Ferdinand Magellan Navigating the Straits Connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans
This late sixteenth-century print embellishes the first circumnavigation of the globe voyage with fanciful representations of native peoples and creatures as residents of South America.
(The Ganger Collection, New York)

What were the objectives and major accomplishments of the voyages of exploration undertaken by Chinese, Polynesians, and other non-Western peoples?

In this era of long-distance exploration, did Europeans have any special advantages over other cultural regions?

What were the different outcomes of European interactions with Africa, India, and the Americas?
In 1511 young Ferdinand Magellan sailed from Europe around the southern tip of Africa and eastward across the Indian Ocean as a member of the first Portuguese expedition to explore the East Indies (maritime Southeast Asia). Eight years later, this time in the service of Spain, he headed an expedition that sought to demonstrate the feasibility of reaching the East Indies by sailing westward from Europe. By the middle of 1521 Magellan’s expedition had achieved its goal by sailing across the Atlantic, rounding the southern tip of South America, and crossing the Pacific Ocean—but at a high price.

One of the five ships that had set out from Spain in 1519 was wrecked on a reef, and the captain of another deserted and sailed back to Spain. The passage across the vast Pacific took much longer than anticipated, resulting in the deaths of dozens of sailors due to starvation and disease. In the Philippines, Magellan himself was killed in battle on April 27, 1521, while aiding a local ruler who had
promised to become a Christian. Magellan's successor met the same fate a few days later.

To consolidate their dwindling resources, the expedition's survivors burned the least seaworthy of their remaining three ships and transferred the men and supplies from that ship to the smaller Victoria, which continued westward across the Indian Ocean, around Africa, and back to Europe. Magellan's flagship, the Trinidad, tried unsuccessfully to recross the Pacific to Central America. The Victoria's return to Spain on September 8, 1522, was a crowning example of Europeans' new ability and determination to make themselves masters of the oceans. A century of daring and dangerous voyages backed by the Portuguese crown had opened new routes through the South Atlantic to Africa, Brazil, and the rich trade of the Indian Ocean. Rival voyages sponsored by Spain since 1492 had opened new contacts with the American continents. Now the unexpectedly broad Pacific Ocean had been crossed as well. A maritime revolution was under way that would change the course of history.

This new maritime era marked the end of a long period in which the flow of historical influences tended to move from east to west. Before 1500 most overland and maritime expansion had come from Asia, as had the most useful technologies and the most influential systems of belief. Asia also had been home to the most powerful states and the richest trading networks. The Iberians set out on their voyages of exploration to reach Eastern markets. Their successes in the following century redirected the world's center of power, wealth, and innovation to the West.

The maritime revolution broadened and deepened contacts, alliances, and conflicts across ancient cultural boundaries. Some of these contacts ended tragically for individuals like Magellan. Some proved disastrous for entire populations: Amerindians, for instance, suffered conquest, colonization, and a rapid decline in numbers. And sometimes the results were mixed: Asians and Africans found both risks and opportunities in their new relations with the visitors from Europe.

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**GLOBAL MARITIME EXPANSION BEFORE 1450**

Since ancient times travel across the world's seas and oceans had been one of the great challenges to technological ingenuity. Ships had to be sturdy enough to survive heavy winds and waves, and pilots had to learn how to cross featureless expanses of water to reach their destinations. In time ships, sails, and navigational techniques perfected in the more protected seas were tried on the vast, open oceans.

However complex the solutions and dangerous the voyages, the rewards of sea travel made them worthwhile. Ships could move goods and people more quickly and cheaply than any form of overland travel then possible. Because of its challenges and rewards, sea travel attracted adventurers. To cross the unknown waters, find new lands, and open up new trade or settlements was an exciting prospect. For these reasons, some men on every continent had long turned their attention to the sea.

By 1450 much had been accomplished, and much remained undone. Daring mariners had discovered and settled most of the islands of the Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean. The greatest success was the trading system that united the peoples around the Indian Ocean. But no individual had yet crossed the Pacific in either direction. Even the smaller Atlantic was a barrier that kept the peoples of the Americas, Europe, and Africa in ignorance of each other's existence. The inhabitants of Australia were likewise completely cut off from contact with the rest of humanity. All this was about to change.

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**The Pacific Ocean**

The voyages of Polynesian peoples over vast distances across the Pacific Ocean were some of the most impressive feats in maritime history before 1450 (see Map 15.1). Though they left no written records, over several thousand years intrepid mariners from the Malay Peninsula of Southeast Asia had explored and settled the island chains of the East Indies and moved onto New Guinea and the smaller islands of Melanesia. Beginning sometime before the Common Era (c.e.), a new wave of expansion from the area of Fiji brought the first humans to the islands of the central Pacific known as Polynesia. The easternmost of the Marquesas' Islands were reached.

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Malay (may-LEY) Melanesia (mel-uh-NEE-zhuh) Marquesas (mar-KAY-suhs)
### CHRONOLOGY

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About 400 C.E. From the Marquesas, Polynesian sailors first reached the Hawaiian Islands as early as 500 C.E. Then, between 1100 and 1300, new voyages northward from Tahiti brought Polynesian settlers across more than 2,000 nautical miles (4,000 kilometers) to Hawaii. New Zealand was settled about 1200. Easter Island, 2,200 miles (3,540 kilometers) off the coast of South America, became the easternmost outpost of Polynesian culture a century later. The fact that the sweet potato, domesticated in South America, became a staple in the Polynesian diet suggests that this thrust to the east had enabled Polynesians to reach the mainland of the Americas as well.

Until recent decades some historians argued that Polynesians could have reached the eastern Pacific islands only by accident because they lacked navigational devices to plot their way. Others wondered how Polynesians could have overcome the difficulties, illustrated by Magellan’s flagship, *Trinidad*, of sailing eastward across
the Pacific. In 1947 one energetic amateur historian of the sea, Thor Heyerdahl\footnote{Heyerdahl (HIGH'-uhr-dahl)}, argued that Easter Island and Hawaii were actually settled from the Americas. He sought to prove his theory by sailing his balsawood raft, 
\textit{Kon Tiki}, westward from Peru.

Scholars have found evidence that suggests limited Amerindian maritime contacts from what is now Ecuador and Colombia northward to Mesoamerica in the period 300–900 C.E., but evidence for ongoing maritime contacts between these culture zones is unclear. Evidence that the settlement of the islands of the eastern Pacific was the result of planned expansion by Polynesian mariners is much more compelling. The first piece of evidence is the fact that the languages of these islanders are all closely related to the languages of the western Pacific and ultimately to those of Malaya. The second is the finding that accidental voyages could not have brought sufficient numbers of men and women for founding a new colony along with all the plants and domesticated animals that were basic to other Polynesian islands.

In 1976 a Polynesian crew led by Ben Finney used traditional navigational methods to sail an ocean canoe from Hawaii south to Tahiti. The \textit{Hokule'a} was a 62-foot-long (19-meter-long) double canoe patterned after old ocean-going canoes, which sometimes were as long as 120 feet (37 meters). Not only did the \textit{Hokule'a} prove seaworthy, but, powered by an inverted triangular sail and steered by paddles (not by a rudder), it was able to sail across the winds at a sharp enough angle to make the difficult voyage, just as ancient mariners must have done. Perhaps even more remarkable, the \textit{Hokule'a}'s crew was able to navigate to their destination using only their observation of the currents, stars, and evidence of land.

\textbf{The Indian Ocean} While Polynesian mariners were settling Pacific islands, other Malayo-Indonesians were sailing westward across the Indian Ocean and colonizing the large island of Madagascar off the southeastern coast of Africa. These voyages continued through the fifteenth century. To this day the inhabitants of Madagascar speak Malayo-Polynesian languages. However, part of the island's
population is descended from Africans who had crossed the 300 miles (500 kilometers) from the mainland to Madagascar, most likely in the centuries leading up to 1500.

Other peoples had been using the Indian Ocean for trade since ancient times. The landmasses of Southeast Asia and eastern Africa that enclose the Indian Ocean on each side, and the Indian subcontinent that juts into its middle, provided coasts that seafarers might safely follow and covers for protection. Moreover, seasonal winds known as monsoons are so predictable and steady that navigation in these waters using sailing vessels called dhows* was less difficult and dangerous than elsewhere.

The rise of medieval Islam gave Indian Ocean trade an important boost. The great Muslim cities of the Middle East provided a demand for valuable commodities. Even more important were the networks of Muslim traders that tied the region together. Muslim traders shared a common language, ethic, and law and actively spread their religion to distant trading cities. By 1400 there were Muslim trading communities all around the Indian Ocean.

dhow (dow)

The Indian Ocean traders operated largely independently of the empires and states they served, but in East Asia imperial China’s rulers were growing more and more interested in these wealthy ports of trade. In 1368 the Ming dynasty overthrew Mongol rule and began expansionist policies to reestablish China’s predominance and prestige abroad.

