

The End of the Old World and the Beginning of the New

Although we commonly use these terms, it is not quite correct to refer to the “Old World” and the “New World,” since the “New World” was only new to the Europeans who “discovered” it. In fact, people had been living there for thousands of years. Instead, it is useful to think of the period around Columbus’s voyage to the Americas as one in which the people of western Eurasia (Europeans) began to mix more frequently with those of eastern Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas. For the people of Europe, who before this period had little knowledge of such vastly different cultures, this did create a “New World.”

Exploration

Europeans in the Late Middle Ages were overwhelmingly peasants, and they tended not to travel far from their homes. The discovery of the Americas changed this for some, but not all; only in the nineteenth century did Europeans start moving to cities in numbers that drastically changed the composition of society.

This is not to say, however, that no Europeans travelled; merchants and missionaries were among those who did, and sometimes even peasants moved from their lands. The areas of southern Europe and North Africa were in frequent contact, as would be expected, since they shared the Mediterranean Sea. In Spain and Portugal, the Moors controlled territory until the Reconquista of 1492, and in the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire captured much territory in the Balkans.

Europeans also knew, or had heard legends, about further lands. Tales of Alexander the Great, who had conquered as far as India in the 320s BCE, were well known to Europeans. For several centuries, the Roman Empire had controlled the Mediterranean coast and maintained contact with civilizations further afield. Romans prized black African slaves, and trade was conducted with China along the Silk Road. While the Roman Empire’s disintegration in the 400s CE disrupted many of these links, trade still led Europeans to connect with other civilizations. Venice was the European hub for spices, which travelled over land and sea from India and the Middle East. Overland trips to China by explorers such as Alexander Nemsy and, especially, Marco Polo, captured the imagination of Europeans. Such trips were infrequent, however, and the fall of the Mongol Empire in the fifteenth century, as well as the rise of the Ottoman Empire, made overland routes to China quite unsafe for Europeans.

Yet the fabled riches and wonders of China and India held great allure for Europeans. Helped by advances in navigation and maritime technology, Portuguese explorers sought sea routes to China by means of a passage around Africa. In so doing, the Portuguese reached the Congo River in 1482 and first sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. On Columbus’s first voyage to North America he was searching for a sea route to China for the Spanish. The wave of European exploration lasted until 1513; in just over two decades after Columbus first made landfall in the Bahamas, Portuguese explorers also travelled by sea to India, Brazil, and Indonesia. These experienced sailors mapped their journeys, which enabled more and more European ships to repeat the routes.

Most Europeans at the time were very insular, and rarely had occasion to travel anywhere, let alone across the world. Accounts of faraway travels were very popular and stirred the imagination of Europeans; Marco Polo's thirteenth-century account of his family's trip to China, for instance, remained popular for centuries. These travelers' tales undoubtedly helped catalyze colonial enterprises, and with the invention of the printing press, sixteenth-century Europe was even more equipped to disseminate such stories.

The Society of Jesus, a new order of Catholic priests, played an important role in this. Missionaries were often part of the vanguard of colonial missions (more on this shortly). The Jesuits were encouraged to report on what they saw, and Jesuit reports from the Americas, China, Japan, and India reached a wide audience. The sixteenth century was a time of tremendous religious upheaval in Europe, and the publication of such reports was an effective method in the battle for souls as much as it was a promotion of colonial enterprises.

Trade with the East

The success of the voyages of exploration gave wealthy Europeans access to countless new foods, products, and resources. When the Portuguese discovered a sea route around Africa to India, it helped them to quickly take over control of the spice market from Venice. After the Portuguese, the Dutch became crucial purveyors of spices from Indonesia, which was known to Europeans as the Spice Islands. In the Middle Ages, spices were a luxury only the nobility could afford. The wider availability of spices thanks to European overseas trade generally improved the bland diet of most Europeans. Since European foods tended to be bland, especially in the north, the introduction of spices was much appreciated. Coffee and tea, today a mainstay of the European diet, were highly valued imports. Other Eastern products were also highly valued in Europe. Chinese porcelain, for instance, was so greatly valued that it inspired European imitators, including Delft pottery from the Netherlands. Indian calicoes, meanwhile, inspired the English East India Company to begin establishing trading bases in India; this was the initial foundation for Britain's colonial rule over India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The relationship between European merchants and their Asian and African suppliers was much more equitable than between Europeans and the peoples of the Americas. This was most strikingly the case in China. The Chinese met Europeans on a level of equality, even superiority. When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci stayed in China, he kept a large map on the wall of his residence. A group of mandarins visited Ricci's residence and were impressed by the map. They told the governor of the city, who asked for a copy. While Ricci's own map showed the world as European explorers had charted it, he changed the governor's copy to reflect Chinese sensibilities – as was customary, the Chinese Middle Kingdom was placed at the map's center. In interactions with the Chinese, European visitors to China like Ricci had to emphasize the superiority of Chinese culture over their own in order to trade with or preach to the Chinese people.

