

Around a theme. The female community of the Order of St. James in Portugal: a journey from the late 15th century to the 16th century.¹

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Abstract

The study of the religious women of the Order of St. James in Portugal during the period mentioned in the title of this paper is intended to show the way in which they observed the vows that they had taken when they donned their habits, how they lived inside the monastery, how they administered their property, how they related to civil society, and how they adapted to the new times brought by modernity.

Although the Master of the order Dom Jorge, drew attention in the early 16th century to the fact that the doors of the monastery should not be opened to women who were not related to the male branch of the Order i.e. relatives of the friar-knights: daughters, wives or widows, documentation reveals that some of the religious women did not belong to the relatives of the members of the Order. Furthermore, it is interesting to understand the mechanisms that led to the donning of the habit.

These women lived in a monastic house which was consecrated by the Monastery of Santos, although, over the course of the Middle Ages, they changed quarters at least twice. During the period covered by this study, they were always supervised by a woman belonging to the family of the Master Dom Jorge.

With this study, we can gain a better knowledge of a community that existed in Portugal from the late 12th century onwards.

Keywords

Religious and Military Orders; Order of Santiago, female communities;

Resumo

O estudo das religiosas da Ordem de Santiago em Portugal na Idade Média pretende dar a conhecer a observância dos votos, a vida monástica, o perfil da gestão das propriedades, as suas relações com a sociedade civil e a sua adaptação aos novos desafios colocados pela Modernidade.

Estes "donas" seriam, na teoria, familiares dos cavaleiros de Santiago (filhas, mulheres ou viúvas), mas a documentação conhecida aponta casos de infracção deste norma, situação que levou o Mestre de Santiago e de Avis, D. Jorge, a tentar regulamentar a situação, embora sem êxito.

Durante o período em estudo, estas religiosas viviam no Mosteiro de Santos, independentemente de terem conhecido outros espaços durante a Idade Média e o governo do Mosteiro esteve entregue a membros da família do Mestre D. Jorge. Pretendemos, pois, apresentar algumas ideias em torno da caracterização da vivência desta comunidade, afinal chamando a atenção para a precocidade da instalação da Ordem de Santiago em Portugal desde o século XII.

Palavras-chave

Ordens religioso-militares, Ordem de Santiago, Comunidades religiosas femininas

The Order of St. James first appeared in the context of the crusading movement, which had its origins in the 12th century. Although the bulk of the religious and military endeavors of Christendom were geographically directed towards the Holy Land, a part of these forces did become established in the Iberian Peninsula to consolidate the southern European borders with the Arabs. It is within this historical, military and religious environment that we can note the appearance of the Order of St. James, in the kingdom of Leon, in the village of Cáceres, later recognized by Fernando II, around 1170, under the form of a Brotherhood of Knights or a noble fraternity. In 1174, however, the Order was transferred to the fortress of Uclés, in the kingdom of Castile, in the time of Afonso VIII, their members being known as “friars of Uclés”. Through the papal decree *Benedictus Dei* issued in 1175, Pope Alexander III confirmed the militia that would act in the various Iberian kingdoms, thus turning it into a Peninsular Order and making it different from other international and national orders.

Its presence in this territory is documented since 1172, the year when Dom Afonso Henriques donated the village of Arruda to the Order. Later, outside the walls of the city of Lisbon, the friar-knights founded their first monastic house, in Santos-o-Velho, which had been given to them by Dom Sancho I, in 1194.

As the reconquest advanced southwards, this house was occupied by the female branch of the Order, formed by a group of single, married or widowed women, related to the friar-knights of the habit of the Order of St. James, who followed the Rule of St. Augustine, adapted to the circumstances of the civil status of some of the members of this community (specifically the vow of conjugal chastity). They were governed by a *comendadeira*, initially elected from among the professing members, being chosen for her outstanding example as a religious woman.² Later, however, the elective system was replaced by a system of royal appointment, or, in some cases, the appointment of the *comendadeira* depended on a suggestion made by the Master of the Order.

