Mapping Global Consciousness:
Portuguese Imperialism and the Forging of Modern Global Sensibilities

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Abstract

This paper concerns the Portuguese forging of globalization, globality and forms of global consciousness in the early modern period. In the now voluminous Anglophone literature on globalization, depiction of the Portuguese contribution to such matters is generally muted, if not ignored altogether, in favour of accounts of Columbus’s famous voyage and the Spanish conquest of the Americas as the constitutive moments of early modern globalization. The paper seeks to rectify the relative neglect of the Portuguese case. It does so by examining how the creation of trans-oceanic networks by the Portuguese made possible new forms of global consciousness. The central arguments forwarded by the paper are: that the Portuguese experience is quite as important as the Spanish one in understanding early modern globalization; that early modern globalization was neither unidirectional or inevitable, but rather shaped in important ways by local and contingent factors operative inside Portugal and within the often tentative expansive endeavours carried out by rival sectors within Portuguese society; that the Portuguese expansion was both made possible by, and further fostered, particular navigational, cartographical and shipping techniques, which themselves embodied and allowed novel forms of global consciousness; that such forms of consciousness were not only the preserve of elites, but were disseminated throughout all social classes; and that it was through the twin endeavours of the Portuguese and Spanish that a radically new and distinctively ‘modern’ sense of the globe and global space was forged. The paper thus seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on the history of globalization, connecting material factors with the development of modes of perception and consciousness.

Keywords: globalization, globality, global consciousness, globe, Portuguese empire, Spanish empire, global networks, modernity, early modernity
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Now you can watch them, risking all
In frail timbers on treacherous seas,
By routes never charted, and only
Emboldened by opposing winds;
Having explored so much of the earth,
From the equator to the midnight sun
They recharge their purposes and are drawn
To touch the very portals of the dawn.

Camões, *The Lusiads*, 1.27 (1572)

Introduction

Thus wrote Luis Vaz de Camões, the Portuguese national poet, of the sea-captain Vasco da Gama and his crew as they sailed to the Indies in the late 15th century. The heroic tone captures a sense of novel and unbounded horizons, the promise of new lands to explore and conquer, and, despite its seeming vastness, the shrinkage of the geographical distances of the earth through the force of Portuguese fortitude and ingenuity. Da Gama’s voyage, and the other exploits of the so-called ‘Age of Discoveries’, became key elements in how the Portuguese have imagined their own history ever since (Sarmento, 2009). But outside of Portugal, appreciation of the Portuguese role in the making of a globalized modernity is more scattered. In the now voluminous Anglophone literature on globalization, depiction of the Portuguese contribution to the making of globalizing forces is generally muted (Author, 2010). Texts providing overviews of the development of globalization phenomena often tend to mention the Portuguese explorations, and the empire which they founded, only in passing. Often this history is swept aside, in favour of generalizing accounts of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Columbus’s famous voyage is often taken as the constitutive moment of ‘early’ globalization, marking the first steps towards full integration of the planet, as ‘old world’ and ‘new world’ are brought into systematic conjunction for the first time (Restall, 2003).

The tendency in globalization studies to concentrate more on the activities of the Spanish ignores the fact that early modern globalization was stimulated by the activities of both the Spanish and the Portuguese, the latter’s activities being as historically resonant as the former’s. As Boorstin (1986) has argued, as ‘organized long-term enterprise of discovery [and conquest], the Portuguese achievement was more modern, [and] more revolutionary, than the widely celebrated exploits of Columbus’. And as Braudel (2002 [1979]: 138) indicated, ‘Portugal played a major role in the cosmic upheaval generated by the geographical expansion of Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. Portugal was the detonator of an explosion which reverberated round the world’. Just as much as Columbus’s venture westwards, Vasco da Gama’s eastward voyage around the Cape of Good Hope ‘was an event symbolizing the advent of the modern age’ (Finlay, 1992: 230).

Given these considerations, the first aim of this paper is to take the Portuguese role in the making of globalized modernity more seriously than it often has been. In recent
years, certain scholars (Rodrigues and Devezas, 2007; Devezas and Modelski, 2006), have endeavoured to communicate what they regard as the revolutionary changes, with broad global ramifications, in communications, transportation and mobility which Portuguese navigators, politicians and merchants created in the forging of the nascent Lusitanian empire. For these authors, the Portuguese sailors, soldiers and commercial personnel of early modernity were true ‘pioneers of globalization’, forging radically new methods, modes of thinking and forms of action, in the creation of long-distance forms of control and movement that were wholly unprecedented. One might even say that the Portuguese ‘gave birth to globalization’ (Rodrigues, 2008: 9).

Such sentiments rather overstate the case, reminding us that reinscribing the Portuguese more firmly into the history of globalization processes must guard against the reproduction of certain clichés, involving overly idealised understandings of the nature of, and the reasons behind, the oceanic activities of the early modern Portuguese. Certain myths as to the ‘Age of Discoveries’ - concerning both the supposedly historically inexorable nature of Portuguese explorations, and the apparently culturally unique dispositions which motivated them - have been part of Portuguese self-understandings since at least the mid-16th century (de Sousa Rebelo, 2007, Subrahmanyam, 1997). It is these mythical narrations that contemporary revisionist scholarship seeks to problematise and transcend (Newitt, 2005, Disney, 2009a, 2009b). The second aim of this paper is to present this newer scholarship to a globalization studies audience, and to show the complex and often highly contingent reasons underpinning the Portuguese contribution to early modern globalization dynamics. A broader point thus emerges: early modern globalization could have been markedly different from the forms it actually happened to take. The specific reasons why it developed as it did must be traced in part to the social complexities of late medieval and early modern Portugal, issues too often omitted in histories of globalization.

