

Lagos in The Golden Age



THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY was Portugal's Golden Age. Of it, the historian Alexandre Herculano wrote: "The glory which we achieved in this epoch was one of the greatest the world has seen." Wealth, prestige, and influence came to this little nation of a million-and-a-half people out of all proportion to its size. It was a legacy bestowed through the epic voyages of discovery of the previous century. It had begun in 1434 with Gil Eanes venturing out of Lagos into seas that none had sailed before, the Green Seas of Darkness beyond Cape Bojador on the Bulge of Africa.

With their chain of fortified trading posts reaching southward down the African coast, around the Cape, up to Ormuz on the Persian Gulf, across to Goa in India, and beyond to Malacca and Macau, the Portuguese established a commercial empire based on maritime skill and mercantile acumen. With the subsequent opening-up of Brazil this empire extended more than half-around the world. In its wake came a cultural awakening, for it was the century of the poet Camões, the playwright Gil Vicente, the painter Nuno Gonçalves, and of the flowering of Manueline architecture.

By Frank Bowers

As a hub of maritime trade second only to Lisbon, Lagos where it had all begun had its share in these golden years. Few and fragmented are the records that have survived, but they do give some picture of the life and activities of the town and its people. Population figures for the period are imprecise because they are usually given in terms of *vizinhos*, i.e. habitations or households. At the beginning of the 16th Century there were about fifteen hundred households in Lagos, at its close twenty-five hundred. If 4.5 is used as the presumed coefficient this gives a growth from 7,000 to 11,000 inhabitants. Lagos was then the most populous town on the Algarve coast, closely followed by Tavira. The growth of Faro did not commence until after the transfer there in 1539 of the bishopric from Silves, a growth which was drastically halted in 1596 when it was sacked and burned by an English expedition under the Earl of Essex. The slow decline of Silves, the old Moorish capital, and the silting of the upper reaches of the Arade river led to the developing of Vila Nova de Portimão, smaller and of far less importance than Lagos.

Lagos was a cosmopolitan town. Sailors from the many foreign ships anchored in the bay trod its streets and patronised its wineshops. Flemings, Bretons, Genoese, Venetians, English and Scots. Among the residents there were many Andalusians and some Castilians. There were enough Italian-speaking inhabitants (merchants from Genoa, Leghorn, and Sicily engaged in the salted fish trade) to warrant their having their own church, Nossa Senhora do Salvo Porto, served by friars of the Trinitarian Order. Some fifty Moorish families were living in Lagos, and in 1544 the citizens petitioned the Crown asking that these Moors be banished from the town. Many Moorish slaves were employed on farms in the district, and within the town there were sufficient blacks for them to have their own confraternity.

Something of the social status accorded to the various occupations can be inferred from the order of precedence in the annual Corpus Christi procession. Leading the parade were the *fidalgos*, the nobility, "the sons of someone", and the *cavaleiros*, the gentlemen. They were followed by the notaries and

the clerks, the *literati*. The merchants and landowners came next, and then the seamen. Tinsmiths and apothecaries marched on equal footing, just ahead of the barbers and the gunsmiths. Then, in order, came the cabinet-makers, the stonemasons, the carpenters, the shoemakers, the saddlers, the tanners, and the blacksmiths. To the rear ranks were assigned the weavers, the potters, and the tailors, and finally in lowliest place, the wine-sellers and the purveyors of offal. Behind the pedestrian parade were the gardeners with carts bedecked with their produce, and the butchers leading a bull, a custom which still exists in the Azores whose first settlers came from the Algarve.

Lagos began to erect new walls in 1520. This was at least partly related to an attempt to ensure isolation against the bubonic plague. The plague had been brought to the Algarve from Arzila in North Africa by way of Tavira. Dread of the plague was an all-consuming fear, and unwalled towns posted guards on the approach roads to prevent strangers entering. In Lagos those suspected of having the plague were banished to the beaches, and these exiles were provided with food and firewood by the Misericórdia. This

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