

# The Marriage Dowries of Peasant Families of Minho, North of Portugal, in the Modern Era

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## ABSTRACT

Our study focuses on the dowries of marriage of peasant families of Minho in the Modern Age and seeks to highlight the position of women at an important moment of your life-marriage. How to marry a daughter without a dowry was difficult, the families sought to provide them the best they could, resorting too often to the portion available to do so.

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## Introduction

The union of two people in marriage was not only an important moment for family alliances, but also for the transference of goods and property, providing a way to distribute possessions during the lifetime of their owners. When they met with the notary, the providers of the dowry would already have everything well organized: the marriage between the two parties and the share of assets to be transferred to the new couple, as well as provisions regarding their death.

Situated in the northwest of Portugal, the Minho could be broadly characterized as a region of smallholdings, with the highest rate of population growth in the country (Serrão, 1993), and marked by a strong flow of emigration, directed towards various regions, but mainly to the New World (Russel-Wood, 1998).

As the subject of our study, we chose to examine marriage dowries in the eighteenth century<sup>3</sup> in two regions of the Minho: one is towards the north and on the coast, and the other is towards the south and inland: the municipalities of Viana da Foz do Lima and Pico de Regalados.

Both municipalities are located in a region where land was especially important, because it was from the land that families drew their sustenance. However, the municipality of Viana da Foz do Lima possessed some specific conditions. Its population, especially that residing in the villages situated along the coast, despite dedicating part of their daily life to the activity of fishing, did not neglect the cultivation of the land, which was fertilized with Sargassum seaweed that the tides deposited on the beaches. The ports of Viana and the nearby town of Caminha functioned as the engines of the region's economy, distinguishing themselves as important fishing centres. From the 1500's, the town of Foz do Lima Viana not only managed to develop its economic activities, especially trade and shipping, but also registered an appreciable increase in the number of inhabitants (Reis, 1993). However, from the second half of the eighteenth century, it began to decline, and fishing decreased to the point where it was necessary to go to elsewhere to get the fish required to meet the demand. In the 1700's, neither the sea nor the land provided enough, but together they supplemented each other to withstand the many hardships of daily life. When the boats returned empty, it was from the land that man took sustenance. So it is understandable that, despite the proximity of the sea and the potential that the geography had to offer, the land continued to be one of the most valued assets of the people of the county. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in this region, land was the principal asset bestowed.

The notary deeds, from which we worked, contain a wealth of information in terms of defining intentions, establishing precisely all that was desired. Although the bride and groom, as well as several witnesses, would also be present, when the moment came to sign the deed, the leading role belonged to the providers of the dowry. They were the ones who formally defined the terms of the dowry, even though its referred to that both of the parties concerned, i.e. the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom, have agreed to it. In cases where the betrothed were orphans and minors, their relatives almost always assumed this role,

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<sup>3</sup> We studied 60 marriage dowries, with an equal amount from each county.

with the guardian's consent. Only after agreement between the dowry provider and the engaged couple, and the consent of the Church to the marriage, in the manner established by the Council of Trent, would they proceed to the formality of drawing up the endowment deed.

### **The bride and groom, and the wedding**

Generally, the bride and groom had a more muted role at the time of the marriage, as this was not a matter in which they could intervene directly. However, we believe that some of them may have taken part in the negotiations. We also know that they were aware of all established conditions, because they pledged to comply with them and made pronouncements accepting them. If the man was an adult with no living parents, it was he who provided the dowry to himself, thus gaining an active voice in the process. It was up to the bride and groom, however, to accept the terms set forth and strive to fulfil them all in regards to goods, property and pledges. Some couples would be happy to accept the conditions in order to achieve a marriage to their liking. Although not many examples of this exist, those that do, take on some significance, as they show that in rural areas in the eighteenth century, certain young people had some influence in the choice of their partner, expressing satisfaction when the choice was accepted. Sometimes those providing and those receiving the dowries were related and that fact could be crucial, not only in the relationship between the future couple, but also in granting of the dowry.

