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Colonial Brazil (1500–1822)

1.1 OVERSEAS EXPANSION AND THE PORTUGUESE ARRIVAL IN BRAZIL

The Portuguese reached the coast of what today is Brazil in April 1500. This occurrence was but one of the many episodes of Portuguese overseas expansion, which began early in the 15th century.

Why did a tiny country such as Portugal begin its expansion at the beginning of the 15th century, almost 100 years before Columbus, sailing for Spain, reached the Americas? There is more than one answer to this question, and, to answer it, a number of factors should be taken into account. In the first place, Portugal had distinguished itself among the European nations as an independent country with a tendency to look beyond its borders. Even though they were still no rivals for Venetians and Genoese, whom they would eventually surpass during the 13th and 14th centuries, the Portuguese had accumulated considerable experience in long-distance trade. Besides, before the Portuguese took control of their own international trade, Genoa had invested in their expansion and had made Lisbon a major center of its commercial endeavors.

Also, Portugal's economic involvement with the Islamic world in the Mediterranean facilitated this commercial experiment, and its rising trade can be measured by the growing use of money as a means of payment. Doubtlessly, the affinity of the Portuguese for the sea was abetted by their country's proximity to islands in the Atlantic and to the coast of Africa. Owing to the technology of the

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time, mariners relied on specific ocean currents, which favored Portuguese ports as well as those situated in southwest Spain.

But there are other factors of Portuguese political history which are at least as important as those already mentioned. Portugal did not escape the crisis affecting all of western Europe. However, the nation faced it under political circumstances that were better than those of other kingdoms. During the entire 15th century, Portugal was a united kingdom and less subject to internal upheaval and dispute. This was not the case in France, England, Spain, and Italy – all of which were involved in wars and in dynastic complications.

The Portuguese monarchy had been consolidated in the revolution of 1383–1385, a very significant episode in the country's history. Beginning with a dispute over who should succeed as king of Portugal, the bourgeoisie in Lisbon revolted. A popular uprising followed, called "the revolt of the common folk" by the chronicler Fernão Lopes. This revolution was similar to other events which shook western Europe at the same time, but its denouement was different from those of the peasant revolts which in other countries were crushed by powerful lords. When the king of Castile, who was supported by the Portuguese nobility of highest rank, entered the country to take control of the throne, the problem of dynastic succession became, in addition, one of national independence. When the two sides met, both Portuguese independence and Dom João's claim to the throne had been secured. Dom João, the central figure in the revolution, was an illegitimate son of King Pedro I. He is known as the Master of the Order of Aviz.

Even though some historians consider the revolution of 1383 to be a middle-class uprising, it ended up reinforcing and concentrating power in the king owing to the policies undertaken by the Master of Aviz. Different influential sectors of Portuguese society – the nobility, the merchants, and the nascent bureaucracy – gathered around the crown. This is a fundamental point in any discussion of the reasons for Portuguese expansion. At that time the state, or better yet the crown, was the only entity capable of great undertakings – provided it had the power and stability necessary for such endeavors.

Finally, one should not forget that at the beginning of the 15th century, overseas expansion served the varied interests of the di-

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verse classes, social groups, and institutions that constituted Portuguese society. For the merchants, expansion offered the prospect of wealth. For the king it was an opportunity to create new sources of income at a time when crown revenues had greatly diminished. It was also a good way to keep the nobles busy, and it was a source of prestige. For the nobles and for the church, to serve the king or to serve God by bringing Christianity to the heathen entailed rewards and jobs that were more and more difficult to obtain within Portugal's narrow framework. For the common people, going to sea meant emigrating and searching for a better life. It was a flight from an oppressive state of affairs. The only ones left out of these converging interests were the large landowners, for whom the departure of men meant a rise in the cost of labor.

This is why overseas expansion became a sort of great national venture which everyone or almost everyone joined and which went on for centuries.

The search for adventure was not just a search for wealth. Five centuries ago there were continents that were scarcely known or totally undiscovered. There were oceans that had yet to be crossed. The so-called unknown regions captivated Europeans' imaginations. In those regions they foresaw, in different cases, fantastic kingdoms, monstrous creatures, and the locus of earthly paradise.

