

AMBASSADORS IN
GOLDEN-AGE MADRID

The Court of Philip IV
through Foreign Eyes

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PROLOGUE: NATIONALISM AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE COURT OF SPAIN

JOHN H. ELLIOTT

In the summer of 1963 Lord Hailsham, at that time the British Minister for Science, came back from Moscow, where he had been sent as the emissary of the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, to take part in negotiations being conducted with the Russians for partial nuclear disarmament. He returned to London with presents for Macmillan from his opposite number, Nikita Khrushchev, the Premier of the Soviet Union. These consisted of caviar, crab meat and wine. Macmillan reciprocated with a vase and some Stilton cheese.¹ It was one further, and rather banal, episode in the long story of diplomatic gift-giving that is a central theme of this book.

Madrid, the seat of the Spanish court since 1561, was a great, and perhaps the greatest, European centre for the exchange of diplomatic gifts during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Effectively the capital of a world-wide monarchy, the *Monarquía española*, Madrid exercised a gravitational pull over the representatives of the other states of Europe, whether they were enemies or rivals, allies or satellites of the Spanish crown. At least until the 1640s and 1650s, when Spain's European hegemony ceased to be taken for granted, the Spanish Habsburg monarchs, Philip II, Philip III and Philip IV, enjoyed a commanding position on the international stage. They and their ministers therefore needed to be courted and wooed, and an essential part of the wooing process was the giving of gifts.

As this volume makes abundantly clear, there was nothing simple or straightforward about giving a present in early modern Europe. It was conditioned by considerations of rank and hierarchy, it was embedded in the conventions of protocol and ceremonial that defined and embalmed court culture, and it was shrouded in a series of arcane rituals that make its practice almost incomprehensible to modern readers. It touched on questions of honour and reputation that lay at the heart of civilized society, and was capable of arousing such

1. Engraved title page to *Política indiana* (detail), by Juan de Solórzano (Madrid, 1648, folio). Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España.

1 HENNESSY (2019), p. 363.

a degree of personal and collective emotion that a well-chosen and well-timed gift could reduce or end conflicts between states or monarchs, while the failure to reciprocate in kind, or to reciprocate at all, could provoke a major diplomatic incident. All this made it essential to move with the utmost circumspection when choosing a present.

The editorial introductions to this volume throw light on Madrid as a centre of international diplomacy and on the demands that life in the capital made on foreign ambassadors and emissaries. It also examines, on the strength of the examples discussed in individual chapters, the different types of gifts that were exchanged, and the extent to which they were tailored to the cultural, religious and aesthetic tastes of the sovereigns of the House of Austria. Since many of these gifts consisted of *objets d'art*, and especially paintings, early modern diplomacy can be seen as a significant element in the commissioning, exchange and international movement of works of art, many of which are now among the most prized possessions of national museums and galleries. The history of such gifts has therefore assumed an important place in art history as practised today, and, to a lesser degree, in the developing history of the book.²

The contextualization provided by the editors for the case histories in the succeeding chapters renders superfluous a repetition of the same story in this Prologue. The book as a whole, however, prompts reflections of a more general nature on the character of the *Monarquía española* as it appears in these pages, and on the operations of the administrative and diplomatic system that confronted new ambassadors on reaching Madrid.

The first such reflection, and perhaps the most obvious, is the degree to which Madrid was at once a national and an international court. All European capitals were to some extent international as well as national cities, in that they all had foreign visitors and residents who brought with them, and generally retained, many of the attitudes and customs of their homelands, but the Spanish court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries possessed a degree of internationalism whose implications are not always fully

understood and appreciated. Up to a point this distinguished and set it apart from other European courts, even while sharing many of the same characteristics.³

One reason for this internationalism was the sheer geographical scale of the *Monarquía* and the diversity of the territories of which it was composed (fig. 1). Spain's was pre-eminently a composite monarchy, in which many kingdoms and provinces, while owing allegiance to the monarch in Madrid, preserved at least some of the laws, liberties and institutions they possessed at the time when they passed under Spanish rule.⁴ Neapolitans or Catalans were the king's subjects, but they clung to their traditional identity, and this was reflected in the way in which they defended their interests in Madrid. If Naples or the Catalan Generalitat, or even the City Council of Barcelona, wanted to raise an issue of concern with the king, it would appoint an 'embassy' to Madrid, and would appoint 'ambassadors' to represent it. Dr. Joan Francesc Rossell, for instance, was sent to Madrid at the end of 1616 by the Consell de Cent of Barcelona as the city's ambassador to complain about the wretched state of the coinage. Not all ambassadors to the Spanish court, therefore, were by any means foreigners; but, as Rossell's correspondence so vividly illustrates, he found himself presented on arrival with exactly the same problems and obstacles as those confronted by any foreign envoy, and was compelled to resort to the same devices to find a way round them.⁵

