

Revisiting Hormuz

Portuguese Interactions in the Persian Gulf
Region in the Early Modern Period

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CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 1863-6268
ISBN 978-3-447-05731-8

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Foreword

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in association with Harrassowitz Verlag, is glad to present *Revisiting Hormuz – Portuguese interactions in the Persian Gulf region in the early modern period*, one year after the publication of *Re-exploring the links – History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka*, which also appeared in the Maritime Asia series.

This volume gathers the papers on the same theme presented at the Calouste Gulbenkian Cultural Centre in Paris, on the occasion of the International Conference held in March 2007.

Five hundred years elapsed since the Portuguese first arrived at Hormuz and this was the pretext to gather a group of scholars from different origins and disciplinary areas. Participants had then the opportunity to debate freely the historical relations between Iran and Portugal, its regional and global impact.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, within the scope of its support programmes for the diffusion of Portuguese culture abroad, has given a special attention to the cultural relations between Portugal and Iran. At the request of the Iranian authorities, projects for the rehabilitation of the Fortresses of Hormuz and Keshm have been supported in recent years.

The Paris Conference was the second major initiative of the Foundation focused on Iran, and stemmed from a suggestion presented by Dr. Rui Loureiro, the scientific coordinator of the Conference. The publication of this volume also benefited from the collaboration of Prof. Dejanirah Couto. To them both I extend my recognition for the excellent job done, hoping that this volume will become an indispensable reference tool for all those who delve on these matters.

Emílio Rui Vilar

Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Preface

The island of Hormuz – as was the case with Ceylon, the mythical Taprobane – occupied an important place in the political and cultural imagination of early modern Portugal. The accounts of European, Islamic and Chinese medieval travellers who visited the island, such as Odorico de Pordenone, Abdu’r-Razzâq Samarqandî, Ibn Battûta and Ma Huan, to name but a few, contributed to the dissemination in Portugal of an image of a wealthy mercantile emporium, a veritable thalassocracy, emerging from the waters of the Sinus Persicus under the guise of an insular, cosmopolitan Babel. The expression that best describes the fascination evoked by this wonderful image – of Hormuz as a multicultural crossroads and, at the same time, as the gateway to the Indo-Islamic world of the Indian Ocean as well as to the distant world of China – is perhaps found in the writing of João de Barros, when he uses a popular oriental saying and declares that “the world is a ring and Hormuz a precious stone set in it” (*Si terrarum orbis, qauqua patet annulus esset / Ilius Ormisum gemma dequesque foret*).

Notwithstanding the fact that some visitors stressed the harsh geological and climatic conditions prevailing on the island of Djarun, where the city of Hormuz stood, the capital of a dispersed empire of the same name, this medieval image clearly influenced, in the opening years of the 16th century, Portuguese strategies in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf regions. In the grand imperial project designed by King Manuel I, Hormuz – towards which converged long and ancient commercial routes from the east and from the west – soon came to play a leading role, especially after Afonso de Albuquerque was empowered with the governorship of the newly established *Estado da Índia*. The first attempt to conquer Hormuz in 1507, together with the final conquest of the island in 1515, mark the culmination of this process, simultaneously fulfilling the strategic vision of the governor and the ambitions of the Portuguese monarch. From then on, the Portuguese were able effectively to control a significant part of the profits that Hormuz gained from its vast trading ventures; however, the submission of the royal Hormuzian house was equally important from a symbolic point of view, because it represented – as it would until the Portuguese were expelled in 1622 – a unique European implantation in an otherwise religiously and culturally homogeneous Islamic world.

This singularity should have placed Hormuzian studies in the forefront of research relating to imperial history, and even, from a more anthropological standpoint, in regard to the study of interaction between the European and the Islamic worlds of the early modern period. In fact, Hormuz became a veritable sociological and political laboratory. On one hand, Portuguese power functioned there as a tuto-

rial regime over a double-natured society, as seen from social and cultural perspectives. The Persian component coexisted, not without antagonisms and conflicts, with the Arab component; the ruler (*malek*), of Arab lineage, acted as the guarantor of the political unity of the kingdom, and the origin of his subjects in itself reflected this double division. On the other hand, this maritime realm, set in continental Persia, was also the target of external tensions, because it had to maintain allegiance to the powers (Timurids, Safavids) that consecutively ruled over the mainland, in order to maintain the independence of its maritime front.

