



Foundations of the Modern World  
Iberian Peninsula I  
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# Introduction

- In the last unit, we focused intensely on the complexity of religious issues, wars, and their consequences that seized Europe spiritually, culturally, and geopolitically, beginning in 1517. Europe, finally, was divided along two major Christian denominations of Catholicism and various forms of Protestantism.
- Amid this turmoil, Europe had been venturing beyond its maritime frontiers, exploring distances, cultures, and commodities. The impact of these first adventures and discoveries will define the world we inhabit today.
- In this unit, we will study some of the initial contours of the onset of this phenomenal change in world history, two weeks each discussing first the Iberian and then the Northern European first steps into the unknown.

# References

- Charles R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969).
- Roger Crowley, *Spice: The 16th-Century Contest that Shaped the Modern World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024).
- Adam Knobler, "The Power of Distance: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Self and Other, 1000–1600," *\*Medieval Encounters\** 19 (2013): 434–80.

# The Power of Distance

- Adam Knobler, focusing on European history from 1000-1600, six centuries before the period we begin to study today, makes an argument that he believes is foundational to the world in the seventeenth century that we seek to understand in this unit.
- He refers to a Medieval European belief that distant lands were powerful in ways that Europeans were not. Prester John, the mythical Christian king of the Indies, lived there. He could assist Europeans in achieving some of their objectives, including defeating the Muslim powers. They associated the Mongols and the Ethiopians with him.

# The Power of Distance

- Finally, the Portuguese, in their search for Prester John, realized that he either did not exist or was more of a client than a full partner.
- Prester John's non-existence did not disappoint them. In fact, it altered the correlation between perceived geographical distance and power. The Portuguese knew that they had emerged as a new geopolitical reality. They had the attributes of the Prester John they had imagined all along because they were masters of the Indies.

# The Power of Distance

- The establishment of the Portuguese seaborne empire, Knobler argues, represented a major shift in the distance-power paradigm, eliminating the Latin sense of dependence on an outside power for global supremacy. For the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, a Western ruler could claim universal authority based on the conquest of vast distances.
- From this point, Europeans approached the non-European from a position of assumed supremacy. They could now claim that they were, in fact, the possessors of the power of distance they had once coveted from afar.

# The Push and Pull Factors

- By the mid-fifteenth century, Europe faced a serious problem. Major trading nations of the Mediterranean began to lose direct access to the Silk Road trade they had under the Byzantine Empire via their outposts on the Black Sea and the Levant. They had to renegotiate trading terms with the new rulers, the Ottomans, since 1453. By 1517, the Ottomans also controlled the Alexandria-Red Sea-Indian Ocean access.
- The Venetians had a deal, but then, like all intermediaries, they passed on the risk and access costs to their consumers.

# The Push and Pull Factors

- From its strategic location at the entrance to the Mediterranean, the Southern European nation of Portugal had been way ahead of others, setting sail in the Atlantic. They had seen their Venetian and Genoese neighbors prosper over the sea waves and control most of the trading ports in the Mediterranean, Adriatic, Aegean, Bosphorus, and Red Sea areas.
- Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), a keen Portuguese enthusiast of maritime trading and innovations, patronized the exploration of the Atlantic and centralized the collection of maps and captains' accounts of the voyages.



## The First Destination

- The Portuguese started with the conquest of Ceuta on the Moroccan coast in 1415. For Henry, the victory sparked a lasting passion for sea exploration.



# Henry the Navigator

- The riches that soldiers amassed from the victory at Ceuta were a great incentive for the exploration of the Arb-controlled caravan trade. The sea was the obvious option because Muslims controlled Africa to the extent Portuguese knew it.
- In 1432, he discovered the Azores Islands. Soon, Portuguese settlers had established colonies on these islands.

## The Destination

- The Portuguese advanced slowly. In three decades, they covered the distance between Lisbon and Sierra Leone, 1500 miles.
- In another three decades, they covered 4000 miles around the Southern tip of Africa.
- The technology of ancient times gained enhanced proficiency in their hands.

