



# THE CASTILIANS DISCOVER SIAM: CHANGING VISIONS AND SELF-DISCOVERY

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## Abstract

Iberians were the first people in Europe to interact directly with Siam. Centuries elapsed between the time the first information about Siam was received in the Iberian Peninsula and the period when their rulers perceived this Asian territory in a more or less coherent framework. This work studies the changes in their perception of the Kingdom of Siam as it evolved from the earliest mythical references, in a long process that was neither uniform nor reliant merely on the receipt of data. Focusing on these early perceptions, this study notes the Iberians' different reactions to this new knowledge, the role of individuals and how the parallel process of their own budding national identities affected the outcome.

## Introduction

The Castilians and Portuguese shared similar conceptions about the "Far East" in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance they were in a privileged position to obtain deeper knowledge about the territories in that region, their rulers and forms of government. Due to the great navigations, they established direct contact. After the Portuguese settled in Malacca in 1511 and the Castilians in the Philippines in 1565, those contacts became frequent. Hence the medieval cognitive framework used to interpret data related to Siam was replaced by the Iberians earlier than by other Europeans. But this external process coincided with an internal evolution of the Iberians' own identities, both as individuals and as members of a society.

Natural curiosity to learn about new lands and peoples, coupled with advances in science, navigation and travel, made many question traditional Christian beliefs about the world created by God for the first time. After the Renaissance, this questioning gave birth to a new set of feelings and a psyche that

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would lead people to make an increasing identification with the reigning monarchies, rather than with the closed communities where they spent their lives. The Iberian Peninsula also underwent a process whereby the landed estates of dukes or counts were increasingly absorbed by monarchs. Furthermore, by the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries, some dynasties merged their territories, and Castile, the Basque country, Navarre or Aragon developed a common identity, increasingly hegemonized by Castile, which could appropriately be termed Spain by the end of the sixteenth century.

The first Iberian contacts with Siam thus evolved along with the emergence of two new Iberian consciousnesses. The knowledge available about those regions far from Europe coincided with new inquiries rising from a different society in a mixture of external and internal inputs that changed greatly in every territory. The contrasting approaches between Portuguese and Castilians are a clear example of this, since while undergoing a similar evolution from the medieval era into early modern societies, differences abounded. The participants and the particular expectations counted as much as the general context or the direct references, changing along the way both the idea of the “other” and the concept of the “self”. The formation of a new framework for understanding Siam relied both on imagination and on reality, both in Europe and in Asia, and involved a much greater number of actors than before.

This article traces the steady divergence between Castilians and their Portuguese neighbours in their images of Siam. It starts with their similar ideas of the region where Siam lay, continues with the impact of the data gathered by the great navigations, and with the new framework formed by Portuguese after conquering Malacca. It then deals with the contributions of individuals to narrowing the difference in perception between Portugal and Castile, and questions how differing perceptions led to differing strategies by Portugal (trade) and Castile (expansion) by the end of the sixteenth century.

### **The pre-contact cognitive framework**

In the Middle Ages the Iberians formed their ideas about Siam from the two basic facts then available, its remoteness and its location somewhere in Asia. This continent and the “Far East” were known in Europe since the time of the Roman Empire. Later they were accommodated to early Christian beliefs. The region was widely believed by biblical experts and monks of the time to be the site of the Garden of Eden, a remote area somewhat difficult to reach, enjoying an eternal springtime and an idyllic setting traversed by a river. Such far-flung regions (other than Palestine) evoked stories where fears and dreams were combined and where their vaguely ascertained existences were the only limits to imagination: the

farther away the place, the more exotic the tales that could be heard. Vastness, perils and hazards could abound but also wealth, abundance, great prizes and presumably immense rewards, as reflected in the literature about “admirable things” or “wonders” (known as *mirabilia*).

The first direct European references to Siam were made by Marco Polo in the setting of this pre-modern cognitive framework of images. Although he had travelled through Southeast Asian waters and the Indian Ocean, Polo had no direct contact with Siam but seemingly heard about it from other travellers. In *The Book of Travels* (or *Il Millione*), Polo mentioned “Locac”, a rich kingdom of idolaters with its own language, many elephants, brazil-wood (similar to sappan-wood), few foreign visitors and widespread use of cowries and gold for payment. Furthermore, he provided wrong data on the location, mistaking Java for Champa, and his description could easily have been referring to Cambodia. The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta referred to a territory with elephants named *Mul-Java* which was probably the same place, although he probably meant Cambodia, in the opinion of Henry Yule (1966:155–157). Polo’s narrative was, in fact, merely one more of many books about remote places. Its popularity during the late medieval period ranked, for instance, behind one of the *mirabilia* narratives, *The Travels* by Sir John Mandeville (c.1336) and led to serious mistakes by those that tried to use his book to draw a map of the world.

A further hindrance to a clear perception of Siam was the differences amongst handwritten copies of Polo’s work. This can be illustrated by taking a look at three of them: the book copied by the Italian editor Giambattista Ramusio, considered as being closest to the lost original; the one in Latin read by Christopher Columbus and published in Antwerp in 1485; and the first translation into Spanish from the Italian original, copied by the Dominican friar Rodrigo Fernández de Santaella, and published in 1503. On riches, Ramusio and Fernandez de Santaella were in agreement. Ramusio’s copy asserted that gold could be found “in incredible quantity” (Yule & Cordier, 1903–1920: Book Three, chapter VII) while that of Fernández noted that it could be “found in great quantity” (Gil 1987:259). However, the book printed in Antwerp indicated that the kingdom was “big and marvellously rich” (*grande y rica a maravilla*, Gil 1987:137). To explain Siam’s apparent isolation, the Antwerp edition and Santaella’s translation agree in pointing to its bellicosity and remoteness: “the region is far from being peaceful” and it was “out of the way” (Gil, 1987:137, 250). But Ramusio instead stresses savagery and fear of foreigners: “this is a very wild region, visited by few people; nor does the king desire that any strangers should frequent the country, and so find out about his treasure and other resources” (Yule & Cordier, 1903–1920: Book Three, chapter VII).

