

Who Was Pero Vaz de Caminha?

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Who would read *A Carta do Achamento do Brasil* today if we had not come to identify the adventure that its author describes as the first encounter with the land now called “Brazil”? This text is not one of those “classics” whose content and form fascinate us independently of the circumstances under which they were written. *A Carta do Achamento do Brasil* has the status of a historical document, which, in this specific case, means that its canonization is owed to a discovery of whose importance the protagonists involved could have been only half-aware at best. While it may be difficult to say why it is important to read such texts, it certainly feels good to have them—especially during years of historical commemoration. But the satisfaction that we draw from them (and the afterglow of a national pride that they still may produce here and there) should not be confused with a desire to react by interpreting them. Indeed there seem to be no interpretations of Pero Vaz de Caminha’s *Carta* that one necessarily feels an urge to develop or to refute. So what, beyond having this text, should we do with it?

For those of us who know similar documents from the same historical context, a solution may come from the sympathy that a first reading of the *Carta* is likely to awaken. Its author comes across as more curious, as more capable of empathy for what is foreign to him, and as less greedy than other writers of early European colonialism. But could this reaction not simply be the projection of wishful thinking? Shall we really engage in celebrating the history of Portugal and Brazil as a mellow story of budding sympathies? Loving both these countries is certainly not an adequate intellectual reason to do so. This is all the more important to admit since, perhaps due to too many

attempts at such national-colonial celebrations, it is not really clear to us what the standard was like—in curiosity, empathy, and greed—for such early colonial documents. Is it true that the *Logbooks* of Christopher Columbus were so much more permeated by the desire for conquest? Was Hernán Cortés as bad as his posthumous reputation? Is the emphatic monumentality in Luis de Camões' celebration of the Portuguese discovery, more than half a century after Pero Vaz de Caminha, the fulfillment or the opposite of what the *Carta* prefigures? I was about that far in my quest for an apt reaction to Pero Vaz de Caminha's text when I finally became aware of the extent to which that quest was an effect of the text's historical immediacy drawing my attention to it. For the ten days between April 22, 1500, and May 1, 1500, the *Carta* allows us to relive the experience of 500 years ago, the enthusiasm, the intellectual struggles, and the ambiguities of a man about whom, except for this text, we know next to nothing. He was probably born around 1450 in Porto. In 1496, he inherited the office of the *Mestre da Balança* from his father in what we think was his hometown. A year and a half later, he was chosen, among others, to write the *Capítulos* for the *Cortes* held by the Portuguese king on January 28, 1498. So we can assume that it was his writing competence that brought him on the expedition that, a year and four months later, was to "discover" Brazil. In 1501 Pero Vaz de Caminha died in India. These isolated, scarce bits of information are not enough to produce anything close to a biography—but such a void makes it all the more fascinating that, for ten days, we can be synchronized with Pero Vaz de Caminha's life. Out of a biographical emptiness, these ten days *come to life*, they straddle the half-millennium which separates us from the discovery of Brazil.

As with any other text from the past, however, the majority of the *Carta* is conventional enough to defer the immediacy of the author's experience during those ten days. By assuring, for example, the King, as the text's addressee, of his best intentions to serve as an objective observer, Pero Vaz de Caminha inscribes himself into an institutionalized discourse and thus into the standard culture of the larger historical context: "Queira porém Vossa Alteza tomar minha ignorância por boa vontade, e creia que certamente nada porei aqui, para embelezar nem para enfear, mais do que vi e me pareceu" (156).¹ The same is true, in principle, for the description of the discussion held among the participants in the expedition that became the origin of Caminha's *Carta*. After a few days in the new land that they believe to be on

the way to Calcutta (cf. 184), they make a dual decision: first, to send an initial account of the new discovery to the King of Portugal and, second, to leave behind two members of their expedition that had been condemned to exile from Portugal, and whose assignment was to perform further exploration, rather than to assemble natives to bring the homeland: “não cuidássemos de tomar ninguém aqui à força, nem de fazer escândalos, mas sim, para que desta maneira fosse possível amansá-los e apaziguá-los, somente deixar os dois degredados quando daqui partíssemos” (168).

