

Why Marriage Mattered? Marriage and Social Reproduction - the Case of Late Medieval Portuguese Aristocracy (1380-1530)

¿Por qué era importante el matrimonio? Matrimonio y reproducción social: el caso de la aristocracia portuguesa bajomedieval (1380-1530)

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Resumen: ¿Cuál era la importancia del matrimonio para la aristocracia medieval? A través del ejemplo de la nobleza curial portuguesa bajomedieval, este artículo plantea conocer las formas en las que el matrimonio contribuyó a proporcionar la estabilidad de la aristocracia como un grupo minoritario, endogámico y dominante. La documentación conservada en archivos públicos y señoriales ha permitido crear un corpus documental, integrado por contratos matrimoniales, testamentos y particiones familiares, a partir del que analizar los aspectos materiales, las estrategias familiares y otras interacciones sociales vinculadas al matrimonio. El argumento principal es que el matrimonio es un mecanismo esencial para construir fuertes y sólidas relaciones sociales. Este estudio de caso demuestra un modelo de endogamia social, organizado por las relaciones estructuradas en torno a la corte real, entrelazadas con matrimonios por consanguinidad distante y por estrecha afinidad.

Palabras clave: Aristocracia; Parentesco; Matrimonio; Dote; Reproducción social.

Abstract: By examining the late medieval Portuguese curial nobility, this article aims to determine the ways in which marriage contributed to provide stability to aristocracy as a minoritarian, endogamous and dominant group. The documentation preserved in public and noble houses archives facilitated the creation of a corpus of marriage contracts, family partitions and wills. This corpus allows us to consider and examine material aspects, familial strategies, and other marital social interactions. The main argument that this article proposes is that marriage was an essential mechanism through which strong and dense social relations were built. This case study demonstrates a pattern of social endogamy, organised by the relations structured around the Portuguese royal court, intertwined with distant consanguineous and close affinity marriages.

Keywords: Aristocracy; Kinship; Marriage; Dowry; Social reproduction.

Sumario: 1. Introducción; 1.1. Algunos comentarios sobre paradigmas historiográficos; 1.2. Aristocracia portuguesa cortesana bajomedieval; 2. Modelos matrimoniales; 2.1. Negociar el matrimonio; 2.2. Redes matrimoniales; 2.2.1. Consanguineidad; 2.2.2. Alianzas en la afinidad; 3. Hipótesis sobre el significado social de los modelos matrimoniales; 3.1. Relacionar modelos y concepciones endógenas.

Summary: 1. Introduction; 1.1. Some considerations on historiographical paradigms; 1.2. Late medieval Portuguese courtly aristocracy; 2. Matrimonial patterns; 2.1. Negotiating marriage; 2.2. Matrimonial networks; 2.2.1. Consanguinity; 2.2.2. Alliances in the affinity; 3. Hypothesis on the social meaning of marriage patterns; 3.1. Connecting patterns and endogenous conceptions.

0. INTRODUCTION

Why and how did marriage matter to the medieval aristocracy? The question, although apparently self-evident, induces several reflections on how social groups strengthened themselves, and how kinship intersected with a number of institutions and social relations, particularly in pre-modern or pre-industrial societies¹. In this article, using the case of seven lineages of the Portuguese late medieval curial aristocracy (1380-1530)², we will employ a structuralist perspective to build a comprehensive viewpoint of the relation between kinship and social reproduction. We want to understand the ways in which marriage contributed to a dynamic and complex process that enabled the stability of social structures and relations: in this case, maintaining the aristocracy as a cohesive, minority, endogamous and dominant group³. What drives our enquiry is not the survival of specific groups and lineages, but rather the reproduction of a social order characterised by the existence of minority, endogamous and dominant groups. Our thesis is that greater emphasis should be given to the study of group relations in general, and matrimonial relations in particular, rather than an excessive focus on ‘lineage’ and ‘vertical’ perspectives, wherein transmission, succession, male and elder figures monopolize the historiographical discourse, obfuscating a set of social behaviours and dynamics that were fundamental to perpetuate the medieval – or even Ancien Règime – social order. This requires a deeper knowledge of matrimonial practices. In this article, we address some issues rarely approached by historians – consanguinity, affinity, and how they intertwine with social networks built around power centres – in a broader and

¹ Our insistence in ‘pre-modern’ or ‘pre-industrial’ societies emphasizes the alterity of these social systems compared with the modern or industrial world. See notably the remarks on the concept of «the double conceptual fracture» by Guerreau, *L’Avenir d’un Passé*, pp. 26-34. For a synthesis on pre-industrial societies, see Crone, *Pre-industrial societies*.

² The lineages are: Albuquerque, Almeida, Ataíde, Castro, Lima, Pereira, and Vasconcelos.

³ We use the concept of aristocracy, rather than other endogenous terms – such as nobility or ‘fidalgos’ in Hispanic languages –, as we are mostly interested in social dynamics where minority and dominant groups are a structural feature. Joseph Morsel highlighted this perspective, along with the need to consider endogenous social categories not as ‘neutral’ instruments describing the complexities of the social fabric, but rather as instruments of classification, acting upon reality, and frequently the object of intense debates between different social groups – Morsel, *L’aristocratie médiévale*, pp. 5-11.

structuralist perspective that goes beyond the description of particular cases, while not denying the pertinence of this approach.

In this article, we will try to answer several questions: How did the Portuguese late medieval aristocrats choose their partners? How did they negotiate their alliances? How did a dominant and endogamous group adapt itself to extensive impediments on consanguinity, affinity and baptismal relations erected by ecclesiastical authorities? Which social factors were behind these patterns? This article will first describe the group, the data, and explain how it was assembled. Secondly, we will try to relate these materials with fundamental and structural aspects of medieval society, proposing some hypotheses on the role of marriage and dense social relations, in general, to the social reproduction of the aristocracy.

Our main argument is that marriage was vital, because building strong and dense relationships was a matter of paramount importance. Although this may be a common feature in pre-industrial societies, in which kinship – or other relationships cementing closeness – was of fundamental importance⁴, one must emphasize the specificities of medieval civilization. Our case study demonstrates a pattern of social endogamy intertwined with relatively distant consanguineous marriages, which paved the way for a group's cohesion and reproduction⁵. By cohesion and reproduction, we want to emphasize the existence of a solid group, deeply entrenched in the most decisive social spaces – specifically the royal court –, with permanent access to and control over sources of power⁶. Our arguments, and the specific data that support them, will be presented in the second part of this article.

Several types of relations existed that tended to promote closeness between individuals, groups, and institutions: kinship, 'feudal' relations, chivalry⁷, patronage⁸, and the bonds between lineages and monasteries⁹. They could be embedded in formal dimensions, with rights and duties inscribed in social practices and in the law – as occurred with familial relationships – or could be constructed

⁴ Guerreau-Jalabert, «Parenté», p. 874. See for example the work of Quintanilla on the importance of consanguineal relations, alliances and 'friendships' for the nobility of Castile: «Élites de poder, redes nobiliarias y monarquía».

⁵ Regarding European marriage patterns, Jack Goody observed: "Europe, on the other hand, came to reject the 'logic' of close-marriages, at least at the level of kinship, for classes remained in-marrying. By doing so, that continent differentiated itself not only from the present practices of the Arab world but also from the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean", Goody, *The development of the family*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ As we will later claim, our conception of cohesion does not imply the absence of conflicts, which were indeed characteristic of the aristocratic context.

⁷ In 2018, I analysed chivalry in this perspective. I defined the concept as an 'ideological system' that granted a basic framework – with a specific set of values, practices, and language – for the ideological representation of late medieval Portuguese aristocracy, their internal relations, and their relation to the crown. See Aguiar, *Cavaleiros e Cavalaria*, pp. 69-155.

⁸ Barata, *Elites e redes clientelares*; Cunha, *A Casa de Bragança*, pp. 395-546.

⁹ See, for example, the synthesis of the relation between Portuguese nobility and the Benedictine monasteries of Entre Douro e Minho: Sottomayor-Pizarro, *Aristocracia e mosteiros*.

upon informal mechanisms. In this article, we will focus on kinship, while recognising its operative dimension¹⁰.

