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Dropbox 13 – 15th Century Mariners

Zheng He, a Muslim, was a eunuch. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He led seven voyages throughout the Indian Ocean, the expeditions of the so-called treasure ships, and they were huge. While Columbus first voyage consisted of three ships. Zheng He led an armada of over 300, with a crew of over 27,000, more than half of London's population at the time. And some of these ships were enormous. The flagships, known as the treasure ships, were over 400 feet long and had 7 or more masts. Zheng He wasn't an explorer. The Indian Ocean trade routes were already known to him and other Chinese sailors. He visited Africa, India and the Middle East, and in a way, his journeys were trade missions, but not in the sense of filling his ships up with stuff to be sold later for higher prices.

At the time, China was the leading manufacturer of quality goods in the world, and there wasn't anything they needed to import. What they need was prestige and respect so that would continue to see China as the center of the economic universe, so there was a tribute system through which foreign rulers of their ambassadors would come to China and engage in a debasing ritual called the kowtow wherein they acknowledged the superiority of the Chinese emperor and offered him gifts in exchange for the right to trade with China. Also, these tribute missions brought lots of crazy things to China, including exotic animal.

Next, Vasco da Gama representing Portuguese exploration. Couple things about Portugal, first, it has a fair bit of coastline. Secondly, it was relatively resource-poor, which meant it relied upon trade in order to grow. Also, the Iberian Peninsula was the only place in Europe where Muslims could be found in large numbers in the 15th century, which meant the Christian crusading spirit was quite strong there, presumably because Muslims had brought so much stability and prosperity to the region. And chief of among these would-be crusaders was Prince Henry the Navigator, so called because he was not a navigator. Da Gama was the first of Henry's proteges to make it around Africa, and into the Indian Ocean. In 1498, he landed at Calicut, a major trading post on India's west coast. He was looking for Gold and Christians, which basically sums up Portugal motivations for explorations.

While on the other hand, Columbus and his crew knew earth was round. He was just wrong about the earth's size. Ptolemy geography and the Imago Mundi, based on Muslim scholarship, and ended up

overestimating the size of Asia and the size of the oceans. Moreover, Columbus never thought he'd made it to China. He called the people he encountered "Indians" because he thought that he'd made it to the East Indies, what we know now as Indonesia. Lastly, Columbus was not a lucky idiot. He navigated completely unknown waters primarily relying on a technique known as dead reckoning.

So, Columbus first journey, he made four, the last three of which were pretty calamitous, was tiny, and he initially landed on a small Caribbean Island he called San Salvador in search, like Portuguese of gold and Christians. But in terms of goal accomplishment, Columbus was much less successful than either Zheng He or Vasco de Gama.