

Legacy of the Portuguese

Easter, this year, marks the 500th anniversary of the coming of the Portuguese to the East African coast. Judy Aldrick examines what lasting reminders they left behind.

With the millennium just around the corner, 1998 may not seem a year blessed with any claim to excite the imagination. But for the Portuguese, and for the town of Malindi on Kenya's north coast, 1998 has a very special significance, marking as it does the 500th anniversary of Vasco da Gama's voyage of exploration to East Africa and the Malabar Coast of India.

Indeed, the year 1498 stands out as a monumental milestone in the history of eastern Africa as it sees the arrival of the Portuguese and the beginnings of European intervention in the region.

On April 7 1498, Vasco da Gama, with four Portuguese ships, arrived off Mombasa and anchored in the outer roadsteads. He had been sailing for almost a year in his search for the 'Spice Lands' and the 'Fabulous East', where he hoped to find untold riches and, more realistically, a trade route that would undercut that of the Venetians.

Braving persistent storms in rounding the Cape of Good Hope, he had reached Mozambique in March of that year, and had then sailed on north along the East African seaboard towards Kilwa on what is now the Tanzanian coast. But he was sailing in seas hitherto unknown to Europeans and, with no charts to guide him, he overshot the entrance to Kilwa and came instead to the large port town of Mombasa.

Here, the local inhabitants were suspicious of the strangers in their unfamiliar craft and would not allow them to land, so on April 13 the Portuguese fleet moved on, reaching Malindi on Easter Day, April 15 1498. On seeing Malindi's neat houses, extending along an open beach surrounded by gardens and palm groves, the homesick sailors were reminded, we are told, of their native towns in Portugal. In Malindi, moreover, the Portuguese were given a friendly reception. Provisions and gifts were exchanged, and the dog-tired sailors were able to rest up for several days before enlisting the services of an Indian sea-pilot to take them on to Calicut, their final destination.

Vasco da Gama promised to return to Malindi on his way back to Portugal, which he did in January the following year, 1499, when he stopped over for



long enough to bury seven less fortunate members of his crew. He was also granted permission to construct, as a memorial to the success of his journey, an heraldic pillar or *padrao*, which he dedicated to the Holy Ghost. The Portuguese did not forget Malindi and were later to make it one of their principal trading bases.

So it is that there still stands, on a small promontory near the sea, close to but just to the south of Malindi, an old grey conical pillar, built of coral rock and surmounted by a cross bearing the Portuguese coat-of-arms. Known simply as the Vasco da Gama pillar, this is a visible reminder of the sailor's original voyage of discovery, and of the first point of entry for the Portuguese on the East African coast.

Otherwise, there are surprisingly few reminders of the once powerful Portuguese presence on the Kenyan coast. But of these, by far the most impressive is the Portuguese Fort at Mombasa, known as Fort Jesus. Massive and indestructible, it stands guard at the entrance to the town's old dhow harbour. The ancient structures inside, coupled with the spectacular views out from the ramparts, are such that the fort has for many years been Kenya's biggest single tourist attraction.

Fort Jesus is the finest and most complete example of a sixteenth century fortress to survive in eastern Africa. It was designed by the Goa-based Italian architect, Giovanni Batista Cairato, who held the position of chief architect for the Portuguese possessions in the East. Fort Jesus was his last assignment — and his crowning achievement. And apart from the addition in 1636 of an elliptical bastion to give extra protection to the main gate and a few other minor alterations made by the Arabs in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Fort Jesus today remains substantially as he originally planned it.

Dedicated on April 11 1593, the fort took more than three years



Vasco da Gama's pillar, near Malindi, as it appears today.

to complete. It was built for the first Portuguese Captain of Mombasa, Mateus Mendes de Vasconcelos, when he moved headquarters from Malindi, after conquering Mombasa in 1585. The site chosen was a coral ridge at the harbour's entrance, and the walls were constructed from the coral rock, with a surrounding ditch on three sides. The plan features a central court with bastions at the four corners and a rectangular gun platform facing the sea. The whole edifice covers an area of almost a hectare.

It is a model fortress in that each feature contributes significantly to the defence of its neighbouring structure. Its most striking features are the two landward bastions, which have deep re-entrant angles for maximum security and visibility. The solid coral ramparts of Fort Jesus are more than two metres thick and in places stand more than thirteen metres tall. This meant that before the advent of modern explosives the fort was virtually impregnable and could be taken only by the risky expedient of escalade.

Over the four hundred years of its eventful history, the fort has changed hands no fewer than eleven times: twice by trickery, in 1631 and 1828; twice by escalade, in 1698 and again in 1746, when there were insufficient defenders to man the walls; twice by starvation, in 1728 and 1828; once by bombardment with rockets and shells, in 1875, and four times through negotiation — in 1728, 1837, 1895 and 1963.





The imposing walls of Fort Jesus, Mombasa, viewed from the sea.

The Portuguese held the fort for more than a hundred years, before losing it in 1698 to Arabs from Oman after a protracted siege lasting almost three years. Mombasa's citizens had specifically asked the Omani Arabs to help rid them of the Portuguese, as the town was impoverished by the punitive customs duties levied by the Portuguese Captains, and by the monopolies on certain trade goods reserved for Portuguese merchants and their allies.

Following their defeat of the Portuguese, the Arabs moved into the fort and took over the Portuguese town. An Omani family called the Mazrui were appointed hereditary governors to administer the town and collect the *kharaj* or tribute money. But in 1741, when the Kingdom of Muscat and Oman was in disarray, the then governor took advantage of the situation, declaring Mombasa to be independent and ceasing to pay tribute to Oman. From 1741 to 1837 Mombasa was ruled by the Mazrui, who created an autonomous city state that stretched from Lamu, in the north, to Pemba in the south. As in Portuguese times, the Mazrui both governed and lived in the fort with their family members and supporters.

