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The Island Trade Route of São Tomé in the 16th
Century: Ships, Products, Capitals

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Special Issue

Crossing Borders: The Social and Economic Impact of the Portuguese Maritime Empire in the early Modern Age

Edited by

Nunziatella Alessandrini and João Teles e Cunha

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The Island Trade Route of São Tomé in the 16th Century: Ships, Products, Capitals*

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Abstract

The 'São Tomé *carreira*' was not just the route that connected Lisbon to the island at the Equator. It stretched along the west coast of Africa to Elmina, Congo, and Angola, and in another direction reached Central America and Brazil. In Europe, it had extensions to the Northern countries of the continent and reached the Italian markets in the Mediterranean. Although it survived beyond this period, it attained its peak in the century from roughly 1520 to 1620. What kept most parts of the route in movement was the trafficking of enslaved Africans, but during this period sugar trade (of which São Tomé and Príncipe became the world's largest producers) also played a major role.

Keywords

São Tomé island; 'carreira'; 16th century; enslaved Africans; Sugar.

Resumo

A 'carreira de São Tomé' não era apenas a rota que unia Lisboa à ilha do Equador. Prolongava-se pela costa ocidental de África até à Mina, ao Congo e a Angola e, noutra direcção, atingia a América Central e o Brasil. Na Europa, tinha extensões pelos países do Noroeste do continente e chegava às praças italianas do Mediterrâneo. Embora tenha sobrevivido para lá desse período, a sua época mais florescente durou cerca de um século, *grosso modo* entre 1520 e 1620. O que animava a maioria dos segmentos da 'carreira' era o tráfico de africanos escravizados, mas, durante o referido período, também o comércio do açúcar (de que São Tomé e Príncipe chegou a ser o maior produtor mundial) teve um papel decisivo.

Palavras-chave

Ilha de São Tomé; 'carreira'; século XVI; africanos escravizados; açúcar.

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1. *Ships*. - 2. *Products*. - 2.2. *Enslaved Africans*. - 2.3. *African Coralwood*. - 2.4. *Ivory*. - 3. *Capitals*. - 4. *Bibliography*. - 5. *Curriculum vitae*.

As early as the 1500s, navigators knew the route as the 'São Tomé *carreira*', i.e., the São Tomé trade route. This term referred to what could be designated its 'central leg', linking Lisbon with the equatorial island of São Tomé. The *carreira* of São Tomé had, in fact, several branches, albeit of unequal flows: It extended to the western coast of Africa across from São Tomé, touched on the Niger delta, and from there extended to the coasts of Mina, the Congo, and Angola. In the western Atlantic, it spread to the Caribbean and Brazil. In Europe, it went northwards from Lisbon to the ports of Bruges, Antwerp, and Hamburg, and stretched southwards into the Mediterranean, serving, in particular, Seville, Genoa, and Venice. The 'lifespan' of the *carreira* essentially coincided with that of the sugar cycle on the island of São Tomé, i.e., from around 1520 to 1620. Throughout the rest of the 17th century, the relationship between Lisbon and São Tomé gradually decreased until it ceased altogether. With the exception of a few special cases, contact between Portugal and the island was, by then, via Brazil instead.

The *carreira* reached its commercial peak in the mid-16th century. It is not surprising that 'the pilots and masters of the *carreira* of São Tomé' should, at that very time, create a confraternity and brotherhood dedicated to Our Lady of Hope (*Nossa Senhora da Esperança*) in Lisbon, founded in 1524 and located right next to the church of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy (*Nossa Senhora da Piedade*)¹.

1. *Ships*

The number of vessels that sailed between Portugal and São Tomé was relatively high. According to one memoir, written in 1554, the estimated annual number 'ranged between 30 and 40, and possibly more'². Around 1585, the somewhat exaggerated calculation of the Portuguese cosmographer João Galego estimated that around 50 to 60 ships 'laden with sugar [...] and many black slaves' arrived in Lisbon from São Tomé every year (Gallego, 1894, p. 13).

¹ Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (henceforth BNP), Reservados, Manusc. Ilustr. no 103, *Livro da Fundação, ampliação, & sitio do Conuento de N[ossa]. S[enho]ra da Piedade da Esperança*, fls. 7v-8.

² Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisboa (henceforth T.T.), *Corpo Cronológico*, I/94/28, 1554-11-22. Memoir sent to the King by Cristovão Nunes.

At around a similar date, the Portuguese trader Duarte Lopes, informer to Italian explorer Fillippo Pigafetta, stated that in 1578, the island produced enough sugar 'to fill 40 large carracks' (*grossas naus*) (Lopez-Pigafetta, 1951, p. 24), thus somewhat tempering the exaggerations of Galego's witness account. However, Duarte Lopes' description of the vessels should, it might be suggested, be read metaphorically, rather than literally, i.e., as an attempt to promote the island's sugar production, rather than refer to the actual tonnage of ships. This is supported by the fact that, unlike the large carracks that sailed for India, the vessels that plied the *carreira* of São Tomé were relatively small.

It is not always easy to determine the exact typology of these vessels, as the sources refer to them in relatively vague terms. In this regard, the least illuminating of terms is 'ship' (*navio*): *navio* can refer to anything from a very specific type of vessel of small or medium tonnage and common in the 16th and 17th centuries, to a vessel of any size. In fact, most of the Portuguese vessels linking São Tomé to Europe (Lisbon, Antwerp, Genoa, Venice, etc.) were small carracks that rarely exceeded 100 tons.

One sample, collected for the purposes of this chapter, is, alas, anything but conclusive. It comprises 25 vessels which, between 1530 and 1535, reported the goods they had loaded in São Tomé to the *Casa da Mina*: Thirteen of these vessels were unspecified 'ships'; nine were identified as carracks; two as caravels; and one as a *hourque*, or hulk, a type of sailing vessel built in Central Europe and used by Dutch and Hanseatic merchants (*nau* possibly bought in Flanders and probably with more tonnage than the usual ships that sailed this route³). The information relating to another sample of 112 vessels is a lot more specific: Between 1535 and 1548, these vessels, laden with sugar from São Tomé, paid a duty called *avaria* in the *Casa da Nação Portuguesa* in the port of Antwerp (Rau, 1971, pp. 13-16). Out of 112, 82 (73,2%) were carracks; 15 (13,4%) were 'ships'; 14 (12,5%) were caravels; and one was a small sailing vessel named *chalupa*. Leonor Freire Costa – who studied the relevant documentation originally compiled by Virgínia Rau, including a section hitherto unpublished – concludes that there was a predominance of vessels of between 70 and 100 tons (Costa, 1997, p. 115).

