

## The Portuguese in Hormuz and the trade in Chinese Porcelain<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The relations between Persia and China were many centuries old when the Portuguese first arrived on the island of Hormuz in the early years of the sixteenth century. Archaeological evidence found in Persian Gulf settlements frequently includes shards and/or pieces of Chinese ceramics, testifying to an intense maritime trade. For centuries, then, Chinese ceramics had been imported into Persia, both by land and sea routes, assuming an important role in the daily life and in the collecting habits of the Persian elites, and also influencing the arts and crafts of Persian potters. But during the reign of Shah Abbas I, a particular interest in collecting Chinese ceramics seems to have developed in the Safavid realm. Was there some sort of connection with the Portuguese establishment of Hormuz and the consequent easier accessibility to Chinese commodities, and namely porcelains? An analysis of the contents of the Ardabil shrine collection seems to suggest a Portuguese connection, meaning that at least part of the Chinese ceramics came to Persia through the mediation of Portuguese Hormuz.

### Resumo

*As relações entre a Pérsia e a China eram antiqüíssimas, quando os portugueses chegaram à ilha de Ormuz nos primeiros anos do século XVI. Vestígios encontrados em escavações arqueológicas levadas a cabo no Golfo Pérsico incluem frequentemente peças de cerâmica chinesa, testemunhando um intenso tráfico marítimo. Durante séculos, as porcelanas chinesas importadas por mar e por terra para a Pérsia tinham assumido um papel relevante na vida diária e nos hábitos de colecionismo das elites persas, influenciando também as artes e técnicas dos ceramistas persas. Mas durante o reinado de Xá Abbas I, um particular interesse parece ter-se desenvolvido no mundo safávida relativamente à aquisição de peças de porcelana chinesa. Teria havido alguma ligação com o protectorado português sobre Ormuz e com o mais fácil acesso a mercadorias chinesas, e nomeadamente a porcelanas oriundas da China? Uma análise da colecção que existia na cidade de Ardabil parece sugerir que existiria uma conexão portuguesa, que teria permitido a aquisição de um considerável número de peças de porcelana chinesa.*

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## 要旨

ポルトガル人たちが16世紀初頭にホルムズ島に到着した時、ペルシャと中国間の関係は既に何世紀にもわたる歴史があった。ペルシャ湾岸で発見された考古遺跡から 中国の陶磁器が数多く発見された。これは活発な海洋貿易が行われていたことを証明する。何世紀にもわたり、海路、陸路からペルシャに輸入された中国磁器は、当時のペルシャにおけるエリート階級の収集家たちの日常生活や習慣に重要な役割を果たすとともに、ペルシャ陶器の美術と技術にも影響を与えた。王（シャー）アッバース1世の治世、中国陶磁の品々の取得が盛んになる。特にサファヴィー朝でその関心はますます大きくなっていったようだ。それはホルムズ島がポルトガル保護領となったことと何らかの関係があったと推測される。中国貿易品、具体的には中国からの陶器類、が簡単に手に入るようになったからだと考えられる。アルダビールに存在するコレクションの分析結果は、相当数の中国陶磁器の買付けを許されていたポルトガルとの関係が存在したことを示唆すると推察される。

**Keywords:**

Hormuz; Persia; China; Ardabil; porcelain; trade.

Ormuz; Pérsia; China; Ardabil; porcelana; comércio.

ホルムズ島; ペルシャ; 中国; アルダビール; 陶磁器; 貿易。

The Portuguese reached the Indian Ocean by a direct maritime route in the final years of the fifteenth century. Their main goal was rather straightforward: to participate in the international trade in Asian spices and other luxury goods bound for Europe, using the newly opened maritime route via the Cape of Good Hope. There was also the project of finding Christian communities, to quote one of the men of Vasco da Gama's fleet who disembarked at Calicut in 1498: "we seek Christians and spices." As the Portuguese soon found out, Christians were scarce in Asia, and furthermore they seemed to be rather unorthodox.<sup>2</sup> But the extraordinary commercial success of their first maritime endeavours, complemented by the awareness that they were, from military, technical and logistical perspectives, fully equipped to reach their objectives, led the Portuguese to establish several bases in the west coast of India in the early years of the sixteenth century. From these outposts, careful surveys were conducted by Portuguese observers, in order to assess the trading possibilities that could be profitably explored in years to come. In the course of these exploring years, the Portuguese made two outstanding discoveries.

2 José Manuel Garcia, ed., *Viagens dos Descobrimentos* (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1983), 183 (all translations from the Portuguese are my own). On the search for Christians, see the still invaluable study by Francis M. Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travel and Rumor in the Age of Discovery* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962).

First, they rapidly understood the mechanics of medium- and long-range trading routes in maritime Asia, which were based on an elaborate regional specialisation: it appeared that each different region produced a particular commodity or set of commodities, that were then exchanged in strategically located port-cities. Countless Asian ships transported immeasurable quantities of valuable merchandise, across a vast web of maritime routes that criss-crossed the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Secondly, they promptly realised that regional trading routes, connecting different Asian ports, could be far more profitable and far less risky than the long and difficult *carreira da Índia*. The journey between Lisbon, India, and back, that had to be accomplished in large, heavy and expensive sailing ships, never took less than one and a half years to complete, involving huge investments in human, material and financial resources. In maritime Asia, on the contrary, a small local ship, with an equally small crew, spending no more than one or two months at sea, and carrying selected merchandise, could yield profits as substantial as those obtained by a big ship on the Lisbon-India run.<sup>3</sup> Among the many valuable commodities circulated within Asian trading networks, porcelains loomed prominently, and they had been exported out of China, by overland or maritime routes, for centuries. Unlike other Asian ceramics, porcelain “is remarkably hard (harder than steel) and absolutely dense (even without a glaze), and is therefore resistant to water, acids, heat, shock and general wear. It can thus remain clean, bright and shiny and as good as new for centuries.”<sup>4</sup> The Portuguese were quick to note the extraordinary success of Chinese porcelain in the Asian markets.

The development of what would later be known as the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* was a consequence of these two fundamental discoveries. With the help of their local collaborators – pilots, sailors, soldiers, merchants, factors, physicians – the Portuguese were quick to learn Asia’s secrets: the mechanics of the monsoons, which controlled sailing calendars; the safest maritime routes; the most appropriate ships to each specific journey; the wealthiest port-cities; the most valuable commodities; the centres of production and distribution of specific merchandises; the prices, measures and weights. More importantly, the Portuguese also began to learn – sometimes at a high cost – the political and religious geography of Asia, the military and naval power they had to confront in each region, where to set up bases, which places should be avoided, where to find allies or trading partners. Afonso de Albuquerque, the strategist who was responsible for the founding of the Portuguese empire in Asia, designed a plan for the conquest of several Indian Ocean

3 See Joaquim Romero Magalhães, *The Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Areas and Products* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 1998).

