PROLOGUE

The peoples of Europe from the earliest times have regarded the lands that lay to the east and south as places of mystery and imagination and of fabulous wealth—the farther away, the richer they were thought to be. Distance, as ever, lent enchantment.

The Chinese perspective was the reverse of the European. From the eastern perimeter of the Old World, countries to the west and south, similarly clothed in fantasy and fable, promised riches on an ascending scale. And between the two lay India, on the opposing limits of direct European and Chinese experience and the symbol and proximate source of respective eastern and western luxuries at the beginning of the first millennium. In due course, 'India' was twice transplanted—farther east and west—to form the 'Indies.'

Europe and China came of age at approximately the same time, under the Romans and the Han respectively, two hundred years or so on either side of the birth of Christ. In both regions, there followed outward-looking periods of innovation and discovery, separated by times of repose and introspection: not one but several Ages of Discovery, leading to the epochal fifteenth century when, within a single lifespan, state-sponsored armadas carried Chinese envoys to the shores of East Africa and Vasco da Gama's small convoy rounded the Cape and (with the help of a Gujarātī pilot) reached the shores of western India. The irony was that the Chinese then officially turned their backs on the sea and on the West, while Europeans pressed on beyond India to the very gates of China.

Five years before Da Gama reached Calicut, Columbus, sailing westward in search of the East, stumbled on an intervening "Other World." A few decades later, the remnants—one ship out of five—of Magellan's expedition, likewise sailing westward, limped back to San Lúcar de Barrameda, having completed a matchless voyage of discovery, the first circumnavigation of the globe.

What drove men to such extraordinary feats, full of hardship and danger, the odds stacked heavily against a safe return? A sense of adventure and curiosity, doubtless; occasionally to advance the frontiers of religion. Chiefly, however, it was thoughts of material gain: gold and silver in easy abundance, the legendary *El Dorados*, and, perhaps more especially, merchandise that was altogether unavailable in Europe—strange jewels, orient pearls, rich textiles,

and animal and vegetable products of equatorial provenance. These were the rewards of success. Only silk among eastern *exotica* was successfully introduced to the West (in the sixth century). For the rest, the East and South were epitomized by pearls and spices, and likewise the West and South to the Chinese. Pearls came chiefly from the Persian Gulf, southern India, and Sri Lanka, and, after ca. 1500, tropical waters of the New World. So clearly was this objective identified that by 1525 all the main fishing grounds of the world were controlled by either Spain or Portugal.[1]

Perlas and *especiería*—along with *piedras preciosas, oro,* and *plata*—were named in the *Capitulaciones* agreed between Columbus and Ferdinand and Isabella on April 17, 1492.[2] Spices included both condiments and medicinal drugs, many of them aromatic. The wealth of the East was thought, in Europe, to consist primarily and inexhaustibly of fine spices. Some were more easily obtainable than others, coming from the Levant, rather than India or the Far East. Nevertheless, it is surprising how early—in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages—that products of very remote origin were available to a select few in northern and western Europe. Purchasing power was, even then, sufficiently large and concentrated to make it worth transporting the most desirable and costly luxuries across half the world.

The ultimate goal was to obtain supplies of spices at source and then to meet demand from whatever quarter. Shippers were not limited to national markets. Venice and Constantinople, Lisbon and Seville served the whole of Europe and parts of western and west-central Asia, whether for bullion or spices. After ca. 1500, European merchants operated much farther afield in India, China, and Japan.

South East Asia was one of the principal sources of spices and *aromata.*[3] Some spices were found over large areas, but the distances from Europe were always immense. The notion that some of the rarest items belonged to "paradise islands" on the eastern margins of the Old World was very old and, moreover, proved to be true. Clove, nutmeg, mace, and sandalwood all came, and effectively only came, from easternmost Indonesia. Malay merchants claimed that "God made Timor for sandalwood and Banda for mace and the Moluccas for cloves, and that this merchandise is not known anywhere else in the world except in these places; and [Tomé Pires] asked and enquired very diligently whether they had this merchandise anywhere else and every one said not."[4]

No European reached these islands before 1500; more surprising, no Arab or Indian merchant venturer did so either, as far as we are aware. Yet supplies of the local aromatics were reaching China, India, western Asia, and the Mediterranean lands more than a thousand years earlier, probably before the beginning of the Christian era. The activities of scores of merchants made this

possible, although, none could have been familiar with, or were even perhaps aware of, the entire route, and few of whom can have had any clear idea of the ultimate provenance of the products in transit. So far as the middle stages (western Indonesia to India) were concerned, Persian and Arab traders can only be invoked from the seventh or eighth century, when they first reached the China Seas. The merchants of earlier centuries appear to have been Indians as well as Malays and Javanese who, in any event, handled the early stages, from the Moluccas to Java, at all times prior to ca. 1500.