African countries also interacted with Europeans on a basis of rough equality. The Portuguese, who established the first European settlements in Africa, carried African slaves to the Americas, but did so with the permission of African rulers, who

often profited enormously from the process. Portuguese merchants were limited to the port of Bissau in the major slave-trading center of Guinea. Meanwhile, Portugal and Angola exchanged representatives, as did Ethiopia and Rome. While the Dutch and British did establish colonies in Africa in the eighteenth century, European dominance over the continent did not come until the nineteenth century.

The Columbian Exchange and Slavery

The phrase *Columbian Exchange* refers to the large-scale transfer of people, plants, animals, and diseases between Eurasia and the Americas, which had previously existed as separate ecosystems. Products from the Americas became very popular in Europe. New foods like potatoes, corn, and tomatoes were introduced into the European diet. In later centuries, potatoes were widely cultivated because they were a cheap crop; when potato blight struck in the late 1840s, for instance, the crop was so widely in use that it caused a catastrophe across Europe, especially in Ireland, where more than one million people perished. More exotic foods like chocolate, another mainstay of the present European diet, were imported from the Americas. In present-day Canada, a seemingly limitless supply of fish and furs drew the French, and to a lesser extent the Dutch, to establish settlements and trade with Native Americans.

European exploitation of the Americas also gave license to produce large quantities of products that Europeans already found desirable. The plantation economy was a widespread model for early colonial enterprises. The Spanish, Dutch, and French all set up large sugar plantations in the Americas, while in Virginia, British entrepreneurs undertook the widespread cultivation of tobacco. Later, cotton plantations in the Americas would become an integral part of transatlantic trade.

The Spanish discovery of gold in the Americas was one of the chief inspirations for other colonial settlements. None of the other powers had such luck. The Portuguese eventually found gold in Brazil in the late 1690s, but the gold rushes in North America did not occur until after the colonial period had ended. To the extent that the other European countries capitalized on the mineral wealth of the Americas, it was at the expense of the Spanish; Spanish galleons transporting Mexican gold back to Europe were a tempting target for Dutch and English pirates.

The exploitation of the Americas required massive amounts of labor, whether to cultivate tobacco fields in Virginia or to work gold mines in Mexico. Europeans turned to various sorts of exploitative labor. In Virginia, plantation owners relied on a mix of indentured workers and slaves, and even in New England some farmers owned slaves, though slavery was outlawed there late in the eighteenth century. Most slaves, however, went to sugar plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil. The job of bringing the slaves from Africa fell mostly to the Portuguese, who brought millions of slaves across the Atlantic over four centuries, mostly from their central ports in Guinea and Angola.

Guns and Germs

While Europeans benefited greatly from the Columbian Exchange, the peoples of the Americas were not so fortunate; rather, they suffered greatly as a result of contact with Europeans. Europeans decimated Amerindian societies in war, and the introduction of guns gave Amerindians an easier means to make deadly war among themselves. The introduction of European diseases also decimated Amerindian populations.

Contact between Europeans and the peoples of the Americas was congenial at first. When Columbus first landed in the Bahamas, he found the people there to be generous. Later colonizers had similar first impressions. In many cases, the locals welcomed the Europeans onto their land, gave them gifts, and taught them to survive. A relationship of rough equality even persisted throughout much of the existence of the French colony in New France, brought on by the harsh climate and mutual dependence in the fur trade.

In most cases, however, the initial relationship of equality degraded into conflict and often warfare. The Amerindians were not always passive victims; in many instances they raided European settlements, and occasionally they massacred Europeans. The Europeans, however, with weaponry far more advanced than that used by Amerindians, were almost always the victors throughout centuries of settlement.

