As they neared the village called Cofitachequi on May 1, 1540, the band of Spanish explorers led by Hernán de Soto beheld a surprising scene. Villagers came to meet the Europeans, carrying their female chief, or cacica. The Lady of Cofitachequi, a Spanish chronicler recorded, welcomed the weary Spaniards to her domain in today's western South Carolina, giving Soto a string of pearls from her neck. Later, she gave the hungry men huge quantities of corn and, seeing that they especially valued pearls, suggested they take the ones they would find in nearby burial chambers.

The Spanish explorers had landed at Tampa Bay, Florida, about a year earlier. They would wander through what is now the southeastern United States for three more years, encountering many different peoples, whom they often treated with great cruelty. Always they sought gold and silver. The people of Cofitachequi told the Spaniards they might find these treasures in another ruler's domain, about twelve days' travel away. When Soto left, he took the Lady with him as a captive, but she escaped and presumably returned home.

Why had the Lady greeted Soto's band so kindly? Perhaps she did not have enough men to resist the Europeans, her people had been devastated by an unknown “pestilence” two years earlier. Or possibly messengers had informed the Lady about Soto's vicious treatment of villages he had previously encountered. Whatever her reasoning, the strategy worked: Soto and his men moved on, and Cofitachequi survived to be recorded by Spanish, French, and finally English visitors over the next 130 years.

For thousands of years before 1492, human societies in the Americas had developed in isolation from the rest of the world. The era that began in the Christian fifteenth century brought that long-standing isolation to an end. As Europeans sought treasure and trade, peoples from different cultures came into regular contact for the first time. All were profoundly changed. The brief encounter between Soto and the Lady of Cofitachequi illustrates many of the
1494 • Treaty of Tordesillas divides land claims between Spain and Portugal in Africa, India, and South America
1495 • Last Canary Island falls to Spain
1497 • Cabot reaches North America
1513 • Leif explores Florida
1518–30 • Smallpox epidemic devastates Indian population of West Indies and Central and South America
1519 • Cortés invades Mexico
1520 • Tenejapa surrender to Cortés; Aztec Empire falls to Spaniards
1524 • Veracruz falls along Atlantic coast of United States
1533–36 • Cartier explores St. Lawrence River
1539–42 • Soto explores southeastern United States
1540–42 • Coronado explores southwestern United States
1587–90 • De Soto's Florida colony vanishes
1588 • Harriot publishes A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia

elements of contract cruelty and kindness, greed, and deception, trade and theft, surprise and sadness, captivity and enslavement. By the time Soto and his men landed in Florida in 1539, the age of European expansion and colonization was already well under way. The history of the six centuries that would become the United States must be seen in this broad context of European exploration and exploitation.

The continents that European sailors reached in the late fifteenth century had their own history. The residents of the Americas were the world's most skillful plant breeders; they had developed vegetable crops more nutritious and productive than those grown in Europe, Asia, or Africa. They had invented systems of writing and mathematics and had created calendars as accurate as those used on the other side of the Atlantic. In the Americas, as in Europe, states rose and fell as leaders succeeded or failed in expanding their political and economic power. But the arrival of Europeans irrevocably altered the Americans' struggles with one another.

After 1400, European nations tried to acquire valuable colonies and trading posts elsewhere in the world. Initially they were interested primarily in Asia
American Societies

Human beings originated on the continent of Africa, where humankind remains about 3 million years old have been found in what is now Ethiopia. Over many millennia, the growing population slowly dispersed to the other continents. Scholars have long believed that all the earliest inhabitants of the Americas crossed a land bridge known as Beringia (at the site of the Bering Strait) approximately 2,000 to 14,000 years ago. Yet striking new archaeological discoveries in both North and South America suggest that some parts of the Americas may have been settled much earlier, perhaps by seafarers crossing from northern Europe by island hopping from Iceland to Greenland to Baffin Island, much as the Vikings did many millennia later (see Map 1.1).

The first Americans are called Paleo-Indians. Nomadic hunters of game and gatherers of wild plants, they spread throughout North and South America, probably moving as bands composed of extended families. By about 11,500 years ago the Paleo-Indians were making fine stone projectile points, which they attached to wooden spears and used to kill the large mammals then living in the Americas. But as the Ice Age ended and the human population increased, all the large American mammals except the bison (buffalo) disappeared. As their meat supply decreased, the Paleo-Indians found new ways to survive.

By approximately 9,000 years ago, the residents of what is now central Mexico began to cultivate food crops, especially maize (corn), squash, beans, and peppers. In the Andes Mountains of South America, people started to grow potatoes. As knowledge of agricultural techniques improved and spread throughout the Americas, vegetables and maize proved a more reliable source of food than hunting and gathering. Thus, most Americans started to adopt a more sedentary style of life so that they could tend fields regularly. Some established permanent settlements; others moved several times a year among fixed sites. All the American cultures emphasized producing sufficient food to support themselves. Trade existed, but no society ever became dependent on another group for items vital to its survival.

Wherever agriculture dominated the economy, complex civilizations flourished. Such societies, assured of steady supplies, were able to accumulate wealth, produce ornamental objects, trade with other groups, and create elaborate rituals and ceremonies. In North America, the successful cultivation of nutritious crops seems to have led to the growth and development of all the major civilizations: the first large city-states of Mesoamerica (modern Mexico and Guatemala), and then the urban clusters known collectively as the Mississippian culture and located in the present-day United States. Each of these societies reached its height of population and influence only after achieving success in agriculture. Each later collapsed after reaching the limits of its food supply.

