied that his worth as a king would depend on his pursuing an expansionist policy. This should
be understood in the light of Fernando's expressed desire, reported in Alfonso's Setenario, to assume the imperial title of the old Hispanic Empire, which had lapsed upon the death of Alfonso VII in 1157. The Hispanic imperial tradition considered the kings of Leon as heirs of the Visigoths and, as such, responsible for reconstituting their kingdom by the reconquest of the whole of Spain and also of North Africa, regarded as having once been part of the Visigothic realm. The goals that Fernando III set for his son therefore were clear: the completion of the reconquest of Spain and North Africa and, by implication, the assumption of the title of emperor of Spain. (5)

These ideas ought to be borne in mind if one is to understand Alfonso's policies. So also must his conception of monarchy as set forth in the Espéculo and the Partidas. Comparing king and people to the human body, he emphasized that the king was the head and the people the members. As such, they formed a unity under the guidance and direction of the head, the king. The king was God's vicar on earth in temporal affairs, placed here to rule the people in justice, rendering to each man his due. The king wielded the same powers in his kingdom as did the emperor in his empire. (6) Although Alfonso acknowledged the supremacy of the pope in spiritual affairs, he stressed that "we have no superior in temporal matters." By affirming two notions common among the jurists of the thirteenth century, namely "a king is emperor in his kingdom" (rex in regno suo imperator est) and "a king recognizes no superior in temporal affairs" (rex non recognoscat superiorem in temporalibus), the king was proclaiming his independence of all other rulers, while also declaring his direct dependence on God, whose vicar in temporal matters he professed to be. Although he did not use the word sovereignty, Alfonso was effectively asserting his sovereign position. (7)

The Government of Castile and León

As a king, Alfonso's first task was to govern effectively the kingdoms that he had inherited. Although he pronounced the unity of king and people in one body, the fact is that he did not rule over a unified state. Rather, his monarchy included several different kingdoms, as the royal intitulation makes clear: king of Castile, Toledo, León, Galicia, Seville, Córdoba, Murcia, Jaén, and the Algarve. (8) By listing all these titles, Alfonso was indulging in a bit of braggadocio, suggesting that his power and prestige were greater because of the many states subject to his rule. At the same time, however, the list also emphasized the historical fact of expansion by conquest, as well as the disparities existing among his dominions. Not only were the legal and institutional differences between Castile and León significant but so were the differences between these two together and the kingdoms to the south. Toledo, Seville, Córdoba, Murcia, Jaén, and the Algarve had once been petty Muslim kingdoms. Toledo, captured in 1085, was listed second after Castile and before León because it was the ancient seat of the Visigothic monarchy. To create a unity from such diverse elements was a staggering task that could not be accomplished in a generation, but Alfonso made certain efforts in that direction. (9) His purpose was not to obliterate all differences but to make them work in a coherent harmony.

Juridical unity could not be said to exist as long as a significant segment of the population was not subject to a common law. A Muslim and Jewish population of significant proportions was incorporated into the kingdom, particularly as a consequence of the conquest of Andalusia and Murcia. These populations were not easily assimilated because they continued to be assured of the right to worship freely and to be governed by their own laws and officials. (10)

The presence of a non-Christian population was closely linked with the task of settling and repopulating Andalusia. If the region were to remain under Castilian control, a substantial Christian population had to be established there. The emigration of thousands of Muslim workers who preferred to live in an Islamic state opened land for colonization, but it also weakened the economy. The distribution of lands to bishops, abbots, [17] nobles, military orders, and others was carried out systematically; within a few years, however, many settlers, finding life on the frontier too arduous or
dangerous, opted to return to their previous homes.\(\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\) Coupled with the 1264 revolt of the Mudejars (as Muslims living under Christian rule were known), this situation required that the work of settlement be undertaken once again. For two years, the Mudejars of Andalusia and Murcia, spurred on by Ibn al-Ahmar, king of Granada, resisted Alfonso's efforts to reduce them to submission; but at length, Alfonso's superior strength prevailed. As a consequence of the rebellion, the Moors of Andalusia were expelled from their lands and moved either to Granada or to North Africa, and the king endeavored to induce Christian settlers to occupy the abandoned lands.\(\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\) After the pacification of Andalusia, Alfonso X spent the years 1270-1272 resettling Murcia, where the Mudejars were allowed to remain though segregated from their Christian neighbors.\(\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\) The retention of these conquered areas was one of the most important tasks that Alfonso had to undertake. Even at the time of his death, the frontier was still not entirely secure, and the settlement of Andalusia was not yet complete.

