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False Imperial Forefathers? Alfonso III of Asturias-León, Oswald of Northumbria and the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon Imperial Phenomena

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Abstract:

During the 10th century, the title *imperator* appears in some Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon charters in reference to the sovereigns of Asturias and León and those of the new kingdom of England. Alphonse III of Asturias and León and Oswald of Northumbria are often considered the initiators or inspirers of these peculiar phenomena. The first Hispanic “imperial charters” seem to date back to the time of Alphonse III, while Oswald is described as *imperator totius Britanniae* in the *Vita sancti Columbae* by Adomnán of Iona. This article aims to review the actual relevance of these two figures in the later use of imperial terminology. On the one hand, the only Alphonse’s ‘imperial charters’ whose authenticity is beyond doubt date from the time of his son Ordoño II, while, on the other hand, the dominant image of Oswald in 10th-century Britain was not that of Adomnán, but that reported by Bede, in which the imperial title does not appear.

Parole chiave: Imperator; Oswald of Northumbria; Alphonse III of Asturias; Royal Diplomas

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False Imperial Forefathers? Alfonso III of Asturias-León, Oswald of Northumbria and the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon Imperial Phenomena

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Introduction

In some charters of the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Asturias, a particular documentary phenomenon developed from the 10th century onwards: the appearance of the title *imperator* linked to the sovereigns of these territories, which are both geographically distant from the imperial see of the moment, Germany, and politically incapable of aspiring to a purely Roman and universal title.

In the Spanish case, this phenomenon, although it began in the 10th century, only consolidated in the second half of the 11th century during the reign of Alfonso VI (1065-1109), who appears in documents as *imperator totius Hispaniae*, reaching its climax in 1137 with the imperial coronation of Alfonso VII (1126-1157) in the church of Santa María in León. This terminology was highly debated in Spanish historiography, which has questioned its real political value, trying to understand whether this title corresponded to a political structure with an imperial nature. Many leading personalities in the Spanish academy took part in this debate, such as Alfonso Sánchez-Candeira, Alfonso García Gallo, and Ramón Menéndez Pidal.¹ More recently, the *imperio astur-leonés* or *imperio hispánico* (as it is called by scholars) has been taken up by Héléne Sirantoine, whose volume about the subject could perhaps be described as conclusive, and certainly indispensable.²

In the English case, on the other hand, the phenomenon – which came to an end as early as the beginning of the 11th century – did not have its own denomination, perhaps due to the coexistence with another phenomenon (which finds its place in the chronicles and not in the documents), the *bretwaldaship*. The use of the imperial title seems to be in line with the figures of some Anglo-Saxon sovereigns of the Heptarchic period – already mentioned in Bede and resumed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – who would have obtained a kind of broad sovereignty over the other peoples of the island. Again, eminent figures in English historiography have taken a direct or ancillary interest in this question, such as Eric John, Patrick Wormald, Barbara Yorke, and Simon Keynes, among others, and, in more recent times, Torben R. Gebhardt and George Molyneaux.³

¹ García-Gallo, “El imperio medieval español”; Menéndez Pidal, *El Imperio Hispánico*; Sánchez-Candeira, “El “Regnum-Imperium” leonés”; Isla Frez, “El imperium de Alfonso VI”.

² Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*; In addition see also: Gamba, “El imperio medieval hispánico y la *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*”; Montenegro Valentín y Del Castillo, “Los títulos de los reyes de León”; Monsalvo Antón, *La construcción del poder real en la Monarquía castellana*.

³ John, *Orbis Britanniae*; Wood, “The Making of King Athelstan’s Empire”; Wormald, “Bede”; Fanning, “Bede”; Yorke, “The Vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Overlordship”; Keynes, “Raedwald the Bretwalda”; Molyneaux, “Why were some Tenth-Century English Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?”; Gebhardt, “From Bretwalda to Basileus”.

