

An Eighteenth-Century Macao Armenian Merchant Prince

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INTRODUCTION

Matheus Joannes, an Armenian, had a pivotal influence on the economy of Macao in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. He was a true “merchant prince,” amassing a large fortune through his trading activities during his thirty-odd years of residence in Macao. He died in 1794, at a time when Macao was in financial crisis. As a member of a religious ethnic community in exile, he was master of many languages and had adapted to another culture, while still identifying with his own Armenian religious and national heritage.

How did I first learn about Matheus Joannes, and appreciate his importance to the economic life of Macao?

I first came across the name of Matheus Joannes in the Macao court archives, in the records of a court action in the year 1802. The plaintiff was Cachick Joannes, of Macao, and the defendant was Nazar Jacob Shamier, of Madras. Cachick Joannes was acting as an executor of the estate of his brother Matheus, and Nazar Jacob Shamier was a former partner of Matheus, who handled his business interests in Madras. The case file included an inventory of the household effects of the deceased Matheus Joannes.¹ This inventory suggested that the deceased was a man of diverse interests and great wealth.²

There the matter rested. Some years later, I was examining the microfilmed archives of the Portuguese Foreign Office preserved in the National Archives in Lisbon, and again encountered the name Matheus

Joannes. To my delight and great interest, I found in this archive extensive documents relating to the estate of this wealthy Macao citizen of the eighteenth century. They contained details about his business activities, the funds of his estate, and the manner of its administration by the Macao Orphans Court. The documents contain a great deal of information about the social and financial affairs of Macao, which, as far I know, have been overlooked by Macao historians, though the name of Matheus Joannes does appear in a few studies of Macao.

MATHEUS JOANNES – THE MAN

Matheus Joannes first arrived in Macao in 1761 as a young man. He was naturalized as a subject of Portugal in 1780 and died at Canton on 24 December 1794. He was survived by two brothers, a sister, a natural son aged ten years, and the boy's mother.³

Three of the many archival documents relating to Matheus Joannes reveal much about the man, his business and his place in Macao's social and economic life. They are the inventory of his household effects in Macao, an inventory made of his papers in Canton, and his last will and testament.

The inventory lists the contents of his large house on the Praia Pequena, that is, the “Little Praia,” on Macao's Inner Harbour. I have tentatively identified this house as previously belonging to Simão Vicente da Rosa, who in his time was one of wealthiest citizens of Macao. The house was situated below the Church of Santo António and to the south of Calçada do Botelho. After Matheus' son moved to Lisbon, the house was sold for 6,000 patacas, at a time when large mansions of wealthy Macanese were valued at two or three thousand patacas.

Matheus owned three slaves, who were sold for 540 patacas. Most wealthy Macanese at that time owned considerably more than three slaves.

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La Pérouse, *Vue de Macao, en Chine*, 1797. Copper engraving with later colour.

The currencies listed in the inventory reflect his extensive trade connections: Venetian and Florentine ducats, Indian star pagodas and rupees, Portuguese Reals, and “silver calculated in Chinese taels.” The currencies, along with some gold objects, were valued at 3,358 patacas.

Many silver trays, plates and serving dishes are listed in the inventory, but there is no chinaware recorded. This suggests the household followed the Indian custom of using metal as table service. The value of these items came to 1,770 patacas. Glassware, including chandeliers and Venetian glass, was valued at 578 patacas.

Of lesser value were furniture, clothing and miscellaneous items, valued at 222 patacas. Among these were a case with pictures of various persons, an eyeglass for distance viewing, a magnifying glass, swords, revolvers and pistols, and a blue satin hat with silver embroidery. His jewellery consisted of diamonds, rubies and emeralds, but their value was not great—only 188 patacas. Finally, there were three iron safes, valued at 111 patacas.

Was he a scholar or a dilettante? There are some clues to the answer to this question in the titles of the one hundred and eighteen volumes in his library. This is an impressive number for a merchant who needed to spend much time with his account books and business papers. Just as his business interests covered a broad geographical area, so did his library reflect a knowledge of different languages and a varied spectrum of subjects. The languages were Armenian, English, Portuguese, French, Latin and probably Greek, Persian, and several Indian dialects. Listed were a “Grammatical,” three volumes of the “Grammars of Balthazar,” a French grammar, a French Portuguese-dictionary, and two other dictionaries.

