

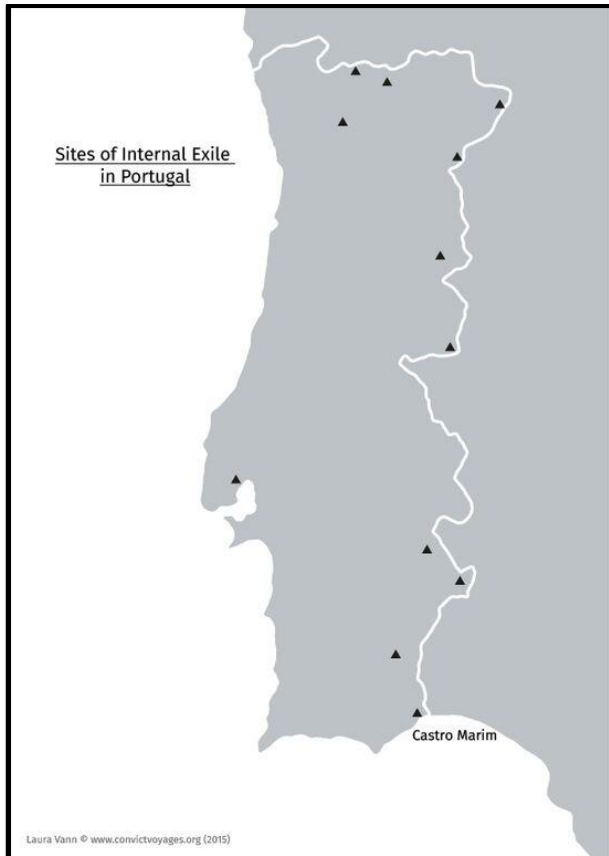
Portuguese Empire: Convicts and their labour

Tim Coates

The Portuguese use of convicts extended from the origins of the country's founding in the High Middle Ages (ca. 1150) to 1932 or roughly 800 years. Until 1415 when Portugal began Atlantic exploration and colonization, this use was largely to populate a series of isolated frontier towns along Portugal's northern and eastern borders with Galicia, León, and Castilla. There was also an extensive use of convicts to man the galleys. With the beginnings of the empire, convicts were used in the army and navy, typically sent overseas in response to a crisis. For example, convicts earned pardons for their participation in the 1415 conquest of Ceuta. This process only expanded with the number of outposts in Portugal's global Empire. After Brazilian independence in 1822, Portugal turned to its remaining African colonies. By the mid 1800s both Angola and Mozambique would develop penal colonies to house and direct convict labor to build colonial infrastructures. By 1932, these would end and Portugal's convicts would remain in the colony where the crime was committed. The one exception to this sweeping overview was political prisoners under Salazar's New State. From the 1950s until the end of his regime in 1974, political prisoners as well as African leaders in the struggles for independence in the five Portuguese African colonies, were sent to Tarrafal, an infamous prison on the island of Sal in Cape Verde.

Sources of Manpower

During the medieval era, convicts were channeled through the two high courts in Porto and Lisbon to sentences of 5 to 10 years of obligatory residence in a border town. As an incentive, their crimes were forgiven after the completion of their sentences. This residence probably translated as military duty or agricultural work since they had to support themselves in this rural environment. As the Empire grew, so did the judicial system. By the end of the early modern era (1500-1800), there were 5 high courts scattered throughout the Empire. The two in Portugal were joined by others in Goa (India), Salvador (Brazil), and Rio de Janeiro.

