

Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature Travel Bursary
Report of visit to the Library of El Escorial Monastery, 5-7 September 2018
Rachel Scott, Postdoctoral Research Associate
Language Acts and Worldmaking, King's College London
rachel.scott@kcl.ac.uk

Thanks to the support of the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature I was able to visit the library of El Escorial Monastery in San Lorenzo de El Escorial located just outside of Madrid for several days intense research. This trip was crucial for my project on the European vernacular dissemination of *Kalila wa-Dimna* (ca. 750), an influential Arabic collection of exemplary fables which was itself based on the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* (300 CE).

My research, which forms part of the AHRC-funded [Language Acts and Worldmaking](#) project, offers a comparative, material and ideological analysis of the three Castilian translations of these fables produced between the 13th and 17th centuries: *Calila e Dimna* (1251), the *Exemplario contra los engaños y peligros del mundo* (1493) and the *Espejo político y moral para príncipes y ministros y de todo genero de personas* (1654/1659). Such an approach offers a fruitful way of addressing the history of this important work's reception as well as certain conceptual and thematic issues, in this case, the evolution of the perception of intercultural relationships between East and West across a period of profound change. (Find out more about the project [here](#).) El Escorial holds two important manuscripts of the first Castilian translation, *Calila e Dimna*, which was commissioned by Alfonso X in 1251 when he was still prince. This translation had a limited circulation amongst court and noble audiences and was not printed in the early modern period. No manuscripts contemporary to its composition survive; the earliest near-complete witnesses are two fifteenth-century codices housed in the monastery: MS A and MS B (h-III-9 and x-III-4 respectively). Although detailed bibliographic descriptions exist, the manuscripts have not been digitised; because my project addresses material bibliography, a first-hand examination of them was therefore necessary.

My research on these manuscripts while at El Escorial focused on aspects of the witnesses that still require further study: the marginal annotations in MS B attributed to a later medieval reader thought to be Queen Isabel I, and the pen and ink drawings in a 15th century hand in MS A. With MS B (x-III-4), I focused on the occurrence of the marginal annotations (highlights, manicules, underlining) within the narrative of the fables. The annotations can be dated to a crucial point in the Iberian Peninsula's history when Christian relations with Muslims and Jews were increasingly fraught and politicised, culminating in 1492 with the fall of the Muslim-ruled kingdom of Granada and the exile of the Jews of Castile. Interestingly, many of the annotations coincide with passages concerned with social relationships, such as those between different groups in society, represented in the text by discussions about friendship between 'meat-eaters' and 'grass-eaters', as well as those addressing the issue of 'guests' in a social group. With MS A (h-III-9), I found that the drawings and the manuscript's mise-en-scene suggest an attempt to locate *Calila* within a similar horizon of expectations as the Arabic *Kalila*. Comparison of this manuscript alongside the incunables of the second translation, the *Exemplario*, which was translated from Latin only a few decades later, shows a very different aesthetic: the latter is situated by the printer and editor within a humanistic and Latinate horizon of expectations. It is also interesting that *Calila* was associated aesthetically with an Arabic cultural milieu in a socio-political context in which this social and religious group was under increasing attack, both military and ideological.

I am grateful to the society for their support, which has provided me with the opportunity to gain important material evidence, which will form part of an essay for a forthcoming Routledge *Companion to Medieval Iberia*, as well as a chapter of my next monograph, which is currently in development.