

Portuguese Communications in the Middle and Modern Ages

Maria Helena da Cruz Coelho
ipd@fl.uc.pt

and

Margarida Sobral Neto
Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra
mneto@fl.uc.pt

1. Middle Ages¹

In 1998, the Portuguese Communications Foundation signed a protocol with the University of Coimbra for the development of academic research into the history of communications, from the times predating the institutionalisation of the Postmaster-General in Portugal, at the dawn of the 16th century, down to the present day.

In the past, Portuguese historiographers have paid scant attention to the subject of communications, particularly communications as they occurred in more far-off times. In the manner of Godofredo Ferreira, the leading exponent on the study of this subject, modern-day Portuguese historians have generally paid some attention to itineraries, mediaeval travels and travellers, or transporters in the form of muleteers, and have studied peripheral issues related to the global communications system. Older or more recent studies from abroad, providing greater detail on this chapter in man's day-to-day life in society, do not appear to have had much impact in Portugal. It is probably no exaggeration to claim that such a situation is not unrelated to the complexity of the research involved.

This general lack of earlier studies explains the project members' hesitation about the means to be used in conducting their research and even more so their uncertainty about the specific results to be obtained, despite their great enthusiasm for the subject. We considered that the most productive means would be for researchers, in studying the sources, to apply the research techniques that they normally used within their specialised subject areas, which have already been dealt with in solid, wide-ranging studies.

The advantages in terms of research were unquestionable. In the absence of specific sources enabling the study of communication systems and agents in the Middle Ages, the widest range of documentary sources would have to be consulted. Total familiarisation with these sources would be the best method, as information on the circulation of messages is occasionally very subtle, indirect and fleeting. Prior knowledge

¹ Paper presented in Lisbon, in 2002, by Maria Helena da Cruz Coelho at the launch of the book *As comunicações na Idade Média*, Maria Helena da Cruz Coelho (coord.), Lisbon: Fundação Portuguesa das Comunicações, 2002, prepared under the aegis of a protocol between the Portuguese Communications Foundation and the University of Coimbra.

of the sources was a *sine qua non* for progress to be achieved in this new field of knowledge.

The procedure was not, however, easy to implement, nor was the information obtained proportional to the work involved. It was only possible to make use of a small amount of the information obtained from the lengthy and painstakingly difficult research carried out. The end results were, however, largely gratifying. As a whole, the studies provided a reliable, well thought-out contribution to the general history of Portuguese communications, which is still in progress. Given that the authors are specialists in terms of the periods, institutions and environments involved in this new line of research, their studies have been enhanced by broad, attractive contextualisations that have, in practice, provided fresh insights into the full scope of the act of communication.

Although project members worked within the scope of their specialities, the particular aim was to achieve internal unity with regard to the studies produced. This is why the published work, *Communications in the Middle Ages* (Lisbon, Portuguese Communications Foundation, 2002) has a *leitmotif* involving two fundamental aspects, namely the role of communications in terms of the power structure and in terms of the support provided to institutions. This led to the presentation of two more specific situations, one dealing with communications in wartime, which understandably operates as a system enabling the circulation of messages as a whole, and another providing details on the production of letters and their means of delivery.

A little more detail is now provided on the presentation of the studies.

As far as concerns the role of communications in the power structure, endeavours were made to find out more about the system for receiving and sending messages, firstly at the royal court and then in municipal (i.e. administrative) districts.

In a well substantiated analysis of the royal court between the period of the earldoms and the reign of Dom Pedro I, Leontina Ventura describes the growing role of writing and written documents in central government bureaucracy. Letter patents addressed by the king to citizens all over the kingdom (to "whomsoever should see this letter"), or addressed to his own officials, circulated over the territory as a whole. It is, however, the reign of Dom Afonso III, "the king who promoted strong public administration and measures for administrative reorganisation", that gives us a better picture of the scope of communications in the structuring of royal authority. This reign provides us with information not only about the letters sent by the monarch, but also about the letters received by him from all over the kingdom. This circulation of royal acts also provides information on the agents who transported them, vouchsafed them, or disclosed their contents orally, in line with the continued and repeated bureaucracy required by the kingdom's internal government or even by the extraordinary diplomat entrusted with the task of establishing peace and treaties with neighbouring kingdoms. All of this information is detailed in full by the author.

