

# ***Besteiros Do Conto (Crossbowmen):*** **Organization, abuses of power and irregularities during** **the reign of Dom João I (1385-1433)**

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine an aspect of social life linked to one of the most important and original forms of military organization in the whole of Portuguese history—the *besteiros do conto* (crossbowmen). This research centers mainly on the royal documents issued under the rule of Dom João I, which made it possible to arrive at a series of perspectives illustrating the constant abuses perpetrated inside this militia, with attention being drawn most notably to the municipal offenses directed against the privileges enjoyed by the crossbowmen, the situations in which these men themselves committed abuses, and, finally, the attempts made to legally escape appointment to this military force.

## Keywords

*Besteiros do Conto* (crossbowmen), Dom João I, war, military history, social history

## Resumo

Através deste artigo pretendemos dar a conhecer um aspeto da sociabilidade de uma das formas de organização militar mais importantes e originais de toda a história portuguesa—os *besteiros do conto*. Esta investigação incidiu principalmente na documentação régia outorgada por D. João I. Através destes acervos documentais conseguimos elaborar um conjunto de perspetivas relacionadas com os constantes abusos praticados no interior desta *milícia*, destacando-se os casos de gravames concelhios contra os privilégios dos *besteiros do conto*, as situações em que eram os próprios *atiradores com besta* a cometer abusos ou, por fim, as tentativas de fugas litigiosas às nomeações de elementos para este *corpo militar*.

## Palavras-chave

Besteiros do Conto, D. João I, Guerra, História Militar e História Social

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout their existence as a military force, the *besteiros do conto* (crossbowmen)<sup>2</sup> played a fundamental role in the battles fought by the Portuguese Crown. This group of soldiers, recruited at the local level in the municipalities, was soon subjected to various attempts at regulation by the monarchy. It is believed that they first began to be organized in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries by Dom Dinis or Dom Afonso IV (Ferreira 1988: 185).

Armed with crossbows, these soldiers were endowed with a deadly accuracy<sup>3</sup> and a highly destructive shooting capacity.<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of the weapon used by this military force was so frightening,<sup>5</sup> that Pope Urban II condemned its use in 1097-99 (Barroca 2003: 140). Years later, the Second Lateran Council (1139) prohibited its use in battles between Christian forces (Barroca 2003: 140). The crossbow, and consequently its users, soon caught the attention of the Portuguese Crown,<sup>6</sup> due to its great value in warfare (Barroca 2003: 140). It is therefore not surprising to discover that, after the militia of the *besteiros do conto* had been created, this “barbaric bow”<sup>7</sup> was mentioned in a document issued by Dom João I, dated 1414, which expressly banned the export of arms and foodstuffs (such as bread, for example) to the Moors. Offenders were liable to corporal punishment, including even the death sentence (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 162-163, vol. III, t. 3, doc. 1078).

This military force was answerable to the monarch and its *anadel-mor* (commander-in-chief), who was appointed by the former. There was also another *anadel* in each municipality, who served as an intermediary for these high dignitaries; however, this captain was chosen from within the municipalities themselves. It was thus the responsibility of the municipal authorities (judges and councilors) to inform the *anadel* of each municipality of the name of the men selected for the position of *besteiro do conto* (Monteiro 1998: 63).

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<sup>2</sup> The origin of this name has a very simple explanation: in order to guarantee the more effective implantation of this military force all across the realm, the monarchy established a *conto*, or, in other words, a fixed number of crossbowmen to be recruited (Monteiro 2003: 197).

<sup>3</sup> Due to their regular training and specialization in the use of their weapons, but also due to the peculiarity that the crossbow had, it could be primed and kept ready for firing for as long as the crossbowman saw fit (Monteiro 2003: 197).

<sup>4</sup> There are several references to this particular feature of the crossbow. Mário Jorge Barroca mentions the description provided by Beatus, a Byzantine princess, who claimed that the shot from a crossbow was so powerful that its arrows could “pass through a shield, perforate a thick iron breastplate, and continue its flight on the other side” of the body (Barroca 2003: 140).

<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that its firing rate is much slower than that of a traditional longbow (Barroca 2003: 140).

<sup>6</sup> There are references to the crossbowmen in the charter of Sernancelhe, dated 1124 (Barroca 2003: 140).

<sup>7</sup> This was how it was referred to by Princess Beatus (Barroca 2003: 140).

Nonetheless, the Crown always attempted to intervene in this process, “invoking a failure to meet the relevant deadlines, fraudulent situations that needed to be corrected, or recruitments that urgently needed to be completed” (Monteiro 1998: 64).

The recruitment of men for this militia was to be made from among the artisans, preferably those who were married and did not till the land on a permanent basis with a yoke of oxen. Were it not possible to find the necessary men from among this group when replacing the force’s members in the event of death, the *Ordenações Afonsinas* decreed that recruitment could be made from other sectors (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 437, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 29).

The *besteiros do conto* enjoyed a series of privileges that distinguished them from the rest of the infantry. They could not, however, aspire to promotion to the status of *cavaleiros-vilãos* (villein-knights) (Mattoso 1995: 299). They were paid soldiers and, as José Mattoso noted, they represented one of the first contingents to display the “minimum requirements of professionalization” (Mattoso 1995: 299) or, as João Gouveia Monteiro further added, “of specialization in the use of a particular weapon (which did, in fact, require regular training)” (Monteiro 1998: 65). In turn, as A. H. de Oliveira Marques noted, the instruments created by the Crown to organize and manage the *besteiros do conto* resulted in a “first step toward the structuring of a State with modern characteristics” (Marques 1986: 348).

