Chapter 2: When World’s Collide, 1492–1590

Chapter Review

I. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES The English at Roanoke

The Roanoke voyages sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh foundered through a lack of planning, misunderstandings in English-Native relations, and the bad luck of the Spanish Armada, but foreshadowed the problems English colonists (focused on plunder and profit and easily moved to violence) would face in their early American ventures.

II. THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE

Contact with, exploration of, and even brief settlement in North America took place long before Columbus’s first voyage. Yet, it was his voyages that had the most profound impact and consequences. An understanding of the transformation of Europe in the centuries before Columbus is essential background knowledge.

a. Western Europe before Columbus

Western Europe was an agricultural society undergoing rapid expansion. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, cultivated land more than doubled and the population tripled. Such rapid growth, however, also led to widespread epidemics (the most notable was the Black Death bubonic plague from 1347–1353), starvation, and death as the economic expansion remained concentrated in only a few hands and feudalism persisted. Advances in technology eventually mitigated some of these effects and resulted in a population of nearly 65 million by 1500. Western Europe was officially Christian and the dominant Catholic Church provided legitimacy for social and political inequality. The Church also actively persecuted heretics and nonbelievers.

b. The Merchant Class and the Renaissance

The economic growth fueled by agricultural expansion created the conditions for a parallel commercial expansion and the growth of markets and towns. The city-states of Italy were at the center of this commercial growth as they capitalized on the new trade routes to Asia. But economic expansion also led to the intellectual and technological growth of Europe, as exchanges with Asia and the Middle Eastern societies helped trigger an artistic and scientific revolution, marked by the growth in communication, universities, and new ideas such as humanism, collectively known as the Renaissance. The human-centered perspective and curiosity spawned by the Renaissance played a critical role in motivating American exploration.

c. The New Monarchies
Peasant rebellions and warfare among the nobility and the social and political disorder of the later Middle Ages created new opportunities for Western European monarchs to replace the lords as centers of power. Often allied with wealthy merchants, the monarchs built up bureaucracies and military forces, all of which would contribute to European expansion.

d. The Portuguese Voyages

The Portuguese were the first and most adept at integrating the exploration and conquest of distant lands into their consolidated monarchial system. Prince Henry “the Navigator” was instrumental in the plan to establish a self-sufficient trading empire. Over the next two centuries Portugal incorporated new ideas and technology into its quest by creating faster and better-handling ships (the *caravel*) and new navigational techniques. Soon Portugal was in control of the Asian spice trade, had access to the trade of the northwest African coast, the Atlantic islands of the Azores and Madeiras, and had already established trading centers in India. They also established the Atlantic slave-trade system.

e. Columbus Reaches the Americas

Trained in Portugal, the Genoese Columbus believed the Indies could be reached more easily by sailing west. Turned down by Portugal, he turned to Ferdinand and Isabella, powerful rulers of a newly united Spain after a victory (the Reconquista) over Spanish Muslims. Although his “Enterprise of the Indies” proved his notions wrong, Columbus’s arrival in the Bahamas and the voyages that followed were an error of monumental consequences. Despite finding no gold and spices, Columbus established the first colony on Hispaniola and set the Spanish pattern of enslavement and exploitation of Native Americas (such as the unfortunate Tainos, a Native American Columbus first encountered) as well as introducing European diseases to the Americas. Although Columbus never realized his errors, by his death Amerigo Vespucci—America’s namesake—had called it a “New World.”

MHL video: How Should We Think of Columbus? At www.myhistorylab.com
MHL document: From the Journal of Christopher Columbus (1492) at www.myhistorylab.com
MHL video: What is Columbus’ Legacy? At www.myhistorylab.com

III. THE SPANISH IN THE AMERICAS

The Spanish Empire was marked by imperial control. But the distance also led to a great deal of local autonomy. Despite the perception that the Spaniards carefully controlled their colonies and the people, the end result was a mixture of peoples, ideas, and customs.

a. The Invasion of America

Spanish control was facilitated by the establishment of the *encomienda* system in which Indians owed service to the Spanish and the profits were funneled back to Europe.
From the Caribbean, the Spanish then began to reach out to new areas in order to secure more labor, including the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. By 1511 they also turned to the Central American mainland. In 1518 they made contact with the Aztecs in Mexico. The next year, Hernán Cortéz—aided by Native rebellions against the Aztecs, “gobetweens” (such as his translator, Malínche), and a smallpox epidemic—overthrew the powerful Aztec empire. Plundering the conquered land, Cortéz brought the Spanish monarchy wealth beyond their imagining.

b. The Destruction of the Indies

Although the native peoples resisted, they were no match for the Spanish conquerors, their weapons. They were also unable to stave off the decimation of European diseases. This two-pronged destruction was quickly characterized as the “Black Legend” and protesters decried its barbarism, violence, wanton disregard for Indian life, and unmitigated greed. Bartolomé de Las Casas was the most notable opponent of the Spanish method and his writing, The Destruction of the Indies, was used by the enemies of Spain to denounce its actions. While scholars have disputed de las Casas’s account, recent studies make it clear that his claims of massive population loss were more right than wrong.

