

# A MACAO NARRATIVE

**AUSTIN COATES**

With Foreword by  
César Guillén Nuñez



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## Portuguese Asia: Why and How

### Discovery of the sea route to India

Portugal's stupendous epoch of exploration and discovery began around 1419, when the first Portuguese reached the island of Porto Santo in the Madeira group following this in 1420 with the discovery of Madeira itself. The initiator of the Discoveries, a person in some ways so strikingly modern and different from his age that he seems to belong more to the twentieth century than to the fifteenth, was the Infante Dom Henrique—Prince Henry the Navigator—the austere, unemotional third son of João I of Portugal and his English queen Philippa, daughter of John of Gaunt. On the heights of Sagres Prince Henry conceived the then incredible idea of making the ocean, beyond which it was believed lay nothingness, into a highway by means of which to reach other lands.

Without himself ever travelling further than Tangier, Prince Henry listened to sea-captains' experiences, examined old travellers' tales and traditions, and after a thorough study of all that in those days could be learnt of geography and navigation, including Arab knowledge which was then the most advanced, he organized from his retreat near the port of Lagos in southern Portugal a series of exploratory voyages down the west coast of Africa. His motives were, like the man himself, a compelling mixture of medieval and modern: to examine the nature of lands hitherto unknown to Europeans, to seek new avenues of trade, to find out how far the dominion of Islam extended, to learn whether there were possibly some unknown Christian kingdoms willing to join in war against Islam, and finally to bring the Christian faith to any willing to receive it.

Europe was threatened, almost encircled by Islam. The entire east and south coasts of the Mediterranean, from Turkey to Morocco, were occupied by a hostile belt of Islamic states; and although the conquering energy of the Arabs had spent itself, the Turks had taken up the faltering banner of the Crescent. In 1453 they captured Constantinople, thereby extinguishing the Eastern Roman Empire, considered to be Christian Europe's main eastern bulwark against Islam. The salvation of Europe from this menace was the foremost military and political problem of the age.

Another lesser problem was associated with it. The Crusades, reviving between Europe and the Middle East contacts that had been lost since the heyday of the Roman Empire, had stimulated European demand for a number of oriental products. Of these the most important were pepper and other food seasonings, such as nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon. Other items were sugar and luxury goods—precious stones, fine silks, cottons, and embroideries. These, brought by sea from different parts of Asia to Baghdad, Damascus, and Alexandria, were transported by caravan across the deserts of the Middle East, then shipped from Egypt and the Levant to Europe's two most important ports, Venice and Genoa, both of which owed their commercial prosperity to what pious Christians considered a disgraceful trade with the infidel. Such was the anomalous situation the Crusades produced. In order to obtain the oriental goods she required, Europe was obliged and willing to buy at exorbitant prices from Islam, her deadly enemy, who was the sole intermediary between West and East.

Maritime exploration, therefore, could lead to two important results, one military and religious, the other commercial—the discovery of a route by which to attack Islam from the rear, and the establishment of direct contact between Europe and the Spice Islands.

This was religion and trade going hand in hand; and as long as activity was confined to the Islamic zone of Asia—the Middle East and the countries bordering the Arabian Sea—the duality of purpose was a natural one. It was only when, sailing still further, Christians came in contact with Hindus, Chinese, and Japanese that the religious design became more complex, changing from a simple crusading determination to stamp out Islam into a dream of establishing a universal Christian state. The change was unavoidable. The Portuguese Discoveries amazed and excited all Europe, and while laymen dreamed of the fortunes they might make in the Indies, it was natural that the leaders of the Christian Church should interpret these developments as a way leading to universal Christianity.

Prince Henry the Navigator died in 1460, when Portuguese vessels were not even halfway down the west coast of Africa, but his work was carried on by others. In the next decades the Gold and Ivory Coasts were reached, and in 1488 Bartolomeu Dias, hugging the coast of Africa in uncertain weather, found himself heading north but with land still to port. He had discovered the Cape of Good Hope.

