

# Diplomacy and Humanism: Ambassador Jean Nicot and the French-Portuguese Maritime Rivalry (1559-1561)\*

## Diplomacia y humanismo: el embajador Jean Nicot y la rivalidad marítima franco-portuguesa (1559-1561)

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*This article aims to re-examine Jean Nicot's embassy to Portugal, by using his correspondence. I attempt to show that the main episodes in this maritime rivalry during Nicot's tenure are intrinsically connected with the ambassador's acquisition of Portuguese maritime knowledge. I also suggest the connection between the information transmitted by Nicot from Lisbon with his work as a translator and disseminator of Portuguese knowledge after his resettling in France. Nicot's embassy is compared with those of other French and Spanish ambassadors.*

KEYWORDS: Ambassador; Go-between; Maritime Knowledge; New Worlds; Atlantic history; France; Portugal; Brazil.

*Este artículo pretende reexaminar la embajada de Jean Nicot en Portugal, usando su correspondencia. Se demuestra que los principales episodios de esta rivalidad marítima durante el mandato de Nicot están relacionados con la adquisición por parte del embajador del conocimiento marítimo portugués. También se argumenta la conexión entre la transmisión de información por Nicot desde Lisboa con su labor como traductor y divulgador del conocimiento portugués tras su reasentamiento en Francia. Se compara la embajada de Nicot con la de otros embajadores franceses y españoles.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Embajador; intermediario; conocimiento marítimo; nuevos mundos; historia atlántica; Francia; Portugal; Brasil.

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## Introduction

The European maritime empires of the early modern period relied critically on their ability to collect and organize information. As the Portuguese and the Spanish were the first to launch global maritime empires, they were rapidly confronted with the necessity of organizing information on their discoveries. For the Spanish case, Arndt Brendecke has demonstrated the role empiricism came to play in Philip II's (1556-1598) management of data about his empire.<sup>1</sup> More recently, and drawing on several previous studies, Ângela Barreto Xavier has highlighted the ways that, since the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese built up a science for administration of their overseas empire, making them the earliest European power to do so.<sup>2</sup> The information tended to be organized under different institutions, such as the Portuguese *Casa da Índia* and the Spanish *Casa de la Contratación*. Both were considered by David Turnbull to be the first scientific institutions in Europe that sought to manage geographical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The administrative structures with which Iberian rulers attempted to achieve a mastery of global oceanic knowledge (nautical and geographical) in the early sixteenth century became a model for the French, English and Dutch maritime enterprises.<sup>4</sup>

In this process, the circulation of information became essential to the development of strategies for both the Iberians, and their rivals. Ever since the beginning of their maritime expansions, the Iberian crowns had tried to keep maritime knowledge out of the hands of competitors, under what is often termed secrecy policies. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that their efforts failed. For the Portuguese case, Luís de Albuquerque has documented instances of appropriation on Portuguese maritime knowledge.<sup>5</sup> María Portuondo has traced very similar episodes in the Spanish context.<sup>6</sup> More recently, and using several cases occurring between 1500 and 1580,

1 Brendecke, 2016.

2 Xavier, 2018. Mota, 1976.

3 Turnbull, 1996.

4 For the English case see: Waters, 1970 and Wright, 1980. For the Dutch case: Unger, 2011. An overview of nautical knowledge transfers from Iberia to Northern Europe: Baldwin, 1980.

5 Albuquerque, 1972.

6 Portuondo, 2009, 168-169 and 262-263.

José María Moreno Madrid has demonstrated a consistent movement of Portuguese cartographical and nautical information to Spain and Italy.<sup>7</sup> Taken as a whole, such studies prove that the Portuguese attempted secrecy policy was regularly circumvented. The main reason for this outcome was the Portuguese and the Spanish Crown's impossibility to fully-control the circulation of all its "national" knowledge makers or the maritime adversaries' tactics to acquire Iberian knowledge. Thus, sailors, seamen, merchants, missionaries, spies, and ambassadors were some of the most pivotal figures in these processes of acquiring secret intelligence. The birth of modern diplomacy conferred critical new duties on ambassadors, as has been highlighted by Dante Fedele.<sup>8</sup> In several cases, ambassadors' activities extended far beyond political interventions. By engaging in endeavours to collect nautical, cartographical and geographical knowledge, ambassadors could easily adopt the role played by go-betweens.<sup>9</sup>

Jean Nicot (1520-25?-1600), the French ambassador to Portugal between 1559 and 1561, provides a striking example of these knowledge exchanges. Remembered in the French scholarship as the man responsible for widespread use of tobacco at the Valois court (called *Nicotiane* in his honor), Nicot is also noted for his humanist works. His membership in *La Pleiade*, the renowned French cultural group, certainly contributed to Nicot's fame. Despite the fact that Nicot's letters from his embassy in Portugal have already been published by Edmond Falgairolle and Luís de Matos,<sup>10</sup> the multiple ways his correspondence relates to the circulation of information and knowledge between France and Portugal in the 1560s was not fully studied. Such communications occurred on a backdrop of French-Portuguese maritime rivalry, best studied for Francis I's reign (1515-1547).<sup>11</sup> For the continued rivalry during Henry II's reign (1547-1559) and the Last Valois period (1559-1589), there is a lack of studies. One notable episode in this period was the *France Antarctique* project (1555-1560), a French attempt at establishing a colony in Brazil undertaken by Henry II. Despite Henry II's sudden disappearance in 1559, and the triggering of the French civil wars,<sup>12</sup> French-Portuguese maritime rivalry did not subside. As these

7 Moreno Madrid, 2021.

8 Fedele, 2017.

9 Raj, 2020.

10 Falgairolle, 1897. Matos, 1952a; 1952b. More recently, another author reappraised Nicot's embassy: Chichkine, 2021.

11 Ferreira, 1995. Borges, 2020, I, 322-349 and 377-416.

12 Knecht, 2000.

issues are both underexamined and essential context for Nicot's embassy, this article likewise aims to bring them into better focus.

Using the ambassador's personal correspondence, already published,<sup>13</sup> as well as key studies on Nicot, we will reconsider several aspects of his embassy, drawing attention to his role in the transmission of maritime information between Portugal and France. For this purpose, we will use the concept of maritime knowledge. Thus, it is important to detail its precise definition. Within the expression maritime knowledge, we include *Mare Clausum* and free trade policies, the acquisition of technical information (such as nautical rutters, cartography or important works related to nautical techniques), as well as the transmission of intelligence on the departure of fleets, their destinations, privateers' combats and events taking place overseas. Since we consider the global flows of maritime knowledge through diplomatic channels to be an often-overlooked aspect, this article will also attempt to discuss its impacts in the broader French-Portuguese relations and maritime rivalry. By showing how Nicot used his humanist *persona*, we will argue that he had a different approach from his predecessors.

### **Jean Nicot and the new Valois approach (1559-1561): Fresh hope for the Portuguese embassy?**

Jean Nicot was born ca. 1520-25, in Nîmes, an important city in Southern France. In a family of eleven children, fathered by a public notary, he was the firstborn. Nicot received a learned education. He started his studies at Nîmes College. He, then proceeded to the Nîmes Faculty of Arts. Later on, at his father's urging, Nicot took his doctorate in law. In late 1553 he chose to go to the Valois court, hoping to capitalize on the respect he had won for his solid humanist training. His rising status is clear in a 1551 letter by Guillaume Pellicier (1490-1568), bishop of Montpellier, asking Nicot's advice on the works of Plinius (23/24-79 AD). Known as an aficionado of the Classics, Nicot was granted access to the Valois court by Claude Baudel (1491-1561), a figure connected to Jeanne d'Albrecht (1528-1572), the Queen of Navarre.<sup>14</sup> At court, Nicot worked under the supervision of Jean Bertrandi, the seal keeper and archbishop of Sens. He was employed as map keeper and later as the

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<sup>13</sup> See note 10.

<sup>14</sup> Falgairolle, 1897, XI-XIV, XIX-XXIV, XCV, XCVII and 130.

itinerant archivist.<sup>15</sup> Soon after, Nicot forged ties with Diane de Poitiers (1500-1566), the favourite mistress of Henry II. This relationship facilitated Nicot's first appointment, by Henry II, to keeper of archives.<sup>16</sup>

In 1556, Guy de Brués, a good friend of Nicot, published his *Dialogues* and praised Nicot for his knowledge of philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Nicot's relationship with poet Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560) also date from this period. Given his office as keeper of archives, Nicot became interested in history and began work on a new edition of a history of France that had been printed in 1514 with several mistakes.<sup>18</sup> In 1556, the King appointed Nicot as his personal secretary. This position was short-lived, with Henry II promoting Nicot to *maitre de requetes de son hotel* shortly after.<sup>19</sup> Nicot's abilities were also noticed by Queen Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), for soon after his appointment as *maitre*, she sent Nicot to Florence to negotiate her share of the Medici clan inheritance.<sup>20</sup> Upon his return, Nicot was considered to succeed Michel de Seure as the French ambassador in Lisbon. His appointment was ensured by the faction led by Dianne de Poitiers, while Seure's had been supported by the constable Anne de Montmerency (1493-1567).<sup>21</sup> Although he was only formally appointed in April 1559, Nicot's ambassadorship was the object of careful preparations by Henry II.<sup>22</sup> This groundwork was directly influenced by the signing of the Cateau-Cambrésis Peace Treaty between France and Spain,<sup>23</sup> a development that also impacted Portugal.

