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Two saints, two aristocrats: Saint Elisabeth of Hungary and Saint Isabella of Portugal, a religious and cultural itinerary between Central Europe and Portugal

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Biography

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Abstract

Elisabeth of Hungary (1207-1231), princess/*landgrave* of Thuringia, and Isabella (Isabel-Elisabeth) of Aragon (1271-1336), queen of Portugal, were two nobles who became famous due to their acts and religious practices. They are linked by the deep faith they felt, the Religious Order they followed (Saint Francis), their humble lives and the services they paid to poor and sick people. They are also related by the royal blood of Hungary's House/Empire of Arpad, with Saint Isabella of Portugal being the great-niece of Elisabeth of Hungary (San Vicente, 1995). They are equally linked by the miracle that, among others, earned them immortality: “the miracle of the roses”.

With this paper, after a biographical approach to these entities, we seek to draw a religious and cultural itinerary interlinking Central Europe and Portugal, based upon the great devotion to Saint Isabel which still survives in at least Portugal almost some seven hundred years later. This religiosity is present in, among other events, the great Isabella celebrations in the city of Coimbra. We propose that this itinerary will be a source of inspiration for tour guides, travel agencies and academics.

Introduction

There would seem no doubt that current Western Christianity traces its origins and religious history back to Nazareth and a real and simultaneously mythical Jerusalem.

We would seem to have a consensus that primitive Christianity shaped the first Christian souls in a then far distant Near East, a hotbed of religious fervour, which would subsequently spread through the Roman Empire with the consent of the still pagan emperor, Constantine, and in the 4th century seeing mass conversions in Europe. This religious fervour would break upon the most westerly point of the Roman Empire. Thus, it should come as no surprise that studying the relationship between the Iberian Peninsula and the ancient Roman province of Pannonia, founded in the first century B.C., which comprises nowadays Hungary and Slovakia, throws up legends and traditions associated with saints born in lands then under the occupation of the Roman legions, as is the case with Saint Martin, born in Pannonia, in the 4th century, who became Saint Martin of Tours. Still today, almost all of Christendom on 11th November, including, as obviously, Portugal, the year's wine gets its first tasting alongside many wishes and salutations for a good harvest.

Furthermore, in this relationship, we find another Martin, also born in Pannonia, who at the beginning of the 6th century arrived in Portucale. *Martin of Pannonia*, the “apostle of Suevis”, was nominated bishop of Braga in 596. He became known as St. Martin of Dume or St. Martin of Braga. He “invented” Portuguese days of the weeks, two centuries before the Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors, undertaken by the descendants the Visigoth elites, advancing as from the 8th century, and resulted in the taking of the territories that we today know as Portugal (as from 1143) and Spain (as far as 1492). Since the 9th century, this Reconquest would help to draw one of the most important Religious and Cultural itinerary in Europe: St. James Way, also known as the Stars Way.

In central Europe, the descendants of the legendary King Árpád (c. 886-907 A.D.), the Conqueror of Pannonia, grasped the importance of not only ensuring political unity but also the benefits religious harmony might bring to their lands. Correspondingly, whilst the Hungarian nation was not founded by any single act or ruler, the beginnings of this unity first emerged with Prince Vajk (997-1000), son of Prince Géza (972-997). Considered the founder of the nation, Vajk converted to Christianity and adopting (997) the baptism name of the first missionary and martyr in Jerusalem, Stephen. He would become known as King Stephen I (1000-1038) and, as a saint his worship continues still today in the lands formerly making up the Austro-Hungarian empire, itself broken up in 1918.

The Kingdom of Hungary, as from Stephen I, became the centre of medieval Christianity, instead of the House of Árpád came to an end in 1301. Of its descendents, we may highlight in Spain, in Aragon and Barcelona, Queen Constance (Saragossa, 1205), Princess Yolanda/ Violante (Barcelona, 1235) and, in Sicily, Princess Constance (Palermo, 1209) (Lázár, 1999: 34).

