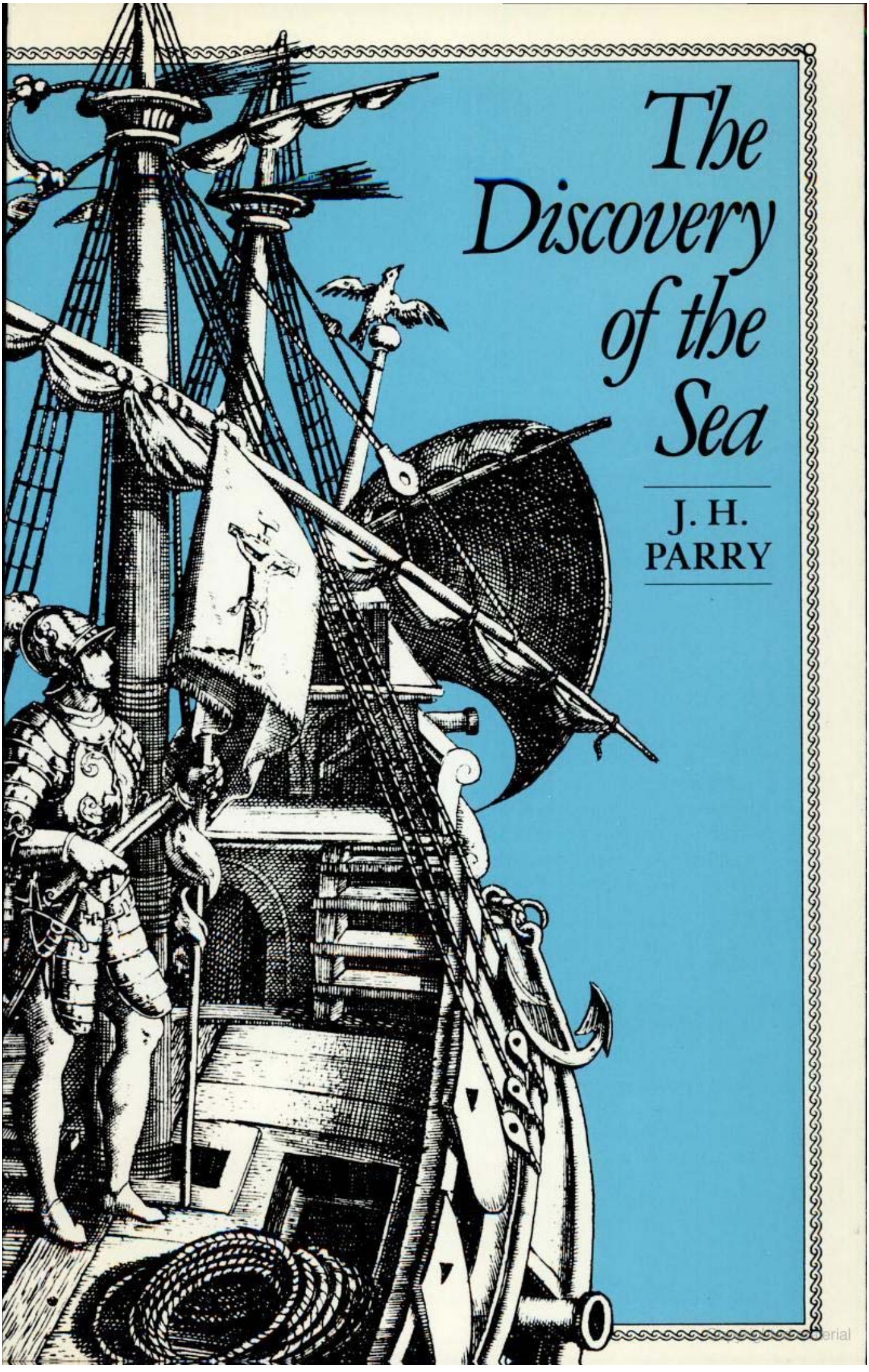

The Discovery of the Sea

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Malacca was known to Europeans already, at least by report. Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna, who traveled extensively in the East between 1502 and 1508, passing himself off as a Muslim as Conti had done, claimed to have visited Malacca, and included a description of it in his *Itinerary*, which he published in Rome in 1510. Portuguese ships made an exploratory voyage there in 1509 and a more serious commercial reconnaissance, with Florentine agents on board, in 1510. Their reception, owing probably to the influence of Arab or Gujerati traders in the harbor, was unfriendly. In 1511, almost immediately after the taking of Goa, Alboquerque himself sailed with nineteen ships to attack Malacca, risking his hold upon Goa in order to do so. The monsoon which took him to Malacca made it impossible to return until five months later. The siege strained his resources in men and ships to the utmost and Goa all but fell in his absence; but the gamble succeeded. The Sultan of Malacca fled down the coast, to establish himself in the marshes of Johore, whence he sent petitions for redress to his remote suzerain, the Chinese Emperor. These petitions later caused the Portuguese, in their efforts to gain admission to trade at Canton, a great deal of trouble; but for the time, the route to the Far East seemed to lie open.

These rapid, successive operations throughout the Indian Ocean were carried through with breathtaking boldness and with extraordinary savagery. On many occasions, Portuguese victory was followed by the systematic butchery or mutilation of prisoners and the massacre of civil populations. To some extent, this cruelty reflected traditional religious hatred; to some extent, particularly with Almeida, the pitiless ferocity of the man's own nature. With Alboquerque, the ferocity was calculated. The Portuguese were engaged in a desperate gamble for very big stakes. They employed a policy of terror in order to make themselves dreaded, and to demonstrate the value of their alliance. Naturally they made themselves hated also; but in regions of petty rulers, such as the Malabar coast, or east Africa, or the archipelago, they never lacked allies. Even more important, more significant in their eastward progress, they had no difficulty in finding local navigators to take them wherever they wanted to go.

