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PORTUGUESE PRESENCE AND ENDEAVOURS IN EAST AFRICA, 1498-1698

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Part I

Part I of this article provides background information on the explorations and entrance of Christianity in East Africa. Part II and III, which will appear in the next issue of AJET 25.2 2006, focus on political occupation and presence and Christian attempts and efforts in the same period of time (1498-1698). The purpose of the whole article is to supply to the readership scarce information on an area which, although important, is obscure in the minds of many.

I. Background Explorations and Entrance, 1415 – 1498.

Introduction

For a long time, Europe had had contact and trade with the Far East. When European access to the East seemed to be blocked by the domination of the passageways by Middle East Muslim powers, it was necessary to find alternate routes to the cherished East. The ascendancy of these Muslim forces made it risky and expensive to continue using the established trade routes. This was especially true after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. In many ways, this event proved catastrophic to European economic and religious connections with the East. It was with this in view, that Western European nations increased their efforts in the search of “a free way to the East behind the backs of the Muslims.”¹

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Somehow, just at the time when trade and trade routes through one direction were closing, openings began appearing in a different direction. It has been observed that in the midst of these changing fortunes, world-trade was to flow mainly through the Atlantic and that, “the nations which border in the Atlantic were to acquire almost a monopoly of human wealth, and of political control of the sources from which that wealth is drawn.”² One of the distinctive contributing factors in this new shift turned out to be the improvement in sea travel and communication which resulted from “the evolution in ship-building and seamanship, which took on new dimensions in the fifteenth century and advanced with even-quickening pace through the sixteenth.”³

The Leading Personality

When efforts of exploration aimed at finding a new sea route to India and the East were embarked upon in earnest, the leading figure in this exercise was

Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal (1394-1460). Prince Henry was born in 1394, and very early in life, he demonstrated interest in affairs outside his European domain. In 1415, he fought in North Africa and helped the Portuguese to defeat the Moors and to capture Ceuta from them. This was a landmark in that this was the first territory that the Portuguese acquired in Africa. About three years after the capture of Ceuta, Prince Henry moved to and settled at Sagres, a promontory “in the extreme south-west of Portugal overlooking the Atlantic”⁴. For the next forty years, Henry lived here and, together with the nearby Lagos as his post, this was the base from which he planned his strategies and assisted in the execution of the resultant voyages of exploration.⁵

When Prince Henry was in north Africa, he learnt a lot about the regions to the south. Of particular interest to him were the prospects of having access to the gold, which these areas were reputed for. The only way of making direct contact with these areas would come if he could “outflank the Muslim lands of Africa” through the envisaged voyages of exploration.⁶ In addition to the mercantile motive mentioned above, there were complementary reasons which inspired Prince Henry in the

enterprise of exploration. A faithful contemporary chronicler named Azurara specifies five reasons why this exercise was undertaken.⁷

1. The first was the scientific reason of finding out the *geographical* knowledge of areas beyond the Canary Islands and the terminus of that time, Cape Bojador. This interest went beyond the territory of the coast of West Africa and in fact included finding a sea route to India as a mainstay of the scheme.
2. In the second instance, there was a *commercial* aim, especially if a Christian nation to the south could be located to become an ally in trade partnerships.
3. The third reason was *political* in that an opportunity was sought for finding the real strength of the Muslim Moors with a view to preparing to combat them effectively as antagonists.
4. The fourth reason had another *political* dimension in which there was longing to find a Christian ruler with whom Portugal could identify since so far, the search for a friendly sovereign in those areas had produced negative results.
5. In the fifth place, there was a clearly *missionary* reason in which Prince Henry was looking for avenues of spreading the Christian faith to areas and people that had hitherto not been reached.⁸

