

# Coimbra

**1290** It was recognised in the last quarter of the thirteenth century that there was an urgent need for a university in Portugal. The country was then in the middle of a period of prosperity and cultural renaissance, under the benevolent rule of Dinis I, the Poet King, grandson of the illustrious Alfonso X the Wise.

On 12 November 1288, twenty-two of the country's highest prelates, among whom were the Dom Abbot of the Cistercian Monastery of Alcobaça and the Dom Prior of the Augustinian Monastery of the Holy Cross of Coimbra, gathered at the small town of Montemor-o-Novo and wrote a collective supplication to Pope Nicholas IV, explaining the need for a *studium generale* in Portugal and the benefits it would bring to all, and asking him to authorize its creation. They added that King Dinis, whom they approached in order to secure his patronage, had agreed that the teachers' salaries would be paid from the revenues of the churches these clerics represented. The initiative apparently had no immediate results, perhaps because the relations between the Portuguese Crown and the Holy See were rather strained at the time. It was not until 1289 that the latter sanctioned an agreement between the temporal and spiritual powers.

Then, on 1 March 1290, King Dinis issued in the city of Leiria a document which is accepted by all as the charter of foundation of the

university. Recognising the fact that Science's admirable treasure helps people attain the knowledge of God and understand more fully the true doctrine, and wishing to adorn his Kingdom with that treasure, he decided - on his own authority - to establish in Lisbon, his capital city, a *Studium generale*, and appointed teachers for all sciences. At the same time, he granted various privileges to the institution and extended his Royal protection to all who wished to study there.

We cannot say anything definite about which texts King Dinis had in mind when he drew up the foundation Charter. On the other hand, there is a degree of similarity between Nicholas IV's 1290 Bull of Confirmation and a similar bull issued on 26 October 1289 to decree the creation of the University of Montpellier from existing Schools of Law, Medicine and Arts.

The University of Coimbra was installed in a building in the Quarry Field, in the borough of Alfama. It began with four faculties: arts, canon law, civil law and medicine. Theology was exclusively taught in the Franciscan and Dominican monasteries.

Finally, Pope Nicholas IV's Bull *De statu Regni Portugalliae*, issued at Orvieto on 9 August 1290, confirmed all that King Dinis had done. After a brief preamble which discreetly mentioned 'certain obstacles' which must be overcome, the Pope instructed the Monarch about what should be done, placed the members of the university corporation under Church, rather than secular, law, and - most important of all - conferred on those who graduated the *jus ubique docendi*, the official recognition of their degrees.

Lisbon, however, was not the ideal location for an institution of higher learning. In 1308 King Dinis transferred it to Coimbra, where the Royal Palace of the Alcáçova was made available for it; and on 15 February 1309 the King granted it a *Magna Charta Privilegiorum*. Although the university did function in Lisbon on two later occasions, it finally - and definitely - returned to Coimbra in 1537.

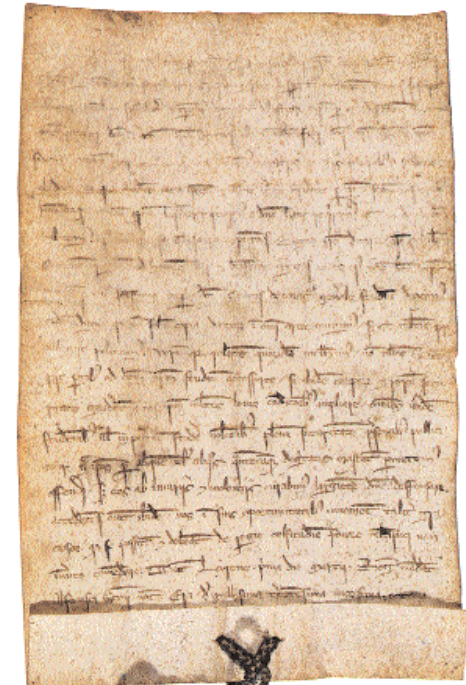
Manuel Augusto Rodrigues, *A Universidade de Coimbra e eos seus Reitores. Para uma história da Instituição*, Coimbra, 1990; -, *A Universidade de Coimbra. Marcos de sua história*, Coimbra, 1991.

Manuel Augusto Rodrigues

There is no known description of the university seal as it was at the time of the creation of the *studium generale*. However, the seal is described in the sixteenth century statutes as having the figure of a crowned woman, representing Sapientia, sitting on a throne, holding a sceptre capped by an armillary sphere on her right hand; surrounded by books, an owl being perched on a book; a sieve, to separate good from bad, is near Sapientia's feet. The motto which accompanies the seal was taken from the Holy Scriptures: *Per me reges regnant et legum conditores iusta decernunt* (Proverbs 8: 15). The 1591 Statutes add that this seal had been used by the university *de seu fundamento*, i.e. from its earliest days. According to Prof. António de Vasconcelos, the original seal was most probably round in shape.

Reconstruction of the university seal as it may have looked like.

António Gomes da Rocha Madahil, *A insígnia da Universidade de Coimbra*, Coimbra, 1937; António de Vasconcelos, *O diploma dionisiano da Fundação primitiva da Universidade Portuguesa (1 de Março de 1290)*, Coimbra, 1990 (new edition); -, *Selo medieval da Universidade portuguesa*, Coimbra, 1990 (new edition).



Leiria, 1 March 1290. Dinis I, King of Portugal, founds a university at Lisbon.

Parchment, 200 x 145 mm. Sealed with the pendent seal of King Dinis I, in white wax, 62,5 x 60 mm, on a braided flat lace of white and blue cotton. Archive of the University of Coimbra (Vault).



(...) eius autem precioso Thesauru cupientes Regna nostra ditare apud vlxibonensem ciuitatem regiam ad honorem dei & beatissime uirginis matris eius necnon beati martiris uicentini cuius sanctissimo corpore dicta ciuitas decoratur generale studium duximus ordinandum quod non solum copia doctorum in omni arte munimus sed etiam multis privilegiis roboramus. verum quia relatione quorundam intelleximus non nullos ex uariis partibus ad dicrum nostrum studium accessuros si ibidem corporum & rerum securitate gauderent nos ipsum uolentes bonis conditionibus ampliare omnibus ibidem studentibus uel in posterum studere uolentibus plenam securitatem presentibus pollicemur nec ipsos per aliquem uel aliquos quatecumque dignitatis existant permit-

temus offendi sed eos ab iniuriis & uiolentiis curabimus largiente domino defensare. accedentes autem ibidem nos in suis oportunitatibus inuenient aliter graciosos quod se possint & debeant de regie celsitudinis fauore multiplici non immerito commendare.

(...) Being our wish to increase the wealth of our Realm with the priceless treasure, we have ordered a General Study in the Royal City of Lisbon, for the honour of God and the Most Blessed Virgin, His Mother, and also of the Martyr St Vincent, whose most holy body ornaments the said city; which Study we supplied with many Doctors in all Arts and confirmed with many privileges. But since we understood, from the information

which some persons gave us, that people will come from divers parts to our Study if they will enjoy security of body and estate; and wishing to see it develop in good conditions; through this letter we do promise full security to all those who study or wish to study in it, and will not allow any offence whatsoever against them, be it committed by a person or persons of the highest dignity; and, with God's help, will defend them from injury and violence. Furthermore, those who will come to it will find us so generous in their needs that they will clearly see that they can trust the Royal favours bestowed upon them. (...) (trans.: Manuel Augusto Rodrigues)