

THE *ALCAIDES* AND CLERKS OF *SACAS* IN THE SMALL BORDER TOWNS OF NORTHEASTERN ALENTEJO (1438-1521): FUNCTIONS, RECRUITMENT, AND MOBILITY*

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ABSTRACT

In Portugal, although the topic of the royal officialdom has attracted historiographical interest since the eighteenth century, and despite some studies focusing on certain local and regional officials connected to the treasury, much remains unclear regarding the Crown's peripheral administrative structure in this area. Therefore, this article examines the *alcaides* and clerks of the *sacas* in a specific region: the border towns of northeastern Alentejo. First, we present the spatial context and the documentary typology used, as well as their potential and challenges for studying the royal officialdom linked to the *sacas*. Next, we seek to reconstruct the development of this network of officials, their functions, and their establishment in the towns analyzed. Finally, we aim to understand the social profile of the individuals who held these positions.

KEYWORDS: Urban history, Medieval Portugal, Taxation, Peripheral Royal Officialdom, Borderlands.

LOS ALCAIDES Y ESCRIBANOS DE *SACAS* EN LAS PEQUEÑAS VILLAS FRONTERIZAS DEL NORDESTE ALENTEJANO (1438-1521): FUNCIONES, RECLUTAMIENTO Y MOVILIDAD

RESUMEN

En Portugal, aunque el tema del oficialato real ha despertado el interés de la historiografía desde el siglo XVIII, y a pesar de que existen algunos estudios sobre determinados oficiales locales y regionales vinculados a la hacienda, aún queda mucho por aclarar sobre la estructura administrativa periférica de la Corona en este ámbito. Así, el presente artículo recurre a estos datos para estudiar los *alcaides* y *escribanos* de las *sacas* en una región determinada: las villas fronterizas del noreste del Alentejo. En primer lugar, se presenta el espacio y la tipología documental empleada, así como sus potencialidades y desafíos para el estudio del oficialato real vinculado a las *sacas*. A continuación, se procura reconstruir el desarrollo de la red de estos oficiales, sus funciones y el perfil social de sus titulares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: historia urbana, Portugal medieval, Fiscalidad, oficialidad real periférica, zonas fronterizas.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the eighteenth-century Portuguese historiography has shown considerable interest in the topic of royal officialdom, as evidenced by the works of João Pedro Ribeiro (1857) and Henrique Gama Barros (1885). Until the mid-twentieth century, the study of the royal office remained almost exclusively in the hands of legal historians (Homem, 2011: 186-189), such as Paulo Merêa (1929: 445-524), Marcelo Caetano (1981), and Ruy Albuquerque and Martim de Albuquerque (1983), with rare exceptions, such as Virgínia Rau (2009). These authors sought to understand the origins, evolution, and functions of the royal officialdom.

In the 1980s, comparable to what occurred in other areas of Portuguese medieval historiography (Mattoso, 2011), there was a significant increase in scholarly production on the officers of various institutions. Regarding the crown's central agents, the pioneering work of Armando Carvalho Homem on the *Desembargo Régio* (Royal Chancery) (Homem, 1974, 1990) stands out, followed by several studies on the same subject conducted under his guidance.

Concurrently, other scholars have studied the body of royal officers at central, regional, and local levels, addressing all areas of activity, including finance. Among these are Iria Gonçalves (1964a, 1964b: 7-87, 1999: 95-107), Saul António Gomes (1988: 1101-1017, 2009), Isabel Vaz de Freitas (2004), António Castro Henriques (2008), Rodrigo Dominguez (2013), Ricardo Vicente (2013), and Catarina Rosa (2020). Their studies have helped to elucidate the creation, development, and functioning of the fiscal administrative network, as well as to analyze the responsibilities of officials working in this area, such as the *almoxarifes*.

Nonetheless, as Amélia Aguiar Andrade (2023: 36) recently emphasized, much remains to be clarified regarding the peripheral administrative structure of the Crown related to fiscal matters. This is especially curious in the case of treasury officers operating in border regions. On one hand, Portuguese historiography has maintained a sustained interest in these spaces¹, highlighting the Crown's role in strengthening surveillance and control over people and goods moving between the two kingdoms. On the other hand, the chancery records of Afonso V (1438-1481), João II (1481-1495), and Manuel I (1495-1521) preserve a substantial number of appointment letters for various officials (including those linked to border regions) that could help answer some of the outstanding questions.

This historiographical context hinders a more comprehensive understanding of the process of creation and evolution of certain offices, their geographic distribution, functions, recruitment methods, and the social background and literacy of the individuals who held them. The scarcity of studies makes it difficult to grasp

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¹ For a historiographic overview on this topic, consult: Costa, 2020: 259-286.

the relationship and articulation between royal fiscal agents and other urban powers, such as municipal authorities, as well as the Crown's capacity to respond to irregularities, such as errors or corruption in office. One example of this issue - already addressed by other researchers (Trindade, 1981: 1-95; Duarte, 1998: 451-474; 1996b: 125-146) - is the case of *alcaides* and *escrivães das sacas* (customs officers and clerks).

This study aims to contribute to the expansion of knowledge regarding royal officers involved in fiscal affairs, particularly within a group of small urban centers along the border. Given the impossibility of examining every position identified, we have limited our analysis to the officialdom of the *sacas*, due to the reasons mentioned above and their role in controlling goods entering and leaving the kingdom through its ports to Castile.

