

The Temptation of the Synthesis

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In the mid-1980s, the first volume of the *New History of Portugal*, edited by A. H. de Oliveira Marques and Joel Serrão, was published. This was a work that examined the period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and consisted of the fourth volume of a long and comprehensive edition of a *New History of Portugal*.² The sole person responsible for this volume was Oliveira Marques, the author who, at the beginning of the 1970s, had been behind the publication of a new and innovative *History of Portugal* in only two volumes, but who proposed a synthetic revision of the History of Portugal through the eyes of a single author.³

This *History of Portugal* was to leave its mark on generations of students and researchers, being regarded for many years as the only example of a history that paid attention to the new historiographic problematics that had marked the 1950s and 1960s. Curiously, it proved to be necessary to wait a further decade⁴ for a new model to appear for the construction and presentation of the History of Portugal, founded on the contributions of different authors. This was the model proposed by the *New History of Portugal*, together with the *History of Portugal*, edited by José Mattoso and published shortly after the *New History*,⁵ and the *History of Portugal* by João Medina, presented in the early 1990s.⁶

In all of these histories, the medieval period was the subject of special attention, despite being approached in quite different ways. For the *New History of Portugal*, reflection about the medieval period spread over 3 volumes, if we consider a long chronology,⁷ each of them the responsibility of different authors, but it was the period between 1096 and the end of the fifteenth century that was afforded particular attention, with two large volumes on the subject, divided by the already firmly enshrined date of 1325, or in other words the death of Dom Dinis.⁸

This division was also the predominant feature of the volume of the History of Portugal edited by José Mattoso and dedicated to the “Feudal Monarchy.”⁹ Here, too, following on from this author’s study on “A Identificação de um País”, 1325 was taken as the date that divides the

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² Marques, 1987. This volume was entitled “Portugal na Crise dos séculos XIV e XV” and was Vol. IV of the *Nova História de Portugal*, edited by A. H. de Oliveira Marques and Joel Serrão.

³ Marques, 1972-1974.

⁴ In the meantime, two Histories of Portugal had appeared with different characteristics. The first was the work of Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão, consisting of 17 volumes published between 1978 and 2008. The second, dating from the beginning of the 1980s, first appeared in the form of separate booklets. As far as the articles dedicated to the Middle Ages are specifically concerned, the *História de Portugal* edited by José Hermano Saraiva and published by Publicações Alfa in 1983, managed to bring together researchers who were to unquestionably make a name for themselves over the following years and texts that were seen as excellent summaries of the themes proposed. Particularly noteworthy, for example, were the articles written by José Mattoso about the first kings of Portugal and by Maria José Ferro about the currency used in the Middle Ages, amongst others.

⁵ Mattoso (ed.), 1992-1994.

⁶ Medina (ed.), 1993.

⁷ Volume II of the *Nova História de Portugal* covered the period of the Germanic invasions, the Islamic presence and the formation of the kingdom of Asturias and Leon.

⁸ We are referring here to Volumes III and IV of the *Nova História de Portugal*. Volume III was edited by Armando Carvalho Homem and Maria Helena Coelho and covers the period between 1096 and 1325, which was given the title of “Portugal em definição de fronteiras”. Volume IV was the first to be published: it deals with the 14th and 15th centuries and was written exclusively by Oliveira Marques.

⁹ José Mattoso and Armindo de Sousa, 1992.

medieval period of Portuguese history into two, and once again the death of Dom Dinis is seen as the moment that signaled a turning point between a bellicose monarchy and the construction of a kingdom that was marked by crisis and by the ending of the Christian conquest movement.

Such a division was also reflected in the choice of the two authors who were to share the writing of these two parts. While José Mattoso returned to the chronology that he had already dealt with in other earlier works, Armindo de Sousa concentrated his analysis on the period of the late Middle Ages until 1480.

In this way, the traditional dichotomy that identified the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a coherent block was maintained, in contrast to the previous period during which the monarchy and the territory were constructed and established.

Despite these similarities, the fact remains that these histories of Portugal were written by various authors, who all sought, albeit in different ways, to include in these texts research work of their own or that resulting from team efforts, which was either in progress or had already been completed. Because of this they ended up amounting to parallel syntheses that did, however, differ in the treatment that they afforded to the evolution of the Portuguese kingdom between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, or even about the western region of the Iberian Peninsula from the fifth century onwards, through their analyses of the role of the Visigothic kingdom, the Islamic presence and the central role of the kingdom of Oviedo in the gestation of the peninsular kingdoms.

What they shared in common was their tendency to propose new readings about the evolution of Portuguese history during this period and the fact that they shone a spotlight on the different generations of historians who wrote many of the texts.

The final decades of the twentieth century therefore resulted in a revision of the production of the histories of Portugal after the great institutional works of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Histories of Portugal written by Damião Peres and Fortunato de Almeida. This new phase is still continuing today, and, like some of the great histories of Portugal produced in the 1920s and 1930s, the new works have sought to reach a diversified and ever larger audience, whose interest in history has grown over the last few decades.