It is not difficult to explain this predominance: In sharp contrast to the Cape Route, navigation on the *carreira* of São Tomé occurred within a free system for Portuguese merchants, who were not subject to other constraints, such as the obligation to navigate in fleets. What's more, navigation was not conditioned by the calendar. The so-called 'anonymous navigator' indicates that while

³ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, part II, several documents.

February was the best month for sailing from Lisbon, ships departed 'at all times of the year', a statement supported by the documentation (Caldeira, 2000, p. 84). This, together with the relatively short voyages (approximately six weeks from Lisbon to São Tomé, and the same again for the return journey) attracted ship outfitters who, even without great financial means at their disposal, were able to invest in the transport of goods that circulated along the *carreira*. They therefore tended to opt for the construction and operation of vessels with small to medium tonnage. Furthermore, the fact that the great majority of these ships (in the general sense) were not equipped with artillery was yet another factor conducive to reducing operating costs even further. Their vessels being light, the masters and pilots counted on their ability for a swift, strategic escape in the event of an untimely encounter with corsairs.

In the years 1544, 1552, and 1558, successive royal orders were issued which ordered the 'carracks and ships' of the Atlantic routes to be 'armed with artillery and equipped with the necessary crew', but to little effect. Not even the heavy penalties – in 1558, offenders ran the risk of having their ships confiscated – were enough to induce ship outfitters with interests in the *carreira* of São Tomé to desist from sailing without artillery, or to reduce (at least officially) the tonnage of their vessels to less than 50 tons, which would have exempted them from the obligation to install artillery and a corresponding crew⁴.

Even after King Sebastian's decree of 1571, compelling small ships (of more than 25 tons) to be equipped with artillery, ship masters continued to resist for two reasons: the costs of armaments as well as larger crews on the one hand, and reduced efficiency due to lower cargo capacity on the other. However, there are cases of compliance. In 1593, the six charterers of a carrack about to load sugar in São Tomé, destined for Hamburg (via Lisbon), demanded from master Francisco Pires Barcelos, a resident of Vila do Conde, that their vessel be 'equipped with artillery'⁵. These precautions on the part of ship charterers can be seen as a result of ever-increasing attacks by corsairs from northern Europe (England, Holland, and also France) in the last decades of the 16th century.

Where the ports of origin of ships that sailed the *carreira* of São Tomé can be identified, the ports of northern Portugal predominate. This demonstrates the capacity of shipyards in that region, as well as the dynamism of local ship outfitters, to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Atlantic trade.

Of 68 identified vessels laden with sugar from São Tomé and bound for Antwerp between 1539 and 1548, 52 (76,5%) were registered in ports north of

⁴ For all measures mentioned see Ferreira, 1997, pp. 331-392.

⁵ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 11*, 1593-9-3, fls. 85v-88.

the river Tagus (Vila do Conde, Porto, Azurara, Póvoa do Varzim, and Viana do Castelo), of which Vila do Conde was foremost with 31 ships originating in its harbours, almost half of the total number. Greater Lisbon, including Barreiro and Setubal, contributed a mere 13 ships (making it a modest 19%); the Algarve (Tavira and Lagos) contributed two, and the Azores one only (Rau, 1971, pp. 13-16⁶).

A 1552 register of merchant ships from the ports of northern Portugal confirms this, albeit less obviously so. Of three ports that were on the list (Matosinhos, Leça, and Aveiro), São Tomé does not figure as a destination at all; while in the Douro (Porto and Massarelos), only one out of 22 vessels was headed for the island. In Azurara, by contrast, the situation was very different: 10 out of 13 merchant vessels were bound for São Tomé. In Vila do Conde, 42 ships are mentioned, ten of which were in São Tomé, three in Lisbon, and six in Flanders. Another six were in ports in the Levant, and it is possible that a good many of those featured São Tomé in their logbooks, i.e., did trade with the island. In any case, Amélia Polónia asserts that throughout the second half of the 16th century, the navigators of Vila do Conde became increasingly sidelined because the ship masters of northern Europe took over maritime transport and thus supplanted the Portuguese (Polónia, 2000, p. 619).

In 1599, in fact, Flemish merchant *hourques*, authorised or not, can be seen headed for São Tomé⁷. Subsequently, in the first decades of the 17th century, only foreign vessels loaded the locally produced sugar from São Tomé (Serafim, 2000, p. 247, table 42). However, rather than attributing the waning interest to international competition, it could be argued that the progressive loss of interest of Portuguese ship outfitters in the *carreira* of São Tomé was instead a sign of the economic difficulties on the island after the end of the 16th century, making the journey to Europe unprofitable.

2. Products

2.1. Sugar

After a somewhat slow start to the industrial stage, sugar production in São Tomé developed very quickly in response to the rapid demand on the European markets (Caldeira, 2011, pp. 41-48). In 1517, only three working sugar

⁶ The only thing we know for sure is the place of residence of the master, allowing us to deduce, despite some margin of error, the provenance of the vessel. Some of the vessels made more than one trip. The values indicated refer to vessel per voyage.

⁷ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 7 A*, 1599-11-19, fls. 108 a 109v.

mills were recorded on the island⁸. Some 20 years later, a regular visitor mentioned as many as '60 sugar mills powered by water' (Caldeira, 2000, p.107), a number which kept increasing in subsequent decades⁹.

