

Maria Marta Lobo de Araujo y Alexandra Esteves, *The Dowry System in Rural Mediterranean Europe. A Case Study of Peasant Families in Minho, Portugal*, Lewiston (NY, USA)-Lampeter (UK), The Edwin Mellen Press, 2018, 239 p., ISBN: 978-1-4955-0668-0.

Maria Marta Lobo de Araujo and Alexandra Esteves have a long standing connection with the north of Portugal and a wealth of knowledge on the region's history. Both researchers are doctors by the University of Minho, where the former is today a Professor, whilst the latter lectures at Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo and Universidad Católica de Braga. A cursory look at the authors' career journeys, research projects and publications bears witness to their in-depth knowledge of both the Minho region and the topic they develop in this book. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that their colossal study of archival sources has resulted in a seminal work on the social history of peasant communities in Mediterranean Europe, specifically in the Iberian peninsula.

Araujo and Esteves' work focuses on dowry contracts undertaken by peasant families in Portugal's Minho district during the eighteenth century. Their research is based on a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of over three-hundred contracts from six districts in the area, drawn from a thorough trawl of the archives and backed by a solid and wide-ranging bibliography. Its aims were: 1) to understand the mechanisms of wealth transmission through marriage related legal institutions; and 2) to analyse social relationships in family and neighbourhood networks in the Mediterranean rural context.

The book has an introduction by Professor Ofelia Rey Castelao of the neighbouring Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and is divided into chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the Minho area and the topic under discussion, providing background information on this small but diverse region where the population was widely dispersed and overwhelmingly rural, with Braga as the sole town of any size. Having described the region's natural and economic resources, the authors focus on its main demographic and social features, namely high population density and widespread emigration. Although the area's power structures were occupied by the nobility and the clergy, the large majority of the population were farmers who occasionally supplemented their income with part-time employment. The authors then describe the Minho family structure, as well as the nature and distinctive features of their smallholdings.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the marriage institution and the processes leading up to it, including its legal framework, constraints and potential issues, family intervention, marital commitments etc. Special attention

is paid to the role of the Church as the institution that supervised the proper functioning of the system, adding ideological control to its legal authority.

Chapter 2 discusses the meaning and context of the legal framework surrounding the institution of dowry in Mediterranean Europe in the pre-industrial era. In a few broad brushstrokes, the authors explain the origin of dowry arrangements and offer a detailed discussion of the *Ordinações Filipinas*, which regulated inheritance rights and the dowry system in Portugal since the late sixteenth century.

The salient point in this chapter, however, is that reality was not uniform but diverse. There was no single model and the authors prove it by reference to the Minho area, analysing family models, household arrangements around extended family networks and the phenomenon of emigration. Finally, they discuss the prominent role of women in family structures and in the social, productive and educational fabric of the region.

Araújo and Esteves lay emphasis on the particular model of social relations in the area, which was based on the twin pillars of religion and work. Neighbourhood relationships, cultural patterns and traditional festive customs all had an important part to play in social interaction.

This discussion takes an anthropological viewpoint, ending with a close look at the ceremonies, actions and protocol surrounding marriage as a rite of passage to a new life and a new social status, and as a harbinger of the newly married couple's new legal circumstances. This was, all in all, the time when relationships between families were at their closest and social bonds were enhanced within the community.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the subject of dowries in the specific context of the region and the individuals involved. Who, how, by what means and under what circumstances were dowries arranged in the Minho region? In order to shed light on these issues, the authors explore, as far as the sources allow, the different variables affecting both givers and receivers of dowries, such as age, marital status, geographical origin and social status. Despite its brevity, this chapter is highly significant, as it explains how a matrimonial contract was formalised and what were the processes underpinning eventual patrimonial transmission.

Chapter 4 examines the material items contained in dowries in the region. The authors argue that a dowry was a key element in the creation and development of a couple's new home. Hence, its content reflected not only the personality and material wealth of the individuals involved but also the resources available in the local economy. The objects and goods included in dowries in the Minho area are classified into three main types: items acquired for productive purposes; objects that provided security, such as clothing and household goods; and finally, money.

Property, both in terms of land – essential to the couple's economy – and buildings, was a key family asset and the discussion therefore turns to the home

as the centre of economic and family life – the hub from which a family’s property, assets and household were run. This leads to a discussion of the trousseau, with special attention to household objects such as furniture and linen. Homes were found to have been simply and sparsely furnished, as well as very homogeneous, although differences were revealed as one rose up the social scale. Two items, however, were invariably included: a bed and chests.

Along with furnishings, Araujo and Esteves study both male and female attire, which consisted of simple outfits that were ideally suited to the day to day needs of the local population. In terms of fabric, shape and colour, these garments conferred regional dress its special character and reflected the rural milieu in which the people signing dowry deeds lived their lives.

The last material component of dowries described by the authors is jewelry, a highly prized element of dowries, not only for its monetary worth but for its social value and aesthetic role. A full account of materials, types and shapes used in jewelry closes this chapter.

The fifth and final chapter of the book addresses the economic and social implications of dowries, analysing the responsibilities and commitments, both in economic and family terms, undertaken by givers and receivers. The authors claim that a dowry was a forward payment on future inheritance, a particularly important issue in a rural socio-economic environment where life revolves around farming, property structures and family. In consequence, many dowries were not actual gifts but promises, since they were only fulfilled when the parent or donor died.

Taking all the above into account, the authors claim that dowries in the Minho area were not only a means to enable two individuals to wed, but had a threefold purpose: First, to ensure the protection and care of older members of the community, even after death; second, to safeguard the family inheritance; and third, to create bonds between families of a similar status in order to maintain or increase their social standing.

The book concludes with a synthesis of the authors’ research and findings and is supplemented by two appendices containing images and a short glossary listing the main types of objects mentioned in the sources. These extra resources bring the Minho region closer to the unfamiliar reader and facilitate understanding of a work of scholarship which will undoubtedly widen our knowledge of family history in Mediterranean Europe.