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## PORTUGUESE SETTLEMENT, 1500–1580

Late medieval Europe had long been linked with Asia via tenuous land routes, as had Asia with America across the Pacific, but it was not until the Portuguese thrust into the Atlantic early in the fifteenth century that the last great oceanic hiatus in global intercommunication came to be closed. Paradoxically, this first stirring of what was to become modern European imperialism emerged from a society in contraction. Portugal, like the rest of Europe, had suffered a severe population decline in the middle years of the fourteenth century; the ensuing abandonment of marginal land along with the depopulation of towns and villages had created a classic 'feudal crisis' with the upper strata of society economically squeezed by the loss of much of their customary revenue. Elsewhere in Europe this pinch had the effect of sending forth members of the nobility on marauding expeditions in search of booty and new sources of income; the Portuguese conquest of the Moroccan seaport of Ceuta in 1415 (the same year as Henry V's victory at Agincourt) may well be viewed in this light. But Ceuta and the accompanying vision of a North African empire that it suggested turned out to be a dead end. It proved impossible to renew the peninsular reconquest in Morocco: the Berber population was too resistant, too deeply attached to its Islamic beliefs; Portugal's population was too small, its military resources too few.

Instead, the Portuguese thrust was deflected westward, onto the sea and down the coast of Africa. Here resistance was minimal. For centuries boats from the fishing villages along the southern coast of Portugal (the Algarve) had been drawn to the Moroccan coast by the natural action of the winds and currents in that part of the Atlantic, and there they found a variety of rich fishing grounds. Now, with

internal pressures for outward expansion growing, these voyagers were stimulated to investigate the opportunities for trade and plunder that beckoned from the adjacent shores.

The traditional approach to this exploration has been to attribute it (at least before 1460) almost exclusively to the inspiration of Prince Henry 'the Navigator' (1394–1460) whose deeds in directing these discoveries were promptly preserved in chronicles which gave him quasi-heroic status. But these discoveries, though certainly stimulated by Henry's desire to create an overseas *appanage* for himself, involved other members of the royal family as well, in addition to numerous followers from their households. Equally important was the participation of members of the Italian merchant community in Lisbon (whether naturalized or not) who brought to the process their Mediterranean expertise and connections. Indeed, they may well have been the decisive factor in transforming these early forays for fishing and plunder along the African coast into organized expeditions for trade.

The Portuguese thrust outward, however, was not limited to pushing down the west coast of Africa, important though that finally proved to be. These sailings inevitably brought them into contact with the islands of the Atlantic – nearby Madeira and the Canaries to begin with, the Azores and the Cape Verdes later. It was the Portuguese experience here, even more than in Africa, that created the patterns later employed in the colonization of Brazil. Taken together, these islands, including the Canaries which gradually fell into the Spanish sphere, formed a kind of 'Atlantic Mediterranean' – a collection of lands whose economy was linked together by the sea.

Madeira was known to exist as early as the fourteenth century, but it was not exploited until the fifteenth. It was the French/Spanish occupation of the nearby Canaries in 1402 that stimulated the Portuguese to initiate serious exploration leading to settlement and agriculture. This began in the years 1418–26 under the leadership of two squires from the entourage of Prince Henry and an Italian nobleman from the household of his brother, Dom João. Development of the Azores lagged behind Madeira by several years. Discovered, or rediscovered in 1427, the Azores began to be settled only in 1439. Finally, much later, the Cape Verdes were explored in the years between 1456 and 1462, but their development and settlement progressed more slowly.

As these various islands or island groups were found, they were progressively incorporated into an economic system centred in Lisbon

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that was controlled jointly by the Portuguese court and the rich merchants (some of Italian origin) of the capital. This process of incorporation passed through at least three rather well-defined stages which prefigure certain aspects of the economic development of Brazil in the following century.

Since the islands were uninhabited when they were found, the first stage in their exploitation was of necessity extensive. In the earliest years, when there were few or no settlers, animals were put ashore to proliferate rapidly in the new surroundings. They could then be periodically rounded up for slaughter and the products taken back to Portugal for sale. The development of Madeira began with this stage and the first inhabitants brought with them sheep, pigs and cows, if indeed these had not, as it seems, already been put ashore to propagate by themselves. Likewise sheep and goats were set ashore in the Azores in 1431, four years after their initial discovery, to multiply at will. The first settlers arrived only later, in 1439, and for several years devoted themselves to tending the already existing herds before moving on to the next stage of development about 1442. The same pattern was repeated in the Cape Verdes where, before settlement began, goats especially were set ashore to multiply freely.

