



Illegal Marriages: Pope Innocent III on Marriages within the Iberian Peninsula and German Lands

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Abstract

Pope Innocent III has drawn constant scholarly attention in the realm of medieval history. Not only was his papacy fundamental in the shaping of the modern-day Roman Catholic Church, but his time as Roman Pontiff is also considered the apogee of the medieval papacy. He expanded papal influence into realms previously dreamt of by Church reformers and exerted it over secular rulers. An often-contested topic of Innocent's historiography is the motivations and justifications for his actions. Are we to view them through the lens of reform or the mind of a pragmatist? This paper contributes to this debate by analyzing Innocent's letters and actions pertaining to the consanguineous marriages of Alfonso IX with Berenguela in the Iberian Peninsula and Otto IV with Beatrix in the German lands. By comparing the actions and justifications of Pope Innocent III in the Iberian Peninsula and the German lands—an area on the periphery of Europe and one central in it—this paper seeks to uncover, firstly, whether Innocent acted similarly in comparable situations from both areas and, secondly, whether Church reform or pragmatism influenced his arguments and measures. This paper finds that Innocent acted in a reformist manner (disregarding temporal outcomes in favor of spiritual strictness) in the Iberian Peninsula while he focused on temporal matters through a pragmatic approach in the German lands due to the severe threat the German Empire posed to Church independence and the ongoing Reconquista in Iberia. Utilizing a comparatist approach to this topic allows for conclusions to be made from his actions in different regions rather than a case study in a singular region.

Keywords: Pope Innocent III, Church Reform, Germany, Iberia, Marriage

Illegal Marriages

A discussion of the medieval Roman Catholic Church (hereafter “Church”) would not be complete without a section on the papacy of Pope Innocent III. His papacy, 1198-1216, established the foundation and structure for the modern-day Roman Catholic Church in its internal hierarchy and external image. Under Innocent, the ideas of Church reform, papal supremacy, the judicial papacy, and Church independence were implemented and exerted over Christendom. These ideas defined Innocent's papacy and the papacies that followed. Pope Innocent III's historiography is one of the largest and most extensive on a medieval figure. It

covers his actions from England to Armenia and Iberia to Scandinavia, while delving into his mind as well. While most scholars agree that Innocent's papacy was one of the most powerful and influential of the medieval period, his motivations for his actions are still being debated. Was Innocent ideologically committed to reform, or was he more pragmatic in his actions? This paper seeks to answer this question by utilizing a comparative approach to analyze the consanguineous marriages of Otto IV with Beatrix in the German lands and Alfonso IX of León with Berenguela in the Iberian Peninsula. These marriages both secured strategic advantages for kingdoms within Europe, but since they fell within a prohibited degree of kinship they could be annulled by the pope. It finds that in the case of the German lands, Innocent acted pragmatically—taking temporal outcomes into consideration—while he focused on the spiritual outcomes in the Iberian Peninsula due to his reform beliefs. His inconsistency can be explained by the importance of the threat the German kingdom posed to the independence of the papacy and the recent struggles of Christians against Muslims in the Reconquista.

This research utilized both primary and secondary sources, original and translated, but was limited to sources in English or Spanish. Due to the amount of research conducted on Innocent, this limitation was not prohibitive. To uncover Innocent's motivations in this paper, a single topic—consanguineous marriages—is analyzed within a comparative framework consisting of two different areas of Europe, the Iberian Peninsula and the German lands. These regions of Europe were chosen for their differences of location, level of threat to the papacy, and interaction with Muslims. They had similarities that allowed this analysis to work, namely the rulers from both regions recognized the authority of the papacy, Pope Innocent III was active in their affairs, and they both had at least one high-level case of consanguineous marriage. The marriages of Otto with Beatrix and Alfonso with Berenguela were chosen due to their similarities—levels of consanguinity, their purposes to unite a fractured people and create peace, involved rulers of kingdoms, etc.—which allowed for a stronger analysis to be undertaken into why Innocent approved one while rejecting the other.