His interests extended to the many parts of the world where these languages were spoken. In the library were five volumes of Armenian stories and two of American ones; two histories of China; the voyages of the early Portuguese traveller in Asia, Fernão Mendes Pinto; two volumes of the *Adventures of Telemachus*; three volumes on the Spanish-Roman Revolution; a biography of Carlos Magnus; and two world histories.

BIOGRAFIA

On the more practical side were *The Happy Man*, the works of Dr. Duarte, two volumes on the English military, one on the Construction of Houses and the New Universal Law.

A book on journalism may explain the unusual number of Bibles and Testaments in his library. Matheus Joannes had strong family and business ties with Madras. The first Armenian journal was published there in October of 1794—three months before his death in December of that year. It was edited by Rev. Arathoon Shumovian.⁴ The press was owned by Jacob Shamier, probably a relative and partner of Matheus Joannes. He also may have helped to finance the new venture.

The press may have been in operation for some time before the publication of the journal, and the Reverend Shumovian, a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, may have published Armenian religious books as well. If so, this would explain the presence, in the library of Matheus Joannes, of four Bibles, seventeen Old Testaments, eleven New Testaments, six Gospels, and seven Psalters. Other titles of a religious nature in the library were a Roman Martyrology, a Declaration of the Evangelist David, and individual stories of Joseph and the Patriarch Abraham.⁵

The life history of Matheus Joannes presented to him various ways to construct his self-identity. How did he handle this problem?

By birth he was an Armenian, probably born in India, or in New Julpha, in Persia. He had strong ties with Madras. By naturalization he became a subject of Portugal and a leading figure in Macao, where at the time citizenship was restricted to those of the Roman Catholic faith. He appears to have come to terms with any conflict between his ancestral heritage and his Portuguese citizenship. The manner in which he reconciled the tensions this duality created is evident in various events and aspects of his life.

Throughout his life he maintained a basic allegiance to the Armenian Apostolic Church. This is expressed in his generous legacies to it, and in the provision that masses be said for his soul. At the same time, his will included generous bequests to Roman Catholic institutions in Macao.

Matheus was an Armenian in diaspora. He belonged to a people but not to a nation. As an Armenian, his identity was the distinctive Christian tradition

of his people, which was rooted in the past but preserved in an ecclesiastical organization in exile. One part of the Armenian Church had, in time, come under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In a political sense, Matheus Joannes had also done so when he became a naturalized Portuguese subject. At this period in history, to be a Portuguese subject was to be under the authority of the Portuguese *padroado*, which bound the state and the church in a close interlocking relationship.

His successful application for Portuguese nationality brought with it problems. It set him apart from other Armenians living in Macao, for he could become a member of the small group of Portuguese ship owners in Macao, while his fellow Armenians could not. His privilege was sometimes referred to as “the rule of iron,” for it enabled him to greatly increase his wealth, while at the same time preventing a native-born Portuguese from acquiring this privilege, as the Chinese authorities limited Portuguese ownership of ships to more or less twenty.

An unforeseen effect of his naturalization was the need to have his natural son, who was born in Macao a few years after his father’s naturalization, baptized as a Roman Catholic, though he may have preferred for the baby to have been baptized into the Orthodox Armenian faith.

As a native-born Macao subject, his son’s future was quite different from the wishes his father set forth in his will.

I shall not go into the theological and ecclesiastical intricacies that divided the Armenian Church from the Roman Catholic Church. Suffice it to say that the Armenians recognize their Patriarch, not the Pope in Rome, as the supreme authority. This and certain doctrinal differences, however, did not prevent a mutual recognition of a common bond in the early development of the faith before positions hardened and division took place.

In Macao, it seems that this mutual recognition did not extend to allowing the burial of Armenians in the consecrated burial sites for Roman Catholics. Or, at least, this is one way of explaining why, in the eighteenth century, the few Armenians who died in Macao were buried in a separate place.⁶ As for Matheus, he was buried in Canton, or perhaps in one of the burial spots on the Danish or French Islands at Whampoa.

BIOGRAPHY

Matheus Joannes had good relations with the Catholic Church. So good, in fact, that when a newly appointed Bishop of Peking went from Macao to Canton to make arrangements for his trip to Peking, he stayed at the establishment of Matheus Joannes in Canton.

The reality of his new identity as a Portuguese subject expressed itself in his bequests to the religious institutions in Macao, the hospitality he extended to the Bishop of Peking, and the baptism of his son as a Roman Catholic. Yet, as shown in his will, he had given his soul into the care not of the Roman Catholic Church, but of the Armenian church of his birth.

