



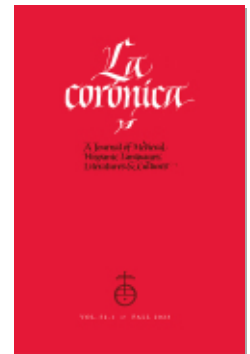
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# ENTANGLED THREADS: ETHIOPIA AND IMAGE-MAKING IN THE *CANTIGAS DE SANTA MARIA*

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*Abstract: Assessing the presence of Black Africa in Iberia through medieval visual culture is complicated by the multiple identities and meaning that medieval artists and viewers assigned to the dark-skinned figures that are often read by modern viewers as unproblematically “African.” This article examines a rare medieval attempt to represent African identity within a historical frame: the depiction of a black man among pilgrims at the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, found in an illustrated manuscript of the Cantigas de Santa María, made for King Alfonso X of Castilla in the late 1270s. Analyzing this image against the backdrop of changing European textual and visual traditions related to Ethiopia and Ethiopians, I suggest that unlike the more fantastical black stereotypes deployed elsewhere in the manuscript, this figure signals a growing Castilian awareness of the actual Ethiopian Christians who were present at the site and with this a new interest in the reality of black Africans as part of a shared world of faith, pilgrimage, crusade, and commerce.*

Assessing the presence of black Africa in Iberia through medieval visual culture can be more challenging than it seems.<sup>1</sup> Premodern visual traditions in both Christian- and Muslim-ruled Iberian lands included a variety of figures whose dark skin and distinctive hair and facial features might be taken to represent African people. However, before the mid-fifteenth century, when the rise of the Atlantic slave trade transformed the social and racial, as well as geographical, valences of skin color for Iberian viewers, the purpose of such images was rarely so straightforward. In most cases, the brown, black, blue, gray, or even purple skin color and routine stereotyping of facial features and hair that set such figures apart from a putatively pale visual “norm” were often employed not mimetically but metaphorically, drawing meaning from the varied and often negative associations that Europeans since the Roman era had associated with dark color (Strickland, *Saracens* 83-87; Patton, “Medieval Slavery” esp. 649-51). Because crafting and maintaining these associations depended explicitly on the reading of dark-skinned figures as unfamiliar Others by their predominantly white European viewers, images of such imaginary black people remained largely disconnected from any direct knowledge that these viewers might have had about contemporaneous black Africans.

This renders even more significant the rare black figure in medieval Iberian art that does seem to engage with African realities. This article examines one such example: the single figure of a black man that appears, without obvious rationale, in *Cantiga* 9 of the richly illustrated manuscript of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (henceforth *Cantigas*) made for Alfonso X of Castilla around 1280 and now in the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial (henceforth RBME) as MS T-I-1 (*Cantigas* no. 9; fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sincere thanks to Nicholas R. Jones and the editors of *La corónica* for their invitation insights, and to Jenica R. Brown for guidance with the Ethiopic transliterations.

<sup>2</sup> The classic critical edition remains that of Mettmann; Kulp-Hill offers an effective English translation. The two illustrated manuscripts of the *Cantigas* have been digitized by their holding libraries and may be consulted at <https://rbdigital.realbiblioteca.es/s/rbme/item/11337> (“Códice Rico,” RBME MS T-I-1) and <https://archive.org/details/b.-r.-20> (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, MS b.r. 20). The miniatures have been cataloged by subject in the Index of Medieval Art of Princeton University (<https://theindex.princeton.edu/>); Index system numbers are given below for miniatures mentioned in this article that are not illustrated or easily found in cited sources.



**Fig. 1.** Illustration of *Cantiga 9*, the so-called “Miracle of Sardonay.” *Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alfonso X, Rey de Castilla; ca. 1280-84; Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, MS T-I-1, fol. 17r. With permission from the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.



**Fig. 2.** Detail of pilgrims at the Holy Sepulcher, illustration of *Cantiga 9. Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alfonso X, Rey de Castilla; ca. 1280-84; Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, MS T-I-1, fol. 17r. With permission from the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.

Although somatically and physiognomically similar to the formulaic black figures used to represent demons, sinners, or Muslim soldiers and slaves in the same manuscript, it diverges from these in its apparent intent to represent an actual person from Africa—and more specifically, as I will argue, an Ethiopian Christian representative of the Ethiopian religious community known to have had a presence in Jerusalem at this time.

If such a reading proves valid, it presents a case in which the late thirteenth-century Castilian makers and viewers of the manuscript might



have understood a specific figure of a black man not as a manifestation of the largely fictitious being described in medieval texts as an *Aethiops*—the stereotyped product of western European imaginings about the various dark-skinned peoples who populated distant lands—but as an actual, living African person and moreover as a fellow Christian quite different from the North African Muslims whom Castilians were more likely to associate with the Africa that they knew. In both senses, the figure offers a welcome opportunity to disentangle and scrutinize some of the conceptual and historical threads by which black Africa was interwoven into the premodern Iberian tapestry.

