

## European Voyages of Exploration: Christopher Columbus and the Spanish Empire

### *The Spanish Empire*

During the period from the late fifteenth through the seventeenth century, the Spanish empire expanded the extent of its power, influence, and wealth throughout the world. In particular the Spanish were responsible for exploring, conquering, and colonizing significant portions of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The Spanish Empire, along with neighboring Portugal, launched the period known in European history as the Age of Discovery or the Age of Exploration. Compared to Portugal, Spain succeeded in establishing more permanent and complex settlements in the New World, largely through centralized colonial governments. During the Age of Discovery several other burgeoning European empires such as England and France followed the lead of the Spanish Crown and increasingly extended their power and influence throughout the New World.

Starting in 1492, Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon largely spearheaded the Age of Exploration under the newly unified kingdom of Spain. Before 1492, the Canary Islands were Spain's only substantial territorial possession outside of Europe. By the end of the first half of the sixteenth century the Spanish Empire controlled territories in Africa, the Caribbean, and significant portions of Central and South America. During the reign of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, Spain's empire grew and developed exponentially, as overseas exploration and colonization became one of the most important priorities for the Crown. The Spanish monarchy had the financial and political freedom to devote their resources to oceanic voyages because of the relative peace in Europe during this period that resulted from several marriages between other European royal households. Overseas expeditions and voyages were typically sponsored by the monarchy or by members of the nobility. Spreading Catholicism and converting indigenous peoples acted as a major impetus for colonization and Spanish imperial expansion.

### *Spanish Conquistadors*

The term *conquistador* refers to Spanish explorers or warriors who led the expeditions into the New World during the Age of Discovery. Christopher Columbus represents one of the most well known conquistadors from this period; however, there were several leading figures that were responsible for shaping the course of Spain's imperial history. Conquistadors such as Hernan Cortes, Juan Ponce de Leon, and Francisco Pizarro invaded and conquered lands in the Americas and the Caribbean from the late fifteenth through the late seventeenth century. Conquistadors can also be understood as colonizers who were acting in the name of the Spanish Empire and the Spanish Crown. The conquistadors are known today in part for their harsh behavior toward natives throughout the early phases of colonization. As professional soldiers, these men utilized European technology, weaponry, and cavalry against unknowing

indigenous populations. Their intent was to subjugate native peoples and exploit their labor, while at the same time converting them to Christianity.

Christopher Columbus's famous voyage to the Americas is considered the most successful expedition of overseas expansion that Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand supported. During his first expedition in 1492, Columbus landed in the present-day Bahamas and continued on to present-day Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The following quote provides an in-depth description of one of Spain's earliest encounters with the New World. The quote is from a journal entry that was recorded during Columbus's first voyage, in October 1492, which landed him on an island in the Bahamas:

*At two hours after midnight the land was sighted at a distance of two leagues. They shortened sail, and lay by under the mainsail without the bonnets. The vessels were hove to, waiting for daylight; and on Friday they arrived at a small island of the Lucayos, called, in the language of the Indians, Guanahani. Presently they saw naked people. The Admiral [Columbus] went on shore in the armed boat, and Martin Alonso Pinzon, and Vicente Yañez, his brother, who was captain of the Niña. The Admiral took the royal standard, and the captains went with two banners of the green cross, which the Admiral took in all the ships as a sign, with an F and a Y and a crown over each letter, one on one side of the cross and the other on the other. Having landed, they saw trees very green, and much water, and fruits of divers kinds. The Admiral called to the two captains, and to the others who leaped on shore, and to Rodrigo Escovedo, secretary of the whole fleet, and to Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia, and said that they should bear faithful testimony that he, in presence of all, had taken, as he now took, possession of the said island for the king and for the queen, his Lords, making the declarations that are required, as is more largely set forth in the testimonies which were then made in writing.*

*Presently many inhabitants of the island assembled. What follows is in the actual words of the Admiral in his book of the first navigation and discovery of the Indies. "I," he says, "that we might form great friendship, for I knew that they were a people who could be more easily freed and converted to our holy faith by love than by force, gave to some of them red caps, and glass beads to put round their necks, and many other things of little value, which gave them great pleasure, and made them so much our friends that it was a marvel to see. They afterward came to the ship's boats where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts, and many other things; and we exchanged them for other things that we gave them, such as glass beads and small bells. In fine, they took all, and gave what they had with good will. It appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything. They go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women, although I did not see more than one young girl. All I saw were youths, none more than thirty years of age. They are very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances. Their hair is short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse's tail. They wear the hairs brought down to the eyebrows, except a few locks*

