Sebastianism, Millenarianism, and Nationalism

The old religious idiom has been replaced by a secular one, and this tends to obscure what otherwise would be obvious. For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still.

Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*

More than four centuries ago – on the plains of Morocco, between the foothills of the Rif Mountains and the waters of the Atlantic Ocean – a Moorish army annihilated its Portuguese foe. This battle, known as the Battle of Alcazar, was one of those events that twists the future of an entire people in an unexpected direction. Had they won, the Portuguese might well have become the masters of Morocco, poised to extend Christendom throughout North Africa. Instead they lost both the battle and control of their own fate. In conjunction with the dynastic politics of the time, this defeat reduced the Portuguese from the imperial masters of half the world to a mere Spanish province. For many Portuguese this turn of events proved unfathomable. Forcibly linked to Spain and its interests, Portugal no longer commanded the resources it needed to carry out its divine mission of fighting Islam and taking Christian civilization to the rest of the world. Seeking a way to reconcile events with their beliefs about Portugal’s place in the world, many Portuguese embraced Sebastianism: a complex of millenarian beliefs which promised the arrival of a warrior hero who would rescue Portugal from a grave crisis, restore its former glory, and return it to its proper path.
In the years following Alcazar, Sebastianism became deeply embedded in Portuguese culture, periodically reemerging in times of political or social crisis. During such times the belief was reborn and adapted to explain the current circumstances, drawing the faithful along the path to salvation. However, Sebastianism and the dreams it offered turned on earthly hopes. This was not the salvation of the soul mediated by the priests – promised in every sermon, but not of this world. Indeed, Sebastianism was more akin to the practice of local religion, in which participating in community processions, venerating local patron saints, and making individual offerings were expected to bring rain for the crops, good weather for the harvest, relief from the plague, protection from bandits, or victory in disputes with neighbors. At this level, salvation was day-to-day and season-to-season, not eternal. Sebastianism emerged from this world. It was, in a sense, another facet of local religion, one focused on an external realm of princely politics that – like inclement weather or the plague – could disrupt everyday life suddenly, capriciously, and often disastrously. Spanish rule in Portugal intruded on this local world by bringing with it Spain’s European ambitions and entanglements, increased demands for men and money, and the unwelcome attentions of Spain’s enemies. Thus, for the Sebastianists, deliverance became political and national: the expulsion of the Spanish and the restoration of Portuguese independence.

During this period the millenarian and the national were intertwined. Was Sebastianism some kind of national millenarianism, messianic nationalism, or something else? This question is the focus of this work. By examining the context and events surrounding the Sebastianist movement in support of the Calabrian Charlatan, we will explore the connection between millenarianism and nationalism in the transition from the former to the latter. As we shall see, these two kinds of popular political movements are so closely related that one might think of modern nationalism as a millenarian movement in which “the nation” has become messiah, and salvation is achieved when “the nation” becomes politically sovereign. The case of the Calabrian Charlatan is of interest since it represents a stark mixture of the two.

Sebastianism

Sebastianism, an intermingling of ancient beliefs and modern loyalties, was born of tragedy. On 4 August 1578, near Ksar-el-Kebir – a
Figure 1  Morocco circa 1578: the Portuguese route to the Battle of Alcazar
small town of no military, economic, religious, or political importance – the Battle of Alcazar was fought. Had the Portuguese been wisely led, the battle would not have taken place, nor would they have been in the Moroccan interior. But in the year 1578 it was Portugal’s fate to be ruled by Sebastian, a youth of twenty-four years brought up with tales of virtuous Christian knights ringing in his ears. His only ambition, it would seem, was to rival the glories of his ancestors by completing Portugal’s conquest of Morocco and claiming it for Christendom. After two long years of preparations for his crusade (and a lifetime of dreaming about it), King Sebastian and his army set sail from Lisbon on 25 June. Nearly three weeks later, on 12 July, they landed at Arzila, one of the Portuguese forts on the Moroccan coast. There the Portuguese waited, hoping that the Moors would venture to attack. Instead, the Sharif of Morocco, Abd el-Malek, wrote Sebastian a conciliatory letter in which he promised to cede to Portugal the coastal town of his choice and a ten-mile buffer zone around all of the Portuguese forts in Morocco; in exchange, the Portuguese king was expected to withdraw. Sebastian rejected the offer. As it provided neither glory in battle nor a significant increase in empire, it did not fit his dreams. In fact, he probably viewed the sharif’s wish to avoid battle as a weakness to exploit. On 29 July, eager for action and ignoring the advice of more experienced men who thought it wiser to proceed by sea, Sebastian led his army of about 16,000 men (not counting the thousands of camp followers) into the hills south and east of Arzila, bound for the Moorish port of Larache. For six days they marched in the heat of the North African summer, headed inland for Ksar-el-Kebir. There they expected to ford the Loukkos River and turn south and west back toward the coast and their goal. On 4 August the day dawned with the exhausted Portuguese army still north of the Loukkos, facing a Moorish force of some 44,000 men.

