

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**MOITA, Irisalva Constância de Nóbrega Nunes**

(Sá da Bandeira, Angola / Lubango, 1924 – Lisbon, 2009)

The daughter of José Nunes Moita and Justina da Nóbrega, she was the sixth of twelve children born to this prolific couple of colonisers, who participated, as the second generation, in the founding of the city of Sá da Bandeira, on the Huíla plateau. José Moita, a native of Sertã, was an enterprising man who, shortly after arriving, acquired a vast tract of land which he called Quinta da Liberdade, which would become his family home. He named his daughter Irisalva because she was born at five o'clock in the morning, which he interpreted as Íris-Alva, Messenger of Dawn, Morning Star. He was a republican, secular, atheist and anticlerical, and later became anti-Salazarist. He combined these strong convictions with an unusual general knowledge, which he acquired as an autodidact. The house was a veritable school. Irisalva would later say that the whole family had been "very influenced by her father (...) a very interested person, very studious, especially in politics and ideas", who educated his children "in a different way from other children", giving them "a lot of autonomy, more freedom than was usual at a time when everything was very closed" (Interview with Faces de Eva, 2006, no. 16, p. 133). Irisalva Moita's childhood and adolescence blossomed and developed in this environment, where there was also high standards, integrity and rigour, values that she assimilated and which were a constant throughout her life, both in the many activities she was involved in and in the scientific work she produced. In all areas of her life, we encounter a woman of strong character and great integrity, who never gave in to pressure or let herself be defeated by failure. She also inherited a left-wing political stance, although she was not actively involved in any party. Her lifelong religious agnosticism did not prevent her from having a good relationship with Catholic institutions. She even left the home of some uncles where she had initially settled to live for a while in a girls' home run by the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, in Quelhas, closer to the School. He later confessed that "it was a new experience that he had enjoyed very much, one of the phases of his life that he remembered most fondly" (Interview, p. 136).

His intellectual education began naturally in primary school, where he finished 4th grade with flying colours, and continued at the Diogo Cão Secondary School, where he found very well-prepared teachers. He completed the Complementary Course in Literature in 1944 with a grade of 17. In addition to history, he liked literature - "because literature is also history" - Latin and, above all, philosophy, to which his great admiration for Walter de Vasconcelos, a teacher of this subject, contributed. He later stated : "I came to history and

philosophy and at the time I was more interested in philosophy than history” (Interview, p.135).

His academic success and personal interest led him to pursue his studies and graduate in Historical and Philosophical Sciences, which meant moving to the metropolis as there was no such course in Angola

. He arrived in Lisbon in the autumn of 1944 and shortly after his arrival, he took the entrance exams for the Historical and Philosophical Sciences course in October. During the four years of the course, his teachers in the field of History were Ferreira de Almeida, Mário de Albuquerque, Manuel Heleno, Artur Gusmão, Virgínia Rau and Silva Marques, and in Art History, Mário Tavares Chicó. In Philosophy and Psychology, he was taught by Délio Santos, Luís Schwalbach and Delfim Santos. She offers the following overall assessment of her teachers: “Most were people from the regime, or monarchists protected by the regime,” although she has fond memories of Vieira de Almeida and Delfim Santos (Interview, p. 136). Her classmates in different subjects included Lindley Cintra, António Ferro and Mário Soares; she also spent time with Urbano Tavares Rodrigues, Augusto Abelaira, Francisco da Gama Caeiro and Mário Pinto de Andrade. Attending the Casa dos Estudantes do Império (House of Students of the Empire) brought her into contact with people who would later become leading figures in the independence movements of the former colonies. After completing the four-year course, she prepared her dissertation, entitled *Para o estudo do Problema Físico e Filosófico da Causalidade* (Towards a Study of the Physical and Philosophical Problem of Causality), which she defended on 28 July 1949, thus obtaining her degree with a final average of 13, at the time one of the highest grades awarded in the 1944/1945 to 1947/48 academic years. In the meantime, she had completed four subjects in the Pedagogical Sciences course, which qualified her for a professional career. And in fact, in October 1949, she was accepted as a secondary school teacher in Faro, at Colégio Fareense, a private girls’ school where she taught for two years. It was her first job. Despite her love of teaching, her main desire was to devote herself to historical and archaeological research. She approached Manuel Heleno, who had been her archaeology teacher, seeking guidance in pursuing this ambition. He recommended her to the Instituto de Alta Cultura (I.A.C.), highlighting in his report her “ability to bring distinction to the Institute”. Her work was limited to research and archaeological practice, based at the Dr. Leite de Vasconcelos Ethnological Museum, where she was recognised for her methodological skills, which she would go on to perfect through practice and knowledge gained from working with renowned researchers.

