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Lisbon: Rumor and Simmering Discontent

Long live, long live the Fatherland and its noble hearts, that they may esteem only their God, their King, and their honor: leaving to their descendants what they were left by their ancestors.

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

News of the appearance and imprisonment in Venice of the Calabrian Charlatan, the supposed King Sebastian, soon reached Portugal. However, the effect was not the engulfing tidal wave hoped for by the man’s supporters, for back in Portugal the news incited no riots and inspired no rebellions. Nonetheless, Sebastian’s rumored return reminded the Portuguese of their lost independence and each ripple of news threatened to erode Portuguese complaisance with Spanish rule.

In the years following union with Spain the Portuguese never completely reconciled themselves with their loss of independence. Only a minority embraced Spanish rule. A few nobles did make their way successfully in the political circles of the Spanish court. Some Portuguese merchants did exploit their new status as Spanish subjects and traded legally in Spain’s American territories for the first time. Yet most Portuguese remained restless. Widespread corruption and generally ineffective government kept the traditional anti-Castilian sentiments of the Portuguese alive and well.² In fact, throughout the period of Spanish rule, almost daily incidents of protest and rebellion reminded the Spanish of their need for political legitimacy. This was the danger inherent in the claims of the Calabrian Charlatan.

H. Eric et al., *The Calabrian Charlatan, 1598–1603*
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They helped undermine King Philip III of Spain’s rule in Portugal by providing the Portuguese with a focus around which their national resentments and political hopes might coalesce into rebellion. Well aware of this, the new rulers of Portugal paid the matter close attention and intervened where they could. Perhaps hoping that the diplomatic talents that helped Spain absorb the kingdom twenty years earlier would prove as useful in defusing the current situation, Philip appointed his father’s expert on all matters Portuguese, Cristóvão de Moura, to the position of viceroy of Portugal.\(^3\)

**Cristóvão de Moura**

On 1 May 1600, some eight months before the Venetians banished the supposed King Sebastian of Portugal from the Most Serene Republic and all of its territories, the new Spanish viceroy arrived in Lisbon. The day before, Moura’s party – including his wife, children, servants, and numerous retainers – had arrived at the town of Barreiro on the southern shore of the Tagus, opposite the Portuguese capital, following a month-long overland journey from Madrid. There they were met by the commander of the Castilian soldiers garrisoning the Castelo São Jorge, his captains, and numerous officials from the courts, all of whom had earlier crossed the river to await the new viceroy and to swear their obedience.\(^4\) At mid-afternoon of 1 May the vice-regal party embarked on four boats (three galleys and a brigantine) to make the two kilometer crossing to Lisbon. Moura crossed in royal style. He sat on a solitary chair placed upon a carpet in the stern of the brigantine, shaded by an awning of crimson damask, surrounded by his retinue. From this seat he could survey the entire city of Lisbon stretched out before him along the riverbank. As the boats approached the northern shore of the Tagus, the ships in port proclaimed the viceroy’s arrival by firing salvoes. From the hill overlooking the city, the Castilian soldiers lining the walls of the Castelo São Jorge took up the salute, shooting their cannons and muskets. As these military heralds boomed their welcome, the four boats touched shore at the fort next to the Terreiro do Paço, where Moura and his party disembarked.\(^5\) Ashore, the new viceroy greeted the Portuguese and Castilian nobles gathered there, embracing many whom he knew from his childhood in Lisbon or from his later years on diplomatic
missions for the king of Spain. This done, Moura climbed to one of the fort’s balconies. He looked out over the people crowding the Terreiro and the adjacent river-front who jostled to get a glimpse of the man who would rule the Kingdom of Portugal in the name of Philip III. Acknowledging the multitude below, Cristóvão de Moura removed his hat and bowed his head.⁶

Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, Philip’s court chronicler, described this same event with a somewhat different slant. According to Córdoba, writing in Madrid on 27 May 1600, the new viceroy’s reception in Lisbon was rather cold. Apparently none of the major Portuguese nobles showed up, and only the Castilian nobles and officials received him warmly.⁷ This tension between Portuguese and Castilian permeated Moura’s entire tenure as viceroy, from 1600 to 1603. Moura found himself in the impossible position of trying to meet the demands emanating from the Spanish court without unduly antagonizing the Portuguese nobility, especially the most powerful. Speculation about Sebastian’s return only made things worse. Soon after his arrival, Moura found himself writing reports describing rumors, beliefs, and actions questioning Philip’s right to the Portuguese throne; worse, he had to admit that there was little he could do about it. Still, even as he encouraged Philip to take decisive action in Venice to put an end to the whole affair, he downplayed the seriousness of the many Sebastianist incidents. He repeatedly reminded his king that the Portuguese were among his majesty’s most loyal subjects.⁸ But then, Cristóvão de Moura himself faced a contradiction which seems to have troubled him: he was Portuguese by family and birth, but Castilian by education and career.⁹

