

SECTION 4

European Societies Around 1492

MAIN IDEA

Political, economic, and intellectual developments in western Europe in the 1400s led to the Age of Exploration.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

European settlement in the Americas led to the founding of the United States.

Terms & Names

- Prince Henry
- Renaissance
- hierarchy
- nuclear family
- Crusades
- Reformation

One European's Story

During the early decades of the 15th century, **Prince Henry** of Portugal, often called “Henry the Navigator,” sent Portuguese ships to explore the west coast of Africa. According to his biographer, Prince Henry’s driving motivation was the need to know.

A PERSONAL VOICE GOMES EANES DE ZURARA

“The noble spirit of this Prince . . . was ever urging him both to begin and to carry out very great deeds. For which reason . . . he had also a wish to know the land that lay beyond the isles of Canary and that Cape called Bojador, for that up to his time, neither by writings, nor by the memory of man, was known with any certainty the nature of the land beyond that Cape. . . . it seemed to him that if he or some other lord did not endeavor to gain that knowledge, no mariners or merchants would ever dare to attempt it. . . .”

—*The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*

Prince Henry’s curiosity was typical of the “noble spirit” of the **Renaissance**, (rĕn’ĭ-sāns’) a period when Europeans began investigating all aspects of the physical world. The term *Renaissance* means “rebirth” of the kind of interest in the physical world that had characterized ancient Greece and Rome. With his burning desire for knowledge, Prince Henry helped launch the era of European expansion.



▲ Prince Henry the Navigator

The European Social Order

In the late 1400s, most Europeans, like most Native Americans and most Africans, lived in small villages, bound to the land and to ancient traditions.

THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY European communities were based on social **hierarchy**, that is, they were organized according to rank. Monarchs and nobles held most of the wealth and power at the top of the hierarchy. At the bottom labored the peasants, who constituted the majority of the people. The nobility offered



their peasants land and protection. In return, the peasants supplied the nobles with livestock or crops—and sometimes with military service.

Within the social structure, few individuals moved beyond the position into which they were born. Europeans generally accepted their lot as part of a larger order ordained by God and reflected in the natural world. Writing in the late 1500s, William Shakespeare expressed the fixed nature of this order in one of his plays.

A PERSONAL VOICE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

“The heavens themselves, the planets, and this center [earth]
Observe degree, priority, and place . . .
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark! what discord follows. . . .”

—*Troilus and Cressida*

MAIN IDEA

Forming Generalizations

A Why did artisans and merchants experience social mobility?

One group that did experience social mobility was composed of artisans and merchants, the people who created and traded goods for money. Although this group was relatively small in the 1400s, the profit they earned from trade would eventually make them a valuable source of tax revenue. Monarchs needed them to finance costly overseas exploration and expansion. **A**

THE FAMILY IN SOCIETY While Europeans recognized and respected kinship ties, the extended family was not as important for them as it was for Native American and African societies at this time. Instead, life centered around the **nuclear family**, the household made up of a mother and father and their children. As in other societies, gender largely determined the division of labor. Among peasant families, for example, men generally did most of the field labor and herded livestock. Women did help in the fields, but they also handled child care and household labor, such as preparing and preserving the family's food.

History Through Art

JUNE, FROM LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY

This miniature painting, representing the month of June, is a page from a prayer book calendar made by the Limbourg brothers around the year 1416. The book, made for a younger son of the French king, tells us a great deal about the aristocratic view of the European social order.

In the background, the walls of the city of Paris protect a palace and the royal chapel, buildings that represent the two most powerful institutions in medieval European society: church and aristocracy.

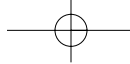
In the foreground, peasants mow the fields in an orderly world of peace and tranquility. However, the image is a fantasy, an idealized vision painted to please the aristocracy. There is no hint of the peasants' grinding poverty or of the violence of the Hundred Years' War that was at that moment devastating northern France.

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Visual Sources

1. What does the painting tell you about the importance of gender in the division of labor during the 1400s?
2. Why might images of poverty have displeased the aristocracy?

 SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R22.





Christianity Shapes the European Outlook

The Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religious institution in western Europe. The leader of the church—the pope—and his bishops had great political and spiritual authority. In the spiritual realm, church leaders determined most matters of faith. Parish priests interpreted the scriptures and urged the faithful to endure earthly sufferings in exchange for the promise of eternal life in heaven, or salvation. Priests also administered important rituals called the sacraments—such as baptism and communion—that were thought to ensure salvation.