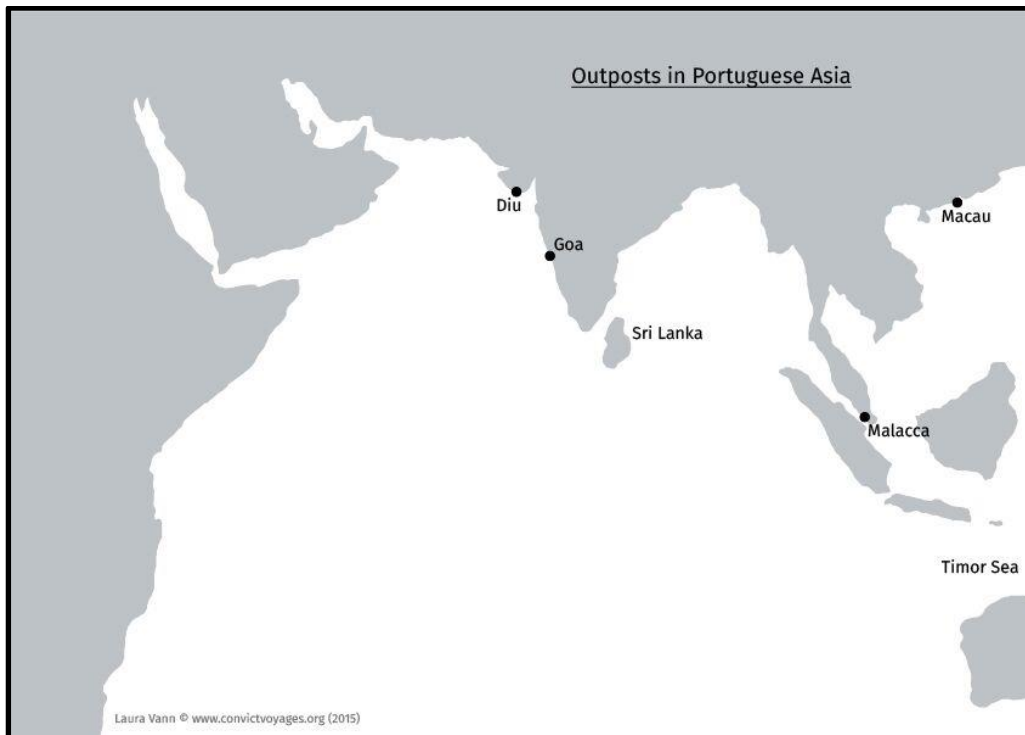


Periodic chain gangs rounded up prisoners from the provinces to bring them to the main jail in Lisbon, Limoeiro. Similar chain gangs brought loads of prisoners to main cities in the Empire for sentencing. The State coordinated sending prisoners to their places of exile with departing ships.

Crimes and Destinations

During early modern times, as a general rule the more serious the crime, the more distant (from the court) the place of exile. Crimes in early modern Portugal were of three types: minor, major, or unpardonable. Minor crimes, such as insulting a crown official or passing notes to someone in jail, would be punished by being banished from town for a given period or being sent to a relatively nearby city. In Portugal itself, the little salt producing town of Castro Marim became the location of choice for such punishments. In Brazil, this process was identified with the ever-expanding frontier. In Goa, the Asian High Court sent minor offenders to Diu or Sri Lanka. Unpardonable offenses were limited to four specific crimes: treason, counterfeiting, sodomy, and heresy. This was an odd assortment to merit the most serious punishments but the state saw these as threats to its government, economy, social structure, and established religion (respectively). In Portugal, those convicted of such crimes were normally sent to São Tomé, Angola, or the galleys. In Brazil, courts might send such convicts to Angola. For example, the Brazilian Tiradentes, who was the leader in a revolt in Minas Gerais, was convicted of treason and beheaded as an example to the population. His followers were sent to Angola. In Goa, unpardonable offences were frequently punished with sentences to Timor or Mozambique Island. Sandwiched between the minor and unpardonable were the major crimes, which consisted of everything else, even crimes such as murder. They would be punished with a sentence of exile to a locale further distant than the minor offenders but not as far as the unpardonable offenders. Since most crimes fell into this category, this group was often sent

to a specific locale in response to some crisis, such as the Dutch threat in Brazil in the 1620s and 1640s.



The Portuguese State developed 5 high courts at the center of this activity. In addition, the Catholic Church in Portugal maintained three tribunals of the Inquisition and a fourth operated in Goa (India). The most frequent sentence from the Portuguese Inquisition was banishment (being sent away from a place) or exile (being sent to a specific place). The Inquisition also coordinated its sentences with the State to sentence bigamists and other men to work the galleys. Minor sinners were sent to Castro Marim while others were frequently sent to Brazil. Minor crimes or sins were normally punished with sentences of 3 to 5 years; major crimes might receive somewhat longer sentences of 5 to 7 years. Unpardonable crimes received sentences ranging from 10 years to life.



Staffing the galleys was one of many requirements faced by all the early modern powers. In Portugal, they were largely manned by bigamists and those convicted of sodomy. Overseas, slaves were at the oars. Sentences of 10 years to the galleys in reality were death sentences since few prisoners could survive that long working the oars.