Even more interesting than studying the two cases individually is undoubtedly their comparative analysis, which was first systematically carried out by Edmund Stengel and, more recently, taken up by Christoph Mauntel, who abandoned the institutional question (were they real empires?) to refocus attention on the terminological question (how and why the use of the terms *imperator* and *imperium*).⁴

This is not the occasion to develop an extensive argument in this direction, the aim of this article is instead to reassess two prominent figures in the history of these two phenomena, one for each context: Alfonso III of Asturias (866-910) and León and Saint Oswald of Northumbria (633-742). Both Alfonso III and Oswald are often considered the “forefathers” of their respective imperial phenomena. The name of the Asturian ruler appears in some charters followed by the imperial title, while Oswald’s only “imperial appearance” takes place in the *Vita sancti Columbae* by Adomnán of Iona (679-704). Here, after a battle against the pagan king Cedwalla, King Oswald is said: “ordained by God [*a Deo ordinatus est*] emperor of all Britain”. In addition to this use of the terminology, it should be pointed out that, at Alfonso’s court, a remarkable historiographical production developed, resulting in no less than three chronicles (the *Crónica Albeldense*, the *Crónica Profética* and the *Crónica de Alfonso III* in its two versions *Rotense* and *ad Sebastianum*) that contributed to laying the foundations of the so-called *neogoticismo* – the ideal of re-establishing the ancient Gothic kingdom on the peninsula.⁶ It should also be recalled that Oswald is one of the seven Anglo-Saxon sovereigns mentioned by Bede as an island lord and subsequently baptised *bretwalda* by the chroniclers of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.⁷

It would be natural to think that there is a common thread linking these two ancient emperor-kings with the later use of the term *imperator*. Indeed, many of the scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of these two phenomena have pointed out the possible connection between the use of the imperial title for Oswald and his successors. For example, in Eric John’s words: “Adomnan is ample confirmation for Oswald’s position, and he says nothing to make one think the Northumbrian hegemony over Britannia was confined to Oswald’s life”.⁸ In a very similar vein, Alfonso’s reign has always been

⁴ Stengel, *Kaisertitel und Souveränitätsidee*; Mauntel, “Ideas of Empire”; Mauntel, “Beyond Rome”. Another fundamental work for the methodology of the study about *intitulationes* – not only British and Hispanic – is that of Herwig Wolfram: Wolfram, *Intitulatio I-II*. On the use of language of power in the Carolingian world see: Garipzanov, *The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World*; Kramer, *Rethinking Authority in the Carolingian Empire*. Among the most recent research projects on imperial forms and models in the Middle Ages, see: *Imperialiter. Le gouvernement et la gloire de l’Empire à l’échelle des royaumes chrétiens (XIIe-XVIIe siècles)* coordinated by Fulvio Delle Donne (2017-2022): <http://web.unibas.it/bup/omp/index.php/bup/catalog/series/imperialiter> (last access 23/10/2023) and *Imperial Languages* <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/cml/research/imperial-languages> coordinated by Christian Høgel and Aglae Pizzone at the Centre for Medieval Literature, SDU: (last access 23/10/2023).

⁵ Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, 1.1.

⁶ A comprehensive edition of the three chronicles in: *Crónicas asturianas*. For the two versions of the *Crónica de Alfonso III* see also: *Die Chronik Alfons III*. There are many studies on these narratives. See at least Isla Frez, *La Crónica de Alfonso III y el reino astur* for both research and bibliography on them.

⁷ HEGA, II, 5; ASC, Ms A, a. 827.

⁸ John, *Orbis Britanniae*, 6-7.

regarded as the starting point of the Hispanic imperial phenomenon. Thus, in fact, Ramón Menéndez Pidal states: “No es muy verosímil, repetimos, que Alfonso III, tan preocupado de continuar la monarquía goda, no aludiese alguna vez en su título al derecho que sobre toda España le asistía, *Hispaniae rex*, ni usase el título *imperator*, que vemos darle después de su muerte⁹”. On the contrary, it is my opinion that there is no real terminological connection between these kings and those who later used this title in the 10th-century documentation.¹⁰

Before proceeding with the argument, however, a methodological premise must be made: in the case of the Iberian peninsula, the question I raised is whether it was at the court of Alfonso III that this terminological use really began; whereas in the case of Northumbrian king – who lived almost two and a half centuries before the Anglo-Saxon imperial phenomenon – the research started from the following question: could Oswald’s definition as *imperator* have been an inspiration for the court of Æthelstan (924-939) and his successors? They are therefore two figures of different relevance, but both stand at the beginning of these two phenomena that are terminologically and politically similar (as well as coinciding chronologically). It must be also stressed that the two cases, although comparable, are based on different types of sources and should therefore be treated separately, which is why I decided to present first the case of Alfonso III and then that of Oswald and to compare them in the conclusions.

