chapter 2

From Royal Household to Royal Court: Patronage as a Political Strategy

Built high on the hill that bears its name, the Castelo São Jorge overlooks the Lisbon harbour. During the Reconquista the earthworks, which had been in use since antiquity, had been rebuilt as a stone-keep castle. Its barbicans afforded occupants a high degree of protection from invaders—and those keeping watch could see miles downriver. By the mid-fifteenth century the palace of the Alcáçova, built just outside the original castle, had become the main residence of the Portuguese court in Lisbon. João II had been born in this palace in 1455 and a successor and namesake, João III (1521–57), would be born here too in 1502. But by this time, the castle and palaces had grown too cramped for the expanding royal household. And in 1509, Manuel I moved the court from its well-fortified location, to a sprawling palace on the banks of the Tagus: exchanging security for wider access to the outside world. When it was finished, the new Ribeira Palace was among the most opulent and luxurious royal residences in Europe, and had truly become the centre of the kingdom.

The relocation of the court from the Castelo São Jorge to the Ribeira Palace in the early sixteenth century embodied a shift from a more medieval configuration of the Portuguese royal court to one that was more modern. In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, the court transitioned from an impermanent entity, merely an extension of the king’s household, to a more permanent institution that operated as the hub of a political network controlled by the Portuguese crown. Of course, a complete shift did not take place in the sixteenth century, and the Portuguese royal court continued to wax and wane and wander throughout the early modern period. But a major expansion of the royal household seems to have taken place during the reign of Manuel I, an expansion which contributed to a major change in the royal itinerary, as well as the political and bureaucratic development of Portugal. These changes were deeply related to the unfolding of the Portuguese overseas expansion and were transformed by Portugal’s involvement in the Indian Ocean Spice Trade.

There is little doubt that the sustained expansion of the royal household at the turn of the sixteenth century was attributable to the increased wealth of the Portuguese crown. This expansion was not however, an afterthought or a ‘caving-in’ to political pressure exuded by rapacious elites as it has sometimes been portrayed. Manuel I’s use of political patronage, especially during the
early years of his reign, was guided by a need to bridge factions that had formed in the aftermath of the War of the Castilian Succession and to walk a fine diplomatic line with regards to Portugal’s relationship with Castile. The surge in the number of aristocratic titles and the inflation in the size of the royal household were related, as the new king sought to bolster his affinity with both the elites and municipalities. To achieve this objective, he first drew on the lands and privileges that belonged to him as the Duke of Beja, Lord of the Isles and the Head of the Order of Christ. After about 1506, he was able to draw on revenues from the Estado da Índia, which would come pouring into the warehouse known as the Casa da Índia.

Historians of the modern era have typically praised those kings who curbed the privileges of the nobility, or to use the famed expression of J.R. Lander, those who broke their proverbial teeth.1 But the parsimony of jaw-breakers like Henry VII of England or João II of Portugal was exercised in periods of extreme financial dearth. As K.B. McFarlane and J. Russell-Major pointed out more than half a century ago, medieval and early modern kings operated in quasi-feudal power-structures and ruled through the manipulation of systems of political patronage. Prior to the establishment of standing armies and police forces, these networks of lords and retainers or patrons and clients formed the backbone of political life.2 The royal household was merely not the milieu of sycophants as described by twelfth century poet Walter Map, nor the parasitic organism that ate away the surplus of the nation, depicted by sociologists and historians of the early twentieth century.3 The royal household or court was the hub of the political network, whose spokes reached out to the localities.

**Political Utility of Large Households**

The so-called ‘new monarchs’ of the sixteenth century were certainly not the first to recognize the political utility of a large household. Prior kings of Portugal were very aware that the royal household was the main vehicle through which they could exercise political patronage. Rita Costa Gomes has drawn attention to the way in which Portuguese rulers used the practice of criação to cultivate political affinities with important noble families. *Criação*

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