

# IDENTITIES IN CONFLICT IN THE CORRESPONDENCE OF A LATE MEDIEVAL PORTUGUESE ENVOY<sup>1</sup>

## IDENTIDADES EM CONFLITO NAS CARTAS DE UM EMBAIXADOR PORTUGUÊS TARDO-MEDIEVAL

Paulo Catarino Lopes<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

Drawing on the epistolary corpus known as the *Letters from Italy*, this paper offers an analysis of the identity-building strategies employed by Lopo de Almeida (c. 1416–1508) in the letters he sent to King Afonso V of Portugal (1432–1481). Anchored in the concept of virtue as a central category within the late medieval noble ethos, the study seeks to understand how the ambassador, through his correspondence, articulated values, experiences, and discourses that reinforced his belonging to a particular aristocratic elite. The analysis is based on the four previously published letters, as well as a recently identified one, which remains largely unexplored by historiography. These documents are examined through an analytical questionnaire and interpreted using a hermeneutic approach. In doing so, this article aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how the Portuguese nobility in transit represented itself and projected its identity within the European context of the fifteenth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity; Virtue; Diplomacy and International Relations; Late Medieval Portugal.

### RESUMO:

Partindo do corpus epistolar conhecido como *Cartas de Itália*, este artigo propõe uma leitura das estratégias de construção identitária mobilizadas por Lopo de Almeida (c. 1416–1508) nas cartas enviadas ao rei D. Afonso V de Portugal (1432–1481). Sustentada no conceito de virtude enquanto categoria central do ethos nobre tardo-medieval, a análise procura compreender de que modo o embaixador articula, nas suas missivas, valores, experiências e discursos que reforçam a pertença a uma determinada elite aristocrática. O estudo baseia-se nas quatro cartas já editadas e na mais recentemente identificada, ainda pouco explorada pela historiografia, submetendo-as a um questionário analítico orientado por uma abordagem

<sup>1</sup> PhD in History from Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at NOVA University Lisbon (NOVA FCSH). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8543-1111> E-mail: [paulo.lopes@fcsb.unl.pt](mailto:paulo.lopes@fcsb.unl.pt). This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Norma Transitória – DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0015 (DOI10.54499/DL57/2016/CP1453/CT0015) and the Strategic Project of the Institute of Medieval Studies – financing UIDB/00749/2020; DOI 10.54499/UIDB/00749/2020 (<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/00749/2020>).

<sup>2</sup> Doutorado em História (Universidade Nova de Lisboa). Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8543-1111> E-mail: [peclopes@gmail.com](mailto:peclopes@gmail.com)

hermenêutica. Através deste exercício, pretende-se contribuir para a compreensão das representações da nobreza portuguesa em trânsito e da forma como esta se pensava e se projetava no espaço europeu do século XV.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Identidade; Virtude; Diplomacia e Relações Internacionais; Portugal tardo-medieval.



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## Introduction

The following pages aim to explore the identity constructions developed by Ambassador Lopo de Almeida (c. 1416–1508) in the letters he sent from Italy to his sovereign, Afonso V of Portugal (1432–1481), against the backdrop of the concept of virtue as it was understood within this historical context in relation to the nobility, the social group to which he belonged. Methodologically, we will analyze the so-called *Cartas de Itália* [Letters from Italy] by Lopo de Almeida—that is, the four published letters along with the recently discovered one—by applying a questionnaire and conducting a subsequent hermeneutical exercise (Faria, 2021, pp. 87-90).

As a case study, the value of the invoked sources resides in the fact that the identity constructions they present regarding the European *Other*, particularly Germans, allow an analysis that goes well beyond the restricted context of the case in itself, addressing more general issues in interpretative terms, such as the image of the German nobility that predominated among secular elites in coeval Portugal and the latter's identification with the notion of *virtue*, which they used as an instrument to evaluate the *Other* they might come across.

### 1. The sources

Either by his own initiative or at the sovereign's behest, Lopo de Almeida sent Afonso V five letters (or perhaps more) where he zealously reported the events that

marked the voyage, and how the delegation was received: first in Siena (February 28, 1452), second in Rome (March 23, 1452), third in Naples (April 18, 1452), forth in a port somewhere in the Adriatic (May 8, 1452) and fifth in Manfredonia (May 14, 1452) (Faria, 2021).

Within the framework of this mission there is also a sixth epistolographic record sent to Afonso V from Italy (March 19, 1452), this time by Luís Gonçalves Malafaia (c. 1389-1464), the sovereign's *ad hoc* ambassador in Rome. In this letter, the diplomat describes the arrival and installation in that city of Emperor Frederick III and the infanta Leonor, as well as the imperial couple's subsequent wedding and coronation ceremonies.

Lopo de Almeida's "italian" epistolary corpus was well received, judging by the copies that circulated and that left traces in the surviving manuscripts (Simões, 1989, pp. 211-218).

The main objective of the letters was to inform Afonso V, King of Portugal, in a plurithematic manner. Therefore, while presenting great informative fluidity and eclecticism of themes and situations, Lopo de Almeida's missives relied directly on the factual. Within the primordial genre (the missive), they combine several subgenres, such as memories, an epistle of a personal character (the diary), an urban chronicle, and a political report, always referring to the general category of history. In turn, the intention of *truth* serves as an instrument of certification and legitimation of the conveyed message.

The author witnessed the events first-hand and wrote his texts soon after the narrated events. His writing is marked by nearly visual descriptions and panoramas, photographic even, with particular attention to detail of what was observed and lived. Therefore, the value of the letters resides not so much in their literary aspects, but rather in the author's vivacity. He did not intend to be serene or logical, but descriptive and emotional.

His personal disquiet is felt in every moment. The style is free and temperamental, but also instinctive and spontaneous, whereby psychological and emotional forces triumph over logical order, underscoring a strong personality that sidesteps the usual literary resources and remains simple yet energetic (Almeida, 1935, pp. V-XIX).