Little is known about the first major Mesoamerican civilization, that of the Olmecs, who about 1,000 years ago lived near the Gulf of Mexico in cities dominated by temple pyramids. Two societies that developed approximately 1,000 years later, those of the Mayas and of Teotihuacán, are better recorded. Teotihuacán, founded in the Valley of Mexico about 300 B.C., (before the Common Era), eventually became one of the largest urban areas in the world, housing perhaps 100,000 people in the fifth century C.E. (Common Era). Teotihuacán’s commercial network extended hundreds of miles; many peoples prized its obsidian (a green glass), used to make fine knives and mirrors. Pilgrims must also have traveled long distances to visit Teotihuacán’s impressive pyramids and the great temple of Quetzalcoatl—the feathered serpent, primary god of central Mexico.

On the Yucatán Peninsula, in today’s eastern Mexico, the Mayas built urban centers containing tall pyramids and temples. They studied astronomy and created the first writing system in the Americas.
Their city-states, though, engaged in near-constant warfare with one another. Warfare and an inadequate food supply caused the collapse of the most powerful cities by 900 C.E., thus ending the classic era of Mayan civilization. By the time Spaniards arrived five hundred years later, only a few remnants of the once-mighty society remained.

Ancient native societies in what is now the United States learned to grow maize, squash, and beans from Mesoamericans, but the exact relationship of the various cultures is unknown. (No Mesoamerican artifacts have been found north of the Rio Grande, but some items resembling Mississippian objects have been excavated in northern Mexico.) The Hopokam, Mogollon, and Anasazi peoples of the modern states of Arizona and New Mexico subsisted by combining hunting and gathering with agriculture in an arid region. Hopokam villagers constructed extensive irrigation systems, but even so, they occasionally had to relocate when water supplies failed. Between 900 and 1150 C.E., the Anasazi built fourteen “Great Houses” in Chaco Canyon, each a massive multitiered stone structure averaging two hundred rooms. The canyon served as a major regional trading and processing center for turquoise, used then as now to create beautiful ornamental objects. Scholars have not determined why the Anasazi disappeared or where they went, but a major drought could well have been responsible.

At almost the same time, the unrelated Mississippian culture flourished in what is now the midwestern and southeastern United States. Relying largely on maize, squash, nuts, pumpkins, and venison for food, the Mississippians lived in substantial settlements. The largest of their urban centers was the City of the Sun (now called Cahokia, near modern St. Louis). Located near the confluence of the Illinois, Missouri, and Mississippi Rivers, Cahokia, like Teotihuacán and Chaco Canyon, served as a focal point for both religion and trade. At its peak (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E.), the City of the Sun covered more than 5 square miles and had a population of about twenty thousand—small by Mesoamerican standards but larger than London in the same era.

Although the Cahokians never seem to have invented a writing system, these sun worshippers developed an accurate calendar, evidenced by a woodcutter— a large circle of timber posts aligned with the solstices and the equinox. The city’s main pyramid (one of 120 of varying sizes), today called Monks Mound, was at the time of its construction the third largest structure in the Western Hemisphere; it remains the largest earthenwork ever built in the Americas. It sat at the northern end of the Grand Plaza, surrounded by seventeen other mounds, some used for burials. Yet after 1250 C.E., the city was abandoned. Archaeologists believe that climate change and degradation of the environment, caused by overpopulation and the destruction of nearby forests, brought about the city’s collapse.

The Aztecs’ histories tell of the long migration of their people (who called themselves Mexica) into the Valley of Mexico during the twelfth century. The unhabited ruins of Teotihuacán, which by then had been deserted for at least two hundred years, awed and mystified the migrants. Their chronicles record that their primary deity, Huitzilopochtli—a war god represented by an eagle—directed them to establish their capital on an island where they saw an eagle eating a serpent, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, that island city became Tenochtitlan, the center of a rigidly stratified society composed of hereditary classes of warriors, merchants, priests, common folk, and slaves.

The Aztecs conquered their neighbors, forcing them to pay tribute, including human beings who could be sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli. The war god’s taste for blood was not easily quenched. At the 1502 coronation of Montezuma II (Montezuma to the Spanish), five thousand people are thought to have been sacrificed by having their still-beating hearts torn from their bodies.

The Aztecs believed that they lived in the age of the Fifth Sun. Four times previously, they wrote, the earth and all the people who lived on it had been destroyed. They predicted that their own world would end in earthquakes and hunger. In the Aztec year Thirteen Flint, volcanoes erupted, sickness and hunger spread, and an eclipse of the sun darkened the sky. Did some priest wonder whether the Fifth Sun was approaching its end? In time, the Aztecs learned that Thirteen Flint was called 1492 by the Europeans.
Everywhere in North America, women cared for young children, while older youths learned adult skills from the parents of the same sex. Young people usually chose their own marital partners, and in most societies couples could easily divorce. Populations in these societies remained at a level sustainable by existing food supplies, largely because of low birth rates. Mothers nursed infants and toddlers until the age of two or even longer, and taboos prevented couples from having sexual intercourse during that period.

The southwestern and eastern agricultural peoples had similar social organizations. The Pueblos lived in multi-story buildings constructed on terraces along the sides of cliffs or other easily defended sites. Northern Algonquian villages (in modern New York State) were composed of large, rectangular, bark-covered structures, or longhouses. In the present-day southeastern United States, Muskogean and southern Algonquian lived in large houses made of thatch. Defensive wood palisades and ditches surrounded most of the eastern villages.

In all the agricultural societies, each dwelling housed an extended family defined matrilineally (through a female line of descent). Mothers, their married daughters, and their daughters' husbands and children all lived together. Matrilineal descent did not imply primogeniture, or the wielding of power by women, but rather served as a way to reckon kinship. Extended families were linked into clans defined by matrilineal ties. The village band of the Great Plains, by contrast, were most often related patrilineally (through the male line).

Long before Europeans arrived, residents of the continent fought one another for control of the best hunting and fishing territories, the most fertile agricultural lands, or the sources of essential items like salt (for preserving meat) and flint (for making knives and arrowheads). People captured in such wars were sometimes enslaved, but slavery was never an important source of labor in pre-Columbian America.

