### The New World Encounters the Old

**Why 1492?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 38,000 BCE</td>
<td>America’s first settlers begin to cross a land bridge connecting Siberia and Alaska</td>
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<tr>
<td>986 CE</td>
<td>Norwegian merchant Bjarni Herjulfsson becomes the first European to sight the mainland of North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1000</td>
<td>Leif Ericsson lands on Vinland</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1010–13</td>
<td>Thorfinn Karlsfni and others attempt to colonize Vinland</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1300</td>
<td>Venetian and Genoese merchants establish overland trade routes to the East</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1400</td>
<td>The invention of printing, advances in navigation and naval architecture, and the introduction of gunpowder increase possibilities for worldwide exploration by Europeans</td>
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<tr>
<td>1488</td>
<td>Bartolomeu Dias rounds Africa’s Cape of Good Hope for the Portuguese crown</td>
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<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Christopher Columbus lands on San Salvador in the Bahamas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1497</td>
<td>Henry VII of England sends John Cabot to find a short route to the Indies. Cabot reaches Newfoundland</td>
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<tr>
<td>1498</td>
<td>Vasco da Gama, Portuguese navigator, becomes the first European to reach India by sea around Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>1519–22</td>
<td>Ferdinand Magellan’s circumnavigation of the world proves that the Americas are new lands, not the Indies</td>
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<tr>
<td>1521</td>
<td>Hernando Cortés conquers the Aztec empire in Mexico for Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1523–28</td>
<td>France sends Giovanni da Verrazano to find a short route to the Indies; he explores the east coast of North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>1532</td>
<td>Francisco Pizarro conquers the Inca empire in Peru for Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1534</td>
<td>Jacques Cartier attempts to find a northwest passage to the Indies for France</td>
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<tr>
<td>1609</td>
<td>Henry Hudson establishes Dutch claim to the Hudson River region in his search for a northwest passage</td>
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Every schoolchild knows that Columbus “discovered” America in 1492. It is a “fact” firmly rooted in our national consciousness. Yet Columbus did not discover America, if by that we mean he was the first person to encounter the two great continents that lie westward between Europe and Asia. At least two other groups stumbled on the Americas before Columbus. Sometime between 40,000 BCE and
12,000 BCE people from northeast Asia reached the “New World” from across the Pacific and quickly spread across the vast new lands. We call their descendants Indians, though many prefer the name Native Americans. Then about 1000 CE, Norsemen, Scandinavians from northern Europe, happened on the Atlantic coast of North America.

Given these earlier encounters, is there any special significance to that famous year 1492? Should we drop it from our list of crucial dates and substitute 40,000 BCE or 1000 CE? If we keep 1492, how do we justify it? Did Columbus’s landing in the Caribbean have a greater impact on the world than the two earlier events, or does our traditional emphasis simply mark our Europe-centered biases? What did Columbus’s discovery mean, both to those in the Old World of Europe, Asia, and Africa and to those already living in the Americas? To answer these questions let us look at the first discovery and its significance.

The Native Americans

The Indian peoples of the Americas were relatively late arrivals from the Old World where the human species evolved. Archeological finds suggest that peoples of several sorts from the Old World may have settled the Americas in remote times, perhaps as far back as 40,000 years ago. Most Indian population descended from these first settlers, but there is evidence that a group of Athapaskan-speakers arrived somewhat later and dispersed through western Canada and Alaska. Physically, both groups belonged to the same human stock as the modern Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. The migrants were people who depended on roots, berries, seeds, fish, and game for food. Perhaps decreasing rainfall and reduced food supplies in their Asian homeland forced them eastward. Today their journey would be blocked by the Bering Sea, but in that distant era of lower sea levels a land bridge joined Alaska to Siberia. Once in North America the migrants moved southward, and within a few thousand years had spread from just below the Arctic Ocean to the stormy southern tip of South America. They had also increased enormously in numbers. From perhaps a few hundred original immigrants, by 1492 the Indian population of the Americas had swelled to some 50 million or more, a figure comparable to that of contemporary Europe.

As their numbers grew over the centuries, the descendants of these people diversified into many groups with distinct languages, cultures, and political and economic systems. By about 3000 BCE some had begun to practice agriculture, with “maize” (corn) as their chief crop and the staple of their diet. They also grew tomatoes, squash, various kinds of beans, and, in South America, potatoes. Surpluses from agriculture transformed Indian life. Abundant food led to larger populations and also to more diverse societies. Classes of priests, warriors, artisans, and chiefs appeared. In the most fertile agricultural regions great civilizations arose with a technological prowess, artistic sophistication, and political complexity comparable to the civilizations of Asia and Europe.

The Great Indian Civilizations. The Mayan people, creators of one of these Indian civilizations, built great ceremonial and administrative cities in the dense rain forests of Yucatan and Central America. Mayan society was composed of
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many separate urban centers, each independent and governed by a group of priests. It also developed a culture of great sophistication: The Mayans alone among the American Indian peoples had a written language and books, and their mathematicians adopted the idea of zero as a number place-holder long before Europeans did.

The Aztecs to the north, in central Mexico, were a more warlike people than the Mayans. Around 1300 CE they settled on the site of what is now Mexico City. Led by powerful rulers, the Aztecs conquered virtually all their neighbors, creating a great empire of more than 5 million inhabitants in central Mexico. In the course of their many wars the Aztec rulers took thousands of prisoners and enormous quantities of feathered headdresses, jade jewelry, and beautiful gold and silver ornaments. The treasure went into the coffers of the rulers and their nobles; the prisoners, by the thousands, had their hearts cut out in public ceremonies to appease the Aztec war god.

