

ESSAY REVIEW

**PUBLISHING THE PAST: PROGRESS IN THE
'DOCUMENTS ON THE PORTUGUESE' SERIES**

THOSE INTERESTED in the people of Zimbabwe and their environment are extraordinarily lucky when compared with their counterparts interested in many other African countries. This is because, whereas almost the entire coastline of Africa was described in first-hand accounts by about 1497, there were very few descriptions of this kind of the interior south of the Equator until well into the nineteenth century.¹ The Zimbabwean plateau and the adjoining parts of central Mozambique and southern Malawi, however, are an exception. It is possible to read either first-hand or good second-hand accounts of virtually every aspect of human activity in this area, as well as descriptions of the physical environment, the climate, the vegetation, animal life and so forth, that were written down over the four centuries prior to the coming of colonial rule.²

The reason for this comparative wealth of descriptive works was the gold of the Zimbabwean plateau which attracted the Portuguese inland at a very early date while they ignored the interior between Ethiopia and the Shire River and between the Save River and the Cape. The descriptions of human society and the environment were a by-product of the year-to-year administration of the Portuguese state, church and mercantile capital in four continents and two oceans. This administration involved the accumulation of very many documents, so many that losses by fire, earthquake and neglect have only slightly reduced their numbers. These documents have found homes in a number of archives in Portugal, Goa, Maputo, Rome, London and Paris, and they provide an essential base for the study of every region visited by the Portuguese.

The publication of these documents is an essential and vital task. In the first place, even the durable paper and ink of past centuries will not last for ever, and the publication of documents makes it less likely that they will be lost, as some undoubtedly have been in the past. Secondly, old-fashioned Portuguese and old-fashioned Portuguese handwriting are not easy to follow even for those who read Portuguese, while the translation of Portuguese transcripts into a more widely-known language such as English or French helps very considerably in the spread of knowledge.

The Portuguese themselves have a long tradition of publishing their documents. Even their very early chroniclers often came close to reproducing the originals in the course of their chronicles, which is fortunate as the originals have not always survived. For example, the description of the

¹ A. Jones, 'The dark continent — a preliminary study of the geographical coverage in European sources, 1400–1880', in B. Heintze and A. Jones (eds.), 'European sources for Sub-Saharan Africa before 1900: Use and abuse', *Paideuma, Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* (1987), XXXIII, 19–26.

² D. N. Beach, 'Documents and African society on the Zimbabwean plateau before 1890', in Heintze and Jones, 'European sources', 129–43.

Zimbabwean plateau in the *Da Asia* of João de Barros is obviously based closely on the report that the Captain of Sofala, Vicente Pegado, was ordered to supply in 1530.³ That report is now lost. In the nineteenth century the publication of historical documents by the Portuguese in Lisbon, Mozambique and Goa became common, and the crisis of 1890 led to even more publications in the vain hope that Britain would be impressed by ancient treaties of over two centuries before.⁴ The further publication of documents by the very historically-conscious *Estado Novo* of Antonio Salazar was simply building on an earlier tradition.⁵ Nevertheless, the documents published solely in Portuguese were apparently selected on a rather haphazard basis. George Theal's nine-volume work of transcription and translation was also haphazard, but by sheer energy and by concentrating on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries he did a great deal to alert English-speakers to the value of the Portuguese archives.⁶

In the 1950s a serious attempt was finally made to produce a definitive publication of the documents on the Mozambique coast and its hinterland. As most of the hinterland was at that time occupied by the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, it was logical that the project should be run by the National Archives in Salisbury and the Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos in Lisbon. The project was initiated by the Director of the Salisbury archives, and the basic selection of documents was made by Eric Axelson, who had already carried out pioneering work in the 1930s and who was later to publish two major surveys covering the period 1488-1700.⁷

The first volume of the project appeared in 1962.⁸ It was a most impressive work, a solid 867 pages, with Portuguese and English texts facing each other. The texts started a third of the way down each page, which looked most impressive but which also meant that sometimes a page of the original document needed two pages in the new publication. The title, place, date and provenance of the document were given, as were details of its previous publication if it had been published (unless it had

³ J. de Barros, *Livro Decimo da Primeira Decada da Asia* [1552] (Lisbon, Agência Geral das Colónias, 1945), 391-8; A. da Silva Rego and T. W. Baxter (eds.), *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa 1497-1840* (Lisbon, Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos and National Archives of Rhodesia, 1969), vi, 324-7.

