The arrival of European Christians in India during the 16th century

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The arrival of European Christians in India in the 16th century was part of the Portuguese political and economic expansion. In competition with the Spanish kingdoms of Castile and Aragón and with the Italian city states such as Genoa and Venice, Portugal sought to establish itself as a maritime power in the latter half of the 15th century. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire into the Balkans and its capture of Constantinople in 1453 had resulted in the Ottoman dominance of trade routes east of the Mediterranean Sea. That expansion, coupled with the continuing monopoly of other trade in the Mediterranean region by the Genoese and the Venetians, prompted Portuguese searches for alternative routes from Europe to Asia. The successful navigation around the Cape of Good Hope and eventual arrival in India by the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, in 1498 was one such effort.

The 16th century ended with a series of Jesuit missions to the court of the Mughal Emperor Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar in northern India. The Portuguese explorers who traversed the Indian Ocean in 1498, however, encountered a milieu not yet controlled by the three major Muslim empires of the Mughals, Safavids and Ottomans that rose to dominance in the Muslim regions in south and western Asia. In 1498, Akbar’s grandfather, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, had not yet begun his advance into the Indian subcontinent; his capture of Kabul, from where he launched his military campaigns into the Punjab, did not take place until 1504. In Persia, Shah Ismail I had not yet consolidated the Safavid control of the region; the decisive victory that gave him control of Azerbaijan and its capital Tabriz did not occur until 1501. And it was not until 1517 that the Ottomans, under Sultan Selim, conquered Egypt and the Hijaz, thus taking control of the Red Sea and its trade. Nevertheless, even with the absence of the three major Muslim empires, the trading networks that dominated the Indian Ocean into which the Portuguese sailed were largely Muslim.

The Portuguese saw the Muslims as their religious and political rivals. Through the 12th century, Christian rulers had been waging war with the
Muslim rulers of al-Andalus, the Iberian Peninsula. The Christians saw this as a *Reconquista* and a vital part of the crusades in western Europe. The final Muslim stronghold on the west coast of al-Andalus had been taken with the capture of Algarve (from the Arabic *al-gharb*, ‘the west’) in 1249 by Afonso III, who declared himself King of Portugal and the Algarve. From that base, subsequent kings of Portugal sought to extend their political control, particularly in the 15th century. The taking of the Moroccan port city of Ceuta in 1415 was the beginning of Portuguese overseas conquests, and was legitimised as a crusade by a papal bull.\(^1\) In a useful summary, C.R. Boxer lists four main motives that inspired Portuguese rulers, nobles and merchants to pursue maritime expansion: ‘(i) crusading zeal against the Muslims, (ii) desire for Guinea gold, (iii) the quest for Prester John, (iv) the search for Oriental spices.’\(^2\) These motives, he notes, appeared in chronological but overlapping order and in varying levels of prominence. While the strong crusading spirit directed against the Muslims present at the capture of Ceuta was still evident in the voyages to India almost 85 years later, the primary motivation appears to have been the desire for a greater share of the spice trade.

In addition to the papal bull declaring the military actions against the Moroccan Muslims to be a crusade, several other key pronouncements by the Vatican helped define the religious nature of Portuguese expansion. The *Dum diversas* of 1452 authorised the king of Portugal to attack, conquer and subdue not only Muslims but also pagans and other unbelievers, and to seize their goods and territories, transferring them to his own possession. The *Romanus Pontifex* of 1455, after tracing the history of the discovery and conquest by Prince Henry, declared that, because expansion furthered the interests of God and Christendom, the Portuguese should have the monopoly of navigation and trade in the regions they had conquered or would yet conquer south of the Moroccan coast all the way to the ‘Indies’, and should have the right to safeguard that monopoly. Permission was given to trade with the ‘Saracens’, provided that this did not involve selling weapons or other war supplies to those enemies of the Faith. This bull also authorised the king and his successors to build churches and monasteries and to send priests to administer

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