In 1580 King Philip II of Spain completed the 800-year-old dream of uniting the Iberian peninsula under one Christian ruler. With the addition of Portugal and its overseas empire to his domains, Philip ruled a vast expanse of territory that could only be measured in continents: the newly discovered Americas, coastal forts in Africa, outposts in Asia, and large sections of western Europe. His merchants spanned the globe, providing spices, sugar, slaves, silver, and gold to the growing European markets. Diplomats and scholars throughout Europe spoke Philip's language – Castilian – and sported Spanish fashions, implicitly recognizing the super-power of the age.

All of the kingdoms and principalities of the Spains – Aragón, Catalonia, Castile, Navarre, and Portugal – may have been ruled by a single monarch, but in practically every other way they remained distinct and separate. Each kingdom maintained its own laws, customs, taxes, and its unique non-Spanish identity. At the center, both geographically and politically, was the Kingdom of Castile. It was from here that Philip ruled his far-flung empire; only rarely did the king grace his other kingdoms with his presence. As a result, the Castilian nobility supplied Philip with most of his officials, diplomats, and generals. The nobility from Spain's other kingdoms naturally resented the preeminence of the Castilians, who enjoyed great advantages in securing prestigious and lucrative royal appointments.

The Portuguese were no exception. Once, with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, they had divided the world with the Castilians. But under Philip they found themselves in a less exalted, subordinate
position. The purported advantages of union with Spain had proven illusory. Instead of greater opportunities for trade and better protection for their outposts, the Portuguese found their empire under attack. Already strained to its limits, Spain did not have the military resources needed to defend Portugal’s overseas possessions. Still, most Portuguese nobles accommodated themselves to the new reality, for they knew that their kingdom had been irrevocably yoked to the Spanish monarchy. Then, shortly after King Philip II’s death on 13 September 1598, a strange turn of events rekindled Portuguese hopes for independence. In Lisbon a rumor surfaced, insisting that Portugal’s King Sebastian – last seen alive in 1578 – was making his way to Venice.2

This report was not without substance. On 7 November 1598 the Spanish ambassador to Venice, Íñigo de Mendoza, wrote to King Philip III of Spain with the news that a man had appeared in the Serene Republic sometime earlier, claiming to be King Sebastian of Portugal. While Mendoza had initially ignored the matter – the man was obviously an impostor, his story was too absurd to be believed – with Philip II’s recent death and the rumor in Lisbon, the man’s claims had taken on new significance. Consequently, the ambassador appealed to the Venetian Senate to put an end to the affair.3

Three weeks later Mendoza again wrote to the king. He reported that the Venetians had responded to his earlier demands by ordering the man claiming to be Sebastian to leave the Republic and all of its territories; otherwise, his life was forfeit. However, this order had not been obeyed, nor had it been enforced. Mendoza therefore had returned to the Senate and informed them that if, as a result of their negligence in ending the charade, Portugal were to suffer from unrest, then their Republic would be held responsible. This time the ambassador’s petition had a tangible effect: the man that the Spanish were to call “the Calabrian Charlatan” was arrested and jailed.4

Mendoza’s reports gained the close attention of the Spanish Council of State for two reasons: first, Sebastian had been dead for twenty years; second, it was as a result of his death that Portugal had become one of the kingdoms ruled by the King of Spain. Over the next five years, the matter of the Calabrian Charlatan resurfaced periodically before the Council of State, for – as Íñigo de Mendoza feared – the man claiming to be King Sebastian of Portugal proved rather troublesome. Nevertheless, through their persistent diplo-
matic efforts and some good luck, the Spanish finally gained custody of the impostor, tried him, and, on 23 September 1603, hanged him.

If this five-year event were approached in Braudelian terms, it could be dismissed as merely one of the many “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs.” The effects of the Calabrian Charlatan’s claims were certainly ephemeral. He personally succeeded only in getting himself jailed and hanged; his supporters succeeded only in gaining the momentary attention of the Portuguese people and provoking the heavy-handed annoyance of the Spanish state. Yet, as successive generations of Portuguese historians have shown, this “surface disturbance” is but one example of a larger phenomenon they have called Sebastianismo – the hoped-for return of King Sebastian and the ensuing resolution of all of Portugal’s problems. From its roots in Sebastian’s death in 1578, Sebastianism lasted well into the nineteenth century. It even followed the Portuguese across the Atlantic, culminating in the 1890s with a millenarian peasant movement in northeastern Brazil. For at least three centuries successive crests of Sebastianism have washed over the shores of Portuguese society and culture. Each crest differed in detail, but all shared the popular millenarian hopes for an improvement in the condition – political, economic, and social – of the believers.

