

TWO SIDES OF THE MIRROR: WAR AND MOBILITY IN ALENTEJO AND EXTREMADURA DURING THE LATE MIDDLE AGES*

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ABSTRACT

In the border territory of the Alentejo (Portugal) and of Extremadura (Castile), which was the object of various conflicts over the centuries, war emerged as an inevitability. Movement, or sometimes the lack of it, tells us a lot about the *praxis* (practice) of the conflict in the region, as well as the policies of the monarchies regarding their respective defences. Generally, it can be said that the inhabitants were affected by the war on both a micro and a macro scale. On the one hand, they were obliged to serve locally by patrolling the walls of the town; on the other hand, they were disadvantaged by various obligations, such as repairing walls, towers and castles, and participating in military campaigns.

KEYWORDS: Alentejo, Extremadura, War, Mobility, Late Middle Ages.

LOS DOS LADOS DEL ESPEJO: GUERRA Y MOVILIDAD EN EL ALENTEJO
Y EXTREMADURA DURANTE LA BAJA EDAD MEDIA

RESUMEN

En el territorio fronterizo del Alentejo (Portugal) y de Extremadura (Castilla), objeto de diversos conflictos a lo largo de los siglos, la guerra surgió como algo inevitable. El movimiento, o a veces la falta de él, nos dice mucho sobre la *praxis* (práctica) del conflicto en la región, así como sobre las políticas de las monarquías en relación con sus respectivas defensas. En general, puede decirse que los habitantes se vieron afectados por la guerra tanto a escala micro como macro. Por un lado, se veían obligados a servir localmente patrullando las murallas de la ciudad; por otro, se veían perjudicados por diversas obligaciones, como reparar murallas, torres y castillos, y participar en campañas militares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alentejo, Extremadura, guerra, movilidad, Baja Edad Media.

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0. INTRODUCTION

In 1443, Álvaro Pais, a resident of Montemor-o-Novo, received his letter of retirement from the military service issued by Afonso V, king of Portugal, after reaching the age of seventy. The document mentions the operations and military campaigns in which Álvaro Pais had participated in, namely Zafra, Arroyo del Puerco, and Cáceres, and adds «em companhia do condestabre» (in the company of the constable)¹. It may refer to Alvaro Pais' presence in one or in several incursions carried out by Nuno Álvares Pereira on Castilian soil in the late 1390s. Another example, dating from the late 15th century, has to do with Teresa de Aldana, widow of Gutierre de Saavedra. She wrote a letter claiming that her husband had served the Catholic Kings in several wars. She referred to the sieges of Montánchez and Medellín during the War of the Castilian Succession (which began in 1475), as well as the military campaigns of Alhama (1482), Álorá (1484) and Baza (1489), in the Granada War².

We mention these cases because they show us the degree of mobility to which medieval warriors were subjected. This mobility was not exclusive to them; it spread to other activities and sectors of society, thereby unravelling the reductive notion that the *Homo Medievalis* rarely moved or travelled great distances (Lopes, 2020: 55-61). Obligated to fulfil their service to the monarch, unless specifically exempted, warriors sometimes travelled great distances in the king's company, or in that of some other powerful person who was part of the king's army, participating in sieges, *chevauchées* and pitched battles³. From another angle, an absence of mobility can also be a useful indicator, albeit a somewhat ambiguous one, regarding both civilian populations and the Crown.

In this case we will analyse how war directly or indirectly influenced the movement of the populations of the Portuguese Alentejo and the Castilian Extremadura, two regions that shared a border and a considerable history of organized violence during the Late Middle Ages⁴. The scenario only grew more complex over time,

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¹ ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Afonso V, liv. 27, fl. 121 (1443.06.17).

² AGS, Contaduría del Suelo, 1ª Serie, leg. 7.

³ As an example, see the studies about the itineraries of the kings of Portugal and other members of the royal family, such as Prince Pedro, which clearly show the symbiotic relation between wars and these individuals' travels (Galego et al., 1988; Moreno, 1988 and 1997: 169-276; Gomes, 2006: 246-257).

⁴ On this subject, see Monteiro, 1995: 373-398; Montaña Conchíña, 2008: 11-28, 2009: 501-519; Rodríguez Casillas, 2013a, 2019: 247-267, 2022a; Nisa, 2020, 2022: 455-472, 2025.

especially in the 15th century when fights broke out among several families of the nobility in Extremadura over jurisdictional control of the territory. These conflicts also involved the military orders, whose domains in that region were quite sizable (Pino García, 1991: 83-86; Rodríguez Casillas, 2022a: 37-41). Furthermore, the geography of this vast area, with few natural barriers, made it favourable for military operations, and its climate was propitious for those operations to take place during many months of the year. It is therefore fundamental to understand that, for the military leaders of that period, planning was of major importance. Just like the cycle of seasons, and harvests, the mobilization of the armies was also seasonal: it began in the Spring, intensified during the Summer, and ended in the Autumn before the rigors of Winter (García Fitz, 2009: 136; Afonso, 2022: 159).

There is a logical explanation for this behavioural pattern. Mobilizing the armies during the Spring and Summer enabled the soldiers to obtain provisions from the land where the military campaign was taking place, and they could feed their war animals in the abundant pastures they found along the way⁵. As stated in *El Libro de los Doce Sabios*, «when you have to invade another kingdom or conquer another land, you should go strongly and with people who have the qualities we have mentioned. And don't go where there is no water, for sustenance is necessary. And enter only when you can find green or dry grass and some provisions for your people» (Uría Maqua y González Álvarez, 2009: tit. xxxii)⁶.

