Voyages of discovery: Europe moves into the Atlantic world

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**Voyages of Discovery: Europe moves into the Atlantic World**

In the late medieval and early modern period, European explorations along the coast of Africa and then across the Atlantic brought them into contact with new places, people and goods. This article examines 150 years of European expansion and looks at the people and events that triggered the development of the region.

**West Africa: gold and slaves**

The historian C.R. Boxer 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 and 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 the crusading Christians liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims.

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 as a chivalrous Crusader knight and this meant that he was prepared to invest in voyages of exploration. 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.

From the mid 15th century onwards, Portugal created a slave-produced sugar industry in 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. 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.

The clichéd view of slavery is that white Europeans came to peaceful African nations and seized slaves, victimising the black Africans for racial reasons and later because labour was needed for the developing sugar plantations around the Atlantic world. But this is too simplistic a view. Africans themselves played a pivotal part in creating the system of slave seizing and trading that stretched down much of the West African coast.

**The search for a route to the Indies: Columbus and Magellan**
Before Columbus even dreamed of setting out across the Atlantic, explorers had made the perilous journey. 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. Some historians also believe that the Chinese reached America before Columbus. 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 fifteenth century. But others claim this is fictional and spurious.

Christopher Columbus, an explorer born in Genoa but working for the Spanish, is credited with the ‘discovery’ of the Americas. Historians tend not to call his arrival a ‘discovery’ any more because it can only be viewed thus from a European perspective. Natives knew of the continent’s existence for years before that! He arrived on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1492. Ironically, he was not searching for the Americas; he was not aware that such a continent existed and he initially thought he had arrived in Japan. He had been paid by Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish monarchs, to send a voyage to the ‘spice islands’ of south east Asia and he had no idea that the continents of North and South America stood in his way. In all Columbus led four voyages to the region and he and his expedition documented the Natives and flora and fauna that they found there. He took this information back to Spain and it encouraged the Spanish to fund further voyages and to claim the region for themselves and for the Christian religion.

Despite this, the goal of making trade connections with the spice islands had not been achieved, so in 1521, Ferdinand Magellan set out on a voyage to do just that. He became the first European to sail from the Atlantic into the Pacific Ocean via what we now know as the Magellan straits at the tip of South America. Unfortunately, Magellan lost his life in the Philippines during confrontation with natives whom he was attempting to convert, but the expedition limped home via the Indian Ocean and thus became the first to circumnavigate the globe.

**What drove exploration?**

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. Technology was also important. 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 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.
**Conquistadores: Cortes and Pizarro in the Americas**

The traditional, prejudiced narrative suggests that the South American Indians and rulers Montezuma and Atahualpa were so naïve about the intentions of the Spanish conquistadores Cortes and Pizarro that they welcomed them and their small armies into the heart of their cities as if they were Gods. This is not accurate. The Aztec and Inca societies, in Mexico and Peru respectively, were complex and sophisticated. They had systems of government that rivaled anything to be found in Europe and subtle religious beliefs that underpinned them. The traditional story of conquest assumes that Europeans dominated because of their weaponry. Actually the technological advantage was not that great; guns were not common and were unreliable. Tales of Native Americans being greatly frightened by them were probably exaggerated for European affect.

Native allies were crucial to the Spanish victory. The final conquest of Mexico City was only successful because the Spanish had 200,000 native allies working for them. Because the Aztec and Inca empires were new and loose confederations, they soon broke apart when a new military power entered the fray. The Spanish conquered by using a military strategy that they had honed the century before in the Reconquista of their own Iberian peninsula. They conquered a small bit of territory and then used that as a jumping off point when conquering the next.

The Spanish were able to dominate the region in a short time and with few men because of disease. Natives had little biological immunity to many of the endemic European diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza and the plague. European accounts acknowledge that many of them were sick when they got off their ships, and immediately transmitted their illnesses to the natives. Part of the problem is that the native response to illness simply didn’t work. It meant that the authority of the local shamans and leaders was challenged. Europeans were also baffled as to why so many natives were dying. They put it down to God’s will.

**English interest in the Americas**

While Elizabeth I was queen, England made the first move to explore parts of America. This had not occurred earlier because of the religious turmoil of the Reformation. At first explorers went to America on short voyages, not intending to stay more than a few months. Martin Frobisher and Humphrey Gilbert led explorations up the coast of what is now New England. They were looking for natives and to see what flora and fauna was there, but were also looking for the north-west passage, a waterway which allegedly led to the Pacific Ocean. This is a total fabrication, but rumours of its existence persisted into the nineteenth century.

In the 1580s though, the English were becoming increasingly keen on having a colony in the New World, they were jealous of Spanish success and wanted to have equal power and riches. So Queen Elizabeth agreed that one of her favourite courtiers, Walter
Raleigh, should organise a colony to be established in North America. The settlement was to be named 'Virginia' after the Virgin Queen. In 1585, a settlement of 100 men was finally made at Roanoke (an island off the coast of present-day North Carolina).

