

# **The Importance of the Horse in the Portuguese Expansion in Morocco: The Occupation of Ceuta and the Development of a New Military Doctrine**

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## ABSTRACT

This work focuses on adapting the Portuguese garrison of Ceuta to the many challenges faced after the conquest of the North African port in 1415. The garrison and its commanders had to adapt to a different form of warfare from what these peninsular warriors were accustomed to. They were centered on fast movements and ambushes, not so much the direct shock of heavy cavalry. The key to this process was the horse, the most essential resource for the city garrison.

Shortly after its domestication, the horse became an emblem of the battlefield. From the chariots of the ancient world to the lethal horse archers of the steppe tribes or the shock of European knights, its presence was constant throughout History. In the skirmishes and raids that defined daily life in Ceuta, this animal once again proved its essential role.

Using the chronicles of the city's first two commanders, *Crónica do conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, and *Crónica do conde D. Duarte de Meneses*, respectively, we will look to answer the following questions: How was this resource acquired? How was it used in the garrison's offensive and defensive operations? We will also use several bibliographical works related to the subject, namely the studies of Luís Miguel Duarte and João Gouveia Monteiro about the conquest of Ceuta.

**Keywords:** Ceuta; Portuguese; Marinid; garrison; horse; expedition; mobility; raiding; D. Pedro de Meneses; D. Duarte de Meneses.

# **La importancia del caballo en la expansión portuguesa en Marruecos: La ocupación de Ceuta y el desarrollo de una nueva doctrina militar**

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en la adaptación de la guarnición portuguesa de Ceuta a los numerosos desafíos a los que se enfrentó tras la conquista del puerto norteafricano en 1415. La guarnición y sus comandantes tuvieron que adaptarse a una forma de guerra diferente a la que estaban acostumbrados estos guerreros peninsulares. Se centraban en los movimientos rápidos y las emboscadas, no tanto en el choque directo de la caballería pesada. La clave de este proceso fue el caballo, el recurso más esencial para la guarnición de la ciudad. Poco después de su domesticación, el caballo se convirtió en un emblema del campo de batalla. Desde los carros del mundo antiguo hasta los letales arqueros a caballo de las tribus esteparias o el choque de los caballeros europeos, su presencia fue constante a lo largo de la Historia. En las escaramuzas y correrías que definieron la vida cotidiana de los ceutíes, este animal volvió a demostrar su papel esencial. A partir de las crónicas de los dos primeros comandantes de la ciudad, Crónica do conde D. Pedro de Meneses y Crónica do conde D. Duarte de Meneses, respectivamente, intentaremos dar respuesta a las siguientes preguntas: ¿cómo se adquiriría este recurso? ¿Cómo se utilizaba en las operaciones ofensivas y defensivas de la guarnición? También nos apoyaremos en varias obras bibliográficas relacionadas con el tema, en concreto los estudios de Luís Miguel Duarte y João Gouveia Monteiro sobre la conquista de Ceuta.

**Palabras clave:** Ceuta; portugués; meriní; guarnición; caballo; expedición; movilidad; correrías; D. Pedro de Meneses; D. Duarte de Meneses.

## **葡萄牙对摩洛哥进行军事扩张一事中战马的重要性： 占领休达和新军事理论的发展**

### 摘要

本文聚焦于1415年占领北非港口后葡萄牙在休达的驻军对诸多挑战的适应情况。驻军及其指挥官必须适应一系列战争形

式，后者不同与他们这些半岛战士所习惯的战争。他们聚焦于快速移动和伏击，而不是重骑兵的直接冲击。这个过程的关键是战马，这是城市驻军最必不可少的资源。马被驯化后，不久就成为战场的象征。从古代世界的战车到草原部落致命的弓骑兵或欧洲骑士的冲击，它的存在贯穿整个历史。在休达日常的冲突和袭击中，这种动物再次证明了其重要作用。通过使用关于该城市第一位和第二位指挥官的编年史，分别为《D. 佩德罗·德梅内塞斯伯爵纪事》(Crónica do conde D. Pedro de Meneses)和《D. 杜阿尔特·德梅内塞斯伯爵纪事》(Crónica do conde D. Duarte de Meneses)，我们将回答以下问题：马这种资源是如何获得的？它是如何被用于驻军的进攻和防御行动的？我们还将使用与该主题相关的几部著作，即Luís Miguel Duarte和João Gouveia Monteiro关于占领休达的研究。

关键词：休达，葡萄牙人，马林人，驻军，战马，远征，机动性，袭击，D. Pedro de Meneses, D. Duarte de Meneses

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In 1415, after the impressive mobilization of a powerful host supported by an armada to match it, the Kingdom of Portugal conquered the Moroccan port of Ceuta after a daring amphibious landing. The Portuguese garrison left behind to protect the city would spend the next 43 years isolated in a highly hostile Maghreb, where they could adapt to a much more mobile style of warfare and eventually become a highly destabilizing regional power. The horse was essential to this process, which allowed the garrison to match the local Maranid forces and create a *modus operandi* that would define the following century of Portuguese expansion in the region.

The Portuguese garrison left by King D. João I to protect his new overseas possession, approximately 3,000 men under the command of the noble

D. Pedro de Meneses, found itself with several problems after the city's conquest. Its huge perimeter was indefensible, its walls were in disrepair, and the danger of an enemy siege to recapture the city was always looming. Despite this, the garrison's greatest challenge was adapting to a different way of warfare in an unfamiliar terrain against an enemy with a much greater mobilization, both in troop number and speed.

