

Memory of Insurance

Did you know the first insurance treatise was written by a Portuguese citizen?

To understand the present and prepare for the future, it's important to learn about the past. In order to find out more about the history of insurance in Portugal, FULLCOVER visited the permanent exhibition, *Memory of Insurance – Exposição Permanente Memória do Seguro* (EPMS), at the head office of the Portuguese Insurance Association – **Associação Portuguesa de Seguradores (APS)** in Lisbon. Here FULLCOVER interviewed Professor Fernanda Rollo, president of the EPMS Custodial Committee and professor at Nova University, and Alexandra Queiroz, APS general manager, a major contributor to this project.

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A view of the exhibition



Click the image and visit the interactive exhibit



A dream come true

Opened in May 2019, the exhibition is a joint initiative by APS, its associates and *Club História e Acervo Português da Actividade Seguradora (CHAPAS)* – a Club that aims to study, preserve and share the history and heritage of the insurance business. “The idea for the exhibition came from Ruy de Carvalho – the first president of APS and now honorary president, when he was writing two books on the history of insurance – and a challenge by CHAPAS who wanted to share their historical artefacts”, explains Professor Fernanda Rollo.

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Supporting society for over 700 years

“Intrinsically linked with our history, insurance is a part of and reflection of our past. In Portugal, it spans over 700 years, starting with King Dinis (1279-1325), who introduced the first material form of insurance,” adds Professor Rollo.

Insurance has been available at the most critical moments of our history, in an ongoing dialog with society at large. Over the centuries, insurance businesses have endeavoured to respond to change – be it commercial, economic, in transportation or banking – to ensure companies can always rely on insurance to support, encourage and protect them.

MILESTONES

1293

Beginning of the history of insurance in Portugal as King Dinis approves the creation of an insurance pool for maritime trade

1380

Creation of the Carrack Company, *Companhia das Naus*, the first Portuguese business to employ formal maritime insurance practices, using methods similar to those of an insurance company

1529

Creation of the position then known as insurance clerk, *Escrivão de Seguros*, the first official insurance title in Portugal

1552

Publication of the first insurance treatise, *Tractatus de Assecurationibus et Sponsionibus Mercatorum*, authored by the Portuguese Pedro de Santarém

