

IMPRESA DA
UNIVERSIDADE
DE COIMBRA
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PRESS

RECOVERED VOICES, NEWFOUND QUESTIONS

FAMILY ARCHIVES AND
HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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PUBLIC OR PERISH: THE FAMILY ARCHIVES OF BEIRA ALTA (PORTUGAL)

ABSTRACT: Building on the recent historiographical interest on family archives, the authors present a type of family archive prevalent in the Beira Alta region still in private hands. The authors describe two family archives to provide an overview of the typical documentation that comprise a Beira Alta family archive in a noble house. Finally, they produce an estimate of family archives that existed around 1850. The authors conclude by highlighting the historiographical relevance of this type of archives and by drawing attention to the risks such archives face today.

Keywords: family archives; nobility; Beira Alta

RESUMO: Alicerçados no recente interesse historiográfico sobre arquivos familiares, os autores analisam os arquivos de família na região da Beira Alta. Para isso, os autores descrevem dois arquivos familiares existentes de forma a fornecer um panorama da documentação típica existente numa Casa Nobre da Beira Alta. Em seguida, os autores ensaiam uma estimativa do número de arquivos privados existentes nestas casas por volta de 1850. Concluem, por fim, sublinhando a importância deste tipo de arquivos para a historiogra-

fia portuguesa, ao mesmo tempo que sublinham os riscos que ameaça este património arquivístico.

Palavras-chave: arquivos de família; nobreza; Beira Alta

Introduction

In the recent years Portuguese historians showed a keen interest in the country's family archives¹. It remains to be seen whether this newly-found interest will supersede long decades of historiographical neglect and create some momentum in the study of this important source. The practical problems are legion. First, the scope and size of the family archives is poorly known. More ominously, their survival is threatened by the social and environmental problems of the Portuguese rural areas: public and private indifference towards heritage, the economic and legal burdens of inheriting historical property and also forest fires, of which those in 2017 stand out. In this dramatic event, at least five noble houses destroyed out and dozens more were threatened. In this study, we hope to contribute to this renewed interest by providing a short analysis of the scope and numbers of the family archives of the country aristocracy within a well-defined territory.

This paper focuses on the archives of the country aristocracy. By “country aristocracy” we mean the families that, by 1700, enjoyed a noble status (*foro de fidalgo*) and often exhibited coats of arms in their homes, but lived in the countryside, not in the court. This was largely because their income derived from their role as tenants of noble and ecclesiastical estates and jurisdictions as well as from economic assets like interest-paying loans, rather than from the redistributive payments from the king (like *tenças* or *moradias*), which were the mainstay of the courtly noble households². Their houses sometimes assumed the form of a grand building traditionally called *solar*³. A few also went by the name of *paço* or as a *torre* (tower), denoting their origins as the

¹ HENRIQUES; ROSA, 2016; SOUSA, 2012 and 2018; LEME, 2012; ROSA, 2012b and 2012c.

² MONTEIRO, 1998.

³ BORGES, 2010; ROSA, [forthcoming].

seat of a seignorial jurisdiction (*bonra*). Nonetheless, more commonly these buildings went by the more modest, and older, term *casa* (house). This detail is important: in northern and central rural Portugal, a *casa* was essentially a hereditary set of property and communal rights that were tied to a specific building⁴. As we shall see, archives were integral to these *casas* or *solares* and were passively bequeathed to the descendants and heirs together with them.

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, we briefly describe two country aristocracy archives, discussing what types of documents can researchers get from them. Then, we estimate of the number of this type of archives for the region of Beira Alta, a largely rural area in the center of Portugal. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the importance and risks that loom over this documental heritage while providing some suggestions for future research on this topic.

1. Two archives in Beira Alta. Different families, similar practices

The origins of rural aristocracy families from Beira Alta have been recently assessed in separate works by the authors of this paper⁵. The coinage devaluation and the high cost of labor that dominated the fifteenth century lent some uppity farmers and the local office-holding families bargaining power vis-à-vis the great landowning monasteries and dioceses. As these major farmers were the tenants of agricultural lands and other sources of revenue, they ascended to the local elites⁶. Such economic context created a particular, fertile environment for the ascent of a local gentry, coupled with older families whose origins may be found in more remote times.