Since the Portuguese population, like that of most of Europe, was at a low ebb in the first half of the fifteenth century, it took some time before these island frontiers could attract enough people for settled agriculture. But whenever the influx had created a sufficient population density, a shift took place from the initial stage of extensive exploitation via cattle raising to the second stage of more intensive exploitation through the cultivation of cereals. In Madeira, this second stage followed only a few years after the first, due largely to an unexpected migration of disillusioned settlers who had abandoned the Moroccan outpost of Ceuta. The island (as its name 'wood' implies) was covered by immense forests and as these were burned to open areas for wheat, the enriched soil gave enormous yields: up to 50 times the seeding, or so the sources, with some probable exaggeration, claim. As the population expanded, however, the richness of the soil declined with successive harvests, the costs of wheat production rose, its market advantage shrank, and investment shifted to other more remunerative products.

In the Azores, the second or cereal stage began about 1442, some fifteen years after the discovery of the archipelago, and as the wheat

exports of Madeira declined those of the Azores rose in compensation. Here, early in the wheat cycle, yields approximating to those of Madeira – 40 to 60 times the seeding – were reported. Unlike Madeira and the Azores, the Cape Verdes did not pass from a cattle stage into one of cereals. Rather the subsequent stage here was one of rice, cotton and fruit and sugar – clear evidence that these islands really lay outside the ‘Atlantic Mediterranean’ and formed, instead, a transitional region between the ecology of Madeira and the tropical ecology of the African coast.

Finally, a third stage of capitalistic agriculture appeared, but only in Madeira. As the grain yields fell off, capital tended to shift to the more lucrative crops of sugar and fine wine. From about 1450 onward, vineyards and cane-fields began to spread. Pre-Madeiran sugar production had centred in the Near East, Sicily and Spain; it was almost certainly from Sicily that it was introduced into the island. The Azores, however, never reached this stage due to climatological conditions. After Madeira, the next great area for sugar was to be Brazil. The spread of sugar cultivation thence, however, came belatedly, only after an initial generation during which the land was exploited in a manner that resembled, not the first or cattle stage of the Atlantic islands, but rather the factory system that the Portuguese had meanwhile developed along the coast of West Africa during the period after 1449.

Along this coast the Portuguese had avoided, as a rule, any attempt at significant settlement: the native populations were too dense to be easily subdued, the area was ecologically unattractive. Instead they chose to exploit the coast after a pattern adopted from the Italian trading cities of the late medieval Mediterranean. Here the key institution was the factory (*feitoria*), or fortified trading post. This was defended by the castle garrison headed by a knight and operated by a factor (*feitor*) or commercial agent who undertook to make purchases from the native merchants or chiefs. The merchandise he secured was stored in the factory and then sold to the Portuguese captains of the trading fleets that periodically visited the factory. These, however, were often attacked by foreign pirates who seized ships and cargoes when they did not make direct attempts to breach Portugal’s fragile monopoly of trade with the natives. In practice the Portuguese crown responded with coast guard patrols to drive off unlicensed ships while juridically it sought and received recognition of its monopoly rights in a series of papal bulls

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(1437–81) that formed the models for the later assignment of exclusive rights in America to Spain and Portugal.<sup>1</sup>

By 1500, then, the Portuguese had elaborated two basic patterns for empire in the South Atlantic, a repertoire to be applied as needed to the problems they encountered: (1) the uninhabited islands they regarded juridically as extensions of the mainland kingdom, to be granted to seigneurial lords by royal gifts (*doações*) similar to those made to lords on the mainland, and to be populated by Portuguese immigrants using a settlement system whose forms were borrowed from the medieval Reconquest; (2) along the African coast, where they did encounter native peoples, they opted, instead, for trade without settlement based on the factory system of the late medieval Mediterranean.

