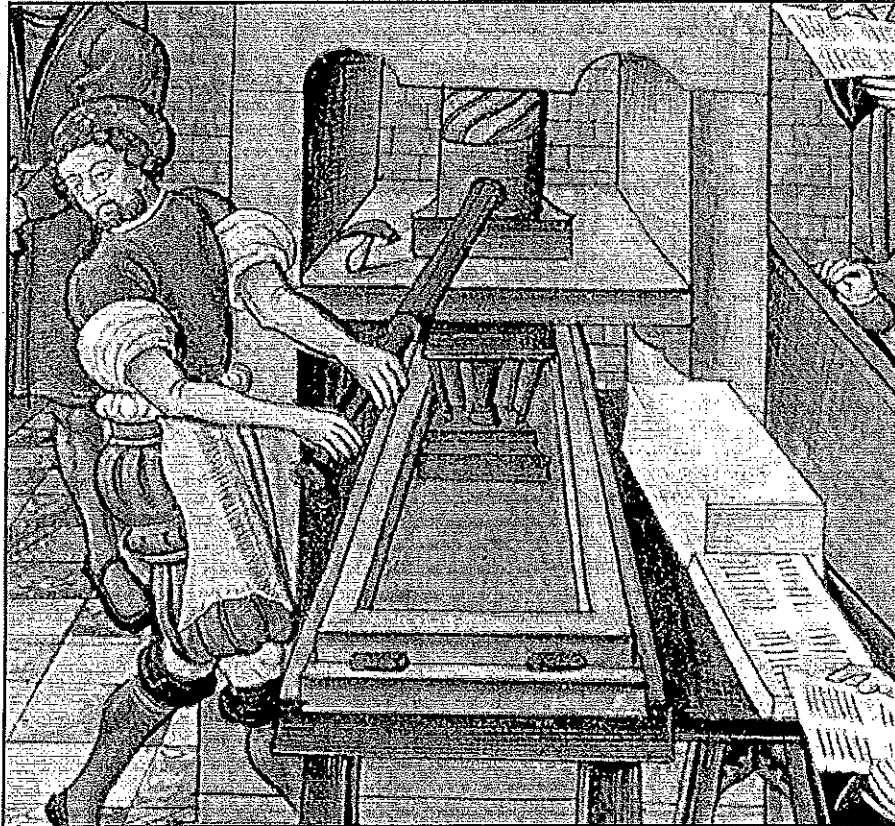# Exploration or Reformation: Which Was the More Important Consequence of the Printing Press?

Overview: There are historians who believe that the printing press ranks among the most revolutionary new technologies in the history of humankind. Like the invention of the alphabet two thousand years before, and the computer 500 years after, the printing press changed the way and the speed with which we share ideas with one another. As much as any invention in human history, the printing press changed our lives.

The Documents:

Document A: The Spread of Printing (map)

Document B: The Spread of Protestantism

Document C: Religions in Europe (map)

Document D: Columbus' Letter (text and map)

Document E: Printing and Mapmaking

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Exploration or Reformation: Which Was the More Important Consequence of the Printing Press?

At the end of the **millenium**, in late 1999, Arts and Entertainment Television identified 100 of the most influential people in the last 1,000 years of world history. It then asked a panel of experts to select the most influential person of these. From a list that included William Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein, the experts picked Johannes Gutenberg. Many viewers were surprised, even shocked. Some weren't sure who Gutenberg was.

What Johannes Gutenberg did in the 1450s was to invent the first practical printing press. His invention came as a milestone event in the evolution of human communication. For probably a million years or more, early mankind had depended on sign language for communicating. Then, about 25,000 years ago, man learned to speak. The first picture writing dates from 8,000 years ago and the first evidence of an alphabet comes from Phoenicia around 1500 BCE.

The amazing thing about the alphabet is that every sound that we can imagine can be shown by some combination of a handful of letters. Unlike the ancient written languages of the Egyptians or Chinese, the alphabet represents sounds, not ideas. The Chinese written language has more than 50,000 different characters; our modern alphabet has 26 letters.