The two cases we consider here have somewhat different trajectories. In the first, the origins are to be found in merchants and tenant farmers who had acquired noble status by the turn of the seventeenth century⁷, following

⁴ GONÇALVES, 1981; CASTANHEIRA, 1998; HENRIQUES, 2003.

⁵ FERROS; FERROS; LEITÃO, 2017; HENRIQUES; MENDES, 2016.

⁶ HENRIQUES; MENDES, 2016.

⁷ HENRIQUES, 2012.

their local preponderance as merchants and rentiers. In the second case, the *paço* of Molelos, there are reasons to believe that its origins go back to the thirteenth century⁸, although the exact generational sequence was already forgotten in the fifteenth century.

Given the space and time constraints, these two cases were selected because they are well-known to the authors, although the resulting tradeoff is a lack of randomization in the selection criteria. Despite this obvious hindrance, we believe both archives illustrate the ideal-type of a rural aristocratic family archive, and also allow us to highlight some differences which reflect the possible range of these collections.

1.1. Archive of the viscounts of Midões

The archive of the viscounts of Midões is known in detail by one of the authors, since he was involved in its rescue and subsequent donation to the Arquivo Distrital de Viseu (the public archive of Viseu)⁹ and was also the object of a study regarding the management of loans and debt by the different generations of the families of each *casa*¹⁰. This large archive was formed possibly at the time of Roque Ribeiro de Abranches Castelo-Branco, first viscount of Midões (1770-1844), a nineteenth-century politician involved in the political and military struggles that affected Portugal in the 1820s and 1830s¹¹. As a staunch, early supporter of the liberals, he was a member of the revolutionary government formed in 1826. Following his side's victory in the civil war (1828-34) he became a member of parliament, a peer of the realm and was eventually granted the title of viscount of Midões¹².

⁸ FERROS, FERROS; LEITAO, 2017; DUARTE; FERROS; COIMBRA, 2018.

⁹ The link for the archive, with a description of part of the documentation, can be found here: <https://digitalq.advis.arquivos.pt/details?id=1047819>. The archive is currently undergoing a detailed description, which will allow for more complete studies of its documentation.

¹⁰ HENRIQUES, 2012.

¹¹ CASTRO, 2002.

¹² For an overview of his political career see his biography in CASTRO, 2002: 464-465. For an overview of his genealogy see CALDEIRA, 2014 and COSTA, 2017.

The viscount inherited seven *casas* from his father and cousins, all located in neighboring municipalities. Some of these houses were non-descript buildings which lay unimposing among other homes in the rural landscape, betraying their modest origins. Other *casas* were nonetheless far more impressive and were rebuilt in the eighteenth-century in an ostentatious baroque style¹³.

The archive has approximately 7,500 documents¹⁴, starting from as early as 1528, the date of the oldest extant document¹⁵. During the lifetime of the viscount, most of the documents received either a cover or were tied together in bundles (*maços*) which also had a cover in front. Furthermore, a small summary of the content of each document was added at the back, as was common in such reorganization efforts. What remains is probably just a small part of what would have been a very complete archive, since it was already in dire conditions at the time of its rescue¹⁶. We shall focus on some key aspects regarding this archive to illustrate how this hon archive contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms of social ascension.

The *casa* as the key organizing principle

The key fundamental organizing principle seems to be that of the *casa* (house) in the sense explained above and in some historical anthropology literature¹⁷ and empirical work¹⁸. Even in the case where properties were bought by non-members of the family, the nineteenth-century archive reformer assigned the document to one of the houses according to the locations involved. Thus, the reformer left in the back of the document the name of the house it referred to. Only in the few cases where no visible connection was found, there was a small written annotation stating something like “I

¹³ One of this *casas* was the *casa do Ribeirinho*, an impressive eighteenth-century noble home where the family archive laid in a room in disrepair, possibly where the viscount had his office. The house and chapel completely burned in the 2017 fires (COSTA, 2017), and the archive survived only because it was safely held in the Public Archive of Viseu.

