Navigation and empire [The atlantic experience: peoples, places, ideas]

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ATLANTIC EXPERIENCE: PEOPLES, PLACES, IDEAS

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A Note to Instructors – Using This Textbook:

The Atlantic Experience: Peoples, Places, Ideas consists of eight thematic chapters. It was designed this way to encourage instructors to allocate time to analyzing and contextualizing the Atlantic World’s rich array of documentary and visual evidence. It was also created to conform neatly to the demands of both twelve and sixteen-week semesters. Courses taught in sixteen-week semesters can use the thematically-organized chapters to frame two weeks of class meetings (with allowances made for the Introduction and conclusion). Those on a more compressed semester can reduce this coverage to a chapter every one and a half weeks, again with allowances for the Introduction and Conclusion.
CHAPTER ONE: NAVIGATION AND EMPIRE

Origins of Empire
The desire to explore the wider world and to establish settlements and empires in newly discovered territories was not new in 1500. There is a long and important pre-history to this desire. Although Europeans considered themselves at the centre of the known universe, Africans and Americans were also early exponents of using conquest to dominate their neighbours and develop new systems of governance, albeit with significant local variations. The language we use to discuss these new journeys and imaginings is significant. In talking about the European ‘discovery’ of America we are telling a particularly Euro-centric story, assuming that all innovation and progress was driven from and by Europe. The next chapter explores in more depth what happened when the peoples of the Atlantic world encountered each other for the first time. However, while it is important to acknowledge that Atlantic development represents a departure from previous cultural patterns, this development can also be seen as a continuation and this chapter will explore how ancient and medieval models of empire and earlier technological advances and modes of exploration drove this innovation. Historian Charles Verlinden argues that this continuity can be traced from the fifth century onwards.

While, prior to 1500, most Africans had not encountered a European in person, the ‘discovery’ of Europe by Africans had certainly begun before that date. Africans soon became aware of the benefits of contact with Europeans and in doing so had redefined themselves and their own identity. Ambassadors and delegations were sent to Europe from 1300 onwards as the European interest in African gold and slaves developed. The Barbary ports on the North African coasts were cosmopolitan places where Europeans of all nations mixed with Africans.

The organisation of West African society was hugely varied and constantly changing. Some tribes had grouped themselves together in kingdoms ruled by a King. Others lived in a hierarchical group of tribes, while still others were village-based with only a few hundred people being governed by an Elder. Across West Africa disease and famine were obstacles to population growth and these factors led to labour shortages, which defined the models of expansion and conquest employed by the dominant tribes and kingdoms of the region. The kingdom of Kongo used slavery to solve its labour shortages before Europeans even visited the region. The African gold rush gave a new power to Malinke speakers around the headwaters of the Niger River. They created the Kingdom of Mali in the early 13th century. Its suzerainty extended over a thousand miles and it became an Islamic state in the early 14th century, Islam having been brought to the region by Berber tribesmen moving south from the North African coast. Mali’s court was so wealthy and magnificent that it received praise and admiration even from European authors. As the Malian kingdom declined in power, the Songhai Empire took its place and, based on a complex taxation system, it became the most powerful African empire of the period. It flourished from the mid-fifteenth century onwards and is named after its principal tribe. The kings and elites of the empire were Muslims but pagan elements were also blended into the culture. This blend allowed Timbuktu to become an important seat of education. The empire declined after an internal civil war made it vulnerable to attack from Morocco. Other empires such as those of the Asante and Dahomey defined the later history of West Africa, but they rose to power after European contact had
changed the region and their power was partly due to their economic advantage given by the transatlantic slave trade.

The American model of empire was well developed before the arrival of the Europeans. The Cahokia settlement near modern day St. Louis existed from the 9th century to the mid 13th century and was an urban settlement that had a number of ‘offspring’ settlements as far away as Aztalan in Wisconsin. These settlements were influenced by Mesoamerican culture and there may have been trade contact between the two. The Spaniards were successful in establishing the first European empire in the New World because their system simply merged with the existing, but crumbling imperial systems of the Aztecs and the Incas. The conquistadors joined the failing empires and took part in tribute and labour systems that already existed. The divided nature of Indian society fatally weakened the native empires, as the Spanish were able to turn Indian against Indian and prevent a pan-Indian feeling developing. Because some natives were disgruntled with the Aztec and Inca empires they were willing to side with the Spanish. A similar pattern emerged during European encounters across America, especially in Portuguese and Dutch contact with Brazilian Indians. The Aztecs and the Incas were only the final empires in a long line of complex and densely populated societies in Central and Southern America. The Mayans had lived in a vibrant and complex culture while Incas were more austere.

Europeans were unique among the Atlantic residents because they pursued imperial aims at a great distance from their homeland. Americans and Africans tried to conquer neighbouring territories whereas the Europeans, modelled on the example of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, travelled great distances to undertake their conquests. Greeks were exponents of maritime exploration and pursued the expansion of their empire, which under Alexander the Great stretched East to India, while also philosophising over the meaning of empire and conquest. The Roman Empire operated partly through military conquest and partly through bringing agricultural technology to an area seen as backward. It encompassed Africa, Asia and Christian Europe. It was the model for much of the imperial development in the Atlantic world. For example the Spanish conquistador, Hernan Cortes, used the term ‘empire’ in the Roman sense to mean territory conquered by military force. The Roman idea of _Res Nulius_, which argued that unoccupied land remained common property until it was put to use was also important in the Atlantic context. This became a justification for European territorial expansion that lingered in the white mindset for centuries. European understanding of ideas such as ‘wilderness’, ‘savagery’ and ‘civilisation’ also emerged from the struggles of Near Eastern peoples as told in the Bible, and was another important intellectual precursor to the 15th century expansion.