Warfare was a constant for the colonizers, not only with the local populations, but also among themselves. Europeans exported their conflicts wherever they went. For instance, the Dutch massacred English traders in Indonesia in the 1600s and destroyed the English colony at Ferryland, Newfoundland in the 1670s. The French colony of Acadia was destroyed by Basque raiders in the 1630s, moved, and was then conquered by the English, who controlled it from 1654 to 1667, when the French got it back. The English then took it again in 1713, at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, and in 1755 all of Acadia's inhabitants were deported because of their sympathy for the French. European conflict again came to North America in the 1750s with the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, in which France and England were again on opposite sides. In 1759 the British successfully besieged the French stronghold at Quebec, and when the war ended they received all of France's territories in North America.

Conflicts between the British and French in North America also involved the Native Americans. The settlers of New England and New France allied with the Iroquois and the Huron respectively, and both sides became involved in European conflicts. The English alliance with the Iroquois was one of the factors in the near-extinction of the Huron. The English had little compunction about giving guns to the Iroquois, while the French only gave guns to those who had converted to Christianity. In a critical battle in 1649, the Iroquois' superior firepower helped them to break through the Huron defenses and scatter the tribe. Native American tribes also fought on both sides in the Anglo-French struggle over Quebec in the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763.

Germs, however, were perhaps the most destructive legacy of European settlement. When the European colonizers brought products, resources, and people across the Atlantic, they also brought numerous diseases with them. While Europeans had all developed partial immunity to diseases like smallpox, chicken pox, tuberculosis, and measles, the inhabitants of the Americas had not. These diseases decimated

Amerindian populations throughout North and South America. Perhaps ninety percent of the Aztec population, numbering in the tens of millions, succumbed to disease. In the north, the Micmac people of Canada were reduced from 35,000 to 3,000. These epidemics were compounded by the introduction of unhealthy European eating habits and alcohol.

Settlement

European exploration opened up new opportunities for the adventurous, and nowhere was this more the case than in the Americas. Opportunistic Europeans, almost exclusively men, seized the chance to make a better life for themselves, usually in the hope of getting rich quick. These men were often the first colonists to advance inland. Once the Spanish had found fabulous gold wealth in Mexico, the search for gold and silver was a common feature in the Americas until 1900. In Brazil, for instance, bands of gold hunters called *bandeirantes* roamed the inland regions, becoming the first Europeans to do so. The French, Dutch, and Swedish built colonies in the St. Lawrence River / Great Lakes region to take advantage of the fur trade. Other sources of wealth abounded: Europeans viewed the land as theirs to colonize, and they used it to make money. Tobacco and, especially, sugar plantations became popular ways to make money from land. The Puritan colony in New England, meanwhile, based its prosperity upon the family farm.

Initially, most colonists in the Americas were men (the exception was New England, where families were more likely to settle as a unit). This gender imbalance had two main effects: first, in some colonies, such as New France, the population grew very slowly until a concerted government effort brought over more women. Second, in all cases, European men had children with Amerindian women, creating sizeable mixed-race communities. Such mixed-ancestry children were often treated as inferior. The Métis of New France, for instance, often became outcasts from both European and Native American communities. Spanish colonial authorities also attempted to impose racial hierarchies that placed Spaniards at the top of a three-tiered society, with *castas* or *mestizos* (mixed-race) in the middle and Amerindians and black Africans at the bottom. In practice, however, these distinctions were often blurred or flexible; black Africans, for instance, were legally inferior to Amerindians but their occupations often afforded them higher social status.

The Spanish were the first European empire to colonize the Americas, which is one reason they had the largest, richest, and most populous empire. The Dutch – who like the Spanish and the French ran sugar plantations in the Caribbean – had the smallest presence; New Netherland, which covered parts of modern-day New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New England, only consisted of a few hundred settlers. English and Portuguese colonies were both prosperous, and they quickly outgrew their original boundaries. The French claimed the next largest landmass behind the Spanish, but it was almost exclusively focused on the fur trade and it was thinly settled.

Religion and Philosophy

Religion was an integral part of the new settlements. This is perhaps to be expected, as many of the early settlements were established during the Reformation. The battle for souls that was raging in Europe extended to Africa, Asia, and the Americas as well.

The Spanish and Portuguese, who were the great naval powers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, brought Catholic priests with them on many of their exploring, trading, and colonizing missions. Five major orders – the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Mercedarians, and later, the Jesuits – accompanied the Spanish colonizers. They attempted to convert as many Amerindians as possible, and they were noted for the zeal of their efforts. The clergy could often be quite brutal, but some became noted for their willingness to stand up for the Amerindians, who they believed were being mistreated. The most famous example is Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican friar who wrote a stinging rebuke of Spanish colonization. The Jesuits, meanwhile, were so renowned for making friends with the Amerindians that the Guarani, a tribe in today's Paraguay, formed a large army to fight on their behalf.

