

Shields of Faith: Apotropaic Images of the Virgin in Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria*

Deirdre E. Jackson

Volume 24, Number 2, 1997

Breaking the Boundaries: Intercultural Perspectives in Medieval Art
Entamer les frontières : perspectives interculturelles dans l'art du
Moyen-Âge

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071665ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071665ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des
universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Jackson, D. E. (1997). Shields of Faith: Apotropaic Images of the Virgin in
Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian
Art Review*, 24(2), 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071665ar>

Article abstract

Cet article examine un certain nombre de miracles racontés par Alphonse X dans les *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ces derniers décrivant comment la Vierge Marie prit la défense de ses fidèles contre leurs ennemis musulmans. Ces miracles de la Vierge ont été puisés dans une grande variété de sources par le roi lui-même et aussi par ses collaborateurs. Nous les comparerons donc avec d'autres miracles d'origine ibérique. Ces deux catégories de légendes sont souvent regroupées autour d'images apotropaïques de la Vierge où cette dernière manifeste son pouvoir. L'image se retrouve ainsi au centre du conflit qui oppose les fidèles de religions opposées. L'antipathie des Musulmans envers l'image de Vierge et leur rejet de celle-ci marquent leur différence avec leurs rivaux chrétiens. Dans la plus grande partie des légendes analysées, la Vierge prend dans la bataille une position défensive plutôt qu'offensive. Nous examinerons aussi la façon dont les deux séries de miracles se différencient les uns des autres dans le traitement des rapports entre les Chrétiens et les Musulmans. Dans le premier groupe, ces derniers sont habituellement caractérisés comme des iconoclastes belliqueux et les Chrétiens comme d'innocentes victimes. Dans le second, les Musulmans sont présentés sous un jour plus favorable et les Chrétiens ne sont plus complètement stéréotypés comme héros. La juxtaposition entre des légendes plus anciennes et d'autres plus récentes pourrait donc avoir fait comprendre aux membres de la cour d'Alphonse X que le Vierge, qui avait défendu les Chrétiens dans le passé, était encore une force tout aussi vitale dans le XIIIe siècle de la Castille-León.

Shields of Faith: Apotropaic Images of the Virgin in Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria**

DEIRDRE E. JACKSON, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Résumé

Cet article examine un certain nombre de miracles racontés par Alphonse X dans les *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ces derniers décrivant comment la Vierge Marie prit la défense de ses fidèles contre leurs ennemis musulmans. Ces miracles de la Vierge ont été puisés dans une grande variété de sources par le roi lui-même et aussi par ses collaborateurs. Nous les comparerons donc avec d'autres miracles d'origine ibérique. Ces deux catégories de légendes sont souvent regroupées autour d'images apotropaïques de la Vierge où cette dernière manifeste son pouvoir. L'image se retrouve ainsi au centre du conflit qui oppose les fidèles de religions opposées. L'antipathie des Musulmans envers l'image de Vierge et leur rejet de celle-ci marquent leur différence avec leurs rivaux chrétiens. Dans la plus grande partie des légendes analysées, la

Vierge prend dans la bataille une position défensive plutôt qu'offensive. Nous examinerons aussi la façon dont les deux séries de miracles se différencient les uns des autres dans le traitement des rapports entre les Chrétiens et les Musulmans. Dans le premier groupe, ces derniers sont habituellement caractérisés comme des iconoclastes belliqueux et les Chrétiens comme d'innocentes victimes. Dans le second, les Musulmans sont présentés sous un jour plus favorable et les Chrétiens ne sont plus complètement stéréotypés comme héros. La juxtaposition entre des légendes plus anciennes et d'autres plus récentes pourrait donc avoir fait comprendre aux membres de la cour d'Alphonse X que le Vierge, qui avait défendu les Chrétiens dans le passé, était encore une force tout aussi vitale dans le XIIIe siècle de la Castille-León.

Every place which has Holy Mary as its shield can be well defended.

Cantiga 28

Certain themes recur with surprising frequency in the history of Marian devotion. Throughout the centuries the Virgin Mary has often been characterized as the defender of Christendom, a zealous warrior capable of striking fear into the hearts of members of rival faiths. The bellicose Virgin first appears in Byzantine literature of the seventh century,¹ but was rapidly appropriated by Western writers of the Middle Ages. In the West, the motif was enhanced by the error of a scribe. In Jerome's translation of the Bible, the text of Genesis 3:15 reads: "*Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius; ipsum conteret caput tuum, et tu conteres calcaneum eius*" ("And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel").² However, as the text was copied, the neuter pronoun "*ipsum*," referring to seed, was changed to the feminine "*ipsa*" and interpreted as a reference to the Virgin Mary who would bruise the head of the serpent (i.e. Satan) by giving birth to Christ.³ A woman with the ability to trounce the devil was certainly capable of vanquishing her earthly opponents and often chose to manifest her power by means of her image. Apotropaic images of the Virgin feature in numerous miracles compiled by Christians in the Middle Ages. The purpose of this paper is to explore a select group of miracles recounted in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* in which the Virgin, via her image, defends her Christian devotees from their Muslim foes.

The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* consists of four related codices commissioned by King Alfonso X who ruled over the kingdoms of Castile-León from 1252 to 1284: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 10069 (To); Escorial, Biblioteca Real MS T.I.1 (T); Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS Banco Rari 20 (F); and Escorial, Biblioteca Real, MS b.I.2 (E). Altogether these manuscripts contain 420 distinct songs exalting the Virgin. The contents of these manuscripts have been described by Manuel Pedro Ferreira and need not detain us here.⁴ However, it is important to clarify that quotations of the Galician-Portuguese lyrics of the *Cantigas* in this paper are from Kathleen Kulp-Hill's English translation which is based on Walter Mettmann's edition and follows his numbering system.⁵ Furthermore, all references to miniatures are to those occurring in Escorial T.I.1(T).

