

intellectual backward in the fifteenth century as opposed to China or the Islamic world. Why these small, out-of-the-way countries? And why did they begin their domination then and not five hundred years before or five hundred years later?

European power was about two things: money and geography. Europe depended on imports from Asia, particularly India. Pepper, for example, was not simply a cooking spice but also a meat preservative; its importation was a critical part of the European economy. Asia was filled with luxury goods that Europe needed, and would pay for, and historically Asian imports would come overland along the famous Silk Road and other routes until reaching the Mediterranean. The rise of Turkey—about which much more will be heard in the twenty-first century—closed these routes and increased the cost of imports.

European traders were desperate to find a way around the Turks. Spaniards and Portuguese—the Iberians—chose the nonmilitary alternative: they sought another route to India. The Iberians knew of only one route to India that avoided Turkey, down the length of the African coast and up into the Indian Ocean. They theorized about another route, assuming that the world was round, a route that would take them to India by going west.

This was a unique moment. At other points in history Atlantic Europe would have only fallen even deeper into backwardness and poverty. But the economic pain was real and the Turks were very dangerous, so there was pressure to do something. It was also a crucial psychological moment. The Spaniards, having just expelled the Muslims from Spain, were at the height of their barbaric hubris. Finally, the means for carrying out such exploration was at hand as well. Technology existed that, if properly used, might provide a solution to the Turkey problem.

The Iberians had a ship, the caravel, that could handle deep-sea voyages. They had an array of navigational devices, from the compass to the astrolabe. Finally they had guns, particularly cannons. All of these might have been borrowed from other cultures, but the Iberians integrated them into an effective economic and military system. They could now sail to distant places. When they arrived they were able to fight—and win. People who heard a cannon fire and saw a building explode tended to be more flexible in