The figure appears on folio 17r, in the second of six panels that illustrate a literary narrative sometimes referred to as “The Miracle of Sardonay” (fig. 2). The tale, a version of which was also included in Marian collection of Gautier de Coinci and earned briefer reference in Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogue on Miracles* (Gautier 4: 378–411; Caesarius 1: 492; Ferreiro Alemparte 535–36), tells of a monk who promised to bring to a “good lady” innkeeper in Syria an image of the Virgin from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. His mission did not go smoothly: after visiting the holy sites and initially forgetting to buy an icon, he discovered that the one he eventually purchased protected him from a lion, robbers, and a storm at sea, and he resolved to keep it for himself. However, upon his return to the inn, he was unable to find the door to depart until he had relinquished the image to the lady, who placed it honorably on an altar, where it began to exude a fragrant oil.

The full-page illustration of this *cantiga*, which appears on the page that follows upon the song’s musical notation and Galician Portuguese text, represents one of the many instances in which the *Cantigas*’ visual narratives diverge from its textual ones (Iacob 40). In this case, most such differences are minor; the main elements of the verbal tale are effectively encapsulated in six scenes depicting the lady’s request, the monk’s visit to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, his purchase of the icon, his protection from a lion and robbers, his ship’s salvation from the storm, and his donation of the icon. However, absent from the *cantiga* text is any reference

to the dark-skinned man who appears in the scene of the visit to the Holy Sepulcher (fig. 2). Here, in a vaulted chamber lit by four lamps, the monk and eleven other pilgrims, all light-skinned, kneel before, gaze at, and kiss a black sarcophagus resting on short colonnettes. Behind them in the portal, his hand resting on the half-closed door as he gazes toward the four lamps that hang above the sarcophagus, stands a brown-skinned man with curly hair, a rounded nose, and full lips touched with pink.

The black man's presence in the miniature has not been well explained. Those scholars who mention his presence in the scene offer little beyond remarking upon his lack of relation to the text (Kennedy, "Seeing" 180). Indeed the text makes no reference to such a figure in connection with the monk's visit to the Holy Sepulcher, which itself is alluded to only in passing as he prepares to begin his journey: "Then the lady, weeping, begged him to return that way after he had knelt at the Holy Sepulcher and kissed it" (Log' enton a dona, chorando dos ollos / muito, lle rogava que per y tornasse, / des que el ouvesse fito-los gēollos / ant' o San Sepulcro e en le beijasse) (*Cantigas*, trans. Kulp-Hill 15; *Cantigas*, ed. Mettmann 29). The far lengthier version of the tale offered by Gautier de Coinci in his *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, a work thought to have served as a source for this and a number of other *cantigas* (Mettmann, "Os Miracles" 81), is similarly laconic in its treatment of the Holy Sepulcher, merely naming it along with other "holy places of the city" that the monk visited before deciding to depart (Quant le sepulchre eut visité / et les sainz lius de la cite; Gautier, 4:382). In short, no surviving texts offer language that might explain the figure's presence in the miniature.

It is no easier to identify a visual precedent for the figure. Few extant illustrations of the Sardonay narrative exist, even in surviving Gautier de Coinci manuscripts, and when one does appear, it is generally represented by a single image featuring a moment more central to the narrative. Characteristic is the initial A in the preface to the tale in a manuscript of the *Miracles* produced in France in 1260–70 and now in the Royal Library of Belgium. Here, the monk is depicted brandishing the icon toward a lion and a pair of armed robbers, a scene that succinctly presents the basis for his unwillingness to relinquish the icon (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Initial for the Miracle of Sardonay. *Miracles de Nostre Dame* of Gautier de Coinci; ca. 1220; Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, MS 10747, fol. 201v. With permission from the Royal Library of Belgium.

Visual comparisons for the representation of the Holy Sepulcher in the *Cantiga* 9 scene are more readily available: its domed space and slender colonnettes loosely echo those in other contemporaneous images of pilgrims at the site. Such an image appears in a late thirteenth-century manuscript of William of Tyre's *Histoire de Outremer* now in Paris; this depicts pilgrims kneeling at Christ's tomb, which rests beneath an aedicula resting on colonnettes and hung with two lamps (fig. 4; see also Folda 216 and Corti 8n7). This visual formula might well have been known within Alfonso's scriptorium, where a now-lost text of the *Histoire de Outremer* itself would later furnish a model for the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar* when

