

Age of Exploration

"Hit the Seas"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

Lyric: it's the 15th Century

Picture Earth. Imagine the green continents and blue oceans that rest on the surface of our great planet, with white clouds swirling above. It's easy to get a mental image, right? How many times have you seen this image of the globe, in your classrooms or on your computer? You can go online and within seconds see maps of your neighborhood, a city across the world, or even the surface of the moon.

If you traveled back in time to the 1400s and asked people to "picture Earth," it would have been impossible. The maps we take for granted today simply didn't exist. People had no idea what was out there. They didn't know much about what the land looked like, what sorts of people they would find, and what mysteries the unexplored world had to offer. But they were very curious to find out. This curiosity inspired the Age of Exploration.

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Lyric: traded with them for their spices,



Notes

Why did people want to explore?

In the 1200s, **Marco Polo** returned to Italy after adventuring in China. He brought back silks, teas and spices. And perhaps more importantly, he came home from the East with stories as fantastic as fairy tales. Marco Polo wrote, "So many pleasures may be found that one fancies himself to be in Paradise." After tasting the exotic wonders of the East, Europeans wanted more. Also, Asian spices helped make rotting food taste better and keep longer, which made them valuable, because refrigerators did not yet exist.

Lyric: Now we could go by land, but that's dangerous and slow. We're better off building ships that float.

Notes

Why did explorers travel by ship?

Since the time of Marco Polo's travels, the Ottoman Turks had gained control of land between Europe and China. The Turks knew that they could turn a nice profit selling Asian spices to Europeans, so they prevented people from passing through their land. The Turks were violently protective of the territory, because if Europeans could get Asian goods for themselves, the Turks couldn't make any money. The Europeans knew there had to be another way—maybe they could sail there!

Lyric: That's the best kind of ship!

Notes

What types of ships did explorers use?

Before the Age of Exploration, nobody had sailed very far before. To sail all the way over to Asia, explorers needed an advanced ship that could handle the rough open seas. The boats that existed were too slow and clunky to make long voyages. A new, lighter and faster ship called the caravel allowed the explorers to go on longer voyages. Henry the Navigator pioneered the use of the caravel to explore the African coast. Columbus's *Niña* and *Pinta* were the same type of ship.



A modern reconstruction of Columbus's Pinta



Who was the first major explorer?

The first great naval explorer was Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal. Because of Prince Henry's influence, Portugal aggressively explored the open sea before other nations caught on. Prince Henry was gutsier than anyone else at the time. Each wave of the high seas brought new challenges. But the undiscovered lands lured him with enticing mysteries. With no guarantee that he would return alive to Portugal, Prince Henry sailed down the west coast of Africa. He named the region the Gold Coast because he found (get this!) gold on the coast. He returned to Portugal very much alive and in possession of great riches.

Lyric: He leads us Portuguese, and we hit the seas like seaweed

What effect did Prince Henry have on continued exploration?

Prince Henry the Navigator inspired many other men to pack their belongings into a trunk and sail off to unknown lands. But a true explorer does not just travel to already discovered lands—now, people had to sail to distant, uncharted lands to gain credibility. So the explorers traveled farther. **Bartolomeu Dias** sailed all the way around the southern tip of Africa. The weather was so terrible there that Dias named it the Cape of Storms. (But that name was too depressing, so other people cheerily renamed the southern tip the **Cape of Good Hope**.)

Lyric: So Isabella funded Christopher Columbus, To sail around the globe, a journey that was wondrous.

Notes



How did Columbus fit into the Age of Exploration?

Italian explorer Christopher Columbus had recently heard about Dias's trip around the southern tip of Africa. While many ignorant people at the time thought the world was flat, explorers who kept up with the science of the times knew that the world was round. But even these explorers thought that sailing west from Spain would eventually get them to India. No one in Europe realized there were two giant continents full of people in between.

Lyric: He didn't find India, "But hey, what am I supposed to do?" In America, it started all this drama.

Notes



How did Columbus arrive in America?

Columbus wasn't excited about sailing south on the stormy seas to India. So Columbus thought that he would try a different approach—sail west instead! He thought it would be a quick trip. But because accurate maps did not exist, Columbus seriously underestimated the distance around the world. With the money and blessing from Spain's Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, Columbus sailed west into the open ocean. When his boat hit ground in 1492, Columbus believed that he had landed on the eastern shores of India. Actually, he had just made it to the Caribbean. He had landed on the island that is now the Dominican Republic. This landing was the spark that forever changed the Western Hemisphere.



Who finally managed to reach India again?