Alfonso also strove to strengthen the institutions of monarchy as instruments of effective government.\(\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\) Not only did he seek to exalt the person of the monarch and to elaborate standards of court etiquette that stressed the king's unique status, but he also shaped the administrative branches of the royal court.\(\text{\textsuperscript{15}}\) The role and functions of the chancellor, notaries, scribes, and other subordinate personnel responsible for drafting, registering, and sealing royal documents were defined. The proper forms for different types of royal documents and a schedule of fees to be charged were set down. Alfonso's successors often cited his ordinance concerning this.\(\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\)

The king also restructured the royal tribunal and described the qualities and duties of royal justices. The ordinance enacted at Zamora in 1274 outlined the functions of the royal court in more explicit detail and also specified the casos de corte or cases that pertained exclusively to royal jurisdiction. Ordinary royal justices heard suits in first instance, as well as appeals from municipal courts; but their judgment could be appealed to other justices especially designated for that purpose. As the one ultimately responsible for the administration of justice, the king himself sometimes sat in a judicial capacity, promising to do so at least three times a week.\(\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\)

The king's most far-reaching action in the legal sphere was his compilation of a code of law to be applied in the royal court. This was the Espéculo de las leyes, a mirror of laws, according to which all other laws \(\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\) would be judged. Probably promulgated in the cortes of Toledo in the spring of 1254, it was intended to serve the justices of the royal court.\(\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\) All litigation brought before that court would be adjudicated in accordance with the Espéculo. Founded essentially upon Roman law, the new code required that the king's justices should have an expertise in that law. As a consequence, the administration of justice was entrusted to professional jurists, thus excluding amateurs, such as the nobles. This was a fundamental reason for their protest against the king in the cortes of Burgos in 1272.

Work on the Siete partidas began soon after the completion of the Espéculo because of Alfonso's election as Holy Roman Emperor and his desire to have a code that would reflect his new status. Though probably finished in 1265, the Partidas apparently was not promulgated until Alfonso XI gave it legal force in 1348.\(\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\)

The regrettable disappearance of so many of the original records of the monarchy makes it difficult to say to what extent the financial arm of the royal court was modified. No doubt the treasury assumed a more professional cast because of the greater complexity of the king's finances and the increase in personnel that it necessitated. The amount of the royal revenue was substantially greater than in any previous reign. Aside from the traditional sources of income cited in the municipal codes, or fueros, Alfonso collected the septennial coinage-tax called moneda forera, the tercia reales or crown share of the ecclesiastical tithe, customs duties, and servicios or subsidies granted by the cortes. Added to them was the tribute paid annually by the king of Granada, ranging from a third to a half of his yearly
income. Though payment of that sum was interrupted from time to time, it deluded Alfonso into believing that he was wealthier than he was. A continuing inflation often wiped out gains on paper and reduced the purchasing power of royal income.\(^{20}\) Alfonso probably had more to do with the development of extraordinary taxation than any of his predecessors. Extraordinary taxation was a common novelty throughout Western Europe in the late thirteenth century, because the business of monarchy had become more complex and more ambitious, and the ordinary revenues of the crown were insufficient to meet new needs. At the same time, Alfonso X incurred exceptional expenses beyond those of most of his contemporaries. For this reason, he aroused intense hostility that eventually contributed to his downfall.

The levying of extraordinary taxes was one reason why the king summoned the cortes into session. The evidence for the existence of the cortes as an assembly of prelates, nobles, and representatives of the towns can be \(^{19}\) traced back to the late twelfth century; but it was during the reign of Alfonso that it began to meet regularly, on the average of about every two and a half years. His description of a \textit{curia generalis} or cortes in 1254 as consisting of "archbishops and bishops; barons and great men of our court; [and] the procurators of cities, fortresses, and towns designated for this by their communities," aptly placed this new body in the institutional framework of the combined Castile-León. In the course of his reign, he convened the cortes concerning such varied issues as the succession to the throne, the regulation of the economy, the projected invasion of North Africa, his claim to the Holy Roman Empire, and the levying of taxes.\(^{21}\)

Whereas the king believed that the convocation of the cortes had certain advantages for him in winning support for his policies, it also gave each of the estates an opportunity to express its concerns and grievances. In his dealings with the clergy, Alfonso presented himself as the defender of Christendom against Islam. On the supposition that what he was doing was for the well-being of the church and of the Christian world in general, he claimed the right to nominate the bishops and to take the \textit{tercias reales}, or a third of the church tithe, for his purposes. Though generally submissive to the royal will, the bishops occasionally challenged him.\(^{22}\) The king made fair promises to them in 1255, in response to their complaints about royal encroachments on ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the \textit{tercias}, and the goods of deceased bishops which he claimed; but he did not substantially modify his policies. Nor does he appear to have observed his pledge, in return for the grant of a subsidy, to ask the consent of the prelates before levying it in the future.\(^{23}\) When some of the prelates, emboldened by the nobles' challenge to him in the cortes of Burgos in 1272, decided to protest royal policies, Alfonso threatened to expel them from the realm. Two years later, his son Fernando de la Cerda, acting on his father's instructions, endeavored to placate the bishops, but nothing really changed. Pope Nicholas III in 1279 sent a legate to confront the king with a long series of charges of abuse and of oppressing the church. Alfonso's failure to provide any real satisfaction, or to show any sign of modifying his attitude toward the church, prompted some of the prelates to join the movement against him in 1282.\(^{24}\)