However, the geography that we are focusing on lies in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula and is quite unique in this aspect: if the autumns were not very severe, only the harshest winters would thwart military movements, especially because of the rise in the flow of watercourses, and heavy rains that made circulation along the roads a logistical nightmare⁷. These and other factors were acknowledged

⁵ In the late Middle Ages, a warhorse needed to consume approximately 15 kg of food per day (Bachrach and Bachrach, 2017: 159). Likewise, John Haldon (1999: 168) mentions that 20 horses would graze one acre per day (four-five hours of grazing). Of course, the animal's feeding, on campaign, would always depend on geography, weather, time, etc. And the shortage of food could hinder or severely compromise a military campaign, as shown by Bertrand Schnerb for the Burgundian case (2015: 73-74).

⁶ «Cuando hubieres de hacer entrada a otro reino o conquistar alguna tierra y fueres por tu persona, cumple que vayas poderosamente y con tal gente como habemos dicho. Y no entres por parte donde no hubiere agua, que todavía el mantenimiento es necesario. Y entra en tiempo que halles hierba verde o seca o algún mantenimiento para tu gente».

⁷ The Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro (1945: 232), claimed that the «originality of the Alentejo, which is geographically connected to the Beira Baixa, is both the immensity of the flat land or slight undulations, and the climate, which, lacking centres of condensations of humidity in the air, puts out oceanic influences». That is not to say that the winters could not be particularly cold. Fernão Lopes (2023a: 346) claimed that during the entry in Castile at the end of 1397, at Ouguela, the constable «slept near a place called Alboter, which is on a very cold river, where they spent a most bitter night, it being the month of December». Rui de Pina (2024: 243) states that, in January 1441, Prince Pedro wanted to promptly conquer the Hospitallers' castles in Alentejo (Belver, Crato and Amieira do Tejo) because it was wintertime.



by contemporaries, as the anonymous author of the *Livro de Arautos* summarized in the early 15th century when he referred to the Alentejo:

The fifth and last province or region of the kingdom is called Entre-Tejo-e-Guadiana because it is situated between the two rivers, the Tagus [Tejo] and the Guadiana. Beyond the Guadiana there are castles belonging to the kingdom of Portugal. This province borders with Castile on the East and the South, and on the West with the kingdom of the Algarve, which is on the other side of high mountain ranges, and faces the great sea, and to its North the river Tagus. It is flatter and hotter than all the other regions of the kingdom. It is fertile in everything, but especially in wheat, which is perfectly preserved in silos for fifteen years or more, which constitutes a great wealth. [...] This kingdom has several strong and nice castles, towns and districts; it is well populated, but it would be a long and tedious task to enumerate everything (Nascimento, 1977: 256-258)⁸.

1. DEFENSIVE ACTIVITY

The first situation that we address herein concerns the obligatory service that individuals had to render to the king of Portugal, called *anúduva*. Basically, it was a duty that every resident of a given place or region had to take part in the restoration of castles, moats, walls, towers, bridges and roads. Although it was the responsibility of the residents of a town and its periphery to repair their own defensive structures, in reality, sometimes people from remote *comarcas* (jurisdictions) were recruited (Monteiro, 1999: 175-179). The working days were stipulated by the king and could be substituted by paying a given amount, an option that was not within everyone's means. The costs associated with travelling, accommodation and meals were borne by the workers, including the costs of caring for their animals. As could be expected, this was not a very popular duty, especially given the distance required to accomplish it, which in some cases was substantial⁹. Also, it meant a considerable disruption in the professional activity of many individuals, most of whom were farmers and livestock breeders (Martins, 2016: 91). In 1337, Afonso IV wrote a letter to the Master of the Order of Avis citing a series of grievances presented by the town of Cabeço de Vide, which was integrated in the domain of Avis. Among the reasons

⁸ «A quinta e última província ou região do reino é chamada Entre-Tejo-e-Guadiana, porque fica compreendida entre os dois rios, a saber, o Tejo e o Guadiana. Para além do Guadiana, há castelos pertencentes ao reino de Portugal. Esta província confina a oriente e sul com o reino de Castela, a poente, com o reino do Algarve, através de altas serras, e com o grande mar, a norte, com o rio Tejo. É mais plana e mais quente que todas as outras regiões do reino. É fértil em tudo, mas especialmente em trigo que se conserva em silos durante quinze anos ou mais, perfeito e em bom estado, o que constitui uma grande riqueza. [...] Este reino tem aqui vários castelos muito fortes e aprazíveis, vilas e concelhos; é muito habitado, mas seria longo e fastidioso enumerar tudo».

⁹ Prince Pedro, on the letter sent to his brother Duarte, from Bruges, in 1426, regarded that the people wouldn't be too displeased if this service was only carried out one or two days per month (Monteiro, 1999: 164).



for complaints was the obligation of its residents to spend six weeks in Noudar, 200 km away, to dig a moat and repair the walls, an obligation that was rescinded by order of the king (Marques and Rodrigues, 1992: doc. nr. 105). As it was a recurring and always uncomfortable issue, some years later, in 1408, D. João I determined that the towns which were part of the lordship of Avis would pay for the works on the castle of Noudar, precluding its residents from travelling such a great distance¹⁰.

In Castile there was a similar service: the *anubda*. However, historians disagree about its significance and scope. While some claim that it was a tribute intended to pay for guarding and mobilization services, others believe that it was an obligation intended to build and repair walls, moats, towers and other defensive structures (Pascual Sarría, 2003: 157). However, apart from discussions of terminology about this issue, it is clear that the population's involvement in these types of tasks was quite common on the Castilian side of the border. From a general point of view, the *Partidas* of Afonso X, for example, show that even, though the king was ultimately responsible for the upkeep of walls and fortifications, it was really the population as a whole who had to pay for restoration works, including the clergy, knights, widows and orphans (García Fitz, 2000: 286). In a more specific perspective, documents of the Order of Alcántara reveal equally important provisions regarding that reality. In 1467, the Master of the Order stipulated that the residents of the town of Alcántara were exempted from the new obligation to provide the workforce to repair the castle and convent of the Order, re-establishing the previous rule whereby they only had to contribute to the restoration of the walls and ramparts. In 1486 the Master Juan de Stúñiga stipulated that, contrary to the intentions of the *Comendador* of Brozas¹¹, the town's residents were only obliged to supply labour for the construction and restoration of the town's defensive structures (Torres y Tapia, 1999: 386 and 513). In principle, these functions were to be carried out by the local population. However, special situations required extraordinary measures. In the context of the Castilian War of Succession, in 1477, after two years of intense cross-border violence, Isabel I of Castile ordered the town of Cáceres and the territories in the province of Leon that were under the control of the Order of Santiago and the Order of Alcántara, to come to the aid of the population of Badajoz, since the defensive structures of that city had deteriorated and needed urgent intervention. She requested that workers, stonemasons and foremen be sent immediately to Badajoz, which was over 50 km away, so as to build an inner rampart (*atajo*) to better protect the town from Portuguese attacks (Palacios Martín, 2003: 323-325)¹².