American political structures varied considerably. Among Pueblo and Muskogean peoples, the village council was the highest political authority; no
Map 1.1 Native Cultures of North America

The natives of the North American continent effectively used the resources of the regions in which they lived. As the map shows, coastal groups relied on fishing, residents of fertile areas engaged in agriculture, and other peoples employed hunting (often combined with gathering) as a primary mode of subsistence.
government structure connected the villages. Nomadic hunters also lacked formal links among separate bands. The Iroquois, by contrast, had an elaborate political hierarchy incorporating villages into nations and nations into a confederacy; a council comprising representatives from each nation made crucial decisions concerning war and peace for the entire confederacy. In all the North American cultures, political power was divided between civil and war leaders, who wielded authority only so long as they retained the confidence of the people. Women assumed leadership roles more often among agricultural peoples than among nomadic hunters. Female sachems (rulers) led Algonquian villages in what is now Massachusetts, but women never became heads of Great Plains hunting bands. Iroquois women did not become chiefs, yet the clan matrons of each village chose its chief and could both start wars (by calling for the capture of prisoners to replace dead relatives) and stop them (by refusing to supply warriors with necessary foodstuff)

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**Primary Source:** Dokanawida Myth & the Achievement of Iroquois Unity

Americans’ religious beliefs varied even more than their political systems, but all the peoples were polytheistic, worshiping a multitude of gods. Each group’s most important beliefs and rituals were closely tied to its means of subsistence. The major deity of agricultural peoples like the Pueblo and Muskogean were associated with cultivation. The most important gods of hunters such as those living on the Great Plains were associated with animals. A bond’s economy and women’s role in it helped to determine women’s potential as religious leaders. Women held the most prominent positions in agricultural societies in which they were also the chief food producers, whereas in hunting societies, men took the lead in religion as well as political affairs.

A wide variety of cultures, comprising more than 5 million people, inhabited mainland North America when Europeans arrived. The diverse inhabitants of North America spoke well over one thousand languages. For obvious reasons, they did not consider themselves one people, nor did they—nor the most—think of uniting to repel the European invaders.

**African Societies**

Twentieth-century Africa also housed a variety of cultures adapted to different terrains and climates. In the north, along the Mediterranean Sea, lived the Berbers, who were Muslims, followers of the Islamic religion founded by the prophet Mohammed in the seventh century C.E. On the east coast of Africa, Moslem city-states traded extensively with India, the Moccasins (part of modern Indonesia), and China. Waterborne commerce between the eastern Mediterranean and East Asia passed through the East African city-states; the route followed the long, land route across central Asia known as the Silk Road.

South of the Mediterranean coast in the African interior lie the great Saharan and Libyan deserts. Below the deserts, much of the continent is divided between tropical rain forests along the coasts and grassy plains in the interior. People speaking a variety of languages and pursuing different subsistence strategies lived in a wide belt south of the deserts. South of the Gulf of Guinea, the grassy landscape came to be dominated by Bantu-speaking peoples, who left their homeland in modern Nigeria about 2,000 years ago and slowly migrated south and east across the continent.

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**Interactive Map: Africa and Its Peoples, c. 1400**

West Africa was a land of tropical forests and savanna grasslands where fishing, cattle herding, and agriculture supported the inhabitants. The northern region of West Africa, or Upper Guinea, was heavily influenced by the Islamic culture of the Mediterranean. Trade via camel caravans between Upper Guinea and the Muslim Mediterranean was sub-Saharan Africa’s major connection to Europe and West Asia. In return for salt, dates, silk, and cotton cloth, Africans exchanged ivory, gold, and slaves with northern merchants.

The peoples of Upper Guinea’s northernmost region, the so-called Rice Coast (present-day Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea), fished and cultivated rice. The Grain Coast, the next region to the south, was thinly populated and not easily accessible from the sea because it had only one good harbor (modern Freetown,
Sierra Leone. Its people concentrated on farming and raising livestock.

In the fifteenth century, most Africans in Lower Guinea were farmers who practiced traditional religions, not the creoles of Islam. As did the agricultural peoples of the Americas, they developed rituals intended to ensure good harvests. Throughout the region, individual villages composed of kin groups were linked into hierarchical kingdoms characterized by decentralized political and social authority.

The societies of West Africa, like those of the Americas, assigned different tasks to men and women. In general, the sexes shared agricultural duties. Men also hunted, managed livestock, and did most of the fishing. Women were responsible for child care, food preparation, and cloth manufacture. Everywhere in West Africa, women were the primary local traders.

Despite their different economies and the rivalries among states, the peoples of Lower Guinea had similar social systems organized on the basis of what anthropologists have called the dual-sex principle. In Lower Guinea, each sex handled its own affairs: just as male political and religious leaders governed men, so females ruled women. In the Dahomean kingdom, for example, every male official had his female counterpart; in the thirty little Akan States on the Gold Coast, chiefs inherited their status through the female line, and each male chief had a female assistant who supervised other women.

Throughout Upper Guinea, religious beliefs stressed complementary male and female roles. Both women and men served as heads of the cults and secret societies that directed the spiritual life of the villages. Young women were initiated into the Sande cult, young men into Poro. Although West African women rarely held formal power over men, female religious leaders did govern other members of their sex within the Sande cult.

West African law recognized both individual and communal landownership, but more seeking to accumulate wealth needed access to labor, including slaves. West Africans held in slavery on their own consent therefore made up essential elements of the economy. Africans could be enslaved for life as punishment for crimes, but more often slaves were enemy captives or people who voluntarily enslaved themselves or their children to pay debts. An African who possessed bondpeople had a right to the products of their labor, although the degree to which slaves were exploited varied greatly. Some slaves were held as chattels; others could engage in trade, retaining a portion of their profits; and still others, achieved prominent political or military positions. All, however, found it difficult to overcome the social stigma of enslavement, and they could be traded or sold at the will of their owners.

