

Szpiech Ep 2 2023

Tue, Sep 12, 2023 2:49PM 41:10

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

medieval, alfonso, middle ages, language, arabic, seville, wrote, spain, world, story, history, translated, spanish, project, castilian, toledo, monuments, talk, started, book

SPEAKERS

Ben Pykare, Will Beattie, Dr. Ryan Szpiech



Will Beattie 00:06

I'm Will Beattie.



Ben Pykare 00:07

And I'm Ben Pykare.



Will Beattie 00:09

And we're two graduate students of the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.



Ben Pykare 00:13

We're here to chat with students and scholars of the medieval world about what they do and how they came to do it.



Will Beattie 00:20

Today, we're continuing our conversation with Dr. Ryan Szpiech, associate professor of Spanish, and director of the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan.



Ben Pykare 00:31

Let's join him once again in the Middle Ages. It's funny thinking about medieval Spain, Will and I talk sometimes, because we'll have to educate me about medieval England, of which I'm so ignorant

ignorance.



Will Beattie 00:46

And vice versa, I should add.



B Ben Pykare 00:48

Oh, yeah, it's sad.



D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 00:49

Sure. Yeah. I feel like if I think back to when I was starting out in grad school, I knew that I wanted to do the past. And I knew I wanted to do the medieval past because of its interest, or its potential interest it held in talking about premodern conceptions of the material, right? Premodern ideas of how the human is integrated or not into the wider Cosmos. I'm fascinated by materialism, or the problem of, increasingly, humanism in a scientific context. And, again, it's always about the same question for me: how you define the human in the context of the material. And for me, the Middle Ages is like a really exciting place to ask that question, because you have a world in which spiritually, or cosmically, people are not riven. They're not, sort of, separated from a sense of being integrated into a meaningful cosmos. Right, they haven't experienced this turn, the scientific shift that really makes people more increasingly alien in the physical universe, or even reduces and sucks the spiritual lifeblood out of the universe in which, you know... now where do we live in a certain secular space that is quite mechanical, right? And, and the things that we see as contingent or meaningful in any sort of human way, are increasingly between people or within people. Human symbols, human art, or human relationships. And it's increasingly hard to look out into the depths of space and look at stars and feel comforted, as if you're in an integrated web of meaning.



Will Beattie 00:49


The Mediterranean



B Ben Pykare 00:49

Because we talked about, like, medieval England and how, like, after the expulsion of the Jewish people that were there, and it being so far from, for example... for a lot of these English texts, when they're writing about Muslims, it's all cultural imagination. There's no point of contact, right? Whereas a place like Spain, it's, it's back and forth, very real history with people fighting, living, worshipping alongside each other. And I'm curious, right, as much ink has been spilled, right, on the uniqueness of medieval Spain, right, and Al Andalus, and all these different conceptions. How have you, kind of, navigated the subfield that is like, the study of medieval Spain? And that exciting world of scholars and interests? Yeah.




 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 03:42

That fascinates me.

 Ben Pykare 03:43


We don't see angels, we see gas.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 03:46


That's right. You know, this is...

 Ben Pykare 03:47


The deenchantment of the world.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 03:49

So I was drawn to that other view, which I thought, I mean, obviously, not all medieval people thought this, but I realized, like, on the whole, this is a time in which people hadn't had to face this problem as much.

 Will Beattie 04:01

Right.


 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 04:03


And I wanted to know more about that. And that's how I decided to start studying the Middle Ages, because it was a time in which it was very modern, in many ways. I mean, so many of our modern institutions, so many things that we consider to be modern or present, you know, real human institutions start there or have recognizable origins there. But at the same time, they're totally different. So I love that, that they're both familiar and foreign, you know, at the same time. It's not the classical world. It's definitely not the, you know, deep ancient world. It's something else. And I think the cusp of this is why I'm drawn to it because it's a problem space.