This was the climax of the first, most dangerous and difficult phase of the Discoveries. Once down the long and inhospitable West African coast and round the Cape of Good Hope, the adventurers entered a region of organized Arab trade and more regular winds and seasons, where at every port there was accurate information to be had concerning other ports, weather conditions, and courses. By taking advantage of such assistance, and with a pilot provided by a friendly East African sultan, Vasco da Gama in 1498 completed the next great phase, and reached the west coast of India. He was now in the heartland of oriental commerce and in the rear of Islam, with a sea route which, if developed, could break Islam's commercial hold on Europe.

It remained to secure his tremendous find. Trade in Eastern seas was dangerous for Christians, Mussulman rulers were established throughout Upper India, their power extending gradually southwards, while in the Indies—the principal goal of the spice trade—Arab and Indian Muslim traders and missionaries had succeeded in converting many formerly Hindu or Buddhist states to Islam. None of the Eastern peoples being particularly interested in overseas connexions at this time, Arabs and Gujerati Muslims had monopolized the entire carrying trade of South Asia, with the inestimable advantage of dealing at almost every port with their co-religionists. The Portuguese discovered that the power of Islam was not, as had been originally supposed, a band of influence lying between Christian Europe and Asiatic lands. Islam reached to the furthest ends of the Indies.

It should be borne in mind that up to this time there was still no idea of founding European colonies. But the Portuguese had to protect their lines of operation. They thus constructed what shortly became a chain of fortresses across Asia, carefully disposed at converging points of trade, not too far distant one from another, combining the services of markets, warehouses, barracks, and shipyards. Improving and enlarging their ships, which were then and for another 100 years the most up-to-date in the world, they reckoned that with well-armed trading vessels operating on the routes designated and protected by their coastal forts, they could gain the mastery of the Indian Ocean's trade, and be strong enough to defend it.

The first of the forts was built in 1503 at Cochin, on the south-west coast of India, and was followed by others along the same coast. In 1505 a start was made in East Africa, where within three years there were establishments at Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Moçambique. Finally, approaching the narrowest points on the spice trade's two main routes, they installed

themselves on the bare, torrid island of Socotra, dominating the southern entrance to the Red Sea, and in 1509 seized Ormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. By these moves, Alexandria and Baghdad were threatened with the drying-up of supplies from the East.

The Islamic world quickly became aware of the threat this presented to their interests. In 1509 they assembled a tremendous international Muslim fleet, which met the Portuguese under their first Viceroy in the East, Dom Francisco de Almeida, off the west coast of India, near Diu. In a well-matched fight, one of the most significant naval battles in history, the Muslims were routed. Although for many years afterwards the Portuguese still had to contend with Mohammedan naval rivalry, their adversaries were never again able to assemble such power against them. By the Battle of Diu, control of trade between Europe and the East passed from Muslim to Christian hands.

## Goa

Celebrating their victory, the Portuguese sailed southward down the Malabar coast, pausing off each Muslim settlement to cannon into its streets one or two limbs of their Muslim prisoners. This uninhibited display was in keeping with the times, the standards of Europe and Asia in matters of this kind being identical.

The following year they seized the port of Goa, a former Hindu city recently absorbed by the Muslims, and transformed it into a tropical headquarters. Forts, churches, colleges, and seminaries were erected with remarkable speed, Goa becoming the capital of the Portuguese mercantile empire, the seat of the Viceroy commanding it, and in addition, the most representative centre of European culture there has ever been in Asia.



A few weeks after Goa's capture, Almeida was succeeded as Viceroy by Afonso de Albuquerque, in some ways the most significant and commanding figure in the history of Portuguese Asia, the nature of which, as a result of his ideas, took a new form, closer to what might be described as colonial. Albuquerque foresaw that with the terrible losses of men by shipwreck, piracy, disease, and warfare, Portugal would not be able to sustain her astern fortresses. The supply of recruits from home was uncertain. Yet permanent, continually replenished military forces had to be obtained. He therefore promoted the colonization of territory in the immediate hinterland of the forts, modest areas sufficient to provide local food supplies, and encouraged his men to marry girls of the various indigenous races, thereby enabling each settlement to have a permanent Christian population, raising sons for its own protection.

