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## The Queen's Hand; Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile

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Elena Woodacre

Berenguela of Castile (1180?1246) is a figure who is often overshadowed by her famous relatives, including her grandmother Eleanor of Aquitaine, her sister Blanche of Castile and her son Fernando III of Castile and León. However, there is no doubt that during her lifetime, she exercised considerable political power as a part of the 'plural monarchy' in both Castile and León in a range of roles. During her childhood, she was heiress apparent of Castile until the birth of her brothers displaced her. Next, she became queen consort of León, until her marriage to Alfonso IX was annulled for consanguinity in 1204. She served briefly as regent for her brother, Enrique I, between November 1214 and February 1215, when Alvaro Núñez de Lara took control from her. Finally she served as co-ruler of Castile and later León during the reign of her son, Fernando III between 1217 and her death in 1246.

-That Berenguela shared power with her son Fernando III is undeniable, her agency is enshrined in contemporary chronicles and documentary evidence from their reign. However, whether Berenguela should be considered a queen mother or queen regnant is a matter of some disagreement. Bianchini argues strongly for the latter, emphasizing Berenguela's hereditary right to the crown and dismissing what she terms 'the canard' that Berenguela abdicated in favour of her son Fernando in 1217. While this 'canard' has become established in Iberian historiography, Bianchini has made it her goal to overturn this premise and ensure that

Berenguela is accorded her due as a Castilian monarch and given credit for her prominent role in the political events of the first half of the 13th century. Bianchini stresses the concept of 'plural monarchy', that power was exercised by a group of individuals working in tandem, rather than one royal figure. Throughout the book, Bianchini underlines Berenguela's constant presence at the core of the plural monarchy, even though her title changed and her position moved at times between the centre and periphery of power, her birthright, marriage and maternal role gave her the authority to remain a key player in both Castile and León throughout her lifetime.

The book moves chronologically through Berenguela's life and political career and is divided into chapters which focus on particular periods of her life: as heiress, as queen consort of León, after the annulment of her marriage, during the regency for her brother Enrique, as queen of Castile with her son, Berenguela's role in the Leonese succession crisis of 1230 and finally her years of co-rule in both Castile and León with her son, Fernando III.

A recurring theme, which is alluded to in the title, is Berenguela's cultivation of clients who were accorded titles, lands and positions through the 'queen's hand'. Bianchini emphasizes how Berenguela was able to use the relationship between lord and client to build a power base of loyal men and women. She notes the considerable territory, including key strongholds and towns given to Berenguela by her father and husband, which were often located in the strategic border region between Castile and León known as the *Tierra de Campos*. Bianchini claims that Berenguela's years as heir apparent gave her vital training in exercise of authority and administration of territory that she leveraged in her role as 'domina'. Moreover, Berenguela's effective management of these lands and her careful placement of loyal clients in these territories enabled her to retain an important position even during challenging moments in her life such as after the annulment of her marriage or when she lost the regency for her brother Enrique. Berenguela's territorial lordship and loyal clientele also facilitated her son Fernando's ability to seize the throne of León in 1230 from his half-sisters, Sancha and Dulce, who were Alfonso IX's designated successors.

Berenguela's role in the Leonese succession crisis and indeed the unique nature of the situation itself is worthy of greater attention and the entire chapter devoted to it in Bianchini's monograph. As Bianchini notes this particular episode was 'a rare opportunity to observe a power struggle that was defined by its female participants' (p. 181); Berenguela, Alfonso IX's first wife Teresa of Portugal and the Infantas Sancha and Dulce. In the latter years of his life, Alfonso IX faced a difficult choice with regard to his successor. His eldest surviving son, Fernando, had inherited the throne of Castile with his mother Berenguela and Alfonso IX was reluctant to confirm Fernando as his successor in León as it would unite the two kingdoms. The king chose instead to vest the succession in Sancha and Dulce, his daughters from his first marriage to Teresa of Portugal. This was a surprising option, not only because of their gender but because they were named as joint heiresses. Significantly, neither of the two women were married. Finding a suitable husband for an heiress, who would be expected to take part in the rule of the realm as king consort was always a difficult process. The fact that the sisters were co-heirs made this an even more delicate situation as it would be impossible to ensure that four co-rulers, the queens and their respective husbands, could rule cooperatively and effectively as a group. This would be perhaps pushing the boundaries of plural monarchy too far. This situation was unusual although there had been a precedent of sorts in the case of Byzantine Empresses Zoe and Theodora Porphyrogenita in the 11th century. As Bianchini notes, the situation was made even more distinctive by the involvement of both Berenguela and Teresa of Portugal as two of the most significant participants in the events of the crisis. Both Berenguela and Teresa fought for the rights of their offspring to rule León, using familial connections and their territorial lordship to command support. In the end, when it was clear that Fernando would triumph, both mothers met to hammer out an accord to satisfy the honour of the two infantas, assigning them properties and rents which would ensure the maintenance of their royal status. Bianchini counters the widely held perception that the two 'modest and pious' maternal figures met to work together to bring peace to the kingdoms and argues instead that the signing of the Treaty of Benavente marked 'the last throes of a rivalry that had stretched across decades, and that was no less fiercely fought because the protagonists were women' (p. 205). Indeed it is very interesting to note that in this case 'Sancha and Dulce's bid for the throne was not undone by their womanhood. Rather,