Alfonso enhanced the position of the nobility, but instead of giving their allegiance, they chose to challenge him directly and even to rebel against him. With the intention of encouraging their service to the crown, he doubled their stipends (\textit{soldadas}), but this increase was dependent upon the tribute from Granada and ultimately required new taxes. The king's action was a bad precedent, as it aroused greediness among the nobles that \(^{20}\) could never be satisfied. They also profited from the distribution of lands in Andalusia. The king's modification of their \textit{fueros} by reason of the \textit{Espéculo}, as well as his imposition (with their consent) of six \textit{servicios} upon their vassals in 1269, eventually stirred their ire.\(^{25}\) Under the leadership of his brother, Felipe, they confronted him in the cortes of Burgos in 1272. Perhaps influenced by the dispute between James I and his Aragonese nobility, over the appointment of the \textit{justicia} as arbiter of noble litigation in the royal court, the Castilians demanded the appointment of
Alcaldes fijos dalgo or noble judges to adjudicate their disputes in accordance with their customary fueros. Alfonso protested that he had always dealt fairly with them and that this demand was a novelty, because none of his predecessors had such judges in the court. Circumstances had changed, however, as the influence of Roman law in the law codes and in the royal court was paramount. Royal judges were trained in the new law; and even though they might be knowledgeable in the old fueros, they were not inclined to apply them since the king had ordered the exclusive use of the Espéculo in his court. The nobles, in effect, were demanding judgment by their peers according to the old laws. Alfonso had to bow to them, confirming their fueros and also limiting the taxes due from their vassals. Some of the more intransigent nobles led by Infante Felipe rejected any compromise and went off to the kingdom of Granada; but within two years, the controversy had been settled, and most of them had returned to their allegiance. (26)

Alfonso effected long-range changes in the government and social structure of the towns. By summoning the towns regularly to the cortes, he gave them the opportunity to participate directly in the highest councils of the realm. The obvious importance of the municipalities, as centers of administration and as sources of military forces and revenues, prompted his action. He attempted to overcome the diversity of municipal laws by granting the Fuero real to the towns of Castile and Extremadura. This code, based in some measure on the Espéculo and probably promulgated with it in 1254 rather than conceded to individual towns over a long period of years, was intended to bring about some uniformity in municipal law. Appeals could be carried from it to the royal court, where final judgment would be rendered according to the Espéculo. Although the towns grumbled and complained, compelling the king to confirm their traditional codes in the cortes of Burgos in 1272, the Fuero real continued in use in many towns. (27)

Royal measures also significantly altered the social structure of the towns. The towns of Extremadura especially had supplied a substantial part of the urban militias for the wars of the reconquest. Now that the frontier [21] was removed to some distance, and the possibility of getting rich by a quick foray into Muslim territory was lessened, many townsmen were not readily inclined to respond to royal demands for military service. Concerned about defending Andalusia, Alfonso in 1256 tried to make military service more attractive by granting exemption from taxes to many mounted warriors in the Extremaduran towns who maintained horses and arms suitable for battle. The exemption was also extended to their widows, minor children, and dependents under certain conditions. The king thereby hoped to assure himself of an urban cavalry always ready for war. His action, on the other hand, served to emphasize the social and economic distinction between the caballeros villanos, or mounted warriors of the towns, and the peones or foot soldiers. Not only were the former privileged and exempt, but they also tended to control the principal offices of municipal government and probably were the usual representatives of their towns in the cortes. Ironically, though exempt from taxes themselves, they were called upon to consent to taxes that would be payable by others less privileged. The caballeros villanos were duly grateful and in the long run tended to become allies of the crown against a turbulent nobility. (28)

Alfonso's economic measures--some innovations, some carryovers from his father's time--affected all classes but especially the townsmen. The policies he established would be continued by his successors. Specifically, he condemned guilds of merchants and artisans unless they were of a purely spiritual or social nature. Merchants were forbidden to join together to fix prices; but in 1252 and again in 1268, the king published both price and wage schedules. Exports were closely controlled, and the export of certain goods (the so-called cosas vedadas--namely, horses, livestock, gold, and silver) was forbidden outright. Royal customs officials were appointed at specific locations to control traffic and to collect customs duties. For the first time, customs duties became a regular and important part of the royal revenue. Alfonso also set down uniform weights and measures and fixed the rate of interest at 33 1/3
percent. He failed to maintain an acceptable coinage, unfortunately, issuing debased coinage that drove good money out of circulation and caused prices to rise. His privileges granted to the Mesta in 1273 and 1278 apparently were intended to bring litigation between the sheepmen and the townsmen and others under royal control and also to enable him to tap the resources of the shepherding industry more efficiently by levying the livestock subsidy *servicio de los ganados*. 

The modifications of the municipal *fueros*, the debasement of the coinage, regulation of the economy, imposition of fines, and levying of extraordinary taxes in the form of subsidies granted by the cortes were causes of irritation and eventually drove the towns into the arms of the Infante Sancho. Before considering the dispute between the king and his son, however, attention must be directed to Alfonso X's external policies, first with respect to the peninsula itself and then to the Holy Roman Empire.

