

# The Participation of the Nobility in the Reconquest and in the Military Orders<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Starting from the general framework of the Crusades and the Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, together with the involvement of the nobility in these two processes, the author seeks to clarify to what extent the participation of the Portuguese nobility – exalted by some chroniclers and literary sources – in both the Reconquest and the military orders was effectively materialized through diplomatic and genealogical sources from the 13th and 14th centuries. Earlier studies have made it possible to conclude that, despite its adoption of the lineage system, the Portuguese nobility did not promote the exclusion of the second-born sons from the paternal inheritance. This weakens the idea that a substantial proportion of them joined the ranks of the military orders, so that it is possible that the same orders also incorporated vassal-knights and members of the urban aristocracies.

## Keywords

Nobility; vassal-Knights; military orders; Reconquest; Middle Ages

## Nobility and Crusades

When Pope Urban II made his famous speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095, exhorting Christendom to liberate the holy places in Palestine, he was far from imagining the dimension and consequences of the phenomenon to which his words were to give rise. The movement of the

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Crusades did in fact assume truly exceptional proportions. Above all it became a question of expansion, both in territorial terms by extending the frontiers of Christendom to the Near East, and by founding various Christian kingdoms there, and as is obvious, in human terms and in terms of the spread of faith. Yet in addition to conquest and expansion, the Crusades also gave rise to new realities and structures. Among these, one must, I believe, inevitably highlight closer contacts established between West and East, with undeniable repercussions at the economic, cultural, artistic and intellectual levels. At the level of structures, I must emphasize the creation of the Christian kingdoms in the Near East and the appearance of the military orders. Being the embodiment of the idea of the *militia christi*, the military orders appeared precisely within the context of the Crusades as the legitimately and canonically armed hand of Christianity.

At this level, one cannot fail to give great importance to the emblematic case of the oldest and most prestigious military order, linked even today to the principles that lay behind its now remote genesis. In fact, the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta initially appeared (in 1080) as an institution created for the lodging and the provision of hospital assistance to all those who, in their quest for redemption, made their way to the holy places of Palestine. As is well known, after the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 it was necessary to protect the crowds of pilgrims converging there from all over Europe, which gave rise to the need to create institutions that were capable of guaranteeing such protection and providing military support to the subsequent conquest and occupation of the territory.

It was within such a context, in the course of the first quarter of the 12th century, that this institution was transformed into a military order – with its initial hospitaller function being relegated to a somewhat secondary position – being followed thereafter by the appearance of the Orders of the Knights Templar, the Teutonic Knights and the Holy Sepulchre. The initial success of these orders in the Holy Land and the prestige that immediately surrounded their appearance led to their benefiting from countless large donations, which soon transformed them into genuine territorial, feudal and economic potentates, being established in practically all of the kingdoms of Christendom.

Right from the beginning, the nobility, especially that originating from France, England and the Empire, was linked to the movement of the Crusades, taking an active part in military actions and playing an important role in the colonization of the territories conquered from the Muslims. It is particularly interesting to note that in most cases, the nobility took with them to the Near East the model of organization that had gradually been developed and implanted in western Europe during the Middle Ages - in other words, the feudal and manorial systems. However, this fact did not stop many of these knights from allowing themselves to be seduced by the exoticism, climate and different cultures that they gradually absorbed. Ultimately, they formed a quite different group from the one that had existed in the places from which they had come. In this context, their intermingling with the Byzantine or other orthodox aristocracies was an extremely important factor, as was duly noted by Rudt-Collenberg in his excellent synthesis of the nobility of the Latin states in the Near East - Edessa, Antioch, Jerusalem, Tripoli, Cyprus and Armenia<sup>2</sup>.