The medieval model of empire introduced the theory of economic exploitation: that the colony should provide an income for the mother country. The rise of the feudal state and development of an urban bourgeoisie went hand in hand with an increased interest in empire. This model is seen in the Crusading conquests in the Holy Land and the Crusades also mirror the combination of religious zeal and military display found in the early explorers of the Atlantic world. From the 12th century onwards European colonies established in the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant allowed Europeans to hone the practical methods and theories that they would later use in their contact with Africa and North and South America. Interest in Mediterranean colonies overlapped with the interest in the Atlantic world so the two co-existed. There are three models of European imperial development that cross boundaries in the medieval and early modern period: feudal (Crusader and Atlantic colonises); charter (Genoese in the Mediterranean, and Virginia and Massachusetts);
agreement (Genoese in the Bosporus and the Mayflower compact of Plymouth Rock in North America). Italian innovation, commercial expertise and financial clout drove much of the medieval imperial expansion and triggered the journeys that took Europeans around the Atlantic archipelago and eventually across the ocean. Genoa’s trading empire faced both east and west and was created because of a rivalry with Venice and a desire for seaborne expansion because the geographical barrier of the Alps made the expansion across land impossible. During much of the medieval period the Atlantic itself remained a barrier, being perceived as a space to cross rather than an arena of potential trade. As we shall see later in this chapter, Europeans struggled to understand this space. Rivalry between European nations, such as the way that Portugal and Castile competed for influence, also triggered Atlantic development.

The struggle between the centralising needs of the state and monarch and the desire of powerful individuals seeking to boost their own power is a recurring theme throughout the exploration of the medieval and early modern worlds. The thirteenth century conquest of Majorca by the Aragonese under King Jaime is important as an early example of European seaborne conquest. Majorca became part of the Aragon dominions, but was not referred to as an empire. Crusaders working under a system of private enterprise conquered Ibiza and Formentera, the crown legitimised but did not lead the missions. In England under the Tudors, empire denoted England’s independence from European powers and Elizabeth I used imperial iconography to reinforce the idea that she was a strong, independent ruler. Ulster provided the model for English adaptation of the Roman idea of empire as overseas conquest, and also provided an example of English and Scots working alongside one another.

Key text box Atlantic Interlopers: Vikings and Chinese?

Two groups do not usually form part of the Atlantic narrative but their claims to be part of it are interesting. Did the Vikings and the Chinese reach the New World before the Southern Europeans?

In the Viking case the answer is yes. We have no contemporary written evidence to corroborate the archaeological evidence found at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, but sometime between the 10th and 15th centuries Viking explorers such as Leif Erickson, based in Greenland, sailed west and reached the coast of what is now Canada, which was only 16 miles away. These stories are told in later sagas.

In the Chinese case, historians hotly debate the evidence. The existence of some archaeological evidence and detailed Chinese maps of the Americas seems to suggest that the Chinese visited the West coast of North America during the middle of the 15th century. But others claim this is fictional and spurious.

What drove exploration?

New technology played an important part in the exploration of the Atlantic empire. Renaissance thinkers rejected the scholastic learning of the medieval church and looked back to the ancients and their models of knowledge of the world and its people. However, looking back could only provide so much impetus. The physical capability for crossing the Atlantic or navigating the coast of West Africa had to be
developed. As important was the will of the individuals, rulers and states undertaking and supporting these expeditions. Without the desire to push further into the unknown, the voyages would never have taken place. In terms of ship design, the replacement of old style galleys with new broadside ‘ships of the line’ was important but did not cause an overnight revolution. The ships’ weaponry was also changing in the 16th century, as cheaper iron guns became available. But the real problems were the small size of the ships, which were not designed for long voyages, and the issue of victualling. The techniques of preserving food were woefully inadequate for voyages of several months. English ships increased in size under James I with the largest being the East India Men. At the same time the distinction between warships and merchant ships was defined, with the former required to protect the latter on the long trading voyages to the East and West. Naval innovation took place in response to opportunities not only in the Atlantic world but also globally.

Myth and exploration were closely tied together throughout the medieval period. One of the most popular books was Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels*, a fictional account, written towards the end of the 14th century, of a journey in which Mandeville encountered unusual races of people in far-flung corners of the earth. The writings of Mandeville influenced Columbus and this is why he expected to find so-called ‘monstrous races’ at his destination. The settlement of the Canary Islands in the early 14th century also shows how myth influenced the process of conquest. The Islands were given names such as Hesperides and the Elysian Fields. Part of the motivation for the Portuguese exploration of the West African coast was a desire to find the legendary land of Prester John: a Christian ruler initially supposed to live in the Far East but by the 15th century sited in Ethiopia. In the 1480s an early attempt at crossing the Atlantic undertaken from Bristol intended to search for the mythical ‘Isle of Brasil’.

The role of classical myth in triggering exploration did not cease once the Europeans had reached America. Amerigo Vespucci’s 1503 work *Novus Mundus* was a renaissance fable that expressed and created excitement about the New World by portraying the natives as natural and pure. Peter Martyr went further saying that the peaceful Caribbean natives were like the people of the golden age of classical antiquity. Significantly Martyr had never been to America so his understanding was based not on visiting America but solely on reading about it. But by 1526, eyewitness Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valde who spent most of his life in the New World, expressed how his observations in America showed classical authorities could no longer be reliable. But his pleas were ignored and thus the disconnect began between the eyewitness reports and the more fanciful humanist accounts written in Europe, which looked back to the models of the ancient world and were written by those with no experience of the Americas. By 1590 Acosta’s *Natural and Moral History* categorically challenged the errors of Aristotle and St. Augustine and proved that America was not Atlantis or Ophir and the natives were not part of the ten tribes of Israel. But this did not prevent Peruvian creoles from using European myths to proudly describe their home. Peru was associated with Ophir throughout the 17th century and in the 18th century creole patriots reiterated this connection.