As anthropologists have long demonstrated, kinship is essentially a social construct. It can assume different conceptions and practices depending on the set of beliefs and ‘founding myths’ of any given society¹¹. Moreover, the idea that kinship is essentially a ‘private’ aspect – separated from the ‘public’ sphere and therefore with a minimum relation to political and economic dimensions – is very recent. In pre-industrial or pre-modern European societies, although kin relationships did not, in theory, determine every aspect of people’s lives (the Church was the most elaborate example of how consanguinity should not invade institutional dynamics¹²), it is almost impossible not to recognise the structural and supportive role kinship played in many dimensions¹³. Kinship was also a determining factor in the organisation of aristocratic groups: on the one hand, the access to seigneuries, to the determinant social spheres – such as royal courts –, circulated among dense kin relationships; on the other hand, the groups’ social cohesion and self-image was partly built on the idea of a never-ending flow of relationships, with ancestors and contemporaries, constantly reiterated to strengthen its unity. As Pedro de Barcelos – author of the most prominent genealogical book of Medieval Portugal – wrote, the blood links between the *fidalgos* were the basis of their unity and friendship¹⁴.

In his far-reaching work *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine conceived kinship as an instrument to build the unity of the social body¹⁵. For medieval authors, kinship was conceived as a set of links constructing closeness between people, and consequently promoting their unity – as opposed to disunity and disaggregation, consequences of

¹⁰ Morsel, *La noblesse contre le prince*, pp. 104-105.

¹¹ In fact, several authors note that the emphasis on biological processes and conceptions is a rather recent phenomenon, linked to the discovery and generalization of scientific knowledge of human reproduction. See notably Godelier, *Métamorphoses de la parenté*, pp. 9-40. On medieval kinship, see Guerreau-Jalabert, «Sur les structures de parenté dans l’Europe médiévale», Morsel, *Noblesse, parenté et reproduction sociale*, pp. 23-29 and Baschet, *La civilisation féodale*, pp. 637-687

¹² Morsel, *Noblesse, parenté et reproduction sociale*, pp. 118-120. Morsel emphasizes that ‘endogamy’ in these institutions was criticised because, as a principle, clerical recruitment should be based upon merit and competence, rather than social status or familial filiation. Nevertheless, we know that kinship pervaded these social spaces, simply because they were structural to the dominant groups’ organisation, and because, despite the attacks on kinship – particularly if they perverted more important principles –, in effect, it retained its social importance. See notably Pardo De Guevara Y Valdés, *De Linajes, Parentelas y Grupos de Poder*, pp. 363-403; Farello, «A quem são teúdos os barões e sages cónegos», pp. 157-159.

¹³ See, for instance, the various studies reunited in Pastor de Togneri, *Relaciones de poder, de producción y parentesco*.

¹⁴ “nom pode ser tam pura segundo natura como daqueles que descendem de ùu sangue, porque estes movem-se mais de ligeiro aas cousas per que a amizade se mantem”, Mattoso, *Livro de Linhagens do Conde D. Pedro*, vol. 1, pp. 55-58.

¹⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, 14:1.

the Original Sin¹⁶. For Augustine, these were also the basis for marriage impediments. One was not forbidden from wedding a cousin on the grounds of ‘biological’ aspects: the idea was to wed someone distant to ‘remake’ old relationships, uniting different social cells, and therefore fabricating the unity of the social body – i.e., the *ecclesia* – as a whole. Kinship was determinant in providing the basis for a cohesive social structure. The incest theories that ecclesiastical hierarchies developed were thus built upon a very simple principle: to multiply relationships between Christians and promote the unity of the *ecclesia*, a strategy that both responded to the nature of human beings and counteracted the tendency towards disunity and chaos. The great social ideals of Christendom – unity and concord, based on *caritas*, the universal love granted by God¹⁷ – manifested themselves as central components of marriage affairs. ‘Religious’ discourses thus assumed an encompassing role in this society, in which Christianity provided an explanation of the world through the revelations contained in the Scriptures¹⁸.

Medieval marriage patterns fit what anthropologists define as complex societies. These kinds of societies are characterized by the predominance of interdicts and by the absence of prescriptive rules¹⁹. The ecclesiastical legislation on marriage stabilized after the Fourth Council of the Lateran, in 1215²⁰. The Church prohibited all unions between people related within four degrees of consanguinity. These interdicts applied both to consanguineous relations (in which the two potential spouses shared at least a common great-great-grand parent) and to affinity. Nevertheless, the prohibitions concerning affinity applied essentially to widows; in practice, one could not marry the kin of one’s late spouse. The interdicts did not apply to a spouse’s direct kin. Consequently, a spouse’s brother could marry his sister-in-law or brother-in-law’s kindred, redoubling the relationship between the groups. As we will see, this possibility gave way to a marriage pattern in which affinity played a key role. Finally, there were a set of prohibitions regarding baptismal kinship: marriages between godparents and godchildren were interdict, along with unions between carnal parents and godparents, or between godchildren and their godparents’

¹⁶ These topics impregnated discourses on family and kinship during the *Ancien Régime*. See notably Hespanha, «Carne de uma só carne».

¹⁷ Guerreau-Jalabert, «Caritas y Don».

¹⁸ Guerreau, *L’Avenir d’un Passé*, pp. 26-34.

¹⁹ Where exogamy acquires a decisive role in assuring the reproduction of society, as insisted by Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, pp. 549-551. See also Godelier, *Métamorphoses de la parenté*, pp. 179-251.

²⁰ These questions are developed in *Summa Theologica, Supplementum*, q. 50-62. See also Brundage, *Law, sex, and Christian society*, pp. 193, 355-356; Reynolds, *How marriage became one of the sacraments*, pp. 51-53; Guerreau-Jalabert, «Prohibitions canoniques et stratégies matrimoniales», «L’apport des données médiévales».

children. This latter issue, however fundamental, poses a different problem: Portuguese sources rarely mention baptismal kinship²¹.

The broad concept of incest formulated by Church authorities derived from a basic principle: multiplying relationships among the *fideles* fostered unity of the *ecclesia*. Physiological ideas were thus of minor importance in ecclesiastical theories²²; as mentioned above, the same principles applied to types of relationships where blood ties were absent, such as baptismal kinship²³. Alliances within the forbidden degrees were nevertheless permitted by dispensation from the ecclesiastical authorities. They were granted in accordance with the view that these extensive interdicts, although inspired by the Holy Scripture, were essentially man-made doctrinal constructs. In this respect, ecclesiastical authorities distinguished the nature of impediments ordained by God – such as those regarding brothers or parents – and those constructed upon the interpretation of biblical message. Dispensations could thus be granted for man-made impediments if the matrimonial union in question was seen as conducive to concord among the *fideles*,²⁴ as was often the case with alliances between princes and kings, with strong kinship providing, in part, the basis for what we nowadays define as ‘political stability’. In the end, this practice only reinforced the Church’s central position in the social system²⁵.

The following postulates may be advanced:

1) Marriage was largely perceived as a positive social institution, uniting men and women, spreading *caritas*, the gift of God to humanity generating the unity that could ward off disorder. It embodied some basic principles and values of medieval Christendom, the result being that an indispensable social function – uniting groups and assuring mankind’s physical reproduction – was embodied with a deep meaning, entrenched in the most basic social institutions.

2) Therefore, marriage should in principle unite people with no previous or with very distant relationships. Unions within a perimeter where there were already previous relationships meant that one was remaking older or recent bonds instead of acquiring new kin, instead of multiplying the bonds among the *fideles* to strengthen the unity of the *ecclesia*. As we will try to demonstrate, these Christian ideals also materialized in basic operations and notions: by marrying someone with whom no previous ties existed, one expanded one’s own kin and acquired new allies. In general, prohibitions were not a real problem for

²¹ The invisibility of these relations in medieval sources can mostly be explained by the absence of goods: since godparents were not obliged to donate anything other than customary gifts to their godchildren, documents were not systematically produced.

²² Deswarte, «Une sexualité sans amour? », pp. 145-146.

²³ Guerreau-Jalabert, «*Spiritus et caritas*», p. 185; Reynolds, *How marriage became one of the sacraments*, pp. 120-132, 332-334.

²⁴ D’Avray, *Medieval marriage*, pp. 150-155.