Because of these circumstances, the history of the kingdom of Hormuz was often characterised by internal upheaval, one of the reasons that explains how easily Albuquerque achieved his conquest. From this perspective, Hormuz often functioned as a catalyser of political interactions. The Portuguese presence only intensified the socio-political contradictions of the kingdom, accelerating breakdowns and changes; these same contradictions, on the other hand, came to influence the political praxis of the Portuguese. In this way, the consequences of the network structure of the *Estado da Índia*, as a multi-centred entity, made themselves felt in a particularly salient fashion: decision-making centres were far apart and officialdom was so incipient that, in certain areas, particular individuals or groups, Portuguese or Luso-Asian, tended to reformulate or adapt the directives emanating from Lisbon or Goa. Influenced by their interactions with local players, individual interest or group strategies frequently overrode the orders of the Portuguese Crown.

Taking this configuration into account – where the notion of local realities is dominant – means strongly to relativize, or better still, to invalidate the binary system according to which a clear distinction should be made between “ruling” Europeans and “ruled” natives. In reality, the frontiers were extremely subtle and the categories fluid. Behaviour patterns changed according to local power balances, forcing dominant players to make many compromises, above all when specific forms of contact, such as war or diplomacy, were at stake. In such a hybrid context, where it is fair to speak about interactions, connected histories and *mondes mêlés*, to use concepts dear to Victor Lieberman, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Serge Gruzinski, it is impossible to take a single and univocal viewpoint, as the Portuguese, much more than the rulers or the ruled, where an integral part of the scene, contributing, along with other social groups, to the makeup of the local political chessboard. They assumed, in fact, several positions, or, as we would say today, *jeu de rôle*, appearing sometimes as real “fields of power”, to use the formulation of Kurt Lewin and Norbert Elias, and sometimes as mere executants, military manpower in charge of regional policing, used by the elites of Hormuz (and the Persian Gulf) for their political or military projects.

This fertile area of research was, paradoxically, relatively neglected by international historiography for reasons that have to do with the recent colonial past and the political evolution of the region. The detailed reports of the British administration in the early 20th century, starting with the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omân and Central Arabia* by J.G. Lorimer (1915) or *The Persian Gulf* by Colonel Sir A.T.

Wilson (1928), for long occupied the space of veritable historical research. In spite of the fact that, during the 20th century, a large scientific community has been studying medieval and modern Iran – namely in the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Germany and Japan – the Persian Gulf and Hormuz have, all in all, been rather neglected by historians. Although they used very different methodological approaches and have varying merits in terms of research, mention should be made in regard to the Gulf of the works of S.H. Longrigg, George W.F. Stripling, Cengiz Ohronlu, Salih Özbaran, Mehmet Medhi Ilhan, Jon Mandaville, Robert Mantran, Svat Soucek and Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, and, in regard to Hormuz, of the work of Jean Aubin, Niels Steensgaard, Willem Floor, Mohammad Bagher Vosoghi, Valeria Piacentini, Monik Kervran and D.T. Potts.

On the other hand, Hormuz and the Persian Gulf have been notably neglected by Portuguese historiography. In spite of its Arabic and Berber cultural heritage, or perhaps because of it, Portugal has not invested in studies about this part of the Islamic world, with the notable exception of A. Dias Farinha. For obvious reasons, researchers have favoured *Al-Andalus* and the nearby “frontier” of North Africa. The most stimulating studies of the kingdom of Hormuz in the early days of its contacts with the Portuguese came from France, under the aegis of Jean Aubin, the leading expert on Medieval Iran. Thanks to these researchers, it was possible to shed light on important questions – namely the double conquest of Hormuz by Afonso de Albuquerque – and to stress the central role of Hormuz as a pivotal area between different political and economic forces that clashed – or coexisted – in the Persian Gulf in the early modern period.

