Part 1

The Slow Rise of Western Imperialism
Iberian Expansion Overseas 1415–1647

Then, we entered the land, and no one was spared, neither male, nor female, pregnant women and droves of infants. And this because this land... had always been an enemy of the Christian name, and above all of the Portuguese; and the land which was wholly put to sack and fire, is called Goa.

*Piero Strozzi’s account of the Portuguese capture in November 1510*

Portuguese and Chinese Maritime Exploration Compared

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, on the extreme ends of the Old World, two powers simultaneously were conducting a series of maritime expeditions. In 1415, King João of Portugal descended on the Moroccan port of Ceuta with a crusader fleet and siezed the city, a project long in the preparation. That same year, the Chinese admiral Zheng He sailed back to the imperial dockyards in Nanjing after his fourth voyage to the “western and southern
oceans”, which included visits to Vietnam, Cambodia, Malacca, Java, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, India, east Africa, and Hormuz, near the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Neither of these two countries were at this time aware of their mutual interest in the sea, although a century later marauding Portuguese ships would be in virtually undefended Chinese coastal waters. So very different were the outcomes of the Portuguese and Chinese expeditions that there is no better place to begin an account of the Western power in Asia than a consideration of their motives, as well as their means of navigation.

The great fleet commanded by the Moslem eunuch Zheng He undertook between 1405 and 1433 seven major seaborne expeditions, which caused the authority and power of the Ming emperor to be acknowledged by more foreign rulers than ever before, with even Mamluk Egypt sending an ambassador. The renown of the restored Chinese empire, after the expulsion of the Mongols in 1368, was increased by these voyages, in which the foremost navy in the world paid friendly visits to foreign ports; and states that acknowledged the sovereignty of Beijing were guaranteed protection and gifts were bestowed on their kings. “Those who refused submission,” we are told

they were over-awed by a show of armed might. Every country became obedient to the imperial commands and, when Admiral Zheng He turned homewards, sent envoys with him to offer tribute. Emperor Yong Le was delighted and before very long ordered Zheng He to go overseas once more and scatter largesse among the different states. On the second expedition the number of ambassadors who presented themselves before the dragon throne grew ever greater.¹

The maritime expeditions had another purpose besides the reassertion of Chinese authority in the southern and western seas after liberation from Mongol rule. They restarted a system of state-sponsored trading, first introduced to protect the precious metals of the empire. The import of luxury items such as ivory, drugs and pearls had been a severe drain on the limited supply of bullion available, and a regulation issued in 1219 specified the commodities to be used instead of coin to pay for foreign imports—silk, brocades
and porcelain. The Southern Song Emperor Gao Zong had already remarked in about 1145 how “the profits from maritime commerce are enormous. If such trade is properly managed, the revenues earned amount to millions of strings of cash. Is this not better than taxing the people?” The loss of the northern provinces to the Jin, nomad precursors of the Mongol invaders, had made the Chinese sea-minded for the very first time. Though the immediate cause of this new interest was pressure from the warlike peoples of the northern steppe-lands, the economic and political centre of the Chinese empire had been shifting for many centuries from the north to the south, from the great plains of the Yellow River to the Yangzi delta.

By the Southern Song period, the southern coastal provinces were both the richest and most populous parts of China. A consequence of the southward movement of the imperial capital to Hangzhou and the unavailability of northern overland routes for trade was a remarkable increase in seaborne commerce, an expansion that was to impress Marco Polo when he visited Zaiton, modern Zhangzhou, in Fujian province. To this port he tells us, “come all
the ships from India laden with costly wares and precious stones of
great price and big pearls of fine quality. . . And for one ship that
goes to Alexandria or elsewhere to pick up pepper for export to
Christendom, Zaiton is visited by a hundred.” Southern Song offi-
cials had deliberately encouraged overseas contacts by sending out
trade missions laden with gifts, which were gratefully received at for-
eign courts. So pleased was the sultan of Malindi with Zheng He’s
presents that he sent an embassy to the Ming capital of Nanking in
1415 bearing exotic gifts of his own, among them a magnificent
specimen of a giraffe for the Imperial Zoo. At the gate of the pal-
ace, the third Ming emperor Yong Le personally received the animal
along with a “celestial horse” and a “celestial stag”; the giraffe was
regarded as “a symbol of perfect virtue, perfect government and per-
fected harmony in the Empire and the universe”. To mark his appre-
ciation, the ambassadors were taken all the way home to east Africa
on Zheng He’s fifth voyage of 1417.

Exceptionally powerful though they were, Ming expeditions
had a very different character from those of the Portuguese: instead
of spreading terror, slaving and planting fortresses, the Chinese
fleets engaged in an elaborate series of diplomatic missions,
exchanging gifts with distant kings from whom they were content
to accept merely formal recognition of the Ming emperor as the
Son of Heaven. The intolerance of the crusader was entirely absent.
Indeed, the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in 1498
abruptly ended the peaceful oceanic navigation that had been such
a marked feature of Asian trade. Arab and Chinese sources speak
of the hazards of the sea, of storms and shipwrecks, but they are
silent about violence, other than brushes with pirates. What the
Portuguese and their European successors brought with them was
the notion of exclusive rights to maritime trade, something entirely
alien to the tradition of long-distance commerce in Asia.

No greater contrast could be drawn between the trading activ-
ities of Zheng He at Calicut, on the western coast of India, and the
atrocities practised there in 1501 by Pedro Alvares Cabral and by Vasco
da Gama on his second visit two years later. There was no Chinese
equivalent of the Portuguese habit of sailing into port with corpses
hanging from the yards. On only three occasions did Zheng He
have to resort to force of arms. In 1406, he crossed swords with
a pirate chief who attempted to surprise his camp at Palembang: the buccaneer was duly returned to China for punishment, since he hailed originally from Guangdong province. Eight years later, again on the island of Sumatra, Zheng He was ordered by Emperor Yong Le to restore a deposed sultan to the throne of Semudera. The third clash of arms occurred in 1411 near Colombo, where Zheng He’s troops were attacked by those of the Sinhalese ruler Alagakkonara. The Chinese won a complete victory, and the captured king, along with his family, went to China as hostages when the fleet set sail from Sri Lanka for Nanjing.

Archaeological evidence for the pacific tenor of Zheng He’s diplomacy ironically comes from Sri Lanka, where a stele, dated 15 February 1409, has been found at Galle with a trilingual inscription. The Chinese text explains how the voyages were intended to announce the mandate of the Ming to foreign powers, the inscription ending with a list of the presents offered to the Buddha: gold, silver, silk and so on. Here we have a Moslem ambassador from China dedicating at a Buddhist shrine in the Indian Ocean gifts from the Son of Heaven, the One Man of Confucian philosophy. More fascinating still is that the other two inscriptions do not exactly translate the Chinese one; the Tamil text praises Tenavari-nayanar, an incarnation of Vishnu, and the Persian one invokes Allah and the great saints of Islam. But while the texts are thus different, they all agree about the list of gifts. Hardly surprising then was the relaxed attitude taken by the Chinese over the conversion of the sultan of Malacca to the Moslem faith. The nodal position of Malacca, at the meeting point of several major Asian trade routes, was understood by Emperor Yong Le, who entertained its ruler and granted him a war junk, so that he could return to his capital and protect his country. Between this state visit to China in 1411 and Zheng He’s fourth voyage two years later, Malacca had adopted Islam, a faith then being spread throughout Southeast Asia by the permanent settlement of Indian traders. Ma Huan, an official interpreter on the voyage of 1413 and a Moslem himself, noted with sympathy how “the King of Malacca and all the people follow the new religion, fasting, making penance, and saying prayers”.

Such urbanity has nothing in common with the religious fanaticism of the Portuguese, whose own sense of identity had been
largely shaped in a struggle against Islamic domination. “Whenever the treasure ships arrived from China,” Ma Huan goes on to tell us, “their crews at once erect a stockade, like a city wall, and set up towers for watch-drums at four gates. At night there are patrols of policemen carrying bells. Inside they erect a second stockade, like a small city wall within which are constructed warehouses and granaries. All the valuables and provisions are stored in them. Later the ships which have gone to other ports return with foreign goods and, when the south wind becomes favourable, the whole fleet puts to sea and returns home.” With the consent of the local ruler, Malacca obviously acted as a temporary naval base during each of Zheng He’s expeditions.

From the beginning of an empire overseas, Portuguese belligerence was legitimised by successive popes as a continuation of the crusades. In 1502, King Manuel demanded of the ruler of Calicut that all Moslems should be expelled from his kingdom, because they were enemies of Christ. The chronicler João de Barros puts the issue bluntly in his Décadas de Asia, written in 1539.

It is true that there does exist a common right for all to navigate the seas, and in Europe we acknowledge it fully. But this right does not extend beyond Europe, and so the Portuguese as lords of the sea by the strength of their fleets are justified in compelling all Moors and Gentiles to take out safe-conducts under pain of confiscation and death. For the Moors and Gentiles are outside the law of Jesus Christ, which is the true law that all must keep under pain of damnation to eternal fire. If then the soul be thus condemned, what possible right has the body to the privileges of our laws? It is true that the Gentiles are reasoning beings, and might if they lived be converted to the true faith, but as they have not revealed any desire to embrace it, we Christians have no duties towards them.

Just how matter of fact this chilling statement is about the unlimited scope for violence enjoyed by the Portuguese may seem strange now, but Barros was simply stating the obvious to his Catholic contemporaries. Responsibility for relations with non-Christians was believed to rest solely with the Pope, and in return for bearing the
costs of the work of their conversion, papal bulls granted to Portugal a monopoly of trade in Asia. The closeness of papal support can be judged from the very first venture overseas: King João’s surprise attack on Ceuta. This expedition received indulgences, although preachers did not mention that it was a crusade until after the fleet had left Portuguese waters, so as to keep secret its destination as long as possible. 8

Perhaps an even greater contrast between the deep-sea navigation of the Chinese and the Portuguese, however, is to be found in the relative sizes of their fleets. Populous and powerful Ming China dispatched Zheng He abroad with a veritable armada. On his first voyage, in 1405, he took 317 ships to Java, Sumatra, Malacca, Sri Lanka and India: 27,870 men in all were under his command. Some of Zheng He’s vessels possessed as many as nine masts and his so-called treasure ships displaced 1,500 tonnes. Arguments over the tonnage of Chinese oceangoing junks were settled in favour of such a large figure by the discovery of an actual rudder post in 1962 at the site of one of the Ming shipyards in Nanjing. It once turned a rudder blade of at least 100 square metres, large enough to steer a vessel between 130 and 190 metres in length. Had Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope 70 years earlier, he would have found his own tiny squadron sailing alongside ships belonging to a Chinese fleet with an average displacement three or four times heavier than his own.

