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A Dissenting Voice: The Clash of Trade and Warfare in Giovanni da Empoli's Account of His Second Voyage to Portuguese Asia

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Giovanni da Empoli's second voyage to Asia (1510–1514) was eventful and violent, characterised by the emergence of conflicting agendas among different groups of Portuguese. The Florentine merchant's long letter about the voyage is an extraordinary document, and provides insights in three important areas. First, it allows us to fill some of the gaps in the history of the early phases of Portuguese empire building, questioning the extent to which the Crown was pursuing a clear and coherent strategy that included the conquest of Malacca. Second, it problematises further our conception of "the Portuguese" by reporting episodes of Portuguese-on-Portuguese violence and opposing views on the objectives of Portuguese fleets in the Indian Ocean. Finally, Giovanni unequivocally expresses admiration for the international markets of Eastern city-ports and openly criticises the militarist attitude and lawless tactics of the Portuguese viceroy, Alfonso de Albuquerque, thereby inviting us to reconsider the chronology of a "cosmopolitan reaction" among Italian writers visiting South Asia.

Keywords: Portuguese Asia, travel writing, global history, intellectual history, cosmopolitanism

Giovanni da Empoli (1483–1517) was a Florentine moneychanger, agent, and merchant who travelled with three Portuguese fleets to Asia shortly after a direct maritime route to the "Indies" had been opened by Vasco da Gama.¹ I have sketched Giovanni's early life and discussed his first voyage to India (1503–1504) in a recent article.² As suggested there, already when penning his brief letter on the first voyage, Giovanni left us hints

of a cultural background and a value system that were markedly different from those one encounters in more official Portuguese sources such as the *Commentaries* of the admiral and viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque.³ In this article, I will focus on Giovanni's second letter to his father, Leonardo, which details the longer and more travelled voyage of 1510 to 1514.⁴ This document is an invaluable piece of evidence that sheds light on the clash of attitudes and agendas among "the Portuguese." In an important article on the 1517 arrival of the Portuguese in China, James Fujitani has already problematised the very notion of "Portuguese" fleets, noting that the Chinese could hardly distinguish the "Portuguese"—ethnically diverse crews with plenty of Asian sailors and pilots—from the many other South Asian groups visiting their shores. Only the size of Portuguese guns eventually grabbed the attention of Ming officers and caused a string of anti-Portuguese propaganda.⁵ This treatment of "the Portuguese" is a welcome development in the literature, and in this article I shall endeavour to integrate it by looking at the diversity of cultural backgrounds and the conflicting agendas existing *within* the subgroup of "Portuguese" whom we may identify as European.

Giovanni da Empoli's is a dissenting voice, which directly and indirectly criticises the militarism and violent actions of the Portuguese viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque (1453–1515). This violence at times targeted even Portuguese subjects who wished to trade freely and engage in a voluntary exchange of goods with non-European counterparts rather than take part in any coordinated military action. Furthermore, the Florentine businessman enthusiastically describes the markets of Asian city-ports and explicitly states that there is a profound gap separating the worldview of merchants from that of "knights." Therefore, my first argument is that this source embodies a mercantile, entrepreneurial culture that was not easily reconcilable with the more militaristic attitude of Portuguese officials like Albuquerque. As we shall see, Giovanni problematises our idea of "Portuguese" expansion precisely because he introduces an *occupational* dichotomy—with moral implications—within the same imperial framework.⁶ Secondly, I suggest a partial correction of Giuseppe Marcocci's thesis that, from the second half of the sixteenth century, a group of Italian writers travelling to the East presents scholars with a case of "cosmopolitan reaction."⁷ While I am in agreement with Marcocci concerning the importance of this stream of thought in the intellectual history of Europe, I believe that sources from writers like Giovanni da Empoli indicate a different chronology. The value system of Italian merchants travelling on Portuguese fleets was causing a "cosmopolitan reaction" already in the first two decades of the sixteenth century.⁸

Between the end of the first voyage in 1504 and Giovanni's return to India in 1510, the Portuguese court had determined that the hostile presence of Muslim merchants (especially those from Gujarat and Mamluk Egypt) and the virtual absence of navies armed by local states called for a military takeover of strategic ports not only along the Malabar coast, but also along the African coast and at the entrance of the Red Sea.⁹ Muslim empire building produced large landed states, but this option was unviable for the Portuguese, who chose instead to use their coercive power at sea and in a number of strategic city-ports. The result was that "Portuguese India got about 60 per cent of its total revenue from customs duties, Gujarat got only 6 per cent."¹⁰ The man initially entrusted to lay the foundations of this

coastal empire in the East was Francisco de Almeida (1457–1510), who was named first viceroy of India and left Lisbon in 1505.¹¹ Almeida was a capable military leader and an intelligent politician, but in March 1508, his son and about a hundred other Portuguese were massacred at the battle of Chaul, when they were attacked by a Muslim coalition which included a Mamluk fleet, Gujarati ships, and vessels from the kingdom of Calicut.¹² This Islamic reaction was checked one year later at the battle of Diu, but King Manuel had already decided to name Alfonso de Albuquerque—the admiral in charge of the fleet that Giovanni had joined in his first voyage—as the second viceroy of the *Estado da India*. The rise of Albuquerque suggests that Portugal was now in the midst of a struggle to conquer by force all the key harbours from Aden to Malacca, in order to reorient the commercial flows of the Indian Ocean and impose a state-run monopoly that would set a stable price for spices and other items.¹³ In 1510, soon after succeeding Almeida, Albuquerque launched a surprise attack on Goa, which was taken but then lost shortly thereafter. Such was the explosive situation in India when a small fleet of four ships sailed from Lisbon with Giovanni da Empoli on board. Detailing events that took place at such a crucial moment, the Florentine's account helps illuminate a fundamental issue: "how plans of conquest gained traction even when some sectors of Portuguese society opposed them."¹⁴