Further south, in the Andes mountains of South America, the Incas created an empire that paralleled the Aztec domain to the north. At its height, 7 million people lived within its borders. Strong rulers like the Aztec chiefs, the Inca emperors built fortresses on the mountainsides and a network of roads that held their far-flung Andean state together. The Inca people were among the most skilled metalurgists of the time, making weapons, tools, and ornaments of gold, silver, copper, and bronze. The Inca privileged classes lived comfortably, but the sick and handicapped were also provided for by the government. Inca society has sometimes been compared to a modern social welfare state.
The Indians of North America. North of these great Indian civilizations were less complex, smaller-scale cultures and societies. By 1492 there was a substantial population, perhaps as many as 7 million people, in what is now the United States and Canada. This population was diverse in culture, economy, and social organization. There were twelve distinct language groups in the present-day continental United States, each embracing numerous individual tribes. The various tribes also had differing economies. Some depended on hunting game and gathering food from the forests and meadows. Others cultivated maize, beans, squash, melons, and tobacco. Indian populations were dense in the well-watered eastern third of the future United States and along the Pacific coast. They were sparse in the arid Great Basin and desert areas of the West.

Indian dwellings ranged from tepees of skin-covered poles—the typical homes of the western Plains Indians—to the impressive lodges made of wooden beams covered with bark built by the Iroquois and other eastern woodland peoples. Among the Hurons and many southeastern tribes these structures were often grouped into towns surrounded by stockades. Although some Indian tribes were isolated and self-sufficient, others relied on traders who traveled long distances by canoe on the lakes and rivers to exchange goods with other tribes.

Many tribes sheltered skilled craftspeople who made beautiful pottery, light and swift birchbark canoes, and implements of copper. Others wove a kind of cloth from the inner bark of trees. The people of other tribes, however, lived very simply, with few artifacts. The numerous peoples of California, for example, blessed with a mild climate and abundant food, made do with minimal clothing and crude houses. Only their beautiful basketwork revealed their skills with materials. Typically, in Indian cultures, women were the cultivators, raising the crops that provided most of the food for the agricultural tribes. Men were the hunters and fishers and the warriors in societies that often resorted to war to settle disputes. The key food producing role of Indian women often gave them a higher relative status than their European sisters.

Politically, these peoples varied greatly. The Indians of the Iroquois Confederacy, or Six Nations, were a united and warlike league, the terror of its Indian neighbors and the scourge of later European settlers. On the other hand, the Chippewas of present-day Ohio lived in many small bands that had little in common besides language. Tribal government among them varied widely. The Natchez of the lower Mississippi River Valley were ruled by an absolute despot called the Great Sun, who was chosen collectively by the female Suns when his predecessor died. The Iroquois had a kind of representative political system. Female clan heads elected both the male delegates to the Confederacy council and the sachems, or chiefs, who governed the Six Nations.

Religion was an important aspect of life among virtually all Native Americans. Most believed in an ultimate being, the creator of nature, humankind, and all the good things of life. But, unlike Europeans who believed in one God, Indians held that spiritual forces resided in all living things. Even inanimate natural objects, in their view, were alive, imbued with manitou. Human beings were merely one part of the seamless web of life things. Like other religious peoples, they expressed their feelings about the change of seasons, hunting, death, love, and war...
in elaborate ceremonies that included dances, songs, feasts, and the wearing of vivid costumes and masks.

The Europeans, who would soon be arriving in North America, held very different views of nature and humankind’s place in the natural world. As the Judeo-Christian Bible proclaimed, God had conferred on human beings “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” This view of “man the master” was reinforced by the contemporary European theme of raw nature as dangerous, a “wilderness” of threatening animals, insects, poisonous plants, and “savages,” a place to be avoided or tamed to man’s use. An even more powerful force guiding Europeans in their relations to nature was avarice. Nature represented latent wealth and opportunity for personal riches. To stand in the way of exploiting nature’s bounty not only hobbled the enterprising individual but violated the laws of human progress. Associated with these attitudes were European views of property. The white settlers of America believed in exclusive individual possession of land, timber, minerals, and other natural resources and measured status by how much of these a person owned.

While Indians were not incapable of altering nature to meet their needs—their pursuit of big game in the earliest years following migration from Asia may have exterminated the mammoths and wild horses that then occupied the Americas—
they were not driven by a lust for limitless resource-consuming possessions and so were not generally willing to sacrifice present satisfactions for remote future ones. Nor did Native Americans accept the European concept of private land ownership. Land, they believed, belonged to the whole tribe, not the individual. Taken together, these differing attitudes toward nature and property would have significant consequences for future Indian-European relations.

The First European “Discovery”

Europeans first touched the eastern edge of the Americas long before Columbus. According to early Scandinavian sagas, in 986 CE a ship commanded by a Norwegian merchant, Bjarni Herjulfsson, on the way to European-settled Greenland, was driven off course by a storm and narrowly escaped being dashed to pieces on an unfamiliar coast. The land Herjulfsson and his crew encountered—probably Newfoundland or Labrador—was covered with “forests and low hills.” The Europeans were not interested in this new land and did not disembark. When they finally reached Greenland, however, they reported their discovery to others.

