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Rituales líquidos: El significado del agua en el ceremonial de la corte de Castilla (ss. XIV-XV)

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In recent decades, the study of kings and queens has undergone profound revision. This revision is thanks to the re-assessment of prevailing historiographical paradigms that had previously largely placed studies of monarchs in the frameworks of positivist political history, nationalist perspectives about the 'kings of the fatherland,' and vain historical curiosities or anecdotes. New research into, and analysis of, the history of power has allowed us to better appreciate realities that are as diverse as the methods by which monarchs exercise their authority.

This new political history has recently produced "a remarkable advance in the studies related to the court scene, taking into account the heterogeneous human group that integrates it, its relationship with the territory and the spaces where they develop their influence, or the political or cultural manifestations that take place in this environment" as Diana Pelaz Flores points out in *Rituales liquidos* (20–21; my translation). Thus, studies no longer emphasise kings as the sole arbiters of power, and there are numerous studies about royalty that help us to better understand the interplay of various expressions of power which come together in a collective reality of complex systems.

It is in this collective context where the study of political communication becomes very important, both through different oral or written languages, and through non-verbal communication of gestures, rituals, attitudes, actions, or images that constitute a true dialogue between powerful groups with the rest of society. These verbal and non-verbal expressions combine in a set of rituals and ceremonies that hide evolving, changing meanings and implications, and are projected with symbolic, distinctive, legitimizing and propagandistic purposes by those who hold power. These rituals and ceremonies have long been the object of historical research, and contribute to existing knowledge about monarchs and their relations with the court and beyond.

In this book, Pelaz Flores provides a detailed analysis of the use of water—a common element loaded with meaning—in the rituals of Castilian Court ceremonial during the Late Middle Ages and its multiple symbolisms: political, cultural, religious-sacramental, and so on. Pelaz Flores divides her study into four chapters, preceded by an introductory preface in which she presents the intentions of her work and its premises: from a common idea of water as a cleaning instrument, she notes that through Christian religiosity this concept became a symbol of purity, and its use began to be understood as a

ritual cleansing presence in court ceremonies, where it acquired a meaning as a rite-of-passage.

In addition to a concluding epilogue, the book contains a large list of sources, demonstrating the firm foundations on which the study is based. It is a varied set of sources—chronicles, legal texts, literary works, didactic books or 'mirrors of princes,' and even cookbooks—and represents the variety of materials that the author masterfully brings together throughout her study.

Pelaz Flores constructs a clear first chapter that proposes a detailed historiographical review of the book's two key components. She charts previous studies of court ceremonies in late medieval Europe, before discussing how medieval people viewed water, focusing on its use in society at a both a local level and a European level.

The book consists of three specific cases of court rituals in medieval Castile in which water played a key role. They were all secular rites, although Christian liturgy was inevitably present within them and lent meanings to water and its ceremonial use. However, despite its organization as three different studies, the interrelation between them is never lost—as the author frequently points out—meaning that it is not possible to conceive of them as separate, independent studies.

The first ritual examined is the bath that monarchs took in the moments before their coronation. Here, Pelaz Flores addresses the specific symbolic charge that distinguished the daily or usual cleaning of kings from the purifying rite that was part of the coronation ceremony. The first was an issue of hygiene and health, generating specialization among the members of the royal household, but one that also required the necessary privacy for the bath. This also upheld the majestic superiority of the king by preventing the royal body and its humanity from being seen. On the other hand, the ritual bath of the coronation was a purifying ceremony for the sovereign, an initiatory transformation similar to the bath also inherent in knightly ritual. Such a ceremony allowed the king to undertake his new mission of governing. This purification was manifested in the symbolism of the washing of each body part, a sacramental confession, and the use of new and clean clothes. The religious and political contents were fed back into this ceremony, which was sometimes only given little attention in late medieval sources, especially in Castilian ones. This forces the author to make a brilliant comparative study with the information about this same procedure from coronation ceremonies of other peninsular and European monarchies.

The next chapter discusses the custom of offering kings the possibility of washing their hands before and after eating at court banquets. It was, as in the previous case, the ritualization of an everyday act that expanded on the purifying role of water. In this case it had a much more public character, given

it was undertaken at the ceremonial table, where it became a means to distinguish the king, in status and distinction, from the rest of the aristocrats, who would imitate the king at their particular tables. The staging was accompanied by music, and the involvement of a domestic servant and specific objects for this act—such as the ewer or *aguamanil* itself—speaks to the specialization that this custom would achieve. Pelaz Flores traces descriptions of the ceremony in the courtly feasts of medieval sources and analyses the persons and objects involved, the moments and the formal order, their theatrical gestures, and the inspiration of their ritual meanings. She also compares the Castilian examples with those known in other European monarchies.

The fifth chapter analyses another courtly liquid ritual, although in this case it is one that was not so directly linked to the kings as in the previous cases. This is the ceremony of giving names to heralds—a court office that the author also studies—through a 'secular' or 'profane baptism' in which water was a fundamental element. Once again, purified by water, the candidate was freed from a previous life, a new identity was opened to him, and consequently he was given a new name. This purification process was used both for the entry of an individual into the position of herald and for his promotion though the various levels of this dignity. Pelaz Flores also analyses the way water could be used to reverse the process: by carrying out this 'baptism' with hot water, the evil official was stripped of these dignities in case of disloyalty or betrayal.

Finally, an epilogue concludes this rigorous investigation. According to Pelaz Flores, water was a very present element in late medieval court ceremonies, with a universal value existing both in its daily uses and in the mentalities of the European courts, through ideals and meanings taken from the Christian liturgy, but deepened with its own sense in court rituals. Water, in short, manifested itself in a triple way in this scenario: it possessed the properties of hygiene and health, it held a symbolic Christian component, and was imbued with clear social signifiers of the courtly group.

This is a rigorous and well-documented study. It is an analysis that emerges out of deep historical reflection and from a great amount of research. This is a very well written and easy to read book that makes available to the scholarly community a valuable expansion of the knowledge about power and the language of power in the Castilian monarchy of the Late Middle Ages.

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