 Will Beattie 04:45


That's a really interesting point. Yeah, because of course, the very institution that we're all working within is fundamentally a medieval construction. But... and so in a sense, we are participating in something which is kind of a medieval tradition in a way, right? But as you say,


it's also a world which is very far removed from us. And we can still look back at it as historians or literary scholars or theologians or whatever, and observe those differences. I suppose, in a way we're in this strange in-between space with work we do as well.


 **Ben Pykare** 05:18
Yeah.

 **Will Beattie** 05:19
Which is a strange thought I just hadn't really thought of it in that way. But...

 **Dr. Ryan Szpiech** 05:23
Yea very much in the academy, too, we exist almost as proxies for this reality. We're both, I think, seeking a certain kind of mastery of the past or an understanding of time. And at the same time, we appreciate something outside of what the normal historian does with social history. The normal modernist, say, someone who's post medieval, in the sense of, there's a lot that we understand we can't get at. And yet, I think for a medievalist "if I can speak for all of us" we like that, right? We are drawn to this conundrum of feeling both close and far from what we're doing. Feeling like we're on top of it, and at the same time the Middle Ages are a vast sea that will never master. It's not one thing at all. It's many things, it's many centuries. So I think that paradox is something at least that, that draws me.

 **Will Beattie** 06:22
I'm curious then about... given, as you say, the medieval world, the Middle Ages is this vast thing that we can never fully understand. In, I suppose in the last few years, there's been an attempt to kind of push the boundary a little bit of what we think of as the medieval world to include more of the world, right? Sort of further eastern Asia and also the Americas and really just trying to get as much of the world in and look at things as more of a cohesive kind of network, I suppose. I'm just curious about what your thoughts are on that.

 **Ben Pykare** 06:57
And being the head of a director that includes right like North Africa, yeah. As well as you know, Western Europe like...

 **Dr. Ryan Szpiech** 07:04
Yeah, I am, on the one hand, entirely, in favor and on board with this initiative to think about medieval history in the global Middle Ages to think about medieval history in the context of a broader sense, a set of systems. At the same time, obviously, it's a problem that we're still using these very reductive periodizations to talk about this global history. The idea of "the

medieval" is, of course, itself reductive in many ways and inappropriate to talk about global trends. "Medieval India" is a conundrum, right? It's a contradiction in terms. "Medieval Japan"? We use these terms, because we we want to locate ourselves in a chronology. But to call them "medieval" is entirely, you know, a Eurocentric...



Will Beattie 07:58

Right



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 07:58

...starting point. So what can we do? I don't know if we can get out of this. We can, it's a lot of hand wringing, that we can feel bad about the fact that these things don't work well. But if we know what we're doing and what's wrong with the terminology, then I think it's okay. As long as we're clear that "the global Middle Ages" is already problematic, right? It's taking a European concept and broadening it out and applying it in which it's not really... why call them the Middle Ages in these global contexts? But okay, so you know, register that and then move on to say, "well, what's happening in this time period that we're calling "medieval" or, it's like "The Artist Formerly Known as Prince," "The Period We've Formerly Accepted as the Middle Ages." What are we calling it? I think that's great. Because really what we need to be thinking about is, is the integration of European systems and broader systems, or lack of integration too. That's important to think... I love thinking about parallel histories and simultaneity. And so I often do these thought experiments with my students to say, "you know, what else is going on on the planet, when Alfonso the 10th is ruling"? Right? And it's great because you think these things are pretty unconnected, and they don't know about each other. But, you know... I think New Zealand is first, or it's either New Zealand or New Caledonia. I can't remember which, but I want to say New Zealand is first, sort of, colonized in 1250, or something like this. Or, you know, Hawaii.




Ben Pykare 08:41


Yes. Yeah.





