Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

John 20:27–9

When on the night of 15 December 1600 the Venetians released the prisoner whom the Spanish called the Calabrian Charlatan, they gave him one day to leave the city and another three days to get out of Venetian territory. They warned him that if he failed to follow this order he would spend the next ten years rowing in the galleys, with iron shackles upon his feet.¹ Exactly who the prisoner was – the long-lost King Sebastian of Portugal or a Calabrian adventurer posing as such – remained a matter of contention between the man’s Portuguese supporters and his Castilian detractors. In any case, the Venetians had tired of being caught in the middle and had “wisely washed their hands” of the whole affair.²

Finally free after two years and twenty-two days of imprisonment, the man made his way from the Piazza San Marco, headed for the inn where he stayed when he first arrived in the Serene Republic.³ One wonders what his thoughts were as he walked beside the canals and down the alleys of night-time Venice. If he was an impostor – a Calabrian named Marco Tulio Catizone – as the Spanish claimed, did
he think about Arnaud du Tilh, the French impersonator of Martin Guerre, to whom he had sometimes been compared? Perhaps he reflected on the final fate of Monsieur du Tilh: to be found out when the real Martin Guerre returned and to be hanged for the imposture.4 Yet that possibility probably seemed far off, for the real Sebastian had not been seen in over twenty years and most likely was safely dead. Besides, with his release from prison, things finally appeared to be going his way. On the other hand, if he was Sebastian (or deranged as some Venetians suspected), he may have barely contained his rage. Aside from the great insult of incarcerating the king and questioning his royal identity, the Venetians had peremptorily ordered him out of town and unceremoniously thrown him into the cold of a winter night. Even worse, they threatened him with the galleys, a punishment fit only for a common criminal. Did he mull over ways to make the Venetians pay for their arrogance?5 Whoever he was and whatever his thoughts, his options converged on one logical course. The impostor would pursue the charade to keep his Portuguese admirers happily financing a royal lifestyle; the real Sebastian would pursue the recovery of his birthright. Whichever the case, this meant establishing himself as Sebastian, King of Portugal, come to claim his throne.6

Whatever one decides about the man’s real identity, what is relevant for our purposes here is what Sebastian – king or impostor – represented to the Portuguese themselves. If his royal identity could be established and become accepted, who he was took on various meanings. For a true believer in Sebastianism, he became Portugal’s messiah, a warrior-king who would liberate his people from their troubles. For a disgruntled nobleman, he became the apex of the Portuguese feudal hierarchy, representing patronage and order. For an anti-Spanish rebel, he became the national leader of Portugal, legitimate ruler and bearer of sovereignty. As we shall see in this chapter, the person of Sebastian was the nexus. He was holy; he was the king; he was Portugal. In him the millenarian and the national remained inextricably linked, the transition from one to the other was not yet complete.

**Dom António and the Portuguese rebels**

At this juncture we need to examine the motives of Sebastian’s supporters. Although they would have protested that their only wish was
to serve their country and its legitimate king, the underlying situation was somewhat more complicated. Sebastian’s supporters – the group of Portuguese nobles and clergyman who had gathered in Venice or who watched events unfold from France or elsewhere – had all once chosen to follow Dom António, the Prior of Crato, in his bid to succeed Henry to the Portuguese throne in 1580. This had proven unwise, for Philip II of Spain’s claim and overwhelming might handily crushed his rival’s efforts. For Diogo Botelho, one of António’s main advisors, supporting the Prior of Crato came at great personal cost: Philip

... banished [Botelho] from [Portugal]; and sent his wife, children, aunt, stepson, and his sisters (who were nuns and old) to Castile; and took all of his property, and gave it to whomever he pleased; this even reached the point where his wife died in exile in Castile.7

Most of António’s supporters suffered some variation of Botelho’s fate, sharing at the least his life in exile. Having already paid such a high personal price, those who fought Spanish rule in Portugal probably felt they had nothing more to lose in opposing Philip, and much to gain. Any means of wresting Portugal from Spanish control was worth trying.

