

## Some Reflections on the Middle Ages

José Augusto de Sottomayor-Pizarro<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of a new *História de Portugal* (Esfera dos Livros, 2009) always arouses some expectations, and even curiosity, particularly amongst the community of historians, and above all when one can still consider the last two similar initiatives produced in this area to be quite recent affairs. I am talking, in this latter instance, about the two collective works, one edited by Joel Serrão and A. H. de Oliveira Marques, which is not yet completed,<sup>2</sup> and the other by José Mattoso,<sup>3</sup> for the histories written by individuals already date from some time ago.<sup>4</sup>

The authors, whom I wish to begin by congratulating on their efforts, identify themselves as the representatives of a new generation of historians whose responsibility it is to transmit the latest novelties produced by the recent efforts of enormous and wide-ranging collective research: “It was time for the historians from the new generations (without forgetting what they owe to their predecessors) to attempt to place the History that is being written nowadays in touch with the general public,” is what is stated in the “Prologue,”<sup>5</sup> even though shortly afterwards, and in my view somewhat overly optimistically, it is said that “the reader that we have envisaged for this book is a demanding one” (I-II). In fact, I do not share the same faith as the authors in identifying the vast majority of the “general public” as demanding readers ...

Having been invited to take part at this conference in the panel dedicated to the study of the Middle Ages, I should like to dedicate my first reflections to some of the statements contained in the presentation or “Prologue” of a work that, I should like to

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto. CEPES-UP. E-Mail: pizarro.jo@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> *Nova História de Portugal* (Joel Serrão and A. H. de Oliveira Marques, eds.), 10 vols., Lisbon, Presença, 1987-2004 (two volumes are yet to be published).

<sup>3</sup> *História de Portugal* (José Mattoso, ed.), 8 vols., Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores, 1992-1993 (Estampa, 1993-1994).

<sup>4</sup> Serrão 1976-2009; Saraiva 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The tribute that is paid to the “predecessors” is made quite clear by the way in which the first part of the “Introduction” (VII-XIII) is structured, being fundamentally centered around the main lines of interpretation developed by Orlando Ribeiro, José Mattoso, Magalhães Godinho and Oliveira Marques.

*e-JPH, Vol. 8, number 2, Winter 2010*

begin by saying, seems to me to be excellently put together in both graphic and editorial terms.

“After the great ideological debates of the past, historiography has shown an understandable tendency in the last twenty years towards a **positivist** concentration on small scale work. The great theories have been abandoned.” (II)

I believe that such a peremptory assertion—even though I consider it fairly debatable whether one can classify the more monographic research as positivist—should be developed in greater detail. First, because this would be a good opportunity to explain to the “general public” why more recent historiography (it is not clear whether this is in Portugal or worldwide) has tended not to discuss or even to abandon the great theories of the past and why the authors see this as something that is understandable. I personally wonder whether this might not be the inevitable corollary of the increasingly evident disappearance of ideological antagonisms, or even ideologies “tout court”, in western society and culture. Secondly, because the “demanding reader” will quite legitimately ask to what extent the text that is presented is a reflection or not of the authors’ own personal academic backgrounds, since they profess to have been trained in the theoretical and ideological premises of the *Annales* school of thought, only to be later seduced by the Anglo-Saxon school of historiography (III).

Thirdly and finally, because it would be interesting to join together the two previous premises with the one arising from what the authors then say in the continuation of the previous text:

“The great theories have been abandoned. Everything has become fragmented and micro. There has been a great multiplication in the number of works written by place and between dates that are very close to one another. (...) The sense of an overall vision has been lost (...)” (II).

In fact, I could not agree more with this last statement! But it would be very difficult to go in a different direction when the academic community from the social and human sciences has deliberately imposed upon itself a research model imported from the mathematical or biological sciences. This is a fact that should merit debate and profound reflection on the part of historians, when the criteria of “fast-food” are being

imposed on the writing of MA and PhD theses, which are necessarily being directed towards thematic micro-approaches. This is the price to be paid for the massification and popularization of academic degrees!

In keeping with the same criterion that I have been defending, I believe that the authors did well to demonstrate clearly and directly the assumption on which this synthesis of Portuguese history was based, namely as “the History of a unity constructed by the political power over the centuries,” and that, therefore, “the narrative would have to be based on political History” (III). This is a perspective that I myself find fairly attractive, leaving the reader in no doubt about the structure of the work.

Unlike some people, I do not consider this *History of Portugal* to be too unbalanced in terms of the three chronological parts of which it is formed, and I am not so certain that the existence of more sources for the contemporary period has resulted in greater knowledge in contrast to the medieval period, even though it should be recognized that the excessive amount of data may, at the same time, also be prejudicial. It is true that there are more sources, but this also frequently means that they are more repetitive and serializable; and, above all, because they are closer to us chronologically, they also arouse passion and controversy (again often excessively so), even when the professional historian is called upon to demonstrate the greatest possible distancing and impartiality. Another fact which is truly undeniable and also deserves serious reflection is that contemporary history is “fashionable.”

Let me make a couple of final comments, of a more general nature, in order to stress the usefulness of the “Annexes,” the good taste shown in the graphics of this edition,<sup>6</sup> and above all the clear and pleasant readability of the text as a whole.

The great and, in my opinion, successful effort that has been made to synthesize the subject-matter has naturally obliged the authors to make some cuts in relation to certain themes. I therefore think that this choice and the fact that this is a more recent history of Portugal would justify the presentation of a more developed and above all commented bibliography.<sup>7</sup> Such a methodology is unfortunately relatively uncommon in Portugal, but it would also make it possible to achieve the aims stated in the “Prologue,” in other words to give due emphasis to the contributions provided by more recent research.

---

<sup>6</sup> In view of the size of the work, I believe that it would have been more practical to place the notes at the end of each chapter, or at least at the end of each of the three parts.

<sup>7</sup> I think specifically that it would be useful to include a report of the main proceedings of recent conferences. *e-JPH, Vol. 8, number 2, Winter 2010*

Divided into seven chapters, the Middle Ages, are presented to us by an author—Bernardo Vasconcelos e Sousa—whose clear and well-constructed discourse we have become accustomed to, enabling the reader to enjoy a very easy understanding of the various phenomena analyzed. In this regard, I draw attention in particular to Chapters IV, V and VI, which seem to me to have the best structure, because of their remarkable internal balance.

From an overall point of view, I should like first of all to remark on the criterion adopted for establishing the chronological boundaries. While it is easy to understand the decision to omit the whole period prior to the appearance of the county of Portucale—although, in my view, this should have implied providing a good bibliographical outline to the study of the previous period (pre- and proto-history, Romanization, the Swabian and Visigothic kingdoms, the Muslim occupation, and, in particular, the kingdom of Asturias and Leon)—I must admit that the conclusion of the analysis at the end of the reign of Dom Afonso V did cause me some surprise. Apart from the absolute novelty of seeing Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro writing about Dom João II—and I'm not implying that he would not have done so with great proficiency—it seems to me that, in the case of various themes, the historiography of recent years has shown a very clear tendency to prolong the Portuguese Middle Ages at least until the end of the reign of Dom Manuel I, and the particular case of various studies about the Military Orders seems to me to be a good example of that reality. In fact, because of a division that, in my opinion, is not very clear, the reading of the last chapter of Part I leaves the reader with the feeling that it is somehow incomplete, without any logical conclusion. Later, one can understand why: I would say that most of the first chapter of Part II could perfectly well have complemented the previous one, for it is only just before the end that it begins to talk about Dom João III.

However, whatever the case, and regardless of the reasons that were given by the editors of this work for choosing this particular solution, I believe that all the criteria should have been clearly explained, for example, in the “Prologue.”

A second more general observation has to do with the absence of a greater focus on the comparative analyses between the history of Portugal and that of other peninsular kingdoms. On the one hand, I understand that obviously in a work of synthesis one has to leave out certain subjects, but, on the other hand, it is a little more difficult to

understand that a work that is structured around the writing of a political history can exclude, or not sufficiently stress, for example, the framework of Portuguese diplomatic relations, which would in fact afford greater prominence to many of the phenomena analyzed (and in fact very well) by Bernardo de Vasconcelos e Sousa. Or that, from another viewpoint, greater emphasis is not given to arguments of a political nature in the analysis of certain phenomena. Let us look at just one example:

“Notwithstanding some earlier initiatives of a more or less sporadic nature, it was only from the mid-11th century onwards that the great enterprise of the Christian Reconquest began in the west of the Iberian Peninsula, understood as a planned series of large-scale military expeditions with the aim of conquering territories and cities from the Muslims. (...) the Iberian Reconquest should be seen as an integral part of a general movement of expansion of the Christian West between the 10th and the late 13th century.” (18-19)

Dispensing with the need to comment on what I consider to be the highly debatable statement about the Reconquest only effectively beginning in the mid-eleventh century, I agree about the importance of the demographic and economic sustainability of the territorial expansion that was achieved—and the consequent process of the region’s human occupation and settlement—between those two centuries; what I do find strange, however, is that, seen from a perspective of political history (the area in which the authors are themselves situated), no reference is made, not even in the form of a brief comment, to the fact that the spread of Christianity in the mid-eleventh century coincided with the complete break-up of the Caliphate of Cordoba and its disintegration into scores of small political units—the Taifa kingdoms. More than anything else, it was this dispersal that greatly facilitated the spread of Christian influence. On the other hand, the recession and delay in the Christian advance in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries was due more to political causes than to reasons linked to the question of demographic and economic expansion. In fact, to underline what was said earlier, the Muslim reaction frequently proved to be successful more as a result of the antagonism that undermined the cohesion between the different Christian kingdoms than because of any clear military supremacy.

I shall now move on to a more detailed consideration of each of the chapters, in which I shall have the opportunity to point out some more examples illustrating the two

criticisms that I have just formulated, namely about the final chronology of Part I and the insufficient consideration that is given to the question of Portugal within the broader context of medieval Hispania.

The first chapter—"From the County of Portucale to the Portuguese Monarchy"—devoted to the eleventh and twelfth centuries begins with what is, in my view, an overly short synthesis ("The Reconquest in the Western Peninsula") of the whole period prior to the creation of the county of Portucale, in which the quotation that I commented on earlier is included. This is followed by an excellent analysis of the circumstances that brought Count Dom Henrique to the court of Leon—seen in conjunction with the influence exerted by the French clergy and the impact that the *Gregorian Reform* had at that time in the Spanish kingdoms—and the military and political role that he played until his death in 1112 ("The 'French' in the Iberian Peninsula").

The next section ("Afonso Henriques—from Prince to King") is also fairly well presented. This genuinely central question is discussed within the context of a relatively balanced look at the life of the first Portuguese monarch and the political and military path that he followed. I do, however, find it lamentable that there is no reference to the relations, or perhaps better the almost complete lack of relations, that Dom Afonso Henriques had with the northern nobility, especially after the court had been moved to Coimbra. I think that, as far as this point is concerned (in keeping with one of my initial criticisms) it would perhaps have been interesting, if only in the form of a brief paragraph, to underline the impact of the powerful military career that Dom Afonso Henriques enjoyed within the much vaster context of Hispania. In this way, the common reader would gain a better understanding of the participation of Fernando II of Leon on the side of the Almohads, in the disaster that befell the Portuguese king in Badajoz, in 1169—the success of the Portuguese Reconquest endangered the future expansion of the Leonese king southwards. The next section is somewhat out of place here, since, in my opinion, it should have been included in the first section: in fact, when, given the chronological sequence followed here, the reader would have expected to find a discussion of the military crisis caused by the reaction of the Almohads, which in turn gave rise to some dramatic moments in the Christian kingdoms, he finds himself instead confronted with a synthesis (in fact a very well written one) about the evolution of Muslim power since the invasion of 711. This means that stress is now placed on the

important role played by political factors in the dynamic process of the advance and retreat of the frontier of the Reconquest (“In Garb Al-Ândalus”).

Finally (“From the first king to the Portuguese royal dynasty”), the last section of the chapter presents the different aspects of the consolidation of the youngest Iberian monarchy, namely through the relations established by the royal family with other royal dynasties. It also discusses the passage of the crown to the new king, Dom Sancho I, intelligently underlining some topics that will be featured in the following chapter, namely the not always peaceful dialectic between the power of the king and the power of the clergy and nobility.

The second chapter—“The Monarchy between the Civil War and the Consolidation”—covers the thirteenth century and, as had been stressed previously, talks about the way in which the kings of this century gradually imposed themselves over the forces that were opposed to the plan to strengthen the royal authority, as well as about the remarkable joint efforts of the Crown and the Military Orders in their commitment to expanding the territory through the Reconquest, which was completed in 1249.

In my opinion, this is a reasonably successful chapter, with the author displaying moments of particular clarity in his exposition of such complex themes as the definition of the seigniorial system or the contextualization of the implantation of feudalism in Portugal. I only need to point out one or two aspects that are less successfully explained or insufficiently developed: in the second section (“Reactions to the concentration of power by the king”), I believe that the reasons for the military intervention of Afonso IX of Leon in 1212 should be made a little more explicit, since, in my view, this should be seen much more as the last desperate attempt by the kingdom of Leon to annex Portugal, or at least to seek to resolve the future possibility of advancing southwards, under the pretext (and this aspect was indeed the case) of defending his ex-wife’s rights of inheritance; in the sixth section (“Socio-regional diversities and the composition of the kingdom,” 66), I find it rather odd that no reference is made to my proposal about the way in which the expansion of the seigniorial system took place, drawing attention to the fact that the Portuguese monarchs, especially Dom Dinis, prevented the secular seigniorial system from extending to the region south of the River Tagus.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in the penultimate section (“The seigniorial system and feudal relations”), which, first of all,

---

<sup>8</sup> Sotto-Mayor Pizarro 1999: 2/449-509.  
*e-JPH, Vol. 8, number 2, Winter 2010*

deals with the structuring of the group of nobles (67), and then with the structuring of the relations of kinship and the transmission of inheritances within that same group (67-68), I cannot conceal a certain surprise in not seeing (at least with a reference in the notes) any mention of my innovative proposals about the two subjects, which have been unequivocally accepted by José Mattoso.<sup>9</sup>

On the whole, I repeat, it seems to me to be a good chapter, but I also think that it would benefit from a reference to the particularly rich and complex political and diplomatic relations between Portugal and the other peninsular kingdoms during this period. This positive impression carries over into the next chapter, Chapter III, dedicated to the theme of “Population and Society” in the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, where there is a very clear synthesis of such complex questions as demography and the economy, or the structuring of society.

As I said at the beginning, I consider Chapter IV (“The Kingdom of Portugal (13-14th Century)”) to be one of the best in Part I. Writing in a very clear and fluent manner, and producing a well-grounded exposition of his subject, Bernardo de Vasconcelos e Sousa presents us with one of the most interesting processes in our history, namely that of the formation of the roots of the structures of the Portuguese State, which was led especially by Dom Afonso III, Dom Dinis and Dom Afonso IV. Even though I continue to think that Portugal’s place within the Iberian context was not afforded the attention by the author that would seem to me to be desirable, the events leading up to the crisis that was to mark the last years of the founding dynasty were very well summarized, particularly the most interesting approach that was adopted in relation to the question of “Inês, from the Castro family” (125-128).

