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The Career And Legend Of Vasco Da Gama



Synopsis

Vasco da Gama (?1469-1524) is well known as one of a generation of discoverers, along with Magellan, Cabral, and Columbus. Yet little is known about his life, or about the context within which he 'discovered' the all-sea route to India in 1497-99. This book, based on a mass of published and unpublished sources in Portuguese and other languages, delineates Gama's career and social context, focusing on the delicate balance between 'career' and 'legend'. The book addresses broad questions of myth-building and nationalism, while never losing sight of Gama himself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'... exhaustively documented, and dense with information.' The Times Literary Supplement
'Subrahmanyam is an exemplary scholar. His knowledge of the subject is unsurpassed.' The Sunday Times
'... a book notable as much for its formidable scholarship as for the boldness and breadth of its conception'. Cultura
'... an outstanding biography ... which makes it easy to follow Vasco Da Gama's career'. Business Standard

A startling new interpretation of the myth and the reality of the life of one of the great figures of the 'Age of Discoverers'.

Vasco da Gama is one of the great heroes of the Portuguese Age of Exploration. This book is a well written and very thorough look at his career and exploits, particularly the impact of political maneuvering within the Portuguese nobility at the time. The author has translated and cited many

historic Portuguese writings. As with many modern histories, the myth and legend are taken down a notch, and da Gama the man - warts and all - is revealed. Nonetheless da Gama is all the more interesting as a flawed human character. My only disappointment with the book is that the author seemed to have missed an opportunity to delve more deeply into the storytelling aspect of da Gama's voyages, especially his first journey to India. The account of the voyages at times seem rather dry, lacking a narrative voice to pull the reader in and recreate what it must have been like as the Portuguese encountered various civilizations for the first time. But it was only because the author does such a thorough job of detailing the events of the voyages that I was left wanting to hear a bit more ... All in all a very well researched and documented study of da Gama, which has served as a good starting point for learning more about this fascinating character.

In times wherein we debate kinks and spikes in a flat world, the relevance of the great explorers of the 15th century in contributing to this phase is a moot point. What could lend a boost to any of these debates is this great book on one of the explorers viz. Vasco Da Gama by Sanjay Subrahmanyam. The book is infinitely detailed, sometimes tiresomely so but to a patient reader the facts form a coherent pattern in a tapestry checkered by messianic zeal and greed. Vasco Da Gama came from a reasonably humble beginning, born to a family of noblemen of an average standing. Though current history and the significance of events have allowed poets and artists to use broad strokes to paint him as an intrepid adventurer, this can only be a partial truth. Vasco Da Gama was a creation of the times albeit a smart and brave one. 15th century Portugal displays an enormous amount of politicking. The power of the royalty is undermined or augmented based on the support of military orders which are leftovers of the crusades, notably one of them viz. The Order of Christ largely being a makeover of the Templars who may have found refuge in Portugal. The king Dom Joao 2, under severe competitive pressure from neighboring Spain which could boast of greater maritime success (both financially and nominally), discovers an excellent device for his ambitions in Vasco Da Gama who is entrusted with the voyage to India. The purpose being twofold - undermine the power of the Moors who till now have dominated the spice trade, and sound the death knell on Islam by allying with the mythical Prestor John who controls an large army of willing Christians. May 1498 sees Vasco Da Gama sighting land in Kerala, and the first Portuguese land in India. The spice trade is portrayed to be fairly open controlled largely by the Samudri Zamorin of Calicut. What follows is a tale of greed and power-play with the Portuguese based on their sheer might on the seas being able to control a large share of the spice trade. Religious zeal takes a back-seat to sheer greed and though the spice trade is largely won its at a fairly large cost to the locals. Vasco goes

back to a sinecure under a new king Dom Manuel and over a period of time with political upheaval taking a toll on his image and standing, he is "convinced" to become the viceroy of India where he finally is put to rest. So the questions linger, was the discovery of the sea route to India an enabler for a more global society? From a western perspective, maybe yes, but for the largely peaceful trade routes that existed in the Indian ocean the dark ages had just begun

Subrahmanyam's book on Vasco de Gama opens like a powerful opera with a nineteenth century overture by Mayerbeeer on one of the heroes of European exploration. One instantly remembers Said's use of Aida to illustrate his point about culture and imperialism, also at the heart of this book . It is a theoretically sophisticated book informed by Foucault and Said, who nevertheless are never in the foreground to cloud the real issues. There is no jargon to spoil the sophistication, yet the discourse about de Gama is slowly deconstructed as it unfolds as a biography, a portrait, a eulogy , an opera and a heroic journey. It is no longer a European view of de Gama, but a more global one, where Middle Eastern and Indian merchants long absent on the pages written in Europe play their role, at long last. It looks at the Portuguese arrival in India as a real historical event as opposed to leaving it a hymn to exploration and European imperialism. The book examines the construction of the Portuguese heroic myth of de Gama often represented as a Christ like figure, followed by 12 apostles, a Christian hero who has left holy relics. It might infuriate some readers, but it will inform many others about a major chapter of history which has remained, as the book title suggests a legend. A tour de force, and a must read for serious historians. The best book I have read in a long time, and a real pleasure to read.

While the book certainly merits praise for its extensive research, one cannot help but see that the author takes every opportunity to throw pot shots at the Portuguese, failing in the process to highlight the merit that this trip had to the whole world. A more objective, less emotional approach would have greatly improved your work. Jos   Dores, Toronto, Canada 5 September 1998

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