

Manuel Alejandro Rodríguez de la Peña

# **SAGE KINGS**

**WISDOM AND ROYAL POWER IN**

**ANTIQUITY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

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**CHRISTIANITY**

Manuel Alejandro Rodríguez de la Peña

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*Deo parentibus et magistris non potest satis gratiae rependi.*

For my beloved mother, Isabel.

In memory of my sadly missed father, Manuel (25/3/1940-18/5/2013), a sage who has been always an inspiration to me, and of Peter A. Linehan (11/7/1943-9/7/2020), outstanding scholar and caring mentor at Cambridge. They made this book possible.



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# Foreword

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## Foreword

The writing of this book has taken an exceedingly long time (2011-2021) and therefore I have accumulated many debts of gratitude, so many that probably I am forgetting to mention some of my benefactors. To them, my apologies.

First of all, I wish to thank my two teachers as a Historian:

Carlos de Ayala Martínez, who sparked my interest in Medieval History research in his brilliant seminars and who later masterfully supervised my Thesis on the topic of this book in Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (1999).

And the late Peter A. Linehan, who kindly invited me to make a post-doc research stay at St John's College, Cambridge, and there became more than a mentor.

Secondly, I would like to express my gratitude to the President and Fellows of Wolfson College, Cambridge. I started to write the present book at Wolfson in January 2011. They have offered me badly needed support electing me as a junior research fellow in 2001 and providing me with a second research stay in 2011.

Thirdly, I would like to thank all my friends and colleagues at Universidad CEU San Pablo and the Ángel Ayala Institute of Humanities for their support and comradeship during this decade full of ups and downs. They know who they are.

Finally, I have benefitted through all these years from lively discussions on this topic with both learned senior historians and young colleagues. I cannot but mention the names of Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge), Adeline Rucquoi (CNRS, Paris), Kirstin Kennedy (Victoria and Albert Museum and King's College, London), David Pratt (Downing College, Cambridge), Laurent Terrade (Wolfson College, Cambridge), Patrick Henriot (EPHE, Sorbonne), Giovanni Collamati (La Sapienza, Roma), Rafael Sánchez Saus (Universidad de Cádiz), Isabel Beceiro Pita (CSIC, Madrid), Hipólito Sanchiz Álvarez de Toledo (Universidad CEU San Pablo, Madrid), and, last but not least, María del Mar Gabaldón Martínez (Universidad CEU San Pablo).

I also owe particular thanks to the encouragement I have found in my editor, Juan Carlos Nieto Hernández. He has encouraged and helped me in many ways.

But my greatest debt is to my wife, Mar, and my two sons, Miguel, and Clara, who have been there to support me in these difficult recent years, particularly the last one, the worst year of my life.

# Introduction

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## Introduction

In this book I will try to explore certain areas of civilization, closely inter-related, in order to establish a genealogy of what I call *sapiential rulership*. These areas are kingship, political ideology, court *intelligentsia*, literacy, and patronage of learning. My main design is to set in its full context the impact and scope of the cultural role played by ancient and early medieval monarchies; and conversely, to examine the political role played by royal patronage of culture as well as by the royal ideology and propaganda fabricated by court intellectuals, in the broader setting of their social alignments.

Within these general preoccupations, four interlocking themes are significant: first, the role of the royal court (or any ruler's inner circle) as a cultural institution, particularly regarding its patronage of learning; secondly, the role played by literacy and high culture in the mentalities and exercise of power of the governing élites; thirdly, the manner in which court intellectuals shaped these political mentalities as ideologues or propaganda agents; and fourthly, the contents and aims of their political ideology, particularly their discourse on sapiential kingship.

But, overall, this is a study in the history of ideas. We will follow the origins and development of a single idea in its historical context, be it social, political, or cultural. This single idea we will deal with is Wisdom, primarily in its relationship with rulership.

First of all, we have to define what is 'wisdom'. We may start with saying that is the cosmovision of traditional, pre-modern, societies and the source both of its learning and its morality. Another approach to wisdom is to define it as "the idea of order and rationality", the rationale of the universe deeply embedded in "the natural religion of early humanity"<sup>1</sup>.

