

**Marcocci, Giuseppe. *A consciência de um império: Portugal e o seu mundo (Sécs. XV-XVII)*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2012. ISBN: 978-989-26-0132-8**

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Given the importance of early modern Portuguese expansion in the history of the slave trade, economic globalization and the development of international law, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the juridical and ideological foundations of Portugal's transcontinental empire. This is especially apparent when compared to the rich historiography on the imperial ideologies of early modern Spain and Britain.<sup>2</sup> And although there is a vast literature on the economic, political and cultural history of Portugal's expansion, few authors have directly analyzed its ideological aspects in a comprehensive way over the long term.<sup>3</sup>

Historians have long been attentive to the important role of missionaries, especially the Jesuits, in Portugal's early expansion overseas.<sup>4</sup> Yet the majority of research has focused on economic aspects of Portuguese expansion, with religious, moral and ideological concerns as secondary, or portrayed as having served simply to justify a profit-driven imperial enterprise. In *A consciência de um império: Portugal e o seu mundo (Sécs. XV-XVII)*, Giuseppe Marcocci helps balance this historiographical tendency and presents a wealth of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, James Muldoon, *The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for Conquest in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire: Ideas in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> A handful of authors have analyzed ideological features of Portuguese imperialism, but have focused specifically on either literary or juridical aspects, or on specific time periods. See Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, "L'idée impériale manuéline," in *La Découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe: Actes du Colloque*, edited by Jean Aubin, 35-103 (Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre Culturel Portugais, 1990), Diogo Ramada Curto, "A literatura e o império: Entre o espírito cavaleiroso, as trocas da corte e o humanismo cívico," in *História da Expansão Portuguesa, Vol. I: A Formação do Império, 1415-1570*, edited by Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri, 434-454 (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1998), António Vasconcelos de Saldanha, *Iustum imperium: Dos tratados como fundamento do Império dos portugueses no oriente. Estudo de história do Direito internacional e do Direito português* (Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, 2004), and Pedro Cardim, "La aspiración imperial de la monarquía portuguesa (siglos XVI y XVII)," in *Comprendere le monarchie iberiche: Risorse materiali e rappresentazioni del potere. Atti del Seminario Internazionale. Roma, 8-9 novembre 2007*, edited by Gaetano Sabatini, 37-72 (Rome: Viella, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The key work on the subject remains Dauril Alden's, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Role of the Jesuits in Portugal, its Empire, and Beyond, 1540-1750* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

new evidence to demonstrate the mutually constitutive role of religion and commerce in Portugal's early expansion. Most importantly, Marcocci's work represents the first sustained, systematic analysis of contemporary moral critiques of Portugal's imperial project and how the crown and court theologians attempted to deflect these criticisms in justifying Portuguese claims to dominion over newly incorporated subject populations in the rapidly expanding colonial world.

In *A consciência de um império*, Marcocci expands on the preliminary arguments set out in his shorter book, *L'invenzione di un impero: Politica e cultura nel mondo portoghese (1450-1600)*, published in Italian in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Marcocci's familiarity with the rich Italian legal historiography on the medieval juridical concept of "conscience,"<sup>6</sup> and his expertise as a historian of the Portuguese Inquisition,<sup>7</sup> makes his approach innovative and enables him to examine with particular skill the often fraught relationship between the Portuguese crown in Lisbon and Papal authorities in Rome, and their collective role in the early development of a juridical-theological defense of Portuguese claims to dominion overseas. He divides the book neatly into four theme-based parts of three chapters each, capped by a prologue and conclusion, and adopts a global frame in tracing the complex development of a Portuguese imperial "conscience" from the early fifteenth century to the union of the Iberian crowns in the late sixteenth century.

In part 1, *A Vocação imperial portuguesa*, Marcocci examines the role of the slave trade in the early phase of Portuguese expansion along the West African coast, the joint importance of commerce and religion in the first official articulations of a Portuguese imperial mission, and the evolving relationship between the king and the pope during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. It is across these first three chapters constituting part 1 that Marcocci sets out two of the book's most innovative themes: the importance of the African slave trade in spurring the earliest and sharpest debates about the morality of the Portuguese imperial endeavor, and the largely overlooked significance of the Mesa da Consciência e Ordens, founded in 1532, in fusing political and ecclesiastical power and serving as the central body of adjudication for all matters regarding the moral conscience of the empire.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Marcocci, *L'invenzione di un impero: Politica e cultura nel mondo portoghese, 1450-1600* (Rome: Carocci, 2011, 191 pp.).

<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Marcocci, *A consciência de um império: Portugal e o seu mundo, Séculos XV-XVII* (Coimbra, Portugal: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2012) 24.

<sup>7</sup> Giuseppe Marcocci and José Pedro Paiva, *História da Inquisição portuguesa, 1536-1821* (Lisbon: Esfera dos Livros, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 39.

