

# Uses and descriptions of marine natural elements in the report of S. Francisco trip (16<sup>th</sup> century) across the Atlantic.



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The “História Trágico-marítima” (Tragic History of the Sea) is a compilation of shipwrecks’ records made by cartographers, apothecaries, religious or anonymous that happened during the Portuguese maritime journeys between 1552 and 1602 and published in 1735/36.

The “relação de viagem da Nau S. Francisco”<sup>1</sup> (Report of S. Francisco trip), relates the events of the voyage that began in April 1596 in Lisbon until March 1599 in Porto Rico. In a letter written to his superior of “Companhia de Jesus”, Father Gaspar Afonso made very complete descriptions of various marine natural elements and of elements that he finds on the land. Most of the elements are described for their utility in food, medicine, signs of land or as a potential danger. However, singular animals or with spectacular behaviors are also described.



In “Baía de todos os Santos”, Brazil, he describes the behavior of great whales that is observed from the window of the College of the Company :



## EXUBERANCE

*"Where for four months of the year, which are those of the summer, (...) they were able to rent our windows to the continuous and joyful sight of many whales, who by private respects theirs have come to collect this time in the concave bay, and spend it in continuous parties, jumps, and dances; Which was not a little impediment to the study, if it had not been so continuous. (...) They [whales], who do so with so much air, and grace, so that we do not lose their unseen return, so much that from the bottom they reach the surface of the water, they throw up a graceful and great spray, as of a water pipe; and so caught the attention of the eyes if it rises very right to the sky, until it prevents nature from going on, and take more of the element of others, gives with that great tower of meat or fish, and extends it over the water with a loud bang". P.648*

When they left Brazil, Gaspar Afonso mentions that this departure was against the advice of a "famous witch of that city" who prophesied that the ship was not to go to Portugal, as in reality came to be confirmed:

*"I forgot to refer by grace a great question, that eight or ten days before we arrived here, it was proposed to me in the ship, and it was: That for two or three days at the previous day a big fish appeared to us, and circling the ship a few times, disappeared until the next day at the same time. And as such a monster was not seen, nor ever known by any of those who came on the ship, though they were so learned and experienced in the course of this vast ocean, some of them said, that was the sorceress, of whom I spoke above, fulfillment of his prophecy; And so I was consulted very wisely, if they could shoot him, and fire a piece at him. To which I replied affirmative; But the fish left us before. All this is laughable, but it does not fail to give an opportunity to the imaginative, to take care because this monster would follow this ship, and another as ugly as him to that of Father Pedro Martins, before giving and laying on the basses, The Santiago ship. ".P.666*

## BAD OMEN

In Santo Domingo the Father Gaspar Afonso describes the manatees, animals that he never had observed, comparing them with known animals:

*"We saw in the city of Santo Domingo a living mother and son; They have no resemblance to an ox, than a little in the muzzle,(...) Only the son could feed a couple of hundred men, and spare to invite the few others; And whit his size he was still breastfed, because he did not leave his breast was took whit his mother too: a new thing in a strange fish, which I had never read or heard of. ".P.694*



## SINGULARITY

1- “Relação da Viagem e sucesso que teve a nao S.Francisco em que hia por Capitão Vasco da Fonseca, Na Armada, que foy para a India no Anno de 1596. Escrita pelo Padre Gaspar Affonso, Hum dos oito da Companhia, que nella hiaõ.” In: História Trágico-Marítima. Vol.12 Bernardo G. de Brito. Edições Afrodite. Fernando Ribeiro de Mello. Coleção Clássicos.1971. (1ª edição de 1735-36). P.p.637-734.