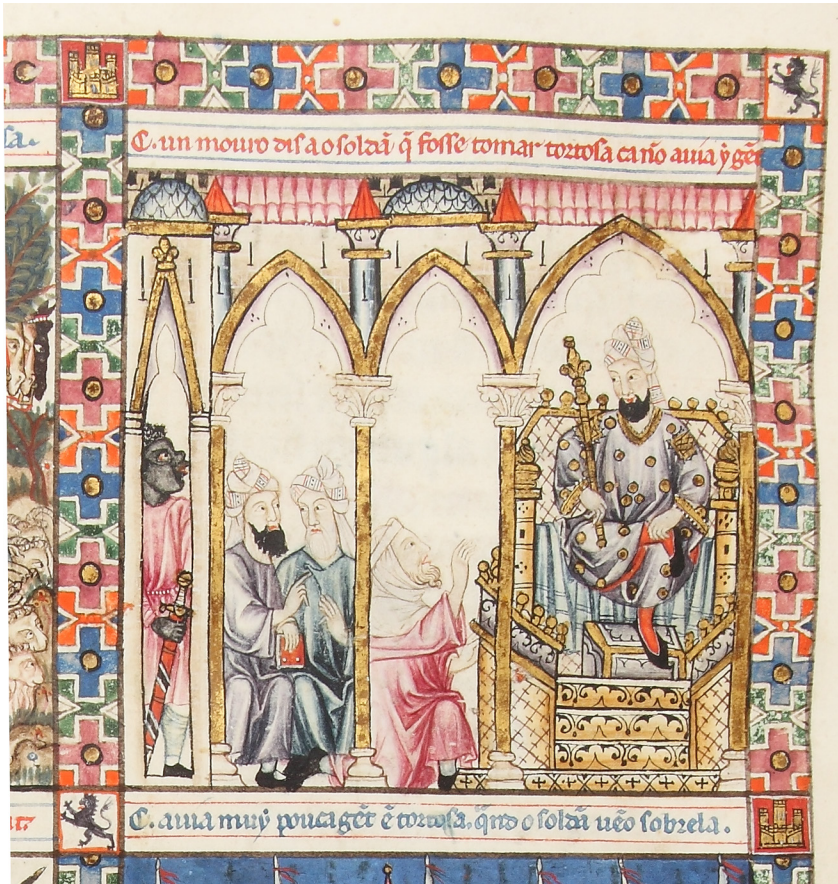


Fig. 4. Pilgrims kneeling at the Holy Sepulcher. *Histoire de Outremer* of William of Tyre; 1229; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS fr. 2628, fol. 1r. With permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

it was produced under Alfonso's successor Sancho IV in 1289-95 (Bautista Pérez 34-36; Domínguez Prieto 21-57). Yet while such precedents attest to the *Cantigas* illustrator's familiarity with a common iconographic formula for the Holy Sepulcher, they do nothing to explain why this artist should have chosen to add to it the distinctive dark-skinned figure that appears that in *Cantiga* 9.

Other illustrations of the *Cantigas* provide limited context for this choice. Although in general physical appearance the man in *Cantiga* 9 resembles several other black figures that appear in other illustrations

in the manuscript, he does not share their more traditional roles. These include representations of the devil or his followers, which echo early monastic traditions that described Satan in this form (Patton, “Demons and Diversity” 155–58; Strickland, *Saracens* 80–83) as well as portrayals of unfree Muslims in Christian households and of low-ranking or enslaved enemy soldiers in Muslim armies (Patton, “Medieval Slavery”).



**Fig. 5.** Detail of the sultan’s court, detail of illustration for *Cantiga* 165. *Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alfonso X, Rey de Castilla; ca. 1280-84; Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, MS T-I-1, fol. 221v. With permission from the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.

At least one prior scholar has suggested that the black figure at the Holy Sepulcher might have been intended as a member of this last category, perhaps as representing one of the Muslim guards sometimes assigned to supervise access to Jerusalem's sacred sites in the era when the *Cantigas* were illustrated (Laguna Paúl 637). This possibility merits consideration but is undermined by several important visual differences between the man in *Cantiga* 9 and the dark-skinned figures that play obvious military roles elsewhere in the same manuscript, such as the black guardsmen serving the sultan "Bondadour," probably Baybars (García-Arenal 139) in *Cantiga* 165 (fig. 5). Although the dark skin color and stereotyped physiognomy of these attendants differ little from those of the man at the Holy Sepulcher, their militant role is signaled clearly by the arms they carry—spears in the first scene and an ornate sword in the second. By contrast, the figure in *Cantiga* 9 is unarmed; his blue tunic resembles neither the colorless garb of the military slave nor the armor of a warrior; and his context amid pilgrims visiting the Holy Sepulcher could hardly be more peaceful. His lack of a weapon, his tranquil posture, the slightly proprietary placement of his hand on the door, and the calm fixity of his gaze suggest that he is at home in this sacred Christian space.