The adoption of the Rule of St. Augustine obliged these women to take both a vow of obedience to the Master and a vow of poverty, but a vow of conjugal chastity (as some of their founding members were married) was also introduced, calling for them to live in separate quarters and in separate monasteries, in the periods of Lent and Advent, as well as on the days given over to the celebration of Our Lady, St. John the Baptist and the Apostles, and on any other dates when religious festivities were held. During the rest of the year, the friar-knights lived with their families.

In this way, a female monastery was founded, consecrated in historiography as the Monastery of Santos-o-Velho, in Lisbon, given to the “donas” after the transfer of the male branch to Alcácer, in 1218.³ This monastery consisted of a group of houses in modest architectural style, built around a pre-existing church, which had been erected on the site at the orders of Dom Afonso Henriques in honor of the martyr saints Veríssimo, Máxima and Júlia who, according to legend, had helped the monarch to conquer the city of Lisbon.

In 1266, the Master Dom Peres Paio Correia determined that the monastery should be occupied by only thirteen “donas”. As time went by, however, eighteen women became members of this community, living off the daily ration initially attributed in the 13th century. In 1508, taking advantage of a vacancy resulting from the death of *Comendadeira* Dona Violante Nogueira, the “donas”, represented by the vicarage, let it be known to the Master, Dom Jorge, that it was necessary to increase the above-mentioned number. The Master agreed to review the situation after the rents of the urban and rustic buildings belonging to the monastery had been updated.

Due to its decline in the 15th century, the monastery of Santos-o-Velho was no longer fit to house the female members of the order, who came from the upper echelons of Portuguese families. The monarch Dom João II offered a new monastery, situated somewhere in Santa Maria do Paraíso, also in Lisbon, in 1490 (this being the date that is accepted as the most probable, despite some differing opinions among historiographers).

The Rule of 1509 shows that the monastery was initially destined for the widows of the knights of the Order, and their daughters, but that, until the early 16th century, this ruling had not been followed.⁴ Dom Jorge determined that, whenever any ration fell vacant, it would be given to female candidates who were related to members of the Order.

The candidates went through a period of novitiate, after which they would be dressed with the habit of the Order. The new religious woman would swear allegiance to the Master, the *Comendadeira*, and to the discipline imposed by the Rule. It was possible to definitively leave the monastery, as long as this was approved by the Master. Examples of such women were the “donas” Mécia Vasques, who married Vasco Martins de Resende, between 1324 and 1325, and Isabel de Mendonça, who married Pedro de Castelo Branco, in 1502, as well as *Comendadeira* Dona Joana Teles de Meneses, who married Dom João Afonso Pimentel, in 1377.

Our study starts chronologically in the last quarter of the 15th century and extends into the following century, paying particular attention to the first half of the 16th century, when two moments of extraordinary importance were to be noted: the government of the *Comendadeira* Dona Ana de Mendonça, and the visit paid by the Master Dom Jorge to the monastery and to all of its rural and urban estate.

The female community did not have either a *scriptorium* or their own scrivener, resorting, in the case of need, to public scribes, to register their actions in writing. The monastery’s documentary collection is deposited at IAN/TT⁵, testifying to the memory of generations of “donas” and providing details about the social, judicial and patrimonial aspects of their life. Also to be found there are memories of plagues, earthquakes, floods, the rural weather and the urban weather; evidence of visitations and the advantages and disadvantages of memory; the loss of memory as a pretext for non-compliance with the obligation-memory; oral testimony, memory as chronology, and the relationship with the Roman leadership; the protection afforded by the royal power and the lives of the men and women in the context of the cloister and the religious world.

The *Comendadeira* Dona Violante Nogueira passed away in either February or March, 1508 (since, on March 31, Dom Jorge let it be known to the vicar and remaining members that the admission of candidates to become *donas* would depend on the rents of the monastery), and she was succeeded in office by Dona Ana de Mendonça.