Appearance

If it is then plausible to imagine that Pero Vaz de Caminha started composing the text halfway through his stay in the newly discovered land, we may assume that its first part was written as a summarizing retrospective, whereas the second part ended up adopting the rhythm of a diary. Certain features of the *Carta* seem to confirm this thesis. It is only once, towards the end of the text, that the author, much in the style of a diary, informs his readers that, “on this day” there was nothing more that deserved to be mentioned: “E não houve mais nada nesse dia que merecesse ser contado” (177). Furthermore, only once, and again in the second part of the *Carta*, do we observe Pero Vaz de Caminha revise an opinion that he had—prematurely—formed. If at first he had become convinced that the dwellers in the unknown land did not build houses (172), he later includes in his report a detailed description of the “nine or ten” one-room houses, which other members of the expedition had discovered in the interim (174). With even more surprising immediacy, Caminha uses the noun “today” in reference to May 1, 1500, the last day of his stay in the new land: “E hoje, que é sexta-feira, primeiro dia de maio, saímos pela manhã em terra” (180). This is also the day on which the *Carta*, in its closing sentence, is officially dated, with formulaic ceremony: “Beijo as mãos de Vossa Alteza, deste Porto Seguro, de Vossa Ilha de Vera Cruz, hoje, sexta-feira, primeiro dia de maio de 1500” (184). We are indeed entitled to imagine that the final—not insubstantial—part of the text was written by Caminha immediately after he returned from his last visit to the newly discovered land, and only a few hours before his departure.

It is true that all the senses of immediacy that I have mentioned so far are, almost, without any content. They barely indicate the impression of freshness which the *Carta* conveys to its readers as authentic—but this does not even

begin to answer the central question that motivates our conversations with the past: even if the extremely scarce information available to us gives us an impression of the social status and the profession of Pero Vaz de Caminha, we have not yet built an impression of who he was, or, in other words of what might have been his specific, individual interests, his fears, hopes, and obsessions during the days between April 22 and May 1, 1500. We only know that our desire to become more familiar with who Pero Vaz de Caminha was during those days—a desire, by the way, which has no general, political, or national relevance whatsoever—is no longer completely unfounded. And the best way, perhaps, to relive what Pero Vaz de Caminha lived, will be to revisit, in our imagination, the things and the situations with which he was most obsessed in the text.

The Gold and the Holy Cross

Not at all surprisingly, the first thing that we see occupying the minds of the Portuguese when they brought two of the natives to their ship, staging this occasion as if it was a reception at Court, was gold. Or was it that gold was one of the first things that Pero Vaz de Caminha felt should be mentioned in his report to the King of Portugal? The reference is prepared with unusual narrative care by the first sentence of the paragraph that describes the reception of the natives on one of the frigates: “Quando eles vieram a bordo, o Capitão estava sentado em uma cadeira, bem vestido, com um colar muito grande no pescoço, e tendo aos pés, por estrado, um tapete” (160). A few sentences later, the Captain’s necklace becomes an object of fascination for one of the visitors to the ship, an object of fascination that triggers a complex act of signification: “Todavia, um deles fixou o olhar no colar do Capitão e começou a acenar para a terra e logo em seguida para o colar, como querendo dizer que ali havia ouro. Fixou igualmente um castiçal de prata e da mesma maneira acenava para a terra e logo em seguida para o colar, como querendo dizer que lá também houvesse prata” (161). How would the natives know that their hosts are longing for gold and for silver? And if they knew (or, if they could guess because they shared with the Portuguese the appreciation of these metals) why would they so eagerly give away the information that gold and silver could be found in their land? It seems as if we have caught Pero Vaz de Caminha in a lie here or, to say the least, as if we have caught him conveying a lie that somebody else fabricated, a lie, moreover, without which the legitimacy of the entire expedition would be threatened. A few days later,

however, when our writer has already become interested in the many other things that the newly discovered land has to offer, his attitude regarding the availability of gold—or, more precisely, his attitude regarding the availability of information about gold—has become much more realistic. There is no way for this communication to take place without a shared language: “O velho falou enquanto o Capitão estava com ele, diante de todos nós: mas ninguém o entendia e nem ele a nós, por mais pergunta que lhe fizessemos com respeito a ouro, porque desejávamos saber se o havia na terra” (170).

