

INTRODUCCIÓN AL DOSIER

FROM FREE WILL TO OBLIGATION. THE MOBILITY OF PEOPLE IN SMALL BORDER TOWNS IN MEDIEVAL PORTUGAL AND CASTILLE: NEWCOMERS, ROYAL OFFICIALS AND WORKERS. AN INTRODUCTION*

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Medieval Europe was home to cities and towns of highly diverse origins, sizes, and socio-economic and cultural profiles. These settlements have long captured the attention of medievalists and have become one of the main spaces of observation and inquiry. Focusing solely on the first decades of the twenty-first century, numerous scholarly gatherings have been held and studies published on a wide range of topics, including major cities, urban networks, port towns, frontier cities, urban planning, supply systems, governance, memory, and daily life, among others¹.

* This article is funded by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of Project: FRONTOWNS - *Think big on small frontier towns: Alto Alentejo and Alta Extremadura leonesa (13th-16th centuries)* - PTDC/HAR-HIS/3024/2020, DOI 10.54499/PTDC/HAR-HIS/3024/2020 (<http://doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/HAR-HIS/3024/2020>).

¹ By way of example, we shall simply outline a few recent discussions and reflections on the historiography of the medieval town in some regions of Western Europe (Portugal, Spain, France, Low Countries, England and Ireland): Andrade e Costa, 2011: 284-293; Coelho, 2011: 284-293; Chittolini, 2010: 227-241; Menjot, 2011: 39-85; Haemers, 2011: 341-354; Val Valdivieso, 2015: 9-32; Muñoz Fernández & Ruiz Gómez, 2020; Harkes, 2022: 648-656.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.cemyr.2026.34.00>

CUADERNOS DEL CEMYR, 34; enero 2026, pp. ?-?; ISSN: e-2530-8378

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Nevertheless, small towns, as objects of study in their own right, remained a marginal topic within urban history. Even in more recent historiography, when incorporated into analyses of urban networks, they have consistently been treated as secondary or peripheral elements and/or viewed from the perspective of the prominence of major cities (Guittonneau, 2017). This scenario is surprising given that such small settlements constituted the majority of urban centers in Europe. In contrast, truly large cities were few in number and primarily confined to specific regions, such as Flanders and northern Italy. Indeed, small towns occasionally attained the status of leading actors in Anglo-Saxon historiography, considering their importance as marketplaces (Hilton, 1985; Dyer, 2002) and that, briefly, in the 1980s historiographic production on this subject intensified (Poussou, Loupès: 1987). However, attempts to produce comparative studies between small towns in different geopolitical areas were doomed to failure, of which the exercise carried out by Peter Clark and Pierre Poussou was an eloquent example (Clark: 1995).

For some years, the adoption of criteria of centrality, and more recently, the contemplation of flows, has helped to transcend the difficulty in defining “small urban center” (Fray, 2006, 2007; Fray *et alii*, 2013; Stable, 2008; Bochaca, 2015), and consequently, increase the opportunities for comparison. It is in this context that the line of research developed at the Institute of Medieval Studies of NOVA University (Portugal) is integrated, guided by the primary objective of developing a questionnaire to analyze small towns. The questionnaire was outlined (Costa, 2013: 145-148), but the concept under study remained undefined.

In fact, the historiographical object *small town* does not in itself constitute a closed delimitation, because the adjective “small” merely characterizes a reality in relation to others. The research line in the Institute of Medieval Studies adopted a flexible notion of a small town as a conceptual strategy that allows us to define the object of study for each specific research project we undertake. There is certainly a minimum criterion that a territorial community must meet to attain the status of a town (*vila*), clearly expressed in the sources (at least the Portuguese and Castilian ones); it must be a municipality that has been explicitly granted the privilege of town status, including jurisdiction over a demarcated territory. In other words, this approach does not apply, for example, to the dichotomy between the urban and the rural worlds.

The problem lies in the upper threshold of the concept of a small town, which cannot be defined by a single structuring feature. Thus, the analysis of small-sized settlement cores with town status must always be considered relative to a framework previously defined by geographical, economic, jurisdictional, or proto-demographic criteria. Alternatively, the adjective “small” must be paired with a permanent characteristic such as mountainous, frontier, or port, for instance.