¹⁰ ANTT, Convento e Ordem de S. Bento de Avis, mc. 8, n.º 786 (1408.05.19).

¹¹ The person in charge of an administrative territorial unit known as *comenda*, in Portuguese, or *encomienda*, in Castilian.

¹² This mobility of artifices for the construction and repair of walls also showed to be extremely important. See the case of Gonçalo Fernandes, a stonemason from Évora who was in charge of the construction of 12 crenels and *castelonas* (merlons) in the neighbouring castle of Arraiolos, in 1385 (Bilou, 2011). For an example on the mobility and hiring of stonemasons, see the example of Douai (Salamagne, 2001: 117-118)



Also during this conflict, Alonso de Monroy, *Clavero*¹³ of the Order of Alcántara, took by surprise, during the night, the town of Alegrete in the northeastern Alentejo (Maldonado, 1978: 126-129; Rodríguez Casillas, 2013b: 127-128). Considering how strategic the location of that town was, Afonso V authorized Pedro Tavares, the *alcaide* (governor) of the castle of Portalegre, to build a fortress there if and when it was reconquered from the Castilians. For this work he counted on the labor of everyone who resided within a radius of five leagues (approximately 25 km), and included the communities of Arronches, Castelo de Vide, Marvão, Portalegre and Crato¹⁴. For the construction of the moat of Olivença, in 1485, the king reduces the required contributions from the two nearby towns of Elvas and Campo Maior, since they had been more damaged by the war, and increased the contributions of the populations of Estremoz, Évora, Portel, Redondo and Evoramonte¹⁵. Additionally, in Elvas, the *aquantados em cavalo* (mounted urban militiamen) complained that they had to comply with *anúduva* obligations, doing the works in the town and cutting wood like simple *peões* (foot soldiers, often labourers) (Dias, 2006a: doc. nr. 502).

For that reason, whenever possible attempts were made to get the king to lighten their military contributions. The most common exemptions in Portugal included relief from owning horses and weapons and undertaking military service on land and at sea. These exemptions could be attributed individually, or collectively to an area (Monteiro, 1998: 91-92). On the other hand, some militias had special privileges. For example, *besteiros de cavalo* (mounted crossbowmen) were excused from serving unless in the presence of the king or his sons (Nisa, 2021: 113-116). These exemptions were translated as financial compensation for the services which they were excused from. The crossbowmen from Montemor-o-Novo, for example, travelled to Coruche and Palmela, which were 40 and 60 km away from their place of residence, to transport prisoners and money. The usual number of crossbowmen that performed this service was between one and three (Fonseca, 1998: 160-162)¹⁶. From another perspective, the privilege of not having to be part of military campaigns was usually granted for two reasons: firstly, demographical factors; secondly, defensive issues. For instance, there was the case of the village of Ponte de Sor, which was exempted in 1370 by King Fernando I from any kind of military obligations – including *anúduva* and serving on the border – as it had lost much of its population due to the «many deaths and plundering and other bad things that were done in that *comarca*»¹⁷. The case of Arronches is a prime example of this situation: in 1385 the community was exempted from serving on land and sea so that the inhabitants could «guard the town well» (Dias, 2005a: doc. nr. 852) and, a few years later, in 1405, the king excused the residents from contributing to the repair

¹³ One of the most important dignities in the military orders, responsible for guarding the keys (*clavis*) to the convent and fortresses, although its functions varied according to the period.

¹⁴ ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 4, fl. 131-132 (1476.04.03).

¹⁵ AHME, Tombo e alvarás, liv. 3 (1586/82), fl. 427-427v (1485.03.25).

¹⁶ An identical situation occurred further south, in Loulé, in the Algarve (Silva, 2022: 102).

¹⁷ ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Fernando, liv. 1, fl. 57-57v (1370.05.06).

and construction of roads, bridges, walls, etc.¹⁸; in 1416 they are excused from owning horses or any kind of weapon¹⁹. That is, in 30 years the population of Arronches stopped having any kind of active military obligation, and defence was insured by their immobilization.

Another duty that displeased the populations was garrison service. In theory the *alcaide* was responsible for the patrolling of the castle, and the town walls were the responsibility of the town, but things were not always that simple. The residents of a municipality were particularly affected by these measures, having to travel several kilometres to fulfil their military obligations in the seat of the district²⁰. Furthermore, certain extraordinary circumstances burdened the inhabitants of the Alentejo. In 1396, after a coordinated and simultaneous military operation against Albuquerque and Badajoz, the Portuguese managed to capture the latter (Rodríguez Casillas, 2022b). The *Crónica de D. João I* mentions that, after the conquest, the Portuguese constable Nuno Álvares Pereira summoned Martim Afonso de Melo to Elvas and «spoke [to him] about how to guard the town, giving him troops who were suitable for the time being» (Lopes, 2023a: 340). Slightly vague, but through other archival sources we know where the men came from to defend Badajoz in the following years: the towns and cities of the region, especially those closest to it, and it is precisely from their complaints –particularly Évora and Elvas– that we learn about this state of affairs (Nisa, 2022: 465-466; Pereira, 1885: 99). In order to avoid the obligation of having to guard the walls of the towns, some people abandoned the areas inside the walls and went to live in the outskirts –one case of micromobility. This situation was complicated for the Crown, and was resolved by granting special privileges –*ofícios do concelho*– only to those who resided within the city walls. For example, in 1371 the residents of Arraiolos were also exempted from *aposentadoria*²¹, from guarding and transporting prisoners and money, etc²². In Elvas, whoever resided in the area of the *alcáçova* (the fortified area within the city) had special privileges, such as exemption from paying *pedidos* (extraordinary taxes) (Dias, 2006b: doc. nr. 891).

