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Venice: Portuguese King or Calabrian Charlatan?

Taking on someone else’s name and person with intention to defraud was thought a serious crime in sixteenth-century France…. But how, in a time without photographs, with few portraits, without tape recorders, without fingerprinting, without identity cards, without birth certificates, with parish records still irregular if kept at all – how did one establish a person’s identity beyond doubt?

Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* ¹

Among the papers that Iniño de Mendoza dispatched to Madrid in the summer of 1598 were a sonnet and a letter, written in Italian and signed “The Unbelieved King of Portugal.”² In poetry and prose, these documents briefly chronicled the story of Portugal’s King Sebastian: his “cruel fate” and apparent death at the Battle of Alcazar twenty years earlier, his miraculous survival through God’s mercy, his recent return to the world.³ Whoever the author was, he seems to have been intent on proving that Sebastian was still alive. Nonetheless, the Spanish ambassador to Venice evidently considered the documents barely worthy of note, mere curiosities. He did not offer a translation. Nor did he explain that they implicitly questioned King Philip II of Spain’s right to rule Portugal. Instead, he simply sent them to the Spanish Council of State, buried amidst more important concerns. Some weeks later, on 13 September, Philip’s death brought the matter to life.

Over the following five years, Spanish officials in Italy, Spain, and Portugal found themselves frequently distracted by “The Unbelieved...
King of Portugal,” his supporters, and the disturbances generated by his story. What Inigo de Mendoza dismissed as inconsequential proved troublesome. Why? Part of the answer can be found in the events themselves. In essence, the news both of the Portuguese king’s reappearance and the Spanish king’s death raised the same troubling question: Who was now king? What had been a simple question of a legal, orderly, and fore-ordained succession became confused with complex issues of sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity. Further compounding the confusion – and providing much of the rest of the answer – were two additional factors common to all of early modern Europe. First, in a society in which information was unreliable and moved slowly, rumor often passed for news. Second, the personal nature of political ties made the state brittle and subject to the flaws of mortality.

**Portugal and the death of Philip II**

Philip’s passing severed the personal and legal ties that bound his subjects to the Spanish monarchy. In Castile this was of little consequence. There, in Spain’s dominant kingdom, local and imperial interests generally coincided. Few nobles stood to gain from anything other than an orderly transition. Furthermore, since the heir to the throne resided in Castile, he could personally create anew the links of patronage and fealty that bound subject to king. For outlying provinces like the Kingdom of Portugal, distance complicated the situation. In these areas, the king’s death brought a dangerous liminal period in which local elites were freed of their feudal restraints. Without the presence of the heir to guide the dynastic state safely through to the next reign, it became especially vulnerable to the forces of rumor, conspiracy, local resentments, and incipient nationalism. For ten days in mid-September 1598, Portugal was adrift. During that time, the rumor of a living King Sebastian who would soon return to take up his throne cast its shadow over the news of Philip’s death. These two events – a king’s death and the genesis of a rumor – set the stage for a group of Portuguese rebels who had never been reconciled to Spanish rule in Portugal. It provided them with the opportunity to convert what had been a mere dynastic struggle into a national one.
In the Portuguese capital, mourning for Philip was a subdued, official affair. By order of Portugal’s council of governors, it began on 20 September, the day after they learned of the king’s death, and ended three days later. On Sunday, the first day of mourning, the bells of Lisbon started tolling at two in the afternoon and stopped at ten the next day. On Monday afternoon, proclamations issued throughout the city instructed everyone to dress appropriately. Fishwives wore black veils, laborers donned caps, and nobles put on hoods. On Tuesday, no work was done. That morning, the city’s oldest official and three magistrates led the people of Lisbon in a procession to three principal landmarks: the Cathedral, the Rua Nova, and the Rossio Plaza. At each location, one of the magistrates raised a shield bearing Philip’s coat-of-arms above his head and cried out: “Weep, weep [Portuguese] people for your good king, Don Philip, who is dead and who governed you for eighteen years in peace and with much justice…”. Then the magistrate dropped the coat-of-arms on the ground, shattering it. Three times the symbol of Philip’s power was raised; three times it was broken. Philip II of Spain was no longer King of Portugal.