For example, when he discovered America, Columbus thought that further inland he would find men with only one eye and others who looked like dogs. He saw three mermaids leap from the sea, but was disappointed with their faces – they were not as beautiful as he had imagined. In one of his letters he referred to people further west who were born with tails. In 1487, when Afonso de Paiva and Pero da Covilhã left Portugal in search of an overland route to India, they carried orders from Dom João II to locate the kingdom of Prester John. According to legend, Prester John was a descendant of the Wise Men and an entrenched enemy of the Muslims. From at least the middle of the 12th century, Prester John was part of Europeans' fantasy world. The legend derived from reality, from the existence of Ethiopia, in east Africa, where blacks had adopted a form of Christianity.

The dreams associated with the oceanic adventure should not be seen as scornful fantasies used to hide material interest. But beyond

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doubt material considerations prevailed, especially when the world's contours became better known and practical matters of colonization entered center stage.

Two final points should be noted when one analyzes Portuguese expansion in general. On the one hand, this expansion constituted an important renovation of the so-called seafaring techniques. When Lusitanian ships set out for Guinea, navigation charts still did not include latitudes and longitudes, only routes and distances. Improved quadrants and astrolabes allowed navigators to use the stars to pinpoint their ships' positions. This was an important innovation. With the caravelle, which was used beginning in 1441, the Portuguese had also developed a more appropriate type of ship design. The caravelle was, for its time, a light and rapid vessel. Its draft was shallow, which allowed it to come quite close to dry land and still avoid running aground. The caravelle was the apple of Portuguese eyes, and they made full use of these ships in their voyages to Brazil during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The other point has to do with a gradual change in outlook notable among Portuguese humanists such as Duarte Pacheco Pereira, Diogo Gomes, and Dom João de Castro. Overseas exploration showed over and over how mistaken the old notions were. For example, the description of the world in Ptolemy's *Geography* was refuted by firsthand experience. Given cases such as this, ancient authorities began to be doubted.

Gold and spices were the goods most sought by the Portuguese. Their interest in gold is easy to understand. It was used as a reliable means of exchange, Asian aristocrats decorated their temples and palaces with it, and they used it in their clothes. But why spices, or rather condiments?

The high price of seasonings can be explained by the era's limited techniques for the preservation of food and also by people's eating habits. Medieval western Europe was a "carnivorous civilization." Huge quantities of cattle were slaughtered at the beginning of summer, when they could no longer forage in the countryside. Meat was stored and precariously preserved by salting it, smoking it, or drying it in the sun. Fish was also preserved in these ways. However, these processes often made the food unpalatable. Seasonings were required, and adding pepper helped to disguise rot. Con-

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diments were also used in stylish food of the time, just like coffee, which much later ended up being consumed in grand scale all over the world. Gold and spices were always in high demand during the 15th and 16th centuries, but there were other sought-after goods as well: fish and meat, wood, dyes, medicinal herbs, and, little by little, instruments endowed with speech – African slaves.

The 1415 conquest of Ceuta, in northern Africa, is usually considered the starting point for Portuguese overseas expansion, which progressed methodically down the west coast of Africa and out to the islands in the Atlantic Ocean. Exploration of the African coast did not happen overnight. It took 53 years, beginning with Gil Eanes's passing Cape Bojador in 1434 to Bartolomeu Dias's rounding of the fearsome Cape of Good Hope in 1487. Once he was in the Indian Ocean, it was possible for Vasco da Gama to reach India, the elusive land of spices and dreams. After this, the Portuguese went all the way to China and Japan, where their influence was considerable. Japanese historians have called the period between 1540 and 1630 the "Christian century."

Without going far into the African continent, the Portuguese set up a series of fortified trading posts or *feitorias* along the coast. The Portuguese crown regulated African trade. It established a royal monopoly on gold transactions and required money to be coined in the Casa da Moeda or Mint. Around 1481 it also created the Casa da Mina or Casa da Guiné, which was a special customs house for African trade. From the west coast of Africa the Portuguese brought back scant quantities of gold dust, ivory (which up to then had come from Egypt and had been controlled by Arab merchants), and a pepper known as *pimenta malagueta*. After 1441 their specialty became slaves. In the beginning slaves were sent to Portugal, where they were employed as domestic servants and urban workers.

The history of Portuguese occupation of the Atlantic islands is quite different. There they carried out significant experiments in large-scale agriculture using slave labor. After disputing and losing the Canary Islands to the Spaniards, the Portuguese managed to hold on to other islands: Madeira (ca. 1420), the Azores (ca. 1427), Cape Verde (1460), and São Tomé (1471). On the Isle of Madeira two parallel farming systems vied with one another. Tra-

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ditional wheat farming attracted a considerable number of small, rural landowners. Sugar plantations arose simultaneously. They were financed by Genoese and Jewish merchants and commercial agents and relied on slave labor.

