

Topic 1.4

Columbian Exchange, Spanish Exploration, and Conquest

In 1491, the world was in many of its aspects and characteristics a minimum of two worlds—the New World, of the Americas, and the Old World, consisting of Eurasia and Africa. Columbus brought them together, and almost immediately and continually ever since, we have had an exchange.

Alfred W. Crosby, historian and geographer, 2011

Learning Objective: Explain causes of the Columbian Exchange and its effect on Europe and the Americas during the period after 1492.

Columbus's purpose in sailing westward in the 1490s was to find a sea route to the lucrative trade with Asia, which had been limited by a long and dangerous land route. The eventual impact of what Columbus found was of far greater importance.

Christopher Columbus

As mentioned in the previous topic, 1.3, changing economic, political, and social conditions in Europe combined to support new efforts to expand. Exploration across the seas was specifically supported by the improvements in shipbuilding and in navigation with better compasses and mapmaking. These factors all helped shape the ambitions of many to explore.

Plans to Reach Asia One of these explorers was from the Italian city of Genoa, Christopher Columbus. He spent eight years seeking financial support for his plan to sail west from Europe to the “Indies.” Finally, in 1492, he succeeded in winning the backing of Isabella and Ferdinand. The two Spanish monarchs were then at the height of their power, having just defeated the Moors in Granada. They agreed to outfit three ships and to make Columbus governor, admiral, and viceroy of all the lands that he would claim for Spain.

After sailing from the Canary Islands on September 6, Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas on October 12. His success in reaching lands on the other side of the ocean brought him a burst of glory in Spain. But three subsequent voyages across the Atlantic were disappointing—he found little gold, few spices, and no simple path to China and India.

The Columbian Exchange

Europeans and the original inhabitants of the Americas had developed vastly different cultures over the millennia. The contact between them resulted in the Columbian Exchange, a transfer of plants, animals, and germs from one side of the Atlantic to the other for the first time. These exchanges, biological and cultural, permanently changed the entire world. Never again would people live in isolation from the other hemisphere.

Europeans learned about many new plants and foods, including beans, corn, sweet and white potatoes, tomatoes, and tobacco. These food items transformed the diet of people throughout Eurasia and touched off rapid population growth in regions from Ireland to West Africa to eastern China. Europeans also contracted a new disease, syphilis.

People in the Americas learned about sugar cane, bluegrasses, pigs, and **horses**, as well as new technology, such as the wheel, iron implements, and guns. But while the Columbian Exchange led to population growth in Europe, Africa, and Asia, it had the opposite effect in the Americas. Native Americans had no immunity to the germs and the **diseases** brought by Europeans, such as **smallpox** and **measles**. As a result the native population declined rapidly in the first century after contact. In Mexico, the native population declined from around 22 million in 1492 to around 4 million by the mid-16th century.

The Rise of Capitalism

In Europe, population growth and access to new resources encouraged trade, which led to economic, political, and social changes. The medieval system of feudalism, a system in which monarchs granted land to nobles in exchange for military service, declined. In its place rose **capitalism**, an economic system in which control of capital (money and machinery) became more important than control of land. As trade increased, commerce became increasingly important, and political power shifted from large landowners to wealthy merchants.

One reason trade increased was that Europeans were eager to gain access to the riches of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. A single successful trade expedition could make the individual who financed the voyage very wealthy. However, ocean voyages were expensive and dangerous. One bad storm could destroy all the ships in an expedition. To finance trade voyages more safely, Europeans developed a new type of enterprise, the **joint-stock company**, a business owned by a large number of investors. If a voyage failed, investors lost only what they had invested. By reducing individual risk, joint-stock companies encouraged investment, thereby promoting economic growth.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS COLUMBUS A GREAT HERO?

When Columbus died in 1506, he still believed that he had found a western route to Asia. However, many Spaniards realized he had not. Nor had he found gold and spices. They viewed him as a failure. Even the land that he had explored was named for someone else, Amerigo Vespucci.

Columbus then became more honored. Scholars praised his skills as a navigator and his daring. He traveled where nobody else had ever dared to venture. As early as 1828, Washington Irving wrote a popular biography extolling the explorer's virtues. The apex of Columbus's heroic reputation was reached in 1934 when President Franklin Roosevelt declared October 12 a national holiday.

Since the 1990s, however, historians have become more aware of the strength and diversity of indigenous cultures and the devastating impact of contact with Europeans. As a result, several biographies have revised their view of Columbus, taking a more critical look at him.