The Spaniards’ seizure of Inca gold from Atahualpa in 1532-3 and the discovery of the vast silver mines at Potosi in 1545 caused the quest for El Dorado, the fabled city of gold mentioned by ancient authors, to reach its peak. The Spanish pushed into the interior of South America searching for mines in the Amazon jungle. The search for El Dorado inspired other European nations especially the British led by Sir Walter Raleigh. In 1542 the Portuguese expedition led by Orellana had supposedly
encountered members of a tribe of warlike female Amazons after whom the region was named and this had whetted the appetite of Raleigh. He had heard about the mythical city and its supposed location in South America and in 1595 these rumours persuaded him to sail to Guiana in order to find it. Raleigh believed that he would find the creatures described by the Roman writer Pliny in his *Natural History*, such as the Amazons and the *Ewaipanoma* who were men with mouths in their chests. This belief in the existence of strange, alien races influenced the way that Europeans treated Africans and Native Americans on their travels as shown in later chapters.

Gold was present in the interior of the Amazon region but Europeans did not discover it until the eighteenth century and Raleigh’s voyage to El Dorado was a failure. He fell out of favour with James I and spent much of the remainder of his life imprisoned in the Tower of London. The English quest for a South American El Dorado was abandoned early in the 17th century when South America ceased to be a model for English expansion in the New World, but English men did not stop fruitlessly seeking gold in North America.

**Key question text box:**
Why did exploration of the Atlantic world increase in the late 15th century?

- Improved naval and military technology
- A desire for fame, wealth and salvation that was no longer fulfilled in Crusades
- Rivalry between European nations
- Being shut off from Eastern trade routes after the fall of Constantinople
- Visionary individuals such as Henry the Navigator, Christopher Columbus
- State willingness to sponsor exploration in order to boost national fame
- Religious imperative: they wanted to take Christianity abroad

**Exploration and the Economy**
The Atlantic trade system did not emerge fully formed following Columbus’s voyages. Many aspects needed for its success were in place before Columbus even received permission for his first journey. Sugar production using slave labour is surprisingly not an Atlantic world innovation. The Venetians ran sugar colonies in Palestine following the First Crusade. The Venetians, Genoese and French also cultivated sugar in the 14th century on the island of Cyprus using Arab slave labour and local serfs. Occasionally a black African was enslaved but the slave communities were cosmopolitan; slavery was not associated with only one race. Sugar production was already an industrial process with huge boilers set up to process the raw sugar.

C.R. Boxer has called the Portuguese the ‘pathfinders’ of the Atlantic world. They were keen to expand their horizons because of their geographical position on the edge of Europe and also due to a lack of good soil in Portugal itself. Portugal and Castile, the regions that drove Atlantic interest, were also on the periphery of Europe in terms of their influence and power and this gave them something to prove. The Portuguese captured the Moroccan city of Ceuta in 1415. This was the first permanent European presence outside Europe in modern times. From Arabs they encountered there, the Portuguese learned about the gold mines in the African interior and this sparked their interest in that continent. The European desire for gold was promoted as
a religious mission. This wealth would help Christians liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims. However, by 1550 the Portuguese had lost their foothold in North Africa and this opened up the region for the other European countries to trade.

A Portuguese prince, Henry the Navigator or Dom Henrique, inspired much of the early exploration of the West African coast. He wanted to be remembered for posterity as a chivalrous Crusader knight and this meant that he was prepared to invest in voyages of exploration. The European naval involvement in the African slave trade began when Captain Goncalvez kidnapped a black man and woman to take to court to please Dom Henrique. This occurred after Goncalvez’s attempts at trading were rebuffed by the Africans. By the 1450s regular trading voyages searching for gold were taking place and by 1482 the Portuguese had established a permanent trading post on the West African coast at El Mina. They exchanged European goods for gold and, to a lesser extent, slaves. This wealth allowed Dom Joao II to send out more voyages of exploration and trade to the East.

From the mid 15th century onwards, in the Atlantic archipelago, Portugal copied the Mediterranean model of island hopping to conquer territory and thus expanded the slave-produced sugar industry into Madeira, the Azores, the Cape Verde Islands and finally Sao Tome and Principe, off the coast of Africa. These places became important trading centres. Once again Dom Henrique was the inspiration for establishing settlements on these islands. The Portuguese possession was not unchallenged as merchants of other nations, especially the Italian states, also invested in these islands. In 1452 the first sugar mill on Madeira was established, in which Dom Henrique was a partner. The islands attracted immigrants from Portugal who began using African slave labour in these mills, associating slavery solely with the black African. On Sao Tome and Principe, African slave labour was used, but the population was a cosmopolitan one with criminals, orphans, gypsies and Jews also settling there. On those islands and the Cape Verde Islands few white women settled and so a creole, mestizo population emerged very quickly. A similar trend occurred in the areas of Portuguese control on the African mainland, once factories had been established. Columbus took sugar to the Caribbean on his second voyage so the experiments with the crop began early in the New World.

During the late 15th and early 16th century the lure of the Far East was arguably more important to the European powers. There had been a demand for Eastern goods in Europe since Roman times and the historically small trade developed in the 16th and 17th centuries when the bullion from Africa and later America triggered more interest in the East. The East held the key to the spice and silk trades, and when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, Europeans were worried that their trade routes would be blocked. The aim of Columbus in setting out west was partly to find a new route to the east, a search continued by successive navigators until the opening of the Panama Canal in the 19th century. Accidents also took fleets bound for India westwards. The Portuguese sighted Brazil in April 1500 because 13 of its ships were blown westwards off course from their trip to India. On arrival they discovered the potential of Brasilwood, after which the country is named, and later sugar growing became important, but many merchants and explorers were not deterred from their eastern focus. By the 1530s, the Portuguese interest in the African coast was beginning to wane as their attention was captured by India and China, although a sufficient presence was maintained to sustain the slave trade.

