

# Geopolitical Lens

## The Turkish Invasions of Europe and the Portuguese Expansion to Asia

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The Portuguese advance around Africa and into Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries took place as the Turks of the Ottoman Empire threatened to overthrow Western Christendom through military invasion in a manner similar to their subjugation of Eastern Christendom in 1453. Stopping the Turks were the German Catholic Habsburg dynasty of Europe's largest political entity, the Holy Roman Empire. Popular texts do not treat sufficiently the relationships between the strategies of the Habsburg dynasty as it confronted the Turks and those of Portugal's Avis Dynasty as it was establishing a dominant presence in the Indian Ocean. A review of secondary and primary sources, however, assuredly demonstrates the close ties between the traditional Portuguese-Catholic Avis dynasty and the German-Catholic Habsburg Dynasty as both confronted a life-threatening and militarily expanding Turkish power in Central Europe and the Mediterranean.

There are two theoretical components to the context of Portuguese advance into Asia: the first is the larger strategy that the central political authorities of Christendom in Rome and Constantinople were attempting to employ against their Islamic adversaries, who in various eras would include the Abbasid Caliphate, the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba,

the Seljuk Turks, the Egyptian Mameluks, and the Ottoman Empire. This larger strategy is anchored in the fact that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Mongol empire crushed the Abbasid Dynasty, then the chief competitor to Christendom for the previous 500 years. The Mongols serendipitously appeared as the Crusader states in the Holy Land and were in their final decades of fending off their Mameluk and Seljuk Turk opponents.

The second component is the role that the Iberians played as part of Christendom's central strategy. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century period of Portugal expansion into the Indian Ocean, an aggressively expanding Ottoman Empire posed a deadly threat to the West. The chronological sequence demonstrates that Portugal entered the Indian Ocean and seized control of the trade between the Middle East and Southeast Asia at the very time the Habsburg rulers of the Holy Roman Empire struggled to survive the Turkish Ottoman invasion. Rarely emphasised in secondary literature, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Habsburg and Avis Dynasties, were linked by blood and marriage.

Specifically, the reign of Ottoman conquerors Sultan Selim I (1515-1520) and his son Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) closely coincided with that of their Habsburg opponents, Holy Roman Emperors Maximilian I (1493-1519) and Charles V (1519-1556). Between 1510 and 1517, Selim I had conquered Syria and Egypt. His son ascended as Sultan in 1520. As the Protestant Reformation exploded in Germany, Suleiman began undertaking a series of much more significant and threatening actions that included the conquests of the strategic Christian fortress that guarded the lower Danube River at

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Belgrade in 1521, the seizure in 1522 of the 400-year-old base of the Order of St John (Hospitallers) at Rhodes which guarded access to the Mediterranean, and the subjugation of Roman Catholic and Habsburg-affiliated Kingdom of Hungary at the Battle of Mohacs in 1526. By 1529 Suleiman had Vienna under siege, the Habsburg capital and central city of the Holy Roman Empire. The loss of Vienna to the Turks would have opened up the Danube River Valley in Germany to Suleiman's conquest with disastrous consequence for Europe and the Roman Catholic Church. Seventy-six years after the Ottomans had extinguished the Eastern Roman Empire through the capture and sack of Constantinople they were by 1529 threatening to do so to Rome.

The Holy Roman Emperors who confronted the threat had deep roots in Portugal. Eleanor of Portugal, the niece of Portugal's Henry the Navigator, had been the Holy Roman Empress and consort of the Habsburg Emperor Frederick III at the time of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. She was the mother of Emperor Maximilian I. As importantly, Charles V and the Portuguese King Dom João III, whose reign from 1521-1557 matched that of Charles V (1519-1556) virtually to the year, had married one another's sister. Isabella of Portugal, the daughter of Dom Manuel I (1495-1521) and the sister of Dom João III, became Charles V's only spouse and the mother of the future King of Spain and Portugal, Philip II. Her father Dom Manuel I had been personally responsible for sending Vasco da Gama around Africa to India in 1498 and for sending Afonso d' Albuquerque to the Indian Ocean to solidify Portuguese control there in 1507. Isabella was talented and attractive when she died in childbirth in 1539; her spouse Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor (HRE), dressed in black for the rest of his life and never remarried. Dom João III married Charles V's sister, Catherine of Austria. A surviving son, John, was Crown Prince of Portugal in his short life from 1537 to 1554, producing the final monarch of the Avis line, Dom Sebastião. Following the death of her husband Dom João III, Catherine served as Regent of Portugal for the five years until 1562. Charles V and Dom João III could not have been more closely synchronised: by

their immediate family relations, their main opponent and the chronology of the actions.

Plate 1 demonstrates the significance of Eleanor of Portugal's marriage to the German King Frederick III on 16 March 1452. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II (1458-1464), had negotiated and then blessed the marriage. Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) crowned the couple Holy Roman Emperor and Empress three days later. When Constantinople fell, Pope Nicholas V called for an immediate crusade to regain the city, but died attempting to organise it. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini as Pope Pius II (1458-1464) followed up on this call for Crusade at the Congress of Mantua, and then he too died in August 1464 trying to launch it. Frederick III would establish the concordant between the Holy Roman Empire with the Catholic Church that would last for the next 400 years,<sup>1</sup> while he and his wife Eleanor's son Maximilian I would rule jointly at the end of his reign. At a time when the Avis Dynasty was gaining a decisive military edge by mounting state-of-the-art cannon on its sailing vessels, HRE Maximilian I wrote his autobiography, intriguingly entitled the *White Knight and Artillery* (*Weisskunicg*). Detailing the rise in firearms that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it would only be published for the first time in 1775.<sup>2</sup>

It is worthwhile to restate the significant: the father of HRE Charles V's wife Isabella had launched Portugal around Africa by backing Vasco da Gama and had sent Afonso d' Albuquerque on the mission that firmly implanted Portugal in Asia. The ports that Dom Manuel I seized in Morocco including Safim in 1508, Azamor in 1513, and Mazagao in 1514, were defensive bases to protect the Portuguese homeland from invasion during the Avis Dynasty's initiative to the Indian Ocean. Vastly more strategic acquisitions included Brazil (1500), Diu (1509), Goa (1510), Malacca (1511) and Hormuz (1515). During Manuel's reign in 1513 Jorge Álvares undertook Portugal's first mission to China, as did Tomé Pires undertake the second ill-fated mission in 1517. In recognition of the spectacular success of the Avis Dynasty's expansion project, on 3 November 1515 Pope Leo X (the second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Giovanni de Medici) extended privileges to Portugal over all lands discovered or conquered from Cape of Bojador to the Indies, thereby creating Portugal's famed Padroado for its overseas territories.

