

ARIAS GUILLÉN, Fernando, *Triumph of an Accursed Lineage: Kingship in Castile from Alfonso X to Alfonso XI (1252-1350)*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-51227-9

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Fernando Arias Guillén's new study is a welcome contribution to debates about political culture in Castile-León during the century after the accession of Alfonso X. As its title implies, this period witnessed the assertive expansion of monarchy, a process that transcended some acute political crises. Notable among these crises was the *infante* Sancho's rebellion against his father, as a consequence of which the *Rey Sabio* appears (understandably) to have cursed his son. The subsequent decades witnessed a sustained ideological attempt to justify the authority of the lineage, whose image was marred by the memory of this event and by lingering doubts about the legitimacy of their rule. The meta-narrative in *Triumph of an Accursed Lineage* is the success of the monarchical project: "after decades of political instability, Alfonso XI had managed to restore order and peace" (13). In this project, the author argues, the nobility were leading beneficiaries and collaborators.

The author turns in Chapter 1 to royal attempts to enhance the image of the crown by means of ritual—notably the spectacular coronation of Alfonso XI in 1332—as well as through law and historiographical production. Underpinning regnal prestige, according to Arias Guillén, was a commitment to *Reconquista*; "the war against the Muslims may be understood as the *raison d'être* of the Castilian monarchy as an institution" (21). This claim might require a little additional nuance. It arguably holds true by the thirteenth and fourteenth century, but may not always have been the case; a fundamental commitment to military expansion against Islamic powers was not characteristic of the early to mid-eleventh century, as the late Bernard F. Reilly and I will argue in a forthcoming study of the reign of Fernando I.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Arias Guillén turns to questions of territoriality and kingship, rightly emphasizing the geographical heterogeneity of the realms as expressed in royal titles, and the variable reach of royal authority

even within the ‘core’ realms of Castile and Toledo. In the face of this diffuse spectrum of power, there was a concerted attempt to emphasize the territorial unity of the kingdom and an increasing insistence of royal *superioritas* in relation to military fortifications. The royal court and its chancery continued to be itinerant, as was the case in France and Aragon—the author is keen to emphasize the typicality of Castilian kings—with a preference for Burgos, Seville, Toledo, and especially Valladolid. It was the area between the Douro and the Tagus that was most pivotal to royal power, Arias Guillén argues, especially after the reign of Alfonso X.

The author suggests that León and Galicia were entirely secondary elements of royal power; Alfonso X did not visit Galicia, “a region characterised by its large monastic estates, as well as the control exerted by the bishops who resided in the principal urban centres” (37). This description may perhaps be slightly reductive. As the contributors to the volume *Galicia no tempo de Afonso X* (Santiago de Compostela: Consello da Cultura Galega, 2021) observe, Galicia had ceased by this time to be central to royal power, in the way it had been in the eleventh century, but neither was it marginal nor was it fully dominated by ecclesiastical and monastic power as it would come to be in later centuries. The author’s remark about Asturias and Cantabria surely also holds for Galicia: “The absence of the kings from these regions does not mean that they were completely forgotten by the Castilian monarchy” (68). One should be cautious about reiterating tropes of the peripherality of “perhaps the kingdom’s most recondite region” (69); “Pilgrimage sites,” writes Arias Guillén, “tend to be associated with remote places located on the limits of Christendom. Santiago de Compostela more than lived up to this image” (69). Yet if Compostela was as peripheral as Rome, Jerusalem, and Canterbury, it was in fine company.

Two of the author’s strongest chapters examine the role played by the royal family in the ruling of the kingdom. In Chapter 4, Arias Guillén shows that literary representations of queenship are riddled with *topoi* (for instance, queen as mediator) that disguise the full complexity of their roles as lords of landed demesnes, patrons of religious houses, as political advisors, as regents during royal minorities, and as active diplomatic ambassadors. He further argues that (as in the case of Queen Violante) the interests of the queen did not always coincide with those of the king. While there were no queens regnant, María de Molina and Leonor de Guzmán both played a vital part in the history of this period. Arias Guillén demonstrates an excellent command of Anglophone scholarship as well as

recent Spanish research, sharing the consensus that monarchy should be understood as a collective enterprise, encompassing royal women as well as men. Chapter 5 examines the role of royal brothers, and the challenges they raised for governance in an age of primogeniture. The increasing exclusion of younger sons by the crown led to a convergence of interests with disenchanting factions of the nobility.

It is precisely to this disenchantment that Arias Guillén turns in chapters 6 and 7. In his view, tensions between crown and nobility were sporadic, more than systemic: nobles generally sought to control expansion of royal government in line with their own interests. This argument is anticipated by passages in earlier chapters; we have read that “the magnates were the main beneficiaries of royal patronage and the expansion of the regnal state” and that Juan Manuel’s writings should be interpreted not as an expression of a distinctive aristocratic culture but rather as “a more personal endeavour” (117). Arias Guillén acknowledges serious conflicts and tensions between crown and nobility but adds that “these were the result of the competition between the noble factions as they sought to control the government and benefit from royal patronage” (127). Indeed, the author suggests, emerging forms of royal taxation were collected for the benefit of the magnates; there was intense competition for higher salaries and plum appointments (such as *merino mayor* and *adelantado*). In his view, the acquisition of major lordships was largely a result of royal largesse; he emphasizes the dramatic expansion of the Lara family’s landed holdings in the century in question.

Triumph of an Accursed Lineage generates some interesting questions, worth examining further. If Juan Manuel “considered that he deserved to be ruling the kingdom alongside the king” (118), was this not also the case—we might ask—for the aristocracy, for whom the royal project frequently represented a major challenge? If he had “a dream of turning his lands into a semi-independent territory” (118), was this not also true for the rulers of Vizcaya? After all, as Arias Guillén writes, it was possession of Vizcaya that led Juan Núñez III de Lara to rebel against Alfonso XI; there was surely tension between the accumulation of great territorial bases by the aristocracy and the interests of the crown. Equally, if “the consolidation of royal authority did not imply a decline in the nobles’ power” (11), from whom was power being wrested, and for whose eyes was the ideological aggrandizement of the monarchy intended?

As is the case with any interpretive paradigm, there are some inconvenient facts—not least, the fact that the Castilian kings began to

serially assassinate aristocratic leaders. Arias Guillén argues that “despite the occasional homicide, kings favoured negotiated solutions to these conflicts” (6). But occasional homicide is a serious caveat. The author politely challenges my own argument in *The Lara Family* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2001), in which I expressed the view that the mid-thirteenth century marked a fundamental shift in the architecture of power, an intensification of political conflicts that paralleled events elsewhere in Europe, and an increasing aristocratic reliance on territorial power, which was only partially dependent on royal favour. The Laras, he argues, “were a pillar of royal authority, not an obstacle” (184). Arias Guillén may, of course, be right, although if so, these pillars were at best shaky and high maintenance, requiring constant upkeep and construction. At worst, they were liable to walk out of the building. Nevertheless, debate is always to be welcomed. Arias Guillén is to be congratulated on an outstanding and eminently well-documented contribution to this ongoing discussion.

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