¹⁴ This is only an estimate of the available documentation. We need to wait for the completion of the inventory process to reach a final number.

¹⁵ CALDEIRA, 2014. This is a notarial transcription of a late fourteenth-century document. It is the only known reference in the archive to the existence of a medieval parchment.

¹⁶ COSTA, 2017.

¹⁷ CASTANHEIRA, 1998.

¹⁸ HENRIQUES, 2003; HENRIQUES, 2007.

don't know what this has to do with this house". Papers relating to property management, the election of local militia officers, judicial disputes or even personal letters all seem to fall within the overarching *casa*, even though at least three of such houses were formed by three brothers of the Abranches family. Thus, for the nineteenth-century archivist the identification of the *casa* was preferred over the family or family name. In some cases, this organization was inspired by the practices typical of entailed property like *capelas* and *morgados*¹⁹, whose importance in the structure of noble archives has already been demonstrated by Maria de Lurdes Rosa²⁰. Nonetheless, in this case at least three of the *casas* were not part of an entailed property, and even the establishment of an entailment (*morgadio*) was the end-result of a process started several generations beforehand. This is the case of the *morgadio de Travanca de São Tomé*, established in 1693 by the priest António de Abranches for his sister²¹, even though the records of acquisitions and other documentation comprised in the *casa* of Travanca de São Tomé start with his great-grandfather Miguel Gomes²², or with the *casa de Várzea de Cavalos*²³, whose chapel still bears the date "169[...]"(the last digit was erased by time) which was built and was entailed by Luís de Abranches Henriques (1650-1708), but whose records start at least two generations before. In the case of another entailed property, the *capela de Nossa Senhora da Piedade* seems to have been subdued to the importance of the *casa* to which it fell²⁴.

¹⁹ See ROSA, 1995 and 2005 for a description of the concepts.

²⁰ ROSA, [forthcoming].

²¹ FERROS; FERRO; LEITÃO, 2017.

²² The document that establishes the entailment cannot be found in the archive, but its entailment is recorded in the still imposing tomb of António de Abranches, archpriest of Besteiros, in the church of Travanca de São Tomé. We will address Miguel Gomes in more detail further ahead.

²³ FERROS; FERROS; LEITÃO, 2017; OSÓRIO GONÇALVES, 2006.

²⁴ The *capela de Nossa Senhora da Paz* was entailed by the last will of Dionisio de Figueiredo in 1597, who died in Goa, and sent large sums of money for his sisters to build a chapel which would remain in their descendancy (the original document will is part of the archive of the viscounts of Midões deposited in the public archive of Viseu). This led to a series of land acquisitions, one of which was of the *casa do Aido*, in the township of Cabanas de Viriato, roughly five miles distant from where the original chapel was built. Nonetheless, the subsequent documentation is organized in the archive as belonging to *casa do Aido*, rather than to the *Capela de Nossa Senhora da Paz*.

As such, at least in this case, the overarching structure for the documentation seems to be that of *casa*. Such organization seems to reflect how the *casa* was understood as an impersonal owner of property and communal rights, in the rural tradition still found by twentieth-century historical anthropology²⁵. Nonetheless, further research is required to understand the interconnections between entailment, *casa* and the specific archival practices in place in rural central Portugal. It must be noted that these *casas* originate from a slow and organic growth process starting in small acquisitions, and the establishment of entailments seems to be the end-result of a process started several generations before.

Small transactions in large volumes

One of the uncommon record types we find in the Midões archive is the *assinado*. That is, a transaction record signed by the intervening sellers and buyers only without the intervention of a public notary (*tabelião*). These were used commonly for the acquisition of plots, sometimes as small as just one olive tree (without enclosing land) or the sale of animals (including dogs). Such records are ever present throughout all the different houses comprising the archive.