In addition, the tendency for the text to reflect the traditional image increased with the number of intermediaries. The original Locac was corrupted into terms such as Lucach or Beach. Later versions of *Il Millione* added illustrations of alleged scenes of Polo's journey, including imaginary figures resembling those described by Mandeville. The inventions by copiers and illustrators helped readers to imagine the world described by Polo, resulting in what Donald F. Lach also noted in his landmark study *Asia in the Making of Europe*: "the facts about Asia were often as wondrous as the fables told about it" (1994a: 110).

Polo's information did not help much in providing a more elaborate idea of the territory. New information was filtered through religious beliefs, and data that could challenge the old perception was discounted. The main advance in improving knowledge about Siam under the *mirabilia* cognitive framework was the association with the two major neighboring territories of India and Cathay, the first being better known and the second quickly catching up (Lach 1994a:20–71; 1994b: 109–110, 191 and Larner 2001:242–245). When the Iberians, who considered themselves at the centre of an ethnocentric world, were brought into contact with people culturally and racially different to them, they projected onto the unknown Asian territories described by Marco Polo the same mixture of fear, excitement and uncertainty they had about their own future. Medieval society in Europe did not demand great accuracy and *Il Millione* was merely a step forward from earlier representations.

### Weak challenges to old myths

The Renaissance heightened the Europeans' desire to advance further in the knowledge of Asia. The need to identify new territories, either by knowing exactly where they lay or by learning about their treasures, became more pressing. Meantime, technical advances allowed Europeans not only to travel to the region of Siam in Arab and Chinese ships as before, but also to travel, settle and trade using their own vessels. The ideas about Siam generated by Christopher Columbus and by Antonio de Pigafetta, the Italian narrator of the first circumnavigation of the world (1519–1521, led at first by Ferdinand Magellan and after his death by Juan Sebastian Elcano) were filled with new contradictions.

When reading about Siam in Marco Polo's *Il Millione*, Columbus wrote in the margins of the book the words "brazils", "lemons" and "elephants", as the references by which he could begin to distinguish this kingdom from all other territories (Gil 1987: 137). Furthermore, Columbus wrote in his diaries during his fourth trip to America about a province that neighboured Cathay with animals named using Polo's terminology, and also announced a forthcoming voyage in search of "the gold mines of the province of Ciampa [Champa]" (Larner, 2001:230–31).

Pigafetta wrote: “On the riverbanks in this kingdom of Siam (as we were told) live large birds which do not eat any dead animal carried there unless there come first another bird which eats the heart, and afterward they eat the rest” (1994:144).

This nonsense shows that crossing the oceans was not enough to rid Siam and its region of the medieval cognitive framework. Columbus mistakenly added the reference to lemons since the version he read merely referred to brazil-wood as big “as lemons” (Gil 1987:137). The province that apparently neighboured Cathay in Columbus’ *Diaries* was in fact the territory of southern Cuba, and when he mentioned his future trip in search of gold mines, he was in reality on the Mosquito Coast, in present-day Nicaragua and certainly far from present-day central Vietnam where Champa lay (Larner, 2001:225, 230–231, 242–243). Columbus wanted to believe he was near the Cathay described by Polo and strove to prove that he had reached the Asian coasts as planned. Reading Polo’s *Travels*, therefore, was part of the exercise aimed at reorganizing his perceptions, his evaluations and his opinions in order to, in Larner’s words, “discover what he had discovered” (Larner, 2001:230; also Gil, 1987:X). As Juan Gil convincingly shows, citing a 1497 letter from the Bristol merchant John Day informing Columbus that he had found him a copy of Polo’s book (Gil 1991a:108–109), the Genoese apparently did not read *Il Millione* for pleasure — indeed he confessed to not reading much — and had in fact studied it only after he returned from America, most probably after his third trip, in order to refute during his next journey the critics’ claims that he had not reached Asia.

The fable referred to by Antonio de Pigafetta is merely one of the many inaccuracies to be found in his account of the world’s circumnavigation. He drew on myths when referring to places not contacted directly by his expedition even though he only saw other human beings and came across islands, territories, landscapes and animals which could be compared to those already seen in Europe. There were many other sources of confusion, as seen in the glossary of words spoken by the peoples encountered along the way. His chances to get a deeper knowledge of the territories he encountered were slim, since he had to rely on Henrique, Magellan’s Sumatran slave, who in fact was really the first person to complete the circumnavigation of the globe.<sup>2</sup>

Pigafetta had difficulties in understanding and being understood by the Sumatran slave, but he had no choice other than to rely on him. So despite the

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<sup>2</sup> Henrique had first travelled from Asia to Europe before he boarded the expedition that circumnavigated the world. Therefore, he returned to Asia before the Europeans finished their journey. Considering that Magellan died in Cebu, Henrique can be considered the first person to circumnavigate the globe, although probably some of the crew members had visited Asia before - one fifth of the members of the expedition were Portuguese, in spite of the Castilian policy of not hiring them.

language problems, and despite his framework of understanding and, most importantly, the *mirabilia*-prone attitude of the public to which the book was aimed, Pigafetta probably offered the best information on Siam he could.

The process of supplanting the mythological view had started centuries ago with the *homo viator*, the itinerant men of different origins who wandered across Europe during the Middle Ages and who now began to sail toward unknown territories (Soler, 2003:70). The members of these navigations carried with them the “scientific curiosity” of the Renaissance (Rubies, 2003:418), but also clung emotionally to their previous convictions. The failure to confirm the existence of Paradise or any other previous myth led to new hypotheses about its location, whether inland or on uncharted islands; old fables were re-created, partly due to the scant information gained from merely seeing a landscape or hearing words for the first time. Thus until new data surfaced, such as from Vasco Nuñez de Balboa’s expedition in 1513, the first to traverse the Pacific Ocean from America, these later *homo viator* (such as Columbus before his death) continued the former myths of exotic places and immense riches.

