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# **terra roxa**

## **e outras terras**

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### THE PORTUGUESE ADVENTURERS (HISTORY, FICTION, REALITY)

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*In memoriam*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

In 1989, the Portuguese celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the high point of their sea voyages: the successful rounding of the Cape of Good Hope. 2009, then, marked the 520<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 1992, Portugal, Spanish America, and Spain celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of another advance on the oceans of the world: Columbus' discovery, which he imagined to be the fabulously rich East Asia described by Marco Polo, the Venetian. Columbus would hardly have dared undertake his voyage had it not been for the Portuguese with whom he had lived and traveled. Was not Ana Maria, his wife, Portuguese?

Every nation glorifies its own achievements and belittles the part played by others. The British boast of Sir Francis Drake, Captain Cook, and Stanley Livingstone, North Americans of Lewis and Clark, Peary, and Byrd. Actually, the early adventurers, such as the Portuguese, and their backers, who gradually were giving us a true picture of our globe, formed an international vanguard of humble as well as dominating individuals, who spurred each other on to venture farther and farther.

Peoples, nations, and universal humankind experience high moments in their history. For the Portuguese that "hour of glory" lasted a century, beginning in the early 1400s with the rediscovery and settlement of the island of Madeira in the Atlantic Ocean. It ended in the mid-1500s with their landing in Japan, their discovery of the Moluccas or Spice Islands, in what is now Indonesia, and the first exploration of the northern coast of California, as far as Cape Mendocino. On their caravels, galleons

and carracks, mere nutshells of ships, the Portuguese swarmed in all directions. Yet, Portugal was then what it still remains, one of the smallest and poorest nations of Europe, though also one of the oldest.

This is an appropriate time to recall the daring seamen and soldiers who sailed uncharted seas, the travelers who penetrated forbidding lands, for do they not foreshadow the bold explorers of our era? Now, space is being explored; then, planet Earth still offered to enterprising, curious, ambitious Europeans oceans, islands, continents to be found, explored and mapped, erasing the words *terra incognita* (unknown territory) from most of Africa, the three Americas, all of the coasts and islands of the Indian Ocean, all of southwestern Asia, northern Asia, Australia, the Pacific islands, and the polar regions.

## II. CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PORTUGUESE ENTERPRISE

The circumstances of the Portuguese enterprise are puzzling. Why were the Portuguese the first at the very end of the Middle Ages to venture forth on the Atlantic Ocean, before the Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch, and long before the Germans? More than one reason has been advanced to explain it.

First of all, location. The country of the Portuguese borders on the Atlantic at a point closest to North Africa, with the simultaneous lure and menace of the Muslim Moors, and to the Mediterranean, through which the two trade routes to the Orient passed. Secondly, the Portuguese were experienced ocean fishermen and sailors. A third reason was their early adoption of advances in shipbuilding, progressing from the small caravels of about 160 to 200 tons to the larger carracks and galleons, as well as the improvements they made to nautical instruments, such as the mariner's compass and the astrolabe in its simplified form, namely the sextant. A fourth reason was a certain population pressure as the country had reached its southern limits when its armies reconquered the Algarve province from the Moors. Finally, a fifth impetus, of considerable weight, was a revolution that occurred in 1385 when the middle classes, that is, master craftsmen and merchants of the cities, wrested the right to representation and other liberties from the nobility.

However, the Atlantic adventure became extremely important, and not just for the Portuguese, when another historical event shook Europe, the conquest of the Greek Orthodox Christian Empire of Byzantium or Constantinople, the modern Istanbul, by the Ottoman Turks, a people of Islam. The conquest happened in 1453, and from then on made it more difficult to follow the traditional routes from Italy, especially Venice, to India and China. It became profitable to find a new route that would bypass the Turks.

Was this a national enterprise? A large number of Italian traders and bankers and their agents became involved. Cristoforo Colombo, the Genovese, and Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine, were merely two of many.

Did the adventure pursue a purely practical, economic end? Fundamentally it did, although other motives also played a role: thirst for knowledge and thus a scientific interest, the desire to see other lands and other peoples, especially strong on the part of young men, the hope of gaining a higher status in society for oneself and one's family. The enterprise was furthermore given a very respectable religious cloak by its official promoter, Prince Henry, misnamed "the Navigator": He sent exploratory ships methodically farther and farther south for reasons stated by his historian Zurara. First of all, Henry wanted to know what lands lay beyond the Canary Islands and the cape called Bojador. Secondly, if some good harbors were found, much valuable merchandise could be safely shipped to Portugal. The third reason was that he wanted to know if some Christian princes could be found as allies against the Muslims, since no other Christian rulers in Europe were willing to join the Portuguese in their fight. In the fourth place, he greatly desired, as grand master of the knightly Order of Christ, to bring the holy faith of our Lord to all those souls in need of salvation. Zurara was sure of another, over-riding reason, namely that Prince Henry was destined to make discoveries because his horoscope showed it written in the stars.<sup>1</sup>

It is said that a Portuguese convict whom Vasco da Gama sent ashore as a scout in India stated the motives much more succinctly. There a Moorish merchant asked him what had brought them across the sea from their distant country. To which the convict replied, "We've come to look for Christians and spices" [*Vimos buscar cristãos e especiarias*].<sup>2</sup>

In the national poem glorifying the Portuguese for the success of Gama's voyage, the author changed those words into crusading verses:

Abrindo (lhe responde) o mar profundo,  
Por onde nunca veio gente humana;  
Vimos buscar do Indo a grão corrente,  
Por onde a Lei divina se acrecente.<sup>3</sup>

Actually, Prince Henry has not left any statement of his own as to his motives. As the head of the wealthy Order of Christ, replacing the Templars in Portugal, he was granted the monopoly of sending ships to West Africa and to trade there. A religious element unquestionably entered his thought. The idea of conquering once Christian Morocco, Portugal's North African neighbor across the Straits of Gibraltar, became a substitute for the Crusades of the past<sup>4</sup>. The adventurers were travelers one and all, fired originally for their quest of exotic lands and immense riches in the East by what Marco Polo had reported when he returned from China two centuries before.