Ever on the lookout for new lands to settle, other Scandinavians soon followed up on Herjulfsson’s lead. In the year 1000, Leif Ericsson, a founder of the Greenland colony, sailed westward to investigate the reports of the new country. He and his party found it relatively warm, densely forested, with streams that overflowed with salmon. Finding what they later described as grapes, and hoping perhaps to encourage settlement, they dubbed the new country Vinland (Wineland) the Good.

Would-be Norse settlers followed Leif Ericsson to Vinland. In 1010 or thereabouts, three boatloads of Greenlanders set out to establish permanent communities in North America. Indian attacks drove them away, but the Norse apparently made other efforts to colonize the new country. In 1960 archaeologists discovered the remains of a small Norse village at L’Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland. The find confirmed for the first time the sagas of medieval Scandinavian exploration. But the simple structures and the primitive tools uncovered also suggest how feeble and limited the Norse colonizing effort was.

Some garbled knowledge of the Norse discoveries spread to other parts of Europe. Yet nothing happened. The first European contact with the Americas simply did not “take.” Europe quickly forgot the eleventh-century Norse voyages to North America. It was as if they had never taken place.

The Rise of Modern Europe

The isolation of the Americas, of course, did not last. The Old World eventually intruded into the New, and within a few generations the contact between these two different worlds completely transformed both. To the people of Europe this contact with the Americas seemed a “discovery”; actually, it was a meeting. As one scholar has written: “Columbus did not discover a new world; he established contact between two worlds already old.”
Medieval Europe. Why did Europe fail to follow up on the Norse voyages of the eleventh century? Why did it respond differently after 1492? What had happened during the centuries separating Leif Ericsson from Columbus to change the way Europeans reacted to the momentous meeting of the two worlds?

Eight hundred years before the Norse voyages, the Roman Empire had joined all parts of the Western European world into a peaceful, prosperous, civilized whole. Then, during the period 500–700 BCE the Germanic invasions, the Muslim conquest of the southern and eastern Mediterranean, and the devastating attacks on settled Europe by the Scandinavian Vikings brought turmoil to the continent. Europeans turned to barons, armed nobles, to protect life and property within their castles against raiders and brigands. Before long, however, the barons themselves became the source of disorder as they battled one another for land and power. By the eighth or ninth century all long-range travel and trade within Europe and between Europe and other parts of the world had become unsafe. Goods, except for a few high-profit luxury items, ceased to move over the Roman roads left over from ancient times, or along now pirate-infested sea routes.

Not surprisingly, Europe declined in wealth. Italy retained its cities and trade, but elsewhere each small neighborhood was forced to become self-sufficient. By the year 1000, particularly north of the Alps, a fragmented, localized economic system had replaced the unified, complex organization of the Roman Empire. Europe was now poor, politically divided, beset by local wars and civil disorder, its people largely illiterate and unfree. Each nobleman’s estate or manor—with its castle or manor house, peasants’ village, and surrounding fields—had to provide all the food, implements, and other commodities it needed. With each manor supplying its own needs, there was little reason to produce a surplus or find new ways to increase the output of crops or other goods. Cities that had once been great centers of commerce and industry declined, with many disappearing entirely.

Most Europeans during this era were unfree peasants or serfs. Like farm animals, they went with the land when it was passed on from one baron to another through inheritance or conquest. In return for the right to till the soil, the peasant family gave the lord of the manor part of its crop plus various other payments in the form of work. Money seldom changed hands. Instead, exchanges and obligations were discharged through crops, animals, or services. Illiterate, superstitious, and often malnourished, as well as exploited, the serfs of Europe were a severe brake on economic change.

Even during the darkest of the “Dark Ages” Europe retained a small merchant class. But in the centuries from 700 to 1000 these traders wielded little economic power and suffered from low social status. Neither serfs nor priests nor feudal lords, they did not fit into the medieval social order, which presupposed a rural society composed of tilling peasants, praying clergymen, and fighting noblemen. Nor did Roman Catholicism, the religion of virtually all Western Europeans, find commerce and merchants congenial. The Church held that all economic relations must be subject to moral guidelines and was suspicious of those who looked only to profits. These attitudes undoubtedly reinforced the economic backwardness of Europe.
By the year 1000, Europe had disintegrated politically as well as economically. Kings reigned in France, England, Portugal, and other realms, but they were not like later monarchs. They did not have armies, navies, or corps of civil servants. Instead, they relied on their vassals—the feudal nobility—to supply them with men and arms in emergencies and to administer the customary law in their districts. Nor did the monarchs of this era have large financial resources. No European kingdom imposed uniform national taxes. Although theoretically supreme, kings were often inferior in wealth and power to one or more of the feudal lords who supposedly owed them allegiance.

The one institution that held Western Europe together during the early Middle Ages was the Roman Catholic Church. Retaining many features of the Roman imperial government—the Latin language, a corps of literate officials, and a supreme head, the pope, residing in Rome—the Church preserved many of the values and much of the culture and organizational skill of the ancient world. Possessing a virtual monopoly of literacy, priests and church officials provided essential services to kings and nobles as scribes and administrators. But the medieval church was no substitute for powerful secular rulers.

Nor was the Church’s learning as useful for practical affairs as it might have been. Indeed, its attention to the salvation of the individual’s soul focused Europeans’ minds on the afterlife rather than on worldly matters. This emphasis discouraged the creative curiosity about nature and the physical world felt by men and women of ancient times.