Lopo de Almeida not only emphasizes what he sees but also their inherent emotions and attitudes, which in turn humanizes his narrative as a whole—particularly in his portrait of Frederick III. In this part of his narrative, he moves away from the dryness and coldness traditionally associated with official documents and embraces a dynamic and colorful discourse.

## **2. Context: a political marriage**

On November 12, 1451, the retinue of Leonor (1434-1467), second daughter of Duarte (1391-1438) and Afonso V's sister, departed to Italy to confirm her marriage to the Habsburg Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493). The marriage had already been concluded by contract in Naples, on December 10 of the previous year, and by proxy in the Portuguese court in late July of that year (Nascimento, 1992, p. 12). The retinue was led by the ambassadors João Fernandes da Silveira (c. 1420-1484) and Lopo de Almeida (c. 1416-1508), first count of Abrantes and a prominent figure given his ascension in the Portuguese court.

The marriage was a bold diplomatic initiative (well-prepared and highly successful) and a unique opportunity for the affirmation and internationalization of the Portuguese monarchy. It was the result of Afonso V's ambitious project to seat Leonor on the throne of the Holy Roman Empire in 1451 and to seat his sister Joana of Portugal (1438-1475) on the Castilian-Leonese throne in 1455, thereby legitimating, in the eyes of the main international powers, a dynasty born at odds with the laws of succession (Coelho, 2002-2003, pp. 41-70; Lima, 2016, pp. 376-380).

This plan did not arise by chance. The marriage of a member of the royal house did not occur for “reasons of the heart”—that is, for personal or private reasons—but rather to serve the interests of the country and kingdom. Hence, inevitably, it was an eminently public matter (Duarte, 2007, pp. 128-175).

Within this political and mental framework, descendants, especially daughters, were seen as investments, and their marriages were, strictly speaking, affairs of state. The volatility of marriage contracts was a reality; all it took was a shift in agreements and alliances. In the marriage contract and its clauses (as well as in the preceding negotiations), political and patrimonial considerations took precedence. The betrothed themselves viewed marriage as one of the many duties of their social position, with two unequivocal aims: to establish or consolidate alliances and to produce heirs.

Even more so in the case of Afonso V, who, like his grandfather and especially his father, approached all decisions that might in any way strengthen the image of the country, the royal family, and the monarch with great rigor and seriousness. This is the historical-political context that led to the marriage between Leonor and Emperor Frederick III. There was a need to legitimize a dynasty born at odds with succession laws: João I was the illegitimate son of Pedro I (r. 1357-1367) (Coelho, 2008, pp. 35-59).

The rise of the House of Avis to power was controversial and, to some, unconvincing. Establishing a solid foundation for its rule was a priority—one that required recognition and reinforcement from the great international powers. Toward this goal, what better way than the ascension of a princess of Avis to the imperial throne of the Habsburgs? The imperial marriage provided a unique opportunity to consolidate the international prestige of the House of Avis and enhance the kingdom's external security.

With this marriage, Portugal gained prestige among the reigning houses of 15th-century Europe (Almeida, 2018, pp. 253-288; Costa, 2018, pp. 1-36). The greater and more magnificent the display of power resulting from the wedding, the better for those who orchestrated it—that is, the monarchs and their kingdoms. Afonso V's ultimate goal was to make the wedding a unique occasion of affirmation and triumph, effectively internationalizing the Portuguese monarchy.

This was Afonso V's bold yet firm and confident move on the gameboard of diplomacy and international political alliances—bold, and even risky, not least because it entailed such enormous expenses and debts that it nearly ruined public finances. So much so that, in 1451, and contrary to the general tendency of his domestic policy, the king decided *motu proprio* to summon the Courts of Santarém to "promote the financial aid that could support the very high cost of the marriage [and dowry] of Leonor with Emperor Frederick III" (Gomes, 2009, p. 89).

The marriage politics of Afonso V—particularly this marriage—demonstrate a long period of reflection and careful planning, as evidenced by the way it was prepared and conducted. This strategy was part of a broader political propaganda campaign, initiated in 1385, serving the Portuguese crown and ultimately aimed at mythologizing the House of Avis (Gomes, 2009, p. 292).

### 3. Lopo de Almeida and the European Other

It is not only in the context of the so-called European Discoveries, where the Iberian Peninsula played a leading role, that we find important testimonies regarding the culture shock resulting from encounters with the "Other," perceived as different. Even on the well-worn roads of Europe, particularly when heading toward Italian territories, there were contacts and mutual evaluations. These roads across the European continent were the equivalent of the Atlantic routes, and the Portuguese travelled upon them, encountering other peoples and cultures.

A stage for political, social, economic, and cultural convergences and divergences, the Old Continent was a rich source of valuable records about otherness between Europeans in the late Middle Ages. This is eloquently illustrated in the *Cartas de Itália* sent by ambassador Lopo de Almeida to Afonso V.

In his missives, the ambassador focuses entirely on action, as well as on the description of ceremonies—where two favored topics are the clothing and objects used—and the behavior of the participants. These epistolary records hold undeniable historical and anthropological value. More specifically, they serve as model letters for expressions of identity and otherness in 15th-century Portuguese diplomatic correspondence.

Within the scope of the present analysis, we are specifically interested in Lopo de Almeida's perception, as Portuguese ambassador – assuming, therefore, all the characteristics associated with the selection and function of this figure, in this period – , of the European Other encountered in his mission—particularly the noble Germans and, within this group, their sovereign, Frederick III.

Other Europeans are also the subject of the Portuguese ambassador's examination, such as the French and English, whose influence on the Portuguese court was vast and profound, particularly the latter through Queen Filipa de Lencastre (1359-1415): "Let not your officials be thus emboldened, for these men are barbarous and beasts (...) but let them practice the good service from your kingdoms and those of England and France, which are kingdoms of men and not beasts" (Almeida, 1935, p. 19). In this case, as we can see, this represents a positive otherness. Even more significant is the reference to the Neapolitan court, whose Aragonese inhabitants are highly esteemed by the author for their generosity and noble behavior.

