

2024

## Two Houses Divided? The Parallel Histories of the Casa de Contratación and the Casa da Índia, 1500-1580

Gustavo L. Romero  
Middlebury College, [gromero@middlebury.edu](mailto:gromero@middlebury.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Organization Development Commons](#), and the [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Romero, Gustavo L. (2024) "Two Houses Divided? The Parallel Histories of the Casa de Contratación and the Casa da Índia, 1500-1580," *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*: 5 (2), 197-219. 10.24968/2693-244X.5.2.7 <https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj/vol5/iss2/7>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal by an authorized editor of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

## **Two Houses Divided? The Parallel Histories of the Casa de Contratación and the Casa da Índia, 1500-1580**

Gustavo L. Romero  
Middlebury College

This paper seeks to investigate the histories of the Spanish *Casa de Contratación* and the Portuguese *Casa da Índia* in relation to one another, identifying possible ways in which each drew inspiration, or imitated the other during the period from 1500 to 1580. Though there is existing research into the individual Casas, comparative approaches have generally been avoided. This work synthesizes the literature and tracks interactions or trends between the Iberian empires from both an institutional and interpersonal perspective. Through analysis of bureaucratic charters, letters, and other documents, it outlines the time periods, possible reasons, and results of this imitation game. Ultimately, after decades of trial and error, each empire settled into a model more suited to its imperial situation on the ground: for the Spanish, this was a more privatized model, while for the Portuguese it was statist in the East and more privatized in Brazil.

## Introduction

*Imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery; it's the sincerest form of learning.*

- George Bernard Shaw

In the early modern period, a time defined by remarkable maritime exploration and imperial pursuits, the Spanish and Portuguese empires emerged as formidable contenders for global dominance. Following the expeditions of Christopher Columbus (1492) and Vasco da Gama (1498), the Iberian Empires began a meteoric rise to wealth and power, decidedly shifting the economic center of Europe from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Even so, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal were heading into uncharted waters, as the mission of designing an empire that spanned oceans and continents was a daunting one. Both empires needed to create an administrative infrastructure that regulated, advanced, and made profitable their colonial pursuits overseas. The Portuguese *Casa da Índia* (“House of the Indies”) and the Spanish *Casa de Contratación* (“House of Trade”), among other institutions, sought to accomplish these goals. At first glance, the two empires’ colonial strategies seem distinct to the point of almost being opposite. Generally, while the Spanish pursued a more land-based, exploitative empire in the Americas, the Portuguese opted for a “factory and fortress” empire based on maritime trade along the coasts of Africa and the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> This popular contrast, though an oversimplification, has become entrenched in the modern historiography. In tracking the histories of the two *Casas*, it becomes clear that from their inception, despite the apparent differences between the Iberian empires, there were processes of mutual learning, shared

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Maxwell, “Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System, 1415–1520,” *Modern Humanities Research Association*, Portuguese Studies, 8 (1992): 1-6.

<sup>2</sup> Carla Rahn Phillips, “The Growth and Composition of Trade in the Iberian Empires, 1450–1750,” in *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, (1990), 74.

wisdom, and imitation taking place. In this essay, I will analyze and compare the *Casas*, exploring Spanish and Portuguese colonial dynamics and discussing possible ways in which the two influenced or learned from one another on both an institutional and interpersonal level.

The academic literature directly comparing the two Iberian empires, not least their *Casas*, is limited, particularly in English.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that while scholars writing in Spanish and Portuguese have created an extensive and detailed literature on their respective empires and *Casas*, they generally avoid comparative analyses.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, leading scholars such as Ângela Barreto Xavier, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Pedro Cardim, and others have pioneered this burgeoning field of scholarship. In his celebrated article, “Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500-1640,” Sanjay Subrahmanyam applies the term *translatio imperii*, which refers to the transfer of imperial models and notions, to the context of Portugal and Spain. Though usually used to describe the succession of rulers or dynasties within the same empire, he offers a new understanding of *translatio imperii* “in the sense of movement across a group of competing empires.”<sup>5</sup> It is in the spirit of this interpretation that I approach the following discussion of influence, imitation, and exchange between the Iberian Empires and their *Casas*.

---

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, “The Growth and Composition of Trade” (1990), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ângela Barreto Xavier, Federico Palomo, and Roberta Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada: (Séculos XVI-XVIII): Dinâmicas Imperiais e Circulação de Modelos Político-Administrativos*, (1a edição Lisboa, Portugal: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2018), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500–1640,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 1, 2007): 1359–60.

## Commerce, Colonies, and the *Casas*

The discovery of a maritime route to India and its lucrative spice trade, achieved by Vasco da Gama's rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, was a major turning point for the Portuguese. They could now bypass the Venetians, Mamluks, and other costly intermediaries who had for centuries monopolized trade with the East and access these markets directly.<sup>6</sup> In 1500, the Portuguese Crown established the *Casa da Índia* to act as a central hub for overseeing commercial and trade matters in the newly unlocked Indian subcontinent. However, this kind of colonial institution was by no means unprecedented in the empire. Since the time of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal had established the *Casa da Ceuta* (1415), the *Casa da Guiné* (1443), and the *Casa da Mina* (1482), each building on the previous with similar fiscally focused missions.<sup>7</sup> This rich history in colonial administration informed the structure of the new *Casa da Índia*, whose main functions would be managing commercial transactions, merchant contracts, the appointment and transportation of officers, the collection of duties and taxes, and importantly, directly controlling trade monopolies through the vast network of Portuguese state-run *feitorias* ("factories", or trading posts) across the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup>

While the *Casa da Índia* enjoyed almost complete jurisdiction over commercial matters, there were other governmental institutions that complemented it. The *Armazéns da Guiné e Índia* ("Warehouses of Guinea and India") were charged with the production of nautical instruments, captains' training, maritime cartography, and other technical issues of overseas voyages. The

---

<sup>6</sup> William S. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Ângela Barreto Xavier, "The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration in the Portuguese Empire," *Journal of Early Modern History* 22, no. 5 (October 2, 2018): 328.