During the time of the Wars of King Fernando (1369-1382), the residents of Marvão who lived permanently inside the walls were exempted from paying tolls in all of Portugal, thus ensuring that the town would be better «populated, defended and guarded»²³. During the war of 1475-1479 with Castile, the Portuguese king took more «professional» measures to guard the fortresses and the territory. Ten garrison

¹⁸ ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 1, fl. 137v (1405.03.12).

¹⁹ ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 1, fl. 62v (1416.01.29).

²⁰ Or situations such as in Vila Boim, where the residents were obliged to travel to Elvas, which was about 10 km away, to watch, patrol and protect a gate of that town, even though it was not a time of war nor was that place a municipality, which caused great duress to the residents, who already had «a lot of work to guard their houses and livestock during the night and day because they were very close to the border of Castile». ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 3, fl. 294-294v (1444.01.08).

²¹ The obligation to host nobles, churchmen and their entourages, including the free provision of food, bedding, and whatever else the guests deemed necessary during their stay.

²² ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Fernando, liv. 1, fl. 73v (1371.06.04).

²³ ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Fernando, liv. 1, fl. 126v-127 (1373.03.01).



lances²⁴ were sent to Redondo, adding to the five that were already there. The captain of the town had to regularly order ten men on foot to patrol the territory and the dry ports of the Guadiana (Salgado and Salgado, 1983: 50). Outlaws (and criminals) also provided an important service in garrisons, especially in times of war. During the Third War of King Fernando (1381-1382) many outlaws were sent to serve in Arronches, Campo Maior and Olivença, as was the case of Domingos Bartolomeu, implicated in the murder of a Castilian called Afonso, and subsequently condemned to serve in the town of Olivença with the *alcaide* of the castle, Pedro Rodrigues da Fonseca for the duration of the war²⁵. These men were also deployed in offensive actions: for example, some of these individuals participated in the reconquest of Alegrete and Ouguela in 1476²⁶. Their usefulness had already been acknowledged earlier: when D. João I reorganizes the *coutos de homiziados* (territories of assylum that provided refuge for outlaws) in Portugal in 1406, he mentions that these places were in the frontier of the kingdom and had gotten depopulated because of the war, but they were good places to gather intelligence and therefore a guarantee for the safety of the territory (Fonseca et al., 2013: 359-368).

2. OFFENSIVE ACTIVITY

From another angle, we can take a closer look at the participation of the men of these border regions in the campaigns and wars of their period. From the 15th century onwards, the Alentejo and Extremadura military contingents were mobilized for various theatres of war, i.e. North Africa, Granada, Italy, America and Asia. However, before that, the men of the Alentejo already took part in campaigns as part of the royal host, and more frequently, in actions against their Iberian neighbours. For example, in 1345, the residents of Reguengo de Alcáçovas reminded the king about their participation in the Salado campaign²⁷. Five years earlier, there had been a comparable situation in Évora, where the residents had immortalized their presence in the battle (1500 men) in the city's cathedral (Barroca, 2000: 1605-1614; Martins, 2014: 135). Their participation in military actions outside of Portugal was also a consequence of the political ties and diplomatic agreements signed between Portugal and other kingdoms of the Peninsula. In 1362, Gonçalo Vasques da Silveira, a squire from Redondo, was part of a force of lances sent by the Portuguese king, who went to the aid of Castile during the War of the Two Pedros (1356-1366). Silveira was killed at the walls of Calatayud, on the border with Aragon, after being struck in the head by a rock hurled by the defenders of that town. His body was brought

²⁴ The lance was a unit composed of several combatants, which varied in number depending on the chronology and the geography.

²⁵ ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Fernando, liv. 3, fl. 17v (1382.02.24).

²⁶ Men like Vasco Afonso, from Monforte, who was pardoned by the king due to this participation in the siege of Alegrete. ANTT, Chancelaria de D. Afonso V, liv. 32, fl. 153v (1480.07.14).

²⁷ ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 1, fl. 17v-18 (1345.03.12).



back to Redondo, and he was buried in the town's church²⁸. One of his companions in the Aragonese adventure was very likely Pedro Rodrigues from Elvas, a vassal of the king, whom, during his absence, was granted the privileges and legal exemptions of *couto* to half of his estate in Olivença, for services rendered to the monarch (Marques, 1984: doc. nr. 859). The participation in military campaigns and its importance in the individual and collective memory of the populations, began to coalesce and crystalize, and became a mental framework. João Vicente, a resident of Arraiolos, could not recall the exact year in which he had made an agreement with the squire Afonso Eanes, but he knew that it had been in the same year that they had gone to Alcántara (1400), some fourteen years before²⁹. And could any experience be more momentous than having participated in the Battle of Aljubarrota? Fernão Lopes Lobo, a knight from Évora, did not think so, and he left instructions in his will that a mass should be celebrated every year in August, on the feast day of Holy Mary, in the monastery of S. Francisco of Évora, to memorialize his participation in that battle, where he had fought when he was seventeen or eighteen years old³⁰.