This text is divided into three main sections. The first focuses on characterizing the geographical area under analysis and the types of sources used, highlighting their contributions and limitations for investigating the issue at hand. Next, we reconstruct the evolution of the network of these royal officers, with particular attention to their responsibilities and how they integrated into the localities studied. In the final section, we concentrate on the socio-professional profile of those who held these offices.

1. *SACAS OFFICIALS IN THE BORDER TOWNS OF NORTHEASTERN ALENTEJO: THE AVAILABLE INFORMATION*

The area of observation for the present study consists of a group of towns located in the present-day region of Alto Alentejo: Alegrete, Alpalhão, Arronches, Assumar, Campo Maior, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, Monforte, Montalvão, Nisa, Ouguela, and Portalegre, as shown in Figure 1. Since the fourteenth century, these localities were part of the *comarca* of Entre-Tejo-e-Odiana (one of the six major administrative and judicial divisions in the realm), but in fiscal terms, they were divided among at least three *almoxarifados* (royal fiscal districts): Portalegre, Estremoz, and, later, Nisa. While Alegrete, Alpalhão, Arronches, Assumar, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, Monforte, Montalvão, and Nisa belonged to the *almoxarifado* of Portalegre, Campo Maior and Ouguela were part of Estremoz. These latter towns were more socially and economically connected to Elvas, the major urban center of northeastern Alentejo (Correia, 2013; Fernandes, 2011: 567).

The border towns of northeastern Alentejo have been described in demographic, jurisdictional, and socioeconomic terms in other texts included in this volume (Silva, Tolfo, 2026a, 2026b; Costa, 2026), as well as by previous scholars (Freire, 1929, vol. 2: 23; Oliveira, 2011: 70-117; Coelho, 2023: 309, 317, 323-324, 338, 340, 376, 380-382, 419, 427, 433, 434). It is worth recalling that these towns were linked to the Crown and members of the royal family, to the military orders, and, at different points in time, to noble households such as the Silva Meneses and the Bragança. These were small urban communities by national standards, and very small in a broader European context. According to the *Numeramento* (census) of 1527-1532 (Dias, 1996: 540-545), the aforementioned towns ranged from 115 households in

the case of Alpalhão to 1,419, but apart from Portalegre, Castelo de Vide, Arronches, and Campo Maior, most communities struggled to reach 500 households.

It is important to note, however, that there was no strong correlation between population size and the existence of certain offices with supra-local jurisdiction, such as the *almoxarife*. For instance, Nisa –unlike Arronches– was the seat of an *almoxarifado* in the early sixteenth century (Dominguez, 2013: 184). Likewise, within the same *comarca*, Portalegre (with 1,419 households) retained an *almoxarife*, while Montemor-o-Novo (1594) and Elvas (2,354) did not.

The northeastern border towns of the Alentejo primarily focused on agricultural production and livestock raising, combining these activities with artisanal production (especially textiles) and commerce. Their geographical location allowed these towns to serve as transit and connection points on routes linking the Beira region to Entre-Tejo-e-Odiana, and also between Portugal and Castile, particularly in the routes connecting Lisbon and Cáceres (Silva, Tolfo, 2026a, 2026b). Maria José Lagos Trindade (1981: 44) noted that Marvão, alongside Elvas, was one of the main entry points for Castilian livestock into the region. Our investigation confirms this was also the case for Arronches, Montalvão, Castelo de Vide, and Alegrete, where officials related to the livestock trade are likewise recorded².

Given the role these towns played in connecting and facilitating transit between the two kingdoms, the Crown classified some of them as *portos secos* (“dry ports”). This designation referred to towns and cities located along the land border between Portugal and Castile, where individuals were required to declare goods and pay the corresponding customs duties (Lencastre, 1891: 16; Ferreira, 1983: 52-55). Within the group of localities studied, to the three already known cases of “dry ports” – Castelo de Vide, Marvão and Arronches (Ferreira, 1983: 52-55) – we can add Alegrete and Montalvão, as they had *contadores de gados* (livestock counters), an office that was only established in locations designated as “dry ports”³. Thus, in order to carry out more effective control over trade and tax collection, the Crown created a body of specialized agents in these towns during the fifteenth century.

These officials can be identified through letters of appointment, especially from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These documents (by which the monarch appointed a new official to a given post) were preserved in the royal chanceries, and typically include information such as the name of the official, the office in question, and the locality (or localities) where the office was to be performed. Often, they also mention the official’s social status – *escudeiro* (squire), *cavaleiro* (knight), or royal servant – and place of origin. Less frequently, they include information on patronage ties (to the royal household or to secular or ecclesiastical lords) and family

² Contador do gado: TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 14, fl. 80 (Arronches, 1466); liv. 32, fl. 44v (Montalvão, 1480); TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 6, fl. 122 (Marvão, 1482); liv. 24, fl. 107 (Castelo de Vide, 1483); liv. 13, fl. 147 (Alegrete, 1490). Escrivão do gado: TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 43, fl. 65 (Marvão, 1496).