However, Roanoke was a failure. The settlement was abandoned after a year as the colonists weren’t very good at growing their own food and they went back to England. John White tried again with another expedition in 1587. This time the colonists were not only men, but also women: in fact the first English baby was born in North America around this time. But Spanish Armada happened in 1588 meaning that supply ships could not get back to Roanoke until 1590 and those settlers who were left in America had vanished. It’s still a mystery today where they went. They probably were massacred by the natives. A few might have survived and lived with the tribe.

With the advent of James I’s reign, peace with Spain brought a more amenable climate for English exploration. On December 20 1606 a voyage set off with 3 ships and 105 settlers. These included 35 gentlemen, a minister, a doctor, 40 soldiers and some artisans and labourers. They arrived in Virginia in April 1607 having sailed by the Azores and then via the Caribbean. This settlement, named Jamestown, initially looked promising as the natives were friendly and they were willing to trade for food. The settlers built a wooden fort and set about starting their community. The soldiers and navigators within the group were ordered to explore the local area.

But problems soon emerged. Members of the group disliked one another and factionalism set in. Also they were poor at clearing land and growing crops. The natives soon realised that they couldn’t supply the English with all the food that they needed and hostilities broke out. In October 1609 a fleet of supply ships from England was scattered by a storm, failing to arrive in America, so the settlers grew hungry and desperate. That winter was known as the ‘starving time’ and people ate dogs, shoe leather and even dead bodies to stay alive. However, the discovery in 1612 by settler John Rolfe, who married Native American ‘princess’ Matoaka or Pocahontas as she’s better known, that sweet West Indian tobacco grew well in Virginia ensured the survival of the colony. This commodity was very popular in Europe for leisure and health purposes and the development of the tobacco trade encouraged more investment in and migration to Virginia.

**Conclusion**

Why did exploration of the Atlantic world increase in the late 15th century, first because of the Spanish and Portuguese, and later, the English?

- Improved naval and military technology
- A desire for fame, wealth and salvation that was no longer fulfilled in the 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

**Glossary terms:**

**Fall of Constantinople:** In 1453 the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire fell to the invading Ottoman army. It had the effect of limiting European trading possibilities with the Far East.

**Reconquista:** Defeat by Christian Spain in 1492 of the ‘Moors’ (i.e. Muslims) who had been occupying parts of the Iberian Peninsula, causing a rise of Spanish national pride and prejudice against non-Christian residents.

‘Ships of the line’: large warships constructed from the seventeenth century onwards to engage in battle by turning side-on and firing powerful guns at an opponent’s ship.

**Spanish Armada:** Attempted invasion of England in 1588 by Philip II of Spain to overthrow Elizabeth I and Protestantism. England was under siege for several months during late summer, preventing the sailing of supply ships to Roanoke.

**Chronology:**

1000 Vikings under Leif Erikson explore coast of Eastern Canada
1421-23 Date of the highly contested Chinese voyage reaching the Americas
1440s Portuguese explorers reach the coast of West Africa
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.
1518-21 Magellan circumnavigates the globe, looking for route to the Indies
1576-78 Martin Frobisher’s voyages in search of the North West Passage
1583 Humphrey Gilbert’s voyage to Newfoundland
1585 First Voyage to Roanoke, men only
1587 Second Voyage to Roanoke with men and women on board
1606-7 Expedition to settle Jamestown, Virginia: England’s first successful settlement in the Americas

**Autobiography:**

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**Points for Discussion:**
1. Why did so much exploration occur during this era?
2. Did the European explorers achieve their goals?
3. What was the response of the Africans and Native Americans that they encountered?
4. Why were the English settlements so different from the Spanish ones?

Further Reading:


Biographies of Key figures:

Henry the Navigator
- Born 1394
- Member of Portuguese royal family, third child of King John I
- Investor in voyages of exploration and in sugar plantations
- Died 1460

Christopher Columbus
- Born 1451
- Shown interest in exploration, mythical and Biblical tales of voyages
- On behalf of Spanish crown led four voyages to the Americas
- Appointed governor and viceroy of the Indies
- Accused of mistreatment of fellow Spaniards and Native Americans
- Died 1506

Ferdinand Magellan
- Born 1480
- Early experience of voyages to India
- Circumnavigated the globe 1518-21
- Died 1521
John White
- Born c. 1540
- Little known of early life
- Voyaged to Roanoke in 1585
- Returned on second voyage as Roanoke’s governor, also recorded it in his art work
- Died probably 1593

John Rolfe
- Born 1585
- Left for Virginia in 1609
- First exporter of Virginia tobacco to England 1612, ensuring colony’s survival
- Married Pocahontas in 1614, but she only survived until 1617
- Died 1622