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Abstract:

It had traditionally been thought that the history of the Portuguese mediaeval parliament was exhausted from the point of view of available information; almost all approaches had studied the Cortes from a legal angle. In 1990, Armindo de Sousa published As Cortes Medievais Portuguesas (1385-1490); this work was to radically renew everything that was known about the theme, proving that, even from the strictly factual point of view, there continued to be a large number of errors and gaps and, above all, suggesting a sociological and political approach to the mediaeval parliament, treating the texts that were produced at the Cortes as discourses, rejecting biologistic theories and concepts such as nature and decadence, lingering in particular over the study of the primary and secondary functions of parliament. But this book, which represented a complete break with everything that had previously been written on the theme, did not provoke any significant reaction either in Portugal or in other countries, being received in virtual silence. Thirteen years after its publication, this article seeks to rekindle discussion about the more controversial and innovative aspects of Armindo de Sousa's thesis, as well as updating it in regard to a number of aspects and putting forward a new agenda for research into the Portuguese mediaeval parliament.

Key words

Parliament; Cortes; discourse; burgesses; commons; representativeness; institutions; powers; duties; functions; chapters; king

1. Difficulties in Relation to the Theme and its Historiography

Each theme and chronology presents its own specific difficulties and challenges. As far as the Portuguese mediaeval parliament is concerned, I would like to highlight four of these:

1. The propensity, particularly if this is unconscious, for establishing a continuum up to the present moment, interpreting the mediaeval Cortes in the light of the present-day Portuguese parliament.

2. The excessive importance given to juridical history, which has led to legalistic interpretations of an institution that was above all political.1

3. Consequently, there is a theoretical weakness which is particularly noted in this field with the constant use of biological analogies (regarding the “origin”, “apogee”, “decadence” and “death” of the Cortes); such analogies make it difficult to gain a correct understanding of the subject-matter. The application of semiology and linguistics has been almost completely absent. It is not possible to see how an institution that lives mainly from the production of discourses can be studied in depth without, for example, turning to the theory of rhetoric and argumentation.

1 Some examples are Caetano, 1963; Merêa, 1923; Santarém, 1828; Soares, 1943.