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## Alfonso de Albuquerque's hesitation in constructing a Fortress in the historical city of Malacca (In 1511) from a tourism perspective

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### Abstract

This article attempts to examine the hesitation of Alfonso de Albuquerque, who was in the 1500s', the captain-General and Governor of India, as to whether to construct or not a Portuguese Fortress in the spice-rich port of Malacca in 1511. Malacca is one of the fourteen states in Malaysia, and UNESCO declared her as a World Heritage City in 2008 (UNESCO World Heritage Center, 1992 – 2024). The article's research was conducted using quantitative (Secondary) resources with regards to some historical texts, peer-reviewed journals and papers depicting Alfonso de Albuquerque's sojourn in the Indian Continent and Malay Archipelago in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Half of the pepper supplies from Malacca were exported to Cairo, Alexandria, and Venice before it arrived in Portugal. The Arab traders brought this commodity to Bab-el-Mandeb<sup>1</sup> to be sold and succeeded many times in eluding the thirst of the Portuguese Indian Fleet in Goa and Cochin for pepper and other spices. The Portuguese was unable to monopolize the spice trade even with their presence in Asia as Malacca's spice market was in the hands of the Moslems from the Middle East (Elaine S. *et al.*, 1936). If the Portuguese could over run Malacca, then the spice trade will be in their hands and would lead to the ruin of Islam in the state. It would also represent the fairest piece of jewel ever bestowed on their monarch's crown.<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese apothecary and diplomat, Tom Pires once said, "Whoever is Lord of Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice." (Scott-Ross 1971, pp.28). Many European powers were determined to capture Malacca's spice port as it represents the symbol of power and wealth (Gulliver K., *et al.*, 2009).

**Keywords:** Malacca (Melaka), Alfonso de Albuquerque, Goa, Cochin, spices, d. Manuel, sultan Mahmud shah, King Manuel

### Introduction

#### Literature Review

#### Background of Melaka (Or Malacca)

In the year 1400, the Malaccan Sultanate was established by Parameswara, a Hindu prince from Sumatra in today's Indonesia. Malacca was a favorite trading port among the Arabs, and they brought together with them the teaching of the Quran. Subsequently, this led to the Hindu prince's conversion to Islam, and he adopted the Moslem name, Raja Iskandar Shah in 1414. Malacca was in a favorable position in bridging West and East Asia, and it was naturally a base market for goods from all corners of the Asia continent. Nevertheless, Malacca prospered because of its facilities, port charges and taxes, which attracted traders, and not because of its ability to control the commerce passing through the Straits of Mala.

In 1511, Malacca fell to the Portuguese under Alfonso de' Albuquerque. The Portuguese realized that Malacca was the vital gateway between the East and West. A Portuguese adventurer, Tom Pires, wrote "whoever is Lord of Malacca, has his hands on the throat of Venice." Since Malacca was the most important key to control the trading from the East and West Asia, the Portuguese were keen on occupying the city. The attack on Malacca was triggered by the imprisonment of some 'infidel' Portuguese by the Bendahara<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> It is a strait between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. It connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

<sup>2</sup> King Manuel I or Manuel O' Afortunado – King of Portugal (1495 – 1521)

<sup>3</sup> Chief Minister or Prime Minister – in traditional Malay states, he is second to the Sultan in rank. He executes the Sultan's commands and the Commander-in-Chief of the Sultan's Armed Forces.

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Malacca under the Portuguese rule, was not as busy as it had been since most Moslem traders preferred to trade in Acheh.

### Who was Alfonso de Albuquerque?

Alfonso could be dubbed as the first European since Alexander the Great who had the vision in establishing a Portuguese Empire in India, or in the whole of Asia, and which will be governed directly from Europe (Hetal S, 1897). He was well-known for his great administration skills and military strategies from which he was nicknamed as the 'Caesar of the East' and the 'Lion of the Seas'. After conquering Goa in 1510, Alfonso was appointed as the second Portuguese Viceroy.

