Columbus, de Gama, and Zheng He! 15th Century Mariners. Crash Course: World History #21

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green; this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to do some compare and contrast, because that's what passes for hip in world history.

Right, so you've probably heard of Christopher Columbus who in 1492 sailed the ocean blue and discovered America, a place that had been previously discovered only by millions of people--

Mr Green, Mr Green! Columbus was just a lucky idiot.

Yeah, no. Here's a little rule of thumb, Me from the Past: If you are not an expert in something, don't pretend to be an expert. This is going to serve you well both in your academic career and in your Kissing Career. MOVING ON.

[intro plays]

So unlike Me from the Past, I'd argue that Columbus has a deserved reputation in history — but was he really the greatest sailor of the 15th Century? Well, let's meet the other contestants. In the red corner, we have Zheng He, who, when it comes to ocean-going voyages was the first major figure of the 15th century. And in the blue corner is Vasco da Gama, from scrappy little Portugal, who managed to introduce Europeans to the Indian Ocean trade network. Columbus, you have to sit in the polka-dotted corner.

As you'll no doubt remember from our discussion of Indian Ocean trade, it was dominated by Muslim merchants, involved ports in Africa and the Middle East and India and Indonesia and China, and it made a lot of people super rich. This last point explains why our three contestants were so eager to set sail. Well, that and the ceaseless desire of human beings to discover things and contract scurvy.

Let's begin with Zheng He, who is probably the greatest admiral you've never have heard of. Couple of important things about Zheng He, First, he was a Muslim. That may seem strange until you consider that by the late 14th century, China had long experience with Muslims, especially when they were ruled by, wait for it... The Mongols.

Secondly, Zheng He was a eunuch. Fortunately, 15th century China had excellent general anesthesia, so I'm sure it didn't hurt at all when they castrated him — what's that, Stan? They didn't have any anesthesia? Oh, boy. Oh. Stan! I'M SEEING IT! I can see, AH AH AHHHH. Stan! SHOW ME SOMETHNG CUTE RIGHT NOW! Oh, hi there kitty! How'd you get in that little teacup? Thank you, Stan. Right, so Zheng He rose from humble beginnings to lose both of his testicles, and become the greatest admiral in Chinese history. Let's go to the thought Bubble.

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. 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, well, enormous. The flagships, known as the treasure ships, were over 400 feet long and had 7 or more masts. See that little tiny ship there in front of the Treasure Ship? That's a to-scale rendering of Christopher Columbus's flagship, the Santa Maria.

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 actually needed to import. What they needed was prestige and respect so that people would continue to see China as the center of the economic universe, so there was a tribute system through which foreign rulers or 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 - or her, but usually him - gifts in exchange for the right to trade with China.

The opportunity to humble yourself before the Chinese emperor was so valuable that many a prince was happy to jump on a treasure ship and sail back to China with Zheng He. Also, these tribute missions brought lots of crazy things to China, including exotic animals: from Africa, Zheng He brought back a zoo's worth of rhinos, zebras, and even giraffes. Basically, he was like the medieval Chinese Noah. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So the Chinese were world leaders in naval technology, and they wanted to dominate trade here in the Indian Ocean. So why, then, did these voyages end? One reason was that Zheng He couldn't live forever, and sure enough, he didn't. Also his patron, the Yongle Emperor, died. And the emperor's successors weren't very interested in maritime trade. They were more concerned with protecting China against its traditional enemies, nomads from the steppe. To do this, they built a rather famous wall. The Great Wall was mostly built under the Ming Dynasty using resources that they only had because they stopped building gigantic ships. Just imagine what might have happened if the Ming emperors had embraced a different strategy. One that was based on outreach instead of isolationism.

And now, to the blue corner. Representing Portuguese exploration, we have Vasco da Gama. 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 among these would-be crusaders was Prince Henry the Navigator, so called because he was not a navigator. He was, however, a patron, not only of sailors themselves, but of a special school at Sagres in which nautical knowledge was collected and new maps were made, and all kinds of awesome stuff happened. And all that knowledge gave Portuguese sailors a huge competitive advantage when it came to exploration.

Henry commissioned sailors to search for two things. First, a path to the Indian Ocean so they could get in on the lucrative spice trade. And second, to find the kingdom of Prester John, a mythical Christian King who was supposed to live in Africa somewhere, so that Henry could have Prester John's help in a crusade.

Da Gama was the first of Henry's protégés 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. And when he got there, merchants asked him what he was looking for. He answered with three words: Gold and Christians. Which basically sums up Portugal's motivations for exploration.

