
THE HISTORIANS

Virginia Rau and the Economic History of Portugal

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Our good friend and colleague, Virginia Rau, who passed away in Lisbon on 1st November 1973, had for many years linked Portuguese historians with the international world of historical studies. At innumerable conferences she represented her country with authority and with humour. I came to know her early on in her career when I was invited to inaugurate the teaching of economic history at Coimbra. Since its foundation in 1960 I have also shared with her the vice-presidency of the *Commission Internationale d'Histoire maritime*. When I first knew her she had written only her first two studies: her University thesis on the Portuguese medieval fairs (1943) and her doctoral thesis on the *Sesmarias* (1946) — the former dealing with commercial, the latter with agrarian history. It was clear from that time that the author intended to devote herself to economic history which then had little following in Portugal. Shortly after she began teaching economic history in Lisbon at the Faculty of Letters. In 1951 her book on the production and trade in Setubal salt was published, and in the same year another book on the *Casa dos Contos*, a study of major importance for the history of administrative institutions, also appeared. In the same period she also ventured into the field of colonial history, and in 1962 in partnership with J. Borges de Macedo produced a short study of the sugar industry in Madeira in the late fifteenth century. These studies gradually led her to appreciate the importance of the foreign contribution to the Portuguese economy, in particular in the fields of commerce and finance, in the period of colonial expansion and in the commercial and financial preparation leading up to this. This can be seen in her article on the Lomellini: « Uma família de mercadores italianos em Portugal no século XV: os Lomellini » (*Revista de Faculdade de Letras*, XXII,

2, Lisbon 1965, pp. 56-83). This family formed part of the huge Genoese contingent which in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period stimulated the Iberian economy. Bartolomeo Lomellini was already "resident" in Lisbon by 1424. He was followed then by Marco, Daniele, Ambrogio, Giovanni, Antonio, Battista and many others who came to form a clan, almost an "albergo" on the Genoan pattern. They controlled the grain supplies of Ceuta; they dealt in bills of exchange; they held the cork monopolies; they exported Madeira sugar, wines and honey not only to Genoa and Venice but also to Flanders. They all of course settled in the West, and became Portuguese like so many other Italians both before and after them.

In the 16th century Virginia Rau was particularly interested in Luca Giraldi: « Un grande mercador-banqueiro em Portugal: Lucas Giraldi » (Estudios Italianos em Portugal, 24, Lisbon 1925, pp. 3-35). Giraldi also sold Madeira sugar, together with spices and slaves, for this was now the colonial period. This important individual at the court of John II also played a part in the colonization of Brasil, as I have recently shown in my *Formes féodales et domaniales de la colonisation portugaise au Brésil au XVIe siècle* (Homanaje Garzon Maceda, Cordoba 1973, pp. 105 ss.).

The strictly national perspective adopted by our late colleague did at times, however, prevent her seeing such foreign collaboration as a dynamic and progressive element in the Portuguese economy, which could not alone have sustained the possibilities opened up both by the discoveries and by colonization. This is evident, for example, in the article which she wrote with B. Diffie in 1953, in which the authors went quite beyond the bounds of any objective critique (« Alleged 15th century joint-stock companies and the articles of Dr. Fitzler », Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research). Certainly the German scholar criticized in the piece had interpreted certain documents relating to companies in which Portuguese were in partnership with foreigners in the early fifteenth century in too general a way, yet the reaction was to deny the existence of any commercial companies in which foreign capital supplemented inadequate Portuguese financial resources. This was certainly an exaggeration, but one which fortunately was not repeated. Her growing knowledge of the documents of the period gave her greater objectivity and sense of proportion. In this she was to have a very valuable influence on Portuguese historiography as a whole; one which it is hoped will before long also be extended to the field of the study of the great discoveries which still remains exclusively nationalist in the country of Henry the Navigator, himself the first to summon without hesitation Italians or Flemings who might be of assistance, as well as men from Madeira or the Azores. Also the aid given by the Genoese and the Flemings in the first wave of Portuguese expansion and colonization in the Atlantic archipelagoes from the time of Alfonso IV to John II must not be forgotten.

As well as the studies which we have mentioned here, Virginia Rau rendered great service to scholarship by publishing collections such as « Os

manuscritos do Arquivo da Casa de Cadaval respeitantes ao Brasil » (*Acta Univertitatis Coinbrigensis*, 2 vol., 1959-8, pp. 540-978), and « Carta de D. Manuel I ao Rei de Aragão Fernando sobre a tomada de Goa » (Univ. of Lisbon, 1968) which is a most valuable contribution to the early history of the Portuguese Indies, and also « Subsídios para o estudo do movimento dos portos de Faro e Lisboa durante o século XVII » (1954) which throws light on several little known features of the economic history of metropolitan Portugal in a period which has received little attention and is hence generally considered to be one of decline.

With Virginia Rau's death the leading figure of the last decades in the study of the medieval and modern economic history of Portugal and its empire has been lost. Her friends regret this deeply, and hope that her example will soon be taken up once more.