²⁵ Goody, *The development of the family*, pp. 145-146.

the Portuguese curial aristocracy in the late Middle Ages: quite the opposite, they permitted a heavy densification of relationships across the group and, consequently, contributed to its internal cohesion. This conclusion suggests that the panorama of the latter Middle Ages is one in which the aristocracy's organisation and reproduction largely fitted the categories imposed by clerical authorities.

1.1. Some comments on historiographical paradigms

The perspective we follow in this article contrasts with most of the existing scholarship on this topic. Marriage is a theme by itself, deeply studied in its theological and legal conceptions and implications. With few exceptions, such as the work of Michael M. Sheehan²⁶, social historians have nevertheless mostly disregarded the ideological dimension of the subject²⁷. There is a solid tradition of works structured around a demographical approach (for example, based on data such as nuptial and celibacy rates)²⁸, but the majority of social historians, particularly those studying dominant groups, have not considered the formation of alliances through marriage as a coherent topic. Therefore, marriages are only judged through the 'strategic' motives that would have shaped individual and lineage decisions; most of the data consists of isolated facts, with a deep lack of coherence. Historians of marriage and social historians seem to be talking past each other: on the one hand, the former seem to be centred on 'theoretical' and 'symbolic' aspects that have limited importance to the comprehension of social dynamics other than, for example, matrimonial litigations; on the other hand, the latter appear to shed little light on the role of marriage in the larger process of social reproduction.

Therefore, we adopted a perspective close to anthropological structuralism, by focusing primarily on the main structures, patterns, and relations that shape matrimonial alliances. To understand the role of marriage in the social reproduction of the aristocracy, two basic methodological assumptions must be made from the outset:

- 1) We must reject the historiographical gap between the so-called social historians and historians of ideas, symbolic systems, and institutions. The main goal is to produce a coherent vision of the past. Ignoring the material produced by historians of ideas and institutions, social historians may assemble a substantial amount of data, but lack a

²⁶ Sheehan, *Marriage, Family and Law*. Portuguese sources are not so abundant regarding marriage litigations in ecclesiastical courts. An interesting study was conducted by Vitória, «Two weddings and a lawsuit», using exceptional documents.

²⁷ We define 'ideology' in a broader, and somehow neutral, sense, according to which every society has a common ground of shared values, images and symbols that provides the basic structure for the functioning of social institutions and their own reproduction.

²⁸ We underline the important conclusions of a study of Galician nobility using this methodology: Framiñán Santas, Garazo Presedo, «Estructuras de parentesco de la nobleza gallega».

coherent perspective. Working on different societies, we know that the first step to avoid anachronisms and ethnocentric judgments is reconstructing the basic features of that society's system of conceptions and representations about their own reality. For medieval Europe, marriage is one such topic where this interaction is indispensable. We cannot understand the basic elements of legislation, such as the extension of prohibited alliances, if we do not consider the theological arguments that sustained these prohibitions, and the extent to which they penetrated a Christian mythology that was the basic mental framework of medieval people.

2) In what concerns the work of social historians, we must be able to abandon the logic of isolated cases. With very few exceptions, most books or articles only consider the marriage choices of the dominant groups as subordinated to the exclusive concerns of physical reproduction and the transmission of the material bases of the group's dominant condition. The degree of social integration permitted by marriage alliances is virtually ignored, especially because the ecclesiastical legislation on prohibited degrees is implicitly regarded as a typical clerical discussion, as a 'religious' issue with little impact on the mental framework of the laity. Consequently, there is a considerable lack of data concerning the accommodation of lay interests within the system built by the Church, which hampers our understanding of how an aristocratic group managed to reproduce itself. Therefore, we believe in the importance of an approach that is capable of reassembling data and constructing patterns, in constant interaction with the ideals and symbols that would have had an impact on the formation of those structures. This approach also provides a general framework within which case studies based on specific groups or contexts might acquire coherence and sense. Moreover, considering structures does not imply that individuals only play a passive role in social dynamics.

1.2. Late medieval Portuguese courtly aristocracy

We also need to emphasize some characteristics of the studied group. In late medieval Portugal – particularly after the 1383-1385 crisis that paved the way to the ascension of the Avis dynasty –, it is impossible to dissociate the high seigneurial aristocracy from its curial dimension. In other words, access to the most complete forms of seigneurial power progressively depended on royal grants, which interconnected aristocratic and royal powers as two faces of the same coin. This connection was also expressed in the concession of noble titles, particularly from the reign of Afonso V (r. 1438-1481) onwards, creating an aristocratic hierarchy based

on the royal perspective²⁹. That connection was reflected in royal grants of land, rents, and titles, but also in how matrimonial alliances were structured, densifying relationships around the royal court. The enduring creation of a curial aristocracy – which exercised power in the name of the king, both in the realm and throughout the empire – was thus inseparable from the constant recreation of dense matrimonial networks³⁰.

2. MATRIMONIAL PATTERNS

Public and familial archives allowed the formation of a corpus of marriage contracts, family partitions and wills, which enabled the enquiry of material aspects, familial strategies, and other marital social interactions. Moreover, the existence of a solid genealogical tradition in Portugal facilitated inquiries on consanguinity and affinity networks, which were in turn associated with other social dimensions.

2.1. Negotiating marriage

Marriage contracts, along with other documents such as dowry and dower charters, or familial partitions, are abundantly present in Portuguese archives. There are numerous marriage contracts in royal sources, especially from the reign of King João I (r. 1385-1433) onwards. The monarchs frequently contributed to amass dowries, and royal control over alliances between curial lineages became the norm.

The matrimonial agreements in late medieval Portugal were essentially organised in the following way³¹:

1) Dowries (*dotas*) were provided by the woman's kin group, particularly her parents. Additionally, other close relatives, such as uncles or grandparents, could contribute with financial support. Most importantly, the monarchs – including the queen or their children – usually contributed substantially. These contributions could be money, rents, or grants that authorized the woman's spouse to succeed in some royal seigneurie. Even if administrated by the man during the couple's life, dowries belonged to the woman: they should be given to her after her spouse's death, or to the woman's heirs, in case of her death.

2) Dowers (*arras*) were promised by the husband and his relatives. They usually consisted in a third of the dowry's value and were given to the wife only in the event of widowhood.

²⁹ In other words, the ascension of monarchical structures and institutions cannot be dissociated from a more profound logic in which the existence of dominant aristocratic groups – however classified – is a self-evident feature: Morsel, *L'aristocratie médiévale*, pp. 289-295.

³⁰ See also Cunha, Monteiro, «Aristocracia, Poder e Família em Portugal»; Monteiro, «Casamento, celibato e reprodução social».

³¹ Aguiar, *Aristocracia, parentesco e reprodução social*, pp. 535-605.

3) Finally, all the estates acquired after the marriage's consummation belonged to the couple and should be divided between the surviving member and the deceased's heirs.

Marriage by *dote e arras* was an aristocratic form of organising material transfers between kin groups, as was frequently underlined in contracts³². The study of family partitions clearly shows that dowries were the feminine form of access to the family fortune. Women and their spouses did not usually intervene in how her family's fortune was partitioned after her parent's death, as the dowry was assumed to be equivalent to the inheritance of other siblings³³. In certain circumstances, the dowry surpassed the share of the wife's siblings, revealing the importance of investing in specific alliances³⁴.

Portuguese sources do not provide plentiful data to answer questions on couple dynamics beyond the legal outset. Therefore, it is virtually impossible to assess women's real conditions within the couple, or even the degree of autonomy in managing their estates. Nevertheless, widows amassed dowries for their daughters³⁵, shared the fortune with their children³⁶, or even instituted entails³⁷, which suggests a certain degree of autonomy once the masculine and tutelar figures disappear.

Gender conceptions are certainly a key element to analyse these questions³⁸. At the end of the Middle Ages, women were progressively relegated from the 'public' sphere, exercising what we may define as 'informal powers'³⁹. Their access to seignuries and other forms of *dominium* tends to be reduced. Estates donated by the crown or organised by aristocratic groups in the form of entailed property, such as *morgadios*, reinforced the image of aristocratic houses as social bodies primarily governed by masculine figures⁴⁰. Family partitions, and the amassing of dowries, are clearly connected with these broader transformations. Since the early 15th century,

³² As in the marriage contract between Pedro de Albuquerque and Catarina da Costa: ANTT, *Chancelaria de D. Afonso V*, lv. 31, fl. 62.