**Relations with the Peninsular States**

Alfonso X was acutely conscious of the Hispanic imperial tradition which regarded the entire peninsula as the legacy of the Visigoths, to be brought under the rule of their heirs, the kings of León. Toledo, the city where Alfonso was born and baptized, had been the seat of the Visigothic monarchy where, as he explained, "the emperors and kings whence we descend were buried." Toledo was the "cabeza de España" where anciently the emperors were crowned." Alfonso may have crowned himself there during the cortes of 1254. Early in 1259, he convened the cortes there concerning the affair of the empire—that is, the business of making good his recent election to the Holy Roman Empire. Perhaps he also wished to use that occasion to proclaim his hegemony over the entire peninsula, thereby resurrecting Leónese pretensions. The political realities had changed significantly since the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when Alfonso VI and Alfonso VII could claim to be emperors of Spain; but Alfonso X probably still aspired to gain recognition of his dominant position, perhaps by persuading the other peninsular rulers to become his vassals as the king of Granada was.

That his peninsular ambitions were not mere fantasy is indicated by the reaction of James I of Aragon-Catalonia. He appointed a procurator to oppose any assertion that Alfonso "should be a Hispanic emperor [imperator hispanus] and that we and our kingdoms and lands should be in any subjection to him by reason of empire" (27 September 1259). James evidently saw Alfonso's election to the Holy Roman Empire as a threat to his own independence. Whether his reaction was prompted by a suggestion that Alfonso's supremacy be acknowledged cannot be ascertained.

If the likelihood of gaining ascendancy over Aragon was quite remote, Alfonso clearly hoped to be able to reduce Navarre to submission. Since the twelfth century, the kings of Castile and Aragon had planned to partition Navarre; but now James I, fearful that Alfonso X might gain control there, lent his support to King Thibault II (1252-1270). One source reported that Thibault came to Alfonso's court at Vitoria early in 1256 and became his vassal. If that be so, it is curious that Alfonso, in the subscription to his charters, did not mention Thibault among his vassals. Alfonso threatened to invade Navarre again in 1274, but the widow of King Henry I (1270--1274) took her daughter Jeanne, heiress to the Navarrese throne, to France, seeking the protection of King Philippe III. Jeanne's betrothal to the heir to the French throne, the future King Philippe IV, made Navarre an appendage of the French monarchy for many years. Even so, Alfonso X and Peter III of Aragon in 1281 renewed plans for a partition of Navarre, though these were never carried out. In sum, Alfonso gained nothing substantial from his intervention in Navarre, but he drove the Navarrese into the arms of the French and thus furthered the aggrandizement of the French monarchy.

In the middle of the twelfth century, the kings of Castile and León had also proposed die partition of Portugal, though Alfonso X seems to have been content with an acknowledgment of his suzerainty in
the Algarve. In 1253, he made an agreement with Afonso III of Portugal (1245-1279), who married El Sabio's illegitimate daughter, Beatriz, and received the usufruct of the Algarve. When the Mudejars revolted in 1264, Alfonso X sought help from his son-in-law, yielding effective authority in the Algarve in exchange for the service of fifty knights. After the suppression of the Mudejar uprising, he agreed in February 1267 to cancel the service as a favor to his Portuguese grandson Dinis and to cede the Algarve to Afonso III. Although Alfonso X continued to call himself king of the Algarve, that may reflect the conservative practice of the chancery rather than an attempt to keep alive some vestigial claim to suzerainty. The boundaries of the two realms were also delimited along a line from Elvas and Badajoz to Ayamonte on the Atlantic Ocean. Some further modifications were made during the reign of King Dinis. In the long run, Alfonso X opted for a valuable alliance on his western frontier in return for territorial concessions.\(^{(35)}\)

Although Gascony was not part of the peninsula or of the Visigothic legacy, Alfonso X put forward claims to it based on his descent from Alfonso VIII and Eleanor Plantagenet, whose dowry it was. When the unruly Gascon nobility turned to Alfonso X for help against King Henry HI of England, the latter decided to negotiate. By the treaty of Toledo signed in the spring of 1254, Alfonso's sister Leonor married Prince Edward, heir to the English throne. When their union was solemnized at Burgos in November, Alfonso ceded whatever claims to Gascony he had to \(^{(24)}\) the newlyweds. For his part, Henry HI promised to aid Castile in a projected invasion of North Africa. Alfonso probably never expected to take possession of Gascony but considered an alliance with Henry useful. As events were to show, Henry's promises proved worthless, and Alfonso gained nothing other than the goodwill of his English brother-in-law Edward I (1272--1307).\(^{(36)}\)