Alfonso was born in 1456 in the district of Alhandra in Portugal, to Gonçalo de Albuquerque and P. Leonor de Meneses. His father served the King of Portugal, D. Alfonso the Fifth, and therefore, Alfonso received his early education in the royal court. He displayed a great interest in Mathematics and Classical Latin. He began his military career in 1471 and accompanied Alfonso the Fifth in the conquests of Tangier, Arafa and Arzila in Africa. At the request of the future Portuguese Monarch, King John the Second, he fought in the wars against Castile in Spain (Hunter WW, *et al.* 1980) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Alfonso succeeded in executing Portugal's grand scheme of combating Islam, propagating Christianity, and establishing a Portuguese Asian Empire (Ooi, 2004, pp17). During the Renaissance Period (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century), Alfonso raided the Persian Gulf, and led the first European voyage into the Red Sea (Stevens *et al.*, 1711, pp 113) <sup>[22]</sup>. He was both an effective military commander (Diffie, Winius and Shafer, 1977, pp 239-260) <sup>[7]</sup> and naval commander during his time. He attempted to close all sea routes from the the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, Red Sea and the Pacific.

Alfonso was appointed as the Naval Commander of both the Arabian and Persian Sea Fleets in 1506. His naval conflicts centered mainly in the Indian Ocean, the trade routes of the Persian Gulf regions and on the Indian coasts. Portugal became the first global empire in history, due to Alfonso's brilliant military strategies in his naval campaigns (Erickson and Goldstein, 2012) <sup>[8]</sup>. He fought and won in numerous battles, not forgetting the fall of Goa in 1510 and Malacca in 1511. He focused solely on administrative duties in his final lives of five years (Bandelier, 1907) <sup>[3]</sup> in which his role as Portuguese India's second governor was crucial to the longevity of the Portuguese Empire. He executed expeditions that led to the establishment of diplomatic ties with Thailand, Myanmar, the Moluccas, and Timor. He sowed the seeds for European trade with China's Ming Dynasty (Vilhena, Maria da Conceicao, *et al.*, 2001) <sup>[29]</sup>.

### Establishment of trade ties with Malacca

Vasco da Gama mentioned about Malacca upon his return from Calicut in which he opened a direct sea route to India around the Cape of Good Hope. He described it as a city that was "40 days journey from India, where clove, nutmeg, porcelains, and silks were sold" (João Paulo de Oliveira e Costa, Vítor Luís Gaspar Rodrigues (2012) <sup>[13]</sup>. Consequently, King Manuel the First decided to establish direct trade ties with Malacca (José Damião Rodrigues, Pedro Aires Oliveira (2014) <sup>[14]</sup>. His Majesty in 1505, dispatched Dom Francisco de Almeida to discover Malacca's precise location and at the same was appointed the first Viceroy of Portuguese India.

In August 1506, Dom Francisco, dispatched two undercover Portuguese envoys, Francisco Pereira and Estevao de Vilhena, to Malacca on board a Muslim merchant vessel as he was unable to gather many resources such as warships, soldiers and sailors for his expedition. Unfortunately, the mission was aborted when their presence was detected by Malacca and were narrowly lynched by a mob when they landed on the Coromandel Coast. By sheer luck, they escaped the lynch and made it back to Cochin in November 1506 (Costa JP, Rodrigues VL, 2012) <sup>[13]</sup>. Unimpressed with Almeida's Malacca's expedition failure, King Manuel commanded Diego Lopez de Sequeira to sail to Malacca to succeed where Almeida failed in his trade and diplomatic expedition in April 1508. His Majesty King Manuel decreed that Diego's mission was to establish trade and diplomatic ties peacefully with the Malacca Sultanate. He was also ordered not to respond to any provocations by aiming their cannons upon Malacca unless fired upon by the Sultan's armies.