*Casa* and the *Armazéns*, together with the *Ribeira das Naus* (“Shipyard”), and the *Armaria* (“Armory”), worked to support the ever-expanding empire.<sup>9</sup> Portugal, with nearly nine decades of colonial experience, entered the sixteenth century possessing a diversified, cohesive system of institutions which the Spanish would not come close to rivalling for many years.

Columbus’ arrival in the Americas, and the subsequent papal allocation of much of the allegedly ‘undiscovered’ land to Spain through the Treaty of Tordesillas, had major repercussions for the developing empire. It catalyzed the development of Spain’s own system of imperial administration. In 1503, the *Casa de Contratación* was established by royal decree in Seville to handle commercial and other matters concerning the New World.<sup>10</sup> As the first colonial institution of its type in Spain, the *Casa* drew inspiration from its Portuguese counterpart in terms of its structure and operation.<sup>11</sup> Being the first also meant that it lacked the supportive administrative infrastructure that the *Armazéns* and *Ribeira das Naus* offered the *Casa da Índia*. The *Casa de Contratación* therefore, needed to have a wider scope. Like the *Casa da Índia*, it managed overseas trade, the collection of taxes and duties, and private merchant contracts. It also resolved commercial disputes. Like the *Armazéns*, it oversaw captains’ education, maritime cartography, and other scientific endeavors. Additionally, it had a political dimension to its jurisdiction, at least during its earlier years, as it became the means by which the Spanish Crown would communicate with and send appointed officers, soldiers, missionaries, and other groups to the New World.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Barreto Xavier, “The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration” (2018): 332-3.

<sup>10</sup> Ramón María Serrera Contreras, “La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla (1503-1717),” *Boletín de La Real Academia Sevillana de Buenas Letras* 36 (2008): 133.

<sup>11</sup> Serrera Contreras, “La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla” (2008): 136.

<sup>12</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1374.

In comparing the two *Casas* during their earlier years, it is crucial to note the differing roles each one served within their empire: whereas the *Casa da Índia* specialized in commerce, the *Casa de Contratación* centralized various commercial, political, and scientific functions under one organization. Indeed, the creation of both *Casas* led to the emergence of a science of administration in Spain and Portugal.<sup>13</sup> Any person wishing to travel to or conduct business with the colonies, whether a private merchant, government agent, or explorer, had to be cleared by Lisbon for the Portuguese and Seville for the Spanish.<sup>14</sup> Meticulous records were kept of every overseas voyage; individuals and goods onboard each ship were noted on departure and scrutinized again upon arrival. These records were stored and cross-referenced at various points to spot any incongruencies and to ensure that each Crown was paid its fair share.<sup>15</sup> As stated in the *Casa da India*'s 1509 set of rules: "the book of expenses must be matched with the book of contracts."<sup>16</sup> Using double-entry bookkeeping and other methods, the *Casas* sought to bureaucratize and track developments with their new imperial frontiers. Moreover, all ships returning to the mainland had to dock and report to the *Casas* in Lisbon or Seville, which henceforth exercised monopolies on colonial trade. Both cities would consequently become among the richest and most populous in Europe over the course of the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Each Crown's choice of appointment for their *Casa*'s first Chief Officer provides some insight into the priorities and character of the two Iberian empires during the early stages of

---

<sup>13</sup> Barreto Xavier, "The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration" (2018): 328.

<sup>14</sup> Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Barreto Xavier, "The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration" (2018): 340.

<sup>16</sup> Damião Peres, *Regimento Das Cazas Das Indias e Mina*, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Instituto de Estudos Historicos Dr. Antonio de Vasconcelos (1947), chap. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Serrera Contreras, "La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla" (2008): 157.

overseas expansion. In the case of Portugal, in 1501, King Manuel I merged the old *Casa da Guiné e Mina* with the new *Casa da Índia*,<sup>18</sup> placing it under the control of Chief Officer Fernão Lourenço. His previous tenure as Chief Officer of the *Casa da Guiné e Mina*, coupled with his authority over the *Casa dos Escravos* (“House of Slaves”) and the *Torre do Tombo* (“Royal Archive”), underscores a Portuguese commitment to consolidating control over the expanding Atlantic slave trade and the *Carreira da Índia*, or “Indian Run.”<sup>19</sup> It further reflects Portugal’s wealth of experience and desire for a coordinated approach to empire-building. Conversely, Spain’s appointment of Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, the Archdeacon of Seville and Chaplain with close personal connections to Queen Isabella I, highlights the relatively nascent nature of the Spanish overseas empire. Fonseca’s robust background in the Catholic Church<sup>20</sup> likewise points to Spain’s dedication to religious conversion as a key element of their colonial mission.<sup>21</sup> Just over a decade after driving the Moors out of Iberia, expelling the Jews, and initiating the Spanish Inquisition, religion was clearly at the forefront of the Spanish imperial consciousness.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say the Portuguese were not religiously motivated as well—they also sent missionaries across their empire, after all.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it should be emphasized that the Portuguese and Spanish overseas empires were fundamentally different, and what worked for one empire need not necessarily be compatible with the situation of the other. It is thus important to frame the purposes and histories of the *Casas* within a broader colonial context.