In 1553, when Moura was 14 years old, his uncle Lourenço Pires de Távora – the Portuguese ambassador to Castile – took the first step towards launching his nephew’s expected career as a courtier in Portugal. This step consisted of arranging for Moura to join the household of Doña Juana, the Castilian wife of the heir to the Portuguese throne. The arrangement followed the traditional Portuguese and Castilian practice of intertwining the nobility of both kingdoms. By placing sons in each other’s households, the nobility of both kingdoms ensured themselves of a supply of officials and diplomats familiar with the adjacent kingdom and its court. Another benefit came from the resulting intermarriages that tied Castilian interests to Portuguese ones and vice versa. The royal families of both kingdoms
were probably the most assiduous followers of this practice. For centuries the royal houses of Spain and Portugal had married their children off to each other. Union under a single monarch was the ultimate goal: an end consciously recognized and pursued by the rulers and nobility of both kingdoms. However, there was one central problem in the whole arrangement. The nobility in each kingdom fervently hoped that it would be their respective monarch who would head the union; they faced the possibility that the other monarch would rule with a certain amount of dread.

This apparent distaste on the part of the nobles for a foreign king was not a matter of national pride. As families, the nobility of the two kingdoms had sacrificed whatever national animosities they might have felt, and invested their children in both Portugal and Castile. Furthermore, union did not mean the absorption of one kingdom by the other; in such an event, each kingdom would remain juridically independent, with the monarchy the only common institution. This composite monarchy avoided the problems inherent in trying to impose a uniform government over historically different peoples by the simple expedient of continuing to rule them as separate nations. Their local laws, privileges, traditions, and noble hierarchy remained intact.

For the nobility the distaste for a foreign king arose instead out of self-interest, at an individual level. A noble who wished to enjoy the political and economic benefits of a position at the center of power could dedicate his career to only a single royal court. If union occurred under the patron for whom he had served, it almost certainly would mean greater prestige and more lucrative royal favors. Otherwise, union probably meant the eclipse of a prosperous career, for only those who were known and trusted by the winning monarch were likely to reap the benefits.

So, when Moura joined the household of the expected next queen of Portugal, his family was grooming him for an influential position in the Portuguese royal court. Events, however, diverted Moura from the career path plotted by his family. On 2 January 1554 Juana’s husband died. For three weeks the Portuguese king and queen attempted to keep this news from the pregnant widow in an effort to prevent a shock which they feared would have grave consequences for the unborn heir to the throne. Although their subterfuge failed, their fears proved groundless. On 20 January 1554 Juana gave birth to a
son, the future King Sebastian. A short four months later, Juana left her infant son in the care of his paternal grandparents and departed with her household for Castile. Whatever her personal inclinations in the matter, they were overshadowed by the needs of her brother, Prince Philip. The son of Emperor Charles V needed someone competent whom he could trust to rule Spain in his stead while he was away in England for his marriage to Queen Mary. He selected his sister Juana for that position. Furthermore, Juana was still young enough to be considered for the central part in another round of the matrimonial diplomacy of the age. The now unmarried Spanish princess was quite simply too valuable to leave in Portugal raising Sebastian. Because of this, Cristóvão de Moura found himself far away from home, in the royal court of Spain. There he passed his most formative years, often in the presence of the Emperor Charles V and King Philip II.

By the time King Sebastian led his army to its disastrous defeat at Ksar-el-Kebir, Moura had become an invaluable member of Philip’s royal court. After serving the Castilian monarch and his sister on a variety of missions to the Portuguese court for nearly twenty years, the future viceroy of Portugal was a seasoned diplomat, well regarded in both Lisbon and Madrid. Perhaps his most important assignment to this point occurred in December 1576, when he served as the chief go-between for Philip and Sebastian. At the behest of both monarchs he arranged their meeting at the Hieronimite monastery at Guadalupe. The young Portuguese king wished to ask his uncle for the military and financial support required for his long-dreamt-of plans to conquer Morocco for Christendom. Although Philip viewed the entire situation as youthful folly, he agreed to the meeting. He reportedly hoped to convince his nephew that he should be attending to far more important concerns, such as arranging a marriage for himself and producing an heir. Although they met several times for private discussions, neither king felt satisfied with the results. As the Spanish historian Antonio Danvila y Burguero pointed out:

> If God had intended to bring together under the same roof two diametrically opposed creatures, then he would have achieved this in the Monastery of Guadalupe, for never were there seen such disparate characters as that of Don Sebastian and Philip II, born never to agree, nor for one to give way to the will of the other. In the end, neither king obtained what he wanted.
Late on the night before Sebastian was to leave, Moura’s cousin – a member of the Portuguese entourage – informed him of the Portuguese king’s frustration and anger, and of his pique that his uncle did not plan to see him off in the morning. Moura prevented a complete rupture between the two monarchs by waking and warning the Spanish king. The next morning, Philip personally awakened his nephew and accompanied him a short distance on his journey. Sebastian left content, thinking that he had finally obtained his uncle’s favor.