If the desire for gold, the one official obsession, is prominent on the first pages of the *Carta*, the other official obligation, namely to proselytize, seems to have preoccupied the Portuguese only during the last days of their visit to the shores of the new land. It is as if they had needed to come to terms with the material necessities of life before feeling safe enough to turn to spiritual things. Even then, the question of what the role of religion would be in this unknown world does not come up before two carpenters take the initiative of building a gigantic cross:

Enquanto cortávamos lenha, dois carpinteiros faziam uma grande cruz de um pau que ontem se cortara especialmente para isso. Muitos deles vinham ali estar junto aos carpinteiros. E acredito que assim o faziam mais para verem a ferramenta de ferro com que os carpinteiros trabalhavam do que para verem a cruz, porque eles não têm coisas de ferro e cortam suas madeiras e paus com pedras. (175-76)

It appears that, at this point, the hope to find gold and silver in a land whose inhabitants did not use any metals was long gone. Thus it became all the more important for Pero Vaz de Caminha to keep up his addressees' hope of winning souls for the Christian faith. This issue becomes so important that, once again, we find the author fabricating one of those complicated and therefore very unlikely acts of signification. The following is what Caminha pretends happened after the Holy Mass that the Portuguese celebrated on May 1, 1500:

Um deles, homem de cinqüenta ou cinqüenta e cinco anos, se conservou ali com aqueles que ficaram. Esse, enquanto assim estávamos, juntava aqueles que ali tinham ficado e ainda chamava outros. E andando assim entre eles, falando-lhes, acenou com o dedo para o altar, e depois mostrou com o dedo para o céu, como se lhes dissesse alguma coisa de bem; e nós assim o tomamos! (181)

Presents

A native whom the Portuguese interpret as the bearer of such divine inspiration will of course receive a present—and, invariably throughout Pero Vaz de Caminha's text, presents consist of apparel:

E chegando ao fim disso—era já bem uma hora depois do meio-dia—viemos às naus a comer, tendo o Capitão trazido consigo aquele mesmo homem que fez aos outros aquele gesto para o altar e para o céu, e com ele um seu irmão. Aquele fez muita honra e deu-lhe uma camisa mourisca; ao outro, uma camisa d'estourtas. (182)

This scene takes place late in the game, when the Portuguese seem to feel safe enough to behave, inadvertently perhaps, as if they were the masters of the natives in some feudal relationship. Presents have turned into favors or rewards. Earlier on, presents were objects to be exchanged quite regularly, and it is this exchange that gives some structure and stability to the precariousness of the first encounters between the natives and the Portuguese. Their interactions indeed begin with an initially timid and improvised, but then almost unstoppable, exchange of headgear that Caminha, in his position as observer, seems to enjoy as a scene whose symmetry contains some carnivalesque flavor for him:

Nessa ocasião não se pode haver deles fala nem entendimento que servisse, pelo grande estrondo das ondas que quebravam na praia. Nicolau Coelho somente lhes pode dar então um barrete vermelho e uma carapuça de linho que levava na cabeça e um sombreiro preto. E um deles lhe deu um sombreiro de penas de ave, compridas as penas, com uma copazinha pequena de penas vermelhas e pardas como de papagaios, e um outro deu-lhe um ramal grande de continhas brancas, miúdas, parecidas com as de aljófer, peças essas que, creio, o Capitão está enviando a Vossa Alteza. (158)

Yet, in spite of Caminha's joyful glance at this scene, we also witness a breach of good faith of which he becomes a part. The presents which Nicolau Coelho receives are addressed to him—and only to him—as he stands face-to-face with the inhabitants of the new land. Pero Vaz de Caminha, however, points to the presents as transformed into objects which, sent to the King of Portugal, will authenticate the fact of the discovery. Seen from this angle, what looked like an exchange of presents turns into a trap, into a device that elicits a potential act of subjection.

