

Bodo Nova

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World Civilization

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15th Century Mariners

The development of knowledge of the 15th century mariners is important in understanding the value and history of the trade networks. In the CrashCourse video, John Green walks us through the three main mariners of the 1400s. These navigators include: Zheng He, Vasco De Gama, and Christopher Columbus. For the majority of my education, I had only heard and learned of the latter of the three men. We put so much emphasis on Christopher Columbus and his notorious “discoveries”, but it is important to also know that there were more meticulous and capable mariners of his time. My favorite in this discussion is Zheng He. My inner perfectionist and analyst finds joy in his conscientious ways. Zheng He, oddly enough, was a muslim, and a eunuch, which in part is due to the reign of the Mongols. From the years 1405-1433, he led seven voyages and had an enormous crew, much grander than that of Christopher Columbus. His navigational tools, called treasure ships, led an armada of over 27,000-more than half the population of London, England at the time. Zhang He was the first major figure of the 15th century; John Green even referred to him as the “medieval Chinese Noah”, because he brought many animals from his voyages from Africa. China wasn't pressed for an import of goods, but rather respect and influence. So, many people would board He's ships just for the chance to visit China and its leaders. Till this day, China, is still thought of with such prestige. The next mariner to be discussed is Vasco De Gama. Unlike He, Vasco De Gama,

was not authoritative or compelling, but he was a daring captain. He was Prince Henry the Navigator's protege, and the first to make it around Africa, into the Indian Ocean. He helped introduce Europe to the Indian trade market. In 1498, he landed in Calicut, on the Indian coast. Contrasting from China, Portugal at the time relied heavily on trade to grow. This gave De Gama an intrinsic push to explore and conquer all that he could. His crew, known for being "glorified pirates", extorted many as a means to trade with them. They would capture other ships and force them to purchase a cartez. Without a cartez, you were unable to trade in any of the regions that Portugal seized and had power over. Lastly, the mariner of the 15th century with the most lasting impact on the world, was Christoper Columbus. Contrary to popular belief, he knew the Earth was round and used a concept of dead reckoning to help him navigate the world. This idea required the conjunction of direction, speed, and time, to provide a map of exploration. Though he was a smart fellow, having also used Ptolemy's geography and the Imago Mundibased on Muslim scholarship, he did ultimately fail in his calculations. He overestimated the size of Asia, and underestimated the size of the oceans. He made 4 voyages, and was able to convince Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to fund his projects. Like De Gama, he prompted gold and conversion of Christians, and used this as his fuel for navigation, which was enough to get the nobles to permit their monies. He was interested in Portugal's route to the Indies and he never thought he would make it China. Christopher Columbus is the bearer of a complicated yet famous legacy, and is known for his ill-advised adventures. I believe that Zheng He deserves more recognition, however, I see why Christopher Columbus is the more known mariner out of the three.