While the alphabet was easy to learn and put down on **papyrus** or eventually paper, it did not make written communication fast or cheap. **Scrolls** and then bound books were developed, but both had to be written by hand. During the Middle Ages, monks wrote manuscript books with pen and ink in a copying room known as a **scriptorium**. Even a small book could take months to complete. A book the size of the Bible could take several years. By the 1400s mass production scriptoriums did exist, with over 50

scribes writing away as a single reader dictated a text. But it was slow and the books that were created, while often beautiful, could only be afforded by the rich.

At this same time, Gutenberg, a goldsmith in Mainz, Germany, began his work on a mechanical printing system. Gutenberg was a businessman and he saw the future. The **Renaissance** was underway with a surge of ideas breathing new life into painting, architecture, old classical literature, theater, and much more. If only books could be created faster. The idea wasn't new. The Chinese introduced **woodblock printing** in 600 CE. They even experimented with movable wooden type, but with 50,000 characters, carving each character was impossible. Gutenberg saw his chance. Why not metal letters that wouldn't wear out, set in a frame that could be inked, papered, and pressed? Copies could be printed by the hundreds, or even thousands.

In 1455 Gutenberg printed 180 Bibles, each of them over 1800 pages long. There are only 21 of these **Gutenberg Bibles** left, some worth over $30 million. By 1500 more than 20 million printed books were in existence. By 1600 more than 200 million books had come off the presses. The impact of all this is hard to overestimate.

Two areas that were clearly affected by the printing press were overseas exploration and the Protestant Reformation. The first involved doubling the size of the known world. The second involved dividing the Christian church into several pieces. Your task in this Mini-Q is first to look at documents that reveal the role played by the printing press in these two movements. Then address the question – *Exploration or Reformation: Which was the more important consequence of the printing press?*
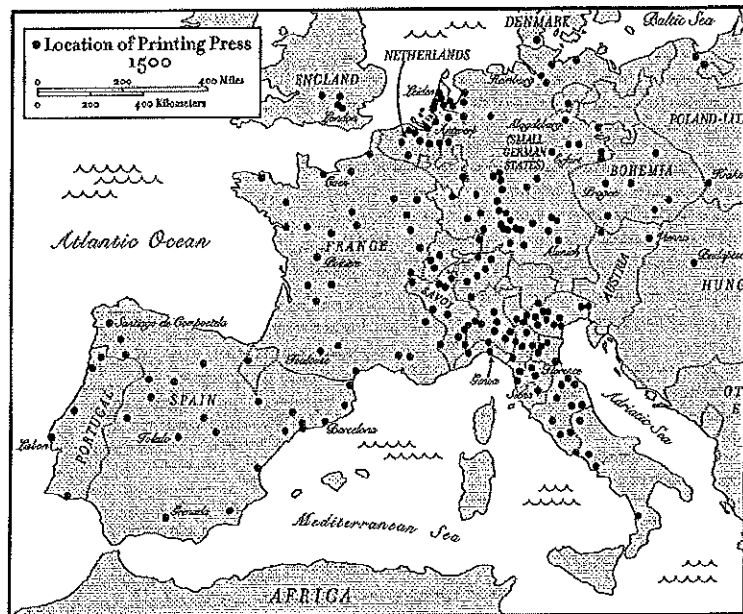
Document A

Sources: Maps created from various sources.

Document Analysis

1. How many printing presses were in Europe in 1471?

2. About how many printing presses were in Europe in 1500?

3. What inference can you make about change in the price of books in Europe between 1471 and 1500? Explain your thinking.

4. What inference can you make about change in literacy in Europe between 1471 and 1500? Explain your thinking.

5. What inference can you make about changes in people's interest in geography? Explain.

6. What inference can you make about changes in the power of the Pope? Explain.

This page may be reproduced for classroom use

Document B

Source: Excerpts from Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, 1517.