A second and more tenable interpretation for the figure might be to identify it as an index of the story's distant locale, akin to the fantastical and often frightening beings that mark the margins of some medieval European world maps and diagrams. Aligning with the predominantly unfavorable descriptions of foreign peoples given by Pliny in his *Natural History*, medieval European authors and artists routinely envisioned the generic *Aethiops*—for them an umbrella term including any dark-skinned person from sub-Saharan Africa, west Africa, and sometimes India—as a remote, imperfect figure whose appearance and behavior were distorted by the extremes of the native climate and their geographical distance from what such Europeans saw as their own civilized center (Friedman 54-55; Strickland, "Monstrosity" 380-83). To place such a figure at the border of a map, a psalter leaf, or even a portal—as at the Abbaye Sainte

Marie Madeleine de Vézelay, where “Ethiopians” are found in an archivolt alongside the other far-flung peoples that wait at the margins of the famous tympanum in which Christ gives his mission to his disciples (fig. 6)—could evoke both alterity and inferiority in an instant. In his visible contrast to the pale-skinned, implicitly European figures at the Holy Sepulcher, the black man in the *Cantiga* 9 illustration does meet some of these criteria; however, his semiotic role seems more complex. Although he hovers at the scene’s margin, he can hardly be called marginal: he stands, after all, in Jerusalem, the conceptual and—insofar as European mapmakers portrayed it—the literal center of the world (Akbari 21). More than the imaginary representative of a foreign place, he is a foreigner in a familiar one: an African in the Holy City, as envisioned by Castilians.



**Fig. 6.** Christ with disciples. Narthex portal of Abbaye Sainte Marie Madeleine de Vézelay, France; 1120-50. Photo by Gerd Eichmann; unaltered image reproduced under an Attribution-Creative Commons Share Alike 4.0 International license.

In this article I employ the term “Ethiopian” in a commensurately literal sense in proposing that the figure in question would have been understood by its largely learned viewers not as a slave-soldier such as those elsewhere in the *Cantigas* nor as the fantastical *Aethiops* described by Pliny and his followers, but as an individual from the kingdom of Ethiopia, a historical place and polity about which Castilian awareness was limited but growing in the last decades of the thirteenth century. I will ground this interpretation in three visual clues: first, the figure’s representation as physically present in Jerusalem; second, his placement specifically within the chamber of the Holy Sepulcher; and third, his seemingly focused gaze toward the lamps that hang above Christ’s sarcophagus. All these elements, as we shall see, link the figure to the historical city of Jerusalem and the community of Ethiopians then based there, with a directness that has much to reveal about what late thirteenth-century Castilians knew, or then were learning, about Ethiopians both as Africans and as Christians with a clear investment in the religious life of the Holy City.

### **Ethiopians in Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher**

It was not without reason that the creators of the *Cantigas* image envisioned an Ethiopian within the space of the Holy Sepulcher. Following the arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia in the fourth century CE, Christians there had quickly developed both an interest and a degree of presence in the city of Jerusalem. Prior to the eleventh century, the details of their engagement there remain obscure (Kelly 428-29; O’Mahony 143-47; Biddle 91). Patristic and early Arabic texts both make occasional reference to “Ethiopians” among those visiting Jerusalem as pilgrims, but because at this time the term often served as a generic reference to dark-skinned people rather than as an ethnonym, its meaning in these contexts remains unclear (Kelly 428; Weber 235). More precise in meaning, although of uncertain date, is an account in the Ethiopic Synaxarium that describes how the sixth-century Aksumite emperor Kaleb (ca. 512-40) abdicated his throne to become a monk, donating his robes and crown to be hung in the



Holy Sepulcher (Lee 81; see also Munro-Hay 88-89; Sergew 143; Meinardus 116). The same accounts credit his son, Gäbrä Mäsqäl, with sending his own monastic son, Abba Moses, to found a hospice in Jerusalem (King 503). Although little corroboration of these details can be found in historical sources, their existence in the Synaxarium attests to early Ethiopian interest in both the city and the Holy Sepulcher.

More concrete evidence of an Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem emerges for the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the eleventh, Gə'əz manuscripts and inscriptions located at several sites in Lower Egypt record the transit of Ethiopian pilgrims to the city; by the twelfth, European travelers' accounts mention encounters with Ethiopians at that destination (Kelly 428-29; Weber 235; Rouxpetel 72). Thirteenth-century references to Ethiopians in Jerusalem in both Latin and Arabic sources offer more details, some of which suggest that a religious community was now established there. One such source is an anonymous addition, covering the years 1252-95, that was made to the *Chronicle of Alberic des Trois Fontaines*; it describes among the population of Jerusalem "all those Christians who are subject to Prester John," a reference taken by Enrico Cerulli and others to refer to those Ethiopians by now established in the city (Cerulli 79; van Donzel 129). Further evidence of such a community is presented by the 1290 quotation, in an Arabic biography of the Mamluk sultan Qalālwūn, of a letter that had been sent by the Ethiopian king Yagba Şəyon to Ethiopians in the Holy City. This bore the king's good wishes and enjoined the recipients to accept its accompanying gifts of red silk, one hundred candles, and the king's royal belt to take to mass on feast days (Cerulli 88-90; Meinardus 118). This donation would be followed by further gifts sent by Yagba Şəyon's successor in the early fourteenth century (Kelly 429). Although details about the size and location of the religious community that was to receive these gifts remain elusive for the thirteenth century, by 1331 this establishment was substantial enough that to have recorded its own set of regulations (Kelly 429-30).