4 Regina Krahl, “Chinese Ceramics in Early Safavid Iran,” in *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1501-1576*, eds. Jon Thompson and Sheila R. Canby (Milan: Skira, 2003), 257-269 (257). For the circulation of porcelain in the Early Modern period, see Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 175-296; and also Stacey Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 9-39.

ports located at the confluence of major trading routes. These included Aden, Hormuz, Goa and Malacca, which, supported by powerful sailing ships and permanent military contingents, were supposed to be the basis for the intervention of the Portuguese Crown in Asian affairs. Fortresses and factories were built and set up all over maritime Asia, and soon there was a vast network of Portuguese establishments, managed by scores of civil and military servants of the Lusitanian Crown, either arrived from Europe on the annual fleets or recruited locally among friendly Asian nations, and complemented by members of sundry Catholic religious orders.<sup>5</sup>

The island of Hormuz was first visited by the Portuguese in 1507, during a naval and military campaign directed at the Red Sea and devised to establish Portuguese outposts in strategic locations of the western Indian Ocean. Attempts were then made to conquer the cities of Aden and Hormuz, but both failed due to internal dissensions among the Portuguese noblemen. In the following years, Afonso de Albuquerque, governor of the *Estado da Índia* since 1509, directed Portuguese might, first against Goa on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent, which was conquered in 1510 and immediately became the centre of Portuguese operations in Asia, and then against Malacca, one of the busiest port-cities in Southeast Asia, which was occupied in 1511, also becoming one of the strategic points of the Portuguese empire.<sup>6</sup> From Malacca, exploring expeditions were dispatched towards various Asian destinations, and namely to China, which was first visited by a small Portuguese party in 1513. Echoing this first visit, the apothecary Tomé Pires, then living in Malacca, would later write about Chinese matters in his *Suma Oriental* (1515), the first modern treatise on Asian geography, describing the mechanics of trade, and listing the most important commodities available, among which Chinese ceramics emerged paramount, no mention being made of the quantities exchanged, since it was such an abundant commodity. Other Portuguese coeval sources confirm the extraordinary importance of Chinese porcelains in the transactions that soon developed between Portuguese Malacca and the South China coast.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese ceramics had previously been known in Europe, where they arrived in small quantities, namely to Italian cities such as Venice and Genoa, through the Asian maritime and/or overland routes that reached the Mediterranean. They were seen as rare and highly valued commodities.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when first arriving in India, the Portuguese

5 For a general survey of Portuguese contacts with Asia, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700* (London: Longman, 1993).

6 On Albuquerque's conquests, see Geneviève Bouchon, *Albuquerque, le lion des mers d'Asie* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1992).

7 Armando Cortesão, ed., *A Suma Oriental de Tomé Pires e o Livro de Francisco Rodrigues* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1978), 366-367. On this first period of Portugal's relations with China, see Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins: Portugal e a China no Século XVI* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2000), 191-336; on Tomé Pires, see Rui Manuel Loureiro, "O Sudeste Asiático na *Suma Oriental* de Tomé Pires," *RC – Revista de Cultura / Review of Culture* 4 (2002): 107-123.

8 See David Whitehouse, "Chinese Porcelains in Medieval Europe," *Medieval Archaeology* 16 (1973): 63-78; and also Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Cracking the Mysteries of 'China': China(ware) in the Early Modern Imagination," *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 1 (2013): 132-167.

were immediately on the outlook for Chinese merchandise. The account of the first voyage of Vasco da Gama mentioned “many porcelains” that came from Malacca to Calicut,<sup>9</sup> while a sixteenth century Portuguese chronicler, Gaspar Correia, would report that Gama, after returning to Portugal, offered to the Portuguese Queen some “porcelains that were bought in Calicut.”<sup>10</sup> In the following years, Portuguese reports coming from Asia frequently made reference to the acquisition of Chinese porcelains. The same Gaspar Correia mentions that in 1501 Pedro Álvares Cabral, captain of the second Portuguese voyage to India, while returning to Europe, came across a Gujerati ship in the Arabian Sea, whose captain offered him a rich present that included “beautiful porcelains” and a large “pot made of porcelain and filled with bags of musk.” These were later offered to King Manuel I of Portugal.<sup>11</sup> It seems clear, then, that before the arrival of the Portuguese in India the trade in porcelain was common in the western parts of the Indian Ocean. And, on the other hand, it also seems evident that the Portuguese observers, besides being attentive to Asian realities around them, were acutely aware of the high commercial value of Chinese ceramics. The first contacts with the South China coast brought the Portuguese nearer to the producing centres of porcelain that in the opening years of the sixteenth century had already been concentrated in and around Jingdezhen.<sup>12</sup>

In 1515 another Portuguese expedition was organised against Hormuz, and this time Afonso de Albuquerque managed to establish an enduring protectorate over the island and its dependencies on both margins of the Persian Gulf.<sup>13</sup> The king of Hormuz remained nominally in control of his dispersed realm, but the Portuguese were allowed to build a powerful fortress in the city of Hormuz, to manage its prosperous customs house, to participate in the intense commercial dealings, and to monitor Asian maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf and in the Gulf of Oman. Due to its strategic location, the island kingdom of Hormuz reaped immense profits from the trading routes coming from India, Persia, Arabia and many other destinations, that crossed the Straits of Hormuz. The trade in horses was notably relevant, since Indian potentates could not live without a regular supply of Arabian and Persian equines; but many other valuable commodities passed through the barren island-city, and namely Chinese ceramics. Modern archaeological surveys conducted at Hormuz and the surrounding region have revealed a wealth of Ming porcelain fragments that bear witness to the extraordinary abundance of Chinese ceramics passing through the island in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and which had surely

9 Garcia, *Viagens dos Descobrimentos*, 218.

10 Gaspar Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, ed. Manuel Lopes de Almeida, 4 vols. (Porto: Lello & Irmão, 1975), vol. 1, 141.

11 Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, vol. 1, 226.