In 1495-6 John Cabot arrived in Bristol and began preparing for his voyage in search of the Northwest Passage. He hoped to make direct connections with the markets of the East so that Europeans would not be reliant on traditional trade routes.
His journey also triggered an interest in the Newfoundland cod fishery, and, in 1501, Bristol merchants worked with Azorean Islanders for the first time to undertake explorations of the northern Atlantic between Greenland and Newfoundland with the purpose of recording commodities there but with no intention of going on to the East. However, America did not interest merchants until the later 16th century. Cabot, like Columbus, misunderstood where he had reached. He thought he had reached Cathay (China). The Northwest Passage was not seen as the sole option for reaching the trade rich lands of the east. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards courtiers such as Sir Hugh Willoughby with the Muscovy Company and explorers such as Sebastian Cabot tried to open up a Northeast Passage to the east via Russia. The Northwest Passage was still driving exploration well after the Atlantic trading system itself had been established and fascination with it touched the lives of many varied individuals. Olaudah Equiano, the former slave and abolitionist, and British naval officer Horatio Nelson were both involved in voyages to find the Northwest Passage. This quest, along with the search for gold, obsessed many of the explorers in the Atlantic World during the early period of contact.

Once the existence of Africa and the Americas had become a reality for Europeans, they began to prepare to exploit the resources that they found there. For example, slaves were not the only commodity that the Europeans desired from Africa; they also traded for dyes, wood, gold and spices. Africans and Native Americans were not merely passive recipients in this trade: they took an active part in the negotiations and often drove a hard bargain, refusing to allow Europeans to get away with offering a low price. In America, in the early years, many of the commodities purchased from the natives were designed to sustain the young colonies themselves. It was not until staples were established that Europeans managed the production and distribution of the crops. In Brazil, the Portuguese and Dutch sometimes worked with the native producers who harvested their trade crop for them and brought it to the coast for sale. But in most parts of America, Europeans did not simply stay on the coast and wait until traders came to their factories, as they did in the East and Africa.

The trading companies not only controlled trade but also encouraged exploration. These companies were focused on a particular area of the globe, but the policy behind them was globally conceived. An example of this is the Dutch West India Company, modelled on the Dutch East India Company, which in turn imitated the ‘fort and factory’ model used by the Portuguese in Africa and the East, which in turn was an imitation of the Italian factories in Byzantium. The Europeans came to Africa not as conquerors but as customers. The fortunes made by the Portuguese in Africa and America caused the Dutch and British to follow their example, although England’s historic alliance with Portugal and resultant pressure from the Portuguese restricted England’s interest in Africa. Economic rivalry developed but this was a global story rather than an Atlantic one. However, it was jealousy of the Spanish that made the English seek their fortunes in North America. Portugal may have prepared the way by offering a model for colonial development, but the Spanish discovered the gold and silver riches of Mexico and Peru and their experience provided the inspiration for many Europeans.

Exploration and national identity
Historians used to remember the voyages of Columbus as epics of ‘discovery’ and described the man himself as a heroic innovator who single-handedly changed the
course of human history. More recently it has been recognised that it is important to put Columbus into the context of his time and also to judge his achievements from a less Euro-centric point of view. His journeys were a disaster for the Native Americans, as many other Europeans were encouraged to follow him carrying their diseases with them. Also, other factors apart from his undoubted bravery and self-belief allowed Columbus to leave Europe in the first place. Spiritual regeneration and the expansion of the Catholic faith drove the Iberian interest in the Americas. The Spanish found a new confidence because of the *reconquista*, the reclamation of the their land from the invading Moors. The symbolic unification of the crowns of Aragon and Castile also changed the way Spaniards viewed their place in the world and Ferdinand and Isabella tried to cement their position as the true heirs of Visigothic Spain. This religious fervour and national pride influenced Ferdinand and Isabella in their decision to award permission to Columbus for his voyage but even then there were many protesters among the examiners at Salamanca who assessed his project and thought Columbus a charlatan who would be unable to fulfil his goal.

Castilians had been interested in territorial expansion since the early 15th century when they conquered the Canary Islands. Italians were also involved in the developing of the sugar trade there; they had easier access to ready currency than the Spaniards. Ferdinand and Isabella were also interested in using the Islands as a trade route for supplying African gold to Castile. The treatment of the Islands’ natives presaged the Spanish treatment of the Native Americans. Slave trading and disease had depleted Canarians’ numbers and once they were pacified, Spanish representations of them in literature depicted them living in pastoral idylls in idealised simplicity. The experience in the Canary Islands offered a precursor to the way that the Spanish empire would be run. The conquistadors in both places were only nominally tied to Ferdinand and Isabella; they wanted to be feudal lords. The monarchs resisted this urge by using land and labour as a means of securing loyalty to the crown.

Around the ports of the southern Mediterranean, the spread of knowledge about the Atlantic, by word of mouth, was an important method of cultural exchange. Sailors who had had experience of visiting the European Atlantic seaboard, Africa and the Atlantic archipelagos shared stories and expertise in informal ways and literate members of the crews would transmit maps and journals to those collecting such data in the universities of Italy and Iberia. For example Columbus learned about the Atlantic both from books and speaking to sailors, but the knowledge he gathered still did not prevent him from grossly miscalculating the distance across the Atlantic.

The reconquest of Spain was political as well as religious. Influenced by Augustine’s idea it was seen as a just war to reclaim stolen territory. The victory boosted Spain’s morale but also engendered a climate of paranoia and intolerance. It allowed the country to turn its attentions elsewhere. Hostility towards the Moors was in evidence throughout the period as Spain’s activities were designed to challenge the power of the Islamic Eastern Mediterranean by circumventing their trade routes. They also hoped to spread Christianity to any peoples they encountered. Rituals of claiming possession show how important the Europeans’ religious identity was to them. They claimed territory in the New World by planting a large cross and giving the region a European name. Using his religious authority the Pope divided up the Americas on Columbus’s return. In 1493 a Papal Bull from Alexander VI gave the Portuguese the eastern portion of the Atlantic and the Spanish the western. The Portuguese challenged this and under the agreement that followed, known as the Treaty of Tordesillas, the line was moved 600 miles to the west. Later, 16th century writers used
the papal donation to justify their territorial ambitions in the New World. Religious authority initially undertook land division although those in temporal authority also played their part. The European nations now had to move to settle and use this land that they had acquired, both by making use of its natural resources but also, a more important duty, by taking Christianity to the natives.