Dr. Ryan Szpiech 09:34


When the human humans arrived, homosapiens arrived in Hawaii? As far as we can tell, at the same time as Columbus is making his voyage, right? Only a few hundred years before Cook. So things like that are really interesting to me to think about human spread and migration and then to put the Middle Ages and political history and social history in that context, because there's so many ways to think about human history writ large. So I was joking before I came here. I told my wife that I was going to do this podcast and she said, "so you should be sure to mention, you know, the fact that you have a grievance that you are not Yuval Harari!" He is a medievalist who writes on military, medieval military history, but one day decides to write a super global bestseller about the history of, you know, humans.


 Ben Pykare 10:30
Yeah.


 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 10:31
She's like, "what's wrong with you? Why can't you you know, man up and do something like that as well?" So I thought, "okay, I'm gonna definitely put this on the record. Like, I have pretensions or ambitions one day to write a Yuval... Yuval Noah Harari-type super book. I just have to think of a good idea.


 Ben Pykare 10:48
Yeah! That's incredibly exciting.

 Will Beattie 10:52
Yeah, we'll hold you to that. Yeah. Well, we'll keep an eye on the shelves in ten years time

 Ben Pykare 10:55
Check back in.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 10:55
The promise starts today.

 Ben Pykare 10:56
Yeah, well, for this book, which compared to that has a much more focussed scope, you kind of mentioned that this has been a project that you've picked up, put down... Again, trying to demystify some of, like, how does a book become a book? At the simplest level, like, where was the kind of germination of the idea? And what work did you start to do as you've been moving toward this, this project on Castile?

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 11:28
So it's funny the... this project could really go all the way back to 2002. Which is kind of embarrassing to think that I'm still fiddling with it, because I had the first moment of thinking about this as a graduate student. My advisor, MarÃa Rosa Menocal was invited to give a talk at a concert given by the Boston Camerata in Connecticut. And they wanted to perform some of the cantigas of Santa Maria, these things I talked about last night. And she was busy and said, "I have a grad student who might want to do it." So she passed it off to me. And for me this was

a big deal. I hadn't really given talks before like that. Barely given a conference paper. And this was going to be a venue. Concert goers wanted to hear about this and I was on a panel of a couple other people who wanted to talk about the cantigas. So I really put my heart and soul into this to write what I thought would be something exciting. And to write it well in her mode, right? In a way that's like public scholarship, that's appealing, that really reaches outside of academic jargon and tries to spin or pitch this concept to the public. And that's what I wrote about. I wrote about the cantigas. And that's when I first discovered this one particular story about Fernando, I didn't really know all that it implied.

B Ben Pykare 11:35

Oh, wow.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 12:53

So what I talked about last night is really stuff that I've come to reading and rereading it thinking, "oh, my God, this is a really amazing story, because he's representing something that he actually did." That, for me is fascinating in itself, a multilingual tomb. But here, he's actually representing it in song and picture. So it's like this ekphrasis is so compelling to me. But at the time, I just spoke about it in kind of broad terms, you know, the influence of Arabic culture, or Islam on Castille, all of the great things that Alfonso did... So I was, you know, speaking in pretty reduced or simple terms, but that's when it started. I didn't do that for my dissertation at all. I got obsessed with some other thing because it was challenging, which was Abner Burgos, which I'll be talking about later today. And I realize now as I'm telling you all these, this sort of genesis story, that's why I worked on Abner as well: because it's so damn hard.

B Ben Pykare 13:55

Yeah,

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 13:55

That I took it to be a challenge. It's just so big and difficult that I'm like, I want to master this. This is something that's really big.

B Ben Pykare 14:04

Yeah.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 14:05

So that's why I keep working on him because he's just, you know, the gift that keeps on giving. It's an endless sea of possibilities. And I keep finding things in that text. And also, because it was obscure, few people had worked on it, and yet it was incredibly huge and difficult. So that's

what I did for my dissertation. But then... and what I did for my first book, when I was on the tenure track, I wrote a book that started with him and his use of conversion narratives. One of the many things that's interesting about Abner Borgos, this convert from Castille in the 14th century is that he narrates his conversion in rather specific terms elaborately, and he has a dream. Right? So here I'm like, bringing in all of my, all my strands. He falls asleep in the synagogue praying and has a dream and then doesn't tell anybody about it for twenty years. This is how he tells the story.

