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Decay or defeat ? : an inquiry into the Portuguese decline in Asia 1580-1645

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INTRODUCTION

The story

In 1580 Philip II of Spain became King of Portugal. Soon thereafter, because the States-General of the Republic of the United Provinces were in revolt against him, they declared his Portuguese subjects to be their enemies and Portuguese shipping open for privateering. In 1640 the restoration of Portuguese independence brought an end to the war between the Portuguese and the Dutch in Europe. In 1648 the Treaty of Munster produced peace between Spain and the northern Netherlands. In that same decade, on the other side of the globe, the Dutch recorded their first major successes in their offensive against the Portuguese in Malacca and Ceylon¹ and after a temporary truce between 1645 and 1652, the Dutch had almost a 'free ride' against the Portuguese *Estado da India*. Their maritime strength and manpower enabled them to capture most of its remaining settlements in Ceylon and Southern India. The fall of Cochin in 1663 signaled the end of the Luso-Dutch hostilities and the continuing decline of the Portuguese presence in the East.

This study focuses on the years 1580-1645. During the major part of this period the Portuguese *Estado da India* and the Portuguese private merchants hardly suffered from the Dutch presence in Asia. Still, at least according to Portuguese sources, there was 'something terribly rotten in the *Estado of India*'. Therefore, the question this 'inquiry' seeks to answer is: what was the real cause of the decline of the Portuguese empire and trade in Asia? Was it decay or was it defeat?

The paradigms

Historiography is like a continuous revolution: paradigms are pulled down like the statues of former heroes, to be replaced by new ones which in due course will suffer the same fate. Some of them, however, offer strong resistance to this process.

Most Portuguese believe that their glorious period of the *descobrimentos* and the establishment of the *Estado da India* was based on the courage and religious ardour of their explorers and the wisdom of their principals, the monarchs of the House of Avis. But there is less agreement on the reasons why and how it all came to an end.

Quite similarly, the average Dutchman used to think that his ancestors were great believers in the freedom of the seas and that after they discovered the route to the Indies, they swept the Portuguese out of Asia out of self defence. More recently, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) has been portrayed as the first successful multinational, businesslike and efficient, ultimately falling victim to the Anglo-Dutch wars at the end of the eighteenth century.

These simplistic paradigms may be part and parcel of the intellectual baggage of the average secondary school graduate, but they have not been invented by the writers of school books: they find their origin in the writings of chroniclers and historians.

¹For reasons of historical authenticity the word 'Ceylon' will be used instead of 'Sri Lanka'.

The first Portuguese documents to appear in printed form were those written by the chroniclers of the *Estado da Índia* who had been assigned the task of describing the rise of the Portuguese imperium and recording the names and exploits of the Portuguese nobility. Printed editions of Gomes Eanes de Zurara, Damião de Góis, Fernão Lopes Castanheda, Gaspar Correia, João de Barros and Diogo do Couto, together with the letters of Affonso de Albuquerque and the correspondence between the king and his viceroys formed the ideal literature to revive the Portuguese national spirit until far into the twentieth century.² To this day Portuguese historiography very rarely escapes from overemphasizing the decisive role 'The King' played during the early phase of Portuguese expansion and in the administration of its resultant empire.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Portuguese historians generally accepted the view that the decline of the Portuguese Asian empire began in the last decade of the sixteenth century as the result of corruption within the *Estado da Índia*. This view mainly found its origin in the gloomy *fin de siècle* work of Diogo do Couto, who took tragedy and downfall as his main themes.³ But it was still reinforced by his successor António Bocarro, who described how the good intentions of the courageous *fidalgos* and *vasallos* of the king were undermined by the lack of manpower, money and other material support and in particular by total confusion.⁴

Furthermore, the publication of the *Documentos remetidos*,⁵ letters from the king and his council to the viceroy, again stressed the sloppiness and corruption amongst the officials of the *Estado* and also put the spotlight on the worldly activities of the clergy. Above all, the letters revealed the lack of money and the impotence of the (Castilian) king to do anything about the situation in Asia.

Later in the twentieth century Portuguese historiography had to support the ideology of the national corporate state and to emphasize the *grandeur* and uniqueness of Portugal. Therefore the main emphasis was on the rise of the empire and a sharp *caesura* was applied to the year 1580, the year that Philip II of Spain also became King of Portugal. The events between 1580 and 1640, the year of *Restauração*, were not really treated as a part of Portuguese history any more.