Various attempts have been made to date the four extant codices and it is thought that Alfonso X was engaged in the production of this encyclopaedic work for "almost three decades, nearly all of his reign."⁶ Both Mettmann and Ferreira argue that a missing prototype of 100 *cantigas* provided the foundation of the collection and agree that the work was completed in stages. Mettmann proposes three stages, the first dating from 1270 to 1274, the second from 1274 to 1277, and the third from 1277 to 1282.⁷ Ferreira concludes that the surviving manuscripts were produced in the following order: first, To, completed by 1264 at the earliest and 1276 at the latest; secondly, T, produced in the early 1280s; thirdly, its companion volume, F, left unfinished and probably started after Alfonso X's death in 1284; and finally E, "probably started before 1284" and finished at an unspecified date.⁸

Alfonso X's attachment to the *Cantigas* is expressed in his

will of January 1284 in which he ordered the manuscripts to be housed in the church in which he was to be interred and stipulated that the songs be performed on the Virgin's feast days.⁹ When the king died on 4 April 1284 he was buried in the Cathedral of Seville where at least two of the codices (T and E) remained until Philip II moved them to the Library of the Escorial which still houses these volumes today. Alfonso X's stipulation that the *cantigas* be publicly performed on the Virgin's feast days suggests that these songs reached a broad audience, even though the miniatures were seen only by a privileged few.¹⁰ Many questions remain to be answered with regards to the original audience of the *Cantigas* and the contexts in which the songs were first performed. The issue of authorship is also unresolved. Scholarly opinion has changed since 1895 when Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo declared that Alfonso wrote the *Cantigas* singlehandedly.¹¹ Although this assertion has been discredited, the extent of the king's involvement in the project has yet to be determined. However, the debate concerning authorship should not eclipse the simple fact that Alfonso X presents himself in the work as its author, and this is clearly what he would have us believe.

Approximately 150 of the miracles in the *Cantigas* corpus occur in various medieval collections and were known throughout Christendom.¹² They are standard Marian legends simply borrowed by Alfonso X and his collaborators and inserted in the *Cantigas*. To be sure, by transforming prose narratives into poetic lyrics and setting these to music, Alfonso X and his circle were innovators as well as imitators. Nevertheless, the Alfonsine authors make no claim to originality. On the contrary, in the introductory verses of numerous miracles, the narrators assure their readers that they are simply repeating what they have learned at second hand. *Cantiga* 61 even cites the specific source of the miracle: "I shall recount a miracle which happened in Soissons. There is a book there all filled with miracles of that place which the Mother of God performs by night and day. I took this from among them."¹³ In short, the reader is repeatedly reminded that the Alfonsine authors are simply reiterating Marian miracles gleaned from a wide variety of sources. Nevertheless, juxtaposed with these standard legends are a number of other miracle tales which seem to have been circulating orally in the Spanish Kingdoms or were conceived at Alfonso X's court since they reflect the local setting, contain references to political figures of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa (including Alfonso X himself) and are replete with details which lend them a more personal tone.

In the following discussion several standard legends in which the Virgin defends Christians against Muslims are singled out for discussion. These are then compared with a number of miracles of similar theme of Iberian origin. As will be demonstrated through this comparison, both the standard and the

Iberian tales often centre around apotropaic images of the Virgin through which the saint manifests her power. The image stands at the centre of the conflict between members of rival faiths. The Muslims' antipathy towards the image of the Virgin and rejection of it serves as the predominant marker of difference between them and their Christian rivals. In addition, this comparison of standard and Iberian tales will stress their similar portrayals of the Virgin who almost always assumes a defensive rather than an offensive stance in battle. Generally, the Virgin does not lead the charge against the Moors although she does stand her ground when her shrines are attacked. The way that the standard and Iberian miracles differ in their treatment of relations between Christians and Muslims will also be examined. As we shall see, in the former the Muslims are usually characterized as belligerent iconoclasts and Christians as innocent victims. In the latter, on the other hand, Muslims are depicted in a more sympathetic light and Christians are not completely reduced to stock heroes. In the course of the analysis the following question will also be considered: what does the juxtaposition of standard and novel legends achieve?

Fittingly, given the Byzantine origin of the theme of the bellicose Virgin, two miracles in the *Cantigas* which show Mary actively battling the Muslim foe describe attacks on the city of Constantinople.¹⁴ *Cantiga* 264, which will be examined here, appears to be based on historical events which occurred in 626 during the storming of the city by the Avars and the Persians when the Emperor Heraclius was absent. The events surrounding this siege are well documented by Byzantine writers, including Theodore Synkellos and George the Pisidian who attribute the Christian victory to the Virgin.¹⁵ Images of the Virgin were set up on the city gates by the Patriarch Sergius (610–638) to ward off the attackers, and the Virgin also entered the fray. In the heat of the battle she took up a sword and, adopting the role of general, exhorted the Christians "to dye the sea red with the blood of their enemies."¹⁶ The account of this Christian victory made its way to the West and was incorporated by occidental writers into compilations of Marian miracles.¹⁷

In the version of the miracle included in the *Cantigas*, a portrait of the Virgin, said to have been painted by Saint Luke from life, is the palladium which wards off the "ships of the Moors" which are attacking the city. The narrator, who informs us that the image was "skilfully painted on wood," emphasizes its verisimilitude, stating: "It looked exactly like the Virgin." The implication is that this image is able to serve as an effective proxy for the Virgin because it is such a good likeness of her – issues of efficacy and verisimilitude are linked. Since the portrait was painted from life, the icon also functions like a contact relic, deriving its power from its proximity to Mary herself. As the Alfonsine author explains, "Before the Virgin died, it was painted in Her likeness in order to destroy the sect of the Jews

and of the devil [i.e. the Muslims].” It is significant that the painting is said to have been created to serve a polemical purpose rather than to inspire the devotion of the faithful.

