

Topic 1.3

European Exploration in the Americas

Thirty-three days after my departure . . . I reached the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our illustrious monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners.

Christopher Columbus, *Select Letters*, 1493

Learning Objective: Explain the causes of exploration and conquest of the New World by various European nations.

Until the late 1400s, the people of the Americas carried on extensive trade with each other but had no connection to the people of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Similarly, Europeans, Africans, and Asians traded among themselves without knowing of the Americas. However, starting in the 1400s, religious and economic motives prompted Europeans to explore more widely than before. As a result, they brought the two parts of the world into contact with each other.

The European Context for Exploration

While Vikings from Scandinavia had visited Greenland and North America around the year 1000, these voyages had no lasting impact. Columbus's voyages of exploration finally brought people into ongoing contact across the Atlantic. Several factors made sailing across the ocean and exploring distant regions possible and desirable in the late 15th century.

Changes in Thought and Technology

In Europe, a rebirth of classical learning prompted an outburst of artistic and scientific activity in the 15th and 16th centuries known as the Renaissance. Several of the technological advances during the Renaissance resulted from Europeans making improvements in the inventions of others. For example, Europeans began to use **gunpowder** (invented by the Chinese) and the **sailing compass** (adopted from Arab merchants who learned about it from the Chinese). Europeans also made major improvements in shipbuilding and mapmaking. In addition, the invention of the **printing press** in the 1450s aided the spread of knowledge across Europe.

Religious Conflict

The later years of the Renaissance were a time of intense religious zeal and conflict. The Roman Catholic Church and its leader, known as the pope, had dominated most of Western Europe for centuries. However, in the 15th and 16th centuries, their power was threatened by both Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims, and rebellious Christians who challenged the pope's authority.

Catholic Victory in Spain In the 8th century, Islamic invaders from North Africa, known as Moors, rapidly conquered most of what is now Spain. Over the next several centuries, Spanish Christians reconquered much of the land and set up several independent kingdoms. Two of the largest of these kingdoms united when **Isabella**, queen of Castile, and **Ferdinand**, king of Aragon, married in 1469. In 1492, under the leadership of Isabella and Ferdinand, the Spanish conquered the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, the city of Granada. In that year, the monarchs also funded **Christopher Columbus** on his historic first voyage. The uniting of Spain under Isabella and Ferdinand, the conquest of Granada, and the launching of Columbus's voyage signaled new leadership, hope, and power for Europeans who followed the Roman Catholic faith.

Protestant Revolt in Northern Europe In the early 1500s, certain Christians in Germany, England, France, Holland, and other northern European countries revolted against the authority of the pope in Rome. Their revolt was known as the **Protestant Reformation**. Conflict between Catholics and Protestants led to a series of religious wars that resulted in many millions of deaths in the 16th and 17th centuries. The conflict also caused the Roman Catholics of Spain and Portugal and the Protestants of England and Holland to want to spread their own versions of Christianity to people in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Thus, a religious motive for exploration and colonization was added to political and economic motives.

Expanding Trade

Economic motives for exploration grew out of a fierce competition among European kingdoms for increased trade with Africa, India, and China. In the past, merchants had traveled from the Italian city-state of Venice and the Byzantine city of Constantinople on a long, slow, expensive overland route all the way to eastern China. This land route to Asia had become blocked in 1453 when the Ottoman Turks seized control of Constantinople.

New Routes So the challenge to finding a new way to the rich Asian trade appeared to be by sailing either south along the West African coast and then east to China, or sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. The Portuguese realized the route south and east was the shortest path. Voyages of exploration sponsored by Portugal's Prince **Henry the Navigator** eventually succeeded in opening up a long sea route around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. In 1498, the Portuguese sea captain Vasco da Gama was the first European to reach India via this route. By this time, Columbus had attempted what he mistakenly believed would be a shorter route to Asia.

Slave Trading Since ancient times people in Europe, Africa, and Asia had enslaved people captured in wars. In the 15th century, the Portuguese began trading for enslaved people from West Africa. They used the enslaved workers on newly established sugar plantations on the Madeira and Azores islands off the African coast. Producing sugar with enslaved labor was so profitable that when Europeans later established colonies in the Americas, they used a similar system there.

Developing Nation-States

Europe was also changing politically in the 15th century.

- Small kingdoms were uniting into larger ones. For example, Castile and Aragon united to form the core of the modern country of Spain.
- Enormous multiethnic empires, such as the sprawling Holy Roman Empire in central Europe, were beginning to break up. For example, most of the small states that united to form the modern country of Germany in 1871 were once part of the Holy Roman Empire.

Replacing the small kingdoms and the multiethnic empires were **nation-states**, countries in which the majority of people shared both a common culture and common loyalty toward a central government. The monarchs of the emerging nation-states, such as Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain; Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal; and similar monarchs of France, England, and the Netherlands depended on trade to bring in needed revenues and on the church to justify their right to rule.

