

**Zeitschrift:** Archives héraldiques suisses = Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik = Archivio araldico svizzero : Archivum heraldicum  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Heraldische Gesellschaft  
**Band:** 127 (2013)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Count-bishops : a case study in Portuguese heraldry  
**Autor:** Santos, Marta Gomes dos  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-746848>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Count-bishops: a case study in Portuguese heraldry<sup>1</sup>

MARTA GOMES DOS SANTOS<sup>2</sup>

This paper aims to discuss the utilization of secular elements in the ecclesiastical coats of arms, referring to the particularity of the count-bishops in the city of Coimbra. A peculiar case in the Portuguese context, the bishops of Coimbra earned the right to the title of Count in 1472, during the reign of King Afonso V. With this gift, they also earned the prerogative to use the coronet with nine pearls in their coats of arms, creating a particular situation in ecclesiastical heraldry in Portugal from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, meaning, an exchange in the route of traditional heraldic representation in Coimbra bishopric.

Given the scarcity of investigation works in this field of Heraldry and above all, the ecclesiastical heraldry, the count-bishops were an obvious choice for my Masters research. If only, perhaps with similar cases in Salzburg (Austria) and Durham (England),<sup>3</sup> the inclusion of secular elements, such as the coronet, in the coats of arms of bishops, is very uncommon in the Portuguese heraldry, despite the example of the Braga Archbishops who sometimes add the coronet of Lord in their arms.

In addition to the coronet, there are other secular elements that can be found in these examples, such as the mitre, the pastoral staff and even a helmet, as we shall observe later.

Nevertheless, the bigger interest in my investigation was to clarify the importance of Heraldry as a vehicle for specific messages and ideologies of power, or by other words, enhance its importance as a social code and signals system.

By granting the title of Count-Bishop, D. Afonso V is not only recognizing the importance of the bishop, but claiming his own power. The King consolidates its image within the Church in an alliance of powers that is inserted in the political strategies of the XV<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the bishop D. João Galvão is reclaiming his temporal power side by side with the sacred emblems, focusing on a speech of corroboration of authority, Bishop and Count, sacred and secular power.

This symbolic jurisdiction and physical space is not only religious but also represents power over new territories which the county comprises. By increasing the power at the territorial level, the bishop will also extend the pastoral jurisdiction, as has happened in Durham and Salzburg.

Its known that any element was likely to be marked as belonging to a bishop, abbot or prelate, through its heraldic symbols.<sup>4</sup> Also frequently, the heraldic emblem could obviously lead to symbols of office and authority. Thus, the analysis of my dissertation was more particularly about the elements which have been referred, as the staff, cross, mitre and coronet, as heraldic elements external to the shield.

Many of these elements representing rank or function were strongly discouraged by the second section of the papal bull *Ut Sive Sollicite*, of 1969.<sup>5</sup> Entitled *Tituli Atque Insignia*, this section was entirely devoted to the question of what should be included or not, in clerical coats of arms.

Interestingly, back in 1644, Innocent X had already forbidden the secular privileges to be represented in the arms of the clergy, crystallizing his words in the bull *Militantes Ecclesiae*. In 1915, this ban was extended to the Patriarchs, archbishops and bishops, by order

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the research for the Master thesis *Heráldica eclesiástica : brasões de armas de bispos-condes*, presented to the Faculty of Letters, University of Coimbra, 2010. Available online at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/15242>.

<sup>2</sup> Doctorate Student in Medieval History with the thesis *Heráldica Municipal na Sociedade Medieval Portuguesa (séculos XII-XV)* at the University of Coimbra, Portugal with Doctorate Grant from the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. Member of the Portuguese Heraldry Institute since 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Chagas, Manoel Pinheiro; *Diccionario Popular*, Lallement Frères, Lisboa, 1880; vol. II, p. 93 e vol.V, p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> Aspects of Heraldry in the Catholic Church, Summary of a Presentation made on Wednesday 14 September 2005 at the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Seixas, Miguel Metelo, «Heráldica Eclesiástica na Porcelana Chinesa de Importação Portuguesa» in Santos, A. Varela, Portugal na porcelana da China: 500 anos de comércio / Portugal in porcelain from China: 500 years of trade, vol. II, Artemágica, Lisboa, 2007, pp. 424 e 470.





