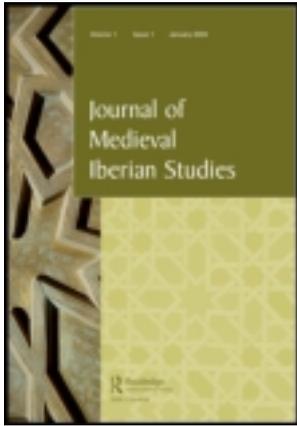


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The assemblies of Alfonso VIII of Castile: Burgos (1169) to Carrión (1188)

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The plenary courts of Alfonso VIII of Castile (1158–1214) have not been studied in depth by his biographers, nor by those interested in the early history of parliamentary assemblies, yet their function, composition and frequency reveal interesting aspects in the dynamics of institutional change and the relationship between the monarchy and the aristocracy. These courts became an important instrument for the centralisation of governance; their political relevance is clearly recognised in the commemorative clauses of some royal diplomas, but has been generally overlooked by scholars more concerned with constitutional landmarks and parliamentary developments. The present study will address the institutional nature and political importance of the great courts summoned by Alfonso VIII, from the great court of Burgos in 1169 to that of Carrión de los Condes in 1188, gatherings that served to publicise two crucial moments in his long reign: the coming of the king's majority, and his consolidation as an Iberian leader.

Keywords: Castile; Alfonso VIII; assemblies; twelfth century; Cortes

The search for parliamentary origins and precedents to justify modern political reform has often obscured the study of medieval institutions. In the case of Castile and León, scholars have often tended to overlook the clues regarding the relevance of those royal assemblies, often identified as *curias plenas*, provided in the twelfth-century diplomatic records.¹ The few events commemorated in the final clauses of royal diplomas – the most valuable source for the period – may be assumed to have had a special significance for contemporaries. One such event was the defeat of the Muslim stronghold of Cuenca in 1177, which had united the Christian rulers of Iberia under one banner: an unprecedented event that, like the imperial coronation in 1135 and the death of Alfonso VII in 1157, merited attention in the diplomatic records. Shortly after the conquest of Cuenca, a royal authorisation for the dispossession of some houses in Burgos was granted at a plenary assembly gathered at that city in February 1178: “the second year after which Alfonso, the most serene king of Castile, had conquered Cuenca and celebrated his court at Burgos.” Equally, we read that the king granted special privileges to the city council “when the most serene king celebrated his court at Burgos.”² Interestingly, along with the

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¹The term *curia* is often translated as court, but in the political and institutional world of twelfth-century Europe they are not always the same body. In this article, “court” refers to the body of regular advisors, permanently close to the king, while *curia* will be used to identify a large assembly summoned by the king to discuss important matters with the nobility of the kingdom. In the sources, this distinction is made when the adjectives *plena*, *solemne* or *magna* are introduced.

²González, *El Reino de Castilla en la época de Alfonso VIII* (hereafter González, *Alfonso VIII*), 2: 485–8, nos. 296–7: “anno secundo quo serenissimus rex prefatus Aldefonsus Concam cepit et apud Burgos curiam celebrauit”; “tunc temporis uidelicet quando serenissimus rex predictus Burgis curiam celebrauit.” Countess Elvira

commemoration of the deeds of the siege and the magnificence of the imperial coronation, we encounter the celebration of a royal court, perhaps suggesting that equivalent importance was attributed to such a gathering. It is worth asking, then, why these assemblies have not been afforded proper historical study in recent years.³

In the heart of the city of León, a plaque nailed to a wall in the Plaza de San Isidoro commemorates what it claims to be the very first parliamentary meeting in Europe: the curia of León convened by Alfonso IX in July 1188. Behind this confident claim, however, lies a debate on parliamentary origins that has provided medieval parliaments with perhaps more scholarly attention than any other subject within the institutional history of medieval Europe. In Spain, the starting point for this debate, in which those courts considered “pre-parliamentary” sessions have remained nearly invisible, may be located almost precisely 200 years ago when, after centuries of royal absolutism and years of Napoleonic domination, parliamentary discussions to promulgate a new constitution began at the Cortes of Cádiz (May 1811). Article 22 was drafted four months later, proclaiming that “by this Constitution the nation returns to the exercise of its political liberty . . . which it had lost with its *cortes*.”⁴ In the midst of these constitutional reforms, and with an eye to determining the original parliamentary essence of the Spanish *cortes*, the jurist and historian Francisco Martínez Marina (1754–1833) singled out Alfonso VIII’s curia of Burgos (1169), which – according to the chronicles – was attended “not only by the counts, magnates, prelates and knights, but also by the citizens and all the urban councils of Castile.”⁵ More recently, Donald Kagay and Thomas Bisson have instead attributed the first Iberian *cortes* to the Crown of Aragón, where parliamentary records reveal the presence of urban representatives at the curia of Zaragoza, also in 1169. But while this challenges the primacy of León, the presence of citizens remains the unquestionable essence of parliament.⁶ Furthermore, not only has the history of the medieval *cortes* been obscured by the theory of the estates; it has also suffered from the nationalism of regional studies, tending to overlook the general institutional context and the importance of comparative perspectives. Luis González Antón has warned that “the nationalistic passions were, and are still, another element of distortion in the study of the old parliamentary history. In each country, the supposed novelties and excellence of their medieval constitutions are singled out.”⁷

Besides the grand assembly that hosted the imperial coronation of 1135, no other Spanish assembly had been commemorated in the royal diplomas during the reign of Alfonso VII of Castile and León (r. 1126–57), nor under the governance of his mother, Urraca (r. 1109–26). However, during the reign of Alfonso VIII (1158–1214), a number of gatherings are

gave to the monasteries of Sahagún and San Salvador de Nugal two parts of the village Nugal and Olmillos, “when the most serene King Alfonso celebrated his court at Burgos” (González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 484–5, no. 295).

³Julio González’s work on the reign of Alfonso and Gonzalo Martínez Díez’s biography provide only brief and descriptive information on plenary courts. Among the more recent studies that referred to assemblies, the most significant are Pérez-Prendes, *Las Cortes de Castilla*; Procter, *Curia and Cortes*; Martínez Díez, “Curia y Cortes;” O’Callaghan, *Cortes of Castile-León*; and Fuentes Ganzo and Martín, *De las cortes históricas*.

⁴Tierno Galván, *Actas de las Cortes de Cádiz*, i.217. The use of medieval precedents for constitutional reform has been recently explored in Nieto Soria, *Medieval constitucional*, although the author overlooks the central debate concerning the constitutional primacy of the Curia of León, summoned by Alfonso IX in 1188 and considered by nineteenth-century historical romantics to be the first parliamentary meeting in Europe (see Cerda, “Towards a New Paradigm”).

