

Sibling Rivalry and the Discovery of America; Was Portuguese-Danish Cooperation Involved?

by Norman Berdichevsky

Scandinavia and Iberia are the two maritime peninsulas fronting on the Atlantic Ocean and respectively guarding the entrances to Europe's two great inland seas--the Baltic and the Mediterranean. Each of these regions has witnessed both a struggle between a unifying cultural-linguistic and religious heritage, and a bitter national envy and rivalry that for a time encompassed union and threatened absorption of the "lesser" or "younger" sibling. This was followed by a renewed independence and sense of distinct identity and the identification of the "older" or "greater" rival with imperialist ambitions, and indelibly stamped as an arrogant and hypocritical usurper. In both peninsulas, the originally unified and ascendant powers of Denmark and Portugal achieved independence as a distinct nation-state, regional hegemony and a far flung overseas empire--only to lose out and suffer a long period of hurt feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis the newly dominant rival "big brother" (Sweden and Spain).

Psychiatrists use the term "sibling rivalry" to denote the frequent sense of competitiveness of siblings for the love of their parents, the affection of friends and relations and the relative success in their chosen careers and personal lives. The same characteristics and traits may be found among closely related nations that have had a long intertwined history, have often been united for a time in a long-lasting union, and speak closely related languages or regional dialects. Such pairs of nations that exhibit feelings of competitiveness, jealousy and alternating phases of superiority and inferiority complexes are The "minor siblings" (Denmark and Portugal) increasingly relied upon their Atlantic coasts and overseas orientation to establish vast colonial empires in the mid-Atlantic (the Azores, Madeira, Brazil) and the North Atlantic (the Faeroes, Iceland and Greenland, and the Virgin Islands), and even further in Africa, India and Asia. One of the most fascinating and as yet incomplete studies of an episode in the history of exploration is the brief but fertile period of Portuguese-Danish cooperation (1425-1476).

It was the Portuguese who first achieved independence by expelling the Moors and achieving national unity, and then established a far-flung colonial empire, only to lose out later in large part to Spain. The result was a prolonged feeling towards the neighbor as an upstart and arrogant "big brother." As late as the sixteenth century, Portugal's greatest national poet, Luis De Camões, could still reflect on the two lands' common heritage embracing all peoples of the Iberian Peninsula. In his epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*, he referred to the Portuguese as "Uma gente fortíssima de Espanha" (Canto I, verse 31). He used *Espanha* in the traditional geographic sense of the entire Iberian peninsula.

It was however the great successes of Portugal's heroic explorers, seamen and cartographers that made such achievements in the Age of Discovery, and cemented the essential feeling of national character that made separation from Spain a matter of national pride rather than regional distinctiveness. The Portuguese love to reassert their imperial past that outlasted Spain's, even though the final remnants eventually disappeared after World War II (Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde islands, Goa, East Timor and Macao). Quite a few Portuguese, while bemoaning the loss of empire, at least have the satisfaction knowing that there are almost as many speakers of Portuguese as Spanish. Some were therefore recently dismayed to learn that Brazil, the largest Portuguese-speaking nation, adopted a new educational curriculum making Castilian Spanish a required subject (as the obligatory first foreign language studied in all schools).

Spanish Role as the "Big Brother"

Observers point out that the Portuguese national character is more sentimental, ironic, mild, and even more melancholic (as can be heard so clearly in the lilting strains of *Fado* music). These characteristics are often held up as the opposite of Castilian culture. Intense Spanish pressure and forced dynastic marriage compelled the Portuguese to follow the Spanish example of expelling the Jews in 1497, a step that deprived Portugal of many of its best merchants, diplomats, mathematicians, geographers, astronomers and cartographers. Feelings of resentment were aggravated by Spanish attempts to absorb Portugal, which

temporarily succeeded from 1580-1640 (a period known as "The Spanish Captivity"). It was a political mistake that only encouraged a strong and proud reaction that cemented the identity of an independent Portuguese nation, a separate state and culture. Imagine what problems Spain would face today, if, on top of the current separatist agitation in the Basque country and Catalonia, Portugal was another antagonistic region.