But the bulk of his evaluation falls, almost constantly, upon the Germans and the Habsburg emperor. The structuring of this entire process of contact, evaluation and

identity construction is essentially based on the sociocultural and performative reference of *virtue*, as it was then understood within Lopo de Almeida's social group.

We are referring to a model, a theoretical frame of reference, inherited from classic Antiquity, which includes at its centre archetypal elements like *Areté* (virtue<sup>3</sup> or excellence<sup>4</sup>) and *timé* (honour). These figures from Greek culture persisted into the roman period – republican and imperial periods –, when they reached an exponent in terms of the collective imagination of the aristocratic class, which always oscillated between a genealogical foundation and a moral foundation to justify its existence as a privileged social group (Adkins, 1960, pp. 23-32; Momigliano, 1991, pp. 66-67). What mattered more: blood or virtue? This is a theoretical framework, that is, mental, Classical, materialized in concrete practices, especially in the Roman period, and which was extended to the Middle Ages and Modernity – as aristocratic ideals and concepts guiding the earthly existence of this social group –, adapting to the diverse political and social circumstances, namely regarding diplomacy and the external relations among States. It is the very ethic of Greek heroes that constitutes and consecrates itself as an intrinsic characteristic, only in those groups considered *great* and *better* (*Aristoi*), that is, the nobility, in this case the late medieval social elite (Junior, 2012, pp. 29-36)<sup>5</sup>.

The classic aristocrats were part of a strongly hierarchical world, in which the hero's personal affirmation – that is, the noble, in the case of the Middle Ages – and reputation rely on recognition by others. Therefore, virtue (in its diverse expressions, namely honour) was necessarily a public phenomenon, recognizable among peers. This ethical paradigm will be structural in the late medieval centuries, as verified in practice through the representation constructed by the Portuguese ambassador to the Holy Emperor.

This is the basis for the evaluation of the northern *Other* by Lopo de Almeida. In his correspondence, without any mental or social *filters*, the Portuguese ambassador explicitly indicates that what matters most in his model of nobility is the ideology of

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<sup>3</sup> As a *state of mind*, intrinsically associated with the will and expressed in behaviour, attitude and reaction to a circumstance or set of stimuli.

<sup>4</sup> The degree of excellence (moral or behavioural) in the exercise of a capacity that a being possesses as their own.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the word *aristoi* (which is the basis of the word aristocracy) derives from *areté*, so there is a whole transference at the semantic level; and that in the Roman world, *nobilis* means notable, distinguished, eminent.



*virtue*. This is the great pillar of his definition of the social group he belongs to and in the definition of what is *to be noble*<sup>6</sup>.

As such, his *Cartas de Itália* faithfully mirror the relationship between *virtue* and *nobility* (quality of *being noble*) in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern era. They indicate that, especially in the 15th century, the practice of virtue in its diverse forms (namely, liberality) and its ideals and rituals became essential for the Portuguese aristocracy's mental and social horizon, in its different domains. The royal court, as a great diffuser of cultural trends in Portugal and demonstrating a pedagogical concern regarding the royalty and nobility, was probably the agent that most contributed to the definition and imposition of this *ideology of virtue* (Gomes, 1995, pp. 46-62 and 295-320; Monteiro, 1988, pp. 89-103; Oliveira, 2004, pp. 293-310). At this point one need consider the didactic literature that circulated in the learned court of the Avis princes, particularly the *Leal Conselheiro* [Loyal Councillor] (1438), written by Duarte and the *Livro da Virtuosa Benfeitoria* [Book of Virtuous Beneficence] (c. 1430/1433), by the infante Pedro (Buescu, 1997, pp. 32-52).

On the other hand, in the missives under examination, the perception and evaluation of the Germans always operates through a comparative analysis with the Portuguese, presented by the author as superior, in any and all aspects. In contrast, the Germans were always demeaned: “and all find scandal with the Germans for so ill-treating the good you sent them” (Almeida, 1935, p. 13). Lopo de Almeida's cultural references are a code that serves as the basis for his anthropological evaluation.

Hospitality, a fundamental virtue in the medieval mental framework, is evoked as a virtue that is absent in the *Other* contacted by the Portuguese. But the lack of capacity for hospitality indicates two other gaps that are much more serious: liberality and honour. In this specific context, the latter necessarily derive from hospitality and, a fundamental aspect, are essential conditions for the possession of *honourability* – both in the literal sense, as a quality of those worthy of being honoured, or as a reflection par excellence of fully possessing a set of core values for being noble in the medieval period, namely integrity, rectitude, probity and respectability.

Lopo de Almeida's referential system contemplates two antithetical levels of apprehension: first, opposing the Portuguese and Germans; and second, contrasting the subjects of the king of Aragon at the Court of Naples with the Germans and

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<sup>6</sup> *Virtus* as the foundation of nobility and nobles distinguishing themselves by exercising it.



Portuguese – the latter, we insist, constitute the author's axis when evaluating the *Other*. As mentioned, the Portuguese are always acclaimed in the confrontations, always worthy of all the compliments: “know, Lord, that the Pope loves all of yours, as if they were his, and so he had us understand it and ordered we be placed in the most honourable places, after the bishops and counts; and only one German was not ordered to sit where we were, nor another in an honourable place, similar to ours; and so we celebrated mass by a cardinal” (Almeida, 1935, p. 11).

The problem of evaluating the *Other* appears here in full form, because the knowledge of this *Other* (and the *Self*) is always obtained analogically: “I know the other by analogy with myself” (after all, interpersonal communication is fundamentally based on dialogue that ensures the *Self* and *You* as subjects, as persons).