The sugar economy ended up winning out, but its success was short-lived. Its rapid decline came from internal factors as well as from competition with sugar from Brazil and São Tomé. In fact, on the Isle of São Tomé the Portuguese set up a system of large-scale sugar plantations very similar to the system they would use in Brazil. São Tomé could count on an abundant supply of slaves because it was close to the African coast and to the trading posts at São Jorge da Mina and Axim. It had plantations or *engenhos* which had as many as 150 to 300 slaves, according to an account written in 1554. São Tomé was always a way station for slaves brought from the continent. From there they were sent to America or to Europe. In the 17th century the sugar industry fell on hard times, and slave distribution became the main activity on São Tomé.

The first ship to return from Vasco da Gama's expedition reached Portugal in July 1499. It produced great enthusiasm. Months later, on 9 March 1500, a fleet of 13 ships set sail from Lisbon. This was the most grandiose of all expeditions so far. It was apparently destined for the East Indies and was under the command of Pedro Alvares Cabral, a nobleman scarcely more than 30 years old. The fleet, after passing the Cape Verde Islands, headed west, away from the African coast. On 21 April it sighted what would become Brazilian land. On that day a landing party went ashore briefly. On the following day the fleet anchored at Porto Seguro, on the coast of the present-day state of Bahia.

Beginning in the 19th century, scholars have debated whether the Portuguese arrival in Brazil was a chance happening brought about by ocean currents or whether there was prior knowledge of the New World, and Cabral had set off on a sort of secret mission toward the west. Everything suggests that Cabral's expedition was directed to India. This does not rule out the probability that European navigators, especially Portuguese navigators, might have visited the coast of Brazil before 1500.

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1.2 THE INDIANS

When the Europeans reached the land that would someday be Brazil, they found an Amerindian population living along the coast and in the basin of the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers. This population was linguistically and culturally quite homogeneous.

Notwithstanding their homogeneity, they can be divided into two large groups: the Tupi-Guarani and the Tapuia. The Tupi-Guarani lived along almost the entire Brazilian coast – from at least Ceará in the North to Lake Patos in the far South. The Tupi, who were also known as the Tupinambá, dominated the coastal strip from the North down to Cananéia, in the southern part of the present-day state of São Paulo. The Guarani were located in the basin of the Paraná and Paraguay and along the coast, from Cananéia down to the southern reaches of present-day Brazil. In spite of their different geographic locations, the two subgroups are known as Tupi-Guarani because of their similarity in language and culture.

At points along the littoral, the Tupi-Guarani population was interspersed with other groups: the Goitacá at the mouth of the Paraíba River, the Aimoré in southern Bahia and the northern part of present-day Espírito Santo State, the Tremembé along the strip between Ceará and Maranhão further north. These groups were called Tapuia, a generic word used by the Tupi-Guarani to indicate Indians who spoke a language different from theirs.

It is hard to analyze this indigenous society and its customs because their culture was so different from ours, and there was and still is considerable prejudice against Brazilian Indians. This prejudice can be seen in greater or lesser proportions in the writing of chroniclers, travelers, and priests – especially in Jesuit writings.

These accounts differentiate between Indians with positive and negative characteristics according to their greater or lesser degrees of resistance to the Portuguese. The Aimoré, outstanding for their military prowess and their rebelliousness, were always portrayed in a negative light. According to various descriptions, Indians usually lived like "human beings," in houses. The Aimoré lived like animals in the forest. The Tupinambá ate their enemies out of vengeance; the Aimoré ate them because they liked the taste of

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human flesh. When the crown passed its first law prohibiting Indian slavery (1570), only the Aimoré were specifically excluded from this prohibition.

There is also a shortage of data, deriving neither from faulty understanding nor from prejudice, but from their difficulty in being obtained. No one knows how many Indians lived in the territory which comprises present-day Brazil and Paraguay 500 years ago, when the Portuguese came to the New World. Estimates range from a low of two million for the entire territory to five million for the Amazon region alone.

The Tupi groups hunted, fished, gathered fruit, and raised crops. When the soil gave out, they migrated to different areas, temporarily or permanently. To plant crops they cut down trees and burned the vegetation. The colonists employed the same techniques. They planted beans, corn, squash, and especially manioc. Manioc flour became a staple food in the colony. The Indian economy was at a subsistence level, and people consumed what they produced. Each village was self-sufficient, and there was little trading of foodstuffs between villages.