Among the other privileges enjoyed by this militia, the following were the most significant: exemption from a series of taxes (municipal for the most part), as was the case with the payment of *almotaçaria*, *peitas*, *fintas* and *talbas* (and, obviously, the payment of *jugadas* and *oitavas*<sup>8</sup>, if the municipal charter included this exemption); the direct protection of the monarch, so that anyone attacking them or their property would be punished judicially; the right to a retirement pension subject to a series of conditions (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 437, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 29); and finally the right to possess weapons and to circulate freely throughout the kingdom (on condition that they did not cause damage with these weapons or wander around outside late at night) (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 179).

Besides these privileges, the *besteiros do conto* were obliged to fulfill a series of obligations and duties. They performed small tasks linked to the policing of the *concelhos* (Monteiro 1998: 68) and transported both prisoners and money (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D.*

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<sup>8</sup> *Almotaçaria* referred to a payment relating to weights and measures; *peitas* were taxes paid by those who were not *fidalgos*; *fintas* and *talbas* were municipal taxes levied on income and property; *jugadas* were agricultural taxes paid in the form of grain; and *oitavas* were a form of tithe. (Translator’s note).

*João I* 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 179). In addition to these duties, crossbowmen were obliged to serve for six weeks without pay as a form of compulsory military service, take care of their weaponry and keep it operational (mainly the crossbow), take part in musters when summoned to do so, and participate in archery contests as a form of training (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 179). Taking into account the series of rights and duties that have just been mentioned, historical circumstances dictated that, particularly from the late fourteenth century onwards, this profession became increasingly less attractive, due, above all, to the suppression of the exemption from the payment of the agricultural taxes of *jugadas* and *oitavas*. Accordingly, some of the taxation rights that they had were revised,<sup>9</sup> which led some of these men to attempt to avoid having to engage in this profession. The fact that they were obliged to be constantly mobilized for the performance of military operations or to transport prisoners and money had a major impact on this question.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see, the privileges that the *besteiros do conto* enjoyed were frequently ignored and even abused by the *concelhos*, a fact that also discouraged them even more from wishing to be incorporated into this militia. In short, it can be concluded that throughout the relatively prolonged initial phase the privileges and social status of the *besteiros do conto* represented an attractive stimulus for joining this militia. However, when some of their privileges were revoked, especially the exemption from the payment of *jugadas* and *oitavas*, together with other undesirable requirements of this profession (such as having to engage in warfare or the various duties and obligations mentioned earlier), meant that incorporation into this military force began to lose its attractiveness toward the end of the fourteenth century (Monteiro 2003: 198).

This military force continued to form part of the Portuguese army for almost two centuries, eventually being suppressed by Dom Manuel I at the end of the fifteenth century, at the Lisbon *Cortes* of 1498 (Santos 2005: 197). However, the role played by the *besteiros do conto* was gradually taken over by other military forces serving the Portuguese crown. The organization of this medieval militia was an important source of know-how that provided the basis for creating and regulating the *espingardeiros do conto*,<sup>11</sup> the militia of musketeers who replaced the *besteiros do conto* and played a leading role in the appearance

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<sup>9</sup> And possibly some of the other privileges (Monteiro 2003: 198).

<sup>10</sup> Carrying out this transport of prisoners and money was a most unattractive task for the men of the time, due to the highly unsafe nature of “the roads and pathways, even inside the towns and villages themselves” (Monteiro 2003: 198).

<sup>11</sup> This force was seen in action for the first time during the disastrous expedition to Tangier, in 1437 (Martins 2008: 395).

and spread of firearms. These two groups did, however, coexist with one another in the last two decades of the fifteenth century (Martins 2008: 395).

## 2. The importance of the *anadel* and the abuse of power

In the brief introduction that preceded this section, a very succinct definition was provided of the figure of the *anadel*. Although it is not my aim here to make an extensive analysis of these officers, there are questions that we have to direct our attention to in order to better understand how this position functioned in practice. One of the most immediate points that should be addressed is how the figure of the *anadel-mor* (commander-in-chief) came to be created and how he was appointed, as well as the procedures that were in place regarding the local *anadéis* (captains). The way in which this position was exercised was highly important for the *besteiros do conto* themselves, so that it is crucial to know more about the relationship between the *besteiros* and the *anadéis*, particularly from the viewpoint of the central power, the social effects of his appointment and the most frequent abuses encountered during the reign of Dom João I.

The need to create an autonomous structure, whose organization would govern the *besteiros do conto*, led to the creation of the position of *anadel-mor* for the whole kingdom during the reign of Dom Pedro I (Pimenta 2005: 146-47). Such an officer would have the responsibility of supervising the activity of the local *anadéis*, mainly with regard to the assessments made by the members of this military force (Martins 2008: 390). Apparently, the local *anadéis* were appointed from within the militia itself until the reign of Dom João I, something that was made quite clear in a charter of privileges granted to the *besteiros do conto* of Guimarães, in 1322 (Ferreira 1988: 188). In turn, in a charter of privileges from 1400, or, in other words, during the reign of Dom João I, the idea of the *anadéis* being appointed by the *besteiros do conto* themselves was totally ignored (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 179). The *Cortes* of Santarém, held in 1418, shed yet more light on this subject. The *povos* or common people complained that previously the *anadéis* were elected annually from within the group of crossbowmen themselves, and at that time this involved none of the abuses that the new form of election gave rise to (Monteiro 1998: 70). Under this old model for the election of an *anadel*, once his “mandate” had come to an end, the crossbowman would return to his previous status of *besteiro do conto* (Martins 2008: 395).

