

On the kings of Portugal, or how an image of a far-away region came to be established in Holland

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Abstract

At the end of the fourteenth century efforts were made to establish better, mainly commercial, relations between the county of Holland and Portugal. At that moment Portugal was certainly no terra incognita for the inhabitants of Holland, as is shown by the fact that a village in Holland already earlier derived its name and coat of arms from Portugal. Yet a clear and positive image, that could serve political goals, was lacking. Such an image was provided by a Middle-netherlandish poem, written shortly before 1390, in which the reestablishing of royal virtues in Portugal was praised.

Keywords

Commerce, image, ideology, diplomacy

Resumo

No final do século XIV, foram desenvolvidos esforços no sentido de melhorar as relações entre Portugal e a Holanda, nomeadamente comerciais. Nessa altura, Portugal certamente não era um território desconhecido para os habitantes da Holanda, como se comprova pelo facto de uma vila holandesa usar o nome e as armas inspiradas nos de Portugal. No entanto, uma imagem clara, que poderia servir propósitos políticos, não chega a existir. Ela aparece num poema holandês, escrito á volta de 1390, no qual se enaltece o restabelecimento das virtudes reais em Portugal.

Palavras-chave

Comércio, imagem, ideologia, diplomacia

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Introduction

When relations between regions and realms are established, the image of the “other” always plays an important role. Especially when new partnerships create bonds between far-away countries, an existing, positive image almost may be called a prerequisite for success. And when ties develop, and relations become more frequent, personal and concrete, success can contribute to the image, at the same time when the image itself may further enhance the success. Finally, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and lasting success only is built on formal confirmations of mutual appreciation, on privileges and contracts granted, on exchange of people, goods and immaterial values. The role of the image then changes from invented, or at least created “imagination” to representation, in a sense objectivized, but still “coloured,” no longer through creative ignorance but rather personal experience.

Portugal and Holland

The relations between Portugal and the county of Holland in the late medieval period offer an interesting case, when we look at the first phase of the establishing of an image in the North of a possible southern partner. These relations are a hardly explored field of historical research. This may be explained by the fact that until the end of the sixteenth century commercial relations between the Netherlands and their “outer world,” were mainly concentrated in Flanders and Brabant. First Bruges and later Antwerp were the main market-centers where merchants from the Mediterranean world, the Baltic Sea, the German hinterland and the Atlantic shores met. Around the year 1300 in Bruges, Siberia virtually bordered the Sahara.² Goods from regions south of the Atlas Mountains were brought by merchants from the Mediterranean, as were furs and amber coming from Russia and shipped across the Baltic. The northern Netherlands in those days mainly played their part in the relations with the Hanseatic League and England. The booming economy of Holland was oriented towards the west, and the commercial interests of the Eastern provinces of the Low Countries were directed to the northeast. It was only halfway through the sixteenth century that Amsterdam began its takeover manoeuvre,

² Boer 2000: 55-71.

which gained force when during the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs the harbor of Antwerp was closed in 1585.³

Yet, already towards the end of the fourteenth century initiatives were taken to attract Portuguese merchants to Holland as part of a general policy to make the economy of Holland profit more from the Hanseatic commercial network. In general the administration of Albert of Wittelsbach, as count of Holland, Zeeland and Hainaut, and duke of Lower-Bavaria (1358-1404), tended to enhance relations with the Iberian Peninsula. In his youth Albert acquired knighthood when fighting in Spain (1362).⁴ He went there expecting to fight Abū-Saʿīd of Granada, with an army gathered by Pedro el Cruel of Castile, in alliance with the kings of Portugal and Navarre, the count of Foix and many nobles from Gascony, but instead he rose to fame during the siege of Calatayud, fighting Pedro el Ceremonioso of Aragon. Since then especially musicians from the south frequented his court in the Hague.⁵ When in 1385 in a double marriage his son William “of Ostrevant” and daughter Margaret were joined in wedlock with Margaret and John of Burgundy—soon to be known as John the Fearless—the main representative from the south was Gaston Febus, count of Foix.⁶ Portuguese guests so far have not been identified. There existed, without doubt an image of Spain, in part based upon the personal experiences of the prince, whereas an image of Portugal was lacking.

Therefore, it is interesting that towards the end of the fourteenth century, a free-lance poet and entertainer at court in the Hague wrote a poem, titled *Vanden coninc van Poertegael* (About the king of Portugal).⁷ So far this poem has been denied any relation to a historical, political reality.⁸ It is however my hypothesis, that it was intentionally written to produce a first image of Portugal that could be functional in preparing the minds of an audience in Holland for establishing new ties with an Iberian political and commercial ally. In this contribution, I want to sketch first how gradual steps towards relations with Portugal were taken, and then to analyze the poem (of the essential parts of which I produced a metrical and rhyming English translation) to find out how it may have functioned.

