

# Portuguese Traders in Atlantic Europe in the Middle Ages

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## Abstract

This article examines some of the problems, questions, arguments, and hypotheses discussed in the doctoral thesis *Portugal and the Medieval Atlantic. Commercial Diplomacy, Merchants, and Trade, 1143–1488*, presented at the University of Porto in December 2012.

## Keywords

Portugal, trade, merchants, Atlantic Europe, Middle Ages

## Resumo

Este artigo examina alguns dos problemas, questões, argumentos e hipóteses discutidos na tese de doutoramento *Portugal and the Medieval Atlantic. Commercial Diplomacy, Merchants, and Trade, 1143–1488*, apresentada à Universidade do Porto em Dezembro de 2012.

## Palavras-chave

Portugal, comércio, mercadores, Europa Atlântica, Idade Média

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## Introduction

The role of Portuguese traders in European markets, and the commercial relations with England, Zeeland, Flanders, Normandy, and Brittany in the Middle Ages have a long historiographic tradition in Portugal. The newest addition to this debate is the doctoral dissertation entitled *Portugal and the Medieval Atlantic. Commercial Diplomacy, Merchants, and Trade, 1143–1488*, which I presented and defended at the University of Porto on 19 December 2012. This article will discuss some of the questions that guided my research and present the main conclusions.

At the origin of my doctoral thesis was a historiographic problem posed by the Belgian historian Charles Verlinden, in 1947, at a conference in Coimbra. Verlinden argued that the works existing at the time were unable to fully explain the origin of Portugal's commercial expansion, the establishment of mercantile nations, the integration of Portuguese merchants in other European markets and networks, and the development of mercantile techniques. According to his idea, those willing to learn the economic history of medieval Portugal would realize that historians had written on the agrarian and rural features of the Portuguese kingdom and then immediately discussed the conquest of Ceuta, the discovery of Madeira and the Azores, and all the other endeavors of the fifteenth-century overseas expansion, as if things had happened “by miracle” or “spontaneous generation” (Verlinden, 1948: 1-15).

Bussche (1874), Francisque-Michel (1882), Shillington (1906; 1907), Renouard (1955), Godinho (1962), Marques (1965), Fonseca (1980, 1986), Paviot (1989), and Childs (1992, 1997) are some of the historians who have contributed to our knowledge of Portugal's commercial activities in the Middle Ages, but most of these studies have adopted a binomial perspective, in an unbalanced examination of Anglo-Portuguese, Flemish-Portuguese, and French-Portuguese commercial relations. Verlinden's problem was yet to be solved and so were other significant questions. What were the causes of Portugal's commercial expansion? What drove merchants to Euro-Atlantic markets? How were they organized, and what prompted the negotiation of commercial statutes with foreign kingdoms and regions? What was the impact of the Hundred Years War on Portugal's maritime trade? Did the fifteenth-century overseas expansion bring substantial changes to Portugal's commercial exchanges with Atlantic Europe?

In order to answer these and other questions, I have gathered together Portuguese, English, Flemish, French, and Spanish sources, which have helped to piece together the actions of the Portuguese traders in Atlantic Europe in the Middle Ages. Portuguese

sources are very limited in their variety and quantity. Only 6% of the records used in this study come from Portuguese archives, making this one of the lowest averages when compared with the documents found in England (46%) or in Belgium (37%); only France has a similar reduced number of sources (5%), and the remaining 6% correspond to records from Castile, Catalonia, Ireland, Zeeland, and other parts of the Netherlands. These records can be divided into three typological groups: urban and royal judicial institutions produced 54% of the records; customs and port accounts produced some 35%; and the remaining 11% correspond to royal charters of privilege, chronicles, and other references. Consequently, these disparities in the quantity and quality of the sources cause some imbalances in the analysis of each region, and constrain conclusions. The next sections will explain how the doctoral thesis is organized and will discuss the main arguments of each of its chapters.<sup>2</sup>

### **From Portugal to Atlantic Europe**

The first three chapters of this research are closely linked to the understanding of the relationship between traders, their kingdoms, and Atlantic markets in the Middle Ages; the development of merchant communities in foreign territories; the effect of political vicissitudes and commercial diplomacy in international trade; and the adaptation of merchants to the overseas expansion.