In the year 1000, in short, Europe could not rise to the challenge of the newfound world to the west. It did not have the economic or technical resources, the political and social cohesion, or even the interest to do so. The disorganized, politically feeble, largely illiterate Europe of Leif Ericsson’s time was incapable of responding to the Norse encounter with America.

**The Lure of the East.** Five hundred years later, when Columbus returned from the Caribbean to report the discovery of a new route to “the Indies,” Europe reacted powerfully and decisively. The continent’s response reflected the remarkable revival of trade and commerce in the half millennium between Leif Ericsson and Columbus. This revival would eventually undermine feudalism and the self-sufficient manor-based economy on which it rested.

In part the change followed contact with the Islamic civilization that rimmed the eastern, southern, and western shores of the Mediterranean Sea. For centuries Western Christians were content with their limited knowledge and rough material sufficiency. But then, at the very end of the eleventh century, thousands of Europeans set out as Crusaders for Palestine to recover the Holy Sepulcher, Jesus’ tomb, from the Muslim “infidels” who occupied the Holy Land. After the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, Europeans settled in the newly conquered Levant on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. Compared with the rude commodities of France, England, and Germany, the silks, cotton, spices, cabinetwork, pottery, and weapons of the Muslims were marvels of delicacy and sophistication. Many Europeans appreciated the skills and artistry of Muslim craftsmen, developed a taste for sugar, silks, fine leatherwork, and other luxury goods of the Islamic world and came to respect Muslim science and philosophy. This was the
beginning of a change in European attitudes and an awakening to the opportunities of commercial relations with distant lands and cultures.

Even more intriguing than the civilization of Islam were the riches of the distant Orient. By the eleventh century a lucrative trade had sprung up between Europe and remote China and India. Italian textiles, arms, and armor, along with north European copper, lead, and tin, moved eastward to these destinations; silk, jewels, and spices came westward in return. Asian merchants—Chinese, East Indians, and Arabs—handled the first leg of the trade to the West. The final phase to Europe’s consumers was conducted largely by Italians from Venice and Genoa. Their immense profits soon made the Venetians and Genoese the envy of other European traders.

The most important sector of this East–West exchange was the spice trade. In the Middle Ages spices seemed indispensable to civilized living. They retarded decay, relieved the blandness of daily fare, and disguised the poor quality of unrefrigerated meat. Europeans used many locally grown herbs to flavor their food, but none of these could compare to pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon, which came from India, Ceylon, and the “Spice Islands” of present-day Indonesia.

The revival of long-distance trade was accompanied by a change in European attitudes toward money and money-makers. Monarchs and nobles learned they could no longer afford to revile and oppress traders for they were now rich capitalists whose wealth might be needed to pay debts or procure arms. New rules granted merchants privileges and provided them with protection. Before long the Church relaxed its ban against charging interest for lending money. Banking soon became both a respectable and a highly profitable enterprise.

The contact with the East also helped break down the self-sufficient manorial system. The nobility soon acquired a passion for the luxuries of Islam and the Orient. But to buy them they needed cash, and cash, in an era when almost all economic relations were based on payment in locally produced commodities or in services, was scarce. The need for cash soon changed these economic relations. Now serfs might be permitted to buy their freedom and purchase land and become independent freeholders. Meanwhile, up-to-date nobles tried to improve their own cultivation methods to guarantee a surplus that they could sell for money in the growing towns. By the thirteenth or fourteenth century the revival of trade had led to the breakdown of the manorial system in many parts of Western Europe and the disappearance of serfdom.

The revival of trade also encouraged the growth of cities and the flowering of urban life. As trade returned, new cities sprang up and old ones expanded. Former serfs flocked to the towns with their markets, warehouses, docks, and shops to work for wages, as laborers, artisans, and craftsmen, and to enjoy the greater freedom and variety of city life. Besides the older centers of Italy, newer towns arose along the Baltic and North seas to distribute the goods of the East and to serve the growing commerce of northern Europe.

The Nation-State. The urban merchant class was a powerful force for change in early modern Europe. The burghers, or bourgeoisie (from burgh or bourg, meaning “town”), were natural foes of the unruly barons whose constant wars made travel unsafe and who levied expensive tolls on trade. What the burghers wanted
was peace, order, and economic unity to permit goods and people to move safely and freely over long distances. Only a friendly and powerful central authority could ensure such conditions.

The interests of the merchants made them the natural allies of feudal kings. And the kings quickly found uses for the merchants. They were the source of borrowed money needed to impose internal order and support challenges to the king from other rulers. Their literacy could free monarchs from reliance on priests and bishops as administrators. The revival of trade and subsequent creation of a money economy made it possible to impose national taxes. Before long, the modern nation-state, with its dedicated civil servants, its armies and navies, and its capacity to mobilize capital and resources to achieve national goals, had emerged in place of the disjointed, hidebound, feeble feudal kingdoms of the past.

These political changes had immense implications for European relations with the rest of the world. The new nation-states were powerful instruments of European policy and ambition. The new rulers could marshal, organize, and focus large forces to serve European ends and project these forces thousands of miles across the seas. In quest of wealth, the new centralized national states would finance exploration and conquest. Their early successes would reinforce the expansion process until it came to feed on itself.