However, this analogical reasoning has two levels: one superficial and another more profound and complex. Lopo de Almeida's merely explores the first level, that is, the knowledge of the European *Other* is based more on spontaneous communication, on the duality sympathy/antipathy and on intuition rather than reflexive knowledge, that is, on the deep analysis of their behaviours (Avelar, 2003, pp. 117-168 and 185-190).

As noted in the text, everything comes to the surface. The disdain for the Germans is clearly sensitive. From there to the state of conflict, rivalry, and predominance of one over the other is a small step, as can be seen in the author's expressions.

Lopo de Almeida's exaggerated Portuguese patriotism reaches hyperbolic proportions, but is nonetheless an essential factor: “the best King in the world, the best land in the world, the best men in the world are from Portugal” (Almeida, 1935, p. 5). First, because he diligently serves his king, which implies a certain discursive rhetoric, that is an adaptation, which cannot be ignored (depreciation of the *Other* is firstly a means to best exalt the *Self* – through the king he serves). Second, because it expresses the path of the coeval Portuguese civilization, concentrated on the Discoveries and militaristic action overseas.

While his words act as a mirror of the Portuguese expansionist spirit in the 15th century, they also illustrate how the collective mentality of its noble class was structured in that specific moment, when they continued to consider weapons and military action as their main reason for being and purest nature: “may God do very well onto the King who has such people; and in this he surely shows how good he is” (Almeida, 1935, p.

26). This is despite the irreversible rise of courtiers and a set of associated values and attributes, well explained by the author when the Portuguese retinue passed through the court of Naples. Values, it should be emphasized, that are also present and consolidated in the Portuguese court (Monteiro, 1988, pp. 89-103).

One should not forget that this hyperbolic discourse is always uttered in reaction to the cold and barbaric behaviour of the Germans. In this, the author is explicit, alluding to the those "barbarous" men and their "deviations and bestialities, at all times like canarians" (Almeida, 1935, p. 9).

An equivalence was established between the Germans and Canarians, perceived at the time in the collective mind of Christians as brutal and wild, the model of moral and social disarray (Cabrera Pérez, Perrera Betencor, 1999, *passim*). Although simple, this symmetric parity is centrally important, for it encompasses all the aversion, intolerance, and xenophobia against the Germans, which is exposed directly and unmasked.

Here, Lopo de Almeida disregards the German's specificity and positions him within the cultural code available in the Portuguese royal court at the time. Based on this operation, he gradually constructs the image of that north European *Other*. We are faced with the Portuguese envoy's "ethnocentric vision" of the German.

This code is based on diverse references – that is, classifications and values – , namely those of the aforementioned chivalry. Based on this code, the author not only evaluates, valuing or devaluing, but above all makes the European *Other* intelligible (Horta, 1991, pp. 209-338).

The difference between nationalities, associated with the vicissitudes of the circumstances themselves, constitutes a motor for Lopo de Almeida's identity constructions and, consequently, the alterities resulting from the contact among parties. Identity is affirmed in the face of difference. One can only speak of the Portuguese ambassador's identity constructions if one also conceives the difference the Germans brought to the gameboard of social relations in the context of this marriage in Italy. This is the question of *ego* and *alter-ego*. To speak of identity implies to speak of alterity.

Since there is an *Other*, the German, against whom Lopo de Almeida seeks at every moment to claim and realize the identity of the Portuguese, that is, his own, it becomes pertinent to speak of a socially constructed identity (Foucault, 1978, *passim*).

One based on Lopo de Almeida's perspective of the day-to-day situations during his mission in Italy, not established *a priori*, exclusively on biological or even geographic (that is natural) aspects. Rather the identity functions and is constructed based on contacts between Portuguese and Germans, that is, as a response to something external and different. It is based on the social dynamic resulting from the circumstances themselves (Jaspert, 2021, pp. 37-73), that is upon direct experience, as verified in several passages in the letters.

The emperor, as the leader and reflection of his people, embodies and reflects all the elements that characterize and distinguish his people, contributing in each moment to reinforce the perception (in this case negative) that the *Others* have of both. This circular logic of cause and effect prevails in this perception of the German Emperor and his people.

Consider, in the first letter, the scene in Florence, when the emperor haggles over a brocade damask with the men of Cosmo de Medicis. The entire description reveals the monarch's avarice and greed and the Portuguese nobleman's contempt: "I swear to you, my Lord, that (...) he is very greedy, without any comparison, and miserly, and see what he has done" (Almeida, 1935, p. 4). There was an absolute absence of the virtue of liberality, that is central to the nobility, among the apex of the Holy Roman Empire (Denis, 2012, pp. 41-71)<sup>7</sup>.

The circumstance is immediately repeated, the author renewing his accusation and disdain: "To none of your nobles [the Portuguese], who assisted him, did he give a single ducat, or bread, neither to me or them" (Almeida, 1935, p. 4).

In the ambassador's words one can sense the idea that a miserly emperor (one that reveals no generosity, magnanimity, munificence, and profligacy) does not deserve the respect and admiration of the Portuguese. One verifies a coherence and constancy in the author's evaluative judgement and in his reactions and expressions when faced with the unequivocal deficiencies in the nobility-virtue relation detectable in Frederick III.

On the other hand, in the Portuguese ambassador's voice, the practice of the virtue of liberality appears deeply linked to the idea of nobility, identified as one of the basic attributes of the noble condition and its political and social identity – we are facing

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<sup>7</sup> It should be emphasised that *liberality*, understood as generosity, is directly linked to Aristotelian thought.

an antechamber of what will develop fully in the Modern Age (Guillén Berrendero, 2021, pp. 19-30).

The author's emotional framework is maintained in another direct criticism of the emperor, namely his weakness of character, revealed by him never making a decision, however slight, without consulting several members of his council: "I have never seen a man so unable to stand on his feet, that if a man said he wanted to go with his mercy, he would not answer before first speaking with three or four of his Council" (Almeida, 1935, pp. 3-4). In the eyes of the Portuguese ambassador, the sovereign lacks one of the main constellations of virtues that are necessarily intrinsic to a good ruler: temperance/moderation, determination, independence, and decision-making. These are virtues that, by definition, must operate together in the act of governing (Amorim, 2020, pp. 644-649). Once more, this gap leads to a sentiment of contempt.

