2.1: Europe in the Age of Discovery - Portugal and Spain

Spain and Portugal led the European Age of Discovery, an era lasting from roughly 1450-1750, in technological advances, exploration, and colonization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they emerged as leaders in this age; after all, the Iberian Peninsula protrudes out from Europe into the Atlantic Ocean, and rivers and harbors provided an ideal environment for sea trade as well as nurturing the art of boat building. Both countries had been incorporated into the Islamic world during much of the Middle Ages and emerged as newly reformulated kingdoms in the period leading into the Age of Discovery. Each sought to push forth from their geographic boundaries and, in so doing, enrich their kingdoms through exploration and trade.

2.2.1: Portugal Initiates the Age of Discovery

Portugal emerged as a nation in 1128 after the Battle of São Mamede with the defeat of the Moors, which is the Iberian name for the Muslims who invaded and controlled parts of the Iberian Peninsula from around 711 to 1492. After the reconquest or Reconquista of Portugal was finalized in 1250 with the conquest of the south, Portugal began a period of great development in navigation. Instruments such as the compass and the astrolabe, which were Chinese and Arabian inventions respectively, allowed the Portuguese to successfully navigate the open sea above and below the equator. Improvements in cartography produced maps that were much more accurate than those of the Middle Ages. The Portuguese also developed the caravel, a ship with triangular sails and a square rig. A light, agile ship, the caravel could carry a large cargo with a small crew. Together, these advances allowed the Portuguese to begin establishing a maritime empire.

Under the sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal began exploring the coast of Africa in order to trade and extend Christianity. Prince Henry the Navigator was the third son of John I, king of Portugal. He was called “the Navigator” because of his support of navigational studies in Portugal, where he established a school for it.
Like the Spanish and other Europeans, the chief desire of the Portuguese was to tap into the lucrative spice trade, including items such as cloves, pepper, and ginger. The spice trade, Europeans knew, originated somewhere in Asia and made its way through India before entering the hands of Muslim traders, who brought the product to European markets. Trade with Asia in spices would not only enrich the nation that established contact, but also would weaken the Muslim world and strengthen the Christian world by diverting the overland spice trade to a European sea trade. This promise of great wealth and sense of religious completion drove the Portuguese to explore the coast of Africa in search of a route to India. The same ideas motivated Columbus to seek a route to Asia and the spice trade by sailing west.

The Portuguese established trade networks along the coast of West Africa, trading for gold and, by 1441, for slaves. To facilitate trade, Portuguese captains negotiated relationships with African kingdoms and leaders in port cities, exchanging gifts and goods to secure permission to trade. They established stone fortresses known as feitorias, or factories, that served as trading posts and as holding areas for slaves. In later years, other nations such as the Dutch, Spanish, and British followed this pattern as the TransAtlantic slave trade emerged, driven by labor-intensive crops such as sugar, rice, and cotton.

The Portuguese explored the coast of Africa not only for profit and religious purpose, but also in search of the mythical kingdom of Prester John. The myth of Prester John emerged in Europe sometime in the twelfth century. Prester John was said to be a Christian monarch somewhere in the Orient—possibly India or Africa—that ruled in the midst of Muslims. Some said he was a descendant of one of the Three Magi; others claimed that the Fountain of Youth was to be found in his kingdom. In any case, Europeans viewed Prester John as a possible ally against the encroachment of Islam and as a powerful Christian figure in the Muslim world. In the late 1400s, Portugal sent ships in search of Prester John; eventually, a Portuguese captain made contact with the African Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. The Portuguese concluded that the Ethiopian monarch was in fact Prester John, even though such a figure would have been several hundred years old by 1500.

