Introduction

The Iberian Queen’s Households: Dynamics, Social Strategies, and Royal Power

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Diana Pelaz Flores
UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Abstract: The study of royal households has undergone a remarkable development in recent years. Thanks to the appearance of works on their composition, family strategies, or specific people at the service of queens and infantas, it is possible to raise new analytical questions, or to focus on lesser-known stages, such as the queens’ youth. The company and service of officers, ladies-in-waiting, maidens, or servants contributed to the creation of a “circle of security” for the infanta and later for the queen, but also of a political instrument, and even of a cultural agent if necessary. The examination of the royal environment of Iberian queens and infantas allows us to understand exchanges in court codes and etiquette, or the demonstration of royal authority over a bordering territory. The comparative study of the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula reflects the ability of royal women when it comes to introducing changes in the composition of the household, as well as being key to understanding the motivations of the personnel at their service. Thus, the objectives of this monographic issue are vindication of queenly authority from the first demonstrations of her political capacity, and contextualization of the changes and decisions orchestrated within the queen’s household through some previously unknown cases in the Late Middle Ages and the early modern eras.

Key Words: Queen’s Households; Iberia; Queenship; Social Networks; Comparative Studies.

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Closely related to studies of the courtly space, the queen’s household provides a platform to study the queen beyond her immediate person. In particular, studying the household stimulates a better understanding of the functioning and synergies of the court environment in a broader sense. The household’s constitution was ordered by the king after their marriage, a step taken automatically. The queen’s household existed in Iberia since at least the beginning of the thirteenth century, although there is evidence of officers at the queen’s service since the beginning of the High Middle Ages. The queens’ and infantas’ households have recently attracted increasing attention from scholars who specialise in the study of the monarchy.

The household was a complex organism, made up of a very large group of people,
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which must be understood as a living entity in itself. In general terms, the
compositional scheme of the queen’s household was homogeneous both inside and
outside the Iberian Peninsula. Beyond the nominal changes in trades, the
households were concentrated around a limited set of departments in which their
trades gradually diversified as the medieval period progressed. The existence of a
common evolutionary framework across households reflects a process of growth
and diversification of court trades, parallel to that experienced by the government
institutions of the kingdom. The expansion of state structures and bureaucratic
development had a positive impact on court growth.6

Service to the royal family allowed a system of social advancement and was
therefore beneficial to noble and oligarchic families, as well as various religious
groups. In the queen’s household, this process was parallel to that experienced by
the king’s household. In fact, it is possible to distinguish a similar structure between
both, thanks to the grouping of servants in the same departments. Each of them is
made up of a varied set of categories of courtly service, according to their functions
in relation to the king or queen. The departments are distributed around the palace
service (the organisation of the household, the pantry, or the table service), the
treasury (revenue of economic resources), the chancery, the chapel, and the
chamber. However, in the former, the so-called “chamber system” fostered an
extraordinary growth of this department within the courtly sphere from the
thirteenth century onwards.7 The level of elaboration and specialisation oscillated
from one kingdom to another. For example, the female entourage in the Crown of
Aragon presents a complexity unmatched in the Iberian Peninsula. The composition
of the household was subject to the incorporation of new trades, many of which
were “imported” from the place of origin of the new queen. The “cobijeras,” a type of
maid of Muslim origin, present in the female entourages of the Crown of Castile,
appeared in the Late Middle Ages in Navarre and Aragon: in the first case, due to the
influence of Leonor of Trastamara (r. 1375-1416); in the second, by the hand of María

7 Rita Costa Gomes, “Para uma história do silêncio: o mundo do cortesão entre a Idade Média,” in A Arte
of Castile (r. 1416-1458). Similarly, “continos,” and “continas,” servants entrusted with special missions requested by the queen, joined the Court of Castile from Portugal after the celebration of the wedding of Juana of Portugal (r. 1455-1474) with Enrique IV of Castile.

There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. On the one hand, the transference of trades and roles between kingdoms may have responded to the monarch’s will to create a domestic (and familiar) environment typical of the bride’s court of origin. On the other hand, it may have been in response to the ability of the paternal court to impose its particularities, perhaps also to influence the receiving court’s etiquette and customs. In any case, it demonstrates the household’s permeability as a living organism, subject to change, with the desire to stand out and create its own history and identity based on the people who lead it. In addition to the existence of a common language regarding courtly service, modern scholars have paid attention to the details that distinguish the royal houses. The monarchy managed to pay for an increasingly complex and numerous courtly network, which achieved a great visual impact on nobility, ambassadors, or other visitors.

