

Topic 4.2 — Exploration: Causes and Events from 1450–1750 - Student

Standards Table

Framework	Standard
AP World History: Modern	Unit 4, Learning Objective B and Learning Objective C ; KC-4.1.III; KC-4.1.III.A–C
National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)	Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance; Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Theme 9: Global Connections
Florida BEST Standards	SS.912.W.4.1; SS.912.W.4.2; ELA.K12.EE.1.1

Lesson Overview

Between 1450 and 1750, European maritime exploration expanded rapidly as states sought new routes, resources, and opportunities for power. This expansion did not occur through individual initiative alone; instead, centralized governments played a decisive role by funding voyages, granting charters, building naval infrastructure, and supporting navigational research. Exploration became a tool of state-building, allowing monarchies to compete for prestige, legitimacy, and influence on a global scale.

Economic motivations were equally significant. European states sought direct access to Asian luxury goods, precious metals, and new markets while bypassing Muslim and Italian intermediaries who controlled overland trade routes. Portugal pursued a trading-post empire in Africa and the Indian Ocean, Spain built a colonial empire in the Americas fueled by silver and plantation agriculture, and northern European states such as England, France, and the Netherlands later joined the competition through joint-stock companies and Atlantic trade.

Together, political authority and economic incentives shaped the direction of global exploration. State-sponsored voyages transformed trade networks, accelerated globalization, and laid the foundations for European maritime empires that reshaped world history.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- **Describe the role of states** in sponsoring and directing maritime exploration between 1450 and 1750 (LO B).
- **Explain the economic motivations** behind European maritime exploration, including mercantilism, trade competition, and access to resources (LO C).
- **Analyze how state support and economic goals interacted** to shape exploration strategies.
- **Evaluate the economic effects** of exploration on global trade networks and empires.
- **Use primary sources** to explain political and economic causes of European expansion.

Essential Vocabulary

- **State Sponsorship** — When a government provides money, protection, or legal approval for exploration.
- **Mercantilism** — An economic system where states seek to gain wealth by controlling trade and resources.
- **Trading-Post Empire** — An empire based on controlling ports and trade routes rather than large territories.
- **Chartered Company** — A business granted special trading rights by a government.
- **Maritime Empire** — A state that gains power through naval strength and overseas trade.

Background Reading

As European states centralized power in the late Middle Ages, monarchs increasingly used exploration to strengthen their authority. New navigational technologies and ship designs made long-distance sea travel more reliable, but voyages were expensive and risky. Only governments had the resources to finance fleets, train sailors, and protect overseas trade. As a result, exploration became closely tied to political authority and competition between states.

Economic incentives intensified this process. Portugal sought to dominate the spice trade by establishing fortified ports along the African and Indian Ocean coasts. Spain focused on Atlantic exploration, which resulted in colonization and the extraction of silver from the Americas. England, France, and the Dutch Republic later entered global trade by searching for northern routes to Asia and forming joint-stock companies to spread financial risk.

By combining political power with economic ambition, European states reshaped global trade. These explorations shifted the center of economic activity toward the Atlantic and connected distant regions into a single, increasingly global system.

Primary Source 1

King João II of Portugal, Letter on African Exploration (1493)

Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1493portugal-africa1.asp>

We have undertaken great labor and expense in exploring the coasts of Africa and Guinea, sending forth caravels under our authority to discover lands, islands, and peoples previously unknown to our realm. These enterprises have been pursued for the service of God and the increase of our royal estate, so that commerce might be expanded and the wealth of our kingdom strengthened. Through these voyages, our sailors have gained knowledge of the seas, currents, and coasts, and have established contact with the peoples of those regions, thereby opening new paths for trade.

These undertakings have not been carried out lightly, but with careful planning and the assistance of learned men skilled in navigation, astronomy, and cosmography. They have recorded the latitudes, described the harbors, and noted the conditions of the seas, so that future voyages may proceed with greater certainty and safety. Such knowledge, gained at great cost, belongs rightly to our Crown and serves the interests of our realm.

