

# Chapter 6: European Exploration and Conquest

Europe was not a particularly important place, in the context of global empires, economics, or cultural influence during the medieval period. While it invaded the Middle East during the crusades and the European states themselves warred against one another almost constantly, on balance Europe was quite weak and poor compared to other regions farther east. China and India are both outstanding examples of regions that produced far greater wealth, had far larger populations, and were far more militarily powerful than any European kingdom was; in the case of China under the Ming dynasty of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Chinese Empire was probably more powerful than all of Europe put together. Likewise, China's cultural influence on its neighbors was profound.

Nevertheless, the long expansion of European power from Europe itself to the rest of the world began in the fifteenth century. One of the great world-historical conundrums is why European states expanded so rapidly and aggressively, while other powers like that of China, the Ottoman Empire, or the Indian kingdoms did not. Why was it *Europe* that took over the Americas (and, much later, much of the rest of the world) rather than Persia, the Ottoman Empire, India, or China?

Ironically, one of the most likely answers to that question is that it was Europe's relative poverty as compared to the states of the Middle East and Asia that led Europeans to seek out new sources of wealth. Whereas the intra-Asian trade routes linking China, Korea, Japan, the islands of the western Pacific, Southeast Asia, and India ensured that Asian states enjoyed access to wealth and luxury goods, Europeans had to rely on the hugely expensive long-distance trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to access goods like spices and porcelain that Europeans desperately wanted (so we can conclude based on the prices elite Europeans were willing to pay for them) but could not produce themselves.

The demand for trade with the east was limitless in European society. Luxury goods from south and east Asia were always among the most sought-after commodities in Europe, stretching all the way back to Roman times. Spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and Chinese goods like porcelain and silk were also highly prized. Enterprising merchants who were able to position themselves somewhere along the Indian Ocean trade routes or the famous Silk Road between Europe and China stood to make a fortune, but the distances

covered were so vast that it was very difficult and perilous to take part in mercantile ventures. Thus, Isabella of Spain was not alone in funding explorers who sought to reach the east via easier routes when she hired Columbus.

The situation became even more difficult for Europeans thanks to the rise of the Ottoman Empire, as well. When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the traditional trade routes to Asia were disrupted, particularly as the Turks started taking over the Venetian maritime empire. Likewise, Europeans had long traded with Muslim merchants in North Africa for gold, ivory, and spices, and they longed to cut out the middlemen and get to the sources farther south. Some of this was doubtless born of anti-Muslim prejudice, but there was also the simple fact that the Ottomans now directly controlled a major link in the East - West trade axis, deriving profits that Europeans desired for their own.

In addition, the crusading tradition, especially that inspired by the Reconquest of Spain and Portugal, served as an inspiration for European explorers. The Reconquest was only completed in 1492, the same year that Columbus sailed in search of a western route to Asia, and many of the Spanish *conquistadors* (conquerors) who invaded South and Central America afterwards had acquired their military experience from what they considered to be the holy wars against the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula. That crusading ideology was easily adapted for the purposes of conquering vast American territories and forcibly converting the Native American inhabitants to Christianity.

There were thus economic and cultural reasons that Europeans *wanted* to reach African and Asian commodities and wealth. They were *able* to access that wealth thanks to technological advances. Until about 1400, Europeans had no ships capable of sailing across an entire ocean (the Viking longboats of the Middle Ages were an exception, but they were no longer in use by the Renaissance era), and the European understanding of geography and navigation was extremely primitive. From about 1420 on, however, maritime technology improved dramatically and it became feasible to launch voyages that could cross the entire Atlantic Ocean with a reasonable degree of certainty that they would succeed. The key here was the invention of the caravel, a new kind of ship that was able to sail both with the wind and against lateral winds; as long as the wind was not blowing in the opposite direction one wanted to travel in, it was possible to keep moving in the right direction. Reasonably effective compasses and a device to measure latitude called the astrolabe came into European hands from the Middle East around 1400 as well. Thus, by 1400 Europeans had both a number of reasons to want to explore and for the first time had the technological means to do so.





