CHAPTER TWO

THE MOORISH KNIGHTS,
FROM THE FRONTIER TO THE COURT

Granada, Castile and their intermediaries

And many days passed between armistices and truces, skirmishes and disputes, lawsuits and legal actions, conformity and dissension, belligerence and reconciliation, and the king of the infidels [Juan II] was left with no hope but to adulate Islam and the Muslims, to scheme against believers, hide the intrigue from the faithful to the one God and hide his deceit from the striving combatants, for while he pretended to be making great efforts to procure the greatest prosperity for the homeland [Granada], and to harbour the best intentions for its inhabitants, and pretended also to be seriously concerned with resolving its affairs and with endeavouring to attend to the well-being of nobles and plebeians, he was in fact doing no more than smacking his lips and using his cunning to seek the perdition of the realm and thereby become able to conquer it.

Ibn 'Asim, Yunnat al-ridda

In the 15th century, Castile was the only peninsular Christian kingdom which bordered on the lands of Islam; Aragón also sought to play a central role in diplomatic relations with Granada because of its interests in the Mediterranean region. This general situation determined the nature of relations between the three kingdoms. Relations between Castile and Granada were of an openly bellicose nature; those between Granada and Aragón were commercial; whereas the relationship which existed between Castile and Aragón was characterised by fierce rivalry and the attempts of domination of Aragón by its more powerful neighbour. Of all the Granadan sultans mentioned in the previous chapter, it was Muhammad IX who maintained the closest relations with the Aragonese, and this had its influence on Castilian interventions to back a series of alternative candidates to the throne.

1 The text is included by al-Maqqari in his work, Nafḥ al-Tib, and is translated into Spanish in the article by F. Velázquez Basanta, “La relación histórica sobre las postrimerías del reino de Granada, según Ahmad al-Maqqari (s. XVII)” in En el epílogo del Islam andalusí: la Granada del siglo XV, ed. C. del Moral, Granada, 2002, p. 491.

2 Given that relations between Granada and Aragón have been amply covered by R. Salicrú, El sultanat, I will focus here on the relationship of greatest importance to the content of this book, i.e. that between Granada and Castile.
Various tactics were used by Castile, the dominant realm, in its policy towards Granada, which was the weakest of the three but was not always in complete subjection. First of all, there was the practice of war, which brought immense profits to the Castilians, although it is not clear to what extent these profits were greater than the money accrued from Granada during truce periods. At the state level, there were two different kinds of military initiative. First, conventional campaigns or wars of conquest, based on a strategy of positions and sieges, which only rarely ended in a pitched battle. On the other hand, economic or gradually erosive warfare, characterised by razing campaigns and small-scale punitive raids punctuated by truces from which the Castilians sought to obtain the greatest possible profits in terms of captives and the payment of punitive parias. However, war was also waged at another, more local, level on the frontier. There, it was characterised by the organisation of small cavalry charges or larger raids which set out from the border municipalities (especially Jaén, Seville, Lorca and Murcia) and which were backed by the great Andalusian landlords.

Diplomacy was the other favoured method of Castilian intervention in Granada. At the highest levels, this included, in times of peace, the imposition on Granadan sultans of an oath of vassalage, used as an institutional instrument for the subjection of the Nasrid kingdom. When such a strategy proved impossible, Castile made alliances with factions inside the kingdom in attempts to impose new candidates of varying legitimacy to the throne. Even in times of war, diplomatic contacts could become another way of conducting an offensive, during periods when truces and the surrender of castles were being negotiated.

Indeed, it has to be recognised that all of these military and diplomatic activities normally took place at the same time. This can create a misleading impression of confusion in relations between the two kingdoms, especially if certain aspects of internal politics mentioned above are not taken into account. Viewed in its entirety, the Granadan policy initiated by Juan II—or to be more accurate, the policy implemented by Fernando de Antequera and Álvaro de Luna during Juan II’s reign—and further pursued by Enrique IV generally prefigured that of the Catholic Kings during their war on Granada.

Chronicles of the period constantly stress the importance of Castilian raids on Nasrid territory. Such raids were good opportunities for kings and noblemen to show off their skills and gain fame and glory. Many lineages were created on the basis of a fortunate intervention in the war on Muslims, and military deeds were used to justify family honour via the chronicle of the founder of the noble house. The ideals of crusading (the struggle against