### **Malacca**

The Portuguese endeavour now penetrated further east and nearer to the commercial crux of the matter—the Spice Islands. Between Goa and the islands of the Indies lay one last strategic port under Muslim control—Malacca, the most important port in South-East Asia. Like Socotra and Ormuz, it was situated at a controlling point on the main trade route. All commerce between the Spice Islands and Baghdad passed through the Strait of Malacca, which off the town itself is at its narrowest, a patrol ship mid-Strait being able to see Sumatra on one side and Lalaya on the other. Only by hugging the coast of Sumatra and making all sail could Arab and Indian traders hope to pass in safety a Malacca hostile to them.

In 1511, after a stiff fight, Albuquerque invested Malacca, which thenceforward became the advance eastern headquarters of Portuguese Asia, under a Captain-General responsible to the Viceroy at Goa. In Malacca the Portuguese once more installed

themselves with forts, churches, and harbour works, creating in that beautiful place another Christian town, this time set in the changeless climate of the equator, with its warm, breezy days and cool nights.

Forcibly diverting spices and other merchandise from reaching the Middle East, by seizure and trickery the Portuguese obtained its flow along the sea route to Goa and Lisbon. Their conquest of Malacca also threw into their hands the considerable Eastward current of trade from Persia, Turkey, and the Arab cities, all of which they put to good account.

### **Jorge Alvares' voyage to China**

On their earliest voyages to the Malabar coast of India, the Portuguese had heard of a mysterious, fair-skinned people called Chin, who many years ago, but just within living memory, had visited India and Ceylon in huge ships. Several times they had come, and then, no one knew why, their voyages had ceased.

While Albuquerque was in Malacca in 1511, it chanced that some large junks arrived in port. Albuquerque interviewed the masters and discovered that they were Chins. More than that—and one may well imagine the excitement of that far-distant shipboard evening—the Portuguese realized that the most celebrated of all European travellers' tales was not perhaps the myth so long supposed. In the person of these Chins they had reached out to the Cathay of Marco Polo. Typical of the age, this remarkable conclusion was conveyed to the King of Portugal and then kept secret, in suchwise that 200 years later, Europe was still arguing about whether, by some inconceivable chance, the China of porcelain, silk, and tea might be the same as Marco Polo's Cathay.

Finding the Chins to be forthright people, seemingly reliable in their dealings and, most important of all, not Muslims, Albuquerque decided that in addition to his main design of

exploring the Indies, expeditions should be sent to Siam, whence some of the junks had come, and to the land of the Chins themselves, which here acquired its European name, China. The junkmasters agreed to carry a Portuguese mission to Siam, and with this encouragement one of Albuquerque's captains, Jorge Alvares, was in 1513 sent in a chartered Burmese vessel to find out what he could about, and if possible open trade with, the Chinese.

Alvares touched the coast of China at the country's great southern mouth, the Pearl River. In appearance it was much as it is today. Although fishermen and pirates had for centuries used its island anchorages, few of the islands themselves were inhabited. Such villages as existed, where the land was flat enough for a few fields of rice, were places of no consequence, grimly surrounded by granite hills. Neglected, remote, the outermost edge of Chinese civilization, the villages were some of them fortified, all with houses grouped close together facing the sea. Behind some were rugged groves of trees, maintained for good luck, and in sheltered valleys a few other hardy trees arose among rocks and small ravines. On hillsides catching the summer winds was nothing but coarse grass. In rain it would be hard to imagine a less inviting place. But under a blue sky, and despite the sea being brown with river silt, the gloomy islands became pale grass green tinged with subtle shades of purple, and the scene assumed an aspect of majesty and peace.

The newcomers anchored in what was then the most populous harbour, between the district town of Namtao and the island of Lintin, situated within the estuary. South of them, where the river meets the sea, rose the 3,000-foot peaks of Lantao Island, with somewhere among the islands east of it, not visible from the river, the island one day to be known as Hongkong. Far across on the west and less mountainous side of the estuary was a low, rocky peninsula, its only sign of

habitation two small temples surrounded by trees. This was the future Macao.

Sixty-three miles from Namtao, up the estuary and river beyond, lay Canton, the largest city in South China, a cosmopolitan trading centre since very early times. Although Alvares was not allowed to go to Canton, he was well received by the Chinese, did a good trade, and returned reasonably satisfied to Malacca. He had discovered yet another unexpected and lucrative route with which Europe had no connexion.

