FROM KINGDOM TO EMPIRE.
POLITICAL LEGITIMACY BUILDING STRATEGIES
AT THE COURT OF ALFONSO THE MAGNANIMOUS

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ABSTRACT

Alfonso the Magnanimous (1394-1458) became king of southern Italy in 1443, celebrating a spectacular Triumph. At his court, he gathered around himself the most important intellectuals of the time, from various places, who completely reworked his political consensus building strategies, adapting them to the new ruler’s imperial image. The king’s legitimacy strategies followed multiple paths (possession of virtues and dynastic inheritance), on various levels (rational, traditional and charismatic). The result was the invention of ‘Monarchical Humanism’, a type of Humanism whose salient characteristics were innovative, alternative and totally opposed to, but certainly no less important than, those of the ‘Civil Humanism’ developing elsewhere.¹

KEYWORDS

Kingdom of Naples, Crown of Aragon, Empire, Alfonso the Magnanimous, Monarchical Humanism.

CAPITALLA VERBA

Regnum Neapolis, Corona Aragonium, Imperium, Alfonsus Magnanimus, Humanismus monarchicus.
1. Alfonso the Magnanimous, Frederick III and the last imperial coronation

The last imperial coronation ceremony took place in Rome on Sunday 19th of March 1452, the day Frederick III of the Hapsburgs was crowned for the third time, by Pope Nicholas V, with a gold crown. As Melcior Miralles, Alfonso the Magnanimous’ chaplain, explained in great detail in his Crònica i dietari, the first coronation, with an iron crown, had been in Germany when he was elected King of the Romans and the second, with a silver crown, once again from the pope in Rome, had taken place the previous Thursday, 16th March: la segona, d’argent, devia pendre en Lombarlà e en Milà, e perquè, per certs respectes, no l’avia presa, lo papa la li donà aquell dia, no obstant protestacions fetes per los embaxadòs del comte Francisco. duch de Milà.2

The ceremony was marked by extraordinary celebrations but was less opulent than those Alfonso the Magnanimous organised the following 26th of March in Naples, at which banquets, chivalry tournaments and spectacular hunting expeditions stretched on until 5th of April. Melcior Miralles, who eulogised his incredible opulence at all times, concluded: ‘lo rey e senyor, tanta e tan alta és la tua gran magnificència e senyoría!’3

And Alfonso’s chaplain was by no means the only person to describe him in this way.4 Bartolomeo Facio, the king’s salaried historian (leading to the dissemination of a specific type of eulogising history across Europe), also devoted the final part of Book IX of his work to this spectacular event. And he provided additional details, above all on Alfonso the Magnanimous’s hunting outings in the Astroni forests near Naples, involving setting up dazzling pavilions featuring a main marquee decorated with a plethora of gold and silver household ornaments and a fountain from which sprung a constant supply of three types of wine which everyone could drink from freely.5 Antonio Beccadelli, called Panormita —responsible for devising

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1. Used Abbreviations: ACA, Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó; BAV, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.
2. “The second one, of silver, was to be taken in Lombardy and Milan, and given that because of different reasons he had not taken it, the Pope gave it to him that day, notwithstanding the protests from the ambassadors of Count Francisco, Duke of Milan”. Miralles, Melcior. Crònica i dietari del capellà d’Alfons el Magnànim, Mateu Rodrigo Lizondo, ed. Valencia: Universitat de València, 2011: 208. In truth, here the day of the imperial coronation is incorrectly indicated as Sunday, 18th of March (which was a Saturday), probably for a trivial error (XVIII instead of XVIII). On the coronation, in general, see Lazzeroni, Enrico. “Il viaggio di Federico III in Italia (l’ultima incoronazione imperiale in Roma)”, Atti e memorie del primo congresso storico lombardo. Milan: Tipografia Antonio Cordani, 1937: 271-397.
3. “Oh King and Lord, so much and high is your huge magnificence and lordship”. Miralles, Melcior. Crònica …: 212.
4. An interesting description is also offered by the later Angelo di Costanzo, who seems to draw on sources of family origin (he quotes a Giacomo di Costanzo, perhaps his ancestor): Di Costanzo, Angelo. Storia del Regno di Napoli. Naples: Brenner, 1839 (the first partial edition of the work dates from 1572, the complete one from 1581): 336.
a revolutionary consent-building strategy for Alfonso— also described the event on multiple occasions in his *De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis*, and one of the first chapters of Book IV (entitled *Magnifice*), concluding: *audivi saepius a regiae rationis scriba universam hanc in imperatorem hospitalitatem aureorum centum milium summam, praeter ingentis precii munera, supergressam fuisse.*

