The House of Barcelona behind the creation of the first Cambridge college

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Coat of arms of Peterhouse, the first college of the University of Cambridge, England.

As it can be seen in the image that opens the article, the coat of arms depicting Peterhouse of Cambridge is formed, in its central part, by four sticks of gules in a golden field, with a border around them with eight old crowns.

This is, who can deny it, very similar to the Catalan royal coat of arms. When we look at it, the first thing we ask ourselves is whether Catalonia and the House of Barcelona -who led in the creation of Catalonia and, later, the Catalan-Aragonese Crown- might be related to the founding of this illustrious college, the first of one of the most prestigious universities in the world. And as we will see in this article, many historical details point in this direction.

The coat of arms of Peterhouse college of Cambridge at present.The coat of arms of Peterhouse college of Cambridge at present.

Peterhouse is the oldest of the colleges of the University of Cambridge, England, and was founded by Hugh de Balsham, bishop of Ely, in 1284and granted its charter by King of England Edward I,mainly known in Catalonia for defeating the Scottish hero William Wallace, known as Braveheart .

Edward I of England, was the son of King Henry III of England and Queen Eleanor of Provence (Ais of Provence v 1223 - Amesbury, England 1291), daughter of the Count Ramon Berenguer IV of Provence, cousin of our Catalan King Jaume I and grandson of Alfons el Cast. Both the Queen Eleanor, and her father, Count Ramon Berenguer, belonged to the Houseof Barcelona and to the Catalan nation, therefore, they used the House’s coat of arms as their own.

Cambridge Peterhouse OldCourt

Why was Queen Eleanor of Provence a member of the Houseof Barcelona?

Because the county of Provence becomes part of the House of Barcelona from 1113, when Ramon Berenguer III receives all rights in this county from his wife Dolça, Countess of Provence, who had inherited it a year before from her mother. But it would not be until her death, in 1127, that he would assume ownership of it. At the death of the count, it wouldbe his son Berenguer Ramon I of Provença, twin brother of Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona, ??who would inherit it.

The following images show various coat of arms of Queen Eleanor of Provence, from the House of Barcelona, ??outside and inside St Katherine's Precinct Regent's Park, London.

Coat of arms of Queen Eleanor of Provence at St Katherine's Precinct Regent's Park, London.

Was there the Catalan queen Eleanor de Provence behind the foundation of Peterhouse in Cambridge?

This is a very plausible possibility, considering that her husband, King Henry III, granted Eleanor a number of towns and

territories in England, including the town of Cambridge (Howell, 2001. p 113). Another fact that reinforces this possibility is that Queen Eleanor was still alive when the Peterhouse College in Cambridge was founded in 1284, since we know that the queen died in 1291.

Hugh de Balsham, bishop of the English town of Ely, is considered the founder of Peterhouse. However, very little is known about the origins of this character from whom, surprisingly, the place of birth and death are unknown. We know, however, that he was elected bishop of Ely in 1256, under the reign of Henry III and of Eleanor of Provence, when the town of Cambridge already belonged to the possessions granted to Queen Eleanor.

In the window of Thriplow Church, in Cambridgeshire, the portrait of Hugh of Balsham appears with the Peterhouse coat of arms, as we can see in the following image:

Hugh de Balsam with the coat of arms of Peterhouse, Cambridge.

It must be borne in mind that Queen Eleanor of Provence was an active monarch. We are told that she was regent at least in 1253, when King Henry III was overseas, and several authors claim that she was a smart and politically capable woman. It is also known that she brought to England many people from her native court. Perhaps Bishop Hugh was one of them or perhaps he enjoyed the favour or protection of the Queen. A better understanding of the relationship between these two historical characters would help to explain if the Queenwas behind the creation of the oldest college at the University of Cambridge and, therefore, one of the most prestigious educational centres in the world.

Finally, here are some images of the shield of the kings of England, Henry III and Eleanor of Provence, at the Royal Gallery, at the House of Lords in the Palace of Westminster, seat of the Parliament of Great Britain, in London. The current Queen of England, Elizabeth II,walks through this room every time she opens the parliamentary legislature.