*behind, which they wear long and never cut. They paint themselves black, and they are the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white. Some paint themselves white, others red, and others of what color they find. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, some only round the eyes, others only on the nose. They neither carry nor know anything of arms, for I showed them swords, and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron, their darts being wands without iron, some of them having a fish's tooth at the end, and others being pointed in various ways. They are all of fair stature and size, with good faces, and well made. I saw some with marks of wounds on their bodies, and I made signs to ask what it was, and they gave me to understand that people from other adjacent islands came with the intention of seizing them, and that they defended themselves. I believed, and still believe, that they come here from the mainland to take them prisoners. They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion. I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure six natives for your Highnesses, that they may learn to speak. I saw no beast of any kind except parrots, on this island.<sup>1</sup>*

As is evident from this journal entry, Spanish overseas exploration was traditionally couched in the language of the Spanish Crown as well as the religious language of Catholicism. Another prominent theme that emerges from this description is the importance and prevalence of trade in the early encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples.

Like many other recorded descriptions of encounters between Europeans and natives in the New World, there is a detailed description of the physical characteristics of native peoples. Traditionally, these descriptions depicted the derogatory ways in which Europeans perceived native populations. As in the case of this quote from Columbus's first voyage, the indigenous population is described as being poor and ignorant. Furthermore, there is the assumption that the natives will play a submissive role to the Spanish as servants or laborers. The Europeans typically overlooked any type of native religion and believed, as evident from the journal entry, that indigenous populations could easily be converted to Christianity.

In all, Christopher Columbus undertook four expeditions and was responsible for launching Spain into its golden age of imperialism and colonialism. The colonial territories founded by Columbus throughout the Americas yielded enormous wealth for the Spanish Empire, which would enjoy European supremacy overseas until the late sixteenth century. Columbus's discoveries also introduced the existence of the Americas, or the New World, to European society.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Calgary, "The European Voyages of Exploration: Christopher Columbus and the Spanish Empire," [http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied\\_history/tutor/eurvoya/columbus.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/eurvoya/columbus.html)

## *Christopher Columbus*

Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) was born in Genoa, in modern-day Italy. Columbus came from a humble background as one of four boys, with a father who worked as a wool weaver. In his youth Columbus worked as an apprentice for one of the most influential families in Genoa. As an apprentice Columbus worked as a business agent, and his work took him to several locations throughout Europe, including England and Ireland. In his thirties, Columbus was involved in commerce and trading throughout the West African coast. Columbus married the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman, providing him with an advantageous marriage.

Although Columbus was not considered a scholar and did not publish any substantial writings of his own, he had a wide array of academic interests and read widely in several fields, such as geography, astronomy, and history. He was multilingual (Latin, Portuguese, and Castilian) and enjoyed reading classical texts by scholars such as Ptolemy. Columbus was also an extremely religious man and was well versed in the Bible. Along with many other Spanish conquistadors and European explorers during this period, Columbus viewed religion as one of the driving factors behind overseas exploration.

## *Columbus's Voyages*

After studying the previous Portuguese voyages into the Atlantic and along the coasts of Africa, Columbus believed that it was possible to travel westward and eventually reach the Far East. In 1484, years before his famous 1492 voyage, Columbus tried to garner support from Portugal's King John II to sponsor a westward expedition to India. King John II turned down Columbus's proposal in favor of continued exploration along the African coast as a way to reach India. Two years later, in 1486, Columbus continued to try and find support for his plan and turned this time to Spain. After being rejected by Spain, Columbus set out on an unsuccessful mission to enlist the Crown of England or France. In 1492, the Spanish Crown revisited Columbus's proposal, and this time agreed to sponsor his voyage westward to try and reach India and the Far East. After defeating the Muslims in the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula and seeking to extend the presence of Catholicism throughout the world, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were now capable of assisting Columbus on an overseas expedition. The Spanish Crown also believed that if Columbus was successful in this journey they would be able to compete financially with the Portuguese.

Columbus's voyage illustrated the technological advancements of European navigation and the durability of European ships. In all, Columbus's round-trip voyage took 224 days. After leaving the Bahamas, Columbus and his men were still in search of a route to the Orient. Instead, Columbus reached the island of Cuba, and afterwards he came across the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), where he established the first European colony. Columbus believed that he had successfully discovered an alternative sea route to the Far East and claimed that the island of Cuba was in fact Japan. The Portuguese, doubtful of his claims, first

thought that Columbus simply discovered new areas on the African coast. Eventually, the Portuguese believed that Columbus most likely discovered uncharted territories in the Atlantic Ocean.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were similarly wary of Columbus's declaration that he had discovered a new route to the Far East, and ultimately came to the conclusion that he found new lands somewhere in the west. Although the Spanish Crown was not entirely clear on what or where these newly discovered islands were, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella desired sovereignty over any newly discovered territory. In 1493, they petitioned Pope Alexander VI for control over these new lands, which he granted through a papal bull issued that year. The bull provided the Spanish Crown with an exclusive title to Columbus's findings.