³³ Beceiro Pita, Cordoba De La Llave, *Parentesco, poder y mentalidad*, pp. 242-243; Waugh, «Marriage, kinship, and property»: pp. 22-25; Derouet, «Dowry: sharing inheritance or exclusion», pp. 31-45; Spiess, «Lordship, Kinship and Inheritance», pp. 56-57; Sperling, «Women's property rights in Portugal», pp. 11 and 26.

³⁴ As in the marriage contract between Joana de Meneses and Pedro de Noronha, in 1492: ANTT, *Chancelaria de D. João II*, lv. 5, fl. 64v.

³⁵ Isabel de Castro organised her daughter's marriage, whose contract is cited in the note above.

³⁶ 1503: *Carta de partilhas dos bens de Álvaro Mendes de Vasconcelos*, Lisboa, Centro de Estudos Históricos, *Casa de Abrantes*, Lote 582, maço 5, n.º 9.

³⁷ In 1538, Maria da Silva, António Pereira's widow, instituted an entail of all her estates, with the necessary agreement of all the children, including the three nuns, who abdicated their inheritance in exchange for an annual rent during their lifetimes – *Instituição do Morgado da Taipá etcetera*, *Padroado de Santa Senhorinha*, ANTT, *Morgados e Capelas*, Registos Vinculares, Processo n.º 21, Santarém, doc. 8, p. 66.

³⁸ Rodrigues, «La identidade de género».

³⁹ Which did not mean that women did not have real power within aristocratic networks, as demonstrated in the analysis of Martín Romera, *Redes de Poder*, pp. 199-220

⁴⁰ Rosa, «Preventing Household Failure».

dowries were mainly formed by money. As a result, estates were concentrated in the hands of men, and women only had access to them if they had no brothers. Although this was not a rare event considering demographic dynamics, it directly affected their condition in the matrimonial market: kings forbade women who had crown estates from wedding someone without their consent, and they were certainly coveted by aristocrats eager to acquire more power. Therefore, their fate was of paramount importance in the general equilibrium of the aristocratic group⁴¹.

However, the main question from this article's perspective is the degree of social interaction promoted by marriage contracts. In a society where the act of giving shapes social positions and embodies the general ideal of *caritas* (of good deeds expressing the bonds of love within the social body), the circulation of wealth amongst aristocratic lineages cannot be reduced to particular strategies, although they were certainly relevant. In a complementary perspective, these practices should be inserted in a broader context, focusing on their global results: the circulation of wealth in the context of socially endogamous groups reinforced their internal links, and therefore their cohesion⁴². This hypothesis will acquire greater solidity once we present the data on consanguine and social networks.

2.2. Matrimonial networks

Despite the obvious assumption that the aristocracy was an endogamous group, several questions must be raised from the outset:

- How did a minority and endogamous group handle the existence of extensive marriage interdicts?
- What role did marriage play in a group's cohesion and social reproduction?

To answer these questions, we assembled a genealogical corpus that allowed the analysis of a group's degree of consanguineous integration⁴³. This genealogical corpus was built using royal and aristocratic records, along with genealogical literature and bibliography⁴⁴. The solidity of this data will be commented later, in specific parts of the forthcoming description. This data was filtered through other specific analytical perspectives, such as the social similarities or dissimilarities between allied groups. By collating this data, we were able to retrace social patterns that reflect certain interactions, for instance, the relation between these groups, the crown, and the particular social milieu of the royal court. Through this kind of approach, one can arrive at a clearer view of matrimonial patterns and their social significance.

⁴¹ *Ordenações Manuelinas*, lv. 2, t. 47, 236-238.

⁴² In a process that J. Morsel characterizes as a sort of "jeu à somme nulle" – Morsel, *Noblesse, parenté*, p. 124.

⁴³ All the data supporting our observations may be consulted in: <https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/handle/10216/135875>.

⁴⁴ Mattoso, *Livro de Linhagens*; Morais, *Pedatura Lusitana*; Gayo, *Nobiliário das Famílias*; Freire, *Brasões da Sala de Sintra*; Vasconcelos, *Nobreza e Ordens Militares*; Vasconcelos, *Livro de Linhagens*.

2.2.1. Consanguinity

The first step consisted in determining, for each lineage under analysis, which marriages involved a consanguineous relationship. This was done by constructing cognatic genealogical trees and identifying the closest common ancestor of any two spouses⁴⁵.

Table 1 – Degree of consanguinity in Portuguese medieval curial aristocracy⁴⁶

Canonical degree of consanguinity	Number of marriages	Percentage of marriages (total of 253 marriages)
2	2	1%
3	15	6%
4	43	17%
5	38	15%
6	31	12%
7-10	43	17%
No consanguinity detected	81	32%

As demonstrated in table 1, we were able to identify some degree of consanguineous relation in 172 marriages, out of a total of 253 (68% of the unions). Even when no such link was found, genealogies were reconstituted up to the 4th, 5th or even 6th degree of consanguinity, which further offset the number of unions between closely related people.

This data was the result of genealogical reconstitution and *does not reflect* genealogical knowledge of historical actors. The immediate conclusion is that canonically defined incestuous alliances were the exception among the curial aristocracy of late medieval Portugal: the 60 marriages within the 4th degree of consanguinity represent a mere 24% of all marriages contracted between roughly 1360 and 1540, a pattern similar to other regions of Medieval Europe⁴⁷. Within this group, marriages between cousins and second-degree cousins were statistically insignificant (1% and 6% respectively). Concerning consanguinity, therefore, the

⁴⁵ Our purpose was to obtain a general panorama of consanguineous alliances. However, the existence of close marriages is sometimes underlined when considering the intersection between aristocracy, kinship, and social endogamy: Beceiro Pita, *Cordoba De La Llave*, 1990: 148-161; Hernández Franco, 2018.

⁴⁶ Based on Aguiar, *Aristocracia, parentesco e reprodução social*, pp. 610-620.

⁴⁷ Similar patterns were detected in the aristocracy of Cordoba: Quintanilla Raso, «Estructuras sociales y familiares», pp. 342-344. J. Morsel also cites the work of David Rheubottom on medieval Ragusa: cit. Morsel, «Quelques propositions pour l'étude», p. 490.

marriage patterns were largely exogamous according to the canonical definition of consanguine closeness.

The data is consistent throughout the period from 1360 to 1540. Of the 110 marriages celebrated between 1360 and 1460, the canonically forbidden degrees, especially the closest ones (2nd and 3rd), represented a mere 5% of the total number of unions. The same ratio was found in the 143 unions from 1460 to 1540. In both these chronological periods, alliances from the 7th to 10th degrees, together with those with no consanguineous link, assumed a comparable share: 51% and 47%, respectively, of all unions.

The 4th degree deserves some specific remarks. Other studies found that this degree was the point of intersection between ecclesiastical perspectives and lay practices⁴⁸. One must recall that matrimonial dispensations depended on the particulars of each case. Forbidden degrees were essentially an ecclesiastical construct, aimed at banning conjugal relationships between close kin, in order to construct the unity of the social body. To some extent, church authorities tolerated infringement of these prohibitions. In fact, only 2nd and 3rd degrees (involving cousins and 2nd degree cousins) seem to have been perceived as constituting close consanguinity. This data is also congruent with the research conducted at the Vatican archives by Maria de Lurdes Rosa, who found that 80 % of the dispensations issued in favour of Portuguese petitioners between 1455 and 1520 concerned the 4th degree, both of consanguinity and affinity⁴⁹.

A specific matrimonial case also emerged in these consanguineous relationships: that between the 4th and 6th degrees. According to table 1, 112 marriages fell within this range, that is, 44% of all unions. We do not claim that people were aware of such links, especially when they stretched beyond the 4th or 5th degrees. Once again, we must underline that this is an analytical construct, designed to understand the relation between social endogamy and consanguineous exogamy. Despite the apparently complicated picture that arises from the table, what this data suggests, with a fairly high degree of certainty⁵⁰, is a very simple idea: the general principle of avoiding marriage between those sharing a close ancestor was solidly implanted and became a socially accepted norm.