Part 2, *A Etiópia, prisma do império*, contains a fascinating discussion on the prominence of Ethiopia and the myth of Prester John in the Portuguese imperial imaginary. Reaching back into the mid-fifteenth century, Marcocci argues that the potential discovery of Prester John's Ethiopia was intended to signify for Portugal what the discovery of America had meant for Spain. Religious and political interests were combined amidst the millenarian dreams of unifying the Roman and Ethiopian churches, of building a pan-Christian alliance to reverse Ottoman expansion, and of bringing about a universal conversion to Christianity. But as these hopes slowly faded with the inability to locate the mythical Christian ruler, literature on Ethiopia became the subject of acute censorship by the Portuguese crown. According to Marcocci, the growing censorship establishment combined with the recently founded Mesa da Consciência (1532) and Inquisition (1536) to become the prime arbiters of the Portuguese Catholic imperial conscience.<sup>9</sup>

In part 3, *Conquista, comércio, navegação: Um senhorio disputado*, Marcocci moves into the mid-sixteenth century. He explains that Portuguese observers, including João de Barros, drew on Machiavelli to highlight continuities between the virtue of Roman and Portuguese soldiers, and how the Portuguese, like the Romans, might tolerate the religious and cultural diversity of subject populations across their expanded composite empire. Yet Marcocci also emphasizes that other figures, like the jurist Jerónimo Osório, criticized Machiavelli for his marginalization of religion in the promotion of civic and military virtue.<sup>10</sup> As the balance of imperial power shifted with the sixteenth-century rise of French and English sea power in the Atlantic, Portuguese justifications of overseas *imperium* based on the fifteenth-century papal bulls lost prominence, slowly replaced by a debate among Iberian jurist-theologians, including some serving on the Mesa da Consciência, over the issue of commercial monopoly. Expanding on Vitoria's doctrine of the natural rights of men, Castilian jurist Vazquez de Menchaca applied it to oceanic space and was the first to argue against Portugal's right to monopolistic empire, a point which Grotius later famously extended.<sup>11</sup> Yet, surprisingly, the sharp internal Iberian discussion failed to generate any substantial international juridical debate, and the conflict instead remained restricted to a closed group of councilors and foreign diplomats in the Portuguese royal court.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, in part 4, *Conversões imperiais: Para uma sociedade nos trópicos?* Marcocci turns to the issue of conversion and its role in the formation of unified yet hierarchical Lusophone

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<sup>9</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 215.

<sup>10</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 268.

<sup>11</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 359.

<sup>12</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 338.

colonial societies. He examines the methods and significance of the conversion of Indians around Goa, African slaves across the empire, and the native peoples of Brazil. The Portuguese used conversion to incorporate these newly subjected populations into the Catholic faith, while at the same time subjugating them within colonial society using the famous purity of blood statutes (*limpeza do sangue*) to deprive them of their absolute freedom. Marcocci argues that the justification of this process was the most ancient juridical foundation of the Portuguese empire.<sup>13</sup> The conversion of African slaves, for instance, was itself seen as providing a sort of freedom, promising eternal salvation in the afterlife. But this rosy view contrasted sharply with the harsh realities of slavery, which eventually came to elicit the harshest moral critiques that the empire would ever endure.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his specific focus on ideological debates within the Portuguese empire, Marcocci does well to set these debates within larger political contexts, with attention being paid to the influence of rival European powers, as well as an array of non-European polities, especially in Asia, in determining the nature of the Portuguese presence in each place. And although depending far more on printed sources than archival ones, Marcocci has nonetheless produced a work of impressive depth and erudition. He pays sufficient due to frequently cited authors such as João de Barros, Damião de Góis and Manuel da Nóbrega, while at the same time demonstrating the importance of lesser-known figures like Pedro Margalho, Fernando Oliveira and António Pinheiro, among many others.

Marcocci is most persuasive in analyzing the decisions set down by the Mesa da Consciência and in arguing for the rising power of court theologians, especially Jesuits, in the Portuguese empire over the sixteenth century. But what do the critiques of Oliveira and Nóbrega on African and Indian slavery, for instance, say about the conscience of royal authority itself? So little of the Mesa's official documentation survived the 1755 Lisbon earthquake that it is often difficult to assess the impact of external criticism on the ultimate decisions taken by imperial officials on each specific issue. Yet Marcocci makes a strong case that these debates slowly coalesced into an increasingly defined set of internal justifications of Portuguese imperial practice.

For a work focused specifically on the Portuguese imperial conscience, Marcocci dedicates considerable attention to Spanish authors, including Menchaca, Tomás de Mercado and Luis de Molina. While these and an array of other Spaniards leveled penetrating critiques against the Portuguese empire, often from within Portugal, Marcocci

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<sup>13</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 371.

<sup>14</sup> Marcocci, *A consciência de um império*, 405.

would do well to expound even further on the deep imbrication between the Spanish and Portuguese juridical-theological traditions in explaining the impact of Spanish critiques on the policy of the Portuguese empire, both in theory and in practice. This is a minor criticism, however, more a question of emphasis than interpretation, and hardly detracts from the merits of Marcocci's impressive work.

Perhaps the book's prime virtue is its potential as a platform for further research. Rather than arguing for the development of an oversimplified, consistently uniform Portuguese imperial ideology, Marcocci highlights how commercial monopoly, the slave trade and conversion took center stage as issues in polyphonic debates over the morality of the Portuguese empire. Drawing on the basis set out by Marcocci, further studies might analyze how these debates compared to contemporaneous ones in the Spanish Monarchy. Although the Iberians drew on similar juridical and theological traditions, how did the specific circumstances and methods of Spanish expansion contribute to the development of an imperial conscience that was distinct from that of the Portuguese? What impact did the union of the Iberian crowns from 1581 to 1640 have on debates over the morality of the Portuguese empire, and to what extent, if at all, is it possible to speak of a common Iberian imperial conscience before, during or after that period? Finally, further studies might build on Marcocci's fine analysis of debates over the morality of commerce, the subjugation of vassals and the development of new colonial societies, to show what legal instruments the crown used to justify its territorial dominion, thereby providing an even fuller vision of the complex juridical and ideological foundations of Portuguese *imperium*.

Marcocci's work is a major contribution to the already rich literature on the Portuguese empire. One only hopes it will be made available in English in order to gain the wide readership it deserves and to help enhance our understanding of how critiques and justifications of Portuguese *imperium* compared to those of the contemporaneous empires of Britain, France and Spain.