

## TranscribeEstoria | Training Materials

[transcribeestoria.bham.ac.uk](http://transcribeestoria.bham.ac.uk)

Aengus Ward (Ed.)  
*University of Birmingham*

Polly Duxfield  
*University of Birmingham*

Ricardo Pichel  
*Universidad de Alcalá*

### MODULE 1

#### Discovering the manuscript and its writing

---

##### The manuscript itself

- Parchment
- Layout
- Rubrics, initials and pilcrow
- Reading the text

##### Gothic book hand

- Letter shapes
- Ascenders and descenders
- Abbreviations
  - Tironian sign
  - General sign of abbreviation
  - Superscript letters
  - Other symbols

So, what do we want you to do?

## The manuscript itself

Medieval texts are manuscript, so each one is unique. This also means, of course, that each one had to be written out by hand. The image below is from the opening folios of the manuscript that we are transcribing here. It is manuscript Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid (Ms. 12837). It is a manuscript of 148 folios written in the first half of the fourteenth century – so it's about 700 years old. It is one of the earliest manuscripts of the *Estoria de Espanna*, and we know that it is a copy of the royal manuscript known as E1, which was written in the scriptorium of Alfonso el Sabio, the learned, in the early 1270s. It also has a curiosity at the beginning – it contains part of the prologue of the other of Alfonso's great histories, the *General Estoria*.

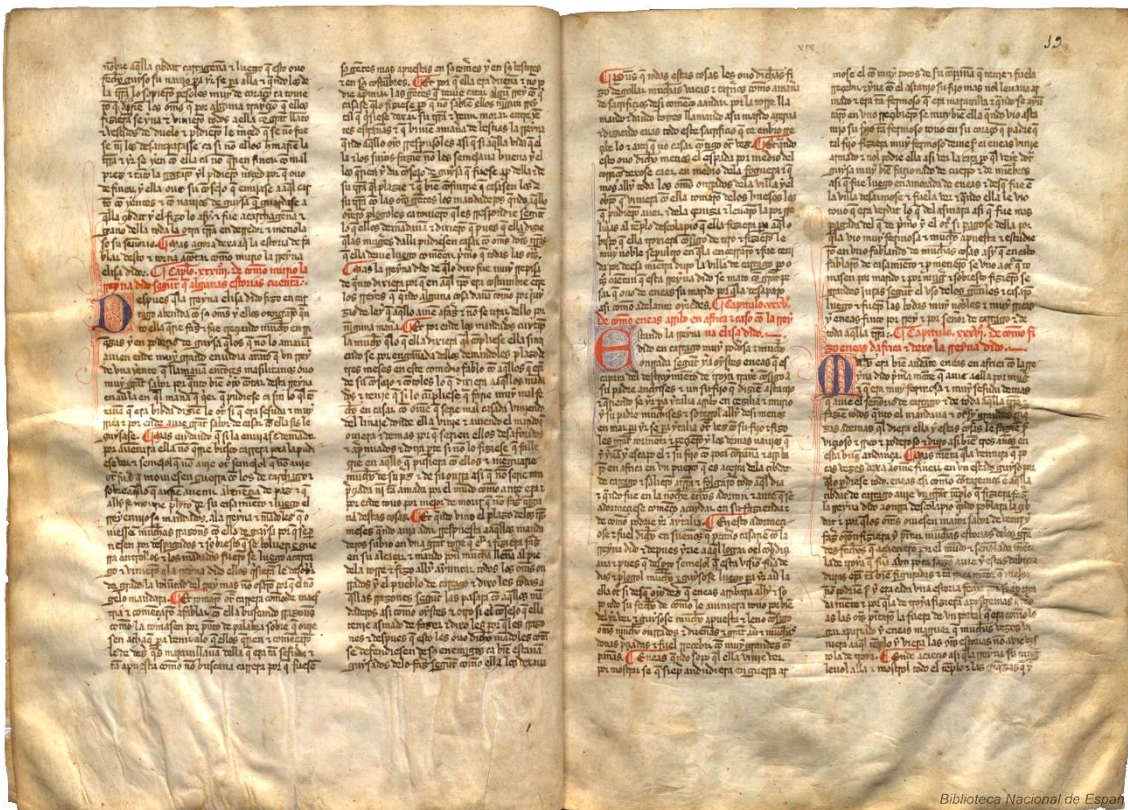


Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fols. 1v-2r

## Parchment

The first impression you have on seeing the manuscript is probably related to the colours. The material on which it is written is not white, like paper. This is because it is parchment, animal skin which has been prepared specially for the purposes of making a book. The different sides of the animal skin (**flesh side** and **hair side**) are also slightly different in colour, so when you turn the page, there is a change of colour. Parchment leaves were gathered in a way that meant that (for example) a flesh side always faced another flesh side, and a hair side faced a hair side. You can see this as we turn the page here:





Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fols. 18v-19r (flesh side, lighter)



Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fols. 19v-20r (hair side, darker)



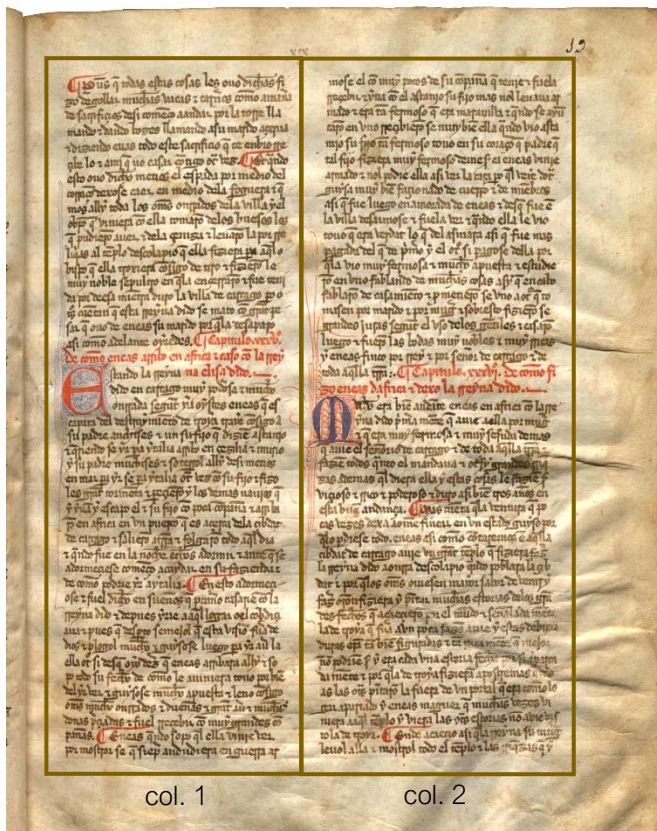
Let's return to the first image, seen again here. You can see on the right-hand page that the opening has become **wrinkled**. Parchment is not as pliable as paper, so these wrinkles remain for a long time. Of course, this means that parchment is also a lot tougher than paper, so often it survives better than paper books do. All of these things mean that the reading experience is different to what we are used to with paper (or digital) books.

## Layout

Another early impression most readers have for the first time concerns the layout of the page and the disposition of the text on the page. As you can see, the text is laid out in **two**



Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fol. 2r



col. 1

col. 2

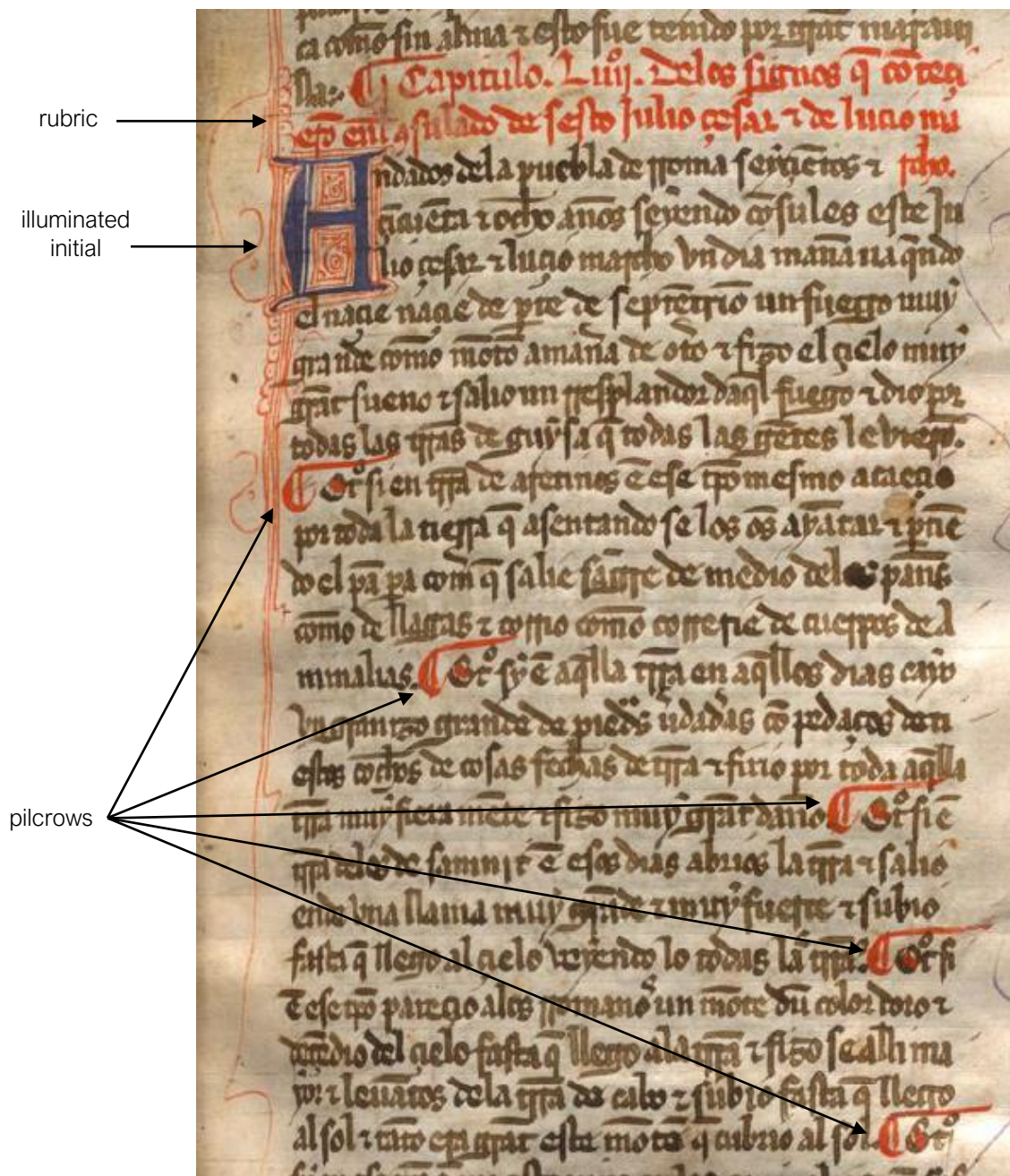
Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fol. 19r

**columns**. This is a very common way of organizing manuscripts at the time. In the *Estoria de Espanna Digital* project we are interested not just in what the text of the manuscript says (although this is of course what is most central for understanding it, and academic study) but also how it is presented and therefore understood at the time. We compare all of the manuscripts of the *Estoria* to see how they are compiled, how they relate to each other, and also to examine the differences between them. We would like your help to identify all of these things so we can draw some conclusions about how people read and understood medieval texts.



## Sections of the text: ink colours, rubrics, initials and pilcrows

In addition to the writing in black or brown, the most common additional colour, which really draws the eye as you can see, is red. The chapter headings, or **rubrics**, are picked out in red, so anyone can instantly spot where a chapter begins. This is also helped by the **illuminated initials**, typically in red or blue and of different sizes depending on the section they introduce; these instantly draw the eye to the textual divisions the authors or scribes wanted to highlight in the manuscript. This is also true of the **pilcrows** ¶, which are something akin to a paragraph marker (you will see something similar in Word documents). The reading experience is therefore different to that of reading a printed book.



Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fol. 27ra

## Reading the text

The opening of the text reads:

*Aqui comjença la coronjca dela gene/ral e grand estoria que el muy noble /  
Rey don alfonso fijo del muy noble / rey don fernando e dela Reyna doña  
be/atriz mando fazer. / Natural cosa / es de cobdici/ar los omnes / saber los /  
fechos que a/caescen en / todos los / tiempos...*

But as you can see, the experience is rather different when we read it directly in the medieval manuscript:



Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. 12837, fol. 2ra

You may find it difficult to recognise words, and the script may seem hard to read at the outset, but you will find that you soon get used to reading the handwriting. It is very regular and your eyes will soon adjust to it.



## Gothic book hand

There were many different handwriting scripts; the one used in the *Estoria de Espanna* manuscript we are transcribing is known as a Gothic book hand, and it is very clear and regular.

