

Conquerors: How Portugal Forged the First Global Empire

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In *Conquerors*, New York Times bestselling author Roger Crowley gives us the epic story of the emergence of Portugal, a small, poor nation that enjoyed a century of maritime supremacy thanks to the daring and navigational skill of its explorers—a tactical advantage no other country could match. Portugal's discovery of a sea route to India, campaign of imperial conquest over Muslim rulers, and domination of the spice trade would forever disrupt the Mediterranean and build the first global economy.

Crowley relies on letters and eyewitness testimony to tell the story of tiny Portugal's rapid and breathtaking rise to power. *Conquerors* reveals the Império Português in all of its splendor and ferocity, bringing to life the personalities of the enterprising and fanatical house of Aviz. Figures such as King Manuel "the Fortunate," João II "the Perfect Prince," marauding governor Afonso de Albuquerque, and explorer Vasco da Gama juggled their private ambitions and the public aims of the empire, often suffering astonishing losses in pursuit of a global fortune. Also central to the story of Portugal's ascent was its drive to eradicate Islamic culture and establish a Christian empire in the Indian Ocean. Portuguese explorers pushed deep into the African continent in search of the mythical Christian king Prester John, and they ruthlessly besieged Indian port cities in their attempts to monopolize trade.

The discovery of a route to India around the horn of Africa was not only a brilliant breakthrough in navigation but heralded a complete upset of the world order. For the next century, no European empire was more ambitious, no rulers more rapacious than the kings of Portugal. In the process they created the first long-range maritime empire and set in motion the forces of globalization that now shape our world. At Crowley's hand, the complete story of the Portuguese empire and the human cost of its ambition can finally be told.

Praise for *Conquerors*

"Excellent . . . Crowley's interpretations are nuanced and fair."—The Christian Science Monitor

"In a riveting narrative, Crowley chronicles Portugal's horrifically violent trajectory from 'impoverished, marginal' nation to European power, vying with Spain and Venice to dominate the spice trade."—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"Brings to life the Portuguese explorers . . . perfect for anyone who likes a high seas tale."—Publishers Weekly

"Readers of Crowley's previous books will not be disappointed by this exciting tale of sea battles, land campaigns and shipwrecks. . . . Crowley makes a good case for reclaiming Portugal's significance as forger of the first global empire."—The Daily Telegraph

"Crowley has shown a rare gift for combining compelling narrative with lightly worn academic thoroughness as well as for balancing the human with the geopolitical-qualities on display here. The story he has to tell may be a thrilling one but not every historian could

tell it so thrillingly."-Michael Prodger, Financial Times

"A fast-moving and highly readable narrative . . . [Crowley's] detailed reconstruction of events is based on a close reading of the works of the chroniclers, notably Barros and Correa, whose accounts were written in the tradition of the chronicles of chivalry."-History Today

Roger Crowley read English at Cambridge University and taught English in Istanbul. He has traveled extensively throughout the Mediterranean basin over many years and has a wide-ranging interest in its past and culture, as well as in seafaring and eyewitness history. He is also the author of 1453: The Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West, Empires of the Sea: The Siege of Malta, the Battle of Lepanto, and the Contest for the Center of the World, and City of Fortune: How Venice Ruled the Seas. He lives in Gloucestershire, England. The India Plan

1483-1486

13° 25'7" S, 12° 32'0" E

In August 1483, a group of weather-beaten sailors was hauling a stone pillar into an upright position on a headland on the coast of what is now Angola. It was five and a half feet tall and surmounted by an iron cross, fixed into a socket with molten lead. Its cylindrical shaft was fashioned at the top into a cube, whose facets were carved with a coat of arms and an inscription in Portuguese:

In the era of 6681 years from the creation of the world, 1482 years since the birth of Our Lord Jesus, the most High and Excellent and Mighty Prince, King D. João II of Portugal, sent Diogo Cão squire of his House to discover this land and plant these pillars.

This monument, a minute pinprick on the enormous bulk of Africa, marked the most southern point of European exploration beyond the shores of the Mediterranean. It was both an immodest act of possession and a baton being carried south, headland by headland, down the west coast of Africa, in search of a seaway to India. It proclaimed its own mythologies about time, identity, and religious mission. Cão planted a succession of these stone memorials as he sailed south at his king's command. Carved probably a year earlier—hence the mismatch with the dates—in the green hills of Sintra, near Lisbon, and carried four thousand sea miles in a pitching caravel, they represented acts of profound intention, like an American flag packed in a spacecraft in anticipation of a lunar landing. As Cão looked south from this pillar, the coast appeared to curve away east. He seems to have thought he was close to the end of Africa. The way to India was in sight.

Like an Apollo space mission, this moment represented decades of effort. In the aftermath of Ceuta, Prince Henrique, who has passed into the bloodstream of history as Henry the Navigator, began to sponsor expeditions down the coast of Africa in search of slaves, gold, and spices. Year by year, headland by headland, Portuguese ships worked their way down the southwestward-sloping bulge of West Africa, cautiously sounding with plumb lines as they went, forever wary of shoals and reefs, over which the sea broke in pounding

surf. In the process they began to delineate the shape of a continent: the desert coasts of Mauretania, the lush tropical shores of the region they called Guinea, the "Land of the Blacks," and the great rivers of equatorial Africa: the Senegal and the Gambia. Under Henrique's direction, exploration, raiding, and trading went hand in hand with ethnographical curiosity and mapping. Each successive cape and bay was pinned to a chart with the name of a Christian saint or a visible feature or an event.