A Failed Attempt to Avoid the Viceroy

Giovanni da Empoli had been sent to Lisbon as an agent of Florentine companies based in Bruges.¹⁵ The only difference from 1503 was that this time Giovanni himself was taking part in the investment (and would eventually get a percentage of the profits).¹⁶ Giovanni's fleet was led by the captain Diogo Mendes Vasconcelos and left Lisbon in March 1510 with papers from the court, which confirmed the commercial nature of the expedition and secured royal protection for the four vessels. These ships had permission to look for the famous port of Malacca and do business with local traders in the regions beyond Ceylon. Crucially, they were to be outside the jurisdiction of the representatives of the Portuguese state in India.¹⁷ The voyage did not start well for Giovanni, who recounts how he fell ill soon after they left Lisbon and recovered only once they reached the coast of Brazil.¹⁸ After battling a storm so strong that the fleet passed the Cape without realising it, Vasconcelos led the ships up the eastern coast of Africa, and here we find the first interesting passage in Giovanni's account:

We arrived at Melindi in Arabia minor, where we stayed for four days; and there we showed letters supporting us from the most illustrious king of Portugal to the king of Melindi, from whom we wished to have pilots to go from the said land to Malacca following a different route than the one passing by India. But after presenting such letters, we were told that he had none [no pilots]; and so we sailed for India.¹⁹

This episode is significant because it shows that, even while holding an official permit from the king, Vasconcelos wished to avoid entirely any encounter with the Portuguese navy and Albuquerque, even at the cost of entering the uncharted waters of a more southerly route. More surprisingly, King Manuel himself must have realised

that this was a preferable choice, since he offered to the captain official letters addressed to African rulers specifically asking for this favour.²⁰ Only after realising that there were no pilots available to guide them directly to Malacca did Vasconcelos and Giovanni, begrudgingly, sail for India.

The fleet reached the waters in front of the Indian coast in August and sighted Albuquerque's fleet, which had just been expelled from Goa. Vasconcelos met with Albuquerque on Anjediva Island, where he revealed to the viceroy that Malacca, not India, was the true destination of the expedition and that, in Giovanni's words, "the king had exempted him from his [Albuquerque's] flag, and that nobody could have any jurisdiction over our ships or crews, until our return to Portugal."²¹ The conversation ended with the viceroy accepting the royal permit and inviting Vasconcelos to follow him to the port of Cananor, from where they could have promptly started their journey to Malacca. This is confirmed by Albuquerque's *Commentaries*, which highlight how Vasconcelos was grateful towards the viceroy and kissed his hands "in token of gratitude."²² But Giovanni tells a different story and describes how he and his companions immediately detected in Albuquerque's behaviour the signs of coming troubles. As soon as the viceroy agreed to respect the king's orders, he turned towards his captains and knights (*chapitani et chavalieri*) and addressed them with a speech (summarised in Giovanni's letter) in which he lamented the loss of honour (*discredito*) due to their flight from Goa and the current state of affairs in India, where the Portuguese fleet was weak (*pocha forza di nave e gente*). He then proceeded to list all the forces that their enemies had on land and sea, before concluding his reflection by openly complaining of the fact that he had to let Vasconcelos's fleet go, as such were the king's wishes.²³ At the end of this passage, Giovanni comments:

And consider that such was the envy towards us, because we were bound for such rich land and we had so many supplies, while they were starving. So that, more or less, we could already foresee what was about to happen.²⁴

Albuquerque's Plot

Once the fleets arrived in Cananor, Albuquerque called a war council with all the Portuguese captains, including Vasconcelos. During the council, Albuquerque first repeated that the military situation was desperate, and then put Vasconcelos and his pilots under political and psychological pressure by posing a rhetorical question: Was India on the verge of being completely lost? Albuquerque demanded that his secretaries take note of how each of the captains replied to this question. Obviously, as reported by Giovanni, "all of them with one voice declared that India was about to be lost, and that the king needed more ships and men and supplies."²⁵ As if this kind of pressure was not enough, at that very moment during the council two messengers from Diu entered the room, bringing letters for the viceroy. The missives, bearing the signature of the governor of Cambay, informed the Portuguese of a major movement of troops: a large number of Muslim soldiers, backed by many ships descending the coast, were crossing the governor's territories and heading for Goa and Calicut. After reading the letter, Albuquerque

turned towards Vasconcelos and asked him what he thought about this situation. Vasconcelos replied that the letters were fabricated, that for a long time there had been rumours about a large Muslim fleet descending the coast but it had never appeared, and that even if the rumours were true such a fleet would be able to move only the following year, with the change of currents. Concerning Goa, Vasconcelos reminded Albuquerque that another Portuguese fleet, led by Gonçalo de Siqueira and composed of nine warships, had been sent by the king to reinforce his navy in India, and that this fleet had left Lisbon on the same day they did, so it should appear shortly.²⁶ After this argument, the council was over, and Vasconcelos and his pilots returned to their ships. Yet Giovanni writes how he secretly stayed on shore at night and looked for the two messengers who had brought the sudden news in the middle of the council. The letter states: “Once I found them, I discovered that they had been called by the general [Albuquerque] and that he made them write those letters in order to harm us. We decided not to say anything, and we pretended not to know, to see what would happen next.”²⁷

At this point in the narrative, we can see more clearly that the conflict between Albuquerque and Vasconcelos was not merely caused by the desire to accomplish the same objective (a military takeover of Goa) in different ways. Nor are we in the presence of two military leaders simply bickering about the chain of command and jurisdictional precedence. Rather, Vasconcelos was leading a private expedition whose main objective was trade, and which had been financed by a pool of investors whose cultural background, interests, and agenda were quite different from Albuquerque’s. On the following day, during a new council of captains, the viceroy proposed holding Vasconcelos’s ships to use in military operations until the arrival of the second fleet, or even until the end of the year (regardless of how many warships would arrive from Portugal). In the midst of the ensuing heated confrontation, according to Giovanni, Vasconcelos spelled out precisely the different rationale and priorities of his expedition:

Hearing such proposal, our captain replied that [. . .] it was already late, and that the other ships [from Portugal] could not arrive before the 20th of September, by which date the season to go to Malacca would have been over, and that he [Albuquerque] should consider carefully the consequences of what he did, because disturbing our voyage would be a serious loss for the king, and that *the merchants should not suffer nor lose anything*, and that if he [Albuquerque] detained their ships, but then the Muslims did not show up, *the king would have lost 300 thousand ducats, which the investors could well demand from him, as they had been prevented from carrying out their voyage*, and that he should consider carefully the fact that the king had exempted him from his flag.²⁸

Obviously, we cannot be sure that these were the exact words used by the captain, but even if we take these as Giovanni’s own words, we are still in the presence of a text written by one of the protagonists of these events and showing unequivocally how our idea of “the Portuguese” in the Indian Ocean needs to be problematised further. The entrepreneurial background and economic interests of at least some of “the Portuguese” travelling on the fleets to India were alien to the militarism of Albuquerque and to the set of political priorities that we tend to associate with Portuguese expansion in the region.

After giving his reply, Vasconcelos, with his pilots and Giovanni, returned to their four ships. At midnight, they were awakened by Albuquerque's captains, who came aboard in the company of many well-armed men (*con molte genti armate*). Vasconcelos and Giovanni were led ashore, where Albuquerque told them that he had been informed of how they planned to escape during the night to continue their voyage without his approval. The viceroy now demanded that Vasconcelos and all his pilots instantly take an oath, swearing to never attempt to leave without his permission. The situation was so tense that, while Vasconcelos and some of his pilots refused to take this oath and still claimed that they were not under Albuquerque's jurisdiction, some of the others decided to swear, out of fear (*per paura*).²⁹ Interestingly, the passages in Albuquerque's *Commentaries* that deal with the events reported by Giovanni mention twice that Vasconcelos's expedition included "merchants."³⁰ Moreover, the *Commentaries* stress the fact that the penalty for breaking the oath included "death and confiscation of their property." While the *Commentaries* add that Albuquerque had been led into thinking that Vasconcelos was about to flee by a jealous captain and that after discovering that this rumour was not true he apologised to Vasconcelos, the chapter in this text closes by reminding the reader that, notwithstanding Albuquerque's apology, he "did not cancel the oath of fealty which Diogo Mendez [Vasconcelos] had taken, nor the penalty which had been imposed upon the pilots and masters."³¹ Yet, at this time, neither Vasconcelos nor Giovanni had fully grasped the extent to which Albuquerque was eager to deprive them of their ships, men, cannons, money, and supplies. In fact, when, in the space of two weeks, not only the nine ships coming from Lisbon but also an additional force of four ships led by Duarte de Lemos arrived in Cananor, Giovanni and his captain naively rejoiced, believing that Albuquerque would now let them go and that they were still in time to use the southern currents to leave India and reach their true destination.³²

A Matter of Honor: The Difference Between Merchants and Knights

When Vasconcelos once again asked Albuquerque to finally allow his fleet to go to Malacca, the viceroy cannily replied that the question had to be settled by the council of captains, which promptly came up with a new excuse to deny such permission. As retold by Giovanni, the captains now mentioned for the first time that, even if more ships had arrived, and regardless of the situation in India, it would not have been appropriate for Vasconcelos and the merchants to visit Malacca, because a few months earlier another Portuguese fleet, led by Diogo Lopes de Siqueira, had already visited that port but had fallen victim to a conspiracy.³³ As explained by Kirti Chaudhuri, in 1510 Siqueira had had friendly meetings with the ruler of Malacca while his men had loaded their ships with spices; however, a group of Muslim merchants from Gujarat had convinced local authorities that the Portuguese were not to be trusted, so Siqueira and his men had been suddenly ambushed, and many of them had been killed or captured.³⁴ Now, the fate of the previous expedition to Malacca was used by Albuquerque and his captains to claim that, before any trade could be conducted by other Portuguese in

that port, a larger fleet would have to be sent there. According to Giovanni, Albuquerque's party argued that "it was necessary that, since they did not want to return the prisoners, we make war against them, to try to have them [the prisoners] back by force: which is something that we in no way could accomplish."³⁵ It would not have been honourable (*non era honore del re*) to let the little merchant fleet of Vasconcelos go to Malacca by itself to trade, as if nothing had happened. Instead, the council decided that Vasconcelos and Giovanni should join the other Portuguese ships and help them to retake Goa. Interestingly, according to Giovanni, Albuquerque insisted especially on the problem of what could be considered an honourable strategy:

And so he believed that it was not good to let us go; and what would have been of service to the king would have been for us to stay with him and go together to conquer the city of Goa; and as soon as we conquered it, he would have given us five or six ships, which would have accompanied us in order to travel more safely and honourably, as it was fitting for the reputation of the king.³⁶

At this point, Giovanni's letter addresses precisely the question of what is honourable, with three brief but meaningful passages in the space of just a couple of pages. The first passage directly questions Albuquerque's honour by describing an episode that took place when the viceroy visited Honavar, a city-port where he met some Indian allies with whom he wished to coordinate the attack on Goa. Once the meeting with these local rulers was over, Albuquerque (who had brought Giovanni and many other men ashore with him) was about to return to the ships, which were anchored outside of the river and in front of the beach, when a violent storm broke out. Worried about the fate of the ships, which were left with only a few sailors and therefore vulnerable to a surprise attack from the sea, Albuquerque ordered an attempt to reach them anyway, dividing his men on several vessels. As a result, twenty-eight men drowned, while Giovanni was lucky enough to make it to the ships; Albuquerque stayed safe, and then comfortably reached the ships on the following day, once the storm had passed. In a cutting sentence, Giovanni comments: "so, as usual, the great lords make sure that their own life is safe, and risk the lives of others."³⁷

