

Vasco da gama



In the name of God, Amen! In the year 1497 King Dom Manuel, the first of that name in Portugal, despatched four vessels to make discoveries and go in search of spices. Vasco da Gama was the captain-major of these vessels; Paulo da Gama, his brother, commanded one of them, and Nicolau Coelho another The Bay of St. Helena [on the west coast of the present country of South Africa]: On Tuesday (November 7) we returned to the land, which we found to be low, with a broad bay opening into it. The captain-major [i. e. , da Gama] sent Pero d'Alenquer in a boat to take soundings and to search for good anchoring ground.

The bay was found to be very clean, and to afford shelter against all winds except those from the N. W. It extended east and west, and we named it Santa Helena. On Wednesday (November 8) we cast anchor in this bay, and we remained there eight days, cleaning the ships, mending the sails, and taking in wood. The river Samtiagua (S. Thiago) enters the bay four leagues to the S. E. of the anchorage. It comes from the interior, is about a stone's throw across at the mouth, and from two to three fathoms in depth at all states of the tide.

The inhabitants of this country are tawny-colored. Their food is confined to the flesh of seals, whales and gazelles, and the roots of herbs. They are dressed in skins, and wear sheaths over their virile members. They are armed with poles of olive wood to which a horn, browned in the fire, is attached. Their numerous dogs resemble those of Portugal, and bark like them. The birds of the country, likewise, are the same as in Portugal, and include cormorants, gulls, turtle doves, crested larks, and many others. The climate is healthy and temperate, and produces good herbage.

On the day after we had cast anchor, that is to say on Thursday (November 9), we landed with the captain-major, and made captive one of the natives, who was small of stature like Sancho Mexia. This man had been gathering honey in the sandy waste, for in this country the bees deposit their honey at the foot of the mounds around the bushes. He was taken on board the captain-major's ship, and being placed at table he ate of all we ate. On the following day the captain-major had him well dressed and sent ashore.

On the following day (November 10) fourteen or fifteen natives came to where our ship lay. The captain-major landed and showed them a variety of merchandise, with the view of finding out whether such things were to be found in their country. This merchandise included cinnamon, cloves, seed-pearls, gold, and many other things, but it was evident that they had no knowledge whatever of such articles, and they were consequently given round bells and tin rings. This happened on Friday, and the like took place on Saturday.

On Sunday (November 12) about forty or fifty natives made their appearance, and having dined, we landed, and in exchange for the ceitils [copper coins] with which we came provided, we obtained shells, which they wore as ornaments in their ears, and which looked as if they had been plated, and foxtails attached to a handle, with which they fanned their faces. The captain-major also acquired for one ceitil one of the sheaths which they wore over their members, and this seemed to show that they valued copper very highly; indeed, they wore small beads of that metal in their ears.

On that day Fernao Velloso, who was with the captain-major, expressed a great desire to be permitted to accompany the natives to their houses, so

that he might find out how they lived and what they ate. The captain-major yielded to his importunities, and allowed him to accompany them, and when we returned to the captain-major's vessel to sup, he went away with the negroes. Soon after they had left us they caught a seal, and when they came to the foot of a hill in a barren place they roasted it, and gave some of it to Fernao Velloso, as also some of the roots which they eat.

After this meal they expressed a desire that he should not accompany them any further, but return to the vessels. When Fernao Velloso came abreast of the vessels he began to shout, the negroes keeping in the bush. We were still at supper; but when his shouts were heard the captain-major rose at once, and so did we others, and we entered a sailing boat. The negroes then began running along the beach, and they came as quickly up with Fernao Velloso as we did, and when we endeavored to get him into the boat they threw their assegais, and wounded the captain-major and three or four others.

All this happened because we looked upon these people as men of little spirit, quite incapable of violence, and had therefore landed without first arming ourselves. We then returned to the ships. Rounding the Cape. At daybreak of Thursday the 16th of November, having careened our ships and taken in woods we set sail. At that time we did not know how far we might be abaft the Cape of Good Hope. Pero d'Alenquer thought the distance about thirty leagues, but he was not certain, for on his return voyage (when with B. Dias) he had left the Cape in the morning and had gone past this bay with the wind astern, whilst on the outward voyage he had kept at sea, and was therefore unable to identify the locality where we now were. We therefore

stood out towards S. S. W. , and late on Saturday (November 18) we beheld the Cape.

