



Wooden locks and keys from Corvo Island (Azores, Portugal)

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Notes on Ethnobotany

Abstract

The Azores Island of Corvo (Portugal) is home to a centuries-old woodworking tradition that has stood the test of time and passed down through generations. Central to this craft is *cedro-do-mato* [*Juniperus brevifolia* (Seub.) Antoine], an endemic species of juniper found in the Azores. Artisans on Corvo have honed their skills in working with this and other local woods to create a variety of functional wooden locks characterized by intricate carving techniques and a deep understanding of the material, which allows them to produce durable pieces. Cedro-do-mato is particularly significant, as this wood is prized for its durability, workability, and aromatic properties. This traditional craft reflects the resourcefulness of the island's inhabitants and plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and maintaining a connection to the natural environment. The ongoing practice of this craft serves as a living testament to the sustainable use of local resources and the enduring cultural traditions of Corvo.

Keywords

Wooden locks, Corvo Island, *Juniperus brevifolia*, cedro-do-mato.

Wooden Locks and Keys

The Azores, the westernmost Portuguese insular territory, are at a unique and fascinating location. Situated in the Atlantic, at the intersection of the African, Eurasian, and North American oceanic tectonic plates, the islands boast distinct geological features (Fig. 1). Corvo and Flores are the most western islands, both located on the North American plate and destined to move away from the other seven islands. Due to their exceptional ecosystem richness, these two islands are now UNESCO Reserves of the Biosphere. The island of Corvo, the smallest and northernmost of the islands in the archipelago, is particularly unique due to its centuries-old woodworking tradition and the use of *cedro-do-mato*. This island was discovered by the expedition led by Diogo de Teive (c.1452), who also found the island of Flores (Lages 2000).

The Corvo has an area of 17,21 km² [6.5 km long by 4 km wide], and circa 400 inhabitants, all living in the town of *Vila do Corvo* (Fig. 2). The island's history was marked by isolation and the need to rely on its natural resources to guarantee human survival. In Corvo, the most emblematic piece, made from raw plant materials, is the wooden lock, which has been preserved here, although, in the past, it was not exclusive to this island. Its origin probably dates back to the 17th century, and several types of wood were used, but the most common was the one obtained from the species *Juniperus brevifolia* (Seub.) Antoine, which, in Portuguese is called *cedro-da-terra* or *cedro-do-mato* [in English, cedar-of-the-land] (Fig.3, Fig. 4). It belongs to the

Cupressaceae family, and it is an endemic species of this archipelago (Franco 1971). The etymology of genus derives from the Latin *juniperus* (*juniperus*), a classic Latin name attributed to junipers; the epithet *brevifolia* originates from the Latin *brevis* = short, reduced; Latin *folium* = leaf; alluding to its tiny leaves (Stearn 1996). This tree species was dominant in the high-altitude humid natural forests, more commonly above 500 meters, but on some islands, such as Flores and Pico, its habitat extended to the coast, before being severely reduced due to the occupation and colonization of this territory. A new subspecies was recently created: *Juniperus brevifolia* (Seub.) Antoine subsp. *maritima* R.B.Elias & E.Dias (Elias & Dias 2014). In wetter areas, the trunk of *Juniperus brevifolia* is often covered with thick layers of *Sphagnum* L., which creates a unique type of forest. The wood of this species is very resistant to the island's harsh weather conditions and insects, and due to the excessive exploitation of this species, its conservation status is now Vulnerable (IUCN) [1], [2].