# Technology Helped

- The Indian Ocean sailors leveraged the monsoon winds to their service.
- The Portuguese developed a faster ship with had 2 or 3 masts with square sails and a triangular sail (called a lateen) to better capture the wind energy and speed.
- The Portuguese also learned that oceanic winds followed a circular pattern and discovered faster westerly winds for returning to Lisbon.
- Instead of the galleys frequenting the Mediterranean, the Caravel had great maneuverability with its lateen or square Atlantic sails.



THE CARAVEL.





# Technology Helped

The Astrolabe, a Greek invention of the second century BCE, had gone through improvements over centuries before the Age of Exploration. The Portuguese capitalized on that knowledge and experience.



# Technology Helped

- Improved use of the compass, a Chinese invention of the second BCE, was another major Portuguese advantage. In a great geographical advancement, they understood that the coast of Africa curved sharply left.





# Cape Bojador

- In another fourteen years, from 1420-1434, they ventured beyond southern Morocco.
- By 1433, 15 expeditions had attempted to break the barrier of Cape Bojador. Finally, a captain named Gil Eannes succeeded in the second attempt in 1434



# Henry the Navigator

- In 1444, the Portuguese reached Cape Verde, which became a staging ground for further exploratory initiatives.
- After Prince Henry died in 1460, the Portuguese exploration remained in a limbo for nine years until, in 1469, Henry's nephew, King Alphonso V, took over and revived the campaigns for a different reason.



# Private Exploration

- Alphonso V devised a way to overcome his financial trouble by relaunching exploration in the private sector.
- Alphonso authorized Fernao Gomes, a wealthy trader from Lisbon, for an annual fee to the crown, exploration of 100 leagues of coastline per year. Gomes also contracted to furnish the king with ivory from Africa at an inexpensive price. In exchange, he would monopolize the trade with the natives of Africa for five years.
- Gomes explored a region from the southwest tip of Africa to just below the equator, covering more territory than Prince Henry had in more than 30 years.

# John II

- In 1481, when the five-year term of the Gomez contract ended, the Crown regained its trading rights. African trade was now a lucrative deal because Portugal received regular shipments of pepper, ivory, gold, and slaves. King John II, thus, found exploration financially rewarding.
- Between 1480 and 1484, explorer Diogo Cão explored the land below the equator and down the mouth of the Congo River.
- Bartolomeu Dias crossed the southernmost tip of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, in 1488.
- Vasco de Gama reached India in 1497-1498.

# Indian Ocean

- In 1500, another fleet of Portuguese ships set sail for India. The commander was Pedro Álvares Cabral; one of the ship captains was Bartholomeu Dias.
- Cabral took a suggestion from Gama and sailed far to the southwest, in an arc away from the coast of Africa.
- Cabral sailed so far that his men spotted land--the coast of South America, in present-day Brazil.
- Cabral claimed the land for Portugal and continued his way around Africa. We will talk about it in part II of our lectures, next week.

# Establishing Strongholds

- In 1511, the Portuguese captured Malacca, gaining a foothold in Southeast Asia.
- In 1515, they seized Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.
- In 1542, they established trade relations with Japan.
- In 1557, they established the colony of Macau (Macao).
- In India, they managed their commercial interests at the ports of Goa and Calicut.
- Within their domains, they enforced Catholic Christianity.



# The Indian Ocean

- Early fourteenth century, the Ming Dynasty launched seven imperial sea voyages between 1405 and 1433. Admiral Zheng He (1371-1435) led these power projection expeditions, with ships of 3000-ton capacity and at one time 27,000 individuals on board.
- The Chinese paused the voyages between 1424 and 1431 and ended them after the last trip in 1432-1433.
- The Chinese withdrawal in 1433 from the Indian Ocean allowed a free hand to the Europeans, who found no rival in the Indian Ocean.
- The Ottoman Empire followed a similar policy in the Indian Ocean.

# In Search of Spices

- Crowley affirms that the Portuguese experience shows how spices have been instrumental in the development of long-distance trade routes by land and sea, the growth of cities, and the spread of religions by the merchants who gathered them.
- Lightweight and durable, they were the first truly global commodity; the markup was astonishingly as much as 1000 percent. By the time they reached Europe, they could be worth more than their weight in gold. At times, they replaced currency (1-3).