Bodies

Clearly, Pero Vaz de Caminha is ambiguous about what he sees and hears. There are, on the one hand, multiple attempts at interpreting whatever is unknown according to the standard knowledge of the Christian world. But there is also, and increasingly so, a temptation to and a pleasure in letting loose, of allowing all these new things to seduce him into engaging with them. For example, the initial interest in the naked bodies that he writes about is exclusively an interest in male bodies—which, as he states with relief, are not circumcised: “Então deixaram-se na alcatifa, para dormir, sem nenhuma preocupação de cobrirem suas vergonhas, as quais não eram circuncisadas, e as cabeleiras delas estavam raspadas e feitas” (162). This observation certainly adds to Caminha’s belief that these humans for whom he has no name must not have a religion (182), and will therefore be easily converted; he is happy to see it confirmed as often as possible: “Nenhum deles era circunciso, mas, ao contrário, todos eram assim como nós” (165). Sometimes, however, these bodies look very different from what Caminha is familiar with, and the fascination of such multiple otherness is quick to take over. An object of never ceasing wonder are the bones with which some of the natives pierce their lips:

... traziam o lábio de baixo furado e metido nele um osso branco e realmente osso, do comprimento de uma mão travessa, e da grossura de um fuso de algodão, agudo na ponta como um furador. Metem-no pela parte de dentro do lábio, e a parte que fica entre o lábio e os dentes é feita à roque-de-xadrez, ali encaixado de maneira a não prejudicar o falar, o comer e o beber. (160)

He enjoys the color with which the natives paint their bodies as much as the colors of the parrots (175, 176) that they are often carrying with them:

Alguns traziam uns ouriços verdes de árvores, que na cor pareciam de castanheiros, embora fossem muito menores. E eram igualmente cheios de uns grãos vermelhos pequenos que, quando esmagados entre os dedos, se desfaziam naquela tinta muito vermelha com que se apresentavam. E quanto mais se molhavam, mais vermelhos ficavam. Todos andavam rapados até por cima das orelhas, bem como as sobrancelhas e pestanas. Traziam todos as testas, de fonte a fonte, tintas de tintura preta, quase parecendo uma fita de largura de dois dedos. (174)

Caminha never doubts that these bodies want to be appealing, and he may well not be aware of how open he is to the beauty of the men: “Esse (. . .) andava por galanteria cheio de penas pegadas pelo corpo, de tal maneira que parecia um São Sebastião cheio de flechas” (164f). With female bodies however he is astonished that their nakedness does not produce any feelings of shame: “Ali andavam... três ou quatro moças, muito novas e muito gentis, com cabelos muito pretos e compridos, caídos pelas espáduas, e suas vergonhas tão altas e tão cerradinhas e tão limpas das cabeleiras que, de as muito bem olharmos, não tínhamos nenhuma vergonha” (164). We will never know for sure exactly what Pero Vaz de Caminha intends to say by pointing to their lack of shame. He certainly underlines that shame did not overcome him, *even though* he thoroughly looked at these splendid young bodies. Was the lack of shame equal to his astonishment over a lack of desire? Or did he mean to say that, far from his own Christian world, he enjoyed desire without any threat of sin? That he compares—and very favorably compares—the bodies of the native women to those of the women back in Portugal seems to indicate that it was not the lack of desire that surprised Pero Vaz de Caminha: “era tão bem feita e tão redonda, e sua vergonha—que ela não tinha!—tão graciosa, que a muitas mulheres de nossa terra, vendo-lhes tais feições, provocaria vergonha, por não ter as suas como a dela” (165).

