

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**REBELO, Brito** (Ponta Delgada, 1830 – Lisboa, 1920)

Jacinto Inácio de Brito Rebelo (born on 25 October 1830 in Ponta Delgada, Azores) was the son of Pedro de Brito Rebelo, an important figure in the liberal army who died after the Cerco do Porto (Siege of Porto). His work was marked by military life although he also made a name for himself as a bibliophile, writer and historian. He studied at the Colégio Militar where he finished his course in 1847. On 27 July of that year he entered the infantry as a private. He pursued a military career and, until he was promoted to captain, held various posts in the public works sector in several *concelhos* [counties] around the country. He became a colonel (1887) and finally retired with the rank of brigadier-general (1895).

In the literary field he wrote both drama and poetry but it was as a historian that he stood out, revealing a clear interest in events related to the archipelago of the Azores. He collaborated on various periodicals, for example, *Jardim das Damas*, *Campeão das Províncias* and *Jardim Literário*, as well as *O Instituto* and *Arquivo Histórico Português*, in which he showed his notable skills as a historian. He was one of the founders of the newspaper *Concórdia* (1873), of which he was chief editor, and the magazine *O Ocidente*, *Revista Ilustrada de Portugal e do Estrangeiro* (1878), becoming one of their most active collaborators. In the various monographs and articles he wrote, he devoted special attention to the figures of Gil Vicente, Afonso de Albuquerque, Miguel Leitão de Andrade and Alexandre Herculano. We owe the first publication of the *Livro de Marinharia* (Book of Seamanship, 1903) attributed to João de Lisboa, a 16<sup>th</sup> century manuscript found in the library of the Condes de Castelo Melhor, to Brito Rebelo as well as publication of a popular edition of Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação* (Peregrination) in four volumes (1908-1910).

In November 1879 he accepted the invitation of Ernesto do Canto to become a regular contributor to the *Arquivo dos Açores*. He therefore moved to Lisbon to carry out some serious research in the Torre do Tombo searching for documents that could throw light on the history of the Azores. However, faced with incomplete indexes and some reference codes he was given by Ernesto do Canto that turned out to be wrong – but which at times in fact led to new discoveries – his research was hard and took a long time. It should be noted that at the time archive documents were not available for reading by the public, the staff were primarily occupied with royal diplomas, and there were no supporting monographs or catalogues. These would only appear later.

Nevertheless, Brito Rebelo was one of the researchers who contributed most to this project with historical documentation, and his palaeographic transcriptions were characterised by their accuracy and were



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accompanied by scholarly notes. From the work he carried out in the Torre do Tombo emerged some valuable contributions to the history of the Portuguese Discoveries. These were very useful not only for his own parallel investigations but also for the work of Ernesto do Canto, who was trying to demonstrate the strategic importance of the Azores for the voyages to the West.

Aware of the national and international historiographical panorama of the time, Brito Rebelo became a bitter critic of both amateur and distinguished researchers. He argued with Teófilo Braga for having blindly, and wrongly, followed with no prior examination of sources – a frequent occurrence – the version proposed by the Viscount of Juromenha as to the ship that brought Luís de Camões to the Kingdom in 1570. The figure of Gil Vicente led to yet another disagreement with his “friend and countryman”, who he had to “fight” as he revealed to Ernesto do Canto whose opinion he wished to hear. What happened was that Teófilo Braga continued to claim that Gil Vicente the poet and Gil Vicente the goldsmith were one and the same person, and this twenty years after Camilo Castelo Branco and Brito Rebelo had refuted this idea supported by genealogists and various archival documents. What is more, Brito Rebelo disagreed that Gil Vicente had wanted to offend Garcia de Resende when in a poetic passage in the *Cortes de Júpiter* he referred to the latter saying he was “Feito peixe tamboril, E inda que tudo entende, Irá dizendo por ende: Quem me dera um arrabil” [Like monkfish made, And though all he sees, will go 'round saying: how I wish for rebec playing] (*Ementas* [...], II, 1902, p. 23) when it was merely a simple but notable passage.