There were, however, contacts among villages for the exchange of women and luxury items such as toucan feathers and stones for making labrets. From these trading contacts, alliances formed and groups of villages attacked other groups. War and the capture of enemies who were later killed during celebrations of cannibalistic rites were essential elements in Tupi society. Prestige and fresh supplies of women were the products of these activities, which were reserved for men.

The arrival of the Portuguese was a veritable catastrophe for the Indians. Coming from afar, in tremendous ships, the Portuguese, and especially the priests, were associated in the Tupi mind with great shamans who traveled the land going from village to village. These shamans cured people; they prophesied and spoke of a land of plenty. Whites, as men endowed with special powers, were at the same time respected, feared, and hated.

On the other hand, since there was no Indian nation, only scattered groups of Indians who were often in conflict with one another, it was possible for the Portuguese to find native allies in their struggles against groups who resisted. Without Tupi allies, the

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town of São Paulo de Piratininga (today the capital of São Paulo state) would have been conquered by the Tamoio Indians during its first years of existence. This is not to say that Indians did not ferociously resist the colonists, especially when the latter made attempts to enslave them. One exceptional form of resistance amounted to self-isolation, which they achieved by constant migration toward poorer regions. Within extremely narrow bounds, this strategy preserved their biological, social, and cultural heritage.

The Indians who gave in, or who were conquered, experienced cultural violence, epidemics, and death. From their contact with Europeans sprang a mixed population whose silent presence in the formation of Brazilian society can be seen even now.

But all in all, the word "catastrophe" is the most appropriate for describing the fate of the Amerindian population. Millions of Indians lived in Brazil at the time of conquest, and only some 270,000 are with us today.

1.3 COLONIZATION

The so-called discovery of Brazil occasioned none of the enthusiasm that Vasco da Gama's arrival in India had. Brazil appears as a land whose profit potential and geographic features were unknown. For several years people believed it was nothing more than a huge island. It was known mainly for its exotic lures: Indians, parrots, and macaws. Some informants, especially the Italians, began to call it the Land of the Parrots. King Dom Manuel first named it Vera Cruz and later called it Santa Cruz. The name "Brazil" began to appear in 1503. This word is associated with brazilwood, from a tropical tree that was the main resource of the land during the early days. Its duramen was very red and was used to make dye. Its sturdy wood was used to make furniture and in ship-building. Curiously, the "Brazil Islands" or something similar were mentioned in medieval Europe's tales of fantasy. Three islands with this name appear in a 1367 map. They are strewn among the Azores, at the latitude of Brittany (France), and along the coast of Ireland.

The first attempts at trading on the Brazilian coast relied on the same feitoria system that was used on the African coast. Brazil was

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leased for three years to a commercial consortium in Lisbon. The group was headed by the New Christian Fernão de Noronha (or Loronha), who had obtained a monopoly. In exchange for his monopoly, he was obliged, so it seems, to send out six ships per year to explore 300 leagues (around 2,000 kilometers) of coastline and to set up a trading post. This consortium sent out a few expeditions, but when its lease expired in 1505, the Portuguese crown apparently assumed the responsibility of exploring the new land.

During these early years, from 1500 to 1535, the chief economic activity was the extraction of brazilwood, which was obtained mainly by trading with the Indians. Brazilwood trees did not grow in clusters or groves, but were scattered everywhere. As the supply gave out along the littoral, Europeans started relying on the Indians to furnish it. Collective work, especially in felling trees, was a common task in Tupinambá society, which meant that harvesting brazilwood would be relatively easy to integrate into traditional patterns of indigenous life. Indians supplied wood and to a lesser degree manioc flour. They traded them for pieces of cloth, knives, pen knives, and baubles – cheap items as far as the Portuguese were concerned.

In the beginning, Brazil was often mentioned along with India, either as a stop-off on the way there or as the location of a new route to India, which the Spaniards (mainly) sought. When he discovered America in 1492, Columbus, reaching the Antilles, thought he had reached the China Sea. Portugal contested the ownership of the new land, which gave rise to a series of negotiations and in 1494 produced the Treaty of Tordesillas. The world was divided into two hemispheres separated by an imaginary line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. The land discovered west of the line would belong to Spain; that east of it would belong to Portugal.

This division lent itself to controversy, since it was never possible to establish exactly where the Line of Tordesillas was. (Only at the end of the 17th century did the Dutch devise a technique for measuring longitude accurately.) In whose territory lay the mouth of the Amazon or the mouth of the River Plate? Were these northern and southern points Portuguese or Spanish? Both rivers were

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