The rejection of the Iberian marriage was the rule for the Roman Pontiff while the approval of the German one was the exception. Innocent's strong aversion to approving consanguineous marriages was a result of his reformist beliefs. The two main goals of his papacy were the reform of the Church and the retaking of the Holy Land, where the crusading kingdoms

had been greatly diminished by the campaigns of Saladin in the 1180s. Along with structural reform of the Church, Innocent pursued moral reform vigorously by working to ensure the laws of the Roman Catholic Church were followed by both the clergy and lay Christians. While the pope pursued the reform of the Church and Christian society because it was his pastoral duty to guide Christendom's souls to salvation, it served another purpose as well (Smith, 2004). His two goals were linked, in his mind, by the fact that the Church and Christendom needed to be reformed and purified to prevail against the Muslims in the Holy Land and the Iberian Peninsula (Smith, 2016). Regardless of the temporal outcomes of refusing to grant a dispensation to a marriage, the prevention of an incestuous, sinful marriage at the most visible level of society would bring more Christian successes than the resulting alliance from the marriage. Innocent's description of the purposes of the Fourth Lateran Council encapsulates his objectives and explains his mindset: "to eradicate vices and to plant virtues, to correct faults and to reform morals, to remove heresies and to strengthen faith, to settle discords and to establish peace, to get rid of oppression and to foster liberty, to induce princes and Christian people to come to the aid and succour of the Holy Land" (Tanner, 1990, p. 227).

Pope Innocent III and Marriage

Even before Innocent was elected to the Papacy, he placed special emphasis on marriage. His *De quadripartita specie nuptiarum* (on four types of marriages) discusses marriage as both a sacramental act and as an allegorical exercise. He writes that when the man and woman marry, they become "two in one flesh" (Kwasniewski, 2013, para. 6). Within the Catholic Church, marriage is a sacrament and is therefore a spiritual and sacred act to get closer to God. Innocent firmly believed this as he discussed the importance of two people becoming one under Christ and never parting. Papal dispensations for consanguineous marriages were therefore important as they could create a valid marriage that cannot be dissolved by man where an invalid one stood.

A major element of the reform movement in Innocent's eyes, so much so that it found its place in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215/1937, canons 50 & 52), was the topic of marriages that violated the accepted degrees of consanguinity. Marriages that were within seven degrees of consanguinity were not valid and could be nullified. The idea that no man could separate what God joined did not apply to marriages of this type as they were not valid, although they could become valid with a dispensation from the papacy. The marriages of Alfonso IX of

León to Berenguela of Castile and Emperor Otto IV with Beatrix of Swabia were within the unsanctioned degrees of consanguinity, but only one was declared null by Innocent III. The other was granted a dispensation. If Pope Innocent III was considered the culmination of the reform movement, then why would he allow a marriage that went against the laws of the universal Church? The marriage that was nullified by Innocent was in the Iberian Peninsula while the one allowed was in the German Empire. The reasons for this difference were the greater importance Pope Innocent III placed on issues in the German Empire and the ongoing Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula.

The measurement of the degrees of consanguinity in the time of Pope Innocent III's papacy was seven degrees but was reduced to four degrees at the Fourth Lateran Council (Bouchard, 1981). Since the Fourth Lateran reforms were seen as the culmination of Innocent's papacy and were mainly written by him and the papal curia (Moore, 2003), perhaps he viewed marriages from the fifth degree and upward as not against the laws of the Universal Church and therefore granted dispensations to those marriages. This might be able to explain the inconsistency in Innocent's actions with regards to the two marriages. However, both were within the fourth degree of consanguinity so there should not have been any inconsistency according to the laws of the Church. It was instead the importance Pope Innocent assigned to the German Empire that resulted in the inconsistencies.

Marriage of Alfonso IX and Berenguela

The marriage of King Alfonso IX of León to Berenguela of Castile, which lasted from 1197 to 1204, is the first marriage we will analyze. Berenguela was the daughter of King Alfonso VIII of Castile—Alfonso IX's cousin. Their marriage was within three degrees of consanguinity as her great-grandfather was Alfonso IX's grandfather. As mentioned above, prior to 1215 the Church outlawed marriages within seven degrees, so this marriage was comfortably within the illegal range. Those involved in arranging this marriage, including the Iberian clergy, were aware of the consanguineous relationship but maintained their support. They ignored the laws of the Church due to the political situation in the Iberian Peninsula.

The Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula were in continuous conflicts with Muslims who had held territory there since the eighth century, conflicts they termed the *Reconquista*. They were also continuously in conflict with each other. León and Castile, ruled at

this period by King Alfonso IX and King Alfonso VIII respectively, were the largest rivals as they sought to exert their domination over the entire peninsula. They sought to emulate their grandfather, Alfonso VII the Emperor, who was king of Galicia, León, and Castile while also exerting influence over the eastern half of the peninsula. Being the grandchildren of the man who dominated such a large part of the peninsula, who employed the title “Emperor of All Spain,” Alfonso IX and Alfonso VIII viewed each other as competitors for that retired title. The rulers and clergy of the two kingdoms viewed the marriage between Alfonso IX and Alfonso VIII’s daughter, Berenguela, as the best solution to bring peace between them and focus their energies and wealth on the *Reconquista* (Smith, 2019).

A major goal of the Iberian clergy was the reconquering of land from the Muslims, just as it was for the Christian Iberian rulers. This resulted in clergy from both kingdoms attempting to persuade Innocent to overlook this consanguineous marriage (Linehan, 2008). It was at this point that Innocent responded to the situation through a reformist mindset. Innocent refused to turn a blind eye and denounced the marriage—excommunicating Alfonso IX and interdicting his kingdom at the same time (Linehan, 2008). He also declared that any children born from the consanguineous marriage were illegitimate and would therefore not receive their father’s inheritance (Martínez, 2021), which in this case would be the Kingdom of León. Innocent wanted success against the Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula, but he did not believe going against the laws of the Church was the way to achieve it. In his eyes, doing so would cement defeat for the Christian forces. As Innocent viewed it, another sin—the marriage—would not lead to victory over the Muslims as the Iberian clergy and rulers hoped but would instead pull the Christian kingdoms further away from achieving their goal of *Reconquista* (Ayala Martínez, 2019). He maintained his position until Alfonso IX and Berenguela separated in 1204.

Perhaps the defeat at Alarcos, which took place a mere two years before the marriage of Alfonso IX and Berenguela, made the impression on the mind of Innocent that the Christian kingdoms on the peninsula were sinful societies. Surely the constant infighting between these kingdoms contributed to his beliefs. Salvador H. Martínez (2021) writes that when Innocent was elected Pope, he faced numerous disciplinary problems originating in the Iberian Peninsula, likely from its isolation and abandonment by Rome. These included an abbess hearing confessions and preaching the Gospel during Mass and incestuous unions throughout the

peninsula. Regardless of what contributed to his view of Iberian society as sinful and in need of reform, he unequivocally viewed this marriage as a sin and irregular. As mentioned above, Innocent had strong beliefs concerning matrimonial morality and this marriage went against his beliefs about a proper marriage; one that would mirror the marriage between Christ and His Church (Smith, 2019). His reform beliefs dominated the way he approached the situation as he completely ignored the temporal outcomes of the marriage—peace between Christian kingdoms and a united front against the Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula—in favor of the spiritual goals of preventing an incestual, sinful union, setting a precedent for Christian society, and obeying the universal laws of the Roman Catholic Church. Innocent believed that “justice should be administered without respect to persons” (Powell, 2004, p. xxix).

Innocent’s focus on enacting reform within the Church and reclaiming the Holy Land contributed to his ignoring of temporal outcomes in the marriage of Alfonso IX and Berenguela. These were the most important goals of his papacy. The *Reconquista*’s relative unimportance compared to those goals can be seen in the papal bull *Quia maior* (1213), where Innocent revoked the crusading privileges—remission of sins—to those who planned to fight in Spain against the Muslims or in the Albigensian Crusade in order to focus Christendom’s attention on the upcoming Fifth Crusade in the Holy Land (Bird et al., 1215/2013). The position of the Reconquista further down his list of priorities meant that it was less important for him to consider all the temporal outcomes of his decision as it would not have directly affected the Catholic Church or his goals of reform—which the marriage would have gone against—and retaking the Holy Land. This relative unimportance compared to affairs closer to Rome and those involving the independence of the papacy resulted in Innocent acting in a reformist manner in this marriage.

