



TOWER OF HERCULES

The legend of Hercules

Of all the legends that have reached us about the Tower, this has been the most influential. In fact we all know this legendary lighthouse as the Tower of Hercules, although the origins of this monument have nothing to do with this classical figure. The author of this legend was King Alfonso X (1252-1284), known as the Wise, who in his *Estoria de Espanna* tells how the hero Hercules built a huge lighthouse to celebrate his victory over Giant Geryon.

Recovering the tradition of Isidore, Alfonso X linked the figure of Hercules to Spain and more specifically to the city of A Coruña. Legend has it that the legendary Greek hero came in search of Giant Geryon, who ruled over the lands between the Douro and the Tagus, to free the people from his unbridled power. Their struggle lasted three days and their corresponding nights, after which time Hercules defeated the giant, beheaded him and buried his head by the sea. To celebrate his victory, he erected over the burial mound a tower-lighthouse and, in the vicinity of it, he founded a city he named Crunia – after the first woman who inhabited this place and with whom the hero fell in love.

When Hercules left, Hispan, his nephew was appointed lord of Spain and he populated villages and cities. He finished the construction of the Lighthouse Tower his uncle had commenced and as he was a wise man he added a beacon to it with a fire that never went out. He also made a great mirror so that enemy ships could be spied from a great distance. The account by King Alfonso X, had an influence on later works such as *Crónica Abreviada* by Don Juan Manuel or the *Crónica General de Espanha* of 1344, in which the myth was elaborated. Licenciado Molina introduces this legend in the *Descripción del Reino de Galicia* (1550). The same does Florián Ocampo in the *Crónica General* (1544), where he tries to tell history from legend.

From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, two lines of historiography were open: one defended the veracity of the fable while the other attempted to tell legend from historical facts. Amongst the first group we might mention the names of Baltasar Porreño, Cardinal Jerónimo del Hoyo, Castellá Ferrer or Rodrigo Mendes Silva, who will be later joined by Pascasio de Seguín, J. Parsicio de Moraleja y Navarro or Juan Antonio de la Estrada, all of the from the 18th century.

The second line was that advocated by Gaspar Barreiros, Juan de Mariana, Friar Bernardo de Brito, Friar Pedro de Santa María or – already in the 18th century – by Luis Moreri and Father Flórez, who would not accept the truthfulness of the legend. This situation changed by late 18th century when José Cornide Saavedra published *Investigaciones sobre la fundación y fábrica de la Torre llamada de Hércules, situada a la entrada del puerto de La Coruña* because from that moment onwards the difference between the mythological account and historical reality became established, and consequently historiography never mixed both arguments again. Nonetheless, the influence of the myth had already left its mark on the iconography of the Tower, which has lived on and reached us.

In the most ancient representations of the monument, legend and reality are intermingled to build a poetic image that has remained greatly untouched since 16th century. Obviously, we are dealing with highly idealised images that do not intend to be realist. Therefore, it is difficult to study the appearance of the building at the time. But they tellingly bear witness to the popularity of the legend throughout the city.

At least since the late 15th century, the Tower of Hercules has been the image of the A Coruña, as the City Council adopted it as the motive of its coat of arms. Ever since then, the city and the Tower were one and the same reality. Its first representations known are from about 1448. They are very sketchy but throughout the 16th century the structure of the coat of arms took shape, so that in the mid decades of the 16th century all the key elements for the interpretation of the legend of Hercules were there.