Dona Ana de Mendonça came to Portugal in around 1476, at the age of 16, after losing her father, Nuno Furtado de Mendonça, during the Castilian adventure of King Afonso V⁶. The date of her arrival at the monastery is however, unknown. Francisco Brandão suggests the year 1507, while the chronicler Frei Agostinho de Santa Maria, on the other hand, mentions the Sunday before Easter in 1508 as a probable date. Most recently, Tude Martins de Sousa expressed the opinion that Dona Ana de Mendonça would have joined the monastery as a *dona*, taking on at once the functions of *Comendadeira*, by virtue of her family’s connection to the Master Dom Jorge. Documentary sources, however, show that Dona Ana appeared, for the first time, on July 28, 1508, as a *comendadeira*, accompanied by the vicar, Dona Joana de Lordelo, and by the group of religious women of the habit of Santiago, to sign a deed related to a rural property in favor of her sister Dona Joana de Mendonça, also a *dona* of the monastery. She would then have been 38 years old.

As *comendadeira*, she enjoyed the allowance left in testament by Dom João II, with whom she had been acquainted, their liaison giving rise to the illegitimate birth of Dom Jorge. From the king, Dom João III, she received, for her keep, a certain amount of wheat.

As to the end of her role as *comendadeira*, historiography is once more not in agreement. The above-mentioned Frei Agostinho de Santa Maria gives as certain her disappearance in the year of 1550. The documentary sources are, in this case, surprising. In fact, Dona Ana de Mendonça, showing her age, renounced the position of *comendadeira* on June 5, 1542, in a letter sent to the Master Dom Jorge, her son. Under these circumstances, Dom Jorge immediately appointed his daughter, Dona Helena, to the position, she being a *dona* professing at the same monastery and chosen for her qualities and experience. One day after Dona Ana’s renunciation of her post, the new *comendadeira* took the oath of obedience, as was determined by the Rule. At the same time, Dom Jorge encouraged the *donas* to recognize his daughter as the person now responsible for the government of the monastery.

Despite the above-mentioned information, the fact remains that Dona Helena de Lencastre’s entry into office did not take place as expected. For reasons unknown to us, the then appointee awarded a power of attorney to Dom Jaime de Lencastre, bishop of Ceuta, so that, in her name, he could take possession of the monastery and respective rents on November 2, 1548. Dona Ana de Mendonça offered no resistance, and did, in fact, display great contentment. After the typical ritual of the solemn taking of office, Dona Helena de Lencastre does not appear again as

comendadeira until April 3, 1549. Dona Ana de Mendonça appears for the last time, on January 3, 1549, being at that time 79 years old.

The second moment that marked this period had to do with the visit paid by the Master Dom Jorge to the monastery in Santos in 1513. In fact, it had been several years since the *Council of Thirteen* had decided to pay regular visits to all of the Order's commanders, with two essential aspects in mind: the spiritual conduct of its members and the thorough inventorying of all its property. This was a crucial time in the life of this institution. The Master complained to the Pope that the estate was being usurped by all sorts of powers. The Rule determined that annual visits should be paid. As these were not made, the monastery did not know what property belonged to it, nor could it enforce its legitimate rights.

In order to study this situation, we organized our work into two parts. The first is called the *Convent's Sociological Structure*, consisting of nine chapters and the second *The Monastic Patrimonialization*, which covers seven chapters. In the first part, we tried to understand, explain and interpret the functioning of this female community. The first information was related with the question of the origin of the monastery, the changes, the internal hierarchy and a whole set of elements necessary for the proper functioning of the institution.

The reforms introduced by the Rule of 1509 affected the religious women in their obligations of a spiritual nature, although the vows of obedience, conjugal chastity and poverty were still maintained. As to the last precept, it was more symbolic than real.