⁴ For example, *O Chronista de Tissuary* (Goa, 1866-9); *Arquivo Português Oriental* (Goa, 1857-67); *Annaes do Concelho Ultramarino, parte não official* (Lisbon, 1854-66); *Memoria e Documentos acerca dos Direitos de Portugal aos Territorios de Machona e Nyassa 1890* (Lisbon, Nacional, 1890); *Boletim do Governo da Provincia de Moçambique* (Mozambique and Lourenço Marques, Nacional, 1854-1975).

⁵ *Moçambique, Documentário Trimestral* (Lourenço Marques, 1935-61); A. A. Andrade, *Relações de Moçambique Setecentista* (Lisbon, Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1955); L. F. de Carvalho Dias (ed.), 'Fontes para a história, geografia e comércio de Moçambique (Século XVIII)', *Anais* (1954), IX, 1.

⁶ G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records [of South Eastern Africa]* (Cape Town, Government of the Cape Colony, 9 vols., 1898-1903).

⁷ E. Axelson, *Portuguese in South-east Africa 1488-1600* (Johannesburg, Struik, 1973) and *Portuguese in South-east Africa 1600-1700* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1960).

⁸ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents on the Portuguese in Moçambique and Central Africa 1497-1840* (1962), 1.

been published by the interloper Theal, who was not mentioned). Notes at the end of some documents explained points that the editors thought needed comment, though in both this volume and Volume III they unfortunately referred the reader to the work of Hugh Tracey for the historical geography — and Tracey's work was fundamentally wrong.⁹ The detail of the documents published was absolutely amazing. For example, eight pages detailed the payments made to the garrison of Sofala for three months in 1506, a page tells us that a book and some paper were sent from Sofala to Kilwa in the same year, and so forth.¹⁰ This was the very stuff of the history of Portuguese colonization, which was obviously the main interest of the Portuguese half of the project, but for historians of the interior who were hungrily waiting for vital documents on the Zimbabwean plateau to emerge it was a little frustrating to see so much space spent on what, to them, was trivial.

Over the next four years further volumes continued to appear, produced to the same impressive standard. Unfortunately, whereas the first volume had covered ten years, the later ones covered only four (Volumes II and III) or two (Volumes IV and V). Obviously, if this rate was to be maintained, it would take the compilers a very long time to reach the cut-off date (1840) for the completion of the project — in fact, the project would be completed only in the year 2127, and that on the assumption that the volume of documentation was constant throughout the whole period, whereas in fact it increased. The editors of this series only occasionally supplied introductions, so one does not know whether it was intentional or not, but after Volume V the project seems to have moved into a brisk trot, and Volumes VI, VII and VIII which came out over the next nine years covered 19, 21 and 28 years, respectively. As the editors noted in 1975, it was decided not to publish entire documents where only part of them related to the Mozambican region.¹¹ The long lists and accounts of the garrisons that had taken up so much space in the earlier volumes became much rarer. It is not clear whether fewer of these lists had survived or whether the editors deliberately omitted them.

The revolution in Portugal in 1974 and the independence of Mozambique brought the project to a halt for fifteen years, but before we go on to look at the latest volume produced, which is the subject of this essay review, it is important to review the content of the first eight volumes that were published between 1962 and 1975.

