De koning, het zwaard en de moraal. Het koningschap in de vorstenspiegels uit Castillie-Leon, circa 1230-1350

Tang, F.R.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Summary

King, sword and morals
Kingship in the mirrors of princes from Castile-León, c. 1230-1350

The genre of the ‘mirror of princes’, which aimed at educating and advising the king (or future king), gained a particular popularity in the kingdom of Castile-León from the middle of the thirteenth century. The background for this bloom was the revival of intellectual and cultural life that took place during those days, a revival that was actively stimulated by the royal court. Besides, this period saw a significant increase in the importance of the institution of kingship, which — while developing an ever more complex governmental machinery — started to assume responsibilities and monopolize rights that until then it had shared with feudal barons and ecclesiastical lords. In this study seven mirrors from the aforementioned kingdom — all written between 1230 (the year Castile and León were united) and 1350 (the year Alfonso XI died) — have been examined: the Libro de los doze sabios, the Siete partidas (especially its second part), Juan Gil de Zamora’s De preconiis Hispanie, Castigos (attributed to Sancho IV), Juan Manuel’s Libro de los estados, Álvaro Pelayo’s Speculum regum and Juan García de Castrojeriz’s Glosa on Giles of Rome’s De regimine principum.

The authors of these works did not strive after originality. They diligently copied from popular anthologies, chronicles, collections of exempla and moralistic, philosophical-theological tracts. The number of sources they directly consulted is in most cases surprisingly small. The countless references to the Fathers, classical philosophers and other authorities therefore are no evidence of the extent of the authors’ erudition, as is sometimes thought. Besides, most often the writers did not succeed in organizing their materials into a new coherent unity. Their works teem with inconsistencies and repetitions. We cannot speak of ‘political theories’ proper. Still, we can discover certain trends in their ideas about kingship. Reading their works, it soon becomes clear that, despite their stressing different aspects, they share a common set of basic principles.

Most important and central to their political thought is the idea of the divine origin of royal authority. Whether it happens in a ‘natural’ way, by divine disposition or only as a result of God’s indulgence, the king always receives his power ultimately from God. Combined with the images of the king as ‘emperor in his kingdom’, as señor natural and as the ‘head’ or ‘heart and soul’ of the ‘body’ of the kingdom — the kingdom to which the concept of the patria is applied — this idea provides kingship with an almost unshakeable foundation. The royal institution then rests on a strong basis and the powers of its incumbent are extended, but they are in no way unlimited. Although we can distinguish the emerging ideological structures of a powerful, sovereign monarchy, there is not much evidence for the tendency towards absolutism noted by some historians already in this phase of Castilian history. That is, there is no more evidence than in other territorial kingdoms of the age, where we meet the same ambiguity when it comes to issues like the position of the king with regard to the law, the right balance between royal capacities and subjects’ rights, the desirability of consultation and consent, the problem of the tyrant and the right of resistance.

Our authors do express certain ideas rather prematurely and with a remarkable clarity — without doubt partly the result of circumstances that were specific to Spain, especially royal leadership in the Reconquest. However, their ideas do not diverge from the main trends in political thought in other kingdoms of Latin Christendom. Even their statements concerning the king’s relationship with the Church are conventional. The concept of the ‘liberty of Spain’, which is connected with the dawning ‘national’ consciousness of the age, so present in the work of Juan Gil de Zamora, exempts the Castilian kings not only from the imperial authority, but also from the papal authority, i.e. as far as secular affairs are concerned. But it is significant that apart from
this the opinions of our authors do not reflect the position the king of Castile had gained himself in practice: nobody concedes him any special rights in ecclesiastical matters. We meet the idea that the clergy, as part of the 'body politic', has to make a contribution to the defence of the realm, but for the rest nobody goes any further than assuming a separation of temporal and spiritual powers, both independent within their own sphere. This means that the king receives his power, symbolized by the temporal sword, directly from God, without intervention from the priesthood, but also that he has to respect the privileges and liberties of that priesthood. There is no 'caesaropapism'; a 'national' church under royal guidance is still far afield. Besides, the independence of the temporal power does not go unquestioned: some authors interpret the relationship between kingship and priesthood in a hierocratic fashion. Most radical is Álvaro Pelayo, who not only vehemently denounces royal interference with ecclesiastical matters, but also stresses that on the strength of his superiority within both spheres the pope can depose any prince in case he shows himself to be unworthy of his dignity.

Given the foundations our authors ascribe to kingship and the limitations they set to it, it is no surprise that their vision of the ideal incumbent of that office is not very remarkable either. Apparently they were too much imbued with the concepts they had become familiar with through their training and sources – both, training and sources, were universal by nature – to create their own ideal king, starting from their acquaintance with Castilian reality. Sometimes it seems that worldly, chivalrous traits are more present than is usual in the portrait of the perfect Christian ruler, especially in the Libro de los doze sabios, which attaches much importance to real, effective power. Appreciation of martial qualities and pragmatism can also be detected in our other sources, but never – not even in Doze sabios – are they in contradiction to the ideal of the virtuous king. The conventional character of the Castilian ideal king is confirmed by the examples of 'good' and 'evil' rulers with which the writers illustrate their admonitions.

Like their colleagues from other countries our authors are aware of the fact that practically no ruler meets their high moral standards. Most of them, particularly those who are writing at royal request, do not dare to criticize ruling kings. Instead, they blame the 'hypocritical', corrupt courtiers and royal servants for the abuses they meet in society. Juan Gil de Zamora and Álvaro Pelayo, both friars minor, however, direct their attacks mainly to the masters themselves. This proves that it is an oversimplification to represent mirrors of princes as mere works of royal propaganda as students of Hispanic literature tend to do. Their authors often had their own particular intentions in writing them and those intentions did not necessarily coincide with royal interests.

All the same, all writers accept kingship as a work of divine providence; even in the eyes of the most critical authors the king is God's steward or servant. Our authors firmly adhere to the idea of theocratic kingship. However, it remains to be seen if this supports Nieto Soria's claim that, even though the kings of Castile were not anointed, Castilian kingship was as sacral as its French and English counterparts. This would only be the case if we were to undo the term 'sacral' from its liturgical, ritualistic connotations and give it a much broader sense than it usually gets when applied to medieval kingship. Still, it is clear that in intellectual circles in Castile-León people thought and spoke of kingship in more or less the same way as in other kingdoms of the age. We should not overestimate the role of this elite, but neither should we underestimate it. As permanent or occasional royal clerks, counsellors, ambassadors or confessors they could, albeit only to a certain degree, influence royal conduct and policy. Besides, some of our mirrors were written by order of a ruling king, sometimes even with his personal collaboration. This means that the ideas expressed in these works at least must have met with the royal approval. This seems to confirm Nieto Soria's conclusion that all late medieval monarchies were confronted with similar problems, which they tried to solve with similar solutions. The process may have had its special characteristics in each kingdom, but all over Europe the divine origin of royal power was invoked to justify the ever growing pretensions of monarchy and to overcome oppositional forces, whether
the monarchy in question made use of an elaborate system of liturgical rituals or not. Yet, we should keep in mind that the idea of theocratic kingship did not merely legitimize royal power; it also circumscribed it at the same time by showing the king his responsibilities and duties. In order to attain the glory of the Heavenly Kingdom, which was his utmost reward, he had to fulfill the task God had imposed upon him. This was only possible with the help of the royal virtues taught by our authors.
Blijkbaar: Stamboom van de Castiliaanse dynastie

Alle personen die in de lessen worden vermeld of nodig zijn om de onderlinge relaties te kunnem volgen zijn opgenomen.