These undisguised criticisms clearly underline the emperor's inability to ensure the aforementioned honourability.

Whenever he can, Lopo de Almeida highlights the differences in temperament between Frederick and Leonor, depicting him as suspicious, calculating, and brutal in his expression and manners. In sum, mediocre and much inferior to the Portuguese princess: "The said Lady was (...) very beautiful, she is well to be praised for her assurance and good restraint; and the Emperor was very reprimanded, because he ordered her to come between these two dukes; and all find scandal with the Germans for so ill-treating the good you sent them" (Almeida, 1935, pp. 12-13).

Always resorting to comparisons (in this case, the noble behaviour of the feminine figure), the Portuguese ambassador was very impressed with the lack of order and the disrespect for social norms between our customs and those of the Germans, far more freer, colder and even brutal (Almeida, 1935, pp. 7-8).

From the perspective of the Portuguese, the northern retinue's disorder, lack of lustre, and its poverty are explained by the emperor's extreme avarice and by the special conditions of abandonment with which he moved to Italy. However, in reality, such "mediocrity" is largely justified by the internal crisis the emperor was facing at the time, and that involved a serious conspiracy by some of the main Austrian Lords, led by Ulrich Eizinger (c. 1395-1460) (Heinig, 1991, pp. 139-156).

Full of irony, humour and intention, the narration of the supper in the palace of John Lateran – which the Germans were responsible for and that followed the

ceremony of the marriage confirmation and the emperor's coronation – is paradigmatic in this regard. In particular, the Portuguese ambassador went so far as to be deeply satirical when describing the emperor's table (among other things, since the tablecloth wasn't long enough, they used loaves of bread as candlesticks; then, because they thought it didn't look good, they brought a silver candlestick, which looked like iron, and took the loaves out of it) (Almeida, 1935, pp. 17-19).

Contact with the German *Other* could not have resulted in a more negative alterity. The ambassador's attentive and perceptive gaze, influenced by his own patterns of social behaviour, constrained his appreciation, almost always negatively. We are dealing with an anthropological evaluation that operates according to the *Other*, in the image built by the author, which approaches or departs from the *a priori* pattern the author defined for himself and that is never abdicated (Lévi-Strauss, 1980, pp. 19-28; Todorov, 1990, pp. 11-65, 227-246 and 297-308): "Let not your officials be thus emboldened, because these men are barbarous and beasts" (Almeida, 1935, p. 19). And, in this case, the distancing is clear – on this point we might even invoke Todorov's model, in particular the praxiological dimension, which we will later analyse in detail.

Lopo de Almeida's identity construction regarding the Germans leads us to infer that it is through the appearance of the *Other* that one can judge oneself, as with an object. And in Lopo de Almeida's discourse, as we have verified, the *Other* is "always there", originally co-present with the *I*, implying, with his performance (in this case negative), the exaltation of the *I*.

The *Other's* voice and performances transform the presence and appreciation of the *Self* into a brutally perceptible/audible "silence". In short, and inverting the perspective, with the coexistence of the *Self* with the *Other*, Lopo de Almeida's letters lose all their meaning and richness, particularly in terms of their cultural anthropology.

For the Portuguese diplomat, the German is an object of values that qualify him without him being able to effectively act upon that qualification, as it arises *a priori*. The author's references highlight that being observed is to be subjected to the *Other's* appraisal. It is feeling like an unknown object of various appraisals, particularly assessments of value: "he is very meagre, without comparison, and greedy" (Almeida, 1935, p. 4).

At one point, the Empress herself, superior in her charm and delicate figure, dared to suggest the protocol code of behaviour, which in the author's perspective only

reveals the weakness of the Germans, particularly the Emperor (Almeida, 1935, p. 29). For Lopo de Almeida, this is one of the main motives to raise the Germans' bestiality and profound limitations, as they did not deserve such a lady (Faria, 2021, pp. 88-89).

He mentions this again upon the farewell to the Court of Naples: "And everyone, the King and ladies will not be tired of seeing her and lament she will be going so far and among such people as the Germans and taken by such a person" (Almeida, 1935, pp. 33). In absolute contrast with the Germans, Lopo de Almeida highlights the behaviour of the Aragonese nobility in the Court of Naples, which so well received the Portuguese retinue: "and such that your sister arrived in the lands of the King of Aragon, (...) certain officials (...) housed her everywhere she travelled, providing all the supplies for everyone without money and not allowing that we pay them" (Almeida, 1935, p. 22).

Here the virtue of liberality prevails. Consequently, respectability and honour are revealed as distinctive attributes of the Court and its protagonists. Honour was possible and achieved. To convey how positively he regarded the King of Aragon's Neapolitan court, Lopo de Almeida did not hesitate in leaving his own nephew there, at the monarch's request (Almeida, 1935, pp. 27-28).

At this point, one should note the importance that Lopo de Almeida attributed to the courtly customs, absent in the German nobility and fully present in the court of Naples. Essential details of courtly etiquette, such as dancing, refinement and gentility of habits, or in manner of dressing, are highly valued by the Portuguese ambassador, who throughout the letters always highlights – by comparison with the Germans – the nurturing of a culture of pomp (Elias, 2006, pp. 141-369). This is very revealing of the predominant ambience in the Portuguese royal court (Monteiro, 1988, pp. 89-103).

In contacts with different civilizations – the German, Italian and Aragonese – Lopo de Almeida compares all that he sees with characters from his country. This fact is not explained merely by the circumstance of providing the King, the letters' effective recipient, with easy and unequivocal terms of comparison.

