**Besteiros Do Conto (Crossbowmen):**
Organization, abuses of power and irregularities during the reign of Dom João I (1385-1433)

Leandro Filipe Ribeiro Ferreira

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine an aspect of social life linked to one of the most important and original forms of military organization in the whole of Portuguese history—the besteiros do conto (crossbowmen). This research centers mainly on the royal documents issued under the rule of Dom João I, which made it possible to arrive at a series of perspectives illustrating the constant abuses perpetrated inside this militia, with attention being drawn most notably to the municipal offenses directed against the privileges enjoyed by the crossbowmen, the situations in which these men themselves committed abuses, and, finally, the attempts made to legally escape appointment to this military force.

Keywords

Besteiros do Conto (crossbowmen), Dom João I, war, military history, social history

Resumo

Através deste artigo pretendemos dar a conhecer um aspeto da sociabilidade de uma das formas de organização militar mais importantes e originais de toda a história portuguesa—os besteiros do conto. Esta investigação incidiu principalmente na documentação régia outorgada por D. João I. Através destes acervos documentais conseguimos elaborar um conjunto de perspetivas relacionadas com os constantes abusos praticados no interior desta milícia, destacando-se os casos de gravames concelhios contra os privilégios dos besteiros do conto, as situações em que eram os próprios atiradores com besta a cometer abusos ou, por fim, as tentativas de fugas litigiosas às nomeações de elementos para este corpo militar.

Palavras-chave

Besteiros do Conto, D. João I, Guerra, História Militar e História Social

---

1 Master student in Medieval Studies, Faculty of Letters - University of Porto, 4150-564, Porto, Portugal. Email: leandro10dazuis@gmail.com or up090704065@letras.up.pt
1. Introduction

Throughout their existence as a military force, the *besteiros do conto* (crossbowmen)² played a fundamental role in the battles fought by the Portuguese Crown. This group of soldiers, recruited at the local level in the municipalities, was soon subjected to various attempts at regulation by the monarchy. It is believed that they first began to be organized in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries by Dom Dinis or Dom Afonso IV (Ferreira 1988: 185).

Armed with crossbows, these soldiers were endowed with a deadly accuracy³ and a highly destructive shooting capacity.⁴ The effectiveness of the weapon used by this military force was so frightening,⁵ that Pope Urban II condemned its use in 1097-99 (Barroca 2003: 140). Years later, the Second Lateran Council (1139) prohibited its use in battles between Christian forces (Barroca 2003: 140). The crossbow, and consequently its users, soon caught the attention of the Portuguese Crown,⁶ due to its great value in warfare (Barroca 2003: 140). It is therefore not surprising to discover that, after the militia of the *besteiros do conto* had been created, this “barbaric bow”⁷ was mentioned in a document issued by Dom João I, dated 1414, which expressly banned the export of arms and foodstuffs (such as bread, for example) to the Moors. Offenders were liable to corporal punishment, including even the death sentence (Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 162-163, vol. III, t. 3, doc. 1078).

This military force was answerable to the monarch and its *anadel-mor* (commander-in-chief), who was appointed by the former. There was also another *anadel* in each municipality, who served as an intermediary for these high dignitaries; however, this captain was chosen from within the municipalities themselves. It was thus the responsibility of the municipal authorities (judges and councilors) to inform the *anadel* of each municipality of the name of the men selected for the position of *besteiro do conto* (Monteiro 1998: 63).

---

² The origin of this name has a very simple explanation: in order to guarantee the more effective implantation of this military force all across the realm, the monarchy established a *conto*, or, in other words, a fixed number of crossbowmen to be recruited (Monteiro 2003: 197).

³ Due to their regular training and specialization in the use of their weapons, but also due to the peculiarity that the crossbow had, it could be primed and kept ready for firing for as long as the crossbowman saw fit (Monteiro 2003: 197).

⁴ There are several references to this particular feature of the crossbow. Mário Jorge Barroca mentions the description provided by Beatus, a Byzantine princess, who claimed that the shot from a crossbow was so powerful that its arrows could “pass through a shield, perforate a thick iron breastplate, and continue its flight on the other side” of the body (Barroca 2003: 140).

⁵ Despite the fact that its firing rate is much slower than that of a traditional longbow (Barroca 2003: 140).

⁶ There are references to the crossbowmen in the charter of Sernancelhe, dated 1124 (Barroca 2003: 140).

⁷ This was how it was referred to by Princess Beatus (Barroca 2003: 140).