It was an extraordinary display of wealth and grandeur by Alfonso. The purpose of this boundless ostentation was not simply to impress Emperor Frederick III but to capture the whole world’s attention, as ambassadors from all the European powers were present and spread word of it far and wide. The Aragonese king was projecting an image of himself as greater and more powerful than the emperor himself, who was subject to him: the emperor had come to pay homage to the king in Naples whilst the latter had not gone to Rome to celebrate the former’s coronation. This certainly did not go unnoticed by contemporaries, as we will see in the conclusion.

### 2. Legitimacy building strategy models

Alfonso’s reception of Frederick III marked the apogee of a very clear and multi-faceted political communication strategy which culminated in his presenting himself as an emperor, even without his triple crown, as we have seen. It was a strategy which rested on all three pure forms of legitimate power so effectively delineated by

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Max Weber: ‘rational’ power resting on consensus over the legality of the statutes and the right to exercise power; ‘traditional’ power based on acceptance of the sacred character of the traditions; ‘charismatic’ power resting on consensus over the holy or heroic status of the individual ruler. Clearly Weber’s types of power are bound up with the specific historic context of the early decades of the 20th century but the theoretical approach set out in them remains effective and methodologically applicable to other contexts. They shed light on the way the legitimacy building strategies implemented by Alfonso the Magnanimous, the King of Naples and the Aragonese crown were delineated and understood, strategies which encompassed all Weber’s three types of power simultaneously, with these three never being fully independent of one another.

As we will see, the basis for Alfonso’s equating his own status with that of an emperor could certainly not be ‘rational’ legitimacy because there were no legally sanctioned grounds for it. It was rather a more ‘traditional’ form which required reworking and, to a certain extent, reinventing his status on the basis of an ideal continuum with the ancient Roman Empire, a continuum which could in any event only be shored up by recourse to ‘charismatic’ legitimacy.

Alfonso’s adoption of this traditional and charismatic imperial continuum approach dated back to 26th of February 1443 with a ceremonial, ancient Roman style Triumphus designed to celebrate the end of a war which had lasted over twenty years and sanction his conquest of the Kingdom of Naples but also, at the same time, mark the advent of a new era, not only in political and institutional terms but also in a cultural sense in that it promulgated new Humanistic models.

3. The 1443 Triumphus: charismatic legitimacy and the virtue system

The spectacle may not have been unusual in absolute terms, because ceremonies of this sort were then fairly commonplace in both Italy and Spain. However, Alfonso’s was the first ancient Roman style Triumphus to be celebrated in the 15th century and became a model for other rulers of the day who emulated its pomp and exhibition of power without, however, perhaps grasping all its implications and fundamental connotations. It melded Spanish traditions and Italian Humanist culture into a whole, bridging the two shores of this corner of the Mediterranean and transforming it into a ‘Catalan lake’.9

First and foremost, this Triumphus served as a ‘charismatic’ substitute for coronation, as a fully-fledged secular surrogate for the religious rites around coronation which Alfonso always circumvented, both as Aragonese King and as King of Naples. At the same time he set in motion a long and complex sequence of processes whose purpose was to legitimise the military conquests of a kingdom whose legal bases were extremely tenuous. The Aragonese dynasty’s claims to the southern Italian Kingdom could potentially have been based on historic claims to descend from Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen, via his son Manfred and granddaughter Constance (who had married Peter III of Aragon, the Great). But Alfonso accorded no special prominence to this genealogical line. In Bartolomeo Facio’s *Rerum gestarum libri*—one of the Alfonso’s preferred propaganda channels—this is paid only cursory attention, and a genealogical line was set out precisely by Pau Rossell, who also played a key role in the legitimacy building strategies employed in the run up to the taking of Naples. In the wake of, and bound up with, the final phase of the conquest, Alfonso preferred to base his legal claims on his adoption by Queen Joanna II of Anjou in 1419, despite this having been subsequently revoked. This adoption was also paid considerable attention in a further important source of information on Alfonso’s consensus building strategies, Gaspar Pelegrí’s *Historia*, the triumphant king’s first chronicler, which enabled Alfonso to present himself as legitimate Angevin heir and continuum. Thus the dynastic issue could plausibly have been marshalled in legal terms but ‘legal’ power—to continue to use Weber’s categories—based on disputed hereditary derivation was not the only source of legitimacy and this continued to be shored up by a further element, the personal virtue ‘backbone’ which was the only sure way of demonstrating Alfonso’s special, personal divine grace. Since the 13th century, virtues—variously elaborated and transformed from mere ethical system catalogue—had been considered to be an unavoidable requisite for true nobility but it was only in the Humanist era that ethical and political scholarly attention was paid the issue, in conjunction with the rediscovery of the Classics and a period of particular institutional ferment.