However, if we take further our inquiry into the meaning of wisdom, we find that there are essentially two different kinds of wisdom. The first one is related to the higher, philosophical, mystical, and theoretical knowledge, that is, "the contemplation of ideas". In this regard, the

<sup>1</sup> Morton W. BLOOMFIELD and Charles W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 106 and 108.

best Classical definition of wisdom is that of Aristotle: “knowledge of first causes and the principles of things”<sup>2</sup>. Plato called it *sophia* and put it above every other aspect of human culture, calling it “the highest of human things”<sup>3</sup>.

But *sophia* is not only related to the intellectual dimension of higher knowledge (*bios theoretikos*), i.e., the philosophical and religious Truth, it is also a way of life marked by the quest for wisdom, and, as such, is also practical, the *bios praktikos* of Greek philosophers, the *ars vivendi* of Cicero and Seneca<sup>4</sup>. Traditional wisdom ideology always put them together. If we find the advocacy of a way of life and its morals and not only the exposition of theoretical knowledge, then we are in presence of “the sapiential view of the world”, be it philosophical, be it religious, or both.

As Bloomfield and Dunn have put it, the sapiential view of the world rests on “the view that the world makes sense, possesses order, rules, and patterns to which individuals if they wish happiness must conform and that everything has its proper place and time. As the ancient maxim has it, *sapientia est ordinare* (...) Wisdom, manifested in all that is best in life, including language and law, enables us to control by either action or understanding the arbitrary and the unusual (...) Wisdom is prudence, which enables us to act and to choose so as to move in harmony with the world”<sup>5</sup>. Aristotle called it *phronesis* and put it above every other moral quality, being an active commitment to the pursue of virtue<sup>6</sup>.

As happened in the Ancient world, Christian *sapientia* was to be found in every aspect of Medieval culture. In this regard, it should be noticed that though the Biblical sapiential books introduced the concept of grace in the Western notion of wisdom, being it a divine gift<sup>7</sup>, the core of the ancient Wisdom tradition remained both unchanged and unchallenged. In fact, Biblical wisdom could be defined in a way which closely resembles that of Greek *phronesis*: “the application of prophetic truth to the individual life in the light of experience”<sup>8</sup>.

If Bloomfield and Dunn quote the classical dictum *sapientia est ordinare* to describe the ancient approach to prudential wisdom, a scholar specialized in Scholastic philosophy, Charles De Koninck, draws similar con-

2 Etienne GILSON, *History of Philosophy and Philosophical Education*, The Aquinas Lectures, vol. 12 (Milwaukee, Wis., 1948), p. 1.

3 Eugene F. RICE, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), p. 1.

4 Etienne GILSON, *Wisdom and Love in Saint Thomas Aquinas*, The Aquinas Lectures, vol. 16 (Milwaukee, Wis., 1951), p. 1; E. F. RICE, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, p. 2.

5 M. W. BLOOMFIELD and C. W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet*, p. 111.

6 See Pierre AUBENQUE, *La prudence chez Aristote* (Paris, 1963).

7 E. F. RICE, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, p. 2.

8 H. WHEELER ROBINSON, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1946), p. 241.

clusions for Christian wisdom: “What is it that characterizes Wisdom? As the saying goes, *Sapientis est ordinare* – ‘It belongs to the wise man to order’. And first of all, what is ‘order’? Two things constitute the notion of order: distinction and principle (...) Now, what order is in question in the adage: ‘It belongs to the wise man to order’? ‘It belongs to the wise man to order’, says St. Thomas Aquinas, ‘because wisdom is reason’s highest perfection, and it is proper to it to know order’. (...) Now knowledge alone of any order whatever is not as such sapiential. Simple apprehension can already attain an order, and all science bears upon a certain order. Wisdom will not be reason’s highest perfection except inasmuch as it denotes an order according to a principle which is purely and simply first (...) The verb ‘to order’ expresses this originating primacy. ‘It is not to be ordered but to order that belongs to the wise man’, says Aristotle”<sup>9</sup>.

