

Why call by name if they did not understand? Naming equids in Portugal between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period

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Through the Barley Account Books (*Livros das Contas da Cevadaria*), kept in the *Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo*, we now have access to extensive records of the names of every equine (both saddle and pack animals) that Manuel I of Portugal (1495-1521) kept in the royal stables. The list includes special animals such as the warlike "Borba", sent by the king to serve a Portuguese captain in North Africa, or "Borba Sendeiro", which stood under 132 cm in height. Among the pack animals, we find the "Poucos o Picam" [Few-Can-Prick-Him], probably harsh of temperament, or the unfortunate "Fortelhão" which, after two years serving the Royal Household, died somewhere in Barreiro (a Portuguese locality near Lisbon) in the winter of 1521. There are also mounts from abroad, such as the "Ruço de Azamor", the "Troiano de Anafé" or the "Ruço Pombo de Çafim", taken (among many others) from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula as tribute, gifts or spoils of war, along with mares from England and Flanders requested by the Portuguese monarch. Not to be forgotten are the, of course, the autochthonous horses whose names suggest their provenance - such as Viseu, Tarouca, Guimarães, Lamego, Alfama and Carnide - or the fine "Palha" horses bred in Portugal that continuously filled the royal stables. These animals, and many others, were the protagonists of the animal force that was essential for the proper function of the Royal Household and all its "departments".

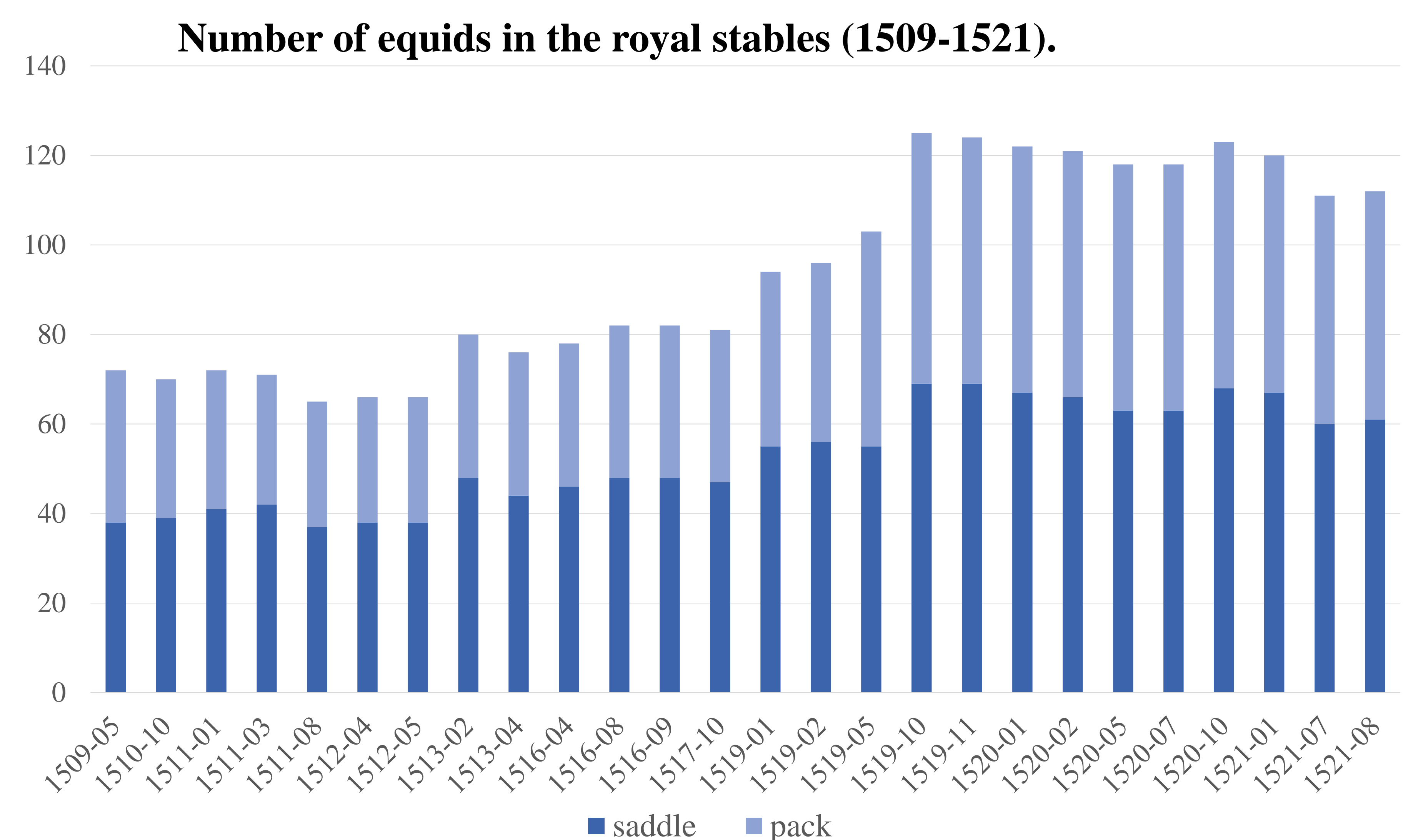
Core Question

However, if we were to follow the medieval beliefs, best expressed by Isidore of Seville, we realise that the ability to respond to their own name was not attributed to equines, being only recognised for dogs. What is more, we have not found any evidence in Portuguese documentation indicating us that it was common for an owner to call his horse by its name. It therefore seems fair to point out that it would not be by calling a horse by its name that the communication would be established. With this in mind, we are led to ask: Why call them by name if they did not understand?

