

Urban food production in Portuguese cities from 16th to 18th centuries: Viseu as a study case

La producción urbana de alimentos en las ciudades portuguesas de los siglos XVI al XVIII: Viseu como caso de estudio

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Abstract

The importance of urban gardens in Portugal, as a guarantee of sustainability and access to fresh produce, is based on a long tradition of urban and rural coexistence in Portuguese cities of medieval origin. If the street was always occupied by the surface of the buildings, the back of the plot was a space for a backyard and auxiliary structures that contributed to the production or transformation of food. These were usually confined spaces that wouldn't allow the production of wheat or similar crops, but would allow the rearing of small animals such as poultry and pigs, and the growing of vegetables and fruit.

Analysis of the data for Viseu, a medium-sized Portuguese city, allows us to understand not only what was produced and how, but also the economic, social and health importance of this intramural food reserve.

La importancia de los huertos urbanos en Portugal, como garantía de sostenibilidad y acceso a productos frescos, se basa en una larga tradición de convivencia urbana y rural en las ciudades portuguesas de origen medieval. Si la calle siempre estuvo ocupada por la superficie de las edificaciones, el fondo de la parcela era un espacio para un patio trasero y estructuras auxiliares que contribuían a la producción o transformación de alimentos. Por lo general, se trataba de espacios reducidos que no permitían la producción de trigo o cultivos similares, pero sí la cría de animales pequeños como aves y cerdos, y el cultivo de hortalizas y frutas.

El análisis de los datos de Viseu, ciudad portuguesa de tamaño medio, permite comprender no sólo qué se produjo y cómo, sino también la importancia económica, social y sanitaria de esta reserva alimentaria intramuros.

Keywords

Viseu, Modern age, backyards, food production

Viseu, Edad Moderna, patios traseros, producción de alimentos.

Introduction

The assurance of the populace's sustenance provision was, in essence, a concern and obligation of modern European states, whether analyzing urban or rural realities. This is evident when studying the management, and its legislative body, of Portuguese cities between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Notwithstanding the undeniable influence of population growth and the introduction of new products on consumption and production habits (or vice versa), the assurance of the provision of essential sustenance to the populace was to be a constant feature in urban policies throughout the Modern Age. The guarantee of food provisions to the population was both the fulfilment of peace and public health keeping and thus one of the key roles of the local political powers.

The city

The modern age city of Viseu can be considered a medium-sized city within the Portuguese context. During the sixteenth century, the city had approximately 2,500 inhabitants¹, a figure that remained relatively stable until the late eighteenth century, when it reached approximately 4,000.

The urban matrix is, above all, of medieval provenance, shaped around a central core "crowned" by the Cathedral. The city walls, erected in the mid-14th century, will protect it from external threats and came to act as a frontier between the city – term that was only applied to the space within the walls – and the non-city, the neighbors and foreigners.

This dichotomy was applied to each and every aspect of the City's Council, including food provisioning. In terms of the political frame, the supply of food to and for the city was under the Council's jurisdiction, making use of a legislative corpus and a body of city officials to ensure the correct provisioning of goods. Despite the evolution of legislation and the city officials over the three centuries under scrutiny, the fundamental characteristics exhibited remarkable constancy throughout the period under review. Viseu's predominant role as a consumer, as opposed to its role as a producer (with exceptions that will be subsequently examined), meant that the majority of its food requirements were sourced from beyond the city's boundaries, necessitating the payment of dues to the Council for the facilitation of these cross-border transactions. Consequently, while the city's coffers were enriched by the consistent influx of "external" products, the Council's obligation to avert any scarcity of a specific commodity and to maintain social harmony was considered evident, irrespective of the associated expenditures.

Firstly, it was imperative that the council guarantee the arrival of the necessary products in the city, as well as their transportation and consistent supply. Secondly, there were to be sufficient local merchants to maintain the trades at a fixed rate and at the designated selling spots as outlined by the Council. Finally, the Council had to ensure that every transaction paid its due tax, while also preventing the emergence of a parallel market. To this end, the Council had specific officials to control all these matters, mainly the "almotacés", who were responsible for supervising product rates and selling spots; and the "repesador", who was in charge of confirming the correct weights for the acquired products.

The supply

The main produces whose provisioning had to be ensured were bread (baked or in grain), wine, meat and – at a smaller scale – fish (mostly during Lenten Season), being the goods upon which we find the largest number of regulations in the Councils documentation.

