

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**MOTA, Avelino Teixeira da** (Lisboa, 1920 – 1982)

Naval officer, university professor, historian, Member of the Chamber of Deputies, officer in the colonial administration and researcher, Avelino Teixeira da Mota left behind a vast body of work that embraces the most varied areas of knowledge. His research on Luso-African cartography and relations, and on the Discoveries and the history of navigation, resulted in a large and noteworthy scientific output. After attending Passos Manuel High School (1931-38) and an initial year at the University of Lisbon's Faculty of Sciences (FCUL, 1938-39), in 1939 Teixeira da Mota entered the Naval School, where he was selected for the Navy Course – a career that was eventually to lead to the rank of Vice-Admiral, which was awarded to him for distinguished service in 1981.

In 1943, Teixeira da Mota submitted “O «*Regimento da Altura de Leste-Oeste*» de Rui Faleiro (*Subsídios para o Estudo Náutico e Geográfico da Viagem de Fernão de Magalhães*)” (“The ‘Regiment for East-West Elevation’ by Rui Faleiro [Aids for the Nautical and Geographic Study of the Voyage of Fernão de Magalhães]) as his graduation dissertation. The Naval School's teaching staff were impressed by the sound research in which a young man aged just 23 had studied and analysed the complex technical problems of the first circumnavigation. Teixeira da Mota's careful work in those initial years of his naval life outlined the academic and scientific interests he was later to develop in his extensive body of written works: the History of the Discoveries; Nautical and Cartographic History; the Luso-Castilian rivalry of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries; and the physical and human geographic aspects of the study of the Atlantic.

At Naval School his interest in the History of the Discoveries, which first appeared in his teenage years, expanded to encompass the nautical and cartographic fields. A devoted reader of Jaime Cortesão, Joaquim Bensaúde and António Barbosa, during his studies as a cadet Teixeira da Mota “discovered” Captain Fontoura da Costa's *Marinharia dos Descobrimentos* (“Seamanship of the Discoveries”, 1934) and Armando Cortesão's *Cartografia e Cartógrafos Portugueses dos séculos XV e XVI* (“Portuguese Cartography and Cartographers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, 1935) – two works that were to greatly influence those he himself later published. Following the example of a pleiad of officer-historians of the previous generation, and claiming that the Navy had played a leading role in the key issues of the history of the Discoveries, Teixeira



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da Mota lists a number of points that he thought indispensable to a renovation of the studies on the Portuguese maritime voyages of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries: cartographic documents, the study of the nautical science of other navies and of magnetism, the evolution of the sea chart, the problem of longitude in cartography, and the influence of Portuguese cartography on that of other countries.

On 16 September 1943, Teixeira da Mota graduated to the Naval Officer Corps with the rank of Sub-Lieutenant, after which he was attached to a number of naval vessels – the destroyers “Dão” and “Vouga”, the gunboat “Faro”, the training ship “Sagres” and the sloop “Afonso de Albuquerque” – for further training at sea. The following year (21 September 1944), he embarked as “crew officer” on the destroyer “Lima”. However, a new phase of his life – service in the colonial administration – was to begin shortly afterwards when, in 1945, Captain Sarmento Rodrigues invited him to be his *aide de camp* in the government of Portuguese Guinea.

Avelino Teixeira da Mota’s scientific work must be seen against the background of the progressive in-depth renovation of the sciences that took place in Portugal in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This renewal process was driven by members of the “Generation of the 1870s”: Oliveira Martins, Antero de Quental, Jaime Batalha Reis, Adolfo Coelho and Teófilo Braga. Their efforts were continued in the first thirty years of the following century through António Sérgio’s critical thinking, Duarte Leite’s highly rigorous historiographical analyses and Jaime Cortesão’s erudition, and further extended in the three decades after that (1940s-1960s) in the fruitful *lessons* on Portuguese culture given by Joaquim de Carvalho (1892-1958), the scholarship of Damião Peres (1889-1976) and the productive works of Armando Cortesão (1891-1978), Luís de Albuquerque (1917-1992), Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho (1920-1980), Luís de Matos (1911-1995), Jorge Borges de Macedo (1921-1996) and Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1918-). Nor should we overlook or underestimate the role played by other disciplines, such as anthropology and geography, which had a direct influence on the historiographical output of the time and helped ensure its renovation. In this respect we should especially note the contributions made by the anthropologist Jorge Dias and the geographers Amorim Girão and Orlando Ribeiro; indeed, Teixeira da Mota said he was a follower of the latter.