Through Malacca there passed to Persia and Turkey regular cargoes of valuable Chinese goods, in particular porcelain and silk. In the opposite direction came Persian carpets, metalware and, from Indian ports, fine cotton, muslin and other luxury articles. To China came numbers of junks from Borneo and the Indies, bearing sandalwood and spices, for which in China there was even greater demand than there was in Europe. The bulk and real value of Asia's trade, as could now be appreciated, was between one Asian country and another, the merchandise going on the long journey to Venice being only a fraction of what the Portuguese found within their grasp. Not only were they able to inaugurate a new commerce between Europe and the East; in the East itself they replaced all others as the principal carriers from port to port.

Within a few years they were established in the Indies, with posts at Ternate in the Moluccas and Macassar in Celebes. Where they occupied no territory, they secured trading rights by treaty, thus extending their operations to Bengal, Burma, Siam, and Cochin-China.

All the costly goods Europe demanded from the East: pearls and brocades from China, superb batik and cloth of gold from Java, benzoin from Sumatra, rubies and scented woods from Burma, exquisitely woven scarves and vestments from Bengal, diamonds and sapphires from Ceylon, camphor from Borneo,

nutmeg, cinnamon, and cloves from the Spice Islands, sandalwood from Timor, carpets from Persia, gold and silver from Ethiopia and India, and every imaginable kind of curiosity and ornament which the ingenuity of the East had devised: it all came in Portuguese ships to Lisbon, in quantities such as Europe had never known before, for sale at prices five times lower than in Venice. The medieval system of trade between West and East was broken, the Navigator's dream at Sagres unbelievably justified and fulfilled.

### **The first European envoy to Peking**

The year after Jorge Alvares' voyage, a second venture was sent to China, this time under a kinsman of Christopher Columbus, the Italian captain Raffaello Perestrello, who reached China in a chartered junk in 1514. These first two encounters with the Chinese having been encouraging, it was decided in Goa to follow the procedure adopted in the case of other non-Muslim countries by sending to the capital of China an envoy with instructions to conclude a trading agreement.

The envoy chosen was Tomé Pires, former apothecary to the Crown Prince of Portugal, and author of one of the great reference works of the period, the *Suma Oriental*, describing the eastern lands the Portuguese discovered, and who, in negotiating with any country other than the Celestial Empire, would surely have had every prospect of success. He embarked with his retinue as passengers in a Portuguese squadron sent in 1517 to trade in the Pearl River. The fleet, the first European ships to reach China, anchored off Namtao before being allowed to sail up-river to Canton, where the envoy was put ashore, a house being provided for him by the Chinese authorities. The following year, with the steady winter wind blowing southward, the fleet sailed back to Malacca, leaving Pires still negotiating to reach the capital.

China was used to receiving foreign missions. Tibet, Burma, Siam, the Indo-Chinese countries, and Central Asian states all sent them from time to time. They were described as missions of tribute-bearing barbarians, the Chinese theory being that China was the only civilized state on earth, of which it was the centre. Magnanimous rules existed for the proper conduct of missions. Canton being one of the principal cities through which embassies entered China and waited for permission to proceed to Peking, Pires' arrival was in conformity with precedent, the only difficulty being that the Chinese officials concerned had never heard of Goa or Portugal. They had to be happy in their minds that such places did in fact exist, because the Imperial Court would have similar doubts, and mistakes on such matters were not tolerated. After waiting in Canton for *two years* while this and various other matters were discussed, Pires was finally allowed to travel northward by the long and slow canal route inland, again, the official route for embassies.

The Emperor Chang Tê (1506–21) was visiting Nanking, the Southern Capital, about halfway between Canton and Peking, his visit coinciding with the mission's arrival. When the Emperor was on tour, the extreme formality of the Court was relaxed. Chang Tê, a genial, easy-going person, received the Portuguese, treated them with every kindness, played games at a table with Pires, asked questions about his country, inspected the envoy's presents, and all his clothes and personal possessions as well, and arranged that the mission should go on to Peking, where later in the year he would see them again. In high hopes they proceeded to Peking and waited; but when early next year the Emperor returned, he did so only to die unexpectedly within a couple of days.