Sometime during these three days of mourning, the rumor about King Sebastian intruded. It told of a daring escape from North Africa: Sebastian and twenty other Christians had stolen a galley and, fleeing their Muslim captors, raced north into the Adriatic Sea towards secure Christian territory. This news caused a great stir in Portugal – although incredible, it seemed possible. After all, Christian slaves did sometimes escape their Muslim masters and return home. If Sebastian had survived the Battle of Alcazar, he might have been captured and enslaved; consequently, he might have languished for twenty years in captivity somewhere in North Africa. If true, however, the coincidental timing was fantastic. For some Portuguese, Philip’s death seemed to have fortuitously made way for Sebastian to return and reclaim his throne. At least in the popular imagination, the Portuguese faced a crucial question: should they swear fealty to Philip II’s son and legitimate heir, Philip III, or reinstate the long-lost King Sebastian?

Authorities in Lisbon launched an investigation. Was the rumor miraculous truth or was it baseless sedition? Popular pressure in the form of excited speculation demanded an official response. The brief inquiry revealed that some letters from Rome had inspired the
account of Sebastian’s escape, but failed to uncover the authors. Unable to verify the disturbing tidings or identify the perpetrators, the authorities tabled the matter. And, on Wednesday, 23 September 1598, the proclamations which ended mourning for Philip II ordered the people of Lisbon to prepare for the ceremony that would fill the vacant throne. No one was to work and everyone was to dress festively. That afternoon, the people of Lisbon gathered at the Terreiro do Paço, where the highest-ranked Portuguese nobles swore an oath of loyalty to Portugal’s new king: Philip III of Spain.

For the moment the question of succession in Portugal had been settled. The Portuguese nobility had taken its oath and Philip III was king. Legally, the Kingdom of Portugal was anchored to the Spanish crown. Yet Spanish authority in Portugal was brittle. Slow and unreliable communications, soldiers of uncertain loyalties, and bureaucracies better structured for graft than governance forced early modern European states to depend on local elites to rule. For those elites whose interests did not coincide perfectly with those of the current regime, political rumor and popular sentiment created possibilities to exploit. In Portugal in 1598, the news about Sebastian aroused both millenarian expectations and political ambitions. For those who yearned for Portuguese independence – Sebastianists, nationalists, and disgruntled nobles alike – the rumor of King Sebastian’s return hinted at a welcome release from Spanish rule.

Genesis of a rumor

This rumor originated in Venice. Months earlier – some time during the summer of 1598 – a man had turned up in the Most Serene Republic claiming to be the long-lost King Sebastian of Portugal. Initially, outside the small community of Portuguese merchants and exiles, he attracted little notice. Nevertheless, word of the man and his claims eventually spread. Among the Venetians he was apparently regarded as some sort of celebrity; he seems to have socialized with various nobles and prelates who were, perhaps, intrigued or amused by his assertions. Undoubtedly, he was the same “Unbelieved King of Portugal” whose writings ended up in the Spanish ambassador’s dispatch to Madrid, but had been disregarded. Up to this point the man was more odd than dangerous. This changed with the news of
Philip II’s death and the ensuing mood of disaffection in Portugal; the supposed Sebastian no longer appeared harmless.

Anxious not to be seen by the Spanish as the source of unrest in Portugal, the Venetians moved to eliminate the threat. On 22 October 1598, having decided to forbid the man – whoever he was – to remain in Venice, the Council of Ten sought to discover his whereabouts. By 24 October, they had been informed that the man claiming to be King Sebastian had recently gone to Padua and was lodged there at the Collegio Cocco. That day the Council sent word to the Paduan Rettori directing them to order the man to leave the city within twenty-four hours and, within eight days, to leave the Venetian Republic. Moreover, they forbade him ever to return.

On 7 November the Spanish ambassador to Venice lodged a formal protest before the Venetian Collegio. He informed them that the supposed Sebastian had ignored their injunction and that the “scoundrel” was once again in Venice. In fact, the man’s “beastly whim” had gained such notoriety in the city that Íñigo de Mendoza could no longer overlook the matter, as he had for the previous three months. Consequently he requested that the Council take the man into their custody so that the question of his true identity could be resolved. Mendoza explained that, in any case, he intended to uncover the truth and take the appropriate steps. If the man could prove that he was indeed King Sebastian of Portugal, the ambassador assured the Venetians that his master, Philip III, would gladly restore the Portuguese throne to his long-lost cousin; however, if this was a “malicious and sad machination,” Mendoza expected the impostor to be punished.