Renewed hope for a lasting peace (and alliance) between hitherto rivals Spain and France meant that a spy-ambassador, like Seure,<sup>24</sup> was unfit for the job. Already in January 1559, Anne de Montmorency had outlined a new policy for Portugal. In a letter addressed to Queen Catherine of Austria, the widow of John III of Portugal (1521-1557) and regent to her grandson from 1557 to 1562, Montmorency started by saying that he was aware that she disapproved of Seure's behavior. He notified the Queen of Seure's recall,

15 Edmond, 1897, 179-180. Baudry, 1988, p. 25.

16 Falgairolle, 1897, XXIV.

17 Matos, 1952a, 83.

18 Edmond, 1897, 179-180.

19 Matos, 1952a, 90.

20 Baudry, 1988, 29.

21 Chichkine, 2021, 44.

22 Edmond, 1897, 179-181.

23 Ribera, 2018, 361-376. For a broader overview on the Peace Treaty negotiations see: Haan, 2010.

24 On Seure's embassy and action see: Serrão, 1969a; Falgairolle, 1895; Chichkine, 2021, 43-47.

and informed that his successor had been named. While never revealing the identity of Seure's replacement, Montmorency presented Nicot as a celebrated courtesan and an advocate of the traditional French-Portuguese alliance. Montmorency also confessed his admiration for Catherine of Austria, and said that he had thought of writing her a long letter, although Gaspar Palha had advised against it. Montmorency's charming operation worked; in a letter to a close advisor, Catherine of Austria expressed her joy at the impending arrival of the new French ambassador (said to be very different from Seure), as had been confirmed by the Portuguese ambassador in France.<sup>25</sup>

On 6 May 1559, Henry II delivered Nicot his instructions. The King ordered him to enter Portugal as an ally kingdom and to reaffirm the French-Portuguese alliance. Bilateral commercial relations were likewise to be reinforced, imbued with aspirations for the new era of Christianity opened by the French-Spanish alliance. Furthermore, Nicot should provide updates on the marriage plans between the Valois and the Habsburgs. On that same day, Henry II addressed letters to Cardinal Henry (1512-1580), regent to his nephew from 1562 to 1568, and to Catherine of Austria, informing them that he had recalled Seure and asking them to receive Nicot with cordiality.<sup>26</sup>

One of Nicot's main missions was to pave the way for a marriage alliance between France and Portugal, to be brought about by the nuptials of Princess Margaret of Valois (1553-1599), daughter of Henry II, and King Sebastian (1554-1578). These plans, like previous French attempts, failed. Regardless, it is important to stress that it was one of Henry II's ambitions vis-à-vis Portugal, and one that fit well with the diplomatic environment created by the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis. Nonetheless, like for his predecessor, Nicot's official mission, was supplemented by another crucial task: gathering intelligence on the developments of the Portuguese navy and empire.<sup>27</sup> Since he was operating in a time of ostensible peace, Nicot had to proceed more carefully. His humanist *persona* had already won the rather young man an appointment that was rare in the sixteenth century French diplomacy. Although there had been previous *maitres* that became ambassadors,<sup>28</sup> in 1559, Nicot was not an experienced diplomat, a venerable churchman, or a military leader.<sup>29</sup> His mission would also be fraught with

25 Matos, 1952a, 286-288.

26 Falgairolle, 1897, 81-85.

27 Edmond, 1897, 180-181.

28 Baudry, 1988, 33.

29 As were, for instance, the French ambassadors in Spain during the 1560s (Ribera, 2018, 44).

the same thorny questions of French-Portuguese maritime rivalry that had been an unrelenting reality during Seure's tenure.<sup>30</sup> Shortly after Nicot's arrival in Lisbon, the Portuguese ambassador in France had issued a warning to Catherine of Austria: Cateau-Cambrésis and Henry II's promises that the French would not sail to Guinea, Mina, and Brazil were a façade. The Portuguese should have armed fleets in all these places to fight the French.<sup>31</sup> Still, Nicot was to count on some support in Lisbon because the Portuguese feared the Spanish. This was owed to Charles V (1516-1556) and later on Philip II's attempts at having Prince Charles (1545-1568) sworn as heir of the Portuguese Crown because of King Sebastian's minority and fragile health. Nicot quickly became aware that the Portuguese would rather support a French or Muslim King than bear a Spanish ruler, as the Spanish ambassador wrote after King John III's death, in 1557.<sup>32</sup> Nicot's welcoming reception and initial reports confirmed this fact, but this did not mean a decrease on the French-Portuguese maritime rivalry.

### **Encompassing the Globe: Nicot and the French-Portuguese maritime rivalry**

Seure and Nicot's embassy in Lisbon coincided with *France Antarctique*, led by Nicholas Durrand de Villegagnon (1510-1571), a project that had earlier origins. Although French efforts until 1547 to compete in Portuguese overseas areas ended up failing, it would be a mistake to interpret French maritime expansion as a misstructured project.<sup>33</sup> Under Francis I, France did much more than bait ships against the Portuguese India Run. They started to make trips to Brazil as early as 1504, and extended its sphere of influence to Mina and Guinea. During the 1520s, French expeditions were also sent to the Indian Ocean. At the beginning, these voyagers relied on Portuguese pilots and knowledge, but by the 1529 Jean Parmentier's (1494-1529) expedition, the French enterprise no longer required this external resource.<sup>34</sup> A failure to meaningfully maintain expeditions to Asia was followed by continuous investment in Brazil and Guinea. In the

30 Matos, 1952a, 83.

31 Cruz, 1992, I, 76, 233 and 236.

32 Buescu, 2007, 331-334.

33 Borges, 2020, I, 308-309 and 347.

34 Falgairolle, 1897, 333-334.



1530s, Portugal's fear of French competition in the Atlantic was so severe that Guinea and Brazil were considered halfway lost. King John III was wracked with worry throughout the 1530s by news that the French intended to dispatch a member of the royal family to colonize Brazil,<sup>35</sup> and that the French were building a fortress on Santa Helena Island.<sup>36</sup> He rightly understood that France's fighting for the South Atlantic was groundwork for its re-entry into the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese King was relieved to learn that Francis I had turned his attention to an area not assigned to Portugal by the 1494 Tordesillas Treaty: Canada with Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) and Jean-François de Roberval (1495-1560) expeditions in the 1530s and 1540s. In addition to these developments, John III was forced to dispatch spies and finance increasingly expensive armed fleets to patrol Portuguese European coasts owing to the traditional attacks by French corsairs and privateers. As Ana Maria Pereira Ferreira and Marco Oliveira Borges' studies have demonstrated,<sup>37</sup> these attacks only increased since the 1520s. Thus, Portuguese overseas concerns were strongly resurrected when Henry II authorized the departure of Villegagnon to Brazil. Maritime conflicts between the Portuguese and the French intensified during Seure's embassy in Lisbon, leading him to make a stunning endorsement of open-war maritime policy against Portugal. Jean Nicot came to have a different approach. Still, his letters unequivocally display how French ambitions and interests were not confined to Brazil and Guinea, but encompassed the terrestrial globe.

Shortly after reaching Lisbon, in his second letter to Francis II (1559-1560), Nicot warned that the Portuguese were already preparing a new fleet, despite his warm reception and Catherine of Austria's speech on the French-Portuguese alliance. Although he could not be sure of the fleet's destination, Nicot warned that the ships might be sailing in pursuit of Villegagnon. Some days later, he reported the departure of another fleet, heading for Brazil with six ships and 200 soldiers. Within this framework, in December 1559, Nicot counseled Charles de Guise (1524-1574), cardinal of Lorraine, to push for a re-evaluation of the ban on French navigation to Guinea and Brazil. He had discovered that Portuguese trade in Guinea was declining, and believed the Portuguese would focus their financial outlays on Asia. He advised a French investment in Guinea that used moderation, secrecy, and well-armed vessels to both avoid a major reaction, and force

35 Ferreira, 1995, 183.

36 Borges, 2020, I, 343-345.

37 See notes 33 and 35.



Portugal to pay more for French grain.<sup>38</sup> The notion that the Portuguese prioritized their position in Asia (and would be willing to cede control over Brazil and Guinea) was not unusual: it was very common reading in France well before Nicot's embassy.<sup>39</sup> Nicot was to witness the error in this idea.