Having restored Chinese dominance in East Asia, the Ming next moved to establish direct contacts with the peoples around the Indian Ocean. In choosing to send out seven imperial fleets between 1405 and 1433, the Ming may have been motivated partly by curiosity. The fact that most of the ports the fleets visited were important in the Indian Ocean trade suggests that enhancing China’s commerce was also a motive. Yet because the expeditions were far larger than needed for exploration or promoting trade, their main purpose probably was to inspire awe of Ming power and achievements.

The Ming expeditions into the Indian Ocean Basin were launched on a scale that reflected imperial China’s resources and importance. The first consisted of sixty-two specially built “treasure ships,” large Chinese junks each about 300 feet long by 150 feet wide (90 by 45 meters).
There were also at least a hundred smaller vessels, most of which were larger than the flagship in which Columbus later sailed across the Atlantic. Each treasure ship had nine masts, twelve sails, many decks, and a carrying capacity of 3,000 tons (six times the capacity of Columbus’s entire fleet). One expedition carried over 27,000 individuals, including infantry and cavalry troops. The ships would have been armed with small cannon, but in most Chinese sea battles arrows from highly accurate crossbows dominated the fighting.

At the command of the expeditions was Admiral Zheng He* (1371–1435). A Chinese Muslim with ancestral connections to the Persian Gulf, Zheng was a fitting emissary to the increasingly Muslim-dominated Indian Ocean Basin. The expeditions carried other Arabic-speaking Chinese as interpreters.

One of these interpreters kept a journal recording the customs, dress, and beliefs of the people visited, along with the trade, towns, and animals of their countries. He observed exotic animals such as the black panther of Malaya and the tapir of Sumatra and encountered local legends such as that of the “corpse-headed barbarians” whose heads left their bodies at night and caused infants to die. In India he noted the division of the coastal population into five classes, which correspond to the four Hindu varna and a separate Muslim class, and passed on the fact that traders in the rich Indian trading port of Calicut could perform error-free calculations by counting on their fingers and toes rather than using the Chinese abacus. After his return, the interpreter went on tour in China, telling of these exotic places and “how far the majestic virtue of [China’s] imperial dynasty extended.”

The Chinese “treasure ships” carried rich silks, precious metals, and other valuable goods intended as gifts for distant rulers. In return those rulers sent back gifts of equal or greater value to the Chinese emperor. Although the main purpose of these exchanges was diplomatic, they also stimulated trade between China and its southern neighbors. For that reason they were welcomed by Chinese merchants and manufacturers. Yet commercial profits could not have offset the huge cost of the fleets.

Interest in new contacts was not confined to the Chinese side. In 1415–1416 at least three trading cities on the Swahili* Coast of East Africa sent delegations to China. The delegates from one of them, Malindi, presented the

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*Calicut (KAL-ih-kut)  Swahili (swah-HEE-lee)
emperor of China with a giraffe, creating quite a stir among the normally reserved imperial officials. Such African delegations may have encouraged more contacts, for the next three of Zheng's voyages were extended to the African coast. Unfortunately, no documents record how Africans and Chinese reacted to each other during these historic meetings between 1417 and 1433, but it appears that China's lavish gifts to the Swahili market for silk and porcelain. An increase in Chinese imports of pepper from southern Asian lands also resulted from these expeditions.

Had the Ming court wished to promote trade for the profit of its merchants, Chinese fleets might have continued to play a dominant role in Indian Ocean trade. But some high Chinese officials opposed increased contact with peoples whom they regarded as barbarians with no real contribution to make to China. Such opposition caused a suspension in the voyages from 1424 to 1431, and after the final expedition of 1432 to 1433, no new fleets were sent out. Later Ming emperors focused their attention on internal matters in their vast empire. China's withdrawal left a power vacuum in the Indian Ocean.

The Atlantic Ocean

The greatest mariners of the Atlantic in the early Middle Ages were the Vikings. These northern European raiders and pirates used their small, open ships to attack coastal European settlements for several centuries. They also discovered and settled one island after another in the North Atlantic during these warmer-than-usual centuries. Like the Polynesians, the Vikings had neither maps nor navigational devices, but they managed to find their way wonderfully well using their knowledge of the heavens and the seas.

The Vikings first settled Iceland in 790. From there some moved to Greenland in 982, and by accident one group sighted North America in 986. Fifteen years later Leif Ericsson established a short-lived Viking settlement on the island of Newfoundland, which he called Vinland. When a colder climate returned after 1200, the northern settlements in Greenland went into decline, and Vinland was abandoned, becoming a mysterious place mentioned only in Norse sagas.

Some southern Europeans applied maritime skills acquired in the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coastal regions to explore the Atlantic. In 1291 the two Vitaldo brothers from Genoa set out to sail through the South Atlantic and around Africa to India. They were never heard of again. Other Genoese and Portuguese expeditions into the Atlantic in the fourteenth century discovered (and settled) the islands of Madeira, the Azores, and the Canaries.

There is also written evidence of African voyages of exploration in the Atlantic in this period. The celebrated Syrian geographer al-Umari (1301-1349) relates that when Mansa Kankan Musa, the ruler of the West African empire of Mali, passed through Egypt on his lavish pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, he told of voyages to cross the Atlantic undertaken by his predecessor, Mansa Muhammad. According to this source, Muhammad had sent out four hundred vessels with men and supplies, telling them, "Do not return until you have reached the other side of the ocean or if you have exhausted your food or water." After a long time one canoe returned, reporting that the others had been swept away by a "violent current in the middle of the sea," Muhammad himself then set out at the head of a second, even larger, expedition, from which no one returned.

In the Americas, limited maritime contacts were made between coastal populations in northern South America and Central America, and early Amerindian voyagers from South America also colonized the West Indies. By the year 1000 Amerindians known as the Arawaks (also called Taino) had moved up from the small islands of the Lesser Antilles (Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe) into the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico) as well as into the Bahamas (see Map 15.2). The Caribs followed the same route in later centuries and by the late fifteenth century had overrun most Arawak settlements in the Lesser Antilles and were raiding parts of the Greater Antilles. From the West Indies Arawak and Carib also undertook voyages to the North American mainland.

**European Expansion, 1400–1550**

The preceding survey shows that maritime expansion occurred in many parts of the world before 1450. Nevertheless, the epic sea voyages sponsored by the Iberian kingdoms of Portugal and Spain are of special interest because they began a maritime revolution that profoundly altered the course of world history. The Portuguese and Spanish expeditions ended the isolation of the Americas and increased the volume of global interaction. The influence in world affairs of the Iberians and other Europeans

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who followed them overseas rose steadily in the centuries after 1500.

Iberian overseas expansion was the product of two related phenomena. First, Iberian rulers had strong economic, religious, and political motives to expand their contacts and increase their dominance. Second, improvements in their maritime and military technologies gave them the means to master treacherous and unfamiliar ocean environments, seize control of existing maritime trade routes, and conquer new lands.

**Motives for Exploration**

Why did Iberian kingdoms decide to sponsor voyages of exploration in the fifteenth century? Part of the answer lies in the individual ambitions and adventurous personalities of the rulers. Another part of the answer can be found in long-term tendencies in Europe and the Mediterranean. In many ways these voyages continued four trends evident in the Latin West since about the year 1000: (1) the revival of urban life and trade, (2) a peculiarly European alliance between merchants and rulers, (3) a struggle with Islamic powers for dominance of the Mediterranean that mixed religious motives with the desire for trade with distant lands, and (4) growing intellectual curiosity about the outside world.
The city-states of northern Italy took the lead in all these developments. By 1450 they had well-established trade links to northern Europe, the Indian Ocean, and the Black Sea, and their merchant princes had also sponsored an intellectual and artistic Renaissance. But the trading states of Venice and Genoa continued to maintain profitable commercial ties in the Mediterranean and preferred to continue the system of alliances with the Muslims that had given their merchants privileged access to the lucrative trade from the East. Even after the expansion of the Ottoman Empire disrupted their trade to the East, they did not take the lead in exploring the Atlantic. Also, the ships of the Mediterranean were ill suited to the more violent weather of the Atlantic. However, many individual Italians played leading roles in the Atlantic explorations.

In contrast, the special history and geography of the Iberian kingdoms led them in a different direction. Part of that special history was centuries of warfare with Muslim kingdoms that were established in the eighth century, when most of Iberia was occupied by invaders from North Africa. By about 1250 the Iberian kingdoms of Portugal, Castile, and Aragon had conquered all the Muslim lands in Iberia except the southern kingdom of Granada. United by a dynastic marriage in 1469, Castile and Aragon conquered Granada in 1492. These separate kingdoms were gradually amalgamated into Spain, sixteenth-century Europe's most powerful state.

Christian militancy continued to be an important motive for both Portugal and Spain in their overseas ventures. But the Iberian rulers and their adventurous subjects also sought material returns. With only a modest share of the Mediterranean trade, they were much more willing than the Italians to take risks to find new routes through the Atlantic to the rich trade of Africa and Asia. Moreover, both were participants in the shipbuilding changes and the gunpowder revolution that were under way in Atlantic Europe. Though not centers of Renaissance learning, both were especially open to new geographical knowledge. Finally, both states were blessed with exceptional leaders.