To account for the presence of South East Asian products in Europe in the early Christian centuries, it is essential to emphasize the strong Indian connection with Indonesia from about this time or earlier. Thereby a 'bridge' was created that carried people and ideas and commodities through the archipelago in both directions. It is essential to emphasize, too, that the Indians themselves were great users of the same aromatics that so attracted Europeans. This 'bridge' was extended westward through Indian influence in the medical centers of the Near East and more especially at Gondēshapūr in Khūzestān (Map 8, chapter 4) between the fifth and the ninth centuries.

No sooner had the Portuguese taken Malacca in 1511 than they despatched a small force to locate the "Spice Islands."[5] Once it reached Banda (1512), contact with the Moluccas proper and with Timor quickly followed. Thence, for the first time, cloves and nutmegs and sandalwood were brought all the way to Europe in European ships—the longest maritime trade route on earth. For those who completed the voyage, profits were rewardingly high; what formerly had been shared among many merchants was now concentrated in the hands of a few. Magellan took with him cloves, nutmegs, and mace (just as Columbus took pearls) to show the local people for what he was looking.[6] The *Vittoria* returned with 533 quintals (ca. 53,000 pounds) of cloves, sole tangible reward of the circumnavigation, yet sufficient in value, at a notional profit of 2500 per cent, to cover the financial cost of the expedition. Sebastián del Cano, who assumed command on the death of Magellan on April 27, 1521, was knighted on his return to Spain by Charles I (Emperor Charles V). Del Cano's escutcheon (Figure 11, chapter 1) pointedly displayed crossed sticks of cinnamon on a ground patterned with cloves and nutmegs, under a globe with the enscrolled motto: *Primus Circumdedisti Me.*

The East has retained its reputation for, and intense interest in, evocative aromas. Peoples of the West, on the other hand, have tended to neglect, or rather to forget, the part that the mysterious sense of smell played in the selection processes leading to plant protection, improvement, and exploitation.

Aromatic substances—condiments, perfumes, medicaments—have been regarded either as necessities or as luxuries, depending on the wealth and

social position of the user. Familiarity with one product doubtless led to interest in others. Natural scents borne on offshore winds advertised the distant presence of exotic species. Some were misidentified at first or confused with known aromas, circumstances that help to account for exploitation by strangers when the resident population showed little or no interest.

The present study of Moluccan spices and of sandalwood opens with their natural history and oriental nomenclature, and the discovery of the Moluccas by Europeans. The purpose is to trace the expanding interest and long-distance trade in cloves, nutmegs, and sandalwood, first, apparently, to India at an indeterminately early date and thence to the adjacent Arabo-Persian world. The medieval West and China lay on the western and eastern margins of diffusion, the former in touch with the Levant, the latter with the trading world of South East Asia. Two thousand years or so ago, peoples of Indian and Chinese provenance expanded, independently, into South East Asia, giving rise to what today we call Indochina and Indonesia. The respective motives for expansion were broadly similar: the presence of desirable natural products and rumors of great wealth, inducements that ultimately brought Europeans into the same arena.

Notes

1 Donkin, 1998: pp. 280–281.
2 Printed in M. Fernandez de Navarrete, *Obras*, 1955–1956: 1: p. 303.
3 Donkin, 1999: pp. 11–14, and Map 1.
4 Pires [ca. 1512–1515] (ed. and trans. A. Cortesão), 1944: 1: p. 204.
5 A. Cortesão (1973: pp. 98, 158–159) thought that the Portuguese perhaps already knew the position of the Moluccas (? Ptolemy's *Insulae Satyrorum*) on the basis of information taken from "some Oriental chart, probably Arab or Malaysian" and forwarded to Lisbon by Pêro da Covilhã, ca. 1490/1492. There is nothing to support this.
6 Pigafetta [1519–1522] (ed. and trans. R. A. Skelton) 1969: 1: p. 64. Likewise Vasco da Gama (ed. and trans. E. G. Ravenstein) 1898: p. 7 (Bay of St Helena, South West Africa, November 1497).