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SCIENCE AGAINST FIRE

The rise of agronomic sciences and the opposition to fire use in Portugal during the 19th century

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During the 19th century, following the intertwined development of the liberal state and agricultural and forestry sciences, the Portuguese countryside came to be harshly portrayed in discourses centred on the ‘progressive improvement’ of land use, which included growing opposition to the use of fire. Mountainous territories were conceived as fire-free forested landscapes as part of narratives of age-old environmental destruction and an emerging scientific discourse that condemned slash-and-burn agriculture as ‘primitive’ or ‘barbaric’. Intermittent farming on the cereal plains, based on fallowing and fire practices, were portrayed as “backward” *Ancien Régime* landscapes opposed to a “continuous” and “educated” agriculture. Fire use was increasingly seen as opposed to scientific forestry and agriculture. This paper covers key works on Portuguese agriculture and forestry – by authors such as Fragoso de Sequeira, Andrade e Silva, Bernardino de Barros Gomes, and Cincinato da Costa – in an attempt to outline the main features of 19th-century fire ecology (in terms of its relationship with vegetation, soil, hydrology and climate). Furthermore, we seek to understand the relationship between this science against fire and the far-reaching modernization of rural territories drawn up at the turn of the 20th century, paying special attention to forestry and grain policies.