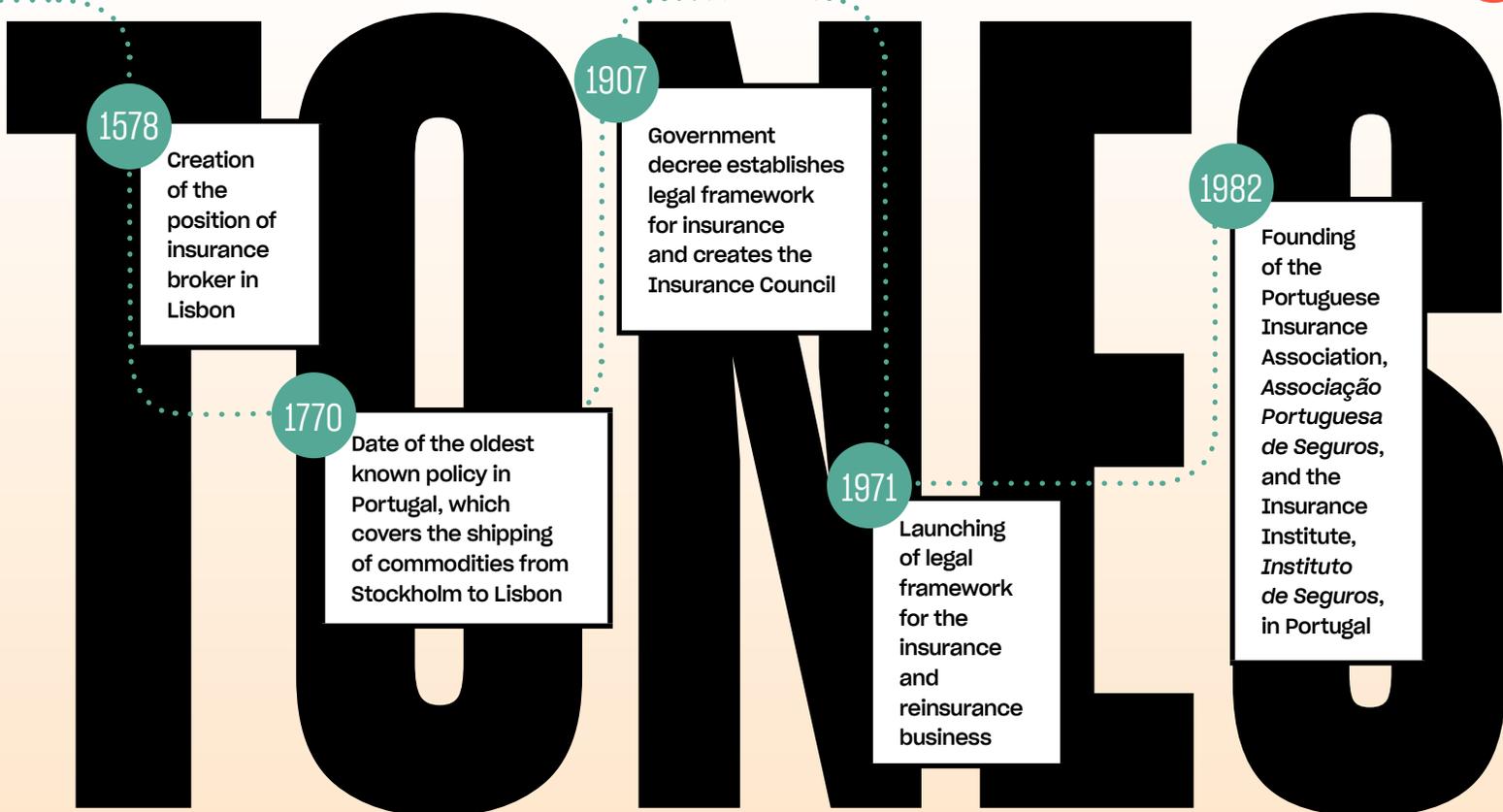
1573

First known document mentioning the purchase of insurance in Lisbon



Professor Fernanda Rollo

[Click to access the detailed cronology](#)



She comments: “To prepare for the future, it is crucial to understand and appreciate the role of insurance in our increasingly risk-prone society, where climate change, new working practices and lifestyles continue to evolve, prompting business to adapt to meet the growing needs of people, companies and countries.”

The importance of insurance in our daily lives

In order to build upon visitors’ knowledge and promote a culture of responsibility, especially with younger generations, the EPMS endeavours to illustrate how insurance permeates every aspect of daily life.

Exhibited alongside each other are historical documents, artefacts, interactive screens, photos of people with unexpected connections to insurance (such as singer Luciano Pavarotti and Nobel prize winner José Saramago), and a collection of plates – ancient emblems displayed by insurance companies that confirmed they had the required financial strength to provide a professional risk & liability service.

“It evokes key moments in insurance history, going all the way back to the 13th century, when the first marine merchant contracts were signed with the Italians, to guard against shipwreck, piracy and theft and, in Portugal, King Dinis ordered merchants to create a fund to compensate those damaged by loss of ships and/or goods,” adds Professor Rollo.

In addition to past events, the exhibition has an interactive section devoted to the present, touching upon existing insurance scenarios, including international insurance and its response to climate change and disasters that have impacted the sector. There’s a ‘future’ section, with APS resources for younger people, plus a micro-site Insurance in the Community (Seguros e Cidadania), which has videos, books and other information relevant to insurance.

The EPMS also provides a wide range of educational material for schools. Alexandra Queiroz explains: “We’re working on a schedule of age-appropriate activities for children, such as games and quizzes, that will help them understand insurance-related concepts; what insurance is and why it matters etc. Another initiative is a series of books by Ana Maria Magalhães

and Isabel Alçada, authors of children’s detective fiction, featuring real adventures set in the world of insurance, and a comic-book series on major disasters, such as the wreck of the Titanic. It is interesting to show the young how these two worlds connect – the old, material legacy of insurance and the digital, interactive component. Even insurers’ plates, with their exquisite colourful designs get a lot of attention.”

For Professor Rollo, the exhibit goes beyond historical significance. It helps people better grasp insurance by drawing attention to issues – ie cultural, social and environmental – that people must take responsibility for. “Sustainability for example, requires insurance to reinvent itself; this becomes clear when you consider how cities, mobility and auto insurance continue to evolve. By having an educational focus, the exhibition will build financial literacy and positively encourage an insurance culture.”