*Nineteenth-century drawing of a Portuguese caravel, based on the designs used during the early Portuguese expeditions of the fifteenth century.*

Despite those advances, the European grasp of geography remained very shaky. As of 1400, Europeans had terribly imprecise knowledge about the rest of the world. They did not, of course, know anything about the Americas. They tended to confuse “India,” “Cathay,” and “Japan” with “Asia” itself. They had a vague notion that all of Asia was ruled by Khans, in part because of the popularity of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo’s famous account of his travels undertaken in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Polo was a Venetian merchant who had traveled to the court of the Mongol Khan Kublai and eventually returned to Europe, but his account merely reinforced just how far away, and difficult to reach, Asia was taking the usual eastern routes. Many sincerely believed that monsters occupied the interiors of Africa and Asia, and besides Polo, no Europeans had ever made the trek to the far east and returned to tell the tale.

## Africa and India

Europeans did, of course, know about North Africa. The Mediterranean had served as the crossroads of the civilized Western World since ancient times, and despite North Africa being ruled by Muslim kingdoms, Europeans regularly traded with Muslim merchants. As noted above, there were many lucrative commodities (like gold and ivory) that Europeans coveted and were only available from North African merchants. Europeans knew that these commodities originated somewhere across the Sahara desert, but were unable to access their sources directly.

During the European middle ages, Sub-Saharan Africa was dominated by various medium-sized kingdoms, most of which had converted to Islam. The largest was that of Mali, which oversaw a lucrative trade in gold and various luxury goods north via caravan to North Africa and the rest of the Mediterranean. Likewise, other kingdoms traded with one another and, via caravans, the Middle East and Europe. These kingdoms also engaged in frequent warfare against one another (just as the states of Europe did).

Drawn by the gold they were able to acquire via merchants in North Africa, Europeans had tried in the late Middle Ages to sail down the west coast of the continent, but their naval technology was insufficient. In the fifteenth century that changed with the introduction of the caravel; the same thing that made it possible for Europeans to reach the Americas allowed them to make reliable journeys along the African coast. Along with new compasses and the astrolabe, Europeans were able to make long-distance trips by the mid-fifteenth century that far exceeded their earlier maximum ranges.

The beginning of the ongoing contact between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe happened under the auspices of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 – 1460), the governor of the southernmost province of Portugal. He sponsored numerous Portuguese expeditions along the west coast of Africa, hoping to somehow seize lands or at least find routes to lucrative sources of gold and spices. In 1497, Vasco Da Gama, a Portuguese nobleman, was sponsored by the Portuguese crown and sailed around Africa and as far as India, in the process claiming various territories for Portugal. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese maintained a lucrative monopoly on trade between Europe and West African kingdoms, East African kingdoms, and Indian merchants. This amounted to a royally-controlled, militarily-enforced monopoly of waterborne trade between Europe and India and Africa that lasted well into the sixteenth century. Thus, tiny Portugal was, for a time, one of the wealthiest states in Europe.



It should be emphasized that this Portuguese “monopoly” was first and foremost a monopoly between the Indian Ocean trade and Europe, *not* a monopoly of trade within the Indian Ocean itself (despite the best efforts of the Portuguese). Indian, African, and Middle Eastern merchants continued to exchange goods and wealth whose value greatly exceeded that of the trade between Europe and the Indian Ocean region. What changed, however, was that Europeans were for the first time able to directly access the sources of luxury commodities like spices, indigo, ivory, and gold, and Portugal was in the forefront of the European states that sought to reach those sources. Other states were quick to follow once the sheer extent of African and Indian wealth was revealed through Portuguese trade, and soon first the Dutch and then the English started taking over the oceanic trade routes from the Portuguese.

