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VASCO DA GAMA

c. 1460 - 1524

Vasco da Gama was the Portuguese explorer who discovered the direct sea route from Europe to India by sailing around Africa.

The Portuguese had been searching for such a route since the days of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460). In 1488, a Portuguese expedition headed by Bartolomeu Dias had reached and rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa and returned to Portugal. With this achievement, the Portuguese king understood that the long quest to find a sea route to the Indies was now near success. However, there were various delays, and it was not until 1497 that the expedition to the Indies actually set forth. To head the expedition, the king selected Vasco da Gama, a minor aristocrat who had been born in about 1460, in Sines, Portugal.

Da Gama set out on July 8, 1497, with four ships under his command and a total crew of 170 men, including interpreters who could speak Arabic. The expedition first proceeded to the Cape Verde Islands. Then, rather than following the coastline of Africa as Dias had done, da Gama sailed almost due south, far out into the Atlantic Ocean. He proceeded south for a long way, and then turned east to reach the Cape of Good Hope. It was a well-chosen route, faster than following the coast down, but it required much more daring and navigational skill. Because of the route he had chosen, da Gama's ships were out of sight of land for an astonishing ninety-three days—more than two and one-half times as long as Columbus's ships had been!

Da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope on November 22, and then sailed up the east coast of Africa. On the way north, he stopped at a few cities under Moslem control, including Mombasa and Malindi in present-day Kenya. In Malindi, he picked up an Indian pilot who guided him on a twenty-three-day run across the Arabian Sea to India. On May 20, 1498, about ten months after his departure from Portugal, da Gama arrived at Calicut, the most important trade center of southern India. The Hindu ruler of Calicut, the Zamorin, at first welcomed da Gama. However, the Zamorin was soon disappointed by the cheap goods that da Gama offered him as gifts. Combined with the hostility of the Moslem merchants who had previously dominated the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, this prevented da Gama from concluding a trade treaty with the Zamorin. Still, when he left Calicut in August, da Gama had a fine cargo of spices on board to show to his sovereign, as well as a number of Indians.

The trip back home proved more difficult than the voyage out. It took about three months to get across the Arabian Sea, and many of the crew died of scurvy. Ultimately, only two ships got back safely: the first reached Portugal on July 10, 1499; da Gama's own ship arrived two months later. Only fifty-five members of the crew—less than one third of those who started out—had survived the round-trip voyage. Nevertheless, when da Gama returned to Lisbon, on September 9, 1499, both he and the king correctly understood that his two-year voyage had been a tremendous success.

Six months later, the Portuguese king dispatched a follow-up expedition under the command of Pedro Alvares Cabral. Cabral duly reached India, discovering Brazil en route (though some historians believe that other Portuguese explorers may have discovered it much earlier), and returned to Portugal with a large quantity of spices. But some of Cabral's men had been killed in Calicut, so in 1502, Vasco da Gama was sent back there on a punitive mission, heading a fleet of twenty ships.

Da Gama's behavior on this expedition was utterly ruthless.

Off the Indian Coast, he seized a passing Arab ship, and after removing its cargo but not its passengers, burnt the ship at sea. All of those on board—several hundred people, including many women and children—perished. When he arrived at Calicut, da Gama imperiously demanded that the Zamorin banish all Moslems from the port. When the Zamorin hesitated, da Gama seized, killed, and dismembered thirty-eight Hindu fishermen, and then bombarded the port. Enraged but helpless, the Zamorin granted da Gama's demands. On his way back home, da Gama established some Portuguese colonies in East Africa.

For those deeds, he was richly rewarded by the King of Portugal, who awarded him titles and granted him estates, pensions, and other financial rewards. Da Gama did not return to India until 1524, when a new Portuguese king appointed him viceroy. A few months after his arrival in India, he fell ill, and he died there in December 1524. He was eventually reburied near Lisbon. Da Gama was married and had seven children.

The basic significance of Vasco da Gama's voyage is that he opened a direct sea route from Europe to India and the Far East, the effect of which was felt by many countries.

