

The Block of Constantinople

Geographers of the fifteenth century believed there was only a scattering of islands in the ocean all the way from Spain westward to China. And, of course, they did not dream of such a thing as the mighty Pacific Ocean, lying west beyond the two continents—twice as large as the Atlantic.

These learned men knew the earth was not flat, that it had the shape of a ball... Gazing out to sea from Spain or Portugal, men believed that somewhere on the other side of that ocean lay Cathay, Cipangu, and the Indies—their names for China, Japan, and the Spice Islands of the Far East... Nobody had tried to reach the Indies by sailing westward. Sailors spoke of the Atlantic with dread... they called it the sea of darkness...

If a traveler wanted to go to the Indies, he would have to turn eastward and proceed overland to distant Persia and then travel thousands of miles through Asia, over high mountains, across burning desert sands, and along lonely roads where bandits lay in wait. Only a few adventurers—like Marco Polo—had ever made that trip.

The Indies were talked about in Europe because they produced many of the good things of life that Europeans longed for and could not buy anywhere else.

Rich people had pepper on the table and other rare flavorings in the kitchen. They dressed in silks. They wore jewelry. Some owned rubies and strings of pearls. All these things came from the Indies. From the Far East they were carried by ships and caravans of camels from one trader to another. They were bought and sold, again and again, as they moved slowly from one country to the next, until finally they reached Europe.

Then there came a time, in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the flow of these goods was choked off. The main over land trade route was closed.

(This happened when the Turks (from Turkey and the Ottoman Empire), who had been fighting the Europeans for centuries and who had already blocked all the land routes, seized the city of Constantinople in 1453. Now nothing could get through even Constantinople.)

A few –makers of maps, readers of book, and star watchers began to ask themselves how the Indies might best be reached by sea. **That** question was the beginning of a search that was to spread to many far places and to go on for hundreds of years.

It was really a search of the earth. As it went on it brought vast changes into the lives of people and of great nations. It decided many important questions—for example, the very important one as to what kind of America we were to be born in, or perhaps whether we would be living in America at all today!

Fifteenth century map-makers believed that from Europe there were two ways to go the Indies by sea. But the known routes on their maps did not reach very far. Beyond a few hundred miles, men’s knowledge grew vague. One route was south along Africa. The other was across the Atlantic...

No one dared... cross the ‘Sea of Darkness’ until, Columbus set out from Spain in 1492, paused at the Canary Islands, then pushed on and on into the long emptiness of the unknown sea.

Europe (finally) realized that Columbus had not found the Indies. The New World was a giant barrier that stood in the way.

Like ants that suddenly find their line of march blocked by an unexpected wall adventurers began to spread along the length of North and South America, trying to find a way through to the Orient (China and Japan). Slowly they learned how enormous the New World was.

From: Discoverers of the New World