Actually, the comparison with the Portuguese (that is, the *I*) necessarily imposes itself as the mechanism that sparks the process of constructing the *Other's* identity. And, to this extent, it is also establishes an unavoidable cultural reference. It is the incognito João Vaz endowed with a loud voice. It is the prince of Aragon who is like chamberlain Gomes Pinto, noting however that the former's nose was not as ill formed

and the latter's. It is the small body and discrete courtesy of this same prince of Aragon who recalls that of João de Meneses, who loved the princess and seeing her stolen became a friar (Almeida, 1935, pp. 22-23).

Another good example is from the abundant and rich court of Naples, when the author invoked the voracious appetite of the Portuguese Fernão Cerveira, who loudly proclaimed that three ducks were well enough before sleeping (Almeida, 1935, p. 28). Lastly, also noteworthy is when Lopo de Almeida refers the two miserable nags belonging to two poor German dukes who reminded him of the saddlery of one Afonso Mendes (Almeida, 1935, p. 34).

Resorting yet again to the comparative method with his nation of origin, the author, although a "good prophet", does not reveal the necessary sensibility to rightly evaluate the coeval Italian civilization. This is illustrated by his final statement in the first letter: "And, according to the disposition of this land, in my weak understanding, if a tough Emperor were to come here, he would take it all without any deterrence, especially given that with the weakness of its people, they don't go to war except for profit, with no desire to fight or kill" (Almeida, 1935, p. 5).

Also evident is the inevitable cultural shock and, consequently, the author's inability to open up and converse with the *Other*, that is, to reflect effectively about him and his differentiating traits, overcoming the superficial form of perceiving/conceiving and, finally, representing.

Little did the Portuguese traveller know that the so-called *Wars of Italy* (1494-1559) (Shaw, 2006, *passim*) were to begin soon, and that the Portuguese would not be great protagonists in the conflict. On the contrary, they resulted in the new continental and maritime great powers: neighbouring Spain and France (Buescu, 2008, pp. 102-108).

As noted by Tzvetan Todorov, the relation with the *Other* is not unidimensional. One needs to distinguish at least three dimensions to frame the problem of constructing an *Other's* identity and exercising alterity following contact (Todorov, 1990, pp. 269-293). Consider Todorov's model applied to Lopo de Almeida's letters, in terms of the Portuguese ambassador's view of the Germans.

First, the axiological dimension, that is, forming value judgements: the *Other* is good or bad, I like him or I don't. In this first dimension, what we see in the *Cartas* is an absolute negative appreciation: the *Self* does not approve of the *Other*.



Then, in a second moment, the praxeological dimension, which entails action approaching or distancing from the *Other*. In the correspondence in question, what stands out is, undoubtedly, distancing from the *Other* (*I am not like Him, We are not like Them*, there is – there must be – a distance between *Us* and *Them*). There is never an approximation (a scenario when the *Self* adheres to the *Other's* values) by Lopo de Almeida regarding the Germans, specifically their sovereign, Frederick III; only distancing. There are numerous examples that reveal the inability of the Portuguese crown's agent to understand the alterity provided by this European *Other*.

Lastly, the epistemic dimension, whereby, to a lesser or greater extent, the *Self* knows the *Other*. In this dimension there is no absolute position, but a gradation between inferior and superior states of knowledge. In this case, as noted previously, Lopo de Almeida's discourse is markedly superficial, that is, his knowledge of the German *Other* is based more on spontaneous communication, on the duality sympathy/antipathy and intuition than on reflexive knowledge, that is, a deep analysis of his behaviours.

In short, applying Todorov's typological model to the relations with the German *Other* identified in Lopo de Almeida's epistolography, one must distinguish between the perception of the *Other* and knowledge of the *Other*. The former (that of Lopo de Almeida) is immediate and the latter is markedly judicious and thoughtful. The result is the permanent impossibility in the *Cartas* of understanding the authentic *Other*, as alterity, given the dominating subjectivity that is the basis for the ambassador's entire discourse.

However, this does not prevent the possibility of situations of tolerance, coexistence and even interculturality. These are very present in the missives. Between the pomp of the powers present and a pragmatic daily experience by all those involved – albeit brief –, there is a complex and undeniable web of relations.

A final word to evoke the missive sent by ambassador Malafaia to Afonso V about the marriage celebrations. Malafaia begins by highlighting the parsimony of the celebrations in Rome, joining Lopo de Almeida's vision in this regard: "The reception of these gentlemen was not so great (...) as expected, nor do I wish to describe them orderly in writing because they were disorderly done" (Faria, 2021, p. 79); "And over the Emperor was placed a pallium in golden cloth, more poor than rich" (Faria, 2021, p. 82); "There were three Portuguese ladies, that is, Loronha and Silva and from

Castille, the German were twelve poorly dressed women" (Faria, 2021, p. 81). However, unlike Lopo de Almeida, this image of a certain poverty of the Germans is nuanced as the narrative proceeds. It does not maintain the assertive constancy that characterizes Lopo de Almeida's discourse.

Also in line with Lopo de Almeida, Malafaia pays special attention, on the one hand, to how the participants in the events were dressed (their clothing and accessories are central in his descriptions) and, on the other hand, to the involving ceremony and its decorative elements. In this latter instance, one should note his careful and insightful description of the Christian rituals in the diverse evoked moments (Faria, 2021, p. 82).

In Malafaia the cultural material involving the marriage ceremony also constitutes a topic of superlative relevance. We can conclude the monarch desired to receive news of this nature, that is, about the richness of the festivities and ceremony. This is not strange given his desire that this wedding cast glory and recognition upon the kingdom of Portugal. A privileged moment of royal propaganda was also an effective moment for this dynasty's affirmation. The celebration's impact had to be elevated to the maximum, particularly regarding the involvement of the papacy.