During the Modern Era, the family was an institution in which marriage and property contracts were forged, often justified, by necessity. Therefore, the betrothed rarely escaped the intervention of the parents, who often had the final say in the choice of a future spouse, given that the family was considered, first and foremost, a unit of social reproduction (Bel Bravo, 2009). The documents themselves recorded through the words of the notary, expose evidence of arranged marriage agreements between families (Vaquinhas, 2000, p. 24). These documents contain many phrases which reveal such arrangements, as can be seen in the following excerpt, concerning the marriage of the son of Pedro Gonçalves Carreteiro with Joaquina Fernandes: "it was declared before me [Registrar] and their witnesses, with the help and grace of God, that they had determined and agreed upon a written contract for the future marrying of his said son Manoel Gonçalves Antunes with the second party (...) <sup>4</sup>". However, as noted, affection was not completely absent in the relationship between the betrothed couple. While the dowry preceded the wedding, this, in turn, was preceded by a courtship, which also could have depended on the prior permission from the parents (Pimentel, 1905).

The information that we have obtained about betrothed couples is scarce, particularly with regard to the socio-economic conditions. When it was possible to obtain information, it was predominantly about farm workers, and they were almost always the legitimate children, although some were orphans. Many men could sign their names, but the same was not true of any of the women studied <sup>5</sup>.

The decision about when the marriage should occur took into account not only the ages and the wishes of the betrothed, but also other deciding factors (Carvalho, 2010). Thus, for women, the high rates of male migration forced them, to some extent, into late marriage or even condemned them to being a spinster, which, in turn, restricted their reproductive role in a region where this function was of fundamental importance, for reasons that are essentially bound to the transmission and preservation of family property.

Of more importance than the age of the candidates was the consent and endorsement of the parents, for the marriage to take place. Parental approval would certainly also be reflected in the content of the dowry, though this was not the only deciding factor. There were other criteria, such as family property and the economic situation of the provider of the dowry. The agreement of the parties regarding the marriage plans was always clearly stated in the relevant document. It should also be emphasized that the existence of a set of requirements in the prenuptial agreement did not always mean its full compliance. Disregard of commitments would, of course, be the cause of difficulties in living together and of conflict between dowry providers and the recipients (Durães, 2005, p. 213).

In most of the cases studied, there is a clear tendency to perform marriages between residents of the same parish, if not of the same place, or of nearby parishes. This suggests that the relationships would result not

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<sup>4</sup> District Archive of Viana do Castelo (henceforth ADVC), *Livro de notas*, 3.º ofício, 1785-1787, n.º 4.34.2.16, page 102 (back).

<sup>5</sup> For some men it was reported that they were above 25 years old, the age of adulthood.

only from the proximity and daily contact of the young people, but also from family strategies (Cabral, 1984, p. 279). The justification for these arrangements would have to do, probably, with the need to ensure that the property was not dispersed and would not fall into the hands of strangers or "outsiders."

In predominantly rural counties, where the everyday life of the inhabitants was filled with hard work, travelling outside one's place of residence was infrequent, so that contact with strangers was more limited. Moreover, to perform the act of writing the dowry, it was the notary who usually travelled to the homes of the dowry givers.

The routine of country life was interrupted by going to church, especially on Sundays, or for the festivals and processions as specified on the religious calendar (Penedo, 2005, p. 57). At the time, some even condemned the excessive propensity for amusement by the people in the Minho, considering that the festivals diverted them from work and led to unruly behaviour (Bezerra, 1992, p. 811). The fairs and markets, which took place in various locations, were also occasions where villagers took the opportunity to socialize, sell their surplus products and purchase that which the land did not provide (Lima, 2000). But it was, above all, at the time of planting and harvesting, particularly during the corn husking and the grape harvest, that the spirit of mutual cooperation brought neighbours together and provided moments of conviviality, the strengthening of ties of friendship and awakening affections. On these occasions, they took the opportunity to talk, sing, and dance and more or less discreetly and under the supervision of those around, to test out or reinforce their amorous relationships, which could culminate in marriage if the parents approved.