Europeans themselves were beginning to understand more about Ethiopians and their engagement with Jerusalem through thirteenth-

century Latin and vernacular travel accounts and histories that described Ethiopians among the other Christian peoples to be encountered in Jerusalem (Weber 235; Rouxpetel 71–90; Zacharopoulou 82–90). Such texts introduced to European Christians not only the notion that Ethiopians inhabited the city but an understanding that they practiced a religious tradition that was related to their own. Bringing both the land and the people of Ethiopia more fully into the real and knowable world of their European readers and listeners, they presented a plausible alternative to the fantastical *Aethiops* that this audience had envisioned on the basis of classical geographies and their medieval offshoots.

Among the most important of these accounts was that of Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre between 1216-27: the *Historia Orientalis*, a work so popular that it survives today in over 100 manuscripts in Latin, French, and Spanish (Bird 56). Likely composed during Jacques's time in Acre, the *Historia* names Ethiopians among the eastern Christians he groups together as "Jacobites"; it traces their conversion to Christianity to Saint Matthew and remarks upon certain aspects of their religious practice, such as circumcision (Cerulli 59–61). Another such author was Burchard of Mt. Sion, whose *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* was composed ca. 1283. Listing Ethiopians among those Christians moved by their faith to visit the holy sites as pilgrims, it praised them especially for their piety and fasting (Cerulli 84-87; O'Mahony 146).

Just as texts such as these developed general European awareness of the vitality of Ethiopian Christianity, they also ignited both papal and political interest in communicating with Ethiopia itself. These efforts began as early as 1245, when Innocent IV included the land of Ethiopia in his bull granting indulgences to eastbound missionaries, and 1267, when Clement IV included Ethiopia in the destinations designated for Dominican preaching (Weber 237-38). Such gestures surely were connected to the growing western European belief that the fabled Christian king Prester John made his home in Ethiopia, rather than India as previously supposed, and the hope that he would support his fellow Christians in retaking Jerusalem and other lost holy sites (Weber 241; Kurt 301-02).



This increase in western European awareness of, and interest in, Ethiopian Christians and their engagement with Jerusalem coincided with the production of RBME T-I-1. This manuscript, which with its unfinished companion in Florence (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS b.r. 20) would comprise the two great illustrated codices of the *Cantigas*, seems to have been well under way by the late 1270s (Fernández Fernández 114-17). The artist's rationale for placing a black man within one of the city's most sacred spaces becomes clearer in this light, especially because by this date Europeans might also have imagined a quite specific link between the Ethiopian community and the Holy Sepulcher itself.

Ethiopian interest in the Holy Sepulcher was already noted in the Ethiopian Synaxarium's account of Kaleb's donation of his crown to hang in that space. However, historical evidence of an Ethiopian presence there remains more elusive. The first European report to make this association explicit appears in the fourteenth-century *Libro d'oltramare* of Niccolò da Poggibonsi. After visiting Jerusalem in 1345-47, Poggibonsi recorded that among the sites of worship maintained there by the Ethiopians was an altar within the Holy Sepulcher and that the community enjoyed the unique privilege of entry to the site without payment (Poggibonsi 22, 27, 126; Cerulli 119-21). Still more specific is the claim, clearly recorded by 1442 in a letter to the Ethiopians in Jerusalem from the king Zār'a Ya'āqob, that the community also bore responsibility for maintaining a number of lamps at the Holy Sepulcher (Selassie 143; Cerulli 236-37). Although these Ethiopian prerogatives cannot be tracked concretely back to the 1270s when the *Cantigas* were in production, their later documentation admits at least the possibility that this association might already have existed and been known to Europeans in this earlier period.

