



chapter six

The European Trade Empires

The Open Door

▼ A view of the Watch Tower in the Forbidden City, Beijing, built by the Ming rulers of China. The bronze statue of a dragon (right) is one of several inside the City. ►



The Portuguese found their new route to the East at an opportune moment. At the beginning of the Sixteenth Century, whilst many different nations were actively trading along the Spice Routes, there was no major naval power to block their way. The door for Portuguese expansion was wide open.

The Egyptians under the Mameluke empire were more concerned with defending their territories from the expansion of the Ottoman Turks; while the Turks, having won Egypt in 1517, were looking to advance into eastern Europe. In Iran, the Safavid Dynasty (1500-1629) was reviving that country's fortunes but it was essentially a land-based power, as were the kingdoms and sultanates of India.

Had the Portuguese arrived some seventy years earlier, the situation would have been very different, for then China was expanding its naval power. In 1368, the Yuan Dynasty had been toppled by the native Ming who were to control China for nearly three hundred years. The Ming Dynasty reached its peak during the reign of the third Ming emperor, Yung Lo (1403-24), who planned a huge programme of trade and exploration abroad. 27,000 men and a fleet of 317 ships were placed under the command of the admiral Zheng He (Cheng ho).

Between 1405 and 1433 Zheng He made seven great voyages. Amongst other places, he visited Thailand, Malaya, Java, Singapore, India, the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa. Part of his fleet may have even rounded the Cape of Good Hope – sixty years before Dias. But these expeditions halted abruptly in 1434. China was once again being attacked by the Mongols from the north and its shipping had begun to be harassed by Japanese pirates. The Chinese government therefore reverted to a defensive policy, breaking off all contacts with the West and no longer encouraging foreign trade.

► (far right) A Hindu temple on the island of Bali, east of Java. Hinduism and later Islam were both introduced to Indonesia by Spice Route traders.

It was unlikely, too, that the Portuguese would meet with much resistance in the Indonesian Archipelago. In the Thirteenth Century, this area had experienced a cultural golden age under the influence of the Majapahit Empire. A Hindu-Buddhist dynasty, with its capital in East Java, it had strong trading and political links through much of the Archipelago. But any unity had disintegrated in the Fourteenth Century and, with the arrival of Muslim traders, there was a gradual conversion to Islam. By 1511, when Portuguese ships first sailed into the area, there was a series of well-established but separate kingdoms ruled by Muslim sultans. Unsurprisingly, the wealth of these sultanates was built on their trade in spices.



▲ This 14th Century bronze oil-lamp is in the style of the Majapahit Empire of East Java.





A Portuguese Empire in the East

Vasco da Gama returned to Portugal in 1499 with news of his breakthrough and the Portuguese were swift to follow this up. Increasing numbers of ships were sent round Africa to India and, in 1505, King Manuel sent a permanent force to India under the command of Francisco de Almeida. He was appointed the first Portuguese Viceroy (the king's representative) of India and set up his headquarters at Cochin on the Malabar Coast. Sri Lanka was next to be occupied in November of that year, giving the Portuguese access to its valuable cinnamon trees and a good strategic position on the Spice Route. In 1509 a combined Egyptian and Indian fleet was defeated by the Portuguese off the north coast of India. These successes established the Portuguese as serious competitors in the Indian Ocean trade, a position they were to maintain and expand on for over a century.

The Portuguese were never to succeed in completely breaking the Muslim hold on the Spice Routes. For example, even at the height of their strength, the amount of cloves they shipped to Europe via Africa was about 80 tons a year, whereas 1,300 tons of cloves, carried by Asian traders, reached Europe by the traditional routes through the Middle East. However, the Portuguese pursued a policy of capturing and holding major ports and demanding tolls or duties from any ships that used them. This gave them a vital stake in the Spice Route trade.



▲ A church at Calangute, Goa, India built by the Portuguese. Soon after their arrival at Goa, the Portuguese set about converting the local people to Christianity.

► A Japanese lacquered screen of the Early Edo period (1573-1615). It shows the arrival of a Portuguese merchant ship at the port of Nagasaki.



It was largely the actions of Alfonso de Albuquerque (1452-1515) that put Portugal in this position. In 1507, a force under his command seized Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, so giving Portugal a commanding position on one of the main entry points of trade into the Middle East. In 1510, Albuquerque, now Viceroy of India, captured the rich port of Goa on the west coast of India. 'Golden Goa' soon replaced Calicut as India's leading trading port. Moving still further eastwards, Albuquerque seized Malaka in 1511. This port on the Straits of Malacca was one of the main distribution centres for Indonesian spices. As Tomé Pires, a Portuguese apothecary who lived in Malaka from 1512 to 1515, wrote, 'Whoever is lord of Malaka has his hands on the throat of Venice'. Indeed, one result of Portuguese expansion was Venice's loss of its monopoly of trade with the East. Other European cities, trading direct with the Portuguese, could now compete on an equal footing and Venice's power began to decline.

