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978-1-108-01296-6 - A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama, 1497-1499

Edited by E. G. Ravenstein

Excerpt

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A JOURNAL
OF THE FIRST
VOYAGE OF VASCO DA GAMA
IN 1497-99.

[Words and Dates not in the MS. have been placed within square brackets.]



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.¹

[Lisbon to the Cape Verde Islands].

We left Restello² on Saturday, July 8, 1497. May God our Lord permit us to accomplish this voyage in his service. Amen!

¹ These vessels, as appears in the course of the Journal, were the *S. Gabriel* (flag-ship), the *S. Raphael* (Paulo da Gama), the *Berrio* (Nicolau Coelho), and a store-ship (Gonçalo Nunes). The author served on board the *S. Raphael*. See Introduction.

² In the suburb of Restello, four miles below the Arsenal of Lisbon,

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On the following Saturday [July 15] we sighted the Canaries, and in the night passed to the lee of Lançarote. During the following night, at break of day [July 16] we made the Terra Alta, where we fished for a couple of hours, and in the evening, at dusk, we were off the Rio do Ouro.¹

The fog² during the night grew so dense that Paulo da Gama lost sight of the captain-major, and when day broke [July 17] we saw neither him nor the other vessels. We therefore made sail for the Cape Verde islands, as we had been instructed to do in case of becoming separated.

On the following Saturday, [July 22], at break of day, we sighted the Ilha do Sal,³ and an hour afterwards discovered three vessels, which turned out to be the store-ship, and the vessels commanded by Nicolau Coelho and Bartholameu Diz [Dias], the last of whom sailed in our company as far as the Mine.⁴ They, too, had lost sight of

stood a chapel or *ermida*, which had been built by Henry the Navigator for the use of mariners. In this chapel Vasco da Gama and his companions spent the night previous to their departure in prayer. After his victorious return, D. Manuel founded on its site the magnificent monastery of Our Lady of Bethlehem or Belem.

¹ The forbidding line of low cliffs, extending for 35 miles from Leven Head to Elbow Point, in lat. 24° N., was known to the Portuguese of the time as *terra alta* (see D. Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, p. 40). The Rio do Ouro or River of Gold is a basin, extending about 20 miles inland and four miles wide at its mouth. No river flows into it. The real "River of Gold" is the Senegal or the Upper Niger.

² Castanheda attributes the separation of the vessels to the fog and a storm.

³ At the southern extremity of Ilha do Sal, in lat. 16° 31' N., is the *Porto de Santa Maria*.

⁴ S. Jorge da Mina, the famous fort built on the Gold Coast in 1482, by Diogo d'Azambuja, one of whose captains had been the very Bartholomew Dias who five years afterwards doubled the Cape, and who now returned to the *Mine*, having been made its captain, in recognition of his great services. (See L. Cordeira, *Diogo d'Azambuja*, Lisbon, 1890, and Barros, edition of 1778, to. I, part I, p. 271.)

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ACROSS THE SOUTHERN ATLANTIC.

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the captain-major. Having joined company we pursued our route, but the wind fell, and we were becalmed until Wednesday [July 26]. At ten o'clock on that day we sighted the captain-major, about five leagues ahead of us, and having got speech with him in the evening we gave expression to our joy by many times firing off our bombard¹ and sounding the trumpets.

The day after this, a Thursday [July 27], we arrived at the island of Santiago [São Thiago],² and joyfully anchored in the bay of Santa Maria, where we took on board meat, water and wood, and did the much-needed repairs to our yards.

[*Across the Southern Atlantic.*]

On Thursday, August 3, we left in an easterly direction. On August 18,³ when about 200 leagues from Santiago, going south, the captain-major's main yard broke, and we lay to under foresail and lower mainsail for two days and a night. On the 22nd of the same month, when going

¹ Bombardas, originally catapults, subsequently any piece of ordnance from which stone balls were thrown. In the north of Europe the term was restricted to mortars. Gama, however, carried breech-loading guns, with movable *cameras* or chambers. (See Staniey's *Vasco da Gama*, p. 226, *note* and *Introduction*.)

² São Thiago, the largest of the Cape Verde Islands. The Porto da Praia, within which lies the Island of Santa Maria (14° 50' N.), is no doubt the bay referred to in the text.

