

THE “ROMANCE DE CARLOS V” AND THE EMPEROR’S IMPERIAL PROPAGANDA MACHINE

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The Battle of Mühlberg (1547) was a major triumph for Carlos V and the Holy Roman Empire in the struggle against the military alliance of Lutheran princes who sought to destroy the political and religious hegemony of the Empire’s territories. The leaders of this coalition, called the Schmalkaldic League for a German provincial town, were the Landgrave of Hesse, Philip I (1504-1567), and the Elector of Saxony, John Frederick I (1502-1554). The battle at Mühlberg, fought in the Electorate of Saxony, was the culmination of the Schmalkaldic War that began in the summer of 1546. Although Carlos was the nominal head of the Spanish-Imperial army, its effective commander was the seasoned warrior Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (1507-1582). The Emperor’s brother, Ferdinand, King of the Romans (1502-1564), accompanied them during this campaign. The battle began in the early morning of 23-24 April, when Alba’s army took advantage of heavy mist and high waters to cross the Elbe River and surprise the unsuspecting Protestant army on the opposite shore. The Protestants put up little resistance, as most of them threw down their weapons and fled before John Frederick was able to re-group his forces and engage the imperial troops in battle. Carlos’s forces pressed on against them, killing thousands of men and taking many prisoners. Philip of Hesse and John Frederick were captured that same day and imprisoned. The Emperor had won the Schmalkaldic War and its League was disbanded, but the victory was relatively short-lived, as the Lutherans continued to pursue their right to practice their own religion. One year later Carlos agreed to endorse the Augsburg Interim, a compromise that granted some concessions to the Protestants. By 1555, amid continuing hostilities and no clear Catholic victory, the Emperor had no choice but to sign the Peace of Augsburg, which divided the

Empire under the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*. The following year he abdicated all of his titles, leaving the Spanish Empire to his son Felipe II and the Holy Roman Empire to his brother Ferdinand. He retired to the Monastery at Yuste, where he died in 1558.

This division of the Christian world brought to an end Carlos's dream of *monarchia universalis*. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1547 his success at Mühlberg quickly became crystallized as the culminating triumph of his career. His sister, María, queen of Hungary and governor of the Netherlands (1505-1558), was a key figure in the campaign to capitalize on this victory through an organized effort to memorialize the moment in various ways (Kagan 67–68). These included the publication of Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga's *Comentario de la Guerra de Alemania* (1548), Titian's commission to paint the now famous equestrian portrait of the Emperor that hangs in the Prado Museum, and various other literary and artistic commemorations of his defeat of the Lutherans in this battle. This multi-media venture had at its heart the desire to aggrandize Carlos V's achievements at Mühlberg, in reality short lived. But to this end historians, poets, and artists engaged in acts of selective memory, cherry-picking facts and changing or embellishing them in order to manipulate the collective memory of the significance of that 1547 battle. In this way they created the myth of the Emperor's triumph over Protestantism which was perpetuated even after his death and the failure of his imperial enterprise.

The emperor was no stranger to the concept of a well-organized publicity campaign, having been raised in the household of his grandfather, Maximilian I (1459-1519), who had mastered the art of self-celebration. Maximilian used the newer technology of the printing press to communicate quickly with subjects all over his realm by disseminating hundreds of proclamations, announcements, and pamphlets. He also commissioned German artists to design woodcuts to commemorate the accomplishments of his lifetime and engaged in other such propagandistic ventures (Pettegree 131–36). By the time Carlos V was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1519 he had long been steeped in his grandfather's imperial ideology and was familiar with the benefits of creating and controlling the image of his person and his reign that he wished his subjects to embrace. Carlos was adept at managing and disseminating information about himself through various forms of representation that included pageantry (such as his

coronation in Bologna in 1530), the commissioning of woodcut engravings, portraits, coins and other artifacts rendered in precious metals, the publication of official histories of his reign, the dissemination of *relaciones de sucesos* and other news bulletins and pamphlets. The published records, in particular, were opportunities to circulate in a controlled and propagandistic way, information about his achievements on and off the battlefield (Burke 435-36).

