

*A Concise History  
of Portugal*

SECOND EDITION

DAVID BIRMINGHAM



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## Peoples, cultures and colonies

The making of modern Portugal began with the revolution of 1640 and a twenty-eight-year war with Spain. The people of Portugal are of course very much older than the modern state and their history is long and rich. Indeed the medieval kingdom of Portugal is sometimes described as Europe's earliest surviving polity. The cultural roots of Portuguese society go back yet further. Stone Age men and women roamed over western Iberia and even if they did not prosper at least they gave their deceased leaders proper megalithic burials. Neolithic Portugal experimented with the rearing of domestic, or semi-domestic, animals and with the taming of cereal plants; it also developed the marine harvesting of fish which was to become a permanent source of nutrition and economic well-being over the centuries. Portuguese art evolved from stone beads and bone carvings to the ornamentation of early crockery, a craft which has been carried forward to present times. The relatively open frontier on the north and east allowed migrants to come and go bringing each new facet of human technology including copper working, bronze casting and ultimately the making of iron tools. The age of metals also introduced the fashioning of costly jewellery, and the search for gold, both at home and abroad, ran like a fine thread through the subsequent history of Portugal.

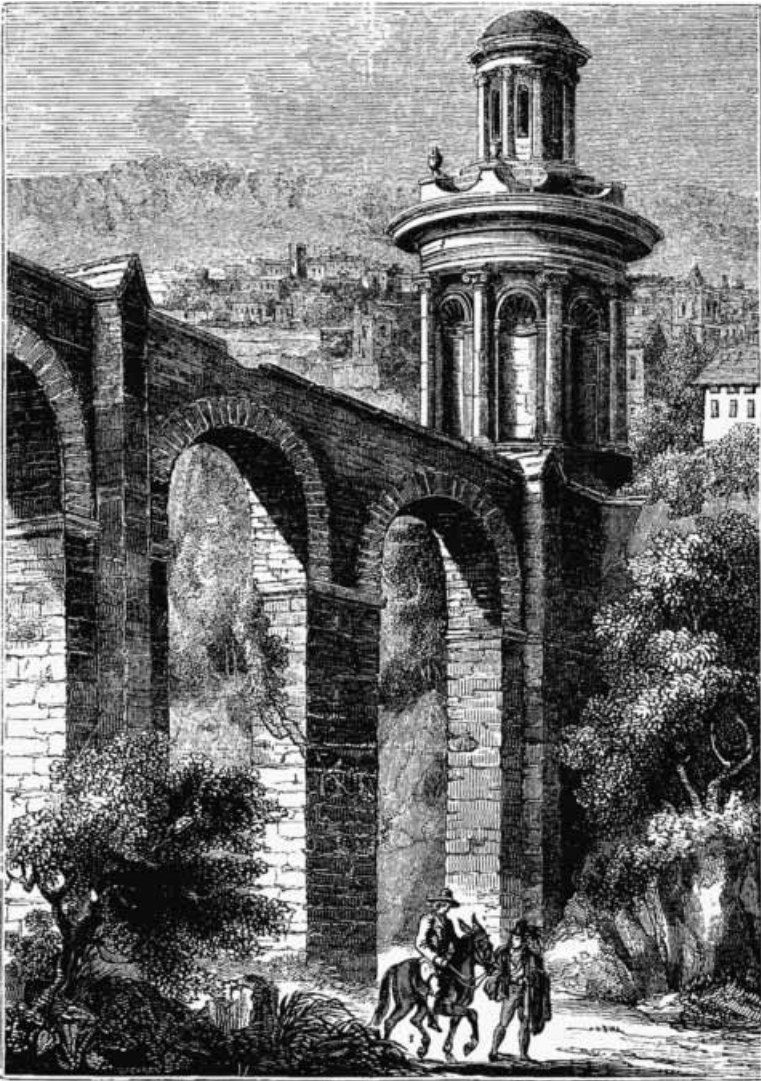
During the Iron Age Portuguese culture was regularly enriched by new peoples and ideas from the outer world of Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa. The old Celts, linguistically related to the Bretons and the Welsh, came overland seeking opportunities to farm and



settle. Family structure in northern Portugal, and the organisation of villages, derived from Celtic experience. The Celts were also an important source of artistic influence and their musical traditions based on the bagpipes were carried down the ages. In coastal areas colonising influences were brought by sea traders from the Phoenician cities of the Levant. The mines of Portugal, like those of Cornwall, enriched the 'civilisations' of the Mediterranean. Phoenician mariners were succeeded by Greeks and Carthaginians who also left their stamp on the harbours and beaches of the Atlantic shore. Long-distance merchants introduced a shipbuilding technology and a taste for imported wines in jars to supplement the local beers. The greatest colonisers of Portuguese antiquity, however, were the Romans. They colonised both the interior and the seashore.

