The Royal Chancellery at the end of the Portuguese Middle Ages: diplomacy and political society

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Abstract

The aim of this text is to review the research undertaken in Portugal on the question of the medieval royal chancellery and diplomacy and their relationship with the study of royal bureaucracy. In this sense, we characterize the lines of development that are to be noted in the research undertaken into political societies and royal power based on the records of the royal chancellery in the last thirty years. Initially, we focus our attention on the relationship established between the royal chancellery and diplomacy and later we highlight the main themes and problems studied under the scope of the social history of institutions. Finally, we refer to the use of prosopography as a method applied to the study of medieval Portuguese elites.

Keywords
royal chancellery and diplomacy; royal power; political elites; historiography; Portugal; Middle Ages

1. A review of history making

This text seeks to provide a review of the studies on Portuguese royal chancelleries in their relationship with diplomacy from the perspective of a history of the State and the social profile of the
higher institutions of the royal bureaucracy, in particular in the last centuries of the Middle Ages. In section 1.1, we characterize the recent developments to be noted in the different approaches to the study of royal diplomacy and the royal chancellery. In section 1.2, we contextualize the return of the political history of the Middle Ages in Portugal, explaining the influence of external approaches on internal developments (Gomes 1989; Homem 1996; Freitas 2004b). In the following sections, we analyze the studies made of the political personnel in the late Middle Ages, under the auspices of the PhD and Master’s Degree programs of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto (hereafter referred to as FLUP). In this context, we undertake a critical analysis of the monographic studies presented to FLUP about royal chancelleries, defining the main lines of research that have been followed. The overriding idea in all research is that of the existence of a large set of possible relations that can be established between royal chancellery and royal diplomacy, chancellery and royal officialdom, chancellery and prosopography, chancellery and political societies and chancellery and State structures. In this way, we seek to highlight the changes in perspective in the “new” historiography of the political and explain the current context regarding the development of studies about medieval royal chancelleries, underlining the current perspectives of analysis of the chancellery archives: the diplomatic perspective (the study of the diplomatic production of the decision-making bodies), the institutional perspective (seeking to establish the organigram of government) and the socio-political perspective (the prosopography of the decision-making bodies). As we shall demonstrate, these three aspects of analysis converge in the most recent view of the political in Portugal1.

1.1 Diplomacy and Royal Chancelleries

Until the 1970s, scholars studying royal diplomacy maintained a preferential interest in determining the types of documents conserved in the archives of the royal chancellery, giving pride of place in their research to the critical analysis of the authenticity, genuineness or falsity of the deeds, complementing this with the inventory of collections and the critical edition of the documents originating from the chancelleries of the counts and the first kings of Portugal (Azevedo 1927; Costa 1975 and 1979). It is therefore not surprising that, until the 1970s, there was a close relationship, in terms of academic studies, between diplomacy (Ribeiro 1810-1836; Reuter 1938 and Azevedo 1940a and 1940b), paleography (Costa 1976), archivism (Azevedo 1927), medieval literature studies (Cintra 1963), and research about the Portuguese historical and linguistic space (Cintra 1958 and 1959) from the origins of the Portuguese nationality to the consolidation of the monarchy (Azevedo 1958 and Costa 1979), bearing in mind the chronological period that was preferentially studied, the 12th to the 13th centuries. The main results of the studies undertaken until that point are systematized in the historiographic syntheses published in recent years (Coelho 2000 and Homem 2005).

A new phase in the study of royal diplomacy, in its close links with medieval chancelleries, was marked by the appearance of a “new” generation of scholars (from the 1980s onwards), a stage that can be broken down into two distinct but related areas of research and study:
- the publication of collections of royal documents, including the publication of all the Portuguese medieval chancelleries, under the coordination and initial academic supervision of A. H. de Oliveira Marques (1953-2007) and later of João José Alves Dias, from the Centre of Historical Studies of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the New University of Lisbon; and
- the systematic exploration of the records of the royal chancelleries in close conjunction with royal diplomacy, e.g. the identification of the different types of charters through the critical analysis of the deeds issued by the chancellery services, with a view to determining the spheres of intervention of the State’s agents. This aspect is expressed in the consolidation of the alliance between royal diplomacy and the history of the State in the Middle Ages (Homem 1981 and 1984).

The study of the first of the areas mentioned began in 1984 as part of a long-term project centered on preparing the publication of the collections of royal documents housed in the National Archives of the Torre do Tombo. Emphasis was laid on the publication of the registers of the royal chancelleries, later extending to the minutes of the Cortes and the publication of regulations and

1 The bibliography referred to here brings together those Portuguese and foreign studies and articles that we consider illustrative of the lines of research discussed in this article. The bibliography of each author is ordered in chronological fashion, from the most recent to the oldest study, respecting the norms of the Harvard system of reference. We apologize here for any omission that may exist in relation to other important works.