²For a good discussion of the printed Portuguese sources see T.R. de Souza, *Medieval Goa, a socio-economic history* (New Delhi 1979) 188-199 and more recently, Geneviève Bouchon, 'Dix ans d'histoire indo-portugaise (1978-1988): bilan et perspectives pour l'étude du XVe siècle' in *La découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe. Actes du colloque 1988* (Paris 1990). For references to the quoted Portuguese authors see the bibliography under printed sources.

³Diogo do Couto, *Da Ásia (Décadas). Dos feitos, que os Portuguezes fizeram na conquista, e descobrimento das terras, e mares do oriente* (Lisbon 1778-1788) Vol. IV-XII. C.R. Boxer (ed.), *The tragic history of the sea, 1589-1622. Narratives of the shipwrecks of the Portuguese East Indiamen São Thomé (1589), Santo Alberto (1593), São João Baptista (1622) and the journeys of the survivors in South East Africa* (Cambridge 1959). Diogo do Couto, *Diálogo do soldado prático* (Lisbon 1954). For an analysis see G.D. Winius, *The black legend of Portuguese India. Diogo do Couto, his contemporaries and the Soldado Prático. A contribution to the study of political corruption in the empires of early modern Europe* (New Delhi 1985).

⁴António Bocarro, R.J. de Lima Felner (ed.), *Década 13 da história da Índia* (Lisbon 1876).

⁵Bulhão Pato, R.A. de (ed.), *Documentos remetidos da Índia ou Livros das Monções* (Lisbon 1880) 4 volumes.

During the Salazar regime the historians in exile also asked themselves what the great past could mean for modern Portugal. In 1940 the often cited historian Jaime Cortesão described the Portuguese *descobrimentos* as: 'the zenith of the national history, the basis of our character as a Nation, the foundation and most determining affirmation of its independence'. He found inspiration in his personal situation: in his opinion the suppression of the renaissance spirit and the free mind by the Counter Reformation and the Jesuits had caused the downfall of the Portuguese empire. Until quite recently Cortesão's thoughts were still kept alive: his *Ensaíos* were reprinted in 1984.⁶

Vitório Magalhães Godinho, who spent many years at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, was, together with the medievalist A.H. Oliveira Marques, probably the first to take exception to romantic rhetorics and hypothesis. His work resulted in a flow of economic data which cover the period 1495-1635, after which, according to Braudel, the expansion of northwestern Europe began. With his Marxist background Godinho saw class struggle between nobility and *burguesia* as an important factor in the way the Portuguese *descobrimentos* proceeded. Thereby he separated himself from the longstanding view that the monarchy or the noble *élite* were the driving forces behind the Portuguese expansion.

With his 'back to basics' approach, Luís Filipe Thomaz appears to have reached calmer waters. Using nothing but direct sources, he has developed the argument that the discontinuities in progress and direction of the Portuguese expansion were largely caused by disagreements between the king, his council and the rest of the nobility.⁷ Portuguese expansion therefore was not as smooth and self-evident as many of his predecessors wanted us to believe. However, whilst he acknowledges the changes that took place in the organization of the Portuguese trade in Asia, he continues to stress the important role of 'monarchial capitalism'. It is only recently, in an article written together with Sanjay Subrahmanyam,⁸ that Thomaz let himself drift beyond the 1580s, the decade in which the Castilian Crown definitely lost its grip on the *Carreira da Índia*.

After the 'Carnation Revolution' of 1974 the glorification of the past has become much less of an issue amongst Portuguese historians and the course set out by Oliveira Marques, Magalhães Godinho and Filipe Thomaz is being followed by their younger successors. But so far, the Portuguese have paid little attention to the downfall of their empire.

Also on the Dutch side the historiography of the rise of the 'colonial empire' in Asia, as written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suited nationalistic purposes. Especially after the Netherlands had become a kingdom and the Belgians had broken away there was a need for a national past with heroes to be proud of. As in Portugal, the books published were excellent source publications, but the commentaries written by the editors were of

⁶ Jaime Cortesão, *Teoria geral dos descobrimentos Portugueses e outros ensaios* (Lisbon 1984).