As far as this question of appointments is concerned, toward the end of the 14th century, there seems to have been a “tug-of-war between the habits of the municipality and

the ambitions of the Crown” (Monteiro 1998: 71). Probably neither side truly won this struggle, so that the solutions found “would have been subject to the geography of regional (economic and political) powers, which profoundly and indelibly marked the different situations of the various *anadelarias* throughout the kingdom” (Monteiro 1998: 71). As proof of this, there is a document dated 1398, in which the muleteers of Elvas, who were also crossbowmen,<sup>12</sup> both *besteiros do conto* and *besteiros de cavalo*,<sup>13</sup> complained to the king about the fact that he had appointed a certain Gomes Peres (*besteiro*) as *anadel* of Entre-o-Tejo-e-Guadiana (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 147-148, vol. II, t. 3, doc. 1304). This act ran counter to the *almocreves*’ customary procedure of electing their own *anadel* each year from among their number. Besides making this complaint, the *almocreves*, in keeping with their local *concelho*, protested that the aforesaid Gomes Peres was rarely to be found in the town, so that they requested permission to once again be allowed to elect their own *anadel*. The king decided in favor of the complainants, on condition that they did not “go against” the aforesaid *anadel* of the regions of Entre-o-Tejo-e-Guadiana (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 147-148, vol. II, t. 3, doc. 1304). The Crown ended up showing some flexibility in this matter, which denoted some royal sensitivity in reviewing the old custom.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The social prestige of exercising the profession of *besteiro do conto* was, in fact, a fairly important one, as the written documentation would seem to suggest, in which these officers normally used this title in detriment to any mention of their professional situation. There were, however, exceptions in the way in which they proclaimed themselves socially—as is the case with the document quoted here—in which they prefer to use the title of *almocreve* (muleteer).

<sup>13</sup> The *besteiros de cavalo*, later created by Dom João I, formed an independent militia from that of the *besteiros do conto*. This militia on horseback functioned as an elite within this military force, evidently requiring members with greater amounts of money, although they were still recruited from within the *concelhos* themselves. Furthermore, they enjoyed much broader privileges that were respected by the Crown, most notably the exemption from having to transport prisoners or money, as well as being free of the need to pay sales tax (*sísa*) when purchasing weapons or crossbows (provided that they found themselves in periods of peace; in this context, they were also exempted from the need to own a horse and weapons), having the right to retire at the age of 60, as compared to 70 for the members of the other contingent, and finally the absolute exemption from the need to pay the *jugada*, something that did not apply to the *besteiros do conto*, who were only exempted from this payment if this fact was stipulated in the local municipal charter. Furthermore, the *besteiros de cavalo*, had a similar structure to that of the *besteiros do conto*. As such, we find a *coudel-mor* (cavalry captain-in-chief), who was responsible for the general organization of the kingdom, assisted by various locally established *anadéis/coudéis*. Such officers were more frequently found in the judicial districts of the Centre and South of the kingdom, due to the abundance of hunting grounds to be found in this region. There were no more than 500 such figures, so that they amounted to ten times fewer in number than the *besteiros do conto* (Monteiro 2003: 199).

<sup>14</sup> In 1396, a document was drawn up granting certain privileges to the town of Aveiras de Cima (in the *concelho* of Santarém), which sought to correct an offense that the Crown had perpetrated against the old local customs. The town had its own *coudel*, Lourenço Peres, who was the captain of the cavalry, infantry and crossbowmen. He had been appointed by the *homens bons* and the local governor (*corregedor*). However, it was the *coudel* of Santarém who selected the cavalry, infantry and crossbowmen, which caused some grievance to the local residents. The king ordered that the selection should be made by the *coudel* appointed by the town, without any interference from the *coudel* of Santarém (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 255, vol. II, t. 2, doc. 1068).

The local *anadéis* (or small *anadéis*) were vested with various powers, which frequently gave rise to several abuses. They played the role of military “commander” when it was necessary to mobilize troops and they enjoyed a small jurisdictional power, since it was incumbent upon them to listen to and judge some lawsuits involving their crossbowmen (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. Pedro I* 1984: 41-42, doc. 79). They also enjoyed some supervisory power, since it was their duty to ensure that the arsenal of the members of this militia was kept in a good condition. The *anadéis* were also charged with summoning musters each week, “before which they also presented themselves as private judges” (Monteiro 1998: 71). According to the *Ordenações Afonsinas*, the small *anadéis* had a book in which they were supposed to record the names of all the new members and remove the names of those who had retired or died (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 453, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 41).