Note: Martin Luther was a Catholic priest who was unhappy with his church. On October 31, 1517 he posted 95 Theses' or criticisms' on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. One of his goals was to stir up debate about indulgences. Indulgences were payments to the Roman Catholic Church in return for pardons for one's sins and grants of salvation in the afterlife. Because of the printing press, the *95 Theses* were known throughout Germany in two weeks and throughout Europe in a month. Luther's protest triggered a movement called the Protestant Reformation and led to the Lutheran religion.

> 20. *Thus those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved (pardoned) from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences.*
>
> 27. *They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.*
>
> 32. *Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.*

Source: John Man, *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.
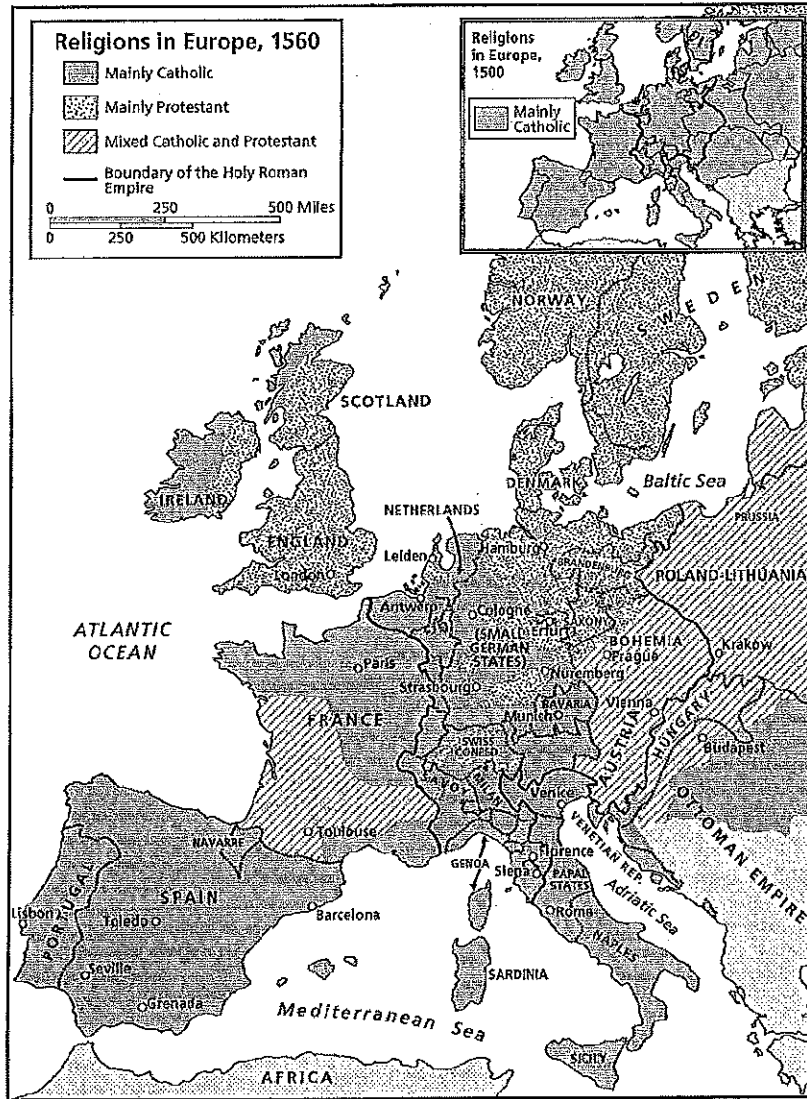
> As Rome prepared the heavy artillery, Luther fired off more salvos, with the help of the press. His sermons, tracts and polemics, all in German ... streamed from presses by the hundreds of thousands.... According to one estimate, a third of all books printed in Germany between 1518 and 1525 were by him. Pause to consider that figure. Of course, printing was in its infancy, but Germany at the time was turning out about a million books a year, of which a third – 300,000 – were by Luther.