Did Portugal's economy depend on its maritime trade? Was medieval Portugal already a maritime kingdom? These are two of the questions addressed in Chapter 1, "What's in a Kingdom?" Chroniclers, rulers, poets, politicians, and economists have fabricated the idea that Portugal regularly benefited from its geostrategic position facing the Atlantic Ocean, for it is likely that, throughout the Middle Ages, less than 7% of the population lived in urban areas close to the coastline, and that only a fraction of those living there were indeed engaged in maritime occupations (Miranda, 2012: 275-292). Utterly rural, just like most European regions, Portugal had, nonetheless, two cities (Lisbon and Porto) that depended greatly on regional and international trade.

The significance of maritime commercial exchange was reflected in three key aspects of those cities. First, Lisbon and Porto created specific infrastructures to support

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<sup>2</sup> The PhD thesis was divided into five chapters: 1) What's in a Kingdom?; 2) The Origins of the Commercial Expansion, 1143–1386; 3) Portugal and the Atlantic, 1387–1488; 4) Trade Patterns and Merchant Organization; 5) Partnerships, Conflicts, and Traders.

overseas trade, and this infrastructure ultimately changed the urban landscape. Second, as merchants grew richer, they became the predominant socioeconomic elites in those places, representing the city and, purportedly, merchants' interests in the Portuguese *Cortes* (parliamentary sessions), and in the negotiation of commercial treaties, statutes, and safe-conducts with foreign rulers. Third, in the absence of merchant guilds, urban institutions were used to gather traders, to exchange information, and to promote their common goal.<sup>3</sup> In combination, these three factors allowed Lisbon and Porto to enjoy their role as central commercial hubs in the Portuguese medieval kingdom, forming large economic areas under their influence, which provided them with figs, raisins, olive oil, wine, oranges, animal hides, honey, wax, cork, and the surplus of other Iberian products to export to markets in northern parts of Europe.

What pushed the Portuguese towards Euro-Atlantic markets? How did Portugal's maritime trade evolve throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? In Chapter 2, "The Origins of the Commercial Expansion, 1143–1386," I discuss the significance of the strategic position of Portugal in the Atlantic, and how the negotiation of commercial treaties placed the Portuguese merchants in European markets. Moreover, I relate these elements with the beginning of the Hundred Years War, and its influence in Portugal's overseas trade.

Lisbon, Porto, and other places along the Portuguese coastline have always been ports of call for traders and travelers coming and going from the Mediterranean and the north of Europe. This movement of ships, cargo and people began prior to the existence of Portugal as a kingdom, and continued throughout the twelfth century. Flemish documents, for example, talk of honey, animal hides, olive oil, figs, and other commodities shipped from Portugal to Bruges in 1200 (Gilliodts van Severen, 1904, vol. 1: 20). This is the same type of products that were exported to England, Normandy, and other European regions in the early thirteenth century, and basically the same wares that were described in the famous *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* (c. 1436).<sup>4</sup> Portuguese traders were also active in

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<sup>3</sup> This idea is developed in "Network takers or network makers? Portuguese traders in the Medieval West", in *Commercial Networks and European Cities, 1400–1800*. Edited by Andrea Caracausi, Christof Jeggle. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> "The marchaundy also of Portyngale / To dyverse londes torneth into sale. / Portyngalers wyth us have trought on hande, / Whose marchaundy cometh mucche into Englande. / They bene oure frendes wyth there commoditez, / And wee Englysshe passen into there countrees. / Here londe hath the oyle, wyne, osey, wex and greyne, / Fygues, reysyns, hony and cordeweyne, / Dates and salt hydes and suche marchaundy." (Warner, 1926)

Mediterranean markets, and were found in Thessaloniki, Marseille, Barcelona, and Valencia from the twelfth century onwards (Godinho, 2008: 101). But southern European regions produced the same type of commodities as Portugal did, hence the need for the Portuguese to preferably sell their products in Bruges, Middelburg, Harfleur, Southampton, Bristol, and London, regions that had different agricultural and economic productions.