Clearly, punishment was the outcome Íñigo de Mendoza anticipated. As he reminded the Collegio in his complaint, the real King Sebastian had fallen in battle twenty years earlier at Ksar-el-Kebir; both the King of Spain and the King of Morocco had subsequently done everything in their power to ascertain his fate. Without a doubt Sebastian was dead. Besides, the ambassador argued, this was a particularly poor impostor: he looked nothing like Sebastian. In fact, claimed Mendoza, the man was from Calabria (in southern Italy) and spoke not a word of Portuguese. It was hard to believe that Sebastian could have forgotten his native tongue. Obviously, the man could not be the missing Portuguese king. And impersonation of a king, an extremely serious crime, warranted retribution.
If, as Mendoza asserted, the supposed Sebastian was obviously a second-rate impostor, why had the Spanish suddenly become so interested? After all, the ambassador himself disregarded the man and his claims for some three months. Certainly, the death of Philip II and the news from Portugal were factors; yet the Portuguese nobility had sworn fealty to Philip III and the Portuguese people had not revolted. Moreover, with his refusal to leave Venice, the alleged impostor hardly seemed keen to return to Portugal and incite a rebellion. So why did the man the Spanish came to call the Calabrian Charlatan now appear menacing? In effect, although the man himself seemed harmless, the rumors he inspired were not. For a state like early modern Spain, held together primarily by personal ties of loyalty to the monarch, anything that threatened to disrupt those ties was dangerous. Whatever the real intentions of the man claiming to be King Sebastian of Portugal, once news of his claims reached Portugal, he constituted a threat. As the Spanish had learned on three prior occasions, the rumor of Sebastian’s return could act as a catalyst for unrest in Portugal. If care were not taken, the tenuous ties linking Portugal to Philip III might be broken and replaced by ties to a resurrected Sebastian. This threat in turn endangered other Spanish domains, for talk of events in Venice and Portugal had spread. For instance, the ambassador received a letter from Sicily warning him of the impostor and even informing him of where he lodged in Venice. Any mis-step, or even hesitation in handling the situation, might reveal a weakness that would encourage rebels elsewhere. So, while the Calabrian Charlatan himself might be ignored, the first rumblings from Portugal of millenarian expectations and national sentiments could not. Íñigo de Mendoza and his superiors in Madrid felt compelled to put a quick end to the matter.

Having heard the ambassador's views, the Collegio relegated the matter to the Senate for consideration. There, presumably after some discussion, one Senator submitted a resolution calling for the arrest of the man calling himself King Sebastian. Once detained, he was to be handed over to the Avvogadori di Comun – the state attorneys – who would prosecute his case; afterwards, the Senate would decide on a “just and opportune” outcome. The resolution, however, failed to pass and the supposed Sebastian continued to have free run of the city.
On 17 November Íñigo de Mendoza renewed his grievance, this time in writing. His concern, as he informed the Collegio, was that the false Sebastian’s claims would incite “some disturbance in Portugal.” Should this happen it would undoubtedly harm the friendship between Spain and Venice – a circumstance for which he, the ambassador, would be blamed. After all, Mendoza conceded, the Signoria previously had no reason to act, seeing as he himself had disregarded the matter and had long failed to bring it to their attention. Now, however, the situation had changed. The Charlatan had come to Venice “half-naked and without any followers,” but now found himself “regally dressed”; furthermore, he now lived “sumptuously” and led “a good company of other scoundrels.”

To forestall any possible and unfortunate deterioration in diplomatic relations, he implored the Collegio to arrest the impostor so that the whole matter could be cleared up. And – although he disliked making such a request, especially in public – his duty obliged him to seek as well the punishment of certain Venetian nobles who protected the “scoundrel” and moved his lodgings from one place to another. In fact, Mendoza pointed out, it was these aristocrats, not the Serene Republic itself, who threatened to damage Venice’s amicable relationship with Spain. As ambassador, he sought only to ensure that this did not happen. Simply apprehending and trying the Calabrian Charlatan would bring the mutual satisfaction and “perpetual peace” that both Spanish king and Venetian doge desired.