it was undone by *another woman*: Berenguela? (p. 207). This episode therefore is not only significant because of its unusual nature or the precedent for female succession but because it demonstrates the political agency and rivalry of women, even though it ultimately resulted in a male claimant's triumph over his elder half-sisters.

This book is a useful contribution to both studies of ruling women and to the history of medieval Iberia. It adds to other recent works on Iberian queenship, including examinations of the more well known Castilian queens regnant Urraca and Isabel, studies of other powerful Iberian queen consorts such as Maria of Castile and Maria de Luna and a current research project on the *Infantazgo* in Castile and León which has also touched on the concept of 'plural monarchy' and female lordship.<sup>(1)</sup> Bianchini is not the first to focus on Berenguela, but her instance on Berenguela's place as a monarch, not a consort, regent or queen mother is uncommon.<sup>(2)</sup> Bianchini carefully documents Berenguela's exercise of the royal prerogatives such as diplomatic negotiations with internal factions and external powers and dispensing justice. She also notes how Berenguela was perceived as a ruling sovereign in both contemporary chronicles and by her subjects and royal peers. One of Berenguela's great strengths was her ability to work successfully in tandem with her advisors and family members, including her son and his two wives. However, this ability to function harmoniously as a member of the plural monarchy may have led to the perception in Iberian historiography that she was less powerful or prominent than she may have been in actuality.

Berenguela is also an important case study for both queenship and royal authority which Bianchini claims 'requires a reconsideration of the structure and gendering, of medieval monarchy' (p. 257). Bianchini claims that female monarchs needed a broad base of support for their rule to combat the inherent prejudice against women in positions of the highest authority. Berenguela's construction of a noble clientele and her ability to command the support of the church through her patronage and her careful construction of the image of a virtuous and pious mother were arguably factors in her success. Bianchini's argument that women could not inherit a crown or exercise sovereign authority without a male co-ruler is compelling although it is bound to generate discussion. Certainly Elizabeth I of England, arguably one of the most successful reigning queens, may have owed her success in large measure to the fact that she did not marry nor sire a son who could replace her or push her aside. However, Elizabeth's rule is part of a very different geographical and temporal context than Berenguela's. Certainly, Bianchini's emphasis on the idea of plural monarchy and the manner in which it supported and enabled female agency and authority supports her central argument that Berenguela was not replaced by her son Fernando but co-opted him as a partner in their mutual reign. In summary, Bianchini's study of Berenguela is an insightful and fascinating look at a figure who certainly merits greater recognition of her place as a female sovereign, and who shaped the destiny of her native Castile and played a significant role in the political events of both Iberia and Europe in the 13th century.

## Notes

1. A recent work which demonstrates some of the interesting research on Iberian queenship is *Queenship and Political Power in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, ed. Theresa Earenfight (Aldershot, 2005). The classic work on Urraca is Bernard F. Reilly, *The Kingdom of León-Castilla under Queen Urraca, 1109-1126* (Princeton, NJ, 1982). Recent works on Isabel include *Isabel la Católica, Queen of Castile: Critical Essays*, ed. David A. Boruchoff (London, 2003) and María Isabel del val Valdivieso, *Isabel la Católica y su Tiempo* (Grenada, 2005). Example of recent monographs on powerful Iberian consorts include Theresa Earenfight, *The King's Other Body; Maria of Castile and the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010) and Nuria Silleras-Fernández, *Power, Piety and Patronage in Late Medieval Queenship: Maria de Luna* (New York, NY, 2008). For the project led by Therese Martin (CSIC-Madrid) which investigates the use of the *Infantazgo* see <<http://www.proyectos.cchs.csic.es/womenasmakers/content/therese-martin> [2]> [accessed 2 January 2013].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Another excellent recent monograph on Berenguela is Miriam Shadis, *Berenguela of Castile (1180-1246) and Political Women in the High Middle Ages* (New York, NY, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author appreciates Dr. Woodacre's thoughtful reading and does not wish to comment further.

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