

The **PORTUGUESE**  
and the  
**STRAITS of MELAKA**  
1575–1619

*Power, Trade and Diplomacy*



Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto

The Portuguese  
and the  
Straits of Melaka,  
1575–1619

Power, Trade and Diplomacy

Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto  
*Translated by* Roopanjali Roy

  
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# PREFACE

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As the age of imperialism and the painful process of decolonization fade into a more distant horizon, the study of European presence in Asia is experiencing something of a renaissance. Students and researchers are subjecting source materials to fresh scrutiny, shaping a fresh image of the colonial era and capturing experiences across different strata of society. Attention is now being paid to a spectrum of social processes such as acculturation, assimilation, social insertion, hybridity, marginalisation, cooperation, and globalisation.

Over the past decades, attention has been placed on the early motives, means, mechanisms and epochs of European expansion together with the social, economic, technological, religious and political factors that enabled these processes. Many older exposés upheld the three “G’s” — God, gold and glory — and celebrated conquest as the triumph of a superior Europe over the other peoples around the globe. These admittedly oversimplistic paradigms of historical analysis, it would appear, have finally been fortunately relegated to the dustbin of discarded research methodologies.

Arguably, in no historical subfield have the underlying paradigms of analysis shifted more than for the early modern period. It was the 15th and 16th century that witnessed the establishment of the first European colonial settlements. Stimulus for deeper research on the latter Middle Ages and the early modern world almost certainly stemmed from a relatively recent plethora of “quintennial celebrations” — from the “discovery” of the Cape of Good Hope (1488–1988), the Portuguese circumnavigation of the African continent (1498–1998) and the Portuguese conquest of the Melaka Sultanate to the Portuguese (1511–2011) to the Spanish “discovery” of the Americas (1492–1992) and soon also of the Pacific



Ocean (1513–2013). At an official level, these commemorations of the European reconnaissance are now being matched, and to an extent also intentionally juxtaposed, by earlier Asian — specifically Chinese — feats of maritime navigation: the great voyages of the Chinese Admiral Zheng He of the early 15th century. It can hardly escape attention that Europe’s aggressive, military and expansionist programme is sharply contrasted by the (supposedly) peaceful, cultural and commercial intentions of Zheng He, that Imperial Eunuch of the Ming Dynasty whose voyages — rightly or wrongly — are celebrated in Asia as missions of “friendship” and “inter-cultural exchange”.

Thanks to considerable research funds generously made available in recent times from both private and public sponsors, the topic of European presence in Asia from the late 1400s to the late 1700s is experiencing a revival. The now classic works of Boxer, Chaudhuri, Furber, Lach, MacGregor, Meilink-Roelofs, Reid, Schrieke, Thomaz, or Van Leur — just to select a handful of examples — are now supplemented by a growing pool of historical studies that revisit known source materials, and sometimes also draw on rare prints or recently (re-) discovered manuscripts. With respect to 16th- and 17th-century Southeast Asia, Portuguese and Dutch sources certainly retain their pre-eminent position in scholarly circles. But recent studies are making more extensive use of documents, reports and cartographical materials written in European languages including Danish, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Portuguese and Spanish.

Under the editorship of Armando Cortesão, the Hakluyt Society in London published the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires with English translation in two volumes. With the benefit of hindsight, this bi-lingual edition marked a major breakthrough for the study of early modern Southeast Asia generally speaking. It has proven especially important to historians of Asia examining the dynamics of regional and long-distance inter-Asian trade and it has proven to be an invaluable source for understanding of that important period of transition between the Melaka Sultanate and Portuguese colonial port settlement. In this context one invariably thinks of the landmark studies by Luís Filipe R. Thomaz, Professor of History at the Universidade Católica in Lisbon, who has so meticulously combed the histories, documents and chronicles of Portuguese expansion. From the information he has gleaned from this pool of sparsely studied materials, he has cogently reconstructed an image of early colonial Melaka that was embedded in a patchwork of interlocked and overlapping commercial networks and found itself surrounded by competing, sometimes expanding

politics that sustained a fragile but ever-shifting balance of power in Malaya, the Indonesian Archipelago and naturally also further afield. There can be little doubt that Thomaz has left for himself an enduring place in the history writing of the Malay world, and arguably Southeast Asia at large.

The present study *The Portuguese and the Straits of Melaka, 1575–1619: Power, Trade and Diplomacy* by Paulo Pinto fruitfully draws on new historiographical trends and builds carefully on the accomplishments of Thomaz as well as other internationally recognized scholars from Europe, Asia and beyond. The work was originally completed as a *mestrado* thesis for the Universidade Nova in Lisbon in 1994 and was first published in a revised Portuguese language edition in 1997. The period Pinto has chosen is a relatively narrow one — 1573/5 to 1619 — that spans an exciting yet highly problematic period for the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. Geographically and thematically the author's attention is focused on the inter-dependent, triangular relationship between Portuguese Melaka, Johor and Aceh and is limited in time from the Acehnese attacks on Melaka (1573/5) to the establishment of Dutch Batavia under Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1619). In contrast to the earlier decades of the 16th century, the period between 1573 and ca. 1605 is far less familiar to present-day students and researchers. Several reasons stand behind Pinto's choice of this period. With the end of the Melaka sultanate in 1511, regional power constellations were to change dramatically. By the second half of the 16th century two "successor polities" of the fallen Melaka sultanate, namely Johor and Aceh, rapidly emerged as formidable agents of trade, diplomacy and war. Portuguese presence in the region also affected the regional balance of power, but the end of the 1500s sees the *Estado da Índia* grappling with a range of institutional, financial and security problems. Its interests are seriously threatened by armed competition from Northern European traders and the East India Companies: the English, French, Danes, and especially the Dutch. Some of the East India Companies, notably the Dutch VOC, entered into alliances with Asian princes with the aim of wresting colonial strongholds from Portuguese control. These attacks initially scored a mixed success. The attack on the Moluccas proved successful in the early 1600s, but Melaka, that celebrated city of spices and commerce, was plucked from Lusitanian control only in 1641 after several failed attacks on that colony.

