In Brazilian and Portuguese historiography, the short-lived experiment with hereditary captaincies (1534–49) has long been neglected—overshadowed by both the earlier age of discovery and later colonial developments such as the General Government and the sugar economy—or else reduced to a debate over the nature of the system (“feudalism” or “capitalism”?). Curiously, this Portuguese experiment has attracted little interest from historians of the other colonial powers, whether French, Dutch, Spanish, or English, who could have used it to help define and delimit the specificity of their own nations’ colonial experiences.

In this context, the period has been presented as at best an uninteresting parenthesis, at worst a failure—as though historians tacitly accepted the conclusions of the Portuguese Crown in 1549 regarding the difficulties of maintaining the system. Portuguese historian Malheiro Dias’ survey of Brazil in the first half of the sixteenth century, written in the early 1920s, influenced several generations of historians, who did not, for the most part, feel the need to consult the primary sources. While it is true that these are relatively scarce compared to the mass of documents produced starting in the second half of the sixteenth century, they are rich in information on the concrete modalities of this first Brazilian colonial experiment.

---

1 This essay was translated from the original French by Leslie Choquette, Institut français, Assumption College.
2 For example, the well-known synthesis of Godinho, *Mito e mercadoria*, devotes only a few lines to the donatary captaincies, although they necessarily had very important implications for maritime affairs.
4 See, for example, the recent innovative works on the captaincies of Porto Seguro and Ilhéus: Reis, *Entre o sucesso e a desgraça*; Coelho Filho, *A Capitania de São Jorge*.
In the last fifteen years, however, in the context of research programs initiated in Brazil and Portugal by the National Commission for Commemorations of Portuguese Discoveries (NCCPD), there has been a rehabilitation of the subject, substantially renewing and qualifying the dominant vision. Works on the grantees, their client networks, and their links to the metropolis along with attempts to assess the system’s impact on colonial development have opened up new avenues for reflection, some of which remain to be confirmed or pursued. The reconsideration of geo-strategic stakes in the South Atlantic and, more generally, of European rivalries on the maritime and colonial fronts—has also made it possible to reevaluate the policies established by the crown to defend its Brazilian territory.

As a first step, it makes sense to discuss the origin of these hereditary captaincies as well as the juridical impact of their implantation in Brazil. Beyond the juridical realm, it is also appropriate to look at the practical impact of the system, notably by taking into account both the background of the first donatary captains (education, financial and organizational resources, personal and client networks, residency or non-residency, direct or indirect management) and their slow adaptation to American realities (climate, topography, Amerindians, pirates...). This approach underlines the extent to which this colonial model was decisive in promoting a first wave of “urbanization” on Brazilian territory, determining economic, administrative, and demographic structures. More than an abrupt change, the abandonment of the model of the donatary captaincy after 1549 was a necessary adaptation of colonial policy in the direction of a mixed system combining private donatary grants and royal captaincies.

The history of Brazil in the first half of the sixteenth century cannot be dissociated from the geopolitical orientations chosen by Portugal in maritime and colonial matters, or, more precisely, from the kingdom’s policies toward Africa and its Asian possessions. Though Brazil was a possible way station en route to the East Indies, it was above

---

3 See, for example, several original studies that offer a renewed vision of the experiment: Couto, *A construção do Brasil*; Vasconcelos de Saldanha, *As capitanias do Brasil*; Serrão and de Oliveira Marques, *Nova História*; Johnson and Nizza da Silva, *O Império luso-brasileiro*; Tapajós, *O regime das capitanias hereditárias*. 