In mid-15th century Italy, in particular, the dynastic lineages of many principalities broke down and were replaced by new ones, and legitimising these required devising an elaborate ethical and political thought hinging on a complex system—not a straightforward list—of virtues which were seen as signs of nobility.\(^{15}\) It was precisely these virtues which Alfonso emphasised most, triggering a debate destined—in Naples with Giovanni Pontano\(^{16}\) but also elsewhere—to revolutionise the conception of power and, to an even greater extent, the way it was represented.

The 26 February 1443 Triumphus is emblematic of these legitimisation representations at the apex of the hierarchy, with its both solidly ideological and abstractly evocative power. It was carefully planned in the finest detail and moved on two parallel lines, that set out by important Humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and Panormita, whose work was the basis for the reworking of the ancient Triumphus model and provided certain significant descriptions of it, and that developed by the city’s colony of Florentine and Catalan merchants.\(^{17}\) The two plans consisted of grafting folklore elements onto a Classical corpus and its popular celebrations echoed those customary in Aragon, especially where the *Corpus Domini* was concerned, where they took the new Classical form of an ancient Roman Triumphus.\(^{18}\) This is not the place for a detailed examination of this. It will suffice here to say that riding a golden victor’s chariot decorated with precious fabrics and pulled by white horses through the city of Naples to be seen by all, Alfonso’s visibility was undoubtedly a fundamental aspect of his imperial epiphany. Passing through a cheering cloud he himself was both star and spectator of this pageant, witnessing a long sequence of scenes, or rather ‘living paintings’, played out to great scenic effect. All descriptions
of the king himself focus on the copious quantities of gold, for a demonstration of power once again based on pomp and ceremony.

It was a scenic representation in the true sense of the word, performed to the widest possible audience of subjects. In an important operetta specifically focusing on Alfonso’s Triumphus, Panormita —undoubtedly the main organiser of the consent-building machine— clearly underlines this:

ubi eminens in curru visus est, tantus et virorum astantium et mulierum supra tecta domorum spectantium clamor et plausus exortus est, ut ne tubicinum clangor nec tibicinum cantus, quanquam essent hi prope innumerabiles, prae clamore exultantium quicquam omnino exaudiri possent."

Thus sight was to take precedence over sound. This erudite Humanist’s description was designed to underline the ceremony’s Classical references: Alfonso’s Triumphus was clearly to conjure up those of the *imperatores* clearly and immediately, namely the ancient Roman commanders victorious in battle. However, this idealised depiction of Alfonso as heir to the ancient Roman Empire was accompanied by a depiction of him as the embodiment of the folklore hero predestined to find the Holy Grail, the sacred chalice. In fact, in the description by Panormita described above, one of the first references is the following: erat item in curru, contra regis solium, sedes illa periculoletis visa flammam emittere, inter regis insignia valde et quidem praecipuum.20

Panormita did not explain and deliberately refrained from going into detail because this would have diverged from his purpose but the image represented, a throne in flames, is to be found in many objects dating to 1420, at the outset of his reign.21 The perilous seat (*siège périlleux*) was Alfonso’s preferred heraldic insignia,22 as Panormita notes in the above extract, and this features in many manuscripts and at strategic points in Castel Nuovo. It can even be identified, though in symbolic flame form only, in the marble slab carved by Francesco Laurana and his assistants.


at the entrance to Naples’s Castel Nuovo, which was built to embody the king’s political and military power. Its meanings and ideological contexts are extremely specific: the reference is drawn from *Queste du Graal*, a collection of Arthurian texts compiled in around 1230 which narrates that only the knight elect was to sit at the Round Table’s wonderful seat without incurring terrible punishment. It was this knight elect, Galahad, son of Lancelot and descendant of King David and Joseph of Arimathea, who was tasked by divine will with the marvellous search for the Grail which Robert de Boron, in his *Roman de l’Estoire du Graal*, written in 1210-1220, identifies with a chalice, first used at the last supper and then at Golgotha, to collect Christ’s blood. The mystic identification between Alfonso and Galahad via the use of the perilous seat insignia was thus evident and public, combined with the fact that the Holy Chalice itself was one of the most precious of the King of Aragon’s reliquaries and Alfonso himself had donated it to Valencia Cathedral where it remains to this day. Like a second Galahad, reincarnation of God’s knight elect, Alfonso had brought to fruition the heavenly mission of conquering Naples and restoring the kingdom’s peace and harmony.