12 On Jingdezhen and relevant bibliography, see Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, 17-46.

13 See Dejanirah Couto and Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Ormuz, 1507-1622: Conquista e Perda* (Lisbon: Tribuna da História, 2007), 29-45.

come all the way from South China through active maritime routes.<sup>14</sup> Notably, the island of Hormuz was repeatedly visited by the great Chinese expeditions that took place in the first half of the fifteenth century under the command of the celebrated eunuch Zheng He. One of the accounts of the Chinese expedition of 1436 mentioned that blue-and-white porcelain articles could be found in Hormuz, certainly a clear evidence of the existence of large supplies.<sup>15</sup> Years later, the Portuguese physician and botanist Garcia de Orta would write in his *Colóquios dos simples e drogas e cousas medicinais da Índia*, published in Goa in 1563, that the Hormuzian people recalled that in their books they found mention “to the entry in their island of Jarun (which now is called Hormuz) of four hundred [Chinese] junks in one single day.”<sup>16</sup>

After 1515, and until the early decades of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese maintained a tight control over the kingdom of Hormuz. Within the *Estado da Índia*, the post of captain of the fortress of Hormuz became one of the most coveted among the Portuguese nobility, and the revenues of the Hormuz customs house came second only to those of Goa, the epicentre of the Portuguese empire in Asia. The Portuguese captain, nominated every three years, lived in the powerful fortress built in the time of Albuquerque, assisted by a large group of civil servants, and with a garrison of about 400 Portuguese soldiers under his command. A permanent fleet of several sailing ships, usually armed with sundry ordnance, complemented the Portuguese military and naval apparatus. The city of Hormuz, according to several European contemporary reports, was a large cosmopolitan metropolis, housing between 30 and 40 thousand people, largely Arabian and Persian, but also including merchants’ communities of Portuguese, Armenians, Turks, Italians, Gujerati, and many others. The trading movement was constant, with Portuguese and Asian ships coming and going in every direction, according to the sailing seasons. It was not uncommon to find 200 ships anchored in the city’s waterfronts. And business transactions of every kind were conducted in Hormuz’ bazaars, including, of course, the buying and selling of Chinese ceramics. The fact that Hormuz was able to maintain, throughout the sixteenth century, a strong autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Persian realm was one of the factors that contributed to Portuguese success in their control over the island-kingdom. The Safavid dynasty, which came to power in 1501, almost coincidentally with the dawn of the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, was too concerned with its own affirmation in face of powerful land-borne neighbours, such as the Ottomans and the Uzbeks, to pay too much attention to events taking place in the maritime periphery of the Persian realm.

14 See Valeria Fiorani Piacentini, *L’emporio ed il regno di Hormoz (VII – fine XV sec. d. Cr.)* (Milan: Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere, 1975), x-xvi; and Peter Morgan, “New Thoughts on Old Hormuz: Chinese Ceramics in the Hormuz Region in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” *Iran*, no. 29 (1991): 67-83.

15 See Ralph Kauz and Roderich Ptak, “Hormuz in Yuan and Ming sources,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 88 (2001): 27-75; and also Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, 240-242.

16 Garcia de Orta, *Colóquios dos simples e drogas da Índia*, ed. Count of Ficalho, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda, 1987), vol. 1, 205.

As long as the Hormuzian authorities kept paying the traditional circulation taxes to the Shah, the merchants' caravans were allowed to travel freely across the Persian territory.<sup>17</sup>

The *Estado da Índia* found its own place within the maritime world of Asia, where the Portuguese ships, with their potent artillery, were able to circulate virtually unharmed. But the Portuguese authorities in Goa, through intelligence reports collected by their own service-men or by friendly collaborators, were acutely aware of the most important continental powers – such as the Safavids in Persia, the Mughals in northern India, or the Ming in China – that could eventually pose threats to Portuguese interests. Thus, from the days of Albuquerque, regular diplomatic missions and embassies were dispatched from Goa to the courts of the most powerful Asian rulers. The Shah of Persia was one such sovereign, and Portuguese envoys visited his court on several occasions in the course of the sixteenth century, always with Hormuz present in the background. From the Portuguese point of view, it was all important to ensure that the Persian ruler maintained his benevolence towards commercial dealings that took place on the island of Hormuz and assured the prosperity of its captains and its customs house.<sup>18</sup> These occasions were especially relevant to examine Safavid protocol, as well as the ceremonial objects used in the Shah's court.<sup>19</sup> The Portuguese observers soon noted the presence of porcelain artefacts which were used by the Persian elite for drinking and eating purposes. During these embassies, an exchange of gifts usually took place, and the Portuguese, having access to the most rare and valuable European and Asian commodities, could choose the most appropriate presents. Often, porcelain was among the presents offered to the Persian rulers, as was the case in 1523, when Baltasar Pessoa presented Ismail Shah with, among many other gifts, "a large porcelain as big as a cart wheel" sent by the king of Hormuz. António Tenreiro, who was with the Portuguese ambassador, further adds that the Shah immediately had the porcelain filled with wine, from where he and his companions drank copiously; but it is not altogether clear if the same porcelain was meant.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although evidence does not

17 On the history of Hormuz, see Jean Aubin, "Le royaume d'Ormuz au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Mare Luso-Indicum* 2 (1973) : 77-179. For the Portuguese period, see Couto and Loureiro, *Ormuz, 1507-1622*, 46-77; and Luis Gil Fernández, "Ormuz pendant l'union dynastique du Portugal et de l'Espagne (1582-1622)," in *Revisiting Hormuz: Portuguese Interactions in the Persian Gulf Region in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Dejanirah Couto and Rui Manuel Loureiro, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2008), 177-190. For the genesis of the Safavid empire, see Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 1-25.

18 On the first Portuguese embassies to Persia, see Ronald Bishop Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations in Persia (1507-1524)* (Bethesda, Maryland: Decatur Press, 1970); and also Dejanirah Couto, "Les missions diplomatiques portugaises en Perse dans la première moitié du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle: les audiences de Miguel Ferreira (1514) et de Fernão Gomes de Lemos (1515) à la cour de Châh Esma'îl Safavide," *Anais de História de Além-Mar* X (2009): 277-308; and Dejanirah Couto, "Les festins à la cour de Châh Isma'îl safavide vus par les ambassadeurs portugais de la première moitié du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Fernão Gomes de Lemos (1515) et Baltasar Pessoa (1523)," *Journal Asiatique* 299, no. 2 (2011): 569-584.

19 See references to relevant sources and bibliography in Rui Manuel Loureiro, "Representações do Golfo Pérsico nas fontes portuguesas, 1550-1600 / Images of the Persian Gulf in Portuguese Sources, 1550-1660," *Oriente* 8 (2005): 20-40.