We are definitely looking at a cross-border scenario of frequent violence. As could be expected, this environment of conflict had an enormous influence on the lives of the inhabitants of the area. The most evident effect was the high state of militarization of the population. As a general rule, men between the ages of 18 and 60-70 were obliged to fulfil military service, whereby they did six weeks of service per year, which would only be paid on the first day after they had completed the six weeks of service (Monteiro, 1998: 50; Martins, 2014: 149)³¹. In addition, they had to present themselves routinely once a year to the *coudéis* (military inspectors) for military review, as well as three more reviews intended for the mounted local militia: one after the Holy Mary feast in September, another during the Octaves of Christmas, and another on the feast of Holy Mary in March (Monteiro, 1998: 55). In the case of Castile, the inhabitants of the towns and cities were classified into different strata and military categories, in accordance with their economic situation. The wealthier ones were required to have a horse suited for war and full harness, while the less privileged at the bottom of the scale were required to have spears and javelins. These obligations enabled the Crown to mobilize a force of over 10 000 men (638 on horseback and 9507 foot soldiers) in Extremadura, at least in the three

²⁸ ANTT, Casa Abrantes, cx. 123, n. 4987, fl. 2.

²⁹ BPE, Convento de Nossa Senhora de Arraiolos, liv. 12, n. 19 (1414.03.03).

³⁰ BPE, Pergaminhos Avulsos, pasta 15, n.º 44, fl. 2v. On the association of the Lobo family with this important event, see Coelho, 2017: 74-75.

³¹ Therefore, sieges could cause a disruption in this *status quo*, especially if they dragged out for longer than expected, and a military commander could count on desertions (Afonso, 2022: 161). An interesting case study regarding Ferrante of Naples' military itineraries (1458-1465) clearly shows that the use of artillery helped to reduce the amount of time spent in this type of operation, generally less than twenty days (Senatore and Storti, 2002: 78). The siege of Campo Maior, in 1388, for instance, conducted by the Portuguese, took more than two months to be resolved, and the attackers only managed to settle the affair because the castle's *alcaide* negotiated its surrender after he realized no help would arrive (Lopes, 2023a: 296-298).





main municipalities (Cáceres, Badajoz and Trujillo). And like in the neighbouring kingdom, the residents of these communities were subject to periodic military reviews or *alardes* in locations previously arranged with the authorities (Rodríguez Casillas, 2022a: 114).

The obvious disruption to daily life caused by military obligations became a reason for many of these men to fail to show up for the reviews, and subsequently defaulting on their duties. The residents of Beringel in the municipality of Beja complained about this, and in the *Cortes* of 1439 the residents of Castelo de Vide claimed that men from all levels of *aquantiamiento* (wealth assessment for military service) had fallen into default, whereby they asked to be forgiven the payment (Dias and Pinto, 2016: 192, 225). In the case of Cáceres, of the 2000 men who had been summoned for review in 1502, only 400 showed up, because most of the infantry of that city was occupied with their day-to-day agricultural work: «After the roll call, when no more foot soldiers were there due to it raining hard on that day and most of the town having to attend to their grape harvest, others were working in the fields, and others did not leave on time» (Ladero Quesada, 2004: 164)³².

A particularly interesting feature was the way inhabitants viewed going off to war. Once the campaign was planned, the authorities informed the populations so that they could prepare their contingents by a determined deadline. When the day came, the companies left in formation, probably accompanied by their neighbours and to the sound of ringing bells. In the case of the districts of Extremadura, at least in 1485, it appears that they were organized in *cuadrillas*, military units usually consisting of 50 men³³.

In terms of marching paces, these are difficult to determine, since numerous factors were involved, such as the size of the expedition, weather conditions, inaccessible terrain and roads in bad state. Based on estimates, we can establish by approximation that marches varied between 10 and 50 kilometres per day³⁴. For example, in the case of the Portuguese invasion (of Castile) in the Spring of 1475 Afonso V's armies took around 15 days from the border to the city of Plasencia, an average of 10 km per day. Another slow march, similar to other large armies, was that of the company of 8000 warriors commanded by Nuno Álvares Pereira which passed southwards of Badajoz in 1385, sometimes managing to cover 50 km in one day, but mostly covering only 10 km daily (Rodríguez Casillas, 2022a: 184). In 1485, the militias of the town of Trujillo were to convene on the 25th of August and be in Cordoba on the 30th, which indicates that they covered 250 km in five days, an average of 50 km per day (Fernández-Daza, 1986: 350).

³² «Hecha la pesquisa cómo no estaban allí más peones hallóse que porque el día tal que llovía mucho agua e todos e la mayor parte de la villa por la neçesidad que tenían todos de vendimiar sus viñas no venían ni parecían allí, otros andavan al campo, e otros no salieron en tiempo».

³³ AHMC, caja 3, exp. 29; AHMT, Actas del Concejo, 1485, fl. 2.

³⁴ These figures may vary according to the type of units deployed (infantry, infantry, and cavalry or just cavalry) and whether the movement is undertaken in friendly or unfriendly territory (Settia, 2006: 207-210).

3. RAIDS AS A FORM OF BORDER WARFARE

The political differences between Castile and Portugal in the second half of the 14th century resulted in intense military activity which had repercussions on the border. From the late 14th to the early 15th century there was a permanent climate of hostility between the two powers, and this lasted almost 40 years. In our specific geographic context, this violence was manifested usually in actions of devastation and destruction in enemy territory. In fact, the devastation of territory was one of the most common practices in warfare throughout the Middle Ages. It was a way of inflicting great damage on adversaries without much risk: it sufficed to burn the enemy's crops, steal their livestock and terrorize the population. The use of this type of action was traditionally associated with contexts of territorial expansion, inasmuch as it weakened the enemy and facilitated the capture of fortresses. However, in the case of the border areas it was used mainly with a political objective, as a method of punishment and intimidation, and became a terrible and agonizing form of exchanging strikes between two adversaries: «Around that period –16 of May [of 1478]– King Fernando returned to Seville and learned that the people of Cáceres had been successful against the Portuguese at the border (...) because the enemy tried in vain to ravage our fields. The people of Cáceres immediately entered enemy territory under the command of Fernando Carrillo and devastated an even larger extension of terrain (Palencia, 1974: 39)»³⁵.