Meanwhile, a more general sense of Christian Ethiopian presence within the city of Jerusalem would have been accessible to the creators of the *Cantigas* through the thirteenth-century texts already circulating in the ambit of Alfonso's scriptorium. The many legal, scientific, historical, and poetic projects initiated by the king involved a diverse cohort of scholarly collaborators, from the Jewish and Muslim translators who provided

access to Arabic sources to the Christian clerics and poets who aided in rendering these, as well as Latin works, into Castilian and Galician Portuguese (Kennedy, *Alfonso X* 35-44). Although the full range of texts on which these scholars relied is not recorded, given the Castilian monarchs' persistent concern with the fate of Crusader territories in the east it is hard to imagine that they would not have included accounts of the history and the peoples of the Holy Land. This apparently was the case, as already noted, for Williams of Tyre's *Histoire d'Outremer*, one of the sources for the Castilian *Estorias de Ultramar* produced shortly after Alfonso's death.

Another text likely to have been available to Alfonso and his circle was Jacques de Vitry's *Historia Orientalis*, a work already widely disseminated in Latin prior to its first translations into Castilian toward the end of the thirteenth century. One such vernacular version, found within a historical miscellany dated to the early fourteenth century (Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid MS 684, fols. 141–201), attests to the work's importance in Castilla by that date (see also Buridant 24-25; Bird 56-58). More pointed evidence of the interest the *Historia* held for Iberian students of the Holy Land at this time is a Latin version in a monastic *Sammelband* dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (RBME MS L.III.22), and very likely produced in Iberia (Cerulli 78-79; van Donzel 129; Antolín 44-45; Wagner 43). In this work, Jacques de Vitry's text (fols. 36-88v) follows upon the *Gesta Romanorum* and the Letter of Prester John to Frederick Barbarossa and is itself followed by a folio (89r) with the heading "Hec sunt nationes christianorum qui habitant in Jherusalem." This provides a roster of Christian communities in Jerusalem that substantially repeats the list in Jacques's text but adds to it a reference to a people called the "Abastini," a term explained by both Cerulli and van Donzel as a corruption of the Arabic "Habasha," referring to the inhabitants of Ethiopia (Cerulli 78; van Donzel 129-30). If this is correct, the reliance upon Arabic too would be consistent with the multicultural purview of scholarship at the Castilian court.

As likely as it is that the *Historia Orientalis*, the *Histoire d'Outremer*, and other texts with similar content circulated among the literati of Alfonso's court, there is no way to guarantee that they were also known directly by



the scribes and artists who worked in the king's scriptorium. However, the nature of the projects undertaken by this atelier, which included historical, astronomical, geographical, and other scholarly works that often required translation and reference to outside texts, did demand regular discourse between those who wrote and illustrated the material books and those who conceived their content (O'Callaghan 134-46; Kennedy, *Alfonso X* 15-40). As a work fundamentally based on the collection and reimagining of oral and written narratives from a diversity of sources, the *Cantigas* certainly entailed collaborations of this kind, and these offer a logical conduit by which new ideas related to the peoples of Jerusalem might have reached Alfonso's illustrators.

If indeed these scholarly traditions inspired the miniaturist assigned to *Cantiga* 9 to portray a black man at the Holy Sepulcher, the insertion would have been far from casual. To do so, after all, required a rejection of the more familiar supernatural and subordinate roles to which the stereotype of the *Aethiops* was traditionally put within the visual culture of Alfonso's court, a stereotype employed throughout the *Cantigas* themselves to represent the demons, slaves, and soldiers from whom the faithful required the Virgin's protection. It also asked them to overlook the accounts preserved in classical and medieval geographies and natural histories that describe those who lived in Ethiopia as outlandish and uncivilized, both physically and morally distorted by the extreme conditions of their home climate. These conceptions were hardly obsolete in the later thirteenth century, even at Alfonso's court, where in 1259 they were rehearsed in the astronomical treatise *El libro de las cruces*. This work, translated by Judah ben Moses ha-Cohen and Johan Daspa from an Arabic text by the Arab astrologer it calls "Obeidala" ('Ubayd Allah b. Jalaf al-Istiyi) (Alfonso, *Libro de las cruces* x, xix-xx), draws in turn on classical traditions in its brief account of the peoples of the world; it includes the common claim that the heat and dryness of their region caused Ethiopians to become not only dark-skinned and curly-haired in their appearance, but lawless and uncivilized in their behavior (Alfonso, *Libro de las cruces* 8). To shake off this proto-racist perspective and reconceive the Ethiopian in the

more humanizing terms suggested by the figure in *Cantiga* 9 would have entailed not just the conscious rejection of such long-held stereotypes, but a deliberate and creative desire to turn their visual representation to a new use consistent with the new kinds of information that were beginning to infiltrate the Castilian vision of the world.