Quantifying the actual production, however, is not an easy task. While the amount of sugar that entered the *Casa da Mina*¹⁰ in Lisbon is known for certain years, the figures are far from constituting a continuous series; they also seem to refer to sugar production in the King's plantations only. Thus, between 21 May 1550 and 27 July 1554, the factors (*feitores*) of São Tomé sent 24,676 *arrobas*¹¹ of sugar¹² to the treasurer of the *Casa da Mina*. Between 10 August 1557 and 31 December 1560, in turn, the treasurer received 40,263 *arrobas* from the same source¹³.

As for global production, and merely for illustrative purposes, the numbers suggested by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho are useful. According to his calculations, sugar production in 1528 slightly exceeded 123,000 *arrobas*; in 1535-1536, it stood at around 136,000 *arrobas*; at 150,000 *arrobas* in the mid-16th century; at around 175,000 *arrobas* in 1578; and at 200,000 *arrobas* in 1580 (Godinho, 1983, IV, pp. 96-97). Several known factors contributed to the sharp decline in sugar production after the year 1580. These include social instability (so-called 'runaway slaves' and subsequent insurrections); attacks by corsairs; as well as a serious blight that attacked the sugar cane. Production was also affected by ever-increasing competition from Brazilian sugar flooding the national market. Subsequently, São Tomé never again recovered its previous levels of sugar production.

The final *coup de grâce* to São Tomé's sugar-based economy was the decline of the sugar trade on the one hand, coupled with a sharp drop in its value as a result of both European and global recessions at the beginning of the 17th century on the other. Throughout the 1700s, therefore, sugar progressively lost its relevance as an export commodity.

Yet even during the years of its heyday, when it was leading the world market (Galloway, 2005, pp. 51 and 58-61), sugar from São Tomé never

⁸ Letter from Bernardo Segura to the King, 1517-3-15, In P.^{de} António Brásio, *Monumenta Missionaria Africana* (hereafter cited as *MMA*), I, 389.

⁹ In 1578, for example, there were 70 *engenhos* in operation (Lopez - Pigafetta, 1951, p. 24).

¹⁰ The *Casa da Mina* was a Portuguese state-run commercial organization that managed the trade in products from West Africa.

¹¹ *Arroba* is a unit of weight equal to approximately 15 kilograms.

¹² T.T., *Chancelaria de D. Sebastião e D. Henrique*, Privilégios, Livro 4, fls. 128-128v, Discharge letter to Álvaro Mendes, 1568-7-24.

¹³ T.T., *Chancelaria de D. Sebastião e D. Henrique*, Privilégios, Livro 9, fl. 84, Discharge letter to Jerónimo Rodrigues Correia, 1575-1-15.

overcame certain technical problems regarding the last stage of its production: The island's extremely humid climate impaired the drying of the 'sugarloaves', which meant that it was often necessary to resort to drying the sugar in stoves at the risk of it being spoiled by smoke. Even when this did not occur, however, sugar from the island never boasted the hardness and whiteness of Madeiran, or even Brazilian, sugar, and it could only be stored for very short periods of time without liquifying before being loaded.

In Lisbon in 1533, the King (who was, in fact, an interested party) had to intervene. He ordered that a city ordinance, which had been issued the previous year, be suspended. This ordinance had barred Lisbon's confectioners from using sugar from São Tomé in their confections and candied fruit because, unlike the sugar from Madeira, it was purported to be unhealthy (Rau, 1971, pp. 6-7).

The poorer quality, or at any rate, the inferior appearance of sugar from São Tomé, was clearly reflected in the price. In 1552-1553, on the market of Antwerp, one *arroba* of Madeiran sugar fetched six to eight florins, while the same weight of sugar from São Tomé fetched less than two florins (Rau, 1971, pp. 6-7). This marked difference persisted throughout the following decades. In 1578 in Flanders, one *arroba* of sugar from Madeira could fetch as much as 2,600 *réis*, compared with 630 *réis* for sugar from São Tomé; in 1582, the prices were 3,000 and 900 *réis* respectively (Azevedo, 1947, p. 249).

However, its markedly lower price, ironically, turned out to be a great competitive advantage for sugar from São Tomé, and it was favoured, therefore, by the markets of northern Europe. Between 1536 and 1550, of all ships entering the port of Antwerp laden with sugar, 59% came in from São Tomé¹⁴. In 1552-1553, 51% of sugar arriving in Antwerp came from São Tomé, 20% from Madeira, 10% from the Antilles, while 19% originated elsewhere (Everaert, 2002, pp. 198-199).

The Flemish in Antwerp, for example, recognised in the quality-price ratio an additional business opportunity. After having been refined, sugar from São Tomé matched that of sugar from other provenances in terms of market value; it therefore did not take the Flemish long to set up refineries in Antwerp: one in 1508, 12 between 1535 and 1539, and 24 in 1556 (*Ibi*, p. 200).

In northern Europe, apart from Antwerp, the cities of northern Germany also received sugar from São Tomé. In May 1593, the island's contractors (Rui Lopes, Heitor Rodrigues, and Baltasar Rodrigues de Chaves) chartered the patache vessel *Bom Jesus* from Tomé Dias with a view to transporting 2,200 *arrobas* of

¹⁴ Of a total of 212 ships, 126 sailed with sugar from São Tomé, 88 of which with single cargoes, and 38 with mixed cargoes (Godinho, 1983, IV, 98).

sugar from São Tomé to Hamburg¹⁵. A few months later, in November 1593, Rodrigues de Chaves, together with several other partners, chartered the carrack *São João Baptista* in order to load 3,600 *arrobas* of sugar, destined once more for the port of Hamburg¹⁶.

In the so-called 'places of the Levant' (*partes do Levante*, i.e., the Mediterranean), the major importers of sugar from São Tomé were from Genoa and Venice. The anonymous author of one of the accounts of voyages to the African coast – published by Giovanni Battista Ramusio in the book *Delle navigatione et viaggi* – was a pilot from Vila do Conde, who, in the first half of the 16th century, regularly sailed the route between São Tomé and Venice (Caldeira, *Viagens*, pp. 29-32). Likewise, a Milanese merchant residing in Portugal in the late 1580s by the name of Francesco Rovellasca, the brother of Giovan Battista, supplied Venice with sugar from São Tomé. As such, it seems that Rovellasca was associated with the Carnesecchi and Strozzi of Florence in the export business of sugar from São Tomé (Alessandrini, 2009, p. 278).