In this violent atmosphere, military activity in the border districts was closely linked to raids³⁶. The road system that had been built by the Romans was widely used during the wars, as were the new roads that were opened during the Middle Ages, all used in the circulation of people and goods ... and contraband. The routes were well known by both sides. During a Portuguese incursion into Castile at the end of 1398, the forces commanded by Gonçalo Vasques de Melo went, during the cover of night, to steal livestock, and if possible, bring captives. But they encountered a problem: while travelling back from Portugal along the bottom of a valley, they were immediately detected by Castilians who happened to be on top of a hill, returning from Portugal with a large number of stolen cattle (Lopes, 2023a: 376). Undeniably, preparation was vital for this type of operations: in some cases, enemies (*línguas*, literally tongues, in Portuguese) were captured to obtain information about the enemy's movements. Among other practices, prisoners were taken between places to prevent news of attacks to reach the intended target area (Monteiro, 2002: 174). The *Regimento da Guerra* itself (regulations that probably date

³⁵ «Casi por la misma época –a saber el 16 de mayo [de 1478]– el rey Fernando volvió a Sevilla y se enteró de que a los de Cáceres les había ido bien contra los fronterizos portugueses (...) pues en vano intentó el enemigo devastar nuestros campos. Inmediatamente los cacereños, entrando en las tierras enemigas bajo el mando de Fernando Carrillo, la devastaron en más grande extensión».

³⁶ On this type of operation, see Monteiro (1998: 373-378); García Fitz (2005: 59-170); Martins (2014: 338-398); Rogers (2014); Afonso (2022: 395-420); Etxeberria Gallastegi (2022: 147-191); Rodríguez Casillas (2022a: 194-215); Nisa and Ölbei (2023: 84-101).





to the late 14th century or early 15th century) which was included in the *Ordenações Afonsinas* is very clear in this question: the survival of a company or of a gathered force depended largely on the service of guides or *adail* (Monteiro, 1998: 226-228). These were local men who knew the places of passage, and the locations of water supply³⁷. Though often referred to in 12th and 13th century sources, their documentary footprint gradually disappeared with the definitive conquest of Portuguese territory. It is likely that the increase in belligerent activity in the early 1370s motivated the reappearance of this *métier*, as evidenced by the presence of the *adail* Lopo Afonso in 1426, in a document where several elements associated with the constable Nuno Álvares Pereira take part³⁸. This is possibly the same individual that was mentioned by Fernão Lopes during the incursion into Castile in October of 1385, some forty years earlier (Lopes, 2023a: 161). This chronicler also mentions an *almocadém*, a guide, who was in charge of escorting Álvaro Coitado by night from Vila Viçosa back to Castilian soil (Lopes, 2023b: 195).

The raids organized by constables, *alcaides*, masters of military orders or local squires varied in scale, ambit, organization, and numbers of participants. The bigger raids had an average duration of two weeks, while the shorter ones could last less than one day, with the attack planned for the night and the retreat before dawn³⁹. While the objective of the small raids was clearly to advance and retreat as fast as possible, avoiding confrontations with the local populations, the larger raids had everything but stealth as their objective. The mobilization of men, which was sometimes announced publicly, (as Antão Vasques did in Évora in October of 1385), removed the element of surprise from the operation (Lopes, 2023a: 161). In this case, they acted with impunity because they were aware that the enemy would either be unable to organize themselves defensively or, on the other hand, preferred to sacrifice their animals and crops to the detriment of their own lives⁴⁰. Some of these operations covered considerable distances: at the end of 1369 Gil Fernandes, the alcaide of Elvas, travelled over 100 km to plunder the outskirts of Medellín, returning by the same route, whereby the companions of the young alcaide claimed that he «had been wrong to expose them to such danger by taking them so deep into enemy territory» (Lopes, 2023c: 69).

Large scale expeditions were not always organized in a uniform host and could be dispersed in smaller companies to cover vaster territories. Alonso de Cárde-

³⁷ In France, the *écorceurs* would use local populations in their advantage, since they would provide them with geographical information that might give them a cutting edge when preparing a *chevauchée* (Furon, 2023: 135-136).

³⁸ BPE, Pergaminhos Avulsos, pasta 3, n.º 54 (1426.03.11).

³⁹ In the 15th century, operations undertaken by Castile against the Muslim Kingdom of Granada would take an average of three to thirteen days (Etxeberria Gallastegi, 2022: 177).

⁴⁰ In order to prevent a significant destruction of fields, the city of Seville paid Vasco Rodríguez de Orantes, *aguazil-mor* for D. Álvaro Perez de Guzmán, for going around the region to order crops to be collected before the incursions of the people from Portugal. AMS, Papeles del Mayordomazgo, rollo 198 (1386-1384), n.º 13 (1386.06.22).



nas, who had led a large contingent of men against Portugal in 1478, realized that he would meet no resistance and decided to spread his troops in the interior of Portugal, with the aim of devastating the border with greater ferocity. The number of men deployed in these units was formidable. Alonso de Cárdenas was a war lord who sometimes employed a force of 500 knights to lay waste to areas that were far away from the border, where the Portuguese kept their livestock, probably as a safety measure. Nuno Álvares Pereira, in turn, in one of his incursions into Extremadura, ordered that part of his troops separate from the main formation into detachments of 600 men to pillage a much larger area, approximately 25 kilometres away (Rodríguez Casillas, 2022a: 197). Regarding the Portuguese forces stationed in Alcántara, that were also commanded by Nuno Álvares Pereira, Portuguese skirmishers managed to enter 16 leagues (approximately 80 km) into enemy territory, to the surprise of the Castilians (Lopes, 2023a: 396).

