

5 Vasco Da Gama Reaches India, John Cabot Reaches Nova Scotia and Duarte Pacheco Pereira Reaches the Coast of Present- Day Brazil (1497-1498)

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5.1 Vasco da Gama Reaches India and John Cabot Reaches Nova Scotia

In Portugal, King John II, by now old and tired, prepared the reply to Christopher Columbus's success by sending a small fleet to India, but on Christmas day 1495 he died and the expedition was suspended. His successor King Manuel I resumed the programme and in 1497 armed a 'First Fleet' (or 'Prima Armada') destined to reach the markets of Asia. The fleet comprised two specifically constructed whaling ships, the *São Gabriel* (120 t) commanded by Vasco da Gama and the *São Rafael* commanded by Paolo da Gama, as well as the *Berrio* (50 t) captained by Nicolau Coelho and the *Santa Fé*, a small ship captained by Gonçalo Nuñez used to transport the provisions and destined to be destroyed during the return journey. The fleet was crewed by 170 men and was escorted as far as Cape Verde by a caravel captained by Bartolomeu Dias.

The 'First Fleet' had sailed on July 8, 1497 two months after the four merchants departed from Cadiz. It sailed to the Cape Verde Islands and then, breaking the tradition of sailing along the coast, headed westward to pick up the southern trade winds in the open sea. This would take the fleet to the Cape of Good Hope and, having rounded the cape, it would advance into the Indian Ocean. Thus, on December 25 Vasco da Gama reached a stretch of the eastern coast of South Africa, which he named Natal. He swiftly sailed north as far as Mombasa where he came into conflict with the local authori-