20 António Baião, ed., *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1923): 37-38. On the consumption of wine in Safavid Persia, see Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37-68.

abound, it seems that Hormuz, in the Portuguese period, continued to be an important port of call in the commerce of Chinese ceramics arriving there by sea route.<sup>21</sup>

The *Estado da Índia* was oriented towards the Cape Route, and every year a varying number of large ships was dispatched from Goa and Cochin, bound for Lisbon, with precious cargos of spices, drugs, ceramics, textiles, jewellery, and precious stones.<sup>22</sup> But, apart from this main intercontinental route, the Portuguese were soon crossing many other short- and medium-range maritime routes, getting involved in Asian local, regional, and also international traffics. First, Portuguese Crown ships, travelling from one Asian port-city to the next in political, military or diplomatic missions, frequently transported smaller or larger quantities of merchandise. Then, the *Estado da Índia* began establishing a set of fixed routes – from Goa to Bengal, from Goa to Malacca, from Goa to the Maluku islands, and so on – that were auctioned to the highest bidder among the Portuguese nobility, or offered as rewards for services rendered to the Portuguese Crown. Thirdly, many Portuguese military and civil servants, as soon as they finished their contract with the *Estado da Índia*, started their own ventures, frequently as merchant-men in the Asian maritime realm. Using locally built ships, they traded any number of precious commodities between different Asian destinations. Soon, besides the official Portuguese empire, there was another *shadow empire* in maritime Asia, formed by Portuguese informal communities, independent from the Lusitanian Crown. Although Portuguese authorities did their best to get some sort of control over Asian maritime trade, especially in the western Indian Ocean through the *cartaz* or passport system,<sup>23</sup> Asian mercantile communities maintained most of their traditional routes, and valuable commodities such as porcelain kept being moved around as they had been for centuries. In the specific case of Hormuz, merchants from Gujarat were largely responsible for incoming commercial traffic from India and further afield.<sup>24</sup>

In the middle years of the sixteenth century, the *Estado da Índia*, complemented by the Portuguese informal networks of the *shadow empire*, stretched all the way from Mozambique

21 See Hossein Bakhtiari, “Rapporti tra le scoperte archeologiche nell’isola di Hormoz nel golfo Persico e i ricordi e le impressioni dei viaggiatori portoghesi,” in *Vice-Almirante A. Teixeira da Mota – In Memoriam*, 2 vols., ed. Rogério d’Oliveira (Lisbon: Academia de Marinha & Instituto de Investigação Científica e Tropical, 1987-1989), vol. 2, 95-114; and also João Lizardo, “A importação de porcelana da China pelos portugueses no século XVI, face aos dados concretos disponíveis,” *Arqueologia Moderna e Contemporânea* 1 (2010): 153-161.

22 On the *carreira da Índia*, see Geneviève Bouchon, *Navires et Cargaisons: Retour de l’Inde en 1518* (Paris: Société de l’Histoire d’Orient, 1977); and Rui Landeiro Godinho, *A Carreira da Índia: Aspectos e Problemas da Torna-Viagem (1550-1649)* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2005). For a later period, see Niels Steensgaard, “The Return Cargoes of the Carreira da Índia in the 16th and Early 17th Century,” in *Indo-Portuguese History: Old Issues, New Questions*, ed. Teotónio R. de Souza (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1985), 13-31.

23 See K.S. Mathew, “Trade in the Indian Ocean and the Portuguese System of Cartazes,” in *The First Portuguese Colonial Empire*, ed. Malin Newitt (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1986), 69-84.

24 See Dejanirah Couto, “Hormuz under the Portuguese Protectorate: Some Notes on the Maritime Economy Nets to India (Early 16<sup>th</sup> Century),” in *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, ed. Ralph Kauz, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 43-60.



Island, in the east coast of Africa, to the southernmost islands of Japan, which were first visited by Portuguese navigators in the early 1540's. In-between these two geographical extremities, innumerable Portuguese ships travelled all the known maritime routes, carrying cargoes of precious commodities from countless production and distribution centres to as many consumers' markets. Regional routes included, among many others, the Goa-Hormuz route, the Goa-Malacca route and the Malacca-Macau route, all three of them controlled or monitored by the Portuguese authorities in Goa. Macau had been the latest addition in the *Portuguese network*, after several decades of informal contacts between Portuguese and Chinese merchant-men taking place in several deserted islands off the South China coast. In 1555 there was already an informal Portuguese settlement in the Macau peninsula, closely watched by Chinese officials from neighbouring Guangzhou. The well-known Fernão Mendes Pinto, while travelling from Goa to Japan in a Jesuit party, stayed in Macau long enough to write a letter to one of his Goan colleagues, this being the first Portuguese extant document dated from such location.<sup>25</sup> In the following years, Macau would become one of the busiest port-cities in Asia, due to its strong involvement in the trade between China and Japan that had the Portuguese as indispensable middlemen for nearly a century.<sup>26</sup>

One of the first Portuguese visitors to Macau was Gaspar da Cruz, a Dominican friar who was conducting an all-Asia survey for his religious order. European Catholic organisations were then trying to concentrate their missionary endeavours in specific geographical areas in Asia, and the Portuguese friar was studying the possibility of opening up a mission in Chinese territory. He stayed in Guangzhou for one month, accompanying his merchant compatriots who regularly visited the bi-annual trading fairs, and he was able to collect a vast amount of sound intelligence about China. Years later, after returning to Portugal, Gaspar da Cruz wrote and published the *Tratado das cousas da China* (Évora, 1569-1570), the first European treatise devoted to Chinese matters. Among a wealth of other extremely interesting news about China, there were various mentions to porcelain, namely about the manufacturing processes, which until then had been a subject of intense debate among the Portuguese. The Dominican missionary also informed that the most important Chinese centre for production of ceramics was located in the province of "Sanxi" (that is, Jiangxi), where in fact the town of Jingdezhen is located.<sup>27</sup> Curiously enough, between 1560 and 1563, Gaspar da Cruz was stationed in the city of Hormuz, where he founded

25 Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Em busca das Origens de Macau* (Macau: Museu Marítimo de Macau, 1997), 67-75. On the Portuguese settlement in Macau, also see Jin Guo Ping and Wu Zhiliang, *Revisitar os primórdios de Macau: para uma nova abordagem da História* (Macau: Instituto Português do Oriente & Fundação Oriente, 2007), 179-318. And on Mendes Pinto, see Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Nas Partes da China: Colectânea de Estudos Dispersos* (Lisbon: Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, 2009), 151-197.

