CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IBERIAN EXPLORATIONS

The construction of global empires (1450–1650)

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the construction of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, approaching it as an entwined historical process across three continents, Africa, America, and Asia. Can we speak of an Iberian imperial pattern? To answer this question, I will examine the fifteenth-century backgrounds and the specific circumstances of the birth of the empires of Portugal and Spain in the early sixteenth century, their shared institutional, legal and social features, and the peculiarities of their respective transoceanic configurations up to the mid-seventeenth century, as well as the main characteristics of Portuguese and Spanish imperial thought.

While discussing the recent historiography on the polycentric structure of the Portuguese and Spanish monarchies, special attention will be paid to its intersection with the vast literature on empires in global history. I will argue that in the construction of their empires, Portugal and Spain did not apply models that diverged since the beginning. Rather, such construction was the product of casual factors and improvisation, circulation of institutions, norms and people, and negotiation with formal and informal powers, but also borrowings from non-European empires. Consequently, their emergence was a slow process that developed over time in profoundly different contexts and was influenced by the thinking of the Portuguese and Spaniards on each other’s transoceanic experiences, as well as by their need to respond to internal criticism and from other European countries. Thus, the term “Iberian explorations” here refers to the multiple forms of power configuration and legitimation in which the Portuguese and Spaniards were obliged to engage in order to consolidate their overseas power.

Recently, the notion that the early modern empires of Portugal and Spain developed in an entwined manner has gained significant scholarly ground (Subrahmanyam 2007a; Elliott 2015; Flores 2015; Ponsen and Feros 2017). This idea breaks with the longstanding view of the two Iberian imperial experiences as distinct, if not opposing, trajectories, and emerges from a consideration of transfers and reciprocal influences, circulation of people and institutional patterns, as well as shared social values and
political ideals. Rivalry and conflict notwithstanding, these two empires supplied the political framework for the emergence of the Iberian world (Gruzinski 2004)—a world on the move, according to a famous sixteenth-century Jesuit:

we see many men who have sailed from Lisbon to Goa, from Seville to Mexico and Panama, and on that other South Sea as far as China and the Strait of Magellan: and they do this with as much ease as the farmer goes from his village to the town.

(Acosta 2002, 55)
The above-cited passage is taken from a chronicle published in 1590, when the Spanish King Philip II of Habsburg (r. 1556–1598) occupied the Portuguese Crown following the end of the Avis dynasty in 1580. In the six decades that preceded the return of a Portuguese ruler to the throne, namely, John IV of Braganza (r. 1640–1656), the consolidation of the two empires reached its apogee. The merging, however, was never complete since Portugal was both “unified to and separated from” Spain (Cardim 2014). Notably, this composite empire fuelled, but did not ignite, the perception of the Iberian world as a single whole. The dream of political unification was already present in late medieval Castile and Portugal. Moreover, a general sense of continuity was nurtured by a porous border, bilingualism, and intermarriage among the elites (including the reigning dynasties), as well as the Reconquista—a common past of confrontation with Muslims, which the Portuguese first exported to Morocco by taking Ceuta (1415), well before the Spanish conquest of Granada (1492), put an end to the last Islamic power in Western Europe.

The projection of universal lordship is common to empire (Bang and Kołodziejczyk 2012). The Portuguese and Spanish were no exception, including before 1580 and after 1640, when their transoceanic possessions were not “under one individual’s empire”, in the words of the Spanish jurist Juan de Solórzano y Pereira (1629–1639, Vol. 1, 76). As such, the expression “global empire” here refers to powers that stretched over an extended multiplicity of peoples and lands, adjusting their forms of government and legislation to local differences. The coexistence of various global empires, in which the desire to dominate on the part of one empire was only limited by a similar ambition on the part of other empires, held the early modern world in balance. As in the case of Spain and Portugal, such competition entailed mutual observation, communication, and imitation, producing a sense of political connection across the globe.

**ATLANTIC EXPERIMENTS**

It all began with explorations along the Atlantic coast of West Africa in the early fifteenth century—a widely shared experience that involved the informal presence of seafarers and merchants from throughout Western Europe and state-sponsored expeditions. These endeavours offered the opportunity to test medieval nautical techniques, geographic knowledge, and human taxonomies, as well as different forms of joint venture with capital from a variety of financial centres and groups. When control of sea routes or settlements were at stake, however, the matter had to be settled among Iberians.

