3 Explorers and Freebooters

The discovery of America and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind (Adam Smith, 1723–90).

the greatest event since the creation of the world, apart from the incarnation and death of Him who created it (Francisco López de Gómara, written in 1552).\(^1\)

Both Smith, the Scottish economist, and the Spanish chronicler who preceded him by a couple of centuries, lived while the expansion of Europe into the wider world, which they described with such enthusiasm, was still in active and successful progress. It was a major element in the climate of their times. Today’s readers, to whom the entire collapse of those extensive and extraordinary empires that Europeans built in other continents is already a matter of recorded history, may be inclined to dismiss as out of date the united verdict of Spaniard and Scot. Readers of a more philosophical cast of mind may even find the precipitous decline of Europe in half a century as remarkable as the five hundred year ascendancy that preceded it.

Even when Europe still bestrode the world in triumph, the writers who celebrated the achievements of their continent might have remembered that Portuguese and Spaniards, in the late fifteenth century, did not begin the movement of peoples and the subjugation of foreigners. Migration had been on a larger scale when the world was an emptier place during the centuries that preceded and followed the beginning of the Christian era. Then it was the nomadic tribes, who ploughed no fields but drove their cattle before them, who invaded and plundered the fat lands of more civilised peoples. In Peking, as in Athens, they were collectively known as barbarians.

Neither the Portuguese nor the Chinese were barbarians, though the Portuguese sometimes behaved as if they were. Both had reached, by the standards of the fifteenth century, a level of civilisation and technological skill well above the human average. This was

J. Cable, The Political Influence of Naval Force in History
© James Cable 1998
particularly true of the Chinese, whose economic and political development allowed them to pursue, between 1405 and 1433, a sustained policy of 'showing the flag' on a scale, so the Chinese chroniclers suggest, more grandiose than any other nation could then have attempted. Cheng Ho, the Imperial Palace Eunuch who commanded these expeditions, had 62 specially built ships, 37,000 officers and men and 'vast amounts of gold and other treasures'. Some of his ships are said by Needham,² the British authority on early Chinese technology, to have been at least five times as large as Vasco da Gama's, though their recorded dimensions³ have aroused scepticism among later naval writers. Could a ship 444 feet long and 180 feet wide actually have been sailed, nine masts notwithstanding, from China to the Indonesian islands, Ceylon, south-west India, the Persian Gulf, Aden and East Africa? The length/breadth ratio of roughly 7:3, contrasted with the 4:1 of an Elizabethan galleon, would suggest a sluggish sailor.

Be that as it may, it is easy enough to believe that visits from Cheng Ho's fleets impressed peoples and rulers along the shores of the Indian Ocean with the power and majesty of China. Many of the countries visited were themselves fairly civilised, though naturally much smaller and weaker, and Cheng Ho would bring back to China on his return journeys treaties of allegiance, a few rulers anxious to declare their fealty and ambassadors bearing tribute. The Yung-Lu emperor who had authorised these expeditions particularly appreciated such gifts as lions, ostriches, zebras and giraffes, but there was always a variety of exotic produce to supplement the gratifying acknowledgement of the Celestial Throne. After 1432 the expeditions were discontinued, perhaps because of their cost, perhaps in order to give priority to resisting barbarian pressure on China's northern borders. Before the end of the century, for reasons still imperfectly understood, China had turned her back on the ocean and reinstated the ban on maritime trade imposed by the Hung-Wu emperor in 1372, a ban that would be renewed, often ineffectively, in later centuries.⁴

Cheng Ho's fleets were a magnificent maritime achievement, but, in the light of the available evidence, not an example of the use of naval force for political purposes.

The early Portuguese voyages to the Indian Ocean were on a more modest scale. They had to be. With a mid-fifteenth-century population of about a million, Portugal was a very small nation compared with China, which may already have had as many as 80