The late 1500s and early 1600s remain a period when Portuguese business intelligence, familiarity with the region, cartography, technical

know-how and diplomatic savvy were important. The period of transition between the late 1500s and early 1600s saw a veritable explosion in Europe of documenting the produce, marketplaces, peoples and customs of Southeast Asia. The majority of these reports were written in Portuguese, but increasingly also in other European languages including Dutch, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish. These later European accounts doubtlessly processed or based their insights on earlier Portuguese accounts. Jan Huyghen van Linschoten's *Reysgeschrift* (1595) and *Itinerario* (1596) can be taken as classic examples of how earlier Portuguese materials were collated, translated, and published.

Without doubt, at the heart of Pinto's work stands the city, port and Portuguese colony of Melaka. He underscores that Portuguese-language documentation dating from the second half of the 16th century appears to be beset with puzzling assessments and sometimes outright contradictions that require careful reading and evaluation. To appreciate this body of documentation more fully it is imperative to place problematic statements or accounts within their proper social, political, economic, diplomatic and geo-strategic context. Pinto displays a special interest in ascertaining diverging forces that nudged toward social and institutional assimilation in Portuguese Melaka on the one hand, and written instructions received from superiors in Goa or Lisbon on the other. Although Melaka was located at the crossroads of principal, converging networks of trade from the South China Sea, the Indonesian Archipelago and the Gulf of Bengal, the Portuguese colony found itself relatively removed and detached from the political centre of the *Estado da Índia* in Goa, and even more so from the colonial metropolis Lisbon. As a result, some higher ranking officers of Melaka, those men-on-the-spot, enjoyed considerable leeway for independent action and decision-making. In order to appreciate more fully the forces broadly underlying these specifically locational contradictions, as well as the perceived symptoms of institutional decay and corruption, Pinto sees it appropriate to first delve into a more comprehensive examination and evaluation of the regional economic, political, diplomatic, military, and social context. This multi-faceted approach gradually narrows toward the city through what Pinto calls "concentric circles". This enables not only a deeper appreciation of Portuguese Melaka in the late 1500s and early 1600s, but through his perusal of Portuguese primary materials makes a noteworthy contribution toward reconstructing the internal histories of the Johor and Aceh sultanates in the late 16th and early 17th century.

To researchers interested in early colonial Melaka who are proficient in the Portuguese language, Paulo Pinto's study is of course already well known. It is a work that has already impacted the field, even if it may have been supplemented since the completion of this study during the early 1990s by a growing body of historical studies focusing on the Luso-Dutch conflict in Southeast Asia at the dawn of the 17th century. Nevertheless, this work remains a seminal and arguably unsurpassed study covering Johor-Melaka-Aceh relations during the final quarter of the 16th century. The present English translation now makes this interesting and useful study accessible to a far wider, non-Lusophone audience, and readers will find the present edition doubly useful for its documentary appendices. In this sense, Pinto's work also serves as a handy reference volume that contains valuable primary sources. Given his extensive archival research and deep familiarity with surviving Portuguese-language documentary materials as well as more recent secondary studies, this study retains its usefulness to the historians of the Malay Peninsula and of Sumatra at the close of the 16th century.

**Peter Borschberg**

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Following the fall of the Melaka Sultanate to the Portuguese in 1511, the sultanates of Johor and Aceh emerged as major trading centres alongside Portuguese Melaka. Each power represented wider global interests. Aceh had links with Gujerat, the Ottoman Empire and the Levant. Johor was a centre for Javanese merchants and others involved with the Eastern spice trade. Melaka was part of the Estado da Índia, Portugal's trading empire that extended from Japan to Mozambique. Throughout the sixteenth century, a peculiar balance among the three powers became an important character of the political and economical life in the Straits of Melaka. The arrival of the Dutch in the early seventeenth century caused considerable changes and led to the decline of Portuguese Melaka.

Making extensive use of contemporary Portuguese sources, Paulo Pinto uses geopolitical approach to analyze the financial, political, economic and military institutions that underlay this triangular arrangement, a system that persisted because no one power could achieve an undisputed hegemony. He also considers the position of post-conquest Melaka in the Malay World, where it remained a symbolic centre of Malay civilization and a model of Malay political authority despite changes associated with Portuguese rule, and in the process sheds lights on social, political and genealogical elements within the Johor and Aceh sultanates.



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