Having reached this point, one can immediately detect one of the main sources of the misdeeds perpetrated by these local officers. In fact, the documentation refers to the fact that the *anadéis* were paid money to enroll a series of individuals as *besteiros do conto*, so that they could thus enjoy the privilege of exemptions from various municipal charges. Such abuses were not only detected during the reign of Dom João I. Roughly forty years before this monarch ascended the throne, during the reign of Dom Afonso IV, there were already instances in Guimarães related with “malpractices”<sup>15</sup> in recruitment. According to Maria da Conceição Falcão Ferreira, “the abuses arose from the fact that there were many crossbowmen there and many of them had been enrolled improperly, in exchange for requests, favors or money, as this was not the king’s service, nor was it performed in defense of the region. Previously, what had motivated those that were chosen in this way were the favors that they could now begin to enjoy, not paying municipal taxes and thus avoiding the normal course of justice” (Ferreira 1988: 191).

Ten years after Dom João I took power, the *concelho* of Vila Real filed a complaint related with the local *anadel*. According to the explanation given, there was not enough income to support expenditure, since there was a group of *besteiros do conto* who had been appointed by their *anadéis* from among the *homens bons*. The reason why they had been appointed was obvious. In this way, they were given the chance to enjoy the privileges that this militia was entitled to, with the stated aim of avoiding municipal taxes. After being spared the need to make these payments, they were immediately withdrawn from the list

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<sup>15</sup> This expression was frequently used in medieval documents, including the *Ordenações Afonsinas* (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 58). The context in which it appeared frequently related to abuses of power or offenses perpetrated by some entity.

and replaced by others. The *concelhos* sought to bring an end to these abuses and asked the king to make sure that the *anadel's* appointment of *besteiros do conto* be confirmed by the judges, councilors and *homens bons* of the municipality. The king granted the request presented by the *concelho* (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 157-158, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 242*).

In 1417, a document was issued that further strengthened this argument. In Santarém, yet another of these frauds seems to have been discovered, this time committed by the men responsible for the recruitment and selection of crossbowmen from among the residents in the local region. The commander-in-chief of the kingdom came to the *concelho* and asked for the list of the respective crossbowmen, in this case one hundred men, although it was argued that certain individuals were missing. After a request had been made for “the book in which their number was recorded,” another ledger was presented that had been drawn up in accordance with their interests. In this ledger, a distinction was drawn between new and old *besteiros*. In this way, when the commander required new *besteiros*, it was necessary to update the list of the enrolled members. Should the *concelho* consider that the list of *besteiros* was greatly reduced, through the death or illness of some of them, then these men should be eliminated from the royal records and new men should be appointed in their place (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 3, doc. 1187*).

Such cases appear to have been frequent, since this question ended up being introduced into the *Ordenações Afonsinas* by Dom Duarte. The Infante let it be known that he was aware that the official numbers of *besteiros do conto* included men that were on the run from prison or “burdened with such needs that they cannot serve when required, for which reason many of those that are given to you and are recorded in your books are already deceased and not available” (*Ordenações Afonsinas 1984: 447, vol. I, título LXIX, n° 31*). This was how the order was given to Vasco Fernandes to visit the places where there were *besteiros* in existence, in order to check that they “are all as they were with the Officers of the Municipalities” and “to cause the names to be added of those who are missing, and to take away those who, despite belonging, do not go, and to put others in their place” (*Ordenações Afonsinas 1984: 447-448, vol. I, título LXIX, n° 31*).

Apparently, irregularities were not only committed in the recruitment of *besteiros*. In maintaining men as members of this militia as a result of “favors, bribes, or friendships,” the *anadéis* “turned a blind eye” to the close inspection that was supposed to be made of



their arsenal.<sup>16</sup> At least, this was what was expressed in the instructions that Dom Duarte gave to Vasco Fernandes, when he told him how he should act were he to come across any of these cases. The Infante further added that these *anadéis* should be immediately removed from their post (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 451, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 37).

The Crown believed that the *anadéis* should be responsible and incorruptible, but, as we have seen, this desire only succeeded in being expressed in theory. Thus, if the upper echelons responsible for the leadership of the crossbowmen committed malpractices, we would also expect to find various offenses being perpetrated by the ranks of the *besteiros do conto* themselves. This premise is easily proved if one glances through the royal documents of that time. I succeeded in detecting three main groups of illegal acts. First of all, “malpractices” committed by the *besteiros* themselves against other figures; offenses committed by other figures against the privileges of the *besteiros do conto*; and, finally, the attempts that certain men made to escape selection for the ranks of the *besteiros do conto*.

These irregularities were not always practiced in different ways, but, to make their presentation easier, I have chosen to deal with them separately. Having said that, what type of illegalities were normally committed by the *besteiros do conto* themselves? And how can we assess the Crown’s actions in regard to these abuses? Was the Crown overprotective in the way that it treated its military elite or did it punish the abuses committed by this militia in a just way? I shall attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

### 3. The “malpractices” of the *besteiros do conto*

Only half a century after Dom João I was acclaimed king did the first records of abuses practiced in the ranks of the *besteiros do conto* (1390) begin to appear in the documents issued by his chancellery. The *concelho* of Freixo de Espada à Cinta complained about the fact that in that municipality there were fifteen or twenty extremely rich *besteiros do conto*, who had good crossbows and good stores for performing their services to the *concelho* and the Crown. However, taking advantage of the privileges that they enjoyed, they caused great damage with their animals, pigs, wives and children to their neighbors’ fields, vineyards and orchards, claiming that they were not subject to penalties imposed by the said *concelho*. These crossbowmen simultaneously rejected the orders of the judges of the *concelho* to work in some trades and professions, claiming that they were under no obligation to do so. They disobeyed their *anadel* and did not leave the municipality to help to defend

