

**AFONSINA**

**III**

2022



**CRAFTS AND  
CRAFTSMEN  
IN THE MIDDLE  
AGES**



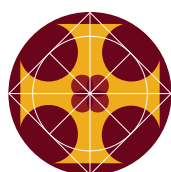
MUNICÍPIO DE  
GUIMARÃES



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## **Meat supply and consumption in Entre-Douro-e-Minho in the late Middle Ages: the contribution of the Guimarães butchers**

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### **Abstract**

The butchers, those who worked in the food trade, had to provide the population with meat, making sure that both quantity and quality satisfied the men and women of the town, according to their social position. Their work was essential and involved killing the animal, dismembering it, and finally selling the food resource thus obtained. This brief article addresses the way butchers worked, their organization and the rules imposed by the royal and municipal authorities at the end of the Middle Ages. Within the scope of this topic, the aim is to compare the reality of Guimarães with that of the neighboring towns belonging to the judicial district of Entre-Douro-e-Minho.

**Keywords:** Food, Supply, Crafts, Butchers



## Introduction

Animal protein has always been essential to human existence. Meat has been and still is present in human food history because it is very nutritious and considered by some to be an indispensable part of meals. This food was not neglected in the Middle Ages, and its supply was a priority. It was mainly the butchers who were entrusted with this task.

The butchers' trade involved killing the animal, cutting it into pieces (the meat was used for food and the hides for the leather crafts), and finally selling the meat to the final consumer. Their work included processing the raw material and then selling the altered product. There were rules governing this whole process, in order to preserve the principles of hygiene, quality, quantity and fair price:

"And that they give by weight and by right measure and without mixture and without deceit (...)" (DUARTE, 1988: 366).

Consumer protection laws were already a reality in medieval times, although still incipient, as we will see throughout this article (WOOD, 2002).

"Cut in the butcher's shop or displayed on stalls in the daily market, the sale of meat was subject to meticulous regulations that the municipal authorities were implementing in each city, awaiting the townspeople who every morning tried to stock up according to their tastes and, above all, the economic possibilities of each one" (GONÇALVES, 2010: 236).

## The Guimarães butchers and those from Entre-Douro-e-Minho

The territory of Guimarães is part of the Entre-Douro-e-Minho judicial district, where there were cities that showed some organization and had important commercial connections with each other (MARQUES, 1987: 125). These cities included neighboring Braga, Barcelos and Viana do Castelo, but above all the economically well-developed Porto (MELO, 2009).

Guimarães was a town until 1853 and had a charter since 1095/1096. Its privileges increased when the first King of Portugal, Affonso Henriques, granted it exemption from paying tolls in 1128 (MARTINS, 2019: 47–49), which facilitated the transit of people and goods to the rest of the King's lands and translated into social and economic benefits. This privilege was so significant that when Braga temporarily became the King's property in 1402, the city asked King João I for the same privilege that had been granted to Guimarães, which was then granted (MARTINS, 2019: 50).

In the period under study, Guimarães stood out for its trade in food prod-



ucts and goods, as well as for its textile, clothing, tanning and metallurgy industries (FERNANDES and OLIVEIRA, 2004: 44).

In this city, butchers belonged to an important network of trades and crafts. Their trade was very important, as they tried to supply the population with large quantities of meat, except on religious days when fasting was required (MARQUES, 2010: 8). By way of comparison, let us look at the following examples from the former neighboring city of Bracara Augusta: in terms of bovine meat alone, an average of 8 oxen per butcher were supplied every week between the years 1509 and 1519; between May 1509 and January 1510, 15 rams, 12 oxen and 8 bulls were slaughtered every week in the butcher's shop in Braga, destined only for the butchers who practiced this trade continuously (CABRAL, 2021: 73-74).

Documentary sources tell us that meat consumption varied greatly in Guimarães. Meat from oxen, cows, sheep, goats and billy goats, lambs, kids, pigs, piglets, chickens, rabbits, ducks, pigeons, hares, partridges, deer, roe deer, fallow deer, bacon and fresh ham was sold. Products derived from these animals were also used, such as eggs, milk, dried cheeses and salted butter — products already mentioned in the Manueline charter granted to the city of Guimarães, as Isabel Maria Fernandes and António Oliveira point out in their article "Ofícios e mesteres vimaranenses nos séculos XV e XVI" (2004: 45).