The question concerned what belonged to whom. The setting was rather different from that of the Mediterranean Sea, which Europeans periodically crossed with aggressive intent, establishing settlements in North Africa and the Levant. Thus, when Portuguese incursions challenged Castilian claims over the Canary Islands in the early 1430s, the pope had the last word, being ascribed spiritual authority over “pagans” living in a non-Christian world, as Canarians were deemed. Such a designation allowed the pope to entrust their conversion to a Christian ruler, entitled to conquer lands and subjugate—but not enslave—their inhabitants if his envoys encountered violent resistance. This legal fiction provided a framework for regulating
official controversies on the edge of the still little-known Atlantic world (Muldoon 1979, 119–131). Papal arbitration, however, was questioned and transgressed, as happened after Castile was granted rights over the Canary Islands (1437).

A few years later, the Portuguese turned again to Rome. The new point of contention was access to a special good to trade: slaves. The first captures of Azenegue Berbers and Wolofs had been made about 1445, along sandbanks north of the Senegal River. The Portuguese, however, were already purchasing slaves from local dealers, when a couple of papal diplomas, between 1452 and 1455, granted them exclusive jurisdiction as “true lords” over the lands and seawaters south of the northern coastal limit of the Sahara Desert. Commerce and navigation in such a boundless space were restricted to authorised ships, irrespective of funding or crew origination. Finally, a deliberately confused depiction of the native people as both “Moor” and “pagan” made it possible to force the papal authority to justify the perpetual slavery of sub-Saharan in the hope of their conversion, that is, to apply to them the rules applied to captives in the context of wars of crusades.

The warlike tone adopted by these papal decisions was geared to legitimise Portuguese control over the incipient slave trade in the eyes of Castilians and other European powers with growing Atlantic interests (Saunders 1982). Moreover, it gave a religious justification to an extraordinary and absolute power over non-Christians, laying the legal foundations for the future Iberian empires. Facts on the ground, however, were rather different. Violations of papal dispositions were an everyday affair, leading to episodes of open hostility. The Portuguese established trading-posts along the African coast, periodically visiting them in search of slaves and other goods (including gold and melegueta pepper). The annual volume of the slave trade increased from under 900 units per year in 1450–1465 to 2,200 in 1480–1499 (Elbl 1997). For the most part, the slaves were sold in Iberian markets, but they were also sent to work in the sugarcane plantations Portuguese settlers introduced in the uninhabited archipelagos of Madeira, the Azores, and Cape Verde (later a junction of the slave trade to America), as did Castilians in the Canary Islands. Thus, the plantation economy that supported the colonisation of the Caribbean and Brazil in the following century took its first steps.

Iberians and their European competitors (mainly English and French) were soon to learn that their success relied on adapting to different contexts. They acquired knowledge of local conditions, including the identification of partners who could actively inform them about commercial opportunities and how to approach local rulers and chiefs. After the death of Prince Henry (1460), who had managed Portuguese explorations until then (Russell 2000), the crown took full control of the Atlantic enterprise. However, both Afonso V (r. 1438–1481) and John II (r. 1481–1495) pursued a patchy overseas strategy. While efficiently colonising the desolate Atlantic islands, Portuguese explorers wandered about West Africa, where established powers and stratified societies already existed (Thornton 2007), in search of landing places and trade hubs. This policy was especially intense on the mouth of big rivers where informal settlements of fugitives (lançados or tangomãos), acting as mercantile mediators and often going native, were soon to show up (Lingna Nafafé 2007). Meanwhile, the annexation of a few cities from 1471 on, marked the return to an expansionist policy in Morocco, after the conquest of Ksar es-Seghir (1458) had revived a crusading spirit which had the conquest of Fez as its ultimate goal.
varied outcomes mirrored different pressures and interests both at court and among overseas lobbies. The crown was still tempted to disengage from direct involvement in exploration, as we see in the case of Fernão Gomes. A leading figure in the early slave trade, in 1469 Gomes received as a private subject a five-year royal delegation to manage traffic with the Gulf of Guinea in exchange for an annual rent and advance along the African coast.

In 1484, Diogo Cão returned from an official expedition to the mouth of the River Zaire, erecting stone pillars with the Portuguese royal insignia along his route instead of wooden crosses, a tradition that Gomes had continued to observe. Commerce was slowly moving, first to political ambition and then to lordship. Thus, when the Portuguese completed the fort of São Jorge da Mina (1485), in present-day Ghana, which became their main trading-post in the area, King John II took the grandiloquent title of “Lord of Guinea”. Meanwhile, institutions connected to the exploitation of African goods were strengthened in Lisbon, where the Casa da Mina e Tratos da Guiné had a specific department for slaves.