The invasion of North Africa, a region once regarded as having been part of the Visigothic realm, had been planned by Fernando III. At the beginning of his reign, Alfonso X sought papal approval of the enterprise as a crusade and built shipyards at Seville for that purpose. In 1260, he appointed a sea lord (adelantado de la mar), "because we greatly desire to carry forward the work of the crusade overseas for the service of God and the exaltation of Christianity." The only consequence of all this activity was a brief Castilian occupation of the port of Salé, Arabic Salâ, on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Pleased with the apparent success of that raid, Alfonso summoned the cortes to Seville in January 1261, to seek counsel "concerning the affair of Africa that we have begun." No further action in Africa was taken, although the Islamic kingdom of Niebla to the west of Seville was conquered in February 1262. Quite possibly, the king concluded that, before undertaking any other ventures in Africa, it would be advisable to gain control of all the ports giving access to the peninsula.\(^{(37)}\)

With that in mind, he demanded from Ibn al-Ahmar, king of Granada, the cession of the ports of Gibraltar and Tarifa. Knowing that this would effectively cut his realm off from the possibility of help from North Africa, Ibn al-Ahmar refused. As a diversion, the Granadan encouraged the Mudejars of Andalusia and Murcia to revolt in the spring of 1264, thereby preventing Alfonso from intervening further in North Africa. The king of Granada returned to his obedience, but Alfonso continued to interfere in his kingdom, lending support to Muslim lords there who sought greater independence. That antagonized Ibn al-Ahmar, who eventually summoned the Marinids of Morocco to his aid.\(^{(38)}\) Their arrival in the peninsula came at a most inopportune time for Alfonso, who was returning from his journey to southern France to place his case for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire before Pope Gregory X.

**The Fecho del Imperio**

Among Alfonso's most consuming passions was his quest for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. His claims came from his mother, Beatriz, \(^{(25)}\) daughter of Emperor Philip of Swabia (1198-1208) and granddaughter of the famous Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1152--1190). Alfonso became actively
involved in imperial affairs after the death of the anti-emperor William of Holland in January 1256. The republic of Pisa, a Ghibelline town, sent a deputation to Soria in March to recognize Alfonso as king of the Romans. No doubt flattered, he sent envoys to Germany to persuade the electors to vote for him. Much to his chagrin, Richard of Cornwall, brother of King Henry III, was chosen by several electors in January 1257. Alfonso X was elected by another faction on April 1, and German representatives offered the crown to him at Burgos in August 1257.\(^{[39]}\)

While Richard went to Germany to be crowned, Alfonso pressed his claims from afar, appointing Duke Henry of Brabant as imperial vicar and sending money to various German princes. Alfonso also sought an alliance with Norway and found support in northern Italy with Ezzelino da Romano, one of the extreme partisans of Emperor Frederick II. Although Alfonso did not directly claim the kingdom of Sicily, he did object to the marriage in 1260 of James I's son and heir, Peter, to Constanza, daughter of King Manfred of Sicily. Both the royal chronicle and Jofre de Loaysa emphasize that the imperial quest was expensive, bringing great poverty to Castile and León.\(^{[40]}\)

From the outset, Alfonso realized that papal recognition of his rights was essential. Perhaps with that in mind, he paid the ransom of Philip of Courtenay, son of Emperor Baldwin of Constantinople, hoping that this gesture would enhance his reputation as a munificent ruler and so win papal favor. *El fecho del imperio* --the affair of the empire--was the principal business prompting the king to summon the cortes to Toledo early in 1259, but what precisely was determined there is unknown. His negotiations with several pontiffs were inconclusive, and the distraction of his Africa expedition, the revolt of the Mudejars, and then the revolt of the Castilian nobility compelled him to postpone any departure for Italy or Rome.\(^{[41]}\)

The death of Richard of Cornwall in April 1272 gave Alfonso reason to hope that at last he could secure an undisputed right to the empire. The Castilian nobility chose to confront him in the cortes of Burgos in September, unfortunately, and their quarrel was not resolved until the following March. Meanwhile Pope Gregory X encouraged the German princes to elect Rudolf of Habsburg on 1 October 1273. Rudolf's promise to lead a crusade to liberate the Holy Land--a promise that was never kept--won him papal approbation.

Alfonso stubbornly refused to accept this new situation. After inducing the nobles to return to their allegiance, he summoned the cortes to [26] Burgos in 1274 to consider "sending knights to the empire of Rome." The main business of the cortes was to appoint the Infante Fernando as regent during his father's projected absence from the realm and to arrange a retinue of knights to accompany the king. Alfonso reminded the assembly that the Lombards had often entreated him to come to them; now that the realm was at peace, he could do so. Setting out on his quest for the empire (*ida al imperio*), he went not to Italy but to Beaucaire in southern France, where he vainly pleaded his case before the pope in May 1275. Perforce he had to accept the reality of events and abandon his imperial pretensions once and for all, although thereafter he occasionally used the title King of the Romans. In practical terms, nevertheless, his imperial quest was finished.