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**Portuguese Voyages**

Portugal's decision to invest significant resources in new exploration rested on an already well-established Atlantic fishing industry and a history of anti-Muslim warfare. When the Muslim government of Morocco in northwestern Africa showed weakness in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese went on the attack, beginning with the city of Ceuta conquered in 1415. This assault combined aspects of a religious crusade, a plundering expedition, and a military tournament in which young Portuguese knights displayed their bravery. The capture of the rich North African city made the Portuguese better informed about the caravans that brought gold and slaves to Ceuta from the African states south of the Sahara. Despite the capture of several more ports along Morocco's Atlantic coast, the Portuguese were unable to push inland and gain access to the gold trade. So they sought more direct contact with the gold producers by sailing down the African coast.

The attack on Ceuta was led by young Prince Henry (1394–1460), third son of the king of Portugal. Because he devoted the rest of his life to promoting exploration of the South Atlantic, he is known as Henry the Navigator. His official biographer emphasized Henry's mixed motives for exploration—converting Africans to Christianity, making contact with existing Christian rulers in Africa, and launching joint crusades with them against the Ottomans. Prince Henry also wished to discover new places and hoped that such new contacts would be profitable. His initial explorations were concerned with Africa. Only later did reaching India become an explicit goal of Portuguese explorers. Despite being called "the Navigator," Prince Henry himself never ventured far from home. Instead, he founded a sort of research institute at Sagres for studying navigation that drew on the pioneering efforts of Italian merchants, especially the Genoese, as well as fourteenth-century Jewish cartographers who used information from Arab and European sources to produce remarkably accurate charts and maps. Henry both oversaw the collection of geographical information from sailors and travelers and sponsored new expeditions to explore the Atlantic. His ships established permanent contact with the islands of Madeira in 1418 and the Azores in 1439.

Henry's staff studied and improved navigational instruments that had come into Europe from China and the Islamic world. These instruments included the magnetic compass, first developed in China, and the astrolabe, an instrument of Arab or Greek invention that enabled mariners to determine their location at sea by measuring the position of the sun or the stars in the night sky. Even with such instruments, however, voyages still depended on the skill and experience of the navigators.

Another achievement of Portuguese mariners was the design of vessels appropriate for the voyages of exploration. Neither the galleys in use in the Mediterranean, which were powered by large numbers of oarsmen, nor
the three-masted ships of northern Europe with their square sails proved adequate for the Atlantic. The large crews of the galleys could not carry supplies adequate to long voyages far from shore and the square-rigged northern vessels had trouble sailing at an angle to the wind. Instead, the voyages of exploration made use of a new vessel, the *caravel*. Caravels were much smaller than the largest European ships and the Chinese junks Zheng He had used to explore the Indian Ocean early in the fifteenth century. Their size permitted them to enter shallow coastal waters and explore upriver, but they were strong enough to weather ocean storms. When equipped with the triangular lateen sails that could take the wind on either side, caravels had great maneuverability and, alternately, when sporting square Atlantic sails and with a following wind, they had great speed. The addition of small cannon made them good fighting ships as well. The caravels' economy, speed, agility, and power justified a contemporary's claim that they were "the best ships that sailed the seas."22

To conquer the seas, pioneering captains had to overcome the common fear that South Atlantic waters were boiling hot or contained ocean currents that would prevent any ship entering them from ever returning home. It took Prince Henry fourteen years—from 1420 to 1434—to coax an expedition to venture beyond southern Morocco (see Map 15.3). The crew's fears proved unfounded, but the next stretch of coast, 800 miles (1,300 kilometers) of desert, offered little of interest to the explorers. It would take the Portuguese four decades to cover the 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) from Lisbon to Sierra Leone; it then took only three decades to explore

*caravel* (KAR-uh-vel)

*Sierra Leone* (see-ER-uh-lee-OWN)
Map 15.3  European Exploration, 1420–1542  Portuguese and Spanish explorers showed the possibility and practicality of intercontinental maritime trade. Before 1540 European trade with Africa and Asia was much more important than that with the Americas, but after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Inca Empires transatlantic trade began to increase. Notice the Tordesillas line, which in theory separated the Spanish and Portuguese spheres of activity.
the remaining 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers) to the southern tip of the African continent.

In the years that followed, Henry’s explorers made an important contribution to the maritime revolution by learning how to return speedily to Portugal. Instead of battling the prevailing northeast trade winds and currents back up the coast, they discovered that by sailing northwest into the Atlantic to the latitude of the Azores, ships could pick up prevailing westerly winds that would blow them back to Portugal. The knowledge that ocean winds tend to form large circular patterns helped explorers discover many other ocean routes.

To pay for the research, the ships, and the expeditions during the many decades before voyages became profitable, Prince Henry drew partly on the income of the Order of Christ, a religious military order of which he was governor. The Order of Christ had inherited the properties and crusading traditions of the Order of Knights Templar, which had disbanded in 1314. The Order of Christ received the exclusive right to promote Christianity in all the lands that were discovered, and the Portuguese emblazoned their ships’ sails with the crusaders’ red cross.

The profits from these voyages came from selling into slavery Africans captured by the Portuguese in raids on the northwest coast of Africa and the Canary Islands during the 1440s. The total number of Africans captured or purchased on voyages exceeded eighty thousand by the end of the century and rose steadily thereafter. However, the gold trade quickly became more important than the slave trade as the Portuguese made contact with the trading networks that flourished in West Africa and reached across the Sahara. By 1457 enough African gold was coming back to Portugal for the kingdom to issue a new gold coin called the cruzado (crusader), another reminder of how deeply the Portuguese entwined religious and secular motives.

The Portuguese crown continued to sponsor voyages of exploration, but speedier progress resulted from the growing participation of private commercial interests. In 1469 a prominent Lisbon merchant named Fernão Gomes purchased from the Crown the privilege of exploring 350 miles (550 kilometers) of African coast in return for a monopoly on trade. He discovered the uninhabited island of São Tomé, located on the equator. In the next century it became a major source of sugar produced by slave laborers imported from the African mainland, serving as a model for the sugar plantations later developed in Brazil and the Caribbean. Gomes also explored the Gold Coast, which became the headquarters of Portugal’s West African trade.

The final thrust down the African coast was spurred by the expectation of finding a passage around Africa to the rich trade of the Indian Ocean. In 1488 Bartolomeu Dias was the first Portuguese explorer to round the southern tip of Africa and enter the Indian Ocean. Then in 1497–1498 a Portuguese expedition led by Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa and reached India (see Environment and Technology: Vasco da Gama’s Fleet). In 1500, ships on the way to India under the command of Pedro Alvares Cabral sailed too far west and reached the South American mainland. This discovery established Portugal’s claim to Brazil, which would become one of the Western Hemisphere’s richest colonies. The gamble that Prince Henry had begun eight decades earlier was about to pay off handsomely.

**Spanish Voyages**

In contrast to the persistence and planning behind Portugal’s century-long exploration of the South Atlantic, haste and blind luck lay behind Spain’s early discoveries. Throughout most of the fifteenth century, the Spanish kingdoms had been preoccupied with internal affairs: completion of the reconquest of southern Iberia from the Muslims; amalgamation of the various dynasties; and the conversion or expulsion of religious minorities. Only in the last decade of the century were Spanish monarchs ready to turn to overseas exploration, by which time the Portuguese had already found a new route to the Indian Ocean.

The leader of the Spanish overseas mission was Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), a Genoese mariner. His four voyages between 1492 and 1502 established the existence of a vast new world across the Atlantic, whose existence few in “old world” Eurasia and Africa had ever suspected. But Columbus refused to accept that he had found unknown continents and peoples, insisting that he had succeeded in his goal of finding a shorter route to the Indian Ocean than the one the Portuguese had found.

As a younger man Columbus had gained considerable experience of the South Atlantic while participating in Portuguese explorations along the African coast, but he had become convinced there was a shorter way to reach the riches of the East than the route around Africa. By his reckoning (based on a serious misreading of a ninth-century Arab authority), the Canaries were a mere 2,400 nautical miles (4,450 kilometers) from Japan. The actual distance was five times as far.

It was not easy for Columbus to find a sponsor willing to underwrite the costs of testing his theory that one could reach Asia by sailing west. Portuguese authorities

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*São Tomé* (sóh toh-MAY)

*Cabral* (kah-BRAHL)
Vasco da Gama’s Fleet

The four small ships that sailed for India from Lisbon in June 1497 may seem a puny fleet compared to the sixty-two Chinese vessels that Zheng He had led into the Indian Ocean ninety-five years earlier. But given the fact that China had a hundred times as many people as Portugal, Vasco da Gama’s fleet represented at least as great a commitment of resources. In any event, the Portuguese expedition had a far greater impact on the course of history. Having achieved its aim of inspiring awe at China’s greatness, the Chinese throne sent out no more expeditions after 1432. Although da Gama’s ships seemed more odd than awesome to Indian Ocean observers, that modest fleet began a revolution in global relations.