By the late 1480s, the Portuguese seized control of a vast trade region in Atlantic Africa. The scenario changed abruptly following a few celebrated voyages. The dream of alliance with Prester John, a legendary Christian ruler believed to reign somewhere between East Africa and Central Asia, encircled by Muslim enemies, contributed to turning Portuguese expeditions eastward, both overland and by sea. The rounding of the Cape of Good Hope (1488) proved that it was possible to sail to the Indies and their sought-after markets, spices aplenty and other luxury merchandise, thus bypassing the traditional land routes, which had been disrupted by the recent Ottoman extension up to the Mediterranean Sea. Four years later, after the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479) had settled internal instability in the Catholic kings’ Spain, a dramatic set of events occurred. Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, who had navigated to the Gulf of Guinea in Portuguese service set sail from Andalusia, travelling westward with patents of the Catholic kings to the Great Khan of Cathay. After his spectacular finding of islands in the open Atlantic Ocean, initially mistaken for the eastern fringes of the Eurasian continent, Castile seemed to be ahead in the race for the Indies. Even this achievement, however, was made possible by a substantial, if not free, circulation of nautical techniques and cartographic knowledge among seafarers, pilots, and map-makers, who often passed from the service of Portuguese ships to Castilian ones and vice versa. Their ability to master new routes across the Atlantic emerged from personal experience of currents and winds, rocky floors, and coasts, which had a high cost in terms of shipwrecks and human lives. Under their tutelage, smaller ships like galleys and caravels were improved, and large vessels of Mediterranean origin, such as carracks, were adapted to the violence of the oceans.

The Portuguese reaction to Columbus’ shocking news provoked a crisis, especially after the papacy granted Castile similar powers over the newly founded islands as those given to Portugal in the mid-fifteenth century—a striking recovery of a Portuguese paradigm in the context of the discovery of America (Russell 1992). After the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) had fixed the Atlantic line of demarcation between the respective legal spaces of Castile and Portugal, Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in West India (1498) with the assistance of a Gujarati pilot, erecting stone pillars on the shorelines along the route. Finally, the Portuguese had entered the Indian Ocean,
not without hostile intentions. Two years later, on the outward journey of the second expedition to South Asia, the fleet commanded by Pedro Álvares Cabral came upon Brazil.

By 1500, the main directions of the Iberian explorations had emerged. The Atlantic experiments had demonstrated that the construction of transoceanic powers was largely a matter of communication and collaboration with locals. However, Castile and Portugal did not rule empires yet. While as early as 1450 the humanist Poggio Bracciolini had exalted Prince Henry as greater than Julius Caesar, the Portuguese court still distrusted the high seas and heeded warnings about demographic weakness (Dinis 1960–1974, Vol. 9, doc. 186, and Vol. 13, doc. 183). The following decades would showcase how the ability to readapt medieval institutions and legal solutions would craft the process of empire-building. Foremost among these notions was the idea that while each crown could possess its own sphere of “conquest”, jurisdiction was subordinate to effective possession. All things considered, more than a half-century of Atlantic exploration had proved the exclusionary overseas project of Portugal to be untenable.

INVENTING EMPIRE

Iberian explorations assumed explicit imperial connotations in the early sixteenth century. After Gama’s return to Lisbon, in a context of millenarian enthusiasm (Thomaz 1990), King Emmanuel I of Portugal (r. 1495–1521) entitled himself “Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India” and created the Casa da Índia. Meant to regulate the trade with the Antilles in a rather different way, the year after its Spanish counterpart—the Casa de Contratación—opened in Seville, where meanwhile a Castilian edition of Marco Polo’s Travels (1503) responded to a recent Portuguese translation (1502), with a prologue celebrating Emmanuel I as next to be “entitled as emperor of any monarchy (com título imperial de toda a monarchia)” (Pereira 1922, 5).

The birth-pangs of the Portuguese establishment in India (Subrahmanyam 2007b) clashed with its metropolitan representation. A handful of men had to get by in local conflicts along the Malabar coast to bring pepper and other spices back to Portugal. Empire for them was a matter of improvisation, juggling diplomatic malleability, threats, and armed resistance in order to open commercial agencies (feitorias). However, as soon as the Portuguese presence was formally organised by appointing a viceroy (1505)—a century-old office created for Aragon’s rule of Sardinia and recently renewed by Columbus (Cardim and Palos 2012)—Emmanuel I was urged from India to call himself “emperor of this world here, which is much larger than that there” (Rego 1960–1977, Vol. 11, 40).

The Portuguese aimed at seizing trade networks and sea routes in the Indian Ocean, where commerce and navigation were traditionally free and no European law was in force. This did not prevent them from signing treaties and agreements, not infrequently extorted from local rulers with demands for tribute or vassalage. Moreover, if from the beginning their empire was “written on water” (Subrahmanyam 2001), its construction drew some inspiration from the model of ancient Rome, especially under the governorship of Afonso de Albuquerque (r. 1509–1515). Albuquerque fought to establish Portuguese authority on solid military and social grounds, taking
control of key port-cities like Malacca (1511) and Hormuz (1515) and conquering Goa (1510), the future capital of the *Estado da Índia*, as the Portuguese called their official power along the coastline stretching from South Africa to the Malay peninsula. The promotion of mixed marriages also reflected the ambition to build a permanent empire in Asia. In the early 1530s, echoing a passage from Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* (bk. 2, ch. 19), the humanist João de Barros was still exhorting King John III (r. 1521–1557) to “order vassals and natives to go and live in the lands acquired (which the Romans called colonies)” (Barros 1937, 114).