The formation of merchant colonies outside Portugal was rather slow, and the paucity of sources for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries makes it hard to acknowledge the existence of efficient trading networks in the medieval Atlantic. The commercial expansion of late medieval Portugal reveals, however, interesting aspects that must be taken into consideration and which are thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2 of my doctoral thesis. Despite the small size of Portuguese cities, thirteenth-century records suggest that the number of merchants in foreign markets was already considerable. The consequences of this are not only to be noted in the quantity of traders abroad. Certain documents point to the presence of formal merchant networks, organized by urban institutions, which were useful for traders to obtain safe-conducts, but also for the negotiation of commercial treaties and benefits. In 1309, for example, King Philippe IV of France (r. 1285–1314) granted special privileges to the “*marchands de Lisbonne établis à Harfleur*” (*Ordonnances des Rois de France*, 1723, vol. 2: 157-158). A few decades later, in 1340, Philippe VI granted commercial rights to the Portuguese, but this time to the “*Mercatoribus Portus Portugalliae & Lixibonæ in Harfleur*” ([\*Ordonnances des Rois de France\*, 1723, vol. 2: 158-159](#)). The sense of an organized merchant community in Lisbon and Porto is clear in those two safe-conducts, for they were not granted to all Portuguese merchants. The situation had been like this since the thirteenth century, and it remained the same in 1353, when the Portuguese negotiated a commercial treaty with Edward III of England, changing only in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The reasons for this are, in some way, related to the beginning of the Hundred Years War.

One of the arguments discussed in the second part of Chapter 2 is that the Anglo-Portuguese commercial treaty of 1353 was signed in order to protect trade and not to stimulate it. Following the battle of Les-Espagnols-sur-Mer, the English attacked several Portuguese ships, allegedly by mistake, thus creating severe hindrances for those sending their vessels to England, Normandy, Flanders, and Zeeland. Another relevant aspect has to do with the fact that trade with England did not grow as a consequence of this commercial treaty; instead its peak was only reached in the 1370s and 1380s, after the murder of Pedro I of Castile in 1369 and Portugal’s entry into the Hundred Years War. Castilian merchants

became unwanted in English ports, and the Portuguese turned into the “official” suppliers of Iberian commodities in England. Despite the three consecutive wars between Portugal and Castile, and the dynastic crisis of 1383–85 in Portugal, maritime trade seems not to have been affected.

Did merchants continue to thrive in England after the signature of the Treaty of Windsor in 1386, which sealed the perpetual Anglo-Portuguese political alliance? Was the conquest of Ceuta, in 1415, advantageous for Portuguese traders? Was fifteenth-century trade with European markets influenced by the overseas expansion? These questions underlay the third chapter (“Portugal and the Atlantic, 1387–1844”), leading to some interesting conclusions. Traditionally, it has been accepted that the Treaty of Windsor reinforced Anglo-Portuguese political and economic relations, and that it was therefore valuable for merchants. However, if we take into account the number of ships registered in English ports and the quantity of petitions submitted to the king and parliament in England, it seems that business relations did not improve after 1386, and that the alliance between Portugal and England actually hindered Portuguese trade in Flanders and Normandy at the end of the fourteenth century. In order to obtain money to hire mercenaries to fight against the Castilians in 1385, the Portuguese crown borrowed from the merchants of London, a debt that would create problems for the Portuguese merchants. From the end of the 1380s and until the beginning of the 1410s, the merchants of London began attacking Portuguese ships and apprehending the cargo they were carrying in order to obtain compensation for the loan that was yet to be fully repaid. Moreover, since Portugal was now under England’s geopolitical influence during the Hundred Years War, Portuguese merchants often faced impediments in Normandy and Flanders. They had become victims of the mood swings of Anglo-French, Anglo-Burgundian, and French-Burgundian political relations.

One of the hypotheses discussed in this doctoral thesis is precisely related to this problem. If one considers as valid the historiographic theory which claims that João Afonso, “*vedor da fazenda*” (high officer of the estate of the kingdom), was responsible for the idea of the conquest of Ceuta, is it possible that the difficulties that the Portuguese were facing in English, Flemish, and Norman markets encouraged the search for an alternative source of revenue? Is it possible that this Euro-Atlantic blockade was one of the economic variables considered by João I of Portugal (r. 1385–1433) while he was planning the conquest of Ceuta? The outcome, however, is well known: Ceuta would prove to be an economic disaster for Portugal, and merchants never envisioned it as a profitable market.

The discovery of Madeira and the Azores, and the exploration of western Africa represented a first major breakthrough in the history of civilization. The influence of fifteenth-century oceanic expansion on Portugal's Euro-Atlantic trade is, however, difficult to measure. The sources that I gathered together for my doctoral thesis do not allow me to confirm that Portuguese merchants received significant compensation from African trade. Indeed, one of the conclusions that I stress is that the introduction of African commodities in the markets of Bruges and London was extremely slow, and that even Madeira's sugar only became noticeable in Flanders, Normandy, and England in the second half of the fifteenth century. The reasons for this are many. First, it is likely that changes in the consumption patterns of Europeans were rather slow. Second, the supply of new commodities might have been low, thus impeding the complete availability of products in every market. Third, some of those commodities were under royal monopoly, thus limiting potential benefits for merchants in general.