Anyway, this comparison is relevant because the use of the imperial title is neither innocuous nor superficial. It could have at least two meanings: the primitive one proceeding from Roman history, i.e. “victorious general”, and the one shared throughout the Carolingian world, i.e. *rex regum*, king of kings. It is therefore important to ask how this title was used in relation to these two sovereigns. At the same time, the title of *imperator* could be considered as a spy, or at least an example of Carlo Ginzburg’s idea of spy inside his theory of “paradigma indiziario¹¹”, according to which even a neglected and secondary element (the title appears very rarely in the sources of that period) can shed new light on a context or a problem. *Imperator* is a spy because, normally, the emperor symbolised a unity of a political community. This is very evident in the case of Alfonso VI and Alfonso VII and the same applies to the 10th-century Anglo-Saxon rulers. However, this is not always the norm, as in the cases of Oswald and Alfonso III.

Alfonso III: imperial mastermind?

The image of Alfonso III proposed by the various chronicles produced around the court of Oviedo during his reign is quite delineated: the Kingdom of Asturias (called in the *Albeldense regnum Christianorum*) is destined to recover the peninsula and restore the ancient *ordo gothorum*. The *Crónica Albeldense* puts the Leonese sovereigns in clear continuity with the Gothic ones, while the author of the *Profética* even defined Alfonso as the one who would reign over

⁹ Menéndez Pidal, *El Imperio Hispánico y los Cinco Reinos*, 33. See also: Maravall Casesnoves, *El concepto de España en la Edad Media*, 413-415.

¹⁰ It should be specified that the focus of this study is exclusively on the occurrence of the word *imperator* and not *imperium*. The latter term has a much broader meaning spectrum and its presence in the sources is so frequent and divergent as to make a complete and useful analysis of its occurrence practically impossible. So when I discuss “terminological connection” I am referring to the title alone.

¹¹ Ginzburg, “Spie”, 164.

all of *Spania* within a few years: “hic princeps noster domnus Adefonsus proximiori tempore in omni Spanie predicatur regnaturus¹²”. With such a premise, it is not surprising that he can be regarded as the first monarch-emperor of the Asturian-Leonese kingdom. Yet if we leave the field of chronicles and move on to the documentary one, the situation differs.¹³ The title *imperator* appears alongside the name of the Asturian king in seven charters, three of which date back to the reign of Alfonso himself, three others to that of his son and successor Ordoño II (914-924), and one of private origin, long after the sovereign’s death.

The three documents dating back to Alfonso’s reign have raised numerous doubts among scholars both because of the – rather peculiar – topics they deal with and because of their decidedly out-of-context use of imperial terminology. The first two date from 867 and 877 and are addressed respectively to Savarico and Rudensido, both bishops of the diocese of Mondoñedo.¹⁴ In the first one, the *intitulatio* is very clear: *Ego Adefonsus totius Hispania imperator, qui licet indigne vocitor Catholicus*. Such a use of the expression “emperor of Spain” and the attribute “Catholic” has made scholars suspicious, but they also had other reasons to doubt the content of the document.¹⁵ Alfonso reportedly received Savarico who had lost his diocese to the Islamic invasion and granted him a new one in Mondoñedo. According to Antonio C. Floriano Cumbreño, the document would have been forged between 1108 and 1122, at the time of a dispute between the bishops of Mondoñedo and the diocese of Compostela concerning the jurisdiction over churches mentioned in the text itself.¹⁶ The fabrication *ex novo* of a foundation charter for the diocese would have enabled the former to defend their ecclesiastical jurisdiction against the growing Compostelan power. The forgery allegations raised on the charter of 867 undermine that of 877 as well. In this one too, the sovereign presented himself as *Idefonsus Hispaniae imperator* and granted Rudensido the lands of the ancient diocese of Dumio, which returned to the Christian side after the conquest of Braga. Surprisingly, the same Floriano Cumbreño who unmasked the charter dated to 867 is more optimistic about the authenticity of this second text, especially after finding a second copy of it in the archives of the Instituto de Valencia don Juan in Madrid.¹⁷ However, the coincidences with the previous document are too many: same addressee, same motivations (legitimation of the authority of the bishop of Mondoñedo), same *intitulatio*. It is indeed difficult not to consider this text too as the result of a 12th-century forgery.¹⁸

Excluding Mondoñedo’s two documents, there is only one text of supposed Alphonsine origin in which imperial terminology is applied to the sovereign: a letter from the king to the clergy of Tours dated 906. Alfonso III reportedly accepted the proposal of the clergy of the French

¹² *Crónica Profética*, XIX, 3.

