Juan de Valdés and
Spanish Imperial Humanism

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Spanish humanism, like its counterparts in northern European countries, combined the study of classical literature and philology with a Platonic desire to perfect society beginning with a reform of the Catholic Church. The uniqueness of Spanish humanism was its conjunction with the rise of a Spanish empire. Since humanism was the predominant intellectual trend of the sixteenth century, it was the natural source of ideas for the promotion of Spanish hegemony.

The search for a suitable imperial ideology became the most pressing issue during the reign of Charles V, 1516-1555, as Spanish humanists sought to solve a double problem caused by his election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519. First, they had to emphasize the central Spanish nature of Charles' heterogeneous empire for which Spain was the main source of money, troops, and administrators. The second problem was to deal with the Lutheran threat to the unity of that empire. Many Spanish humanists were ready to agree to radical reforms within the Church in order to maintain the loyalty of Lutheran princes in the constant warfare between Charles and the French-Turkish alliance. In the evolution of imperial ideas and policy a small group of Spanish intellectuals developed and implemented the first modern theory of empire based solely on cultural superiority and disassociated from the universal titles of pope and emperor.¹

Ferdinand and Isabella had combined humanism with religious reform to serve the needs of a rising nation-state and empire. The Archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain, Ximénes de Cisneros, was granted the authority to reform Spanish religious life. His greatest achievement was the establishment of the University of Alcalá which united the new learning of the humanists with theological studies. The heart of the university was the School of Grammar which taught the classical and Biblical languages with heavy assignments in their respective literatures. Cisneros decided to give his pet school a great task: the collection, editing and printing of the oldest Biblical manuscripts available. The resulting Polyglot Bible presented the original texts opposite the Vulgate translation.²

Spain's rapid rise as an imperial power led to a special interest in the Hellenic ideal of empire. Three of the most commonly assigned classical authors at Alcalá were Plato, Aristotle and Isocrates, all of whom agreed on rule by the most virtuous, be it an individual or a class within a state or one state
among a group of states. Natural law compelled the virtuous to extend their superior culture as far as possible thus promoting the universal humanization of mankind. The classical relation of culture to political authority influenced Antonio de Nebrija, the famed professor of Greek at Alcalá, to focus on the essential link between language and empire. His purpose in writing the first Spanish grammar book was obviously to promote Spanish imperialism, a purpose clearly defined in his preface: "language was always the companion of empire, and in such a way that together they began, grew, and flourished."  

The great humanist and court chronicler of Charles V, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, went further in the elaboration of a Spanish imperialism based on culture. He emphasized all great Spanish intellectuals from Seneca to Alfonso the Wise to underscore Spain's numerous contributions to intellectual enlightenment. He lauded the superiority of Spanish educational, political, and religious institutions which produced a more virtuous national populace. The conclusion was obvious: Spain was the most virtuous state, and, hence, was best suited to exercise hegemony.

As a student in the School of Grammar at Alcalá, Juan de Valdés came under the influence of classical and Nebrian views of cultural imperialism. Valdés' ideas on the subject were further refined during his apprenticeship under Sepúlveda as an imperial diplomatic agent in Rome during the early 1530's. The fruit of Valdés' educational germination was his Diálogo De La Lengua, a book which forcefully defended the Spanish language and culture before an Italian audience that resented Spanish domination and considered anyone beyond the Alps a barbarian. Utilizing his knowledge of ancient history and philology, Valdés emphasized the cultural prestige of his native tongue by attributing its origin to the Hellenic Greeks. He rejected the idea that Spanish was a mere vulgarization of Latin and opposed the upperclass tendency to Latinize Spanish words. He stressed the unique and hybrid qualities of his language which made it "so noble, so complete, so elegant, and so abundant." Valdés also attacked Italian egocentricity. For example, when one of the Italians represented in the dialogue criticized him for praising the style of a Spanish translator, Valdés replied, "is it not possible for you to concede that a non-Italian has a good use of Latin." Elsewhere in the work, when his Italian friends were amazed by Valdés' liberal social philosophy, one asked where he had learned it, sarcastically adding, "you didn't get this in Castile"; whereupon Valdés rejoined, "you are deceived my friend, much of what you call philosophy I learned in Spain.