2.2. Enslaved Africans

At the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe was not only uninhabited, but it was also known to be injurious to human health. In order to incentivise settlers to populate a territory like that, therefore, the only thing the Portuguese Crown had to offer were trade advantages with the western coast of Africa. However, since it had no intention of relinquishing the gold trade, which was centralized in São Jorge da Mina, and which the Crown considered an exclusive royal prerogative, little was left but to offer the traffic of enslaved persons.

To that effect, the King granted permission to trade 'in the five slave rivers beyond the fortress of São Jorge da Mina' (Marques, 1971, III, p. 646), extending his authorisation to any subject willing to upend and live in what was then the most remote territory the Portuguese had ever built on. With the royal charter of 1493, when the coast was better known, the area of Portuguese dominion seems to have been extended 'from the Rio Real [the common entrance to the New Calabar and Bonny rivers] and the island of Fernando Pó to the whole land of Manikongo' (*Ibi*, III, p. 423). However, the charter now excluded the 'slave rivers', i.e., the various branches of the Niger delta, which had, in the intervening years, been leased exclusively to the Florentine merchant banker

¹⁵ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 11, 1593-3-29, fls. 63v-65.*

¹⁶ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 11, 1593-9-3, fls. 85v-88.*

Bartolomeo Marchionni (Heers, 1971, II, p. 921; Guidi Bruscoli, 2014, pp. 118-119).

One of the main economic activities of São Tomé was to be the re-exportation of enslaved Africans to Portugal, as well as to São Jorge da Mina. After 1519, therefore, São Tomé became the sole exporter of enslaved persons to São Jorge da Mina (Vogt, 1973, pp. 453-467; Ballong-Wen-Mewuda, 1993, p. 338). At around 1519, it also became, alongside Cabo Verde, one of the suppliers of an enslaved workforce to the Spanish Antilles, following the Spanish Emperor Charles V's authorisation for enslaved Africans to be shipped directly from the Portuguese islands off the coast of Africa, without having to go through the *Casa de Contratación* in Seville. This, however, did not mean that he had exempted them from the required licenses (Cortés López, 2004, pp. 23-38).

As such, the shipment of enslaved captives to the Antilles followed strict rules. There is a documented reference to the 'Regiment of the Antilles', although it is not known if this was ever put in writing. According to this rule book, there should be twice as many enslaved men than women; none should be younger than 15 years; none older than 40; and all the so-called 'specimen' (*peças*) must be 'good and fleshy and heavy and chosen by the pilot [of the vessel they were boarding] and by two sworn men', after which the letter G (for Guinea) was to be branded on their right shoulder. In 1534, for example, having met all these conditions, the galleon *São Miguel* loaded 201 enslaved persons (134 men and 67 women) in the bay of São Tomé, to be delivered to André Ferreira, the royal factor in Santo Domingo¹⁷. The following year, three more ships left the island for Santo Domingo, with 671 enslaved persons on board, of which 94 perished during the journey¹⁸.

While, initially, Lisbon was the principal destination for the trade in enslaved persons, it was, after 1520, surpassed by the Caribbean, and also by Mina. This did not mean that Lisbon lost its role as distribution centre of enslaved persons for Europe, as captives continued to be sent from the capital to the Mediterranean, especially to the south of Spain, but also to northern Europe, and in particular, to Antwerp¹⁹.

Re-exportation of enslaved Africans from São Tomé to Lisbon, albeit with fluctuating numbers, was largely concentrated in the first half of the 16th century. This was a time when São Tomé was the main supplier of captive

¹⁷ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /196/147, 1534-12-19.

¹⁸ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /205/13, 1535-12-1.

¹⁹ Jean Denucé, seemingly discounting Seville, claims that in the 16th century, Antwerp was, after Lisbon, the European city 'with the largest number of inhabitants of colour' (Denucé, 1937, p. 30).

laborers to metropolitan Portugal, as the ships that carried sugar and other goods to Lisbon filled up part of their hold with enslaved persons. It is important to note that the *carreira* of São Tomé never included any so-called 'slave ships' as such. For example, in 1532, the *nau-hourque Conceição*, which belonged to master João Afonso, left São Tomé with 670 boxes of sugar (around 3,200 *arrobas*), 27 *quintais*²⁰ of ivory, 33 *quintais* of African Coralwood, and 150 'specimen of male and female slaves of all ages'²¹. Because of this irregular cargo situation, enslaved captives travelled in overcrowded conditions, and thus the death rate was extremely high. In the example above, 78 of the captives did not reach their destination alive²². In 1525 and 1526, 555 enslaved persons left the *feitoria* of São Tomé, but only 303 arrived in the *Casa da Guiné* alive²³. Between 1532-1534, of 1,265 captives that left the island, only 785 arrived in Lisbon alive²⁴. Many had perished at sea, and two dozen were sold at the stopover in the Azores.

During the 16th century, the merchants of São Tomé and Príncipe, authorised to deal in enslaved persons on the African coast, frequented chiefly the Gulf of Guinea, especially the area that stretched from Cape Palmas as it was then known (now Harper), to Cape Lopez (named after Lopo Gonçalves). Whenever possible, however, they preferred some of the arms of the huge Niger delta, a region known at the time as 'the rivers'. Some of their most frequent destinations were 'the rivers': this referred to the Benin River, the Forcados River, and the Rio Real. However, with the proliferation of sugar plantations, the demand for enslaved persons increased, and so did the sales of captive laborers. In this way, trafficking of enslaved persons gradually extended to Loango; to the kingdom of the Congo (ships from São Tomé appear in the port of Mpinda from the early 16th century onwards); and as far south as to the estuary of the Kuanza river and beyond. It is probable that it stretched even further, into the region of Benguela.