³ Boer 2000A: 243-254; Haemers, Stabel 2006: 20-38; Blondé, Gelderblom, Stabel, 2007: 154-174.

⁴ Van Anrooij 1990: 5; Bishko 1975: 430- 436.

⁵ Janse 1986: 139, 146.

⁶ Boer 1998: 276-292.

⁷ Bisschop; Verwijs 1981:16-18. See also: www.dbnl.org/tekst/hild002wbis01_01/hild002wbis01_01_0008.php. Accessed 10/30/2012.

⁸ Zie voor deze interpretatie Meder 1991:130.

Commercial and political relations

In his research on the Portuguese merchants in the Euro-Atlantic space in the Middle Ages, Flávio Miranda, who as doctoral student from Oporto spent one year at my University of Groningen, without doubt will confirm this image of the late, and fragmentary involvement of the Northern Netherlands in Portuguese trade. I expect that his work most of all will deepen our insight in the connections between Portuguese sailors and merchants and England, next to important new knowledge about their relations with the Burgundian sphere. Although Holland and Zeeland from 1433 onwards belonged to that sphere, for the reasons indicated above, the emphasis continued to lay on Flanders and Brabant.

Until now these relations are best known through the publication of the documents on the diplomatic and economic relations between Portugal and the Burgundian power bloc since the acquisition of Flanders by Philip the Bold in 1384.⁹ In this analysis, Jacques Paviot especially treated the way in which the Burgundian rulers made use of Portuguese naval assistance on several occasions. This was followed by a list of 473 documents, written between 1384 and 1482. The oldest document in that list mentioning the county of Holland dates from the year 1425 and does not even have a direct connection to actual relations.¹⁰

Yet, people from Holland and Zeeland do turn up earlier: in October 1409 a councilor of Burgundy was sent out to “*beaufreire de Haynau*,” count William “of Ostrevant” of Holland-Zeeland-Hainaut (1404-1417), to discuss a compensation for the robbing of merchants from Portugal and some from Flanders by “*Hollandoiz et Zellandoiz*.”¹¹ A year later hostile acts between subjects of the count of Holland and Zeeland and Portuguese merchants led to diplomatic action, when “*aucuns Zellandoiz et robeurs de mer*” had robbed both Portuguese merchants, “*Osterlins*” (members of the German Hanse in Bruges) and Flemings. In February 1411 a special meeting in Antwerp was organized.¹²

It must have been these or similar hostilities that caused deliberations of the Estates of Holland at the end of the year 1412. On the day of St. Lucie, 13 December 1412, representatives from the town of Leiden went to the Hague to participate in a special

⁹ Paviot 1995.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 198, nr. 78; it is about a voyage of the duke of Burgundy to Holland.

¹¹ *Id.*, 162, nr. 23.

¹² *Id.*, 165, nr. 28B.

meeting of the towns of Holland, to talk about “*den scade die ghesiet was twisken ons heren onderzaten ende den Vlaminghen, den Scotten ende den Poortegalosen*” [the damage that had been done between the subjects of our lord (i.e. the count of Holland) and the Flemish, Scots and Portuguese].¹³ They obviously gathered to discuss the outcome of a meeting of deputies of the duke of Burgundy, as count of Flanders, and three councilors from Holland and Zeeland—Filips van Borsele, mr. Floris van den Abeele and Jan Heerman, that had taken place in the Flemish town of Biervliet in the early days of December.¹⁴ In Biervliet it was agreed to continue the negotiations ultimately on 23 April 1413, in Antwerp,¹⁵ but when already earlier, from 1 to 6 April 1413 in Middelburg the mutual damage afflicted by subjects of the lords of Holland-Zeeland and Flanders were discussed, the representatives from the North refused to “*over nemen de clachten van den Scotten ende van den Poortegaloyzen van scaden die hemlieden Hollanders ende Zeelanders ghedaen hadden up den Vlaemschen stroom*” (take into account the complaints by the Scots and the Portuguese about the damage that Hollanders and Zeelanders had done them in the Flemish waters).¹⁶ The deliberations then were postponed to take place again in Sluis on June, to drag on afterwards for several more years.¹⁷ Less important for this contribution than the outcome of the conflict, is the fact that obviously Scottish and Portuguese merchants, as participants in the rich, active and wide-stretching commercial network of Flanders, got involved in the political controversies that reflected both the alliances in the Hundred Years War and the tensions between John the Fearless of Burgundy, and William of Ostrevant, count of Holland and Zeeland, as rivals and brothers-in-law at the same time.