Plate 1: Pinturicchio, 'Aeneas Piccolomini introduces Eleonora of Portugal to Frederick III' (detail), fresco in the Piccolomini Library, Duomo, Siena. ([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pinturicchio\\_002a.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pinturicchio_002a.jpg)).

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In order to begin to assess whether the actions of the Portuguese kings and Holy Roman Emperors were coordinated, rather than serendipitous or random, we observe three historic eras of particular interest. Examples of relationships during each period suggest a coordinated strategic approach to a common enemy; first, by those in power in Rome and Constantinople who sought military allies in the East, and secondly by those on the Iberian periphery who played a role in the strategies of the central powers.

Three eras appear best to frame the geopolitical context of the Iberian Expansion:

(i) The Crusades, from 1054 to 1353 freed Portugal for its later expansion. During this era in 1258 the Mongol Empire destroyed the chief competitor to Western Christendom, the Abbasid Caliphate. This ensured that a central Islamic power could not direct forces to the re-conquest of Iberia. The period provides the analytical precedent to view military actions across the Mediterranean as being coordinated. The Mediterranean, known as 'Our Sea' (*Mare Nostrum*) to the Roman Empire, was certainly viewed in its strategic entirety by Roman military leaders. More

importantly, Mongol armies are likely to have provided to Christendom an impetus for the search in later eras for a strategic partner to the east of its Islamic chief opponent.

(ii) The Fall of Constantinople, extending from 1389 to 1453, put the responsibility for the defense of Christian Eastern Europe on to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. During this period by 1389 the Ottoman regime had firmly established itself in the Balkans through the destruction of the Kingdom of Serbia at the Battle of Kosovo. The Ottomans subsequently extinguished the Eastern Roman Empire through the capture of Constantinople in 1453. Arguably, this was the city that brought Christianity to Europe. The psychological blow to Christendom of the city's loss stimulated attempts to undertake new Crusades, from both the Papacy and from the Holy Roman Emperors.

(iii) The Ottoman Empire Expansion into the Balkans, Central Mediterranean and North Africa, from 1510 to 1699, brings the Turkish threat to the doorstep of the Habsburgs and Avis. Between 1510 and 1517 the Ottomans consolidate their Eastern Mediterranean

Plate 2: Prester John as Mongol Wang Khan in Marco Polo's *Le livre des merveilles*. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wang\\_Khan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wang_Khan)).



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position through the seizure of Syria and Egypt; in 1521 they pivot to attack Europe through the Danube River Valley. In this third period the Avis Dynasty of Portugal, during the reigns of the Holy Roman Empire's Maximilian I and Charles V, aggressively enters the Indian Ocean seizing the trade routes from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, offsetting local Asian Islamic power, and establishing an ocean empire that will be dominant for the next 150 years.

Certainly the political power holders in Rome and Constantinople, the former capitals of the pagan Roman Empire and then the dual capitals of Christendom, would not have been naïve players in the contest of global power. For Rome and Constantinople the concept of *Mare Nostrum* had not died out with the sack of Rome in 476 AD. Emperor Justinian I (527-565 AD) operating from Constantinople 100 years later almost recreated the reality. For the next 500 years Constantinople maintained a direct and unbroken line back to the Roman Emperors Constantine the Great and Justinian I, while retaining near continuous control of its Western Mediterranean bastions in Southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. Establishing relations with military power that existed on the opposite side, in this case to the east, of one's chief rivals was a well-known stratagem. However, these potential relationships for the Crusades of the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Iberian Expansion of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries have been virtually ignored in English-language secondary histories.

The origins of this absence may reside in the intensive European struggles that arose after the 1492 discovery of the ocean routes to Asia-America and the Iberian expulsion. Certainly Portugal itself has undergone four distinct regime changes since the Absolutist-Liberal civil war that ended in 1834. This war was one of the first manifestations of the break-up of the Anti-Napoleon coalition, 'the Concert of Europe', established under Austria's Count Metternich in Vienna in 1815. Still in power until 1848, Metternich undoubtedly backed the losing pro-Habsburg Miguelist faction of the Portuguese Civil War as London backed the victorious Liberals under Dom Pedro. Few of the intellectuals that supported subsequent Portuguese political elites, beginning with the Bragança's London-influenced constitutional monarchy, would have regarded the conservative Roman Catholic Church of the Habsburg era with favour.

But, the search for Prester John has been well documented, as Portuguese explorers in the early 1500s sought to establish contact with the rumored Christian emperor to the east of Egypt's Arab Mameluks and Asia Minor's Turkish Ottomans. Some assert Prester John was Ethiopian and Ethiopia's Coptic Emperor, but Marco Polo contends that Prester John was Toghrul, also known as Wang Khan 王汗 (1203),<sup>3</sup> the Nestorian Christian elder of the Mongol Kerait clan that produced the mother of the conqueror of China, Kublai Khan.<sup>4</sup> An edition of Polo's book published in France in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (*Le livre des merveilles*)<sup>5</sup>, depicts Wang Khan as a cardinal with his followers bearing crosses (Plate 2). Indeed, the Portuguese attempted to establish relations with Ethiopia (1520), while the Jesuits initially under their General Ignatius of Loyola (1540-1556) operated a mission there from 1555 to 1632.<sup>6</sup> He had already established bases in Asia, including those in Goa (1542),<sup>7</sup> Malacca (-1547), and Kyushu (1549), which sought relations with the major powers of the Far East, and would open one in Macao in 1556, the year of his death.

For Western European Scholars locating Prester John in Ethiopia forestalls the difficult task of deeming him to have been the Nestorian-Mongol kinsman of Hulagu and Hulagu's Nestorian Christian wife. That narrative could not have avoided the record of the devastating destruction of Baghdad in 1258. Asserting that Prester John was in Ethiopia, however, removes from the analytical process recognition of a compelling strategic mission for the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jesuits. Led by the former military officer and General of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, it is doubtful that senior Jesuit leadership missed the example of the Nestorian Christians, nor the implications for the Ottoman Turks of a successful re-establishment of the relations between Rome and Beijing.

