

II. Europe Before the Age of Discovery

A. What the People of Europe Knew of the World

1. Well past Leif Ericson's time, most Europeans remained ignorant of the world's geography. Most Europeans had never even left their own county, let alone Europe.
2. In Ancient times, a Greek geographer named Ptolemy had created a map of the world that represented all that was known of the world.
 - a) Ptolemy's map showed only Europe, Africa, and Asia.
 - b) Ptolemy did not really know the shape of Africa or Asia.
 - c) Ptolemy did not think there was anything west of Europe.
3. Ptolemy's work was known only to a very small education segment of the European population, the scholastic monks, who labored to preserve knowledge by copying ancient texts in their scriptoriums. For nearly a thousand years, no knew knowledge of geography was sought, however.
4. Pilgrims (religious travelers) made their way to the Holy Land (the place where Jesus had lived, and where Israel is today). They brought back stories of what they had seen and journals explaining the routes they had traveled.
5. Then the Christians of Europe decided to conquer the Holy Land, which was controlled by the Muslims, in a series of wars called the Crusades.
6. The Crusades were the first time that large groups of Europeans actually left Europe for another part of the world.
7. By living in the Holy Land, the Crusaders learned more about the world around them, including the cultures of Asia.

B. Marco Polo and Interest in Asia

1. The Europeans living in areas around the Holy Land during the time of the Crusades were conquered by the vast Mongol Empire that stretched out from Mongolia and China all the way to Eastern Europe.
2. Among them was the Polo family, merchants from the Italian city of Venice.
3. Merchants Niccolo and Mafeo Polo were invited to meet with the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan in the far eastern part of the Empire.
4. Kublai Khan became interested in Christianity and trade with Europe, and he sent the Polos back to Europe to bring back priests to teach the Mongols about Christianity.
5. On the return trip to Asia, Niccolo brought his son Marco.
6. This time, the Polos stayed in China for 17 years, in the service of the Mongol Emperor.
7. Upon their return to Europe people could hardly believe the stories the Polos told of Asia, but Marco Polo's travels were eventually published and became a popular story that increased people's interest in the world outside Europe.

III. The Age of Discovery (1415-1607)

A. Portuguese Exploration under Prince Henry “The Navigator”

1. Portugal Takes the Lead

- a) Portugal is the country that started the “Age of Discovery” (the period that involved a greatest wave of exploration in recorded history.)
- b) Portugal’s king wanted to enrich his country in order to stay independent from his powerful neighbor, the kingdom of Castile. For a smaller country to be able to fend off aggressive neighbors the key was to have sufficient wealth to entice allies to fight at one's side.
- c) Portugal aspired to increase its wealth by establishing trade with Asia, but this would prove difficult, if it tried to do so by way of the Mediterranean.
 - i) Portugal was outside the Mediterranean, and to reach it, its sailors would have to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar and Muslim-controlled waters.
 - ii) Its merchants would have to compete with the Italian merchants of Genoa and Venice.
 - iii) The Portuguese also preferred to wage war on Muslims, rather than trade with them.

2. Prince Henry

- a) In 1415, the King’s son, Prince Henry, led an expedition to conquer the Muslim city of Ceuta in northern Africa.
- b) He discovered that Ceuta was part of a trading network that extended far into Africa, which could be conquered to Portugal's advantage.
- c) Prince Henry then established a school of geography and exploration at Sagres in southern Portugal.
- d) The work of ancient geographers, such as Ptolemy and Al-Idrisi, suggested that the Portuguese might be able to sail through Africa (on the Western Nile) or around it, to get to Asia.
- e) Prince Henry ordered his sailors to make the attempt, and for over 40 years, they continued to work on this project, slowly creeping past Cape Verde (the westernmost point of Africa) and the equator.
- f) Along the way, the Portuguese found that they could profit from obtaining ivory, gold, and slaves from Africa.
- g) A route to Asia was not found during Prince Henry’s life, but the voyages he organized were the first efforts of a new trend of exploration. Portugal's limited success began to awaken Europe out of the slumber of the Dark Ages.