How were these imperial claims reconciled with the fact that European political tradition acknowledged one emperor at a time? In fact, Iberian explorations were just a further breach of the universal authority still attributed to the Holy Roman Empire, but somewhat eroded when Charles of Habsburg, already king of Spain (r. 1516–1556), ascended its throne (1519). Significantly, the following year, soon after his unauthorised invasion of Mexico, Hernán Cortés wrote to Charles V that he could now entitle himself “emperor of this kingdom with no less glory than that of Germany which, by the grace of God, Your Majesty already possesses” (Pagden 1995, 32). Imperial dignity was established by overseas conquests and, as in the Portuguese case, this new possession soon became a viceroyalty (1535), taking the name of New Spain.

Nurtured by similar proclamations, the ideological construction of the empires of Portugal and Spain ran in parallel to each other. Moreover, initially these paths were fairly confluent. The conventional distinction made between the two empires—Portugal as maritime and merchant and Spain as land-based and military—developed with the passing of time and stemmed from many factors: different opportunities on the ground, conflicts among imperial elites and indigenous resistance, acceptance of local autonomies and privileges, rendering their structures more polycentric (Cardim et al. 2012), as well as a constant circulation of persons and ideas (Ruiz Ibáñez 2014). Spain, for its part, was much more powerful than Portugal and quickly invested institutional and legislative effort in the American enterprise, developing the *encomienda* system to such an extent that as early as 1514 Bartolomé de las Casas criticised it as a mere front for the enslavement of natives. Yet, on Albuquerque’s death (1515), a European observer would have found it difficult to say which power was more promising, with the still-limited Spanish possessions in the Caribbean and the Portuguese settlements dotting the African and South Asian coasts—Brazil still being just a few lines sketched on a map. Ironically, one of the few extant eyewitness accounts of the Iberian feats was published in 1512 by a Castilian soldier, Martín Fernández de Figueroa, about his service in Portuguese Asia (McKenna 1967). Despite an increasing interest in the discovery of America, spices long emblematised the wealth made accessible by Iberian exploration.

Things began to change after the expeditions of Cortés in Mexico (1519–1522) and of the Pizarro brothers in Peru (1531–1535). The Spaniards profited from local rivalries and civil conflicts to overthrow the Aztec and Inca political order, establishing the conditions for a wide-ranging, land-based empire in Central and South America. Viceroy—of Peru being established in 1542—served as direct rulers embodying the “king’s living image” (Cañete 2004), while high courts of justice (*audiencias*) were established in the main cities. What survived the violence of conquest became the material structure of the new colonial power. It benefited from pre-existing
networks of urban centres and roads, whose magnificence induced chroniclers to draw parallels between ancient Romans and Aztecs (Motolinía 1985, 318) and Incas (Cieza de León 1864, 144). And if some pre-Hispanic customs and traditions were maintained in the institutional life of villages and small towns, after Charles V’s New Laws (1542) condemned the encomenderos’ misconduct and forbade enslaving natives—their emancipation being anything but automatic (Van Deusen 2015)—pre-Hispanic regimes of tributary service (cuatequil, mita) provided a basis for a gradual, if irregular reorganising native labour (repartimiento), often after long-distance displacement, while the massive importation of African slaves guaranteed the settlers a new workforce.

As the Spaniards were building their empire in America, the Portuguese were abandoning any illusion about substantial advance in Asia. In parallel to Cortés’ conquest, an expedition headed by Tomé Pires (1517–1524) was still following the vain hope of subjugating China, encouraging local representations of the “Franks” (a term denoting all Europeans) as cannibals (Gruzinski 2014). Meanwhile, the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan’s circumnavigation of the globe on behalf of Spain (1519–1522) showed to what extent Iberian antagonism had become truly planetary. Controversy arose over the demarcation of their respective conquests, until the Portuguese paid a large sum to obtain full rights over the Moluccas (1529), the “Spice Islands” where cloves came from. Thus, while protests in Europe grew against its monopoly over the spice trade, the Portuguese Empire gradually went onto the defensive. After all, some internal voices were already pressing for a lighter structure, more oriented towards commercial objectives, and it was from Southeast Asia that low-cost solutions emerged, possibly inspired by the pluralism that had allowed the fourteenth-century Majapahit Empire to dominate the region from Java. In this area foreign communities kept their legal autonomy under the Portuguese, while personnel from all over Asia, including Japan, were appointed to official positions (Villiers 1986). Meanwhile, contrasting visions of empire placed into question the Portuguese network of strongholds in Morocco. It was a corollary of the distance between overseas possessions and from the kingdom that gave the empire its characteristic configuration as a “nebula of power” (Bethencourt 2007). Formally limited only by royal instructions, viceregal authority in Goa was spatially fragmented and locally challenged by captains, while fugitives and renegades created merchant communities that enlarged the “informal empire”, especially in the Bay of Bengal (Newitt 2001). All this encouraged free trade and smuggling in the region. Short duration of high offices—usually three years—so exacerbated factional rivalry that a clash for the governorship nearly caused a civil war in the Estado da Índia (1526–1527). Not long after, the Ottoman expansion across the Indian Ocean posed a serious threat to the Portuguese, who claimed to keep 300 vessels and 20,000 soldiers in readiness to protect the liquid connections upon which their empire relied (Góis 1539, E4v).

