

THE MILITARY ORDERS



Volume 5

Politics
and
Power

edited by
Peter W.
Edbury

Chapter 36

Inquiring about Honour in the Portuguese Military Orders (Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)¹

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This essay aims to analyse a specific range of issues in the period between the time when the orders were brought under the tutelage of the Portuguese Crown and 1773, the date by which the distinction between New Christians and Old Christians had officially been brought to an end. With that in view, it is necessary to outline the prerequisites for admission into the Portuguese military orders and to scrutinize the details and meaning of these requirements in comparison with those of the Castilian orders. Finally, it is crucial to demonstrate the way these prerequisites were ascertained and set them against the procedures followed by other institutions that also had to establish eligibility for membership, such as the Holy Office (Inquisition) in Portugal. In tackling these questions, I shall take into account not only the theoretical framework, which underpins them, but also the actual institutional practices, which are essential for a proper understanding of what was at issue.

As early as the first half of the sixteenth century background investigations were carried out to ascertain whether candidates were fit for the military orders. The earliest ones on record date from the time of Dom Jorge, master of the orders of Avis and Santiago (†1550). A number of processes dating from the 1520s and later survive in the archives;² earlier ones have apparently been lost. At that time the requirements in force in the orders replicated those for the secular clergy. The process was essentially geared towards corroborating the candidate's honesty, ensuring that he was not part of any ongoing criminal investigation as well as establishing that he possessed material assets that would allow for a standard of living befitting the social status enjoyed by the institution.

¹ Research work carried out within the scope of the PTDC/HAH/64160/2006 – FCT (= Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology). The Author expresses her gratitude to Professor Francis A. Dutra for reviewing the English translation of this paper.

² M.C.G. Pimenta, *As Ordens de Avis e de Santiago na Baixa Idade Média: o governo de D. Jorge* (Palmela, 2002), p. 230.