

Chapter 2

Portuguese Navigators Explore the Seas

VASCO DA GAMA

IT WAS THE HOPE of reaching Asia that had brought Columbus across the Atlantic. He was seeking the gold and spices that Europe wanted from the Orient. Other explorers also were lured across uncharted seas in search of a water route to the Far East. If the precious oriental cargo could be loaded on ships rather than land caravans, Europeans would get more goods at less cost. The land route over deserts and mountains brought a mere trickle of trade to Mediterranean ports.

Portugal was an established rival of Spain in this race for trade. Bordering the Atlantic Ocean, Portugal had early turned to the sea for a livelihood. A school for navigators was founded by Prince Henry, a member of the royal family. The sailors from Prince Henry's school gained the reputation of being the most daring navigators in Europe. Before Columbus had sailed for Spain, these Portuguese mariners had been venturing out into the Atlantic Ocean to the Azores and beyond. They had been sailing down the western shore of Africa and trading trinkets for gold on the Guinea Coast. In May of 1493, less than a year after the first voyage of Columbus,

action was taken to remove a possible cause of war between these two rivals. Pope Alexander VI issued his famous decree that separated the hunting grounds of Spain and Portugal. These two countries sealed the papal edict with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. They agreed to a line of demarcation:

From the Arctic Pole to the Antarctic Pole, which is from North to South, which mark or line – must be drawn straight, as is said, at 370 leagues from the islands of Cape Verde to the West, – . And all that which up to the present shall be found and discovered by the said King of Portugal, or by his vessels, – going by the Eastern side within the said line to the East, – may belong to the said Lord, the King of Portugal and to his successors for ever after.

– From this day, henceforward, the King and Queen of Castile and of Leon, etc. (Spain) will not send any ships, by this part of the line on the Eastern side which belongs to the said Lord the King of Portugal. In like manner the representatives of the King of Portugal agreed not to send ships for trade and territory west of this line, which belongs to the said Lords, the King and Queen of (Spain) to discover and search for any lands or islands, or make treaties, or barter, or conquer in any manner.

In the first part of July, 1497, Vasco da Gama's little fleet of three vessels sailed from Lisbon, Portugal, to gain for that city



The harbor of Lisbon, Portugal as it looked when Diaz, da Gama, and Cabral were making their famous voyages that brought land, trade, and wealth to that country.

the envied title, center of the spice trade. Vasco da Gama did not creep cautiously down the coast of Africa as former explorers had done. Instead, he steered southwest, in a huge curve, to take advantage of the trade winds and to escape the dreaded region of equatorial calms. He was the first mariner to explore the South Atlantic Ocean. Not until the fourth of November did he sight the African mainland. On this day the unidentified keeper of the journal on this voyage wrote the following entry, which reported the joy of the crews:

At nine o'clock, we sighted land. We then drew near to each other, and having put on our gala clothes, we saluted the captain-major (da Gama) by firing our bombards, and dressed the ships with flags and standards.

Four days later the fleet anchored in a bay that:

extended east and west, and we named it Santa Helena. We remained there eight days, cleaning the ships, mending the sails, and taking in wood.

Then da Gama headed for the Cape of Good Hope, discovered ten years before by Bartholomew Diaz, another Portuguese navigator. The wind blew so hard at the Cape that it took four days to round the stormy point.

On the way up the eastern coast of Africa, Vasco da Gama stopped at ports where Arab traders eyed the Europeans with unfriendly suspicion. Why had they come? Did they have goods to sell? Would they be competitors in the future? The

keeper of the journal described the people seen at Mozambique:

They are Mohammedans, and their language is the same as that of the Moors (Arabs). Their dresses are of fine linen or cotton stuffs, with variously colored stripes, and of rich and elaborate workmanship. They are merchants and have transactions with white Moors, four of whose vessels were at the time in port, laden with gold, silver, cloves, pepper, ginger, and silver rings, as also with quantities of pearls, jewels, and rubies, all of which articles are used by the people of this country.

Continuing the voyage the three vessels arrived at Calicut, a town on the southwestern coast of India. The name Calicut means cock's crow. The town was called Calicut because the territory of the first king there extended only as far as the crow of a rooster could be heard. Taking thirteen men with him, Vasco da Gama called upon the King, whom he found reclining on a couch covered with green velvet. His Majesty was chewing a betel nut and spitting out the husks into a large golden cup held in his left hand. The two men talked about merchandise and the articles each country had to offer. The King of Calicut then wrote a letter with an iron pen on a palm leaf. Vasco da Gama was to take the letter to the King of Portugal. It read:

Vasco da Gama, a gentleman of your household, came to my country, whereat I was pleased. My country is rich in cinnamon, cloves, ginger, pepper, and precious stones. That which I ask of you in exchange is gold, silver, corals, and scarlet cloth.