Sebastian and his officers spent the morning discussing their strategy, while the Moroccan army waited patiently for the invaders to make their move. This finally came shortly before noon when Sebastian ordered his army to advance. During the six hottest hours of the day the two armies fought. From the beginning the Portuguese found themselves surrounded, badly outnumbered, and poorly led. Their only chance came when, while directing his forces from his tent, Abd el-Malek died. Had this news become common knowledge, the
Moorish army would probably have fragmented into the antagonistic tribal groups from which it was formed. However, the sharif’s advisers kept his death a secret and the Moroccan army continued to press the steadily shrinking enemy force. After the Portuguese defense finally collapsed and the remaining defenders fled or surrendered, the victorious Moorish soldiers turned to securing their share of booty and prisoners from the battlefield, sometimes fighting one another for their chosen prize.

The greatest prize of all, a living King Sebastian, was nowhere to be found. Throughout the battle Sebastian had darted on horseback to wherever the fighting was heaviest, trying to rally his men to ever greater efforts. He was last seen charging his horse into the thick of the battle, in a desperate attempt to break the Moorish onslaught. No one who survived, Christian or Moor, witnessed the king’s fate. After the Portuguese defeat, Abd el-Malek’s brother and successor – Ahmed el-Mansur – sent two of Sebastian’s servants (now his prisoners) in search of the king’s body, promising them their liberty should they find it. On the second day after the battle, they returned with a stripped corpse slung across a horse. Some of the captured Portuguese noblemen identified the body as Sebastian’s, even offering Ahmed el-Mansur 10,000 ducats for it.\(^{11}\) He refused, probably hoping for a higher ransom.

As the victorious Moorish soldiers searched and stripped the rapidly decomposing bodies of the dead of anything of value, the various Portuguese who eluded capture – fewer than one hundred of the approximately 26,000 soldiers and camp followers who marched to Ksar-el-Kebir – made their way back to the coastal forts held by their compatriots.\(^ {12}\) A couple of days after their defeat, one group of survivors straggled out of the Moroccan interior near Tangier, reaching the Portuguese fortress there after dark. When challenged by a sentry, a wounded nobleman among them claimed to be King Sebastian and demanded to be let in.

Modern historians have depicted the nobleman’s claim as a ruse, blaming it for the rumors that swept through Portugal following the Battle of Alcazar. These rumors assured the Portuguese that their king had survived his defeat and was making his way back home. The failure to recover the body identified as Sebastian’s from the Moors until December only reinforced the desperate hope that the disastrous news from Africa was not true. What had begun as a glorious
adventure led by a Portuguese Alexander the Great, had become instead a personal tragedy for thousands of families. Many of these families remained unsure for months or years whether a father, husband, or son had been killed or captured. Lacking information about their soldiers’ fates, most people did not know whether to mourn their dead or to begin collecting the ransom that would release a loved one from captivity. Such personal uncertainties probably reinforced the national uncertainties about Sebastian’s fate. Some may have clung to the rumors that the king had survived, hoping that he would soon return with a loved one as one of his companions.

Dynastic politics fueled the rumors even more. With the apparent death of the childless Sebastian, his sixty-six-year-old grand-uncle Cardinal Henry ascended the Portuguese throne. Still, Henry was only an interim solution to the dynastic problem. In January 1580, before he could secure a papal dispensation releasing him from his vow of celibacy so that he could marry, Henry died. In the ensuing dynastic struggle for Portugal, King Philip II of Spain advanced his claim to the Portuguese throne by invading. By the fall of 1580 Portugal was effectively a Spanish province. Since Philip claimed to be Sebastian’s heir, only the return of a living Sebastian could peacefully restore Portuguese independence. The rumor of Sebastian’s survival and Portugal’s political circumstances combined to give rise to the core tenet of Sebastianism: the belief that Sebastian had survived the Battle of Alcazar and would return to Portugal to save his people from the Spanish yoke.

Those who fail to share the beliefs of Sebastianism, especially non-Portuguese, have long dismissed it as a peculiarly Portuguese aberration which defied all rationality. For the Spanish viceroy in Lisbon from 1600 to 1603, the tenacious popular belief that Sebastian had survived and reappeared proved a continual source of frustration and embarrassment. In the eighteenth century a peer of the English House of Lords was reputed to have remarked: “What can one possibly do with a nation, one half of which expects the Messiah, and the other half their King, Don Sebastian, who has been dead two hundred years.” Edward Bovill, an English historian writing in the mid-twentieth century, regarded Sebastianism as a “strange sect” worthy of only brief mention in his account of the fateful events at Ksar-el-Kebir. Most outsiders viewed Sebastianism with bemused
incomprehension, noticing it only when it intruded upon their world.