---

<sup>18</sup> Some now refer to it as the ‘*Casa da Índia, Guiné, e Mina*’, but for the sake of brevity I will hereafter refer to it simply as the *Casa da Índia*.

<sup>19</sup> Barreto Xavier, “The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration” (2018): 334–5.

<sup>20</sup> Fonseca also served as Bishop of Badajoz, Córdoba, and Palencia. For his life, see John F. O’Hara, “Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca: First President of the Indies (1493-1523),” *The Catholic Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (July 1917): 131-150.

<sup>21</sup> Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 92.

<sup>22</sup> The reigning monarchs were Ferdinand and Isabella, “the Catholic Kings”. On religion see Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 13-5.

<sup>23</sup> Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 29-30.



On the home front, Spain had a significantly larger population than its Iberian neighbor. It outstripped Portugal by a factor of four or five, according to census data from the early sixteenth century (see Figure 1).<sup>24</sup> This superior endowment of human resources allowed it to support a vast, land-based empire in the New World through settlement. There were few if any established empires in the Americas when the Europeans arrived, save for the Aztecs around modern-day Mexico and the Incas in the Andes, both of which the Spanish subdued in 1521 and 1532, respectively.<sup>25</sup> This relative absence of centralized powers on the continent made large-scale settlement possible for the Spanish, which it should be noted was not an option for the Portuguese in the East.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, although the indigenous populations had gold and systems of exchange, “their commercial arrangements had little in common with the sophisticated trading networks of Asia, Europe, or Africa.”<sup>27</sup> Since the preexisting trade networks of the Caribbean were neither stable nor extensive enough for Spain to support an overseas empire, a strategy of settlement and economic exploitation was the only way the Spaniards could construct a financially viable empire. Early on, there was a move to reinvent the *encomienda* system in the Caribbean context to organize, govern, and develop the region, which would have catastrophic consequences for indigenous populations.<sup>28</sup> Settlers and conquistadors were given vast swathes

---

<sup>24</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1365.

<sup>25</sup> Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 52-8.

<sup>26</sup> While the Portuguese did establish footholds in the East such as Goa and Macau, these examples represent strategic trading posts and administrative centers with small permanent populations rather than large-scale colonial settlements. The presence of centralized powers, such as the Mughal Empire in India and the Ming Dynasty in China, limited the possibility for extensive Portuguese settlement. The Portuguese primarily acquired these outposts through negotiation with local powers, treaties centered on trade, and limited military engagements, as in Goa.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips, “The Growth and Composition of Trade” (1990), 74.

<sup>28</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1366.

of land, and by leveraging native labor for resource extraction, they began to make the business of colonization a highly lucrative one for Spain.<sup>29</sup>

The *encomienda* model showcases the degree to which the Spanish relied on private participation for their colonial project. The *Casa de Contratación* thus took a more hands-off approach. Generally, it invited private actors to develop the territories of the New World themselves, collecting payments and imposing penalties on any who failed to comply with its policies.<sup>30</sup> These included condemnations for smuggling, bribery, and various taxes. By far the most significant source of revenue for the *Casa* and the Crown was the *quinto real*, or “royal fifth”, an aptly named tax on twenty percent of all bullion (gold and silver) and precious metals extracted from the colonies. It often also included additional fees for assay and coinage.<sup>31</sup> Merchant families and banks from all over Europe, notably the Italian city-states and southern Germany, were well represented in Seville. They participated heavily in the financing of voyages *extra territorium*, such as the historic expeditions of Columbus, Vespucci, and Magellan.<sup>32</sup> The mercantile class in the city would later create the *Consulado de Mercaderes* (“Merchants’ Guild”) in 1543, which adjudicated commercial disputes and worked closely with the *Casa* to facilitate private investment in the colonies.<sup>33</sup> Even before the establishment of the *Casa* and the *Consulado*, Seville had become a hub for trade with Northern Africa, Portugal, and the Canary Islands. Boasting a long mercantile tradition and a sheltered port on the Guadalquivir River, Seville became the ideal placement for both organizations.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Serrera Contreras, “La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla” (2008): 136.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, “The Growth and Composition of Trade” (1990), 84.

<sup>32</sup> Maxwell, “Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System” (1992): 8.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, “The Growth and Composition of Trade” (1990), 76–7; see also Eufemio Lorenzo Sanz, *Comercio de España Con América En La Época de Felipe II* (Valladolid: Institución Cultural Simancas, 1986), 168-9.

<sup>34</sup> Serrera Contreras, “La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla” (2008): 137.