In the second century before Christ the Romans, having defeated their Carthaginian rivals in western Iberia, set about attempting the conquest of the Lusitanians, later to be known as the Portuguese, in eastern Iberia. After more than 100 years of costly fighting the Roman republic sent Julius Caesar to overcome the ongoing resistance in the central highlands of Portugal. With an army of 15,000 men he crossed the mountains, reached the Atlantic, and fought his way north into the Douro valley. He found 'Portugal' sufficiently prosperous to supply the loot necessary to satisfy his creditors back in Rome. Forty years later the legions completed the bloody 'pacification' of north-western Iberia and four centuries of intellectual and economic Romanisation began to transform the life of the Lusitanian peoples. A strategic highroad was built between the great harbour at Lisbon and the fertile north which was not bettered until the age of rail 2,000 years later. The great rivers were bridged in stone with such engineering skill that some public works stand to this day. Even greater architectural elegance was displayed in the arched aqueducts which carried water across the parched southern plain. At the heart of the country the Roman city of Conimbriga flourished not far from the future medieval city of Coimbra.

Roman colonisation, whether by immigrants from Italy or by retired conscripts who had served their time in the legions, was so intense and so prolonged that the language of the people was Latinised. Equally pervasively the Roman pattern of urban law and



1 Roman architecture brought not only mosaic-paved villas and marble temples to 'Lusitania', but also important civil engineering projects to supply cities such as Evora with water.

administration was adopted. Cities gained financial and juridical rights and responsibilities of lasting complexity. Important towns such as Mértola on the Guadiana River minted their own coins. Municipal government became the linchpin of Portugal's political system. It was also the form of control which the Portuguese carried around the world when they began their own colonising ventures a thousand years after the Romans had ceased to rule the ancient world. Outside of the towns Roman villas became the focus of great landed estates, known in a later age as 'latifundia'. Some of the Roman estates of the southern plains spread out over ten thousand and more acres where client subjects and purchased slaves farmed olives and vines, wheat and rye, figs and cherries. In addition to their crops and cattle some villas along the Tagus River became known for breeding prized Lusitanian horses. The wealthiest owners of villas commissioned fine mosaics on their patios, built hot baths for their guest suites, and owned private temples for their funeral services. Meanwhile their servants and concubines fed on broad bean soup and millet porridge.

The industries of Portuguese antiquity related to the demands of Roman civilisation. Quarries were developed to supply building blocks, paving slabs and fine-grained stone for carved inscriptions. Portugal even quarried some of the marble used for the finest buildings. Opencast mines of gold and lead in the north and of copper and iron in the south were owned by the state and managed by carefully supervised contractors. To limit smuggling and tax evasion anyone caught transporting metals during the hours of darkness was subject to a heavy fine. The workforce consisted exclusively of slaves, a mode of production that was to survive in Portugal until the eighteenth century. On the south coast and around the estuary of the Sado River the main industry was fish conservation. Portuguese tuna paste had been developed as a relish by the Phoenicians, was widely appreciated in classical Athens and became a staple export of the Roman 'Algarve'. The curing of fish required large quantities of salt which was panned around the coasts of Portugal. Fish drying, like ceramics and textiles, was a Roman industry that remained one of the anchors of the Portuguese economy into modern times. But perhaps the most lasting legacy of Rome was the artistic tradition of carved tombs, of marble sculptures, of mosaic pavements, all of



2 Fishing from small open boats has been one of Portugal's major industries and has provided scenes typical from Carthaginian times to the present day.

which survived to be adapted and imitated through the dark ages and beyond.

The Germanic invasions which transformed the Roman empire had their impact on Portugal as elsewhere. Germans settled in the north of Portugal cheek by jowl with the Romanised Lusitanians. In

many ways the new Germans tried to maintain Roman traditions, imitating their currency for instance. One group of immigrants created a fifth-century kingdom whose capital was established at Braga. The international affiliation of the Braga kingdom may have been to the Byzantine empire of the east, but its autonomy and alliances were not sufficiently mighty to resist incorporation into a wider Germanic empire of Iberia, the kingdom of the Visigoths. Although Gothic domination lasted throughout the seventh century in Portugal, the legal, cultural and economic impact was muted and the capital with its glittering finery lay far away at Toledo in Spain. In many respects the Germanic period in Portugal tends to be better remembered by historians as an interlude between the half millennium of Roman high culture which preceded it and the half millennium of Islamic high culture which followed. One Germanic legacy, however, did survive. That was a strengthened Christianity. The new Mediterranean religion had begun to spread to Portugal in late Roman times, but it was the Germanic princes who gave it a new thrust. The city of Braga became the premier bishopric of Portugal while that of Toledo became the senior ecclesiastical see in Spain. Christianity in Iberia survived five hundred years of Islamic overrule.

