There can be few groups in sixteenth-century Ireland who had to juggle political and religious loyalties more constantly than the internationally trading port merchants. Because their business obliged them to cross between Protestant and Catholic jurisdictions and deal in territories where the Inquisition operated, they were the first to feel the practical consequences of the religious conformity required by the Elizabethan regime. Their lot was conflicted and not always happy. According to the traveller Henry Piers, writing in the 1590s and speaking in particular of the Galway merchants, Richard Skerret and Valentine Blake, then trading through Seville,

... doe prove evidentlie that the merchants of Irelande which trafficke for Spaine were then in a verie harde Case, for there, they weare for the moste parte suspected of heresie, and reputed for spies, heere in Ireland vexed and ill thought of for beinge papistes and mistrusted as intelligencers for the Spainiardes.2

The ambiguities of which Piers wrote, not all of which were quite so negative, remained at the heart of the Irish mercantile experience in Iberia throughout the early modern period. For Irish merchants in Spain, the political and religious uncertainties of the mid-sixteenth century greatly complicated trading activity. However, while Elizabeth and Philip’s representatives alternately fought and negotiated, traders adapted to create for themselves a role and position that would ensure their usefulness to both the Spanish and British regimes for the following two centuries. Their experience of the Inquisition was part of this process. For the Holy Office, the Irish were initially just another suspect foreign group, like the English, the French and the Dutch. However, the
strategic necessities of both the Spanish and the English and the Irish merchants’ ability to pose convincingly as both orthodox Catholics and as vassals of the English monarch, created circumstances that they learned to exploit. The first evidence of their success came in 1584, with their exemption from the Spanish trade embargoes. This was a token of things to come.

**Sinews of trade**

The longstanding Irish trade with Spain and Portugal comes into early modern inquisitorial focus at a key moment in the economic history of Iberia. The creation of a truly Atlantic economy, consequent on Portuguese and Spanish discoveries, had multinational foundations and affected all their European trading partners. It was, at the same time, shaped by the fiscalization and centralization activities of the Iberian monarchies. Like all international merchants, the Irish active in Spain operated under state licences, respected navigational controls and acquiesced to state oversight. However, although state regulation was unavoidable (smugglers aside), the trading and navigation sectors that sustained the vast colonizing enterprises of the Spanish and the Portuguese were based in and carried on through urban centres, like Lisbon and Seville, which retained the trading and governing liberties inherited from the Middle Ages. In Ireland, an equivalent role was played by the port cities in Leinster, Munster and Connacht. Despite the historical exactions of local potentates and the gradual encroachment of the sixteenth-century state, these towns and their merchants maintained a significant degree of autonomy in local government, the organization of religion and the management of their international contacts. At the beginning of this period, their loyalties were first and foremost to their cities with their cultural and religious traditions.

Although commercial contact between sixteenth-century Ireland and Iberia was tiny from the Spanish and Portuguese viewpoints, it was significant from the Irish side, with Spain and Portugal being Ireland’s most important continental trading partners in the sixteenth century. The exploitation of primary produce was at the core of the relationship, especially Irish fisheries, which attracted fleets from a number of European countries, but especially Spain. The exploitation of this resource was regulated, with taxes levied on both the Spanish and Irish sides. Fishing stimulated trade and brought Irish merchant ships to Spanish wharfs. Waterford was the most active international port on the island, with nearly half the Irish vessels to Spain in the period