This decorative brass weight, created by the Asante peoples of Lower Guinea, was used for measuring gold dust. It depicts a family pounding fufu—a food made by crushing together plantains (a kind of banana), yams, and cassava. The paste was then shaped into balls to be eaten with soup. This weight, probably used in trading with Europeans, shows a scene combining foods of African origin (plantains and yams) with an import from the Americas (cassava), thus bringing the three continents together in ways both symbolic and real. (© Trustees of the British Museum. Photo by Michael Holborn.)
European Societies

In the fifteenth century, Europeans too were agricultural peoples, split into numerous small, warring countries. Europe was divided linguistically, politically, and economically; yet to social strata Europeans' lives were more similar than different. European societies were hierarchical: a few families wielded autocratic power over the majority of the people. At the base of such hierarchies were people held in various forms of bondage. Although Europeans were not subjected to perpetual slavery, Christian doctrine permitted the enslavement of "heathens" (non-Christians), and serfdom restricted some Europeans' freedom, tying them to the land, if not to specific owners. In short, Europe's kingdoms resembled those of Africa and Mesoamerica, but differed greatly from the more egalitarian societies found in America north of Mexico (see Map 1.2).

Most Europeans, like most Africans and Americans, lived in small villages. European farmers, who

Map 1.2 Europe in 1490

The Europeans who ventured out into the Atlantic came from countries on the northwestern edge of the continent, which was divided into numerous competing nations.
were called peasants, owned or leased separate landholdings, but they worked the fields communally. Because fields had to lie fallow (unplanted) every second or third year to regain fertility, a family could not ensure itself a regular food supply unless all villagers shared each year’s work and crops. Men did most of the fieldwork; women helped out chiefly at planting and harvest. In some areas, men concentrated on herding livestock. Women’s duties consisted primarily of child care and household tasks, including preserving food, milking cows, and caring for poultry. Some Europeans kept domesticated pigs, goats, sheep, and cattle for meat; hunting had little economic importance in their cultures.

In contrast to African and American societies, in which women often played prominent roles in politics and religion, men dominated all areas of life in Europe. A few women—notably Queen Elizabeth I of England—achieved status or power by right of birth, but the vast majority were excluded from positions of political authority. Hundreds and thousands of men expected to control their families. European women generally held inferior social, economic, and political positions, yet within their own families they wielded power over children and servants.

Christianity was the dominant religion in Europe. In the West, it was the Church that gave meaning to human existence and provided guidance and support to believers. The Church served as a source of hope and guidance for people, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time.

While Christianity was the dominant religion in Europe, the Church also played a role in the political and social life of the time. It served as a source of hope and guidance for people, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time.

The fifteenth century was a period of great change in European society. The Church played a significant role in the political and social life of the time. It served as a source of hope and guidance for people, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time.

Effects of plague and war were devastating, and the Church played a role in helping to recover from these events. The Church provided support and guidance to people during this time, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time.

The Church played a significant role in the political and social life of the time. It served as a source of hope and guidance for people, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time. The Church provided support and guidance to people during this time, and it played a significant role in the political and social life of the time.

Although European peoples were nominally Catholic, many adhered to local belief systems that the Church deemed heretical and could not enfranchise. Kings would ally themselves with the Church when it suited their needs but often acted independently. Even so, the Christian nations of Europe from the twelfth century on publicly united in a goal of driving nonbelievers (especially Muslims) not only from European domains, but also from the holy city of Jerusalem, which caused the series of wars known as the Crusades.

When the fifteenth century began, European nations were slowly recovering from the devastating effects of the Black Death, which seems to have arrived in Europe from China, traveling with long-distance traders along the Silk Road to the eastern Mediterranean. From 1346 through the 1360s and 1370s, the plague killed an estimated one-third of Europe’s people. A precipitous economic decline followed, as did severe social, political, and religious disruption because of the deaths of clergy and other leading figures.

As plague ravaged the population, England and France waged the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453) over the English monarchy’s claim to the French throne. The war interrupted overland trade routes through France that connected England and the Netherlands to the Italian city-states and thence to Central Asia. Merchants in the eastern Mediterranean found a new way to reach their northern markets by forging a regular maritime link with the Netherlands to replace the overland route. The use of a triangular, or later, sail (rather than the then-standard square rigging) improved the maneuverability of ships. Also of key importance was the invention of navigational instruments like the astrolabe and the quadrant, which allowed meandering sailors to estimate their position (latitude) by measuring the relationship of the sun, moon, or certain stars to the horizon.

In the aftermath of the Hundred Years’ War, European monarchs forcefully consolidated their previously diffuse political power and raised new revenues through increased taxation of an already hard-pressed peasantry. In England, Henry VII in 1485 founded the Tudor dynasty and began uniting a previously divided land. In France, the successors of Charles VII united the kingdom. Most successful of all were Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, who married in 1469, founding a strongly Catholic Spain. In 1492 they defeated the Muslims, who had lived in Spain and Portugal for centuries, and thereafter expelled all Jews and Muslims from their domain.

The sixteenth century also brought technological change to Europe. Moveable type and the printing press, invented in Germany in the 1450s, made information more accessible than ever before. Printing stimulated the Europeans’ curiosity about fabled lands across the seas—lands they could now read about in books. The most important sixteenth-century work was Marco Polo’s Travels, first published in 1477, which recounted a Venetian merchant’s adventures in thirteenth-century China and, most intriguing, described that nation as bordered on the east by an ocean. Polo’s account bell
many Europeans to believe that they could trade directly with China in oceangoing vessels instead of relying on the Silk Road or the route through East Africa. Technological advances and the growing strength of newly powerful national rulers made possible the European explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Each country craved easy access to African and Asian goods—spices like pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg (to season the bland European diet), silk, dyes, perfumes, jewels, sugar, and gold. A desire to spread Christianity around the world supplemented the economic motive. This linking of materialist and spiritual goals might seem contradictory today, but fifteenth-century Europeans saw no necessary conflict between the two. Explorers and colonizers—especially Roman Catholics—honestly sought to convert “heathen” peoples, while at the same time hoping to increase their nation’s wealth and standing among other countries.
Early European Explorations

Before European mariners could discover new lands, they had to explore the oceans. To reach Asia, mariners needed not just maneuverable vessels and navigational aids, but also knowledge of the sea, its currents, and especially its winds. How did the winds run? Where would Atlantic breezes take their ships?