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<sup>16</sup> A *besteiro do conto* was supposed to keep his crossbow in a “good, reasonable and acceptable” state (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 450-451, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 36).

other regions when they were called upon to do so, resorting to the argument that they were situated in a border region. The *concelho* concluded their complaint by claiming that these men “were very harmful and not at all useful.” The king accepted the appeals of the *concelho*, stripping these men of their profession as *besteiros do conto*. He gave privileges both to the *homens bons* and to the *concelho* of Freixo de Espada à Cinta, allowing them to appoint their own *besteiros do conto* for their municipality (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 157-158, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 242).

In this case, it can be seen that the decision favored the complaints lodged by the *concelhos*. However, as we shall see, such a decision was far from being the customary ruling. The case of Freixo de Espada à Cinta points to two matters that were extremely sensitive in the view of the Crown and which ended up dictating the removal of these men from their positions. First of all, the clear rebelliousness that was being displayed against the local *anadel* and against the Crown itself. In this regard, it is abundantly evident that one of the essential tasks of the members of this militia was not being fulfilled—the rendering of military service. A military elite only functions properly if its members are duly organized. In this way, these *besteiros* represented a hindrance to their correct organization, because they disobeyed the direct orders issued by their *anadel* and did not guarantee any type of defense for the neighboring villages when they were summoned to do so. This situation was further aggravated by the fact that the Portuguese troops continued to fear the possibility of a war with Castile. Secondly, the question of the region’s constant famines and its depopulation, which were distinct realities in 1390, made a fairly important contribution to this outcome. The Crown was fairly sensitive to this type of problem.<sup>17</sup> Famine, plague and depopulation, above all in a border region, were keenly felt on the ground and were an intrinsic part of everyday life at that time. By way of example, one could mention the extensive period of famine between 1384 and 1387, and another one between 1391 and 1392 (Marques 1986: 30). As can be seen, these cases coincided with the complaints against the *besteiros do conto* of Freixo de Espada à Cinta. So, the fact that these crossbowmen committed offenses in the local orchards, fields and vineyards, or, in other words, caused damage to essential food crops, led the Crown to take an imperative decision.

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<sup>17</sup> As proof of this, we have the case of farmers refusing to be selected as *besteiros do conto*. Vasco Fernandes and João de Basto, responsible for selecting the kingdom’s *besteiros do conto*, questioned the king about how to act when farmers steadfastly refused to be appointed as *besteiros do conto*. The king supported the farmers, stating that if they had “a yoke of oxen and farm[ed] with them, then we [would] all consider them farmers; and yet we order you not to put others in their places if they are already there” (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 430-431, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 17).

A few years after the case mentioned above, in 1394, a new complaint was lodged against the *besteiros do conto*. The *concelho* and the *homens bons* of Castelo de Vide claimed that the local crossbowmen should be brought before the judges and *almotacés* (government inspectors) to respond to the offenses that they had committed, and yet they did not do so. The king rejected the *concelho*'s argument, stating that it had been stipulated during the reign of Dom Pedro I that the *besteiros do conto* should only be legally answerable to their *anadel* (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 136-137, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 224*).

In this case, there is no record of any offense having been committed by the *besteiros do conto* in this region, but, if one reads between the lines in the complaints lodged by the *concelho*, it is possible to make one or two suppositions. The first consists in the fact that the members of this militia had behaved illegally and that their *anadel* did not submit them to any appropriate judgment. This event caused some indignation in the *concelho*, leading to this complaint being made to the king. As will be shown by the following case, the illegal acts that the *besteiros do conto* could be committing did not necessarily involve matters that were directly linked to the Crown. On the other hand, this complaint could be taken to the king due to the simple fact that the *homens bons* of the *concelho* wished to recover an ancient privilege, or, in other words, the fact that the crossbowmen were supposed to be tried by the judges and *almotacés* of the municipality. In my opinion, these two suppositions are not very far removed from reality.

Another series of offences were apparently committed in 1395, in the region of Óbidos. The *concelho* complained of various privileges that the *besteiros do conto* enjoyed, listing some of the illegalities that a number of them had committed. The main source of discontent was the fact that members of this military force had the right to be legally tried by their *anadel*. In this way, it would be difficult to punish the illegalities committed by the *besteiros do conto*, as their *anadel* followed a policy of protecting his subordinates. Apparently, audiences were only held once a week, permanently ignoring the malpractices that the members of this military force engaged in, which meant that the illicit acts continued. Furthermore, if we believe the *concelho*'s complaints, one of the main sources of problems in the region was the fact that the game hunted and sold by the crossbowmen was exempt from the *almotaçaria* tax. The report of misdeeds is clear and succinct: some of the *besteiros do conto* in the *concelho* issued sales contracts charging the *almotaçaria* tax, and then pocketed the money that was destined to pay this tax. The matter seems not to have upset the king, thus running counter to the wishes of the *concelho*. He ignored the requests to put an end to sales that were exempt from the *almotaçaria* tax, as well as ignoring the claims that members

of this militia should be tried by local magistrates (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 826, vol. II, t. 2, doc. 117-19*).