Food

Despite the bodies, there is nothing that interests him more than food. Pero Vaz de Caminha may not be completely aware of it, but he seems to consider food a medium of communication. And this is not just his individual obsession. When the Portuguese for the first time bring two inhabitants of the new lands to one of their ships, they quite systematically test their eating and drinking preferences:

Mostraram-lhes um carneiro: não fizeram caso dela; uma galinha: quase tiveram medo dela—não lhe queriam tocar, para logo depois tomá-la, com grande espanto nos olhos. Deram-lhe de comer: pão e peixe cozido, confeitos, bolos, mel e figos passados. Não quiseram comer quase nada de tudo aquilo. E se provavam alguma coisa, logo a cuspiam com nojo. Trouxeram-lhes vinho numa taça, mas, apenas haviam provado o sabor, imediatamente demonstraram não gostar e não mais quiseram. Trouxeram-lhes água num jarro. Não beberam. Apenas bochechavam, lavando as bocas, e logo lançavam fora. (161)

Yet only a few days later, the natives and the Portuguese have in the meantime invented forms that allow them to be together without fear. Pero Vaz de Caminha, in a tone that is similar to parents speaking about their children, reports that two new guests to the ships have really been “eating well”: “Os hóspedes sentaram-se cada um na própria cadeira; e de tudo que lhes deram comeram muito bem, especialmente presunto cozido frio e arroz” (177). Later during the same day, some of them even drink wine for the first time on the beach. The Portuguese, in contrast, although they harvest and eat the fruits of the new land (171), and although they know, in some detail, what the natives eat when they are among themselves (179), seem reluctant to have a meal with the natives. Were they afraid that, according to a logic similar to that of the Eucharist, they might become permeated by what they ate? Whatever the answer to this question may be, Caminha implies, quite naturally and quite consistently, that it was the Portuguese who wanted to know, who desired and who, therefore, shaped the encounters with the natives.

Dancing

As the encounters become increasingly happy encounters, Caminha is by no means surprised that one day, after the Portuguese have finished the service of the Holy Mass, the inhabitants of the new land begin to play music and finally start to dance: “E depois de acabada a missa, quando sentados nós escutávamos a pregação, muitos deles se levantaram e começaram a tocar corno ou buzina, saltando e dançando” (166). As with eating, dancing becomes one of the social forms in which the natives and the Portuguese have a chance to experience being at ease with each other. Unlike previous eating scenes, the natives provide the frame for the interaction—but, once again, it is only the Portuguese who decide to join in:

E do outro lado do rio andavam muitos deles dançando e folgando, uns diante de outros, sem se tomarem pelas mãos. E faziam-no bem. Passou-se, então, além do rio. Diogo Dias, que fôra tesoureiro da Casa real em Sacavém, o qual é homem gracioso e de prazer; e levou consigo um gaiteiro nosso com sua gaita. Logo meteu-se com eles a dançar, tomando-os pelas mãos; e eles folgavam e riam, e o acompanhavam muito bem ao som da gaita. (171)

The Social

But Diogo Dias becomes too confident. Inspired by what he obviously interprets as their admiration for his dancing, he goes on to show them some acrobatic movements—and these end up scaring his spectators away: “Depois de dançarem, fez-lhe ali, andando no chão, muitas voltas ligeiras e o salto mortal, de que eles se espantavam muito e riam e folgavam. Como ele—Diogo Dias—com esses bailes muito os segurasse e os afagasse, logo se retraíram, como animais monteses, e se retiraram para cima do monte” (171). Apparently, Pero Vaz de Caminha is shocked—and saddened—by what he sees. He goes on to describe how the Portuguese, on their way back to the ships, killed a shark and brought it to the beach. But then, turning to his royal addressee, he decides to interpret the sudden withdrawal of the natives as a sign of their inferior cultural—if not cosmological—status: “Tudo isto bastará a Vossa Alteza para ver como eles passavam de uma confraternização a um retraimento, como pardais com medo do cevadoiro. Ninguém não lhes deve falar de rijo, porque então logo se esquivam; para bem os amansar é preciso que tudo se passe como eles querem” (172). But when he has finally pronounced the verdict that assigns the natives to the animal realm, another metaphor rekindles his admiration for them:

Esses fatos me induzem a pensar que se trate de gente bestial e de pouco saber, e por isso mesmo tão esquivam. Mas, apesar de tudo isso, andam bem curados e muito limpos. E naquilo sempre mais me convenço que são como aves ou animais montesinhos, aos quais faz o ar melhor pena e melhor cabelo que aos mansos, porque os seus corpos são tão limpos, tão gordos e formosos, a não mais poder. (172)

Retrospectively, this episode, and Pero Vaz de Caminha’s interpretation of it, will be no more than a brief intermission in the story that he wants to write—a story of increasing mutual familiarity and of increasing mutual interest. Almost obsessively, he gives account of the, almost, steadily growing numbers of natives who expect and who want to meet the Portuguese. When the new land first comes into sight, they find “seven or eight men” on the shore, “segundo disseram os navios pequenos que chegaram primeiro” (157). But a few moments later, there are already groups of naked men gathering: “acudiram pela praia homens em grupos de dois, três, de maneira que, ao chegar o batel à boca do rio, já ali estavam dezoito ou vinte homens” (158). The next day, he counts “sixty or seventy”

(159), and soon the number grows to “around two hundred” (162). The day after the dancing event and its sudden end, he sees “many of them but not as many as before” (173). Yet in the end the number reaches “close to three hundred” (177) and, finally, “four hundred or four hundred and fifty” (178). And Pero Vaz de Caminha is equally aware of an improvement in the quality of their interaction. With a sort of happy hyperbole, he complains about the intensity of their contact becoming an obstacle for the work that the Portuguese want to do: “A conversação deles conosco era já tanta, que quase nos estorvaram no nosso trabalho” (176); with a similar rhetorical move he seems to underline how the natives have definitely overcome the crisis of the dancing event: “estavam já mais mansos e seguros entre nós do que nós estávamos entre eles” (178). Caminha notices the one occasion on which the natives take the initiative of joining in with the Portuguese in a working activity and, above all, he understands well enough what it means to have some of them engage in a kind of a wrestling match—without this turning into an outburst of uncontrolled aggression: “e misturaram-se todos de maneira tal conosco, ao ponto de alguns nos ajudarem a acarretar lenha e a transportá-la para os batéis. E lutavam como os nossos, tomando nisto grande prazer” (175).

Vanishing

Only one of Pero Vaz de Caminha's hopes for the contact between the natives and the Portuguese remained unfulfilled. However hard the Portuguese tried, their hosts, the friendly masters of the new land, never allowed any of the newcomers to stay with them overnight: “Mandou o Capitão àquele degredado, Afonso Ribeiro, que se fosse outra vez com eles. Ele assim o fez e ficou por lá um bom pedaço, mas à tarde retornou, mandado por eles, que não o queriam por lá. E deram-lhe arcs e flechas; e de seu não lhe tomaram alguma coisa” (172). The scene repeated itself the next day: “E como já anoitecia, fizeram com que eles logo retornassem, pois não queriam que lá ficasse ninguém” (175). Nevertheless, when the ships left the new land on May 2, 1500, the commander of the expedition decided to leave behind the two exiled members of his crew to continue the exploration and to further develop the relationship with the natives. But no ship ever returned to discover their fate.² We know that Pero Vaz de Caminha lived for another year. But our closeness, our conversation with him ends on the day that separated the author of *A Carta do Achamento* from what would become Brazil.

Notes

¹ For reasons of readability, I am quoting the “Transcrição Atualizada da Carta.”

² See Almeida Prado’s “Apresentação” to the 1998 edition of *A Carta do Achamento do Brasil*, 103ff.

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