In 1595, with the death of Dom António, the cause of Portuguese independence had been cast adrift. António’s two sons, Manuel and Cristóvão, inherited the claim to the Portuguese throne. Like their father they repeatedly pleaded their case with the rulers of France and England. However, they proved unable to acquire the financial and military support they needed to collect their inheritance. Although Spain’s enemies had once eagerly assisted Dom António and his cause, their enthusiasm had waned. Nevertheless, Dom Manuel and Dom Cristóvão persisted in their efforts. Their highest hopes probably lay with the French, for the persistent foe of Habsburg hegemony still had no wish to see Spain’s might augmented by the resources of Portugal and its far-flung empire.

Although the French had recognized Dom António as the legitimate King of Portugal in 1580, they had proven unable to provide the military support the Portuguese needed to resist the Spanish invasion that spring. By autumn, the Prior of Crato’s defense of his kingdom had crumbled in the face of the Duke of Alba’s overwhelming Spanish
forces. The prior, realizing that he could do little to regain his throne while in hiding and without extensive outside help, fled to France in early 1581.\(^8\) There he successfully petitioned Henri III and Catherine de’ Medici for French military support. Almost immediately the French began to prepare a fleet to rescue the Azores, the one Portuguese possession that still resisted Spanish rule. Rumor claimed that António had agreed to cede Brazil, once regained, to the French in exchange for their help. A year later, on 16 June, a French fleet under the command of Filippo Strozzi set sail for Terceira (the best defended of the islands in the Azores).\(^9\) Unfortunately for the Portuguese and their French allies, well-placed spies among António’s supporters informed King Philip of the rebels’ plans. Even before Strozzi’s fleet sailed on 10 June, a Spanish fleet had set out from Lisbon to meet them. The two fleets met on 25 July; the ensuing battle resulted in the destruction of the French forces. Although the Portuguese on Terceira successfully repelled the ensuing Spanish landing, the following year they were not so fortunate. At the end of July 1583 the Spanish took Terceira. With this defeat António was left without a territorial base from which to fight his enemy. In spite of the Prior’s repeated pleas for more help, after the loss of Terceira the French did little more than continue to recognize António’s rights and provide him with asylum. In 1589, when Henri IV ascended the French throne, António’s hopes may have risen. However, Henri had trouble enough with the turmoil created by the French Wars of Religion and Philip II’s invasion of France in support of Henri’s enemies. In 1598, after Henri successfully established his control and pacified France, the Peace of Vervins ended the war with Spain and therefore ruled out active French support for the Portuguese cause.

Like the French, the English recognized Dom António as the legitimate King of Portugal and happily provided him and his entourage with a safe place of exile. In August 1581, because of the English interest – and possible involvement – in the planned French expedition against Terceira, Philip II instructed his ambassador to England to demand António’s surrender. (António was in London at the time, pleading for English support.) If the English did not do so, the ambassador was to warn them that they would face a Spanish embargo on all English goods; furthermore, should António leave England and enter any Spanish territory, it would be considered an act of war. However, the demand and the accompanying threats were
apparently never delivered, for by the time the ambassador received his instructions, the English had cooled in their support of the Prior. In spite of the increasingly anti-Spanish sentiment in England, the English were not eager to antagonize Philip by actively supporting António and his claims. This changed in 1584 after the discovery of Spanish involvement in a failed plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. Over the following years tensions built between England and Spain, culminating in the attack by the Spanish Armada in 1588. Although England defeated the invading fleet, the attack demonstrated to the English their pressing need to challenge and reduce Spain’s naval power. In reaction, they put together an expedition under Francis Drake and John Norris which was intended to destroy the remnants of the Armada and eliminate Spain’s ability to invade England. Of the major tasks planned, only one is of importance here: the invasion of Portugal. If successful, this would cut the funds and warships available to Philip, as well as providing the Spanish king with a major distraction.