26 On the Macao-Japan trade see the classic Charles R. Boxer, *The Great Ship from Amacón: Annals of the Old Japan Trade, 1555-1640* (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1963).

27 Gaspar da Cruz, *Tratado das coisas da China*, ed. Rui Manuel Loureiro (Lisbon: Edições Cotovia & Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos portugueses, 1997), 100 and 149-150. On Gaspar da Cruz, see Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins*, 617-645; and also Eduardo Ferraz and Rui Manuel Loureiro, "Frei Gaspar da Cruz e a porcelana no século XVI," *Kéramica* 274 (2005): 6-16.

a Dominican convent. His treatise included an appendix with a Portuguese translation of the lost Persian chronicle *Shahnameh*, written by the Hormuzian prince Turanshah in the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>28</sup> However, no mention is made by Gaspar da Cruz concerning the existence and/or use of porcelains in the city of Hormuz.

In fact, extant sixteenth century documentation is not excessively prolix about daily life on the island, and much less so about the collection of precious artefacts such as Chinese porcelains, owned by the noblest residents of the Portuguese fortress, the kings of Hormuz, or the wealthiest Christian, Islamic or Jewish merchants in town. An interesting visual testimony of the Portuguese way of life in the island of Hormuz appears in the famous *Codex Casanatense 1889*, which is kept at the homonymous library in Rome. Under the designation of “Album di disegni indiani,” the codex includes a collection of 76 watercolor drawings, on large double sheets of paper, which were painted in India, probably in Goa, in the middle years of the sixteenth century, by an Indian artist. The drawings present a sort of systematic geo-ethnographic compendium of Oriental peoples contacted by the Portuguese in the first half of the sixteenth century, along the African and the Asian coast lines, from the “cafres from the Cape of Good Hope” all the way to the “people from the land of China.”<sup>29</sup> Most of the illustrations are very detailed, appearing to have been sketched on location, with live models. Some of the drawings include Portuguese people, and one of them represents “*Jente portuguesa de ormuz*,” a group of Portuguese men and Asian women who are having their meal inside a pool in Hormuz, surrounded by a large group of servants, also Asian.<sup>30</sup> Curiously enough, several Chinese blue-and-white dishes and bowls are being used to serve food, in a clear indication that the Portuguese living in the city of Hormuz possessed, appreciated and employed porcelain artefacts in their daily lives.

This example can be linked with two well-known facts. On the one hand, Portuguese servants of the *Estado da Índia* began, from an early date, making use of porcelain wares in their daily life, namely plates, bowls and bottles for eating and drinking purposes. It was possible to find in the Asian ports rather inexpensive Chinese ceramics, which were practical to utilise and easy to clean. Afonso de Albuquerque, in a letter to the Portuguese king D. Manuel I written in 1514, had complained about “the loss he received by serving meals in porcelains” to his soldiers, who kept breaking them.<sup>31</sup> In all likelihood, the practice of using porcelains was generalised to all Portuguese fortresses and establishments, includ-

28 Cruz, *Tratado das coisas da China*, 267-279.

29 Luís de Matos, ed., *Imagens do Oriente no século XVI: Reprodução do código português da Biblioteca Casanatense* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda, 1985), i and lxxvi. On the codex, see Georg Schurhammer, *Orientalia*, ed. László Szilas (Lisbon & Rome: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos & Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1963), 111-118; José Manuel Garcia, *Ao Encontro dos Descobrimientos: Temas de História da Expansão* (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1994), 85-92; and also Rui Manuel Loureiro, “Information networks in the *Estado da Índia*, a case study: Was Garcia de Orta the organizer of the *Codex Casanatense 1889*?” *Anais de História de Além-Mar* 13 (2012): 41-72.

30 Matos, *Imagens do Oriente no século XVI*, xviii.

31 Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, vol. 2, 408.

ing Hormuz, from the early decades of the sixteenth century. On the other hand, as soon as regular contacts were established with China, Portuguese noblemen, and namely those detached to the fortress of Malacca, began ordering sets of Chinese ceramics, sometimes with specific inscriptions, other times with their families' coats of arms. In this way, they acquired commodities that were simultaneously exotic and personalised.<sup>32</sup> Matias de Albuquerque was one of those *fidalgos*. While he was stationed at Malacca in the late 1570's, he commissioned from Chinese merchants who regularly visited that Portuguese outpost an unspecified quantity of porcelains, ornamented with his own coat of arms, of which one blue-and-white plate still survives. Later, when he served as captain of Hormuz between 1584 and 1587, he brought his Chinese ceramics with him to the island.<sup>33</sup>

Another interesting testimony may be recalled, from a slightly later period. Agostinho de Azevedo was an Augustinian friar who lived in Hormuz for eleven years, between 1589 and 1600. After returning to Europe by the overland route, in 1603 he prepared a large manuscript, "Relação do Estado da Índia," an account of Portuguese endeavours in Asia. And in this text, while describing the most important merchandises that proceeded from China, he claimed that in Hormuz he had seen "many and very large antique porcelains from China, in the houses of the king [of Hormuz] and of his *guasil* [minister]." He further added that the most eminent Muslims in Hormuz had "niches on the walls of their residences, similar to windows", where they displayed their most valuable porcelains. Apparently, according to the Augustinian missionary, this was the most fashionable decoration one could have in all of Persia, affordable only to the wealthiest.<sup>34</sup> Agostinho de Azevedo's statements are remarkable, since they bring some light onto an architectural and decorative practice which was then quite common among the Persian elites, and apparently was also used in Hormuz. At the same time, he introduces a subtle distinction that must be taken into account, between common use Chinese ceramics, used in daily life and available at reasonable prices, and "antique porcelains from China," collected by the Persian elites and probably rather expensive.

32 See Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, "Porcelanas de Encomenda," *Oceanos* 14 (1993): 40-56; Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, "Porcelana Chinesa: De presente régio a produto comercial," in *Caminhos da Porcelana: Dinastias Ming e Qing / The Porcelain Route: Ming and Qing Dynasties*, ed. João Rodrigues Calvão, (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 1998), 93-108; and Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, *Cerâmica da China: Coleção RA*, 3 vols. (Lisbon: Jorge Welsh Books, 2011), vol. 1, 123-139.

33 The plate is part of the collections of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, in Lisbon; see Simonetta Luz Afonso, Jean-Paul Desroches and Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, eds., *Du Tage à la mer de Chine: Une épopée portugaise* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1992), 98. Fragments of a similar plate were found in Hormuz in 1977; see Ulrich Wiesner, *Chinesische Keramik auf Hormoz: Spuren einer Handelsmetropole im Persischen Golf* (Cologne: Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, 1979). On Albuquerque's career, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "'The Life and Actions of Mathias de Albuquerque (1547-1609)': A Portuguese Source for Deccan History," *Portuguese Studies* 2 (1995): 62-77.