### Sequeira's arrival in Malacca

The Portuguese fleet under the command of Diego Lopez de Sequeira sailed into Malacca's harbor in September 1509. Sequeira immediately seek the help of Chinese merchants in the harbor at that time to arrange an audience with the Malaccan ruler. They invited him onboard one of their vessels for dinner and obliged to arrange an audience between him and the Malaccan ruler, Sultan Mahmud Shah <sup>[4]</sup>. The Sultan acceded to Sequeira's audience requests and permitted him to establish a 'feitoria' <sup>[5]</sup> in Malacca. Unfortunately, the Muslim Gujaratis and Javanese merchants were wary of the commercial and political Portuguese threats that may disrupt Malacca's peaceful landscape. The merchants subsequently convinced Sultan Mahmud Shah and the 'Bendahara' to betray and capture the Portuguese (Costa JP, Rodrigues VL, 2012) <sup>[13]</sup> to stamp the lustful desires of the Portuguese.

Sequeira was convinced of the Sultan's geniality that he disregarded the information from his informant, Duarte Fernandes, about the Sultan's plot in destroying his fleet, which was even confirmed by the Chinese merchants (Castanheda FL, *et al.*, 1979) <sup>[9]</sup>. Sequeira was having a game of chess aboard his flagship when a few Malaccan ships, disguised as merchants, ambushed and attacked his fleet (Barros JD, 1553, *Decades de Asia*). The Portuguese failed to halt the Sultan's army from boarding their ships and thereby unable to land ashore to rescue their fellow countrymen who were trapped in the 'feitoria'. As their attempted rescue mission was bleak, Sequeira called off the mission and decided to sail back to India before the monsoon arrived, leaving his men stranded in Malacca. Before his departure, he conveyed a message to the Sultan and the 'Bendahara' in the form of two captive heads with an arrow through their skulls, warning that this would befall on them should they cause any harm to the captivated Portuguese (Barros JD, 1553, *Decades de Asia*).

### Preparations to avenge and conquer Malacca

<sup>4</sup> Sultan Mahmud Shah was the last Malaccan Sultan who reigned from 1488-1511 before the city was captured by the Portuguese in 1511.

<sup>5</sup> Factory- an early form of free-trade zone or transshipment point. Local inhabitants could interact with foreign merchants (often known as factors) over trade.

Sequeira reached Travancore (Present day Kerala and Tamil Nadu) in April 1510 and learnt that Alfonso d' Albuquerque had succeeded Dom Francisco de Almeida as the Governor of Portuguese India. Fearful of reprisals from Albuquerque for previously supporting Almeida, Sequeira promptly set sail back to Portugal (Barros JD, 1553, *Decades de Asia*). In Lisbon, King Manuel dispatched Diego de Vasconcelos to trade directly with Malacca in which he believed that Sequeira had successfully established trade ties with Malacca. The Portuguese captives sent a message (Which was written by a captive, Rui de Araujo) to Alfonso which detailed the Malacca Sultan's military strength, the atrocious treatment which they received from their captors, and the strategic importance of Malacca. Their message was delivered through a Malaccan Hindu merchant, Nina Chatu, who interceded for the Portuguese captives. Alfonso was aware that if Vasconcelos was to proceed to Malacca with a meagre force, it would turn out to be a suicidal mission and therefore managed to convince him not to proceed with his suicidal mission until they captured Goa later that year. After capturing Goa, Alfonso amassed 18 ships with 600 soldiers besides slaves for his expedition to Malacca to free his countrymen.

### The Attack on Malacca

The Portuguese Armada sailed into Malacca's harbor on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1511, displaying their military might by firing their cannons which caused commotion in the harbor. He forbade ships from leaving the harbor without his permission and immediately negotiated for the release of the Portuguese captives still trapped in Malacca. He demanded that the Malaccan Sultan should release the captives without asking for ransom, but the Sultan was vague and evasive in his reply to Alfonso. The Sultan was actually buying time to fortify his city against possible Portuguese attacks and immediately recalled his navy back to his harbor.