³ Alongside the documents mentioned in the previous note, see also: *Ordenações Manuelinas*, liv. 5, tit. 89: 271-272; Andrade, 2025: 27.

relationships (for example, when the previous officeholder was a relative), as well as the name of their predecessor and the reason for replacement. Examples include João Teixeira and Diogo Camelo. In 1487, João Teixeira, *alcaide das sacas* (customs officer) in Marvão, was dismissed for accepting bribes and allowing livestock to cross the border into the neighboring kingdom⁴. In 1517, Diogo Camelo, a knight of the royal household, was appointed *alcaide das sacas* for Portalegre, Alegrete, and Assumar, replacing João Rodrigues, who had died⁵.

The letters of appointment of *alcaides* and *escrivães de sacas*, as well as other normative sources, did not explicitly stipulate either the remuneration or the duration of the officials' terms of office. Nevertheless, in the latter case, the reconstruction of known careers suggests that these offices were, in all likelihood, held for life. Indeed, it was possible to determine the length of service for five officials. While the *alcaides* occupied their posts for periods ranging from one to nineteen years⁶, in the case of the *escrivão* it is known only that he served for two years⁷. The factors leading to the termination of these appointments included dismissal for errors committed (three cases), death (two cases), and resignation (one case). However, it should be emphasised that, given the small size of the sample, the conclusions that may be drawn from it are necessarily limited.

Research into the documents preserved in the chanceries of Afonso V, João II, and Manuel I, as well as in the *Gavetas* and *Corpo Cronológico* collections of the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, made it possible to identify 23 *alcaides das sacas* and 14 *escrivães* (clerks). Letters of appointment have survived for 19 *alcaides das sacas* and 11 *escrivães*; the others were identified through references in other types of documents, such as letters of pardon, official correspondence, and royal orders. The number of appointment letters found was lower than expected and, in fact, considerably fewer compared to other offices. This scarcity may be attributed to three main factors. First, monarchs only began appointing *alcaides* and clerks of *sacas* in a systematic way in the late fifteenth century. Second, the lifelong nature of the office likely accounted for the reduced number of appointment letters issued. Finally, the reforms made to the chancery registers in the following centuries – and the resulting loss of documentation⁸ – may also have contributed to the disappearance of some of these records.

⁴ TT, *Ch. D. João II*, liv. 19, fl. 96.

⁵ TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 10, fl. 83.

⁶ Vasco Pires (1482-1501) (TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 2, fl. 138; TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 1, fl. 27); Diogo Baço (1486-1487) (TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 1, fl. 152v; TT, *Ch. D. João II*, liv. 19, fl. 41); João Rodrigues (1486-1487) (TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 1, fl. 157; TT, *Ch. D. João II*, liv. 20, fl. 112v); Martim Vasques Barradas (1502-1503) (TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 2, fl. 46; TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 23, fl. 6); João Rodrigues (II) (1513-1517) (TT, *Ch. D. Manuel I*, liv. 42, fl. 13; TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 10, fl. 83).

⁷ João Luís de Cáceres (1496-1498) (TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 43, fl. 30v).

⁸ On this subject, see the work and the studies cited in: Faria, 2013: 15-21.

2. ALCAIDES, ALCAIDES-MORES AND ESCRIVÃES DAS SACAS: OFFICES AND FUNCTIONS

Since the reign of King Afonso IV (1325-1357), a group of *mercadorias defesas* (“prohibited goods”) had been defined. These included, primarily, precious metals, coins, cereals, vessels, arms, and livestock (Duarte, 2019: 451-453). The Crown sought to prevent the export of these items from Portugal, as they played a fundamental role in maintaining the kingdom’s wealth, and their export would strengthen neighboring and potentially hostile realms (Duarte, 1999b: 136). Nonetheless, the monarch retained the authority to grant a *saca*, that is, a license allowing the bearer to export these goods abroad. The *Cortes* (the Portuguese parliament) of 1472-1473 and 1481-1482 registered complaints from the people against the issuance of such licenses (Barros, 1885, vol. iv: 111). Among other criticisms, they argued that the royal license holders – particularly *fronteiros* and *alcaides-mores* (offices related to military defense) – exceeded the permitted quotas for trade stipulated in the licenses they received (Duarte, 1999b: 136). In response to such abuses, and others, and in order to enhance fiscal control along the border, it became necessary to establish a corps of officials to monitor and regulate both the trade in prohibited goods and the licenses issued. We will now turn our attention to this group, beginning with the *alcaide* and *escrivão das sacas* (clerk of the export licenses) and concluding with the *alcaide-mor das sacas*, the official responsible for their oversight.

Although the matter remains unclear, it appears that the *alcaides-mores* – responsible for the military defense of urban centers (Duarte, 1992a: 161) – were initially tasked with overseeing export licenses. This responsibility would later pass to the *alcaides das sacas*. For example, in 1443, D. Diogo Lopes de Sousa, royal steward and counselor, was appointed on the same day as both *alcaide-mor* and as *alcaide das sacas* of Elvas⁹. This marks the first recorded mention of this office in the sources. Scholars who have studied these officials, such as Maria José Lagos Trindade (1981: 41-46) and Luís Miguel Duarte (1999b; 2019: 454), have not proposed a definitive date for the emergence of this office, but affirm it was in existence in the second half of the fifteenth century. However, the above-mentioned case allows us to date the creation of the post to the first half of the century and suggests that Elvas was the first town to have an *alcaide das sacas*, which is understandable given its role as the kingdom’s principal inland customs station (Ferreira, 1983: 48). Thus, in Portugal, the office of *alcaide das sacas* emerged later than in Castile, where it was mentioned as early as 1351 (Pino Abad, 2000: 207-217; Sánchez Benito, 2017: 432).