Spanish America, too, experienced internal tensions—especially Peru, where the eruption of a separatist rebellion headed by Gonzalo Pizarro (1544–1548) exposed local discontent for the New Laws. Lack of military pressure by other European powers and exclusive concentration on America made the indios—a collective name for the indigenous peoples—a key matter for the Spanish Empire (Pagden 1982). The celebrated Dominican theologian Francisco de Vitoria lectured on this topic in Salamanca (1539), acknowledging the indios’ full rights to their freedom and lands,
and maintaining that, as for any other people, only the infringement of natural law (like anthropophagy, human sacrifices, and prohibition of free circulation) authorised their conquest. In so doing, Vitoria somehow was supporting Charles V’s aim to deal with his empire in the New World as a personal affair, rejecting any papal interference by virtue of the diplomas issued since 1493. It was part of a general assertion of the crown’s authority in America, which had already led Charles V to settle his controversy with Columbus’ heirs over the Antilles (1536) and to put an end to the Welsers’ private colony in Venezuela (1528–1546), after having granted this German family of bankers exclusive rights to explore it and use it to repay his debts.

Law and theology supported the construction of the Iberian empires, and both Portuguese and Spaniards used iconography to celebrate their global powers and read them in light of millenarian expectations. The latter stimulated missionary efforts carried out under royal patronage, through which the papacy entrusted the Crowns of Spain (1508) and Portugal (1514) with organising spiritual life overseas (Boxer 1978). Religion was an essential feature in Iberian imperial thought. The centrality of the indios, their conversion and rights, made the Spanish debates both extensive and daring. Temporary or permanent boards, starting from the Consejo de Indias (created as an autonomous institution in 1524), discussed imperial matters, carving out a lively intellectual space together with judicial courts, universities, colleges, and monasteries on both sides of the Atlantic. Things were slightly different in the Portuguese case. As shown in many literary works, including the chronicles of explorations, the two imperial cultures evolved in a process of mutual exchange. Yet, some peculiarities of Portuguese imperial thought were not simple to incorporate into that of Spain. First of all, its relative military weakness compared to other European competitors—France was then the most serious rival, though it allowed a bilateral court in Bayonne (1537) to settle litigation about privateering—prevented Portugal from rejecting papal diplomas. Moreover, the Portuguese Empire’s spatial extension embraced peoples and cultures that could not be brought under a common definition. The notion of indio was not widespread, partly due to the slow colonisation of Brazil, where the most familiar category was the theological one of “heathen” (gentio). The term “heathen” meant different things in different places, a fact that hindered the development of consistent legislation and a general theory of empire.

With all their centrifugal forces, the Portuguese did not lack institutions that defined their official line. A royal board of theologians and canon lawyers, the Mesa da Consciência, was founded in 1532, after discarding the idea of replicating a Consejo de Indias also at the Portuguese court. It was meant to interpret papal diplomas, limiting Roman interference on delicate matters like war, trade, slavery, and conversion. This choice led to silence Vitoria’s name in Portugal, despite influential pupils of his, including Martín de Ledesma and Martín de Azpilcueta, holding important chairs at Coimbra University. Similarly, there was nothing comparable to the celebrated controversy at Valladolid between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda about the nature and rights of indios (1550–1551). However, this controversy seems to have influenced a Portuguese treatise that condemned the Atlantic trade of African slaves with the same arguments as Las Casas—paradoxically, if we think that he suggested replacing indios with them—adding that the Portuguese, “being little in number, conquered many lands and kingdoms of barbarian nations in India, Guinea and Brazil, thanks to cunning and astuteness” (Oliveira 1555, 70v).
In the mid-sixteenth century, when the Iberian empires had reached a relatively stable balance and appearance, the casuistic approach typical of the Spanish representatives of the Second Scholastic, including the missionaries overseas (who not infrequently supported local settlers), also characterised Portuguese imperial thought. While the anonymous, unpublished *Treatise on the Just War* harshly criticised imperial violence and the enslavement of “heathens” and raised doubts about a “conquest as that of India” (Rego 1960–1977, Vol. 2, 684), Azpilcueta taught that, on certain conditions, not only trading, but even forming a military alliance with Muslims was licit. In the following years, further developments were to challenge the Iberian imperial theories in many unexpected ways.