The prominent role of the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe as Atlantic trading posts dedicated to the trade of enslaved persons did not last long as sales for the region of Mina plummeted in the 1530s. Lower demands for enslaved persons were due to much-reduced imports of gold to the coast, coupled with King John III's moral considerations. He abhorred the fact that

²⁰ *Quintal* is a unit of weight equal to 4 *arrobas* (approximately 60 kilograms).

²¹ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /181/129, 1533-3-19.

²² T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/210/91, 1533-8-4.

²³ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, I /47/97, 1531-11-13.

²⁴ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, I /57-58, II /174/85; II /176/56, II /178/49, II /181/122, II /181/129, II /182/67, II /184/17, II /190/106, II /195/41, II /207/15, II /207/15, II - 210-91, III /11/102.

Christians sold enslaved persons, some of whom had been baptized, to non-Christians. The flow of enslaved people to Europe, Lisbon in particular, was fully dependent on the sugar trade and ran alongside it, and both came to an end in the early 17th century. By contrast, the most profitable trade in enslaved people, which was the trade with Spanish America, was far too competitive a market for São Tomé to break into and fully take advantage of. What's more, a newly emerging destination, Brazil, became the focus for the trade's rising, and ultimately most dominant, centre: Angola. This came about through direct bilateral trade between the two sides of the Atlantic. Throughout the 17th century, therefore, São Tomé and Príncipe headed towards considerable isolation in various other economic fields, as well as in the trade in enslaved persons.

2.3. African Coralwood

Coralwood was never a major export product for São Tomé. However, most of the vessels who left the island laden with sugar and enslaved Africans during the first decades of the 16th century also carried Coralwood, which they offloaded in the *Casa da Mina*.

In October 1530, for example, the factor Manuel Vaz sent Afonso Fernandes, master of the *Marieta*, 508 *arrobas* of sugar and 120 *quintais* of Coralwood²⁵. In January 1532, the carrack *Santa Maria da Luz* loaded 500 boxes of sugar (the equivalent of 2,362 *arrobas*) and 60 *quintais* of Coralwood²⁶. In 1533, the *São Miguel*, whose master was Vicente Rodrigues, loaded 2,386½ *arrobas* of sugar in boxes and caskets, 50 'peças of male and female slaves of all ages', and 50 *quintais* of Coralwood, which were added to the sugar cargo²⁷.

Coralwood (*Pterocarpus soyauxii* or *Pterocarpus tinctorius*) was common in the humid forests of Africa's western coast, Sierra Leone, and also Angola, where it was called *takula* in Kimbundu. It was a resistant hardwood used in exterior carpentry, but especially appreciated as a dye. Although it was a different plant species to Brazilwood, the officials of the *Casa da Mina* in 1526 are recorded as stacking both the African and South American logs in the same warehouse, and seemed to be unable to distinguish between them²⁸.

Some of the wood exported by São Tomé may have come from the island itself, although consistent information is, unfortunately, unavailable; what is

²⁵ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/165/80, 1530-10-26.

²⁶ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /173/112, 1532-1-31.

²⁷ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /181/122, 1533-10-15 e II/210/91, 1534-3-24.

²⁸ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II /171/62, 1531-1-4.

certain, however, is that the majority came from the coast of Africa. In 1517, João Fialho informed António Carneiro, captain of the donatarie of the island of Príncipe, that the *Oliveira* had brought enslaved persons, as well as ivory and '36 Coralwoods' from Benin²⁹. In 1519, the *Regimento do Trato de S. Tomé* (Regulations Governing the Trade in Enslaved Persons in São Tomé) instructed the clerks of the *feitoria* to register, while unloading, not only the enslaved Africans and ivory, but also the number and weight of the Coralwood pieces³⁰.

Later, São Tomé lost partial, or possibly total, control over the exportation of 'Tacula wood', as it was also known, as the island was replaced as a shipping port for Coralwood by Loango and Angola³¹. In terms of its use as a dye, at any rate, Coralwood had by then been supplanted by Brazilwood.

2.4. Ivory

As was the case with Coralwood, ivory was never one of the major products that circulated on the *carreira* of São Tomé, despite the fact that, during the 16th century, many ships from São Tomé that docked in Lisbon carried it as their cargo.

Writing at the beginning of the 1500s, the explorer and geographer Duarte Pacheco Pereira noted the locations where the Portuguese of São Tomé bought ivory, such as the interior of the kingdom of Benin, as well as the river Benin itself, which he called the 'Formoso river'. He makes cursory mention of the region of the Forcados River, while lingering a little more on the mountains and river of the Cameroons, i.e., the continental area across from the island of Fernando Pó, claiming that 'this land has many great elephants, whose tusks, which we call ivory, we buy; and for a *manilla* (shackle) of copper, one can find here a great elephant tusk'³².

The price of ivory soon increased, a sure sign of demand. In 1517, the crew of the *Oliveira*, property of António Carneiro, donatory captain of the island of Príncipe, brought back 187 ivory tusks from Benin, for which he paid 1,623 manillas of copper, i.e., an average of 8,7 manillas per tusk. The average price the crew paid per enslaved person was 57 manillas³³.

And still, prices continued to rise. Only five years later, the *São Miguel* bought 228 elephant tusks in Benin, of which 31 were paid for with cloth and

²⁹ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, I /22/70, 1517-8-24.

³⁰ *Regiment of the São Tomé Slave Trade*, 1519 (MMA, IV, 130).

³¹ Letter from Fr. Garcia Simões to the Provincial, 1575-10-20 (MMA, III, 133-134).

³² Letter from Pedro Sardinha, 1611 (MMA, VI, 54).

³³ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, I /22/70, 1517-8-24.

manillas, while the remaining 197 were paid for with 3,845 manillas. This amounted to an average of almost 20 manillas per tusk, although bigger tusks were known to cost as much as 50 manillas each (Ryder, 1969, 61-62).

There is no information as to ivory ever being the exclusive, or main, cargo of any of the ships that left São Tomé for Europe. As such, it always played a secondary cargo role in the island port. In 1530, the carrack *Santa Maria do Monte*, piloted by João Velho, was dispatched from São Tomé to the *Casa da Mina* in Lisbon with 160 enslaved persons, 120 *quintais* of Coralwood, plus four *quintais* and one *arroba* of ivory³⁴.