The scope of the research is further extended in the next study by António Resende, who considers the communication mechanisms used at the various courts between the mid-14th century and the creation of the post of Postmaster-General by Dom Manuel I, in 1520. This information was compiled from chronicles (and not from the court documents on which the previous analysis was based), from which other conclusions may be drawn, and essentially related to the royal, seigniorial and other courts. Further details are provided about communication levels and contexts, identifying their principal agents – bearer, messenger, ambassador, trotter – and an explanation is provided about the forms of communication which are commonly referred to by the terms "letters, personal messages, written letters, writs, messages, news and errands". The study ends with suggestive information about the means and speed of transport.

In addition to analysing the message distribution system in use at the court or courts, the aim was also to gauge the impact of communications on the local power structure, particularly in the municipal

districts. This was the scope of our analysis, which was essentially compiled from information available at the town councils. It is stated at the beginning that "only an ascending, horizontal or descending communications network could pull the strings of municipal affairs in the 14th and 15th centuries". In the chapter on internal communications, emphasis is given to the announcement of by-laws by criers, who would proclaim them out loud in the busiest, most central public spaces in cities or towns. Particular emphasis is given to the elucidation of communications movements as a whole, between central and local government, with some knowledge coming to light regarding the bearers of royal letters, their arrival times and means of announcement. A description is also provided of the framework of the messages that the municipal districts arranged to be sent to the court with a view to furthering their political and economic affairs, borne by specialised mail couriers, such as the municipal district's trotter, or his most accredited ambassadors, who were generally chosen from among the municipal district's leading citizens and officials, and occasionally spent a great deal of time and money at the court in order to submit the requests of the municipal district's institutions, either orally or in writing. Lastly, reference is made to the dispatch of communications to the furthest reaches of municipal districts and even between municipal districts, particularly in wartime or in times of foraging crises, when even women were occasionally conscripted as couriers.

This compilation of studies is linked with the following chapters, in which communications are considered as an institutional support, with particular attention being paid to the Church and the University, considered to be model institutions within the communications system.

Maria Alegria Marques looks at the issues associated with communications between Portugal and the Holy See. She begins by sketching a brief outline of the evolution of the Papal Court and analyses the Papal Chancellery in terms of its officials and the *modus operandi* of this department, which specialised in producing and sending documents. In her approach to the relationships established between Portugal and the Papacy in the Middle Ages and the communication vehicles existing between the two, she considers both the Portuguese who were present at the Papal Court and the legates and the affairs of the apostolic judges in Portugal. The former were essentially ecclesiastics, who travelled to the Holy See for a variety of personal and/or institutional reasons. They bore their own messages and those with which they were entrusted by others, undertaking to bring back the replies to the Kingdom of Portugal. They presented their requests to the Pope or to particular departments either orally or in writing, and generally travelled in small groups to lessen the risks associated with such long journeys. Upon their return, they would have to convey the messages they brought with them. If such messages were for public announcement, the Sunday mass would be the best means of transmission, together with an announcement made at the church doorway.

As far as the circulation of ecclesiastical messages is concerned, Maria do Rosário Mourjão gives a detailed explanation of the case of the diocese of Coimbra, analysing the cathedral's documentary collection, which she used in the preparation of her doctoral thesis. She begins by characterising the space in which the messages circulate and their principal authors and recipients – the bishop and the cathedral's chapter. She analyses the messages, which took the form of either missives or juridical acts that also had to be dispatched to their addressees. She studies the various stages of their production, from request to final document, making reference to the formularies used, as well as the means used to authenticate the acts. She then endeavours to ascertain who were the bearers of such texts and, in several cases, succeeds in discovering that the agents entrusted with the responsibility of delivering the letters to their destination, and even of announcing the contents thereof by reading them out to their addressees, were often the procurators of the bishop or chapter. Most of the information obtained refers to sentences of excommunication and interdiction

which the author deals with in some detail. Lastly, an attempt is made to calculate the time elapsing between the act of writing the letters and their delivery to addressees, in addition to the distances travelled.

