The Silk Industry In Trás-Os-Montes During The Ancient Regime

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Abstract

The silk industry was historically the most important industrial sector from Trás-os-Montes, with no competition until the 19th century. For centuries, it was the economic activity most open to the outside and the first to yield to the new capitalist mentality. It was, undoubtedly, the productive activity that contributed most to the national and international acknowledgment of the region and its identity. The explanation for the localization of this industry in northeastern Trás-os-Montes lies in its multi-secular tradition, nourished by silkworm creation, that is, by the existence of raw materials in that region, a virtuous cycle that is difficult to perceive. In this paper, which serves as a brief history of the silk industry in Trás-os-Montes during the Ancient Regime, we study the available sources that, although scarce, allow us to verify the irregular evolution of this industry, and the factors leading to its periods of depression and prosperity.

Keywords

Trás-os-Montes, Bragança, Chacim, silk industry, Arnauds, Piedmont

Introduction

The region of Trás-os-Montes is located in Portugal’s northeastern interior, bordering Spain; more specifically, it shares a frontier with the provinces of Castilla-León and Galicia. For several centuries, the northeastern portion of Trás-os-Montes retained an important silk industry, which remained an important local activity until the 19th century.

The Trás-os-Montes silk industry started in the 15th century, but the rearing of the silkworm was an even older activity, dating back to the 13th century. Although the center of the silk industry was always situated in Bragança, the truth is that this economic activity also extended into other villages and towns in northeastern Trás-os-Montes.

As far as we are aware, the sources relating to the Trás-os-Montes silk industry during the Portuguese Ancient Regime are quite rare, and therefore do not allow us to gain a sufficiently broad perspective of its general evolution. Nonetheless, it is possible to see that this evolution was very

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