

# Portugal Begins the Age of Exploration

**T**he Age of Exploration began in Portugal. This small country is located on the southwestern tip of Europe. Its rulers sent explorers first to nearby Africa and then around the world.

**Key Explorers** The key figure in early Portuguese exploration was Prince Henry, the son of King John I. Nicknamed “the Navigator,” Henry was not an explorer himself. Instead, he encouraged exploration and directed many important expeditions.

Beginning in about 1418, Henry sent explorers to sea almost every year. He also started a school of navigation where sailors and mapmakers could learn their trades. His cartographers made new maps based on the information captains brought back.

Henry’s early expeditions focused on the west coast of Africa. He wanted to continue the crusades against the Muslims, find gold, and take part in trade.

Gradually, Portuguese explorers made their way farther and farther south. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias became the first European to go around the southern tip of Africa. Later, Dias died in a storm at sea.

In July 1497, Vasco da Gama set sail with four ships to chart a sea route to India. Da Gama’s ships rounded Africa’s southern tip and then sailed up the east coast of the continent. With the help of a sailor who knew the route to India, they crossed the Indian Ocean.

Da Gama arrived in the port of Calicut, India, in May 1498. There he obtained a load of cinnamon and pepper. On the return trip to Portugal, da Gama lost half of his ships. Many of his crewmembers died of hunger or disease. Still, the valuable cargo he brought back paid for the voyage many times over. His trip made the Portuguese even more eager to trade directly with Indian merchants.

In 1500, Pedro Cabral set sail for India with a fleet of 13 ships. Cabral first sailed southwest to avoid calms (areas where there are no winds to fill sails). But he sailed so far west that he reached the east coast of present-day Brazil. After claiming this land for Portugal, he sailed east and rounded Africa. Arriving in Calicut, he established a trading post and signed trading treaties. He returned to Portugal in June 1501 after battling several Muslim ships.

**The Impact of Portuguese Exploration** Portugal’s explorers changed Europeans’ understanding of the world in several ways. They explored the coasts of Africa and brought back gold and slaves. They also found a sea route to India. From India, explorers brought back spices like cinnamon and pepper and goods such as porcelain, incense, jewels, and silk.

After Cabral’s voyage, the Portuguese took control of the eastern sea routes to Asia. They seized the seaport of Goa in India and built forts there. They attacked towns on the east coast of Africa. They also set their sights on the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, in what is now Indonesia. In 1511, they attacked the main port of the islands and killed the Muslim defenders. The captain of this expedition explained what was at stake. If Portugal could take the spice trade away from Muslim traders, he wrote, then Cairo and Makkah “will be ruined.” As for Italian merchants, “Venice will receive no spices unless her merchants go to buy them in Portugal.”

Portugal’s control of the Indian Ocean broke the hold of Muslims and Italians on Asian trade. The prices of Asian goods like spices and fabrics dropped, and more people in Europe could afford to buy them.

During the 1500s, Portugal also began to establish colonies in Brazil. The native people of

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Brazil suffered greatly as a result. The Portuguese tried to get the native people to give up their religion and convert to Christianity. They also forced them to work on sugar plantations. Missionaries sometimes tried to protect them from abuse, but countless numbers died from overwork and European diseases. Others fled into the interior of Brazil.

The colonization of Brazil also had an impact on Africa. As the native population of Brazil decreased, the Portuguese needed more laborers. Starting in the mid 1500s, they turned to Africa. Over the next 300 years, ships brought millions of enslaved West Africans to Brazil.

## Questions

1. What contributions did each of these individuals make to Portuguese exploration?
  - Prince Henry “the Navigator”
  - Bartolomeu Dias
  - Vasco da Gama
  - Pedro Cabral
2. What impact did Portuguese exploration have on the people of these continents?
  - Africa
  - Asia
  - the Americas