¹³ On Asturian-Leonese charters, see: Lucas Álvarez, *Las cancellerías reales astur-leonesas*.

¹⁴ None of these texts has been transmitted in original, but they both appear in an 18th-century manuscript now preserved in: Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, ms. 9.194.

¹⁵ Barrau-Dihigo, *Recherches*, 81; 234, n. 3; 553, n. 3; Menéndez Pidal, *El Imperio Hispánico*, 29; García Gallo, “El imperio medieval español”, 114; Sánchez-Candeira, “El “Regnum-Imperium” leonés”, 14; Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 99-100.

¹⁶ *Diplomática española del período astur*, vol. 2, n. 89.

¹⁷ Floriano Cumbreño, “El expediente diplomático de la iglesia Minduniense”, 79-82.

¹⁸ García Gallo, “El imperio medieval español”, 114; Sánchez-Candeira, “El “Regnum-Imperium” leonés”, 14; Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 99, n. 94.

city to buy an *imperiale coronam serenitatis nostrae condignam*. With the income from this sale, the clerics would have rebuilt the church destroyed by a Norman attack in 903. In this case, the *intitulatio* does not present Alfonso as emperor (the only imperial reference is to the crown), who is instead described as *Hispaniae rex* – once again it is precisely this explicit reference to a full peninsular authority that raises doubts. Furthermore, in the text, the title *archiepiscopus* is used for the bishop of Santiago de Compostela – a see that did not receive the pallium until 1120 with Diego Gelmirez – and an account of certain miracles of St. James is also reported. According to Floriano Cumbreño, this account would partly coincide with an apocryphal letter attributed to Pope Leo IX and therefore dated more than a century later.¹⁹ Finally, the manuscript tradition raises further doubts. The text was transmitted via the *Pancarte Noire*, a cartulary formerly preserved in Saint Martin of Tours. It was compiled between 1132 and 1137 and later lost in a fire in 1793, although a copy was made in the 17th century and was later included in Florez's *España Sagrada*.²⁰ The opinion generally accepted by scholars today is that what concerns the crown is authentic in content, while the narration of the miracles of St. James, the title of archbishop and that of *Hispaniae rex* were added when the text was transcribed in the *Pancarte Noire*.²¹ It is much more difficult to establish whether the crown was defined as imperial even before the transition to the cartulary and, if so, what meaning it had. According to H el ene Sirantoine, the *corona* could be a devotional object to be hung suspended above the church altar (like the famous crown of Recesvinto, today in the Museo Arqueol ogico Nacional, Madrid), rather than the royal headdress – for which the word *diadema* was normally used in that period.²² Whether it is a headdress or a devotional ornament, the problem arises from the presence of the adjective “imperial”. We cannot overlook the fact that the *Pancarte Noire* was made between 1132 and 1137, i.e. during the reign of Alfonso VII, who had himself crowned *imperator totius Hispaniae* in 1137, even though he used this title earlier. As Sirantoine herself states, the “empire manifeste²³” of Alfonso VII was well known even outside the Iberian peninsula, in fact we know that eminent figures such as Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux recognised him as Emperor of Spain on several occasions.²⁴ Such a coincidence leads me to believe – at least in the current state of matters – that the adjective “imperial” may also have been added in the 12th century, when the descendant of Alfonso III boasted a similar title.

If we also exclude the letter to the clergy of Tours, we must accept that none of the texts from the Alphonsine court containing the imperial title (or similar terminology) can be considered reasonably authentic. In fact, the only reliable charters in which Alfonso appears as *imperator* dated after his death. Three of them date from the reign of his son, Ordo o II, and share the same *intitulatio*: *Ego Hordonius rex [...] filius Adefonsi magni imperatoris*. Two are donations made by the king

¹⁹ *Diplom tica espa ola del per odo astur*, vol. 2, p. 345.

²⁰ *España Sagrada*, vol. 19, 346-349.

²¹ Men ndez Pidal, *El Imperio Hisp nico*, 31; *Diplom tica espa ola del per odo astur*, vol. 2, 345; Henri t, “La lettre d’Alphonse III”; S nchez-Candeira, “El ‘Regnum-Imperium’ leon s”, 13. A complete edition in: D az y D az, “La Epistola Leonis pape”.

²² Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 71, n. 89.

²³ Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 310-331.

²⁴ Peter the Venerable, *Contra sectam Sarracenorum*, 54; Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistolae*, nos. 455, 301.

and his consort Elvira in order to found new monasteries: the first to abbot Servando for the *caenobium* of St. John (January 916), and the second to Trasmundo and Recesvinto for that of St. Andrew (January 917). The last is a foundation charter of the monastery of St. Cosmas and Damian in León (August 916).²⁵ Finally, there is a text that provokes no little curiosity among scholars, the will of a private individual, Fredesindo, dated 17th May 950, almost half a century after the death of the Asturian king.²⁶ Fredesindo left to the monastery of Eslonza (León) the lands that had belonged to his family for generations, whose boundaries had been established by an unknown Gonzalo, *filio imperatori nostro domino Adefonso princeps*.²⁷ Since the original of two of these diplomas has been transmitted, scholars accepted them as authentic and they can thus safely be considered the earliest of the Hispanic imperial phenomenon.²⁸ Consequently, there are no reliable texts in which Alfonso III uses the title *imperator* for himself or other private individuals use this title to describe him while he is alive.

Oswald: imperial inspiratory example?

If in the case of Alfonso, the title *imperator* appeared only in a few documents of questionable authenticity, there are no diplomas – trustworthy or not – for King Oswald of Northumbria in which it appears. The life of this king is only portrayed by narrative sources, both chronological and hagiographic.²⁹ The most important source of information is Bede, who dedicates half of the third book of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* to him. It must be added – for the sake of completeness – that sporadic information can be found also in the *Annales Cambriae*, in *The Annals of Ulster*, and in the Clonmacnoise group of *Irish annals*, as presented by Clare Stancliffe.³⁰ However, the passage that places Oswald within the Anglo-Saxon imperial phenomenon is not found in any of these sources, but in the *Vita sancti Columbae* by Adomnán (d. 704). In this work, the ninth abbot of Iona decided to write the life of the founder of his monastery, the Irish monk Columba (521-597).

As usual for hagiographies, the author did not simply narrate the life of the saint, but devoted a substantial part of his account to the various miracles and apparitions that followed the saint's death. Among these, there is an apparition that interests us. On the eve of the battle of Denisesburna (today usually identified with Heavenfield), Columba appeared to Oswald in a dream. Combining the information provided by Adomnán with that supplied a few years later by Bede, we know that Oswald was the nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria (624-632), who had lost his throne to Cedwalla (*Catilo* in the *Vita*). After the fall of his uncle, Oswald fled to the Kingdom of Dál Riada (west coast of Scotland), where he met Bishop Aidan, who instructed

²⁵ León, Archivo Catedralicio, n. 905 (9th January 916); *Tumbo legionense*, ff. 467r-468r (27th August 916; lost); n. 390 (8th January 917).

²⁶ Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, *Clero*, carp. 958/7.

²⁷ There were three known sons of Alfonso: García, Fruela II, and Ordoño II. It could be possible that he also had other children, bastards or born by other marriages, but the only existing mention of Gonzalo comes from this text.

²⁸ García-Gallo, "El imperio medieval español", 114; Sánchez-Candeira, "El 'Regnum-Imperium' leonés", 15; Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 100.

²⁹ Stancliffe, Cambridge, *Oswald*.

³⁰ Stancliffe, "Oswald", 34.

him in the Christian faith (in the Irish style) and baptised him.³¹ Barely a year after he fell into disgrace, he was able to face Cedwalla and the night before the battle, the Irish monk warned him of the forthcoming victory. The next morning Oswald, unsurprisingly, won the fight and, on his return from the battlefield, was ordained by God as emperor of all Britain.

“Eadem subsecuta nocte Ossualdus rex, sicuti in visu edoctus furerat, de castris ad bellum, cum admodum pauciore exercitu, contra millia numerosa progreditur; cui a Domino, sicut ei promissum est, felix et facilis est concessa victoria, et rege trucidato Catlone, victor post bellum reversus, postea totius Britanniae imperator a Deo ordinatus est³²”.