The recurrence of marriages with a distant relative is certainly a consequence of a minority and socially endogamous group, where the number of available partners was limited. In fact, individuals did not need to be aware they were wedding a distant

⁴⁸ Beceiro Pita, Cordoba De La Llave, *Parentesco, poder y mentalidad*, pp. 154-160.

⁴⁹ Rosa, «Mariage et empêchements canoniques», 535-536.

⁵⁰ Some comments must be made regarding the «high degree of certainty». Genealogical literature is not exempt from errors and mistakes. Even if we did try to compare different sources, it is likely that, for example, a relation we define as 5th consanguineal degree based on one source, could in fact be a closer relation. It is impossible to calculate a margin of error, but we assume that finding errors in close relations, i.e., in the closest degrees, is less probable, which in turns favours the general argument that marriages within very close consanguineal relations were tendentially avoided and constituted the exception, and not the norm.

relative, as long as there were no links up to the 4th degree. Nevertheless, we must recognise the importance of medieval thoughts on this scheme. The ‘founding myths’ in medieval society considered that humanity came from one man, created in the image of God. According to Augustin’s interpretation of the Bible, the first generations of humanity wed close relatives simply because their options were scarce⁵¹. Later, however, people tended to avoid marriage with someone they considered close. The problem was not ‘biological’ closeness, but rather ‘spiritual’: by espousing a distant relative – descending from a single ancestor, humankind is all related – one re-enacted old relationships, connected different social cells, and promoted the union of the social body. Consequently, we can see the parallels between these conceptions and marriage patterns, simply by insisting that alliances between close relatives – even in the context of a minority and endogamous group – although existent, were nonetheless the exception.

For all marriages up to the 6th degree, we tried to compare the social profile of both kin groups in each matrimonial alliance⁵², by identifying common elements among those determining the aristocratic hierarchy at that time – such as possession of a noble title, custody of estates donated by the crown, presence in the royal household or in the administrative and judicial institutions of the crown⁵³. As a result, one can speak of social endogamy when multiple aspects coincide: for example, when both kin groups were present at the royal court and held estates of the crown. In addition, and since these aspects are organized hierarchically, one can speak of social homogamy when the social profile is equivalent, or patterns of social hypergamy when one kin group that does not possess a noble title manages to marry into a titled family⁵⁴.

Of the 17 marriages in the 2nd and 3rd canonical degrees, 11 took place in the later part of our chronology (1460-1540), and the same number involved kin groups that possessed a noble title. This pattern coincides with a dynamic observed in the reign of Afonso V (r. 1438-1481), when the crown granted noble titles associated with specific estates, organizing the hierarchical system of curial aristocracy⁵⁵. These titled families married into families with the same status or families lacking a noble title but possessing some crown estates or solidly attached to the royal household. A similar pattern can be observed regarding the 4th degree: of 38 marriages, 22 concerned titled families, of which nine united two groups with the same status. The presence of titled groups becomes more tenuous for lower levels of consanguinity, which suggests they primarily favoured homogamous marriages, and that there was an ongoing process forming a distinctive group: a titled aristocracy with dense

⁵¹ *De Civitate Dei*, XV: 16.

⁵² Aguiar, *Aristocracia, parentesco e reprodução social*, pp. 620-634.

⁵³ Gomes, *A Corte dos reis de Portugal*, pp. 62-108.

⁵⁴ Boone, «Parental investment and elite family structure».

⁵⁵ Oliveira, Rodrigues, «Um Processo de Reestruturação».

consanguineous relations. Indeed, these dynamics would become even clearer in the 17th and 18th centuries⁵⁶.

2.2.2. Alliances in the affinity

After the Fourth Council of the Lateran, matrimonial interdicts on affinity became essentially limited to widows. To wed a deceased partner's kin up to the 4th canonical degree, a dispensation was necessary. Maria de Lurdes Rosa remarks that the great majority of dispensations regarding affinity concerned the 4th degree⁵⁷, suggesting that, even for this kind of relationships, Portuguese medieval curial aristocrats tended to avoid new marriages to close kin by affinity. At the same time, however, there were no limits to unions between a spouse's consanguineous relatives and his kin by affinity: for example, a spouse's siblings could wed the other spouse's siblings or nephews.

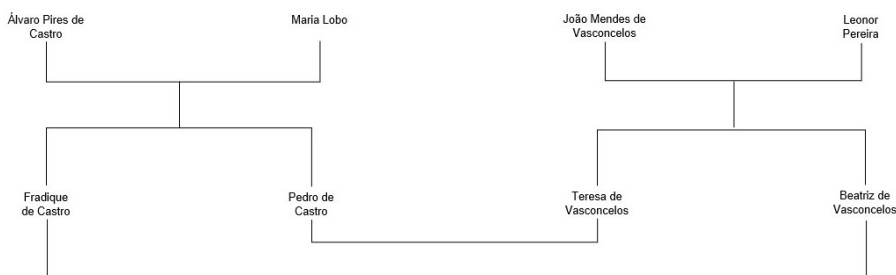
Several studies have already suggested that the combination of distant consanguineous relations and marriages into close affinity groups was specific to medieval and pre-modern European societies⁵⁸. We explored this hypothesis, gathering an extensive corpus of genealogies. Contrary to consanguineous patterns, finding links in affinity poses other problems and methodological challenges. In this domain, one must have solid genealogies at one's disposal to be able to retrace the web of relations beyond consanguineous progeny. One must systematically reconstruct all relationships in order to find this kind of alliances. Based on the corpus of 253 marriages mentioned above, we traced all the offspring and affinity webs across several generations, and were able to find 152 schemes of alliances that were redoubled or remade by affinity. To illustrate, we will start by describing the various typologies we found; subsequently, we will sketch a global interpretation of the data, combined with the consanguineous and social patterns described in the previous subsection.

⁵⁶ Monteiro, *O Crepúsculo dos Grandes*, pp. 77-81.

⁵⁷ Rosa, «Mariage et empêchements canoniques», pp. 535-536.

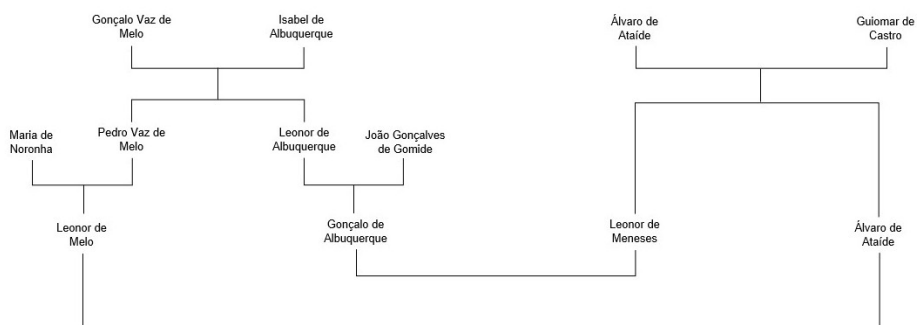
⁵⁸ Delille, «Parenté et alliance», «Logique générale de l'échange»; Lutter, Frey, Krammer, Majorossy, «Kinship, gender», pp. 253-255, 265.

Figure 1 -Marriages between pairs of siblings (Aguiar, 2021)



The simplest case was the marriage between two pairs of siblings. We found 14 cases of this type: 4 cases uniting two brothers and two sisters, 10 linking a brother and sister with a sister and brother.

Figure 2 - Siblings and consanguineous relatives (Aguiar, 2021)



We also found several typologies where two siblings wed two close consanguineous relatives. In 11 occasions, brother and sister wed aunt and nephew; in 8 occasions, they married two cousins (as presented in the image above); in 21 occasions, they wed two 2nd or 3rd degree cousins (as in the image below)⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ These practices were also frequently observed by Sottomayor-Pizarro, *Linhagens Medievais Portuguesas*, vol. 2, p. 615.