Around 1410 it was clear that the Portuguese definitely had chosen for Bruges as their bridgehead in the Low Countries. That very year the Portuguese nation in Bruges got permission from the Dominicans to use the Holy-Cross-chapel for their services, and in 1411 the Flemish community reached a similar agreement with the Portuguese Dominicans to use their Holy-Cross-chapel in Lisbon.¹⁸ This confirmed the failure to establish better relations between the Portuguese and the joined counties of Holland and Zeeland.

Some 25 years earlier this outcome was not clear at all. In spite of the Flemish dominance—or even because of it—Albert of Wittelsbach made several efforts to get a

¹³ Smit; Prevenier (eds.) 1987: 465, nr. 794.

¹⁴ Zoete (ed.) 1982: nr. 452.

¹⁵ *Id.*, nr. 458d.

¹⁶ Smit; Prevenier (eds.) 1987: 466, nr. 796.

¹⁷ *Id.*, 473, nr. 811; Zoete (ed.) 1982: nrs. 530, 532, 550.

¹⁸ Paviot 1995 : 57 and 59.

better share of the commercial movements in the Low Countries, in which already the skippers from Holland and Zeeland took part actively, but mainly as transporters.¹⁹ He did so by facilitating merchants from different regions to come to the north, and allowing them favorable toll-privileges. As a step in this policy the count instructed in October 1388 his toll-gatherers that he had granted to merchants of certain nations, especially “*Lombarden, Genevoysen, Lucoeysen, Katelongerren, Blasentynre* (still un-identified, possibly people from Valencia), *Spaengaerden, Florentijnre ende Poertegaloyzen*” the same rights that he had already given in 1363 to merchants of the German Hanseatic league.²⁰ This privilege however would only last until 1 May 1389. Albert’s initiative clearly was connected with efforts at that moment to have the Hanseatic Kontor in Bruges be transferred to Dordrecht. The Hanseatic League regularly came into conflict with their Flemish hosts, and many Hanseatic merchants evaded Bruges and Flanders during the urban revolts during the early 1380s, when the new Burgundian count turned against those who maintained relations with the rebellious towns. In 1385 deliberations started to move the Hanse-kontor from Bruges to Dordrecht in Holland, and in May 1388 such a decision effectively was taken at the Hanse-diet in order to force the count through a boycott to give in to the Hanseatic demands.²¹ In these circumstances the count of Holland played commercial bluff-poker and hoped to convince the Hanse and its partners to establish themselves permanently in his county. The Hansards indeed came to Dordrecht in 1389, but left already in 1392.

This episode indeed offered interesting possibilities for a Portuguese-Hollandish approach. At the start of his reign over Flanders, in 1384, Philip of Burgundy had granted commercial privileges to the Portuguese in Flanders.²² A treaty between Portugal and England, signed in Windsor, 9 May 1386, temporarily endangered the position of the Portuguese merchants. Many of them therefore chose to seek refuge in the capital of Zeeland, Middelburg.²³ The renewal of the liberties of the merchants “*desdiz royaumes de Portegale et de la Garbe*” obviously did not convince all of them, as the duke explicitly states that “*aucuns sont desja descenduz en Zellande*.”²⁴ The situation was even more complicated

¹⁹ Boer 1992: 51-61, and Boer 1996: 126-152.

²⁰ Niermeyer (ed.) 1968: Volume 2, 336, Nr. 620.

²¹ Seifert 1997: 115, also: Van Herwaarden 1996:180.

²² Paviot 1995:133 document 1.

²³ *Id.*, 57.

²⁴ *Id.*, 136-138, documents 5 and 6.

when the infant Dinis—who was on his way to England as negotiator—was taken prisoner by fishermen from Biervliet when he too wanted to go to Middelburg.²⁵

To try to solve the problems and to formalize the commercial relations with Flanders, France and Brittany, while respecting the treaty of Windsor, King João I of Portugal decided to appoint in June 1388 Fernão Gonçalves as his ambassador. When in Flanders, Fernão did not address the duke of Burgundy, but negotiated directly with the Flemish towns in March 1389, which led to a renewed commercial treaty.²⁶ Moreover in 1390 Dinis was set free, although the agreed ransom never was paid.