Not long after the beginning of his triumphal journey along the city’s streets, Alfonso and the Fortune effigy holding a crown of pure gold and carried on a chariot were made to meet. Fortune was placed on a golden sphere apparently held up by a boy resembling an angel. Behind her were the three theological virtues, Hope carrying a crown, Faith with a chalice and Charity accompanied by a naked child. These were followed by the four cardinal virtues: Fortitude supporting a marble column; Temperance mixing wine and water in a glass; Prudence holding a mirror in her right hand and a snake in her left; Justice brandishing a sword and holding up scales in her left hand. Behind Justice was a throne surrounded by three angels who seemed to have descended from the heavens and proffering a triple crown to Alfonso. At the beginning of this work we saw the meaning of the threefold crown which must have been fairly clear to those who had designed the scene and better informed spectators. The throne shown was evidently the imperial throne on which Alfonso could sit in the event that he showed himself to be worthy of it. In any event the subsequent scene eliminates any remaining doubt. In it Julius Caesar in person—at the time considered the first Roman emperor—appeared before

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Alfonso to dedicate him a caudate sonnet in the vernacular exhorting him not to trust to luck but to conserve and nurture the seven virtues which had just passed before him, because it was only with these that victory in war was possible. The first verse of this sonnet referred to Alfonso as ‘new Caesar’, namely new emperor, renewer of the ancient Empire.25 The message could not have been more explicit!

4. Empire and the Aragon Crown: ideal descent versus bloodline legacy

The reference to Rome’s ancient imperial era and its rebirth at the hands of the Aragon king was the cornerstone of the propaganda implemented by the Humanists around Alfonso. In his previously cited pamphlet describing Alfonso’s Triumphus, and as the main proponent of his consensus building machine, Panormita was even more explicit in representing the scene. In his elegant Latin paraphrase of the sonnet, Caesar exhorted Alfonso to pursue, or rather preserve, the seven virtues, as systematically eulogised by him: ego te, praecellentissime regum Alfonse, cohortor, ut VII has virtutes, quas coram te modo transire vidisti, quas perpetuo coluisti, ad ultimum usque tecum serves.26 And then, continuing, he explained the immediate consequences of his behaviour right away: Quod si feceris —ac facies scio— quae te nunc triumphantem populo ostentant, aliquando dignum efficient sede illa imperatoria, quam modo transeunt intuens concupisti.27 Thus the prize was to be the imperial throne. It is likely that Alfonso never had imperial ambitions but that this evocation was fundamental to his portrayal as powerful southern Europe lord, or rather, the most powerful. Moreover, the reference horizon was not the medieval emperors —note that at the time Albert II was only King of the Romans and was never crowned in Rome—but the ancient Roman emperors, the fully fledged model for the period’s dominant Humanist model.

This assumption is clearly stated in the preface to the fourth and last book of Panormita’s De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis, one of the works which did most to make Alfonso a model of virtue.28 What Panormita was doing here was to draw up an extraordinary laus Hispaniae:29 the greatest virtue of this land was to have supplied the Romans with a great number of emperors of whom the most important were

27. Panormita, Alphonsi regis triumphus …: 16.
29. On the evolution of this reason, see Delle Donne, Fulvio. “Cultura e ideologia alfonsina tra tradizione catalana e innovazione umanistica”. L’immagine di Alfonso il Magnanimo tra letteratura e storia, tra Corona d’Aragona e Italia – La imatge d’Alfons el Magnànim en la literatura i la historiografia entre la Corona d’Aragó i Itàlia, Fulvio Delle Donne, Jaume Torró Torrent, eds. Florence: Sismel edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016: 33-54.
Trajan, Hadrian, Theodosius, Arcadius, Honorius and Theodosius II. It was clearly not simply a rhetorical affirmation. What clarifies the Aragon king’s imperial destiny beyond all doubt was his conclusion that Alfonso was to be added to this list: *postremo Alfonsum, virtutum omnium vivam imaginem, qui cum superioribus his nullo laudationis genere inferior extet, tum maxime religione, id est vera illa sapientia, qua potissimum a brutis animalibus distinguimur, longe superior est atque celebrior.*