The present proceedings are the final result of a Conference organized in March 2007 by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, through its Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian in Paris. As the title of the proceedings suggests, the *Revisiting Hormuz* Conference was a deliberate attempt to continue the research work developed by Jean Aubin, while, at the same time, being a posthumous homage to the celebrated scholar, whose untimely death occurred in 1998. The year 2007, exactly five centuries after the Portuguese first landed on the island of Hormuz, seemed a very appropriate moment to bring together a large group of specialists that could establish the current *state of the art* in field of the history of Portuguese interactions with Hormuz and the Persian Gulf region. The chronological borders of the Conference, quite naturally, were extended to the early decades of the 17th century, to include the final departure of the Portuguese from Hormuz in 1622 and subsequent developments. Needless to say, this 5th centennial was used as a mere pretext, devoid of any nostalgic meaning whatsoever.

Any selection is a subjective selection, but in the case of the Paris Conference two additional motives limited the choice and the number of participants: on one hand, the extreme difficulty experienced in involving Iranian scholars in the project; on the other hand, the quite coincidental organization of a similar conference in

Washington DC, also focusing on the relations between Portugal and the Safavid realm. All in all, it was possible to gather in Paris a large and varied group of scholars who have in recent years, in one way or another, delved into Hormuzian matters, including not only renowned specialists, but also promising newcomers. Although the focus of the conference was supposed to be history, in any of its political, social, economic or cultural variants, the complex nature of Portuguese interactions with Hormuz and Safavid Persia, and also the existence of an important monumental heritage of Portuguese origin in the Gulf area, made the presence of art historians, architects, and archaeologists desirable.

The essays collected in this volume were presented as papers at the Paris Conference. It was decided that they should be written either in French or in English, the working languages used during the Conference. As it is a kind of convention with conference proceedings, the editors refrained from any intervention in the contents of the essays, although in a number of cases, they would tend to disagree with minor details. But writing history implies a certain freedom of debate, and that should be respected. This has also led the editors to allow for some flexibility in the use of personal and place names, especially as different authors often belong to different schools.

Within the chronological scope initially defined (1507 to 1622), different themes and varied approaches are explored in the essays gathered in this volume. The nature of the Hormuzian realm and its relations with the world around it were dominant subjects and, in particular, shaped the essays by Valeria Fiorani Piacentini, Willem Floor and Huges Didier. The Portuguese confrontation with the Ottomans, as both expanding empires clashed repeatedly along the Persian Gulf, was another dominant topic, present in the essays of Svat Soucek, Dejanirah Couto and Nicola Melis. The fluctuations of Luso-Persian diplomatic relations, so often focused on a possible alliance against the Ottomans, were investigated by Luis Gil Fernandez and Vasco Resende. The analysis of early modern sources concerning Hormuz and the Gulf was also a recurrent matter, from a documental perspective (Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam) or from the viewpoint of spatial representations (Zoltán Biedermann). Travellers and travel accounts were a major concern, occupying several essays, especially those by Elio Brancaforte, José Manuel Garcia and Rui Manuel Loureiro. The circulation of valuable objects, usually connected with the exchange of diplomatic embassies, was the theme of the papers by Nuno Vassallo e Silva and Maria Fernanda Passos Leite. Finally, Portuguese military architecture in the Persian Gulf area was the subject of the essays by João Lizardo and João Campos. Needless to say, during the formal sessions, as at all conferences, further ideas were exchanged, new projects were discussed, future lines of research were proposed, and international cooperation was strengthened. All in all, it appears certain that the Paris Conference moved things forward in the field of the history of Portuguese interactions with the Persian Gulf region.

As a final note, of a more particular nature, we wish to express our enormous gratitude to Dr. Emilio Rui Vilar, Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and to Dr. João Pedro Garcia, Director of its International Department, for their enthusiastic and enduring support, which was of vital importance to the success of the Paris Conference and to the subsequent publishing of these proceedings. The Centre Culturel, with its legendary hospitality and its efficient staff (*domo arigato* to Fátima Gil), was the perfect environment for three days of productive and rewarding debates. ‘Long may it run’, as the poet would say! Further afield, sincere thanks are also due to Roderich Ptak, founding editor of the ‘Maritime Asia’ series, for his constant support throughout the preparation of the proceedings; to the Harrasowitz Verlag team for their impeccable professionalism; to Peter Wise and Ana de Carvalho, for competently handling the translation and/or revision of some of the essays; and to Luís Pinheiro, for meticulously preparing the index.

Dejanirah Couto & Rui Manuel Loureiro
December 2007