B Ben Pykare 15:00

Yeah.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 15:00

Right? So how can we historicize this, this is just his story that he had a dream, and that it caused him to act twenty years later. I love this. But that first book on conversion narratives was really a book... you know, it was my tenure book, and it had to be a book that... it had to be done. It was full steam ahead. I had to do it in a certain amount of time, as best I could. But, or as well as I could. But I didn't get the chance to, sort of, pursue all of the strands that I would want to. And then, you know, I got tenure and started as an associate [professor], and immediately went back to Alfonso because that's where I was really thinking about language a lot. And I started working on this. I wrote an article on this, a chapter on this same subject, really: Alfonso, his relationship with his father. And I had a friend in grad school who wrote his dissertation on Alfonso. And so I had already been talking to him a lot about his work. He ended up becoming a union organizer and not pursuing his career in academia. But he always encouraged me and said, you know, "Alfonso's super cool."

B Ben Pykare 16:10

Yeah.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:10

"You have to do more on Alfonso." So I also at the time in grad school had a radio show, on Public Radio, of medieval music.

B Ben Pykare 16:20

Very cool.

D Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:21

Called, yea it was called "Nova Cantica." All medieval, all the time.



Will Beattie 16:28

That's great.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:28

And it was on Sunday nights from midnight to 2am.



Will Beattie 16:32

Primetime audience.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:33

Yeah, I had a lot of a lot of followers and I played recordings, you know, modern recordings of medieval music. And there happened to be a lot of recordings of Alfonso's cantigas. They're very performable. There are 420 some of them. They have notes...



Ben Pykare 16:49

Sorry to interrupt. Can you just tell our audience about Alfonso and his productions? Like...



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:55

Sure, yeah.



Ben Pykare 16:56


What a what a person.




Dr. Ryan Szpiech 16:57


He's a cool guy, for sure. He is... he is a Castilian king in the 13th century, who is the son of the conqueror of the city of Seville, who is St. Ferdinand (known as Ferdinand the Third, or Fernando Tercero). In the middle of the 13th century, this is the culmination of the Christian push to conquer cities in the south of the peninsula in Spain, in Castile. So the central area, the central kingdom of the peninsula. These lands had always been Muslim since the eighth century. And so in the 13th century there was a turn, starting in 1212 [AD] Christians had a great victory at Las Navas de Tolosa. And there was a real push to acquire new lands, and drive south. And Fernando the Third really was the hero of this military campaign. He took Cordoba, Jaén, Seville, and other lands in between in a matter of, you know, just a few decades. So he was a military hero and took the city of Seville. He died four years after that. So Alfonso


