

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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CORTESÃO, Armando de F. Zuzarte (Coimbra, 1891 - Lisbon, 1977)

Armando Cortesão established a solid reputation as a historian of cartography, producing an extensive body of work that spanned not only historiography but also agronomy, colonial affairs, the history of science, culture, and international relations. He was a liberal opposition republican, a colonial administrator, a senior official at UNESCO and an accomplished Olympic athlete. Born on 31 January 1891 in São João do Campo, near Coimbra, Cortesão came from a middle-class family with a republican and liberal background. After completing his education in Coimbra, where he excelled in various sports, he represented Portugal in its first Olympic team at the 5th Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912, competing in the demanding 800-metre race.

He earned a degree in Agricultural Engineering from the *Instituto Superior de Agronomia* [Higher Institute of Agronomy] in Lisbon, with a dissertation on trematology and plant improvement, where he already exhibited a strong sense of patriotism and a keen interest in history — two elements that would guide him throughout his life. Between 1914 and 1920, he participated in numerous projects across the Americas, the West Indies, Guinea, Senegal, and São Tomé, publishing several papers on these projects and building an impressive academic record. He also took part in the Geodesy Project in São Tomé and Príncipe, conducted by Gago Coutinho in 1917-18. Upon his return to Lisbon in 1920, Cortesão held various positions in the Portuguese colonial administration until his retirement in 1932. He was the Portuguese Delegate to the London Colonial Conference in 1921 and the Brussels Conference in 1924, and was Portugal's Commissioner-General at the Antwerp International Exposition in 1930.

Cortesão became the first Agent-General of the Colonies and founded the *Boletim da Agência Geral das Colónias* [Bulletin of the General Colonial Agency], which he led until 1932. He wrote several articles on the colonies, geography, cartography and history. During this period, he visited all Portuguese colonies and the capitals of the main European colonial powers, taking part in international forums and exhibitions. In 1928, he joined the International Colonial Institute, remaining a member for 30 years. In 1930, he was awarded the rank of Grand Officer of the Military Order of Christ in recognition of his exceptional contributions to the nation through his public service.

In early 1932, he was removed from his senior positions for political reasons. From then on, he focused on



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writing his historical research before embarking on a series of conferences on ancient cartography and historical topics, including the Columbian question. As a colonial official, Cortesão was part of a group of scientific and technical personnel who were essential to overseas policies pursued by the Portuguese state in the first half of the 20th century. The political regime was a somewhat secondary issue, as the “*Ultramar*” (Overseas Territories) was seen as a national issue that united various political and ideological positions, from liberal democratic republicanism to the rhetorical nationalism of the Estado Novo.

From an early age, Cortesão was interested in topics related to Portuguese overseas expansion. His first paper, titled *Onde era o Cabo dos Mastros dos nossos antigos Navegadores* [Where Was the Cape of the Masts of Our Ancient Navigators?], was published in 1926. In 1932, he published an article in *Seara Nova* about a new atlas by Vaz Dourado, followed later that year by a monographic study in O Instituto on the 16th-century Portuguese cartographer family named Homem. This study became the foundation for his first major work in cartographic studies, *Cartografia e cartógrafos portugueses dos séculos XV e XVI* [Cartography and Portuguese Cartographers of the 15th and 16th Centuries], published in 1935.

Meanwhile, Cortesão became increasingly active in growing political and ideological activities against the Oliveira Salazar dictatorship, particularly from Spain, where he went into exile. After the outbreak of Spanish civil war, he took refuge in London. During his exile in England, Cortesão contributed to the war effort as a volunteer from 1942 to 1945, earning a commendation from King George VI. In 1944, under the patronage of the Hakluyt Society, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* was published in London, based on an unpublished codex discovered by Cortesão in September 1937 in the library of the Chambre des Députés in Paris. The volume also included the book and atlas by the cartographer and pilot Francisco Rodrigues.

Between 1946 and 1952, Cortesão held senior positions at UNESCO in areas related to the history of science and culture. In 1950, at the invitation of his friend Charles R. Boxer, he delivered an exclusive lecture at King's College, University of London, highlighting Portugal's contributions to scientific navigation and cartography. In 1953, in an article published in *Imago Mundi* journal, he announced the *The North Atlantic Nautical Chart of 1421*, and later released his most comprehensive work on the subject in Coimbra, in 1954. In late 1949, Cortesão discovered a Venetian nautical chart that led him to develop a more traditional thesis regarding the presence of Portuguese navigators along the American coasts in the early 15th century. Although he faced heated criticism from proponents of the traditional Columbian paradigm, he continued his research, firmly standing by his original beliefs. In 1960, as part of the celebrations marking the 5th centenary of Prince Henry the Navigator's death, Cortesão co-authored *Portvgaliae Monvmenta Cartographica* alongside Teixeira da Mota. This work became his magnum opus, the result of a comprehensive six-year research project cataloguing the work of Portuguese cartographers from the 15th to the 17th centuries. In April 1961, the University of Coimbra awarded him an honorary doctorate in Mathematical Sciences, in recognition of his academic research into the cartography of the Discoveries. Later that year, in October, he received an honorary doctorate in Letters from St. John's University in Canada. In the same year, President Américo



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Thomaz awarded Cortesão the Grand Cross of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator, the highest honour, which had been created in 1960. In the late 1960s, in collaboration with Luís de Albuquerque, Cortesão published the *História da Cartografia Portuguesa* [History of Portuguese Cartography], a work he left unfinished, as well as a controversial essay on Vasco da Gama in 1973.