The notion of wisdom, be it *sophia*, be it *phronesis*, is so submerged in the deepest roots of ancient society and so widely found in almost all human endeavour in traditional cultures that it is not easy to distinguish it from its ubiquitous background<sup>10</sup>. The modern, rationalistic, and empirical, concept of knowledge makes even more difficult to distinguish what is wisdom in traditional cultures. In fact, until recently, there has been a troublesome scholarly misunderstanding of wisdom due to an anachronistic approach to it.

For instance, it has not been properly understood that wisdom, religion, and oral and written culture were indistinguishable in traditional societies; that “the performance of poetry was absolutely basic to the social fabric of culture”<sup>11</sup>, and, further, that “poems are more than ‘prime sources’ for politics. They *are* politics”<sup>12</sup>. The poet, the sage, the priest, the diviner, the prophet, and, indeed, some kings, all were public performers of wisdom, and, as such, interpreters of divinity. At the same time, it has to be reckoned that any public performance of an authoritative or charismatic figure has *per se* a social and political role in traditional societies. The power of the word inasmuch as it is *power* can never be excluded from politics.

9 Charles DE KONINCK, “*Ego Sapientia*. The Wisdom that is Mary”, *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, ed. R. McInerney (Notre Dame, Ind., 2009), pp. 5-6.

10 M. W. BLOOMFIELD and C. W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet*, p. 106.

11 Simon GOLDHILL, *The Invention of Prose* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 2-3.

12 Richard P. MARTIN, “Solon in No Man’s Land”, *Solon of Athens. New Historical and Philological Approaches*, ed. J. H. Blok and A. P. M. H. Lardinois (Leiden, 2006), p. 158.

In the past two hundred years in modern Western culture delight and entertainment has been the only focus of literary production, and pure scientific advancement the object of scholarship. There has been no room for the didactic and gnomic function of literature and the philosophical and spiritual dimension of learning. The 'Art for Art's sake' movement and the Scientific Revolution brushed aside entire areas of traditional culture in what we may call a cultural obliteration which killed the memory of thousands of years of tradition<sup>13</sup>. Fables, legends, books of marvels and tales in general were now confined to the field of children's literature, genres like mirrors for princes, meditations, and didactic-moralistic treatises were completely abandoned, and alchemy and astrology began to be despised as superstition.

The sapiential world view was deeply linked with this kind of literature which mixed up literary, didactic, and scholarly genres. In the Enlightenment all this started to be judged as "a mass of old saws and proverbs which were popular with our ancestors and which are boring, repetitive, and useless"<sup>14</sup>. Its disappearance, together with the rationalistic approach of the Enlightenment's to learning, meant the death of ancient wisdom. To sum it up, everything related to what we may call the *mirabilia*, the wonders and the marvellous of the world<sup>15</sup>, was utterly and plainly rejected. Thus, the long process that Max Weber labelled 'the disenchantment of the world' came to an end.

In present time we live in an 'information society' where knowledge is a product sold and bought in the market in the context of what has been labelled a 'knowledge economy'. At the same time, ironically but not surprisingly, this kind of knowledge deprived of any sapiential dimension whatsoever, has been questioned in its reliability and objectiveness by Post-Modern philosophers who stress that knowledge is not discovered, but 'invented' or 'constructed'<sup>16</sup>. Thus, this secularized and demystified knowledge is now, at the same time, more socially prestigious and less philosophically respected than ever before in human civilization.

Regarding the history of knowledge, it has to be reckoned that the new 'genealogical' approaches, albeit deadly for the ethical dimension of the philosophical quest for Truth, have been, however, beneficial for research on the history of ideas. After centuries of oblivion, in which

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13 M. W. BLOOMFIELD and C. W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet*, p. 107.

14 M. W. BLOOMFIELD and C. W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet*, p. 109.

15 See Jacques LE GOFF, "The Marvelous in the Medieval West", *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago, 1988), pp. 27-46.

16 Peter BURKE, *A Social History of Knowledge. From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 1.

scholarship missed the fundamental role of traditional wisdom in the creation of human rationality and science<sup>17</sup>, in the past fifty years the full range and meaning of ancient wisdom has been dealt with by scholarship, particularly Biblical scholarship, and its widespread influence in ancient cultures measured.