Carlos V was particularly enthusiastic about the cultivation of his personal image, first as a chivalric hero in the manner of Amadís de Gaula or Tirant lo Blanc, and later as a hero like those of Classical Antiquity. In the first instance he followed his grandfather's enthusiasm for the knightly code of King Arthur, which led Maximilian to fancy himself and his court as heirs to the legendary king and his Round Table (Prieto 168-60). As a child in the household of his aunt and tutor, Margaret of Austria, Carlos particularly enjoyed reading *libros de caballerías*, and thus inherited a fascination with medieval knighthood. He enjoyed the jousts and tournaments that remained popular in the early sixteenth century and which were part of almost all court celebrations. Carlos fashioned his own self-image on this chivalric model, delighting in the tournaments that were organized to celebrate his entrance into Spain in 1517. He carried this illusion into the beginning of his reign as emperor, personally knighting the Spanish courtiers who attended his coronation. For the young emperor the knightly code of behavior was not just an ideal, but a standard of conduct that he embraced and proposed to live by.

So perhaps it was inevitable that sixteenth-century authors would follow the emperor's own example and turn his exploits into the feats of a chivalric hero. The depiction of Carlos as a hero corresponds closely to the general chivalric ideology of empire that the public admired. Readers believed that the chivalric model was not only plausible but desirable and palpable, a viewpoint that could blur the line between fiction and reality. This trend manifests itself most notably in the romance of chivalry entitled *Don Tristán el Joven*, a 1534 continuation of *Tristán de Leonís*, whose plot closely follows the events of Carlos V's life. Here the young emperor is transformed into a chivalric hero whose deeds transcend those of the champions familiar to the reading public (Cuesta 553).

Carlos V's handlers also took advantage of the efficiency of orality by commissioning and propagating verse compositions intended to be recited or sung, calling upon a long-standing oral tradition to help them spread their message and to gain acceptance for their ideology. Some of the *relaciones en verso* provide the title of a popular tune to which the composition should be sung. As Víctor Infantes has pointed out (379-80), these informational and propagandistic poems were composed contemporaneously with the events that they described and were usually derived from written documents recounting battles, dangers to the emperor and his troops, or meetings between key figures. The compositions therefore possess a certain immediacy and are full of vivid details and exaggerations of numbers of enemy forces killed, as well as long lists of the names of Imperial soldiers. Like other *relaciones*, these texts were rushed to press by commercial printers who were eager to make a quick profit. The need for expeditious dissemination means, of course, that the literary quality of these verse accounts was negligible. Their purpose was much less artistic than practical: they aimed to quickly get the emperor's message to a large group of people in a palatable manner that, because of its orality, had the potential to be repeated to others many times over.

It is difficult to say how many ballads about Carlos V were written and printed in the sixteenth century, as a great number of *pliegos sueltos* have disappeared over the years due to their ephemeral nature. Printed books had a much better survival rate. The most popular *romanceros* of the era, as well as the later editions of the *Cancionero General* (1557 and 1573), include ballads that recount significant moments in the life of the emperor as well as his various military exploits. In his 1958 edition of *relaciones de sucesos* in verse about Carlos V, Antonio Pérez-Gómez announced that he planned to compile an edition of eleven ballads about the emperor, but the volume was never published. The number of extant ballads seems to be sixteen, but this is probably only a small percentage of those that would have circulated in the 1500s.