### Castilians Envisioning Africans

Place mattered to those who illustrated the *Cantigas*. Although in many cases they seem to have found it sufficient simply to identify a tale's locale in the tituli habitually inscribed above each scene, in certain cases they also chose to evoke a sense of place visually, through the depiction of identifying landmarks or other features within the scenes themselves. Some of these signs are architectural or topographical: in *Cantiga* 107 (RBME MS T-I-1, fol. 154r), Segovia is identified by a horseshoe-arched version of the city's Roman aqueduct; in *Cantiga* 125 (RBME MS T-I-1, fols. 177v-78r), Auvergne is embellished with characteristically domed and polylobed architecture; and in the previously cited *Cantiga* 165, the Syrian port of Tarsus is carefully placed at the seaside.<sup>3</sup> In other *cantigas*, a sense of place is provided by depictions of people in what presumably was envisioned as the costume of a particular locale, whether real or imaginary. The courtiers who accompany Emperor Alexios of Constantinople as he visits a mine in *Cantiga* 131 (RBME MS T-I-1, fol. 185v) wear long Byzantine beards; the metaphorical landscape of parchment sky and inky sea in *Cantiga* 110 (RBME MS T-I-1, fol. 157v) features an eastern sage with a long beard and an exotic, gilded headdress; and in tales set across the *dar al-Islam*, Muslim warriors carry tabbed battle standards with pseudo-Arabic inscription and distinctively lobed, tasseled shields called *adargas*.<sup>4</sup>

Interpolations of this kind could serve as more than mere locational signposts: by embellishing the settings where each narrative takes place

<sup>3</sup> *Index of Medieval Art*, nos. pap20200930001 (*Cantiga* 107), pap20201202001 (*Cantiga* 125), and pap202105030001 (*Cantiga* 165).

<sup>4</sup> *Index of Medieval Art*, nos. pap20201210001 (*Cantiga* 131) and pap20201008001 (*Cantiga* 110).



with the distinctive monuments, people, and attributes that their viewers might expect to see there, they also heightened the familiarity and immediacy of each tale, and thus of the miracles that occurred there. Such details did not need to be accurate, and indeed they sometimes had little to do with the actual appearance of things and people in the locations where the miracles were portrayed taking place. Whether the palms of Elche (*Cantiga* 133; RBME MS T-I-1, fol. 188r) or a fantastically turbaned nobleman in Alexandria (*Cantiga* 155; RBME MS T-I-1, fols. 210v-11r), such elements succeeded in portraying for literate Castilian viewers precisely what they were prepared to envision.<sup>5</sup>

The black man at the Holy Sepulcher might be understood in this light as well. For a viewer who did imagine the site to be attended by Ethiopian monks, he constituted a signifier that helped to anchor the monk's pilgrimage more firmly in the city of Jerusalem. This effect would have been heightened by the gaze he directs toward the four lamps suspended above the tomb. Whereas the lamps themselves are a common convention in contemporary representations of the Holy Sepulcher—two such lamps also appear, for example, in the Paris *Histoire d'Outremer* discussed above—in the *Cantigas* miniature they are made more prominent by the directness of the Ethiopian's gaze, which beckons the viewer's eyes to join it as it traverses the empty space of the Holy Sepulcher to rest on the lights as they illuminate the sacred space where Christ's body once rested. It is possible, if at this writing still unprovable, that this visual emphasis also made reference to the tradition that the Ethiopian community bore responsibility for maintaining a light at the Holy Sepulcher.

Even in the absence of this association, the Ethiopian's active gaze performs an important semiotic role by differentiating this figure from the pale-skinned pilgrims who genuflect before and kiss the sarcophagus on which their visual attention remains focused. The contrast simultaneously detaches him from the pilgrims' direct and emotional engagement with their *locus* and affirms the privilege of continuous access that he and his

<sup>5</sup> *Index of Medieval Art*, nos. pap20210106001 (*Cantiga* 133) and pap20210324001 (*Cantiga* 155).

community enjoyed there. Elevating the figure beyond a mere locational cipher, it endows him with a specificity of place that aligns well with the travel accounts and histories that at this same moment were bringing the historical Ethiopian into clearer focus for western Europeans.

If the figure was recognized in this sense by even some medieval Castilian viewers, it signals the beginnings of a sea change in the perception of black Africans in later medieval Iberia. Expanding beyond the malleable black stereotype through which white Christian Europeans brought to life the stock adversaries and underlings of prior visual tradition, the black man in *Cantiga* 9 introduces an Ethiopian who, if he was perhaps still not quite firmly understood by even the best-informed Castilian, had at least become real enough to be envisioned as participating in the shared world of pilgrimage, crusade, and commerce of which Jerusalem formed the center. Escaping the rigidity of classical and earlier medieval formulae, he proffered a concrete and humanized alternative to the black African of past imaginings.