The issue of religious difference is also placed squarely in the foreground in the description of the actual battle when the Christians, in an attempt to save themselves from the Muslim fleet, toss the image of the Virgin into the sea, crying: “Defend yourself and us from these men *who did not nor do now believe in your Son* [italics mine], for we have great need.” It is a cliché of image-oriented miracles that images are treated as if they were the saints themselves, and we see this phenomenon in this passage in which the image/saint is told to defend it/herself. The same merging of saint and image occurs earlier in the narrative when the narrator, speaking of the painting, conflates it with Mary stating: “when it had been placed there [the icon on the shore], they prayed to *Her* [italics mine] in tears.”

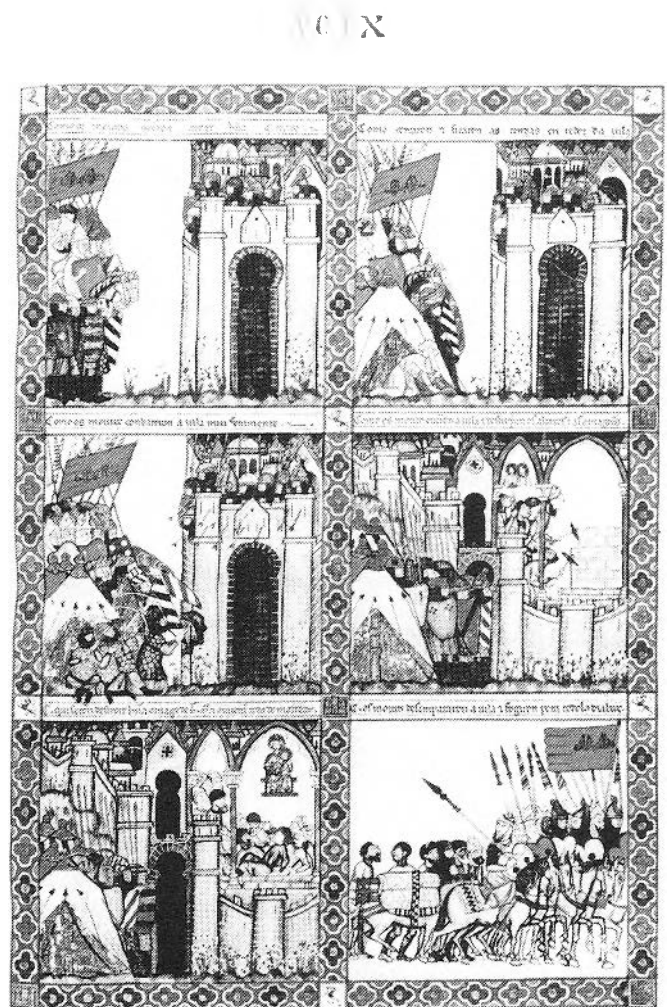
As reported in the penultimate verse of *Cantiga 264*, the Virgin at once answered the Christians’ pleas and caused the ships of the Moors to sink into the sea.

The power of the Virgin to vanquish the Muslim enemy is emphasized in several other image-oriented legends drawn by Alfonso and his collaborators from the standard Marian repertoire. In the miniature illustrating *Cantiga 99*, a Moorish army lays siege to a heavily fortified Christian city (fig. 1). When the Moors break through the defences, a group of them wielding pick-axes storms a church and smashes the altar and sacred images. When they attempt to destroy an image of the Virgin, they are struck dead (note the carnage in panel five). The invincible image bears no sign of being harmed, and as the caption above the final panel of the miniature explains, the remaining Moors “abandoned the city.”¹⁸ Thus, the Marian image not only safeguards the church but, like the Constantinopolitan icon, defends the entire community.

According to José Filgueira Valverde, this miracle originated in Spain and was transmitted orally.¹⁹ To be sure, *Cantiga 99* and its accompanying miniature reflect the atmosphere of the Iberian Peninsula; note, for example, the standard carried by the attacking troops and the distinctive horseshoe-shaped arch of the city gates. Nevertheless, a similar incident is recorded in several collections of the Virgin’s miracles, and in Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum historiale* sent to Alfonso X by Louis IX of France (d. 1270).²⁰ In some variants, the miracle is set near Ascalon after the defeat of Baldwin, King of Jerusalem.²¹

In order to present a balanced picture, it should be noted that not all of the standard miracles in the *Cantigas* which advertise the Virgin’s protection of her devotees involve Muslims. *Cantiga 51*, based on a widely diffused tale recounting an attack on a Christian castle by the Count of Poitiers, is a case in point.²² The besieged warriors of this fortress appeal to the Virgin to be their shield and place her statue on the battlements

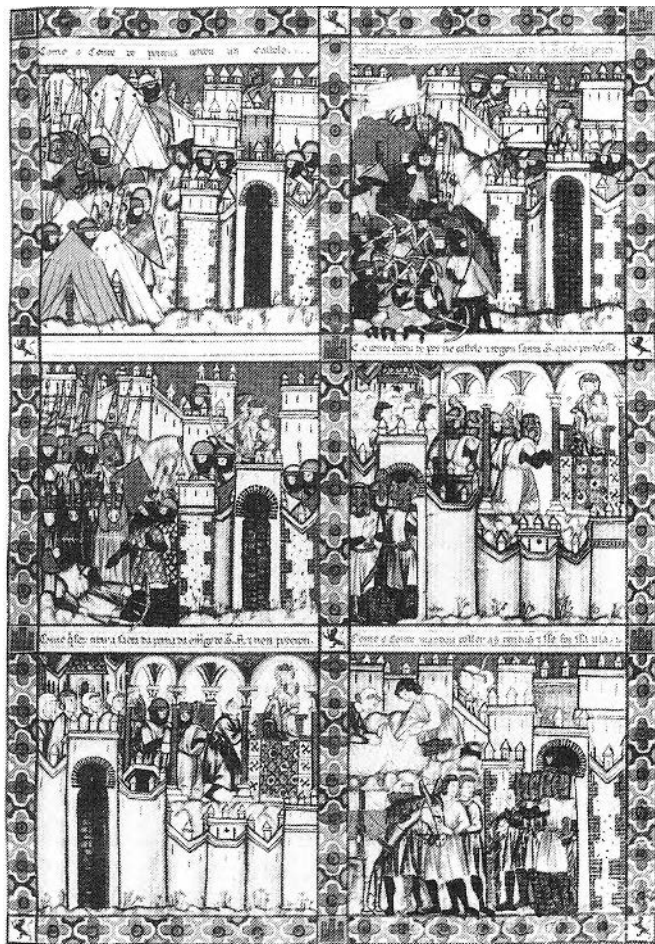
Figure 1. *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, early 1280s (Escorial, Biblioteca Real MS T.I.1), fol. 144r. *Cantiga 99*: the Moors attack a Christian city (Photo: Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid).



