

CONQUERORS: HOW PORTUGAL FORGED THE FIRST GLOBAL EMPIRE

(ROGER CROWLEY)

August 15, 2020

Without specific intention, I seem to have turned into a Roger Crowley fanboy, as shown by that I have now read every one of his books. Crowley is a British maritime historian, all of whose books are tied to the Mediterranean in the pre-modern portion of the second millennium, many centering around the interaction of Christianity and Islam. *Conquerors* is somewhat of a departure—still a maritime history, even more so than most of his books, but focused not on the Mediterranean, instead on the nearly unbelievable accomplishments of the Portuguese in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans between 1490 and 1520. Crowley makes the colorful, dramatic, and heroic deeds of the Portuguese leap off the page.

It is this type of history that schoolchildren should be taught, though of course in today's America they are not, rather being stuffed with a nasty mix of lies and the celebration of people of no consequence. (Some are still taught truth: those who will probably, or hopefully, be tomorrow's ruling class, when our current ruling class has been defenestrated.) When I was in Lisbon two years ago, in the good old days when one could travel, before the Wuhan Plague and the stupid feminized reactions to it upended the world, I spent quite a bit of time in the city's port area, where the River Tagus empties into the Atlantic, and from where the great Portuguese expeditions departed. There, in 1960, to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the death of Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese built the Discoveries Monument.

The monument is a stylized ship, in limestone, along the prow of which are lined up sculptures of the important men of the Portuguese Age of Discovery. Thirty-one of them, together with one woman, the mother of Henry the Navigator—Queen Philippa, born English, the oldest child of John of Gaunt and sister to Henry IV. The sculptures celebrate these men, without apology, who range from Vasco da Gama; to his son Christopher, who led a successful crusade in Ethiopia against Muslims terrorizing Christians; to men more obscure, such as Pedro Nunes, great mathematician of navigation. Many of the men on the

sculpture feature in this book; I wish I had read *Conquerors* before I went to Lisbon, since I would have grasped the pride of the Portuguese in their heroes better. (And on a side note: we flew the Portuguese national airline, TAP. It was incredible. It was a joyous, fun experience, like flying in the 1980s. There was no attempt to minutely control the passengers in the interests of fake security; there were no constant fascist demands blaring overhead to not get up and to not dare stand near anyone else; the flight attendants were not surly fat women and male homosexuals, but friendly young women, no doubt many looking for husbands. Fly TAP if you can!)

The incredible story of Portuguese expansion began in 1415, when the Portuguese took the Moroccan port of Ceuta by storm, despite it being viewed as an impregnable Muslim position. The Muslims of North Africa were numerous, rich and powerful; the Portuguese had maybe a million people and were too poor to even mint gold coins, scraping out a national living by fishing and subsistence farming. The new king, John I, who had seized the crown in the face of Castilian objection, was ambitious and correctly saw this mini-crusade as a way to externally direct the chivalric energies of the Portuguese nobility, all eager to continue the success of the *Reconquista* against the enemies of Christ who had occupied Christian lands for too long (and who to this day, unfortunately, occupy too many). John and Philippa's son, the famous Henry the Navigator, fought in Ceuta, and it was he who began the Portuguese thrust into the Atlantic and down the west coast of Africa, thereby earning his sobriquet. The crown directed and paid for these expeditions, hoping both for gold and glory, and, critically, insisted on centralized collection of information that was then kept under lock and key, but used to plan and guide the next expedition.

The Portuguese, and all Westerners, knew little about sub-Saharan Africa. Two legendary kingdoms fired their imagination—that of Mansa Musa, ruler of Mali and supposedly fabulously wealthy from his control of the gold trade, and that of Prester John, supposedly a mighty Christian king. The Portuguese hoped to find rivers that allowed eastward transit of Africa to the lands of these kings, and to gain from both connections. Of course, they were to be disappointed. Mansa Musa did exist, and Mali probably was fairly wealthy for a second-rate kingdom (though Mansa Musa is often bizarrely held up now, in these ethnonarcissist days, as the

richest man to ever live). Prester John did not exist. Navigable rivers did not exist, either, so the Portuguese kept going south, expedition after expedition, leaving stone monuments at each point reached, looking for gold, allies, and rivers. John I died in 1481, and was succeeded by John II, the "Perfect Prince" (or as Isabella of Castile referred to him, "The Man"), who presided over the most glorious period of Portuguese expansion.

John II was also the Portuguese king who showed Christopher Columbus the door, whereupon, as we all used to know, he petitioned John's Spanish rivals, Ferdinand and Isabella. By this time, the Portuguese were well aware of the possibility of reaching Asia by going around Africa, but they did not know exactly when they would round Africa, since they were the first to explore the west coast of Africa. In 1486, Diego Cão turned back at Cape Cross, in modern Namibia. The Portuguese were still probing inland as they went. Never daunted, they kept sending small teams of men up rivers and across deserts, many or most of which did not return. A hundred miles upstream the Congo River, for example, in 1911 a marker carved by men from Cão's expedition was discovered, high on a cliff, where they were stopped from going further by rapids and waterfalls. The men never returned; the inscription is broken off in mid-sentence, and no record of this trip inland resides in the Portuguese records. Yet they kept forging ahead. King John even sent engineers to destroy the rocks that formed rapids on the Gambia. The engineers failed, but it never seems to have occurred to them to do otherwise. More than anything else, this attitude, of seeing no limits to what men of spirit and drive can do, is what makes the difference in civilizational success, or at least civilizational accomplishment. Think of fifteenth-century Portugal as a country filled with saner Elon Musks.