The dilemmas of such men when weighing contradictory information reflected the circumstances of the emerging societies of those times. Castile, during these first decades after its unification with Aragon in the early sixteenth century, was populated with men and women brought up on stories of monsters and non-human beings populating far-away territories. They expected (and desired) that the new information received thanks to the great navigations would confirm these stories. Instead, the new input triggered consequences which would forcibly challenge the old visions. When looking at maps, for instance, the significance of locating Paradise and being reminded that God had created the world had diminished, while the desire to pinpoint oneself and one’s environment as accurately as possible on those charts increased – giving way, for instance, to the emergence of the concept of nation.

The users of the new maps, however, still had to grapple with the scarcity of data. In his representation drawn in 1541, the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator showed two territories (Locach and Beach) on a northern peninsula of the much-fabled territory that was said to cover the southern hemisphere *Terra Australis* — where he included Polo’s references to the lack of visitors. He replicated Polo’s mistakes about distances and directions, as well as various copiers’ corruption of names (Larner, 2001:243–244), revealing both a lack of discrimination in using his data and his own desire to show that the myth of the *Terra Australis* was true. Even though this map dated from two decades after the first circumnavigation of the globe, his depiction was copied for decades, for example in Ortelius’s *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* dating from 1570.

Donald Lach notes that “In the eyes of Europe, the image of Asia was constantly changing in detail while remaining surprisingly constant in general

outline” (Lach 1994a:822). However, in truth a new perception was emerging. Changes in detail occurred throughout history, but these important navigations generated data which presented the biggest challenge yet. Yet new data on distant territories were still insufficient to substantiate a complete reinterpretation, and instead triggered a reconsolidation of the old framework of understanding about Siam. Two complementary psychological reactions can explain this: *premature cognitive closure* (the conscious avoidance of discrepant information), typical of Columbus’ attitude, and *perceptual satisfaction* (forming a theory on scant information merely to reach a quick conclusion), as shown in Mercator’s maps. In order for there to be a new framework of understanding, people had to accept the disappointment over the old fables being disproved, and the data needed to be more complete. Until then, imagination still overwhelmed concrete information.

### Multiple pressures to change the framework

After their seizure of Malacca in 1511, the Portuguese showed that it was feasible to speed up the emergence of a new perception. The background to their encounters was no different from that of the Castilians or the rest of Christendom, although they could count on new narratives from travellers along the Indian Ocean. But, more importantly, they had set foot in the region intending to remain and therefore needed to conduct business-like relations with any neighbouring authority, preferably non-Muslim.

The Portuguese could benefit from new books depicting similar itineraries to that of Marco Polo, such as those of Niccolò Conti, the Venetian merchant who spoke Arabic, spent two decades in Asia and travelled from Southern Asia to Europe a century after Marco Polo. Another example some years later was Ludovico di Varthema, whose *Itinerario* (published in 1510) was the first narrative of a European traveller to present-day Southeast Asia. But those accounts were not significant advances on Marco Polo since they added little new relevant data. Conti’s insights are, as Rubiés points out, “very similar to those offered by Marco Polo” (Rubiés 2000:97), while some of Varthema’s descriptions are simply inventions. In fact, it is even uncertain whether Conti and Varthema visited Siam; both probably called at Mergui (Tenasserim) on the bay of Bengal, then under Siamese suzerainty, but there is no definite evidence to confirm this (Trakulhun, 2004:67, Lach 1994a:165, 494).

Their 1511 occupation of Malacca compelled the Portuguese to shape a perception of Siam free from *mirabilia*. The architect of their Asian empire and commander-in-chief of the expedition, Afonso de Albuquerque, soon learnt that Siam was an important non-Muslim power in the area with a long history of confrontation with Muslim Malacca. Therefore, Siam was not only a possible ally

but also an ideal territory to provide his people with needed supplies, as Maria da Conceição Flores asserts (1995:24). As a result, Albuquerque sent an envoy to its capital, Ayutthaya, among other embassies to neighbouring ports on the Coromandel Coast, Sumatra, Java and Pegu. Duarte Fernandes, the envoy, informed the Siamese authorities of the Portuguese intention to settle there and seek political alliances (Flores, 1995:25). Other expeditions followed, and one of Fernandes' men wrote a report on the dress, customs, products and depths of the Siamese harbours after a two-year stay (Flores, 1998:138, Pintado, 1993:275, Villiers, 1998:125).

The Portuguese decided to engage with other city-states in Asia. In order to continue commercial and diplomatic expeditions, the first treaty between Siam and a European country was signed in 1518, when King Ramathibodi II allowed the Portuguese to establish a permanent residence in Ayutthaya, as well as in various ports around the Malay Peninsula such as Mergui, Patani and Ligor (present-day Nakhon Sithammarat). The Portuguese disappointment about the limited profits from the merchandise sold in Ayutthaya was compensated by the supply of their basic staple, rice, as well as crucial information and partners in their advance towards the Chinese Empire (Costa & Rodrigues, 1992:95,174, Münch Miranda & Serafim, 1998:198–199).

Over time, the close interaction with local powers increased mutual cooperation. The Portuguese crown's interests were strongly intertwined with the expansion overseas and it tried to alter the patterns of trade in Malacca to its own advantage. Because the Portuguese presence was dependent on the local rulers, they had to avoid confrontation (Teixeira, 1983:21; Damrong, 1955:1–2; Reid, 2000:166). The contacts between Portuguese and Siamese were between equals sharing common interests. The Portuguese officials secured their supply of rice, satisfied their need for allies in their struggle against their "Moorish" trade competitors – sources refer to the already existing Malay, Indian and Persian Muslim traders – and consolidated their chances of establishing a trade network in southern China. The Siamese hoped that cooperation would provide them with Portuguese mercenaries to redress the military superiority of their Burmese enemies. King Ramathibodi II (1491–1529) was thinking of new commercial flows to Ayutthaya and other ports on the Malay Peninsula, such as Patani or Malacca, with Siam acting as an entrepôt between Fujian and the Muslim traders on the Indian Ocean. The Burmese King Tabinshwehti (1531–50) also tapped the Portuguese for military help, while Chinese and Arab traders had already started to introduce firearms (Andaya, 1992:416). Ayutthaya required skilled technicians, new military strategies and fortifications able to withstand the new artillery. Against this background of joint ventures, the myths, legends and *mirabilia* began to fade. The time and space for imagination had shrunk.