### Letter shapes

Many of the letters are shaped just as we still write them now. For example the letters **e**, **p** and **n**.

e p n

Here is the word **bueno**; it looks just like we would write it today. Here is also the definite article **la**.

bueno la

However, some letters look a bit different to how we write them today. For example, here is a **z**, also as part of a word (**fizieran**).

z fiziera

### Ascenders and descenders

For some letters, what we call the ascender, the part of the letter which goes above the average size of the font, does not point straight upwards, as we usually write it but can be oblique or diagonal. For example have a look at this **d**:

d

And some letters have a descender, the part which goes below the line of the rest of the letters, where we would not draw one today, such as the **r** here in the word **entre**:

entre

Scribes sometimes wrote the letter **i** with a descender below the line, so it looks more like our letter **j**. See here in **metje** where the **i** looks like the **r** above with its descender:

metje

But sometimes they wrote an **i** that looks just like we draw them today. Here is **pieça**. In this example you can also see the c-cedilla (**ç**), still used in French, Portuguese and Catalan, which was used to make an /ts/ sound.

**pieça**

Something else to look for is the long **s**, which can easily be confused for an **f**. Here is the word **sobre**. Notice also the round shape of the letter **r**, which is different to the long **r** with a descending stroke we saw earlier in the word **entre**.

**sobre**

And here is **fasta** ('hasta' in modern Castilian), showing both an **f** and a long **s**:

**fasta**

Not all of the **s**'s are long, however, such as this one here (**hercules**):

**hercules**

A **v** at the start of the word can look a little different to our modern eyes too; sometimes the initial stroke is prolonged. Here is the word **vino**:

**vino**

As you can see, the shape of manuscript letters does not always coincide with the current shapes of letters. In other cases, you can see how the same letter has variations, for example the familiar "s" and the long "s"; the "r" with a descender and the rounded "r", the "d" with a diagonal or vertical ascender, and the short and long "i". In all of these cases we transcribe using the same letter (s, r, d etc.) with the sole exception of the long "i", which we transcribe with a "j".

**s** **ſ** = s    **ʁ** **d** = d    **ʀ** **z** = r    **i** **j** i - j



If all of this seems a lot to take in, remember that you will not be transcribing from scratch, but rather correcting an existing transcription from another manuscript - E1, from which this manuscript is copied. Your task is to revise the transcription of E1 so that it matches this manuscript. Looking at the transcription of E1 can often be a big support in helping you to decipher the handwriting in the manuscript you are transcribing, until you get used to reading it.

## Abbreviations

Let's talk about abbreviations. As we all know from note taking and sending text messages, it is frequently more time effective to **abbreviate writing**. Medieval scribes did this all the time, and not least because before the fifteenth century the material on which they were writing was expensive to produce, unlike paper. It therefore made sense to include as much text as possible into each manuscript. It takes a little effort to follow the use of abbreviations, but when you do, and with a little help, you can read very quickly.



These are the most common abbreviations used in our manuscript. We will show you more examples in module 3, but for now, we'll show you the ones you'll see most often.

### Tironian sign

The character that you will see most often is this one: **ꝛ**. This is the Tironian sign which represents the conjunction **y**, **e** or **et**, depending on the language used and the time the manuscript was composed. It emerged as a shorthand way of writing Latin **et**.



### General sign of abbreviation

The other most common abbreviation is the macron, or general sign of abbreviation. It appears over (usually) a preceding letter or letters, and signifies that the following graphic sequence has been abbreviated - especially **ue** or **n**. By far the most common usage of this abbreviation is in the word **que**, which looks like this:



Sometimes the scribes also abbreviate *que* even when it is internal in a word, so you will also see (for example) *aquel* and *aquello* written like this:



The image shows two words in a medieval script. The first word is 'aquel', where the 'que' is abbreviated as a single character 'ql'. The second word is 'aquello', where the 'que' is abbreviated as 'llo'. Both words are written in a dark brown ink with a yellow highlight on the top of the 'a' in each.

Equally important is the use of the macron to indicate that a following nasal consonant has been abbreviated. Thus, in the following example, the word *grant* (meaning 'gran' or 'grande') sees the *n* replaced by a macron over the preceding *a*.



The image shows the word 'grant' in a medieval script. The 'n' is replaced by a macron over the preceding 'a', resulting in 'grāt'. The word is written in a dark brown ink with a yellow highlight on the top of the 'a'.

Scribes frequently use the macron with the value of *n* at the end of words, so you will see this often at the end of verb forms, as in the following examples *fueron* and *fuesen*. But they don't always do this, as you can see in the word *pusieron*.