The inventory of his estate suggests that he retained certain inherited traditions, such as eating food from silver service rather than chinaware, as was the custom in China and Portugal. In addition, the blue satin hat embroidered with silver, which may be a part of traditional dress, and the many Armenian books in his library, are items which would reinforce his Armenian identity.

As a man without a country, he was not bound to a political state. This changed in 1780, when, after nineteen years residence in Macao, he applied to the Queen of Portugal to become a Portuguese subject. In his application, he took advantage of a new law that allowed him to be exempt from serving in the public positions of Senator, Procurador of the City and Judge Ordinary of the Orphans. The reason for such an exemption was probably the belief that someone whose heritage of customs and laws was different from those of Portugal might not have the background to best discharge these offices.

Though he was exempt from certain civil duties, there is evidence that he did participate in civic affairs. In 1787, the peace of the city was threatened by a Chinese mob provoked by the Portuguese authorities' destruction of shacks in the Patane and Mong-Há districts. These two districts were beyond the city wall, in the area where the Chinese still exercised jurisdiction. When the news of the demolitions reached the market, shops were closed and an angry mob gathered which harassed *negro* slaves shopping for their masters and some soldiers on patrol. The irate protesters then attacked a nearby house "belonging to an Armenian" on the Praia Pequena along the Inner Harbour, where the Governor "and many respectable citizens" were gathered. I have little doubt that this was the house of

Matheus Joannes. The Portuguese capitulated and promised to negotiate with the local Chinese authorities; the mob dispersed, partially satisfied. It is not clear if the Governor and leading citizens met at the house of the Armenian after they heard the news of the disturbance, or if they were there for another purpose.⁷

One aspect of the identity of Matheus Joannes could be described as global. His estate papers show business transactions with Americans, British, Dutch, Spanish, French, Scandinavians, Portuguese, Chinese, Greeks, and Indians. His social contacts also included a broad spectrum of people.

His hospitality towards the Bishop of Peking has already been noted. In 1788, the first American Consul to China, Samuel Shaw, made a courtesy call on the Macao Governor and his wife, and also called at the residence of Matheus Joannes before leaving for a visit to Bengal. Shaw noted in his journal that, "Excepting with the governor's family, and those of Senhor Matheus Joannes and Senhora de Souza, there is no intercourse between the Europeans residing at Macao and the Portuguese inhabitants."⁸ This observation is evidence that Matheus circulated in both foreign and Portuguese circles. Further evidence of the latter, at least at the official level, was the presence of the Governor and leading citizens at his house at the time of the disturbances in 1787.

ANALYSIS OF HIS WILL⁹

The last will and testament of Matheus Joannes states his last wishes in his own words. It is free of the legal verbiage of wills drawn up by a professional. The will reflects his values and personality, gives a few details of his business affairs, and mentions the people who were most important to him.

The will was written in Canton, six days before his death. It may have been written in Armenian and then translated into Portuguese. A judicial ruling later stated that because Matheus did not have the advice of a Portuguese lawyer, the will did not conform to Portuguese legal requirements.¹⁰ The Macao Court annulled the will on the grounds that Matheus Joannes had divided his estate into five parts instead of the three parts ordained for Portuguese wills. Another problem with the will was that he had appointed two Armenians as executors, and although they were living in Macao,

BIOGRAFIA

they were not Portuguese subjects, therefore their appointment was declared invalid.

The will can be analysed in four sections:

1. Introductory acknowledgements and minor bequests.
2. Division of the estate into five parts.
3. Instructions as to carrying out provisions of the will.
4. Executors and signature.

1. THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION

This section moves alternately between the general and the specific. Can we read any significance into the fact that this introductory section is structured in three polar movements: (1) from God to the individual man, (2) from the powerful and wealthy religious establishment to the poor and powerless, (3) from his young son to two people of particular significance for his son?

The will began, as was customary, with a religious preface: "In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Frequently, Macao wills of the nineteenth century began with more theologically explicit formulas, such as "In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Distinct Persons and one True God," or the specific Christian identification, "I am a Christian, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman, in which faith I hope to live and die."

