

## FEATURE

# Exotic Exploits Of Gaspar Da Gama

By Jack Goldfarb

It is the last decade of the Fifteenth century. Half a millennium ago. Spain and Portugal, rival kingdoms striving to expand their hegemony and commerce, are aroused by the bold idea of finding a sea route to the fabled Indies. The Ottoman Turks have recently captured Constantinople, and along with the Sultans of Egypt, are demanding exorbitant duties on goods trafficked from Asia to Europe by camel caravans across the Levantine land route to the Mediterranean.

The prizes awaiting the intrepid maritime explorers who discover the ocean route to India are the opulent cargoes of gold, precious gems, silks, and spices of the East.

In Spain, Christopher Columbus bravely sets out westward from Palos on the 3rd of August, 1492, just one day after the massive exodus of the Inquisition-driven Spanish Jews begins. The Italian navigator has at last secured backing from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, after eighteen years of seeking sponsors in France, England, Portugal and Spain. The patronage of the Spanish sovereigns has finally been

granted, mainly through the intervention of an influential group of Marranos at the royal court. These Christianized Jews, namely the powerful Luis de Santangel, chancellor of the royal household and close adviser of the king, and Gabriel Sanchez, the royal treasurer, are instrumental in convincing Ferdinand, and particularly Isabella, that Columbus' expedition would bring them great wealth, territories, and an enduring place in history.

It was to Santangel, the appreciated benefactor, who personally advanced the sum of seventeen thousand florins without interest to outfit the fleet of three caravels, that a grateful Columbus wrote the first detailed account of his New World discoveries.

Of vital importance to Columbus' navigational success were the astronomical tables and nautical instruments perfected by two renowned Jewish scientists of the time—Abraham Zacuto, distinguished teacher of astronomy and mathematics at Spain's University of Salamanca, and Joseph Vecinho, Portuguese mathematician and royal physician, Columbus' weathered

copy of Zacuto's astronomical tables, with the explorer's handwritten marginal notes, is preserved in the Columbina Library in Seville today. Called the Almanach Perpetuum, this work was translated from Zacuto's original Hebrew into Spanish and Latin by his pupil, Vecinho.

In Portugal, Vasco da Gama, experienced navigator and aristocrat, is about to set sail southward out of Lisbon in quest of the sea route. It is July 8, 1497, and most of the town's population has crowded onto the banks of the Tagus River.

All eyes are focused on the fleet of four little ships in the harbor. The sailors, with lighted candles in hand, follow a procession of white-robed priests chanting hymns. The huge throng joins in the singing of a litany.

On the decks of the flagship, the 120-ton Sao Gabriel, Captain-major da Gama and crew members are in last-minute consultations with Abraham Zacuto. Zacuto, having fled Spain's oppressive Inquisition, is now Royal Astronomer to the Portuguese king, Manuel I. Zacuto has provided da Gama with several astrolabes specially designed by himself for this expedition.

He has also supplied sheafs of maps, general sailing instructions and a copy of his Almanach Perpetuum which enabled mariners to locate their latitude position by calculating the height of the sun at noon each day.

Among the other documents Zacuto has given da Gama is a copy of a letter written in 1487 by two Jewish travelers, Rabbi Abraham of Beja and Joseph Zapateiro de Lamengo, who claim that it is possible to navigate around the south coast of Africa into the Indian Ocean and thence across the waters to India.

When Zacuto and the host of farewell-wishers have disembarked, the four vessels unfurl their sails and amidst sustained cheers and ecclesiastical blessings move slowly out to the open sea and their unknown destiny.

Among the 170-man crew was a sprinkling of Marranos. One of these conversos was Joao Nunes, a man fluent in languages, including Hebrew and Arabic. On Fifteenth century voyages of exploration a navigator commanding an expedition felt safer with a Hebrew interpreter on board. It was believed that in strange lands there was always the likelihood of finding some-

one of the Twelve Tribes with whom to speak. Nunes was also a degradado, a prisoner pardoned on condition he was to perform the more dangerous tasks on a risky journey.

Da Gama's fleet, after losing one third of its crew to the ravages of scurvy, and having survived menacing encounters with natives and Arab rulers along the south and east coasts of Africa, finally reached its goal, the Indian port of Calicut (called Kozhikode today), ten long months after leaving Portugal.

Joso Nunes was ordered ashore to scout the situation at Calicut. He was promptly surrounded by a mob who hauled him in not too gentle fashion to the house of resident Tunisian traders. There Nunes was hostilely greeted in Castilian with, "The devil take you! What brought you here?"

"We come in search of Christians and spices," he asserted.

Nunes' laconic reply was the first riposte in a bitter duel between the Portuguese and Arabs for the commerce of India; a conflict that within a few years would see the Portuguese, by using sea power and violence,

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