Mendoza’s statement apparently bewildered at least some of the members of the Collegio. After assuring the Spanish ambassador that they too wished to sustain the good relations between their respective rulers, they informed him that the supposed Sebastian had already left Venice. Accordingly, they believed that they had brought the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. Nevertheless, Mendoza insisted that the impostor remained in the city and continued to receive many visitors, among them Venetian noblemen and priests. Although not entirely convinced, the Collegio consented to look further into the matter. When their investigation was complete, they would summon the ambassador and inform him of their findings. As Íñigo de Mendoza took his leave, he urged the Venetian ministers – “per l’amor di Dio” – not to allow a regrettable conclusion to this affair to undermine Venice’s relationship with Spain, especially at the very beginning of Philip III’s reign.
Obviously, Mendoza hoped to quash the rumor of Sebastian’s return by eliminating its source and punishing those who helped it spread. As the ambassador well knew, in an era lacking steady and reliable sources of information, rumor served as news. Usually, however, the best way of dealing with damaging noise was to dismiss it; most rumors were ephemera, quickly drowned in early modern Europe’s universal flood of gossip and speculation. Actively trying to suppress a rumor ran the risk of magnifying it and lending it credence. Nevertheless, some rumors grew beyond the point where they could be safely ignored. Exaggerated and promoted for political purposes, such speculation was dangerous: a well-timed challenge might incite a popular revolt or encourage ambitious or resentful local elites to test the strength of their bonds to the early modern state. For the Spanish, the widespread and persistent rumors surrounding the Calabrian Charlatan threatened their hold on Portugal in just this way.

Spanish diplomatic pressure on Venice had its effect. Following the discussions of the Collogeio with Mendoza, the Senate debated the matter and how best to respond. However, the Senators could not agree on whether to detain the alleged impostor immediately or simply to renew the order of expulsion. Disagreement seems to have fallen along the factional lines developed in the 1580s: the “Old” party pursued a policy of neutrality in European politics and hence did not wish to offend Spain; in contrast, the “Young” party believed that neutrality had led to Spanish dominance in Italy and, hoping to end this, sought to ally the Most Serene Republic with Spain’s northern European opponents (France, England, and the Netherlands). Reflecting these divisions, three resolutions came to a vote; none passed.36 Nevertheless, probably driven by hopes for Spanish participation in a league against the Turks (which overshadowed Venice’s European political concerns), the Senators eventually formed a consensus.37 On 24 November the Council had six of the fake Sebastian’s Paduan and Venetian accomplices arrested.38 They were immediately turned over to a special four-man commission formed that same day and invested with the usual “power to detain, to prosecute, to torture.”39 The next day, on 25 November 1598, the Venetian authorities collared the Calabrian Charlatan himself and handed him over to the commission as well.40

For the next two years, the supposed Sebastian languished in jail. No longer did he receive Venetian nobles and prelates curious about
his miraculous survival at the Battle of Alcazar and his subsequent adventures fighting for Christendom. Instead, his days, weeks, and months were punctuated by official interrogations and visits from probing skeptics.\textsuperscript{41} His visitors scrutinized his story and uncovered each flaw and inconsistency. Yet he did not alter his claims; he steadfastly insisted that he was, in fact, the long-lost King of Portugal.\textsuperscript{42} (Torture was apparently not applied.) After an initial flurry of activity the formal inquiry tapered off since – besides failing to extract a confession – it had uncovered little that was new. Increasingly left undisturbed in his cell, the prisoner turned once more to composing sonnets.\textsuperscript{43} Other than admitting he was an impostor, there was little else he could do. His fate would be decided by others.

\textbf{Identifying the prisoner}

Outside the prison walls at least three groups – Venetian investigators, Spanish officials, and Portuguese rebels – sought to decide the fate of the imprisoned poet. Naturally, given the man’s unchanging and extraordinary claims, the key issue was one of identity. This was no simple matter. Lacking any impartial and indisputable means for establishing a person’s identity (such as comparing fingerprints, examining dental x-rays, or consulting photographs), early modern institutions were forced to rely on logic and the testimony of generally less-than-reliable witnesses.\textsuperscript{44} Any contested identity thus rested on a fragile reconstruction of frail memory. In the case at hand, the dispute over who the man actually was turned on memories faded by twenty years and prejudiced by political purposes.

