Introduction

The objective of this essay is to discuss the political role of the seigniorial households of the Portuguese infantes (princes) during the sixteenth century, taking into account the degree of autonomy progressively acquired by these individuals and by their respective entourages. In particular, I will explore how these institutions are related to the Crown and other nobility. This dimension is characterized by periods when the existence of inter-institutional cooperation is verified, intermixed with episodes of conflict between them. It is assumed, therefore, that there are situations in which the households of the infantes declare their will to collaborate with the diverse political projects of the monarchy. On other occasions, it is clear that these households carried out projects of their own, which often resulted in the Crown attempting to control them.

I will argue in this paper that the households of the infantes were relevant in the territorial and political control of the kingdom during the first half of sixteenth century, namely in the balance of power between nobility and the Crown. Factors such as the existence of a web of interpersonal relationships between the titled nobility or a policy of resource redistribution between the central government and the latter helped the monarchy to control the destination and reproduction of its members, and thus avoided an even greater degree of political division. The use of a wide range of resources granted by the Crown gradually gave the households of the infantes significant potential to attract clientele and, thus, a considerable degree of competitiveness with the other noble households. Then, I will address several issues associated with the formation and composition of the households of the infantes while integrating them into the historiography of the evolution of the royal households and courts. I will then turn to the emergence of the entourages of the Manueline infantes within the royal household to clarify the origin of the households of the respective individuals that coincides with a period of progressive
emancipation from the Crown. Finally, I will evaluate certain variables displayed by these households – resources, patronage, composition of respective entourages – and assess their importance to the balance of the political forces regarding the Portuguese monarchy in this period.

**Historiography and the Problem**

The formation and development of the households of the *infantes* pose an issue that I will tackle in two ways: first, as part of the development of the court as a political institution during the medieval and modern period, and second, in the context of the emergence of the proto-state forms of government in pre-contemporary Europe.\(^1\) The subject has been discussed regularly by historians since Elias’s classic thesis. His model, based on royal centralization amid the gradual loss of autonomy of the aristocratic power, has generated strong criticism in recent decades.\(^2\) Many of these commentaries discuss the relationship between the monarchy and nobility. One matter of importance is the existence of a reciprocity between both parties. This reciprocity was of fundamental importance for the rule of the respective pre-modern political units, which challenges the premise of the royal court being a center of domestication of the nobility. This perspective was centered on the existence of a model with a plurality of courts, where princely and noble households replicated the royal domestic model of governance on the periphery, as well as in the participation of the nobility at the political center.\(^3\)

On the other hand, the existence of intense debates about the role of the royal court and household in the government of the European kingdoms dur-

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