One merely needs to widen the geographic and temporal scope of the struggle against the Turks to obtain striking corollaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the Qing conquered Turkestan (Xinjiang) in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Russians seized the strategically critical and Ottoman-controlled north shore of the Black Sea. One hundred years later, as the Qing repressed an extensive rebellion in Turkestan the Russians conquered the western half of the region. Both the Qing and Russian empires had significantly reduced, at the same time, the Turkish sphere of power and



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influence, while splitting control of the Silk Route, a reportedly significant overland trade route between the Eastern Mediterranean and China. Not coincidentally, the first two key treaties between the Qing and the Russian Empires, which preceded these conquests, were Nerchinsk in 1689 and Kiakhtha in 1727. Both were facilitated by Jesuit advisors to the Qing court, and at least the first was reported to have been written in Russian, Manchu and Latin.

Certainly, as Rome and Constantinople battled Islamic power in the Eastern and Western Mediterranean from 1000-1300 and then again from 1400-1800, military initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean would have inevitably impacted those in the west. In both eras, military allies to the east of the Arabs and then the Turks would have been an effective method of focusing Islamic military power in Mesopotamia and not in Iberia. A review of the map of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 AD demonstrates the global stretch of Rome and Constantinople's strategic opponent (see Plate 3). The Caliphate controlled a region that extended from India to Iberia, including three sides of Rome-Constantinople's *Mare Nostrum*. Importantly, while the Eastern Roman Empire blocked Arab power from a direct assault on Rome from the east (including through the control of the strategic islands of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica), the threat from Iberia was much more immediate, and therefore of much greater concern. Indeed it had been Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours (Poitiers) in October 732 that had halted a Moorish invasion deep into Western Europe led by the Umayyad Caliphate's Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, Governor-General of al-Andalus (Spain). An eight-century-long attempt to eliminate this power, known popularly as the *Reconquista*, followed. The direct political descendant of Charles Martel was Charlemagne. His Holy Roman Empire, for which he was crowned Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day 800 AD, would become the major political entity in Europe for the next thousand years.

## THE CRUSADES, FROM 1054 TO 1353

The Mongol destruction of the key competitor to Western Christendom in 1258, the travels and publications of the Marco Polo family in Asia shortly thereafter, and the half-century long Roman Catholic mission to the Mongol-Yuan Dynasty that existed from 1286 to 1353 may have provided the example and

the inspiration for the Holy Roman Empire's search for strategic allies in the east. Though the Crusades preceded Portugal's 15<sup>th</sup> century expansion into the Indian Ocean region, it was not by a particularly lengthy period. The last mission from the Yuan Capital arrived in Avignon in 1353; only 62 years later Dom João I in 1415 began the Portuguese move around Africa with the seizure of Ceuta.

The Crusading era had begun as Rome and Constantinople split Christendom in 1054, creating two Churches from one. Constantinople's power was soon expelled from Southern Italy in 1071, while the Seljuk Turks in the same year invaded Anatolia and dealt Constantinople a crushing defeat at Manzikert on 26 August 1071. After capturing the *Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes*, the Seljuks rapidly conquered cities of Anatolia which had been Christian and Roman for the better part of eight centuries. Nicaea, Antioch, and Tarsus, which had played fundamentally important roles in the emergence of Christianity centuries before, became Turk and Moslem.<sup>8</sup>

In reaction to Emperor Alexios I Komnenos' call for assistance, Pope Urban II responded with the First Crusades on 27 November 1095. For the next approximately the next 200 years, Western Christendom battled to maintain a position in the Holy Land against the Seljuk Turks and the Mameluks of Egypt. It is of singular importance for modern analysts not to miss the significance of Iberia during this period. The Crusading armies moved from a 'Western Front' in France and Germany that was in extraordinarily close proximity to Iberia, to seize Jerusalem, a city that controlled the overland routes of any army entering Egypt from Mesopotamia. More important than being a Holy City, a well-endowed army at Jerusalem in the Judean highlands could block the route along the coast from Mesopotamia to Africa: specifically, the route the main Abbasid armies would have to take from their capital at Baghdad to Iberia.

Though the First Crusade had captured Jerusalem in 1099, it is often reported that the remainder of the Crusades were substantially less successful. But whether by plan or by coincidence this surely was not accurate. How could military operations in the eastern and western Mediterranean not have been related? After the conquest of the Cordova Emirate's capital of Toledo in 1085, Rome and Western Europe launched its first strike into the heart of Islamic power in 1095. The

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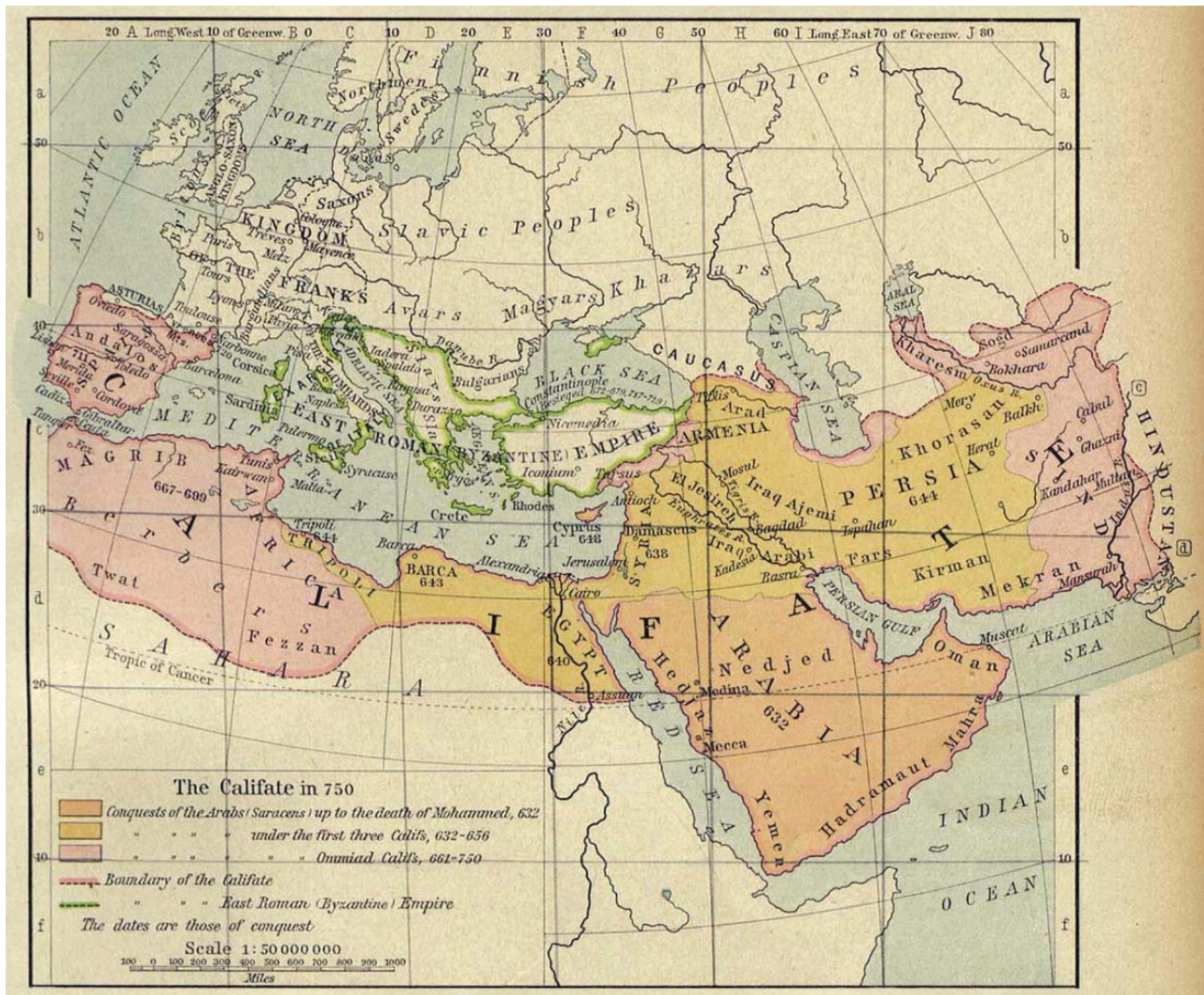