Let us now shift our attention to another geographical space of Christendom. By the time of the First Crusade, the Iberian Peninsula had long been a space of crusades, although this movement of territorial expansion designed for the spreading of faith, colonization and settlement, this “holy war”,

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<sup>2</sup> RUDT-COLLEBERG 1978: LXXXVII-CIX.

was known here as the Reconquest. Towards the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th century, largely thanks to the efforts of Ferdinand the Great and his son, Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile, most notably with the important conquests of Coimbra, Toledo, and other settlements, the Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula became much more dynamic in its scope. Yet at the same time, such a movement required even greater care and attention in the defense and colonization of the newly reconquered spaces.

Under such circumstances, it is easy to understand the interest of the Iberian monarchs in seeking out the support of institutions such as the military orders, which had appeared in the context of the Crusades, and for this very reason were endowed with a clearly warlike vocation, so that the first donations made to the orders of the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar dated from the first quarter of the 12th century. However, as is well known, the services initially provided by these orders were not exactly brilliant, and it can even be stated that it was only from the last quarter of the 12th century that the results of their efforts became visible – coinciding to some extent with an increase in highly beneficial royal donations – with their actions throughout the 13th century being truly remarkable. Meanwhile, and also from the second half of the 12th century, the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar began to share their activity with the new military orders. These were orders with strictly peninsular roots, such as the Orders of Santiago, Calatrava and Avis, this final group being of Portuguese origin. Later, under circumstances that are well known to everyone, the Order of Christ was to appear, and was intimately linked to the movement of overseas expansion.

## **The Portuguese Nobility, the Reconquest and the Military Orders**

The idea that the Portuguese nobility played an active part in the process of the Reconquest and that it abundantly supplied the contingents of the military orders is, I believe, for most people a deeply ingrained notion. A certain romantic view of the Middle Ages and of the actual role of the nobility, combined with the wording of epic narratives or chronicles, such as those dedicated to the deeds of Dom Gonçalo Mendes da Maia, the Fighter, or to the Master of the Order of Santiago, Dom Paio Pires Correia, have also helped to cement this idea. The reality is, however, somewhat removed from this idealized picture, with regard to both the Reconquest and the Military Orders.

Let us succinctly analyze these two points, beginning with the first. The participation of the nobility in the Reconquest, especially from the second half of the 9th century, i.e. from the establishment of the domains of Porto and Coimbra to the end of the 11th century, is an undeniable fact, as proved by the different personal trajectories of various members of the comital families of Portucale and Coimbra, and, above all, during that last century, by those members of the families of the *infanções* (feudal lords – nobles of the second rank) who gradually distinguished themselves until they came to occupy the pinnacle of the hierarchy of nobles, thus filling the gap created by the decline and extinction of the comital nobility<sup>3</sup>.

As is also well known, some of these families had already been afforded the lofty status of *ricos-homens* (rich men – the top rank of the nobility) by the turn of the 11th to the 12th century and thereafter provided the main support for the youthful Dom Afonso Henriques. However, the support

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about this process, see, above all, MATTOSO 1982: 37-114.

and companionship shown at São Mamede in 1128 were soon to be eroded to a considerable extent. Overlooking, for the moment, perfectly plausible reasons relating to military strategy and logistics, such as the city's greater proximity to the frontier, it seems clear that there were also reasons of a political nature underlying the decision taken by Dom Afonso Henriques in 1131 to establish his court at Coimbra. In effect, the young king must have felt himself to be heavily constrained in Guimarães, in the heart of the feudal north, with his freedom of movement being greatly restricted by the high density of lay and monastic landlords. Dom Afonso Henriques therefore preferred to breathe more freely close to the line formed by the River Mondego.

This set of circumstances may, however, be open to another interpretation. This is, as is obvious, a mere hypothesis, and as it happens, there are no data to confirm the idea. Even so, it seems to me to be something worth putting forward as a possibility. The question to ask is, after São Mamede, did the political program or - perhaps better put - the strategic priorities of the Infante and the nobility, coincide? It seems undeniable that the future of Dom Afonso Henriques depended on a demonstration of his warlike capacity, so as to assert his opposition to both his cousin Alfonso VII and the Muslim enemy. The consolidation and expansion of the territory southwards became his unequivocal preference, which explains why he moved to the city that best served his project. And it is in this way, I believe, that the problem should be addressed.