But the main convergence between the missives from ambassadors Malafaia and Lopo de Almeida is that in both one can identify a negative alterity towards the Germans as protagonists of a condemnable behaviour. A *negativity* in terms of *virtues* – although, as mentioned, the specific issue of the German delegation's poverty is nuanced throughout Malafaia's letter: "And after what the knights did the [emperor] went to St. John of Letrom where he ate without a tapestry or cloth of state in this ill equipped room" (Faria, 2021, p. 84).

This is not strange, as mentioned, given the moment lived by the Portuguese in political-military terms at the international level, which could be the cause for the *a priori* arrogance and prejudice. But, in contrast, it can confirm an effective lack of sensibility by the Portuguese diplomats, unable to have a reflexive and non-superficial view of the European *Other* they encountered in such a relevant moment of Portuguese foreign diplomacy.

A paradigmatic example took place when Frederick III saw Leonor for the first time and didn't kiss her hand "because they don't have that custom" (Almeida, 1935, p. 2). Recognizing this difference, Lopo de Almeida did not shy from generalizing,

informing the king of his conclusions, clearly hasty. A lack of sensibility in this specific case related with the gestures and rituals (we could add other aforementioned examples, but this one *per se* is quite explicit). Although there were not radically different, the truth is that, within the framework of coeval western civilization, the grammar of gestures was not universal. The point is that the Portuguese ambassador simply could not understand this difference and judged hastily.

The same judgement, also in terms of gestures – as already mentioned, but given its extreme relevance it is worth repeating –, takes place when the same ambassador criticizes how the emperor and his men wash their hands before a banquet, such that we couldn't "see if they had washed or not" (Almeida, 1935, p. 18). These and, as we've seen, other disparities were not only observed but also object of immediate censorship, contributing towards a hasty, superficial and inconsistent construction of the negative perception of the German *Other*. Hence the peremptory conclusion, "these men are barbarians and beasts." (Almeida, 1935, p. 19).

#### **4. Choosing a 15th century ambassador: a random process or a choice based on specific qualities and criteria?**

In the Middle Ages, there were no formal diplomatic bodies composed of professionals permanently dedicated to foreign relations. This premise is unanimously recognized. However, unsurprisingly, these functions were not carried out by individuals chosen at random or without specific selection criteria.

Some of the figures involved undoubtedly developed certain levels of specialization—whether thematic or geographic—which made them more suitable than others for roles related to international relations. A key factor was also the set of personal characteristics and attributes that, in terms of profile, made them particularly well-suited for such functions, especially from the contractor's perspective.

In general, the main duties of an ambassador in the Late Middle Ages were to represent a contractor, negotiate on their behalf, and provide them with as much information as possible about the matter under negotiation and how it was being conducted (Ribera, 2007, p. 131). The complexity of the tasks associated with these three functions was considerable, making the selection of individuals for such roles a crucial decision.

Although there were no professional ambassadors or even a clear set of norms defining their functions and profiles—especially in Portugal—those who appointed

them (sovereigns, for instance) engaged in critical reflection on the qualities expected of these representatives.

In the late Middle Ages, governing elites had a clear understanding that the competency of ambassadors could significantly impact the outcome of important international matters. This is evident, for example, in the words of Philippe de Commines, who, as a representative of Louis XI, attributed the failure of Afonso V's voyage to France to his ambassadors:

A prince should take care in choosing the ambassadors he sends abroad; for if those who came here to conclude the alliance with the King of Portugal [...] had been more intelligent, they would have better informed themselves about our affairs before advising their lord to come, which caused him such harm" (Commines, 2009, p. 353).

In the diverse diplomatic documentation of the 15th century, the term "entrusting" frequently appears, highlighting the central importance of the king's trust in his ambassadors. It is from this trust that the characteristics justifying the selection of individuals with virtues such as honor (loyalty), temperance, and prudence emerge, along with more concrete indicators of a social or cultural nature, including discretion, the ability to dissimulate, knowledge, a desire to serve the king, and, naturally, the kaleidoscopic courtesy that encompasses good manners. These are the characteristics of a conceptual nature often mentioned in didactic literary texts, such as the mirrors of princes (Lazzarini, 2015, pp. 123-131).

Naturally, the process of the coeval curialization of the nobility had a significant influence on this phenomenon (Elias, 1975, pp. 75-92). As noted previously, the court nobility was a privileged source for recruiting ambassadors—particularly the restricted group of royal councillors (Homem, 1987, pp. 9-67).

In addition to these qualities, in 15th-century Portugal, there were other criteria considered essential for kings when selecting individuals to represent them abroad on important matters. These included royal trust, which had both a political and a deeply personal dimension, expressed through the integration of diplomats into the Royal Council, the court's nobility, and significant positions within the sovereign's household, as well as in central administration. Social status was another crucial factor; for certain missions, it was vital that ambassadors held a position of high rank to command respect from their interlocutors. Additional criteria included experience traveling and the ability to circulate abroad, including knowledge of foreign languages, and prior experience in the role (which suggested a tendency toward specialization), particularly

in regard to the topic at hand, as well as knowledge of the geography and human elements of the destination (such as specific people). João Fernandes da Silveira and Lopo de Almeida serve as prime examples in this regard.

In an era of increasing diplomatic activity, the individual chosen to act as the king's representative had to possess specific characteristics (Rivero Rodríguez, 2000, *passim*). The selection process had to be careful and judicious, with fidelity and honor being essential conditions.

As Philippe de Commynes aptly demonstrated, the ambassador is, after all, a risky element for the Crown and a kingdom's foreign policy (Bély, 2008, pp. 69-86). Thus, recruitment should come from the court's elite—someone close to the Crown—because what is at stake is the international support for the country's power structure. A poor choice could lead to inadequate representation of the kingdom and, even worse, expose it to unnecessary risks.

The intermediary, whether an ambassador or diplomatic representative, had a degree of liberty in negotiations that could be vital to the fate of the nation they represented. They were not passive figures in this process, but rather the Crown's voice and ears in foreign lands. Hence, their selection and role were of the utmost political importance.

