

Roger Crowley
*Conquerors. How Portugal
Forged the First Global Empire*

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Conquerors is an agile, compelling book that lacks nothing in historical accuracy and methodological rigor. Roger Crowley's narration takes the reader, both the simple curious and the specialist, through a relatively short historical parable that changed the history of the world forever. The book starts with the exploration of the west African coast made by Diogo Cão between 1483 and 1486, and it ends in 1515 with the death of Afonso de Albuquerque, conqueror of Malacca, Goa and Ormuz. Between these chronological boundaries, the author explores the epic moments of the Portuguese maritime, military, and commercial expansion towards the east and the west. It recounts the achievements of some great Portuguese explorers such as Bartolomeu Dias, who rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Vasco da Gama, discoverer of India, and Pedro Álvares Cabral, who first arrived in Brazil.

Beyond its brilliant narrative, which certainly represent one of the merits of Crowley's work, the book shows a series of historiographical understatements of undeniable importance. *Conquerors*, in fact, within the Anglo-Saxon historiographic panorama, in which the studies on maritime and global early modern history somehow glorify the enterprises of English-speaking and Northern European nations, rediscovers with enthusiasm the part played by Portugal. The book insists on the central role of the small Iberian realm in establishing for the first time in history a global and stable network in commercial, cultural and technological terms. Roger Crowley not only tells a political history, but also a social and scientific one. The book brings to light elements that are often ignored in contemporary global historiography, like the cosmopolitan character of Lisbon in the 16th century. Already in 1500, the Portuguese capital had 15% of its population composed of Guinea blacks, in addition to the widespread presence of scientists, bankers, merchants, sailors and technicians from all European nations: Jewish, Germans, Flemish, Spanish, Italian, French. The Portuguese capital is defined as the "cutting edge of new ideas about cosmography and navigation, the shape of the world and how it might be imaged on maps" (p. 45). Lisbon was perhaps the first modern global city, or the first global city in the modern sense of the term. The Portuguese capital is described as a melting pot of ideas, experiences, exchanges and traffic comparable only to 19th century London or 20th century New York.

Conquerors, however, does not fall into celebratory tones and does not yield to deterministic temptations. Crowley explains the medieval roots of the India Run, in a sort of heterogenesis of ends. The Portuguese kingdom, locked in its narrow borders after the end of the *Reconquista*, had the chivalrous desire cloaked in crusade ethics to continue the war on Islam. In addition to this, the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 had opened the eyes of the small but striving Portuguese monarchy to the goods coming from the East, which had their last commercial hub in the North African city. The desire to outflank the Islamic trade monopoly, together with the desire to join forces with the mythical Christian king Prester John, were among the reasons that triggered a process of expansion and discovery that would lead to the birth of Europe's longest-running colonial empire. But Portuguese achievements are not spared a dark and contradictory side. The conflicts of power between the proud Lusitanian captains are described, such as those that opposed Francisco de Almeida and Alfonso de Albuquerque in 1508. Crowley is not unaware of the violence sometimes committed by the Portuguese. For example, during the conquest of Malacca in 1511 Albuquerque's soldiers were ordered "not to spare the lives of the Muslims, their wives and children wherever they are found" (p. 300).

The book, while maintaining its Eurocentric approach (a choice not without courage in modern historiography) does not lose sight of other geographical and cultural contexts and their role in this global story. Crowley illustrates the important albeit transient early 15th century African exploration of the Chinese fleet led by Muslim Admiral Zheng He. The author also highlights how the Portuguese did not create *ex nihilo* a trading network, but they linked the existing ones into a new shaped world that included new continents and territories. As Crowley writes, "for thousands of years the Indian Ocean had been the crossroads of the world's trade, shifting goods across a vast space from Canton to Cairo, Burma to Baghdad through a complex interlocking of trading systems" (p. 64).

In conclusion, Roger Crowley's *Conquerors* is a much-needed book in the field of global history. His fascinating narrative, his courageous approach and his rigorous historiographical method build a far-reaching historical fresco. Among the merits of this book is undoubtedly the fact that it highlights the propulsive power of a small medieval kingdom that within few years managed to connect the various parts of the world in a stable system. The compelling story of the beginnings of the Portuguese Empire, with its challenges and even its inconsistencies, not only reveals one of the most exciting chapters of western history but can make us more aware of some issues of the present time, from the new global integration and the frontiers of scientific progress, up to the new horizons of space exploration.

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