Document Analysis

1. Who was Martin Luther?

2. What was Martin Luther's main objection with the Catholic Church? Explain in some detail.

3. According to Luther, what will happen to people who pay the Catholic Church to get out of purgatory and into Heaven?

4. How did the printing press help Luther's protest against the Catholic Church? Provide concrete numbers.

This page may be reproduced for classroom use

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

Religions in Europe, 1560
- Mainly Catholic
- Mainly Protestant
- Mixed Catholic and Protestant
- Boundary of the Holy Roman Empire

0   250   500 Miles
0   250   500 Kilometers

Religions in Europe, 1500
- Mainly Catholic

Document Analysis

1. According to the inset map, what religion dominated Europe in 1500?

2. By 1560, what two main branches of Christianity existed in western Europe?

3. What countries, or parts of countries, were all or mostly Protestant in 1560?

4. Compare this map with the printing press map in Document A. Is there a connection between the spread of Protestantism and the spread of the printing press? Explain your thinking.

5. What arguments can be made to support the claim that the Protestant Reformation was a very important consequence of the printing press?
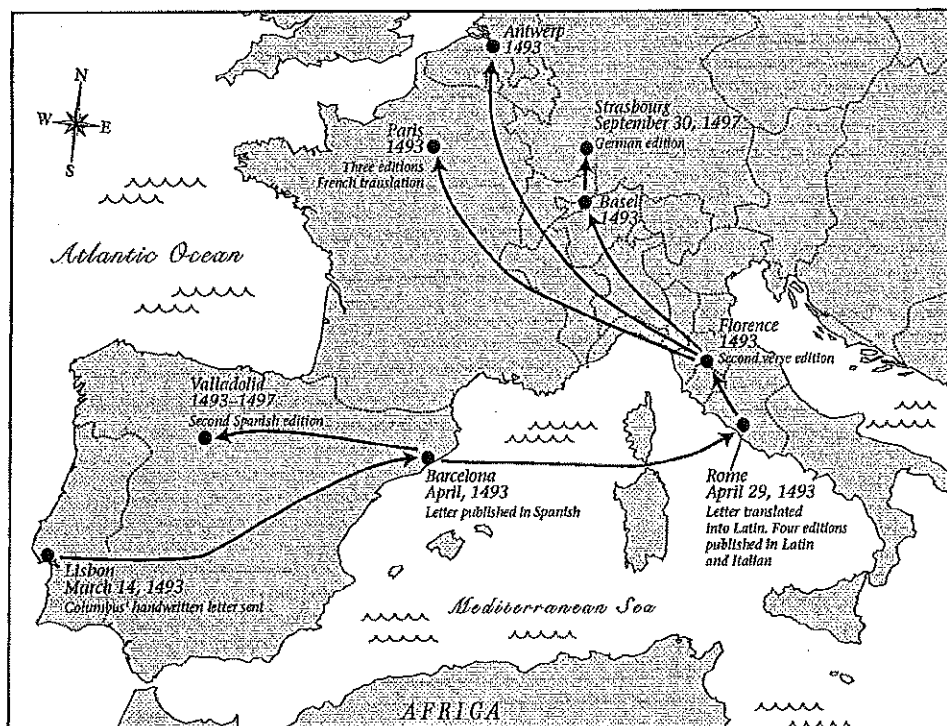
Document D

Sources: Christopher Columbus's letter, *Concerning the Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Sea*, 1493.
Map created from various sources.

> Because my undertakings have attained success, I know that it will be pleasing to you: these I
> have determined to relate, so that you may be made acquainted with everything done and discov-
> ered in this our voyage. On the thirty-third day after I departed from Cadiz, I came to the Indian
> sea, where I found many islands inhabited by men without number, of all which I took possession
> for our most fortunate king, with proclaiming heralds and flying standards, no one objecting.
>
> **Note:** Columbus's 15-page letter to the King of Spain was written on his return voyage from the Americas.

