

Motivations for the age of exploration



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During the 1400s, Europeans started venturing beyond their borders to foreign places. This period of time when Europeans explored, colonized, and settled in foreign countries is known as the Age of Exploration. It began in the 15th century and lasted until the 17th century. The event led to numerous advancements in geographic knowledge, and also improved the interactions and trade between countries. Several factors favored Europe as the starting place of exploration. Medieval religious fervor made captains feel it was their duty to convert everyone they met to Christianity. Europe was also in good conditions economically, and its geographic position drove it to find routes to Asia, which then led to the Americas. Both the Renaissance and the Crusades were crucial in the development of the Age of Discovery. Renaissance ideas motivated the Europeans to experience and observe other cultures, giving them the courage to interact with different people. The Crusades also opened the minds of the Europeans which brought them in contact with different goods and religious ideas. After the Renaissance and the Crusades, the Age of Exploration began due to the Europeans' urge to spread Christianity, their eagerness for fame, their desire for wealth, and the improvements in technology that allowed voyages.

A major motive for the Age of Discovery was the religious desire to convert people to Christianity. Bartolomeu Dias, an early Portuguese explorer, stated his motives for voyage: "To serve God and His Majesty, to give light to those who were in darkness and to grow rich as all men desire to (Miller)." The first two motives stated were both religious goals that Christians hoped to accomplish. Another story that they believed in also motivated them to explore. This was the myth of Prester John (The Myth of Prester John).

Although fake, the Europeans believed in this story where the king of the legendary Christian nation had ordered all Christians to join him in a religious battle against the infidels. This myth persuaded many Christians to join the holy wars, or the Crusades, which were extremely important factors of the Age of Exploration.

Europeans thought that it was their duty to fulfill God's wishes and save souls by spreading Christianity. The Crusades played a significant role in building up to the Age of Exploration (The European Voyages of Exploration). It exposed the Europeans to new people and places, giving them the new objective to convert more people to Christianity. Setting up missions was one of the religious goals of exploration. Missionaries that traveled with explorers preached to the natives of different areas to achieve their religious wishes. Francis Xavier was a Jesuit missionary that went to India with the Portuguese explorers (McGrath). He learned the local languages and was able to preach in their native tongue. This was a more effective way of spreading religion which made thousands of people convert to Christianity. Missionaries like Xavier were influential in saving the souls of people from all around the world, completing an objective of exploration.

The Age of Exploration developed along with the Renaissance, as these ideas influenced their desires for individual glory. The Renaissance stressed the individual human being, so explorers wanted to earn fame and honor for themselves with successful explorations. People during this time wanted to live enjoyable lives, unlike people during the medieval times who wanted to reach heaven. Because of this, people during the Renaissance worked for themselves and worked to become rich in order to live an enjoyable life.

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Explorers also wanted to voyage in search of individual wealth and fame. Explorer Christopher Columbus was an example as he worked to achieve fame and fortune (Christopher Columbus). His contract with the Spanish rulers agreed that when he discovered land, he would be given a noble title, could keep ten percent of the riches he found, and would be able to govern the lands he discovered. Kings and queens also wanted glory for their countries, so they promoted exploration. With the invention of the printing press, it became possible for one to become famous for what he or she did. With this in mind, explorers became motivated by personal glory to discover lands in the New World.

The “ rebirth” of classical Greek and Roman values that brought many changes to how people thought was created by the Crusades. The holy wars let the Europeans see beyond their own world, sparking their interest in learning which led to the Renaissance. The secular outlook made people think more about religious authority, and also gave them scientific curiosity (Brotton). It was a time when people wanted to learn more about the world. Humanism brought intellectual curiosity about the world to people’s minds, and the discoveries made led to a new age in search of scientific knowledge. The will and courage to learn and understand different cultures made people want to explore and see more around the world (Lecture 2). This idea links with the Renaissance in general, and also the human nature to explore and gain information on the unknown.

The search for trade routes that led to wealth was an indispensable cause of European exploration. The Crusades and trade brought the Europeans to spices, silk, and other luxuries. The Europeans demanded spices from the

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East to add flavor to their bland food, making it extremely valuable. When important trade routes to the East were blocked by the Turks, the explorers embarked to find better ones (FC67). Better trade routes could increase the profit made in the markets of luxuries. Thomas Mun's ideas on the effects of foreign trade stated in *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade* showed how he supported foreign trade since it increased England's treasury (Koeller). He tells of how England exports more goods than it imports, thus increasing the profit they made from trade. This idea links to mercantilism, where people thought that there was only a limited amount of money in the world. In order to make the kingdom strong, they had to have more wealth than other countries. Mercantilism motivated the Europeans to explore and search for trade routes, which could then help them become wealthy and powerful.

Before the newer trade routes existed, trade for goods in the East was controlled by the Italians and Muslims. The Muslims sold the goods they got from the East to the Italians at a raised price, and then the Italians also increased the price of the goods sold to Europe in order to make profit. The Europeans were not happy with the amount they had to pay, so they wanted to find a route directly to Asia to bypass the middlemen. Before trade routes were found, a pound of cinnamon cost twenty-four pence, which would have taken a master carpenter three days to earn (Kelley). Although costly, Europeans still considered spices a necessity and were willing to pay large amounts of money for them. In order to acquire these goods and more wealth, explorers searched for trade routes, and the Portuguese accomplished this with their trading empire. Previous costs of spices could be anywhere from ten to a hundred times the original price, so a huge

difference was made to these prices after the trading empire was created (Munro). It allowed merchants to bring back goods at the original price paid at the source, making it affordable to more Europeans.

The Age of Discovery would not have been possible without the geographical knowledge gained during this time. Before maps had improved and included locations on global scales, sailors used the color of skies and waters, the types of vegetation, and also the types of sea birds in the area to identify their location. Later, portolan charts, coastal maps of Europe and the Mediterranean, and global projections were created, giving the Europeans better ideas of the world (FC81). With clear ideas of direction, sailing became a lot easier and explorers were also less likely to sail to the wrong place. Prince Henry the Navigator helped improve the techniques used to explore and map the new lands. He developed the first nautical map that replaced the portolan charts (Briney). The portolan charts kept sailors close to the shore, but the nautical maps allowed them to sail away from land which improved the results of travel, because more could be seen and discovered. Prince Henry also introduced navigational schools to improve the geographical knowledge of explorers.

Furthermore, various naval inventions and advancements allowed the oceans to be sailed. Some of the most important were the magnetic compass, the astrolabe, and the changes in shipbuilding (FC81). The compass invented by the Chinese gave a better sense of direction. The astrolabe, perfected by the Muslims, helped determine latitude. Great changes were also made to the European ships. The hulls of the caravels were bulkier and sturdier, allowing voyage in large waves. The southern

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triangle or lateen sail allowed ships to sail against the wind, which was not possible before. These inventions made sailing overseas an attainable task, leading to the discovery of the various areas separate from Europe.

The Age of Exploration was a crucial period of time that made influential differences in not only the history of Europe, but the history of almost the entire world. This event would never have occurred without the Crusades, Renaissance, and advancements in technology. The will to fulfill religious desires, search for wealth, and pursue personal fame drove the Europeans out of the Old World in search of new places over the seas. All the voyages made helped link different countries together, and even influenced the basis of knowledge nowadays. Although the Age of Discovery ended in the 1600s, the effects of it still make significant changes to the world today.

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