But this stage of cooperation had an unexpected consequence. The Portuguese “men on the spot”, who fought in the Siamese armies and later settled in Ayutthaya, were now crucial parties in the mutual contacts and crucial agents for conveying a new image of Siam. The mercenaries helped Siam achieve a new balance of power with Burma (although the modernization of ancestral wars needed bigger investments of capital in new technology), and several who settled in the capital as personal bodyguards of the monarch gained direct peacetime access to the Siamese decision-makers (Flores, 1998:160, Subrahmanyam, 1993:256–261). Because of both their long-term expertise and their proximity to the court, active and retired soldiers became intermediaries for other Portuguese on such business matters as entry permits for ships and for relaying petitions. From the second half of the sixteenth century, Portuguese residents shaped Lisbon’s perception of Siam. They introduced important nuances to that perception, both because of their wealth of data, and because they endeavoured to further their own interests, whether these coincided with the official Portuguese agenda or not.

This signalled a new stage in mutual contacts and perception. Before this, the accounts told by the Portuguese returning from the great navigations were in no position to challenge Portuguese official interests. The narratives written in the 1510s, such as Tome Pires’s *Suma Oriental* (1990) with references to Malacca, Java, Sumatra and the Spice Islands, or Duarte Barbosa’s *Relaçao* (1946), were kept in the *Casa da India* in Lisbon and remained secret, although the latter text was read by selected persons. Over time, however, the state’s grip on information relaxed, partly because of the diminishing need for secrecy (which facilitated the circulation of Pires’s work), but also because the flood of information provided by the residents in Siam made it much more difficult for officials to maintain secrecy. In *Décadas* (1552–1615), João do Barros relied extensively for his treatment of Siam on Domingo de Seixas, who had spent over two decades in the country, while for his *Peregrinação* (1614, written decades earlier), Mendez Pinto based his account on Galeote Pereira, who fought against Pegu on the Siamese side in the 1540s (Spence 1998:28).

The changes in Portuguese society after 1550 also helped to raise the value of the residents’ expertise. The significance of Asia declined as Brazil gained prominence in Portugal’s attentions, while there was a growing feeling that Portugal’s high moments of glory had already passed. Similarly, the joint reign of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabelle and Ferdinand, only a few decades earlier, was already being remembered as a glorious era never to return. The expatriates residing in Asia wanted the court in Lisbon to look again towards the East and send more resources to the region where they lived. They tried to achieve this by boasting about their own past deeds, intimating the possibility of future glories, and restating the *mirabilia* framework.

Firstly, residents needed to glorify their achievements. An example was the increasing importance of shipwreck narratives, such as in the epic poem *Os Lusíadas*, a journey along the Indian Ocean replete with excitement and enemies, whose author, Portugal's most honoured poet, Luís Vaz de Camões, narrowly survived a shipwreck which left him on the banks of the Mekong River. Next, the residents needed to make Siam seem more attractive and accessible. In his *Décadas*, Barros pointed to the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, while Mendez Pinto in *Peregrinação* portrayed the kingdom as much more powerful and extensive than it really was (Villiers, 1998:120; Smithies, 1997:72; Lach, 1994a:494–499), while others recycled the old legends of the riches of the east. Finally, residents needed to make Siam more interesting, often by repeating the old *mirabilia*. Accounts of the first contacts referred to cannibalistic customs, unlikely to take place in a Buddhist country (Pintado, 1993:I 357). Barros also repeated such legends about Siam as the founding of the country as a consequence of the union of a dog and a woman. In fact, medieval ideas had retreated, but perceptions never die.

The Portuguese, certainly, possessed direct information sooner and so refurbished their image of Asia more quickly than the neighbouring Castilians, but the *mirabilia* framework remained latent and was able to make a comeback. Those who had emigrated and were living in Asia were united in enhancing their adventures and the importance of the areas to which they had emigrated. At the same time society was more interested in learning about glories than about failures, and there was still much territory to discover. Therefore, there was still room to keep alive and even reinforce the legends and myths, despite official interest being contrary to them. Representations could differ not only among different nations but also among different interests within their societies, and the private interests of individuals could even predominate over those of the state, as happened later in the case of Castile.

### Individuals restructuring perceptions

In the mid-sixteenth century, the gap between the views of Castile and Portugal over Siam was very wide. While the Portuguese and Siamese had trading relations in which they cooperated or opposed each other and relations improved or soured depending on any number of reasons, Castile still remained unknown to the Siamese and vice versa. Obvious reasons can be found to explain this. The Castilians were continually at war in Europe and still had immense territories to conquer and occupy in America; Charles V had recognized Portuguese hegemony in Asia by selling his rights in the Maluku, so thereafter the Portuguese blocked Castilian inroads into a region they considered as theirs. But while the royal courts

looked in opposite directions and preferred not to compete directly, individuals helped to reduce that perception gap and lend a different outlook based on their personal interests by transferring information from one kingdom to another. Two Portuguese cartographers, three adventurers from the Atlantic coast of the Iberian peninsula, and a Portuguese bishop had a crucial role in doing what the governments did not dare to do, that is, help Spain to revise its image of Siam by establishing contacts between the two places. In doing so, they shaped a perception that was different to that of Lisbon.

Portugal did its utmost to prevent information from being made public; King Manuel I ordered all information about routes and populations to be safeguarded in the *Casa da India*, while those responsible for violating the secrecy or leaking data could be condemned to death. However the cartographers Diogo Ribeiro and Pero Reinel contravened the order for complete secrecy about geographical discoveries. They were hired by the Castilian king, Charles V, and in 1529 drew the first world map that indicated with relative accuracy the position of territories in America and Asia and the extent of the Pacific Ocean. Once the Treaty of Saragossa, also dated in 1529, had separated the world into Portuguese and Castilian areas of influence – continuing the line established in 1474 for the Atlantic Ocean in the Treaty of Tordesillas – Charles V, whose *Casa de Contratación* was as secretive as its Portuguese equivalent (Del Pino, 1998:55n), was interested in claiming the newly found territories. Betraying the interests of their monarch, Ribeiro and Reinel's map was inclined "to exaggerate the breadth of the Bay of Bengal and of the Archipelago in longitude, so that the Moluccas might fall within the Spanish hemisphere" (Thomaz, 1995:89, plate VII). And since they drew a "Regno de Ansiam" in its correct location, Castile obtained a first glimpse of the kingdom as a recognisable entity. Even though no Castilian had travelled there, the coasts were left blank and this map coexisted with contradictory references (such as those of Mercator), this was an important step forward.