From their base at Malaka, the Portuguese were soon sailing direct to the Moluccas, China and Japan. Trade agreements with some of the Moluccas were established by 1513 and China was reached in 1515. The Chinese were less welcoming but eventually allowed the Portuguese to establish a trading post at Macao, close to Canton, in 1557. From here, the Portuguese could sail to Nagasaki in Japan. For the first time, Europeans were now actively trading along the whole length of the Spice Routes.



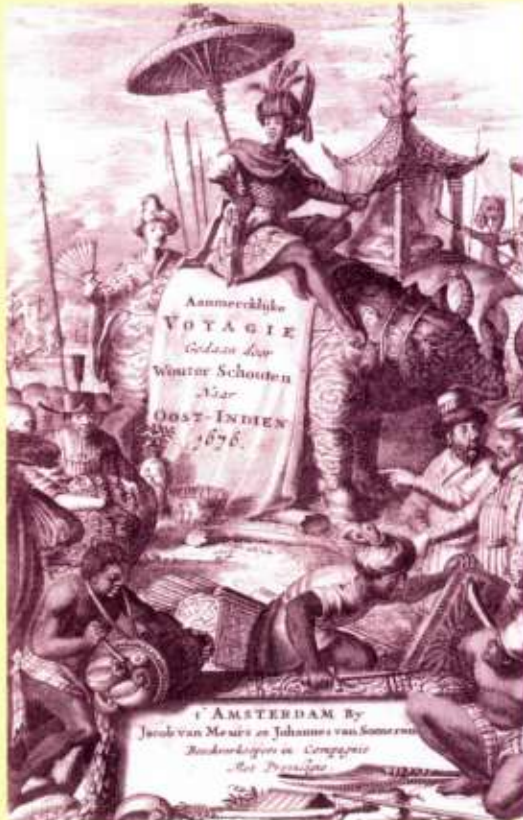
▲ This carved stone bust forms part of the Viceroy's Arch in Goa, erected by the Portuguese in the early 16th Century.





The Dutch Arrive

▼ The frontispiece to a book that tells of the travels of one of the many Dutch East Indian traders.



▼ A street scene in Batavia (Jakarta), Java, the Dutch capital of the East Indies.



Portugal's trading empire was in effect a chain of different ports linked over great distances by the trade routes. Because it was so widely dispersed, the Portuguese had difficulty in providing the necessary supplies and finance to sustain it. Towards the end of the Sixteenth Century, the vulnerability of the Portuguese became increasingly obvious to other European nations. Two in particular, the Dutch and the English, were determined to become involved in direct trade with India and Southeast Asia or, as it was called, the East Indies.

In 1595, a group of Amsterdam merchants raised enough money to send out the first Dutch expedition to the East Indies. Its success prompted more ventures, each sponsored by rival groups of merchants. The competition between these groups was fierce so in 1602, to avoid a conflict of interests, the groups combined as the United East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC for short). It had wide powers and was to become the driving force behind the Dutch colonial empire.

In 1603, a VOC expedition secured a valuable foothold for the Dutch on the Indian coast by making a treaty with the Zamorin of Calicut. Even more importantly, it then sailed on to the Moluccas where treaties of friendship were made with the rulers of Ternate and the Banda Islands. Crucially, in 1605, it captured the island of Amboyna from the Portuguese.

From this basis, the Dutch now set out to take complete control of the spice trade. With their larger numbers of soldiers and ships and superior weapons, they succeeded in driving the Portuguese from the Moluccas. They established their headquarters at the port of Batavia (Jakarta) on Java in 1619 and organized a blockade of Malaka (which the Portuguese finally surrendered in 1641). In 1656, they ousted the



Portuguese from Sri Lanka. The Dutch were now Europe's most influential spice traders.

The Moluccas had welcomed the Dutch as liberators from the Portuguese but the Dutch concern for profits, which were often more than 1,000 per cent, was soon crippling the islanders. The Dutch prevented them from trading with anyone else and restricted the growth of certain spices to particular islands. To control production and prices in Europe, spices were burned or dumped in the sea, whilst nutmeg and clove trees were uprooted and destroyed. In 1625 alone, 65,000 clove trees were cut down in the Moluccas. Deprived of their main sources of income – spice cultivation and free trading – the people of the Moluccas were reduced to poverty and the splendid sultanates that had given the islands their name (Moluccas comes from the Arabic meaning 'the region of many kings') fell into decay.