Vasco da Gama figured he could sail even farther than Bartolomeu Dias. He sailed past the Cape of Good Hope and landed in Calicut, India. Nearly 300 years after Marco Polo's eastern travels, Europeans had found a way to get back to the East. And it paid off. When da Gama returned to Portugal with a ship full of delicious Indian spices, he became a celebrity. And very, very wealthy. When people saw da Gama's glory and riches, they rushed to sign up for the next voyage. And when other countries observed the power and riches that Portugal found overseas, they didn't want to be left behind.

Lyric: Then Magellan circumnavigated the globe,

Notes

Why did Magellan sail around the world?

Because Portugal controlled Africa, Spain needed to find another way to get to Asia for spices and other riches. Even though Columbus died in 1506 still believing that he had reached India, the Spanish realized pretty quickly that Columbus had actually "discovered" a new continent—the Americas. Not letting something as little as North and South America get in their way, the Spanish dreamed that they could reach Asia by sailing farther west.

Ferdinand Magellan led the first crew that sailed from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. People often celebrate Magellan for being the first person to **circumnavigate**, or sail all the way around, the globe. But the truth is, Magellan made it only most of the way. Natives of the Philippine Islands killed him before he could make it back to Spain. Some of his crewmembers did successfully circumnavigate planet Earth; too bad people don't celebrate them.

Still, Magellan's voyage proved for all doubters that the world was round. And it sped up the process of shrinking the world.

Lyric: Life on a ship? It's no cruise cousin, Get up at the crack, no snooze button.

Notes

What was life at sea like?

Traveling on these ships was no pleasure cruise. Whether you were the captain leading the way or the lowly page scrubbing the deck, the toilet was still just a ledge on the side of the ship. You still had to scratch the lice in your hair and sleep with bedbugs and cockroaches. And forget about sleeping a full night—sailors had to work to keep the ship afloat at all hours.



Magellan's ship Victoria

Lyric: You probably got scurvy.

Notes

What type of food did people eat?

When food started running out, everyone had to ration, or eat small amounts. Otherwise, they'd starve together. Because sailors ate lots of old food, they didn't get enough vitamin C. Lack of fresh fruit caused the disease scurvy, which commonly made sailors' teeth fall out. If life gives you lemons, at least you won't get scurvy.

Lyric: If you're caught slacking off, You'll get whipped or flogged by the captain for acting soft.

Notes

This sounds awful! So why on Earth did people put up with this?

For the explorers themselves, these voyages held the promise of riches and fame. Not so much for the sailors, however. They were mostly professionals, varied in age, who worked hard for their paychecks. Some were criminals who were granted pardons if they sailed on dangerous voyages. Some were running away from family and responsibilities. And some simply loved the sea and spent more time on the ocean than they did on land.

Lyric: An Old World / New World Columbian Exchange:

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What was the Columbian exchange?

Once Europeans realized that Columbus had not landed in India, they called this land the "New World." Columbus's landing in the New World marked the beginning of a fraught relationship between Europeans and Native Americans. Since they had never met before, both sides desired to trade goods that they could never have imagined before the meeting. Named for Columbus, the exchange of food, animals, plants and cultures that developed has been called the **Columbian exchange**. Europe and the "old world" tasted chocolate, potatoes, tomatoes and tobacco for the first time. In fact, the new addiction to tobacco would be an important part of the early economy in the United States. The people of the New World got to try coffee, tea and lemons and see horses, cows, cats and other domestic animals for the first time.

Lyric: Plus smallpox, oh yeah, and malaria.

Notes

What were negative effects of the Columbian exchange?

In addition to the exchange of goods that seemed like luxuries to both sides, there was also an exchange of disease. And despite all the new goods, most Native Americans wouldn't live to enjoy them. European diseases like measles and smallpox ravaged the Native American population. The diseases would end up killing up to 90 percent of the Native Americans, who didn't have natural defenses against these potent ailments.

Lyric: We hit the seas, and don't look back.

Notes

What did they do when they landed?

Along with the Renaissance, the Age of Exploration marked the end of the Middle Ages. Europe was shifting from an extremely agrarian, or farm-based, society to one that put more emphasis on trade. The master shipbuilders of Spain and Portugal provided just what Europe needed to quench its new thirst for trade and riches. But a potent mix of greed, superiority and religious fervor meant that these explorers weren't going to act like Mr. Rogers in these new neighborhoods. Soon the places where these Europeans landed would be stained with blood.

Lyric: Society at Sea

Notes

What was the social structure on a ship?

Ships operated as mini societies. And like the societies that shipmates left behind on land, workers were in different social classes that contributed different skills for daily life. Even though captains held the most power, everyone depended on one another for survival on these dangerous voyages. And if one thing was certain, it was the uncertainty of survival.