The paper’s third aim concerns issues to do with matters of globality and ‘global consciousness’. There has been in recent years increasing recognition that globalization forces have a long historical provenance (Holton, 2007). If globalization proper dates back at least as far as 1492, then this raises questions as to what degrees, and in what manners, early modern people thought about what we today refer to as globalization and globality. In an influential overview of the globalization literature, Scholte (2000: 62, 65) argued that while ‘global consciousness began to tease secular minds half a millennium ago … [it] touched few minds [before the nineteenth century] … Even for that small minority, globality was usually a passing rather than a central thought’. In other work (Author, 2004, 2006), I have tried to show that such a statement is empirically untenable, as ‘global consciousness’ - defined as awareness of the planet as ‘one place’, and reflection upon one’s own place within it – has been a feature of various times and places in ‘Western’ history. Thus the Roman empire was replete with many instances of ‘global thinking’, not only among elites, but also to significant degrees among the lower social classes. Here I want to make an analogous argument as regards the early modern Portuguese. \textit{Pace} Scholte and others, we will see that far from ‘global consciousness’ being primarily a phenomenon of the late 19th century onwards, the Portuguese experience in the later 15th and 16th centuries is replete with instances of a range of people, and not just elites, thinking about the globe, taken as a whole, and of their own place within it.
In mainstream views of the European Renaissance current since the time of Burckhardt (1995) in the mid-19th century, it has been conventional to note that new Renaissance modes of selfhood and self-scrutiny were connected to the Iberian explorations and conquests of far-off places. The new horizons, physical and mental, that were encountered in the 15th and 16th centuries both involved and were made possible by ‘the discovery of the world and of man [sic]’ (Burckhardt, 1995: viii), the former instigated by the Iberian crowns, the latter enacted by pan-European intelligentsias. A crucial part of ‘Renaissance culture’ involved newly-invigorated forms of global consciousness: the Renaissance person is someone who can reflect on their own place in planet-spanning social orders, the contours of which became ever more visible as the 16th century progressed (Author, 2006). The forms of global consciousness characteristic of the 16th century and after, were to a large extent pioneered by the Portuguese. Through examining these matters, the paper overall seeks to contribute to an emerging genealogy of pre-19th century modes of global consciousness (Bartelson, 2010, Sloterdijk, 2009).

The Building of a Global Network

The Portuguese expansion outside the customary boundaries of Europe began in the early 15th century both through a series of tentative explorations of the seas to the south and southwest, and through the territorial ambitions of the Portuguese crown in North Africa (Gunn, 2003). The initial economic imperative was to find new sources for gold and slaves on Africa’s west coast (Cipolla, 1965, Disney, 2007). But once the Portuguese sailors and the elites who backed them found that there was a feasible route to the east via the southern tip of Africa, they saw that such a route could break Venice’s monopoly on the hugely lucrative spice trade, creating a new means of bringing spices back to Europe from the Indies (Findlay and O’Rourke, 2003).

The conventional narration of Portuguese expansion runs as follows (for an exhaustive depiction, see Disney, 2009a, 2009b). It begins with the conquest of the city of Ceuta in North Africa in 1415. This was followed by exploration of the Azores and Madeira, with explorations of the West African coast under the tutelage of Prince Henry, ‘The Navigator’, starting in the 1430s, and Portuguese ships reaching the Congo in the early 1480s. The Cape of Good Hope at the tip of southern Africa was rounded in 1488 by Bartholomeu Dias. After that, explorations continued eastwards, culminating in Vasco da Gama’s voyage to the west coast of India in 1498. Two years later, an expedition led by Cabral travelled westward, in the wake of Columbus’s Spanish-backed voyage of 1492, landing in Brazil. Mauritius and Madagascar became trading posts in 1507, as did Aden (1516) and Macau (1535), the Portuguese becoming the first Europeans to reach Japan, in 1542 (Gunn, 2003). In contrast to the Spanish model of colonial expansion, which involved the conquest of large land-masses in South America, the Portuguese model (with the exception of the colonisation of Brazil) involved the setting-up of fortified trading posts which combined to create a highly extended trading network backed up by military might (Pimentel, 2000).

By the 1540s the Portuguese enjoyed de facto control of all major shipping movements in the Indian Ocean (Steinberg, 1999). Thus the Portuguese were able to construct the Atlantic and Indian oceans ‘as a space supportive of their specific
strategies for dominating distant land spaces’ (Steinberg, 1999: 257). This entailed a very significant restructuring of time-space relations (Giddens, 1990) across what for the period was a truly vast distance, unparalleled in sea-faring terms until that time. Given the vast expanse of ocean from Lisbon to the easternmost settlement, Nagasaki in Japan (operative from the late 1560s), Devezas and Modelski (2006) do not exaggerate when they note the creation of a ‘global network and of instruments of global reach’. This was arguably the first truly global network created in history (de Souza, 2002), both because one power had come to control unparalleled expanses of ocean territory, and also because in addition to their eastward movement, the Portuguese also expanded westwards, colonizing Brazil and sending out large-scale cod-fishing expeditions to the Newfoundland coast from the early 1500s onwards.