The Islamisation of Portugal began late in the first Muslim century. Between 710 and 732 of the Christian calendar Arab armies and their Berber camp-followers from North Africa crossed Iberia and invaded France. They brought with them a new flowering of Mediterranean civilisation. Their capital was to be the wealthy metropolis of Córdoba where the great mosque stretched out under a thousand marble pillars and looked down on the old Roman bridge over the Guadalquivir River. Far to the west Islamisation led to the conversion of a large proportion of the population of Portugal. Old Roman temples were adapted or rebuilt to make new mosques. Christian and Jewish minorities who held fast to their faith were tolerated but Islam became the religion of the people. Only in the far north, where Germanic influence had been strongest, did Islam fail to penetrate as the Christian chiefdoms held out against the imperial might of Córdoba. In the rest of the country up and thrusting young Portuguese left their homes in the west to seek their fortunes as administrators and merchants in the great Muslim cities. In old age they returned full of memories to their villages to grow pumpkins and write pastoral poetry in Arabic verse. The tradition of

emigration and of wistful longing for the idyllic charms of one's native land was already well established in ninth-century Portugal, five hundred years before Camões wrote his poems about the homesick Portuguese of India.

Science and learning were among the most profound contributions which Muslim scholars brought to Portugal. The old Greek philosophers and mathematicians were rediscovered through the medium of Arabic translations of the classics. Astrolabes and compasses were introduced to facilitate open-sea navigation and map making. Muslim experience in shipbuilding for the high seas of the Indian Ocean rather than the quieter Mediterranean was adapted to suit Atlantic conditions. Arabic technical terms were adopted not only in naval architecture but also in domestic architecture. Brick pavings, roofed chimneys and tiled walls became a permanent feature of Portuguese homes. Muslim tiles were geometrically decorated but in later centuries Christians used tiles to build up large and complex murals depicting heroic episodes of history and scenes of everyday life. In Muslim Portugal the vernacular language remained Latinised, but technical terms for plants and tools, weights and measures, carts and harnesses were borrowed from Arabic. The greatest economic impact of Muslim culture was felt in agriculture. Irrigation was improved and extended as huge water wheels were built to lift water from the rivers to the fields. The mechanisation of corn milling spread in place of the labour-intensive pounding of mortars. In Muslim Lisbon the city was commended by the geographer Idrisi for its hot public baths and its good sanitation. Social life was dominated by music and dancing and the display of fine costumes. Long after the government of Portugal had changed from Muslim rule to Christian rule, 'Moorish' dancers were still invited to perform at the great ceremonies of state. A Muslim ancestry may perhaps still be detected in the haunting folk music of the Alfama quarter of Lisbon. The winding Muslim alleys survive today much as they were when conquered by English crusaders in AD 1147.

The Portuguese wars of religion began long before the European crusading movement brought seaborne mercenaries heading for the Holy Land on to the scene. In the mountains of northern Iberia Christian politics had survived on a small scale almost throughout the Muslim era. By the eleventh Christian century these northern people were raiding deep into Muslim territory, beyond Braga in

Portugal and down to Toledo in Spain. At the same time renewed military vigour was coming out of Africa to impose a new dynasty, the Almoravids, over Muslim Iberia. The Christian call for foreign help evoked a response among the tribes of France. The monks of Cluny encouraged French knights with their armed followers to join the religious wars in Portugal. By the end of the eleventh century one Henry from Burgundy dominated the land around the harbour of Oporto on the Douro River known as 'Portugal', the land of the port. On 9 April 1097, thirty-one years after the French Duke of Normandy had conquered England, Henry's Burgundian earldom laid claim to the Atlantic plains of Portugal from the Minho River to the Mondego River. A Christian state was emerging to challenge the walled cities and high castles of the Muslim states in Portugal.

The earldom of Portugal soon aspired to the status of kingdom of Portugal and Henry's son Afonso Henriques established his royal capital in the heavily fortified city of Guimarães, not far from the archiepiscopal see of Braga. His pretensions were severely challenged on two fronts. In the north the Christian kings who later conquered Castile claimed supremacy and Portugal was compelled to invest extensive resources in training and equipping military personnel and in building stone fortifications. In the south Portugal's aspirations to dominate the plains of the Tagus River were challenged by Muslim communities under Almoravid domination. Portugal nevertheless pushed southward in the first half of the twelfth century and moved the capital first to Coimbra and then to Lisbon after crusaders had captured it in a particularly gruesome orgy of blood-letting. In the second half of the twelfth century Muslim power revived under the Almohad dynasty which had crossed over to Europe from Morocco, but in the thirteenth century the advantage turned once again to the Christians. Meanwhile the northern frontier remained deeply embattled causing much stress in Portuguese medieval society. Collaboration between the nobility and the monarchy regularly broke down and the feudal contract was spasmodically replaced with royal authority exercised by ecclesiastical lawyers trained at the university of Bologna in Italy. A mounting challenge to this royal authoritarianism culminated in a Christian civil war in 1245.