On 16 May 1589 Norris landed with an army of about 6,000 men at Peniche, planning to march overland to Lisbon; meanwhile, to support Norris’s attack, Drake took the fleet with the remaining soldiers to the mouth of the Tagus. Dom António, his son Manuel, and a variety of supporters accompanied the English army. António had convinced the English that his presence would ignite a rebellion. With popular support the English expected to capture the Portuguese capital with little effort. António would regain his realm and the English would gain an ally on Spain’s doorstep. Long having feared this possibility, the Spanish had taken care to eliminate, or at least weaken, any pro-António sentiment. For instance, in February 1589 (even before the English sailed), Philip summoned to Court in Madrid the Portuguese nobles he least trusted; by this means he hoped to prevent their leading a rising in Portugal. Later, warned by Philip’s spies of Drake’s destination and plans, the Spanish governor in Lisbon rounded up anyone suspected of sympathizing with António’s cause. Of these, he executed the leaders. Due to these efforts, and perhaps because the Prior of Crato’s popularity had faded, the expected anti-Spanish rising never took place. Since the English lacked the strength to take Lisbon themselves and almost no local help was forthcoming (António attracted perhaps 200 Portuguese soldiers), the invasion fizzled. On 8 June, the invaders embarked on
Figure 4  Lisbon circa 1589: the English invasion of Portugal
Drake’s ships and soon returned home. More than anything else, António’s inability to raise the Portuguese populace convinced the English that actively supporting him was a wasted effort.\textsuperscript{15} From the failed invasion to his death in 1595, António received little more than the passive recognition of his rights from the English. By 1600 the English were even less inclined to support António’s eldest son Manuel, for – abandoned by their French ally in 1598 – they were trying to end their long conflict with Spain.

Peace, for the cause of Portuguese independence, was disastrous. For nearly two decades the Portuguese who refused to accept Philip as King of Portugal had depended on the support of France and England to drive the Spanish out. Although this support had accomplished nothing concrete, it had been the only hope for restoring Dom António to his throne. This hope had been unrealistic: the French and English were unable and unwilling to do more than offer assistance for a Portuguese rebellion that António had proven incapable of inciting. France and England had neither the will nor the resources to take and defend Portugal by themselves. After 1598, with France at peace with Spain and England moving in that direction, the Portuguese exiles were bereft of any hope of help from their erstwhile allies. These new political realities forced António’s sons – Dom Manuel and Dom Cristóvão – and their supporters to reassess their struggle. At some point in the years following Dom António’s death and the Peace of Vervins, they must have realized two things, both of which João de Castro had long asserted. First, that the only way to restore Portugal’s independence was to raise the kingdom in revolt against Spain. Second, that they themselves lacked the popular support to accomplish this. Unless a way could be found to resolve these two problems, the cause of Portuguese independence would be lost.\textsuperscript{16}

Even as the hopes of the Portuguese exiles withered away in 1598, two events augured well for their cause. First, on 13 September Philip II of Spain – the arch-enemy – died in his monastery at El Escorial. Although his death did little to change Portugal’s status in the Spanish crown, the exiles at least had a new enemy. Instead of facing the man who had outmaneuvered them at every turn for nearly twenty years, they faced the young and inexperienced Philip III. The second event was the appearance of Sebastian in Venice in the autumn of 1598. However, António’s sons and their supporters were slow to recognize
its importance. Only after some sixteen months of persistent reports from Venice that the long-lost King of Portugal had returned, did they finally send someone to investigate. The timing here was of great significance. Sebastian’s imprisonment in Venice coincided with the time when the Portuguese exiles, forced by their inability to achieve anything by following the Prior of Crato’s old policies, began to search for a way to revitalize their struggle. What probably spurred the exiles to act was the reaction in Portugal to the news from Venice. From the rampant rumors and wild speculations concerning the return of Portugal’s king, it soon became obvious that Sebastian commanded the popular support that Antônio and his heirs lacked. Whatever the man’s true identity, the exiles saw him as a means to incite Portugal to rebellion against Spain. They therefore wished to establish him as King Sebastian of Portugal, come to claim his throne. But there were still deep divisions among Sebastian’s supporters. Even as they worked together to restore their supposed king, the exiles fought over how best to accomplish their goals. In spite of these differences, they had all committed themselves to proclaiming Sebastian as the genuine Portuguese king. The rebels knew that this was probably their last chance to free Portugal from Spanish rule.

