

Bringing firepower, commerce and the faith to Asia

James Flanigan | Jan. 4, 2012

HOLY WAR: HOW VASCO DA GAMA'S EPIC VOYAGES TURNED THE TIDE IN A CENTURIES-OLD CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

By Nigel Cliff

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God and Mammon, medieval power plays, and the role of sheer firepower in carrying the faith to Asia in the 15th century. *Holy War* is a great tale. There's more: the lure of gold and spices, and royal privilege -- vast lands and manor houses. Far more: the role of the papacy in promoting those voyages.

Nigel Cliff, a journalist and historian, writes essentially of the voyage of Vasco da Gama, who sailed for Portugal in 1497, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and crossed the Indian Ocean to open Asia once again to Christianity and European commerce.



But Cliff sets his story in a larger context of the rivalry of Christianity and Islam,

which began in 714 and persisted through centuries of crusades launched by popes and fought by European kings and nobles against Saracens, Mongols, Turks and other Muslim powers.

Ferocious as they were, those battles failed almost totally to win Christian access to Jerusalem and/or the fabled riches of India and China.

It could have been different, Cliff argues, offering as a contrast to holy war the story of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who lived in Sicily and secured Christian access to Jerusalem in 1229 by simply leasing it from the reigning Muslim sultan. The papacy was unimpressed of course; it had already excommunicated Frederick for not volunteering to crusade.

However, the tide turned for Europe after the Black Death in the 1300s reduced populations everywhere. Then Moorish rule retreated before new monarchies in Spain and Portugal, which were commissioned by the papacy to seek sea routes to Asia in order to spread the faith, destroy Muslims and gain access for trade.

Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain sent Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic but Manuel I of Portugal, believing that "the Holy Spirit had inspired him to usher in a new global age of Christianity," sent Vasco da Gama to lead a mission of three ships to "reach India, oust Islam and entrench Portugal as an Eastern power."

Thus, a third of the way into the book we meet da Gama, a courtier 28 years of age, and begin a rollicking tale of adventure and discovery. The Portuguese crews sailed south along the coast of Africa, visited and sometimes fought with people on the shore, and survived scurvy and other diseases. Da Gama himself caught an arrow in the leg and dressed his wound with a poultice of urine, olive oil and a theriac of supposedly helpful ingredients mixed with honey.

Six months after leaving Lisbon, the Portuguese sailed around the tip of Africa and reached Mozambique on the eastern coast. There they found Muslim Arab ships laden with gold and silver, cloves, pepper and ginger. "Here was the first evidence of the fabled riches of the East," writes Cliff -- "disturbing, of course, to discover that Muslims controlled the entire Swahili Coast." The Portuguese sailed up that coast beyond what is now Kenya and, with the aid of a helpful Sultan, caught the monsoon wind and crossed the Indian Ocean to Calicut on India's southwestern tip.

There they found Hindus whom they thought were Christian because they adorned their temple walls with human figures -- "strange looking saints," they assumed. In other ways they discovered how ignorant of the wide world Europeans were. Muslim merchants, who had developed trade between the Middle East and India, laughed at da Gama and his men when they offered trinkets and crude fabrics as gifts.

The Calicut ruler more or less welcomed the Europeans -- and the sailors appreciated the local women who went blissfully about naked from the waist up and had the custom of taking several "visiting husbands." However, vipers lurked in this paradise, too. Muslim merchants plotted against the Portuguese, took some of da Gama's men captive and tried to raid their vessels. But that proved a fatal mistake. Portuguese men and arms were far more powerful than Muslim fighters or local weaponry.

"For centuries trade of the Indian Ocean had rarely been ruffled by conflict," the author notes, whereas "Portugal, like all European nations, had been waging war at sea for generations." Portuguese forces won battles and slaughtered thousands of Muslims under da Gama, and they continued to win under commanders Pedro Cabral and Alfonso de Albuquerque as Portugal built an empire in Asia centered on the coastal Indian state of Goa.

Da Gama returned to Portugal a hero in 1499 and subsequently became admiral of India, where he died at age 55 in 1524. His voyages had opened a new era of European economic and military supremacy. Before 1500, India and China had the largest economies on Earth. After Portugal and Spain opened colonies in Asia, Christianity was spread by such missionaries as Francis Xavier. But commerce grew more powerfully. Holland and Great Britain built even greater empires that lasted until the mid-20th century.

Nonetheless, faith should not be underestimated. Without it, would Portugal's doughty seamen have risked lives and endured suffering? It might be a question with relevance today as China and India's economies rise again and books such as *Holy War* look at Arab and European sailors who used the monsoon winds and their potential to connect two worlds and the papacy saw the need -- and opportunity -- to propagate the good news along with the commerce.

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