The advanced state of Ming nautical technology derived from a tradition of invention already over a millennium old. The steering oar, used in the West until the late Middle Ages, put a severe limitation on the size of ship that could safely be constructed, besides giving the steersman a hazardous task of control in rough weather. In China, it was replaced in the first century of the Christian era by the stern-post rudder, the prototype of Zheng He’s impressive oceangoing steering system. Other early Chinese advances in shipbuilding were the watertight compartment, which allowed junks to become large deep-sea craft, and the aerodynamically efficient mat-and-batten sail. These improvements fascinated Marco Polo, who felt it necessary to provide shipbuilding details for the benefit of his Venetian compatriots. The bulkhead-built hull, divided into separate watertight compartments, really caught his attention, since it permitted repairs to be carried out at sea. But it was the mat-and-batten
rig that allowed junks to make headway to windward, something the square-sailed ships of Europe simply could not do.

For this reason Portuguese shipwrights had turned to Arab models when developing long-distance craft. The famous *caravo* or *caravela* (from the Arabic word *karib*) had a wide hull displacing little water, with three masts hoisting triangular sails, hung from very long spars. This permitted greater mobility in manoeuvring as well as better use of the wind. By the time Vasco da Gama left Lisbon for India with four vessels, the dhow-like caravels in his tiny fleet had still only increased their displacement from 50 to 300 tonnes. A Chinese invention of direct use to him was undoubtedly the magnetic compass, which had passed westwards through Arab hands. The magnetic compass, along with accurate star charts, allowed Zheng He’s fleet to reach southern Africa, touch the northern coast of Australia, and sail widely in the Pacific Ocean.

What Vasco da Gama found on rounding the Cape of Good Hope was an almost empty Indian Ocean, because after 1433, the Ming emperors discouraged maritime activities and ran down the imperial fleet, a policy of indifference to sea power that would eventually expose China to the unchecked depredations of European navies. Not all the causes are apparent for this crucial reversal of policy, which left a power vacuum in the southern and western oceans—into which the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the English and finally the French sailed. A combination of circumstances seems to have been responsible. Chinese scholar-officials, strongly against the ocean voyages from the beginning, were even more opposed to the prestige Zheng He and the eunuchs derived from their success. The grip that the eunuchs gained over state policy was to worry the imperial bureaucracy greatly as young or weak emperors were manipulated one after another. So influential did they become that the Manchus, who overthrew the Ming dynasty in 1644, regarded eunuch power as the chief reason for their victory. Under the Qing, their own dynasty, the management of the imperial household passed into the hands of the emperor’s own kinsmen. The eunuchs were once again restricted to duties in the imperial harem. But the despatch of fleets overseas was anyway becoming less profitable as trading ventures and the cost of mounting them pressed hard on the imperial exchequer.
Another consideration was the removal in the 1420s of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, the site of the former Mongol seat of power. The laying out of a city and a palace there shifted the centre of imperial gravity northwards and concentrated attention on the Great Wall. This line of defence was bound to rank as the top priority, once strong leaders re-emerged among the nomadic peoples living to its north. Ming preoccupation with this new threat culminated within a hundred years of Zheng He’s death in 1433 in a series of anti-maritime edicts that made it a capital offence to own or build craft with two or more masts. Even the administrative records of the great voyages were destroyed in the 1470s on the grounds that they contained “deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people’s ears and eyes”. Yet this lack of interest in the rest of the world was part of a more general attitude in East Asia. The inward-looking societies of pre-modern China, Korea and Japan chose to concentrate on their own affairs, and as far as possible ignore the arrival of Western power and influence. Though the Japanese were initially fascinated by the Portuguese, and as many as 200 Catholic churches were built, in 1614 missionaries were summarily expelled. Even more commerce with Europe was soon ended, except for a very limited exchange with the Dutch, who had conveniently arrived to replace the zealous Portuguese. The Dutch managed to trade by eschewing all missionary activity, a calculated policy that was condemned by their European rivals as nothing more than a cynical accommodation with Japanese superstition.

No such compromise was ever countenanced by the Portuguese crown, the driving force behind the expansion overseas from Ceuta onwards. For it was from the aristocrats who actually attended court, or who were the monarch’s representatives outside the capital, that the impetus for overseas conquest and exploration nearly always came. War with Spain had sharpened interest in seapower—the city of Seville was attacked in 1369 by a fleet of 32 Portuguese ships—and so encouragement was given to shipbuilders in the form of tax-free timber from the royal forests, and to merchants by means of maritime insurance. Ships paid 2 per cent of the value of their cargoes into the royal treasury and received insurance against losses in war or against unexpected taxes. Anti-Spanish sentiment was behind the foundation of the Avis dynasty in 1385.
In alliance with the English duke John of Gaunt, whose daughter he married, King João managed to turn back a full-scale Spanish invasion at the battle of Aljubarrota. Learning from English experience in France, the outnumbered Portuguese army remained on the defensive behind a makeshift barricade of stakes and brushwood, which was intended to break Spanish cavalry charges. From the safety of this position, longbow shot could be directed against attackers either on horseback or on foot. Some 700 English soldiers were among the 7,000 men at Aljubarrota who fought for King João I. Their surprise victory prevented any permanent merger of Portugal with Spain, although during a temporary union under the Habsburgs from 1580 until 1640, the old alliance with England did not exempt it from attack by English forces.

The marriage on 14 February 1387 of King João and Lady Philippa symbolically united England and Portugal. Because Dona Filipa, the name given by the Portuguese to the Lancastrian bride, took delight in chivalry, she would have enjoyed the ten days of tournaments that were held after the wedding. And we are aware that she wholeheartedly approved of King João’s wish that their sons “should be knighted in splendid fashion”. According to the chronicler Gomes Eannes de Azurara, this was what the monarch wanted above all else. A great expedition was therefore secretly arranged: an attack on Ceuta, a city situated on the Moroccan side of the Straits of Gibraltar. King João found himself in much the same position as his Lancastrian relations in England. His possession of the throne was also due to a usurpation, and he had to find employment for a quarrelsome nobility now that Portugal was at peace with Spain.

The capture of Ceuta in 1415 actually coincided with Henry V’s invasion of Normandy and the resumption of the Hundred Years War. Rather like the youthful English monarch, João thought that young men must practise the arts of war or they would waste the best years of their lives, for it was only through fighting that knightly ambitions could ever be fulfilled. Honourable though this medieval notion was as a means of maintaining status, the Portuguese king could not quite disguise an obsession over plunder during the overseas expedition. Besides regular trading with Norway, Flanders and Genoa, his own ships are known to have participated in the piracy that customarily took place between Moslems and Christians. Arguably,
it was this characteristic Mediterranean mixture of commerce and conflict that Portugal later transferred to the Indian Ocean. At a time when the value of rents steadily fell, ransoms were as useful a way of supplementing income as trading profits. Portugal was, as were many other European countries, very short of gold, and Moroccan coins were in general circulation as a result of Moslem purchases of fruit from the Algarve. Their high quality, plus knowledge that Ceuta handled a large proportion of the west African gold trade, was the economic spur behind the expedition, Portugal’s first overseas crusade. The large loans raised by King João from bankers in Portugal and elsewhere to finance it would not have been forthcoming without an expectation of their ready repayment. That it was the royal treasurer, João Alfonso, who acted as the chief advocate of the Ceuta attack can be taken to reflect the confidence felt about its prospects by the merchant community.

Six years were spent in making preparations for the expedition. The king of Granada, the last Moslem holding of any size on the Iberian peninsula, sent an embassy to inquire about its purpose. But the secret was so well kept that when the Portuguese fleet dropped anchor off Gibraltar, before turning south towards Morocco, in alarm the Moslem authorities there sent out to King João “the best and most precious things they could find, while asking him to assure them of peace. The Portuguese king, however, would make no promises and confined himself to accepting their presents.” An outbreak of plague in the expeditionary force failed to deflect King João’s purpose, and tactical surprise was achieved on its arrival at Ceuta. Recording the events in the 1450s, when fresh Moroccan expeditions were being planned, Azurara was at pains to present the capture of Ceuta as the logical first step in conquest overseas, and to elevate the role played by Henry the Navigator, third youngest of the Portuguese princes. Henry was always keen on a forward policy in Morocco, and to him fell the difficult task of holding Ceuta on behalf of the Portuguese crown. His extended governorship of the Algarve makes sense as the person officially responsible for the fate of this African city. Yet its possession was a drain on the royal treasury for the reason that, once the Moslems realised recapture was impossible, the trade they controlled across the Sahara was diverted to other cities.
For Azurara, there was no question about the correctness of King João’s actions. Celestial signs lent their support before the assault, in which the Moslems were shown no mercy at all. Fighting raged in the streets and in Moorish houses that made “our poor homes look like pigsties”. Ordinary Portuguese soldiers, Azurara had to admit, were less interested in glory than gain.

But theft was dangerous in houses with low and narrow doorways, like those of the Moors. Men who were carried away by covetousness entered without caution, which often led to their destruction, for many of the Moors had taken refuge in their houses and were defending them to the end, preferring to lose their lives rather than preserving them by flight. . . . Seized by grief, they hid themselves behind doors in order to kill their enemies when they crossed the threshold; but from this the Moors had little advantage, for behind the foremost were others, and they were all armed.13

The fall of Ceuta permitted King João to dedicate its great mosque to Christian worship, and under the newly consecrated dome make his three oldest sons into knights. For the dubbing ceremony, the king had brought along three special swords that Dona Filipa had provided. She died just before the expedition set off. Then, leaving behind a garrison of 2,700 men, the Portuguese sailed away after a stay of just 13 days.

Although the attack on Ceuta was the beginning of a century and a half of warfare in Morocco, the limited advantage gained through this initial foothold weakened for some years the alliance formed between Portuguese commercial interests and the Avis dynasty. Relations were hardly improved by the disastrous attack of 1437 on Tangier, under the command of Prince Henry. It was thought that occupation of the city would give support to Ceuta and facilitate progress inland, a move still effectively thwarted by Moslem arms. The expedition seems to have been poorly supported, so that the capture at Tangier of King João’s youngest son, Fernando, came as a considerable embarrassment. Henry found himself in the unenviable position of having to argue against the ransom of his
captured brother, for whom the Moslems demanded the surrender of Ceuta. Whilst Prince Fernando died as a prisoner of war, hard-nosed Henry established himself at Sagres on the south-western tip of the Algarve and sponsored exploration along the African coast.