**The Crisis of the Succession**

Returning in great disappointment from his interview with the pope, Alfonso heard even more dismaying news of events that had transpired in the peninsula during his absence. The Marinid emir of Morocco, Abu Yusuf, invited by the king of Granada, invaded Spain in the summer of 1275. At first news of the invasion, the regent Fernando de la Cerda hastened to the frontier but died suddenly at Villarreal on 25 July. The Marinids gained a victory over the Castilians near Ecija on 7 September, but the king's second son Sancho assumed command and regrouped his disheartened troops. Thus, when Alfonso reentered his kingdom, he found himself faced with two problems. The more immediate one was to prepare for the renewal of hostilities with the Marinids in the spring. The other was the question
of the succession. The Marinids were persuaded to accept a truce for the time being; the succession was a more difficult matter. (43)

Essentially, the issue was this: should the king designate as his heir Alfonso de la Cerda, the oldest son of the dead infante, even though he was under age, or Sancho, now aged seventeen? In the spring of 1276, Alfonso summoned the cortes to Burgos to consider the problem. While Juan Núez de Lara urged the claims of Alfonso de la Cerda, Lope Díaz de Haro and many other nobles, prelates, and townsmen supported Sancho. Ballesteros believes that the king did not make a decision at this time, but the Marinid threat and the king's own infirmity and increasing age put him under great pressure to act resolutely. That Sancho was acknowledged is indicated by his appearance in charters of October 1277 as fijo mayor et [27] heredero, and by his generally faithful and assiduous service to his father during the next several years. This behavior is evidence of Sancho's assurance and confidence in his position as the king's designated heir. The rejection of Alfonso de la Cerda's claims was also confirmed by the withdrawal of his chief supporter, Juan Núez de Lara, to France, where he became a vassal of King Philippe III in September 1276. Given the French king's insistence on upholding his nephew's rights, Alfonso nevertheless agreed in November 1276 to allow the issue to be adjudicated before his own court, but Philippe failed to ratify that agreement. In giving his consent, Alfonso probably was confident that Sancho's supporters would not abandon him and that if the issue came to trial it would be resolved in his favor. (44)

The Moroccans invaded the peninsula again in June 1277, waging war all along the frontier until a truce was concluded in February 1278. As the defense of the frontier preoccupied the king, he apparently decided to entrust Sancho with greater responsibility for the governance of the northern regions of Castile and León. Convening the cortes to Segovia in the spring of 1278, Alfonso not only confirmed Sancho's rights as heir but also conferred even greater authority upon him. In his will of November 1283, Alfonso remarked that he had given Sancho "greater power than any king's son had in his father's lifetime." Fray Juan Gil de Zamora, Sancho's tutor, also noted that Spain was ruled by many noble kings until the time of "King Alfonso, elected king of the Romans, and his son the illustrious Sancho who began to reign together [corregnare] with him in the year of the Lord 1278." In taking this step, Alfonso would seem to have rejected once and for all the claims of his grandson. That may have been the reason for the flight to Aragon of Queen Violante with her daughter-in-law Blanche and her two children, the infantes de la Cerda. (45)

In spite of that contretemps, Alfonso X had to concentrate attention upon the continuing threat of the Marinids. In the hope of shutting off the invasion route from North Africa, he laid siege to Algeciras, but lack of funds caused him to abandon the project in October 1278. In the interim, he tried to exploit every source of income, imposing fines on Christian usurers and on merchants who violated the laws concerning weights and measures and the export of prohibited goods. He also plundered the Jews, manipulated the coinage, and demanded ever larger servicios from the cortes. Tensions in the king's relations with nobles, prelates, and townsmen steadily mounted. The townsmen vented their grievances by appealing to Sancho and the king's brother Manuel to intercede for them. Philippe III of France, moreover, demanded that some provision be made for the infantes de la Cerda. As a consequence, Alfonso proposed granting the kingdom of Jaén to Alfonso de la Cerda, to hold in vassalage of Castile. That was unacceptable to Philippe as too little, and to Sancho as too much. (46)

The climax came when the king convoked the cortes to Seville in the fall of 1282. In order to press the war against the Moors, he proposed an innovation in the coinage, to which the assembly consented "more out of fear than love." The king made a grave mistake, however, when he indicated his intention to allow Alfonso de la Cerda a share in the inheritance. Sancho objected strenuously to any diminution of the realm, insisting that unity must be preserved. Harsh words were exchanged, and Sancho decided
to appeal to the realm for support.\(^{(47)}\)

The assembly summoned by Sancho for Valladolid in April 1282 brought together the principal estates of the realm, including Queen Violante (who had returned from Aragon in 1279) and Infante Manuel. The decision was taken to deprive Alfonso of the essential powers of government and to entrust the administration of justice, the collection of taxes, and control of royal fortresses to Sancho. Alfonso was left with the empty title of king. This was a fundamentally conservative action, in that Alfonso was not deposed. The leaders of the opposition, chiefly the king’s brother Manuel, evidently taking into account the powers already given to Sancho in 1278, proposed giving Sancho full authority throughout the kingdom but not the royal title. In that way, Alfonso retained the honors of kingship, while his responsibilities were transferred fully to Sancho.\(^{(48)}\) While the assembly was in progress, several bishops and abbots, chiefly from León, as well as the towns of León and Castile, formed leagues (hermandades) in support of Sancho. As a means of defending their liberties against both the king and Sancho, should either intrude upon them, the leagues proposed to meet annually.\(^{(49)}\)