The image shows three words in a medieval script. The first word is 'fuero', the second is 'fuese', and the third is 'pusieron'. Each word has a macron over the 'o' at the end, indicating a nasal consonant. The words are written in a dark brown ink with a yellow highlight on the top of the 'f' in each.

If you have been wondering why we call the project the *Estoria de Espanna*, with two “n”s, and not *España* with an “ñ”, this is because the palatal nasal was originally represented in Castilian by *nn* (but in Portuguese by *nh*, in French by *gn*, Catalan by *ny* etc.). As a shorthand, scribes started to abbreviate the second one to give *ñ*, and so the *ñ* was born.



The image shows the word 'espanna' in a medieval script. The 'n' is replaced by a macron over the preceding 'a', resulting in 'espanā'. The word is written in a dark brown ink with a yellow highlight on the top of the 'e'.

### Superscript letters

This example also shows another common abbreviation: the superscript *i*. As you can see here, the superscript *i* represents *ui* in the word *quien*, although it would be more accurate to say that it represents the syllable “qui”.



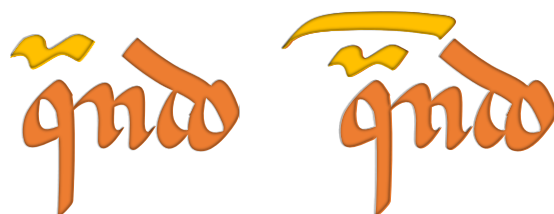
The image shows the word 'quien' in a medieval script. The 'ui' is represented by a superscript 'i' over the 'q', resulting in 'q<sup>i</sup>en'. The word is written in a dark brown ink with a yellow highlight on the top of the 'q'.




Just when you think you understand these abbreviations, you realise that the same abbreviation marker can represent different syllables. In the next example, the verb form *prisieron* (modern 'prendieron') we see that the scribe has used the standard abbreviation for "-on" at the end of the word, and has again used the superscript *i* at the beginning. This time, though, the combination of *p* and superscript *i* represents the sequence *pri*. It can also represent *ir*, as in the example of *virtud*, so when you transcribe for our project, you have to make sure that you choose the right expansion. We'll explain how in other modules.



Another common abbreviation is what looks like two superscript dots, but which is in fact the letter *a*, sometimes with a little line above. Here, the scribe has used it with the letter *q* to represent the sequence *qua* in *quando*:



However, the same abbreviation, used in combination with other letters, can represent different syllables. Thus, in combination with *t*, it represents the syllable *tra* in the word *otra/s*.



A superscript *o* in combination with a *t* represents the syllable *tro*, as in the following examples, *otros* and *troya*:



We can also find a superscript *e* as an abbreviation, as in the example *sobrenombre*:



Yet another common one is the superscript hook. It can represent **re** as in **siempre**, but also **er** as in **tener**. Very occasionally it can represent what we think of as **ir** as in **dezir**.

siemp<sup>r</sup> ten<sup>r</sup> des<sup>r</sup>

#### Other symbols

Another of the most common shorthand characters is **p**, that is, a **p** with the descender crossed. This is most frequently used to represent the syllable **par** as in the case of the conjunction **para**, or internally in a word, as in **partes**. But it is also used for the syllable **per** as in **aperçebir**.

pa<sup>p</sup> ptes<sup>p</sup> apcebr<sup>p</sup>

A particular favourite of the Estoria Digital project is this character: **9**. Here, you can see that it represents **us** as in the possessive adjective **sus**, or at the end of the name **Venus**. But you will also see the same abbreviation used to represent the syllable **con** as in this case, which is the word **consejo**.