Portugal spared no expense in ensuring that the fleet would make it to India and back. Craftsmen built extra strength into the hulls to withstand the powerful storms that Dias had encountered in 1488 at the tip of Africa. Small enough to be able to navigate any shallow harbors and rivers they might encounter, the ships were crammed with specially strengthened casks and barrels of water, wine, oil, flour, meat, and vegetables far in excess of what was required even on a voyage that would take the better part of a year. Arms and ammunition were also in abundance.

Three of da Gama’s ships were rigged with square sails on two masts for speed and a lateen sail on the third mast. The fourth vessel was a caravel with lateen sails. Each ship carried three sets of sails and plenty of extra rigging so as to be able to repair any damages due to storms. The crusaders’ red crosses on the sails signaled one of the expedition’s motives.

The captains and crew—Portugal’s most talented and experienced—received extra pay and other rewards for their service. Yet there was no expectation that the unprecedented sums spent on this expedition would bring any immediate return. According to a contemporary chronicle, the only immediate return the Portuguese monarch received was “the knowledge that some part of Ethiopia and the beginning of Lower India had been discovered.” However, the scale and care of the preparations suggest that the Portuguese expected the expedition to open up profitable trade to the Indian Ocean. And so it did.

twice rejected his plan, first in 1485 following a careful study and again in 1488 after Dias had established the feasibility of a route around Africa. Columbus received a more sympathetic hearing in 1486 from Castile’s able ruler, Queen Isabella, but no commitment of support. After a four-year study a Castilian commission appointed by Isabella concluded that a westward sea route to the Indies rested on many questionable geographical assumptions, but Columbus’s persistence finally won over the queen and her husband, King Ferdinand of Aragon. In 1492 they agreed to fund a modest expedition. Their elation at defeating Granada, the last independent Muslim kingdom in Iberia, may have put them in a favorable mood.
Columbus recorded in his log that he and his mostly Spanish crew of ninety men “departed Friday the third day of August of the year 1492” toward “the regions of India.” Their mission, the royal contract stated, was “to discover and acquire certain islands and mainland in the Ocean Sea.” He carried letters of introduction from the Spanish sovereigns to Eastern rulers, including one to the “Grand Khan” (meaning the Chinese emperor). Also on board was a Jewish convert to Christianity whose knowledge of Arabic was expected to facilitate communication with the peoples of eastern Asia. The expedition traveled in three small ships, the Santa María, the Santa Clara (nicknamed the Niña), and a third vessel now known only by its nickname, the Pinta. The Niña and the Pinta were caravels.

The expedition began well. Other attempts to explore the Atlantic west of the Azores had been impeded by unfavorable headwinds. But on earlier voyages along the African coast, Columbus had learned that he could find west-blowing winds in the latitudes of the Canaries, which is why he chose that southern route. After reaching the Canaries, he had the Niña’s lateen sails replaced with square sails, for he knew that from then on speed would be more important than maneuverability.

In October 1492 the expedition reached the islands of the Caribbean. Columbus insisted on calling the inhabitants “Indians” because he believed that they were part of the East Indies. A second voyage to the Caribbean in 1493 did nothing to change his mind. Even when, two months after Vasco da Gama reached India in 1498, Columbus first sighted the mainland of South America on a third voyage, he stubbornly insisted it was part of Asia. But by then other Europeans were convinced that he had discovered islands and a continent previously unknown to the Old World. Amerigo Vespucci’s explorations, first on behalf of Spain and then for Portugal, led mapmakers to name the new continents “America” after him, rather than “Columbia” after Columbus.

To prevent disputes arising from their efforts to exploit their new discoveries and to spread Christianity among the people there, Spain and Portugal agreed to split the world between them. The Treaty of Tordesillas, negotiated by the pope in 1494, drew an imaginary line down the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean. Lands east of the line in Africa and southern Asia could be claimed by Portugal; lands to the west in the Americas were reserved for Spain. Cabral’s discovery of Brazil, however, gave Portugal a valid claim to the part of South America located east of the line.

But if the Tordesillas line were extended around the earth, where would Spain’s and Portugal’s spheres of influence divide in the East? Given Europeans’ ignorance of the earth’s true size in 1494, it was not clear whether the Moluccas, whose valuable spices had been a goal of the Iberian voyages, were on Portugal’s or Spain’s side of the line. The missing information concerned the size of the Pacific Ocean. By chance, in 1513 a Spanish adventurer named Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus (a narrow neck of land) of Panama from the east and sighted the Pacific Ocean on the other side. And the 1519 expedition of Ferdinand Magellan (ca. 1480–1521) was designed to complete Columbus’s interrupted westward voyage by sailing around the Americas and across the Pacific, whose vast size no European then guessed. The Moluccas turned out to lie well within Portugal’s sphere, as Spain formally acknowledged in 1529.

Magellan’s voyage established the basis for Spanish colonization of the Philippine Islands after 1564. Nor did Magellan’s death prevent him from being considered the first person to encircle the globe, for a decade earlier he had sailed from Europe to the East Indies as part of an expedition sponsored by his native Portugal. His two voyages took him across the Tordesillas line, through the separate spheres claimed by Portugal and Spain—at least until other Europeans began demanding a share. Of course, in 1500 European claims were largely theoretical. Portugal and Spain had only modest settlements overseas.

Although Columbus failed to find a new route to the East, the consequences of his voyages for European expansion were momentous. Those who followed in his wake laid the basis for Spain’s large colonial empires in the Americas and for the empires of other European nations. In turn, these empires promoted, among the four Atlantic continents, the growth of a major new trading network whose importance rivaled and eventually surpassed that of the Indian Ocean network. The more immediately important consequence was Portugal’s entry into the Indian Ocean, which quickly led to a major European presence and profit. Both the eastward and the westward voyages of exploration marked a tremendous expansion of Europe’s role in world history.
Encounters with Europe, 1450–1550

European actions alone did not determine the global consequences of the new contacts that Iberian mariners had opened. The ways in which Africans, Asians, and Amerindians perceived their new visitors and interacted with them also influenced future developments. Everywhere indigenous peoples evaluated the Europeans as potential allies or enemies, and everywhere Europeans attempted to insert themselves into existing commercial and geopolitical arrangements. In general, Europeans made slow progress in establishing colonies and asserting political influence in Africa and Asia, even while profiting from new commercial ties. In the Americas, however, Spain, Portugal, and later other European powers moved rapidly to create colonial empires. In this case the long isolation of the Amerindians from the rest of the world made them more vulnerable to the diseases that these explorers introduced, limiting their potential for resistance and facilitating European settlement.

Western Africa

Many Africans along the West African coast were eager for trade with the Portuguese. It would give them new markets for their exports and access to imports cheaper than those that reached them through the middlemen of the overland routes to the Mediterranean. This reaction was evident along the Gold Coast of West Africa, first visited by the Portuguese in 1471. Miners in the hinterland had long sold their gold to African traders, who took it to the trading cities along the southern edge of the Sahara, where it was sold to traders who had crossed the desert from North Africa. Recognizing that they might get more favorable terms from the new visitors from the sea, coastal Africans were ready to negotiate with the royal representative of Portugal who arrived in 1482 seeking permission to erect a trading fort.

The Portuguese noble in charge and his officers (likely including the young Christopher Columbus, who had entered Portuguese service in 1476) were eager to make a proper impression. They dressed in their best clothes, erected and decorated a reception platform, celebrated a Catholic Mass, and signaled the start of negotiations with trumpets, tambourines, and drums. The African king, Caramansa, staged his entrance with equal ceremony, arriving with a large retinue of attendants and musicians. Through an African interpreter, the two leaders exchanged flowery speeches pledging goodwill and mutual benefit. Caramansa then gave his permission for a small trading fort to be built, assured, he said, by the appearance of these royal delegates that they were honorable persons, unlike the “few, foul, and vile” Portuguese visitors of the previous decade.

Neither side made a show of force, but the Africans’ upper hand was evident in Caramansa’s warning that if the Portuguese failed to be peaceful and honest traders, he and his people would simply move away, depriving their post of food and trade. Trade at the post of Saint George of the Mine (later called Elmina) enriched both sides. From there the Portuguese crown was soon purchasing gold equal to one-tenth of the world’s production at the time. In return, Africans received large quantities of goods that Portuguese ships brought from Asia, Europe, and other parts of Africa.

After a century of aggressive expansion, the kingdom of Benin in the Niger Delta was near the peak of its power when it first encountered the Portuguese. Its oba (king) presided over an elaborate bureaucracy from a spacious palace in his large capital city, also known as Benin. In response to a Portuguese visit in 1486, the oba sent an ambassador to Portugal to learn more about the homeland of these strangers. He then established a royal monopoly on trade with the Portuguese, selling pepper

Bronze Figure of Benin Ruler

Both this prince and his horse are protected by chainmail introduced in the fifteen century to Benin by Portuguese merchants.