Three adventurers from northern Spain using Portuguese logistics were also crucial in drawing the Asian territories closer to Spain. The first was the Galician, Pero Díaz (sometimes Pedro, or Díez), who stayed several weeks in Patani in 1544 before travelling onwards to China, Japan and Maluku. His journey illustrates very well the arduous complexity of these travels and the difficulty of categorizing those first contacts through present-day eyes. Pero Díaz can be considered as the first to make the first direct recorded contact between Spain and Siam, but that depends on whether Díaz was a Spaniard and whether Patani was Siam.

Patani had different allegiances. This city-state was a strategic meeting point for Malay and Chinese vessels, which had benefited from the fall of Muslim Malacca and had relations with Ayutthaya based principally on commercial interests like many other towns on the Malay Peninsula. Patani can be considered

part of Siam when Díaz arrived, since periodic offerings to Ayutthaya of the *bungamas* (the traditional ‘golden flowers’) as tribute points to its notional subjection. But Patani can also be considered independent from Siam, as is shown by the fact that three years after Díaz’s visit, in 1547, the Sultan enforced Muslim law (Chemmanurith, 1990:34–35; Bougas, 1994:12–14).

Pero Díaz can be categorized as a Spaniard, although there are reasons for doubt. He came from Monterrey, a town in Orense province barely a few kilometres from the present Portuguese border. Galicians also share with the Portuguese a very similar culture and a common language and the fact that Díaz arrived on Asian shores using Portuguese routes and ships leads one to speculate that he was closer in outlook to Portugal than to Castile. The same was true of another Galician adventurer, Diogo Soares, who became the military commander and confidant of King Tabinshwehti (1531–1551) of Burma’s Toungoo dynasty, and was later stoned to death by an angry crowd (Reid, 2000:171, 180). But while we can wonder about the personal loyalty of Díaz towards either of the two Iberian monarchs, the issue seems to have been irrelevant to them. Díaz surely went to Patani using Portuguese logistics and made contact with some of the 300 resident Portuguese merchants who were able to benefit from the excellent relations between the sultan and Malacca. Díaz’s primary interests must have revolved around who held power in Patani and how he could continue his travels (Cabezas, 1995:101; Gil, 1991b:23). The information of Siam that Díaz was able to transmit to Castilians was based mostly on personal interests, such as the best connections and routes towards Asia and the business opportunities available in Patani.

García de Escalante Alvarado, born in Laredo, Santander, the official *factor* on the Villalobos expedition, can be considered the first to report information on Siam in Spain. His expedition had departed from Spain two years earlier, crossed the Pacific Ocean, met Pero Díaz in Ternate (De la Vega, 1975:76) and was later detained by the Portuguese along with the other expedition members in the neighbouring island of Tidore. In the report after his return, dated Lisbon, August 1548, and copied by a fellow citizen from Laredo, Manuel Velasco Torre (Martinez Shaw, 1999:11), García de Escalante makes reference to Diego Freitas, who he met in Maluku, after meeting Díaz. Freitas’s elder brother was a Portuguese captain who had been in Siam and was thus an apparently reliable source on the kingdom. He reports how Freitas referred exultantly to the inhabitants of “the city of Siam” as “ready to work, white and with beards, dressed with silks and cloths, almost like us”, as well as the travel restrictions placed on the Siamese, apparently for fear of losing population (Escalante, 1999:126; Martinez Shaw, 1999:28). He also mentioned the trade in gold and silver, and the disputes between merchants from China and Ryukyu. It was another fact illustrating the numerous leaks of information occurring among Iberians.

The Basque sailor (and later Augustinian) Andrés de Urdaneta was another person from the Iberian Atlantic coast whose information was crucial for the Castilians, since he solved the biggest logistic problem involved in setting foot in Asia: how to return via America. As a member of the Villalobos expedition, Urdaneta was detained in the Maluku, lived there for eight years and later returned to the Iberian Peninsula, passing through Malacca along Portuguese routes. Urdaneta apparently gained vital information that led him later, in the 1560s, to discover the *tornaviaje*, or return route across the Pacific Ocean. Thus, by discovering the route from Manila to Cape Mendocino and Acapulco in Mexico, the Castilians could establish an autonomous position in Asia without Portuguese aid, authorisation or interference. However, it should be noted that this step forward in identifying the region where Siam lay was achieved again thanks to information gained while Urdaneta was in Portuguese hands and obviously without official Spanish sanction.

João Ribeiro Gaio, the bishop of Malacca between 1576 and 1601, also shaped the perception of Siam for the Castilians. Out of his conviction of the importance of returning Portugal to its golden age of maritime hegemony by joining forces with the Castilians in the recently-formed Iberian Union (1580), the bishop considered the seizure of the sultanate of Aceh in Sumatra as the primary task. Ribeiro Gaio proposed attacking Aceh with a Portuguese expedition sent from Goa to be coordinated with a Castilian fleet and around 2,000 soldiers who would seize Patani and Siam whose capital, he averred, could be conquered with a mere one thousand soldiers because the population was not bellicose (Boxer, 1969:127; Subrahmanyam, 1983:125). This proposal deserves special attention. He wrote detailed reports about the political, economic and military life of Aceh in his book *Roteiro das cousas do Achem* (Alves & Manguin, 1997), and explained how Siam would provide an agricultural base, as well as being a rich centre of trade. The bishop not only asserted that Siam was easy to conquer, as many others had, but also showed a knowledge of strategy, as Jorge dos Santos Alves asserts (1998: 325–327). By starting with minor targets, and expecting to benefit from the “divide and rule” tactics so successful in other territories, the bishop planned to take measured steps, depending on the scale of difficulty, leaving the conquest of Canton (Guangzhou) to the future. Ribeiro Gaio’s perception of the Southeast Asian mainland is especially interesting, since he considered this region as the main place in which to foster Iberian cooperation and expansion.