Obviously the attractiveness of the Flemish connection was larger than the offer that the count of Holland could make. The commercial and diplomatic “flirt” of Albert of Wittelsbach in 1389 remained without a lasting result. Nevertheless, the years between 1386 and 1392 clearly are the only years in which at court in The Hague a positive image of Portugal and its rulers could be instrumental in creating the ideological background for the political initiatives.

Other traces of a Portuguese “connection”

This being a fact, it is amazing to find that to the southwest of Rotterdam, in a district that belonged to a side-line of the old comital dynasty, the lords of Putten, a small village already at an earlier moment bore the name of *Poortugael*. The earliest mentioning of the name *Poortugael* stems from the year 1368, when Zweder of Abcoude, lord of Gaesbeke, gave permission to two project-developers to organize the drainage of lands, outward the villages of Poortegaal and Roden, in order to embank and polder it.²⁷

²⁵ *Id.*, 22 ff.

²⁶ *Id.*, 145-146, document 9.

²⁷ Unger 1907: 274, nr. 922.

Fig. 1. Coat of arms of Poortugaal²⁸

Fig. 2. Coat of arms of Portugal

There is no other etymology of that place-name than that it derives from, or reflects, the name of Portugal—be it the region of Oporto—be it the kingdom of Portugal as a whole. And indeed the coat of arms of *Poortugaal* as seigniorial entity copies the one of the kingdom of Portugal.

Its church must go back to the church of the castle of the Lords of Putten, founded around 1180, of which the foundations have been traced through archeological research. The oldest part of the present church is its tower, that dates from the second part of the fourteenth century. But when and why was this seigniorial property given its name, and in how far does it reflect an understanding of that far away region of Portugal that under its Burgundian dynasty was developing into a nation?

When trying to explain the origin of name and coat of arms of the village of Poortugaal, a similarity comes to mind with the noble family of Polanen, also in Holland, which inhabited a castle with the same name—Polanen (= Poland)—some 30 kilometers north-west of Poortugaal. In the case of Polanen that name appears for the first time in

²⁸ www.ngw.nl/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Poortugaal. Accessed 10/30/2012.

1305, and most probably is connected with the participation of members of a noble family in the Northern Crusades in Poland and Prussia, starting in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The first wave of military expeditions, later labeled as “Prusades,” was organized from 1272 until 1283 to submit East Prussia. From the participating nobles only the name of the German margrave Dieter von Meissen is known. From 1304 onwards the expansion of the Teutonic order in the Baltic regions was again supported by such actions.²⁹

If a similar line of thought is followed, it is possible that members of the dynasty of the lords of Putten took part in the quite disastrous crusade of 1147. The only success of which was that a combined force of 13,000 Flemish, Frisian, Norman, English, Scottish, and German crusaders in 1147 conquered Lisbon, that still was kept by the Moors. Sailing from England to the Holy Land, the crusaders assisted the smaller (7,000) Portuguese army to capture Lisbon and drive out the Muslim forces. Tradition says that a Frisian nobleman, who died at the conquest of Lisbon, was buried in the monastery of San Vicente outside Lisbon, with the name of Henricus. Sometimes he is confused with another legendary Frisian crusader, a nobleman Popte or Poptetus Ulvinga.³⁰ In the Frisian sources this Popte acquired almost saintly qualities. Anyway, it may well have been the case that participation of that crusade also brought nobles from Holland—that in these days still hardly was to be distinguished from Frisia—fame (possibly even knighthood), and that involvement in the siege of Lisbon was reflected in choosing a name for this seigniorial property.

Next to this an old tavern in the town of Utrecht bears the name *D'coninck van Poortegael*, shown on a plaque in the façade, with the date 1619. This tavern, built before 1582 on twelfth century foundations, allegedly owes its name to the fact that in 1619 the king of Portugal should have financed a new façade. This is for several reasons highly improbable. That king was Philip II of Spain, who was at war with the young Dutch republic. At the end of the nine-year truce in the Dutch revolt, him financing a facade in a rebellious town remains highly improbable. May be the name simply is older and was transferred from the old to the new house, or was given by its seventeenth-century owner as a political statement.³¹

²⁹ Paravicini 1989: 21.

³⁰ Mol 2002: 89–110, esp 90; Poortinga 1965.