Caught at the center of this debate was the four-man commission established by the Venetian Senate to adjudicate the matter. Any ruling they made, especially if not backed by convincing evidence, would provoke someone: the “Old” or the “Young,” the Spanish or the Portuguese. Realizing this, Marco Querini (a member of the commission) persuaded a Portuguese Dominican friar to go to Lisbon to obtain the proof they needed; in exchange, upon his return, he would be allowed to speak with the prisoner. Querini expected this friar – Estêvão de Sampaio – to come back with incontrovertible documents that would either verify or refute the supposed Sebastian’s assertions.\textsuperscript{45} Converting rumor and speculation into fact, however tenuous, would clarify the political choices with which the Serene
Republic was faced; in addition, the delay caused by the investigation would give the two Venetian factions time to form a consensus about which choices might prove most advantageous.

For Sampaio, this journey entailed great risk. Twenty years earlier, the Dominican friar had opposed Philip II of Spain’s claims to the Portuguese throne, and instead supported Dom António, the native Portuguese claimant. At the Battle of Alcântara – one of the few military engagements of consequence in the brief contest between Philip and António – Sampaio’s patriotism converted him into a combatant. 

He killed one Spanish soldier and captured a royal standard from another. For these acts of rebellion, on 28 January 1581 the new (Spanish) vicar general of the Portuguese Dominicans issued an order for his detention and incarceration. Although jailed, Sampaio eventually escaped and made his way to the French city of Toulouse, from where he continued to agitate against the Spanish occupation of Portugal. As a result, in 1599, Fra Estêvão de Sampaio was a wanted man in all Spanish territories, including Lisbon.

In spite of the danger, Sampaio returned to the Portuguese capital. There he hoped to compile an authoritative list of Sebastian’s physical traits: his height; the color of his eyes; the color of his hair; the location, size, and shape of any scars he had; and, anything else that could be used to identify an individual. Sampaio searched Lisbon for people who had known Sebastian and could provide this kind of detailed information about their king. Unfortunately, most had died. Still, he tracked down a few people who had served in Sebastian’s household, including his barber and shoemaker. From them, he obtained what he needed: notarized and sworn testimony of the signs by which the true Portuguese king could be recognized. For example, from the barber Sampaio learned that in 1578 one of Sebastian’s lower right molars had been pulled, and from the shoemaker he learned that one of the king’s legs was shorter than the other. In November and December 1599 Sampaio wrote to Querini from Lisbon, apprising him of his findings. The friar informed the Venetian that while he would like “to show the falseness of this Fabrication,” he could not. He swore – “by the living God and [his] holy orders” – that the signs he had sent were true, implying (without actually saying) that the prisoner in Venice was who he claimed to be: King Sebastian of Portugal. This testimony had no immediate,
tangible effect. Still, it may have renewed Venetian doubts about the true identity of their captive poet for, during the summer of 1600, the news in Lisbon insisted that the supposed Sebastian’s jailors had transferred him to better quarters and provided him with a daily stipend for food.

By October 1600 Sampaio was once again in Venice, campaigning for the release of his king. In a letter written to José Teixeira, another Portuguese exile, Sampaio swore – driven only by “a fraternal love, the truth, and zeal for the freedom of [Portugal]” – that “the King Dom Sebastian, our lord, is a prisoner in [Venice].” He claimed that this was proven by the signs he had gathered in Portugal for, without exception, the alleged impostor bore each one. The Portuguese friar complained, however, that the machinations of Inigo de Mendoza and the malice of Portuguese Jews had prevented the Venetian Signoria from seeing the truth by convincing them that their prisoner was a Calabrian. Sampaio requested that Teixeira, in his role of advisor to the King of France, persuade his master to intervene on Sebastian’s behalf. If Teixeira were to come to Venice with the appropriate royal missives, the Venetians would surely recognize the truth and free King Sebastian.

