

The Portuguese Empire

In 1494, two years after Columbus first sailed to the Americas, the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies divided the world among themselves. The Treaty of Tordesillas established a line from pole to pole, 370 leagues from Cape Verde; Portugal took all the land to the east of the line, meaning they had exclusive rights to explore, trade, and colonize there, and Spain took all the land to the west. The treaty did not last long, as the other European powers quickly contested its terms. Even Portugal later went against the part of the treaty that limited their territory in Brazil. Nonetheless, it shows the great power that the Portuguese had at the turn of the sixteenth century because of their navy.

Portugal's empire was mostly an Atlantic one, and its influence in the Atlantic region was vast. The Portuguese shipped millions of Africans to plantations in the Americas, and killed, displaced, or enslaved millions of Amerindians while colonizing Brazil. Portuguese culture had a large impact on both groups; many Africans and Amerindians were converted to Christianity, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries pidgin Portuguese was the most widely spoken language in the Atlantic region. The Portuguese also played a significant role in trade with India and East Asia in the sixteenth century, though they were later supplanted by the Dutch and the English.

The Portuguese Archipelagoes

Portugal's empire began on a very small scale, with the establishment of colonies on a series of archipelagos (island groups). The Portuguese discovered and colonized four archipelagos in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the Madeiras, Azores, Cape Verdes, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The main settlers were farmers and merchants, which reflected the orientation of the islands towards the export of resources. Sugar was the main export, but a variety of other products – like grains, timber, sheep, and wine – were also important. Crucially for Portugal's future empire, these islands became bases of operation and centers of commercial activity. Unfortunately for the colonists, the archipelagos were often targeted by pirates because of their relative prosperity.

The Spice Trade

In the late fifteenth century, Venice had a monopoly on the spice market in Europe. Spices came overland from India, Arabia, and China and then were processed through numerous middlemen in Venice before being sent to western and northern Europe. In 1498, explorer Vasco de Gama reached India after sailing around the southern tip of Africa. In the ensuing century, Portuguese traders duplicated de Gama's voyage and began to tap into the Indian spice market. The Portuguese sea route helped Portugal wrest control of the spice market away from Venice. The market was secured when Portugal appointed Afonso de Albuquerque the first Portuguese viceroy of India in 1508, and Portugal enjoyed a monopoly on the sea route for the rest of the century.

The Portuguese also quickly established bases on the East African coast at Mozambique and Zanzibar. Such bases helped make the sea route more secure for

Portuguese ships. Once Albuquerque took over as viceroy, he established other bases: at Goa on the west coast of India in 1510, at Malacca in modern-day Malaysia in 1511, and at Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in 1514. Goa became the capital of Portugal's eastern ventures, but not before Albuquerque ordered the massacre of the entire Muslim population living there. In the ensuing decades, Portuguese possessions continued to increase. In 1534, Portugal took over Bombay Island. Throughout the sixteenth century, the Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka increased. Furthermore, in 1557 Portuguese merchants created a colony at Macao, in East Asia. By the end of the century, however, Dutch and English merchant companies challenged and partially supplanted the Portuguese along these lucrative trade routes.

Portugal's African Colonies

Initially, Portuguese exploration of the coasts of Africa was for the purpose of finding a sea route to India. In the process of this exploration, however, they also developed an interest in Africa itself. On the west coast, the Portuguese were attracted to the African slave trade, which they used as a source of labor for European plantations in the Americas. The Portuguese developed colonies at Angola and Guinea as they tapped into the slave trade. In the east, through their outpost at Mozambique, they heard tales of a fabulously wealthy ruler, Munhumutapa, who had an enormous collection of gold. They travelled up the Zambezi River to find him, and established two settlements as they travelled. One of them, Tete, was 260 miles from the sea. The Portuguese never found Munhumutapa, but they retained colonies in both East and West Africa until late in the twentieth century.