We should also ask if the powerful barons from the county of Portucale, who fought alongside the Infante at São Mamede would not have preferred an attack northwards, in order to prevent the spread of the hegemony of the Galician faction supported by Dona Teresa? It is possible that the Infante's political project was directed firstly towards Galicia rather than more southerly areas, which would explain the presence of several Galician nobles, such as the Counts of Celanova, alongside Dom Afonso Henriques, and the attacks launched against Galician territory – such as the counties of Toronho and Límia. This action spoke to the opposing projects of the Infante and some members of the old northern lineages, and to the deteriorating relationship between the nobles and the Infante, with the latter consequently departing for Coimbra.

Whatever the case, the fact of the matter remains that from then on, whether through disinterest or because the king deliberately pushed them away, the absence of the high nobility from the Reconquest seems to be quite evident. First of all, after 1131 we find Dom Afonso Henriques surrounded by a group of individuals of various origins – Franks, *Moçárabes*, Asturians, etc. – who were unconditional supporters of his military campaigns and would later occupy either extremely important governorships (*alcaidarias*), from Coimbra to the line of the River Tagus, or receive important seignories, so that, in short, they formed a fairly homogeneous group with particularly close links to the king. I do not need to spend more time describing the characteristics of this group, that of the Knights of Coimbra, which was so masterfully analyzed some years ago by Professor José Mattoso<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, and serving as a complement to the previous explanation, it was rare for members of the high nobility to be found close to Dom Afonso Henriques, if we accept, almost as an exception, the participation of the ensign:

The nobility evidently took part in the foreign war from the 11th to the 13th centuries. But it would be a serious illusion to attribute to them the principal

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<sup>4</sup> MATTOSO 1982: 181-227.

merits of the conquest of the territory, as many nobles were trying to make people believe from the end of the 13th century, and as recent historiographers have also believed. In fact, after the direct participation of armies of counts and feudal lords in the occupation of the valley of the River Douro in the 11th century, the active role between 1064 and 1147, or, in other words, between the conquest of Coimbra and Lisbon, fell to nobles of a middle or lower category from the regions of Viseu, Lamego and Coimbra, sometimes under the command of Galician counts, such as the Travas, and the vassal-knights from the *concelhos* (townships or rural communities). Later, between 1147 and 1217, this role fell to the armies of Afonso Henriques and his son Sancho, to the military orders and to certain bands of marginal characters, such as the one commanded by Geraldo Sem Pavor, the Portuguese El Cid. In fact, this active support role fell predominantly to the military orders between 1217 and 1249, the date when the Algarve was definitively conquered. The members of the high nobility who took part in the royal army were only the high dignitaries of the court, among them the ensign. It is to be supposed that such participation was little more than honorific. The effective intervention was due above all to knights of the second and third categories, who fought alongside the vassal-knights<sup>5</sup>.

In this sense, it seems clear to me that the fact that there were no seigniories to the south of the River Vouga possessed by members of the most powerful noble families must necessarily be the clearest possible expression of their disinterest and distancing from the king<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the old nobility seem to have preferred to consolidate their northern estates, expanding their area of influence into regions that were closer at hand, as occurred in Trás-os-Montes and in the upper valley of the River Douro with the Braganções, or in the middle valley of this same river and in the Beira Alta with the lords of Baião and, above all, of Riba Douro. The establishment of seigniories further south over the course of the 12th century was left, apart from the lineages founded by the already mentioned companions-in-arms of Dom Afonso Henriques, above all in the hands of important monastic communities, especially the Cistercian monks and the Canons regular, along with the military orders. The time has now come for us to discuss these monastic and military orders.

