CHAPTER 8

From Politics to Prophecies: Portuguese Resistance and the Prophetic Arsenal at the Time of King Philip of Spain

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In Portugal during the late Middle Ages and at the dawn of Early Modern period, news about prophets and prophecies was rare and scarce. One example is Fernão Lopes’ account that the Master of Aviz, the future John I, before killing the Count of Andeiro, had consulted a fortuneteller who lived very close to the monastery of S. Francisco, who advised him not to leave Lisbon as, “God will be pleased if he is the ruler” (a Deos prazia de ell seer rregedor).¹ For sure, another was a prophetic ambience that was present in the Portuguese court at the time of D. Manuel.² Or yet, along the sixteenth century, there were the famous Trovas of the cobbler of Trancoso, Bandarra, written around 1530;³ and later the case of Simão Gomes, the “holy shoemaker”.⁴ However there was a period in the history of Portuguese culture with a series of elements that testify to a particularly ardent atmosphere in the reading and circulation of texts in this genre. We refer to the times roughly between the disaster at Ksar el-Kebir and the end of the rule of King Philip IV (1578–1640).

The description by Pero Roiz Soares is interesting. Throughout his book Memorial he recounts the “mishaps of this afflicted kingdom”.⁵ Describing the

³ In a first phase, he had extraordinary popularity mainly in the New-Christian community and, thus, attracted inquisitorial censorship in 1541. In the court’s perspective, the text, which the inquisitors had, was about to unjustifiably suffer interpretations of messianic tones. João Carlos Gonçalves Serafim, “Gonçalo Anes, o Bandarra, Sapateiro de Trancoso” (master’s thesis, University of Porto, 1996), 64–84.
⁴ José Adriano de Freitas Carvalho, “Um Profeta de Corte na Corte: The case (1562–1576) of Simão Gomes, the Sapateiro Santo (1516–1576)”, in Espiritualidade e Corte em Portugal (Séculos XVI a XVIII) (Porto, 1993), 237.
dramatic atmosphere upon receiving the tragic news from Ksar el-Kebir, he says there was no “witchcraft, nor divination, nor devout man or woman who did not get involved”, and explored “the ladies” and “the noblewomen”, so that it seemed to be “a Pentecost of the witches, who even went to Aljube Prison to search for them [the witches]”. Soares adds: “Look at... the deception that existed there”. And there is news that, within the same context, the prophecies of Bandarra, which the Holy Office court had prohibited in 1541, were copied and read extensively in an attempt to find answers to the many uncertainties in them.

After the death of Cardinal D. Henrique, the nationalists hope for Portuguese autonomy was concentrated particularly on D. Antônio, Prior of Crato, who on August 25, 1580, in the Alcântara valley with a group of improvised troops, challenged a large and well-armed force commanded by the Duke of Alba. For his most loyal followers, it was the beginning of long years of failure and suffering. After a brief exile in France, Antônio and his followers participated in an expedition commanded by General Filipe Strozzi, and later in one coordinated by Commander Chaste at Terceira Island. Moreover, starting in 1583, they spent twelve long and painful years in exile in France and England, with occasional moments of hope, but always condemned to failure.

When D. Antônio’s expectations were thwarted, there was no lack of shrewd spirits to muster other solutions. One of the most daring was D. João de Castro, grandson and namesake of a famous viceroy of India. In 1587, at a time the Prior of Crato was still alive and had left England with another distinguished Portuguese man, D. Antônio de Meneses, Castro, tired of so many setbacks and disillusioned with governmental inaction and the ingratitude of the exiled suitor, channeled his dissatisfaction by “inventing” the idea that King Sebastian was still alive, an idea anchored in prophetic speculations. In “Discurso falando com El Rey Dom Sebastiam”, his first work – written in Paris in a single day, July 25, 1588 – Castro wrote:

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