The most tumultuous century in Castilian medieval history was that which was largely covered by the reigns of the last two monarchs of the Trastámara dynasty, Juan II (1406–1454) and Enrique IV (1454–1474). However, although this was a time of conflict in which internal struggles tore the kingdom of Castile apart, it was also a period that saw the creation of an “absolutist” ideology of royal power accompanied by a great flowering of humanism, making it possible to consider these two monarchs the earliest representatives of a Castilian political Renaissance.\(^1\) Political justification of the dynasty had already been established during the earlier reigns of Enrique II and Juan I, by means of carefully orchestrated propaganda which manipulated the historical memory of previous reigns. In addition, the succession issue had been definitively solved by the marriage between Enrique III and Catalina of Lancaster, descendants of each branch of the Castilian royal family.

The long minority of Juan II, lasting from 1406 to 1418, determined much of what was to occur during his subsequent reign. At his death, Juan’s father Enrique III had left as co-regents his widow Catalina of Lancaster and his brother the infante Fernando. As soon as Enrique III died, the two regents engaged in direct confrontation, with each trying to impose a different dynastic policy on Castile. Catalina’s aim was to aggrandise the monarchy by creating ties with her own English and Portuguese royal families, whereas Don Fernando sought to further the careers of his numerous children and promote good relations with France and Aragón, the traditional policy under Enrique III.\(^2\)

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In 1412 Fernando was elected king of Aragón, but he retained a tight hold on the reins of his regency of Castile through various delegates and noblemen. Fernando worked hard to extend his family’s power in both kingdoms until his death in 1416. His son Alfonso inherited the Aragonese crown, and two other sons were to play a fundamental role in Castilian politics as the so-called “infantes of Aragón”. These two sons were the infante Enrique, Master of the Order of Santiago from 1409 and the inheritor of a large fortune from his mother, Leonor of Albuquerque, and the infante Juan, first heir and then king of Navarre, who inherited the lands belonging to his father in Castile. Two strategic marriages were made in an effort to tighten the circle around Juan II of Castile: Maria of Aragón, sister to the infantes, married Juan himself, and Juan’s sister, Maria of Castile, was married to Alfonso V of Aragón. (This marriage could only be realised under the auspices of the infantes of Aragón in 1418, after the death of Catalina of Lancaster, who had been consistently opposed to the project.)

Although Queen Catalina was accused of withdrawing her son from the reach of the nobles and keeping him away from court circles, a close reading of contemporary historical chronicles makes it clear that it was in fact Don Fernando who was the direct or indirect cause of this removal, because the queen lived in constant fear that her brother-in-law might seize the young king from her. Nevertheless, Juan II did make public appearances at a number of festivities and key ceremonies, and during his childhood he was taken to those Castilian cities which were habitual places of royal residence: among the cities he visited were Valladolid, Segovia, Ayllón and Salamanca. The queen’s court was made up of a clique whose power had been partly curtailed by Fernando—he was, for example, able to persuade Catalina to banish her personal favourite, Leonor López de Córdoba, from court. However, Catalina’s clique continued to support the queen throughout her complex political crisis, and the young nobleman Álvaro de Luna, later to become Juan II’s personal valido, first appeared within this circle.

Juan II’s reign as such can be sub-divided into several periods: the first, from the moment he reached the age of majority until his first clash with the infantes of Aragón, during which time he was supported by Álvaro de Luna (1418–1420); the second from 1420 until the valido’s first fall from grace as