

The European Voyages of Exploration: Introduction

Beginning in the early fifteenth century, European states began to embark on a series of global explorations that inaugurated a new chapter in world history. Known as the Age of Discovery, or the Age of Exploration, this period spanned the fifteenth through the early seventeenth century, during which time European expansion to places such as the Americas, Africa, and the Far East flourished. This era is defined by figures such as Ferdinand Magellan, whose 1519–1522 expedition was the first to traverse the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and the first to circumnavigate the globe.

The European Age of Exploration developed alongside the Renaissance. Both periods in Western history acted as transitional moments between the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Competition between burgeoning European empires, such as Spain and England, fueled the evolution and advancement of overseas exploration. Motivated by religion, profit, and power, the size and influence of European empires during this period expanded greatly. The effects of exploration were not only felt abroad but also within the geographic confines of Europe itself. The economic, political, and cultural effects of Europe's beginning stages of global exploration impacted the long-term development of both European society and the entire world.

Empire and Politics

During the eighth century, the Islamic conquest of North Africa, Spain, France, and parts of the Mediterranean, effectively impeded European travel to the Far East for subsequent centuries. This led many early explorers, such as Vasco de Gama and Christopher Columbus, to search for new trade routes to the East. Previous travel accounts from the early expeditions of figures such as Marco Polo (during the late thirteenth century) encouraged many Europeans to search for new territories and places that would lead to the East. Ocean voyages were extremely treacherous during the beginnings of European exploration. The navigation techniques were primitive, the maps were notoriously unreliable, and the weather was unpredictable. Additionally, explorers worried about running out of supplies, rebellion on the high seas, and hostile indigenous peoples.

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.

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.

Economic Factors

Before the fifteenth century, European states enjoyed a long history of trade with places in the Far East, such as India and China. This trade introduced luxury goods such as cotton, silk, and spices to the European economy. New technological advancements in maritime navigation and ship construction allowed Europeans to travel farther and explore parts of the globe that were previously unknown. This, in turn, provided Europeans with an opportunity to locate luxury goods, which were in high demand, thereby eliminating Europe's dependency on Eastern trade. In many ways, the demand for goods such as sugar, cotton, and rum fueled the expansion of European empires and their eventual use of slave labor from Africa. Europe's demand for luxury goods greatly influenced the course of the transatlantic slave trade.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries small groups financed by private businesses carried out the first phase of European exploration. Members of the noble or merchant class typically funded these early expeditions. Over time, as it became clear that global exploration was extremely profitable, European states took on a primary role. The next phase of exploration involved voyages taken in the name of a particular empire and monarch (e.g., France or Spain). The Iberian empires of Spain and Portugal were some of the earliest states to embark on new voyages of exploration. In addition to seeking luxury goods, the Spanish empire was driven by its quest for American silver.

Science and Culture

The period of European exploration introduced the people of Europe to the existence of new cultures worldwide. Before the fifteenth century, Europeans had minimal knowledge of the people and places beyond the boundaries of Europe, particularly Africa and Asia. Before the discovery of the Americas, Europeans did not even know of its *existence*. Europeans presumed that the world was much smaller than it was in actuality. This led early explorers such as Columbus and Magellan to believe that finding new routes to the Far East would be much easier than it turned out to be.

Profound misconceptions about geography and the cultures of local populations would change very slowly throughout the early centuries of European exploration. By the sixteenth century, European maps started to expand their depictions and representations to include new geographic discoveries. However, due to the intense political rivalries during the period, European states guarded their geographic knowledge and findings from one another.

With the growth of the printing press during the sixteenth century, accounts of overseas travels, such as those of Marco Polo in the late thirteenth century, spread to a wider audience of European readers than had previously been possible. The Age of Exploration also coincided with the development of Humanism and a growing

intellectual curiosity about the natural world. The collection and study of exotic materials such as plants and animals led to a new age of scientific exploration and inquiry. These initial surveys and analyses influenced future revolutionary developments in numerous fields of science and natural history in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Religious Factors

One of the tenets of Catholicism decreed that Christianity ought to be the universal religion and faith among all mankind. The Crusades in the centuries preceding the Age of Exploration exposed Europeans to new places, people, and goods. It also reflected the zealous nature of medieval Christianity and foreshadowed the fervent missionary work that would form a major part of all early global expeditions. The pope played an important and validating role in these voyages by sanctioning and encouraging worldwide exploration. This often included the approbation of enslaving Africans and indigenous peoples. Missionaries were frequently a part of the early expeditions of Spain with the aim of bringing Christianity to the native inhabitants. Europeans typically viewed indigenous populations as barbaric heathens who could only become civilized through the adoption of Christianity.

Summary:

- The age of European exploration and discovery represented a new period of global interaction and interconnectivity. As a result of technological advancements, Europeans were able to forge into new and previously undiscovered territories. They understood this to be a “New World.”
- European exploration was driven by multiple factors, including economic, political, and religious incentives. The growing desire to fulfill European demand for luxury goods, and the desire to unearth precious materials such as gold and silver, acted as a particularly crucial motivation.
- The period of European global exploration sparked the beginning phases of European empire and colonialism, which would continue to develop and intensify over the course of the next several centuries.
- As European exploration evolved and flourished, it saw the increasing oppression of native populations and the enslavement of Africans. During this period, Europeans increasingly dealt in African slaves and started the transatlantic slave trade.