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1 Vitorino Magalhães Godinho ed., *Documentos sobre a expansão portuguesa*. (Volumes I & II Lisbon: Gleba, 1945; Volume III, Lisbon: Cosmos, 1956). This collection transcribes what Gomes Eanes de Zurara writes about Prince Henry, the Navigator, in his *Crônica da Guiné*, chapter vii.

2 Godinho

3 Luís de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, c. vii, st. 25, vv. 5-8.

4 Godinho

The Portuguese voyages were already well under way when a small chapbook began to circulate in Portugal about 1520, *The Book of Prince Pedro of Portugal, Who Traveled in the Four Parts of the World*<sup>5</sup>. This booklet of some twenty pages was still being peddled in Brazil as late as the nineteenth century. This is what it tells: With twelve companions, Prince Pedro, a brother of Prince Henry, followed a fantastic itinerary leading them from Portugal to Constantinople, the Holy Land, Egypt, from there to Samarkand in Turkestan, where they were received by Tamerlan, the fourteenth century emperor of the Mongols, then back to Mount Sinai, on to Arabia as prisoners, next, free again, to a land of Christian Amazons, the land of the captive tribe of Judah, the land of the Giants, and thence to the land of the Christian Prester John or Johannes of the Indies. Thereupon they visited the Biblical Earthly Paradise but did not stay in it, moving on instead to the country of the one-handed, one-footed people and that of the Pygmies. The time had come for them to return home via Prester Johannes's realm, the Red Sea and the Kingdom of Fez in northern Morocco, thus failing to fulfill Prince Pedro's desire "to travel until he would not find any other nation in the world." That world only contained what medieval Europeans knew. It did not even extend to sub-Saharan Africa. It does show a fascination with "Prester Johannes," the fabled Christian prince whose lands were supposed to include "Greater India," "Lesser India" and Abyssinia. "Prester Johannes" was to fire the imagination of Portuguese adventurers for a hundred years after Prince Pedro until they actually set foot on Abyssinian soil. By the way, the real Prince Pedro traveled only in Northern and Eastern Europe.

### III. THE ADVENTURERS

Everybody, I am sure, is familiar with some of the Portuguese adventurers, at least by name. Who has not heard of Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan (Fernão Magalhães to the Portuguese), who put the Straits of Magellan on the map? But what about Cabral? Cabrilho? The brothers Corte-Real and João Fernandes Lavrador, whose name lives on as Labrador, the northeastern Canadian peninsula, which he visited perhaps as early as 1492, or more likely about 1500?

There exist at least a dozen others whose names still figure on our modern maps, such as Tristan da Cunha, the navigator for whom an island was named in the southern waters of the Atlantic in 1506; Pero (Pedro) Mascarenhas, the discoverer of a group of islands in 1512, now known as the Mascarenes, east of Madagascar; or Fernão do Pó, for whom an island was baptized in Biafra Bay, south of Nigeria, because he found it in 1472.

In addition, Portuguese captains did what others were to do after them, which was to give places the names of the exact day of the year when they first saw them,

5 Anonymous. *Livro do Infante Dom Pedro de Portugal. O qual andou as sete Partidas do Mundo*. Facsimile of the 1602 edition, in Francis M. Rogers *List of the Editions of the Libro del Infante Don Pedro de Portugal*. Lisboa: Companhia de Diamantes de Angola, 1959; other editions speak of four, not seven, parts of the world.

for example New Year's Day, the day when Diego Cão discovered an island off the coast of West Africa in 1484. Ever since it has been known as *Annobom* (or Annobon), literally "Good Year," as they call the New Year's Day in Portuguese. Similarly, Christmas has given its Portuguese name, *Natal*, to a province of South Africa and a coastal city in northeastern Brazil. In addition, the fifteenth day of April, the day of the virgin Saint Helen, Helena in Portuguese, was the date when Saint Helena came into sight, the same island on which Napoleon had to spend his last, lonely years.

Forgotten, except in Portugal, are other adventurous souls who crossed lands uncharted then by Westerners, men such as Pero da Covilhã, who at the end of the fifteenth century, before Gama's ships sailed toward India, scouted the lands of Islam from western Morocco to Mecca and from Egypt to India.

Another, Jerônimo da Quadra, is said to have attempted to cross Africa already in 1520/21. A third discovered the sources of the Nile long before Livingstone. His name was Duarte Lopes, and he did it in 1578. Portuguese missionaries penetrated the Mwenemutapa's black empire deep in southern Africa, where they beheld the mysterious stone towers of Zimbabwe. The leader of the expedition, Gonçalo da Silveira, was killed there in 1561. In North America, several Portuguese noblemen accompanied Hernando de Soto on his exploration of Florida in 1539, and one of them left us a critical account of Soto's hardships and cruelties, *The True Report . . . of the Province of Florida* (Évora, 1557)<sup>6</sup>. Another Portuguese, André do Campo, was a prominent member of Coronado's expedition from Mexico to the present-day southwestern United States in 1540. After years of adventures, including an Indian captivity, he returned to Mexico around 1550, with long hair and a braided beard, telling strange tales about the lands, rivers and mountains he had crossed, after his companion, a Franciscan friar, had been killed<sup>7</sup>. In Asia, Duarte Barbosa explored the interior of India the year after Gama's voyage, and so did a certain Antônio Tenreiro the interior of Persia, modern Iran, during the five years between 1523 and 1528. The port cities of Southeast Asia, China and Japan held no secrets for Fernão de Mendes Pinto, who traded there for twenty years, as well as for many missionaries, chiefly Jesuits, who reported their findings and doings in the *Annual Letters* they were required to send to headquarters in Europe<sup>8</sup>. All this was achieved before 1600. Not much later, a Portuguese priest, Bento de Góis, crossed the Himalayas, while in the Pacific Ocean, Pedro Fernandes de Queiróz discovered the Marquesas and Society Islands, including Tahiti, in 1605. Queiróz is also responsible for the name of Australia, for he gave that name to New Guinea in a slightly different form, *Austrialia*.

