

HENRY THE NAVIGATOR, PRINCE OF EXPLORERS

By Richard Sorokin

On the most southern coast of Portugal there is a desolate area that has some old deserted building and some ground markings. The place is truly unattractive. Visiting it is most unimpressive. Yet it was here that beginning of the exploration of this planet got its start 500 years ago.

He was born in 1394, fourth son of King John I and his English Queen. He was given Algarve, the southern province of Portugal. He retired there in his twenties to a simple retreat at Sagres. Henry never married or took his regular place in court. He did not sail to strange, faraway places. He discovered nothing, left few records beyond the stones of Sagres. Yet this Prince lit and sustained the flame of discovery, changing the thinking and the very shape of the world.

At this time the Moslem empire stretched from the Middle East to Gibraltar. Ships were too frail to challenge the oceans and superstitions shackled the mind. But Europe was changing, the force known as the Renaissance was stirring. Advances in the sciences and arts were pushing back the horizons of the mind. Henry would push back the horizons of the earth.

The economic motor to Henry's explorations was the spice trade. Europe's drab diet offered few vegetables, few fruits, little sugar, no tea, coffee or chocolate. Fresh meat was scarce in winter: animals were butchered in the fall for lack of fodder; pungent flavoring enlivened this fare and concealed meat's putridity. But the costs were nearly prohibitive. Nutmeg or cloves, worth little in their native East Indies, traveled a tortuous and costly road to Europe. Malay Hindu merchants shipped them to India. From there the Arab monopoly brought them to the Persian Gulf or Red Sea, and then put them on camel caravans to Alexandria or Beirut. Stowed aboard Venetian and Genoese ships, they traveled to these city states and from there were distributed to markets of Europe. Costs at each transfer pyramided so that only the very rich could afford them.

Only on the sea could Prince Henry outflank Islam and break the Arab stronghold. His purposes were manifold: not only to extend Portuguese trade and power but to increase geographical knowledge and spread Christianity.

He dreamed of going south around Africa to reach the Indies. To accomplish this, he and his men had to develop new sailing ships and invent the navigational instruments to sail them. There was also the mental thing. Leaving your home port going out to an unknown sea far from home takes special people.

Medieval Europeans knew only piloting-sailing within sight of land and dead reckoning: using the compass course, speed and time, wind drift and currents to determine location. At Sagres the prince assembled mathematicians, chart makers, pilots, master mariners and others. They helped Henry to create better charts, improve such instruments as the compass, astrolabe, and quadrant, and compile more detailed astronomical tables.

They had to find a better sailing vessel. The square rigged, round bellied cargo carrier with one sail would not do. Going to windward they were of little use. They combined the Arab dhow with its lateen sails with their own sturdy vessels and came up with the caravel. Strong European hulls capable of stowing ample stores supported two or three masts with fore and aft lateen rigs.

From Lagos, a close port went the first explorers. In 1420 they found Madeira. In 1432 the Azores, way out in the Atlantic. The way to the Indies had to be south along the African continent. Prince Henry sent his ships that way-ship after ship.

It was slow going. Seamen were superstitious; the sea was unknown to them and its imagined dangers very real. Henry was asking his sailors to venture into it. It took 19 years for Henry to get his first captain past Cape Bojador. In 1444-46 the prince licensed 30 voyages. Dinis Dias rounded Cape Verde. Alvaro Fernandes neared Sierra Leone. They discovered the Cape Verde Islands. It must have been profoundly discouraging, his ships coming back year after year only to report that Africa still stretched far and away. But Henry carried on. His rich land of the Algarve paid his way. Rich tuna fishing, olives and cork trees, almonds and grain provided his income.

As the little caravels inched down the great bulge of Africa their captains found gold, ivory, and slaves. It was asking a lot of them to give up this wealth. Many went no further. They set up trading posts, went up the rivers searching for gold.

By the time of his death in 1460 his caravels had reached Sierra Leone, still only a third of the way down Africa. But the momentum of his efforts drove his captains on. The real fruits of his labor came after him. The crown took over and the caravels continued south. The coast of Guinea ran eastward, and they named the land for the trade they offered: Grain Coast, Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, and slave Coast. A young Genoese by the name of Christopher Columbus sailed with the Portuguese in 1480. He must have learned a lot.

In the southern hemisphere the trade winds change direction. The winds were now against them. Yet the caravels continued. By 1484 Diogo Cao had pushed nearly 6000 miles south. He came within a thousand miles of his goal.

Little is known of the gallant Dias, for there was a conspiracy of silence around these adventures. Other nations could profit from their efforts. We do know that Dias fitted out his two ships of discovery with special care, and he added something other explorers would copy, a supply ship. Dias sailed in 1487. After traveling south for many days a huge storm drove him south for 13 days. The storm abated and he sailed east, expecting to connect again with the coast. None appeared, so he turned north and found land. He had turned the tip of Africa. He planted a pillar there. He named it Cape of Storms; later another Portuguese renamed it the Cape of Good Hope.

This was an epochal event, the triumph of Prince Henry's dream. Now, as the Navigator had foreseen, Europe could sail free of its medieval bonds. For the next two hundred years sailing ships would pass the cape to the Indies.