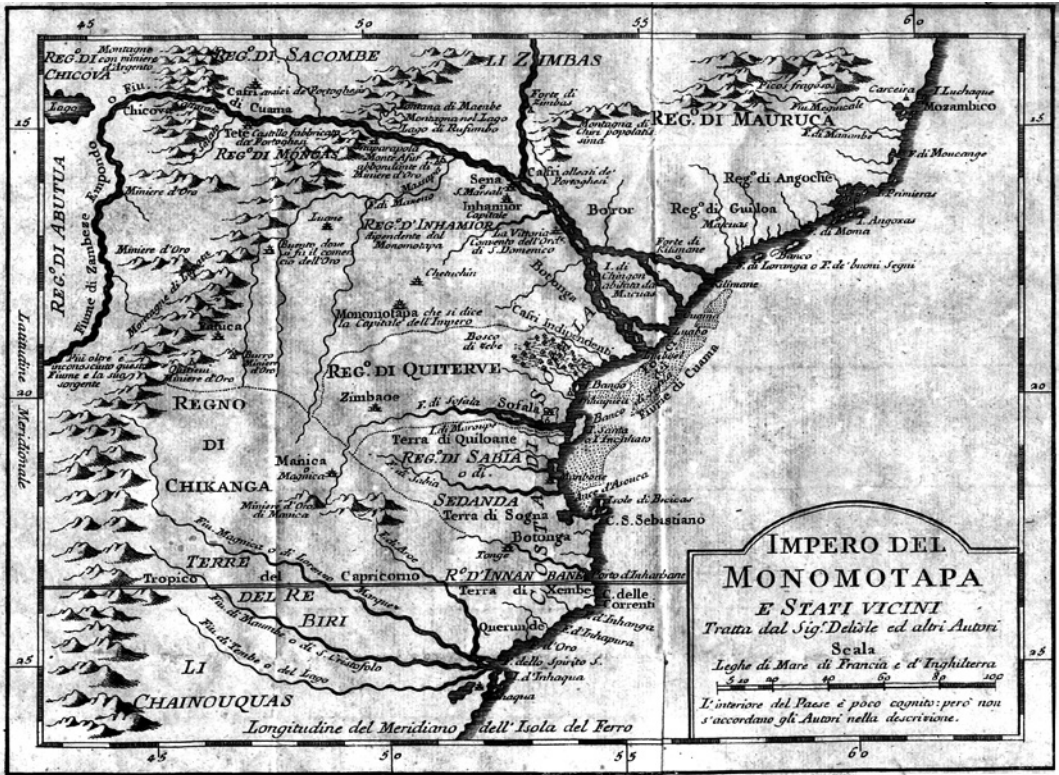


Figure 5.1 Eighteenth century map of south-eastern Africa showing the places visited by Vasco da Gama's First Fleet. The large river at the top is the Zambezi. *Impero del Monomotapa e Stati Vicini* by Jacques Nicolas Bellin (1781). © Stanford University Libraries/University of Cape Town Libraries

ties, and then to Malindi, where he received a friendly welcome. These lands were unknown to Europeans, organised into large and small kingdoms controlled by the Arabs.

At Malindi, Vasco da Gama hired a skilful Yemeni pilot, who in May led the small fleet to Calicut, in whose harbour many strange ships from far-away lands were moored. The city stood on the south-western coast of India (today it is called Kozhikode) and was governed by a rich Rajah, or Indian Prince. Negotiations with the prince to obtain permission to establish a Portuguese base in the city were made difficult by the Arab merchants who had an important trading centre at Calicut. From here, they sent spices to Egypt where they were loaded onto Venetian ships and then distributed throughout the Mediterranean and central Europe.

In these circumstances, Vasco da Gama realised that the architecture and sails of the Asian ships were inferior to those of the Portuguese vessels, a flaw that hampered their manoeuvrability. Nor were the Asian ships armed and this made them vulnerable. He also noticed that the large cities on the Indian Ocean were not surrounded by walls and were much wealthier and livelier than was believed in Portugal, so much so that the gifts given to the Rajah were to be considered rather modest and even the letter sent by King Manuel to the Indian prince did not seem very flattering. However, Vasco da Gama obtained something and, to consolidate the agreement,

organised an exchange of hostages: he left some Portuguese individuals in Calicut and took two high-ranking people from the city with him. Then, on October 5, 1498 he set sail to return to Lisbon.

This was an unfortunate time for returning as in those days the monsoons began to blow from south-west. Vasco da Gama was probably advised against departing, but he overestimated the resources and advantages available to him. The ships survived but were obliged to tack arduously for three entire months, while an unknown illness began to take a toll of the crews. The illness was scurvy and was unknown in the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula, although Scandinavian sailors knew it as *Scherbuch*. It caused the mouth to become inflamed, bleed and swell up so that the sick could not eat and were overcome by weakness. If they did not receive suitable food, they died within two or three weeks. After three months of navigation, 55 sailors were dead and others were very weak. Vasco da Gama docked at the Cape Verde Islands in order to cure his brother Paolo who however died when they reached the Azores, where it was necessary to destroy the *São Rafael*, which no longer had a crew (the *Santa Fé* had already been demolished). Vasco da Gama returned to Lisbon on September 9, 1499 with only his flagship, which had half a crew but carried a precious cargo that guaranteed some profit. Amerigo Vespucci reported about Vasco da Gama's return after this enterprise,¹ while Girolamo Sernigi, a Florentine merchant, wrote an account of the voyage.²

Vasco da Gama's voyage concluded the first phase of Prince Henry the Navigator's ambitious programme³ whose success was due to the heroic efforts made by the Portuguese in opening a new trade route. The entire world economy was on the point of being profoundly changed. However, King Manuel was angered about the great losses suffered by the expedition and for how badly he thought he had been made to look in the eyes of the Indian prince by Vasco da Gama's presentation of gifts that were too modest. As a precaution, he exaggerated the economic results of the endeavour and immediately began planning a second and greater one, to be entrusted to a different captain.

