A Catalan-Mallorcan colony in the Canary Islands, s.XIV

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Data de publicació: 11-11-2016

A Catalan-Mallorcan colony in the Canary Islands during the fourteenth century.
Monday, 11 June 2012
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Published in issue 422

The European rediscovery of the Canary Islands at the beginning of the fourteenth century as a result of the explorations carried out by the Genoese navigator Lancelotto Malocello, whose Ephemeris (1312-2012) commemorates the 700th anniversary of this year, was published in the portolan signed by the Mallorcan cartographer Angelino Dulcert in 1339.

Old map of the Canary Islands.

As a result of the knowledge and dissemination of Dulcert's work and the importance of the Portuguese-Italian maritime voyage of 1341, the Catalan-Mallorcan navigators sponsored various expeditions to the newly encountered islands, which had as their purpose the establishment of commercial relations, the creation of bases of mercantile support for navigation in that part of the ocean, territorial domination and external sovereignty, and political control aided by religious proselytism, evangelization and conversion of the indigenous populations of the Canary Islands. But, sometimes, they also resulted in the development of human trafficking.

Either because of the increase in Mallorcan contacts with the outside world, which apparently would cause the slave raids of other corsairs, or because of a facies of food stress, because of their interference in native affairs and the transgression of interethnic pacts, because of the development of an allochthonous epidemic that decimated the island's inhabitants or because of sexual vices as J. Viera y Clavijo pointed out, the Catalan-Mallorcan settlement in the Canary Islands culminated in the massacre of its members at the end of the fourteenth century.

Between the years 1342 and 1386 there are testimonies that narrate the preparation and departure of Mallorcan and Catalan voyages to the Canary Islands, collected by Antonio Rumeu de Armas in an extensively documented essay. A large part of these documents refer to licenses, accounts and incidents of trips, appointments of the expeditionaries responsible and their crews, royal and ecclesiastical letters, papal bulls and wills, among many others. But, in addition to the contributions of this essay, an extensive bibliographic production on this subject can be found from the twenties to the nineties of the last century.

Among the most important works of this period of the fourteenth century is the Book of the Knowledge of all the kingdoms and lands and lordships that are around the world, and of the signs and weapons that have each land and lordship by sy and of the kings and lords that they proueen, an anonymous work made by a Spanish Franciscan friar around 1350 in which the islands are listed and designated quite precisely Larger Canary Islands and four islets through the literary device of an imaginary journey through the Archipelago starting from the African coast. The list of the different codices of this work and the vicissitudes to which they were subjected until they were published in 1877 by

Marcos Jiménez de la Espada in the Bulletin of the Spanish Geographical Society was addressed by B. Bonnet Reverón. At the time of writing the aforementioned book it seems that only the islands of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria were recognized as populated or, as B. Bonnet warns, only three islands of our archipelago had been landed, or if they were disembarked on the others, their inhabitants fled to the interior. The historical importance of the text lies in the veracity of its geographical information, taken from writings and portolans related to the Mallorcan expeditions, as well as the fact that it was handled by the editors of the subsequent expedition of Jean de Bethencourt and Gadifer de La Salle, indicating that it enjoyed recognized reliability.

Also noteworthy is a fragment of the Prolegomena by the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun which, between 1353 and 1362, gives an account of certain Canarian slaves who had been sold in Morocco by subjects of the King of Aragon in the mid-fourteenth century. Once they learned the language, they provided information of indisputable authenticity about their homeland, the island of Gran Canaria.

And, finally, the anonymous account of two expeditions to the Canary Islands collected in Valencia between 1389 and 1395 transmitted around 1440-1445 by Félix Malleoli, the canon of Zurich, better known as Félix Hemmerlin, in his work De nobilitate et rusticitate, published by A. Lütolf in 1877 and published in Spanish by E. Serra Ràfols.