Once again it was the lure of wealth that motivated Henry as much as his hatred of Moslems: the ships he sent against them in the service of the Catholic faith were expected to seek plunder, slaves and ransoms as well. Although privateering had become increasingly thefavoured economic activity of the Portuguese nobility, Henry’s captains were little different from the followers of the Lancastrian invaders of France. To maintain support, Henry V of England had from the start of the new campaign against the French made it his policy to share the profits of war. Finding employment and opportunities for young retainers to prove their skills and abilities was a constant problem for European rulers at the close of the Middle Ages, and Portuguese monarchs largely solved it by overseas adventures, although very few of them proved immediately profitable.

Chivalry might well be used by Azurara as a manifesto for the Avis dynasty’s foreign policy, but beneath the chivalric veneer of his narrative the reality of hit-and-run raiding is visible. In 1441, the first black slaves were brought back to the Algarve, and two years later, Henry obtained from the Pope a bull confirming his rights to their homeland in Guinea. The prince had every right to be pleased, according to Azurara, because “though their bodies were captive, this was small matter in comparison with their souls which would enjoy freedom for eternity”. It did not seem to worry anybody at Lagos, the Algarvian port at which African slaves were landed, how families were usually split up on purchase, with parents and children being sent to places far apart. In the Algarve itself, slaves came to make up 10 per cent of the population, in Lisbon the proportion was even higher. By the time Henry died in 1460, slaving had become a staple of Portuguese trade.

The Sea Route to India Discovered

Rivalry with Spain for control of the African coast stimulated the Portuguese to push their claims by making new discoveries. In 1474,
Prince João, the future João II, was at the age of 19 charged with responsibility for overseas expansion. To him, rather than Henry the Navigator, credit should be given for the creation of a deliberate plan of discovery. Once on the throne, King João II tried to direct the financing and planning of an overseas empire himself, in contrast to Spanish monarchs who tended to restrict themselves to an indirect role through granting licences to conquistadors. It earned his equally energetic successor, Manuel, the title of “grocer king”. The expedition King João II sent southwards in 1482 was perhaps the most important of all, because its discovery of the eastward trend of the African coast to the north of the equator appeared to promise the chance of reaching India by sea. Intelligence gathered by Pero de Covilham a decade later revealed the existence of a maritime route to the east coast of Africa from India. Fluent in Arabic, Covilham had travelled in the guise of a Moorish merchant as far east as Calicut and Goa. His report to the Portuguese king contained details of the spice trade, including both its origins and routes of exchange. Covilham died in 1526 in Ethiopia, where he had gone to make contact with the legendary Christian ruler Prester John.

It was the voyage of Bartolomeu Dias to the Cape of Good Hope in 1487–88 that finally located the passage from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. In all probability a professional mariner rather than a member of the nobility, Dias had been sent southwards with three vessels to discover where the African continent ended. It took him a good seven months to sail back home after the discovery. Another explorer watched Dias’ return to Lisbon, for the Genoan Christopher Columbus was still trying to enlist the support of the Portuguese crown for a scheme of his own: basing his calculations on the work of Italian mapmakers, he argued for a westerly sea route to India.

It could well be the confusion caused by Columbus’ apparent success on behalf of Spain in 1492, which brought about a pause in Portuguese exploration. What news of his discovery of the “Indies” certainly did was to oblige the Holy See to redefine the spheres of influence belonging respectively to Spain and Portugal. A bull issued in 1493 placed the dividing line west of the Azores, or the Cape Verde Islands. With the exception of Brazil, which Portugal had yet to discover, it remained in force until Ferdinand Magellan,
a Portuguese in Spanish service, arrived off the Philippines in 1521. By sailing there in a westerly direction via Cape Horn, he invalidated the papal bull and forced another revision in 1529, when the Spaniards gave up any claim to the Moluccas in exchange for a Portuguese undertaking to allow the Spanish conquest of the Philippines.

The resumption of Portuguese exploration in 1497 thus took place in the shadow of Spanish exploits. Even the size of Vasco da Gama’s expedition belied King Manuel’s claim to lordship over the Indian Ocean. Four vessels and fewer than 200 men hardly matched the expedition’s declared intentions: these were sailing direct to India, the establishment of Portuguese control over the spice trade by force of arms, and the making of alliances with Christian rulers who supposedly lived there.

While Lisbon could see the long-term financial gain of breaking the Venetian–Moslem monopoly over the supply of spices to Europe, King Manuel may not at this stage have been ready to stake a great deal of his personal prestige on the venture. Another possibility is that da Gama was not his own choice for the command, but had been forced upon him by nobles who feared the increased power that would gather to the crown from the diversion of Asian trade round Africa. Except for a few years in the 1460s, it had already exercised a monopoly on all imports of gold and slaves from West Africa. Royal licences were needed by well-born people who wished to take part

Vasco da Gama was the first Portuguese commander to sail to India, reaching Calicut in 1498
in this profitable trade, and Azurara tells us they included noblemen, churchmen, high officials, as well as members of the military orders. The government even tried to set the price for imported pepper, but it was naturally forced down as supplies increased. By the last decade of the fifteenth century, however, increasing demand for spices in general pushed prices upwards and stimulated further Portuguese exploration.\textsuperscript{15}

For Vasco da Gama’s epoch-making voyage, we are fortunate to possess a chronicle, most likely a personal diary kept by a certain Alvaro Velho on board the \textit{São Rafael}. Little is known about the author, whose account of the expedition covers the period from July 1497 to June 1498, the month the tiny fleet of four ships left Calicut for the return voyage to Lisbon. Beforehand, Velho may well have spent some time in Guinea. Having travelled more than half the distance of the outward journey, da Gama’s ships came on 25 December 1497 to the farthest point reached by Bartolomeu Dias: it is still called Christmas, or Natal. Continuing up the coast of east Africa the condition of the crews became pitiful, as scurvy took its toll. “There were many with swollen hands and feet, the gums growing over their teeth to such an extent they could not eat.”\textsuperscript{16} After a month restoring their health and making repairs to their vessels, da Gama made for Mozambique, Mombasa and then Malindi, from which he eventually set sail for Calicut in late April.

Mozambique was the first direct contact made by the Portuguese with the Indian Ocean trading network. This is how Velho reports the encounter:

The people of this country are dark and well-built. They are Moslems, and their language is the same as the Moors. Their clothes are made of fine linen or cotton, with coloured stripes and rich embroidery. All of them wear caps decorated with silk tassels and gold thread. They are merchants, and trade with the White Moors, four of whose vessels were at the time in port, laden with gold, silver, cloves, pepper, ginger, and silver rings, as well as quantities of pearls, jewels and rubies, all of which articles are used by the people in this country. We understood them to say that all these things, with the exception of the gold, were brought here by the Moors.\textsuperscript{17}
The distinction drawn between black Moslems and White Moors, in other words between “native Moslems” and “Moors from Mecca”, indicates that the Portuguese explorers saw the last as their principal adversaries. But they realised from the start how they lacked adequate manpower to engage in an all-out war against Islam. Unlike Ming China, with a population approaching 200 million, Portugal was inhabited by barely 1.5 million people. The total number of Portuguese at any time in Asia is reckoned never to have topped 10,000 men.18

It was fortunate then for da Gama that at this time Egypt, Persia and Vijayanagar in southern India had no armed shipping in the Indian Ocean, if indeed they ever owned navies at all. And later this stroke of good luck continued with the foundation of the Mughal empire in India, a land-oriented power with little concern for the sea. Its third ruler, Akbar, responded with puzzlement when in 1586 he stood on a beach and first saw waves. In desperation, Venice had requested in 1502 that the Mamluk sultan of Egypt should take action over the Portuguese incursion into the spice trade, but he was in no position to stop the newcomers from blocking trade along the Red Sea. The sultan asked the Pope to intervene instead, on pain of Egyptian harassment of Christians and destruction of sacred sites in Jerusalem. Not until the Ottoman Turks had conquered Egypt, and extended their power into the Persian Gulf with the capture of Basra in 1546, would the Portuguese become really stretched at sea.

But da Gama’s visit to Mozambique did not pass off without violence. After the local sultan promised to provide pilots, two of the Portuguese vessels came under attack and a three-hour engagement ensued. Blame was placed on the White Moors here and at Mombasa, where once again there was fighting. Henceforth, Velho refers to them as “dogs”. It was a stroke of luck that the Moslem ruler of Malindi was willing to lend da Gama a Gujarati pilot, who guided his fleet straight across the Indian Ocean to Calicut, the expedition’s destination. There anti-Moslem sentiment among the Portuguese crew got the better of common sense and they worshipped at a Hindu temple a goddess said to be the Virgin Mary, in part because no sign of Islam was in evidence. “Many other saints were painted on the walls of the church, wearing crowns. They were
painted variously with teeth protruding an inch from the mouth, and four or five arms. Below this church was a large masonry tank, similar to many others, we had seen on the road.” In his dealings with the powerful ruler of Calicut, da Gama proceeded with caution and decorum. The first person sent ashore had been an ex-convict named João Nunes, who on meeting two Tunisian merchants in the city made the famous remark about how the Portuguese had come to Asia in search of “Christians and spices”. No animosity is apparent in Velho’s account of the exchange, which points to the peaceful transaction of trade at Calicut.

Face-to-face with the king himself, da Gama discovered to his dismay that relations were far less easy, in all likelihood because of the poor gifts sent by King Manuel. He felt that the Indians were deliberately drawing him into a trap, when he was told to bring his ships closer inshore and hand over the rudders and sails. Leave-taking was also complicated by the holding of hostages, although da Gama departed at last with a letter from the ruler of Calicut, in which he offered the Portuguese monarch cinnamon, cloves, ginger, pepper and precious stones in exchange for gold, silver, coral and scarlet cloth. The feelings of the expedition were summed up by Velho, who wrote that “we were saddened to think a Christian king should treat us so badly”.

