

European Exploration
AP World History
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In the early fifteenth century the sea-faring countries of Europe were poised to expand their influence in the rest of the world through a program of sustained and systematic exploration. In some cases the motive for exploration was profit, in others, exploration was fanned by the quest for knowledge about the world in which Europeans lived. Still others justified their actions as the logical extension of the Crusades of Christianity against Islam.

Although Europe was, by and large, a self-sustaining continent, Europeans had acquired a taste for luxury items that had long been traded from the East (Persia, India, China, etc.) and whose demand far exceeded the supply since 1250. One positive effect of this new demand was that the power of merchants began to increase in Europe. With this new-found power, merchants broke down social class distinctions and helped usher in an age of greater rights for a wider range of citizens. The main negative effect of this demand for goods was the colonization and exploitation of the newly discovered lands.

The lure of profits from the cotton, silk, precious stones, exotic spices, and slaves that were traded prompted Europeans to find a better way to directly access these items. European and Eastern traders had established overland routes through central Asia that served as direct links for these exotic goods, but even regional overland trade was risky and costly.

The principal political actors throughout the Age of Exploration were Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, England, and France. Certain European states, primarily Portugal and The Netherlands, were primarily interested in building empires based on global trade and commerce. These states established worldwide trading posts and the necessary components for developing a successful economic infrastructure. Other European powers, Spain and England in particular, decided to conquer and colonize the new territories they discovered. This was particularly evident in North and South America, where these two powers built extensive political, religious, and social infrastructure.

The Spanish and Portuguese were some of the first European states to launch overseas voyages of exploration. There were several factors that led to the Iberian place in the forefront of global exploration. The first involved its strategic geographic location, which provided easy access to venturing south toward Africa or west toward the Americas. The other, arguably more important, factor for Spain and Portugal's leading position in overseas exploration was these countries' acquisition and application of ancient Arabic knowledge and expertise in math, astronomy, and geography.

Technology which allowed European exploration included the astrolabe, the compass, and advanced cartography (map-making) skills. The astrolabe, which measures latitude, which was known to the ancient Greeks, had been improved in the Islamic world by 800 and was introduced to Europe from Islamic Spain (al-Andalus) in the early 12th century. The magnetic needle, or compass, came to Europe from the Arab world in the 12th century after its invention in China. Lastly, there was a need for more accurate maps and skilled mapmakers. One had to know how to map and chart what they had seen and the 15th century saw profound developments in the art

and science of cartography, primarily through the re-emergence of Greek, Roman, and Arab map-making skills.

Bartolomeu Dias (or Diaz) was a Portuguese explorer who sailed around the southernmost tip of Africa in 1488, the first European known to have done so. While his goal was to reach India by water, he failed to do so, he did prove that such a route was possible.

Vasco da Gama was a Portuguese explorer and navigator, and the first person to sail directly from Europe to India. Setting off in July 1497, da Gama's expedition took advantage of the prevailing winds by sailing south down the coast of Africa, then veering far out into the Atlantic and swinging back in an arc to arrive off the southern African coast. This established a route still followed by sailing vessels. The expedition then rounded the Cape of Good and, after sailing up the coast of east Africa, took on an Arab navigator who helped them reach the Indian coast, at Calicut (now Kozhikode) in May 1498. This voyage launched the all-water route from Europe to Asia.

The Portuguese displaced Asian traders who had supplied spices to Red Sea and Persian Gulf ports for onward sale to Venetian, Genoese and Catalan traders. But this was only a fraction, perhaps a quarter, of Asian trade in one group of commodities. In addition there was trade within Asian waters in textiles, porcelain, precious metals, carpets, perfume, jewellery, horses, timber, salt, raw silk, gold, silver, medicinal herbs and many other commodities. Hence, the spice trade was not the only trading opportunity for the Portuguese, or for the other later European traders (Dutch, British, French and others) who followed. Silk and porcelain played an increased role, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cotton textiles and tea became very important. There were possibilities of participating in intra-Asian trade as well. In the 1550s to the 1630s this kind of trade between China and Japan was a particularly profitable source of income for Portugal.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, from East Africa to Malacca (on the narrow straits between Sumatra and Malaya), Asian trade was conducted by merchant communities which operated without armed vessels or significant interference from governments. Trade was relatively free and dominated by Muslim merchants, trade kingdoms, and the Ottoman Empire.

The Portuguese trading network was different in two respects. It consisted of a string of strongly fortified bases linked by a fleet of armed ships, so market forces were modified by coercion. The headquarters of the Portuguese trading empire was established in 1510 at the captured Arab port of Goa, an island harbour halfway up the west Indian coast which was a Portuguese colony for nearly 460 years. Malacca, capital city of the Aceh Empire and the port which controlled trade and shipping from India to Indonesia and China, was captured in 1511 and kept until 1641 when it was taken by the Dutch. A base was established at Jaffna in Sri Lanka for trade in cinnamon. Most Portuguese shipments of pepper and ginger originated from the Malabar coast of India, but

for higher value spices they obtained a base at Ternate in the Moluccas (between Celebes and New Guinea) for trade in cloves, nutmeg and mace.

Despite attempts to control trade in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese were largely unsuccessful. Traders in the Indian Ocean responded to Portuguese attempts at controlling trade by resisting efforts, moving to other cities away from the Portuguese trade posts, or selling undesirable pepper or luxuries instead of spices.

Along with European advances in the Indian Ocean, the Americas were explored by the Europeans as well. Christopher Columbus is, of course, known as 'the man who discovered America'. Columbus was in fact trying to find a westward sea passage to the Orient when he landed in the New World in 1492. This unintentional discovery was to change the course of world history. While Columbus was not the first to discover the Americas, his "re-discovery" differed significantly from earlier Viking voyages. The Vikings failed to maintain a presence in the Americas after finding them four hundred years before Columbus. Columbus is significant because Europeans would go on to establish permanent settlements in the Americas. Columbus' voyages to the Americas would lead to an exchange of agricultural products and disease between Europe and the Americas. The principle impacts of this exchange came from the importation of sugar into the Americas, the exportation of corn to Europe, and the importation of pathogens into the Americas.