

*Before Middle Passage: Translated Portuguese Manuscripts of Atlantic Slave Trading from West Africa to Iberian Territories, 1513–26.* Trevor P. Hall, ed. and trans.

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The Cape Verde islands were uninhabited when they were discovered by the Portuguese in 1460. However, through the importation of slaves from the African mainland the islands were soon converted to an entrepôt for slaves being exported to other Atlantic islands, such as the Azores, Madeira, and the Canaries, as well as to Portugal and Spain. This early Atlantic slave trade occurring prior to Spanish arrival in the New World in 1492 constituted the foundation on which the transatlantic slave trade later developed. This episode in Atlantic history is not well known beyond the Portuguese-speaking world, so this attempt to bring knowledge of the early Atlantic slave trade to a wider audience through translating some of the earliest known records into English is to be welcomed.

*Before Middle Passage* consist of two sections. The first comprises the translations of accounts of taxes collected by customs officers in Cape Verde between 1513 and 1516. Slave traders were required to pay a 20 percent tax (*vintena*) on each slave to the Portuguese Crown and the Military Order of Christ (Ordem Militar de Cristo). This tax was levied in Cape Verde even though the slaves were acquired on the West African coast. Together the six accounts record the taxes paid on 3,166 slaves, but they also provide information on the ships arriving, the ship owners, and the slave traders. As accounting journals, the focus is on the taxes paid, though occasionally information is given on the age, gender, and health of the slaves, as well as on other merchandise being traded.

Apart from imparting information on the slave trade, the accounts provide unique insight into the nature of bookkeeping at the time.

The second section consists of the log of a ship, the *Santiago*, which sailed from Portugal to acquire slaves in Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone in 1526. This rich eyewitness account provides much greater insight into the operation of the slave trade, detailing the strategies used by the Portuguese to acquire slaves, the commodities they exchanged for Africans (iron bars, cloth, beads), and the food that was purchased for the slaves and crew. It also records the mortality rate suffered by slaves during their journey from West Africa to Portugal, which Hall calculates at 12 percent.

In the introduction, Hall provides a sketch of the early settlement of the Cape Verde islands and the commercial relations that were developed with the mainland. This is essential for understanding the context in which the early Portuguese slave trade operated, but it relies on a rather outdated bibliography and fails to take full account of recent research by scholars such as Philip Havik, Peter Mark, José da Silva Horta, Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, and António de Almeida Mendes, among others. A few of the names of the authors cited are misspelled. Running through the introduction, the short prefaces to each document, the footnotes, and the conclusion there is a considerable degree of repetition that might have been reduced by more effective editing.

My main concerns center on the translation, even though the author details how the documents were transcribed and translated, and on the editing of the book as a whole. Some Portuguese names for commodities have been simply mistranslated or they are translated differently on different occasions in the documents and in the glossary. For example, *lienzo* is translated as “Handkerchiefs or cloth worn to cover the head” (227), when it should say “linen.” The glossary

gives *milho* as “corn of the New World variety,” when the commentary says that *milho* was not maize because it would not have spread to Africa at this time. *Alaquecas* are on different occasions referred to as unidentified or stones, when they are carnelians. On other occasions words or quantities are omitted. While such errors may seem small, they detract significantly from the value of the book, particularly for serious scholars who will probably wish to consult the documents in the Portuguese language, all of which have been transcribed, with the 1526 log available free online.

While the detail presented in the book should be used with considerable caution, including by teachers who might find the documents useful for teaching, Hall has performed a service in bringing to wider notice the existence and character of these exceptional sources for understanding the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade.

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