In the next study, José Antunes firstly provides us with a concise description of the *urban agents and agents on foot* who placed themselves in the service of the communications required by the scholars of European universities. He then concentrates on Portuguese universities, demonstrating that the Papal Bull of 9 August 1290 confirmed the *Stadium Generale's* privilege of having its own *nuncios*, considered by the author to be couriers, conveying not only messages, news and mail, but also goods and even people. He also considers that, owing to its use of the term *mancipiis*, the *magna carta* of privileges bequeathed by Dom Dinis in 1309 refers to urban messengers, a hypothesis which had not previously been put forward, and others suggested by him in this sphere of the circulation of messages, always equated with the broad contexts of the Roman Empire or the whole of Europe. Through the information obtained from the volumes of *Chartularium Universitatis Portugalensis*, however, he had the opportunity to study a man who journeyed to the court of Rome bearing a letter from the university, complementing this with other information on scholars' requests for the exchange of money and on the circulation of supplications to the Papal Court made by the scholars and masters of the university itself, together with the reception of an enormous amount of pontifical documentation. He reminds us that, even after the institution of the post of Postmaster-General in Portugal in the 16th century, the university continued to employ its own private couriers, using the services of boatmen, carters, wagoners, muleteers and foot messengers to help deliver the messages, news and goods required by its day-to-day affairs.

A rigorous study by João Gouveia Monteiro concentrates on the extraordinary environment created by war, which has always required special means of communication. As a specialist in the subject, he contextualises the war scenario of the Reconquest experienced in Portugal in the early Middle Ages and the battles with Castile, which required a continuous "information service", mobilising spies, scouts, messengers and even ambassadors, merchants, clerics, pilgrims, women, prisoners and traitors, to thwart the intentions and movements of the enemy's forces. For the effective processing of the transmission of news, however, in such times of natural obstruction, the author states that three techniques were used — "visual techniques" in the form of "encoded signals" either sent from a distance, particularly those using smoke and fire, or involving the placement of such objects as flags and pendants at particular vantage points; "auditory techniques" which could be used at the same time as the others and which took the form of sound emissions, using bells, trumpets or other means; and, finally, the use of "special emissaries", such as all kinds of "couriers" who brought the news over land, river or sea through their own endeavours and who occasionally displayed great courage and daring. Less commonplace techniques were also used, such as sending written messages inside the shafts of arrows, communicating by code or password and through the use of carrier pigeons, demonstrating the great range of communication methods and, most suggestively, showing how mediaeval man endeavoured to "control space and time, the two nuclear valencies of wartime since time immemorial".

To complete this collection of studies, Maria José Azevedo Santos concentrates upon the specificity of the written message as a whole in her evocatively entitled work *Na Volta do Correio* ("By Return Mail"). She begins by reflecting upon the importance of the written word in societies, making particular reference to letter-missives. She then goes on to study an important collection of 73 letters sent by Prince Pedro, Duke of Coimbra, between 1429 and 1448, the vast majority of which was sent to the municipal district of Coimbra and its "good men" (i.e. leading citizens), comprising a hybrid genre of missives simultaneously referring to both private and public spheres. An examination is made of their formal characteristics and their material

authors (because they are heterographic letters), the support material, the ink and the handwriting which give them form, the method of folding and the guarantee of inviolability through the affixing of a seal. Reference is also made to the punishments meted out to those persons betraying the confidentiality of the correspondence, including the publication of a law on the subject in 1450. Lastly, the author poses various questions about the form in which the letters were sent and about the agents entrusted with their delivery, including, *inter alios*, foot messengers, errand boys, postmen, trotters and muleteers, carters and wagoners, while also making reference to the difficulties involved in the journeys, owing to the means of transport used at the time, the poor state of the roads and the dangers involved in travelling.

It is not my intention to conclude this work without providing more interested readers with additional support material. Maria do Rosário Morujão has produced a national and foreign bibliography on message communication systems in the Middle Ages, drawn from other bibliographies and the records of national and foreign libraries and databases. She has compiled a list of more than a hundred titles dealing, either directly or indirectly, with message transmissions. We realise that such a bibliography must necessarily be incomplete, though it may, nonetheless, provide a starting point for subsequent studies on the subject.

We believe that these works are highly suggestive and appealing, often leaving us with more unanswered questions than certainties and requiring yet more research. Consideration is given to the many different scenarios under which communications were forced to develop in response to political and institutional demands, thus giving visibility to yet another facet of man's life in society.