Preserving a legacy

A fine example of ongoing collaboration, the EPMS continues to grow. “The major challenge is to highlight the role of insurance and how it values and protects people and property,” confirms Professor Rollo. She appeals: “In order to evidence how important insurance actually is, every player in the sector must work together. We would like companies, brokers and other stakeholders to input to the exhibition and share their knowledge with wider society, as well as amongst employees.”

To this end, insurance firms must familiarise themselves with their history. Professor Rollo concludes: “Sometimes we put our historical treasures away in boxes. Our team helps companies discover those treasures and, what’s more, can preserve them. This in turn, contributes to preserving our sector’s heritage and honouring its memory in Portugal.”



Check the APS micro-website

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Some consider this ‘bush knife’, given its artistic value, one of the most significant pieces of salvage in the history of Portuguese insurance. To me it goes beyond that. The knife is a memento and tribute to all insurance professionals who, at a time when communication and technological resources were limited, persisted in the recovery and valuation of this part of the company’s legacy – something many had already considered lost forever.”

Jorge Magalhães Correia
President, Fidelidade

A TALE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY KNIFE

At the opening of the exhibition, one item stood out among the rest — a hunting knife owned by the insurer Fidelidade, a magnificent piece of craftsmanship from the 19th century, with quite a story behind it.

Out of a single silver ingot, craftsman Raphael Zacarias da Costa fashioned, taking over 11 years to do, a unique hunting knife of incalculable worth. With care and true genius he carved upon the knife’s 63 centimetre long handle and sheath, 130 animal heads – all interwoven with extraordinary skill, depicting nature in such a way that must be seen to be believed.



Initially intended for King Fernando, the envisaged sale did not go through and unable to find a buyer in Portugal, the knife's owner decided to ship it to London (a major market where vast fortunes were housed). Surely in London the knife would capture someone's attention? The hunting knife travelled on the maritime vessel *Cádiz* in May 1875 when it sank into the waves near Brest, taking most of the passengers and crew with it. Its owner, Estêvão de Sousa, had insured the knife with Fidelidade and was paid £7,000.

Over the following years, the insurer made numerous efforts to recover the knife – no easy task, as *Cádiz* was sunk deep and the surrounding currents/undertow posed such high risks, the English government forbade divers from recovering it. A specialist London firm was hired and after six weeks hard work, retrieved the knife from the depths.

The knife made its way back to Lisbon on 20 July 1876 and then travelled to London for cleaning and restoration. In 1878, at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, it was given pride of place among the leading examples of Portuguese jewellery, securing its position as one of the most valuable pieces in the legacy of the Portuguese insurance community. ●



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DID YOU KNOW?

The first insurance treatise, *Tractatus de Assecurationibus et Sponionibus*, was written by Portuguese jurist Pedro de Santarém and originally published in 1552.

‘Five hundred years later’, says Pedro Romano Martinez (professor of Law) in his preface to the 2018 APS¹ edition of the *Tractatus*, ‘this study, with a focus on insurance, in many ways remains fully topical’.

Pedro de Santarém may have taken his name from the city where he was born, but he lived, studied and penned his treaty in Italy, where he may have served as Portuguese consul.

Containing practical advice, the treatise was written to address valid concerns brought to Pedro Santarém by contemporary merchants. They wanted clarification on the validity of insurance contracts against illegal activities, acts of God and insurance contracts as good-faith agreements. According to Pedro Romano Martinez, this treatise ‘is an early legal study, systematically organised, on maritime

insurance, with specific references to the relationship between risk and tariff, references which hold up today, even relating to other types of insurance’.

Throughout the treatise, there are concepts both familiar and current; such as criminal intent, amounts owed by insurers for claims, insured property and contract resolution. Another item that appears is ‘insurance for your insurance’. Not specifically reinsurance, but a second insurance policy, similar to co-insurance, or additional cover, against the risk the first insurer might not pay the policyholder.

As Pedro Romano Martinez states, ‘500 years later, the majority of the answers provided by this jurist relate to today and although the terminology varies, the principles translate into present-day legal rules’.

1 SANTARÉM, Pedro de - *Pedro de Santarém's Treatise on Insurance*. Lisbon: APS, 2018. ISBN 978-972-27-2676-4