These expeditions were modest affairs: two or three vessels, under the direction of a squire of Henrique's household, though the navigation and ship management were the responsibility of an experienced and, usually, anonymous pilot. Each carried a few soldiers, crossbows at the ready as they approached an unknown shore. The ships themselves, caravels, were a Portuguese development possibly of Arab origin. Their triangular lateen sails allowed them to sail close to the wind, invaluable for battling back from the Guinea coast, and their shallow draft made them ideal for nosing up estuaries. They were well suited for exploration, even if their small size—hardly eighty feet long, twenty wide—limited their space for supplies and rendered long sea voyages a trial.

Henrique's motivations were mixed. Portugal was small and impoverished, marginal to European affairs, and hemmed in by its powerful neighbor Castile. At Ceuta the Portuguese had glimpsed another world. Henrique and his successors hoped to access the sources of African gold, to snatch slaves and spices. He was influenced by medieval maps produced in Majorca by Jewish cartographers that showed glittering rivers leading to the kingdom of the legendary Mansa Musa, "king of kings" who had ruled the kingdom of Mali early in the fourteenth century and controlled the fabled gold mines of the Senegal River. The maps suggested that some rivers crossed the whole continent and linked into the Nile. They nourished the hope that Africa might be traversed via internal waterways.

The royal household projected these voyages to the pope as crusades—continuations of war with Islam. The Portuguese had expelled the Arabs from their territory far earlier than their neighbors in Castile and established a precocious sense of national identity, but the appetite for holy war remained undimmed. As Catholic monarchs, those in the royal house of Aviz sought legitimacy and parity on the European stage as warriors for Christ. In a Europe that felt itself increasingly threatened by militant Islam, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, they obtained from the papacy spiritual and financial concessions and territorial rights over explored lands in the name of Christ. The crusading remit from Rome was "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ . . . and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery."

They were impelled, too, by a desire to do great deeds. Henrique and his brothers were half English—their mother was Philippa of Lancaster, granddaughter of Edward III; their cousin was Henry V, the victor at Agincourt. An atmosphere of knightly chivalry, fueled by their Anglo-Norman ancestry and medieval romances, hung heavily around the royal court and infused its restless nobility with a high-octane mixture of prickly pride, reckless courage, and a desire for glory, linked to crusading fever. This noble group, in Portuguese the fidalgos, literally "the sons of someone," lived, fought, and died by an honor code that

would accompany the Portuguese across the world.

Behind the Africa initiative lay a very old dream of militant Christendom: that of outflanking Islam, which blocked the way to Jerusalem and the wealth of the East. Some of the maps portrayed a regal figure dressed in a red robe with a bishop's miter on his head, his throne glowing with burnished gold. This was the legendary Christian king Prester John— John the Priest. The myth of Prester John reached far back into the Middle Ages. It constituted a belief in the existence of a mighty Christian monarch who resided somewhere beyond the barrier of the Islamic world, and with whom Western Christendom might link up to destroy the infidel. It had been conjured out of travelers' tales, literary forgery—in the shape of a famous letter purporting to come from the great king himself in the twelfth century—and a blurred knowledge that there were actual Christian communities beyond Europe: Nestorians in Central Asia, followers of St. Thomas in the Indies, and an ancient Christian kingdom in the highlands of Ethiopia. Prester was held to command vast armies, and he was immensely wealthy, "more powerful than any other man in the world and richer than any in gold, and in silver and in precious stones," according to a fourteenth-century account. The roofs and interiors of the houses in his country were said to be tiled with gold, and the weapons of his army were forged in it. By the fifteenth century the Prester figure had been superimposed onto the actual Christian kings of Ethiopia, and the maps suggested that his kingdom could be reached by river through the heart of Africa. For more than a century, this dazzling mirage would maintain a powerful hold over the imagination and strategies of the Portuguese.

The maps, the travelers' tales, confused images of great rivers that could penetrate to the heart of Africa, fabulous rumors of gold, word of mighty Christian rulers with whom an alliance might be forged against the Islamic world—this swirl of half-truths, wishful thinking, and mistaken geography leached into the worldview of the Portuguese. It was what lured them ever farther south down the African coast, hunting for the River of Gold or the river that would take them to Prester John. Each gulf, each river mouth seemed promising to their inquisitive ships, but the push down the coast was hard-won. The pounding surf made landings treacherous; the reception from the local people was always edgy. The sailors encountered vast lagoons and tortuous mangrove swamps at the mouths of the rivers, dense fogs and calms and violent equatorial rainstorms. The fever zone struck the sailors heavily. Within the Gulf of Guinea, the contradictory local winds and a strong current from east to west hampered forward progress, but they were for a long time spurred on by the eastward trend of the coast. Slowly they evolved a belief that they were inching toward the southern tip of Africa and that the riches of India might be reached by sea rather than by river, but the shape and sheer size of the continent, fifty times as big as the Iberian Peninsula, would baffle and confound their preconceptions for almost eighty years.

The idea of outflanking Islam's grip on Europe was both economic and ideological. To trade directly with the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, to source gold and possibly spices—spurred on by the image of the gold nugget in the hand of the Malian king—was an enormously powerful attraction; to link up with Prester John and his mythical army and attack Islam from the rear was equally persuasive. When Henrique died, the initiative

faltered for a while, until pushed forward again in the 1470s by his grandnephew Prince João II. It was when João II became king, in 1481, that the Africa project received a whole new impetus.

Other Books

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