When Sebastian failed to return from Morocco in 1578, leaving his great-uncle Cardinal Henry as the aged and never-married heir to the throne, Cristóvão de Moura found himself in an ideal position to further his own career in Philip’s service. This opportunity arose because the Spanish ambassador to Portugal, Juan de Silva, was missing somewhere in Morocco. As required by his position, de Silva had accompanied Sebastian on his fateful journey and had been captured by the Moors at Ksar-el-Kebir (an outcome not required by his position, but probably inevitable). In the chaos of the defeat no one knew for quite some time whether the ambassador had survived or not. Due to Moura’s practical experience dealing with the Portuguese court, his family connections in Portugal, and his record of faithful service, Philip selected him as de Silva’s substitute. As Philip’s unofficial ambassador to Portugal, Cristóvão de Moura pursued his master’s claims to the Portuguese throne as Henry’s heir.

Moura soon proved his great diplomatic ability as well as his complete loyalty to King Philip. During King Henry’s brief two-year reign, the Portuguese diplomat did everything necessary to ensure Philip’s succession to the Lusitanian throne: he publicly argued the genealogical niceties of the succession in the Spanish king’s favor; he promised royal favors to Portuguese officials; he spread Spanish silver to the influential (especially important in light of the Portuguese need to ransom the hundreds of captives in Morocco); he obstructed the Portuguese Cortes when they were about to make the wrong decision. When Henry died in 1580, having declared no heir, the Spanish claims to Portugal – persuasively argued by Moura and the Spanish army on the frontier – were unbeatable.

This then was the source of the new viceroy’s cold reception in Lisbon. For those who cast him in the role of traitor, the appointment was obviously Moura’s reward for betrayal. Furthermore, Cristóvão de
Moura’s arrival in Lisbon as the virtual king in Portugal insulted the highest levels of the Portuguese nobility. A man who came from a minor noble family and who had sold out to a foreigner had returned to Portugal to occupy the most powerful position to which a Portuguese nobleman could aspire.\textsuperscript{16} Personally this situation created enormous problems for Moura, for these were the people with whom he had to deal. At a more subtle level it probably reminded many of the Portuguese nobles that, by accepting Spanish silver and favors, they (or their fathers) had sold out as well and had gained little for it.

News, rumor, and speculation

Although, while on the Council of Portugal in Madrid, he had recommended ignoring the wild speculations about the return of Sebastian, within six weeks of his arrival in Lisbon the viceroy understood that the strange events in Venice were of great importance and should be attended to immediately.\textsuperscript{17} On 17 June 1600, he reported to the king that “…rumors circulate among the people with news about that Calabrian who is imprisoned in Venice, the common people believing that this prisoner is King Sebastian, as he claims.”\textsuperscript{18} In spite of the quasi-seditious nature of these rumors Moura reminded King Philip of the loyalty and love the Portuguese had always felt for their kings. However, the viceroy also noted, this natural fidelity was unfortunately combined with a natural credulity which made the news from Venice about the alleged King Sebastian rather disturbing for them. He recommended persuading the Venetians to punish the Charlatan themselves or to place him in Spanish custody; in either case the trial and punishment should be public.\textsuperscript{19} Moura concluded that this was the only means of putting a quick end to the growing Sebastianist agitations in Portugal. He understood that the fundamental problem for anyone who believed the news from Venice was a nasty dilemma. To whom should a Portuguese give his legendary loyalty? To a distant Castilian king only recently come to the throne? To a native Portuguese king miraculously returned after twenty years? A well-publicized trial would expose the claims of the Calabrian Charlatan as fraudulent, as well as ridiculous. With the impostor unmasked, the rumors of Sebastian’s return would cease, the credulous Portuguese would no longer wonder if their
loyalty to Philip actually belonged elsewhere, and the trouble would end. However, all Moura could do from Lisbon was suggest this course of action to the king in the hope that Philip would act on his advice and mobilize Spanish diplomacy in order to get the Venetians to cooperate.\textsuperscript{20}

Knowing that he could not afford to wait for decisive action in Venice – as an experienced diplomat he was quite familiar with the slow workings of Spanish bureaucracy and international diplomacy – Moura began investigating the situation. In spite of a frustrating conspiracy of silence, by the end of October the viceroy had a rough idea of the extent of the problem.\textsuperscript{21} His spies and informants reported that the rumors were widespread, apparently extending throughout the kingdom.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, they afflicted not only the common people but also “very dignified members of religious orders,” and even “principal noblemen who seem sensible.”\textsuperscript{23} Through the end of his viceroyalty in 1603, incidents associated with the news of Sebastian's appearance in Venice continually plagued Moura and forced him to continue his investigations.

Most of the evidence we have for the effects, in Portugal, of the Calabrian Charlatan's claims comes from Cristóvão de Moura's reports to King Philip on these Sebastianist incidents. Unfortunately the bulk of these are missing; those that remain cover only the first year and the final months of Moura’s tenure in Portugal.\textsuperscript{24} Because of this, it is impossible to reconstruct a complete narrative of events, at least as seen by the viceroy. However, we can still develop a reasonable idea of which Portuguese social groups were affected and their reactions.

In his reports Moura consistently distinguished between three main groups of people involved in the Sebastianist rumors, roughly following the traditional three medieval estates: the nobles, the religiosos (members of religious orders), and the povo (the common people).\textsuperscript{25} For the most part, in each of the incidents he recounted, only one of these groups was involved. It was as if the Sebastianist activities in Portugal were played out on three isolated strata. (As we shall see, the only exception to this was Moura's conclusion that the religiosos were the ones who actively spread the rumors and thus caused most of the trouble.)\textsuperscript{26} The viceroy treated each of the groups as if they had no significant interactions, although he clearly feared the possibility. For instance, in an incident with two nobles he noted
that they, fortunately, “had little credibility with the people,” and therefore presumably their activities had little influence on the 
povo.27 Nevertheless, we know from a contemporary chronicle that Moura’s three groups did sometimes interact. First, however, we need
to examine each of the groups – nobles, religiosos, and povo – and the incidents the viceroy associated with each of them.

Although most Portuguese nobles had accepted union with Spain (even if grudgingly), the news from Venice stirred great interest. For
those nobles disgruntled with the new regime, the return of Sebastian – whether real or not – provided a possible political tool. Provoking
some disturbance might force Philip to pay more attention to his Portuguese nobles and, perhaps, buy them off with lucrative favors. In
such a gamble the chance of loss far exceeded that of gain. Still, if the game were played right, a clever noble might turn the Sebastianist rumors to his advantage. It seems appropriate, then, that Moura apprehended the first nobles associated with the rumors in a Lisbon gaming house.

When the viceroy cast his net of spies across Lisbon in search of
the names and activities of those spreading the seditious news about
the Charlatan, he ordered them to pay particular attention to the

 gaming houses, for there “many people gathered and spoke more

 openly.”28 In one house, Moura’s spies soon reported, a nobleman
named Nuno Mascarenhas had publicly stated that the rumors about
the imminent arrival of the prisoner from Venice must be true. This
implied that he believed King Sebastian would soon return and
reclaim his throne. Later, when Mascarenhas fought with another
nobleman over their gambling, the viceroy found himself armed
with a convenient excuse to take action. Sometime in October 1600
he shut down the gaming house and arrested the two noblemen, as
well as the owner of the house, Rodrigo Lobo.29 After questioning all
three Moura concluded that the noblemen were only peripheral
figures in this matter, that their involvement was more a matter of
grumbling and idle speculation than sedition.30 He therefore diffi-
dently recommended to the king that no punishment was necessary
in the case of Mascarenhas and Lobo; in fact, he advised Philip, all
that was really needed in dealing with noblemen who complained
about their situation was to keep them busy. And, if the king were to
pay closer attention to his Portuguese nobles, they would have no
time for such speculations.31
As already noted, much of this disgruntlement stemmed from the fact that the Spanish annexation of Portugal had benefited few Portuguese. Some nobles who, like Cristóvão de Moura, moved to the new center of power found the new situation highly advantageous. However, the majority found themselves suddenly relegated to the provinces. Even worse, Castilians sometimes came to Portugal and occupied positions that the Portuguese believed should have been theirs under the terms of the union with Spain. Although not shorn of all political and economic power, they suddenly found themselves with fewer chances to wield it or make it grow. Flirting with the Sebastianist beliefs provided a way for Portuguese nobles to make known their dissatisfaction with the situation in Portugal, to make their voices heard. By publicly speculating about the truth of the rumors of Sebastian’s return and its consequences they sent a not-so-subtle message to their king that perhaps their loyalties had been inadvertently misplaced for the past twenty years. In the case of Mascarenhas and Lobo, their message was heard, although they gained little for their efforts. In December, Philip suggested that the two nobles receive a strong rebuke, but he left the final decision to Moura.

In spite of incidents like the one at the gaming house, rumors about the Calabrian Charlatan seem to have played a minor role among the Portuguese nobility. Beliefs about Sebastian and whether or not he had returned were apparently of little immediate consequence in their world. What mattered was currying the current king’s favor and obtaining from him the offices that brought power and wealth. Still, for some noblemen publicly discussing the rumors may have been a way to gain attention; for others such discussions may have been merely an amusing dalliance, the subject of idle speculation.

The second group Moura dealt with, the religiosos, seem to have seen more possibilities in the news from Venice. Practically from the first day of union with Spain many religiosos had been openly anti-Castilian. Seizing whatever material current events offered them, many preachers used their sermons to launch impromptu attacks on Castile.

One such opportunity came with Moura’s appointment as viceroy. Beginning in April 1600, about the time Moura left Madrid to take up his new duties, plague had periodically visited Lisbon. The officials
charged with safeguarding the city’s health attempted to isolate the afflicted in the city’s sick house. This soon filled – not only with the sick, but with filth and the unmistakable stench of the “bad” air which the medical profession of the age believed was the source of contagion but never learned to deal with effectively. With the Casa da Saude overflowing, the officials set aside the Rua Formosa for the most gravely ill, blocking off both ends of the street in an attempt to enforce a rudimentary quarantine. In spite of the application of the best medical theories of the time, when the new viceroy arrived the plague “walked openly [out of hiding] through [Lisbon].”

In the week of Moura’s arrival more than sixty-five people died; on one day alone eighteen perished, not including the dead from the sick house. An anonymous chronicler judged one day that week to have been, if not good, at least less bad, for on that day the cart that collected the bodies of the dead passed in front of the house where he was staying with the body of only one unfortunate. Quarantines might slow or even stop the spread of plague, but they did nothing to help those already stricken.