This case study strengthens the arguments that I made earlier. Analyzing the offenses listed, it can be seen that these were exclusively local in nature and that the main sufferer was the municipality of Óbidos itself. However, there is no mention of any illegalities that were considered to be as serious as those noted in Freixo de Espada à Cinta. Accordingly, in the cases of Castelo de Vide and Óbidos, the Crown had greater freedom to pursue a policy of protectionism in relation to its military elite, opting to maintain their privileges without any special additions, while remaining aware that the crossbowmen in these *concelhos* were engaged in some illegalities.

We can also find a series of illegalities related with the maintenance of the weaponry of the *besteiros do conto*. This question was introduced into the *Ordenações Afonsinas*, which in itself serves to demonstrate the importance that this situation had at that time. By analyzing these legal instructions, we can see that there were cases of crossbowmen whose weapons were poorly cared for and rendered useless, or, in even more drastic cases, who did not have any crossbows at all. The reports of Vasco Fernandes and João de Basto are quite detailed in these aspects: in the first of these cases, we find references to crossbows that were “so heavy that [the archers] cannot carry them” (*Ordenações Afonsinas 1984: 426, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 10*). Furthermore, there were some crossbowmen who did not have the financial means to own and maintain their weapons due to poverty, and, in many cases, they used crossbows that were not theirs, while others “showed crossbows that were not in an acceptable state” (*Ordenações Afonsinas 1984: 426, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 10*).

The question of the weaponry raised a number of concerns for the Crown. Vasco Fernandes received multiple instructions to check whether the local *anadel* was aware of these matters. Apparently, if an *anadel* noted that a crossbowman did not have his crossbow in an acceptable state, he could set a period of six weeks for the crossbowman to acquire a crossbow and subsequently appear with it on parade. If the period had elapsed and the crossbowman “did not have a bow, nor wished to have one,” the *anadel*, in the presence of Vasco Fernandes, was supposed to seize as much of the archer’s property as would be necessary, and sell it in order to raise sufficient funds to purchase a crossbow (*Ordenações Afonsinas 1984: 450-451, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 36*).

As far as the duty of the *besteiros do conto* to appear at musters is concerned, it is known from the *Ordenações Afonsinas* that some archers refused to even go to the “parade

ground” and did not want to “play with or even fire crossbows” (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 426, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 10).

Throughout this section, mention has been made of offenses of varying degrees of seriousness, committed by *besteiros do conto*, which must, however, be placed and understood in a much broader context. In fact, the *besteiros do conto* were not the only ones accused of unlawful practices if we are to believe the documentation consulted, as a series of cases were uncovered in which offenses were committed against the privileges of the members of this military force. As we shall see, these cases were not merely sporadic ones, which justifies the fact that, in the next section, the figures who committed these offences are identified, together with the matters that they related to, as well as the framework of punishment that the Crown established for these types of situations.

#### 4. Violation of the privileges of the *besteiros do conto*

As early as 1387, only two years after Dom João I took to the throne, the *anadel* and *besteiros do conto* of Leiria complained to the king about the successive violations of their privilege of exemption from the payment of the *jugada* tax. The judges and the *almoхарife* (tax collector) of the municipality ignored this privilege and seized the property of the members of the *bestaria do conto*. The king ordered that the privilege should be maintained and honored (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 113-114, vol. II, t. 1, doc. 177).

In 1395, a new complaint arose, this time lodged by the *besteiros do conto* of Lamas de Orelhão. These men denounced the failure to honor the privileges to which they were subject, more precisely the exemption from the payment of *fintas*, *talbas* and other municipal taxes. The king once again told the judges of that district that the privileges granted to all the *besteiros* of the kingdom should also be respected in that locality (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 160, vol. II, t. 2, doc. 160).

In 1412, the *besteiros do conto* of Porto lodged a complaint against the city’s council, again based on the question of their various exemptions from municipal payments. According to the crossbowmen, they were obliged to pay the charges relating to favors, loans, *peitas*, *fintas* and *talbas*. Once again, the king decided in favor of the *besteiros do conto* (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 56-57, vol. III, t. 3, doc. 892).

Eleven years later, the *besteiros* of Miranda presented two complaints to the king, with one of them actually being included in the confirmation of the town’s charter (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 169, vol. I, t. 2, doc. 838). The first of these, the

above-mentioned ratification, was promulgated in April and contained a confirmation of the privileges granted to the *besteiros do conto*, which made them exempt from the payment of the taxes (*jugadas*) on bread, flax and wine. This privilege was granted during the reign of Dom Fernando, but thereafter had been abused by the *concelhos* (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 169, vol. I, t. 2, doc. 838*). In December of the same year, a new document was issued detailing the offenses committed in the exemption from the payment of *fintas* or *talhas* to the *concelho* and the right of the members of this militia not to be illegally dispossessed of their straw, firewood or any other personal property (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 92-93, vol. I, t. 3, doc. 1127*).

As can be seen, these cases related above all to taxes, and, in every instance, both Dom João I and Dom Duarte decided in favor of the *besteiros do conto*. They had every reason to do so, since these were frequent abuses of a series of privileges granted to crossbowmen. The *besteiros* were exempt from payment of the *jugada*—if the local charter so stipulated<sup>18</sup>—nor did they have to pay *peitas*, *fintas* or *talhas*, and they were relieved of the obligation to be money collectors among a series of other privileges that exempted them from municipal duties (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I 2004: 89-91, vol. III, t. 1, doc. 179*). Although this situation perpetuated the policy of royal protectionism begun during the reign of Dom João I, on this occasion, the Crown was acting with complete legitimacy.