Plate 3: The Caliphate in 750. From William R. Shepherd's *Historical Atlas* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911).

Iberian *Reconquista*, from a base in Northwestern Spain that included the Basque region (home of the future Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola) then relentlessly moved ahead.

Modern analysts should recognise that the existing narrative of the Crusades in virtually all secondary literature does not juxtapose critically important dates which sketch a Western European-Roman move to widen its circle of security: (i) 1054: split between Rome and Constantinople; (ii) 1061: Beginning of the Norman conquest of Sicily and Southern Italy at the behest of the Pope; (iii) 1071: Norman conquest of Bari, Constantinople's key port and headquarters in Southern Italy; (iv) 1071: Turkish defeat of Constantinople at Manzikert and capture of

Roman Emperor; (v) 1085: King Afonso of Leon and Castile capture of Toledo, capital of Cordova Caliphate in Spain; (vi) 1095: launch of Crusades; (vii) 1099: capture of Jerusalem; (viii) 1147: Capture of Lisbon and control of the Tagus River, the key waterway of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>9</sup>

#### WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN STRUGGLE: ROME VERSUS CARTHAGE, 218-208 AD

The Iberian Peninsula, which controlled trade in the Western Mediterranean and the ocean trade link between the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, had been one of the earliest sites of ancient Roman expansion. It was the center of the struggle with



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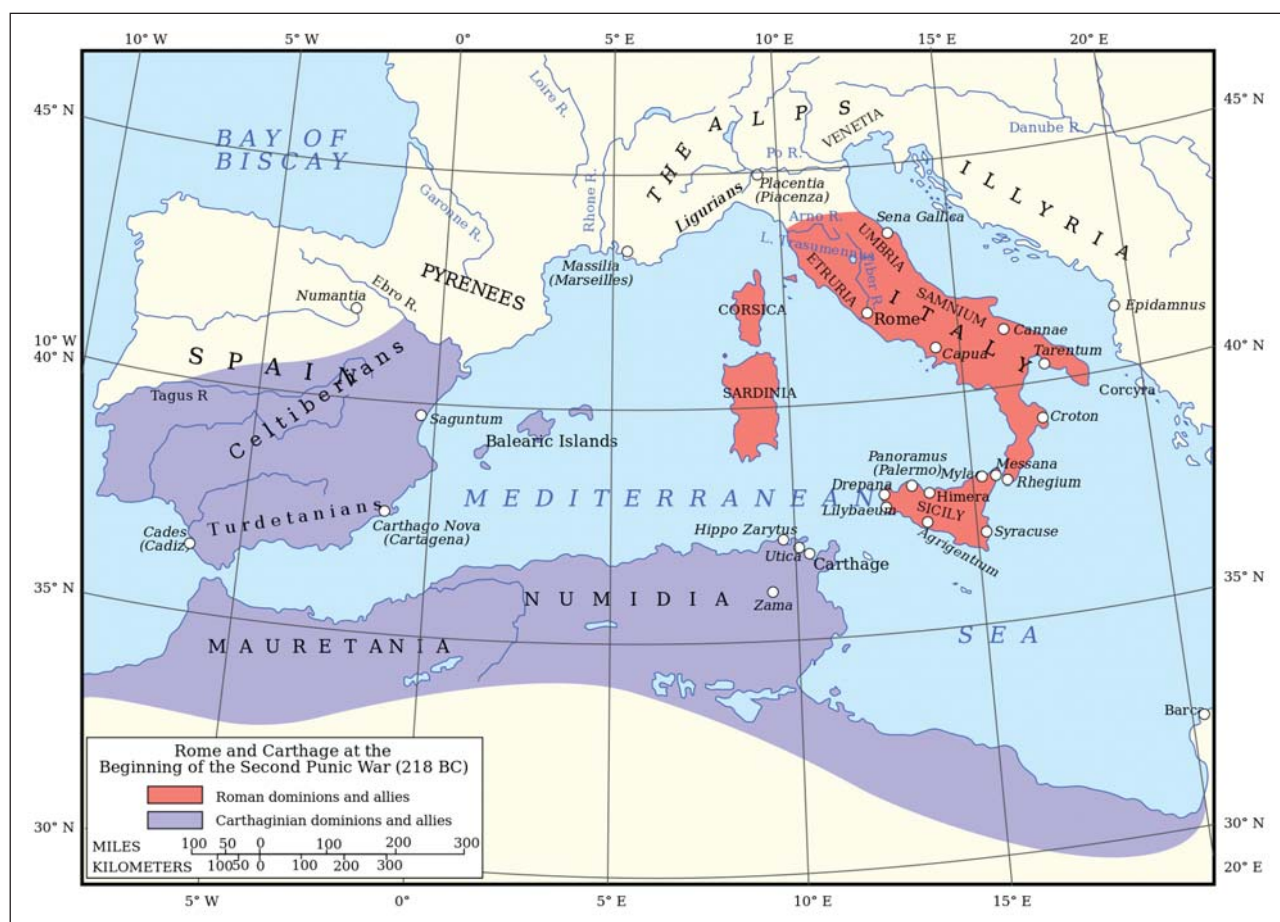


Plate 4: Rome and Carthage at the beginning of the Second Punic War. Adapted from William R. Shepherd's *Historical Atlas*.