Fig. 1

of the Pope Benedict XV, with the exception of the emblems of the Order of Malta and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

In fact, the ban is on elements related to liturgical practice, such as the mitre, which means that badges of dignity, as is the case of the ecclesiastical hat, can be included.

Concerning the Heraldry treaties written in Portugal and by Portuguese, for a long time, there were attempts to regulate the use of these elements, and we can find very relevant testimonies, such as the work of Pedro de Sousa Castelo Branco (Fig. 1) that in 1741 writes: «O bispo de Coimbra como conde de Arganil mete de mais sobre o escudo, por baixo da mitra, e Bago, a coroa de Conde»<sup>6</sup> meaning that the bishop of Coimbra, as count of Arganil, includes in his shield, under the mitre and staff, the crown of count.

Often we see the use of the coronet of the count bishops completed by the ecclesiastical hat with variable number of tassels and colors since the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, but the usage of mitre is also very common in the Portuguese context, even until today. Also, we can't forget that the arms of the clergy were owned by right, and were often assumed, and the shield should be effective in its identifying purpose. Dioceses, cathedrals, bishops, abbots, that is, all the ensemble of elements, individuals or institutions connected to the Church, had

Arms, mostly with the purpose of documental corroboration. However, we found that increasingly, the clergy used with special importance, preferably their personal or familiar badges or Arms, even though in theory they had never the purpose of integrating a field of battle or tournaments, so identifying the war target became obsolete.

It is also interesting that the clergy for several times replaced the more bellicose elements for liturgical motifs or elements related to their personal devotion. The shield remained, but the mantling, crest, helmet and most of the supporters, directly related to honors and dignities of secular life have been canceled and replaced by elements such as the mitre, the crosier and the gallerum. Other symbols will be added to the list of paraphernalia that frames the coat of arms of the clergy and in this list, the one that is important to this study is the coronet and its unprecedented appearance in the arms in the bishops of Coimbra as Counts of Arganil and Lords of Côja.

The inclusion of personal and family elements in blazons of ecclesiastical dignitaries, members of religious orders or congregations, is evident since the beginning of the usage of heraldry by the clergy, as we can see even internationally in many examples as seals, but even so, there is a certain modesty in accepting coronets in the arms of prelates. However we see them not only in the national context in the case of the Count-bishops, but also, as have been said, in the example of the Prince-bishops, in Durham. Nevertheless, this is not indicative of something that will often occur because in fact, is not.

As we could determine, the inclusion of these elements has been widely questioned, challenged and reformed, but we can say with conviction that, despite the different types of ornaments on the exterior of the shield, and considering the above mentioned vetoes, a cleric shouldn't bear the elements, or is, coronets, referring to his lineage and/or noble family. In theory, heredity should never be evident in these coats of arms as in all cases, the clerical condition is considered above all others and, to add to this, the clergy has its own hierarchy that corresponds to specific elements, like the gallerum. So, again theoretically, any other sign outside the ecclesiastical spectrum could be taken as a disturbing element of the emblazoned set. In the words of Bruno Heim, if the clergy are all brothers, their genealogy should not be relevant.

<sup>6</sup> Castello Branco, Pedro de Sousa, Elementos da história, ou o que he necessario saber-se da chronologia, da geografia, do brazão (...), traduzido e adaptado de Vallemont, Pierre Le Lorrain de; Tomo II, Officina de Miguel Rodrigues, Lisboa Occidental, 1741, p.115.



But again concerning the title of count, granted by D. Afonso V to the bishop of Coimbra D. João Galvão in 1472, as a way of supporting and celebrating the remarkable presence of this bishop in Africa, while conquering the cities of Tangier and Asilah,<sup>7</sup> it can be marked as a high point in the heraldic scenario in Portugal, as from this honor, a count coronet was added to the set of this bishop, as well as to all the successors in the mitre of Coimbra, until the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

While granting this title to D. João Galvão, the king did it regardless the family history of the prelate? Maybe not. Nevertheless the honorable character of this title, as have been said, any ecclesiastical office is at a superior level than any title of nobility, considering the clergy condition as a divine privilege beyond any other, is quite intriguing that he has awarded a bishop with a secular position of nobility.