The legal exemptions from being appointed as a *besteiro do conto* were a definite reality, together with the attempts to escape appointments to this profession, which is in keeping with the observation that I made earlier, namely that the attractiveness of this profession began to diminish toward the end of the fourteenth century. Dom João I promulgated these appointments throughout his reign; however, members of this militia continued to try and avoid being selected. So, we must ask: what stratagems were used to escape appointment to this profession? I found three quite distinct forms of avoidance.

## 5. Problems related with the appointment of *besteiros do conto*

The protectionism afforded by knights, squires and other powerful figures to the newly appointed *besteiros do conto* seems to have been a matter that quite seriously disturbed the Crown. These powerful men ensured that the individuals that were under their protection remained exempt from this profession. Thus, other individuals would have to be appointed as *besteiros do conto*, and these would be people who should never have been

<sup>18</sup> In the two cases presented here, this is clearly shown both by the king's final decision and by the very nature of the complaints.

chosen for this task. To solve this problem, the king prohibited anybody from being present during the appointment process unless they were council officers. It was a heavy hand that the monarchy seems to have exerted. Dom João I, in partnership with Dom Duarte, ordered that, if the powerful men who engaged in these “malpractices” did not agree to leave the place where the selection was being made, the judges of the *concelhos* should seize their property and later sell it for 600 white *reais*. This sum was then to be handed to Vasco Fernandes and Armom Botim<sup>19</sup> to help pay their expenses (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 453-454, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 42).

We are thus faced with the first category of illegal ways of avoiding appointment to the ranks of *besteiros do conto*. The selection would consequently be perverted by a group of high-ranking figures—both socially and financially—who exerted pressure to ensure that their protégés remained exempt from being incorporated into the *bestaria do conto*. There were, however, other cases that could be slotted into a different category. Here we are confronted with situations of *besteiros* who also depended on outside parties, but who had to develop some kind of ingenious strategy themselves in order to escape appointment to the ranks of crossbowmen.

I found a case referring to the fact that some figures assembled funds from other sources to be able to put together sufficient sums of money to own horses and thus be dispensed from appointment as *besteiros do conto*. The king was quite prompt in the action that he took. He informed the authorities of the kingdom so that they would make sure that the property that had been included litigiously could be seized and divided into two parts: two thirds would remain immediately in the possession of the Crown and the remainder would be given to the king’s emissary so that he could unmask the scheme (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 458-459, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 53-54).

Finally, the identification of the different categories for escaping selection as one of the *besteiros do conto* is brought to an end with the mention of cases in which it was the individuals belonging to this military force who devised their own stratagems for escaping appointment.

According to the descriptions provided by Vasco Fernandes, in some places men who belonged to the infantry were appointed by the *concelhos* and *condéis* to serve as *besteiros do conto*. After being appointed, they tried to escape this profession by pleading poverty. When they understood that their attempts would not obtain a favorable response, they asked to be given a *besta de garrucha* (a light crossbow suitable for mounted soldiers) and a

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<sup>19</sup> A new scribe entrusted with the task of helping Vasco Fernandes with his work.

horse without weapons, even if they did not have sufficient funds for this. However, although they satisfied none of these conditions, some of them managed to pull the wool over the authorities' eyes and were exempted from this type of compulsory requirement. The king ordered that the men who sought to own a *besta de garrucha* or a horse without weapons would have to be noted down and rigorously inspected, both by Vasco Fernandes and by the local *coudéis*, unless there was “not sufficient money for this.” Accordingly, they should remain exempt from possible appointment as *besteiros do conto* (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 428-430, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 16).

Even more ingenious were the cases of individuals who benefited both from the privileges that were inherent in the profession of a *besteiro do conto* and from the exemption of their being appointed to this position. The Crown exempted some figures from being incorporated into this militia for a variety of reasons. The main reason was the intervention of the Crown or some powerful figure,<sup>20</sup> followed by cases in which the Crown proceeded to recognize important feats that had been performed for it,<sup>21</sup> or the Crown wished to attract larger populations to certain underpopulated areas.<sup>22</sup> The rules ordered that the subject who received this letter of exemption should be removed from “the king’s ledger, which the *anadel-mor* has” (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 58), so that he could be replaced by another crossbowman. However, there were members of this militia who received a letter of promulgation detailing their exemption from incorporation into the profession of the *besteiro do conto*, but who did not show it to the local *anadel* so that they could continue to enjoy the privileges that were inherent in this military force. Meanwhile, when they were summoned by their *anadel* “for some services both for Ceuta, as well as for some fleets” (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 58), they refused to obey him, stating that they had a letter of exemption (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 460-461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 57). Dom Duarte stated that he was fully aware that the crossbowmen acted “with malice aforethought” and so he created regulations to avoid these abuses (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 58). He ordered the

<sup>20</sup> As an example, one could mention the case of the king’s surgeon who asked for farmers from his marshland estate to be exempted from service as crossbowmen (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 287-88, vol. IV, t. 2, doc. 893).

