

Magellan The Bold

A Journey Into The Vast Unknown

Ferdinand Magellan's most famous contribution to world history was his command of the first known expedition to circumnavigate the Earth. Over the course of his life he played a significant role in the expansion of Portugal's vast colonial empire, only to sail later under the flag of Portugal's arch-rival, Spain, in completing perhaps the most ambitious journey history had yet known. At the time of his birth, Europeans were not even aware of a sea route around the tip of Africa. With his death, the full vastness of the globe was realized. His travels entailed incredible adventures, but even those only comprise one part of the story....



When five heavily armed Portuguese vessels entered the port of Malacca, Sultan Mahmud Shah was not pleased, to say the least. However, his Arab advisors warned him that it would be best not to start up with the powerful Portuguese and their superior weaponry. Instead, he greeted them warmly and gave them free run of the city to engage in trade. The sultan honored Sequeira, the commander, with an invitation to his palace for a game of chess.

Francisco Serrão suspected treachery, and told Sequeira as much, but his concerns were not heeded by the commander. Serrão confided his fears to his friend Ferdinand Magellan. While most of the men left the ships for the promises of the opulent city, and Sequeira made his way to the palace for the chess game, Magellan and a few others stayed aboard to keep watch.

After a while, Captain Garcia de Sousa noticed that small Malay boats began drifting toward the Portuguese ships, until an uncomfortably high number of them were clustering around. As he peered out at the

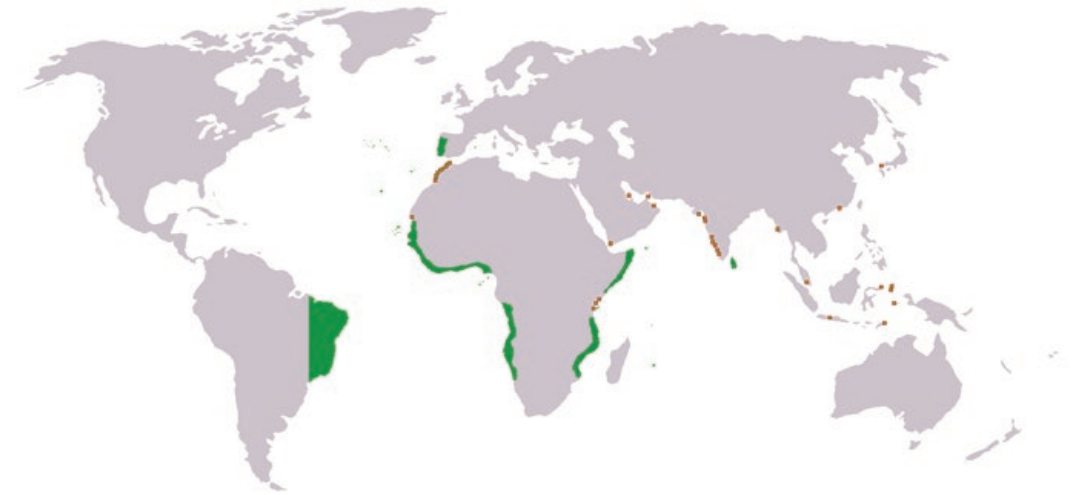


Artist's conception of Ferdinand Magellan. There have been numerous attempts to depict the explorer, but almost no reliable records have come down to us of what he really looked like.

native boatmen, he took careful note of the menacing knives they were armed with. As some of them began trying to talk their way aboard the ships, de Sousa sent Magellan to fetch their commander Sequeira. The sultan had laid a trap.



A map of Southeast Asia. The Strait of Malacca, where the Portuguese gained control in 1511, is at left just above the equator (middle line). The Moluccas, called the Spice Islands by Europeans, are at middle right just below the equator.



The extent of the Portuguese Empire in 1550. Dots are outposts. Portugal's population was too low to support many large colonies.

In fact, even as he extended the friendly invitation to the Portuguese, Mahmud Shah was secretly sending for reinforcements from elsewhere in his extensive kingdom. With any luck, a large contingent would be able to ambush and overwhelm the intruders. As the troops drew nearer, Magellan scurried to the sultan's palace to warn Sequeira of the danger. His next actions proved essential for the escape of the entire Portuguese contingent.

He walked into the palace and began speaking to Sequeira in a very composed manner, feigning nonchalance. The sultan and his advisors had no knowledge of Portuguese, so the two were able to make an unremarkable exit. Sequeira drove away the hordes of Malay boats that surrounded the ships, but there were still many men of his on shore and the Malay soldiers began to attack them.

Magellan demonstrated his bravery by dashing to shore in a small boat and joining the fray, helping to save his friend Serrão and some of the other sailors. Meanwhile, Sequeira was able to maneuver the ships out of the harbor and away from danger.

Although some 60 Portuguese were killed or captured, Magellan's presence of mind had saved the armada and earned the future world explorer a reputation for bravery.

Magellan's Youth and the Rise of Portugal

Ferdinand Magellan was born around 1480 in Portugal's northeast to the Malgahães family (Magellan is the French form of his name), who were among the minor nobility. In 1492, at the age of 12, he was sent to the royal court in Lisbon, Portugal. He was put under the supervision of Duke Manuel, the king's first cousin, who would later himself become King Manuel I of Portugal. Early accounts indicate that Manuel did not like the young Magellan, a precedent that would set the tone for later encounters between them.

As a page at the royal court, Magellan was entitled to a first-class education. Part of the standard curriculum was instruction in astronomy and navigation, and Portugal was on the forefront of these sciences at that time. Here young Ferdinand would learn of Portugal's great explorers and study maps of far-off lands. He began to dream of following in their footsteps.

In 1493, the year after Magellan arrived in Lisbon, Christopher Columbus shocked the world by sailing into Lisbon's harbor and announcing that he had found a western route to India.