34 Agostinho de Azevedo, "Relação do Estado da Índia," in *Documentação Ultramarina Portuguesa*, ed. António da Silva Rego, 5 vols. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1960-1967), vol. 1, 197-263 (233). On Azevedo, see Georg Schurhammer, *Francisco Javier: Su vida y su tiempo*, trans. Félix de Areitio Ariznabarreta, Francisco Zurbano and Jesús Iturrioz, 4 vols. (Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra, Compañía de Jesús & Arzobispado de Pamplona, 1992), vol. 3, 564-571.

The relations between Persia and China – political, diplomatic, and economic – were many centuries old when the Portuguese first arrived on the island of Hormuz in the early years of the sixteenth century.<sup>35</sup> As previously mentioned, archaeological evidence found in Persian Gulf settlements frequently includes shards and/or pieces of Chinese ceramics, testifying to an intense maritime trade over the centuries.<sup>36</sup> After the thirteenth century, during the Yuan dynasty, there was an increase in all sorts of interactions between China and Persia, the overland route gaining importance over the maritime one, which after the end of the *Pax Mongolica* regained its previous relevance.<sup>37</sup> For centuries, then, Chinese ceramics had been imported into Persia, both by land and sea routes, assuming an important role in the daily life and in the collecting habits of the Persian elites, and also influencing the arts and crafts of Persian potters. The Persian market especially favoured blue-and-white porcelain, which started to be produced in large quantities during the fourteenth century, available evidence apparently pointing to the Persian origin of the cobalt-blue pigment used in that particular type of Chinese ceramics.<sup>38</sup>

Porcelain was certainly a luxury commodity in Persia, on account of its exotic nature: it came from distant lands, it was associated with the brilliance of Chinese culture, it was aesthetically imposing, it was technically outstanding, and it was expensive. It brought, therefore, social status upon its owners, which explains the development of collecting practices among the Central Asian elites of Mongol extraction or influence.<sup>39</sup> The fifteenth century Timurid ruler Ulugh Beg appears to have been one of the first Central Asian sovereigns to organise a specific architectural display for his collection of valuable Chinese porcelain, which he kept in a *Chini-khaneh*, or ‘China room’, in his palace in Samarkand.<sup>40</sup> Evidences of the existence of ‘China-rooms’ within the Persian realm do not abound. But it appears obvious that the habit of collecting precious porcelains was

35 See Aly Mazahéri, *La route de la soie* (Paris: SPAG, 1983).

36 See Axelle Rougeulle, “Les importations de céramiques chinoises dans le Golfe Arabo-Persique (8-11<sup>èmes</sup> siècles),” *Archéologie Islamique* 2 (1991): 5-46; Michèle Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, “Uma mercadoria com grande procura: a cerâmica chinesa importada no Golfo Árabe-Pérsico, séculos IX-XIV / A Commodity in Great Demand : Chinese Ceramics Imported in the Arabo-persian Gulf from the Ninth to the Fourteenth Century,” *Oriente* 8 (2004): 26-38.

37 See Jean Aubin, “Y a-t-il eu interruption du commerce par mer entre le Golfe Persique et l’Inde du XI<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle?,” *Studia* 11 (1963): 165-171.

38 See Margaret Medley, “Islam, Chinese Porcelain and Ardabil,” *Iran* 13 (1975): 31-37; and Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 58-64. For a recent technical appraisal, see Du Feng and Su Bao Ru, “Further study of sources of the imported cobalt-blue pigment used on Jingdezhen porcelain from late 13 to early 15 centuries,” *Science in China Series E: Technological Sciences* 51, no. 3 (2008): 249-259.

39 On the specific interactions between Chinese and Persian ceramics, see Priscilla Soucek, “Ceramic Production as Exemplar of Yuan-Ilkhanid Relations,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35 (1999): 125-141; and Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie*, 39-73.

40 See Margaret Medley, “Islam, Chinese Porcelain and Ardabil,” 35-36; and Stacey Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics,” 31-32. On Ulugh Beg, see V.V. Barthold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia – Volume II: Ulugh Beg*, trans. V. Barthold and T. Barthold (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 43-177.

emulated by early Safavid rulers and members of their families.<sup>41</sup> One first example is given by Mahin Banu Sultan, the sister of Shah Tahmasp, who in 1561 left many of her most precious possessions, including a porcelain collection, to the shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhad.<sup>42</sup> But another outstanding instance may be invoked, that of the endowment of Shah Abbas I to the Ardabil shrine.<sup>43</sup>

During the reign of Shah Abbas I, a particular interest in collecting Chinese ceramics seems to have developed in the Safavid realm. Was there some sort of connection with the Portuguese establishment of Hormuz and the consequent easier accessibility to foreign commodities, and namely porcelains? In fact, the Persian ruler himself, as well as some of his most trusted collaborators, such as the Armenian *ghulam* (or royal slave) Qarachaqay Khan, amassed large quantities of valuable porcelains, mostly of the blue-and-white variety. Chinese porcelains were considered an extremely valuable commodity, not specifically for daily use, but rather for purposes of gathering significant collections, which would be highly regarded socially. These collections are rather well-known, because in 1607-1608 the Shah decided to make another of his customary endowments to a religious institution, this time to the Safavid ancestral shrine in Ardabil.<sup>44</sup> This shrine had been founded by Shayk Safi al-din Ishaq, the thirteenth-fourteenth century Sufi mystic who was at the origin of the Safavid dervish order that eventually gave rise to a political dynasty with Ismail Shah in the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Several Portuguese based in Hormuz had visited the city of Ardabil, located not far from the Caspian Sea, normally in the course of overland journeys to the Mediterranean. António Tenreiro, already mentioned, passed through Ardabil in the 1520's, noting in his *Itinerario* the existence of an important shrine, which he mistook for a mosque: "Here lies a mosque which is famous among Muslims, where the father of the *Sufi* is buried."<sup>46</sup> Decades later, in the 1560's, another Portuguese traveller known as *Mestre* Afonso repeated the very same words, adding that all the ancestors of Shah Tahmasp, who then ruled Persia, were

41 See Krahl, "Chinese Ceramics in Early Safavid Iran," 257-269.

42 Sussan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe and Massumeh Farhad, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 122. See also Abolala Soudavar, "A Chinese Dish from the Lost Endowment of Princess Sultanum (925-69/1519-62)," in *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar*, ed. Kambiz Eslami (Princeton: Zagros Press, 1998), 125-134. On the shrine, see Sheila R. Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (London: The British Museum Press, 2009), 186-219.