became king relatively quickly after the conquest of the city from the Almohads. And Seville was really the most elaborate splendid opulent Muslim city at the time. It was large. It was wealthy. And so it was the true jewel. And really, it was one of the largest cities or civilizations in Spain, in Iberia, until the 16th century. You know, [at this time] Madrid is not on the map at all. Barcelona is big. Valencia is big. But they're not anything compared to the importance of Seville. Yet. And Seville becomes super important even in the 16th century for other reasons. So Alfonso becomes king shortly after his father took all of this land. He's a young king with a lot of wealth and, and he has connections to the Holy Roman Empire through his mother. His mother, Beatrice of Swabia, was descended from sovereigns that would allow Alfonso to try to claim that title, which he did do. He tried to and was actually elected Holy Roman Emperor, but never quite confirmed. So he lost out on his ambition. But in the 13th century, he took over and ruled from 1252 to 1284. And I like to understand his rule in the context of his father's campaign to conquer land. His father had just conquered all of this important land, and there really wasn't a lot for Alfonso to do militarily. There were little things. There was North Africa. There was... there was Grenada, but that was not on the table because they were essentially a tribute state in the mountains. So Alfonso looked for other ways to distinguish himself and he was obsessed with the culture of the lands that his father had conquered, and saw it not just as a source of a challenge, say, or as a source of opposition, but as a source of wealth and prestige. He really recognized the importance of the Islamic civilizations that were in southern Iberia and also in North Africa. He knew the importance of these texts in Arabic, that were not only Islamic texts, but also classics from Greece, and other parts. You know, from Persia, that had come to Spain or come to Iberia, and had been translated since a century before in and around his birthplace in Toledo. There's a lot of kind of reductive history that talks about a school of translators in Toledo or that sees these things as more organized than they were. But it doesn't matter. The point is that Alfonso was born in Toledo. And he, I think, grew up with a sense that translation from Arabic was an important source of lifeblood for his civilization. He was fascinated by these texts, and he himself translated or had translated an Arabic book before he was even king about how to be a good ruler. Right? And this is the first book of prose in Castilian of prose literature. And it is also one of the most widely disseminated books in history, which is "Kalila and Dimna," originally the "Panchatantra" from India, which made its way across Persia, and ended up becoming "Kalila wa Demna" in Arabic in the eighth century. And it was that copy that made it to Iberia, and was the text that he chose to translate before he even became king. So he was really interested in translation from Arabic and his reign was then defined by these campaigns. So he translated many books, including books of Arabic science, or I should say Arabic books of science, astronomy. And also he was interested in writing his own books. He compiled a giant law code, the "Siete Partidas," which was more like an encyclopedia of law, or, you know, a philosophical treatise on law. It wasn't a practical code that people used, at least not for a century after. But it drew together and reflected his universalizing ambitions to be the ruler of all things, right? He wrote these universal histories that I talked about yesterday: a history of Spain, a history called "The General History," which is like a history of everything. He also wrote a book on chess and other games, partly translated from Arabic. He wrote, or translated a book on Muhammad's night flight from Mecca to Jerusalem. And this is a really important, sort of, monument in popular Islamic thought. Not a not a canonical work by any stretch, but a popular story, which... it was translated into Castilian under his, sort of, patronage. And a number of other projects. So his interest, his intellectual interest is vast. And above all, was astronomical, or astrological, which really weren't distinguished too much for him. And I think that that's... there are many ways you can talk about his legacy. But one of them is that he chose to translate books not into Latin but into his own language, or his own local language that he ruled in: Castilian. He also spoke Galician. And so he wrote his lyric songs in Galician, the cantigas are in Galego Portuguese. But the fact that he chose to translate into a Romance language is really monumental.

 Ben Pykare 23:53
Yeah.


 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 23:54

No king had choked had ever done a project like this. They had used their own languages for ruling or for law codes on a small scale, or for their own diplomacy or chancery. But to translate many different books that are of high intellectual or scientific caliber into what is essentially a, you know, an oral local language, really elevates that language and creates a kind of identity for it as an intellectual language or language of science or history or law. So he really transforms Castilian into a bonafide language that wants to be on par with Latin, or Arabic or other classical tongues. And I think that's really the most important piece of his legacy.

 Ben Pykare 24:40
Yeah.

 Will Beattie 24:40

That's really interesting, because it almost sounds like in some ways, he parallels, in my research, Alfred the Great. You know, that project... supposedly Alfred himself did all this translation. Whether that's true or not is still pretty open for debate. But, you know, he was engaged in a similar project of taking this learning and rewriting in the vernacular. In that case, I suppose so that the people could be reeducated, in his view, because the education had collapsed had suffered so much. But it's interesting that Alfonso is, in a different way essentially... they they're doing it for different reasons, perhaps, and in a different way, but coming, in a sense, to the same conclusion, which is that the vernacular is then elevated, into this new, this new register. It's really interesting.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 25:27

