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## THE PANELS OF ST VINCENT

The British Historical Society kindly sent me the essay of Mr Malcolm S. Howe called *Portugal's Perplexing Panels* (2001), which provides Nuno Gonçalves's masterpiece with numbers to distinguish the sixty portraits of the royal family and contemporaries. I am obliged to Mr Howe for the loan of some of the works on the Panels he has collected. I agree with most of his identifications and much of his text. The six Panels were discovered in 1882 in store at the monastery of St Vincent de Fora, and much ink has been spilt since then in attempts to identify the figures shown. Some of these are wide of the mark. There is more to be said.

When the panels were found, they were in disorder. The six panels form two triptychs, each of a centrepiece, and left and right side-panels. The first questions to be asked are: 1) how they were originally assembled and 2) why there are two triptychs. The first triptych has as its centrepiece the panel showing Afonso V, Prince John as a boy and Prince Henry the Navigator. It is often called the Panel of the Infante because the portrait of Prince Henry is readily recognizable from the illustration to Gomes Eanes de Zurara's *Chronicle of Guinea*, finished in 1453 and now in Paris. It should rather be known as the Panel of the Royal Family, since, in addition to the king, the prince and Henry, it shows also Queen Isabel, deceased on December 3 1455 at the age of 23, eight months after the birth of Prince John on March 3 1455. Its left-hand panel is that of the Frades, showing Cistercians in their white robes. The head of the Order was the Abbot of Alcobaça, who was also royal confessor and almoner, though he might delegate these functions: the Abbot was then D. Estevão de Aguiar. The corresponding right-hand panel is that of the Relic, so called because the kneeling figure in red holds an open cloth pouch



with a fragment of skin. He is D. Nuno Álvares de Aguiar, who left the Cistercians in 1463 to become Prior of the Augustinian monastery of St Vincent in Lisbon; he later became Bishop of Tangier when it was reconquered in 1470, but remained at court. Also in this panel is the Chief Rabbi, Abraham Negro, who wears the red star required of Jews. He was physician to Afonso V and collector of taxes of his community. After his death in 1470, the office passed to Isaac Abarbanel, who was general tax-gatherer and became so unpopular that he fled to Castile and then to Italy, where his son Leon Hebreo published his famous Dialogues of Love in Italian. The three panels taken together have a religious theme suitable for a monastery which was closed to the public at large.

The remaining three panels are, on the contrary, suitable for display in a cathedral church to which everyone had access, especially in time of Crusade. They show men in armour and with weapons, which were inappropriate in a monastery, although an exception was allowable for the ceremonial swords worn by the king and prince. The centre-piece, the Panel of the Constables, shows the king's brother, the Infante Fernando, kneeling before the Saint, who is blessing his arms with a white wand. The Infante Fernando was made Constable on the death of his predecessor 'Pedro the Constable', who died of illness and despair, while pursuing his claim to be king of the Catalans in Barcelona, on June 29 1466. He is buried in Santa Maria del Mar, and his sword of state, now in the Barcelona Museum, bears his device *Peine pour Jole* ('through suffering to eternal bliss'). One of the side-panels also shows men in armour, that of the Braganças, descendants of D. Afonso, the illegitimate and eldest son of John I. He repented not being made duke when John I introduced the title for his sons Pedro (of Coimbra) and Henry (of Viseu). His own jealousy was cooled when Pedro the Regent gave him the title: he lived until 1460



and died in distant Chaves. His eldest son, also Afonso, carried on the resentment, but predeceased him and so never held the title, which passed to the second son Fernando, who rallied to the side of Afonso V after the arrival of the Bull of Crusade in 1457. The left-hand panel is commonly called of the Fishermen because the central figure is draped in a net. But he also carries a small nautical instrument, perhaps a compass, which is not symbolic of fishermen, but of pilots and navigators. The panel should properly be called of the Seafarers. It appears here because when Prince Henry the Navigator died on November 13 1469, he had made Fernando, his nephew, his heir, with the legacy of the Discoveries. Fernando, the future Constable, followed Afonso V in giving priority to the Crusade, and used the ships of the explorers mainly to transport the Portuguese armed forces to North Africa.