Armando Cortesão was a professor of cartography at the University of Coimbra for more than a decade and was a member of over a dozen national and international scientific and cultural institutions, including the Royal Geographical Society and the Hakluyt Society of London, the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences, the National Geographical Society of Washington, the Royal Academy of the History of Spain, the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon and the Geographical Society of Lisbon.

The fame and prestige Cortesão gained in the specialised field of cartography, particularly after the publication of *Portvgaliae Monvmenta Cartographica*, opened doors to the prestigious *Imago Mundi* journal. He joined its Editorial Board in 1960 and its Committee of Management in 1962, a position he held until his death in 1977. *The Geographical Journal* noted, "Portugal has lost a man of distinction and a remarkable scholar, whose convictions at times invited controversy [...]. His friends mourn a man of great charm and distinction: the world has lost its greatest authority in historical cartography", ("Obituaries...", *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 144, issue 3, Nov. 1978, p. 534). Posthumously, in 1987, the democratic republican regime awarded Cortesão the Grand Cross of the Military Order of Saint James of the Sword, an honour given to individuals distinguished for their literary, scientific, or artistic achievements. Cortesão's fluency in multiple languages, particularly English, played a crucial role in expanding his international reach. His early positions in the Portuguese colonial administration provided him with opportunities to understand the realities of Portugal's overseas territories and to interact with key European colonial powers.

His career as a researcher can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase saw a steady rise, culminating in the 1935 publication of *Cartografia e cartógrafos portugueses dos séculos XV e XVI* [Cartography and Portuguese Cartographers of the 15th and 16th Centuries,], released while he was already in exile. A second phase was one of consolidation and recognition, culminating in his magnum opus, *Portvgaliae Monvmenta Cartographica*, co-authored with Teixeira da Mota and published in the early 1960s. The third and final phase marked the pinnacle of his career, characterised by widespread international recognition, significant academic accolades, and prolific written production, which he maintained until his death. Despite his continuous work, his *História da Cartografia Portuguesa* [History of Portuguese Cartography] remained unfinished but was published in 1969/70.

With the creation of the Ancient Cartography Studies Group, part of the Overseas Research Board, Cortesão became the director of its Coimbra Section, affiliated with the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Coimbra, where it had been operating since 1960. This centre, an important hub for historiographical research related to overseas expansion, is known for its *Memórias e Separatas Verdes* [Green Memoirs and Separates] series, which published over 250 papers between 1961 and 2004 (including the first 100



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monographs, released while Cortesão was still alive), authored by renowned scholars such as Luís de Albuquerque, Teixeira da Mota, and Cortesão himself.

On 12 May 1960, as part of the celebrations of the 5th centenary of Prince Henry's death, Cortesão delivered an *Oração* [speech] given in the Capelos Hall at the University of Coimbra. In this address on the scientific environment of 15th century Portugal, during the embryonic stage of Atlantic expansion, he emphasised: "the Portuguese Discoveries took place within the new mystical, cultural and scientific environment created by Franciscanism, or of which it was an integral part, which reached Portugal from the very beginning". This patriotic and national sentiment was common among Portuguese intellectuals of the time, including Armando's older brother, Jaime Cortesão, who sought to emphasise and credit Portugal's significant historical achievements.

Conceptually, Cortesão aimed to systematise what was already an autonomous discipline, establishing it as a distinct area of study with its own content and structure. In 1966, in the entry "História da Cartografia" [History of Cartography] in the *Verbo Enciclopédia* [Verbo Encyclopedia], he highlighted the development of cartographic studies from antiquity to the 19th century, distinguishing three perspectives in historical cartographic studies: the Cartography of History, Historical Cartography and History of Cartography. In this approach "which deals with the origin and development of the technique of geographical maps, their enumeration and systematic study over the centuries", four major development periods can be found: Classical Cartography, Medieval Cartography, Modern Cartography and Contemporary Cartography. Focusing on the history of Portuguese cartography, and using a periodization approach, he identified five distinct phases: First period: Infancy; Second period: Splendour; Third period: Stagnation; Fourth period: Renewal; and Fifth period: Contemporary.