The wars of religion in Portugal did much to impoverish the country after the long period of Muslim tranquillity. Not only did war

bring with it famine, flight and the spread of disease, it also disrupted the path of economic progress. As the Christian raids bit deeper into the south, sometimes followed by permanent Christian occupation, so Portuguese Muslims sought to emigrate to calmer and more prosperous regions in Spain and Morocco. Sections of the conquered land were partially depopulated and immigrants from the north lived off them wastefully and extensively rather than investing in advanced productive farming. Muslims who stayed behind often found themselves enslaved or at best given a reduced status. The Christian ghettos of the Muslim towns, on the other hand, provided the new local leadership. The most artistic aspect of Christian colonisation was the establishment of Cistercian monasteries on the old Muslim lands. The great abbey of Alcobaça was but one Portuguese representation of flowering medieval architecture. Monastic colonisation and agricultural development contrasted with the more mercenary activities of the Christian military orders, such as the Templars, which also took a leading part in the wars. After AD 1250, however, nation building took on a more constructive form as the two halves of Portugal were brought together.

In 1256 the resuscitated monarchy, adopting French models of incipient democracy, convened a parliament, or 'cortes', to talk out the differences of national ambition. The aspirations of the nobles were partially satisfied in one more round of territorial expansion when the Christians of Portugal conquered the neighbouring Algarve and replenished their fortunes in the old plundering style. The great 'Moorish' castles of the Algarve, Islam's Atlantic 'Kingdom of the West', were awarded to Christian conquerors. In order to avoid a debilitating haemorrhage of productive peoples, however, the new rulers gave some civic and economic rights to their Muslim subjects. Christian toleration of Muslim religious practices was not as complete as Muslim toleration of Christian worship had been but Islam did survive for some centuries among peasants and artisans and the mild land of orchards and fisheries continued to prosper gently as a semi-autonomous kingdom whose ruler also wore the crown of Portugal.

The Christian conquest of the Algarve had the severe disadvantage of bringing Portugal into acute conflict with Castile. This conflict was to dominate the foreign policy of Portugal for the next seven





3 The southern plain of Portugal around Evora was colonised by Romans, who built the now-ruined temple of Diana (centre of photograph), by Muslims who fortified the hilltop city, and by Christians whose kings frequently resided there.

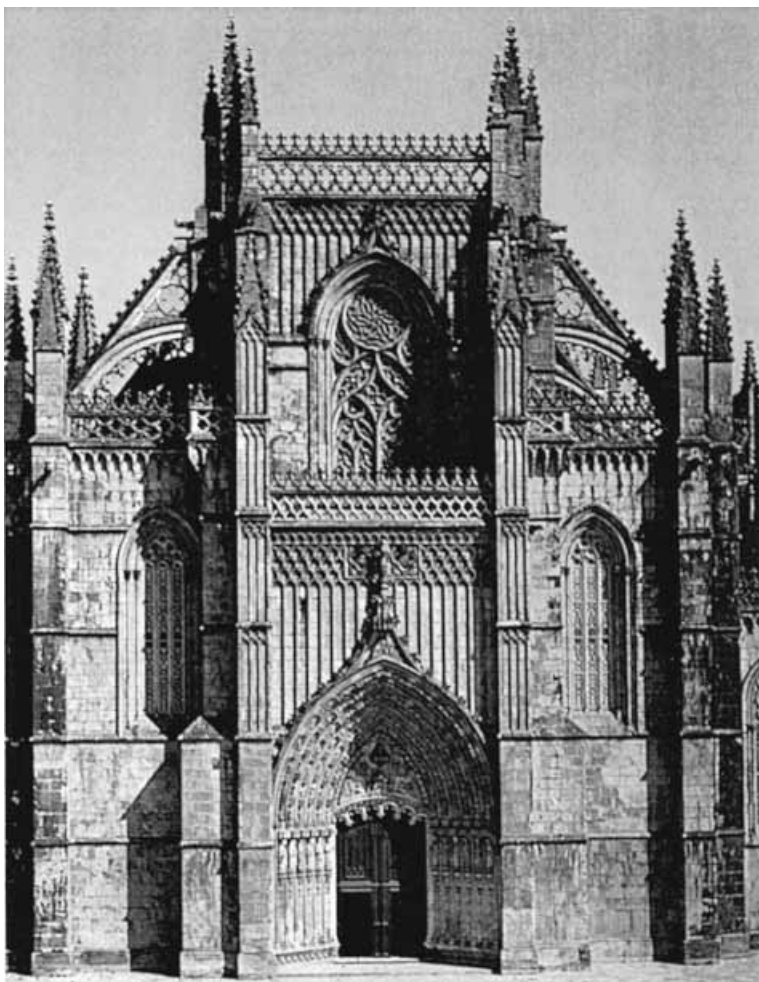
hundred years. The southward expansion of Castile from the high plateau of central Spain had closely paralleled the expansion of Portugal. Portugal, however, had the advantage of constant access to the Atlantic coast. Castile's demand for an outlet to the sea led to claims on the Muslim west which the Portuguese conquest of the Algarve thwarted. Castile was compelled to develop its overseas trade through the conquered river ports of Andalusia, Seville and Córdoba, rather than the ocean ports of Lagos and Tavira to which it aspired. The conflict did not end with the fall of the Algarve, and confrontation between Portugal and its eastern neighbour intensified. The military tradition of maintaining frontier castles to protect the realm was no longer directed at Muslim enemies in the south but at fellow Christians in the east. The frontier fortresses were periodically reinforced right through until the great war of Portuguese independence that began in 1640. The financing of defence imposed a burden on the Portuguese exchequer which further exacerbated the difficult search for a social balance between the rival layers of post-conquest society.