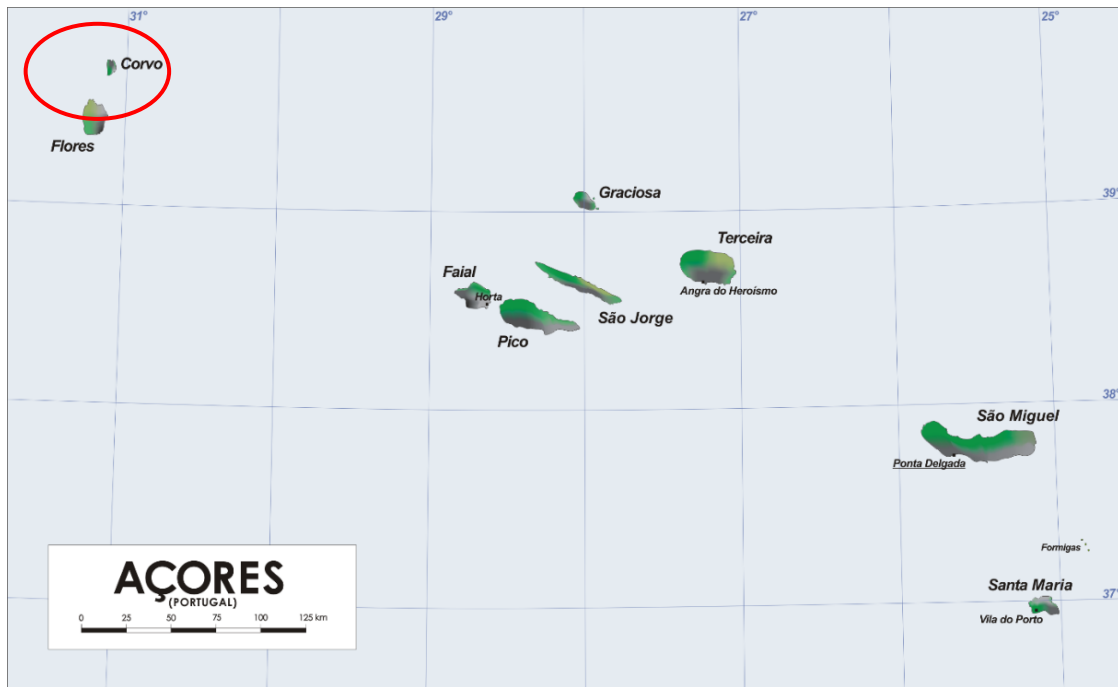


Figure 1. Map of the Azores archipelago, with the location of Corvo island. Photo by Wiki Commons.



Figure 2. Aerial photo of Corvo island, showing the location Vila do Corvo, farmlands and the volcanic cone. Photo by Marco Silva (Câmara Municipal do Corvo).



Figure 3. Leaves and seeds of *Juniperus brevifolia* (Seub.) Antoine. Flora On, photo by Paulo Ventura Araújo.



Figure 4. Old specimen of *Juniperus brevifolia* (Seub.) Antoine. Flora On, photo by Paulo Ventura Araújo.

The writer Gaspar Frutoso (1522-1591), who was born in the Azores and wrote the chronicle *Saudades da Terra*, an extensive description of the islands, states that Corvo was covered by a very thick woodland from which much *cedro-do-mato* wood was obtained (Frutoso 1978).

In the past, almost all men living in Corvo were farmers, and some demonstrated extraordinary skills in carpentry. Thus, in the final hours of each working day, they went to their workshop, called *chapos*, located outside the house, where they worked on wood, including making locks they used for themselves or to change, but not for sale.

Contemporary wooden locks often result from reusing old wood previously used in construction, roof beams, or agricultural instruments. This work is challenging because the wooden sticks are weakened by the axes or full of rust due to the nails that secured them to the roofs of the houses. Some of these woods are over a century old (Fig. 5, Fig. 6) but remain in satisfactory condition and still release their typical fragrance. The fragrance is due to essential oils that preserve them.

The lock is made entirely of wood, a testament to the artisan's skill and dedication. The wood and craftsmanship ensure excellent resistance to saltpetre, and they have a simple operating system with a latch and a wood key. Each piece is unique, handcrafted with care and precision, making the key exclusive to the lock. The wooden locks are not just functional; they are a work of art and a testament to the island's rich tradition of craftsmanship (Fig.7, Fig. 8).

The use of locks to protect properties and values is millennia old (Mendes 2023); however, in Corvo, they were never used to protect the property of wealthy households because the population had minimal and modest resources. The history of the settlement of this island and its communities has been studied and published, as in the book *Retratos Sociais da Ilha Do Corvo – Do Povoamento ao Século XIX* (Matos & Leite 2016), where we read that since the first settlers, there was no notable wealthy people. This was still evident at the beginning of the 20th century when the Portuguese writer Raul Brandão (1867-1930) visited the islands and described what he found in his work *As Ilhas Desconhecidas Notas e Paisagens* (1926). Raul Brandão wrote this about Corvo's community: 'I have never seen such an extraordinary feeling of equality as on this island. Corvo is a Christian democracy of farmers (...) they find refuge in the Christian feeling of brotherhood, which makes them bear (...) the abandonment to which they are condemned. Better yet: they love their island. When the girls embark for America they even hug the rocks goodbye. Corvo is a world' (Brandão 2011).