(AntennaGallery Dakar Senegal/© DagliOr/Th%A r Art Archive)
and ivory tusks (to be taken back to Portugal) as well as stone beads, textiles, and prisoners of war (to be resold at Elmina). In return, Portuguese merchants provided Benin with copper and brass, fine textiles, glass beads, and a horse for the king’s royal procession. In the early sixteenth century, as the demand for slaves for the Portuguese sugar plantations on the nearby island of São Tomé grew, the oba first raised the price of slaves and then imposed restrictions that limited their sale.

Early contacts generally involved a mixture of commercial, military, and religious interests. Some African rulers were quick to appreciate that European firearms could be a useful addition to their spears and arrows in conflicts with their enemies. Because African religions did not presume to have a monopoly on religious knowledge, coastal rulers were also willing to test the value of Christian practices, which the Portuguese eagerly promoted. The rulers of Benin and Kongo, the two largest coastal kingdoms, invited Portuguese missionaries and soldiers to accompany them into battle to test the Christians’ religion along with their muskets.

Portuguese efforts to persuade the king and nobles of Benin to accept the Catholic faith ultimately failed. Early kings showed some interest, but after 1538 the rulers declined to receive more missionaries. They also closed the market in male slaves for the rest of the sixteenth century. Exactly why Benin chose to limit its contacts with the Portuguese is uncertain, but the rulers clearly had the power to control the amount of interaction.

Farther south, on the lower Congo River, relations between the kingdom of Kongo and the Portuguese began similarly but had a very different outcome. Like the oba of Benin, the manikongo (king of Kongo) sent delegates to Portugal, established a royal monopoly on trade with the Portuguese, and expressed interest in Christian missionary teachings. Deeply impressed with the new religion, the royal family made Catholicism the kingdom’s official faith. But Kongo, lacking ivory and pepper, had less to trade than Benin. To acquire the goods brought by Portuguese and to pay the costs of the missionaries, it had to sell more and more slaves.

Soon the manikongo began to lose his royal monopoly over the slave trade. In 1526 the Christian manikongo, Afonso I (r. 1506–ca. 1540), wrote to his royal “brother,” the king of Portugal, begging for help in stopping the trade because unauthorized Kongo was kidnapping and selling people, even members of good families (see Diversity and Dominance: Kongo’s Christian King on page 428). Afonso’s appeals for help received no reply from Portugal, whose interests were now concentrated in the Indian Ocean. Some subjects took advantage of the manikongo’s weakness to rebel against his authority. After 1540 the major part of the slave trade from this part of Africa moved farther south.

Eastern Africa

Different still were the reactions of the Muslim rulers of the trading coastal states of eastern Africa. As Vasco da Gama’s fleet sailed up the coast in 1498, most rulers gave the Portuguese a cool reception, suspicious of the intentions of these visitors who painted crusaders’ crosses on their sails. But the ruler of one of the ports, Malindi, saw in the Portuguese an ally who could help him expand the city’s trading position and provided da Gama with a pilot to guide him to India. The initial suspicions of most rulers were justified seven years later when a Portuguese war fleet bombarded and looted most of the coastal cities of eastern Africa in the name of Christianity and commerce, though they spared Malindi.

Another eastern African state that saw potential benefit in an alliance with the Portuguese was Christian Ethiopia. In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Ethiopia faced increasing conflicts with Muslim states along the Red Sea. Emboldened by the rise of the Ottoman Turks, who had conquered Egypt in 1517 and launched a major fleet in the Indian Ocean to counter the Portuguese, the talented warlord of the Muslim state of Adal launched a furious assault on Ethiopia. Adal’s decisive victory in 1529 reduced the Christian kingdom to a precarious state. At that point Ethiopia’s contacts with the Portuguese became crucial.

For decades, delegations from Portugal and Ethiopia had been exploring a possible alliance between their states based on their mutual adherence to Christianity. A key figure was Queen Helena of Ethiopia, who acted as regent for her young sons after her husband’s death in 1478. In 1509 Helena sent a letter to “our very dear and well-beloved brother,” the king of Portugal, along with a gift of two tiny crucifixes said to be made of wood from the cross on which Christ had died in Jerusalem. In her letter she proposed an alliance of her land army and Portugal’s fleet against the Turks. No such alliance was completed by the time Helena died in 1522. But as Ethiopia’s situation grew increasingly desperate, renewed appeals for help were made.

Finally, a small Portuguese force commanded by Vasco da Gama’s son Christopher reached Ethiopia in 1539, at a time when what was left of the empire was being held together by another woman ruler. With Portuguese help, the queen rallied the Ethiopians to renew their struggle. Christopher da Gama was captured and tortured to death, but Muslim forces lost heart when their leader was mortally wounded in a later battle.
Portuguese aid helped the Ethiopian kingdom save itself from extinction, but a permanent alliance faltered because Ethiopian rulers refused to transfer their Christian affiliation from the patriarch of Alexandria to the Latin patriarch of Rome (the pope) as the Portuguese wanted.

As these examples illustrate, African encounters with the Portuguese before 1550 varied considerably. As much because of the strategies and leadership of particular African states as because of Portuguese policies, Africans and Portuguese might become royal brothers, bitter opponents, or partners in a mutually profitable trade, but Europeans remained a minor presence in most of Africa in 1550. By then the Portuguese had become far more interested in the Indian Ocean trade.

Indian Ocean States  Vasco da Gama’s arrival on the Malabar Coast of India in May 1498 did not make a great impression on the citizens of Calicut. After more than ten months at sea, many members of the crew were in ill health. Da Gama’s four small ships were far less imposing than the Chinese fleets of gigantic junk that had sailed Calicut sixty-five years earlier and no longer than many of the dhows that filled the harbor of this rich and important trading city. The samorin (ruler) of Calicut and his Muslim officials showed mild interest in the Portuguese as new trading partners, but the gifts da Gama had brought for the samorin evoked derisive laughter. Twelve pieces of fairly ordinary striped cloth, four scarlet hoods, six hats, and six wash basins seemed inferior goods to those accustomed to the luxuries of the Indian Ocean trade. When da Gama tried to defend his gifts as those of an explorer, not a rich merchant, the samorin cut him short, asking whether he had come to discover men or stones: “If he had come to discover men, as he said, why had he brought nothing?”

Coastal rulers soon discovered that the Portuguese had no intention of remaining poor competitors in the rich trade of the Indian Ocean. Upon da Gama’s return to Portugal in 1499, the jubilant King Manuel styled himself “Lord of the Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India,” setting forth the ambitious scope of his plans. Previously the Indian Ocean had been an open sea, used by merchants (and pirates) of all the surrounding coasts. Now the Portuguese crown intended to make it a Portuguese sea, the private property of Portugal alone.

The ability of little Portugal to assert control over the Indian Ocean stemmed from the superiority of its ships and weapons over those of the regional powers, especially the lightly armed merchant dhows. In 1505 a Portuguese fleet of eighty-one ships and some seven thousand men bombarded Swahili Coast cities. Next on the list were Indian ports. Goa, on the west coast of India, fell to a well-armed fleet in 1510, becoming the base from which the Portuguese menaced the trading cities of Gujarat* to the north and Calicut and other Malabar Coast cities to the south. The port of Hormuz, controlling entry to the Persian Gulf, was taken in 1515, but Aden, at the entrance to the Red Sea, used its intricate natural defenses to preserve its independence. The addition of the Gujarati port of Diu in 1535 consolidated Portuguese dominance of the western Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, Portuguese explorers had been reconnoitering the Bay of Bengal and the waters farther east. The independent city of Malacca* on the strait between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra became the focus of their attention. During the fifteenth century Malacca had become the main entrepôt* (a place where goods are stored or deposited and from which they are distributed) for the trade from China, Japan, India, the Southeast Asian mainland, and the Moluccas. Among the city’s more than 100,000 residents an early Portuguese visitor counted eighty-four different languages, including those of merchants from as far west as Cairo, Ethiopia, and the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Many non-Muslim residents of the city supported letting the Portuguese join its cosmopolitan trading community, perhaps hoping to offset the growing solidarity of Muslim traders. In 1511, however, the Portuguese seized this strategic trading center outright with a force of a thousand fighting men, including three hundred recruited in southern India.

Force was not always necessary. On the China coast, local officials and merchants interested in profitable new trade with the Portuguese persuaded the imperial government to allow the Portuguese to establish a trading post at Macao* in 1557. Operating from Macao, Portuguese ships came to nearly monopolize trade between China and Japan.

In the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese used their control of major port cities to enforce an even larger trading monopoly. As their power grew, they required all spices, as well as all goods on the major ocean routes such as between Goa and Macao, to be carried in Portuguese ships. In addition, the Portuguese tried to control and tax other Indian Ocean trade by requiring all merchant ships entering and leaving one of their ports to carry a Portuguese

Gujarat (goo-juh-RAHT) Malacca (muh-LAH-kuh)
entrepôt (ON-truh-poh) Macao (muh-COW)
Kongo's Christian King

The new overseas voyages brought conquest to some and opportunities for fruitful borrowings and exchanges to others. The decision of the ruler of the kingdom of Kongo to adopt Christianity in 1491 added cultural diversity to Kongoese society and in some ways strengthened the hand of the king. From then on Kongoese rulers sought to introduce Christian beliefs and rituals while at the same time Christianizing Kongoese society to make it more intelligible to their subjects. In addition, the kings of Kongo sought a variety of more secular aid from Portugal, including schools and medicine. Trade with the Portuguese introduced new social and political tensions, especially in the case of the export trade in slaves for the Portuguese sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé to the north.