Portuguese society was divided into three very different geographical regions in the centuries following the wars of religion. In the north a feudal hierarchy of contractual relations dominated an essentially agrarian economy. The supply of labour to the barons in return for a share of the crops and a minimal protection against neighbourhood aggressors was the basis of the social contract. The system was exploitative, violent and unstable but it survived even such large-scale fourteenth-century catastrophes as the Black Death and a 'peasants' revolt', both of which affected Portugal in much the same way and at much the same time as they affected England. In central Portugal the focus was on the towns and rather different class affiliations evolved. A 'bourgeoisie' of middle-class burghers gained influence in the burghs and gained their wealth from crafts and commerce. Power resided in the municipalities rather than with the barons. The town demand for food helped enrich the landowners of the central plains but the town demand for labour drained workers off the farms and created a scarcity of fieldhands. In an attempt to retain their vassals, landowners began to award them limited land rights in return for payments in cash or kind. In the south it was neither the northern-style barons nor the plains-style

municipalities which dominated society but the knights of the religious orders. Their estates were worked by Christian immigrants and Muslim slaves. Throughout the country labour service was demanded and resisted in a pattern of co-operation and confrontation of varying intensity. In 1373 the city of Lisbon imposed obligatory labour dues of particular severity when the burghers decided that they needed a new city wall to protect themselves from rebellious rustics as well as from alien intruders. Tensions rose and within ten years the countryside was in open rebellion and the monarchy lost control of its kingdom.

The revolution of 1383 laid the foundations of early modern society in Portugal. Not only did the peasants rebel against the barons, but the burghers rebelled against the crown. Rival claimants to the regency of the vacant throne drummed up support in both town and country, opening the way to extensive participation in political affairs. In the confusion the bishop of Lisbon was lynched, and an illegitimate prince led a palace coup and was acclaimed by the mob as the defender of the realm. The prince, John of Avis, was master of the religious military Order of Avis, and was able to obtain support from other military orders when he left the city to recruit nationwide support in a civil war. Castile took the disorders as an opportunity to intervene and besieged Lisbon in a vain endeavour to put its preferred royal faction in power. Plague descended on the city, however, and forced the Spaniards to lift the siege. After two years of upheaval the Portuguese parliament met at Coimbra and declared the throne vacant. The eleven churchmen, seventy-two noblemen and knights of the military orders, and fifty commoners representing the municipalities then elected the Master of Avis to be king of Portugal with the title John I. Castile immediately invaded again only to be defeated by a coalition of Portuguese factions at the great battle of Aljubarrota on 14 August 1385. The victors set to work designing Portugal's finest monastery, Batalha, and Lisbon sponsored the building of a great Carmelite church of thanksgiving. Portugal's elected dynasty had won internal support and international respect in a resounding victory over one of the great powers.

The Avis dynasty began its ascent in international relations by seeking a stable alliance against Castile to serve it in the future. One obvious potential partner was England, that other small Atlantic



4 The construction of the monastery of Batalha was begun after the battle of Aljubarrota which confirmed the election of John I of Avis to the throne, cemented the English alliance and drove out the Castilian invaders.

kingdom on the western fringe of great power politics. Relations between Portugal and England had fluctuated ever since an English crusader had become the first bishop of Lisbon. Later, during the first decades of the Hundred Years War, Portugal had intermittently

sided with England. Now John I signed a 'perpetual alliance', sealed at Windsor in 1386, which was to be the bedrock of Portuguese diplomacy until well into the twentieth century. He also married Philippa of Lancaster, granddaughter of Edward III of England; their sons, the royal princes, carried Portugal to the edge of the modern age. Edward (Duarte) became king and won the support of the nobility, Peter (Pedro) patronised the towns and encouraged the commercial growth of Lisbon, and Henry (Henrique), the so-called Navigator, became commander of the military Order of Christ and laid the foundations of a worldwide Portuguese empire. The only unexpected twist on the distant horizon concerned John's illegitimate son, Afonso, who married the daughter of his military commander, thus acquiring extensive estates gained during the war with Castile. They founded the nation's wealthiest family of dukes, the Braganzas, and it was they who eventually gained power in 1640, revived the English alliance after eighty years of Castilian captivity, and restored an empire ravaged by forty years of Dutch attack. Before that, however, Portugal had enjoyed its first golden age under the legitimate Anglo-Portuguese branch of the Avis dynasty.