43 About this specific case, see Medley, "Islam, Chinese Porcelain and Ardabil," 31-37; Babaie, Babayan, Baghdiantz-McCabe and Farhad, *Slaves of the Shah*, 121-125; Sheila R. Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, 116-185; and Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics," 31-37.

44 On the Shah's endowments, see Robert D. McChesney, "Waqf and Public Policy: The Waqfs of Shah 'Abbas, 1011-1023/1602-1614," *Asian and African Studies* 15 (1981): 165-190.

45 On the shrine, see Kishwar Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine: Architecture, Religion and Power in Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

46 Baião, *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra*, 42. The Portuguese often referred to Shah Ismail as the "Sufi" or "Sofi."

also buried in the same shrine. He actually did not visit Ardabil, but was using a copy of Tenreiro's *Itinerario*, first published in Coimbra in 1560, as a travel guide.<sup>47</sup>

The Shah's *waqf* to the Ardabil Shrine comprised a large set of manuscript books and, more important in the present instance, a collection of about 1.200 pieces of porcelain, of which more than 800 are still extant in several Iranian museum facilities.<sup>48</sup> A special *Chini-khaneh* was prepared in the Ardabil Shrine to receive the endowment, and in 1611 the porcelains were installed in several hundred niches made of wood and plaster. No coeval account explains what pieces were exhibited in the niches, which as they appear today seem more adequate to taller artefacts, such as bottles, ewers, or jars, and not so much to the many large dishes included in the endowment.<sup>49</sup> Apparently, besides being displayed for relatively restricted public enjoyment, the Chinese ceramics were also occasionally used for purposes of collective receptions or ceremonies. During public celebrations which included eating and drinking, some of the porcelains may have been accidentally broken, since they had to be removed from their niches and then placed back, thus explaining the disappearance of about 300 pieces.<sup>50</sup> The surviving pieces can be divided in several groups, for methodological purposes.<sup>51</sup> The majority of them, with the exception of 31 pieces, exhibit the endowment inscription of Shah Abbas I, signalling that the Safavid ruler was the ultimate owner and endower. But many other pieces also have other inscriptions, namely with references to one of Abbas' closest collaborators.

At least 90 pieces of a particularly homogeneous group of fifteenth century blue-and-white porcelains are also inscribed with the name of Qarachaqay Khan, the Armenian slave who in 1616 was nominated commander-in-chief of the Safavid army. The double inscription has usually been interpreted as a proof that the pieces originally belonged to the Armenian royal slave, who had carefully collected them, and when the Shah decided to make his endowment to the Ardabil Shrine he followed suite, in order to increase his

47 Baião, *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra*, 184. On Tenreiro, see Jean Aubin, "Pour une étude critique de l'Itinerário d'António Tenreiro," *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Português* 3 (1971): 238-252, and Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, "Un rapport ottoman sur António Tenreiro," *Mare Luso-Indicum* 3 (1976): 161-173; about Afonso, see Vasco Resende, "Viagens de um cirurgião português na Pérsia: o Itinerário de Mestre Afonso (1565-1566) / The Travels of a Portuguese surgeon in Safavid Persia: the Itinerary of Mestre Afonso (1565-1566)," *Oriente* 19 (2008): 106-122.

48 The extant collection was studied in 1950 by John A. Pope, *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art - Smithsonian Institution, 1956); see further Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, 116-185.

49 Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics," 33, n. 94.

50 See the suggestion in Caroline Mawer, "Washing up - and the Ardabil collection," <http://www.carolinemawer.com/whats-new/shah-abbas-old/washing-up-and-the-ardabil-collection/> [accessed 31-08-2013]

51 Having in mind the difficulty of gaining access to John A. Pope, *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine*, for a summary of the numbers and types of porcelains in the extant collection, see Margaret Medley, "Ardabil Collection of Chinese Porcelain," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ardabil#pt.4](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ardabil#pt.4) [accessed 31-08-2013].

political standing with Abbas I.<sup>52</sup> But taking into consideration that Qarachaqay only came into positions of power after 1602-1603, and would only then have the necessary means to start and maintain his collection, while at the same time having in mind the fact that his part of the collection seems to form a specific unit from a visual and formal perspective, perhaps another interpretation may be advanced. Perhaps the Safavid ruler originally also owned the 90 pieces, which he offered in block to his close collaborator as a reward for outstanding services rendered; hence, the double inscription. And when Shah Abbas decided to endow his porcelain collection to the Ardabil Shrine, Qarachaqay had no other choice than to emulate his master.

A still unsolved question is the possible origin of the pieces of porcelain included in the collections.<sup>53</sup> Qarachaqay Khan's slightly fewer than 100 pieces might have been the result of a princely gift from the Safavid ruler or, alternatively, of a single acquisition through purchase or confiscation. What about the origins of Shah Abbas' more than 1.000 pieces? The Safavid ruler may have inherited part of the collection from his ancestors, while the other part was certainly gathered after he ascended to power in 1587, whether through offers from his subjects, through diplomatic gifts from foreign embassies, through looting during the frequent military campaigns against his internal and external enemies, or through normal purchases. The vast majority of the extant pieces of the Ardabil endowment, around 700, pre-date the Portuguese arrival on the Indian Ocean. It is not yet established if the Portuguese, in the course of the sixteenth century, had some sort of involvement in the trade in antique Chinese porcelains in the Asian seas, and namely between China and Persia, coeval Portuguese sources being rather sketchy about the subject. Of course, Gaspar da Cruz in his *Tratado das cousas da China* wrote about the existence of extremely valuable porcelains, made in Jingdezhen, which the Europeans could only buy as contraband.<sup>54</sup> But they were probably not yet aware of the high value of certain antiques, if Jesuit reports coming from Japan in the later years of the sixteenth century are taken into account.<sup>55</sup> This means, most certainly, that these Chinese ceramics reached Persia, either by the overland or the maritime routes, through the mediation of Asian merchants, before 1500. Perhaps some of the pieces were even brought by the Zheng He's expeditions that visited the Persian Gulf area, and eventually reached the hands of interested Persian collectors.

52 Babaie, Babayan, Baghdiantz-McCabe and Farhad, *Slaves of the Shah*, 123-125.

53 See the suggestions of Pedro Moura Carvalho, "Porcelains for the Shah, Ardabil and the Chinese Ceramics Trade in the Persian Gulf," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 66 (2001-2002): 47-56.