Yeah, I think that parallel is really spot on as well. Because what's interesting about the case of Alfred is he's really doing the same thing but with less or different material. So the thing that Alfonso has is that he has all of these texts that he himself is interested in; these texts that no one knows about. He's not only reiterating the tradition that he's in, or that he wants to spread to his people, but he's trying to bring in all of this foreign stuff. And instead of doing it into an intellectual tongue, he does it into his local tongue. But I think that the interesting parallel, which... it tells us something about the vernacular, I think, by comparing these two figures, is that it's only in in England, I think, that we can see a parallel desire to elevate the vernacular. It's unthinkable, almost, in the Mediterranean because these languages are so clearly tied to Latin. You know, they're just derivative versions of Latin to a lot of people. And to such an

extent that it's, it's conceptually difficult to realize these could stand alone and become their own languages intellectually. So the first, you know, really the first proper efforts at writing grammars and standardizing and improving Latin come out of England.



Will Beattie 25:43

Yeah. Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 26:53

Because they're seeing it as a language that stands apart from a local language. Right? I think that there's never a confusion that, that, you know, their local languages are connected with Latin. They're two different languages, or two different systems. And so they're able to see it in this way and see that it needs help, right? That it needs reforming, or that it needs, spelling guides or whatever, grammar. Whereas in the Mediterranean, and especially people working in the Romance languages, they... I think, conceptually, it's difficult. Which makes Alfonso's decision to use this very low language almost... almost incomprehensible. Why would you do that when you have a better version of Romance?



Will Beattie 27:36

Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 27:36

Right? You have essentially... it's akin, it's a parallel to thinking of why would somebody in the Arabic world today choose to translate high philosophy or government into the local dialect? When we already have a language for this, we have the Classical language. You know, Standard Arabic is high and full of, you know, important structures that can hold these thoughts. Why would you try to put it in the local Ammiya, when, you know, we already have Arabic structures for this. That's what, that's what he's doing. It's not approaching a kind of separate language and seeing like, "oh, I'm gonna put that thing into my language."



Ben Pykare 27:49

Yeah.



Will Beattie 28:14

Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 28:14

It's suddenly realizing that this local, local home language, this language of his community, of his childhood, is actually a bonafide different language that can hold all these classical thoughts, right? Thoughts worthy of classical tongues. So I think that the parallel is really good. And at the same time, it's revealing how different the contexts are. Because it shows how significant it is to actually choose a Romance language, essentially a low dialect of Latin to then become its own thing.



Will Beattie 28:49

Right.



Ben Pykare 28:50

And speaking of becoming its own thing, you have a great video posted that is very accessible to anyone who wants to listen, right? About, kind of, the development of Spanish and the history of Spanish. Can you tell us just briefly about that project and your desire behind that?



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 29:09

Absolutely. Yeah, that is a movie documentary project I did a few years ago, just before COVID. And I titled it "The Birth of Spanish in 3D." And that's really... I was just, you know, looking for a sexy title because the academic titles I first proposed, the director said, "you really going to call it that? Like, nobody's gonna watch that." So we came up with this sort of sexy title or, you know, slightly maybe inaccurate, but... but cool title, at least compelling title. "The Birth of Spanish in 3D." Like, what could that possibly mean?



Will Beattie 29:48

Right.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 29:49

But the goal of it was to talk about essentially Alfonso's influence, his role in elevating Castilian to become a world language. So people look at Spanish and Spain and think of the Spanish Empire as the real driver in expanding the Spanish language. But I want to suggest in this film and in my own work that really Alfonso is primarily responsible for the elevation of Castilian into what we call a world language today. That he is the seed of empire.