One of the objectives of this monographic issue is to expand our knowledge of the exchanges produced between queenly servants. The formation of the infantas’ households, before becoming queens, is very revealing in this regard. This is the first step in the creation of the infanta’s identity, still particularly surrounded by the

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11 This is related to the concept of fashion and the need to constantly adapt to new times, as well as being able to be at the forefront and exercise cultural leadership. Juan Vicente García Mansilla, “La moda no es capricho. Mensajes y funciones del vestido en la Edad Media,” Vínculos de Historia 6 (2017), 71–88; Juan Vicente García Mansilla, “El lujo: ÑMotor del crecimiento o camino hacia la ruina? Percepciones y actitudes ante el gasto suntuario en la Historia,” Ars & Renovatio 7 (2019), 6–26.
maternal circle. From the configuration of the “Cot House,” her courtly environment underwent changes, both to adapt to the needs of her age and status, and to reflect the political and cultural context. Just as the queen evolved, so did her household. However, the household did not function as a homogenous entity that developed in a single direction, but rather as an entity in which many interests converged.

The household consisted of people with personal and/or familial motivations and interests that, in turn, were juxtaposed against the interests of other household members. These people could be from different backgrounds and various social conditions. All these circumstances contributed to the creation of a singular identity for each female household. Officials from the queen’s home court assisted her at the beginning of her reign. However, her marriage guaranteed the immediate introduction of men and women belonging to the secular and ecclesiastical aristocracy, as well as the urban oligarchy. Consequently, the household was a combination of disparate factors and wills at the service of a specific woman, but also at the service of her institutional status. This variable set of people experienced changes as time went by due to multiple circumstances: the need to replace an officer due to his death; mobility between the royal households (among other possible factors); promotion because of their interest in the religious policy of the kingdom, or their expert training; or even their temporary exchange with other royal houses. Although the household did not function as a body with a common goal shared by all its members, the personal realities of its personnel contributed to endow the queen’s household of meaning and character, as well as contributing to its evolution.¹³

The Iberian Peninsula offers an added singularity. During the Late Middle Ages, royal marriages constantly intertwined the diverse Iberian royal families. Four Christian monarchies and the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada coexisted in a relatively small territorial space. Their fluid matrimonial contacts ran parallel to a deep knowledge of the neighbouring kingdoms and a close contact—harmonious or not—

¹³ Norbert Elias, La sociedad cortesana (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982).
in their diplomacy and international politics.\textsuperscript{14} For example, the border towns were always a matter of dispute that justified military confrontations, but also necessitated matrimonial alliances. The exchanges of princesses and \textit{infantas} fuelled cultural connections, in addition to the strengthening of political ties. This was a process to which the staff of the royal houses contributed decisively.\textsuperscript{15}

As the political experience of the \textit{infanta} accumulated, so did the personnel at her service. The queen and her household built an intimate bond, and studying it helps to understand the role played by each. Through the people integrated into the household, the queen’s authority could be undermined. For instance, periods of great political influence of a royal favourite (\textit{privado}) over the king could be especially complex for the queen’s authority. Thanks to his close friendship with the king, the royal favourite managed to reach an exceptional position at court and in the government of the kingdom. The king gave him responsibilities in making decisions that he deems appropriate and, consequently, he becomes an alter ego of the queen. The king does not act on her advice, but according to the dictates of his \textit{privado}. The \textit{privados} always waited to interfere in the queen’s courtly framework to obtain control over her.\textsuperscript{16} Consequently, the queen’s household could be a site of coercion and submission, not only of freedom and trust.