The main source of these provisions was undoubtedly the city's outskirts and what we now term neighboring municipalities. However, in times of scarcity, the council would consider more distant suppliers. A notable illustration of this can be found in the Council meeting of 6 February 1577, where the procurement of bread was a matter of pressing concern: "Cristovão Rodrigues and his brother Pedro Nunes are to be summoned, as they were tasked with bringing bread from Aveiro to this city due to the pressing need for it, as stipulated in the contract signed with the Council"².

However, during periods of scarcity, the sale of this commodity to distant areas was prohibited, as evidenced by the Council meeting of 20 June 1534, which addressed this issue. The shortage of wine: "no person of the aforementioned city may sell any wine to the "almocreves" to be sold outside the city and its outskirts, and the said wine may only be sold for the needs of the peasantry"³.

¹ Numeramento de D. João III (1527). Alexandre Vale, "Índice dos Livros do Século XVI", *Beira Alta*, 1968, Vol. XXVII, nº IV, (1968): 20-32.

² Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1577 Fl. 4.

³ Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1534 Fl. 49v.

By this Council deliberation, we can also observe another reality that encompasses the entire Modern Ages, which is the differentiation of importance between the city itself and its outskirts and surroundings. While the outskirts were recognized as falling within the Council's "object of action" and contributing to the payment of taxes and other existing obligations, particularly in relation to food production, they were consistently prioritized second to the city in terms of supply and overall safety.

The Transactions

The sale of foodstuffs was subject to licensing, as was the transportation of such goods. On an annual basis, a contract was established between the Council and each individual seller, wherein the quantities, frequency, price, and locations for sale were stipulated.

If for the supply of bread and wine, there were specific and fluctuating scarcity periods making its provisioning eventually difficult, in the case of meat, the hardship apparently resided on permanently ensuring suppliers. This aspect was most noticeable with butchers who were often subpoenaed to "use their trade" as is clear from the Council's deliberation on the 28 of march of 1534: "where summoned to the Council, João Afonso, resident at the Arco e Pedro Gonçalves and his sun-in-law Lopo Gonçalves residents at the Esculca butchers that always were up until now in the city and used their trades as butchers in the city as was the past years and part of the present one, to whom [the Council] ordered [...] provide each for the coming Easters Eve and brought to the city's slaughter house a fine ox and six lambs the best they can muster to cut for the supply of the population and from today on use they trades as butcher and they with other butchers cut the meat in the city to its plenty fullness, risking each a penalty of 500 reis reverting to the Council and being exiled during a year to Mértola"⁴.

Despite the Council's occasional utilisation of its political and judicial authority to enforce contracts upon suppliers, the majority of the aforementioned contracts were arrived at through a voluntary agreement between the parties involved. A breach of contract by the trader would result in substantial fines; however, the contract would also guarantee the trader exclusive supply for that particular year. Furthermore, it was explicitly stipulated that any individual attempting to sell designated food produce without possessing the requisite licence would be subject to fines. For instance, the contract for the sale of dry fish in 1534 stipulated that "no other person within this period may sell the abovementioned fishes, even if they are willing to sell them at a lower price. Any other that tries to sell them will pay 1000 reis for each time he does so, reverting to the Council"⁵. The quality of the produce was also assured, as vendors of goods deemed improper for consumption were heavily fined.

In addition to ensuring the consistent delivery and distribution of various goods within the city, the Council was responsible for determining the specific locations for commercial activities. This decision, pertaining to the choice of venue, was not a matter of trader discretion. The sale of staple goods and food items, including bread, meat, and fish, was permitted in designated areas within the central square, known as the "Praça". The sale of meat was conducted at the city's slaughterhouses, situated within the lower levels of the City Hall. Bread, fish, and various other foodstuffs were displayed on movable stalls throughout the "Praça" during the designated transaction period. The Council exercised stringent oversight over each sale licence, thereby ensuring the provision of goods and services at the stipulated price.

The Council also imposed penalties for the failure of bakers (predominantly female) to provide sufficient rye bread and white loaves at the market, thereby ensuring the availability of these essential goods and preventing the occurrence of complaints regarding shortages⁶.

In addition to the regulation of staple goods, the Council also oversaw the sale of perishable items such as fish and meat, which were exclusively traded within the designated market.

⁴ Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1534 Fl. 25v.

⁵ Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1534 Fl. 21v.

⁶ Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1769-1776 fl. 4v.

Conversely, other goods could be sold at private establishments. However, the Council also regulated this aspect, namely private houses or boarding houses, defining beforehand if only straw for men and beasts could be sold, or furthermore if bread, wine, olive oil, honey or, in rare occasions, prepared meals.