## Spain, Columbus, the Great Dying, and the Columbian Exchange

The most important voyages of discovery of the early modern period were undertaken by agents of the Spanish monarchy, starting with that of Christopher Columbus in 1492. They were inspired by religious fervor as much as a practical desire for riches – fresh off the successful Reconquest, Queen Isabella agreed with Columbus’s vision of flanking the Muslim forces of the Middle East and recapturing the Holy Land as much as she also wanted new trade routes to Asia. The voyage was thought to be feasible both because all educated people already accepted that the world was round (common knowledge since the days of ancient Greece) and because the circumference of the globe was not really clear to them; it simply was not known how long one would have to sail west to reach the east.

Columbus himself had totally inaccurate beliefs about the distance between Europe and Asia – he based his geography on an ancient (and completely inaccurate) account by the Greek philosopher Ptolemy and he thought that Asia was not far west of Europe. Despite being disliked and distrusted by most of the rulers he had approached in the past, Columbus succeeded in winning Isabella over to his vision, and she paid to outfit him with a tiny fleet (she sent him with letters of introduction to the Great Khan, who she presumed still ruled in Asia). Columbus departed in August of 1492 with three small boats – the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria - and 90 men. They arrived in the Bahamas in October.



*The four voyages of Columbus between 1492 and 1504. 'Juana' is present-day Cuba, and 'Hispaniola' is present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic.*

Columbus ended up spearheading everything the Spanish empire was to represent in the Americas: brutality against the native "Indians," attempts to convert Indians by force, intense greed for precious metals, and the introduction of pathogens against which the native people had absolutely no resistance. With Columbus, the traffic in goods and commodities between the two hemispheres began. While Europeans at the time were obsessed with the vast mineral wealth found in the Americas, it is clear in historical hindsight that far more important than precious metals were the living things exchanged between the western and eastern hemispheres of the globe starting in 1492. Historians now refer to that enormous distribution of plant and animal species, as well as bacteria and viruses, as the Columbian Exchange.

From the New World, Europeans brought back corn, potatoes, tobacco, chocolate, and tomatoes, just to name the most important of the crops that soon flourished across Africa and Eurasia. From the Old World, Europeans imported all of the large domesticated animals - horses, cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and sheep - as well as numerous crops like rice, wheat, sugarcane, and coffee. Potatoes alone would go on to reshape the demographics of all of northern Europe and various other regions in the world because they provide a great deal of nutrition and calories and can grow in poor, rocky soils. The poor of many European regions (Ireland, most famously) became largely dependent on potatoes for nourishment by the eighteenth century.



That noted, the single most significant biological entity to be exchanged between the hemispheres was the smallpox virus, which was at the heart of the worst epidemic in world history. Isolated from the western hemisphere for thousands of years, Native Americans had no resistance to Eurasian diseases. Because almost all diseases that affect humans are mutated strains of diseases affecting domestic animals, referred to as zoonotic diseases, and all of the large animal species that can be domesticated were Eurasian in origin except llamas, Eurasians and Africans had spent thousands of years both suffering from and building up resistances to epidemics while Native Americans did not. Those epidemic pathogens arrived all at once with the European invasion of the New World that began with Columbus.

Historians refer to the demographic catastrophe that accompanied the European encounter with the Americas as the Great Dying. As much as 90% of the native people of the Americas died within a few generations of Columbus's arrival. While the Spanish and Portuguese did win some noteworthy military engagements with native forces, due largely to their use of steel weapons and horses, their true military advantage lay in germ warfare, something they certainly did not anticipate unleashing on their arrival. Spanish explorers in the early sixteenth century encountered whole vast swaths of land with abundant evidence of sophisticated cultures that were already abandoned, their former inhabitants decimated by disease. In other words, the conquest of the Americas by Europeans was shockingly swift not because Europeans were significantly more militarily powerful than were Native Americans, but because most of the latter were already dead thanks to disease.