54 Cruz, *Tratado das coisas da China*, 150.

55 Luís Fróis, a Jesuit missionary active in Japan in the second half of the sixteenth century, expressed his surprise at the high prices that Japanese noblemen were ready to spend on antique ceramics used in the tea ceremony. Perhaps this is indicative of the Portuguese lack of antiquarian sense when it came to Oriental ceramics. See Luís Fróis, *Historia de Japam*, ed. Joseph Wicki, 5 vols. (Lisbon: Biblioteca Nacional, 1976-1984), vol. 2, 39. On Fróis, see Loureiro, *Nas Partes da China*, 199-232.

Concerning the 120 porcelain pieces in the Ardabil extant collection that can be dated to the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, including a variety of blue-and-white bowls, plates, ewers, vases, and also *kendi*, there is a high probability that they came into Persia through Hormuz. The entrance of the Portuguese into the Indian Ocean world, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, did not radically alter overall currents of trade, but rather short-circuited some of the main maritime routes, while introducing distortions in many others. A rather important part of the traffic between China and Malacca came into Portuguese hands in the middle of the sixteenth century, when the *Japan voyage*, sponsored by the *Estado da Índia*, began to function regularly. Every year, a large Portuguese *nau* sailed from Goa all the way to the southern islands of the Japanese archipelago, and came back by way of Macau, carrying in its holds massive cargos of Chinese commodities, among which porcelains occupied a significant part.<sup>56</sup> A glimpse at the contents of these great ships is offered by the *Santa Catarina* incident, when the Portuguese ship of that name was captured by the Dutch off Patane on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, when she was sailing from Macau to Goa. In the transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, European competitors, and among them the Dutch, launched repeated expeditions into Asian waters, to try and get hold of a part of the lucrative trades that until then had made the fortune of the Portuguese.<sup>57</sup> When the *Santa Catarina* was captured by Admiral Jakob van Heemskeerk in February 1603 she was carrying 900 people on board, in addition to a shipment that was later taken to the Low Countries and sold for approximately 3.5 million guildens, a truly astronomical figure, corresponding at the time to half the capital of the recently incorporated VOC, the Dutch East India Company.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary Dutch sources described in some detail the cargo that had been seized and was later sold at auction in Amsterdam. It included, among merchandise such as Chinese textiles, furniture, sugar, and drugs, approximately sixty tonnes of porcelain, including dishes “of every sort and kind”.<sup>59</sup> Although this shipment caused great amazement in the Low Countries, the goods carried by the other big Iberian ships that travelled through the South China Sea did not differ much. However, it is quite likely that many of these goods were destined for the Asian markets, in particular the 10 thousand pieces of porcelain carried on board.<sup>60</sup>

56 See Boxer, *The Great Ship from Amacon*, 21-171.

57 For a general overview of Portuguese-Dutch conflicts, see Ernst van Veen, *Decay or Defeat? An inquiry into the Portuguese decline in Asia, 1580-1645* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, 2000).

58 See Peter Borschberg, “The Seizure of the *Sta. Catarina* Revisited: The Portuguese Empire in Asia, VOC Politics and the Origins of the Dutch-Johor Alliance (1602-c.1616),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002): 31-62.

59 Borschberg, “The Seizure of the *Sta. Catarina* Revisited,” 38. About the porcelain that reached the Netherlands, see Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 54-83.

60 On the inter-Asian trade carried by the Portuguese, see James Boyajian, *The Portuguese Trade in Asia under the Habsburgs, 1580-1640* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).



Thus, it would be extremely probable that at least part of the Ardabil collection of Chinese ceramics came to Persia through the mediation of Portuguese Hormuz. Meanwhile, a specific example may be invoked to support this supposition. It has to do with the so-called 'Jorge Álvares Chinese bottles'. Jorge Álvares was a Portuguese merchant and adventurer, very active in the South China Sea in the middle years of the sixteenth century. He was one of the first Portuguese to visit Japan, of which he wrote a manuscript account in 1548. A few years later, in 1552, his ship was moored in Shangchuan, an island off the coast of Guangdong province, where in December of that same year the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier passed away. The Portuguese ships trading in Japan had just recently started using Guangdong anchorages, this practice eventually leading to the establishment of a permanent settlement in Macau. Perhaps during the voyage between Malacca and Japan, the year before, Jorge Álvares had commissioned from Chinese merchants a large set of porcelain bottles, personalised with the inscription "ISTO MANDOU FAZER JORGE ALVRZ NA ERA DE 1552," meaning that he had ordered the pieces in the year 1552. The bottles were in fact delivered to him in Shangchuan, on his way back from the Japanese archipelago. But unfortunately Álvares was killed in late 1552 or early 1553, a few weeks after his return to Malacca, while he was in the countryside chopping for wood.<sup>61</sup> Nothing is known about the dispersion of his possessions. But nine of his bottles are still extant in museums and collections around the world.<sup>62</sup> And precisely one of those "Jorge Álvares bottles" is part of the extant Ardabil Shrine collection; it could only have arrived in Persia by way of Hormuz and the Portuguese connection.

In the early years of the seventeenth century Shah Abbas I had decided to put an end to Portuguese control over the entry of the Persian Gulf and, after a series of missions had been dispatched from Lisbon and/or Goa to the Safavid ruler's court with no success, the fortress of Hormuz was conquered by a Persian and English coalition in 1622.<sup>63</sup> But the Portuguese soon found new operational centres, first in Muscat on the Omani coast and later in Bandar-e Kong on the Persian mainland, not far from the island of Hormuz, from where they continued to be involved in regional politics and maritime trade.<sup>64</sup> In any case, for more than a century they had played an important role in the Persian Gulf region from their Hormuz outpost. Through ports and routes that the Portuguese controlled all over maritime Asia, Chinese porcelains easily found their way from the Jingdezhen kilns to Macau, then to Malacca and Goa, and to the merchants' shops in the bazaars of Hormuz, and from there to Safavid Persia.

61 See Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins*, 487-493. This Jorge Álvares must be distinguished from two homonyms, also with connections to China in the first half of the sixteenth century; see Schurhammer, *Francisco Javier*, vol. 3, 63-64.

62 See Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, *Cerâmica da China: Coleção RA*, vol. 1, 160.

63 See Couto and Loureiro, *Ormuz, 1507 e 1622*, 77-113.

64 See Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of Five Port Cities, 1500-1730* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2006), 323-477.

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