After this initial nod to religion, the testator identifies himself in a manner that reflects his Armenian origins. "I, Matheus, son of Joannes." The Armenians at that time were still using the patronymic naming system. A son took the given name of his father as his surname. This meant that in each generation, the surname was different. I have not discovered what may have been the surname of his father, but the name of Matheus Joannes' son also followed the patronymic system, though in a Portuguese guise. The son was named João Mateus. The Armenian "Johannes" had been converted into the Portuguese "João," and "Matheus" became "Mateus."

The first legacy mentioned in the will expresses his regard for the religious establishment of Macao. He leaves 5,000 patacas to the Bishop of Macao, to be distributed among the churches and the clergy. We do not know the depth of Matheus' allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church *vis-à-vis* the religion of his

forebears, the Armenian Apostolic Church. The inventory of his household effects lists neither an oratory nor religious pictures or images, which are included in the inventories of most Macanese of that period. There is no evidence that there was a priest in Canton to administer the last rites. His body was not returned for burial in Macao, and he did not leave a sum for masses to be said in Macao for his soul after his death, a provision frequently stipulated in the wills of wealthy Macanese. In his bequests to Armenian ecclesiastical institutions, however, he does provide for masses to be said in his name.

His next two bequests are to two persons closely connected to his ten-year-old son. First is his son's godfather. As the son of a naturalized Portuguese subject, Matheus' son had been baptized as a Roman Catholic in the Church of Santo António in Macao. Unfortunately, the registers of this parish were destroyed in the typhoon of 1874. Usually a child would have two godparents, a male and a female, often relatives or close friends of the parents. Macao wills show that the godparents often took their relationship to their godchildren seriously enough to leave them bequests. The godmother of João Mateus was Regina do Rozario, who is mentioned later in the will.

To his son's godfather, Manuel Vicente Rosa de Barros, Matheus bequeathed 5,000 patacas for the purchase of a "friendship ring" for remembrance. The godfather was a wealthy merchant, a bachelor, descended from an old elite Macao family.

The next provision in the will was 200 patacas to the "Aya" of his son. "Aya" was an Indian term for nursemaid or child caregiver. This woman is unnamed, but the accounts of the estate show a legacy of 200 patacas was paid to Elena Gracias. She died in Macao on 27 March 1818. The only possible reference I have found for her is in the baptismal register of the São Lourenço Church: "March 30, 1762, Baptized Gueteria, aged 17 or 18, Helena, aged 19 or 20, Chinese, servants of Maria Graces."

The sequence of those to be remembered thus moves from God to the religious establishment at Macao to two persons important in the life of his young son, and then to a servant of Matheus' household, named Haron, to whom he bequeathed 400 patacas as a remembrance. Haron's name suggests he was neither Portuguese nor Armenian. Probably he was from India, perhaps a Muslim. He may have been the "majordomo"

BIOGRAPHY

of the household. If so, it suggests that the style of the Joannes household was more Asian than colonial Portuguese-Macanese with a Chinese flavour.

The next provision veers away from the personal to the poor of Macao, to whom he leaves a sum of 1,000 patacas for distribution as alms.

2. DIVISION OF THE ESTATE INTO FIVE PARTS

A. *One-fifth part:*

He left one-fifth part of his estate to Maria Begum, the daughter of his sister. This is the only bequest he made to a relative. He had two living brothers. The children of one of these brothers, Lazaro, had been engaged in a business venture with their uncle Matheus, who still owed them 5,233.75 patacas from the profits of the venture.

In the account of legacies paid from the estate is the sum of 3,000 patacas paid to his niece in Madras, and a debt of 1,980 patacas owed to Materus Begum. Perhaps this latter sum was also the profit from a business transaction undertaken on behalf of the said Materus, who perhaps was the father, husband or son of his niece, Maria Begum.

Matheus stipulated that this fifth portion of his estate be managed by a prudent business firm and invested in safe ventures to produce a profit which was to be used for the maintenance of his said niece. After her death, both the capital and interest were to be distributed equally among her children.

B. *One-fifth Part:*

Another one-fifth part of the estate was to be used for the benefit of the testator's soul. It was to be placed in the hands of a reputable business firm that would invest it in secure ventures; the profit from these ventures was to be distributed in four parts to the following Armenian Church establishments.

- "1. For the Holy Land of Jerusalem, to be delivered to the Patriarch of the Armenians.¹¹
2. For the Church of St. Gregory of Ararat, to be delivered to the Patriarch of the said Convent, also of the Armenians.¹²
3. For the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator in that part of Russia which is our new land, which is called New Nakchaom, which is for the support of the Seminarians of the College or Church.¹³

4. To be used by the Convent of the Saviour at Isapahan [Ispahan, Persia], in the city of Julpha, where there is a convent of nuns, to be distributed to churches, priests, monks and nuns with the obligation to say masses for my soul."

