

8 The Portuguese Second Fleet Under the Command of Álvares Cabral Crosses the Atlantic and Reaches India (1500-1501)

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8.1 On the Way to India the Portuguese Second Fleet Stops Over in Porto Seguro

In Portugal, King Manuel, having evaluated the successes achieved and errors made during the voyage of the First Fleet (or First Armada), quickly organised the voyage of the Second Fleet to the East Indies. On March 9, 1500, this fleet of thirteen ships, i.e. four caravels and nine larger vessels, carrying a total of 1,400 men (sailors, soldiers and merchants), set sail from Lisbon. Two ships were chartered, one from the Florentines Bartolomeo Marchionni and Girolamo Sernigi, the other from Diogo da Silva, Count of Portalegre. The 240-ton flagship *El Rey* and ten other ships were equipped with heavy artillery and belonged to the Crown.

The fleet was under the command of the young nobleman Pedro Álvares Cabral (1467-1520) and its mission was to reach the markets of the Indian Ocean. For this reason, no expense had been spared in equipping the ships; in addition to the artillery they carried a large amount of money and goods for exchange (mainly metals: lead, copper and mercury), and many glittering gifts to be distributed, created by refined artisans. King Manuel remembered Vasco da Gama's humiliation over the small size of his ships and gifts, and intended to present himself on the eastern markets as a great king whose magnificence could rival that of the Indian princes. Amerigo wrote to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco informing him of the fleet's imminent departure: "And now once again the King of Portugal has equipped 12 ships with great riches".¹

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

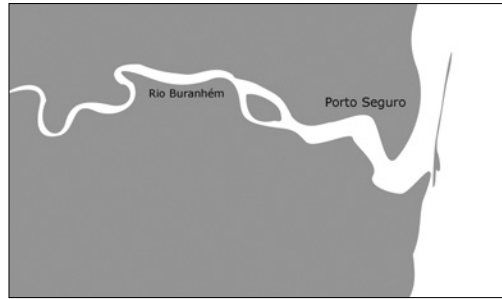


Figure 8.1 Porto Seguro, the river port where Cabral's fleet docked (from Google Earth). Mount Pascoal is situated 60 km to the south

Alongside those splendid, well-painted ships sailed two modest caravels under the command of the brothers Bartolomeu and Diogo Dias destined to explore the eastern coast of Africa, which were supposed to identify Sofala, a city with a nearby gold mine. The thirteen ships sailed fast: after five days, they sighted the Canary Islands and eight days later they reached the Cape Verde Islands. Then they crossed the ocean on a south-westerly course that took the fleet far out to sea to catch the southern trade winds, which would push them some distance south of the Cape of Good Hope.

The crossing had only just begun when Vasco de Ataíde's caravel disappeared without apparent reason. The fleet searched for it for many hours; his brother Pêro de Ataíde, known as 'Captain Hell', searched the ocean from his ship, scanning the horizon in vain for a wreck, or a survivor. Evening came and they continued their navigation, making increasing leeway towards the west. On about March 12, a small island was sighted, which they named Quaresima. After further days of navigation, the lookouts saw signs of land: banks of seaweed and land birds. On April 24, 1500 the Friday after Easter, they saw a great mountain (which in reality was not that high), which was named Mount Pascoal, and many natives standing still along the beach watching the fascinating spectacle of the sailing ships, which were very strange and seemed enormous to them. They had reached the coast of present-day Brazil.

While the ships were anchored offshore in a place that seemed secure, a boat was sent ashore to establish contact with the natives who appeared warlike. In the meantime, a strong southerly wind began to blow: the situation risked becoming critical and so the captains re-called the sailors who had gone ashore. They had been unable to communicate with the *Indios*. The fleet, entrusting itself to the wind, sailed in search of a more hospitable place. The waters were made dangerous by submerged reefs, sandbanks and large floating trunks, so that boats were sent ahead of the ships, the sailors sounding the sea floor and shouting out the depth. After about forty miles of careful navigation a river mouth was sighted. This was the Buranhém, as it was later named, which before reaching the ocean formed a great body of water with the capacity to shelter the entire fleet; an appropriate name was chosen, Porto Seguro.² Although surrounded by a tall forest, in some ways it was similar to Lisbon's river port situated upstream of the mouth of the Tagus.

² The stopover at Porto Seguro was described between 1500 and 1502 by five different people: the Portuguese, Pêro Vaz de Caminha, the *maestre* João Faras, an anonymous pilot, and the two Florentines Girolamo Sernigi and Amerigo Vespucci. In addition, it was clearly illustrated by the painter and cartographer Lopo Homem in the *Miller Atlas*.

