

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Portuguese Devastations in the Indian Ocean

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The discovery of America and the circumnavigation of Africa were logical consequences of the religious-political rivalry between the Christian powers of Iberia and the Muslim powers of North Africa. As the Maghrib disintegrated, the Christian powers of Iberia, with the cooperation of the maritime powers of Italy, consolidated their positions and projected their power far beyond the borders of the Iberian Peninsula.

Religion and profit were the principal motivations for the Portuguese-Spanish thrust. Christian fanaticism expressed itself through the Spanish Inquisition. Abu Abdallah (Boabdil), the last emir of Granada, had agreed to surrender under a comprehensive treaty, which guaranteed freedom of religion to the non-Christians. But no sooner had the ink dried on this treaty than it was abandoned. The Inquisition was let loose, first on the Jews, then on the Muslims. There was sustained resistance but it proved fruitless. Some of the Muslims hid in caves in the hills of El Pujarra near Granada to escape the Inquisition. They were hunted down and exterminated. In 1502, the Spanish monarch issued a decree to expel the Muslims.

The conflict was not confined to the Iberian Peninsula. It spilled over into North Africa. The Christian Iberians dreamed of conquering North Africa for their faith. Pope Alexander VI divided the world into two spheres of influence, one for the Portuguese and one for the Spaniards. In accordance with the Pope's edict, the Portuguese moved along the Atlantic coast, while the Spanish focused on the Mediterranean coast.

The profit motive was not far behind as a driving force. Europe had long dreamed of opening trade routes to India and East Asia. The products of Asia—spices, silk, cloth, brass work, ivory, iron—were in great demand in the Mediterranean, and the trade was highly profitable. Since the 8th century, Muslims had controlled the trade routes to India, Sumatra, and China, and the wealth of such cities as Alexandria in and Basra in Iraq depended to a large extent on this trade. The city-states of Italy—Venice, Genoa, and Naples—bought these products in Alexandria, and sold them to the rest of Europe, making enormous profits and growing rich in the process.

The Portuguese were the first European nation to realize the dream of reaching India. They were helped in this undertaking by technology and geography. *First*, there were major technological advances. The winds around the coast of West Africa change direction from south to north around the Cape of Bajador. Until the second half of the 15th century, neither the Christians in western Europe nor the Muslims of

the Maghrib possessed the technology to sail against the wind. This was so even though the technology was known to the Venetians and was also widely used in the Indian Ocean. The absence of such ships had prevented the people of the Maghrib from venturing further south along the coast. The Portuguese and the Spaniards acquired this technology, circa 1450, from the Venetians.

Second, the cannon made its appearance in the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century. The Muslims of North Africa had learned the technology of gunpowder from the Turks and had introduced it into Spain. Now, the same technology in the hands of the Christians was turned against them.

Third, the economic and political disintegration of the Maghrib precluded any coherent Muslim response to the military challenge from the north. The Muslims of the Maghrib had lost the trade routes in the western Mediterranean (1350-1400). The Trans-Saharan trade was sporadic because of the unsettled political conditions in the region. The emirs were in constant warfare with one another. In contrast, the consolidation of Christian Iberia steadily gathered momentum. Even though the Iberian political structure was feudal and despotic, it proved to be more cohesive than the prevailing political chaos in the Maghrib.

Fourth, historical developments and its own geography helped the Portuguese. The location of Portugal on the Atlantic seacoast gave it access to the coastline of West Africa. Portugal emerged as a unified country after the Crusades of 1236-1248, more than 200 years before Spain was unified under Ferdinand and Isabella and Granada was conquered. Political cohesiveness gave the Portuguese a leg up on their rivals in their race to the Atlantic Ocean. Contacts with the Muslims of North Africa had taught the Iberians that there were thriving African communities south of the Sahara, where gold and ivory were plentiful. The tales of Timbaktu were heard in the souks (markets) of Tangier and Ceuta.

The lure of African gold beckoned Europe. If the Maghrib could be bypassed by sea, it would benefit the Iberians in their strategic military confrontation with the Muslims, and at the same time, eliminate them as middlemen in the lucrative trade with the Sudan (the vast stretch of territory from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans south of the Sahara was called the Sudan). In both Lisbon and Madrid, the exploration of the Atlantic coast of Africa received the highest priority. The Portuguese Captain Tristao successfully crossed Cape Bajador in 1434. This was a benchmark achievement. In 1441 Portuguese ships raided the coast of southern Morocco. In 1443, the island of Tristao, later to gain notoriety in the Atlantic slave trade, was captured. In 1456, Senegal and Gambia were visited. In 1472, the Portuguese Captain Sequira reached Benin in Nigeria. Thereafter, Portuguese excursions thrust them forward in a relentless quest for the southern tip of Africa.