In the two decades that followed their initial appearance and establishment in Portugal in the second decade of the 12th century<sup>7</sup>, the orders of the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar were not particularly successful, only beginning to play an important military role after the conquest of Lisbon and Santarem by Dom Afonso Henriques in 1147. Being responsible for the building of some castles along the line of the River Tagus, the Orders of the Temple of Jerusalem and of St. John

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<sup>5</sup> MATTOSO 2000 (1): 301.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the location of the estates of the main noble families throughout the 12th century, see, above all, MATTOSO 1982: 68-74 and 207-227 (for the estates of the “King’s knights”), and 1985 (1): 136-189. For the 13th century, see VENTURA 1992: 565-736 (it should, however, be noted that the estates located further south, and even in the Alentejo, were obtained outside the context of the Reconquest).

<sup>7</sup> More recent research suggests that 1112 was the year when the Knights Hospitaller arrived in the county of Portucalense (cf. COSTA 1999/2000: 97).

of the Hospital gradually began to consolidate their actions from the beginning of the 1160s, with the peninsular Orders of Santiago and Avis appearing in the following decade.

Being subject until the end of the 12th century to the vicissitudes of the ongoing wars, sometimes making advances and sometimes suffering humiliating retreats due to the terrible attacks launched by the Almohads, the role of the monastic and military orders in the Reconquest was to prove decisive, especially from the reign of Dom Afonso II until the definitive conquest of the Algarve in 1249. Meanwhile, the accumulation of countless privileges and the generous royal and private donations gradually transformed these monastic and military institutions into genuine territorial and feudal potentates<sup>8</sup>.

All this is well known, but what was the role and/or connection of the nobility with these institutions? This is the question that we must now analyze, even though it is not one about which we can make any truly safe pronouncements. After underlining the important role played by Dom Gualdim Pais Ramirão and Dom Gonçalo Viegas de Lanhoso at the head of the Order of the Temple of Jerusalem and the Order of Avis in Portugal, respectively, José Mattoso states:

These two masters must therefore have contributed most powerfully to the attraction of numerous recruits to the two militias. This happened precisely during the period when the noble families were forming their own lineages, which made the military orders the most suitable solution for the problems arising from the need to find a place for the disinherited young men who were not supposed to marry. There were no longer enough posts in the service of the king or as vassals of the feudal lords (who were few and did not have the resources to sustain large numbers of troops) to absorb all the young knights. The clerical life did not seem to attract them greatly during this period, and the monastic life was not suited to them all. These two individuals are, however, the only two members of the military orders that we can safely identify in social terms until the end of the 12th century<sup>9</sup>.

Two friars, even if they were masters, constitute little evidence, but the fact that the military orders only began to demonstrate their real importance from the last quarter of the 12th century may serve to explain this incoherence<sup>10</sup>. It must therefore be supposed that the picture altered profoundly during the 13th century, since this was the period when, on the one hand, there was a consolidation of the lineage system and, on the other hand, the military orders began to enjoy their unequivocal success. Let us see if this was the case.

Let us begin by analyzing the information contained in our mediaeval peerage books, genuinely privileged sources for our knowledge of the Portuguese mediaeval nobility until the mid-14th century. Besides the two masters of the Order of the Temple and the Order of Avis to which we have already referred, and who lived in the 12th century, the *Livro Velho de Linhagens* and the *Livro de Linhagens do Deão* enable us to count, for the 13th century, two priors and four friars belonging to the

<sup>8</sup> An excellent synthesis of this process is to be found in MATTOSO 1982: 227-232.

<sup>9</sup> MATTOSO 1982: 233.

<sup>10</sup> José Mattoso is the first author to have found this fact rather strange and to have sought to justify it (MATTOSO 1982: 235-239).

order of the Hospitallers, and one master (Dom Martim Martins da Maia) and two friars from the Templars. This amounts to nine members in total, and from only two military orders<sup>11</sup>. But obviously there were more. The *Livro de Linhagens do Conde Dom Pedro*, the most complete and the latest to be compiled, raises this number to twenty (12 from the Order of the Hospital, 4 from the Order of Santiago and 4 from the Order of the Temple)<sup>12</sup>. It must be admitted that the numbers are not very impressive, and the same feeling persists even when the count is further raised to thirty-four, thanks to the four members of the Order of the Hospital, the two from the Order of Avis and the eight from the Order of Christ, who can be situated in the first half of the 14th century.