A Fortunate Navigator Some have argued that Columbus was simply at the right place at the right time. Europeans at the end of the 15th century were eager to find a water route to Asia. If Columbus had not run into the Americas in 1492, some other explorer—perhaps Vespucci or Cabot—would have done so a few years later.

A Conqueror Some revisionists take a harsh view of Columbus, regarding him not as a discoverer but as a conqueror. They portray him as a religious fanatic who sought to convert the American natives to Christianity and kill those who resisted.

Response to the Critics Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued that Columbus's chief motivation was neither greed nor ambition—it was the challenge of the unknown. Others pointed out that, while Columbus brought deadly diseases to the Americas, the costs of contact were partially offset by positive results such as the development of democracy.

Historians will continue to debate the nature of Columbus's achievement. As with other historical questions, distinguishing between fact and fiction and separating a writer's personal biases from objective reality are difficult. One conclusion is inescapable: As a result of Columbus's voyages, world history took a sharp turn in a new direction. People are still living with the consequences of this interaction.

Support an Argument *Explain two perspectives on Columbus's role in the European expansion in the Americas.*

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. How did the Columbian Exchange develop, and what was its impact on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean?

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Exchange & Interaction (WXT, GEO)

horses
diseases

smallpox, measles
capitalism
joint-stock company

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“Apart from his navigational skills, what most set Columbus apart from other Europeans of his day were not the things that he believed, but the intensity with which he believed in them and the determination with which he acted upon those beliefs. . . .

Columbus was, in most respects, merely an especially active and dramatic embodiment of the European—and especially the Mediterranean—mind and soul of his time: a religious fanatic obsessed with the conversion, conquest, or liquidation of all non-Christians; a latter-day Crusader in search of personal wealth and fame, who expected the enormous and mysterious world he had found to be filled with monstrous races inhabiting wild forests, and with golden people living in Eden.”

David E. Stannard, historian, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*, 1992

1. According to Stannard, which of the following most accurately describes the context in which Columbus lived?
 - (A) Europeans believed they should spread Christianity to people in other parts of the world.
 - (B) Europeans viewed their culture and the cultures of other people as very similar.
 - (C) Europeans were the wealthiest people in the world and considered themselves “golden.”
 - (D) Europeans assumed that a continent existed that they had no contact with.
2. Evidence that would modify or refute the view of Columbus expressed by Stannard in this excerpt would include
 - (A) statements by Spaniards in the late 16th century who believed that they should not try to convert people to Christianity
 - (B) excerpts from letters by Columbus indicating that he hoped his ventures would make him wealthy
 - (C) descriptions of Native Americans by other European explorers that were negative
 - (D) examples of long-term benefits for people in Europe and Asia that resulted from the voyages by Columbus

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

1. “The New World provided soils that were very suitable for the cultivation of a variety of Old World products, like sugar and coffee. The increased supply lowered the prices of these products significantly, making them affordable to the general population for the first time in history. The production of these products also resulted in large inflows of profits back to Europe, which some have argued fueled the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Europe. . . .

The exchange also had some extremely negative impacts. Native American populations were decimated by Old World diseases. This depopulation along with the production of valuable Old World crops . . . fueled the demand for labor that gave rise to the transatlantic slave trade. The result was the forced movement of over twelve million slaves from Africa to the Americas and devastating political, social, and economic consequences for the African continent.”

Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, *The Columbian Exchange*, 2010

“Most dramatically, the Columbian Exchange transformed farming and human diets. This change is often so culturally ingrained that we take it for granted. . . .

Despite the transport of new killer diseases, including the emergence of deadly syphilis in Europe and Asia, which was linked to trade with the Americas, the Columbian Exchange eventually allowed more people to live off the land. These newly available plants and animals led to the single largest improvement in farm productivity since the original agricultural revolution. The results of different peoples’ efforts in domesticating and refining crops over thousands of years were now available and being adopted worldwide.”

Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *Atlantic*, August 24, 2018

Using the excerpts above, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- Briefly describe ONE important difference between Nunn and Qian’s and Lewis and Maslin’s historical interpretations of the Columbian Exchange.
- Briefly explain how ONE specific historical event, development, or circumstance from the period 1491–1607 that is not specifically mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Nunn and Qian’s argument.
- Briefly explain how ONE specific historical event, development, or circumstance from the period 1491–1607 that is not specifically mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Lewis and Maslin’s argument.