Marriage, besides requiring the family to mobilize their resources, implied other considerations. The marriageable girl was required to be honourable and have a flawless moral character (Sánchez Ortega, 1998). On the other hand, if her household's assets were few, she would not receive a dowry to make her desirable, and consequently, the marriage proposals would be, from the outset, seriously compromised. But, nevertheless, if she wanted to keep her aspirations to marry, she had to keep her honour intact, in other words, be an unsullied virgin, with a virtuous character and a public image beyond reproach.

In the Minho during the eighteenth century, it was not always easy for a woman to comply with all the expectations that were demanded. The emigration of the men, many of them still single, depopulated the countryside of strong men and limited the choices for marriage. Bad harvest years, which occurred in the late eighteenth century, and the consequent shortage of foodstuffs worsened the population's living conditions and contributed to the exodus of those who, in desperation, left to seek their fortunes in other lands, rarely returning to their homelands. The scarcity and low productivity of agricultural holdings, the meagre wages and financial difficulties, the absence of manufactured goods and the escape from military service, also contributed to the flow of migration. Yet in the late eighteenth century, the Minho was still the most populated province of the kingdom. Housekeeping, child rearing and management of the family's assets, were the wife's duties. In the absence of the guardianship of a husband, she became more vulnerable and more exposed to all sorts of risks.

### **The dowry and the distribution of family assets**

The decision to provide a dowry was a personal one, and care was taken that the endowment deed be seen as a voluntary act, made without any constraint. It was intended as a means to transmit to the new couple a considerable part of the inheritance given to one's daughter or relative, almost always the legitimate heir, in order to allow the couple to begin married life more comfortably. Receiving a dowry at the time of marriage was a considerable advantage, not only because it facilitated the choice of spouse, but also because it allowed one, in many cases, to receive more than their legal entitlement (Muriel, 2001, p. 47). Not having a dowry increased the difficulty of marrying, especially in a region with high male emigration, above all to Brazil. In the case of orphaned and poor girls, the dowry was an incentive for marriage and helped them to avoid falling into moral ruin. In these situations, it was the benefactors and charitable institutions that provided the marriage dowries.

The dowry providers acted within the legal framework that defined the conditions under which the family property could be distributed and inherited. Moreover, as already mentioned, the dowries were part of a plan of family strategies. The "*Ordenações Filipinas*" provided the legal framework for the endowment, specifically the law of dowries. In accordance with the provisions in this document, the dowry can be seen in

two ways: from the dowry provider's point of view it represents the assets that parents, relatives or nonrelatives grant to the betrothed; from the perspective of the betrothed, it corresponds to the goods which they are given and which will belong to the new couple (Durães, 2002).

One of the clauses regulating the granting of dowries included the possibility of the family property being returned to the possession of the family who gave it if, upon the death of one of the new couple, there is no offspring. This provision was intended ultimately to prevent the property falling into strangers' hands. The prohibition of the sale of any of the dowry assets and the payment of the benefactors' debts, are clauses that could be included in the agreement that dowry receivers were obligated to respect.

Most of the dowries that we studied concerned women, but the tradition of giving dowries to men at the time of marriage, also existed (Ramos, 2010, p. 82). We found parents who provided dowries to their sons, but also young men who gave dowries to themselves. In the latter case, they were men with no living parents, who created a dowry from the inheritance they had received on the death of their parents.

However, although the dowry constituted a part of the daughter's estate, it was intended for the couple as long as they were alive, because, as the deeds mention, if there were no legitimate children from the marriage, "each will take their dowry and half of all acquired"<sup>6</sup>. This situation meant that each one could dispose of their dowry and other family assets as wanted.