Portuguese exploration continued through the end of the fifteenth century. One of the most significant moments came in 1487, when Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa. A decade later, Vasco da Gama reached the subcontinent of India. This moment was particularly significant, for it marked the Portuguese entry into the lucrative spice trade which, until this time, had been dominated by Muslim traders. From India, the Portuguese continued...
east, following the spice trade to the so-called Spice Islands, today a part of Indonesia. In 1511, Admiral Alfonso de Albuquerque conquered the city and Strait of Malacca, which controlled all sea trade between China and India. This capture provided the Portuguese with a port of call at the heart of the spice trade while simultaneously breaking the Arab spice trade network. The conquest of Malacca marked the beginning of a period of great wealth, power, and prosperity for Portugal.

Columbus’s 1492 voyage of discovery brought a new sense of competition to the race for the spice trade. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas was negotiated and signed to preserve order and to effectively divide the world’s trade routes into spheres of influence. The treaty imagined a line about halfway between the Portuguese-held Cape Verde islands off the coast of Africa and the islands discovered by Columbus, namely Hispaniola and Cuba. Lands and routes to the east belonged to Portugal; lands and routes to the west, to Spain.

2.2.2: The Spanish in the Age of Discovery

While 1492 is best known for Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the New World, the year was also significant to the Spanish for reasons other than Columbus’s “discovery.” First and foremost, 1492 marked the end of the long [Reconquista](#) of the Spanish peninsula with Ferdinand and Isabella’s conquest of Grenada, the last area to be held by Muslims. To consolidate their victory and to begin the process of “purifying” their kingdoms, the monarchs issued orders for all Jews and Muslims to make a choice: convert to Christianity or leave Spain. For many of the Spanish, the [Reconquista](#) had been as much a religious as a military re-conquest of the land. The Roman Catholic Church viewed the Spanish [Reconquista](#) as a great victory for Christianity; the pope marked the event by granting the monarchs the [Patronado Real](#), which gave them powers to oversee the operation of the Church within their realm. The idea of religious conquest and the power of the Spanish monarch to oversee representatives of the Church in later years would play an important role in the New World as the Crown sent thousands of monks to convert Indians to Christianity. Proselytization was of course part of the Christian doctrine, and as good Catholics, the monarchs felt it their duty to convert the natives. Moreover, the Spanish had revisited their identity as Spaniards and as Christians in the wake of hundreds of years of Muslim rule and the [Reconquista](#). The newly reformed Spanish identity was unquestionably Christian, and all subjects of the Crown were to belong to the Catholic fold. Thus, the religious conquest would be brought to the New World along with the military conquest.

For Spain, Columbus’s voyage joined with the excitement of defeating the Muslims at Grenada. Isabella, Queen of Castile, agreed to support Columbus’s enterprise in the hope of great gains for God and Castile. She promised him a title of nobility and 10 percent of the gold, silver, spices, and other valuables he obtained if he were successful. Columbus sailed in September of 1492 with three ships, fewer than ninety men, a year’s provisions, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the size of the earth. Scholars all over Europe argued that Columbus grossly underestimated the distance to Asia. This, along with Columbus’s egotistical demeanor and demands for great personal rewards from his expedition, ensured that Columbus failed to enlist other potential backers to finance the voyage.

On October 12, 1492, Columbus and his men sighted an island in the chain later named the Bahamas. Further exploration revealed Hispaniola and Cuba, the two largest islands in the Greater Antilles of the Caribbean. He established a settlement called La Navidad and left thirty-nine men to secure it. Columbus returned to Spain in 1493, convinced that he had reached Asia. He described a tropical paradise and brought back enough gold and valuables to secure permission for a second voyage.
The Caribbean quickly became the base for further Spanish exploration of the region. Within twenty-five years, European explorers and cartographers had sketched a remarkably accurate outline of the Caribbean and the eastern coasts of North, South, and Central America. For a time, Columbus himself served as Governor of the Indies, the name used by the Spanish for the Americas. He was accused of harsh rule and mistreatment of the colonists, who called him “the tyrant of the Caribbean.” Columbus was arrested and returned to Spain in chains, where he was stripped of his titles and office for misrule.