Hand in hand with the belief in salvation was the call to convert people of other faiths. This missionary call spurred Europe to reach out beyond its borders first to defend, and then to spread, the faith.

CRUSADING CHRISTIANITY By the early 700s, Muslim armies had seized huge areas of Asia and North Africa, along with most of the Iberian Peninsula, where Spain and Portugal sit. To regain this territory, Spanish Christians waged a campaign called the *reconquista*, or reconquest. By 1492, the forces of the combined kingdoms of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon, who married in 1469, finally drove the Muslims from the peninsula. This victory ended more than seven centuries of religious warfare. A united Spain stood ready to assert itself internationally and to spread Christianity around the globe.

Meanwhile, Christian armies from all over western Europe responded to the church's call to force the Muslims out of the Holy Land around Jerusalem. From 1096 to 1270, Europeans launched the **Crusades**, a series of military expeditions to the Middle East in the name of Christianity.

In the end, these bloody Crusades failed to “rescue” the Holy Land, but they had two consequences that encouraged European exploration and expansion. First, they sparked an increase in trade, as crusaders returned home with a new taste for products from Asia. Second, the Crusades weakened the power of European nobles, many of whom lost their lives or fortunes in the wars. Monarchs were able to take advantage of the nobles' weakened ranks by consolidating their own power. Eventually, monarchs sponsored overseas exploration in order to increase their wealth and power.

DECLINE IN CHURCH AUTHORITY The Crusades had a third long-term consequence: the decline of the power of the pope. The ultimate failure of these campaigns weakened the prestige of the papacy (the office of the pope), which had led the quest. Power struggles in the 1300s and 1400s between the church and European kings further reduced papal authority and tipped the balance of power in favor of the monarchies.

Disagreements over church authority, along with outrage over corrupt practices among the clergy, led to a reform movement in the early 1500s. This movement, known as the **Reformation**, divided Christianity in western Europe between Catholicism and Protestantism. This split deepened the rivalries between European nations during the period of American colonization and sent newly formed Protestant sects across the Atlantic to seek religious freedom. **B**

Background

In Christian theology, salvation is the deliverance from the power or penalty of sin.

KEY PLAYER



**“KING ISABELLA”
1451–1504**

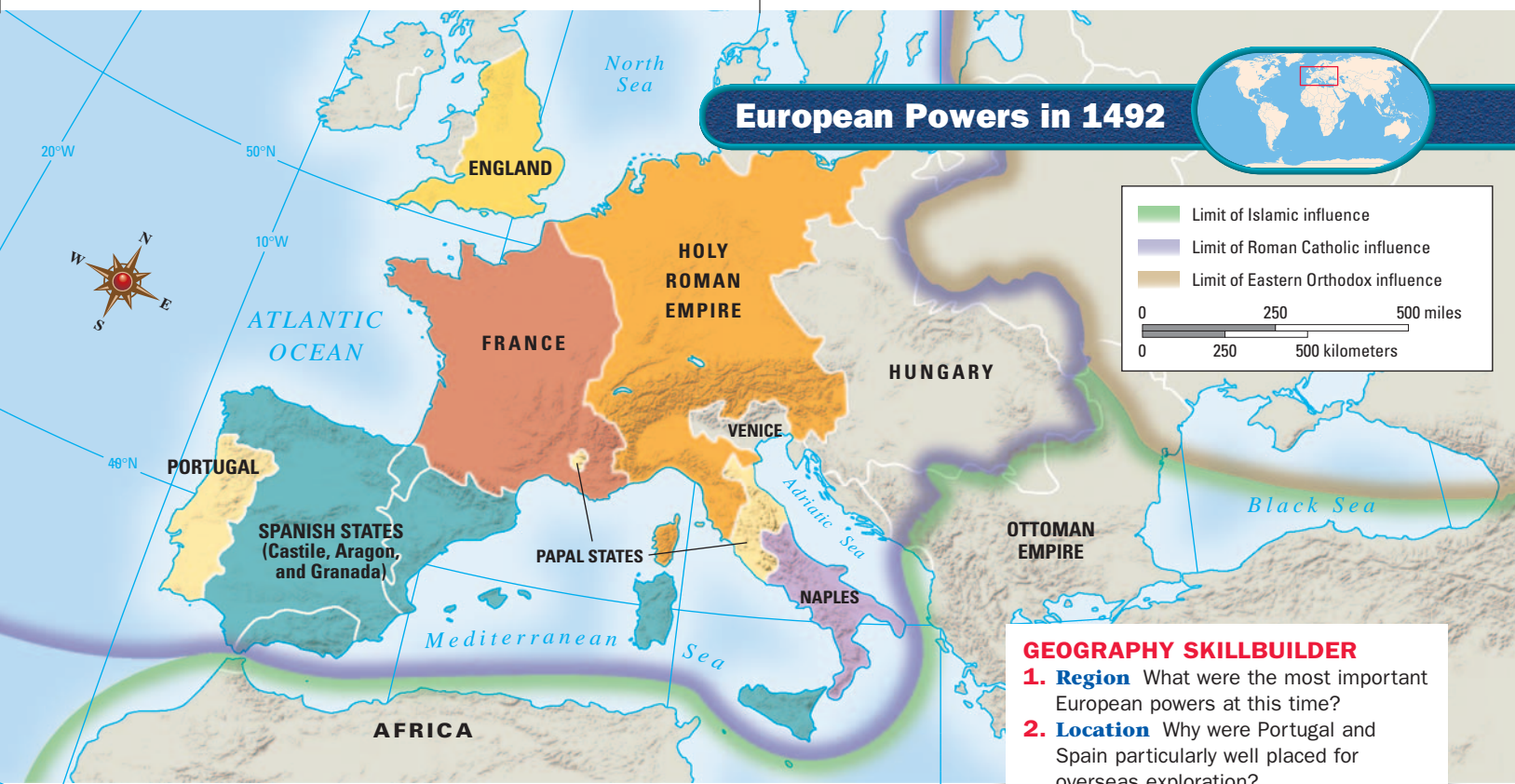
Queen Isabella, who played a central role in European exploration by sponsoring Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas, made her mark on the Old World as well. As co-ruler of Spain, Isabella participated in her country's religious and military matters.

