

A.H. de Oliveira Marques: medieval views¹

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In a passage taken from a well-known interview, A. H. de Oliveira Marques considered that his work was always based on sources and that it reflects an interpretive view of historical realities (Ferro, 1994: 169). This is, in fact, completely true, but his modesty prevented him from adding some of the consequences that his work had among the community of historians, in this case the medievalists.³ Fortunately, the importance of his legacy has been strongly recognized, and it is very rewarding to see that some of the latest comments on the significance of Oliveira Marques' many assets draw our attention to *his capacity for synthesis, his facility for leading group projects and his propensity for "creating a School," for leaving a historiographical legacy* (Homem, 2007: 3).

In my view, and in total accordance with this approach, it is very easy to justify such compliments by taking some features of his work into account. In fact, in 1956, he completed his university degree with a dissertation on *A Sociedade Medieval Portuguesa (aspectos da vida quotidiana)*⁴, while he also adopted among his topics of study, themes like an important law issued by the Portuguese king Afonso IV in 1340; the Portuguese population in the thirteenth century or the medieval currency and navigation between Prussia and Portugal in the fourteenth century (Marques, 1959). This was undoubtedly innovative, and certainly quite daring. As far as medieval studies are concerned, the historiographical profile of that epoch may be defined by mentioning Oliveira Marques' major contributions on those themes, as they were all relevant and full of novelty. So, it is not surprising that the author continued to choose other striking themes, as in the case of his PhD thesis, *Hansa e Portugal na Idade Média* (Marques, 1959) or *Introdução à História da Agricultura em Portugal* (1962). In less than ten years, this historian firmly established one of the directions of his research, doing justice to his methodological proximity to Virginia Rau, and, of course, in the case of the economic dimension, also to the influence of Magalhães Godinho's ideals. Nevertheless, these works reveal, at the same time, a particular concern with enhancing

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³ An approach to Oliveira Marques' contemporary historical studies was presented by Meneses, 2013.

⁴ Only published in 1964a.

important characteristics of the Middle Ages, which, up to then, had not been divulged by Portuguese medieval historiography (see Coelho, 2007: 2).

To mention what the author said about his work on the Portuguese rural economy, Oliveira Marques wrote years later that the book *deals especially with the problem of cereals* (Marques, 1988: 77). Its impact did in fact go far beyond this: it opened a wide range of possibilities for research by future generations, and it still stands as a benchmark for how a documentary source - the *Livro do Provimto do Pão* - appeared as the point of departure that, in conjunction with other available documents, paved the way for fresh insights about medieval economic structures. As far as this option is concerned, Oliveira Marques seems to *prefer being one step ahead of his time* (Coelho, 2006) and announces here many of his forthcoming preferences.

And the same applies to *A Sociedade Medieval Portuguesa*, the study of both ordinary people and elites, from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, analyzed from the point of view of a rigorous, but, at the same time, emotional and caring historian able to stress the importance of themes like food, dress, housing, work, welfare, distractions, beliefs, spiritual life, funerals, courtship, love, culture, and education. The book is a remarkable portrait of medieval society. Furthermore, as Wheeler wrote: *the work is handsomely illustrated, too, with reproductions of engravings from manuscripts and books* (2007: 3). In a recent comment, Rodrigues da Silva emphasized the pioneering nature of this approach (2007: 7).

These *premature* views regarding Portuguese historiography foreshadowed some problems that were only to be expected, especially if we recall that, also in Portugal, the 1960s were famous for periods of *academic crisis*.⁵ Later, when Oliveira Marques was already back in Portugal, urban history, which was, in fact, to become an everlasting topic throughout his life, came to light with a renewed visibility. He conceived his own methodology for studying urbanism, and there was an immense adherence by other scholars to his views about medieval cities.⁶ Within this specific *milieu*, postgraduate courses at the New University of Lisbon included a seminar totally dedicated to this theme, which was held under his guidance, and the book *Novos Ensaios de História Portuguesa* (1988) was also published, testifying to the importance of the theme. Because of the attention that was being paid to this important area, several master's degree dissertations were presented, and the time was considered appropriate for aiming even higher: he supervised the edition of

⁵ Oliveira Marques left Portugal and was welcomed in the United States. He was a professor at Auburn, (Alabama) and Florida, and gave lectures in many other universities across the country.

⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Coelho (2003:31-34); Freitas (2009: 193-195).

an *Atlas de Cidades Medievais Portuguesas* (1990), a book that, indeed, filled a noticeable gap in Portuguese Studies.⁷

It is thus clear that writing about Oliveira Marques urges us to remember the novelty of the issues studied, but it also compels us to stress that the historian, because he was also a teacher, did not ignore students' most particular interests. This commitment led him (together with other colleagues) to edit an album of paleography and diplomacy (1987) and to engage in a complex and arduous task: to provide students with a guide to medieval history (first published in 1964, but followed by constantly revised editions), a book he dedicated "To my students." This last work had, as I understand it, an immense influence on the subsequent advance of Medieval Studies in Portugal. It is sufficient to add that it was updated in the second and third editions, precisely due to the increase in the number of studies that had been written on the epoch, especially during the 1980s. This fact justified *additions and corrections nearly page by page*, as the author himself wrote (1988: 25). The publication of the *Guia do Estudante de História Medieval Portuguesa*, which included several suggestions for enhancing new medieval research work, is, perhaps, one of the best examples for explaining his belief in future generations. The author stated that this book was a choice that he had made on his own, and not in response to any request. He called it a spontaneous choice. We just have to thank him for having followed his instinct.

Due to his dedication to a *school*, his willingness to develop collaborative projects and to follow a coherent program of publishing primary sources from the medieval and early modern period is well known, especially at the *Centro de Estudos Históricos* (Lisbon). This goal included an intense program of publication of the records of the royal courts and chanceries, and, fortunately, some of his pupils have continued this practice with publications on a regular basis⁸: seven volumes of *Cortes Portuguesas* and fourteen volumes of the *Chancelarias Régias* of the kings Afonso IV, Pedro I, João I and Duarte, are remarkable examples attesting to his commitment in these areas.

Besides recognizing the extreme importance of all these works, we need to continue our pursuit of the historian in order to highlight his other skills. His almost unique capacity for synthesis⁹ is certainly one of them. This ability placed Oliveira Marques at another level of success, certainly one that was more visible and had greater impact,

⁷ An option that Oliveira Marques continued in 2003 with the co-edition of *Atlas histórico de Portugal e do Ultramar português*.

⁸ To consult the complete list of published works, see http://www2.fcsh.unl.pt/ceh/publicacoes_cortes.html and http://www2.fcsh.unl.pt/ceh/publicacoes_chancelarias.html (accessed on Nov 20, 2014).

⁹ The precise meaning of this word was well expressed and understood by Duarte (2003: 160).

resulting in his own conception of a *História de Portugal*,¹⁰ an attempt to assemble a new vision of Portuguese History. This was written in the United States (where he lived and taught from 1965 until 1970), after the author had recognized “...that there was nothing commendable, nothing, indeed, that a professor of history of Portugal could advise to the students...” (Marques, 1972: XIII). The book was also published in English (1972) and translated into several languages, so that it is reasonable to think that, among other aims, this initiative could have had the purpose of filling a gap felt by the historian and also by the academic community that surrounded him at that time. We cannot help wondering if this option could also be considered, in a way, as an attempt to return home, expressed in each line he wrote.

The way he planned this work was, once again, innovative. Oliveira Marques went beyond the traditional model that had been used until then, as expected, giving us his views along a lengthy timeline (from *remote times* to the contemporary Portuguese reality).¹¹ It presents a harmonious symbiosis between facts, chronology, and interpretation. It also focuses more frequently on economic and social history rather than on political points of view. This project was further enriched by the historian’s including a precise cartography, selected bibliography, and a very useful index, as Gomes has already noticed (2007).

