

[Print](#)

*Europe was aware of the riches of Asia and Africa. Attempts to increase trade with these lands eventually developed into an era of European exploration that reached far beyond Europe's borders.*

## New Ideas, New Nations

### ***Where did the Renaissance take place?***

For centuries after the Roman Empire fell in A.D. 476, the people of Western Europe were cut off from the rest of the world. Western Europe was made up of small kingdoms and city-states dominated by the Catholic Church. Then, in the early A.D. 600s, a new religion, Islam, began to spread rapidly in the Middle East and Africa. This rise of Islam would soon end Western Europe's isolation.

In 1095 the Europeans launched the first of nine expeditions, known as the **Crusades**. Their purpose was to take back control of Christian holy sites in the Middle East from the Muslims—followers of Islam. The Crusades also had an unplanned result. In the Middle East, Europeans met Arab merchants, who sold them spices, sugar, silk, and other goods from China and India. European interest in Asia grew.

That interest grew even more after Italian explorer Marco Polo returned from China. In the late 1200s, Polo wrote about Asia's people, great riches, and splendid cities in his book, *Travels*, which was widely read in Europe. Two hundred years later, his *Travels* would inspire another Italian explorer—Christopher Columbus.

### **The Growth of Trade**

Merchants in Europe knew they could make a lot of money selling goods from Asia. Wealthy Europeans were eager to buy Asian spices, perfumes, silks, and precious stones.

Merchants first bought these goods from Arab traders in the Middle East. The merchants then sent the goods overland by caravan to the Mediterranean Sea. From there, the goods traveled by ship to Italian ports in Venice, Genoa, and Pisa. These cities prospered as centers of the growing trade. However, Arab traders charged high prices. This led Europeans to look for a route to the East that would not require them to buy from Arab merchants.

### **The Growth of Ideas**

By the 1300s, several Italian city-states had become strong economic and cultural centers. Their influence spread across Europe. Newly powerful bankers and merchants in Pisa, Venice, and Genoa studied **classical** works—those of ancient Greece and Rome.

Science was another area in which change occurred. Many scholars tested new and old theories of science. They performed experiments and evaluated the results.

The arts were also influenced by classical forms and new ideas. Authors wrote about the individual's place in the universe. Artists studied classical sculpture and architecture. They admired the harmony and balance in Greek art.

## **The Renaissance**

This period of intellectual and artistic creativity is known as the **Renaissance** (reh • nuh • SAHNS). The word *renaissance* means "rebirth" in French. It refers to the rebirth of interest in classical Greek and Roman ideas. As the Renaissance spread across Europe over the next two centuries, it changed the way Europeans thought about themselves and the world. It also set the stage for an age of exploration and discovery.

### **The Rise of Powerful Nations**

For centuries, Europe had been a patchwork of small states. By the 1400s, however, a new, larger type of state had developed in Western Europe. Strong monarchs rose to power in Spain, Portugal, England, and France. They began to establish national laws, courts, taxes, and armies to replace those of the local rulers. These ambitious monarchs sought ways to increase trade and make their countries even stronger and wealthier.

As early as the mid-1400s, powerful countries such as Portugal and Spain began to search for sea routes to Asia. They, too, wanted to engage in foreign trade. This placed them in direct competition with the Italian port cities that had become so powerful a century earlier. As a result, a new era of exploration began.

**Drawing Conclusions** In what way did trade help to bring about the Renaissance?

## **The Effects of New Technology**

### ***What technological advancements paved the way for European voyages of exploration?***

Advances in technology—the use of scientific knowledge for practical purposes—helped to make European voyages of exploration possible. In the 1450s, the introduction of the printing press made it much easier to print books. More people had access to books and

to new information. Many Europeans read Marco Polo's *Travels* when it appeared in printed form in 1477. This book gave people descriptions of faraway places, such as modern-day areas of Iraq, Siberia, Japan, India, Ethiopia, and Madagascar. Whether the descriptions were entirely accurate is open to debate. However, Polo's *Travels* led European readers to realize that there were many spectacular sights beyond their immediate world.

