

THE PORTUGUESE MERCANTILE COMMUNITY AND THE SLAVE TRADE (EXTRACT FROM REF 340)

In Portugal, both Portuguese and foreign merchants had commercial interests in the slave trade. Most foreigners were from the Italian cities and Flanders, while the Portuguese merchants were divided between Old Christians and New Christians. These businessmen had begun their economic activities in the South Atlantic in the fifteenth century. Western Africa was their first economic target, followed by the Spanish Americas and Brazil in the early sixteenth century. The sugar, dyewood, and slave trades were their main interests. Lisbon and Seville were the organizational centers of the Old World slave trade, and their role continued when the transatlantic traffic began. As already stated, private merchants wanting to participate in these businesses needed to lease a monopoly or obtain a commercial license from the crown and/or the *contratadores*. According to Freire Costa, the Dias Henriques, the Vaz de Évora, the Rodrigues de Elvas, and the Fernandes de Elvas were some of the most prominent families holding the management of the *contratos régios* (royal monopolies). The Lamego, the Ximenes, the Coutinho, and the Gomes da Costa families were also prominent. Until the mid-1620s, these families appeared regularly as holders of the monopoly contracts of the Portuguese crown, not only for western Africa, but also for other commercial areas. During this period, there was also foreign investment in the royal contracts for the African trade, including the slave trade. For instance, between circa 1583–1600, Giovanni Batista Rovelasca, a Milanese merchant based in Lisbon, and his associates Pedro de Sevilha and António Mendes Lamego rented the royal monopoly of São Tomé. During the same period, Rovelasca's partners also held the monopoly rights of the contract of Angola. Throughout the Union of the Iberian Crowns (1580–1640), the Portuguese commercial and financial community also had the chance to hold contracts from the Spanish royal monopolies.⁴² The Spanish *asiento*—Spain's monopoly over the trading licenses for the regular supply of African slaves to the Spanish American colonies—was among those contracts. Between 1586 and 1640, Portuguese businessmen monopolized the system of *asientos*. By holding simultaneously the Spanish *asiento* and the Portuguese royal monopolies on the African trade, these merchants managed to control both the major supply and the consumer markets for slave labor. For instance, João Rodrigues Coutinho, governor of Angola and son of Lopo de Sousa Coutinho, ex-governor of São Jorge da Mina, held the monopoly rights to the trade with Angola between 1593 and 1606. Between 1595 and 1600, his partner, Pedro Gomes Reinel, was the main holder of the Spanish *asiento*. In the following period (1601–1609), João and his brother Gonçalo Vaz Coutinho managed to obtain the Spanish *asiento* through their connections in the court of Philip II. Gonçalo Vaz Coutinho was also the son-in-law of Diogo da Veiga, a merchant engaged in the slave trade with Brazil and the Río de la Plata. After the Portuguese Restoration in 1640, the Portuguese merchants who held the *asiento* at the time abandoned Seville, and the links of the Portuguese mercantile elite based in Lisbon to the transatlantic slave trade appeared to weaken.⁴⁹ Between the 1640s and 1670s, most *contratadores* of the Angolan royal monopoly were citizens and merchants based in Luanda. This was the case of Lopo da Fonseca Henriques, Tomás Figueira Bultão, Diogo Sanches Caraça, and Jerónimo de Teixeira Henriques. Most of these businessmen were New Christians linked with families that were already major investors in the African trade. For instance, Lopo da Fonseca Henriques rented the contract of Angola between 1645 and 1651. Together with his brother Jerónimo Teixeira da Fonseca, captain of Massangano in Angola, he took over the same contract for two other terms, between 1663 and 1664 and again between 1669 and 1676. The brothers had family ties with Duarte Dias Henriques, holder of the contract of Angola in the period 1607–1614 and the Spanish *asiento* from 1627–1647, who had wide connections in Brazil and the Spanish American colonies as well. Aside the slave trade, the Fonseca brothers also held bonds of the Portuguese public debt and were investors in the Company of Brazil, chartered by the crown in 1649.