Source – the Barley Account Books

This source comprises 26 books, dated between May 1509 and August 1521. Each one contains a monthly record of the amount of barley - or, less commonly, other cereals - spent on feeding the equines in the royal stable or given to officials in the royal household who kept an equine to serve the king.

These books, which all follow the same common structure, always present two lists of equids. The first lists saddle animals and the second pack animals. Each of the lists identifies each horse and indicates its respective daily consumption of barley.



Source: Lisbon, *Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo*, Contos do Reino e Casa, Núcleo Antigo 834-859.

Some conclusions

The names of these four-legged animals are attributed according to different reasonings, and in names composed of more than one word we can find several motifs at the same time. The ones we have been able to identify are related to:

- 1) the type of animal;
- 2) coat colour;
- 3) geographical provenance;
- 4) breeder, former owner or offeror of the animal;
- 5) physical appearance or size;
- 6) temperament.

Returning to the main question: **Why call by name if they did not understand?**

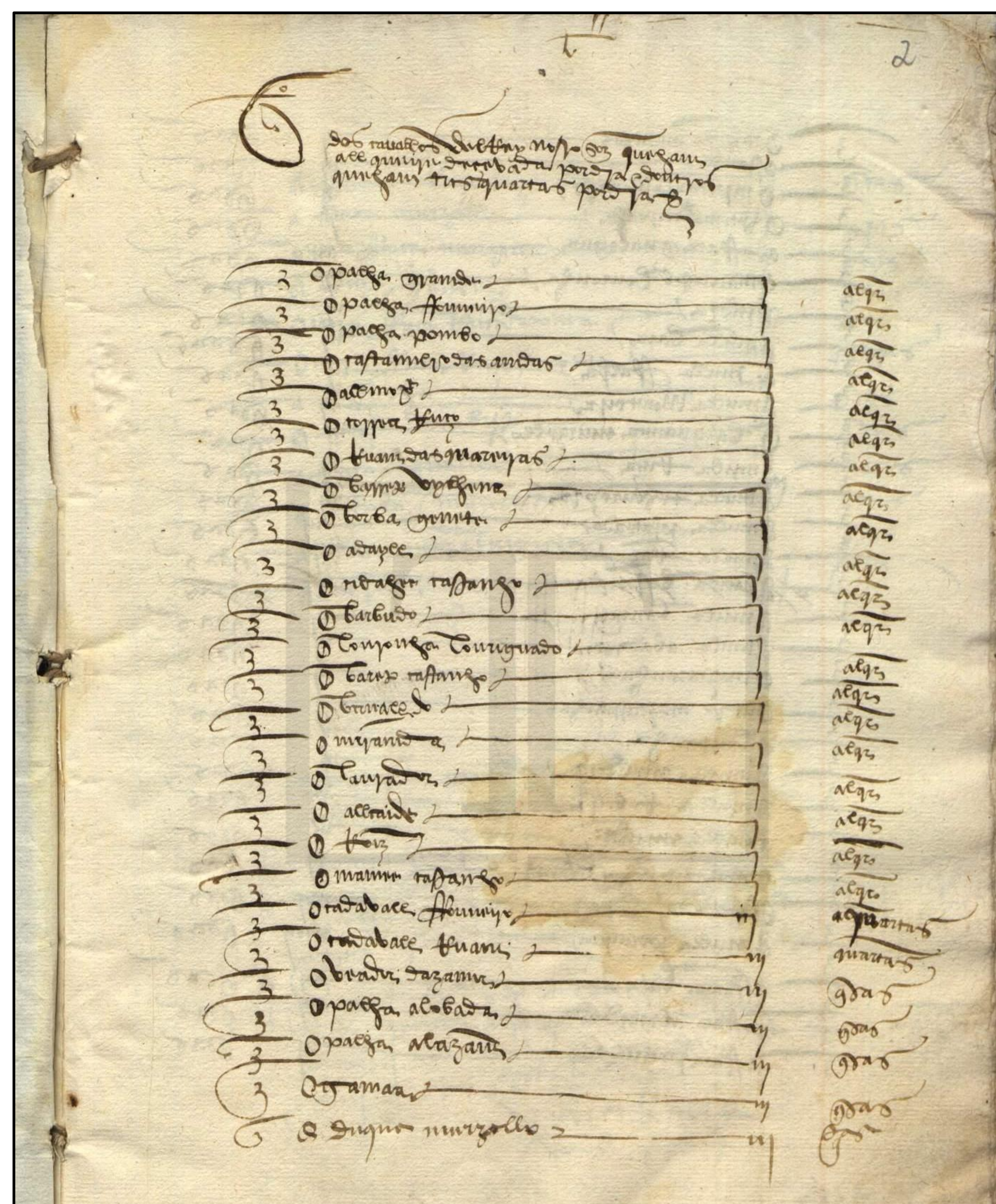
On the one hand, the practical nature of identifying an equine from among dozens of others that composed the royal stables seems quite clear to us. This is particularly evident in the names that describe the animal's intrinsic features, such as the colour of its coat or a certain uncommon physical characteristic. The source itself, where these names appear repeatedly, was administrative by its own nature, and it was therefore only natural that each animal should be accounted for as distinctly from the others as possible.

On the other hand, there may have been a desire to attribute a certain individuality to an equine that, in certain contexts, was a close companion in daily work for a royal official over several years, or a faithful war companion of a knight.

Some of these animals are expressly assigned to individuals, from minor to senior royal officials, and even to the prince himself - who, at least from the age of six, rode smaller equines. Consequently, it is not hard to believe that emotional bonds were formed between riders and particular equines, and perhaps these names (which are no more than a human construction) are an expression of each animal's uniqueness, and of their proximity to humans.

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Source: Lisbon, *Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo*, Contos do Reino e Casa, Núcleo Antigo 852, fl. 2.