I have chosen only one ballad for this study, as it provides a good example of how a significant event was publicized in several different ways. The ballad in question is entitled simply "Romance de Carlos V Emperador," and it condenses and recounts key events of the Battle of Mühlberg. Kagan has noted that the publicity campaign launched

after the battle aimed to capitalize on a victory that was more symbolic than politically significant. He refers to this campaign as a “multimedia affair” that Mary of Burgundy and Juan Hurtado de Mendoza (the emperor’s ambassador in Venice) mounted soon afterwards (82). In addition to a series of ballads commemorating the event, there are a set of nine tapestries, a book of engravings by the Dutch artist Maarten van Heemskerck, Leone Leoni’s bronze statue of the emperor battling heresy, Eneo Vico’s engraving of the battle, and Titian’s equestrian portrait of Carlos at Mühlberg.

The “Romance de Carlos V Emperador” appears in an unedited *cancionero*, Ms. 5902 of the Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), a small anthology of texts (thirty-four verse and two prose works, many still unedited) mostly concerning the Emperor’s court in Germany around the time of the Battle of Mühlberg. It was probably assembled no earlier than 1559, a year after Carlos V’s death, but most of the events referred to in its compositions took place between 1547 and 1552, including the ballad in question. Judging from the historical circumstances of the *cancionero* and the similar discourse of several of its unedited texts, it is likely that the author of the ballad was someone attached to the emperor’s court during this time period.

The author of the text closely follows Luis de Ávila y Zúñiga’s *Comentario de la guerra de Alemania*, selecting key moments of the battle and, as we shall see, altering events to make them more dramatic. He was fully conversant with the conventions of traditional ballads, and begins the poem by deftly establishing the place, time, and conflict, while at the same time providing a succinct characterization of the adversaries:

Ya se arma el Sacro Marte,
 don Carlos 5 nombrado,
 por los campos de Saxonia
 camina con furia armado
 contra el que rebelde ha sido
 al ymperio consagrado,
 que la sacra yglesia á dado
 para darle aquel castigo
 que merece el tal peccado.
 Día hera de San Jorge,
 San Jorge nuestro abogado. (29v)

Two references in this fragment identify Carlos V as a warrior in defense of his religion. The first is “Sacro Marte,” an epithet that combines the fierceness of the mythological god of war with the emperor’s imperial religious mission. The other is the well-conceived mention of St. George, who, according to the medieval tradition, slew a dragon that represented the devil. In this way the author of this ballad not only asks the readers to draw a parallel between the saint and the emperor, but also apparently takes advantage of the fact that the ballad of Mühlberg began on the feast day of St. George, April 23. The dragon-slayer was the patron saint of knighthood as well, a fact that helps characterize Carlos V as he liked to visualize himself, a chivalric hero. In these initial verses the Protestants are depicted as rebels in opposition to both the empire and the Catholic church, and in this way are enemies of the dream of *monarchia universalis*, the Emperor’s most desired mission. The poet places additional emphasis on this conflict by moralizing for his readers, declaring that the rebels must be punished for their sin.

Carlos’s heroic and religious mission is further supported by the events narrated in the next sequence of the ballad:

En las albinas riberas
vn río tan celebrado,
mostróse vn alto misterio
en tiempo muy señalado.
Vino vn villano corriendo,
ante el Çésar se ha humillado.
Díxole: “Dios es contigo,
yo te mostraré este vado.” (29v)

A villager did indeed assist the imperial troops in locating a viable place to cross the Elbe, but the facts were more mundane than those narrated here. The Duke of Alba sent soldiers to search for such assistance and the man came forward to help because the previous day he had suffered a loss of two horses to the Protestant troops. In his text Ávila de Zúñiga reports the story of the townsman’s loss and his desire for vengeance (441). The poet nevertheless prefers to turn the embellish the facts, turning the man into an angelic figure who, like the Archangel Gabriel before Mary at the Annunciation, kneels before the

Emperor and proclaims “the Lord is with thee”, in this way suggesting that his mission is divine.