Upon finally reaching India (Vasco da Gama, 1498), it was the 'African' system the Portuguese imposed. Finding an age-old culture difficult to penetrate or conquer, they resorted to setting up an 'empire' based on factories, defended by sea patrols to control unlicensed shipping in their area. Brazil, 'discovered' in the course of the second voyage to India, presented a more ambiguous image. Geographically it resembled the Atlantic islands, but, like the African coast, it was populated by savages whom the first Portuguese often called 'negroes'.<sup>2</sup> Only with further exploration did Brazil's real nature gradually come into focus. Treated in the same fashion as the African coast during the first 30 years, it later came to be settled after the pattern of the Atlantic islands.

DISCOVERY AND EARLY EXPLORATION

Upon his return from India in 1499, Vasco da Gama, we are told, pleaded fatigue and recommended that the follow-up expedition of 1500 be entrusted instead to Pedro Álvares Cabral, a *fidalg*o and member of the king's household. Cabral's fleet of thirteen ships followed da Gama's route from Lisbon via the Canaries to Cape Verde, but after crossing the doldrums it was pulled westward by the winds and currents of the South Atlantic and came within sight of the Brazilian coast near present-day Porto Seguro on 22 April 1500. The eight days that the fleet spent refreshing itself in Brazil provided a first brief encounter between

<sup>1</sup> Charles-Martial de Witte, *Les Bulles pontificales et l'expansion portugaise au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Louvain, 1958), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> On the indigenous peoples of Brazil in 1500, see Hemming, *CHLA*, I, ch. 5.

two civilizations, one recently embarked upon aggressive imperialism, the other a stone-age culture, virtually outside of time, living in the innocence apparently of Eden. The details of these first contacts were carefully related by the fleet scribe, Pero Vaz da Caminha, in a long letter to King Manuel of Portugal (the 'birth certificate' of Brazil, in the happy phrase of Capistrano de Abreu) that remains our principal source of information about the discovery. On 1 May, Cabral's fleet weighed anchor for its final destination, India, but the supply ship under the command of Gaspar de Lemos was detached to carry immediate news of the 'miraculous' discovery back to the Portuguese court. King Manuel I (1495–1521) promptly notified his Castilian relatives, Ferdinand and Isabella, of the discovery, emphasizing its strategic value to Portugal as a way-station for the India fleets, and organized another expedition the next year for further exploration of Caminha's 'Island of the True Cross'.<sup>3</sup>

This second fleet of three caravels left Lisbon in May of 1501 under the command of Gonçalo Coelho with Amerigo Vespucci aboard as chronicler. Our basic knowledge of this, as well as of the later voyage of 1503–4, comes from Vespucci's vain, if not mendacious, pen which has given birth to intricate and endless historiographical questions. Suffice it to say that the expedition of 1501–2 explored and named many points along some 500 leagues (c. 2,000 miles) of the Brazilian coast, from Cape São Roque in the north to near Cananéia in the south; these were soon incorporated into the Cantino map of 1502. Though Vespucci's mercantile sensibilities were not excited by what he saw, '...one can say that we found nothing of profit there except an infinity of dyewood trees, canafistula...and other natural marvels that would be tedious to describe . . .',<sup>4</sup> this second expedition brought back to Lisbon the first American samples of the brazilwood (*caesalpinia echinata*) that was not only to provide the 'Island of the True Cross' with its permanent name (Brasil), but also the only compelling reason for its further exploration.

This second voyage also served to establish the sailing route between Portugal and Brazil for the remainder of the colonial period. Ships leaving Portuguese ports usually made for the Canary Islands (where

<sup>3</sup> On the seemingly endless debate regarding the 'intentionality' of Cabral's landfall, see the expert judgement of the late Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European discovery of America: the southern voyages, 1492–1616* (New York, 1974), 224.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Malheiro Dias, 'A Expedição de 1501–02', in *História da colonização Portuguesa no Brasil*, ed. C. Malheiro Dias (Porto, 1924), II, 202.