Carthage for dominance during the Punic Wars. The Second War in the Third century BC (218 -201 BC) provided a classic example of military strategy for subsequent military analysts. From an Iberian base, Carthage's Hannibal sought the destruction of Rome, while Rome's Scipio Africanus invaded Carthage's home and to score a devastating and war-winning victory. While it might be tenuously proposed that Latin scholars in Rome may have forgotten this struggle, the rulers in Constantinople, who deemed themselves Roman Emperors (and direct descendants of the Roman Republicans) and who until approximately 1061 AD controlled the islands over which Roman and Carthage fought, would surely have not. Cato's famed '*Cathago delenda est*' forgotten?

The Roman Church would not have forgotten Charles Martell, who had defeated the Iberian-based Moorish invaders in France in 734 AD. Launching from Spain, Hannibal's attack had been the most significant

threat to Rome's existence in history. For over 2,000 years his destruction of the Roman Army at Cannae in 216 BC has provided the most enduring declaration of the danger. The counter to Hannibal, as students of military history have learned for centuries, was Scipio's attack on Carthage's home territory. His victory at Zama on 19 October 202 BC ended the war, ensured Roman dominance of the Western Mediterranean, and ultimately resulted in the total destruction of Carthage. This military strategy of attacking in the heartland of an enemy to alleviate deadly threats from its periphery has become a time-tested maxim. Why would Rome and Constantinople not have employed this strategy during the Crusades? Were they to wait for the Turks to crush Constantinople from the east, while their Moorish allies did the same to Rome from the west?

In fact, during the period when Christendom had occupied a key military position in what it deemed the Moslem heartland of Jerusalem and the Holy Land,



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it permanently regained control of Iberia. Fourteen years after the Moslem Turks began the conquest of Asia Minor in 1071, by 1085 the capital of the Emirate of Cordoba was in Christian hands. After the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, most of the Iberian Peninsula would be re-conquered by 1250, prior to and not impacted by the fall of the last Christian enclave at Acre in 1291.

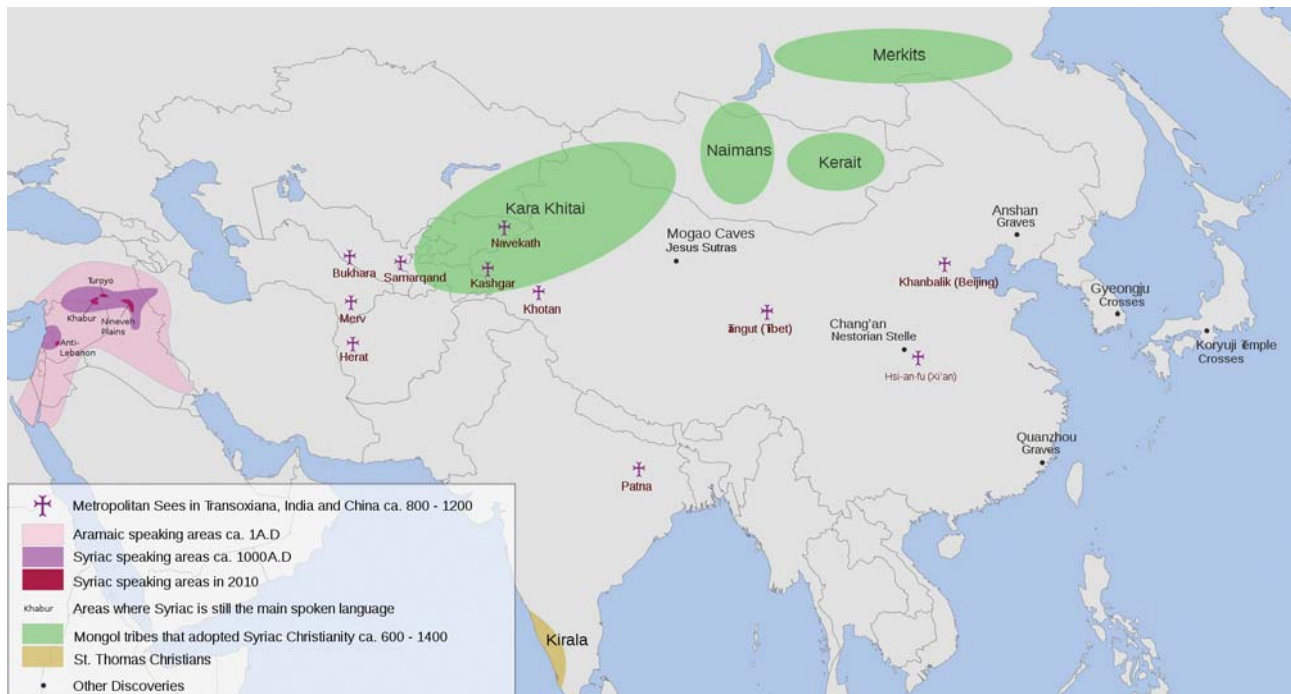
Certainly with respect to the Second Crusade, the time sequence is clear: reported to have substantially failed in the Holy Land between 1145 and 1149, this Crusade in 1147 captured the biggest prize in the west: the city of Lisbon, the estuary of the Tagus River (on whose banks also was Toledo) and the best port on Europe's Atlantic seaboard. The strategic value of the Port of Lisbon has been demonstrated innumerable times since then. It facilitated the British capture of the key military bastion guarding the mouth of the Mediterranean at Gibraltar during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) as well as the defeat of Napoleon's French-Spanish Fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. Analysts need only recognise that the common narrative of the capture of Lisbon consistently omits the discussion of the conquest of Toledo on the upper reaches of the Tagus River only thirteen years before

to recognise a distortion in<sup>TM</sup> the traditional analysis. With both Toledo and Lisbon in Christian hands, Christendom held the key water resource that divided the Iberian Peninsula; its recapture by Islamic forces was remote.

With respect to the final creation of Portugal, King Afonso III completed the acquisition of the last piece of continental territory in 1249 by taking Faro in the Algarve. Within three years of the capture of Algarve, the Emirate of Granada, along the southeastern rim of Iberia (and including Gibraltar) remained the only Islamic foothold in Western Europe (1252). By 1258 Hulagu's destruction of Baghdad precluded any assistance coming again from the Caliphate for a Moslem re-conquest of Iberia.