In contrast, Portuguese historians since at least the nineteenth century have studied Sebastianism with great interest. João Lúcio de Azevedo, in his classic *A evolução do Sebastianismo* (*The Evolution of Sebastianism*), writes: “Born of suffering, nourished on hope, [Sebastianism] is for history what yearning is for poetry, an inseparable part of the Portuguese soul.” Although not a Sebastianist himself, Azevedo saw Sebastianism as an integral part of Portuguese culture, an expression of the collective hopes of the Portuguese people from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In Portuguese historiography this open-minded interest is the beginning point for discussions of Sebastianism. Debate in the late twentieth century has centered on the origins of Sebastianism, not its importance to Portuguese culture. At one end of the analytical spectrum is Joel Serrão (writing in 1983) who considers Sebastianism as an expression of the economic, social, and political conditions of *ancien-régime* Portugal. He argues that, initially, Sebastianism was an anti-seignorial popular movement which appealed primarily to poor and powerless peasants. During the period of Spanish rule (1580–1640), the Portuguese aristocracy – the very people to whom Sebastianism was initially opposed – partially co-opted the movement to pursue their anti-Spanish political goals. With the successful restoration of Portuguese independence in 1640, Sebastianism lost its appeal as a political tool of the nobility and returned to its popular roots. According to Serrão, Sebastianism only began to die out in the nineteenth century as the Portuguese *ancien régime* began to break down. At the opposite end is António Belard da Fonseca (writing 1978–79) who believes that King Sebastian indeed survived the Battle of Alcázar and that first his uncle, King Phillip II of Spain, and then his cousin, King Phillip III of Spain, conspired to prevent Sebastian from reclaiming his throne. For Fonseca, Sebastianism as a mystical movement begins after the possible lifetime of a surviving Sebastian and is of no immediate interest. Between these two poles, it seems that almost every serious Portuguese historian has written something on Sebastianism. Although interpretations differ, most of this Portuguese historiography generally agrees that Sebastianism can be divided – roughly along the lines defined by Joel Serrão – into three basic phases: *Encubertismo* (before 1580), political Sebastianism (1580–1640; the
period of Spanish rule in Portugal), and popular Sebastianism (after 1640). The story of the Calabrian Charlatan (1598–1603) exemplifies political Sebastianism. In the movement that formed around the Charlatan, aristocratic efforts to liberate Portugal from Spanish rule and popular belief in Sebastianism converged. In essence, an aristocratic political superstructure overlaid a foundation of popular millenarianism. Anti-Spanish rebels mined Sebastianism for the words and ideas that, they hoped, would inspire the Portuguese to revolt. By invoking Sebastian – the absent messianic soul of the people – these revolutionaries expected to rouse the Portuguese to action from their political sleep.

Millenarianism

It might be tempting to dismiss Sebastianism and other similar early modern European popular movements as some kind of temporary mass hysteria, born of desperation coupled with superstition and ignorance. Perhaps such movements should simply be considered anachronisms, historical leftovers from medieval times which had little bearing on the development of the modern era. After all, few accomplished their goals, or had any easily discernible lasting effects outside of popular mythology. Yet some of these movements did not simply disappear. Some continued to influence the nature of popular politics for decades, and even centuries, after their original force had petered out. The popular movement of interest here, Sebastianism, was a particularly long-lived case, lasting well into the nineteenth century. The very fact that such movements survived in a hostile era – one devoted to the scientific, the rational, and the secular – makes them worthy of interest and investigation; and just as important is the fact that people entrusted their economic, political, and social destinies to such movements, desperately hoping to change their world for the better.

In Religion and the Decline of Magic, Keith Thomas notes that the myth of the “sleeping hero” was, in the cultures of pre-industrial Europe, universal. Particularly during times of war or famine, stories were told of a legendary hero who would return and free his people from their troubles. For instance, in Celtic areas many awaited the return of King Arthur, who was expected to re-establish his northern
European kingdom and thus inaugurate a new era of peace and prosperity. Among the Germans and Italians there were those who believed the return of Frederick Barbarossa would bring similar benefits. For the Russians during the Time of Troubles – the first dozen years of the seventeenth century – it was the false Dmitris who, by restoring the rightful line of the Tsars, promised to end an era of famine and social upheaval. Social, political, and economic crises of all sorts inspired mass movements, religious reformers, political manipulators, and subverters of the established order. As part of their attempts to do this, they all turned to divine revelation, political prophecies, and other forms of ancient wisdom.

In each case, those involved idealized the past – mythic or historical – and cast it into the near future. Knowledge of the past, combined with prophecy, became their guide for that future. Properly interpreted, ancient prophecies foretold exactly when the sleeping hero would return and the changes this would bring. Nevertheless, time after time the hero failed to return when expected. Despite these failures, those who believed did not lose their faith; instead, they pushed their interpretations and expectations once again into the future. Among the poor and oppressed to whom these stories appealed, this malleability ensured continuing relevance. By keeping their hopes alive and assuring them that they were on the brink of a peaceful and prosperous future, their beliefs helped them traverse a present in which scarcity, famine, and disease, soldiers, taxes, and tithes were the only things in abundance. Fully aware of these popular beliefs, those who ruled (or wanted to rule) sometimes tried to mobilize them for their own political purposes. By claiming to be the fulfillment of the prophecies surrounding the sleeping hero, the elites of early modern Europe sometimes sought to consolidate their own political legitimacy and undermine that of their opponents.