European explorers answered these questions in the "Mediterranean Atlantic": the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean that is south and west of Iberia, the peninsula that includes Spain and Portugal, and bounded by the island groups of the Azores (on the west) and the Canaries (on the south), with the Madeiras in their midst. Europeans reached all three sets of islands during the fourteenth century. From their experience sailing in the Mediterranean Atlantic, mariners learned to exploit the prevailing winds—the North Atlantic Trade that would push them south along the coast of Africa and eventually toward the Caribbean and the West Indies, farther north, that returned them to Europe.

During the fifteenth century, armed with knowledge of the winds and currents of the Mediterranean Atlantic, Iberian seamen regularly visited the three island groups, all of which they could reach in two weeks or less. By the 1450s, Portuguese colonies in the Madeiras were employing slaves (probably Jews and Muslims brought from Iberia) to grow large quantities of sugar for export to the mainland. By the 1470s, Madeira had developed into a colonial plantation economy. For the first time in world history, a region had been settled explicitly to cultivate a valuable crop—sugar—to be sold elsewhere, and only a supply of enslaved laborers to do the backbreaking plantation work could ensure the system's continued success.

Meanwhile, the Guanche people of the Canary Islands fought the assaults of the French, Portuguese, and Spanish. However, the Guanches were weakened by European diseases, and one by one the islands fell to Europeans, who carried off the Guanches as slaves to the Madeiras or the Iberian Peninsula. Spain conquered the last island in 1496 and subsequently devoted the land to sugar cultivation. Collectively, the Canaries and Madeiras became known as the "White Islands" because much of their sugar production was directed to making sweet wines.

For Portugal's Prince Henry the Navigator, the islands were steppingstones to Africa. He knew that vast wealth awaited the first European nation to tap the riches of Africa and Asia directly. Each year he dispatched ships southward along the African coast, attempting to discover an oceanic route to Asia. But not until after Prince Henry's death did Bartholomew Dias round the southern tip of Africa (1488) and Vasco da Gama finally reach India (1498).

Long before that, Western African states had allowed the Portuguese to establish trading posts along their coasts. Carrying the traders' goods and keying duties on goods they imported, the African kingdoms set the terms of exchange and benefited considerably from their new, easier access to European manufactures. The Portuguese gained too, for they no longer had to rely on trans-Saharan camel caravans. Their vessels earned immense profits by swiftly transporting African gold, ivory, and slaves to Europe. By bargaining with African masters to purchase their slaves and then carrying those bondpeople to Iberia, the Portuguese introduced black slavery into Europe.

In the 1480s, the Portuguese colonized an island off the African coast, previously uninhabited: São Tomé, located in the Gulf of Guinea. The soil of São Tomé proved ideal for raising sugar, and plantation agriculture there expanded rapidly. Planters imported large numbers of slaves from the mainland to work in the cane fields, thus creating the first economy based primarily on the bondage of black Africans.

By the 1490s, Europeans had learned three key lessons of colonization in the Mediterranean Atlantic. First, they had learned how to transplant their crops and livestock successfully to exotic locations. Second, they had discovered that the native peoples of those lands could be either conquered (the Guanches) or exploited (the African slaves). Third, they had developed a viable model of plantation slavery and a system for supplying nearly unlimited quantities of such workers. The stage was set for a pivotal moment in world history.
The Voyages of Columbus, Cabot, and Their Successors

Christopher Columbus was well schooled in the lessons of the Mediterranean Atlantic. Born in 1451 in the Italian city-state of Genoa, Columbus was by the 1490s an experienced sailmaker. Like many mariners of the day, he was drawn to Portugal and its islands, especially Madeira, where he commanded a merchant vessel. At least once he voyaged to the Portuguese outpost on the Gold Coast. There he acquired an obsession with gold and came to understand the economic potential of the slave trade.

Like all accomplished sailors and most educated people, Columbus knew the world was round. However, he differed from other cartographers in his estimate of the earth’s size: he thought that China lay only 3,000 miles from the southern European coast. Thus, he argued, it would be easier to reach Asia by sailing west than by making the difficult voyage around the southern tip of Africa. Experts scoffed at his reckless notion, accurately predicting that the two continents lay 12,000 miles apart. When Columbus in 1484 asked the Portuguese authorities to back his plan to sail west to Asia, they rejected the proposal.

Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, jealous of Portugal’s successes in Africa, were more receptive to Columbus’s ideas. Urged on by some Spanish noblemen and a group of Italian merchants residing in Castile, the monarchs agreed to finance the risky voyage. And so, on August 3, 1492, in command of the Pinta, the Niña, and the Santa María, Columbus set sail from the Spanish port of Palos.

On October 12, he and his men landed on an island in the Bahamas, which he named San Salvador. Later he went on to explore the islands now known as Cuba and Hispaniola. Because he thought he had reached the Indies, Columbus referred to the inhabitants of the region as Indians. Three themes predominate in Columbus’s log. First, he insistently asked the Tainos, the islanders’ residents, where he could find gold, pearls, and valuable spices. Each time, his informants replied (largely via signs) that such products could be obtained on other islands, on the mainland, or in cities in the interior. Second, he wrote repeatedly of the strange and beautiful plants and animals, Columbus’s interest was more than aesthetic. “I believe that there are many plants and trees here that could be worth a lot in Spain for use as dyes, spices, and medicines,” he observed, adding that he was carrying home to Europe “a sample of everything I can,” so that experts could examine them.