On that same day we again stood out to sea, returning to the land in the course of the night. On Sunday morning, November 19, we once more made for the Cape, but were again unable to round it, for the wind blew from the S. S. W. , whilst the Cape juts out towards S. W.. We then again stood out to sea, returning to the land on Monday night. At last, on Wednesday (November 22), at noon, having the wind astern, we succeeded in doubling the Cape, and then ran along the coast. To the south of this Cape of Good Hope, and close to it, a vast bay, six leagues broad at its mouth, enters about six leagues into the land. 1498. Calicut. That night (May 20) we anchored two leagues from the city of Calicut, and we did so because our pilot mistook Capna, a town at that place, for Calicut. Still further there is another town called Pandarani.

We anchored about a league and a half from the shore. After we were at anchor, four boats (almadias) approached us from the land, who asked of what nation we were. We told them, and they then pointed out Calicut to us. On the following day (May 22) these same boats came again alongside, when the captain-major sent one of the convicts [men who had been added to the crew as a punishment] to Calicut, and those with whom he went took him to two Moors from Tunis, who could speak Castilian and Genoese.

The first greeting that he received was in these words: " May the Devil take thee! What brought you hither? They asked what he sought so far away from home, and he told them that we came in search of Christians and of spices. They said: " Why does not the King of Castile, the King of France, or the

Signoria of Venice send thither? " He said that the King of Portugal would not consent to their doing so, and they said he did the right thing. After this conversation they took him to their lodgings and gave him wheaten bread and honey. When he had eaten he returned to the ships, accompanied by one of the Moors, who was no sooner on board, than he said these words: " A lucky venture, a lucky venture!

Plenty of rubies, plenty of emeralds! You owe great thanks to God, for having brought you to a country holding such riches! " We were greatly astonished to hear his talk, for we never expected to hear our language spoken so far away from Portugal. The city of Calicut is inhabited by Christians. [Note: The first voyagers to India mistook the Hindus for Christians.] They are of tawny complexion. Some of them have big beards and long hair, whilst others clip their hair short or shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as a sign that they are Christians. They also wear moustaches.

They pierce the ears and wear much gold in them. They go naked down to the waist, covering their lower extremities with very fine cotton stuffs. But it is only the most respectable who do this, for the others manage as best they are able. The women of this country, as a rule, are ugly and of small stature. They wear many jewels of gold round the neck, numerous bracelets on their arms, and rings set with precious stones on their toes. All these people are well-disposed and apparently of mild temper. At first sight they seem covetous and ignorant. When we arrived at Calicut the king was fifteen leagues away.

The captain-major sent two men to him with a message, informing him that an ambassador had arrived from the King of Portugal with letters, and that if

he desired it he would take them to where the king then was. The king presented the bearers of this message with much fine cloth. He sent word to the captain-major bidding him welcome, saying that he was about to proceed to Calicut. As a matter of fact, he started at once with a large retinue. A pilot accompanied our two men, with orders to take us to a place called Pandarani, below the place (Capna) where we anchored at first.

At this time we were actually in front of the city of Calicut. We were told that the anchorage at the place to which we were to go was good, whilst at the place we were then it was bad, with a stony bottom, which was quite true; and, moreover, that it was customary for the ships which came to this country to anchor there for the sake of safety. We ourselves did not feel comfortable, and the captain-major had no sooner received this royal message than he ordered the sails to be set, and we departed. We did not, however, anchor as near the shore as the king's pilot desired.

When we were at anchor, a message arrived informing the captain-major that the king was already in the city. At the same time the king sent a bale, with other men of distinction, to Pandarani, to conduct the captain-major to where the king awaited him. This bale is like an alcaide [governor of a fortress], and is always attended by two hundred men armed with swords and bucklers. As it was late when this message arrived, the captain-major deferred going. On the following morning, which was Monday, May 28th, the captain-major set out to speak to the king, and took with him thirteen men.