Written in small pieces of paper and invariably occupying just one page, these records were kept by all different houses. Regardless of the different family or house they refer to, they all seem to obey the same structure: “I [name of seller] residing in [name of town] that it is true that from this day onwards I sell to [name of buyer] and his wife [name of buyer] resident in [name of town], in the council of [name of town], the [name of the property]”. After describing the lands’ boundaries, the document ends typically with the seller describing how he requested someone to make the *assinado*, who witnessed it and the date.

As the archive is still being organized, it is hard to estimate the total numbers of these documents and their overall weight in the archive. Our rough estimates suggest that there are a few thousand *assinados* and they may represent up to half of the total documentation present in the archive. While the

²⁵ LE ROY LADURIE, 1982; CASTANHEIRA, 1998.

assinados are sometimes bound together, as in the case of more than 100 small transactions made by António de Abranches (1576-1643) in the early seventeenth century, at other times they were merely bundled together with an overarching description of the *casa* they belong to.

This legal instrument allowed the buyer to avoid paying *ad valorem* sales taxes (the *sisá*). The record of larger transactions, on account of higher risks and costs, was written down and registered by a notary public. These smaller transactions seemed also to have been advantageous to the buyers who were literate, while most of the sellers were illiterate and, judging by their names, seem to be small farmers. These documents are practically absent from the public archives, where the registers of the notaries public are kept. This absence creates a strong bias when studying the land market. Indeed, when one looks at the notary registers, one finds only ten to fifteen land sales per year. Yet, as the *assinados* from the archives of the viscount of Midões show, a few scores of sales took place every year. Also, the notarial registers only encompass the top of the markets, ignoring a plethora of farmers that were very active in the local lands markets. Access to these private archives sheds light upon a more granular level, that falls out of the scope of most public records.

Links with a courtly family archive

A third unusual perspective that this archive provides is the articulation between the local tenants and merchants that founded these houses and the large landowners such as the house of the marquis of Abrantes, who ruled over the municipalities of Oliveira do Conde and Góis by concession of the Crown. In the Abrantes archive, which is held by the Portuguese national archive²⁶, we can see how the ancestors of the house of Abrantes usually tax-farmed their revenues in bulk, either yearly or biyearly, by auctioning them to the highest bidder. In the Abrantes archive we can find the records of the tax-farming contract and know the identity of the tax-farmers. The names found in the Abrantes archive gain life in the archive of the viscount

²⁶ A description of the archive can be seen here: <https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/details?id=3908153>.

of Midões. By 1580, the main tax-farmer of the Beira revenues that belonged to the ancestors of the marquises of Abrantes (the counts of Vila Nova de Portimão), the old line of the marquis of Abrantes, was a merchant called Manuel Fernandes²⁷ together with his elder son Manuel Fernandes de Figueiredo²⁸. They are ancestors of the viscount of Midões through a male line. Likewise, the already mentioned António de Abranches (1576-1643)²⁹ and his brother and sons, who were also ancestors of the viscount through a female line, tax-farmed the revenues of the same counts³⁰. The two archives thus become complementary, since these tax-farming documentation is absent from the Midões archive and without the Abrantes archive the role of tax-farming as a form of social ascent would remain obscure.

The articulation between both archives helps to understand the origins of some *casas*, namely that of Travanca de São Tomé. This *casa* belonged to Miguel Gomes who bought ten small plots of land in the mid-sixteenth century, records of which subsist in the archive. Gomes's origins are obscure, although these records suggest that he was a middling farmer. He married a woman with an equally unimposing last name: Antónia Gomes. Nonetheless, the archive records the increasing volume of the transactions made by their descendants until his granddaughter married the aforementioned António de Abranches (1576-1643). Their lands were endowed to the *casa* of Travanca de São Tomé. However, whilst the family archive of the viscounts of Midões leaves the social origins of Miguel Gomes unclear, if we resort to the archive of Abrantes we find that Miguel was the son of Diogo Gomes and Maria Álvares, local farmers who acted as tenants to the ancestors of the marquis for their property in Travanca.³¹ The descendants of this otherwise obscure couple would later give rise to three houses that spread throughout Beira Alta.

