

## HISTORYMAKERS

## Vasco da Gama

*Sailing into History*

*"May the devil take you! What brought you here?"—spoken by Tunisian merchants who sighted Vasco da Gama in India (1498)*

The tiny kingdom of Portugal had made a major seafaring breakthrough in 1488, when Bartolomeu Dias sailed to the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. However, it was not until the mid-1490s that King Manuel of Portugal decided to send another voyage south. He chose a little-known sailor named Vasco da Gama, and he took the first step in creating a Portuguese trading empire in Asia.

Born around 1460, much of da Gama's early life is unknown. It is believed that he was born to poor but noble parents and that his father served as governor of Sines, the town where da Gama was born. He had two older brothers, who both later joined him on his trips. He remained an obscure figure until 1492. That year he captured some French ships in a Portuguese port during a period of hostility between the two European powers.

In 1495, King Manuel was making preparations to send an expedition around Africa to reach the valuable spice markets of India. He had named da Gama's father to head the voyage, but the old man died that year. As a result, Manuel chose da Gama.

In July 1497, da Gama departed with four ships. Rather than follow the West African coast, he swung far out into the Atlantic Ocean, hoping to avoid the areas of little wind called the doldrums. It was not until late November that the group passed the Cape of Good Hope. It took them another five months to work their way up the eastern coast of Africa, stopping at several ports along the way.

These ports were largely controlled by Muslim merchants. Though many of these merchants welcomed the Portuguese, some Muslim ships attacked the Portuguese explorers in Mombasa, located in modern Tanzania. In da Gama's next stop in modern Kenya, the ruler there gave the Portuguese an expert guide. He led them across the Indian Ocean to Calicut, the center of the Indian spice trade. They landed there on May 20, 1498, more than ten months after they had left Portugal.

Da Gama was unable to meet the leader of Calicut for ten days, however. Furthermore, when the two men did meet, the conference went badly.

The Portuguese had brought few goods of value to India, and the ruler expected gold in return for the spices that da Gama desired. Relations soured, and the Indians and the Portuguese both took prisoners. Later, the captured people were exchanged, but in August of 1498, da Gama and his crew left for home after hearing rumors of plots against them. They only had a small cargo of spices, but they had shown that the route could work.

The return voyage was more difficult than the journey there. Thirty men died of disease, including da Gama's brother Paulo, who had commanded one of the ships. Da Gama finally reached Portugal on September 9, 1499, two years after having left. He was given a hero's welcome.

A second voyage to Asia, commanded by another man, produced poor relations with the Indians, and the king called on da Gama again. In 1502, he set out with a much larger fleet of 20 ships that were armed for hostilities. When he reached the Indian coast, da Gama captured a ship loaded with Muslims making a pilgrimage, then killed them and burned the ship. When the ruler of Calicut refused to cooperate with da Gama, da Gama had his sailors shell the city. After picking up a cargo of spices in more friendly cities, he returned to Portugal.

Da Gama's actions raised alarms among the Muslims. They formed an alliance with the rulers of Egypt and other Indian cities to resist the Portuguese. From then on, the Portuguese built their trading empire by force, not by peaceful commerce. Da Gama made one more trip to Asia. Named Viceroy of India by the king, he was supposed to restore order but died shortly after arriving there.

## Questions

1. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What hardships did da Gama and his crew suffer during the first voyage?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did the Portuguese not enjoy more success in their first voyage?
3. **Making Inferences** Why did the Muslims oppose the Portuguese arrival?