³¹ Van Campen 1979: 87–112. In the sixteenth century another house in Utrecht also had the name ‘The King of Portugal’, in which case without doubt a visit of don Emanuel, prince of Portugal, who stayed in Utrecht in 1595. This prince is the natural son of Antonio I, *Prior of Crato* (1568–1638), who married the Countess

The poem “Vanden coninc van Poertegael”

Against this background I want to present my central issue of this contribution: the poem *Vanden coninc van Poertegael* (About the king of Portugal) that was written and performed by the favourite free-lance poet at the court of the Counts of Holland, Willem van Hillegersberch (himself born in a small village outside Rotterdam around 1350). Willem was a true master of the new genre of the relatively short, moralistic-didactic poetry of the second half of the fourteenth century. In many aspects an equal to Chaucer, yet practically unknown internationally, as he wrote in Middle-Netherlandish.³²

The poem *Vanden Coninc van Poertegael* most likely belongs to the early period of Willem’s activities, who started to perform at court in 1383, and continued to do so until ca. 1408. It is therefore most acceptable to date the poem in the early 1390s, so in the same period, when efforts were made to establish relations between Holland and Portugal. So far literary historians in the Netherlands had difficulties to interpret and explain the subject matter of this poem. Twenty years ago Theo Meder published what seemed the last word on Willem van Hillegersberch in his voluminous 708 pages study of the poem and his work.³³ About this poem he stated: “It seems *less probable* that Vanden coninc van Poertegael contains a historical nucleus of truth. Hillegersberch tells in this poem that the kings of Portugal died young, through the intervention of God who, at the instigation of the collective prayers of the people, punished them for their unjust rule. When a young Portuguese king was addressed by a Spanish colleague (SIC) about this in a didactic way, the first mentioned bettered his life, and finally died at a high age. The story lacks specific elements and mainly seems to serve an exemplary goal: the national identity of the kings in fact is of no real importance.”³⁴ Elsewhere in his book Meder stresses that Hillegersberch’s message is that an early death is God’s punishment for an unjust rule.³⁵

The 124 lines long “entry” of the poem evokes the tension between good and bad, and in the last lines of the poem the poet warns his listeners—obviously an audience of

Emilia of Nassau. It may be useful to indicate any reference. As an example, it may be quoted: Sousa 1947: 232-233.

³² Van Oostrom 1992: 37-77, on Willem van Hillegersberch. See also the summarizing article by Van Oostrom 1994: 30-46, esp. 37.

³³ Meder 1991.

³⁴ *Id.*, 130 (my translation).

³⁵ *Id.*, 393 and 501.

princes—that they should keep this in mind, and to remember that he (the poet) is not the one to pass judgment, but that God will measure every one according to his measure.

But what about a historical nucleus? What about Portugal just being an indistinguishable far-away-land, some kind of “Elsewheristan” which is exchangeable for any other mysterious, far away country? I doubt it strongly. Meder underestimates here the knowledge and awareness of his audience, who exactly around 1390 must have been well aware of what Portugal was and along what historical lines its history under the Burgundian dynasty had developed. Let us therefore look at what the poem exactly tells us.