⁷ Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor* (Lisbon 1994).

⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, 'Evolution of empire: the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean during the sixteenth century' in James D. Tracy, *The political economy of merchant empires. State power and world trade 1350-1750* (Cambridge 1991) 298-331.

course products of their time. De Jonge's 'The Emergence of Dutch Authority in the East Indies'⁹ fitted very well in the time of the establishment of Dutch rule in the archipelago. His sturdy Dutch sailors and their clever leaders chased the Spanish or Portuguese arch-enemy from the East and rightfully punished any treason or breach of contract by the natives.

With liberalism and the abolishment of the 'cultivation system' around 1870 the perspective changed. 'Civilizing the native' acquired its place in Dutch minds and Tiele and Heeres¹⁰ showed little appreciation for the exploits of the Governor General Jan Pieterszoon Coen. The year 1919, three-hundred years after the Dutch factory in Jacatra¹¹ had received the name Batavia, saw the beginning of Coen's rehabilitation with the publication of the documents related to his presence in the Indies.¹² The Dutch early-colonial past and its pioneers ('*daar werd iets groots verricht*') could not have received a better monument.

After the Indonesian independence the VOC became subject of a totally different approach to its history. The emphasis was now on shipping, trade and economics.¹³ Van Leurs' thesis of 1934, which was far ahead of the mentality of that time, was reprinted in 1983.¹⁴ For about fifty years, until very recently, with few exceptions, Dutch aggression in Asia, even against the Portuguese, has not been on the agenda.¹⁵

Also the writings of well-known authors on Portuguese expansion, who can hardly be accused of national bias, such as Charles Boxer, A.R. Disney, Jonathan Israel, A.J.R. Russell-Wood and George Winus, betray something of their own background, experiences and the time in which they wrote.

Bias in historiography is almost unavoidable, because in the final analysis one's views are moulded by the sources used. Another problem that can hardly be avoided is that of uni-linear explanations of history, because they produce logical and easy to understand answers. But the answer to the question just put forward: 'what caused the decline of the Portuguese presence in Asia?' cannot be but complex. During the period 1580-1645, the Portuguese and Dutch

⁹J.K.J. de Jonge (ed.), *De opkomst van het Nederlandsch gezag in Oost Indië: verzameling van onuitgegeven stukken uit het oud-koloniaal archief* (The Hague 1862-1909) 16 vols.

¹⁰P.A. Tiele, J.E. Heeres, *Bouwstoffen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanders in den Maleischen Archipel* (The Hague 1886-1895) 3 volumes.

¹¹The Dutch corruption of Jayakarta, presently called Jakarta [J. van Goor, *De Nederlandse koloniën. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse expansie 1600-1975* (Bilthoven 1997) 25].

¹²H.T. Colenbrander, *Jan Pietersz. Coen, Bescheiden omtrent zijn bedrijf in Indië* (The Hague 1919-1934) 7 vols.

¹³M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian trade and European influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague 1962), F.S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Bussum 1982), J.R. Bruijn, F.S. Gaastra, I. Schöffer, *Dutch-Asiatic shipping in the 17th and 18th centuries* (The Hague 1987).

¹⁴J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian trade and society. Essays in Asian social and economic history* (Dordrecht 1983).

¹⁵L. Blussé, G. Winus, 'The origin and rythm of Dutch aggression against the Estado da India, 1601-1661' in T.R. de Souza (ed.), *Indo-Portuguese History. Old issues, new questions* (New Delhi 1985), 73-83, L. Blussé, 'Brief encounter at Macao' in *Modern Asian Studies* 22 (1988) 647-664.

confronted one another with trade, piracy, privateering and what Grotius called 'private war'. There were, however, many other developments in Europe, in Asia as well as in South America, which had a decisive influence on the outcome of the Luso-Dutch conflict. The publications of Pierre Chaunu, J.C. Boyajian, Frédéric Mauro, Teotonio R. de Souza and Sanjay Subrahmanyam are eye-openers in this respect: the monarchs and the administrations had most of the time very little grip on what happened overseas.