Like his fellow Dominican, Fra José Teixeira had supported Dom António against Philip II. However, unlike Estêvão de Sampaio, Teixeira seems to have taken up words – instead of arms – to fight the Spanish invasion and takeover in 1580. In effect, Portuguese liberty became Teixeira’s gospel and he zealously proclaimed it to his countrymen. For instance, in 1582 in the Azores, during a mass for a group of António’s supporters, a Portuguese Jesuit made the mistake of presenting a homily on a text from St. Matthew: “Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of? They say unto him, We are able.”

Although by all accounts an excellent discourse of great comfort to the Portuguese patriots, it upset Teixeira. After the Jesuit had finished, the Dominican friar rose, went to the pulpit, and proceeded to give an impromptu political sermon. He complained “that what the [Jesuit] father preached about and dealt with was only the Gospel: what you all already know; and, of that which is so important for you to know and to do, he says nothing.”

For Teixeira it was far more important to speak about how the King of Spain had unjustly subjugated Portugal, unseating Dom António,
the legitimate lord and king; how António had suffered in the wilderness while the Spanish pursued him and how he had escaped by following a star to a ship named “The Magi”; and, how the “Spanish Lutherans and Castilians” had occupied the rebels’ lands and taken their women and children. Following this patriotic litany of troubles and miracles, Fra José Teixeira called upon his compatriots to pray for King António’s victory, an act that would inspire them to their duty as “good Christians and subjects.”

A year earlier, as part of the propaganda effort in the struggle to free Portugal, Teixeira published a book entitled De Portugaliae Ortu (On the Birth of Portugal). In it he argued that legitimate political power was given “by God through the people”, and therefore that it was by the will of the people that each Portuguese king had ascended the throne, not by right of inheritance. In other words, as any modern nationalist would insist, sovereignty resided in the people. Since António’s right to rule in Portugal had been legitimized by popular acclaim before the Spanish conquest placed Philip II on the throne, any of the Spanish king’s legal claims had been superseded. Nevertheless, political legitimacy without military power proved worthless: to expel the Spanish invaders António and his followers needed allies. Following his return to France in 1583, Teixeira took part in French court life, doubtless hoping to influence French policy regarding Portugal. He attended court whenever he was in Paris and spoke of the Portuguese plight at every opportunity. Eventually he became counselor and preacher to two French kings, Henri III and his successor Henri IV; nevertheless, Teixeira never could convert these positions into effective action against Spanish rule.

With the death of Dom António in 1595 Teixeira’s political world collapsed. Over the following years, many of his fellow exiles abandoned the cause and made their peace with Spain. Perhaps their loyalties had been dynastic, tied to António himself; perhaps they had simply tired of an endless and hopeless struggle. Still, Fra José Teixeira refused to give up. Although he had never wavered in his support for Portugal’s dispossessed king, the friar’s political loyalties were not personal or dynastic; they were national – both pro-Portuguese and anti-Spanish. In the final years of the sixteenth century, when Portugal seemed irrevocably attached to the Spanish empire, the rumors and stories surrounding Sebastian must have held a natural appeal for an early modern nationalist like Teixeira.
After all, they told of the miraculous return of a native Portuguese king who, with God’s help, would surely recover his throne.

From August 1600 at the latest, José Teixeira avidly followed the tidings from Venice. Over the next six months the Dominican slowly pieced together and published an annotated collection of documents – letters, bits of news, fragments of ancient prophecies – concerning King Sebastian and his life following the Battle of Alcazar. In this volume, the *Adventure Admirable par dessus toutes autres (The Strangest Adventure that Ever Happened)*, Teixeira transferred his fight for Portuguese freedom to new ground. At the heart of his argument was the idea that Portugal had been established and sanctified by God. Thus the Portuguese loss of independence violated God’s plan; however, this calamity would soon be overcome.

Teixeira built the core of his case on a series of documents uncovered or produced by Fra Estêvão de Sampaio during his perilous trip to Lisbon in late 1599. The first of these documents was allegedly the sworn testimony of Afonso Henripes, the first king of Portugal, describing his vision the night before the Battle of Ourique. That night Afonso had retired to his tent to rest and prepare himself to face his Moorish foe in the morning. Seeking inspiration, he read the biblical account of Gideon’s victory over the Midianites for, like the Israelites, the Portuguese were outnumbered. After a prayer for victory, Afonso fell asleep and his vision began. In it, he learned that God had chosen “…to establish an Empire upon [Afonso] and [his] posterity, so that [God’s] name would be revealed and increased among the most distant nations…. [Portugal would be] a sanctified Kingdom, pure in the faith, and loving piety.” This chosen status was to last for sixteen generations, after which Portugal’s royal line would weaken and the kingdom would enter a time of troubles; nevertheless, God would continue to favor and help the Portuguese.