The period between 1922 and 1937 saw the publication of two major histories of Portugal. One, by Fortunato de Almeida, bore a markedly individual stamp. The other was a collective work directed by Damião Peres. Jaime Cortesão, David Lopes, João Lúcio de Azevedo, Joaquim de Carvalho and Queiroz Veloso were just some of the authors who participated in this “monumental” *História de Portugal*, which became a reference in Portuguese historiography. In addition to these two, three more 1930s works were to play a fundamental part in the field of studies on the Discoveries and cartographic and nautical history: *História da Expansão Portuguesa no Mundo* (“History of the Portuguese Expansion in the World”, 1936-1940), which was directed by António Baião, Hernâni Cidade and Manuel Múrias; the “*Obras Completas*” (“Complete



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Works”) of Luciano Pereira da Silva (1943-1946); and *Descobrimentos Portugueses* (“Portuguese Discoveries”, 1944-1971) by João da Silva Marques, which contained several hundred valuable documents, in a publication that was only to be completed later on. These were just some of the instruments available to anyone who began to research the history of the Discoveries and nautical and cartographic history in the mid-1940s.

With the end of the Second World War and the appearance of a new generation, there arose a new audience that was not just interested in an exclusively nationalist history underpinned by methods based on simple scholarship. There was a need for summaries that provided a better explanation of the past, with more methodological rigor and help from other sciences.

Teixeira da Mota took part in this renovation movement, establishing close ties with many of those who had initiated it. His discussions and exchange of ideas over the years with Vitorino Magalhães Godinho and Jaime Cortesão and joint scientific and academic work with Armando Cortesão and Luís de Albuquerque leave little room for doubt as to Teixeira da Mota’s role in outlining the new paths that Portuguese historiography travelled in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He said that he did not think that the study of the past should serve to highlight glorious facts, but rather to understand that past.

It is particularly worth mentioning four of his studies, and one work he co-wrote, as projects that contributed to the renovation of Portuguese historiography over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a) *A Descoberta da Guiné* (“The Discovery of Guinea”, 1946); b) *A Arte de Navegar no Mediterrâneo nos Séculos XIII-XVII e a criação da Navegação Astronómica no Atlântico e Indico* (“The Art of Navigating in the Mediterranean and the creation of Astronomical Navigation in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans”, 1957); c) *A Viagem de Bartolomeu Dias e as Concepções geopolíticas de D. João II* (“The Voyage of Bartolomeu Dias and the Geopolitical Conceptions of King João II”, 1958); d) *A Escola de Sagres* (“The Sagres School”, 1960); and e) *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* (1960-62).

Africa, its peoples, cultures, religions and the physical and human geography of the Dark Continent are central to Teixeira da Mota’s writing and thoughts. The fact is that the twelve successive years he spent there (1945-1957) were to open up broad horizons in the research field and generate close contacts with a body of European scientists who held positions in the colonial administrations there. The process of renewing the sciences and many of the scientific progresses of the period were also linked to the European scientific campaigns in post-war Africa. Many of the historiographical novelties produced by Teixeira da Mota were profoundly influenced by this scientific and intellectual environment. The twelve years in which he lived on the west coast of Africa were among the most fruitful of his intellectual life. His love of history and geography expanded to include an interest in sciences such as anthropology, ethnography and topography. His first major research work to be made public – “A Descoberta da Guiné” – came out in 1946, in *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, and immediately stirred the waters of Portuguese historiography, which at the



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time was engaged in a debate that opposed tradition and renovation. His direct knowledge of populations and the geographic environment, complemented by the use of old texts, many of which had thus far been historiographically un- or underused, gave the then Aide de Camp to the Governor of Portuguese Guinea the opportunity to resolve the intricate problem of the chronology of the “discovery” of Guinea and the whole process surrounding it.

Teixeira da Mota’s study appeared at a time of animated intellectual controversy. On the one hand were the historians who supported the regime; on the other, those who fought against a history transformed into propaganda and enslaved to the political ideologies of an authoritarian state. The “duel” that was to rage between Father Dias Dinis, who brought forward the publication of *O V Centenário do Descobrimento da Guiné Portuguesa à Luz da Crítica Histórica* (“The 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Discovery of Portuguese Guinea in the Light of Historical Criticism”) and Duarte Leite, Magalhães Godinho and Damião Peres, bears witness to this intellectual confrontation. Teixeira da Mota – a 26-year-old naval officer – consciously took one side: that of a scientific history that helps us understand the past and society. The role of his study on the discovery of Guinea (1946) was solely that of a contribution designed to help clarify the ongoing debate.