5.2 King Henry VII of England Enters the Competition

In Portugal, voyages along the African coasts were initially contracted out, but following the conquest of the gold mine in Guinea, the great seagoing ventures were decided and organised directly by the King and his councillors, who had a solid central base and an efficient logistical network that was enlarged as the programmes progressed. In contrast, in other countries, journeys of exploration opening routes towards new worlds, and also towards new markets, were decided and organised under the impetus of seafaring men who wished to widen their own horizons; as had happened with Christopher Columbus in Spain, so it happened in England where John Cabot had arrived.

¹ "Prima lettera familiare". *Codice Vaglianti*, folio 47ra.

² *Codice Vaglianti*, folios 57va-65ra.

³ Prince Henry de Sagres, called 'the Navigator' (1415-1460), was a farsighted individual who throughout his life encouraged Portugal's expansion on the seas and towards Asian markets. This policy was pursued with success for 300 years.



Figure 5.2 The sails of a Portuguese caravel destined for open ocean navigation. The sails and the flag at the top of the mast are decorated with the cross of the Portuguese navy. The image, from a Renaissance manuscript, belongs to the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa

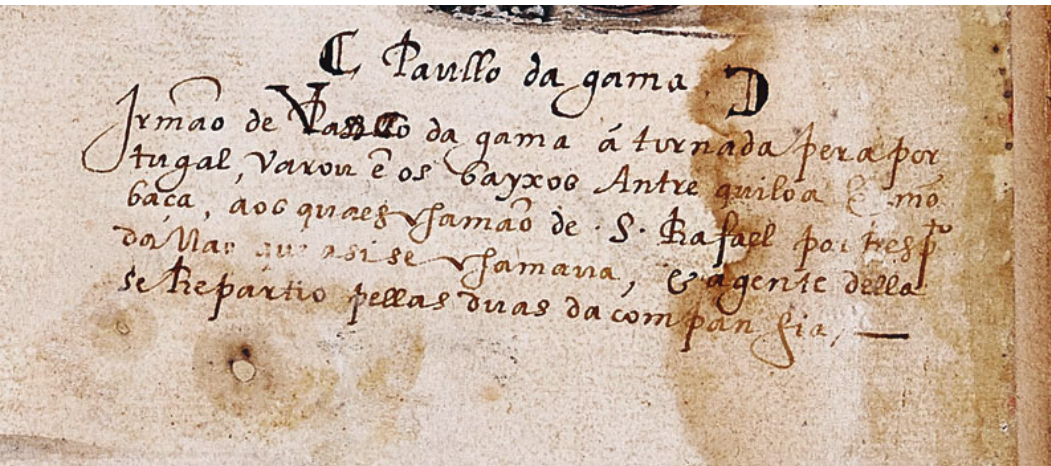
This daring sailor - who had an adventurer's temperament - belonged to a distinguished family from Gaeta⁴ which had been forced to take refuge in Venice. In 1476, he was granted Venetian citizenship, but he had to leave the city because of his heavy debts. In about 1492, he was in Valencia, where he was issued with an extradition warrant sent from Venice requiring him to return to serve a sentence for non-payment of debt.

He ignored this and continued to work for King Ferdinand of Aragon, directing the works for the enlargement of the port. These works were interrupted when the King had to hurriedly finance the colonisation of Haiti. John Cabot then went to London and put a proposal to King Henry VII: reaching China by navigating along a more northerly route than the one followed by Columbus. King Henry - perhaps jealous of King Ferdinand - gave him permission to undertake this venture, and the Bardi family of Florence provided the funding.

John Cabot would have liked to have a small fleet at his disposition, but only managed to equip one 50-ton ship, the *Matthew*, with a crew of 18 men, including his thirteen-year-old son Sebastian. He set sail from Bristol on May 2, 1497: two months would pass before Vasco da Gama departed in the attempt to reach India, while eight days later the four merchants including Amerigo Vespucci set sail to explore the lands on the other side of the ocean.

