THREE ISLANDS OF THE PORTUGUESE ATLANTIC

Their economic rise, fall and (sometimes) rerise

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Abstract

Three islands of the Portuguese Atlantic – Madéira, Santiago de Cabo Verde, and São Tomé – were all uninhabited upon discovery, were all settled about the same time, and were under similar political, social, and economic conditions imposed by their Portuguese rulers. However, their economic evolution was quite different. Differences in location, environment and the external needs of Portugal (and Brazil) caused these islands to have very different economic histories. Different crops, different climate, different ecology and different political influences, all played a role in causing the historical differentiation that these three seemingly similar islands went through. This article examines the rise and fall, and sometimes the recovery, of these islands' economic past. It traces their economic history from the 15th through the 19th centuries, and draws some conclusions and lessons as to why they differed so, despite their seeming commonalities. It concludes with some suggestions regarding the ways in which islands can, or cannot, cope with economic and political change.

Keywords:

Madéira, São Tomé, Cape Verde Islands, economy, crops

Introduction

Many islands, by their very nature, have a limited number of economic choices. Their relatively small size, small population (which often is not even native), small number or amount of natural resources, and their general inability to use the world economic system rather than be used by it, all contribute to their economic fragility. Before the modern era, in which a place bereft of resources such as Singapore could support itself by providing services and the work of a skilled population, islands generally had only one or two resources by which their inhabitants might earn a living. These resources might take different forms – good soil, a valuable local crop (native or introduced), a key location – but they are limited and, by their nature, fixed. If the soil fails, if a crop fails due to climate or competition, if a location becomes no longer strategic, then the economic basis of that island, and indeed its entire society and way of life, face disaster. The practical question then becomes, 'What can be done?'

There is also a theoretical dimension to this dilemma. As discussed by Cook in his edited volume dealing with island micro-states, dependency (and hence economic fragility) is often a product of the inability of small islands to generate capital accumulation or to enable economic development beyond the local production of a single crop or simple commodities, such as ships' stores (1983: 12-13). The result of this is that such places are at risk given fluctuations in world demand for their produce. Further, if and when shipping routes change or come to be dominated by rivals, there are few available markets – literally and figuratively – that the small island can resort to in order to correct the increasingly deleterious terms of trade (ibid: 13).

This factor is also discussed by Brookfield in his overview of island economic development and options (1990: 25). He concludes that "island-ness" can be generally considered from the point of view of two factors: scale and location. Small size is seen to be a distinct disadvantage unless the island lies close to a continent or occupies a strategic position in relation to the world transport system. Further, locational advantage is also affected by an island being part of a larger archipelago (as is the case, in this article, with Santiago de Cabo Verde). Brookfield gives as an example Oahu, in the Hawaiian Islands, where location has been the basis for all later economic development, not to mention strategic importance (ibid: 25-26). As for matters of scale, he notes that in general, small size means dependency, and hence fragility as well as physical constraints to sustainable economic development. While these factors are discussed in relation to contemporary island economies, it will become clear that such limits and restraints also can be applied to island economies in centuries past.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, three Atlantic islands - Madéira, Santiago de Cabo Verde, and São Tomé - faced precisely these issues. All saw the basis of their very existence threatened by economic changes over which they had little control but to which they had to respond in order to survive. Originally, the three islands were similar in many ways. Each was uninhabited at the time of discovery. Each was first discovered and settled by Portugal. Each was granted by the Portuguese Crown to a royal favorite or favorites with the expectation that the new possessors would develop their island and remit a share of the profits to their benefactor. And each, after an initial period of prosperity, eventually faced economic ruin. Their varied responses, and the success or failure of them, serve as a set of case studies on how, or if, small islands can change sufficiently and fast enough to make the transition from one economic regime to another. The first of the three to be considered is the island of Madéira, which was also the first to be discovered and settled by the Portuguese.