The expedition’s return to Lisbon in 1499 helped to strengthen King Manuel’s hand. At very little cost, Vasco da Gama had fulfilled a royal dream of direct trade with India. On the way back, the São Rafael had to be abandoned and burnt after passing Mombasa, because death and disease had reduced the expedition’s crews so much that it was impossible to sail all the ships. The goods on board were, however, transferred to the remaining vessels. And against his noble detractors, King Manuel could now declare that there were populous Christian kingdoms in India, potential allies against any Moslem interference with Portuguese trade. Even more telling was the intelligence that very little naval opposition could be expected in the Indian Ocean. So confident was the Portuguese court that it joked how the Venetians would soon turn to fishing for their livelihood because they had no future as international traders. Without hesitation, Manuel added to his title of “King of Portugal and the Algarve and beyond the sea in Africa, and Lord of Guinea” this
ambitious extension of authority: “Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India”.

Although Manuel and his successors never termed themselves emperors in Asia, unlike British monarchs were to do in India, the extent of the authority claimed by the Portuguese crown seems immense as a result of a single expedition. But with a speed surpassing even Spain’s lightning conquest of the New World, the Portuguese were about to spread along the eastern trade routes of the Old World, and by 1517 drop anchor off distant Guangzhou in southern China. These voyages were quite different in character from da Gama’s first expedition, for the lukewarm welcome he had received at Calicut determined Manuel to show off Portuguese power in Asian waters. He had already announced plans to modernise and develop Lisbon’s commercial facilities in anticipation of a massive increase of overseas trade. Within a century, it had brought immense wealth to the Portuguese crown, the net profit on pepper alone having risen to 152 per cent.

The firm conviction of King Manuel about the possibilities of Portuguese power in Asia explains the second expedition which he dispatched in 1500. It comprised 13 ships, ten of which belonged to the crown and the rest to syndicates of noblemen and merchants. For the expedition’s commander, the king passed over Vasco da Gama and instead chose Pedro Alvares Cabral. He was a member of the Order of Christ, a military organisation that had been active in the Portuguese penetration of Africa. As early as 1433, the Order of Christ had received a royal grant of authority over Madeira, Porto Santo and other islands, which was confirmed by papal bulls. So favourable were their terms that by 1455 it could claim “all power, dominion and spiritual dominion” over the whole area of Portuguese expansion. 20

A contemporary even went so far as maintain that Manuel was an instrument of the divine will, since “the King is not King of his own self, or for his own self. . . The King’s heart is in the hand of God, and God inclines it where he will, as the Holy Scripture says.” 21 The Portuguese monarch gave Cabral detailed instructions on what he was to buy and how he was to deal with local rulers. Believing its king to be a Christian, he was told to insist at Calicut on the expulsion of all Moslems, a policy that Manuel under intense
pressure from Spain had already put into force in Portugal. But his
decree of 1496 was lax in comparison with those of Spain: con-
version for Jews and Moslems was largely symbolic, because these
prominent traders were given 20 years to instruct themselves in the
Catholic faith. Only with the Counter-Reformation would Portugal
come to match the fanaticism of Spain, the Inquisition establishing
itself in Lisbon in 1536. Cabral’s instruction for Calicut can there-
fore be seen as essentially a commercial device intended to disrupt
the flow of spices to the great Moslem terminals for Asian trade at
Hormuz and Aden.

En route the second expedition was blown off course and in
April 1500 made landfall in Brazil. The discovery was believed to
be a sign of divine providence, and one ship was sent back with the
news. Manuel responded by dispatching three vessels to Brazil in
1501, before Cabral returned from India. Meanwhile, the elaborate
gifts carried by Cabral got him off to a much better start with the king of Calicut than da Gama had achieved. At this stage of the negotiations, the Portuguese still thought the people of Calicut followed a deviant form of Christianity, for Manuel proposed sending “clerics and also church ornaments, so that you may be able to see the doctrine of the Christian faith which we hold”.22 Even though this view turned out to be incorrect, there was no reason to expect Cabral to resort so quickly to arms, unless he connected the slowness of negotiations with Moslem influence at the Calicut court. But with more than 1,000 men on board, he could afford to take a tough line and, in reply to local intransigence, a bombardment of the city was ordered. Afterwards, the Portuguese fleet sailed to nearby Cochin, where the ruler received Cabral warmly and allowed him to load a cargo of pepper. Before leaving for Lisbon, he also visited Cannanore, a city to the north of Calicut, because he had heard that it would also welcome good relations with Portugal.

On his return home Cabral justified his use of force by reference to Islam. His dispelling of any lingering illusions about Christian powers being situated around the Indian Ocean added to the gloom felt in the Portuguese court. As Barros noted, it was realised how on the Indian coast “there were more Moors than all those facing us on the coast of Africa between Ceuta and Alexandria. . . All of whom plotted our downfall.”23 The king’s counsellors urged caution, but Manuel refused to be down-hearted and a third expedition was launched under the command of da Gama, not Cabral. It seems very likely that the setting aside of Cabral reflected court intrigue. Though less well connected and well born than Cabral clearly was, da Gama had his supporters at court, who were only too ready to point out Cabral’s inability to make Calicut into a firm ally of Portugal.

At a solemn ceremony held in Lisbon cathedral on 30 January 1502, da Gama was awarded the rank of admiral and handed the royal standard to carry on his voyage. If the change of command was intended to mark a less belligerent approach in India, the outcome was no different from Cabral’s because the third expedition subjected Calicut to another bombardment. Da Gama additionally slew several hundred innocent fishermen who were caught up in the action. The era of peaceful trading in the Indian Ocean was over. Even Mamluk Egypt was stirred to revive its navy, and at Diu
unsuccessfully challenge the Portuguese with Gujarati support in 1509. By then, Manuel had no option but to go onto a permanent war footing. It is impossible to be sure of the exact purpose of da Gama’s second voyage, because the instructions he received were not recorded. But the Portuguese monarch may have already decided on a robust approach, for in 1503 a small fort, the first in India, was built at Cochin, and another fort at Cannanore followed two years later.

The Formation of the Portuguese Empire

A new policy seems to commence with the appointment of Francisco d’Almeida in 1505 as commander of the fleet for three years. His title was viceroy of Portuguese Asia, and his brief was to trade where possible, to make war where necessary. The continuity of leadership was meant to secure the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, for Almeida was ordered to capture and fortify Sofala and Kilwa in east Africa as staging posts for shipping, while a third fortress was to be built on the Angediva Islands, southwest of Goa. Another instruction suggested that Sri Lanka and Malacca might be occupied as well. Already Manuel appreciated the importance of controlling the Red Sea trade, although an attack on Aden was not launched by Alfonso de Albuquerque, the second viceroy, until 1513. Its failure was the only setback for the Portuguese in their plan of domination. According to his son, Albuquerque

often used to say that for the preservation of India, and for the prevention of troubles arising from that territory to the Kings of Portugal, there were four main things, of which their possession by the Portuguese must be made very strong and very sure. These were: Aden, in order to have dominion over the Straits of Mecca, before the Grand Sultan could forestall them in seizing it; Hormuz, so as to have supreme rule over the Straits of Bacora; and Diu and Goa, for sovereignty of all the other districts of India. And with these four places assured to Portugal, and fortified with very strong fortresses she could avoid many other unnecessary expenses to which she was now subject.24
Under the tireless command of Albuquerque, the Portuguese secured their hold over much of the spice trade. In 1510, he captured the Moslem stronghold of Goa, the future capital of the Estado da India, or “State of India”.

A keen participant in the assault was Piero Strozzi, an extract from whose letter to his father heads this chapter. Along with other Florentines granted a licence by the Portuguese king to trade in Asia, Strozzi was enrolled by Albuquerque in his attacking force, which took Goa in November. The place Strozzi describes as “very strong, and populous, and large, where there is a castle and fortress; where in guard of it were eight to ten thousand persons, with more than 200 pieces of artillery, where, by the grace of God, we entered by force of arms, and to enter it we killed around two thousand persons who resisted us. And these were almost all Turks, and renegade Christians of every sort; among whom were Venetians and Genoese in the largest numbers”. Having disposed of the garrison, the Portuguese laid waste the town, killing men, women and children without distinction. Strozzi’s only regret was an arrow wound that prevented him from looting anything, unlike his fellow Florentines. In his remarkable letter home, there is a curious mixture of hatred and admiration for the Moslems, whose merchants “can do better calculations by memory than we can do with the pen. And they make fun of us, and it seems to me they are
superior to us in countless things, except with sword in hand, which they cannot resist.”

A year later, Strozzi sailed with Albuquerque’s fleet of 17 ships against Malacca, the eastern entrepot for spices. The second viceroy clearly felt that he had a mandate for aggression. Yet Albuquerque, like his fellow countrymen, drew equal strength of purpose from celestial portents. Sailing in the Red Sea he was deeply moved to observe a cross in the sky, “very clear and resplendent. When a cloud tried to pass across it, the cloud was rent into several parts without touching the cross, or reducing its brightness. The cross was seen by the whole fleet, and all the crews knelt and worshipped it, with tears in their eyes.” Despite this favourable portent, no one would agree with Albuquerque’s recommendation that the fleet should put about and seek out Prester John because, unlike the viceroy himself, they were “men of little faith.” A strong streak of messianism also resided in the breast of Manuel, to whom a report of this incident was immediately sent. The king managed to combine a belief in crusading against the enemies of Christ with a shrewd commercial instinct, even after the disappointment of
discovering that Hindus were not religious brethren. His own miraculous elevation to the throne after the death of six better-placed candidates served to reinforce an idea of his reign as being one of great deeds against unbelievers. Never entirely abandoned at court was the hope of recapturing Jerusalem as the final stage of Portuguese expansion overseas.

At Malacca, in 1511, Albuquerque had the personal satisfaction of delivering a powerful blow against the infidel while simultaneously advancing Portugal’s commercial interests. In a conference held a few days before the assault, he told his captains that the expulsion of the Moors from the city would destroy Islam locally. As for trade, the construction of a fort at Malacca must bankrupt Cairo and Mecca, and oblige the Venetians to buy spices in Lisbon. On St. James’ day, a saint to whom Albuquerque was particularly devoted, the fierce fighting began. Despite the Malaccan sultan being well supplied with cannon and Javanese mercenaries, the Portuguese force of 1,100 men triumphed within two weeks and looting rivalled in quality the booty taken by the Spaniards in the New World, even though most of the city’s wealth remained in the hands of its original owners, because Albuquerque had issued flags of protection to residents who did not oppose his coming. Chinese merchants had even loaned him a junk to overwhelm the bridge in the centre of Malacca.

After the capture of the city, the Portuguese worked round the clock to build a fortress strong enough to resist a counter-attack. They were fortunate that the nominal overlord of Malacca, the Ming emperor, was disinclined to offer the deposed sultan any assistance at all. Having received complaints from Chinese merchants about their unfair treatment by the sultan, he was gratified to learn of the restraint shown by Albuquerque towards them and their property. But it is unlikely that China still possessed the naval capacity for imposing its political will in Southeast Asia anyway.

Courage and faith aside, Portuguese success at Malacca depended upon a concentration of firepower. Their cannon would have even outgunned the Chinese, who for centuries had led the world in the use of gunpowder. Portuguese muzzle-loaders were less likely to burst, their trajectories were longer and more accurate, and their shot was heavier than most Asian cannon of equivalent
weight. For the Chinese imperial armies, the new weaponry was to come as a rude shock, when in 1592 they exchanged fire in Korea with the Japanese invasion force sent there by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The samurai were armed with superior guns based on the Portuguese musket. The possession of better guns was at this time giving the Russians an advantage on the steppes too, as they pushed eastwards over the Urals in pursuit of their Tartar enemies. Russia had always been vulnerable to attack from Asia: Moscow was burned to the ground as late as 1571. The Russians only won control of the lands on the European side of the Urals in 1552, when they took the fortress-city of Kazan. With superior artillery, plus the services of a Danish sapper who supervised the mining of the walls, Ivan the Terrible was able to storm it and then overrun the whole Kazan khanate. Vast numbers of prisoners were taken; some were deported to Russia and forced to convert, whereupon they were enrolled in Ivan’s army; others were simply killed on the spot.

The Cossacks who crossed the Urals into Siberia in the 1580s also made effective use of firearms to expand eastwards, reaching the Pacific within half a century in their pursuit of furs. This rush to the ocean soon brought about conflict with China, which in 1689 concluded at Nerchinsk its first treaty ever with a European power. Even though signed by a Manchu emperor, the Treaty of Nerchinsk was the first occasion on which the Chinese empire accorded diplomatic equality to another signatory. Emperor Kang Xi appreciated the settlement reached with the Russians for the good reason that he was now free to deal with the Mongols, the perennial enemies of China. One of the great military achievements of the Manchu conquerors for the security of the Chinese empire was to remove once and for all the nomad threat to its civilisation of settled agriculture. It is important to keep the Western technological edge in warfare in a proper perspective, however. Not till after the end of Portuguese supremacy in Asia would the European advantage become a significant factor, as the military revolution in Europe during the late seventeenth century fed through to colonial warfare. The string of early Portuguese victories may have been in part due to the application of concentrated firepower at specific strategic targets, but such an innovation was not on such a scale that some Asian states were unable to emulate it themselves.29
Leading Indian states understood the need for artillery, not least the Mughal empire, whose southward drive the Portuguese viewed with grave alarm. The Venetian Nicolao Manucci, a doctor in the service of the Mughals, noted the early recruitment of an English gunner from Surat, at the staggering rate of five hundred rupees a month. However, the English race, like other European peoples, being fond of drinking wine, a thing they cannot procure in Hindustan owing to its prohibition under Mohamedan law, the gunner, in spite of all those rupees, was most unhappy. One day Akbar directed the Englishman to fire at a target for which purpose a great sheet had been erected in front of the palace on the bank of the river. The gunner intentionally fired the ball into the air, so that it disappeared. On this account was the emperor much put out, thinking that the gunner had no skill taking aim. He asked the man the reason for such a great error in his aim, when he had such repute in the art of discharging canon. The Englishman replied that the mistake arose from his not being able to see; if he had drunk wine he could aim straight at the target. The king commanded that they should bring him spirits (of which there was no shortage in the imperial household, where it was made for giving to the war-elephants to increase their courage). When he saw the spirits, the Englishman was highly delighted; he seized the bottle, putting it to his mouth with the same eagerness that a thirsty stag rushed to a crystal spring. At one go he drank the whole, and then licked his moustache. The king was amazed and astounded to see the pleasure that the Englishman had in drinking spirits. Purposely the Englishman made all sorts of gestures to show his satisfaction; then, turning towards the target, he rubbed his eyes, and asked them to take away the sheet and replace it with a pot stuck upon a stick. So said, so done. He discharged the piece and knocked the pot to bits. At this the king and his courtiers were all lost in amazement at such a good shot. It was on account of this fact that Akbar conceded to Europeans the permission to distil spirits for their own consumption, and would not allow anyone to interfere with them. He said that as Europeans must have been created at the same time as spirits, and if deprived of them were like fish out of their element, unless they had drink they could not see plain.
How much European mercenaries in the pay of Moslem states owed to this artful gunner it is impossible to tell, but the presence of these military experts was recognised over a wide area by “their eyes rolling from drinking liquor”. Akbar’s successor, Jahangir, may have recalled the service rendered by the thirsty Englishman when in 1608 he gave the English East India Company permission to set up a factory at Surat. Realising later that trade with the English would jeopardise good relations with the Portuguese, the Mughal emperor withdrew permission for the factory and expelled the English. Jahangir did not wish to offend officials of the Estado da India in Goa, lest they direct their fleet to disrupt vessels carrying pilgrims to Mecca, a destination he was bound to ensure that Moslems could safely reach.

All ships in the Indian Ocean were required by the Portuguese to have a *cartaz*, or “pass”. It stated who was the captain, how big

An island at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, Hormuz was captured by the Portuguese in 1515
was the ship, and what crew it carried. Usually issued at a fort, a pass required that a ship should trade with the Portuguese or call in to pay customs duties on its cargo before proceeding to its final destination. A cash deposit had to be left at the place where the pass was issued. Any vessel sailing without such an official safe conduct could be taken as a prize. Central to the system of passes was Hormuz, an island at the mouth of the Persian Gulf: Albuquerque captured it in 1515, two years after his repulse at Aden. He achieved this conquest in spite of strong opposition from his captains, who preferred the much easier task of plundering merchant vessels at sea.

**Mixed Portuguese Success in Southeast Asia**

Because very few forts were ever established to the east of India, Albuquerque’s hope of extinguishing Islam in Southeast Asia came to nothing. An unforeseen consequence of the capture of Malacca by the Portuguese was the further spread of Moslem belief, as the local population worked hard to keep the spice trade from falling into Christian hands. Utterly beyond Portuguese strength was retention of distant outposts at Ternate and Tidore in the Indonesian archipelago. They had been set up there in the 1520s among “the spice islands” so as to check Spain, but they collapsed as much through mismanagement as opposition from local rulers. The vicious and corrupt Lopes de Mesquita, captain of the Ternate fort, precipitated a crisis that ended the Portuguese presence altogether. This greedy official tried to expropriate a large part of the clove crop for his own personal benefit, and stabbed the friendly sultan to death when he pointed out the blatant injustice of this action. Mesquita even had the body cut into pieces and cast into the sea. Sultan Baab Ullah, the vengeful son, called the people to arms and in 1576 forced the surrender of Ternate: the Portuguese hung on for a while at Tidore, but the arrival of the Dutch soon encouraged the local inhabitants to drive them out as well.

But the grip of Portugal was already loosening elsewhere in Southeast Asia, in large measure through the energies of Aceh, a
fanatically Moslem state situated in northern Sumatra. Fourteen times the Acehnese launched attacks on Malacca. From the 1530s, they also shipped pepper and other spices to the Turkey-dominated Red Sea without apparent difficulty. There is indeed evidence of military cooperation between the Ottoman Turks and the Acehnese against Portugal. A chronicle composed in Aceh reveals how its aggressive ruler, Alau’ddin Ri’ayat Syah al-Kahar sent “a mission to Istanbul in order to strengthen the Moslem faith. The sultan there sent back craftsmen and experts who knew about making guns. It was at this time that large guns were cast. It was also he who first built fortifications at Aceh, and he who first fought all unbelievers, to the extent of going to attack Malacca in person.”\textsuperscript{32} By the 1560s, the idea of a pan-Islamic counter-crusade against the Portuguese had taken root in Southeast Asia. When Aceh sent a succession of envoys to Istanbul, Turkey responded by sending not only technicians capable of casting cannon but even more soldiers to serve as artillerymen.

At the height of its military power in the 1620s, Aceh boasted 5,000 large and small cannon. For the attack of 1629 on Malacca, an enormous ship was specially built, known as “the Terror of the Universe”: it may well have been one of the largest wooden vessels ever launched, since its armament comprised 100 guns, according to the Portuguese who captured the vessel.\textsuperscript{33} Frequent though the assaults were on Malacca, the Portuguese never countered with any blow directly on Aceh, a sign of the increasing weakness of the Estado da India.

Even in the Bay of Bengal a manpower crisis had forced the announcement of a general amnesty for those Portuguese who had deserted for trading and raiding on their own account. The Estado da India hoped that they would return to the service of the crown. Right around the Bay of Bengal, unofficial Portuguese settlements had sprung up in the major ports as private initiative came to the fore. About 1551, some 240 Portuguese were living in Pegu, the capital of the Toungoo dynasty in southern Burma. Their choice of residence connected with its traditionally profitable relations with Malacca. Once the Achenese moved against Malacca, and disrupted the supply of foodstuffs from Java, the trade with Pegu became vital as the city came to rely on Burmese rice. Trade was not, however, the
only activity with which unofficial Portuguese residents concerned themselves. Reports were received at Goa about their involvement in warfare both as mercenaries and suppliers of firearms.

The Portuguese traveller Fernão Mendez Pinto tells us how news of an impending Burmese attack on Ayudhya, the Thai capital, resulted in a general call-up. Foreigners were given three days to quit the country or rally to the colours. He records that

with regard to the Portuguese, who had always been shown the highest respect, the Siamese king sent a minister, the governor of the kingdom, to ask them to voluntarily join his army, in view of the reputation they had, for he was most desirous of having them serve as his personal guards since, from what he knew about them, they were better suited for it than all others.
Considering the nature of this message, which was accompanied by liberal promises and expectations of high wages, favours, honours, and above all, permission to build churches in his kingdom, we felt so deeply obligated to him that, out of the 130 of us Portuguese who were there at the time, 120 agreed to go with him.34

The Thai monarch whom these volunteers served was Naresuan. On two occasions before Naresuen became king in 1590, the Burmese had sent forces to intimidate Ayudhya but, as the heir apparent, he saw off both these threats. The decisive moment came in early 1593 at the battle of Nong Sarai, for which the Portuguese contingent was hastily recruited.

Although outnumbered by the Burmese invasion force, a Thai chronicle relates how Naresuan found comfort in the appearance of auspicious signs such as relics of the Buddha, which glowed in the sky as they moved slowly northwards. But he placed his hope of victory in the effectiveness of “the lotus array”, a military formation using a vanguard supported by powerful wings. His army was thus deployed when a small force he had sent forward to reconnoitre the enemy’s position was driven back in disorder. Instead of coming up to its aid, Naresuan decided to stand firm and let the Burmese advance in the belief that the whole army of Ayudhya was retreating before them. The uncoordinated approach of the Burmese units
gave Naresuan’s soldiers the advantage in the general engagement that ensued, although they had to fight very hard to avoid envelopment. Pinto mentions how the Thai king cleverly adjusted his tactics after the initial contact, but he does not record the encounter between him and the Burmese commander, in which Naresuan slew his opponent with a long-handled sword from the top of his favourite elephant. And, more important still, there is no mention of a singular Portuguese success: a shot fired by one of the volunteers killed the chief contender for the Burmese throne atop his elephant, and contributed to a succession struggle that for a generation weakened the Toungoo dynasty.\(^{35}\)

The aftermath of Nong Sarai, according to Pinto, was a determined effort to strengthen the Thai position, since “the king attended with great haste to the fortification of the city of Ayudhya and to everything else that was necessary for its security. To determine his losses in battle he ordered a review of his troops and found that he had lost only 50,000 men. . . whereas for his enemies, it was learned on the following day that 130,000 of them had died.”\(^{36}\)

The Toungoo dynasty eventually recovered from this reverse, and in Anaukpetlan and his successor Thalum produced great kings, but these two rulers had to accept the independence of Ayudhya, and to overlook the sanctuary it provided for Burmese dissidents.

It was Anaukpetlan who brought to an end the most remarkable example of Portuguese enterprise in the Bay of Bengal, the private kingdom of Filipe de Brito e Nicote at Syriam in the Irrawaddy delta. Before taking up service as a mercenary with the ruler of Arakan, de Brito was a salt merchant resident at Chittagong. Even though affairs on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal interested Goa very little, it was a region into which many underpaid, indeed unpaid, Portuguese soldiers had drifted in search of personal wealth. Pinto places the number of Portuguese mercenaries fighting for the Toungoo dynasty at 700: this figure may be as exaggerated as his claim that outside the city of Prome there were among the dead “500 Portuguese whose only burial then was in the bellies of the vultures and crows that tore them apart bit by bit as they lay scattered in the fields.”\(^{37}\) This earlier encounter between the Burmese and the Thai was complicated by disease arising from contaminated water, which carried off most of the Portuguese soldiers of fortune in the
De Brito’s own opportunity for independent power came after the disastrous Burmese invasion of Ayudhya in 1593.

In the turmoil after the battle of Nong Sarai, the Arakanese succeeded in taking Pegu, the capital of Burma, and despoiling the city of its famous treasures. With members of the Toungoo royal family fighting among themselves for the Burmese throne, there was nothing to stop the Arakanese invasion force from leaving a garrison of Portuguese mercenaries under de Brito’s command behind at Syriam. Possibly, the Portuguese commander gave up his share of the spoils from Pegu, or paid the ruler of Arakan cash, for the privilege of building a wooden fort there in 1601. In the following year, de Brito arrived in Goa with an interesting proposition for the Portuguese viceroy. He pointed out the absence of the fortresses belonging to the Estado da India in the area and suggested that a customs house at Syriam would be ideally placed as a counterpart to Malacca. A Portuguese squadron stationed there could easily supervise the trade between Burma and the Indonesian archipelago.

De Brito’s motive seems to have been a desire to rejoin mainstream Portuguese society. Therefore, he sought to link his holding in Syriam via Goa with both Lisbon and Madrid—two capital cities, because between 1580 and 1640 Portugal was under the Spanish crown. While Philip II had decided that the two overseas empires of Spain and Portugal should remain separately administered entities, de Brito could not have been unaware of joint Luso-Spanish efforts in Cambodia during the 1590s. So anxious were Cambodian kings about pressure from Ayudhya and Laos that one of them seriously contemplated Christianity as a means of securing military aid. A Portuguese adventurer named Diogo Veloso received permission to construct a fortress on an island from King Ton, the son of the legitimate king, in gratitude for his help in succeeding to the Cambodian throne. The grant of land to Veloso provides an insight to the difficulties besetting the Cambodian kingdom at this time. With the aid of Spanish troops from Manila, Veloso had deposed a usurper and placed Ton on the throne. But this new ruler was assassinated in 1599, the year that Spanish soldiers were also massacred. Veloso died in a separate altercation in peninsular Malaya, possibly over a dispute on trading rights. Useful though this fleeting foreign support may have been in introducing firearms to an embattled
Cambodia, the strategic weakness of the kingdom remained its position, wedged between the Thai, Laotians and Vietnamese.

Because the political situation in lower Burma seemed more favourable to the Estado da India, de Brito was well received in Goa by the viceroy, who lent him support in his dealings with Lisbon, and married one of his daughters to him. In return for Syriam coming under the formal control of the Estado da India, which decided to maintain a customs house there, de Brito was given ships, men and supplies. He was also ennobled and given the title to the captaincy of the Syriam fortress for life. Should he have a legitimate son, then this entitlement would be inherited by him. For Goa, the endorsement of de Brito’s enterprise held the distinct possibility of dominating the commerce of Burma. Until Syriam fell to a resurgent Toungoo dynasty in 1613, de Brito was allowed to behave like a semi-independent ruler with jurisdiction and authority over the Portuguese living along the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal. He had the power to pardon their crimes, even when deserving a death sentence.39

Although his enclave enjoyed some indigenous backing through the recruitment of Indian and Burmese mercenaries, de Brito’s conspicuous patronage of the Catholic church ensured that he was always looked upon as an outsider. In any case, the local population was never really large enough to sustain a state with territorial ambitions, for the prolonged period of civil war and invasion had laid the Irrawaddy delta waste. When Anaukpetlan besieged Syriam, de Brito probably had no more than 400 Portuguese and Indian followers, and perhaps five times that number of local auxiliaries, to face a Burmese army of 100,000 men. Once he ran out of gunpowder and was unable to use his cannon effectively, his local troops stole away till de Brito’s remaining followers could no longer man the defences. As a punishment for looting Buddhist temples, de Brito was impaled on an iron stake, where he lingered for two days in full view of his men. However, Anaukpetluan decided to spare the lives of these cowed professionals, and for well over a century their descendants were responsible for Burma’s artillery.

What the fate of Syriam demonstrated was the limits of European power when confronted by the manpower resources
of organised Asian states. Only in disunited Sri Lanka would the Portuguese become rulers of extensive territory for any length of time, and benefit from a monopoly of cinnamon. Colombo had been seized as a stronghold in 1518, but after gaining control of the coastal lowlands where this spice grew, Portugal never formally claimed possession of the island. The Estado da India was content to manipulate instead the once-dominant kings of Kotte, who embraced the Christian faith from 1557 onwards. This conversion did not impress the predominantly Buddhist population and the Portuguese were obliged to move the puppet dynasty to the safety of Colombo in the 1590s. Already, the costs of dealing with the restless vassals of the Kotte kings was proving a liability for the Portuguese, and policy wavered dangerously between a landward advance and complete evacuation.
In the event, the Dutch solved the dilemma for Portugal, its last fortress falling to the new arrivals on the northern coast of the island at Jaffna in 1658. With the notable exception of Sri Lanka then, the Portuguese always accepted that they were too weak on land to defeat a determined Asian enemy. So they tended to come to terms with local rulers and commercial interests so that they could hold on to their initial gains. On the eastern periphery of the Estado da India, this cautious approach was even more marked, although the refusal of Ming China to allow its merchants to trade with Japan gave the Portuguese the lion’s share of Sino-Japanese trade. Along with the Malaccan spice trade, revenues drawn from it made up a substantial proportion of Goa’s already declining receipts.

Missionaries swiftly followed on the heels of merchants. The Society of Jesus sent Francis Xavier to preach Christianity in Asia. A disciple and friend of Ignatius Loyola, the order’s founder, Xavier made many converts in Sri Lanka, before staying for six months at Malacca in 1547. There the future saint asked his congregation to pray for victory over the Acehnese, a recommendation all could support. More controversial was his urging of the Portuguese “who were living with female slaves either to sell them or marry them”. Abuse of domestic slavery was not of course restricted to Malacca, but there it seems to have especially flourished with one man having “twenty-four women of all races, all of whom were his slaves, and all of whom he enjoyed”. With a chronic shortage of Portuguese women in the Estado da India, there was a sexual problem which the authorities simply could not ignore. Quite likely thinking of future manpower needs too, Alfonso de Albuquerque had inaugurated an intercommunal marriage policy, when in 1510 he encouraged his men to marry the “white and beautiful” widows and the daughters of Moslem defenders of Goa whom they had slain in battle or subsequently burnt alive. The viceroy was quite frank about his disdain for dark-skinned Indian women, who seemed little removed from the slaves so readily traded in Africa. Many of his men did not share this racial prejudice, but there were many others who did and the offspring of such marriages often found themselves poorly regarded.

A later viceroy, Antonio de Mello de Castro, lamented in 1664 how “our decay in these parts is entirely due to our treating the natives thereof as if they were slaves or worse than if they were
A reinforcement of prejudice came from the attitude of the religious orders, as they tended to uphold white supremacy. Clerics indeed pointed out how it was divinely ordained that black people should be enslaved; they bore the burden of Noah’s curse as the supposed descendants of his son Ham. This insidious notion of racial inferiority provided a convenient cloak for the slave trade. Whereas Noah’s other two sons Japhet and Shem were believed to have settled in Europe and West Asia respectively, Ham dwelt in Africa. One of the descendants of Shem was none other than Jesus Christ, a circumcised Jew, whose life and death brought about the conversion of Japhet’s offspring, the uncircumcised Europeans. Entirely outside the Catholic church, and the protection of Christ, were the heretical descendants of Ham. For St. Augustine, the ancient interpreter of the Christian world, the division between Japhet, Shem and Ham, between European, Hebrew and African, was not a question of ethnicity, but rather a matter of those who lived according to divine will and those who lived according to human desires. This is hardly an unexpected interpretation of the biblical story when it is remembered that Aurelius Augustinus was of Berber stock himself.

