

African Slavery in Portugal 1441-1532

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According to translation by Jorge Fonseca in the book *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, during Cleynaerts's visit to Portugal, by the year 1533, "There are slaves everywhere... Portugal is full of this kind of person"¹; "I believe that in Lisbon male and female slaves outnumber free Portuguese."² Although Clenardus's observations paint a whimsical and certainly exaggerated portrayal of slavery in Portugal, it does prove that slavery was not unknown in this country. Such a high concentration of black African slaves in Europe was unique to Portugal, particularly in the cities of Lisbon and Evora. Beginning roughly around 1350 the Iberian peninsula had in fact dealt with the presence of Moors, Jews and New Christians as an anomaly within its social body³. Even African slavery was present on a small scale and in the form of captured Moors during the Reconquista. One hundred years later this scene would begin to transform as the Portuguese pushed exploration deep into Africa.

Prince Henry the Navigator greatly intensified these efforts. Interestingly, it seems in principle, Prince Henry was not concerned with slavery, nor bringing slaves back to Europe. The Prince was much more concerned with knowing his enemy by ascertaining the strength of the Moors in Africa and expanding the Catholic Religion. Although voyages were made to the African Coast prior to 1440, none were successful in returning any captives. It wasn't until 1441 when records show the first captives being returned to Portugal. While on voyage for the purpose of obtaining sea wolf skins in the area of the Rio d'Ouro, Affonso Goncalvez lead a war like raid capturing one black Moor and one black Mooress.⁴ Despite the early success of the acquisition of slaves through raids, the now vigilant Africans yielded less and less captives while Portuguese attacks further South down the coast were thrown back in defeat. As Kevin Shillington outlines "On the whole European slave traders were not active in the business of capturing their victims.

¹ Jorge Fonseca, "Black Africans in Portugal during Cleynaerts's visit (1533-1538)," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe, 2005, 114.

² Ibid.

³ Didier Lahon. "Black African slaves and freedmen in Portugal during the Renaissance: creating a new pattern of reality," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe, 2005, 262.

⁴ Gomes Eannes De Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, trans. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage. New York: Burt Franklin, 1896, 39-43.

European traders did not have the military power to go on their own extensive raiding expeditions. In any case, why go on expensive raiding expeditions when captives could be bought more cheaply and with less risk at the coast?"⁵ In fact, for no more than very few years in the 1440s, the Portuguese relied upon warfare for the acquisition of slaves as they took moors captive during early campaigns in Morocco. Accordingly the possibilities for peaceful trade were explored instead.⁶

As A.J.R. Russell-Wood states, "Vessels cruising off the Moroccan Coast had kept a weather eye open in the hope of abducting Moors from villages. Both sources had been unsatisfactory. The Canaries proved unreliable with danger. Goncalves' initiative, coupled with Lancarote's commercial acumen, introduced three new elements in the slave trade: 1) discovery of conditions in the sub-Saharan region conducive to establishing a permanent slave mart; 2) enslavement of peoples with whom the Portuguese had no territorial dispute or religious rivalry; and 3) use of black slave labor in Portugal. Within a few decades the pattern of trade on the West African coast and in the Atlantic islands was irrevocably altered."⁷ The African trades were a monopoly for Prince Henry and after his death, the crown. In 1445, Pope Nicholas V essentially granted a commercial monopoly of the Atlantic African coast to Portugal and unbridled, the Portuguese extended the slave trade South. The primary Portuguese objective was to bypass the Muslim north Africa and gain direct access to gold producing lands. This would provide the poorly-endowed state of Portugal with a major source of national wealth, for sub-Saharan Africa was known to be the main source of gold for the coinage of western Europe.⁸ As exploration continued south it was hoped Arguim would become a favorable spot to make such efforts. However the Portuguese did not obtain as much gold as expected and instead huge profits were reaped from the slave trade. By the year 1455, the Italian explorer Cadamosto reports "[...] every year the Portuguese carry away from Argin 1000 slaves." and "Thus they took these

⁵ Kevin Shillington. *History of Africa: Second Revised Edition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 173.