**MUTUAL ATTRACTIONS**

The traditional distinction between Spaniards committed to the construction of a vast land-based power in America, and Portuguese defending on the seas their scattered settlements and possessions from North Africa to Southeast Asia—“crumbs remaining on the table after dinner” (Sassetti 1970, 418), to recall the witticism of a Florentine merchant—appears to have become an established fact by the late sixteenth century. Yet, the reality might be less cut-and-dry, not only because the Spanish Empire relied heavily on the military control of the Atlantic routes, or because its possessions in the New World were far from covering uniformly a clearly defined territory (Herzog 2015). Well before the dynastic union, a dual movement of convergence had emerged, also showing traces of increasing influence of cultural circulation across the Iberian world (Curto 1998). This movement gradually reoriented the Portuguese Empire toward both land and the South Atlantic, especially after the launch of a real colonial project in Brazil, which established a central government in Bahia (1549) and put an end to a French settlement (1555–1567) in the area of present-day Rio de Janeiro. We should place in this context also the unsuccessful attempt to penetrate Southeast Africa (1569) and Angola (1571), which, at least in the second case, allowed the Portuguese to strengthen their presence on the coast, gaining access to new slave markets. At the same time, after the conquest of the Philippines (1565) and the inauguration of a trans-pacific route, annually navigated by galleons connecting Manila to Acapulco and exchanging Chinese merchandise for the American silver from the mines of Potosí (exploited since 1545), the maritime nature of the Spanish Empire became undeniable.

It was only then that the Portuguese formulated a real theory of seaborne power, in response to the Spanish jurist Fernando Vázquez de Menchaca. Paving the way for the return of Spanish ambitions for Asian products, he refused any lordship over the oceans, by applying Vitoria’s doctrine on free circulation, “no matter what the Portuguese shout out, as I often heard them do” (Vázquez de Menchaca 1564, 114r). In the following decade, while the Portuguese in India suffered the increasing pressure of the Mughal Empire (Flores 2018) and other local powers, like the Bijapur Sultanate that put Goa under siege (1571), professors at Coimbra and Évora universities took a stand against Vázquez de Menchaca. If Vitoria’s titles “authorised the Spaniards to rule the West Indians”, “the same must be understood for the Portuguese with the East ones” (Simões 1575, 304r), they taught, while maintaining that “it only takes to occupy some lands and to have power to conquer other ones,
to forbid another king to interfere” (Barbosa 1982, 371). A few decades later, both Iberian powers had to face the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1609), who used Vitoria’s and Vázquez de Menchaca’s argument against seeking to prohibit anyone from sailing the seas to trade worldwide. The first to react was a Flemish Jesuit living at the court of Madrid, Nicolas Bonarct, who as early as 1610 defended the legitimacy of lordship over the oceans, since, like the ancient Greek thalassocracy, it ensured safety of navigation and trade, delivering the high seas from a state of anarchy (Mariño 1992).

In the same years, the integration of the Iberian empires, which, however, remained formally separate, was praised by stressing that the many “kingdoms, dominions, provinces and diverse states” already under the Hispanic monarchy were now reinforced by a “great power over the sea” thanks to the Portuguese, whose galleons were equated to “rocky castles” (Salazar 1619, 2 and 16)—a maritime image consistent somehow with the representation of Portuguese as “frogmen” then circulating in East Asia (Flores 2014, 37). Meanwhile, the Habsburg Crown attempted to remodel Portuguese imperial institutions on those of Spain, such as with the replacement of the Mesa da Consciência’s overseas activities with a Conselho da Índia in Lisbon (1604–1614), the ambitious theorising of Jesuit theologians like Luis de Molina and Francisco Suárez, and the introduction of a centralised judicial system in Brazil, paralleling that which already existed in the rest of the New World (Schwartz 1973). This occurred in 1609, in association with renewed efforts to restrict the enslavement of indios, which, unlike Spanish America, the Portuguese never prohibited entirely, though they promulgated a set of laws and decrees against it (Perrone-Moisés 1998). After all, the attraction of a plantation economy based on forced labour led the settlers to seek repeatedly an extension of the encomienda system to Brazil. Due partly to native resistance—which, however, never took forms like the Vilcabamba kingdom in Peru, ruled by the last Inca, Tupac Amaru, executed in Cuzco (1572)—colonisation was long limited to the coast. Thus, the relationship with the indios living in the sertão, outside Portuguese jurisdiction, developed into a daily frontier war. This struggle was not so unlike those fought by the Spaniards in North Mexico or Chile, where the pacification of Mapuche was significantly termed “Indian Flanders” (Lázaro Ávila 1997). It was a clear reference to the military confrontation with the Dutch, which was to turn into a global conflict (Israel 1982) following the first signs of a new challenge from Northern Europe, in the form of Francis Drake’s raids against Iberian possessions during his circumnavigation of the globe (1577–1580). In the meantime, a black legend had emerged, not only of the Spanish Empire, as introduced by Las Casas (1552) or Girolamo Benzoni (1565), and then revamped by many translations published in Northern Europe, but of the Portuguese Empire too, as is shown by the coeval defamatory poems describing the colonisers of Brazil as “sodomites”, published by the Scot George Buchanan (Williamson 1998). Demonised in similar terms, these very characterisations of Portuguese and the Spanish, too, pushed for the emergence of an “Iberian Atlantic” (Schwartz 2011; Braun and Vollendorf 2013).

