

## The roads of Portugal

Afonso the Fifth is successful in Africa but not in Europe; he accumulates huge prestige, but he wastes it within a single day. In Portugal, he has a good reputation and prestige, but elsewhere, in the other European courts, he gives a bad impression. He boasts the title – very pompously, in truth – of “King of Portugal and of the Algarves beyond the sea”, but he is not able to conquer Castile and to realize the Iberian unity, when he has the opportunity to do it. He is named with the same name of Publius Cornelius Scipio, known as *O Africano*, (The African), but he does not have the same strength of character. He does not understand the changes, he remains anchored to the idea of the crusade and he does not understand the potentialities implied by the African enterprise.

Around him, at court, there are many noblemen who are becoming richer and more powerful day by day. He spends a lot of money, wins and loses battles, avenges Fernando by recovering his mortal remains and by conquering Tangier and Arzile (1471) in Africa. But when he tries to interfere with the affairs of Castile, he loses all his prestige.

Castile is in turmoil. Henrique II, the king, is in trouble. His restless nobility is pressuring him and, in addition, there are some poisoned rumours circulating at court. According to these rumours, the kingdom's heiress, princess Juana (Jane), is the daughter of a nobleman, don Beltran de la Cueva, not of the king. For this reason, at court, some people call her “*la Beltraneja*”. And what about Isabel, the future Isabel of Castile, half-sister of the king? She has a strong character and clear ideas and is ready to unsettle the plans of her brother (who is planning a Portuguese wedding for her) by marrying, eighteen-year-old, almost secretly, Fernando of Aragon.

When, at Henrique's death, Isabel is proclaimed queen of Castile, the nobility of the opposing Party (the party of the *Beltraneja*) offers the hand of Juana and the crown of Castile to Afonso, who, in the meanwhile, has been widowed. It is the war. Afonso cannot make a mistake: if he loses the war, loses also his prestige and the Castilian noblemen's support. They are for the moment at his side, but tomorrow, in case of defeat, they could change their minds.

At first things go right for the Portuguese king: the whole of Leon is easily conquered. But when Afonso faces the enemy army near the village of Toro (1476), he is unable to defeat it. It is not a real defeat, in truth: it is, a draw, if we use a sporting term.

However that draw is paid at high cost by Afonso: his prestige falls down and the Castilian nobility abandons him. Without allies, without support, *O Africano* is forced to give up his enterprise. However, he makes a final attempt. He goes to Paris and tries to convince the king of France to invade Castile from the north. Louis XI has no intention of going on that adventure. Thus, he promises and then denies, pretends to move troops withdrawing them immediately, he tries to gain time without maintaining his promises.

Afonso understands he has been deceived and ridiculed. He, then, abdicates and professes his intention to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He is dissuaded and brought again in Portugal, where his son and heir João, who had been proclaimed king at the moment of Afonso's abdication, give him back the crown.

With the treaty of Alcaçovas (1479), Afonso gives up his pretention on the Castilian throne, obtaining, in change, some concessions in Africa. The most important is the following: the lands situated south of the Canarias islands, included those not yet discovered, belong to the Portuguese Crown.

When, in 1481, Dom João, second in this name, becomes king, the situation in Portugal is critical. During the reign of Dom Duarte, the great landed aristocrats were only four; when Afonso V dies, they are around forty. Ascended the throne, Dom João comments: “My father has left me owner of the roads of Portugal only.” But he does not feel discouraged. His cousin, the legendary Isabel of Castile, when talks about him, calls him *El Hombre: The Man* par excellence.

For *El Hombre* the moment to conquer again the entire Country and not only its roads has arrived. And even the moment to conquer the Ocean sea has arrived.