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# Rotting from the inside: the decline of retail guilds in Portugal, 1755–1833

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## ABSTRACT

The end of early modern professional guilds is attributed to inherent inefficiencies (an incapacity to solve economic problems) or to state intervention. Governments became powerful enough to dispense the financial support of the guilds and put an end to their privileges and monopolies. This is the dominant view within Portuguese scholarship, especially in relation to craftsmen and artisans. This article focusses, however, on retailing guilds and their internal developments, arguing that the individual disruptive behavior of many Portuguese shopkeepers was as damaging to the corporative structure as was any sort of state policy. At the same time, it also argues that the corporative crisis did not extend to the economic sector itself. In fact, while the guild framework was crumbling, Portuguese retail businesses seemed to persist and prosper. Finally, the article argues that this prosperity was linked to broader changes in fashion and material culture taking place throughout Europe.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

This article explores several dimensions of the decline of the retail guilds in Portugal. It departs from the historiographical perspective that prevails within Portuguese scholarship, which tends to focus on the relation between the ruler and the guilds and which also emphasizes the role of the state, in particular the absolutist state, in the decline of these pre-contemporary institutions. The present article is, instead, mainly concerned with the internal developments of the guilds and retail sector they controlled, presenting explanations for their fate that go beyond the role of the state.

Guilds were professional associations that dominated the secondary and commercial sectors of the European economy from the High Middle Ages, when they contributed to an urban expansion on the continent,<sup>1</sup> to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although less prevalent among farmers or shepherds, guilds were almost universally adopted by craftsmen, artisans, and shopkeepers. Their decline has been a matter of contention and can be broken down into two main interpretations. On the one side, we have those who claim that guilds declined because they stopped doing their job; they ceased to be effective. New economic solutions emerged to settle economic problems that had

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previously been solved by guilds, such as contract enforcement, information asymmetries in thin and dispersed markets, quality controls, and transmission of skills. This is today the most dominant historiographical view.<sup>2</sup> On the other side, there is the interpretation that correlates the declining power of the guilds with their dwindling relationship with the state, which is mainly and notably backed by the body of work of Sheilagh Ogilvie. From 1500 onwards, some governments became powerful enough to dispense with the alliance of the guilds. States grew to the point where they were finally able to raise revenues for themselves. States therefore no longer needed loans and subsidies from the guilds, which, according to Ogilvie, was the only reason why guilds were allowed to exert monopolies, set prices, or restrict entries.<sup>3</sup> Resources that were redistributed to powerful allies at the top, at the expense of the broader economy, no longer compensated for the political protection of such rent-seeking entities, which were exclusively concerned with a cartel of male masters with citizenship rights in a world of underprivileged people.<sup>4</sup>

The decline of the guilds has been addressed in Portugal as well and it is clear where most scholars fall on the issue.<sup>5</sup> Although some have pondered the role of the market and changing consumer tastes as influences on the fate of the guilds,<sup>6</sup> the scholarship tends to situate the beginning of the decline of this institution in the period of unparalleled state overreach. This period is normally associated with the absolutist government of Joseph I (1750-1777), which was led by the strongminded minister Marquis of Pombal (1699-1782). The tragedy of the guilds in Portugal was, therefore, a top-down imposition associated with the end of a symbiotic relation with the state, and not necessarily the result of inherent inefficiencies.

While not siding exactly with those who choose to focus solely on efficiency, or lack thereof, the article does not want to overplay the role of the state, either. Instead, the article explores the internal transformation of what was one of the best-organized guilds in the Portuguese world: the *Mesa do Bem Comum dos Mercadores de Retalho* (Board for the Common Good of Retailers).<sup>7</sup> The article will discuss the guild's inability to enforce regulations on its members, which permitted, for example, the infiltration of external capital. This in turn created unwanted dependencies among the shopkeepers. However, it also argues that the internal fatigue of the corporation did not stifle the general prosperity of the retail sector, which should be attributed to parallel developments taking shape throughout Europe. Although not in the midst of a retail revolution—a controversial concept that has been largely abandoned<sup>8</sup>—Portuguese shopkeepers, and especially the mercers of Lisbon, might have been experiencing a golden age similar to that which has been noted by scholarship of other places.<sup>9</sup> The present article argues that shopkeepers benefitted from a wider cultural shift in consumer patterns, including a growing preference for novelty and for new, fashionable products, and that this shift was accompanied by a significant convulsion on the supply side with the appearance of more shops. While the retail guild was failing, Lisbon came to display some traits of a burgeoning 'consumer society'.<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of a debate dominated by economic and political arguments, we propose an interpretation that also emphasizes social and cultural dimensions. Accordingly, the article makes ample use of travel journals, as well as the petitions, resolutions and records of meetings produced by the *Mesa do Bem Comum*. It also explores statutes, deeds of accreditation and guarantee and parliamentary proceedings.

The text is divided into three sections. The first revisits the reorganization along corporate lines of the Lisbon retail sector after the 1755 earthquake. In the second, the article examines the ambiguous relationship of the retail guild with the state. Both the absolutist state and the 1820–1823 liberal state, though often unfriendly, never became hostile. These sections provide context for the third and final section, which explores the internal dynamics of the guild through an engagement with scholarship on the history of retail and consumption.<sup>11</sup>

## The 1755 earthquake and the reorganization of retail

On the morning of 1 November 1755, Lisbon was hit by a powerful earthquake that reached magnitudes of 8.5–9 on the Richter scale. News of the devastation traveled fast throughout Europe, with the earthquake and the ensuing tsunami becoming a popular topic of reflection for the most distinguished members of the Republic of Letters, such as Voltaire and Rousseau. Although very destructive, the earthquake also provided the opportunity to rethink the Portuguese capital, with various plans being drawn up for a new urban grid and safer, more functional architectural solutions.