Identifying and sanctifying the king

This returns us to Sebastian. When he reached the inn, he probably had to pound on the door and yell to be let in, for at that late hour no one was awake. Inside his old room he found two of his Portuguese supporters, Rodrigo Marques and Sebastião Figueira. The two men – just roused from their beds, in their night-shirts, and most likely still half asleep – were “amazed by this unexpected event, and delighted to see him.” After Sebastian briefly related the story of his release, Marques rushed out to take the miraculous news to the other Portuguese exiles gathered in Venice: Dom Cristóvão, Pantaleão Pessoa, Diogo Manuel, João de Castro, and Manuel de Brito d’Almeida. Since the various men were staying in different inns and houses, Marques went from place to place to spread the glad tidings. At some point it was decided that everyone should gather immediately in one place to decide what should be done. Castro’s lodgings were elected, for he occupied a larger and less public house. Time and secrecy were of
the essence, for the Portuguese exiles had no intention of allowing
the Spanish any opportunity to disrupt their plans.

By sometime between one and two in the morning (here we are
following Castro's proselytizing account), the former prisoner and his
Portuguese supporters were gathered in João de Castro's lodgings.21
When Sebastian entered, Castro “threw himself at [Sebastian's] feet,
recognizing him as his true king and lord.”22 After everyone had
recognized Sebastian and declared his loyalty, Sebastian made a
short statement:

Portuguese, you have performed a very great service for your
fatherland [patrie], and an outstanding service for me who am
your King and Lord. You are my vassals and subjects. Since you
have done what you should for God and your duty, I will not be at
all ungrateful. I am your Father, and you are my children.23

Like a father he then asked for news about their families, speaking of
them with great familiarity.24 Eventually the conversation returned
to Sebastian, who briefly recounted the final moments at the Battle of
Alcazar, when most of his noble companions were killed around him.
After their escape, the king and the few men who survived with him
had wandered the world. They all lived in extreme poverty, for they
refused to accept the gifts of money that people occasionally offered
them, preferring to trust in God's providence.25 Following his sum-
mary of events Sebastian turned to an issue of central importance. He
stated that he knew that many people doubted his identity. To satisfy
such skeptics he needed his faithful supporters to have proof – other
than their personal recognition – of his claims. Therefore, he submit-
ted to a physical inspection that would allay any doubts. He

showed his head wound which he received in Africa, taking the
hands of some [of those present] and making them feel it; he
showed his missing molar; he showed his legs, his arms, and
even knelt, placing a slipper under one [knee] to show that he
was shorter on one side.26

The resulting evidence was then compared to a list, obtained earlier
from Portugal by the exiles, containing the twenty-two “marks and
signs that the King of Portugal, Don Sebastian, carrie[d] naturally on
his body.”

For instance, sign twenty-one mentioned a scar on his head and sign thirteen stated that his body was shorter on the left side than on the right – both signs agreed perfectly with the physical proof Sebastian presented to his supporters. The king then placed his person and his fate entirely in their hands.

While Castro’s account of this meeting is almost certainly pure fabrication, it does reveal the image of Sebastian that he and the other rebels wished to present to their compatriots in Portugal. With this vision of Portugal’s sanctified king they hoped to inspire the Portuguese people. To help interpret the meaning that the physical examination of Sebastian’s marks and signs would have held in the early seventeenth century, it might be helpful to examine an otherwise unrelated series of events which occurred some fifteen years earlier in Lisbon.

At least since the Holy Day of the Finding of the Cross in 1585, the Mother Prioress of the Cloister of the Annunciation had been marked by the stigmata of Christ. On that day and on every Friday thereafter, starting about ten o’clock in the morning, the wound in her side bled five drops of blood. A cloth placed upon the wound would come away with a stain in the form of a cross. Although the news of this wondrous miracle spread widely, not everyone was convinced by the Prioress’s story. Skeptics claimed that the stigmata were painted – with ocher or some other substance – on the nun’s body, that the whole affair was a hoax. Eventually, to determine the truth of the matter, the Prioress’s superiors ordered an investigation. As a result, on 10 November 1587, Fray Luis de Granada and Fray Caspar de Aveiro went to the cloister to examine the wounds on her hands.

Brother Luis de Granada wetted a kerchief in a vessel filled with water and began to wash the wound therewith and to rub it, which could not come to pass without great pain, for she suffered whenever he came close to the nail. As ultimately there was no change either in the water in which the cloth had been wetted or in the colour of the wounds, we gave up tormenting her any further.