On the contrary to Saint Isabella of Aragon, for whom we have more precise details about her life and works, especially in Portugal, the information that we have gathered throughout the course of our research on the descendent of the house of Árpád, Elizabeth of Hungary, or Elisabeth of Thuringia (because of her marriage with Ludwig IV, Prince of Thuringia and Saxony), remains far more imprecise.

As regards her place of birth, the traditional consensus stands around Elizabeth of Hungary, daughter of Andrew II and Gertrud of Andechs-Meran of Bavaria, being born in 1207, in Pozsony (in Hungarian, Pressburg, in German, as from 1918, and henceforth known as Bratislava in 1993) but, as Lázár (1999: 43) details: “Elizabeth was born in 1207, in Pozsony or at Sárospstak” (in Northern Hungary). Pozsony had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary, as this land had been conquered from the Slavs by the Magyars in the 10th century. In the 16th century, Pozsony held out against the Turkish advances and became the capital of Hungarian Kingdom till 1830.

Isabella of Aragon was daughter of Pedro III, King of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia (1276-1285) as well as of Sicily (1282- 1285/1293), and Queen Constance of Hohenstaufen, daughter of Manfred of Sicily (1231-1266), the natural son of Frederick II. Hence, she was the great granddaughter, on her maternal side, of Frederick II (1215-1250), Emperor of the Holy Roman-Germanic Empire and granddaughter on her paternal side of James I, the Conquistador. Her paternal grandfather, James I, father of Pedro III, was married to Violante/Yolande of Hungary, the sister to Elizabeth of Hungary. Constance would choose the name of Isabella for her daughter in memory of a great-aunt who had already been canonised.

So, after so many centuries these nobles, linked by royal blood, will guide our itinerary and will link Central Europe to Iberian Peninsula.

Literature Review

Till now, this area of study, in what concerns cultural and religious tourism, or cultural and religious itineraries, hasn't deserve attention by the researchers of tourism. So the

bibliography about this subject is lacking. We make recourse to scientific articles on itineraries (Lew and Mckercher, 2006), in order to build this one.

We also make recourse to historical and geographical sources (Domingues, 1967, Lázár, 1990), as well as to other sources necessary to attaining the objectives of this paper. Our fieldwork also includes acknowledging the main sites related to these religious figures. As beyond many manifestations of saintliness, they feature in one of the best known legends in hagiographic imaginary: the “Miracle of the Roses”, we will put in evidence the presence of this miracle in their iconographic liturgy, literature, arts and architecture, between others.

Methodology

Based upon the documental research undertaken, the material resulting was subject to analysis in order to cross-reference evidence from various different sources as, in accordance with Yin (2013), the purpose of documental research is to enhance the evidence and the sources encountered. Within this framework, the documents collected were subject to analysis and interpretation with the objective of identifying their incidence, occurrence, content and characteristics as well as their mutual links and bonds.

Results

Based upon this methodology, we are in a position to set out an itinerary (or several ones), that while containing a material dimension, it shall also retain a spiritual facet. As such, and as an analogy, we conceive of it as displaying an open structure just as Umberto Eco posits for a work of art (*The Open Work*). Therefore, its beginning might be either in Slovakia, in Hungary, or in Portugal. But, as from a genetic point of view Saint Elizabeth of Hungary is the great aunt of Isabella of Portugal, this itinerary shall begin in Slovakia and will end in Portugal. We will pick out not only some of the cities and the places that prove most emblematic to religious and cultural pilgrimage, connected with their lives or relics, but also, for instance, churches dedicated or with representations connected to the saints featured here.

Conclusion and Discussion

While the theoretical assumptions of tourism would indicate otherwise, this itinerary may be stated to have neither a beginning nor an end in the sense that, in accordance with the terms set out throughout this research project, we find such a disparate range of geographic territories in which we may find the footprints of Elizabeth of Hungary and Isabella of Aragon. This task becomes still more difficult, when considering the extent of the symbolical and spiritual territories that their worship has ended up shaping and influencing not only in Europe, but also in the American continent, namely in countries like Brazil, Canada or the U.S.A. Based upon this study, others may also emerge to deal with all those facets that, following due collection of materials and the questions raised, restrictions on time and length prevent us from developing here.

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