Alfonso X “The Wise”: The Last Almohad Caliph?

Maribel Fierro
Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales
Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 28037 Madrid, Spain
e-mail: maribel.fierro@cchs.csic.es

Abstract
When dealing with the prolific intellectual output during the reign of Alfonso X, known to be indebted to Arabic sources, hardly any reference is made to the Almohad context. It is particularly striking that Almohad culture is even ignored when referring to the influence of Averroism. It was in fact the Almohad caliphs who encouraged the development of Aristotelian philosophy, which interest in philosophy and knowledge formed part of the “sapientialist” concept of the Almohad caliphate itself. The present essay discusses this often-disregarded “sapientialism,” insisting on its connection with Alfonso X, continuing the line of inquiry begun by Ana M. Montero. This study describes what was involved in the political and cultural project of the Almohads, in order to show the parallels with the political and cultural project of Alfonso X.

Keywords
Almohads, political and cultural project, Alfonso X, sapientialism, knowledge, cultural transfer

Following the line which some have called of the Banū Codera (Marín, “Arabistas en España”; Monroe), traditional Spanish Arabism has paid little attention to the Almoravid and Almohad periods, for it viewed the North African Berber empires as a foreign domination characterized by religious fanaticism, which brought to an end the culture, supposedly largely indigenous, which flourished in the Iberian Peninsula under the Umayyads and the tāʾifā kings.¹ The degree to which the indigenous

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at the colloquium Passages. Déplacements des hommes, circulation des textes et identités dans l’Occident médiéval, organized by J. Duclos and P. Henriet at Bordeaux University on February 2-3, 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. English translation of the Spanish original of this essay
culture—Hispano-Roman and Visigoth, as well as Christian—survived in al-Andalus varies according to individual interpretation, but almost exclusive preference has been given to the study of the early centuries of Andalusi history. These centuries, considered to be an age of splendor and religious coexistence (Menocal), were more easily accepted when it came to the writing of the national history of Spain (Al-Andalus/España). It was thought to be more difficult to do the same with the political and cultural processes that took place under the Almoravids and the Almohads.

Naturally there were exceptions to the lack of scholarly enthusiasm for the history of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, some of which are very noteworthy, such as the studies carried out by the eponym of the Banū Codera, Francisco Codera y Zaidín, and later by Ambrosio Huici Miranda, whose work is becoming ever more highly valued (Marín, La cocina), as well as the work by Jacinto Bosch Vilá. Figures such as Ibn Qızmân, Ibn Țufayl, Muḥyī l-dīn Ibn ʿArabī or Ibn Rushd (Averroès), living under the Almoravids and the Almohads, have been the object of investigation, but generally little attention was paid to explain their lives and works within the framework of the Almoravid and Almohad political and cultural contexts. In recent years more interest has been given to this line of inquiry. There have been a growing number of studies, as shown by Volume 8.2 of the Historia de España Ramón Menéndez Pidal (Viguera Molins), and its accompanying bibliography, and other collected studies that have appeared subsequently (Los almorahes: Problemas y perspectivas; Averroès et l’averroïsme, XIIe-XVe siècle).

Mistrust of a period seen as alien and fanatical has left a legacy of general ignorance, and as a result certain striking parallels with the political and cultural processes in the Christian world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries have gone unnoticed. It is true that the debt the prolific intellectual output during the reign of Alfonso X owes to Arabic sources has been generally recognized, with extreme points of view ranging from a radical reluctance to acknowledge the debt, to a constant harking back to Andalusi precedents, as in the case of the studies by Francisco Márquez Villanueva.2 Even in the latter case, however, hardly a reference is made to the

---

2 See Gómez Redondo, where the presentation of the intellectual production during the times of Alfonso X obscures its indebtedness to Arabic sources. On the other hand, see Burns: “A major component of [Alfonso X’s] work, indeed the indispensable tool,