The amount of meat supplied to the butcher's shop could vary over the years, depending on the butchers' ability to obtain and slaughter the animals, according to the conditions of agricultural production. In the event of a crisis in the supply of meat, we can see from the municipal documentary sources that the good men of the city and their masters tried to find solutions so that there would be no shortage of food in the community.

To try to prevent a strong inflation of prices as a result of dearth, various proposals were implemented, such as tax exemptions, price fixing and aid from tradespeople from neighboring towns (GONÇALVES, 1996: 106–107).

However, whether there was a lot of meat or not, it was at the butcher's shop that supply was made, as it was the place that had the conditions for cutting the meat and controlling its distribution. This place was usually central in the cities, close to seats of power. In the case of Porto and Braga, the butcher's shop remained in front of the See until the end of the Middle Ages (MELO, 2018: 343). The subsequent change of location was due to hygiene concerns, as cutting the meat involved a lot of waste and foul smells — for example, according to the rules established by the Braga and Évora authorities, butchers' shops were cleaned on Saturdays (PEREIRA, 1998: 196; Livro I, [1509], f. 23). The same was true of Guimarães, which had a Collegiate Church instead of a See. Maria Conceição Ferreira explains that the city's butcher's shop was in Praça da Oliveira and only moved to the adjoining Praça de Santiago in 1608. And it was only in 1605, according to the councils of Guimarães, that the dumping of blood into the city's fountains was banned. The problems of urban hygiene and meat supply went hand in hand over the years (FERREIRA, 1986: 125).

However, the need to control the supply of meat did not prevent the butcher's shop and its filthy waste from taking center stage. The elites of a place, town or city had priority access and could choose what they liked best, followed by the people. In Braga,

this situation caused many problems and the King himself had to intervene to establish a fairer distribution of meat (MARTINS, 2020). The same happened in Guimarães, when in 1400 King João I interfered in the meat trade by deciding that the Collegiate Chapter should be served first. This decision caused problems later on, as Maria Conceição Ferreira explains in her article "Uma rua de elite na Guimarães Medieval" (An elite street in medieval Guimarães) (FERREIRA, 1986).

This priority in the distribution of meat to the city's inhabitants was not limited to taste or palate, as the question of precedence resulted from issues of social prestige and the political and economic imposition of certain social groups.

Therefore, the butcher, together with the local authorities, had a key role in supplying meat to the population. It was up to these two groups to prevent meat shortages, which led to discontent, riots and deaths.

The authorities worked to protect both the butchers' trade and the consumer. For example, King Duarte granted the butchers of Guimarães exemption from being cross-bowmen, so that they would dedicate themselves to the good supply of the city. This same situation happened during the reign of King Alfonso V, when the butchers asked to be allowed to increase their numbers because they were in crisis. The King consented, as long as the number did not exceed six butchers (MADUREIRA, 2021).

Another way of responding to dearth and rises in prices was the possibility of streamlining the situation between neighbors; hence the importance of interconnections between municipalities, as they worked to maintain a network of camaraderie regarding the regulation of meat and animal trade and to promote the exchange of goods and greater communication between urban centers.

There is evidence of this interconnection in a Braga document from the late Middle Ages: the First and Second Books of Judgments and Councils of the Braga Municipality, which include minutes, agreements and copies of documents from various sources. One of the books contains a document entitled "Regimento da Carne que fez ho licenciado Pero de Gouvea no Porto que trazia alçada", dated 1496 (Book I, [n.d.], f. 200-202). This is a very extensive documentary source (covering folios 200 to 202 of the First Book of Judgments and Councils of the Braga Municipality) and contains a lot of important information about regional exchange and the organization of meat supplies in the Entre-Douro-e-Minho region.

This Meat Regulation was the result of a meeting that took place in the city of Porto with representatives from various towns, cities and places, namely Guimarães. Here is a short excerpt that proves the presence of two representatives from Guimarães: "And then at the said meeting, all the proxies of the said places and the city officials were brought together before the licensed lord and same Joam Sodere (fl. 200v.) and Joam do Porto, proxies of the noble and loyal town of Guimaraes, and all of them together agreed each one to do what seemed right to them" (Livro I, [1496], f. 200v-201). Representatives from Braga, Vila do Conde, Barcelos, and Ponte de Lima were also present.