Following Cão's return, John II sent out Bartholomew Dias, in 1487. These were still small expeditions, two or three ships. Dias, when he reached Namibia, for reasons nobody knows, perhaps intuition, perhaps calculation, sailed west, into the wide and uncharted ocean. Not a little west—a thousand miles west, deep into the Antarctic cold. And then back, around the Cape, though out of view of the Cape, and anchoring on the east coast of what is now South Africa. He turned back, then, but he was still the first man to round the Cape, and this maneuver is what made it possible, when hugging the coast would have resulted in being blocked by contrary winds.

John II did not follow up this success immediately, however, tied up dealing with campaigning in Morocco against the Muslims, and with an influx of Jews moving to Portugal in 1492, those who had refused to convert to Christianity at the command of Ferdinand and Isabella (who, soon enough, in 1496 were given the same hard choice by the Portuguese). In this time, Columbus sailed to the New World and returned, and the Portuguese and Spanish sparred over who would control what areas of the globe—a matter settled at the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, where the Pope drew a longitudinal line between the two powers. The Spanish got most of the New World (except Brazil, which is why it speaks Portuguese today, although it had not been discovered in 1494). The Portuguese, barred from going west, got a new incentive to round Africa.

King John died in 1495, and was succeeded by his cousin, Manuel, “The Fortunate,” his only legitimate son having died in a horse-riding accident. (That sort of thing was surprisingly common; we forget that horses, and coaches, were actually quite dangerous, even into the twentieth century.) Manuel saw himself as God’s instrument to accomplish both God’s glory and Portuguese glory, between which he did not much distinguish, which seems odd to us but historically was a very winning strategy for everyone involved. By this time, exploration had already enriched Lisbon, so that the crown was able to finance bigger and better expeditions, and the city had been transformed from a backwater to a sparkling hub of activity, where the Fuggers opened a branch to provide banking services to the newly wealthy Portuguese. Given his drive and new opportunities, one of Manuel’s first acts was to finance a large and carefully planned expedition, to be led by Vasco da Gama, the most remembered of the Portuguese explorers, in part because he kept a detailed journal, unlike Dias, who was largely forgotten for quite a long time. (I bought a copy of Gama’s journal, translated, published by the Hakluyt Society in 1898, and available, like a vast range of similar books published over the past century and more by the Society, in a high-quality reprint. It is fascinating.) He sailed to Kenya, then across the Indian Ocean, to Calicut in India, a major trading center, including for spices imported from yet further east. This inaugurated the Portuguese dominance of the Indian Ocean trade, and the rest of Crowley’s book is a tale of how this was finally accomplished and Portuguese power cemented.

In short, it was accomplished by violence in the service of dominating trade, with a large side helping of beating down the Muslims, in the form of the decayed Mamluk sultanate, on principle. The Mamluks exercised a vague suzerainty over the Muslims of the Malabar Coast, who were directly ruled by Hindu overlords in a mostly peaceful symbiosis. The Portuguese arrived knowing essentially nothing about the cultures, trade networks, or anything else of the Indian Ocean. For some time, they thought that Hindus were merely a particularly odd and heretical sect of Christians, since they had never heard of such a religion. What made the Portuguese succeed was a combination of technology, which both in shipfaring and weapons far exceeded anything the Muslim or Indian world could offer, and attitude, of willingness to take existential risks at the drop of a hat, eagerness to fight, and disinterest in compromise.

Having bullied a series of local lords, loaded up on spices, and generally disrupted every place he landed, Gama wound his way home, discovering that it was nearly impossible to return to Portugal except at specific seasons, dictated by the monsoon winds. This reality would govern later Portuguese policy, because it meant whoever was in charge in the Indian Ocean had only very intermittent contact with the king, and could in practice do largely as he pleased, for good and bad.

King Manuel, no fool, upon Gama's return quickly outfitted a large and powerful return expedition. Between 1500 and 1505, Manuel sent eighty-one ships, with the goals both of trade and conquest, with expeditions led by Gama and by others. As before, massive volumes of information were collected, centralized, and synthesized, all to the benefit of Portugal. Not everyone at court thought this was a wise investment, but Manuel was not interested in the opinions of others. Other Europeans weren't happy, either, especially the Venetians, who had a cozy trading relationship with the Mamluks that allowed them to monopolize the spice trade, a monopoly the Portuguese were threatening both by providing an alternative route to market and by providing cheaper spices by cutting out middlemen. The Mamluks were least happy of all, especially when the Portuguese blockaded the Red Sea, and were confused how the "Franks" had gotten to the Indian Ocean, attributing it to their ability to breach a mythical wall constructed by Alexander the Great barring access.