Figure 3 - Siblings and consanguineous relatives (Aguiar, 2021)

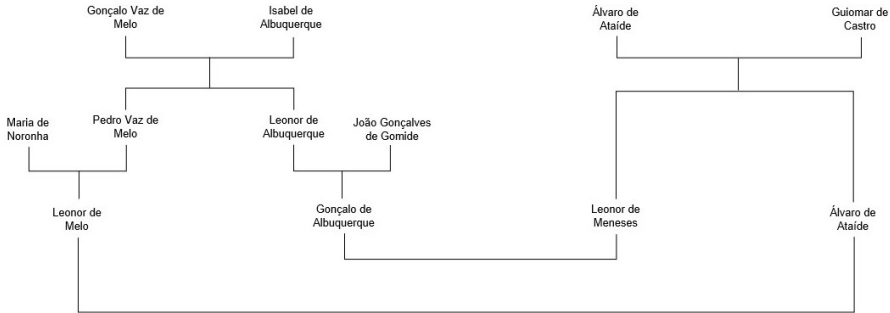
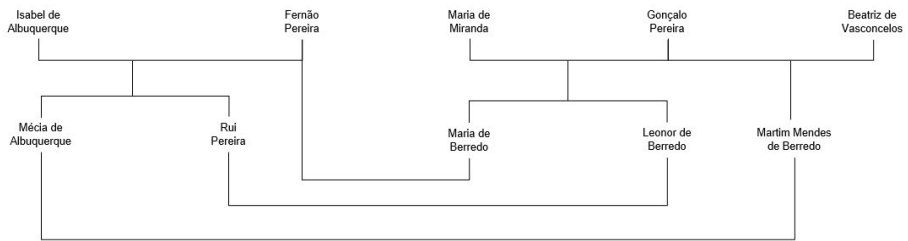
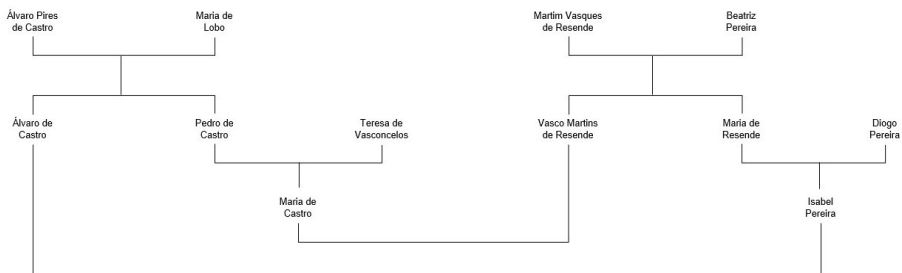


Figure 4 - Alliances between children of different marriages (Aguiar, 2021)



Six cases were also detected where children of a first marriage wed the children of their stepfather or stepmother’s previous marriage.

Figure 5 - Uncles and nephews (Aguiar, 2021)



In this typology, we detected six cases where uncle/aunt and nephew/niece married two other people with the same kind of relation (as in the image above), along with 12 cases where uncle/aunt and nephew/niece wed two cousins (image below).

Figure 6 - Uncles and nephews (Aguiar, 2021)

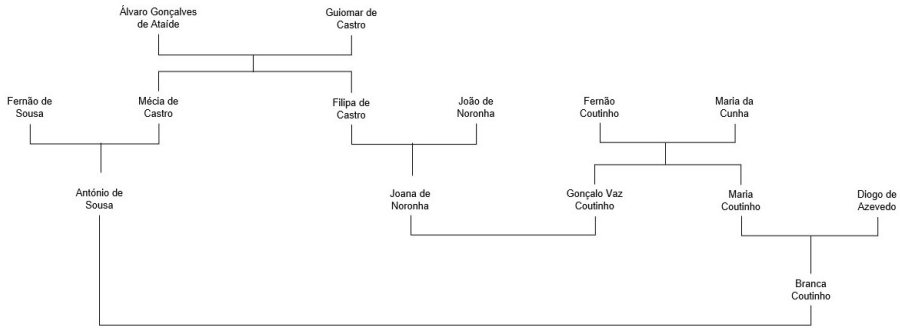
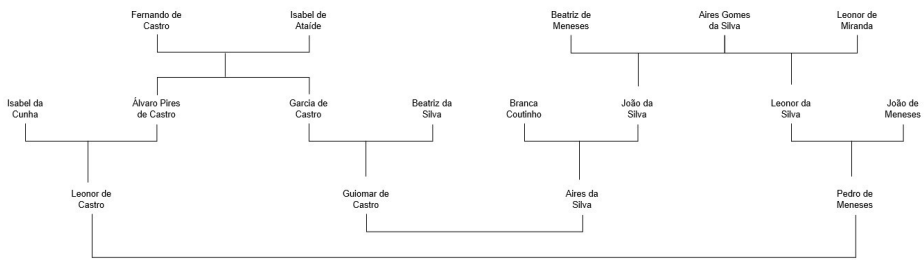
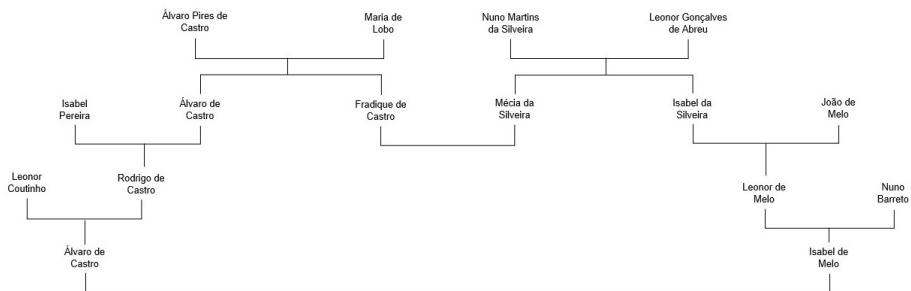


Figure 7 - Cousins in 2nd canonical degree (Aguiar, 2021)



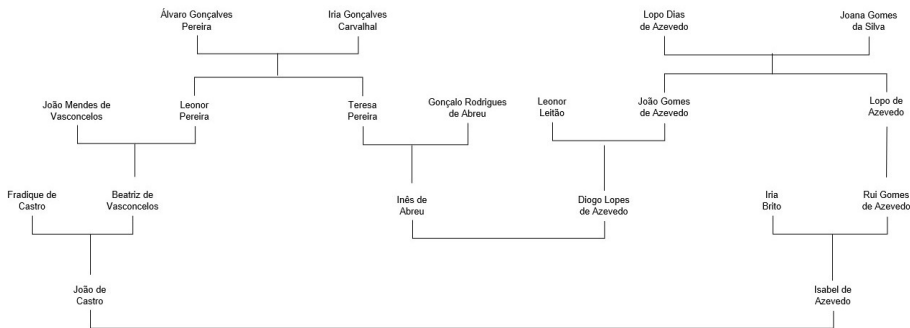
Marriages between two pairs of 2nd canonical degree cousins were not very frequent (3 cases).

Figure 8 - Great-uncles and great-nephews (Aguiar, 2021)



We detected 20 cases where one great-uncle/great-aunt and his/her great-nephew/niece wed two closely related kin (brothers, uncle-nephew, cousins or two people with the same relation – as in the image above).

Figure 9 - Connecting 3rd or 4th degree consanguineous relatives (Aguiar, 2021)



A substantial number of alliances connecting two pairs of relatives in the 3rd or 4th canonical degree were also found: in six occasions, we found two pairs of relatives in the 3rd canonical degree (as in the image above); in 26 cases, two pairs of cousins in the 3rd or 4th degree, in different generations. Along with all these typologies, we were able to detect 18 other occurrences where various typologies overlap.

A closer look at the typologies and the number of occurrences clearly reveals that a substantial number involved close kin by affinity, between the 2nd and 3rd degrees: unions between pairs of siblings; between siblings and close consanguineous relatives (cousins, uncle and nephew); between two pairs of cousins; and between cousins and two people related in the 3rd degree. In total, there were 54 occurrences with these typologies. A simple comparison with the same degree of consanguinity is striking, since only 17 marriages were contracted in the 2nd and 3rd canonical degree of consanguinity. Therefore, aristocratic groups seem to have constantly relied on their close affinity networks to find spouses. In most typologies uniting two pairs of close kin, the consanguinity links were also distant: for example, in most marriages between two pairs of siblings, they were related in the 6th canonical degree of consanguinity; when siblings wed an uncle/aunt and nephew/niece, they were mostly related in the 4th and 5th degrees.