Two letters sent to King João (zhoo) III of Portugal in 1526 illustrate how King Afonso of Kongo saw his kingdom's new relationship with Portugal and the problems that resulted from it. (Afonso adopted that name when he was baptized as a young prince.) After the death of his father in 1506, Afonso successfully claimed the throne and ruled until 1542. His son Henrique became the first Catholic bishop of the Kongo in 1521.

These letters were written in Portuguese and penned by the king's secretary João Teixeira (ty-SHER-uh), a Kongo Christian, who, like Afonso, had been educated by Portuguese missionaries.

6 July 1526

To the very powerful and excellent prince Dom João, our brother:

On the 20th of June just past, we received word that a trading ship from your highness had just come to our port of Sonjo. We were greatly pleased by that arrival for it had been many days since a ship had come to our kingdom, for by it we would get news of your highness, which many times we had desired to know, . . . and likewise as there was a great and dire need for wine and flour for the holy sacrament; and of this we had had no great hope for we have the same need frequently. And that, sir, arises from the great negligence of your highness's officials toward us and toward shipping us those things. . . .

Sir, your highness should know how our kingdom is being lost in so many ways that we will need to provide the needed cure, since this is caused by the excessive license given by your agents and officials to the men and merchants who come to this kingdom to set up shops with goods and many things which have been prohibited by us, and which they spread throughout our kingdoms and domains in such abundance that many of our vassals, whose submission we could once rely on, now act independently so as to get the things in greater abundance than we ourselves; whom we had formerly held content and submissive and under our vassalage and jurisdiction, so it is doing a great harm not only to the service of God, but also to the security and peace of our kingdoms and state.

And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since every day the mentioned merchants are taking our people, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them so as to have the things and wares of this kingdom that they crave; they grab them and bring them to be sold. In such a manner, sir, has been the corruption and deprivation that our land is becoming completely depopulated, and your highness should not deem this good nor in your service. And to avoid this we need from these kingdoms [of yours] no more than priests and a few people to teach in schools, and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament, which is why we beg of your highness to help and assist us in this matter. Under your agents to send here neither merchants nor wares, because it is our will that in these kingdoms there should not be any dealing in slaves nor outlet for them, for the reasons stated above. Again we beg your highness's agreement, since otherwise we cannot cure such manifest harm. May Our Lord in His mercy have your highness always under His protection and may you always do the things of His holy service. I kiss your hands many times.

From our city of Kongo. . . .

The King, Dom Afonso
18 October 1526

Very high and very powerful prince King of Portugal, our brother,

Sir, your highness has been so good as to promise us that anything we need we should ask for in our letters, and that everything will be provided. And so that there may be peace and health of our kingdoms, by God's will, in our lifetime. And as there are among us old folks and people who have lived for many days, many and different diseases happen so often that we are pushed to the ultimate extremes. And the same happens to our children, relatives, and people, because this country lacks physicians and surgeons who might know the proper cures for such diseases, as well as pharmacies and drugs to make them better. And for this reason many of those who had been already confirmed and instructed in the things of the holy faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ perish and die. And the rest of the people for the most part cure themselves with herbs and sticks and other ancient methods, so that they live putting all their faith in these herbs and ceremonies, and die believing that they are saved; and this serves God poorly.

And to avoid such a great error, I think, and inconvenience, since it is from God and from your highness that all the good and the drugs and medicines have come to us for our salvation, we ask you to send us two physicians and two pharmacists and one surgeon, so that they may come with their pharmacies and necessary things to be in our kingdoms, for we have extreme need of each and every one of them. We will be very good and merciful to them, since sent by your highness, their work and coming should be for good. We ask your highness as a great favor to do this for us, because besides being good in itself it is in the service of God as we have said above.

Moreover, sir, in our kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people, out of great desire for the wares and things of your kingdoms, which are brought here by your people, and in order to satisfy their disorderly appetite, seize many of our people, freed and exempt men. And many times noblemen and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives are stolen, and they take them to be sold to the white men who are in our kingdoms and take them hidden or by night, so that they are not recognized. And as soon as they are taken by the white men, they are immediately ironed and branded with fire. And when they are carried off to be embarked, if they are caught by our guards, the whites allege that they have bought them and cannot say from whom, so that it is our duty to do justice and to restore to the free their freedom. And so they went away offended.

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that every white man living in our kingdoms and wanting to purchase slaves by whatever means should first inform three of our noblemen and officials of our court on whom we rely in this matter, namely Dom Pedro Manipunzo and Dom Manuel Manissaba, our head bailiff; and Gonçalo Pires, our chief supplier, who should investigate if the said slaves are captives or free men, and, if cleared with them, there will be no further doubt nor embargo and they can be taken and embarked. And if they reach the opposite conclusion, they will lose the aforementioned slaves. Whatever favor and license we give them [the white men] for the sake of your highness in this case is because we know that it is in your service too that these slaves are taken from our kingdom; otherwise we should not consent to this for the reasons stated above that we make known completely to your highness so that no one could say the contrary, as they said in many other cases to your highness, so that the care and remembrance that we and this kingdom have should not be withdrawn. . . .

We kiss your hands of your highness many times.

From our city of Kongo, the 18th day of October,

The King, Dom Afonso

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What sorts of things does King Afonso desire from the Portuguese?

2. What is he willing and unwilling to do in return?

3. What problem with his own people has the slave trade created, and what has King Afonso done about it?

4. Does King Afonso see himself as an equal to King João or his subordinate? Do you agree with that analysis?

passport and to pay customs duties, Portuguese patrols seized vessels that attempted to avoid these monopolies, confiscated their cargoes, and either killed the captain and crew or sentenced them to forced labor.

Reactions to this power grab varied. Like the emperors of China, the Mughal \textsuperscript{1} emperors of India largely ignored Portugal’s maritime intrusions, seeing their interests as maintaining control over their vast land possessions. The Ottomans responded more aggressively, supporting Egypt against the Christian intruders with a large fleet and fifteen thousand men between 1501 and 1509. Then, having absorbed Egypt into their empire, the Ottomans sent another large expedition against the Portuguese in 1538. Both expeditions failed because Ottoman galleys were no match for the faster, better-armed Portuguese vessels in the open ocean. However, the Ottomans retained the advantage in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, where they had many ports of supply.

The smaller trading states of the region were less capable of challenging Portuguese domination head on, since rivalries among them impeded the formation of any common front. Some chose to cooperate with the Portuguese to maintain their prosperity and security. Others engaged in evasion and resistance. Two examples illustrate the range of responses among Indian Ocean peoples.

\textsuperscript{1} Mughal (MOO-gahl)

The merchants of Calicut put up some of the most sustained local resistance. In retaliation, the Portuguese embargoed all trade with Aden, Calicut’s principal trading partner, and centered their trade on the port of Cochin, which had once been a dependency of Calicut. Some Calicut merchants became adept at evading these patrols, but the price of resistance was the shrinking of Calicut’s commercial importance as Cochin gradually became the major pepper-exporting port on the Malabar Coast.

The traders and rulers of the state of Gujarat farther north had less success in keeping the Portuguese at bay. At first they resisted Portuguese attempts at monopoly and in 1509 joined Egypt’s failed effort to sweep the Portuguese from the Arabian Sea. But in 1535, finding his state at a military disadvantage due to Mughal attacks, the ruler of Gujarat made the fateful decision to allow the Portuguese to build a fort at Diu in return for their support. Once established, the Portuguese gradually extended their control, so that by midcentury they were licensing and taxing all Gujarati ships. Even after the Mughals (who were Muslims) took control of Gujarat in 1572, the Mughal emperor Akbar permitted the Portuguese to continue their maritime monopoly in return for allowing one ship a year to carry pilgrims to Mecca without paying the Portuguese any fee.

The Portuguese never gained complete control of the Indian Ocean trade, but their naval supremacy allowed
them to dominate key ports and trade routes during the sixteenth century. The resulting profits were sent back to Europe in the form of spices and other luxury goods. The effects were dramatic. The Portuguese were now able to break the pepper monopoly long held by Venice and Genoa, who both depended on Egyptian middlemen, by selling at much lower prices. They were also able to fund a more aggressive colonization of Brazil.

In both Asia and Africa the consequences flowing from these events were startling. Asian and East African traders were now at the mercy of Portuguese warships, but their individual responses affected their fates. Some were devastated. Others prospered by meeting Portuguese demands or evading their patrols. Because Portuguese power was based on the control of trade routes, not the occupation of large territories, Portugal had little impact on the Asian and African mainlands, in sharp contrast to what was occurring in the Americas.

