

The Use of Medieval History in Constructing National Identities in 19th-Century Portugal

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Abstract: Looking back at the development of Portugal today, the 19th century was undoubtedly an important turning point, with the emergence of professional historical writing in the country, the reconstruction of national identity, and the topic of intellectual commitment of the time. The main point of this study is to analyze the writing of European history in the early 19th century. Antony Smith considers the 19th century the beginning of professional historical writing under the framework of a national character. By the theory of Stephen Berger, the scientificity of history is seen as a key point. Combined with the actual situation of Portugal at that time, this paper seeks to emphasize that Portugal in the European environment was influenced by the general European view of history. Portuguese historians carried out scientific historical writing, choosing a romantic and liberal view of history. The paper focuses on Portuguese historians, represented by Alexandre Heerculano. In his view, the Middle Ages were a time of glory. Furthermore, the paper analyzes his professional historical writing and the literary creation of historical elements. Alexandre Heerculano used the well-ordered and vibrant Middle Ages to resist the depressed social situation in Portugal at that time. He called for the establishment of the Middle Ages as the origin of the nation, and the importance of the national imagination to restore national confidence and rebuild national identity. The paper follows this vein and explores how medieval history was used to construct Portuguese identity.

Keywords: medieval history, national identity, Portugal, Alexandre Herculano

1. Introduction

The history writing of nineteenth-century Portugal was, for a long time, a continuously updated process. Portuguese historians began to write systematically, inspired by the situation that history was seen as a science and also in the context of professional European historical writing at that time.

Focusing on the 19th century, it is necessary to mention its modernity. During this period, the university established the discipline of history. Historians received professional systematic training to write the past with a modern perspective, tracing back to the national history writing born in the Middle Ages, and constructing national narratives. Linking between history and nationalism is not only that nationalism is profoundly ‘historicist’ in character, but also seen as a profound historical movement in which historians’ figure prominently among its creators and devotees [1]. Thus, due to the second half of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of a new understanding of history as

science, giving historians the authority of history [2], we can consider the 19th century the beginning of professional historical writing, within the framework of a national character.

In the first half of the 19th century, liberal historiography began to develop in Portugal. The paper explains the overall situation of Portuguese historical writing in the 19th century, which took place under the development of professional historical writing in 19th-century Europe. The most prominent among historians of this period was Alexandre Herculano, a romantic and a liberal, shared the ideals of convergence in a project of national, traversed by history, allied to literature and morals, which aimed to form the generations in the love of the Nation, which was intended to be based on representative bases [3]. He considered the Middle Ages was a period of splendor. This idea is also present in his writing of history and literary creation. He suggested to look for value from the past to change Portugal's turbulent situation at the time.

This paper analyzes how historians, represented by Alexandre Herculano, used medieval history to explore and construct national identity in the early Portuguese professional historical writing, and the inspiration of medieval history in presenting national identity in his literary process.

2. Portugal: Historical and Literature Writing in 19th Century

How the historical writing of 19th-century Portugal was recounted? "From the late eighteenth century, history was seen as a powerful means of strengthening the Portuguese sense of national identity and was closely linked to the history of the monarchy" [4]. But as entering the 19th century, a series of blows seemed to have changed the relationship between history and national identity. The first was the invasion of Napoleon in 1807, and in 1808 the royal family and a large number of nobles fled to Brazil. This was followed by the liberal revolution of 1820, the independence of Brazil in 1822. In this turbulent situation, "liberal historiography emerged in the first two decades of the 19th century, partly due to the exile of liberal intellectuals to England and France" [4]. Thus, in the first half of the 19th century, Portuguese historians accepted historical research methods from other European countries. "Old historical narratives based on royal and superficial events were challenged by a historical narrative aimed at a broader historical narrative, based on the concept of nationality, combining institutional and social dimensions" [5]. This was an inevitable trend, especially in the absence of indigenous historical thoughts. The British and French currents to reconstruct the past history spread to Portugal, in a way of searching a national identity shaken by socio-political upheavals at the turn of the century.

The greatest promoter of this approach - "the idea that the Middle Ages were a golden age" in this period was, Alexandre Herculano, one of the most important Portuguese historians of the 19th century and considered to be the founder of modern Portuguese historiography [6]. European liberalism and romanticism were embodied in Alexandre as the cause of his thinking about the Middle Ages and combining them with the Portuguese example. The medieval theme was seen by him as a central element of Portuguese history, helping him to better understand Portugal's past while analyzing the social situation of the time. As already mentioned, Portugal had already suffered a series of blows just into the 19th century, and "by the mid-19th century, Portugal's intellectual elite saw their country as a weak state, having lost almost its entire colonial empire and at the mercy of the European powers" [5]. The idea of national decadence prevailed from the end of the 18th century until the 19th century, and the question of how to reconstruct national self-confidence had become a key issue. This context therefore makes the medieval discourse particularly important. Aside from the identity of historian, Alexandre Herculano was one of the iconic figures of the Portuguese romantic literary period in the 19th century. The interest in the past, especially national, is an unquestionable fact of all romantic aesthetics [7]. Medievalist themes could be found both in Herculano's prose fiction, historical novels and tales. This reveals the great

unity that runs through the author's work [8]. Through the interpretation and analysis of the Portuguese past, Alexandre further used his works to call for the national identity to the Portuguese.