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6 Anonymous (A fidalgo from Elvas). *Relação verdadeira dos trabalhos que o Governador dom Fernando de Souto e certos Fidalgos portugueses passaram no descobrimento da Província da Florida* (Évora, 1557). (About Hernán de Sotos's expedition of 1539.)

7 Francisco López de Gómara. *Historia general de las Indias* (1552). Chapter 214 tells about André do Campo's part in Coronado's expedition of 1540.

8 Fernão Mendes Pinto. *Peregrinação e outras Obras*. Edited by Antônio José Saraiva. Three volumes. Lisboa: Sá da Costa, 1961-1963. Translated into English by Rebecca Catz as *The Travels of Mendes Pinto*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

The Jesuits followed and outdid the Franciscan fathers in the mid-sixteenth century when both ventured into the Brazilian hinterland, the *sertão* or “great desert,” to convert and protect the Amerindian tribes, as some of the priests still do in Brazil today. Like their brethren in Asia and Africa, they sent detailed reports about land and people back to Europe.

It was a different sort of trailblazer of Portuguese origin that appeared in South America. More like the Portuguese adventurers of an earlier age, these *Bandeirantes*, as they came to be called, were leaders and members of the banner-carrying armed companies (or *bandeiras*) who roamed the interior of the continent east of the Andes in search of gold, silver, precious stones, and Indians to be captured in order to serve as slave labor on the coast. In the process, these raiders courageously and ruthlessly expanded the colony of Brazil to its modern borders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sallying forth from their home bases in the East, principally from the small town on the southern high plateau that developed later on into the commercial and industrial megalopolis of São Paulo. Theirs, too, is an epic of ups and downs, amazing discoveries, sinister misdeeds, and personal misfortunes.

#### IV. SIX ADVENTURE STORIES

Before drawing general conclusions about the voyages, the stories of six less well-known Portuguese adventurers, briefly sketched, will give an idea of what many, perhaps most, of those men were like and what they had to face.

##### a) Diogo Cão

Like many of the early navigators, including Columbus, Diogo Cão was a self-made individual, who descended from a family without noble titles. Little is known of his family or early career. He was born in Vila Real, a town far inland in northern Portugal. The house of his middle-class family still stands. He must have acquired considerable experience in navigating the high seas to be chosen by King John II to command a fleet of caravels with the mission of exploring the African coast south of the Gulf of Guinea. It is known that he had belonged to Prince Henry’s entourage.

Cão left Lisbon in the Spring of 1482 with a set of stone pillars. He was to set them up along the coast as markers of Portuguese domain. Three of those pillars have been preserved. Cão got very excited when he not only came upon a black kingdom near the river Congo, receptive to friendly relations with the Europeans, but gained the conviction that he had reached the cape where the Atlantic connected with the Indian Ocean, proof that there was a sea route to India. When he returned to Lisbon after two years with those two pieces of good news, as well as several Congolese youths to be instructed in the Portuguese language, the Christian faith, and good manners, the King was so pleased that he made Diogo a nobleman, gave him a coat of arms featuring the pillars, provided him with a large annual stipend out of the royal

treasury, and informed the Pope in Rome and the College of Cardinals of Cão's discoveries, thus registering his claim on them.

The King sent Cão on a second voyage to return the African youths with royal presents to the ruler of the Congo, after which he was to further explore the coast and cross over to India. Alas, it turned out that Cão should not have believed Ptolemy's ancient geography book about the dimensions of Africa; for he soon found out that the African west coast continued on and on. For an unknown reason, he turned back when he had already sailed as far south as present-day Namibia. The rest of his life remains shrouded in mystery. Most likely, the King did not forgive Cão's error, because of which he had lost face before all Europe. No more honors for Diogo Cão! However, he should be remembered for one good thing: differently from others, he established lasting good relations with an African nation, in contrast to the practice of seizing natives regardless of sex and age to be taken back to Europe and serve as informants or be sold as slaves.

#### **b) Bartolomé Dias**

Thanks to Diogo Cão's exploration of the West African coast, it became relatively easy to reach its southernmost point and even to round it, as West winds were discovered to prevail in that part of the ocean. The fortunate discovery fell to the lot of Bartolomé Dias, of whose antecedents we know even less than of Cão's.

Dias must have belonged to a seafaring family, since he descended from a captain Dinis Dias, who had discovered Cape Verde, the "Green Cape" near Dakar. He also had a brother who was a sea captain and who was to command one of the three caravels of Bartolome's fleet. They sailed from Lisbon in August of 1487. Five months later they had rounded Africa, without actually seeing its southernmost cape, and were able to sail north along the east coast.

The previous year, an envoy sent to Lisbon by the King of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, mentioned the existence of a great chief in a land to the east, who was a kind of Pope. King John of Portugal's counselors concluded that he could be no other than Prester Johannes of the Indies. Acting upon their judgment, the King decided at once to send one expedition headed by Dias to the Prester by sea and simultaneously to send another by land. Like Cão, Dias was to erect pillars along the coasts to take possession for Portugal.

When a storm had tossed the little caravels about, during fourteen long days, near where the port of Durban is now, the three captains held council and decided to turn back. Dias persuaded them to continue sailing north for another couple of days. When they still did not find any black Prester Johannes, Dias had to turn back, although it grieved him, the historians wrote, as if he had lost a son.