⁶ A.C. De C.M. Saunders. *A social history of black slaves and freedmen in Portugal 1441-1555*. New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1982, 4-5.

⁷ A.J.R. Russell-Woods. *Iberian Expansion and the issue of black slavery: Changing Portuguese attitudes 1440-1770*. *The American Historical Review* 83 (1), 18.

⁸ Shillington, 2005, 169.

Arabs both men and women, and carried them to Portugal for sale: [...]”⁹ As the coasts and rivers were explored, it became clear that Africa was not only desert or jungle but also consisted of heavily traveled trade routes and in 1445, the same year Cadamosto described Arguim, the Portuguese had reached the mouth of the Senegal river, the island of Cape Verde and the first regular commercial contacts with the interior of Mali began.¹⁰ By 1470, Portuguese ships reached the west African coast south of the Akan goldfields, present day Ghana. As Portuguese exploration continued to push further South, so the number of slaves being sent to Portugal steadily increased. According to David Northrup “To deal with the needs of the rising African population in their Spanish kingdoms, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1475 appointed the “Black Count” Juan de Valladolid as mayoral (steward) of the blacks in Seville.”¹¹ Unfortunately the number of black slaves imported into Portugal during this time is unlikely to ever be known, however it is clear the dynamics of slavery were rapidly changing.

In the 1480s, the Portuguese had discovered the uninhabited equatorial islands of Principe and Sao Tome. In the years that followed, Portuguese settlers developed thriving sugar plantations in the rich volcanic soils of these islands. They manned their plantations with slave labor drawn from the African mainland.¹² These islands would eventually become the prime example for the plantation system installed in the Americas. By 1483 slaves were being acquired from the Benin and even from locations as deep as the Kongo, with the island of Sao Tome definitively settled and now serving as the clearing house for most slaves acquired in these coastal regions. Despite exploration continuing its push further south, most slaves acquired were actually drawn from the Gulf of Guinea, reaching its peak export in the mid sixteenth century of 3500 slaves being sent to Portugal

⁹ Alouise Da Ca Da Mosto. “The Voyages of Cadamosto” in *The Voyages of Cadamosto and other documents on western Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century*. trans. and ed. G.R. Crone. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1937, 18.

¹⁰ Katia M. de Queiros Mattoso. *To be a slave in Brazil 1550-1888*. trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986, 9.

¹¹ David Northrup. *Africa’s Discovery of Europe 1450-1850*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 7.

¹² Shillington, 2005, 169.

annually.¹³ To further manage the increasing African trade being brought to Portugal, in 1486, various officials were brought together under one mercantile complex known as the Casa Dos Escravos, which would come to play a key role in the organization of African trades and more importantly the slave trade as they placed special levies on goods brought from the coastline of Africa to Portugal, specifically slaves.¹⁴ These levies would bring the crown extremely large amounts of wealth as slaves were increasingly trafficking through the city of Lisbon. As a matter of fact, in *The Asia of Joao de Barros*, he states, “As to their increase in royal patrimony, I do not know in this Kingdom any yoke of land, toll, tithe, excise or any other royal tax which is more certain in each yearly return than is the revenue of the commerce of Guine.”¹⁵

The slave presence in Lisbon was due solely to the law of 1473 which required all slaves from African posts to be brought to Portugal before they could be sold elsewhere.¹⁶ According to David Northrup, the number of slaves being sent to Portugal reached an average of 700 per year in the 1480s and 1490s and that nearly half of the slaves brought to Portugal were sold to other lands, especially to the Spanish kingdoms.¹⁷ Despite the re-export of many of these slaves, it seems the black slave population in Portugal remained relatively high. From the earliest seizures of slaves at the Rio d’Ouro in 1441 until 1470, when the trade in the Gulf on Guinea began, anything up to 1000 slaves may have arrived in Portugal every year while between 1470 to 1490 no exact figures are available. However, there is a clear indication that the number of slaves increased after 1490 to about 2000 slaves annually being brought to Lisbon.¹⁸ The strong, healthy slaves fetched the highest prices. As Cadamosto notes “They are men who require little food and can withstand hunger, so that they sustain themselves throughout the day upon a mess of barley porridge. They are obliged to do this because of the want of