With their patron out of the way, the Portuguese became the victims of a Court intrigue that had been going on for years, the antagonists being the palace eunuchs and high members of

the civil service (the mandarins). In the last century, during the reign of Yung Lo (1403–24), the Court eunuchs, cultivating an interest in foreign countries, had organized the immense naval expeditions that had made the Chinese known as far abroad as Ceylon, the Malabar coast, and Arabia. Later, the strait-laced, traditionalist civil service promoted a successful reaction in favour of seclusion. Chang Tê's interest in Pires aroused civil service disapproval—it smacked of the Yung Lo epoch—and on the question of an audience with the new emperor, Ch'ia Ching, their opportunity came of asserting the dignity of the celestial Empire, as opposed to the frivolous informality tolerated by the eunuchs.

The mission's documents were re-examined. Surprise was expressed that the letter to the Emperor was written only by a subordinate (the Viceroy at Goa) and in language inadmissible in a communication addressed to the Son of Heaven. When barbarian kings addressed the Son of Heaven they did so personally, in terms of the deepest humility, not in this (as a European diplomatic document seemed to them) egalitarian tone. The suggestion was that Pires was an impostor, posing cleverly as a tribal envoy in order to gain admittance to the Heavenly Presence.

Since to admit to the Court that they had allowed an impostor to reach Peking would involve them in trouble, the officials had to proceed cautiously. With the excuse that it was not correct procedure for embassies to await the Emperor's pleasure in Peking itself, the Westerners were sent back to Canton until it be made known whether Ch'ia Ching would receive them.

In Canton, Portuguese prospects had deteriorated. A year earlier, while a number of their vessels were anchored off Namtao, a Chinese official had been assaulted by one Simão Peres de Andrade. The ships had been allowed to sail away

unmolested, but the affair, duly reported to Peking, caused a bad impression. Eight months later, Portuguese merchants trading at Namtao, when informed that as a consequence of the Emperor's death all foreign shipping must leave China, had refused to depart until their cargoes, already promised, were put aboard. Several Portuguese were in consequence taken prisoner, some vessels being fired on as they approached to aid their countrymen.

It was to this deteriorated situation that Tomé Pires returned in Canton, where he and his staff were kept confined to their house, waiting through the winter for permission to go up again to Peking. Meanwhile from Goa a large squadron set sail under the command of Martim Afonso de Melo Coutinho, who also had instructions to make a treaty of peace and trade with China. In Malacca the Captain-General urgently advised them to proceed no further, lest they damage the prospects of Pires' mission, but Melo Coutinho, intent on the commercial profits of a voyage to China, took no notice. On arrival in the Pearl River in 1522, his ships were attacked by a fleet of Chinese war junks, and an attempt to land at Namtao met with popular hostility, obliging the Portuguese to withdraw. The squadron finally fought its way out to sea with the loss of two ships.

This incident sealed the fate of the Portuguese diplomatic mission. The Portuguese, in the Chinese assessment, were a dangerous tribe whose activities, evidently piratical, were not to be encouraged. Tomé Pires and his entourage were thrown into prison. Some were later executed; the rest are thought to have died in captivity. It was hardly an auspicious beginning to European diplomatic relations with China.

**Effect of success on Portugal—Magellan's desertion to Spain**  
 Meanwhile, great changes had taken place in Portugal since the wealth of the Indies first began to reach Lisbon. The country



was rapidly demoralized by its fabulous success. Agriculture and other normal forms of husbandry were neglected. With money pouring into Lisbon from all over Western Europe in exchange for spices and oriental goods, it was easier to purchase domestic requirements from abroad, rather than produce them by wearisome labour at home. With spend-thrift carelessness, Portugal began selling her splendid eastern wares to Antwerp in exchange for meat, corn, cheese, butter, and even chickens and eggs. Young men deserted their fields and villages in their thousands to take part in the eastern voyages, on which great numbers died. Imported Muslim and negro slaves from Africa, an important outcome of the voyages, to some extent replaced them at home; but thereby even more manual and menial work was taken out of Portuguese hands, increasing indolence and neglect of the land.