The dowry providers were usually a couple: the father and mother of the girl and/or of the boy. Thus, the surviving father or mother used the marriage deed to share the inheritance of which they were sole holders due to the loss of their spouse. When this happened, as a rule, the inheritance was not granted immediately after marriage, but after the death of the other parent.

Nevertheless, when one of them had died, it was the survivor who gave the dowry. There were, however, other family members involved with the dowry, principally in cases where a parent had died: aunts and uncles, in-laws, godmothers, etc. Such situations occurred as a result of the widowed mothers not having the assets for the dowry. The parent's state of widowhood did not have to be permanent and, therefore, we have found individuals in second marriages giving dowries to their children <sup>7</sup>.

According to the provisions in the "*Ordenações Filipinas*", after the death of either spouse, the other, as head of the household, assumes the role of heir <sup>8</sup>. According to this same document, it was the duty of the surviving spouse to divide up the inheritance among the legitimate children of their marriage or those of previous marriages. In this situation, the dowry functioned as an early inheritance for one of the children, who would not be included later when the remaining siblings divided the inheritance, unless they wished to include assets from their dowry into this process <sup>9</sup>.

Other relatives, namely uncles and aunts, also contributed to help pay expenses for the wedding and the early days of married life. In these cases, the endowment might not have been an act completely devoid of ulterior motives. Our assertion is based on the analysis of situations where the childless aunts and uncles bequeathed their money or property to the niece or nephew, in order to ensure support in their old age and the salvation of their soul after death, in the same way as was normally demanded by the parents.

When making decisions, the endower would have been concerned with benefiting the family's successor, almost always granting him/her the "*terça da alma*" (portion to be set aside as assets for salvation of the soul). However, the situations of the remaining children were not forgotten. Usually designated in order of birth, it was expected that they would receive their fair share, and that they would also get married. These were always remembered, and how much and what they were to receive as their endowment was put into writing. This situation is related to the fact that Portuguese law does not allow them to be "left out of the inheritance unless in exceptional circumstances" (Durães, 2002, p. 135).

The endowments included goods and property, livestock, wood, gold, clothes and money. Among the properties, some benefactors included, besides the land, the houses they lived in, which would only be bequeathed after the benefactor's death, as well as other structures related to farming, such as threshing

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<sup>6</sup> District Archive of Braga (ADB), Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book A 396, April 1784 to May 1787, pp. 51b.

<sup>7</sup> ADV, *Livro de notas*, 3.º letter, 1785-1787, 4.34.2.16, pp. 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Ordenações Filipinas*, Book IV, heading 94, pp. 947-950.

<sup>9</sup> *Ordenações Filipinas*, Book IV, heading 96, pp. 962.

floors, granaries and other storage rooms attached to houses. Incidentally, in rural areas, the concept of home could already include the surrounding areas, including the courtyard, the threshing floor, vineyards, nut and fruit trees and agricultural implements (Cabral, 1989, p. 65). Usually, next to the house, there were small gardens, intended primarily for the cultivation of vegetables for home use and which helped to supplement the household economy (Capela, 2005). For people of the Minho, the house was not only a place of residence, but functioned also as an extension of working areas; in this region there was no well-defined boundary separating the countryside and home. Hence the great significance that this took on in the rural world (Cabral, 1984).

The concern to avoid large differences between the dowries of the bride and groom led some families to offer to guarantee a certain amount <sup>10</sup>. The composition of dowries, intended to be in accordance with the value of the house, could also rely on the ability to bring together relatives who could contribute toward the endowment.

The distribution of property at the time of the dowry reflects the importance of marriage as a time for the transfer of property, establishing itself as an occasion for sharing the inheritance, as well as defining family strategies concerning the ownership of personal property and the bequesters' future. In addition to creating practical conditions for the new couple, and organizing the life of the new family, plans were set up to support the parents in their old age, providing the right conditions for a period of life when, unable to work, they would become increasingly dependent. At the same time, death was not forgotten.

