On the 30th of October 1340 the armies of the Castilian king Alfonso XI (1312–1350) met the allied forces of the Marinid sultan of Morocco and the emir of Granada on the banks of the river Salado in the deep south of Spain. Alfonso, who was supported by his father-in-law Alfonso IV of Portugal and crusaders from all over Europe, was facing superior numbers. Still, the Christians won the battle and crushed the enemy. According to the Crónica de Alfonso el Onceno, which was probably written by Alfonso’s confidant Fernán Sánchez de Valladolid, the Muslims suffered severe losses: 200,000 warriors are said to have been killed. Besides, the Christians captured not only the sultan’s harem, but also an enormous amount of silver and gold. As a result the prices of these precious metals dropped considerably in places as far away as Paris. The number of Muslim victims (against only twenty dead knights on Christian side!) is, of course, highly exaggerated. That does not alter the fact that the Battle of Salado is celebrated as one of the great Christian victories of the Reconquest, which had started over 600 years before with the legendary Battle of Covadonga and would be completed 152 years later, when the Catholic Kings Fernando and Isabel took Granada. The danger of an invasion from Africa had been averted once and for all, especially when Alfonso secured Castilian control of the European side of the Straits of Gibraltar by conquering Algeciras at the end of a long siege in 1344.

Contemporaries were grateful to Alfonso, who in 1350 was to fall victim to the plague while besieging Gibraltar. Writing shortly after the battle Alvaro Pelayo, bishop of Silves in the south of Portugal, but originating from Spanish Galicia and residing from around 1338 regularly in Seville, is lavish with his praise in the opening pages of his Speculum regum. In this mirror (manual) of princes the friar minor and canonist, who in De statu et planctu Ecclesiae (The lamentable state of the Church) had supported pope John XXII’s claims to universal authority over the emperor and other rulers, again vehemently criticizes the powerful, not least his ‘natural lord’ Alfonso XI, to whom the work is dedicated. Between the lines he accuses him, among many other things, of adultery, extortion, negligence of...
state-affaires, non-observance of the fast, omission of extirpating heresy and interference with ecclesiastical matters. This does not keep him from hailing the king as the champion of Christendom in the first chapters. Castile surpasses all other kingdoms, because Alfonso as defender of the other Catholic kingdoms truly reveres the Creator of all nations. Who among the Christian kings is willing to risk his life for the sake of the faith? Who else but Alfonso, the ‘rex fidelissimus’ or most religious king! While other kings lead a life of luxury in their palaces, he lives in the ‘tents and encampments of Christ’ and contents himself with a frugal meal. Other kings are fast asleep, but he spends his nights waking lest the Church may prosper in peace. He is the only one who is prepared to lay down his life in order to repay the sacrifice that Christ has brought. Among other kings the blaze of his faith shines like the sun in the darkness at the break of dawn. Alfonso, who had the papal banner carried ahead of his armies during the battle, is the ‘victorious defender of the faith and Christ’s special standard-bearer’.

As said before, Alvaro was not blind to the defects of the king, on the contrary. The reason he praises him so enthusiastically after all is not just that he allows himself to be carried away by the euphoric mood caused by the recent victory. There is a second explanation: what he is up to, is to incite Alfonso to continue the struggle. The king has to annihilate the many heretics, sorcerers and soothsayers that live within the boundaries of his kingdom – particularly in Andalusia and Asturias – and go on with the war against the infidels. His task is not yet fulfilled: only when he as pugil Ecclesiae (champion of the Church) has recovered Africa, which once had been submitted to Christianity by the ‘most glorious and most religious’ Gothic kings, but had been lost because of the sins of the Christians, he may put down his sword. Alluding to the myth according to which the former Roman province Mauretania Tingitana had been a part of the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo he maintains that Africa belongs to Alfonso, heir of those kings, and that it is his duty to take revenge for the humiliation inflicted upon Christ in that part of the world. It was the bishop’s conviction that this project could only be brought to a happy end, if Alfonso changed his ways; only if he succeeded in overcoming his own vices, he would keep on conquering his enemies. Alvaro offered his help by giving a detailed – and often tedious – description of the way a Christian king ought to organize his life and kingdom in the remaining pages of his Speculum. By removing obstacles to the continuation of the Reconquest on African soil, Alvaro hoped to further the realization of an old Franciscan dream: bring the north of Africa back to Christianity. This dream his order shared with the pope, who was also trying hard to create the proper conditions. About the same time Benedict XII wrote a letter to the Castilian king that sounds much the same as Alvaro’s admonishing words. The pope warned Alfonso not to attribute his victory to his own strength or to that of his men, but to the might of the divine majesty. If he wanted divine grace to be even more generous towards him in the future,