The development of that line of research on small towns is not based on a specific methodology or on predefined analytical models, nor does it correspond to a historiographical trend directly imported from derived from the concerns of medieval communities. Instead, it is primarily an observational perspective that grants the leading role to smaller population centers (Costa, 2021: 597-598).



While recent historiography has significantly renewed our understanding of the medieval town, scholars have, in parallel, continued to explore another long-established field of research – that of the frontier(s). It has experienced a revitalized interest and a notable increase in scholarly production, particularly on the occasion of commemorating major medieval treaties². We are referring, in the Iberian case, to the Treaty of Alcañices between Portugal and Castile, concluded in 1297. Research on the frontiers has aimed to combine various perspectives, encompassing the processes of border delimitation, the networks of officials established to oversee and administer these territories, commercial exchanges and smuggling, as well as the social and economic profiles of the towns founded within them and the interactions between different cultures³.

In this context, the FRONTOWNS project –*Think Big on Small Frontier Towns: Alto Alentejo and Alta Extremadura Leonesa (13th-16th centuries)*– was launched. The chosen border was the one that separated the kingdoms of Portugal and Castile. This frontier remained virtually unchanged since 1297, making it a rare and distinctive case study in the European context. Specifically, the project focuses on the towns located along the border between what is now the Alto Alentejo and Spanish Extremadura. This zone, following the Beira region and its neighboring Castilian lands, constituted the principal area of overland contact between Portugal and Castile. Although this project is a national one, we tried to give it a comparative component, which was reinforced by integrating Spanish colleagues specialized in the territory of Leonese Extremadura into the team. We acknowledge that, although our object of observation is a border territory between two kingdoms, this is not a truly comparative study. Indeed, the Castilian area considered is larger than that bordering Alto Alentejo, and the objectives of its inclusion are, first, to serve as a mirror to better understand the Portuguese side and, second, to grasp the connections between the two territories.

One of the main objectives of the Project – and the purpose of this thematic issue – is to advance scholarly understanding by bringing together three interrelated domains: small towns, frontiers, and mobility. Our intention was to revisit established questions while also introducing new ones, including:

- Were these small frontier towns connected to more distant regions?
- What role did small border towns play in the construction of routes and mobility between different kingdoms in the 14th-16th centuries?
- How far do the inhabitants of small frontier towns go?
- Where do people come from to live/work in these settlements?

² As an illustration, we will briefly highlight a few recent collective volumes that have explored the study of frontier(s) during the medieval period: Josserand, Buresi, 2001; Murray, 2009; Fernandes, Boissellier 2015; Abulafia, Berend, 2016; Butler, Kesserling, 2018; Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public, 2021; Leighton *et al*, 2023; Ardelean *et al*, 2023.

³ For the frontier towns in Portugal, see the state of the art presented in Costa, 2020: 1-28.



The previous set of research questions guided the ten contributions to this dossier, which were presented in two sessions held at the International Medieval Congress (Leeds) and an international conference in Lisbon, both events organized in 2023. The discussions and insights generated during these meetings played a key role in enriching the research and strengthening the coherence of the adopted approach.

The central focus of the texts is mobility within a defined geographical framework between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The sequence of articles offers readers a structured progression, beginning with four coordinated contributions (two on Alto Alentejo and two on the Spanish region of Extremadura) that address the same topics, albeit with variations arising from the sources and their respective chronologies. This section continues with a collaborative Portuguese-Spanish text. It culminates in a final pair of mirrored articles analyzing mobility in towns on both sides of the frontier, each with distinct themes. In the last three texts, the contrapuntal framework between the two sides of the border is abandoned, with the analysis confined exclusively to the towns in the Alto Alentejo. As previously noted, the project is Portuguese, which explains the predominance of Lusitanian research. Let us now examine these texts more closely.