behind which the gatekeeper takes cover. When the gatekeeper is shot at by one of the crossbowmen storming the gates, the statue of the Virgin raises its knee to intercept the arrow. The narrator informs us that on seeing this miracle the Count of Poitiers called off the attack, entered the city as a penitent and “knelt and worshipped the statue of the Virgin, weeping and confessing his wickedness.” Although the grateful defenders attempt to extract the arrow from the statue’s knee (as shown in the fifth panel of the miniature, fig. 2) they are unable to do so. Furthermore, the statue never resumes its original pose, a fact which greatly impresses the narrator of *Cantiga 51* who writes: “Holy Mary showed such great sorrow for the event that, to my knowledge, She never again put down Her leg, but still holds it exactly as She had moved it.” Fortunately, the statue’s copious garments ensure that the pose is not indecorous.

Having examined three standard miracles inserted in the *Cantigas*, the following conclusions can be asserted. Miracles

Figure 2. *Cantigas de Santa María*, early 1280s (Escorial, Biblioteca Real MS T.I.1), fol. 76r. *Cantiga 51*: the Count of Poitiers attacks a castle (Photo: Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid).



which celebrated the Virgin's military prowess, regardless of the original circumstances of their production, appealed to an Iberian audience. Christians in the Spanish Kingdoms no doubt appreciated the contemporary relevance of the "old" miracles and saw themselves as heirs of the Virgin's protection – that bulwark which had previously sustained the citizens of Constantinople and, in more recent memory, the crusaders setting off to fight in the East.²³ Tales describing the Virgin's defense of Christendom against the Muslim foe evidently struck a chord throughout Western Europe since they are among the most often repeated miracles of the Virgin. Nevertheless, given the proximity of Muslims to Christians in the Spanish Kingdoms, and Alfonso X's attempts to consolidate the Muslim territories gained by his father, Fernando III, it is likely that such stories had a particular appeal within his court circle.

Furthermore, the message that the Virgin was more than able to defend the Christians of the Spanish Kingdoms against

their Muslim foes suited Alfonso X's political agenda. As he pushed the Christian frontier forward, he required Christians to move southwards to settle in these recently won Muslim regions. Although the prospective settlers were promised land, this reward still did not alleviate their fears of being taken captive by the Muslims in border raids and of having to endure the hardships of frontier life.²⁴ By shifting the focus onto the Virgin and advertising her miraculous abilities to protect the faithful, Alfonso X could not only bolster his own confidence in the resettlement project but allay the fears of prospective settlers. As Peter Linehan observes, the *Cantigas* "present Alfonso X praising Marian miracles and thereby promoting the places in which such wonders had been wrought. An effect of such promotion could be to attract settlers into the vast undermanned areas which had been reconquered – but only in a formal sense reconquered – during recent decades. *Romeros* were *pobladores* by another name, and *pobladores* were urgently needed to achieve the permanent reconquest."²⁵

It is clear that Alfonso X entrusted the defense of his kingdoms to the Virgin since he established a military order under her auspices to protect coastal regions and the Andalusian frontier. Established in 1272, this militia was christened the Order of Santa María de España and took as its seal an image of the Virgin and Child seated within an eight-pointed star.²⁶ The same motif was featured on badges worn by the knights. The name of the order reflects Alfonso X's devotion to the Virgin²⁷ and also expresses his confidence in Mary's abilities to defend his territories against his Muslim enemies.

Not only did the standard miracles advertising Mary's ability to fend off the enemy find a receptive audience in the Spanish Kingdoms, but they served as a foundation, supporting the creation of novel miracle tales within Alfonso X's court circle. Although it is impossible to determine whether the standard tales served as direct inspiration for the Alfonsine authors or whether the Virgin was simply working similar wonders in Spain as she had already worked elsewhere, some Iberian miracles share similarities with the standard ones.

As we have seen, in *Cantiga 51*, a statue of the Virgin literally assumes the function of a shield and is struck by the arrow intended for the gatekeeper. Similarly, in *Cantiga 185*, of Iberian origin, a statue of the Virgin, set up on the battlements, protects the Christian stronghold of Chincoya in the kingdom of Jaén from an attack by the King of Granada. The narrative begins by outlining the political circumstances leading up to the conflict. We are told that the Christian guardian of the castle of Chincoya and the guardian of a nearby Muslim castle of Bélmez were united in friendship. However, one day the castellan of Bélmez betrayed his Christian friend so that the King of Granada could attack the Christian stronghold. As the narrator informs us: "those who were inside were so mightily afraid that

they took the statue of the Mother of the Saviour which was in the chapel and put it on the battlements, saying, 'If you are the Mother of God, defend this castle and us ... and protect your chapel so that the infidel Moors will not capture it and burn your statue.' They left it there, saying: 'We shall see what you will do.' The statue manifests the Virgin's power and causes the King of Granada to realize the futility of his attack.²⁸

Cantiga 229 which recounts how the Virgin "saved her church in Villa-Sirga from the Moors who tried to tear it down" is reminiscent of *Cantiga* 99 examined earlier. The stories share the same basic theme but diverge in details: in *Cantiga* 229 the Moors who attempt to deface the sanctuary are blinded and crippled rather than stuck dead. A more significant difference is the treatment of Christians within these two tales. While the Christians in *Cantiga* 99 are presented as innocent victims and shown in the accompanying miniature cowering behind their defences, *Cantiga* 229 states that Alfonso X's own grandfather, Alfonso IX of León, "brought Moors ... to ravage Castile." As noted by Mettmann this phrase likely refers to: "the year 1196, when, in the war against Alfonso VIII of Castile, the Almohad army ravaged the valley of the Tagus and the troops of Alfonso IX of León invaded the Tierra de Campos."²⁹

Even this brief glance at *Cantiga* 229 confirms the premise stated at the outset: the miracles originating in the Iberian Peninsula generally present a more complex portrayal of the relationships between Christians and Muslims than the standard Marian ones. Although Muslims are portrayed as belligerent iconoclasts in some Iberian tales, there are deviations from this stereotype. In addition, the Christian protagonists are not always painted in the best possible light. In short, the boundaries between heroes and villains are not quite as clearly defined, and such ambiguities reflect the political realities of reconquest Spain.