Madéira

Madéira may have been known to the ancients, but was discovered or re-discovered by the Portuguese early in the 15th Century (Ministerio do Ultramar, 1951: 123-128). In 1425, Prince Henry (known as 'the Navigator') ordered the settlement of the island and in accordance with customary feudal practice, assigned the place to two *donitários* or proprietors, with the expectation that they would transport settlers and useful crops to Madéira. (The *donitario* was a sort of feudal lord, appointed by the king to rule over and develop all or part of a newly found island. A share of the profits, usually a fifth, was due to the Crown). Settlement would provide a source of income to the Crown and also establish Portuguese sovereignty in face of Castilian competition (ibid: 128-131).

Figure 1 – Location of the Portuguese Eastern Atlantic Islands, Madéira, The Cape Verde Islands, and São Tomé, and their relation to the African mainland

Madéira was a good news, bad news island. Its soil was very fertile, its climate benign, and it had some adequate natural harbours, notably Funchal on the south-east coast. Unfortunately, it was also very rugged and mountainous, and just away from the coast there was hardly a flat piece of ground. The total area is only some 226 square miles (approximately 400 square kilometres) and much of that was so rugged as to be uncultivable by any method (Duncan, 1972: 25-27). In addition, there was no native population; the African slave trade had begun in the mid-15th Century, but more labour was provided by European immigrants from Portugal, Flanders and Italy than from slaves, at least until the early 1500s. To cultivate any crop required extensive terracing and the construction of elaborate irrigation channels to bring water from the central massif to the fields. Draft animals could not be used because of the quasi-vertical landscape, and so all cultivation was by hand, arduous back-breaking labour on impossibly steep slopes. Another result of the topography was that nearly all land holdings were small, family-owned plots or terraces; plantations and labour gangs (ie slaves) were simply not feasible in such a landscape (ibid: 27-31).

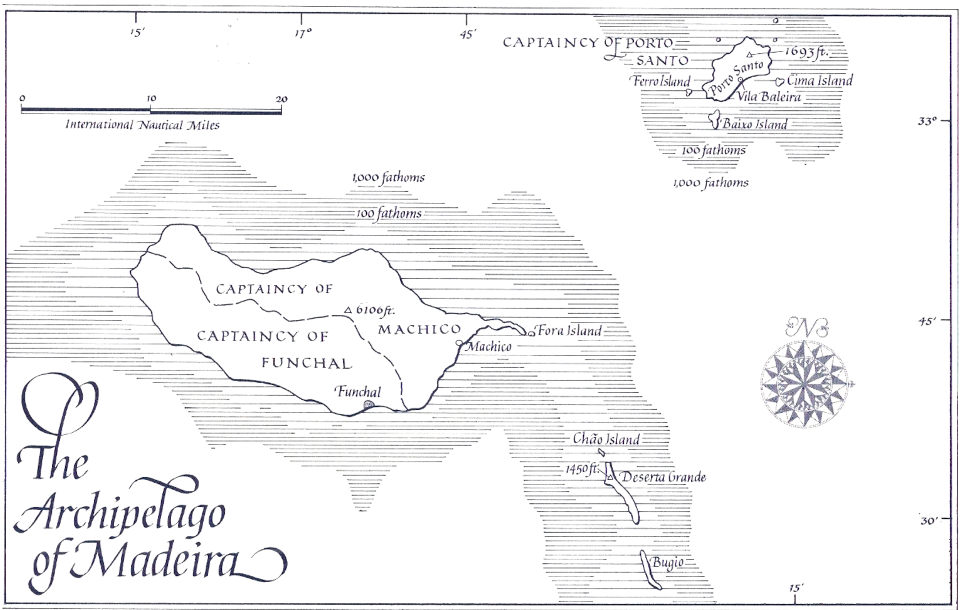

Figure 2 – The Archipelago of Madéira (Duncan, 1972: 26; © University of Chicago Press, used with permission)

It was Italians, notably Genoese, who introduced sugarcane to the island, a crop with which they were familiar, having helped grow and market it in the Mediterranean region. (One Genoese, Christopher Columbus, lived on the neighboring island of Porto Santo in the 1470s and married that island's *donitário*). Besides sugar, early crops included wheat and wine, and the island's fine natural forests provided valuable woods for Portugal (*Madéira,* in Portuguese, means 'wood'). But it was sugar that dominated the first century and a half of Madéiran history, and by mid-century, the island was already exporting almost twenty-six tons of sugar per year. Its sugar was actually of poor quality, and had to be extensively re-refined in Europe, but the supply and demand were both so great that the price of sugar fell by 50% even as profits soared (Rau and Macedo, 1962: 1-5).