On 26 July 1952, Irisalva Moita was admitted as a scholarship holder at the I.A.C., a status she held until 1972, fulfilling the institution’s requirements, but without neglecting other areas that did not conflict with the conditions she had accepted. Her initial interest focused on research into Greco-Roman antiquity in relation to archaeology in Portugal, particularly the study of mosaics. From this field, she moved on to prehistory, carrying out several excavations with the aim of clarifying aspects of dolmen culture: in 1952 and 1953, she explored dolmens in the region of Pavia and Mora, in the Alentejo, and in 1955, she reviewed the exploration of those in Beira Alta, which had been carried out by Leite de Vasconcelos, which extended to the region of Viseu, publishing a *Corpus* of the monuments existing in this district. From 1958 onwards, due to incompatibility with Manuel Heleno, she became associated with the Centre for Peninsular Ethnology at the



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University of Porto, which belonged to the same institute. She began in the Guimarães region, visiting the interventions carried out two years earlier at Citânia de Briteiros and Castro de Sabroso, on the initiative of the Martins Sarmento Society in partnership with a team from the University of Oxford, led by Christopher Hawkes. The United Kingdom was then considered an undisputed scientific reference. Irisalva made a point of learning about the new findings and investigating the fieldwork methods and techniques used. She was equally interested in the archaeological work carried out in Portugal by the renowned French archaeologist Father Jalhay, about whom she wrote the article “Padre Jalhay” (O Arqueólogo Português, new series, vol. I, Lisbon, 1951 - separate publication). He continued his research throughout the country between 1959 and 1972, with a view to gathering all the information for his study “A Cultura Castreja no Ocidente Peninsular” (The Castreja Culture in the Western Peninsula) and the publication of “Inventário e Carta dos Castros de Portugal” (Inventory and Map of the Castros of Portugal), which remained unfinished. However, she published partial results in extensive annual reports, in various news articles based on them, and also presented them at specialist conferences. The scientific skills she demonstrated in such diverse fields confirmed her profile as an archaeologist.

While working in the field in 1954, at the invitation of Manuel Heleno and Virgínia Rau, she was admitted as a second assistant, in addition to the permanent staff, to teach practical courses in General History of Civilisation, History of Eastern Antiquity (semester), History of Classical Antiquity (semester), Medieval History, Modern History, History of Portugal, History of the Portuguese Discoveries and Colonisation, Palaeography and Diplomatics, Epigraphy (semester), Numismatics and Sphragistics (semester) and Archaeology, subjects she taught over three academic years (A. H. Oliveira Marques, “Notícia histórica da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa (1911-1981), pp. 183 and 186). She was one of the few women to teach History at the Faculdade de Letras [School of Arts and Humanities]. As she enjoyed university teaching, she began a doctoral project, which she gave up when she was dismissed in 1957, due to an unfavourable opinion from Manuel Heleno, the same professor who had contributed most decisively to her admission. Her academic training, now enriched by university teaching, combined with recognition for her work in archaeology, gave her unquestionable scientific authority as a historian. She did not let this adversity get her down. When she was dismissed from the School, she sought secondary school teaching and went on to teach in 1957-1958 at the Afonso Domingues Industrial School in Marvila, in evening classes “with students who came from the factories but really wanted to study” (Interview, p. 138).

Aware of her talents and attentive to opportunities for which she felt qualified, she had already begun to explore another professional possibility in 1953. Before entering university, she applied for an internship as an Assistant Curator of Museums, Palaces and National Monuments, which was open that year, and came first among the eight candidates admitted. In the 1953-1954 academic year, she took courses at the National Museum of Ancient Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, under the guidance of their respective directors, Dr. João Couto and sculptor Diogo de Macedo; and in the 1954-1955 academic year, at the Dr. Leite de Vasconcelos National Museum of Ethnology, under the guidance of Professors Manuel Heleno and



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Scarlatti Lambrino. She took her final exam with a thesis entitled Preliminary Project for the Archaeology Section of the Future Ethnological Museum of Dr. Leite de Vasconcelos.

Qualified as a Museum Curator, she applied for the position of Curator from March to October 1954. When she was dismissed from university teaching in March 1958, she rejoined the Lisbon Municipal Museums (City Museum, Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro Museum, Antoniano Museum) as a 1st Class Curator, rising to the rank of Chief Curator of Municipal Museums in a public competition in 1970.