The economic losses were massive. In addition to approximately 10 000 casualties, the city lost two-thirds of its buildings: only 3 000 of the 20 000 dwellings survived. It also lost all of its hospitals, 35 of its 40 churches and 33 noble palaces.<sup>12</sup> However, once again there was a positive side, at least for certain groups that took full advantage of this economic collapse. A group of economic agents used the reconstruction of the capital to reinforce their grip on the Lisbon retail sector, asking the future Marquis of Pombal to establish an association with extensive privileges.<sup>13</sup>

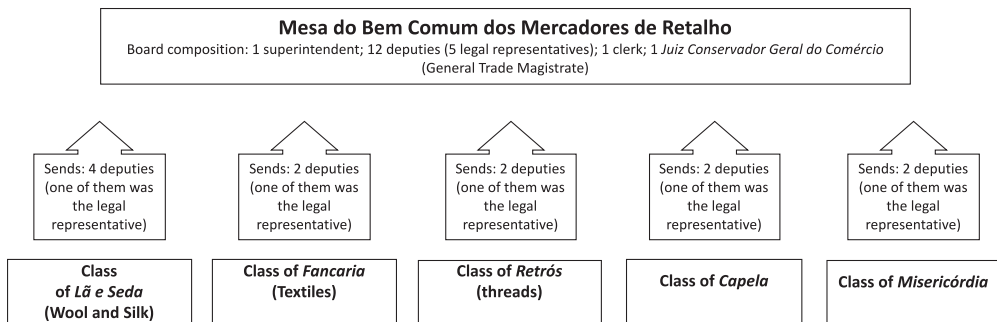
The new guild was a conglomerate of smaller retail organizations of shopkeepers called ‘classes’, each of which received a monopoly over the distribution of various articles and products, national and imported from Europe and Asia. The prosperous mercers dealt with textiles of all kinds, from high-end fabrics such as shalloons, chintzes, chambrays, embroidered quilts, silks or brocades, to coarser fabrics such as osnaburgs, duroys, calicoes or dull-finish linens. There were also less affluent classes that sold everyday objects, such as flintlocks, glasses, and combs made of bone, among other items. These were the Misericórdia and Capela classes, named after the places where their members did business before the earthquake, probably as stallholders. This shift to the fixed shop fits nicely into James Jeffries’s retail model according to which the fixed shop substituted the fairs, markets, and peddlers.<sup>14</sup> In 1786 the guild absorbed the previously unincorporated shopkeepers who sold rich, Asian goods including highly desirable earthenware.<sup>15</sup> In a way, this proves that the guild remained attractive enough to standalone economic agents who were convinced that the benefits of joining the guild would compensate for the eventual loss of their commercial autonomy. It also proves that shopkeepers were expanding the range of goods offered to a growing number of consumers, which is once again in line with James Jeffries’s retail model.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of that expansion, the guild remained a small organization. In 1758 there were 503 shops in Lisbon that belonged to the five classes, and that number was slashed to 359, in 1778, when, according to the *Mesa do Bem Comum*, the king ‘liquidated some merchants of lesser importance’.<sup>17</sup> The guild members were a small fraction of the vast retail sector of the Portuguese capital, which included many agents unrelated to the

guild. There were many peddlers or street vendors, who sold and transported several kinds of goods. Some operated mainly in Lisbon, but many linked supply and demand over long distances. There were also weekly fairs in Praça da Alegria and in Ribeira Velha, on Sundays and Holy Days, with many stallholders. And there were all the merchants that sold foodstuffs in the shops, in the markets, and in the streets. All these economic agents, which included innkeepers, cooks, bakers, and butchers, among many others, formed the third-largest socio-professional group in Lisbon, comprising 15% of the workforce in the capital city. Only the crafts and trades (35%) and the domestic services (26%) provided occupations for more people.<sup>18</sup>

The guild had a hierarchical structure, much like that of the retail shops in which a shopkeeper would oversee the work of one or two shop assistants/clerks (*caixeiros*). At the top of the new *Mesa do Bem Comum dos Mercadores de Retalho* there was a board of representatives of the five classes. The representation was unequal however: it favored the affluent class of mercers of *Lã e Seda* (wool and silk), as shown in the organizational chart below. These retailers also paid more towards the guild's collective fund. The retailers of the wool and silk class paid 24 000 *reis* per year; those from the *Fancaria/Lençaria* (textiles) class paid 19 200; those from *Capela* paid 12 000; those from *Retrós* (threads) 9 600; and those from the *Misericórdia* class paid 6 400 *reis* per year.<sup>19</sup>

#### Organization chart of the retailers' guild



The statutes of the *Mesa* reflected the traditional priorities of guilds while upholding the underlying rhetoric of *Pombalismo* (the period of Portuguese history that was dominated by the absolutist minister, the Marquis of Pombal); in a sense, they thus confirmed the traditionalism of Pombal's economic views.<sup>20</sup> The preamble of the statutes of the guild replicated parts of the statutes of the *Junta do Comércio*, a political body that was run by leading businessmen of the period and assigned to carry out Pombal's economic vision.<sup>21</sup> Published a few days apart, both regulatory pieces stressed the need for good merchants, although not necessarily for many.<sup>22</sup>

Ensuring monopolies was the primary concern. Only guild members could sell the products that were conceded to that guild, and only in their open-door shops in the streets attributed to their trades. It would be illegal for one of these shopkeepers to sell goods from any other site. For example, a guild member should not use a peddler to sell its goods on the street. As the literature on this subject has already pointed out, the spatial concentration of shops—the creation of central business districts in European cities—owed as much to state intervention and guild regulation as it did to economic

factors such as the rental value of proprieties.<sup>23</sup> Lisbon with its new streets was no different. There was a clear ambition to establish a commercial hub in the new downtown quarter from the very beginning, with the streets taking names of commercial occupations. Even the main square, which previously had been associated with the monarchy, had its name changed to the mundane Praça do Comércio (Square of Commerce), as if the monarchy and the church had given way to economic enterprises.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the statutes of the guild barred other economic agents from participating in this trade in Lisbon, even if they had done so before.<sup>25</sup> The concealed sale of these goods, which normally occurred on the mezzanine (*sobreloja*) of other commercial spaces or in warehouses or first-floor offices/stores (*sobrado*) of wholesalers, was strictly forbidden.<sup>26</sup> Peddlers, street vendors, stallholders in fairs and other shopkeepers were forbidden to sell the goods that were granted to the guild as a monopoly. However, the same regulatory framework reveals the restrictions imposed on the institution. The appointment of a royal magistrate with an extensive commercial purview to enforce the guild's monopolies could be seen as a sign of royal protection. Yet this dependence on a royal appointee also shows that the shopkeepers never had the capacity to enforce their monopolies for themselves. There was no private adjudication; there were no private judges to apply the Merchant Law, as has been suggested.<sup>27</sup> More important was the dependency of the *Mesa* on the *Junta do Comércio*, which would oversee the craft and retail sectors that were usually organized along corporative lines. It was, for example the *Junta do Comércio* that sanctioned new admissions to the retail sector. It was the *Junta* that examined those who wanted to become shop assistants/clerks and it was the same *Junta do Comércio* that certified those assistants/clerks when they wanted to become full shopkeepers. Finally, it was the *Junta* that issued licences to the open shops of the five classes,<sup>28</sup> frequently to the dissatisfaction of the guild members. In fact, the way in which the *Junta* exercised its oversight would lead to persistent resentment and several conflicts, as we will see below.

