

Topic 1.6: The Age of Exploration

CONTEXTUALIZATION

During the Middle Ages, luxury goods, such as spices and silks, were brought to Europe by way of the **Silk Road**, a collection of land routes across Asia. In medieval Europe, luxury goods were extremely expensive and very few could afford them. **Mediterranean trade routes** were controlled by Italian merchants from Genoa and Venice.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

The Age of Exploration began in the fifteenth century with Portuguese attempts to find an all-water route around Africa. This era of European exploration and colonization continued into the seventeenth century.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Age of Exploration began an era of **global trade** and **European economic dominance**.

KEY TERMS

Magnetic Compass

In the Late Middle Ages, compasses were improved to the point that they could be used at sea to enable sailors to see which direction they were going even when they could not use the stars to navigate.

Mercator Projection

In 1569, Gerardus Mercator developed a map projection that was designed to be used by sailors in navigation. The Mercator projection distorts the sizes of the polar regions, making it an awkward wall map, but quite useful for sailing across an ocean.

Mercantilism

The economic theory of mercantilism holds that wealth is measured in precious metals, such as gold and silver. In order to preserve a nation's supply of precious metals, governments regulated trade in order to reduce imports. Mercantilism encouraged the development of colonial trade systems, in which colonies traded primarily with the mother country.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

What **caused** early modern Europeans to seek all-water trade routes to Asia?

Overland trade routes were long, expensive, and dangerous, with luxury goods passing through many hands along the way, resulting in a massive markup. Only the wealthiest Europeans could afford luxury goods from Asia.

What **effect** did European discoveries of all-water trade routes have on the global economy?

The creation of new trade routes began an era of global trade, reducing the price of luxury goods and igniting a continual exchange of goods, people, and ideas across continents.

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PRINCE HENRY THE NAVIGATOR

In the early fifteenth century, **Prince Henry of Portugal** began actively encouraging exploration and the expansion of Portuguese trade into Africa and the Atlantic. He became a patron of navigation, supporting the development of the **caravel**, a new type of ship that was fast and maneuverable, enabling Portuguese explorers to venture into the Atlantic Ocean and explore the African coastline, which had always been a mystery to Europeans. Historians have referred to Prince Henry as “the Navigator” in recognition of his extensive support for the progress of exploration.



Prince Henry the Navigator

Portuguese explorers sought to find an all-water route to Asia by sailing around the tip of Africa. In 1488, **Bartolomeu Dias** became the first European to reach the southernmost point of the African continent. Ten years later, **Vasco da Gama** became the first European to reach India, establishing the first direct trade route between Europe and the East Indies.

SPANISH EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION

While the Portuguese sailed east in search of direct trade routes to Asia, the Spanish believed that Asia could be reached by sailing west (contrary to popular belief, they *did* know that the earth was round). Queen Isabella commissioned **Christopher Columbus** to reach Asia by sailing west. Rather than finding Asia, Columbus unwittingly discovered the Americas, establishing a permanent trade relationship between the Old World and the New World. Columbus was followed by **conquistadors**, Spanish explorers who conquered native tribes in the Americas, aided by their use of **firearms** and the natives' lack of immunity to European diseases.

MERCANTILISM: THE REGULATION OF TRADE

As Spanish explorers brought gold back from the New World, the economic theory of **mercantilism**, which holds that national wealth is measured in precious metals, encouraged them to hold onto as much of it as they could. Mercantilism encourages governments to limit imports, since imported goods must be paid for with gold and silver. As a result, **colonial empires** were established in order to create self-sufficient national trade networks between colonies and their mother countries.

CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM BEYOND EUROPE



André Reinoso, Saint Francis Xavier Preaching in Goa (1610)

In addition to an increase in global trade, the Age of Exploration also resulted in a global exchange of ideas. Along with explorers seeking trade routes came Christian missionaries who made efforts to **evangelize** native populations. The **Jesuits**, a Catholic religious order founded during the Catholic Reformation, were

especially active in evangelism efforts in the Americas and in Asia. **Francis Xavier**, a co-founder of the Jesuit Order, sailed to India, where he converted thousands to the Catholic faith in the Portuguese colony of **Goa**. In 1549, Xavier became the first Christian missionary to set foot in Japan.

Catholic missionaries also followed Spanish conquistadors into the Americas. **Bartolomé de las Casas**, a Spanish priest, criticized the abuses of the Spanish *encomienda* system, which exploited native labor for profit.