

The course of portuguese exploration history essay



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The Age of Exploration marked the peak of Portuguese power and wealth. At the beginning of the fifteenth century Portugal had a population of one and a quarter million and an economy dependent on trade with Northern Europe. Although Portugal lacked the wealth and population of its rivals, it would lead the Europe in the exploration of sea routes to Africa, the Atlantic Islands, and to Asia and South America during the sixteenth century. Several factors contributed to Portugal becoming the leading European country in maritime exploration. The first was its geographical position along the west coast of the Iberian Peninsula, which allowed for the development of trade and maritime activities. The second was the evolution of an economy in which the port cities of Lisbon and Oporto became the commercial centers of the country. The merchant community used these port cities as a center from which they financed the majority of the various exploration and trading projects.

The third critical factor that made Portugal a forerunner in exploration was its monarchy. Portugal benefited from a stable monarchy whose kings encouraged trade and shipping. The Crown gave every possible incentive by implementing tax privileges and insurance funds to protect the investments of ship owners and builders. Often, members of the aristocracy were also investors, such as Prince Henry the Navigator. The aristocracy used their political position to aid the Crown's granting of royal sanctions that regulated the voyages of exploration made by the merchant community. Portugal was fortunate to have kings who recognized the country's dependence on overseas trade and assisted in its expansion in every possible way. The stability of the monarchy was essential for economic growth, thus the

stability of the Portuguese monarchy gave the kingdom a seventy-year head start over the Spanish, what with their civil war and the Reconquista of Granada. It was not until Columbus' voyage in 1492 that the Spanish were finally in a position to challenge Portugal's power in exploration.

After Columbus' voyage to find the New World, both Spain and Portugal wanted to claim new lands and began competing with each other. This competition was straining the relations between the two countries, which could eventually lead to war. Fortunately, both countries listened to one authority- the leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope.

Although the Pope wanted both countries to continue exploring, he did not want war to break out between them. His concerns were for both economic and religious matters. Portugal and Spain donated large amounts of money to the church. As the two countries became richer, the church also became richer. Additionally, the church viewed new lands as excellent places to spread their faith, often sending missionaries to try to convert the natives.

In order to keep the peace, the pope ruled that Spain and Portugal would share the seas. In 1494, both countries signed the Treaty of Tordesillas. This treaty drew an imaginary line from the North Pole to the South Pole. The line was approximately 1800 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands. The Treaty of Tordesillas declared that all land to the east of this line would belong to Portugal, while everything to the west would belong to Spain.

While this treaty worked for Spain and Portugal, it failed to recognize that other countries, such as England, were eager to begin their own explorations. In addition, the Treaty of Tordesillas also failed to account for

the fact that people who lived in Africa, India, and other countries, did not want to be ruled by Spain or by Portugal. Such short-sightedness only goes to show the authority of Spain and Portugal at that time, and their role as “superpowers”.

Vasco da Gama was a Portuguese businessman who sought to find a route to India by going around Africa. In 1497, he set out with four ships and 170 men, and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and up the eastern coast of Africa. This area was unknown to Da Gama, and he eventually landed in the port of Malindi, modern-day Kenya. There Da Gama met a Muslim sailor named Ahmad ibn-Majid, who showed him the route to India.

Da Gama’s voyage, however, was not without cost. More than half of the sailors died from a condition called scurvy, and the rest were left weak due to food shortage and improper hygiene. In May of 1498, Da Gama reached Calicut, where he was able to acquire great wealth, which was eventually used to sponsor future explorations.

After Da Gama’s success, another Portuguese businessman named Pedro Cabral attempted a voyage to India. Cabral (luckily) went off course and landed in South America. Because he landed east of the line established by the Treaty of Tordesillas, he claimed this new land for Portugal, which became known as Brazil. While most South Americans today speak Spanish, Brazilians speak Portuguese, due to the efforts of Cabral and the exploration endeavors of Portugal.

Portugal's contributions to the discovery of America were great beyond measure, and if not for explorers such as Columbus and Da Gama, the America that exists today might never have been established.