c. The Virgin Soil Epidemics

Las Casas was incorrect in attributing most of the deaths to warfare. Indian peoples lack antibodies to resist European diseases, especially smallpox, leading to “virgin soil epidemics” in which, even the Spanish observed among the Inca people of the Andes, as much as half the population died. Combined with famine and low birthrates, native populations fell by as much as 90 percent, a downward spiral that was not reversed until the twentieth century.

d. The Columbian Exchange

While the Spanish plundered their conquests, sending tons of precious metals back to Europe, the Old and New Worlds exchanged their peoples, animals, plants and goods. In addition to disease, Europeans introduced sugar, rice, and coffee, as well as cattle and horses to the Americas. American maize and potatoes became staple crops in Europe and tobacco, vanilla, and chocolate became highly valued.

e. The Spanish in North America

Following Ponce de Leon’s 1513 discovery of Florida, Spain turned her focus northward. Explorations from Narváez to Cabeza de Vaca to de Soto to Coronado unsuccessfully sought Indian empires and cities of gold between the 1520s and 1540s. Fierce native resistance and the lack of easy riches led Spain to lose interest for 50 years, but meanwhile de Soto unleashed epidemics that devastated the Mississippians.
f. The Spanish New World Empire

In the century after Columbus, 250,000 Europeans, mostly Spanish, and 125,000 Africans settled in the Americas, many in urban communities built atop Aztec and Inca ruins. With few European women among them, European men married or cohabited with Africans and Indians, creating a hybrid population of whites, *mestizos* and *mulattoes*, Indians and Africans. Ruled in theory by the Spanish Council of the Indies, colonial regions in fact exercised considerable local decision making.

IV. NORTHERN EXPLORATION AND ENCOUNTERS

The success of the Spanish, not surprisingly, attracted the attention of other European powers as first France and later England launched their own colonial ventures.

a. Trade, Not Conquest: Fish and Furs

The fishing grounds of Nova Scotia had attracted European fisherman well before Columbus’s journeys. Both France and England sent explorers back to the region to investigate possible places for settlements, trade routes, and new goods. Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot) made the first English voyage in 1497. Jacques Cartier explored the interior of North America for France in the 1530s, initiating the fur trade, which for the next three centuries would dominate European and North American connections. The French found willing trade partners among the Indians of Canada and the Great Lakes region based on commerce rather than direct conquest. Trade, already an unequal exchange favoring the Europeans, created conflict between Indian tribes as they contested for access to hunting grounds, and grew dependent on European goods such as knives, kettles, and firearms. Ultimately the French set up settlements and sought to monopolize the fur trade.

b. The Protestant Reformation and the First French Colonies

The Protestant Reformation sparked by Luther in 1517 was initially a quest to reform the Catholic Church, but ultimately rejected Catholic authority, power, and theology. As Protestantism spread, John Calvin brought reformed ideas to France, leading to a persecution that drove Calvin to Geneva and many French Huguenot Protestants into exile. In 1562, Jean Ribault led a group of Huguenots who sought to set up a religious outpost in the present-day American South. But Spanish King Philip II ordered a massacre of the Huguenots and, to eliminate all future incursions founded St. Augustine in 1565.

c. Social Change in Sixteenth-Century England
As English landlords responded to rising prices by “enclosing” lands and shifting to sheep grazing, displaced rural populations fled to the cities seeking work. Henry VIII increased royal power, forging an alliance with wealthy merchants and landowning gentry. Breaking away from Rome over a marital dispute, Henry launched an English Reformation that led to confiscation and redistribution of church property. After the brief and contentious reigns of Edward VI and Mary, Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, both consolidating royal power and launching an English conquest of Ireland, where conflict with the Irish would influence English attitudes in the Americas.

d. Early English Efforts in the Americas

Elizabethan adventurers, many of them veterans from the conflicts in Ireland, both explored the North Atlantic and raided Spanish America, challenging Spanish control and ultimately breaking Spain’s monopoly of the New World. Walter Raleigh’s ill-fated Roanoke venture described in the chapter opening failed, in part due to the 1588 attack of the Spanish Armada, but led John White and Thomas Harriot to publish the first accurate description of North American Indians at the moment of contact.

V. CONCLUSION

Beginning with Columbus in 1492, Spain developed the first New World empire, with catastrophic consequences for Native Americans. While France followed Spain’s model of commercial exploitation, the French focused on trade rather than settlement. English efforts in Ireland and Roanoke would lead to another model of American colonization.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 2:

1. What was the European background to the colonization of North America?
2. What kind of empire did the Spanish create in the New World, and why did it extend into North America?
3. In what ways did the exchange of peoples, crops, animals, and diseases shape the experience of European colonists and American natives?
4. What was the French role in the beginning of the North American fur trade?
5. Why did England enter the race for colonies?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. It has been said that the Europeans would not have been successful in their colonization had it not been for the unintended consequences of the spread of disease and epidemics. To what extent do you agree with this statement?
Answer: There is no question that disease was the single largest factor in eliminating the presence of Native Americans throughout the continents of the Americas. Many Indian societies lost upwards of 90 percent of their populations, oftentimes without even directly encountering Europeans. Rarely were the Europeans able to levy such heavy casualties on the Indians as a result of war that could even come close to matching the destruction wrought by disease.

