The Iberian Union and the Portuguese Overseas Empire, 1600-1625: Ormuz and the Persian Gulf in the Global Politics of the Hispanic Monarchy

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Abstract

This article analyzes how the Portuguese overseas empire was integrated into the global politics of the Hispanic monarchy. By studying the conflict of Ormuz in the period between 1600 and 1625 and by seeking parallels with other conflicts scattered throughout the different regions of the empire, it seeks to demonstrate that the evolution of the Portuguese overseas territories during the Iberian union largely depended on the geopolitical priorities of Castile, something which contradicts the thesis of Portuguese political autonomy that historiography has long defended.

Keywords

Iberian Union; Ormuz and the Persian Gulf; Portuguese Overseas Empire; Hispanic Monarchy.

Resumo

Este artigo procura demonstrar a forma como o império ultramarino português foi integrado na política global da Monarquia Hispânica. Analisando o conflito de Ormuz no período compreendido entre 1600 e 1625 e procurando paralelismos com outros conflitos dispersos pelos diferentes espaços do império, procura demonstrar que a evolução dos territórios ultramarinos portugueses durante a União Ibérica dependeu largamente das prioridades geopolíticas de Castela, algo que vem contradizer a tese da autonomia durante muito tempo defendida pela historiografia.

Palavras-chave

União Ibérica; Ormuz e o Golfo Pérsico; império ultramarino português; Monarquia Hispânica.

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Introduction

The conflict of Ormuz at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which resulted in the Portuguese defeat in 1622 and in the consequent loss of this important eastern fortress, is a topic that has been studied almost exclusively in terms of its direct relationship with the decline of the Portuguese empire in Asia. However, the integration of Portugal into the Hispanic monarchy (1580-1640) makes it necessary to consider the global equilibrium of the Habsburg Empire throughout this period. The main purpose of this article is therefore to demonstrate how the question of Ormuz was dealt with in Madrid, while also seeking to understand in what way the evolution of the Portuguese position in the Persian Gulf was conditioned by the perception of, and the importance attributed to, the region in the global politics of the Habsburgs.

For a long time, the effects of the Habsburg government on the politics of the Portuguese empire were generally disregarded by historiographies describing the Portuguese overseas empire and the union of Portugal and Castile. The privileges granted by the Carta Patente of the Cortes de Tomar, which stipulated that the two empires would be kept separate, and that the kingdom of Portugal would retain its autonomy, has led historians to believe that the different Portuguese colonial territories evolved in isolation from the overall evolution of the Hispanic monarchy. Whenever the dynastic union was considered, it was only to find the Catholic monarchs responsible for all the empire’s misfortunes. It is true, however, that the theses of both autonomy and negligence have started to be gradually questioned by an impartial historiography, a historiography that is concerned with the impact of the Habsburg government on the political, economic, social and cultural framework of Portugal and its empire, and which has devoted privileged attention to the Iberian Atlantic world. However, studies about the Portuguese overseas territories in Asia are far rarer, and it is generally still believed that the Habsburg government had no influence whatsoever on the politics of the Estado da Índia and the succession of events that occurred in many of its territories (something that is immediately contradicted by the very existence of works such as the 1582 Livro das Cidades e Fortalezas).

2 There are some authors who, exceptionally, followed the early works of Alice Canabrava, Charles Boxer, and Stuart B. Schwartz.
3 Pedro Cardim makes an excellent survey of the most important works about the Habsburg government and the Portuguese empire in the Atlantic Ocean in Cardim (2004). See also Studnicki-Gizbert (2007) and Marques (2009).
4 Consider the exceptions of Subrahmanyam (1993 and 2007), Boyajian (1993), Valladares (2001), and Costa (2002). Because of all their interactions with Manila, the Portuguese territories in the Far East developed a different dynamics from the Portuguese territories in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, so that they have...