In another letter, from late 1559, Nicot denounced law officer Almeida, who frequently imposed the death penalty and harsh treatment on the Frenchmen imprisoned in Portuguese overseas areas. In the same missive, Nicot gave his support to a recent petition by the parliament of Normandy asking Francis II to lift the prohibition on French navigation to these areas. Infuriated by Almeida's actions, he went so far as to claim that France had exhausted its policy of friendly gestures and affirmations of alliance with Portugal, even asserting that such indulgence had encouraged the Portuguese to behave so arrogantly with Frenchmen. If Portugal was to respect France, it needed to suffer a good *bastonade*.<sup>40</sup> This was the only time during his embassy where Nicot's attitudes and recommendations mirrored Seure's; he did not take this stance long, as he was perfectly aware of the costs to France associated with naval assaults. Evolving in his strategy, Nicot developed a new approach: rather than propose full-blown war with the Portuguese, he concentrated on obtaining and transmitting all the intelligence he could about the Portuguese Empire to France. Meanwhile, he took every opportunity to openly defend and advocate for French interests.<sup>41</sup>

This shift of attitude is noticeable in Nicot's missives. Yet around the same time as the letter described above, Nicot sent France news that viceroy D. Constantino de Braganza (1558-1561) had conquered Daman in India. This meant the occupation of almost 300 villages and a huge income. He had been alerted of the situation by a Jewish courier sent from India by land. Near the end of 1560, Nicot wrote to Charles IX (1560-1574) with intelligence he received from the Portuguese ambassador in Rome. The Ottomans had opened a channel between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, permitting them to intensify attacks against Portuguese Asia. Nicot rejoiced at these tidings. In the same letter, he commented that Catherine of Austria had withdrawn her decision to leave a Moroccan fortress (Mazagan), in part due to the impact it would have on the Portuguese King's reputation. This state of affairs was relevant to Nicot's report to Charles IX, sent in August

38 Falgairolle, 1897, 10-11, 25 and 37-40.

39 Ferreira, 1995, 147.

40 Falgairolle, 1897, 43-45.

41 Matos, 1952a, 85-87.

1561, that the Portuguese were preparing to launch an expedition to Mutapa, on the Eastern coast of Africa. Nicot was unsure on the exact location of this famous empire, but believed it to be between the Congo and Nile rivers. He was, however, fully convinced that the Portuguese wanted to explore gold mines in the region to cut off the precious metal's movement to West Africa, something that could harm the French trade in Guinea. In the letter, Nicot implied that France ought to do something, although he conceded that navigation from Portugal to East Africa was difficult. As Gaspard de Coligny (1519-1572), the French admiral since 1552, was interested in such matters, Nicot also sent him this intelligence.<sup>42</sup> The Portuguese expedition to Mutapa did not depart until 1569, but Nicot was absolutely right in pointing out its potential impact.

Meanwhile, Nicot also kept the Valois court briefed on other developments. In April 1561, Nicot counseled Catherine de Medici on the exploration of the meridional countries (possibly the geographical area surrounding the Strait of Magellan), because they would bring much wealth to France. Along with the letter, she was to find a packet of information on that area. The next month, Nicot informed Charles IX on the Moroccan sultan's siege of Mazagan, and explained that French requests for Portuguese maritime assistance in the Mediterranean were not likely to be fulfilled. His prognosis was based on a Frenchman report, who had witnessed the power of the Moroccan army. The same month, summarizing intelligence brought by India Run ships, Nicot reported that viceroy D. Constantino had staged a revolt in Asia, and intended to declare independence from Portugal. In this letter, Nicot also noted that Portuguese authorities had approached him about the capture of a Portuguese ship by Scots. Despite the alliance between France and Scotland, Nicot maintained that this had nothing to do with him. But he ended up writing to Queen Mary Stuart (1542-1587).<sup>43</sup> In fact, the Portuguese action was justified as France used to hide captured Portuguese ships in Scotland.<sup>44</sup> Although the news on the Asian revolt turned out to be false, it is illustrative of the surprising degree to which Nicot obtained secret information through contacts at the Portuguese court.

Nevertheless, Nicot was not the only one sending sensitive intelligence to France. Portuguese-born António Almeida, *en route* to France, offered his services to the cardinal of Lorraine. His rhetorical strategy for

42 Falgairolle, 1897, 53, 56, 63-64 and 71-72.

43 Falgairolle, 1897, 148-149.

44 Borges, 2020, I, 355 and 391.

elevating himself as an informant is documented in his 1560 letter. Pleading his love for France and the fact that many years would pass before young King Sebastian could assume the government of Portugal, he promised the French cardinal information about the Portuguese empire. He also stated that Nicot had been very well received and was much appreciated in Portugal. Finally, he advised Lorraine to take good care of João Pereira Dantas, but to never forget that the Portuguese ambassador in Paris was a deadly enemy of France's ambitions. He offered his personal advice on how to deal with Dantas if the graces he sought were granted. Since Almeida wrote that he had Nicot's letters to France,<sup>45</sup> it is likely that he was one of Nicot's agents. After all, in this task of acquiring information, Nicot could follow the example of his predecessor Seure and try, with greater discretion, to create his own networks of informants in Portugal. The ongoing maritime rivalry discussed so far both compelled and conditioned Nicot's acquisition of Portuguese works.

### **Diplomacy and Humanism: Nicot's acquisition of Portuguese maritime knowledge**

Nicot's access to Portuguese works is both explained by France's maritime projects and linked with the ambassador's personal interests. Using his status as a renowned French humanist,<sup>46</sup> Nicot was able to access a particular milieu. In this section, we will consider his contacts in learned Portuguese circles, discuss the requests he received and sketch the methods Nicot employed to acquire Portuguese knowledge for each case.

In one of his first letters, Nicot promised he would send jelly from India as soon as he could. With works on the Louvre ongoing, Nicot also sent samples of marble. By April 1560, Nicot sent the first full package of natural products: oranges from Algarve, fig and lemon seeds, as well as the leaves of the tobacco plant, which he said possessed medicinal properties. Charles IX was so delighted with the oranges that he ordered Nicot to dispatch more, along with their seeds, so that the King could begin cultivating them in the Loire valley. In 1561, a letter from Nicot regretted that lack of funds prevented him from fulfilling a request to send strawberries. Still, he was able to send some indigo. In this same letter, he notes that these products

45 Matos, 1952a, 217-224.

46 Matos, 1952a, 95-96.

had come to Portugal not by India Run ships, but via land routes. Nicot had to bribe several people to purchase his samples, since the business was in the hands of Spanish merchants.<sup>47</sup> Nicot's active gathering of natural or scientific materials was not always asked of him by the Valois court, as the case of the tobacco shows. This may suggest that, prior to his embassy, he was directed to collect such knowledge, an issue that also needs to be considered.

Our first hypothesis on previous French requests to Nicot relates with André Thévet (1516-1590). The Franciscan traveller published his *Cosmographie du Levant* in 1554, spent four months in Brazil and returned to France in 1556. Thévet also published his *Singularites de La France Antarctique*, in 1556,<sup>48</sup> with the support of the court's seal keeper (with whom Nicot had previously collaborated). Members of the *Pleiade* group (with whom Nicot would later become close) also supported Thévet, as was the case of Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585).<sup>49</sup> Thévet was appointed French royal cosmographer in 1559, the same year that Nicot departed for Portugal. As royal cosmographer, Thévet may have asked Nicot to acquire nautical and cartographic intelligence in Lisbon. At least from 1563, Thévet had in his possession a copy of a Portuguese seamanship book by Manuel Álvares.<sup>50</sup> It is possible that Nicot was the one who brought the book to Thévet (either at his request, or because he knew Thévet's interests). Nicot himself had a seamanship book by André Pires in his library.<sup>51</sup> Since both books circulated in manuscript and were the most updated Portuguese nautical compilations of the time, Nicot is likely to have acquired both volumes in Portugal. Whether resorting to bribery or simply exploiting his daily contacts with French and Portuguese seaman in Lisbon, the fact that Nicot managed to get seamanship books suggests that he recognised the value of these texts. At the same time, Nicot could be certain that such intelligence, in the form of technical information that Portugal was desperate to keep from its rivals, would captivate the Valois court and might win him enhanced status upon his return.

Nicot's pursuit of sensitive information was, moreover, directly related to a special request by the cardinal of Lorraine and Coligny. Before Nicot's departure from France, they had tasked him with hiring two good

47 Falgairolle, 1897, 12, 35, 50, 103, 121, 128 and 147-148.

48 For a good modern edition see Thévet, 2011.

49 Lestringant, 1994, 9-10, 22-23 and 126.

50 *O livro de marinharia de Manuel Álvares*, 6-9.

51 Matos, 1952a, 99.

Portuguese pilots to guide a French expedition to India and the Moluccas. Cognizant of Portuguese vigilance, Nicot argued that he would attempt to fulfil this, but noted that the matter demanded special discretion. Nicot succeeded in sending two pilots.<sup>52</sup> The request itself illustrates a larger issue: that Henry II and Coligny were bent on developing policies to create a French overseas empire in the area assigned to Portugal by the Treaty of Tordesillas. This point takes us back to earlier French borrowings of Portuguese navigational expertise.

