

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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BENSAÚDE, Joaquim (Ponta Delgada, 1859 - Lisbon, 1952)

Joaquim Bensaúde was born into a Hebrew family that migrated in the 19th century from Morocco to the island of São Miguel in the Azores, where they settled and went on to create a vast chain of diversified businesses. We know that his grandfather, Abraham Ben Saud, settled there in 1818 or 1819, trying out a way of life that was increasingly difficult in Morocco and to which Europe was opening its arms after the French Revolution and, above all, after the Napoleonic gale that ended in 1815. Even in Portugal – where the persecution of Jews had been extremely ferocious in the 16th and 17th centuries – the atmosphere was opening up to the children of Israel with winds of religious tolerance and, above all, new conceptions about the economy and the wealth of nations, which understood development as the result of free trade and competition.

Abraham Ben Saud obtained Portuguese nationality in 1830, and his naturalisation card indicates him as Abraham Bensod, a name that the Portuguese language quickly rounded off to the extent of its vocalic comfort to the surname Bensaúde. His eldest son had been born in Casablanca, but the rest of his children already saw the light on Azorean soil as part of the second generation of the newly arrived Israeli community, brimming with the energy inherent in the conviction that they were ushering in a new era.

José Bensaúde, the youngest son of the family patriarch and father of Joaquim Bensaúde, was the great builder of the Bensaúde emporium and responsible for the children's cultural education and technical training. We can say that he was an example of a man fascinated by the idea of development typical of those times, who knew how to love culture and life, understanding it as a process of permanent enhancement, with a fundamental instrument in books and study. José Bensaúde showed particular care in his children's education, sending them to study abroad, choosing Germany on the advice of Antero de Quental. In 1874, his wife and children settled in Hanover, where Joaquim attended the Higher Technical School, obtaining his diploma as a civil engineer in 1884. With this professional qualification, he worked in London, Cette (France) and, from 1890, in Lisbon.

He was directing construction work on the Alcochete harbour when he was struck down by malaria, which left him temporarily incapacitated and took him to a retreat in Switzerland for a full recovery. Around this time, he began his more in-depth studies of the History of Portugal and, in particular, the History of the Discoveries.



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He was particularly interested in the scientific foundations of Portuguese navigations, focussing on dispelling the legend created by Alexander Humboldt a few decades earlier that Portuguese nautical knowledge in the 1500s had German origins and had arrived in Lisbon with the German Martin Behaim, who had brought Regiomontano's knowledge and books with him.

Joaquim Bensaúde was thus following the trail laid down in the 1940s by the Viscount of Santarém, when he published his *Recherches sur la priorité de la découverte des Pays sur la côte Occidentale d'Afrique* [Research on the priority of the discovery of countries on the west coast of Africa]. However, the centrepiece of his research was the history of nautical science itself, taking as his starting point a 15th-century Portuguese nautical text that he had found in the Munich Municipal Library. In truth – as he himself tells us – his studies began shortly after 1890 when he came into contact with the studies of Meyer Kayserling and, above all, Moritz Steinschneider (*Die Hebräischen* [The Hebrews], 1893), which alerted him to the work of Abraão Zacuto and other Jewish astronomers from the Iberian Peninsula. And by associating these studies with the document he found in Munich, he developed the idea that Portuguese nautical knowledge from the period of the Expansion had a different origin from that announced by Humboldt, allowing him to categorically challenge his theory with the publication of the study *L'Astronomie Nautique au Portugal à l'Époque des grandes Découvertes* [Nautical Astronomy in Portugal at the time of the Great Discoveries] in 1912.

Basically, Bensaúde proved that the Portuguese nautical documentation of the late 15th and early 16th centuries, namely the solar tables and the technique of using them to calculate latitude at sea, had nothing to do with Regiomontano's works, nor had they arrived on the Peninsula by the hand of Martin Behaim. The Munich text – today known as the *Munich Nautical Regiment* – is the oldest printed Portuguese nautical document and the solar tables it contains originate from Abraham Zacuto's *Almanach Perpetuum*, translated from Hebrew into Latin by José Vizinho and published in Leiria in 1496. This places them in an Iberian astronomical tradition of Arab origin, which passed through the court of Afonso X and reached the 15th century via peninsular astronomers, some of them of Jewish origin, who sat at the court of D. João II.

Joaquim Bensaúde's most important studies in the early decades of the 20th century centred on nautical science and astronomy, benefiting from a thorough knowledge of mathematics, which he learnt as part of his engineering training. And he certainly benefited from his experience in Central Europe and his command of German, French, and English, which facilitated his access to libraries and allowed him to publish his work in a language more accessible to European historians, to whom he wanted to show Humboldt's errors. The specific nature of these studies and the required ancillary knowledge led Reis Torgal to classify him in a group of historians specialising in Portuguese nautical science (*História da História...*, vol. I, p. 229 et seq.). In fact, the subject required specific knowledge, which Bensaúde mastered better than anyone else, but above all, he was motivated by the idea of revealing a new dimension of Portuguese nautical knowledge, which underpinned the ocean voyages of the 15th and 16th centuries.

His works are marked by a deep patriotic sense, fuelled by his family's Jewish origins, which led him to value the peninsular Hebrew sages who lived in the courts of Portugal and Castile until the expulsions at the



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turn of the century. Reading his father's biography, written by his brother (A. Bensaúde, *Vida de José Bensaúde*, [The life of José Bensaúde] 1936), one understands this dynamic of a family that dreams of modernity and finds its space for development in the country that welcomed them and opened the doors to success. A country that they learned to love intensely, developing the sense of patriotic service that characterised Joaquim Bensaúde and that somehow had to do with his association, in 1919, with the Sociedade Portuguesa de Estudos Históricos [Portuguese Society of Historical Studies], directed by Fidelino de Figueiredo.

In the 1930s, Bensaúde set out to reconstruct the evolutionary line of the Portuguese Expansion process by studying two key figures, Prince D. Henrique and D. João II. *Lacunes et surprise de l'Histoire des Découvertes Maritimes* [Gaps and surprises in the History of Maritime Discovery] (1930) was the most significant work he published on the reign of the Perfect Prince. However, I think his interpretation of the figure of the Prince was the most striking from a historiographical point of view.

From his perspective, D. Henrique's warrior zeal is the same force that drove the sailings along the African coast in the 15th century and is due to a medieval-inspired crusader spirit, devoid of material interests and with no other purpose than to dislodge the Saracens from North Africa and the holy places of the Middle East. Taking this image as a (preconceived) starting point, the explorations carried out along the west coast of Africa could have no objective other than reaching the East and liberating the Holy Land, attributing to the Prince an early plan for the Indies. Damião de Góis and Camões had already suggested this in allegorical terms, but it now took on the rationale of historical reasoning that he presented at a conference held at the Seville Exhibition in 1930, having already published the text in French the previous year (*Origine du plan des Indes* [Origin of the map of the Indies], 1929). Duarte Leite responded to the text with the article 'Talent de bien faire' [Talent for doing well] (*História dos Descobrimentos* [History of the Discoveries], vol. I, p. 67), emphasising how Bensaúde had stopped analysing the economic interests of the Prince and the Order of Christ in African explorations. This was followed by two new letters from Bensaúde, creating a relevant (and rather polite) debate on how to contrast two ways of looking at, selecting and analysing the facts in order to create a historical discourse (*A cruzada do infante...* [The infant's crusade], 1942, p. 77).

Joaquim Bensaúde was a founding member of the Academia Portuguesa de História [Portuguese Academy of History], elected on 22 December 1937, and published dozens of works on the History of Portuguese Expansion over five decades of intense historiographical work.

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