▲ *Barbary pirates attack Dutch ships off the coast of North Africa. Ships frequently fell prey to pirates.*

▼ *An 18th Century porcelain figurine of a Dutch woman made in China for export to Europe.*





The English Challenge



▲ An engraving of Drake's ship, the *Golden Hind*.

► Portrait of Sir Francis Drake (c. 1545-96). In 1577 Drake embarked on his voyage round the world, returning to England in 1580.



▼ A Chinese porcelain plate of the 18th Century. The coat-of-arms of the British sovereign has been painted in the centre. The expansion of European trade led to a huge demand for Chinese porcelain and Chinese styles were considered highly fashionable.



The Dutch were not without European rivals along the Spice Routes. Portuguese power did not disappear completely and English ships had already sailed in eastern seas before the arrival of the Dutch. In 1579, Francis Drake had reached the Moluccas during his famous journey around the world. His ship, the *Golden Hind*, returned to England with a cargo of cloves, and the observations he made of the East Indies did much to fire the interest of contemporary English merchants. In 1600, the East India

Company was founded in London – it was this threatened competition that led the Dutch merchants to unite under the VOC.

Funded by money from English merchants, the East India Company was granted a Royal Charter from Queen Elizabeth I. This gave the merchants of the company the authority to trade in the Far East for 15 years without interference from the Crown. Over the next 250 years, the East India Company was to grow into one of the most powerful trading empires the world has ever seen.

Unlike the Dutch, the English did not pursue an active policy of ousting the Portuguese or of cornering the spice trade. They were more interested in finding markets for their own goods, especially woollen cloth. They did not ignore the spice trade altogether, though, and might have pursued it more actively if the Dutch had not stood in their way.

The initial Company expeditions, leaving London in 1601 and 1604, had some success in trading with the Moluccas but thereafter the Dutch attacked the English wherever possible. In 1619, the two rivals entered a brief period of co-operation – the Dutch allowing the English a share of the spice trade in return for military assistance against the Portuguese – but this ended abruptly in 1623 when the Dutch sabotaged the agreement by murdering a number of English traders in Amboyna.

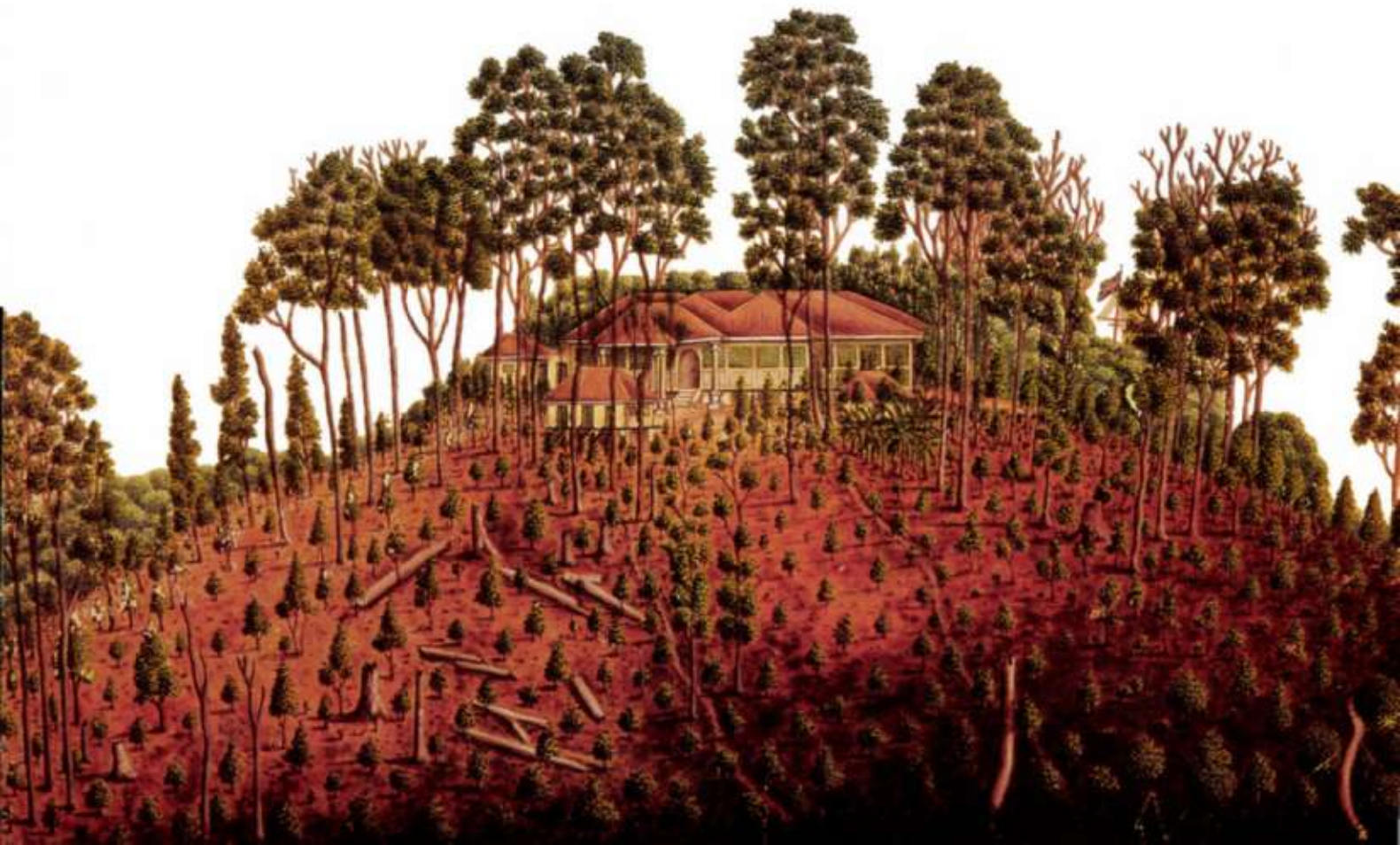
Over the next sixty years, the Dutch slowly but surely pushed the English out of the Moluccas' spice trade. The merchants of the English East India Company began to concentrate their attentions on the rich kingdoms of India. Here, the commercial opportunities were more open and – in the long term – more lucrative.