As early as the 1520s, the French were keen on sailing to the Moluccas. Indeed, this was the intended destination of one of the Parmentier brothers' expeditions, to which end Leone Pancaldo (1490-1538), one of Ferdinand Magellan's (1480-1521) pilots, was hired.<sup>53</sup> Also in 1528, Giovanni di Verrazano (1485-1528) is said to have planned to sail to the Moluccas via the Magellan Strait, although the trip was cancelled.<sup>54</sup> Portuguese authorities were alarmed by this increasing drainage of pilots and cartographers to Spain, and then to England and France. In the late fifteenth century, they attempted to stem the outward flow of expertise by issuing strict rules (with a penalty of death) to any pilot who betrayed Portugal by handing over sensitive information to its rivals. Although regarding Northern Europe, Portuguese pilots started by serving in England,<sup>55</sup> France was always interested in hiring these technical personnel to launch maritime expeditions, as the 1530s case of Portuguese pilot Jean Alphonse (1484?-1544?) illustrates. Such tactics also explain King John III's battle with the French ship-owner and corsair Jean Ango (1480-1551), who sometimes had support from Francis I and the French admirals. When Portuguese diplomacy in France was not able to delay the departure of fleets or to sabotage the participation of Portuguese pilots in those expeditions, they resorted to bribery. The French admiral Phillipe de Chabot (1492-1543) received, in the 1530s, a rent from the Portuguese.<sup>56</sup> When Francis I later concentrated his endeavors in Canada,<sup>57</sup> desires for a maritime expansion to Brazil, Guinea, and Asia were by no means extinguished. With perilously rising French ambitions, the 1562 Portuguese Courts passed a motion demanding better treatment of Portuguese pilots as they were not prized enough. Among other things, the

52 Falgairolle, 1897, 35-36.

53 Ferreira, 1995, 170-171.

54 Roncière, 1906, III: 270.

55 Roncière, 1906, III: 282-285; Ferreira, 1995, 210-216.

56 Ferreira, 1995, 374-375; Roncière, 1906, III: 284-285.

57 For an overview of Francis I's maritime policies: Knecht, 1994, 369-384.

motion hoped to prevent nautical experts from serving abroad.<sup>58</sup> Still, the drainage of Portuguese pilots to Spain, France and England continued in the following years.

In spite of Portuguese attacks on French ships in the Atlantic, at the beginning of his reign, Henry II confirmed the interdiction of French navigation to Portuguese overseas areas.<sup>59</sup> He changed his position, however, when asked by Coligny to support Villegagnon's plan for *France Antarctique*. Henry II agreed to give Villegagnon the title of viceroy, as well as funding, ships, and men. Rather than vacillating on his maritime policy, Henry II opted to back the most serious challenge the French would mount on Portuguese maritime hegemony in the whole of the sixteenth century. His action cannot be disconnected from his policies aiming to build up a French navy fit to match the power and maritime ambitions of Spain.<sup>60</sup> These choices throw added light on Henry II's orders to Seure and Nicot to send him intelligence on the Portuguese navy, which he clearly conceived as a model worth emulation. But a navy to be admired is a navy to be feared, and Henry II had to prepare his Brazilian plan under utmost secrecy, so that Portugal and Spain would not (as was their habit) interfere before Villegagnon's departure. The plan was not concealed for long: the Spanish ambassador in France warned Charles V. The ambassador realised that if the French established a colony in Brazil with 3000 or 4000 men, Spain's position would also be imperiled, because their rival would have a base from which to raid Spanish navigation to the Western Indies.<sup>61</sup>

The episode of *France Antarctique* culminated in the 1560 French defeat, during Nicot's embassy, as we shall discuss. Still, Henry II's and Coligny's aims influenced Nicot's actions in Lisbon. If Nicot, like Coligny and Henry II, was not favorable to Villegagnon's whim of proclaiming himself King of America,<sup>62</sup> this was because he quickly grasped that ownership of Fort Coligny was not worthy of such a title. Sensing that *France Antarctique* would fail, Nicot redoubled his efforts to deliver intelligence to France that could assist in the preparation of new expeditions. In 1561, after the defeat in Brazil, Coligny seriously considered organizing an expedition to the Moluccas and Mutapa (hence his aforementioned request for

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58 Matos, 1952a, 6.

59 Heulhard, 1897, 90-91.

60 Roncière, 1906, III: 453 and 455.

61 Whitehead, 1904, 93, 98 and 128.

62 Whitehead, 1904, 178.

pilots to Nicot). We also consider that Nicot's statements on the Moluccas and Mutapa, influenced Coligny's decision. The destination for Coligny's intended expedition (plans for which were taking shape amidst the upcoming outbreak of the first French civil war and an anti-Spanish policy) was subsequently changed to Florida. It was there that Coligny next applied himself to the construction of a French base.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of the precise location from which to launch an empire, the consequences of Coligny's and the Valois maritime ambitions in Nicot's embassy are easily documented in his interest on some Portuguese works.

Nicot's acquisition of a technical opinion on the Moluccas, written by Portuguese cosmographer Lopo Homem, relates to such aims. In a letter, Nicot used Homem's opinion, originally addressed to the Portuguese King, to detail all the historical and scientific roots of the Portuguese-Spanish rivalry in the Moluccas. He informed France that the *Casa da Índia* had orders to falsify the distance in nautical charts, allowing the Portuguese to furnish cartographic proof that the Moluccas fell on their side of the antemeridian of Tordesillas.<sup>64</sup> It is very likely that Nicot was personally acquainted with Lopo Homem; it is almost inconceivable, however, that Homem would have offered up such secret information to a French ambassador. By this time, Homem was an experienced cartographer of a venerable age. He had already witnessed other cases of foreign espionage on Portuguese nautical and cartographic science. Furthermore, some of his sons were examples of Portuguese experts working abroad. He also knew that the Portuguese Crown exacted severe punishment on the perpetrators of such actions. Thus, it is more plausible that Nicot secured Homem's text via bribery. Nicot may have also obtained cartographic information using bribery and the contacts that he had established in Portugal during his embassy. Nevertheless, if he did, no direct mention is known.

Directly connected with Homem's case is that of the Portuguese royal cosmographer Pedro Nunes. Nicot was responsible for bringing one of Nunes' major works to France: the *Tratado em defensam da carta de marear* (1537). Nicot's letter sending the book, advising its translation into French and recommending that mathematician Pierre Danés (1497-1577) supervise this project, is published. Nicot's dispatch reflects a previous interest. French humanist Élie Vinet (1509-1587), who met Nunes in Portugal during the 1540s, had already brought a short chapter of the same book to

63 Whitehead, 1904, 315-316, 319, 332 and 335-336.

64 Falgairolle, 1897, 109-113.



France. Nunes had contacts with mathematician Jacques Peletier du Main (1517-1582).<sup>65</sup> The mathematician Oronce Finé (1494-1555), target of one of Nunes' works, and Jean Fernel (1497-1558), Henry II's personal doctor, were also curious about Nunes' major texts. The professed interest of such scholars may have prompted figures like the cardinal of Lorraine, Élie Vinet, or Jacques Peletier,<sup>66</sup> to ask Nicot to send Nunes' works to France. Members of the cartographic school of Dieppe may have joined the chorus of requests to Nicot. The letter Nicot sent alongside the *Tratado*, addressed to the cardinal of Lorraine, notes that Nunes was the royal chief of Portuguese nautical charts and a great mathematician. Because of Nunes' status, Nicot took precautions when transmitting his book, analogous to those used when he sent the pilots to France.

In the case of the *Tratado*, Nicot is again cognizant of heightened Portuguese vigilance against technical espionage. However, while Nicot probably did meet Nunes at court, there was no need for him to rely on personal connections to gain access to the *Tratado*, which was on sale in Lisbon's markets. Although there is no formal evidence that Nicot learned Portuguese,<sup>67</sup> Nicot's suggestion on the translation points to a previous look at Nunes' text. If the main audience to Nunes works was cosmographers, teachers of mathematics, cartographers, and instrument makers,<sup>68</sup> Nicot also saw its utility outside the French court and academia. A potential readership among French seamen explains his desire for a French edition of Nunes' book. The publication was halted by the death of the edition's printer, even though the translation of the *Tratado* itself was ready for release with several notes for the printer. The extent of this manuscript circulation in France remains unknown. Still, owing to the lack of important French works on the topic, we should not step aside the hypothesis that Nicot might have attempted to divulgate this knowledge within academic or maritime environments.

Nicot's familiarity with the work of Pedro Nunes is also connected to his likely ongoing contact with Portuguese humanists Fernando de Oliveira (1507-1585), João de Barros (1496-1570), Damião de Góis (1502-1574) and others. Although these relationships are not evidenced in surviving letters (Nicot's correspondence, as that of Seure, is clearly incomplete),

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65 Matos, 1952a, 123 and 126-128.