In the short run, the greatest impact was upon Portugal. Through control of the new trade route to the East, this formerly poor country on the outskirts of the civilized world soon became one of the richest countries in Europe. The Portuguese rapidly built up a substantial colonial empire around the Indian Ocean. They had outposts in India, in Indonesia, on Madagascar, on the east coast of Africa, and elsewhere. This, of course, was in addition to their holdings in Brazil and to their colonial empire in west Africa, which they had begun to develop even before da Gama's voyages. The Portuguese succeeded in retaining several of these colonies until the last half of the twentieth century.

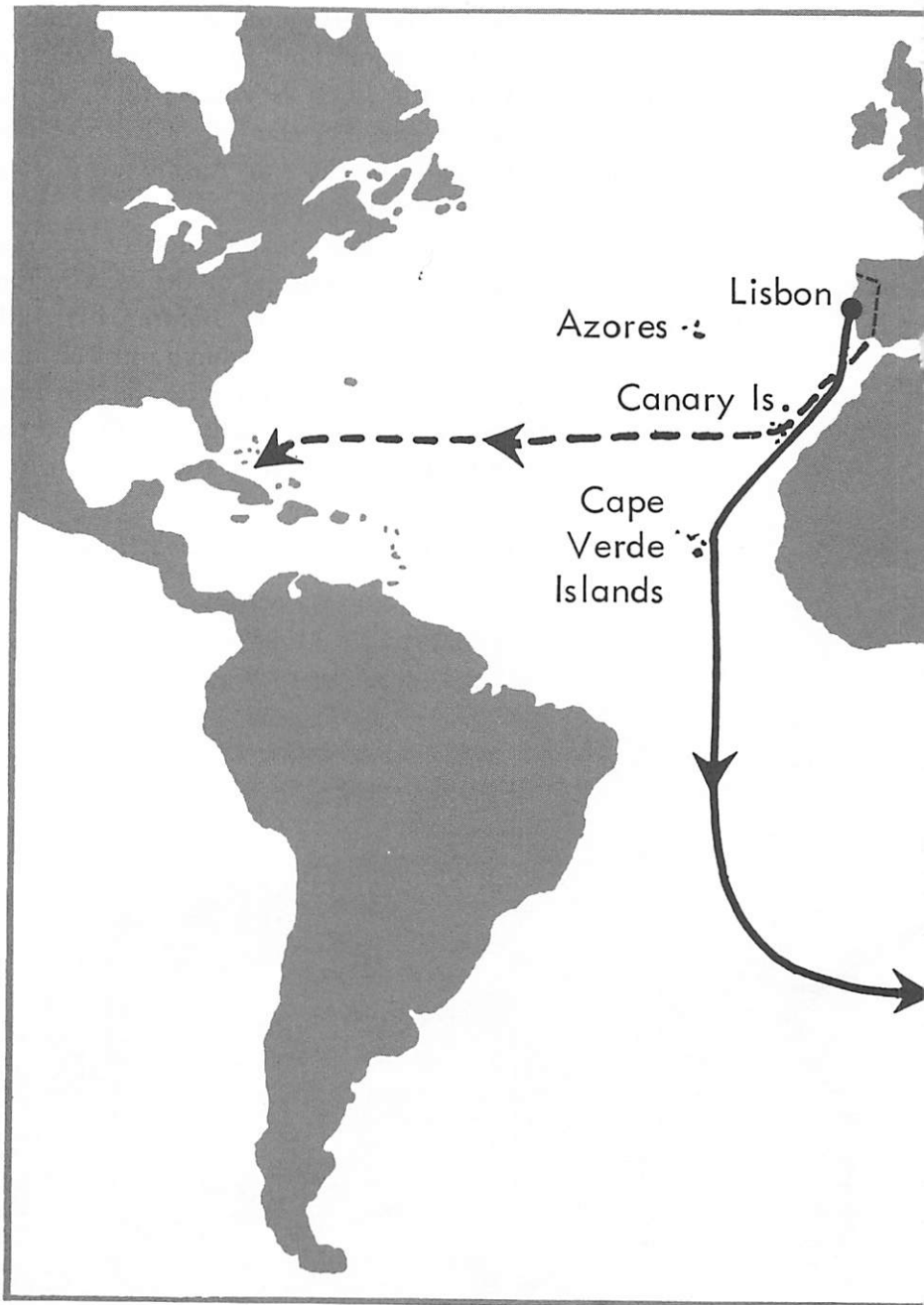
Vasco da Gama's opening of a new trade route to India was a severe setback to the Moslem traders that had formerly controlled the trade routes of the Indian Ocean. Those traders were soon thoroughly defeated and displaced by the Portuguese. Furthermore, the overland trade routes from India into Europe

