Relations between Portugal and Castile in the Late Middle Ages - 13th-16th centuries

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Abstract

A study of the intense diplomatic relations maintained between the Portuguese and Leonese, afterwards Castilian-Leonese, monarchies throughout the Middle Ages. They were dotted with a series of agreements relating to the internal problems of each kingdom, the mutual relations and the general political situation in the Iberian Peninsula. These relations, except for specific moments of brief warfare, which were sometimes very serious, were friendly and familiar. This didn't exclude the occurrence of frictions resulting from contrary interests. On both sides of the frontier very similar problems were faced: dynastic confrontations or rebellions of the nobility in which both monarchies usually collaborated closely. Castilian expansion and the resulting imbalance of power in its favour, was the cause of the gravest tensions.

Key words

Diplomatic Relations, Castile, International Treaties

Relations between the Portuguese monarchy and the monarchies of Leon or Castile (the Kingdom of Castile was the historical continuation of the Kingdom of Leon) after the unification of the latter two kingdoms show a profundity, intensity and continuity not to be found among any of the other peninsular kingdoms during the Middle Ages, even though these were also very close. The bond between the two went far beyond merely diplomatic relations. The matrimonial unions between the two were so strong and frequent that it is possible to claim that both kingdoms were ruled by a single dynasty during the entire Middle Ages.1 Despite this, any attempt by one or the other to unify both kingdoms was destined to failure, and more often than not, to harsh confrontation leading to prolonged resentment and suspicions which were difficult to overcome.2 The very close relations are, in my opinion, the result of a common historical, cultural, and mental identity, but also of an awareness of the differences between their respective personalities. I make this claim without wishing to give credit to nationalist viewpoints which I consider to be out of place and inadequate for historical analysis.

1 This claim may seem to be exaggerated. However, I think it is fully endorsed by the frequent matrimonial alliances between the two ruling families. Five of the nine kings of the first Portuguese dynasty had Castilian wives: Alfonso II, Sancho II, Alfonso III, Alfonso IV, and Pedro I (and to some degree the same could be said of Fernando I). Leonor, wife of Duarte, was also Castilian, even if she was considered to be “Aragonese”, and so were the three successive wives of Manuel I. A very similar panorama is seen in the marriages of the kings of Leon and Castile. Fernando I, Alfonso IX, Fernando IV, Alfonso XI, Juan I, Juan II and Enrique IV all married Portuguese princesses, a tradition which carried through to the 16th century.

2 I am referring to, on the Portuguese side, to Fernando I’s claim to the Castilian throne, which didn’t have further consequences and to a similar claim by Alfonso V, which lead to his involvement in the Castilian Civil War. On the Castilian side, we have Juan I, whose claim to the Portuguese throne lead to violent confrontation, a civil war in Portugal, and to the disaster of Aljubarrota.