¹³ Saunders, 1986, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ Joao de Barros. “The Asia of Joao de Barros.” in *The Voyages of Cadamosto and other documents on western Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century*. trans. And ed. G.R. Crone. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1937, 147.

¹⁶ Saunders, 1986, 22.

¹⁷ Northrup, 2009, 7.

¹⁸ Saunders, 1986, 23.

victuals they experience. These, as I have said, are taken by the Portuguese as mentioned before are the best slaves of all the Blacks.”¹⁹ The sick and weak slaves could be purchased at discounted prices through the Casa de Escravos but would usually require a significant investment in returning them to health.

In the first fifty years of the slave trade the price of slaves was relatively inexpensive, allowing even the common people to afford and to purchase at least one slave. While these prices remained relatively steady for several years, in 1530 the price virtually doubled. This price increase would eventually put slaves beyond the reach of most Portuguese. The crown, never concerned primarily with domestic demand, maintained its ability to purchase and possess relatively large numbers of slaves as domestic servants. For this reason, slavery in Portugal was significantly different from any type of slavery familiar to Africa, islands such as Sao Tome or even the plantations in the New World. Paul Lovejoy explains, “Slavery as a minor feature of society must be distinguished from slavery as an institution. In those places where a few people owned a few slaves, perhaps as conspicuous examples of wealth but not as workers, slavery was incidental to the structure of society and the functioning of the economy.”²⁰ The slave population in Portugal may have been large but slavery certainly was not an institution as defined by Paul Lovejoy. As Saunders outlines, “The French chronicler Commynes writing between 1489 and 1491 perceived Portugal as a slave-owning society and most Portuguese would probably have accepted this description readily enough. Slaves were, however, a relatively small part of the workforce and supplemented, rather than displaced, free labor even in the most menial jobs.”²¹ Regardless, African slaves in Portugal seem to have a unique experience. As early as 1445, Azurara describes black slaves certain ability to easily assimilate into Portuguese Society explaining that slaves would convert to Christianity, train in mechanical arts, manage property, gain their freedom and even marry Portuguese natives.²² According to David Reubeni, a Jewish

¹⁹ Cadamosto, 1937, 18.

²⁰ Paul E. Lovejoy. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa, Second Edition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 9.

²¹ Saunders, 1986, 176.

²² Azurara, 1896, 84.

traveler in the sixteenth century, “After that he saw my Ethiopian servant and asked him if he was a Moslem or a Christian, and the servant replied that he was a Christian; [...]”²³ Christianity had a positive appeal as Africans in the Iberian showed great enthusiasm for Catholicism, joining their lay brotherhoods and in some cases, following religious vocations.²⁴ Granted a large percentage of Portuguese owned slaves, most were owned by aristocrats, priests and religious institutions, government officials and professional men.²⁵ The aristocratic accumulated slaves as a symbol of their wealth. As Edith Saunders interprets, “Clenardus noted that when a gentleman of Evora sallied forth on horseback, two slaves marched in front, a third carried his master’s hat, a fourth his cloak (in case of rain), a fifth held the horse’s bridle, a sixth the gentlemen’s silk slippers, a seventh his clothes-brush, an eighth bore a cloth to rub down the horse while his master attended mass or chatted to a friend, while a slave bearing his master’s comb brought up the rear.”²⁶ Clearly the slaves described by Clenardus served no real economic purpose but rather were for show, displaying openly the financial esteem of the Master. In Iberian society in general, the color black symbolized elegance and splendor. This idea clearly translates into the aristocratic society of the Iberian peninsula. Possession of a large number of slaves was actually the principal means of demonstrating wealth and power, which conferred honor and prestige and therefore such a large numbers of slaves working exclusively as servants were rarely found outside of the house of nobility.²⁷