A sense of shared global responsibility could not fully dispel a reciprocal, residual mistrust between the Portuguese and the Spanish, which not only emerged in Brazil (Schwartz 1968), but also in Southeast Asia (Valladares 2001). As early as 1570, the Portuguese Crown had given up controlling directly the annual voyage between Lisbon
and Goa, selling the business to private traders from all over Europe. Faced with multiple challenges and despite the late colonisation of Sri Lanka in 1597 (Biedermann 2009), the Estado da Índia suffered from diverging drives on the part of the imperial elites, precipitating a crisis that led to complaints about endemic corruption and decline (Winius 1985), besides diverse losses caused by the Dutch (Ambon 1605, Ternate 1607, Solor 1636, Malacca 1641, Sri Lanka 1658, Cranganore, Cannanore and Cochin 1662–1663) and the English (Surat 1615, Hormuz 1622), whose strategies were part of a more general tendency to learn from the Iberian enemy (Elliott 2009; Pagden and Subrahmanyam 2011). The Portuguese also ended up being expelled from Japan in 1639, after even enjoying exclusive rights in trading with China through the route between Macao (whose harbour had been granted them in 1557) and Nagasaki, the main centre of the local Jesuit mission.

In this turbulent scenario, the Spaniards exploited the threat of North European ships and settlements in Southeast and East Asia to expand their official presence in the area. This continued a policy dating back to the conquest of the Philippines, where they established an audiencia (1584), headed by a governor and other American institutions (despite some voices pressing for a much lighter structure), countering the Portuguese-protected Jesuits by supporting missions to East Asia of rival orders like Augustinians and Franciscans. The Spaniards sought to control the global trade of Chinese merchandise, a goal that met with some trouble, like the bloody repression of the sangleys, as the Chinese community was known in the Philippines, who revolted against Spanish restrictions and malpractice (1603) (Borao 1998). Meanwhile, the Spaniards established themselves as defenders of Iberian rights in the area, on the basis of Tomar’s capitulations (1581) on the relations between Portugal, Spain, and their respective empires under Habsburg rule. Armies from Manila repeatedly intervened in places within Portuguese legal space, including Cambodia, where a Spanish expedition under a Portuguese commander (1593–1599), supported by a junk with a mestizo crew, headed by a corsair from Nagasaki, Francisco de Gouveia (probably of mixed Portuguese-Japanese origin) (Morga 1970: 186–188), failed to exploit the military disorder to put the region under indirect rule. Later, the Spanish attempt to contain the rise of the Dutch from their fortress in Tidore (1606) gave rise to works like the Conquista de las islas Molucas (1609) by Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola, which did not spare criticism of the Portuguese, who in turn protested the emergence of a Spanish Empire in Asia. This general readjustment also provided opportunities for playing personal games.

In 1603, a Portuguese navigator at the service of Spain, Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, set sail from Peru with the royal permission to explore the South Pacific in search of his obsession, the mythic Austral continent, though he returned to Acapulco (1606) after having discovered only islands and archipelagos. A few years later, on the way back to New Spain after his temporary governorship of the Philippines (1608–1609), Rodrigo de Vivero was shipwrecked in Japan, where he negotiated the dispatch of miners from Mexico in exchange for better conditions for Iberian merchants and a possible cessation of Dutch penetration. At the same time, Vivero had a significant discussion with the minister of court ceremonies: if he had to present himself before the ruler Tokugawa Ieyasu (r. 1600–1616) not as a “private gentleman” but as a “servant and minister” of Philip III (r. 1598–1621), the protocol needed revising, as the latter “was known as the greatest and most powerful king in all the world, since
his kingdom and empires extended throughout the East Indies and the greater part of the New World” (Vivero 2015, 88–89).

