Out of the Middle Ages 3
Trade and Exploration

Travelling to the East presented an exciting challenge to Renaissance explorers, but what was the East actually like at this time? Europeans had a good idea what China was like because the thirteenth-century explorer Marco Polo (c. 1254-1324) had been there and had written about its wealth and riches. They also knew about India, or the Indies, but were not sure of the exact location. They were confident about the luxury goods they would find there and there were stories of a mountain of gold. They had also heard stories about strange peoples (see Sources A and B) and fearful monsters.

Setting sail

For centuries, European sailors never ventured far from land so that they wouldn’t lose sight of familiar landmarks. In the open sea it was vitally important to be able to navigate effectively because accurate maps did not exist. Dead reckoning was used by sailors, which meant that a compass told them what direction they were going in and a logline allowed them to make a rough calculation as to their speed. This logline was a piece of wood with a rope attached to it. On the rope knots were made at regular intervals. When the wood was thrown into the sea, the rope would unwind as the ship sailed forward and, by counting the knots, sailors could make a rough calculation of their speed. A knot is still used today as a nautical term for miles per hour. Sailors would also use a cross-staff or quadrant as a further check to measure the position of the pole star and other stars in relation to the horizon.

The explorers used ships called caravels (see above). They could travel quite quickly because the big sails caught the wind well and the triangular lateen sail at the back made it easy to tack (move in a zig-zag direction) when sailing directly into the wind. These ships were set deep enough into the water so they didn’t capsize easily. They were just large enough (approximately 21 metres long and 6.5 metres wide) to take the crew needed to deal with all the complicated rigging, the necessary stores and the guns, which could be fired through the ports (holes) cut into the high sides.

Italy - the key centre for trade

In the fifteenth century Italy was well positioned to become a key centre for European trade with the east, because it attracted many scholars, bankers, merchants and trades people. It became the banking centre of Europe and the rest of the known world. As these people prospered, so did the Italian city states such as Venice, Milan and Florence. Successful traders wanted the best for themselves, their families, and their towns and cities. They had the money to buy beautiful things and support the arts. Wealthy families acted as sponsors to scholars and artists, providing them with work and a living, so cities such as Florence became centres of Renaissance learning and the arts.

Trade in the East

Trade was not limited to Europe alone. For Europeans, the East - countries such as India and China - was seen as a great mystery and exciting and the goods to be found there were much in demand. For example, cottons, silks and delicately coloured porcelain were much sought after in Europe. The search for gold spurred explorers to go to far-flung places. By the end of the fifteenth century there was not enough gold in Europe to satisfy the needs of the rich and wealthy.

Journeys of discovery

At this time knowledge of the world was rapidly expanding as people journeyed more and new peoples and cultures were discovered. This process was aided by recent inventions like the compass, logline and maps. Why did voyages of discovery take place? There are a number of factors, namely:

- the desire for trade
- spreading religion
- the desire for increased wealth and power
- the desire for adventure to discover the unknown
- technical advances
- empire building and to establish control over other countries.

Source A

'Strange Races of Man' from a 1540 map by Sebastian Munster

Source B

In another isle are men without heads, and they have eyes in both shoulder, and their mouths are round-shaped like a horseshoe amidst their breasts. Yet there is another isle where the folk have but one foot, and that foot is so broad that it will cover all the body and shade it from the sun.

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, published between 1357 and 1371.
What problems did the sailors face?

One problem, which was never really solved by the explorers, was how to keep the crew healthy. The crew had to put up with many hardships and dreadful conditions whilst on board ship. Below decks it was very cramped, dirty and dark; often the sleeping space was not much more than a metre high; rats and lice were common-place. In bad weather, water seeped in through the wooden planks and it was not possible for the sailors to go on to the open deck; the work was extremely dangerous because adjusting the sails in a storm was a hazardous operation. In a dead calm, on the other hand, the crew soon became bored because there was nothing to do to keep them occupied. As the ship was made from wood, fire was a constant risk and a sailor's diet became worse and worse as the long journey progressed. Hot food was cooked on a fire in a box of sand, when the weather allowed. However, water stored in barrels soon went off and wine turned sour. Food also went stale and rotted or the ship's biscuits became infected with weevils. Lack of fresh fruit and vegetables meant sailors often suffered from diseases such as scurvy. When they went to places where no other Europeans had been before it was dangerous to land and restock with food and water because the inhabitants might be hostile.

Source C

Food does not keep well, no one washes, no one shaves. It is almost impossible to keep anything dry in a storm, and you can expect to be wet and miserable most of the time. The cabins stink of urine, faeces and vomit, not to mention the smell of rat urine. They also tend to get unbearably hot in summer. You may also be woken by the constant noise of the waves. In high seas the timbers grind against one another, as if the ship is trying to wrench itself apart. If you are stuck on deck; the work was extremely dangerous becau


Who were the great explorers?

Spain and Portugal were great naval powers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; they wanted to enlarge their empires. They led the way in exploration with Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) discovering the islands of the Caribbean - the West Indies - in 1492.

In 1497 the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) sailed round Africa and discovered the southern sea-route to India and the east. This opened up the East India trade route and led to the development of the Portuguese empire. Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) was a Portuguese explorer who led the first expedition that sailed around the Earth (1519-1522). Magellan also named the Pacific Ocean. Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) was an Italian explorer who was the first person to realize that the Americas were separate from the continent of Asia. America was named for him in 1507.

Consequences

European overseas expansion led to the contact between the Old and New Worlds producing the Columbian Exchange, named after Columbus. It involved the transfer of goods unique to one hemisphere to another. Europeans brought cattle, horses, and sheep to the New World and from the New World Europeans received tobacco, potatoes and maize.

Massive profit could be made by those who risked money on investing in explorers and trading adventurers.

Investors joined together to raise the necessary capital in joint-stock companies and shared in the profits depending on how much of the stock they owned. An investor's share in the company's stock could be sold at whatever price buyer and seller may agree upon. With this concept of stocks and shares, one of the basic elements of the modern economic system (capitalism) evolved.

The Atlantic trade largely supplanted pre-existing Italian and German trading powers which had relied on their Baltic, Russian and Islamic trade links. The European economic centre shifted from the Mediterranean to Western Europe. The city of Antwerp for example became the richest city in Europe at this time.

Activities

1. Why do you think the great voyages of discovery began at the end of the 15th century?
2. How useful are sources A and B? Explain your answer.
3. Why was sea travel so difficult and dangerous?
4. 'The consequences of the voyages of discovery were largely positive'. How far do you agree with this assertion?