

The European Voyages of Exploration: Portugal

Scholars typically date the European Age of Exploration, or the Age of Discovery, to the period beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing on through the seventeenth century. This period saw the expansion of European presence and influence throughout the world in places such as Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as the Europeans searched for new sea routes to the Far East. The empires of Spain and Portugal, in particular, played a pioneering role as leaders of overseas exploration. Today, Portugal is considered by many to have been the first global empire.

During the fifteenth century, Portugal was not a leading political power in the larger dynamic of Europe's continental politics. It lacked the population and financial resources that other European states enjoyed. However, throughout the sixteenth century, Portugal's geographic location, its robust commercial maritime trade, and the active involvement of the Portuguese Crown allowed Portugal to emerge in the forefront of European overseas exploration and expansion.

Historical Context and Background

In the eighth century the Muslim Moors of Northern Africa conquered and occupied the majority of the Iberian Peninsula. Over the subsequent four centuries the region was heavily influenced by Moorish culture, which included Arabic scientific and mathematical theories that would eventually aid the Portuguese Empire in its overseas expeditions. Christian leaders continuously attempted to redeem their land from the Moors during what is now referred to as the Reconquista. While this effort took much longer in Spain, the Reconquista in what would become Portugal was nearly complete by the twelfth century. Led by Afonso Henriques, who would become the first king of Portugal, the Portuguese achieved their independence in 1139. In 1179 the pope legally recognized the kingdom of Portugal, and in 1249 the Portuguese Reconquista was officially completed.

During the monarchical reigns following Afonso, the Portuguese Crown actively pursued the development of naval and mercantile expansion. Due in part to the Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula, the Portuguese developed some of the earliest breakthroughs in mathematics and science. During the fifteenth century Portugal became a site for knowledge production and technological development. The Portuguese monarchs and the nobility sanctioned and often funded the construction of research centers with the goal of creating science and mathematical techniques that would further their overseas aspirations.

Maritime Economy and Nautical Science

During the Age of Exploration, Portugal was primarily a trading empire with centers in the port cities of Lisbon (to the South) and Oporto (to the North). The harbor in Lisbon was one of the largest in Europe and provided merchants with a central location for international trade and commerce. Portugal's global expeditions began in 1419, when explorers traveled the African coast in search of a new sea route to better

reach the heart of the spice trade in the Far East. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese exploration became increasingly feasible and frequent. In 1498 Vasco da Gama reached India, and in 1500, Pedro Alvares Cabral discovered Brazil. By the end of the sixteenth century, Portugal's commercial empire extended from Lisbon to Africa, India, Asia, and South America.

The growth of overseas exploration in Portugal engendered the development of expertise in nautical science. Portugal boasted several figures, such as Pedro Nunes and Joao de Castro, who pioneered the fields of astronomy, navigation, and cartography. In the fifteenth century (ca. 1450) the Portuguese developed the caravel, a new ship designed for voyages overseas. The design of the sails enabled the caravel to travel faster than any previous ship of its kind. It was originally intended to provide easier access to the Atlantic coast of Africa and for passage across the Atlantic Ocean. The Portuguese continued to use the caravel as their primary means of oceanic travel throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The Portuguese Monarchy

Throughout the early phases of European overseas expansion, Portugal enjoyed a stable and secure monarchy compared to other European states, such as Spain, which underwent civil war in the late fifteenth century. The Portuguese Crown during this period championed and fostered the development of the kingdom's maritime economy and overseas explorations. The monarchy provided financial incentives through tax benefits for ship owners and insurance funds for securing the investments of overseas expeditions. These actions encouraged the advancement of the kingdom's foray into global commerce.

Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460) was one of the most important figures in promoting the expansion of the Portuguese Empire. Henry was one of the main sponsors of the development of the caravel. He is considered to be one of the premier benefactors of Portuguese overseas discoveries, and held a particular fascination with the exploration of Africa. Prince Henry was curious about, and concerned with, the extent of Muslim territory throughout Africa. In 1415, Henry convinced his father, King John I, to invade and conquer the Muslim-controlled North African port city of Ceuta, which was located across the Straits of Gibraltar from Portugal. Henry was also preoccupied with encouraging the discovery of new sea routes to reach Asia as a way to gain a foothold in the lucrative spice trade.

Throughout the Age of Exploration, the Portuguese and Spanish Empires enjoyed a relatively beneficial relationship with one another in their imperial conquests and discoveries. In 1494, Spain and Portugal signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided their overseas discoveries between themselves. The treaty was meant to allocate any territory east of the west coast of Africa to the Portuguese and anything west of the newly discovered territory of Cuba and Hispaniola to the Spanish. However, the specific terms of the treaty were not strictly enforced by the Spanish, as evidenced by the Portuguese expansion into the easternmost part of Brazil in 1500. In 1529, the Treaty of Zaragoza superseded the Treaty of Tordesillas. The new treaty maintained

the divisions specified in the Treaty of Tordesillas, but added additional division lines in Asia designating Spanish or Portuguese spheres of influence.

From 1580 to 1640, the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain joined forces through a dynastic union. Following a succession crisis in Portugal, Spain's King Phillip II oversaw the unification of the Iberian Peninsula in what has come to be known as the Iberian Union. This union politically bound Portugal and its territories to the fate of Spain. Portugal's commercial posts throughout its overseas trading network were left vulnerable to attack from Spain's imperial rivals—England, France, and the Netherlands. As a result of the Iberian Union, Portugal's commercial empire started to collapse, in part due to its inability to ward off these stronger European powers. During the seventeenth century, Portugal lost a substantial portion of its Indian and Asian territorial holdings, and by the early nineteenth century it lost Brazil, the kingdom's most lucrative territory, in Brazil's struggle for national independence.

Summary:

- Beginning its foray into overseas expansion in the fifteenth century, Portugal is understood today as one of the first major global empires. Its participation in global exploration helped spark the European Age of Discovery.
- The Portuguese Empire was primarily based on maritime and commercial trade. These endeavors acted as the backbone for the majority of its imperial excursions.
- Portuguese merchants established trading posts throughout the world, from Asia to Africa to the Americas.
- The Portuguese Crown played a pivotal role in fostering the progress and expansion of overseas exploration.
- The apogee of the Portuguese overseas empire was from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. During the seventeenth century, the empire started to decline as a result of its dynastic union with Spain, and the consequential fighting with Spain's rivals.