**Revolutions in Thought and Communication.** Intellectual and cultural shifts also made 1492 different from 1000 CE. People in the Middle Ages had little sense of historical change. To medieval Christians all that had preceded the birth of Jesus was a prelude to that great event; all that followed was a long epilogue that would culminate in Christ's Second Coming and the "end of days." Before about 1300 CE Europeans gave the ancients little credit for their contributions to civilization and, in fact, knew little about them. Then, in fourteenth-century Italy, scholars began to discover that the Greeks and Romans knew many things that they did not. This new realization was probably sparked by the interchange with Greek-speaking Constantinople and the Muslim Mediterranean world, which had preserved and translated many ancient Greek and Latin authors and thinkers. It was reinforced by the discovery of hundreds of ancient manuscripts hidden in monasteries, churches, and libraries for almost a thousand years.

The new contact with classical antiquity was a wonderfully stimulating experience. Encountering a new civilization, even one long dead, made European culture richer and more complex. At the same time it gave Europeans a new confidence in their own society and in themselves. The ancients were great and creative people, surely, but their achievements were not beyond reach of the moderns.

The interest in history and literature inspired by contact with the Greek and Roman world (the new "humanism") secularized the way many people thought; that is, it deflected their attention from religion and salvation toward the things of this world. The humanism of the era we call the Renaissance was not the irreligious, materialistic, and pleasure-obsessed set of attitudes we once believed it was. But it did create new concern with the laws of physical nature and new appreciation of the beauties of form, color, and line.

The new attitudes were immeasurably helped by the invention of printing. In ancient and medieval times books had to be copied laboriously by hand and so
were scarce and expensive. By the end of the Middle Ages the revival of trade had created a new class of literate men and women, but the high cost of recording people’s thoughts and experiences inevitably slowed the spread of ideas and knowledge. Then, in the middle of the fifteenth century, Johann Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany perfected a way to print pages from movable type, and the new technique soon spread throughout Europe. By 1500, about 1,000 printers were working in the trade, and they had published 30,000 separate book titles in some 6 million copies.

Many of these books were devoted to religion, but there were also scientific works, books on navigation, and numerous accounts of discoveries in the Far East and West. Columbus’s description of his first voyage to the “Indies” was quickly printed and widely circulated and read. The new, inexpensive printed book created a large audience for new information and guaranteed that Europeans would not forget America a second time.

New Technology. Advances in navigation and naval architecture also helped Europe exploit its encounter with the Americas after 1492. In the year 1000 the Norse captains had located their position on the open sea by sighting the sun with the naked eye and guessing their speed through the water. By 1492 Europeans had adopted the compass, consisting of a magnetized needle attracted to the north magnetic pole attached to a card marked with directions. Now a ship captain could calculate his direction even when the pole star was obscured by clouds and pinpoint his location more accurately than by sighting the sun. By the fifteenth century, European navigators were also beginning to calculate latitude with the quadrant and astrolabe.

Improvements in navigation were accompanied by advances in ship design. The merchant ship of medieval Europe was a tubby vessel with a rudder at the side and a single, large square sail useful only when the wind blew directly from behind. Gradually these ships were modified to carry adjustable sails and mount their rudders at the stern. Now, by “tacking”—following a zigzag course toward one’s destination—vessels could sail without the wind directly at the rear. Faster, more maneuverable, and more stable ship types such as caravels, carracks, and galleons also expanded Europe’s reach. These nautical changes gave Europeans the equipment needed to undertake long ocean voyages with relative confidence.

One more innovation was needed before Europeans were equipped to subdue the world: gunpowder. First used to propel missiles from cannons early in the fourteenth century, it was mostly employed in siege operations against walled cities. Cannon were soon installed aboard ships as well. With time, guns were miniaturized so that by 1360 soldiers could wield primitive handheld small arms. When combined with the horse, pike, metal armor, and steel sword, these weapons would prove devastating against the native peoples of the Americas.

European Expansion

By the 1400s, fueled by advances in navigation, trade, and the rise of the bourgeoisie and nation-state, Europeans were launched on a campaign to explore the world and make contact with other lands and peoples. The quest began with the
effort of Prince Henry of Portugal, later known as Henry the Navigator, to seek out new lands to the south and west of Europe. Henry was not a fully modern man impelled by curiosity or hope of profits. Rather, his chief concern was to find the legendary Christian kingdom of Prester John and reunite him and his people with the main body of Christendom.

To advance his goals Henry financed a program of exploration along the Atlantic coast of Africa. Each year ships left Portugal to venture ever farther south, their captains spurred on by Henry’s financial rewards for progress. By 1445 Dinis Dias had rounded Cape Verde and reached the humid, fertile part of the African coast below the Sahara. Ten years later Alvise da Cadamosto sighted the Senegal and Gambia rivers and discovered the Cape Verde Islands.

After Henry’s death his work was taken over by the kings of Portugal who now focused their efforts on finding an all-sea route to India, Cathay (China), and Xipangu (Japan) that would pass around the southern end of the African continent and cross the Indian Ocean. If the Portuguese could bypass the Italian and Muslim middlemen, who controlled the land routes, and go to the source of the precious products of Asia, all the profits of trade would be theirs.
In 1488 Bartolomeu Dias finally rounded the tip of the African continent. Encouraged by Dias’s report, Vasco da Gama set out from Portugal for India in July 1497. The following May his four ships arrived at Calicut, where he collected a valuable cargo of pepper, ginger, cloves, and cinnamon. He returned home safely in 1499, the first European to sail directly from Europe to India and back.