Several small canoes with native fishermen were floating there. One, with two naked men adorned with multi-coloured feathers, came alongside the flagship. With gestures, they were invited aboard the ship where a solemn welcome was prepared. Amazed at the sight, the two natives came into the presence of Cabral, who was dressed in sumptuous clothes and had a showy gold neck-chain hanging on his chest. He treated them as though they were ambassadors from a great chief. The interaction between them was disappointing: one of the fishermen pointed at the necklace, and using gestures perhaps asked if he could have it, but this gift was refused. Both Indios made downward-pointing gestures that were interpreted in contrasting ways. In the end, the bewilderment and apprehension caused by this meeting got the better of them; both young men lay down on the deck and went to sleep. The crew members observed their carefully shaved and painted naked bodies. Someone put something under their heads and others covered their nakedness. When the Indios awoke their dream continued; they were accompanied ashore and given many gifts: showy hats, two shirts, mirrors and bells. Once ashore they disappeared among their tribesmen who crowded around them.

There were more meetings with members of the tribe in the following days: some Indios were suspicious and reticent and held back others who seemed more welcoming, but in the end festive cordiality prevailed and the people became increasingly good-humoured. Many danced to the sound of their instruments and at this point the young captain Diogo Dias got out his bagpipes and began to play and dance with them. The jollity became increasingly unrestrained.

Pêro Vaz de Caminha, the Admiral's secretary, carefully recorded the events of this close encounter. He described the vigorous and healthy bodies of the people (of Tupiniquim stock), saying that this agitated community reminded him of a well-fed herd of wild animals. He did not say this in an unfriendly manner, quite the opposite. The comparison with the small, often undernourished or crippled people of his own country, was all to the advantage of the natives. Pêro Vaz carefully described three young women, their long, loose, shoulder-length hair, the carefully shaved robust bodies, elegantly painted, the fine faces that, unlike those of the men, were not deformed by bones inserted into the lips or coloured stones in holes in the cheeks.

In the meantime, the captain major decided on the names to give to these places and christened those vast lands, not understanding whether they were part of an island or a continent, with the name Vera Cruz. In addition, it also seemed certain that they were on this side of the *raya* and thus belonged to Portugal. In any case, Cabral took possession of them in the name of King Manuel. He consulted with the captains of the many ships on what to do and on the advisability of not delaying the departure for the East Indies.

He discussed the idea of carrying off a number of natives, but the idea was discarded: it was better to remain on friendly terms. It was decided to leave behind two *degradados* (criminals sentenced to death who were crew members) so that they could learn the language and collect important information for those who might arrive there in the future. It was also decided to immediately send a ship back to Lisbon with news of the newly discovered lands. The chosen vessel was a caravel under the command of André Gonçalves, which carried all the supplies for the entire fleet and was to be destroyed when the supplies had been consumed. The name of this caravel, protagonist of an epic solo voyage, is unknown, but it is usually called the *naveta*.

Cabral decided to send Diogo Dias, who had become friendly with the natives, to visit their village situated a short distance away near the beach. He went with the two *degradados* who were to remain there.

Before setting sail, Cabral intended to celebrate the Easter. A cross, made of two large tree trunks, was raised on a small islet close to the land delimiting the harbour. The natives helped and keenly observed the iron tools used to cut the wood and the nails used to join the trunks. They immediately understood the great value of this metal. The priests travelling with the fleet celebrated the sung mass with solemnity; the natives participated with empathy sharing the sense of the sacred, and the Christian sailors were struck by this.

When the sailors unloaded the supplies from the *naveta* to then distribute them among the other ships, the natives helped, and they also assisted in loading logs of brazilwood, which produced a red dye. This episode was illustrated with great accuracy on the Portuguese nautical chart made by Lopo Homem in 1502.

As stated above, Diogo Dias, the jovial entertainer, accompanied by the two condemned men, went to the native village carrying his bagpipes. He observed the *malocas*, the great long houses supported on large tree trunks and roofed with palm leaves, and inside he saw the hammocks woven from cotton cords hanging in rows down both sides of the hut; he did not see the supplies of smoked meat hanging above, or did not give them much attention. He went outside and began to play his bagpipes and once again, loud music and dancing broke out.

When night came, the three Portuguese men were accompanied to the shore, but only Diogo got into the boat. The two condemned men stayed on the beach crying and the Indios, moved by this, insisted that they too were taken to the ships, but without success. Being left behind was the condemned men's fortune.

