

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

### Introduction

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The following ten studies deal with the social and economic history of the Portuguese Maritime Empire, showcasing its many facets and the way it impacted at home, in the empire and abroad during this period, which covers broadly the Early Modern Age and the first globalisation. The editors of this dossier preferred to choose papers dealing with different periods of time and contrasting geographical spaces, highlighting crucial moments, distinct players, relevant commodities and market organisation in order to give distinctive perspectives of the character and evolution of the Portuguese Maritime Empire. For that purpose, the editors distributed the essays around two areas: Commercial routes and commodities; and mercantile networks, its agents and cross/intra-cultural trade.

While the first section deals more with the structural side of the Portuguese Maritime Empire economy, namely by evolving around nuclear trade routes in the Atlantic and in the Indian Ocean, and with its key commodities; the second part works over the people who made those routes possible, and their endeavour to adapt, thrive and survive in face of adversity. Another thing worth noticing is the fact that despite analysing the Portuguese Maritime Empire, at least two papers deal with other European empires of the Early Modern Age, namely the Spanish and the British, evincing a greater connection between distinct imperial spaces, mainly through private trading networks, especially those belonging either to Portuguese New Christians, or to their relatives who returned to Judaism in The Netherlands and England, as seen in the studies of Elsa Penalva and Carla Vieira.

These trading and financial networks overlapping different polities and economic worlds previous to a unified world economy, show the importance some European traders and financiers had in the establishment and development of the Portuguese Maritime Empire since the fifteenth century, namely the Italians and the Germans. Though their presence and importance in the Portuguese economy is attested since the later Middle Age, their role

became crucial in financing and redistributing throughout Europe some key commodities, especially spices, but also sugar, exotica and other precious goods, since the discovery and the exploration of the Atlantic Islands and Africa's west coast in the fifteenth century. The studies of Jürgen Pohle, Mark Häberlein and Nunziatella Alessandrini display these pivotal connections Portugal had with the German world and Italy (particularly Genoa), important to finance the Portuguese imperial expansion in the Atlantic and in Asia, as well as to distribute and consume the commodities brought back to Europe, among which the fabled spices. Though the importance of German networks in Portugal seems to wane at the end of the sixteenth century, the Italian influence, particularly of the Genoese, lasted longer, and we can still see their investment in the Portuguese Maritime Empire in the eighteenth century, along with other players from the Italian peninsula, namely those coming from Livorno (which included Jews). But European input to the Portuguese Maritime Empire, and to its economy, can also be assessed by the scientific contribution made by some men like Martin Behaim, as Rui Loureiro points out. Behaim was a valuable intermediary between the discoveries being made in the Atlantic and the importation of scientific instruments to Portugal, and in mapping the new spaces discovered, of which the first globe made around 1492 in Nuremberg was his most memorable achievement, as it pointed to the feasibility of a direct maritime route to India, a goal that Portugal and Spain wanted to achieve by different ways.

The discovery of the maritime access to India by way of Africa's southern tip, the Cape of Good Hope, and the creation of a permanent maritime trade route after the voyage of Vasco da Gama (1497-99), was a break with the past but it didn't change completely the commercial pattern established between Europe and Asia as shown by João Teles e Cunha. Therefore, the old Mediterranean route could compete with the new Atlantic route established by the Portuguese due to the way the trade with Asia was organised and financed since the reign of King D. Manuel I (r. 1495-1521), though it lost its weight when Europe managed to create a unified consuming market for spices in the seventeenth century thanks to the supply made by the Dutch and the English East India Companies. The establishment of the Cape Route, however, was the forerunner of the other great transoceanic routes created in the sixteenth century, as was the case of the Manila Galleon linking Asia to America through the Pacific after 1570. As Elsa Penalva points out, Portuguese private players invested in both trade routes during the period of political union between Portugal and Spain (1580-1640), accidentally sapping the economic exploration of the Cape Route to their profit.

Furthermore, Elsa Penalva and Paulo Pinto display the way Portuguese private traders and their local associates built their trading networks in Southeast and East Asia, and how they had to cope with the Crown, and its representatives, and other Asian players for their share of the market. Their papers highlight the role and weight of Portuguese private trade in Asia, and of its resilience and capability to adapt to an ever-changing commercial environment, and also by taking advantage of every opportunity they had, especially in a region with little state presence and capability to enforce its policies, and where the Portuguese and the Spanish empires overlap, thus opening the door to informal commercial connections.

The Atlantic World is represented by three essays, which enlighten different periods and aspects of its construction. Arlindo Caldeira stresses the importance of São Tomé in the establishment of an early Atlantic economy in the sixteenth century by linking Africa to Europe first, and then creating a triangular connection between Africa, America and Europe based on sugar and slaves. Though Portuguese private investors, as traders, slavers and plantation owners, thrived in the Atlantic, some of them started crossing into other European empires in the area, namely the Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as purveyors of slave workforce. The New Christians excelled in that role, but, as Carla Vieira shows, they started crossing into other European empires in the seventeenth century and returning to Judaism, beginning with the Dutch (taking advantage of their presence in Brazil, where they were decisive in the transference of sugar transforming technology to the Dutch Caribbean plantations) and continuing with the British. The closely knit family networks enabled them to tap into different imperial spaces through backdoors, sometimes using relatives who had stayed behind in Portugal and in her empire, but also connecting with Portuguese and British traders (both Home and colonial merchants), which enabled them to build extensive commercial routes, and shift from one place to another when it suited them to ripe a good profit.

Last, but not the least, the study by Margarida Machado points out the importance of key commodities in the construction of the Atlantic economy, tobacco in her case. Rapidly made into a monopoly, the sale of tobacco in Portugal and in her empire was an important source of revenue for the Crown, though it was made by private individuals and syndicates who bade its contracts for a given region. Margarida Machado takes us on a tour for the impact that such contracts and the entrepreneurs who bade for them had on the overall Azorean economy.

The following pages will provide an overview of the social and economic impact of the Portuguese Maritime Empire at Home and abroad, with its players and commodities, enlightening how it worked during the Early Modern Period.

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