66 Leitão and Mota, 2013, 589-599.

67 Matos, 1952a, 123, 131-133 and 217-224.

68 Almeida, 2011, 528.

circumstantial clues, such as those suggested by Luís de Matos concerning Nicot's library,<sup>69</sup> are convincing enough to move forward on the presumption of such interpersonal connections' existence. We may consider the humanist circles in which Nicot might have moved while in Portugal. It is relevant to bear in mind that all these interactions took place in Lisbon, the place where Nicot lived. By Nicot's stay, Lisbon's intellectual milieu was not that big and its members tended to know each other. Each new coming foreigner with a humanist reputation was immediately noticed, and this was precisely Nicot's fame.

Given Nicot's personal interest in navigational issues, it is possible that he sought out Fernando de Oliveira (who authored a treatise of nautical matters in 1555) for discussion. His contact with Oliveira would have been facilitated by Nicot's almost daily interactions with seamen, and Oliveira's previous paths between Spain, France and England. By the time of Nicot's embassy, Oliveira was not a Portuguese Crown official; therefore, his sharing materials with Nicot remains plausible. Similarly, João de Barros may have given Nicot information directly (Nicot had his first two *Décadas* in his library, one of which seems to have been acquired in Portugal).<sup>70</sup> Barros, who was at the time an officer in the *Casa da Índia*, may have given Nicot the famous Latin letter of King Manuel I (1495-1521) to the Pope Julius II (1503-1513) on Portuguese victories in India. As Luís de Matos argues, this letter might have been translated into French by Nicot's brother, Gille, who had come to Lisbon to serve as his secretary. Further evidencing this possibility is the fact that Gille Nicot seems to have settled in Portugal, becoming the father of Filipe de Brito Nicote (1566-1616), a famous Portuguese captain in Burma in the seventeenth century.<sup>71</sup> Nicot could have gotten hold of the letter purely by means of his status and connections, without any espionage, as its contents did not violate Portuguese attempted secrecy policies. Indeed, the letter constituted a piece of Portuguese imperial propaganda that would favorably present Portuguese power abroad. As for Barros's *Décadas*, Nicot might have acquired them in Lisbon market.

Another book in Nicot's library, the *Itinerário* of António Tenreiro (1485-1560?), might have come to him by the way of the Jewish courier sent by the viceroy of India to Portugal in 1560, or through Damião de Góis. Góis is likely to have been one of Nicot's humanist contacts during his embassy.

69 Matos, 1952a, 95-96.

70 Matos, 1952a, 97-98 and 107.

71 Matos, 1952a, 116, 118, 120-121.

The chronicler of King Manuel, Góis certainly met Nicot at his arrival in 1559, since Góis made a practice of attending the reception of all ambassadors.<sup>72</sup> The two men would have plenty to discuss, since Nicot had worked in France as keeper of archives, the same post Góis held in Portugal. They also could have exchanged information on history and literature. As a humanist, Nicot would have been deemed a worthy interlocutor. Nicot could present Góis his ongoing work on the re-edition of the French history mentioned earlier, something that would certainly motivate Góis to reciprocate with his own knowledge. Thus, Góis is another possibility for the hand-over to Nicot of the famous letter of King Manuel to Pope Julius II.

Nicot's philological interests (later inspiring him to publish the *Trésor*) make close connections with João de Barros and Fernando de Oliveira even more plausible, since both published Portuguese grammars. Princess Mary (1521-1577), to whom Barros dedicated a famous panegyric in 1545, might have acquainted Nicot with Barros and his work. Some of Nicot's letters document his contacts with this Renaissance Princess, whom Nicot so admired.<sup>73</sup> She might have also introduced Nicot to Diogo Sigeu, a fellow native of Nîmes. The Princess' servant was another contact of Nicot, and their connection elucidates the curious fact that certain sonnets by Portuguese writer André de Resende (1498-1573) ended up published in France in 1566 (Sigeu gave such sonnets to Nicot, but Nicot was not the responsible for its publication in France).<sup>74</sup> Still, considering a 1566 letter from Nicot to Sigeu,<sup>75</sup> it is highly probable that he contributed to the project, as Resende's sonnets would enchant *La Pleiade*, the group that Nicot formally integrated after his return to France.

In spite of incomplete documentary evidence for Nicot's social circle, some humanist contacts within the Portuguese nobility are also quite likely. We strongly argue for his acquaintance with the dukes of Braganza and Aveiro, whose controversial marriages in 1559 are mentioned in Nicot's letters.<sup>76</sup> Nicot's possible contact with D. Teodósio (1510-1563), the fifth duke of Braganza, might have arisen through Diogo Sigeu, who had been in Teodósio's service. Nicot may have also met some courtier earls (like those of Redondo, Portalegre and Castanheira), alongside the baron of Alvito,

72 Matos, 1952b, 33.

73 Falgairolle, 1897, 14.

74 Matos, 1952b, 109, 112 and 114.

75 Monteiro, 2019, 98.

76 Falgairolle, 1897, 32.

referenced in his missives. All of them attended his ceremonial reception, if not some of his meetings with Catherine of Austria. Furthermore, Nicot reports being called often by high courtiers. Such relationships were valuable; winning the trust of important noblemen helped Nicot to gain access to strategic information. Nicot's reputation and engaging humanist personality, together with the fact that he was the sole official representative of mighty France, set the stage for fact-finding at the Portuguese court. By appropriating Henry II's, Jeanne d'Albrecht's, and Catherine de Medici's renown in Portugal, Nicot was also able to acquire Portuguese knowledge, which, at the time, was difficult for foreigners to come by. Having laid such groundwork and fostered a diverse social network, Nicot may have wished to remain in Portugal longer, deepening his humanist connections or even becoming a permanent ambassador. But Charles IX's decision to recall Nicot, was motivated by a different set of factors. We may now analyse the circumstances surrounding Nicot's abrupt departure.

### **Crisis in the embassy: *La lettre de rappel***

Although the end of Nicot's embassy is normally associated with the loss of Fort Coligny in Brazil, his letters reveal that much more was at play. Nicot had piled up a huge debt that he was unable to repay. The scandalous case of French captain Bastien de Lyard, along with Nicot's actions regarding his cook and the Frenchmen suspected to be secret Protestants, did irreparable damage to his embassy. We will start with a brief description of these events, so that we can discuss the main factors explaining his recall.

Ever since his arrival in 1559, Jean Nicot had asked that money be sent to him in a timely manner, having found that life abroad entailed significant expenses. Just a year later, in a letter to the French ambassador in Spain, Nicot revealed that he was bankrupt. The situation was so serious that he had to sell some of his own properties in France to keep himself afloat.<sup>77</sup> In April 1561, Nicot wrote to Charles IX stating again that he had gone bankrupt. This time, the insolvency had come about because Nicot (and his Francophile friend, the Portuguese financial minister baron of Alvito) had laid out substantial funds to finance François de Guise's (the brother of the duke of Guise) stay in Lisbon in 1560. His salary as ambassador was

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<sup>77</sup> Falgairolle, 1897, LVIII-LIX, 16 and 116-117.

not enough, and both Nicot and Alvito became objects of ridicule at the Portuguese court. In May 1561, Nicot was desperate enough to beg 2000 écus of Catherine de Medici so that he could begin to pay his debts (in the same letter, he bemoaned Guise's attitude, considering that he was one of the richest noblemen in France). Nicot was careful to underscore the ways that his own financial woes were tarnishing France's reputation in Portugal. Although in July he did receive the 2000 écus, they were not enough. Nicot suggested to Catherine de Medici that she directly collect the money Guise still owed. In the letter, he also noted ruefully the laughingstock being made of his friend Alvito at the Portuguese court, who had lately been forced to sell his personal collections to pay for his Francophile debt. In a letter to Charles IX, Nicot even reported that Guise's creditor had approached him at the Portuguese court to collect the money. As Nicot could not afford to pay, Guise's creditor promised to go personally to France to recover his money.<sup>78</sup> The humiliation conferred on Nicot was one of the arguments that Charles IX used to recall him. Another driving force behind his recall was the Lyard case unfolding at the same time.