In cases like this, the borderline between 'national' and 'international' was a narrow one, and throughout Europe, and not least in Spain and its European and non-European territories, the concept of 'foreignness' was porous and juridically ill-defined.⁶ Were the Portuguese, for instance, foreigners or not after the Union of the Crowns of Spain and Portugal in 1580? Much depended on the context and the situation at any given moment. In 1625 Spain followed the French example in appointing a *conductor de los embajadores* to look after foreign envoys and arrange their audiences, but it was by no means clear who exactly was qualified to receive his help.⁷ Simply because of the size, diversity and pre-eminence of the *Monarquía* the number of envoys and

2 DAVIS (2000), pp. 59–61, 75–80.

3 For similarities and differences see ELLIOTT (1989), ch. 7.

4 ELLIOTT (2009), ch. 1.

5 AMORÓS I GONELL (1992).

6 HERZOG (2003).

ambassadors who had to be received and housed in Madrid must easily have exceeded the number of those appointed to other courts, including the court of Spain's closest rival, France, although this, too, had something of the same international outreach as the court of Spain.

The Spanish court was unusual, too, in that it possessed, even if it did not necessarily enjoy, a special relationship with the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna. Dynastic marriages had created many links between European monarchs and their courts, but the Madrid-Vienna relationship was different in kind because Spain and the Holy Roman Empire were ruled by two branches of the same, Habsburg, family. Inevitably, family interests and concerns received high priority in their diplomatic dealings, and the interdependence of the two branches of the House of Austria was consolidated from generation to generation by new marriages, which were preceded by the exchange of court portraits of the future bride and groom. The closeness of this relationship was reflected in the special status of their ambassadors at each other's court. But managing the relationship was by no means plain sailing and was complicated by the fact that, while the emperor was nominally the senior of the two partners, the Spanish monarch had much larger purse strings. King and emperor may have shared similar views about the state of the world and the defence of the faith, but there were times, especially in the age of the Thirty Years War, when the emperor could not survive without Spanish silver and military support. The resulting sense in Vienna of humiliating dependence, and in Madrid of anger and exasperation when the emperor and his ministers showed a determination to pursue a line of their own, was liable to generate acute tension, as in 1648 in the deliberations over the Peace of Westphalia. In a startling break with convention the imperial ambassador, the Marquess of Grana, found he no longer enjoyed easy access to Philip IV's apartments.⁷ Precisely because king and emperor shared so many of the same preoccupations and were so closely bound to each other by ties of blood and kinship, diplomatic relations between them were normally conducted at a higher level than with Spain's other partners and disagreements led all too easily to wounded feelings on both sides.

In general, king and emperor found themselves at one in their response to the religious revolution that divided post-Reformation Christendom into warring camps, even if they often disagreed over the strategies to be adopted. Both therefore cultivated the papacy assiduously in order to ensure its spiritual and practical support, including the financial support of the church in their dominions. Consequently, gifts to cardinals and intensive lobbying when a new pope was to be elected were regarded as essential for producing a successful outcome, and the Spanish embassy in Rome, where the ambassador had a permanent residence, was a hive of activity in pursuit of papal support, or at least benevolence.

The two branches of the House of Austria also shared a profound preoccupation over the menacing presence of Islam. Although the advance of the Ottoman Empire into the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Balkans was a source of general alarm, the immediacy of the threat to Spain itself and to the borderlands of the Holy Roman Empire was of particular concern to the Habsburgs, who felt the weight of responsibility on their shoulders for the defence of Christendom. On the other hand they could use this to obtain additional leverage over Rome; and Philip II, with the semi-blessing of the papacy, would prove a master of self-representation as the natural champion of Christendom against the Turk.

The relentless Turkish advance accelerated a movement that was already well under way by the later fifteenth century—the extension of European diplomacy to embrace states and rulers of the non-European world. Diplomatic contacts between Europeans and the Ottoman Empire were well established by the late fifteenth century as each side sought to know the other better, but contacts were also well under way with more distant rulers than the Sublime Porte in Istanbul.

The pioneers in this process of diplomatic outreach were the monarchs of late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Portugal as the sponsors of long-distance overseas voyages down the African coast and into the Persian gulf, the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia. Even if the Portuguese only came as traders, their establishment of trading posts and enclaves had major political implications for the re-

7 LOOMIE (1975).

8 See Luis Tercero Casado's chapter in this volume, pp. 133–34.