Portuguese self-understandings increasingly revolved around the notion that their commercial-military lines of communication and transportation had come to surpass even those of ancient Rome (Miller, 1969). This view was founded on the fact that the sea-lanes across the Indian Ocean were coming to be as stabilised and regularised as had been the customary shipping routes of the Romans in the generally much less challenging environment of the Mediterranean. One cannot deny the dangers and lengthy voyage times that Portuguese mariners had to contend with: a round-trip from Lisbon to the Spice Islands in the later 16th century regularly took up to eighteen months, shipwrecks being commonplace (Chanda, 2007; Curtin, 1998). However, a key feature of Portuguese expansion was a series of attempts – mostly generally successful – by the political authorities and the technical specialists who worked for them, to regularise the means whereby ships went from the westernmost tip of Europe to the other side of the world, such that they could come back again in reasonably predictable ways (Law, 1986).

**Accounting for Expansion**

How such a situation was achieved, to the extent possible at the time, is a question taken up by many authors (see Braudel, 2002 [1979]: 138 passim.). Traditionally in Portuguese scholarship on such matters, the alleged cultural uniqueness of Lusitanian dispositions has been emphasised (e.g. de Figueroda, 1926). This disposition has in large part been reproduced for a contemporary global audience by Rodrigues and Devezas (2007). These authors make a case for the innovations in sea-faring, navigation and expansive ambition that were at the heart of the Portuguese building of their trans-oceanic network, as being rooted in a uniquely ‘Portuguese’ set of cultural dispositions that started to take shape in the early 15th century. Portuguese elites from Henry the Navigator (1394 – 1460 – see Russell (2000)) onwards possessed, and desired to augment, certain kinds of intellectual capital that both allowed for and drove their ambitions to map ever greater parts of the oceans. Portuguese elites became ever more dissatisfied with the narrow confines of Europe, and came to view the rest of the world, including parts of it only dimly known to Europeans, as affording new sorts of opportunities (Krejci, 2004: 181).

Henry the Navigator seems to be a crucial figure here. Portuguese and other authors have emphasised his founding of bodies of leading scientific advisers in cosmography, oceanography and navigation, thinkers whose theoretical ideas were then put to empirical test by Portuguese mariners (Braudel, 2002 [1979]: 139). This
scientific culture became institutionalised further over the course of the next century, often involving the recruitment of foreign leading lights in the relevant scientific fields (Pimentel, 2000), the theoretical accomplishments of the scientists ever more matched by the logistical expertise of the mariners. The result of the combination of advanced theory and increasingly geographically ambitious practice, is regarded by these authors as a characteristically Portuguese maritime culture, characterised by pragmatic, empirical attitudes rather than reliance on established medieval dogmas (Domingues, 2007). This is seen to have led to the development of increasingly reliable forms of scientific instrumentation, especially the astrolabe (Devezas and Models, 2006). In this manner a distinctive ‘globalist vocation’ is seen to have developed among the early modern Portuguese.

The account offered by Rodrigues and Devezas has its merits. A focus on Portugal’s distinctive scientific culture of the period is helpful, as the notion that the Portuguese pragmatically pursued the cause of empirical testing and verification of general cosmographical propositions, locates them within broader currents of the so-called ‘European Renaissance’ of the period, when normally the Iberian peninsula hardly figures at all in accounts of the latter (Pimentel, 2000, Headley, 2000, Disney, 2007). Yet their analysis also reflects earlier Portuguese historiography, and the national mythologies it is thoroughly intertwined with. It promotes notions of Portuguese cultural exceptionalism which contemporary revisionist scholarship, often undertaken by scholars located outside of the Lusophone world, seeks to deconstruct.

Revisionist scholars (see Newitt (2005) for an overview) reject the views that the expansion of the Portuguese - both down the west coast of Africa, round the southern tip of Africa, and also across the Atlantic to Brazil – was due to something unique about Portuguese culture, and was somehow inexorable once the process had begun. As regards alleged Portuguese cultural uniqueness, explorations down the West African coast for trading purposes had already been pioneered by Majorcan and Genoese sailors throughout the 14th century, these groups developing remarkably sophisticated mapping techniques throughout the next century (Fernández-Armesto, 2007). The merchant groups clustered in Lisbon in the late 15th century included Genoese (the most important of all foreign presences), Florentines, Flemings, French, German, English and Castilian Jews, as well as Lisbon natives (Newitt, 2005). These foreigners were attracted to the new business opportunities afforded by Lisbon, but their presence – and the capital, technical know-how and drive for profits which they brought with them - was also a key reason why an ever more expansive trading network spinning outwards from that city was possible in the first place (Subrahmanym, 1993: 39). In terms of the development of new kinds of shipping that would be able to undertake ever longer ocean-going voyages, as well as the expansion of new navigational methods, the Portuguese elite made use of broader European intellectual currents. Non-Portuguese actors were centrally involved in such matters, like the Jews involved in the scientific and printing culture of Lisbon (Gunn, 2003).