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they often tarried to fish) and then headed for the Cape Verdes to take on fresh water and food; normally this leg of the voyage could last anywhere from fifteen to twenty days, depending upon weather conditions. From the Cape Verdes, ships steered south by southwest to cross the doldrums, a tiresome and tricky task that could easily fail, leaving the fleet to be swept up by the southern equatorial current into the Caribbean, as happened to Governor Luís de Vasconcelos on his outward voyage in 1571. Once safely across the doldrums, ships would veer westward, drawn naturally (like Cabral) in that direction by the winds and currents, until they touched Brazil somewhere between Cape São Roque and Cape Santo Agostinho, whence they could follow the coast all the way down to the Río de la Plata. A voyage, say, from Lisbon to Bahia required about a month and a half, if all went smoothly. If it did not (as with Padre Cardim in 1583), the outward voyage could take all of two months or more, even if the Cape Verdes were bypassed. Ships returning to Portugal steered north from Cape São Roque until they found the Azores whence they could ride the westerlies into Lisbon. This usually took longer than the outward voyage, often two and a half months or more.

THE FACTORY PERIOD

Once the initial phase (1500–2) of discovery and reconnaissance had been completed the Portuguese crown faced the problem of devising a system to exploit the new-found land. In the context of Portugal's prior Atlantic experience, the nature of Brazil was ambiguous. In most respects, it appeared to be simply another Atlantic island, but unlike Madeira or the Azores, it was populated by savage though comely natives. The island pattern of putting cattle ashore to multiply before the first colonists arrived was thus impossible in Brazil where the animals would rapidly fall prey to the Indians. Instead, the Portuguese felt obliged to treat Brazil like the coast of Africa and to exploit it via a system of trading factories.

To develop the few tradable commodities that were found (dyewood, monkeys, slaves and parrots) the crown opted to lease out Brazil to a consortium of Lisbon merchants headed by Fernão de Noronha, who was already important in the African and Indian trades. Unfortunately, the contract itself has not survived, but indirect evidence suggests that it resembled that by which the Guinea trade in Africa had been leased



in 1469 to the merchant Fernão Gomes for a five-year period. The group, we are told, was granted a trade monopoly for three years with no payment to the crown the first year, a sixth of the profits the second, and a quarter the third. In return, the group agreed to send out six ships each year to explore 300 leagues (c. 1,200 miles) of coastline and to construct a fortified trading post or factory there.

We know of two fleets which the consortium sent out. Details of the first are sketchy: sailing under an unknown captain, it left Lisbon in August of 1502, made Brazil near Cape São Roque, visited the area of Porto Seguro and returned to Lisbon in April of the next year, bringing back a cargo of brazilwood and Indian slaves. The second voyage is better known, thanks to Vespucci who was in command of one of the five ships. He has left us an account of the voyage (his third and last) in his *Letters*. Departing Lisbon on 10 June 1503, the expedition ran into bad weather near the island of Fernando Noronha (named after the principal merchant of the consortium). Here Vespucci's ship, along with that of another captain, lost the fleet. The two went on together to Cabo Frio in Brazil where they stayed five months to erect the factory called for in the contract which they garrisoned with 24 men.<sup>5</sup> In June of 1504 the two ships returned to Lisbon with a cargo of brazilwood. It is likely that the consortium sent out a third voyage in 1504–5, but no evidence of it has survived.<sup>6</sup>

The profitability of these voyages is unknown, but, when the group's contract expired in 1505, indirect evidence suggests that the crown resumed direct control of the Brazil trade just as it did with regard to the India trade at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Thus re-established in 1506, direct crown control of Brazil was to last until 1534 when the land was again leased out, not, as earlier, to merchants for trade, but rather to territorial lords for purposes of settlement.

During the intervening years (1506–34) of royal exploitation, the Portuguese crown continued to adhere to the patterns worked out in Africa during the fifteenth century, i.e., it maintained royal factories at a number of strategic points along the coast (Pernambuco, Bahia?, Porto Seguro?, Cabo Frio, São Vicente?), but licensed private vessels to trade with the natives under its auspices. No yearly statistics for this trade

<sup>5</sup> The point of departure for Hythlodæus in More's *Utopia*.

<sup>6</sup> Max Justo Guedes, 'As primeiras expedições portuguesas e o reconhecimento da costa brasileira', *Revista Portuguesa de História*, 12/2 (1968), 247–67.

<sup>7</sup> Rolando A. Laguarda Trías, 'Christóvão Jaques e as armadas Guarda-Costa', in *História Naval Brasileira*, ed. M. J. Guedes (Rio de Janeiro, 1975), 1/1, 275.