2. The Modern Age²

The subjects dealt with in this book form part of the "Postal history" area, a historiographic field that has only in recent decades begun to be studied systematically. Interest in this subject derives both from the relevance of the communications phenomenon to our present time and the creation of conditions that allow for a full contextualisation of the multiple aspects of postal communications studies. The history of the postal services is a highly interdisciplinary field, which brings together various areas of historical knowledge.

In Portugal, studies of the history of the postal services in modern times were conceived within the heart of an institution dedicated to communications – the CTT - and initiated by Godofredo Ferreira, a patient and painstaking researcher who examined several documentary collections in his quest for information. This enabled him to find out more about the past affairs of the institution in which he worked and for which he nurtured a particular affection. A major study in this area was produced by Teodoro de Matos, who dealt with several aspects of Postal history, starting from the central theme of his work, *Transport and Communications in Portugal, the Azores and Madeira (1750-1850)*. Reference should also be made here to other contributions to the knowledge of postal history produced by philatelists, in addition to other scholars, several of whom are associated with this Foundation and whose works are included in separate studies or published by the marvellous *Códice* magazine.

The challenge I issued both to myself, as the co-ordinator of the project, and to my colleagues on the research team, Drs. Fernando Taveira da Fonseca, Ana Cristina Araújo, José Pedro Paiva, Maria Antónia Lopes, Joaquim Ramos de Carvalho and M.A. Ana Isabel Ribeiro, was to study the structure and operations

² Paper presented in Lisbon, in 2005, by Margarida Sobral Neto at the launch of the book *As comunicações na Idade Moderna*, Margarida Sobral Neto (coord.), Lisbon: Fundação Portuguesa das Comunicações, 2005, prepared under the aegis of a protocol between the Portuguese Communications Foundation and the University of Coimbra.

of the postal communications systems used by the state, several of the most representative institutions in terms of communication flows (the Church, the Inquisition, the *Misericórdias* and the University) and private citizens. These subjects were divided into several more specialised themes, which have been dealt with in this book's various chapters.

The first chapter was written by Margarida Sobral Neto and is called *The Post in the Modern Age*. In this text, which is used to contextualise the whole of the work, I explain those points of time that I consider to have been decisive in terms of establishing the organised post, in addition to analysing the main thrust of the operations of the postal communications system in the Modern Age.

The organised postal service made its appearance in Portugal during the reign of Dom Manuel I, at a time when Portugal was taking decisive steps to "open up the world", and when the Portuguese caravels had already cast anchor at several central locations of the Portuguese empire - Africa, India and Brazil. From here, the crews brought merchandise that fuelled international trade, whilst gaining fresh experiences (news of which was received by word of mouth or letter) that were to construct new world representations and form the basis for the Scientific Revolution in 16th-century Europe.

The founding act of the organised communications service was the creation of the post of Postmaster-General, in 1520. The holder of such an office was entrusted with the task of providing the court and individual citizens with postal services for the conveyance of messages and letters. The initiative of the monarch ("Manuel the Fortunate") comprised the embryo of a communications network that, over time, was to embrace the whole of the continental territory and subsequently extend to the overseas territories and the rest of Europe due to its privileged associations with the Spanish and English postal services.

The postal network was linked by nodes, comprising the auxiliary post offices that were progressively being established in the principal towns and cities. In the chapter entitled *The Postal Network in the Second Half of the 18th Century*, Joaquim Ramos de Carvalho charts the main axes linking the different parishes in the country with the various mail reception and distribution points. In this way, he provides us with an enormously useful instrument of knowledge about Portugal's internal organisation in terms of communications, in addition to increasing our understanding of the differential geography of various parts of the territory.

The fact that, between the years of 1606 and 1797, the administration of the postal services was entrusted to a private entity in the form of the Mata family requires us to become better acquainted with the leading figures in the management of the postal services in the 17th and 18th centuries. This task fell to Ana Isabel Ribeiro, who, in the chapter entitled *The Postmasters-General of the Kingdom. Their Profile and Social Trajectory*, explains the strategies of this family of bourgeois origin that gradually rose up through the social ranks during the course of the Modern Age and whose principal material support was the revenue generated by the transport of parcels, money and letters.

The end of the reign of the Postmasters-General made it possible for postal communications to take on the role of a true public service, a development encouraged by Portuguese ambassadors who, in Europe, had witnessed the operation of postal communication systems that were more efficient and profitable for the state than those run by Luís da Cunha and Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho. A stagecoach service was established as part of the profound restructuring of the postal services during the transition from the 18th to the 19th centuries and the circulation of parcels, money, and particularly letters, was made more flexible.