Firstly, there are relatively few obvious errors of dating or interpretation. Four thousand cows were reduced to four in Volume I,¹² a letter

⁹ *Ibid.*, 400–1; Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1964), III, 180–1; R.W. Dickinson, 'António Fernandes — a reassessment', *Rhodesiana* (1971), XXV, 47.

¹⁰ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1962), I, 632–51, 410–1.

¹¹ A. da Silva Rego and E. E. Burke (eds.), *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa 1497–1840* (Lisbon Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos; National Archives of Rhodesia, 1975), VIII, xviii–xix.

¹² Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1962), I, 392–3.

of 1528 was placed in the volume for 1518,¹³ and the word *muroyi* (wizard) used to accuse Gonçalo da Silveira was mistranslated *mouro* (Muslim), which was inappropriate since his accusers themselves were allegedly Muslims.¹⁴

Secondly, some documents simply ought not to have been in the collection at all, even by the most generous interpretation of the project's terms of reference. For example, documents on Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Gulf were not the business of the project, any more than were the affairs of the Church in India.¹⁵ The editors sometimes included only extracts of much longer documents, putting in only what concerned Mozambique, but they were not consistent. An example of an inclusion of material that ought to have been left out is in Volume VII: the clerk João Velho wrote two letters to the king complaining of the behaviour of Dom Jorge, the captain of Sofala, on 4 November 1547.¹⁶ Presumably he wrote two in case one should be lost or intercepted, for they were practically identical, and it would have been easy and space-saving to note the differences between the two in footnotes, but instead both letters were published. Yet another example: once the news of the death of Gonçalo da Silveira reached India it was mentioned in several letters from clerics there writing back to Portugal, but they hardly ever mention anything that we did not know already from the accounts of Antonio Caiado and Luis Frois. As both of these accounts were very properly included in Volume VIII, there was no need to include the later versions.¹⁷

On the other hand, the volumes had some unfortunate omissions. The long and valuable account of André Fernandes on the area south of Inhambane in 1562, which was published by Theal, was not in Volume VIII.¹⁸ This is a serious omission, but a much more serious one is the exclusion of João de Barros's *Da Asia* from the collection. There was no explanation for this. It cannot have been because it was a published source, for the published accounts of Martin Fernández de Figueroa and Duarte Barbosa had already been included.¹⁹ It cannot have been because Barros had been published by Theal, since one of the avowed purposes of the project was to update Theal.²⁰ It cannot have been because *Da Asia* appeared long after some of the events that it chronicled, because Volume VIII included part of the *Da Asia* of Diogo do Couto, also published long after the event, as a necessary companion to Francisco de Monclaro's

¹³ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1966), V, 538–73. As Dickinson pointed out, as the letter refers to a Captain of Sofala of the late 1520s (and to the Straits of Magellan), it is actually of 1528: 'António Fernandes', 51.

¹⁴ Silva Rego and Burke, *Documents* (1975), VIII, 4–5.

¹⁵ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1965), IV, 234–59; Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1969), VI, 20–33, 68–87.

¹⁶ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1971), VII, 184–95.

¹⁷ Silva Rego and Burke, *Documents* (1975), VIII, 2–9, 24–59, 70–81, 100–3, 112–17.

¹⁸ Theal, *Records* (1898), II, 19–52.

¹⁹ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1964), III, 586–633; (1966), V, 354–81.

²⁰ Silva Rego and Baxter, *Documents* (1962), I, vi–vii.

account of the 1569–76 period.²¹ The reader is left to suspect that the real reason for the omission was the length of the account. This, however ought not to have entered into the argument: some of the primary documents of the seventeenth and later centuries were very long indeed, so the problem will recur in future editions, while if more care had been taken to exclude material that had little or nothing to do with Mozambique and its hinterland then there would have been plenty of room for the relevant and important parts of Barros's *Da Asia*. (I suggest an alternative method of dealing with this problem later in this review.)