## The state and the retail guild

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the retailers' guild started to make cash transfers to the Portuguese Crown, which was engulfed in the political upheavals of the French Revolution. The guild made a voluntary contribution in 1804, another in 1808, and after that several more until the end of the Peninsular War (1814). These contributions amounted to 125 000 000 *reis*, according to the guild.<sup>29</sup> A cash payment in exchange for confirmation of privileges seems to illustrate the typically close-knit relationship that European guilds had with the political authorities. The chronological context of these cash transfers also seems significant. Indeed, in March 1810, the Portuguese Prince Regent put an end to restrictions previously imposed on mobile vendors, whose numbers had been growing throughout Europe. Some have even argued that these alternative commercial circuits may have reached a zenith in the age of Enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> In Portugal, peddling increased immensely in the aftermath of the Third French Invasion (1810-1811), when many fled the war-torn countryside and looked for survival by any means in the streets of the capital.<sup>31</sup> Their activity was profusely represented in many early nineteenth-century Portuguese lithographs.<sup>32</sup>

The sweeping measure, which has been dubbed one of the most daring economic measures of the period,<sup>33</sup> was not exclusively directed at the retailing guild of Lisbon. All shopkeepers in the Portuguese world were affected by the legalized flood of street vendors and peddlers. Yet only the guild of Lisbon was able to reimpose its commercial monopolies in 1812, with the Prince Regent granting a special status to the incorporated shopkeepers of Lisbon.<sup>34</sup> Apparently, the end of the prohibition of door-to-door commerce was upheld everywhere else, including in several Brazilian cities,<sup>35</sup> except where shopkeepers were protected by a guild.

The representatives of the guild persuaded the government to accept their demands by successfully mobilizing economic and social arguments. The end of their privileges would entail the disarticulation of economic life as well as the interruption of the steady stream of fiscal revenues to the state. The defence of the guild's privileges was linked to the defence of well-regulated commerce, in which only authorized agents were able to take part: men who had 'spent their first years in acquiring the doctrines mandated in the statutes, having submitted and had evaluated the guarantee of their credit and moral and civil probity, arranged their book-keeping, opened shops, started families, and established commercial streets'.<sup>36</sup>

The end of the guild's commercial privileges would also threaten an idealized version of society that was based on solid groups like the merchants. According to them, 'From these honest, refined, and well-bred families comes good settlement, when their children are poured into all social occupations.'<sup>37</sup> The alternative, they argued, would be social chaos: door-to-door transactions would expose every house to strange and dangerous people who would perpetrate crimes including rape and homicide.<sup>38</sup> The shopkeepers reproduced the deep-rooted and widespread perception that peddlers were associated with bad morals and lewd behavior. In England, for example, peddlers were stereotyped as treacherous and seductive.<sup>39</sup>

The *Mesa dos Mercadores* was not always as successful in its interactions with the state. During the initial years of the association, the representatives of the guild failed to restrict entries, which threatened their monopoly. More precisely, they failed to prevent people who did not fulfill all the statutory requirements of the guild from opening shops. Licenses were issued by the deputies of the *Junta do Comércio* and they often disregarded the formal barriers that the *Mesa* had successfully introduced onto the statutes. For example, the *Junta do Comércio* ignored the six years of experience that shop assistants/clerks needed specifically in retail in Lisbon.<sup>40</sup> This particular training should have functioned as an effective barrier to entry.

Another barrier that the powerful institution established by the Marquis of Pombal seemed to ignore was the educational criterion, with the *Junta* conceding a retail license to an illiterate merchant, to the dismay of the guild.<sup>41</sup> Between 3 March and 7 July 1758, the representatives of the guild met at least seven times specifically to protest the way in which licenses were being issued. They even considered bypassing the Marquis of Pombal and consulting the king directly.<sup>42</sup>

The state, even if it was not always accommodating, acknowledged the role of the retailing guild and protected shopkeepers. This was obvious in 1810-1812, when the government opted to reinstate the contested monopolies, as was discussed above. It was also obvious during first experience of a liberal regime in Portugal (1820-1823), when the subject of the extinction of the guilds of craftsmen and retailers came up again.

Several liberal deputies in the Liberal *Cortes* considered the petitions sent by the shopkeepers as nothing more than ‘the clamouring of those who seek to ward off competition ... , children of the craving for monopolies that is typical of such classes, against which an enlightened and provident government must be always on guard’.<sup>43</sup> Others, however, harbored different, much more positive views. For them, the economic benefits of the merchant guilds outweighed their costs. The guilds provided legitimacy, commercial security, and quality control. At the same time, they were socially important. For Francisco de Lemos Bettencourt, the retailers should be seen as a pillar of the new liberal order, even if their monopolies challenged the liberal rhetoric. Lemos Bettencourt stated:

The Merchants, Shopkeepers, Mercers, and Capelistas [a class of retailers] are subject to many burdens, and usually the need to acquire customers makes them more affordable in terms of price; and above all, more sincere about the honest quality of the goods. They suffer with military billets. They serve, either in the Municipal Corps or in the Militias, etc. These Classes are depended upon for their taxes, and as far as the needs of the State are concerned, they contribute their apportioned share; they are Family Men, trustworthy and useful.<sup>44</sup>

Some argued that the extinction of the guild and the complete liberalization of economic transactions in the streets would destroy a useful class of citizens, and that it would also damage the Portuguese economy. These door-to-door services carried out by peddlers continued to be portrayed as a backdoor for the entry of forbidden foreign goods. If it went unrestrained, this trade would increase immensely while also damaging the Portuguese balance of trade, especially with England. Representative Peixoto claimed that ‘The Manufacturers of Manchester and Liverpool certainly cannot have better agents and commissaries ... without them we would certainly have saved most of the great sum of millions of *cruzados* that Great Britain, especially since the unfortunate Treaty of 1810, has been taking from us in exchange for four worthless cotton rags.’<sup>45</sup>