Dividing the Americas

The Western European monarchs used their power to search for riches abroad and to spread the influence of their version of Christianity to new overseas dominions. This led to competition for control of land in the Americas.

Spanish and Portuguese Claims Spain and Portugal were the first European kingdoms to claim territories in the Americas. Their claims overlapped, leading to disputes. The Catholic monarchs of the two countries turned to the pope to resolve their differences. In 1493, the pope drew a vertical, north-south line on a world map, called the *line of demarcation*. The pope granted Spain all lands to the west of the line and Portugal all lands to the east.

In 1494, Spain and Portugal moved the pope's line a few degrees to the west and signed an agreement called the **Treaty of Tordesillas**. The line passed through what is now the country of Brazil. This treaty, together with Portuguese explorations, established Portugal's claim to Brazil. Spain claimed the rest of the Americas. However, other European countries soon challenged these claims.

English Claims England's earliest claims to territory in the Americas rested on the voyages of John Cabot, an Italian sea captain who sailed under contract to England's King Henry VII. Cabot explored the coast of Newfoundland in 1497.

EUROPEAN LAND CLAIMS IN NORTH AMERICA IN THE 1600s



England, however, did not immediately follow up Cabot's discoveries with other expeditions of exploration and settlement. Other issues preoccupied England's monarchy in the 1500s, most importantly the religious conflict that followed Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church.

Later in the 16th century, England took more interest in distant affairs. In the 1570s and 1580s, under Queen Elizabeth I, England challenged Spanish shipping in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Sir Francis Drake, for example, attacked Spanish ships, seized the gold and silver that they carried, and even attacked Spanish settlements on the coast of Peru. Another English adventurer, Sir Walter Raleigh, attempted to establish a colonial settlement at **Roanoke Island** off the North Carolina coast in 1587, but the venture failed.

French Claims The French monarchy first showed interest in exploration in 1524 when it sponsored a voyage by an Italian navigator, Giovanni da Verrazzano. Hoping to find a northwest passage leading through the Americas to Asia, Verrazzano explored part of North America's eastern coast, including the New York harbor. French claims to American territory were also based on the voyages of Jacques Cartier (1534–1542), who explored the St. Lawrence River extensively.

Like the English, the French were slow to develop colonies across the Atlantic. During the 1500s, the French monarchy was preoccupied with European wars as well as with internal religious conflict between Roman Catholics and French Protestants known as Huguenots. Only in the next century did France develop a strong interest in following up its claims to North American land.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain what supported and motivated European exploration and colonization in the New World.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Atlantic Trade (WOR)

gunpowder
sailing compass
printing press
Isabella and Ferdinand
Christopher Columbus

Henry the Navigator
Treaty of Tordesillas
Roanoke Island

Identity & Politics (NAT, PLC)

Protestant Reformation
nation-states

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“I marvel not a little, right worshipful, that since the first discovery of America (which is now full four score and ten years), after so great conquests and plannings of the Spaniards and Portuguese there, that we of England could never have the grace to set fast footing in such fertile and temperate places as are left as yet unpossessed of them. But . . . I conceive great hope that the time approacheth and now is that we of England may share and part stakes . . . in part of America and other regions as yet undiscovered. . . .

Yea, if we would behold with the eye of pity how all our prisons are pestered and filled with able men to serve their country, which for small robberies are daily hanged up in great numbers, . . . we would hasten . . . the deducting [conveying] of some colonies of our superfluous people into these temperate and fertile parts of America, which being within six weeks’ sailing of England, are yet unpossessed by any Christians, and seem to offer themselves unto us, stretching nearer unto Her Majesty’s dominions than to other parts of Europe.”

Richard Hakluyt, *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and the Islands Adjacent*, 1582

1. Which of the following would best explain the British failure to follow the Spanish and Portuguese in exploring the New World?
 - (A) Lack of British explorers
 - (B) Development of British colonies in Asia
 - (C) Domestic challenges to the crown within England
 - (D) Establishment of the Church of England
2. Which of the following would eventually become a more important motivation for colonists than the ones suggested in the excerpt?
 - (A) The desire for religious freedom
 - (B) The hope of finding gold and silver
 - (C) The loyalty of members of the nobility
 - (D) The success of merchants and traders
3. According to the excerpt, which of the following areas is the most likely region that the British would colonize?
 - (A) North Atlantic coast
 - (B) West Indies
 - (C) Southern Florida
 - (D) Central America

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly explain ONE specific cause that led to European colonization in the Americas during the 15th and 16th centuries.
 - (b) Briefly explain ONE additional cause that led to European colonization in the Americas during the 15th and 16th centuries.
 - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific effect that resulted from European colonization in the Americas during the 15th and 16th centuries.