Figure 1: <sup>35</sup>**Table 1**

<i>Spain</i>		<i>Portugal</i>	
<i>Region</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Population</i>
Castile	4,513,000	Trás-os-Montes	178,000
Catalonia	312,000	Entre Douro e Minho	275,000
Valencia	300,000	Beira	334,000
Aragon	290,000	Estremadura	262,000
Navarre	152,000	Entre Tejo e Guadiana	244,000
Alava	50,000	Algarve	44,000
Others	132,000	Lisbon	65,000
Total	5,749,000	Total	1,402,000

SOURCES: For Spain, A. W. Lovett, *Early Habsburg Spain, 1517–1598* (Oxford, 1986), 245–247, quoting Felipe Ruiz Martín, “La población española al comienzo de los tiempos modernos,” *Cuadernos de Historia* (Madrid) 1 (1967): 189–202. For Portugal, Orlando Ribeiro et al., *Geografia de Portugal*, vol. 3: *O povo português* (Lisbon, 1987), 735.

Portugal encountered a different set of circumstances in its own overseas empire, which at first spanned the coasts of Africa and the Indian subcontinent. The combination of a smaller territory and population with an experienced seafaring class predisposed Lisbon to pursue a more maritime, trade-focused strategy. Legitimized by papal bulls, the Portuguese began their empire along the West African coast, establishing *feitorias*, such as that of São Jorge da Mina in the Gulf of Guinea, in 1482.<sup>36</sup> By 1510, Portugal had full control over the sea routes that would sustain its trade in Asia and Africa, with “seven forts in two captaincies, one for the Red Sea and the other for the Malabar Coast of India.”<sup>37</sup> Even without the demographic deficit the Portuguese

<sup>35</sup> Table drawn directly from Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1366; For Spain, see A. W. Lovett, *Early Habsburg Spain, 1517–1598* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 245–7, quoting Felipe Ruiz Martín, “La Población Española al Comienzo de Los Tiempos Modernos,” (*Cuadernos de Historia* 1, Madrid 1967): 182–202; For Portugal, see Orlando Ribeiro, Hermann Lautensach, and Suzanne Daveau, *Geografia de Portugal* (1a. ed. Lisboa: Edições J. Sá da Costa, 1987), 735.

<sup>36</sup> Maxwell, “Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System” (1992): 4–5.

<sup>37</sup> Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, “The Portuguese Seaborne Empire in the Indian Ocean,” in *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67–73.

faced relative to the Spanish, they would have struggled to sustainably maintain a colonial settlement of any real significance given the existence of more established empires and polities in the East. Portugal's presence in these regions was characterized more by negotiation than conquest.<sup>38</sup> While they could (and did on occasion) utilize the superiority of European firepower at sea, the existence of their small, coastal entrepôts depended heavily on the consent and interests of the regional authority.<sup>39</sup> This necessitated a centralized, state-run model of trade which could negotiate and project naval power to protect its interests when threatened by rival empires, such as the Ottomans.<sup>40</sup> It also meant that instead of 'creating their own trade'—as the Spanish had been forced to do in the Americas—the Portuguese could tap into the established trade networks of the Old World. For example, they became heavily involved in the African trade of slaves and melegueta pepper, known in Europe as "grains of paradise."<sup>41</sup> The Portuguese Crown sought to maintain monopolies on many such goods through the *feitorias*, which were themselves under the authority of the *Casa da Índia*. After docking and reporting to the *Casa* authorities in Lisbon, goods could be reshipped to other *feitorias* to be sold. For instance, many shipments were sent to the *feitoria* in Antwerp, which supplied much of the Western European market at the time.<sup>42</sup> Profits from these sales would flow directly to the Portuguese Crown and the *Fazenda Real* ("Royal Treasury"). Though there was some private participation in these ventures,<sup>43</sup> it was mainly the *Fazenda Real* and the *Casa da Índia* that stood at the helm of Portugal's 'state capitalist' trading network.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 59.

<sup>39</sup> Carlo Maria Cipolla, *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion 1400 – 1700* (6th pr. Manhattan, Kan: Sunflower University Press, 2002), 106-9; see also Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 59.

<sup>40</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Holding the World in Balance" (2007): 1367.

<sup>41</sup> Barreto Xavier, Palomo, and Stumpf, eds, *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada* (2018), 89-95.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Ralph Boxer, "From Lisbon to Goa, 1500–1750: Studies in Portuguese Maritime Enterprise," 1984, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Holding the World in Balance (2007): 1374.

<sup>44</sup> Pierre Chaunu, *Conquista y Explotación de Los Nuevos Mundos* (Barcelona: Ed. Labor Sa, 1973), 102-3.

## Rules and Regulation

In exploring the charters and royal edicts that governed each *Casa*'s goals, daily operation, and bureaucratic processes, it becomes easier to clearly identify similarities between the two. When the Spanish established the *Casa de Contratación* in 1503, they issued a founding charter consisting of twenty-two rules. One of these rules outlined what the staffing of the *Casa* was to look like: the Spaniards would employ one Chief Officer, one treasurer, and one clerk, who would later be called an accountant.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, this was almost identical to the model of the *Casa da Índia* (which by this point had existed for three years), except the Portuguese employed two more clerks.<sup>46</sup> While one cannot definitively prove that the Spanish were replicating the structure of the Portuguese *Casa*, overt similarities such as this one reinforce the almost unanimously held belief in the historiography that during the early years of the sixteenth century, Spain drew inspiration from Portugal's empire to some extent. The Portuguese were more advanced in colonial management than the Spaniards at this point, after all. This makes the fact that the *Casa de Contratación* issued a founding charter *before* the *Casa da Índia* issued its own in 1509 incredibly striking. Granted, this later Portuguese set of rules did not seek to establish new parameters for a fledgling enterprise, as in the Spanish case; rather, it would formalize and codify practices that had been in use in one *Casa* or the other for decades.<sup>47</sup> But it raises the question: why now? Did the Portuguese do this as a response to the *Casa de Contratación*?