Madéira seemed to be the quintessential Atlantic success story; within two generations of settlement, the island had economically matured, producing one immensely valuable dominant crop and several lesser ones. All suitable land had been brought under cultivation, effective administration established, non-Portuguese claims or pretensions eliminated and it had been well-integrated into the dawning European-African-Atlantic-American economic nexus that would dominate the world, or at least its notional western half, for the next five centuries.

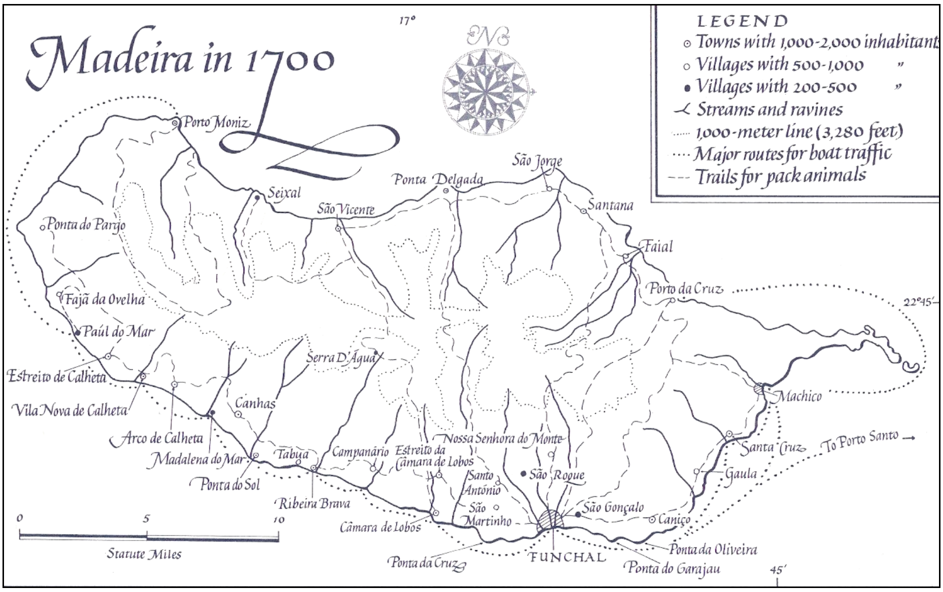

Figure 3 – Madéira in 1700, showing the relief of the island, and the main settlements (Duncan, 1972: 62; © University of Chicago Press, used with permission)

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This blissful state lasted for about 150 years, though we can see in retrospect that Madéiran sugar production was doomed once a new source, more productive and/or of finer quality, came into being. The source of that doom was first, São Tomé Island, and then Brazil, settled by the Portuguese in the 1530s and producing sugar on a massive scale by the 1570s. Brazil had an almost-infinite supply of good tropical soil, a seemingly-endless supply of flat and easily cleared land and, with the flourishing of the Atlantic slave trade, an equally almost-infinite supply of labour. Faced with this, Madéira had only two advantages, one real and one false. The former was the island's closeness to Europe, which drastically reduced shipping times and costs. The latter was the specious claim that Madéiran sugar was of much higher quality than that of Brazil, an assertion that our century would recognize as 'spin'. Besides Brazilian competition, Madéiran sugar growers also faced problems of soil erosion and exhaustion, losses to rats and other introduced vermin, and the huge costs in money and labour involved in maintaining the vital and complex irrigation and terracing systems (Rau and Macedo, 1969; Duncan, 1972: 31-36).

Numbers tell the story: about twenty-six tons of sugar exported around 1450; eleven tons per year by about 1580, and much of that poor quality barely suitable for refining. In terms of price, Brazil vastly undersold even good quality Madéiran sugar by about

60%. Though Madéira's sugar trade occasionally showed some small revivals over the next 200 years, and while Madéiran growers sought special protections from the Portuguese Crown, the fact was that the crop that had made Madéira was economically finished. The only question that remained was whether this would doom the island to a future as a salubrious slum (as would happen in the 19th Century West Indies) or could some new crop be found that would revive the island's economy. Unlike the other two islands discussed in this article, the answer to the latter question was 'yes'; Madéira's salvation was wine.