Likewise, in March 1533, the *Conceição* under master João Afonso, resident in Azurara, received in the *feitoria* of São Tomé 150 enslaved persons, 670 boxes of sugar, 33 *quintais* of Coralwood, as well as 27½ *quintais* and 28 *arrobas* of ivory (the equivalent weight of 99 tusks), all destined for Portugal³⁵. The following year, another mixed cargo on the carrack *Pena* brought 126 tusks, totalling 36 *quintais*, 3 *arrobas*, and 28 *arratéis*³⁶ of ivory³⁷. In more global terms, it is documented that between June 1582 and June 28th 1586, the 'receiver of the slave trade of the island of São Tomé', Pero Vaz da Quinta, received 253 *quintais*, 2 *arrobas*, and 30 *arratéis* of ivory, which, according to the average cargo tonnage of the *Pena*, corresponded to over 800 elephant tusks³⁸.

Another receiver, Gaspar Cadena, registered 196 *quintais* and 20 *arratéis* of ivory (approximately 560 elephant tusks) headed for Lisbon between 23 June 1589 and late December 1602. This was a much lower annual average than for the previous period. It allows us to conclude that the global drop in trade on São Tomé in the early 17th century also affected ivory exports³⁹.

3. Capitals

From the early 16th century onwards, right after the settlement of São Tomé and the transformation of the newly occupied territory into an export economy, the island itself, as well as the *carreira* of São Tomé, developed great potential for both private and Crown investments.

³⁴ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/165/80, 1530-10-26.

³⁵ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/181/129, 1533-3-19; II/210/91, 1533-8-2.

³⁶ *Arrátel* is a unit of weight corresponding to approximately 1/32 of an *arroba* (0,459 kilograms).

³⁷ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/210/91, 1534-7-16.

³⁸ T.T., *Chancelaria de D. Filipe II*, Privilégios, Livro 2, fl. 25 e 25v, 1602-8-1.

³⁹ T.T., *Chancelaria de D. Filipe II*, Privilégios, Livro 1, fl. 51v, 1602-10-20.

Except for charging customs duties, the King never restricted travel along the main trade routes. He did, however, invest directly in the production of sugar, and had, during various periods of time, exclusive control of the traffic in enslaved persons between the African coast and São Tomé, as well as of the supply of captive laborers from the *feitoria* fortress of São Jorge da Mina. Private investment in the *carreira* of São Tomé, on the other hand, involved both the transport of goods, and trade per se.

In the case of transport, as outlined above, the *carreira* was not limited to vessels with big tonnage only. This allowed investors with moderate financial resources, most of whom resided in the small ports in the north of Portugal, to finance ship outfitting with a view to carrying enslaved persons, as well as sugar and other goods, from São Tomé across the Atlantic. In this context, divided ownership of vessels was not uncommon, as this maximised on opportunities for potential, less affluent investors; it also allowed for the investment risk to be a shared out.

In this way, Gonçalo Afonso Maio, plus two other residents of Vila do Conde, along with António Luís from Azurara, and Miguel Dias from Lisbon, had a carrack (*nau*) built in Vila do Conde. In January 1576, it was 'finished and rigged, equipped and armed with everything that was necessary to go the island of São Tomé', having cost a total of 2,052,624 réis. Two of the partners had invested a third each, one of the partners a sixth, and two others divided the remaining sixth between them. The total price of the carrack included '29,000 tiles which in the aforementioned *nau* is paid by all, and 3 barrels of rosin for the ship's use and whatever was left over to be sold'⁴⁰. Apart from this small commercial investment, the main profit anticipated by the five partners was most probably the freight paid by the shippers, since the most common relationship between ship owners and merchants was that of the merchants chartering the vessels from the owners.

One pertinent example here illustrates the system of pre-established freight: In March 1593, Tomé Dias of Viana da Foz do Lima – who was master, pilot, and owner of the *patache Bom Jesus*, anchored in the river Tagus – made an agreement with the 'slave contractors' of São Tomé (Rui Lopes, Heitor Rodrigues, and Baltasar Rodrigues de Chaves) to take 2,200 *arrobas* of sugar, shipped in boxes, from the island to Lisbon, and from there to Hamburg. From São Tomé to Lisbon, the freight was priced at 160 réis per *arroba*, from Lisbon to Hamburg it was 6 *cruzados* (2,400 réis) per 'ton of 54 *arrobas*'⁴¹.

⁴⁰ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 1*, 1576-1-4, fls. 80-81.

⁴¹ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 11*, 1593-3-29, fls. 63v-65.

There was, however, another kind of agreement between ship owners and investors, which gave rise to partnership-type companies: In 1586, a partnership was formed between Gaspar Rodrigues, resident in Lisbon and master and owner of the carrack *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda*, along with one of his brothers on the one hand, and the merchant Heitor Coronel on the other. The latter took responsibility for loading the ship, while the two brothers agreed 'to sell the goods in São Tomé at the best advantage', in exchange for sugar and enslaved persons. Two thirds of the profits would go to Coronel, and one third to the two brothers⁴².

From the beginning of the settlement of São Tomé, the economic activity that most attracted big private investors ('wholesale merchants', *mercadores de grosso trato*) was the trade in enslaved persons with the African coast, i.e., the Niger delta, and with the kingdom of Benin in particular.

In 1486, just one year after the first donatory captain was assigned to São Tomé, exclusivity of the 'slave rivers' trade for the following ten years was leased to the Florentine merchant Bartolomeo Marchionni, established in Lisbon since 1469, for the sum of 1,100,000 *réis* per year (Guidi Bruscoli, 2014, pp. 118-119). In 1502, this exclusivity was granted to Fernão de Loronha, a prosperous New Christian and Knight of the Royal Household, who twice held the monopoly of the Brazilwood trade also. Other leaseholders followed, always with the contractual obligation of supplying São Jorge da Mina with enslaved persons and *coris* ('blue beads with red lines').

