

# VASCO DA GAMA

VASCO DA GAMA (circa 1460-1524), Portuguese navigator and discoverer of the sea-route to India, was born at Sines, a small seaport in the province of Alemtejo. Of da Gama's early history little is known. His descent, according to the Nobiliario of Antonio de Lima, was derived from a noble family which is mentioned in the year 1166; but the line cannot be traced without interruption farther back than the year 1280, to one Alvaro da Gama, from whom was descended Estevão da Gama, civil governor of Sines, whose third son Vasco was born probably about the year 1460. In that year died Prince Henrique the Navigator, to whose intelligence and foresight must be traced back all the fame that Portugal gained on the seas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Explorers sent out at his instigation discovered the Azores and unknown regions on the African coast, whence continually came reports of a great monarch, "who lived east of Benin, 350 leagues in the interior, and who held both temporal and spiritual dominion over all the neighboring kings," a story which tallied so remarkably with the accounts of "Prester John" which had been brought to the Peninsula by Ethiopian priests, that Joao the Second of Portugal steadfastly resolved that both by sea and by land the attempt should be made to reach the country of this potentate. For

this purpose Pedro de Covilham and Affonso de Payva were dispatched eastward by land; while Bartholomeu Diaz, in command of two vessels, was sent westward by sea (see Ethiopia). That there was in truth an ocean highway to the East was proved by Diaz, who returned in December 1488 with the report that when sailing southward he was carried far to the east by a succession of fierce storms, past—as he discovered only on his return voyage—what he ascertained to be the southern extremity of the African continent. The condition of John's health and concerns of state, however, prevented the fitting out of the intended expedition; and it was not till nine years later, when Emanuel I. had succeeded to the throne, that the preparations for this great voyage were completed—hastened, doubtless, by Columbus's discovery of America in the meanwhile.

For the supreme command of this expedition the king selected Vasco da Gama, who had in his youth fought in the wars against Castile, and in his riper years gained distinction as an intrepid mariner. The fleet, consisting of four vessels specially built for this mission, sailed down the Tagus on the ninth of July 1497, after prayers and confession made by the officers and crews in a small chapel on the site where now stands the church of Saint Maria de Belem (see Lisboa), afterwards built to commemorate the event. Four months later the flotilla cast anchor in Saint Helena Bay, South Africa, rounded the Cape in safety, and in the beginning of the next

year reached Malindi, on the east coast of Africa. Thence, steering eastward, under the direction of a pilot obtained from Indian merchants met with at this port, da Gama arrived at Calicut, on the Malabar coast, on the twentieth of May 1498, and set up, according to the custom of his country, a marble pillar as a mark of conquest and a proof of his discovery of India. His reception by the zamorin, or Hindu ruler of Calicut, would have in all probability been favorable enough, had it not been for the jealousy of the Muslim traders who, fearing for their gains, so incited the Hindus against the new-comers that da Gama was unable to establish a Portuguese factory. Having seen enough of India to assure him of its great resources, he returned to Portugal in September 1499. The king received him with every mark of distinction, granted him the use of the prefix Dom, thus elevating him to the rank of an untitled noble, and conferred on him pensions and other property. In prosecution of da Gama's discoveries another fleet of thirteen ships was immediately sent out to India under Pedro Alvares Cabral, who, in sailing too far westward, by accident discovered Brazil, and on reaching his destination established a factory at Calicut. The natives, again instigated by the Muslim merchants, rose up in arms and murdered all whom Cabral had left behind. To avenge this outrage a powerful armament of ten ships was fitted out at Lisbon, the command of which was at first given to Cabral, but was afterwards transferred

to da Gama, who received the title admiral of India (January 1502). A few weeks later the fleet sailed, and on reaching Calicut da Gama immediately bombarded the town, treating its inhabitants with a savagery too horrible to describe. From Calicut he proceeded in November to Cochin, "doing all the harm he could on the way to all that he found at sea," and having made favorable trading terms with it and with other towns on the coast, he returned to Lisbon in September 1503, with richly laden ships. He and his captains were welcomed with great rejoicings and he received additional privileges and revenues.

Soon after his return da Gama retired to his residence in Evora, possibly from pique at not obtaining so high rewards as he expected, but more probably in order to enjoy the wealth and position which he had acquired; for he was now one of the richest men in the kingdom. He had married, probably in 1500, a lady of good family, named Catherina de Ataide, by whom he had six sons. According to Correa, he continued to advise King Emanuel the First on matters connected with India and maritime policy up to 1505, and there are extant twelve documents dated 1507-1522 which prove that he continued to enjoy the royal favor. The most important of these is a grant dated December 1519 by which Vasco da Gama was created count of Vidigueira, with the extraordinary privileges of civil and criminal jurisdiction and ecclesiastical patronage. During this time the Portuguese

conquests increased in the East, and were presided over by successive viceroys. The fifth of these was so unfortunate that da Gama was recalled from his seclusion by Emanuel's successor, Joao the Third, and nominated viceroy of India, an honor which in April 1524 he left Lisbon to assume. Arriving at Goa during September of the same year, he immediately set himself to correct with vigor the many abuses which had crept in under the rule of his predecessors. He was not destined, however, to prosecute far the reforms he had inaugurated, for, on the Christmas-eve following his arrival, he died at Cochin after a short illness, and was buried in the Franciscan monastery there. In 1538 his body was conveyed to Portugal and entombed in the town of Vidigueira. In 1880 what were supposed on insufficient evidence to have been his remains were transferred to the church of Saint Maria de Belem. His voyage had the immediate result of enriching Portugal, and raising her to one of the foremost places among the nations of Europe, and eventually the far greater one of bringing to pass the colonization of the East by opening its commerce to the Western world.