

Jorge Semedo de Matos
*Roteiros e rotas portuguesas no Oriente
nos séculos XVI e XVII*

Lisbon, Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau – Fundação Jorge Álvares, 2018, 471 pp.

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When I started to read the very first lines of Semedo de Matos' book, *Roteiros e rotas portuguesas no Oriente nos séculos XVI e XVII*, it reminded me of a peculiar passage from Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Navigazioni e viaggi* (1550-1559). On the occasion of a visit to the well-known man of letters Girolamo Fracastoro, at Caffi, near Lake Garda, Ramusio met an intriguing unnamed philosopher and mathematician. At a certain point, the distinguished man, using a very large and special globe, began to explain how the Portuguese Monarchy spent inestimable resources on discovering new lands that for so many centuries were kept hidden. In conclusion of his discourse, the mathematician interestingly enumerated all the virgin lands of the globe. In this respect, the book by Semedo de Matos is about the Portuguese attempt to fill the (water) blank spaces of Fracastoro's globe. The author clarifies in which way, between the 16th and early 17th centuries, the nautical routes were defined, *rediscovered* or, in his words, "have fixed themselves on other ancestral ones" (p. 88). Semedo de Matos' New World is extended beyond the Strait of Malacca, a maritime space in which the reader comes across a plurality of lands, seas and routes.

The book, resulted from a doctoral dissertation presented at the University of Lisbon in 2016, is divided in two parts (the study and a documentary appendix with selected documents), but it also contains an essential bibliography on nautical sources, a short glossary of maritime terms, and images with a visual reconstruction of many routes. Geography is an important element in the architectural organization of the book. The first part contains the key elements of the author's interpretation of the Portuguese sailing experience in East Asia and is divided in four chapters. Each chapter is devoted to a specific space, respectively to the harbour of Malacca, a pivotal place located between the Indian Ocean and the Chinese Sea; to the Indonesian Archipelago

between Malacca and the Moluccas; to the Chinese Sea; and to the space between China and Japan.

The most interesting aspects of the book concern the construction of route patterns to China and Japan. The author highlights the encounter of different nautical traditions and especially insists on the importance of a clandestine pattern of navigation. The official system of voyages (the rules established by the Portuguese King, the control exercised by the cosmographer and the supervision of the *Casa da Índia*) was enriched by a parallel and subterranean network developed thanks to the “personal initiative” of local pilots (and, without a doubt, of the Portuguese ones who were escaping the rules!). Frequently, the author uses the word “informal” to describe this kind of navigation. The complexity of the navigation patterns, including the recourse to local know-how, comes to the fore in many statements, as we can read when the author points out that “the first voyage of Portuguese ships to China was realized [...] with Chinese pilots boarded in Malacca” (p. 132). According to Semedo de Matos, these considerations are applicable also to the rutters production. Rutters were not always official documents and frequently remained in a private sphere. The dangers of such voyages combined with the anxiety of the pilots, evoked by Semedo de Matos, made clear how important a rutter was, especially in the “Far East labyrinth of shoals and islands” (p. 224). In the pilots’ mind rutters were an indispensable instrument for navigation. The author, comparing different sailing directions, discloses the practical choices and secrets of different pilots for specific routes and alternative courses. He highlights the contingency of navigational practices and discusses meteorological aspects and weather conditions (monsoons, winds, sea currents etc.), night navigation and visibility, the presence of shallows and seabeds, the information about good and large harbours, or water colour observations. In addition to this, the narrative of Semedo de Matos is punctuated by quick explanations and captions relating to old toponyms (some of them still problematic and enigmatic) or to the spectres of lost vessels and shipwrecks, like the *Sabaia* case. The theme of the book could merit a wide readership, but sometimes the reader feels lost in the amount of data, technical issues, terminology and sources used, waiting for—perhaps—a more conceptual approach.

In the second part of his book, Semedo de Matos offers to scholars a rich *corpus* of unpublished nautical rutters of the Far East, accurately transcribed and modernised in terms of punctuation, capitalisation and abbreviations. The author made landfall on the paper-coastline of two important private collections, both held in Portugal (the codex *Casa do Cadaval* preserved in the family palace in Muge and the codex *Castelo Melhor* of the Vasconcellos e Souza family), to which he added other two representative

nautical texts (the *Livro de marinbaria* of André Pires, owned by the *Bibliothèque National de France* in Paris, and the *Livro de marinbaria* of the *Academia de la Historia de Madrid*). All these sources were known to scholars interested in nautical history of Portuguese empire from many decades, but Semedo de Matos' work is the first, most comprehensive, collection of rutters ever published for the regions east of Malacca. The author identified approximately 240 nautical rutters, all written in Portuguese, but only transcribed a selection of them. Unfortunately, besides the geographical coherence, no clear information is provided on the precise criteria used for selecting the rutters which should be published. Anyway, the transcription of both principal sources (*Casa do Cadaval* and *Castelo Melhor*) is introduced by an index of their contents.

In addition to a direct well-grounded knowledge of documents and main sources—Linschoten, João de Lisboa, Bernardo Fernandes, Gaspar Moreira and Manuel de Figueiredo, among others—the historical reconstruction benefits from the technical skills of Semedo de Matos. The book comes from the pen of a naval officer, inspired by his sailing life. Every line bears echoes of the “practice of the sailor” combined with a special “instinct”, of someone who “still hears close up the sea’s aroma and the wind, the sprays of the hailstorm and the sails and cables chanting” (p. 18). In sum, Semedo de Matos makes a significant contribution to a growing literature seeking to situate rutters in a more prominent place within the typologies of sources on navigation and ocean science. Moreover, the book anchors its sources in the complexity of the Far East framework, showing how commercial and private interests, navigational practices and different forms of knowledge-gathering (less or more intuitive) shaped the definition of sea routes in this corner of the early modern world.

Lisbon, 17 October 2020

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Acknowledgements

The RUTTER project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 833438).