By looking at the roots of Portugal's commercial expansion, it proved possible to identify several variables that stimulated maritime trade at that time, but also some disruptive elements. Private initiative seems to have been at the origin of the development of the early commercial routes and colonies in European markets. Merchants had become a significant socioeconomic group in the major urban centers in Portugal, mixing their economic responsibilities with political functions. Some of the examples presented throughout this doctoral thesis show merchants acting as traders, but also as creditors, agents, diplomats, and politicians. The complexity of their tasks increased, as did the interference of the Portuguese crown in the last two decades of the fourteenth century, and this would ultimately change trade relations and merchant organization.

## **Trade and Traders**

The final two chapters discuss the central pieces of a large multifarious mechanism of Euro-Atlantic trade, analyzing traders, markets, commercial transactions, institutions, networks, and conflict in order to understand the progression of trade patterns, the commercial strategies, the formation of traders' linkages and partnerships, and the many disputes between merchants settled in judicial institutions.

How did Portugal's maritime trade evolve throughout the Middle Ages? Is it possible to find any relation between the town of origin, the merchant partnership involved, the commodity exchanged, and the final market? The maritime trade of medieval

Portugal with Atlantic markets, from the twelfth century to the fifteenth century, can be divided into three stages (Miranda, 2013). The first was one of commercial expansion and lasted approximately until the political crisis of 1383–85. The second began in the post-Windsor period and was characterized by a rupture and stagnation in trade. The third phase started in around the 1440s and lasted until the end of the century, being considered as a period of commercial growth during the beginning of the overseas expansion.

The first section of Chapter 4 (“Trade Patterns and Merchant Organization”) begins by examining the numbers of medieval trade in order to create a general perception as to where the merchants and commodities came from, how many ships commuted between Portugal and Atlantic markets, which port cities received those ships, and how and why the situation varied over time. Moreover, the analysis correlates merchants, ports of origin and commodities with partnerships and destination ports. The findings on this matter are interesting. For example, Anglo-Portuguese trade was frequent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the consistency of those commercial contacts was irregular, due to political and economic vicissitudes. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Portuguese managed to become England’s preferred commercial partner in Iberia, benefiting from the political convulsions of the war against Castile. This allowed Portuguese traders to thrive in England, and the number of their ships in English ports grew significantly. But these circumstances changed after 1386, as already mentioned, and especially after 1388, when Anglo-Castilian relations were restored, allowing the return of Castilian merchants to England and English ships and traders to Castile (Childs, 1978: 41).

In the fifteenth century, the number of Portuguese ships and traders in England was very irregular. This, however, does not mean that Anglo-Portuguese trade was less frequent. What happened was that most of the Portuguese merchants opted to concentrate their business operations in Flanders, while English and Italian traders shipped commodities from Portugal to England. In the fourteenth century, Bristol received 45% of the Portuguese ships in England; this percentage dropped to 3% in the fifteenth century. Yet Portuguese commodities, especially wine, continued to reach customers in Bristol. With the end of the Hundred Years War, wine from Gascony had become extremely expensive for English traders; Portuguese wine was one of the alternatives that English merchants found, and the number of Bristolians in Lisbon grew significantly.

By cross-referencing the available sources used in this study, and by looking specifically at the type of commodities exchanged, the merchants involved, and the destination port, it is also possible to find some other relevant commercial intersections.



Merchants from Lisbon would usually be associated with English (46%), Flemish (20%), and Italian (20%) traders, who would travel especially to Bristol, Southampton, Bruges, and Middelburg. This combination of traders usually resulted in the export of wine, figs, and raisins. As for Porto, a similar correlation is observable. Its merchants were often associated with English (34%), Italian (33%), French (20%), and Fleming traders, and the destination ports were frequently located in England and Flanders. The novelty here is the presence of Italian merchants, but their inclusion explains why animal hides were exported from Porto, alongside olive oil, figs, raisins, and salt.