Like the Spanish and Portuguese, the French also brought priests and missionaries with them when they settled. The Recollet, Capuchin, and Jesuit orders of Catholic priests all sent missionaries to the new French colony in North America in the seventeenth century. The missionaries believed that the Native Americans needed to convert to Christianity and change their lifestyle. First, they tried living with the Native Americans. The priests quickly came to believe that the Native Americans' nomadic lifestyle was uncivilized, and they proceeded to try to correct it. The Jesuits focused their efforts on the Huron, an ally of the French whose seminomadic ways seemed the most civilized out of all the tribes. While living amongst them, however, they also found aspects of Huron culture they appreciated. The Huron were sober – alcohol arrived with the Europeans – they lived healthily, respected different religions, and were generally open towards others. In the end, the French missionaries had mixed success in their attempts to convert the Native Americans to Christianity.

In general, the Native Americans considered the new religion carefully, and several tribes incorporated aspects of Christianity into their own religions. Others were converted entirely. Many, however, faked their conversion because the French only gave guns to Christian converts, and the Huron in particular were at war with another tribe, the Iroquois. Still others rejected Christianity entirely. Christian notions of heaven, hell, and sin often did not resonate with Native Americans. Moreover, the priests often brought European diseases like smallpox with them. When these decimated the local population, the priests became people of ill repute.

Female religious orders also accompanied the French. While nuns in Europe were expected to live in a cloister, in New France nuns could often live a more active religious lifestyle in the settlement. Female religious women played a major role in education in the colony, both of Native Americans and French immigrants. A few nuns also converted Native American girls.

Religion was also at the core of the Puritan settlement in New England. While the colony was said to be established in the name of religious freedom, in fact it was established so that the Puritans could practice freely; they were banned in England. All members of the community were expected to attend church, and dissenters were

threatened with banishment. As generations passed, however, the Puritans' religious fervor diminished somewhat, whereas the Catholic Church remained a strong presence in French and Spanish colonies. The English colonies made no sustained efforts to convert the Native Americans.

While bringing Christianity to the “heathens” of the world was a major driving force of initial European colonization and exploration, the act of meeting other cultures also brought Europeans into contact with new ideas. For the most part, this contact occurred between the clergy and the peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. While traders and settlers would also have been in contact with these cultures, they either did not take the pains to learn about them or did not keep records of their encounters. The clergy, however, spent a lot of time with different peoples in the attempt to convert them.

The Jesuit order is a particularly interesting example. Many Jesuits took great pains to observe and record the cultures of other peoples. They often incorporated outside cultures into their rituals, and even sometimes incorporated their beliefs. In Brazil, the Jesuits took up playing music to please the Guarani, who were fond of it. A Jesuit church in Macao incorporated both Baroque and Buddhist styles in its construction. Moreover, the Jesuits became so enamored of Confucian culture in China that it created a scandal in Rome. The Jesuits exemplify a desire among some Europeans to share and disseminate the cultures they encountered across the world.

Summary

- There were two main forces behind the profusion of long-range European voyages: the allure of India and China and improvements in navigation.
- Ocean-based trading brought many desirable goods back to Europe from the East. Coffee, tea, spices, pottery, and calicoes were among the many greatly desired (and highly profitable) products.
- African and Asian kingdoms conducted business with European merchants on a roughly equal footing, and were often enriched by the process as much as the Europeans were.
- European exploitation of the Americas brought many new products – such as potatoes, corn, tomatoes, and chocolate – to Europe. Sugar and tobacco were also produced in great quantities for European consumption.
- The Columbian Exchange was distinctly one-sided. The pre-Columbian lifestyle in the Americas was all but extinguished. Many millions died from disease and many more from war. Many of those who remained were converted by the sword and given alcohol and guns.
- Women played a relatively small role in the European expansion into the world. In almost all the colonies, men greatly outnumbered women. Some women, however, like the nuns of New France, used the ambiguous social structure of colonial life to their advantage and played a greater role in their community.
- Missionaries played a major role in European exploration; they accompanied traders to the south and east and colonists to the west, all in the hope of winning

converts to Christianity. A few, including Bartolomé de Las Casas, became staunch defenders of Amerindian rights.

- In all of the European colonies, religion (whether Catholic or Protestant) had a prominent place in everyday life.