The German Throne Dispute and the Marriage of Otto IV and Beatrix

The marriage of Otto IV and Beatrix was also intended to end an armed conflict between claimants to the German throne: Philip of Swabia and Otto of Brunswick. The competition between them lasted from 1198 to 1208 when Philip of Swabia was murdered and Otto emerged as the sole claimant to the German throne. Pope Innocent III supported Otto since he had pledged to respect papal lands in central Italy and privileges in Sicily (Moore, 2003, p. 66). With the civil war ended, Otto convened a diet at Würzburg in 1209 to unify the German princes and secure

their support. The chronicler Arnold of Lübeck highlighted marriage as a key element of the diet, as Otto stated, “This distinguished meeting has, however, been convened to consider the case of the daughter of Duke Philip of Swabia” (Arnold of Lübeck, 1209/2019, p. 297). In the Chronicle of Arnold of Lübeck (1209/2019), he recounts a speech made by Otto to the assembly. Otto acknowledged that Beatrix is related to him within the third degree and asked the members of the meeting, which included papal legates, for their “advice and judgement” on how to proceed in the matter (Arnold of Lübeck, 1209/2019, p. 297). The text does not explicitly say that Otto wishes to marry Beatrix. Rather, Otto framed the issue as him being obligated to marry Beatrix at the risk of his own salvation. He stated, “For if we were to live for six thousand years, we would choose rather to live a life of celibacy for all time rather than to take a wife and place our soul in peril” (p. 298). Otto seems to employ the language of being bound by duty to gain support/sympathy from the members of the diet and achieve a dispensation for his marriage.

Otto hoped the marriage would bring peace to the empire and reinforce his claim to the German throne. The reason he sought approval for the marriage was due to its consanguineous nature; they were related within the third degree of consanguinity just like the previous marriage in the Iberian Peninsula. However, where Innocent condemned and thwarted that marriage, he approved this one. One explanation for this may be that Otto IV appealed to papal authority for a dispensation prior to marrying Beatrix, whereas in the Iberian case, they disregarded the laws of the Church and therefore the authority of the papacy in spiritual matters. Perhaps if they presented their proposals of consanguineous marriage to the pope for approval or disapproval before marrying, Pope Innocent III may have been more lenient. Innocent did consider himself supreme judge of Christendom. He wanted to be the authority that everyone turned to for spiritual matters, and even temporal. In a letter to the king of Armenia, Innocent wrote that he was right to appeal to the successor of St. Peter “not only in spiritual matters but also in temporal matters and to appeal to her strength in defence of your just rights” (Tierney, 1964, p. 133). Whether it was bishopric translations, temporal arbitration, or spiritual questions, Innocent wanted the papacy to be the destination for all concerns. He would have wanted the Iberian kings to acknowledge papal authority in the realm of marriages—especially consanguineous marriages—by emulating Otto in his seeking of papal approval before marrying Beatrix, instead of disregarding the Church’s teaching on the matter and advancing with the marriages.

The issue of Otto respecting papal authority by proposing the marriage to papal legates before marrying is not the reason for the acceptance of the German marriage and rejection of the Iberian one. In the case of Alfonso IX and Berenguela, they did not procure papal approval before the marriage. However, the nobility of the Castilian and Leonese kingdoms performed multiple acts to demonstrate their respect for the Church with the hope of changing Innocent's mind. They made donations to the Military Order of Santiago (Portilla Castle) and the cathedral of León and its bishop (Ferrera Castle) (Martínez, 2021). These were presented by delegates of Alfonso IX to Pope Innocent III to demonstrate Leonese and Castilian loyalty to the Church and acknowledgment that only the pope could offer dispensation for a consanguineous marriage. The delegates even offered the papacy a staggering 20,000 silver marks and 200 soldiers for the defense of Christendom if Innocent would grant a dispensation for the marriage; Innocent stood by his reformist beliefs (Linehan, 2008). If he had acted within a purely pragmatic mindset, Innocent would have taken the marks and granted a dispensation. However, adhering to Church teaching was worth more than the money being offered by the king of León as the spiritual trumped the temporal for the reformist pope.