The Columbian Exchange, and the Great Dying that was part of it, began with Columbus's initial voyage. Almost immediately after Columbus's return to Spain after his expedition, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain grasped the significance of his discovery and actively funded more expeditions and, soon, colonists. The Spanish crown also quickly tried to cement its hold on the New World – they petitioned the pope to grant them everything across the Atlantic. After papal intervention and negotiations between the Spanish and Portuguese, the Spanish were to receive everything west of an arbitrary line on the map 1,100 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands, with everything to the east granted to the Portuguese. Practically speaking, this meant that the Portuguese concentrated their colonization efforts on Brazil, Africa, and India, while the Spanish concentrated on the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Needless to say, the other European powers were not about to honor this agreement, called the Treaty of Tordesillas and dating to 1494, but it gave the Spanish and Portuguese a considerable head start.

By the 1520s, Europeans recognized that Columbus had been completely wrong about the New World being part of Asia. The term "America" was invented by another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, who was another early explorer (he led two expeditions between 1497 and 1503) and the first to grasp the immensity of the western hemisphere. Vespucci coined the phrase "New World" in the first place, hence "America" rather than "Columbia" – Vespucci's accounts were printed first. He was also a relentless self-promoter, whereas Columbus did not attempt to publicize his discoveries with the same focus.

Even though Europeans quickly realized that the Americas were whole new continents, they persisted in their quest to find a western route to Asia. The Spanish dispatched explorers and sailors who sought Asia by going around the Americas, even as they were also busy conquering the great empires of the Aztecs and Incas. This led to the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan (1480 – 1521), who commanded a small fleet of five ships funded by the Spanish crown and tried to find a western route to Asia in 1519. He succeeded in rounding South America and crossing the Pacific, but was then killed by natives of the Philippines in 1521. The remnants of his fleet limped back to Spain in 1522, proving that it was possible to sail around the world. The Spanish would subsequently use the Philippines as the basis of their Pacific trade network, ultimately linking together Europe, the Americas, and Asia and fulfilling the original vision of a western route to Asia that had inspired Columbus's expedition in the first place.

## The Conquistadors

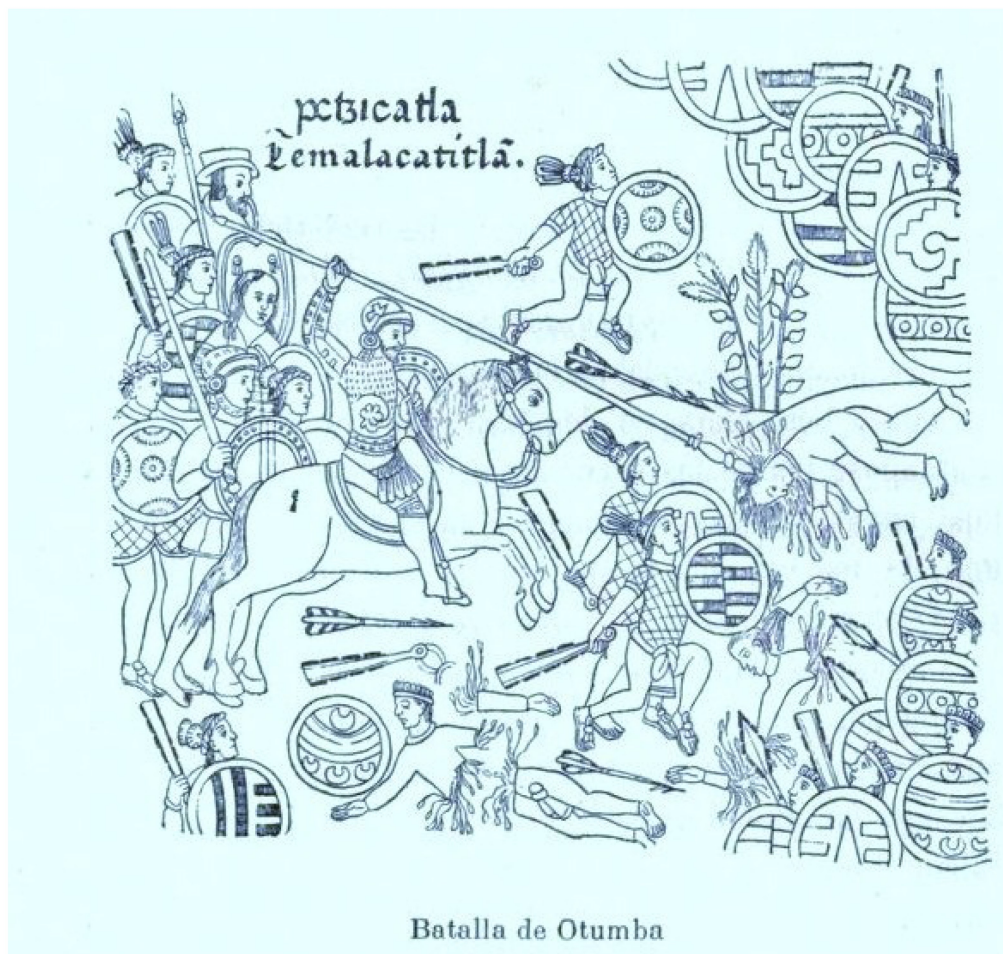
The Conquistadors were the military explorers sent by the Spanish crown to the Americas to claim land, convert "heathens," and enrich both themselves and the crown. They were usually poor noblemen with few prospects back in Spain; in the first generation of explorers many were essentially unemployed knights. Some conquistadors simply launched expeditions to the New World without royal authorization, hoping to seize enough plunder to receive retroactive royal approval; official ones were obliged to turn over the "royal fifth" - 20% of all precious metals discovered or mined - of all loot to the crown.