The revival of the project in the 1980s was a remarkable achievement. Mozambique, Portugal and Zimbabwe, the eventual heirs of the plan formulated in the 1950s, were all short of money, and even when the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal, the Portuguese Government and the National Archives of Zimbabwe found the necessary funds it was, almost certainly, not easy to re-create a momentum that had (temporarily) fallen away. I stress this because I wish it to be understood that my criticisms of Volume IX, which has just been published,²² are being made in a constructive spirit and in the hope that the project will go on and continue to play a vital role.

Volume IX is produced to the same high standard as the previous eight volumes. There is the same generous allocation of space and the same layout of basic information. There is also the same failure to mention whether the document in question had been published by Theal. (There appear to be about 20 documents out of the 82 in this category.) The footnotes are only in English, and appear to be accurate apart from a few interesting errors.²³ In short, the volume has all of the characteristics that the series has displayed since 1962.

Unfortunately, it also has some of the same faults. Although I noted at the beginning that there is a wealth of documentation in the Portuguese archives on Mozambique and the interior, it has to be admitted that the wealth is unevenly distributed. In the period 1589–1615 it so happens that documents actually written in Mozambique appear to be rare, and of the 82 published here only 3 came from Sena or the Ilha de Moçambique, and 2 came from Goa. The rest all came from Lisbon or the Spanish court. (This bias seems to be confirmed by the works of Axelson and by the contents of the Goan archives.²⁴) What this means is that, whereas we

²¹ Silva Rego and Burke, *Documents* (1975), VIII, 248–429.

²² L. de Albuquerque (ed.), *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa 1497–1840* (Lisbon, National Archives of Zimbabwe, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane and Centro de Estudos de História e Cartografia Antiga do Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, 1989), IX, xxxd, 498 pp., Z\$40,00, hereafter cited as *Documents*, IX.

²³ The main errors are: p. 21, Fort Jesus was not destroyed by the Turks or anybody else in 1729 or since, and the island of Corvo was and is in the Azores group in the Atlantic; p. 67, the 'Cabires' were almost certainly not Makua (see fn. 31 below) and G. M. Theal as a historian of African peoples was extremely untrustworthy; pp. 44–5, Pedro de Sousa's expedition was not to the Mutapa state (see fn. 31); and p. 59, 'Bazarugos' is noted as possibly being Bazaruto, but it is beyond the bounds of probability that Lisbon could have thought that anything grown on the desolate island of Bazaruto could have been worth shipping 6 000 kilometres to support the navy in Goa. The lands of Bazarugos have to have been close to Goa.

²⁴ Axelson, *Portuguese in South-east Africa 1488–1600*, 169–79, and *Portuguese in South-east Africa 1600–1700*, 1–14; Goa Archives, Panaji, Livros das Monções, vols. 7–12.

know a great deal about what the Portuguese government and its Hapsburg overlord wanted to do about Mozambique and the Zambezi area, it is not so easy to deduce what was actually happening in that region. If it had not been for the habit of the Iberian officials to remind the Viceroy in Goa of what he had written about on a specific matter, we would often be at a loss to understand events: lacking the original reports from Mozambique to Goa and even those from Goa to Lisbon, we are seeing things at third hand. (Indeed, Axelson's skill in making sense of these documents is impressive.²⁵)

Nevertheless, even though the compilers of Volume IX were facing an exceptionally intractable set of sources, they continued to publish what should have been omitted and to omit what should have been included, just as happened with the previous eight volumes. Far too many of the documents published here are mainly or entirely about areas outside Mozambique. It is true that they are interesting, but their publication should be the result of agreements between the archives of Portugal and those of Madagascar, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, rather than those of Mozambique and Zimbabwe which are in effect supporting the histories of other countries for no direct return.²⁶ Moreover, some of the documents that do concern our areas are rather trivial: Document 32 of 1609 tells us that, if no actual money can be sent for the proposed conquest of Mutapa, at least thirty casks of wine and oil should be sent. Fair enough, but two more documents trace the saga of this wine and oil, as well as some biscuits, taking up another three valuable pages.²⁷ In view of the fact that mighty events were taking place in the region that were virtually ignored by the documents of this volume, is there not a question of priorities? Similarly a whole page tells us that on 4 June 1614 the King wished the Treasury to attend to his orders of 23 April. Might not a footnote have sufficed?²⁸