One of the greatest transformations that took place during the Discoveries was in the art of navigation. Sailing the open seas, far from the coast, with no obvious visible points of reference and in the face of adverse winds and currents that led them to plunge deep into the ocean, mariners had to resort to the stars in order to navigate the high seas. Heirs to Mediterranean navigation techniques underlain by “course and dead reckoning”, plotted charts and the mariner’s compass, the plumb line, and above all the pilot’s experience (reckoning), in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese were to develop a new form of navigation based on the use of the stars and the calculation of a geographic coordinate – latitude.

From 1938 onwards, António Barbosa was to prove that elevations were never used to navigate in the Mediterranean until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the inland sea, ships essentially sailed along the coastline, using the description of the coasts contained in portolan charts, together with maritime charts with magnetic lines that gave a flawed depiction of the Mediterranean in that the calculations used magnetic rather than true north. Writing around twenty years after António Barbosa, Teixeira da Mota added weight to this position with *A Arte de Navegar no Mediterrâneo nos Séculos XIII-XVII e a criação da Navegação Astronómica no Atlântico e Indico* (1957). In it, he advanced the study of this question a little further, particularly in terms of the comparison between different ways of navigating the oceans – a discussion to which he added the Arab navigation of the Indian Ocean.

Until that point it was thought that astronomical navigation began in the Atlantic, with the calculation of latitudes, immediately followed by use of nautical charts graduated with latitude-based scales. Teixeira da Mota posed the question in another way. When studying the propositions put forward by António Barbosa and the British historian E.G.R. Taylor, he noticed that there had been a phase that preceded the use of



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latitudes and was very similar to the way in which pilots navigated the Indian Ocean – a phase in which the Portuguese mariners began by using the difference between the elevations of stars to check their north/south progress and merely used latitudes to give them information about coastlines.

*A Viagem de Bartolomeu Dias e as Concepções Geopolíticas de D. João II* (1958) – this article appeared in the year in which commemorations were held to mark the 470<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by Bartolomeu Dias. The study looked at one of the most often referred-to reigns in the history of Portugal – that of King João II (1481-1495). Earlier works founded on interpretations of the chronicles of Rui de Pina, Garcia de Resende and Damião de Góis had praised João II's policy, associating it with a golden period in the history of the small Portuguese kingdom. These patriotic studies emphasised a number of elements: the monarch's plans for the Atlantic area; his "Indies project", which was a means of reaching Asia by sailing round Africa; that the colonies were administered effectively from 1474 onwards; the increase in diplomatic contacts; and the king's shrewdness, which was thought to be a sign of an authentic Renaissance Prince. However, they lacked a coherent explanation and a sufficiently enlightening overall analysis of the Perfect Prince's royal wishes – one with the ability to problematise both the geographic "interpretations" that existed at the court and elsewhere in Europe, and João II's African policy, which was central to his ambitions. Teixeira da Mota wanted to study the monarch's actions and work, but made it clear from the start that he thought that historians usually made the mistake of putting other leading figures of the day on a pedestal and inappropriately attributing great deeds to them. He instinctively rejected this approach, and says so in this study, in which he looks at the history and not at heroic acts and deeds. It was exactly his experience in Africa and as a brigade officer for the Guinea Geo-Hydrographic Mission that enabled him to analyse João II's actions in an innovative way. It is also likely that his undoubted cartographic knowledge helped shed new light on the subject. We think that the key lay precisely in the experience and information he acquired on the African continent and in his in-depth knowledge of historical cartography. In short, in this essay on "King João II's Geopolitical Ideas" we find a new historiographical approach, which was acquired in Africa and enriched during the process of perfecting methods and techniques that incorporated new issues, and which clearly diverged from the currents of the day, which were more inclined to an idea of history based on heroic deeds.

The Sagres School was an academic institution that was provided with the best cosmographers, geographers, cartographers, pilots and other "scientists" of the day, lavishly equipped with an astronomical observatory, and given the mission of teaching navigation to the rough mariners who left the Algarve in search of new lands. The topic of the School lodged itself deeply in the popular mind-set, as well as in some historiography. Even today, intellectuals and leading figures linked to culture and the arts around the world still consider the idea that there was a scholarly naval academy at Sagres in the 14<sup>th</sup> century a valid one.

Teixeira da Mota addressed the subject (*A Escola de Sagres*, 1960) in the midst of a cycle of



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commemorations of the life of Prince Henry the Navigator, before an audience that was largely made up of cadets from the Naval School, on the Sagres promontory itself. Right at the start of his talk, he bluntly said that the first part of it was devoted to showing that there was no such thing as a “Sagres School”. The basic outline of this position went back to the debates of the 1920s, which were to be renewed and taken to greater depth at the beginning of the 1960s and in which the naval officer and historian Teixeira da Mota was to be one of the authors who rejected the invasion of history by myth.