To a certain extent, there has been a clear attempt to produce academic historiography based on careful factual research and, at the same time, to provide students, researchers and interested readers with a particular line of reflection, as well as, in some cases, to raise problematic issues. These concerns were echoed by the authors of *History of Portugal* that has served as the starting point for this current reflection when they identified the two objectives that led them to compile this history of Portugal. In the prologue to the work, Rui Ramos explicitly and clearly states these objectives. On the one hand, he speaks of the need to “provide all readers, in a coherent and compact text intended to be as readable and clear as possible, with the results of the research and reflections of the most recent generations of historians.”¹⁰ On the other hand, the aim is also “to stimulate the debate about the frameworks used for the interpretation of our history,”¹¹ going beyond the practice of merely joining together fragmented studies and moving towards synthetic viewpoints that can be discussed, but which also seek to provide a new proposal for reading the history of Portugal.

Hence, the decision to produce just one volume, unlike the histories of Portugal written immediately before this one, although, on this occasion, the book is the work of three authors. This is how this history of Portugal succeeds in being both a collective history and an individual history. It is, in fact, a history written by three authors, but, at the same time, it represents an individual view of each of the great periods in history that are considered here, and in this way it establishes a complete break with the approaches adopted by the most recently written Histories of Portugal, published in the course of the 1980s and 1990s. In this respect also, it seems to draw closer to the foundational history written by Oliveira Marques in the early 1970s.

Curiously, the first decade of the twenty-first century has also seen the appearance of other synthetic views of the history of Portugal, edited in some cases by foreign authors, as is the case with A.R. Disney, whose *History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire* was published by Cambridge

¹⁰ Rui Ramos (ed.), 2009, p. I.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. II

University Press in 2009,¹² six years after the Portuguese version of the *History of Portugal* by Jean-François de Labourdette had been published.¹³

In the specific case of the first work mentioned, the lack of an up-to-date knowledge of the Portuguese bibliography, and particularly of the most recent research undertaken in this area, clearly limits the analysis of the medieval period, which, together with a reflection centered upon some key dates in the political process involved in the foundation of the kingdom, leads to the painting of an impressionistic, but rather vague picture of the context of Portuguese history in those centuries.

The construction of a particular and individual view of the evolution of the history of Portugal is also what can be noted from reading the work by António Borges Coelho, a history of Portugal whose first edition also dates from 2009, but which, in the author's words, is to be considered a history "without a dalmatic,"¹⁴ a history of questioning, which does not follow the established canon but instead prefers to rely on "the rigor and pleasure of the word."¹⁵ The first volume deliberately entitled *Where We Came From* covers Portuguese pre-history, the Roman period, the Islamic presence and the Christian west of the Iberian Peninsula until 1128. All of this in roughly 220 pages that confront us with a reading largely displaying the appearance of an essay and a particular view of the evolution of a society.

In fact, there seems to be little that actually connects this history to the history presented by Rui Ramos, Bernardo Vasconcelos e Sousa and Nuno Monteiro, beyond a common desire to spread knowledge about the evolution of a geographical area and a kingdom. The essay writing is not to be found in this work by Rui Ramos, in which the discourse is meant to be founded on recent academic research. On the other hand, despite their common aims and even a number of common features that link the three authors of this History of Portugal, both in terms of their academic backgrounds and their paths of historiographic development, the truth is that each of the parts presented here, in their different coverages of the subject, reveal individual approaches that should be continually stressed and borne in mind.

In the prologue, the authors make a point of mentioning that the space allotted to the three chronological periods covered by the history kept on growing in order to deal in greater detail with events, situations and processes that were chronologically closer at hand, in keeping with similar works, without, however, attempting to say everything.¹⁶

In fact, it would be impossible to say everything whatever the options were, but this choice of increasing the available space in accordance with chronological proximity resulted in a volume that was uneven in the treatment that it gave to the different periods, with the medieval period (from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries), for example, being allotted only 180 pages, whereas the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was given 239 pages, and the contemporary period 341 pages.

Such unevenness necessarily has repercussions on the type of texts that are presented, with the authors openly preferring to adopt a model that appears to be relatively incomprehensible and clearly restricts the approach that is developed, owing much to specific individual views that have different ways of evaluating the different periods covered by the history.

If, however, we direct our attention to the first part of this work, we must first of all stress that the fact that its structure is based on succeeding chapters points to a discursive construction that attempts to follow a chronological thread, ranging from the emergence of the county of Portucale to the beginning of the overseas expansion and the government of Afonso V, and comprising an account of the main political facts. This account displays a line of discourse that begins in the first chapter with the foundation of the county and the emergence of Afonso Henriques and the first "Portuguese royal dynasty" and then extends the reflection in the second chapter until the end of the reign of Sancho II and the crisis of 1245.