In the Minho, the quality and value of farmland was measured not only by its location or size, but also by its ease of irrigation. Despite being a region characterized by high rainfall, water for irrigation was disputed by the owners, and often was a cause of discord and disputes.

In addition to land and other property, upper pastures were often included in the dowries, which is not surprising given their importance in the lives of the population and in traditional agriculture. Besides being used for cattle grazing, they provided the grass, which, transformed into manure, was used to fertilize the ploughed land; they were also the source of the supply of wood needed for cooking food and heating homes, and were therefore precious and much sought after assets in rural environments (Pérez Álvarez, 1996).

The families of the Minho sought to ensure, through endowments, the last stage of life. By favouring one of the daughters, almost always the oldest, with a portion to be set aside as assets for the salvation of the soul and the largest share of the inheritance, they ensured their old age and determined different paths for the remaining children. This daughter would almost always live in parental home or in a house nearby. Leaving home implied the setting up of a new house and the same time, avoided future misunderstandings that could jeopardize family relationships.

The distribution of property was closely associated with the division of goods. Typically, when goods were wholly or partly endowed, property was endowed in the same way. In this case, they not only endowed what they possessed, but also what they were to receive. If all assets were given, the endowers frequently established an amount to be reserved from the fruits of "the threshing floor and the hoof," i.e., grain and animals, for their personal use while alive. It referred to, among other details, the quantities of maize, wheat, rye, beans, wine, and olive oil, they would receive from the new couple. This quota or condition, as it was commonly called, guaranteed the survival and independence of endowers if relations between the parties deteriorated. There are also frequent references to joint meals, conferring great significance to the feeding of those who had bequeathed everything and retained no part of the income. In this situation, parents would often take part in the work while they had strength, as well as contribute to the settlement of pensions and taxes. There were also those who provided for the hiring and payment of a servant when old age made it impossible to work <sup>11</sup>.

With these determinations, the parents maintained a connection to the property, continuing to manage, if only in part, the properties they had inherited and/or acquired.

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<sup>10</sup> Pascoal Francisco, uncle of João Francisco, with no living parents, stands ready to guarantee that the assets of his nephew, which constitute his dowry, will reach 170 thousand réis, according to his wishes. In the event that they don't attain this amount, he will donate the rest. ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book nº A-335, 1701-1709, pp. 26b.

<sup>11</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book A 396, April 1784 to May 1787, p. 61.

When the bride and groom did not reside with the dowry providers, and the dowry was composed of only a part of their properties, the fields, tillage and land contained in it would be precisely defined, also dividing the goods so that the new family unit would be established with some logistical support. In this situation, the best house was always kept for the dowry providers, with the expectation that the newlyweds would fix up a single-story house or a hay barn where they could live. Not infrequently, criteria were also established for work to be done on these houses, defining, for example, the front door, or in other words, the path through which people and property of the new family circulated<sup>12</sup>.

Cattle, important for working the land, took on great significance in the rural world of the Modern Era, and were part of many of the dowries studied (Caldas, 1982, p. 134) . However, their importance goes far beyond their work capacity, they also represented a useful source of income. Not all farmers had the financial capacity to acquire their own cattle, so sometimes the cattle they owned were not theirs, but were "loaned" <sup>13</sup>.

Without cattle, it was almost impossible to work the land. To varying degrees, all the farmhouses sought to have a few head of livestock, mainly cattle, which were widely used for labour in local cultivation, where corn was of greater importance.

The same was true for stocking the wine cellar. The Minho provided fertile ground for the production of white wine. The barrels and the vats referred to in endowments were for the storage of this wine.

Essential in setting up a new home, goods took on great importance at the time of marriage and, therefore, constituted a part of the inheritance that usually was incorporated in the dowry.

