

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PORTUGUESE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE

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I argue in this brief paper that the widely held perception in the literature that the Estado da Índia and the private Portuguese traders were essentially inconsequential participants in the Indian Ocean trade in the early modern period is a completely false perception. The volume and value of trade carried on by the Portuguese between Asia and Europe as well as that within Asia in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century was in all probability less, and possibly substantially less, than that carried on by the Dutch and the English East India companies in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. But it nevertheless was fairly substantial in both value and volume and should not be dismissed lightly as being altogether inconsequential. It should also be recognized that at a qualitative level, the Portuguese were responsible for some important innovations and new initiatives in the organizational structure of the Indian Ocean-South China Sea trading complex. To mention only one such initiative, the Portuguese private traders operating under the concession system were instrumental in the restoration of the lost tradition of the long distance Asian maritime trade.

Perhaps even more important from a researcher's point of view is the consideration that analytically speaking, the reconstruction of the Portuguese trade flows both within Asia as well as between Asia and Europe, is a much more challenging, and, therefore, more interesting, as a project than the reconstruction of corresponding trade flows for either the Dutch or the English East India companies. This is essentially because the quantitative as well as the qualitative data base in respect of the Portuguese enterprise is extremely limited due largely to the 1755 earthquake which nearly destroyed the Casa da Índia's records. The

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researcher, therefore, is at a great disadvantage in comparison with the Dutch and the English enterprises, where a ship by ship reconstruction of the trade flows is possible in respect of all regions and all periods. From the perspective of someone like myself whose principal interest over the years has been the Dutch and, to a smaller extent, the English enterprises in the East, the Portuguese case is an exceedingly challenging one. One must, therefore, begin by paying tribute to the ingenuity of pioneers in this field whose work has enabled one to make substantive advances subsequently. The pioneers whose work one draws upon include people like Herman Kellenbenz, Frederic Lane, Magalhães Godinho, Charles Boxer, Geneviève Bouchon, Niels Steensgaard and Luís Felipe Thomaz, among others.

Traditionally, the Portuguese Euro-Asian trade is believed to have consisted overwhelmingly in the procurement of pepper in Asia, mainly India. From the very beginning, the Portuguese government had formed a syndicate for trade with Asia, in which both the Crown and certain private interests participated. But from 1506 onward, the trade in precious metals from Portugal to India, and that in pepper and other major spices in the reverse direction, was reserved as a royal monopoly. As is well-known, the mounting liquidity problems of the Crown forced a major reorganization of the trade with Asia in 1564 when the first of a series of contracts giving over trade on the Cape route to private parties was concluded. The remaining part of the century witnessed a variety of experiments carried out in an attempt to identify the optimal strategy that would ensure the Crown maximum monopoly revenue without obliging it to be directly involved in the conduct of the trade with Asia. One of these experiments was the introduction of the Asian contract system in 1575. Under this arrangement, Konrad Rott, a German from Augsburg and his associates received intact the royal monopoly of the Cape route including the procurement of spices in Asia, their shipment to Europe, the provisioning of the carracks in Lisbon and Goa, and the distribution of the pepper in Europe.

I referred earlier to the problem of the reconstruction of the Portuguese Euro-Asian trade flows. As far as the return cargoes from Asia are concerned, information regarding value is totally missing and one has to depend entirely on movements in shipping and tonnage and on some data on the volume of these cargoes. Following the earlier work of Magalhães Godinho and Niels Steensgaard, about twenty years ago T. Bentley Duncan presented a new series of shipping movements between Portugal and Asia. This series largely superseded earlier work not only because of its more comprehensive data base but also because it provided, in addition, the movement of shipping in the reverse direction i.e. Goa-Lisbon, as well as the extent of losses on the way. Even more importantly, by carefully putting together the available information on the type of ships, the manner of their employment, the number of people aboard and the quantity of cargo carried, Duncan produced a plausible tonnage series as a

counterpart to his shipping movement series. The important conclusion that his tonnage series brought out is that an increase in the average tonnage of the ships employed in the Portugal-India run overtime more than neutralized the decline in the number of ships employed. Duncan's work would thus cast serious doubt on the validity of the generally held notion of a decline in the Portuguese India-Europe trade in the latter half of the sixteenth century. As far as the composition of the return cargo is concerned, there is general agreement that in the early part of the sixteenth century, pepper overwhelmingly dominated the return cargo – say between 85 and 95 percent depending on whether one is looking at volume figures or value figures. But later in the sixteenth century, pepper would seem to have accounted for less than 70 percent with a growing role for commodities such as indigo and Sri Lankan cinnamon. Textiles were also seen to be becoming more important.

