Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 - 1460)

Henry the Navigator lived from 1394 to 1460. Prince Henry of Portugal was interested in sailing and commerce, and studied navigation and mapmaking. He established a naval observatory for the teaching of navigation, astronomy, and cartography around 1450. From 1419 to his death, Prince Henry made many expeditions south along the west coast of Africa to secure trade routes and establish colonies.

Prince Henry of Portugal organized and financed many voyages that went south from Portugal and eventually rounded the African continent. His goals were to create maps of the West African coastline, establish trade routes, and spread Christianity. He encouraged voyages of expeditions and the scientific study of navigation. Furthermore, he ran an observatory and school of navigation. Prince Henry played a vital role in the development of more accurate maps and the engineering of a new ship that was more ideal for exploring rough seas.
Zheng He (1371 - 1433)

Zheng He [pronounced as JUNG HUH] lived from 1371 to 1433. He was born in Yunnan at the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. As a child, his name was Ma He. He grew up a Hui, a Chinese Muslim. When he was only 10 years old, Chinese soldiers, under the orders of the Ming Dynasty, invaded Yunnan in effort to overtake one of the last Mongol holds. They killed his father and he was captured. Along with many other boys who were taken, he was castrated and forced to serve for a Chinese prince known as Zhu Di. In 1402, Zhu Di took the throne as Emperor Yongle. He made Ma He the chief of staff for all the servants and changed his name to Zheng He. The Yongle Emperor proved to be one of the most ambitious emperors of his time and chose Zheng He to be the commander in chief of a series of missions across the Indian Ocean in order to increase China's influence.

From 1405 to 1433, Zheng He led seven naval expeditions throughout the Chinese Seas and the Indian Ocean, and he reached locations from Taiwan, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. He saw the commission of 3,500 ships and commanded at least 62 ships and 27,800 men (more than half of London’s population at the time). Zheng He’s led nine-masted flagships that measured about 400 feet long (Christopher Columbus’s Santa Maria was only 85 feet long). These were some of the largest wooden ships ever built in this time period. These naval expeditions did not serve the purpose to colonize or conquer but rather served as “treasure hunts” that brought back items of great value as tribute to the Yongle Emperor. Zheng He brought back gold, jewelry, and other delicacies. He even brought Zebras, Rhinos, and Giraffes. In 1424, the Yongle emperor died and his successor suspended all naval expeditions abroad. Zheng He went on his seventh and final voyage from 1431 to 1433. He died at sea and was buried off the coast of India.

Zheng He and his naval voyages had a great impact on the status of China at the time. These voyages increased maritime and commercial influence of China throughout the Indian ocean up until the 19th century. Foreign goods, medicines, and geological knowledge flowed through China at an unprecedented rate even though these ships only served as treasure ships. Many historians argue that China could have become a great colonial power many years before the age of great exploration if
the leadership had decided to use their technology for outreach rather than for isolation.

Here is a good map of the travels of Zheng He: https://cdn.kastatic.org/KA-share/BigHistory/KU8.1.8-4_Zheng_He-Map.pdf

Christopher Columbus (1451 - 1506)

Christopher Columbus lived from 1451 to 1506. He made four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean in an effort to find a new route to the East Indies by traveling west rather than east. Having inaccurate estimates of Earth’s magnitude, he underestimated the distances necessary for the voyage and believed he had found islands off the coast of Asia when, in reality, he had reached the “New World.”

Christopher Columbus believed sailing west would be a faster way to get to India and to all the spices and riches it held. When his idea was rejected by Portugal, Columbus went to Spain where the King and Queen agreed to sponsor him. Columbus was granted three ships (the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria) and funds to finance his voyage across the ocean. After two months of sailing, Columbus and his crew arrived in the present-day Bahamas. Due to his excellent navigation records, he was able to sail back to Spain with proof, in the form of gold and other materials, of his success. However, the rest of Columbus’ voyages
were unsuccessful. Although he died bitter and believing he had found Asia, Columbus’ discovery opened up a whole new world for his successors to explore.

**Ferdinand Magellan**

Ferdinand Magellan lived from 1480 to 1521. He left Spain in September 1519 with 270 men and five vessels in search of a westward passage to the Spice Islands. The expedition eventually lost two ships even before finally discovering and passing through the Strait of Magellan and rounding the tip of South America in November 1520. Magellan crossed the Pacific Ocean and arrived in the Philippines in March 1521, where he was killed in a battle with the natives on April 27, 1521. Magellan’s skill as a navigator makes his voyage probably the most outstanding single contribution to the early charting of the oceans.

Magellan had the idea to sail west across the ocean to get to Asia. Contrary to his expectations, Magellan sailed past modern-day Argentina and found a route to the Pacific Ocean. He was the first person to sail across the Pacific Ocean. It took him six long months to arrive in Asia though he had been looking for a shorter route. Eventually, Magellan and his crew sailed into charted waters in East Asia. Unfortunately, Magellan was killed in battle in the Philippines. His crew continued without him and reached Spain a total of three years after they had first set out on their voyage. Though Magellan perished during the voyage, his belief that the Earth is round was proven to be true. This important discovery altered the way people thought about the world and had a significant impact on future voyages.

**References**