Nevertheless, back in Lisbon Dias was hailed for having rounded what he called "the Stormy Cape," Cabo das Tormentas--and for good reason did he give it that name! But King John II changed the name to the one it continues to bear to this day, "Cape of Good Hope," Cabo da Boa Esperança, the confident hope of soon completing the

sea voyage to India and finding a Christian ally on the way. Dias remained the King's trusted representative in naval affairs. In 1493, when Columbus landed in Lisbon on his return from America, Dias was chosen to go on board the *Niña*, Columbus's ship, asking in King John's name to see the papers authorizing Columbus to sail west into what the Portuguese regarded as their exclusive domain. Columbus replied that he was not allowed to show documents to anyone.

When King John's successor, Manuel, sent Vasco da Gama with a fleet to open the sea way to India in July 1497, on the basis of Covilhã's and Dias's findings, Dias was given command of one of Gama's ships and told to guide Gama as far as the fortress of Mina, the famous port from which the gold of Guinea was shipped to Lisbon. Again, Dias was placed in command of a ship in the second expedition to India under Admiral Pedro Álvares Cabral's orders. He thus shared in another glorious feat, the discovery of Brazil on Cabral's outward voyage. But on the same voyage, he tragically perished with all of his crew when another storm wrecked his ship and three others off the Cape of Good Hope. It was one of many disasters that were to darken the history of Portuguese navigation.

### c) Pedro Álvares Cabral

In contrast with Dias, Cão and many other early captains, Pedro Álvares Cabral belonged to the highest rank of nobility. Born in Belmonte, a small town surrounded by high mountains near the Spanish border, he was related to Afonso de Albuquerque, "the Terrible," a future viceroy of Portuguese India. At the royal court, no lesser a man than Gama sponsored the youth. When he was only thirty-three years old, King Manuel sent him on the voyage that made him famous, as commander in chief of a fleet of thirteen ships.

Pero Vaz de Caminha, the secretary who was going with Cabral to India to direct the first royal trading house or *feitoria* has left us a detailed report addressed to their royal master. It tells about Cabral's landing in Brazil and how amiable the first encounter with the amazing Amerindians turned out, innocent as they were of clothing or of the sharp practices of Old World traders.

Secretary Caminha notes that the Portuguese found the dark Indian girls quite attractive, "Many women in our country would be ashamed if they saw such perfection."<sup>9</sup> A sad fate awaited the Secretary in India months later, with dire consequences for the Portuguese in general. When Cabral landed in the south Indian port of Kozhikode, called Calecute by the Portuguese, on the Malabar coast, the eager Secretary and his servants were killed at the instigation of the Moorish traders, who resented the competition of Christian infidels. Cabral responded by applying terror. He seized ten Moorish cargo ships in the harbor, killed six hundred sailors, tied up the rest and burnt them with their ships. Then he cannonaded the city for an entire day. It was Christmas Eve. He sailed away to the port of Cochin, the rival of Kozhikode farther south<sup>10</sup>.

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9 Ley

10 Ley

If one believes in divine and poetic justice, one has to agree that Cabral deserved the second storm, into which his fleet ran on the southeastern coast of Africa during the return voyage. The month of June, 1501 was almost over when he entered the Tagus river and saw Lisbon again. King Manuel was satisfied with his admiral. He appointed Cabral once more supreme commander of a fleet, which was even bigger, consisting of twenty ships. But Cabral rejected the honor. The King replaced him with old Vasco da Gama. Cabral was sent packing upriver, and there he remained, in the provincial town of Santarém, out of favor, forgotten. Caminha's letter concerning Brazil was also forgotten, and only rediscovered in the late nineteenth century.

#### d) Gaspar Corte-Real

Gaspar Vaz (short for Vasco) Corte-Real was one of three grandsons of a favorite nobleman at the royal court. Gaspar's father, João Vaz, had been a navigator. Supposedly it was he who rediscovered Newfoundland before 1474. Two of his three sons also became seafaring men. The youngest was Gaspar, probably born about 1452 in Tavira, a small port of the Algarve. King Manuel, whom he had served as a young man in Lisbon, granted him the right to govern "some islands and the *terra firma* he intended to discover." In May 1500, three years after Cabot the Venetian had been to Labrador, claiming it for England, Gaspar undertook his first voyage to Newfoundland, sailing through the ice floes around Greenland. He made a second voyage the following year to Newfoundland, where he remained with one of his three caravels. The other two he sent back with Indian captives and news of the abundance of fish on the nearby banks. After that, dead silence. The family wondered what had happened to him. His brother Miguel went with three ships to look for him but found no trace. Miguel also vanished. Three more ships were dispatched from Lisbon at royal expense. They had to return without success. Some people believe that Miguel's name is inscribed on the Dighton Rock, a much scribbled-over sandstone boulder in the Taunton river near Boston, with a sibylline addition in Latin. It was interpreted as meaning "by the will of God, Chief of the Indians." Was the inscription genuine or fake? The mystery remains unsolved.<sup>11</sup>

#### e) Pe(d)ro da Covilhã

Hailing, like Cabral, from the highest region of Portugal, Pero da Covilhã took his name from his native town, the center of a woolen textile industry. In him we meet once more an intelligent, resourceful and enterprising commoner of the urban middle class.

As a youth, he entered the service of a Spanish grandee, the Duke of Medina Sidonia in Seville, where he spent many years. At the end of 1474 or early in 1475, he returned to Portugal in the company of the Duke's brother and entered the service of King Afonso V as a humble groom, in charge of the spurs of the mounted guard. He rose from the ranks while accompanying his King on campaigns in Castille and on a journey to France. The next king, John II, sent him to Spain on a secret mission and

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<sup>11</sup> Francisco Fernandes Lopes, *Os Irmãos Corte-Real* (Lisboa: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1957).

twice to North Africa, the land of the Berbers, ostensibly as a merchant engaged in buying Arab horses. Next he was given the mission that made his reputation. He was to attempt to reach Abyssinia, the kingdom of Prester Johannes. He was given a companion who, like himself, could speak Castilian and Arabic. In fact they were spies charged with gathering information on the trade routes to the Asiatic regions where the finest spices were grown, such as pepper, cinnamon and cloves.