The Dutch and English threat, whose development had been nurtured by trading concessions made in the 1580s by António, Prior of Crato, the pretender to the Portuguese throne who had challenged Philip II, reinforced the sense of a deeply connected Iberian world. After all, external observers had already developed its unitary image, reflecting on the incipient crisis of both the Portuguese and Spanish empires, ascribed to the “dearth” of men: they had not imitated the example of the Romans, whose “number”, by incorporating foreigners, “became so great that it stood against the whole of the rest of the world, not only with its valour, but with its size” (Botero 1591, 15). Conversely, in the 1620s, the English adventurer Anthony Sherley, while endorsing the Count-Duke of Olivares’ plan to strengthen the political and military integration of the different components of the Hispanic monarchy, maintained that the Portuguese scattered across the globe were unable to establish an “empire” because of their “greed” (Sherley 2010, 90). A further position was that of the converso merchant Duarte Gomes Solis. He argued that the dynastic union was the cause of the decline of the Portuguese Empire, which had inherited all the enemies of Spain (Elliott 1986, 143–146), asserting that a solution on the model of the Dutch or the English East India companies would restore its trading hegemony in Asia (Disney 1978).

**CONCLUSION**

The contraction of Portuguese Asia, whose Christian inhabitants, mainly converted natives, nevertheless numbered around half a million in the mid-seventeenth century (Bethencourt 2005, 118), must also be related to the marked relaunch of the colonisation of Brazil following the expulsion of the Dutch colony in Pernambuco (1630–1654). From the Western Indies of Castile to the new “states” of Brazil and Maranhão, as they were renamed in 1621, America was now the heart of both Iberian empires, with a population of roughly ten million and colonial societies that were more and more mixed, partly thanks to thousands of African slaves. However, a substantial difference between the empires remained, since the Spanish possessions not only extended further and had a more complex institutional organisation but saw also increasing activism from Creoles (sons of Iberians born overseas) and descendants of indigenous peoples. The former redefined the role and attitude of local elites, with visible effects on urban architecture and rural landscapes. On the other hand, indios and mestizos addressed judicial courts to negotiate their rights about lands, labour, and tributes. In Mexico they interpreted Spanish legislation as a practical and moral resource that might allow them to retake some control over their lives (Owensby 2008), occasionally submitting pictorial codices as legal proofs. In the Viceroyalty of Peru, oral traditions about ancestral entitlements were slowly replaced by verdicts that certifed land properties at the time of the Spanish arrival, which were not infrequently solicited before a trial (Herzog 2013). Significantly, this attempt to appropriate justice followed the publication of chronicles concerning delicate matters like the pre-Columbian ages and the conquest, written by indigenous authors such as Chimalpahin, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, or Guaman Poma de Ayala. A controversial project to create the “laws of the Indies” (derecho indiano) as a uniform body of norms to impose upon all indios indiscriminately emerged in this context, with the publication of Solórzano y Pereira’s
De Indiarum iure (1629–1639). Nothing comparable existed for the Portuguese Empire. Paradoxically, while not applying to Brazil, the “laws of the Indies” prompted the release of at least those Asian slaves of Filipino origin who had been transported to America (Seijas 2014), since they were considered equal to Spanish indios, unlike “Javanese, Malays, Bengalese, Malabars, Gujaratis”, and others from regions under Portuguese jurisdiction (Solórzano y Pereira 1629–1639, Vol. 1, 743).

None of this means that Portuguese colonial societies were less hybrid and hierarchical than their Spanish counterparts: indeed, they featured an intense blend of coexistence and segregation. But in the first half of the seventeenth century, there were at most Portuguese chroniclers writing the history of their empire from Goa, while the only native authors there were those converted Brahmins who claimed to have a distinctive social position in Portuguese India (Xavier 2012). Evidently, despite further losses in the North (Tangier, transferred to England in 1661, and Ceuta to Spain in 1668, as a peculiar consequence of its withholding support from the new Braganza dynasty in 1640) and West Africa (the Gold Coast, seized by the Dutch in 1642), the original geography of empire had not been fully abandoned in favour of Brazil and the South Atlantic. Like the Spanish Empire, the Portuguese transoceanic power still had a global projection. It even tried to reassert the importance of the Estado da Índia, from South Asia (Ames 2000) to China (Souza 1986), now operating under the oversight of the Conselho Ultramarino, established in the aftermath of the independence from Spain in imitation of the Consejo de Indias. More than two centuries into the Iberian explorations, it would have been difficult to say if the enduring asymmetries between the Portuguese and Spanish empires outnumbered the similarities originating from their entwined history.

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