Apparently not completely satisfied one way or the other, the two returned on 25 November with a third man, Fray Juan de la Cruz. To forestall any preparations, they arrived at the cloister
unannounced at two in the morning, demanding to see the Prioress. Invoking the orders of her superior as well as the story of how the Apostle Thomas resolved his doubts about Christ’s resurrection by feeling his wounds, the three men firmly requested that the Prioress submit to an examination of all her wounds.33 Although reluctant, she agreed. First, after calling on three old nuns to assist her, the Prioress bared her head so that the investigators could see the nine or ten small wounds on her head. Then she was made to show the wound in her left side, which she did with “great modesty and decency.”34 They

then bade the Mother Prioress in the name of holy obedience to bare her feet and this she did with the help of the three old women. By the light of the candle we saw clearly and distinctly that above the instep of the right foot she had a wound – not quite round. This was of a beautiful ruby-red, and it showed in the centre the head of a nail. In the sole she had a round wound of similar colour with the black mark of a nail.35

Last of all, they re-examined the wounds in her hands. Following this they spoke briefly with her about her mystical experiences. Then, they asked her when the wound in her side normally bled and took their leave. Returning at noon the next Friday, 27 November, they confirmed that the blood from her side left a stain in the shape of a cross upon a cloth pressed to it. By now convinced, they speculated “as to the purpose Our Lord, the originator of this miracle, could have had in willing it so,” concluding “that He has thus ordered it in the days when evil reigneth, to awaken men, who sleep.”36

Thus, God’s miracle was confirmed and His purpose unraveled. Fray Luis de Granada and his two companions had examined the Mother Prioress’s wounds and found them to be real.37 Their reasoned and systematic observations, combined with the sure knowledge that such miracles could and did occur, established the truth of the nun’s claims. Like the Apostles who witnessed the resurrection of Christ, the three friars had the divine duty “to awaken men, who sleep,” to witness to the world the Truth that their investigation had revealed to them. The news that this miracle had occurred would reinforce the belief of the faithful. It would also undermine the claims of the Protestant doubters who said that the time for miracles
had passed.\textsuperscript{38} Most important was that with their testimony, men like Granada, Aveiro, and Cruz might favorably tip the balance for those who wavered in their belief.

Although Sebastian was not marked by the holy stigmata, there are some striking parallels between his examination and that of the Mother Prioress. First, in both cases the examiners wished to settle an issue of identity. For the nun the question was not who she was, but instead her status as a holy and blessed woman. If real, the stigmata signified divine favor, granted only to so exemplary a person. For Sebastian, his identity and his status as legitimate King of Portugal were inextricably bound. The marks and signs that established his person also established his station. Second, in both cases the examiners themselves, having made the identification, necessarily became Apostles of that identity. Their knowledge and conviction required that they share both with the world. Finally, in the case of the Mother Prioress, the stigmata demonstrated God’s intervention in human affairs. In the case of Sebastian, Castro’s account of the twenty years between Sebastian’s disappearance in Morocco and his reappearance in Venice (summarized below), established a parallel conclusion.

According to Castro, following the disaster at Ksar-el-Kebir, Sebastian and a few companions eventually made their way to Tangier, a Portuguese fort on the coast. Arriving at night, he called to the sentry, identifying himself as the king and demanding to be admitted.\textsuperscript{39} The next morning they embarked, with other stragglers, on a ship back to Portugal. Disembarking in the Algarve, Sebastian decided not to return to Lisbon, for he was too ashamed to face the consequences of his folly.\textsuperscript{40} Instead, he resolved to abandon his throne and travel the world as a common man. Over the following years the king and his companions wandered from battle to battle, venting their martial inclinations. As might be expected in such a crusader for Christendom, he fought most of his battles in the service of God, against the infidel Turks. In the process Sebastian “saw all of Europe, a large part of Asia, and some of Africa (visiting Prester John’s kingdom and other kingdoms in the interior).”\textsuperscript{41} Eventually, inspired by God and having tired of his battles and endless travels, Sebastian decided to become a hermit in a remote area. He was determined to spend the rest of his days in penance, leading a holy life. After some time Sebastian began to have visions ordering him to return to Portugal, to take up once
again his responsibilities as king. At first Sebastian fought these visions, thinking they were temptations of the Devil. However, his only companion – his saintly hermit guide – having begun to receive the same visions, convinced Sebastian that they were real and that he had to obey God’s command. So Sebastian left his holy life and traveled to Sicily, arriving there by the end of 1597 or in early 1598. From there he took a galley to Rome to seek an audience with the Pope as a first step toward regaining his throne. However, God had not yet finished testing him. One night, while he slept, his servants robbed him of everything, even his clothes. Unable to prove his identity and in abject poverty, he turned back to a life of wandering, eventually ending up in Venice.42

