How Did the Age of Exploration Begin?

As Portugal, France, Spain, and England became more powerful united countries, many factors set them up to become the leading players in the Age of Exploration:

- Each had an Atlantic coastline, which put them in the best position to explore unknown parts of the world to the west.
- The monarchs of these countries financed overseas explorations, hoping to establish independent connections with the Far East.
- The new ship designs, navigational tools, and navigational information they gathered enabled explorers to sail to the New World and other far-off lands.

New values favouring travel and exploration, increased consumerism, and accumulation of wealth, fueled the race for new trade routes. Portugal and Spain were especially anxious to find new trade routes to the East. Their willingness to fund large expeditions provided the motivation for wealthy merchants to do the same. England and France joined the race to the New World after hearing about the great wealth being accumulated by Portugal and Spain.

Portugal

In the early 1400s, Portuguese sailors headed south and east along the western coast of Africa in hopes of finding a new route that would allow ships to sail around Africa to India and China. They were so successful in finding new trading areas that Lisbon became Europe’s new trade capital.
In 1487, Bartholomew Diaz sailed along the coast of Africa and was the first European to reach the Cape of Good Hope, the continent’s southern tip. About ten years later, another Portuguese explorer, da Gama, was the first European to cross the Indian Ocean to India. He returned to Portugal with his ships full of valuable jewels and spices. A sea route to the wealth of the East was now established. Portugal defeated Arab strongholds in the area and set up trading posts stretching along the coasts of Africa and into India. The Portuguese gradually expanded eastward to China, establishing the famous port city of Macau.

Spain

Spain was envious of Portugal's wealth and power and decided to send its own expeditions to the Far East. The pope had already given Portugal the coasts of Africa and India, so Spain decided to find more direct routes to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic to China and India. Spain and the rest of Europe, however, were unaware that two continents, the Americas, lay between them and the Far East.

The Roman Catholic Church was very involved in the exploration of the new lands since it wanted to spread Christianity. In 1493, the pope divided the world outside of Europe between Portugal and Spain. Spain and Portugal did not agree with the decision and reached their own agreement on how to divide the world between them. It later proclaimed that the Roman Catholic faith was the only Christianity allowed in the new lands.
Columbus

In 1492, Columbus set sail from Spain and after almost ten weeks at sea, sighted an island that he believed was close to Japan. In fact, it was an island in the Caribbean. Columbus made three more trips to the Caribbean between 1494 and 1504, but never reached mainland North America. He still believed he had sailed all the way to Asia. Explorations by others convinced Europeans that Columbus had, in fact, discovered a world previously unknown to Europeans.

He first asked the Portuguese king in 1485 to sponsor him on a westward voyage to reach Asia, but was turned down. No one in the Portuguese court believed that the Earth was spherical, so they did not believe it was possible to sail westward to the other side of the Earth. He next approached Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain for support. After many years of lobbying, he finally convinced them to support his venture in 1492.
Magellan

In 1519, Ferdinand Magellan explored the east coast of South America. He discovered a passageway at the tip of South America, now known as the Strait of Magellan, that led to another ocean, as he had predicted. He named it the Pacific Ocean because of its calm, pacifying waters. He continued sailing west across the South Pacific until he finally reached some islands in Indonesia. There, he learned other Europeans had already visited and realized that he had reached the eastern part of Asia. Although Magellan was killed in the Philippines, one of his five ships finally returned to Spain, the first to successfully circumnavigate the globe.
England

At the beginning of the 16th century, England was more interested in trade within Europe and did not rush to fund exploration. One of the few voyages supported by the monarchy was Giovanni Caboto’s visit to Newfoundland in 1497, where he claimed parts of North America for England. Known in English as John Cabot, he was the first explorer since the Vikings, 400 years earlier, to reach North America.

It was not until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the last half of the 16th century that the English showed any great interest in exploration. Because Spain and Portugal had become so wealthy from their claims in the New World, England decided it was time to focus on expansionism — getting involved in exploration and conquest. In 1560, a group of English merchants funded Martin Frobisher to search for a northwest passage through the islands of northern Canada to India and China because Spain and Portugal controlled the other sea routes to the East. Between 1576 and 1578, Frobisher and another explorer, John Davis, explored the North Atlantic coast. Queen Elizabeth then sponsored colonies in the New World. By the beginning of the 17th century, England had established more colonies along the North American Atlantic Coast and in the West Indies than any other European power.

Canada is becoming more focused on its northern waterways. Each summer, Arctic sea ice is melting more than in the past and the Northwest Passage, searched for by Frobisher, Davis, and other explorers, may be open for ship traffic. Canada wants to maintain control over ship traffic through its territory.

Martin Frobisher sails down the Thames, passing Greenwich Palace on his expedition in search of a northwest passage.
In the early Renaissance, France was distracted by its ongoing war with England and, for the first half of the 16th century, its wars in Italy. However, after Portugal and Spain found wealth in the Americas, France decided it also wanted some of the riches from the new lands. After a French expedition to Florida was defeated by the Spanish, the French monarchy decided to finance expeditions to areas farther north and west. In 1534, Jacques Cartier sailed to the New World and explored the St. Lawrence River as far as the Haudenosaunee settlement of Hochelaga (the location of present-day Montréal). He set the stage for France’s future exploration and colonization in the New World.

1. What values and beliefs were shown in the fact that Europeans thought it was acceptable to divide the world and its inhabitants outside Europe between Spain and Portugal?

2. How do you think Europeans reacted to their discovery that there were entire continents that they had known nothing about? How would that knowledge change their worldviews?

3. Use the Roundtable method to discuss one of the following:
   a. How does the modern space program reflect a spirit of exploration? Do you think there are also expansionist motives to the space program?
   b. Is there evidence that modern governments have expansionist worldviews similar to those of Western Europe during the Renaissance?