D. Pedro de Meneses had the difficult task of fighting an enemy with more resources and a complete knowledge of the local terrain, which favored ambushes and quick operational movements. According to the *Crónica do conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, originally published in 1453, the Portuguese commander said, "the war that you would make in this place is unlike other forms of war [...] a man needs to be careful, if

not after defeating ten or twenty moors, two thousand more will follow.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s worth noting that outside of Christendom, the European knight experienced difficulties in the open field against lighter Turkish and Moorish mounted units due to their hit-and-run tactics. European war horses were also not accustomed to fighting under the heat of these regions, namely in their armor.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of the horse in the practice of war in medieval Christianity cannot be understated, though; even the Portuguese successfully used dismounted knights as elite infantry units during the Crisis of 1383–1385.<sup>3</sup> As Erol Burçin says, “The medieval knight was inconceivable without his horse. Knight, the English term rooted in Anglo-Saxon of medieval Europe, denoted a mounted soldier; in French, Chevalier, German, Ritter, Italian, Cavaliere, and Spanish, Caballero were the terms used.”<sup>4</sup> In Ceuta, the horse was the most useful tool in the adaptation process, allowing an increase in the reconnaissance around the city and information gathering on enemy forces. It also allowed Portuguese expeditions outside the city. The cavalry corps of the garrison, nonexistent in the first years of the occupation, would become a formidable force that eventually allowed the creation of a considerable area of influence around the city.<sup>5</sup>

The timeline chosen for this study is 1415–1458, more specifically, when the conquest of Ceuta took place and when Portugal conquered its second castle in the region, Alcácer-Cegu-

er. This first contact and the experience gained in combat during these years shaped what would become the Portuguese military doctrine in Morocco.

This study begins with a brief contextualization of the conquest of Ceuta, the garrison that occupied the city, and its first combat experiences. Following this is an analysis of how the garrison used horses, firstly in defensive operations and its role in the reconnaissance network, and secondly, how it shaped the offensive operations of the city, namely the role of mounted units during these expeditions. The final section is dedicated to how the garrison acquired new horses to increase their cavalry corps, namely in skirmishes, looting, and foreign markets.

The sources used in this study are the 1997 edition of the *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and edited by Maria Teresa Brocardo, and the *Crónica do Conde D. Duarte de Meneses*, edited by Larry King and published in 1978 by the University Nova de Lisboa.<sup>6</sup>

The port of Ceuta proved to be an important point in the commercial axis between the Mediterranean Sea and Northern Europe. This city, which was fortified since the sixth century’s Byzantine occupation, transitioned between several regional powers throughout the medieval period because it was both an important commercial hub and strategically vital. After all, it was in the crossing between the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. In 1415, the Kingdom of Portugal paid attention to this



Image 1: Representation of Ceuta in *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* by Georg Braun.  
Source: *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg, 1572, Cologne.



Image 2: Proposal of a reconstitution of Ceuta in 1415, by Carlos Gozalbes Cravio-to. We can see the layout of Ceuta's walls, with Medina's castle as the centerpiece of the city defenses and the isolated fortress of the Afrag outside the city walls.

Source: Duarte, Luís Miguel. *Ceuta 1415: Seiscentos anos depois*.  
Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2015.

commercial port. The kingdom recently fought a devastating war with Castille and organized an expeditionary force to conquer the city.<sup>7</sup> This Portuguese King João I undertaking is impressive due to its scale and organization, especially considering the troubled days of his early reign.

Ceuta shows the sophistication of the Portuguese bureaucracy in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. After several reigns focused on increasing the Crown's power and developing a bureaucracy capable of meeting its new necessities, D. João I had little trouble gathering a mighty armada with a land force to match it to lay siege to the city. Due to its early centralization, the kingdom was able to mobilize a great number of military resources, with all the logistical problems that operations of that scale had while keeping the target of the expedition a secret until the fleet's departure. The King himself led the operation, accompanied by his three eldest sons, the expedition was organized with the guarantee that a royal absence of this proportion would not threaten the Crown's position.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to give an exact number of the Portuguese force, but the historiographical consensus is that it was a notable mobilization, a military expedition of great proportions. João Gouveia Monteiro estimates that the host numbered between 14,000 and 20,000 warriors. Meanwhile, Luís Miguel Duarte assumes between 12,000 and 15,000, transported by a fleet of about 200 ships, but he admits the possibility of this number being larger.<sup>9</sup> The best military contingents of the

kingdom were gathered, and they were pointed at the walls of Ceuta.

After a troubled voyage marked by bad weather and plague outbreaks in some ships, the morale of the Portuguese warriors was low. Despite this, unexpectedly, a small skirmish on the Ceuta beach developed into the capture of one of the city gates. This opening, accompanied by the constant arrival of fresh Portuguese warriors on the beach to assault the breach, sealed the city's fate. Ceuta was firmly in Portuguese hands the following morning after the retreat of the remaining Moorish garrison.<sup>10</sup> The first days of the Portuguese occupation of Ceuta consisted of organizing a garrison to occupy the recently conquered city. Around 3,000 warriors were left behind, commanded by the noble D. Pedro de Meneses, who immediately began preparing the city for an eventual siege following the royal host's return to Portugal.<sup>11</sup> The first skirmishes started not long after the Portuguese armada left the city's port. In the first months, the garrison fought a hard campaign to stabilize the city's perimeter, and several skirmishes took place in the forested hills surrounding the city. These actions typically took place after an ambush, or attempt at one, that then developed in scale with the arrival of additional forces.<sup>12</sup> Besides this, sections of the city had to be abandoned, namely the slums outside the city walls, due to the inability to effectively occupy these areas.<sup>13</sup> The walls were the target of intense maintenance due to several sections of it having fallen into disrepair throughout the decades, and a battle order was created for the garrison,

allowing quick responses to any developing threat.

Due to their enemy having a much superior mobilization and knowledge of the local terrain, the focus of the Portuguese captaincy of Ceuta was building a reconnaissance network, by both land and sea, giving the garrison the ability to shadow enemy movements around the city. This took shape with sea patrols by small ships along the coast and a system of watchtowers along the walls, which eventually were expanded along the main routes taken by the garrison in its offensive operations.