In May 1487 they left Portugal, embarked in Valencia, Spain, changing ships twice before landing on the Island of Rhodes. Disguised as honey merchants they entered Islamic territory at Alexandria, Egypt, where they almost died of malignant fever and their honey was taken from them. They recovered, acquired different merchandise, and proceeded through the Red Sea to Aden in southernmost Arabia. There they separated. Covilhã headed for India, his companion Afonso de Paiva for Abyssinia. Covilhã reached the port of Cannanore, a little to the north of Kozhikode, the city where Gama and Cabral were to run into great trouble. Apparently, Covilhã had no trouble whatsoever, thanks to his perfect disguise, when he went south to Kozhikode, nor when he turned farther north to the port of Goa, halfway to Bombay. From Goa he sailed to Hormuz, at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, then back to East Africa, and next he traveled to Cairo, where he and Paiva had agreed to meet. He waited and waited. Finally he received word that Paiva was dead. Instead he met two Portuguese Jews whom King John had sent to look for him and Paiva. He gave them a letter to take back, containing precious information about the route to India, precious for the preparation of Gama's voyage.

Having taken the two envoys to Hormuz, as ordered, Covilhã then returned to the Red Sea port of Djiddah, the gate to Mecca. Disguised as a Muslim pilgrim, he visited the holy Islamic shrines in Mecca and Medina. Next, he joined a caravan of returning pilgrims, with whom he reached Syria after having crossed the great Arabian Desert. Turning south once more, he paid a visit to the ancient Christian monastery on Mount Sinai. A different caravan took him thence all the way to "Upper Ethiopia," another name for Abyssinia, where new adventures awaited him.

Presenting himself to the ruling Negus Alexander, he was graciously received. But when he asked for permission to leave the country none was given! Instead, he was requested to become the governor of a district in the countryside. The next ruler, Queen Helena, sent an ambassador to Portugal as a result of Covilhã's mission, but failed to choose him to be her ambassador. King Manuel dispatched an embassy in turn to go back to Queen Helena with the Abyssinian ambassador. The year was 1515. It took the embassy *four* years to reach its destination, partly with new personnel. Among its members was a priest, Father Francisco Álvares. Álvares looked up Covilhã and found that the latter had acquired a dark Abyssinian family in the meanwhile, becoming in fact a bigamist. It is likely that Covilhã was no longer eager to return to his homeland and to face his Portuguese wife. He died in Abyssinia a few years later, in 1524.

Father Álvares listened to Covilhã's tales, including some of them in a book that caused a sensation in Europe. The priest gave it the title *The True Information of the*

*Lands of Prester Johannes of the Indies*, to contrast it to the legends that had circulated for centuries. It was published in 1540 and translated quickly into several languages<sup>12</sup>.

#### f) Antônio Raposo Tavares, the “Bandeirante”

Antônio Raposo Tavares represents the tenacious trailblazers and ruthless leaders of the bands that penetrated deeply into the interior of South America. He is a truly epic figure. In the face of endless hardships, he and his band completed the longest exploratory journey of any single group of men in the history of the Americas. As a result, he pushed the frontiers of Brazil as far west as any man could before being blocked by the Spaniards in Peru.

Tavares hailed from the southern Portuguese province of Alentejo. He came to Brazil with his father about 1618. They settled in São Paulo, then a small frontier community of roughnecks, who engaged in clandestine commerce with the distant Spanish colonies, including raids on Indians from the southern highlands to the Andes Mountains.

Before his biggest incursion, which took him, his sixty armed men, and their Indian carriers from São Paulo to the mouth of the Amazon (1648-1651), Tavares had already achieved notoriety because of two exploits. He had led assaults on the Jesuit missionaries' Indian villages in Paraguay with his bands, had destroyed the villages of those Christianized Indians, and had carried off as many as 20,000 in 1628 and 29. That got him into trouble with the Inquisition, as the Jesuits complained to Philip V, King of Spain, and Portugal. On the other hand, he gained the reputation of a patriot when he raised a company of a hundred and fifty *Paulistas* at his own expense to help expel the Dutch when they invaded northeastern Brazil.

In 1648, his great *bandeira* expedition took advantage of Portugal's newly recovered independence by entering what was considered Spanish territory. Setting out from the town of São Paulo in canoes, they paddled on the small Tiete River to the Paraná River and then to the Paraguay River. From there they turned north, probably overland, embarked once more and navigated down the mighty Madeira, which flows into the Amazon. Three years after their departure from São Paulo, they arrived at the mouth of the Amazon and landed at the ocean port of Belém on the Atlantic coast. Thus, they completed a voyage of at least 6,000 miles through the wilderness, much of it covered by huge rain forests. An account written twenty-three years afterwards claimed that Tavares also crossed the Andes and got as far as Quito in Ecuador. He definitely reached the foothills of the Andes.

When Tavares returned home to São Paulo, his own family could not recognize the haggard, wild-looking man. In a letter of 1654, based on conversations with several of Tavares' travel companions in Belém, Father Antônio Vieira, the famous Jesuit, wrote:

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12 Francisco Álvares. *Verdadeira informação das terras do preste João das Índias* [1540] (Lisboa: Agência geral das colónias, 1943), chapter CIV,

[The perpetrators of the attack on the Indian villages of the Jesuits] were punished by famine, plague, and war. The plague was such that not one of them escaped dire sickness; the famine they suffered from was most extreme. Roots and fruit from all the trees were all that the sick could hope for [...]. Moreover, in the midst of this weak and helpless condition, they were continuously attacked by savages on foot and on horseback, who showered them with arrows. [These ordeals] were the worst of their sufferings ever<sup>13</sup>.

## V. THE DARKER SIDE OF THE STORY

When we admire the daring of the great adventurers, we are apt to forget the darker side of their motives and actions, rooted in the deep recesses of human nature and therefore more or less present in all, not only the Portuguese and the Spaniards, as British and American imperialist propaganda sometimes has wanted us to believe.