⁵Martínez Marina, *Ensayo histórico-crítico*, 64. By some historians, this meeting is considered the first parliamentary session in Castile (and Spain). See González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 211–16, nos. 124–6; cf. also García Rámila, “Las Cortes de Castilla,” 93, and Martínez Marina, *Teoría de las cortes*, 138–9. Their views are primarily based on Ocampo’s *Las quatro partes enteras*, MS R/52 and R/30757, f.387v–388r.

⁶Kagay, “Emergence of Parliament;” Bisson, *Medieval Crown of Aragon*.

⁷González Antón, *Las Cortes de Aragón*, 18. See also Reynolds, “Historiography of the Medieval State,” 123, 130–2.

commemorated in the diplomatic records. Alfonso's political majority was officially proclaimed at the curia of Burgos that assembled in November 1169, when the king held his first court. Two other royal diplomas signed at Burgos the following week contained similarly commemorative clauses, and when Alfonso gathered the *universitas regni* (community of the kingdom) of Castile at the curia of Medina de Rioseco at Christmas in 1182 his judges resolved a judicial dispute "that year in which the king celebrated his curia."⁸ If a text cited by Julio González in 1977 is not a forgery, or has not been severely manipulated, similar diplomatic recognition was granted to the curia of Nájera in 1184, when royal donations were discussed and conceded "that year in which King Alfonso congregated his curia in the city of Nájera."⁹ Two years later, another important court gathered at San Esteban de Gormáz to arrange the marriage between the son of the Holy Roman Emperor and Alfonso's daughter. A royal diploma granted to the bishop of Sigüenza bears witness to the significance of this assembly, stating that a "charter was drafted at San Esteban . . . the year in which a curia was celebrated in the aforementioned village and where the marriage between the illustrious son of the emperor of the Romans and the illustrious daughter of the king of Castile was discussed with the messenger of the lord emperor."¹⁰ The marriage took place and was celebrated at the curia of Carrión de los Condes in July 1188: a highly significant political occasion, which saw the knighting of Conrad, Alfonso VIII's son-in-law, and Alfonso IX, the recently enthroned king of León. As in the case of the courts of Burgos (1169 and 1178), Medina de Rioseco (1182) and San Esteban de Gormáz (1187), this meeting was given its due importance in a royal document which provides an account of an exchange between the king and the Monastery of Sahagún, when a charter was drafted at Carrión, "the year in which Alfonso, King of Castile, knighted Alfonso, King of León at his curia in Carrión."¹¹ Were all these Castilian assemblies as significant as the imperial coronation of Alfonso VII and the conquest of Cuenca? Why have other important courts of Alfonso VIII been deprived of such recognition? And why do Aragonese and Leonese diplomas seem oblivious to the territorial gatherings of nobles? These are surely interesting questions for future research in institutional history and chancery practice.¹²

Although the term *curia* is preferred in the diplomatic records, distinguishing these meetings from those described by alternative institutional nomenclature such as *colloquium*, *conventus*, and *concilium*, the narrative sources are at best ambiguous when labelling these political sessions. The chronicles *De Rebus Hispaniae* and *Chronica Latina Regum Castellae*, written a few decades after the meeting of these courts, describe the curia of Carrión de los Condes, for example, as a *plena curia* (plenary court) and *curia famosa* (famous or important court) respectively.¹³ The vernacular *Crónica de Veinte Reyes* and *Primera Crónica General de*

⁸González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 211–13. See also González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 213–16, 686–8, nos. 125–6, 398. At the same curia, the king gave the right of inheritance over Estevilla, close to Medinaceli, which was later confirmed in 1176. A diploma witnessed the following day gave the bishop and cathedral of Burgos the monastery of San Miguel de Cijancas, in the *alfoz* (group of small villages under one jurisdiction) of Bricia, as it was held by Martín Peláez. The judicial case resolved at Medina de Rioseco involved a noble called Pedro Gutiérrez.

⁹This text was possibly drafted on 10 March 1185, and is cited in González, "Sobre la fecha."

¹⁰González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 807–8.

¹¹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 868–70, no. 505. Another document by which the abbot of Sahagún recovered some land given to the monastery by Cit Jiménez in Valladolid. The document makes reference to the curia in Carrión and is published in Fernández Flores, *Colección Diplomática*, 438, no. 1443.

¹²Some interesting considerations concerning the Castilian chancery under Alfonso VIII are offered in Ostos, "La cancellería de Alfonso VIII."

¹³Jiménez de Rada, *Historia de rebus Hispaniae* (hereafter *DRH*), 246–7; Charlo Brea, "Chronica Latina Regum Castellae" (hereafter *CLRC*), 11: 43–4.

España employ the word *cortes*, normally reserved for the parliamentary assemblies of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ The only contemporary accounts survive in the form of a series of chancery records, one of which relates a land exchange between Alfonso VIII and the monastery of Sahagún. The transaction was probably discussed at the assembly, and it bears witness to Alfonso IX's homage to the Castilian king "curia sua in Carrionem."¹⁵ Donald Kagay's work on Aragonese assemblies in the twelfth century reveals that "the ephemeral nature of such meetings is perhaps best expressed in the myriad of names applied to them in the official records from the late twelfth century."¹⁶ However, the use of diverse concepts may not necessarily reveal institutional fluidity, for such an imprecision extended as far as the fourteenth century, to the point that it remains difficult at that juncture to distinguish the type of assembly described in the sources.¹⁷

In the Spanish realms, the word *curia* is said to have evolved from the *palatium regis* (king's palace meaning royal court) of the Asturian-Leonese kingdom, an offspring of the Visigothic *aula regis* (king's hall meaning royal court) of the seventh century.¹⁸ Valdeavellano has suggested that the term was probably used at the end of the Carolingian period and was brought to the kingdom of Navarre as early as the tenth century, then being implanted in Catalonia and shortly after in Castile-León, towards the end of the eleventh century.¹⁹ According to Gonzalo Martínez Díez, the term first appeared in a royal document from May 1075, possibly as a result of the Burgundian traditions brought to the Leonese court from the later part of the eleventh century onwards.²⁰ In this spurious manuscript, which is preserved in the Cathedral of Oviedo, the term *curia* appears not to be used in reference to a general assembly, but this might be the sense intended in a document signed at an assembly in Toledo in 1086; this is definitely the case with another document produced at a gathering in Villalpando in November 1089.²¹ For twenty years after this we have practically no signs of a general assembly until the accession of Queen Urraca in 1109, and the word *curia* is absent in the documents. Regardless, we can only agree with Martínez in suggesting that by this period, *curia* had displaced *palatium* in the identification of royal assemblies.²²

¹⁴See Martínez Díez et al., *Crónica de Veinte Reyes* (hereafter *CVR*); Menéndez Pidal, *Primera Crónica General de España* (hereafter *PCG*), 677, 683.