Throughout the entire Modern Age, the documentation bears evidence of both sellers and buyers who attempted to circumvent their transactions from the Council's control and subsequently the taxation that accompanied it. The timely expressions for those attempts were "vender de agacho" (squat-sell) or "atravessar" (cross) a given good, in truth meaning that the same was introduced into the city by – clandestinely – crossing the physical and conceptual barrier that the city wall formed.

Self-Consumption Food Production

Although the market was seemingly the guarantor of the products that constituted the Portuguese consumer basket, comprising food items – bread (made of either wheat, rye or later maize), meat, wine, olive oil, eggs, and hens, and non-food items – charcoal, linen cloth, soap and lamp oil⁷, it was undoubtedly not the sole source for these products.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that a considerable proportion of products not subject to the same scrutiny, including but not limited to fruit, vegetables and certain tubers, were also part of the diet. This food production, intended for consumption within the city, is not directly subject to the authority of the Council, but rather operates beyond its direct jurisdiction.

The data presented here is primarily derived from the analysis of logging and property surveys conducted within the city of Viseu. The documentation, which is not intended to regulate or record production or transactions, but rather to manage urban property, provides indisputable data on agricultural, fruit and livestock production within the Walls.

Recognizing the value of not built space within the city as well as its productive capacity, the backyards of the lots are often detailed through their dimensions but also their occupation. The existence of animal husbandry spaces such as pens, stables, hen houses, etc., as well as the enumeration and identification of fruit plants are the most common elements, along with the mention to the existence of water, but the productive capacity is also listed in properties of superior dimensions.

The inner Walls soil was predominantly owned by religious powers, followed by the city with a small number of parcels, and only in a residual form was private ownership identified, occupying a small portion of individual (private) land owners (within the walls). However, through land leasing (what was called "emprazamento" that could take the form of one, two or three lives of extent), almost the entire sum of land parcels was occupied and managed by private individuals and their respective households.

The utilisation of space

In the Modern Age city of Viseu presents a dual perspective – a common attribute shared by most Portuguese cities of medieval origin – whereby the urban and compact appearance is evident when viewed from a street perspective, whilst the rural and open character is discernible when observed from within the confines of the individual plots. In this urban environment, the street was predominantly occupied by buildings with surface and homestead levels – often also serving as the site for commercial activities at the street level – with their narrow façades imposing their height. In contrast, the rear of the lot was designated for a domestic space, including a backyard, and auxiliary structures contributing to food production or transformation.

⁷ J. Reis, "The Gross Agricultural Output of Portugal: A Quantitative, Unified Perspective, 1500-1850", *EHES working papers in economic History*, 98 (2016): 9.

Despite the intensification of land use in terms of area and height throughout the modern era, the permanence of empty spaces inside the lots will be maintained whenever possible, exception made to the ancient "Judaiaria" (Jewish quarter).

The dimensions of the plot and its extension along the street frontage are determined by the financial capacity of its occupants, with larger plots and noble residences typically accommodating only a single storey.

However, it should be noted that this is not a uniform reality, and rather adapts to the possibilities of implementation in the field. In this sense, there are cases where the area of the lot is up to six times higher than the area of implantation of the house, while in others, for example, the space occupied by the yard is lower than that of the dwelling.

The property represented by Diogo de Miranda, a citizen residing in "Rua da Regueira", is an exemplar of the first type. The property's total area encompasses 1,231 square metres, of which a mere 22.5 square metres is allocated for residential use.

An example of a yard with clearly inferior dimensions to those of the housing is provided by the lease held by Isabel Mendes of a property in "Rua Nova". The lot in question has a width of three and a half "varas" (measuring sticks) in front of the street, and a depth of eighteen. Within this space, which corresponds to ninety square metres, seventy-five square metres were occupied by the house and only fifteen square metres by the yard.

The predominant lot model features a yard that occupies more than double the area of the dwelling itself. An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the lease agreement held by Amaro Rodrigues, a barber, for a property situated in "Cimo de Vila". The width of this lot is a mere four and a half "varas" (4.9 meters), while its depth extends to twenty-two "varas". The house occupies approximately thirty-nine square metres of this space, while the yard encompasses more than one hundred and three square metres⁸.

The rear gardens of properties often contained structures used for breeding animals, which were typically located as far as possible from the front of the property. To illustrate this point, we may consider the land lease contract in the name of Mariana, signed in 1607, which stipulated a dwelling as its object. This was located at the Escaleirinhas da Sé, where free space was a rare commodity. The total area of the lot was 144 square metres, yet it contained both a horse stall and a pig sty⁹.