Although the shortage of studies on the Minho region prevents a consistent analysis of family systems and marriage patterns for the period that was studied, it is known that, in contrast to what was happening in the south, in the north the family tree, both in its "multiple and extended variants" seems to have assumed a greater significance (Serrão, 1993, p. 60).

The formation of the new family did not imply having their own home or a residence separate from their parents, as already noted. Almost all the dowries studied, point to them living together with their parents, usually the wife's, even when the possibility of setting up a new home was considered.

When the new couple went to live in the paternal home, normally all personal property was endowed, however, the endowers reserved the right to use them while alive. It was also possible that, though living together, the new couple was given only half of the personal property, with the remainder being reserved for the other children.

If the young couple went to live in a new home, which the parents had given to them or helped build, the goods were almost always divided in half, reserving the other part for the benefactors to use while alive, to be divided after death between the remaining heirs. Another situation was also identified: the new couple would not live with the parents, but moved into an adjoining house. In this situation, the parents would occupy the best house, and the newly weds the single storey house.

In the county of Pico de Regalados, some changes emerged in relation to personal property during the second half of the eighteenth century. On one side, certain agricultural implements are mentioned which had not previously been included in the list of assets, and on the other, the woman's trousseau assumed greater significance. In this are mentioned; the trousseau's chests or chest, depending on her possessions and the size of her trousseau, the gold pieces that she brought and some personal clothes.

In relation to personal property, we found some differences between the two counties studied: in the county of Pico de Regalados, dowry deeds declare some of the contents of the trousseau, while in Viana da Foz do Lima this reference is more scarce, even though they mention personal property.

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<sup>12</sup> The dowry of Miguel and Maria da Rocha established, in 1720, that they could not use the front doors of the house nor the gate that gave access to the threshing floor, and were required to create a door to the path through which people and assets could pass. ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book nº A-349, January 1720 a November 1720, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Having cattle "on loan" meant that these cattle had been placed in another home other than their owner's. The farmer that had them, looked after them and used them to his advantage, but the profit from their offspring or their sale was divided between both parties, according to what had been previously stipulated.

While adolescents, girls had to prepare white linens for the home and also personal clothing, for their trousseau. The trousseau reflected not only the financial capacity of the girl, but also made apparent the girl's manual skills and her ability to manage a home. The mothers helped, but the girls had the biggest responsibility for its composition (Wall, 1998, p. 118).

The cloth for the home was made of linen fabric, sown and finished at home by the woman. It was with this fabric that they fashioned the linens for the house, but also the woman's underwear. The references left in the dowry deeds concern trousseaus with few contents and tailored to the condition of a "peasant woman", in other words, a woman who worked the land.

Items of gold were also contained in dowries. Gold was part of the family property and of the everyday life of the Minho women, and showing off certain pieces was common in all social groups. These were adornments that no woman from the Minho could be without during the important moments of her life: family celebrations or festivals were occasions in which they dressed festively and adorned themselves with gold (Martins *et al*, 2000). Gold accompanied several generations of the same household and was passed from generation to generation like any other asset. It was an essential accessory that enhanced the traditional costumes and showed off the worth of the user and her family (Esteves, 1988, p. 9).

In some segments of society there was greater attention to a woman's appearance and it was decided to include their outer clothing in the dowry. Thus, there were a number of cases in which the dresses that the girl would have in her dowry were stipulated<sup>14</sup>. In others, the wedding dress and dresses for everyday or special occasions were alluded to<sup>15</sup>. One senses, in these situations, that these were -women of wealth, who were concerned about their looks and wore a special outfit on their wedding day (Araújo, 2011, p. 88).

In the county of Viana da Foz do Lima, allusions to the endowment of personal property are frequent, but quite generic, since the dowry givers did not differentiate or characterize these assets. This means that we have not found any references to furniture, bedding and clothing, the so called trousseau, or to gold or silver jewellery pieces, or other small items of high symbolic value to the Minho society of the eighteenth century, in contrast to what happened in later times (Esteves, 2010). In the cases studied, we discovered references to only two chests, one of Brazilian black wood and another of pine, without, however, any explanation of their contents<sup>16</sup>.