Thus Nuno Gonçalves painted two triptychs, one for the monastery of St Vincent and the other for a cathedral church. His outstanding greatness as a painter was recognized by Francisco de Olanda, who visited Italy and met Michelangelo and the great Italian artists. He ranks Nuno Gonçalves with the dozen greatest painters. He writes in about 1548, and must be regarded as the father of art history in Portugal: his testimony is not lightly to be set aside. He says that Nuno Gonçalves was royal painter, and that his panels were to be seen in the cathedral of Lisbon. This confirms the purpose of the two triptychs.

The date to be assigned to the paintings cannot be exact. It is not known if Nuno had pupils or assistants, -perhaps not, since the painters of the following generation fall much below him. In any case, the execution of sixty portraits was a matter of months rather than weeks. It is highly probable that the royal family came first: Nuno worked for the king and received orders from him. An approximate date is provided by the portrait of Prince John, the future John II, born on March 3 1455: he

is shown as a boy of about eleven, with no sign of down on his chin, and clutching a ceremonial sword too big for him to wield. The prince reached eleven on March 3 1466. If painted much before or after, he would have appeared differently.

As we see, Nuno Gonçalves painted some personages who were already dead, such as Prince Henry and Queen Isabel. He had seen these people while they were alive, but does not seem to include any of an older generation. The central figure of the triptych of the Constables is Afonso V's younger brother Fernando, who held the title from the death of Pedro the Constable on June 29 1466. Fernando himself died in September 1470, when Prince John had been married to his eldest daughter Leonor, though the formal ceremony had not taken place, since the necessary papal dispensation had not arrived. It took place on the feast of St Vincent, January 22 1471. The office of constable had been made hereditary by Afonso V's father King Duarte, who before coming to the throne visited Nun' Álvares Pereira, then a Carmelite monk in his monastery in Lisbon, and desired him to retain the office for the duration of his life. It passed into the royal family in the person of the Infante John, a younger brother of Duarte, Pedro and Henry. From John it passed to his son Diogo, who outlived him by only a year and dies as a lad. The Regent Pedro quickly bestowed it on his young son, also Pedro, the Constable, and future claimant to the title of King of the Catalans, En Pere IV. The bestowal of the title on the boy Pedro, only fourteen, and hastily knighted, inflamed the jealousy of the Braganças, who brought about the death of Pedro the Regent at Alfarrobeira in May 1449. The Regent's daughter Queen Isabel upheld her father's memory with the young Afonso V, but her brother Pedro the Constable was driven into exile in Castile, and returned only to play his part when the Bull of Crusade was issued in 1457. In a very legalistic court, it is improbable that Pedro

the constable was ever divested of his title, so that no successor could be appointed until after his death: thus the Infante Fernando could not become Constable until after June 1466. While the king was himself present, it was he, and not his constable, who issued orders. Hence Pedro felt that he could leave Afonso V in the midst of the war in North Africa, declaring afterwards that he was serving no useful purpose there.

In our own time, the most tragic and sympathetic figure is that of Pedro the Constable, who, like a true knight-errant, thought it his duty to go to Catalonia to pursue the claim that he inherited from his mother. The Generalitat of Barcelona did not have the right to dispose of the crown of Aragon, and was itself divided. Pedro found himself involved in a civil war he could not win. As his cause declined he consoled himself with moral works and poetry, desperately seeking to revive the English Alliance by a marriage to a sister of Edward IV. His portrait was painted, not only for the gallery of Nuno Gonçalves, but for the Epiphany by a fine Valencian artist, Mestre Huguet, resident in Barcelona. Of it, Carolina Michaelis wrote that his face is 'full of saudades for a better world and inclined to scorn earthly glory'.

The Panels now occupy a place of honour in the Janelas Verdes. Three of the portraits are of the half-English sons of Philippa of Lancaster, the *ínculta geração* of Camões. About a score of others may be identified with reasonable assurance, but the majority of Nuno Gonçalves' sitters are likely to remain unknown to us.

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