Around 1400 CE, India and China were the hub and driving force of the Afro-Eurasian economy. They had the largest populations, the greatest wealth, and by far the largest volume of exchanges. A commercial network linked them to Southeast and Inner Eurasia, the Islamic world, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe.

Long distance maritime trade from Asia to Europe was at this time largely in the hands of Muslim merchants, though people of many faiths and origins participated. They brought goods by ship from China, Indonesia, the Indian Ocean rim, and, on the final leg, from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf overland to ports on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and to Egypt. From there, ships from Venice, the leading southern European seaport, typically picked up the merchandise and distributed it to consumers in the rest of Europe.

More than just merchandise was passed on. Along with trade goods traveled political, cultural, economic, religious, and technological information—and sometimes infectious microorganisms. The flow of information favored collective learning among human communities and sparked innovation. The exchange of diseases between densely-settled areas eventually increased the overall immunities of people in these areas.

Shifts in this long-established system took place as a result of the deliberate series of European long-distance sea voyages started in the fifteenth century by peoples of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). However, they were not the only people to undertake such voyages. Imperially-sponsored Chinese navigators took part in a series of marine expeditions in the first third of the century. These voyages crossed the Indian Ocean and reached ports as far as Arabia and the East African coast. While these destinations were not new to them, their short-lived visits were not intended to establish permanent colonies or achieve conquests.

Iberian mariners’ voyages, on the other hand, resulted in finding new sea routes, lands previously unknown to Europe, and a shift from a search for profits to a grasp for domination. The consequences that followed, both intentional and unintentional, gradually brought Europe from the edges to the center of the world’s trade. Over some 300 years, the opening of the oceanic passages contributed to the growth of European power on the world scene economically, politically, and culturally. They also helped promote:

- Intensification of every kind of exchange worldwide.
- Increased volume and speed of the movement of goods, peoples, information, and ideas.
- That entanglement of diverse economies and societies, which we now call globalization.

As a result of these developments, both diversity within groups and uniformity across groups have increased. So have inequality between and within groups, as well as environmental costs. From the sixteenth century on, deforestation became a bigger problem than earlier thanks to over-use of timber to meet the increasing demands for ships and for smelting ores, such as gold, silver, and iron. The trend of moving more people and goods for longer distances was given a mighty push in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Since then it has accelerated and by the the later eighteenth century was accompanied by the steep rise in use of the fossil fuels, which has contributed to growing pollution and global warming in our own time.
The beginnings were small steps. For nearly a century, Iberian seafarers explored the Atlantic islands close to Africa, and the Portuguese navigated down the west coast of that continent. Then, beginning in 1492, mariners sponsored by Spanish and Portuguese rulers set out on long-distance voyages, though not necessarily setting off into “the unknown.” Explorers thought they knew their destinations, but were looking for previously unknown routes to reach them. Spaniards went looking for an alternative and more direct route to the spices and other treasures of the Indies. Instead, they came across huge amounts of gold, silver, and land in the Americas, which they proceeded to conquer, subdue, and exploit, using unfree labor. The Portuguese first looked for gold in West Africa. Their search led them gradually to the carriers and sources of the spice trade. They used their cannon-equipped ships, based at forts and trading stations along the edges of the Indian Ocean, to intimidate or eliminate competitors. Their aim was to establish a monopoly over the distribution of spices and, more generally, of sea-borne trade in the region.

In the course of their search, mariners sailing from Iberia made a series of revolutionary discoveries. They found:

- An unexpected continent, first an obstacle in the way of reaching Asia from Europe by a western sea route, then a major contributor to the rise of European power.
- Proof that routinely crossing the Atlantic Ocean both ways was possible, thereby linking Europe and the American continent.
- Proof that there was open sea below the southern tip of Africa and that an entirely waterborne crossing from the Atlantic into the Indian Ocean was possible.
- A sea-passage that allowed bypassing America, proving the possibility of an uninterrupted passage by sea from the Atlantic into the Pacific, which was at that time barely glimpsed by Europeans.
- The path across the Pacific to Indonesia, proof of Columbus’ idea that reaching the East by sailing west was possible, though a return voyage east across the Pacific was not managed until after 1550.
- The possibility of circumnavigating the globe. Having crossed the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, and rounded Africa’s southern tip, European mariners were able to home in on the Spanish port where their westward voyage had begun. This proved that the seas were all connected and could serve as an uninterrupted highway linking the world’s landmasses with each other.