Meanwhile, she combined her work as a museologist with a renewed interest in archaeology, now focused on the city of Lisbon and its surroundings, a field that aroused her particular interest and in which she was a pioneer. She began by conducting prospecting and surveys at the Neolithic site of Vila Pouca, in the Serra de Monsanto, in 1959. However, the work that brought her the most notoriety was her archaeological intervention in the remains of the Royal Hospital of Todos-os-Santos in Praça da Figueira, at the invitation of the mayor, during the excavations of the Rossio Metro Station in Lisbon, which the municipality entrusted to her. This excavation was “a milestone in the history of archaeology, constituting the first major action to safeguard urban archaeological heritage” (“Margarida Almeida Bastos and Rita Fragoso de Almeida, Museu de Lisboa, *Irisalva Moita um percurso fotobiográfico*” p. 111). She herself stated that it was “the first medieval urban excavation within the city (...) because at that time only the Roman period was of interest”. (Interview, p. 139). She wrote five reports on the work carried out, which were published in the *Revista Municipal* between 1964 and 1966, under the title “Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos – Report on the excavations ordered by the Municipal Council: from 22 August to 24 September 1960”, accompanied by a photographic report. In this context, a Roman necropolis, used between the 1st and 3rd centuries, was also discovered in Praça da Figueira, which she monitored and reported on. This discovery alerted her to the possibility of further traces of Roman presence in the city, which was confirmed, for example, by the appearance of two graves with bones and coins in Olivais-Sul in 1964 and an amphora in Beco dos Armazéns do Linho in 1967. These and other findings alerted her to the remains that were being discovered when holes were dug for the construction of buildings, which she kept an eye on until the end of her life.

All this work made Irisalva Moita a leading archaeologist in the city and, as such, she was entrusted with directing the excavations of the Roman Theatre (1966), whose interventions were decisive in the monument being classified as a Property of Public Interest. Another area of interest was the restoration of the Roman Galleries on Rua da Prata, previously known as the “Roman Baths.” She prepared a restoration study with a view to opening them to the public, which happened in 1982. It should be added that all the movable items that were uncovered were sent to the City Museum, whose reconfiguration programme she designed and directed, as she was qualified with all the scientific skills required for the position, as mentioned above.

The vicissitudes experienced by this museum were described by Irisalva Moita in the entry “Museu da Cidade” in the *Dicionário da História de Lisboa* (1994), of which she was co-author (pp. 598-599). The acquisition of the Pimenta Palace by the municipality in 1961 would allow her, as Chief Curator of the municipal museums, to inaugurate it in this new space in 1979, transforming the modest museum that had

existed in the Mitra Palace into the Lisbon Museum. To this end, she drew up a programme between 1973 and 1975, with a chronological and evolutionary discourse on the city. It was in this position, which corresponds to the most outstanding phase of her career, that she focused all her interest on the history and defence of the capital's heritage until 1994, when she retired on reaching the age limit. For Irisalva Moita, the heritage to be safeguarded went beyond the material value of the pieces or the spirit of collecting. It stemmed from her conception of history: these were objects from different eras, bearing the mark of human hands, bearing witness to the long adventure of the people who inhabited and contributed to the definition of the urban area. The same mindset had guided her work as an archaeologist.

This perspective was clearly expressed in the ambitious museum programme she drew up, in which she distinguished between National Museums, Regional Museums and City Museums, the latter being specific to an urban agglomeration and therefore richer in historical implications. ("Fundamentos dum Museu de Lisboa" [Foundations of a Lisbon Museum]. *Revista Municipal*, nos. 130 - 131, 1971, p. 19). She put this into practice with a long exhibition on the history of the city of Lisbon from prehistory to the end of the Middle Ages, continued in a second part, which takes us to the end of the 18th century (published in the same journal, nos. 132-133 – 1st and 2nd quarters of 1972). These texts are fundamental to understanding the museum's programming: the museum displays a selection of exhibits showcasing the city's history from its prehistoric and protohistoric origins to the establishment of the Republic in 1910. It was opened to the public in successive phases between 1979 and 1984, but his plans for the museum were never fully realised.

