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Primary Sources

November 7, 2012

Honors World History

“Chinese and Portuguese Voyages in the Fifteenth Century”

(Question: 1)

The main motives of the two expeditions were to seek the other countries’ goods. However, “these were very different expeditions, from very different countries.” (Page 154) The similarity that China and Portugal shared on their expedition is that both were headed to the same location, Calicut. The Chinese expedition occurred in 1430, setting sail from the country of Mecca, you would sail south-west to reach the destination. Upon reaching Calicut, a specific amount of men were asked to bring on the expedition their countries valuables. This included a load of musk, porcelain articles, and other useful necessities. Mecca was ultimately searching to trade with Calicut. Mecca brought their colossal ‘money making’ valuables to trade with Calicut, in hopes of receiving an item that would be worth trading for. On the other hand, the Portuguese set out on their expedition which lasted from 1497-1498 C.E. The Portuguese were looking to dissect the Calicut people by getting to know their cultures. Rank meant a colossal amount in Calicut; the way people dressed expressed this. “The Christians would have beards and long hair, whilst others clip their hair short or shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as a sign that they are Christians. They also wear moustaches. They pierce the ears and wear much gold in them. They go naked down to the waist, covering their lower extremities with very fine cotton stuffs.” (Page 159) This represents that the Christian were ranked highly, since their style was expensive, and used very fine material to create the items. Another highly ranked culture in Calicut was the Jews. They would wear gold necklaces, numerous bracelets on their arms, and rings made of precious stones on their fingers and toes. The lower class included the women. They were viewed as ugly and of small stature. In conclusion, both expeditions took time and risks, but the overall result was rewarding.

(Question: 2)

The Chinese expedition was controlled by nature, this included strong winds, heavy rain, etc. “His giant ship on the roaring waves of the boundless ocean rode; afar, o’er the rolling billows vast and limitless, it strode. The vast sea’s rolling billows in lovely breakers sweep.” (Page: 156) This shows the dramatic weather conditions that the Chinese had to experience. The Chinese explained the waves as being huge dragons. Weather played a negative factor in the expedition, but one that the Chinese overcame. The numerous dogs, which were used for protection, resembled those in Portugal. The birds were similar as well and include cormorants, gulls, turtle doves, crested larks, and many others. The Portuguese realized that the climate in Calicut was colder. The way that people were dressed resembled this, wearing skins, and sheaths. The conditions were so cold, that some would even stand with a horn, attached to a lit fire. The climate wasn’t too healthy however, it allowed good herb production. This was one way the economy started getting better. For the most part, the Chinese were welcome in the country of Calicut. Not much occurred; some trading took about a year and continued back and forth. “The negroes then began running along the beach, and they came as quickly up with Fernaro Velloso as we did, and wounded captain-major and three or four others.” (Page: 158) This shows how the Portuguese did not feel as welcomed, especially when the Calicut natives started attacking them. The comparison is limited; however, both the Chinese and Portuguese were ultimately welcomed into the country of Calicut.

(Question: 3)

The Chinese came in with a positive and respectful attitude to their foreigners. “An order was respectfully received from our imperial court that the principal envoy the grand eunuch Chen Ho and others should go to all the foreign countries to read the imperial commands and to bestow rewards.” (Page 157) This would explain how respectful the Chinese were to the king of Mecca. The Chinese also sent seven men with a load of goods, this included musk, porcelain articles, and other goods. On the other hand, the Portuguese would act in a negative attitude towards their foreigners. The Portuguese would want to use the Calicut people to find out the cultures and customs shared throughout Calicut. First, the Portuguese would be respectful and would take a native aboard their ship to feed them, and to give them better clothes. Next, the Portuguese would ask the foreigners to take them to their houses. Lastly, the Portuguese would discover that the Calicut natives would not know about many articles. This included cinnamon, cloves, seed-pearls, gold, and many other things. The attitudes that the Chinese and the Portuguese would display, gave a back ground on what the purpose of them being in Calicut was.

(Question: 4)

The Indian Ocean was very important because, “launching a major Portuguese commitment to oceanic trade and colonizing in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere, which in turn was part of Western Europe’s commercial surge in the early modern centuries.” (Page 154) This explains how in the Indian Ocean, many trade routes were established and used. Most trading and colonization activity was occurring throughout the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean was in the center of all the trading. The Calicut port was located in the Indian southwest; this is where the Chinese and Portuguese would make their expedition to.

(Question: 5)

Ma Huan and Vasco Da Gama were the writers who recorded the expeditions. They wanted to explain their experiences from the 1400’s to see how we can apply them to today. As I have read, I learned how many aspects are involved with just one expedition. Some factors that Ma Huan and Vasco Da Gama included weather conditions, nature’s role, customs and cultures of other countries, and their trading items. One distortion was the way that the Chinese and Portuguese would behave and treat others. “The native was taken on board the captain-major’s ship, and being placed at the table he ate of all we ate. The captain-major expressed a great desire to be permitted to accompany the natives to their houses, so that he might find out how they lived and what they ate.” (Page 158) This was how the Portuguese would use natives for information about the way he lived in his country. Trading back in the 1400’s meant everything, the wealth of the country, its strength, and its importance.

(Question: 6)

The significance of the two expeditions dealt with increasing trade for their own country. The Chinese wanted to come into Calicut to learn about their best trading products. What they would find out is that the Calicut would trade with “unusual commodities, and rare valuables, lions, ‘camel fowls’, and other such things.” (Page 157) In return, The Chinese would present loads of musk, porcelain articles, and other such things to complete the trade. The Portuguese would use a different approach, instead of bringing forth their best items; they wanted to see if the natives in Calicut would give out information. By using the natives, the Portuguese were out smarted and didn’t receive much information. The Portuguese found that Calicut natives weren’t aware of particular merchandise. This would be a positive for the Portuguese; hence this merchandise would be fantastic for trading.