The most significant conquistador was Hernan Cortes (1485 – 1547). A poor knight who had fought in the aftermath of the Reconquest as a young man, he jumped at the chance to travel to the New World. Cortes proved brilliant at manipulating the native groups he encountered in Mexico, where he arrived in 1519 with 450 Spanish troops and 15 horses. There, a powerful empire under the Aztecs had recently seized control of a large swath of territory. The Aztecs did not directly rule their subjects but instead demanded a constant flow of



tribute, including captives who were destined for human sacrifice. Needless to say, the Aztecs were not popular with their subjects.

Working through a native translator, Malinche, who had already learned Spanish, Cortes was able to convince native groups resentful of the Aztecs to fight alongside the Spanish; practically speaking this meant that the native groups suffered most of the casualties. He fought his way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, where he was initially welcomed by the emperor Montezuma II. Once the Aztecs realized the extent of the rapacious designs of the Spanish they chased them from the city, but then an epidemic of smallpox undermined their ability to fight. Cortes was able to achieve the surrender of the surviving Aztec forces by 1522 and founded the Spanish colony of New Spain in the center of Mexico.



*A later Spanish illustration of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. Note the allied Native Mexican troops both behind and in front of the charging Spanish soldier.*

The other noteworthy conquistador of the first generation following Columbus was Francisco Pizarro (1478 – 1541). Inspired by Cortes' success in Mexico, Pizarro set off (with 180 Spanish troops and 30 horses) for an empire the Spanish had learned of in the Andes of western South America in 1531. This was the Inca empire, also a relatively young state that encompassed territory along the Andes through present-day Chile, Ecuador and Peru. Pizarro ambushed the Inca emperor Atahualpa and captured him, demanding a building full of gold for his release. Instead, once the ransom was paid, Pizarro had the emperor killed and then marched on the Inca capital of Cuzco. By 1533, Spanish forces were in control of the empire and began sending enormous quantities of bullion back to Spain.

Thus, less than fifty years after Columbus's initial landing, the two greatest empires of Central and South America had already fallen to the Spanish. By 1600, practically every part of Central and South America was at least nominally under Spanish (or, in the case of Brazil, Portuguese), control.