The contracts issued might also have included the levying of the customs duties on goods leaving the island. But the most attractive part continued to be the exclusivity of trade with the African coast, often called a 'slave contract'. In this system of monopoly, the contractors were obliged to sell licenses to private merchants who wanted to participate in the trade between the island and the African continent. In view of the high profits, the island's Crown officials convinced the Portuguese King to get in on this particularly lucrative trade, so that between 1519 and 1529, the Crown came to directly administer both the trade of the African coast, as well as the provisioning of Mina, both from the *feitoria* in São Tomé.

The monopoly remained throughout the decades that followed, oscillating between royal administration on the one hand, and leases to private entities on the other, the latter being especially attracted by the possibility of exporting enslaved persons to Brazil and Spanish America. In the case of Spanish America, an important stipulation demanded that licenses be bought

⁴² T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 1, 1586-1-4, , fls. 22-25.*

beforehand, and even though they had to be issued by the *Casa de Contratación*, they were nonetheless dependent on royal favour. As such, licenses were not easily obtainable by those who did not move in the financial circles of the Court in Madrid. This gave the trade a subtly international and political dimension, of which all parties involved in the contract would have been all too acutely aware.

In 1579, due to the rapid increase in the exportation of enslaved persons from the port of Luanda, the São Tomé trading contract was separated from that of Angola. This augured a precipitous decline in the island's business. It was somewhat offset, however, by the union of the Iberian Crowns in 1580 and the ensuing anticipation of easier access to the markets of Spanish America. This made the traffic of 'the rivers' and the exportation of enslaved persons from São Tomé more attractive to big European merchants.

Between June 1583 and June 1589, the trading contract of São Tomé was run by the Milanese merchant Giovan Battista Rovellasca⁴³, who closed the deal for 11,000,000 *réis* per year, having procured from the Spanish King the right to ship a total of 1,800 enslaved persons to the Spanish West Indies during the six years of his lease (Ventura, 1998, p. 32).

Thereafter, until around 1620 (which constitutes the time limit of this chapter), the contractors of São Tomé were always New Christians who, through family ties and commercial connections, were well established in the network of converts that spread all over Europe. Two cases case in point are Heitor Rodrigues' and Baltazar Rodrigues' contract at the end of the 16th century; the other is that of the soon-to-be-estranged brothers Jorge Rodrigues da Costa and Fernão Jorge da Costa (1606-1617) (Salvador, 1981, p. 34).

However, the so-called 'slave contract' only covered one part of the economic activity that passed through the *carreira* of São Tomé. Its main section, the connection with Europe, remained unmonopolised and therefore open to other commercial activities. Extant documentation shows us that the business opportunities provided by São Tomé and Príncipe allowed for an extensive number of economic agents, from big merchants (working in international networks), to smaller merchants (often associated in partnerships) and even professionals of other areas, all trying their luck at commercial activity.

⁴³ Giovan Battista Rovellasca is often considered an Italian-Flemish merchant because he lived for a long time in Antwerp where his father, a Milanese merchant, was established. Giovan Battista arrived in Lisbon in 1577 and soon started participating in major business deals, particularly the pepper contract (in which he partnered up with several Portuguese and foreign investors), and, years later, the customs contract. His funding came from prominent Milanese businessmen, whose interests he represented in Lisbon (Alessandrini, 2009, 266).

In many cases, the big merchants were foreigners, representatives of international interests in Lisbon. Often, the only thing we know about those interests is the person who was in situ. In 1525, for instance, the Genovese merchant João de Odon (Giovanni de Odone) bought 600 enslaved persons from the Portuguese King, who at the time controlled the trade monopoly with the African coast. De Odon paid 3,240,000 *réis*, in two instalments⁴⁴. In 1526, another Italian showed a keen interest in this line of business: Estêvão de Espínola (Stefano de Spínola), from Genoa, was a partner in a company for which João Francisco Affaitati acted as guarantor, and bought from the King the same number of enslaved Africans, to be delivered in São Tomé⁴⁵. Decades later, Giovan Battista Rovellasca appears again; he was a so-called 'slave contractor', but in 1587 and 1588, he is seen to be buying from the King 'the new sugar crops from the island of São Tomé and Príncipe', i.e., 6,000 *arrobas* at 53 *réis* per *arroba*⁴⁶. A Flemish merchant, Gaspar Peres (Pels?), resident in Lisbon, appears in different years between 1573 and 1590 as a buyer of sugar from São Tomé⁴⁷. Lastly, in 1599, two self-proclaimed German merchants living in Lisbon, Luís Godim and Sebastião Bacler (Bachor?), bought 4,000 *arrobas* of sugar to be shipped to Flanders in two *hourques*. The seller was Gaspar de Sousa Lobo, a nobleman of the *Casa del Rei* and landowner in São Tomé⁴⁸.

Even more present than the foreigners were the Portuguese New Christian merchants, also active in the European and world trading networks, who, either individually or in companies, participated in the trade in enslaved persons, as well as in the sugar trade.

One case in point is the merchant André Faleiro. He had commercial interests in the Cape route as well as good contacts in northern Europe⁴⁹. In 1591, Faleiro – acting as procurator of his relative Duarte Gomes Solis – bought 2,000 *arrobas* of sugar from Pero Vaz da Quinta, a former receiver of trade goods (*recebedor do trato*) in São Tomé⁵⁰. In 1593, Faleiro associated himself with Vaz da Quinta,

⁴⁴ T.T., *Núcleo Antigo*, n^o 590, fl. 61, 1525.

⁴⁵ T.T., *Corpo Cronológico*, II/131/154, Royal Charter of 1526-2-17.

⁴⁶ B.N.P., *Reservados, Fundo Geral*, 637, fl. 16.

⁴⁷ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o 7 A*, 1573-11-2, fls. 130-131v; *Cartório Notarial n^o 11*, 1590-6-14, fls. 126v-128v.

⁴⁸ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o 7 A*, 1599-11-19, fls. 108 a 109v.

⁴⁹ André Faleiro belonged to one of the most powerful New Christian families, having been granted the title of Gentleman Knight of the Royal Household. Persecuted by the Inquisition, however, he was exiled in Hamburg and subsequently in Venice, where he was known as Jacob Aboab. In 1606, along with Rodrigo Ximenes, he became Consul of the Portuguese Nation in Antwerp.