The following analysis of Iberian miracles serves to reinforce this point. In *Cantiga* 215 an army of Moors (led by Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb, the Marinid sultan, 1258–86) advances through Christian territory sacking Christian castles and churches. The Muslims seize a statue of the Virgin from a church dedicated to her and, later, having taken it to their encampment, attempt to destroy it by every possible means. One of the men who strikes it with his sword manages to cut a large piece from it, but (since "God would not allow the statue to be abused") he receives such a serious wound that he loses his arm. His companions nevertheless continue their attempts to destroy the statue by stoning and burning it. They are completely thwarted and finally, desperate to be rid of it, toss it in the river only to see it float. Realizing that it is no ordinary object, they then recover it and take it to the King of Granada, Abū Abd Allāh Muḥammad II, al-Faqih (1273–1302), informing him of its invincibility. As the narrator of this *cantiga* tells us, the King of Granada himself "recognized this event as a great miracle" and sent the statue via

some Christians to Alfonso X admonishing them to tell him what had transpired "but to do all they could to prevent its being discovered that he had sent it." Evidently, the Christians did not try very hard to conceal the statue's provenance since the gesture of the King of Granada is recorded for all posterity.

The events described in this *cantiga* may be entirely fictitious (or at very least, exaggerated), but it is possible that aspects of the story have some basis in fact. Relations between the Kingdom of Granada and the Kingdom of Castile-León were ambivalent and unstable. As noted by Mahmoud Makki in his survey of the political history of Al-Andalus: "The kings of Granada would adopt a flexible policy, alternating between a truce when their opponents were powerful and the use of force if they perceived their neighbours to be weak. ... Thus their political conduct was a mixture of force and diplomatic action, which permitted them to strike a delicate balance with the surrounding powers."³⁰ Perhaps, during a period of truce, Muḥammad II actually did send such a statue to Alfonso X to win the favour of the Christian monarch. This hypothesis is weakened, however, if we believe the assertion that he ordered the gift be given anonymously.

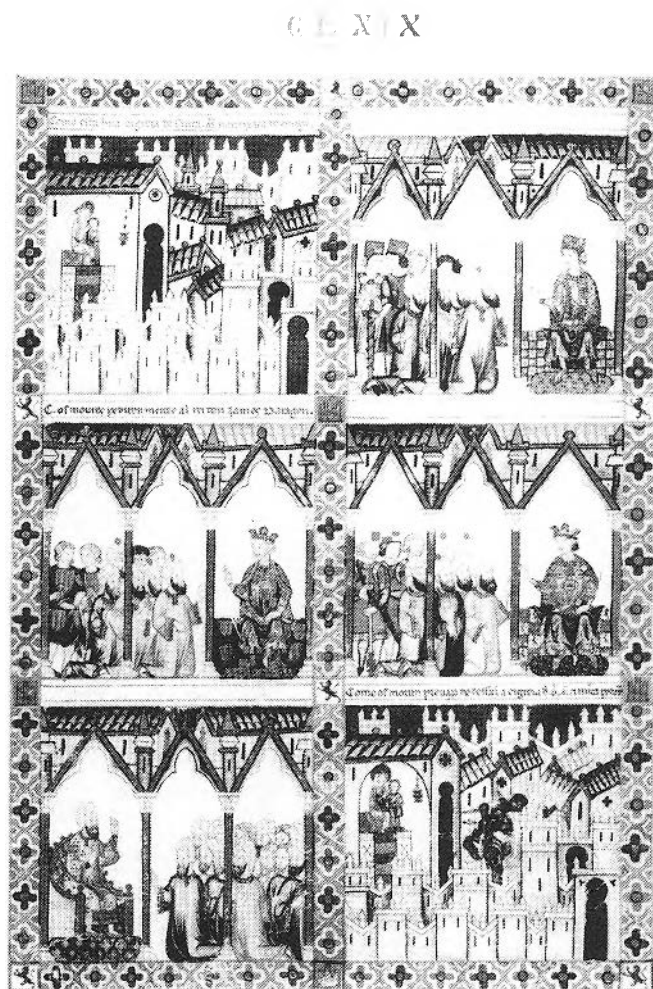
Essentially the statue of *Cantiga* 215 undergoes a martyrdom. From the moment it is seized by the Moors, like an early Christian martyr dragged before a pagan tribunal, it suffers a saint's persecution and manifests a comparable invincibility. The Alfonsine narrator contributes to the human characterization of the statue by comparing its ordeal by fire with that of the three Hebrews who emerged from the furnace in Babylon unscathed. And like a long-suffering saint, the statue bearing the scars of its martyrdom ultimately serves as an inspiration for the faithful. As the final verses of the miracle explain, when Alfonso X (residing in Segovia) received the damaged statue he "had it displayed to everyone so that they might be moved by it and try with all their might to defeat that tribe of Moors and avenge the statue."