Unquestionably, it was the old hunger for gold, silver and precious stones that drove the *bandeirantes* of Brazil, for example. In Africa and Asia, too, the desire to get rich quick, greed in one word, was accompanied by cruelty, violence, outright thievery, and the corruption of public officials. Thoughtful Portuguese historians did not fail to publicize and condemn the outrageous misdeeds, fearing for the future of the hard-won empire. The bitterest protest was the work of the honest historian Diogo do Couto, a dialogue that he called *Experiences of a Veteran Soldier (O Soldado Prático)*. In this book, a veteran soldier supposedly relates the many evils he has observed or suffered during many years of service in East India. Some missionaries likewise reacted again and again. Two of their scathing satires became classics of the genre. One was the sainted Jesuit Francis Xavier's letter to his Provincial Superior in Portugal, written in 1545, about how the greedy Portuguese officials were conjugating the verb "to plunder" in India, both in the singular and the plural: "I plunder, you plunder, he plunders, we plunder. . .<sup>14</sup>." The other is an anonymous book dating from the eighteenth century, called *How to Steal Skillfully (A Arte de Furtar)*<sup>15</sup>.

However, worst of all was the stealing of human beings, that is to say, the slave trade, which reached incredible proportions during the past century. It weakened the moral fiber of society as a whole.

There had been outright opposition to overseas adventures at the very beginning of the incursions into Morocco and West Africa. Many Portuguese felt that it was more important to chase the Moors out of Granada, their last stronghold on the

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13 Richard M. Morse. *The Bandeirantes*. New York: Knopf, 1965. (Morse quotes Antônio Vieira's letter of 1654 about Tavares' *bandeira* on page 110).

14 Diogo de Couto., *O soldado prático (que trata dos enganos e desenganos da Índia)* [1790], ed. M. Rodrigues Lapa (Lisboa: Sá da Costa, 1937).

15 Anonymous. *A Arte de Furtar*. Tenth edition, prefaced by Jaime Brasil. Lisboa: Livraria Peninsular, 1937. (Attributed to Antônio Vieira.)

Iberian Peninsula, than to seek adventure abroad. The churchmen in the universities raised further objections to the practice of forcible conversion and to unprovoked armed attacks against other peoples, such as the Moroccans and Berbers, because such warfare was unjust and therefore sinful. Dire divine punishment was foretold. Those protests came to naught, for the adventurers had the kings on their side. However, the very man who was to glorify their exploits in the epic poem that all Portuguese school children have to read felt obliged to introduce the figure of a venerable old gentleman who personifies that opposition<sup>16</sup>. In an episode known as “the Speech of the Old Man on the Riverbank,” the old man addressed Admiral Vasco da Gama and his sailors as they were about to depart for India. The poet had him exclaim:

Glory of Empire! Most unfruitful lust  
After the vanity that men call fame! (. . .)  
What new disasters dost thou now prepare  
Against these Kingdoms and against their seed?  
What peril and what death for them to bear,  
Under some mighty name, hast thou decreed?  
What mines of gold now dost thou promise fair?  
What kingdoms? – promise lightly made indeed! (. . .)  
Hast thou not ever near thee Ishmael’s breed,  
With whom to carry on perpetual war?  
Does he not cleave to the false Arab creed,  
If it be but Christ’s faith thou fightest for? (. . .)<sup>17</sup>

Great disasters were, indeed, in store, among them bloody slave rebellions, particularly that of the Zumbi of Palmares in Brazil, wars of fierce resistance in Africa and Asia, for example, the campaigns of Nzinga, the Amazon-like Bantu Queen, in Angola; the expulsion of all the Portuguese from entire countries—Japan, Abyssinia; or the loss of leaders, above all of that quixotic youth, King Sebastian, who died in Morocco with the flower of his army. All of those misfortunes came to be symbolized in the shipwreck. In that shape they found literary expression in a collection of twelve dramatic accounts of as many shipwrecks, published under the title *The Tragic History of the Sea (A História Trágico-Marítima)*. Simultaneously, the untimely and useless death of King Sebastian, which for generations the Portuguese refused to accept, created a myth, the myth that Sebastian would, like King Arthur, return one foggy morning, to usher in a new Golden Age for his country<sup>18</sup>.

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16 Anonymous. *A Arte de Furtar*.

17 Anonymous. *A Arte de Furtar*.

18 Antônio Sérgio. *História trágico-marítima* (3 vols.). Lisboa: Sul, 1956. (At the end of volume III, Sérgio’s long essay “Informes para leitores nada eruditos, mas amadores das relações e visões globais dos acontecimentos, “ 265-347.)

## VI. FANTASIES, LEGENDS, AND ILLUSIONS

Fantasies born of illusion had accompanied the adventurers from early times on. Already in the Middle Ages, a large island named Antilia was rumored to lie in the Atlantic Ocean, with seven cities founded by seven bishops who had escaped with their flocks from the Muslim Moors when they conquered Spain and Portugal. Once discovered, the Azores had been identified with Antilia. And when the Cape Verde Islands became known, they eventually were presumed to have once upon a time been the paradisiac isles where the daughters of Hesperus, the West Wind, were guarding the tree of the golden apples.

Then there was the fear rampant among seamen that farther south, in the African tropics beyond Cape Bojador, facing the Canary Islands, the waters of the Atlantic were boiling hot so that no ship could pass through.

To be sure, Portuguese imagination never went to such lengths as, say, the imagination of the old Irish. What prevailed in Portuguese minds was a combination of fantastic dreams with observed reality, in which reality furnished the solid points of departure and arrival. That is borne out by the printed record. Three examples stand out among many dozens to be found especially in a large array of epic poems, some written as late as the twentieth century.