---

<sup>45</sup> Eulalia Maria Lahmeyer Lobo, "Processo Administrativo Ibero-Americano (Aspectos Sócio-Econômicos—Período Colonial)," (São Paulo: Biblioteca Do Exército, 1962), 112.

<sup>46</sup> Peres, *Regimento Das Casas Das Índias e Mina* (1947), chap. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Barreto Xavier, "The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration" (2018): 336.

I would argue it highly probable that the *Casa da Índia*'s 1509 charter was simply a natural next step in a continuous process of imperial bureaucratization. The growth of the Portuguese Empire began to place greater strain on the institutions that managed it, and this increased demand would have required a response. In the King's own words, the work of the *Casa* "could not well be done [...] as it was done until now," i.e., with only a Chief Officer, a treasurer, and three clerks.<sup>48</sup> The charter was initially comprised of 65 chapters but would undergo additions to it over the course of the decade. In a letter to Estêvão Vaz, the Chief Officer of the *Casa da Índia* at the time, the King expressed his desire to "assemble the old statutes that were dispersed,"<sup>49</sup> which is to say, codify the already existing rules and practices of the *Casa*. The extremely specific nature of these rules further highlights the newfound importance of this 'science of administration' and bureaucracy in the Portuguese Empire. They concerned themselves with operational minutiae such as the registration of officers' daily hours of arrival and departure (Chapter 2), and even had an entire chapter dedicated to the "ordering" of letters arriving from India,<sup>50</sup> in the hopes that this systematization would streamline Portugal's colonial management. Moreover, much of the information gathered by the *Casa da Índia* came from the transcontinental network of *feitorias* it administered. Each *feitor* provided registers of commodities exchanged, predictions about local markets, and reports on daily life in the colonies. This kind of information allowed the Portuguese Crown to track its losses, to spot opportunities, and crucially, to plan future trips.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Barreto Xavier, "The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration (2018): 335; as drawn from Peres, *Regimento Das Cazas Das Indias e Mina* (1947), chap. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Peres, *Regimento Das Cazas Das Indias e Mina* (1947), 84.

<sup>50</sup> Peres, *Regimento Das Cazas Das Indias e Mina* (1947), 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> Susannah Humble Ferreira, *The Crown, the Court and the Casa da Índia : Political Centralization in Portugal, 1479-1521* (Brill, 2015), 66-8.

The expansion of Spain's empire likewise necessitated a myriad of administrative changes to the *Casa de Contratación's* operation. These would serve to bureaucratize its processes and subtly steer it away from the Portuguese model it had initially drawn inspiration from. Though both enacted a considerable amount of minor record-keeping-related policies, the Spanish approach began to reflect the distinct territorial nature of its empire. For example, the Spaniards placed paramount importance on tracking the movement of pearls, raw gold, silver, and other precious metals from the New World.<sup>52</sup> This is unsurprising given that all bullion was taxed by the *quinto real*. Between 1555 and 1600, the *quinto real* from one Spanish colony, Tierra Firme, accounted for a staggering sixty percent of royal income.<sup>53</sup> In meticulously documenting these goods, the *Casa de Contratación* sought to safeguard the Crown's interests and its most valuable source of revenue. Similarly, we can observe an emphasis on preventing fraud in the burgeoning colonial economy. According to the ordinances of 1531, the treasurer and clerks were to note all expenses, record transactions in separate, duplicate record books, and sign the other's copy to certify that "they see and know that the charge is truthful and accurate" so that "at the time we order accounts to be taken, [the accountant] may agree the one book with the other and there be no confusion."<sup>54</sup>

By charting the progression of institutional rules in the *Casas*, it becomes evident that though there seems to have been some imitation by the Spanish of the *Casa da Índia* in the early sixteenth century, both *Casas* thereafter seem to diverge due to the distinct profiles of their overseas empires. This emerges as a central theme in my analysis. Spain's primary objective

---

<sup>52</sup> Francisco Fernández López, "La Memoria y El Registro de La Real Hacienda de Indias En La Casa de La Contratación," *Revista de Humanidades* 0, no. 22 (2015): 108.

<sup>53</sup> Lorenzo Sanz, *Comercio de España Con América* (1986), 166-72.

<sup>54</sup> Fernández López, "La Memoria y El Registro" (2015): 109.

revolved around the extraction of wealth from private trade with the Americas, and so they tailored their *Casa*'s operation to meet these needs. In a letter addressed to the king in 1503, the factor Francisco Pinelo and treasurer Sancho de Matienzo defend the Spanish model, saying “that it is not convenient for the Reyes’ own ships, because the flights will be cheaper, and that it will also be more profitable, to give permission to [private parties] to go on their own account to the islands of the Pearls.”<sup>55</sup> Conversely, it seems the Portuguese empire prioritized establishing a more networked, statist system that was information-driven.

It is important to note that institutions, by their very nature, can be rigid and resistant to change, particularly when it comes to capturing the nuanced sentiments of a society. However, history shows that change can emerge naturally, driven by practicality. In 1555, double-entry bookkeeping became standard practice in the *Casa de Contratación*.<sup>56</sup> Curiously, there was no royal commandment that required this, and yet, the revolutionary Florentine accounting method seamlessly made its way into the operations of the *Casa*. This transition illustrates two important principles. Firstly, that if a system proves itself efficient, it is likely to be implemented or replicated. Secondly, it demonstrates that *translatio imperii* need not occur by royal intervention at the highest level; as in the case of the Florentine merchants that brought this system to Seville, everyday people can play a pivotal role in instigating change within institutions and societies more broadly.

---

<sup>55</sup> Lahmeyer Lobo, “Proceso Administrativo Ibero-Americano” (1962), 114; drawn from Ernesto Schäfer, in *El Consejo Real Supremo de Las Indias: Su Historia, Organización y Labor Administrativa Hasta La Terminación de La Casa de Austria, T. I, Historia y Organización Del Consejo y de La Casa de Contratación de Las Indias*, Sevilla: M Carmona (1935): 11-12.

<sup>56</sup> Fernández López, “La Memoria y El Registro” (2015): 104.



## Interpersonal Interactions and Influence

A closer look at the Spanish maritime workforce of the early sixteenth century would reveal, paradoxically, that a significant portion of it was formed by Portuguese mariners. As was the case with colonial institutions, Portugal's human capital and collective expertise in navigation and overseas empire far exceeded that of Spain at first.<sup>57</sup> This is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that of the *Casa's* first three Chief Pilots, none were Spanish.<sup>58</sup> These movements of professionals internationally may have, even if subconsciously, shaped the *Casa's* approach and management. Humans, after all, have the potential to be effective vectors for *translatio imperii* behind the scenes. Nationality seems to have been a less controversial factor at this point, and experience was held in higher regard. This may also be explained by the fact that during the initial stages of exploration, each empire's sphere of influence was not yet well-defined. There was interest from the Spanish in Portuguese navigators who understood certain regions of the world, and vice versa.<sup>59</sup> The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 helped to delineate a provisional boundary for Madrid and Lisbon to follow, but with growing empires and expanding horizons, there would inevitably be conflicts.

One of the most significant disputes between the Iberian empires during this period comes about regarding the Moluccas and Spice Islands of the East Indies. Discontent with the

---

<sup>57</sup> Granted, this was not a one-way exchange—while many Portuguese pilots assisted in the fledgling Spanish Empire, some Spaniards, such as Sancho de Tovar, commanded Portuguese fleets in Asia. But the former occurs on a much greater scale. See Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1364.

<sup>58</sup> The nationality of Juan Díaz de Solís (the second Chief Pilot) is contested among historians—many say that he was born in Lebrija, on the Spanish side of the border. However, it is uncontested that he received his training and led most of his life and career in Portugal before serving in the *Casa de Contratación*. See Edward Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación and the Exámenes de Pilotos,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 26, no. 2 (May 2014): 181.

<sup>59</sup> Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación” (2014): 182.

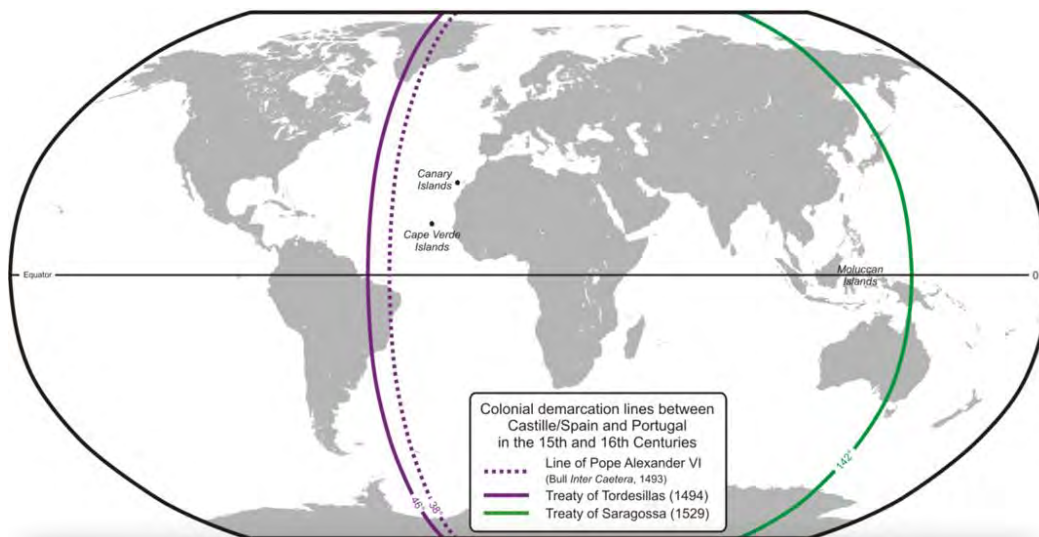
Portuguese King Manuel I after he repeatedly rejected his voyage proposals, Fernão de Magalhães, known in posterity as Ferdinand Magellan, decided to leave Portugal in 1517 and join the service of the young King Charles I of Spain (later emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire). He claimed that the Spice Islands, until then under the influence of the Portuguese, in fact lay east (on the Spanish side) of the antimeridian established by Tordesillas and proposed an expedition to find a westward route (through the Americas) to the East Indies, something which never been attempted before.<sup>60</sup> Magellan's defection, seen by many in Manuel I's court as a betrayal, caused a large-scale migration of Portuguese mariners, cosmographers, cartographers, and others to the *Casa de Contratación*.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, his expedition would spawn a territorial crisis over the Moluccas which would only be resolved a decade later, with the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529, in which Spain sold its claim to the islands to Portugal.<sup>62</sup> More interestingly from the lens of the *Casas*, the arrival of Magellan and many of his colleagues from Lisbon would noticeably feed a new trend of resistance by the Spanish to the presence of Portuguese in their fleets.