# In Search of Spices

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- The first Portuguese expedition for cloves sailed from Malacca around November 1511 to go to the Moluccas for cloves and Banda for nutmeg. They discovered that they had mistimed to reach the clove-bearing islands of the Moluccas. Instead, they continued to the Bandas. The captains noticed such an abundance of the commodity there that they asked for larger sailing ships of 500 tons to collect greater volumes of spices, which could not be done in smaller ships.
- The Portuguese, says Crowley, traded items such as cloth, rice, Chinese porcelain, and Javanese gongs, musical instruments, for large quantities of spices. They had shiploads of nutmeg and mace. They could also procure from the Banda traders imported cloves and Banda junk to replace one of their ships.



# In Search of Spices

- The vastness and distances were intimidating.
- The Moluccas, until then, were the easternmost hub of Portuguese power whose limited human resources were spread thinly across a chain of forts and bases stretched from Africa to the Persian Gulf and the West Coast of India, a vast arena.
- The Moluccas were two monsoons and nine thousand miles away from Royal power.



# The Pioneers

- In the introduction to Boxer's *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415- 1825*, J.H. Plumb observes, "The Portuguese were indeed the pathfinders of Europe's seaborne empires. Even more clearly than Spain, they demonstrated to Europe the effectiveness of a sailing ship armed with cannon, not only against primitive native people of Africa, but also against the well-fortified ports and empires of the East. And so, the Orient lay at Europe's mercy. The carracks, piled high with loot of all sorts, like pepper, cinnamon, mace, silks, pearls, rubies, aroused the lust of Europe." XXIV

# The Pioneers

- Plumb considers that the terms of trade were unfair, but adds, “And yet from this gross exploitation arose the surplus wealth, the opportunities, the stimulus, the intellectual challenge that were to be instrumental in enabling the whole of mankind to develop a totally new way of life. The possession of world markets helped to tip commercial Europe into its industrial future.”



This map illustrates the Ming Dynasty's maritime trade network and the early European exploration of Southeast Asia. Key features include:

- Ming Dynasty (1368-1644):** Labeled at the top, with Nanjing as the capital.
- Trade Routes:**
  - Green Lines:** Represent the Ming Dynasty's trade routes, connecting East Asia to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.
  - Yellow Lines:** Represent the routes of European explorers, including Magellan (1522), Urdaneta (1565), and Juan Ekano (1522).
- Geographical Labels:**
  - East Asia:** Korea, Japan (Tokugawa), and the East China Sea.
  - Southeast Asia:** SiAM, Ayuthaya, Angkor, Kauthara, Prey Nokor, Kelantan, Pahang, Malacca (1511), Bintan (1526), Sumatra, Jambi, Palembang, Banten, Sunda Kelapa (1522), Tuban, Jayakarta, Surabaya, Majapahit, Java Is., Sumba, Timor, Larantuka (1557), Makassar (1545), Banggai, Borneo, Tangjungpura, Manila, Cebu, Philippine Is., Ternate (1522), Tidore, Ambon (1511), Maluku Is., and Australia.
- European Exploration:**
  - Magellan (1522):** Shown as a yellow line from the Philippines to the Pacific Ocean.
  - Urdaneta (1565):** Shown as a yellow line from the Philippines to the Pacific Ocean.
  - Juan Ekano (1522):** Shown as a yellow line from the Philippines to the Pacific Ocean.
- Other Labels:**
  - Ilha de São João (1550):** A Portuguese settlement in the South China Sea.
  - Macau (1555):** A Portuguese settlement in China.
  - Shanghai:** A major port in China.
  - Ningbo (1533):** A port in China.
  - Fizhou (1547):** A port in China.
  - Canton:** A major port in China.
  - Manila:** A major port in the Philippines.

	ambergris		metalware
	carpets		pearls
	porcelain		perfumes
	cotton		rice
	cured fish		silk
	gems		silver
	gold		slaves
	grain		spices
	horses		sugar
	incense		tea
	indigo		textiles
	ivory		timber

