Study Questions for: G.J. Ames, Vasco da Gama: Renaissance Crusader

Overview

1) How successfully has the author proved his thesis: That Vasco da Gama’s “life reflected the rapid and significant changes that Portugal, Europe, and the world underwent during” the late-15th and early-16th centuries? (p. xii)

2) The subtitle of the book is “Renaissance Crusader,” because, writes the author, “da Gama’s life and career embodied a religious and mercantile [i.e., commercial] crusade that was unique to his country and his time.” To what degree is this premise developed and supported throughout the book? (p. xii)

3) Based on the unfolding narrative of the book, do you think da Gama, in traveling to India, was equally motivated by his search for “Christians and spices”? Or, was one more a motivation than another? (p. xiii)

4) Does the author make a convincing case for Portugal’s superior maritime technology and ship-borne artillery? Explain. (p. xiii)

5) How did da Gama use his political skills to advance the interests of his family? How important were his efforts in this home-front arena as compared to his work in navigation and trade? (p. xiii)

Chapter I

6) What were the most important ingredients that went into making Portugal the leading maritime power during the 15th century?

Chapter II

7) Note the preparation that was made for da Gama’s first voyage, including the foods and supplies stored for the crew.

8) Who was Prester John and what was his significance?

9) What was the significance of the disparity between the goods da Gama brought with him to trade (on his first voyage to India) and those goods he was given, or wanted, first along the east African coast and then in India?

Chapter III

10) What was the nature of the reception da Gama and his men received upon reaching India and what was its significance?
Chapter IV

12) What was the significance of da Gama’s first voyage (1497-99)? Compare that significance to what Columbus achieved.

13) Analyze the various reasons presented by the author to explain the King of Portugal’s aggressive follow-up of da Gama’s first voyage to India (i.e., by establishing a Portuguese presence along the east African coast and in India).

14) What role did the weather play in all the voyages discussed in the book?

15) Assess the extent to which da Gama, on his second voyage to India (1502-03), was justified in using harsh methods of attack and retaliation.

Chapter V

16) As their trading empire along the coasts of Africa and India developed in the early 16th century, why didn’t the Portuguese press for political and colonial control?

17) How do you account for the success of the Portuguese in establishing their empire inasmuch as they had relatively few ships and men and were so far from home?

Epilogue

18) How much of the transformation of Portugal during da Gama’s lifetime (from a second-rate European power to a country possessing a global empire) can be attributed to his actions and influences?