¹⁵González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 857–63, 868–73, nos. 499, 505, 506; Procter, *Curia and Cortes*, 75.

¹⁶Kagay, "Emergence of Parliament," 224.

¹⁷García Gallo, "La historiografía," 135.

¹⁸The *palatium* astur-leonés consolidated itself as the central organ of governance in the period 718–910 (Sánchez-Albornoz, "El 'Palatium regis' asturleonés"). The *curia* or king's court is said to have evolved from the *palatium*, which performed tasks similar to those of the Visigothic *aula regia* and the councils of Toledo. O'Callaghan, *History of Medieval Spain*, 169.

¹⁹García de Valdeavellano, *Curso de Historia*, 452. See also Porras Arboledas et al., *Historia de España VII*, 75.

²⁰Martínez Díez, "Curia y Cortes," 118. The first document is that of 26 May 1075 from the *Liber Testamentorum* (dubious): "in presentia regis et omnium nobilium eius curie" (published in García Larragueta, *Colección de documentos*, 222–5. In 1077, the term makes another appearance: "sicut iudicatum fuerat a iudicibus et a nostra curia." [as it was made by the judgment of the judges and our court]. See Serrano, *Cartulario de San Millán*, 240.

²¹The first instance when *curia* unmistakably signifies a general assembly was probably in 1086. It makes reference to the assembly that gathered in December in Toledo, summoned to elect the first archbishop of Toledo, for the city had just been reconquered and re-Christianised. Inexplicably, however, the word *curia* is not mentioned in the text quoted by Martínez, "Curia y Cortes," 119. The document is signed by twelve bishops, six counts, the *alferez* (commander of royal household), *mayordomo* (steward), and fourteen other magnates. Such a witness list is a persuasive indication of a meeting of the general assembly, which in this case gathered "ad quorum consensum ibi dignus Deo eligeretur archiepiscopus." This is published in García Luján, *Privilegios reales*, i.17. After this assembly, another *curia* is reported to have met at Villalpando in 1089 (24 November). See Sánchez-Albornoz, "Muchas páginas," 147.

²²Martínez, "Curia y Cortes," 118; García de Valdeavellano, *Curso de Historia*, 450.

“Court,” on the other hand, seems to be related to the Latin *cohors*, a word used in connection with the royal entourage or the king’s household and not with the *curia*, a body of officials dealing regularly with matters of governance. In García Gallo’s words, *curia* “designates the assembly or committee which accompanies the king and administers justice,” whereas court “signifies the king’s entourage or retinue and his immediate officials, as well as the place where the king resides with them.”²³ Their composition and functions might at times overlap with each other, but they are distinctive bodies, and the particularities are reported in the sources. Among the diplomas of Alfonso II (of Aragón), Fernando II, and Alfonso VIII, several royal donations and sanctions are done “with the counsel and providence of my entire court” or “with the advice of the nobles of my court” or “by the request of my court.”²⁴ Julio Valdeón’s introduction to Vladimir Piskorski’s book on the Castilian *cortes* suggests that the famous meeting at León in 1188 was called a *curia* in order to distinguish it from previous gatherings.²⁵ This was clearly not a festive court, nor was it a judicial or an administrative session of the *curia regis*, but the term *curia* had been used in connection with important royal assemblies before 1188. There is little that makes the meeting at León distinctive from its precedents, and it is certainly not the nomenclature. As Carlos Estepa indicates, the term is systematically used during the reign of Fernando II (1157–88) and it is frequently related to political consultation from the 1170s.²⁶ The Castilian and Aragonese chanceries are no exception in this period. Nilda Guglielmi’s exhaustive study of the *curia regis* asserts that the word *cort* was the vernacular chosen to replace the Latin *curia*, probably in the middle of the reign of Fernando III.²⁷ The Castilian term *cortes* and the Catalan *corts* are the vernacular plural of *corte* and *cort*, indicating perhaps, as Valdeón has argued, that “the etymology of the word *cortes* shows how the estates of the kingdom, which gathered at the king’s command, constituted his court in a certain way.”²⁸

On the other hand, the word *conventus* is rarely employed in Spanish records in connection with royal assemblies in the twelfth century, while *concilium* was generally used to refer to church and town councils.²⁹ There is enough evidence to suggest that *colloquium* was used for diplomatic meetings or conferences between two or more sovereigns – for instance, when Alfonso VIII and the king of Aragón reached an agreement at Cazola in 1179, “cum ibi haberent colloquium,” [where they held a conference] and shortly after, when a peace ended the conflict between the kings of Castile and Navarre, assembled at a place between Logroño and Nájera, “colloquium haberent.”³⁰ The alliance between Alfonso VIII and his uncle, Fernando II of León, was another diplomatic manifestation of the growing Castilian supremacy in this period. In February 1183, both kings gathered at Paradinas to discuss a peace agreement which was put in writing on the first day of June, when the kings met again at

²³García Gallo, “La historiografía,” 134. See also Porras, *Historia de España*, 77.

²⁴This is manifested in phrases such as: “cum consilio et providentia totius mee curie,” or “cum consilio procerum/baronibus/nobilibus curie mee,” or “de rogatu curie mee.” See also González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 683–5, no. 396.

²⁵In Piskorski, *Las Cortes de Castilla*, 13.

²⁶Estepa Díez, “Las Cortes en el Reino de León,” 275–6.

²⁷Guglielmi, “La Curia Regia,” 118. The term *cort* is used in the poem of El Cid (PMC), but generally without reference to any particular assembly, except Alfonso VI’s court in Toledo (Ruiz Asencio and Hernández Alonso, *Poema de Mio Cid*, i.56/960–4, 72; iii.133/2929, 2931, 174; 137/3227, 188; 140/3270, 190; 149/3393, 198; 149/3480 and 3495, 202). Refer also to Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin*, 136.

²⁸Valdeón in Piskorski, *Las Cortes de Castilla*, 19. Miller and Fryde suggest that a parliament was a “coming together of the courts” (*Historical Studies*, 1: 3).

²⁹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 143, 485–6, nos. 83, 296; 2: 806, no. 470; Fernández Flores, *Colección Diplomática de Sahagún*, no. 1424, 409–10; *DRH*, 238; *PCG*, 670.

³⁰González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 529–31, 535, nos. 319–21.