But in reality, this was in fact the most consistent way for the monarch to reward the prelate, because only the Pope has the power to change the position of the bishop in the Church hierarchy. As in all forms of art, heraldry succumbed to changes dictated by the times, politics and taste. The fact that the sovereign recognized the importance of heraldry as a vehicle for an ideology of power is evident.

Building an analysis from the perspective of Semiotics,<sup>8</sup> a symbol is until a certain point, just what he represents itself, but from the time when something or someone takes that same iconic image to represent a higher ideal than the part by itself, is to enhance its own ideology. The ideal of perpetuating an image as a symbol of something or someone is synonymous of creating an image of power before the other, the reader of that same symbol. The legitimation of power through symbols is directly related to the role of symbols in social and behavioral patterns, according to the theory that we all just communicate through a system of signs. In our case, Heraldry can be seen as a sign system that establishes a discourse between the beholder and the observer of the same heraldic set.

So, to appeal to a global recognition of something that we try to be perceived by all as a bearer of a certain meaning and authority,

without being reduced to the sphere of physical and temporal power, the subject should be able to combine the physical and symbolic, as both complement each other. More specifically, we rely on the understanding of other people to legitimate individuals or institutions, because without this, the message becomes obsolete.

About the content of the coat of arms itself, of course there is an obvious preponderance of family arms in the shields of these prelates, but this is related to the nomination of the bishops itself and consequently, to the men that achieved this kind of power, not only in the hierarchy of the church, but also in the court, on the side of the kings. The relationship between spiritual and secular power of the bishops, turned into reality and, therefore, the genealogical context cannot be disconnected to its path in the clergy, directly related to the trust that the king had in these individuals.

The context of bishop nomination<sup>9</sup> had several changes over the centuries, but, one way or another, there is no denying about the importance of the genealogy in the panorama of heraldic representation, at least until the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the common knowledge that any prelate has the right to bear arms, we are not unaware that the bishops here represented belonged to a privileged group in the overwhelming majority of cases, and this will be dominant in their heraldic sets.

Now, going to specific examples, Given the temporal range in focus here and the small size of the compelling dissertation, six subjects were selected representing the various socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts, at the same time, iconic characters with particular significance for this historical and projected research, covering the period from 1472 until 1967. This is 25% of the total of count-bishops, to proceed to the Heraldic analysis of the whole set of their coats of arms. But, as far as it concerns to the specific study of the usage of the coronet, is very curious that considering all that has been said, the only bishops not including the coronet in their arms were precisely the first two who had the privilege to use it.

The first case, D. João Galvão, presents in his arms a gradual adoption of the canting arms of Costas (Fig. 2), part of the set of Galvão. For many seals studied, there is a mixed type regarding the field of the seal, where we have heraldic, but also symbolic and iconographic

<sup>7</sup> Gomes, Saúl António, D. Afonso V – O Africano, Coleção Reis de Portugal; Círculo de Leitores, Lisboa, Agosto de 2006, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Eco, Umberto, A Theory of Semiotics, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979, and Fidalgo, António e Gradim, Anabela, Manual de Semiótica, Universidade da Beira Interior, Covilhã, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Paiva, José Pedro; Os bispos de Portugal e do Império: 1495-1777, Imprensa da Universidade, Coimbra, 2006.