For Cortesão, the third period in the general history of cartography, known as Modern Cartography, aligns with the first three phases of Portuguese cartography — from its emergence and peak to its stagnation. Cortesão attributed this stagnation to the period during and after the Philippine rule, when the decline of the Portuguese Empire led to a diminishing role for Portuguese cartography, relegating it to a secondary status by the turn of the 17th century. In this general overview of Portuguese cartography, Cortesão dedicated his studies to the most significant phase, providing only brief and summarised notes on cartographic production after the 18th century. Francisco Roque de Oliveira's observation is insightful, describing Cortesão's perspective on the history of cartography as "[...] entirely aligned with the mimicry of the positivist tradition [...]", concluding that, as a sign of the times, "[...] the world that Armando Cortesão questioned remained indifferent to the impossible and anachronistic equation to which it clung until the end" (*Leitores de Mapas...*, 2012, p. 18).

In more recent decades, particularly at the end of the 20th century, there has been a resurgence of new studies on the development and history of cartography, driven by research from Portuguese geographers. These studies have introduced different approaches and methodological perspectives on the development of



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Portuguese cartography, aligning more closely with trends seen in the monumental editions of *History of Cartography*. In 1991, Maria F. Alegria and João C. Garcia raised, among other issues, the academic training of cartography scholars, particularly Portuguese cartography and its history, noting that "among the individuals we identified, there were no historians: The Viscount of Santarém was a diplomat, Armando Cortesão an agronomist, A. Fontoura da Costa and A. Teixeira da Mota navy officers" ("Etapas de Evolução da Cartografia Portuguesa [Stages in the Evolution of Portuguese Cartography] [...]", 1991, p. 229). They also noted the "lack of continuity" in the studies of the *História da Cartografia Portuguesa* [History of Portuguese Cartography] following the passing of Armando Cortesão and Teixeira da Mota, emphasising that "regarding terrestrial cartography, particularly of metropolitan Portugal, there is no comprehensive work and very little of any other kind" (idem, ibidem, p. 229).

One of the most common criticisms directed at Armando Cortesão by geographers was his repeated efforts to establish "a chronological division of Portuguese cartography into epochs or stages." This approach was contentious, not only because of disagreements over the "nomenclature of Schools or Periods" but also because it was seen as downplaying or omitting terrestrial cartography in favour of nautical cartography (*História da Cartografia Portuguesa...*, 2012, p. 19). For over a century, from the Viscount of Santarém's early studies in the mid-19th century to the publication of *Portvgaliae* and Cortesão's later works in the 1970s, the historiographical approach to cartography often served as a diplomatic tool or an instrument of official propaganda, integrated into the broader national project of celebrating the legacy of the great maritime discoveries.

Cortesão was a strong advocate for Portugal's presence and sovereignty in its overseas territories, a stance he maintained throughout his life. Despite facing ideological opposition that led to his exile, his sympathies and collaboration with the regime, which began in the mid-1950s, became particularly evident during the 1960s, especially following the outbreak of armed conflicts in Portugal's African colonies. Even as he grew ideologically closer to the conservative nationalism of the Estado Novo, Cortesão was still recognised as an authority in cartographic history, his expertise unchallenged domestically and widely acknowledged internationally.

A speech he delivered at the end of the 1962 Overseas Conferences, which emphasised the priority of discovery, occupation, and civilising efforts by the Portuguese, became a cornerstone of Estado Novo's foreign diplomatic propaganda. It is important to note that Cortesão's principles mirrored those that guided the research of the Viscount of Santarém a century earlier. During his time, Santarém, a Miguelist in self-imposed exile in Paris, supported the diplomatic efforts of liberal governments to counter French claims over Portuguese-occupied territories along the West African coast.

In late 1963, Cortesão became embroiled in a heated controversy with English historian Charles Boxer over Boxer's recently published book *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825*. In a series of five articles published in the *Diário Popular* [People's Journal] between 27 December 1963 and 4 January



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1964, under the general title *Um Livro Insidioso* [An Insidious Book], Cortesão refuted Boxer's historiographical analysis. While acknowledging Boxer's expertise in Portuguese overseas expansion, Cortesão accused him of Lusophobia, aligning his argument with the regime's official stance on Portuguese overseas territories.

Cortesão also faced accusations of nationalism from some critics, who called for greater impartiality in his historical interpretations. However, his perceived exaggerations were rarely disputed. As a historian, he was influenced by the context of his time, which inevitably shaped some of his more ambitious theoretical ideas. Controversial topics, such as the Columbian question, Portuguese precedence, and the policy of secrecy, were endorsed by Cortesão from the 1930s onward and continued to feature in his later works, republished in *Esparsos* [Sporadic] and reiterated in *O Mistério de Vasco da Gama* [The Mystery of Vasco da Gama].

Cortesão's bibliographical legacy consists of approximately 300 works, primarily focused on cartography and the history of the Portuguese Discoveries, produced over more than sixty years. His interest in studying and researching topics related to navigation, overseas expansion, and their cartographic representation was particularly evident in his extensive exploration of contemporary documentation in major international archives. Notably, his work in editing cartographic sources (which included a substantial collection of documents) is particularly significant. His critical, rigorous, and factual analyses reshaped the understanding of Portuguese Renaissance cartography on the international stage, paving the way for alternative perspectives and historiographical approaches to overseas expansion.

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