## Ming Dynasty Voyages of Exploration and Diplomacy: Zheng He (1405–1433)

Pêro da Covilhã – Secret intelligence mission (1487–1490)  
 Vasco da Gama – First direct sea route from Europe to India (1497–1499)  
 Portuguese Trading Posts with Year of Establishment

Magellan & Elcano – First circumnavigation of the globe (1519–1522)  
Andrés de Urdaneta (1565) – Discovered the return route across the Pacific (Tornaviaje)



# The Monopoly

- The Indian Ocean thrived with cultural and commercial activity by the time the Portuguese reached there.
- Boxer contrasts the Portuguese and the existing Indian Ocean trading practices. He points out that the domination of the seaborne trade of the Indian Ocean, first by the Arabs and later largely by Muslims of the Indian region, chiefly Gujaratis, was achieved, in either case, quite peacefully.
- The trade had a strong socio-cultural dimension. People engaged in oceanic trade travelled alone but built strong connections to the transit points and the trading ports (45).

# The Monopoly

- The Arab, Gujarati, and other merchants and mariners who traded to Ceylon, Malaka, and Indonesia inevitably raised families while awaiting the favorable monsoon for their return voyage. Their children were almost invariably raised as Muslims, who became great catalysts spreading the faith to their maternal kith and kin.
- As these multicultural trading colonies flourished, the traders acquired permission to build mosques and then invite mullahs or religious teachers to disseminate the message of Islam (46).

# The Monopoly

- Boxer emphasizes that these traders never employed militant methods. The Portuguese, on the other hand, “immediately realized that they could only break their hold over Indian Ocean communities by brute force and not by peaceful competition. This, they proceeded to do with complete ruthlessness and astonishing speed” (47).
- The Portuguese had already strategized the use of force. Their naval supremacy on the East African coast was already assured by their construction of a fort at Sofala in 1505, Mozambique in 1507, and by their alliance with the Sultan of Malindi. They failed, however, to establish substantial control over the Red Sea trade.

# The Monopoly

- Within the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese seized three of its principal entrepots of Goa, Ormuz, and Malacca. The Portuguese then tried to monopolize the Indian Ocean. King Manuel had already taken the pretentious title of “Lord of the conquest, navigation, and commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia, and Persia.” The crown retained it for centuries.
- The Portuguese claimed a monopoly over certain ports and, in certain commodities, chiefly the spices. This trade could be carried on only for the benefit of that crown or its nominees. (48).

# The Monopoly

- The Portuguese allowed Asian ships to sail on two conditions: a) if they purchased a Portuguese license. They called it a *cartaz*; and b), if the captains or traders paid customs for spices and other designated goods, at Goa, Ormuz, or Malacca.
- If they met unlicensed ships in the Indian Ocean, they could seize or sink them, particularly if the Muslim traders were the owners.



# The Advantage

- Among the lucrative products of this extensive empire were:
  - the gold of Guinea (Elmina), of southeast Africa (Monomotapa), of Sumatra (Kampar);
  - the sugar of Madeira, Sao Tome, and Brazil;
  - pepper from Malabar and Indonesia;
  - mace and nutmeg from Banda;
  - cloves from Ternate, Tidore, and Amboina;
  - cinnamon from Ceylon;
  - gold, silks, and porcelain from China;
  - silver from Japan;
  - horses from Persia and Arabia;
  - cotton textiles from Cambay (Gujarat) and Coromandel.

# The Advantage

- The trading took place in two ways: the Asian merchandise could be bartered in the entrepôt trade within the continent or transported around the Cape of Good Hope to Lisbon.
- The Crown redistributed the precious imports to the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds in exchange for the metals, cereals, textiles, naval stores, and other manufactured goods on which Lisbon depended for functioning as the nerve center of a seaborne empire.
- For most of the 16th century, Antwerp was the principal trading center for Lisbon pepper. The Italian bankers competed to buy pepper and other spices from the Portuguese crown on short or long-term contracts.
- Pepper was the principal commodity imported from the east, and silver bullion was the principal export to golden Goa (51-52).