fell into disuse, because the Portuguese sea route around Africa was cheaper. This was injurious both to the Ottoman Turks and to the Italian trading cities (such as Venice) that had formerly controlled the eastern trade. For the rest of Europe, however, this meant that goods from the Far East were a good deal cheaper than they had been previously.

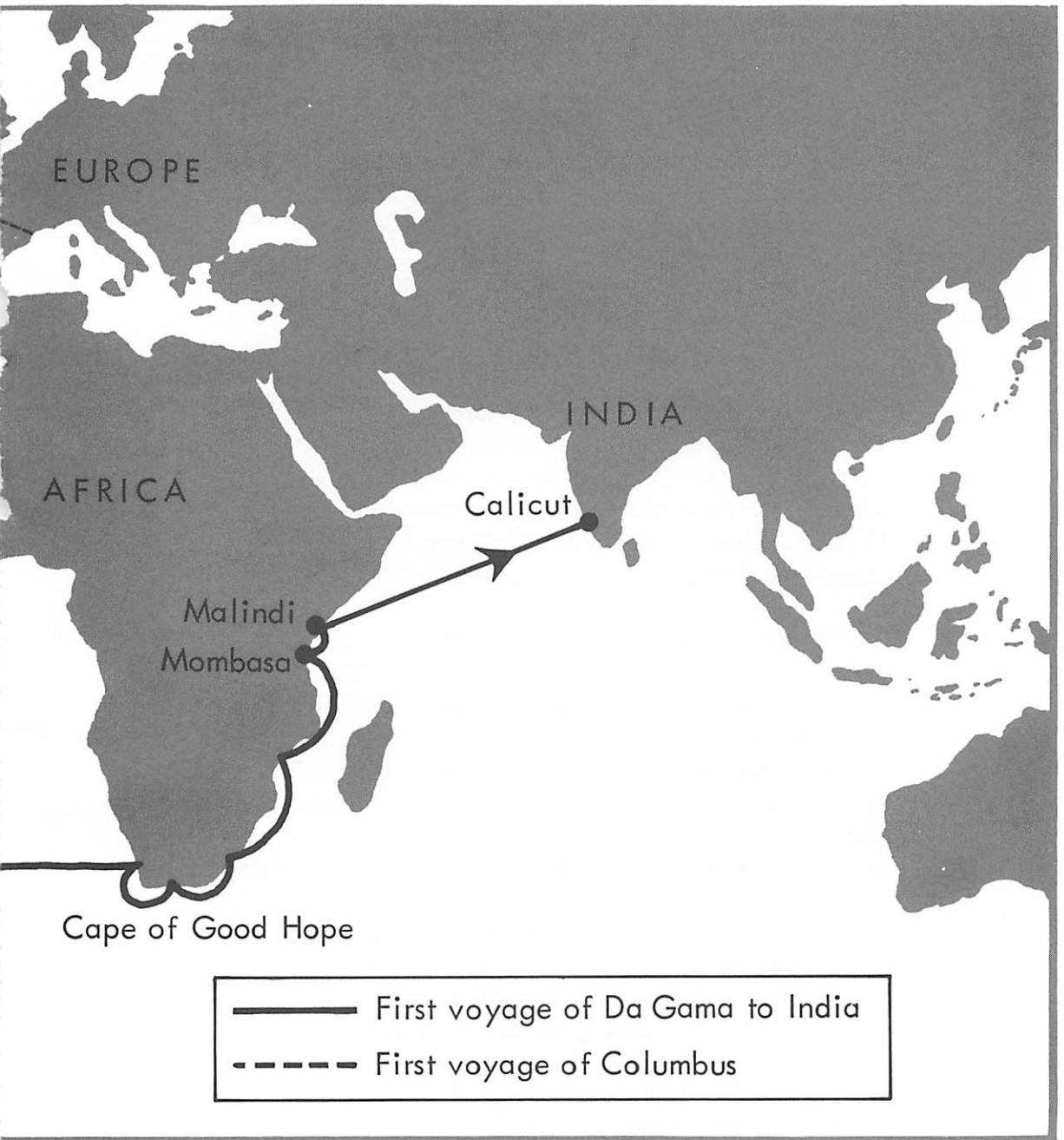
Ultimately, however, the greatest impact of Vasco da Gama's voyage was not upon Europe or the Middle East, but rather upon India and Southeast Asia. Before 1498, India had been isolated from Europe. Indeed, through most of history India had been a fairly self-contained unit, with the only important foreign influences coming from the northwest. Da Gama's voyage, however, brought India into direct contact with European