In 1450, we find the first normative text referring to the *alcaides das sacas*, specifically in the letter of appointment of João de Melo (a nobleman of the royal household, chief cupbearer and *alcaide-mor* of Serpa) as *alcaide das sacas* of Serpa and Redondo¹⁰. According to this document, the official could station guards in

⁹ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 27, fl. 154.

¹⁰ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 34, fl. 81v.

the towns under his jurisdiction and seize prohibited goods that were being traded illegally. Two-thirds of such commodities would be retained by the *alcaide das sacas*, while one-third was to be delivered to the treasurer of public works in the locality. The *alcaide das sacas* was also required to take a *fiança* (financial bond) from anyone seeking to transport arms or horses to Castile, with the purpose of ensuring that the owners would bring those goods on the return journey¹¹.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, further responsibilities were outlined in the *regimento* (regulatory text) granted to Lopo Álvares de Moura, which we will examine in greater detail below (Duarte, 1999b: 138). When judges and notaries identified individuals involved in the illicit trade of livestock or prohibited goods during their investigations, they were to submit a list of suspects to the *alcaide das sacas*, so that he could publicly accuse them before the court. Additionally, the *alcaide das sacas* was responsible for recording Castilian livestock entering Portuguese territory for seasonal grazing. With the help of his men, he had to count and register “very truthfully and in detail” the number of animals, so that the same number could be verified on their return (Duarte, 1999b: 138).

The provisions from Lopo Álvares de Moura’s *regimento* regarding the *alcaides das sacas* were later reproduced almost verbatim in the *Regimento sobre os gados que vêm de Castela* (Ordinance on the cattle arriving from Castile) (1503)¹² and in the *Regimento dos alcaides das sacas sobre a passagem dos gados e outras coisas defesas para fora do reino* (Ordinance of the *alcaides das sacas* concerning the passage of livestock and other prohibited goods outside the kingdom), published in the *Ordenações Manuelinas*¹³ (book 5: 268-281), which we will revisit below. These later texts added a clause stipulating that *alcaides das sacas* could only be appointed to frontier towns, thereby excluding the rest of the realm, a demand made by towns and cities during the *Cortes* since at least 1490 (Sousa, 1990, vol. II: 498).

As Figure 2 shows, archival research confirms the appointment of *alcaides das sacas* in all the towns under study. The first occurred in 1476 with the appointment of Gonçalo Tavares, who held jurisdiction over the towns of Alegrete and Portalegre¹⁴, where he also served as *alcaide* (Góis, 2014). These officials typically had jurisdiction over a single town, although some held authority over as many as three. Examples include Álvaro Pires, Diogo Camelo, and João Rodrigues, who were *alcaides das sacas* of Alegrete, Assumar, and Portalegre between 1496¹⁵ and 1517¹⁶.

¹¹ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 34, fl. 81v.

¹² TT, *Corpo Cronológico*, Parte III, mc. 2, doc. 29.

¹³ Code of laws issued by King Manuel.

¹⁴ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 26, fl. 184v (Alegrete e Portalegre, 1476); TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 2, fl. 138 (Castelo de Vide, 1482); liv. 2, fl. 161 (Montalvão, 1482); liv. 1, fl. 152 (Nisa, 1486); liv. 1, fl. 157 (Monforte, 1486); liv. 4, fl. 6 (Marvão, 1486); TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 40, fl. 56 (Alpalhão, 1496); liv. 27, fl. 26v (Assumar, 1496); liv. 15, fl. 75 (Arronches, 1514).

¹⁵ TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 27, fl. 26v.

¹⁶ TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 10, fl. 83.

The geographic proximity of these towns likely explains the consolidation of offices under a single official.

The *alcaide das sacas* was assisted by the *escrivão das sacas*. The first known case dates to 1440, when João Álvares, a servant of Pero Peixoto, was appointed to this position in the inland port of Sabugal, in the Beira region¹⁷. Indeed, the office of *escrivão* appears to have been established in Portugal a few years before that of *alcaide das sacas*. It is not surprising that the first reference to the post concerns a “dry port” in Beira, as this was the main point of overland importation from Castile during the fifteenth century, particularly for textiles (Ferreira, 1983: 56-65).

The first normative text to mention the *escrivães das sacas* is the *regimento* granted to Lopo Álvares de Moura (Duarte, 1999a: 657). According to its provisions, these officials, alongside the *alcaide das sacas*, were responsible for fiscal surveillance along the border. They assisted in registering shepherds and livestock moving between Castile and Portugal (Duarte, 1999b: 136). In their records, the *escrivães* had to identify the shepherds, record the number of animals, take note of their owners’ names, and specify their place of origin to ensure that no more livestock exited than had entered (Duarte, 1992b: 139). These duties were later reproduced in the 1503 *regimento* and in the *Ordenações Manuelinas* (book 5: 279).