These provisions indicate that Matheus was well acquainted with the situation of the Armenian Church at that time, and that his more immediate forebears were probably from the community of Armenians at New Julpha, in Ispahan, Persia. This community still exists in the same location. The bequest to the Armenian establishment at New Nakchaom gave rise to a lawsuit heard in the British court at Calcutta.

C. *The Remaining Three-Fifths Part*

The remaining three-fifths part of his estate was to be invested for the benefit of his son Joannes. It is interesting that we find the Armenian form of this name in the will rather than the Portuguese "João," which is used in the other documents of the estate.

3. PROVISIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE WILL

The father specifically states that the portion intended for his son should be managed by his executors, namely his business partner Pegus Adam (elsewhere called Paul Adam), his son Joannes, his son's mother Vertannis, and Senhor Lazaro Joannes. The latter was the testator's brother, then living in Macao.¹⁴

He instructed his executors to collect the money of his estate. This was no simple matter. Over an extended period, he had loaned money to many persons, some of whom were dead, absent or insolvent. He had substantial capital invested in partnerships in Madras and Calcutta. The records of some of his business affairs had become illegible over the years, and in any case they were in Armenian, English, Portuguese, Chinese, and possibly Greek. If the estate was to be put into proper order, the executors had a daunting task before them. But more of this will be explained in a later section.

He left instructions that the year after his death, his son Joannes and the boy's mother should be sent to Madras to be placed under the care of Senhor Xamier Sultan, who was perhaps a relative, and who had been

BIOGRAFIA

a partner in a firm in Madras with which Matheus conducted extensive business.

Matheus requested that his son's mother live with the boy and care for him, in return for which the two would enjoy the income from three-fifths of the estate. However, if the boy's mother did not wish to do this, she would not share the income, but instead would be paid a sum of 5,000 pure silver rupees. As noted below, the Macao government would not issue a license for João Mateus, the son, to move to Madras; as a result, his mother received her legacy at the house of her son in Macao on 9 June 1795. After this date she disappears from the records. Although she received her legacy in Macao, it was paid in rupees. Should we assume that soon after this she left for India? She is a somewhat shadowy figure.

Two other females are mentioned as having a close relationship with the son: his Aya, or nurse maid, and his godmother Regina, "who cared for him as her own." This suggests that his natural mother may have played a secondary maternal role for the boy, although it should be borne in mind that the lad's father did desire both mother and son to go to Madras after his death, and that the mother would there care for her son, being supported by the income from the boy's inheritance.

Matheus then turns to the business he had conducted with or on behalf of his brother Lazaro, for the benefit of Lazaro's children. The profit was to be divided into three parts. Lazaro's two sons would each receive one part, and his daughter the third part, as a "remembrance."

If Matheus, or those who were with him when his will was written, had been better acquainted with the laws of Portugal, he would have known that the provisions regarding the division of his estate into five parts violated the Portuguese requirement of division into three parts. There were other aspects of Portuguese regulations that apparently he did not know or ignored. A Portuguese subject living in Macao required a license from the state to move permanently to another place. When it was known that his son, who had been baptized in Macao as a Portuguese subject, was to leave Macao for Madras, the government refused to grant him a license.

Matheus should also have realized that as his son was a minor, the estate would come under the jurisdiction of the Macao Orphans Court, and the inheritance of a minor was deposited in the Orphans Fund. As we shall note, it took several decades before

the son, João Mateus, received all of his inheritance. This was many years after he had reached his majority.

As noted above, in the introductory section of his will, Matheus Joannes mentions his son's "Aya" and his godfather. In this section, he mentions the boy's godmother Regina, "who cared for my son as her own son." He mentions that due to lack of education, she "took the wrong path," and for this will have to give account on the day of judgement. In making this observation, did the mortally ill testator think of his own relation with the woman who had borne his illegitimate son, and what answer he would give for this irregular relationship when he stood before the judgment seat?

In the accounts of the estate, a legacy of 400 patacas was paid to Regina do Rozario. She died a widow in the Parish of São Lourenço in Macao, on 20 April 1820.