Columbus went to his grave believing that his voyages had taken him to Asia. Others, however, argued that he had reached a previously unknown land mass, a so-called “New World.” While the Spanish were busy establishing themselves in the Caribbean, Vasco da Gama had made contact with India and thus had “won” the race to tap into the spice trade. Columbus’s mathematical errors and fundamental misunderstanding were confirmed in late 1520, when Ferdinand Magellan’s fleet entered the Pacific Ocean. Magellan had been commissioned by the Spanish Crown to seek a trade route to Asia; however, what his voyage revealed was the immensity of South America and the Pacific Ocean. Although Magellan died mid-voyage, his fleet became the first to successfully circumnavigate the globe, returning to Spain in 1525. The voyage took an incredible toll on the fleet; of the original 237 men and five ships, only one ship and eighteen men survived.

The legacy of circumnavigation of the globe revealed itself politically, economically, and scientifically. The Treaty of Tordesillas had established that the world was to be divided into two zones of influence; this agreement lacked the exact divide between Portuguese and Spanish territory in the east. Since the Spanish fleet reached Asia and the Moluccas, or the Spice Islands, they claimed that the Portuguese were violating their territory, thus bringing the two nations once more into conflict. The matter was resolved in 1529 with the Treaty of Zaragoza, which gave the Moluccas to Portugal and the Philippines to Spain. Although Spain was disappointed not to have gained the Spice Islands, the Philippines quickly became an important base of Spanish operations for Asian trade. They obtained particular importance after Spain established mining operations in the colonies of New Spain and Peru, when silver became the basis for great wealth.

Scientifically, Magellan’s voyage revealed the exact size of the earth’s diameter. It also established the need for an International Date Line. Although the mariners kept strict track of dates over the voyage in a logbook, they found upon their return to Europe that they were one day behind the calendar. They had, in effect, lost a day while traveling westward, counter to the earth’s rotation.

2.2.3: Before You Move On...

Key Concepts

Portugal was one of the leaders of the European Age of Discovery. The Portuguese were able successfully to navigate the open sea because of the compass, the astrolabe, and the caravel. Under the sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese explored the coast of Africa and later established trading posts up and down the coast of West Africa. The Portuguese also established trading ports in India and, after the conquest of Malacca, in the Spice Islands. Portugal’s entry into the Indian Ocean marked the beginning of a powerful sea empire.

The Spanish followed Portugal’s lead after completing the Reconquista and sponsoring Columbus’s 1492 voyage. Like
the Portuguese, Columbus’s goal had been to reach Asia to tap into the lucrative spice trade. Columbus instead reached a “New World,” and the Spanish found themselves exploring vast new lands. Competition between Portugal and Spain was alleviated with the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the earth into two zones of influence. However, competition was reborn when the Spanish circumnavigated the globe in 1520-1525. The Treaty of Zaragosa established the antemeridian of the Treaty of Tordesillas, effectively extending the dividing line into the eastern half of the globe and completing the separation of the zones of influence.

Test Yourself

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\))

What important event(s) took place in 1492?

a. Columbus’s first voyage to the New World

b. the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims from Spain

c. the end of the Reconquista

d. All of the above

e. A and C

Answer  
d

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\))

_____ enabled the Portuguese to enter the spice trade.

a. Rounding the Cape of Good Hope

b. The conquest of Malacca

c. The discovery of the New World

d. Making contact with Prester John

e. The conquest of Goa

Answer  
b

Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\))

True/False: For the Spanish, reconquering the Iberian Peninsula was a military and religious action.

a. True
Exercise \(\PageIndex{4}\))

The mythical king Prester John was important to the Portuguese because

a. he controlled the spice trade

b. he would be an ally to the Spanish in reconquering the Iberian Peninsula

c. he was a Christian king in an area dominated by Muslims

d. he could direct them in how to cross the Indian Ocean

Answer
c

Exercise \(\PageIndex{5}\))

5. The Treaty of Tordesillas and the _____ worked in tandem to establish zones of influence for Portuguese and Spanish trade.

a. Treaty of Nanking

b. Treaty of Molucca

c. Treaty of Zaragoza

d. Treaty of Goa

Answer
c