This geographical aspect of the raids almost allows us to map with precision the areas of destruction inflicted by medieval armies. During the conflict of 1475-1479 Portuguese attacks were carried out against Encinasola and Cumbres de San Bartolomé, and they even got as far as Fregenal and Higuera la Real, 30 km from the border. The destruction caused by the latter raid is estimated to have prevented the payment of 8000 maravedis in revenues (Fernández Gómez, 2013: 107). During that conflict, the *Crónica da Ordem de Santiago* mentions that the Master of Santiago departed from Mérida towards the Portuguese border, where he razed a strip of land of around 50 km., which included the towns of Olivença, Elvas, Campo Maior and Ouguela (Orozco and Parra, 1978: 409).

To get a notion of the devastation caused by the raids, we have an example from 1478 in which the grain needed to supply the border town of Elvas had to come from the granaries of Avis, a town located at more than 70 km from the border⁴¹. But this was no anomaly: in 1385 the fortress of Arronches, which was provisioned by ... Évora, a city almost 100 kilometres away, and a caravan carrying supplies destined to the former was captured (Lopes, 2023a: 64). If we use Badajoz as a point of reference, —one of the border areas most affected by the succession conflict in 1475— we ascertain that the systematic devastation of fields halted normal agricultural activity in that area for a long period. The fact that the land could not be cultivated for two consecutive years caused the population to suffer a process of acute scarcity of food. The scarcity must have been so bad that in 1477, with the truces signed with Portugal, the Catholic Kings ordered the city of Cáceres, (about 80 km away from Badajoz), and other relatively distant areas, to urgently send provisions to sustain the people of Badajoz (Palacios Martín, 2003: 322-323). Another measure used to prevent the enemy's advance was burning crops to cut off the opponent's source of supply, ambushing groups of skirmishers, or even the use of siege-engines in peripheral areas, both as a defensive tactic and a way of making the enemy lose precious

⁴¹ AHME, Tombo de provisões, cartas régias, alvarás e ordens, liv. 3 (1586-82), fl. 443-443v (1478.10.30).

time⁴². It could make the difference between success and disaster, since just a few hours would be enough for the defenders to alert neighbouring communities and to get help through to them.

4. FLEEING THE WAR

The fear caused by the advent of a military campaign led farmers and peasants to flee their homes⁴³. When Nuno Álvares Pereira was roaming the region of Badajoz in 1385, and arrived at the village of Villagarcía, he found that all of its inhabitants had abandoned the settlement, leaving behind all their goods and possessions. Shortly afterwards, when Álvares Pereira was plundering northern Extremadura, the inhabitants of Arroyo del Puerco fled in panic in the direction of Cáceres, since it was the most fortified place in the whole region (Montaña Conchiña, 2008: 21). That event brings to mind what happened in Alegrete in 1476 during the conquering expedition of the *Clavero*, since, according to Maldonado's text, the inhabitants of the region had sought shelter in this enclave because it was a strong place (Maldonado, 1978: 129). Usually, flight was an occasional and temporary occurrence, although in some cases, due to the violence of the attacks on the populations and on the land, depopulation became permanent. For example, there was the case of the incident with the town and land of Badajoz, one of the territories most affected by the incessant military campaigns carried out by Castile and Portugal at the end of the Middle Ages. In the context of the Wars of King Fernando, a document from 1370 mentions that the castle of Badajoz was very deserted and uninhabited, with many empty houses (Carande, 1927: 265). What happened in Badajoz was not an isolated event. In fact, two of the most significant resettlement processes carried out by the Suárez de Figueroa family to attract population to their properties coincided with some of the most aggressive military campaigns of the Portuguese armies. The first, from 1404, was a letter of resettlement granted to Oliva de la Frontera and Valencia del Mombuey, two villages that had been recently acquired by the Lord of Feria and had suffered an agonizing demographic deficit as a result of the war with Portugal. The second took place in 1481, right after the end of the War of Succession (Mazo Romero, 1980: 380-386). In the region of Cáceres, there was the case of Aliseda, a village which had a deficient demographic balance for a good part of the 15th century as a result of the trans-border conflicts: «The village and hinterland of the said town is destroyed and burned and robbed and depopulated by the war that our King has waged with the Kingdom of Portugal. The aforementioned village is near the Kingdom of Portugal, in the mountains and range called San Pedro and

⁴² In 1398, the Tierra de Barros, the fields were burned to prevent the invading Portuguese forces from getting provisions (Mazo Romero 1980: 76).

⁴³ The war caused a high number of displaced people and refugees, who in their haste to get to a protected place within the walls of a town or city, could only carry some food and personal belongings (Martins, 2001: 93).

another village is in the Pass and Road that goes from here to Caceres and Albuquerque» (Floriano Cumbreño, 1987: 147)⁴⁴.

The territory became so depopulated that it seemed almost like a no-man's-land. In fact, the lack of people living in frontier towns, which had been abandoned by the constant pressure of war on their populations, was one of the main guiding principles in the establishment of *coutos de homiziados* in those areas. This type of privileges is known to have been granted in some areas in the Alentejo, such as Marvão (1378), Arronches (1385), Fronteira (1385), Juromenha (1388), Monsaraz (1414), Ouguela (1420) and Mértola (1420) (Baquero Moreno, 1986: 94-115). The example of Fronteira is fairly illustrative of the brutality of the conflicts, and the deep and long-lasting consequences that military operations left. Although this town was not exactly on the border, it had been besieged by the Castilians right before the battle of Atoleiros (6 April of 1384), just a few kilometres away. For that reason, the city council requested the new King João I to create a *couto de homiziados* in the town, arguing that it was depopulated after the war that started in 1383, and other previous wars, in which the residents many times had been made captives and their goods stolen by the enemy. Consequently, many had abandoned the town and gone to other places where they would feel more secure (Dias, 2005a: doc. nr. 830). This is reiterated in a document of King Duarte regarding a chapel built in Fronteira by Inês Lourenço, which mentions the non-compliance of certain clauses because «most cattle, goods and chattels had been lost in previous wars»⁴⁵. Closer to the border the problems were amplified, as demonstrated by the very bleak state of the town of Redondo in 1394, an «area near the frontier and because of the wars it was depopulated and very damaged and destroyed» (Dias, 2005b: doc. nr. 703).