Matheus wished to insure that his son could continue in the same surroundings, at least until he and his mother left for Madras. The large and small houses in Macao were left to the son as a residence for the boy and his mother. Knowing how quickly buildings deteriorated in the climate of Macao, and the ever-constant threat of termites, typhoons and leaking roofs, he left instructions that they should be maintained in a good state.

His last thoughts were for the future of his ten-year-old son. When of age, he should marry "a good woman" approved by his executors, and the lad himself should be a "good man of justice, capable and in favour with God;" at the age of majority, his son should be given the administration of the estate. Leaving final words of advice to sons was a common feature in Chinese wills.¹⁵

As it happened, the executor did not approve of João Mateus' marriage, and João Mateus battled for many years to get full possession of his inheritance from the Macao government.

The provisions of Matheus Joannes' will conclude with the bequest of 100 patacas to his clerk, José de Souza, who may have written the will for the sick testator.

4. EXECUTORS AND SIGNATURE

The will concludes with the names of the Executors and Beneficiaries: the Bishop of Macao, Manuel Vicente Rosa de Barros, Pagus Adam, Vertennes and "my son Joannes," and Lazaro Joannes.

BIOGRAPHY

It seems most unusual that the Bishop would have been named as one of the executors, and I have already remarked on the unlikeliness of the son and his mother being included among the executors. Could this have been an Armenian practice? Of the others, it was natural that the godfather and companion of his son, the testator's business partner, and his brother Lazaro, act as executors.

The will was dated "Day of Judgement, 4 December 1794." The designation "Day of Judgement" must refer to the Last Sunday in Trinity when the Gospel reading is St. Matthew, Chapter 25, verses 31 to 45, concerning the Last Judgement.

The will was signed: Matheus Joannes. But as the original will appears to have been lost, there is now only a copy. It is possible that the original was written in Armenian script and the copy on record is a translation.

It is strange that this copy does not have the names of witnesses.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE ESTATE

THE PERIOD OF CONFUSION: 1795 TO 1797

A. The Inventory at Macao

An inventory of the effects of Matheus Joannes at his residence on the Praia Pequena was made on 5 January 1795.

B. The inventory at Canton

Matheus Joannes conducted some of his business from Canton, where he had quarters in one of the range of buildings called "hongs" or "factories" in the area set aside by the Chinese authorities for the foreign traders. It was necessary, therefore, to make an inventory of his possessions there. Arrangements were made for a party from Macao to visit Canton on 17 January 1795, where they were joined by Mr. Henry Brown, the first supercargo of the East India Company—who was nominally recognized as the head of the foreign community at Canton—and Lu Maoquan, the senior Co-hong merchant. The party from Macao consisted of the executors named in the will of the deceased, namely, Manuel Vincent Rosa de Barros, Lazaro Joannes, Paul Adam and the son and heir of the deceased, João Mateus. The clerk of the deceased's firm, José de Souza, either came with the party or was already in Canton. Also present were several Armenians, who may have been

employees of the firm or business associates, namely, Jacob Minas, Carapiet and Satoor Alexander.

While the inventory in Macao consisted principally of household effects, money, jewels and the house property, the inventory in Canton consisted of bonds, letters, accounts and other business papers. These were found in an iron safe, two blackwood paper holders, and a yellow painted chest with copper accoutrements. There was also a red leather trunk that held the clothing of the deceased, three silver boxes and a folder, which had been used by his son, full of old papers.

The iron safe contained twelve bonds and obligations totalling 112,500 patacas from Armenians, English, Swedes, Dutch, Spanish and a Portuguese.

Two books of Chinese paper were comprised of fifteen documents

C. Questions and problems regarding the estate

A precise accounting of the estate could not be finalized due to the confused state of the firms' records, and because some documents were illegible or incomplete. Satisfactory translations of documents written in Armenian script were also needed. Because the testator had divided his estate into five parts, which did not conform to Portuguese estate laws, it was necessary for the court to declare the will invalid. This meant that the share of the estate given to the Armenian Church was diminished. This gave rise to an action in the British court at Calcutta.

All of these matters prompted Lisbon to request an accurate account of the funds of the estate as of 31 December, 1797. In reply, Macao submitted the following documents.