The greatest challenges faced by the garrison were the sieges of the city between 1418 and 1419, consisting in a strong Marinid offensive by land, supported by a fleet of the kingdom of Granada, which blockaded the harbor, totally blocking off the city.<sup>14</sup> The fighting was brutal and frequent, each assault progressively wearing down the city's garrison, which, in the moment of highest pressure, had to face an all-out assault on the walls by the Moroccan forces, while warriors from Granada had landed and occupied the Almina, and attacked the cities flank.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, the arrival of the Portuguese relief force changed the outcome of the siege, inflicting many casualties on the Granada fleet and its warriors, who were now isolated on land. Meanwhile, a strong counterattack by the city's garrison retook the Almina, which led to the Marinid army retreating in good order, thus breaking the siege.<sup>16</sup> This was the last time a force of such size threatened Ceuta, and the Portuguese presence

was truly threatened. After the siege, and once again seizing the opportunity of the massive regional instability lived at the time in the Maghreb, the Portuguese garrison would become bolder in its expeditions, as we will see.<sup>17</sup>

After the city's conquest and expecting the eventual enemy attack, the first aspect handled by D. Pedro de Meneses was, as previously said, creating an information system that allowed the garrison not to be "blind" to enemy movements. The Portuguese position was extremely precarious because, even though the garrison left behind was quite large, Ceuta was isolated in an extremely hostile land, considerably far away from a relief force. A complex system of watchtowers was placed along the walls of Ceuta, whose visibility increased dramatically after the removal of the forest that surrounded the city. Several other tools eventually accompanied these watchtowers, as the Portuguese positions strengthened. These included sea patrols by light, fast ships in the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar, an effective information network, and watchtowers along the main offensive routes used by the garrison. The horse fit into this scheme extremely well since it was the fastest way of informing the city's captaincy of enemy troop movements or the status of any expedition that had left the safety of the city's walls.

Each warrior in Ceuta was decisive for its defense, and every casualty was a harsh blow to the garrison due to its total dependency on supply ships from mainland Portugal to maintain the city. Besides this, the captaincy wanted

to keep the highest number of veteran warriors in the city because they would be more mature and battle-hardened; thus, the risk of them threatening the city's safety with their actions was limited. Warriors who had no experience in the African theater had, typically, a great enthusiasm for the idea of fighting the infidel in Ceuta, and this would lead to many impulsive tactical decisions, resulting in unnecessary deaths. Besides this, the presence of experienced warriors and captains within the city would lower the risk for new arrivals, by teaching them and controlling their actions.

The mounted contingents' role in preserving manpower cannot be underestimated. The system that D. Pedro implemented in the raiding expeditions was supported by a reserve that would stay combat-ready and send relief for the main force if it had faced superior enemy forces. This reserve's main mission was to protect the original forces retreat with the loot they could gather, helping them reach the city's safety. An example of this force in action occurred after a disastrous incursion along the coast, led by the noble Álvaro Afonso without permission of Count D. Pedro. D. Pedro gathered a relief force of ninety knights that, due to the clandestine nature of this attack didn't arrive in time to save this effort. Álvaro Afonso and most of his company had died, and the relief force was only able to rescue three survivors, after which the count led a fighting retreat to the city gates.<sup>18</sup>

As we will see during our analysis of the horse's offensive use, this reserve

typically was successful in its rescue operations, but the lack of communication within the hierarchy of the garrison, combined with the lack of prudence shown by many nobles, made the task of manpower preservation extremely difficult. Count D. Pedro was forced to fight a war of attrition ever since he took command of the city, and unnecessary casualties needed to be prevented. Besides this, during the first months of this system's development, the mounted patrols around the city were of great help to the captancy. These reconnaissance actions allowed the discovery of pockets of enemy resistance around the city, namely the ambushes orchestrated by the warriors of Abu.<sup>19</sup> An example of this occurred when a patrol of thirty knights discovered several ambushes spread around several points surrounding the city.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding defensive actions, the knights of Ceuta were instrumental in the several skirmishes that took place outside the city's gates. Their traditional role as a shock unit was limited, due to the lack of horses in the city, forcing most of the nobility to fight on foot. Even though they were few, the mounted knights could attract enemy forces near the walls, where the devastating fire from the crossbowman and cannons on the walls broke several enemy attacks. These feigned retreats in the direction of supportive fire were typically enough to force an enemy retreat. However, if it did not, the few mounted knights would lead the footmen in counterattacks against the confused enemy.



Image 3: Remains of the Marinid walls of the Āfrag, photo by Fernando Villada.  
Source: Costa, António Martins and João Gouveia Monteiro. *1415 A conquista de Ceuta: O relato empolgante da última grande vitória de D. João I*. Lisboa: Letras & Diálogos, 2015.



Image 4: View of a section of the curtain wall of the Āfrag, with the gate of Fez visible on the right.

Source: Duarte, Luís Miguel. *Ceuta 1415: Seiscentos anos depois*.  
Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2015.

An example of these actions occurred during a Moorish night attack on Ceuta, discovered by the Portuguese watchtowers and shadowed by a small group of mounted knights. This small force was reconning ahead for the main Portuguese force, under the command of D. Pedro de Meneses, whose objective was to attract the larger enemy force near the walls to bring their firepower to bear. When this didn't work, the Portuguese forces attacked the enemy host, supported by the few mounted knights available. The battle ended in a Portuguese victory, after a decisive action by the city's crossbowman, who left the city gates and fired on the exposed Moorish flank.<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to its role during a siege, despite its limited mobility due to it being surrounded by the city, the knights of Ceuta were quite active. In these moments, the mounted forces were used to harass the enemy's siege lines and to sabotage any new attack made on the city. We can see this when, after an unsuccessful attack on the city gates, D. Pedro led an incursion into the Aljazira, a fortified position outside the city used by besieging forces, which resulted in the capture four siege ladders and a large amount of wood which would be used for additional siege weapons. Furthermore, several wells and water cisterns were blocked, further hampering the enemy siege.<sup>22</sup>