As Afonso had foreseen, his dynasty faltered at the appointed hour – the ill-fated Sebastian was Portugal’s sixteenth king. Although the future might have appeared bleak for the Portuguese living at the end of the sixteenth century, there was reason for hope; God after all had promised not to abandon his people. In fact, for those who knew how to interpret them, ancient prophecies could provide a chart for the unfolding of God’s plan. For instance, St. Cyril the Carmelite prophesied that “In the time of 54 years a Sun will rise. . . And this Sun will
be hidden. . . . Afterwards he will come to triumph over the world."77
In his commentary on this text, José Teixeira asserted that the "Sun"
referred to Sebastian; the fact that the Portuguese king was born in
1554 provided unquestionable proof.78 In another prophecy, St. Isidore
of Seville predicted the appearance of "a Hidden king, twice given [by
God]."79 Again, Teixeira interpreted this as a reference to Sebastian.
The first time Sebastian was "given" was in 1554 when, with his
birth, he provided King João III of Portugal with a successor, thus
saving the kingdom from annexation by Spain. The second time had
begun with Sebastian’s miraculous appearance in Venice in 1598 and,
as before, would surely result in the liberation of Portugal.80

Neither of the Portuguese Dominicans was content, however, to
leave the future of his country entirely in God’s hands. Sampaio’s
second document described an agreement of "vassalage" between
Afonso and the Pope, detailing their reciprocal feudal duties.81 This
legal contract established Portugal as a fief of the Holy See, a kingdom
distinct from and independent of Spain. With the apparent extinct-
ion of the Portuguese royal family, it might seem that this agreement
had lapsed or passed on to Philip II; however, Teixeira insisted, the
original enfeoffment had been done with the consent of the Portu-
guese people, making them party to the covenant.82 Consequently,
the Pope had an obligation to the Portuguese nation to ensure that
they remained his feudatories, "free of all foreign domination."83

Both Estêvão de Sampaio’s and José Teixeira’s arguments expressed
one fundamental idea: a Portugal "free of all foreign domination."
Differing audiences and changing circumstances dictated their ter-
minology – whether dynastic right, divine sanction, feudal contract,
or popular will. Thus, shifting allegiance from Dom António to the
supposed Sebastian was a matter of making the best of present
opportunities. In fact, for the two Portuguese patriots it mattered
little whether the man in Venice was an impostor or not. As with
modern nationalist groups, any means of ridding the nation of
foreign rule was legitimate.

This point was not lost on the Spanish. As part of his ongoing
efforts to unmask the Calabrian Charlatan, Íñigo de Mendoza closely
watched both Portuguese travelers and the Portuguese community in
Venice – people suspect by virtue of their nationality.84 In February
1600 the ambassador informed his superiors of three minor, but
somewhat disturbing, incidents. First, one of Dom António’s sons
Dom Cristóvão de Portugal – had passed through the city on his way to Constantinople. He was on a mission, reportedly inspired by the Dutch, to plead with the Turks to declare war on the Spanish. However, Mendoza believed that nothing would come of this initiative, since the Turks were fully occupied elsewhere. Second, several Portuguese had come to Venice to investigate the rumor of King Sebastian’s imprisonment. Among these were a group of Portuguese Franciscans who had asked to visit the prisoner, but the Venetian authorities had prevented them from doing so. As a result, they claimed that the man really was King Sebastian and were spreading this rumor back to Portugal. Third, although he provided no details, the Spanish ambassador briefly noted that a Portuguese friar had been corresponding with one of the Venetian commissioners assigned to the supposed Sebastian’s case.  