The poet refers to Carlos V as Caesar, an epithet associated with him since the 1520s, and which has special significance here, as there is a clear parallel between the emperor’s crossing of the Elbe and Julius Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C. Caesar’s action was a pivotal moment because it constituted a declaration of war against Pompey, which would eventually culminate in Pompey’s death. Ávila y Zúñiga makes an implicit reference by way of comparison, reporting that the emperor uttered the words “Vini, vidi, Deus vicit” on his defeat of John Frederick’s forces (443). This embellishment of Caesar’s words is significant, as it represents both the military action and the religious mission, and effectively places Carlos above Caesar in importance. As Carlos Checa Cremades aptly suggests, “[e]l paralelismo con la Antigüedad presupone la idea de la superación de la misma. El pasado clásico se imagina como mundo mítico y ejemplo a seguir, pero también como época a superar” (*Carlos V* 86).

The author of the ballad deviates from these historical sources by eliminating entirely the Duke of Alba from his composition. Nevertheless, Alba played a significant role in the Battle of Mühlberg: he commanded all the imperial troops (a combined army of Spanish infantry, German regiments, and Hungarian light cavalry), worked to locate a ford, and then led his men to defeat the Duke of Saxony’s forces on the other side of the Elbe. Nevertheless, in the ballad it is the emperor’s brother Ferdinand, King of the Romans, who is credited with these achievements:

El rey de Romanos junto,
sereno y amado,
con el esfuerço usitado
puso gran solicitud
para passar aquel vado.
Mandó a los caualleros
con su seso acostumbrado. (30r)

It is not immediately clear why the poet would choose to omit Alba, whose decisive actions on the shores of the Elbe were fundamental to the emperor’s victory. Perhaps he made a conscious effort to emphasize

the Habsburg dynasty, as Carlos V's aunt Margaret of Austria was keen to do.

The ballad continues with a straightforward narration of the numerous soldiers crossing the Elbe and harbusiers riding on the haunches of the cavalry's mounts, chasing down the frightened Lutherans who fled to safety in a nearby wood. Carlos V followed, and he is depicted here as he is portrayed in the historical sources, a strong horseman traversing the deep waters and galloping across the land on the other side of the river. But the *romance*, like the histories it was informed by, engages in an act of selective memory in this part of the story: in the weeks leading up to the battle and even at Mühlberg itself, Carlos had suffered recurring bouts of gout, a disease that had long plagued him, and he often had to be transported on a litter. While it is certainly plausible that the emperor made an effort to cross the river that day on his well-appointed chestnut horse that Ávila y Zúñiga described in great detail and that Titian painted in the famous portrait, it probably was not with the vigor and alacrity that their words and images would suggest.

The next moment of the battle on which the ballad's author fixes his attention is a blasphemous sight that Carlos V came upon after crossing the Elbe. At a *humilladero* (a site for devotion typically found at crossroads or entrances to a town), an image of the crucified Christ had been shot through the chest with an arquebus. As Ávila reports, the emperor could not contain his anger and tears, "y mirando al Cielo dicen que dixo: Exurge Domine, iudica causa tua. Y en nuestra lengua: Señor si vos quereys, poderoso soys para vengar vuestras injurias" (445). But in the ballad the wound to the Christ figure and the emperor's posture are exaggerated, and Carlos's words are changed for dramatic effect:

Vido estar en la llanura
 vn Jesús crucificado.
 Vidole por la cabeza
 con un arcabuz pasado.
 El Çesar como le alli vido
 tan espantoso pecado,
 humillóse al crucifixo
 con corazon lastimado:
 —Doi gracias al alto Dios
 que perdona al mas culpado.

In this version, emphasis is placed on divine clemency for the Protestant transgressors, instead of the desire for vengeance in the words that the historian reported.

The ballad ends with the capture of the Duke of Saxony:

Ya que en vna selva entraua
 el duque mal acordado,
 alcançó el Sacro Marte,
 por Dios estaua ordenado.
 Con poca jente, con furia,
 apagó el fuego inflamado
 que tenía el duque ençendido.
 Allí fue desbaratado
 en campo, muerta gran jente,
 y en duque en prision tomado.