During the great sieges of 1418 and 1419, Count D. Pedro made his mounted units one the most important pieces of the Portuguese defense. After the tactical placement along the walls

was finished, he organized a rapid response force of fifty mounted knights and 100 footmen, which was ordered to reinforce highly pressured positions or even face enemy breaches in the defensive perimeter.<sup>23</sup> This task was essential throughout the several attacks launched against the city walls. Still, the mounted units would only return to their natural element after the arrival of the relief force sent by D. João I. The drop in the enemy's morale, mixed with the enthusiasm of the garrison, led to a ferocious counterattack against the troops of Granada at the Almina. The count himself, on his horse and with his remaining reserves, entered the fray, thus breaking the siege. The combat was brutal; D. Pedro had to be removed from the fighting to reequip after the death of his horse and the loss of his lance, and he was then removed a second time after losing his conscience due to being hit by a projectile.<sup>24</sup>

Before we finish our analysis of the use of the horse defensively, it's important to address the differences between the belligerent's mounted forces, the gap being abysmal, for the difficulties of the Ceuta garrison were not felt by the local Moroccan armies. With extensive recruitment and with many more resources available for rapid deployment for the war effort, the armies gathered against Ceuta typically had many mounted units. We can see this, for example, in the first years of conflict with the warlord Abu, which gathered 1,500 horsemen and 25,000 footmen for one of his attacks; in a different offensive, 2,000 mounted warriors were gathered, along with 25,000 footmen.<sup>25</sup>

These numbers are certainly exaggerated, but they mirror the duality between these forces when they met in battle.

A notable example of this unbalanced matchup between both horsemen can be seen in a large-scale skirmish in front of the city's walls. After the discovery of several ambushes around Ceuta, orchestrated by a large Moroccan force, D. Pedro decided to face the enemy in the open field. In his tactical disposition, Abu's cavalry squadrons were divided into four companies placed in key positions around Ceuta; each company numbered 200 to 300 horsemen, with an additional 200 in reserve. In the undecided battle that followed, in which the Portuguese were forced to retreat inside the city, D. Pedro was only able to bring 90 mounted knights for the engagement, according to Zurara.<sup>26</sup>

In these initial days of Portuguese presence, the cavalry corps of the garrison was diminished and gradually strengthened throughout the years, as we will see. The use of mounted forces here is almost surgical; they were restricted to reconnaissance and tactical movements, like feign retreats and some flanking actions. Even with this prudence, there were several cases where knights were cornered in battle by enemy footmen, something that happened to D. Pedro when he was rescuing an expedition, being surrounded by enemy warriors, taken off his horse and gravely injured, being saved by the intervention of two other nobles.<sup>27</sup> According to the garrison's descriptions, the first months of the Portuguese occupation of Ceuta are, according to

Zurara's offensive operations, defined by the first expeditions to the forested hill that surrounded the city, namely by dismounted warriors. These early skirmishes with the remnants of the original garrison of Ceuta, unorganized and with little cohesion, pale in comparison to the battles against Abu, the first great Moorish lord to face this new threat.

With the arrival of Abu to the Ceuta theater, the Moroccan efforts became more lethal, namely through the use of ambushes in the wooded areas around the city. The Portuguese casualties, both in warriors and horses, began to rise due to their enemy's advantage in mobility and terrain knowledge. D. Pedro sought to adapt his tactical and strategical thinking to this new reality, also employing ambushes and feigned retreats against his enemy. Abu had set two ambushes in one of these skirmishes, attempting to divide and destroy the Portuguese force. D. Pedro, warned by his scouts of this, refused to advance, forcing Abu's hand, who ordered an attack on the Portuguese position. During his advanced, the Moorish force was ambushed by the smaller mounted forces of the garrison.<sup>28</sup>

Even though these early campaigns were technically the first offensive actions of the garrison, the first proper expedition was only launched after the defenders had gained a moment of respite from their adversaries. In this incursion, we can see the prototype evolving into the garrison's offensive system. Fifty *almogavars*, who were highly mobile light footmen units mostly made up of locals, led by Afon-

so Bugalho, left Ceuta with two armed ships with crossbowmen supporting them and attacked Cabeça Ruiva, where they found part of Abu's forces.<sup>29</sup> This first strike didn't succeed, but it motivated new expeditions.

The next operation took place in the valley of Laramjo and involved a force of 100 almogavars and crossbowmen, who attacked a lightly defended village during the night. In the following morning, they were faced with a larger enemy force, alerted by the survivors who had escaped the previous night. The fighting was intense, and the Portuguese forces only managed to escape due to the timely arrival of reinforcements sent by Count D. Pedro.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the many problems faced during this operation, namely failing to completely neutralize the village defenders, this moderate success was just the beginning of what would become a highly destabilizing regional power. This was followed by expeditions to the villages of Bolhões, Romal, multiple villages spread around the valley of Castelejo, Albejal, Almaça, Água de Ramel, among others.<sup>31</sup> Throughout these first experiences outside of the walls of Ceuta, the garrison perfected its *modus operandi*, using the lighter almogavars to recon ahead of the main Portuguese force, searching for the most vulnerable villages and the best routes to hide their movements.

The composition of these expeditions changed as the years passed and the garrison gained more resources. Initially, we see that these are mixed units of crossbowmen and footmen, support-

ed by the few mounted units available. The Portuguese warriors would arrive and take their positions around the village, using the cover of darkness to hide their movements. At dawn, they would attack in force, trying to cover every entrance into the village to avoid survivors escaping and warning other local forces.

Even with this methodical approach by D. Pedro, the absence of mounts was extremely limiting for the mobility of these expeditions, them being more easily intercepted by the enemy. To mitigate this, the Portuguese captain placed a second force in reserve, typically under his personal command, who were ready to ride in assistance of the main advance. In these early years, the rare incursion in which the Portuguese warriors didn't have to fight back into the city led to D. Pedro commanding several sharp rear-guard actions.