Concessions to the papacy are another possible explanation for Innocent's inconsistency. Renzi (2015) argues that Innocent had to accept the marriage because of the promises Otto renewed at Speyer to respect papal lands in central Italy and privileges in Sicily. However, the presence of concessions does not explain the rejection and condemnation of the marriage between Alfonso IX and Berenguela. They offered the pope 20,000 silver marks and 200 crusaders. If a concession was all that was needed, both marriages would have been granted a dispensation. The difference in importance of the German Empire and the Iberian Peninsula to Innocent III is the only explanation for the Bishop of Rome's inconsistency. The previous German emperors forcefully asserted their authority in Italy and wanted to limit the independence and influence of the papacy in the peninsula (Pavlac, 1999). They also wished to exert control over the papacy as was done in the eleventh century. To prevent this nightmarish outcome for a reformist, Innocent believed that the independence of the Patrimony of St. Peter needed to be secured (Moore, 2003).

This was the basis for Innocent's support for Otto during the German Throne Dispute, as Otto had promised to respect the lands occupied by the Papal States and not unify with Sicily—

both would have seriously threatened the papacy. Otto renewed this promise at Speyer in 1209. This renewal is the reason why Innocent granted the dispensation for the marriage between Otto IV and Beatrix and softened his firm position against marriages that went against the laws of the Church. Securing the Church against secular influence and pressure in the form of the German king was paramount to papal interests, especially the interests of reform-minded popes who were greatly influenced by the papacy of Gregory VII and his *Dictatus Papae* (1075), which had arisen out of a power struggle between Gregory and an earlier Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV (1050-1106) nearly a century before. Gregory's papacy marked the beginning of the Church reform movement (known as the Gregorian Reform Movement) as his ideas and beliefs about the papacy were adopted and modified by succeeding papal reformers. Innocent's pastoral and reformist goals required the freedom of the Church (Moore, 2003). No Christian kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula presented a threat in the same realm of importance to the Church and the Bishop of Rome. While a military loss to the Muslims in the *Reconquista* was undesirable, it would not shake the very foundations of the Church or stain its moral and spiritual authority as corruption from secular influence in the heart of Christendom would.

Conclusion

Pope Innocent III's decisions to approve a marriage and reject another, on the surface, demonstrate a clash between his reformist beliefs and pragmatic attitude. However, the temporal considerations in the marriage of Otto IV and Beatrix directly relate to the goals of reform-minded popes dating back to Gregory VII. For Innocent, the shielding of the papacy and the Church against outside secular influences was following the principles of the reformers. In the instance of the marriage between Otto and Beatrix, the promises made by Otto to respect the lands within the Patrimony of St. Peter and not to reunify with the Kingdom of Sicily resulted in Innocent granting a dispensation for the consanguineous marriage, as these would ensure insulation against outside threats. While Pope Innocent III's actions appear pragmatic as they ignore the laws of the Church on incestuous marriage, they were ignored due to the threat the German kingdom posed to the papacy, but most importantly, for Innocent, they were a threat against the independence of the papacy and its moral and spiritual authority.

Innocent's decision to reject the consanguineous marriage between Alfonso IX and Berenguela was based on his reformist beliefs, with the ongoing *Reconquista* being an important

factor. While he wanted the reform of the Church to improve and elevate it, he believed it would also lead to victory against the Muslims, as a sinful society could not win against the enemy. Through the rejection of the incestuous marriage, the Roman Pontiff strove to set a reformist precedent over the rest of Iberian society. It is important to remember that the Iberian Peninsula was not one of his primary goals, even though it saw war between Christians and Muslims. The reconquering of the Holy Land was Innocent's priority in military conflict against the Muslims and he had often refocused resources from across Europe towards that goal. Reform of the Church was a goal in itself within the Iberian Peninsula for Innocent, regardless of whether it would provide victories. This research should be expanded to include other interventions of the pope in similar circumstances, such as political struggles, to analyze whether the reform beliefs in the Iberian Peninsula and the pragmatic actions within the German lands hold. This research could also benefit from incorporating other areas of Europe for a larger comparative analysis.

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