

GALLERY

Luís de Albuquerque, the historian of science

Aquilino Ribeiro said that the Portuguese language was a mausoleum of a great literature. But there are other things that seem to be buried in that language. One of these is the Portuguese history of the maritime discoveries. It does not require a great effort to confirm this addition of mine to Aquilino's mausoleum. If one simply browses through any standard history of science in English or French one barely finds any reference to the Portuguese maritime explorations in the 15th and 16th century.

Luís de Albuquerque spent a sizable part of his life uncovering and dusting off important pieces of what would be assembled into a remarkable mosaic telling this story, one that deserves a better place in the history of science books. Realizing the importance of Portuguese contributions to science and technology of the 15th and 16th centuries Albuquerque was unique in conducting this type of research. He ploughed through piles of documents reading them closely with an intuitive sense for the relevant documents; and collected data that he scrutinized and evaluated with a keen and critical eye. Indeed he wrote indefatigably on practically all scientific and technological aspects of the discoveries, producing an impressive array of books and papers, many of them not well-known even among his colleagues and countrymen. Hopefully one of his students will gather a team capable of preparing an edition of his complete works.

It is, nevertheless, outside Portugal that his writings should be better known. With the means at his disposal (and they were remotely far from what the young generation has available nowadays) he did what he could to bring the fruits of his research to the attention of the wider world. One of the difficulties in Albuquerque's works gaining attention outside Portugal was that his English pieces (some two dozen, including thirteen encyclopedia entries) were scattered over too many disparate publications for them to make a mark. Another difficulty was the fact that many of his writings were published in Portugal, and so had only a limited circulation outside of the country. Of his encyclopedia entries, practically only those written in the *Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia* and the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* enjoyed a broader circulation, but those pieces form only a mere

fraction of Albuquerque's research.

A good selection and edition of his papers already available in English would most certainly attract the attention of a prestigious publisher interested in the history of science. Actually, it may be the case that one of Albuquerque's most productive former students may accept the challenge of carrying out such a task. But there are other works of his which could and should be translated.



Luís de Albuquerque

Conspicuously missing is an English series or library of classic works of Portuguese culture. Figuring prominently among them should be a translation of at least one of Albuquerque's books. The inclusion of his *Portuguese navigation: an historical development* in the book catalogue of the "Circa 1992: Art in the Age of Exploration" exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is a mere example of the interest a translation of his works would generate (ed. Jay A. Stevenson, Washington, 1992, pp. 35-39). Luís de Albuquerque tried to entice foreign historians of science with the unknown data available in the Portuguese travel literature of the discoveries, but very few could penetrate to the fruits contained

within, due to their lack of knowledge of the Portuguese language. One exception was the Dutch historian of science Reyer Hooykaas, who took up the challenge and produced a most impressive study on Dom João de Castro (“Science in Manueline style”), which, despite its near 300 pages, was unfortunately buried as an appendix to the Portuguese edition of the complete works of D. João de Castro. Fortunately, one of Hooykaas students, H. Floris Cohen, took note of that study and recognized the contribution of the Portuguese (and of D. João de Castro in particular) among the path breakers for the roads to modern science in his book *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1994) and he will do so again in

his forthcoming volume *How Modern Science Came Into the World*.

Luís de Albuquerque would be glad to know that his work has, after all, had an impact in the historiography of science. But I am sure that if I were to bring him the news he would dismiss it with his habitual modesty and proceed to change the conversation. Always ready for a good laugh he would ask, “Don’t you have any new joke about Mathematicians?”

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