This largely traditional interpretation of the available data, however, received a severe jolt with the publication in 1993 of James Boyajian's *Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580-1640*. In my view, this book, like Duncan's 1986 article, needs to be recognized much more than has happened so far in the profession, although scholars like Ernst van Veen have indeed made use of them. Basically, Boyajian argued that between 1580 and 1640, the volume and value of the Portuguese Euro-Asian trade was in fact much larger than has traditionally been believed. At the heart of Boyajian's analysis is his almost revolutionary revision of current orthodoxy in the matter of the relative role of the private Portuguese traders in the Euro-Asian *carreira* trade. According to Boyajian, private cargoes on the account mainly of the New Christian merchants, accounted for an almost unbelievable 90 percent of the total value imported over the period 1580-1640 from Asia. By far the most important constituent of this cargo was textiles, accounting for as much as 62 percent of the total imports valuewise, followed by items such as precious stones (14 percent), pepper (10 percent), indigo (6 percent) and spices other than pepper (5 percent). It is indeed true that the evidence base of Boyajian is somewhat weak, a subject that I have analysed in some detail elsewhere. But even if one argues that the extent of private trade was less than what Boyajian suggests it was, it nevertheless puts the primacy of pepper in the import cargoes into Lisbon in grave doubt. Incidentally, since that was precisely the ground on which Steensgaard had characterized the Portuguese enterprise in Asia as being essentially redistributive in character, Boyajian's work also puts a big question mark on that characterization.

What about the Portuguese participation in trade within Asia that they often described as "trade from India to India"? Boyajian's work is also of great importance in this regard. While a part of the Portuguese intra-Asian trade fed the Euro-Asian trade, a large part was simply aimed at making a great deal of profit. Initially, the Crown had participated in this trade but had withdrawn completely by about 1550. The principal participants thereafter were the Casado merchants

operating under the protection and the jurisdiction of the Estado da Índia on the basis mainly of the concession system.

The scale of this trade was quite large and it embraced practically all the major segments of the Indian Ocean – South China Sea trade. As an example, I would draw attention to the famous Goa-Malacca-Macao-Nagasaki concession voyage started in the 1550s. This voyage resumed the practice of long distance Asian maritime trade by which I mean a single voyage connecting all the three geographical segments of Asian trade, namely the Western Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. This was a tradition that had been lost ever since the cessation of the Cheng-Ho voyages in the 1430's.

CALICUT, THE INTERNATIONAL EMPORIUM OF MARITIME TRADE AND THE PORTUGUESE DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Calicut was a widely known international port town of the east west axis of the emporia trade connecting Malacca with Venice on the Adriatic. The visitors of the fifteenth century found it the most important port town of the whole of India. As reported by Affonso de Albuquerque in 1512, it was the chief emporium of Cairo. Linschoten noted that the town of Calicut was in the past the most famous town in all Malabar or India. Merchants from various parts of the world crowded together at Calicut to take part in the international maritime trade. Even when the Gujaratis who met Vasco da Gama on the East African coast and offered whatever spices they wanted and dissuaded the Portuguese from going over to Calicut, Vasco da Gama did not fall prey to their insinuations and insisted on proceeding to his destination. The Portuguese contacted the Zamorins from time to time to come to terms with them and establish a fortress and their settlement even after suffering a lot of harm from them. This shows the great stake of the Portuguese at Calicut. But the Dutch and the French visitors to Calicut towards the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century understood that when the Portuguese began to prosper in their enterprise and to get possession of the country, and so masters of the sea, Calicut began to decay and to lose both name and traffique. They were of the opinion that by the close of the sixteenth century it was one of the towns of least account in all Malabar. In other words, the decline of trade at Calicut during the sixteenth century and its fall from the earlier position are closely connected with the Portuguese. It may be said that the scholars of Indo-Portuguese studies have done little attempt to

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