Some wine had been grown on Madéira from the first days of settlement, but it was only after the collapse of the sugar economy that the wine came into its own. It was not until the 18th Century, however, that the uniqueness of Madéira wine enabled it to become the island's economic mainstay. Its almost bizarre properties compared to even the best usual wines – it gets better with extreme age, heating, rough handling and long rough transportation – make it special, as does its smooth, rich taste. While sugar was profitable, even this wine was produced only in small amounts. When sugar vanished, wine saved the island, and the figures of the wine trade are astonishing. By the mid-1700s, 6,000 'pipes', the equivalent of over 3 million 1-litre bottles of wine, were exported each year. Ironically, most of this was shipped to Brazil and the West Indies, where the wine's imperviousness to heat and rough usage made it the drink of choice. Another major market was Britain's colonies in North America, where the wine's palate, rather than its hardiness, was most prized (Duncan, 1972: 37-53).

Thus, Madéira survived. Growing grapes was as hard on the cramped, hilly island as growing sugar cane had been. But with no rival for its unique wines, the immense difficulties of growing, pressing and packaging the wine were economically doable. Not until the 20th Century and its new 'gold standard' for island economies, tourism, developed, did wine lose its place as Madeira's prime source of income. Of all the islands considered here, only Madéira successfully made the transition to a new crop that ensured its economic survival. The same kind of thing sort of happened on São Tomé; the difference was one of time lag. While Madéira substituted wine for sugar in less than half a century, São Tomé took almost 250 years to find a replacement crop; even then, that island never again saw its glory days return.

São Tomé

Like Madéira, São Tomé was uninhabited when discovered by the Portuguese in the 1470s, along with the other islands in the Gulf of Guinea. Lying almost on the equator, it is highly tropical with constant heat and plenty of water, ideal for growing almost any crop. Unlike Madéira, the island has an extensive flat area in its northeast, about eighty square miles (approximately 150 square kilometres) in extent, and once cleared it made for a highly-fertile agricultural region. Further, São Tomé is volcanic in origin with a high central peak and many lesser ones.

Figure 4 – The Islands of the Gulf of Guinea (source: Wiki Commons)

As a result, the soil is almost excessively rich and the flow of water from the central massif makes the need for irrigation minor and simple (Tenreiro*,* 1961: 35-67). Thus, by the early 16th Century, most of the northern flatlands had been cleared and planted. And, the example of contemporary Madéira being at hand, most of the planting was in sugar cane. Unlike Madéira, however, the land was organized into large *fazendas,* or plantations; this was due to the far larger holdings made possible by the island's size and to the fact that almost no European labourers were brought to the island. The agricultural labour force was entirely African slaves, and such a regime economically and administratively demanded large holdings and severe control over the workers, both more easily accomplished on a plantation than on a family-based small holding.

São Tomean sugar, like Madéira's, was not of high quality, though it was somewhat better than that of its rival. But its quantity was extraordinary, and before the rise of Brazilian, and later West Indian, sugar, São Tome's sugar drove Madéira's from the market by its sheer volume. For about sixty years in the mid-16th Century, São Tomé was the largest sugar producer in the world, and the wealth of its planter class proverbial. At its height, the island exported over 25,000 tons of sugar each year, the quantity overcoming the low quality of the crop. In addition, São Tomé had another economic factor that played little part in Madéira – slaves. As noted, the ecology of the island allowed, in fact nearly demanded, that sugar be produced on plantations with large gangs of unfree labour. Tied to this was the fact that São Tomé was also the largest supplier of slaves to the New World, mainly Brazil, in the 16th Century; thus a sugar-slave nexus developed that gave the island it stunning economic success (ibid: 67-74). However, these twinned bases of wealth were destroyed by the same factor, the rise of Brazil. By the early 17th Century, Brazilian sugar was doing to its São Toméan counterpart what the island had earlier done to Madéira, driving it from the market by dint of vastly superior quantity and appreciably better quality. In addition, by that time Brazilian planters were beginning to import slaves directly from Africa (mainly from the modern Congo and Angola) thus undermining São Tomé's role as aggregator and middleman of the labour needed on Brazil's vast plantations. By about 1650, shortly after the island emerged from nearly a decade of Dutch occupation, the sugar-slave economy had run its course, and the island reduced to poverty, what has been referred to as the "great fallowing" (Garfield, 1992).