Fresno-Lavandera.³¹ The link between these two conferences is clearly established by the treaty, which provides further evidence for the usage of the term *colloquium*, repeatedly used in reference to these meetings involving the Iberian kings.³²

Driven perhaps by the search for constitutional phenomena and parliamentary origins, most approaches to Spanish assemblies in this period have focused on their composition and attendance. Although the royal diplomas granted at the curia of Burgos in November 1169 are only subscribed by the nobles of Castile and reveal no trace of the presence of urban representatives, some historians have considered the thirteenth-century account of Florián de Ocampo's *Tercera Crónica General*, which relates how the assembly had been attended by the magnates, the prelates, the knights and the citizens ["los ricos omes e los perlados e los caualleros e los çibdadanos"], thus agreeing with a passage of the *Crónica de Veinte Reyes* which reports the presence of "los más honrrados omnes de los conçejos" [the most honourable men of the municipalities].³³ These passages provided the documentary foundation for Martínez Marina's claims in the 1810s, but in the 1980s, the work of Gonzalo Martínez Díez questioned these reports, arguing that not only are those citizens omitted in the witness lists but also that the incorporation of urban representatives was too revolutionary an event to be the initiative of a fourteen-year old monarch in his first territorial assembly and after more than ten years of a minority. Moreover, he argues that the chronicle of Ocampo is the only thirteenth-century account to identify the meeting as "Cortes de Castiella en Burgos."³⁴ Martínez Díez's views were also shared by Colmeiro, Sempere, Piskorski, García de Valdeavellano and Procter, while the opinion of Martínez Marina found support in the studies of Anselmo Salvá and García Rámila, both of whom identified the assembly of Burgos as the first Castilian *cortes*.³⁵ The significance of these events will remain a matter of debate among institutional historians, but more significant than any of these occasions was the meeting convened by Alfonso VIII at San Esteban de Gormáz in May 1187 to discuss a treaty with Emperor Frederick and approve the marriage of his son Conrad and Alfonso's daughter, Berenguela, an assembly that has been compared by Estepa to the Leonese curia of July 1188.³⁶ The treaty was drafted and signed at Seligenstadt in Germany and dates to April 1188, three months before the wedding celebrated at the plenary curia of Carrión de los Condes, and it is ratified by three bishops, two *comites* (counts), fifteen nobles and officials and more than fifty Castilian cities grouped in three separate regions.³⁷ According to Martínez Díez, the treaty of 1188 is the only document that signals the presence of the cities at San Esteban de Gormáz, and it is perhaps indicative of the participation of urban representatives at earlier gatherings, particularly at Burgos in 1169.³⁸

The presence of citizens at twelfth-century assemblies seems incidental and not a constitutive aspect of the first parliamentary sessions. Their composition is nevertheless an important feature that requires analysis and provides some clues for understanding their institutional and political essence. These royal *curiae* were increasingly territorial and public occasions which assembled the community of the realm, the *universitas regni*, with the king and his court so to deliberate on

³¹González, *Regesta de Fernando II*, nos. 46, 315–21.

³²González, *Regesta de Fernando II*, 315, 320.

³³*Tercera Crónica General*, f.387v–388r; *CVR*, xiii.7, 273; Nieto, *Medievo constitucional*, 137.

³⁴Martínez Díez, "Curia y Cortes," 134, 136–7. See also Martínez Marina, *Ensayo*, 64; and *Teoría de las cortes*, 138–9.

³⁵A summary of these views is in Martínez Díez, "Curia y Cortes," 131–6. Salvá, *Historia de la Ciudad de Burgos*, 147–8; García Rámila, "Las Cortes de Castilla," 93.

³⁶Estepa Díez, "La Curia de León," 34.

³⁷González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 862, no. 499.

³⁸Martínez Díez, "Curia y Cortes," 142.

matters concerning the entire land. Most of the evidence regarding the attendance at gatherings in Castile from 1169 to 1188 is drawn from the royal diplomas, in the absence of letters or writs of summons, and contemporary chronicle descriptions.³⁹ The *Tercera Crónica General*, written in the thirteenth century, explains that in order to assemble the Castilian nobles in Burgos in 1169, Alfonso VIII “fizo pregonar sus cartas”: that is the king ordered his letters to be proclaimed or announced, this being one of the very rare and later, references to written convocations for royal assemblies.⁴⁰

There is more evidence for determining who was present at these meetings than for establishing the way in which they were called to attend, for those records were disposable once the assembly had commenced. However, the witness list of diplomatic records should not always be considered a definite statement of the attendance at these gatherings, but an indication of who was – or should have been – consulted concerning a particular royal grant. Although these lists are by no means identical, they seem to point to the group of nobles who were meant to provide counsel to the king and assent to his decisions. At the court assembled in Carrión de los Condes in August 1178, King Alfonso confirmed some possessions granted by his father Sancho III to the church of Husillos: as the diploma reports, “una cum uxore mea Alienor regina ... consilio et auctoritate comitum et principum regni mei” [as one with my wife Eleanor [and] with the counsel and the authority of the counts and princes of my kingdom].⁴¹ Alfonso and Eleanor married at Tarazona in September 1170, and the very same month the king confirmed the possessions of the church of Osma with his consort and the counsel of his barons and the nobles of the court. The queen’s name is incorporated as a template among royal donations thereafter, and she is also mentioned in diplomas granted at assemblies in Montealegre in September 1171, Belorado in 1176, Cuenca in 1177, Burgos in January and September 1178, Medina de Rioseco in 1182, Nájera in 1184, San Esteban in 1187 and Carrión de los Condes in 1178 and 1188; the princes, Fernando, Enrique and Berenguela, also feature in several diplomas witnessing royal concessions granted at assemblies. Apart from the royal family, some of Alfonso’s assemblies were attended by the king of Aragón: for example, Sahagún in 1170 and Montealegre in 1171, a condition of subordination from which Alfonso II was released after the cooperation lent by the Aragonese at the siege of Cuenca. Thereafter, the king of Aragón met Alfonso not at the courts of Castile, but at diplomatic conferences, perhaps with the exception of the Council of Burgos in 1177, attended not only by the Aragonese but also by the king of Navarre.⁴² All the kings of Christian Spain were present at the Castilian curia of Carrión de los Condes in July 1188 to witness the knighting of Conrad, the son of the Holy Roman Emperor, and his marriage to Princess Berenguela, as well as the knighting of Alfonso IX of León. Such a momentous occasion could not have been honoured by lesser guests, the significance of which was captured decades later by the *Chronica Latina Regum Castellae*. The anonymous prose reports that the king of Castile celebrated “a famous and noble curia at Carrión” [*curia famosa et nobili*], where the king of León was knighted and “kissed the hand of the Castilian king there being present the Galicians, Leonese and Castilians,” and in the same location and after two months was also knighted Conrad, the son of the Holy Roman Emperor, at the celebration of a magnificent curia [*magnifica curia*].⁴³

³⁹Falque Rey, *Historia Compostellana*, 269. This account also registers a reference to the 1119 summons for the Council of Reims. See also *Historia Compostellana* 2: 242 and *PMC*, 2: 1953–9, 125.