It can at least be argued that documents are better included in a collection than excluded on the grounds that at least somebody can learn something from them. It is harder to excuse the omission of important documents, especially when earlier writers have made good use of them. The Theal collection was hastily assembled, and it appears from this volume that what Theal presented as separate documents in his Volumes IV and V were actually paragraphs of single documents published here. I count at least twenty documents published in Theal's collection that do not appear here, some of which are trivial, but others are really important, such as the account of Agostinho de Azevedo, undated but from this period,²⁹ and a grant of lands to the Dominicans.³⁰ Even more important is a crucial document of 1598 that identifies — up to a point — one of the

²⁵ Axelson, *Portuguese 1488-1600*, 169-79, and *Portuguese 1600-1700*, 1-14.

²⁶ *Documents*, IX, 2-9, 42-3, 44-51, 78-83.

²⁷ *Documents*, IX, 184-92, 198-203.

²⁸ *Documents*, IX, 390-1.

²⁹ Theal, *Records* (1899), IV, 33-7.

³⁰ Theal, *Records* (1899), IV, 108-9.

major enemies of the Portuguese on the Zambezi;³¹ as this document is one of the crucial ones in an ongoing debate between four major academics in the 1980s, it certainly ought to have been included in the volume but it was not.³²

This brings us to the main point of my criticism of this volume: the period 1589–1615 was one of tremendous importance in the region, but one would hardly guess it from the documents reproduced here. On the one hand, as far as we can tell, vast political and military events were taking place north of the Zambezi, reaching at least as far as Mombasa.³³ Exactly what was involved is by no means clear, but this volume omits most of the evidence that might help us find out what it was. Similarly, the mighty Mutapa state was suffering from a mixture of external threats from north of the Zambezi and from the Portuguese and internal troubles of its own making.³⁴ Also during this time, the heart of the Portuguese conquest, the fortress of Mozambique, was twice attacked by the Dutch. The best sources on this, in Dutch and Portuguese, are not in this volume.³⁵ Finally, during this period shipwrecked Portuguese in the south were inadvertently adding to our knowledge of the region around what is now the capital city, Maputo. One would not know it from this volume.³⁶

The missing evidence is to be found in the *Ethiopia Oriental* of João dos Santos which was published in 1609; in part of the *Da Asia* of Couto, written in 1609–16; in the *Decada* of Antonio Bocarro, which covers the years 1597–1616; in the *Cercos de Moçambique* of António Durão and the *Lofflijcken Voyage*; and in the relevant sections of Gaspar Ferreira Reimão's 'Trattado. . .' and of João Baptista Lavanha's *Naufragio*.³⁷ Why were these works omitted? The Zimbabwean introduction to the volume states that Santos was omitted because his work 'has long existed in accessible printed form, with translation'.³⁸ This is only partly true, and no mention is made of the other missing sources. If previous publication in Theal's collection had been a bar to publication, then a quarter of the documents in this volume would not be present, so, as with Barros's *Da Asia*, one is left to conclude that the real reason for the exclusion of certain sources is

³¹ Theal, *Records* (1901), V, 281–3.

³² M. D. D. Newitt, 'The early history of the Maravi,' *The Journal of African History* (1982), XXIII, 145–62; M. Schoffeleers, 'The Zimba and the Lundu state in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries', *ibid.* (1987), XXVIII, 337–55; C. Wrigley, 'The river-god and the historians: Myth in the Shire valley and elsewhere'; and M. Schoffeleers, 'Myth and/or history: A reply to Christopher Wrigley', *ibid.* (1988), XXX, 367–83, 385–90.

³³ Goa Archives, Panaji, Livros das Monções, XVII, 138, King to Viceroy of Goa, Lisbon, 27 Feb. 1633.