Alfonso frequently received messages from the Sultan's captive and his fellow countryman, Rui de Araujo, of the Sultan's military strength through a local Portuguese collaborator, Nina Chatu. The Sultan's army stood at 20,000 men which included Turkish and Persian bowmen, artillery and 20 war elephants. However, Alfonso noted there were not enough soldiers to handle the artillery. Alfonso himself would later report to the King that only 4,000 of those were battle-ready (Fernão Lopes de Castanheda *et al.*, 1979)<sup>[9]</sup>.

The small presence of Alfonso's military contingent did not pose a great threat to Sultan Mahmud's stature. Alfonso later personally informed King Manuel that Sultan Mahmud had somehow estimated that Alfonso's total army strength had a margin of "less than three men" (Raymundo Antonio de Bulhao Patora, de Mendonca HL *et al.*, 1884)<sup>[19]</sup>. Thus, the Sultan remained steadfastly in his city, without a single thought of escaping from obliteration and defeat from the Portuguese. He was busy organizing his city's defenses, "not realizing the great danger he was putting himself into". Negotiations between the Sultan and Alfonso bore no results and Alfonso decided to bombard Malacca in the middle of July 1511. Feeling startled, Sultan Mahmud promptly released the prisoners, and Alfonso took the opportunity to demand from Sultan Mahmud a compensation of 800,000.00 cruzados (i.e., 1,080,000 grams

of gold)<sup>[6]</sup> and the permission to build a fortress. Alfonso anticipated that the Sultan would not heed his demand.

### Alfonso's hesitation in establishing a fortress in Malacca

Sultan Mahmud's ignorance of Alfonso's earlier demands had made him felt anxious. Alfonso was forced to risk his men the second time in launching another attack on Malacca with the hope of taming the Sultan's pride; and he had not in the land any means of building a fortress (Alfonso's unintentional desire of building a fortress in Malacca) which it was his chief intent to do, neither could Rui de Araujo give any advice on these events<sup>[7]</sup>.

Alfonso's hesitation in capturing Malacca was also revealed when he gathered his military officers informing them that he will launch another assault on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1511, the Day of Santiago<sup>[8]</sup>. "The Governor accordingly got ready, to assault the town. But he warned all the 'fidalgos' (Portuguese nobility) that if he succeeded, he would build a fort. Unless they were prepared for this, it was not worthwhile to risk a single man to gain Malacca"<sup>[9]</sup>. Alfonso's soldiers were exhausted from their battle against Sultan Mahmud Shah's forces. They had to fight beneath the hot equatorial sun for eight hours. His men neither had eaten nor slept and he could not risk anyone of them to fetch supplies on board their vessels. Without adequate supplies of rations and rests, it was impossible for his men to build a fortress overnight in defending themselves against enemy attacks. Alfonso postponed his final assault the following day after taking into consideration this predicament. He set fire to the city and allowed his soldiers to plunder the city at the same time. Much of the Sultan's artillery was carried off<sup>[10]</sup>.

Albuquerque expected Sultan Mahmud to surrender after all these military assaults. The Sultan dispatched a message to the Portuguese, deploring their assaults, since he had released the prisoners back to Alfonso. His officers became bored as each day passed by without any end to their assaults on Malacca. When anything hung fire, they quickly lost interest. Besides, the idea of fortress building was depressing. Suppose Malacca was conquered, some pessimists gloomily remarked it would be after such a struggle and there would be so many wounded that men would be more fit to go to bed than to start fortress building<sup>[11]</sup>.

