

# **AMERICA AND EUROPE: THE FIRST ENCOUNTER**

## **1492-1700**

Columbus's voyages to the land he thought were the Indies were the result of the medieval and early modern expansion of Europe. Since at least the year 1000, Europe had been steadily expanding its political influence and commerce. Recent advances in scientific and geographical knowledge had made times ripe for Columbus's effort and if he had not done so, someone else would have certainly sailed west from Europe, thus encountering the hitherto largely unknown American continent. To properly understand this, the European background to the age of discovery and exploration should be studied. One would then realize that Columbus was not an isolated adventurer, but rather a part of the expansion of Europe. The Spanish were the first to introduce European culture to the Americas; the Portuguese, French, Dutch and English would come later. As the demands of mercantilism grew, these countries would need the resources that were found in the New World, which would create a great rivalry for this land.

### **THE WORKS OF COLUMBUS**

Christopher Columbus's birth in a family of merchants in Genoa, Italy gave him a strong interest in navigation and trade. This ambitious, persistent, aggressive Italian, an able student of geography and navigation, was convinced and began promoting the idea that a direct, all-water route to the Indies might be found by sailing due west. As early as 1482 Columbus sought the support of the King of Portugal, was refused, and turned his attention to convincing the King of Spain.

### **THE VOYAGES OF COLUMBUS**

Columbus, with the aid of a friendly scholar in the Spanish court, finally convinced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of the feasibility and importance of his project for locating a direct trading route to India. With the backing, but no financial support, he sailed, in August 1492, in three small ships and in October reached the Bahamas. On this first voyage he also discovered Cuba and Haiti. He believed the new lands he discovered to be outlying parts of the Indies and called the natives "Indians." Three more voyages by Columbus led to rapid colonization of the new lands once it was discovered (possibly during Columbus's second voyage) they had not discovered a trading route, but, instead, a new continent.

Because of the demands of the people to make money in the new land and the lack of gold found, many of the colonists turned to agriculture (sugar) to make money. The attempts to enslave the Indian failed when they soon died after exposure to many European diseases. After the Indian died off (98%), the Europeans turned to the importation of the African as a slave.

### **SPANISH SETTLEMENT OF THE MAINLAND**

Realizing the enormous potential of the new land and the rivalry in Europe for goods, the Spanish embarked on conquering the new land.

### **EARLY EXPLORATION AND CONQUEST**

The two greatest conquests of the Spanish were the overthrow of the two Native American empires, the Aztec and the Inca civilizations. Hernan Cortes (1519-1521) with a small band of soldiers overthrew Montezuma and conquered his Aztec subjects in Central Mexico. Francisco Pizarro in a similar adventure beginning in 1531 conquered the Incas of Peru. Cortes and Pizarro both looted enormous amounts of gold and silver (jade was the most important jewel to both tribes) and whetted the Spanish appetite for more riches. By 1598, Spain had colonized from the Rio Grande River through South America.

### **THE FRENCH IN AMERICA**

Hearing of the riches of the Spanish in the New World, the French began exploring and settling in the Americas. At first the French came to the Canadian coasts and to Newfoundland organized as small

fishing and fur trading expeditions beginning about 1504. Beginning in the St. Lawrence Seaway, the French gradually expanded their trading posts in North America and moved down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico.

Over the vast area explored and claimed by the French, widely scattered missions, trading posts and agricultural settlements were founded. The French settlement is mostly recognized as being friendly to the Native Americans, which would become an important ally for the French in North America.

### **THE BEGINNING OF ENGLISH COLONIZATION IN AMERICA**

As with other European nations, England's exploration of North America was partly motivated by a search for a water passage through to the Pacific – the Northwest Passage. After Elizabeth, the Protestant daughter of Henry VIII, became Queen, England, as head of the European Protestant nations, began a long period of rivalry and warfare with Catholic Spain and France.

### **THE “SEA DOGS”**

In the 1560s John Hawkins, the leader of the “sea dogs,” began raiding Spanish treasure ships and ports in the Caribbean – with the support of Elizabeth. Hawkins also began engaging in illicit trade, particularly in slaves from Africa. In the 1570s Sir Francis Drake began making raids in the Spanish West Indies. On his most famous voyage he sailed into the Pacific Ocean to raid unguarded Spanish shipping on the Pacific coast as far north as San Francisco. From California he crossed the Pacific to return to England and thereby circumnavigated the globe. Elizabeth knighted him for his exploits against Spain. Subsequently war broke out between England and Spain. Years of spending lavishly, however, hurt the Spanish and they were unable to raise enough money to fight a successful war. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 gave Britain naval supremacy over Spain and made possible the planting of the first American colonies.

### **EARLY ENGLISH FAILURES IN FOUNDING COLONIES**

Sir Humphrey Gilbert in 1583 attempted to found a colony in Newfoundland, but these plans ended when Gilbert died in a sea storm. His half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, was responsible for sending three expeditions to Roanoke Island in North Carolina from 1585 to 1587. The first two attempts failed completely. The third expedition planted a colony in 1587. When a relief vessel arrived in 1590, only the buildings built by the colonists were found; the settlers had disappeared and their fate has never been determined.