Third, Columbus described the Taino people, and he seized some to take back to Spain. The Tainos were, he said, very handsome, gentle, and friendly. He believed they would be likely converts to Catholicism. He also thought the islanders “ought to make good and skilled sailors.”

These records of the first encounter between Europeans and America and its residents revealed the themes that would be of enormous significance for centuries to come. Above all, Europeans wanted to export profits from North and South America by exploiting their natural resources: plants, animals, and peoples alike. Christopher Columbus made three more voyages, exploring most of the major Caribbean islands and sailing along the coasts of Central and South America. Until the day he died in 1506 at the age of fifty-five, Columbus believed that he had reached Asia. Even before his death, others knew better. Because the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, who explored the South American coast in 1499, was the first to publish the idea that a new continent had been discovered, Martin Waldseemüller in 1507 labeled the land “America.” By then, Spain, Portugal, and Pope Alexander VI had signed the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), confirming Portugal’s dominance in Africa—and later Brazil—in exchange for Spanish preeminence in the rest of the Americas.

Five hundred years before Columbus, about the year 1001, the Norseman Leif Ericsson and other Norse explorers sailed to North America across the Davis Strait, which separated their villages in Greenland from Baffin Island (see Map 1,1), settling at a site they named Vinland. Attacks by local residents forced them to depart after just a few years. In the 1960s, archaeologists determined that the Norse had established 600 outpost at
what is now L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, but Vinland itself was probably located farther south. Later Europeans did not know of the Norse explorers, but some historians argue that European sailors may have found the rich Newfoundland fishing grounds in the 1400s but kept their discoveries a secret so that they alone could fish there. Whether or not fishermen crossed the entire width of the Atlantic, they thoroughly explored its northern reaches, voyaging among the European continent, England, Ireland, and Iceland. Those who explored what would become the United States and Canada built on their knowledge. They learned that in the spring at the northernmost reaches of the West Indies, sputtering shifts to easterly winds would push them west. Thus, those taking the northern route usually reached America along the coast of what is now Maine or the Canadian maritime provinces. The European generally credited with “discovering” North America is John Cabot. More precisely, Cabot brought to Europe the first formal knowledge of the northern coastline of the continent and claimed the land for England. Like Columbus, Cabot was a master mariner from the Italian city-state of Genoa, and he was in Spain when Columbus returned from his first trip to America. Calculating that England—which traded with Asia only through a long series of middlemen stretching from Belgium to Venice to the Muslim world—would be eager to sponsor exploratory voyages, Cabot sought and won the support of King Henry VII. He set sail from Bristol in late May 1497, reaching his destination on June 24. Scholars disagree about the location of his landfall (some say it was Cape Breton Island, others Newfoundland), but all recognize the importance of his month-long exploration of the coast.

The voyages of Columbus, Cabot, and their successors finally brought the Europeans to the Western Hemisphere together. The Portuguese explored like Pedro Álvares Cabral reached Brazil in 1500; John Cabot’s son Sebastian followed his father to North America in 1507; France financed Giovanni da Verrazzano in 1524 and Jacques Cartier in 1534; and in 1609 and 1610 Henry Hudson explored the North American coast for the Dutch West India Company. These men were primarily searching for the legendary, nonexistent “Northwest Passage” through the Americas, but their discoveries interested European nations in exploring North and South America.

Spanish Exploration and Conquest

In the areas that Spain explored and claimed did colonization begin immediately. On his second voyage in 1493, Columbus brought to Hispaniola seventeen ships loaded with twelve hundred men, seeds, plants, livestock, chickens, and dogs—along with microbes, rats, and weeds. The settlement named Isabela (in the modern Dominican Republic) and its successors became the staging area for the Spanish invasion of America. At first, Spanish explorers fanned out around the Caribbean basin. In 1513 Juan Ponce de León reached Florida, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean. In the 1530s and 1540s, conquistadors traveled farther, exploring many regions claimed by the Spanish monarchs: Francisco Vásquez de Coronado journeyed through the southwestern portion of what is now the United States at approximately the same time as Hernán de Soto explored the southeast and encountered the Lady of Cozontuche. Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailed along the California coast, and Francisco Pizarro acquired the richest silver mines in the world by conquering and enslaving the Incas in western South America. But the most important conquistador was Hernán Cortés.

Cortés, an adventurer who first arrived in the West Indies in 1504, embarked for the mainland in 1519 in search of the wealthy cities rumored to exist there. As he moved his force inland from the Gulf of Mexico, local Mayas presented him with a gift of twenty young female slaves. One of them, Malinche, who had been sold into slavery by the Aztecs and raised by the Mayas, became Cortés’s translator. Malinche bore Cortés a son, Martín—one of the first mestizos, or mixed-blood children—and eventually married one of his officers. When the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan fell to the Spanish in 1521, Cortés and his men seized a fabulous treasure of gold and silver. Thus, not long after Columbus’s first voyage, the Spanish peoples
The Columbian Exchange

Spain established the model of colonization that other countries later attempted to imitate, a model with three major elements. First, the Spanish Crown maintained tight control over the colonies, imposing a hierarchical government that allowed little autonomy to New World jurisdictions. Second, most of the colonists sent from Spain were male. They took Indian— and later African—women as their sexual partners, thereby creating the racially mixed population that characterized much of Latin America to the present day.

Third, the colonies’ wealth was based on the exploitation of both the native population and slaves imported from Africa. The encomienda system, which granted tribute from Indian villages to individual conquistadors as a reward for their services to the Crown, in effect legalized Indian slavery. Yet in 1542 a new code of laws reformed the system, forbidding Spanish from enslaving Indians. In response, the conquistadors, familiar with slavery in Spain, began to lure Africans to increase the labor force under their direct control.