1. Property of Matheus Joannes, died 1794.
2. Request for opinion concerning the letter of the Ouvidor [Judge] of Macao, António Pereira dos Santos, about the will of Matheus Joannes.
3. Will and inventory of the house of Matheus Joannes.¹⁶

The cover document of this file was dated 16 December 1797. Among other matters, it dealt with the question of the validity of the will, which had been made when the testator was mortally ill and without legal advice. He was a native of a country with completely different customs, particularly as regards the division of the estate and the naming of executors. The Governor and Captain General of India confirmed the opinion of the Macao judge in

BIOGRAFIA

this matter. The will was sent to Lisbon for confirmation. This was to avoid “national discredit by foreigners who might conclude that the judgment is against the good faith of the testator, who had disposed of his property by an excusable ignorance and which had been done without being aware it was contrary to the effects of naturalization and the failure to have the advice of a counsellor to make it admissible.”¹⁷ The reply explained why the circumstances caused a delay in the settlement of the estate. The delay was detrimental to the interests of the orphan child of the testator. The Armenian Archbishop through his representative the Rev. Father Stephen’s petitioned the British Court at Calcutta to set aside the action of the Macao Court to invalidate the will, exclude the Armenian executors and change the division of the estate from five parts into three. The Calcutta court required a deposit of 40,000 Spanish patacas from the funds of the estate.

The report from Macao to Portugal wished to assure the throne that the change of the will from five parts to three accounted for only a small reduction of the estate. At the time of the report of 1797, there were still a number of Armenian and Chinese documents that had not yet been translated, and some of the Christian debtors had yet to be identified.

There were questions about some of the sixteen documents found in an iron safe in Matheus’ Canton office. They were pledges of seed pearls to be paid on application to Paul Adam, his Macao partner. It was not clear whether the pledges were for a debt owed, or if they were an arrangement with one of his overseas partnerships.

Macao explained that one of the difficulties to be overcome in settling the estate was the extensive business network that Joannes Matheus had established over the years. There were complicated partnerships in different Asian ports, and many transactions with merchants at these ports with which the Portuguese had had little contact.

The Macao court’s invalidation of the will gave rise to expensive litigation in the Calcutta Court. A representative of the Archbishop of Eckchaom sent his almoner, Rev. Father Stephanus, to Calcutta to contest the invalidation of the will and the effect it had on the legacy left to the Armenian Church.¹⁸

The extant records on this episode in the administration of the will do not give a full account of the intricacies of the litigation. I have not made a search

in the records of Calcutta to see if there are records of the case in the archives there.

It was necessary for Manuel Vicente Rosa de Barros, the executor officially recognized by the Macao court, to go to Calcutta to contest the church’s claim, taking with him 40,000 patacas to cover expenses and possible claims. He probably sailed on the ship “Nossa Senhora do Carmo,” which departed Macao on 12 September 1796. The owner of the vessel was Januário Agostinho de Almeida.¹⁹

The “Carmo” also carried the current accounts of the Armenian executors. They had been disqualified by the Macao court. However, they were still necessary in order to settle the strictly Armenian affairs of the estate. Also included on the “Carmo” was an English translation of the Macao court’s decision regarding the share of the estate that should be allotted as the legacy due the Armenian religious establishments, once the original one-fifth portion had been altered to conform to the regulation requiring the whole estate to be divided into thirds. The amount allotted was three to four thousand rupees.

Manuel Vicente Rosa de Barros submitted a letter to the Court, dated 7 August 1797, setting forth the facts of the case as he saw them. Inasmuch as the Macao court had already recognized him as the legal administrator of the estate, he requested the court to confirm this decision. He also asked for an annulment of the previous court judgment in favour of the Rev. Father Stephanus, who, on behalf of Archbishop José of Eckchaom, had contended that Mr. Barros was not qualified to plead the case before the court.

The Calcutta court required three to four thousand rupees to cover translations of Portuguese and Armenian documents. The costs of the action were to be paid from the funds of the estate. Mr. Barros charged that the harm caused to the estate in having to bear these costs was due solely to the obstinacies of the Rev. Father Stephanus in initiating and pursuing the court action.

In order to arrive at a decision in the case, the Judge of the court at Calcutta had consulted Paul Adam, one of the Armenian executors appointed by the testator. He had been a partner in the firm of the deceased Matheus Joannes. He could testify to certain details of business transactions.

The decision of the Macao court to annul the will and change the original division of the estate from five parts to three effectively reduced the amount due the legatees. An exception was made in regard to the three

BIOGRAPHY

Armenian churches, which were to receive legacies for the benefit of the soul of the deceased. There was a dispute between the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Archbishop of Eckchaom about this matter. In India, there were three Armenian churches that would benefit from the legacy, namely at Surat, Madras and one to be built in Calcutta. Father Stephanus had requested that annual payments be made in accord with the provisions left by the testator to the these churches in India, and to the churches and convents at Ispahan in Persia and Eckchaom in Russia.