In the Americas the Spanish established a vast territorial empire, in contrast to the trading empires the Portuguese created in Africa and Asia. This outcome had little to do with differences between the two Iberian kingdoms, except for the fact that the Spanish kingdoms had a much larger population and greater resources to draw on. The Spanish and Portuguese monarchies had similar motives for expansion and used identical ships and weapons. Rather, the isolation of the Amerindian peoples made their responses to outside contacts different from the responses of peoples in Africa and the Indian Ocean cities. In dealing with the relatively small indigenous populations on the Caribbean islands, the first Spanish settlers resorted to conquest and plunder rather than trade. This practice was later extended to the more powerful Amerindian kingdoms on the American mainland. The spread of deadly new diseases, especially smallpox, among Amerindians after 1518 weakened their ability to resist.

The first Amerindians to encounter Columbus were the Arawak of Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas to the north (see Map 15.2). They cultivated maize (corn), cassava (a tuber), sweet potatoes, and hot peppers, as well as cotton and tobacco. They met their other material needs from the sea and from wild plants. Although they had no hard metals such as bronze or iron, they were skilled at working gold. However, these islands did not have large gold deposits, and, unlike West Africans, the Arawak did not trade gold over long distances. The Arawak at first extended a cautious welcome to the Spanish but soon learned to tell exaggerated stories about gold in other places to persuade them to move on.

When Columbus made his second trip to Hispaniola in 1493, he brought several hundred settlers from southern Iberia who hoped to make their fortune, as well as missionaries who were eager to persuade the Amerindians to accept Christianity. The settlers demanded indigenous labor to look for gold, stole gold ornaments, confiscated food, and sexually assaulted native women, provoking the Arawak to rebel in 1495. In this and later conflicts, steel swords, horses, and body armor gave the Spaniards a great advantage, and thousands of Arawak were slaughtered and captives forced into bondage. Those who survived were forced to pay a heavy tax in gold, spun cotton, and food. Any who failed to meet the quotas were condemned to forced labor. Meanwhile, the cattle, pigs, and goats introduced by the settlers devoured the Arawak's food crops, causing deaths from famine and disease. A governor appointed by the Spanish crown in 1502 institutionalized these demands by dividing the surviving Arawak on Hispaniola among his political allies as laborers.

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- Primary Source: A Dominican Voice in the Wilderness: Preaching Against Tyranny in Hispaniola

The actions of the Spanish in the Antilles were reflections of Spanish actions and motives during the wars against the Muslims in Spain in the previous centuries: they sought to serve God by defeating nonbelievers and placing them under Christian control—and to become rich in the process. Individual conquistadors (conquerors) extended that pattern around the Caribbean. As gold and indigenous labor became scarce on Hispaniola, Spanish expeditions looked for new opportunities. The search for gold and the Spanish need to replace the rapidly declining Amerindian population of Hispaniola led to the forced removal of most of the Arawaks from the Bahamas, taken to Hispaniola as slaves, Juan Ponce de León (1460–1521), who had participated in the conquest of Muslim Spain and the seizure of Hispaniola, conquered the island of Borinquen (Puerto Rico) in 1508 and then initiated the exploration of southeastern Florida in 1513. Cuba was conquered by forces led by Diego Velázquez between 1510 and 1511.

Following two failed expeditions to Mexico, the governor of Cuba appointed an ambitious and ruthless nobleman, Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) to undertake a
new effort. Cortés left Cuba in 1519 with six hundred fighting men, including many who had sailed with the earlier expeditions, and most of the island’s stock of weapons and horses. After demonstrating his military skills in a series of battles with the Maya, Cortés learned of the rich Aztec Empire in central Mexico. Cortés brought to the American mainland the military tactics, political skills, and institutions that had been developed earlier in the reconquest of Muslim Iberia and the settlement of the Greater Antilles.

The Aztecs themselves had conquered their vast empire only during the previous century, and many of the subjugated Amerindian peoples were far from loyal subjects. Many resented the tribute they had to pay the Aztecs, the forced labor, and the large-scale human sacrifices to the Aztec gods. The Aztecs also had powerful enemies, including the Tlaxcalans, who would become crucial supporters of Cortés’s military campaign. After fierce battles with the Spanish, who believed they were allies of the Aztecs, the Tlaxcalans forged a lasting military alliance with Cortés. Like the peoples of Africa and Asia when confronted by Europeans, the Amerindian peoples of Mexico calculated as best they could the benefits and threats represented by these strange visitors. Individuals were forced to make these kinds of choices as well. Malintzin (Malinche), a native woman who was given to Cortés shortly after his arrival in the Maya region, became his translator, key source of intelligence, and mistress. As peoples and as individuals, native allies were crucial to the Spanish campaign.

While Cortés proved decisive, directing his force toward the center of the Aztec Empire, the Aztec emperor Montezuma II (r. 1502–1520) hesitated to use force and attempted diplomacy instead. Cortés pushed toward the glorious capital city of Tenochtitlan. Along his route he demonstrated the technological advantages enjoyed by the Spanish on the battlefield, using his firearms, cavalry tactics, and steel swords to great effect. In the end Montezuma agreed to welcome the Spaniards. As they approached the island city, the emperor went out in a great procession, dressed in all his finery, to welcome Cortés with gifts and flower garlands.

Despite Cortés’s initial promise that he came in friendship, Montezuma quickly found himself a prisoner in his own palace. The Spanish looted his treasury, interfered with the city’s religious rituals, and eventually massacred hundreds during a festival. The Aztecs then rose in mass rebellion, forcing the Spanish to attempt a desperate nighttime

Tlaxcalans (tlash-KAH-lans)

Malintzin (mah-LEENT-zeen)  Montezuma (mock-TEH-ZOO-ma)  Tenochtitlan (teh-noch-TIT-lan)
escape. Briefly the Aztecs gained the upper hand. They destroyed half of the Spanish force and four thousand of the Spaniards’ Amerindian allies, sacrificing fifty-three Spanish prisoners and four horses to their gods and displaying their severed heads on pikes. In the battle Moctezuma was killed.

The Spanish survivors retreated from the city and rebuilt their strength with the help of the Tlaxcalans. Their successful capture of Tenochtitlan in 1521 was greatly facilitated by the spread of smallpox, which weakened and killed more of the city’s defenders than died in the fighting. One source remembered that the disease “spread over the people as a great destruction.” The bodies of the afflicted were covered with oozing sores, and large numbers soon died. It is likely that many Amerindians as well as Europeans blamed the devastating spread of this disease on supernatural forces. After the Aztec capital fell, Cortés and other Spanish leaders led expeditions to the north and south accompanied by indigenous allies including the Tlaxcalans and others. Everywhere epidemic disease, especially smallpox, helped crush indigenous resistance.

Before these events, Spanish settlements had been established in Panama, and settlers there had heard tales of rich and powerful civilizations to the south, although they did not have specific intelligence of the Inca Empire (see Chapter 11). During the previous century the Inca had built a vast empire along the Pacific coast of South America, stretching nearly 3,000 miles (5,000 kilometers) from southern Colombia to Chile. As the empire expanded through conquest, the Inca enforced new labor demands and taxes and even exiled rebellious populations from their lands.

The Inca Empire was a great empire with highly productive agriculture, exquisite stone cities (such as the capital, Cuzco), complex trading networks, and rich gold and silver mines. The power of the Inca emperor was sustained by the belief that he was descended from the Sun God, as well as by a professional military and an efficient system of roads and messengers that kept him informed about major events in the empire. Yet all was not well.

About 1525 the Inca ruler Huayna Capac died in Quito, where he had led a successful military campaign. His death set off a contested succession between two of his sons that led to civil war. In the end Atahuallpa, the candidate of the northern army, defeated Huascar, the candidate of the royal court at Cuzco. The military and political leadership were decimated, and the surviving supporters of Huascar were embittered. Even more devastating was the threat awaiting the empire from Francisco Pizarro (ca. 1478–1541) and his force of 180 men, 37 horses, and two cannon.

With limited education and some military experience, Pizarro had come to the Americas in 1502 at the age of twenty-five to seek his fortune. He had participated in the conquest of Hispaniola and in Balboa’s expedition across the Isthmus of Panama. By 1520 Pizarro was a wealthy landowner and official in Panama, yet he gambled his fortune on more adventures, exploring the Pacific coast to a point south of the equator, where he learned of the riches of the Inca. With a license from the king of Spain, he set out from Panama in 1531 to conquer them.

Huayna Capac (WHY-nah KAH-pak)  Pizarro (pih-ZAHR-oh)
Having seen signs of the civil war after landing, Pizarro arranged to meet the Inca emperor, Atahualpa (r. 1531–1533) near the Andean city of Cajamarca on November 1532. With supreme boldness and brutality, Pizarro’s small band of armed men seized Atahualpa from a rich litter borne by eighty nobles as it passed through an enclosed courtyard. Though surrounded by an Inca army of at least forty thousand, the Spaniards were able to use their cannon to create confusion while their swords brought down thousands of the emperor’s lightly armed retainers and servants. The strategy to replicate the earlier Spanish conquest of Mexico was working.