It would take another 250 years before the Christian Iberian powers had the power and motivation to conquer Granada. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella of Aragon and Castile seized Granada, thereby depriving the Islamic powers of their strategic hold on the water transport routes from the Mediterranean to northern Europe and their last foothold in continental Western Europe. This action came as the soon-to-be Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I prepared to step into the role that his father, Frederick III, had held for the

Plate 5: Nestorian Christians in the Mongolian Empire ([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syriac\\_Christianity.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syriac_Christianity.svg).)



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previous five decades. Maximilian I's mother, of course, had been Eleanor of Portugal, the daughter of the Portuguese King Dom Duarte and niece of Henry the Navigator, who had indisputably launched Portugal on its mission around Africa.

The Crusading era both illustrates the relationship between European moves on Iberia and those in the Holy Land and demonstrates the potential benefits of European military coordination with Asian powers. Objections that these moves were not related and unlikely to have been recognised by the existing military powers in the West must overcome the clear example of Charles Martel's defeat of the Moors (October 732 AD) for Rome, and the Punic Wars (202 BC) for Constantinople. Establishing the existence of this collective case of amnesia seems to be a highly dubious task. To recap the phenomenon of military coordination between the West and Asia: in 1258 Hulagu, the half-brother of Kublai Khan, the founder of the Yuan Dynasty, under the orders of the Mongke Khan assembled the largest Mongol army to date to crush the Islamic states of Southwest Asia. With an army of Mongols, Armenians and some Christians he destroyed Baghdad on 10 February 1258, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, and subjugated Syria. Hulagu would have proceeded to Egypt, had he not returned to Mongolia following the death of Mongke. Steven Dutch in *The Mongols* asserts that 'the Mongol destruction of Baghdad was a psychological blow from which Islam never recovered'. The Caliphate's massive stretch of territory from Persia in the East to Morocco in the West, which included three coasts of the *Mare Nostrum*, would never again be controlled by a central Islamic power.

The defeat of Abbasid Caliphate was followed by a series of diplomatic initiatives between Rome and the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan, and between Constantinople and the Mongol Ilkhans that ruled Persia. It is reported that Hulagu's wife, Dokus Khatun, was a Nestorian Christian whose intervention had spared the Christians of Baghdad, and that the former royal palace was offered as a Cathedral to the Nestorian Catholicos Mar Makikha.<sup>10</sup> Historically too, Nestorius, the reputed founder of the Nestorians (Church of the East) had been the Archbishop of Constantinople from 428 to 431. His views against a strident position on Mary as 'the Mother of God' brought him into conflict with the Emperor Theodosius II and his bishops; he was

exiled first to Antioch and subsequently to Upper Egypt where he died in 451 AD. Eight hundred years later his church and beliefs remained widespread throughout the East. They continue to the present era as the Assyrian Church of the East.<sup>11</sup>

The Nestorian Church had, in fact, made significant inroads in the Central Asian tribes, including becoming the religion of the Kerait Mongolians, the dominant tribe of the Mongolian plateau which Genghis Khan had incorporated in the empire he created in 1206. Details of this relationship were provided by SH Bira in his article entitled 'Mongolian Tenggerism and Modern Globalism' in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in April 2004. Genghis Khan ordered a Uighur scholar in 1206 to develop a writing system for the Mongolian language that would be based on the Syriac Script at a time when Syrian Christians were the largest religious group among the Uighurs.<sup>12</sup> More significantly, a Nestorian Christian woman of the Kerait tribe, Sorghaghtani Beki, married the youngest son of Genghis Khan (Tolui). Her children, who included Kublai Khan, Mongke, and Hulagu, became the dominant leaders of Mongolia, and incorporated China and Persia into the Mongol empire.<sup>13</sup> These were precisely the individuals with whom the powers in Rome and Constantinople sought to establish alliances.

Shortly after the destruction of Baghdad (and before the 1261 end of the Latin Regime that had begun with the Venetian sacking of Constantinople in 1204) Marco Polo's father and uncle left Constantinople on a nine-year journey (1260-1269) through Asia. Upon their return, they brought the young Marco Polo from Venice on a longer twenty-four year long trip (1271-1295) to the Yuan Dynasty. Departing from Acre and returning by sea to Ormuz, Marco Polo would bring back with him detailed observations on the Mongol ruler of China and the Christians therein.

While ultimately the enhanced relationship that was attempted between Rome and the Mongol-Yuan Dynasty is not reported having come to fruition, it would seem highly doubtful that the extensive diplomatic effort expended over many decades was not memorialised in the records in Rome or the Habsburg capital of Vienna. Indeed, Marco Polo's journeys during this time were extensively published after his return in 1295. These provided detailed reporting on the Nestorian Christians then in Mongolia and China and the Great Khan's relationship to them.



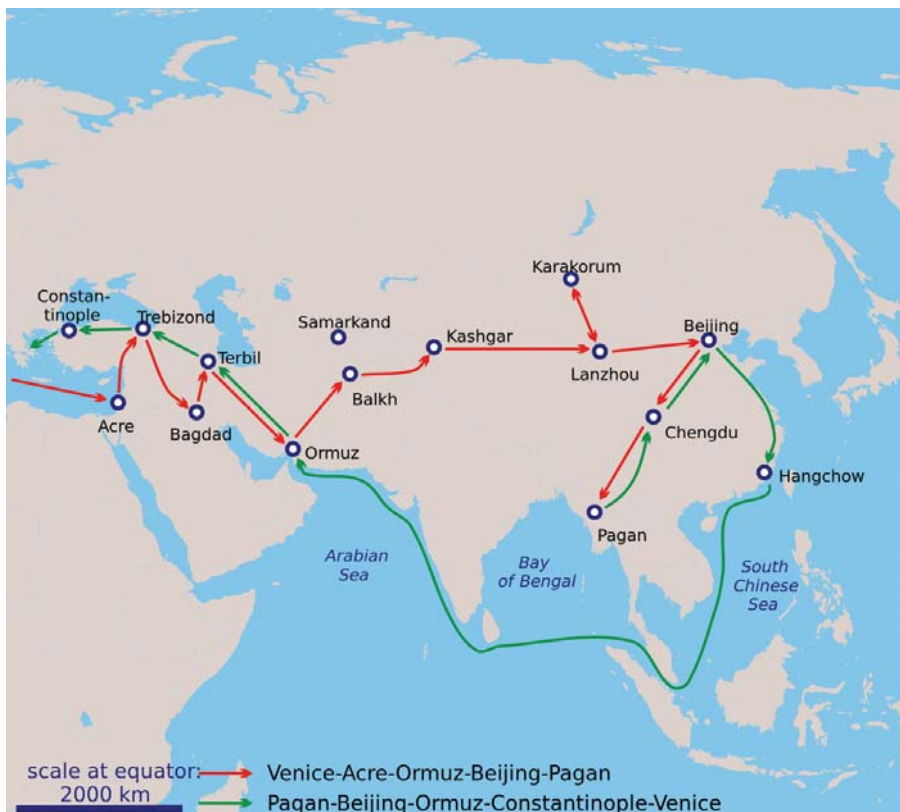
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MARCO POLO'S TRAVELS  
IN THE MONGOLIAN EMPIRE, 1271-1295