In 1503, overall command of the Indian Ocean was given to Afonso de Albuquerque, the man most responsible for shaping Portuguese dominion in the area. He was super-competent, and he knew it. Albuquerque had many excellent subordinates, as well—for example, men who were not afraid to remain behind facing overwhelming odds in a small fort, knowing it would be half a year before a new Portuguese fleet could relieve them. Albuquerque tirelessly organized the Portuguese presence to seek all the crown's goals, which were always twin—riches, and crushing the Muslim foe, with the ultimate aim of restoring the Holy Land. His enemies were many, and not just among foreigners—the Portuguese, like the Spanish, and perhaps like any group of wildly ambitious men reaching for the main chance, engaged in fierce infighting and jockeying for internal power and advantage, so Albuquerque was always busy, and always using all his talents.

Albuquerque sailed up the Indian coast, establishing forts and trading partnerships, mostly by coercion and playing off one Hindu prince against another, sometimes by defeating Mamluk fleets, and across to the Arabian Peninsula, capturing Ormuz, then sailing up the Red Sea. Crowley narrates numerous skirmishes and battles, which may sound boring, but in his hands is not. The Mamluks were no match for the Portuguese at sea; nonetheless, the Portuguese were prevented from total victory both by having little land presence or soldiery outside the coasts, and by their habit of letting their lust for glory hamper their better tactical judgment—preferring to close with Mamluk ships and fight hand-to-hand, rather than simply standing off and pounding them with their far-superior cannon. Yet Albuquerque ground all his enemies down, and gradually established a permanent Portuguese presence in India, among other things encouraging marriage with local women, creating a Christianized population in several areas of critical importance—most of all Goa, which the Portuguese held until 1961, when they were forced to give it up. At the same time, they kept up the pressure on the Mamluks. They even reached Ethiopia, a Christian kingdom, and met a king whom they thought of as Prester John—a monarch hemmed in by Muslim enemies, and a sad comedown from the all-conquering king of legend.

From their rapidly-consolidated dominance, the Portuguese expanded their reach further east. We should keep in mind—this was

all within ten years, with round trip of expeditions of at least twenty-four thousand miles, yet the Portuguese were eager for more. Keen to reach the source of spices, they sailed to the city of Malacca, the gateway to the Spice Islands. As Cortes did in Mexico, they simply sent out a few hundred heavily armed men, landed, and cut their way through. As Crowley says, "The capture of Malacca, with its huge population, by a few hundred Portuguese in leaky ships [was] an extraordinary coup, a risky feat of breathtaking daring and outrageous self-belief, undertaken against vastly superior numbers armed with their own gunpowder weapons." This was the rule, though, not the exception.

Although Crowley focuses on men, not machines, underlying all this achievement was technical accomplishment of the first order. Pedro Nunes, for example, invented the rhumb line, a method of sailing in a straight line while keeping the same bearing on magnetic north, and also invented the beginnings of what would become the Vernier scale. Other cultures are given far too much credit for basic inventions they never developed by surrounding them with necessary ancillary and follow-on technologies, from the compass to gunpowder, and Nunes's work is just one example of how the art of accurate deep-sea navigation was developed solely by Europeans, even if primitives like the Polynesians also sometimes managed open-ocean navigation with simpler techniques.

Albuquerque spent nine years in the Indian Ocean, then was recalled, through the machinations of his enemies at court. Broken-hearted, he died on the return journey, in 1515. King Manuel died in 1521. The Portuguese high-water mark against the Muslims had already been reached; the Ottomans broke the Mamluks and were a much more competent foe against Christendom for the next two hundred years. The Ottomans attacked the Portuguese, ensconced in their forts, on the Indian coast throughout the sixteenth century, but failed to expel them. They did manage to break the Portuguese blockade of the Red Sea, and substantially eroded the brief spice trade monopoly held by them. Meanwhile, the Portuguese also extended their reach yet further east, to Japan, China, and the Philippines, but that is another story. And Portuguese success paved the way, in tools and techniques, for seventeenth-century Dutch and English expansion. The Portuguese themselves, though, failed to reinvest their wealth and the country slowly

declined into a backwater, a position from which it has never recovered. A brief civilizational efflorescence, then no more; the candle that burns twice as bright, burns half as long. Now, Portugal is just another decayed outpost in a decayed Europe, spiritually dead and physically dying out, but at least mostly spared the new Muslim invasion destroying what is left of the rest of Europe, since Muslim migrants cannot easily get there, and anyway prefer to settle in wealthier countries where the hand-outs are more generous and the native Europeans more eager to abase themselves before their new overlords. The Portuguese are still proud.

There is not much more to say, except that, as always, civilizational accomplishment is the exception, rather than the rule. Our dream of inevitable progress is merely a fantasy conditioned by the success of the West over the past five hundred years. It requires immense sacrifice and civilizational will. It does not auto-generate, and it can easily go into reverse, at high speed. Probably we are watching that in real time. Whether it can be reversed, we will see—though it has never been reversed before.