2. What were the European factors and developments that led to their ability and desire to explore, expand, and settle in the New World?

Answer: Economic and political consolidation fueled by success in trade to Asia and the Middle East as well as the incorporation of Africa into their sphere of influence. Scientific advances also played a central role in allowing the seafarers to travel further, faster, and with more certainty of success.

3. How and why did the Spanish, French, and English attempts at settlement differ?

Answer: Each nation settled in different regions of the New World, with the Spanish taking possession of vast tracts, as authorized by the Papal declaration in the Treaty of Tordesillas. The Spanish came with the full intent of exploitation and settlement often was a premeditated action, engaging in frontiers of inclusion out of need and relying on the native peoples for labor. The French and English were almost “accidental” colonizers, slowly entering into their respective regions first by means of trade and small settlements and eventually by being enticed by new goods—furs and tobacco as opposed to the Spanish quest for gold.

Lecture Outline

American Communities: Roanoke
The Expansion of Europe
   Characteristics of European Communities
   Joining of the Merchant Class and Monarchies
   Cultural and Political Renaissance

Portuguese Explorations
   Prince Henry and Science/Technological Advances
   Asia and Africa
   Advent of the Slave Trade

Columbus’s “Discovery”
   Spanish Political Consolidation
   First Voyage and Discoveries
   Political and Economic Advances
   Later Voyages and Colonization
   Vespucci and Novus Mundo

Spanish in America
God, Gold, and Glory
Invasion and Conquest
The “Black Legend”
Intercontinental/“Columbian” Exchange
Communities in Conflict: de Las Casas and the Debate Over the Justice of the Conquest
A New World Empire

European Competition
The Impact of the Protestant Reformation
French Exploration and Settlement
Changes in English Society
English Efforts at Exploitation
Elizabethan Ireland and America
John White’s Watercolors

Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
1492: An Ongoing Voyage: http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/1492_exhibit/Intro.html is an online exhibit from the Library of Congress that examines the multiple dimensions of the world from which Columbus sailed, the world to which he traveled, and the world from which the slave labor was drawn to sustain the development of New World Empires.

Myth and Reality: The Legacy of Spain in America: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/776920/posts from the Institute of Hispanic Culture of Houston, this site provides a reliable compilation of the scholarly research that has been conducted on the Black Legend.

A Treasure Trove of North American Exploration: http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/2/8/ from the National Library of Canada, shows that the exploration of North America was really a long, arduous process that took place over more than four centuries of exploration, from the arrival of the first Europeans to the discovery of the Northwest Passage.

American Memory: Discovery and Exploration:
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/dsxphome.html documents the discovery and exploration of the Americas through manuscripts and maps dating from the late fifteenth century to the seventeenth century and even later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps documenting the exploration and mapping of the continental interiors.

Films/Video
1492: Conquest of Paradise (154 minutes). Paramount, 1992. Covers the 23-year span of Columbus’s initial efforts to secure financing through to his last voyage and death, ending with his legacy being carried on by his son.
The Mission (126 minutes). Enigma Productions, 1986. Eighteenth-century Spanish Jesuit efforts to establish missions among the Guarani Indians of Brazil and their subsequent efforts to protect them the consequences of domination by pro-slavery Portugal.

Aguirre: The Wrath of God (93 minutes). Werner Herzog Films, 1972. German with English subtitles. Starring Klaus Kinski and filmed on location, this movie explores the ill-fated 1560s Spanish expedition that, marching from the mountains of post-conquest Inca Peru, sought El Dorado (the city of Gold) in the Amazon jungles as the conquistador leader, Aguirre, goes mad and the expedition collapses in death and destruction.

Cabeza de Vaca (112 minutes). Roger Corman International. Spanish with English subtitles, this award-winning Mexican film follows Cabeza de Vaca, the sole survivor of the Navarre expedition, in his travels across the Gulf Coast in the 1520s.

MY HISTORY LAB CONNECTIONS

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

Read the Documents
From the Journal of Christopher Columbus (1492)
Christopher Columbus, Letter to Luis de Sant’ Angel (1493)
Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, “Indians of the Rio Grande” (1528–1536)
Jacques Cartier on Meeting the Mik’maq Indians (1534)
Mik’maq Chief’s Observations of the French (1691)
Bartolomé de Las Casas “Of the Island of Hispaniola” (1542)

Research and Explore

Read the Documents
Exploring America: Exploitation of the Americas
Cultures Meet: Europeans View the New World

Read the Biographies
Virginia Dare
Bartolomé de Las Casas

Watch the Videos
What Should We Think of Columbus?
What is Columbus’s Legacy?
Critical Thinking Exercises

Students should be assigned readings that speak to the Native American rationales for permitting and assisting and resisting the European settlements. Often times the same tribes and groups engaged in different responses to the Europeans over time and depending upon the changing circumstances. What did Native Americans have to gain by being cooperative?