Here the explicit depiction of Alfonso as imperial hinged entirely on his virtues. He is depicted as superior to the ancient emperors because, in addition to the virtues of his predecessors, he also possessed *religio*, the culmination and summation of all the others virtues, as true *sapientia.* The direct derivation of merit-based right is certainly typically Humanist but it is also functional to a more specific need. In fact, Panormita’s propaganda game aims to relegate Alfonso’s family inheritance, the Trastàmara Castile (later Catalan-Aragonese) dynasty, to the background and replace it with an ideal Roman legacy. It thereby downplays Alfonso’s ‘Gothic’ and thus Barbarian origins (in accordance with the Humanist representation of the day) in order to promote his Italic inheritance which was seen as better able to justify and shore up his rise to the Naples throne ideologically on the basis of victory in war, replacing the previous, legitimate Angevin dynasty.

Thus the principle of official dynastic descent (grafted onto the Roman imperial line) was better suited to Alfonso’s purposes than family dynasty, with its Spanish derivation. Thus, whilst the absence of suitable family descent requisites prompted a greater emphasis on personal virtues, the propaganda sought to demonstrate that Alfonso’s claim to royal and imperial status was based on his virtues and not on lineage. As we have seen, the situation during Alfonso’s reign was not dissimilar to that existing in the larger Italian states of the day where the power of virtually none of the rulers was shored up by a historic dynastic line. In the words of the celebrated 14th century jurist Bartolo da Sassoferrato, the lion’s share of the lords of the day were, in legal terms, ‘tyrants’ *ex defectu tituli*, in search of legitimisation *ex parte exercitii.* It was precisely in this context that the bolder theoretical experiments designed to legitimate government were possible.

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5. Virtues and lineage in literary reworking

The specific case of Alfonso shows some specific features which mark it out from those of other Italian lords. First and foremost, he was a king (no secondary matter as this placed him higher in the hierarchy than dukes, counts or princes) and by hereditary right, albeit of a foreign land. Thus the nobility of his lineage was incontrovertible and the propaganda theorising consequently hinged on two, only apparently divergent trends.

The first and clearest of these was by Paromita, once again in De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis, which focused on the personal virtue concept to justify kingship claims independent of the hereditary nature of the title. The most explicit excerpt appears in Chapter 29 of Book Two which embarks on a singular anecdote in this way: cum aliquis Alfonsum a nobilitate maxime laudaret, quod rex esset, filius regis, regis nepos, regis frater et caetera istiusmodi, rex hominem interpellans dixit nihil esse quod in vita minoris ipse duceret, quam quod ille tanti facere videretur. 33

Alfonso’s response was proportional to the virtue of moderatio on which leadership is based. He rejected courtly celebration modestly and showed the lack of importance accorded the vanity of earthly goods. But he also went further, immediately afterwards: laudem enim illam non suam sed maiorum suorum esse, quippe qui iustitia, moderatione atque animi excellentia sibi regnum comparassent; successoribus quidem oneri regna cedere, et ita demum honoris, si virtute potius, quam testamento illa suscipiant.

Thus finding oneself at the helm of a kingdom is no in itself sufficient but one must show one’s worthiness of the honour and be guided by the virtues at all times. Hereditary rights are no badge of merit in themselves and a dead letter if they are not kept alive by suitable behaviour: a se itaque, si qua modo extent, elicet ornamenta, non a patribus iam mortuis extorqueret.

The second line refers once again to lineage, but in a very subtle and sophisticated way. It is most tangible in the literary context, in Alfonso’s desire to breathe life into a dynastic-celebratory history on the Castile-Aragonese model. Once again, a typically Spanish model was brought to Italy —the two shores of the Mediterranean once again united!— and grafted onto a Classical, Humanist tradition where it changed shape entirely, passing from the national language to Latin. Following on from this shift, which was first set in motion by the previously cited Gaspar Pelegri (a Catalan historian, it can now be confirmed,34 who gave up Catalan for Latin), this model then made itself felt throughout Italy and Europe. Alfonso’s reign witnessed an explosion in Historiae celebrating the king and laying the foundations for the

regulation of the rhetoric and contents of the history genre. It was an entirely new regulation which melded the Spanish and Classical-Humanist traditions.  