Similar Resentment Against the Swedes

The popular press in Denmark delights in playful teasing and taunting the older brother rival – Sweden in much the same way. Although educated people regard this pandering to old prejudices as the cheapest form of sensationalism, its continued emotional long-term appeal cannot be doubted. A favorite part of this teasing is the double-meanings employed in manipulating the two closely related languages. Danes and Swedes will often prefer to converse in English rather than speak their own languages with each other. The written form is sufficiently similar so that the general meaning of texts can be generally understood but differences in intonation, pronunciation and the distinct different meanings of closely sounding words provide an endless form of humor. Swedes have a special "Sj" sound and most Danes use a pronounced glottal stop that is difficult for non-natives to imitate.

All this may seem like making a mountain out of a molehill for many foreign observers who imagine that the Scandinavian peoples are so similar they should have long ago buried the hatchet. Indeed, all the Scandinavian states remain among the most stable in the world politically. They cooperate in many economic and social areas such as the joint SAS airline and are culturally, socially and linguistically similar, but maintain a distinct sense of political separateness.

The Case of Sweden (Tilfældet Sverige) by the Danish journalist, Mogen Berendt became a popular best seller in Denmark during the 1980s. He analyzed renewed Danish-Swedish policies and popular prejudices that have contributed irritating, albeit minor, disagreements. These included the proximity of the Swedish nuclear power plant in

Barsebeck facing the Danish coast of Zealand and Copenhagen, Swedish import regulations affecting the sale of Danish pork products, differences in policies over taxation, the sale of alcoholic beverages, differences in adoption laws and a border dispute over the island of Hesselø, an island with a handful of inhabitants.

The Swedes are often the target of jokes and satire that picture them as arrogant, snobbish, overly formal and fond of titles. A victory by the Danish team over its Swedish rival in international competition is still considered the most emotionally satisfying for Danish football fans. Well known Danish psychologist Per Christensen, commenting on the underlying reasons for the appeal of the book had this to say:

“The Swedes have typical narcissistic traits. They feed on an ingrown imaginary greatness. The Swedes are full of megalomaniac impressions and are clearly tied to their own traits and achievements. The Danes, can on the other hand, be described as chronic depressives with a lack of self-confidence and a tendency to exaggerated skepticism of highflying plans and ideas. The Swedish attitude towards Denmark easily becomes commandeering, arrogant and nonchalant.”

Overseas Expansion of the Two Atlantic Powers: Portugal and Denmark

One of the most fascinating but as yet unanswered questions regarding the controversy over “Who Discovered America” is the role played by joint Portuguese-Danish ventures and cooperation (1425-1476). Why did two distant and unrelated nations maintain such ties for a period of over fifty years?

Prince Henry the Navigator had been in touch with the Danish court through his brother Don Pedro who had fought together with the Danish King Erik VII and visited him in 1426. The following Danish king, Christopher III sent several Danes to study at Prince Henry’s school in Sagres. The Portuguese then invited a Danish nobleman (whose name was turned into the Portuguese sounding Vallarte) to lead one of these expeditions in 1448

(the only foreigner to be accorded such an honor) as the Portuguese slowly made progress sailing further South along the coasts of West Africa. This “Vallarte” was sent to negotiate with the natives of the Cape Verde Islands whose king was thought to be a Christian. Vallarte was either killed or captured which must have dampened the eagerness of Danish noblemen to sail with the Portuguese.

Only a few decades earlier, the last Norwegian-Danish contacts had been made with the old dwindling Viking colony on Greenland. King Christian I of Denmark sent an unsuccessful expedition to explore the shores of the Arctic Ocean with the hope of finding a Northwest Passage to China and India sometime between 1470 and 1472. The fact that both the Danes and Portuguese were making efforts to reach India and eventually China resulted in this cooperation along with the common strategy of outflanking their rivals at home – Spain and Sweden.