About this major contribution, António Costa Pinto wrote that it is *one of the most readable, balanced and scholarly histories of the country written in the twentieth century, almost unique among those addressed to the average reader* (Pinto, 2007: 56). Perhaps in continuation of a previous substantial, and also remarkable, collaboration with Joel Serrão on the *Dicionário de História de Portugal* (1963-1971),¹² both historians returned to the idea of embarking on a *Nova História de Portugal*¹³ (ten volumes published between 1987 and 2004), and also a *Nova História da Expansão Portuguesa* (8 volumes between 1986 and 2006). Oliveira Marques could not conceive of one without the other, as he confessed to João Pedro Ferro, just as his belief in the need to provide an insight into Portuguese expansion, in which civilizations

¹⁰ Published in English by Columbia University Press in 1972, and in Portuguese in 1972-1974 (with roughly 18 successive updated editions, even in other languages: see Freitas (2011: 612, footnote 22)). The author also organized the *Breve História de Portugal*, 1995, translated into French, English, Chinese, Romanian, German, and Italian (Coelho, 2007a).

¹¹ The subtitle was to change - from 1972 to 1981 - according to the political rulers of the Portuguese Government: Marcelo Caetano, Palma Carlos, Pinheiro de Azevedo, and Ramalho Eanes.

¹² On Oliveira Marques’ contributions to this important Dictionary, Freitas (2011: 612) chooses to mention only three articles within the medieval epoch: *Pesos e Medidas*; *Diplomática* and *Peleografia*. In fact, the historian had 85 articles published in this Dictionary (Coelho, 2003: 37).

¹³ In fact, Oliveira Marques recognized that his commitment to organizing a “new” collection on Portuguese history was anchored in a previous project, in which Magalhães Godinho had played a crucial role, back in the 1960s (Ferro, 1994: 181-182).

and local ethnic groups had a prominent place, made the author defend an autonomous organization of the two collections (Ferro, 1994: 181 and 183).

Despite his many contributions to these new editorial projects, one should also stress his personal choice to write an entire volume about Portuguese history in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (*Portugal na Crise dos Séculos XIV e XV*). Of the whole collection, this one was the first volume to be published (number 4), dealing with late medieval chronologies. It still remains, and will continue to be, difficult to surpass this volume in terms of its historical accuracy.

Offering new views on that epoch, at the end of the 1980s, proved to be possible, and was therefore not surprising: to say the least, Oliveira Marques was undoubtedly both directly and indirectly responsible for much of the research carried out up to that point. He was able to provide us, in a very coherent and precise style, with all the fundamental data about a topic. Paying attention to some of his own words written in the preamble to the book, even the page layout is new for 1987: we all recall those intertextual insertions with a different letter size to read if you are interested in all the details about a specific topic (Marques, 1987: 10; Duarte, 2003: 163, footnote 18). Also his self-confessed preference for using expressions such as *it seems that, probably, as far as we know* paved the way for future works promoted by the following generation. It is thus a prospective book. That is why, for medievalists, that thick green volume will always be a reference work that is always close at hand.

The truth is that he left us with an enormous legacy, full of ideas that fortunately many of us have since taken into account. If we recall Oliveira Marques' integration into a complex academic universe that may have compelled him to make some of his particular choices, his effort, in the pursuit of excellence, however painful it may have been, still prevails in his concern with leaving us a real example. An effort that has been justifiably recognized, it must be stressed. In fact, this historian is still very highly valued by many of his disciples, and he was able to see for himself the result of such dedication.

First of all, 25 years after the publication of his very first article – *A Pragmática de 1340* – some former students organized the publication of two volumes (*Estudos de História de Portugal*, 1982-1983). The first one comprises 13 articles on medieval topics. If we recall the authors who were invited to collaborate or voluntarily provided their own contributions to this homage, there are one or two things that may be worth mentioning: some were very close friends and colleagues from the time when they had studied together; others were pupils who began their career selecting the medieval epoch to focus on in their

research (some continued, some did not); and, finally, some were non-Portuguese authors, who were interested in Portuguese themes and who knew Oliveira Marques personally.

Secondly, in 2003, on the occasion of his retirement (*Na Jubilação Universitária de A. H. de Oliveira Marques*), another tribute was prepared and published in what we might describe as a “joint venture” between the Universities of Coimbra and Porto, in which some of Oliveira Marques’ most prestigious disciples were again present. Nine authors presented nine themes that interested our author, and the book was completed with an updated list of his publications between 1982 and 2003. This was the scheme of this book; undoubtedly a simple structure that turned out to be coherent and was certainly helpful for understanding the work of the historian.