So, once the Portuguese breached the Indian Ocean, they didn't create, like, huge colonies, because there were already powerful empires in the region. Instead, they apparently sat in the middle of the Indian Ocean doing nothing. Actually, they were able to capture & control a number of coastal cities, creating what historians call a "trading post empire." They could do this thanks to their well-armed ships, which captured cities by firing cannons into city walls like IRL

Angry Birds.

But since the Portuguese didn't have enough people or boats to run the Indian Ocean trade, they had to rely on extortion. So, Portuguese merchant ships would capture other ships and force them to purchase a permit to trade called a cartaz. And without a cartaz, a merchant couldn't trade in any of the towns that Portugal controlled. To merchants, who'd plied the Indian Ocean for years in relative freedom, the Portuguese were just glorified pirates, extracting value from trade without adding to its efficiency or volume.

So, the cartaz strategy sort of worked for a while, but the Portuguese never really took control of Indian Ocean trade. They were successful enough that their neighbors, Spain, became interested in their own route to the Indies, and that brings us to Columbus.

But first, let's dispel some myths:

One, Columbus and his crew knew the earth was round. He was just wrong about the earth's size. Columbus used Ptolemy's geography and the Imago Mundi, based on Muslim scholarship — and ended up overestimating the size of Asia and underestimating the size of the oceans.

Two, 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 as Indonesia.

And three, Columbus was not a lucky idiot. He navigated completely unknown waters primarily relying on a technique known as dead reckoning, in which you figure out your position based on three pieces of information: the direction you're going, your speed, and the time, which you figure out via hourglass. With only that technology to guide you, it's not actually that easy to hit a continent. Come here, people who are saying he didn't hit a continent, that he only hit some islands. Come here. DAHHH!

Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?
An open letter to the Line of Demarcation. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, its a globe. Thanks Stan! Just what I always needed.

Dear Line of Demarcation, You have so much to teach us about the way that the world used to work, and the way that it works now. In 1494, Pope Alexander VI settled a dispute between Portugal and Spain by dividing the world into two parts: The Spanish part, and the Portuguese part. This whole thing, at least according to Pope Alexander VI, could be split between Spain and Portugal.

At least when it came to so-called unclaimed land. I mean, unclaimed by whom? You know all the American Indians were like, "wait, this land is available? In, in that case, we'll just, we'll just keep it. If it's all the same to you."

Anyway, Line of Demarcation, I have great news for you. What Alexander VI did totally worked. We haven't had a problem since.

Best wishes, John Green

So, Columbus's 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 the Portuguese, of Gold and Christians. He was able to convince Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to fund his expedition by promising riches and conversions of the natives, hopefully to sign them up for yet another crusade.

And there's a long-standing myth that Columbus tricked Ferdinand and Isabella into paying for his trip, but in fact they'd commissioned two different sets of experts to analyze his plans, both of which agreed, he was crazy. One called the plan, "Impossible to any educated person."

But even so, Ferdinand and Isabella footed the bill, partly because they were full of Crusading zeal after expelling the Muslims from Spain, and partly because they were desperate to get their hands on some of that pepper richness. Columbus, of course, failed at finding riches — he returned with neither spices nor gold. He did create some Christians, as we'll discuss in a future episode, but in terms of goal accomplishment, Columbus was much less successful than either Zheng He or Vasco de Gama.

But within two generations of Columbus, Spain would become fantastically wealthy, and for a time they were the leading power in Europe. Columbus's voyages also had a huge, largely negative, impact on the people the Spanish encountered in the Americas. And excitingly from my perspective, once Columbus returned from San Salvador, we can speak for the first time of a truly world history. Except for you, Australia.

So who was the greatest mariner of the 15th century? Well, as usual, it depends on your definition of greatness. If you value administrative competence over ill-advised adventure, than Zheng He is certainly the winner. But the reason we remember Columbus over him or Vasco de Gama is that Columbus's voyages had a lasting impact on the world, even if it wasn't necessarily a positive one. And that makes me wonder what kind of person you'd want to be: A capable administrator and brilliant sailor like Zheng He? A daring captain like de Gama? Or the bearer of a complicated but famous legacy like Columbus? Let me know in comments.

Thanks for watching, and we'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's Phrase of the Week was, "You smell pretty." Thanks for that suggestion, by the way. If you want to suggest future phrases of the week, you can do so in comments, where you can also guess at this weeks phrase of the week or ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.

Ahhh, crash! No, avoided!