INTRODUCTION

THE “ALFONSINE ERA”

This is the kingdom of the lord king don Alfonso, who, in his knowledge, good judgment and intelligence, righteousness, kindness, piety, and nobility, surpassed all learned kings. And therefore we deemed it fitting to set as the beginning of the era the year this noble king began to reign so that this era may be known and proclaimed, as were other eras before, so that it may last and the name of the noble king may endure forever. And we determined that the beginning would be the year 1252 and we called it the “Alfonsine era.” (Alfonsine Astronomical Tables)

The year 2003 when this work appeared in its original version was the 750th anniversary of the proclamation of the “Alfonsine Era.” We cannot accuse the authors of the Alfonsine Astronomical Tables of mere propaganda or flattery when they surprise us with such a weighty declaration in the prologue to that work. They also tell us that, just as in the past when historical accounts were done according to the various eras, starting in 1252 they will be done according to the “Alfonsine era” so that “it may last and the name of the noble king may endure forever.” Composed at the beginning of that long reign, it must be recognized that the scientists who worked on the Tables were astonishingly farsighted. Thirty-two years later, the Christian West would have confirmation of this: Alfonso “in his knowledge, good judgment and intelligence, righteousness, kindness, piety, and nobility, surpassed all learned kings,” to such an extent that according to the early testimony of his nephew, the great writer don Juan Manuel, “he set out to increase knowledge to the best of his ability, and he did this to such an extent, that it could be said that from king Ptolemy to these days no other king or man did as much as him.” (Book on Hunting).

Besides being a great ruler, Alfonso was the first humanist king who, consciously integrated knowledge into the duties and obligations of the Crown. Likewise, he was the first professional king of letters who, in addition presenting himself to his subjects as a ruler and legislator, also did so as a teacher and intellectual guide of his people, making knowledge available to all, so everyone could benefit from it. Don Juan Manuel wrote in one of his letters:
No one could say more or even as much as he in the field of letters. And this for many reasons: first because of the great intelligence God granted him; second, because of the great disposition he had to perform noble and profitable tasks; third, because he housed in his court many teachers of the sciences and knowledge, which was a good thing, and all with the purpose of advancing knowledge and ennobling his kingdoms, because we find that in all the sciences he produced many works and all very good. (Abbreviated Chronicle)

Alfonso was lucky enough to occupy the throne in a unique period in European cultural history. He could have said with Alexander Neckham, “we are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, that’s why we can see more and farther.” Medieval Christendom had reached an unprecedented level of economic development. In the cultural sphere, the splendor of the “Renaissance of the 12th century” was followed by the progressive and innovative 13th century, termed by J. Le Goff “the Enlightenment century” (“le siècle des lumières”). And the collaborators of the Alfonsine works in the prologue to the Learned King’s most important scientific work did not hesitate to label his reign “the Alfonsine era.” This was no exaggeration given the results and the unmatched cultural patrimony he left behind. Intellectual figures, works, and translations from many places converge and change the world of science and letters with great speed. The three great cultures, Latin, Greek and Muslim, clash and influence each other. And Alfonso is the great beneficiary of it all. At his court gathered scholars representing all three traditions. From this unprecedented cultural crossroads was born in the royal scriptorium a new vision of the national past in the Estoria de España (EE) (History of Spain) and of universal history in the General Estoria (GE) (General History), which is reflected in the extraordinary production of scientific, legal, poetic, and even leisure works that would occupy the mind of the Learned King in the next thirty-two years of his reign.

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1 This aspect of social progress has been masterfully emphasized by G. Duby in his two great works: Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West, trans. C. Postan, Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1976; and Año 1000–año 2000. La huella de nuestros miedos, Barcelona, 1995.