Prior to Marco Polo's return from China to Italy the Roman Church had already taken steps to advance relationships with the Mongols. In 1289 the Italian Franciscan Giovanni (John) Montecorvino led a full-blown mission from Rome to the Yuan Emperor in Khanbalik (Beijing).<sup>14</sup> Pope Nicholas IV (1288-1292), who had been Montecorvino's superior as head of the Franciscan order and also the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople<sup>15</sup> initially in 1275, sent Montecorvino to Persia. Ten years later in 1286 the son of Hulagu and the Ilkhan ruler of Persia, Argun, requested through the Nestorian Christian Monk Rabban Bar Sauma that Rome send Catholic missionaries to the court of the Great Khan Kublai (1260-1294) in China itself. In 1289 Nicholas IV therefore sent Montecorvino as Roman legate on a mission to the Mongols. It is reported that these and similar missions were stimulated by the 18 May 1291 loss of the last Christian city in the Holy Land, Acre, to the Egyptian Mameluks.

By 1307 Montecorvino had been named the Roman Catholic Patriarch of Khanbalik (Beijing), a position he would hold until his death in 1328. The mission would continue for 40 years more, until the 1368 overthrow of the Yuan Dynasty by the Ming. In the last years of the dynasty in 1336, Toghun Temur, the final Mongol Emperor of China, sent a mission to Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342) in Avignon headed by two Genoese. In response the Pope in 1338 dispatched 50 missionaries led by a John Marignonlli, who would return to Avignon in 1353 with a letter from the Great Khan to Pope Innocent VI (1352-1362).<sup>16</sup> By that time the Black Death had struck in both China and Europe, sweeping large sections of the population to the grave, including a massive percentage of the population in Henan. With the death of the Yuan Dynasty came the end of the Roman, Constantinople and Nestorian missions and communities in China. This was almost 200 years before the Jesuits attempted to re-establish the mission in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but only 62 years before Dom João I and his sons set out on the first step of Portugal's expansion to Asia in 1415.

Plate 6: Marco Polo's travels ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Travels\\_of\\_Marco\\_Polo.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Travels_of_Marco_Polo.svg)).



Marco Polo's work is variously known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, *Il Milione*, *Livres des merveilles du monde*, and *Divisament dou monde*. At times, as is demonstrated by Wikipedia, graphic excerpts that detail Marco Polo's lengthy discussions of Christianity in the Mongol Empire are obscured. Wikipedia reported that these are sourced from *Livres des merveilles du monde* (*Book of the Marvels of the World*) rather than the more obvious *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The depiction of Hulagu imprisoning Caliph Al Mustasim after the sack of Baghdad illustrates this phenomenon (Plate 7). The relationships of the Christians and Mongols could have been well-known to the readers of the French edition of Marco Polo from the 1400s. That

## HISTORIOGRAFIA

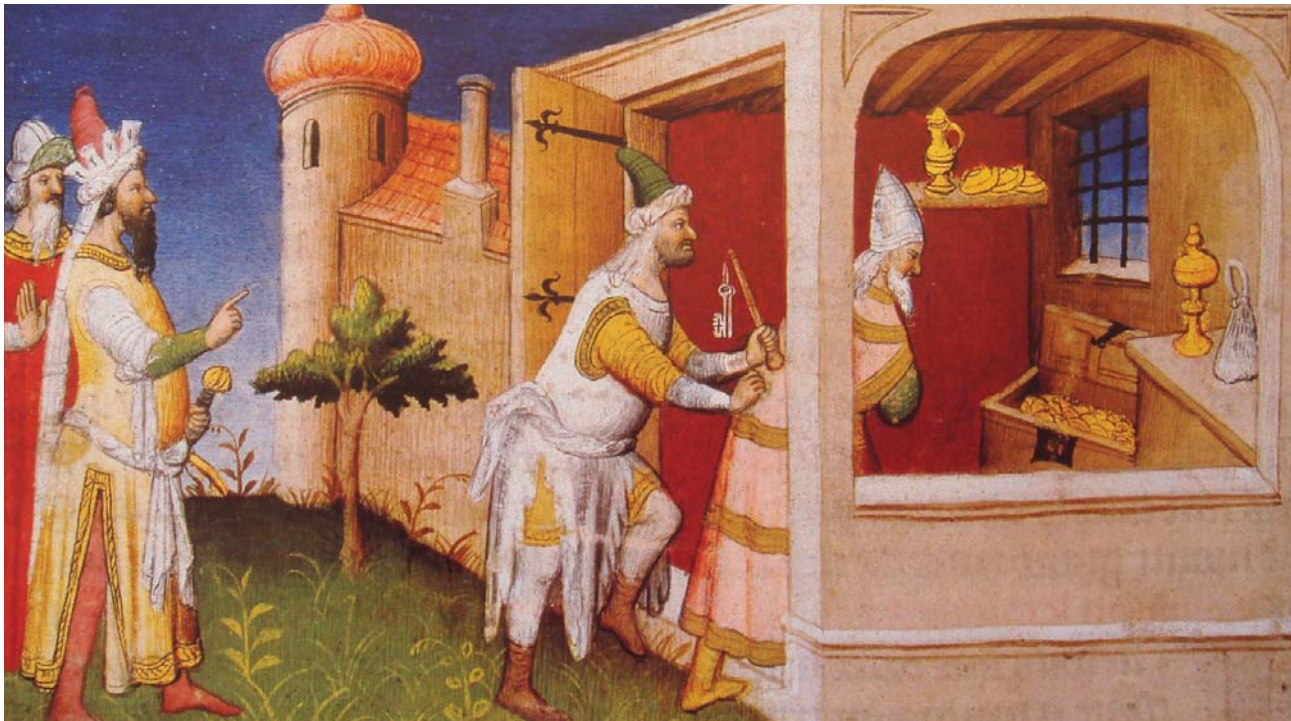


Plate 7: Hulagu imprisons Baghdad Sultan. Depiction from *Le livre des merveilles* (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HulaguInBagdad.JPG>).

they have been somewhat obscured in reporting in the modern era suggests that the topic continues to be one of sensitivity.