Although the King was friendly, the Arab merchants who controlled the trade, resented the coming of any rivals. They made trouble for the Portuguese when the latter tried to display their merchandise. When agents of the King came to inspect

the display, they did not buy because the Arab merchants made fun of the Portuguese goods. Since the Portuguese could not speak the native languages, and the Arabs could, the Europeans were at a disadvantage. The journal entry for Wednesday, August 29, 1498 reads:

The captain-major and the other captains agreed that, inasmuch that we had discovered the country we had come in search of, as also spices and precious stones, and it appeared impossible to establish cordial relations with the people, it would be as well to take our departure. — We therefore set sail and left for Portugal.

Sometime about the middle of September in 1499, after an absence of over two years, Vasco da Gama reached Lisbon. He was honored with a title, Count of Vidigueira, in recognition of his feat in discovering a water route to India. Less than half of his men survived this epoch-making voyage that put the little kingdom of Portugal in the front rank of commercial nations for years to come.

CABRAL SEEKS TRADE IN THE NEW WORLD

WHEN VASCO DA GAMA told about the riches he had found in the East, the King of Portugal wanted him to return there with shiploads of merchandise to trade for spices, herbs, and jewels. Da Gama was tired and suggested that his friend Cabral go in his place. Cabral could take along some members of da Gama's crew to act as guides and captains.

It was a gala day when fourteen ships assembled in the Tagus River a few miles below Lisbon. This was the first com-

mercial fleet sailing from Portugal with goods to trade for spices in the fabulous East. The cargo consisted of copper, vermilion, mercury, amber, coral, and rolls of woolen, velvet, and satin cloth. Dom Manuel, the King, was there to bid Cabral farewell and present him with a banner carrying the royal arms. The music of fifes, drums, horns, and bagpipes mingled with the cheers of the crowds that lined the riverbanks. It was the ninth of March, 1500 and a great day for Portugal, for whom Cabral was to win both trade and empire.

To avoid the calms off the Gulf of Guinea, Cabral followed the mid-Atlantic route of da Gama. The trade winds and ocean currents, however, carried the vessels far off the course. After almost two months in the South Atlantic, the Portuguese set foot on the mainland of South America at a spot which they named Porto Seguro. Cabral named the newly found land, "land of the true cross." He took possession of it for the King of Portugal. Since Porto Seguro is east of the line of demarcation, Cabral's landing gave Portugal a claim to the country. The territory was soon renamed Brazil, because a valuable dyewood by that name became the leading product exported to Europe.

The unknown keeper of the journal wrote:

During these days which we stayed there, the captain determined to inform our Most Serene King of the finding of this land, and to leave in it two men, exiles condemned to death, who were in the same armada for this purpose. (It was the custom to offer condemned prisoners freedom if they agreed to take the chance of living among natives in new lands to learn the languages.) And the said captain promptly dispatched a small supply ship which they had with them. This small ship carried the letters to the King. In these were contained what we had seen and discovered. After the said

small ship was dispatched, the captain went on shore and ordered a very large cross to be made of wood, and he ordered it to be set up on the shore, and also, as has been said, left two convicts in the said place. They began to weep and the men of the land comforted them and showed that they pitied them. The following day, which was the second day of May of the said year (1500), the armada made sail on its way to go round the Cape of Good Hope.

Approaching the windy region of the Cape, the fleet ran into a storm that wrecked four vessels and all on board were lost. The captain of one of these ill-fated vessels was Bartholomew Diaz, who perished off the "Cape of Storms" which he himself had discovered. The surviving ships rounded the Cape without further damage and continued the voyage to Calicut, India.

Arabs controlled the spice trade. They resented the efforts of the Portuguese to take some of this business from them. In riots started by Arab merchants, Cabral lost fifty men who were killed or captured. He left Calicut to seek cargo in other ports. However, he did not find cloves, the most profitable spice. The Moors had purchased the entire supply on the market.

On the long return voyage around Africa the expedition took a short rest in a harbor near Cape Verde. During this stop-over three vessels under the leadership of Amerigo Vespucci dropped anchor in the same harbor. The King of Portugal had sent Vespucci, an Italian, to explore the new land that Cabral had described in the letters from Brazil. Amerigo Vespucci later wrote such interesting letters about his travels in the New World that he became better known than the men who had discovered the countries he later visited. In 1507 Martin Waldseemuller wrote a geography in

which he suggested that the newly-discovered lands to the west be called "America" after Amerigo Vespucci. At first the title was applied only to the southern continent, and later, to North America.