Up to the end of the 19th century, the letter, "paper written to absent people" (Bluteau), was the "key element in the distance communication process". In her study entitled *Correspondence: Epistolary and Practical Rules on Writing*, Ana Cristina Araújo analyses the contents of missives, linking them with social contexts and

standards of civility. Letters, representing privileged instruments of communication, were analysed by various authors who decided upon the most adequate forms for producing missives, depending on the occasions and the correspondent's status. Special reference should be made to the relevance of special books for *Secretários* ("practical guides to epistolary wording"), giving advice and rules on the composition of missives and varying from the layout of the text on the paper to the different forms of address, including the style of writing, the correct placement of the validation and security seals or the appropriate manner of addressing the envelope. This theoretical knowledge is illustrated in the book through the presentation of a number of illustrations.

State, institutional and personal correspondence would be delivered by ordinary mail channels. The fact that the network managed by the Postmaster-General was not, however, conducive to the speedy circulation of letters, led certain institutions to create their own communication systems.

In his text entitled *Communications in the Sphere of the Church and the Inquisition*, José Pedro Paiva describes the communication network for the delivery of institutional and private correspondence to a wide range of addressees created by the Church and particularly by its bishops. The efficacy of this network can be gauged by the fact that it was frequently used by the Crown to issue instructions or request information. This was also the case with the Inquisition.

Several bishops, such as those of Braga and Viseu, took the initiative of proposing the creation of ordinary mail and were themselves users of such services during the course of the modern era. At the same time, they organised their own delivery channels for urgent or confidential messages, in the form of a structure comprising foot messengers and occasional letter bearers.

The contents of several missives sent by the bishop of Coimbra, Afonso de Castelo Branco, to his agent in Rome, Gianbattista Confalonieri, exemplify the manner in which postal communications were processed between Coimbra and the "Capital of Christianity".

In the Modern Age, *Misericórdias* gave rise to an intense and continuous flow of communications, deriving from their institutional nature as "enterprises in the position to assimilate and administer properties and income from capital while also operating as the providers of services, divided into two main areas: assistance to souls and material assistance to the poor".

A quantitative study of the correspondence recorded by the copyists of the Lisbon and Porto *Misericórdias* enabled Maria Antónia Lopes, in her chapter entitled *Communications in the Misericórdias*, to measure and chart the communication flows irradiating from two of the country's largest fraternities to diverse points in mainland Portugal and in the overseas territories. The study resulted in a general configuration of the areas under these institutions' protection or domination.

Although it was not possible to obtain relevant information on postal services from the research carried out into the *Misericórdias*' documentary archives, such research did, however, undeniably indicate "the importance of correspondence as an unquestionable source for studying the history of the *Misericórdias*", a conclusion that also applies to many other institutions, such as the University of Coimbra.

Starting in 1537, the University of Coimbra was to become "the Kingdom's most important intellectual centre", providing training in several areas of knowledge and conferring "valid qualifications for the performance of high office in royal and ecclesiastical administrations or the professions". In addition to its role as an educational establishment, the university was a powerful landlord that administered an enormous patrimony scattered all over the country. The range of functions performed by the University of Coimbra throughout the Modern Age made it an institution that was somewhat similar to a revolving door, into and out of which diverse communication flows irradiated. In his study entitled *Communications in the University*

of Coimbra, Fernando Taveira da Fonseca describes the contents of such human and information flows and the channels – ordinary mail and that of the institution itself – used by the University of Coimbra to achieve speedy, secure communications, with institutional addressees, students' families or rent administrators.

The above few lines provide a very short and necessarily incomplete synthesis of the various contents of the book entitled *Communications in the Modern Age*, showing the mature fruits of the research that was undertaken in the course of the project. This research area has not, however, been exhausted. As is the case with all of the research in this book, several questions have been answered and others, for which we shall endeavour to find a response in future works, have been formulated.

A country's communications system serves as a mirror of its development potential, as well as highlights its weak points. We therefore consider that the pages of this book not only relate the history of the Portuguese postal services, but also describe extremely important components for improving our knowledge of the history of Portugal in a variety of areas, ranging from economic to cultural aspects.

Copyright 2005, ISSN 1645-6432-Vol.3, number 2, Winter 2005