Vasco da Gama's ship rounds the Cape of Good Hope.





*The voyages of
Vasco da Gama
and Columbus.*



civilization via the sea routes. The influence and power of the Europeans grew steadily stronger in India, until by the last half of the nineteenth century, the entire subcontinent was subject to the British crown. (It might be remarked that this was the only time in history that all of India was united under a single ruler.) As for Indonesia, it fell first under European influence, and then under complete European control. Only in the mid-twentieth century did these areas regain autonomy.

The obvious person with whom to compare Vasco da Gama is Christopher Columbus. In some ways, the comparison favors da Gama. His voyage, for example, was a far more impressive achievement. It was very much longer than Columbus's in both distance and duration—more than three times as long, in fact! It required far better navigation. (Columbus, no matter how far off course he went, could hardly have missed the New World, whereas da Gama could easily have missed the Cape of Good Hope and gotten lost in the Indian Ocean.) Furthermore, unlike Columbus, da Gama succeeded in reaching his original destination.

It might be argued, of course, that Vasco da Gama did not discover a new world, but merely made contact between the Europeans and a region already populated. The same, however, is true of Columbus.

Columbus's voyages ultimately had a tremendous impact upon the civilizations pre-existing in the western hemisphere; da Gama's voyage ultimately resulted in a transformation of the civilizations of India and Indonesia. In judging the relative importance of Columbus and da Gama, it should be remembered that, although North and South America are each enormously larger in area than India, India has a larger population than all the countries in the Western Hemisphere combined!

Nevertheless, it seems plain that Columbus was vastly more influential than Vasco da Gama. In the first place, the voyage around Africa to India was *not* prompted by any suggestion of Vasco da Gama's. The Portuguese king had decided to send such an expedition long before he chose Vasco da Gama to head it.

Columbus's expedition, however, had been instigated by Columbus himself, and it was his persuasiveness that induced Queen Isabella to finance it. Had it not been for Columbus, the New World (though it surely would have been discovered eventually) might have been discovered substantially later, and by a different European country. On the other hand, had Vasco da Gama not lived, the Portuguese king would simply have selected another man to head the expedition. Even if that man was incompetent and failed, the Portuguese would surely not have abandoned their long effort to find a direct route to India when it seemed so near success. Moreover, given the existing set of Portuguese bases along the west coast of Africa, there was little chance that another European nation would have been able to reach India first.

In the second place, European influence on India and the Far East was not nearly as overwhelming as European influence on the Western Hemisphere. The civilization of India was eventually vastly modified by its contact with the West. However, within a few decades of Columbus's voyage the major civilizations of the New World were virtually destroyed. Nor is there any parallel in India to the creation of the United States of America in the Western Hemisphere.

Just as one cannot credit (or blame) Christopher Columbus for all the events that have since occurred in the Western Hemisphere, so one cannot credit da Gama with all the results of direct European contact with the East. Vasco da Gama forms but one link in a long chain that includes: Henry the Navigator; a whole set of Portuguese captains who explored the west coast of Africa; Bartolomeu Dias; da Gama himself; his immediate successors (such as Francisco de Almeida and Alfonso de Albuquerque); and many other men. I feel that Vasco da Gama was easily the most important single link in that chain; however, he does not stand out nearly as much as does Columbus in the corresponding chain of persons involved in the Europeanization of the Western Hemisphere, and it is principally for that reason that he has been ranked so far below Columbus.