Once opened, the route around Africa became a busy thoroughfare. To expedite the trade in spices, silks, drugs, and other precious goods, the Portuguese established trading posts in Africa, along the Malabar coast of India, in Ceylon, and on the islands of Indonesia. The Portuguese commercial empire soon expanded to the western Pacific. By 1550 the small Atlantic nation had established a virtual monopoly of the European spice trade.

Columbus and the Spanish Explorations. The success of the Portuguese aroused the envy of the rulers of Europe’s other new nation-states. Eventually the Dutch, the French, and the English would challenge Portugal’s stranglehold on the all-water Eastern spice trade around Africa. But meanwhile, a Genoese adventurer and visionary named Cristoforo Colombo (Christopher Columbus) had arrived at an alternative that not only promised a shorter route to the East but also seemed likely to avoid a direct confrontation with the Portuguese. Columbus’s scheme was simple, though based on false premises. Only a narrow body of water, he believed, lay between Europe and the Indies. So a ship sailing west, after only a few weeks, should reach Asia and its riches.

After unsuccessfully peddling his idea to every prince of Western Europe, Columbus finally caught the interest of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The joint rulers of Spain had just concluded a centuries-long crusade to push the Muslim “Moors” out of the Iberian peninsula and were looking for new worlds to conquer. Pledging her jewels as security, Isabella borrowed from a Spanish religious order some of the money Columbus needed. The rest came from the small city of Palos, whose burghers, as punishment for an infraction of Spanish law, she ordered to supply “the Admiral” with three small vessels. The total cost of the expedition was about 2 million maravedis (today about $50,000), a great fortune that could not have been gathered for such a purpose 500 years earlier, in Norse times. With this sum Columbus fitted out his three small ships and on August 3, 1492, he and his crew of ninety left Palos. They arrived at the Caribbean island of San Salvador ten weeks later, almost exactly five centuries after the first European had sighted North America (though they believed they had reached the Indies).

Columbus’s first voyage was followed by three others, each better equipped than the first. The “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” explored the Caribbean, surveyed its major islands, and touched the mainland of the Americas at several points. He also established the first permanent European communities in the New World. Columbus’s expeditions were followed by many more whose leaders established European settlements on the Caribbean islands. From these settlements in turn Spanish commanders launched expeditions to the mainland. One of these, under Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, crossed the Isthmus of Panama in 1513, its members becoming the first Europeans to see the eastern shore of the Pacific Ocean.
Voyages of Exploration
Having discovered new lands between Europe and Asia, Spain did not abandon hope of finding an all-water route to the Far East. In 1519 the Spanish crown sent the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan to find a way around the Americas. Sailing south, in November 1520, Magellan discovered the stormy strait at the southern tip of South America that bears his name, sailed through it, and launched his small fleet onto the vast Pacific. Months later, after harrowing experiences with hunger, scurvy, and thirst, he arrived in the Philippines, off the Asian mainland. There he was killed in a skirmish with the natives. Eventually one of his vessels reached Spain by sailing westward around Africa. Though the route was far too long to be practical for the Europe–Asia trade, Magellan’s voyage proved that the Americas were not part of the Indies. It was also the first circumnavigation of the globe, a milestone for humankind.

Spain Encounters the Indian Civilizations. Spain’s bounding energies soon made it master of the two new continents its explorers had encountered. In 1519 Hernando Cortés set out from Cuba with 600 men, 17 horses, and 10 cannons, landed at present-day Veracruz, and marched overland to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (Mexico City). The Aztec ruler, Moctezuma II, believed that the invaders were gods returned to the world of men. His warriors, moreover, were startled and demoralized by the Spaniards’ strange horses and firearms. Taking advantage of this combination of trust and fear, the Spaniards seized Moctezuma and plundered the overflowing Aztec treasury. After Moctezuma’s death, his successors sought to rally the people of Mexico against the invaders, but few Indian nations, unwilling to aid their Aztec oppressors, would cooperate. The final blow to Aztec hopes was a devastating epidemic of smallpox caught from the Europeans. By 1521 all resistance was over. The mighty Aztec empire had fallen to a few hundred Europeans.

The conquest of Mexico was soon followed by the fall of the Inca empire in Peru. The conquistador this time was Francisco Pizarro, a young man of lowly Spanish birth, who, while in Panama, had heard of a rich native empire along the Pacific coast of South America. In 1532, after a 45-day climb up the high wall of the Andes from the coast, Pizarro and his 102 men and 62 horses reached the frontier of Peru. The Inca ruler, Atahualpa, confident of his own strength, allowed them to advance unchecked. When he finally met the Europeans, they attacked, cut down 5,000 Indian warriors, and took the Inca emperor prisoner. The royal captive offered the Spaniards a roomful of silver and gold to buy his freedom. Pizarro accepted. Then, with the treasure safely in his hands, he had Atahualpa bound to a stake and strangled. Inca resistance continued for some time after this, but over the next few years the Europeans extended their control over the whole of the vast Inca domain, from modern Colombia to what is now central Chile.

