Voyages to Empires

Tracing motives and consequences in the Americas

MWH.C.2.5.A "Explain the economic and religious motivations that prompted European exploratory expeditions into the Western Hemisphere and describe how these expeditions led to the expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in Latin America."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline economic motives, circle religious motives, and number two details that show how expeditions became empires.

What Followed the Voyages

1. In the late 1400s, European merchants prized spices and other goods from Asia. Portugal's rulers paid for voyages along Africa's coast, hoping to reach Asian markets by sea and gain control of profitable trade. Spain's monarchs backed Christopher Columbus in 1492 as he tried to reach Asia by sailing west. His ships instead reached Caribbean islands, where Indigenous peoples already lived. Both crowns also sought to spread Christianity, and missionaries later traveled with colonizers. For rulers, a voyage could promise wealth, new Christian communities, and an advantage over rival states. Those goals did not make the lands they reached empty or unclaimed.

2. After Columbus's voyages, Spain claimed Caribbean islands and established settlements there. Spanish expeditions then pushed onto the mainland. Hernán Cortés and his allies defeated the Aztec Empire in 1521; Francisco Pizarro and his forces seized control of Inca lands in the 1530s. These conquests gave Spain control over large parts of the Americas. Colonizers sought gold and silver, and Spanish officials organized mining and other work using coerced Indigenous labor. Missionaries worked to convert Indigenous communities to Christianity, often amid pressure from colonial authorities. Disease, warfare, and forced labor devastated many Indigenous communities, even as Spanish rulers gained territory and revenue.

3. Portugal's route to empire began differently. A 1494 agreement between Spain and Portugal, the Treaty of Tordesillas, divided their claimed overseas spheres, ignoring the people who lived there. In 1500, Pedro Álvares Cabral's Portuguese expedition reached the coast of what is now Brazil, which lay on Portugal's side of the dividing line. Portugal later built settlements and sugar plantations there. Colonizers enslaved Indigenous people and brought enslaved Africans to provide labor, while missionaries sought converts. Thus, journeys driven partly by trade and faith produced two empires: Spain ruled much of mainland Latin America, while Portugal ruled Brazil. For Indigenous peoples, expansion meant lost land and autonomy.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the hope of Asian trade influence the routes Portugal and Spain funded?

2. How did the goal of spreading Christianity continue after the voyages led to conquest and settlement?

3. Explain how Spanish expeditions led to both territorial control and new sources of wealth.

4. How did the 1494 agreement and Cabral's voyage help Portugal establish an empire in Brazil?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 75 to 100 word museum caption explaining how a voyage aimed at Asian trade could lead to empire in the Americas. Compare one Spanish result with one Portuguese result, and explain why calling these voyages only religious missions would be misleading.

ANSWER KEY

Voyages to Empires

HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.C.2.5.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline economic motives, circle religious motives, and number two details that show how expeditions became empires. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the hope of Asian trade influence the routes Portugal and Spain funded?	**Portugal funded voyages along Africa's coast to reach Asian markets by sea. Spain funded Columbus's westward voyage in hopes of reaching Asia.**
2	How did the goal of spreading Christianity continue after the voyages led to conquest and settlement?	**Missionaries traveled with colonizers and sought to convert Indigenous communities, sometimes amid pressure from colonial authorities.**
3	Explain how Spanish expeditions led to both territorial control and new sources of wealth.	**Spain established Caribbean settlements, then conquered mainland territories, including Aztec and Inca lands. Colonizers sought gold and silver, and officials organized mining with coerced Indigenous labor.**
4	How did the 1494 agreement and Cabral's voyage help Portugal establish an empire in Brazil?	**The agreement placed the area that became Brazil in Portugal's claimed sphere. Cabral's expedition reached its coast, and Portugal later built settlements and sugar plantations there.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

An Atlantic voyage intended to reach Asian markets could instead bring Europeans to lands where Indigenous peoples already lived. Spain claimed Caribbean islands, then conquered mainland territories and extracted gold and silver using coerced labor. Cabral's expedition reached Brazil, where Portugal later established sugar plantations using enslaved labor. Both empires sent missionaries to spread Christianity, but calling the voyages only religious missions hides the pursuit of trade, territory, and wealth. It also hides the loss of land and autonomy suffered by Indigenous peoples as European rule expanded.

Accept other accurate comparisons grounded in the passage. Captions should connect an economic motive to expansion, identify a Spanish and a Portuguese result, and explain why the religious motive alone is incomplete.