One is the obviously imaginary episode of the Isle of Love set within the historic framework of Gama's voyage to India and back to Portugal by the poet Camões in his epic *Os Lusíadas*. Briefly told, the sailors, and not just their leader Gama, are rewarded on their homeward voyage by the goddess Venus. She leads them to an unsuspected island of lovely nymphs in the Atlantic, where they could rest a while and enjoy the favors of those sweet young women after a playful chase,

O que mais passam na manhã e na sesta,  
Que Vénus com prazeres inflamava,  
Milhor é experimentá-lo que julgá-lo;  
Mas julgue-o quem não pode experimentá-lo.  
Destarte, enfim, conformes já as formosas  
Ninfas cos seus amados navegantes,  
Os ornam de capelas deleitosas,  
De louro e de ouro e flores abundantes.  
As mãos alvas lhe davam como esposas<sup>19</sup>.

Thus did Camões in 1572, with a kind of "magic realism," allegorize the rewards those seamen expected.

Another example is an episode that occurs in a curious work whose basis is formed by the Asiatic adventures of the author, a certain Fernão Álvares do Oriente, probably born in India of Portuguese parents. He was poetically gifted and successively

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19 Luís Vaz de Camões., *Os Lusíadas* (Lisboa, 1572), stanzas 83-84.

an army officer, shipping captain, and colonial official, living during the second half of the sixteenth century. He gave his bulky work the form of a pastoral novel, with shepherds and shepherdesses, alternating prose and verse in the Italian fashion. But Álvares transferred pastoral Arcadia to the surroundings of China, Japan and other exotic lands, where he had traveled. At a certain point in his work, which he called *Lusitania Transformed* (*Lusitânia Transformada*), printed in 1607, reality gives way to full-blown fantasy. Surviving a dreadful tempest at sea, the shepherd Felício lands on the island of Formosa, “the Beautiful,” now known as Taiwan. There he hears a story of star-crossed lovers, which takes the reader back to the romances of chivalry, with the difference that these lovers are not European like Tristan and Isolde, but a Japanese prince and a Chinese princess. Eventually, Felício is able to return to the continent, that is, to India. Being himself unlucky in love, he sails from there back to Portugal via Abyssinia. Lo and behold, he stops on the Island of Saint Helena on the way and finds it so lovely that he feels it must be the Isle of Love! But he does not linger, for he is anxious to join other shepherds in a bucolic Portuguese countryside, where one can lead, he declares, the only life worth living after having experienced too many years of a hazardous globetrotting existence, “broken up in a thousand pieces strewn all over the world.”<sup>20</sup>

The third example is drawn from a thrilling prose narrative of the early seventeenth century presented as an autobiography. It bears the short title “Peregrinação,” referring to the adventures of one Fernão Mendes Pinto on his many oriental journeys. Pinto mixes fact and fiction, describing real places and peoples, particularly China, Japan and Thailand, but adding others and inventing languages not corresponding to any that then existed. Published in 1614, thirty years after the author’s death, a partial English translation of this work appeared as early as 1653. An American, Rebecca Catz, studied and newly translated the 226 chapters of the work in 1989<sup>21</sup>.

Pinto’s stories of piracy, shipwrecks, imprisonments, miracle healings, visits to the Great Wall of China and other famous sites, read like one of the Spanish rogue stories of the same period. However, Pinto is actually another satirist who disguises his intentions in a simple style that smacks of orality. Writing in his old age, he had second thoughts about the Portuguese enterprise overseas.

In chapter 55, following the shipwreck of the Portuguese pirate Faria, in whose crew Pinto tells us he was serving, they seize a Chinese merchant launch while its owner and crew are on shore and sail away on it. They enjoy the Peking duck dinner they find already prepared in the ship’s galley, give grace to the Lord, count the booty and while doing so, come upon the only living soul, a Chinese boy of twelve or thirteen, the merchant’s son. Faria interrogates him. The boy laments his father’s misfortune. Faria tells him to stop crying and promises to treat him as if he were his own son. The episode continues as follows:

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20 Fernão Álvares do Oriente, *Lusitânia Transformada*. (Lisboa, 1607).

21 Fernão Mendes Pinto, *Peregrinação* [1614], trans. Rebecca Catz, *The Travels of Mendes Pinto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

A que o moço, olhando para elle, respondeo com hum sorriso, a modo de escarneo; não cuydes de mim inda que me vejas minino, que sou tão parvo que possa ciydar de ty que roubandome meu pay me hajas a mym de tratar como filho, & se es esse que dizes, eu te peço muyto muyto muyto por amor do teu Deos que me deixes botar a nado a essa triste terra, onde fica quem me gerou, porque esse he o meu pay verdadeyro, com o qual quero antes morrer aly naquelle mato, onde o vejo estarme chorando, que a viner entre gente tão má como vos outros sois; alguns dos que aly estavam o reprenderaõ, & lhe disseraõ que não dissesse aquillo, porque não era bem dito a que elle respondeo, sabeis poreque volo digo, porque vos vy louvar a Deos despos de fartos com as mãos alevantadas, & cos beiços untados, como homens que lhes parece que basta arreganhar os dentes ao Ceo sem satisfazer o que tem roubado, pois, entendeuy que o Senhor da mão poderosa não nos obriga tanto a bolir cos beiços, quanto nos defende tomar o alheyo, quanto mais roubar & matar, que são dous peccados tão graves, quanto despos de mortos conhecereis no riguroso castigo de sua divina justiça. [...] E não querendo mais responder a pergunta nenhuma, se foy por a hum canto a chorar, sem em tres dias querer comer cousa nenhuma de quantas lhe davão.<sup>22</sup>

Another enlightening if equally invented episode occurs in chapter 122, where Pinto and other Portuguese prisoners are led before the ruler of the Tartars upon his successful invasion of China in the middle of the sixteenth century. This time they are the ones being questioned,