These examples of individuals, whose role and behaviour did not differ much from the Portuguese “men on the spot” referred to earlier, show how crucial their contributions were. They felt free from total allegiance to distant monarchs, refused to depend completely on any one power, and had allegiances in the two continents in which they struggled. Working at the margins of the growing national

interests represented by bureaucracies, they were at the crossroads of feudal loyalties and modern identities, while personal origins were less important than cooperation to achieve common targets. The highest ranking among them, Bishop Ribeiro Gaio, acted as an individual. While his ecclesiastical function allowed him to rise above political rivalries, the bishop was aware that cooperation between Portugal and Castile was essential to achieve their goals, especially when expectations of the Iberian Union (1580–1640) still ran high, and the Castilians were more easily manipulated due to their recent arrival.

Due to the extreme fragility of the Castilian presence in Asia, the contribution by individuals had greater weight in Castile's perception of Siam. On the one hand, this greater reliance on personal roles and on information provided on a personal basis made Castile more dependent on those contributions. The difficulties of finding crew members for the expeditions, as illustrated by Juan Gil (1989: 198n), clearly shows the crown's need for individual contributions to its Asian plans. It even affected crucial journeys, such as the one led by Legazpi that would initiate the Spanish presence in the Philippines. Urdaneta, who had ordained as an Augustinian since his return to Mexico, refused to go to the Philippines, but Philip II gave him sealed instruction with orders that they be opened only after eight days at sea, when his margin for refusal had diminished (Gil 1989:86–87). On the other hand, the Castilian monarch was more receptive to individual agency. After 1580, Philip II reacted more attentively to demands from the settlers, even those in the area under Portuguese jurisdiction, in recognition of the settlers' greater expertise. From this period, the Iberian crown started to delegate its monopoly on trade in the region by giving "letters of travel" (*providos das viagens*) or appointing "captains of travels" (*capitães das viagens*) that soon evolved into a kind of "private trade", as Marques Guedes points out (1994:87). But this did not stop the official diplomatic activity to avoid alliances inimical to the crown's interests. Philip II sent two letters (in 1589 and 1591) ordering the viceroy in Goa, Duarte de Menezes (1584–88) to offer Nandabayin, the Toungoo king of Pegu, the fleet he had sought to fight against Siam in 1591, with the aim of averting Nandabayin's possible alliance with Aceh (Marques Guedes, 1994:89). As the Iberian presence in Asia expanded and the need for further backing from the crown diminished in both the Portuguese and, especially, Castilian camps, individual actions acquired a greater relevance.

### **The different reaction from Castile**

When the Legazpi expedition from New Spain (modern-day Mexico) arrived in the Philippine islands in 1565 with the intention of settling, the imperatives were similar to those faced by Portugal, especially the need to obtain reliable information and elaborate a new cognitive framework that could help in under-

standing the area. After 1571 the Castilians established themselves in Manila, a port better suited for defence and trade than any Portuguese port in Asia, and looking in particular towards China, unlike Cebu, where they first disembarked. To pursue this goal, they had to act as any other city-state in the area, seeking allies and looking out for enemies, and hence the Castilians became reliant on reliable information about the neighbouring territories. And, like the Portuguese, the aims of the settlers and officials in Manila were again split between diplomatic niceties and personal ambitions to obtain sudden glory and riches.

By 1586, a new and more data-based cognitive framework on Siam had emerged among those in Manila, as numerous references in documentation show. The first official reference to Siam was dated 1578, when Governor Francisco de Sande (1576–80) located the kingdom between territories inhabited by pagans and idolaters.

In Borney I obtained precise information concerning the entire archipelago and the mainland, as I found there people from China, Cuahi, Camboja, Sian, Patane, Pahan, Jabas, Samatra, Achen, Manancabo, Batuchina, Maluco, Vincanao, Limboton, and other islands thereabout. Concerning these I inform you only that as far as Sian there dwell Moros; and thence toward the north are idolaters. (Sande to Philip II, Manila, 29/VII/1578. B&R, IV, 1973:131).

By 1586, Siam was often mentioned as a focus of commercial interests and colonial expansionism.

Bellicose intentions were already clear. The Royal Audiency (*Audiencia Real*), the highest judicial body created in Manila three years earlier, met in 1586 for the first time to decide how to proceed in the islands and which petitions should be addressed to the king and which to the pope. The memorandum addressed to Phillip II included Siam as one of the enemy kingdoms that encircled the Philippines, together with Patani, Java, Burney (Brunei) and the Moluccas, while the biggest threats were posed by Japan and China, of which Siam was perceived to be a vassal (B&R, VI, 1973:178). The following year, after a visit by a Japanese emissary, Governor Vera relayed to Philip II the possibility of receiving Japanese soldiers from a friendly *Daimyō*, or feudal lord, in order to send an expedition either to China or to “Bruney, Siam or Maluco” (26/VI/1587. AGI, Secc. Filipinas 34, quoted in Ollé, 2000:91). The Jesuit Alonso Sánchez, who was appointed to send information to King Philip II “about everything in relation to this land [the Philippines] and about China, Japan, Siam, Patan [sic] and other Kingdoms”, reported on Siam after having consulted other monks and lay persons who had already visited the kingdom (AGI, Secc. Filipinas 18, Manila, 20-VI-1586). Sanchez’s report did not devote much space to ethnology but instead promoted

further expansion of the crown's presence in the region: in his perception, as Manel Ollé gently asserts, East Asia was reduced "to mere object of desire – either missionary or colonial" (2000:56).