From a revisionist perspective, the idea of Henry the Navigator surrounding himself with the leading scientific and navigational luminaries of his time is utterly misleading, with Portuguese chroniclers from the mid-16th century onwards erecting a nationalistic myth of Henry as a far-sighted Renaissance prince with a global vision, when he was in fact possessed of a notably conservative late medieval mindset,
characterised mostly by pragmatic concerns as to finding new locales to plunder that were geographically close to his kingdom (Diffie and Winius, 1977). But although ideas as to a uniquely Portuguese ‘global vocation’ are misplaced, Lisbon still figures as a very major locus of the development of early modern globalization, precisely because of it having become by the later 15th century a unique crucible of trans-European actors and their diverse skills and capacities (Russell, 2000).

Revisionist scholarship has also taken aim at a related myth, that the expansion of Portuguese trading and military networks was somehow inevitable and inexorable, once the ‘explorations’ had begun. Contemporary scholarship (Disney, 2009a, 2009b) emphasises the contingent reasons underpinning Portuguese expansion, as well as the initially very tentative and often confused steps that the Portuguese and those associated with them took as they edged ever further from their coastline. From the start, motivations for further exploration were various and ambiguous. Although the search for wealth was at the root of the explorations, this was modulated in various ways. Initial forays down the west African coast were characterised more by established modes of piracy and plunder than by any wider visions, with the shift towards founding established trading relations, including trade in slaves, only being brought about by encounters with strong local kingdoms that could not be plundered in opportunistic ways (Vogt, 1979). The search for wealth was also intertwined in complicated ways with religious dispositions. The struggle against Islam was always a factor in the onward pursuit of new territories, but this varied over time, as different fractions within the aristocracy pursued divergent visions about how converts to Christianity might be won, how the war against the ‘Moors’ should be fought, and how such warfare might be financed by the wealth accumulated through trade (Subrahmanyam, 1993). In contrast to traditional historiography which assumes a socially and culturally unified country, revisionist thinking emphasises the social complexity of late medieval Portugal, with different fractions within the nobility pursuing often radically different agendas, the most notable division being between those groups wishing to concentrate on the military pacification of North Africa for both religious-political and economic reasons, and those wishing to pursue the development of trade in west Africa and thence in the Indian Ocean (ibid.). Divisions within the aristocracy were mirrored in divisions within the merchant class and within the populace at large, with different groups forming alliances with each other in pursuit of often radically heterogeneous goals: some favoured piracy as a strategy, others peaceful trade; some saw Asian expansion as the main goal, others regarded it as a disaster, and so on (Newitt, 2005).

From this perspective, Portuguese expansion was from being inevitable, monolithic or mono-directional, the courses it happened to take being driven by a broad range of contingent, local factors, both within Portugal and outside, such as in terms of Portuguese elites’ rivalry with the Castilian monarchy (Newitt, 2005). Early modern globalization starts to seem more like a series of tentative steps, taken by people pursuing often narrow interests, but which often had unintended consequences of planet-spanning importance subsequently, rather than the product of a small elite of pioneering visionaries, as Lusitanian myth since the mid-16th century has it. In order to enoble the activities of kings, aristocrats and merchants, Portuguese chroniclers began to present their activities as a coherent whole, characterised by a globalist vision, rather than as the generally heterogeneous, ambiguous and confused set of actions that revisionist scholarship can now discern. God-given providence was
invoked to cover up contingency, the idea of the global vocation of Henry the Navigator being just one instance of a widespread imperial mythopoiesis from about the 1650s onwards (de Sousa Rebelo, 2007, Subrahmanyam, 1997). Despite the myth-making, the Portuguese did indeed play an important role in the forging of novel forms of global consciousness, as we will see.

Globalizing Technology

Where traditionalist and revisionist scholarship can agree concerns the literally world-transforming capacities of the sailing and navigational technologies the Portuguese first deployed then further developed – even if their debt to earlier Majorcan and Genoese innovations has to be recognised. Although technological factors are a mainstay of traditionalist scholarship (e.g. Cipolla, 1965), a more recent and intellectually satisfying account (as far as contemporary globalization debates are concerned) has been offered by the British sociologist of technology John Law (1986). He has analysed Portuguese maritime organisation from the viewpoint of Actor Network Theory, which examines how complex ‘assemblages’ of people and objects make certain activities possible.

The Portuguese oceanic network depicted above was generally ‘made possible by the firepower of cannon, allied to the mobility of ships’ (Davies, 1967: 337), insofar as the regularisation of navigational routes was dependent upon both the physical constitution of the ships deployed, the navigational means used to steer them, and their military capacities to defend and attack. Law analyses the complex of humans, objects and knowledges deployed within one of the main types of ships used in the trans-ocean network, the carrack (or caravel). The Portuguese aim was to carve out of the natural environment (seas, winds, sky, stars, sun) a reliable mode of communication and transportation such that ‘a small number of people in Lisbon might influence events half-way around the world’ (Law, 1986: 235). The carrack had built into its very constitution scientific methods that allowed humans to harness the powers of the natural world, rather than have these work against them. Medieval vessels were ill-equipped to deal with the long distances and the necessity of straying quite far from land compelled by the trans-oceanic network. So new forms of ship design were instituted which allowed the carrack to be accommodated to this novel environment. It was fortified to be virtually impregnable to attack; it was large enough to carry substantial amounts of both cargo (making it economically viable on long-distance voyages) and supplies for the crew (reducing the number of stops it had to make); it had a range of different kinds of sails (to allow it to take advantage of variable wind conditions); and it required only a relatively small crew.

