

Fifteenth Century, the Age of Discoveries, by Luís Adão da Fonseca

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Abstract

This article analyzes Luís Adão da Fonseca's contribution to the study of the Portuguese overseas expansion. Most of his work deals with a narrow chronology of roughly one century—the fifteenth century—and through his texts we obtain a broader and more detailed picture of this period as a time of intense and diverse changes, which started in Europe but, for the first time, were to have a dramatic impact all over the world. I attempt to show that he was a pioneer in inserting the dynamics of Portugal's development within a European and Mediterranean context and combining this with its overseas activities to arrive at a single (and complex) historical process.

Keywords

Renaissance, Discoveries, Globalization, Military orders, Atlantic, Mediterranean

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o contributo de Luís Adão da Fonseca para o estudo da História da Expansão Portuguesa. A maior parte da sua obra aborda uma cronologia limitada a cerca de um século—o século XV—e através dos seus textos obtemos uma visão global desse período, como um tempo de mudanças intensas e diversificadas, que começaram na Europa, mas, pela primeira vez, tiveram repercussões relevantes por todo o mundo. Realço, por isso, que foi um pioneiro na integração das dinâmicas de Portugal com a Europa e o Mediterrâneo com as actividades ultramarinas num único (e complexo) processo histórico.

Palavras-chave

Renascimento, Descobrimientos, Globalização, Ordens militares, Atlântico, Mediterrâneo

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I first met Luís Adão da Fonseca (LAF) in 1988 during a conference in Lisbon about Portuguese navigations in the fifteenth century. He already had his chair at the University of Porto, while my colleagues and I were preparing our master's degree theses. This first contact introduced me to a brilliant scholar and excellent teacher, always ready to listen and to encourage young people and to provide them with opportunities for their development. I often had the chance to hear his comments about my own work (he never missed any of my lectures in Porto), and I also listened to his lectures on many occasions. I was always able to gain something new from those sessions. I should like to stress, for example, how he rediscovered a concept that had originally been developed by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho. It is one that I myself have frequently employed, after having first heard it used by LAF. It involves considering the English Channel and the Straits of Gibraltar as the strategic medieval borders of Portugal (Fonseca 2015: 17-29),² which was a key concept for my analysis of the Ceuta affair (1415-1443) (Costa, Rodrigues, and Oliveira 2014: 32-45).

When I met him, he had already been a specialist on the fifteenth century for two decades, and his focus was shifting at that time from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. The dissertation that had formed part of his bachelor's degree had been written on the subject of Dom Pedro (1429-1466) (Fonseca 1968)—the son of the Duke of Coimbra and the grandson of King João I, who was the Master of the Order of Avis, the Portuguese *Condestável*, and finally the King of Catalonia (1464-1466)—and it was this that had first introduced him to the broader perspective of Iberian and Western Mediterranean history. The fifteenth century was a time of intense change in Europe and a period that had a strong impact all over the world. The Renaissance was characterized by a new way of making war, based on the development of firearms, and by a new way of disseminating knowledge and ideas, through the printing press. At the same time, Europeans were developing a new way of thinking and representing reality, through Humanism and the arts, and a new way of conceiving the world itself, resulting from the overseas expansion of the Portuguese and later the Castilians. The discoveries forged a new geography, while new businesses were developed, firstly between Europeans and Africans and then later on a global scale. From their very beginning, the Portuguese navigations were clearly a global phenomenon, whose main events took place far away from Europe but nonetheless had profound consequences for Europeans.

² This article was presented at a conference in 2011, which I attended and where I heard him talking about this topic, although he had already written about it earlier (Fonseca 2006: 41-60).

Over a period of fifty years, LAF retained his focus on the fifteenth century but this seemingly narrow chronology covered a variety of themes and a worldwide geography. Therefore, we may say that he understood the *Quattrocento* in its full complexity and that is why we find dozens of titles relating to the Portuguese discoveries and overseas expansion among his publications. He was one of the first Portuguese historians to realize that, in order to be able to write early modern history, it is impossible to separate European history from overseas history, especially when the geographical area is Portugal, the Iberian Peninsula, and even the Western Mediterranean.