²⁷ ANTT, Arquivo da Casa de Abrantes, mç. 53, doc. 976.

²⁸ ANTT, Arquivo da Casa de Abrantes, mç. 53, doc. 978.

²⁹ ANTT, Arquivo da Casa de Abrantes, mç. 53, doc. 968.

³⁰ ANTT, Arquivo da Casa de Abrantes, mç. 53, doc. 977, 982.

³¹ ANTT, Arquivo da Casa de Abrantes, mç. 54, doc. 999.

1.2. The archive of *paço de Molelos*

The *Paço de Molelos* is a manor house whose origins go back to the thirteenth century, although the lineage can only be traced with certainty from the fifteenth. The term *paço* denotes the existence of a jurisdiction held by a family of aristocratic rank. The knight Henrique Esteves who inherited the jurisdiction (*bonra*) of Molelos decided to entail it, together with his other (and his wife's) properties and create a *morgadio* in 1520³². The *paço* is to this day still the property of its descendants, including one of the authors. The archive that we will address is still in the possession of the family and is kept in the *paço*, where it is undergoing a process of reorganization by its proprietors.

The documentation spans from *c.* 1500 to the twentieth century. Although the *paço* has remained in the possession of the same family, an unquantifiable amount of documents was distributed to other branches, which eventually died out. It is hard to estimate the impact of this dispersion. Also, between the death of the last administrator (or *morgado*) in 1920, and the transmission of ownership to the present owner, in 1970, the house was uninhabited and suffered disrepair. Most of the archive was kept in chests and drawers, where it was damaged by rats and insects. Several volumes with documentation that were bound together were removed and stored at another location for safe-keeping, as the condition of the *paço* deteriorated. Some documents older than 1520 subsist which shows that preserving the records that documented the material foundations of the *morgadios* was an important concern for their administrators³³.

The need for a *tombo* (land inventory)

The *tombo* or land inventory of the *morgadio* of Molelos consists of a bound volume dated between 1651 and 1659. It was compiled at a time when the heiress, D. Ana de Tovar, was only eight years old and under tutorship appointed by the crown. As suggested by Maria de Lurdes Rosa, the threat of

³² FERROS; FERROS; LEITÃO, 2017.

³³ ROSA, 1995 and [forthcoming].

losing properties and rights appears to be at the forefront of the need to make a detailed inventory of the properties owned by the descendants of Henrique Esteves³⁴. Although this document did not prevent continuous usurpation of land, similar inventories were being compiled at the time by monasteries, convents and large land-owning families. The beautifully-drawn frontpage, adorning a massive volume, was carefully preserved and remains in good condition. Further, this volume details the properties and other assets as it contains transcriptions of the original documents relating to each of these sources of revenue. As Maria de Lurdes Rosa states:

From the end of the fifteenth century, *tombos* were made obligatory by the Crown, and so they are very common in these archives. Frequently there were also documents relating to the fulfilment of pious charges, or at least notes on them³⁵.

It must be noted that the importance of such inventories for entailments has been highlighted in historiography, and many other examples abound. The *tombo* may have influenced the creation of other volumes in 1920 when the second count of Felgueiras married the heiress of *paço de Molelos*³⁶ and collected the documents he deemed relevant in bound volumes, possibly influenced by the existence of the previous inventory.

Enforcing property rights

Unlike the archive of the viscounts of Midões, we detect an early attempt by the administrators of the *morgadio* of *Molelos* to create a written inventory, which served as an instrument for enforcing property rights³⁷. According to nineteenth-century experts, this practice was actually mandatory for entailed property³⁸. None of the many houses which united under the viscount of

³⁴ ROSA, [forthcoming].

³⁵ ROSA, [forthcoming].

³⁶ FERROS; FERROS; LEITÃO, 2017.

³⁷ ROSA, [forthcoming].

³⁸ MENEZES, 1819.