In spite of endless processions and prayers, religion too could do little to cure or prevent plague. Still, it at least provided an explanation for an otherwise mysterious phenomenon. In the early seventeenth century most Europeans believed that nothing happened by mere chance. For them every occurrence formed part of the divine plan, and therefore anything out of the ordinary required interpretation. In Portugal, as in the rest of Catholic Europe, it was the intermediaries between God and man, the preachers, who decoded the divine message embedded in a given event and made their interpretation public for the benefit of their flock. From the outset of the absorption of their kingdom into the Spanish monarchy, many Portuguese preachers had publicly opposed the union. In their sermons they denounced the loss of independence, supporting their message with biblical stories, historical allusions, and current events. They also interpreted disastrous and monstrous events as signs of divine displeasure, signs which showed that, like Babylonian rule in biblical Israel, Spanish rule in Portugal was God’s way of chastising the Portuguese people for their sins. Lisbon’s preachers promoted this interpretation of the plague that spring of 1600, reminding their flock anew of its place as a modern Israel in the divine plan. More subtly, their sermons also told of how the viceroy’s betrayal of his country
and the nobles’ willingness to accept it had brought down the divine scourge.\textsuperscript{42}

Given such sermons, it was only natural that Moura suspected that the Portuguese \textit{religiosos} were the main group spreading rumors of Sebastian.\textsuperscript{43} Within the \textit{religiosos} the viceroy concentrated on the mendicant orders in Portugal (primarily the Franciscans and the Dominicans).\textsuperscript{44} Instead of withdrawing from the world as did the monks of the traditional monastic orders, the mendicant friars had pledged themselves to an activist role, primarily among the less fortunate. Providing for the poor, caring for the sick, teaching the ignorant – all were roles taken up by the mendicant orders. Their ideal was one of apostolic poverty: renouncing material wealth and political power, and taking up a Christian life of piety combined with service. In doing so each friar helped transform his corner of the real world into some approximation of an ideal one. This ideal was of course enormously appealing to the \textit{povo}, and to Moura made the mendicants’ subversive activities seem all the more dangerous.

Rumor of Sebastian’s return proved to be perfect ammunition for the attacks of the anti-Castilian \textit{religiosos}. Sebastianism combined the proven religious message of a millennium of justice and prosperity with a Portuguese particularism which labeled the Castilians as the bearers of injustice and hard times. Given their history of anti-Castilian activities it is no wonder that the \textit{religiosos} eagerly spread the news from Venice. One Franciscan friar assured his flock that he had met with the prisoner in Venice and recognized him as Sebastian, his king. Moura reported that the friar’s provincial quickly punished him for this, but that it was probably too late.\textsuperscript{45} Testimony like the friar’s undoubtedly lent credence to the rumors among the more trusting; and official opposition only reinforced their apparent truth. Of their better, the \textit{povo} was most likely to believe those who had long ministered to their needs.

Moura’s third group was what he called the \textit{povo}. Unfortunately, the viceroy did not do historians the favor of defining exactly whom he meant when he wrote “el pueblo” or “esta gente.”\textsuperscript{46} Nor did he specify the extent or distribution of Sebastianist belief; he said only that belief in the return of Sebastian was widespread, affecting both young and old.\textsuperscript{47} Because of this, the \textit{povo} remains anonymous, an ill-defined grouping of the Portuguese third estate – peasants, tradesmen, merchants. The very vagueness of Moura’s description suggests
that he did not view the commoners’ gossip and speculation about the news from Venice as a threat to be investigated and countered; instead, he worried that a member of the ruling classes – a nobleman or a cleric – would incite the povo to riot or rebellion.

Moura should probably have been more concerned with the povo itself. For the unprivileged people of early modern Europe, revolt – whether incited by outsiders or generated from within by unbearable social and economic conditions – was perhaps the only effective means of communication with the ruling, privileged classes. Theoretically government was a mutually beneficial exchange between ruler and ruled; practice, however, was quite different. The burdens of state weighed heavily on the backs of the third estate in the form of taxes, labor, and other demands. In exchange, the state was to provide protection and justice. As peasants and other unprivileged groups knew, sometimes what they most needed was protection from the representatives of the state: the petty officials, the rapacious tax collectors, the unpaid soldiers. Powerless and virtually voiceless in their demands for justice, they sometimes turned to riot or revolt, knowing that this would at least force the ruling classes to hear their grievances. Inevitably, the rulers exacted a bloody price for such violence. Nevertheless, those rioters who survived were sometimes rewarded for their efforts, for the rulers – hoping to maintain fragile order – would sometimes lighten their demands. Sooner or later, however, the unprivileged would be pushed once again to the breaking point.48

