
Document 1589B

Note on Dom João da Gama and Gamaland

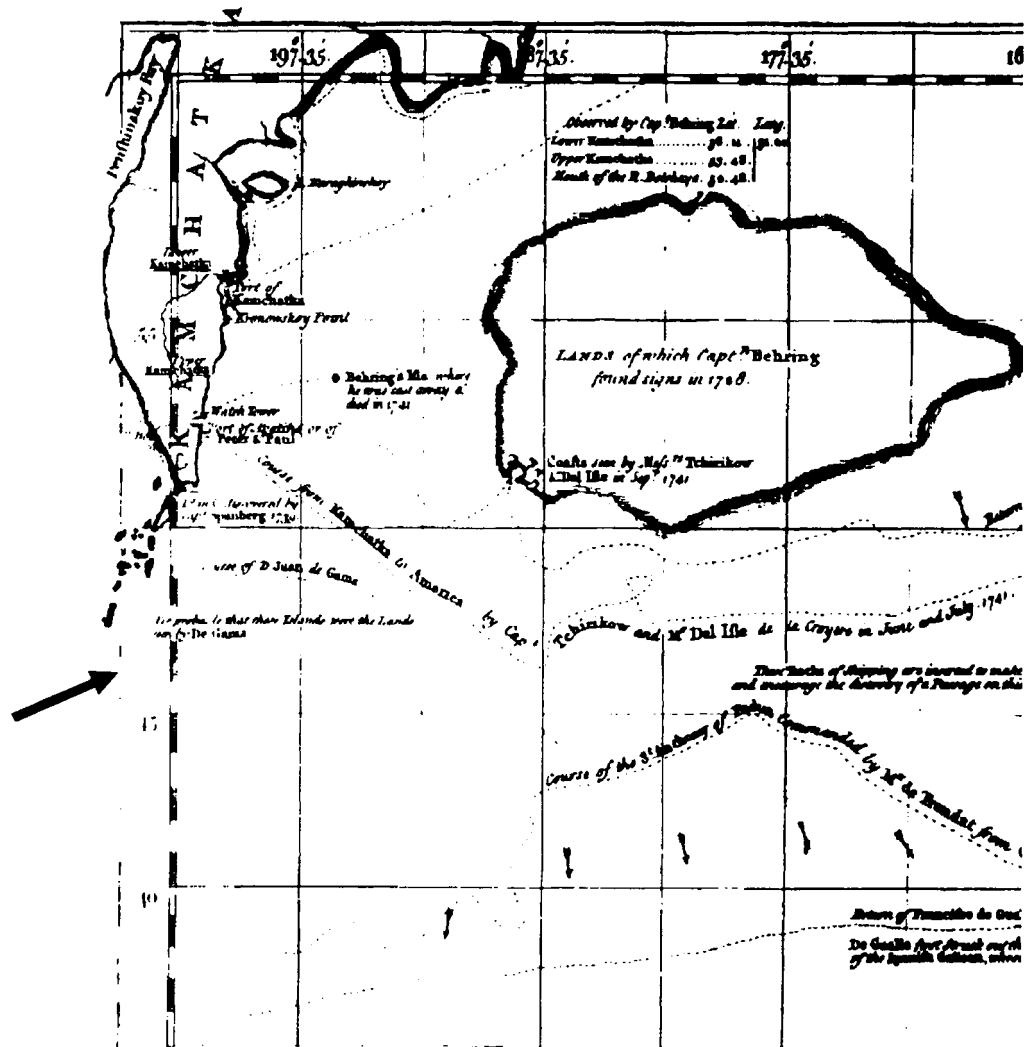
Source: C. R. Boxer's Fidalgos of the Far East, 1550- 1770 (The Hague, 1948), pp. 43-44.

From Macao to Acapulco in 1589-90

The Jesuit Father Louis Frois, in his annual Letter for 1589 wrote: "Dom João da Gama who was sailing for New Spain, was forced to seek shelter here in Japan, owing to the terrible storms and tempests he encountered, which he did with great peril and difficulty, his ship being badly battered and her rudder broken. He put into the port of Saxinoçu [Sashinotsu?] in Amakusa, and from him we learnt that owing to difficulties which had arisen in the port of Macao, it was unlikely that there would be any voyage [from Macao to Nagasaki] this year." This is confirmed by the Ajuda Jesuit Codex which states, "there came no junk from China, nor Soma, this year; only the carrack of Dom João da Gama which was forced into the port of Saxinoçu in the island of Amakusa whilst bound for New Spain, and which continued its voyage at the end of October [1589]. A frigate with dispatches bound from the Philippines to Mexico was also forced to seek shelter in Satsuma about the same time."

Dom João da Gama had served a tour of duty as Captain of Malacca, where he had behaved in such wise as to induce the King to order him to be sent home as a prisoner in irons. Before the Viceroy could act on these instructions Dom João had reached Macao, where he was accused of committing further disorders, and whence he set sail for Mexico in defiance of the Iberian navigation Laws, which expressly prohibited all contact and travel between the colonial dominions of the two Crowns. Despite her stormy voyage in Japanese waters, his ship reached Mexico in safety (the first Portuguese ship to effect the crossing of the Pacific) but he was arrested by the Spanish authorities there and sent prisoner to Spain, whither the confiscated cargo of his ship was likewise remitted. He seems to have died soon after; but a lengthy lawsuit ensued over the impounded goods, for which his heirs claimed compensation. This they apparently eventually received, which is somewhat surprising in view of the grave irregularities he was said to have committed at Malacca and Macao. It was on his voyage

across the Pacific in 1589-90, that Don João da Gama sighted that **Gama land** which proved such a puzzle to 17th and 18th century cartographers, but which was probably Hokkaido (Yezo) or one of the Kurile islands.¹



Part of a 1753 map by T. Jefferys showing Da Gama's track. The arrow points to the following remark: "It is probable that these Islands were the Lands seen by De Gama."

1 Ed. note: The galleon of Dom João apparently crossed the Pacific westward in the latter part of 1591 and arrived at Manila. Nothing more is heard about it, as far as Pacific history is concerned. I could not find the name of the ship either.