This state of affairs did not last, however. And in the nineteenth century, when Oman had sorted

out its political difficulties and was again united under a strong ruler, the Mazrui were taken to task. In 1837, after several sieges and heated battles, Mombasa was once more subjected to the ruler of Oman, for whom an administrative centre had been established in Zanzibar.

So it was that between 1837 and 1888 the town of Mombasa was ruled from Zanzibar. To begin with, responsibility for the East African coast fell directly under the Sultan of Oman, but after 1856 the Sultanate was divided up, and the East African possessions were ceded to a junior branch of the Busaidi royal family, who took the title of Sultan of Zanzibar. Mombasa in the nineteenth century was ruled by

a political appointee of the Sultan's, called a *liwali*, who resided in a house in the town, and by an *akida*, who acted as chief of police and who lived in the fort. The job of the *akida* was to maintain law and order, and to this end, he had under his command a contingent of Baluchi mercenaries, famed for their ferocious fighting qualities as soldiers, garrisoned at the Fort.

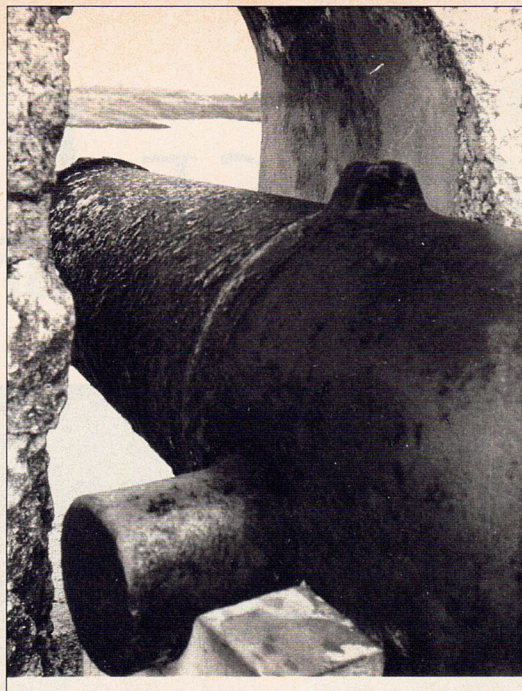
In 1875, though, the *akida* Muhammed bin Abdallah and his troops rebelled against the Sultan and took over the fort, creating a precarious situation in Mombasa. The Sultan in Zanzibar was so alarmed by this development that he asked the British navy to intercede on his behalf and to restore order in Mombasa.



Interior courtyard, Fort Jesus.

Two British men o' war, *HMS Rifleman* and *HMS Nassau*, proceeded to bombard the fort until, eventually, its occupants surrendered. This is the one and only time the fort has ever been taken by force of arms.

After 1895, when the British established a protectorate in Kenya, Fort Jesus was converted into a government prison, with cells built over the stumps of the walls of the old barrack rooms. Both men and women were among those imprisoned here and there was a section for lunatics as well. In 1958 a proposal, and with it a generous grant, was received from the Portuguese Gulbenkian Foundation for the restoration of Fort Jesus as an historical monument and museum.



Cannons like this one, on the gun platform facing the sea, made Fort Jesus virtually impregnable.

The excavations at the fort were headed by James Kirkman, who also became the first curator of the Fort Jesus Museum when it opened to the public in 1960. Today, in 1998, Fort Jesus

forms part of the National Museums of Kenya and is a gazetted national monument. It is the most popular museum in the country and receives thousands of visitors every year.

Apart from Fort Jesus and Vasco da Gama's heraldic pillar, there are in East Africa remarkably few surviving monuments dating from the Portuguese period. Indeed, the only other Portuguese remains of any note are the small, ruined forts on Mombasa Island and the one rather modest Portuguese chapel in Malindi. By comparison with the wealth of fabric found in the numerous ruined Swahili settlements, many of which date back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the legacy of two hundred years of Portuguese rule on the Kenya coast is, it has to be said, surprisingly meagre. ■

JUDY ALDRICK

A WEEK TO REMEMBER

The 500th anniversary, this April, of Vasco da Gama's historic landing at Malindi is not being allowed to pass unheralded. At least, not in the resort town of Malindi itself.

A special Vasco da Gama Commemorative Week, beginning on April 9 and leading up to the actual anniversary on April 15 1998, has been laid on by, among others, the Malindi Museum Society — and promises to be quite a festive and eventful period.

The programme provides for a colourful parade through the main streets of the town and a flood-lit ceremony at the Vasco da Gama pillar, just outside Malindi, along with a feast of special exhibitions, lectures, boat races and other exciting competitions and sporting events. Many of the town's businesses, shops and hotel premises are already decked out in resplendent decorations in anticipation of the week-long festivities.

The events of Easter Sunday, April 12 1998, include a special Commemorative Mass at Malindi's Portuguese Chapel. And on Easter Monday, April 13, after the flood-lit ceremony at the pillar, there is a Grand Dinner to which Portugal's Ambassador to Kenya and many other dignitaries have been invited.

Coinciding as this week of festivities does with the Easter holiday break, Malindi is gearing up to welcome an especially large influx of visitors. Further information, on the week's commemorative events, can be obtained from the Malindi Branch of the Mombasa and Coast Tourist Association, on **Tel. +254 (0123) 20874**; or from the Malindi Museum Society, **Tel. +254 (0123) 21156**. ■



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