In some cases, the backyards contained water wells¹⁰, facilitating the maintenance of livestock and agricultural production, and contributing to the prevention of forced movement of women through the city, ensuring the required water supply at the city fountains.

These green spaces were of greater value in promoting healthier lifestyles in urban areas, serving as disposal sites for unwanted waste and facilitating a wide range of day-to-day activities, including work and leisure. In addition, they played a crucial role in ensuring food provision within the city walls, both in normal circumstances and during times of famine or plague.

The products

Meat

There is an absence of concrete data on the amount of meat consumed per inhabitant, although it is known that this has decreased during the period under discussion, due to the increase in

⁸ Liliana Andrade de Matos e Castilho, "A cidade Viseu no século XVI" (mestrado, Universidade do Porto, 2007), vol. II; and Liliana Andrade de Matos e Castilho, "A cidade de Viseu nos séculos XVII e XVIII: arquitetura e urbanismo" (Doutoramento, Universidade do Porto, 2013), vol. II.

⁹ Arquivo Distrital de Viseu, Fundo do Cabido Lv. 435/12 fls. 35v a 39v.

¹⁰ Arquivo Distrital de Viseu, Fundo do Cabido Lv. 438/15 fls. 68 a 72; A.D.V. F.C. Lv. 442/18 fls. 22 a 23v.

cereal production (to the detriment of grazing lands). For example, it is estimated that the daily consumption of meat in the Azores was between 50 and 60 grams per person¹¹.

The meat supply had different origins depending on its type: cow and lamb were sold by butchers and subjected to inspection and taxation, while pigs and poultry mainly came from self-production. Breeding and raising animals (mostly pigs and poultry) within the lots was relevant to the domestic economy, satisfying not only the self-consumption needs but also serving as a payment method (even if partial) for land leases, especially when the land was owned by religious institutions.

Documentary evidence pertaining to the circulation of pigs within urban areas is abundant, and the prohibition of pig ownership during religious festival days is clearly stipulated in the following provision concerning Corpus Christi day: "Those who possess pigs must confine them for the entire day, or face a fine of three thousand "réis" to the county's public works."¹² This suggests that even an average-income family could potentially maintain a pig annually, albeit in a limited space, such as a modest backyard.

Chickens were also kept in backyards and within dwellings, often in proximity to kitchens, even in cases where the kitchen was located on upper floors. An example can be found in a lease agreement made to Matias Ferrão de Castelo Branco of a property in Rua Direita in 1623. The property under discussion is a dwelling of two "houses", the ground floor of which consists of a reception room, from which a corridor leads to the yard, a cellar, a storeroom and a stable. On the first floor, there is a living room, a corridor and five rooms, and on the second floor, there is a house of indiscriminate function, a kitchen, a porch and a house to keep chickens¹³.

Bread, wine and olive oil

Bread, wine and olive oil constituted the food basis at the time, and therefore their supply was essential to urban life and the maintenance of social peace (Jones, 1998, p. 123). The daily bread ration was 620 grams per person in Portugal¹⁴, and was certainly supplemented by wine and fat to achieve the daily intake of 3000 calories for an adult male, although the percentage of this supplement is unknown. The bread sold was primarily composed of wheat or rye, with the former, known as white bread, being significantly more expensive and thus catering primarily to the upper echelons of society.

It is acknowledged that the production of these goods was challenging within the urban context and thus their supply was ensured through commercial activities overseen by the municipal government. However, references have been found to cereal production, including wheat, barley and corn¹⁵, along with the presence of olive trees¹⁶ and vines within the city limits. Nonetheless, it is understood that these productions represented only a fraction of the total picture in terms of the production and consumption of these goods.

Fruit

Fruit constituted a significant component of the food production, whether in its fresh state or following the application of a preservation process. The presence of fruit trees was ubiquitous, found in every domestic garden. The documentation consistently refers to indigenous species, with the exception of sweet orange trees, which were introduced to Portugal in the 15th century. The most prevalent and abundant species were orange and lemon trees, which served

¹¹ J-L Flandrin, M. Montanari, ed.), *História da Alimentação – Da Idade Média aos tempos actuais* (Lisboa: Terramar, 2001), 175.

¹² Biblioteca Municipal de Viseu. Livro de Atas da Câmara 1735-1739 fl. 3.

¹³ Arquivo Distrital de Viseu, Fundo do Cabido Lv. 438/15 fls. 8v a 12 (B).

