

European Society Around 1492

As the 1400s began, European societies were still recovering from a series of disasters during the previous century. From 1314 to 1316, heavy rain and disease wiped out crops and livestock. Thousands of peasants died of starvation. Then, beginning in the 1340s, an epidemic of plagues killed over 25 million people— a fourth of Europe’s population. Meanwhile, long wars also raged across the continent, including the Hundred Years’ War between England and France. However, amid this turmoil, modern Europe began to take shape. After the plague, Europe experienced vigorous growth and change. The expansion of Europe pushed Europeans to look to other lands

<p>The Crusades opened up Asian trade routes and whetted the European appetite for Eastern luxuries, such as silk, porcelain, tea, and rugs. Merchants in Italian city-states were the first to profit from trade with Asia. They traded with the Muslim merchants who controlled the flow of goods through much of the Middle East. As trade opportunities increased, new markets were established and new trade routes were opened.</p>	<p>By the end of the 1400s, Europe’s population had rebounded from the plagues. This increase stimulated commerce and encouraged the growth of towns. The return to urban life (which had been largely neglected after the fall of Rome) brought about far-reaching social and cultural change. The new urban middle class would assume increasing political power, especially in Britain and its colonies.</p>
Main Idea:	

<p>The Crusades weakened the nobility and strengthened monarchies. Western European monarchs began exerting more control over their lands by collecting new taxes, raising professional armies, and strengthening central governments. Among the new allies of the monarchs were merchants, who willingly accepted taxes on their newfound wealth in exchange for the protection or expansion of trade. By the late 1400s, four major nations were taking shape in western Europe: Portugal, Spain,</p>	<p>France, and England.</p> <p>Only the king or queen of a unified nation had enough power and resources to finance overseas exploration. Monarchs had a powerful motive to encourage the quest for new lands and trading routes: they needed money to maintain standing armies and large bureaucracies. So, the monarchs of Portugal, Spain, France, and England began looking overseas for wealth.</p>
Main Idea:	

<p>“Thank God it has been permitted to us to be born in this new age, so full of hope and promise,” exclaimed Matteo Palmieri, a scholar in 15th-century Italy. Palmieri’s optimism captured the enthusiastic spirit of the Renaissance. The Renaissance led to a more secular spirit, an interest in worldly pleasures, and a new confidence in human achievement. Starting in Italy, a region stimulated by commercial contact with Asia and Africa, the Renaissance soon spread throughout Europe. Renaissance artists rejected the flat, two-dimensional images of medieval painting in favor of the deep perspectives and fully rounded forms of ancient sculpture and painting. Although their themes were still often religious in nature,</p>	<p>Renaissance artists portrayed their subjects more realistically than had medieval artists, using new techniques such as perspective. European scholars reexamined the writings of ancient philosophers, mathematicians, geographers, and scientists. They also studied scholarly Arab works brought home from the Crusades.</p> <p>The Renaissance encouraged people to regard themselves as individuals, to have confidence in human capabilities, and to look forward to the fame their achievements might bring. This attitude prompted many to seek glory through adventure, discovery, and conquest.</p>
Main Idea:	

<p>Although Marco Polo’s journey to China took place in the 1200s, it was not until 1477 that the first printed edition of Polo’s account caused renewed interest in the East. Like other European merchants, Polo traveled to Asia by land. The expense and peril of such journeys led Europeans to seek alternative routes. European merchants and explorers listened to the reports of travelers and reexamined the maps drawn by ancient geographers. Europeans, however, needed more than maps to guide</p>	<p>them through uncharted waters. On the open seas, winds easily blew ships off course. With only the sun, moon, and stars to guide them, few ships ventured beyond the sight of land. To overcome their fears, European ship captains adopted the compass and the astrolabe, navigating tools that helped plot direction. They also took advantage of innovations in sailing technology that allowed ships such as the caravel to sail against the wind.</p>
Main Idea:	

<p>Under Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal developed and employed these innovations. Although Henry was only an armchair navigator, he earned his nickname by establishing an up-to-date sailing school and by sponsoring the earliest voyages.</p> <p>For almost 40 years, Prince Henry sent his captains sailing farther and farther south along the west coast of Africa. Portuguese explorations continued after Prince Henry died. Bartolomeu Dias rounded the southern tip of Africa in 1488. Vasco da Gama reached India ten years later. By sailing around Africa to eastern Asia via the Indian Ocean, Portuguese traders were able to cut their</p>	<p>costs and increase their profits.</p> <p>While cartographers redrew their maps to show the route around Africa, an Italian sea captain named Christopher Columbus traveled from nation to nation with his own collection of maps and figures. Columbus believed there was an even shorter route to Asia—one that lay west across the Atlantic.</p> <p>In Spain an adviser of Queen Isabella pointed out that support of the proposed venture would cost less than a week’s entertainment of a foreign official. Isabella was convinced and summoned Columbus to appear before the Spanish court.</p>
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