Figure 5. Wood with circa years Photo by Aparas de Madeira.

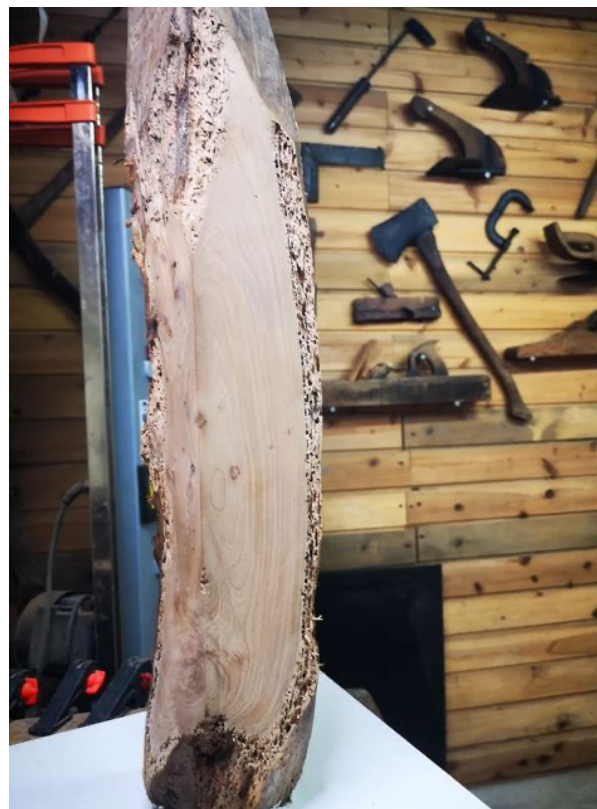


Figure 6. Old wood showing its core to be used in locks Photo by Aparas de Madeira.

Wooden locks have now become a typical Corvo Island craft sought after by visitors. From the 1980s until his death, the craftsman José Mendonça de Inês contributed to keeping this tradition alive (Fig. 9). He participated in handicraft fairs, where he introduced the wooden lock to the world, although others also knew how to produce.

Wooden doors and corresponding wooden locks can still be observed in some areas, especially in sheltering houses used for agricultural purposes on the island's many arable lands (Fig. 10, Fig. 11).

This piece evokes a time when knowing that a particular building was private property was enough for others to respect it. It is a symbol of trust between community elements since, in some houses, the keys were put in holes close to the entrance on a stone wall that was part of the house itself. Often, the keys were even left in the doors as a symbol of trust.

Currently, on the island of Corvo, there is only one workshop in which locks are made, run by a young Irish immigrant (David T.P., with German and Hungarian ancestors) who settled recently (2020) in Corvo, on facilities provided by an island's inhabitant (Fig. 12 to Fig. 15). Through Ordinance 15/2017 of 2/02/2017 from the Azores Government, the Corvo wooden lock is now recognized as unique in Portuguese territory, certified, and protected as an artisanal product from the Azores.



Figure 7. Wooden keys. Photo by *Aparas de Madeira*.



Figure 8. Several stages of the lock construction. Photo by Ofício Luísa Flores. Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores.



Figure 9. Former Corvo local artisan (José Mendonça de Inês) working on the lock. Photo by Ofício Luísa Flores. Centro de Artesanato e Design dos Açores.



Figure 10. Old traditional door with its wooden lock, on the upper left. Photo by *Aparas de Madeira*.



Figure 11. Contemporary wooden locks and keys in a traditional door. Photo by *Aparas de Madeira*.



Figure 12. Contemporary artisan working on a lock. Photo by Andrea Zanenga.



Figure 13. David T.P. working in his workshop. Photo by Andrea Zanenga.



Figure 14. A contemporary wooden lock with its key and instruments was used for its construction. Photo by *Aparas de Madeira*.



Figure 15. Several sizes of wooden locks with their keys. Photo by *Aparas de Madeira*.

Declarations

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