At the same time, there were efforts to establish mutual trade. The first expedition from Manila to Ayutthaya appears to have taken place in 1586. In that year, Governor Santiago de Vera reported to King Philip II that Siam was one of the neighbouring kingdoms, along with Brunei and Mindanao, to which he had sent persons to make peaceful contacts. He continued: "... it has come to my knowledge that [the King of Siam] wanted to send ships to these Islands and have contacts and our friendship. I have sent a ship with some presents and offering him [what has been offered to] the others on behalf of Your Majesty and our desire to open the route." (AGI, Secc. Filipinas 6. Letter to H.M., Manila, 26/VI/1586). In the same document, Siam is again referred to as a potentially problematic territory, while the possibility of profits is also mentioned: "This Kingdom of Çian is very big and of countless people and merchandise of which Your Majesty will be informed. The people are little bellicose, less than others of those Kingdoms." Lastly, the Augustinian friar Juan González de Mendoza mentioned Siam in *The Famous History of the Mighty Kingdom of China*, a book also published in 1586, translated into many languages and probably the most important influence on the image of China at the time. González de Mendoza portrayed Siam as "the mother of all idolatries," with an expansionist religion, noting also that its population was mostly "cowardly" (and thus dominated by Burma) though Siam did have important trade (381–83, 387–88).

References about Siam in 1586, then, are scattered in the documentation but already significant. There is no further reference to what happened to that "embassy" sent by Governor De Vera and it appears to have been a trade mission with enhanced rank in order to ease protocol, similar to another embassy sent in 1598, when the first trade treaty between the two countries was signed. These mentions give a first glimpse of the new perception of Siam among recently arrived Castilians. They saw Siam as an in-between realm, neither big nor small and neither a (permanent) Muslim enemy nor a submissive ally: all options were open. It was ranked below Japan or China and partly subservient. Its suzerainty over Patani and the possibility of making deals made it more important than Aceh, Maluku or Brunei, while former wars against the Burmese or Cambodians went unnoticed. On the whole, Siam appears as a lesser threat among potential enemies and a key player to deal with. This image was clearly influenced by the perceptions recorded by individuals, as can be traced some years later, at the same time that letters from King Philip II were sent through Portuguese channels to the Burmese king Nandabayin offering an army against Siam, as mentioned above. In the end of the 1580s, two adventurers working for the King of Cambodia, Diogo Velloso and

Blas Ruiz de Hernan Gonzalez, managed to convince Manila to send an expedition to mainland Southeast Asia, claiming officially that their purposes were to defend the Khmer king from Siamese attacks and to stimulate Christianity in the area through royal protection, although it is obvious that they aimed at physical expansion.

This expansionist approach from Manila contrasts with the friendly relations conducted by Portugal at the beginning of the sixteenth century, showing that the same process, such as establishing direct intercourse with East Asia, ended with opposite results.

### **Conclusion: new forms for expansionist aspirations**

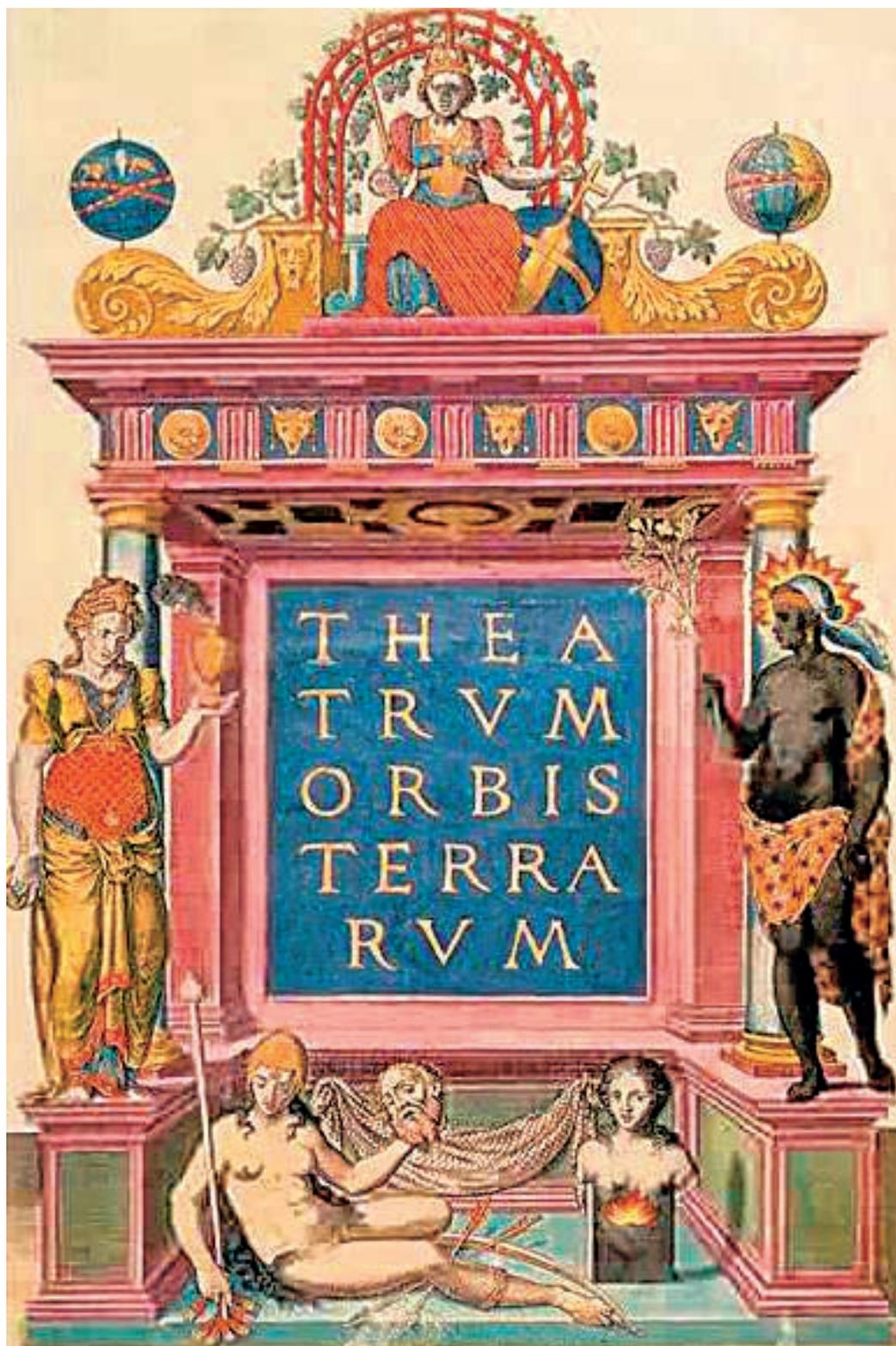
The settlement of the Portuguese in East Asia in 1511, and of their fellow Iberians in 1565, were radically different, in spite of similarities. For a start, the political context changed over time. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Siam was a powerful centre in the region; after 1545 the kingdom underwent continuous conflicts with her neighbours to the north (Lan Na), to the west (the Burmese even occupied Ayutthaya in 1569), and to the east, especially when the Khmers tried to profit from its weakness. The Iberian settlements were also different. Portugal merely had some scattered fortified positions along the coasts and needed to work hand in glove with local rulers to maintain its presence and continue trade. The Castilians were aware they had found an excellent territory with a good harbour and with no threat of local rulers attacking from the rear, to the point that they considered Manila the ultimate stronghold in case Portugal lost Macao or Malacca (Ollé, 2002: 201).

