

The Lapidary of Alfonso X of Castile: Global Connections and Centralizing Discourse

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the translation of Arabic science by King Alfonso X of Castile (r. 1252-1284) situating them as part of a transference of knowledge through translation from the Persian region to the Iberian Peninsula. Using the *Lapidary* as a case study, I discuss a tension between global and nationalistic elements subjacent to Alfonso X's project. On the one hand, the practice of translation continues a conception of scientific knowledge as widely connected across geographic, religious, and linguistic difference. On the other, the translation of the *Lapidary* is framed by the nationalistic and expansionist agenda of Castilian rulers.

In the Castilian Prologue, Alfonso X is represented as the person who recovered the Arabic manuscript and made its content accessible to his subjects by commissioning its translation. This brief paratext also explains the origin of the Arabic treatise as the result of the travel of a Muslim sage to the Chaldean land of his ancestors. This fictionalization of the transmission of lapidary sciences reveals how a connected conception of the globe was instrumental to the appropriation of the cultural productions that Castilians found after their conquests of Andalusian lands. Castilian negotiation with a local Muslim past and a distant Chaldea suggests that, in this context, going global was conceived as a strategy to reinforce the centralizing discourse of the Castilian crown.

Thinking about the Middle Ages from a global perspective appears as useful strategy to counter the Eurocentric bias on the origin of medievalism. With this reading of the Prologue of the *Lapidary*, I aim to problematize the relationship between the idea of global Middle Ages in

current Academia and the centralizing or nationalistic agendas of medieval attitudes towards the wider world. In this occasion, I focus in an example of lapidary science. As other forms of medieval science, this type of knowledge was widely transmitted and translated across the distant spaces of the medieval world.

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