Just these sorts of pressures had been building up in Portugal. For instance, by 1601 the relations – never good – between the Castilian soldiers garrisoning Lisbon and the population of the city had deteriorated. In January Moura found it necessary to arrange, at considerable cost, different accommodations for the soldiers; he hoped that keeping the soldiers more isolated from the populace would help prevent disorder.49 Although this action may have reduced the daily friction between the two groups, it did not solve the problem. In May, two Castilian soldiers returning from their palace posts to their quarters in the castle were set upon and stabbed by a group of unidentified Portuguese. Not long afterwards two more soldiers were attacked in the streets; this pair sought refuge in a house and remained there besieged until a ten-man squad came to their rescue.50 Moura’s attempts to calm the situation were probably
hopeless, for the fundamental Portuguese objection to the Castilians went beyond any offensive liberties taken by the soldiers. Ostensibly the soldiers were in Lisbon to protect the city from enemy attack. From the Portuguese point of view, the foes most likely to attack – the English or the Dutch – were enemies of Spain, not Portugal. If the Spanish were to leave, the Portuguese believed they could renew amicable relations with their former allies. However, the Spanish stayed and Portugal remained the “first line of defense for the Iberian peninsula.” Consequently the Castilian soldiers were viewed, not as a necessary defense, but instead as the cause of foreign attacks. Foreign occupation, combined with a seemingly corrupt and unjust government, made the Portuguese restive. Although clearly unhappy with the Castilian presence, the Portuguese commoners were still not ready to chance the certain dangers and high price of revolt. Instead they placed their hopes for justice elsewhere: in a millenarian yearning for the world turned upside down.

The news from Venice fed these kinds of yearnings. While the critical mass that would turn gossip into a millenarian movement had not yet built up, some in the povo had begun to act on their hopes in the truth of the rumors. In October 1600 Moura reported that the people of Lisbon and its outskirts were making an odd investment. The investors would give money to “those who accepted it;” in return, these “brokers” agreed to pay back twice the amount invested upon the coming of the “Messiah.” Unfortunately, Moura states nothing about the sums involved or exactly who gave and who collected the money; nor does he explicitly state the identity of the messiah. However, he does mention that the practice arose in response to the widespread rumors that soon the man in Venice would come to Portugal. Surely, the messiah was Sebastian. Sebastian’s return was not merely the restoration of the legitimate king of Portugal, nor fundamentally a concern with who occupied the apex of the noble hierarchy. Instead it was what the povo most yearned for: a divine easing of their burdens. After so many years of punishment for their sins a redeemer would arrive. This Portuguese messiah would utterly transform Portuguese society, ensuring for the povo both justice and prosperity.

Notably these investments were apparently individual, private actions. They were not a community collection of funds to bring the messiah to Portugal, or to serve some other communal purpose.
Instead, they were personal or family preparations for an impending event: individuals gave the money, and individuals would collect the return. Clearly some part of the povo genuinely believed the rumors. There is no way for us to determine how many true believers wagered their scarce funds; however, that their investments came to the attention of the viceroy indicates that their numbers were not insignificant.

**New Christians or Venetians?**

In the povo, the viceroy suspected one sub-group in particular – the New Christians – of spreading the Sebastianist rumors. This segment of the Portuguese population was created in 1497 by the forced conversion of the Jews in Portugal, including both the Portuguese natives and the Spanish refugees from the expulsion of 1492. Like the Spanish five years before them, the Portuguese rulers decided that the time had come to create a pure Christian society in Portugal – the logical end of the crusading ideology of the Reconquista. However, in Portugal it was simply not practical to expel the Jews. They formed, as one historian estimates, nearly one fifth of the entire population of Portugal.\(^{54}\) Arranging sufficient sea transport – for they could not travel by land through Spain – would have been nearly impossible, as well as prohibitively expensive. Instead, the Portuguese rulers opted for forced assimilation. That way they would not lose a large portion of Portugal’s population, its wealth, or its skills. However, baptism – especially forced baptism – could not instantly wash away the convictions of the Jews or the prejudices of the Christians.

Initially the New Christians kept a low profile and maintained their separate communities. Some who had the means and opportunity to escape did so. Perhaps a few embraced Christianity, hoping that the many barriers to their participation in Portuguese society had really been swept away with conversion.\(^ {55}\) The majority simply waited, hoping that like so many other persecutions this one would eventually end. Instead, things got worse: in 1499 a law prohibited the New Christians from leaving Portugal without royal license; in 1504 a mob attacked New Christians in the commercial center of Lisbon; in 1505 a crowd demolished an old synagogue in Évora. This was only the beginning. More laws prohibited New Christians from holding any important political or Church office, effectively removing the only
advantage that baptism might have conferred. Like their ancestors they were barred from most professions. In addition, the few permitted professions could be dangerous: the New Christian doctor whose Old Christian patient had the bad grace to die might be accused of murder. In 1536 the violence took a judicial turn, for in that year Portugal established a Spanish-style Inquisition. Any suspicious action – such as wearing white clothes on a Saturday, working on Sunday, or not eating pork – could bring a New Christian before the Holy Office, accused of judaizing; often all that was needed was the accusation. Unfortunates considered unrepentant or repeat offenders were burned. Forced to join the Christian community and then prevented from taking part in that community, the New Christians were driven to the social and political margins. There they could only wait for a messianic savior or plot to improve their condition. Consequently, in the minds of the Old Christians the New Christians became a dangerous, subversive force.