In this way, the interpretation that is made of Portuguese history returns to the division into periods that takes the beginning of the reign of Afonso III as the beginning of a new stage and a new chapter, which Bernardo Vasconcelos e Sousa has no qualms in naming "The Kingdom of

¹² A. R. Disney, 2009.

¹³ Jean-François Labourdette, 2003.

¹⁴ António Borges Coelho, 2010, vol. I.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁶ Rui Ramos (ed.), p. III.

Portugal” and which continues until the emergence of the political crisis of the fourteenth century. In this way, the government of the king known as the “Boulognese” appears as a turning point, an idea that can already be found in other approaches and which, although open to dispute, has the undeniable advantage of relocating the angle of analysis at the turn of the mid-thirteenth century and in the recovery and successful pursuit of a strategy that sought to define and consolidate royal power, in some cases recovering earlier measures and, in others, developing new areas in which the king might intervene.

Thus, although the author does not clearly state this and prefers to insert into his chapters global chronological barriers, the truth is that there is here an attempt to make a global interpretation of a period that lasted from 1245 to 1383 as the period during which the kingdom was consolidated. This seems to us to be an enriching approach that moves away from the view that is centered upon the fourteenth century and forms a limited picture of this time, which in many cases is exclusively confused with the signs of a crisis that marked a substantial part of that century. Instead we are provided with a broader and more coherent view of a period running from the second half of the thirteenth century (when the initiatives introduced in the earlier decades began to take shape) to the last decades of the fourteenth century.

But this analysis also allows us to glimpse another fact, and this has to do with the unquestionable gaps that our knowledge of the fourteenth century still displays. In fact, despite the increase in the number of studies produced in the last few decades at the level of Portuguese medieval historiography, it seems to us that the fourteenth century has, in many regards, been considered a poor relative of more recent research, after the great attention paid to this period during the 1960s and 1970s. This opens up a myriad of questions about the administration, social organization and the cultural and religious framework, as well as a whole host of more specific examples. To some extent, the great attention paid to earlier centuries has made it possible to develop further research into the initial period of Portuguese history, but at the same time it has also meant that our knowledge about the fourteenth century has, in some respects remained hidebound by fairly outdated frameworks of interpretation.

As far as the narrative thread guiding this first part of the *History of Portugal* is concerned, the “long” fifteenth century that stretched from Dom João I’s ascension to the throne to the reign of Dom Afonso V occupies the last three chapters, including in its discourse the first phases of the Portuguese overseas expansion beyond the confines of its continental borders. In between, there is one chapter, the third one, which seeks to provide a structural description of the population and society through a reflection that inevitably appears as an attempt to reduce its complexity to just over twenty pages of analysis.

Similarly limited are some of the choices that were made here, invariably resulting from the need to adapt a long and ambitious discourse to the space available, are reflected in the limitative approach to the theme that is presented here.

One of the first limitations is to be found in the relatively secondary place afforded to the Muslim presence in this text. As this is a history of Portugal that seeks to accompany the development and organization of the Portuguese kingdom, the characterization of Al-Gharb Al-Andalus is given only secondary importance and the gradual integration of the south of the territory is seen as a somewhat inevitable process.

A second limitation is to be found in the deficient characterization of religious aspects, including the clergy and their role in the political evolution of this period. Although the author has correctly devoted special attention to some of the conflicts that marked the relationship between the Crown and the Church, particularly from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, the truth is that this explanation is, in some respects, an apparently casuistic one and does not always allow us to glimpse the essential background to these conflicts.

A third limitation is to be found in a view that is sometimes seen as overly centered upon the internal evolution of the Portuguese territory and does not always incorporate the reality of the Iberian Peninsula and the influences exerted by the other peninsular kingdoms on the evolution of the kingdom that emerged in the twelfth century.

In fact, this history of Portugal is to be seen, above all, as a political history and owes much to a historiographic movement that attempts to recover the political aspects of the question. It is a history that has an underlying thread to it, accompanying both the process of constructing a kingdom and the process of constructing a monarchy. Hence the references, from the very outset,

to the gradual implantation of the monarchy, the process for the construction and definition of the royal power, the strengthening of the “center” in detriment to the peripheries. Such a procedure runs the risk of sometimes overlooking the limits imposed on the exercise of this power which was mediated by intermediate bodies.

But this history of Portugal is, above all, an ambitious product that fulfils its purpose of disseminating knowledge and enables a broader public to come into contact with a simple text that is pleasant and easy to read. A text that, despite these qualities, seeks to incorporate the results of recent research and the contributions of the new analyses, as well as drawing attention to what still remains to be discovered.

It is a history of Portugal that confronts readers with a fresh “recounting” of history and that, in the course of roughly two hundred pages, enables them to glimpse the evolution of the construction of a kingdom, from the constitution of the county of Portucale to the expansion into North Africa and the Atlantic Ocean. As such, it represents a long-desired attempt to provide a synthesis of this information and reflects the continuing attraction of taking a “fresh” look at the evolution of history.

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