In parallel with distant consanguineous marriages, the aristocracy tended to densify their kinship networks through their close affinity. Considering this description, the notion of *densification of relations* captures the essence of the pattern: new close relatives were acquired within a perimeter that already included some kind of previous relations. The concept of *social densification* becomes particularly visible when these schemes were connected to certain specific social dynamics, impossible

to describe in detail in this article. For example, a family enjoying rapid social ascension might celebrate several marriages with people related to each other, allowing them to be absorbed quickly into the higher strata of the aristocratic group. From that moment on, that rising family possessed several kinship bonds in that social space. Kin groups well established as high curial aristocrats constantly used the schemes described above in order to renew their bonds. Therefore, the system generated both the inclusion and absorption of new groups, densifying the relations between those who were already in a high position.

We must emphasize that this pattern was not deliberately pursued by Portuguese medieval aristocrats. The schemes, however consistent, might well be the result of other social constraints. Considering the data and the arguments presented above, the most solid hypothesis seems to suggest that the use of dense affinity webs was the direct consequence of the largely exogamous consanguineous alliances and the social pressures that pushed individuals and kin groups to ally themselves with others with a similar social status. Considering that dominant groups were a minority, these constraints forced them to constantly wed people who were somehow related by affinity, which in turn produced the impression they all belonged to a social and distinct group and were in some way related.

This pattern, produced by the interaction of consanguinity, affinity, and social constraints, resulted in a group capable of absorbing newcomers, mixing different hierarchies, and constantly acquiring new allies⁶⁰. This system therefore generated a curial aristocracy with dense social relations, larger and more solid – and with greater capacity to reproduce itself – than if they only sought to wed close consanguineous kin. As we previously demonstrated, these unions were solidified with the circulation of wealth through every alliance, thus strengthening the social bonds amongst the group's different hierarchies.

Church doctrines on marriage inculcated the principle of avoiding alliances with close relatives. However, this did not erode the aristocratic group's cohesion, but rather gave rise to a matrimonial system that permitted the multiplication of relations and the expansion of the web of allies. This group depended heavily on its attachment to the royal household, deriving its lordly status from the king. Therefore, having a dense web of relations at the royal court was of paramount importance.

3. HYPOTHESIS ON THE SOCIAL MEANING OF MARRIAGE PATTERNS

In the last part of this article, we formulate some general hypotheses concerning the aristocratic alliance system and the role it played in social reproduction, relying on the previously outlined elements. Our aim is to demonstrate that some of the principles and social patterns might have a general value when studying medieval Europe, despite specific variations in different areas and chronologies. In this regard,

⁶⁰ Bouchard, *Those of my blood*, pp. 39-58.

one should obviously not consider *general value principles* as strictly identical historical process. However, we are dealing with a social system with at least two structural characteristics: a Christian mental framework, attributing a central role to ecclesiastical hierarchies and theories; and the existence of dominant and minority groups, grounded in their control of the land and its inhabitants, and with deep social relationships with other aristocrats, be they equals, inferiors, or superiors (as princes and kings). Thus, we think that a general hypothesis conceding a central role to matrimonial issues should be tested in a larger perspective.

Let us emphasize some of the main ideas previously outlined, while adding some information:

- The data regarding consanguineous alliances shows that the vast majority of marriages were contracted with distant blood relatives, which is particularly relevant considering the aristocracy was a minority group.

- Simultaneously, aristocratic kin groups used their close affinity to find allies. Through this method, they simultaneously enlarged and densified their social relations.

- The observable patterns in consanguinity and affinity suggest an ingrained principle of avoiding unions with close kin, therefore multiplying aristocratic social relations. One should recall that these principles were rooted in Christian values and commandments, notably the multiplication of relations among *fideles* aimed at bringing unity and cohesion to the *ecclesia*.

- Social constraints penetrated kin structures. A pattern of high social endogamy was perfectly combined with tendentially consanguineous exogamy and close affinity, producing a curial aristocratic group with dense relations. These alliances were primarily defined by the connection to a specific social space, the royal court⁶¹. This was the decisive factor in the groups' structure, while geographical factors seem to have been secondary in matrimonial choices⁶² – a pattern that cannot be generalised, since different aristocratic groups, largely grounded on local spheres,

⁶¹ Thus the important concept of 'social space', which should not be reduced to a geographical dimension. See notably the work on the relation between Portuguese nobility and the military orders by Vasconcelos, *Nobreza e Ordens Militares*.

⁶² Although reconstructing a lineage and house's extensive patrimony is a hard task, it seems that royal seigneuries, entails and 'private' estates in the hands of curial aristocrats tended to be scattered across the realm – this is a tendency, not an absolute rule. In our PhD thesis, we tried to assess the importance of geographical distribution of royal seigneuries and entails in determining matrimonial choices, and we concluded that only a small portion of alliances were made with neighbouring groups, even in those cases of marriages within closer degrees of consanguinity. In fact, most marriages united groups whose principal seigneuries or entails were 300 or 400km apart. On the one hand, this pattern indicates that royal control of curial aristocracy alliances tended to avoid the formation by marriage of solid seigneurial blocs. On the other hand, it also seems that the main factor defining matrimonial policies was the social relations embedded in the royal sphere, formed by royal family member households, the court, and the crown's judicial and administrative structures: Aguiar, 2021, *Aristocracia, parentesco e reprodução social*, pp. 664-671.

had necessarily different priorities⁶³. All marriages within this circle were sanctioned by the king. The monarchs prevented unions that could unite aristocratic houses with significant power, but at the same time promoted alliances between groups that were deeply entrenched in the royal household and the crown's judicial and administrative institutions. They actively encouraged the formation of a curial aristocracy under their control. This aspect is also of vital importance to understand the general equilibrium produced by the alliances system, in which, as we argued, one sees general social endogamy, with prevalently homogamous marriages, punctuated by unions between families in slightly different hierarchical positions.

3.1. Connecting patterns and endogenous conceptions

As we have emphasized, building a set of close and diversified relations – be they kinship or other kinds of ‘artificial’ relationships (i.e., patronage, chivalry) – was a structural element in pre-modern and pre-industrial societies. Our task when studying medieval Europe lies in identifying how this feature became so important, what were its social functions⁶⁴, and how it was perceived by historical actors. In this regard, endogenous conceptions represent what Maurice Godelier once defined as “la partie idéelle du réel”⁶⁵: in other words, every society elaborates a system of beliefs, conceptions, and representations of their own world, which provides a certain and specific logic that becomes self-evident to those living in that context. Moreover, to observers – be them historians or other social scientists – symbolic systems only acquire a concrete meaning when they relate to social practices, this combination forming the specific dynamic of any given society.

The vast and dense theological literature on marriage allowed the formation of a solid tradition of historiographical works on the subject. Books like the monumental study by Philip Reynolds are a clear example⁶⁶. Other approaches, such as David D’Avray’s, emphasize the power of marriage symbolism⁶⁷. In the last decades, Anita Guerreau-Jalabert also underlined the importance of considering the conceptions of marriage in the context of a society founded on Christian myths, which produces a

⁶³ For groups whose social prominence was mostly local or regional, grounded in a solid control of the land or municipal institutions, these patterns could certainly be different (Quintanilla Raso, «Estructuras sociales y familiares»; Hernandez Franco, Penãfiel Ramon «Parentesco, Linaje y Mayorazgo»). The same can be said about the dominant groups in Madeira and Azores. For instance, the work of Damião Rodrigues clearly shows that, during the Early Modern period, Azorean main houses tended to be closely connected by consanguineous marriages, which resulted in high concentration of entails. In this case, consanguineous endogamy was also a consequence of social interactions concentrated in the islands: Rodrigues, «Valorização e exploração do património vinculado».

⁶⁴ In the Iberian context, a very interesting study on a dominant group, while considering the importance of social relations and the potential of social network analysis, is the research on Valladolid oligarchy conducted by Martín Romera, *Redes de Poder*.

⁶⁵ Godelier, *L'idéal et le matériel*, pp. 21, 171, 197-205.

⁶⁶ Reynolds, *How marriage became*.