The task of moving forward on this plan was initially formally entrusted to Lorenzo Valla, who had been working alongside Alfonso since 1435. The intention, clearly agreed with the Aragonese king, was to fashion a new ideal dynastic history eulogising the king’s exploits but starting from the narrative of those of Alfonso’s father, King Ferdinand I. This dynastic history had been entrusted to him in 1438 but *Gesta Ferdinandi regis Aragonum* was only finally completed in 1445-46. And the work must have significantly diverged from expectations because Valla did not explicitly eulogise the Trastàmara dynasty but attempted to subordinate it to an ethical model in which history’s search for truth was seen as superior to poetry and philosophy, considerable methodological uncertainties notwithstanding. His work was thus broken off and plans to continue the narrative to cover Alfonso’s exploits did not come to fruition. An extremely heated debate *de historia conscribenda* was triggered, however, over the (as yet unwritten) laws of history writing, in which Valla’s ideas gave way to the more apposite and ideologically functional approach of Panormita and Bartolomeo Facio.

The debate between Facio (*Invective in Vallam*) and Valla (*Antidotum in Facium*), on one hand, and Valla (*Gesta Ferdinandi regis*), on the other, revolved essentially around *elegantia* and *decorum*, elements which Facio saw as lacking in Valla’s *Gesta Ferdinandi regis*. These accusations also masked an intention to supplant Lorenzo Valla in the king’s favour (and the substantial income which went along with this) but it was primarily an opportunity to develop Alfonso’s official history strategy. Thus the search for *veritas* and its affirmation, as propounded by Valla, as against a eulogising ideal which planned, via the *brevitas* expedient, to remove from the record all those inconvenient or unsuitable facts where the king’s dignity were concerned. Thus the histories were not to tell the whole truth where this risked conflicting with the plausible: *non enim solum veram, sed etiam verisimilem narrationem esse oportet, si sibi fidem vendicare velit*, affirmed Facio in the second *Invectiva in Vallam*. It was an affirmation which constituted a sort of formal theorisation of revisionist history which, while not going as far as to falsify

37. See the Proemio, in Valla, Laurentius. *Gesta Ferdinandi ...*: 4-6.
41. Facio, Bartolomeo. *Invective ...*: 96.
the facts—the ethical principles governing the literary genre would have made this inadmissible—did omit all facts considered in some sense inopportune.

The question was a very complex one and took place on various planes: on the more ethereal literary ethics plane and the material plane of professional rivalry in which the various players attempted to gain access to the considerable income which went along with employment at the royal court. This is certainly not the place to examine all these, and it will suffice here to note that Lorenzo Valla’s intention was to take an approach which would, at least apparently, have led to a precise chronicling of events in accordance with the principles of objective truth. He thus portrayed certain members of the Aragonese dynasty in an ‘indecorous’ or ‘inconvenient’ light. This was not the case of Alfonso, whom he had not yet touched upon, but rather Martin the Humane, his predecessor from a different dynasty, at whose court his father Ferdinand had been raised. This was an extremely slippery slope in that the plane it debased kingship to was an extremely lowly, earthly one, whilst the king was in any case, together with all kings, to remain on a sublime, exemplary plane. Undermining this principle meant undermining humanity’s very ethical and theological need for kingship. It thus could in no way be bent to Alfonso’s propaganda designs, which aimed to exalt his royal dignity and magnanimitas. Whilst it was true that the dynasty Alfonso wanted to bind his fate to was, as far as virtue was concerned, the ancient Roman ideal, the family line, the bloodline, could in any case not be compromised in any way. Thus the writing of the Gesta brought Valla’s employment at court to an end and left the field entirely open to Panormita, who proceeded to radically rework the king’s image building strategy. De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis, a speculum principis disguised as work of history, offered the most complete celebration of the king who was depicted as possessing all the virtues. Via an infinite sequence of short chapters Alfonso himself was to be an example for men through his actions and words.

In other words, an attempt to go down the dynastic lineage route—in accordance with a model of history customary in the Spanish tradition—was made but it was revealed to be less fruitful than the ideal line of imperial derivation which, in the Italian Humanist context, linked Alfonso directly to his ancient Roman predecessors. And if the basis of his reign was to be dynastic continuum (and, ultimately bloodline), he was to be equally worthy of the title on the basis of his virtues as well.