It was time to depart: the *naveta* under the command of André Gonçalves, an experienced man from a noble family, set sail on May 1 on a north-easterly course, destination Lisbon, to take news of the great discovery to King Manuel. The fleet sailed the next day, heading towards a destiny of storms, conflicts and successes.

8.2 Cabral's Fleet Reaches India

Cabral and his fleet had left Porto Seguro on May 2, 1500, sailing towards the Cape of Good Hope, a crossing of 1,500 leagues. On May 12, a comet with a long tail appeared low on the horizon towards Arabia.³ It remained visible for about ten days and then set. On Sunday May 24, while the fleet sailed together, a sudden gust of wind came from the bows, so sudden that it went unnoticed until it tore the sails and broke the masts of many ships. In a moment, four ships keeled over and sank with all on board, without a chance of rescuing anyone. Among them were the caravel of the skilful and courageous Bartolomeu Dias and the ship hired from the Count of Portalegre. The seven surviving ships continued in that terrible squall with broken masts and torn sails for the whole day, and then the sea swelled to such a degree that it seemed as though the ships were "to rise up to heaven". The wind sudden-

³ It was thought at the time that comets were meteors that travelled through the atmosphere.

ly dropped although the storm was still so fierce that none of the captains dared unfurl his remaining sails. Adrift in the dark, some of the ships lost sight of each other. Two remained with the flagship, the *El Rey*, another two with the great ship the *Anunciada*.

The seventh ship, Diogo Dias's caravel, had disappeared. The six ships finally regrouped at the small Island of Mozambique, off eastern Africa, whose pasha gave them a friendly welcome. From here, the fleet reached Kilwa where Cabral attempted, unsuccessfully, to come to a diplomatic agreement with the pasha there. The fleet then sailed up the coast as far as Malindi where Cabral took on two skilled local pilots, as Vasco da Gama had done three years earlier, in order to reach the western coast of India.

When they reached the great peninsula, they stopped in a quiet place where the ships were repaired and repainted. The fleet then reached Calicut where Cabral was received by the city's prince, the Rajah or Zamorin, in his luxurious residence. Cabral offered him gifts of high workmanship, including splendid crystal wares, and presented his King's credentials together with a very flattering letter the latter had written to his faraway peers. Cabral also arranged the exchange of hostages that Vasco da Gama had organised previously. In other words, Cabral proceeded with careful diplomacy and great generosity, after which he asked the Rajah for permission to establish a base in the city for trading with Portugal. Permission was granted but not without some hesitation. The agreement was soon in the public domain and caused alarm among the Arab community, which controlled most of the trade that took place in that port.

Cabral, underestimating this alarm, began to build the fortifications that were to house the base. After two months of work, the increasingly hostile Arab merchants stirred up a revolt involving the local population, and a reciprocal massacre began. The Portuguese at the base were all killed, and only those who threw themselves into the water and swam to the ships survived. Aires Corera, head of the base, the secretary Pêro Vaz de Caminha, João Faras, King Manuel's physician and astronomer, three friars and more than fifty soldiers and sailors all died. The men from the Portuguese ships then attacked a 'Moorish' ship, killed the crew and set fire to it. Seeing that the Rajah did not intervene, as had been agreed, the Portuguese artillery fired on the city for a whole day destroying many houses and killing 'six hundred'⁴ inhabitants. These events occurred during the last days of 1500.⁵

The Portuguese fleet then set sail heading south, reaching the city of Cochin, where the Rajah was friendly and hospitable. Cabral carried out a more modest version of his programme. Having organised a base at Cananea and taken on board spices and other goods, he headed towards Africa in order to return home before the monsoons prevented him from doing so. In this way, he avoided an attack by the Arabs who had gathered a fleet of eighty ships with the intention of destroying the hated competitors. The crossing was not tranquil. First, the Portuguese intercepted and plundered an Indian ship. Then, upon reaching Malindi, the great flagship *El Rey* leading the convoy ran aground and its keel was ripped open. The crew and cargo were saved, but the beautiful ship of 240 tons had to be burned. The numerous cannons that were its pride were given to the city. At this point,

⁴ For the Latins, 'six hundred' indicates a large and indeterminate number.

⁵ Exactly when the Columbus brothers were being taken to Seville in chains.

Sie machen eyne platten vff frem haupt/lassen daumb
 her eyn krenzlein von haren wie eyn m̄sch. Ich hab
 sie offte gefragt/wober sie das muster der haar betten/
 Sagten sie/ Vhre vorwarter bettens an eynem Manne gese-
 hen/der bette Weire Humane geheysen/vnd bette vil wun-
 derbarlichs dings vnter snen gethan/vnd man wil es sei eyn
 Propheet oder Apostel gewesen.