European economies were linked together by flows of goods, money and people. However, the institution of *The State*, to keep control and to give direction, existed only in a primitive form. The collection of revenues and the regulation of internal conflicts were under the given circumstances heavy tasks. Therefore, in Europe as well as in Asia, coincidence and personal initiative could also play a major role in the way Luso-Dutch relations developed. Communication was too slow or virtually impossible and for a long time the means of power were too thinly spread to allow control either by the King and his Viceroy in India or by the States-General and the Council of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) in Batavia. Even where they would pretend to have some kind of control, the outcome was often completely different from their intentions. Not the institutions, but private initiative and trade, demography and local politics played an important role in the process.

This book

Already in the 1590s the Portuguese in Asia looked upon the Dutch as a threat and most historiography has not been able to get away from the part that the Dutch played in the Indo-Portuguese drama. The decline of the Portuguese-Asian empire was however the result of endogenous and extraneous developments, in Asia as well as in Brazil, Africa and Europe. For an analysis of these developments a multi-linear approach has been chosen in the form of, what one could call, a revolving stage. Each scene, or rather each chapter, produces in the end a different answer to the same question.

The first five chapters discuss the social and financial fundamentals of the Portuguese 'empire' overseas and the position of the Portuguese in Asia, in terms of population, trade and military power. Special emphasis has been laid on the relationship of the so called New Christian Portuguese with the Castilian crown and their particular role in the trade with India. It will be shown that, to them, satisfying the need for silver of the Habsburg monarchy became a more attractive proposition than investment in the *Carreira da India*. This and other developments in Asia undermined the position of the *Estado da India* and of the private Portuguese traders in Asia, before the Dutch became a serious threat to them.

The next three chapters are concerned with the Dutch: it will be shown that their active role in the Iberian and the Luso-Atlantic trade did not exclude an aggressive mood in Asia, or *vice-versa*. Dutch aggression in Asia was in the first instance prompted and legalized by the States-General, but commercial considerations also caused the *bewindhebbers* of the VOC to adopt a bellicose way of thinking and writing. However, it will be shown that apart from some acts of piracy and privateering against Portuguese ships and attacks on the Portuguese forts on the Moluccan islands, Dutch violence was mainly directed against the Spanish in the Philippines and the

Chinese trade with these islands. On the other hand, whereas the conquest of the Moluccan spice trade became a first priority, the VOC was unable to prevent the Spaniards from taking over many Portuguese forts and even had to accept that the Portuguese spice merchants moved to Macassar, where for a long time they stayed out of reach of the Company.

In the discussion of the Dutch commercial and military initiatives many of the paradigms around the rise of the Dutch empire in Asia will be punctured. In the first forty years of its existence the VOC was far from the effective business organization or war machine that many writers have made it to be. Many of the glorified feats of arms can only be described as defeats or a waste of manpower, ships and money.

Finally, the ninth chapter concentrates on the Asian environment in which the Luso-Dutch confrontation took place. During the period under review, major shifts in the local political situation were caused by the southward expansion of the Moghul empire, the rise of the Nayaks of Ikkeri in Kanara, the expansion of Persia under Shah Abbas, the unification and state formation in Japan under the Tokugawas and finally, the Manchu conquest of China. As far as the Portuguese were concerned, all these developments, each in their own way, worked in the same, negative, direction.

The role of silver

During the time that this thesis was written Andre Gunder Frank published a 'new' paradigm,¹⁶ the rise of the West as 'a mere blip in an Asia-centred world'¹⁷ with, until the decline of the East in 1800, the European states buying themselves entry into an expanding Asian market with South American silver, because they had nothing else to offer.

Frank's assertion may be right but it is certainly not new. In the European Middle Ages China was already a source of supply of silk and the richness of the East became well known through the account of Marco Polo's travels. It was indeed the fame of the East, reflected in popular tales, which incited the Europeans to go there and the first Dutch expedition, around the North, was not aiming to reach the Indies, but China.¹⁸ It may well be that European historiography has overemphasized the role of the Europeans in Asia, but already for many years the historians of trade have recognized the sizeable volume of the native Asian trade, in which the Europeans could only try to gain their share.

Andre Gunder Frank, however, goes a few steps further. Was there a seventeenth century crisis? In his critical review of the literature on the subject,¹⁹ he concludes that if there was any crisis in China, it was caused by 'the marked decline of silver imports into China by more than half just prior to and also after the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644'.²⁰ At the same time, he supports the

¹⁶ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1998).