Castro concluded that God had allowed Sebastian to fall into his folly – culminating with the Battle of Alcazar and Portugal’s loss of independence – to teach him and other men the dangers of relying solely on human wisdom.43 Then he was sent into the wilderness for some twenty years (half the time allotted to the tribes of Israel) to learn humility. Over those years God stripped Sebastian, like Job, of everything worldly: his throne, his youth, his martial spirit, his pride, his possessions, his clothes. In the end, the Portuguese king emerged with his faith purified and strong. Only such a king could lead God’s chosen people. For although Sebastian himself was not marked by the holy stigmata, Portugal was: in 1139, at the Battle of Ourique, God had “bestowed as [Portugal’s] escutcheon the five wounds he suffered on the cross.”44 This badge marked the Portuguese as having not only divine favor, but also the divine mission of taking Christian faith and civilization to the entire world. The king sanctified was a solid foundation upon which God could build a Portugal renewed, a Portugal free to carry out God’s will.45

God, messiah, and nation

This other-worldly image of Sebastian’s kingship contrasted sharply with that of Philip II. The Spanish king’s sanction to rule Portugal did not come from God; instead, it drew its legitimacy from the legal and political heritage of late-medieval Europe. Although theory stated that kings ultimately held their kingdoms by the grace of God, practice had cut God out of the equation. Who ruled a particular bit of territory had more to do with local power than with divine favor.
The accidents of marriage, birth, and death – as well as the ability to advance the resulting legal claims by force – dictated the shape and extent of most European states. Philip’s claim to Portugal was just this: a contested inheritance, seized and retained by force of arms. Had past dynastic marriages happened to follow a different pattern, the King of France or the Queen of England could just as easily have laid claim to Portugal in 1580. They might have found it less easy to enforce their rights, for they lacked the advantage of geographic contiguity. Still, that would have been merely one of many obstacles. The logic of state-building was legal and dynastic. In the relationship between ruler and ruled, the only issues that needed settling were legal and dynastic. Everything else – including differences in culture, language, and religion – could, and often did, remain unresolved.

It was such unresolved elements that provided early modern popular movements with fertile ground. Ignored by the ruling elites until they obviously posed a threat, such movements set deep roots. Aside from time to grow, popular movements possessed three interrelated characteristics which helped them survive when eventually they attracted the hostile attention of their political and social betters. First, they rejected the linear, progressive time imposed by the logic of institutions and laws. They hearkened back, instead, to a cyclical, mythic time more attuned to the natural cycles of days and seasons that governed the lives of most people. A cyclical sense of time allowed the faithful to believe that the world would return to a better past, much as winter inevitably would return to spring. Thus, failure was always temporary, a mistiming of the human seasons. Second, popular movements were eclectic, drawing inspiration and material from any source: religion, myth, folktale, rumor. This is not to say that their ideas were inherently irrational, self-contradictory, or uncritically accepted. Instead, this eclecticism reflected a lack of systematic thinking – each idea was useful in a particular situation; there was no need to impose an overarching and internally consistent system. As a result, what was adopted was often shorn of its original context and interpretation.

Third, popular movements were eternally mutable, changing constantly under the force of circumstances. Although such movements drew from the mythic and traditional past, they operated only in the present. If they could not adapt themselves to current conditions – explaining the world and providing ways to deal with it – they died. Because of these
characteristics and because they were not beholden to strict logic or a rigid system, popular movements provided their enemies with a protean and resilient target.

