CHAPTER 11

The Kingdom of Galicia and the Monarchy of Castile-León in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*

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Like many political territories in Europe, contemporary Galicia is the heir of one that took shape in the central Middle Ages, specifically in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The kingdom of Galicia which emerged after 1100 bore the name of the late Roman province of Gallaecia, but occupied a smaller region. The nucleus of the ancient province and its capital Bracara Augusta (modern Braga) lay beyond the borders of the newly configured kingdom of the twelfth century. Moreover, the medieval kingdom of Galicia would remain part of the kingdom of León. After both were permanently joined with Castile in 1230, Galicia became just one more of the numerous kingdoms that made up what is customarily known as the Crown of Castile.

Within this ensemble, the kingdom of Galicia retained a distinctive character, based partly on the Galician language which differentiated it from the rest of the Crown of Castile and linked it more closely with neighboring Portugal. Galician society, however, manifested other distinguishing features as well, and, from the thirteenth century onward, a separate administrative and fiscal structure was established for the region. Historians have particularly highlighted the political and economic power and social position of the church in Galicia, and made this the explanation for the relative poverty of the lay aristocracy and the diminishing interest of the Castilian kings in the region after 1230. According to this narrative, the monarchy lost direct political authority over much of Galicia, because of the royal concession of cotos—territories protected by immunities from royal intervention—to cathedrals and monasteries during the twelfth century. Moreover, the Galician cities with episcopal sees

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were all under the lordship of their respective bishops. Outside of Galicia, this was true only of Oviedo, Palencia, and Sigüenza. In addition, the archbishop of Compostela extended his lordship over important towns founded by the monarchs. Urban development in Galicia has also been customarily tied to the economic activity of the monasteries, particularly the Cistercian houses, for this would have been critical to the growth of towns which, after 1230, rarely saw a king who normally resided in Castile or Andalusia.

In a word, the medieval history of Galicia appears to hinge on the year 1230 when, with León, it was integrated into the Crown of Castile created by Fernando III. Thanks to its isolation in the far northwest and the powerful role of the church, the kingdom would fade in importance for the monarchs whose policy towards the region changed dramatically. A period of relative neglect began, in sharp contrast with the twelfth century and the first decades of the thirteenth when Galicia enjoyed a political prominence that it would never again recapture. In the late Middle Ages, the monarchy would simply follow the pattern set by Fernando III and his immediate successors. The alleged disregard for the region by the Castilian kings was underscored by the rarity of their visits. Even when they did appear, their visits have typically been understood merely as signs of devotion to St. James, whose shrine they approached as faithful pilgrims.¹

In this article, I aim to demonstrate that the monarchy never lost interest in the kingdom of Galicia, despite the evident changes in royal policy resulting from the unification of Castile and León in 1230. Nor was Galicia’s situation unique, for the king could no longer be present in all the territories he governed within the vastly enlarged Crown of Castile. Nor did the importance of the seigneurial powers of the church imply the monarchy’s neglect of the region, for, as we shall see, the kingdom of Galicia, like other territories, was the setting for important measures taken by the Crown, notwithstanding the region’s distinctive characteristics.

The Shaping of the Kingdom of Galicia in the First Half of the Twelfth Century

Despite the heritage of late Roman and early medieval Galicia, contemporary Galicia is the heir of the kingdom which began to be defined in the first decades of the twelfth century, from the last years of the reign of Alfonso VI through that

¹ All these assertions appear in general histories of Galicia and, to a lesser degree, in histories of Spain: Andrade and Pérez Rodríguez (1995) and, most recently, Portela and Pallares (2007).