⁴⁰*Tercera Crónica General*, f.387v–388r. The *pregón* was an announcement or proclamation, occasionally registered in the epic of El Cid and often in relation to a royal act (see *PMC*, 3: 3272–4, 190).

⁴¹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 501, no. 305.

⁴²González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 139–40, 162, 290; *CVR*, 274; *PCG*, 678.

⁴³CLRC, 11: 43–4, 14: 47.

There is practically no diplomatic evidence to suggest that Juan, Cerebruno and Gonzalo – the archbishops of Toledo during the reign of Alfonso VIII – were ever absent from any of the important courts of the realm for they are invariably incorporated as witnesses to royal donations. All seven bishops of the kingdom of Castile were present at plenary courts at Atienza, Maqueda and Toledo in 1166, Burgos in 1169, 1170, 1177 and 1178, Zorita in 1169, Munó in 1173, and after the election of a bishop for Cuenca, eight prelates assembled at Carrión de los Condes in 1178. The courts at Segovia in 1161 and Belorado in 1175 were attended by no fewer than six bishops; seven gathered at San Esteban de Gormáz in 1187 and Carrión de los Condes in 1188.⁴⁴

If the witness lists contained in the diplomatic records are a reliable indication of the attendance at assemblies, then comital presence at courts and councils must have ranged on average between two to five magnates, while the body of barons would have normally been three times as large. According to the diplomatic records, the plenary court of Burgos must have assembled in November 1169 more than twenty nobles, among them seven Castilian counts, all of whom appeared to have gathered again three months later in the same location.⁴⁵ However, only two *comites* appeared in the witness lists of diplomas granted at the important courts of Medina de Rioseco, Nájera, San Esteban de Gormáz and Carrión de los Condes, none of which was attended by the entire episcopate of Castile and had an average presence of some thirteen barons and royal officials.⁴⁶ If these figures present a substantial contrast with the numbers gathered earlier at Burgos and are not typical of a territorial assembly, they nevertheless represent only those who acted as *testes* or witnesses and thus the least possible number of nobles present. Royal charters and diplomas discussed *consilio et deliberatione* or *assensu comitibus et principibus et baronibus* (with the counsel and deliberation or the assent of the counts, princes and barons) were granted at the Castilian courts assembled at Toledo 1162, Sahagún and Soria in 1170, Montealegre in 1171, Cuenca in 1177 and Carrión de los Condes in 1178.⁴⁷

In Castile, royal courts were often attended by the newly established body of *merinos*, the royal administrators of the fiscal and territorial units of the kingdom who supervised the *maiorinus* or *merinus regis*, who were present at most courts from the 1170s and informed the king on all regional matters.⁴⁸ Their presence was often complemented by the expertise lent by the *alcaldes* or governors, who were royal delegates, established in most Castilian settlements during the second half of the twelfth century, an administrative innovation which resembled the existing urban offices in the large Muslim cities of the south.⁴⁹ These are not to be confused with the *adelantados* (local governor or justice) nor the *cives electi* (urban representatives), for the *alcaldes* must have attended assemblies as royal officials and not as influential members of their communities. These urban officials were present at several assemblies in Castile from the 1160s, and most prominently at the courts of Toledo (1166) and Burgos (1178).⁵⁰

⁴⁴González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 53, 82–3, 117–18, 124–6, 133–6, 186, 229, 290, 295–7, 305–6, 499, 505–6; Martín-Cleto, *Los Anales Toledanos*, 157.

⁴⁵González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 124–6.

⁴⁶González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 229, 396–8, 428–31, 467–71, 499, 505–6.

⁴⁷González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 98, 238, 253–4, 276, 453, 501; Abajo Martín, *Documentación de la Catedral de Palencia*, nos. 62, 65; Fernández Flores, *Colección Diplomática*, no. 1346; González, *Regesta de Fernando II*, 395.

⁴⁸Reilly, *Medieval Spains*, 149.

⁴⁹The word *alchaid* is clearly of Arabic origin. The term *alcalde* was also applied to the jailer of the castle (see Barton, *Aristocracy*, 332).

⁵⁰See González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 154–6, nos. 89–90: Orti Ortiz, *alchaid in Toledo* confirms a royal diploma in 1166. Four *alcaldes* sign a document at Burgos in 1178: see González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 488, no. 297. An insightful survey of the changing attitudes to law and administration during the reign of Alfonso VIII is provided in García de Cortazar, “Cultura en el reinado de Alfonso VIII,” 182–4.

The unprecedented political, military and financial importance acquired by some Castilian cities on the frontier of al-Andalus, throughout the twelfth century, had turned the municipalities into power cells that often competed with the central administration, the office of the *alcaldes* thus becoming a vital proxy of royal presence in the cities. Accordingly, the presence of the *alcaldes* at assemblies not only kept the monarchs informed of local affairs but must have also kept the municipalities and the “urban patriciate” aligned with the central government.⁵¹ In sum, as the royal court became more sedentary, the presence of loyal servants of the monarch in the localities might have supplied the regional information at assemblies and ordinary sessions of the king’s court, as well as keeping local bodies subsidiary to the central administration, all of which had been inefficiently fulfilled by an itinerant *curia regis*. The presence of the royal court at assemblies was thus a fundamental aspect of these plenary courts and its role was summarised in some diplomas in the ending clause *tota curie regis presente, corroborante et testificante* (with the entire royal court present, confirming and witnessing).⁵²

Along with their composition, the function and business of these meetings also testify to their institutional nature as plenary territorial sessions of political discussion and deliberation. Gavin Langmuir is right to remind us that “one of the most obvious yet least examined characteristics of royal assemblies [was] that they were, for contemporaries, primarily occasions on which counsel was given and taken.”⁵³ Twelfth-century rulers expected *auxilium et consilium* (aid and counsel) from their vassals, and although Angus McKay has argued that the Castilian kingdom “was not specifically based on feudal relationships of a vassalitical-contractual nature, but on the general relationships between the king and his subjects,” the king was just as well expected to consult their powerful subjects on matters of importance.⁵⁴ The canonical maxims “quidquid principi placuit legis habet vigorem” [whatever pleases the prince has the strength of law], and “quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur” [whatever touches all should be decided by all] have often been seen as contrasting ideas of medieval kingship and cooperative governance. Although neither of these principles of Roman law is likely to have been in Alfonso’s mind when summoning assemblies, Langmuir has rightly warned that “there is no doubt that consultations were a valuable political device for the monarchy; what is too often forgotten is that they were also the fulfillment of an ancient royal obligation which the magnates were interested in preserving.”⁵⁵ Indeed, “successful medieval kings acted on the general assumption that to take counsel was a source of strength and not of weakness.”⁵⁶ Thus kings were expected to consult the powerful subjects of the land concerning general business but they were not necessarily bound to follow the advice received from the nobles. At this point, Kantorowicz’s words in reference to the doctrine of Henry de Bracton may be relevant: “even the fact that legislation itself was to emanate from the council of magnates, at their advice and counsel, should again not be interpreted exclusively in the sense of royal restriction, since it was after all ‘by the authorisation

⁵¹O’Callaghan, *Cortes*, 11.