Perhaps the only effective protection from its oppressors that the New Christian community possessed was its financial strength. Wherever the New Christians could identify a crack where a few well-placed cruzados might buy them some relief, they tried to fill it. For instance, in 1542 the papal nuncio in Portugal, one Capodiferro, received 2,000 cruzados from the New Christians to ensure that their pleas in Rome for a general pardon went well. They also paid him a yearly stipend of 1,800 cruzados when in Portugal, as well as his expenses when corresponding with Rome on their behalf. Another of Capodiferro’s suspected financial dealings with the New Christians consisted of selling pardons for judaizing. Rumor had it that when the nuncio left Portugal, he left 30,000 cruzados richer. Such incidents only heightened the suspicions of the Old Christians who saw them as corrupt and a threat to Christian society.

Even after Spain absorbed Portugal the Portuguese New Christians continued trying to defend themselves with financial incentives to the powerful. In 1598 the New Christians began negotiations with the new Spanish king. In exchange for a cash payment of 675,000 cruzados and an interest-free loan of 500,000 cruzados (the total package to be delivered in four annual payments from 1598 to 1601), the New Christians sought a general pardon for judaizing. Such an agreement would empty the prisons of the Portuguese Inquisition and force any new judicial processes to deal only with offenses committed
after the pardon. This scheme raised a storm of protest from the Holy Office, several Portuguese and Spanish archbishops, the Governors of Portugal, the Council of Castile, and numerous nobles. In February 1600, in exchange for a promised loan of 800,000 cruzados from the Governors, Philip rejected the New Christian offer. Moura, who had just been appointed viceroy in Portugal, congratulated the king on his decision, saying “. . . that coins which had bought offenses to God could not shine.” Nevertheless, the Governors’ counter-offer fell apart in October 1601 when the Portuguese Cortes refused to raise the sum. Thereafter negotiations with the New Christians resumed.

Assaulted on all sides and able to buy only temporary relief, it is no wonder that the New Christians entertained messianic hopes. During the first half of the 1500s several prophets and false messiahs fed the New Christians’ dreams for a better world. Among the prophets was Bandarra, the author of the Trovas (the poems that provided the scripture of Sebastianist prophecy). Although apparently of Old Christian descent, Bandarra initially had his largest following among the New Christians who searched his poems for prophecies that would answer their prayers. With a history of millenarian disturbances, especially those associated with the Trovas, the New Christians were natural suspects in rumors surrounding the Calabrian Charlatan.

In September 1600 Cristóvão de Moura wrote that he was “very suspicious that all these things [the news of Sebastian] are a sham and spread by . . .” Here Moura started to write “New Christians,” stopped, crossed it out, and wrote “Venetians” instead. What was the viceroy’s doubt? Did he suspect the involvement of the New Christians, but was not sure? He may have known that Venetians were involved, but surmised that they were Portuguese New Christian merchants who had escaped to Venice, revealed their Jewish identities in the tolerant republic, and operated from there as Venetian merchants while maintaining lucrative commercial ties in Portugal. Perhaps, since he could not confirm his suspicions, he settled on “Venetians”. Moura’s change of mind is especially interesting since he did not mention the New Christians in any of his subsequent reports on Sebastianist activities for about a year. Then in May 1601 Moura again wrote “New Christians”; this time he did not cross it out. In this report he blamed “foreigners and New Christians” for spreading the rumors with “papers and false letters.”
Why the change of heart? Aside from the New Christian attempt to buy a pardon which had fallen apart before Moura arrived in Lisbon, the only major change in their relationship with the Portuguese state came in April 1601, just prior to the viceroy’s renewed interest in the possibility that they had something to do with the Sebastianist rumors. On the fourth day of that month, a law was passed in Portugal – in return for 200,000 cruzados – which allowed the New Christians to sell their property and leave the kingdom with the proceeds. This law also prohibited the use of the terms New Christian, Marrano, confess, and Jew. (When Moura wrote his report in May, he seems to have been breaking the law.) We can only speculate as to what connections might exist between these larger issues and Moura’s reports. The viceroy’s report in September 1600, where he chose to blame “Venetians” instead of “New Christians,” was probably not a matter of protecting the New Christians, for he opposed the general pardon of 1598. Perhaps, in spite of his prejudice, he had genuine doubts about their involvement. What seems more likely is that he did not want the Portuguese, even if New Christians, to be seen as the source of the rumors. Moura, after all, continually tried to convince Philip of the natural loyalty of the Portuguese people. In May 1601, after the passage of the new law, the situation apparently changed in Moura’s mind. He probably opposed this latest deal with the New Christians and perhaps wished to remind the king that the New Christians were troublemakers.