In July, 1501 seven ships of Cabral's fleet returned to Lisbon. Two of the ships were empty. Five held a cargo of spices, drugs, and jewels. The cargo was enough to pay, in part, for the seven vessels that did not come back. The loss of life cast a pall of gloom over the little kingdom. This voyage, however, netted Portugal both commerce and an empire. The opening of a sea lane to the Orient brought about a decline of the power of Venice, Florence, and other commercial cities of the Mediterranean that had prospered on the overland spice trade by the old caravan routes.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Portuguese did not realize the value of Cabral's detour to land in the New World. Little did they dream that the time would come when a Portuguese monarch would flee from a conqueror and set up a throne for the royal family in far away Brazil. Portugal's ambition was to win the spice trade of the East, which seemed more important than empire in those days.

MAGELLAN STARTS AROUND THE WORLD

ONE OF THE GREATEST Portuguese explorers was Magellan, leader of the expedition that was the first to sail around the world. However, this accomplishment brought glory and land to Spain, rather than Portugal. Spain financed this voyage.

In August of 1519, the year that Cortes began the conquest of Mexico, Magellan

sailed from Seville. The fleet of five vessels gathered supplies as they went down the Guadalquivir River to the Atlantic Ocean. There were men from many lands on this expedition. Magellan, the captain-general, was Portuguese. With him went between 235 and 268 men; the exact number is not known. They were Spaniards, Portuguese, Sicilians, Genoese and other Italians, Germans, French, Dutch, English, Malays, Moors, Negroes, and natives of the Madeira, Azores, and Canary Islands. The pilots were Portuguese, and the chief gunners were German, French, and English. On board the vessels were sailors, common seamen, carpenters, calkers, coopers, stewards, interpreters, notaries, accountants, barbers, shepherds, blacksmiths, servants, and cabin boys. In addition there were the officers and five priests, one for each ship. There were other men, "extras," going along for adventure. They took the part of soldiers, defending the crews if the expedition was attacked by enemies. Among these "soldiers of fortune" was a well-to-do Venetian named Pigafetta, who kept the journal of the voyage.

By the time Magellan entered the service of the King of Spain, it was known that two continents connected by a narrow isthmus blocked the western water route to India. Spanish explorers had searched in vain to find a strait across this narrow strip of land linking the Atlantic Ocean and the "South Sea," discovered by Balboa. Magellan determined to find this waterway in another direction. Touching the eastern shore of South America near Bahia (old name for Salvador) he turned south, following the coast line and exploring inlets like All Saints Bay and the Rio de la Plata in search of the mythical strait.

At Port St. Julian mutiny broke out

when the crews learned the captain-general intended to spend the winter of 1520 in this cold and barren region. All had been put on rations to save food. The men declared Magellan “was taking them all to destruction.” When requested to turn back, Magellan replied that he would either die or accomplish what he had promised. He said that he had to sail until he found the end of the land or some strait which must surely exist. He scolded the men for complaining “since the bay had an abundance of fish, good water, many game birds, and quantities of wood, and that bread and wine would not fail them if they would abide by the rule regarding rations.” To quell the mutiny, however, some of the leaders were executed by Magellan.

The fleet remained at Port St. Julian from the last day of March to the twenty-fourth of August. These are winter months south of the equator. On the twenty-first of October Magellan discovered by chance the strait that bears his name. Although this body of water is approximately 300 miles long, Magellan traveled over 400 miles while investigating arms of the strait to find one with an outlet. Some men scaled the snow-covered mountains flanking the waterway to find the way out. It was the twenty-eighth of November before Magellan emerged from the puzzling network of gulfs and bays that link the two oceans. He had only three ships. The *Santiago* was wrecked before entering the strait, and Gomez, pilot of the *San Antonio*, had slipped away with his vessel while under orders to explore an inlet of the waterway. Gomez skirted the coast of both continents in the Western Hemisphere looking for a passage through either one of them. Failing in the attempt he turned home and arrived safely.

For three months and twenty days Magellan sailed the vast Pacific Ocean. When food ran low, the crews ate wormy biscuits, ox hides taken from the main yard, and sawdust. Many died of scurvy. The survivors were overjoyed when they at last came upon some islands. Magellan named these islands “Ladrones” (robbers) because natives swarmed over the ships and stole everything they could, even rowboats. Not far away, however, on another island the Europeans found friendly natives with whom they traded red caps, mirrors, combs, bells, and ivory for fish, figs, bananas, rice, and coconuts.

Magellan discovered the Philippine Islands. This rich archipelago was held by Spain until 1898 – over 375 years. The territory, however, cost Magellan his life. He and sixty of his men joined forces with an island prince who had become a Christian, to force another chief at Matan to accept the Christian ruler, to obey the King of Spain, and to pay tribute. In the battle that followed, a warrior hurled a poisoned bamboo lance into Magellan’s face after he had been wounded in the leg with an arrow. Magellan died on the battlefield. The day was April 27, 1521. A week later two new captains who had been elected to replace Magellan were dead. They were among those killed at a banquet given by the Christian king whom they had defended. Choosing new captains again, the survivors continued the voyage in two vessels. They had burned the third ship before they left the Philippines because there were not enough men left to sail it.

The crews fired guns for joy when they arrived in the Moluccas, the Spice Islands. On these islands were a few Portuguese traders who had arrived after the voyages of da Gama and Cabral. Here, the men in

Magellan's ships traded cloth, hatchets, linen, quicksilver, knives, scissors, and broken mirrors for cloves, a spice that sold at a high price in Portugal. At other islands they gathered nutmeg, mace, and cinnamon.

The little ship *Victoria* was the only ship in the expedition that finally returned to Spain. The other ship, the *Trinidad*, was captured by the Portuguese, who claimed the exclusive right to trade in the East Indies. When the *Victoria* reached Spain, Pigafetta wrote in his journal:

On Saturday, September six, 1522, we entered the Bay of San Lucar with only eighteen men and the majority of them sick, all that were left of the sixty men who left Malucho (the Molucca Islands). Some died of hunger; some deserted at the island of Timor; and some were put to death for crimes. From the time we left that bay (San Lucar) until the present day of our return, we had sailed fourteen thousand four hundred and sixty leagues, and furthermore had completed the circumnavigation of the world from east to west.

Magellan, a Portuguese navigator in the service of a Spanish King, was the first European to sail across the Pacific Ocean. He discovered another water route to India, proved beyond any doubt that the earth was round and that the lands Columbus discovered were not Asia. The voyage was a success commercially. The cargo on the *Victoria* consisting of cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, and sandalwood, was sold for a sum profitably exceeding the original cost of the four lost vessels and equipment.

The visit of Magellan's men to the Moluccas gave Spain a claim to these rich spice islands, where mountains were covered with clove trees. Therefore Portugal and Spain again reached a trade agreement by extending the line of demarcation to the Eastern Hemisphere. Portugal took

the Moluccas, but paid an indemnity to Spain. For nearly a century after Vasco da Gama's first voyage on the Indian Ocean, that body of water was practically a Portuguese sea. Portugal prospered on spices until Dutch traders swooped down upon the rich East Indies and gradually took that business to the Netherlands.

THE PORTUGUESE SETTLE IN AMERICA

PORTUGAL PLANTED COLONIES in Brazil to hold the country against invaders, especially the French, who threatened to settle there. The colonial plan resembled the *encomienda* system established by Spaniards in the Americas. The King of Portugal gave huge land grants to nobles of his realm. In turn these nobles accepted the responsibility of conquering and pacifying territory allotted them, of inducing settlers to go there, and of governing the territory as vassals of the King. These original land grants were called captaincies, and their owners, captains. Brazil began with eight captaincies, south of the equator, from which developed the coastal provinces of present-day Brazil. These grants extended along the Atlantic Ocean and inland as far as the line of demarcation separating Spanish and Portuguese territory in South America.

About seventy years after Cabral touched the coast of Brazil, a Portuguese named Pero de Magalhaes wrote the first history of that country. His aim was to encourage poor people in Portugal to migrate to the nation's colony in America. The title of his book was *History of the Province of Santa Cruz* because the name

had not been officially changed to Brazil.

Magalhaes tells of life on the estates:

The first thing which the inhabitants seek to obtain is slaves to work the land and to till their plantations and ranches, because without them, they cannot maintain themselves in the country. One of the reasons why Brazil does not flourish much more is that the slaves revolt and flee to their own land and run away every day. The crops from which they obtain the greatest profit are sugar, cotton, and brazil wood, and, because there is little money in the country, they pay with these the merchants who bring them goods from the Kingdom. All the inhabitants of the country have plantations of food stuffs. There are also many Guinea slaves (Negroes). These are more certain than the Indians of the country, because they never flee as they have nowhere to go.

Since Brazil was an agricultural country, landowners imported Negro slaves from Africa to work on their ranches and plantations. The landowners also held the

natives in bondage. In order to develop the resources of the country, the Portuguese established a social order based upon master and slave from which evolved a society much like that in Spanish colonies. Although the aristocratic landowners became the ruling group in rural sections, towns in Brazil had a form of self-government similar to the plan commonly used in New England towns during colonial times. The Portuguese captains defended their provinces against invaders, mainly French and Dutch, and held the country. Today, the land of Brazil is Portuguese America, where the people celebrate Cabral's Day with national rejoicing on the third day of May each year.

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Atlas of American History by Edgar B. Wesley