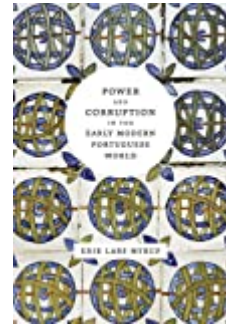




Erik Lars Myrup. *Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. 256 S. (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8071-5980-4.



Reviewed by José Eudes Gomes

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E. L. Myrup: Power and Corruption in the Early Modern Portuguese World

“Portugal and its empire are one of the great enigmas of history”, wrote J. H. Plumb in his introduction to Charles Boxer’s account of the Portuguese seaborne empire. Charles R. Boxer, *The History of Human Society*, New York 1969. In fact, how did such a small, poor and peripheral western European country manage to build the first truly global empire?

In his recent book, Erik Lars Myrup offers an answer to that intriguing question. According to him, the Portuguese empire consisted of an extensive web of human connections. Inside and underneath its formal institutions, social networks and interpersonal relationships were the ties that brought together the faraway Portuguese dominions and outposts. On the one hand, a system of royal patronage and rewards as well as the usage of entangled personal networks enabled the crown to rule from a far. On the other hand, shared jurisdictions and personal connections transformed royal government into a decentralized and negotiated affair, playing vital roles in the frauds and corruption that spread all across the early modern Portuguese empire.

Myrup’s answer is not an original one, as most re-

cent studies in the field point out the importance of social networks and its consequences in the early modern Portuguese world. Nevertheless, what makes this book interesting is its focus on this specific aspect in a more comprehensive way, discussing how informal networks were remarkably decisive from the court of Lisbon to the hinterlands of Brazil and the shores of southern China. The volume is organized into three parts of two chapters each, addressing Europe, South America and Asia, respectively. From documents researched in Portugal, Spain, Brazil, and China, in each chapter the author retraces the lives of individuals and groups in order to reveal how they navigated their social connections.

In *Part I: Europe*, Myrup discusses the trajectories of two early members of the Overseas Council and provides a concise prosopography of the 142 individuals who took office from 1643 to 1833. Inspired by its Spanish counterpart, the creation of the Overseas Council intended to bring the colonial bureaucracy in the hands of advisers with extensive experience overseas and loyal to Portugal’s new Bragança dynasty. Considering the careers of Dom Jorge de Mascarenhas and Salvador Correia de

SÃ¡, Myrup indicates that the appointments to that tribunal depended not only on merits and previous services, but also on family background, patronage, and personal connections in the court and abroad. Indeed, the status and the networks of its members were crucial to both reinforce the council's power at home and to turn royal orders into practice overseas.

Overseas Council's members often defended their comrades and were not afraid to harass enemies and to benefit relatives and friends. Their shared backgrounds helps us to understand such practices. During the seventeenth century, the tribunal maintained a ratio of two aristocrats (members of the landed or military aristocracy) to one *letrado* (holders of an academic degree in canon or civil law). From the early eighteenth century on, the number of *letrados* began to outnumber aristocrats, members with prior experience overseas remained majority, and individuals with services in America came to dominate its ranks, reflecting Brazil's growing importance.

In *Part II: South America*, the author traces back the lives of two officials who served the Portuguese monarchy in the Brazilian's hinterlands during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Addressing the case of the seventeenth century explorer and Indian hunter AntÃ³nio Raposo Tavares, Myrup indicates how patron-client networks simultaneously expanded the reach of the royal government and empowered local elites from remote areas. Despite committing illegal acts, frontiersmen like Tavares were considered useful allies by the crown, thanks to their services on the conquering of new areas, submission of indigenous populations, discovery of precious minerals, and provision of strategic geographical knowledge. In turn, these powerful settlers managed to bargain land grants, appointments in the local administration, and other privileges.

Taking into account the career of Dom Rodrigo CÃ©sar de Meneses, a governor of SÃ£o Paulo charged to look after the new gold mines of CuiabÃ¡ in the eighteenth century, the author points out that colonial administrators depended on local allies in order to establish royal authority and collect taxes. Asserting that smuggling and fraud were rampant in Portuguese America, Myrup suggests that colonial officials were frequently key players in the corruption they were supposed to root out. Thus, the interactions between overseas officials and settlers were often ambiguous as they could promote governance and social control as well as favouritism and

corruption. The author mistakes the year the colonial capital was moved from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro, in what seems to be a typographical mistake.

In *Part III: Asia*, Myrup indicates how trading and personal networks were crucial to the maintenance of the Portuguese community in Macau and its relations with both Manila and mainland China during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this period, Portuguese merchants in Macau acted essentially as middlemen between different Asian ports. Actually, they promoted the clandestine silk trade between China and Japan and often traded in Asian slaves and others items prohibited by both Chinese mandarins and Portuguese viceroys. Furthermore, even colonial officials engaged on the trade and smuggling networks between Portuguese Macau and Spanish Manila during the Luso-Spanish union and beyond. Controlling the municipal council of Macau, the most powerful merchants in the city managed to preserve great autonomy in relation to the Portuguese royal authority.

Considering the mysterious murder of two Chinese subjects in Macau during the mid-eighteenth century, Myrup came across a plot of cover-up and bribery which sheds light on the informal relationships connecting Portuguese authorities with members of the Qing bureaucracy. Despite the presence of missionaries, cross-cultural mixing and miscegenation, the endurance of the Portuguese in Macau depended on commerce and contraband trade, as well as on the sufferance of local Chinese officials. After all, Macau owed its existence to the relationships cultivated by its inhabitants rather than to the state intervention.

In this book, Myrup convincingly demonstrates the central importance of informal relations, patronage, and personal relationships in the early modern Portuguese world. Regarding corruption, it would be valuable to provide more comparison with the same practices in other early modern maritime and territorial empires, specially its European counterparts, as bibliography is available. In terms of geographical coverage, the inclusion of a section about Africa would have made the volume even more comprehensive. Although not providing a completely new view on the matter, addressing a series of case studies through a highly readable and engaging narrative, Myrup unveiled the complex web of personal social networks that were the life blood of one of the largest maritime empires ever.

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