An example of the devastating consequences of this lack of mobility occurred when, after a reconnaissance mission by eight almogavars, D. Pedro sent a force to the trading post of Almarça, a contingent of 200 footmen, dismounted knights and crossbowman supported by a light ship. The land force was ambushed multiple times in their way, taking refuge in the nearby hills, where they were surrounded. The commander of this force, Gonçalo Vasques, tried, in vain, to signal the light ship to come ashore so they could evacuate. The unrelenting Moorish attacks throughout this were wearing down the small force, which led to Gonçalo Vasques gathering his remaining knights and

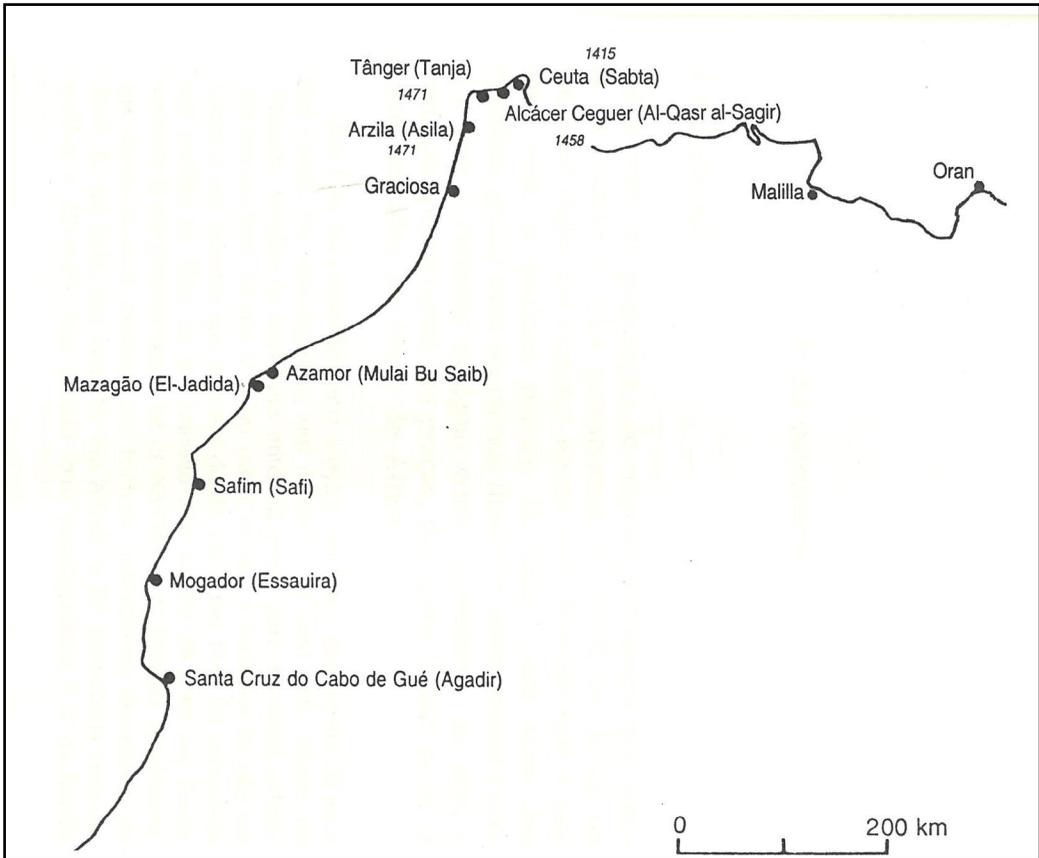


Image 5: Spanish and Portuguese fortresses in North Africa in the XV and early XVI centuries.

Source: A. H. de Oliveira Marques, "A Expansão Quatrocentista", Vol. 2 of *Nova História da Expansão Portuguesa*, edited by Joel Serrão and A. H. Oliveira Marques. Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1998, 295.

attempting a breakout. The Portuguese warriors were able to force their way out, escaping to the coast and boarding the light ship. Of the 200 warriors that had left Ceuta, only 25 returned, the remainder being killed in battle or taken prisoner.<sup>32</sup>

With the growth of the cavalry corps of the garrison, its mobility increased as well, which allowed for the deployment of new tactics in these offensive actions, but this would only oc-

cur after the sieges imposed on the city. The events of the great sieges of 1418 and 1419, where the garrison defeated the Granada-Moroccan coalition, were the turning point for the isolated fortress. With this existential threat defeated, D. Pedro sought to gradually expand the Portuguese area of influence in the region, which led to a search for new locations to strike. Before this, the garrison would receive a last challenge, several attacks by warriors from Gazulla on the city, moved by words of holy war

against the Christian invaders. Multiple battles took place against these incursions, where the Portuguese cavalry played a crucial role by being used in their traditional form as a shock force. We can see this in the first engagement, where thirty-five Portuguese knights broke the unorganized Moorish line of 1,000 footmen and 100 mounted warriors, being followed in their advance by 100 dismounted knights, forcing their enemy's retreat.<sup>33</sup>

In the years that followed the siege, D. Duarte de Meneses, the son of the captain of Ceuta, progressively gained more influence and authority inside the garrison. This led to D. Duarte being the temporary city captain for many months while his father visited the family's estates in Portugal. D. Duarte looked for a more aggressive policy while he was a commander in Ceuta, unleashing the instrument of war his father created on the Maghreb, perfecting his tactics in the process. D. Duarte effectively used a feigned retreat to destroy an enemy mounted force guarding the village of Benexeme, luring them into an ambush.<sup>34</sup> Using local celebrations in the village of Alfageja, D. Duarte was able to steal 340 cattle with just fifteen knights, avoiding combat with the local garrison, all thanks to the information network built by his father.<sup>35</sup>

With D. Duarte, we see a much more dynamic garrison in battle, not just in its use of mounted forces but also in the expeditions' ability to respond to unexpected threats. An example is the incursion to the village of Bur-

buy in 1434, where the local garrison was barricaded in wooded platforms with deep trenches in front. The Portuguese commander harassed the fortifications with his crossbowman, forcing the defenders to take refuge inside the village. The village fell to the attackers after an assault by all sides.<sup>36</sup>

With his withdrawal from battle, focusing on ruling Ceuta and the strategic deployment of the garrison, D. Pedro returned to an old idea, the use of naval assets to support his land forces. The count chose the castle of Alminhacar as his base for offensive operations, this being the rallying point for both naval and ground forces. Even though the naval squadron of Ceuta was sometimes used to attack coastal settlements, these ships were mainly used to patrol the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar and pirate enemy ships. In this new strategy, the garrison's ships would transport the footmen, which included dismounted warriors and crossbowman, while the cavalry sent from the city, which were increasingly more numerous, would follow the land route, unburdened by the slower pace of the footmen. Both forces would join in the castle and advance upon their target. After the battle, they would regroup in Alminhacar, where the horsemen would follow the land route back to the city, while the ships would transport the dismounted elements and their loot.