Shortly thereafter, the Portuguese armada gathered in front of Goa and Giovanni gives a very brief description of the battle, in the course of which the city was retaken. Interestingly, Giovanni stresses the horror of seeing the river red with blood and full of corpses, thereby lamenting the great human losses on both sides. Here the Florentine agent inserts his second direct accusation against Albuquerque's conduct: "In the city, we took a rich booty; which was taken and then distributed in such a way that we, for our part of men and ships, got nothing; as he always lied to us."³⁸ Literally, the expression used by Giovanni translates: "as he always held us with words." "He" is, obviously, Albuquerque, who in the space of just two paragraphs has been accused first of cowardice and then of dishonesty. These passages in Giovanni's text are important not for a correct assessment of Albuquerque's character, and in fact we know that this admiral throughout his career showed bravery and even recklessness on several occasions, risking his life in attacks conducted with fewer forces than the ones available to his enemies.³⁹ Rather,

what seems relevant here is that Giovanni's narrative functions as a broader criticism of Albuquerque's priorities, militarism, and thirst for glory.

Giovanni evidently represents the perspective of those "Portuguese" who had a different outlook and a different agenda. To appreciate this, it is important to remember that in Giovanni's narrative these events all supposedly happened after Albuquerque and his knights forbade Vasconcelos and Giovanni to head to Malacca because they were concerned about the "honour" of their king. But it is the following paragraph of this section of the letter that, while being written in the form of an indirect criticism of Albuquerque, constitutes the most interesting of these three attacks on the admiral. Giovanni writes:

During that war many were knighted by the Viceroy, who liked to make me a knight too. I accepted this more for the privileges that come with such title, than for anything else; because merchants and knights are very different: so that today, since things are ruled by force, it is more convenient to be a knight than a merchant.⁴⁰

The opposition between merchants and knights is, obviously, at the heart of the passage: Giovanni, whose formative years were spent in Florence, Siena, and Bruges—places far removed from the Iberian and North African battlefields—now realises that these are not just two different professions, but rather two different worlds, ruled by opposing and irreconcilable value systems. Giovanni here does much more than just confirm the transnational character of sixteenth-century empire building or the entangled nature of imperial spaces, jurisdictions, and histories. He also spells out a progressively self-conscious definition of different, conflicting identities and agendas within the same imperial framework—and sanctioned by the same monarch.⁴¹ As suggested by the figure of Vasconcelos, these identities, as perceived by Giovanni, are determined by social and occupational mores rather than by space or nationality.

Deceit and Violence: Who Are "the Portuguese"?

The examples of arbitrary power by Albuquerque were not over. After Goa was taken, the viceroy forced all the men at his disposal to work for three months in the city: they dismantled some of the existing buildings, carried rocks and bricks from one side of the town to the other, and built a large fortress. In his letter, Giovanni describes this exhausting enterprise, mentions that about one hundred fifty men died because of it, and then concludes with a mocking sentence saying that the "honour" for the great victory was all given to Albuquerque, since he "acted like an Orlando."⁴² Once the castle was almost completed, Vasconcelos asked once more to be left free to go to Malacca with his merchant fleet. Albuquerque replied ambiguously, saying that there was no hurry, but that the captain could start to send somebody to purchase supplies for the voyage. Vasconcelos, perhaps naively, trusted the viceroy and promptly dispatched Giovanni to the markets of Cananor and Cochín. In Cananor, the Florentine cautiously refused to pay for the food and other goods immediately, preferring instead to book them and wait for the arrival of Vasconcelos.

About a month passed with no trace of his fleet, so Giovanni wrote letters to Vasconcelos, suggesting that the captain complain formally and respectfully (*in buona*

forma) but without making any illegal move, so that they could later sue Albuquerque at the king's court, if necessary. The Florentine merchant, if we are to trust his own account, also wrote to Vasconcelos that he should avoid giving the viceroy any excuse to confiscate their fleet.⁴³ However, unbeknown to Giovanni, the situation in Goa had already degenerated. When Vasconcelos realised that Albuquerque had no intention of letting him go, he took the fateful decision to try to escape. On the first day of April 1511, the small fleet led by Vasconcelos quietly set sail at night and attempted to exit the port of Goa unnoticed. But the four ships were spotted by Albuquerque's guards, and when an unfavourable wind slowed them down they were overtaken and blocked by the viceroy's armed brigantines. Albuquerque ordered them to open fire, and one Portuguese was killed. The consequences of Vasconcelos's failed attempt to escape were tragic. Albuquerque confiscated the small fleet, took all its money and supplies, arrested Vasconcelos, and claimed that all the pilots who had taken part in the failed flight from Goa were still under the oath that they had taken a few months earlier. Therefore, the viceroy quickly picked three of them and condemned them to death by hanging. The sentence was carried out immediately. A few days later, Giovanni, still waiting in Cananor, was suddenly arrested by the Portuguese governor.⁴⁴

Giovanni's letter comments on "the great deceit and the great violence" of Albuquerque and compares Vasconcelos, arrested and humiliated, to Christ in front of the Jews.⁴⁵ For twenty-two days, Giovanni was kept prisoner in Cananor without knowing, though perhaps suspecting, what had happened in Goa. Then Albuquerque arrived at Cananor, in charge of a large fleet that was heading for Malacca.⁴⁶ The viceroy had effectively robbed Vasconcelos not only of his ships and goods, but also of his very mission. Well-armed and eager to fight, Albuquerque and his knights now led a very different expedition to Malacca, one that was military in nature and ruthless in its tactics. At Cananor, Albuquerque and Giovanni had a meeting, during which the viceroy spelled out the Florentine merchant's precarious status. As recalled by Giovanni:

[Albuquerque] told me that I had been lucky not to be in Goa; he wanted me to know that, if I had been at Goa, I would have been among those who had been hanged; because he knew well that I had thrown the stone and then hidden my hand; and that now I would follow them to Malacca in whatever ship I wished. [. . .] So I embarked for Malacca and stayed most of the time on the general's ship, to try to reconcile with him and make him happy, even though there I suffered from lack of food and clothes.⁴⁷