Parents who had money also endowed specific amounts to their daughters. In some cases, the dowry was comprised solely of money, but usually it represented only a portion of the assets granted.

Margarida Durães argues that marriage was one of the few times when money entered into a peasant home, and consequently, they invested in the bridal endowment by including some money in the dowry in order to make the girl more attractive in the marriage market (Durães, 2002).

In a subsistence economy, the limited surpluses were sold in local fairs and markets, the profit of which was almost always used in the acquisition of certain assets that the family unit did not produce. Consequently, the amount of money kept in peasant houses was very little.

On various occasions, we found that the money was in the form of a pledge, transferred by deed to the name of the new couple<sup>17</sup>, or paid according to a schedule of partial payments for the agreed amount. When this arose, interest payments could be agreed upon, although this clause was not always mentioned<sup>18</sup>. Sometimes, this money was only available after the death of benefactors.

The money is also referred to with regard to the obligations to other children. Whenever the endowment consisted of all the goods and property, and there were other children, the receivers of the dowry assumed responsibility for their siblings and brothers/sisters-in-law, and were obliged to pay them their endowments, usually in cash, although they could also include property. When these occurred, the debts that the new couple should pay were often mentioned.

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<sup>14</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book nº A-349, January 1720 to November 1720, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Book nº A-349, January 1720 to November 1720, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> ADV, *Livro de notas*, 3.º letter, 1785-1787, 4.34.2.16, pp. 127.

<sup>17</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Livro nº A-335, 1701-1709, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Livro nº A-351, November 1720 to May 1722, p. 62.

At the time of allocation, the soul was not forgotten, and a portion was also reserved for it. The preoccupation with death is very present in these notary deeds. All benefactors expressed their last wishes, setting aside assets and/or money so that these could be fulfilled. Usually, it was the endowment receivers who were responsible for their fulfilment.

The granting of the endowment came at two paradoxical moments: at marriage, associated with procreation, and therefore life, and at death. This was accomplished by the transference of an endowment to the legitimate heir, through a pre-mortem inheritance for the former, and the fact that among the requirements for the effective allocation of the dowry, the assistance to be given to benefactors, both in life and in death, was often included. Thus, the receivers of the endowment, if they wanted to have the promised dowry, had to honour the commitments, including remaining in the parental home, ensuring their well-being while alive, and caring for the salvation of the benefactors' souls.

Take as an example the dowry deed that parents of Rosa Ferreira conceded to her in 1785, to enter into marriage with a boy from the parish of Afife in the municipality of Viana. The parents transferred to her half of the assets of an upper pasture located in the parish of residence, half of the house where they lived, as well as the surrounding land. The parents would keep the remaining part of this family property while they were alive. However, this dowry was not without conditions: beyond the obligation to continue to live in the parental home, the bride pledged to order the saying of two "*trintário*" (a set of thirty masses said over thirty days), when her benefactors passed away.<sup>19</sup>

The main concern expressed was in respect to the funeral. The wealthier benefactors chose the burial sites, the shroud for the body, the confraternities that were to accompany them to their final resting place, the number of priests that they wanted present and the number of religious services to celebrate on the day of the funeral or in the days immediately following. All who prepared for death, also asked for a "reception for all who attended the funeral, as was customary".<sup>20</sup>

For the salvation of the soul, daily, weekly, monthly or yearly masses were also performed and one could also request their celebration on other days throughout the year. The preferred dates almost always fell during periods of increased religious fervour: Christmas, Easter, Descent of the Holy Spirit, All Saints Day, and feast days in honour of Our Lady. The locations for the celebration of mass were chosen, and the moral and personal qualities of the priests were enumerated. Everything was done, so that the soul would benefit from these masses. Responses, holy services and prayers were requested to facilitate achieving eternal rest. The belief in intercessions made men pious, leading them to plead for protection in the difficult time of passage to an unknown place, hoping to achieve a "good death" through interventions.