After being subject to two millennia of colonisation by Phoenicians and by Romans, by Muslims and by Christians, the Portuguese embarked on their own career of imperial expansion and settler colonisation. Their first successes were on the islands in the Atlantic. In the Canary Islands they had to enslave the indigenous Berbers before turning the conquerors into landowners with a mandate to grow vines and sell canary wine. The scheme was successful and Tenerife in particular attracted many land-hungry immigrants, but after half a century of Portuguese activity the Canaries were transferred to Castile in one of the many peace treaties that tried to abate intra-Iberian rivalry. A longer-term Portuguese project, also sponsored by Prince Henry and his military order, brought Portuguese settlers to the vacant islands of Madeira and the Azores where wheat was successfully introduced to supplement the internal farm trade of Portugal and to supply corn to Lisbon by ship rather than by ox cart. Yet further afield the colonisation of the Cape Verde Islands led to the development of a textile industry based on slave-grown cotton and indigo dyes. Even deeper into the tropics the West African island of São Tomé was planted with sugar cane harvested by black

slaves. Thus in the space of one hundred years Portugal had experimented with colonial models for growing the great crops that were to dominate world trade over many centuries.

The second feature of Portugal's imperial ambition was even more adventurous than its initiation of island colonisation. The Avis dynasty aspired to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and conquer the African mainland. In previous ages Iberia and the Maghreb had commonly been dominated by the same political culture, Roman or Germanic or Arab, and now Christian kings sought to unify Portugal and Morocco. The lure was land which attracted both the nobility of northern Portugal and the southern knights of the military orders. The soils of Portugal were fertile but scarce in the north and plentiful but sterile in the south. North Africa, formerly the breadbasket of Rome, appeared to offer great plains where wheat could be grown in abundance if only the Muslim peasants could be dominated by Christian knights as they had been in the southern plains of Portugal and the Algarve. The Master of Avis and his sons sought to give a third thrust to the *reconquista* following the twelfth-century conquest of central Portugal and the thirteenth-century conquest of the Algarve and thereby enrich their supporters with new African territory and new vassals subdued in approved style. The venture did not prosper but one feat of arms went down in history. That was the capture of the fortified city of Ceuta, taken from the Moroccan resistance in 1415. Prince Henry won his spurs at Ceuta and the event symbolised the end of the inward-looking European middle ages and the beginning of the outward-looking age of expansion.

The European age of expansion, led by Portugal, did not owe its success to the land-hungry barons and knights but to the city-bound burghers of Lisbon and Lagos who prospered under the patronage of Prince Pedro. The second lure of Africa was gold. It was known throughout the Italian banking fraternities of Islam and Christendom that much of the Mediterranean world's gold came from West Africa via the Moroccan camel caravans. Portuguese merchants therefore aspired to capture the desert markets of the northern Sahara and to dominate the European supply of foreign gold in much the way that the Almoravids had done in the eleventh century. Despite numerous heroic military ventures the conquest of Morocco always eluded the Portuguese. Their economic intelligence



5 This oak panel painted in 1445 by Nuno Gonçalves shows the beatified Prince Ferdinand flanked by his sister Isabel of Burgundy, and his brother Henry 'the Navigator'.

did, however, improve, and slowly they began to skirt the Saharan seaboard in search of alternative routes of access to the mines. By the 1460s they were buying gold in Senegal and within twenty years they had reached the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and built a stoutly fortified trading post named Saint George of the Mine. A proportion of the gold which had previously gone overland by camel was diverted. The trade was a royal monopoly, administered by an office on the Lisbon waterfront, and very soon it was supplying Portugal with wealth formerly unheard of amounting to half a ton of gold each year.

The high bourgeoisie of Lisbon and their clients did well out of the colonial expansion and gave their full support to Prince Pedro, the merchants' friend, in the round of upheavals that affected the Portuguese body politic when he became regent on the death of his brother King Duarte. The rival court faction of landowners was less enchanted with the rise of the bourgeoisie and eventually stripped the prince of the regency and in the turmoil he lost his life. There was a long lull in the African trade until the nobility recognised that they too could benefit from the new imperialism if in less glittering ways. One great economic weakness of the estates of southern Portugal was the shortage of labour. The knights who raided Morocco were therefore keen to kidnap women and children or to capture prisoners of war who could be sold into slavery on the latifundia of the plains or the old fruit farms of the Algarve. The merchant seamen of Lagos took up slave catching with enthusiasm. When the explorers reached West Africa they began to buy black slaves, sometimes selling horses in exchange. When trading revived in the 1450s the profit on a Mauritanian slave was estimated at 700 per cent. Black immigration into Portugal grew to such prosperous dimensions that southern landowners were able to survive without new frontiers to conquer. In Evora, the greatest city of the south and the first one to have been conquered by Christians, 10 per cent of the population was black at the height of the slave trade to Europe. The lot of African slaves, whether on the farms or in household service, was not a happy one and they were denied many of the legal rights given to the older generations of white slaves who had been subdued in the wars of conquest. Black women slaves, for instance, were not afforded the protection against sexual exploitation that was given





6 In the fifteenth century, before the colonisation of Brazil, black slaves from Africa were used extensively in Portugal for both field and domestic labour.