To enter the monastery, the candidate needed to have not only a religious vocation, but also economic support in the form of either cash or property, whether this was rural or urban. We know of cases where the candidate possessed a certain amount in money, but the vast majority of professing women only had a diverse group of assets, originating from what it has become the convention to call a "dowry".⁷ Once in possession of these assets, the *dona* administered them all her life, receiving the respective rents in the form of money, goods, domestic animals and manufactured products, drawing up contracts for the lease of useful domains, appointing attorneys to represent her in dealings with her tenants and in judicial hearings and also to inspect buildings, looking after their conservation in accordance with the clauses of the tenancy agreements.

The inheritance was not always a peaceful matter, especially when the heirs were powerful, many of them gravitating through the courts, where they exercised judicial functions. Peaceful possession of assets was the rule for most cases, but we also find complex situations where there were mutual and not always clear accusations. The judicial sentence always favored the arguments of the *dona*.

Carried out under the form of an internal regulation, Dom Jorge's visit followed an entirely ancestral practice, but it was also intended to supervise a whole set of acts of a spiritual nature, with a view to enhancing the religious vocation of the women.

The Master's concerns were founded on four essential pillars: the *donas* as members of the Order; their religious activities; the candidates; and the management of the estate. These items required him to look into such subjects as absence from the monastery, the number of lay women available for daily chores, sustenance and rations, the choir girls, the canonical hours, the wearing of white robes, the washing of ornaments, the porters, the Monday procession for the dead, the celebration in honor of St. James, birthdays, the donning of the habit, the amount to be paid for the new professing woman, the payments made to the members of the monastery, the instruction on contractual matters, the duties of the monastery's attorney.

We would like to provide an overview of the internal hierarchical structure of this community. In his instructions and recommendations, however, the Master does not allude to this subject. Therefore, we can only present what the documents show us. At the head is the *comendadeira*, subordinated, like her male peers, to the Master, through the vow of obedience. We know all the *donas* who occupied this post from its inception to the period that is covered by our study. To back up this knowledge, there is a set of assets belonging to the *Mesa da Comendadeira*,⁸ some of which date back to ancient times. Secondly came the vicar, "elected" by the *comendadeira*. The choice having been made, she was presented to the female collective. Her job was to assist and substitute the *comendadeira* when necessary, although she had no authority to introduce structural changes without the permission of those that she represented. When the *comendadeira* was absent, it was her job to govern the community. The record that the documentary heritage has left us allows us to form a practically complete list of the vicars who served the community during the time

period covered by this analysis, with only the names of those occupying the position between 1538 and mid-1551 being missing.

The vicar of the choir had the task of accompanying the candidates to professors, during the year of their novicehood. The woman responsible for the sacristy was also responsible for safeguarding the ornaments and all the objects of worship in the church of the respective monastery. In the sacristy, there were chests for the safekeeping of the ornaments.

The role of the butleress was to receive the food supplies from the rents of the rural buildings, and perhaps from others, acquired by purchase. It was her responsibility to distribute the supplies to all her companions in the form of a daily ration. The sources provide only scanty information about the butleresses.

Finally, we have a reference to the position of the porter at the monastery. The Master Dom Jorge recommended that she should be chosen from among the older and more honest *donas*. Her “election” was decided by the *comendadeira*, who would present the nominee to the female plenary.

The religious functions were ensured by the convent’s permanent chaplain, who received a substantial salary for his services. Besides him, there were other chaplains in charge of Wednesday mass. The Master warned that the chaplains should be members of the order. Of those who have been identified as chaplains of the monastery, only one is referred to as a prior of Castro Verde who belonged to the Order. As to the *comendadeira*’s chaplains, one was the prior of Coima (a village that belonged to the monastery) and the other was Diogo Pires, who, in the late 16th century, resided in the monastery.

Apart from the elements, the *donas* relied on the support of a large number of lay servant women for domestic chores, and male members for other functions, most notably those of worker for the *comendadeira*, orchard keeper for the *comendadeira*, butlers in different places, landlords and groundkeepers.

To represent the female community there were the attorneys, whom the documentation allows us to classify under three categories: attorneys for isolated acts, general attorneys, and work attorneys.