The opening article by *Gonçalo Melo da Silva* and *Thiago Tolfo* reconstructs the transport and communication networks of the small border towns of north-western Alentejo. By examining the physical routes, the buildings that supported travelers, and the institutional frameworks that facilitated circulation, the authors reveal how these towns functioned as key nodes of exchange within and beyond the Portuguese realm. Their study not only expands our knowledge of southern road systems – traditionally less studied than those north of the Tagus – but also underscores the role of these towns in shaping the urban hierarchies of both Portugal and Castile. Complementing this analysis, *Luis Clemente-Quijada* focuses on the *hauliers* and distribution networks of rural *Alta Extremadura*. Drawing upon legal and municipal sources, he identifies the rise of a specialized professional group – the *recueros* – who were instrumental in sustaining the economic cohesion between coastal Portugal and the Castilian hinterlands during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Having established the main routes of communication, this issue turns to the socio-economic fabric of frontier society, examining the dynamics that shaped its communities and interaction patterns. In their second contribution, *Gonçalo Melo da Silva* and *Thiago Tolfo* examine the professional activities of craftsmen in small and medium-sized towns of northeastern Alentejo. Their analysis distinguishes between common and specialized trades, tracing signs of economic diversification, urban complementarity, and professional mobility. This perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how occupational hierarchies were shaped by both geography and frontier dynamics. Complementary to this, *Luis Clemente-Quijada's* second article on *Alta Extremadura* highlights the emergence of textile and leather manufacturing from the late fifteenth century onwards. Through a comparison of municipal ordinances, royal records, and judicial documents, he shows how certain towns achieved a level of productive specialization that integrated them into wider interregional trade circuits, supported by cross-border commercial agreements.

Mobility across the frontier was not limited to transport and commerce: it was also profoundly marked by war and politics. In their joint article, *João Rafael Nisa* and *Carlos Rodríguez Casillas* explore the realities of conflict in the Alentejo and Extremadura borderlands, one of the first regions to experience the impact of the conflicts between the Crowns of Portugal and Castile. Their analysis of wartime movement – whether the deployment of troops, the repair of fortifications, or the enforced immobility of besieged populations – reveals how military exigencies shaped local life and royal policy alike. War, in this context, emerges as both a constraint and a catalyst for mobility, frequently structuring the rhythms of everyday existence along the frontier.

Considering forced immigration, *Ana Leitão* examines the *coutos de homiziados* –territories designated for the exile of convicted criminals– established in the northeastern Alentejo towns of Marvão, Arronches, and Ouguela. Through the analysis of royal chancery pardons issued between the reigns of Afonso V (1437-1481), João II (1481-1495) and Manuel I (1495-1521), she reconstructs the profiles, origins, and trajectories of the *homiziados* (exiled convicts), revealing how penal mobility intersected with the Crown's strategies of political and territorial control. The study of demographic and social mobility in urban centers forms another key dimension of this volume. *Julián Clemente Ramos* examines the city of Cáceres from its Christian conquest in 1229 to the early sixteenth century, focusing particularly on immigration patterns. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, settlement was gradual and primarily driven by immigrants from León, Galicia, and Castile, a presence also reflected in local toponymy. By the fifteenth century, although León remained a principal source of settlers, migration became more diverse, including arrivals from New Castile, Galicia, neighboring towns in Extremadura, Andalusia, and Portugal. This later immigration was motivated by economic opportunities, service in noble households, and artisan or labor mobility. The influx of newcomers contributed to the renewal and consolidation of Cáceres as a key urban center in late-medieval Extremadura.

The final section of this issue turns to the Portuguese royal officials acting in the Alto Alentejo border region – connected with notarial functions, taxation and justice – tracing the mobility that the development of these activities implies and how the king's authority was enacted in these peripheral zones.

The bureaucratic and documentary dimension of mobility is explored in *João Pedro Alves's* study of notaries and their clients in the Alto Alentejo region. Combining evidence from royal pardons, legislative texts, and *Cortes* proceedings, he reconstructs the professional trajectories and networks of notaries in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. His approach reveals how documentary practices both reflected and reinforced the circulation of people, ideas, and legal culture across local and regional boundaries. In a related vein, *Marcelo Moreira Andrade* examines the *alcaides* and *escrivães das sacas* – officials responsible for overseeing customs duties and export licenses in northeastern Alentejo – between 1443 and 1521. Drawing on chancery documentation, he reconstructs the evolution of this administrative network. He offers insight into the social profiles and mobility of those who served as royal intermediaries in the borderlands. Finally, *Adelaide Millán da Costa* investigates



the *juízes de fora* (peripheral royal magistrates) active in the small frontier towns of Alto Alentejo during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By analyzing their appointments, movements, and local integration, she demonstrates how these officials embodied the Crown's efforts to assert judicial authority and reinforce administrative cohesion at the kingdom's margins.