Knowledge of the people in the queen’s service is essential to examine her reign and the networks built both at court and in the kingdom. The female entourages are particularly interesting because they evidence the creation of strategies, alliances, and mutual care between women. It was one of the clearest distinctions between the queen’s and the king’s household. The queen needed the presence of secular and ecclesiastical women, who were also influential and

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\item \textsuperscript{16} Pelaz Flores, \textit{La Casa de la reina}, 29–31.
\end{itemize}

\textit{Royal Studies Journal (RSJ)}, 10, no. 1 (2023), page 6
powerful people.\textsuperscript{17} Their scarcity contrasts with their representation of the whole of the queenly service. Ladies and maids were part of the imagery that configures the “large Queen’s body.” Despite their symbolic relevance, their individual identities were not clearly specified in, for instance, the chronicles or other historiographic texts. While other male officials are alluded to individually, and their trades indicated, the female entourage was included only to represent the queen’s company, i.e., the queen’s absence of solitude. The constant accompaniment of virtuous women dispelled any suspicion of risking her honour. Through non-specific but recurring allusions to the queen’s entourage, the transmission of that idea was reinforced. Her body and virtue had to be protected, hence the non-specific allusion to her ladies in trips, royal entrances, ceremonies or urban celebrations. As Alfonso X pointed out in the Espéculo, the protection of the queen’s body necessitated the introduction into the court of ladies-in-waiting and maids of irreproachable virtue.\textsuperscript{18} Other texts promoted by Alfonso X, such as the Partidas, assimilated the queen’s household to the queen’s chamber exclusively.\textsuperscript{19} This mutual protection and exemplary mechanism guaranteed the safeguarding of female honour and the legitimacy of her offspring, becoming a literary topos\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Ana Echevarría Arsuaga, “Redes femeninas en la corte castellana: María de Portugal (1313-1357),” La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures 45, no. 2 (2017), 165–189.

\textsuperscript{18} Alfonso X, El Espéculo. Leyes de Alfonso X, ed. Gonzalo Martínez Díez and José Manuel Martínez Asencio (Ávila: Fundación Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, 1985), Libro II, Título XV, 60. The queen makes possible the incorporation of the group of ladies-in-waiting and of maids to the courtly circuit, and enables their participation in the ins and outs of power. Ángela Muñoz Fernández, “La casa delle regine. Uno spazio politico nella Castiglia del Quattrocento,” Genesis: Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche 1, no. 2 (2002), 71–95. The prolonged absence of a woman occupying the status of the queen consort left the noblewomen in an uncomfortable place, given the impossibility of incorporating them into any department of the King’s Household and their reluctance to leave the court, as would have happened during the first years of the reign of Fernão I and the first two years of the government of João I of Portugal: Silva, “The Portuguese Household of an English Queen,” 277.

\textsuperscript{19} Alfonso X, Las Partidas (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1807), vol. II, Segunda Partida, Título XIV, Ley III, 129.

\textsuperscript{20} The search for courtly normality and domestic harmony also requires the presence of the queen consort, who justifies the incorporation of noblewomen of the receiving court. This is reflected in the provisions of Juan I of Castile after agreeing to his second marriage with Beatriz of Portugal. In addition to summoning the main lay and ecclesiastical of the kingdom, they were ordered to travel to the court of ladies of Castile to accompany the queen: “Otroso enviò por muchas nobles Dueñas de Castilla, que viniesen à Badajoz, para acompanhar à la Reyna Doña Beatriz su muger que avía de ser.” Pedro López de Ayala, Crónica
The non-specific mentions of this female presence in the chronicles invite us to reflect on their meaning. The female entourage—in its entirety or, when required, in a small representation—was its own entity, protecting the queen’s honour. The female collective was valued, but its members were not individualised, as was frequently the case for men in the service of royal houses. Nevertheless, the closeness to the queen and the demonstration of that link should be understood as a sign of the importance acquired by certain women in the courtly network. Both chronicles and legal texts—such as the Partidas in the Crown of Castile—share the image of the queen’s entourage as a symbolic space that surrounds the queen, inside and outside the palace. Consequently, the queen’s body is presented as a plural feminine construction, which requires a precise apparatus in order to represent her. The genre makes it an “antagonistic body” to that of the king, but also to that of the authors of the chronicles. While men are often singled out individually, women are cited as a group. The genre supposes a key difference with respect to