There was one other factor that contributed to this. In Madéira, whose population was overwhelmingly of European descent and where plantations never existed, the collapse of sugar led to the creation of small, family-owned farms growing crops for passing ships, notably wine. Also, given Madéira's topography, there was really no place for the inhabitants to go if they intended to remain on the island; they had to continue to be part of its society and culture. On São Tomé, by contrast, the existence of a vast, ungoverned and nearly feral interior led thousands of slaves and ex-slaves to simply remove themselves from the established society in the north-eastern flatlands and create isolated but self-sufficient communities in the interior. This would have not mattered except that these people, known as *Angolars*, regularly descended on the flatlands, burning (moribund) plantations and sometimes carrying off people for their *quilómbos*, or forest villages. These episodes encouraged those who remained to revolt against their exploitation and servitude, as in the revolt of Amador in 1595, which further devastated the island's stability and economy. Thus, by the end of the 1600s, São Tomé was an economic as well as physical ruin, far worse off than Madéira (Tenreiro, 1961: 71-77; Garfield, 1992).

What saved São Tomé were new and valuable cash crops, coffee and cacao. Coffee was introduced about 1800; cacao in 1822. But, as with sugar, these crops could only be profitably grown with large supplies of cheap (or unfree) labour on plantation settings. Since Britain was attempting with some success to suppress the lingering slave trade of the 19th Century, and Portugal had formally outlawed the trade in 1842, new sources of labour had to be found. Ironically, they were found in the same place as the old ones, especially Angola. Contract labourers were hired to work on the island's plantations, with guarantees of decent pay and repatriation at the end of their service, usually five years. In reality, as investigations would show, the contract labour regime was often indistinguishable from slavery itself; labourers were brutally treated, cheated of their wages, and few were ever returned to Angola. Despite, or because of, such exploitation, the two new crops flourished. Huge new plantations, some as large as eighty square kilometres, sprang up, much of the formerly-ignored interior cleared, and production boomed. About 1900, just one of the island's plantations was able to export almost 2,000 tons of cacao and about 650 tons of coffee. In aggregate, this one small island annually produced about 11.5% of the world's supply of the two crops. São Tomé thus seemed to have escaped the economic trap that had nearly doomed Madéira, finding like the latter a huge new source of income (Tenreiro, 1961: 77-90).

Unlike Madéira, however, this situation was not to last. Ironically, part of this was due to the island's nemesis, Brazil. By the late 19th Century, Brazil had become the world's largest coffee producer, and as with sugar, the sheer volume of its production crippled São Tomé's coffee industry, even though in this case the island's coffee was regarded as superior in quality. The fate of cacao, however, was more unusual. Rumors of how the crop was produced reached Europe, especially Britain, which imported most of São Tomé's harvest. Investigations, notably one by Henry Nevinson in 1900, revealed that the island's crops were grown and harvested under conditions little distinguishable from slavery (Soério de Brito, 1966: 33-45). The resultant scandal led to a boycott of São Toméan coffee and cacao; despite some belated and half-hearted reforms by the Portuguese government, the result was to undermine the crops as the new economic mainstay of the island. A final blow came with the introduction of coffee and cacao to the nearby African mainland, notably the British Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and the French Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire). It was Brazil *redux* – much more land, more labour, and better processing and shipping facilities led to the mainland's production overwhelming what the island could do. By the mid-20th Century, São Toméan coffee and cacao had become boutique items, esteemed for quality, but which could not be produced or marketed in quantities that could support the whole economy of the island.