³ This date, August 18th, is obviously wrong. Deducting the delay of two days, Vasco da Gama spent 95 days on his passage from São Thiago to the Bay of St. Helena, the distance being about 1,170 leagues (4,290 miles), his daily progress amounted to 12 leagues or 45 miles. If the dates in the text were correct, he would have made 12½ leagues daily up to August 18th, and between that date and the 22nd (allowing for the delay) at least 300 leagues (1,010 miles), which is quite impossible. It is evident that the second date is wrong, and instead of "the same month", we ought perhaps to read "October". In that case the daily progress, up to October 22nd, would have averaged 10 leagues (34 miles). Thence, to St. Helena Bay, a distance

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S. by W., we saw many birds resembling herons.¹ On the approach of night they flew vigorously to the S.S.E., as if making for the land.² On the same day, being then quite 800 leagues out at sea [*i.e.*, reckoning from S. Thiago], we saw a whale.

On Friday, October 27, the eve of St. Simon and Jude, we saw many whales, as also quoquas³ and seals.⁴

On Wednesday, November 1, the day of All Saints, we perceived many indications of the neighbourhood of land, including gulf-weed,⁵ which grows along the coast.

of 370 leagues accomplished in 16 days, the daily progress would have averaged nearly 23 leagues (78 miles). Of course these are merely rough approximations, as the course taken by Vasco da Gama and the incidents of this memorable passage are not known to us. We may mention that modern sailing vessels going from S. Thiago by way of Sierra Leone and Ascension to the Cape, a distance of 5,410 miles, occupy on an average $49\frac{1}{2}$ days on the passage, making thus 110 miles daily (58 in crossing from Sierra Leone to Ascension). A ship going direct (3,770 miles) has performed the passage in 41 days, thus averaging 92 daily. (See Admiral Fitzroy's "Passage Tables" in the *Meteorological Papers* published by the Admiralty in 1858.)

¹ The MS. has *Garçôes*, a word not to be found in the dictionary, but evidently an augmentative of *garça*, a heron. Pimental, in his *Arte de Navegar*, mentions large birds with dark wings and white bodies as being met with a hundred leagues to the west of the Cape of Good Hope, which are known as *Gaivotões*.—KOPKE.

The Gaivota, or gull, however, in no respect resembles a heron.

² That is, towards Africa, Gama being at that time considerably to the north of Walvisch Bay.

³ Kopke supposes that we should read *phoca* instead of *quoqua*, but this is not very likely, as *lobo marinho* is employed throughout the *Rutter* to describe the *phocæ* or seals. Among the animals which these early navigators must have met with, but which are not mentioned, are porpoises (*peixe de porco*) and dolphins (*doiradas* or gilt-heads).

⁴ *Lobo marinho*, sea-wolf, a term vaguely applied to all species of seals, as also to the sea-elephant, has been translated throughout as *seal*.

⁵ *Golfão*, *i.e.*, *Zostera nana*, which is met with along the coast of South-Western Africa.

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THE BAY OF ST. HELENA.

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On Saturday, the 4th of the same month, a couple of hours before break of day, we had soundings in 110 fathoms,¹ and at nine o'clock we sighted the land.² We then drew near to each other, and having put on our gala clothes, we saluted the captain-major by firing our bombards, and dressed the ships with flags and standards. In the course of the day we tacked so as to come close to the land, but as we failed to identify it,³ we again stood out to sea.

[*The Bay of St. Helena.*]

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 sent Pero d'Alenquer⁴ 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

¹ A Portuguese fathom, or *braça*, is equal to 5.76 feet 10 inches.

² This was considerably to the north of St. Helena Bay, which was only reached three days later.

³ A reference, no doubt, to Pero d'Alenquer, Vasco da Gama's pilot, who had been with B. Dias during his memorable voyage round the Cape, as had probably others of this armada.

⁴ Castanheda and Goes state that Nicolau Coelho was sent to take the soundings. It is, however, much more probable that this duty was intrusted to Pero d'Alenquer, who had already doubled the Cape with Bartholomew Dias, and had touched at several points in its vicinity.—КОРКЕ.

I cannot see how his having been with Dias can have conferred any very special qualification for taking soundings in a bay which Pero d'Alenquer had never seen before. On subsequent occasions Coelho seems to have been employed repeatedly upon this duty.

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leagues to the S.E. of the anchorage. It comes from the interior (sertão), is about a stone's throw across at the mouth, and from two to three fathoms in depth at all states of the tide.¹

The inhabitants of this country are tawny-coloured.² 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.³ They are armed with poles of olive wood to which a horn, browned in the fire, is attached.⁴ 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

¹ Now called Berg River. —KOPKE.

² *Baço*, a vague term, meaning also brown or blackish.

³ Castanheda, in his first edition (1551), adopted this statement, but subsequently suppressed it. D. Jeronimo Osorio, Bishop of Silves, in *De rebus Emanuelis*, has “pudenta ligneis vaginis includunt.—KOPKE.