⁵⁰ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o 7-A*, 1591-8-6, fls. 131-132.

Bernardo Drago, Baltasar Rodrigues (leaseholder of a 'slave contract'), and also with António Faleiro de Abreu, another relative, who was a landowner and *recebedor do trato* in São Tomé, as well as procurator of Manuel Fernandes de Elvas. For their shared purpose of shipping sugar from São Tomé to Hamburg, the five partners chartered the carrack *S. João Batista* from Francisco Pires Barcelos who was, in addition to being the ship's master and pilot, a neighbour from Vila do Conde⁵¹. It is certain that for the years 1606 and 1607, André Faleiro, in addition to other business dealings, bought the new sugar crops from the São Tomé properties of the *Misericórdia* of Lisbon, amounting to a total of 7,440 *arrobas*⁵².

Further examples of New Christian merchants during the 1580s include the prosperous Bento Dias de Santiago. He had a particular interest in transporting enslaved persons from São Tomé to the captaincy of Pernambuco, where he owned the *engenho* of *São Bento*⁵³. Another example is António Rodrigues da Veiga who, in the early 17th century, seems to be a principal stakeholder; together with Jorge Lopes de Abrantes, Gaspar da Costa da Palma, and Diogo Ribeiro, Rodrigues da Veiga chartered a caravel to transport sugar from São Tomé to Europe⁵⁴. We also read of one Baltasar Rodrigues de Matos – who later became one of King John IV's bankers, and who had agents both in Mexico and Seville – buying up enslaved persons in São Tomé (where his father was administrator of the estates of deceased and missing persons, *tesoureiro dos bens dos defuntos e ausentes*) and shipping them onwards to Vera Cruz⁵⁵.

At times, members of the lower nobility partnered with merchants, such as the merchant knights exemplified by Magalhães Godinho. In 1569, in order to charter the carrack *Santiago* anchored in the port of Viana, two prominent merchants in the Oporto market, Simão Vaz (agent of the Castilian firm of Simón Ruiz) and Henrique Dias partnered with Vicente Rodrigues – a nobleman of the house of the Infanta D. Maria – who appears on different occasions in this type of business. Once the *Santiago* was loaded in Oporto, it was to sail on to Madeira to load wine, from there continue on to São Tomé to exchange the wine for 80-100 enslaved persons, whom, in this triangular trade pattern, they were to take to Bahia, from where, in turn, they were to bring back sugar and cotton to Oporto, before possibly sailing onwards to Antwerp⁵⁶.

⁵¹ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º11*, 1593-9-3, fls. 85v-88.

⁵² T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 7-A*, 1608-3-13, fls. 4-6v.

⁵³ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º7-A*, 1585-10-17, fls. 87-90.

⁵⁴ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 7-A*, 1608-3-16, fls. 2-3v.

⁵⁵ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n.º 7-A*, 1609-9-23, fls. 124v a 126v; and 1609-11-14, fls. 24v a 27.

⁵⁶ Arquivo Distrital do Porto (henceforth ADP), Po. 1.º, 3.ª série, liv. 33, fl. 63v-67v, 1569-12-21, in

However, noblemen, at times, bypassed merchants, especially when anticipating lucrative deals. In an effort to secure a contract for the provision of services in the *Casa dos Contos do Reino*, three such Knights, Francisco Rodrigues Freitas, and Miguel da Rua, residents in Oporto, together with Manuel da Rocha Pereira, 'resident in his estate in Pombeiro', teamed up with Gonçalo Dinis, for whom they acted as guarantors and main payers, and who was to buy in São Tomé, or Angola, 'a certain number of slaves' and transport them to Brazil⁵⁷.

Examples abound of yet another important, albeit more informal, trade model in the *carreira* of São Tomé. In 1568, several residents of Oporto – Francisco das Neves (merchant), António de Freitas and Francisco Rodrigues (identified merely as 'citizens'), Estêvão Garcês (notary), Brás Velho (silversmith), João Gonçalves (manufacturer of fishhooks), and Pedro Álvares (barber) – appointed a procurator to defend their common interests. Six years previously, they had each sent 'goods' to São Tomé, care of a clerk who was responsible for selling them there at the best possible price, and in return send each one of them either sugar or enslaved persons. However, as the agent had died before finishing his mission, the seven men from Oporto tried to recover their investments⁵⁸.

They were not the only ones to attempt to profit from the island in this informal fashion, sending goods which they had bought with their savings. In 1592, Gaspar Fernandes (cooper and resident in Lisbon) commissioned Pedro Alvares (pilot of the *carreira* of São Tomé) to sell a *quarta* of wine and half a *quarta* of flour on the island on his behalf, in exchange for one enslaved person⁵⁹. Around 1600, and with a similar objective, Luís Álvares Gago, a tailor from Lisbon, sent a package containing wax candles and flour to an acquaintance in São Tomé⁶⁰. The shoemaker Afonso Fernandes also, from Lisbon, sent a shipment, the content of which is unknown, via a cousin who lived on São Tomé⁶¹.

Although it is not possible to quantify these informal business dealings, which documentation only contemplates in very specific conditions, it is, nevertheless, highly likely that these forms of 'trade de-professionalisation'

Barros, 2004, II, pp. 169-175.

⁵⁷ ADP, Po. 1^o, 3^a série, liv. 74, fl. 65-67, 1584-1-31, in Barros, 2004, II, pp. 319-322.

⁵⁸ ADP, Po. 1^o, 3^a série, liv. 27, fl.s 29v-32, in Barros, 2004, II, pp. 137-141.

⁵⁹ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o7A*, 1592-4-2, fl. 56, in Fonseca, 2010, p. 132.

⁶⁰ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o 1*, 1604-6-21, fl. 123v.

⁶¹ T.T., *Lisboa, Cartório Notarial n^o 1*, 1604-3-8, fl. 68-69.

played a significant part in the totality of trade furnished by the *carreira* of São Tomé.

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5. *Curriculum Vitae*

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