Giovanni in Sumatra and Malacca

Therefore, when a Portuguese fleet of about seventeen ships reached the Strait of Malacca in 1511, Giovanni was on board, but he had lost his official role (as *feitor*), his captain (Vasconcelos), and any shadow of royal protection. In other words, Giovanni was at the mercy of the viceroy, who at any moment could accuse him formally of being implicated in Vasconcelos's attempted escape and order his arrest, or even his execution. Albuquerque knew that the Florentine was an invaluable asset, because of both his mercantile skills and his experience in assessing Eastern markets—an experience that he had

acquired under the orders of Albuquerque himself, during their first voyage to the Indian Ocean in 1503–1504. In 1511, as the large Portuguese fleet entered the sophisticated markets of the Malay and Sumatran coasts, Albuquerque took advantage of Giovanni's precarious status to use him as an envoy to rulers of city-states whose merchant vessels he had just assaulted and robbed, thereby unscrupulously endangering the life of the Florentine agent.

This happened, for instance, when the Portuguese reached the market town of Pedir, on the northern coast of Sumatra. Giovanni recalls in his account how Albuquerque sent him ashore to present the viceroy's list of arrogant demands to the local king, even though the Portuguese had just seized the ships of local merchants in front of the harbour:

And so I left at night, because the general [Albuquerque] sent me to the land of enemies, where in addition there were people from whom we had stolen property and ships, and of whom we had killed the father, or some sons, or brothers. [. . .] He [Albuquerque] did this as a man who did not care about me.⁴⁸

Arriving at Pedir late at night, Giovanni was left to spend the night outdoors, outside of the house of the chief customs officer: "And while in this situation, many people came during the night, with lights to look at me, as if I were a monster; and many of them asked how could we be so daring to go to someone else's lands to rob people and harbours."⁴⁹

On the following day, Giovanni was able to speak with the king of Pedir. In a beautiful passage that clearly shows his admiration for the wealthy city-ports of Sumatra and for their free markets, the Florentine puts these dignified and (from a merchant's perspective) truly honourable words in the mouth of the king of Pedir:

His [the king's] answer was the following: that I should tell the great captain general [Albuquerque] that the city of Pedir had been distinguished for a long time thanks to a great and rich commerce, and that to his harbour come the ships of Mammedi, king of Gujarat, the ships of the king of Aden, and junks, which are ships from Bengal, Pegu, Martaman, Sarnau and Tanazzar, and junks from China and from other places; and that his had always been a free trade port, so that every man could come and go and stay safely; and that his land had every sort of merchandise that we could possibly seek and that his lands had many strong people; and that they were men and not women, so those who took the ships coming to his ports would not be considered as friends; and that if he [Albuquerque] wanted his friendship, then he should have returned what was stolen, so that then we could come ashore to buy and sell.⁵⁰

Whether these words depicting an international, peaceful, and prosperous harbour were truly pronounced by any of the authorities in Sumatra or were the invention of Giovanni, they represent a remarkable endorsement (and idealisation) of the cosmopolitan markets and mercantile city-states of the East.⁵¹ These words also suggest that we should rethink the chronology of the "cosmopolitan reaction" elaborated by Italian travellers to Asia. This positive reaction was rooted in the values of late medieval merchant capitalism, and it was not, in the first instance, a Renaissance phenomenon.⁵²

Albuquerque decided to send some gifts to the king and then move on. A similar scene (with Albuquerque sending Giovanni to present demands which embarrassed the Florentine, and the local ruler sending the Portuguese away) took place again in the following weeks at Pasai, where Giovanni, after almost drowning, prayed God "to free me

from his hand, that is from the general's."⁵³ Once the fleet reached Malacca, Giovanni was enchanted by the port and the incredible number of ships and merchants (*cosa bellissima a vedere*), including many Chinese. In the account to his father, we read:

Believe me when I say that things here are really amazing and very great and there are large walled cities; abundance of merchandise and wealth; different habits and lifestyles. We are like a zero: India is the minor and poorest thing that there is here.⁵⁴

Albuquerque, on the other hand, after making unreasonable demands to the king of Malacca and claiming to fight to avenge the conspiracy against Diogo Lopes de Siqueira, eventually ordered an attack on the city, which was taken after a bloody siege lasting for more than a month.⁵⁵

Far from celebrating the Portuguese victory, Giovanni details the suffering of the men Albuquerque ordered to build two fortresses (first a temporary one made of wood, then a stronger one of bricks and stones). The men, including Giovanni and many Portuguese, were forced to work while armed, under the counterattacks of enemy troops, and carrying heavy rocks and building materials across an insalubrious stretch of land:

We built the castle while wearing our arms, under an intolerable heat and blazing sun, because the site of that land is two degrees above the equinoctial line. The place is in lowlands full of swamps; and it is full of cattle, so that it produces an intense stench and bad air. We had only rice to eat, and so all our people started to fall ill. [. . .] Not one man was left without a diabolical fever, so much so that corpses stayed in the rooms of the captains for two or three days, because there was nobody available to bury them.⁵⁶

By the end of the works, about seven hundred Portuguese and seven hundred Gujarati prisoners had died from malnutrition, plague, and exhaustion. Unsurprisingly, neither the *Commentaries* nor João de Barros's *Asia* describe a disaster of these proportions. However, Giovanni's story and the loss of human lives during the construction of the Portuguese fort are confirmed by Gaspar Correia in his *Lendas da Índia*.⁵⁷ Giovanni himself was left for dead and had only partly recovered when in December 1511 he took the first opportunity to leave with Albuquerque, who was now worried about the state of affairs on the Malabar Coast and therefore intended to hurry back to India. Overall, Giovanni distances himself from all the celebratory accounts of the Malacca expedition, and he does not leave any doubt about his assessment of the conquest: by the time he left with the viceroy the fighting had restarted, and many Portuguese were ordered to remain in Malacca to fight. When the small fleet with Albuquerque and Giovanni left the port "among the screams of the war and those of the men forced to stay behind, it was a miserable scene to behold" (*miserabile a vedere*).⁵⁸