43. See Ferràù, Giacomo. Il tessitore di Antequera …: 40-41.
6. The imperial side of monarchical Humanism

Thus the theoretical power legitimation channels were various and stratified. Alfonso belonged to a royal dynasty but was, at the same time, a usurper and thus had to justify his right to conquest on the basis of his virtues and God’s favour, making him worthy of sitting down successfully on that ‘perilous seat’ which was his destiny and the empire’s ideal throne. This was the blueprint for the Monarchical Humanism which developed at the court of the Aragonese kings of Naples. 44

A particularly important part in this complex system of representation and legitimation was played by equating Alfonso with the ancient Roman emperors, as we have already seen in depth. The 1443 Triumphus itself revolved around the terminological ambiguity referred to above between imperator, in the sense of a victorious general celebrating his victory in Rome, and imperator in the sense of caesar or augustus. In all likelihood Alfonso never actually aspired to be emperor and, in fact, he always demonstrated a formal respect for the bearer of this title in accordance with medieval tradition. He did not need imperial status just as affirming his status as sovereign of the realm did not require coronation. The Triumphus ceremony acted as a ‘secular surrogate’ not only for royal title, as was the case here, but also for the imperial title, in the popular imagination.

As we have seen, appearance was more important than reality where the title was concerned. And Panormita must have been very much aware of this when, in accordance with tradition, he dictated the inscriptions to frame the marble slab placed at the entrance to Naples’s Castel Nuovo gate depicting the Triumphus, to commemorate Alfonso’s imperial sublimation for posterity. Above it, in characters significantly echoing ancient Roman scripta capitals, we read: Alfonsus regum princeps hanc condidit arcem. As the new founder of the castle, Alfonso is defined ‘first among kings’, the greatest, a benchmark for all: there was no need for the more challenging—at least in a legal sense— terms imperator, caesar or augustus as the epithet regum princeps would have conjured these up immediately. Equally, this same representation easily evoked the titles appearing below the marble slab: Alfonsus rex Hispanus, Siculus, Italicus, pius, clemens, invictus. Justinian’s Institutiones began precisely with a similar list of titles: Imperator Caesar Flavius Iustinianus, Alamannicus Gothicus Francicus Germanicus Anticus Alanicus Vandalicus Africanus, Pius Felix Inclitus Victor et Triumphantor semper Augustus. And similar lists were also adopted by medieval emperors, by Lothair III, Otto III and Frederick the Redbeard but above all by Frederick II, emperor —this latter by legitimate title— who, like Alfonso had been king of southern Italy and to whom he could legitimately claim kinship, via Constance, daughter of Manfred, Frederick’s grandson. 45 The message would have

44. On this notion see Delle Donne, Fulvio. Alfonso il Magnanimo … : XI-XII.
been eminently clear to any one with even a smattering of legal knowledge from anywhere in Europe.

Thus the imperial traits of Alfonso’s kingdom were entirely ideal and abstract in nature, with no basis in actual historical events. The benchmark was not the ‘German’ empire, heir to the medieval one, and neither were the comparison parameters closely bound up with legal legitimation or institutional organisation or even with geographical scope, the variety of subject peoples or the multiplicity of languages spoken.⁴⁶ These elements certainly played their part but the sole, more sublime benchmark was historic, the ancient Romans, whose heirs trod Italian soil: possession of these lands granted him the potential right to this title but only if the Italian Humanists sanctioned it, the Humanists the intent on restoring Classical antiquity as the litmus test of ethical and political perfection. The imperial route was thus not a matter of claiming a ‘medieval’ title which had lost all meaning but being put on a par with his Classical predecessors from ancient Rome. There is nothing random about the fact that, after Frederick III, imperial coronations were no longer held in Rome and ultimately shifted to a further imaginary plane. Alfonso had already embarked on this path in 1452-53, namely in the years of Frederick III’s visit to Naples, which was, in all likelihood, also the date work began on the ancient Roman style Castel Nuovo triumphal arch⁴⁷ and he continued decisively along it in 1455 when he commissioned Florentine sculptor Desiderio da Settignano to make a group of 12 Imperial Roman heads, probably in bas relief. This was also probably the year in which he was depicted in this same way by Mino da Fiesole as the thirteenth emperor in the sequence idealised by Suetonius. And the use of imperial names and symbols is also clearly to be seen in the medals coined by Pisanello, whose use of the divus attribute and facial profile are symbolically ‘imperial’.⁴⁸