⁵²González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 151, no. 88. This was a royal concession to the bishop of Palencia, granted at Toledo in 1166. Recuero affirms that the royal court was still itinerant during the reign of Alfonso VII (*Alfonso VII*, 33).

⁵³Langmuir, “Counsel and Capetian Assemblies,” 21.

⁵⁴Mackay, *Spain in the Middle Ages*, 98.

⁵⁵Langmuir, “Counsel and Capetian Assemblies,” 25. See also Marongiu, *Medieval Parliaments*, 32; Kagay, *Usatges of Barcelona*, nos. 65 and 80; Ulpianus, *Digestum in Pandectae Justinianae in novum ordinem Digestae*, I, 1:1 and 4:1; González Antón, *Las Cortes de Aragón*, 23; Berki, *History of Political Thought*, 108–9 and Tierney, “Freedom and the Medieval Church,” 77; Post, “Romano-Canonical Maxim;” “Roman Law;” Linehan, *History and Historians*, 306.

⁵⁶Butt, *History of Parliament*, 28.

of the king' (*rege auctoritatem praestante*) that a law became Law."⁵⁷ In any case, it is unlikely that kings were ever faced by such pristine and distinctive options of government.

It is not unlikely that the terms equivalent to "counsel," "assent," and "consent" were used in twelfth-century records to describe the same process of approval. Towards the end of the year 1169, Alfonso granted the monastery of San Zoilo a market in the village of Carrión de los Condes "consilio prelatorum sancta ecclesie et principum regni nostri,"⁵⁸ that is, with the counsel of the prelates of the holy church and the princes of our kingdom. This royal grant as well as other contemporary donations resulted not from the private counsel of the king's entourage or court, but from the general consultation and discussion at the curia of Burgos.⁵⁹ In August 1178, a group of eight bishops and eighteen nobles and officials assented to a royal confirmation to the church of Santa María de Husillos at the meeting of a plenary court at Carrión, "consilio et auctoritate comitum et principum regni mei," [with the counsel and authority of the counts and princes of my kingdom]⁶⁰ and two weeks later, another important curia assembled in Burgos, possibly to discuss a treaty with Aragón and to concede, among other royal donations, a royal diploma to the monastery of San Juan "consilio pariter et uoluntate principum." [with the counsel as well as by the princes' will]⁶¹ Like other European rulers, Alfonso VIII might have conceived a general gathering of the realm as a useful institutional instrument for dealing with the new set of political circumstances that affected royal policies requiring general counsel and assent. As Thomas Bisson has argued in reference to the general court of Agenais, these assemblies treated "issues no lord-prince could retain in his arbitrary discretion after about 1175."⁶² At the plenary curia of San Esteban de Gormáz, the king and the bishop of Calahorra granted *fueros* or special privileges to the village of Santo Domingo de la Calzada "cum consensu tocius capituli ecclesie Sancti Dominici de Calzada et cum consilio et assensu tocius capituli Calagurritane ecclesie" [with the consent of the entire chapter of the church of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, and with the counsel and assent of the entire chapter of the church of Calahorra].⁶³ Letters of communal consent and delegates voicing collective petitions were factors essential to the transformation of royal assemblies in this period, and for the development of procuratorial powers thereafter.⁶⁴

If the primary function of these gatherings was to widen the basis of royal consultation, the business that was entertained at these discussions concerned a variety of matters, all of which pertained to the stability of the kingdom. The chronicles of the thirteenth century and the diplomas of Alfonso VIII provide some information on the issues that were probably considered by the king and his assembled nobles, although it is not always possible to determine what was actually addressed during the sessions beyond the routine concession and confirmation of property and privileges. Much mystery has surrounded, for example, the meeting of a royal court at Nájera towards the end of 1184, which is said to have promulgated what is traditionally known as the Ordinance of Nájera. Possibly an apocryphal text of the thirteenth century, this territorial decree prohibited *realengo* (royal lands) from becoming *abadengo* (lands of an abbot).⁶⁵ Just

⁵⁷Kantorowicz, *King's Two Bodies*, 154–5. See also Álvarez Borge, *La Plena Edad Media*, 267.

⁵⁸González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 211–13.

⁵⁹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 211–13 and nos. 124–6.

⁶⁰González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 501.

⁶¹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 503.

⁶²Bisson, "General Court," 29; Marongiu, *Medieval Parliaments*, 55.

⁶³González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 802–4, no. 469. For consent/assent of Spanish cathedral and church chapters, see Martín López, *Patrimonio Cultural*, nos. 87, 117, 132, 167.

⁶⁴Post, "Romano-Canonical Maxim," 211; O'Callaghan, *Cortes*, 15; Tunmore, "Dominicans and Representation;" Marongiu, *Medieval Parliaments*, 41; Tierney, "Freedom and the Medieval Church," 66, 88; Post, "Roman Law," 214–17.