Spanish wealth derived from American suffering. The Spaniards deliberately leveled American cities, building cathedrals and monasteries on sites once occupied by Aztec, Inca, and Mayan temples. Some conquistadors sought to erase all vestiges of the great Indian cultures by burning the written records they found. With their traditional ways of life in disarray, devastated by disease, and compelled to labor for their conquerors, many demoralized residents of Mesoamerica accepted the Christian religion brought to New Spain by friars of the Franciscan and Dominican orders.

The friars devoted their energies to persuading Mesoamerican people to move into new towns and build Roman Catholic churches. In such towns, Indians were exposed to European customs and religious rituals designed to assimilate Catholic and pagan beliefs. Friars deliberately posed the cult of the Virgin Mary with that of the coyote goddess, and the Indians adeptly melded aspects of their traditional worldview with Christianity, in a process called syncretism. Thousands of Indians residing in Spanish territory embraced Catholicism, at least partly because it was the religion of their new rulers.

Diseases carried from Europe and Africa, though, had a devastating impact on the American peoples. Indians fell victim to microbes that had long infected the other continents and had repeatedly killed hundreds of thousands but had also left survivors with some measure of immunity. The statistics are staggering. When Columbus landed on Hispaniola in 1492, approximately half a million people resided there. Fifty years later, fewer than two thousand native inhabitants were still alive. Overall, historians estimate that the alien microorganisms could have reduced the American population by as much as 90 percent.

The greatest killer was smallpox, spread primarily by direct human contact. One epidemic began on Hispaniola in December 1518 and was carried to the mainland by Spaniards in 1520. There it totally weakened the defenders of Tenochtitlán. As an old Aztec man recalled, “It spread over the people as great destruction.” Likewise as a consequence, Tenochtitlán surrendered, and the Spaniards built Mexico City on its site.
Maize

Maize, to Mesoamericans, was a gift from Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent god. Cherokees told of an old woman whose blood produced the prized stalks after her grandson buried her body in a cleared, sunny field. For the Alenaks, the crop began when a beautiful maiden ordered a youth to drag her by the hair through a tunnel—over food. The long hair of the Cherokee grandmother and the Alenaks maiden turned into silk, the flowers on the stalks that Europeans called Indian corn.

Sacred to all the Indian peoples who grew it, maize was a cereal crop, a main part of their diet. They dried the kernels; ground into meal, maize was cooked as a mush or shaped into flat cakes and linked, the forerunners of modern tortillas. Indians also heated the dried kernels until they popped open, just as is done today. Although the European invaders of North and South America initially disliked maize, they soon learned that it could be cultivated in a wide variety of conditions—from sea level to twelve thousand feet, from regions with abundant rainfall to dry lands with as little as twelve inches of rain a year. Corn was also highly productive, yielding almost twice as many calories per acre as wheat. So Europeans too came to rely on corn, growing it not only in their American settlements but also in their homelands.

Maize cultivation spread to Asia and Africa. Today, China is second only to the United States in total corn production, and corn is more widely grown in Africa than any other crop. Still, the United States produces 45 percent of the world’s corn—almost half of it in the three states of Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska—and corn is the nation’s single largest crop. More than half of American corn is consumed by livestock. Much of the rest is processed into syrup, which sweetens carbonated beverages and candies, or into ethanol, a gasoline additive that reduces both pollution and dependence on fossil fuels. Corn is an ingredient in light beer and toothpaste. It is used in the manufacture of tires, wallpaper, cat litter, and aspirin. Remarkably, of the ten thousand products in a modern American grocery store, about one-fourth rely to some extent on corn.

Today this crop bequeathed to the world by ancient Americans plant breeders provides one-fifth of all the calories consumed by the earth’s peoples. The gift of Quetzalcoatl has linked the globe.

The earliest known European drawing of maize (below), the American plant that was to have such an extraordinary impact on the entire world. (Yale Phot. Rep. 454 PRL, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.)
In America, Europeans encountered tobacco, which at first they believed had beneficial medicinal effects. Smoking and chewing the “Indian weed” became a fad in Europe. Despite the efforts of such skeptics as King James I of England, who in 1609 pronounced smoking “harmful to the brain, [and] dangerous to the Lungs,” tobacco’s popularity climbed.

The European and African invasion of the Americas therefore had a significant biological component, for the invaders carried plants and animals with them. Some creatures, such as livestock, they brought deliberately. Others, including rats, weeds, and diseases, arrived unexpectedly. And upon their return home, the Europeans deliberately took back such crops as corn, potatoes, and tobacco, along with that unanticipated stowaway, syphilis.

In North America, northern Europeans, denied access to the wealth of Mesoamerica by the Spanish and beaten to South America by the Portuguese, were initially more interested in exploiting North America’s abundant natural resources than in the difficult task of establishing colonies on the mainland. Following John Cabot’s report of a plentiful supply of fish along the North American coast, Europeans rushed to reap the sea’s bounty. By the 1570s, more than 350 ships, primarily from France and England, were capitalizing on the fisheries of the Newfound-land Banks each year. European fishermen soon learned that they could augment their profits by exchanging cloth and metal goods like pots and knives for the native trappers’ beaver pelts, which Europeans used to make fashionable hats. At first the Europeans conducted their trading from ships sailing along the coast, but later they established permanent outposts on the mainland to centralize and control the traffic in furs. The Europeans’ demand for furs, especially beaver, was matched by the Indians’ desire for European goods that could make their lives easier and establish their superiority over their neighbors. Some bands began to concentrate so completely on trap- ping for the European market that they abandoned
their traditional economies. The intensive trade in pelts also had serious ecological consequences. In some regions, beavers were completely wiped out. The disappearance of their dams led to soil erosion, especially when combined with the extensive clearing of forests by later European settlers.

Although their nation reaped handsome profits from fishing, English attaches and political leaders watched enviously as Spain's American possessions enriched that country immeasurably. In the mid-sixteenth century, English "sea dogs" like John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake began to raid Spanish treasure fleets sailing home from the West Indies. Their actions helped to foment a war that in 1588 culminated in the defeat of a huge invasion force—the Spanish Armada—at the English coast. As part of the contest with Spain, English leaders started to think about planting colonies in the Western Hemisphere, thereby gaining better access to valuable trade goods and simultaneously preventing their enemies from dominating the Americas.

The first English colonial planners hoped to reproduce Spanish successes by dispatching to America men who would similarly exploit the native peoples for their own and their nation's benefit. In the mid-1570s, a group that included Sir Humphrey Gilbert and his younger half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, began to promote a scheme to establish outposts that could trade with the Indians and provide bases for attacks on New Spain. Approving the idea, Queen Elizabeth I authorized first Gilbert, and then Raleigh, to colonize North America.

Gilbert died trying, unsuccessfully, to plant a colony in Newfoundland, and Raleigh was only briefly more successful. After two preliminary expeditions, in 1587 he sent 117 colonists to the territory he named Virginia, after Elizabeth, the "Virgin Queen." They established a settlement on Roanoke Island, in what is now North Carolina, but in 1590 a rescue ship—delayed in leaving England because of the Spanish Armada—could not find them. The colonists had vanished, leaving only the name of a nearby island carved on a tree.

Thus, England's first attempt to plant a permanent settlement on the North American coast failed, as had similar efforts by Portugal on Cape Breton Island (in the early 1520s) and France in northern Florida (in the mid-1560s). All three enterprises collapsed because of the hostility of their neighbors and their inability to self-sustain at sea.

The explanation for such failures becomes clear in Thomas Harriot's A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, published in 1588 to publicize Raleigh's colony. Harriot, a noted scientist who sailed with the second of the preliminary voyages to Roanoke, described the animals, plants, and people of the region for an English readership. His account revealed that although the explorers depended on nearby villagers for most of their food, they needlessly antagonized their neighbors by killing some of them for what Harriot himself admitted were unjustifiable reasons. The scientist advised later colonizers to deal with the native peoples of America more humanely than his comrades had.

Harriot's Brief and True Report depicted for his English readers a bountiful land full of opportunities for quick profit. The people already residing there, he thought, "at a short time he brought to civilitie" through conversion to Christianity, admiration for European superiority, or conquest—if they did not die from disease, the ravages of which he witnessed. Thomas Harriot's prediction was far off the mark: European dominance of North America would be difficult to achieve.

Summary

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The process of initial contact between Europeans and Americans that ended near the close of the sixteenth century began approximately 250 years earlier when Portuguese sailors first set out to explore the Mediterranean Atlantic and settle its islands. That region of the Atlantic was so close to "European and African shores marinated mariner's who, like Christopher Columbus, ventured into previously unknown waters. When Columbus first reached the Americas, he thought he had found Asia, his intended destination. Later explorers knew better but, except for the Spanish, regarded the Americas primarily as a barrier to their long-sought goal of an oceanic route to the riches of China and the Moluccas. Ordinary European fishermen were the first to realize that the
northern coasts had valuable products to offer: fish and furs, both much in demand in their homelands.

The wealth of the north could not compare to that of Mesoamerica. The Aztec Empire, heir to the trading networks of Teotihuacan as well as to the intellectual sophistication of the Maya, directed the conquistadors with the magnificence of its buildings and its seemingly unlimited wealth. The Aztecs believed that their fifth Sun would end in earthquakes and hunger. Hunger they surely experienced after Cortés’s invasion; and if there were no earthquakes, the great temples tumbled to the ground nevertheless, as the Spaniards used their stones (and Indian laborers) to construct cathedrals honoring their God and his son, Jesus, rather than Huiztilopoch不多. The conquistadors employed first American and later enslaved African workers to till the fields, mine the precious metals, and herd the livestock that earned immense profits for themselves and their mother country.

The initial impact of Europeans on the Americas proved devastating. Flourishing civilizations were, if not entirely destroyed, markedly altered in just a few decades. By the end of the sixteenth century, fewer people resided in North America than had lived there before Columbus’s arrival, even taking into account the arrival of many Europeans and Africans. And the people who did live there—Indian, African, and European—resided in a world that was indeed new—a world engaged in the unprecedented process of combining foods, religions, economics, styles of life, and political systems that had developed separately for millennia. Understandably, conflict and obsession permeated that process.

Each year, the United States celebrates the second Monday in October as a tribute to Christopher Columbus’s landing in the Bahamas in 1492. The first known U.S. celebration of Columbus’s voyage occurred in New York City on October 12, 1792, when a men’s social club gave a dinner to mark its three hundredth anniversary. In the late 1860s, Italian American communities in New York City and San Francisco began to celebrate October 12, but not until 1892 did a congressional resolution order a one-time national commemoration. Columbus Day was first observed as a national holiday in 1971.

Today, the annual observances can arouse strong emotions. The American Indian Movement, founded in 1968, has declared that “from an indigenous vantage point, Columbus’ arrival was a disaster” and that he “deserves no recognition or accolades.” At the same time, people of Hispanic descent have claimed Columbus as their own, insisting that his voyage was “a thoroughly Spanish event.” In some cities, most notably New York, their celebrations rival those organized by Italian Americans; in others, such as Miami, Hispanics control the official commemorations. Still other Latinos, especially those of Mexican descent living in Los Angeles, call October 12 Día de la Raza and use it as an occasion to protest current U.S. immigration policy.

As ethnic diversity has increased in the nation and as peoples of different origins have sought to claim a share of the American heritage, holidays have unsurprisingly become the occasion for heated contests. Each fall, the American people and nation continue to confront the controversial legacy of Columbus’s 1492 voyage.