Two daring Danish (or German) sea captains, Hans Pothorst and Didrik Pining were appointed by King Christian I to discover new islands and lands in the northern seas sometime in the 1470s. What is in dispute is to whether or not the Danish voyage to the West was accompanied by João Vaz Corte Real, the personal envoy of the Portuguese king and if this expedition reached Greenland.

Samuel Eliot Morison, the leading authority on pre-Columbian voyages of exploration and discovery doubts the authenticity of the claim that a voyage involving Pothorst, Pining and Corte Real reached North America. He finds it unlikely for a host of reasons – meteorological, unsubstantiated source material and the simple “lack of a motive” The motive could well have been the mutual benefit derived from Portuguese advances in cartography and navigation combined with the Viking daring and familiarity with previous voyages to Greenland and North America. The two kings must have well been aware sixteen years prior to the first voyage of Columbus, that the world was round and that it would be possible to reach India and China by sailing West. From the Danes, the Portuguese had learned that there was no tenable “Northwest Passage” and that Greenland was so barren and inhospitable that the old Viking settlement had been unable

to survive and so little wonder that the Portuguese refused Columbus' initial request for support to reach "The Indies".

The Portuguese thus continued their steady attempts by Vasco da Gama to circumnavigate Africa and eventually succeeded in 1497. A mosaic memorial on the Avenida da Liberdade in Lisbon, states that João Corte Real was the real discoverer of America and even the two volume authoritative history of Denmark by Bent Rying, published by the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs accepts the accounts of Pothorst's voyage to Labrador in 1476. Rying adds that Pothorst confessed his "Depredations in Vinland" at Christmas mass in the priory church at Elsinore in 1484.

There has been considerable recent speculation (or wishful thinking?) that Columbus was really a Portuguese spy bent on misleading the Spanish throne throughout his four voyages and pretending that he had indeed landed in Asia rather than a "New World". If this is so, it will undoubtedly be recorded as the greatest double-cross in history. See the well documented case in *The Portuguese Columbus; Secret Agent of King John III* by Mascarenhas Barreto (Macmillan, 1972; in English 1992) that Columbus was originally a Portuguese Jew. None of his written records were made in any form of Italian. They bare all the hallmarks and errors of a Portuguese speaker who has learned Spanish!

One might even go further and suspect a world-wide Portuguese conspiracy when Fernando de Magalhães (Magellan), a Portuguese seaman, volunteered his services to the Spanish crown to discover a "Southwest Passage" Magellan's route westward around South America's southern tip in the first circumnavigation of the world but it was a much more perilous and longer route than the well established Portuguese routes to India and China by rounding Africa and sailing eastward. This enabled the Portuguese to dominate trade with Africa and Asia for a fifty year period, 1470-1520, while the Spaniards were occupied in ventures sailing westward. The Portuguese jealously guarded their maps and records of all voyages. The death penalty was prescribed for misappropriation of maps and sailing charts. Log books were often frequently falsified with misleading recordings of longitude to ensure that Portugal's trade with the East was undisturbed.

What is true no matter what the actual historical record is that there is a deep reluctance on the part of many Danes and Portuguese to simply defer to Spanish and Swedish claims that assert their role as the Big Brother.

There is great resentment too that Portugal during the period of the Spanish Captivity was drained of its resources and forced to provide much of the timber, a substantial number of ships and crews and its nautical expertise as part of the doomed "Invincible Armada" in the foolhardy attempt by Spain to invade England in 1588 and restore the Catholic faith there as the state religion.

The Portuguese often sadly reflect that their loss of empire was the result of attempts to seize control of much of Morocco and North Africa from its base in Ceuta. There they faced a numerically superior enemy armed with equivalent firearms, while the Spaniards obtained much of their great empire in the Canary Islands, Mexico, Peru, the Americas and the Philippines by fighting people who possessed a Stone Age technology.