## New World Wealth

The Spanish discovered huge sources of wealth in South and Central America. The most important source of wealth in all of the Americas for the Spanish crown was discovered in 1545: the mountain of Potosi in present-day Bolivia. Potosi had the most enormous silver deposits in the world at the time, producing thousands of tons of silver for the crown. It also represented a horrible site of slave labor for the native peoples of the entire extended area, in which the Spanish forced them to toil in atrocious conditions, often until they died from exhaustion. Whereas the Great Dying might be the most iconic aspect of the Columbian Exchange, Potosi is probably the greatest symbol of the humongous influx of mineral wealth that flooded into Spanish coffers for over a century, as well as the site of the greatest human misery caused by that lust for bullion.

The irony of the wealth generated by American mines is that it undermined the vitality of the Spanish state itself in the long run – Spain did not have to cultivate trade or pursue technological or bureaucratic innovation in the same manner as the rest of the European powers because it had such an enormous surplus of precious metals. Thus, even though Spain was the most powerful state in Europe in the sixteenth century, its longer-term trajectory was one of decline, in large part because of its commercial stagnation. In addition, so much bullion was shipped back to Europe that inflation undermined its value, another factor that weakened Spanish power over time.



Much of the story of Spanish conquest is one of the abuse of the native peoples of the Americas. Part of that abuse grew out of the crusading tradition, but part of it also came out of the discomfort many of the Spanish felt in discovering people who had quite obviously never been in contact with the Christian world. The Bible did not explain their origins, so the Spanish invented various hypotheses: Native Americans were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel described in the Old Testament of the Bible, they were somehow created and ruled by the Devil, they simply were not human beings but strange, human-like animals, and so on. The consensus by the 1530s was that, wherever they were from, Native Americans were blank slates who had to be conquered for their own good; the Pope recognized the humanity of the Indians in 1537, but the church continued to support forcible conversion. Native Americans were referred to as the “justly conquered” and either enslaved outright or conscripted as serfs in service to Spanish colonial masters.

Back in Europe, funded by the incredible wealth of the New World, the still recently-united Spain became the greatest European power in the sixteenth century. In the New World, royal authority was enforced by two viceroys, royal officials who ruled over the northern and southern parts of the territory. Under them, rich nobles (often originally successful conquistadors) ran *encomiendas*, feudal estates with the legal right to exploit native labor. Those often evolved into the even larger *haciendas*, the size of whole states back in Europe.

Because the vast majority of Spanish immigrants were men, even a formal ban of marriage between Spanish men and native women did not prevent the growth of a large “mixed” class of *mestizos*, the children of Spanish – American unions who were often recognized as the legitimate children of the former. There was still a racialized hierarchy in New World society, but more ethnic mixing occurred in Central and South America than in North America.

## Conclusion

The Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the Americas were nothing less than a catastrophe for the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. Whole cultures were obliterated, empires fell, and the survivors found themselves at the mercy of conquerors whose major priorities were the extraction of mineral wealth and the exploitation of labor. To those ends, the Native peoples were frequently enslaved outright to work on plantations or mines. The use of slave labor only grew over time, although by the middle of the sixteenth century Europeans were increasingly turning to African slaves, spawning one of the most horrendous injustices in history: the Transatlantic Slave Trade (considered in a following chapter).

European states in the Americas were thus built on the backs and with the blood of both the Native inhabitants and enslaved Africans.

The impact of the conquests on Europe took longer to become entirely evident, but in the long run the conquest of the Americas sparked the beginning of the process by which Europe became one of the dominant global regions. Europeans now had access to not only enormous quantities of precious metal, but vast new natural resources (from huge stocks of fish to millions of acres of fertile land) that were to bolster European power for centuries to come. It is no coincidence that the year 1492 is often used as the starting point of the early modern period: when both global hemispheres came into sustained contact for the first time, it was the starting point of massive change for the human species as a whole.

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