5. CONCLUSIONS

During the Middle Ages, war was a constant factor that shaped the lives of its men and women, to the point that historians describe Medieval society as a society forged / moulded by, and for, war. The border between Portugal and Extremadura was not foreign to this reality. The political differences between Castile and Portugal during the 14th and 15th centuries unleashed a wave of violence that profoundly altered the lives of the border populations. In this context, the border communities were obliged to fulfil a series of military obligations, both defensive and offensive. For example, it was common that they be charged with the repair of defensive structures, even in relatively remote areas from their place of residence. Furthermore, they had

⁴⁴ «La aldea e termino de esta dicha villa es estruida e quemada e robada e despoblada por la guerra que nuestro señor rrey avido con el Reyno de Portugal. Por quanto la dicha aldea es cerca del Reyno de Portugal en vera de las montañas e sierras que diçen de San Pedro e otro sila dicha aldea es en el Puerto e Camino que va de aquí de çaçeres a Alburquerque».

⁴⁵ «Gaados e mooves os mais delles e se perderam nas guerras passadas». ANTT, Leitura Nova, Odiana, liv. 6, fl. 154-154v (1433.11.16).



to defend local castles and fortresses with garrison duties, and they could be mobilized in groups to attack the neighbouring kingdom for days, or even weeks at a time.

One interesting aspect worth pointing out is that, when the conflicts between the two powers ended in the late 15th century, especially after the end of the War of Succession which began in 1475, the residents of these villages, towns and cities, brought up in this hostile environment, offered the crown all their efforts and war experience, applying them in increasingly distant lands: North Africa, Granada, Italy, America and Asia. On the other hand, constant war, characterized by incursions and plundering in enemy territory obliged many farmers and peasants to abandon their houses, some temporarily and others definitively, to seek security in fortified enclaves, or at least places that were less exposed to attacks.

In short, wars fomented, directly and indirectly –but most of the time in a forced way– a great mobility of the population. The idea that a medieval society was static, confined to their native region, is therefore a myth which must be refuted.

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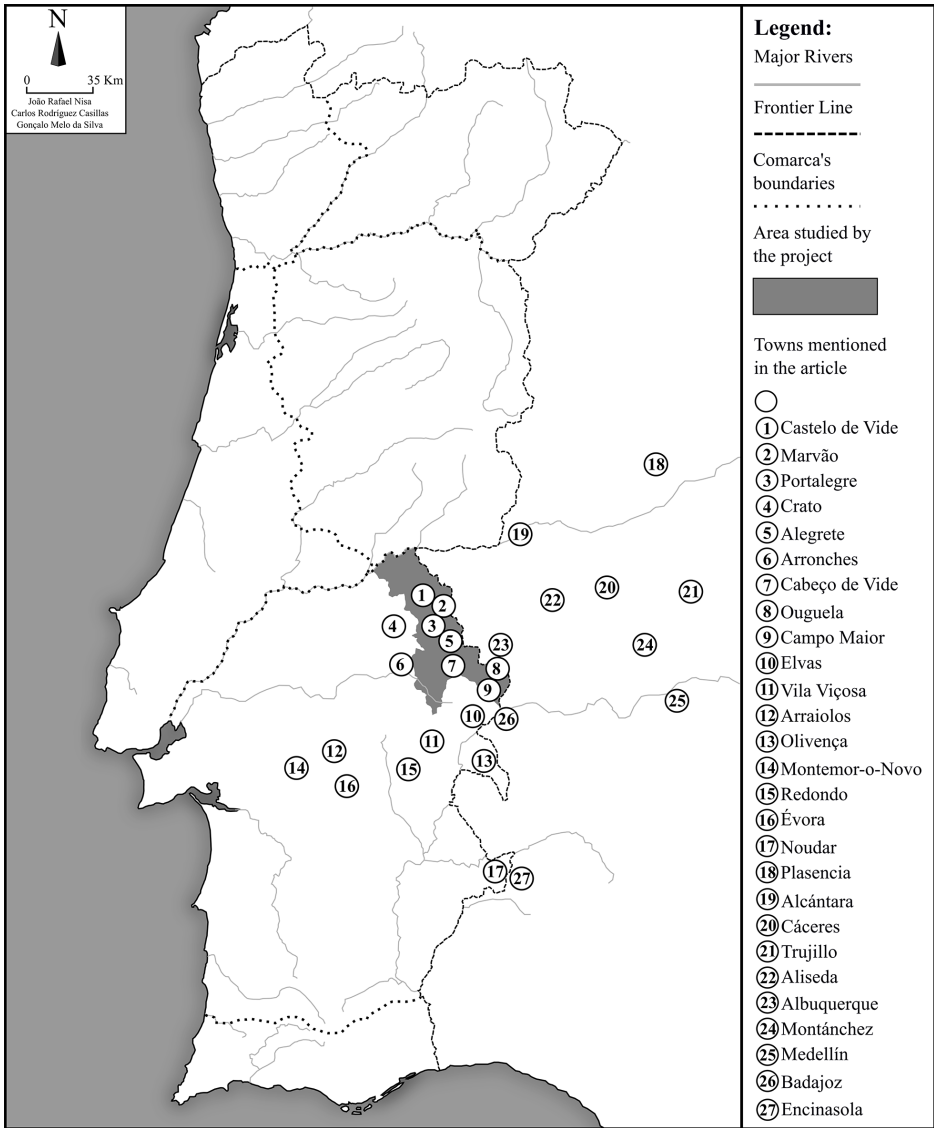


Image 1. Most important towns mentioned in the text.