The use of such a sheath is universal among the Bantu tribes of Southern Africa, but seems now to be more honoured in the breach than the observance among the Hottentots, here spoken of. John of Empoli, who went to India with Afonso de Albuquerque (*Ramusio*, i), observed such a sheath made of leather with the hair on, among the Hottentots of the Bay of S. Blas. Leguat (Hakluyt Society's edition, 1891, p. 288) found it still in use in 1698.

⁴ The shafts of their assegais are made of assegai- or lance-wood (*Curtisea faginda*), and not of olive-wood, and even in John of Empoli's time had iron blades. Their spears for spearing fish, on the other hand, are tipped with the straight horn of the gemsbuck.

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HOTTENTOT VISITORS.

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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.¹

On the following day [November 10] fourteen or fifteen natives came to where our ships 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 çeitils² 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 fox-tails attached to a handle, with which they fanned their faces. I also acquired for one çeitil 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 Fernão 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

¹ We learn from Barros that Vasco da Gama landed for the purpose of observing the latitude. The captive was handed over to two ship's boys, one of whom was a negro, with orders to treat him well.

² *Çeitil*, a copper coin, worth about one-third of a farthing.

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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 Fernão 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 Fernão 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 Fernão Velloso¹ as we did, and when we endeavoured 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 wood, we set sail. At that time we did not know how far we might be abaft the Cape

¹ We gather from Barros and Goes that Fernão Velloso was granted the desired permission at the intercession of Paulo da Gama. When Vasco da Gama returned to his vessel, Coelho and some of the crew were left behind, collecting wood and lobsters. Paulo amused himself by harpooning a whale, which nearly cost him dearly, for the whale dived, and would have capsized the boat had not the water been shallow. In the afternoon, when Coelho and his people were returning to the vessels, Velloso was observed to run down a hill. Vasco da Gama, ever observant, saw this from his ship, and at once ordered Coelho back, entering himself a boat to join him. Some delay or misunderstanding occurred, the "negroes" threw stones and discharged arrows, and several men were wounded, including the captain-major and Gonçalo Alvarez. For further particulars see Stanley's *Vasco da Gama*, p. 46.

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of Good Hope. Pero d'Alenquer thought the distance about thirty leagues,¹ 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 the 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 the 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.²

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.³

[*The Bay of São Braz*].⁴

Late on Saturday, November 25, the day of St. Catherine's, we entered the bay (angra) of Sam Brás,

¹ The distance is 33 leagues.

² Castanheda says that the Cape was doubled on "Wednesday, November 20", but Wednesday was the 22nd. Barros says "Tuesday, 20th", but Tuesday was the 21st. Compare Stanley's *Vasco da Gama*, p. 48.

³ The actual dimensions of False Bay are about 5 by 5 leagues. The bay is called "Golfo Antº delle Serre" on the map of Henricus Martellus Germanus, 1489, which illustrates the voyage of B. Dias (Add. MS. 15760, Brit. Mus.).

⁴ This is without the shadow of a doubt Mossel Bay (see plan on map II). It is also most probably the Bahia de los Vaqueiros of B. Dias, who certainly was here [see below]. Barros refers to it as

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10 IN THE BAY OF S. BRAZ.

where we remained for thirteen days, for there we broke up our store-ship and transferred her contents to the other vessels.¹

On Friday [December 1], whilst still in the bay of Sam Brás, about ninety men resembling those we had met at St. Helena Bay made their appearance. Some of them walked along the beach, whilst others remained upon the hills. All, or most of us, were at the time in the captain-major's vessel. As soon as we saw them we launched and armed the boats, and started for the land. When close to the shore the captain-major threw them little round bells, which they picked up. They even ventured to approach us, and took some of these bells from the captain-major's hand. This surprised us greatly, for when Bartholomeu Dias² was here the natives fled without taking any of the objects which he offered them. Nay, on one occasion, when Dias was taking in water, close to the beach, they sought to prevent him, and when they pelted him with stones, from a hill, he killed one of them with the arrow of a cross-bow. It appeared to us that they did not fly on this occasion, because they had heard from the people at the bay of St. Helena (only sixty leagues distant by sea)³ that there was no harm in us, and that we even gave away things which were ours.

The captain-major did not land at this spot, because there was much bush, but proceeded to an open part of the beach, when he made signs to the negroes to approach. This they did. The captain-major and the other cap-

being *now* called S. Braz. Its original name had thus been abandoned in favour of that bestowed by Vasco da Gama.

¹ The thirteen days are counted from November 25 to December 7, both these days being counted. According to Castanheda (I, p. 12), the store-ship was burnt.

² See note 4, p. 9.

³ The distance by sea is over 90 leagues, that by land 64. "By sea" is probably a slip of the pen.