Adomnán seems to attribute a certain prominence to the event and immediately adds that the whole episode had been reported to him by his predecessor, Abbot Failebo – who in turn had heard it *ab ore ipsius Ossualdi regis* – but he does not spend a word more to contextualise or explain the use of the imperial title. There is no mention of a coronation ceremony nor even that of an act of submission by other kings or lords of the island; nothing that could have justified the use of *imperator* in the sense of *rex regum*. The title appears for Oswald and disappears with him since Adomnán did not use it for any other king mentioned later in the hagiography.³³

By applying to the *Vita sancti Columbae* the same basic scepticism used to analyse the Alfonso's documents, one might suppose an interpolation with a later addition – perhaps as late as the 10th century – of the word *imperator*. This doubt is soon dispelled, however, by the fact that the oldest manuscript of the *Vita sancti Columbae* dates to shortly after the author's death. This is the Schaffhausen Generalia 1, drafted by the hand of Dorbene (d. 713), who was the immediate successor of Adomnán at Iona. Palaeographic analyses have revealed that the codex would have been copied at the beginning of the 8th century, and a later alteration can therefore be excluded.³⁴ After this sudden appearance, it would be almost two and a half centuries before the word *imperator* in reference to an Anglo-Saxon king would appear again in Britain.³⁵

Is there a connection between the British imperial phenomenon and Oswald? The answer is yes, but it must be contextualised. The sovereigns who make use – first-hand – of the title in their own diplomas are the descendants of the house of Wessex, that is to say, the heirs of that Alfred at whose court the compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* began at the end of the 9th century. The material in the first part of this annalistic collection comes mainly from Bede,

³¹ HEGA, 3, 1.

³² Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, 1.1.

³³ Adomnán presented one of the famous Irish High Kings, Diarmait Mac Cerbaill (d. 565) of the Uí Néill dynasty, describing him as *totius Scotiae regnatorem, Deo auctore ordinatum*: Adomnán, *Life of Saint Columba*, 1.29. So that, in this case, there is no imperial reference. See: Sharpe, *Life of Saint Columba*, 60–62.

³⁴ Picard, “The Schaffhausen Adomnán”, 216–249.

³⁵ The first two charters where the title *imperator* appears date back to the time of Æthelstan (924–939) and are *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, nn. 392, 406. Their authenticity is still partly debated: Drögereit, “Kaiseridee und Kaisertitel”, 60–61; Stengel, “Imperator und Imperium”, 56, 62; Hart, *The Danelaw*, 435; Keynes, “Review of Sawyer, Burton”, 216; *Charters of Burton Abbey*, XLVII–XLIX, and 8–9.

including the famous passage of the seven lords – among whom Oswald stands out – who held an insular *imperium*.³⁶ As is well known, in re-elaborating and translating this part the chroniclers added an eighth ruler, Egbert – grandfather of Alfred himself – and coined a new term, that of Bretwalda.³⁷ This placed the House of Wessex in direct line with the ancient Anglo-Saxon lords, justifying Alfred’s plan for political and territorial unification.³⁸ This plan was then continued by his successors, who initiated a policy of power towards the other island populations and – starting with Æthelstan – made use of the imperial title in their charters.

There is a strong temptation to see a direct terminological connection between Oswald and Æthelstan. The Northumbrian king was at the time, together with St. Cuthbert (634-687), the most famous Anglo-Saxon saint, whose cult had even crossed the English Channel to the continent.³⁹ Æthelstan himself spent part of his childhood in Gloucester in the same years in which – William of Malmesbury warns us⁴⁰ – the saint’s remains were being moved to the city. It can be assumed that if Æthelstan or someone from his court had read the *Vita sancti Columbae*, he could have used it as inspiration to draw up the first imperial charters. Yet the manuscript tradition of the *Vita* suggested that it may have been less widespread than imagined. Of the four manuscripts that have come down to us, three (all coming from Northumbria) are copies from several centuries later, while the third, Dorbene’s famous Generalia 1, was in the abbey of St. Gall as early as the year 870, as demonstrated by Jean-Michel Picard.⁴¹ This would suggest that the *Vita* had limited circulation in the south of the island, but it is still not a sufficiently strong argument to reject the hypothesis that Æthelstan and his scribes may have taken their cue from this work when drafting the documents.