---

<sup>60</sup> Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 50.

<sup>61</sup> Collins, "Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación" (2014): 181.

<sup>62</sup> Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668* (London: Routledge, 2004), 98.

Figure 2: <sup>63</sup>

Amid many complaints from Spanish captains, the *Consejo de Indias* (“Council of the Indies”) issued a series of reforms to address the ‘Portuguese problem.’ It was decreed in 1527 that “he who wants to be a pilot must be a native of these kingdoms of Castile” and “[*Casa* officials] will give no charge to any foreigner nor will they be given consent to own a nautical chart, or any image of the Indies... without our special license.”<sup>64</sup> There were many who found creative ways around this nationality stipulation. Modern studies have found that there were many Portuguese in Magellan’s fleet who claimed to be Andalusians, or commonly, disguised themselves as Galicians. The latter was not particularly difficult, given the linguistic and cultural similarities between Portugal and Galicia.<sup>65</sup> Tensions reached a breaking point in the 1550s, when a Castilian pilot, Alonso de Zapata, submitted a formal complaint to the *Consejo*, accusing the Portuguese of incompetence and endangering the safety of many ships on the *Carrera de*

<sup>63</sup> Map drawn from “Lines of Demarcation, 1493, 1494, and 1529,” Princeton Online Libraries.

<sup>64</sup> Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación” (2014): 182; drawn from Archivo General de Indias, Patronato, 251, R.22. “Método Para El Examen de Pilotos: Sebastián Cabot,” August 2, 1527.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación” (2014): 182.

*India*.<sup>66</sup> In response, the 1552 Ordinances of the *Casa de Contratación* reiterated the nationality stipulation, created new standards for pilot training, and introduced new requirements for those applying for a license. Chief among these was the use of reports from witnesses who could testify to the personal history, character, and skills of the prospective pilot, which made it much more difficult for aspiring Portuguese mariners to join.<sup>67</sup> Nationality thereafter became a politically charged and exclusionary factor in the *Casa*, and exchanges of personnel became more infrequent.

By the 1530s, Spain had established itself as the leading Iberian power, and there were many within Portugal who looked to the Spaniards as an example of how to run an empire.<sup>68</sup> Ironically, this seemed to be a complete reversal of the situation just three decades prior. High-ranking members of the court of King João III, such as Martim Afonso de Sousa, began what would be a very slow movement towards the Spanish model, particularly in the then undeveloped territory of Brazil.<sup>69</sup> The establishment and old guard in Portugal resisted this trend, as can be seen in this letter from courtier and future governor of India, Dom João de Castro to the King in 1539:

I would like to act as a seal to stamp documents and set them out in the *Torre de Tombo* of Lisbon, to affirm that in no circumstances should the Portuguese enter as much as a handspan into the interior [*pela terra dentro*] of India, because nothing keeps the peace and conserves our friendship with the kings and lords of India except that they believe

---

<sup>66</sup> Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación” (2014): 182-3.

<sup>67</sup> Collins, “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación” (2014): 183-4.

<sup>68</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1371.

<sup>69</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1372.

and consider it most certain that we are content with the sea, and that we have no plans, nor do we imagine that we will ever come to desire their lands.<sup>70</sup>

The pro-Spanish-model sentiments of Sousa and others were largely kept at bay until the late 1560s, when the child King Sebastião I of Portugal came of age and assumed direct rule. Given his young age, he was perhaps more easily influenced by his advisors and his court than his predecessor. A slew of changes were effected, kickstarting the sugar-based plantation period in Brazil as well as creating a system closer to the Spanish *asiento* (“contract”) arrangement for private trade and shipping.<sup>71</sup> This was a dramatic challenge to the *Casa da Índia*’s traditional statist model. In Brazil, these changes led to the emergence of a landowning, slavery-run plantation economy which would prove highly valuable to Lisbon and the *Fazenda Real*. However, the attempt at a quasi-Spanish private contracting trade system in the East did not last particularly long, as ships from Portugal soon began to suffer raids from the Dutch, forcing the Portuguese to revert to their traditional statist model in these regions in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> These results further substantiate the observation that different strategies are not always compatible with varying colonial contexts—indeed, the more ‘Spanish’ model saw great success in Brazil, as the territory shared many of the characteristics of Spanish America, but it was unsuited to the Indian Ocean.

---

<sup>70</sup> Letter appears in Luis de Albuquerque, *Cartas de D. João de Castro a D. João III* (Lisbon: Publicações Alfa, 1989), 12.

<sup>71</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1375.

<sup>72</sup> Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance” (2007): 1375.