Albuquerque's Mistakes and Lawlessness

The sense of relief at escaping the unhappy fate of Malacca, which until a few months earlier had been the beautiful and wealthy port that Giovanni and Vasconcelos had dreamed of visiting, was short-lived. Even the story of the return voyage to India

gives Giovanni an opportunity to attack Albuquerque, question his leadership, and mock his character. When the flagship suddenly sank while crossing the Strait of Malacca, Giovanni's ship had to welcome Albuquerque and the other survivors onboard. This incident was the beginning of yet another horrifying experience for the Florentine businessman, as the overcrowded ship, slowed down by unfavourable winds and with no friendly port in sight, attempted to cross the waters of the Bay of Bengal. Giovanni blames Albuquerque for at least two mistaken decisions. First, the viceroy resolved not to enter the port of Pedir, where the ship could have obtained fresh water and food supplies. According to Giovanni, Albuquerque took this decision against the opinion of everyone on board.⁵⁹

Then, during the crossing from Sumatra to Ceylon, the Portuguese captured two Gujarati ships, but once again, Albuquerque made a fateful error. According to Giovanni, the ships had water and food that could have lasted for several months, but Albuquerque was in such a hurry that he ordered them not to take anything except for a few chickens, flour, and one cask of water for himself. The viceroy explained that the captured vessels would travel alongside the Portuguese ship, functioning as store-ships during the rest of the crossing.⁶⁰ However, when a storm separated the ships, the Portuguese were left without supplies in the middle of the long voyage.⁶¹ Giovanni's account gives a vivid impression of the dark atmosphere on board, while also alluding to the widespread resentment against Albuquerque and ridiculing his apparent cowardice:

We were reduced to having only six ounces of wet biscuit and one sip of water a day; and half of the water was salty, because of each barrel of water we made two by adding sea water; and therefore there was suffering and discontent [*mormorio*: literally, whispering or plotting], giving glances to each other, as the general stayed locked up inside his cabin, so that nobody could see him. [. . .] And there were some sinister parties going around: at night, several Moors were thrown overboard, while sleeping.⁶²

The atrocious experience ended when the ship finally reached India, anchoring at Cochin. Giovanni tried to recover from the illness and the near-death experience of the return voyage. Yet Albuquerque's ruthless and arguably illegal treatment of Giovanni was not over. The viceroy did not have any intention of reconsidering the position of the Florentine (a foreigner, and originally part of an expedition that the king had exempted from his jurisdiction), nor of pardoning him after his services in Sumatra and Malacca. Instead, he forced Giovanni to work once again, this time on the construction of walls around the Portuguese fortress at Cochin:

While we were in Cochin to take rest after our misadventures and illnesses, the general decided to build a circle of walls around the castle of Cochin; and organizing everything, he ordered an announcement that every man of whatever status was to help and work and carry stones, mortar, wood, and water, under penalty of ten years of confinement to Malacca. He could have done it [the construction] with the locals from Malabar, at the expense of the king; but in order to show to the king that he could make him save money, he preferred to do it with the blood of Portuguese and Christians, because he is one of those men who wish to acquire fame through cruelty.⁶³

Therefore, not only Giovanni himself, but also many Portuguese still recovering from the illnesses and suffering of the voyage to Malacca were subject to this regime of forced labour. And the Florentine does not miss the opportunity to report this piece of information to readers back in Europe, openly criticising, once more, the actions of the viceroy, and directly attempting to erode his knightly “fame” by portraying him as a tyrant.

Finally, in August 1512, Albuquerque ordered Giovanni to go again to the Strait of Malacca, to conclude some commercial treaties and bring back three Portuguese ships that had been left behind. During his mission, Giovanni had to battle a Javanese fleet in front of Malacca and face a mutiny on his own ship, before returning to India in February 1513.⁶⁴ After meeting once again with Albuquerque, the Florentine agent was finally able to “flee from his hands” (*schanpparlli delle mani*) and sailed from the port of Cochin in January 1514.⁶⁵ The return voyage was long and dangerous, but Giovanni’s ship arrived in Lisbon on the 22nd of August, 1514. While at Cochin, Giovanni was able to acquire spices and to load them onto his homebound ships. Both he and his company turned an extraordinary profit, but this was not enough to make Giovanni forget the abuses and violence suffered at the hands of Albuquerque. As soon as he disembarked, Giovanni sued the viceroy at the king’s court (Manuel entrusted the count Martins de Castello Branco with the investigation); then, in order to make sure that justice would be served, Giovanni wrote a letter to Pope Leo X, a Florentine countryman, recounting the mistreatment he had suffered and the criminal behaviour and unchristian conduct of Albuquerque. We do not possess the original letter penned by Giovanni to the Pope, but a copy of Leo’s reply, addressed to King Manuel, has survived.⁶⁶ In his letter, the Pope mentions the account that he had received from Giovanni and asks politely but firmly that the Portuguese court investigate fully the accusations against Albuquerque.

Conclusion

The story of Giovanni da Empoli’s second voyage to the East, of his private merchant fleet sabotaged by Albuquerque and turned “*militare per accidens*,”⁶⁷ is an extraordinary tale that can help shed light on the misty beginnings of the Portuguese presence in Asia. Giovanni is also a pivotal figure in the history of the early production of knowledge and images about Asia, who can be considered among the very first Europeans to reach Sumatra and Malacca.⁶⁸ Yet the Florentine agent’s account of his adventures (and misfortunes) is an invaluable source not merely because it fills some gaps in the chronology of Lusitanian exploration and empire building. In his second letter to his father, Leonardo, Giovanni realises more clearly and spells out more unambiguously that “merchants and knights are very different.” This difference, in mores, outlooks, and agendas, contributes to the problematisation of our notion of “the Portuguese” in Asia. The varied group of people aboard Portuguese vessels was diverse not only in the sense that, as indicated by Fujitani, it comprised European Christians and Arab Muslims, African slaves and Indian pilots, but also because *among* European Christians there was a marked

cultural gap between, on the one hand, entrepreneurially minded agents and merchants, and on the other hand, political leaders and “knights” whose ethos was militarist. The serious episodes of Portuguese-on-Portuguese violence related by Giovanni, such as the hanging of three pilots and several episodes of forced labour, are invaluable for a correct understanding of Portuguese expansion.⁶⁹ A second aspect emerging from Giovanni’s letters is that a “cosmopolitan reaction,” even self-criticism, was already expressed by dissenting voices as early as the first decades of the sixteenth century.

