CHAPTER ONE

THE APPRENTICESHIP OF A GREAT KING

Rex, decus Hesperie, thesaurus philosophie
El rey, que es fermoura de Espanna et thesoro de la filosofia
(The King, who is the ornament of Spain and treasure of its philosophy)

1. Birth and Ancestors

We are the product of our genes and education. If that is true of all human beings, it perhaps applied best to the subject of our biography, Alfonso X, King of Castile and León, justly termed the Learned or the Wise.¹

According to the documents available, he was born in the imperial city of Toledo on Tuesday, November 23, 1221, on the Feast of St. Clement.² The birth at Toledo was probably accidental, as his mother, accompanying her husband, who was headed south to crush the rebellion of the Lord de Molina, had to take refuge in the imperial city in order to give birth. Beatriz and her husband were also accompanied by her inseparable mother-in-law, Queen Berenguela (1180–1246), who was often present at her son’s military campaigns. She was probably the one who suggested the name for the newborn, Alfonso, in memory of this notable event.

¹ The bibliography on the life, reign, and culture of the times of Alfonso X is vast. The main biographies and important studies as well as the various collections of documents consulted are gathered in the Bibliography at the end of this volume. In the notes, these works are frequently quoted in abbreviated form.

² It is Alfonso himself who declares: “Because we were born in the city of Toledo and we received there the baptism,” Privilegio dated February 21, 1253 (AHN, Liber Privilegiorum Toletanae Ecclesiae, fol. 182 r–v, published in MHE, I, pp. 5–8); “I was born the day of Saint Clement,” Letter of concession, May 25, 1254 (AHN, Sellos, publ. in MHE, I, p. 43); “we prayed to Saint Clement in whose day we were born,” Testament of Alfonso X, Seville, November 8, 1283 (MHE, II, p. 111). Both details are confirmed in Anales Toledanos II: “Tuesday, day of Saint Clement, on the 23rd day of November was born the infant don Alfonso, son of king don Fernando of Castile…”] (ed. ES, XXIII, Madrid, 1799, p. 406).
of her father, the great Alfonso VIII, hero of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212). The newborn was immediately entrusted to the care of a nurse, the noblewoman Urraca Pérez, and her husband, don García Alvarez de Toledo, who were always cherished by Fernando III and Alfonso himself.3

At three months, the child was transferred along with his nurse to Burgos. On March 21, 1222, with the court at Burgos, representatives of the city were summoned to acknowledge and vow fidelity to the new heir. The act took place in the cathedral, in the presence of the entire court, noblemen, and the church officials. The four month-old Alfonso was held by his nurse, doña Urraca, while the representatives of the cities, one by one, proceeded to make a vow of fidelity and obedience.4 The summer of that same year, the child was entrusted to the caretaker García Fernández de Villamayor and his wife, doña Mayor Arias, who would later be granted lands by Alfonso, when he became king, in recognition of their many services, especially for his healthy upbringing in Villaldemiro and Celada del Camino, some twenty kilometers from Burgos, in the Arlanzón lowlands.5

There is speculation that the selection of both nurse and caretaker was highly influenced by Queen Berenguela, for don García, besides having repeatedly proven his fidelity to the crown in its struggle against don Álvaro de Lara, happened to be Berenguela’s butler; previously he

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3 The name of the nurse appears in a grant document by Fernando III quoted by E. Flórez, Reinas cathólicas, I, p. 446. Regarding the care that should be taken in the selection of the nurse for the children of kings, there are many details in the Segunda Partida:

[... ] wherefore the ancient sages, who discussed these matters in a natural way, declared that the children of kings should have nurses who afforded sufficient milk; that they should be well bred, healthy, handsome, belong to good families, have good habits and especially that they should not be very high-tempered. For where they afford abundance of milk and are well-formed and healthy, they will bring up healthy and vigorous children; and if they are handsome and graceful, the children will love them more, and take greater pleasure in seeing them, and permit them to control them better. (Partida II, Tit. VII, Law III, Las Siete Partidas, 4 vols., ed. Robert I. Burns, trans. By Samuel Parsons Scott. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. vol. 2, p. 300. All quotations in English from this work come from this edition, unless otherwise noted.)

4 This act is remembered in a diploma issued by Fernando III to the city of Burgos and granted on the next day, March 22 (in J. González, Reinado y diplomas de Fernando III, II, p. 194).

5 “because don García Fernández and his wife doña Mayor Arias raised me and performed many services and especially because they raised me in Villaldemiro and in Celada...” (in A. Ballesteros, Alfonso X el Sabio, p. 50).