How can these facts be explained? Let us immediately state our firm belief that in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries, there cannot have been a total of forty individuals joining the military orders. How many members of these militias were overlooked in the documentary records of their own time? In fact, this is the sense to be given to the words of José Mattoso that are transcribed below, when he seeks to understand and interpret the intriguing silence of the sources:

But those knights who, on joining the orders, did not rise to important positions of leadership, did not distinguish themselves through actions that were out of the ordinary, and did not give rise to new branches of noble families, were in fact probably not remembered by their own families and consequently became forgotten. We cannot doubt, however, that membership of the fraternity of religious knights was one of the main attractions for the young men that were kept away from their homes by the nature of the lineal structures, just as, at exactly the same time, the convents of Benedictine nuns, and those of the Cistercian nuns from the early 13th century, were filled with the young ladies of these families. The extremely large numbers of donations made by the kings and by the families of the high, middle and low nobility, especially to the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller, help to confirm this suspicion. Anastácio de Figueiredo's work about the Hospitallers, who had property and estates all over the country, even in the heart of the great manorial region of Entre Douro e Minho, provides an abundant illustration of how the nobles bestowed upon them the greatest possible generosity - not only because they piously believed in the spiritual benefits that they would derive from this connection with institutions that were so closely linked to the Tomb of Jesus Christ, but also because they felt the need to favor those who received their young sons and kept them occupied<sup>13</sup>.

In this way, everything would seem to indicate that the contingent of nobles in the military orders would have been much greater than the documentary evidence allows us to see. Let us therefore

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<sup>11</sup> *Livros Velhos de Linhagens*, 1980. Besides those indicated in the text, there is also a reference to two more friars, but without any indication being given as to their order, as well as to two masters of the Order of Alcântara, two masters of the Order of Calatrava and one master of the Order of Christ, this latter figure obviously being from the first quarter of the 14th century.

<sup>12</sup> *Livro de Linhagens do Conde Dom Pedro*, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> MATTOSO 1982: 235.

accept that the relatively uninspiring careers of many of them justified their being largely forgotten. But then one could not expect that the same type of brilliance, i.e. distinguished action in battle, would be shown by all those who, for similar reasons, must have entered into other institutions of the regular or secular clergy, which were endowed with equal generosity with donations by the kings and the families of the different levels of the nobility. And yet it seems that in exactly the same way there is a marked silence to be noted in relation to these people and their actions.

I cannot put off dealing with what seems to me the fundamental question for understanding this phenomenon, or in other words, the adoption by the Portuguese nobility of the family model based on a lineal structure, in keeping with a process that would have started around the mid-12th century and which was already completed across the various strata of nobility by the end of the first few decades of the following century. Everyone knows the work of José Mattoso, who was the first person to perceive, analyze and interpret this phenomenon. Consequently, I will refrain from mentioning here the main works in which that illustrious historian laid out his conclusions, with which, generally speaking, I immediately declare myself to be in agreement. I should like, however, because of their innovative nature, to recall some of his articles gathered together in the collection entitled *A Nobreza Medieval Portuguesa*, published in 1981<sup>14</sup>, along with most of the pages of what I consider to be his most brilliant and inspiring synthesis, *Ricos-Homens, Infanções e Cavaleiros*, published in 1982.

In all this process, however, there is one point on which I cannot agree, and about which I have already had the opportunity to present my analysis and draw my conclusions, based on the study of a vast number of wills and letters relating to the division of inheritances. Thus, until proven otherwise, I do not believe that in Portugal – just as I am convinced for most of the Iberian Peninsula – second sons were excluded from the paternal inheritance, with the system of hereditary division remaining in force at least until the appearance of the system of primogeniture at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century<sup>15</sup>. If I am correct, this means that the number of nobles entering the monastic-military orders – just like the other monastic institutions or secular clergy – was not so high as the previously quoted words of José Mattoso would have us believe, since all brothers received the same share of the family estate. It should not, however, be assumed that this fact meant a lesser expression of celibacy, since the analysis of this phenomenon, within the scope of the universe of the 2,354 individuals that served as my database for the above-mentioned study, reveals numbers that cannot fail to impress:

MEN – 12th C – 29.4% / 13th C – 39.3% / 1st half of 14th C – 57.1%

WOMEN – 12th C – 22.7% / 13th C – 38.0% / 1st half of 14th C – 41.3%

There is, however, one very significant difference between male celibacy and female celibacy – whereas the former was mostly and unequivocally lay in nature, the latter was clearly understood to be mainly religious in the 13th century<sup>16</sup>. Only in this way is it possible to understand why it is so much easier to identify the social origin of nuns, with it almost always being possible to discover to which family they belonged, in contrast to what occurred with the members of the military orders, with monks or with members of the clergy.

<sup>14</sup> “Cavaleiros andantes: a ficção e a realidade” and “Sobre a estrutura da família nobre portuguesa” (MATTOSO 1981: 353-369 and 371-386, respectively).

<sup>15</sup> PIZARRO 1999 (II): 565-592.

<sup>16</sup> PIZARRO 1999 (II): 489-490.

## Conclusion

All these considerations have been intended to clarify some aspects of the problem, but I do not doubt that the main question still remains unanswered. To restate the question, who comprised the ranks of the military orders at that time, and what was their sociological composition? Even with all the limitations that I have just summarized, we should be prepared to accept that a part of the friars came from the nobility, perhaps in smaller numbers than might have been expected, but even so in substantially greater numbers than those that we are able to identify from the limited data available, although because of some rule or regulation of which I am unaware, they were led to assume a certain anonymity in relation to their family origins. Even accepting all this, the question still remains: from what social classes did the others come?

I venture to put forward an idea that is not an answer, but a simple suggestion for further study: to try to discover if the military orders may not have gradually absorbed a part of the members of the municipal militias, i.e. from among the villein-knights or the urban aristocracy. This origin would explain the absence of any identifying family information at a time when surnames were only used amongst the nobility. Basically, beginning in the 11th century and during a good part of the 12th century, war was the point of entry that allowed certain military professionals to be admitted to the nobility. José Mattoso himself stated some time ago: "There was therefore a whole period during which men of arms of non-noble origin could become men of arms *per naturam* and thus enter into the category of nobles"<sup>17</sup>.

If this did in fact occur at different moments of the 11th and 12th centuries, the same thing may have happened throughout the first half of the 13th century, but in a different way, i.e. not in terms of ennoblement, at least not immediately, but strictly and exclusively at the level of entry to the military. In other words, since the frontier with the Muslims was shifting progressively southwards, especially after the advances into the Alentejo region, what was to be done with the individuals who enjoyed a privileged social status under the scope of charters that had been granted previously within the context of a direct war with the Muslims? If it is true that after the conquest of Alcácer do Sal and until the definitive conquest of the Algarve, it was the military orders that genuinely led the military effort of the Reconquest, should one exclude the hypothesis that, in the face of necessity, the same orders may have incorporated into their ranks a certain number of villein-knights or even members of the urban aristocracies of Evora or Beja, as well as from other Alentejo towns, about which so little is known<sup>18</sup>?

These are questions that, like many others, need to be answered by specialists on the military orders. I do, however, believe that a profound analysis of the social hierarchy of the mediaeval commanderies, a detailed survey and systematic analysis of the wills or other personal data of the friars, together with the various prosopographical surveys and genealogical reconstructions already undertaken by historians studying the nobility, would perhaps make it possible to clarify a little better the doubts that have been raised in this article. In conclusion, I believe that specialists working in these two areas - the military orders and the nobility - only stand to gain if they join forces with a view to improving

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<sup>17</sup> MATTOSO 1982: 175.

<sup>18</sup> MATTOSO 2000 (I): 372-373.

our knowledge of two of the institutions that most marked the history of western Europe, and which were certainly fundamental in laying the foundations for the support of mediaeval Christendom.

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