Ben Pykare 30:22

Yes.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 30:22



Dr. Ryan Szpiecn 30:22

The idea that this can be this very local, small version of Latin, right? This local romance language can become an imperial language. And of course, he doesn't realize it exactly. He tries to, and fails in many ways. But that is the beginning, the genesis of this process that has led to the fact that Spanish, what we call Spanish, is one of the three top spoken languages today. Spoken by hundreds of millions of people on, you know, almost every continent. So how does that happen? A local little scrubby language like, Castilian, or English, become[s] a world language. You know, it's not Chinese, which is a dominant language because there are lots of people who speak it, you know, in its own country. These are languages that have spread. So English and Spanish are colonial languages. And the... the expansion of these languages to become that, I think, is the process I was trying to chart. The genesis of that project was that a colleague of mine had received some money for making short movies about the Mediterranean for use in class. And this was to celebrate [The University of] Michigan's 200th anniversary as a university. So it was called "Michigan in the Third Century," or something like that. And so they, they gave him a fair amount of money. And he said, "well, I want to do something on Spain." He was doing a version... a movie on Athens. And I think St. Paul's visit to Athens was his first one. So while he was doing that, and that was more developed... and I think they were even filming and editing, he asked me to start coming up with ideas for something about Spain, and to pitch them to him so that he could do it as his project. And I did that. And you know, we couldn't come to a good agreement about ideas. He wanted more sexy things. He wanted flamenco and soccer and whatever. And so I was trying to give him what he wanted. But then he really spent heavily on his first movie. And so then the university said, "well, I think that's enough, you don't need to do it anymore."



Will Beattie 32:26

Okay.



Dr. Ryan Szpiech 32:27

So he wrote back to me and said, "I'm sorry, we don't have enough money to follow through with the second project. So you know, good luck." And essentially, that's where it should have ended or could have ended. But I had actually put in quite a lot of time thinking about this. And someone, one of my colleagues said, "well, you can try to get your own money and do it your own way." So on a whim, I wrote to some of the funding bodies at the university and said, "this is what happened. I have this project sort of developed, in my mind. And here's the script I've already written for this colleague, and are you interested in having me develop further? Like, I could propose a budget." And [I] really easily found some funding for this from a number of places in the university that that were excited to tie it to classroom use. So part of the project became not just the movie, but taking 360 degree photos in each monument that I would visit, and then making them part of a website, even a virtual reality website. So you can use these, these pictures with VR glasses. And this was pitched partly as a question of accessibility; you would offer all students of all abilities the chance to visit these monuments. So you don't have to study abroad, you don't even have to be able to access these monuments. Sometimes they're hard to get to. But you can go there, right? And we'll provide access. So that's where the, the concept of "The Birth of Spanish in 3D" came from, that we were going to do this in terms of spaces, and 360 degree spaces. And then I developed the concept, and I sort of ran with it. How can I tell the story of Alfonso in 22 minutes? You know. And it was really fun

because I got to dream big about how I would tell the story visually. It was a really an important shift for me mentally to learn how to think visually and to tell the story in film, because I was used to telling the story in words and in, you know, maybe slides. But to actually think about scripts and chunks of text, and scenes, and music and visuals. This was a really new language. And it's very difficult to tell a good story in a compelling way. I developed an immense amount of respect for people who make documentaries, historical documentaries, because I realize how difficult it is to balance the pull towards information with the pull towards actually being coherent and interesting. This isn't a lesson you know, I don't want to be up there tapping my lectern. You have to keep interest and attention. So how did I do that? We, we told this story as a journey. We decided to tell it as my journey. I was uncovering this mystery because I was curious. So it was... it was put in terms of my personal experience of asking a question: how does Spanish become a world language? And that's how it starts. I'm standing in, you know, [Puerta] del Sol in Madrid, in the middle of crowds. There's a mariachi band behind me. And I'm... I asked myself, "why? Why is this language a world language? How does it happen?" And that's how we set off on this journey. And so I start uncovering pieces. I go to the library, and there's a statue of Alfonso and I say, "who is this guy?" And I go inside, and I start asking around and I go visit a professor. And little by little I uncover the fact that Alfonso is really important for my story. And that's when I start to tell the story of why. Why and how Alfonso is important. And it leads me from Madrid to Escorial, where his manuscripts are, to Toledo his birthplace, to Seville, his death and burial place. And so we tell it as a bit of a physical journey, but also my discovery, my journey of discovery. Visiting these monuments and then narrating as I go, what I'm seeing and how these places tell the story. The physical places that I visit. So I get to go in a lot of interesting places from inside the Biblioteca Nacional, including the reading room. And in Madrid, also the... outside the library, the National Palace, and a couple of other sort of spaces on the street, including Plaza Mayor. And then I get to visit the streets of Toledo and many different monuments there. The actual library in Escorial, which is a monastery built in the 16th century, but has an amazing library. And then to Seville where we visit all of the monuments that, that Alfonso knew and loved. And [we] end with his actual tomb and the tomb of his father. And so this story really was fulfilling to tell because it was a visual story. And I got to end with the monument, the actual tomb I talked about last night. But it was also a journey of discovery for me, a challenge and an exciting one, to learn how to tell a story in a new way. And I'm continuing this journey. I got a lot of footage on that first trip. And one thing I didn't get to talk a lot about was the Alcázar Palace next to the cathedral in Seville, which Alfonso loved a lot. But his part is actually kind of obscured because it fell down during an earthquake and has been re-done in the Renaissance period and has actually... people don't really think about Alfonso...

