How Did a Spirit of Exploration Become Part of the Western Worldview?

By the Renaissance, Europeans had traded with peoples beyond their borders for thousands of years. During the Greek and Roman Empires, land trade routes were expanded, so more exotic goods from societies beyond the edges of the empires made their way back to Europe. Throughout the Middle Ages, city-states such as Genoa and Venice expanded their trading areas in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. They traded with Islamic and Asian civilizations for luxury goods desired by consumers in Europe’s growing wealthy middle and upper classes. Trade was becoming increasingly profitable.

During the Renaissance, city-states in Italy gained power and wealth. Both the governments and the traders worked to expand their control of trade around the Mediterranean. In the rest of Europe, the feudal system declined and larger centralized states came under the control of monarchs who also wanted the wealth that came from trade with the East. This competition spurred the need for new trade routes. With increasing geographic knowledge and new sailing technologies, the Age of Exploration, sometimes called the Age of Discovery, arrived.

The Age of Exploration began during the Renaissance in the early 15th century and continued into the 17th century. A European desire to expand their influence to other areas of the world became a major part of their worldview. European expansionism would spread the Western worldview to all the inhabited continents of the world.
Factors Affecting Expansionism

The Need for New Trade Routes
For centuries, Europeans had used the Silk Road to trade with the Far East. But the trade was limited and did not meet the demand for goods in Europe. Ways of doing business were changing. Several merchants would form a company and pool their money to fund trading trips to bring back spices and other goods. They would share the profits from the sale of these goods. Making a profit through trade became a more important part of the European worldview. In fact, many Italian merchants often wrote “In the Name of God and of Profit” on the top of their account books.

Some countries in western Europe — Portugal, Spain, France, and England — were too far from the East to deal directly with the producers of these exotic products. Instead, they had to deal through Italian or Muslim traders on the Mediterranean Sea who had control over the trade. As the focus on making a profit increased, merchants no longer wanted to deal with these Mediterranean traders (or middlemen). They wanted to deal directly with the regions supplying the goods. As Portugal, Spain, France, and England became more centralized states, their rulers became more powerful. Monarchs and wealthy merchants paid for voyages of exploration to find new sea trade routes to the East.

When Constantinople was conquered by the Turks in 1453, they gained control of the straits that connected the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Traders from Venice and Genoa were no longer allowed to pass through the straits. The flow of goods from Asia was nearly halted. As a result, finding new direct sea routes to India and China became even more important for Western European countries.
New Ideas and Knowledge

Geography

As taught centuries earlier, by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, many people still believed that the world was round and flat, like a circular dish or plate. Others followed the teachings of Ptolemy, an Egyptian geographer, and believed the world was shaped like a sphere or ball and that there was only one ocean. Sailors and others thought that if ships sailed west, they would eventually reach the eastern shores of Asia. Ptolemy had miscalculated the circumference of the Earth, which led European explorers to greatly underestimate the time it would take to sail westward to Asia.

Knowledge gathered by Islamic scientists, and then European scientists such as Copernicus, seemed to confirm that the Earth was spherical. This gave sailors confidence to sail westward across the unknown ocean, believing that they would not fall off the edge of the world. It is not known how much knowledge Western European explorers had of the earlier voyages of the Vikings to the New World.

The world’s earliest surviving maps, starting with ancient Babylonian clay tablets from the 6th century BCE through early Greek maps of the 3rd century BCE, typically show the world as a small land mass entirely encircled by a ribbon of water. This clay tablet map, 700 to 500 BCE, was found in southern Iraq.
Interest in Learning More About the World

Humanism was a new way of thinking that encouraged individuals to question and to explore their ideas, lives, and worlds. It brought about a renewed interest in geography and a willingness to challenge older geographical beliefs.

Travel writers during the 16th century also created interest in trade and exploration. The travel writers promoted the idea that one should experience and observe the world as much as possible. There was a desire to learn more about the world and explore what it had to offer.

During the Renaissance, interest in navigation increased as Italian traders, and then others, sailed the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Their voyages made them, the merchants, and the city-states in which they lived, fabulously wealthy. To remain competitive in trade, sailors and ships had to have better technologies and knowledge than their rivals. Technological advances in cartography, navigation, and shipbuilding meant that ships could travel further. The carrack and the caravel were two new ships that combined the navigational and design technologies of the Arabs with European design.

Knowledge about navigational tools also improved. Although the compass was brought from China to Europe in the 12th century, it was only used for land travel, not sailing. During the 15th century, European sailors began to use the astrolabe, an instrument developed by Islamic inventors that allowed navigation by stars at night. Previously, sailors used landmarks and the sun for navigation, so they could not travel any distance during the night or anywhere too far from land. The astrolabe allowed journeys farther from the sight of land, leading to the discoveries and explorations of new worlds.

The invention of the printing press spurred wide distribution of maps and navigational tables. This made it possible for new sailing knowledge and charts to be easily shared across Europe.

did you know that West Edmonton Mall, in Edmonton, has a full-size replica of the world’s most famous carrack, Columbus’s Santa Maria?

Christopher Columbus’s flagship, the *Santa Maria*, was also a carrack. His two other ships, the *Pinta* and the *Niña*, were caravels, which were designed to take advantage of wind from any direction. The shallower hull and better lines of the caravel made them easier to sail than the bulky carracks, but they could not carry as many provisions, which created hardship for the sailors.