⁶⁷ D’Avray, *Medieval marriage*.

specific set of ideals and practices⁶⁸. These studies accurately place great emphasis on the Christian elements that structured medieval society. Furthermore, relations and conceptions of kinship were not perceived as independent components of social organization; on the contrary, they were firmly integrated in how medieval people perceived their relationship with God, and consequently how the world should function⁶⁹. Overall, as we have quite often insisted, kinship played a significant role in a society with a tenuous dichotomy between public and private matters, and where many elements that we nowadays perceive as theoretically independent (economics, politics, kinship) were deeply entwined⁷⁰.

Despite the various debates and heresies throughout the centuries⁷¹, in late medieval times the main assumptions about marriage were solidly rooted⁷²: marriage was a virtuous institution, created by God in Paradise⁷³; monogamous and indissoluble; perceived as reflecting the union between Christ and the Church; and that framed the reproduction of mankind and the unification of the social body by spreading *caritas* through every union⁷⁴. According to several authors, this symbolism is of great significance⁷⁵. Anita Guerreau-Jalabert emphasizes the importance of Saint Augustine's theories, upon which medieval theologians and canonists built the evolving conceptions of the Church⁷⁶. As we know, unity was a social ideal, whereas disunity and disharmony were the direct consequences of Original Sin. Love, in the sense of a global and social bond between people – very different from romantic and modern conceptions⁷⁷ –, the gift granted by God, would help to counteract the human defect towards disunity. Thus, building strong relations, be they kinship or other kinds, was socially valued in medieval Europe. For instance, aristocratic fortunes only had real efficacy because they could circulate and densify different kinds of relations between people and institutions, which in turn consolidated the group's position in the social fabric⁷⁸. As we have emphasized, building closeness had a general value and was embedded with a deep and 'religious'

⁶⁸ Guerreau-Jalabert, «Prohibitions canoniques et stratégies matrimoniales», «L'apport des données médiévales».

⁶⁹ Hummer, *Visions of Kinship*.

⁷⁰ Guerreau-Jalabert, «Parenté».

⁷¹ For instance, some authors explore the differences between Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome, or the disputes between the bishop of Hippo and the Manicheans: Brundage, *Law, sex, and Christian society*, p. 90; Reynolds, *How marriage became*, pp. 103-107.

⁷² Before the Reformation and the confrontation on several canonical approaches, such the prohibited alliances questioned by Luther, or the marriages of Henry VIII of England: Reynolds, *How marriage became*, pp. 742-743.

⁷³ This belief is also frequently stated in Portuguese marriage contracts.

⁷⁴ Goody, *The development of the family*, p. 57; *Summa Theologica, Supplementum*, q. 49.

⁷⁵ D'Avray, *Medieval marriage*, pp. 206-207.

⁷⁶ Guerreau-Jalabert, «L'apport des données médiévales».

⁷⁷ On this subject, see Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.

⁷⁸ This was indeed our main argument regarding familial partitions and testamentary bequests of Portuguese aristocracy: the circulation of wealth was fundamental to feed social relations and consolidate the group's position – Aguiar, *Aristocracia, parentesco e reprodução social*, pp. 503-514.

meaning – in a society with hardly any distinction between what we nowadays call ‘religious’ and ‘social’ aspects.

Therefore, the matrimonial patterns previously described acquire a great social significance, deeply embedded within a broader social and historical context. The Portuguese late medieval curial aristocracy spread and circulated their wealth through dowries; multiplied their relations by tendentially exogamous consanguineous marriages, combined with the recruitment of close affinity; and married into individuals and groups of similar social rank, gravitating around the royal household, consequently generating an equilibrium within the minority dominant group. Thus, when we refer to the social group’s cohesion, we are not claiming the absence of tensions, rivalries, and disputes, both within kindred, lineage, and curial aristocracy⁷⁹. What we do claim is that the existence of these solid and diversified social relations ensured the survival of a powerful and dense group, which in turn was one the backbones of the distribution of power in late medieval Portugal, and indeed during the *Ancien Régime* centuries.

All these factors reinforce the idea of densifying relations, which surely promoted the cohesion of the curial aristocratic group, a key factor in its own social reproduction. This broader context does not devalue individual agency, or studies centred on ‘strategies’. In this regard, one could consider these interpretative variations like the different scales of a map: broader or more detailed perspectives allows us to see different things. Moreover, we conceive structures as dynamic relations between different elements, generating a homoeostatic equilibrium. However, they are organised by social principles, whose hierarchy and dynamics are specific to any given society. This combination produces a specific social dynamic, formed by malleable structures built upon regularities and variants. Given these theoretical assumptions, it is worth pointing out that, in the case of marriage, these very same principles were irrigated by the ecclesiastical discourse, simply because God and the scriptures were this society’s common ground, thus paving the way for the historically constructed centrality played by ecclesiastical hierarchies.

Matrimonium seminarium caritatis est, as postulated by Gratian. Marriage was an institution created by God, with the purpose of enlarging and reproducing the *ecclesia*, the spiritual brotherhood united by the new Alliance. It was a deep social bond, which united the social body through *caritas*, spread and cemented with every union. Therefore, the ecclesiastical discourse should not be considered merely as some sort of technical discourse, though that dimension certainly existed. Even if the complexities of such debates were unknown to the common folk, the fact is that social practices were deeply imbued with these conceptions, as simplified versions of ideas, symbols and rules. Marriage practices and conceptions are an excellent example of how we cannot dissociate ‘ideal’ and ‘material’ elements if we are to understand how society – let alone the aristocratic groups – reproduced itself; the same can be said

⁷⁹ Guerreau-Jalabert, «Observations sur la logique sociale».

about ‘religious’ discourse in pre-modern societies, since it played a much broader role than in our own societies. This perfectly demonstrates the impossibility of apprehending the dominance exercised by the aristocracy, and its internal cohesion, outside the Christian mental framework that structured their own world.

Overall, this demonstration also allowed us to emphasize a theoretical approach on the study of medieval dominant groups, particularly in the Iberian context. We clearly recognise that, from the 13th century onwards, ‘vertical’ elements tend to appear as progressively decisive in shaping this group’s structure and identity: genealogical literature and discourses on ‘lineage’; the development of the entail system, which favoured the concentration of the inheritance in the hands of first-born males⁸⁰ – although not excluding the remaining children; the progressive formation of a system of aristocratic power based on ‘Houses’, which consisted in a constellation of material and immaterial elements that should always be united, preserved and transmitted⁸¹; the organisation and reorganisation of ‘familial’ and noble-house archives during the early modern period, which with their documentary selection and organisation, clearly shapes the image of these ‘houses’⁸² in a «sociogenetical» manner⁸³. These and other factors combine to establish a social image and identity primarily based on a ‘vertical’ dimension. Our theoretical position does not devalue all the previously enounced elements, which were obviously fundamental in the group’s organisation and how they organised and exercised power in the operative framework provided by kinship relations, both consanguineal and by alliance. Rather, in a complementary perspective, by stressing the importance of matrimonial networks as a whole, of the circulation of wealth, and of building an extensive set of dense and varied social relations, we intend to emphasize that the position, structure and reproduction of dominant groups also fundamentally depended on a level of social interactions that far surpasses ‘vertical’ behaviours. A better comprehension of these social dynamics, which were clearly intertwined, depends on the capacity to reconstitute the fundamental endogenous conceptions of that society, the patterns formed by social practices, and the abstract reasoning on these dynamics⁸⁴.

⁸⁰ This problem, among a large set of complex questions regarding Portuguese entails, is presently being addressed by a far-reaching ERC project, *VINCULUM*, at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa: <https://www.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/>.

⁸¹ Monteiro, «Casa, casamento e nome», p. 137. This definition of House, which is clearly operational for historians working on the early modern period, is illusory and unsuitable for previous centuries (on the Portuguese case, see notably the observations made by Sousa, «Linhagem e identidade», pp. 894-895). The rise of a House system seems to occur in the 15th and 16th centuries – however, the process still requires deeper research.

⁸² See notably the study by Rosa, «Penser et organiser les archives de famille».

⁸³ Morsel, «Production d’archives» and «Le médiéviste, le lignage et l’effet de réel».

⁸⁴ As stated by Jérôme Baschet: “On croit donc utile de ne pas faire dire au système ce qu’il ne dit pas, ou plus exactement de ne pas prétendre qu’il dit lui-même ce qu’on voudrait lui faire dire. Si une interprétation fondée sur l’usage de nos catégories contemporaines peut être légitime, elle ne saurait l’être

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