Fig. 2

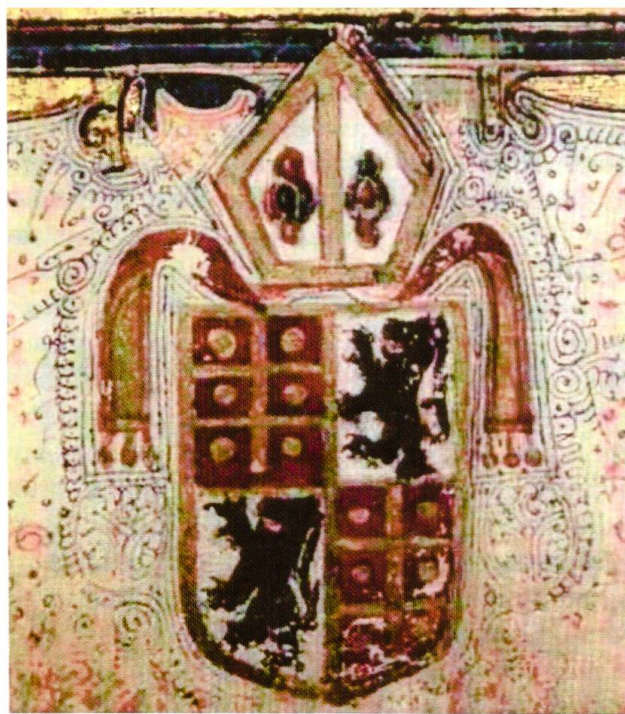


Fig. 3

elements, micro-architectures with gothic aesthetic and devotional motifs. This is important because it leads us to the description of this bishop by many authors as a characteristically medieval bishop, that can be connected to the absence of the coronet in all the examples found. Being the first Count of Arganil, it would be expected to include this symbolism in his arms. If this is related to the medieval formalism pre-

viously mentioned, with the result of a practice in place that nobody wanted to distort, or even by purely aesthetic or iconographic reasons, it cannot yet be said for sure.

The second case to be analyzed was D. Jorge de Almeida. According to many sigillographic specimens, we find two heraldic seals quartered with Almeida and Silva. But it is interesting to confirm that these Arms are actually the same