For this reason, it is our will that the lands and waters discovered by our navigators remain within our governance, since they have been pursued under our authority and expense. We have long labored in these explorations, and it is fitting that the benefits of such efforts should accrue to our kingdom, strengthening our power, enriching our treasury, and securing our position among Christian princes.

Why this matters

This letter shows that Portuguese exploration was a **state-directed project**, justified through religion, financed by the monarchy, and designed to expand both **political authority and economic power**.

SAQ-Style Guided Questions — Source 1

- A. Identify **one reason** King João II gives for supporting exploration.
- B. Explain **one role** played by the state in making Portuguese exploration possible.
- C. Explain how this document illustrates the relationship between **political power and economic goals**.

Primary Source 2

Afonso de Albuquerque, Letter on the Capture of Malacca (1511)

Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1511albuquerque-malacca.asp>

Malacca is a city made for the trade of the whole world, for merchants from China, the Moluccas, Bengal, Arabia, Persia, and many other lands gather there. Its position is such that the commerce of the seas passes through its harbor, and whoever holds Malacca holds the key to the trade of these regions. From this port, goods flow to and from the East and West, and its markets are filled with merchandise of great value.

The merchants who reside in Malacca are many and of various nations, each bringing the wealth of his land. The customs collected in this city are immense, and the revenues drawn from them are a great source of profit. By capturing this port, the King of Portugal will draw the commerce of Asia into his realm and deprive rival powers of the advantages they now enjoy in these seas.

With control of Malacca, Portugal will be able to regulate trade, secure the passage of ships, and ensure that no commerce is conducted without contributing to the wealth of our kingdom. This conquest will strengthen the Crown, enrich the royal treasury, and establish Portuguese authority over the principal routes of Asian trade.

Why this matters

This source reveals the **economic logic of the Portuguese trading-post empire**, showing how control of strategic ports—not large territories—allowed states to dominate global trade.

SAQ-Style Guided Questions — Source 2

- A. Identify **one economic feature** that made Malacca valuable.
- B. Explain **one economic goal** Portugal hoped to achieve by controlling Malacca.
- C. Explain how this source demonstrates **mercantilist thinking**.

State Power and Economic Motives

Cause	Effect
State competition	Increased funding for exploration
Desire for Asian trade	Establishment of overseas ports
Mercantilist beliefs	Expansion of maritime empires
Joint-stock companies	Northern European expansion

European Exploration Strategies

State	Strategy	Primary Economic Goal
Portugal	Trading-post empire	Control spice trade
Spain	Colonization	Silver and plantation wealth
England	Chartered companies	Atlantic trade
Dutch	VOC	Global commerce

CCOT / Comparison / Causation Section

Prompt:

Explain **one political cause** and **one economic cause** of European maritime exploration between 1450 and 1750.

Key Takeaways

- European exploration depended on strong state involvement.
- Economic competition drove exploration strategies.
- Different states pursued different economic models.
- Exploration reshaped global trade and power.

Student Practice Writing Task

Write **two well-developed paragraphs** explaining how **state sponsorship** and **economic motivation** worked together to encourage European maritime exploration between **1450 and 1750**.

- **Paragraph 1:**
Explain how **state sponsorship** supported maritime exploration. Your paragraph should describe the role of governments in funding voyages,

training navigators, granting charters, or asserting political authority over exploration. Use **at least one specific historical example** (such as Portugal or Spain).

- **Paragraph 2:**

Explain how **economic motivations** encouraged exploration and how these motivations depended on state support. Your paragraph should discuss goals such as controlling trade routes, accessing spices or silver, or expanding national wealth under mercantilist ideas. Use **at least one specific historical example** and clearly connect economic goals to state involvement.

Your response should:

- Stay focused on the period **1450–1750**
- Use **specific evidence**, not general statements
- Show how **political power and economic goals were interconnected**, not separate causes

Source Citations

- King João II, Letter on African Exploration (1493). Fordham Internet History Sourcebook.
- Afonso de Albuquerque, Letter on the Capture of Malacca (1511). Fordham Internet History Sourcebook.