The route around the southern tip of Africa to the Indian Ocean was not unknown. As early as 1406, the great Chinese Muslim Admiral Zheng Yi had sailed the Indian Ocean around the Cape of Good Hope to the western coast of Africa. But he had turned around before navigating northwards to Morocco and Europe. In 1496, Vasco de Gama achieved what Admiral Zheng Yi did not. He circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope, and, guided by a Muslim sailor Ahmed ibn Majid who was a resident in East Africa, sailed with the northeasterly monsoons to reach the coast of Malabar (India).

The events of the last decade of the 15th century, namely the conquest of Granada (1492), the discovery of America (1492), and the successful voyage around Africa (1496), released the energies of Europe. The Muslim presence in Spain had bottled up Europe for 700 years. Not only had Europe escaped the juggernaut of the Muslims, it had in turn drawn a circle around the Muslim heartland in West Asia and North Africa. It was only a matter of time before the noose would tighten. *History had changed.*

East Africa was a part of the wider Islamic world. The Indian Ocean was an open sea plied by Arab dhows, Indian multi-mast sails, and giant Chinese ships. The littoral cities of the ocean provided open markets for the exchange of goods from the far-flung corners of Asia and Africa. The African seaboard carried on a brisk trade with the coasts of Arabia, Persia, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and China. Exports from East Africa included gold, ivory, cola nuts, palm oil, rhino tusks and iron ore. Imports included spices from Malabar and Indonesia, finished iron products from Bijapur, cotton goods from Bengal, silk from China and Persia, marble and incense from Arabia. As an illustration, iron ore was exported from Kilwa (Tanzania) to Gujrat and Bijapur (India) where it was smelted into iron. Al Masudi records that the Indians made excellent swords with this iron. Some of the smelted iron was exported to Basra from where it was shipped to the metal working industries of Iraq and Syria and processed into "Damascus Steel", an alloyed product using the high temperature super plastic properties of steel.

Islam forged together a brotherhood and sisterhood in East Africa transcending the barriers of region, race and ethnicity. Trade and travel resulted in intermarriage among the people of the Indian Ocean seaboard. Malabar (India) and the Sahel (Africa) had large populations resulting from such intermarriages. This melting pot produced a rich, cosmopolitan Islamic culture, which fused the ancient cultures of Persia and India with the energy of Africa and the doctrinal restraint of Arabia. Cities such as Dar es Salaam (doorway to peace), Shofala, Kilwa, Mombasa, Pemba, Malindi, and Mogadishu grew up with stone fortresses, paved streets, great mosques and imposing palaces. Al Masudi refers to Shofala (Mozambique) as a city of gold. A new language, Swahili was born, combining Bantu grammar with Arabic and Persian vocabulary.

The cannons of the Portuguese broke the peace of Dar es Salaam. Vasco de Gama saw a thriving civilization in East Africa and western India, and what he saw whetted his appetite. As soon as he returned from India, the Portuguese drew up plans for the subjugation of East Africa and the capture of Muslim trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Historical currents favored the Portuguese. It was a period when major political realignments were taking place in the Islamic world. In Persia, Shah Ismail was busy consolidating the Safavid Empire. In Egypt, the Mamlukes were a spent force. Cairo, as the seat of the Caliphate, was unable to defend itself, let alone protect the Muslims worldwide. The Ottomans, active in Europe, had not yet firmed up their boundaries with Persia and Egypt. In India, the Lodhis were a distant echo of the powerful Sultanate under the Khiljis. The Maghrib had just lost Granada, and was in total disarray with rampant warfare among the local emirs.

Sensing an historic window of opportunity, both Portugal and Spain moved to expand their positions around the globe between the years 1500 and 1530. The mandate of the Portuguese from their king was to cut the trade routes, subjugate the African trading cities and destroy "Moorish" influence. The Portuguese and the Spanish used the term Moors to refer to all Muslims, whether they were Arabs, Africans, Persians, Indians or Malays. These cities had minimal fortifications, because they had no natural enemies; their relations with the African hinterland were peaceful, and they looked with open arms to the blue ocean for free trade. So, when the Portuguese cannon boomed and rained death and destruction, the trading centers around the Indian Ocean were totally unprepared.