The same positive impression continues into the following chapter, “The Dynasty of Avis and the Refoundation of the Kingdom (1383-1438),” perhaps with rather too much restraint being shown in the writing of the section dedicated to the long reign of the first king of the Avis dynasty (“João I – bastard, master and king,” 136-144), which is followed by an extremely beautiful analysis of Fernão Lopes and the importance of chronicle writing in the legitimization of the dynasty (144-146). This chapter ends with an analysis of the structuring of the monarchy and the exercise of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Sotto-Mayor Pizarro 1999: 2/537-541 and 565-592, respectively, for the two themes, and 1/9-11 for the opinions of José Mattoso. I feel the same sense of surprise in the following chapter, once again about the structuring of the group of nobles and the expansion of the seigniorial system (*História de Portugal* 2009: 95-98).

royal power in the dynasty's first two reigns.<sup>10</sup> In relation to this, I draw attention in particular to the analysis of the centralizing measures that were adopted, namely the control exercised over the military orders (130). I just find it to be a pity that no comparison is made here with what was happening in the neighboring kingdom of Castile.

Chapter VI, which is dedicated to the fairly complex reign of Dom Afonso V (“Return to the Past? (1438-1481)”), is, in my opinion, the most successfully written and balanced chapter of them all, with a very interesting introduction and a good synthesis about the regency of the Infante Dom Pedro and the outcome of the Battle of Alfarrobeira (153-158), with there being nothing to say against the analysis of the governance of Dom Afonso V (158-163). The section about “The Iberian Temptation”—which is in itself very well written—clearly reveals, in my opinion, that the decision to move coverage of the reigns of Dom João II and Dom Manuel I to Part II was not the most successful one, because the question of “Iberian unity” can only be properly analyzed if seen as a whole. The final section also appears to be a good analysis, being a particularly speculative one (“‘Seigniorial reaction’ or the ‘advance of modernity’?” 167-169), which would be even more notable if the comparison made between the various kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula were less general.

“The Beginning of the Overseas Expansion (15th Century),” the seventh and last chapter of this Part I, once again confirms the excellent power of synthesis demonstrated by Bernardo de Vasconcelos e Sousa, which I have been emphasizing throughout these pages. Its only flaw is the rather abrupt chronological break, which I have already referred to on several occasions.

This question does, in fact, allow me to make some final remarks in relation to a series of comments that, I must stress, were never intended to be more than simple reflections about a history of Portugal that undoubtedly represents a serious synthesis and a very valid contribution to current Portuguese Historiography.

An abrupt break, as I was saying, not only in terms of the approach to the theme of overseas expansion, but also in the way in which this Part I is brought to an end, just

---

<sup>10</sup> In which one notes the rather strange omission of any reference to the work by Armando Luís de Carvalho Homem, *O Desembarço Régio (1320-1433)*, Porto, INIC-CHUP, 1990.

when one might perhaps have expected a more protracted final reflection. Especially because one was expecting the development of a particularly interesting idea put forward by the author:

“Rather than being rooted in any long cycle of growth in western Europe, the Portuguese overseas expansion originated from the immediate circumstances of the crisis of the 14th and 15th century, the structural difficulties faced by the kingdom and its Iberian impasse.” (195)

Indeed, this statement, as rich in ideas as it is paradoxical in its contents, should, in my opinion, have led to a conclusion that would provide a particularly fertile orientation for approaching later centuries. How then should the fifteenth-century expansion be explained within the context of the recession of the late Middle Ages? The problem is that the answer cannot be given without taking two factors into account: comparing the evolution of the royal power in Portugal and the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, prolonging the analysis until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