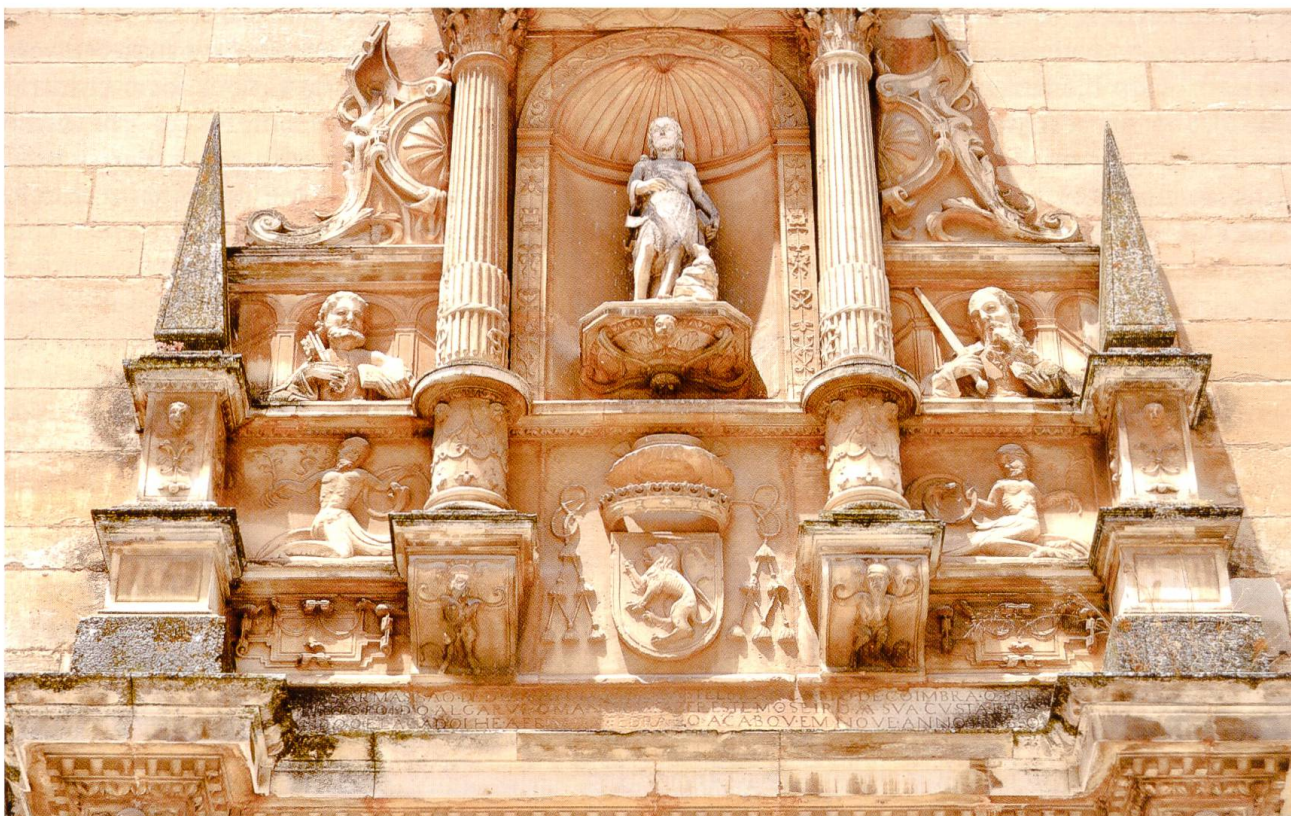


Fig. 4





Fig. 5

as those of his brother, D. Pedro da Silva, who later was to receive, by royal appointment, the honor of being able to use the lion of black or blue. As we are talking of gifts, this can be very interesting as this difference would be considered personal, however, it was also adopted by D. Jorge de Almeida in some of its heraldic representations (Fig. 3).

Just as the difference granted to his brother is a personal honor, especially mentioned in the *Book of Armeiro-Mor*<sup>10</sup> (ordered by D. Manuel I), also the episcopal arms are non-transferable. This similarity can be corroborated in many examples where D. Jorge de Almeida bothered to fix the symbols of his identity, at least since 1485, when his consecration as bishop of Coimbra. Nevertheless, even replicating the arms of his brother, by completing these arms with the prelatric insignia, such as the mitre or the ecclesiastical hat, the bishop is making them undoubtedly his arms.

So why is this relevant in our study? This proved that this is an individual of such an importance that he doesn't need to add the coronet in his arms. He is known by his majestic parades in the city, by his genealogical context<sup>11</sup> (among many other examples we can emphasize more two of his brothers, D. Francisco that was the first Viceroy of India, and D. Fernando, bishop of Ceuta, legate of Pope Alexander VI and connected to the Borgia family). He

<sup>10</sup> Du Cros, *Livro do Armeiro Mor*, (estudo José Calvão Borges), 2ª Ed, Academia Portuguesa da História, INAPA, Lisboa 2007, and Azevedo, Francisco de Simas Alves de, *Uma interpretação histórico-cultural do Livro do Armeiro-Mor : factos significativos da história da Europa reflectidos num armorial Português do séc.XVI*, *Jornal do Comércio*, Lisboa, 1966.

<sup>11</sup> Craveiro, Maria de Lurdes, *O Renascimento em Coimbra: modelos e programas arquitectónicos*, Tese de doutoramento em História da Arte, apresentada à Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, 2002, p. 287.

even uses a *mitra preciosa* in his many heraldic representations on the altarpiece of the Old Cathedral in Coimbra, sponsored by himself.

His heraldry is, as his role in the Portuguese context of the time, exemplary, with powerful language and symbol of a perfectly calculated speech, capable of transmitting an ideal of authority, respect, and visual excitement.

The third case-study, D. Afonso de Castelo Branco, already presents the coronet in several occasions, as we can see in the portal of the convent of Saint Ana, relocated on the Machado de Castro National Museum in Coimbra (Fig. 4). Like its predecessors, he uses the arms of his lineage. The mentioned coronet can be seen combined alternately with the gallerum or mitre, and we found an unusual representation of his arms surmounted by a helmet and framed by a mantel, on one of the same portals of Santa Ana. As a curiosity about this apparently unusual element, we can refer that unfortunately the inscription below this arms with the helmet is gone, what prevents us to draw more accurate conclusions about this representation. It is curious, however, that a bishop who in all its activities and route proved to be representative of the post-Tridentine ideal has a helmet in his arms, despite other similar cases abroad.