Vasco de Gama's first voyage was an intelligence gathering one. He returned in 1502 at the head of a flotilla of twenty-five ships armed with the most powerful cannons in the Portuguese inventory and bombarded the city states all along the east African coast. His first encounter with shipping in the Indian Ocean was a vessel carrying 700 returning hajjis from Mecca to India. An Indian Muslim from Malabar, Merim, owned the ship. Disregarding pleas for mercy, de Gama burned the ship with all of its occupants, women and children included. When the Portuguese arrived off the coast of Calicut, the Raja of Calicut, Manna Vikrama, sent an emissary, a Brahmin of high repute, to negotiate peace. The

ambassador arrived on board the Portuguese flagship with his two sons and a nephew. De Gama cut off the hands, nose and ears of the ambassador, and had the three young men nailed to crosses. The bombardment of Calicut began in earnest, wreaking havoc on that ancient city. He then turned his attention to the ships in anchor. He treated the captured Hindus the same way he had treated the Brahmin ambassador of the Raja, cutting off their hands, noses and ears and piling them up in heaps on board his ships. But the most sadistic treatment was reserved for captured Muslims. One Khwaja Muhammed, a noted merchant from Egypt was captured, beaten, his mouth stuffed with pig refuse, and then set afire. Such atrocities were repeated wherever the Portuguese went on the Indian coast.

The first Portuguese raids established a fortified position in East Africa. Shofala, a trading center established by Muslim merchants as early as 957, was captured. More powerful thrusts followed. In 1505, the Portuguese captain Almeida raided Kilwa and shot his way along the East African coast to Somalia, returning with a rich booty. In 1507, Bab el Mandap, at the entrance to the Red Sea fell. The Portuguese made an attempt to capture Aden (Yemen) but failed. In 1508, they appeared on the coast of India, and captured Diu and Daman. Shortly thereafter, the port of Goa was captured from Sultan Adil Shah of Bijapur, who was betrayed by a renegade Adil Shahi sailor, Timoja. All of its Muslim male inhabitants were slain and the women were enslaved. The splendid port of Goa gave the Portuguese a commanding base from where to expand their operations, and it became the seat of their fledging empire in the Indian Ocean.

In 1511, Albuquerque was appointed the governor of Goa and was given command of operations in this sector. Ambitious, determined, and ruthless, Albuquerque vowed to turn the Indian Ocean into a Portuguese lake. In 1512, a powerful fleet sent from Goa arrived at the Straits of Malacca (Malaysia). Malayan resistance was valiant, determined and desperate but the greater firepower of the invaders proved decisive and Malacca fell. The control of Malacca gave the Portuguese a stranglehold on trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific (China). In 1515, Albuquerque captured the Straits of Hormuz in Persia at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and completed his conquests by occupying Muscat and Bahrain (1516).

Within a span of fifteen years, the Portuguese had destroyed the thriving city-states of East Africa, captured strategic naval posts all along the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, occupied the entrances to both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and disrupted the trade that had flowed from India, Sumatra and China to West Asia and East Africa. Once thriving cities on the African seaboard became ghost towns. Violence, greed, enmity and ruthlessness took over trade and cooperation. Portuguese hatred of Muslims was unbounded. Wherever they landed, their first targets were the Muslims. The Inquisition was instituted in Goa against both Hindus and Muslims, and instructions were passed out by the Portuguese governor that no Muslim was to be hired, even though the territory of Goa had been a part of the Sultanate of Bijapur, and had a large number of Muslims in it.

The global Portuguese challenge did not go unanswered. In the period 1261-1517, the Mamlukes of Egypt were the custodians of Mecca and Madina. The Caliphate resided in Cairo. The Mamlukes, as custodians of the Caliphate, were duty bound to help Muslims worldwide. When East Africa and Gujrat (India) cried for help, Mansuh al Ghalib, Mamluke Sultan of Egypt sent a powerful fleet from Yemen into the Arabian Sea, despite the fact that the Mamlukes themselves had serious financial difficulties. In 1508, this fleet defeated a strong Portuguese force off the coast of Chaul (near modern Karachi), and proceeded to lay siege to Diu (in Gujrat). The Portuguese held on; however, the Mamluke fleet was caught in a monsoon storm and had to moor at Surat, which was ruled by the Sultan of Gujrat. This episode shows that in the early part of the 16th century, there was close coordination between the Muslim states of East Africa, India and the Mamluke Caliphate in Egypt.

The battle at Diu was a turning point in history. The inability of the Mamlukes to expel the Portuguese solidified their hold on Goa, Diu and Daman. They stayed there for almost 500 years until the Indian Army ejected them in 1962.

Events in West Asia overtook this initial thrust of the Mamlukes. Following the Battle of Chaldiran (1514), the Ottoman Turks advanced into Egypt and took Cairo (1517). The Caliphate moved to Istanbul and the responsibility for the protection of the Muslims passed on to the Ottomans.