However, he reserved his most biting criticism for Oliveira Martins, for letting himself be carried away by fantasy and fleeing from historical and documentary rigour. In effect, being part of the so-called positivist historiographical current, Brito Rebelo stood out for his work which involved historical revision and the demystification of ideas put forward without any documental support as was the case of the Escola de Sagres [School of Sagres] – a controversial topic and a debate that would continue for a long time. If, on one hand, Brito Rebelo praised and was inspired by the work that Alexandre Herculano had done to dispel other legends of national history that had grown up over the centuries, on the other, he considered that there was still much work to be done.

In effect, in 1894, the year of the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Infante D. Henrique, he wrote an article for the magazine *Ocidente* in which he countered the idea that Sagres was the spot where the town founded by the Infante on the Algarve coast had been. He also claimed that the existence of a school there where savants, cosmographers and mathematicians helped Prince Henry plan his voyages was a fantasy. In another study, still following the path of the “country of fables and romance”, Brito Rebelo considered D. Fuas Roupinho to be a legendary figure and his naval battles implausible, and he said there was not “the slightest trace in contemporary Arab or Christian writers of those desired heroic feats” (*Livro* [...], 1903, p. XII).

Despite enjoying a strong historiographical position, Brito Rebelo continued to reveal his humility as a researcher and to point out possible errors in his interpretations, as we can see in the caveat to his book *Livro de Marinharia de João de Lisboa* or in the following passage: “The desire to re-establish the truth is what has guided us in our work; if we have been right in some things, our heart feels satisfied; if we have



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erred, may those who read us pardon us, but take into account that, following the motto of the great Infante – whose life and actions we strive to highlight, ridding it of the dreams that have even provided the opportunity to consider him evil – what moves us is only the – *talent de bien faire*” (“Villa do Infante”, 1894, p. 71).

This historian from the island of São Miguel established a huge number of contacts with other distinguished researchers in his area of interest as the correspondence exchanged with Ernesto do Canto reveals. In fact, the many years he spent researching in the Torre do Tombo and the knowledge he acquired about the documentation existing there meant that he was often solicited by historical researchers. His notes and hand-copied material were so famous that some of them were even acquired by the Portuguese National Library. All this research activity allowed him to forge contacts with foreign archives and led to an exchange of correspondence with various renowned foreign researchers, notably Henry Harrisse, Henri Vignaud and Konrad Haebler, with whom he discussed historiographical topics linked to the Portuguese voyages.

His research work proved useful to Count Henry de Castries, who used it in his work *Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc*. Moreover, he was an assiduous correspondent with Inocêncio Francisco da Silva, primarily dealing with questions related to articles for the *Dicionário Bibliográfico Português* (Portuguese Bibliographical Dictionary), work on which occupied him six to eight hours a day in addition to those hours he spent on other projects at the same time.

In 1903, when he published a manuscript of a nautical nature compiled in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which he attributed to the pilot João de Lisboa, but which also contained remarks and notes taken from other pilots, Brito Rebelo coined the term “livro de marinharia” (Book of Seamanship). According to Luís de Albuquerque, similar manuscripts from then on were also given the same designation and, in the absence of an author who they could be attributed to, were considered, supposedly and expressly, to have been written by the pilots who were most frequently quoted in them even though some had chapters written after the death of the authors they were accredited to. This procedure was not explicitly adhered to by contemporary historians but over time it gradually became common practice.

In parallel to his intellectual life, Brito Rebelo was a citizen committed to certain areas of public life. Being the son of a soldier who had been involved in the struggles against the absolutists and who had been present when the liberal forces disembarked in Mindelo, he showed a sense of civic duty that was linked to the defence of patriotic values but also extended to problems involving emigrants from the Azores to the Sandwich Isles (Hawaii) where his fellow-islanders were very badly treated, and to the question of earthquake victims in the Azores.

In 1888 he was made a Commander of the Order of Aviz and in 1911, somewhat late in life, he became a correspondent member of the Portuguese Academy of Sciences. The “Master of Portuguese researchers of his time”, as he was referred to by António Baião (*Catálogo [...]*, 1933, s/p), Brito Rebelo died on 5 February 1920 in Lisbon. Although his death and historiographical labours had passed unnoticed by the general public, Brito Rebelo left a remarkable cultural legacy that has recently been brought to light in a study by José Damião Rodrigues and Francisco Silveira in which he is referred to as being one of the most important

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historians from the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the area of the Portuguese maritime discoveries.

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APOIOS:

