

Vasco Nunez de Balboa

Explorer and conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean.

Synopsis

Born in Spain in 1475, explorer and conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa helped establish the town of Darién on the Isthmus of Panama, becoming interim governor. In 1513, he led the first European expedition to the Pacific Ocean, but news of the discovery arrived after the king had sent Pedro Arias de Ávila to serve as the new governor of Darién. Ávila, reportedly jealous of Balboa, had him beheaded for treason in 1519.

Early Life and Exploration

Born in 1475 in Jerez de los Caballeros, in the province of Extremadura in Castile, Spain, Vasco Núñez de Balboa went on to become the first European to see the Pacific Ocean.

At a time when many people in Spain were seeking their fortunes in the New World, Balboa joined an expedition to South America. After exploring the coast of present-day Colombia, Balboa stayed on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). While there, he got into debt and fled, hiding away on a ship headed for the fledgling colony of San Sebastian.

Once he arrived at the settlement, Balboa discovered that most of the colonists had been killed by nearby native peoples. He then convinced the remaining colonists to move to the western side of the Gulf of Uraba. They established the town of Darién on the Isthmus of Panama, which is a small strip of land that connects Central America and South America. Balboa became the interim governor of the settlement.

Seeing the Pacific Ocean

In 1513, Balboa led an expedition from Darién to search for a new sea reportedly to the south and for gold. He hoped that if he was successful, he would win the favor of Ferdinand, the king of Spain. While he didn't find the precious metal, he did see the Pacific Ocean, and claimed it and all of its shores for Spain.

Death

The news of the discovery arrived after the king had sent Pedro Arias de Ávila to serve as the new governor of Darién. The new governor was reportedly jealous of Balboa and ordered him to be arrested on charges of treason. After a brief trial, Balboa was **beheaded** on January 12, 1519, in Acla, near Darién, Panama.

Marco Polo

Venetian merchant and adventurer Marco Polo traveled from Europe to Asia from 1271 to 1295. He wrote 'Il Milione,' known in English as 'The Travels of Marco Polo.'

Who Was Marco Polo?

Marco Polo (1254 to January 8, 1324) was a Venetian explorer known for the book *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which describes his voyage to and experiences in Asia. Polo traveled extensively with his family, journeying from Europe to Asia from 1271 to 1295 and remaining in China for 17 of those years. Around 1292, he left China, acting as consort along the way to a Mongol princess who was being sent to Persia.

'The Travels of Marco Polo'

Marco Polo's stories about his travels in Asia were published as a book called *The Description of the World*, later known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Just a few years after returning to Venice from China, Marco commanded a ship in a war against the rival city of Genoa. He was eventually captured and sentenced to a Genoese prison, where he met a fellow prisoner and writer named Rustichello. As the two men became friends, Marco told Rustichello about his time in Asia, what he'd seen, where he'd traveled and what he'd accomplished.

The book made Marco a celebrity. It was printed in French, Italian and Latin, becoming the most popular read in Europe. But few readers allowed themselves to believe Marco's tale. They took it to be fiction, the construct of a man with a wild imagination. The work eventually earned another title: *Il Milione* ("The Million Lies"). Marco, however, stood behind his book, and it influenced later adventurers and merchants.

When and Where Was Marco Polo Born?

Marco Polo was born in 1254, in Venice, Italy.

Family, Early Life and Education

Although he was born to a wealthy Venetian merchant family, much of Marco Polo's childhood was spent parentless, and he was raised by an extended family. Polo's mother died when he was young, and his father and uncle, successful jewel merchants Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, were in Asia for much of Polo's youth.

Niccolo and Maffeo's journeys brought them into present-day China, where they joined a diplomatic mission to the court of [Kublai Khan](#), the Mongol leader whose grandfather, [Genghis Khan](#), had conquered Northeast Asia. In 1269, the two men returned to Venice and immediately started making plans for their return to Khan's court. During their stay

with the leader, Khan had expressed his interest in Christianity and asked the Polo brothers to visit again with 100 priests and a collection of holy water.

Khan's Empire, the largest the world had ever seen, was largely a mystery to those living within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. A sophisticated culture outside the reaches of the Vatican seemed unfathomable, and yet that's exactly what the Polo brothers described to confounded Venetians when they arrived home.

Marco Polo's Voyage to China

In 1271, Marco Polo set out with his father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, for Asia, where they would remain until 1295. Unable to recruit the 100 priests that Kublai Khan had requested, they left with only two, who, after getting a taste of the hard journey ahead of them, soon turned back for home. The Polos' journey took place on land, and they were forced to cut through challenging and sometimes harsh territory. But through it all, Marco reveled in the adventure. His later memory for the places and cultures he witnessed was remarkable and exceptionally accurate.

As they made their way through the Middle East, Marco absorbed its sights and smells. His account of the Orient, especially, provided the western world with its first clear picture of the East's geography and ethnic customs. Hardships, of course, came his way. In what is now Afghanistan, Marco was forced to retreat to the mountains in order to recoup from an illness he'd contracted. Crossing the Gobi desert, meanwhile, proved long and, at times, arduous. "This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end," Marco later wrote. "And at the narrowest point it takes a month to cross it. It consists entirely of mountains and sands and valleys. There is nothing at all to eat."

Finally, after four years of travel, the Polos reached China and Kublai Khan, who was staying at his summer palace known as Xanadu, a grand marble architectural wonder that dazzled young Marco.

The Polos had originally planned to be gone for only a few years. However, they were away from Venice for more than 23 years. Debate has swirled among historians as to whether Marco ever really made it to China. There is no evidence outside his famous book that he traveled so far east. Yet his knowledge of the culture and its customs are hard to dismiss. His later account told of Khan's extensive communication system, which served as the foundation for his rule. Marco's book, in fact, devotes five pages to the elaborate structure, describing how the empire's information highway efficiently and economically covered millions of square miles.

Khan's acceptance of the Polos offered the foreigners unparalleled access to his empire. Niccolo and Maffeo were granted important positions in the leader's Court.

Marco, too, impressed Khan, who thought highly of the young man's abilities as a merchant. Marco's immersion into the Chinese culture resulted in him mastering four languages.

Polo the Explorer

Kublai Khan eventually employed Marco as a special envoy he sent to far-flung areas of Asia never before explored by Europeans, including Burma, India and Tibet. With Marco, as always, was a stamped metal packet from Khan himself that served as his official credentials from the powerful leader.

As the years wore on, Marco was promoted for his work. He served as governor of a Chinese city. Later, Khan appointed him as an official of the Privy Council. At one point, he was the tax inspector in the city of Yanzhou.

From his travels, Marco amassed not only great knowledge about the Mongol empire but incredible wonder. He marveled at the empire's use of paper money, an idea that had failed to reach Europe, and was in awe of its economy and scale of production. Marco's later stories showed him to be an early anthropologist and ethnographer. His reporting offers little about himself or his own thoughts, but instead gives the reader a dispassionate reporting about a culture he had clearly grown fond of.

Journey Back to Europe

Finally, after 17 years in Khan's court, the Polos decided it was time to return to Venice. Their decision was not one that pleased Khan, who'd grown to depend on the men. In the end, he acquiesced to their request with one condition: They escort a Mongol princess to Persia, where she was to marry a Persian prince.

Traveling by sea, the Polos left with a caravan of several hundred passengers and sailors. The journey proved harrowing, and many perished as a result of storms and disease. By the time the group reached Persia's Port of Hormuz, just 18 people, including the princess and the Polos, were still alive. Later, in Turkey, Genoese officials appropriated three-quarters of the family's wealth. After two years of travel, the Polos reached Venice. They'd been gone for more than two decades, and their return to their native land undoubtedly had its difficulties. Their faces looked unfamiliar to their family and they struggled to speak their native tongue.

When and Did Marco Polo Die?

Marco died at his home in Venice on January 8, 1324. As he lay dying, friends and fans of his book paid him visits, urging him to admit that his book was fiction. Marco wouldn't relent. "I have not told half of what I saw," he said.

Christopher Columbus

Famed Italian explorer Christopher Columbus discovered the "New World" of the Americas on an expedition sponsored by King Ferdinand of Spain in 1492.

Who Was Christopher Columbus?

Christopher Columbus (c. 1451 to May 20, 1506) was an Italian explorer and navigator. In 1492, he sailed across the Atlantic from Spain in the Santa Maria, with the Pinta and the Niña ships alongside, hoping to find a new route to India. Between 1492 and 1504, he made a total of four voyages to the Caribbean and South America and has been credited for opening up the Americas to European colonization.

When Was He Born and Where Was He From?

Christopher Columbus was born in 1451 in the Republic of Genoa, or what is now Italy. In his 20s he moved to Lisbon, Portugal, and later resettled in Spain, which remained his home base for the duration of his life.

Early Years & First Voyage in the Atlantic

Columbus first went to sea as a teenager, participating in several trading voyages in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. One such voyage, to the island of Khios, in modern day Greece, brought him the closest he would come to Asia.

His first voyage into the Atlantic Ocean in 1476 nearly cost him his life as the commercial fleet he was sailing with was attacked by French privateers off the coast of Portugal. His ship was burned and Columbus had to swim to the Portuguese shore. He made his way to Lisbon, Portugal, where he eventually settled and married Felipa Perestrello. The couple had one son, Diego, around 1480. His wife died soon after, and Columbus moved to Spain. He had a second son, Fernando, who was born out of wedlock in 1488 with Beatriz Enriquez de Arana.

After participating in several other expeditions to Africa, Columbus gained knowledge of the Atlantic currents flowing east and west from the Canary Islands.

Columbus' First Voyage to America: Route and Ships

The Asian islands near China and India were fabled for their spices and gold, making them an attractive destination for Europeans. Since Muslim domination of the trade routes through the Middle East made travel eastward difficult, Columbus devised a route to sail west across the Atlantic to reach Asia, believing it would be quicker and safer. He estimated the earth to be a sphere and the distance between the Canary Islands and Japan to be about 2,300 miles.

Many contemporary nautical experts disagreed. They adhered to the (now known to be accurate) second-century BC estimate of the Earth's circumference at 25,000 miles, which made the actual distance between the Canary Islands and Japan about 12,200 statute miles. Despite their disagreement with Columbus on matters of distance, they concurred that a westward voyage from Europe would be an uninterrupted water route.

Columbus proposed a three-ship voyage of discovery across the Atlantic first to the Portuguese king, then to Genoa and finally to Venice. He was rejected each time. In 1486, he went to the Spanish monarchy of Isabella of Castille and [Ferdinand of Aragon](#). Their focus was on a war with the Muslims, and their nautical experts were skeptical, so they initially rejected Columbus. The idea, however, must have intrigued the monarchs, for they kept Columbus on a retainer.

Columbus continued to lobby the royal court, and soon after the Spanish army captured the last Muslim stronghold in Granada in January of 1492. Shortly after, the monarchs agreed to finance his expedition. In August of 1492, Columbus left Spain with three ships. He was sailing in the Santa Maria, with the Pinta and the Niña alongside.

Where Did Columbus Land?

After 36 days of sailing westward across the Atlantic, Columbus and several crewmen set foot on an island in the [present day Bahamas](#), claiming it for Spain. There he encountered a timid but friendly group of natives who were open to trade with the sailors, exchanging glass beads, cotton balls, parrots and spears. The Europeans also noticed bits of gold the natives wore for adornment.

Columbus and his men continued their journey, visiting the islands of Cuba (which he thought was mainland China) and Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which Columbus thought might be Japan) and meeting with the leaders of the native population. During this time, the Santa Maria was wrecked on a reef off the coast of Hispaniola. With the help of some islanders, Columbus' men salvaged what they could and built the settlement Villa de la Navidad ("Christmas Town") with lumber from the ship. Thirty-nine men stayed behind to occupy the settlement. Convinced his exploration had reached Asia, he set sail for home with the two remaining ships. Returning to Spain in 1493, Columbus gave a glowing, somewhat exaggerated report and was warmly received by the royal court.

The Next Three Voyages to the Caribbean and Americas

Second voyage

In 1493, Columbus took to the seas on his second expedition and explored more islands in the Caribbean Ocean. Upon arrival at Hispaniola, Columbus and his crew discovered the Navidad settlement had been destroyed with all the sailors massacred.

Spurning the wishes of the queen, who found slavery offensive, Columbus established a forced labor policy over the native population to rebuild the settlement and explore for gold, believing it would prove to be profitable. His efforts produced small amounts of gold and great hatred among the native population. Before returning to Spain, Columbus left his brothers Bartholomew and Diego to govern the settlement on Hispaniola and sailed briefly around the larger Caribbean islands further convincing himself he had discovered the outer islands of China.

Third voyage

It wasn't until his third voyage that Columbus actually reached the mainland, exploring the Orinoco River in present-day Venezuela. Unfortunately, conditions at the Hispaniola settlement had deteriorated to the point of near-mutiny, with settlers claiming they had been misled by Columbus' claims of riches and complaining about the poor management of his brothers. The Spanish Crown sent a royal official who arrested Columbus and stripped him of his authority. He returned to Spain in chains to face the royal court. The charges were later dropped, but Columbus lost his titles as governor of the Indies and, for a time, much of the riches made during his voyages.

Fourth and final voyage

Convincing King Ferdinand that one more voyage would bring the abundant riches promised, Columbus went on what would be his last voyage in 1502, traveling along the eastern coast of Central America in an unsuccessful search for a route to the Indian Ocean. A storm wrecked one of his ships stranding the captain and his sailors on the island of Cuba. During this time, local islanders, tired of the Spaniards' poor treatment and obsession with gold, refused to give them food. In a spark of inspiration, Columbus consulted an almanac and devised a plan to "punish" the islanders by taking away the moon. On February 29, 1504, a lunar eclipse alarmed the natives enough to re-establish trade with the Spaniards. A rescue party finally arrived, sent by the royal governor of Hispaniola in July, and Columbus and his men were taken back to Spain in November of 1504.

Christopher Columbus' Death

In the two remaining years of his life following his last voyage to the Americas, Columbus struggled to recover his lost titles. Although he did regain some of his riches in May of 1505, his titles were never returned. He died May 20, 1506, still believing he had discovered a shorter route to Asia.

A Mixed Legacy

Columbus has been credited for opening up the Americas to European colonization as well as blamed for the destruction of the native peoples of the islands he explored.

Ultimately, he failed to find that what he set out for: a new route to Asia and the riches it promised.

In what is known as the Columbian Exchange, Columbus' expeditions set in motion the widespread transfer of people, plants, animals, diseases, and cultures that greatly affected nearly every society on the planet. The horse from Europe allowed Native American tribes in the Great Plains of North America to shift from a nomadic to a hunting lifestyle. Wheat from the Old World fast became a main food source for people in the Americas. Coffee from Africa and sugar cane from Asia became major cash crops for Latin American countries. And foods from the Americas, such as potatoes, tomatoes and corn, became staples for Europeans and helped increase their populations.

The Exchange also brought new diseases to both hemispheres, though the effects were greatest in the Americas. Smallpox from the Old World decimated millions of the Native American population to mere fractions of their original numbers. This more than any other factor made for European domination of the Americas.

The overwhelming benefits of the Exchange went to the Europeans initially and eventually to the rest of the world. The Americas were forever altered and the once vibrant and rich cultures of the Native American civilizations were changed and lost, denying the world any complete understanding of their existence.

Santa Maria Discovery Claim

In May 2014, Christopher Columbus made headlines as news broke that a team of archaeologists may have found the Santa Maria off the north coast of Haiti. Barry Clifford, the leader of this expedition, told the Independent newspaper that "all geographical, underwater topography and archaeological evidence strongly suggests this wreck is Columbus' famous flagship the Santa Maria." After a thorough investigation by the U.N. agency UNESCO, it was determined the wreck dates from a later period and was located too far from shore to be the Santa Maria.

Sir Francis Drake

English admiral Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe from 1577-1580, helped defeat the Spanish Armada of 1588 and was the most renowned seaman of the Elizabethan era.

Who Was Francis Drake?

Francis Drake, born around 1540-1544 in Devonshire, England, was involved in piracy and illicit slave trading before being chosen in 1577 as the leader of an expedition intended to pass around South America, through the Strait of Magellan, and explore the coast that lay beyond. Drake successfully completed the journey and was knighted by [Queen Elizabeth I](#) upon his triumphant return. In 1588 he saw action in the English defeat of the Spanish Armada, though he died in 1596 from dysentery after undertaking an unsuccessful raiding mission.

Early Years

Like many of his contemporaries, no birth records exist for Sir Francis Drake. It is believed he was born between 1540 and 1544, based on dates of later events.

Francis Drake was the eldest of 12 sons born to Mary Myllwaye (spelled "Mylwaye" in some cases) and Edmund Drake. Edmund was a farmer on the estate of Lord Francis Russell, the second earl of Bedford. Drake was eventually apprenticed to a merchant who sailed coastal waters trading goods between England and France. He took to navigation well and was soon enlisted by his relatives, the Hawkinses. They were privateers who prowled the shipping lanes off the French coast, seizing merchant ships.

Life as a Slave Trader and Privateer

By the 1560s, Drake was given command of his own ship, the *Judith*. With a small fleet, Drake and his cousin, [John Hawkins](#), sailed to Africa and worked illegally as slave traders. They then sailed to New Spain to sell their captives to settlers, an action that was against Spanish law. In 1568, Drake and Hawkins became trapped in the Mexican port of San Juan de Ulúa in a face off with the newly established Spanish viceroy's forces. The two escaped on their respective ships while scores of their men were killed. The incident instilled in Drake a deep hatred of the Spanish crown.

In 1572, Drake obtained a privateer's commission from Queen Elizabeth I, which was essentially a license to plunder any property belonging to [King Philip II](#) of Spain. That year Drake embarked on his first independent voyage to Panama from Plymouth, England. He planned to attack the town of Nombre de Dios, a drop-off point for Spanish ships bringing silver and gold from Peru. With two ships and a crew of 73 men, Drake captured the town. However, he was seriously wounded during the raid, so he and his

men withdrew without much treasure. They stayed in the area for a time, and after Drake's wounds healed, they raided several Spanish settlements, picking up much gold and silver. They returned to Plymouth in 1573.

Circumnavigating the Globe

With the success of the Panama expedition, Queen Elizabeth sent Drake out against the Spanish along the Pacific coast of South America in late 1577. She also clandestinely assigned him the task of exploring the Northwestern coast of North America, seeking a Northwest passage. Drake had five ships for the expedition. Among his men were John Winter, commander of one of the vessels, and officer Thomas Doughty. Major tensions flared between Drake and Doughty during the trip, potentially motivated by political intrigue. Upon arriving off the coast of Argentina, Drake had Doughty arrested with the accusation of planned mutiny. After a brief and possibly illegal trial, Doughty was convicted and beheaded.

Francis Drake then led the fleet into the Strait of Magellan to reach the Pacific Ocean. They were soon caught in a storm, with Winter's ship reversing course and returning to England. Continuing to face stormy weather, Drake remained in his flagship, the newly dubbed Golden Hind and only remaining vessel from the original squad, sailing up the coasts of Chile and Peru and plundering an unprotected Spanish merchant ship full of bullion. Drake reputedly landed off the coast of California, claiming it for Queen Elizabeth.

(There is some debate about Drake's voyages, with certain historians asserting that Drake deliberately recorded misleading geographical info. to cover the true scope of his travels from the Spanish. There has been conjecture that Drake in fact reached the Oregon coast or even as far north as British Columbia and Alaska. Even with the continuing debate, in 2012 the U.S. government officially recognized a cove in California's Point Reyes Peninsula as Drake's landing site, an action championed by the Drake Navigators Guild.)

After repairing the ship and replenishing food supplies, Drake set sail across the Pacific, through the Indian Ocean and around the Cape of Good Hope back to England, landing at Plymouth in 1580. Drake had thus become the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world. The treasure he captured made him a wealthy man, and the Queen knighted him in 1581. That year he also was appointed mayor of Plymouth and became a member of the House of Commons.

Battle With Spanish Armada

Between 1585 and 1586, relations between England and Spain grew worse. Elizabeth unleashed Drake on the Spanish in a series of raids that captured several cities in North

and South America, taking treasure and inflicting damage on Spanish morale. These acts were part of what prompted Spain's Philip II to invade England. He ordered the construction of a vast armada of warships, fully equipped and manned. In a preemptive strike, Drake conducted a raid on the Spanish city of Cadiz, destroying more than 30 ships and thousands of tons of supplies. English philosopher [Francis Bacon](#) would come to refer to this act as "singeing the king of Spain's beard."

In 1588, Drake was appointed vice admiral of the English Navy, under Lord Charles Howard. On July 21, 130 ships of the Spanish Armada entered the English Channel in a crescent formation. The English fleet sailed out to meet them, relying upon long-range cannon fire to significantly damage the armada over the ensuing days.

On July 27th, Spanish commander Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, the duke of Medina Sidonia, anchored the armada off the coast of Calais, France, in hopes of meeting up with Spanish soldiers who would join in the invasion. The next evening, Lord Howard and Sir Francis Drake organized fire ships to sail right into the Spanish fleet. They did little damage, but the ensuing panic caused some of the Spanish captains to cut anchor and scatter. Strong winds carried many of the ships towards the North Sea, and the English followed in pursuit.

At the Battle of Gravelines, the English began getting the better of the Spaniards. With the armada formation broken, the lumbering Spanish galleons were easy targets for the English ships, which could quickly move in to fire one or two well-aimed broadsides before scurrying off to safety. By late afternoon, the English pulled back. Due to weather and the presence of enemy forces, Medina Sidonia was forced to take the armada north around Scotland and back to Spain. As the fleet sailed away from the Scottish coast, a strong gale drove many ships onto the Irish rocks. Thousands of Spaniards drowned, and those who reached land were later executed by English authorities. Less than half of the original fleet returned to Spain, sustaining huge casualties.

Final Expeditions and Death

In 1589, Queen Elizabeth ordered Drake to seek out and destroy any remaining ships of the armada and help Portuguese rebels in Lisbon fight against Spanish occupiers. The expedition instead sustained major losses in terms of lives and resources. Drake returned home, and for the next several years busied himself with duties as mayor of Plymouth.

In 1595, the queen once again called upon Drake. He and his cousin Hawkins were to capture Spain's treasure supply in Panama, in hopes of cutting off revenue and ending the war. After defeat at Nombre de Dios, Drake's fleet moved farther west and anchored off the coast of Portobelo, Panama. There, Drake contracted dysentery and on January

28, 1596, died of a fever. He was buried in a lead coffin at sea near Portobelo. Divers continue to search for the coffin.

Vasco da Gama

Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama was commissioned by the Portuguese king to find a maritime route to the East. He was the first person to sail directly from Europe to India.

Who Was Vasco Da Gama

Explorer Vasco da Gama was born in Sines, Portugal, around 1460. In 1497, he was commissioned by the Portuguese king to find a maritime route to the East. His success in doing so proved to be one of the more instrumental moments in the history of navigation. He subsequently made two other voyages to India, and was appointed as Portuguese viceroy in India in 1524.

Early Years

Explorer Vasco da Gama was born into a noble family around 1460 in Sines, Portugal. Little is known about his upbringing except that he was the third son of Estêvão da Gama, who was commander of the fortress in Sines in the southwestern pocket of Portugal. When he was old enough, young Vasco da Gama joined the navy, where was taught how to navigate.

Known as a tough and fearless navigator, da Gama solidified his reputation as a reputable sailor when, in 1492, King John II of Portugal dispatched him to the south of Lisbon and then to the Algarve region of the country, to seize French ships as an act of vengeance against the French government for disrupting Portuguese shipping.

Following da Gama's completion of King John II's orders, in 1495, King Manuel took the throne, and the country revived its earlier mission to find a direct trade route to India. By this time, Portugal had established itself as one of the most powerful maritime countries in Europe.

Much of that was due to Henry the Navigator, who, at his base in the southern region of the country, had brought together a team of knowledgeable mapmakers, geographers and navigators. He dispatched ships to explore the western coast of Africa to expand Portugal's trade influence. He also believed that he could find and form an alliance with Prester John, who ruled over a Christian empire somewhere in Africa. Henry the Navigator never did locate Prester John, but his impact on Portuguese trade along Africa's east coast during his 40 years of explorative work was undeniable. Still, for all his work, the southern portion of Africa—what lay east—remained shrouded in mystery.

In 1487, an important breakthrough was made when Bartolomeu Dias discovered the southern tip of Africa and rounded the Cape of Good Hope. This journey was significant;

it proved, for the first time, that the Atlantic and Indian oceans were connected. The trip, in turn, sparked a renewed interest in seeking out a trade route to India.

By the late 1490s, however, King Manuel wasn't just thinking about commercial opportunities as he set his sights on the East. In fact, his impetus for finding a route was driven less by a desire to secure for more lucrative trading grounds for his country, and more by a quest to conquer Islam and establish himself as the king of Jerusalem.

First Voyage

Historians know little about why exactly da Gama, still an inexperienced explorer, was chosen to lead the expedition to India in 1497. On July 8 of that year, he captained a team of four vessels, including his flagship, the 200-ton *St. Gabriel*, to find a sailing route to India and the East.

To embark on the journey, da Gama pointed his ships south, taking advantage of the prevailing winds along the coast of Africa. His choice of direction was also a bit of a rebuke to Christopher Columbus, who had believed he'd found a route to India by sailing east.

Following several months of sailing, he rounded the Cape of Good Hope and began making his way up the eastern coast of Africa, toward the uncharted waters of the Indian Ocean. By January, as the fleet neared what is now Mozambique, many of da Gama's crewmembers were sick with scurvy, forcing the expedition to anchor for rest and repairs for nearly one month.

In early March of 1498, da Gama and his crew dropped their anchors in the port of Mozambique, a Muslim city-state that sat on the outskirts of the east coast of Africa and was dominated by Muslim traders. Here, da Gama was turned back by the ruling sultan, who felt offended by the explorer's modest gifts.

By early April, the fleet reached what is now Kenya, before setting sail on a 23-day run that would take them across the Indian Ocean. They reached Calicut, India, on May 20. But da Gama's own ignorance of the region, as well as his presumption that the residents were Christians, led to some confusion. The residents of Calicut were actually Hindu, a fact that was lost on da Gama and his crew, as they had not heard of the religion.

Still, the local Hindu ruler welcomed da Gama and his men, at first, and the crew ended up staying in Calicut for three months. Not everyone embraced their presence, especially Muslim traders who clearly had no intention of giving up their trading grounds to Christian visitors. Eventually, da Gama and his crew were forced to barter on the waterfront in order to secure enough goods for the passage home. In August of 1498, da Gama and his men took to the seas again, beginning their journey back to Portugal.

Da Gama's timing could not have been worse; his departure coincided with the start of a monsoon. By early 1499, several crewmembers had died of scurvy and in an effort to economize his fleet, da Gama ordered one of his ships to be burned. The first ship in the fleet didn't reach Portugal until July 10, nearly a full year after they'd left India.

In all, da Gama's first journey covered nearly 24,000 miles in close to two years, and only 54 of the crew's original 170 members survived.

Second Voyage

When da Gama returned to Lisbon, he was greeted as a hero. In an effort to secure the trade route with India and usurp Muslim traders, Portugal dispatched another team of vessels, headed by Pedro Álvares Cabral. The crew reached India in just six months, and the voyage included a firefight with Muslim merchants, where Cabral's crew killed 600 men on Muslim cargo vessels. More important for his home country, Cabral established the first Portuguese trading post in India.

In 1502, Vasco da Gama helmed another journey to India that included 20 ships. Ten of the ships were directly under his command, with his uncle and nephew helming the others. In the wake of Cabral's success and battles, the king charged da Gama to further secure Portugal's dominance in the region.

To do so, da Gama embarked on one of the most gruesome massacres of the exploration age. He and his crew terrorized Muslim ports up and down the African east coast, and at one point, set ablaze a Muslim ship returning from Mecca, killing the several hundreds of people (including women and children) who were on board. Next, the crew moved to Calicut, where they wrecked the city's trade port and killed 38 hostages. From there, they moved to the city of Cochin, a city south of Calicut, where da Gama formed an alliance with the local ruler.

Finally, on February 20, 1503, da Gama and his crew began to make their way home. They reached Portugal on October 11 of that year.

Later Years

Little was recorded about da Gama's return home and the reception that followed, though it has been speculated that the explorer felt miffed at the recognition and compensation for his exploits.

Married at this time, and the father of six sons, da Gama settled into retirement and family life. He maintained contact with King Manuel, advising him on Indian matters, and was named count of Vidigueira in 1519. Late in life, after the death of King Manuel, da Gama was asked to return to India, in an effort to contend with the growing corruption

from Portuguese officials in the country. In 1524, King John III named da Gama Portuguese viceroy in India.

That same year, da Gama died in Cochin—the result, it has been speculated, from possibly overworking himself. His body was sailed back to Portugal, and buried there, in 1538.

Juan Ponce de Leon

While on a quest for gold, Juan Ponce de León founded the oldest settlement in Puerto Rico and landed on the mainland of North America, a region he dubbed “Florida.”

Synopsis

Born in Spain in 1460, Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León led a European expedition for gold, which eventually brought him to the southeast coast of what would become the United States. He gave Florida its name and went on to become the first governor of Puerto Rico.

Early Years

Juan Ponce de León was born into a poor yet noble family in Santervás de Campos, Spain, in 1460. He served as a page at the court of Aragon, where he learned social skills, religion and military tactics. He eventually became a soldier and fought against the the Moors in Granada. Like other conquistadores, Ponce de León soon sought fame and fortune through exploration, and it is believed he began his quest as part of [Christopher Columbus](#)'s second expedition in 1493. During his later explorations, he employed the skills and tactics he'd learned in the military to subdue and control the native peoples of the Caribbean.

Hispaniola and Puerto Rico

In the first decade of 1500, Ponce de León built settlements in Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), started farms and constructed defenses in hopes of establishing an island colony for Spain. His efforts paid off and he prospered well, selling produce and livestock to Spanish ships returning home. After helping suppress a native Carib uprising in Hispaniola, in 1504 Ponce de León was named the provincial governor of the eastern part of the country. On a return trip to Spain around this time, he married a woman named Leonora, with whom he would eventually have three children.

But hearing persistent reports of gold on nearby Puerto Rico, in 1508 the Spanish crown officially sent Ponce de León to explore the island. (Some accounts speculate his ambitions may have led him to *unofficially* explore the area two years earlier.) He took 50 soldiers and a single ship, settling near what is now San Juan. A year later, he returned to Hispaniola, having found much gold and opportunity. The expedition was deemed a success, and he was named governor of Puerto Rico.

Encouraged by his profits, the Spanish crown instructed Ponce de León to continue settlement of the island and step up gold-mining efforts. He soon returned to Puerto Rico, bringing his wife and children. As he did on Hispaniola, Ponce de León

established a successful settlement by using a large number of slaves as labor. Although some historical accounts make mention of his relatively nonviolent treatment of the native population, the overall effect of enslaving Tainos and the introduction of diseases like smallpox and measles was disastrous to the native population.

But despite his gains on the island, in 1509 a struggle between the son of Christopher Columbus and the Spanish crown resulted in Ponce de León losing his governorship of Puerto Rico.

The Fountain of Youth and the Naming of Florida

Though the Spanish crown had given some ground to Ponce de León's rivals, King Ferdinand wished to reward him for his loyal services. In 1512, the king encouraged him to continue searching for new lands, in hopes of finding yet more gold and expanding the Spanish empire. Around this time, Ponce de León learned of a Caribbean island called Bimini, on which it was rumored there were miraculous waters purported to be a "fountain of youth." The fable was familiar on both sides of the Atlantic, alleging the spring was in the Garden of Eden, which many believed was located in Asia (early Spaniards believed America to be Asia).

Though the pursuit of a fountain of youth is often cited as the motivating force behind his expedition, Ponce de León was able to strike a substantially lucrative deal with the crown to mount it. He would hold exclusive rights and be declared governor for life of any lands he came across. Conspicuously, there was no mention of a fountain of youth in the crown's orders, and recent research shows that such a quest was only associated with his name after his death.

In March 1513, Ponce de León led an expedition, at his own expense, of three ships and more than 200 men to Bimini from Puerto Rico. In a month's time, he and his men landed on the east coast of Florida. Not realizing he was on the mainland of North America, he thought he had landed on another island. He named the region Florida (meaning "flowery"), in reference to its lush floral vegetation and because he discovered it at Easter time, which Spaniards referred to as *Pascua Florida* ("feast of flowers").

Though often credited with "discovering" Florida, Ponce de León merely landed in an area that had been inhabited by people for a considerably long time. In addition, he was not the first European to explore the area. Spanish slave expeditions had raided the Bahamas on a regular basis for years prior, and there is evidence that some made it as far as the east coast of Florida.

Upon returning to Puerto Rico later that year, Ponce de León found the island in chaos. A neighboring tribe of Caribs had burned the settlement to the ground and killed several Spaniards. His own house was destroyed and his family had narrowly escaped death.

Further Exploits and Death

In 1514, Ponce de León returned to Spain, where he reported on his discoveries and was named military governor of Bimini and Florida, securing permission to colonize those regions. The Spanish crown also ordered him to organize a small army to subdue a native uprising on Puerto Rico that had continued in his absence. He left Spain with a small fleet in May 1515. Historical accounts of his encounters with the Caribs on Puerto Rico are vague, but it seems there was a series of military engagements with no clear outcome. Ponce de León eventually broke off hostilities upon learning that his major supporter, King Ferdinand, had died in Spain, and he quickly returned to protect his claims and titles. He stayed there for two years, until he finally received assurances that his financial empire was secure and returned to Puerto Rico.

In February 1521, Ponce de León left Puerto Rico for a second exploration of Florida. Records are scarce, but some accounts describe a poorly organized trip. The expedition landed somewhere on the western side of the Florida peninsula, where it was soon attacked by Calusa warriors. Ponce de León was wounded in the confrontation, possibly by a poison arrow to his thigh. The expedition sailed back to Cuba, where he died in July 1521.

Legacy

Juan Ponce de León was a product of his time—ambitious, hardworking and ruthless when the occasion called for it. He built a small financial empire that helped advance Spanish colonization in the Caribbean, and he might have gone even further had he been able to avoid political intrigue with the Columbus family.

Many historical sources agree that he treated the native people under his control better than most conquistadors. However, enslavement and disease took a very heavy toll on these populations and he faced several violent uprisings during his tenure as governor.

Ponce de León will forever be associated with the fountain of youth, even though there is no record that he deliberately searched for it. Though he acknowledges the existence of the fable in his memoir, he was by all accounts far too practical a man to waste time on such a fantasy amidst the building of his fortune.

Ferdinand Magellan

While in the service of Spain, the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan led the first European voyage of discovery to circumnavigate the globe.

Synopsis

Ferdinand Magellan was born in Portugal, circa 1480. As a boy, he studied mapmaking and navigation. By his mid-20s, he was sailing in large fleets and was engaged in combat. In 1519, with the support of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Magellan set out to find a better route to the Spice Islands. He assembled a fleet of ships which, despite huge setbacks and Magellan's death, circumnavigated the world in a single voyage.

Early Life

Ferdinand Magellan was born in Portugal, either in the city of Porto or in Sabrosa, circa 1480. His parents were members of the Portuguese nobility and after their deaths, Magellan became a page for the queen, at age 10. He studied at Queen Leonora's School of Pages in Lisbon and spent his days poring over texts on cartography, astronomy, and celestial navigation—subjects that would serve him well in his later pursuits.

Navigator and Explorer

In 1505, when Ferdinand Magellan was in his mid-20s, he joined a Portuguese fleet that was sailing to East Africa. By 1509, he found himself at the Battle of Diu, in which the Portuguese destroyed Egyptian ships in the Arabian Sea. Two years later, he explored Malacca, located in present-day Malaysia, and participated in the conquest of Malacca's port. It was there that he acquired a native servant he named Enrique. It is possible that Magellan sailed as far as the Moluccas, islands in Indonesia, then called the Spice Islands. The Moluccas were the original source of some of the world's most valuable spices, including cloves and nutmeg. The conquest of spice-rich countries was, as a result, a source of much European competition.

While serving in Morocco, in 1513, Magellan was wounded, and walked the remainder of his life with a limp. After his injury, he was falsely accused of trading illegally with the Moors, and despite all of his service to Portugal, and his many pleas to the king, any further offers of employment were withheld from him.

In 1517, Magellan moved to Seville, Spain, to offer his skills to the Spanish court. His departure from Portugal came at an opportune time. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) declared all newly discovered and yet to be discovered territories east of the

demarcation line (46°30' W) were given to Portugal and all territories west of the line were given to Spain. In the three years following his departure from Portugal, Magellan had religiously studied all of the most recent navigation charts. Like all navigators of the time, he understood from Greek texts that the world was round. He believed that he could find a shorter route to the Spice Islands by sailing west, across the Atlantic Ocean, around South America and across the Pacific. This was not a new idea, Christopher Columbus and Vasco Núñez de Balboa had paved the way, but such a voyage would give the Spanish open access to the Spice Islands without having to travel across areas controlled by the Portuguese. .

Final Years

Ferdinand Magellan presented his plan to King Charles I of Spain (soon to become Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire), who gave his blessing. On September 20, 1519, he set out with a fleet of five fully supplied ships, but hardly adequate to sail the distances he proposed. The fleet sailed first to Brazil and then down the coast of South America to Patagonia. There an attempted mutiny took place and one of the ships was wrecked. Despite the setback, the crew continued on with the four remaining vessels.

By October 1520, Magellan and his men had entered what is now called the Strait of Magellan. It took them over a month to pass through the strait, during which time the master of one of the ships deserted and sailed back home. The remaining ships sailed across the Pacific Ocean. In March 1521, the fleet anchored in Guam.

Later in March, 1521, Magellan' fleet reached Homonhom Island on the edge of the Philippines with less than 150 of the 270 men who started the expedition. Magellan traded with Rajah Humabon, the island king, and a bond was quickly formed. The Spanish crew soon became involved in a war between Humabon and another rival leader and Magellan was killed in battle on April 27, 1521.

The remaining crew escaped the Philippines and continued on towards the Spice Islands, arriving in November, 1521. The Spanish commander of the last ship, the Victoria, set sail December and reached Spain on September 8, 1522.

The Controversy over Who was First

There has been considerable debate around who were the first persons to circumnavigate the globe. The easy answer is Juan Sabastian Elcano and the

remaining crew of Magellan's fleet starting from Spain on September 20, 1519, and returning in September 1522. But there is another candidate who might have gone around the world before them—Magellan's servant Enrique. In 1511, Magellan was on a voyage for Portugal to the Spice Islands and participated in the conquest of Malacca where he acquired his servant Enrique. Fast forward ten years later, Enrique is with Magellan in the Philippines. After Magellan's death, it is reported that Enrique was grief stricken and when he found out he was not going to be freed, contrary to Magellan's will, he ran away. At this point the record gets murky. Some accounts state Enrique fled into the forest. Official Spanish records list Enrique as one of the men massacred in the attack, but some historians question the records' credibility or accuracy, citing a bias against native people.

So, it is possible that if Enrique had survived after his escape, he might have made his way back to Malacca where he was originally enslaved by Magellan back in 1511. If true, it would mean Enrique—not Elcano and the surviving members of the crew—was the first person to circumnavigate the globe, albeit not in a single voyage.

Hernando de Soto

Hernando de Soto was a Spanish explorer and conquistador who participated in the conquests of Central America and Peru and discovered the Mississippi River.

Synopsis

Hernando de Soto was born c. 1500 in Jerez de los Caballeros, Spain. In the early 1530s, while on Francisco Pizarro's expedition, de Soto helped conquer Peru. In 1539 he set out for North America, where he discovered the Mississippi River. De Soto died of fever on May 21, 1542, in Ferriday, Louisiana. In his will, de Soto named Luis de Moscoso Alvarado the new leader of the expedition.

Early Life

Explorer and conquistador Hernando de Soto was born c. 1500 to a noble but poor family in Jerez de los Caballeros, Spain. He was raised at the family manor. A generous patron named Pedro Arias Dávila funded de Soto's education at the University of Salamanca. De Soto's family hoped he would become a lawyer, but he told his father he would rather explore the West Indies.

In accordance with his wish, the young de Soto was invited to join Dávila, governor of Darién, on his 1514 expedition to the West Indies. An excellent horseman, de Soto was appointed captain of a cavalry exploration troop. Setting out from Panama to Nicaragua and later Honduras, de Soto quickly proved his worth as an explorer and trader, reaping large profits through his bold and commanding exchanges with the natives.

Conquest of Peru

In 1532, explorer Francisco Pizarro made de Soto second in command on Pizarro's expedition to explore and conquer Peru. While exploring the country's highlands in 1533, de Soto came upon a road leading to Cuzco, the capital of Peru's Incan Empire. De Soto played a fundamental role in organizing the conquest of Peru, and engaged in a successful battle to capture Cuzco.

In 1536 de Soto returned to Spain a wealthy man. His share of the Incan Empire's fortune amounted to no less than 18,000 ounces of gold. De Soto settled into a comfortable life in Seville and married the daughter of his old patron Dávila a year after returning from Peru.

Exploring North America

Despite having a new wife and home in Spain, de Soto grew restless when he heard stories about Cabeza de Vaca's exploration of Florida and the other Gulf Coast states. Enticed by the riches and fertile land de Vaca had allegedly encountered there, de Soto

sold all his belongings and used the money to prepare for an expedition to North America. He assembled a fleet of 10 ships and selected a crew of 700 men based on their fighting prowess.

On April 6, 1538, de Soto and his fleet departed Sanlúcar. On their way to the United States, de Soto and his fleet stopped in Cuba. While there, they were delayed by helping the city of Havana recover after the French sacked and burned it. By May 18, 1539, de Soto and his fleet at last set out for Florida. On May 25 they landed at Tampa Bay. For the next three years de Soto and his men explored the southeastern United States, facing ambushes and enslaving natives along the way. After Florida came Georgia and then Alabama. In Alabama, de Soto encountered his worst battle yet, against Indians in Tuscaloosa. Victorious, de Soto and his men next headed westward, serendipitously discovering the mouth of the Mississippi River in the process. De Soto's voyage would, in fact, mark the first time that a European team of explorers had traveled via the Mississippi River.

Death

After crossing the Mississippi de Soto was struck with fever. He died on May 21, 1542, in Ferriday, Louisiana. Members of his crew sank his body in the river that he had discovered. By that time, almost half of de Soto's men had been taken out by disease or in battle against the Indians. In his will, de Soto named Luis de Moscoso Alvarado the new leader of the expedition.

Amerigo Vespucci

America was named after Amerigo Vespucci, a Florentine navigator and explorer who played a prominent role in exploring the New World.

Synopsis

Explorer Amerigo Vespucci was born March 9, 1451, (some scholars say 1454) in Florence, Italy. On May 10, 1497, he embarked on his first voyage. On his third and most successful voyage, he discovered present-day Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata. Believing he had discovered a new continent, he called South America the New World. In 1507, America was named after him. He died of malaria in Seville, Spain, on February 22, 1512.

Early Life

Navigator and explorer Amerigo Vespucci, the third son in a cultured family, was born on March 9, 1451, (some scholars say 1454) in Florence, Italy. Although born in Italy, Vespucci became a naturalized citizen of Spain in 1505.

Vespucci and his parents, Ser Nastagio and Lisabetta Mini, were friends of the wealthy and tempestuous Medici family, who ruled Italy from the 1400s to 1737. Vespucci's father worked as a notary in Florence. While his older brothers headed off to the University of Pisa in Tuscany, Vespucci received his early education from his paternal uncle, a Dominican friar named Giorgio Antonio Vespucci.

When Amerigo Vespucci was in his early 20s, another uncle, Guido Antonio Vespucci, gave him one of the first of his many jobs. Guido Antonio Vespucci, who was ambassador of Florence under King Louis XI of France, sent his nephew on a brief diplomatic mission to Paris. The trip likely awakened Vespucci's fascination with travel and exploration.

Before Exploration

In the years before Vespucci embarked on his first voyage of exploration, he held a string of other jobs. When Vespucci was 24 years old, his father pressured him to go into business. Vespucci obliged. At first he undertook a variety of business endeavors in Florence. Later, he moved on to a banking business in Seville, Spain, where he formed a partnership with another man from Florence, named Gianetto Berardi. According to some accounts, from 1483 to 1492, Vespucci worked for the Medici family. During that time he is said to have learned that explorers were looking for a northwest passage through the Indies.

In the late 1490s, Vespucci became affiliated with merchants who supplied Christopher Columbus on his later voyages. In 1496, after Columbus returned from his voyage to America, Vespucci had the opportunity to meet him in Seville. The conversation piqued Vespucci's interest in seeing the world with his own eyes. By the late 1490s, Vespucci's business was struggling to make a profit anyway. Vespucci knew that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain were willing to fund subsequent voyages by other explorers. Then in his 40s, Vespucci, enticed by the prospect of fame, decided to leave his business behind and become an explorer before it was too late.

Voyages

According to a letter that Vespucci might or might not have truly written, on May 10, 1497, he embarked on his first journey, departing from Cadiz with a fleet of Spanish ships. The controversial letter indicates that the ships sailed through the West Indies and made their way to the mainland of Central America within approximately five weeks. If the letter is authentic, this would mean that Vespucci discovered Venezuela a year before Christopher Columbus did. Vespucci and his fleets arrived back in Cadiz in October 1498.

In May of 1499, sailing under the Spanish flag, Vespucci embarked on his next expedition, as a navigator under the command of Alonzo de Ojeda. Crossing the equator, they traveled to the coast of what is now Guyana, where it is believed that Vespucci left Ojeda and went on to explore the coast of Brazil. During this journey Vespucci is said to have discovered the Amazon River and Cape St. Augustine.

On May 14, 1501, Vespucci departed on another trans-Atlantic journey. Now on his third voyage, Vespucci set sail for Cape Verde—this time in service to King Manuel I of Portugal. Vespucci's third voyage is largely considered his most successful. While Vespucci did not start out commanding the expedition, when Portuguese officers asked him to take charge of the voyage he agreed. Vespucci's ships sailed along the coast of South America from Cape São Roque to Patagonia. Along the way, they discovered present-day Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata. Vespucci and his fleets headed back via Sierra Leone and the Azores. Believing he had discovered a new continent, in a letter to Florence, Vespucci called South America the New World. His claim was largely based on Christopher Columbus' earlier conclusion: In 1498, when passing the mouth of the Orinoco River, Columbus had determined that such a big outpouring of fresh water must come from land "of continental proportions." Vespucci decided to start recording his accomplishments, writing that accounts of his voyages would allow him to leave "some fame behind me after I die."

On June 10, 1503, sailing again under the Portuguese flag, Vespucci, accompanied by Gonzal Coelho, headed back to Brazil. When the expedition didn't make any new

discoveries, the fleet disbanded. To Vespucci's chagrin, the commander of the Portuguese ship was suddenly nowhere to be found. Despite the circumstances, Vespucci forged ahead, managing to discover Bahia and the island of South Georgia in the process. Soon after, he was forced to prematurely abort the voyage and return to Lisbon, Portugal, in 1504.

There is some speculation as to whether Vespucci made additional voyages. Based on Vespucci's accounts, some historians believe that he embarked on a fifth and sixth voyage with Juan de la Cosa, in 1505 and 1507, respectively. Other accounts indicate that Vespucci's fourth journey was his last.

America's Namesake

In 1507, some scholars at Saint-Dié-des-Vosges in northern France were working on a geography book called *Cosmographiæ Introductio*, which contained large cut-out maps that the reader could use to create his or her own globes. German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller, one of the book's authors, proposed that the newly discovered Brazilian portion of the New World be labeled America, the feminine version of the name Amerigo, after Amerigo Vespucci. The gesture was his means of honoring the person who discovered it, and indeed granted Vespucci the legacy of being America's namesake.

Decades later, in 1538, the mapmaker Mercator, working off the maps created at St-Dié, chose to mark the name America on both the northern and the southern parts of the continent, instead of just the southern portion. While the definition of America expanded to include more territory, Vespucci seemed to gain credit for areas that most would agree were actually first discovered by Christopher Columbus.

Final Years

In 1505, Vespucci, who was born and raised in Italy, became a naturalized citizen of Spain. Three years later, he was awarded the office of *piloto mayor*, or master navigator, of Spain. In this role, Vespucci's job was to recruit and train other navigators, as well as to gather data on continued New World exploration. Vespucci held the position for the remainder of his life.

On February 22, 1512, Amerigo Vespucci died of malaria in Seville, Spain. He was just a month shy of 58 years old.

Hernan Cortez

Hernán Cortés, marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, was a Spanish conquistador who overthrew the Aztec empire and won Mexico for the crown of Spain.

Synopsis

Born around 1485, Hernán Cortés was a Spanish conquistador and explorer who defeated the Aztec empire and claimed Mexico for Spain. He first set sail to the New World at the age of 19. Cortés later joined an expedition to Cuba. In 1518, he set off to explore Mexico. There he strategically aligned some native peoples against others to overthrow them. King Charles I appointed him governor of New Spain in 1522. Cortés died in Spain in 1547.

Early Life

Hernán Cortés, marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, was born around 1485 in Medellín, Spain, and helped advance Spain's position in North America in the 1500s. He came from a lesser noble family in Spain. Some reports indicate that he studied at the University of Salamanca for a time.

In 1504, Cortés left Spain to seek his fortune in New World. He traveled to the island of Santo Domingo, or Hispaniola. Settling in the new town of Azúa, Cortés served as a notary for several years. He joined an expedition of Cuba led by Diego Velázquez in 1511. There, Cortés worked in the civil government and served as the mayor of Santiago for a time.

Conquered the Aztecs

In 1518, Cortés was to command his own expedition to Mexico, but Velázquez canceled it. Cortés ignored the order and set sail for Mexico with more than 500 men and 11 ships that fall. In February 1519, the expedition reached the Mexican coast.

Cortés became allies with some of the native peoples he encountered, but with others he used deadly force to conquer Mexico. He fought Tlaxacan and Cholula warriors and then set his sights on taking over the Aztec empire. He marched to Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital and home to ruler Montezuma II. Cortés took Montezuma hostage and his soldiers raided the city. Cortés left the city after learning that Spanish troops were coming to arrest him for disobeying orders.

After facing off against Spanish forces, Cortés returned to Tenochtitlán to find a rebellion in progress. The Aztecs eventually drove the Spanish from the city, but Cortés returned again to defeat them and take the city in 1521. King Charles I of Spain (also

known as Holy Roman Emperor Charles V) appointed him the governor of New Spain the following year.

Later Years

After his victory over the Aztecs, Cortés faced challenges to his authority and position. He traveled to Honduras in 1524 to stop a rebellion against him in the area. Back in Mexico, Cortés found himself removed from power. He traveled to Spain to plead his case to the king, but he was not reappointed to his governorship.

In 1540, Cortés retired to Spain. He spent much of his later years seeking recognition for his achievements and support from the Spanish royal court. Cortés died in Spain in 1547.

Francisco Pizarro

Spanish explorer and conquistador Francisco Pizarro helped Vasco Núñez de Balboa discover the Pacific Ocean, and after conquering Peru, founded its capital city, Lima.

Synopsis

Francisco Pizarro was born circa 1476 in Trujillo, Spain. In 1513, he joined Vasco Núñez de Balboa in his march to the "South Sea," during which Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean. In 1532, Pizarro and his brothers conquered Peru. Three years later, Pizarro founded the nation's new capital, Lima. Pizarro was assassinated on June 26, 1541, in Lima, Peru, by vengeful members of an enemy faction of conquistadors.

Early Years

Conquistador Francisco Pizarro was born, an illegitimate child, circa 1476, in Trujillo, Spain—an area stricken by poverty. His father, Captain Gonzalo Pizarro, was a poor farmer. His mother, Francisca González, was of humble heritage. Pizarro grew up without learning how to read. Instead, he herded his father's pigs.

As young man, Pizarro heard tales of the New World and was seized by a lust for fortune and adventure. In 1510, he accompanied Spanish explorer Alonso de Ojeda on a voyage to Urabá, Colombia. Although the expedition was unfruitful, Pizarro proved he could be relied on in a bind.

March to the Sea

In 1513, Pizarro joined conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa in his march to the "South Sea," across the Isthmus of Panama. During their journey, Balboa and Pizarro discovered what is now known as the Pacific Ocean, although Balboa allegedly spied it first, and was therefore credited with the ocean's first European discovery.

Ironically, Pizarro later arrested Balboa under the orders of Pedro Arias de Ávila (also known as Pedrarias), Balboa's rival and a known tyrant. Afterward, Pizarro stayed in Panama for a time, where he was awarded an estate, served as mayor of Panama City and amassed a small fortune.

Reconnaissance Voyages

In 1524, Pizarro teamed up with navigator Diego de Almagro and a priest named Fernando de Luque. The first of their reconnaissance voyages went as far as the San Juan River. The next gave Pizarro the chance to explore further south along the coast. In the meantime, Pizarro's chief navigator, Bartolomé Ruiz, forged across the equator and then returned with word of those regions south of the equator.

Conquering Peru

In 1528, Pizarro went back to Spain and managed to procure a commission from Emperor Charles V. Pizarro was to conquer the southern territory and establish a new Spanish province there. In 1532, accompanied by his brothers, Pizarro overthrew the Inca leader Atahualpa and conquered Peru. Three years later, he founded the new capital city of Lima.

Over time, tensions increasingly built up between the conquistadors who had originally conquered Peru and those who arrived later to stake some claim in the new Spanish province. As a result, conquistadors were torn into two factions—one run by Pizarro, and the other by his former associate, Diego Almagro. After taking Cuzco, Almagro engaged Pizarro and his brothers in the Battle of Las Salinas. Upon the Pizarro brothers' victory, in 1538, Hernando Pizarro captured and executed Almagro. On June 26, 1541, in Lima, Peru, members of the defeated party avenged Almagro's death by assassinating Francisco Pizarro

Bartolomeu Dias

Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias led the first European expedition round the Cape of Good Hope in 1488.

Synopsis

Born in 1450, Bartolomeu Dias was sent by Portuguese King John II to explore the coast of Africa and find a way to the Indian Ocean. Dias departed circa August 1487, rounding the southernmost tip of Africa in January, 1488. The Portuguese (possibly Dias himself) named this point of land the Cape of Good Hope. Dias was lost at sea during another expedition around the Cape in 1500.

An ambitious plan

Almost nothing is known about the life of Bartolomeu de Novaes Dias before 1487, except that he was at the court of João II, king of Portugal (1455-1495), and was a superintendent of the royal warehouses. He likely had much more sailing experience than his one recorded stint aboard the warship *São Cristóvão*. Dias was probably in his mid- to late 30s in 1486 when João appointed him to head an expedition in search of a sea route to India.

João was entranced by the legend of Prester John, a mysterious and probably apocryphal 12th-century leader of a nation of Christians somewhere in Africa. João sent out a pair of explorers, Afonso de Paiva (c. 1460-c. 1490) and Pêro da Covilhã (c. 1450-c. 1526), to search overland for the Christian kingdom in Ethiopia. João also wanted to find a way around the southernmost point of Africa's coastline, so just a few

months after dispatching the overland explorers, he sponsored Dias in an African expedition.