This is not to say that merchant bankers and knights (as well as other subgroups of “Portuguese”) could not work together, or could not be part of a coherent grand strategy.⁷⁰ In fact, Giovanni still believed that King Manuel’s court could be the means to satisfy both his more general ambition—visiting unknown markets to freely trade—and his more specific obsession—being among the first Europeans to reach China by sea. The latter was an ambitious dream, even in Florence, one of the European cities characterised by a long-standing outward-looking attitude and curiosity stretching back to the Middle Ages. Giovanni’s self-perception, his desire to be the first one to explore and describe new lands and rich nations, and his family’s conscious efforts to celebrate his achievements (by writing the *Life of Giovanni da Empoli*) are important facts that, in a way, nuance the contrast between the figures of Giovanni and Albuquerque. In other words, Giovanni was not immune to the chivalric desire to stand out from others as an individual. Giovanni knew that his travels took a toll on his father in Florence, who would wait at times for more than a year before receiving old, unreliable, and confusing news about his son’s expeditions. Yet his enthusiasm for exploring new lands could not be quenched. In a touching passage of his second letter, Giovanni wrote:

This voyage has rendered me and has made me appear old; so that while before people thought that I was your brother, now they will think that I am your father. However, I do not feel old in spirit, as I have not visited China yet. But this will happen when God and you will wish, because I decided that from now on I will never embark in this kind of voyages again without your permission and approval.⁷¹

By 1514, Giovanni had accumulated a vast sum of money, which virtually rules out the idea that economic motives are enough to explain his continuous restlessness. The idea that he felt obliged to accept King Manuel’s request that he embark on a third voyage is also unconvincing. Rather, it seems that what could not be quelled were Giovanni’s sincere curiosity and his eagerness to accomplish great deeds—feelings so similar and yet so different from Albuquerque’s. We do not know whether Leonardo gave his son permission to embark on the third voyage to the East. But we know for certain that Giovanni sailed from Lisbon one last time in 1515, holding the office of *feitor* for the Portuguese Crown. After reaching India, he went on to cross the Bay of Bengal, and then, after spending some time in Pasai and Malacca, he sailed farther east with Fernão Pires de Andrade. Giovanni accomplished his dream in September 1517, when his ship entered the port of Canton (Guangzhou), in Southern China.⁷² This is where he suddenly died of plague just a few weeks later, together with many of the “Portuguese” (including two other Florentine citizens) who had accompanied him.⁷³

Giovanni thus died far from Florence and from his father, Leonardo, but true to his restless mercantile spirit and his fascination with the “Indies.”

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Notes

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- 1 On the first phase of Portuguese empire building in Asia, see Subrahmanyam, "The Birth-Pangs of Portuguese Asia." See also Chaudhuri, "O estabelecimento no Oriente"; and Pearson, "Markets and Merchant Communities in the Indian Ocean." Another important work is Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance*. For a more general introduction to the Portuguese Empire, see Boxer, *From Lisbon to Goa*; Russell-Wood, *A World on the Move*; and Papagno, *I Portoghesi d'oro*.
 - 2 Salonia, "The First Voyage."
 - 3 *The Commentaries* were first assembled and published by Albuquerque's son in 1557. Here I follow the edition by Walter de Gray Birch, *The Commentaries of the Great Alfonso de Albuquerque*. See also two other important sources: Barros, *Asia*; and Correia, *Lendas da Índia*.
 - 4 Da Empoli, "Chopia d'una lettera." The original manuscript followed by Spallanzani is at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (Florence), II. IV. 347, cc. 208r.–232r.
 - 5 Fujitani, "The Ming Rejection of the Portuguese Embassy."
 - 6 I am not the first one to comment of Giovanni's Christian and mercantile ethics: Da Empoli, "Religiosità e spirito mercantile."
 - 7 Marocchi, "Renaissance Italy Meets South Asia." See also Alessandrini, "The Image of India."
 - 8 It is not a coincidence that intellectuals in the two Tuscan cities where Giovanni had spent his youth, Florence and Siena, had developed serious and systematic discussions on business ethics and moral mercantile practices. De Roover, *San Bernardino of Siena*, especially 11–3, on St. Bernardino's description of fair trade. See also Trugenberger, *San Bernardino da Siena*, even though it does not stress enough the positive model offered by the saint to late medieval merchants; and Catturi, *Etica e attività mercantile*.
 - 9 As early as 1502, the Portuguese court had tested the possibility of blockading the Red Sea. Manuel, *Copy of a letter of the King*, 15.
 - 10 Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 121.
 - 11 For an introduction to the Sultanate of Gujarat on the eve of Portuguese expansion see Basak, "Coastal Gujarat." On Francisco de Almeida, the best monograph is Candeias Silva, *O Fundador*; see especially 95–7 for a good discussion of the detailed and impressive plan elaborated at the Portuguese court, and embodied by the *Regimiento* given to