In 1525, Sulaiman the Magnificent, Ottoman Sultan and Caliph, sent his Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha to Cairo to reorganize the administration of Egypt. One of the accomplishments of Ibrahim Pasha was to energize the Egyptian (now Ottoman) navy in the Indian Ocean. In 1535, Sulaiman Pasha, Governor of Egypt, set out with a powerful fleet from Suez, drove the Portuguese from Yemen, and arriving in India, laid siege to Diu (Gujrat) in cooperation with the Sultan of Gujrat. The siege was, however, unsuccessful, and Sulaiman Pasha returned to Egypt.

The defense of the eastern trade routes took on added importance to the Ottomans when they captured Iraq and the Port of Basra (1546) from the Safavids. The Portuguese commanding the Straits of Hormuz blockaded Basra. Sulaiman the Magnificent ordered the blockade to be broken. The celebrated Admiral Piri Rais, sailed from Suez in 1551, inflicted heavy damage on the Portuguese garrisons in Hormuz, Muscat and Oman and made his way to Basra. Leaving his command in Basra, he returned the following year. However, he was unable to drive the Portuguese from Hormuz and the blockade of the Persian Gulf continued. The following year, another admiral, Ali Pasha, fought his way through the Portuguese blockade and laid siege to Diu together with the Sultan of Gujrat but had to abandon it due to a storm. Soon thereafter, Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) captured Gujrat and made Surat a principal port of export for the Moghul Empire. Akbar, although acknowledging the Ottoman Caliphate as one "in the tradition of the four rightly-guided Caliphs", had his own ideas about how to deal with the Portuguese.

The Portuguese started negotiations with fellow Christians in Ethiopia to deny the Ottoman navy access to the Red Sea. To pre-empt this possibility, the Turks occupied Masawa (Eritrea) in 1557. In 1560, a Turkish force was assembled to recapture the Straits of Malacca (Malaysia) from the Portuguese, but the effort was abandoned due to the internal political situation in Malaysia. Nonetheless, through his determined efforts, Sulaiman the Magnificent broke the back of the Portuguese blockades by the time he passed away in 1565.

The war between the Ottomans and the Portuguese for control of trade routes continued throughout the 16th century. Admiral Ali Beg sailed from Yemen in 1580, and turning south from the coast of Somalia, raided Portuguese forts in Mombasa, Kilwa (modern Tanzania) and Malindi. In 1589, he repeated this feat again, but this time he was stopped south of Kilwa by a strong Portuguese fleet sent from Goa. This naval engagement had the far-reaching effect of preserving the East African coastlines in Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania for Muslim influence. However, the Portuguese held on to Mozambique, which became a Portuguese colony for 400 years, and an important source of slaves for shipments to Brazil.

The Portuguese threat subsided towards the end of the 16th century for four important reasons. First, the Portuguese had neither the material resources nor the manpower to monopolize the Indian Ocean trade. The limited land area of Portugal could not produce the timber required to support a large navy. By 1565, more trade flowed on Muslim ships than did on Portuguese ships, and Alexandria in Egypt was once again a flourishing trading post. Second, Portuguese trade was monopolistic, with the king of Portugal holding all the cards, and monopolies are inherently inefficient and do not survive for long. Third, the Portuguese ruling structure was feudal, with the governors beholden to the king, and little

latitude for local initiative. And fourth, Ottoman resistance in the Indian Ocean broke the back of the Portuguese monopoly. The littoral empires of the Great Moghuls in India and the Safavids in Persia became so powerful that the Portuguese became no more than a nuisance. A more potent European challenge was to emerge in the following centuries, first from Holland, and then from England.

The Ottoman naval activities were global, and were not confined just to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Arrayed against the Ottomans was the combined might of Europe involving Spain, Portugal, Venice, Austria, Russia and the Vatican. In 1552, when the Russian Czar Ivan IV captured Astrakan and Kazan, Sulaiman the Magnificent ordered a fleet into the Black Sea to recapture Astrakan. Sultan Sulaiman had a grand vision to dig a canal linking the Rivers Don and Volga so that Ottoman troops could bypass the opposing Safavids in Persia, and move through the Turkoman territories around the Caspian Sea to the friendly territories of the Moghul Empire in India. This dream persisted until the First World War (1914-1918) when the Ottomans made a desperate plan to strike at the British in India through the region of the Caspian Sea and link up with the large pro-Turkish, pro-Caliphate Muslim populations of Afghanistan and what is today Pakistan. Sulaiman's efforts were unsuccessful in 1555, and the Ottoman efforts were frustrated in 1914 by Russian advances into eastern Turkey and northern Persia.

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