It envisaged the expansion of the Palace, which had free space beyond the woods, allowing for the construction of pavilions for complementary collections with a new building, "to be built to the south of the enclosure (...) intended for the installation of reserves" and various services; "the assembly, in the Palace Park, of the archaeological remains of the Royal Hospital of Todos-os-Santos"; "the construction of several pavilions for complementary sections of the Museum, such as the exhibition of Lisbon's tile collections, contemporary painting and sculpture with an Olisiponense theme". and other sections. Of this ambitious project, "only the pavilion for tiles was ever built (now called the "Black Pavilion"), without ever being used for its intended purpose". However, it left its name linked to this artistic expression so genuine to the city, collaborating in the exhibition *Azulejos de Lisboa* (Tiles of Lisbon), held at the Estufa Fria (Parque Eduardo VII) in 1984. (José Meco, Irisalva Moita. *Curriculum Vitae*, 2009, pp. 7-25).

Her interest in olisipography was not limited to museology, but also manifested itself in important temporary thematic exhibitions, which she coordinated or collaborated on, producing catalogues of great scientific value. Irisalva had a comprehensive view of all human expressions, which the catalogues also bear witness to. In each one, behind the materiality of the piece on display, Irisalva sees the human being who produced it. The exhibition spaces were diverse and not confined to the museums she had been in charge of since 1958, mentioned above. While it is not possible to mention all the many initiatives, the most notable ones are highlighted below. At the City Museum: Iconographic and Bibliographic Exhibition commemorating the 800th anniversary of the arrival of the relics of St. Vincent in Lisbon (1973), a saint whose cult he had





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researched throughout the country; Lisbon and the Marquis of Pombal, organised in the context of the bicentenary celebrations of the death of Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo (1982); Lisbon in the 16th Century: the image and life of the city (1983). At the Patriarchal Cathedral of Lisbon, The Cult of Saint Anthony in the Lisbon region (1231-1981) (1981). At the Coruchéus Palace, Zé Povinho Turned 100 (1976), The People and Lisbon: types, environment, ways of life, markets and fairs, entertainment, mentality (1979). At the Galveias Palace, D. João V and the Water Supply to Lisbon (1991). When asked which of the exhibitions she had most enjoyed organising, she replied, "There were so many, but I remember 'The People of Lisbon', 'Lisbon in the 16th Century' and 'The Águas Livres Aqueduct'. I enjoyed doing them all, because I have always been interested in a wide variety of subjects. I would start working on them and immediately fall in love with them" (Interview, p. 143).

The Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro Museum was another museum space that Irisalva Moita brought to life: "When I arrived there [in 1971], I had to do all the groundwork, starting with the inventory (...) because the inventory is the basis for more reliable knowledge. It makes it easier and safer to identify the pieces in a collection" (Interview, p. 142). The museum and museographic refurbishment resulted in the remarkable exhibition *As Faianças de Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro* (The Faience of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro) at the Galveias Palace in 1985. This was followed by another, already in the museum named after him, on *Fontes Pereira de Melo in the caricatures of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro* (1988). He chose this venue for the exhibition *Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos. 500 anos* (1993), a theme that was particularly dear to him, accompanied by the publication of his book *V Centenário do Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos* by CTT. These achievements were accompanied by communications. In 1993, he presented *Rosa Araújo in the caricatures of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro*, at the Gabinete de Estudos Olisiponenses, and *Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro and the Grupo do Leão*, at the Palácio Galveias.

Irisalva Moita published 196 works, including articles in journals, communications, reports and exhibition catalogues, according to the aforementioned curriculum vitae prepared by José Meco. However, among the vast body of work associated with her name, *O Livro de Lisboa* (The Book of Lisbon) stands out. She coordinated this work and wrote three studies for it, which was part of the major event "Lisbon 94 European Capital of Culture" in 1994. For this work, which is a reference for the history of the city, she received an award from the City Council in 1995. Irisalva Moita's life and work reveal a personality that combines the facets of historian, archaeologist and museologist. However, given the central role that Lisbon has acquired and combined in all these fields, considering her an *olisipógrafa* (a writer specialising in Lisbon) perfectly sums up her true profile. Reflecting on the various activities in which she was involved, she herself summed it up as follows: "I couldn't seek the life I wanted, but I liked all the lives I had" (Interview, p. 143). She died on 13 June 2009, the feast day of Saint Anthony, one of the city's patron saints, to whose museum she had devoted so much of her life, without ever managing to expand it as she had wished. She was a Corresponding Member of the National Academy of Fine Arts ( ) (1978); Vice-President of the Friends of Lisbon Group (1980) and Member of the Association of Portuguese Archaeologists (1997).

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