The portrayal of the king of Granada in *Cantiga* 215 is a departure from the caricature of the iconoclastic Moor. He acknowledges the miracle, and although he is a reluctant witness, it is through his agency that the miracle of the statue is brought to Alfonso X's attention and ultimately recorded in the *Cantigas*. The desire for the power of the Virgin to be acknowledged universally is emphasized in several other miracles in the *Cantigas* as well, and the Alfonsine narrator, speaking in the first person, occasionally insists that he has been informed of a miracle by Muslims. For example, *Cantiga* 183 concludes: "... as I heard from Moors and Christians who told me the tale." In fact, although this miracle is presented as a contemporary event, it has literary precedents since it appears in both the *Chronicle of the Reign of Richard I* and in the *Chronicle of Roger of Hoveden*.³¹ *Cantiga* 183 revolves around an image of the Virgin which sits

“facing out to sea” in the city of Faro in the Algarve. Although the city is under Muslim rule, the Christians living there refer to the city as “Holy Mary of Faro” and pray to the statue which is said to be a legacy from the “time of the Christians” (i.e. an artifact dating from before the Muslim conquest). The statue, having become a rallying point for the defeated Christians, is thrown by the Muslim citizens into the sea. However, as long as it is submerged, the Muslims are unable to catch any fish. Eventually they recover it and restore it to a position of prominence “on the wall between the merlons.” Although relatively brief (*Cantiga* 183 consists of only six verses), it contains many interesting details. In the first place, it is clear that the statue is left in place by the Muslims after their takeover of Faro and does not elicit their displeasure until the resident Christians appropriate it as a symbol of their defiance. Since the statue was set up in the open, the Christians coming to pray to it would have made a public spectacle, and it is this to which the Muslims seem to have reacted more than to the presence of the object in and of itself. As in *Cantiga* 215, the Moors’ treatment of the statue of the Virgin of Faro is characterized as an affront to the honour of the Mother of God rather than a simple act of vandalism. Although the stereotype of the iconoclastic Moor comes into play in this *cantiga*, a positive reference is made to the Muslim ruler of the Algarve in the opening lines of the song which read: “Concerning this, I shall tell of a miracle which the Holy Virgin Mary performed in Faro in the times of Aben Mafon, who ruled the kingdom of the Algarve then as a courageous man in times of war or peace.” As recounted in the *Cantigas*, this miracle also presents a fairly balanced picture of the Muslims who catch more fish than ever once they have recovered the Marian statue.

In *Cantiga* 169, written in the first person as if by Alfonso X himself, the roles of Christian and Muslim leaders are reversed. In this *cantiga* (whose historical circumstances have been analysed by O’Callaghan)³² both Alfonso X and his father-in-law, James I of Aragon, agree to the destruction of a Marian shrine in the Muslim suburb of Murcia. However, the Muslim lord, ‘Abd Allāh, refuses because he does not want to incite the anger of the Virgin. The last three verses of this *cantiga* function as an appendix since they recount how later, in 1275, when Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb led an attack on the city, the Virgin saved her church from the Muslims and “drove them out of there.” Although there is no reference to a Marian image in the lyrics of the song, the final panel of the miniature (fig. 3) shows a statue of the Virgin enshrined in the church glaring out at the Moors who stand in front of the edifice with their spears poised, powerless to attack it. *Cantiga* 169 ends with a statement which suggests that the Virgin in thirteenth-century Castile-León was viewed as a patron of the Reconquest: “Therefore, Her church is now free, for never can Mohammed hold power there because

Figure 3. *Cantigas de Santa María*, early 1280s (Escorial, Biblioteca Real MS T.I.1), fol. 226v. *Cantiga* 169: the Moors cannot destroy a church dedicated to the Virgin (Photo: Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid).



She conquered it and furthermore, She will conquer Spain and Morocco and Ceuta and Arcila.”³³

The Muslim respect for the Virgin expressed by ‘Abd Allāh in *Cantiga* 169 is emphasized in other miracles in the *Cantigas* as well. For example, in *Cantiga* 165, a sultan refuses to wage war on a Christian city because the Koran records that Mary was a virgin. After ordering his troops to retreat, he then kneels before a statue of the Virgin, offering gifts to the saint. Since the image of the Virgin stands at the centre of so many miracle legends involving Muslims and Christians, it is not surprising that the miniature showing the sultan venerating the statue represents his coming to terms with the Christian community. Like the three Magi of Matthew’s gospel whose pose he mimics, the sultan attests to the universal validity of Christian concepts and ideals.

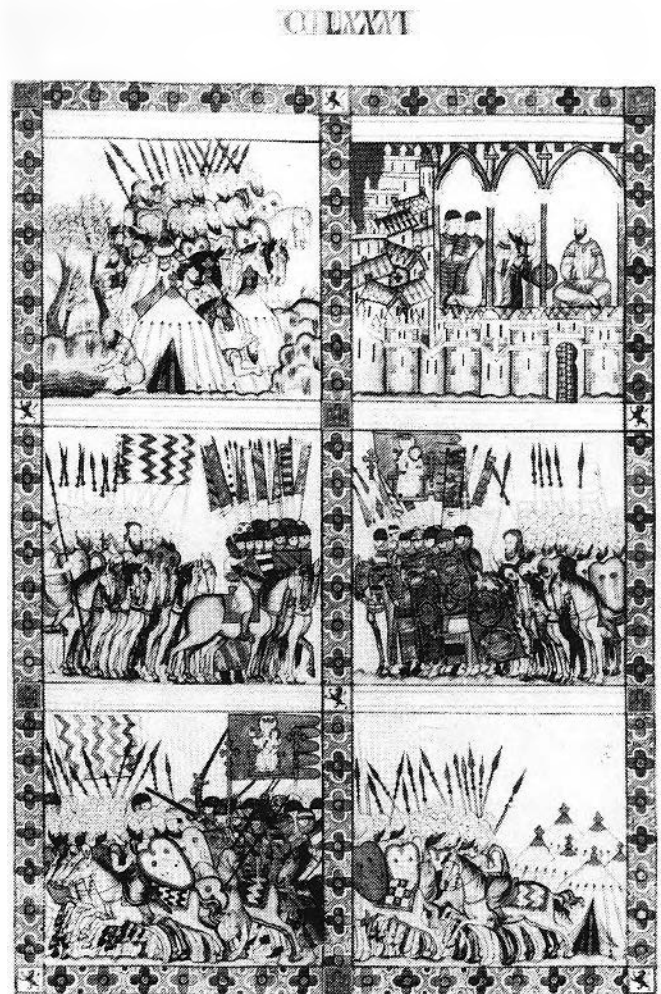
An even more favourable portrait of a Muslim leader is presented in *Cantiga* 181, the final example to be considered here. Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb also appears in this narrative, this time, “waging bitter war” with the King of Marrakech.³⁴ The latter,