The most relevant ethnohistorical data on the native world of the Canary Islands from this long period of the fourteenth century refer to the presence of idolatry and an astral cult in the pre-Hispanic communities, their productive activities, food and culinary customs, clothing, socio-cultural habits, difficulties and feats for their conversion to Christianity, as well as the subtle process of transculturation that took place from their first contacts with Europeans.

In this regard, the evangelization of the Canarians in their vernacular language is striking, using interpreters and/or baptized captives from previous expeditions instructed in the Catalan language, as well as the provisioning of products made by the Mallorcans for their voyage in 1352. Among them we highlight, translated from Latin, the presence of cereals (wheat and barley) for consumption and, as seed, wine, oil, iron tools, black fish, pitch, implements and farm animals.

If we accept the statements present in Le Canarien, A. Cedeño and Abreu Galindo, among others, some of these imported elements contributed to the establishment of commercial relations between navigators and indigenous societies for more than forty years. But if, in addition, we complement this news with the official documentary records cited, relating to the settlement of Mallorcans in Gran Canaria, it is obvious that the introduction of metal instruments, edible species, foreign products, animals and farming implements, brought with it a substantial and progressive technological and productive transformation with very broad consequences yet to be specified.

Analysing the subsequent testimony of the chroniclers and first historians of the Islands, it seems evident that the innovations allegedly operated in the indigenous infrastructural bases (use of metal instruments, construction and ornamentation of buildings, irrigation works, alteration of crops, exploitation of raw materials...) and, consequently, those that implied other levels of the native societies (socio-political organization, religious ideology...), could have contributed to important socio-cultural changes in the island world more than a century before its effective conquest by the Castilians at the end of the fifteenth century.

But, either because of the increase in Mallorcan contacts with the outside world, which apparently would be caused by the slave raids of other corsairs, or because of a facies of food stress, because of their interference in native affairs and the transgression of interethnic pacts, because of the development of an allochthonous epidemic that decimated the inhabitants or because of sexual vices as pointed out by J. Viera y Clavijo, the Catalan-Mallorcan settlement in Gran Canaria culminated in the massacre of its members at the end of the fourteenth century. According to M. Mitja, the direct causal factor of the dramatic outcome can be traced in the work of J. Vincke, for whom the revolt of the Canarians, mainly in the area of Telde where the Mallorcans were based, was due to the kidnapping of indigenous children for slave purposes by the Castilian members of the razzia of 1393. We have consulted the work of J. Vincke cited by M. Mitja and, specifically, his reference in footnote 28 to page 203 of the aforementioned work, where this argument does not appear in any way. On the other hand, J. Vincke attributes the death of the members of the Mallorcan colony and mission to the distrust aroused in the islanders by the contacts they maintained with abroad.

Comments:

Apr 15, 2014 2:14 PM - José Rizal Montelongo González says: It turns out that there was an expedition prior to that of the Catalans and Mallorcans, and also prior to that of Jean de Bethencourt and Gadifer de la Salle, this was that of Luso-Genovesa-Españolal, piloted by the Genoese naturalist, Nicolosso da Recco.

2 Jul. 2015 10:41 - Jose Rizal Montelongo Gonzalez of Recco said: That they do not attribute to themselves what they should not, because the studies on the subject of that Portuguese-Portuguese-Genoese and Spanish expedition are dated in the letters of Petrarch, Historian of Ancient Rome.

2 Jul. 2015 10:46 - José Rizal Montelongo González de Recco said: Niccoloso da Recco was a fourteenth-century Genoese navigator, the first European navigator who is documented to have arrived in the Canary Islands. In June 1341, two ships chartered by King Alfonso IV of Portugal and with Florentine, Genoese and Spanish crews, reached the islands under his command and with the help of his second, the Florentine Angiolino del Tegghia de Corbizzi. They remain there for five months. On his return to Lisbon, the writer Giovanni Boccaccio wrote a portrait of the Guanche people, based on the information given to him by Da Recco.1