Following the assembly of Valladolid, Sancho still had to persuade his father to accept the new situation, but the king retained the loyalty of Seville and Murcia. Abandoned by his wife, his sons, his brother, and many of his subjects, Alfonso denounced Sancho's actions in scathing language and disinherited him. He found it necessary, nevertheless, to borrow money from his erstwhile enemy, the emir of Morocco, who landed troops in the peninsula and plundered the regions around Córdoba, Toledo, and Murcia, ostensibly on the king's behalf. As a stalemate developed, proposals for a reconciliation were made but came to naught. In his last will, drawn up in January 1284, Alfonso affirmed his rejection of Sancho, bequeathing his realms to Alfonso de la Cerda and creating vassal kingdoms at Seville and Murcia for his younger sons, Juan and Jaime, who had returned to their former allegiance. Should Alfonso de la Cerda have no heirs, the kingdoms of Castile and León would pass to the king of France. That can only be regarded as a final expression of a father's spleen against a rebellious son. This time of turmoil came to an end shortly thereafter when the king died at Seville on 4 April 1284.\(^{(50)}\)

**A Final Assessment**

In weighing the accomplishments of Alfonso, one must bear in mind that there is little in history that can be stated starkly in black and white terms. A merely mechanical calculation of successes or failures is an inadequate method of assessment. As light blends into shadow and shadow into light, pierced at times by flashes of brilliance and clouds of darkest gloom, so too Alfonso's more than thirty years on the throne were marked by extraordinary triumphs and grave calamities, but also by steady and substantial achievements. One thing is certain: Alfonso was an activist king who sought to advance his people and his kingdom beyond the point where they were when they first became his charge. As a student of Roman law and of the writings of St. Isidore of Seville, he knew that a monarch's principal responsibility was to render to every man his due and to merit the title of king by ruling properly. As head of the body politic, he recognized his duty to give guidance and leadership to his people. Aside from his personal accomplishments as a scholar and poet, he strove to educate his people, a role that many other scholars have discussed.

As an activist king, he consciously built upon the foundations established by his predecessors, but he transformed them as well. His impact upon the institutional development of his realm was profound and the consequence of a deliberate policy. By exalting, strengthening, and expanding the idea of kingship, he ran the risk of raising questions about the extent of royal authority in matters of justice, legislation, and taxation. Convinced of his duty to see that justice was done to every man, he endeavored to establish the *Fuero real* as a uniform municipal law and the *Espéculo* (and later the *Partidas*) as a common law for the royal court. He challenged the separate jurisdiction of church courts
and, by means of the special judges of the Mesta, brought litigation involving the sheepmen under royal control, in this way, he strove to achieve a semblance of juridical unity, without which only a limited political unity could exist. His efforts roused opposition among nobles, clergy, and townsmen, but his innovations eventually triumphed and became the basis for the laws of modern Spain. This surely was his greatest achievement as a ruler. One might add that if he had ordered the *Partidas* written in Latin, it would have probably been accepted as the basic code of law for all of Western Europe.

His restructuring of royal administration, particularly the chancery and the tribunal, similarly had long-term significance. The development of the cortes, convoked at frequent intervals, also owes much to him. Aside from its value as an instrument of royal government, the cortes allowed the estates, especially the townsmen, an opportunity to voice their opinions on matters of public policy. Although Alfonso continued the tradition of his predecessors in successfully curbing the independence of the clergy, his concessions to the nobility ultimately worked to his disadvantage and to that of his successors. He gained short-term benefits from the privileges granted to the non-noble urban cavalry (*caballeros villanos*), but this was detrimental to the towns and society as a whole in that it created another privileged class and emphasized social distinctions so as to encourage social conflicts.

The king's activist bent also led him to regulate the economy and to attempt to bring the problem of inflation under control. Many of the measures he took, such as the establishment of customs posts and regular customs duties, became the foundation of later governmental policy. His manipulation of the coinage, unfortunately, had a destructive effect and roused intense hostility. His request for subsidies from the cortes established the basis for extraordinary taxation in the future but provoked the outcry that he was reducing the kingdom to poverty. Inasmuch as we do not possess the royal budget with information about his ordinary and extraordinary income and expenses, we cannot say whether the charge rested upon a substantive basis. While the plea of poverty may be regarded to some extent as a rhetorical response to the king's expressed needs, I am inclined to think that it did reflect reality.

Alfonso was unable to resuscitate the Hispanic Empire as he and his father had probably hoped to do. His relations with Aragon and Portugal, despite some controversies in his earlier years, on the whole ultimately proved to be friendly. His one misstep was his attempt to browbeat Navarre into submission, with the result of allowing France to extend its influence and power into that kingdom.

In dealing with the Muslim world, he realized that the conquest of Granada, already tributary to Castile, was not an immediate necessity and that the wisdom of attempting to absorb its thousands of Muslims was doubtful. He recognized that the consolidation of Castilian control over Andalusia and Murcia with its substantial Moorish population was of paramount importance, though it greatly strained the resources of the kingdom. His repopulation and retention of these regions, in the face of their concerted effort to throw off the Castilian yoke and of later Moroccan offensives, was an achievement of great significance.