### *Spain and the New World*

Although scholars today refer to the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century as the Age of Discovery, many of the lands that Europeans "discovered" were already inhabited by rich and vibrant indigenous civilizations for tens of thousands of years. For example, when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, the population of Central America was approximately forty-five million people. The indigenous civilizations in the Americas were extremely diverse and distinct from one another. Columbus and his fellow conquistadors mistakenly thought that they had reached the East Indies and, as a result, identified all native peoples as "Indians." By grouping together such disparate groups of people, the Europeans perceived a unity among native populations that did not always exist. Oftentimes native peoples would take advantage of the Spanish to get them to fight against rival tribes, villages, or peoples.

A substantial difference between the civilization of the Old World and the New World was the physical isolation of the New World from exposure to other groups of peoples and cultures. Unlike Europeans, who had been in contact with peoples from Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Far East for centuries, natives from the New World were extremely susceptible to diseases brought over by Spanish conquistadors from the Old World. Diseases, such as smallpox, ravaged New World populations. Europeans also had access to newer technologies, such as steel and iron, which provided them with the military advantage that allowed them to successfully conquer and dominate native societies of the New World.

### *The Significance and Results of Columbus's Expeditions*

Christopher Columbus was not the first European adventurer to travel across great distances and explore exotic locales. Contemporary explorers such as Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama also explored distant lands; however, they had some previous knowledge of the places and regions to which they were journeying. Even though very little was known about Africa and parts of Asia, Europeans knew of their existence and their peoples from previous travel narratives, which circulated widely throughout Europe. Columbus's accidental voyage to the New World introduced an

entirely new portion of the earth that was previously nonexistent to Europeans. Because this was, according to Europeans, an entirely new and undiscovered region, it was eligible for seizure and domination. After landing in the Bahamas, Columbus and his men took possession and claimed the land in the name of the Spanish Crown. During that first voyage, Columbus and his men established the first European colony and constructed a European political and social structure under which it was to operate. The system was imposed on the indigenous population, as well as the Spanish colonizers who stayed behind to try and create a permanent settlement.

During Columbus's second voyage, in 1493, he attempted to establish a more intricate and complex bureaucratic and economic structure, in order to expand the strength of the colony. Before embarking on his second overseas expedition, Columbus was instructed to establish a trading post and to forcibly convert any native peoples to Catholicism. The Spanish Crown also granted Columbus a monopoly on all exploration throughout the entire region. The second voyage comprised seventeen ships that carried a total of approximately 1,500 men. Columbus and his men succeeded in reaching Hispaniola toward the end of 1493. Upon their arrival, Columbus's men discovered that some of the native populations of Hispaniola had decimated and destroyed their first Spanish colony and killed all of its inhabitants.

Columbus and his men established a new colony shortly after their arrival and shifted their perspective on colonization to one defined by violent subjugation and conquest. Spanish military units frequently patrolled the inland regions surrounding the settlement to fend off any native attacks or signs of hostility. Any hostile natives that were discovered by the Spanish were captured and enslaved, or held ransom for gold.

Over the course of his time in Hispaniola, Columbus's behavior became increasingly violent and unpredictable. His presence exacerbated what was already evolving into a hostile and volatile environment. Following consistent reports back from Hispaniola to the Spanish Crown regarding Columbus's erratic behavior, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sent for Columbus to return to Spain. In 1500, Columbus was finally brought back to Europe in chains. However, this was not the end of Columbus's voyages to the New World. As King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella became increasingly concerned over Portugal's potential commercial success in the Far East, they decided to dispatch Columbus once again to try and discover a new route to the Orient. Columbus claimed that China was located only a short distance away from South America and that he could discover a passage to the Indian Ocean from Hispaniola. He failed to find a route that led to the Indian Ocean, or to the Far East, and toward the end of 1502, he decided to turn around and return to Spain. Columbus died in 1506 in relative obscurity and received very little appreciation from the Spanish Crown for his discoveries.

Summary:

- In the late fifteenth century the Spanish Empire started to flourish under the rule of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. The monarchy's support of overseas expansion contributed to Spain's early involvement in exploration. Their

discoveries in the New World were largely responsible for sparking Europe's Age of Discovery.

- Under the patronage of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, Christopher Columbus embarked on several voyages intended to discover new and more efficient overseas trade routes to the Far East. Instead, Columbus discovered the Americas and introduced Europe to the existence of an entirely unknown portion of the world.
- The Spanish conquistadors were some of the first Europeans to ever come into direct contact with North America, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. They were a combination of explorers and warriors, and are known for their violent behavior toward indigenous populations that they encountered in the New World.
- Most Spanish conquistadors viewed the native populations of the Americas as barbaric and uncivilized peoples. As a result, the Spanish subjugated and exploited indigenous populations, and forced them to convert to Christianity.