Like most sleeping-hero stories, Sebastianism rested on an ancient foundation of myth and prophecy. In this foundation, the apocalyptic traditions of Christianity formed the most influential elements. One Portuguese historian, José Veiga Torres, has traced the roots of Sebastianism back to the twelfth-century writings of the Calabrian Abbott Joachim of Fiore. These writings reflected Joachim’s belief that he lived at the brink of the final age of the world. He and his followers expected the existing social order and all its injustices to be swept away and replaced by one in which justice would rule.
argues that the millenarian beliefs embedded in Joachimism were the antecedents for many similar beliefs associated with Sebastianism.\textsuperscript{41} Of these, the most important was the idea of historical progress. Instead of an essentially unchanging and endless cycle of days or seasons, history was a movement through time in which things could change and which had a definite beginning and an ultimate goal. In its simplest terms, history was the story of human civilization groping towards an age of perfection, what Joachim called the Age of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{42} However, this history was orchestrated by God, not man. Thus, mere human efforts could not alter the course of events.\textsuperscript{43} Only when the God-appointed time came would He provide the warrior messiah who would transform the world, bringing about the Age of the Spirit.

By the early sixteenth century, the Age of the Spirit was still in the future and the identity of the warrior messiah was still unknown. Nevertheless, Joachim’s ideas flourished. Periodically reinterpreted to fit local traditions and conditions, they formed the nucleus of a swirling, ever-evolving complex of millenarian beliefs and hopes. In Spain and Portugal, prophetic writings attributed to Merlin and to St. Isidore became a principal part of the millenarian mix.\textsuperscript{44} One of the more important Isidorean prophecies foretold the arrival of a hero called \textit{El Encubierto} (the Hidden One). Current events fed the mix as well, for those who studied such prophecies kept a careful watch for their fulfillment. For instance, in 1522 a man claiming to be the son (long dead) of Ferdinand and Isabella and calling himself \textit{El Encubierto} led a rebellion in Valencia;\textsuperscript{45} and in 1525 a Jewish adventurer – David Rubeni – arrived in Portugal, claiming to be the precursor of the Messiah.\textsuperscript{46} Such events heightened millenarian expectations, for the Spanish and Portuguese knew that the End would be accompanied by “wars and rumours of wars” and “false prophets.”\textsuperscript{47}

In Portugal this apocalyptic atmosphere coalesced into a series of prophetic poems known as the \textit{Trovas}. These were composed in the 1530s by a prosperous shoemaker in the village of Trancoso.\textsuperscript{48} Gonçalo Añes, or Bandarra as the cobbler-poet was called, was a well-known figure in the surrounding region.\textsuperscript{49} Apparently, his prodigious memory and the fact that he had memorized much of the Bible made him into a popular local authority on religious matters.\textsuperscript{50} Reportedly, his New Christian neighbors relied on him to settle scriptural disputes and to interpret prophecies.\textsuperscript{51} His verses, written in a popular
style and drawing on the Bible and various prophetic texts for their themes, came to be regarded as prophetic as well. For example, one of the Trovas predicted the arrival of a great king (the Lion) who would conquer Africa:

A great Lion will arise,
And will give great bellows,
His roars will be heard,
And will terrify all;
He will run, and bite
And do great damage,
And in the African Kingdoms
He will conquer all.52

From a modern perspective (and in a rather literal translation), this verse is not in any way compelling; yet in early sixteenth-century Portugal it augured well for a young empire, expanding rapidly in both Africa and Asia.53 In the year this verse was written and in those that closely followed, the news of the day confirmed some of the prophetic truths embedded in the Trovas, lending credence to those prophecies not yet come to pass. With the circulation of his poems in manuscript, Bandarra’s fame spread to the rest of Portugal and even into royal circles. In 1540 his growing popularity attracted the attention of the Inquisition, which arrested and tried him for heresy. Although the shoemaker was released in 1541, the Trovas were banned and he was forced to abjure them. Thereafter, Gonçalo Anes quietly disappeared; however, the Trovas – Bandarra’s distillation of Portuguese millenarianism into verse – became all the more popular for having been forbidden.

For the Portuguese millenarians, the crucial question left unanswered by the Trovas was the identity of the great king. Although the poems provided this figure with several impressive titles – the Lion, O Desejado (the Hoped-for One), O Encuberto (the Hidden One) – and told of the great deeds he would accomplish, they were distinctly vague when it came to his name or exactly when he would appear. Nonetheless, in early 1554 this problem was resolved for many of those who waited. On 2 January the untimely death of the heir to Portugal thrust the kingdom into crisis. With Prince João’s demise the Portuguese throne – as dictated by an earlier marriage
treaty – would pass to Spain unless João’s pregnant wife, Juana, gave birth to a son. For nearly three weeks the Portuguese waited, hoping that a miracle would save them from Spanish domination. When on St. Sebastian’s day, Juana gave birth to a son, all Portugal rejoiced.54 Sebastian – O Desejado – had saved his people from their fate. Having rescued his kingdom once, it was thus hoped that the future King of Portugal would restore and expand its glory, that he would fulfill more prophecies.