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22 The entourage of Queen Juana Manuel de Villena, in the festivities that took place in Burgos on the occasion of the coronation in 1367 of Enrique II of Castile, Count of Trastámara, provides an example of the feminine contribution to the dignity of the ceremonial of the monarchy. Diana Pelaz Flores, “La reina Juana Manuel de Villena (1339–1381). La legitimación de la Casa Trastámara,” in En la Europa medieval. Mujeres con historia, mujeres de leyenda. Siglos XIII-XVI, ed. Manuel García-Fernández (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 2019), 175–176. The protection of the queen’s body is also indicated in the Aragonese setting, during the War of the Union. King Pedro IV and his wife, Queen Maria of Navarre, were confined on their way to Valencia, leaving them practically isolated from the staff of their households. According to the autobiographical chronicle of Pedro IV, just two ladies-in-waiting and four knights accompanied Queen Maria: “Luego, sin detenernos ni una hora siquiera, cabalgámos en un palafrén, y acompañado solamente de tres cabalgadores y con la reina nuestra esposa, que tampoco iba acompañada mas que de dos damas y cuatro cabalgadores, nos fuimos á Torres tomando el camino de Teruel.” King Pere IV, Crónica del Rey d’Aragó en Pere IV lo Ceremoniós ó del Punyálet, ed. Joseph Coroleu (Barcelona: Imprenta “La Renaixensa”, 1885), 279.

23 There is no extant record of any female chronicler in the Iberian courts, unlike Christine de Pizan in the reign of Charles V of France. Christine de Pizan, La vita e buoni costumi del Saggio Re Carlo V, ed. V. Rossini (Roma: Carocci, 2010).

the chronicler and the precepts of the patriarchal system, and in relation to the
government of the kingdom. The chronicles of the reigns of Fernando I of Portugal,
Pedro IV of Aragon, or the Trastámara kings (in which the weight of ritual and,
consequently, the characterisation of the queen through her household, was
substantially less important) manifest this. This same idea was also present in later
narratives, as can be seen in the Castilian or Portuguese spheres of the fifteenth
century.

Beyond the rhetorical or symbolic capacity of the entourage, and of the
queen’s household as a whole, its maintenance required significant financial and
logistical efforts. The need to situate a very large group of people in the courtly
context should lead us to ask how they were paid, and from where these resources
were obtained. But it is not that simple. The queen’s household, like that of the
infantas, was often made up of people who also served in the king’s household, or in
the court, in the widest sense. At the same time, they were well-connected in the
urban setting, and with other bureaucratic functions relevant to political life. This
leads us to wonder which time these people actually devoted to the service of the
queen, and whether this was done during shorter periods of time between other
obligations. The “système de tour,” detected by Monique Somme for the household
of the Duchess of Burgundy Isabel of Portugal (r. 1397-1471), could explain this

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25 Lledó Ruiz Domingo, “Crédito, deuda y finanzas de la Casa de la reina: los capítulos entre la reina
Violante de Bar y su nuevo tesorero, Berenguer de Cortilles,” Historia, Instituciones, Documentos 45

26 “Queens Resources: Examining the Resources & Revenues of Royal Women in Premodern Europe” is
an initiative of great scientific value to answer all these questions. See:
https://www.queensresources.org/

27 Lledó Ruiz Domingo, El Trésor de la Reina. Recursos i gestió económica de les reines consortes a la Corona
d’Aragó (segles XIV-XV) (Barcelona: CSIC, 2022); Michele Seah and Katia Wright, “The Medieval English
Queen as Landholder: Some Reflections on Sources and Methodology,” in Women and Economic Power in

28 For instance, Gutierre Álvarez de Toledo, Bishop of Oviedo, was Senior Chancellor and confessor to
Queen Juana Manuel de Villena and he carried out diplomatic tasks on behalf of the Kings of Castile, as
his direct participation in the signing of the Peace of Almazán (1375) indicates. José Antonio Chelle
Ortega, “Conflicto y comunicación en la Castilla bajomedieval: cartas de Juan I al obispo de Oviedo
ruante la guerra con Portugal (1384-1385),” in Comunicación y conflicto en la cultura política peninsular
question, but the lack of serial data for Castile or Portugal prevents us from asserting it categorically.\textsuperscript{29}