The new methods of navigation being developed in Lisbon were built into the design of the carrack. Medieval navigational methods reflected the nature of the sea-lanes they had been developed in, those of the Mediterranean, Baltic and North seas. They were unsuited for the challenges of the Atlantic and Indian oceans, for they relied on sailors being able to sight the shore or to take a depth sounding, techniques impossible in oceanic conditions. A certain kind of context-free globality had to be built into the new navigational methods and the vessels which used them: ‘the Portuguese problem was to build a new navigational context for their vessels ... that would render [them]
Navigational methods were purged of dependence on context, so that they could be reliably drawn upon potentially anywhere on the planet. The Portuguese were advancing in this direction as early as the 1480s, with mariners being able to use observations of the Pole Star, the Southern Cross, and the altitude (\textit{altura}) of the sun. These techniques became more important over the subsequent decades. The scientific bureaucracy of the Portuguese crown, the Casa de Guinea e India in Lisbon, developed a series of techniques to regularise, simplify and thus make reproducible in any part of the globe, \textit{altura}-based navigational techniques. From the early 15\textsuperscript{th} century, the tome called the \textit{Regimento do Astrolabio et do Quadrante} was used by all Portuguese ships. It contained all the astronomical data needed effectively to work the astrolabe and the quadrant, and was akin to having a trained astronomer on board every ship. The design of astrolabes and quadrants was radically simplified over time, making them less in need of highly specialist knowledge to use them. These instruments rendered the heavens a highly useful human resource. The data and the instruments allowed a navigator to work out from potentially any point on earth where exactly his ship was located, radically transcending the context-based navigational methods of earlier epochs.

Camões’ poem is concerned with two major symbols, the Christian Cross (because of the supposed missionary zeal of da Gama’s mission) and the astrolabe (Aubin, 1996). How important it was that this device could map potentially the whole earth, is reflected in these lines about landing on unknown territory:

[I]n order to discover in parts
   So remote, precisely where we were,
... [I used] the astrolabe, that new instrument
   It took skill and ingenuity to invent.

   We went ashore at an open stretch,
   Where our men quickly scattered
To reconnoitre this welcome land
   Where no-one seemed to have ventured;
But I, eager to know where I was,
   Stayed on the sandy beach with the pilots
To measure the sun’s height, and use our art
   To fix our bearing on the cosmic chart (5.25/26)

The narrator is far more concerned to know his position vis-a-vis the ‘cosmic chart’ than to ascertain the nature of the newly encountered terrain around about him. This indicates a specific kind of global consciousness, a form of vision simultaneously contextualising (as regards the sun and the sky) and decontextualising (as regards the immediate terrain). As Sandman (2002) indicates, this form of seeing and knowing rooted in the new navigational techniques, increasingly over the 16\textsuperscript{th} century won out over the older, context-based modes of navigation, so fortifying a novel kind of consciousness of the planet-as-a-whole, and one’s own position within it. While this form of thinking and seeing was strongest amongst navigational specialists, the deliberate simplification of navigation techniques meant that ever more varied individuals, even those of limited education, could use the instruments and think in
this way. Thus there was a certain ‘democratisation’ of this kind of global consciousness, thinking about the whole planet and one’s position within it no longer being solely the preserve of elites. The creation of the trans-oceanic network by the Portuguese involved not just ‘kings and merchants’ but also ‘sailors and astronomers, navigators and soldiers of fortune’, with people in more lowly social positions increasingly having to participate in globally-oriented thought and practice (Law, 1986: 261). Crucial to the ongoing stability of the oceanic system was the drilling of ships’ crews and other personnel into habituated, reliable behaviours, including having clear senses of where one was on the planet, and of how one was to return home from potentially any point on the globe.

The Expansion of Global Consciousness

It was the Portuguese and the Spanish ‘who, for the first time in history, developed the technical capacity for relatively undistorted communication at a global level’ (Law, 1986: 235). The network thus created was historically unprecedented, a situation that elite sectors of Portuguese society reflected upon. The Roman empire at its peak had created impressively long-distance trading routes, but the sea-routes had been contained within the Mediterranean (Author, 2004). Portugal’s apparent surpassing of the geographical reach of even the Romans, spurred Camões to begin the Lusiads thus:

Boast no more about the subtle Greek  
Or the long odyssey of Trojan Aeneas;  
Enough of the oriental conquests  
Of great Alexander and of Trajan;  
I sing of the famous Portuguese  
To whom both Mars and Neptune bowed
(1.3)

We have navigated every ocean  
Between the Antarctic and the Great Bear;  
We have rounded the coast of Africa  
Seeing strange lands and new constellations.
(1.51)

A radically new kind of world-order is posited here. Neither Alexander the Great nor the Roman emperors had surpassed the achievements of the Portuguese, in terms of control of the world’s seaways, the geographical extent of these, the scientific mapping of them, and the wealth now being carried upon them. The hymn of praise Camões dedicates to the ‘Portuguese argonauts’ (1.18) indicates that unlike their Greek mythical predecessors, the former traversed far more than just the sea-lanes of the Mediterranean, for they had struck out into the unknown Atlantic and Indian Oceans (7.14).