The queen often defied the pope to ensure that her candidates were appointed to positions in the Spanish church. In addition, Isabella tasted battle more frequently than most rulers, either male or female. The queen rode among her troops in full armor, personally commanding them in Ferdinand's absence. Whenever Isabella appeared, her troops shouted, “Castile, Castile, for our King Isabella!”

MAIN IDEA

Recognizing Effects

B How did religious changes in Europe affect the European colonization of the Americas?



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

- 1. Region** What were the most important European powers at this time?
- 2. Location** Why were Portugal and Spain particularly well placed for overseas exploration?

Changes Come to Europe

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.

THE GROWTH OF COMMERCE AND POPULATION 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.

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.

THE RISE OF NATIONS 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, France, and England.

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

MAIN IDEA

Developing Historical Perspective

C In what ways would the revival of the cities have affected European social and cultural life?



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.

THE RENAISSANCE “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, 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.

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. **D**

Vocabulary
secular: worldly rather than spiritual

MAIN IDEA

Drawing Conclusions

D How might Renaissance attitudes and ideas have influenced European explorers?

Science & Technology

THE CARAVEL

The caravel, the ship used by most early Portuguese and Spanish explorers, had many advantages over earlier vessels. It was lighter, swifter, and more maneuverable than other ships.

The triangular lateen sails, an innovation borrowed from Muslim ships, allowed the caravel to sail against the wind. Rigged with lateens, the ship could tack (sail on a zigzag course) more directly into the wind than could earlier European vessels.

The smaller deck at the stern provided protection from the rain.

The sternpost rudder allowed greater maneuverability.

The shallow draft (the depth of the ship below the water line) made the ship ideal for coastal exploration.

The large hatch allowed goods to be stored below deck.



Europe Enters a New Age of Expansion

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.

SAILING TECHNOLOGY Europeans, however, needed more than maps to guide 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. (See "The Caravel" on page 24.)

PORTUGAL TAKES THE LEAD Under Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal developed and employed these innovations. Although Henry was only an arm-chair navigator, he earned his nickname by establishing an up-to-date sailing school and by sponsoring the earliest voyages.

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 costs and increase their profits.

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.

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.



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Prince Henry
- hierarchy
- Crusades
- Reformation
- Renaissance
- nuclear family

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Re-create the web below on your paper. Fill it in with the changes taking place in western Europe during the 1400s.



How did these changes help lead to the European Age of Exploration?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING ISSUES

Which European event of the late 1400s to early 1500s do you think had the most far-reaching impact on European lives? Explain and support your answer. **Think About:**

- the importance of religion
- the role of adventurers and explorers
- the increase in prosperity

4. SUMMARIZING

How did advances in technology open the way for world exploration?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Why do you think other European nations lagged behind Portugal in the race for overseas exploration? Support your reasons with details from the text.