Ever since its foundation under royal protection, the monastery was endowed with the well-known letters of privilege, grace and mercy, but also others in domains such as justice, arbitration of conflicts, or even donations made to implement and execute monastic works.

The legal coverage of the vast array of actions was made through letters of “guarda e encomenda”⁹⁹ awarded in favor of the monastery. Throughout the Middle Ages, there were many charters awarded to the *donas* of the habit of the Order of St. James. However, the one that will serve as a model for the chronology of this study dates from August 6, 1378, written by the vassals and counselors of the queen, Dona Leonor Teles. This was the letter that was later to be successively confirmed and that reiterated the royal protection of the monastery, as well as the protection of the religious members, their dependants, their cattle and their estate against any possible criminal activity.

The *donas* were, by force of circumstance, forced to maintain a set of relationships with society. Those to which they were required to devote most attention were the ones connected with so-called feudal rights. In this context, problems of a jurisdictional nature absorbed much of the community’s energy. It was necessary for them to claim their rights and to make sure that these rights prevailed, which did not always sit well with the municipal forces that were directly affected. The chartered men were another important source of latent social tensions. The spending on legal actions was high and the resolution of such cases was slow. The monastery was, generally, available to resolve conflicts through negotiation, based on deals in which both litigating parties were visibly seen to give way.

To keep intact the estate, which was scattered over a very disperse and often adverse geography, the Order promoted a series of visits to the landlords belonging to the monastery, specifically to the municipalities of Coima and Aveiras. The documentary evidence shows us that a few visits were made but not as many as the Rule determined. Through some scattered information, we have discovered other visits that were paid, but which have no known record.

The visitors were concerned with taking an inventory of all assets, whether of a religious or tangible nature. Arriving at the site, the inquirers performed a series of formalities, so that,

afterwards, they could proceed with the task entrusted to them at a general meeting of the Order, exhibiting, for this purpose, the document confirming their power of attorney.

After observing the conduct of the members of the Order in the exercise of their religious functions, the inquirers took an inventory of all the ornaments and objects used for worship in the parish church. Not all the records that have come down to us followed the same procedures. In any case, there was always a clearly visible concern with registering in great detail the state of conservation of each of the items inventoried, and also often their monetary value and their origin. At the end of this inventory, a summary was made of the alterations and restoration work that needed to be made to the church, altar, walls, bell or baptismal font. The inquirers were responsible for the maintenance of the church and anything that was connected with it, with the council, the people, or the *comendadeira*. The deadlines stipulated for the execution of the work were short. The texts implied that nobody was interested in spending money on building work. The *comendadeira* was a bad example in this respect. According to the regulations governing the visit, the *comendadeira* was required to be present. If she was absent, the recommendations would rarely reach her hands, and, if they did, she would excuse herself by saying that the earnings of the monastery did not allow for the work which was needed. Also visited were the brotherhoods, allowing us to know the extent of their assets and their state of conservation.

The origins of the monastery's estate were diverse. The contributors to its formation were the Order itself as an institution, its members, the king and queen, private citizens, and essentially the *donas* through their "dowries". In this way, it was possible to draw up an inventory of a large number of buildings, of all types, which the religious women administered through attorneys and other people with specific functions (butlers, landlords and groundkeepers).

In 1513-1514, Dom Jorge made an extensive survey of all the monastery's estate, showing that the *donas* did not follow an organized procedure, and that receipts relating to its revenue had mostly either been lost or were out of date.

Many buildings were out of the monastery's control. In fact, Dom Jorge had reasons to complain when he said that all kinds of people had usurped the Order's estate, which he governed. Many of the owners of the urban or rural buildings did not possess any title or deed that gave them the right to use the building. Once the survey was completed, many chartered men defended themselves by claiming that they had verbal permission to use the buildings, claiming entitlement through their parents and grandparents, and stating that they were mere inheritors. Dom Jorge regulated these various anomalous situations, updated the rents, either in goods or money, and awarded new contracts for the use and occupation of the buildings, under the terms established by the Rule of St. Augustine, i.e. with obvious advantages for the monastery.