The published secondary discussions of the Jesuit mission to Beijing 300 years after Marco Polo do not disclose Marco Polo's memoirs as having been consulted by Jesuits traveling to the Far East in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; but such sources do report that Christopher Columbus had used them extensively 50 years before. Indeed, Marco Polo's report was virtually the only substantive report published by any Western on the inner-workings of the Chinese kingdom prior to those published by the Jesuits themselves. Because Marco was himself Italian from the largest and most important trading city of Europe, it seems a very tenuous argument to assert that neither of the influential Italian Jesuits that followed in his footsteps (Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci), who had the objective of establishing the Roman Catholic Mission in Beijing, consulted the one known source available that reported first hand on Christianity in the same city.

Irrespective of what the various interpretations of Prester John may have been, by the mid-1200s Rome and Constantinople had become well aware of

the importance of Mongol military power as an offset to Arab and Moorish power. Baghdad had been the capital of the Abbasid Dynasty, and it had been the major competitor to Christian Europe for the previous 500 years. While the Abbasid and Constantinople had established a tenuous border in southern Anatolia over the previous centuries, and therefore the Abbasid Dynasty was not an immediate threat to Rome from that quarter, the Abbasid did control vast stretches of North Africa and asserted power into Iberia. The destruction of the Caliphate might have been regarded as beneficial in many quarters. Derivatively it seems unlikely that Rome and Vienna, with the knowledge that Constantinople had already been destroyed, were not aware of the potential benefits of a powerful state to the East during their conflict with the Turkish Ottomans that commenced 200 years later.

## SUMMARY

As Portugal expanded into the Indian Ocean, the Holy Roman Emperors (HRE) of the Habsburg Dynasty, who were inter-married with Portugal's Avis Dynasty, were confronting the biggest challenge to Christian Europe since the fall of Rome 1,000 years



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before. The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 opened Europe to Turkish invasion via the Danube River Valley and the Mediterranean. HRE Frederick III and Maximilian I were first forced to deal with the Turks, while as a twenty-one year-old, HRE Charles V (1500-1558) battled Suleiman the Magnificent as his powerful armies invaded the Danube River Valley. With the Reformation flaring behind Charles V, Suleiman took Belgrade in 1521, the Island of Rhodes in 1522, and the Roman Catholic Kingdom of Hungary in 1526. He had Vienna itself under siege by 1529.

The consort of HRE Charles V, Isabella of Portugal, was the daughter of Dom Manuel I (1495-1521), the Portuguese king who had launched Portugal on a decisive strategy of rounding Africa and seizing the lucrative trade routes from Asia to the Middle East. This trade helped bankroll the Ottoman state and its Islamic rivals, the Mameluks. Dom Manuel's initiatives to Asia were undertaken as his first cousin HRE Maximilian I (1493-1519) ruled from Vienna. Maximilian's father, HRE Frederick III (1452-1493), had been the first Habsburg to face directly the military power of the Turks following the loss of the Constantinople, the fortress city that for more than a thousand years had anchored Christendom in the East.

Dom Manuel's initiative to reach Asia from 1495 tracked a route to the East that had been established three centuries before during Europe's conflict with the Abbasid Caliphate. Rome and Constantinople had both established relationships with the Nestorian-affiliated Mongol rulers that destroyed Christendom's chief Islamic opponent in Baghdad in 1258. While the

Crusader states were lost by 1291, Christendom reconquered the most important geopolitical position in Western Europe, the Iberian Peninsula. The Christian base had included the Basque region of Northwestern Iberia. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century the knowledge of the benefits of a powerful state east of the Ottomans was certainly known to the Habsburg and Avis rulers Vienna and Lisbon. For the previous 300 years one of the most widely read books in Europe had been Marco Polo's memoirs (*Livre des merveilles du monde*). The famed text had specifically recounted the Nestorian Christian relationships with the Mongols.

As the Turkish Ottomans threatened Christendom as never before between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the strategic examples of history could not have been forgotten in Rome, Vienna and Lisbon. The Roman Scipio Africanus had defeated Hannibal of Carthage through invasion of his homeland in the Punic Wars in 202 BC; the *Reconquista* had seized most of Iberia by 1252 as the Crusades occupied the Abbasid Caliphate's military routes from Mesopotamia to Iberia; and the Abbasid Caliphate was destroyed by the Mongol Hulagu in 1258. Assuredly these strategic initiatives were not lost on Charles V who between 1519 and 1556 had the chief responsibility beginning in 1519 to forestall a disaster in Rome similar to that which had befallen its sister Christian capital in Constantinople in 1453. He, after all, ruled as *La Compagnie de Jésus* was established in 1540. And, he then oversaw the dispatch of its most talented members to India, Japan and China under the Basque and Jesuit General Ignatius of Loyola (1540-1556) shortly thereafter. **RC**

## NOTES

- 1 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Constantinople).
- 2 Hagen Schulze, *Germany, a New History*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 47.
- 3 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wang\\_Khan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wang_Khan).
- 4 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_among\\_the\\_Mongols](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_among_the_Mongols).
- 5 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\\_Livre\\_des\\_Merveilles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Livre_des_Merveilles) (The Travels of Marco Polo).
- 6 [http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/dzo/artikel/201/003/3614\\_201.pdf?t=1244127310](http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/dzo/artikel/201/003/3614_201.pdf?t=1244127310).
- 7 [http://goanhvchurches.com/Orders,Congregation,Societies?Jesuits%20\(S.J.\).htm](http://goanhvchurches.com/Orders,Congregation,Societies?Jesuits%20(S.J.).htm).
- 8 [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Crusade\\_of\\_1101\\_v1.svg&page=1](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Crusade_of_1101_v1.svg&page=1).

- 9 An interesting note is that in 1088 Europe's oldest university, the University of Bologna, was founded in the Papal States with what came to be the Europe's leading school of law.
- 10 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Baghdad\\_\(1258\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Baghdad_(1258)).
- 11 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_Church\\_of\\_the\\_East](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_Church_of_the_East).
- 12 Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, M.E.P. *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000 (Histoire des chrétiens de Chine)*. Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2002). San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, p. 73.
- 13 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorghaghtani\\_Bekhi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorghaghtani_Bekhi).
- 14 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_of\\_Montecorvino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_Montecorvino).
- 15 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope\\_Nicholas\\_IV](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Nicholas_IV).
- 16 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni\\_da\\_Montecorvino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovanni_da_Montecorvino).