

Luis Salas Almela. *The Conspiracy of the Ninth Duke of Medina Sidonia (1641): An Aristocrat in the Crisis of the Spanish Empire*.

Trans. Ruth MacKay. The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World 52. Leiden: Brill, 2013. xix + 184 pp. \$133. ISBN: 978-90-04-25526-5.

In the cycle of revolts that shook the Spanish monarchy in the 1640s, the conspiracy of the Duke of Medina Sidonia usually receives only a passing mention, as a symptom of the general crisis more than as an episode relevant in itself. There is even a certain condescension in the way it is sometimes alluded to the duke's dream of becoming King of Andalusia, implying that it was a quixotic plan with no basis in reality. Contemporaries, though, thought that the affair was much more serious than that; Philip IV himself wrote in 1646: "This matter caused such a scandal throughout Europe, there was no place where people did not know about it" (156). This is the view endorsed by Luis Salas in what can be considered the first full and

rigorous study about the episode; for him, the 1641 conspiracy was an “audacious plot” (129), “not chimeric, absurd or peculiarly personal” (159).

Salas’s study is divided in two parts. In the first one, a synthesis of previous research (*Medina Sidonia: El poder de la aristocracia* [2008]), Salas studies the duke’s assets of power: the dominions of the family in southwestern Spain; the revenues he extracted from the control of transatlantic trade, particularly through custom duties imposed on foreign merchants; the military functions he exercised as hereditary captain general in the maritime frontier and the Strait of Gibraltar; and also his diplomatic activity, particularly in the relations with the Kingdom of Morocco. As Salas notices, in all these actions the duke showed a striking degree of autonomy, not to say a quasi-regal attitude: he exchanged embassies with the Sultan of Morocco and corresponded freely not only with Fez, but also with the Venetian Senate and the Kings of England and Poland. Salas stresses that such accumulation of power and influence rested on a more or less implicit pact between the house of Medina Sidonia and the monarchy, but it also created the context for accusations of disobedience and, finally, of treason.

The second part of the book is devoted to the conspiracy itself. Salas first analyzes the dubious behavior of the duke in the weeks and months following the outbreak of the Portuguese revolt in December 1640 until being summoned to Madrid in August 1641, where he was forced to confess his contacts with his brother-in-law and new king of Portugal, João IV. The author then recounts the royal pardon, the duke’s return to his estates, the second arrest, and the final judgment and punishment.

Expressly avoiding any psychological or speculative interpretation of the events, Salas has adjusted his exposition strictly to the documentary evidence from the wide range of archival sources he has explored. This is undoubtedly a wise method but it can also result in a certain rigidity of exposition. For instance, regarding the genesis of the plot, he first recounts the duke’s actions as military governor in the first half of 1641, and only afterward, when he has arrived at the duke’s first arrest and considers the evidence from the denunciations against the duke, does he explain particular circumstances, such as the role played by the Marquis of Ayamonte in engaging Medina Sidonia in the conspiracy. A more integrated reconstruction of the course of events and some deeper reflection on the conspirators’ personalities would, I think, have been helpful. The development of the international side of the plot also remains rather vague, due undoubtedly to the scarcity of evidence.

On the other hand, Salas makes very pertinent remarks about the final goals of the revolt. He shows that the idea of becoming King of Andalusia was a malicious rumor spread by the Portuguese and ostensibly rejected by the duke. Ayamonte, for his part, dreamed of a “free republic,” but only as a temporary regime in order to force a change of government in the monarchy. As an ultimate interpretation, Salas points interestingly to the idea, mentioned by some sources, of the duke becoming *potentado* (potentate); that is, “a prince with absolute dominium over a province but invested by another, superior prince,” as the

dictionaries of the period say. The duke's Atlantic interests are also taken into account in the last pages of the study.

Dense and informative (and meticulously translated by historian Ruth MacKay), this book covers a lacuna in Spanish historiography, throws much-needed light on an episode that is far from anecdotal, and also offers a stimulating case study to those interested in the history of conspiracies in the early modern age.

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