s<sup>9</sup> uen<sup>9</sup> 9sejo

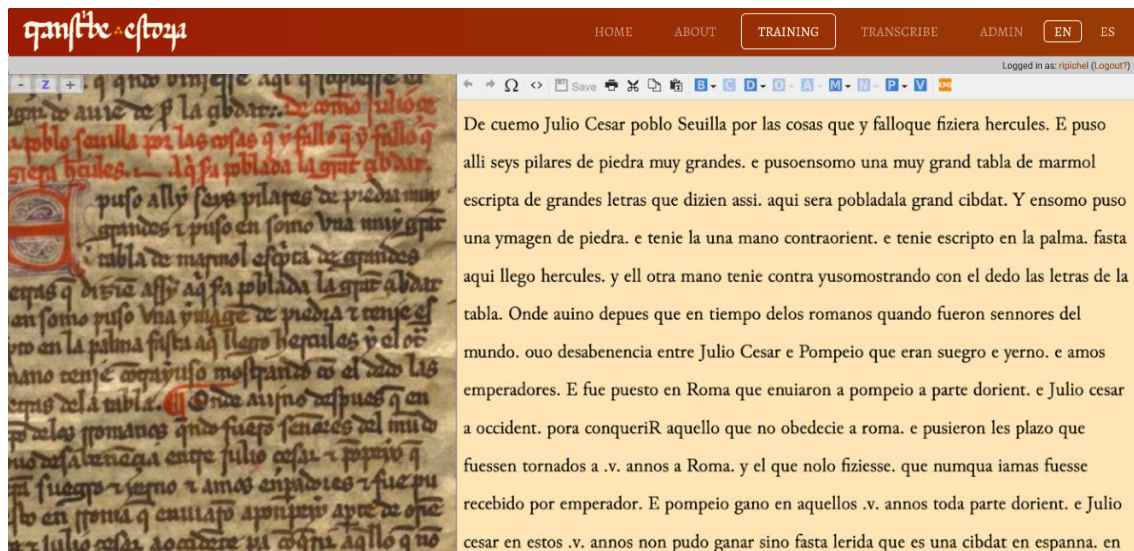
To conclude this brief introduction, we should point out that these are not rigid rules, that scribes are human and that sometimes they do their own thing. Often they will use their **own abbreviations**, simply to ensure that all of the text fits into the line in question. So when we say that the macron is employed to abbreviate a nasal, here is an example where it is used for the vowel **e**, in **razones** (and note the double **rr** at the beginning of the word).

rrason<sup>̄</sup>s

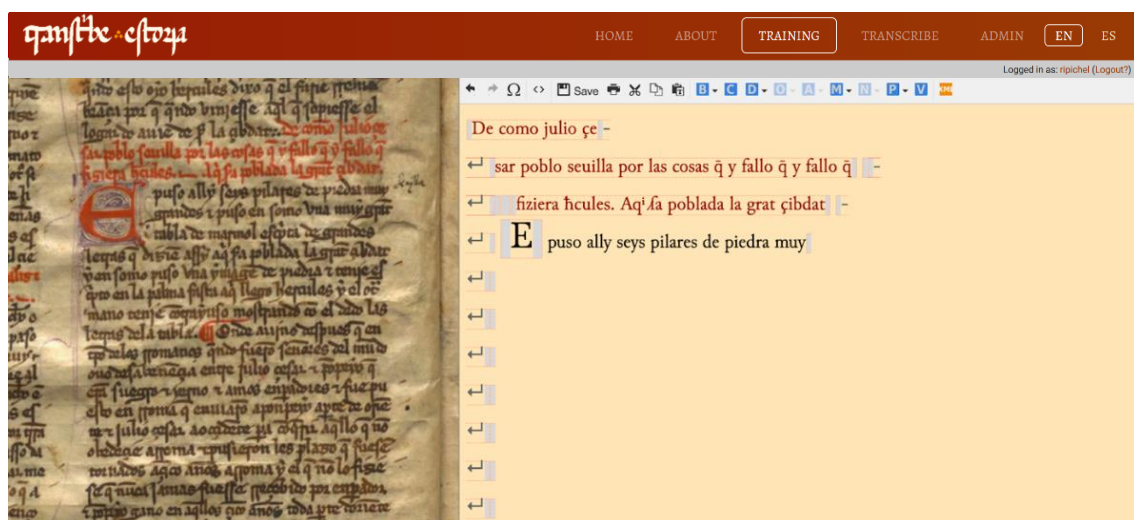


## So, what do we want you to do?

We would like you to help us expand our knowledge of the *Estoria de Espanna*. To do this, we need to be able to compare the text of the Estoria as it was written in Alfonso's *scriptorium* and that of all the other manuscripts. We are interested in all aspects of each manuscript, so we want to record any changes of any kind - graphical, abbreviations, corrections, notes etc. In the transcription tool which we have created, you will see this screen:



On the right is the text of the Alfonsine chronicle (manuscript E1), and we would like you to **rewrite this text** so that it looks **exactly like the image** on the left. The base text on the right may then help you to understand the manuscript text in the image, but remember it is not quite the same, and we want to mark all of the particularities of the manuscript that you find. Thus for example, we would like you to mark that the text in the image in red is a chapter heading or rubric, so it looks like this:



In the next three modules we will show you how the system works and what elements we would like you mark in your transcription.