By the end of the Seventeenth Century the patterns of trade along the Spice Routes had changed dramatically. Prompted by the example of the Dutch and English, other European countries set up companies to trade with the East – amongst them were Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and notably France, who was to be England's main rival in India. With trade now flowing so freely round Africa, the Spice Routes of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were largely redundant. By 1713, Hormuz, once one of the Spice Routes' greatest ports, was virtually deserted. The proud Muslim empires of the Middle East were all but forgotten in the European scramble for power over east-west trade.



▲ A 16th Century engraving of weavers at work. Woollen cloth was a major English export.

▼ Raffles' villa in western Sumatra. Sir Thomas Raffles (1781-1826) was an English colonial administrator who helped to increase British influence in the Far East. He founded Singapore in 1819 to rival Dutch-held Batavia.





The Wealth of India



▲ The stone gate towers of the Mughal fort at Lahore in Pakistan.

► Lengths of dyed cotton cloth dry in the sun on an Indian beach. Cotton has been a major industry in India for many centuries.



Portrait of the Emperor Jahangir as a young man.

Lying at the heart of the Spice Routes, the Indian sub-continent had always played a vital role in their history. Traders from both East and West could meet in its ports to exchange their wares and, of course, purchase those that India produced itself. Indian goods, such as black pepper and cotton fabric, were in great demand in markets right across Asia and Europe, making a stop-over at one of India's ports not only convenient but highly profitable. By controlling some of these ports, European traders – firstly the Portuguese, then the Dutch, the French, the Danish and particularly the English – were able to take a sizeable share of the profits made on Indian trade.

That European control did not extend beyond this during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries was largely due to the power of the Mughal Empire. Claiming descent from the Mongols, the Mughals (from the Iranian word for Mongol) led by Babur had invaded India from Central Asia. By defeating the Sultan of Delhi in 1526, Babur had established Mughal rule in northern India and the empire continued to expand under his successors.

Foremost of these was the third emperor, Akbar (ruled 1556-1605). He was one of India's greatest rulers and his long reign is considered a golden age. He built a strong, centralized government run by both Muslims and Hindus (still the majority religion in India). Although himself a foreigner and a Muslim, he encouraged religious tolerance and the fusion of cultures this produced led to a flowering of science, art and literature. Magnificent buildings and monuments were erected and exquisite gardens laid out.

The Mughals also encouraged foreign trade. During the Sixteenth Century, the Portuguese, with their remarkable sailing skills, had found favour at the Mughal court and were allowed to trade freely along their north and eastern coasts. But when the Portuguese were defeated by the English at sea in 1611 the attitude of the court changed. In 1615, Akbar's son and successor, Jahangir (reigned 1605-27), received an official English ambassador at his court for the first time. The trade agreement that was negotiated then for the East India Company marked the beginning of England's increasing involvement with India.

Initially, England used its position of favour simply to build up trading activities through Asia, particularly with China. It was not until 1689 that the East India Company sought the support of the English Crown in establishing a 'nation of traders in India', that is to colonize the sub-continent, in order to give it a stronger grip on Asian trade. It was the decline of Mughal power in the early Eighteenth Century that gave the English the opportunity to fulfil this aim.

▼ A miniature painting from a Mughal book *The Life of Akbar*. The great emperor Akbar receives the infant Prince Abdur Rahim at Agra Fort in 1562. The art of miniature painting flourished in India under Mughal rule.