Midões did the same, or at least the corresponding evidence did not survive³⁹, leaving their petty *assinados* intact but not transcribed. The need to enforce property rights directly translates in the archive organization. In fact, even though the Molelos archive is still undergoing a major inventory effort, we can infer that a third of the documentation concerns nineteenth-century judicial processes against farmers refusing to pay rent, as a consequence of the “liberal” legislation of the nineteenth century. Thus, enforcing property rights and proving such rights resorting to a well-organized house archive was paramount. This need for effective and extensive legal action in the nineteenth century is well apparent within the archive.

The *casa* as the overarching archive structure

Family tradition, rightly or not, tells that there was an old archive kept in a family property that was lost in a fire during the sixteenth century. This may explain the lack of fifteenth-century documentation. The subsequent archival production was nonetheless organized alongs houses or entailments⁴⁰. There are six main houses that comprise the Molelos archive, denoting different inheritances. The first is the documentation regarding the *Paço de Molelos*, which comprises not only documents regarding properties and the payment of the *foros*, but also correspondence and documentation regarding the entailed property. The second group concerns the properties entailed by the bishop of Coimbra Gil Alma († 1415) to fund a chapel he created in the local Dominican convent. Another house was centered around a sixteenth-century entailment (*morgadio*) with lands in Batalha, of which there is an eighteenth-century land inventory (*tombo*). Finally, three other sets of documents concerning different properties inherited by the administrators of the *morgadio* de Molelos: the *casa* in Folhadosa, the properties in Douro, and finally the documentation of the counts of Felgueiras and the Ferros Ponce de Leão who married with

³⁹ It must be noted that parchments and bounded volumes are absent from the archive and may have been stored in a different part of the *casa do Ribeirinho* or taken for safe keeping by a family member. As such, it should be noted that the authors are working with an incomplete archive.

⁴⁰ See ROSA, [forthcoming] for a more complete description on the links between family archives and entailed property.

the heiresses. The organization of the documents according to the house, as in Midões, highlights how archival practices reflect the prevalence of the *casa* and its administrative and judicial matters over the private and personal documentation.

The country aristocracy archives

Given these two cases, we cannot claim that the country aristocracy archives in Beira Alta are uniform. Furthermore, the families from which these archives originated are not uniform. While some are considered members of the aristocracy for generations, many other houses seem to have their origins in local merchants or enriched individuals which rented large pieces of land in exchange for a lump yearly fee from the larger property holders, such as the courtly aristocracy, large monasteries or the Church. Nevertheless, some common traits are clear. We will not fall far from the truth by stating that overall they preserve documents relating with property rights and their management (deeds, rent contracts, loan transactions, wills and foundational documents, but no accounts of any sort), appointments to offices or functions (such as charters granting an office as public notary) and genealogical and personal information such as letters. These features do not set these archives apart from their equivalents belonging to the courtly aristocracy. However, we find two distinctive traits. The first is that the *casa*, not the family, acts as the organizing principle, reflecting the importance of property rights. The second is the viewpoint that they offer on the agents active in the lower levels of economic life.

2. An estimation of the number of Beira Alta archives

As the previous pages explain, record-keeping practices were essential to any aristocratic *casa*. In fact, these *casas* were impersonal owners of goods and rights whose management and safeguard required the preservation of the sales and tenancy contracts, wills and sometimes genealogical information. Hence, archives are intrinsic to the very concept of *casa*. Thus, we assume that by 1850 to each *casa* corresponded one archive.

In order to gauge the original dimension of this type of archives, we present an estimate of the number of archives that existed in Beira Alta c. 1850. This “historical province” was defined in the 1930s as comprising two districts (Viseu and Guarda) and the two easternmost municipalities of the district of Coimbra (Tábua and Oliveira do Hospital).

Within the entire Beira Alta, five municipalities (Tábua, Santa Comba Dão, Tondela, Nelas and Carregal do Sal) have adequate, if slightly different, instruments for reliable estimates of the number of country aristocracy houses. Together with the research by Inês Borges⁴¹ on the local *solares*, the recent inventory of coats of arms of the municipality of Tondela allows for a very complete approximation to all the *casas* that have been built there⁴². Similar inventories have been recently conducted in the neighboring municipality of Carregal do Sal⁴³, while for the municipalities of Santa Comba Dão, Nelas and Tábua we resorted to the inventory of the national monument protection institute, complemented by our own field research⁴⁴ and available bibliography⁴⁵.