The first record of an *escrivão das sacas* in the study region dates to 1471, with the confirmation of Martim Fragoso as *escrivão das sacas* of Campo Maior¹⁸. As seen in Figure 3, during the period under analysis, appointments were also made for Alegrete, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, Nisa, and Portalegre¹⁹. The presence of these officials in such towns is attributable, as noted above for the *alcaides das sacas*, to their strategic location along the routes connecting the two kingdoms (Silva, Tolfo, 2023a). It is likely that in other towns – Assumar, Monforte, Montalvão, and Nisa – their functions were performed by local notaries, although this cannot be definitively confirmed.

In this region as well, the appointment of *escrivães das sacas* often preceded that of *alcaides das sacas*. While the reasons for this practice remain uncertain and may only be clarified through a broader-scale study, it is possible that *alcaides das sacas* duties were still being performed by regular *alcaides* prior to the establishment of the new office.

Above the *alcaides* and *escrivães das sacas* stood the *alcaide-mor das sacas* of the *comarca*. Although the date of its creation remains unknown, a holder of the office was already in place in the *comarca* of Entre-o-Tejo-e-Odiána by 1454²⁰. Once again, as with the *alcaides das sacas*, the appointment of an *alcaide-mor das sacas* for

¹⁷ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 20, fl. 109.

¹⁸ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 22, fl. 115v.

¹⁹ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 22, fl. 115v (Campo Maior, 1471); TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 6, fl. 21 (Alegrete, 1482); liv. 6, fl. 19 (Arronches, 1482); liv. 22, fl. 58v (Castelo de Vide, 1484); liv. 1, fl. 35 (Portalegre, 1486); liv. 4, fl. 103v (Nisa, 1486).

²⁰ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 10, fl. 78.

the Alentejo preceded those for other regions, such as Beira (1462)²¹, Entre-Douro-e-Minho (1463)²², and Trás-os-Montes (1464)²³.

The responsibilities of the *alcaides-mores das sacas* were first outlined in the letter of appointment of Lopo Álvares de Moura. In 1477, he was appointed to the post in the *comarca* of Entre-Tejo-e-Odiana and the kingdom of the Algarve²⁴, and held the office until his death in 1516²⁵. According to the appointment, he was to present candidates to the king for the position of *alcaide das sacas* in towns where such officials were deemed necessary. He was later granted a *regimento* governing both his own duties and those of the *alcaides* under his authority. Luís Miguel Duarte (1999b: 137) dated this document between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, possibly between 1477 and 1503²⁶.

Although similar appointments were made in other regions, there is no record of equivalent *regimentos* for officials in those areas (Duarte, 1999b: 139). According to this particular document, the *alcaide-mor* was to oversee the activities of the *alcaides das sacas* in the towns of his *comarca*, and in the case of misconduct, suspend them and appoint a replacement in conjunction with local judges. The contents of this *regimento* were later incorporated into the *Regimento sobre os gados que vêm de Castela* (1503)²⁷, and published in the *Ordenações Manuelinas* (book 5: 279), now addressed to the *alcaides-mores das sacas* of those *comarcas* “where such officials exist” (*Ordenações Manuelinas*, book 5: 268-281). Thus, up to this point, and in contrast with what occurred in fifteenth-century Castile, the responsibility for overseeing and sanctioning potential misconduct by *alcaides das sacas* does not appear to have been entrusted to judicial officials, namely the *corregedores* and *juízes de fora* (Dino Abad, 2000: 207-217).

Finally, it is worth noting that in 1482, King João II authorized the officialdom of the *sacas* of the *comarca* of Entre-Tejo-e-Guadiana to carry arms, day or night, in whatever number was necessary for their defense and the proper exercise of their duties²⁸. This illustrates that the fulfillment of their responsibilities was not always peaceful or uncontested.

²¹ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 9, fl. 21.

²² TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 8, fl. 49.

²³ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 8, fl. 175 e liv. 29, fl. 39v.

²⁴ TT, *Ch. de D. Afonso V*, liv. 2, fl. 21.

²⁵ TT, *Ch. de D. João III*, liv. 37, fl. 73.

²⁶ The proposed critical dating is based, in the case of the initial date indicated, on the year the official was appointed to the post, and, in the case of the final date, on its coincidence with the publication of the *Regimento sobre os gados que vêm de Castela* (TT, *Corpo Cronológico*, Parte III, mç. 2, doc. 29), which reproduces the document in question almost verbatim.

²⁷ TT, *Corpo Cronológico*, Parte III, mç. 2, doc. 29.

²⁸ TT, *L.N.*, liv. 7 de Guadiana, fl. 98v.

3. THE MEN OF THE SACAS: THE POSSIBLE SOCIAL PROFILE

Between 1476 and 1517, we identified 23 *alcaides das sacas*, with the towns of Alegrete (seven) and Marvão (seven) having the highest number of known officials. Archival documentation reveals the geographic origin of 14 of them. Most held office in the municipality in which they resided, with only two exceptions. The royal ordinances did not stipulate that the individual appointed to the position had to be a resident of the town, but if no one was deemed suitable, it was perhaps likely that someone would be recruited from outside. This practice also seems to have been used to address or correct failings of previous officeholders and to prevent cronyism. Indeed, in 1487, for example, João David, a resident of Fronteira, was appointed *alcaide das sacas* of Marvão after his predecessor was accused of collusion²⁹. However, this approach may not always have been effective, as seen in the case of João Rodrigues. A native of the kingdom of Castile, he was appointed *alcaide das sacas* of Monforte between 1486 and 1487 but was later dismissed for having accepted multiple bribes³⁰.