This change in tactics changed the paradigm in the Maghreb because, even though the interior regions of Morocco were essentially avoided by the garrison, the coastal areas were

extremely vulnerable to these attacks. Several raids to villages around Tetuan, the closest Moorish castle, took place, like in Cece, where a cavalry charge in the Moorish flank devastated the local garrison; and in Benamede, where D. Duarte's brilliant command of his cavalry, led to the encirclement of the enemy horseman, securing a Portuguese victory. In late 1435, and after the arrival of fifty knights from Portugal, D. Duarte led a force of 150 knights and 300 footmen to take the castle of Tetuan. This attempt was repelled due to the attacker's lack of siege equipment, and the defenders attacked the retreating Portuguese force. D. Duarte organized an effective rearguard action with his knights, inflicting, according to Zurara,<sup>37</sup> 300 dead on his enemy.<sup>38</sup>

The year 1437 is forever remembered in Portuguese military history for the disastrous expedition to the port city of Tangiers, where the Portuguese expedition was decisively defeated. D. Pedro de Meneses sent 400 knights and 1,000 crossbowmen and footmen with the expedition, many of them veterans of the garrison commanded by his son, D. Duarte. Before leaving for Tangiers, D. Duarte led an expedition to Tetuan, the most notable castle close to Ceuta. Once again, using Alminhacar as a base of operations, Tetuan easily fell to the Portuguese host, whose defenders had abandoned the castle before their arrival.<sup>39</sup> D. Pedro would die in Ceuta during the expedition to Tangiers after multiple years of diligently defending his post. Leadership of the city passed to his son-in-law, D. Sancho de Noronha, while D. Duarte would later receive the

captaincy of Alcácer-Ceguer, after its conquest in 1458.

We can find multiple parallels between the first year of D. Duarte's captaincy in Alcácer-Ceguer and the first months of his late father's rule of Ceuta. D. Duarte immediately organized his command and started the first expeditions outside the city gates to eliminate the remaining enemy resistance and deforest the area around the walls to increase his field of vision.<sup>40</sup> Sometime later, he destroyed his first enemy incursion as captain, even though he could only field 15 knights, now having the task of building a new cavalry corps. In these first years, D. Duarte would also depend on the footmen and crossbowmen under his command and also the new arquebusiers, which were now being introduced in the Portuguese military.<sup>41</sup> D. Duarte would also prepare his son, D. Henrique, for war in the North African theater, who would later carry on his military duties.

After understanding how the garrison of Ceuta used the horse, both in defensive and offensive roles, we will now analyze how this resource was acquired. Even though originally Ceuta was a commercial harbor with a considerable volume of trade and importance, after most of its inhabitants abandoned the city, following the Portuguese conquest, it essentially became a fortress. According to Flávio Miranda, "Those who know the history of the Portuguese presence in this north-African city know well that it was the military part that evidenced and not the com-

merce; that they were people of war and not merchants.”<sup>42</sup>

No military force can fight on an empty stomach thus the supply of the 3,000 warriors stationed in Ceuta became a priority to both the captaincy of the city and the Crown. Despite not being part of the food supply, the need to acquire horses was, as we have said before, crucial for the maintenance of the Portuguese position and expansion of their offensive operations. In this light, the city’s captaincy took the search for horses as one of its highest priorities, both in foreign markets and during raids.

It is also important to note that the Portuguese were looking for war horses, specific types of the species made for combat, with their military training. War horses had a more aggressive behavior, developed in training, being trained to bite and stomp the enemy. Typically, a knight would go to war with one or more destriers or coursers, one Pouncey for traveling, and an additional horse to carry his equipment.<sup>43</sup> As we can see, these luxuries were not common during the early years of the Portuguese occupation of Ceuta.

One of the main focuses of the Portuguese raids on North African villages was to steal cattle. Paulo Drummond Braga proposes that, from 1415 to 1464, 346 animals were captured, of which 232 were goats and oxen, 53 dogs, and 61 horses; Nuno Silva Campos points to 4.412, counting large and small cattle, besides 78 horses; Filipe Themudo Barata notes that 93 horses were captured in this period for the

house of the captain of Ceuta.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the narrative given by Zurara, we can see the capture of new mounts by the garrison, whether gathered after a raid on a village or the battlefield, after one of the many skirmishes common in Ceuta. We can see this in the capture of some horses in the villages of Almaça and Água de Ramel;<sup>45</sup> in 1432, three horses were captured in Meigeçe;<sup>46</sup> in the same year, twenty-three new mounts were captured in battle after a successful ambush near the city;<sup>47</sup> in the year 1436, five new horses were captured after a raid on Benamede.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the horses acquired through raiding were significant, the main source of resupply for mounts was the foreign markets. In this task, the main political and economic force behind the supply of the beleaguered city was the Crown, the architect behind the conquest. To this end, the Casa de Ceuta was created in Lisbon, a royal institution focused on supplying the fortress, managed by the Infante D. Henrique and the men of his house. This intermediary was responsible for the logistics behind the supply route and shipping of goods to the city.<sup>49</sup>

The analysis of a dispatch letter sent to Gonçalo Afonso, who occupied the position of treasurer of Ceuta in Lisbon, allows us to see the city expenses between the years 1453 and 1454, offering an idea of what kind of products the city imported. We can see the arrival of wheat, wine, fish, salted pork meat, grain, and corn during this period, among other products.<sup>50</sup>