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| <p>125 Ick heb ghehoert in ware tale,
 Dat coninghen van Portingale
 In horen jonghen daghen storven,
 Entie nae hem stat verworven,
 Die voeren mede den selven voy.</p> <p>130 Dus claechden sy dicke mit vernoy,
 Die dit spel voer oghen saghen,
 Dat si in horen jonghen daghen
 Mosten lijff ende goet verliesen,
 Ende haestelijck dat sterven kiesien.</p> <p>135 Dit was een harde bitter lot.
 Ander coninghen spaerde God,
 Die leefden langhe ende worden oudt.
 Also als mijn materi hout,
 Soe quam daer een vanden jonghen,</p> <p>140 Die hadde gheerne den doot ontdronghen
 Off vorste ghenomen by naturen,
 Ghelyken sine naegheburen.
 Des nam hi raedt mit sinen lieden,
 Die hem naestelyken rieden,</p> <p>145 Dat hi voer te Spanghen waert:
 Daer woende een coninc out vermaert
 Ende hadde in eren langh gheleeft:
 <i>"Alsulken raedt als hi ons gheeft,
 Dien suldi doen, al wats gheschiet."</i></p> <p>150 Die coninc en merrede langher niet,
 Hy en toech aldaer sonder vertreck
 Om te claghen sijn ghebreck,
 Ende rade te soecken tsinen vromen.
 Ende als die reyse was volcomen,</p> <p>155 Ende sy nakeden sconincx hove,
 Hy hadse ontfanghen mit groten love,
 Den jonghen coninc entie sijn.
 Dierbaer spise ende edelen wijn
 Sachmen daer ter tafel draghen;</p> <p>160 Scoen berechten ende edel vrighen
 Die hoerdmen daer in reynre tucht;
 Mar hi die hadde groten ducht</p> | <p>I have heard as a true tale
 that former kings of Portugale
 died very young, and not alone:
 those who succeeded on the throne
 followed the same and mortal course.
 So all complained, with much remorse,
 who witnessed these dramatic plays,
 that all of them in their young days
 were losing life and property,
 and moribund too hastily.
 This fate was really much too sore.
 God favoured other kings. And more:
 they aged and became very old.
 But then, as by my sources I am told,
 one of a younger generation
 wanted to change this situation,
 avoid the cold of deadly labours,
 just like so many of his neighbours.
 Among his vassals he sought advice;
 they told him honestly and wise
 to travel to the Spanish throne:
 there ruled an king, of much renown
 who lived in honour in his lands:
 <i>"Every advice he recommends,
 You have to follow, come what may."</i>
 The king accepted no delay
 and travelled thither without faint
 to express his sad complaint,
 and find there what could serve him best.
 When they finished their long quest,
 and approached the royal residence,
 they were received with praise immense,
 the youthful king and baronets.
 Costly dishes and noble clarets
 one could see served there to the guests;
 fair judgments and noble requests
 were issued there in a pure queue;
 but he thought of that frightening view</p> |
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Voer den doet ende voer sulc scheiden,
 Die maecte node langhe beyden,
 165 Ende leyde vast den coninc an,
 Om dat hi was soe ouden man,
 Starc, ghesont, van goeden zeden,
 Off hy mit enigherhande reden
 Hem leren mochte enighen raet;
 170 Want hoer coninlijcke staet
 Wilde God niet langher sparen
 Dan binnen horen XXX jaren:
 Dan mosten sijt rumen onvoersien.
"Dit mach by reden al gheschien,"
 175 Dat sprack die coninc totten heren,
*"Als u ghenoecht van hier te keren,
 Ende ghy coemt binnen uwen palen,
 So laet ghetrouwe boden halen
 Ende doet besoecken ende bevraghen,*
 180 *Off die luden hem yet beclaghen
 Van uwen ouders hier te voren,
 Dat sy tonrecht sijn beschoren,
 Off hoir goedekijn offghebroken,
 Dat an u ouders is ghebroken*
 185 *Off an u te wreken staet;
 Ende ymmer neemt alsulken raedt,
 Dat ghijt weder doet verclaren,
 Ende pijnt in uwen jonghen jaren
 Wel te doen ende Gode tontsien:*
 190 *Ju sel te beter heil gheschien.
 Al schijn ic oudt, ten is gheen wonder:
 Mijn luden bidden elck bysonder,
 Vroech ende spade, ist man off wijff,
 Altoes om mijn langhe lijff;*
 195 *Ende God die heeft haer bede ghehoert
 Van tyde tot tyde dus vaste voert,
 Dat ic oudt worde ende grijs;
 Mar doch ick bin der saken wijs:
 Men mach der doot hier niet ontwenken,*
 200 *Mar die hoer sterven overdencken
 Die vresen Goods gherechticheit."*
 Ende als die coninc hadde gheseit
 Alsulke woird int openbaer,
 Doe dochte die jonghe: *"Tis al waer,*
 205 *Tmoet aldair by comen toe,
 Dat mijn ouders storven vroe,
 Ende ic die reyse moet bestaen.
 Si hebben veel onrechts ghedaen:
 Die wrake comt van onsen sonden."*
 210 Doe namen si oerloff daer ten stonden,
 Ende neghen den coninc totter eerden,
 Ende toghen thuus mit snelre vaerden.
 Teerst dat sy te lande quamen,

of death, and of such a deceasing,
 and found a long delay displeasing,
 insisting therefore upon his host,
 since of all kings, he grew old most,
 yet strong and healthy, of good moral
 that he would reasonably tell
 him any counsel, sound and good;
 since God, our lord, no longer would
 spare their high and royal state
 than within their third decade:
 then they had to leave unforeseen.
"This all may happen for a reason",
 the king spoke to his noble guests.
*"If it pleases you to return west,
 and you arrive within your borders,
 call faithful messengers and give orders
 to stroll the lands and ask around
 if for whatever cause or ground
 people are holding plaint or grudge
 for wrongs your parents did, as such,
 or when their belongings were torn down
 and they took vengeance on the crown
 or want to do it now to you;
 and always take this advice too:
 try to reinforce the truth
 and endeavour in your youth
 to be God-fearing and do well:
 Receive better fate, you shall.
 No miracle explains my old appearance:
 all people pray to my assistance,
 early and late, husband and wife,
 that I may longer stay alive;
 and God, he answered to their praying
 till day and age, as goes the saying,
 when I turned wrinkled, old and grey;
 but in control I always stay:
 to flee our death is beyond powers
 so contemplate the end of ours
 and fear the justice of our Lord."*
 And when the king had marked this word
 and gave advice all publicly,
 the young king thought: *"Much right is he,
 the reason why ancestors died
 and I had many miles to ride,
 is without doubt fully related
 to the crimes they perpetrated:
 this is the vengeance for our sins."*
 Therefore they took their leave at once,
 saluted the king in genuflection,
 and hurried home in rapid action.
 When entering their territory