In August 1487, Dias' trio of ships departed from the port of Lisbon, Portugal. Dias followed the route of 15th-century Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão (c. 1450-c. 1486), who had followed the coast of Africa as far as present-day Cape Cross, Namibia. Dias' cargo included the standard "padrões," the limestone markers used to stake Portuguese claims on the continent. Padrões were planted at the shoreline and served as guideposts to previous Portuguese explorations of the coast.

Dias' expedition party included six Africans who had been brought to Portugal by earlier explorers. Dias dropped off the Africans at different ports along the coastline of Africa with supplies of gold and silver and messages of goodwill from the Portuguese to the indigenous people. The last two Africans were left at a place the Portuguese sailors called Angra do Salto, probably in modern Angola, and the expedition's supply ship was left there under guard of nine men.

Expedition Around South Africa

In early January 1488, as Dias' two ships sailed off the coast of South Africa, storms blew them away from the coast. Dias is thought to have ordered a turn to the south of about 28 degrees, probably because he had prior knowledge of southeasterly winds that would take him around the tip of Africa and keep his ships from being dashed on the notoriously rocky shoreline. João and his predecessors had obtained navigational intelligence, including a 1460 map from Venice that showed the Indian Ocean on the other side of Africa.

Dias' decision was risky, but it worked. The crew spotted landfall on February 3, 1488, about 300 miles east of present-day Cape of Good Hope. They found a bay they called São Bras (present-day Mossel Bay) and the much warmer waters of the Indian Ocean. From the shoreline, indigenous Khoikhoi pelted Dias' ships with stones until an arrow fired by either Dias or one of his men felled a tribesman. Dias ventured further along the coastline, but his crew was nervous about the dwindling food supplies and urged him to turn back. As mutiny loomed, Dias appointed a council to decide the matter. The members came to the agreement that they would permit him to sail another three days, then turn back. At Kwaihoek, in present-day Eastern Cape province, they planted a padrão on March 12, 1488, which marked the easternmost point of Portuguese exploration.

On the journey back, Dias observed the southernmost point of Africa, later called Cabo das Agulhas, or Cape of Needles. Dias named the rocky second cape Cabo das

Tormentas (Cape of Storms) for the tempestuous storms and strong Atlantic-Antarctic currents that made ship travel so perilous.

Back in Angra do Salto, Dias and his crew were aghast to find that only three of the nine men left guarding the food ship had survived repeated attacks by locals; a seventh man died on the journey home. In Lisbon, after 15 months at sea and a journey of nearly 16,000 miles, the returning mariners were met by triumphant crowds. In a private meeting with the king, however, Dias was forced to explain his failure to meet up with Paiva and Covilhã. Despite his immense achievement, Dias was never again put in a position of authority. João ordered that henceforth, maps would show the new name for Cabo das Tormentas--Cabo da Boa Esperança, or Cape of Good Hope.

Advisor to Vasco da Gama

Following his expedition, Dias settled for a time in Guinea in West Africa, where Portugal had established a gold-trading site. João's successor, Manuel I (1469-1521), ordered Dias to serve as a shipbuilding consultant for the expedition of Vasco da Gama (c. 1460-1524).

Dias sailed with the da Gama expedition as far as the Cape Verde Islands, then returned to Guinea. Da Gama's ships reached their goal of India in May 1498, nearly a decade after Dias' historic trip around the tip of Africa.

Afterward, Manuel sent out a massive fleet to India under Pedro Álvares Cabral (c. 1467-c. 1520), and Dias captained four of the ships. They reached Brazil in March 1500, then headed across the Atlantic toward South Africa and, further ahead, the Indian subcontinent. At the feared Cabo das Tormentas, storms struck the fleet of 13 ships. In May 1500, four of the ships were wrecked, including Dias', with all crew lost at sea.

Leif Eriksson

Norse explorer Leif Eriksson is credited with being the first European to reach North America.

Synopsis

Born in the 10th century, Norse explorer Leif Eriksson was the second son of Erik the Red, who is credited with settling Greenland. For his part, Eriksson is considered by many to be the first European to reach North America, centuries ahead of Christopher Columbus. However, the details of his voyage are a matter of historical debate, with one version claiming his landing accidental and another that he had sailed there intentionally after learning of the region from earlier explorers. In either case, Eriksson eventually returned to Greenland, where he had been commissioned by Norwegian king Olaf I Trygvason to spread Christianity and is believed to have died circa 1020. In the early 1960s, the discovery of the ruins of a Viking settlement in Newfoundland lent further weight to accounts of Eriksson's voyage, and in 1964 the United States Congress authorized the president to proclaim each October 9 as Leif Eriksson Day.

Leif the Mysterious

Although various accounts exist, the differences in their details often make it difficult to separate fact and legend when discussing the life of Norse explorer Leif Eriksson. He is believed to have been born circa 960–970 A.D., the second of three sons of [Erik the Red](#), who founded the first European settlement on what is now Greenland. As Erik the Red's father had been banished from Norway and settled in Iceland, it is likely that Leif was born there and raised in Greenland. However, from here the facts become as diverse as the spelling of his name.

Vinland

By most accounts, around the year 1000, Eriksson sailed from Greenland to Norway where he served in the court of King Olaf I Trygvason, who converted him from Norse paganism to Christianity. Soon thereafter, Olaf commissioned Eriksson to proselytize across Greenland and spread Christianity to the settlers there as well. Although Eriksson would eventually make it back to Greenland, it is the details and motives of his return route that are the subject of most debate.

In the 13th-century Icelandic account *The Saga of Erik the Red*, Eriksson's ships are said to have drifted off course on the return voyage home, finding dry ground at last on the North American continent. They are most likely to have disembarked in what is now Nova Scotia, which Eriksson named Vinland, perhaps in reference to the wild grapes that his landing party saw there. However, *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, which dates

to the same era, suggests that Eriksson had heard already learned of “Vinland” from another seamen, Bjarni Herjólfsson, who had already been there more than a decade earlier, and that Eriksson sailed there on purpose, landing first in an icy region he named “Helluland” (believed now to be Baffin Island) and the heavily forested “Markland” (thought to be Labrador) before eventually making his way eventually to the more hospitable Vinland.

Whatever his motives, or the lack thereof, Eriksson is generally credited as the first European to set foot on the shores of North America, nearly five centuries before [Christopher Columbus](#) would arrive in 1492. But all suggest that Eriksson was most likely a member of an early Viking voyage to North America, if not, in fact, the leader of that first expedition.

Return

Despite his exploration, Eriksson would never colonize the region, nor did his brothers Thorvald Eriksson and Freydis Eiríksdóttir or Icelander Thorfinn Karlsefni, who visited Vinland after Eriksson. Returning to Greenland, Eriksson spent his efforts spreading Christianity. His mother, Thjodhild, became an early convert and built Greenland’s first Christian church, at Brattahlid, Erik the Red’s home in the east of the settlement. As for Eriksson, he is believed to have lived out his life in Greenland, dying somewhere around the year 1020.

The exact location of Vinland is not known, but in 1963 ruins of an 11th-century Viking settlement were discovered at L’Anse-aux-Meadows in northern Newfoundland. Now labeled a UNESCO National Historic Site, it is the oldest European settlement to have been found in North America, and more than 2,000 Viking objects have been recovered from it, supporting accounts that Eriksson and his men wintered there before setting sail for home.

Legacy

In recognition of Eriksson’s pioneering voyage, in September 1964 the United States Congress authorized the president of the United States to declare each October 9 as Leif Eriksson Day, a national day of observance. Over the years, various groups have attempted to elevate the celebration, but due in part to the fact that Christopher Columbus’s later voyage resulted more directly in European migration to North America, its status has remained unchanged.

Despite this, Leif Eriksson’s voyage is commemorated by statues throughout the United States, and in Newfoundland, Norway, Iceland and Greenland, and Iceland’s Exploration Museum annually presents its Leif Eriksson Awards for achievements in the field of exploration.