Sebastian’s death at Ksar-el-Kebir in 1578 completed the transformation of Portuguese millenarianism into Sebastianism. Those who believed the rumors of the king’s survival identified their missing ruler as O Encuberto and studied Bandarra’s Trovas, hoping to discover when he was going to return. João de Castro – a major figure in the case of the Calabrian Charlatan – even reinterpreted the events surrounding Sebastian’s birth in light of the millenarian expectations: “. . . [A]t the same hour that [the Lord] gave [the Portuguese] His only Son to save them from the Devil’s bondage, He gave them a Prince to save them from that of Castile.”55 In effect, Sebastian became Portugal’s messiah.56

Nationalism

João de Castro cast Sebastian in the role of Portuguese messiah in his Discurso da Vida de El Rey Dom Sebastiam de Portugal.57 Published in 1602 and addressed to the “three Estates of the Kingdom of Portugal” – nobles, clergy, and commoners – it called on all Portuguese to believe the news of Sebastian’s return.58 The Discurso was a complete history of the Portuguese king, ranging from Sebastian’s birth, through the Battle of Alcazar and the Spanish invasion, to the king’s imprisonment in Venice. It demonstrated for all doubters that the king had survived at Ksar-el-Kebir and had recently returned from a purifying holy pilgrimage. To bolster his arguments, Castro showed how prophecy had predicted the events recorded in his history. For instance, he referred to a twelfth-century letter purportedly written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux which promised that Portugal would never lack for a Portuguese king, but might be punished up to thirty years for its sins. (In 1602 Portugal had been occupied by Spain for twenty-two years).59 Running throughout the Discurso, supplementing prophecy and history, was a thread of Portuguese patriotism. This
culminated in Castro’s reminder to his readers of their love of *Patria* and their duty to preserve Portugal’s ‘patrimony.’ Finally, in the penultimate paragraph of the final chapter, he appealed to them directly: “... you Sirs are Portuguese; take a Portuguese resolution with a Portuguese King. Remember well that a King, who must be invincible, cannot make use of those who are not also invincible.” This was a call to arms. No longer were the Portuguese enslaved by a Spanish king and kingdom: Sebastian’s return restored to them their freedom.

Embedded in this mix of prophecy and patriotism was the accumulation of nearly two decades of João de Castro’s steadfast opposition to Spanish rule. In the years prior to the publication of the *Discurso* Castro had seen little, if any, active popular support for the political struggle for Portuguese independence. Although intended to place the native Portuguese claimant – Dom António, the Prior of Crato – on the throne, even the English invasion of Portugal in 1589 inspired only a handful of anti-Spanish rebels. During this period only two events briefly roused the Portuguese people: the appearance of two men claiming to be King Sebastian, the first in 1584 and the second in 1585. Although both men were quickly arrested, tried, and condemned before anything could come of their claims, they certainly brought to the attention of Castro and other Portuguese rebels the political possibilities contained in the rumor of Sebastian’s survival. By 1586 Castro was thinking about Sebastianism and studying the related prophecies. Two years later he wrote a document (never published) in which he set down his intention “... to devote all of [his] ability and life to awaken[ing] Portugal by some means, [to] opening its eyes.”

Castro’s involvement with the Calabrian Charlatan and his *Discurso* were the culmination of this intention. For Sebastianists who read the book (or heard the news it contained), the *Discurso* vindicated their beliefs and informed them that the time for waiting was over, that their king needed their active support. For others, it clothed anti-Spanish sentiments and interests in the convenient guise of a prophecy come to pass. While many of Castro’s contemporaries might have doubted his interpretations, they would not have questioned the idea that prophecies could, and sometimes did, foretell the future. Thus it was perfectly reasonable for early modern Europeans to use (or appear to use) prophecy as a guide for their
actions. João de Castro's purpose in writing and publishing the Discurso was to give the Portuguese people, whether steeped in millenarian beliefs or simply disgruntled with Spanish rule, a reason to act, to attempt to restore Portugal's independence. In essence, he was trying to push them into the world of nationalism.

At this point we need to consider what is meant by the terms “nation,” “nationalist,” and “nationalism.” (After this brief excursion into theories of nationalism, we will examine Sebastianism in light of these theories.) For nineteenth-century scholars – including the Portuguese historians of the period – these terms were not difficult to understand. In the case at hand they could easily be defined by enumeration: the people of Portugal were the nation, João de Castro was an example of a Portuguese nationalist of the period, and political Sebastianism was an early manifestation of Portuguese nationalism. For early-twenty-first-century scholars things are not so easy. As students of nationalism moved away from narrative descriptions and purely political concerns, they began to ask questions about class, culture, economics, ethnicity, gender, identity, language, race, and religion. In their attempts to provide a general explanatory framework, they generated a dense thicket of theory. Penetrating this undergrowth is an exercise for the adventurous, or the foolhardy, for even the definitions of basic terms like “nation” and “nationalism” are contested and often not clearly articulated.

Consider, for example, the theories of Ernest Gellner and Liah Greenfeld, in particular their explanations for the origins of nationalism. In Nations and Nationalism, Gellner defines nationalism as:

... a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state – a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation – should not separate the power-holders from the rest.

Gellner narrows this definition to cover only nineteenth- and twentieth-century states, arguing that the origins of nationalism lie in the novel economic conditions created by the Industrial Revolution. With the transfer of work to the factory and skill to the machine, the mobility and adaptability conferred by literacy in a national language and culture became a worker's most important assets. As a
result, for the first time, an investment in education was economically advantageous for the majority of a state’s population, as well as for the state itself. The advent of widespread education in a national high culture and the economic forces driving the need for that education engulfed and displaced traditional forms of identity, establishing a new form: nationalism. Unlike previous forms of identity, nationalism had no formal internal barriers; all members of the nation were theoretically interchangeable, sharing a common culture and loyalty to the group. Thus, Gellner argues, while nationalism is a “species of patriotism,” it is distinct from the “cultural chauvinism” of the pre-industrial world.

Unlike Gellner, Liah Greenfeld places the origin of nationalism in the pre-industrial world, in sixteenth-century England. In this place and time a variety of circumstances – the weakening of the old feudal hierarchy, a new-found social mobility based on education, the alliance of the Tudor monarchy with Parliament, and the Protestant Reformation – transformed the nature of English society. Social divisions weakened and the population grew increasingly homogeneous. Privilege gave way to law; rank gave way to ability. As a result, more and more Englishmen began to feel that they had a stake in England and its government. Subjects had become citizens. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the English were a “people” which was “… the source of individual identity … the bearer of sovereignty, the central object of loyalty, and the basis of collective solidarity.” For Greenfeld, this conception of a “people” is the central idea of nationalism. In its native environment in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England, it reflected over a hundred years of social change taken root; transplanted elsewhere, it became instead an agent for change.

Now consider political Sebastianism and João de Castro in light of these theories. Gellner’s basic definition of nationalism as a theory of political legitimacy requiring congruence between political and ethnic boundaries seems to apply. Although expressed in millenarian terms, political Sebastianism certainly sought politico-ethnic congruence in that it promised the Portuguese salvation from their Spanish oppressors through the return of Sebastian, their native king. However, early modern Portugal was neither industrialized nor industrializing; therefore, by theoretical fiat, any popular political movement in this setting could not be nationalism. If this is the
case, how then do we explain someone like João de Castro who, in his efforts “to awaken” his people, echoes the hopes, goals, and language of modern nationalists? Gellner’s theory provides no answer.79

In contrast, Greenfeld’s theory raises an interesting possibility. Although Greenfeld fails to mention it, one of the great events of early English nationalism – if it indeed existed – would have been the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. From her arrival and virtual imprisonment in England in 1568, Mary’s claim to the English throne, staunch Catholicism, and taste for intrigue imperiled the fragile stability of the kingdom.80 As Queen Elizabeth’s legal heir, Mary as Queen of England was only a matter of time. For many Englishmen, particularly Londoners, this was unacceptable. Rule by the Scottish Queen represented a return to a past which threatened to destroy the new English social order.81 By 1586, opposition to Mary had grown into unrelenting public pressure on Elizabeth to have her executed. On the morning of 18 February 1587, Mary was beheaded. That evening the people of London celebrated. João de Castro, who spent the fourteen months from March 1586 to May 1587 in London, must have heard the news and seen the celebrations.82 Although his writings leave little trace of his time in England, one wonders how closely he observed English politics while he was there. Did Castro watch the public pressure mount on Elizabeth and her advisors until it culminated in the order for execution? Did Castro see the keen interest with which most Londoners, even commoners, followed political events? Did Castro sense the power of English national sentiment? Perhaps Castro observed all of these things and realized that, to achieve his ends, he needed to inspire the Portuguese with a similar love of nation. If Greenfeld’s theory of the English origins of nationalism is correct, this could help explain João de Castro’s nationalist hopes, goals, and language. The timing was certainly right, for Castro wrote of his intention “to awaken Portugal” in 1588.83 Although suggestive, Greenfeld’s theory fails to explain fully the nationalist dimension of political Sebastianism. As we shall see in Chapter 2, Portuguese national sentiment – especially in its anti-Spanish form – predates Castro by several decades, if not centuries. Like other early modern Europeans, the Portuguese were not without love for their country.84

Unfortunately, this brief sortie into theory has left us with no clear-cut definitions. Nor do we have an adequate explanation of João de
Castro’s nationalist language and aspirations. Part of the problem seems to be that most modern theories of nationalism seek to establish a fairly precise time and place for the origin of nationalism. In doing so, they inevitably raise the difficulty of explaining exactly why an apparent episode of nationalism in a previous time or different place is not, in fact, nationalism. The case of the Calabrian Charlatan and other episodes of pre-modern “patriotism” suggest that the theoretical insistence on the novelty and modernity of nationalism creates an unjustifiable and unnecessary breach with the past. We need a different approach.

In his study on the formation of the modern border between Spain and France (and implicitly on the formation of their national identities), Peter Sahlins notes that most modern studies on nation-building and nationalism have concentrated on “how the nation was imposed and built from the center outward.” These works described the growth and spread of nationalism as a process of replacing local identities with national ones. For Sahlins this model is simplistic. He argues that the process of shaping nations and national identities was a two-way interaction between central and local interests.85 Furthermore,

... national identity ... appeared on the periphery before it was built there by the center. It appeared less as a result of state intentions than from the local process of adopting and appropriating the nation without abandoning local interests, a local sense of place, or a local identity. At once opposing and using the state for its own ends, local society brought the nation into the village.86

Sahlins describes national identity as one of several disjointed layers of territorial identities (for example, village, county, region, nation), in which there was no fixed hierarchy of importance. Instead, each person or group emphasized a particular layer of identity where and when it proved useful to meet specific ends. Local issues aroused local identities; larger issues invoked the identities of the appropriate scale. Sahlins’s observations on national identity suggest that the basis of nationalism is nothing new, that modern nationalism itself is a manifestation of age-old social patterns.

While Sahlins’s work says a great deal about the ways in which local and national identities evolved and played off each other, it says little
about the development of nationalism itself. Still, by returning the discussion of national and other identities to the scale of individuals and local communities, it provides a useful starting point. After all, nationalism became significant at the level of state politics only after a significant portion of a state's population adopted the beliefs and sentiments of the nationalist, and, as nationalists, either acted in determined opposition to the state or became its most ardent defenders. Sebastianism was no different.

Identities, if examined at an individual scale, might be described as an entangling web. Spun from the strands of community and personal relationships into sometimes reinforcing, sometimes opposing patterns, this web forms the substructure of identity. Within the web some strands are weak, easy to break or ignore. Others are sturdy. Strengthened by culture, social pressure, or personal interest, such strands bind people together through common loyalty to the relationship connecting them. Which loyalties exert the strongest influence is a function of time, place, and the legacy of an individual’s choices when resolving often conflicting pulls. In any given society, a few forms of identity gain dominance. Whether based on family, ethnicity, religion, village, or nation, these dominant forms are those that prove most useful for living in that society. Note that none of these forms of identity is fundamentally any different from the others; each defines a person’s place in the world, each guides behavior, each can engender intense loyalties. Nationalism is no exception. Territorially based and linked to the state, it reflects and reinforces the political and social structures of the sundry times and places where it is found. Explaining the rise of nationalism is not a question of explaining the origins of a new phenomenon; instead, it is a question of explaining shifting patterns of identity, of discovering how and why some relationships were strengthened and others weakened.

**Messianic nationalism**

If nationalism is not a fundamentally new phenomenon, if its rise can be explained as a result of changing circumstances and the resulting shifts in patterns of identity, then can we find something akin to modern nationalism in the pre-modern era? One of the central arguments of this study is that we can, that nationalism
emerges out of millenarianism. More specifically, this study argues that Sebastianism in Portugal marked a local, transitional mid-point between the two. If so, this indicates that all of these movements are inherently related, that they actually describe different stretches of the same historical continuum. What then was the nature of the transition from millenarianism to nationalism? What remained the same? What changed? As described below, the continuities and differences were such that it is convenient to call this transition messianic nationalism.

As Benedict Anderson has termed it, the modern nation is an “imagined community.” It is a community in which people who have no direct contact with most of their fellow nationals nonetheless share similar experiences, outlooks, and therefore a sense of solidarity. Anderson argues that this sense of solidarity forms the foundation of what we call nationalism. Yet by itself, the imagining of community is nothing new. To name only a few of the many possible examples, the ancient Greeks, the Jews of the diaspora, and the early modern Irish all had a sense of community that was in some way imagined; culture, religion, and ethnicity have long been nuclei around which otherwise anonymous people have grouped themselves. If this is so, then were these past communities some sort of nation, imbued with a sense of nationalism? As already noted, most students of nationalism deny that label to anything pre-dating the Industrial Revolution. This may be more a consequence of narrow scholarly specializations and surviving historical sources than historical reality. After all, most scholars studying nationalism have focused almost exclusively on modern history, the period in which their field of study became a particularly visible, potent, and therefore interesting political force. In addition, as one reaches further into the past, the record of the common man’s life – and his feelings of community and solidarity – grows ever scarcer, leaving scholars with the (false) sense that politics and political action were a monopoly of the elites. Still, casting these quibbles aside, modern nationalism does seem somehow different from what we know of its predecessors. But, is it different in its essence or merely in its accidents? What is essential – the sense of cultural solidarity, the imagining of community, the willingness to die for that community – is a human trait reenacted and recreated in each generation from time immemorial; the accidental circumstances of historical development and the context of time and place determine how that solidarity is
manifested, the scale at which it operates, how it is imagined. While circumstance and context are what distinguish the various historical forms of community solidarity from one another, in the cases of medieval millenarianism and modern nationalism even these elements are closely linked. Aside from the obvious continuities of historical development in western Europe, one might say that both types of movement share a peculiar kind of imagining. In what follows, this shared imagining will be explored in three of its facets: “chosenness,” salvation, and sovereignty.

However, before proceeding, note that while feelings of patriotism (“love of nation”) or millenarian beliefs may be widespread or even universal in a given community, that does not mean that the entire community is composed of ardent nationalists or fervent millenarians. At most times these kinds of movements remain latent, with the more virulent and visible aspects active only among a disaffected minority. It is some kind of crisis that gives voice to the more aggressive and vocal members of the community, helping them rouse other people to their cause. This is when nationalist and millenarian movements emerge, become most visible, and demonstrate their potential as a political force – a force to be feared, appropriated, or manipulated. However, sooner or later the crisis subsides. The radical elements in these movements rarely prove able to sustain their force and become latent in the community once again. Nonetheless, since it is the ardent nationalists and the fervent millenarians who have the most tangible influence on politics, the discussion of the continuities (and differences) between nationalism and millenarianism will focus on these more aggressive elements.

When expressed in religious forms, the notion of a “chosen” people is so familiar as to be unremarkable. Yet the assertion of “chosenness” is extraordinary. As a group, the chosen people claims to have been raised by God to a special status and to have been taught the Truth about the nature of the world. Consequently they have a divine duty to carry out the precepts of that Truth, the will of God. Thus, the chosen become the protagonists of God’s narrative on Earth, the agents for the unfolding of His plan. Every success – whether the abundance of a harvest, or the defeat of an enemy – is attributed to divine favor and, where necessary, justified by it. Failures are invariably interpreted as a means of purifying the people, reminding them of their elect status and their mission.
As various scholars have noted, the idea of being chosen is not limited to religious movements; it is endemic (although often latent) in nationalist movements as well. Every nation sees itself as elect, as possessing an inherent superiority over all other nations. And, as a consequence, every nation has a mission to fulfill, whether self-rule, or the expansion of an empire, culture, or way of life. In nineteenth-century Great Britain, for instance, national choseness took the form of an expanding empire and the “white man’s burden”: the British, by dint of their industrious nature, scientific and technical achievements, and enlightened form of government, had the right and the duty to take the benefits of their civilization to less fortunate parts of the world. Whether manifest in an ancient religious tradition or a modern political force, choseness provides meaning and purpose to otherwise random events; it also provides priests, politicians, and other seekers of power with a means of inspiring and mobilizing the people to do their bidding. That nationalism shares this feature with millenarianism and other religious movements is not a matter of coincidence. Instead, nationalism is the direct descendant of those earlier movements, adapted to fit modern circumstances. In its essence, modern nationalism is not new.

The reward proffered to those who faithfully pursue the mission of the chosen is salvation. Again, the religious form is the more familiar. By preparing themselves and the world for the arrival of the messiah, millenarian groups hope to usher in an age of peace, prosperity, and justice. In short, they seek a worldly and day-to-day salvation for their entire community and, in some cases, the world. However, the path of the chosen is beset by hardships and by enemies who seek to divert the faithful from their goal. In overcoming these obstacles, some members of the community will inevitably perish; while they will not share in the eventual communal salvation, they are promised the individual, other-worldly salvation of the martyr. Modern nationalism makes the same promise. Whether the construction of a national state, the independence of a colony, or the expansion of an empire, the pursuit of the national enterprise is a search for salvation. Communal, the political, economic, and social ills afflicting a people are expected to disappear when the nation achieves its goal; and the individuals who sacrifice themselves – perhaps inadvertently – for the nationalist cause will be remembered with the respect due to the nation’s martyrs.
While similar, the salvation of the millenarian is subtly different from that of the nationalist. Since a millenarian group is following God’s preordained plan, the hoped-for change in the world must be wrought by God’s hand, by His external agent; thus, communal salvation necessarily awaits the arrival of the messiah. As a consequence, millenarian movements have a tendency to be passive, to spend their energies in preparations for the coming of the millennium, to await the unfolding of inevitable events. Modern nationalism is not constrained in this way. Nationalists and their followers are free to plot their own course through history and to attempt actively to fulfill their nationalist dreams. This is the main difference between messianic nationalism and modern nationalism. In the specific case of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Portugal, the incipient nationalism of the Portuguese was encumbered by the need to await the return of Sebastian. Without the messiah, nothing could really change.

A changed notion of sovereignty is what made possible the shift from the millenarian’s nearly passive hopes for salvation to the nationalist’s active efforts to create salvation now. In this shift, exactly who holds sovereignty over a given people is key. In post-Roman western Europe there was a transition in sovereignty from God (medieval Christendom), to Kings (early modern empires, kingdoms, and principalities), to peoples (modern nation-states and their various minority groups). Moreover, at each historical moment, only he who held sovereignty – or could legitimately seize it – could succeed politically for more than a short time. Once the people became sovereign unto themselves, they became a nation and gained the ability to act politically without the mediation of God, messiah, or kings. They therefore began to take upon themselves the trappings and institutions of sovereignty, to create their own nation-state. And as nationalists, they began to seek their own salvation in the genesis of that nation-state.

Thus, modern nationalism is in essence a secularized millenarian movement in which belief in the nation has replaced faith in God and the nation itself has become the central focus of identity. Furthermore, messianic nationalism is an early stage in the development of nationalism in which the only substantive difference is that sovereignty has not yet been fully vested in the people. As a consequence, for this earlier type of nationalism to take root and blossom into a
nationalist revolt, a messianic figure embodying that sovereignty is needed. In Portugal during the period under consideration, that sovereignty resided in the figure of the youthful king tragically lost on the dusty plains of Morocco, at the Battle of Alcazar on 4 August 1578.

In 1580, the Spanish annexation of Portugal brought crisis to the Lusitanian kingdom. Existing webs of loyalty – and therefore identity – were disrupted. Over the subsequent years some Portuguese, mostly aristocrats and merchants, adapted to the new situation, developing their ties to Spain and adopting Spanish loyalties. Others could not. As the following chapters will show, Sebastianism was one element that helped bind such people together, whether nobleman, cleric, or commoner. Was this nationalism? Yes, in every important respect. Hope for King Sebastian's return – whether as messianic savior or national leader – provided a symbol around which an inherently anti-Spanish Portuguese national consciousness coalesced. Portuguese rebels like João de Castro, seeing or sensing the political possibilities of a people unified for a national purpose, hoped to ignite these national sentiments in Portugal. People like Castro were certainly nationalists and Sebastianism was at least a nascent form of Portuguese nationalism.