We must remember that the pages written by Bede were as close to a hagiography circulating in 10th-century Britain as it was possible to get. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* presents the battle of Denisesburna and describes Oswald’s new authority in the aftermath of the clash in a less hasty manner than Adomnán does:

“Huius igitur antistitis doctrina rex Osuald cum ea, cui praeerat, gente Anglorum antistitus, non solum incognita progenitoribus suis regna caelorum sperare didicit, sed et regna terrarum plus quam ulli maiorum suorum ab eodem uno Deo, qui fecit caelum et terram, consecutus est, denique omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est Brettonum Pictorum Scottorum et Anglorum, divisae sunt, in dicione accepit⁴²”.

Oswald’s dominion – or, to use the same term employed by Bede in the previous book, *imperium* – extends over all the peoples of the

³⁶ HEGA, 2, 5.

³⁷ Fanning, “Bede”.

³⁸ An exhaustive study about the political thought of Alfred in: Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*.

³⁹ Thacker, “Membra Disjecta”.

⁴⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, IV, 155.

⁴¹ Picard, “Schaffhausen Generalia 1 and the textual transmission of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* on the continent”.

⁴² HEGA, 3, 6.

island,⁴³ but the monk of Jarrow does not summarise this authority with the word *imperator*, which remains an exclusive of the *Vita Sancti Columbae*.

The *Historia Ecclesiastica* had an enormous popularity on the island and, with it, this particular depiction of Oswald. This is demonstrated by the *Old English Martyrology* (late 9th century), where the description of Oswald follows that of Bede and where there is no trace of the imperial title.⁴⁴ In short, it seems unlikely that Æthelstan's scribes would have been inspired by the *Vita* to draw up their own diplomas since it seems reasonable to assume that Bede's Oswald was better known than Adomnán's: to quote the US physician Theodore Woodward, "when you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras". Even so, it would be wrong to deny the continuity of the idea of Anglo-Saxon overlordship from the Heptarchic period to the Unitarian period, because such continuity exists. One just has to accept that the title of *imperator* did not always correspond to the overlord.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there does not seem to be a direct terminological relation between the use of *imperator* for Oswald and that of the Anglo-Saxon kings of the 10th century, just as it has been shown that Alfonso III never used this title himself, nor does it appear in public or private documentation dating from his reign. In the case of the Northumbrian king, the appearance of the title in the *Vita Sancti Columbae* is exceptional and seems to have had little impact in the Anglo-Saxon court. In the second case, on the other hand, the Hispanic monarch is the first to appear as emperor, thus opening the history of the famous *imperio astur-leonés*, but only in the charters coming from his son Ordoño II's court. He was, in a sense, the object of the empire and not the subject of it.

This is not the place to try to find out who was responsible for this use of imperial terminology – although much evidence seems to point the finger at Ordoño II and Æthelstan – because such a mission would need many more pages, documents and arguments. However, it can be asserted "beyond reasonable doubt" that these initiators were neither Oswald nor Alfonso III. Yet, one should not fall into the temptation to exaggerate the value of the word, as one would risk losing the overall context. Leaving aside the terminological issue and focus on the political legitimization of territorial dominion, the role of the two kings in relation to their successors' changes. Alfonso and his court constituted the starting point of *neogoticismo* – the ideal of the restoration of the Gothic kingdom – which reappeared again and

⁴³ Notice how the formula used in this passage visibly recalls the one adopted at the beginning of the first book to describe the political situation of the island. In that case, too, the division into four languages (those of the Britons, Picts, Scots and Angles) is mentioned, and the presence of a fifth language (Latin) that is common to all populations, as the language of Christianity, is emphasised. HEGA, 1, 1.

⁴⁴ "On þone fiftan dæg þæs monðes bið sancti Oswaldes tid, þæs cristenan kyninges, se ricsode nigon gear in Bretene, ond him sealed god mare rice þonne ænigum his foregengum him wæron underþeodde þa feower þeoda þe synod on Bretene, þæt synod Brytwalas ond Pehtas ond Sceottas ond Ongle. Oswald endade his lif in gebedes wordum þa hinde mon sloh, ond da he feol on eorðan, þa cwæð he: 'deus miserere animabus' he cwæð: 'god, miltsa þu saulum' his handa siondan ungebrosnode in þære cynelican ceastre seo ys nemned Bebbanburh, ond his heafod wæs gelæded to Lindesfearne éa, ond se lichoma ys elles in Lindesse mægðe æt Beardanegge, ond his wundor wæron miclo ge beheonan sæ ge begeondan". *An Old English Martyrology*, August 5th, St. Oswald.