Breton captain Bastien de Lyard and his entire crew were murdered in front of Lisbon's royal palace in May 1561, due to what Nicot called the traditional Portuguese arrogance towards Frenchmen. Cognizant of Lyard's status as a reputable seaman, Nicot ordered a judicial testimony be written up and demanded, from Catherine of Austria, compensation to Lyard's widow. When Nicot went to the palace to confront Catherine, she accused Nicot and the French community in Lisbon of taking part in a recent English capture of a Portuguese ship. Since Catherine refused to sympathize with the ambassador's complaints, Nicot reminded her that he was the representative of a mighty country which ought not be trifled with. The tenor of the conversation deteriorated to such a point that Nicot left the meeting. The next day, Catherine of Austria announced she would provide compensation to Lyard's widow, but Nicot refused to receive it in view of her haughty tone at their previous meeting. In a letter to Charles IX, Nicot stated that he would not tolerate the Queen treating him the same way she had treated Seure. At the same time, Nicot realised that Catherine and her ministers distrusted him. In this context, Nicot confessed his inability to assist the many Frenchmen subjected to abuse and imprisonment by the Portuguese Inquisition. Meanwhile, Gaspar Treschel, a Frenchman from Lyon caught

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78 Falgairolle, 1897, 61, 122-124, 127, 133 and 150-152.

by the Inquisition with Lutheran and Calvinist books that he intended to sell in Portugal, was jailed around the same time.<sup>79</sup> Nicot was able to persuade Cardinal Henry, the Inquisitor General of Portugal, to release Treschel and ship the heretical books back to France,<sup>80</sup> but his cook was burned by the Inquisition at accusation of Protestantism.<sup>81</sup> A pall fell on Nicot himself, with Villegagnon's affair in progress and the arriving news during 1561 on the religious situation in France. The fact that Nicot was born in Nîmes, a place that soon became a Huguenot stronghold, may have complicated even more Portuguese religious suspicions on Nicot. The impact of Fort Coligny's loss forms the final factor in the crisis facing Nicot's embassy.

As Nicot had anticipated the loss of Fort Coligny was brought about by the arrival of a Portuguese fleet in March 1560. Since Francis II had given his blessing to *France Antarctique* and to Villegagnon's plans,<sup>82</sup> the news of the fort's surrender caused great agitation at the Valois court. Shortly after his return to France, Villegagnon was appointed to command a fleet of eleven vessels that would attack Portuguese India run ships. But the 1560 Amboise conspiracy put a stop to Villegagnon's departure, as well as a major military reaction.<sup>83</sup> Because of the Brazilian loss, Charles IX demanded a 200 thousand écus compensation to João Pereira Dantas, the Portuguese ambassador in France. Since Dantas refused it and declined to temporarily return Fort Coligny to France,<sup>84</sup> Charles IX issued letters of marque. This was a traditional French tactic for pressuring Portugal and was aimed at recovering the amount demanded by the French Crown by means of attacks on Portuguese vessels. The tension prompted Catherine de Medici to seize ambassador Dantas' correspondence, in which he warned Portugal that Charles IX had issued the letters.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, from England, Portuguese agent Manuel de Araújo also sounded the alarms in April 1561: Villegagnon was returning in three ships to Brazil.<sup>86</sup> In the end, again, Villegagnon did not leave France, in spite of his calls for action against the Portuguese.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, in early 1561, realising that ambassador Dantas would not meet their demands, the Valois

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79 Falgairolle, 1897, 66 and 139-147.

80 Fonseca, 2019, 194.

81 Polónia, 2005, 128. Baudry, 1988, 85.

82 Falgairolle, 1897, LXIX.

83 Heulhard, 1897, 195.

84 Ferreira, 1989, 164.

85 Heulhard, 1897, 203-206.

86 Matos, 1952a, 187.

87 Heulhard, 1897, 263-265.

court placed their hopes in Nicot. In this context, Charles IX and Catherine de Medici sent Jean Ébrard (the future French ambassador in Spain from 1562 to 1565 that had already come to Lisbon in 1560) as extraordinary envoy to Portugal to insist on financial compensation.<sup>88</sup>

In April 1561, Nicot addressed a letter to Charles IX concerning Ébrard's arrival and the Brazilian case. Nicot started by informing that the Portuguese court was astonished to learn that France dared to demand compensation. When Nicot had confronted Catherine of Austria, she had replied with reports from Dantas that Villegagnon was considered an outlaw in France (because of his harboring Huguenots in Brazil and alleged conversion to Protestantism).<sup>89</sup> She also argued that the French had been attacking the Portuguese, and cited rumours that they even fed their enemies' bodies to Brazilian Indians. In such a scenario, despite the French-Portuguese alliance, the Portuguese were forced to expel the French from Brazil. To keep the delicate peace, Catherine agreed to free some Frenchmen imprisoned in Brazil. At this stage of the letter, Nicot reminded Charles IX what he had written to Francis II: France would only be taken seriously by Portugal if it responded in the same level to Portuguese aggression. Since Nicot knew that would hardly happen (due to the evolving situation in France with Charles IX's minority and the spectrum of a religious war), he continued his attempts at freeing Frenchmen imprisoned in Mina. He watched powerlessly as his request of Portuguese maritime assistance against English corsairs were declined. Thus, Nicot's letters suggest that he understood that Portuguese policy was targeted at forcing France to renounce its maritime ambitions. Nonetheless, Ébrard was very well received by Catherine of Austria, probably due to his social status. In May 1561, Nicot wrote to Charles IX that Catherine was so impressed by him that she even sought his political advice. Still, she did not agree to Ébrard's stipulations for payment. Therefore, in her formal reply to Ébrard, Catherine declined any compensation to be paid to France.<sup>90</sup>

Even after Charles IX's decision to recall Nicot in July 1561 (of which Nicot became aware when the lord of Carse arrived in Lisbon that month),<sup>91</sup> the ambassador continued to worry about the Frenchmen

88 Cabié, 1903, 12.

89 While there is no sign that Villegagnon ever converted to Protestantism, this reference points to the importance of the Protestant religious dimension of *France Antarctique* and other French overseas attempts in the sixteenth century. On the topic see: Lestingrant, 2015.

90 Falgairolle, 1897, 124-127, 134-137; Matos, 1952a, 303-305.

91 Falgairolle, 1897, LXXXIII-LXXXIV.



imprisoned in Mina. Nicot's letters from August 1561 document his demands of compensation for the loss of Fort Coligny, and his persistence in tracking down intelligence on captured French ships. Nicot also tried to secure, without success, Portuguese assistance for French ships taken by the Ottoman fleet.<sup>92</sup> The accumulation of all these factors, as well as Nicot's letter to Charles IX, confessing that he had lost all hope of being able to defend French interests because he was distrusted by Catherine of Austria and her ministers, was deadly.

On 8 July 1561, Catherine de Medici addressed a letter to Nicot ordering him to return to France, sending him money for his journey, and asking him to keep protesting about the Brazilian affair. On 18 July, she informed the French ambassador in Spain of her decision and asked him to ensure that Nicot received the funds.<sup>93</sup> The formal *lettre de rappel* was written by Charles IX on 9 July. The Valois King explained the decision with his opinion that Nicot had become useless, since he was unable to provide justice for mistreated Frenchmen abroad, and there appeared to be no profit in maintaining a French embassy in Portugal. Charles IX instructed Nicot to reply, should he be asked again about his debt, that he was tired of such inquiries. He would depart from Portugal at the King's orders, although he should not disclose the exact date of his exodus. Nicot was told that he could openly express Charles IX's deep displeasure with the way his ambassador had been treated in Portugal. Charles IX saw Nicot's treatment as unworthy of such a great humanist, and doubly inappropriate in the context of an existing alliance between the two kingdoms. Before leaving Portugal, Nicot was likewise ordered to make petitions for jailed Frenchmen and yet again push to a compensation for Fort Coligny. In September 1561, Nicot replied to Charles IX, stating that he had already received the letter from his mother and was taking care of several issues. He was prepared to leave by the end of that month. Before Nicot's departure, he lodged a complaint with Catherine of Austria regarding a subsidy that Portugal had already conceded to France, which was to be paid due to the confiscation of several French cargo's in Lisbon. Nicot knew that the compensation did not represent even 1/10 of revenues the Portuguese Crown had received with the seizures. Instead of confiscating the French goods, Nicot suggested that the Portuguese crown send lists of captains and cargos apprehended to France. Only an open collaboration on the matter of such confiscations, it seemed to

92 Falgairolle, 1897, 66-71.

93 *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, 1880, I: 210-211 and 216.