Thirdly, after his death in 2007, it was very easy to find obituaries and eulogies to the man, the professor, the historian, and the citizen. Among many other tributes, it was the e-JPH editor’s privilege to organize such a contribution (Homem, 2007; Coelho, 2007; and Wheeler, 2007), where two of his disciples, once again, bore testimony to his work, along with a stimulating article by Douglas Wheeler, who wrote *A Foreign Historian’s Perspective on Oliveira Marques’ Principal Historical Studies in English*.

Lastly, in 2009, in continuation of an already published previous volume, Brepols invested in *Renwriting the Middle Ages in the Twentieth Century*, compiled under the coordination of Martin Aurell and Julia Pavón. Some key medievalists of that time were selected, and Oliveira Marques, surrounded by such authors as Runcimann, Huizinga, Gourevitch, Forey, among others, is presented to us through the hand of a researcher of my generation, Judite Freitas.

These examples have merely been used to draw attention to something that Oliveira Marques as a teacher, researcher and historian most definitely achieved: the ability to gather together a vast *consensus* around his work.

His legacy is enormous and, to a certain extent, some of his historical interpretations were to alter a frequently ignored understanding of the Middle Ages by stressing the need to observe this period through the complexity of all the different elements that had contributed to its evolution. The explicitness of his discourse, his objectiveness, his appeal to a precise vocabulary, and his systematic use of primary sources helped to introduce some novelty into the perception of such themes as the concept of *feudal society*...as far as he understood it. Contrary to what had generally been thought until then, by giving the title of *The Feudal Era* to one of the chapters of *História de Portugal*,

Oliveira Marques clearly stated his view about *Feudalism* (Mendes, 1996: 322).¹⁴ Furthermore, his admiration for the Muslim civilization and culture, highlighting its role in the formation of Portugal (Coelho, 2003: 39), led many historians to revise their positions on the subject of the “reconquest.”

To finish this brief survey, I should like to mention two particular moments in Oliveira Marques’ writing that enchanted me on account of their acuity and subtlety. Firstly, his great humility when stating, in an opening note to the 4th edition of his *History of Portugal*, that *the success of this book does not make me forget the sadness I feel over the lack of book reviews. Only Domingos Maurício Gomes dos Santos published one in Brotéria, in 1973*, as Mendes reminded us (1996: 323). Secondly, the enormous challenge for today’s historiographers in following in his footsteps regarding the simplicity of expounding an idea: *I believe that one of the missions of the historian is to transform the difficult into the easy* (Ferro, 1994: 170).

Complementing these views it occurred to me to consult the recent book *Historiography of Medieval Portugal c. 1950-2010*. This comprises twenty-eight articles by different authors. Disregarding five papers that deal with themes that Oliveira Marques did not especially dedicate his attention to, all the others include several references to the historian. Many express positive opinions about his work, others contradict some of his views. That is the way the story goes, especially if you are able to use the results of new research that our historian could not possibly have known about in his time. His views have a date, which corresponds to a precise historiographical moment in Portuguese erudition. He presents his conclusions and analysis based on the state of the art at the time when he was writing his books (just like any of us). That is why, in the aftermath of new research, it is likely that some of his ideas may need some adjustment.¹⁵

This is, indeed, the right way for history to evolve. All those who had the privilege of knowing Oliveira Marques’ work will never doubt that he would like history to find its own path: *The history of any country finds itself constantly evolving. Hypotheses, assumptions and truths*

¹⁴ The author gives many other examples. See Mendes (1996: 318-324).

¹⁵ Duarte mentioned precisely this when he wrote: “When Oliveira Marques insisted, in his classic *Introduction to the History of Agriculture*, on the chronic shortage of cereals in medieval Portugal, was he not generalizing to the country a situation that was felt in Lisbon and which was, to a lesser extent, also felt in Porto? Recent studies advise us that, we should at least, keep the question open.” Available at http://www.usc.es/estaticos/congresos/histec05/b24_duarte.pdf.

of a time are constantly modified, according to new studies. [...] The work of making history is continuous and often involves complete and permanent renewal (Marques, 1999: 35).

But, much more important than this is the enormous challenge that he has left for today's historiography: those who have received such a legacy have no excuses for not doing their work properly. By doing so, it will be possible to do justice to the huge contribution that he made throughout his academic life.

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