In this way, one would be able to understand, first, that the Portuguese secular seigniorial group, unlike the one in Castile, did not grow any larger and richer with the actions of the Reconquest, with the Portuguese kings choosing to base the settlement and organization of the territory on the other side of the River Tagus on the network of *concelhos* (boroughs), only allowing the seigniorial system to spread there through the presence of bishops, a few monasteries and, above all, the military orders; in Castile and Aragon, on the contrary, the system of “*repartimientos*” opened up Andalucía or Valencia to the secular seigniorial system, favoring the more powerful lineages and allowing for the territorial growth of other middle-ranking lineages. Second, besides other factors, this would explain the relative ease with which the Portuguese monarchs imposed a more centralizing system that, despite a number of setbacks, continued well into the beginning of the Modern Age; on the contrary, and especially in the kingdom of Castile, the existence of a particularly powerful seigniorial group obliged the monarchs to seek the support of ever more powerful and politically influential urban oligarchies. Yet both the former and the latter groups brazenly took advantage of the situations of royal weakness, as was the case with the successive periods of royal minority that affected Castile throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. And, third, even in the

most conflict-ridden situations, such as the ones that marked the dynastic breaks of the second half of the fourteenth century, the Portuguese monarchs were able to maintain that guiding thread that structured and centralized the royal power, whereas, in the neighboring kingdom, the seigniorial group and the cities were increasingly strengthening their power. Fourth, as a paradigmatic example of what has just been said, one should note the fact that the new Portuguese dynasty of Avis took full control of the Military Orders by placing them in the hands of the members of the Royal Family, whereas in the new Castilian dynasty of the house of Trastámara the masterships of the military orders served to fuel even further the insatiable appetite of an already well-fed group of royal favorites. I believe that it would be interesting to understand that the Catholic Monarchs, from the last quarter of the fifteenth century onwards, and after imposing their will on the nobility and the leagues of cities, were finally able to promote measures of a centralizing nature that the Portuguese monarchs had already been applying throughout their kingdom, in some cases since the very beginning, but on a continuous basis since the middle of the thirteenth century.

It might then perhaps be easier to understand the reason why, at a time when England and France were recommencing the hostilities of the Hundred Years War at the Battle of Agincourt, when Aragon was beginning to experience the first years of a new royal dynasty, and Castile was going through the first throes of a prolonged and disastrous cycle of royal governance (1406-1474), the small and peripheral Portugal had the means and the capacity to turn its attention to the conquest of fortresses in North Africa and the exploration of the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1492, when a new continent fell as if by miracle into the lap of Isabella I of Castile, the Portuguese monarchs were already on the verge of discovering the sea route to India and also of setting foot on this same continent, after more than half a century of continued efforts of conquest and discovery. This cycle, which, after a certain moment, was accompanied by a shared desire for *Iberian Union*, was only to be brought to an end, in every regard, from 1521 onwards.

But, as I said at the beginning, and apart from the occasional detail that may be open to discussion (which is, in fact, perfectly natural in works of this type and size), the pages dedicated to the Middle Ages are, on the whole, an excellent contribution to the synthesis that the authors were attempting to make.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

- História de Portugal* (José Mattoso, ed.), 8 vols., Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores, 1992-1993 (Ed. Estampa, 1993-1994).
- História de Portugal* (Rui Ramos (ed.), Bernardo de Vasconcelos e Sousa and Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro), Lisbon, Esfera dos Livros, 2009.
- Homem, Armando Luís de Carvalho (1990), *O Desembargo Régio (1320-1433)*, Porto, INIC-CHUP.
- Nova História de Portugal* (Joel Serrão and A. H. de Oliveira Marques, eds.), 10 vols., Lisbon, Ed. Presença, 1987-2004.
- Saraiva, José Hermano (1993). *História de Portugal*, Lisbon, Publ. Europa-América.
- Serrão, Joaquim Veríssimo (1976-2009). *História de Portugal*, 17 vols., Lisbon, Ed. Verbo.
- Sotto-Mayor Pizarro, José Augusto de (1999), *Linhagens Medievais Portuguesas. Genealogias e Estratégias (1279-1325)*, 3 vols., Porto.