Alfonso explained to his army again why Malacca should be captured by them. He told his men that half of the world's pepper came from Malacca, and it leaked through Cairo, Alexandria and Venice and does not beyond these cities. The Arabs would then collect the peppers from these cities and

<sup>6</sup> 1 cruzado = 3.6 grams of gold (Bakshi GD; *The Rise of Indian Military Power; Evolution of an Indian Strategic Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2015), KW Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> The Hakluyt Society (1875); *Commentaries of the Great Alfonso de Albuquerque*, pp. 110

<sup>8</sup> Elain S (1936); Chapter XVIII – Malacca Taken; *Indies Adventure; The Amazing Career of Alfonso de Albuquerque, Capt.-Gen and Governor of India (1509-1511)*; London, Glasgow and Son Ltd., pp 172 -175

<sup>9</sup> Elain S (1936); Chapter XVIII – Malacca Taken; *Indies Adventure; The Amazing Career of Alfonso de Albuquerque, Capt.-Gen and Governor of India (1509-1511)*; London, Glasgow and Son Ltd., pp 172 -173

<sup>10</sup>, <sup>11</sup> Elain S (1936); Chapter XVIII – Malacca Taken; *Indies Adventure; The Amazing Career of Alfonso de Albuquerque, Capt.-Gen and Governor of India (1509-1511)*; London, Glasgow and Son Ltd., pp 172 -176

set sail from there to Bel-el-Mandeb <sup>[12]</sup>, until they reach their homes in the Middle East, where the pepper will be sold. With Malacca still in the hands of Moslem traders, the Portuguese monopoly of the spice trade would never be complete. The defeat of Malacca by the Portuguese would assure that they will monopolize the spice trade, and with Malacca conquered, it would be the fairest jewel in Dom Manuel's crown <sup>[13]</sup>. "I have put the case before you", he concluded, "tell me your views. Alfonso emphasized, that he would not conquer Malacca as a gift unless his men were prepared to build the strongest fortress, "that part you think fit," and they answered sweetly, "you know the best?" <sup>[14]</sup> "Make yourself clear upon one point," said Alfonso. "Will you build that fort or will you not?" To which they recklessly replied that they would build two forts if necessary. "Very well," said Alfonso, "now we can proceed," and the captains, full of enthusiasm, entreated him to hurry up <sup>[15]</sup>.

Also, it was reported to Alfonso that there were some among the captains who were in the habit of saying that they did not think it of service to the King of Portugal for them to maintain the city nor to build a fortress within it <sup>[16]</sup>. On hearing this piece of information, Alfonso summoned his military commanders on board his ship and asked them, "Sirs, you will have no difficulty in remembering that we decided upon attacking the city, it was with the determination of building a fortress within it, for so it appeared to all to be necessary, and after having captured it, I was unwilling to let slip the possession of it yet, because ye all advised me to do so, I left it and withdrew; but being ready, as you see, to put my hands upon it again once more, I learned that you had already changed your opinion; now this cannot be because the Moors have destroyed the best part of us <sup>[17]</sup>. (By analyzing this statement, Alfonso adhered to the earlier advice of his council members as not to establish a fortress in Malacca, However, their opinions altered which compelled Alfonso to change his mind to conquer and establish a fortress in Malacca).

### Research Questions

- Was Alfonso de Albuquerque hesitant to capture and establish a fortress in Malacca?
- What were the influential factors which changed his mind to besiege and establish a fortress in Malacca?
- Who influenced Alfonso de Albuquerque to go ahead with the final assault on Malacca?
- Would Melaka (Or Malacca) be declared as a UNESCO World Heritage City had it not been for Alfonso's change of mind to conquer Melaka in 1511, thus attracting millions of tourists to visit this historical city today?

### Research Aims

<sup>12</sup> It is a strait between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. It connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

<sup>13</sup> Elain S (1936); Chapter XVIII – Malacca Taken; Indies Adventure; The Amazing Career of Alfonso de Albuquerque, Capt.-Gen and Governor of India (1509-1511); London, Glasgow and Son Ltd., pp 172 -176

<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Elain S (1936); Chapter XVIII – Malacca Taken; Indies Adventure; The Amazing Career of Alfonso de Albuquerque, Capt.-Gen and Governor of India (1509-1511); London, Glasgow and Son Ltd., pp 175.