**Key information text box:**

**Columbus’s voyages**

- Born in Genoa
- Spent time in Portugal learning from sailors; visited Iceland and Ireland
- 1480 Visited Madeira to buy sugar for Portuguese
- 1480s early: visited Gold coast of Africa
- But Portuguese would not support a trans-Atlantic mission so went to Castile
- 1492 Permission finally given for voyage

But:
- He didn’t do it alone; Portuguese precursors; also used advice of others.
- Was confused about where he was/misunderstood span of ocean
- Thought he’d arrived in the East Indies, no concept of America
- Fell out with monarchs over use of Indians as slaves
- Never found the huge gold mines he sought
- Died in relative obscurity

**Exploration and International Rivalry**

The motivation to explore the far-flung corners of the earth emerged from the rivalry between the European powers. Nations who had not yet reached the Americas wished to emulate the success, fame and religious honour gained by the Iberians. This dynamic was especially important for the English and the Dutch who had their own reasons, of enmity with Spain, for pursuing interests across the Atlantic. A distinction is often drawn between the formalised systems of conquest used by the Iberian world and the commercial system of Northern Europe’s empires, but there were important similarities and the two sorts of empire were bound closely together and did not operate in isolation. The Spanish provided an example of how to exploit the natural resources but also how not to behave towards the natives. The emergence of the Black Legend, the idea that the Spanish Catholics were behaving in a particularly cruel and inhumane way in Central and South America, flourished in Northern Europe from the late 16th century onwards. In 1542, the work of Bartolome de Las Casas defended the Indians and criticised the behaviour of his fellow Spaniards, inspiring the Black Legend, as will be seen in a later chapter. It was cemented in the minds of Englishmen and the connection made between global expansion and the Protestant faith by the collector of travel narratives, Richard Hakluyt, and the observer of natives Thomas Harriot. Despite seeing the Spanish treatment of natives as a terrible example, the English settlers did not behave any better and pursued a policy of exclusion, removal and annihilation where necessary. From 1585 to 1603 when England and Spain were at war, the Spanish empire in the New World was a reality and many Englishmen
attacked Spain via her Atlantic empire. Elizabeth’s official policy was defensive but many of her sailors led a more offensive policy.

The first English forays into the Americas were by privateers lying in wait for the Spanish treasure ships returning from Mexico and Peru. Raiding continued, tacitly supported by Robert Cecil, even after peace was concluded by the two nations in James I’s reign. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the Dutch and English challenged the naval power of the Spaniards in the Atlantic. Not only was the Armada’s defeat a morale boost for the English and devastating for the Spanish, but in practical terms it reduced the size of Spain’s navy to such an extent that it was unable to prevent challenges from other nations. Sir Francis Drake’s circumnavigation voyage of 1577 during which he attacked Spanish ports along the Pacific coast and his successful action at Cadiz prior to the Armada also increased anti-Spanish feeling and Protestant nationalism in England. Drake worked with anyone who saw themselves as enemies of the Spanish such as the *cimarrones* (free blacks) who, in 1573, helped him to seize silver shipments from an overland mule convoy at Nombre de Dios, in present day Panama. In 1585 he also held the city of Cartagena to ransom in a lucrative raiding voyage. Through the work of privateers such as Drake, the English became successful interlopers in the Iberian trade.

Once settlements had been established, the rivalry between European powers triggered further expansion into wilderness areas, such as the Spanish and Portuguese competition in the Brazilian interior. The English were more concerned about the Spanish and the French than any threat from the Native Americans. The Caribbean was another important site where international rivalries played out. For example, the Spanish were forced to give up Jamaica by the English Puritan government of the mid-seventeenth century following a mission driven by religious and patriotic zeal.

A similar pattern emerged in West Africa where initial Portuguese dominance was challenged by the Dutch and the English, creating a situation in which Africans had to choose sides and could be disadvantaged by picking the wrong one. In the 1560s commercial rivalry between the English and the Portuguese over the Guinea trade in Africa developed into war. In the 1550s and 1560s the English, who desired a foothold in the gold trade, privately financed voyages to Guinea. In 1558 Mary paid for a royal voyage and in 1564 Elizabeth partnered John Hawkins in a slaving voyage, loaning him one of her ships. These were successful plundering voyages and they marked the start of the English involvement in the triangular trade but were also characterised by brutality towards Africans and a very high mortality rates among the sailors. The Portuguese sank English ships that they encountered off the coast of Africa, forcing the English out of the trade until the 17th century. Even the attempt in 1618 to form a Guinea trading company came to nothing in terms of participation in the slave trade although some gold and timber were acquired.

The Portuguese war with the Dutch in the early 17th century could be described as the first world war as the Dutch challenged the Portuguese in Brazil, gaining Pernambuco and Bahia, and on the African coast, gaining Sao Tome and Principe and some Gold Coast forts and even pushed the Portuguese temporarily out of the Malabar coast of India. The Dutch had been encouraged by Linschoten’s account published in 1598, which revealed the vulnerability of the Portuguese empire. The Dutch rise to power was rapid and global. However, the Portuguese proved difficult to dislodge because they had already created a settled community and established a number of native alliances. Some Dutch at Pernambuco actually converted to Catholicism such was the force of the Iberian cultural tradition there. There is also one recorded case of a Jesuit working for the Portuguese turning
renegade and joining the Dutch Calvinists. The Dutch defined themselves as enemies of Hapsburg Spain who, they felt, had colonised them in Europe and so their enmity of the Spanish was a reaction against tyranny. The unity of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in the late 16th century brought the Dutch and Portuguese into conflict. The Dutch saw the New World as a site of Iberian cruelty and hoped to rescue the natives. They were surprised to discover that the relationship between the Europeans and the Native Americans was not as simple as the coloniser taking advantage of the colonised. The French were also a significant Atlantic power during this early period and their challenges to Portuguese dominance of Brazil and to Spanish dominance of Florida forced both Iberian nations to further fortify and solidify their holdings.