The fourth bishop whose arms were analyzed was D. Miguel da Anunciação, who combined in his coat of arms, those of his family (Canting arms of Cunha) with the symbolism of his devotion – Santa Cruz, also used the coronet in the majority of his heraldic representations, like the example of the Major Seminar in Coimbra, today very uncharacterized (Fig. 5), and the magnificent holy water font composed by two pieces.

The same happens regarding the fifth bishop whose arms were analyzed, D. Francisco Lemos de Faria Pereira Coutinho. His coat of arms, composed by a quartering of Moreira, Lemos, Azeredo and Coutinho, with a escutcheon of Pereiras on the center is almost always completed by the coronet, as we can see in many paintings, seals and silver plates with his heraldic representation, and where he only changes the shape of the shield (Fig. 6).

The last case, D. Ernesto Sena de Oliveira, was also the most challenging to study. His arms are completely different from all the other examples (Fig. 7), not only for being arms of faith, but for using the ecclesiastical hat, mitre, crosier and cross of two arms in the same set, and not using the coronet. We must consider that these are arms of deep faith and





Fig. 6



Fig. 7

devotion, are also very relevant if we take in care his role in the Patriarchate of Lisbon and his consequent nomination as Archbishop of Mitilene. Although he doesn't use the coronet, he was the last bishop to use the title of Count, being known as Archbishop-Bishop-Count D. Ernesto.

Now, after these few examples we can conclude that, in all cases was proved the discordant relationship between treatises and practice, proving that, in fact, heraldry is a living science in continuous evolution, as a result of aesthetic paradigms and of the social, cultural and political context. It was also evident the role of Heraldry as social code and sign system that establishes a dialogue with the observer and that reflects the ideologies of his bearer, conveying a clear discourse of power.

Address of the author: Marta Manuel Gomes dos Santos  
Rua da Escola 53  
Valongo  
P-3040-589 Antanhol, Coimbra

### Bibliography:

- AZEVEDO, Francisco de Simas Alves de, *Uma interpretação histórico-cultural do Livro do Armeiro-Mor : factos significativos da história da Europa reflectidos num armorial Português do séc.XVI*, Jornal do Comércio, Lisboa, 1966
- CASTELLO BRANCO, Pedro de Sousa, *Elementos da história, ou o que he necessario saber-se da chronologia, da geografia, do brazão (...)*, traduzido e adaptado de Vallemont, Pierre Le Lorrain de; Tomo II, Officina de Miguel Rodrigues, Lisboa Occidental, 1741
- CHAGAS, Manoel Pinheiro; *Diccionario Popular*, Lallément Frères, Lisboa, 1880; vol. II, p. 93 e vol.V,
- CRAVEIRO, Maria de Lurdes, *O Renascimento em Coimbra: modelos e programas arquitectónicos*, Tese de doutoramento em História da Arte, apresentada à Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, 2002, p. 287
- DU CROS, Livro do Armeiro Mor, (estudo José Calvão Borges), 2ª Ed, Academia Portuguesa da História, INAPA, Lisboa 2007
- FIDALGO, António e GRADIM, Anabela, *Manual de Semiótica*, Universidade da Beira Interior, Covilhã, 2005
- GOMES, Saúl António, *D. Afonso V – O Africano*, Colecção Reis de Portugal; Círculo de Leitores, Lisboa, Agosto de 2006
- PAIVA, José Pedro; *Os bispos de Portugal e do Império: 1495–1777*, Imprensa da Universidade, Coimbra, 2006
- SANTOS, Marta Manuel Gomes dos, *Heráldica Eclesiástica – Brasões de Armas dos Bispos Condes*, Dissertação de Mestrado em História da Arte, Património e Turismo Cultural, apresentada à Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, 2010.
- SEIXAS, Miguel Metelo, «Heráldica Eclesiástica na Porcelana Chinesa de Importação Portuguesa» in Santos, A. Varela, *Portugal na porcelana da China: 500 anos de comércio. / Portugal in porcelain from China: 500 years of trade*, vol. II, Artemágica, Lisboa, 2007.
- ECO, Umberto, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979.