Though the Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish trading colonies in Africa, they did not follow this initial action with sustained colonization or conquest. They did, however, maintain a strong presence in Africa based on their role in the slave trade. The strongest connection was with the colony at Guinea, which was the closest to Portugal. The region around Guinea was known as the Slave Coast for its role in the slave industry. The Portuguese were only permitted to operate through the port of Bissau, however, as the Guinean rulers did not want the Europeans going any further inland and cutting into their profits. Nonetheless, the Portuguese position in the transatlantic slave trade was secure; none of the other European powers could dislodge them from Guinea. The British attempted to establish a rival port for a brief period in the 1790s, but that effort failed.

Down the African coast, however, other European powers soon established colonies in southern Africa to rival the Portuguese in Angola. While Portugal kept a few fortified settlements on the coast (and held on to the colony of Angola, which was eventually expanded, until the 1970s), the Dutch established the Boer settlement in South Africa in the eighteenth century, and in the early 1800s the British established a competing settlement. Nonetheless, in Angola the Portuguese were the main Europeans to profit from the slave trade. Most slaves shipped through Angola went to Brazil. Portuguese colonial settlements on the East African coast were much smaller, even though the Portuguese had penetrated further inland in their efforts to find Munhumutapa. Other groups – the Ottoman Empire, for instance – were also interested

in this region and its lucrative trade in gold, ivory, and slaves. The Portuguese were just one group of explorers among many.

Though the Portuguese had a small presence in these areas, they nonetheless had been in Africa the longest of all the European empires. When the other European powers began the Scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century, they recognized Portuguese claims to Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique without much trouble.

Brazil

The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas gave most of the Americas to Spain, but part of modern-day Brazil, since it extends into the Atlantic, was designated Portuguese territory. Portuguese explorer Pedro Cabral first charted the coasts of Brazil between 1500 and 1502, but as the Portuguese were focused on the eastern spice trade in the early part of the sixteenth century, they did not attempt to colonize the Americas as quickly as the Spanish.

The Portuguese called the new land Brazil after a type of wood called pau-brasil; red dye extracted from the wood was very popular in Europe at the time. The colonization process began in 1533, when King John II divided the coastline into fifteen sections, called *donatários*, each of which stretched about 150 miles along the coast. He gave the land to fifteen courtiers, who were permitted to create cities, grant land, and raise taxes on as much of the inland area as they could colonize. The scheme was flawed, however, as some donatário owners never came to Brazil, while others lacked the capital to invest. When by the 1540s only two donatários had had any success, the monarchy took over the colony. The first governor-general landed at the capital of Bahia (today's Salvador) in 1549. The capital remained there until 1763, when it moved to its present site, Rio de Janeiro.

Both colonists and Jesuit missionaries arrived with the governor-general. The typical immigrants were young, single men who had been artisans or agricultural laborers. Few families arrived at first, and the colonies had a large imbalance between men and women until the eighteenth century. The Jesuits, who were trying to convert the Amerindians to Christianity, moved further inland before the settlers did. The priests often clashed with bands of men called *bandeirantes*, who were often of mixed European-Amerindian ancestry. The bandeirantes searched across the continent for gold and silver to rival the Spanish finds in Mexico.

As all of these groups moved further inland, they expanded the original boundaries of Brazil as set out in the Tordesillas agreement. By the late seventeenth century, Portuguese settlers had occupied the entire Amazon River basin to the Andes Mountains. The colonists also moved as far south as the Rio de la Plata, which is the modern border between Argentina and Uruguay. The settlement resulted in a century of border conflicts between the Spanish and the Portuguese.

The two successful donatários of the 1530s, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, were initially the major sites of economic activity in Brazil. Both donatários were home to many sugar plantations. Cattle farming was also a major occupation, and many settlers, including miners, owned subsistence farms. While on the surface the plantation economy seemed promising to those back in Portugal, in practice there were many

obstacles. The original donatario system meant that much of the arable land was unavailable to those who wanted to farm it, and a labyrinthine bureaucracy further dissuaded potential capitalists.

While bandeirantes searched for gold on their initial voyage to the Americas, they did not find it until 1693, when it was discovered in the southern region of Minas Gerais. This resulted in the first major gold rush of the American colonial period. Prospectors swarmed to Minas Gerais and helped to open up the interior of the country in the process. Diamonds were also discovered in the region in the eighteenth century, further accelerating its growth.