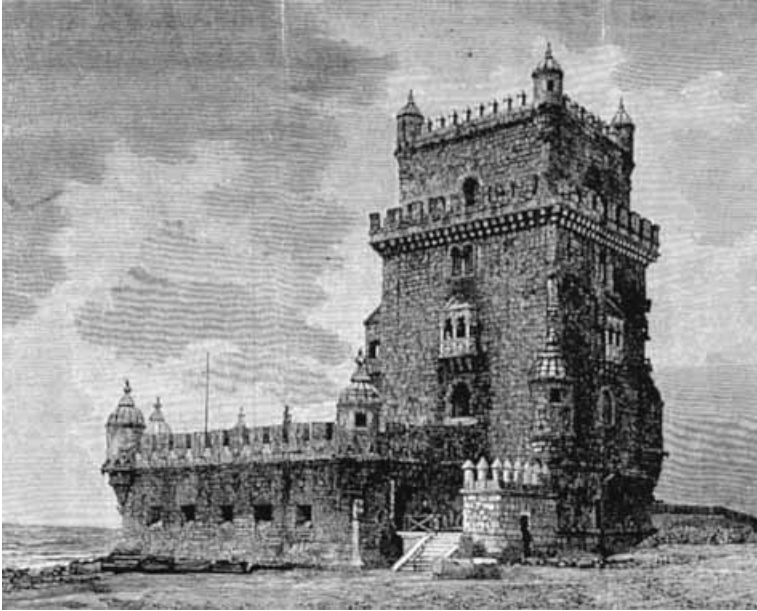
to white domestics, and young *mestiço* girls of mixed race were prized as mistresses though not necessarily as wives. Miscegenation meant that within a dozen generations the 35,000 black Africans who had once lived in Portugal had been blended into the mainstream of a somewhat darkened Portuguese race. Only in Lisbon did a small African ghetto survive and specialise in particular skills such as house painting. The longer-term legacy of the traffic in black slaves was to be felt with the opening of the American colonies in the seventeenth century.

The first great colonising breakthrough, following the exploration of the African coast, occurred in 1492 when a Genoese admiral, formerly in Portuguese service but now in the pay of Castile, crossed the Atlantic and opened new vistas of European empires in the Americas. Columbus' own efforts concentrated on the Caribbean islands, but in 1500 Portuguese sailors discovered the southern mainland of Brazil and made good their claims under a papal dispensation. Charters of conquest not unlike those used in the conquest of the Moorish lands were awarded by the crown to colonial entrepreneurs

willing to invest their money and talent in opening up a new continent. The planting skills developed on the African islands were brought across to Latin America and efforts were made to instil a work discipline into the enslaved native American population. When the private ventures failed, the crown took on direct responsibility for economic exploitation and organised the transportation of black slaves from Africa in the manner that had already proved so successful in Europe. In order to increase the supply of black slaves a Portuguese chartered colony was established in Angola and conquistadores were given the right to subdue African chiefs and force them to pay feudal dues in the form of captives for export. The system was so successful that the trade gradually rose over the next century to 10,000 men, women, children and babies a year. They made Brazil into a sad but prosperous colony.

The second breakthrough in the rise of the Portuguese empire occurred in 1498 when a small fleet commanded by Vasco da Gama reached the coast of India having rounded the African Cape of Good Hope and discovered a direct sea lane from Europe to Asia. Thereafter huge sailing carracks brought Indian pepper and cotton, Indonesian perfume and spice, Chinese silk and porcelain, to the royal trading house at Lisbon. It took thirty years for the old oriental trading houses in Venice, in collaboration with the Ottoman empire, to recapture a significant share of the trade that had formerly gone overland. Although the sea route was long, and the wooden ships liable to decay, to shipwreck and to piracy, the profits on a successful round trip to India were astronomic. To guard the route Portugal built a great fortress at Mombasa in East Africa, established a colonial city at Goa in India, built an entrepot at Macau in China and even created a community of Christian converts at Nagasaki in Japan which flourished until overwhelmed by the reviving power of the Japanese state. For 100 years Portugal virtually monopolised the sea route to Asia.

