

THE BEGINNINGS OF OUR GLOBAL AGE: EUROPE, AFRICA, AND ASIA

Primary Source

The goal of the first European explorers was not really to discover new lands. They wanted to reach India, where they hoped to buy and trade for luxury goods, such as spices, precious metals, and silks. In 1498, explorer Vasco da Gama was captain of the ship that brought the first Portuguese to India. In this excerpt, you will read how they were welcomed and what the Indian king and his Moorish, or Arab, attendants thought of the goods da Gama wanted to trade. The description is from the log of a sailor who accompanied da Gama. ♦ *As you read, think about why the various people in this excerpt acted the way they did. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Portuguese Reach India

On Tuesday, the captain got ready the following things to be sent to the king[:] twelve pieces of *lambel* [striped cloth], four scarlet hoods, six hats, four strings of coral, a case containing six wash-hand basins, a case of sugar, two casks of oil, and two of honey. And as it is the custom not to send anything to the king without the knowledge of the Moor, his [agent], and of the [governor], the captain informed them of his intention. They came, and when they saw the present they laughed at it, saying that it was not a thing to offer to a king, that the poorest merchant from Mecca, or any other part of India, gave more, and that if he wanted to make a present it should be in gold, as the king would not accept such things. When the captain heard this he grew sad, and said that he had brought no gold, that moreover, he was no merchant, but an ambassador. . . .

When the captain saw that they [the Moors] were determined not to forward his present, he said that as they would not allow him to send his present to the palace, he would go to speak to the king, and would then return to the ships. They approved of this. . . .

The king then said that he [da Gama] had told him that he came from a very rich kingdom, and yet had brought him nothing. . . .

The king then asked what kind of merchandise was to be found in his country. The captain said there was much corn, cloth, iron, bronze, and many other things. . . . The king said . . . he [da Gama] might . . . land his merchandise and sell it to his advantage. . . .

We were well aware that the Moors of the place, who were merchants from Mecca and elsewhere, and who knew us, could ill digest us [did not like us]. They had told the king that we were thieves, and that if once we navigated to his country, no more ships from Mecca . . . nor from any other port, would visit him. They added that he would [gain] no profit from this trade [with Portugal] as we had nothing to give, but would rather take away, and that thus his country would be ruined. They moreover offered rich bribes to the king to capture and kill us, so that we should not return to Portugal.

Source: *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama, 1497–1499*, ed. and trans. by E.G. Ravenstein (Hakluyt Society).

Questions to Think About

1. What error in judgment did the Portuguese make?
2. How did the Arab merchants try to keep the Portuguese out of India?
3. **Draw Inferences** What are some possible reasons why the king decided to allow the Portuguese to begin trading?
4. **Activity** Write a short play using details from this primary source. Write dialogue for the Portuguese, the Arabs, and the Indian king. Present your play to the class.