The conquest of the third great existing Native-American civilization, the Mayans, was slower and less dramatic. There was no single Mayan state whose collapse would assure Spanish rule. Not until about 1550 were the Mayan communities of middle America subjugated and placed firmly under the control of the Spanish king. The last great native civilization of the Americas was now gone.
Meanwhile Spanish explorers, priests, soldiers, and settlers—moved by
greed, curiosity, ambition, and Christian zeal to save souls—pushed their reconnais-
sance of the Americas into what is now the United States. In 1565 they
established the first European settlement on the North American mainland at
St. Augustine, in present-day Florida. Thirty years later Don Juan de Oñate, mov-
ing north from Mexico, brought settlers to present-day New Mexico. In 1609 these
European colonists founded the city of Santa Fe.

Spain’s Rivals. By 1600 Spain had conquered virtually all of Central and South
America except for Brazil. This eastward extension of South America had been
awarded to Portugal by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which, with the sanction
of the Pope, divided the non-European world between the two Iberian nations.

At first Spain’s claims in America were unchallenged. Gold and silver con-
fiscated from the Indians poured into Spain, soon joined by additional streams of
precious metals from newly opened mines in Peru and Mexico. From 1500 to 1650
Spain extracted almost 20,000 tons of silver and 200 tons of gold from its Ameri-
can colonies. In addition, cocoa, tobacco, dyes, and other American products
found ready markets throughout Europe, providing another source of Spanish
income. All this New World bounty made Spain the richest and most powerful
nation in Europe.

But the Spanish monopoly could not last indefinitely. Other European rulers
questioned the pope’s decision to divide the non-European world between Spain
and Portugal. As the French king Francis I remarked to the Spanish ambassador in
1540, “The sun shone for him as for others,” and where, he wondered, in “Adam’s
will” had the Americas been divided between Spain and its Iberian neighbor?

England was the first northern European country to join the scramble for a
share in the New World. In 1496 King Henry VII authorized a Venetian captain,
John Cabot, to sail west “to seeke out, discouer, and finde whatsoeuer isles, coun-
tries, regions or prouinces of the heathens and infidels whatsoeuer they be.... ”
Cabot made two voyages to North America, sighting either Nova Scotia or New-
foundland, and sailing down the Atlantic coast as far as the Delaware or Chesa-
pake bays. The English government did not follow up on these voyages, but
Cabot’s report of codfish in Newfoundland waters attracted many fishermen from
France and England to the area. More important, his voyages became the basis for
English claims to North American territory.

France joined the quest for overseas wealth in 1524, when Francis I dispatched
the Florentine mariner Giovanni da Verrazano to find a more practical sea route
to the Far East than Magellan’s. Verrazano touched land probably somewhere
along the Carolina coast and sailed north as far as Nova Scotia fruitlessly seeking
a gap to the Pacific in the North American continent. Later Francis sent mariner
Jacques Cartier on a similar quest. On his first voyage to America Cartier explored
the coasts of Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and the Gaspé Peninsula.
On a second voyage he sailed up the St. Lawrence River to the site of present-day
Montreal. Cartier’s voyages, of course, did not reveal the long-sought sea route
to Asia, but they gave France a claim to part of North America.

The Dutch began exploring America relatively late. By the beginning of the
seventeenth century most of modern Holland had achieved autonomy from Spain
and was developing into a prosperous country dominated by aggressive merchants and bankers. In 1609 a group of these capitalists, joined as partners in the Dutch East India Company, hired Henry Hudson, an English sea captain, to find the elusive water route to the Far East through North America. Hudson failed to find this “Northwest Passage,” but he added to Europe’s geographical knowledge and Holland’s claim to part of North America by sailing down the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to Virginia. During this trip Hudson explored Cape Cod and Delaware Bay and sailed partway up the broad river that now bears his name.

These expeditions were only a small part of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century exploration of the Americas. There were scores of other expeditions along every coast and into every accessible bay, inlet, and navigable river of the two western continents. Meanwhile, Spanish captains like Hernando de Soto and Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, and the Frenchman Samuel de Champlain, pushed overland deep into the heartland of North America. By about 1650 Europeans knew the essential outlines of the two New World continents and had even learned much about their remote interiors.

The Columbian Exchange

Writing in 1552 the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara claimed “the greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and the death of Him who created it) is the “discovery” of the Indies.” If we discount the word “discovery” and allow for some exaggeration, López was correct: Few if any events have so changed the history of the world as the encounter of Europeans and Native Americans at the end of the fifteenth century. The resulting interaction of culture, products, ideas, and diseases—the “Columbian Exchange”—altered human destiny.

In Central and South America, Europeans quickly swept away all traces of Indian self-rule, save for a few remote interior regions. North of Mexico the process of conquest was slower but no less thorough. Vicious warfare against the Indians was part of the history of every European colonial power. At times, the kings of Spain, France, and England sought to protect their new Indian subjects. Friars, priests, and ministers sometimes denounced the cruel treatment of the Native Americans. Yet even when Europeans refrained from outright murder, they treated the native peoples harshly. In the Spanish colonies Indians were enslaved and sometimes worked to death. Well into the nineteenth century Indians in Spanish-held lands remained “peons” whose lot resembled that of medieval serfs. In the English colonies the more nomadic North American tribes generally escaped forced labor only by slipping away into the forest.