Joining confraternities also had the objective of expanding their scope of belonging to include groups that provided solidarity in life and in death (Vovelle, 1998, p. 178). In addition to dowry deeds, wills also revealed these concerns, making the salvation of the soul, in some cases, the principal heir (Araújo, 1997). In the second half of the eighteenth century, Pombaline laws established limits to religious endowments for "the soul", which caused the church and charitable institutions to receive less pious bequests (Abreu, 1999).

The celebration of masses, responses and other holy services strengthened the spiritual component, fuelled the belief in Purgatory, and encompassed not only the dead but also the living. It was for this reason that many benefactors sought to have the masses for their souls celebrated on privileged altars. In the county of Pico de Regalados some masses were requested to be celebrated at the altar of São Pedro de Rates in the Cathedral of Braga, where they sought to achieve greater spiritual benefits on behalf of their souls<sup>21</sup>. But this was not the only altar mentioned. Others preferred the altars for their devotion in the church of their parish, such as Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Santíssimo Sacramento, or Santo António, and specified the confraternities to which they belonged or from whom they expected protection in death.

Whenever benefactors expressed concern about the funeral and the salvation of the soul, they stipulated the amount of money to spend, since included in the dowry they had given a portion to be set aside as assets for the salvation of the soul. There were even those who provided amounts of money to complete each task, leaving no room for the heirs to manage it for their own benefit. This attitude shows not only concern with

<sup>19</sup> ADVC, *Livro de notas*, 3.º letter, 1785-1787, 4.34.2.16, folio unreadable. Each "*trintário*" consisted of 30 masses.

<sup>20</sup> Receive the parish meant to give food and drink to all present at the funeral. Normally, bread and wine were distributed.

<sup>21</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Livro nº A 396, April 1784 to April 1787, pp. 55b.

salvation, but mainly a strong desire to establish in advance and to fully specify the amounts reserved for each purpose. There were also those who decided to leave money for the assets of the salvation of the soul, but left until the making of the will, the discrimination of the tasks to be performed, delaying the decision for the arrangement of their death <sup>22</sup>.

### Conclusion

To study the marriage dowries is to understand the distribution of family assets in the peasant homes of the Minho and to analyze their division. Important for the marriage arrangement and for the recruitment of partners within their social group, the dowry was almost always provided by the parents. In the absence of either of them or in the impossibility of achieving a dowry worthy of the partner, other family members could add to the dowry, providing part of the assets to their relative.

The endowments consisted of land, pastures, money, household linen and clothing, furniture, jewellery, a few tools for working the field, money and livestock.

As a pre-mortem inheritance, the dowry permitted, because it was intended for the marriage, the establishing or strengthening of social bonds and at the same time benefitting the daughter or son with that which was intended. This mechanism enabled the benefactors to manage the family assets according to their wishes and safeguarded their old age.

Those receiving dowries were not free from obligations, as we have described. In the first place and in many cases, the bride and groom assumed the commitment of caring for their parents in old age, since in these cases, the dowry held the largest share of the properties, but also the payment of any debts, pensions and taxes. Whenever there were unmarried siblings, and when newlyweds had been given all the assets, they took on the responsibility to provide the siblings with the amounts and property stipulated, as well as to provide for the "assets for the salvation of the soul". The burden for the salvation of the soul went from the burial to the celebration of masses, through to the contracting of priests for the funeral, the shroud and the "reception for the parish." A certain amount of money was almost always reserved to carry out these tasks, which had to be fulfilled at the right time.

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<sup>22</sup> ADB, Notary documents of Pico de Regalados, Livro nº A-357, November 1723 to May 1726, pp. 16b.

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