3. An Analysis of Alexandre Herculano's Writing

3.1. Historical Works

Herculano's writing is romantic historical and romantic aesthetic. Between 1846 and 1853, he produced the book *The History of Portugal* (*História de Portugal*), in four volumes, a work that was "to establish the main lines of Portuguese national history" [4]. His historical views and works indicate how he treated and used the medieval past.

"I will limit myself in these letters to the first cycle, because I believe it to be the most important, or rather the only important, if we consider history as a science of application" [9]. Through this excerpt, we can directly see his exposition of historical theory, history is scientific in his eyes. It also better reflects how the writing of professional history in Europe in the 19th century was reflected in him, so we can think that he followed a systematic and modern approach in writing national history. This quest for science and true history aims to break down the barriers of nationalist ideology. In Herculano's view, history was used to rebuild the nation, considering its decline, a new birth was needed. Under the idea of Romanticism, swept by Europe, national particularity can be traced back to its origins, returning to its essence. Thus, the road leads to the Middle Ages.

"It is therefore at the separation of Portugal from the Leonian kingdom that our history begins: all that remains beyond this date belongs, not to us, but to Spain in general: this is the first yardstick for the division of our epochs" [9]. From this excerpt, we can find that in Herculano's view the Portuguese medieval period began with the independence of the Kingdom of Portugal from the Kingdom of Lyon, the victories of the King of Alfonso I (D. Afonso Henriques) in the wars to recover lost territories had great courage and confidence for the Lusitanian (Lusitania) nation. Between the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, and in the course of the wars of Reconquest, centralized political and administrative unity played a role of inescapable importance. The organization gave the nation a sense of wholeness, which is why Herculano argues that the Middle Ages were the period when the Portuguese nation was "formed" and reached its "moral masculinity" [7]. Herculano also added "Nowhere, perhaps, during the Middle Ages, did it have more influence on the progress of society, was it more energetic and vivacious than in Portugal [10]. Therefore, facing with the depressed national reality, the decadent national consciousness, the vibrant Middle Ages is the projection of his gaze. We cannot say that this is an escape, but the prosperity of the past is the driving force against the decadent factor, to discover the withering national self-confidence and also to reconstruct a Portuguese national identity.

3.2. History Fiction

In 1844, Herculano published his most famous historical novel *Eurico, o Presbítero*. A historical novel set in the 8th century, the narrative, besides telling the love story of the warrior Eurico and the noble Hermengarda, presents a historical interpretation of the Visigothic society and the Arab invaders that corroborates with the historical vision [8]. After his humble origins and victory on the battlefield, the protagonist proposes to Duke's daughter but is tragically rejected. Discouraged, the young man turned to religion and became a priest. However, the protagonist's life is interrupted by the Muslim invasion, and instead of refusing the call to battle, the ancient warrior transforms into a mysterious knight dressed in black. Along the way, he breaks through the battlefield, destroys enemy forces, defends and takes revenge on his former Visigothic companions, and finally gives up love in favor of duty to guard his home until death.

Eurico is a humanized hero who fights for his country and faces his own psychological conflicts, just like the people of Portuguese in the 19th century. Eurico accepted the call, accepted it, fought for his homeland. As a consequence of divine or heroic initiative and action, marking or defining the style of a nation or a civilization [11]. Likewise, Herculano called on all those who care about their country to fight for their country, both in the revolution and in literature [12]. An appeal to medieval origins, and an emphasis on the national imagination. In this way, it is possible for him to transcribe some important moments that Portugal had missed in its country's history [12].

4. Conclusion

Influenced by the modernity of the 19th century, professional scientific historical writing emerged in Europe. This mode of historical writing is closely related to nation and is from the outset within a national framework. In this European environment, this kind of historical writing inevitably appeared in Portugal, giving birth to the development of indigenous schools of historical thought in Portugal. The most emblematic of this period was the Romantic and liberal historian Alexandre Herculano, who followed the theory that history was an applied science and systematically wrote national histories at the time.

At the same time, as a promoter of medieval discursive narratives, he sought confidence in the construction of national identity from the past in the face of the crisis in Portugal at the beginning of the 19th century. The victory of the wars of Reconquest was seen by him as an affirmation of the nation's origins. The unified management of the administrative ministry in the Middle Ages was considered a good political order with reference. His appeal to medieval origins and his emphasis on the national imagination were used by him to construct national myths unique to Portugal in his literary works. The dynamism of the Middle Ages was used by him to resist the decline of the nation, alleviate the social unrest in 19th-century Portugal, and rebuild the national identity.

Throughout the 19th century, Alexander's idea of valuing the Middle Ages at the beginning of the century did not last until the end of the 19th century. However, his method of writing history and the consciousness of applying the past to resolve the present were highly constructive national self-salvation at the time. From the 19th to the 20th century, Portuguese intellectuals were obsessed with reforming the country to keep up with Europe. For Portugal, the construction of a national identity is, generally, an ongoing topic.

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