That Noah’s curse was evoked at the very moment of Iberian expansion overseas should not come as a surprise, for the disdain it justified towards African peoples was a useful device for aggressive imperialism. As yet, this attitude was not the fully fledged racism of the late nineteenth century, when pseudoscientific evidence was adduced to shore up Western dominance in world affairs. The English travel writer Samuel Purchas could still hold in 1613 that the diversity of mankind was evidence of God’s wondrous handiwork: “The tawney Morre, black Negro, duskie Libyan, ash-coloured Indian, olive-coloured American should with the whiter European become one sheepe-fold, under one great shepheard, till this mortalitie being swallowed up of life, wee may all be one, as he and the father are one. . . Without any more distinction of colour, Nation, language, sex, condition al may bee One in him that is ONE, and only blessed forever.” For Purchas, the apparent differences between people had more to do with custom than intrinsic qualities.

It was not a view shared by Xavier, who in persuading Portuguese settlers to marry their local concubines, imposed a definite colour bar. “When the woman was dark in colour and ugly featured, he
employed all his eloquence to separate his host from her. He was even ready, if necessary, to find for him a more suitable mate.”

Although Xavier was genuinely shocked by the moral laxity of the Estado da India, his response was no more saintly than that of other Jesuits who welcomed measures taken in Goa against Hinduism. Xavier even asked the Portuguese king to transplant the Inquisition as soon as possible: it arrived in 1560, eight years after his death. An estimated 30,000 Hindus were subsequently obliged to quit Goa, leaving the majority of the population with mixed parentage.

During the last quarter of the sixteenth century, Alessandro Valignano, the dominant figure among the Jesuits in Asia, proved to be less tolerant still. Already he had decided that Indian converts were unsuitable candidates for admission to the Society of Jesus, before he left Goa for his mission in Japan. The “dusky races” were condemned as “stupid and vicious, and of the basest spirits”. Senior officials and members of the aristocracy had little interest in most Indians, whatever their social standing, but the humbler soldiers who followed them from Portugal seem to have been less disdainful, in spite of religious admonishment. In the Philippines, a similar pattern of relations pertained between the ordinary Spanish settlers and the indigenous peoples. But in comparison with that of the Portuguese, the Spanish
enterprise in Asia was a modest affair, not least because the Philippines always remained an offshoot of Spanish dominion in the New World, being under the direct jurisdiction of the viceroy in Nueva España, present-day Mexico. The death of its “discoverer”, Fernão de Magalhaes, better known as Magellan, hardly acted as an encouragement for settlement, despite the cargo of spices loaded in the Moluccas on the homeward voyage more than covering the cost of this first expedition. Trying to elevate one local chieftain over others as a client ruler of Spain, Magellan had overestimated the advantage of European arms, and fell in an engagement against more than a thousand warriors on the island of Mactan. While few Spaniards were actually killed in the attacking force of 50 men, the aura of invincibility was lost, and a tactical withdrawal became necessary.

Born about 1480 in northern Portugal, Magellan had fought in Africa, India and the Indonesian archipelago before he returned to Lisbon seeking a reward for this period of service. Having two petitions turned down between 1514 and 1516 in Lisbon, he decided to try his luck with the Spaniards instead. By sailing to Asia in a westerly direction and rounding Cape Horn, he led his tiny Spanish fleet to the Philippines in 1521. On its return to Spain, the failure was conveniently blamed on the impetuosity of the dead commander. But other expeditions fared no better until in 1564 a fleet of five ships and more than 400 men under the command of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi set sail from Mexico, with instructions about “the conversion of the natives and the discovery of a safe route back to Nueva España, that the kingdom may increase and profit from trade.” On the site of a Moslem stockade at Manila the expedition constructed the first stone fortress in the Philippines. By 1650 its walls had been extended to surround the settlement which rapidly developed close by.

Because there was no single political or religious authority in the Philippine archipelago, the Spaniards were able to exploit island rivalries for their own advantage, once the healthy climate attracted enough permanent settlers at Manila. The brutality of these immigrants was to some degree mitigated by intermarriage with Filipino converts. The effect of conversion in lowering barriers between the rulers and the ruled would have been even greater had not the Spanish authorities decreed that for security reasons only priests were allowed to live in the interior. Missionary activity
was increasingly seen as a sure method of preparing the indigenous peoples for acceptance of the Spanish state. Thus Portuguese and Spanish settlers in Asia were unlike later Dutch and British arrivals, who tended to view themselves as only temporary residents.

**China and Japan**

In East Asia, the strength of the major powers restricted the Portuguese solely to business. Neither China nor Japan ever perceived the fleets of the Estado da India as a major threat, notwithstanding the restriction placed on trade by the former and the general exclusion the latter eventually pronounced against missionaries and traders. The first Portuguese vessels from Malacca reached Guangzhou in 1517. Others followed without mishap but relations with the Chinese were strained by Simão Peres d’Andrade’s construction of a fort downstream from Guangzhou, from which he proceeded to hinder the movements of rival merchant vessels. This typical Portuguese method of coastal domination so annoyed the Ming emperor Wu Song that he denied the king of Portugal’s envoy an audience. But the cool reception accorded Tomé Pires at Beijing in 1521 may have been the consequence of other factors than Simão Peres d’Andrade’s high-handedness. Adverse reports about Portuguese rule in Malacca seem to have prompted several ministers to recommend a complete rejection of Pires’ overtures.49

The sudden death of the 31-year-old Wu Song meant that the imperial court had to observe a period of mourning in any case. The Portuguese envoy was ordered to return to Guangzhou, where he was arrested at the same time that Chinese troops destroyed the fort downstream. Pires did not survive imprisonment and his fellow countrymen were forced to trade at Chinese ports by subterfuge. They had to remain below decks while hired Malays or Thai dealt with the exchange of goods and paid customs duties. Ming China even revived its coastal protection fleet to deal with Portuguese smugglers and pirates. The unsatisfactory situation was only resolved when a small Portuguese settlement at Macao, near present-day Hong Kong, received Chinese toleration. But its swift growth soon caused the local Chinese authorities some uneasiness, and in 1574 they constructed a wall right across the isthmus
connecting Macao with the mainland, posting soldiers to guard a single gateway, above which was written: “Fear Our greatness, and respect Our virtue.” Movement through the gate was henceforth denied to foreigners lacking official Chinese passes.

Although Macao was an admission that foreign trade could not be prohibited, the imperial government ensured by this arrangement that contact between Chinese and foreigners was kept to a minimum. Above all else, Beijing feared that unregulated coastal trade would disturb the social life of China’s countryside, the place where the overwhelming majority of its people lived. What happened in the Macao enclave was of no concern to the Chinese, who were uninterested in the efforts made by its residents to keep Spaniards out, even after Philip II seized the Portuguese throne. In 1567 the Ming dynasty lifted its ban on Chinese participation in foreign trade and within a decade Portuguese residents were permitted to travel from Macao to Guangzhou to purchase Chinese products. The more relaxed approach also encouraged Chinese merchants to venture abroad with the result that large numbers settled in the Philippines. Violence dogged the Chinese community there almost from the
beginning, as Spanish records give the number killed in 1603 alone as 15,000. Earlier, Philip II had rejected a suggestion by the governor of Manila that Spain should attack China. This proposal to open up the Chinese market by force, if it had been carried out, would have anticipated the First Opium War by two and a half centuries.

Tiny though Macao was in comparison with other Estado da India holdings, merchants living there conducted the most lucrative of all Portuguese trading operations in Asia. Even more remarkable is the circumstance that the impetus for the Macao–Nagasaki exchange came neither from the Portuguese court nor its overseas representatives, but traders and missionaries who stumbled upon an untapped market. Because of Japanese pirate raids, China forbade all direct trade with Japan. The exchange of Chinese silk and gold for Japanese silver was naturally something the Portuguese were delighted to handle.

At first, this very profitable commerce was open to all, but the Estado da India moved to extract the maximum return for the crown by allowing just a single ship to make the Goa–Macao–Nagasaki run. Its hold was hired out by the person who held the concession for each round trip. Spanish merchants at Manila were also drawn into Macao’s trading network, as they purchased Chinese silk with American silver and sent it back to Europe via Mexico. When in 1641 the Dutch captured Malacca and closed the straits to Portuguese vessels, the Manila trade helped to save Macao from commercial extinction. Well before the last Portuguese were expelled from Japan in 1638, this eastbound trade so greatly surpassed Macao’s business with the Japanese that the movement of silver from the New World became a headache for Spain. Its scale genuinely shocked Spanish officials visiting Mexico and the Philippines.50

On the southernmost Japanese island of Kyushu the Portuguese found a ready market for firearms as well as Chinese products. But that peculiarly Japanese talent for imitation quickly put a local version of the musket into production so that there was “not a village or hamlet, no matter how small, where they do not produce a hundred or more, and in the important cities and towns they speak of them in nothing less than thousands”. It was evident to Pinto that the people of Japan took naturally “to military exercise, which they enjoy more than any other nation that is known to date”.51 This disposition suited the Portuguese, who could relate to the
sword-wearing samurai as well as the large numbers of foot-soldiers fighting in the interminable civil wars. With their own military religious orders of Santiago, Avis and Christ, they found no difficulty in understanding the regiments of warrior-monks maintained by Buddhist monasteries. The paradox that wars between monasteries devoted to the worship of the gentle Buddha should be part of the contemporary turmoil entirely passed them by. They showed no curiosity over battle flags bearing the legend: “The mercy of the Buddha should be recompensed even by rending flesh. One’s duty to the Sage should be recompensed by smashing bones!”