In general, settlement in Brazil was scattered. Apart from the missionary orders, the institutions that characterized European life were slow to emerge in the new land. The crown did not assign governors for the inland regions until the eighteenth century. The first convent did not appear until 1677 (by contrast, the much smaller New France colony already had several convents). Both secular and ecclesiastical courts, moreover, were only belatedly established and haphazardly convened.

Missionaries

Portuguese colonization of Brazil was accompanied by widespread missionary activity. From the beginning of the colony one of its main purposes was to convert the Amerindians to Christianity. Three major Catholic orders of priests – the Dominicans, Franciscans, and later, the Jesuits – accompanied the colonizers. When the Spanish first colonized Mexico, the friars went with them and reported great successes (though they likely exaggerated). One Franciscan friar boasted that he had baptized 200,000 Amerindians, including 14,000 in one day. When the Portuguese began to colonize, they attempted to emulate the Spanish missionary zeal.

The colony's religious mission was often used to excuse the brutal excesses of colonial conquest. Soon, however, some of the priests and brothers began to advocate for the Amerindians. Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Franciscan friar, became the leading critic of Spanish abuses. Though he had originally participated in the brutal conquest and conversion of the Amerindians in Mexico, he grew increasingly horrified by the Spaniards' brutal methods. He wrote a scathing indictment of the Spanish and sent it back to Europe.

Of all the Catholic orders, the Jesuits played the most significant role in the Portuguese colonization. The Jesuits often stayed in Amerindian settlements to educate and convert the locals. The Jesuits had won the admiration of the Amerindians for the relatively evenhanded way they dealt with them and even sometimes defended them against the rapacious colonizers. In the process of converting the locals – a process that was only somewhat successful – the Jesuits also showed themselves very willing to accommodate local traditions and, occasionally, to learn local languages.

In both Europe and the Americas, however, the Jesuits eventually became too powerful in the eyes of many. In Paraguay, for instance, the Jesuits controlled a series of towns, or *reductions*, which were defended by their own private army of Amerindians. As part of a wider European backlash against the Jesuits in the late eighteenth century, the order was gradually expelled from South America. Portugal led the way by expelling

the Jesuits from Brazil in 1759. Spain followed suit in 1763. Ten years later, the Catholic Church suppressed the Jesuit order entirely, though it re-formed in the early 1800s.

The missionary motive was also crucial to Portugal's other colonies. Jesuits travelled with early Portuguese missions to India and East Asia, and established a church in the Portuguese colony at Macao. Portuguese relations with the Kingdom of Kongo, which began with the discovery of the Congo River in 1482, were always premised on converting Africans to Christianity. Some Portuguese hoped that relations with the Kongo would bring them closer to the legendary Christian king of Ethiopia, Prester John. (They had miscalculated the distance between the mouth of the Congo and Ethiopia; initially they believed they were closer together.) Smaller Portuguese settlements along the West African coast were also driven by the desire to convert Africans to Christianity. For the most part, however, these early attempts to win Africans to Christianity were unsuccessful.

Summary

- Portugal's empire was diverse; there were different types of colonies around the world, and the Portuguese merchant fleet was involved in many different industries, from spices to slaves.
- Through the slave trade, Portugal maintained a massive presence on the west coast of Africa
- That trading effort was not accompanied by an attempt to colonize, however, at least not on a large scale. In general, Portuguese settlements were small and restricted to the coast.
- Portugal's main colony was Brazil, which was characterized by haphazard development throughout its first centuries of development.
- The system of donatários retarded the colony's early growth.
- Aside from sugar plantations, which were a major feature of the new colony, the economy was mixed, and included cattle grazing, mining, and subsistence farming.
- Missionaries were a major feature of Portuguese colonization.
- The Jesuits, in particular, won many converts to Christianity among the Amerindians, and their evenhanded dealings with the locals made them friends even among those they did not convert.
- Missionary settlements in Africa were less successful; they were limited to the coast and not attached to a major colonial initiative as Brazilian Jesuit settlements were.