- | | |
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| <p>Doe dede hi soecken alte samen
 215 Hantvesten ende brieven goet,
 Daer haer luden recht in stoet,
 Dat harde qualijck was ghehouden.
 Dat heeft die coninc sint vergouden,
 Ende dede den luden goet bescheit;
 220 Ende God doer sine ontfarmicheit
 Ende om der gueder lude bede,
 Soe wart hi out ende hadde vrede,
 Ende starff daer nae een salich sterven.
 Die heren, die hoer volck verderven,
 225 Die moghen hier in proeven dit,
 Wat ghebet datmen hem bidt.
 Machmen trecht van hande wisen,
 Entie ziele daer mede spisen,
 Dat kent hi wel die al sal weten.
 230 Ick en wilre niet nae meten,
 Mar ghi, die meters sijt op eerden,
 Draghet u maten in sulker waerden,
 Dat ghi den meter dort verbeiden,
 Die alle mate sal bescheiden.</p> | <p>he made collect immediately
 deeds and charters of the crown
 in which the rights were written down
 that frequently were violated.
 The king, since, had them compensated,
 returned them in their right and place;
 thus granted God in all his grace
 at peoples prayers a long life
 as monarch without war and strife,
 who finally obtained salvation.
 Those wicked lords who ruin their nation
 should by this story be aware,
 what will be prayed in many a prayer.
 Is it allowed to refuse justice
 feed the soul with what earthly dust is?
 He only knows, who knows it all.
 I cannot measure tax or toll,
 but ye, our rulers here below
 respect the measure such and so
 that you dare to wait the measurer
 who acts as heaven's treasurer.</p> |
|--|---|

So essentially the poem tells us that there were Portuguese kings who lived to a respectable age. They were, however, succeeded by kings that died already in their thirties. A younger member of the dynasty went to an old and wise king in Spain for advice, who told him to rule with more justice, and to restore the people in their rights. He did so and they started to live longer again, blessed by the prayers of their people.

Explanation

If Meder had looked better at the history of the connections between Holland and Portugal, he would have realized that his poet was not writing in a vacuum or from ignorance, but against a background of scarce yet interesting ties, that required the building of a Portuguese image between the years 1385 and 1392, as we have demonstrated above. And had he looked better at the history of Portugal and Spain, he would have been struck by the high level of historical probability and evidence that can be linked to the poem. Let me briefly summarize the facts:³⁶

³⁶ Not having a Portuguese library at hand I used for this survey mainly general works like Marques 1972, Vones 1993. On the first kings of Portugal, the most recent biographies are those that are included in the collection *Kings of Portugal* (Matos, Costa 2007).

The first two kings of the Burgundian dynasty, Alfonso and Sancho died at an age of 75 and 58 years respectively. Both lifespans were within the normal life expectancies of the period. Their successors however: Alfonso II (1185-1223) and Sancho II (1209-1248) were 38 and 39 years young, when they deceased. Alfonso is known for establishing peace with Castile and setting up the first centralized Portuguese administration and issuing the first Portuguese laws. In establishing his administrative powers, Alfonso made the mistake to weaken the power of the clergy and ended up to be excommunicated by pope Honorius III, before dying in 1223.

His son and successor Sancho seems to have been a better military commander, but a weaker administrator, who managed to get in conflict with both the nobility and the growing merchant elite. He was deposed by the pope, and died in exile in 1248, after his brother Alfonso III had replaced him one year before.

Here an analytical problem occurs: this Alfonso III (1210-1279) was the first monarch to reach a high age again: he died 69 years old. However: he seems at the start of his reign no “candidate” for being “*the young new king who seeks the advice of the Spanish ruler,*” as presented in the lines 140 ff. of the poem. When climbing the throne, he already was 37 years old, and being the count consort of Boulogne, his connections were mainly French. What speaks in favor of him being the main character of the poem, is the fact that Alfonso III actively sought to restore good relations with the merchants and land owners, organized the Portuguese Cortes, issued laws their restrained noble misuse. Moreover, marrying Beatrice of Castile in second wedlock, which gave birth to his son and successor Dinis in 1261, he established good relations between Portugal and Castile. Yet Alfonso came in conflict with the church again.