The court judgement also stated that the two other legatees, the testator's son and niece, were not to contest the legacy to the Armenian churches. I assume that the exception regarding the churches' legacy was made because it was a pious bequest, given specifically for masses to be said for the testator's soul.

The Armenian executors had written to the Calcutta court in March 1796, with the sum of 3,529.10.3 rupees paid into the account of the estate. Another sum of 83,823.4 rupees was paid to the Court by Mr. Barros. This was in papers of the East India

Company bearing eight per cent interest amounting to 6,000 current rupees. Altogether some 90,000 rupees had been paid to the court. This amount was to be paid to Rev. Father Stephanus, including an obligation for 20,000 rupees, which was his share of court costs.

CONCLUSION

Matheus Joannes was an unusual man in many ways. He was among the wealthiest merchants of Asia. Though Armenian by birth, he acquired Portuguese citizenship. This enabled him to join a select group of less than twenty native-born Portuguese subjects who controlled the economic life of Macao. His role in the development of the opium trade to China has been largely overlooked. He was global in his business activities and a man of many interests.

His life story needs to be rescued from the dusty manuscripts, reconstructed and recognized as one of great importance in the economic history of Macao. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Utah Genealogical Society, Macao Court Records, microfilm 1127859.
- 2 Reference of Court Action.
- 3 An article "Armenian Families in Macao" by Carl Smith and Paul Van Dyke is intended for publication in a future issue of the *Revista de Cultura*.
- 4 David Marshall Lang, *Armenia, Cradle of Civilization*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1970, p. 211.
- 5 Felix Feliciano da Cruz owned and operated the Armenian press in Macao and later in Hong Kong. His wife was Maria Isabel Cachick, born in Macao about 1807, the daughter of Joannes Cachick, also known as Cachick Joannes—the brother of Matheus Joannes. Felix Feliciano da Cruz published the Macao newspaper, *O Macaista Imparcial* [1836-1838], *O Farol Macaense* [1841-1842], *A Aurora Macaense* [1843-1844] and Canton Commercial List [1848-1856 (?)] and the Hongkong Almanack and Directory for the 1850s.
- 6 The Armenian cemetery in Macao is discussed in more detail in an article entitled "Armenian Footprints in Macao," intended for publication in a future issue of the *Revista de Cultura*.
- 7 Anders Ljungstedt, *An Historical Sketch of the Portuguese Settlements in China and of the Roman Catholic Church and Mission in China*, James Monroe and Co., Boston, 1836, republished by Viking Hong Kong Publications, 1992, p. 124.
- 8 Josiah Quincy, *Journals of Major Shaw*, Ch'eng Wen Publishing Company, Taipei. 1968, p. 245. Original Publication, Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, Boston, 1847.
- 9 A copy of the will of Matheus Joannes is included in the documents concerning his estate that were sent to Lisbon. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino 642, Cx. 20, document 33.1-55p.
- 10 Unfortunately I have not as yet found the specifics of these requirements.
- 11 There is still an Armenian Patriarch in Jerusalem. The Armenian Patriarchy of Jerusalem dates from the fifth century A.D.
- 12 The Khor Virap at the foot of Ararat commemorates the pit in which St. Gregory spent thirteen years. He was only released when the King of Armenia accepted the Christian faith in 301 A.D.
- 13 The "new land" must be understood in reference to Russia's treaty of Georgievsk in 1793 which concerned its interest in Transcaucasian territory. New Nakchaom must refer to the modern Etchmiadzin with its Cathedral of St. Gregory the Illuminator. The cathedral is the seat of the premier Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church.
- 14 I wonder if I have interpreted this provision correctly. It is not usual to name a ten-year-old child as an executor of a will.
- 15 See Carl T. Smith, *A Sense of History*, Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., Hong Kong, 1995, p. 3-37, "Hong Kong Chinese Wills: 1850-1890."
- 16 Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, CO 642, Cx. 20, Document 32, with three appended documents.
- 17 Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, *ibid*.
- 18 Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino C.O. 671, Cx. 63, doc. 39-1832/03/18.
- 19 Also sailed for Bengal on 4 November 1797, but this would have been too late.