The plentiful supply of spices from the East caused prices in Europe to fall, and profits from voyages declined sharply. The sale of the cargo of pepper, cloves, and cinnamon which Vasco da Gama brought back from his first journey to India raised a sum sixty times greater than the entire cost of the voyage; but even before the end of the reign of Manuel I (1495–1521) such profits were a thing of the past. Pepper fell from 80 cruzados per quintal to 20 cruzados. Venice was reduced to a minor port, but Portugal did not benefit by her decline.

There can be few cases in history where the acquisition of wealth sowed such quickly-sprouting seeds of decline as happened in Portugal within ten years of the foundation of Goa. Commercially inexperienced, carried away by vainglorious confidence, and with a failure to grasp economic actualities, the Portuguese held that the fall in profits could only be offset by increasing the number of expeditions sent to the East. To finance these from a dwindling treasury, the King raised loans from Antwerp bankers and merchants. When, as was inevitable,

profits dropped still more, Portugal fell more and more into debt.

The capital outlay required to finance sufficient voyages to meet the people's demand for them soon exceeded the royal capacity. In the hope of balancing the decline in profits by a greater trade and more discoveries, King Manuel withdrew his monopoly control, permitting private traders to finance their own expeditions. The resulting decrease in naval supervision of the trade route down the West African coast opened the way for numerous pirates, prominent among whom were the French. The dangers of the journey east increased; total losses became more frequent. By the early years of the reign of João III (1521–57) it was realized that Portugal had taken on more than she could carry. Several fortified posts on the west coast of Africa were abandoned, the forces manning them being diverted to Brazil, which seemed to be a more profitable region of enterprise than the East, and certainly a less distant one.

At the same time, far away in the Spice Islands, the contacts established by Portugal were threatened by Spain. With a view to limiting a dangerous rivalry between the two countries, the Borgia Pope Alexander VI had in 1494 divided between them, along a line which came to pass longitudinally 370 leagues west of the Azores, authority over all new-discovered lands. To the East of this line—this included Brazil, the discovery of which the Portuguese evidently kept secret until then—was Portugal's sphere, to the west Spain's.

That a pope, by drawing a line down the Atlantic Ocean, should divide the world between two nations has often been ridiculed since. At the time it was a very sensible arrangement. Confirmed by the two countries in the Treaty of Tordesillas, it might have been satisfactory as a means of keeping the peace, had it not been for the dissatisfaction of one outstanding Portuguese captain, Fernão de Magalhães, known in English

as Magellan. Having served under Albuquerque at the taking of Malacca, Magellan returned to Portugal, where on account of certain misdemeanours committed by him in India, his application for a pension as a nobleman attendant at Court was refused. Disgruntled, he transferred his services to the Emperor Charles V, took Spanish nationality in 1517, and with the knowledge he had already gained of the East, set out to reach the Spice Islands by a westerly route across the South Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the direction technically allowed for Spanish ships. In 1521, having rounded the foot of South America through the straits that today bear his name, Magellan reached the islands later to be named the Philippines. In an attempt to bring them under Spanish suzerainty he was opposed and killed by the forces of the Raja of Mactan, a small island near Cebu; but his comrades, continuing the voyage, finally reached the much-desired Moluccas.

During the next thirty-five years, other Spanish expeditions were sent with varying fortunes to resume contact with the Philippines, and in the Moluccas there were frequent fights between Spaniards and Portuguese. Not only therefore was Portugal at home lightly throwing away the fruits of her immense enterprise; in the East her position, even before it was fully established, was being assailed by another European state.

## Bibliography

A great deal about Macao's early history went unrecorded and is unknown. Portuguese official chroniclers and contemporary historians scarcely refer to it, and it was not until the last 100 years that the past was brought gradually to reveal its secrets, thanks to the work of modern scholars, of whom the most notable are the Marques Pereiras, Montalto de Jesus, J.M. Braga, Professor Charles Boxer, Father Gervaix, Jordão de Freitas, Dr Armando Cortesão, Luis Gonzaga Gomes, and Father Manuel Teixeira. As a result of their efforts, the picture has become, as J.M. Braga put it, 'fairly intelligible'.

Apart from various minor points arising from this author's own investigations, the present work follows these authorities. Any unattributed quotation in the text is from one or other of the works of J.M. Braga, whose magnificent collection of printed works on the Portuguese in the Far East is accessible to the public in the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

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