The position he defended was undoubtedly a daring one. However, by re-centring the question of the Sagres School on its *symbolism*, he left the door far enough ajar for the proponents of the more conservative positions taken within the structure of the New State and in the scientific milieus linked to it to be able to save face. We should remember that a very common stance taken in the official and unofficial discourse of that year focused on an idealised image of a prince who was a scientist, a wise man and a romantic and who, at Sagres, was the architect of the plan to reach India.

*Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* (1960-62), which was published in five volumes plus a small volume of indices, is in part a destination in its own right. It is the product of a lifetime of hard labour, effort, work and research on the subjects linked to cartography (geodesic science and topography), and particularly on the study of historical cartography. For its two authors – Armando Cortesão and Teixeira da Mota – it was a dream come true: to reproduce and study all the known Portuguese cartography up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This was the reference work of the 1960 commemorations dedicated to Prince Henry. Teixeira da Mota played an especially key role in the final volumes of *Portugaliae*, in which he wrote about most of the cartographers of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and above all the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is also important to look the studies Teixeira da Mota undertook as part of his membership of the academic institutions and circles which were always a part of his scientific life and which his own activities and work helped stimulate. While he began with the Centre for Studies in Portuguese Guinea (CEGP), which he helped create, the Naval Military Club (CMN), the Lisbon Geography Society (SGL), the Centre for Overseas Historical Studies (CEHU), and the Group for Studies in Historical Cartography (AECA, which he directed), were no less important to his research work. He also belonged to the Portuguese Academy of History (APH), the Lisbon Academy of Sciences (ACH), and finally the Centre for Naval Studies (CEM), which later gave rise to the Naval Academy (AM), of which he was the second president. In all these institutions Avelino Teixeira da Mota found support, specialised journals in which to write and publicise his results, opportunities to begin to work with others, and discussion groups and joint projects to take part in. In addition to all this, his teaching work at the Naval School (1958-1965) and as guest professor at the University of Lisbon’s Faculty of Humanities (FLUL, 1965-1969) gave him the opportunity to establish deep and close ties with the academic and scientific community at large.

Taken as a whole, Avelino Teixeira da Mota’s written work can be divided into two major areas. On the



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one hand, the texts on the study of historical cartography, nautical science and the Portuguese expansion; on the other, the studies – pioneering in Portugal – on Afro-Portuguese relations, African societies and the history of Africa. It is important to note that this duality was due to his professional duties as a naval officer. While it is true that his interest in matters of a nautical and cartographic scope awoke while he was still at Naval School, it is equally the case that his first publications on Africa and Luso-African relations only appeared years later, between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, when he was the main driving force behind the Centre for Studies in Guinea – of which he was the founder and its president in the 1950s – and he was serving first as the governor's aide de camp and then in the local Geo-Hydrographic Mission.

When, in 1971, he returned from his service commissions in Guinea and Angola, Teixeira da Mota was detached on special commission to the Colonial Ministry, where he was to direct the Group for Studies in Historical Cartography. It was his intention to use AECA to publish Portuguese sources for the history of Africa, with critical studies and editions in various languages. The task was to prove a difficult and unrealistic one for the scientific and cultural panorama of the day, given that in the next few years the country was to go through a period of social and political transition.

In 1976, Teixeira da Mota was transferred to the naval reserve with the rank of Captain (to which he had been promoted in 1973), albeit he continued on active service with functions at the Navy Court and the Ministry of Defence. At the same time, a number of international universities and other institutions invited him to give talks. At the beginning of the 1980s he was asked to outline the plans for one of the main sections of the 17<sup>th</sup> Exposition of Art, Science and European Culture, but he fell seriously ill when the draft for this grandiose event, which symbolised the renewal of Portugal's ties with the rest of Europe after the "African period", was nearly ready.

Teixeira da Mota died in 1982. In the final years of his life he tried to gather support for the publication of Portuguese sources for the study of African societies. This was his great unfinished research project and one that he hoped would bring Portugal and Africa closer together.

A naval officer with a notable service record and a historian of acknowledged merit, Avelino Teixeira da Mota left us a vast body of work based on careful scientific methods that in many respects are still current today. Methodical, with a deep sense of organisation in everything he did, he devoted himself hermit-like to studies and research in various sciences; his legacy for posterity is a bibliographic heritage that encompasses the most varied domains of knowledge. His investigative work in the fields of Seamanship, Nautical Science, Cartography and Luso-African relations, as well as on the Discoveries and especially historical cartography, is today an obligatory reference for anyone who studies these subjects.

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APOIOS:

