The New Chosen People

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all nations that are upon the earth.

Deuteronomy 14:2

It is my will to build upon you and upon your descendants, an Empire dedicated unto me, so that my name will be spread to foreign peoples.

João de Castro, *Discurso da vida do Rey Dom Sebastiam*¹

What was it that made the Portuguese of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries ready, if not eager, to believe in the claims of the four false Sebastians?² After all, those claims were hardly credible. As Íñigo de Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador to Venice, concluded in the matter of the Calabrian Charlhatan (the fourth false Sebastian): “there has never been a more foolish charlatan.”³ The man’s claim to be King Sebastian of Portugal was absurd; not only had the Portuguese king died twenty years earlier at Ksar-el-Kebir, but the Charlatan looked nothing like Sebastian, nor did he speak a word of Portuguese. Yet the ambassador found that he could not ignore the situation, for not everyone so easily dismissed the man and his story.⁴ In this case, as in the previous three, many Portuguese rejected the merely rational and instead embraced the idea of Sebastian’s return, for it represented hopes and aspirations deeply embedded in centuries of Portuguese history and culture.
In the decades before its annexation by Spain in 1580, Portugal’s empire reached its apex. Goa, Ceylon, Macao, Brazil, the islands of the Atlantic, and the forts of Africa were all subject to the Lusitanian kingdom. The chain of coastal forts and trading posts in Africa and Asia enabled Portugal to compete favorably in the lucrative eastern-spice and luxury trade which had made Venice so prosperous and so powerful. Even the trade from the new Brazilian colonies flourished; brazilwood and sugar made their way to eager and growing European markets.5 Such imperial ventures built not only Portuguese fortunes, but also Portuguese confidence in their divinely appointed place in the world. In the minds of many Portuguese, God had obviously selected them as his new chosen people, the Christian heirs to the covenant with Abraham.6 Divine election brought empire and its material fruits to Portugal; it also brought the spiritual duty of taking Christianity and its benefits to the world.

Of the many sights that attract modern tourists in Portugal, perhaps Lisbon’s Monument to the Discoveries – erected in 1960 for the 500th anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator – best captures the spirit of Portugal’s divine election.7 Carved in stone of pure white, a ship rises from the bank of the Tagus, ready to set sail. The ship, a caravel, is sculpted in simple geometric shapes: the prow a tilted pyramid, the body a rectangular base, the masts a towering wall, the billowing sails three curved walls rising up on each side of the masts. Sweeping back, the sails and the masts form a giant cross at the ship’s stern. Together, these shapes draw the viewer’s gaze forward and down to the prow and gunwales crowded with realistic, larger-than-life people. At the prow stands Henry the Navigator, confidently looking off into the imperial future of his people. Behind him, crowding both sides, other heroic figures press forward: soldier, nobleman, and navigator; chronicler, priest, and friar. Each gazes forward with a grim determination to embrace the divinely ordained destiny of his people and conquer whatever obstacles may lie in his path. On the eastern side three men struggle to plant one of the stone pillars, capped by Christian cross and royal shield, with which the Portuguese marked their new territories. On the western side stands Luis de Camoens holding a verse from his epic poem The Lusiads:

Madmen that you are, thirsting in your blindness for the blood of your own! But here at least, in this small land of Portugal, there
will not lack those who will do and dare for Christendom. In Africa they already hold coastal bases; in Asia none can dispute their sovereignty; in the New World they are ploughing the fields. Were there more lands still to discover they would be there too.  

Towards the rear, a crowned woman kneels in prayer, perhaps yearning for the safe return of one of the sons of Lusus. These are the servants of God, chosen to undertake a divine mission and ready to suffer its purifying consequences. This heroic vision of Portugal – a nation chosen by God to spread Christianity to the far corners of the world – drew its inspiration from the kingdom’s half-millennium of conquest and exploration. It is this history that provides the key to understanding the persistence of Sebastianist beliefs among the Portuguese and, more specifically, the events surrounding the appearance of the Calabrian Charlatan in 1598. As a result we need to examine Portugal’s history from its birth to the last half of the sixteenth century. However, since each generation interprets the past through its own beliefs and experience, a purely twentieth-century version of that history will not serve.  

Only from a vantage point approaching that of the sixteenth-century Portuguese can we begin to understand how they saw their own history. For them, the past was more than the remembrance of people long since crumbled into dust. History, like scripture, revealed God’s purposes. At key points one could see the signs of God’s intervention guiding His creation along His chosen path. Assisted by faith and inspiration, a careful examination of the past could chart history’s general course and thus serve as a map for both present and future. History was prophecy. Therefore, what follows is in no way a complete or modern history of Portugal. Instead, it is a selection of key people and events infused with meaning and metaphor for a Portuguese person of the late sixteenth century.  

Our guide for this history will be The Lusiads. Aside from its historical content, this poem provides an appropriate entry into our sixteenth-century frame of reference for two main reasons. First, since it was published just before Spain annexed Portugal, it captures a Portuguese view of their history not yet tainted by the need to explain the union. This is important to see the nature of the past that many Portuguese hoped to regain by throwing off Spanish rule. Second, the poem was written in Portuguese and cast in a popular
literary form; it was an epic meant to be performed in public. Since Camoens's intended audience was not limited to scholarly or noble circles, his narrative themes concentrated on events and legends well known to the Portuguese people and, likely chosen to reflect public opinion. As a result, we can with some certainty conclude that the view of Portugal presented in *The Lusiads* resonated with Portuguese culture and society. Note that this is not to say that Camoens's version of Portuguese history was the only sixteenth-century interpretation. Nonetheless, it did contain many of the strands present in sixteenth-century Portuguese identities, ones often exploited and reinforced by anti-Spanish activists during the period of Spanish rule.

The history of Portugal that follows, as presented through *The Lusiads* and supplemented with modern studies and analysis, will trace the development of a Portuguese identity with pronounced Christian, imperial, and anti-Castilian elements. The central tenet of this identity was that God had set the Portuguese apart as his chosen people and had cast them to play a key role in the future. Thus, many Portuguese found it difficult to accept Portugal’s loss of independence in 1580 and its new status as merely one of the several constituent kingdoms of Philip II’s Spain. History, which confirmed the separate identity and destiny of the people of Portugal, had yoked them to someone else’s fate. This tension between political realities and national expectations permeated Portuguese society and culture in the final decades of the sixteenth century. It was this tension that gave rise to Sebastianism and exacerbated the troubling news emanating from Venice.

**Reconquista**

Although Camoens began his narrative history of Portugal some four centuries after the beginning of the *Reconquista*, those years were nevertheless embedded in his story of the never-ending conflict between Christian and Moor. Therefore, we need our history to include that period so that we can examine the sources of that conflict and its legacy in the Christian Iberians, especially the Portuguese.

In the year 711 an Arab army crossed the Strait of Gibraltar. Building upon a century of victories in Christian North Africa, the apparently invincible forces of Islam swept away the defenders of Visigothic
Figure 2  Portugal circa 1580: Regions in the western part of the Iberian peninsula
Spain. From there the invaders pressed on into the heart of Carolingian France. Initially it appeared that they would conquer that kingdom as well, but at the Battle of Poitiers in 732 they were turned back. By 751 the Franks had pushed the Arabs back behind the Pyrenees.

Unable to overcome the Franks and push further into Europe, the new masters of Spain turned their attention to consolidating their rule in the Iberian peninsula. By then, however, it was already too late. Even before the Muslim leaders started building the lasting institutions of what would become al-Andalus – the independent Islamic Kingdom of Spain – the seeds of the militaristic Christian society that would eventually destroy Muslim rule in the peninsula had begun to grow in northern Spain. Legend has it that a man named Pelayo, the son of a Visigothic duke, led a group of Christians in Asturias in revolt against Muslim rule. At Covadonga, in 718, the rebels successfully defeated the force sent to punish them. Having survived, this rebellion slowly grew into the Kingdom of Asturias. By 911, the Asturians had conquered the northern fifth of Spain. As the self-proclaimed heirs of Iberia’s Visigothic rulers they established the basic ideology of the Reconquista: the recovery of the entire peninsula and the reestablishment of Christian rule.

As an ideology the Reconquista was very successful. By making Christianity the central element of their identities, it brought together groups as disparate as Galicians, Asturians, Basques, and Catalans. In spite of their many internal differences – in language, ethnicity, legal code, history – as Christians they had a common cause and a common enemy. Some of those internal differences even subsided over time. For instance, in the case of language, all of the groups save one – the Basques – spoke Romance dialects that, although distinct, were mutually intelligible. Instead of reinforcing the differences between them, they lumped them all together as “cristiano”: the language spoken by Christians. Where language conflict did exist, it was vis-à-vis Arabic. Although cristiano never really became a single language and the various groups of northern Spain never became a single people, they were all, first and foremost, Christians.

For our purposes most of the details of the ensuing struggle between Christians and Muslims for mastery in Iberia are of little interest. Basically, the Christians inexorably reduced, in fits and
starts, the area of Islamic rule. What is of more interest is that, even as
they expanded, the Christians failed to maintain a unified state.
Although Christianity – and the resulting conflict with Islam – dic-
tated the main historical course taken by the peoples of northern
Spain, it did not determine everything. In the tenth century, fac-
tional politics fractured the Kingdom of Asturias into three kingdoms
which were almost as likely to fight each other as continue with the
*Reconquista*. These states would coalesce as the result of marriage or
battle, then fragment yet again, only to regroup later in yet another
configuration. By the end of the eleventh century the Kingdom of
León was the dominant Christian power. Over the previous hundred
years it had unified the various Christian kingdoms of Spain into
a fragile empire temporarily refocused on expanding south at the
expense of the Moors.

During the *Reconquista*, as the Christians pushed the frontier zone
between them and the Muslims further south, they actively colon-
ized the newly conquered lands. Colonization served two main pur-
poses. First, it rewarded those who had fought successfully against
the Moors and taken their territory. Second, and more important, it
established permanent control over the expanding frontier. Thus, the
colonized areas gained loyal Christian populations and became inte-
grated into the political and military structures of the conquering
kingdom. The Kingdom of Galicia, a sub-kingdom of the Leonese
empire, had conquered and colonized the area between the Minho
and Douro rivers – the region that would become the northern end of
Portugal.22 Early in the eleventh century the Galicians had pushed on
towards the Tagus, extending their rule even further south.23 How-
ever, in 1094, responding to the Galician loss of Lisbon and other
areas south of the Douro, the king of León detached the area south of
the Minho from Galicia, creating the County of Portugal. His intent
was to create local Portuguese interests, independent of Galician
ones, which would increase the incentive to fight the Moors. For
the new Portuguese nobility the loss of their territories meant not
just the disappearance of one source of income, but extinction.
Increased independence was dangerous, however, for almost as
soon as the Portuguese were free of their Galician overlords, they
began to test the strength of their bonds to León.

Political bonds might be broken, but cultural ones could not. By
the time Portugal was born, Christian Spain had fought Islam for
nearly five hundred years. In that time the religious beliefs that had originally been invoked to justify and fuel the *Reconquista* became the foundations upon which Iberian culture and society were built.\(^{24}\) The Portuguese might have questioned their loyalty to the king of León, but would have found it impossible to question their loyalty to Christ. Above all else, they were Christians. Around this central fact, everything else revolved: religious belief was the unmovable and immovable center. Other things, such as political allegiance, could and sometimes did move. As a cultural trait, the militant Christianity of the *Reconquista* was so firmly embedded in the Portuguese that four centuries later, long after the Moors had been driven from Iberia, they still yearned to fight the infidel.

**Guimarães, 1127–28**

Unable to ignore Portuguese moves toward independence any longer, the king of León invaded Portugal in 1127 to secure oaths of allegiance from the two Portuguese factions: one led by Countess Teresa of Portugal, the other led by her son, Afonso Henriques. The Leonese fought their way to Guimarães, the county seat loyal to Afonso, and put the castle there under siege. Badly outnumbered and seeing the futility of resistance, the defenders agreed – in Afonso’s name – to recognize the sovereign rights of the king of León. To seal the bargain one of the defenders, Egas Moniz, pledged his own life as a guarantee that Afonso would submit to royal authority. The siege was raised. Satisfied with the son, the king of León turned to the mother and, six weeks after the invasion had begun, forced her submission as well. With this, the Leonese troops withdrew to Galicia. However, the Portuguese themselves were not finished with the matter. The next year, on 24 July, armies led by Teresa and Afonso fought each other near Guimarães, at São Mamede. There Afonso defeated his mother and expelled her from Portugal. Having consolidated his hold on Portugal, Afonso could turn to severing his ties to León and to forgetting the promise made at Guimarães.

Afonso Henriques may have forgotten, but Egas Moniz did not. When he realized that his lord had no intention of submitting to Leonese authority, Moniz – accompanied by his wife and children – made the difficult journey to the Leonese court. There, barefoot and with a rope around his neck, Egas Moniz redeemed his pledge. His life
and the lives of his family were meekly delivered into the hands of the enraged king of León. Nevertheless, the king despite his anger did not exact his due. Recognizing great integrity and loyalty, he released Moniz from his oath.\(^\text{25}\) Still, he could not forget the treachery of Afonso Henriques. Because more pressing concerns demanded his immediate attention, however, there was little he could do at the time to force his recalcitrant subject into submission.

Camoens recounts basically the same history; however, his details and emphasis show his sixteenth-century sensibilities. For instance, the poet cast Castile in the place of León. This distorted the twelfth-century political scene: after all Castile was at the time a part of León and – like Portugal – on the verge of independence. Still, in the continual twists and turns of Spain’s medieval Christian kingdoms, Castile later grew in power, gained independence, and eventually absorbed León. As a result, from a sixteenth-century perspective, the Castilians had inherited both the Leonese claims to Portugal and the status of Portugal’s long-standing Christian enemy.\(^\text{26}\)

Another major difference in the account from \textit{The Lusiads} lies in a revised chronology. According to Camoens the battle between Teresa and Afonso occurred first and was then followed by the “Castilian” invasion. This changed the apparent motivation of Castile: instead of invading to extract an oath of allegiance from both factions, the poet depicted the Castilians as fighting to support the unjust claims of Teresa after her defeat. In Camoens’s version, Castile was taking advantage of an internal Portuguese conflict in the hope of adding Portugal to its territory. Furthermore, instead of being hard pressed to defend themselves, the Portuguese easily trounced the Castilian armies. The one exception to this pattern of constant Portuguese victory in battle occurred at Guimarães. Here Afonso was caught unprepared, for the Castilians – having learned from their earlier humiliations – attacked with a larger army than before; however, with his pledge to the Castilian king, Egas Moniz prevented a costly defeat and secured the enemy’s withdrawal. Because of this, in spite of Castile’s best efforts, Portugal survived. Obviously, Camoens concluded, God had assisted the Portuguese in their victories.\(^\text{27}\)

This version of events leaves it clear that, for the sixteenth-century Portuguese, the Castilians were the greatest threat to Portuguese independence. From the very origins of Portugal, Castile had been
trying to conquer the kingdom, but had failed. Any anti-Castilian sentiments harbored by a sixteenth-century Portuguese had the imprimatur of this long – although inaccurate – history of antagonism as outlined in The Lusiads. Furthermore, that God had supported the Portuguese in battle was an early indication of the special destiny reserved for them.\(^{28}\)

### Ourique, 1139

For over a decade after Guimarães, Afonso Henriques continued to spar with the Leonese. Several times he raided across the Minho into Galicia, trying to push his jurisdiction north of the river. In spite of his attempts to expand Portugal at the expense of his nominal overlord, he continued to style himself Count of Portugal, not having declared his independence. In 1139, however, he began to use the title of king. Legend attributes this change to a miracle which occurred on 25 July, just before a battle with the Moors at Ourique.

Camoens recounts that Afonso had turned his military efforts to driving the Muslims from the lands south of the Tagus. During one of his campaigns, when he reached Ourique he encountered five Moorish kings leading an army that outnumbered the Portuguese a hundred to one. Instead of withdrawing, as a more prudent man might have done, the count placed his trust in God and remained. The next day at dawn, presumably while praying to prepare for the coming fight, Afonso beheld a vision of Christ on the cross.\(^{29}\) News of this miracle so heartened his men that they immediately acclaimed him king. Following their now divinely appointed leader, Afonso’s soldiers marched into battle. The Portuguese army fell upon the infidels and routed them. With God as ‘midwife’ the Kingdom of Portugal was born.\(^{30}\)

Modern historians tell a different story. Searching twelfth-century documents for accounts of this miraculous battle has proven fruitless. Scholars have found only brief mention of a skirmish with the Moors in July of 1139, perhaps the result of a large Portuguese raid. Nor have historians been able to identify, without controversy, the location where the battle was supposed to have taken place. Although the chronicle that notes the skirmish places it at an “Ourique,” it is difficult to accept that this is the same location now associated with the legend. Today’s Ourique is in extreme southern Portugal, deep in
the Muslim-ruled territory of Afonso's day (and about as far away from the original County of Portugal as one can get and still remain within the boundaries of what became the Kingdom of Portugal).\(^{31}\) In fact, as far as historians can tell, the legendary version of the battle comes from a chronicle written in 1419, nearly three centuries after the event. At this time the relations between Portugal and Castile were, to say the least, tense. For the past three or four decades the Kingdom of Castile had been actively trying to add Portugal to its domains.\(^{32}\) As part of this effort, the Castilians claimed divine sanction to lead the Reconquista and all the Christian kingdoms of Iberia. They based their claim upon the story that St. James and an army of angels had established Castile by assisting its founder in battle against the Moors. To undercut this Castilian propaganda and legitimize the independence of Portugal, the Portuguese probably concocted the legendary Battle of Ourique. The competition of origin stories was such that the fourteenth-century Portuguese probably chose the skirmish at Ourique as their founding event since it occurred on or near the feast day of St. James (25 July) and would, they hoped, overshadow it.\(^{33}\) Although the Castilians might have the support of St. James, the Portuguese had the support of Christ himself.

Nonetheless, to a sixteenth-century audience in Portugal the miracle at Ourique was real. Before the battle, with God's blessing, Afonso Henriques had become king of Portugal and gone on to win. To commemorate the miracle and his victory, Afonso

> proudly adorned his white buckler with the design of five shields in bright blue, signifying the five kings he had vanquished. And within the five shields, disposed in the form of a cross, he commemorated further the divine help he had been vouchsafed by depicting in a different colour the thirty pieces of silver for which Christ was betrayed, five in each shield, the shield in the centre counting twice.\(^{34}\)

Afonso and his successors took this design for Portugal's royal coat-of-arms. The symbolism reminded the Portuguese of the divine origins of their independence and of their relationship with God. As long as Portugal remained steadfast in the Christian faith, they could be sure of God's support. By the sixteenth century the symbolism had been pushed even deeper: “... [the royal] coat-of-arms, recalling [Christ's]
appearance on the victorious field of Ourique, when he bestowed as [Portugal’s] escutcheon the five wounds he suffered on the cross.\textsuperscript{35} Not only did the Portuguese have divine favor, they were marked by the honor reserved for the most holy of the saints: the stigmata. Obviously the Portuguese had been chosen by God for some divine purpose.

Even more than the events at Guimarães, the miracle at Ourique established the principle of Portuguese independence for Camoens and his sixteenth-century compatriots.\textsuperscript{36} Afonso’s vision and victory had sealed a pact with God that provided the Portuguese with
a heavenly charter for their kingdom. This could not be forgotten, for the Portuguese royal coat-of-arms carried the sign of this covenant for all to see.

**Portuguese Reconquista, 1139–1249**

After Ourique, whatever the real nature of this battle, King Afonso I continued to press the Moors. Even as he did this he had to resolve two unrelated, but major, problems. First, the dispute with León over the status of Portugal – subject county or independent kingdom – remained unsettled and left him surrounded by enemies on all borders. Needing some sort of external political support, Afonso turned to distant Rome in 1143 and offered the Pope his fealty, a continuing Reconquista, and an annual tribute in gold. His offer was accepted. The Portuguese king had helped consolidate Portugal’s independence by taking Christ’s vicar as his liege lord and thereby legitimizing what he had won by force. Even better, recognizing the constant demands of the wars with the Muslims, the Pope absolved Afonso of his feudal duty to appear at court in Rome. A conveniently distant overlord, one who could not meddle easily in local affairs, was exactly what the first king of Portugal wanted.

With the political future of Portugal assured, Afonso turned to his second problem: securing the future of his dynasty. Visigothic Spain had left a legacy of elective monarchy in which, theoretically, the nobles chose the king’s successor. In practice however, the monarchy was usually hereditary. When his eldest son came of age, a Visigothic king usually began to involve him in the business of governing the kingdom. As the king-to-be gained experience he received more responsibilities. This training eased him into court life, giving him time to practice the art of governance as well as to learn the intricacies of managing the noble factions. When the king died, the son usually moved right into place, skilled enough to secure his right to the succession. Following the Visigothic practice, Afonso declared in 1173 that his son Sancho would rule jointly with him. In this way Afonso and his heirs succeeded in establishing a basically hereditary dynastic principle for Portugal. Still, whenever a succession was in doubt, the Visigothic legal tradition was revived.

With both his independence secured and the dynastic problem addressed, Afonso Henriques and his successors, as faithful sons of
the Church, put most of their efforts into the *Reconquista*. By 1249 the modern limits of Portugal had been established and the Islamic rulers had been expelled. The Portuguese *Reconquista* had ended after little more than a century. Again, the details of this process are of little interest here. Suffice it to say that Camoens neglected to describe its fitful nature. Instead, he related a heroic account of the constant struggle against the infidel, showing yet again the continued fervor for religious conflict some three hundred years after Islam no longer threatened Portuguese soil.39 What does matter for our purposes is that the *Reconquista* left the Portuguese without an open frontier into which to expand. The only available directions for expansion by land led north and east into Castile (which by this time had replaced León as the dominant Christian power in Iberia). Following the dictates of piety, geography, and the strength of the Castilians, the Portuguese eventually turned to the sea, and set their sights on Muslim Morocco.40 First, however, they had to fend off an aggressive Castile.

**Aljubarrota, 1385**

While not the first conflict between Portugal and Castile prior to the sixteenth century, the Battle of Aljubarrota probably came closest to ending Portuguese independence. When King Fernando of Portugal died on 22 October 1383, the future of his country seemed set. A year before, Fernando’s only surviving child, Princess Beatriz, had been betrothed to King Juan I of Castile as part of a peace treaty between the two kingdoms. Knowing that his health was failing, Fernando had stipulated in the marriage agreement the various complexities of who would inherit Portugal and under what conditions. When the Portuguese king died leaving no heir but the twelve-year-old Beatriz, one thing was absolutely clear: Castile and Portugal would be united. Nevertheless, united they were not. Divine will, or quite possibly human agency, intervened in the form of a heavenly portent: “It happened in Evora, where a baby girl, suddenly endowed with speech, raised itself in its cradle and, hand in air, proclaimed: ‘Portugal, Portugal, behold your new king, Dom João!’”41 Ignoring the possibility that the infant’s proclamation referred to King Juan of Castile (for Juan is simply the Castilian form of João) and invoking the Visigothic tradition of elective monarchy, Fernando’s
bastard cousin João de Avis answered the call backed by widespread popular support. The result, as *The Lusiads* recounts, was war.

From Camoens’s sixteenth-century perspective, this war was not merely a clash of elites vying for supremacy; it was a fight for Portuguese independence and freedom. This being the case, the entire nation mobilized. Even the commoners – normally the hapless victims of medieval armies – rallied to João’s cause:

[W]hile some [commoners] were voicing the general approval of the war in defence of the homeland, others set about polishing and refurbishing their arms that the years of peace had coated with rust, lining headpieces, testing breastplates, each man fitting himself out as best he could.42

Naturally the nobles also joined in, for the common people did not hold a monopoly on patriotism. Nevertheless, in contrast to the poet’s depiction of the commoners’ unwavering support, he related that a group of nobles expressed their doubts when João sought their counsel:

And some did in fact advance views at variance with the common determination, their former valour having given way to an unwonted and discreditable disloyalty. Fear had chilled and numbed their hearts, driving out natural fidelity, until they were prepared to deny both their king and their country. Had it suited their interests, they would have denied, like Peter, their very God.43

Still, with a rousing appeal to Portuguese history and skill at arms, the king vanquished most of the nobles’ concerns. And in *The Lusiads*, a gloriously bloody struggle, complete with noble traitors and common heroes, ensued.44 Reality was somewhat more prosaic. Intent on securing his rights to Fernando’s legacy, Juan invaded and fought his way toward Lisbon. Rallying his supporters (both noble and common), João moved his army north from the Portuguese capital to intercept the Castilian invaders. On 14 August 1385 the two armies met in battle on the plateau of Aljubarrota, near the site of the modern town of Batalha.45 Despite Juan’s great resources and strength, João won. Portugal’s
independence was secured, although a lasting peace with Castile came only in 1411. Still, for the sixteenth-century Portuguese, the Battle of Aljubarrota and the events preceding it reinforced the idea that they were God’s chosen people, meant to be independent. The only possible explanation for the infant’s cry heralding João de Avis as the new king of Portugal was divine intervention. Obviously God supported Portugal and had no intention of allowing foreigners to rule over His people. Because of this, the Portuguese believed that they had been granted victory over the much stronger Castilians.

Africa and empire

With Castile fended off, but too powerful to attack, King João I set his sights on Africa. Extending the Reconquista into Africa, he hoped, would provide the active frontier he needed to keep his nobles occupied and rewarded. As a first step, he decided to take the Moroccan port of Ceuta. Located in a strategic position in the Strait of Gibraltar, this city served as a base for the Moorish corsairs who periodically raided the Algarve and attacked Christian ships sailing through the strait. By seizing Ceuta, the Portuguese hoped to protect the seaborne trade route between Italy and northern Europe for which Portugal was a vital way station. What made the city even more enticing was that it served as a center of the rich Saharan gold trade. Finally, João hoped that the city would prove an ideal staging point for the eventual conquest of Morocco, thus reversing the course taken by the Muslims in 711. In 1415 João launched his attack and, after only a day of fighting, took the city.

Although the Portuguese captured Ceuta with little effort, this step did not prove to be the first leading to the demise of Muslim rule in Morocco. Nor did the city deliver its trade into Portuguese hands; the Moorish merchants simply moved to other cities and bypassed the old center. Still, holding Ceuta did help consolidate Christian control of the strait and its traffic. However, the cost was high: the Moors constantly harassed Ceuta’s garrison and supplies often had to be obtained by risky raids into the surrounding countryside. In the long run, the conquest accomplished only two basic things. First, as Camoens observed, occupying Ceuta made practically impossible a renewed Islamic invasion of the Iberian peninsula. Second, the experience at Ceuta set the pattern for the Portuguese overseas
empire. Instead of territorial conquest, the Portuguese established strategic coastal forts, guarded them well, and tried to channel local trade through them.

Over the next century the Portuguese systematically explored the west coast of Africa, slowly edging ever further south. This process culminated in 1497 with Vasco da Gama’s epic voyage – the central narrative thread of *The Lusiads* – in which the Portuguese finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope and pushed on to India. There, after nearly a century of exploration, they discovered the source of the eastern spice trade. For the first time, Europeans could engage in this lucrative commerce without having to deal with Muslim intermediaries. Da Gama’s achievement, combined with the discovery of Brazil in 1500, quickly converted Portugal from a minor Iberian kingdom into one of Europe’s wealthiest realms. By the second half of the sixteenth century the Portuguese had built a wide network of forts and trading-posts throughout Africa, Asia, the East Indies, and Brazil from which they supplied European markets with slaves, spices, and other commodities. The rapid expansion of the Portuguese Empire and the prosperity it brought, vindicated the belief in the divine mission of the Portuguese people.\(^5\) Imperial and commercial success was simply the means God had chosen to spread His Gospel to the farthest ends of the earth. God had preserved Portugal’s independence from Castile for this very reason.