The meeting had the following agenda: price adjustments; meat weight; a ban on selling meat to hagglers and hucksteresses; a ban on butchers leaving the region of Entre-Douro-e-Minho to butcher meat; and, finally, neighborhood charters. These measures

tried to equalize prices and sales standards between the different municipalities and also provided some consumer protection. Despite the lack of institutions dedicated exclusively to this purpose, it was in the interest of the rulers to ensure the well-being of the population. This also prevented price inflation and disparity in food costs between municipalities.

In addition to protecting the various consumers, protectionist measures were introduced to regulate transactions involving animals and between butchers. The import and export of goods, in this case meat, depended on a permit in the form of a neighborhood charter. This document, issued by the municipal officials of the place of residence, functioned as a certificate or warrant and authorized butchers to sell or cut meat outside the boundaries of the municipality or town. The document had to be signed by the judge after being sealed. In Braga, officials who signed neighborhood letters without sealing them were fined 100 reales (Livro I, [1496.], f. 201v).

It was also profitable for crafts and trades to trade outside the imposed limits, including within the city. For example, the butchers of Guimarães had the privilege of selling outside the castle: "By the charter of privileges granted in 1372 by King Fernando to the inhabitants of the town and castle of Guimarães, we learn that butchers, bakers and fishmongers should not be forced to cut or sell their products outside the castle" (FERNANDES and OLIVEIRA, 2004: 45).

In the said Livro de Acórdãos e Vereações there is a documentary source dated July 8, 1511 that corresponds to a copy of a letter sent to Guimarães by King Manuel I, in which we find the same themes of establishing prices and sales by weight. But the difference with this letter is that it mentions a problem that was very common in the Middle Ages: the intrusion of hagglers and hucksteresses in the sale and purchase of meat. This resale trade could lead to price inflation, since it was in the interest of these workers to earn more money from their trade. This profession was sometimes frowned upon in medieval society and was generating a considerable increase in prices in Guimarães.

"Complaints blamed the hucksteresses for the rise in prices. The local officials tried to alleviate the problem — (...) they put them in certain places, where the weights and measures inspector would monitor the quality and price of the merchandise" (COELHO, 1990: 41).

The good men of Guimarães complained to King Manuel that the hagglers and hucksteresses were buying "oxen, cows and other cattle from the farmers" (Livro I, [1509], f. 209) and then selling them to the butchers in the city. The complaint referred to the rise in price, since the cattle would be cheaper if the butchers bought it directly from the farmers.

The King then gave his opinion and replied: "And what you ask of us seems to be a good thing". He thus forbade the existence of the trade of dealer in the buying and selling of cattle for the supply of meat, giving exclusive rights to butchers. This practice of persistently limiting and regulating the work of hagglers and hucksteresses was common for the above-mentioned reasons.

But the letter doesn't end there. This lengthy document included a number of complaints, one of which related to slave labor:

"Item acerca da defesa dos mulatos que dizees que som causa de os lavradores e

criadores nom fazerem tanta criaçom de gado como poderiam pareceo nos que se nom deve nisso fazer defesa alguma porque seria causa e azo d'opresam ao povoo assi em lhos nom consentiir criar e teer como na execuçam das pennas que por iso fosem postas e aver os dictos mulatos no regno parecer que podera escusar de sair dinheiro pera fora do regno pois ha necessidade do serviço deles” (Livro I, [1511], f. 209–209v).

The letter from Lisbon also responded to a complaint that slaves of African descent were not helping farmers to raise cattle, but rather they were making production unprofitable for the farmers. However, this time the King defended the need for slave labor, as he assumed that it was beneficial to the people.

### Conclusion

The supply of meat was, in fact, something that concerned officials and men of power in the Middle Ages. The cities of the judicial district of Entre-Douro-e-Minho acted together when the problem of supply became uncomfortable. Food issues were not neglected, as shown by the constant need to establish a maximum ceiling for meat prices, the impetus to make this supply free from the inflation resulting from intermediaries, but above all the need to regulate responsible trade. We should not judge the fair distribution of meat or consider that this organization was poor, because that was not the case.

From production/processing to buying and selling, the governing elites, together with the trades, organized their laws and conduct, protecting the product, quality and quantity, distribution and above all the interests of the various consumers, from the most privileged to the neediest.

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