A desire to emulate the trading and colonising success of the Italians, especially Genoa and Venice, was an important factor in the emergence of the Iberians into the Atlantic world. The growth in economic wealth and power of Venice was based on its success in the Levant trade that other Europeans wanted to emulate. The Barbary ports along the North African coast were cosmopolitan places where traders of many European and African nations lived and worked alongside one another. But it is important to remember that many individuals who played a part in the Atlantic story operated across national boundaries. For example, Columbus was a Genoese who had worked for the Portuguese before sailing across the Atlantic for Castile, but he always remained nostalgic for his home city. Although national rivalry drove much of the expansion, the story of the individuals involved reveals a more cosmopolitan aspect and there was a significant sharing of knowledge both orally by sailors of different nations and on paper through Latin works or the translation into the vernacular of books about the newly discovered parts of the world. Internal competition within one country could also trigger interest in the Atlantic as shown by the development of merchant class in Bristol and their sponsorship of trips to find a northwest passage and to open up fisheries and settlements in North America. They defined themselves in opposition to and in competition with the merchants of London. During this period London’s merchants were wary of exploiting the Atlantic trade, preferring instead to focus on opportunities in continental Europe. This lack of support was a serious weakness in England’s approach to overseas trade during the 16th century. It must be remembered that local pride and patriotism was as important in the early modern period as national identity.

Extra-national conquest
So far we have examined the role played by the crown, the state and individuals in the exploration of the Atlantic world. But the Catholic Church along with other denominations also played their part. In Catholic countries the secular church and the religious orders defined European expansion, but Protestantism was also an important motivator, both in its relationship with nationalism and in driving the migration of particular groups. Missionary zeal was central to the expansion. The desire on the part of Christians to convert ‘the heathen’ drove exploration and migration to all parts of the Atlantic world and caused a religious revival in Southern Europe. The Catholic Church was successful in converting millions of natives, slaves and freemen and gave the Iberian colonies an important coherence. The continental Catholic Church was in a state of uncertainty in the late medieval period. The burning of heretic enemies was seen as redemptive and this provided the backdrop to the behaviour of the church in the New World. As shown in a later chapter, Christian beliefs about the pagan Indians
and Africans and the way they should be treated influenced the developing racial ideology of America.

The Catholic Church responded quickly to the explorations of the Atlantic with the Papal Bull of 1493, which divided the region between the Portuguese and the Spanish. The territory was given to them with the proviso that the conquerors and settlers take with them missionaries to evangelise any native populations they encountered. This division of territory was respected by the nations as they pushed into the Americas and Africa. Papal Bulls that had been used in the conquest of the Mediterranean islands became the model for the Bull dividing the Atlantic. For example, in 1478 a Bull of Indulgence was given by Sixtus IV to encourage the conversion of the Canary Islanders. This in turn was modelled on the papal declarations encouraging crusades.

Representatives of the Catholic Church duly followed migrants and conquistadors into the New World and the orders arrived followed. In New Spain, Franciscans arrived in 1524, Dominicans in 1526 and Augustinians in 1533. However, the relationship between the secular parish-based Catholic priests and the members of the religious orders was sometimes a challenging one and the orders often operated outside the remit of the national, imperial structures. Initially, in New Spain, the mendicant orders had a leading role in evangelising and in debating the role to be played in society by the Native Americans, but then the crown established parishes and appointed secular clergy who took over from the orders. They used a system of mass baptism coupled with attempts to instruct the individuals (especially the young) about Catholicism. They learned local languages such as Nahuatl in Mexico and Quechua in Peru in order to instruct the Indians in their own language. They also instituted a policy of resettlement for the Indians forcing them to move from their tribal homes and to live in settlements controlled by the orders.

The Jesuits were not a uniquely Atlantic organisation; they operated in a global context. The Jesuits were managed by a complex administrative system of procurators based on the geographical unit of the province. Their independence upset the diocesan churches, especially in frontier areas where Jesuits took over roles usually undertaken by the secular church. The Jesuits were most influential in Brazil, having failed to get a foothold in Kongo. However, there was some success in the conversion of Africans. As early as 1488 King Jeleen of the Wolof people (in modern day Senegal) and six of his chief followers were baptised with members of the Portuguese royal family as godparents. C.R. Boxer has argued that Jesuit activity was all that kept some regions Portuguese, for example in East Africa and Timor. Although they owned thousands of slaves in Brazil, Jesuits also sent missions to enslaved Africans both in Africa and in the Americas. The Jesuits were keen founders of libraries and distributors of medicines, although they struggled to help the Natives overcome the horrors of the European plagues such as smallpox and measles, using them to teach the lesson that God was punishing the natives for their sinful ways. Some Indians saw the Jesuits as loyal allies who defended them against the aggressive settlers. While the Jesuits tried to prevent illegal slavery, the settlers needed labour and the Jesuits were powerless to stop the raiding by bandierantes, although by the 17th century they had begun arming the Indians at their missions.

However, by the mid-eighteenth century the Jesuit Atlantic was being dismantled by the national governments of Spain, France and Portugal who wished to reduce the power of the Jesuits in the Americas. They were accused of being greedy and corrupt and it was true that the Jesuits were very wealthy. The religious houses also became a battleground for the struggles for power and influence between
American born creoles and Iberians born *peninsulares*. The Inquisition was employed in the Americas and globally to stamp out superstition and sorcery but it was more tolerant than it first appeared. Magic borne of ignorance was not seen as an evil heresy and was tolerated until it was possible to ‘re-educate’ the natives. However, in some cases the heavy-handed tactics of the Inquisition may have hindered conversion by intimidating the natives.