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have survived, nor have we any record for most of these voyages. Good luck, however, has preserved for us a relatively detailed account of one expedition, that of the *Bretoa* in 1511, which reveals the essential nature of the system. The ship was financed by a group that again included Noronha, now in association with Bartolomeu Marchione, an important Florentine merchant settled in Lisbon who was already active in the Madeiran sugar trade. Carrying a complement of five officers and 31 crew, the *Bretoa* left Lisbon in February and arrived at Bahia in April where it remained about a month. In May it proceeded south to load dyewood at the factory established in 1504 near Cabo Frio. The factory had been sited on an offshore island (for safety against Indian attack) and contact between the crew and the natives was strictly forbidden, factory personnel being the sole go-betweens. Some 5,000 logs were cut and transported to the factory by Tupi Indians who were paid for their labour with gifts of trinkets and small tools. Members of the crew were also allowed to trade for their own account; thus, in addition to the main cargo of dyewood, 35 Tupi Indian slaves and numerous exotic animals were brought back. Sailing late in July the ship made Lisbon at the end of October. The overall profitability of the Brazil trade cannot be sensibly calculated from this one voyage, but it was evidently lucrative enough to attract at least occasional investors, especially those who were already involved in imperial trade or who had Antwerp outlets, as did Noronha.

Interest in Brazil was not exclusively economic, however. It also presented a geopolitical problem for the Iberian powers. If, as many still thought, it was really a large (but relatively poor) island, could it be rounded and a westward passage found to the much more lucrative spice islands of the East Indies? Though almost everyone agreed that the Brazilian bulge fell within the Portuguese sphere as defined by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), did the mouth of the Amazon and the Río de la Plata (the most likely routes around Brazil) fall on the Portuguese or Spanish side of the line? The search for answers centred largely on La Plata during most of the second decade of the century. A Portuguese expedition (the Fróis-Lisboa, financed by the Castilian-born Christóvão de Haro among others) had first discovered the Río de la Plata in 1511–12; Castile responded with the Solís expedition of 1515. This in turn helped trigger the Portuguese coastguard patrols probably begun in 1516 by Christóvão Jacques. These, however, did not prevent Spain

from sending Magellan to Brazil on the first leg of his search for a westward passage in 1519. His subsequent discovery of the way around 'Brazil' to the Spices, though a spectacular feat of navigation, was largely useless to Castile. The route proved too long to be practical; and in the meantime Cortés had distracted the Spanish with his discovery of the riches of the Aztecs. After years of desultory negotiations, Spain pawned her claim to the Spice Islands given her by Magellan to Portugal for 350,000 ducats (Treaty of Zaragoza, 1529) and Spanish pressure on Brazil came largely to an end.

More important in the long run than Spanish probing around the fringes of Brazil was French poaching on the dyewood trade. Evidence for this is haphazard: a ship seizure here, a protest there, but it was growing, led by merchants operating out of northern French ports in Normandy and Brittany. A French ship intent upon breaking into the India trade had, like Cabral, drifted off course onto the coast of Brazil in 1504, where it remained to load dyewood instead and then returned to Honfleur. Appetites whetted, French merchants from other ports (Dieppe, Rouen, Fécamp) began to seek dyewood in Brazil. They made no attempt to establish factories after the Portuguese pattern, but traded directly from their ships, sending agents to live among the Indians, with whom good relations were developed. Not only did French competition deprive the Portuguese crown of revenue, but it lowered the price of brazilwood by increasing supplies on the Antwerp market. In addition, French seizures of Portuguese ships drove up costs to such a point that fewer and fewer merchants were willing to risk involvement in the trade.

The initial Portuguese response was to apply the tactics that had worked so well in the Indian Ocean: to dispatch a fleet to police the seas with instructions to seize or destroy unlicensed foreign ships. The expedition of Christóvão Jacques, sent to the Brazilian coast in 1516, was the first direct royal reaction in defence of Brazil. We have little information on Jacques' activities during the three years his fleet patrolled the coast (1516–19) but we know that he established a royal factory at Pernambuco<sup>8</sup> and may also have attempted a limited settlement there for growing sugar cane (if one can trust a document – since disappeared – cited by Varnhagen). This first coastguard expedition cannot be considered a complete success, however, for after 1520 there was a noticeable increase in French piracy which was no

<sup>8</sup> According to Laguarda Trías, he simply moved the factory Vespucci had established at Cabo Frio (or Rio de Janeiro) to Pernambuco.