Slaves with special skills were especially appreciated and sought out by the Portuguese royalty, aristocrats and rich partisans. Renaissance Portuguese society favored white Moorish slaves because they were considered beautiful; however, as Muslims they were considered untrustworthy while Black Africans were deemed ugly but faithful, while mulattos were especially liked because they were more Caucasian and Christian in appearance.²⁸ Slaves owned by the aristocrat population were very well treated. Wealthy

²³ Elkan Nathan Adler, ed., *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1987, 315.

²⁴ Northrup, 2009, 8.

²⁵ Saunders, 1986, 63.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸ Annemarie Jordan. “Images of empire: slaves in Lisbon household and court of

Portuguese followed after the example set by their Kings, their Queens and their courts, who treated their slaves with great care. One example which seems to be well documented was the treatment of slaves by the Queen Catherine. One of the first gifts King Joao III presented his new bride, Catherine, in 1526, shortly after her arrival at the Portuguese court, was a black pastry chef and confectioner by the name of Domingos de Florenca and from this humble beginning of her reign Catherine would become active in acquiring slaves to maintain and run her household while becoming increasingly concerned for their welfare or wellbeing.²⁹ Catherine's slaves were well treated and employed in positions of trust. Although she preferred to obtain young children and females for her court, males could be found sweeping and maintaining the grounds. Catherine provided her slaves with clothes and bedding and in some cases provided her slaves with money and education. Young female slaves received special training and education, learning to sew and any other skills valuable to the Queen's service. According to Annemarie Jordan, "As documents corroborate, female slaves who personally attended the queen and her female court were highly regarded and treated almost as if they were free maids of honor. They were granted rich, brightly colored clothes and shoes, besides several changes of clothing. One document underscores how slave women were often dressed in the finest of materials imported from India: [...]"³⁰ Not only did Catherine spend a great deal of money on her slaves clothing, she generously provided them with many extravagant accessories. Catherine's concern for her slaves also extended beyond their welfare or well-being and she often troubled herself with emancipation and manumission. Unfortunately there are no records available describing the King's employment of slaves or the larger royal industries. However it is known that many slaves did serve in departments of the state such as the Casa de Escravos.

By the middle of the sixteenth century Africans made up about 10 percent of the population in Lisbon.³¹ Lisbon was not only the capital city of Portugal but it was also the

Catherine of Austria." in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*. ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 156.

²⁹ Ibid., 157-9.

³⁰ Ibid., 170-1.

³¹ Northrup, 2009, 7.

largest city and contained the largest slave population. Although nobles owned large numbers of slaves to add an exotic touch to their house, this alone can not account for the large number of slaves in Portugal. In the southern regions of the Portuguese countryside, many slaves were employed in agriculture. Unpleasant working conditions in these regions led to an outflow of native laborers, leaving their place to be filled by migrant laborers and slaves in turn creating a self-perpetuating demand.³² Lisbon on the other hand presents a special case. As Lisbon grew on the wealth from Africa, a demand for labor was created which could only be met by slaves. In Lisbon especially, no occupation was exclusively associated with slaves. Slaves were often employed in religious institutions who readily accepted slaves because they were often too poor to afford free labor and most freemen considered the work performed by servants to be beneath them. Slaves were also frequent workers in hospitals. Working with the sick and dying was considered a very dangerous job often refused by freemen as it was considered menial. Therefore slaves were left to sweep floors, change bed linens, empty chamber pots and any other tasks that free laborers refused. Apart from religious institutions and hospitals, slaves were also working in a number of trades as workmen and often earned money for their masters. In many respects the life of black slaves resembled the life of white lower class. It seems that most slaves agreed with their situation as they dressed, ate, worked in the same way as whites, began speaking the same language and answered to the same Christian names. However, they were expected to conform to the same legal, religious and moral codes.³³ Just as white servants, under the master's power of corporal punishment, black slaves were subject to penalty for breaking these codes. The Jewish traveller David Reubeni describes one incident during his time in Portugal between 1523 and 1527, "[...] after I sent them to Tavira the young Ethiopian slave fled from me and only the big Ethiopian slave was left. He was a bad man and when he went to the market he used to smite the Christian slaves, and they came to me to and said, "Thy servant has done us wrong," and he quarreled with them because of their women whores, and afterwards that Ethiopian attacked the artisan, who was with me in the house and wished to kill him, and I ordered that they should bind