After 53 days of navigation, Cabot reached Cape Breton Island, adjacent to Nova Scotia, at a lower latitude than Bristol but with a much harsher climate. He took possession of the island in the name of King Henry VII. During the return journey, he saw the large island of Newfoundland. He reached Bristol in early August, believing he had reached Cipangu, as Japan was known at that time, a large but little-known country. For the acquisition of this land, the king compensated Cabot with ten pounds sterling, but a few months later granted him a small life annuity.

⁴ The surname 'Caboto' is probably a modification of 'Caputo', which is still common in Lazio and Campania.



The taking of that island by the English Crown angered the Portuguese and Spanish sovereigns who sustained that, according to the Treaty of Tordesillas, the land belonged to them. Henry VII ignored their protests and a year later organised another venture with six ships and over 200 men, once again giving command to John Cabot, who was again accompanied by his son Sebastian.

The fleet departed between June and July following an even more northerly route. The outcome of this expedition is unknown: it is likely that shipwrecks decimated the fleet, while it is certain that at least one ship returned with Cabot and his son on board.

John died soon after his return, while Sebastian went on to become a great navigator who surpassed his father's achievements and did great service to Spain.

5.3 Duarte Pacheco Pereira and His Controversial Transoceanic Voyage

It is appropriate to introduce the somewhat mysterious Portuguese individual who perhaps paved the way for the Second Fleet under the command of Cabral (see Chapter 8). Duarte Pacheco Pereira (1460-1533) is usually shown wearing a steel cuirass and holding a large sword with a strangely shaped hilt. This architect and soldier had built and defended the fortifications for the 'bridgeheads' established by Portugal along the coasts of Africa and Asia. In his poem *The Lusids*, the poet Luís Vaz de Camões compared Pacheco Pereira to Achilles, as he had managed to defend the base of Cochin in India with only 150 Portuguese and the few local people against the army of the Zamorin (or Prince) of Calicut estimated at over 50,000 men. An epic defence perhaps more worthy of Hector than Achilles.

In his book,⁵ Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho compares him instead to Leonardo da Vinci because of his studies on various naturalistic themes, including his exceptional studies on the relationship between the lunar phases and tides set out in a singular work entitled *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (1506-08).

Pacheco Pereira is attributed with a voyage to the coast of Brazil undertaken in 1498 with a fleet of eight ships. Yet, some authors, convinced that the primary achievements of their preferred personalities have great historical value, deny that this voyage ever happened, just as they deny the authenticity of those of Amerigo Vespucci and Juan de La Cosa. However, the premises for Pacheco Pereira's voyage exist: the Portuguese had a great interest in knowing what they had gained from the Treaty of Tordesillas and ascertaining where the *raya* passed.

The obvious incentive for this voyage was the possibility to verify what Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci might have seen, having both departed from the Cape Verde Islands to cross the ocean. There exists an important confirmation: both Vespucci, who reached those parts a year later, and Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, who reached the Brazilian coast in January 1500, met Indio tribes, who were expert in the Europeans' cruel behaviours and therefore set fatal traps for these navigators. Although in the Portuguese chronicles of the late 15th century there is no trace of the discoveries of Duarte Pacheco Pereira, it is certain that they were immediately introduced in the *Padrão Real* of 1500, and then in the copy of it that Alberto Cantino brought to Italy. In this copy, made in 1501-02, we find the drawing of the stretch of coast between the parallels 15° and 32° South and a series of place names that stops shortly before the Tropic of Capricorn. None of the many Spanish caravels that in the year 1500, or the year before, explored the eastern cusp of the New World, reached these places.

In conclusion, this much-debated voyage would have opened the shortest route across the ocean for successive expeditions and would have provided a motive for the peremptory order issued by the Portuguese that no violence should be done to the natives.

Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a man of rare qualities, was the victim of the hostility of King John II's courtiers and later of the more perilous hostility of King Manuel I, and thus he died poor and forgotten.

5 *As fonte de Duarte Pacheco Pereira no "Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis"*.