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# 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese Nobilities in the European Context: A historiographical overview

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## Abstract

As a result of a genuine explosion in historiographical studies on the subject over the last two decades, the various European nobilities can now be considered to have been studied in some depth. A general tendency to be noted in the above-mentioned works relates to the idea highlighted by various researchers seeking to attenuate the early modernisation of noble values, who have taken the French case, in particular, as their benchmark. It should be stressed immediately that none of the descriptions just quoted can be applied to the kingdom of Portugal, to which almost no reference is made in these texts. On the one hand, the noble groups were constantly increasing in number, which seems to have run contrary to the general trend in eighteenth-century Europe. On the other hand, the high nobility of the Portuguese court did not grow, instead remaining extremely stable and crystallising from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, contrary to what was happening in the neighbouring monarchies. Finally, the central core of family values, expressed in the discipline of the aristocratic house, an essential secular aspect of the “ethos” of the *fidalgo* (nobleman), was maintained until the end of the eighteenth century. The extremely closed society of the court of the new Portuguese dynasty of the Braganças only promoted a very limited spread of a cosmopolitan culture within its circles.

## Keywords

Nobility, Aristocracy, Elites, Enlightenment, Family, House, Bragança, Seventeenth Century, Eighteenth Century, Fidalgo, Nobleman

## 1. Some Directions in Recent European Historiography

As a result of a genuine explosion in historiographical studies on the subject over the last two decades, the various European nobilities, both in the modern period and in the contemporary period, can now be considered to have been studied in some depth (see, for the modern period, the syntheses and collections of Meyer 1973, Labatut 1978, Bush 1988, Scott 1995 and Dewald 1996). In view of this increased knowledge, it is now much easier, from a comparative point of view, to establish some of the most prominent specific boundaries of the Portuguese categories of nobility in the modern era. Although, naturally enough, this is not true of all of them.

In the various syntheses on European nobilities to which several Anglo-Saxon historians have dedicated themselves, there frequently appear certain theses that have come to enjoy fairly widespread validity. As far as the central question of the group’s size and structure are concerned, it is useful to stress the idea 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” (Dewald 1996: XVI and 25), whilst, at the same time, there was a progressive growth in the upper nobiliary categories.

It should also be stressed immediately that none of the descriptions just quoted can be applied to the kingdom of Portugal, which is in fact almost completely devoid of any reference in these texts.