- Almeida in 1505, which is published in the appendix, 261–99.
- 12 This coalition may have received some support from both Venice and the Ottoman Turks.
 - 13 This reorientation of trading networks was never fully accomplished. At times, the Portuguese established friendly relations and financial networks with local traders and businessmen (including Muslims). Mathew, “Indian Merchants and the Portuguese Trade.” The most accurate assessment of the impact of the Portuguese arrival on the spice route can be found in Subrahmanyam, “The Birth-Pangs.” Subrahmanyam uses the seminal work of Jean Aubin to conclude that before 1509 the Portuguese did not even attempt to stop the supply of spices to the eastern Mediterranean. Aubin, *Le Latin et L’Astrolabe*.
 - 14 Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 4.
 - 15 On the role of Italian bankers in Lisbon, there is a vast literature. See for example Albini, “Per una storia degli italiani in Portogallo”; D’Arienzo, “La società Marchionni-Berardi”; Berti, “Le aziende da Colle”; and Alessandrini, “La presenza italiana a Lisbona.” Some key reflections on the relations between private merchant bankers and the Portuguese state are in chapter 3 of Crivelli, *Commercio e finanza*, 57–88.
 - 16 Spallanzani, *Giovanni da Empoli*, 24–26.
 - 17 On the collaboration between monarchy and investors interested in the Asian markets at this early stage, see Bouchon, “Glimpses of the beginnings,” 48.
 - 18 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 160.
 - 19 This and all other translations from Empoli’s letter are mines. *Ibid.*, 161.
 - 20 The Portuguese had had friendly relations with the monarch of Malindi since the first voyage of Vasco da Gama. Manuel, *Copy of a letter of the King*, 5, 22. See also Parry, *The Discovery*, 202–5. A useful introduction to the Portuguese route(s) to Asia (which however does not consider Malindi) is Boxer, “The Principal Ports.”
 - 21 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 163.
 - 22 Albuquerque, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 201.
 - 23 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 163–64.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 164.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 165.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 165–66.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 166.
 - 28 Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, 166.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, 166–67.
 - 30 Albuquerque, *Commentaries*, 220 and 231.
 - 31 Albuquerque, *Commentaries*, 232.
 - 32 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 167.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, 168.
 - 34 Chaudhuri, “O estabelecimento,” 176.
 - 35 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 168.
 - 36 *Ibid.*
 - 37 *Ibid.*, 170–71.
 - 38 *Ibid.*, 171.
 - 39 Bouchon, *Albuquerque*.
 - 40 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 171.
 - 41 King Manuel gave instructions stressing peaceful trade and the establishment of diplomatic relations also to Diogo Lopes de Siqueira. Boxer, “The Portuguese in the East,” 209.
 - 42 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 172.
 - 43 *Ibid.*, 172–73.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, 173–74. Giovanni’s account of the events at Goa is confirmed by several other documents. Besides the *Commentaries*, see also the “Letter to friar John Baptist,” written by an anonymous Italian merchant on Vasconcelos’s ships. Spallanzani, *Mercanti fiorentini*, 121–22.
 - 45 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 173.
 - 46 Ferdinand Magellan (1480–1521), who had already been among the first Portuguese to ever visit Malacca in 1508, also took part in this expedition. Morison, *The Great Explorers*, 552–53.
 - 47 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 174.
 - 48 *Ibid.*, 175.
 - 49 *Ibid.*, 176.
 - 50 *Ibid.*, 176–77.
 - 51 In fact, even before the arrival of the Europeans, the Indian Ocean was not peaceful, but rather a militarised space where violence was at times pervasive. For a discussion of the literature on this, see

- Biedermann, *(Dis)connected Empires*, 21–23.
- 52 For some examples of the cosmopolitan discourses fostered by medieval capitalism, see Salonia, *Genoa's Freedom*, especially 73–78. Renaissance cosmopolitanism is the continuation of a medieval tradition. Giovanni himself was a medieval man through and through, a devout Catholic who had formerly been a follower of Savonarola. Salonia, “The First Voyage of Giovanni da Empoli to India.”
- 53 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 184–86.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 57 Albuquerque’s self-congratulatory tale of conquest is in Albuquerque, *Commentaries*, vol. 3, 111–37. See also Barros, *Asia*, Dec. 2, 134–40; and Correia, *Lendas*, book 2, 250–52. On the history of Malacca following the 1511 Portuguese conquest, some interesting reflections are in Sar Desai, “The Portuguese Administration,” especially from 505.
- 58 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 187.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 189–90.
- 61 The account of the terrible voyage given by Giovanni is confirmed by another Italian source, the anonymous 1513 “Letter to friar John Baptist”; see Spallanzani, *Mercanti fiorentini*, 126–7.
- 62 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 190.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 192–8.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 66 The Pope’s letter to King Manuel has been published in Peragallo, *Cenni intorno alla colonia italiana*, 73n1. From a letter written by Giovanni to Lorenzo de Medici, we know that he had also sent to the Pope some gifts, including a beautiful dead bird from Malacca which supposedly lived always up in the air, since it was apparently without any feet. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Mediceo Avanti Principato*, f. 116n405. The letter is published in Spallanzani, *Giovanni da Empoli*, 213–4.
- 67 Leo X in Peragallo, *Cenni intorno alla colonia italiana*, 72.
- 68 This is true also in light of the scepticism surrounding Ludovico de Varthema’s *Itinerary*, or at least its sections concerning areas east of the Malabar coast. Aubin, “Deux chrétiens au Yémen Tahiride.”
- 69 Therefore, contrary to what has been suggested by Bartolomé Yun Casalilla in an otherwise splendid book, certain cultural differences between merchants and nobles were quite resilient in Portugal and Castile (or certainly more resilient than in Italian maritime republics). Yun Casalilla, *Las redes del imperio*, 18.
- 70 Still, we can affirm that Manuel’s idea of sending two separate fleets, one, led by Gonçalo de Siqueira, larger and apparently destined to help Albuquerque, and another one, led by Vasconcelos and heading for Malacca to trade, was not a success.
- 71 Da Empoli, “Chopia d’una lettera,” 183.
- 72 For a discussion of Giovanni’s last voyage, on which very few documents have survived, see Spallanzani, *Giovanni da Empoli*, 69–87.
- 73 For an account of Giovanni’s arrival in China and sudden death, see the *Life of Giovanni da Empoli*, written by his uncle Girolamo in 1530. Da Empoli, “Vita,” 135.