This dependence on local skill and knowledge became more marked than ever after the taking of Malacca. Malacca was one of the major ports of trans-shipment in the international spice trade. Tomé Pires, the apothecary's son who served from 1512 to 1515 as accountant of the Portuguese factory there, wrote in his *Suma Oriental* an excited description

of its harbor and godowns, its shipping, its busy polyglot trade. "Malacca is a city made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world, the end of monsoons and the beginning of others." East of Malacca lay a vast, mysterious region of shallow seas and beautiful, productive islands, including the Moluccas which produced the cloves, the mace and the nutmeg the Portuguese had come to find. Northeast lay the south coast of China, source of silk and porcelain and itself an eager market for island spices. So much Pires and his compatriots could learn in Malacca, if they did not know it already. "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice. As far as from Malacca, and from Malacca to China, and from China to the Moluccas, and from the Moluccas to Java, and from Java to Malacca and Sumatra, all is in our power."

This was an exaggeration; from Malacca to the Moluccas is more than two thousand miles of intricate navigation; to the nearest Chinese ports, about the same distance, across the stormy China Sea; and certainly none of these places, except Malacca itself, was in Pires's day in Portuguese power. They were, however, accessible through a dense and efficient network of local shipping, Chinese and, even more, Javanese. It was relatively easy for the Portuguese to open business in places farther east by consigning their goods in local ships. Their initial contacts with China were made in this way, at minor harbors in Lin-tin Bay, downriver from Canton. The first recorded Portuguese visit was that of Jorge Alvarez in 1514; Alvarez purchased, besides silk and porcelain, a quantity of tung oil, which the Chinese used for varnishing ships' planks. When the Portuguese tried to penetrate, in their own ships, to Canton itself, their reception by the Chinese authorities—understandably, in view of their reputation at Malacca—was unwelcoming, and several decades elapsed before they secured a tolerated toehold at Macao.

Cloves, however, interested the Portuguese more than silk, and the Moluccas rather than China were the principal goal of their search. The only independent account of these islands available in Europe at that time came from Varthema, who may or may not have visited them himself. Varthema's *Itinerary*, in any event, was not published until 1510 and was not known to the Portuguese officers who took Malacca, though some of them may have met Varthema in India. These officers picked up most of their knowledge of the islands in Malacca itself. For the navigation between Malacca and the Moluccas they depended on Javanese information and guidance; and this, apparently, was readily available. Many Javanese lived in Malacca; besides the usual floating population of seafarers, they included a big mercantile colony and many craftsmen, including shipwrights. Alboquerque was so impressed by the skill of the shipwrights that he recruited some of them to work at Goa. The Javanese trading community, at first, was not wholly hostile. The Sultan had

been a grasping ruler; some of them were probably glad to see him go, and possibly they thought the Portuguese too inept in business to be serious competitors. At least one Javanese prince, who had had commercial differences with the Sultan, initially welcomed the Portuguese victory. Although other Javanese rulers were less friendly, and although the Portuguese were discouraged from visiting Javanese ports, they were able to recruit Javanese pilots for their early expeditions to the Moluccas.

The term Maluco, as used by Europeans in the early sixteenth century, covered a much smaller area than the Moluccas as they are marked on maps today. It included the five spice islands, Ternate, Tidore, Motir, Makian and Bachan, together with the larger island of Halmahera on which the others depended for much of their food supply. The Amboina and Banda groups were regarded usually as separate archipelagos, though included with the Moluccas in the general term, the Spiceries. This compendious name was often used loosely, also, to describe a much larger area, including Celebes, the Sunda Islands and even Sumatra. Borneo was usually considered separately from the Spiceries, and grouped with China, Japan and the Philippines under the general head of "countries to the East." All the islands of the Spiceries produced pepper, or could produce it; only the small islands of the Molucca group produced cloves, only the Banda Islands nutmeg, with mace its derivative. Politically, the islands were divided among hundreds of small sultanates. Their only unity derived from seaborne trade.

Immediately after the capture of Malacca the Portuguese set about investigating this complex geographical puzzle, with a view to making their own contacts with the sources of cloves and nutmeg. António de Abreu left Malacca for this purpose late in 1511, with three ships, carrying Javanese pilots. The fleet sailed along the northern side of the Sunda Islands as far as Flores, then northeast to Amboina, the south coast of Ceram, and the Banda Islands. In the Bandas, they loaded nutmeg, and with this cargo Abreu decided to return to Malacca. He had lost one of his ships among the islands, but as captain and crew were picked up, he bought a local ship to replace it. On the return passage this vessel became separated from the others in rough weather, and was wrecked in its turn. Its captain, Francisco Serrão, with a few companions, made his way to Amboina and eventually to Ternate. Ternate is a small island, only about eight miles across: a single volcanic cone, surrounded by a narrow but extremely fertile coastal plain. Its population, though dense, was small. There was only one town. The clove trees which grew on the coastal ring, however, made the people of the island commercially rich, and its Sultan a ruler of consequence, the dominant ruler of the island group. Serrão settled down to a comfortable beachcombing life as mercenary captain and adviser to the Sultan.