We were able to determine the social status of the *alcaides das sacas*, in 17 cases. Most were *escudeiros* (squires), while three were *criados* (retainers), one was a knight, and one was a *fidalgo* (nobleman). All were connected to the Crown, except in two cases, both *criados*, respectively, of Nuno Pereira³¹ and of the *clavero* (an office) of the Order of Christ³². Like other lords, the *claveiro* secured the appointment of trusted individuals to royal offices in towns under the jurisdiction of the Order, such as Nisa, in order to strengthen the militia's influence in the locality.

In general, these individuals had held other posts in royal service in areas such as defense, finance, justice, and writing, prior to their appointment as *alcaides das sacas*. However, work related to writing was the most frequently recorded (five cases). It is possible that the office of *alcaide das sacas* was considered prestigious, serving as a kind of career apex for these men. While we know of prior appointments in most cases, we lack evidence of further offices held afterward, except in the case of Álvaro Rodrigues, who was later appointed to the offices of *coudel*³³ (local military officer), *vedor dos vassalos e das lanças*³⁴ (inspector of vassals and armed forces), and *juiz das sisas* (magistrate tasked with hearing cases related to this tax) in Nisa³⁵.

As for the *escrivães das sacas*, we identified 14 officials appointed to these towns between 1471 and 1501, with the highest number known in Marvão (four). Information on geographic origin is available for eight of them, and the majority held office in their town of origin. Two exceptions are known: in 1486, João Afonso

²⁹ TT, *Ch. D. João II*, liv. 19, fl. 96.

³⁰ TT, *Ch. D. João II*, liv. 20, fl. 112v.

³¹ TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 1, fl. 157 (João Rodrigues, 1486).

³² TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 12, fl. 14 (Álvaro Rodrigues, 1500).

³³ TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 12, fl. 170 (1490).

³⁴ TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 9, fl. 81 (1491).

³⁵ TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 5, fl. 32 (1492).

served as *escrivão das sacas* in Castelo de Vide, his hometown, and in Portalegre as well³⁶. Meanwhile, Diogo Fernandes, a native of Portalegre, resigned in 1501 from the position of *escrivão das sacas* in Marvão (Leitão, 2022: Annexes, Table vi). In both cases, the reasons for these overlapping appointments are unclear, but two possible explanations may be suggested: the geographic proximity of the towns and the fact that they were under the jurisdiction of the same *alcaide das sacas* during this period.

Regarding the social status of the *escrivães*, we found that nine were *escudeiros* or *criados*, affiliated either with the royal household or with courtly nobility who held influence in the towns where their clients were appointed. Among these noble figures were Nuno Martins da Silveira, *alcaide-mor* of Castelo de Vide (Oliveira, 2011: 118), Afonso Teles de Meneses, *alcaide-mor* of Campo Maior (Moreno, 1973), and Pedro de Moura³⁷, *alcaide-mor* and captain of Marvão. Like the *alcaides das sacas*, the *escrivães* held offices related to finance, defense, justice, and especially writing (three are known to have served as notaries). Indeed, noblemen sought to secure the appointment of their own clients to writing-related offices as part of broader strategies to reinforce their power in towns where they held interests³⁸. This practice was widespread and has been documented in other regions of the kingdom, such as Beira (Oliveira, 1999: 133-138). However, the available documentation does not allow us to determine whether these individuals held other offices before or after serving as *escrivães*, making it difficult to trace any possible *cursus honorum*. Only one case is known in which, after serving as *escrivão*, the official was appointed *recebedor das sisas*³⁹ (revenue collector for this sales tax).

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study has allowed us to observe how royal letters of appointment partially reconstruct the network of royal officials in a region, the pace of their appointments, the profiles of their protagonists, the clientelistic networks to which they belonged, and their experience in service to the Crown.

We focused on fiscal offices, specifically those linked to the *sacas* in the border towns of the northeastern Alentejo region. The *alcaides das sacas* of each locality and the clerks of the office were indispensable royal agents tasked with overseeing the trade of goods and the transhumance of livestock along the border. We conclude that these offices originated in the first half of the fifteenth century but only expanded in the studied territory by the end of the century. The office of *escrivão das sacas* appears to have emerged earlier than that of *alcaide das sacas*, although the latter function was already being carried out by the *alcaide*. Indeed, the office of *alcaide das*

³⁶ TT, *Ch. de D. João II*, liv. 1, fl. 35.

³⁷ TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 40, fl. 127v.

³⁸ For more on this issue, see: Andrade, 2025: 89-97.

³⁹ TT, *Ch. de D. Manuel I*, liv. 43, fl. 65v (Diogo Fernandes, 1520).

sacas appears to have been established significantly later in Portugal than in Castile, where documentary evidence confirms its existence from as early as 1351. The roles and responsibilities of the *sacas* offices are gleaned from the regulations, later incorporated into the *Ordenações*, as well as from practical records that mostly concern breaches of the law and corruption. With the creation of the office of *alcaide-mor das sacas* in the second half of the fifteenth century, the responsibilities of overseeing the conduct of, and punishing any offences committed by, the *alcaides das sacas* were assigned to this office. Judicial officials, such as the *corregedores* and *juízes de fora*, appear not to have held authority in this regard, contrary to the situation in Castile.