Nicot, could deescalate French-Portuguese maritime rivalry. This undated letter ends with Nicot's assertion that an agreement should be reached between Christian Kings in compliance with civil and canonical law.<sup>94</sup>

Taking Nicot's humiliation personally, Charles IX made an impulsive decision: no French representative would be stationed in Portugal after Nicot's recall.<sup>95</sup> Only in 1578, in the context of the Portuguese succession crisis, France appointed a new ambassador in Lisbon. In the meantime, the French ambassadors in Spain dealt with Portuguese affairs. Vladimir Chichkine argues that Charles IX's decision had other motivations: France's critical shortage of funds and the declining chances for the Portuguese marriage for Margaret of Valois in 1561 due to the evolving religious situation in France.<sup>96</sup> Although these arguments are absolutely on target, I consider that the maritime tensions between France and Portugal also influenced the Valois' final decision. The loss of Fort Coligny became a key factor as the Valois' inability in responding on military terms, mainly due to the negotiations that the Portuguese ambassador in France launched with Villegagnon and Coligny,<sup>97</sup> also impacted France's reputation in Europe. The fact that, in this context, Nicot had piled debts and was distrusted by Catherine of Austria, only further revealed that a bad image of France was also at stake. Furthermore, the loss of Fort Coligny continued to influence for several years the French-Portuguese relations. Despite this loss, the French still kept their hold in Brazil at Cabo Frio until 1577 when the remaining French were expelled by the Portuguese. This is not to imply that the surrender of the Brazilian fortress stalled French maritime and imperial plans. As we have shown, Coligny considered first expeditions to Asia in 1561, but shifted them to the 1562 Florida journey.<sup>98</sup>

Allies in Europe and discreet rivals in the Atlantic, the French and the Portuguese could not endure a long-lasting war against each other. If France was militarily defeated in Brazil, one should not forget that it successfully contributed to the Portuguese commercial decline in Mina and Guinea.<sup>99</sup> Portugal would have had difficulty maintaining a long Atlantic maritime

94 Falgairolle, 1897, 74-78 and 154-155.

95 Falgairolle, 1897, LXXXI-LXXXII.

96 Chichkine, 2021, 51.

97 In an article about João Pereira Dantas, I have fully explained his bribery at the Valois court, precisely concerning *France Antarctique*. For further details see my «Fighting for *Mare Clausum* and *Secret Science*: France, England and Spain in the strategies of ambassador Dantas (1557-1568)» forthcoming at *Vegueta* journal.

98 Falgairolle, 1897, LXVII.

99 Costa, 2013, 218-221.

war with France. On the other hand, France could not hazard overt hostilities and the loss of an ally against Spain. This accounts for Charles IX's final choice to accept compensation from Portugal and delay the Brazilian project.<sup>100</sup> Later in the 1560s, Charles IX and Catherine de Medici were similarly unable to react forcefully to the French expulsion from Florida by the Spanish. Strong pressure from Coligny could entice neither to enter into a risky war with Spain.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, we must be careful not to conflate the Valois' failure in their Brazilian project with Nicot's outcome at the Portuguese embassy. If Nicot was unable to ameliorate maritime frictions between Portugal and France (and his embassy ended on a sour note), he succeeded with his overall strategy for improving French-Portuguese relations, particularly as he had been very successful in diffusing France's image in Portugal when the brother of the duke of Guise visited Lisbon in 1560.<sup>102</sup> When he departed from Portugal, the projected French marriage of King Sebastian, Nicot's main task, was still desired by the Portuguese. It was even formally confirmed by the Portuguese courts in 1562. Because of King Sebastian's and Princess Margaret's young age, Nicot departed before any wedding could materialize (and this has often been a cause for wrongly stating that Nicot's embassy was a failure).<sup>103</sup> But plans for the wedding were only scrapped much later and for reasons wholly unconnected to Nicot's embassy. The fact that Nicot had compiled important information and successfully sent to France, where it could assist in maritime aims, is another point indicating that his embassy was not a failure. An analysis of Nicot's career after returning to France suggests that he may have continued to play an important role as a mediator of Portuguese knowledge.

### **Nicot: a go-between of Portuguese knowledge in France (1561-1600)?**

After returning to France, Jean Nicot's status was enhanced. Resettling in Paris, Nicot soon connected with members of the *Pleiade*, including Ronsard and Pierre Ramus (1515-1572). He finished his edition of the history of France, printed in 1567. Nicot then collaborated with François de

100 Heulhard, 1897, 242-245.

101 Ribera, 2018, 443-464.

102 Chichkine, 2020, 49-50.

103 Falgairolle, 1897, LVII and LXXXXIX.

Belleforest (1530-1583) on his cosmography, providing information on historical monuments from Nîmes. He also gave Denys Lambin (1520-1572) three manuscripts of Horace (65-8 BC) for publication, and convinced Marc-Antoine Muret (1526-1585) to publish his Latin correspondence. Nicot himself thought of preparing editions on Tacitus' (56-120 AD) and Livy's (59BC-19AD) texts.<sup>104</sup> His abandonment of this project was owed to Nicot's joint work with printer Jacques Depuys on the *Dictionnaire françois-latin*, printed in 1573. Unsatisfied with his own work, he soon labored, for several years, on a more complete edition: the *Trésor de La Langue Française*. The work was only published in 1606, after Nicot's death.<sup>105</sup> Not much is known about his life at court aside from his success in promoting tobacco (helped along by Catherine de Medici's endorsement).<sup>106</sup> He arranged for his nephew (also named Jean Nicot) to become his heir. By the end of his life, Nicot was still *maitre* and counsellor,<sup>107</sup> which suggests that he might have continued to play an important role as political advisor of the Last Valois and of Henry IV (1589-1610).

In this context, Nicot's embassy in Portugal surely conferred him authority to give advice on any matter related to Portugal, its empire, and navigation in general. Nicot's interest on these matters after his resettling in France are easily proven. In the 1560s Nicot stepped in to prevent a map of France (prepared by the Portuguese cosmographer André Homem, in the service of Charles IX) from falling into the hands of the Spanish ambassador. The episode, mentioned in the *Trésor*, involved ambassador Dantas, who tried, without success, to prevent André Homem from being accepted as cosmographer of the King of France. The details of Nicot's intervention are unknown, but it seems probable that he had acted to protect French interests (after all, he had become, while in Lisbon, a victim of Dantas' actions in Paris regarding the loss of Fort Coligny). Unpleasantness between Nicot and Dantas is also attested in an incident at the Valois court in 1562, shortly after Nicot's return. Following Nicot's protests about French prisoners in Lisbon, Dantas was pressed to justify Portuguese policies at the *Conseil Privé*. Dantas presented the Portuguese position with documents proving that out of the thirty-seven Frenchmen that Nicot mentioned in jail, only three were really French and none were receiving bad treatment. As

104 Matos, 1952a, 91-93.

105 Baudry, 1988, 123 and 173.

106 Frielda, 2003, 311.

107 Falgairolle, 1897, CIX and 177. Baudry, 1988, 163-170.

Dantas convinced the *Conseil Privé*, Nicot's credibility was on the line.<sup>108</sup> At least by then, he had personal reasons to wish for Dantas' demotion at court. As Dantas was known to harbor in his house Portuguese cartographers and pilots and negotiate their return to Portugal,<sup>109</sup> it is also possible that, in 1565, Nicot had intervened to sabotage Dantas' plans. If he did, he was successful: cosmographer André Homem, pilots Gaspar Caldeira and Antão Luís were not to return to Portugal in 1565, despite Dantas' efforts.<sup>110</sup> This matter is closely tied to some indications that Nicot might have played a role as a disseminator of Portuguese knowledge in France.

Nicot's library, said to be one of the most compendious to be found in late sixteenth century France, includes important items related to Portugal. As has been shown, Nicot used his stay in Lisbon to compile a number of Portuguese works that ended up in his collection (Barros' first two *Décadas*, the letter of King Manuel to Pope Julius II, the *Itinerário* by António Tenreiro, a report on the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan and the seamanship book of André Pires). Some of these works, like André Pires' seamanship book, or the report on the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan, also helped him write a section on artillery and nautical issues in his edition of the Latin-French dictionary.<sup>111</sup> In Nicot's etymological treatise on naval construction, there are features shared with the Portuguese work of Fernando de Oliveira. Did Nicot also laid hands in Oliveira's 1555 nautical treatise during his embassy? We are unable to provide a final answer, given the lack of evidence. However, if he did not, we should remain open to the possibility that he might have acquired it later, already in France, using his humanist contacts in Lisbon. After all, this was a topic in which Nicot was deeply interested. In his own etymological treatise, Nicot details the meaning of several nautical terms that had been introduced into the French language. Some of these words had a Portuguese origin and ended up also influencing his first edition of the Latin-French Dictionary and later the second edition of the *Trésor*.<sup>112</sup> If it is very likely that Nicot acquired André Pires' book in Portugal, as well as António Tenreiro's work, the source of Magellan's report is less certain. Such reports were available in France long before Nicot's embassy. This is what can be documented because, as has been argued,

108 Letter from João Pereira Dantas, Paris, 16.VIII.1562, ff. 1v.-2 – Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo [Lisbon], *Corpo Cronológico* I-106-4, ff. 1v.-2.

109 See note 97.

110 Matos, 1952a, 17.

111 Falgairolle, 1897, CV-CVI.

112 Baudry, 1988, 84, 112 and 177.

there are many uncertainties concerning Nicot's original library contents. This leads us to think that it might have included much more works than those we know today. Many of Nicot's original books could have ended in other places during his life since he belonged to *La Pleiade*, a group that is known for the share of materials within its members. The dispersion of Nicot's library after his death is also an established fact.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, after returning home, Nicot went from recommending translations be undertaken (Nunes' book), to likely assuming a role of promulgator of Portuguese nautical knowledge, as he also knew that France needed this knowledge for its own maritime expansion. Albeit the lack of more concrete evidence, this data suggest that Nicot might have played a role of go-between of maritime knowledge between Portugal and France. How can we, understand the legacy of Nicot's embassy, especially when compared with his French predecessors and Spanish ambassadors to Portugal?