This book examines but one of the many incidents of Sebastianism: the one associated with the Calabrian Charlatan. While this incident is worthy of consideration in its own right, the investigation here serves a wider historiographical purpose. By focusing on the interplay of religious ideas and political hopes in Spanish-occupied Portugal, this study will explore the connection of both to early-seventeenth-century Portuguese nationalism. From this focus three key arguments will emerge. First, that nationalism is deeply rooted in history and not merely – as many students of modern nationalism would have it – the inexorable political consequence of an economic shift to an industrial mode of production; and, since nationalism is a historical phenomenon, it can only be understood through the close examination of the circumstances specific to a particular time and place. Second, that the important question to ask about the rise of modern nationalism is not when it emerges, but instead how, why, and from what it emerges. While a specific time helps set the context, it does little to tell us about the nature of nationalism and why it has been
such a potent political force in the modern world. Third, that (at least in western Europe) the roots of modern nationalism can be traced to medieval millenarianism. Changing beliefs about salvation, evolving notions of sovereignty, and shifting patterns of identity were the historical processes that led to the transformation of the one into the other. In all of this, the matter of the Calabrian Charlatan is the lens.

Note, however, that this is not one of the usual lenses of historical writing. What follows is not a conventional narrative relating the story of the Calabrian Charlatan from a single perspective, from beginning to end. Nor is it a theory-driven treatise, fitting historical details into a pre-conceived framework. Instead, it follows Isaiah Berlin’s notion of history as a “thick” enterprise in which the richness and complexity of the interwoven details leads to historical understanding. Each chapter – made up of events, context, and theory – takes up one or more facets of the Calabrian Charlatan’s story and provides the reader with a view from a limited angle. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Sebastianism, describing both its origins in a disastrous sixteenth-century battle and its centuries-old millenarian context. Noting the apparently “nationalist” sentiments of some ardent Sebastianists, this chapter also briefly examines current theories of nationalism. It argues that these theories are mistaken in their dismissal of pre-industrial national sentiments, and sketches an alternative outline for a theory of nationalism based on identities of various scales interacting with historical circumstance. Chapter 2 considers the development of Portuguese identity from the foundation of Portugal to the late sixteenth century. Using the Portuguese epic poem The Lusiads as a framework, it lays out the main features of Portuguese identity from a perspective that would have been familiar to the Portuguese contemporaries of the Calabrian Charlatan. Chapter 3 begins the main narrative of events, concentrating on the death of Philip II (as seen from Lisbon) and the appearance of the Charlatan in Venice. This chapter explores, from a theoretical standpoint, the fragility of the early modern state, and thus why the Spanish considered the Charlatan’s appearance to be a threat. Chapter 4 examines the reaction in Lisbon to the events in Venice from the vantage point of the viceroy – a man Portuguese by birth and family but Spanish by education and career. With his convoluted and torn loyalties as a backdrop, this chapter follows
the viceroy’s attempts to determine exactly who was involved in spreading the news about the Calabrian Charlatan. Chapter 5 returns to Venice for the story of the supposed King Sebastian and an account of his Portuguese-exile supporters. It argues that the exiles’ motives were political and national, not based on genuine millenarian beliefs. Nevertheless, in order to obtain popular support in Portugal, the Charlatan’s supporters sought to establish him as a sanctified, holy king, a sort of Portuguese national messiah. Chapter 6 is the final section of narrative, detailing the Calabrian Charlatan’s departure from Venice, his capture in Florence, and subsequent trials in Naples and southern Spain. Using the evidence presented at these trials, it attempts to reconstruct the course of events from the viewpoint of the alleged impostor himself. On a more theoretical level, this chapter uses the Charlatan’s story as a way to look at the role of rumor in early modern statecraft. Finally, the Conclusion and the Epilogue draw all of these threads together into an impressionistic whole, arguing that the case of the Calabrian Charlatan represents a clear instance of early modern Portuguese nationalism. As the narrative progresses from one limited view to the next, the reader may occasionally note overlaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the material presented to that point. These are all part of the “thick” historical enterprise. They serve to remind us of the inherent complexity of the events and processes at hand.