Thus, São Tomé nearly replicated the experience of Madéira. In both cases, a new crop or crops was found to replace sugar. For Madéira, wine of an unusual quality, grown in difficult surroundings but for that very reason not subject to humanitarian condemnation, proved to be (before the rise of tourism) an economic salvation. For São Tomé, after a substantial time lag, two new crops promised to do the same for that island; however, the new crops in this case proved to be fatally vulnerable, both to competition and to a change in international norms of what constituted acceptable economic practices. And, in a further irony, whereas tourism was a major economic godsend to Madéira, São Tomé was simply too far away, and too lacking in amenities, to take advantage of this new source of wealth. Each island tried to survive the collapse of its initial economic base. Madéira did so, and São Tomé did, albeit temporarily and incompletely. But our third island did neither. Poor and poorly endowed to begin with, Santiago de Cabo Verde scarcely flourished in the beginning, and sank deeper into poverty and irrelevance as the decades and centuries passed.

Santiago de Cabo Verde

The Cape Verde Islands, lying in two groups about 300 miles/450 kilometres off the westernmost tip of Africa – Cape Verde – are the poorest islands of the Atlantic, in both the ecological and economic senses. They are all desert or semi-desert, and of the ten major islands in the group, five – São Vicente, Sal, Maio, Boavista, Santa Lucia – are nothing but large salt pans where almost nothing will grow.

Five others – Santiago, Fogo, Brava, São Nicolau, Santo Antonio – are essentially scrubland, with bushes and rough grass constituting most of the vegetation, which is limited by the dryness; rainfall averages barely twelve inches per year, or less. In fact, over the seven hundred years since their discovery, the major cause of mortality in the archipelago has been famine, which even in the 19th Century caused over 150,000 deaths. The 'fertile' islands are further handicapped by the fact that such arable land as there is tends to lie inland, in narrow valleys; thus, what little can be grown must be transported with difficulty and over relatively long distances to the islands' ports (Duncan, 1972).

Without human habitation upon contact, the islands had little that anyone could want. There were no native plants or animals that had any commercial value; only sea salt, lying in vast pans on several of the islands, had any economic value. But even this was of little use in terms of economic development, since the salt could be gathered easily and freely by any passing ship. Taxing the salt trade was difficult and barely worth the expense of doing so. The islands' only value, such as it was, lay in their location, since they were well-placed to offer services of supply and repair for ships going to and from the East or West Indies, or trading on the nearby African coast. The problem was, however, that they had nothing to offer such ships and the harbours were few and not terribly secure against either foul weather or marauders. For Portugal, the issue became one of introducing human, animal and plant life that could give some degree of economic value to the islands, and finding and settling harbours where ships could come to deliver, or carry away, these commodities. By default, the island of Santiago, and its harbour, Ribéira Grande, became the economic and administrative focus of the Cape Verdes from the 15th through the 18th centuries (Ameal 1966).

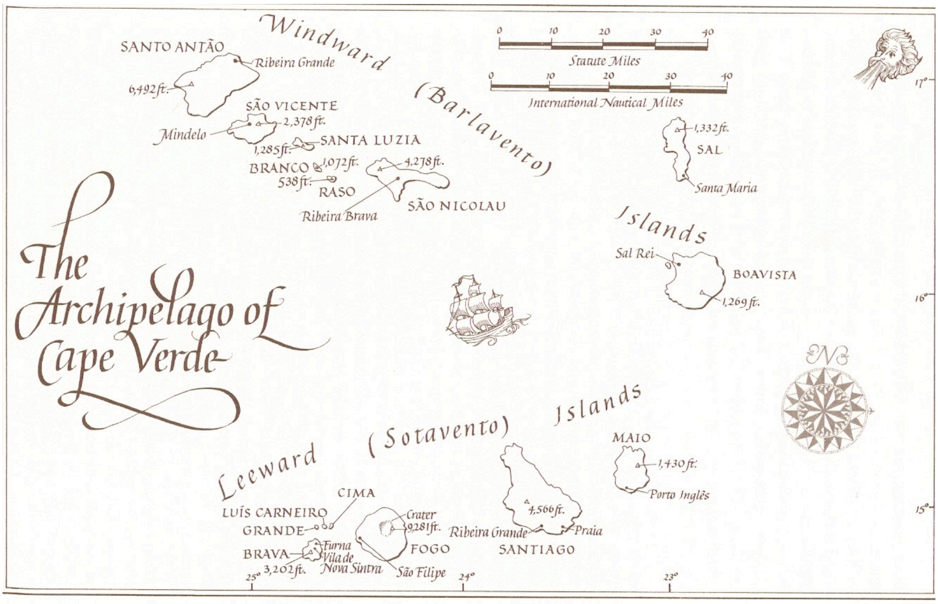

Figure 5 – The Archipelago of Cape Verde (Duncan, 1972: 81; © University of Chicago Press, used with permission)