The ballad greatly exaggerates Carlos's role in this incident, as he was not, in fact, present at the capture of John Frederick. The poet chooses to capitalize on the epithet "Sacro Marte" in order to emphasize the emperor's divine mission, as he does with the declaration that this incident was God's plan. He also implies that Carlos's own religious fervor has extinguished the flame of Saxony's heresy.

The Battle of Mühlberg is perhaps best remembered today through Titian's equestrian portrait of Carlos V that has pride of place at Madrid's Prado Museum. The enormous painting (approximately eleven by nine feet) was commissioned by the Emperor's sister, María, to commemorate this important victory. Titian was a natural choice, as he had already painted several portraits of Carlos at different moments in the emperor's reign. The Italian Renaissance author Pietro Aretino may have been the first to notice the relationship between the equestrian portrait and Ávila y Zúñiga's *Comentario*, and in this opinion was seconded by the historian Paolo Giovio (Checa 57-58). Following their lead, Checa has mined the *Comentario* to discover all the elements and symbols that the chronicler used in his account which, in turn, informed Titian's portrait. The painting, like the "Romance de Carlos V Emperador" and Ávila's historical text, relies on two cultural referents, St. George and Ancient Rome. The artist painted Carlos on the dark chestnut horse with the rich red and gold trappings that the historian had described in minute detail. So too, the armor that the Emperor wore that day,

a complete suit of war trappings complete with the weapons that he carried onto the battlefield, now on display at Madrid's Royal Armory. One of the weapons that the chronicler describes, the "media hasta, casi venablo," has been identified as a the same kind of lance depicted in equestrian portraits of several Roman emperors and of St. George, leading him to conclude that Titian purposefully included this detail as a way to tie together not only the religious and chivalric aspects of the *miles Christi*, but to relate them as well to Ancient Rome. The artist chose to represent the crossing of the Elbe not in a literal manner, but as a concept filled with symbolism. He includes the river in the background of the painting, where it clearly appears on the right side, flowing behind a tree that he placed at the height of the horse's head and chest. Titian takes a cue about the illumination of his subject from Ávila's description as well, adopting the blood-red sun falling in the late afternoon, lending the entire portrait a twilight tone (Checa 63-64). Checa concludes that while Titian clearly used the *Comentario* as a point of reference to depict Carlos V exactly as he was seen that day, he did not intend to paint a narrative of the battle, but instead a portrait commemorative of the event, a work faithful to the minutest of details of the historical record (66).

Maarten van Heemskerck's series of twelve engravings, entitled *Divi Carli. imp. opt. max. victoriae* appeared in Antwerp in 1556. The first of the prints, which serves as a summary of Carlos's political career, is a fictionalized representation of the emperor's dream of a Christian empire, which had been dashed the year before with the signing of the Peace of Augsburg (Rosier 26). The last four prints in this series concern his struggles with the Protestants in Germany, and it is the tenth that depicts the events at Mühlberg. Van Heemskerck includes two key scenes, the battle itself and the surrender of the Duke of Saxony. But, as Rosier points out, the artists relegates the battle to background, thus emphasizing the political significance of John Frederick's capitulation. Despite the anachronistic nature of this set of engravings—all of which glorify a universal monarchy that never was—they were very successful and remained influential in European art for years (34-37).

The Habsburg court sculptor Leone Leoni received a commission from the Emperor in 1549 to produce a series of bronze and marble sculptures commemorating his victories. The most famous of these is *Charles V and The Fury*, in which the emperor— dressed in Roman

armor—towers over a fallen man who has been chained, an allusion to the Protestants (Checa, *Carlos V, a caballo* 21). Enea Vico, the Italian engraver, also opted for the Roman depiction of the Emperor in his 1551 plate depicting the Battle of Mühlberg. Vico combined the allegorical with the real and produced an engraving that was as much a historical document as it was a symbolic representation of Carlos V's identification as a hero comparable to those of classical antiquity (García Arranz 5).