Readers will note the absence of any mention of the death penalty. Such sentences were on the books but were very rarely if ever enforced. Even the Portuguese Inquisition, which has the popular reputation of burning sinners at the stake, rarely killed people. Their power was in the threat of being able to do so, rather than actually carrying it out. Many times, the State would threaten to use the death penalty if the prisoner returned before completing his sentence overseas, but even when this occurred they did not enforce it. There is a fundamental, practical reason why the Portuguese State and Church avoided using the death penalty: in a country with a small demographic base and a global empire, everyone had the potential to be useful. Roma, prostitutes, vagrants, orphans (both boys and girls), and convicts were all put to some useful endeavor around the Portuguese World. As a result, the Portuguese use of convicts and their labor is linked to a much broader view of early modern marginality and empire.

Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

This system of crime and punishment worked remarkably well from 1415 to the mid 1800s. It cost the State very little (limited time in prison and transportation) while it provided free male labor for

the military and forced female colonization, especially to Brazil. All this would change with the sweeping penal reforms of the nineteenth century. Portugal, in line with the US, UK, France and other western countries would draft new legislation and develop the modern prison with goals of penitence and reform of the individual. The Portuguese would take these theories one more step and tie them to their traditional sentencing of colonial exile. However, by 1850 the Portuguese Empire was limited to a handful of outposts in Asia and 3 small and 2 very large colonies in Africa. Convict labor became closely connected with Mozambique and especially Angola. In the 1880s, the Portuguese created two penal institutions in former forts, São Sebastião on Mozambique Island and São Miguel in Luanda, to house and direct convict labor. Prisoners from Portugal and the Portuguese Atlantic were sent to Luanda while those from throughout Portuguese Asia were sent to Mozambique.



These new penal theories posited that limited time in prison would allow the prisoner to reflect on his or her criminal behavior and become penitent over past evil deeds, hence the term “penitentiary.” In many prisons, this was taken to the extreme of individual cells and long periods of isolation when prisoners would not see another human other than guards. Thus the prisoner would be cleansed of evil and then sent to Portuguese Africa to perform labor that would redeem his or her standing in society. That was the theory. In reality, the prisons quickly became overcrowded and sentences were abbreviated.

Once in the colony, prisoners labored under the direction of the military. This is one of the striking features between the early modern and modern systems. In early modern times, these convicts *were* the military. Now they were supervised by a professional military. The objective was

to build modern infrastructures in Mozambique and Angola that would allow Portugal access to the natural resources and facilitate free emigration from the homeland. In Angola, prisoners were working for the city of Luanda, the colonial government, and the military. Convicts swept the streets of Luanda, helped in the expansion of the city, worked in the docks, the printing press, the police headquarters, and even cleaned the homes of officers. Within the prison itself, male prisoners learned various trades such as carpentry, working in tin, cobblers, and bookbinding while the female convicts washed, ironed, and starched laundry. The details regarding the activities of the Mozambique prisoners are sketchy due to a near total lack of documentation. It is safe to assume they performed similar tasks.

The male and female convict populations were radically different. The male population sent to Angola was largely urban, single, and under 35. These were textbook convicts, guilty of murder or theft or both. The female population was also largely under 35 and not married but many were from smaller towns and most were guilty of infanticide (the murder of an unwanted child) or murder by poisoning (typically of the boyfriend). Men were between 90% and 95% of the total population. Vagrants were also sent to Angola and proved to be the most problematic of all. As one commander noted, 10 vagrants ate as if they were 20 and did the work of 2.

These two institutions were not cheap to run and in fact ended up costing the State a great deal of money. After all, these prisoners were performing labor that could have easily been done by Africans at a fraction of the cost. The two institutions closed their doors in response to the global depression of 1929. They were too expensive and even the Lisbon authorities acknowledged they failed miserably in achieving their major goals. However, they were creative and original experiments of sending European and Asian convicts to labor in Africa.

In the drawing of *Trabalhos Forçados*, it is possible to see the popular image of convict labor in Portuguese Africa. The convict is resting on a rock after working with his pick and has a chain on his ankle. In the distance, the army fires on their enemy and the ships stand by. In reality, Portuguese convicts did not wear chains and their uniforms did not include the little hats shown here, which were used by the French in Guiana.