Through the letters of appointment, some information was gathered about the social status, affiliations, and areas of professional development of the individuals prior to their connection to the *sacas*. In this regard, it is important to emphasise two aspects. Firstly, the individuals appointed to these positions resided in the localities where they served and belonged to the local elites. The appointment of individuals from other towns was rare, which seems to suggest that these offices were not generally associated with high levels of mobility. Secondly, those appointed were often connected to the royal household and to nobles within the courtly sphere - some of whom held the post of *alcaide* in the very towns where the *oficiais das sacas* were appointed. This enabled both the Crown and the nobility to strengthen their influence in these towns.

Future research is required to address new questions: How were the royal clerks' offices established in other border points of the kingdom? How did royal offices linked to the border develop in other parts of the realm? What was the relationship between the men of writing and the other officials with whom they interacted? These aspects may guide forthcoming studies.

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APPENDIX

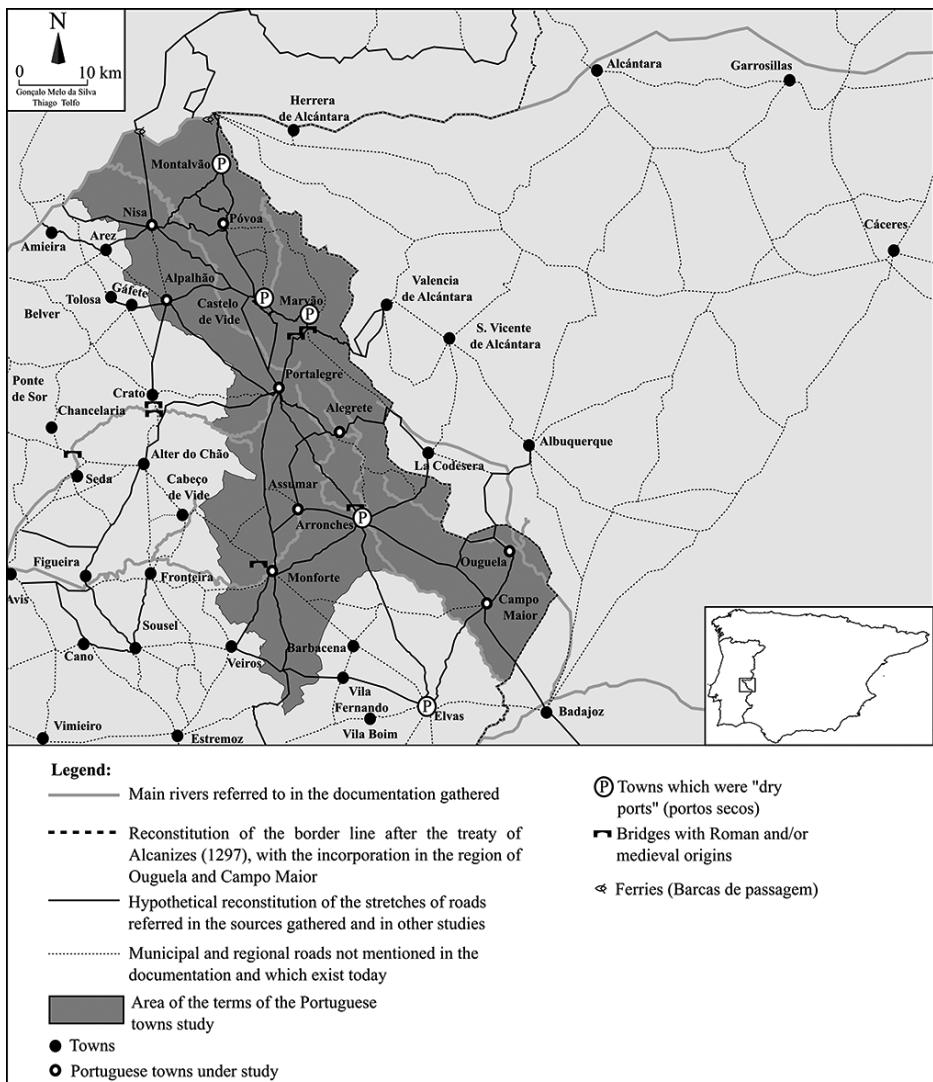


Figure 1. Circulation routes and “dry ports” in northeastern Alentejo (15th century).