His preparation for an invasion of North Africa was in response both to ideological presuppositions and to strategic considerations. The Visigoths, whose heirs the kings of Castile-León claimed to be, were thought once to have ruled Morocco; thus, its subjugation seemed logical to many. Of more practical concern was Alfonso's recognition of the necessity of gaining control of the ports giving access to the peninsula. His planned campaign in North Africa came to naught, though his conquest of Niebla completed his control of the coastline from the Algarve to the frontiers of Granada. Though he was unable to capture Algeciras or to persuade the king of Granada to surrender Gibraltar and Tarifa, his efforts to close the invasion route from across the Straits pointed the way for his successors to follow.

Alfonso's greatest disappointment perhaps was his unsuccessful quest for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. Because of his pursuit of the imperial throne, historians have described him as an unrealistic
dreamer and his reign as a failure politically. Roger Merriman, for example, remarked that "he aspired to be emperor, though he was not even able to play the king." In light of what has been said thus far, that judgment is erroneous. To expect that Alfonso would have refused the imperial crown when offered, given his ties to the Hohenstaufen family, would be unrealistic. It is hardly likely that any other thirteenth-century ruler would have spurned it. If one were to fault Alfonso, it would be for not having been more aggressive in seeking the empire, but that would have required sending troops to Germany and Italy or going there personally. He chose not to abandon Spain or to neglect his responsibilities there, I believe, because Spain was always paramount in his thought and he hoped to link the universal claims of the Holy Roman Empire to the peninsular aspirations of the Hispanic Empire.

The reign of Alfonso ended badly, because of the unforeseen controversy that developed over the succession. I doubt that Sancho would have succeeded in depriving him of royal authority if Alfonso had not already antagonized significant elements in society. In the heat of conflict, and feeling a keen sense of betrayal by his son, Alfonso proposed the partition of his realms for the benefit of his grandson Alfonso de la Cerda and for his own younger sons. While one may understand and perhaps even sympathize with the king's decision, it ran counter to the thrust of thirteenth-century political theory, which was beginning to emphasize the notion of the state and the inalienability of its territory. The principle was stated clearly in the Partidas: "Anciently they made a fuero and statute in Spain that the dominion of the king should never be divided nor alienated." Alfonso's decision was a political misjudgment of the gravest sort; if implemented, it could only have been disastrous.

To conclude: Alfonso was not a frivolous man, not an idler or a fool, not dissolute or dissipated, but a hard-working monarch who took his responsibilities as king seriously. His exaltation of kingship; his organization of royal government; his development of the tax system, of the law, of the judicial administration, and of the cortes; and his consolidation of his father's conquests rank him as one of the greatest medieval kings of Spain and a distinguished contemporary of Emperor Frederick II, Louis IX of France, and Edward I of England. If he suffered the ignominy of rejection by his son and by many of his people, that was perhaps because he attempted to do too much and to move his kingdom forward too quickly.

Notes for Chapter Two


2. See the classic judgment of Juan de Mariana, Historia general de España Toledo: 1601, XIII.XX: "While he was contemplating the heavens and looking at the stars he lost the earth and his kingdom." Robert A. MacDonald's forthcoming essay, 'The Varying Historical Perspective of Alfonso X of Castile," studies the attitudes of historians toward the king, from his thirteenth-century contemporary Jofre de Loaysa to his twentieth-century biographer Antonio Ballesteros Beretta.


8. See examples in the royal charters in *MHE*, vols. 1, 2.


15. Espéculo, II.10-11; II.2.1-6; II.3.1-3; II.4.1-7; II.14.5-9; II.15.1-13; II.16.7; Partidas,II.13.17-18; II.14.1-4; II.15.1.


25. *CAX*, ch. 1, in *BAE*, 4; *CLC*, 1: 85-86.


32. MHE, 1: 151, no. 69. Carlos de Ayala Martínez, Directrices fundamentales de la política peninsular de Alfonso X (relaciones castellano-aragonesas de 1252 a 1263) (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1986).


38. CAX, chs. 10-12, in BAE, 8-12; Toribio Mingüella, Historia de la diócesis de Sigüenza, 3 vols. (Madrid: Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1900-1913), 1: 599-601, no. 225; see notes 12-13.


42. CAX, chs. 22, 59, in BAE, 18-19, 47-49; Fernández del Pulgar, Palencia, 1: 344-45; Ballesteros, Alfonso X, 683-87, 717-32.

43. CAX, chs. 61-65, in BAE, 48-52; Ballesteros, Alfonso X, 744-69; Arié, Nasrides, 68-75.


46. CAX, chs. 69-74, in BAE, 53-58; Ballesteros, Alfonso X, 853-56, 875-85.


48. CAX, chs. 75-76, pp. 60-61; Jofre de Loaysa, Crónica , 102, ch. 28.


52.11.15.5.