Ocean exploration had its origins partly because of a movement known as the Renaissance. The Renaissance began in Italy, where traders brought books, news, and inventions from Asia that helped inspire new thought. The movement spread quickly across Europe. The age marked a “rebirth” of knowledge. It was a time of invention and discovery in all the arts and sciences. People of the Renaissance wanted to discover as much as they could about themselves and the world in which they lived. How could they resist exploring the globe and finding people of other cultures?

Another event added to the Renaissance-era push to explore. The Ottoman Empire, which originated in Turkey, expanded its power by conquering much of Southeast Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East by 1453. These conquests gave the Ottomans control of all the trade routes in and through Southwest Asia and Southeast Europe, closing the routes to Western European countries. Europeans depended on trade with Asia. Asia supplied the spices needed to flavor and preserve meats. Silk was another Asian export, and much of the clothing of the wealthy was silk-based. The Europeans needed an alternate route to India and China, one that did not cross through Ottoman territory. A sea route around Africa would enable Europeans to trade directly with India and China and to avoid sharing their profits with the Ottomans.

**Prince Henry of Portugal**

Into this situation came Prince Henry of Portugal, known by historians today as Henry the Navigator—even though he never joined the sailors on their voyages! Portugal is a sea-oriented nation—a small country tucked into the corner of the Iberian Peninsula, surrounded on two sides by Spain and on two sides by the Atlantic Ocean. Nearly all of Portugal is less than 80 miles from the sea. As a result, the trading and shipping industries were very important to the Portuguese.

Prince Henry was the son of the Portuguese king. Henry wanted to spread his Catholic faith and to increase his wealth through trade, but he also had an academic interest in geography. Henry became a patron, or sponsor,
of explorations to find a sea route to India. These explorations led to the mapping of Africa’s coast and coastal waters. This was important because navigation required sailors to rely on coastal landforms and features. Eventually, European sailors would learn new techniques and develop new tools and instruments, enabling them to sail the open ocean, away from land.

**Out into the Deep**

After Prince Henry’s death, other wealthy leaders continued to sponsor expeditions along the Atlantic coast of Africa. By the late 1480s, the Portuguese were on the verge of a major breakthrough.

In 1487, a wealthy navigator, **Bartolomeu Dias**, was appointed by King John II of Portugal to find a trade route to India by going around Africa. Dias took three ships down the western coast of Africa, following the paths of Prince Henry’s earlier expeditions.

In January 1488, caught in a storm, Dias sailed past the **Cape of Good Hope**, the southern tip of Africa, without actually seeing it. Legend has it that, due to the rough weather there, Dias originally called it “Cape of Storms.” He was the first explorer to find the Indian Ocean from the west.

Ten years later, Dias accompanied **Vasco da Gama** on his expedition to reach India and break into the Indian Ocean trade. In 1497, their ships sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. Vasco da Gama stopped in Malindi, on the eastern coast of Kenya, to hire an African navigator who could help him reach southern India. He arrived in Calcutta, India, but the local rulers were suspicious of the Portuguese sailor. Although he returned to Portugal in 1499 with ships loaded with spices, da Gama was unable to negotiate a trade contract with India.