LAF's first studies in maritime history dealt with the Portuguese corsairs in the Mediterranean (Fonseca 1978), after which he enlarged his field of vision and analyzed the interaction of Portugal's old Mediterranean links with the new Atlantic routes in a paper that he presented in Paris in 1987 (Fonseca 1989: 147-162).³ At that time, I was preparing my master's degree thesis with Luís Filipe Thomaz, who also participated in that conference, and, on his return, referred to LAF's paper as the most challenging he had ever heard. Looking beyond the overseas chronicles and documents, it was possible to gain a broader picture of the discoveries. Most scholars who studied the discoveries focused their attention on the Atlantic, but only a few, like LAF, always bore in mind that the oceanic strategies of João II and Manuel I were still ultimately focused on Mediterranean goals. This was the case, for example, with Jorge Borges de Macedo (1989: 387-403) and Thomaz (1990). We may say that, at that time, LAF was developing a parallel analysis of the main aspects of the fifteenth-century Portuguese expansion, together with Luís Filipe Thomaz, from whom I learned the same topics that LAF explained and explored in several of his works.

One of the topics that they both analyzed was the role of Europe in the Portuguese overseas expansion. There is a deep-rooted and traditional belief among scholars (historians, philosophers, and others) that Portugal developed a culture that was focused on the sea and that it had its back turned towards Europe. "We are not in Europe," said Eduardo Lourenço, for example, in 2000 (Lourenço 2020: 15). Therefore, the Portuguese discoveries have been perceived by many authors as a great and obvious example of separation that makes Saramago's surrealist metaphor of the Iberian Peninsula as a stone raft (*A Jangada de Pedra*, 1986) seem almost real. At that time, the Portuguese academic world still considered that people who studied fifteenth-century Portugal and Europe had a different specialization from those who studied overseas history. By moving beyond this tradition, Thomaz and LAF

³ See also a later article, dated 1996: "Do Atlântico Medieval ao Atlântico Moderno: Os Descobrimientos e a Formação do Espaço Oceânico."

stressed the close interconnections between the two themes (Thomaz 1994: 1-41; Fonseca 1997: 133-147). Later, other authors confirmed this European basis of the discoveries, such as Jacques Paviot, who published Flemish documentation revealing that the prototype of the *caravela* was created by a team of Portuguese and Flemish officers in Antwerp (Paviot 1995), and I myself, who stressed the European self-conception of Henry the Navigator as well as all the international efforts and contributions to the success of the discoveries (Costa 2009). LAF kept this topic in mind and revisited it in 2016 (Fonseca 2016: 547-555).

After his graduation, LAF dedicated much of his attention to military orders, as is explained in Paula Pinto da Costa's article. As the order's knights were noblemen, they were involved in military actions in Morocco and were members of the crews that sailed beyond Cape Bojador in the first overseas ventures. Since the mid-twentieth century, Marxist historiography has portrayed the Portuguese overseas expansion as an example of the class struggle, suggesting that the Moroccan option was sustained by the nobility in opposition to the bourgeoisie, who supported the discoveries and overseas trade. However, documentation has shown that, during the fifteenth century, the overseas expansion was led by noblemen in all of its different scenarios. The seminal essay outlining this new perspective was published by Luís Filipe Thomaz in 1989, first in France and later in Portugal (Thomaz 1994: 43-148). Many of Thomaz's students, myself included, adopted this interpretation as a new line of research and developed it, in particular, for the *Estado da Índia*, based on systematic genealogical and political studies.

In the 1990s, LAF added another dimension to this analysis, emphasizing the role played by the military orders in the rivalries between lineages, as well as in the crown's political decision-making, and especially in the fight that ensued to be appointed to the Cape Route captaincies. The preparation of his biography on Vasco da Gama (Fonseca 1997b)—a major figure who was the first knight of the Order of Santiago, but later switched to the Order of Christ—and the supervision of PhD dissertations (Pimenta 2002; Silva 2002) were certainly an inspiration for his new approach. I listened to him lecture on this topic, for the first time, in Paris in 1998, during a major conference organized by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in celebration of the 500th anniversary of Vasco da Gama's voyage. There, he presented a paper about the political significance of Gama's expeditions of 1497-99 and 1502-03 (Fonseca 1999: 69-100), and in the same year, he published an article in which he focused his attention on the captaincies of the 1502 expedition, viewed from the perspective of the rivalry between the Order of Santiago, headed by Dom Jorge, the Duke of Coimbra, and the Order of Christ, headed by King Manuel I (Fonseca 1998: 11-32). I adopted this

same perspective a few years later when I wrote the biography of Manuel I, because it was crucial for understanding the first period of the king's governance (Costa 2005). Around this time, I began the coordination of a research project with Vitor Luís Gaspar Rodrigues on the role of the nobility in the foundation of the *Estado da Índia*, and together we organized a conference in 2001 at which we analyzed the connections of each titled house with the Indian Ocean campaigns during Manuel I's rule, and LAF joined us with a synthesis of his previous works about the Military Orders (Fonseca 2004a: 322-348). The role of the military orders in the nominations for the Cape Route captaincies and their involvement in the politics of the *Estado da Índia* were themes that were later developed by other scholars, such as Teresa Lacerda in her dissertation *Os Capitães das Armadas da Índia no reinado de D. Manuel I—uma análise social* (2006).