⁶⁵Martínez, *Alfonso VIII*, 280.

as zealous as most European rulers about the royal forests, the Castilian king had earlier demanded the return of *realengo* from the hands of some Castilian nobles at the plenary curia of Burgos in November 1169.⁶⁶ However, it has been difficult for historians to establish not only the veracity of the Ordinance of Nájera, but also its association with the meeting of a plenary court. According to a document published by Julio González, Alfonso met with his nobles at Nájera in 1184 or early 1185, “in anno illo in quo rex Aldefonsus in Nazarensi urbe curiam suam congregavit” [that year in which King Alfonso congregated his court at the city of Nájera].⁶⁷ According to Martínez, this was not a period of legislative innovation in Castile; rather, this was typical of the *fueros* or special privileges conceded to particular communities.⁶⁸ At the curia of San Esteban de Gormáz in May 1187, royal *fueros* were granted to the monastery of Santo Domingo de la Calzada and the city of Haro.⁶⁹ In the context of a royal strategy of reconquest and repopulation, these *fueros* may be associated with policies that assisted the centralisation of governance and the development of territorial assemblies. These concessions were also accompanied by other measures that facilitated the king’s control over the newly incorporated territories and assisted in the local administration of peripheral settlements.⁷⁰

Although some important judicial disputes were resolved at the courts of Burgos (1177), Medina de Rioseco (1182), Calahorra (1184) and Buitrago (1186),⁷¹ royal assemblies were not only concerned with judicial and legislative matters, but were also an instance for the discussion of fiscal issues. For Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, the origins of the *cortes* could only be understood by considering the king’s financial measures to obtain more revenue from his subjects, for it was common for rulers in the twelfth century to exploit their customary rights of taxation and financial prerogatives to the fullest.⁷² In Castile, an incident was registered in which some three thousand *hidalgos* or petty nobles refused to pay the *petitum* and abandoned a royal assembly gathered in Burgos in 1177.⁷³ Evelyn Procter indicated that this is probably the first Castilian reference for a tax which appears to have become a regular tariff by the end of the twelfth century, and while this might be accurate, the *Tercera Crónica General de España* makes reference to an agreement among the magnates to pay a tribute identified as *pecho* at the curia of Burgos (1169).⁷⁴

⁶⁶González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 211–16, nos. 124–6; *CVR*, 273.

⁶⁷González, “Sobre la fecha.” See also Biblioteca Nacional, MS 431: *Libro que feso el muy noble rey don Alfonso en las Cortes de Nájera de los Fueros de Castiella* cited by Galo Sánchez, “Para la historia,” 290. The Ordinance of Nájera is also published in García Gallo, “Textos de derecho territorial castellano.” Cf. Sánchez-Albornoz, “Dudas sobre el Ordenamiento;” and “Menos dudas,” 465–7; Altissent, “Otra referencia.”

⁶⁸Martínez, *Alfonso VIII*, 280–1. Some of the legal reforms introduced during the reign of Alfonso VIII are also explored in García de Cortazar, “Cultura en el reinado de Alfonso,” especially 182–4.

⁶⁹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 8008, nos. 467–71.

⁷⁰O’Callaghan, *Cortes*, 9. See also Bisson, “Prelude to Power,” 24; García de Valdeavellano, *Curso de Historia*, 458; Gautier-Dalché, *Historia Urbana*, 460; Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 421–2; and Mackay, *Spain in the Middle Ages*, 97.

⁷¹The curia of Burgos resolved the differences between the monasteries of La Vid and Gumiel, while the court at Medina de Rioseco involved the litigation of a noble by the name of Pedro Gutiérrez. At Calahorra, the city councils of Madrid and Villagonzalo reached a settlement, while at Buitrago the settlement was between Sepúlveda and the Monastery of Sacramenia (González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 290, 396–8, 429, 461; *CVR*, 13: 274; *PCG*, 678).

⁷²García de Valdeavellano, *Curso de Historia*, 470; Sánchez-Albornoz, *Estudios sobre las instituciones*, 471–7, 817–18.

⁷³See González, *Alfonso VIII*, 1: 42–4, 2: no. 290.

⁷⁴Procter, *Curia and Cortes*, 82; *Tercera Crónica General*, f.387v–388r: “Cuenta la estoria . . . e desdeque ouo morado en Toledo quanto se pago e ouo y librado sus cosas, fizo pregonar sus cartas para Burgos e salio de Toledo e fuese para alla andando por la tierra cobrando aun lo que non auie cobrado e desi llego a Burgos:

Plenary courts were also concerned with diplomatic and military decisions. The minority of Alfonso VIII ended with a plenary court at Burgos in November 1169, an occasion when the matter of the king's marriage was probably resolved; and the knighting and homage of Alfonso IX of León at the curia of Carrión de los Condes in 1188 is a neat illustration of the new political order in Spain. In addition, the assembly at Carrión had not only witnessed the subordination of the new king of León but also the knighting of Conrad, the son of the Holy Roman Emperor and Alfonso's future son-in-law. The diplomatic importance of the curia of Carrión is manifested in the chancery records which solemnly proclaimed that "the illustrious king of Castile and Toledo knighted the son of the emperor of the Romans, named Conrad, and gave him her daughter, Berenguela, as wife," the very same year "in which the aforementioned Alfonso, the most serene king of Castile, knighted Alfonso, the Leonese king, at his curia in Carrión."⁷⁵

These two assemblies are associated with glorious moments in Alfonso's long reign, but the delicate balance of power in Spain made its rulers dependent on tactful diplomacy. In June 1170, a treaty was agreed between Alfonso VIII of Castile and Alfonso II of Aragón at Sahagún with the counsel of their nobles. The terms of Castile were possibly discussed at the curia of Burgos two months earlier, or at Sahagún, just days before the *colloquium*. Territorial disputes led to a military conflict between Castile and Navarre, an issue that was probably discussed and organised by Alfonso VIII and his nobles the same year at the curia of Belorado in 1175. An embassy was sent to England requesting an arbitration after a conference between Sancho VI and Alfonso VIII at Nájera-Logroño in August 1176, "pro iudicio regis Anglie" [held to discuss the judgment of the king of England].⁷⁶ Shortly after, a treaty strengthening the friendship between Alfonso II and Alfonso VIII was reached "communi consilio et consensu principum et baronum nostrorum," [with the common counsel and consent of our princes and barons]⁷⁷ releasing the king of Aragón from his homage to Castile. Another alliance was accorded between them at a conference celebrated at Cazola in 1179, which assembled to organise the conquest of the Moorish Levante, and to establish a confederation against Navarre.⁷⁸ The Castilian and Aragonese terms of the agreement were probably conceived at the royal courts of Burgos and Tortosa respectively, towards the end of 1178, and greatly alarmed the king of Navarre who, facing the imminent threat of a collective offensive, desperately attempted to appease Alfonso VIII with a treaty that was concluded at a conference near Logroño in April 1179, barely a month after the confederation of Castile and Aragón.⁷⁹ A common enemy prompted a further alliance between these monarchs in 1186, against Pedro Ruiz de Azagra, lord of Albarracín, while the king of Aragón was fighting Count Raymond of Toulouse for the lordship of Carcassonne.⁸⁰ Such a pact could have been considered at a Castilian court assembled at Calahorra early in 1186, but there is no evidence to confirm this. Similarly, the discussions at the courts of Astorga and Medina de

e los condes e los ricos omes e los perlados e los caualleros e los çibdadanos e muchas gentes de otras tierras fueron y. La corte fue y muy grande ayuntada: e muchas cosas fueron acordadas e ordenadas e estableçidas e los ricos omes que tierra tienen del rey entregarongela luego: e sobre todo acordaron el pecho del rey don Fernando de León e el corrimiento que contra el rey don Alfonso su señor fizo en su criança e dele dar ende la revidada." In the edition of the *Crónica de Veinte Reyes*, the verb *pechar* is defined as the payment of tributes (CVR, 358). This is not to suggest, however, that the *pecho* was, in fact, an equivalent thirteenth-century designation of the *petitum*.