Antes de chegarmos a elle dez ou doze passos, fizemos nossa cortesia, beijando o chão tres vezes com outras cerimonias que os interpretes nos insinavam. El Rey mandou então que cessasse a musica dos estromentos, & disse ao [General] Mitaquer, pergunta a essa gente do cabo do mundo se tem Rey, & como se chama a sua terra, & que distancia averá della a esta do Chim em que agora estou, a que hum da nossa companhia em nome de todos respondeo, que a nossa terra se chamava Portugal, cujo Rey era muyto grande, poderoso, & rico, & que della a aquella cidade do Pequim averia distancia de quasi tres annos de caminho, de que elle fez hum grande espanto como homem que não tinha esta maquina do mundo por tamanha, & batendo tres vezes na coxa com huma varinha que tinha na mão, & os olhos postos no Ceo como que dava graças a Deos, disse alto que todos o ouviram, [...] ò criador, ò criador de todas as cousas qual de nos outros pobres formigas da terra poderá comprender as maravilhas da tua grandeza. [...] venham cá, venham cá, & acenando com a mão nos fez chegar até os primeyros degraos da tribuna onde os quatorze Reys estavam assentados, & nos tornou a perguntar [...] quanto? quanto? A que respondemos o mesmo de antes que quasi tres annos de caminho, a que elle tornou a dizer, que porque não vinhamos antes por terra que aventurarmonos aos trabalhos do mar? a que se respondeo que por a terra ser muyto grande, & aver nella Reys de diversas nações que o não consintiriam,

<sup>22</sup> Mendes Pinto, pp. 59-60.

a que elle tornou, que he o que vindes buscar a estoutra, porque vos aventurais a tamanhos trabalhos? & declarandolhe então a razão disto pelas melhores & melhor enfeitadas palavras que então ocoreram, esteve hum pouco suspenso, & bulindo tres ou quatro vezes com a cabeça disse, para hum homem velho que estava junto delle, conquistar esta gente terra tão alongada da sua patria, dá claramente a entender que deve de aver entre elles muyta cubiça & pouca justiça, a que o velho, que se chamava Raja Benam, respondeo, assi parece que deve ser, porque homens que por industria & engenho voam por cima das agoas todas, por aquirerem o que Deos lhes não deu, ou a pobreza nelles ha tanta que de todo lhes faz esquecer a sua patria, ou a vaydade, & a cegueyra que lhes causa a sua cobiça he tamanha que por ella negam a Deos, & a seus pays.<sup>23</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION: THE REAL RESULTS OF THE PORTUGUESE ADVENTURERS' GREAT DEEDS

The results that the exploits of the Portuguese adventurers achieved were not all negative. The most useful thing the adventurers did for the Old World was to bring additional food plants back from the Americas, particularly corn, the sweet potato, the “Irish” potato, and cassava<sup>24</sup>. Another enduring result was what may be called the creation of the empire of the Portuguese language, which thanks to them spread to a couple of continents outside Europe, so that Portuguese is being increasingly used by six modern nations—one in the Americas and five in Africa. More importantly, they and the Spanish conquistadores made the human race conscious of its worldwide oneness. To this day, Portuguese people see in those men models of manliness, daring, tenacity, high ambition, and great ease in dealing with other nations. Not all Portuguese alive today, especially since the fall of their colonial empire, would deny that tenacity led to the foolishness of being the last to let go of the colonies in Africa, deluded by the idea that they constituted a Greater or Overseas Portugal; that high ambitions led to illusions of grandeur and the overextension of meager resources; or that easy mixing with other peoples did not prevent the latter's growing neglect and demoralization.

Nor has the breed of Portuguese adventurers entirely vanished. Their remote descendants are the adventurers of the Space Age, peaceful heroes, though less numerous than those found in some other, technically more advanced countries. Such were the two Portuguese aviators Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral, the first to cross the South Atlantic in their small airplane in 1922, five years before Charles Lindbergh's celebrated crossing of the North Atlantic. Another offspring of theirs was Alberto Santos-Dumont, the Brazilian pioneer, who conceived and flew the first dirigible balloons in 1898 and was the first man in Europe to fly an airplane in October 1906. Their motto could have been the verses written by a minor Portuguese author:

<sup>23</sup> Mendes Pinto, pp. 146-47.

<sup>24</sup> Orlando Ribeiro. *Aspectos e problemas da expansão portuguesa*. Lisboa: Junta de Investigações da Ultramar, 1962. (Especially page 26ff on the diffusion of food plants and page 86ff on the integrating and universal features of Portuguese expansion.)

In the vast ocean of the Future  
There won't be any lack of Indies to explore. . .  
Be ready to embark, come, let's depart!  
Let's search the new horizons  
For the new lands of Liberty and Love.<sup>25</sup>

Old Camões, the national bard, had centuries ago summed up the spirit of the Portuguese adventurers in a single verse, the proud boast that his small nation, “If more worlds existed, would get there, too. (E, se mais mundo houvera, lá chegara!).<sup>26</sup>

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25 Final lines of Augusto Casimiro's poem “A tentação do mar” (The Temptation of the Sea), 1911

26 *Os Lusíadas*, canto vii, st. 14, l. 8

27 Other editions speak of four, not seven, parts of the world.

28 The reference to the reply of a Portuguese convict to a Muslim merchant in India is taken from it.

29 Edition of a sixteenth-century manuscript first published in 1790.

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30 About Hernan de Soto's expedition of 1539.

31 Transcribes what Gomes Eanes de Zurara writes about Prince Henry the Navigator in his *Crônica de Guiné*, chapter vii.

32 At the end of volume III, Sérgio's long essay “Informes para leitores nada eruditos, mas amadores das relações e visões globais dos acontecimentos,” 265-347.

33 Translated from the Portuguese.

34 Includes the English translation of Pero Vaz de Caminha's report on the Discovery of Brazil to King Manuel, May 1, 1500.

35 Chapter 214 tells about André do Campo's part in Coronado's expedition of 1540.

36 Morse quotes Antônio Vieira's letter of 1654 about Tavares's *bandeira* on p. 110.

37 Especially p. 26ff on the diffusion of food plants and p. 86ff on the integrating and universal features of Portuguese expansion.