Camões was here explicitly alluding to the two great water-borne epics of the ancient world, the Odyssey of Homer and the Aeneid of Virgil, as well as Jason and the Argonauts (Cosgrove, 2003; Hardie, 1986). But the authorial consciousness animating the Lusiads was ‘intent on moving beyond ancient limits’ and what bow were seen as the narrow confines of the Mediterranean world (Finlay, 1992: 241). The novelty of
the *Lusiads* lay in the fact that the epic form was mated with a ‘realistic’ depiction of the course and extent of the burgeoning Lusitanian imperial trade network, involving a ‘world travelogue’ of the places initially encountered by the Portuguese expeditions, and now by Camões’ time, in the 1570s, operating as established nodes within the trans-oceanic networks (Gunn, 2003). The *Lusiads* testifies to how, over the relatively short duration of three-quarters of a century, the Portuguese consciousness of the world had shifted from involving a series of tentative reaches out into the unknown, to a strong sense of the durability and systematicity of lines of communication and commerce from Lisbon across the Indian Ocean. What once was opaque had been rendered knowable and thus, to some degree, domesticated. The principles of Portuguese ordering of the universe were seen as stretching like an umbilical cord from the homeland outwards across vast oceanic spaces.

Camões’ vision both looks back to ancient models, and also constructs new, specifically modern versions of their visions of the world-as-a-whole. Ancient Greek and Roman visions of the world-as-a-whole were often written under the influence of Stoic philosophy, with its concerns as to universal brotherhood within a shared planetary sphere (Baldry, 1965). Well known to early modern intelligentsias was a Stoic-influenced passage by Cicero, which imagines the Roman nobleman Scipio in a dream ascending above the earth, and able to look down upon the whole globe (Cosgrove, 2003). Medieval reproductions of this text were often accompanied by world maps (*mappae mundi*), offering a ‘synthesis of global geography, world map and dream theory [that] informed cosmographic thinking and practice well into the 16th century’, allowing the reader to imagine what the entire globe might look like if viewed from above and outside it (Cosgrove, 2003: 860). In both medieval and early modern mindsets, the idea of the globe-seen-from-outside was often strongly conjoined with ideas of empire: the empire one lived within could one day encompass the whole terrestrial sphere. Such associations were also linked to *mappae mundi*. Thus the emperor Augustus had a gigantic map of the world, depicting Rome as the centre of the earth, put up on permanent display in the city’s centre (Dupont, 1994, Sloterdijk, 2009).

Such connections between imaginings of the globe, maps of the world, and the cultivation of connectivity between diverse parts of the earth through the means of imperial dominion, were very much alive in the courtly cultures of early modern Portugal and Spain (Pimentel, 2000, Headley, 2000, Bartelson, 2010). It was upon this cultural template, plus the well-known ancient texts depicting heroic sea-voyages, that Camões drew to connect the globe-spanning achievements of Imperial Rome with the present-day activities of the Portuguese. Explicitly echoing the Ciceronian imagery, he depicts Vasco da Gama being led by the goddess Tethys to view a ‘lustrous and translucent globe’ suspended in the air, which represents ‘the whole created world’ and which can illustrate ‘where you have been, and are, and wish to be’ (77, 79). Tethys then depicts each of the world’s oceans and continents, and bequeaths them to the Portuguese. Camões reaches back to ancient associations between Roman imperial glory and representations of the world-as-a-whole (Hardie, 1986). But he updates these to the contemporary Portuguese case, having the goddess enumerate a whole series of places in Africa, the Middle East, India and the Far East the Portuguese will come in time to reach and conquer, with the Americas predicted to be reached by Magellan, who, although working for the Spanish, was nonetheless ‘in all his actions Portuguese’ (10.140).
The *Lusiads* uses an ancient literary device for very contemporaneous purposes, rendering through mythic archetypes the new sense of the world created and experienced by Portuguese outward movement, and the subsequent regularisation of that movement into habituated modes of long-distance voyaging. At the very moment that the modern world-system is born (Wallerstein, 2004), ancient sources are reformulated in order to understand the nature of the novel entity thus created. Camões’ work stands as one of the first major European literary endeavours to make sense of a newly-emerged geographical/political/economic/cultural constellation, seen to be increasingly encompassing all places and peoples.