The image was novel in another way, in that the African that it presented would have been recognizable as Christian. The inhabitants of the African continent that thirteenth-century Castilians had known best up to this point were first the Almoravids and Almohads whose rule of large swathes of North Africa along with the southern Iberian Peninsula had posed an ongoing challenge to Castilian rule until the middle of the thirteenth century, and next the Marinids who succeeded them in present-day Morocco, and whose proximity posed a persistent challenge to Alfonso's authority (O'Callaghan 167-80, 234-44). Castilians would also have been familiar with the Mamluk Sultanate based in Cairo, whose rule over Egypt and Syria gave it a powerful military and mercantile presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and they might also have had some knowledge of the newly flourishing West African empire of Mali, a source of much of the gold, salt, and copper that reached western Europe via north African trade routes (Gomez 59-144; Guérin 103-07). The rulers and popular majority of all these lands were Muslim, an identity that dominated their representation, under the generic and homogenizing rubric "moro," throughout Christian-



ruled Iberia.

Although Castilian horizons would expand notably in the fourteenth and especially fifteenth centuries, when increased Iberian enslavement, and often conversion, of sub-Saharan Africans would foster new representational traditions (Rowe 127-69; Fracchia 56-90), in Alfonso's Castilla the paradigm of the African as Muslim would seem to have left little room for the notion that Africans could be Christian. The *cantiga* illustrator's apparent decision to represent an African man who should be read as a member of that faith suggests an effort to envision a new, Christian African that tracks along a similar path to those thirteenth-century traveler's accounts that reported with such interest on the presence and practices of Ethiopians in the Holy Land.

A direct relationship between these textual accounts and the figure in *Cantiga 9* remains difficult to verify. As has been noted, while there are grounds to envision some of them circulating in Castilla at the time when the illustration was made, very little is known about the specific working methods of their artists, the non-artists who might have worked with or advised them, or the scope of the literary and other texts to which they might have had access. Nonetheless, the coincidence between the appearance of the image and the circulation of the texts allows both to be examined as symptoms of a widening conception of black Africans in Iberia, a conception that challenged received knowledge and longstanding tradition to register some such Africans as Christian, and thus as a community of allies in the faith at a time when the Holy Land had fallen all but completely under foreign and Muslim control.

The black figure in *Cantiga 9* was hardly the only such "positive" African to appear in European imagery at this time. Although few comparable images can be found within medieval Castilla specifically, the mid-thirteenth century in northern Europe had witnessed the emergence of several figures visually coded as both black and virtuous, if not explicitly Christian. One was the Queen of Sheba, the pagan ruler whose openness to Solomon's wisdom was seen as a model for conversion to the Christian faith and

who began to be depicted with black attendants and/or as black herself as early as the late twelfth century (Caviness 553-66). Another was Saint Maurice, whose portrayal as black after the mid-thirteenth century has been suggested by Effrosini Zacharopoulou to reflect increased European and especially Hohenstaufen interest in Nubian and Ethiopian Christians in the later Middle Ages (Zacharopoulou 77-110; see also Heng 18-44). Although the tradition of representing these two figures as black finds little echo in Iberian visual culture during these same years, their emergence in other European lands suggests that the hard symbolic contours long attached to Blackness and Whiteness were now softening in multiple areas over the course of the thirteenth century. In this sense, they offer contextual support for the positive reading proposed here for the black man in *Cantiga* 9.

### Conclusions

As so often is the case for medieval images, neither the artist's intent in producing the illustration for *Cantiga* 9 nor the viewer's response to it can be known with certainty. My hope, however, is that entertaining an explanation for the black man at the Holy Sepulcher as something more than a stereotyped formula will encourage those who study premodern Iberia to consider new routes to understanding of the Castilian view of the world and of the place of black Africans within it. To accept even provisionally that the makers and viewers of the *Cantigas* understood the man in *Cantiga* 9 to represent an Ethiopian Christian such as those they might have learned about through the accounts of Jerusalem and its holy sites that had filtered back to western Europe over the course of the thirteenth century is to allow that their interest in representing the specifics of the city and its religious life might have been more considered than is sometimes assumed. To accept this is also to place this distinctive figure within the context of an emerging tension between the flat stereotypes long used by European artists to represent racial and cultural others and a new kind of representation that aimed to respond to and authenticate new information about the peoples and places of the world.



The illustration holds potential insight into what Castilians specifically appear to have brought to this process and into an apparent shift in the basis of their knowledge about the places and peoples beyond their borders. Modifying received traditions that caricatured black Africans abstractly as barbaric, imperfect figures, as well as a conception of Africa primarily as the home base for the Muslim-dominated polities who preoccupied them geographically, politically, and economically, the image suggests that they both recognized and sought to learn more about the diversity of the peoples and practices to be found in African lands. While the creation of a single image by a single anonymous artist does not herald the abandonment of old assumptions and stereotypes—some of which persisted well beyond the Middle Ages—it can perhaps invite new consideration of how black Africa was envisioned in medieval Iberian life and thought, in the process drawing out an overlooked thread within the tapestry of premodern Spain.

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