Taken together, the studies assembled in this thematic issue not only offer a multifaceted view of the small frontier towns of Alentejo and Extremadura, but also invite broader reflection on the questions we raised previously. Firstly, many of the main routes that structured circulation and communication during the Roman period – particularly those connecting Lisbon with Cáceres and Badajoz – continued to influence contacts between the two realms throughout the Middle Ages. Although the course of some roads evolved over time, the establishment of a political frontier did not disrupt these lines of movement; instead, it reinforced them, transforming nearby towns into essential points of support and articulation. The evidence discussed throughout the monograph allows us to classify the region's routes and mobility circuits – namely the commercial ones – into four broad categories: local (within the municipal territory), regional (linking neighboring towns), national (on the scale of each kingdom), and international (connecting both realms, especially at the regional level, being rarer those extending beyond the peninsula). These layers of circulation interacted constantly, sustaining the material, institutional, and human exchanges that defined frontier life.

War, too, played a paradoxical role in these processes. It generated both defensive and offensive mobility, as men and resources were mobilized to secure the border and fight in other geographic areas. Yet, when peace returned, the experience of displacement acquired a new social meaning. Former combatants frequently invoked their participation in distant theatres of operation – whether in North Africa, across the neighboring kingdom, or later in the 16th century, Italy, America, and Asia – as evidence of loyalty deserving royal reward. Mobility thus became a mechanism of recognition, advancement, and social negotiation, once again demonstrating that medieval society was far from static.

Although the data concerning the arrival of new inhabitants (whether by their own will or as a result of punishment) are of a different nature and require some caution, there nevertheless appear to be particular distinctions between Portugal and Castile. In both realms, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the arrival of settlers from the northern regions (e.g., Beira for Portuguese towns and Galicia for Castilian towns) predominated. However, by the fifteenth century, the Portuguese case had diverged, at least regarding the *homiziados*. Most of them settling in Alentejo towns now originated within the region itself, possibly due to proximity.

The studies on royal officials and economic activities equally expose the hierarchical structure of Portuguese urban centers, with Portalegre clearly occupying a leading position within the regional network. Yet, unlike in other regions, no single city or town emerged as a dominant pole capable of monopolizing local production. The absence of a large urban hub, however, did not isolate these frontier towns. They were actively integrated into long-distance supply routes linking them to major markets such as Lisbon, Valladolid, and Medina del Campo. What seems to

emerge is a certain balance among the frontier towns of Alto Alentejo, occasionally renegotiated, as evidenced by the well-known cases of Castelo de Vide and Marvão (Oliveira, 2011), probably due to the urban centers considering that only in this way could they respond more effectively to the challenges they faced.

Finally, the frontier itself has not constrained the development or interconnection of the local economies of both realms. On the contrary, it often acted, among other factors, as a catalyst for production and exchange, especially in sectors such as livestock, textiles, leather, and sumac (*rhus coriaria*), a key raw material for the textile and, above all, leatherworking sectors. Far from dividing, the frontier stimulated complementarity and mutual dependency, reinforcing the idea that the borderlands of Alentejo and Extremadura were not peripheries, but vibrant crossroads of mobility and creation. Moreover, this allows us to demonstrate, as the project sought to test, that small towns did not exist solely in the shadow of larger urban centers, but were capable of forging their own networks. While these networks were naturally smaller and more concentrated at the local and regional level, some inhabitants nevertheless managed to extend them over considerable distances. Notable examples include commercial agents from Portuguese towns such as Castelo de Vide and Portalegre, reaching, respectively, Guarda and Lisbon in Portugal, and Valladolid in Castile – distances of approximately 160, 200, and 400 km on foot.

In short, despite the lack of sources and the diversity of observation points in time, the towns of Alto Alentejo and Alta Extremadura Leonesa remain small in our analysis. Still, their connections, flows, and impact have grown significantly.



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