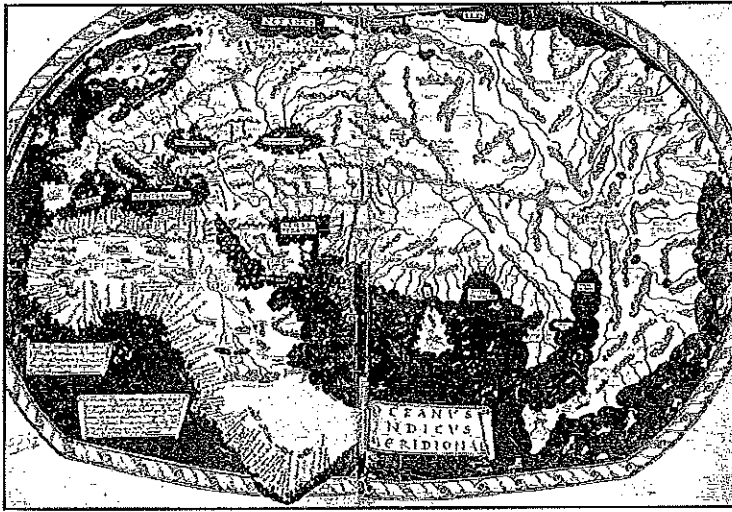### Distribution of Columbus's Letter

Document Analysis

1. In his letter to the king of Spain, what did Columbus claim to have discovered?

2. Why, in 1493, would this discovery have been big news?

3. Where was Columbus when he wrote his letter?

4. In what European cities, and in what languages, was the letter published in 1493?

5. Based on this document, do you think the printing press is likely to have had a significant effect on
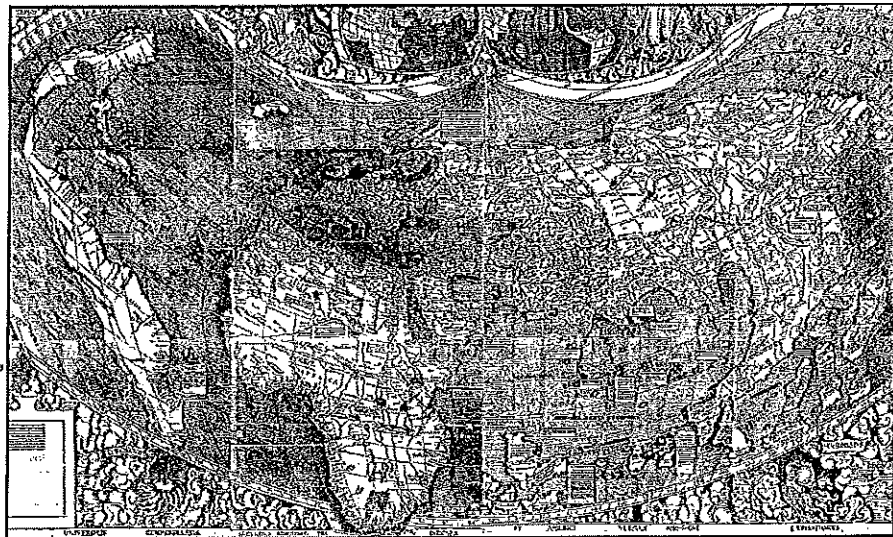   exploration in the late 1400s and early 1500s? Explain your thinking.

This page may be reproduced for classroom use

Document E

Source: Henricus Martellus's World Map, 1489.

Source: Martin Waldseemuller's
World Map, 1507.

Note: The map at right is the
famous 1507 Waldseemuller
World Map. It has the nick-
name "America's Birth
Certificate" because it is the
first known map to record the
existence of the American
continents (albeit in a strange,
inaccurate shape).

Document Analysis

1. In what year was the Martellus World Map printed and published? The Waldseemuller World Map?

2. What discoveries made between 1489 and 1507 appear on the Waldseemuller Map?

3. What inference can you make about the connection between the Waldseemuller Map and the published 1493 letter of Columbus in Doc D?

4. How can you use documents D and E to argue that the printing press played an important role in stimulating exploration?

5. What arguments can be made that exploration was a more important consequence of the printing press than the Reformation?