Careful observation of the administration of the monastery's assets allows us to state that the Order in general, and the monastery in particular, had a management system with unique characteristics. All the deeds awarded in favor of a landlord required that their holders should register them in the "Livro dos Próprios da Ordem",¹⁰ within the space of a year, which was quite remarkable. This book is, however, unknown.

One of the greatest problems related with the practice of leasing is bound up with the ambiguity of the legal language used in contracts. The normal practice was to establish the terms of the deed, the period and the nature of the tenancy. However, the actual use to be made of the land was not clear, leading to ambiguous language, which did not normally happen in the Middle Ages.

My study of the estate was based on two aspects: the urban property and the rural property. In the first, I studied the houses, sties, huts and all the surrounding area, such as the vegetable gardens and other land attached to the estate. In the rural context, I studied the property of greatest importance, such as farms, cottages, vineyards, olive groves, and a large number of other rural properties through which the monastery received cereals, wine, olive oil, linen or manufactured products in the form of payment for the charter or rent. In addition to this, I studied all the means of production that were recorded in the documentation, such as windmills.

In the case of all these buildings, I looked at typical problems such as the nature of contracts, late payments of rent, and also judicial processes, sales unauthorized by the monastery or the withholding of rents. Although all these problems were not specific to this Military Order, they deeply affected everyday life in this female community and they constitute some of the characteristics of the Portuguese late Middle Ages. Perhaps it will be necessary to wait for the modern epoch for the creation of new solutions followed by new experiences of government.

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² The term “comendadeira” has the same meaning as prioress or abbess – terms which appear sporadically. From the early 13th century onwards, the word “comendadeira” was used to designate the religious woman who was in charge of the monastery, chosen for her qualities in the guidance of other religious women. It was her sensitivity that ultimately determined the good functioning of the house and its reputation.

³ The term “dona” is used in the documentation to designate the religious woman who lives in this monastery; she swore to observe the established vows of the Order, but she also enjoyed widespread freedom, which was reflected, for example, in the administration of her own patrimony, in the appointments of solicitors, landlords and tenants. She could use the courts and had the possibility of leaving the monastery to get married. The Master Dom Jorge himself recognized that the “donas” enjoyed a very liberal status within the Order.

⁴ The text has been very well known in Portuguese bibliography, ever since the work of Barbosa, Isabel Maria Lago, *A Ordem de Santiago em Portugal nos finais de Idade Média. Militarium Ordinum Analecta – As Ordens de Cristo e de Santiago no início da Época Moderna: A Normativa*, Porto: Fundação Engº António de Almeida, 1998, pp. 201-288. Similarly, FERREIRA, Maria Isabel Rodrigues. *A Normativa das Ordens Portuguesas (séculos XII-XVI). Poderes, Sociedade, Espiritualidade*, PhD Dissertation, Porto: 2004, vol. II, pp. 125-220, published the *Rule of Santiago of 1540*, which is also important for those who are interested in the study of this Order.

⁵ IAN/TT: Institute of National Archives/Torre do Tombo, Lisbon.

⁶ Soveral, Manuel Abranches de and Mendonça, Manuel Lamas de – *Furtados (os) de Mendonça Portugueses. Ensaio sobre a sua verdadeira origem*, s/l, ed. Manuel Abranches de Soveral, 2004, p. [85-87].

⁷ We use the term “dowry” to refer to the group of assets belonging to the *dona*, bequeathed to her through inheritance.

⁸ The “Table of the Comendadeira” consisted of a group of assets whose rents were paid exclusively to the “comendadeira” and were destined for her sustenance.

⁹ The letters of “guarda e encomenda” were charters of royal origin, by which the monarch and the queen placed under their guard and protection, the religious community, their dependants, their cattle and their assets.

¹⁰ The “Livro dos Próprios” was a book into which agrarian or urban contracts were copied in full, after being ratified by the Master.