Whatever the actual involvement of the Portuguese New Christians, Moura never moved beyond his vague, apparently unsubstantiated, accusation. Instead, he concentrated his investigation on his foreign suspects, the Venetians. In late October 1600, a month after he had first accused the Venetians, the viceroy arrested a Venetian called El Febo.63 This man – apparently the captain of a Venetian merchant ship – had been implicated in spreading the rumors of Sebastian’s return.64 Like the Franciscan friar, he claimed to have seen the prisoner in Venice and recognized him as the Portuguese king. Using as a convenient pretext three placards in support of Sebastian anonymously posted in public places (one quite appropriately at the Church of St. Sebastian), Moura had El Febo apprehended. The viceroy planned to use El Febo as an example of what happened to those who trafficked in sedition, hoping that this would dampen the eagerness to gossip about the Calabrian Charlatan.65 By blaming
a Venetian he also hoped to show the Portuguese *povo* that he did not hold them responsible for the matter.\textsuperscript{66} Moura’s action seems to have worked, for by February 1601 he was satisfied that the rumors of the Calabrian Charlatan were quieting down. Consequently, so as not to stir things up unnecessarily, he proposed to shut down his investigation.\textsuperscript{67} However, by May the rumors had “returned to life.”\textsuperscript{68}

**Renewed rumors**

With the resurgence of the rumors Moura must have become very frustrated, for none of his efforts seemed to have paid off. He even reported to the king that people “…come to ask me what I think about these things, if I believe them. And the more I ridicule and belittle what they tell me, the more suspicious they become, believing that what I do is a charade.”\textsuperscript{69} Who these people were is unknown. However, those in closest contact with the viceroy were officials in the government or the Church. Did they believe? Perhaps a few did. What seems more likely is that Moura’s obvious discomfort with the whole situation provided some nobles – undoubtedly a group with a mild sadistic streak – with some entertainment.

All of these strands came together two days before the feast of St. Simon and St. Jude, on 26 October 1601, when Moura’s detractors received, or perhaps created, an opportunity to attack. That day a fire gutted the Church and the Chapel of the Hospital de Todos-os-Santos in Lisbon.\textsuperscript{70} Had the fire started during the daytime when people were up and about, it might have been discovered and doused; instead, it began sometime after midnight and, by the time someone raised the alarm, lit up the whole city as if the sun were shining. A crowd formed and attempted to save the sacarium. They failed. The rescuers saved only the Church’s main doors, ripping them from their hinges. Two days later, when the feast day dawned, only the blackened walls of the Church still stood. The great heat of the fire had reduced nearly everything else, even the building’s iron supports, to little more than powder.\textsuperscript{71} Yet, not quite everything within the Church perished. Much to the amazement of the first to enter the smouldering remnants of the building, they found four miraculous survivals: the retable of Our Lady of Peace, the retable of St. George, a painting of King Sebastian, and a wooden carving of the Portuguese coat-of-arms.\textsuperscript{72}
Over the following three days the authorities investigated the fire, hoping to uncover its origin. They were unsuccessful. And their investigations could not dispel the growing belief in the unnatural source of the fire. During those same three days two more strange events occurred. On the morning that the investigation began, Lisbon woke to a dense fog, unprecedented for that time of year. When the fog burned off at mid-day a swarm of grasshoppers descended upon the city. For all three days, clouds of grasshoppers obscured the sun and people could not venture into the streets without being covered by the insects. When the biblical plague finally lifted, the olive trees in and around Lisbon looked as if they had been burned, for only the trunks remained.\textsuperscript{73}

The significance of the outbreak of the fire at the Hospital de Todos-os-Santos was not lost on Lisbon’s preachers. For them its occurrence shortly before All Saints Day (\textit{Dia de Todos-os-Santos}) was no mere coincidence of names.\textsuperscript{74} This sign, as well as the unseasonable fog and plague of grasshoppers, signaled that the fire was no natural event. Obviously, what had survived the conflagration was a divine message which could not be ignored. On All Saints Day the residents of Lisbon expressed their meek acceptance of divine will in a solemn penitential procession through the city. The city’s prominent leaders – both noblemen and clerics – led the ceremonies, calling on everyone to repent for the sins that had brought down these disasters. What those sins were could be read in the miraculous legacy of the fire. The survival of Sebastian’s portrait clearly indicated that the Portuguese king was still alive; the survival of the Portuguese coat-of-arms showed that Portugal would survive as well. The sin lay in having allowed the Spanish to absorb Portugal without a strong fight. Although the people of Portugal may have given up on their king and country, God had not. Clearly, the fire was intended to remind the Portuguese of where their loyalties should be placed. The well-known Jesuit Father Francisco Cardoso preached that day and made sure that everyone knew this.\textsuperscript{75} The irony of the situation would have been lost on no one present. For among the notables leading the procession was Don Cristóvão de Moura. The man trying to track down the source of the rumors of Sebastian’s return had been forced by his position to take a leading role in ceremonies which seemed to affirm the truth of those rumors and publicized their divine sanction.
The fire in the Hospital de Todos-os-Santos was emblematic of the situation in Portugal at the time. Like the fire, the rumor of Sebastian’s return threatened to engulf all of Portugal in flames. However, neither fire nor rumor got out of hand, and real damage was contained. Still, as the two retables, the portrait, and the coat-of-arms had survived the conflagration, so too had Portuguese hopes for a redeemer and their national aspirations for independence.

In early modern Europe, verifying a rumor was as intractable a problem as establishing someone’s identity. How did one separate truth from lies? Without reliable, consistent, and independent sources of information the task was, in all practicality, impossible. Even if reason and experience allowed someone like Cristóvão de Moura to dismiss a rumor as idle gossip, others believed it to be news. As the viceroy discovered, denials of the validity of the news often only confirmed its truth. Finally, if enough people believed, rumor – no matter how flimsy – took on a reality of its own. And talk could lead to action.