Only the third of these incidents grew into something of significance. In April a Portuguese archdeacon in Rome delivered two letters to the Duke of Sessa, the Spanish ambassador to the Pope. One of these letters, dated 8 December 1599, was a report from Estêvão de Sampaio to Marco Querini. In it, the Dominican relayed his findings concerning the physical signs by which the real King Sebastian could be recognized and implied to the Venetian that his prisoner was indeed the Portuguese King. The second letter was far more interesting. This one, dated 15 November 1599, was also from Sampaio but addressed to a Portuguese merchant in Venice by the name of Nuno da Costa. In it, the friar related the same signs by which Sebastian could be identified; in this letter, however, Sampaio noted that these signs were enough “to reveal the duplicity of [the prisoner].” Furthermore, he stated, the secretive way in which the Venetian Signoria was investigating the affair had only fueled the rumors and speculation in Lisbon. The Duke duly sent copies of these two documents to both Madrid and Mendoza, noting that the Portuguese in Venice obviously knew that the supposed Sebastian was an impostor.

In September the Dominican friar again came to Mendoza’s attention. This time, the Spaniard ran across a copy of the original Latin version of the documents and prophecies which Estêvão de Sampaio had collected in Lisbon. The ambassador described this “persuasive epistle” in a report to Madrid, noting that it predicted the emergence of a Hidden King who would expel the Spanish from Portugal. However, in spite of the Duke of Sessa’s report and the intercepted
letters, Mendoza did not think that Sampaio had connected the Calabrian Charlatan with the Hidden King. Even the friar’s obviously anti-Spanish politics apparently did not overly concern the ambassador. Instead, he dismissed the friar as “simple.”

**Punish or release?**

About this time Inigo de Mendoza’s replacement – Francisco de Vera y Aragón – arrived in Venice. When Philip III appointed de Vera as ambassador, he ordered him to pay special attention to the matter of the Calabrian Charlatan. Due to the threat of a Portuguese revolt in support of a returned Sebastian, it was imperative to punish the impostor and any accomplices who could be identified. Consequently, Philip instructed his new ambassador to redouble his efforts to persuade the Venetians to subject the Charlatan to an appropriate and public punishment; the king believed that this was “such a damaging fabrication and bad example” that it needed to be ended.

Francisco de Vera wasted no time in assessing the situation in Venice. On 9 December 1600 he appeared before the Venetian **Collegio**, demanding that the Calabrian Charlatan be punished or released. He informed them that the “insolence” of Fray Estévão de Sampaio had forced him to act. De Vera could no longer tolerate the lies being spread by Sampaio, Nuno da Costa, and their rebel accomplices in public places, including the Piazza San Marco. Therefore, he appealed to the Senators to do what was just. If, as they seemed to think, the man was a lunatic not to be held responsible for his actions, he should be released; if not, he was obviously an impostor and should therefore be “severely punished.” By demanding that something be done, even if it meant liberating the false Sebastian, the ambassador apparently hoped to provide the Venetians a way to satisfy both Spanish and Portuguese without appearing to take sides. Besides, should the **Collegio** choose to liberate their prisoner, Francisco de Vera had already devised plans to recapture him.

Two days later, Dom Cristóvão de Portugal and other Portuguese rebels gathered in Venice made a similar appeal. Much like the Spanish ambassador, they appealed to the **Collegio** to administer justice. They asked to be allowed to see and recognize the prisoner. Should they find him to be an impostor, the Portuguese would call for the
“exemplary justice” warranted by the affair;\textsuperscript{100} if he proved to be Sebastian, they asked that he be released into their custody. To ensure complete satisfaction on part of the Venetians, Dom Christóvão would agree to remain behind with several companions as a guarantee. If Sebastian’s claims later proved to be false, the Senators could impose whatever punishment they chose.\textsuperscript{101}

Bending before this pressure from both the Spanish and the Portuguese, but not really meeting either side’s demands, the Venetians released their captive on 15 December 1600. They ordered him to leave Venice within twenty-four hours and all Venetian territory within three days.\textsuperscript{102} After over two years in jail the man claiming to be King Sebastian had finally regained his freedom. The messiah of Sebastianists, native king of Portuguese nationalists, and potential catalyst of a revolt against Spanish rule might now make his bid for the Portuguese throne. If Francisco de Vera’s plans failed, the Calabrian Charlatan’s release boded ill for the Spanish viceroy in Lisbon where, over the previous eight months, popular support for the supposed Sebastian had grown.