Meanwhile, during the fifth centenary of Pedro Álvares Cabral's arrival in Brazil, LAF published a new book, again with some innovative topics, such as highlighting the impression that in his letter, Pero Vaz de Caminha expressed an awareness of being in a different world where his social codes were useless or at least inappropriate, which was a challenge for the traditional and timeless ideas of a single and universal truth (Fonseca 1999). LAF therefore emphasized the humanistic mentality of the discoverers, bringing us back to the European background of the Portuguese overseas expansion. In 2000, he returned to this specific issue in an article published in São Paulo, with a special focus on the “novelty” of Caminha's letter (Fonseca 2000: 38-47).

By the end of the twentieth century, a new debate had been initiated among scholars of the early modern era, centered on the concept of globalization. There is no consensus either about just one single meaning for the concept or about the moment when it first began. Following the studies of authors such as Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1918-2011), and Pierre Léon (1926-2013), it became clear that the fifteenth-century discoveries, started by the Portuguese, had initiated a “decompartmentation,” according to Léon, or an “unlocking” of the world, to use Braudel's words. One of the earliest contributions to the discussion, which stresses the worldwide structural changes provoked by the Portuguese navigations, was an article by LAF, published in 2004 with a provocative question in its title: “Globalization before globalization?” (Fonseca 2004b: 643-684). I obviously share LAF's views on this subject and I further added the notion of a Geographical Revolution to point out the dramatic and worldwide changes that began in the fifteenth century.

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The list of LAF's publications is a long one, and their contribution to the history of the overseas expansion is enormous. I have emphasized what I consider to be the main lines of his thought and the most important contributions that he has made to the advancement of the historiography on this subject. However, mention should also be made of a few more studies and themes that he developed, and which were valuable contributions to a deeper knowledge of more classical topics.

Portugal's relations with Italy constituted one of the topics to which he frequently returned to. In 1989 and 1990, he wrote about the Portuguese-Genoese connections (Fonseca 1989: 635-644) and about the itinerary of Antoniotto Usodimare (Fonseca 1990: 963-971), and later about the links between Pope Alexander VI and the discoveries (Fonseca 2001: 227-247). Unfortunately, LAF did not greatly develop this specific topic of the papacy and the discoveries, and I do not know any other scholars who have written about any other papal policy or ideas in relation to the Portuguese overseas expansion. Consequently, the topic is still awaiting further studies long after the publication of this seminal (but largely forgotten) article.

Another topic on which he published regularly was the Portuguese diplomacy towards the Iberian kingdoms, with special attention being given to the Treaty of Tordesillas as well as the Atlantic countries; in fact, one of his earliest books is about the Treaty of Windsor (Fonseca 1986).

LAF developed a lasting collaboration with Artur Teodoro de Matos through the NOVA University as well as through the Catholic University. In 2001, he was the co-author of the book *O Milénio Português* in which he wrote a chapter on the fifteenth century, which he entitled "The First Expansion," once again emphasizing the specificity of the Portuguese *Quattrocento* (Fonseca 2001: 215-265). In 2005, he wrote João II's biography for inclusion in the collection of biographies about the Portuguese monarchs (Fonseca 2005). I think it is fair to say that he was exactly the right scholar to write about such a king, and his book is yet one more example of his writings about the Portuguese fifteenth century which make it clear that internal and European affairs must always be related to the country's overseas achievements as a single episode whenever we refer to fifteenth-century Portugal.

LAF discussed all these topics in his publications and lectures, while also being the curator of a number of exhibitions. One of his most recent contributions was to the *Dicionário da Expansão Portuguesa (1415-1600)*, coordinated by Francisco Contente Domingues (2016).

Due to the variety of articles that he wrote, we can almost regard his contribution to this dictionary as a synthesis of his whole career in relation to the study of the Portuguese overseas expansion: main issues—“Castela e Aragão,” “Mediterrâneo,” and “Ordens Militares”; politicians involved in Atlantic enterprises—“Infante D. Fernando” and “Infante D. Pedro”; navigators—“Vasco da Gama” and “Pedro Álvares Cabral”; and authors—“Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha” and “Zurara.”

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As a final comment, I should just like to say that Luís Adão da Fonseca’s most valuable and fruitful contributions have provided us all with a clear perspective of the fifteenth century as a time of amazing change—visible not only in the singularity of individuals, but also in entire countries and civilizations.

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