Camões’ work was part of a broader trend in pan-Iberian culture of the time, involving novel versions of the ancient tradition of ‘reading the globe as a multilayered icon of both empire and the ethics of self-shaping’ (Cosgrove, 2003: 861). The reader or viewer was invited to rethink her customary self-conceptions vis-a-vis their senses of what place they themselves and their nation occupied in the world, and how they related to all other persons and peoples across the planet. Texts such as Camões’ – and its Spanish equivalent, Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga’s *La Araucana* (1569) (Dawson, 1962) – are strongly imperialist in nature. But they also invite the reader to re-imagine the contours of the world in light of new information about it, thus challenging long-established Eurocentric, primarily Mediterranean-centred, senses of world and self. As older certainties were brought into question, new modalities of selfhood and otherness were offered within an explicitly global frame of reference, that frame going beyond the often highly speculative ancient versions thereof, by depicting locales that were now concretely known and part of the burgeoning system of trans-oceanic commerce and transportation. If one of the most important features of ‘Renaissance culture’ is a questioning, through classically-inspired literary means, of classically-authorised certainties, then a strong case can be made for regarding the texts of Camões and others of the period not just as simple imperialist *apologias*, but as distinctively Iberian contributions to broader, pan-European patterns of ‘Renaissance’ thought, representation and self-scrutiny vis-a-vis the world-as-a-whole (Author, 2006).

**Dividing the World in Two**

Contemporary revisionist scholarship on the European ‘Renaissance’ also stresses that a crucial area of cultural production at this time was the design of maps and globes (Jardine, 1997, Jardine and Brotton, 2000). They were primarily created both for the purposes of commercial gain - depicting new sources of wealth and trading opportunities - and for gaining advantage over political rivals vis-a-vis political control of newly discovered lands (Gunn, 2003: 116-20). In the often fierce rivalry between Spain and Portugal to control the eastern spice trade, maps and globes were crucial tools of power, used to justify which state had control over which parts of the world. As maps and globes compelled the viewer to reflect upon the nature of the world-as-a-whole and their place within it, the political-economic disputes of the time were prime movers in the fostering of new forms of global consciousness.

The most striking case in point concerns the Treaties of Tordesillas and Saragossa, signed by the Portuguese and Spanish crowns in 1494 and 1529 respectively.
Following Columbus’s expedition to the Americas, the Papacy in 1493 issued a Bull dividing up the newly discovered territory between Spain and Portugal: the former was to receive all non-Christian territory lying west and south of a north-south line that was drawn 100 leagues west of the Azores and the Cape Verde Islands (Steinberg, 2000). In the following year, under the Treaty of Tordesillas - which Davies (1967: 338) refers to as ‘possibly the most pregnant treaty in world history’ - each monarchy agreed a modification of the Papal decree. Spain was to control all non-Christian lands west of a north-south line drawn 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. Portugal was to control all non-Christian lands east of the line. But pragmatic difficulties in actually ascertaining where this line fell led to a whole series of disputes between the two crowns (Williams, 1922).

In the Tordesillas Treaty, the religious motivations of the Bull concerning missionary activities were augmented with important commercial considerations, for where the line was drawn very much influenced which country was entitled to use specific resources, be those slaves or spices. Once the da Gama voyage had shown there was a sea route to the Indies by way of southern Africa, rivalry for control of the highly lucrative spice trade became a consuming passion of both crowns, leading to a further round of competitive map-making, teams of experts being employed by both in order to strengthen their employer’s claims to control the spice trade (Jardine, 1997).

Magellan’s voyage for the Spanish of 1519-22 demonstrated there was a westward route to the spice islands, breaking Portugal’s monopoly on the sea-borne spice trade. Indicating the great political salience of globes and maps at this time, when Magellan came to sell his services to the Spanish monarch, he carried with him a painted globe made by one of the leading cartographers of the time, the German Martin Behaim, a much sought-after figure in courtly circles. Much of his knowledge of world-map making was taken from his earlier experiences in Lisbon with the Portuguese scientific bureaucracy (Jardine, 1997). Behaim’s globe purported to show that the spice islands were in the Spanish sphere of influence, and would be accessible by a western route. Both countries laid claim to the spice-rich Moluccas islands. The Tordesillas line could not arbitrate as to which monarchy was entitled to the islands, so a new antipodal line had to be drawn north-south through the Pacific Ocean. Negotiations to that end in 1524 involved teams of cartographic experts supporting each side (Jardine, 1997: 271). The negotiations were concluded by the Treaty of Saragossa in 1529, apparently in Portugal’s favour, the line being drawn 297.5 leagues to the east of the Moluccas, putting the latter into the Portuguese sphere, leaving Spain most of the Pacific Ocean.

Thus by the beginning of the 1530s, it was commonplace for Iberian elites – and increasingly other European ruling groups too – to be thinking commercially and geopolitically in terms of the world-as-a-whole, their imaginings being structured by, and in turn partly structuring, the representations to be found on globes and world maps. While it was probably impossible for anyone reading late 15th century maps to possess a clearly unified image of the world, within about forty years this was more than possible, indeed politically and economically crucial for elites and those dependent on them (Turnbull, 1996). Although the incorporation into maps of ‘new lands, new races and new natural species was the result of a slow, uphill effort to see something different and new from a perspective that was, by definition, obsolete and
fragmentary’ (Pimentel, 2000: 19), nonetheless the relatively very rapid growth of new forms of global consciousness at this period is striking.