The driving forces that underlay early modern Iberian maritime enterprises were varied and complex. Insofar as we can now reconstruct motivations for the so-called “voyages of discovery” by Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, primary among them were the following:

- Continued rivalry with Muslim powers in the Mediterranean region. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ottoman Turkish empire conquered the Byzantine state, the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe, and the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.
- Intensified search for Christian rulers in Africa or Asia, who might be enlisted as allies against Muslims. Legends about these rulers may have been based on the existence of a Christian kingdom in Ethiopia.
- Increased zeal among Roman Catholics for conversion of unbelievers to Christianity, an enthusiasm that emerged partly from the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing loss of the Roman Church’s Christian monopoly in western and central Europe.
- Increasing demand in the West for luxury goods such as spices, silks, porcelain, and other products of Asia, stimulated by the significant growth of population after the Black Death and the rise in incomes that came about after death rates had made labor scarce.
• Increasing need for gold to pay for the Asian goods that Europeans desired. Europeans had few other exports of significant interest to Asian markets.

• Search for new ways to access sources of gold on the one hand and of goods from China, India, and Indonesia on the other. The aim here was twofold. One was to stop profits from going to Muslim middlemen, then the primary carriers of trade between East and West. The other was to gain all profits for Christian merchants and countries.

• Achievement of individual fame and honor in services to God, Church, and ruler.

Several different conditions favored the undertaking and continuation of long-distance European ocean voyages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The success of long-distance maritime exploration of regions new to Europeans was promoted, to varying degrees, by:

• The existence of wind systems in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans that could be counted on to blow consistently in a known direction at known times of the year at known latitudes.

• Gradual technological changes from the Middle Ages onward that upgraded the sailing qualities and sturdiness of Iberian ships, by combining existing features of Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean ship designs.

• Western mariners’ learning to use the altitude of the Pole Star or the sun to establish latitude and thereby a ship’s position when out of sight of land. The development of instruments to help measure latitude.

• Translations of Greek and Arabic texts, which allowed recovery by Renaissance humanists of classical geographical information and access to more recent Islamic cartography and geographical scholarship.

• The Renaissance values of interest in the natural and physical world.

• The printing press, which made news of discoveries, travel accounts, and sailing manuals available to more people faster and more cheaply, thereby both whetting appetites for further exploration and aiding in carrying it out.

• The strong financial interest of rulers in the fruits of overseas ventures, and their resulting enthusiastic support for it.

• The institution in Iberia of formal instruction, examinations, and licensing of pilots to improve navigation in the early sixteenth century.

• The use of cannon on board Iberian ships and the lack of comparably-armed competition in the Indian Ocean until the 1530s or so.

• The land-orientation at the time of major political units such as Ming China, the Delhi Sultanate, the Vijayanagar empire in South India, and the Aztec and Inca empires in the Americas. Also, their lack of vital interests in either overseas trade or possession of large navies.

Overseas discoveries, and their consequences, played themselves out against a background of complicated cultural and religious changes and political power plays in Europe and the wider world. The Spanish and Portuguese oceanic voyages of the fifteenth century, and the possibilities they opened, were soon followed by other voyages sponsored by other European nations as well. In the 1400 to 1550 CE period, Iberian mariners’ expeditions and those of their imitators, took place in a context that in Europe included:

• The European Renaissance, an intellectual and aesthetic movement to resurrect ancient learning and to experiment with new modes of literary and artistic expression.

• The rapid spread of ideas owing to the technology of moveable-type printing and other improved communications.
• The “gunpowder revolution,” resulting in widespread adoption of cannon, muskets and bigger armies.

• The Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

• Christian states’ attempts to organize resistance against the advancing Ottomans, with whom they warred intermittently throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

• The series of wars between the huge Habsburg empire of Charles V on the one hand, and France, sometimes allied with the Ottoman empire, on the other.

• The consolidation and centralization of territorial states with bureaucracies and police that more vigorously collected taxes from their subjects.

• The beginnings of the scientific revolution.

In a world context, the Iberian maritime expeditions were contemporaneous with:

• A rise in population in most areas of Afro-Eurasia, though not in the Americas. Afro-Eurasia’s population surged in the sixteenth century from about 418 million to 545 million. At the same time, the native populations of the Americas plunged. In 1600, therefore, something close to 98 percent of all human beings lived in Afro-Eurasia.

• Expansion of the Ottoman empire into Europe from the late fourteenth to the late seventeenth century.

• The conversion to Christianity in 1491 of the king of Kongo and many of his people, the greatest success of Portuguese missionary effort in Africa.

Source:

Chapman, Anne “Landscape Teaching Unit 6.1: Oceanic Ventures And the Joining of the Continents 1400-1550 CE.” World History for Us All. PDF File.