

15th-century Europe, grappling with feudalism, economic hardship, and religious conflict, experienced a Renaissance fostering intellectual and scientific growth. A key driver was the desire for a direct sea route to Asia, bypassing the Ottoman-controlled Silk Road and its lucrative Asian goods. Marco Polo's accounts fueled this ambition. Portugal spearheaded exploration, with Prince Henry the Navigator leading voyages down Africa's west coast. Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, proving access to the Indian Ocean. Vasco da Gama reached India in 1498, establishing a direct trade route and boosting Portugal's global influence. Simultaneously, Columbus, seeking a westward route to Asia, landed in the Bahamas in 1492, inadvertently discovering the Americas. These voyages, while initiating transatlantic trade and cultural exchange, also marked the beginning of European colonization of the Americas.