

7

Nobility and Aristocracy in Ancien Régime Portugal (Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries)¹

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Anglophone historians, who have contributed to the recent revival of interest in the European nobility, have advanced a number of these of supposedly general applicability. They have emphasised that 'over the early modern period nobles became less numerous and on average richer', and that 'almost everywhere nobles became dramatically scarcer after 1600. In the eighteenth century, at least, contemporaries had no doubt that numbers were declining'.² Simultaneously, there was a gradual increase both in the numbers and the overall proportion who can be described as belonging to the aristocratic élite. Finally, guided by the celebrated thesis of Arno Mayer, emphasis has been placed on the survival of their power until the beginning of the twentieth century.³ It should be emphasised at the outset that none of these propositions applies to Portugal which, in any case, is usually ignored in writing about modern Europe's nobility.

The evolution of a noble hierarchy (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries)

The identity of the Portuguese nobility is defined, for the period around 1500, by the medieval lineages of noblemen (*fidalgos*), together with those subsequently elevated to that status. It refers back to the descendants of *fidalgos* whose names were included in the *Livro de Linhagens do Conde D. Pedro*, a celebrated genealogical work dating from the mid-fourteenth century, and to other noble lineages which, though of later creation, also had their coats of arms displayed in the rooms of the royal palace of Sintra during the sixteenth century.⁴ The new terminology of the later Middle Ages, which would co-exist alongside other modes of classification until the end of the ancien régime⁵ – *fidalgos*, knights and squires – reveals

the spread of the ideals of chivalry. As elsewhere in the Iberian peninsula (see above, Chapter 6), the term *fidalgo* best conveys membership of these renowned lineages. Its most familiar definition is that contained in the *Siete Partidas*, issued by King Alfonso X of Leon and Castile in the mid-thirteenth century: '*hidalguia* . . . is the nobility that comes to men through their lineage' (*hidalguia* [. . .] *es nobleza que viene a los omes por linaje*).⁶

The transformations which subsequently influenced the composition of Portugal's nobility were part of the monarchy's effort to control both official social terminology and the boundaries of the hierarchies within society. In this process, the fifteenth century represented a watershed, with the granting of new titles, the passing of the *Lei Mental*,⁷ and the introduction of the registers of the royal household. Under the Avis dynasty (1385–1580), the Crown systematically adopted a series of measures, which proved essential for the nobility's internal structure and hierarchy until 1832. These included the awarding of titles and the grant of seigneuries (whether jurisdictional or not), together with a clause theoretically permitting – within the framework of the *Lei Mental* – their retrocession. The final incorporation of the three Portuguese Military Orders of Avis, Christ, and Santiago in 1551, making the King the greatest landowner in the realm, provided the Crown with enhanced means to distribute and redistribute, in the form of honours and revenues. This was true for all levels of nobility. At the bottom of the noble pyramid, the granting of habits conferring membership of an Order was essential for the award of knightly status, while in the restructuring of the apex of the noble pyramid, the distribution of commanderies – more than 600 overall – similarly played a crucial role. The colonial territories acquired in Africa and Asia, and, subsequently, in South America (Brazil), provided the Crown with additional resources in the form of revenues and offices, and these could also be used to implement royal policy towards the nobility. Finally, all the royal grants of distinctions, lands and pensions possessed a distinctly legal nature. They required to be confirmed regularly, sometimes every generation, through a specific process of registration. Yet despite all these practices, it was only during the eighteenth century that the Portuguese monarchy was able to establish its sole claim to regulate legitimate social classification, even if it sometimes meant directly contradicting established genealogy.⁸

The stratification of the Portuguese nobility was brought about by a long-term process which extended from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the triumph of the liberal revolution in 1832–34. It was marked, broadly speaking, by two simultaneous yet antithetical developments: the lesser nobility increased in size and admitted newcomers from outside the Second Estate, but gradually lost its distinctive privileges; while a court aristocracy was formed which was small in numbers and clearly separate from the remainder of the nobility. The first development did not coincide with the wider trend identified at the outset, that of a reduction in the size of