War materiel and horses were also sent along this route, from bascinets, coats of chainmail, and breastplates to offensive equipment, like swords and cross-bows, among other military gear. Portugal had to use the foreign markets in order to be able to effectively supply the city, ordering, for example, horses from Sicily, belonging to the Crown of Aragon in 1419; Portugal also received 60 fully equipped lances from Henry V of England, who sent an additional 300 to the Infante D. Henrique, to support his campaign to defend the city.<sup>51</sup>

There is a detail in Zurara's text that shows us just how important the horse was to the garrison, this being the author's description of the post-battle casualties, in which he also includes, more often than not, the horses lost in the engagement. Some examples of this are an ambush against Abu in Pedras Ruivas, where three horses were lost, and a raid on the village of Benexeme, where thirteen mounts were lost.<sup>52</sup> This detail in the chronicles reflects how vital this animal was to the maintenance of the city. As we were able to see, the larger the cavalry corps of the garrison became, the safer the raiding expeditions were.

Furthermore, all aspects of maintenance regarding the existing horses were prioritized inside the city, among the nobility that used them in battle. The lack of hay and grazing grounds in the first years of the occupation, namely due to the creation of a "No Man's Land" for three miles from the city by D. Pedro, motivated the disastrous expedition of Álvaro Afonso, already

mentioned earlier in the text, who rode out in search of hay.<sup>53</sup>

Portuguese Ceuta found itself isolated in a highly hostile Maghreb for more than four decades, being considerably far from a possible relief from mainland Portugal. During this period, the garrison was challenged in all aspects of military life, be it in battle against their enemy or against their own logistical problems. Multiple issues had to be corrected, but in this investigation, we focused on the key resource for the maintenance of the city—the horse. This resource was absolutely essential, allowing an increase in the number of horsemen, which gave the garrison better offensive reconnaissance and more effective patrols along the defensive perimeter, besides being able to better harass enemy siege lines. Even though this was quite beneficial, its main advantage was increased mobility of incursions, which allowed the Portuguese to raid villages without giving the enemy enough time to organize an adequate response. Furthermore, it was extremely advantageous in battle, as a significant number of engagements were decided by crucial actions of the horseman present. It is also noteworthy that despite being quite the significant tool in battle, this aspect was secondary, as the garrison preferred to avoid large-scale conflicts outside the walls of Ceuta.

The horse also proved to be a major problem for the captaincy of Ceuta. The city didn't have many mounts in 1415, and it took years to build an effective cavalry corp. To this end, many

horses were taken in raids from villages or from their former masters after a battle, accompanied by the purchase of these animals in foreign markets, their donation from friendly kingdoms, and other war material.

With the siege attempts defeated by the arrival of the relief armada, never again was an operation to retake the city attempted, becoming the first Portuguese foothold in North Africa. We can consider these 43 years a large period of adaptation, where the Portuguese garrison, foreign to the regional reality, had to gather information on the terrain and geography around itself and learn how to fight like the locals, with a bigger emphasis on mobility.

The offensive organization of the garrison consisted of expeditions into enemy territory by a smaller, lighter force, generally around 150 to 300 warriors, whose objective was to raid isolated enemy villages, gather as much loot and resources as possible, and retreat to the safety of the city before their enemy could organize a response. These raids followed a rigorous reconnaissance, usually made by the *almogavars* present in the garrison, which had the speed and the knowledge of the local terrain necessary to pick the best targets. Little by little, sentries were placed along the main routes used by the Portuguese,

which allowed any party sent out to ask for aid if they had been intercepted. D. Pedro de Meneses always kept reserve combat ready to rescue any expedition sent out of the city to protect their retreat to Ceuta. Eventually, the naval squadron of the city was brought into play, transporting the footmen contingent during these raids, allowing for the cavalry to move independently throughout the region.

The raid operations themselves were highly methodical, surrounding the target during the night and attacking in force at the break of dawn, limiting the chance of an escape and a possible alert to other garrisons. After the looting was over, the Portuguese force tried their best to retreat without facing other enemy forces, which was taken as an unnecessary risk.

The *modus operandi* developed by D. Pedro de Meneses was perfected by his son, D. Duarte, who would now put these lessons into practice during his tenure as captain of Alcácer-Ceguer. Even though there were some setbacks, namely the disaster of Tangiers in 1437, the Portuguese nobility was able to successfully adapt to the Maghreb, opening the doors for the eventual conquest of the Moroccan coast, until the end of these ambitions in the battle of Alcácer-Quibir, in 1578.

## About the Author

João Pereira is an early career historian based in Portugal. He achieved his bachelor's degree in History from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto in 2021. He achieved his master's degree in Medieval Studies from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto in 2023. His master's thesis focused on the Portuguese defence of Ceuta from its conquest in 1415 up until the conquest of Alcácer-Ceguer in 1458. His main area of interest is military and political history.