again during the medieval centuries and up to the beginning of Modern Age.⁴⁵ When, in 1085, Alfonso VI reconquered Toledo and began using the title of *imperator Hispaniae*, it was because he based his authority on an idea of Gothic political and territorial unity, as already amply demonstrated by Hélène Sirantoine.⁴⁶ However, there is no evidence of this congruence between *neogoticismo* and the use of imperial terminology in the sources of Alfonso's reign. He does not appear as *imperator* in the chronicles and there are not even reliable contemporary texts that portray him with the same title. In fact, to be completely accurate, not even in the diplomas of Ordoño II Alfonso is described as *imperator Hispaniae*, but only as emperor. This might lead one to think that such emperor-*neogoticismo* overlap was not present even at his son's court, but this would be beyond the purpose of this study.

Oswald too, although he cannot be considered the inspirer of imperial terminology, was an important political model for later English rulers. The international spread of his cult and his "survival" as *bretwalda* in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* confirm him in the *pantheon* of Anglo-Saxon kings and overlords. This is also demonstrated by the way the authority of later rulers is portrayed, which is clearly influenced by the image of Oswald given by Bede and spread by the *Old English Martyrology*. Consider, for instance, how the chroniclers of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* portrayed Æthelstan's seizure of York (927), emphasising the act of submission of "all the kings who were in the island" (*7 ealle þa cyngas þe on þyssum iglande wæron he gewylde*): Hywel, king of the West Welsh, Constantine, king of the Scots, Owain, king of Gwent and Aldred, son of Eadwulf lord of Bamburgh.⁴⁷ Actually, not all the sovereigns of the island submitted to Æthelstan that day; we must not forget that just like the Asturian chronicles, their Anglo-Saxon counterpart also gives a partial and political view of the facts, perhaps giving more space to aspirations than to reality. However, this idea of subjugating other peoples of Britain appears several times in the source, both before Æthelstan – in the time of his father Edward (899-924) – and afterwards, in each case without using any specific title.⁴⁸

Can we, therefore, say that Oswald and Alfonso did constitute two imperial forefathers for the kings who succeeded them? As often happens, an easy question corresponds to a difficult or at least specific answer. One need to define what is meant by "imperial forefathers": if this expression means that the two sovereigns began a certain (and peculiar) use of the title *imperator* then the answer is a clear no. Neither Oswald was an indirect inspirer of it, nor was Alfonso its first inventor. If, on the other hand, one wants to see in these two kings a model of limited territorial dominion (*Britannia, Hispania*), complete and concluded, then the judgment is completely reversed, for all the reasons listed above. It is therefore necessary to review the immediate

⁴⁵ Maravall Casesnoves, "La tradición de la herencia goda como mito político".

⁴⁶ Sirantoine, *Imperator Hispaniae*, 197-205.

⁴⁷ ASC 927 (=926): "Her oðeowdon fyrena leoman on norðdæle þære lyfte. 7 Sihtric acwæl, 7 Æþelstan cyning feng to Norðhymbra rice. 7 ealle þa cyngas þe on þyssum iglande wæron he gewylde, ærest Huwal Westwala cyning, 7 Cosstantin Scotta cyning, 7 Uwen Wenta cyning, 7 Ealdred Ealdulfing from Bebbanbyrig, 7 mid wedde 7 mid apum fryp gefæstnodon on þære stowe þe genemned is æt Eamotum on .IIII. Idus Iulii, 7 ælc deofolgeld tocwædon, 7 syþþam mid sibbe tocyrdon."

⁴⁸ Edward (899-924): ASC 920 (=923); Edmund (939-946): ASC 944, ASC 945; Eadred (946-955): ASC 946; Edgar (959-975): ASC 959 (D, E, F), ASC 975 (D, E).

relationship between insular and peninsular territorial dominion and imperial terminology: these two elements do not always coincide. They do not coincide in Alfonso III, who even in the charters of Ordoño II appeared as a simple *imperator*, without territorial specification, and they probably did not coincide in the case of Oswald either. Although Adomnán's Oswald is the emperor of all Britain, one must take as a reference Bede's Oswald, who was overlord of the island, but not an emperor. Sometimes emperors make History, sometimes historians make emperors.

Abbreviations

ASC = *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes. Cambridge: Simon Taylor, 1986-2004.

HEGA = Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and Roger A. B. Mynors. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.

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