who finds his city besieged, takes his subjects' advice to sally forth with the crosses of the Christians and a banner emblazoned with the image of the Virgin. As the narrator informs us, as soon as the banner "was seen by the Moors on the other side, they were so alarmed by it that ... none of them drew back on their reins as they fled. Thus Holy Mary helped Her friends, although they were of another faith, to defeat their enemies." The miniature accompanying this remarkable *cantiga* shows Christian knights leading each contingent of armed Muslims. It is worth noting that those fighting on the side of the King of Marrakech hold the banner of the Virgin aloft while their Muslim compatriots clutch a blank one (fig. 4). Perhaps the Alfonsine artist responsible for this illustration preferred not to place the banner of the Virgin directly in Muslim hands. At any rate, the miniature is open to the interpretation that the Muslim warriors of Marrakech, although willing to fight under the banner of the Virgin, chose not to come into contact with it directly. According to the refrain of this *cantiga*: "The Virgin will aid those who most love Her, although they may be of another faith and disbelievers." However, another moral can be detected, namely, that images of the Virgin are efficacious weapons in battle even when employed by non-Christians.

The following conclusions may be drawn from this brief comparison of standard and Iberian miracles. In both the widely diffused miracle tales (like the account of the miraculous icon of Constantinople) and in those unique to the *Cantigas* (such as the tale of the martyred statue) images play pivotal roles in miracles involving conflicts between Muslims and Christians. With the notable exception of the banner of the Virgin in *Cantiga* 181, the images featured in these miracles serve as markers of religious difference – the Christian predilection for religious images and dependence on them is contrasted with the Muslim rejection of them. Although it is not possible to explore this subject in depth here, it is worth noting that the issue of religious images is also raised in Muslim sources describing conflicts with Christians in the Spanish Kingdoms. For example, in the Marinid chronicle, *Al-Dhakhira al-saniyya* (which describes how Abū Yūsuf crossed the straits from North Africa to engage in an attack on Castile-León) the Muslims are said to be "desirous to prosecute the war against those who worship idols," while a Muslim victory is described as "a great reverse for the idol-worshippers."³⁵ Elsewhere, celebrating the triumph, the text states: "Islam was given cause to rejoice once more, and the worshippers of idols and graven images were immediately humbled."³⁶ Although these references to Christians as idol-worshippers are rhetorical tropes, this does not discount the fact that they reflect the Muslim rejection of Christian cult practices.

In addition to the importance assigned to images in the *Cantigas*, it has been demonstrated that both standard and

Figure 4. *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, early 1280s (Escorial, Biblioteca Real MS T.I.1), fol. 240r. *Cantiga* 181: Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb wages war on the King of Marrakech (Photo: Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid).



Iberian miracles emphasize the Virgin's ability to defend her devotees. Considering the drive to expand Christian territory, we might expect a more aggressive/offensive portrait of the Virgin in the miracles conceived in thirteenth-century Castile-León. However, she is not shown leading the charge against the Moors in any of the miracles examined here (with the exception of *Cantiga* 181 in which she helps the King of Marrakech fight his co-religionists). On the contrary, in both the standard and Iberian tales the Virgin assumes a defensive rather than an offensive stance. In the *Cantigas* she is the shield of the faithful rather than their sword. This conception of the Virgin also manifests itself in church dedications, since numerous churches along the frontier between Christian and Muslim territory were dedicated to her, providing a defensive line against the enemy.³⁷ Despite their similar treatment of the Virgin, we have seen that the standard and Iberian miracles differ in their treatment of the relationships between Christians and Moors, with the latter

generally presenting a more complicated and less caricatured picture of incidents involving members of rival faiths.

Although the miraculous events reported in the *Cantigas* are said to have taken place in widely different settings, separated by centuries, the gap between them is bridged by the Virgin whose intervention is ongoing throughout history. The juxtaposition of standard and Iberian legends within the *Cantigas* impressed upon members of Alfonso X's circle that the Virgin who had defended Christians in the distant past was just as vital a force in thirteenth-century Castile-León.

Notes

* A draft of this paper was prepared while I was an M.A. student at the University of Victoria and read at the UAAC conference in Vancouver in 1997. Since then I have continued my research on the *Cantigas* at the Courtauld Institute. This paper thus represents preliminary observations.