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## Notes

- 1 Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, ed., Maria Teresa Brocardo (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1997), 262.
- 2 Katrin Boniface, “Horse Power: Social Evolution in Medieval Europe,” (Master’s thesis, College of Social Sciences of the University of California, Fresno, 2015), 13.
- 3 A succession war that saw the rise of the D. João I to the Portuguese throne, after inflicting several defeats to the Castilian armies. Chief among these was the battle of Aljubarrota, where the Portuguese knights fought on foot. For more information on this, see: João Gouveia Monteiro, *Aljubarrota 1385: A Batalha Real* (Lisboa: Tribuna da História, 2003).
- 4 Burçin Erol, “Gallop through the Middle Ages: The Horse in Life and in Middle English Literature,” *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies* 10, no. 19 (June 2022): 4.
- 5 Namely focused on the Moroccan coast, always at a respectful distance of Fez, in order to not provoke a reaction from this regional power. Even though the Marinid Dynasty was in decline, it still had the resources to challenge the Portuguese presence.
- 6 Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Duarte de Meneses*, edited by Larry King (Lisboa: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1978).
- 7 A truce was signed in 1411, but peace was only rectified in 1431/32. See: Vicente Ángel Álvares Palenzuela, “El restablecimiento de la paz entre Castilla y Portugal: 1402–1431,” in *Ibéria: Quatrocentos/Quinhentos. Duas Décadas de Cátedra (1984-2006), Homenagem a Luís Adão da Fonseca*, edited by Armando Luís de Carvalho Homem; José Augusto Sotto Mayor Pizarro and Paula Maria de Carvalho Pinto Costa (Porto: Centro de Estudos da População, Economia e Sociedade, 2009), 80-90.
- 8 Armando Luís de Carvalho Homem, “Louvor de Trezentos,” *História: Revista da FLUP* 9, no. 1 (2019): 147-166. DOI: 10.21747/0871164X/hist9\_1a6.
- 9 João Gouveia Monteiro, “De D. Afonso IV (1325) à batalha de Alfarrobeira (1449)- Os desafios da Maturidade,” in Vol.1 of *Nova História Militar de Portugal*, ed., José Mattoso, (Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores, 2003–2004), 204.; Luís Miguel Duarte, *Ceuta 1415: Seiscentos anos depois* (Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 2015), 168-169.
- 10 Luís Miguel Duarte, “A Marinha de Guerra. A Pólvora. O Norte de África,” in Vol.1 of *Nova História Militar de Portugal*, edited by José Mattoso (Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores, 2003–2004), 400-403.
- 11 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 200-202.
- 12 João Manuel Caetano Pereira, “Um bastião isolado em terra hostil: A defesa de Ceuta até à conquista de Alcácer-Ceguer (1458),” (Master’s thesis, University of Porto, Porto, 2023), 110-132.
- 13 Duarte, *Ceuta 1415*, 233.

- 14 The question of the sieges of Ceuta was the center of historical debate throughout the decades, mainly due to the lack of clearness by Zurara in this matter. The question falls on if there were two distinct sieges or just one. As João Gouveia Monteiro points, despite the confusion around the sieges, Zurara speaks of a great siege in 1419, different from the events that took place in 1418. This, accompanied by the necessary time needed to prepare a relief armada, seem to indicate Ceuta was subjected to a double siege [See: António Martins Costa and João Gouveia Monteiro, *1415 A conquista de Ceuta: O relato empolgante da última grande vitória de D. João I* (Lisboa: Letras & Diálogos, 2015), 134]. We also recommend the analysis of this question by Isabel Drummond Braga and Paulo Drummond Braga in Isabel Drummond Braga and Paulo Drummond Braga, *Ceuta Portuguesa (1415–1656)* (Ceuta: Instituto de Estudios Ceutíes, 1998), 33-34.
- 15 Section of the city located on the extreme edge of the Peninsula in which Ceuta was built, it stands out for its notable height; Pereira, *Um bastião isolado em terra hostil*, 113-142.
- 16 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 143-146.
- 17 One of the main reasons for this instability was the conquest of Ceuta in 1415, which was a massive blow to the prestige of the Marinid Dynasty in Fez, leading to a period of civil war in the kingdom.
- 18 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 397-400.
- 19 The first great regional military leader that challenged Ceuta. The skirmishes and battles against this local lord defined the first combat experiences of the Portuguese nobility in the region against a disciplined and cohesive force.
- 20 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 358-359.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 273-285.
- 22 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 322-324.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 503-505.
- 24 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 513-517.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 294-295; 314-315.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 297-301.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 288-289.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 245-248.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 255-258.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 258-266.
- 31 For a more detailed version of these events, see: Pereira, *Um bastião isolado em terra hostil*, 110-132.

- 32 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 410-412.
- 33 Ibid., 536-543.
- 34 Ibid., 665-668.
- 35 Ibid., 668-671.
- 36 Ibid., 673-676.
- 37 Who cites the alfaqueque of Ceuta as is source. This was an emissary that was in charge of negotiating prisoner releases and exchanges.
- 38 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 680-684; 702-704; 684-694.
- 39 Ibid., 711-716.
- 40 Ibid., 122-123.
- 41 Ibid., 123-124.
- 42 Flávio Miranda, “O tempo de Ceuta: comércio e mercadores,” In *As décadas de Ceuta (1385–1460)*, ed., Maria Helena da Cruz Coelho and Armando Luís de Carvalho Homem (Casal da Cambra: Caleidoscópio, 2018), 90.
- 43 Erol, “Gallopig through the Middle Ages,” 5-7.
- 44 Paulo Drummond Braga, *Uma Lança em África: História da Conquista de Ceuta* (Lisboa: A Esfera dos Livros, 2015), 56-60; Nuno Miguel Silva Campos, *D. Pedro de Meneses e a construção da casa de Vila Real: 1415–1437* (Lisboa: Colibri, 2004), 84; Filipe Themudo Barata, “Ceuta: da organização de una máquina de guerra à eficácia de um instrumento de política externa,” in *Portugal y el norte de África: Historia D’aquem e D’além-mar, XVII Jornadas de Historia de Ceuta*, ed. Alberto Weil Rus; Maria Jesús Fuentes García; José Antonio Alarcón Caballero; José Maria Campos Martínez; José Luis Ruiz García (Ceuta: Instituto de Estudios Ceutíes, 2017), 69.
- 45 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 325-335.
- 46 Ibid., 656-658.
- 47 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 325-335; 656-658; 660-665.
- 48 Ibid., 702-704.
- 49 José Miguel Zenhas Mesquita, “O abastecimento alimentar de Ceuta, 1415–1458” (Master’s thesis, University of Porto, Porto, 2017), 34-35.
- 50 Costa and Monteiro, *1415 A conquista de Ceuta*, 71.
- 51 Zurara, *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses*, 173-175.
- 52 Ibid., 242-245; 665-668.
- 53 Ibid., 397-400.