Even 150 years after discovery, Santiago only had about 8,000 inhabitants, and the other islands much less; four, in fact, still had no human inhabitants at all in the 17th Century, though they all had many thousands of feral goats, which had been introduced so that their hair, hides and meat could be supplied to passing ships; some horses, cattle and donkeys soon joined them. Cash crops, such as they were, were limited to cotton which was woven into cloth and sold on the nearby mainland in exchange for slaves, and orchil, a dye made from a lichen which could be used to color the cloth or else exported for dye-works elsewhere (Duncan, 1972: 160-161). The major economic activity was slaving, slaves being acquired from the nearby mainland and then sold onward to Brazil or to islands in the West Indies. Unlike São Tomé, there was no need for a great number of slaves in Santiago or any other island. The domestic labour needed to produce dye, cloth, animal products, or services for passing ships was of course provided by slaves, but without plantations, the number permanently in the islands was relatively small, especially compared to São Tomé (ibid).

The economy of the Cape Verdes thus came down to this: passing ships could be supplied with meat and salt, they could be repaired, within limits, and the crews allowed to enjoy the very limited on-shore pleasures of Ribéira Grande or its neighboring village, Praia, the only habitations of any size on Santiago. Ships could carry away cloth and dye in limited amounts, and also carry extra meat and salt for sale in Madéira, Brazil, the West Indies and British North America. There was a slave trade, but it never provided Santiago or any other island with the wealth that it created for other Atlantic islands or for Brazil (Meintel, 1983: 146-147). Mostly, Santiago provided a break and some meager diversion and resupply for passing ships, little more. And even this declined with the substitution of steam for sail in the 19th Century, and the replacement of coal with oil for fuel in the 20th Century. In fact, by the 19th Century, the major export of the Cape Verdes was once again people; not slaves, but ships' crewmen, especially for whalers (ibid: 147-148). Eventually, a Cape Verdean diaspora grew up all around the North Atlantic, with an especially large community found in the old whaling ports, such as New Bedford, in New England.

Santiago, and by extension the Cape Verde Islands as a whole, thereby differ in their economic history from Madéira or São Tomé. More than almost any other Atlantic island or group, the Cape Verdes owed what tiny value they had almost solely to their location, not their production. Therefore, the ruination of one crop ironically did not spell total economic collapse and did not call forth the search for a substitute. Never having reached even the temporary level of wealth that the other two islands did, Santiago had much less far to fall. And with a remarkable consistency, the islands continued, and continue, to do what they have done for over 600 years, export salt and people (ibid: 148-149).

Figure 6 – Harbour of Porto Grande, Island of St. Vincent, Cape Verde Islands (Silveira, *Iconografia*; original 1888, public domain)

Conclusion

Island economies are fragile; they are almost wholly dependent on the economics and politics of larger and distant lands. Reliance on a single economic resource is a recipe for ultimate disaster because changes in the world's economic or even technological environment can be devastating, and, worst of all, there is very little that an island can do about any of this. Dependency, fragility, and an acute sensitivity to external factors (think of it as the island economic version of the 'butterfly effect') are the fate of island economies in the past as well as in the contemporary world, as the work by Brookfield (1990) and Cook (1983) make clear. Madéira made the transition, not easily, with the rise of the wine and tourist trades. São Tomé tried to, moving from sugar to coffee and cacao, only to find that international moral standards had changed and that its new crops could only serve as a luxury export and not the basis of a whole economy. Ironically, it was poor Santiago and the other Cape Verdes, never rich and never likely to be, that demonstrated what the future of island economies might be. People and their skills, not crops or other biological resources, may be islands' ultimate economic salvation. That, and a good location where tourists want to go, where the tourist industry is able to send them at a profit, and a local population willing to indulge them.

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