For Japan seemed such a relief to the Portuguese after China, where a brush-wielding bureaucracy had relegated the military to a subordinate role in government. Responding to the chivalry and pride of the samurai, to the traditional way of the warrior, Xavier believed that the Japanese were the best people so far discovered in Asia. His single reservation was homosexuality, a widespread phenomenon among warriors and monks alike. He was amazed that
monks “had many boys of prominent families in their monasteries, where they taught them to read and write and abused them for sinful purposes, as they openly admitted. The laymen agreed with Xavier and his companions when they condemned these unnatural sins as a severe offence against God. But the vice was so general and so deeply rooted that the monks were not reproached for it.” 52 Never able to reconcile himself to this practice, Xavier tried without success to get the Buddhists in Japan to condemn monastic homosexuality. In addition to this mini-crusade, he sought out the Japanese emperor, admission to whose presence was secured by payment of an entrance fee. As baffled by the destitution of the imperial court as he was by the corruption of the monasteries, Xavier learned that the emperor lived in a village near Kyoto because he could not afford to repair his palace in the city. Power had long since shifted to the great warrior families, who owed allegiance to the shogun, the supreme military commander, a post held in theory by permission of the throne. In practice, even this quasi-feudal order had almost broken down, leaving the way open for the rise of all-powerful warlords such as Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

On his return to Goa in 1552, Xavier reported favourably on the prospects of mission work in Japan, and spoke highly of the character of the Japanese people. He urged the dispatch of missionaries without delay, and they had considerable success on the island of Kyushu, where local rulers always welcomed the arrival of Portuguese merchant ships. One of the Jesuits active then was Luis Frois, who had travelled to Japan after nine years in Malacca. In 1569, this Portuguese missionary impressed Oda Nobunaga when the warlord was inspecting the construction of a bridge at one of his castles. Asked about his purpose in coming to Japan, Frois explained about Christianity while disparaging the Buddhist faith. As the great Buddhist monasteries remained a thorn in his side, Oda Nobunaga was more than willing to protect the Jesuits against Buddhist hostility, which Frois said was the result of exposing the sins of the monks. This did not mean the warlord was a likely convert: Frois reported to his Jesuit superiors in Europe that Oda Nobunaga “states unequivocally that there is no Creator, no immortality of the soul, and no life after death”. 53 He was a straightforward soldier who disliked the rigmarole of both religious observance and court etiquette. So plain
were his own clothes, except for a tiger skin that he wore round the waist, that no one dared to appear before him in expensive robes.

Within two years of their meeting, Frois witnessed Oda Nobunaga’s most notorious single act, the complete destruction of the Enryakuji temple complex on Mount Hiei near Kyoto. Long the most belligerent Buddhist foundation, its warrior-monks had sided with the warlord’s enemies in 1570. The immediate cause of the quarrel between Oda Nobunaga and Enryakuji was his confiscation of some estates owned by the monastery. The sudden assault on the temple complex was meant to quell once and for all military opposition from the Buddhist monasteries. Oda Nobunaga’s men destroyed every building and killed every person they encountered at Enryakuji. Here is how Frois described the event:

On the following day, which was the last of September, the day of the glorious Saint Jerome, the great temple... located on the top of the mountain was first burned down, and thereafter, Oda Nobunaga sent many harquebusiers into the mountains
and woods to hunt for monks who might be hiding there. The soldiers were to spare nobody, and they executed this order promptly. This victory did not satisfy Oda Nobunaga, however. As he wanted to quench his thirst for revenge still more and thus strengthen his reputation, he ordered his whole army to immediately devastate the remaining houses of the monks, and to burn the four hundred or so temples. . . I have been told that 1,500 monks died, as did an equal number of men, women and children. . . Praise be to God’s providence and ultimate goodness, for he has ordered such a great hindrance to be punished by extinction, so that one day His holiest law will be propagated in these parts in abundance.54

In 1587 the followers of a subordinate surprised the residence of Oda Nobunaga early one morning in Kyoto. After exterminating the warlord and his next of kin, the rebels dithered over their next move, giving Toyotomi Hideyoshi ample scope to avenge Oda Nobunaga’s assassination.

As ruthless as his assassinated overlord, Toyotomi Hideyoshi dominated all Japan by 1590, ending more than a century of civil wars. Of peasant origin, he reduced the feudal lords to obedience through a spectacular series of victories. Unlike Oda Nobunaga though, Toyotomi Hideyoshi dealt generously even with those he had overcome in battle and did not tolerate the unnecessary slaughter of prisoners, before the frustration of the expeditions which he sent against Korea. They were intended to divert the restless energies of the samurai into conquest abroad, starting with Korea as a first stage of an invasion of China. His rage in 1596, when Chinese ambassadors offered him recognition as the king of Japan in return for peace in Korea, reputedly caused “vapour to rise from his head”. A decade earlier a Catholic embassy had better luck, since Alessandro Valignano succeeded then in preserving a degree of toleration for mission work.

When it was later announced that Toyotomi Hideyoshi would pay a visit to Kyushu, the Jesuits still decided to disguise churches, take down crosses and send novices to remote areas.55 This was prudent because in matters of religion Toyotomi Hideyoshi differed from Oda Nobunaga. Although his own personal beliefs remain unknown, he was less hostile to Buddhism than Christianity, and he disliked the influence exercised by the Jesuits over Kyushu leaders.
He was also displeased by the adoption of Portuguese fashions in clothes: at Kyoto there was a vogue for everything foreign.

This was obviously a different world from Goa, where Valignano exhibited a profound distrust of the indigenous population. He even reproved Francisco Cabral, a leading Jesuit, for calling Japanese converts “blacks”, and insisted that any of them who entered the Society itself should have the same treatment as other recruits. For Valignano appreciated the strength of Japan, positively discouraging any wild Luso-Spanish ideas of dominion. He knew that Toyotomi Hideyoshi had dispatched an army of 100,000 men against Korea. The king of Ayudhya, Naresuan, offered to send his nominal overlord naval assistance against the Japanese, but the Ming emperor had no need of the Thai navy for the good reason that in the Korean admiral Yi Sunsin the defenders were blessed with a strategic genius. Not only did he design and build the first fully armoured warship in the world, but during several engagements Yi Sunsin sank one
Japanese fleet after another. The Korean admiral’s “turtle boats” were invincible in close combat.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi was beside himself with anger, threatening to attack Manila after conquering Korea and China. In 1583, an engagement had been fought between Japanese and Spanish ships in Filipino waters. And Toyotomi Hideyoshi executed seven Franciscans from Manila, who were less tactful than the Portuguese Jesuits in their dealings with him. Yet the willingness of the Jesuits to become involved with Japanese affairs of state led to their undoing: it was soon to become apparent that the teachings of the gospels did not quite square with the harsh code of the Japanese warrior. Refusal by Japanese converts to follow this pattern of traditional loyalties could be construed only as treason. As a result of such occurrences, after his triumph over all rivals at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, issued an edict that stopped samurai from professing the Christian faith.

The arrival of the Dutch in 1609 conveniently brought the Portuguese monopoly of international commerce to a close. The ensuing rivalry between them was advantageous to Tokugawa Ieyasu, who desired to curb Catholic evangelism without disrupting trade. In retaliation for the severe punishment of riotous Japanese sailors in Macao, he destroyed the Portuguese vessel *Madre de Deus* in 1610 and executed its crew. Macao merchants continued to trade under growing Japanese pressure, which in 1636 meant the removal of remaining Portuguese residents to the artificial island of Deshima in Nagasaki harbour, until an edict issued two years later barred them altogether, leaving Deshima in the sole possession of the Dutch. The political consequences of the Spanish takeover of Portugal had reached the farthest-flung outpost of the Estado da India.

It is one of the ironies of history that the country in which the Portuguese commenced their expansion overseas at Ceuta in 1415 should have witnessed a defeat that led to this disastrous union of crowns, for it was in Morocco that the childless Portuguese king Sebastian fell at the battle of Alcazar in 1578, the victim of an ill-conceived and ill-prepared crusade. The fanatical king led 10,000 poorly armed men deep into the interior, where a Moroccan army routed them in a six-hour engagement. One of the cannons fired by the Moslems had been supplied by the English, something Habsburg
propagandists did not fail to point out in 1580, the year in which Philip II of Spain was able to occupy a disorientated Portugal with the loss of very few men. The bungled crusade cost the Portuguese dear: previously on friendly terms with all Europe, they acquired Spain’s enemies, notably the French, the English and the Dutch, who preyed upon their shipping and their overseas empire.

The Dutch were indeed already in rebellion against Philip II, and in 1598 they took their war of independence abroad. Within seven years Dutch warships had reached the Moluccas, from which they expelled the Portuguese with local help. A Spanish counter-offensive from the Philippines had to be repulsed by the Dutch, before they could gain the upper hand in the Indonesian archipelago over intruding English ships and in 1641 take the greatest prize of all, Portuguese Malacca. In India and Sri Lanka, Portuguese losses were just as great, for they lost control of pepper and cinnamon supplies. But at Macao the Dutch were in 1622 decisively repulsed, much to the disgust of the Dutch governor-general Jan Pieterszoon Coen, by “many Portuguese slaves, Kaffirs and the like, [who] having been made drunk, charged fearlessly against our muskets, that it was a wonderous thing to see”.58 Another eastern possession that escaped capture was East Timor, the main source of sandalwood for India as well as China. After the fall of Malacca, some Catholics of mixed parentage joined existing settlers there and formed a group called by the Dutch the Zwarte Portuguesen, or “Black Portuguese”. The ethnic mixture actually comprised people of Dutch, Portuguese and Timorese ancestry. A backwater of the Dutch East Indies, the Portuguese colony was left largely undisturbed until the middle of the twentieth century.

By 1700, the Estado da India was reduced to no more than a collection of territorial niches and trading networks, the latter populated by merchants who were anxious to keep officials at arm’s length. Positioned between piracy and capitalism, between the late medieval and the early modern, the Portuguese empire in Asia had been at its height an incredible instance of opportunistic endeavour which somehow managed to overlook its own obvious shortcomings and weaknesses. An amazing achievement was its creation of a global system of seaborne exchange, which the Dutch and the English in particular were about to transform into the present-day
pattern of world trade. But unlike the Spaniards in the Philippines, the Portuguese did not hold on to extensive Asian territories, their chief possessions being confined to Africa and South America. Not that the successors of Philip II possessed a valuable asset in the Philippines, an archipelago singularly short of the natural commodities attractive to early international commerce. The export business of the Manila Company was never very buoyant: the first shipment to Spain of tobacco and indigo dates from as late as 1784, and represents a transfer of tribute in kind rather than the beginnings of commercial agriculture. For though the brief absorption of Portugal gave the Spanish crown authority over the largest colonial empire in the world, the defeat of the Armada by the English in 1588 and the independence of Holland in 1648 spelt the end of any global strategy.

It signified little that Philip II sent out his best military engineer to strengthen Portugal’s chain of fortresses overseas. His enduring monument today is Fort Jesus at Mombasa. Built around a rock core with solid foundations, the new fortress was impervious to the greatest danger faced by all fortifications: mining beneath the walls to make a breach. But this did not stop Fort Jesus changing hands on more than one occasion. As Philip II’s envoy in Lisbon had prophetically written to his master: “The gain or loss of Portugal will mean the gain or loss of the world.” What he failed to foresee in the heady days of 1580 was that the Spanish link would cost the Estado da India an Asian world of its own.