Numbers and Sources

I have previously estimated that the total number of convicts sentenced to frontier towns in the Middle Ages was up to 21,000. This is based on the number of such towns as were available and the numerical limits the crown placed on each. From 1550 to 1755, at least 50,000 convicts and sinners from the Inquisition were sentenced to some form of banishment or labor. I made that estimate in *Convicts and Orphans* in 2001 and it is undoubtedly too low. From 1755 until Brazil's independence in 1822, another 12,000 convicts were sent overseas. In Africa from 1822 to 1881 some 11,000 more convicts were sent, increasingly to Angola. During the period the two penal institutions were functioning (1881-1932), they received between 16,000 and 20,000 convict laborers. In all cases, the overwhelming majority of the convicts (90% to 95%) were male.

One of the most difficult aspects of working on the subject of Portuguese convict labor is the total lack of secondary sources. Crime and related subjects are only very recently being studied in Portugal. Archival sources for the early modern period are highly fragmentary and scattered throughout numerous archives in Portugal and its former colonies. The great earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 destroyed many collections that would have been central for such a study, such as the galley records, court cases, and documentation on shipping and the military. For the period post 1850, the

opposite is the case. There are so many boxes of materials from the Ministry of Justice alone that it would take years to sort through them. More materials are in the collections in the Overseas Archives as well as archives in Luanda.

What Remains Today from these Penal Systems?

Other than the documentation (discussed above), the most impressive remains of the Portuguese penal systems are some of the buildings. The main jail in early modern Lisbon, Limoeiro, is today a judicial studies institute. Drawings of the prison from earlier days can be viewed at <http://osinteressesdela.blogspot.com/2010/03/o-limoeiro-ontem-e-hoje-aspecto-da.html>. Also in Lisbon, the main penitentiary built in response to nineteenth century penal reforms can be seen at <http://www.cm-lisboa.pt/en/equipments/equipment/info/cadeia-penitenciaria-de-lisboaestabelecimento-prisonal-de-lisboa>. Another institution of importance to forced colonization and the use of convict labor in Africa was the Lisbon Geographical Society. It held several conferences and sponsored publications on using convict labor to develop Angola and Mozambique in the period from 1900 to 1926. It is possible to learn more about it at <http://www.socgeografialisboa.pt/en/>. Finally, there are a number of photos and websites regarding the two fortresses that housed the inmates in Africa. The Fortress of São Miguel overlooking Luanda can be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortress_of_S%C3%A3o_Miguel. Note that this article does not even mention that it was a prison! Today it is the Museum of the Armed Forces. UNESCO has made Mozambique Island and all its structures a World Heritage Site. It is possible to see the Fortress of São Sebastião at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Island_of_Mozambique_banner_Fort_Sao_Sebastiao.gif.

Significance

Portugal is a small country yet it controlled a vast global empire. The unending manpower requirements to staff the many forts, galleys and other ships, as well as to populate remote and unpopular imperial locales demanded novel solutions and the participation of the entire population. Convicts were part of the solution to these problems during early modern times and were the major solution for the scramble for colonies in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The early modern punishment of exile was both cruel and humane. Separating the offender from hometown, family, and friends, it removed the convict to a distant location with no support. Penal exile to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a dreaded sentence, lamented by the population in song and books. The total numbers of people relocated by the Portuguese State from 1150 to 1932 are impressive when viewed against Portugal's small population. The punishment of exile was a powerful tool for the State not only to extract labor but as a very real threat to maintain social control.

Further Reading

C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (London: Hutchinson and Company, Ltd., 1969). This book is not really about convict labor in the Portuguese Empire although it does have one chapter on marginal figures. It is, however, a wonderful introduction to the Empire as a whole.

Timothy J. Coates, *Convicts and Orphans: Forced and state-sponsored colonization in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). This work discusses the early modern use of exile as punishment and how convicts were part of this imperial marginal labor force.

Timothy J. Coates, *Convict Labor in the Portuguese Empire, 1740-1932: Redefining the Empire with Forced Labor and New Imperialism* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). This work discusses the more modern developments of penal institutions in Angola with some reference to Mozambique.

Geraldo Pieroni and Timothy Coates, *Do Couto de Pecado a Vila do Sal: Castro Marim, 1450-1755* (Lisboa: Sà da Costa, 2002). This work, unfortunately not available in English translation, centers on the town of Castro Marim, who was sent there, why, and what labor they performed.

Maria João Vaz, *Crime e Sociedade. Portugal na Segunda Metade do século XIX* (Oeiras: Celta, 1998). This work, also only available in Portuguese, discusses the impact of crime on Portuguese society in the second half of the nineteenth century.