

Vidal, Laurent - *Mazagão la ville qui traversa l'Atlantique du Maroc à l'Amazonie (1769-1783)*. Paris: Aubier, 2005.

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The history of the foundation of Nova Vila de Mazagão presents such unique data that it seems in certain aspects to be more closely related to fiction. This is a city that was literally transported from one continent to another. Obviously it was not the city itself that was transported, with all its buildings, for the 18th century was not equipped with the technology for this purpose, but practically the whole of its population was transferred from the fortress of Mazagão, on the African coast, to the new town of Mazagão, in the depths of Amazonia. It is this shifting city that has interested Laurent Vidal. Or, more precisely, as the author says in the introduction to this book, his study invites us to devote our attention to the “singularity of the city’s waiting and travel times”, which he again confirms in the conclusion, proposing Mazagão as an example “for a social history of waiting”. It is fair to say that, in this sense, the history of Mazagão is particularly seductive and potentially rich, since it includes various examples of how the population literally waited for the successive means of transport that would take them from Mazagão to Lisbon, from Lisbon to Belém, from Belém to Nova Vila de Mazagão. And there is also the metaphorical waiting, the potentially distinct desires that this population nurtured at each of these different moments, what they expected from the Crown (which had obliged them to move) and what the Crown expected from them. Vidal sets out to study all these waiting periods, both the literal and the metaphorical ones, those of the population and those of the Crown. It is in this proposal that one finds both the merit and the risk of this work.

Laurent Vidal is *maitre de conférences* at the University of La Rochelle. His basic academic background is in History, and, according to the presentation that is provided in the book, his particular area of specialization is in the history of cities and urban societies in Brazil and the New World. It is therefore within the context of this category that this book should be read. It is, however, important to stress that, unlike most historical studies, this one does not begin by presenting the current state of the art regarding the subject-matter being studied. Although the book has an appropriate and fairly complete bibliography, and although the author makes full use of this in the course of the different chapters, he does not make any reference to existing works on the subject in his Introduction.

The study begins at the Moroccan fortress, with a very brief presentation of its role in Portuguese overseas expansion, and pays greatest attention to the moments immediately preceding its abandonment. Vidal already seeks to present the city to us as an actual society, more than simply the walls that it is about to leave. Perhaps there is some excess to be noted in his presentation of the life that was lived in the last days of the fortress’s existence, which sometimes has overtones of a fictional account of war-torn day-to-day life, emphasized by some phrases of a rather dubious effect. While it is fair to admit that the inhabitants’ resistance to the order to leave would have been fairly strong, it does not seem to me to be possible to state that the reaction against the abandonment of the fortress was the only link binding the population together, or that such resistance can be interpreted as a challenge to the political institutions.

More pertinent, to my mind, is the claim that the abandonment of the fortress led to the creation of a “city of memory” that was to accompany the population throughout their journey. And this collective imagination (despite the possible variations that it may have had in the evocations of its inhabitants) was, in a certain way, constructed in opposition to the atomization that the operation of the population’s physical transport implied and which the Crown set up with its methodical control procedures. This aspect is crucial and Vidal draws our attention to the change in status that, from the Crown’s point of view, was brought about in Lisbon. It was not a city that embarked, but rather families, described and accounted for in a series of check lists. Those who left were no longer soldiers, but colonists.

The wait in Belém occupies the third chapter, while the fourth chapter deals with the process of the construction of the new town and the people’s transfer to it. This is where the author comes closest to his intention to study the waiting period, which is shown to be much more dynamic than the simple numbers on the lists of those who were transported might suggest. The data of the marriages between *mazaganistas* and the inhabitants of Belém and other towns are particularly interesting, as are the initiatives taken by some of these settlers in the construction of a new sociability, and the problems inherent in the process. The chapters are well researched and their only drawback is some possible overemphasis in their writing. This exaggeration is even more evident in Chapter Five, when the author allows himself to interpret the plot of a series of operas that were performed in Mazagão as a kind of coded message delivered to the Crown, in which the inhabitants denounced the injustice of their town’s abandonment. What the author presents there as a kind of “lost language” does not seem to be a serious historiographic argument and only reveals his excessive over-interpretation of the sources.

This risk of hyper-interpretation runs through the whole of the book. It was not, in fact, something that one could regard as of little consequence, as the author suggests right from the beginning, so that the text’s over-emphatic nature might, on various occasions, have been attenuated by a more restrained use of language. Yet sometimes the author’s intention seems to be more successfully achieved, as at the end of the book when he describes his visit to the festival of Santiago, and, on the basis of this, makes an interpretation of the role played by our memory about societies and cities, which is particularly meaningful. There is something in this chapter that has overtones of an essay-like reflection, opening up the question to the discussion of matters of anthropology, sociology and literature, which, when it is done appropriately, is one of the merits of the historiography traditionally produced in France.