## Conclusion

A literary and scientific man at heart, Jean Nicot is an excellent example of the sixteenth century French humanist diplomacy.<sup>114</sup> Still, his outcomes at the Portuguese embassy cannot be examined without considering the roles played by his predecessors in office. Michel de Seure's inability to adapt to the Portuguese environment and clearly anti-Iberian approach resulted in Portuguese complaints to Henry II and demands that he be recalled. Henry II's decision to award Seure's services is also related to the outcome of Honorais de Caix's embassy. During his years as ambassador in Portugal, which coincided with the whole reign of King John III, Caix became too well adapted to the Portuguese environment. Several documents from Caix's embassy, dating from the 1530-40s, evidence his transformation into a defender of Portuguese *Mare Clausum* policies. At decisive moments, he opposed France's interests, such as when Francis I gave letters of marque to Jean Ango. He also went personally to France as an agent of King John III on several occasions (to try to recover cargo from Breton and Norman captains), as well as to negotiate at the Valois court in the shadow of the Portuguese ambassador (as John III instructed Caix and his formal ambassador). Although he was never formally named John III's ambassador,

113 Baudry 1988, 114-115.

114 Matos, 1952b, 35.

he was accused on multiple occasions of neglecting French interests and was physically threatened because of it. At the basis of Caix's behavior was his belief that France should leave the maritime expansion to Portugal and simply try to profit from it. Championing a policy of conciliation, like the one Jean Bodin (1530-1596) advised later, Caix failed to convince Francis I that France should not engage in maritime wars with Portugal since that could enable him to negotiate with King John III a good commercial treaty.<sup>115</sup> At the end of his life, Caix had been forgotten by Henry II, as a revealing 1558 letter from Catherine of Austria to ambassador Dantas testifies. In this missive, she asked Dantas to wait for Caix's advice, and to petition Henry II to award Caix, as his advanced age prevented travel to France, but his devoted service to King John III deserved recognition.<sup>116</sup> Given this precedent, it is possible that Henry II's appointment of Seure and the tasks he entrusted him were provoked by Caix's apparent disinterest in promoting French causes.

The espionage Seure undertook while in Lisbon was partly prompted by Henry II's support of *France Antarctique*. But, after Seure was discovered, Henry II was forced to appoint a new ambassador. To improve relations with Portugal and ensure that his new ambassador would not be immediately mistrusted, he chose a man with a very different profile. Instead of a knight (Seure), Henry II opted for a humanist (Nicot). The more sympathetic approach of a humanist would (and did) make the Portuguese forget Seure's spying. But appearances can be misleading: we are fully convinced that Henry II also charged Nicot with acquiring all the knowledge he could on the Portuguese empire and navy, while cautioning him not to adopt Seure's problematic behavior. As we outlined, Henry II's ploy succeeded, even before Nicot's arrival, in kindling Catherine of Austria's curiosity about the new French ambassador.

Therefore, Nicot was fated to become an ambassador who fell midway between Caix's and Seure's approaches. This is precisely what we witness in his correspondence. While promoting the union between France and Portugal (expressed in the planned marriage of King Sebastian and Princess Margaret), Nicot also vigorously stood up for French interests. Nicot was ready to denounce any injustice visited on Frenchmen, like Seure, but also warned the Portuguese of illegal French activities, like Caix. His middle ground positions were targeted at winning Portuguese maritime assistance

115 Serrão, 1969b, 162-163, 182, 186 and 194.

116 Matos, 1952a, 274.



for France against English and Ottoman maritime threats. Using his humanist *persona*, Nicot studied Portugal and the Portuguese, something Seure would hardly do because of his anti-Iberian approach. Nicot quickly understood that he could exploit Portuguese fear and rivalry with the Spanish to France's benefit. This context enabled him to make numerous contacts at the Portuguese court and secure the conditions needed for fulfilling Henry II's directives (confirmed by Francis II and Charles IX) of transmitting intelligence on the Portuguese maritime *status quo*. Considering the new era of French-Spanish relations inaugurated by Henry II with the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis and the action of French ambassadors in Spain until the death of Queen Elizabeth of Valois (1545-1568), third wife of Philip II,<sup>117</sup> a question arises. Did Henry II intend, with Nicot's appointment, embassy and action, to focus France's maritime action against Portugal, instead of the traditional clash with Spain? As in several other questions concerning this King's policy after the signing of the peace, Henry II's death deprived us of the answer. Still, the hypothesis remains a possibility, and might have affected Nicot's actions in Lisbon even after Henry II's death. Knowing personally Catherine de Medici, Nicot recognized that there would be a continuity of French maritime interests via her role in the rule with Kings Francis II and Charles IX.

Nicot's access to the details of Portuguese operations in Brazil, Guinea, Mina, Mutapa and Asia document French maritime interest in Portuguese activities very well. If Nicot became a victim of the loss of Fort Coligny, he was still able to send sensitive intelligence to France. However, Nicot's awareness of Portuguese naval capacity explains why he did not push for all-out maritime war, as Seure had advocated. Nor was Nicot, like the Raymond de Fourquevaux (1508-1574), the later French ambassador in Spain between 1565 and 1572, a paladin of French maritime expansion against the Iberians.<sup>118</sup> In this matter, Nicot's views also run counter to Caix's, who proposed an end to French maritime ambitions. Nicot advised that if France wanted to take a tougher position against Portugal, it would have to prepare itself for the conflict. Thus, Nicot exploited every possible chance to get his hands on sensitive maritime knowledge while in Lisbon, and very likely established important connections to people with robust knowledge of these topics (like Fernando de Oliveira, Damião de Góis and João de Barros). Such endeavours were prerogative to his interest in disseminating Portuguese nautical knowledge

117 Ribera, 2018, 361-516.

118 Matos, 1952a, 11-12.

for French seamen. As Nicot knew, the civil wars would eventually end, and France would regain the capacity to launch serious maritime projects; to meet the moment when it arrived, preparation was essential. In this context, Nicot was more than an influential figure in the rise of the modern French language. He also laid the foundations for the major maritime successes that France achieved in the seventeenth century, despite dying too early to see his labor come to fruition.

Furthermore, Nicot's embassy has analogs in the paths taken by Spanish ambassadors to Portugal during the 1560s and 1570s, such as D. Alonso de Tovar, D. Juan de Borja, D. Juan de Silva and D. Cristobal de Moura. For all of them, we observe the same: an attempt to gather sensitive imperial and maritime information. D. Juan de Borja is often dubbed a spy-ambassador. D. Juan de Silva was instructed by Philip II (in 1575) to gather Portuguese cartography and nautical rutters, employing discretion and secrecy to avoid detection.<sup>119</sup> These orders are not very different from Henry II's to Nicot. Such cases suggest a common *modus operandi* of nautical espionage among sixteenth century French and Spanish ambassadors to Portugal. What differentiates Nicot from his Spanish colleagues was the degree of political espionage. Nicot occasionally reported on political matters, but his main goals were elsewhere: technical maritime intelligence. To obtain the information he desired, Nicot had to become a bit Portuguese. In this process, Nicot's correspondence suggests that he even came to admire the unassuming little country's unlikely ability to build and sustain the world's first global maritime empire. Therefore, the importance of knowledge transfers, well-known in history of science,<sup>120</sup> is another conclusion for Nicot's embassy as his endeavors are, in a way, emblematic of France's interest in acquiring Portuguese technical knowledge.

Nicot was neither a spy-ambassador like Seure, nor a Lusophile distributing Portuguese knowledge in France. Possibly Nicot's complex personality and interests are best captured by the concept of a go-between.<sup>121</sup> By mixing Humanism with political and maritime interests, Nicot became somehow different from the traditional French ambassador in Lisbon. But even in this, Nicot's case might not be an isolated one. Further studies are still required to check how sixteenth century diplomacy influenced the birth of complex personalities, such as Nicot, that used Humanism as a weapon

119 Moreno Madrid, 2021, 12.

120 Secord, 2004, 655.

121 Raj, 2020.

to achieve maritime goals, thus fully transgressing the normal categorization of humanist. In the end, Nicot's endeavours are also all related to the major process of globalization of maritime knowledge that became fully unstoppable in all Europe ever since the arrival of the first news about New Worlds. Only further studies on maritime diplomacy and espionage will help to understand if Nicot was not a symptomatic case of a global ambassador. Still, despite his privileged position, Nicot was just one of the many actors carrying Portuguese knowledge abroad to spark further European maritime ambitions.

Thus, Nicot's embassy can be summarized by his efforts to support France's maritime ambitions. But for such a maritime empire to be born, Nicot knew that France would have to do what she had done since the beginning of the sixteenth century: learn and profit from the Iberians' maritime experiences. Only then, France would be able to successfully surpass Iberian maritime knowledge and power.

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