The peddlers’ impermanence seemed to be particularly concerning and was widely criticized in Portugal as elsewhere in Europe.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the trustworthy shopkeepers, it was claimed that these peddlers were dangerous men and women; they were often likened to gypsies or vagabonds, and were often foreign.<sup>47</sup> They evaded taxes and contributed nothing to the state. In the words of the liberal deputy Francisco Vanzeller:

There are some who are exempt from suspicion, but the average one of them [the peddlers] generally has this reputation: they belong to the order of the Gypsies, and they are no less pernicious, nor can they consider themselves to be otherwise, these men who by their profession continually coexist with criminals on the roads, at fairs, and in taverns. They are always armed, and that is why they are always dangerous, because as soon as the profits do not match everything that they squander, it is obvious what they will resort to.<sup>48</sup>

The Portuguese national consciousness was trying to create an idealized nation of citizens. Some, such as itinerant traders, did not seem to fit that image, while others were full members. This explains why the Liberal *Cortes* decided to approve the statutes of the guild without any further plenary discussion,<sup>49</sup> going against the advice of the leading businessmen of the Portuguese capital, who recommended the extinction of the *Mesa*. When, in 1821, the *Cortes* finally invited the shopkeepers to submit their proposal for how the monopolies could be extinguished without them incurring unnecessary

inconveniences,<sup>50</sup> the *Mesa* replied in unbending fashion, insisting on the economic advantages of the corporative model.<sup>51</sup>

### Individual interest vs. institutional cohesion

The guild's problems went far beyond the prevailing political regime, whether that was absolutism or the liberalism of the 1820s. To function efficiently, the guild had to ensure a degree of discipline and cooperation amongst its members. However, from the outset there were many instances when the internal regulation of the institution was openly flouted by shopkeepers in pursuit of their own individual economic goals, which had nothing to do with the state. And these individual interests were as likely to undermine group cohesion as anything that the state may have done.

The use of peddlers as an alternative way to distribute goods was naturally forbidden by the regulations of the guild. After all, shopkeepers could only sell their products in their fixed shops in the designated streets. Yet like many of their European counterparts,<sup>52</sup> some Portuguese mercers used peddlers to sell their goods door-to-door, going against the regulations of the guild. This irritated other mercers of that class who petitioned the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, in 1758, although without success. The representatives of the other classes in the *Mesa* abstained from adjudicating the claim. They argued that this problem was specific to the *fancaria* class, which led the aggrieved mercers to appeal to the *Junta do Comércio* instead, again without success.<sup>53</sup>

Another scheme used by mercers to bypass guild regulations or even conventional associative behavior was the formation of commercial companies that did not include all members of the class. For example, in the late 1750's, some wealthy shopkeepers of the wool and silk class formed such a society to buy fabrics in bulk at a lower cost. This example of close interaction between different retail circuits has been noted in the historiography.<sup>54</sup> Without the support of the magistrate, the *Mesa* limited itself to summoning the offenders who did not feel compelled to acquiesce.<sup>55</sup> Almost two years after receiving its first warning, in 1759, the group was reprimanded again, apparently unsuccessfully.<sup>56</sup>

Even more salient was the inability of the guild to fend off the infiltration of external capital in the retail sector. Ideally, the corporation sought to keep non-guilded capital at bay in order to avoid undue external influence. Such intentions were carefully expressed in the statutes of the guild, particularly in the sections dealing with inheritance and the transmission of ownership. For example, widows of deceased shopkeepers who wanted to take over their late husband's business had to request authorization from the *Mesa*. The representatives of the retailers would assess whether these women had enough capital and whether there was a 'concealed negotiation'. The widows had to appoint a shop assistant/clerk, they could also find commercial partners, but in no circumstances were they to become mere distribution points for non-guilded interests.<sup>57</sup>

There was an underlying fear of allowing the formation of uneven relationships in which the shopkeeper would be a mere dependent at the mercy of ambitious wholesalers. In 1760, the retailers discussed the pitfalls of such dependencies and uneven relations, alerting to the:

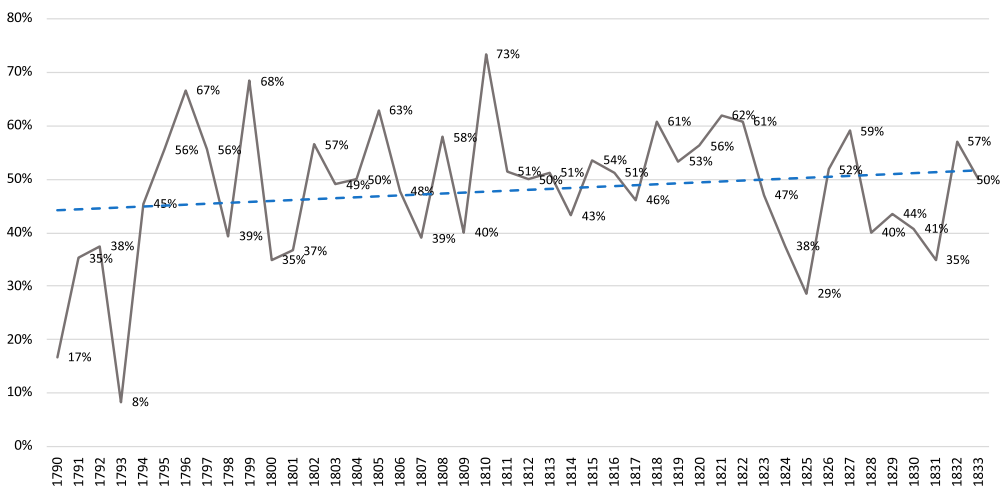
great damage that was being experienced in all classes, caused by daily manipulation of clerks by other merchants, and especially by people who are not merchants, both

foreigners and Portuguese, to set up stores with the main obligation of selling their goods; agreeing that most of the profits belong to them [merchants or outsiders], and to the clerks a tenuous salary. After getting these licences, these same interested parties, foiled by the lack of profits that the ambitious chase, ... order a full inventory, and after knowing the damage they stop supplying the deceived clerk who runs out of credit. Burdened with many debts, the clerks become unable to establish themselves to the discredit of the classes ...<sup>58</sup>