¹⁷ Quotation taken from the back cover.

¹⁸ See chapter 7.

¹⁹ Frank 1998: 231-248.

²⁰ Frank 1998: 241, using data from Richard von Glahn, 'Myth and reality of China's seventeenth century monetary crisis' in *The Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996)

suggestion that 'the rise and fall of the Spanish empire were best viewed in the context of a sino-centred world economy'.²¹

The role of the American silver in the economic development of Europe and, to a lesser extent Asia, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can certainly not be exaggerated. If one imagines a world where transport took place by ship, bullock cart or simply by carrying one's produce to the market, and where barter deals had to be struck to exchange not only durable but also perishable goods, one can well see the enormous advantages of the metallization of the economy. Even letters of exchange in Europe, which obviated the need for frequent transport of large sums of money, required at the end of the day a certain compensation, the greater part with letters of exchange, the rest with money. Silver created confidence and was accepted everywhere, world-wide. One could spend it, hoard it for better times to come, save it to buy more expensive goods at a later date, invest it or use it as a guarantee for the creation of credit. Because of its greater availability and therefore lower value compared to gold, silver enabled many more people to participate in an expanding economy.

The fact remains that not the Chinese, but the Europeans took the risks, extracted the American silver and sent something like 40 per cent of it to Europe. A much smaller part, at least according to the official records, went either directly or via Europe into Asia, where it ended up in China to support the growth of the imperial economy. In the process the Europeans were able to force themselves into the Asian markets and get access to the Asian luxuries, making a good living from it. The rest of the silver was either retained in America, or exported illegally. It is of course the latter part that, unchecked, feeds the imagination and can be blown up to almost any proportion.

As will be shown in chapter 2, in the first part of the seventeenth century, of the roughly two hundred-twenty tons of silver arriving annually in Spain something in between seventy and one hundred-thirty, or even one hundred-eighty tons was remitted via various channels to northern Europe, to pay and feed the soldiers in Flanders and to buy war equipment and ammunition. Thus, the ambitions of the Habsburgs contributed to the geographical distribution of wealth. Frank may well argue that all that silver finally ended up in China, which was not true in the first place, but of course the route through which it came there and how many times it changed hands is also important. This study will make this abundantly clear.

However well accepted 'silver' and the 'real of eight' as an international means of payment may have been, the many peoples of this earth of course produced their own coinage. While historians may be satisfied quoting prices and sums of money, lumping many different kinds of nominations together, they cause *nolens volens* total confusion in the minds of their readers.²²

429-454.

²¹Frank 1998: 246, referring to Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, "Born with a 'Silver Spoon': The origin of world trade" in *Journal of World History* 6 (1995) 201-222 and 'China and the Spanish Empire'. Paper presented at the 55th Annual Meeting of the *Economic History Association, Chicago*, September 1995 8-10.

²²Typical examples are the 'rixdollar' introduced by Atman, a name reminiscent of the Dutch *rijksdaalder*, a piece in use since 1586 that contained 25.7 grams of pure silver. Domínguez Ortis converts all monies into Spanish *ducados*, thereby creating

In this study an attempt has been made to create a sense of relative size of the volumes of trade and the flows of money. For that reason the flows of precious metals, moneys and values of merchandise will be expressed in the kind of money mentioned in the source, followed, in brackets, by its conversion into tons or grams of silver.²³

In doing so, one has to keep in mind that international payments took place in silver or gold, bullion or coins, but that for internal payments in e.g. Castile, copper money came in use, which was not accepted anywhere else.

It should also be realized that on a spot-basis the rates of exchange may have deviated, sometimes may be even up to 10 or 20 per cent, because the prices of bullion and coinage were subject to the laws of supply and demand.

Nevertheless, the present approach has been very helpful in putting the Portuguese-Asian economic and financial data in perspective. It may also help to understand the priorities and actions of the VOC.

Finally, most of the numbers on the volumes of trade or flows of bullion have been taken from literature. They suggest an accuracy almost to the last kilogram, which, of course, these figures do not have. They are, however, taken as they are, because further rounding-off would make them difficult to recognize, if the reader would like to square them with the data in the original literature.

the impression that these gold coins were still in use in large quantities, which they were not, certainly not inside Castile.

²³For the conversion factors which were used see appendix 0.1.