With respect to the social history of knowledge, begun by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber more than a century ago, the truth of the matter is that until the seminal studies of Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Burke few historians have taken the topic seriously<sup>18</sup>.

We also find this new understanding of the importance of the idea of wisdom in kingship studies and, particularly, in the field of the history of political thought and political theology. The relationship of knowledge with power is a topic that finally has been given due scholarly attention.

The very nature of the relationship between learning, political thought, and kingship is a long and complex history. The theme of the ruler's wisdom, erudition, and prudence fits within a wider frame of theological and philosophical references. In the first place, the idea of the wisdom of the king mainly refers back to ancient myths, like the Mesopotamian and Greek legend of the Seven Sages, but also to the political theology of the sapiential books in the Hebrew Bible. It was also exposed in philosophical tracts in Greek and Latin thought, particularly in Plato's *Republic*, many Sophists' *basilikoi logoi*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Cicero's works and in the writings of not a few Stoic thinkers. In Christian Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Latin Medieval West it is everywhere in the mirrors for princes and the chronicles.

In fact, sapiential kingship in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, be it Pagan or Christian, was another variant of sacral kingship. The wise ruler's special relationship to divine wisdom guarantees his country's good governance and the divinity's protection, providing him with both legitimacy and moral authority. What all of this adds up to is the charismatic legitimation of royal power in terms of royal and dynastic Pagan 'divinity' or Christian 'sanctity'. As happened with other secular kingly attributes, there was a gradual process through which the charismatic attributes of the sacral or holy king came to harmonise with the rational and philosophical idea of the Philosopher-King. One example which particularly fits this category is Constantine the Great, the first Christian ruler to combine both types of sapiential kingship: the charismatic-reli-

17 M. W. BLOOMFIELD and C. W. DUNN, *The Role of the Poet*, p. 108.

18 P. BURKE, *A Social History of Knowledge*, pp. 6-9.

gious, and the philosophical one. As we will see, to combine the *topoi* of the rational Philosopher-King and the charismatic-sacral Sage King, was something indeed previously tried in Classical Antiquity.

Not long ago the medieval royal court was not even a category of thought in the history of western culture or science, but in present times the juxtaposition of 'science' and 'royal court' in the Middle Ages no longer strikes the reader as something odd. Many medievalists already know that the Renaissance period may have been the apogee of the cult of the learned prince, but it was no exclusive Renaissance phenomenon, rather it was one with medieval roots. The remarks of Sergio Bertelli concerning the Renaissance courts, "the court, shielded from the outside world (...) projects an image of itself as mysterious and inaccessible; its power is enhanced by the double aim of seeming both very learned and very glorious"<sup>19</sup>, can be also projected into not a few medieval courts.

Indeed, regarding the role of the ruler's wisdom in Late Medieval political thought, Anthony Black has coined the expression *the sapiential idea* and pointed out that "the case for giving the wise and important place in government was virtually unanswerable given the belief in rationality endemic in European culture, or at least the literate culture which produced political theory. This belief stemmed from Platonism, Stoicism and their Christianised variations which came to dominate the mental perspectives of Late Rome, Byzantium and the Early and High Middle Ages in the West. It was the way to keep the myth of the monarch as the seat of wisdom"<sup>20</sup>.

To sum it up, royal patronage of learning was a universal phenomenon in the Ancient Near East and the Middle Ages (Christian and Islamic), and not just in the Classical Age, the Renaissance and Early Modern Europe. Similarly, royal wisdom was considered by many intellectuals to be just another dimension of good rulership. The royal patron of learning, when not personally engaged in producing learning himself, was decisive in a number of key cultural enterprises in Antiquity and the Middle Ages and it is certainly of no little importance to elucidate what moved these rulers.

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<sup>19</sup> Sergio BERTELLI, "The Courtly Universe", *The Courts of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. S. Bertelli, F. Cardini, and E. Garbero Zorzi (Milan, 1986), p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony BLACK, *Political Thought in Europe, 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 160.

**PART I.  
THE SAGE KING. WISDOM  
AND RULERSHIP IN THE ANCIENT  
NEAR EAST.**

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