# The Advantage

- Boxer estimates that the global amounts of the cargoes carried by the Portuguese around the Cape in annual total were between 40,000 to 50,000 quintals in the first third of the 16th century, 60 to 70,000 quintals later.
- The proportion of pepper in these cargoes oscillated between 10,000 and 45,000 quintals, but for a long time averaged about 20 to 30,000.
- The other spices like cinnamon, cloves, mace, nutmegs, ginger, etc., accounted for between 5 and 10,000 quintals in these yearly shipments.

# The Advantage

- As late as 1611, Lisbon maintained that pepper was still the basic commodity of the Portuguese Indian trade, and the only one which yielded a satisfactory profit to the crown (59-60)
- Although the Malabar merchants refused to accept payments in anything but gold, the Portuguese never had to rely on the mother country for the supply. They obtained the greater part of the gold they required for purchases in Malabar from Southeast Africa, Sumatra, and China from about 1547 onwards (61).

# The Advantage

- Although the Spanish initially contested the Portuguese monopoly of trade between Japan and China, in 1580, the Spanish government accepted the Portuguese contention that Japan lay within their sphere of influence as demarcated by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 and that the Japan trade should be monopolized by Macau rather than by Manila.
- The Chinese sanctioned the Portuguese footing in Macau around 1557.
- The trade with Japan essentially comprised an exchange of Chinese raw and manufactured silk and gold for Japanese silver bullion (63-64).

# Overextended?

- The Portuguese faced difficulties when they tried to apply in the South China Sea the strong-arm methods that had served them so well in the Indian Ocean. They were decisively defeated by the Chinese Coast Guard fleets in 1520 and 1522.
- Though they subsequently gained admission to the coveted China trade, it was on the terms laid down by the Chinese authorities and not on those imposed by themselves (49).

# Overextended?

- Boxer considers that the lack of manpower and equipment was a major difficulty the Portuguese faced in running their overstretched seaborne empire from Brazil to Japan.
- Portugal had a small population. Based on the census for the year 1527, its population might have been between 1 and 1.4 million.
- Boxer calculates that during the 16th century, approximately 2400 able-bodied Portuguese annually left home for overseas. Relatively, a few of them ever returned.

# Overextended?

- Another problem facing the empire was the lack of shipping.
- Boxer estimates that at the peak of its maritime power, Portugal possessed not more than 300 ocean-going ships. This figure is an impressive one for such a small country, but it was obviously totally insufficient for the adequate support of a seaborne trading empire with worldwide ramifications. (56).



# Monopoly Challenged

- The regional challenge to the Portuguese monopoly kept rising.
- They had to retain good terms with Persia.
- Ottoman Turks conquered Syria and Egypt between 1514 and 1517, most of Iraq in 1534, took Eden in 1538, and Basra in 1546.
- The spice trade to the Levant through the Red Sea, which had never been entirely closed by the Portuguese for any length of time, revived markedly about 1540 onwards (59).

# Monopoly Challenged

- By the end of the 16th century, the Portuguese share of the pepper exports to Europe had dropped to about 10,000 quintals, and greater quantities were reaching Europe by the overland routes to the Levant.
- The Portuguese had thus only a short-lived monopoly over the Indian Ocean trade and chokepoints.

# Monopoly Challenged

- By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese realized that they had opened a Pandora's box for themselves.
- The biggest setback came from the internal situation. Spain annexed Portugal from 1580 to 1640.
- The other European powers soon cracked their Atlantic/Indian Ocean code and followed them into the Indian Ocean.

# Conclusion

- Portuguese achievement can in no way be diminished.
- This is how Plumb articulates it,

“At a terrible cost, Portugal opened the doors to a wider world, one that she could neither dominate nor control; with history's usual malice, she was quickly overtaken and left moribund, a prisoner in the world stakes; possessing enough for survival, too little for glory... And yet indelibly her name is written across the world's history: an extraordinary achievement for so small, so poor a country” (XXVI).