Weiter fragte ich sie/womit sie betten die har Konnen ab-
 schneiden/ehe snen dieschiff betten scheren bracht/sagten sie
 betten eynen stein teil genomen/betten eyn ander ding darun-
 ter gehalten/daruff die har abgeschlagen/dan die mittelste
 platte hatten sie mit eynem schiber/eyns gebellen steyns/
 welche sie vil brauchen zum scheren/gemacht. Weiter ha-
 ben sie eyn ding von roten feddern gemacht/heyset kannitta-
 re/das binden sie vmb den kopff.

Sie haben auch inden vndersten lippen des mundes/eyn
 groß loch/das machen sie von jugent auff/wan sie noch juns-
 gen sein/stechen sie snen mit eynem spitzen birzborns knochen
 syn löchlin hindurch/darin stecken sie dan eyn steynlein oder



Figures 8.2a-b The 'ornaments' inserted into the cheeks of the male members of the Tupinambá Indians are carefully smoothed coloured stones. From Hans Staden, *Wahhaftige Historia* (Marburg 1557).
 © Biblioteca Digital de Obras Raras e Especiais da Universidade de São Paulo

Wahrhafftiger kurtzer be-
richt/handel vnd sicken der Tuppin In-
bas/derer gefangner ich gewesen bin/Wonen in Ame-
rica/ire landt schaffe ligt in in 24. gradus vff der
Seuden seit d linien æquinoctial/ir landtstoffet
an eyn reffer/Aio de Jenero genant.



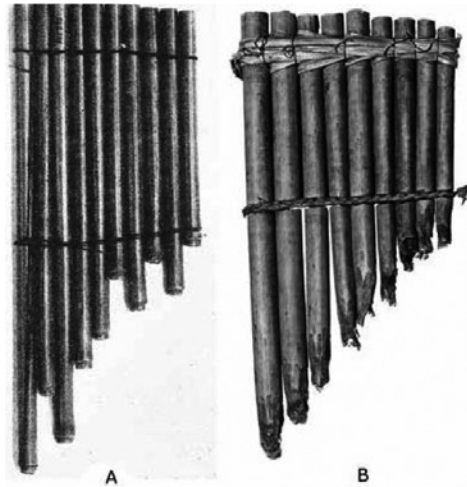


Figure 8.3 Pan flutes were part of the musical repertoire of the South American Tupiniquim Indios (A) and of the Melanesian population of the Solomon Islands (B); both populations were late-Neolithic cultures. Each pipe of the flute was tuned individually. Fig. A from: Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle des tribus Tupi-Guarani* (1928); fig. B: Toulouse Muséum d'histoire naturelle. © Didier Descouens, Wikimedia Commons

Cabral ordered Nicolau Coelho, captain of the *Anunciada*, to sail ahead alone to the appointment at Cape Verde, which had been prearranged in Lisbon.

This ship, the fastest in the fleet, arrived there punctually at the end of May 1501. Cabral remained in the rearguard, his fleet reduced from thirteen ships to five.

In reality, six vessels survived, because Diogo Dias had not been shipwrecked as all had feared. After the great storm, his caravel drifted for many days until a sailor on watch in the crow's nest sighted a large uninhabited island, which today is called Mauritius, and a few days later, the island of Réunion, also uninhabited.⁶

The ship then veered west, came to a land they did not recognise and sailed northward up the coast. This was Madagascar, a very large island whose existence they were unaware of, although it was well-known to the Arabs as it was the setting for some of the adventures of 'Sinbad the Sailor' from *A Thousand and One Nights*. On reaching the northern end of the island, the small caravel once more sailed in the vastness of the Indian Ocean. After several weeks of navigation towards the north, they came in sight of Cape Guardafui (today Ras Asir) at the top of the Horn of Africa. The hostility of its inhabitants forced Dias to take to the open sea. For many weeks, the ship was at the mercy of monsoons and threats from pirates. Thirst, hunger and scurvy took their toll on the crew. Finally, on reaching the coast of present-day Eritrea they found help and were able to obtain water and fresh supplies. Only six men survived with the captain Diogo Dias, a crew so small that it was only possible to manage the caravel by working non-stop for many hours with hardly any sleep. The captain decided to sail southward along the coast of East Africa, round the Cape of Good Hope and sail up to Cape Verde. The caravel was the first to make the rendezvous at the end of May 1501.

⁶ These islands are today called the Mascarenes.