### Better Maps and Instruments

Most early maps were not accurate. This was because they were drawn based on the points of view of traders and travelers. Little by little, cartographers, or mapmakers, improved their accuracy. Using reports of explorers and information from Arab and Chinese scholars and astronomers, mapmakers made more accurate land and sea maps. These maps showed the directions of ocean currents. They also showed lines of latitude, which measured the distance north and south of the Equator.

People also improved instruments for navigating the seas. Sailors could find their latitude with an astrolabe (AS • truh • layb), which measured the positions of stars. In the 1200s, Europeans acquired the magnetic compass from China. The compass allowed sailors to accurately determine their direction.

### Better Ship Design

Advances in ship design allowed sailors to make long ocean voyages. The stern rudder and triangular sail enabled ships to sail into the wind. The Portuguese three-masted caravel (KER • uh • vehl) became the most famous ship of the European age of exploration. Caravels could sail faster and carry more cargo and supplies than earlier ships. These advances and competition for foreign trade led countries such as Portugal and Spain to search for sea routes to Asia. Portugal began its explorations along the west coast of Africa, an area Europeans had never visited before.

**Determining Cause and Effect** How did the caravel affect exploration in a positive way?

### Kingdoms and Empires in Africa

#### *What were the most powerful empires in Africa?*

Between A.D. 400 and 1600, powerful kingdoms and city-states flourished in Africa south of the Sahara. Much of their power and wealth came from mining and trade.

Arab traders traveled Africa's east coast exchanging cotton, silk, and porcelain for African ivory and metals. West Africans mined and traded gold, copper, and iron ore. Trade with North Africa's Islamic societies brought wealth and Islamic customs to the West African kingdoms. The kingdoms also traded directly with Europe. The Portuguese set up trading posts along Africa's western coast in the mid-1400s.

#### Ghana—A Trading Empire

Between A.D. 400 and 1100, a vast trading empire known as Ghana emerged in West Africa. Ghana grew wealthy from the taxes it placed on trade. Caravans carrying gold, ivory, and enslaved people crossed the desert to North Africa and returned with salt, cloth, and brass. Such trading contacts led many West Africans to become Muslim.

In 1076 North African people called Almoravids (al • muh • RAH • vihdz) attacked Ghana, disrupting the trade routes in the region. Soon new trade routes bypassed Ghana altogether. The drop in trade led to Ghana's decline, and new kingdoms emerged in the region.

#### Mali—Wealth and Power

Mali, one of the new kingdoms, grew very powerful. Mali developed trade routes across the desert to North Africa. By the late 1200s, Mali's territory was huge. One traveler reported that it took four months to cross it from north to south.

In 1324 Mali's great king, Mansa Musa, a Muslim, traveled to the Muslim holy city of Makkah (Mecca) in what is now Saudi Arabia. He returned from this religious journey, or pilgrimage (PIHL • gruh • mihj), with an Arab architect. The architect built great **mosques** (MAHSKS), Muslim houses of worship, in Timbuktu, Mali's capital. Timbuktu became a center of Islamic art and learning.

#### The Songhai Empire

In time, the Songhai (sawng • GEYE) people, who lived along the Niger River, overthrew Mali rule. They captured Timbuktu in 1468. Askiya Muhammad, leader of the Songhai Empire, divided Songhai into provinces, each with its own officials. Everyone in the empire followed a legal system based on the teachings of Islam. In the late 1500s, North Africa's kingdom of Morocco defeated—and ended—the Songhai Empire.

**Drawing Conclusions** What did the Middle East and Africa have that Europeans wanted?

### LESSON 1 REVIEW

#### Review Vocabulary

1. Examine the two terms that follow. Then write a sentence based on what you have read that explains the connection between the terms.

a. astrolabe

b. technology

2. Write a sentence about the classical ideas that were rediscovered during the Renaissance.

### Answer the Guiding Questions

3. **Explaining** How did the rise of Italian city-states help lead to the Renaissance?

4. **Identifying** How did new technology pave the way for European voyages of exploration?

5. **Listing** What were the three most powerful empires in West Africa between the 400s and 1500s?

6. **ARGUMENT** Which of the following do you think was the most important innovation, and why?

- the compass
- improved maps
- the printing press