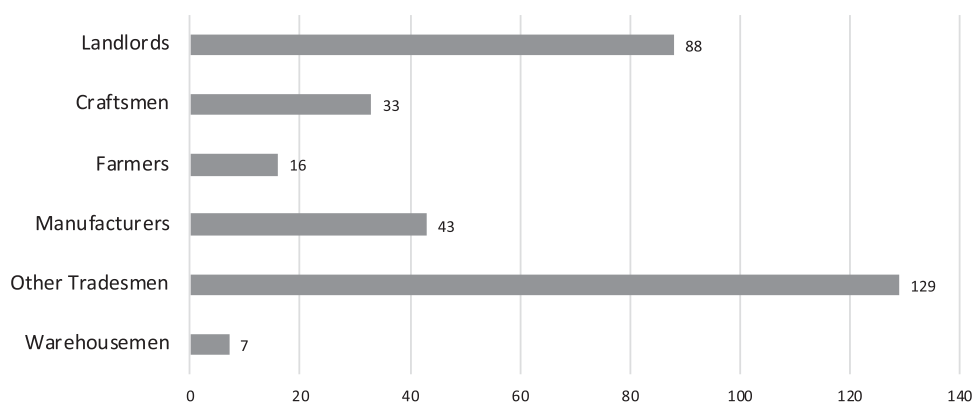
In order to prevent those unwanted dependencies and the ultimate disgrace of aspiring clerks, the guild started to demand *escrituras de abonação e fiança* (deeds of accreditation and guarantee). Initially recommended by the *Mesa* in 1789,<sup>59</sup> this juridical solution became mandatory to open a shop. Through these deeds, a guarantor accepted the unfulfilled debts incurred by a new commercial establishment, although only up to a specific amount. The legitimacy and transparency of the operation was thus ensured, as well as the full autonomy of the new shopkeeper, at least in theory. The chart below (Chart 1) pertains to the opening of new retail shops using *escrituras de abonação e fiança*, and shows that external capital continued to be poured in to the sector. On average, almost half of the shops opened in Lisbon between 1790 and 1833 were backed by external economic agents. In several individual years, this number rose above 60%.

Even if guild members were well represented, many other groups were backing a sector in which they should have not taken part, at least as principal agents. As we can see below (Chart 2), the most representative groups were affluent businessmen (*negociantes*), that is, men who were involved in large commercial operations, long-distance trade, tax farming, and royal contracts.<sup>60</sup> But there were also less-wealthy men, such as artisans or bakers.

The large majority of the guarantors was established in Lisbon. When they were from other places in the country, they partnered with Lisbon residents. At least 150 of the 1132 deeds of accreditation involved some kind of family connection, but this number may well be much higher since kinship was seldom mentioned. A retailer would often help



**Chart 1.** Percentage of terms subscribed by a non-member of the guild in the total number of terms.



**Chart 2.** Terms of approval and guarantees with participation of other groups.

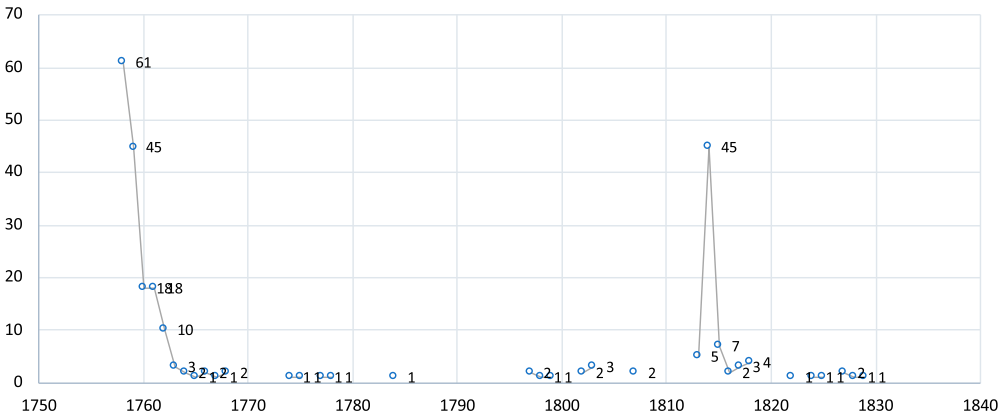
to establish one or several of his sons, as was the case with José Montês Garcia. In 1807, he helped his son, António Montês Garcia; in January of 1813, he helped a second son, André Montês Garcia; and two months later, he helped a third son, Peregrino José Montês.

Behind the initial support, a different relationship often took shape in which those who backed new establishments were also their suppliers, probably their only supplier. In other words, commercial operations were no longer in the hands of the shopkeeper. Economic agents like José Luís da Silva, for example, exploited the retail shops that he helped to set up as a distribution network. This businessman undersigned eight deeds of accreditation for new commercial spaces in 1806, 1809, 1810, 1813, 1816, 1817, 1824 and 1827.

Sometimes it was the shopkeepers themselves who acted as suppliers to other guild members, thereby breaking the corporative regulations that forbade any retailer from having more than one commercial space.<sup>61</sup> This was the case of Francisco de Sousa Carvalho, who, after being backed himself by the owner of a tannery in nearby Cascais in 1805, helped to establish four other shops between 1811 and 1823. In spite of many suspicions, complaints, and reprimands, the *Mesa* was apparently consistently unsuccessful in curbing the economic ambitions of the members who sought covertly to run more than one commercial space.<sup>62</sup>

This led to an attitude of carelessness, of disregard towards the institutional life of the guild. Shopkeepers seem to have stopped participating actively in the guild. As the [Chart 3](#) below shows, they stopped meeting in official sessions. It was as if they stopped caring. They probably found other more expedited ways of resolving their issues, ignoring protocol and guild regulations. After all, the *Mesa* was proving to be incapable of reining in what some of them believed to be pernicious individual economic pursuits.