Malacca avoided the mistake of sending expeditions of conquest, but Manila did so twice. Why? Castilians should have benefited from all the data-gathering and from the consequent revised perception of Siam, but those two expeditions suggest that accumulated knowledge counted for little. By contrast, in the 1570s proposals for the conquest of China were discarded. Ollé suggests there had been a “change of paradigm” in the perception of the Central Empire by the 1580s, brought about not only by “direct observation of isolated data but its systematization and articulation through the study of the Chinese language” (2000: 60).

Debate in the Iberian Peninsula about the need to justify wars might have stopped the two expansionist expeditions, but seems to have done no more than raise some doubts: the Bishop of Manila, Domingo Salazar, and many others who opted for pacific incursions into China, favoured a similar approach when dealing with mainland Southeast Asia (Ollé 2000:115-120; Ollé 2004:23), but the expeditions to further Castilian expansion nevertheless sailed forth.

To explain the different outcomes of the Portuguese and Castilian presence, four points should be taken into consideration. First, the *mirabilia* framework proved very resilient, in spite of the many inputs that forced a reconsideration of classic illusions about Asia. The expected treasures had not yet been found, but this only stimulated the search more intensively. Strong economic interests spurred the search, since the royal treasury financed private endeavours (Gil, 1989:132). Second, the experience of the Castilians in America, where resistance to conquest proved weak, fuelled expansionist aims. In the Castilian imagination, filled with images of conquest in America, the Siamese were compared to the American Indians as people ready peacefully to accept a new ruler. Third, a crucial role was played by individual Castilians residing and travelling in the region, where their lack of allegiance to any one crown allowed them to pursue their own interests. The further they were from their bases, the more spontaneously the Westerners united for a determined purpose, forming groups based on very different considerations to national ones. Their national origins were less important than their ambitions to gain glory or gold in distant lands from whatever source. Their allegiances were transient and helped Castile to develop a kind of frontier spirit. The relative decline of Portuguese energy and the shift in its interests to Brazil in the second half of the sixteenth century made Castile the more promising sponsor for ambitious individuals who dreamt about riches.

Finally, the preferred place for adventurers hoping to attract support from governments was the Southeast Asian mainland, where individuals could enjoy a role more important than they warranted. The multi-ethnic character of many ruling elites in Southeast Asia facilitated the welcome, accorded to numerous private traders, treasure hunters and adventurers in general, regardless of their national origins – Castilian, Portuguese, Basque, Florentine, Flemish or even Armenian, among others. At the same time, mainland Southeast Asia was where the European presence was at its weakest: east of Cape Comorin in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese state had a greatly diminished capacity to act, and the same can be said of Spain west of the Philippines. The region was therefore the most appropriate setting for any kind of unofficial cooperation between the administrations of Goa and Manila (Flores, 1998:138; Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, 1972: 110; Subrahmanyam, 1990:148–50). Unlike Portugal (or the Aragonese kingdom in Spain which forbade travel to Asia), Spain was lured on by adventurers in Southeast Asia who aimed to enrich themselves or gain fame or secure conversions, especially once the American colonies became a springboard to Asia. The Spanish authorities expressed concern about the many missionaries who travelled outside official control to mainland Southeast Asia (and Japan) and often upset formal relations. In fact, the expansionist drive faltered precisely when the missionaries recognized their lack of success in preaching to the Asian natives and decided to switch their focus to the Philippine lowlands.



The context and perceptions of Asia had changed, certainly, but also the self-perceptions of those Portuguese, Castilians and Spaniards who had contact with or received information about new territories and new populations in a world that, finally, was getting to be known with some accuracy. The frontispiece of the famous “theatre of the world” designed by Abraham Ortelius around 1570 helps to understand those differences in representations of Siam. In its upper part, it enthrones Europe represented as a woman with symbols of Christianity. Below her are three other female characters: Asia, Africa as caryatids sustaining the theatre as columns, and America at the bottom of the scene, already recognized as a new continent, while holding up a human head. This representation denotes the change in European perceptions. Europeans considered themselves superior to the rest, and all other continents were subservient. Each of the other continents had its specific characteristics. Africa was almost naked, and aroused no interest. Savage America was in need of being Christianized in order to achieve a degree of civilization that would put an end to people killing and eating each other. Asia, richly clad, was the place of luxuries.

The Portuguese and Castilians seemed to focus on different aspects of this image. The Portuguese had gained a new perception of these Asian luxuries and the riches they could obtain from their trade. The Castilians were taken by Asia’s subordinate position under the figure of Europe, and tempted to expand. Times had changed, and representations with them, although more as a result of creating new categories of representations rather than forgetting previous frameworks of understanding. These two Iberian peoples evolved and learnt about Siam as they became aware of their own developing and different identities.

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### Abbreviations

AGI: Archivo General de Indias

B&R: Blair and Robertson

HPEO: *Historia dos Portugueses no Extremo Oriente*

JSS: *Journal of the Siam Society*

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