Since the early part of the 15th century, Prince Henry had distinguished himself as "the spirit and architect of Portugal's seaborne expansion".⁹ As he directed and guided the attendant expeditions, he was accorded greater recognition for his efforts. In 1455, a part from being praised and recognized through a Papal Bull for helping in promoting the Christian cause, he was given authority by the same Bull to conquer and possess the territories which came under his exploration.¹⁰ Dealing with the activities which Prince Henry's efforts were connected with and inspired on the western coast of Africa, Neill writes,

Prince Henry never left his own country and never went himself on any voyage of discovery. He was the guide and director, and the inspirer of the explorers. In 1434 Cape Bojador was turned. In 1444 the first contacts were made

with the [Black] races of tropical Africa. In 1482 the mouth of the Congo was reached. In 1487 Bartholomew Diaz discovered the Cape of Good Hope.¹¹

Brief Outline of Geographical Advance

Following the capture of Ceuta in 1415, Prince Henry had moved to and set his headquarters at Sagres about three years later. As his captains probed ahead, they came across Madeira and “sailed down the African coast to Cape Bojador” within a year or two from the time that he moved to Sagres. This would suggest that by about 1420, Cape Bojador had become the terminus of these expeditions. It has been pointed out that because of fear of the unknown, no one dared proceed beyond this point for the next twelve years or so.¹² When this barrier was broken at last, steady progress was made over the years.

The actual turning point came in 1434 when Gil Eannes, one of Henry’s captains, dared to move into the feared territory. As he sailed on and on, he found the coastlands to be more hospitable and inhabited than had been believed. Through this new forward momentum the River Senegal was passed in 1445 as Cape Verde became the most westerly point of Africa reached then. In quick succession, the next expedition went as far as the River Gambia.¹³ This was the state of affairs when Prince Henry died in 1460.

Even after his death, the machinery which he had set in motion, coupled with the impetus which he had given the enterprise when he was still alive, helped propel explorations farther. In the next two years following his death, about 600 more miles were explored with the result that the mountainous area of Sierra Leone was reached in 1462. This included journeying as far as Cape Mesurado, the location of the later Monrovia in Liberia.¹⁴ Through an exclusive trade contract which was awarded Fernando Gomez, expeditions continued from 1469 on a new level of enthusiasm. In this manner, the coast of Ghana was reached in 1470, and the following year, 1471, the first crossing of the equator in west Africa was recorded. Over ten years later, in 1482, Diego Cam reached the mouth of the River Congo.¹⁵ Farther along the onward push,

Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1487, thus signalling in a sense that a breakthrough in the search of a sea route to India was imminent. The process was completed when, after going beyond the Cape in 1497, Vasco da Gama made history when he anchored in Calcutta, India, on 20th May, 1498.¹⁶ On the way there, he sailed along the eastern coast of Africa, stopping at Mozambique, Mombasa and Malindi, in the process.¹⁷

END NOTES

- ¹ Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions*. (London. McGraw Hill, 1966), 35.
- ² Neill, 36
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa, Volume I to 1840*. 4 Vols. (London. Lutterworth Press, 1964 Reprint.) [1948], 118
- ⁵ Groves I, 118
- ⁶ Groves I, 119
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Groves I, 119. [Also see, Clarke, Peter B. *West Africa and Christianity*. (London. Edward Arnold, 1986), 7, for geographical, political, economic and religious objectives].
- ⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. (London. C. Hurst & Co., 1983), 21.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.

- ¹¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*. (Middlesex, England. Penguin Books, 1964). [In the case of the mouth of the Congo, opinion varies as to whether it was reached in 1482 or 1484].
- ¹² Groves I, 119.
- ¹³ Groves I. 123. [Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, 37, mentions 1430 as the year when the voyages of discovery were launched and when the Azores were reached. He, however, concurs that progress beyond Bojador was made in 1434].
- ¹⁴ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 138. [Groves I, 123-124, points out that opinion is divided on whether the Congo was reached in 1482 or in 1484].
- ¹⁵ Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, 38. [Groves I, 125, puts the sighting of the shores of India on 17th May].
- ¹⁶ Groves I, 125.