The "Romance de Carlos V" is just one example of the use of poetic texts to perpetuate the memory of the emperor's deeds. The fifteen other ballads about his campaigns and victories depict him in the same heroic terms. In his *Romancero General* Agustín Durán includes nine ballads that concern Carlos' actions against the Turks, all of which refer in some way to the themes of *monarchia universalis* or the Emperor's identification as Caesar. All or most of them are contemporaneous to the events they describe, as is the "Convocatoria para la guerra contra los turcos", in which the poet tediously names dozens of cities, families, and social groups which he calls upon to join in the enterprise, evoking the image of the Emperor not only as conquering Roman general ("Y a queste nuestro César / todo lo ha de conquistar",) but as the champion of christendom ("Don Carlos tiene d'estar / abrazado con la cruz / que Dios nos mandó abrazar") (*Romancero* 2: 151) In the years after his abdications and death a number of literary texts about him continued to appear for decades until the end of the sixteenth century. There were, for example, three epic poems written about his exploits: Jerónimo Samper's *Carolea* (1560), Luis Zapata's *Carlo famoso* (1566), and Juan Mal de Lara's *Hercules animoso* (1584).

It is clear that the Habsburg "propaganda machine," which had been active since the era of Maximilian I, made aggrandizement of Carlos V a priority since his earliest days as emperor. Its most important body of work was the concerted effort to immortalize his victory at Mühlberg not only in his lifetime, but long afterwards as well. His mission to maintain and lead a universal Catholic empire failed; nevertheless, the effectiveness of the multi-media publicity campaign kept alive the positive image of Carlos V for decades to come.

NOTES

¹The *relaciones de sucesos* were brief reports of royal events or other occurrences that were generally printed on a broadsheet of two to four folios. Most of them were prose accounts, some of which took the form of a letter in which the author claims to have witnessed the incidents in question, but others were presented in narrative verse. See Redondo 266-68.

²The reading public was not interesting only in fictional tales of heroic acts. The popularity of biographies of Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, *el gran Capitán* (d. 1515, biography published in 1554) or his follower, Diego García de Paredes (1466-1534), attest to the existence of men whose real experiences embodied the chivalric ideal, and to the fashion for reading of their exploits.

³Rodríguez-Moñino estimates that the number might be as high as a million lost (34).

⁴Durán includes the ballad in his *Romancero* (1: 144-45), citing as his source a “códice de 1640,” which I have been unable to identify. This late date seems to indicate the continuing popularity of ballads about the Emperor. In a footnote Durán comments: “Conserva este romance una tradición de su tiempo muy a propósito para inspirar odio contra los herejes.” This version contains a few variant readings, which will be noted below.

⁵See Marino for a study of this *cancionero* in its literary and historical contexts, and further considerations about its compiler and the author of its anonymous poems. I am presently editing the manuscript for publication.

⁶The text in Ms. 5902 reads “señalado”. The copyist evidently was reading ahead to the fourth line.

⁷Carlos was first referred to as “el César” following the Battle of Pavia in 1526, and the appellation was subsequently reinforced by his conquest of Tunis in 1535, which was reminiscent of Ancient Rome’s triumph over the Carthaginians.

⁸In Ms. 5902, instead of “acostumbrado” it reads “usitado,” clearly a copyist error.

⁹ Checa also cites Alfonso de Ulloa's *Vita dell'invistissimo e sacratissimo imperator Carlo V* in which he states that the fog miraculously disappeared and the sun shone through a deep, rust color, "un verdadero presagio de la caída de los Sajones [...] pareciendo que Dios favorecía al Emperador contra sus enemigos" (65).

¹⁰ For an overview of the literary image of Carlos V, see López Estrada.

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