**Imperial decline and decay**

When Camoens published *The Lusiads* in 1572 this history was in the all too distant past. At the end of his poem, he lamented that

> those to whom I sing are become hard of hearing and hard of heart. This country of mine is made over to lusting greed, its sense of values eclipsed in an austerity of gloom and depression: there is no longer to be had from it that recognition which fans the flame of genius as nothing else can.\(^5\)

Camoens’s voice echoed that of many of his countrymen, who saw Portuguese greatness exchanged for corruption.\(^5\) For them, the Portuguese spirit had faltered. Despite the rich legacy of heroic exploits by men like Vasco da Gama and João de Castro (governor of Goa and
The last half of the sixteenth century saw the Portuguese unable to sustain the economic, military, and demographic burdens demanded by their far-flung empire. As a result, instead of continuing its inexorable advance into every corner of the world, the Portuguese empire began to weaken and shrink. The renewed strength of Portugal’s Muslim competitors in the spice trade reinforced this trend and made it more apparent. No longer able to command the market, Portugal saw its revenues from the trade begin to fall, although its expenses did not. Modern historiography has ascribed this situation to the Portuguese failure to block off the Red Sea and thus prevent the Ottoman revival of traditional Middle Eastern trade routes. The sixteenth-century Portuguese saw the same pattern, but wondered what spiritual failing had conferred victory on the Turk. Sure in their knowledge that they were God’s chosen people, they could only conclude that their collective sins – perhaps in the form of pursuing “futile glory or riches” – had brought this punishment upon Portugal.

In reminding the Portuguese of their heroic past, however mythical, The Lusiads prescribed the remedy for the malaise of empire. Through his poem, Camoens called upon his people to remember and renew their traditional values and strengths: their Christianity, their independence, and their divinely appointed place in the world. More directly, he called upon his king – who occupied his “throne in furtherance of the divine will” – to lead his kingdom back to its former glory. Under the pious and warlike King Sebastian, the ancient dream of the Reconquista would once again guide the Portuguese to greatness; for, as the poet explained, Sebastian was “sent by God to strike new terror into Moslem hearts and to win for the faith vast new regions of the earth.”

If the Portuguese refocused on their divinely appointed role, the “gloom and depression” that had beset them would fade away and Portugal would reassert its proper place in the world. This, in 1572, was the imagined future: one sketched out by history, prophecy, and hope.

Reality, as we know, turned out quite differently. In 1578 the disastrous Battle of Alcazar dashed the national hopes raised by Sebastian’s youth, his vigor, and his reaffirmation of the Portuguese
as a proud and independent people. Just when the Portuguese found the king who would assuredly reinvigorate the kingdom, God snatched him away. For a people who considered themselves to be God’s chosen people, this turn of events must have seemed perplexing. Why would God deprive His people of the leader they needed to accomplish His work? Out of the confusion surrounding Sebastian’s death – and the national crisis precipitated by the Spanish annexation in 1580 – arose the idea that the Portuguese king had not gone to his grave, that God for some reason kept him hidden. Perhaps Sebastian was occupied with a sanctifying pilgrimage. Perhaps the Portuguese were not yet ready to take up their divine role. In any case, Sebastian would eventually return to lead his people to the culmination of their appointed destiny.

This returns us to the question with which this chapter opened, although in a more general form: What was it that made the Portuguese of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries ready to believe in Sebastianism? As we have seen, the cultural elements upon which Sebastianism drew – a separate people, elected by God, with a divine mission to carry Christianity to the world – were embedded in over half a millennium of Portuguese history. Fostered by empire and reinforced by the Spanish annexation, these elements created a distinct sense of Portuguese identity. For the people of Portugal, Sebastianism was an appealing formulation of this identity expressed in millenarian terms. It reflected both Portugal’s unique past and Portuguese hopes for a better future. For Portuguese rebels during the period of Spanish occupation, Sebastianism’s popular appeal would make it a useful political tool. It was nationalism in another guise.