The idea of a colony in America as a refuge from religious persecution began in the 1560s with the French Huguenot migration to Florida. They were the first to see America as a haven, but were soon followed by the religiously pluralist colonies of England in North America: the Catholic exile colony planned by George Peckham, the Catholics in Maryland and perhaps most famously, the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth and the Puritans in Massachusetts. These groups established transatlantic communities of dissent designed to help anyone who was a victim of religious persecution. Quakers were especially good at maintaining these networks and this explains the cosmopolitan nature of the Pennsylvania colony, which attracted dissenting migrants from all over Europe.

**Who held these nascent empires in place?**

The founding of the overseas empires was undertaken by various groups of people. Critics of Columbus say that he was a decent navigator but a poor administrator and without the help of others the Spanish empire in the New World would have been a complete failure. Who were these groups that bound the new European empires together?

Soldiers and sailors were an important force, especially in the early years of exploration. These military men were often a motley trans-national and even interracial collection who worked both for the state they represented and for their own financial gain. In New Spain, Cortes and the Pizarro brothers saw themselves as representatives of Spain and the Catholic monarchs, but much of their activity was undertaken to secure plunder and honour for themselves and their men. The relationship between the soldiers and the crown was strained at times. Gonzalo Pizarro was a rare example of a conquistador who turned completely against his own crown because he disagreed with the New Laws and their more sympathetic treatment of the natives. He was executed in 1548.

The settlements at Roanoke and Jamestown also contained a number of military men alongside civilian settlers and, although the soldiers were very good at exploring and mapping the local area, they were poor at growing crops and establishing friendly relationships with the Indians. Although without sailors the voyages would never have taken place, they did not hold a position of respect in the societies of Europe. They often worked against the settlers if their interests clashed, leading to tensions between the two groups. The Puritans in Massachusetts were upset by the behaviour of the soldiers and sailors they encountered whom they considered to be ungodly and coarse. Public opinion in Europe was also critical of the worst excesses of the military representatives of empire. After the Spanish conquistadors murdered Atahualpa in Peru and divided into factions, Spanish public opinion turned against them.

Alison Games believes that to understand the story of the Atlantic World it is important to study the patterns of migration. There were two sorts of migration to and around the Americas: free and forced. Free migrants were either economic or religious settlers seeking exile and security in the New World. Often these two motivations were combined. Free migrants were encouraged by a series of push and
pull factors: push factors such as poverty or debt in their own country that encouraged them to leave, and pull factors such as the possibility of making a fortune that attracted them to their new home. In New Spain and New France, only Spanish or French Catholic settlers were welcomed, and they travelled in small numbers. However, in Brazil, Portuguese, Dutch and French settlers appeared, while English North America was more cosmopolitan still, with a wide variety of different nationalities settling in that region. Migrants were especially important in the establishment of the English colonies in which the main focus was the creation of white settlements rather than the management of natives. The nationality of the settlers did not threaten the imperial government of the colonies and all were welcomed. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, the white settlers encouraged the use of Indian slave labour and gained dominance over the gold mines of the interior. They formed groups of bandierantes, who set out on harsh, long journeys to kidnap slaves or explore for gold mines. These bandierantes were mixed race groups formed initially because the soil of the Sao Paulo region was poor for growing sugar. They were hostile not only to local Indians but also to other white settlers who moved into the region following the gold rush.

In Africa few European settlers stayed permanently. The European presence consisted of merchants who stayed on the coast of West Africa for a few years. Some took African wives but many had families in Europe and their move was not intended to be permanent. From the 1580s onwards merchants were an especially important part of the English exploration, with their ships and money allowing the voyages to North America to take place. Merchants also worked against the trend towards centralised empire by indulging in illicit trade. Africans also sent out emissaries and negotiators to European courts, realising the importance of engaging with the crown of Portugal in order to improve trade. Their traders and merchants played a key role in the development of the Atlantic system. Arguably without them, the transatlantic slave trade would not have been a success.

Forced migration also ensured the success of the New World empires. The most obvious and numerous cause of this was the transatlantic slave trade, without which the sugar industry in the Caribbean and Brazil would not have developed. However, initially Indian slave labour provided the workforce for settlements in New Spain and Brazil. Settlers and missionaries combined to ‘reduce’ the natives to civilisation by moving them to Spanish and Portuguese-controlled villages from where they could hire out their labour. Although imperial authorities forbade Indian slavery, demands for labour meant that the kidnapping of Indians into slavery continued. Despite their denials and opposition, Jesuits colluded in this system. White labourers were also part of the forced migration, such as criminals who were exiled and labourers who were kidnapped from the streets of London to work in the plantations of Barbados and Jamaica.

Missionaries held many of the European empires in the New World together, especially in frontier regions. Although religious orders operated outside the imperial structure, their activities allowed the Europeans to gain control of the Americas using Indian labour. They were also important in New France, Brazil and New Spain in defending the rights of the natives and ensuring that they were considered full imperial subjects. In British North America missionaries were not a significant factor. Although individuals, such as John Eliot, concerned themselves with converting the natives, there was never a concerted effort on behalf of the Protestant denominations or the crown to make the Indians Christian, but missionaries transmitted information about the geographical realities of the Americas and its people to interested audiences.
in Europe. In Africa missionaries attempted to ply their trade, but were mostly unsuccessful due to the reluctance of Africans to replace their own religions with Christianity. The Portuguese Jesuits in Angola and Kongo had some success and missionaries there worked with the African elites and with captives on board the slave ships about to cross the Atlantic. However, the missionary effort did not have a significant impact on Africa until the 19th century when the imperial relationships morphed into a new form.

