

Exotic Exploits (continued)

displace the centuries-old Arab monopoly on Indian trade.

After three months of negotiations with the Zamorin, the Hindu ruler of Calicut (who was not impressed with the cheap trinkets the Portuguese had brought along as gifts), da Gama was able to load up his ships with precious stones, cinnamon, ginger, and pepper. The fleet sailed up the Malabar coast, past the great port of Goa, and anchored off the Anjidi Islands.

It was here that da Gama came across an extraordinary individual, a Polish, shtetl-born Jew, on whom he was to subsequently bestow his own name. The man was to ultimately achieve fame and fortune as a mariner in the service of the Portuguese king. But I am getting ahead of my story.

When da Gama's flagship arrived off the Anjidi Islands, a little rowboat drew alongside, and a tall, long-bearded European in a linen robe called out a traditional welcome in Castilian, "God bless the ships, the captains, and all the sailors"

Delighted to hear a familiar greeting in this far-off locale the crew invited the man on board. The visitor asked for news of Europe, and intrigued

the crewmen with colorful tales of his own adventures. To da Gama the man seemed to be lingering too long and trying too hard to ingratiate himself. Suspecting him to be a spy, da Gama ordered him seized, chained, and flogged until he confessed his real mission.

The man broke under the merciless thrashing, and admitted he was an emissary of Sam-bajo, the Arab prince who was governor of Goa. He said he had been sent to gather information on the strength and intentions of da Gama's fleet. Furthermore, he disclosed he was a Jew, born in Poland, and had wandered with his parents to Spain and Egypt. As a youth he had journeyed eastward from Alexandria to Arabia, where he had been captured and sold as a slave. To gain his freedom, he was forced to accept Mohammedanism. In Goa he had become a shipowner, and had often put to sea. He had a Jewish wife and children who lived in the southern Indian city of Cochin.

Vasco da Gama recognized that the man had an extensive knowledge of seafaring in Indian and East African waters and a mastery of more than a few languages. He could be of valuable service on the voyage home. da Gama offered to spare his life and would even become his

godfather—granting him his surname—provided he would become a baptized Christian.

And so the Posen-born Jew, who had fled Christian persecution in Poland, who later was compelled to convert to Islam, now, by virtue of survival, embraced Christianity. From then on he became known as Gaspar da Gama. And his godfather no doubt prided himself on having saved an infidel's lost soul.

On the homeward journey Gaspar da Gama proved himself to be a skillful pilot and seafarer as the Sao Gabriel and its sister ship recrossed the Indian Ocean to East Africa.

Misfortune dogged the fleet, however, on its year-long return trip to Portugal. Dozens more died of scurvy. One vessel had to be destroyed for lack of crewmen to sail it. The remaining ships suffered severe storms and dead calms. The decimated fleet, with fifty-five survivors, including Gaspar da Gama, limped back into Lisbon harbor in September 1499 to a thunderous, triumphant welcome.

At the grand reception Gaspar was presented to King Manuel, who promptly took a great liking to him. He became a favorite at court, the king enjoying discussions with this well-informed adventurous figure from the East. Royal gifts of clothing,

servants, and horses were offered to Gaspar along with a stipend and special privileges.

Within six months of Vasco da Gama's return and his glowing account of the wealth of India, an armed merchant fleet of thirteen ships sailed from Portugal to capitalize on da Gama's pioneering achievement. Gaspar, who had meanwhile gained a notable reputation as an expert on India (he was also called, 'Gaspar da las Indias') was urged by the king to join the expedition. The armada of vessels, under the command of a young nobleman, Admiral Pedro Alvares Cabral, was seen off by King Manuel himself, who recommended Cabral keep in close consultation with the knowledgeable Gaspar.

Forty-four days out of Lisbon, the flotilla, having taken a wide westerly direction on its way south, sighted an uncharted land. According to many sources, the navigational detour was advised by Gaspar da Gama, probably to circumvent the equatorial doldrums. The newly-discovered land was Brazil, which Cabral called Terra de Vera Cruz, Gaspar, whose talents as an envoy and interpreter were already appreciated by Cabral, was among the first to step ashore and make contact with

the natives of this lush green tropical land.

After only ten days in Brazil the expedition hastened on to its original destination, Rounding the Cape of Good Hope, four of the ships were lost in a storm and the diminished fleet anchored off Calicut in September, 1500. Gaspar must have been greatly excited at the prospect of seeing his wife and children again. The Zamorin at first welcomed the Portuguese, with an especially warm greeting to an old friend, Gaspar.

But after Cabral's men had set up a fortified trading station in the town, hostile Moslem merchants and Hindu supporters besieged the station and slaughtered most of the defenders. Gaspar was among the handful of survivors who were rescued when reinforcements from the fleet stormed ashore to drive off the attackers.

After this episode, Cabral accepted Gaspar's suggestion to sail to the port of Cochin where the expedition was warmly received. While Cabral's six remaining vessels were being loaded with treasured spices, Gaspar went in search of his family. But he did not find them in Cochin.

On the return voyage to Portugal, Cabral's ships met another

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