Frederick III of the Hapsburg’s visit to Alfonso after his Roman coronation on 16th March 1452, then, constituted an undeniable shift, as we have seen. The singularity of the event did not escape Giannozzo Manetti, the Florentine Republic’s envoy at the coronation, as he followed the imperial procession. Shrewdly grasping what was going on and perhaps noting the new ideological direction quipped that Frederick had come to Naples as an emperor but left as a knight. Respicite, quesum, respicite, inquam, Federicum nostrum qui ex hoc loco Neapolim imperator contendit atque...
he noted, commenting the fact that Alfonso had given him the white collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Not only was it not a king visiting and paying homage to an emperor but, turning normal practice on its head, it was a king granting a noble title to the emperor. This was thus the juncture at which Alfonso’s imperial image began to be delineated more clearly and was bound up with ostentatious power and wealth abundantly highlighted in the texts shown. It was, perhaps, from the starting point of this event that the ancient Roman caesars of Spanish origin began to take more concrete, albeit symbolic, shape. And it was not only symbolic and not merely rhetorical and literary either.

As we have seen, Alfonso never had himself crowned, either in Italy or elsewhere, certain preparations notwithstanding. This decision may perhaps have been partially dictated by unrelated reasons or the desire to submit to papal authority, which continued to claim seigneurial rights over the Naples kingdom. It is, however, likely that it was precisely this lack of a coronation which made him paradoxically superior to anyone wearing a crown granted by a higher spiritual or temporal authority, emperors not excepted. A clue in support of this hypothesis may lie, once again, in an extract from Panormita’s Triumphus, which he sought to link to De dictis et factis Alfonsi regis, two works which were probably rewritten at the same time, in around 1455, i.e. in the years in which Alfonso was stepping up his imperial representation. The matter may date to 1443 but it was looked at from a later ideological perception. Thus the point at which Alfonso mounted the triumphal chariot was remembered as: numquam enim adduci potuit, quanquam hoc sibi a pluribus et quidem viris magnis suaderetur, ut coronam lauream de consuetudine triumphantium acceptaret: credo pro singulari eius animi modestia ac religione, deo potius corona deberi diiudicans quam cuipiam mortali.

Perhaps, as seen by Panormita, Alfonso was refusing the crown, just as Julius Caesar had (further imperial models, explicitly propounded on the occasion of the Triumphus, as we will see) during Lupercalia in 44 BC. Above all, however, what makes Alfonso superior to the imperatores of antiquity is, once again, religio. Exactly in the same terms as we saw in the proemio to Book IV of De Dictis, in which the Aragonese king is presented as the true heir to the ancient Roman emperors of Spanish origin, but superior to them precisely on the grounds of his religio.

51. For details see, however, Delle Donne, Fulvio. “Il trionfo, l’incoronazione mancata” ...
53. Panormita. Alphonsi regis triumphus: par. 7. This is also repeated in da Facio, Bartolomeo. Rerum gestarum …: 310 (cap. VII 136), but with less emphasis, lauream coronam triumphantium more, quamvis amici suaderent, renuit id honoris Superis tantum tribuendum inquiens.
In fact the passage can be read in connection with a further De dictis anecdote, too: *scimus Alfonsum ... cupere se moribus et auctoritate regem videri, quam dyademate aut purpura.*\(^5^4\) It is not the crown which makes a king illustrious or superior to others. It is his virtues and, primarily, *religio*, a byword for the divine providence status which these virtues accorded him, precisely as an example to all men. Thus Alfonso had no need of a crown nor even of an imperial title which would, according to the by then prevalent ideological parameters of the Italian Humanists, have bound him to a by-then outdated ideological state. What he did need was an ideological *mise en abyme* capable of conjuring up that Humanist rebirth of the values of antiquity dream, the only true ethical values worth aspiring to. And with the support of the most avantgarde and illustrious Humanists of the day —men such as Il Panormita, Lorenzo Valla, Bartolomeo Facio and Giannozzo Manetti— Alfonso was able to adapt and apply the new Classical culture to the absolutist power structures of his royal court. A court which ultimately developed an extraordinary Humanist and Renaissance culture which was certainly very different from the ‘civil’ culture prevalent in certain, generally better studied, Italian towns but no less significant and revolutionary than they were.\(^5^5\)

\(^5^4\) Panormita. *De dictis*: I 24. The text follows the ms. of the BAV. Urb. Lat. 1185: 9v (Centelles, Jordi de. Dels fets ...: 98).