How were merchants organized? Were commercial conflicts common in overseas trade? The final chapter is entitled “Partnerships, Conflicts, and Traders,” and it discusses the type of commercial linkages established between merchants throughout the Middle Ages, as well as the cases of violence and privateering at sea and in port towns. Its closing section examines what there is to know about some of the major Portuguese traders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

One of the opening examples of this chapter is the case of Luís Martins, a merchant who lived for thirteen years in Bruges and had commercial relations with Portuguese, Italian, and Flemish merchants. For those traders that had settled in Flanders, Bruges offered endless business opportunities that could help them to thrive and enlarge their commercial prospects, for they had access to a wider information network on prices and commodities, and services such as moneychangers, hostellers, and agents from several parts of Europe. This does not mean, however, that most Portuguese operating in Atlantic markets were involved in complex trade networks. Indeed, only a small percentage of Portuguese traders seem to have been part of such larger economic webs of business. Small communities had little to gain by including members of another origin in their commercial networks (Landa, 1994).

People may have a propensity to barter, as Adam Smith once said, but they also have a tendency for conflict. Since many of the sources used in my doctoral thesis come from the records of the *Civiele Sententiën* (Flanders) and are composed mostly of petitions (England), there is a wide variety of cases of assault, privateering, cheating, physical violence, and murder to consider.

Pirate attacks and privateering happened throughout the Middle Ages as a mechanism guaranteeing fast revenue, as a response to debts or previous incidents, and even as a political weapon, especially during the Hundred Years War. Physical violence and murder were more frequent amongst sailors in port cities. The accounts of the water bailiff

of Sluys, in Flanders, recorded many cases of fist fighting, stabbing, and other forms of violence between the Portuguese, but also involving seamen from other parts of Europe. The local bailiff usually arbitrated those cases, and the sentence would typically be a fine or prison. Cases of cheating were less common than one might have expected, and one of the hypotheses put forward to explain this is that merchants were aware of the damage that cheating could do to their reputations, ruining commercial relationships with old and potential clients.

Some of those merchants lived in Flanders, Normandy, and England for many years, and the final section of this chapter looks at a few Portuguese merchants from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even though the sources do not always provide enough information to analyze all the aspects of their professional and personal lives, they do suggest that there were a number of quite notorious Portuguese merchants. In the 1350s, João de Rates was an important merchant in Normandy, acting as a representative for other traders, and he had also been “*tesoureiro*” (treasurer) to the king of Portugal (Homem, 1990: 348). In the 1380s, João Ramalho was one of Porto’s top merchants, with business connections that led him to the Mediterranean and England. During the Portuguese crisis of 1383–85, he had become famous for his bravery during the siege of Lisbon, and later commanded a fleet with an embassy to Rome. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Álvaro Dinis was probably one of the most important Portuguese merchants in Bruges. During his lifetime, he traded with merchants from Flanders, Italy, Spain, England, and the German Hanse, and also became the king’s consul at the Portuguese “*feitoria*” in Bruges, where he was responsible for controlling African commodities shipped to Flanders.

## Conclusion

The doctoral thesis presented in this article discusses Portugal’s overseas trade with Atlantic Europe in the later Middle Ages and also examines the role played by Portuguese merchants in foreign markets by analyzing urban, commercial, political, and judicial strands in order to understand which elements helped to stimulate or to hinder its dynamics. This work has resulted in four major conclusions. First, it demonstrates how private initiatives undertaken by different socioeconomic groups, supported by urban institutions, organized their businesses, negotiated safe-conducts, and created commercial ties with international markets. Second, it discusses the impact of the Hundred Years War on Portugal’s maritime trade, and demonstrates that the foreign policies of the different rulers had more severe

effects on trading routes than actual battles – a situation that is directly related to the next point. Third, it challenges the generally accepted view of historiographers that the Anglo-Portuguese alliance was beneficial for the commercial exchanges taking place between the two realms, since it proves that other variables caused difficulties for the Portuguese sailing through the Channel. Fourth, it presents explanations for the variations of Portugal's maritime trade from the twelfth century to the beginning of the overseas expansion. Therefore, it addresses Verlinden's problem regarding the expansion in international trade by proposing an explanation for each stage of commercial development in the Euro-Atlantic markets (first via commercial contacts, followed by consolidation, and then expansion), and by showing how everything changed in the fifteenth century with the beginning of the overseas expansion and the exploration of Western Africa.

This doctoral thesis raises, at least, two major problems that have been identified in the conclusion. The first problem has to do with the need that historians have to further explore archives in Spain and Italy, for Mediterranean merchants were extremely important in Portugal's economy. The second problem has to do with the available sources. On many occasions, it is almost impossible to follow the career of merchants, to trace their activity in European markets, to determine what happened to some of their investments, and to know how judicial conflicts ended. Sometimes, it seems as if one is only seeing the tip of a giant iceberg, knowing that the commercial relations between Portugal and the medieval Atlantic were possibly much greater.

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