<sup>21</sup> Here, we have the example of the gatekeepers from the town of Santarém, dated 1391. Since the beginning of the town’s settlement, the gatekeepers who served the *concelho* had received no wages for their work, nor any payment whatsoever, enjoying only the privileges of exemption from all kind of work and servitude that the town’s residents were subject to (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 259-60, vol. II, t. 1, doc. 492).

<sup>22</sup> In 1407, Dom João I granted privileges to the tenant farmers of the entailed estate of Mindelo, situated in the Diocese of Lamego. In the king’s opinion, the estates had been destroyed by war and, in order to settle the population in this area, he would grant privileges to anyone who was prepared to go and live there, exempting them from military service at sea or on land (*Chancelarias Portuguesas: D. João I* 2004: 149-50, vol. I, t. 3, doc. 1228).



local *anadéis* to establish a limit of three months for the crossbowmen to show “their letters and warrants” (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 461, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 58) that exempted them from the profession. If they did not show these and so were not replaced by others, they should be obliged to remain as *besteiros do conto* (*Ordenações Afonsinas* 1984: 462, vol. I, título LXIX, n.º 59).

## 6. Conclusions

As has been shown throughout this article, abuses of power and other offenses were frequent occurrences in the history of the *besteiros do conto*, continuing throughout the reign of Dom João I. Four distinct cases were reported: first of all, the abuses practiced by some *anadéis*; secondly, the offenses committed by the *besteiros do conto* themselves; thirdly, the abuses committed by other figures against the privileges enjoyed by members of this militia; and finally the problems related with the attempts made by certain individuals to escape appointment as *besteiros do conto*.

The *anadéis* played an important role in the organization of the *besteiros do conto*. However, in some cases, they themselves committed various offenses for their own benefit. As we have seen, these illegalities were frequent at the time and represented a matter of great importance and sensitivity for the Crown, since only in this way were they included in the actual *Ordenações Afonsinas*. These inappropriate practices perpetrated by the *anadéis* were subdivided into two main groups. The first consisted in the protectionism that was motivated solely by monetary interest, or, in other words, the *anadéis* were recompensed and corrupted in order to exempt a certain individual from the post of *besteiro do conto*, but also to take other individuals as *besteiros* with the intention of escaping the payment of municipal taxes. And finally, there was the situation of *anadéis* undertaking an incomplete inspection of the obligations that the *besteiros do conto* were supposed to comply with. The second group of offenses were more personal affairs between the *besteiros do conto* and their *anadéis*, or, in other words, the latter protected their friends who were crossbowmen and who did not, for example, possess duly operational crossbows.

In the section relating to the offenses committed by the *besteiros do conto* themselves, various cases were presented that illustrated this type of behavior. Three distinct types of offenses can be identified that were frequently committed at this level. First of all, there were the offenses practiced against the *concelhos*. In this regard, a situation of mutual disrespect was identified, or, in other words, although the *besteiros do conto* committed

offenses against the *concelhos* on various occasions, the same *concelhos* also committed offenses against the various privileges enjoyed by the *besteiros do conto*. The Crown invariably took the side of its military elite, even in situations where the *concelhos* were quite clearly harmed by the illegalities committed by the members of this militia. It can therefore be inferred that, during the reign of Dom João I, there was clear evidence of royal protectionism being exercised on behalf of this body. According to the documentation that was uncovered, it must have been particularly frequent for the *besteiros do conto* to be found innocent whenever they committed offenses at the local level that did not cause harm either to the Crown or the kingdom in general. Subsequently, situations were noted in which the *besteiros* committed fairly serious abuses, as was the case in Freixo de Espada à Cinta. The king acted imperatively in this particular case, which involved questions connected with the defense of the border and the depopulation of the region. Matters related with the failure to comply with tasks inherent in this profession were also punished by the king, since it was considered fundamental to maintain a correct organization of the *besteiros do conto*.

As was mentioned, the *concelhos* committed most of their offences against the privileges of the *besteiros do conto*. Taxation was a matter that gave rise to various conflicts in the relationship between the two parties. The crossbowmen took full advantage of their privileges on several occasions, especially those that were related to exemptions from municipal taxes. In turn, the *concelhos* responded in similar fashion, ignoring privileges that the *besteiros* were entitled to.

Last of all, I highlighted the attempts made to escape appointment as a *besteiro do conto*. The Crown issued letters and warrants granting exemption from this profession; however, several individuals created some subterfuges to avoid being selected for this militia. Analysis of the available documentation revealed three distinct categories in this regard. Avoidance that was completely dependent on outside parties, in which the individual was supported by somebody who enjoyed great social and financial power; avoidance that still depended on outside parties, but which also required some ingenuity on the part of the subjects concerned (such as the need to gather funds from other sources in order to have enough money to purchase a horse and, in this way, obtain exemption); and, finally, the subterfuge that called for great ingenuity on the part of the men that were attempting to avoid recruitment. In this situation, they were responsible for all of their actions. Indeed, one particular case was noted in which men managed to obtain a letter of exemption from this profession, although, by not exhibiting it, they enjoyed both the

privileges of the *besteiros do conto* and the possibility of being exempted from the exercise of this profession.

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Received for publication: 7 January 2013

Accepted in revised form: 14 June 2014

Recebido para publicação: 7 de Janeiro de 2013

Aceite após revisão: 14 de Junho de 2014