

Pedro Álvares Cabral Biography

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Biography

Pedro Álvares Cabral (ca. 1467-1520) was a Portuguese navigator who discovered Brazil on a voyage to India.

Born on the family estate in Belmonte, Pedro Álvares Cabral grew up close to the Portuguese court. As a nobleman, he served in the council of King Manuel I and received the habit of the Order of Christ. Little is known of his activities before 1499, when Manuel appointed him the chief captain of a fleet being prepared to sail to India to follow the maritime route to the East charted by Vasco da Gama on his historical voyage of 1497-1499.

Amid colorful pageantry 13 ships with 1,200 men sailed from the Tagus River on March 8, 1500, en route to India. On April 22 the fleet unexpectedly sighted land in the west at 17° South latitude. Cabral explored the coast and claimed the new land for his sovereign. He christened it Ilha de Vera Cruz. Merchants, quickly attracted to its plentiful stands of brazilwood, the source of an excellent red dye, called it Terra do Brasil, and the name Brazil gained popular acceptance.

Cabral's discovery has raised a series of historical questions which have never been properly answered. Was he the first to reach Brazil or had the Spanish or French made prior visits? Had Portugal previously discovered Brazil and protected that discovery with secrecy? Did Cabral--who was far off the prescribed course to India--discover Brazil accidentally or intentionally? There is room for much speculation on each of these questions, but lack of documentary evidence to the contrary leads to the conclusion that Cabral was the first to discover Brazil and that he did so accidentally. The first cartographic notification of Cabral's discovery was the Cantino chart, finished no later than 1502.

After dispatching news of his discovery to King Manuel, Cabral proceeded to India, where he established a trading post at Cochin. He then returned to Lisbon laden with the coveted spices of the East. He helped to prepare the next fleet for India, which sailed under the command of Vasco da Gama. Cabral then apparently retired to his estate at Jardim, near Santarém, where he died about 1520.