On landing, the captain-major was received by the alcaide, with whom were many men, armed and unarmed. The reception was friendly, as if the people were pleased to see us, though at first appearances looked threatening, for

they carried naked swords in their hands. A palanquin was provided for the captain-major, such as is used by men of distinction in that country, as also by some of the merchants, who pay something to the king for this privilege. The captain-major entered the palanquin, which was carried by six men by turns.

Attended by all these people we took the road of Calicut, and came first to another town, called Capna. The captain-major was there deposited at the house of a man of rank, whilst we others were provided with food, consisting of rice, with much butter, and excellent boiled fish. The captain-major did not wish to eat, and as we had done so, we embarked on a river close by, which flows between the sea end the mainland, close to the coast. The two boats in which we embarked were lashed together, so that we were not separated.

There were numerous other boats, all crowded with people. As to those who were on the banks I say nothing; their number was infinite, and they had all come to see us. We went up that river for about a league, and saw many large ships drawn up high and dry on its banks, for there is no port here. When we disembarked, the captain-major once more entered his palanquin. The road was crowded with a countless multitude anxious to see us. Even the women came out of their houses with children in their arms and followed us.

When we arrived (at Calicut) they took us to a large church, and this is what we saw: The body of the church is as large as a monastery, all built of hewn stone and covered with tiles. At the main entrance rises a pillar of bronze as high as a mast, on the top of which was perched a bird, apparently a cock. In addition to this, there was another pillar as high as a man, and very stout. In

the center of the body of the church rose a chapel, all built of hewn stone, with a bronze door sufficiently wide for a man to pass, and stone steps leading up to it.

Within this sanctuary stood a small image which they said represented Our Lady. Along the walls, by the main entrance, hung seven small bells. In this church the captain-major said his prayers, and we with him. We did not go within the chapel, for it is the custom that only certain servants of the church, called quafees, should enter. These quafees wore some threads passing over the left shoulder and under the right arm, in the same manner as our deacons wear the stole.

They threw holy water over us, and gave us some white earth, which the Christians of this country are in the habit of putting on their foreheads, breasts, around the neck, and on the forearms. They threw holy water upon the captain-major and gave him some of the earth, which he gave in charge of someone, giving them to understand that he would put it on later. Many other saints were painted on the walls of the church, wearing crowns. They were painted variously, with teeth protruding an inch from the mouth, and four or five arms.

Below this church there was a large masonry tank, similar to many others which we had seen along the road. After we had left that place, and had arrived at the entrance to the city (of Calicut) we were shown another church, where we saw things like those described above. Here the crowd grew so dense that progress along the street became next to impossible, and for this reason they put the captain-major into a house, and us with him. The king sent a brother of the bale, who was a lord of this country, to

accompany the captain-major, and he was attended by men beating drums, blowing arafils and bagpipes, and firing off matchlocks.

In conducting the captain-major they showed us much respect, more than is shown in Spain to a king. The number of people was countless, for in addition to those who surrounded us, and among whom there were two thousand armed men, they crowded the roofs and houses. The further we advanced in the direction of the king's palace, the more did they increase in number. And when we arrived there, men of much distinction and great lords came out to meet the captain-major, and joined those who were already in attendance upon him. It was then an hour before sunset.

When we reached the palace we passed through a gate into a courtyard of great size, and before we arrived at where the king was, we passed four doors, through which we had to force our way, giving many blows to the people. When, at last, we reached the door where the king was, there came forth from it a little old man, who holds a position resembling that of a bishop, and whose advice the king acts upon in all affairs of the church. This man embraced the captain-major when he entered the door. Several men were wounded at this door, and we only got in by the use of much force. May 28.

The king was in a small court, reclining upon a couch covered with a cloth of green velvet, above which was a good mattress, and upon this again a sheet of cotton stuff, very white and fine, more so than any linen. The cushions were after the same fashion. In his left hand the king held a very large golden cup (spittoon), having a capacity of half an almude (8 pints). At its mouth this cup was two palmas (16 inches) wide, and apparently it was

massive. Into this cup the king threw the husks of a certain herb which is chewed by the people of this country because of its soothing effects, and which they call atambor.