³⁴ Axelson, *Portuguese 1600–1700*, 30–53; D. N. Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900–1850* (Gweru, Mambo, 1984), 125–7; S. I. G. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa, c. 1400–1902* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988), 223–41.

³⁵ Axelson, *Portuguese 1600–1700*, 15–29.

³⁶ Axelson, *Portuguese 1488–1600*, 219–26.

³⁷ Theal, *Records* (1901), VII, 1–370; (1901), VI, 339–57, 392–410; (1899), III, 254–435; Axelson, *Portuguese 1600–1700*, 15–29; *Portuguese 1488–1600*, 219–26.

³⁸ *Documents*, IX, xii.

their length. As some of the longest documents are the most interesting, their exclusion means that the Documents on the Portuguese project runs the risk of becoming 'Hamlet without the Prince'.

These are fairly severe criticisms of a volume that was eagerly awaited. All of them can be overcome, in the future volumes that *must* appear. Material that relates to areas outside Mozambique and its hinterland and trivial material must be ruthlessly excised or summarized. A new 'master list' of documents must be compiled, to augment that of Axelson which was composed nearly forty years ago. (This can easily be done by putting all references to the documents in secondary works and guides into a chronological sequence using a computer.)³⁹ As many scholars as possible should then be consulted as to the value of the proposed publications listed; in this way it is unlikely that valuable documents would be omitted. Much later on as many academics as possible should be consulted on the footnotes, as no single person is omniscient.

Looking ahead, the editors of the project are going to face considerable problems as the number of documents to be edited increase as the Portuguese expanded their activities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It could well be that it would take an entire volume to cover the documents of a single year in later centuries! A way around this might be to break up the series into concurrent regional series, perhaps those of the 'North', 'Centre' and 'South'. Possibly Malawi might be involved in the northern series, and Swaziland or even a free South Africa in the southern. This might treble the speed of publication.

Finally, what of the problem of very long documents? Here it seems that convenience might run hand-in-hand with profit. As Paul Hair has pointed out, the Theal translation of the *Ethiopia Oriental* of João dos Santos covers only of part of the book, so anybody who wants to read the whole must read Portuguese.⁴⁰ Yet, it is a fascinating blend of accurate observation and fantasy, and is much more likely to appeal to the general public than any of the nine volumes of documents published so far. There is no reason at all why such works should not be published in a separate series. Imagine a full publication of Santos, with facing-page translation, accurate footnotes, maps, colour photographs of the regions described, and a romantic, full-colour cover, perhaps of the Sofala coast! Properly marketed, such a book ought to do very well in the bookshops of the world, and the profits might help the main project. Another such volume might combine the relevant parts of Barros's *Da Asia*, the André Fernandes document of 1562, part of Couto's *Da Asia*, and the relevant part of Bocarro's *Decada*. Similar presentation to that of the Santos volume, perhaps with a cover showing Fura and northern Zimbabwe, would begin to attract the compulsive series-buying members of the general public, as well as academics. A third volume might include the António Gomes

³⁹ Beach, 'Documents and African society', 140-1.

⁴⁰ P. E. H. Hair, 'The task ahead: The editing of early European-language texts on Black Africa', in Heintze and Jones, 'European sources', 32, 40.

document of 1648, Francisco de Sousa's *Oriente Conquistado* and other documents of a clerical nature.⁴¹

In short, the resumption of publication of the documents in this series is welcomed, but changes are needed if full value is to be obtained from them.

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⁴¹ 'Viagem que fez o Padre Ant^o Gomes da Comp^a de Jesus, ao Imperio de de [sic] Manomotapa; e assistencia que fez nas ditas terras d^e algu's annos' [2 January 1648], ed. E. Axelson, *Studia* (1959), III, 155-242; Francisco de Sousa, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa* (Lisbon, V. da Costa Deslandes, 2 vols., 1710).