The results are shown on Table 1.

Table 1. Casas

	Number of <i>casas</i>, c. 1850	Pop of municipality (in 1864)	Archives per population
Tondela	33	27791	842
Tábua	20	12347	617
Carregal do Sal	19	17207	906
Santa Comba Dão	14	11908	851
Nelas	14	9712	694
Median	-	-	842

These five municipalities provide a benchmark for which we can extrapolate the overall number of archives. In order to extrapolate we calculated how

⁴¹ BORGES, 2012.

⁴² FERROS *et al.*, 2017.

⁴³ RIBEIRO, 2012.

⁴⁴ Also check the blog “solares e brasões” at solaresebrasoes.blogspot.com.

⁴⁵ DUARTE, 2009; GONÇALVES, 2006.

many *casas* existed per population by 1850 (using the 1864 census data). We chose the census for this year rather than contemporary figures, given the great contrast between the dense numbers of these rural municipalities in the nineteenth century and the low population of today. In order to infer the total number of *casas* in Beira Alta from our benchmark, we extrapolate the median archive density to the total population of this province in 1864 (Table 2)⁴⁶.

Table 2. Estimated number of *casas* in Beira Alta, c. 1850

Area	Population (in 1864)	Estimate
Viseu	353,543	385
Guarda	210,414	229
Oliveira do Hospital and Tábua	41,344	45
Total	605,301	719

Notes: The estimated figure results from multiplying the median of *casas* per capita found in Table 1 with the contemporary population of Beira Alta.

The estimate indicates that Beira Alta was home to more than 700 noble houses by 1850. Assuming that all houses had their archives, which can be confirmed in all cases for which we had access, this corresponds to a commensurate number of archives. Fires and other hazards also took their share of these collections. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many other were destroyed by the sheer indifference of owners.

Conclusion

The present paper overviewed two private family archives from the rural aristocracy of Beira Alta. It served the purpose of shedding light on the private lives not only of the rural aristocracy, but also of its relationship with

⁴⁶ Population density, an alternative we considered, proves a far worse predictor of the number of archives. As seen in Table 1, the rank of population is very close to the rank in number of archives, unlike population density. This warrants some robustness to this method.

other major institutions that shaped Portuguese society. We hopefully showed that these source collections have a vast potential, as they tend to be complementary to the typical collections held in the public archives. They also provide a different perspective on some, otherwise inaccessible, aspects of the rural economy while highlighting the mechanisms behind the local primacy of the gentry families. Their sales instruments provide a fresh viewpoint on the economic life of middling farmers, whose modest sales, sometimes involving goods like one olive tree or one dog, dispensed with the formalities of the notaries, that provide the bulk of the local sources.

Given the importance of these archives, we attempted to calculate the total number of family archives in the region of Beira Alta by the middle of the nineteenth century. According to our own conservative, assumption-light estimate there were about 719 family archives in this region. This is an impressive number, especially if compared with the small number of family archives currently deposited on the two district-level archives of this region (only twelve collections in the public archives of Viseu and Guarda). At any rate, the number of surviving archives is likely a modest share of what once existed. Also, these archives are currently at risk of dispersion, destruction or being devoured by pests. In the four municipalities studied, at least seven known archives were lost in the last hundred years for various reasons, ranging from indifference to inheritance disputes. In the same period, only five were recovered, most of them already in dire conditions. Further losses are expected to be uncovered as local historians continue with their important fieldwork. Partnerships with public institutions are essential for the preservation of this patrimony, hence our title: public or perish.

In many cases, these important source collections clarify how men and women of mostly mercantile and farming stock were able to move in far more important circles, including ecclesiastical institutions, courtly nobility and the Crown and build the *casas* and *solares* that still shape the Beira Alta of today.