¹⁴ Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, *Introdução à História Económica* (Lisboa: Liv. Horizonte, 1971).

¹⁵ At Rua do Gonçalves "there is a vegetable garden and a corn field". A.D.V. F.C. Lv. 427/5 Fl. 108v-111.

¹⁶ "And it has a fountain and twenty three olive trees that shall come to produce eight alqueires [a measure] yearly". A.D.V. F.C. Lv. 427/5 Fl. 108v-111.

both dietary and medicinal purposes, and olive trees. Fig trees and vines were also present, along with some references to pear, pomegranate, apple, peach, plum and pine trees¹⁷.

The importance of fruit in diets is evidenced by the relative abundance of trees, given the scarcity of space within the city, as well as the detail put into their description in property records. For instance, in the description of a property, it is noted that "for the first yard he descends from the camera by a rudimentary stone staircase there was an orange tree [...] and one "limeira" [lemon tree] and peach trees and rose bushes"¹⁸.

Vegetable

Determining the quantity and typology of other types of production, such as vegetables, is more challenging, although it is certain that they were produced in backyards.

Higher classes did not favour vegetables, but most of the population regularly consumed cabbages, beans of various types, chickpeas, broccolis, lettuces, cucumbers, radishes, turnips and carrots¹⁹, among other easily cultivated vegetables in such backyards.

The existence of vegetable gardens is corroborated by references in the land lease contract made to Barbosa de Almeida, of a house with its backyard at Rua do Gonçalves: "These houses have a backyard all surrounded by walls. [...] and downwards past the pomegranates land there is a vegetable garden"²⁰. Mention is also made to the production of vegetables, albeit without the discrimination of specific productions²¹.

The list presented by the priest of Germil, parish of Penalva do Castelo [about 20km from Viseu], in 1758, is more specific and provides evidence for the cultivation of cabbages, lettuces, chicory, chard, borage, spinach and herbs in the region for seasoning. These were cultivated in the gardens alongside mint, parsley and savory²².

Notably, no references to the cultivation of potatoes in the city of Viseu have been found, despite the fact that they were beginning to be produced in the region during the 17th century²³.

Final Words

In the modern age, the provision of food in Viseu was the responsibility of the City Council, although this was not always a straightforward relationship between public and private interests. The city's provision and supply of food is closely linked to its political and social structure and spatial definition. The Praça is a key location for transactions, and backyards are essential for ruralised food production sites within the city's boundaries.

The presence of vegetable gardens and fruit orchards in such locations was of paramount importance to the city's inhabitants, as they provided fresh produce that complemented a diet primarily consisting of bread, meat, and fish, with meat being prohibited for a duration of sixty-eight days each year. During times of famine or plague, these gardens became a vital source of sustenance within the city's confines.

¹⁷ "There is an orange tree, a lemon tree, a fig tree, and a plum tree." A.D.V. F.C. Lv.481 / 34 fls. 61-64; "There are many small pine trees plum and pear trees." A.D.V. F.C Lv. 431/8 Fl. 76-78v.

¹⁸Arquivo Distrital de Viseu, Fundo do Cabido Lv. 442/18 fs. 27 to 30 v.

¹⁹ Alexandre de Oliveira Marques, *A Sociedade Medieval Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Livraria Sá da Costa Editora, 1981).

²⁰ Arquivo Distrital de Viseu, Fundo do Cabido Lv. 427/5 Fl. 108v-111.

²¹ "This is a great cover that serves to create in itself good vegetables of several species as well as fertile hemp of wheat and flax". João Oliveira, *Notícias e Memórias Paroquiais Setecentistas: 1 Viseu*. (Viseu: Palimage Editores, 2005): 228.

²² João Oliveira, "Entre a Tradição e a Inovação: A agricultura da Beira Alta nos séculos XVIII e XIX", *Revista Portuguesa de História*, nº XLI (2010): 79.

²³ Joaquim Magalhães, "Do tempo e dos trabalhos: a agricultura portuguesa no século XVII", *Revista Portuguesa de História*, nº XLI (2010): 59-72.

While not yielding a substantial quantity, the production of food within urban areas was instrumental in ensuring the survival of the population, playing a pivotal role as a guarantee of diversity and access to perishable goods.

In this discourse between political and commercial frameworks and production for self-consumption, the fulfilment of one of the most fundamental needs is evident. The assurance of sufficient quantities of diverse foodstuffs was regarded as a political and social imperative, with the overarching goal being to maintain social harmony and public health.