**European Exploration**

The lure of profits from the cotton, silk, precious stones, exotic spices, and slaves that were traded prompted Europeans to find a better way to directly access these items. European and Eastern traders had established overland routes through central Asia that served as direct links for these exotic goods, but even regional overland trade was risky and costly.

For centuries, the East was a potent image for Europeans. The legacy of the Roman and Ancient Greek civilisations that had regular trading and diplomatic contact with India and China (the Han Dynasty) inspired the Europeans of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to attempt to establish their own eastern empires. Alexander the Great's empire, for example, consisted of territories in both Greece and India, thus greatly facilitating contact between western and eastern Eurasia. In the eighth century Islam engulfed North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, Spain, and France, igniting hostilities between the Christian and Muslim kingdoms that led to the cutoff of trade routes to the East.

For centuries Europe's only knowledge of the East was limited and often second-hand. Merchants like Marco Polo, gleaned valuable information about the East while looking for new trade routes. Europeans were so inspired by travelling accounts like Marco Polo's, that they were determined to re-establish routes of their own to the riches of the East.

The contemporary written accounts of exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries often use words like "luck" and "accidents." Nevertheless, the persistence and determination of certain individuals, like Prince Henry the Navigator, sustained and nurtured exploration during its infancy. This persistence was echoed by explorers like Christopher Columbus and Bartolomeu Dias, who overcame the tremendous physical and mental barriers of ocean exploration.

Even when basic fears about the existence of sea-monsters or sailing over the edge of a flat earth were conquered, there was a myriad of other misfortunes that could befall European explorers at sea or onshore in a distant land with hostile inhabitants. Navigation techniques were rudimentary and maps were sometimes a strange mixture of fact and wishful thinking. Supplies could spoil or run out entirely. Crews could rebel against sailing to distant and uncharted parts of the globe and mutiny against their captains. Above all, the seas themselves were unpredictable and dangerous.

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/eurvoya/intro.html>