All empires needed administrators and a system of government in order to survive. In Central and Southern America governing the large Indian populations was the main concern for administrators. They used the encomienda system, offering natives protection in return for their taxes and forced labour. The Spanish were the most efficient at putting an imperial organisation into place because they had the incentive of wanting to gain access to the mineral wealth of Mexico and Peru. Their portion of the Americas was divided into the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru and a Board of Trade and a Council of the Indies was set up to control the area from Spain. However, some of the Spanish governors ruled almost as absolute monarchs, for example Francisco de Toledo in Peru in the 1570s. He conducted a survey of the natives within his region and forced them to move into small towns, although he did not actually take their land from them. He also mobilised a slave labour force to mine less accessible ores at Potosi. This meant that the financial benefit of his methods prevented criticism from Spain. Other European nations were slower to create a structure and were more haphazard in their methods of managing their new colonies. The Portuguese began distributing land to a group of donatories who were in charge of pacifying the Indian threat in their area. The most active of these was Duarte Coelho who was in charge of Pernambuco in the 1540s and 1550s and who made use of Indian slave labour in his sugar mill and managed to enforce Portuguese control of the region by playing the local Indian tribes off against one another. Royal governors oversaw the donatory system. In British North America a system of local assemblies began in Virginia in 1619, and settlers had representative rule during the reign of Charles I whilst the residents of England did not because the King had dissolved Parliament. From 1660 onwards, royal governors, who received a mixed reception among the settlers, oversaw the local assemblies but overall the royal control imposed on the Americas was much more tolerant than that imposed by Spain.

A final group who held these nascent empires together were the authors who wrote about the Americas and Africa and triggered European interest in the regions, their people and their commodities. Some of these authors were religious or economic migrants who had travelled to the New World, but many were ‘armchair travellers’ who stayed at home but saw it as their religious and national duty to encourage interest and investment in the colonies. John Dee, who coined the idea of a seaborne British Empire, and Richard Hakluyt, were the leading English exponents of this. As John Donne, poet and supporter of the Virginia Company wrote, ‘he who prints, adventures’. Despite the way that Europeans portrayed their own successes during this period, without the connivance of Natives and Africans, they would not have been able to gain a foothold in the Americas, so while Europeans were masters of their own destiny, they had to work with the other races of the Atlantic world in order to truly dominate the region.

As this chapter has shown, the European impulse to cross the Atlantic and establish settlements had important precedents. An interest in trade, plantation slavery and conquest had flourished in the Mediterranean for centuries. European rivalry in this region encouraged some states to push further in their attempts to seek economic
gain and religious salvation. As the Crusades ended, the desire to take Christianity to other parts of the world motivated those crossing the Atlantic or travelling down the coast of West Africa. The desire for personal gain and power also cannot be ignored. Every explorer, conquistador and settler from Columbus onwards saw the New World as a place where he or she could gain a heroic reputation and undreamed of wealth or influence. So, national pride, religion and personal gain united to drive the development of the Atlantic World. It is important to look at the explorers in the context of the time. Although we might be tempted to see them as heroes, they did not act alone. Similarly, white Europeans could not have achieved what they did without the assistance of other participants in the Atlantic story.

Chronology: Navigation and Empire
1000 Vikings under Leif Erikson explore coast of Eastern Canada
1421-23 Date of the highly contested Chinese voyage reaching the Americas
1430 Portuguese reach Madeira and the Azores under Prince Henry the Navigator
1440s Portuguese explorers reach the coast of West Africa
1481 El Mina founded on Gold Coast of Africa as a Portuguese trading post
1492 Genoan Christopher Columbus on behalf of the Spanish monarchy reaches the Americas, landing on Hispaniola. Also year of Reconquista: Spanish Christian defeat of Moors.
1493 Papal bull from Alexander VI dividing Eastern and Western Atlantic between Spanish and Portuguese
1497 John Cabot voyage claims Newfoundland for the English, looking for the North West Passage
1498 Vasco da Gama reaches India
1500 Portuguese explorers reach Brazil
1501 Amerigo Vespucci (After whom America was probably named) sailed round South America
1513 Juan Ponce de Leon becomes the first European to reach Florida
1519 Conquest of Mexico by Hernando Cortez
1526 Francisco Pizarro reaches Peru
1535 Jacques Cartier sails up the Hudson River to site of modern day Quebec
1539 Hernando de Soto reaches SE of North America
1540 Coronado explores the SW of North America
1542 Bartholome de las Casas defends the Indians in A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (not published until 1552)
1562 John Hawkins sails to Africa in the first English slave trading voyage
1576 Martin Frobisher sails to region that became New England looking for North West Passage
1577 Sir Francis Drake circumnavigates the world
1585 Roanoke colony established
1607 Founding of Jamestown
1613 Dutch trading post established on Manhattan Island
1620 Pilgrim Fathers arrive in Plymouth
1630 Puritans led by John Winthrop reach Massachusetts
Navigation: recommended reading
Kenneth Andrews, Trade, Plunder and Settlement (Cambridge, 1984)
Charles Boxer, The Portuguese Seaborne Empire (New York, 1975)
Alfred Crosby, The Columbian Exchange (Westport, 1972)
Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Before Columbus (Philadelphia, 1987)
Alison Games, Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World (Cambridge, MA, 1999)
Peter Hulme, Colonial Encounters (London, 1986)
Sidney Mintz, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (New York, 1985)
Benjamin Schmidt, Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World (New York, 2001)
Charles Verlinden, The Beginnings of Modern Colonization (Ithaca, 1970)

Key questions Navigation and Empire:
1. Prior to 1492 what were ‘colonies’ like?
2. What drove European exploration of and settlement of the Americas?
3. What role did rivalry between the European nations play?
4. Apart from states and monarchs, how did other organisations become involved in this process of expansion?