

Age of Exploration

“Hit the Seas”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. In the 1200s, explorer Marco Polo returned to Italy after adventuring in China. He brought back silks, teas and spices, and, perhaps most importantly, stories as fantastic as fairy tales. After tasting the exotic wonders of the East, Europeans wanted more. Asian spices also helped make rotting food taste better and keep longer, which made them valuable because refrigerators did not yet exist.

Notes

Since the time of Marco Polo’s travels, the Ottoman Turks had gained control of land between Europe and China. The Turks prevented people from passing through their land and were violently protective of the territory because if Europeans could get Asian goods for themselves, the Turks couldn’t make any money. The Europeans knew there had to be another way around, and thus the search for new trade routes began.

2. The first great supporter of naval exploration was Prince Henry of Portugal, called Prince Henry the Navigator. Because of Prince Henry’s influence, Portugal aggressively explored the open sea before other nations caught on. Each wave of the high seas brought new challenges. But the undiscovered lands lured him with enticing mysteries. Henry funded expeditions to the islands off the Portuguese coast and to the west coast of Africa, where he began to trade in slaves and gold.

Notes

Prince Henry’s influence inspired many men to pack their belongings into a trunk and sail to unknown lands. But a true explorer does not just travel to already discovered lands; explorers now had to sail to distant, uncharted lands to gain credibility.

3. Bartolomeu Dias was an explorer who journeyed around the southern tip of Africa. While many ignorant people at the time thought the world was flat, explorers who kept up with the science of the times knew that the world was round.

Notes

Italian explorer Christopher Columbus had heard about Dias's trip. Columbus wasn't excited about sailing south on the stormy seas to India, so he thought he would try a different approach—sail west instead! He thought it would be a quick trip. But because accurate maps did not exist, Columbus seriously underestimated the distance around the world. When his boat hit ground in 1492, Columbus believed that he had landed on the eastern shores of India. Actually, he had just made it to the Caribbean. He landed on the island that is now the Dominican Republic. This landing was the spark that forever changed the Western Hemisphere.

4. Vasco da Gama figured he could sail even farther than Bartolomeu Dias had. He sailed past the Cape of Good Hope and landed in Calicut, India. Nearly 300 years after Marco Polo's eastern travels, Europeans had found a way to get back to the East. When da Gama returned to Portugal with a ship full of delicious Indian spices, he became a celebrity.

Notes

Another famous explorer, Ferdinand Magellan led the first crew that sailed from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. People often celebrate Magellan for being the first person to circumnavigate, or sail all the way around, the globe. But the truth is, Magellan made it only most of the way. Natives of the Philippine Islands killed him before he could make it back to Spain. Some of his crew members did successfully circumnavigate Earth, though. Still, Magellan's voyage proved for all doubters that the world was round.

5. In the beginning of the Age of Exploration, no country could rival Spain or Portugal's seafaring prowess. They built the best ships, had the most experienced sailors and relied on celestial navigation, which is the use of the position of the sun, moon and stars for directions. These two countries wanted more than just the glory of exploration, however. They wanted land. But how would Spain and Portugal divide the land between them? The two countries signed a treaty that essentially drew an imaginary line down the center of the Atlantic Ocean and part of South America, the Line of Demarcation. Portugal would be able to claim any land found east of the line, and Spain would have everything west of it. In South America, Brazil was the only major country east of the Line of Demarcation, so it came under the rule of Portugal. This is why Portugal is the official language in Brazil, and Spanish is the official language in most other countries in South America.

Notes

6. Ships operated as mini societies that were similar to those on land, with social classes that each contributed different skills for daily life. However, whether you were the highest ranking official—the captain—leading the way or the lowly page scrubbing the deck, traveling on these ships was no pleasure cruise. You still had to scratch the lice in your hair and sleep with bedbugs and cockroaches. And forget about sleeping a full night—sailors had to work to keep the ship afloat at all hours.

Notes

When food started running out, everyone had to ration, or eat small amounts. Otherwise, they'd starve together. Because sailors ate lots of old food, they didn't get enough vitamin C. Lack of fresh fruit caused the disease scurvy, which commonly made sailors' teeth fall out.

7. Columbus's landing in the New World marked the beginning of a fraught relationship between Europeans and Native Americans. They exchanged food, animals, plants and cultures in what was called the Columbian exchange. Europe and the "old world" tasted chocolate, potatoes, tomatoes and tobacco for the first time. The people of the New World got to try coffee, tea and lemons and see horses, cows, cats and other domestic animals for the first time.

Notes

In addition to bringing goods, the Europeans also brought disease. European diseases like measles and smallpox ravaged the Native American population. The diseases would end up killing up to 90 percent of the Native Americans, who didn't have natural defenses against these potent ailments.