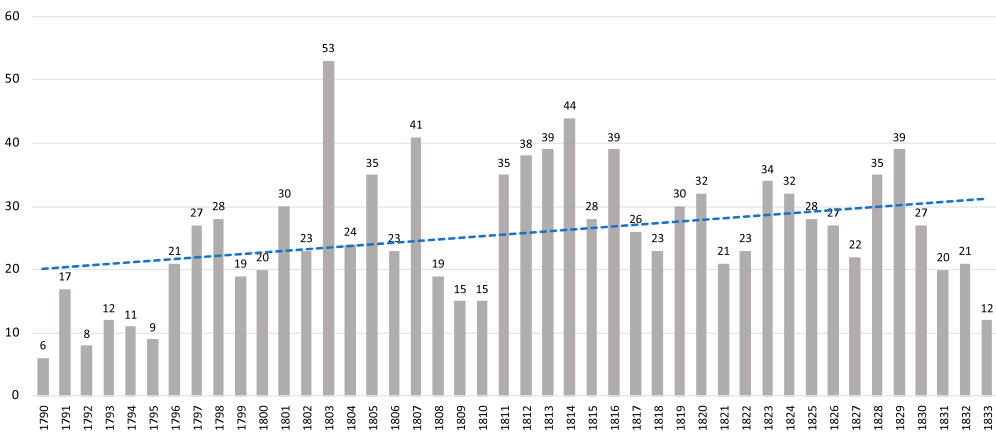
It should be noted that the influx of external capital, as well as the freedom with which some shopkeepers did their business, does not mean the sector was itself in crisis, although it might seem that way at first glance. In fact, the infiltration of external capital, even if officially unwelcomed, might have been a net positive for a sector that was probably much healthier than the corporative structure around which it was organized. Allowing infiltration of external capital can even be seen as a sign of the intrinsic



**Chart 3.** Formal meetings of Mesa dos Mercadores de Retalho.

flexibility of the guild. The members of the Mesa were displaying an adaptive behavior that has been detected in cities like Madrid,<sup>63</sup> and that is probably behind the long-term success of the sector, both in Madrid and in Lisbon. This economic success is confirmed by the data on the number of retailing shops opened in Lisbon between 1790 and 1833, the year in which the guild was finally abolished by the victorious liberals. **Chart 4** does not show a sector in crisis, it mainly shows long-term stability, if not growth.<sup>64</sup>

In total, 1,132 shops of the five classes were opened in Lisbon in forty-four years (1790-1833), an average of almost twenty-six shops a year. In 1778 there were only 359 shops of the five classes. Unfortunately, we cannot compare the total number of shops that were opened with the shops that were eventually closed. Even if the guild members were very ineffective in preventing bankruptcies and foreclosures (and there is no reason to believe they were), this is still an impressive growth for a section of the retail still governed by protective regulations.



**Chart 4.** Shops of the Five classees opened in Lisbon (1790-1833).

To be sure, one can detect several downturns, which can reasonably be linked to specific political circumstances. The slump of 1808–1810 is linked to the French invasion and subsequent war. In 1821 and 1822, the country was going through the growing pains of the first liberal experience, which naturally caused some disturbances. The final slump of the early 1830s can be linked to the civil war between liberals and absolutists. Yet the sector always recovered quickly.

The reason behind such performance, we argue, is connected to the broader dynamism of the retail sector in Europe during this period. It had little to do with the guild itself. Historiography has identified that high levels of consumption preceded the arrival of the large department store by several decades. Just as in other places, in their efforts to emulate aristocratic groups, the affluent middle classes in Portugal exerted great pressure on the demand side which seems to have been met by a growing number of retail shops in the Portuguese capital. Carl Israel Ruders, a Swedish traveler to Portugal in the early nineteenth century, spoke of the ‘countless number of shops and warehouses, overflowing with English products, the consumption of which is excessive.’<sup>65</sup> Throughout Europe, these affluent middle classes were driven by changes in taste. They displayed a burgeoning desire for novelties and for imported and fashionable products. The same Swedish traveler also observes that, in Lisbon, ‘with the exception of the lowest classes, everyone is generally well dressed.’<sup>66</sup>

As in other European cities, dynamic shopping sites attracted keen consumers who would gather outside embellished shops, and for whom the shopkeeper would probably play an advisory role.<sup>67</sup> Though not exactly at the leading edge of the fashion industry, the Lisbon shopkeepers nonetheless seem to have shared the same kinds of concerns regarding shop design that Claire Walsh has detected in their London counterparts.<sup>68</sup> The issue needs further research, but the accounts provided by Carl Ruders of the window displays, interior decoration, and display techniques for the goods marketed hardly fit the description of a rudimentary retail system. In his description of the new, ‘beautiful’, wide avenues of the new city center (*baixa*) – the Rua do Ouro and Rua da Prata (literally Street of Gold and Street of Silver) – he reported that:

All of the shops of the different businesses, absolutely uniform, are occupied by establishments where you can see the most precious ornaments and jewelry, gold and silver work of all kinds, in glass cabinets suspended on both sides of the doors. In front of these establishments there are always many amazed people. The number of precious things is great ...<sup>69</sup>

Those amazed people were no longer interested in expanding the lifecycle of cloths, as had been case throughout Europe.<sup>70</sup> Although second-hand markets and dealers (called *adelos* and *adelas*) did not disappear from Lisbon, their customers came to be reduced to the lower classes.<sup>71</sup> Those amazed people that Ruders spoke about were much more interested in new fashion trends, eager to know what was popular in Paris and London. As a fashion taker, the Portuguese capital witnessed the creation of at least two short-lived newspapers that were almost exclusively dedicated to international fashion. First there was the *Jornal de Modinhas* in 1796, and later the *Correio das Modas* (1807).<sup>72</sup> In the time of the ‘great masculine renunciation’, these journals targeted not

only women, but also the men who were looking for the ideal wrappings of respectability and manliness.

It should be pointed out that the consistency and prosperity of retail in Lisbon occurred in a less-than-ideal economic setting. Recent research shows that after several decades of moderate growth between approximately 1630 and 1750, the country entered a period of decline (especially when compared with other European countries), from which it would only escape during the twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> The departure of the royal family to Brazil in 1807 should have been particularly catastrophic, especially for the mercers who traded in high-end fabrics. The sector might surely be expected to have missed out on the many courtesan customers, royal officials, and other wealthy groups that traditionally gravitated towards the court and now followed it to Rio de Janeiro, where a new version of the splendid Versailles was to be built: a truly tropical Versailles, to use Kirsten Schultz's suggestive expression.<sup>74</sup> Yet in fact, the sector continued to prosper without those affluent clients. The sector also coped well with the independence of Brazil, declared in 1822, which deepened the Portuguese economic crisis.<sup>75</sup> Although, the shopkeepers were not directly involved in imperial trade, at least usually, some of their customers definitely were. The performance of Portuguese shopkeepers seems to confirm the resilience of early modern retail in other European cities, where other economic downturns or even long-term crises were also successfully negotiated. Bruno Blondé and Ilja Van Damme, for example, showed how retail developments in Antwerp do not square nicely with the depressing economic environment or de-urbanization pattern of the city. They called it Antwerp 'retail paradox'.<sup>76</sup> Maybe, we can also speak of a Lisbon 'retail paradox'.