The wealth of Africa was garnered by John II who ascended the throne in 1481. He used it to build up the power of the monarchy against the nobility, much as Prince Pedro had done during his regency one generation before. The confrontation between king and nobles culminated in the execution of Portugal's premier duke, the Duke of Braganza, in a public display of awesome power in the



7 The Belem Tower at the mouth of the Lisbon river was built in the ornate ‘Manueline’ style favoured by King Manuel I in the prosperous years that followed the opening of the seaborne spice trade with India in 1498.

royal city of Evora. Further staged executions split the court into rival factions and isolated the king. He was able to survive by building up a new form of government based on hired clerks who managed new-style administrative departments of state. Eventually the noble interests fought back and when the king died his estranged brother-in-law gained the throne at the head of the noble party in 1495. The new king, Manuel I, continued to use the modern administrative system to govern overseas trade and reigned over a golden age of unforetold imperial prosperity as the wealth of Asia began to pour into Portugal. The Manueline era was particularly noted for its exuberantly ornamented architectural style. The wealth arrived at the seaports of Lisbon and Lagos, but the ostentation was displayed in the royal residences built or refurbished in the provinces. Celebration of the new prosperity also took the form of religious thanksgiving and church patronage of the arts. The triple alliance

of the landed nobility, the church aristocracy and the peripatetic court remained powerful despite its dependence on the merchant class of the ports. In order to protect the traditional power of the nobility Manuel adopted new Spanish-style measures to keep the rising bourgeoisie in the subservience from which they had twice broken free during the fifteenth century.

It was perhaps no accident that the opening of the European overseas empires coincided with a fundamental transformation of social relations inside the Iberian peninsula. In 1492, just before Columbus reached America, Castile broke its long-standing pattern of alliances and rivalries with Granada. In a lightning invasion the old Muslim monarchy was overthrown. The coup was politically successful though economically costly. The last Muslim kingdom of western Europe was plundered rather than nurtured by its Christian invaders and many wealthy merchants and silk manufacturers emigrated from Spain. Once Muslim power had been broken, toleration of Muslim religious practices declined sharply and persecution was institutionalised by the Court of Inquisition. The ending of religious toleration in Spain was rapidly emulated in Portugal. In 1497, the very same year that Vasco da Gama set off to open the African route to India, Portugal passed legislation forbidding public worship by either Muslims or Jews. Forced conversions led to the recognition of a new social category of 'New Christians'. Many of the Jewish New Christians were artisans and merchants who played an important economic role in the cities and ports and beyond them in the colonies. They therefore became embroiled in the disputes between the landed nobility which dominated the north and the urban middle class that was so powerful in the central towns of Portugal. The landed interests limited the power of the merchants by accusing them, rightfully and wrongfully, of illegal religious practices. The middle class no longer had a royal patron as it had had under Pedro in the civil war of the 1440s, or during the reign of John II in the 1480s, and so those who opposed the conservative domination at court risked their lives. The nation's need for entrepreneurial skills and the nobility's fear of middle-class power remained in tension for the next three centuries.

The great wealth of King Manuel's Portugal did not long outlast him. Rival routes to India were revived by the Italian city states and



8 This great window in the Convent of Christ, Tomar, represents one of the most elaborate examples of Portuguese stone carving in the Manueline style.



9 Sixteenth-century Portuguese seafaring was not only a matter of peaceable exploration and profitable commerce; it often involved armed conflict with enemies afloat and ashore.

the gold fields of West Africa were visited by semi-piratical merchant venturers licensed by Elizabeth of England. The Portuguese nobility turned its attention again to dynastic marriages and in particular to a search for the unification of the Iberian peninsula. In the late 1570s a wild young king, Sebastian, briefly revived the notion of overland conquest as the key to the nation's fortunes and led a military campaign into Morocco. He was defeated and disappeared at the battle of Alcacer Quibir. The royal succession was determined in favour of the Spanish Habsburgs. Philip II of Spain was alleged by the myth-makers to have said of Portugal 'I inherited it, I bought it, and I conquered it', but much of the ruling élite of Portugal in fact

felt that their long-term ambition of integration into a multinational, multicultural Iberian empire alongside Andalusia and Aragon had at last been achieved. Nationalist separatism was not a serious issue of high politics though cultural patriotism may have existed at a popular level. The new king meticulously adopted the Portuguese title of Philip I and guaranteed that Portuguese juridical and constitutional autonomy would be secured. For a short while he even moved his chancery from the central Spanish plateau down to Lisbon, his new window on the Atlantic, but *realpolitik* soon required his attention at the heart of the united kingdoms in the newly-founded city of Madrid.

Iberian unification brought opportunity and prosperity to many Portuguese. First and foremost it ended centuries of border conflict which, while it may have benefited soldiers, mercenaries, horse breeders, arms dealers and smugglers, had absorbed too much of the nation's political energy. The Portuguese nobility now gained access to a much wider court culture than the narrow post-feudal high society of their own court. Bishops and aristocrats sought illegitimate preferment in the Castilian domains of Andalusia and even beyond in the Spanish possessions of the Mediterranean. The Portuguese middle class gained even more benefit by illegally but successfully opening up the Spanish American colonies to Portuguese trade. Portuguese emigrants often preferred the silver wealth of Peru to the unhealthy slave colonies of Africa and Brazil. True Castilians complained of the competition and readily accused the Portuguese of being Jewish refugees escaping from the Castilian pogroms. Portuguese commercial acumen, on the other hand, was tacitly welcomed by the Castilian authorities in expanding the wealth of the colonies. By the time Philip II died in 1598 Spanish unification was complete and Spain dominated the world from the West Indies to the East Indies.