- 1 See Norman H. Baynes, "The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople," in his *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1955), 248–60; and Averil Cameron, "The Virgin's Robe: an Episode in the History of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople," in her *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (London, 1981), XVII, 42–56.
- 2 Both Vulgate and King James versions as quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan in *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, 1996), 26–27.
- 3 Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 27.
- 4 Manuel Pedro Ferreira, "The Stemma of the Marian Cantigas: Philological and Musical Evidence," *Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa Maria*, VI (Spring 1994), 58–98.
- 5 Walter Mettmann, ed., *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, 4 vols (Coimbra, 1959–72). Kathleen Kulp-Hill's translation is soon to be published by Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Tempe, Arizona).
- 6 Joseph T. Snow, "The Central Rôle of the Troubadour Persona of Alfonso X in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, LVI (1979), 306.
- 7 Walter Mettmann, *Alfonso X, el Sabio, Cantigas de Santa Maria*, 3 vols (Madrid, 1986–89), I, 24.
- 8 Ferreira, "Stemma," 72.
- 9 Georges Daumet, "Les testaments d'Alphonse X le Savant, roi de Castille," *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, LXVII (1906), 70–99, esp. 91.
- 10 George D. Greenia, "The Politics of Piety; Manuscript Illumination and Narration in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*," *Hispanic Review*, LXI (Summer 1993), 325–344, esp. 337.
- 11 Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, "Las *Cantigas* del Rey Sabio," *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, XXXIX (1895), 127–31, 143–46 and 159–63.
- 12 Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Alfonso X and the Cantigas de Santa Maria: A Poetic Biography* (Leiden, 1998), 11.
- 13 This quotation and all subsequent ones of the lyrics of the *cantigas* arc derived from Kathleen Kulp-Hill's unpublished typescript and arc used by permission of the author.
- 14 *Cantigas* 28 and 264. In *Cantiga* 28 the Virgin uses her mantle to catch the stones fired at the city during an attack by a sultan.
- 15 Theodore Synkellos, sermon on the siege of the city (626) and George the Pisidian, *Bellum Avaricum* as cited in Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), 495–98.
- 16 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 36.
- 17 Mary Vincentine Gripkey. *The Blessed Virgin Mary as Mediatrix in the Latin and Old French Legend prior to the Fourteenth Century* (Washington, 1938), 164.
- 18 Kathleen Kulp-Hill, "The Captions to the Miniatures of the 'Codice Rico' of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a Translation," *Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa Maria*, VII (Spring 1995), 3–64, esp. 36.
- 19 Alfonso X, El Sabio, *Cantigas de Santa Maria: Códice Rico de El Escorial*, trans. José Filgueira Valverde (Madrid, 1985), 174.
- 20 Vincent of Beauvais, "Speculum Historiale," lib. vii. 110, in *Bibliotheca mundi Vincentii Burgundi; speculum quadruplex, naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale*, 4 vols (Douai, 1624), IV, 262.
- 21 Harry Leigh Douglas Ward and John Alexander Herbert, eds, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols (London, 1962), II, 687.
- 22 This popular tale is also included in Gautier de Coincy's *Miracles de Nostre Dame*; V.F. Koenig, ed., *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, 4 vols (Geneva, 1955–70), III, 42.
- 23 Derek Lomax notes that "crusading ideas were widespread in Spain." Derek W. Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain* (London, 1978), 103. See also Julie A. Harris, "Mosque to Church Conversions in the Spanish Reconquest," *Medieval Encounters*, III, 2 (July 1997), 158–72.
- 24 Joseph F. O'Callaghan, "Image and Reality: The King Creates His Kingdom," in his *Alfonso X, the Cortes, and Government in Medieval Spain* (Aldershot, 1998), II, 16–17.
- 25 Peter Linehan, "The Beginnings of Santa María de Guadalupe and the Direction of Fourteenth-Century Castile" in his *Past and Present in Medieval Spain* (Aldershot, 1992), XII, 299. The term "romero" was originally applied to people making pilgrimage to Rome but, through common usage, came to mean any pilgrim. See Alfonso X, *Siete Partidas*, trans. Samuel Parsons Scott (Chicago, 1931), Partida I, Title, XXIV, Law I, 264. "Pobladores" are settlers.
- 26 Antonio Ballesteros-Beretta, *Alfonso X El Sabio* (Barcelona, 1963), 588.
- 27 Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *The Learned King: The Reign of Alfonso X of Castile* (Philadelphia, 1993), 196. Also consult Juan Menéndez Pidal, "Noticias acerca de la Orden Militar de Santa María de España," *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, XVII (1907), 161–80; and Juan Pérez Villamil, "Origen e instituto de la Orden militar de Santa María de España," *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia*, LXXIV (1919), 243–71.
- 28 Joseph O'Callaghan surmises that the events described in *Cantiga* 185 "relate to the very beginning of the revolt of the Mudéjars against Alfonso X in May 1264." He also notes that the reference to the King of Granada is to "Ibn al-Aḥmar, whose name meant

- the Red” which is why he is depicted in the miniature of *Cantiga* 185 “in a red tunic, with a red flag, and a red shield.” The Christian and Muslim castellans cannot be identified with certainty. O’Callaghan, *Alfonso X and the Cantigas*, 112.
- 29 Mettmann, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, 3 vols (Madrid, 1986–89), II, 301. Translation mine.
- 30 Mahmoud Makki, “The Political History of Al-Andalus (92/711–897/1492),” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, (Leiden, 1992), 3–87, esp. 78.
- 31 As noted by José Filgueira Valverde in Alfonso X, El Sabio, *Cantigas de Santa María: Códice Rico de El Escorial*, trans. Valverde (Madrid, 1985), 299.
- 32 O’Callaghan, *The Learned King*, 191–95.
- 33 This point is noted by Amy Remensnyder who is engaged in a project concerning the Virgin’s role in the Reconquest. See Amy G. Remensnyder, “Ambivalent Architecture: The Virgin Mary and the Christianization of Mosques and Temples in Medieval Spain and Early Sixteenth-Century Mexico” forthcoming in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religious Expression and Social Meaning in the Middle Ages*, eds Sharon Farmer and Barbara Rosenwein (Cornell, 2000).
- 34 The King of Marrakech of *Cantiga* 181 has been identified as “al-Murtada, the last of the Almohad caliphs (d. 1268).” O’Callaghan, *Alfonso X*, 136.
- 35 *Al-Dhakhira al-saniyya* as cited in L.P. Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250–1500* (Chicago, 1992), 156–57.
- 36 *Al-Dhakhira al-saniyya* as cited in Harvey, *Islamic Spain*, 155.
- 37 Lomax, *The Reconquest of Spain*, 104. Many of these churches had originally been mosques. See Harris, “Mosque to Church Conversions,” 158–72. On the role played by the cult of the Virgin in the Reconquest, see also Maricel E. Presilla, “The Image of Death and Political Ideology in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*,” *Studies on the Cantigas de Santa Maria: Art, Music, and Poetry*, eds Israel J. Katz and John E. Keller (Madison, 1987), 429–32; and Remensnyder, “Ambivalent Architecture.”