## Conclusion

While success often begets imitation, the effectiveness of this emulation remains context specific. This was a lesson that the Iberian empires learned through trial-and-error, as at different points each borrowed certain ideas and norms from the other. Both institutionally and interpersonally, the *Casas* engaged in an exchange of knowledge and expertise, particularly in the first half of the sixteenth century. As bureaucracies developed and hostilities grew, they gradually influenced each other less directly, and instead focused on doing what was best given their situation on the ground.

The death of King Sebastião I of Portugal without a direct heir to the throne in 1578 caused a succession crisis which would end with Philip II of Spain being declared King of Portugal.<sup>73</sup> He would go on to merge the two Crowns, thereby creating the Iberian Union of 1580. Philip assured his Portuguese constituency that in the spirit of the Treaty of Tordesillas, he would keep the two kingdoms, and the two empires, administratively and conceptually separate.<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding, the questions of *translatio imperii* and the dynamics between the two *Casas* after this unification of the crowns present an interesting avenue for future research.

---

<sup>73</sup> Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (2009), 112.

<sup>74</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Holding the World in Balance" (2007): 1360.

## Bibliography

- Albuquerque, Luis de. *Cartas de D. João de Castro a D. João III*. Lisbon: Publicações Alfa, 1989.
- Archivo General de Indias, Patronato, 251, R.22. “Método Para El Examen de Pilotos: Sebastián Cabot,” August 2, 1527.
- Barreto Xavier, Ângela. “The Casa Da Índia and the Emergence of a Science of Administration in the Portuguese Empire.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 22, no. 5 (October 2, 2018): 327–47. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342599>.
- Barreto Xavier, Ângela, Federico Palomo, and Roberta Stumpf, eds. *Monarquias Ibéricas Em Perspectiva Comparada: (Séculos XVI-XVIII): Dinâmicas Imperiais e Circulação de Modelos Politico-Administrativos*. 1a edição. Lisboa, Portugal: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2018.
- Boxer, Charles Ralph. “From Lisbon to Goa, 1500–1750. Studies in Portuguese Maritime Enterprise,” 1984.
- Chaudhuri, Kirti Narayan. “The Portuguese Seaborne Empire in the Indian Ocean .” In *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, 63–79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Chaunu, Pierre. *Conquista y Explotación de Los Nuevos Mundos*. Barcelona: Ed. Labor Sa, 1973.
- Cipolla, Carlo Maria. *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion 1400 - 1700*. 6th pr. Manhattan, Kan: Sunflower University Press, 2002.
- Collins, Edward. “Portuguese Pilots at the Casa de La Contratación and the Exámenes de Pilotos.” *International Journal of Maritime History* 26, no. 2 (May 2014): 179–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871414527399>.
- Fernández López, Francisco. “La Memoria y El Registro de La Real Hacienda de Indias En La Casa de La Contratación.” *Revista de Humanidades* 0, no. 22 (2015): 101–27. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5944/rdh.22.2014.14292>.
- Humble Ferreira, Susannah. *The Crown, the Court and the Casa da Índia : Political Centralization in Portugal, 1479-1521*. Brill, 2015.
- Lahmeyer Lobo, Eulalia Maria. “Processo Administrativo Ibero-Americano (Aspectos Sócio-Econômicos—Periodo Colonial),” 108–50. São Paulo: Biblioteca Do Exército, 1962.
- “Lines of Demarcation, 1493, 1494, and 1529.” Princeton Online Libraries , n.d. [https://library.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/pacific/spice-islands/demarcation-lines.html](https://library.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/pacific/spice-islands/demarcation-lines.html).

- Lorenzo Sanz, Eufemio. *Comercio de España Con América En La Época de Felipe II*. Valladolid: Institución Cultural Simancas, 1986.
- Lovett, A. W. *Early Habsburg Spain, 1517-1598*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Maltby, William S. *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Maxwell, Kenneth. "Portugal, Europe, and the Origins of the Atlantic Commercial System, 1415–1520." *Modern Humanities Research Association, Portuguese Studies*, 8 (1992): 3–16.
- Newitt, Malyn. *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- O'Hara, John F. "Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca: First President of the Indies (1493-1523)." *The Catholic Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (July 1917): 131–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25011495>.
- Peres, Damião. *Regimento Das Cazas Das Indias e Mina*. Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Instituto de Estudos Historicos Dr. Antonio de Vasconcelos, 1947.
- Phillips, Carla Rahn. "The Growth and Composition of Trade in the Iberian Empires, 1450–1750." In *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, 34–101, 1990.
- Ribeiro, Orlando, Hermann Lautensach, and Suzanne Daveau. *Geografia de Portugal*. 1a. ed. Lisboa: Edições J. Sá da Costa, 1987.
- Ruiz Martín, Felipe. "La Población Española al Comienzo de Los Tiempos Modernos." *Cuadernos de Historia* (Madrid) 1 (1967): 182–202.
- Schäfer, Ernesto. In *El Consejo Real Supremo de Las Indias: Su Historia, Organización y Labor Administrativa Hasta La Terminación de La Casa de Austria. T. I, Historia y Organización Del Consejo y de La Casa de Contratación de Las Indias*, 11–12. Sevilla: M Carmona, 1935.
- Serrera Contreras, Ramón María. "La Casa de La Contratación En El Alcázar de Sevilla (1503-1717)." *Boletín de La Real Academia Sevillana de Buenas Letras* 36 (2008): 141–76.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. "Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500–1640." *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 1, 2007): 1359–85. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.112.5.1359>.