

# Reasons for the Age of Exploration

**W**hy did European exploration begin to flourish in the 1400s? Two main reasons stand out. First, Europeans of this time had several motives for exploring the world. Second, advances in knowledge and technology helped make voyages of discovery possible.

**Motives for Exploration** For early explorers, one of the main motives for exploration was the desire to find new trade routes to Asia. By the 1400s, merchants and crusaders had brought many goods to Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Demand for these goods increased the desire for trade.

Europeans were especially interested in spices from Asia. They had learned to use spices to help preserve food during winter and to cover up the taste of food that was no longer fresh.

Trade with the East, however, was expensive and difficult. Muslims and Italians controlled the flow of trade. Muslim traders carried goods to the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Italian merchants then brought the goods to Europe. Problems arose when Muslim rulers sometimes closed the trade routes from Asia to Europe. Also, the goods went through many hands, and each trading party raised their price.

European monarchs and merchants wanted to break the hold that Muslims and Italians had on trade. One way to do so was to find a sea route to Asia. Portuguese sailors looked for a route that went around Africa. Christopher Columbus tried to reach Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic.

Other motives also came into play. Many people were excited by the opportunity for new knowledge. Explorers saw the chance to earn fame and glory as well as wealth. Some craved adventure. And as new lands were discovered, nations wanted to claim the lands' riches for themselves.

A final motive for exploration was the desire

to spread Christianity. Both Protestant and Catholic nations were eager to make new converts. Missionaries followed the path blazed by explorers, sometimes using force to bring native peoples into their faiths.

**Advances in Knowledge and Technology** The Age of Exploration began in the midst of the Renaissance, a time of new learning. A number of advances made it easier for explorers to venture into the unknown.

One key advance was in cartography, the art and science of mapmaking. In the early 1400s, an Italian scholar translated an ancient book called *Guide to Geography* from Greek into Latin. The book had been written by Ptolemy in the second century C.E. Printed copies of the book inspired new interest in cartography. European mapmakers used Ptolemy's work to draw more accurate maps.

Discoveries by explorers gave mapmakers new information to work with. The result was a dramatic change in Europeans' view of the world. By the 1500s, globes showed Earth as a sphere, or ball. In 1507, a German cartographer made the first map that clearly showed North and South America separated from Asia.

In turn, better maps helped explorers by making navigation easier. The most important Renaissance geographer, Gerardus Mercator, created maps using improved lines of longitude and latitude. Mercator's mapmaking technique was a great help to navigators.

An improved ship design also helped explorers. By the 1400s, Portuguese and Spanish shipbuilders were making caravels. These ships were small, fast, and easy to maneuver. Their shallow bottoms made it easier for explorers to travel along coastlines where the water was not deep. Caravels also used lateen (triangular) sails, an idea borrowed from Muslim ships. These sails

# Reasons for the Age of Exploration

---

could be positioned to take advantage of the wind no matter which way it blew.

Along with better ships, new navigational tools helped sailors to travel more safely on the open seas. By the end of the 15th century, the compass was much improved. Sailors used compasses to find their bearing, or direction of travel. The astrolabe helped sailors figure out their distance north or south from the equator.

Finally, improved weapons gave Europeans a huge advantage over the people they met in their explorations. Sailors could fire their cannons at targets near the shore without leaving their ships. On land, the weapons of native peoples often were no match for European guns, armor, and horses.

## Questions

1. What were some key motives for Europeans during the Age of Exploration?
2. Which motive do you think was the strongest for encouraging European exploration? Why?
3. What key advances in knowledge and technology allowed Europeans to explore these new areas?
4. Which advance do you think was the most important? Why?