An even better reason to doubt that the main character of the poem was Alfonso III, is the identity of his Spanish antagonist. When Alfonso III acquired the crown in 1248, Ferdinand III (5 August 1199–30 May 1252) was at the age of 49 king of Castile, where he had started to rule 30 years before. Not very old, and although known for his perseverance in the Reconquista, his favoring of the university of Salamanca, and his support for the *convivencia*—the peaceful coexistence of the three religions—he was not particularly famous for his wisdom.

Ferdinand’s son, however, who succeeded on the throne in 1252 was Alfonso X “el Sabio.” Born in 1221, he was almost 31 years old, when called to rule over Castile and Leon. After a severe conflict triggered by the conquest of the Algarve held by the

Portuguese (1249), and claimed by Castile, the peace was signed in 1267, having the King of Portugal married to the illegitimate daughter of Alfonso “el Sabio,” Beatrice, in 1258.

During the 32 years of his reign, Alfonso X, king of Castile, gained fame through his legislative and cultural efforts. He counts as the founder of the *Mesta*, gave orders to create a sound judicial system and a unified code of laws, the *Fuero Real* and the *Siete Partidas* essentially being his work. He instigated the use of Castilian as a language of culture and administration, and he became renowned as a writer himself, writing the famous *cantigas* and being the author of treatises on astronomy.

In internal politics things did not go that smoothly, however. Alfonso “el Sabio” regularly came in conflict with the nobility, and had to face a revolt against his rule by a noble coalition, led by his second son Sancho in 1282. Therefor his last two years, until his death on 4 April 1284 saw his authority crumbling, and his health weakening.

Yet when in 1279 Alfonso III of Portugal died, and left the throne to Dinis, Alfonso “el Sabio” really could count as the old and wise king of Spain: 58 years of age and famous for his wisdom.³⁷

It seems therefore an interesting thought that along the lines of epic concentration the image of Alfonso III and the one of Dinis have melted together. When succeeding his father in 1279, Dinis was at the age of 18. His “grandfather” Alfonso “el Sabio” was 40 years older than him, and at the zenith of his power. Let us therefore look at the policy of Dinis as if inspired by a Castilian advice. There are, in fact, in the biography of these two kings, enough common aspects that can lead us to think. Indeed, it should be noted the following: within a few years after his accession, Dinis managed to come to an agreement and reconciliation with the papacy, and started to devote his attention to an internal reformation of the Portuguese administration, and certainly in the early years of his reign relations with Castile remained good. A short war about Moura and Serpa did not lead to a lasting controversy.

Like his grandfather, relations with the nobility were not always the best. Also developed the extension of the legislation and further centralization. His emphasis laid on the protection of the middle and lower classes from abuse and extortion, which exactly was the advice the king in my poem received from the wise Spanish king. Dinis established a policy of remaining a “visible ruler,” travelling through his lands, offering assistance and justice. As king, he travelled around the country, correcting unjust situations and resolving problems. Just like Alfonso “el Sabio” did in Castile, Dinis promoted the development of

³⁷ Salvador Martínez 2010.

Portuguese as language of administration and culture. Not only he contributed through his measures to the development of towns and commerce. Next to this he also gained renown as troubadour through his songs and *cantigas*.³⁸

Although later in his reign Dinis too was faced with internal strife, one can safely say that, through his deeds and acts as a young Portuguese king, he fits best the image as offered in the Dutch poem. Epic concentration may have melted Alfonso III and Dinis together, but I hope to have demonstrated convincingly that the historical mirror that Willem van Hildegaersberch held his audience around 1390 reflected a true and real Portuguese past, in which two kings in succession, that had troubled reigns, died at a young ages, and in which only when law and justice became a central issue of government, their successors were blessed again with a long life.

Conclusion

At the court in The Hague, that had strong international contacts, and a sound historical awareness, around the year 1390 the moralistic-didactic lesson of the poem *Vanden Coninc van Poertegael* must have been well understood, exactly because of its strong relation with a historical reality with which the noble community was roughly familiar. At the end of the fourteenth century Willem van Hildegaersberch could appeal to an image of Portugal, an Iberian region, far away in physical distance, but recognizable in its historical identity, a country of strangers, but certainly no strange country. The poem on *De Coninc van Poertegael* at the same time made use of that image and contributed to its popularity, at a moment when commercial and political initiatives needed such an image.

³⁸ Saraiva 2006, Ferreira 2005.

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