Atahualpa, seeking to guard his authority even as a captive, ordered the execution of his imprisoned brother Huascar. He also attempted to gain his freedom. Having noted the glee with which the Spaniards seized gold, silver, and emeralds, Atahualpa offered a ransom he thought would satisfy even the greediest among them: rooms filled to shoulder height with gold and silver. But when the ransom of 13,400 pounds (6,000 kilograms) of gold and 26,000 pounds (12,000 kilograms) of silver was paid, the Spaniards gave Atahualpa a choice: he could be burned at the stake as a heathen or baptized as a Christian and then strangled. He chose the latter. The unity of the Inca Empire, already battered by the civil war and Atahualpa’s decision to execute his brother Huascar, was further undermined by the Spanish occupation of Cuzco, the capital city.

Nevertheless, a massive native rebellion was led in 1536 by Manco Inca, whom the Spanish had placed on the throne following the execution of his brother Atahualpa. Although defeated by the Spanish, Manco Inca and his heirs retreated to the interior and created a much-reduced independent kingdom that survived until 1572. The victorious Spaniards, now determined to settle their own rivalries, initiated a bloody civil war fueled by greed and jealousy. Before peace was established, this struggle took the lives of Francisco Pizarro and most of the other prominent conquistadors. But the conquest of the mainland continued. Incited by the fabulous wealth of the Aztecs and Incas, conquistadors extended Spanish conquest and exploration in South and North America, dreaming of new treasuries to loot.

Comparative Perspectives

The rapid expansion of European empires and the projection of European military power around the world is one of the most important topics in world history, but it would have seemed unlikely in 1492. No European power matched the military and economic strength of China and few could rival the Ottomans. Spain lacked strong national institutions and Portugal had a small population, both had limited economic resources. Because of these limitations the monarchs of Spain and Portugal allowed their subjects greater initiative. While royal sponsorship was often crucial in, for example, the Portuguese contacts with Africa and the first voyages to Asia, many of the commercial and military expeditions were effectively organized and financed as private companies. Very often the kings of Spain and Portugal struggled to catch up with their restless and ambitious subjects, sometimes taking decades to establish royal control in new colonies.

The pace and character of European expansion was different in Africa and Asia than in the Americas. In Africa local rulers were generally able to limit European military power to coastal outposts and to control European trade. Only in the Kongo were the Portuguese able to project their power inland. In the Indian Ocean there were mature markets and specialized production for distant consumers when Europeans arrived. Here Portuguese (and later Dutch and British) naval power allowed Europeans to harvest large profits and influence local commercial patterns, but most native populations continued to enjoy autonomy for centuries.

In the Americas the terrible effects of epidemic disease and the destructiveness of the conquest led to the rapid creation of European settlements and the subordination of the surviving indigenous population. The Spanish and Portuguese found few long-distance markets and little large scale production of goods that could be exported profitably to Europe. The Americas would eventually produce great amounts of wealth, but the production of the gold, silver, and sugar resulted from the introduction of new technologies, the imposition of oppressive new forms of labor, such as slavery, as well as the development of new roads and ports.
The voyages of exploration undertaken by the Chinese and Polynesians pursued diverse objectives. In the Chinese case, the great voyages of the early fifteenth century were made out of interest in trade, curiosity, and the projection of imperial power. For the Polynesians, exploration opened the opportunity to both project power and demonstrate expertise while at the same time settling satellite populations that would relieve population pressures on limited resources. In both cases new connections were made and societies were invigorated. The Vikings had similarly explored new lands in the North Atlantic, using their knowledge of the heavens and seas to establish settlements. There is also written evidence of African voyages in the Atlantic during this same period, although their purpose is less clear.

The projection of European influence between 1450 and 1550 was in some ways similar to that of other cultural regions in that it expanded commercial linkages, increased cross-cultural contacts, and served the ambitions of political leaders. But the result was a major turning point in world history. During those years European explorers opened new long-distance trade routes across the world’s three major oceans, for the first time establishing regular contact among all the continents. As a result, a new balance of power arose in parts of Atlantic Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Americas.

Europeans created colonial empires in the Americas quite rapidly, while their progress in Africa and Asia was much slower. Many Amerindians welcomed the Spanish settlers at first, only to have them tax their labors, steal their food, introduce disease and warfare, and eventually subjugate them. In contrast, Portuguese visitors to Africa remained a minor presence in 1550. In some regions, the Portuguese were welcomed as trading partners; in others they were regarded as potential political and military allies. The real focus of the Portuguese was to capture the rich trade of the Indian Ocean. While they never gained complete control, they used their superior military strength to dominate key ports and major trade routes.

As dramatic and momentous as these events were, they were not completely unprecedented. The riches of the Indian Ocean trade that brought a gleam to the eye of many Europeans had been developed over many centuries by the trading peoples who inhabited the surrounding lands. While rapid, the European conquest of the Americas was no more rapid or brutal than the earlier Mongol conquests of Eurasia. Even the crossing of the Pacific had been done before, though in stages, by Polynesians.

What gave this maritime revolution unprecedented importance had more to do with what happened after 1550 than with what happened earlier. The overseas empires of the Europeans would endure longer than the Mongols’ and would continue to expand for three and a half centuries after 1550. Unlike the Chinese, the Europeans did not turn their backs on the world after an initial burst of exploration. Not content with dominance in the Indian Ocean trade, Europeans opened an Atlantic maritime network that grew to rival the Indian Ocean network in the wealth of its trade; they also pioneered trade across the Pacific. The maritime expansion begun in the period from 1450 to 1550 marked the beginning of a new age of growing global interaction.
KEY TERMS

Zheng He p. 416
Arawak p. 417
Henry the Navigator p. 419
caravel p. 420
Gold Coast p. 422
Bartolomeu Dias p. 422
Vasco da Gama p. 422
Christopher Columbus p. 422
Ferdinand Magellan p. 424
Conquistadors p. 431
Hernán Cortés p. 431
Moctezuma II p. 432
Francisco Pizarro p. 433
Atahualpa p. 434

SUGGESTED READING


NOTES


Climate and Population to 1500

During the millennia before 1500, human populations expanded in three momentous surges. The first occurred after 50,000 B.C.E. when humans emigrated from their African homeland to all of the inhabitable continents. After that, the global population remained steady for several millennia. During the second expansion, between about 5000 and 500 B.C.E., population rose from about 5 million to 100 million as agricultural societies spread around the world (see Figure 1). Again population growth then slowed for several centuries before a third surge took world population to over 350 million by 1200 C.E. (see Figure 2).

For a long time historians tended to attribute these population surges to cultural and technological advances. Indeed, a great many changes in culture and technology are associated with adaptation to different climates and food supplies in the first surge and with the domestication of plants and animals in the second. However, historians have not found a cultural or technological change to explain the third surge, nor can they explain why creativity would have stagnated for long periods between the surges. Something else must have been at work.

Recently historians have begun to pay more attention to the impact of long-term variations in global climate. By examining ice cores drilled out of glaciers, scientists have been able to compile records of thousands of years of climate change. The comparative width of tree rings from ancient forests has provided additional data on periods of favorable and unfavorable growth. Such evidence shows that cycles of population growth and stagnation followed changes in global climate.

Historians now believe that global temperatures were above normal for extended periods from the late 1100s to the late 1200s C.E. In the temperate lands where most of the world’s people lived, above-normal temperatures meant a longer growing season, more bountiful harvests, and thus a more adequate and reliable food supply. The ways in which societies responded to the medieval warm period are as important as the climate change, but it is unlikely that human agency alone would have produced the medieval

Figure 1  World Population, 5000–1 B.C.E.

![Graph showing world population from 5000 to 1 B.C.E.](image-url)
surge. One notable response was that of the Vikings, who increased the size and range of their settlements in the North Atlantic, although their raids also caused death and destruction.

Some of the complexities involved in the interaction of human agency, climate, and other natural factors are also evident in the demographic changes that followed the medieval warm period. During the 1200s the Mongol invasions caused death and disruption of agriculture across Eurasia. China's population, which had been over 100 million in 1200, declined by a third or more by 1300. The Mongol invasions did not cause harm west of Russia, but climate changes in the 1300s resulted in population losses in Europe. Unusually heavy rains caused crop failures and a prolonged famine in northern Europe from 1315 to 1319.

The freer movement of merchants within the Mongol Empire also facilitated the spread of disease across Eurasia, culminating in the great pandemic known as the Black Death in Europe. The demographic recovery under way in China was reversed. The even larger population losses in Europe may have been affected by the decrease in global temperatures to their lowest point in many millennia between 1350 and 1375. Improving economic conditions enabled population to recover more rapidly in Europe after 1400 than in China, where the conditions of rural life remained harsh.

Because many other historical circumstances interact with changing weather patterns, historians have a long way to go in deciphering the role of climate in history. Nevertheless, it is a factor that can no longer be ignored.

Figure 2  Population in China and Europe, 1–1500 C.E.