Itinerancy and mobility are also key issues that we ponder in this issue: as assets of the medieval system of government, but also as determining factors in the provision of royal households. As Rita Costa Gomes pointed out, a distinction must be made between the court “\textit{en andada}” (when it moved from one place to another), and the court “\textit{en estada}” (when it settles with a more stable character in a specific place).\textsuperscript{30} The Castilian case is illustrative in this respect. As in Portugal, in the queen’s chamber objects “on the way” (“\textit{de camino}”) were key liturgical objects, essential for the maintenance of religious worship, regardless of where the queen was. In the Castilian documentation we could find the name of the “very little chapel” belongings (“\textit{capilla pequennuela}”).\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, officials and servants of the queen’s household could be part of the essential staff, while many others were secondaries, due to the expenses and difficulties in lodging. Undoubtedly, this is another of the questions that will have to be dealt with in the future. In the Iberian Peninsula, kings and queens not only lodged in palaces, but also in monasteries and aristocratic residences. In the smaller town halls, the settlers had to find accommodation for the people who made up the court, which entailed numerous difficulties, such as conflicts with the neighbours, and the availability and conditions of the houses in which they were located. The study of settlement systems will be key to establishing the distance between their personnel and the body of the king and queen. It will allow us to know which departments, such as the chancellery,\textsuperscript{32} had greater autonomy and contributed to unfolding the queenly

\textsuperscript{29} Monique Somme, \textit{Isabelle de Portugal, duchesse de Bourgogne. Une femme de pouvoir au XV\textsuperscript{e} si\textegrave;cle} (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1988), 252.

\textsuperscript{30} Gomes, \textit{A Corte dos reis de Portugal}, 255 and 285.

\textsuperscript{31} Archivo del Real Monasterio de Guadalupe, Leg. 3, carp. R-VI-4, doc. 15-e. Santa María la Real de Nieva. [1445], march, 18. The name of “very little chapel” appears uniquely to date in the list of belongings of Queen María of Aragon. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know which objects were in this type of chapel throughout the time, or what changes it would experience from one reign to another.

authority, and which people continued to maintain a close relationship with the queen after leaving the court.

Reflecting on the design and distribution of the infrastructures that sheltered the queen and her closest circle will help to appreciate court etiquette and its singularities. It will also be possible to assess how the dimensions of the royal houses and the court as a whole conditioned the architecture of the great palatine complexes, some of which emerged at the end of the Middle Ages and others developed in the Modern Age.\(^33\) The Royal Palaces of Barcelona (Palau Mayor and Palau Menor),\(^34\) or of Olite in Navarra,\(^35\) describe a reality similar to that of Portugal, where the palatial infrastructure of Lisbon and Sintra allowed the distribution of the royal family and royal officials.\(^36\)

The Iberian Queen’s Households: Dynamics, Social Strategies, and Royal Power issue does not in tend to exhaust the study possibilities of the queen’s household, something beyond its scope. Instead, this issue offers new insights into a research topic that will continue to advance in the coming years. The studies presented by Paula Del Val Vales, Stefano Cingolani, Lledó Ruiz Domingo, Martina del Popolo, Concepción Villanueva Morte, Óscar Jiménez, and myself aim to draw attention to the enormous possibilities of study of these Households, some of them very unknown. In additional to these aforementioned articles, a study by Bábara Boloix Gallardo, which delves into the knowledge of the space of feminine power in the Nasrid court of Granada, will be published in a subsequent issue of the Royal Studies Journal. Boloix’s work initiates an important dialogue between the Christian and Muslim Iberian courts that, without a doubt, should continue in the future.

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\(^33\) The French court had fortresses such as Vincennes, Amboise, Blois, or the Louvre palace complex to house the court. In all of them there is evidence of the existence of specific rooms for the queen’s household, with kitchens and rooms for the bathroom, as well as other chambers. Murielle Gaudé-Ferragu, *La reine au Moyen Âge. Le pouvoir au féminin XIVe-XVe siècle* (Paris: Tallandier, 2013), 197–198.


From the consignment of offices at the service of the queen in the thirteenth century to the first households organised around the daughters of Isabella the Catholic, three centuries of exchanges and transformations passed. The courtly service specialised, and reached unquestionable levels of sophistication, marked by the creation of the identities of the kingdoms and, at the same time, by a desire to demonstrate their level of refinement and power. Consequently, the households of the Iberian queens become an active setting for this dialogue, marked by their own mobility between the borders of the kingdoms.