<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> The Hakluyt Society (1875); Commentaries of the Great Alfonso de Albuquerque, pp 115.

- The main aim (Or purpose) of the research was to find out (Or uncover) why Alfonso de Albuquerque was hesitant to capture and establish a fortress in Malacca.
- The second purpose of the research was to unearth what were the influential factors which changed Alfonso de Albuquerque's mind to besiege and establish a fortress in Malacca.
- The third purpose of the research was to uncover who influenced Alfonso de Albuquerque in launching his final besiege on Malacca.
- The fourth factor was to uncover whether Melaka (or Malacca) be declared as a UNESCO World Heritage City if Alfonso contemplated not to capture Melaka (or Malacca) in 1511, and would she been able to draw the tourist's attention to this city today?

### Findings

- Being the first European since Alexander the Great, Alfonso de Albuquerque had the vision of establishing a Portuguese Empire in Asia and to be administered from Europe (Hetal S, 1897). He was well-known for his great administration skills and military strategies and was dubbed as the 'Great', the 'Caesar of the East' and the 'Lion of the Seas' (Hunter WW, *et al* 1980) <sup>[12]</sup>.
- Sultan Mahmud Shah (1488 – 1511), the last Malaccan Sultan before his kingdom was capitulated by Alfonso, granted an earlier permission to Lopez de Sequeira to establish a 'feitoria' <sup>[18]</sup> and to occupy vacant building for trading activities. The Muslim Gujaratis and Javanese traders were aware of the commercial and empire expansions of the Portuguese which they posed to the Muslim and other traders in Asia. To thwart these threats, they convinced Sultan Mahmud and his 'Bendahara' to capture and hold some of Lopez's men as prisoners
- Alfonso de Albuquerque emphasized, that he would not take Malacca as a gift unless they were prepared to build the strongest fortress that part of the world had ever seen, "I have put the case before you", he concluded, "tell me your views. Do you think fit," and they answered sweetly, "you know the best?" "Make yourself clear upon one point," said Alfonso. "Will you build that fort or will you not?" To which they recklessly replied that they would build two forts if necessary. "Very well," said Alfonso, "now we can proceed," and the captains, full of enthusiasm, entreated him to hurry up.
- Alfonso defeated Sultan Mahmud's 30,000 strong armies by using a handful of only 1,100 of his soldiers. To his dismay, he failed to receive any kinds of verbal acknowledgment from his King for the service <sup>[19]</sup>.
- Melaka recorded 5.12 million tourist arrivals between January and April 2024 in conjunction with the Visit Melaka Year 2024 (The Malaysian Reserve *et al.*, May 2024). This figure would not have been achieved and Melaka would not have taken a spot on the global tourist map if Alfonso de Albuquerque rescinded his decision in capturing Melaka and an absence of diverse

<sup>18</sup> Factory- an early form of free-trade zone or transshipment point. Local inhabitants could interact with foreign merchants (often known as factors) over trade.

<sup>19</sup> RS Whiteway (1899); The Rise of Portuguese Power in India, 1497-1550; Archibald Constable & Co., pp.144

cultures and races would be unheard of in this historical city today, which is the main tourist's attraction.

### Conclusion

The Portuguese ruled Malacca for the next 130 years (1511 – 1641), until it was captured by the Dutch. The research clearly revealed that Alfonso de Albuquerque was quite hesitant to besiege Malacca and establish a fortress therein, until he had to consult with his military commanders and 'fidalgos' to seek their views and blessings. Malacca's capitulation offered a monopoly to Portugal in controlling the global spice trade and route. With the addition of new naval bases, the Portuguese controlled important sea routes between the Indian Ocean, Java Sea and the South China Sea. This research welcome further research and analysis by future historians specializing in European Maritime Powers from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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