Overall, we can conclude that the lack of professionalization or specialized institutions for diplomatic activity in the 15th century does not equate to randomness or arbitrariness in the selection for *ad hoc* missions. Specific qualities and criteria determined the choice of ambassadors, to the point that tendencies toward specialization can be observed.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that, in the Late Middle Ages, the role of ambassador had become an important distinction for the political elites, which was highly relevant for the nobility's collective imagination. Serving the king in foreign missions conferred recognition, status, and, most likely, rewards.

## 5. Final considerations

The letters Lopo de Almeida sent from Italy to his sovereign demonstrate how, in the late Middle Ages, *virtue* defined the aristocracy in a plurality of circumstances and dimensions. In other words, they reveal that one simply cannot think of the late medieval nobility (in this specific case, Portuguese), particularly its summit, without the

notion of virtue. They also demonstrate, from another angle, how epistolar writing was a form of generalized communication, a privileged textual form, one the hand, to create and reinforce relations of trust and friendship between people (that is, establish solidarity networks) and, on the other hand, resolve conflicts and crises, namely of a political and religious nature.

The Portuguese ambassador uses the discourse of virtue to shape his group's self-image. Therefore, in his epistolography, he expresses the ideology of *virtue* as an element that, in this turning point of history, stands out and predominates in the process of defining the nobility's classification, functions and social parameters. This is even more relevant because the letters in question constitute a truly practical demonstration, that is, an action *in loco*, by the Portuguese nobility in a diplomatic mission of high political relevance.

For their content, as well as the context in which they were produced, these letters reveal how the Portuguese secular elite regarded the European *Other*—specifically the Germans and the inhabitants of Aragonese Naples. On the other hand, they shed light on how this elite viewed itself in relation to the same European Other in the mid-15th century. The coexistence of the *Self* and the *Other* is both the touchstone and the foundational element of the *Cartas de Itália*.

Singular and original within the framework of representations by Portuguese nobles in a diplomatic context, the Portuguese ambassador's constructions of identity regarding the European *Other*—particularly the Germans—are primarily based on the notion of *virtue*, as understood within his social group.

In this sense, Lopo de Almeida's letters suggest a clear association between the Portuguese *service nobility*, that is, those that gravitate around the king and seek prestige through assisting the royal administration (Elias, 1975, pp. 219 and 229-230; Gomes, 2012, pp. 147-174)<sup>8</sup>, and a discourse favouring the kaleidoscopic notion of *virtue* as the fundamental pillar of *being noble*. In the sense, Lopo de Almeida's

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<sup>8</sup> From King João I onwards, the founder of the Avis dynasty, there was a progressive interdependence between the monarch and the lords, particularly the nobles, who became increasingly close to the court. According to Norbert Elias, we are witnessing a 'curialisation of the warriors', because from now on, what made more sense was to serve the king according to an obedience and subjection that translated into the granting of land income and the social projection of an elite, rather than the warlike exercise of individual action that characterised the previous centuries. This reality can be seen in the creation of a large number of dependents around the court and the existence of the manor houses of the infantes and other noble families, which determined a social hierarchy dictated by the rules of precedence.

missives constitute a *living* expression of the coeval Portuguese noble culture, as well as what the nobility assumes as representative of its social group.

In other words, Lopo de Almeida's gaze and evaluative judgement are based, on the one hand, on a conceptual frame of reference, where what stands out as the nobility's prerogative is the practice of *virtue* in its various dimensions – inherited as mentioned from the classical world<sup>9</sup>–, the axis from which emerge the vectors of *honour*, the binomial *temperance/moderation*– and mostly *liberality*, *sine qua non* conditions to achieve *honourability*; and, on the other hand, the persistent comparison with his territory and the human gallery of origin (Portugal and the Portuguese).

The vocabulary that Lopo de Almeida uses—always evaluating the Germans in comparison to the Portuguese and even the Aragonese—evokes the practice of honorability; that is, a certain way of being and behaving that should, indisputably, be appropriate for the high nobility (Elias, 2006, pp. 79-117). Within this framework, the German assumes the role of a (negative) mirror for the Portuguese (Hartog, 2014, pp. 15-44, 243-261 and 394-403).

Always insightful, and at times ironic and satirical, Lopo de Almeida constructs identities and shapes collective portraits—such as those of the Germans and Aragonese—as well as individual portraits, notably of Emperor Frederick III. In no case, however, are we presented with cold or detached portrayals. On the contrary, his representations are always rich in emotions, feelings, and the human element—undoubtedly what most captivates the author.

Thanks to the impressive epistolary records of Afonso V's ambassador, we can also confirm that court culture was deeply ingrained in the Portuguese court and served as the ultimate reference for evaluating the European Other on the same social level—particularly in terms of the behaviors and moral code that should mediate the transition from thought to action, that is *virtue*.

The courtly customs then in vogue—female conversation, concerns with clothing, and dancing—are repeatedly evoked by the author, whose missives suggest the considerable prestige these activities enjoyed among the nobility. Naturally, this prestige was reinforced by frequenting courtly environments, particularly the royal court.

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<sup>9</sup> We insist that the question of classical heritage is central, because the code of Greek heroes will determine the Roman mental framework and later, in fusion with the German legacy, the medieval noble mentality.



A place of frequent contact among the Portuguese secular elite and the most open—through various channels—to foreign influence (mainly English and French), the court was a privileged space for an educational process reflected not only in attention to behavior and outward appearance but also in greater politeness toward women and the cultivation of various arts, such as dancing. The court played a central role as a cultural hub and, consequently, as a guiding force in the evolution of noble culture. After all, courtly interactions, complementing physical appearance, were meant to shape a young person's behavior at court, both in relation to his peers and to the women present. This is particularly evident in a passage from the *Cartas* concerning the court of Naples.

For it is within this world of transformation, marked by the emergence of new models of behavior for the courtly elite, that we must situate Lopo de Almeida's *Cartas* and his distinctive vision of the European Other.

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