⁷⁵González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 868–73, nos. 505–6. See also PCG, 677, 683, CLRC, 11: 43–4, 14: 47; DRH, 7; CVR, 273, 277; Martín-Cleto, *Los Anales Toledanos*, 157.

⁷⁶González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 440.

⁷⁷González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 473, no. 288.

⁷⁸González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 528–30, no. 319.

⁷⁹González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: 533, no. 320.

⁸⁰Caruana, "Itinerario de Alfonso II," 155.

Rioseco in 1182 are likely to have included the forthcoming peace treaty between León and Castile, signed at a *colloquium* in Paradinas early in 1183.⁸¹ Alfonso VIII's betrothal of his daughter to Conrad of Germany at the curia of San Esteban de Gormáz, secured Castile the vital friendship of the Holy Roman Emperor: an alliance that was made in a treaty drafted in April 1188, but made official and publicised three months later at the following plenary court in Carrión de los Condes.⁸² The business treated at twelfth-century assemblies may thus be summarised as relating to the state and stability of the kingdom [*statu et stabilitate regni*], and included matters relating to internal politics, war and diplomacy, finance and taxation, legislation and justice, and anything that touched the welfare of the king and his family, all of which was of general concern and was therefore considered at large gatherings that assembled the political community of the realm.

The sources also allow an analysis of other institutional patterns such as the location and frequency of these meetings, aspects that have generally escaped the attention of the constitutional historiography, which has privileged the questions of attendance and consultation. The separation of the kingdoms of Castile and León prompted the definitive rise of Burgos as a major political centre in Spain and invigorated its credentials as the *civitas regia* [royal city] and *caput Castelle* [head of Castile], worthy of hosting some of the most important assemblies during the reign of Alfonso VIII.⁸³ From 1158 to 1214, no other Castilian town witnessed as many courts as Burgos, although meetings of great political relevance were also held at Medina de Rioseco, San Esteban de Gormáz and Carrión de los Condes. If any geographical pattern may be identified besides the importance of Burgos, then the concentration of meetings in northern and central Castile can be proposed as an identifiable feature. Four royal courts and one legatine council had assembled in Palencia during the reign of Alfonso VIII's grandfather, but there are no important meetings in the episcopal towns of Palencia, Osma and Soria, all three very important urban centres located at relatively short distances from the royal capital, and Valladolid, which in the thirteenth century becomes one of the recurrent locations for the *cortes*, and perhaps the most important Castilian town in the late medieval period. This pattern is all the more surprising given the increasing municipal importance of frontier cities and episcopal sees like Ávila and Segovia, which hosted not a single general meeting of the royal curia in the twelfth century.⁸⁴

Less information can be obtained regarding the space employed for these meetings, and if the magnificent curia of Burgos in 1169 might have lent itself to such detailed description, no contemporary account is available. The Cistercian monastery and royal pantheon at Las Huelgas was not built until the 1180s, and the last general curia to take place in Burgos was that of 1178, but the study of urban development carried out by Gonzalo Martínez Díez reveals the existence of a royal palace and residence in the city.⁸⁵ Similarly important was the Castilian monastery of San Zoilo, said by the *Chronica Latina Regum Castellae* to have hosted one of the most important courts in July 1188.⁸⁶ San Zoilo was once one of the most powerful monasteries in Castile after the Benedictine houses at Sahagún and Santo Domingo de Silos. No royal court met in Silos, as far as the evidence reveals, but some three or four assemblies gathered in Sahagún throughout the twelfth century.

⁸¹González, *Regesta de Fernando II*, 315–20, no. 46.

⁸²González, *Alfonso VIII*, nos. 471, 499.

⁸³On the status of Burgos as royal city in this period see Suárez Fernández et al., *Historia de Burgos*, 1: 114, 137–9; Estepa Díez et al., *Burgos en la Edad Media*; Linehan, *History and Historians*, 289–90.

⁸⁴González, *Alfonso VIII*, no. 53. On the municipal importance of frontier cities see Pérez Ruiz, *Concejos y Ciudades*. Among many other references on the subject see also O'Callaghan, *Cortes*, 11–15; Gautier-Dalché, *Historia Urbana*, 462–5.

⁸⁵Suárez Fernández et al., *Historia de Burgos*, 1: 138; González, *Alfonso VIII*, 2: no. 306.

⁸⁶CLRC, 11: 36–7.

Considerations regarding the frequency of meetings are undoubtedly more revealing than the incidental aspects related to their location and space, because they manifest a political phenomenon by which these assemblies become frequent occasions for deliberation and a useful instrument of royal governance. The hostilities with Navarre and the campaigns of the reconquest seem to have kept Alfonso occupied for much of the years 1172–73, 1176–77, and 1180–89, but from 1169 to 1188, the king summoned his nobles once a year on average. Further research may explain the scarcity of great assemblies from the meeting at Carrión de los Condes in 1188 and Alfonso's death in 1214. Although the meeting of plenary courts was not periodical, nor was the rhythm of the *cortes* of the thirteenth century. And if some conclusions may be drawn from the extant records of witness lists and chronicle registers for meetings, it appears that there were more assemblies in Castile during these two decades than during the reigns of Urraca and Alfonso VII combined, thus enjoying some degree of regularity.⁸⁷ How much stronger would this comparison be, had chronicles been written during or survived for the reign of Alfonso VIII? In any case, such unprecedented frequency, which can also be observed in other parts of Europe in the second half of the twelfth century, modified the dynamics of institutional change and the political relationship of the monarchy and the nobility, thus establishing the foundations of a parliamentary phenomenon distinct from the constitutional landmarks identified by more anachronistic approaches. As the curia of Burgos celebrated the end of the king's minority and the meeting at Carrión de los Condes signalled the consolidation of the kingdom in the peninsula, Alfonso's assemblies seem important milestones in the political history of medieval Castile. As we approach the eighth centenary of Alfonso's death, the commemorative clauses of his diplomas invite more historical attention for these important, yet understudied, royal gatherings.

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⁸⁷Cerda, "Parliamentary Calendar;" Martínez Díez, *Alfonso VIII*.

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