## Conclusion

The main guild of shopkeepers in Portugal shared the fate of the other guilds. If they did not collapse altogether, they were frequently unable to protect their monopolies and restrict new entrants. As has been shown previously, the state – and especially the Marquis of Pombal – was often less than accommodating towards these long-lasting institutions. Even if he did not extinguish them, he left them toothless, powerless to maintain their commercial privileges. The inability of the retail guild to restrict entries, as included in the 1757 statutes, was similar to the limitations that were imposed on other corporations. For example, in 1761, the craftsmen were also stopped from maintaining barriers to entry by a royal decree that recognized the right to work of skilled artisans in industries that had been protected by the previous monopoly system.<sup>77</sup> At other times, the Portuguese state was much friendlier, upholding endangered monopolies and maintaining corporations even when many were demanding their extinction.

In a sense, it is hard to attribute the success or otherwise of these institutions solely to state interventions. This article has examined alternative explanations for the weakness of the retail guilds and has identified what we can call concerning signs of internal fatigue. Internal regulations, for example, were unable to curb the individual economic pursuits of some guild members, and this ultimately undermined group cohesion. This dynamic seems to have produced an attitude of disregard, particularly noticeable in the abandonment of statutory meetings.

To be sure, the shopkeepers' representatives might have found other ways to convene, in a less solemn fashion and without leaving written records. Yet the breach of protocol cannot be seen except as sign of scepticism about the institution in which they had placed their initial expectations. The *Mesa* showed that it was unable to mount a united front against outsiders or to suppress individual disruptive behavior and many shopkeepers probably did not want an overreaching body either. They could address smaller complications outside of the purview of the guild, whether within the specific class or individually, as could any other unincorporated economic agent.

Instead of a sign of decay, this may be even interpreted as a sign of resilience or flexibility of the guild. But, while this intrinsic flexibility probably extended the life of the institution, it also eroded their very essence, their internal cohesion, and their kinship ties. Ultimately, if they stopped functioning like a guild, they were no longer a guild. That was certainly the case for many guilds throughout Europe during the transition to the nineteenth century.

The underlying sector did not seem to be affected by the decline of the corporative structure, though. Quite the opposite. Retail resisted an unfavorable economic environment, made worse by the loss of customers after the court departed for Rio de Janeiro in 1807, as well as by the independence of the former colony in 1822. We argued, that behind such performance were the changes in material culture and growing consumer preferences for novelty and newness. It is this wider cultural shift that needs to be placed front and center in any discussion about the performance, decline, or flexibility of European retail guilds.

## Notes

1. For example, Greif, "Institutions and International Trade," 128–33.
2. The scholarship is too vast to cover in this footnote. There are some indispensable works, though. Regarding the question of security and contract enforcement in the merchant guilds, see Greif, Milgrom and Weingast, "Coordination, Commitment, and Enforcement", 745–76; Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* 58–90 and 91–123. Regarding the issue of information asymmetries over quality, see Gustafsson, "The Rise and Economic Behavior," 1–40 or Richardson, "Guilds, Laws, and Markets," 1–25. Regarding the issues of skills and innovation, see Epstein, "Property Rights to Technical Knowledge," 382–7 and Epstein and Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy*.
3. Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*, 182–8.
4. Ogilvie, "Rehabilitating the guilds," 175–82; Ogilvie, "Guilds, efficiency, and social capital," 286–333; Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade*; Ogilvie, *The European Guilds*.
5. Pereira, "Artesãos, operários e o liberalismo," 41–86, 1988; Madureira, *Mercado e Privilégios*; Pedreira, *Estrutura Industrial e Mercado Colonial*.
6. Madureira, *Mercado e Privilégios*, 233.
7. There has been a growing interest in this institution, which has traditionally been under-researched. See, for example, Cruz, "A Mesa do Bem do Comum," 679–715.
8. Mathias, *Retailing Revolution*.
9. Several historians have been tackling the transformation of the retailing sector during the eighteenth century, and they have criticized the previous emphasis on the role of the revolutionary department store. See, for example, Blondé et al., "Retail circuits and practices," 8–9. Nevertheless, the idea of a retail revolution was fruitful and opened new avenues of research, as observed by Stobart and Howard, "Introduction," 4–5.

10. McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*. For a discussion, see Blondé and Van Damme, “From consumer revolution to mass market,” 33–8. See also Welch “Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe,” 231–2.
11. This article takes advantage of previous work that has fostered the study of retailing in Europe while revisiting corporate and guild history. See, for example, Sosson, “Les métiers, normes et réalité,” 339–48; Stabel, “Markets in the Cities,” 797–817.
12. The total economic losses were estimated by José Augusto-França to be approximately 229 520 *contos* (between 65 000 and 70 000 000 pounds sterling). Augusto-França, *Lisboa Pom-balina e o Iluminismo*, 66–7.
13. Petition from the retailers, 18 August 1756. Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo (hereafter ANTT), Junta do Comércio (hereafter JC), packet 373, box 748 “Avisos e portarias para e da Junta do Comércio para a Mesa”.
14. Jeffreys, *Retail trading in Britain*.
15. Neves, *Obras completas*, 186.
16. Jeffreys, *Retail trading in Britain*.
17. Report from the guild (1778?). ANTT, JC, maço 367, caixa 738 (Mesa do Bem Comum).
18. Lousada, “Espaços de sociabilidade em Lisboa,” 54.
19. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter 2, § III.
20. See broader discussion in Monteiro, *D. José*, 207–222, 300.
21. Madureira, *Mercado e Privilégios*, 80.
22. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter 2, § I. *Estatutos da Junta do Comércio*, chapters 20 and 21.
23. Blondé et al., “Retail circuits and practices,” 16–7.
24. Monteiro, *José*, p. 317.
25. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter 2, § I.
26. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter 2, § III.
27. Milgrom, North and Weingast, “The Role of Institutions,” 1–23
28. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter 2, § VII.
29. Undated account (probably from 1811). ANTT, JC, packet 367, box 738 (Mesa do Bem Comum), “Papéis que servem de instrução à resposta que a Mesa tem de dar sobre o exclusivo das Classes e sua extinção”.
30. Blondé et al., “Retail circuits and practices,” 14.
31. Cruz, “Soterrados em petições,” 148.
32. Cruz, “Soterrados em petições,” 150. For other countries, see Welch, “Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe,” 240–1.
33. Pereira, *Negociantes, fabricantes e artesãos*, 37.
34. Royal decree 14 May 1812, in *Collecção de Leis, Decretos, Alvarás*, 85.
35. Chaves, “O outro lado do Império,” 167–9.
36. Undated account (probably from 1811). ANTT, JC, packet 367, box 738 (Mesa do Bem Comum), “Papéis que servem de instrução à resposta que a Mesa tem de dar sobre o exclusivo das Classes e sua extinção”.
37. Account 2 June 1812. ANTT, JC packet 367, box 738 (Mesa do Bem Comum), “Papéis que servem de instrução à resposta que a Mesa tem de dar sobre o exclusivo das Classes e sua extinção”.
38. *Idem*.
39. Welch, “Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe,” 238.
40. Opinion of the *Mesa dos Mercadores* regarding Manuel Gomes da Matta, 25 November 1760. ANTT, JC, packet 331, box 668 “Requerimentos de licença para abertura de lojas de lã e seda”.
41. *Atestação* (Verification) of the *Mesa dos Mercadores* regarding José da Matta, 28 November 1758. ANTT, JC, packet 331, box 668 “Requerimentos de licença para abertura de lojas de lã e seda”.
42. Meeting of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 7 July 1758. ANTT, JC, book 348 “Livro de conferências da Mesa,” fl. 28v–29.

43. Opinion of the Commerce Commission, 23 May 1821. Arquivo Histórico Parlamentar (hereafter AHP), Comissão de comércio, Section I e II, packet 92, document 6.
44. Francisco de Lemos Bettencourt parliamentary speech, 30 May 1821, in *Diario das Cortes Geraes*, no. 93, 1081.
45. Peixoto, parliamentary speech, 26 April 1821, in *Diario das Cortes*, no. 64, 689.
46. Welch “Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe,” 240.
47. In England they were also associated with Jews. Welch “Sites of Consumption in Early Modern Europe,” 238.
48. Francisco Vanzeller, parliamentary speech, 18 de junho de 1821, in *Diario das Cortes Geraes*, no. 106, 1243–44.
49. Pereira, *Negociantes, fabricantes e artesãos*, 41.
50. Notification to the Regency, 18 June 1821. ANTT, JC, packet 367, box 738 (Mesa do Bem Comum) “Papéis que servem de instrução à resposta que a Mesa tem de dar sobre o exclusivo das Classes e sua extinção”.
51. The *Mesa*’s reply is on the same set of papers, but has no date. It starts with the following expression: “A Mesa do Bem Comum dos Mercadores e classes de sua dependência, con-tando-se-lhes pelo Diário do Governo de 13 do corrente mês ...”.
52. Blondé et al., “Retail circuits and practices,” 11.
53. Meeting of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 26 May 1758. ANTT, JC, book 348 “Livro de conferências da Mesa,” fls. 20v-21.
54. Blondé et al., “Retail circuits and practices,” 8, 14.
55. Meeting of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 26 February 1760. ANTT, JC, book 348 “Livro de Conferências da Mesa,” fls. 88-89.
56. Meeting of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 25 September 1761. ANTT, JC, book 348 “Livro de Conferências da Mesa,” fls. 113v-114.
57. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter II, § X and § XI.
58. Meeting of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 26 August 1760. ANTT, JC, Book 348 “Livro de conferências da Mesa,” fl. 97v-98.
59. Recommendation of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 10 November 1789. ANTT, JC, packet 332, box 671 “Requerimentos de licença para abertura de lojas de lã e seda”.
60. In the Portuguese world there was a clear-cut and formal distinction between retailer and *homem de negócios* or wholesaler, with the elevation of the latter to the nobility during the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet, as is often the case, social categories cannot accurately capture complex realities. Boundaries were permeable. It was not unusual for businessmen to have open stores. Moreover, not all wholesalers were wealthy and not all retailers were modest. See, Madureira, “*Inventários*,” 29–31 and Pedreira, “Os negociantes de Lisboa,” 414–5, 426–30.
61. *Estatutos dos Mercadores de Retalho*, chapter II, § XVI.
62. For example, Recommendation of the *Mesa dos Mercadores*, 10 November 1789. ANTT, JC, packet 332, box 671 “Requerimentos de licença para abertura de lojas de lã e seda”.
63. Nieto Sánchez and Zofío Llorente, “The Return of the Guilds”.
64. This data was mainly collected from the books of the *Mesa do Mercadores*. ANTT, JC, books 323, 324 and 325 “Termos de fianças para a abertura de lojas”.
65. Ruders, *Viagem em Portugal*, 146.
66. Ruders, *Viagem em Portugal*, 27.
67. See the discussion about the new advisory functions of the shopkeeper, who would help the customer navigate fashion trends, in Blondé and Van Damme, “Retail growth and consumer changes,” 656–7.
68. Walsh, “Shop Design and Display of Goods,” 157–76.
69. Ruders, *Viagem em Portugal*, 35.
70. See, for example, Stobart, “Clothes, cabinets and carriages,” 225–44; Lemire, “Peddling fashion,” 67–82 and Allerston, “Reconstructing the second-hand clothes,” 45–56.
71. Ruders, *Viagem em Portugal*, 226.
72. Tengarrinha, *Nova História da Imprensa*, 142.

73. Palma and Reis, “From convergence to divergence,” 477-506.
74. Schultz, *Tropical Versailles*.
75. See Alexandre, *Os Sentidos do Império*, 767-92.
76. See the case of Antwerp in Blondé and Van Damme, “Retail growth and consumer changes”.
77. Madureira, *Mercado e Privilégios*, 236.

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