

# Understanding Slavery Initiative

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## Portugal Case Study

Portugal, which pioneered the opening of the wider world to European trade and conquest, seems an unlikely country to have exercised such remarkable influence. It had a small population, and compared to some of its northern European contemporaries, its economy was backward.

But its location gave it quite an advantage. Its long Atlantic coastline sat astride the trade routes between northern Europe and the Mediterranean, and traders stopped at its ports en route. At first, Portugal just traded its produce – its foodstuffs and drinks – for the produce and other commodities from northern Europe. In time, however, it would be able to offer other Europeans the wealth of the wider world, courtesy of the discoveries of its merchant adventurers in all corners of the globe.

## The first voyages

In search of foreign trade goods to the east and south, and encouraged by the Crown, a succession of Portuguese missions gradually edged their way down the Atlantic islands and eventually along the African coast, where they learned about the commodities and wealth available there. Successive voyages returned to Portugal with valuable trade items – salt, pepper, gold – and with enslaved Africans. Each voyage also yielded more practical information for later voyages into what were, literally, uncharted waters.

By the 1460s, Portugal was trading in Sierra Leone and, two decades later, the Congo. Bartolomeu Diaz rounded the Cape in 1488, and 10 years after that, Vasco da Gama had ventured up the East African coast and encountered ancient trading routes to India and beyond. The way was now open to China, Japan and South-east Asia.

In the same period, voyages across the Atlantic, also with the aim of reaching India, had opened new, unexpected prospects, not least the vast expanse of Brazil.

## Riches of Africa

Pioneering Portuguese sailors returned home with goods and trade items from all corners of the globe. West Africa yielded up commodities that had been previously acquired only via long and difficult overland routes across the Sahara. These items now came direct to Portugal by ship.

Inevitably, the Portuguese also returned with Africans – both free and enslaved. By the early 16th century, small numbers of them could be found scattered throughout Portugal, and there is evidence of more than 10,000 living in Lisbon by 1620.

Those aboard the ships of other European maritime nations, who were regular visitors to Portuguese ports as they sailed along the Atlantic coast, were quick to spot the riches of Africa – and Asia – being unloaded at quaysides there. Not surprisingly, they, too, were keen to join in what was clearly a lucrative (though risky) trade around the globe.

## The beginnings of the slave trade

Those other European traders also noted the forced African labour. But like the Portuguese themselves, they were not, initially, interested in Africans as items of trade. All looked to Africa, and to Asia, for more conventional items of trade, especially spices and the gold acquired along the Gambia River on the 'Gold Coast' (modern-day Ghana) from the inland Akan gold fields. There, and further south in Benin and the Congo, slaves were also available, but they remained of little interest, even though the Portuguese used African slave labour on its Atlantic islands and for heavy work in Portugal itself (reclaiming land in the Algarve, for example).

However, when the Portuguese began the development of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea and planted sugar there, they turned to African slave labour in significant numbers.

Having established a rough template of plantation building in Africa, the Portuguese transplanted it to new settlements on the other side of the south Atlantic – in Brazil. They were also pioneers in the shipping of large numbers of Africans to Brazil and (under licence) to Spanish possessions in the Americas. That role was eventually taken over by the Dutch and then the British.

Even so, the Portuguese persisted with slave trading, and their ships were still evading British and American abolitionist patrols in the 19th century. Portugal both led the way and clung to the slave trade until the bitter end.