Contact with Europeans injured the native peoples even when whites intended no harm. Because of their long geographic separation, humans of the Old and the New Worlds had developed immunities to different diseases. As a result, neither people could fend off the infections of the other. Europeans encountered a virulent form of syphilis in America, and it quickly spread over all of Europe. Thousands broke out in horrible sores and died before anyone knew how to deal with the malady. The Indians suffered far more. Even European childhood diseases such as measles became killing scourges among populations without
protective antibodies in their blood. Smallpox, too, along with tuberculosis and cholera, hit the native populations hard. In Mexico the 25 million Indians of 1519 were reduced, primarily by disease, to 2.5 million by 1600. Along the Atlantic coast of North America a similar grim process took place. In 1656 Adriaen Van der Donck reported that the Indians of New Netherland, the Dutch colony, claimed “that before the arrival of the Christians, and before the small pox broke out amongst them, they were ten times as numerous as they now are. . . .” Indeed, the English and Dutch occupations of the eastern coast were greatly facilitated by the European plagues that had spread to North America from the south and decimated the native population even before the Europeans themselves appeared on the scene.

Disease was only part of the damage that Europeans inflicted on Indian societies. In many areas, especially drier regions, native agriculture was destroyed by the great herds of sheep and cattle the conquerors introduced. European manufactures swamped native crafts and undermined native skills. European “fire water”—brandy, wine, whisky—created serious alcoholic dependence among many. Even efforts to implant the Christian faith often did harm. The European missionaries hoped to benefit the Indians by bringing them the blessings of Christianity. Some friars and priests won converts by their example of humility, kindness, and courage; others, however, fiercely attacked every aspect of the Indians’ religion. Bishop Diego de Landa of Yucatán destroyed thousands of Mayan books in his effort to root out the sin of idolatry, impoverishing both the Mayans themselves and our knowledge of their civilization and history.

Europe Benefits. The transatlantic encounter after 1492 was no less momentous for Europeans than for Native Americans. But the effects were almost diametrically opposite. With few exceptions (such as the scourge of syphilis), the contact between the Americas and Europe benefited Europe dramatically. Its fabulous treasure from the Americas catapulted Spain into the first rank of European powers. Simultaneously, the deluge of American gold and silver stimulated European trade, commerce, and industry. Rising prices produced by the influx of precious metals further weakened the feudal system by accelerating the conversion of labor services into cash payments. The treasure also provided national rulers with enormous new incomes, giving them and the nation-state an additional edge over unruly and disobedient vassals. Finally, the events following 1492 accelerated the rise to wealth and influence of the merchant-capitalists who entered the American trade. In short, the “discovery” of America speeded the “modernization” of Europe that was already underway when Columbus sailed from Palos.

The transatlantic contact also provided Europeans with an enormously expanded and improved diet. Potatoes and Indian corn would eventually become staples consumed by millions of Europeans. Tomatoes, pumpkins, a wide assortment of beans, and many new fruits were also brought eastward to be widely grown in Europe. Rubber and chicle (the raw material for chewing gum) were other useful American borrowings. Not all the plant imports were seen as blessings: Some would consider tobacco almost as serious a scourge as syphilis, and
Syphilis fell like a scourge on Europe shortly after Columbus returned from the New World. It was the real “Montezuma’s Revenge.” The picture of a victim was drawn by the German artist Albrecht Dürer in 1496.

there are those who have their doubts about chicle. Yet it is clear that America was a botanical, as well as a mineral, treasure trove.

The New World also influenced the intellectual climate of Europe. The relative ease with which Europeans conquered the New World peoples encouraged European arrogance—on the theory, apparently, that strength and ferocity equaled virtue. After observing the Aztecs’ mass sacrifices of war captives, the Spanish were certain that the native religions were bloodthirsty superstitions. But not all Europeans found their prejudices reinforced. Some felt wonder at the variety of the world’s cultures. Some saw Native Americans as “noble savages” living in the same state of simplicity and grace that Adam and Eve had enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. It is not surprising that the first modern utopia was conceived by Sir Thomas More in 1516, soon after the Spanish discoveries. This contact with new cultures widened Europe’s horizons and produced new fields of knowledge and new intellectual disciplines, including the predecessors of anthropology and sociology.
Conclusions

We focus on 1492 as the date of America’s discovery for several good reasons then. One of these, no doubt, is that we tend to accept a Europe-centered view of the world. But from any cultural perspective, Columbus’s landing at San Salvador in 1492 was a transforming event. For the millions living in the Americas, the change was a social disaster marked by disease, misery, bondage, and cultural disintegration. For Europe as a whole, 1492 marked the beginning of a new era of geographic, intellectual, and economic expansion.

By 1500 Europeans were also about to embark on the greatest mass migration of all time, one that would eventually pull 100 million humans westward across the Atlantic. We have seen something of the “forces” that led to this momentous occurrence. Let us now consider the personal motives that impelled countless ordinary (and not-so-ordinary), individuals to risk their lives and their fortunes to create new communities in the strange lands across the ocean.

ONLINE RESOURCES

“Spanish Exploration and Conquest of Native America” http://www.floridahistory.com Containing text and analysis of conquest records, maps, and illustrations, this site explores the movements and experiences of the Spanish conquistadors. It also offers an in-depth look at the impact Spanish exploration had on the Native-American population.


Feudal Life in Europe http://www.learner.org/exhibits/middleages/feudal.html A good review of life in Medieval Europe before Columbus.

The Norse in the North Atlantic http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/norse.html A good review of the Norse Voyages before Cabot, including the Vin land discovery and attempted settlement. Includes maps and pictures.