Sebastianism was such a movement. Over some eighty years it had grown from a series of prophetic poems mostly of interest to the Portuguese New Christians, into an endemic popular force in Portugal which contested Philip II of Spain’s right to rule the kingdom. In 1600, for those who accepted the basic premise of Sebastianism – that Sebastian would return to rescue his people in their time of need – there could be no other king. Only Sebastian, the king appointed by God, could rule. For the Spanish, this meant that no argument for Philip’s legitimacy could convince any believer. For Sebastian’s followers, this was why it was crucial to establish the royal identity of the Venetians’ ex-prisoner and the miraculous nature of his return – hence Castro’s doubting-Thomas account of the meeting in Venice. By fulfilling prophecy they would gain immediate and widespread popular support. However, there was one minor detail in the prophecies that remained unfulfilled: Sebastian was to return to Portugal, not to Venice. This is what Sebastian’s new-found Apostles set out to accomplish.

Leaving Venice

With the fate of their king in their hands, Sebastian’s supporters turned to the major concern of the moment: getting Sebastian out of Venice before his twenty-four hours were up. First, however, they decided to let him spend most of the dawning day catching up on badly needed rest. Nightfall would be soon enough to leave town and would make it easier to leave unnoticed. Fray Sampaio and Fray Crisóstomo – two of Sebastian’s earliest and most ardent supporters – insisted on taking Sebastian to their monastery. There he would be safe from Spanish spies. With the king hidden in the monastery, the leaders of the Portuguese rebels reconvened at Dom Cristóvão’s lodgings to discuss the best way to proceed.51

Everyone agreed that the best first step was to get Sebastian to France, well away from Spanish hands. Three routes were considered. The first led north along the trade routes from Venice into Austria and Germany. This was rejected, for if the travelers were discovered the Austrian Habsburgs were likely to accommodate their Spanish
Venice to Leghorn: Sanctifying the King

To: Switzerland
To: Austria

16 December 1600
Sebastian leaves Venice

29 December 1600
Sebastian arrested in Florence

Figure 5  Northern Italy circa 1600: the Calabrian Charlatan’s route from Venice
relatives. The more direct second route led north-west through the Alps, to Switzerland, and into France. However, although not fraught with the political dangers of the northern route, this one was rejected as well. Sebastian’s followers worried that after so long in prison, the king would lack the strength to make it through the treacherous passes and winter snow. Consequently, they settled on the third path. This would take Sebastian south and west through the Duchy of Florence and on to Leghorn where he could embark for France. Since the Grand-Duke was pro-French and had married into the French royal family, Sebastian’s followers reckoned this route reasonably secure. However, they took further precautions. Sebastian was to travel disguised as a friar, accompanied only by a little-known, but trustworthy, friar as guide (they considered themselves to be too well known to be safe companions for the king). In addition, to distract their enemies, they would remain in Venice, acting as if Sebastian were still with them.\(^{52}\)

As planned, Sebastian slipped out of Venice at nightfall on 16 December. However, after a propitious start, all the rebels’ carefully considered plans began to unravel. For some reason, Sampaio and Crisóstomo had decided against an outside guide and the well-known Fray Crisóstomo undertook the task himself. From there things only got worse. After the first day, Sebastian tired of his disguise and refused to wear it. Instead of immediately leaving Venetian territory by going directly to Ferrara, Crisóstomo took a detour through Padua. Since Sebastian was well known there, secrecy was completely forsaken. Before long the news of his passage through that city in the company of a friar was common knowledge in Venice. Castro and the others immediately became alarmed but, in order to contradict the news, felt compelled to stay in Venice. From Padua Crisóstomo finally took Sebastian to Ferrara. There, instead of keeping to themselves, they contacted the papal nuncio, but accomplished nothing. Remarkably, they passed through Bologna without incident. Finally, they arrived in Florence on 29 December, the last stage on the way to Leghorn and safety in France. However, that night, on the orders of the Grand-Duke of Tuscany, Sebastian was once more arrested and cast in jail.\(^{53}\) His freedom had lasted a mere two weeks. King Sebastian’s second coming would have to wait.