Novel cartographic devices were treated with the greatest of secrecy, for leaks of important geographical information could potentially seriously undermine commercial and political claims. Thus world maps necessarily circulated within primarily elite social networks in the first half of the 16th century, these now being increasingly globe-spanning in scope. But in the second half of the century, once trading and military routes to the newly-encountered parts of the world had been stabilised and had lost the status of state-secrets, map-making entered into a new phase of mass production, reaching much broader sectors of the population than hitherto (Gunn, 2003: 114). Translations of technical cartographic information from Latin into contemporary languages became more widespread, having a democratizing effect (Grafton, 1995: 69-70). The information to be found in world maps became ever more part of demotic life, especially for those such as sailors, soldiers and merchants, but also, for example, middle class citizens of a scholarly bent who wished to ponder the nature of the whole world and their place within it (Russell-Wood, 1998, Disney, 2007).

One of the most important innovations of the Tordesillas and Saragossa processes involved profound transformations of earlier forms of imperial consciousness (Bartelson, 2010). In ancient Rome, the idea of the world as a globe was fundamentally connected to the notion that it was an entity that could potentially be controlled by one imperial power. The Tordesillas and Saragossa treaties both embody, and were central in further developing, a new and distinctively modern form of consciousness of the globe. The recent Portuguese and Spanish explorations had indicated two dimensions of the world that earlier imperial forms of consciousness were unaware of: that all parts of the planet were probably inhabitable (the extremities of the world being thought in ancient times to be uninhabitable), and that all the oceans were fully navigable. Thus a ‘single global space’ (Bartelson, 2010: 231) was now construable in ways it had not been before. That space could now be imagined as being dominated by one imperial power, both the Spanish and Portuguese crowns being transfixed by that dream in the early 16th century. But a further innovation was also introduced due to the advances in navigational and cartographic technologies that the explorations had produced and were made possible by. Such technologies could be used to divide up, for imperial purposes, the newly imaginable global space, ‘according to geometrical principles applicable to a spherical object, rather than with reference to natural barriers’ or current political boundaries (ibid.). In this way, older senses of space were transcended through a radical reconceptualisation of what the ‘globe’ was and how it could be grasped. It was through the scientific-political nexus of the Portuguese and Spanish imperialisms of early modernity that a new, wholly ‘modern’ form of consciousness, involving perceptions of truly ‘global’ space, was forged.

One could therefore say that if modernity has its own distinctive mode of perception, it was this new vision of what the world ‘is’ - a single space, geometrically graspable and potentially open to political domination - that came to be very much at its centre (Eisenstadt, 2001). In a very profound way, then, the Hispanic imperialisms of the 16th century are at the very root of the ‘modern condition’, if that latter is a quintessentially global one, both at the level of material forms of connectivity, and of
forms of consciousness which are unavoidably structured by, and shot through with, visions of the world-as-a-whole (Robertson, 1992).

**Conclusion**

As Wallerstein (2004: 23) has remarked, the ‘world in which we are now living, the modern world-system, had its origins in the 16th century’. In this paper, I have endeavoured to show how the Portuguese contribution to the forging of commerce, politics, cosmography, map-making and related activities, played a crucial role in making that century the dynamic period of globalization and the forging of conditions of globality that it was. How the apparently ‘puny fleet of a petty kingdom on the outskirts of the European peninsula’ (Finlay, 1992: 230) came both to embody, and also in significant part to animate, the broader tendencies of the early modern globalizing world-condition, involves considering the interpenetration of the commercial and the political, the material and the imaginary, and the elite and demotic elements of the Portuguese experience. The latter - which was never purely Portuguese, but involved a range of international actors - should be seen as part of broader European intellectual and cultural, as well as political and commercial, trends of the period, part of the wider constellation ill-served by the generic term of ‘the Renaissance’.

Some important lessons for ongoing attempts to understand the history of globalization, globality and global consciousness are apparent. First, that the Portuguese experience is quite as important as the Spanish one in understanding early modern globalization processes. Second, that when one goes beyond the myths of the Portuguese ‘age of discoveries’, one sees how early modern globalization was neither unidirectional or inevitable, but rather shaped in important ways by local and contingent factors operative inside Portugal and as regards the often tentative expansive endeavours carried out by rival sectors within Portuguese society. Third, that the Portuguese expansion was both made possible by, and further fostered, particular navigational, cartographical and shipping techniques, which themselves embodied and allowed novel forms of global consciousness. Fourth, that such forms of consciousness were not just the preserve of elites, although elites were very much involved in their creation, but were disseminated, albeit unevenly, throughout all social classes, changing the senses of world and the self held by even lowly actors. Fifth, that it was through the twin endeavours of the Portuguese and Spanish, especially as concerns the rivalry between the two, that a radically new sense of the globe and global space was forged, a sense that would come to have vast ramifications for subsequent global history and the forms of consciousness characteristic of the modern world-condition.

If we are to seek some of the most important precursors of present-day modes of globality and global consciousness, then it is the 15th and 16th century palaces and scientific establishments of Lisbon, the decks of Portuguese vessels, and the forts and quays of the Lusitanian empire, that we must look towards. Such locations and the phenomena they created and embodied now need to be fully integrated into the historiography which informs contemporary globalization studies.
References


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1 I utilize throughout this paper the recent translation by Landeg White – see Camões (1997).
2 See e.g. the major globalization studies textbook by Cohen and Kennedy (2007), which devotes merely one paragraph to the Portuguese explorations.
3 For other 16th century Portuguese authors equally possessed of explicitly ‘global’ visions, such as Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, João de Barros (read by Camões) and Duarte Galvão, see de Sousa Rebelo (2007).