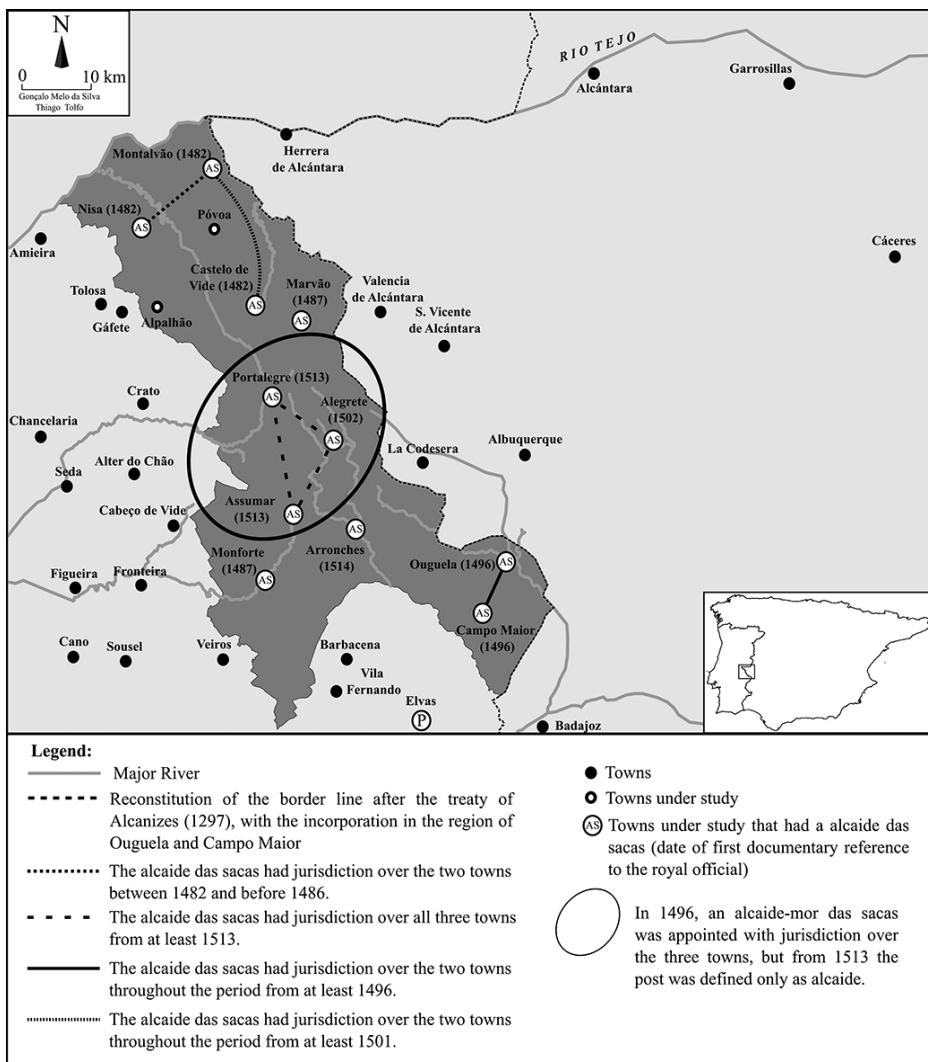


Figure 2. Towns for which *alcaides das sacas* were appointed (1476-1513).

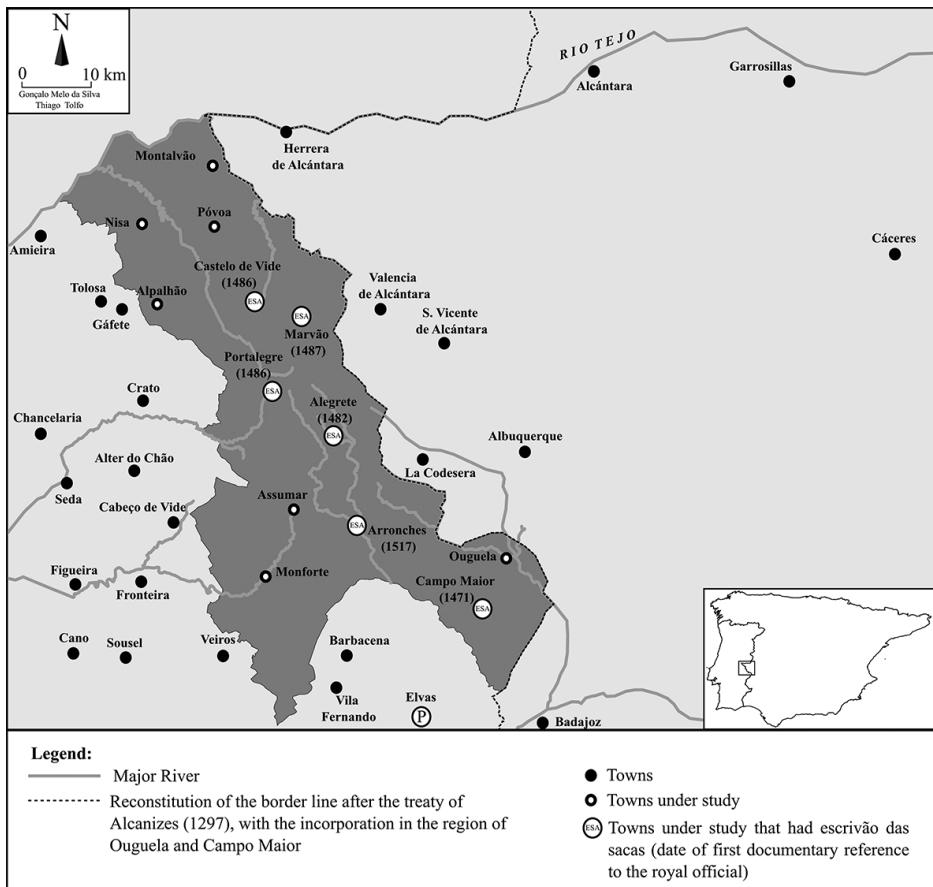


Figure 3. Towns for which *escrivães das sacas* were appointed (1471-1517).