³² Saunders, 1986, 87.

³³ Ibid., 89.

his hands and legs with cords, and I took a great stick in my hand and struck him on the head until I broke the stick. And I took another stick and struck him more and I made weals on his whole body, and then I told the Marrano³⁴ to give him 100 blows, and we put iron chains upon him and locked him in the house; and he stayed thus for ten days, and after that I let him out and had him dressed.”³⁵ Reubeni continues his story as he describes how he gave his slave black velvet garments and made peace with his slave.

This was one distinguishing factor between freemen and slaves; by law, slaves were their master's possessions. Therefore, slaves were more apt to physical or sexual abuse than those free servants were. Some masters chose to rule their house with an iron fist, imposing stern regimens on all his subjects. The only limit on a master was that he could be tried for murder if a slave died as a result of punishment; the law offered slaves no protection against cruelty.³⁶ In Portugal it seems this cruelty was very rare and overall, slaves were treated fairly because of their Christianity. It is believed that due to this fair treatment, black slaves rarely fled their masters. Perhaps this factor of slavery in Portugal is due to the ease of assimilation, fair treatment including an assured maintenance of food, clothing and shelter but also because slaves were outsiders with nowhere to flee. However, many black slaves were able to obtain their freedom in exchange for years of faithful service or rather than hoping for such kindness to come their way, African slaves in Iberia commonly exercised their legal right to purchase their freedom with the portion of wages they were allowed to keep from outside employment.³⁷ Even as freedmen satisfaction was not guaranteed. Many freedmen were left in poverty and preferred the assurances provided by their masters. This aspect of slavery was also inimitable to Portugal.

As previously mentioned slavery in Portugal was very unique. Despite occasional cases of poor treatment, slaves were mostly treated fairly and in many cases treated better than freedmen. From first hand accounts it is apparent that from the onset of slavery in

³⁴ Marrano is a term used to describe a Jew living in the Iberian Peninsula who was forced to convert to Catholicism but practiced Judaism in secret.

³⁵ Adler, 1987, 312.

³⁶ Saunders, 1986, 108.

³⁷ Northrup, 2009, 10.

Portugal, slaves enjoyed a certain luxury not seen in the West. Slaves quickly became a part of Portuguese society by converting to Catholicism, learning the language and even taking on Christian names. Despite the large slave population in Portugal, slaves actually played a very small economic role and were rarely organized into gangs to work on plantations as in the new world. Saunders explains this in an exemplary fashion when she states, “Furthermore, in a plantation economy, an interest in profit might lead slaves to be treated as mere human machinery, essential for the production of the export crops, but expendable and easily replaced by the slave-trade. In Portugal on the other hand, black slaves were never more than a small minority and the nature of their employment, though menial, did not usually balance the life of the slave against a demand for profit.”³⁸

Although slavery cannot be considered an institution in Portugal, with the first captives being taken across the Atlantic and sold into slavery in 1532,³⁹ slavery was transforming into an institution in the new world. It is most important to then understand that, the importation of slaves into Portugal would mark a turning point in the history of slavery signifying the transformation of slavery associated with the age of discovery. Furthermore, the enormous influx of slaves into Portugal would foreshadow the Atlantic slave trade and the Brazilian system.

³⁸ Saunders, 1986, 178.

³⁹ Shillington, 2005, 172.

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