B

Ben Pykare 37:52

Yeah.

D


Dr. Ryan Szpiech 37:53

... and the Alcázar together, even though he was... he had his own role in it. They think about his descendant, Pedro, who created a beautiful palace decorated in Arabic in the 14th century. And I spent a lot of time in that palace. So I'm doing another project right now, with a student actually, trying to map out the Arabic inscriptions in that palace. I've already put up a beta

version of this little movie, about 10 or 12 minutes long, on the website, in Spanish. So I need to do an English version. And it'll be much more elaborate when we have all of these inscriptions mapped out.

 Ben Pykare 38:27

That's great. Yeah, we'll have to include links to all of these for our listeners.

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 38:32

Yea, it's on the web. Free to all to use. Pictures, movies, everything in Spanish and in English. It's called "The Birth of Spanish in 3D." Just Google that and you'll find the website.

 Ben Pykare 38:43


Yeah, no, we were able to find it.

 Will Beattie 38:45

Yeah, we found it. It was great.

 Ben Pykare 38:46

So you can as well. Unfortunately, Professor, that's all the time we have for today. Dr. Szpiech, it's been a pleasure chatting with you. How can our listeners find out more about you or your work? Where would you want to direct people?

 Dr. Ryan Szpiech 39:02

Well, I want to thank you both for having me. It's been a really great conversation, a pleasure to talk with you. I appreciate your questions and the chance to talk about my journey as a medievalist and a scholar. And I have a number of websites. I have a website of my own, which is a WordPress site at University of Michigan, which is easy to find. If you just Google my name, and it'll probably be one of the first ones. But you could also put in "WordPress" if you want to find the actual university site. I also have all the same materials on my academia.edu page. I put all this stuff up there. So those are easy to find as well. Just Google me. The hardest part is remembering how to spell my name. S Z P I E C H. That's the hard part: the tricky Z. But I also have this website I related to the movie project, "The Birth of Spanish in 3D." So all of those are places where my my work is up and on the web, and I really love talking to people. So don't, don't hesitate to reach out. I love getting emails, I love discussing questions. And I'm really, you know, not just tied up in my work. I want to talk about your interests, too. So, reach out to me and let's talk. I would love to swap ideas and stories.



Ben Pykare 40:29

Fantastic.



Will Beattie 40:30

Thanks very much. Thank you again, Dr. Szpiech, for joining us today. And thank you everybody for listening in. And we'll see you next time in the Middle Ages. "Meeting In the Middle Ages" is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for medievalist, send them to us at "meetinginthema@gmail.com." You can follow us on Twitter at "MeetingintheMA," and Instagram at "MeetingintheMiddleAges." For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening