Before you read this chapter

European voyagers and colonizers “discover” the Americas (the so-called New World) and connect Afro-Eurasia with the Americas for the first time since the Ice Age.

Not only do peoples move back and forth between Afro-Eurasia and the Americas; so do plants, animals, cultural products, and diseases—the Columbian exchange.

Europeans create empires at great distances from their homelands, fail to enslave Native Americans, and bring in African captives as slave laborers, creating the Atlantic system.
In 1519, five ships under the command of Ferdinand Magellan set out from the Spanish mainland. Nearly three years later a single vessel returned, having successfully circumnavigated the globe. This achievement came at a high cost: four ships had been lost, and only 18 men out of 265 had staved off scurvy, starvation, and stormy seas to complete the journey. Magellan himself had died. But the survivors had become the first true world travelers. Unlike earlier adventurers who penetrated Eurasia and Africa, Magellan’s transoceanic passage connected these worlds with others that, from an Afro-Eurasian viewpoint, had been apart—the Americas.

The voyages of Magellan and other European mariners intensified westerners’ contact with Asia’s vibrant commercial networks and gave Europeans access to a region they called the New World. Although Christopher Columbus did not intend to “discover” America when he went looking for Asia, his voyages convinced Europeans that there were still new territories to exploit and people to convert to Christianity. Moreover, in colonizing the Americas, Europeans drew on connections with West Africa. Indeed, African laborers became vital to agriculture...
and mining in the American colonies. Soon the New World’s riches were prominent participants in the commercial circuits of Afro-Eurasia.

This chapter introduces the initial European conquest and colonization of the Americas. In the narrative of world history, few events surpass Columbus’s voyages of discovery, which opened up worlds about which Afro-Eurasians had no previous knowledge. For the first time since the Ice Age migrations, peoples again moved from Afro-Eurasian landmasses to the Americas. So did animals, plants, commercial products, and—most momentous—deadly germs.

It was enormously significant that Europeans, rather than Asians or Africans, first stumbled upon the Americas and then exploited their resources. For Europeans, too, now became empire builders—but of a different nature. Their empires were overseas, far from the homeland. While the new colonies generated vast riches, they also brought unsettling changes to those who sought to make and maintain empires.

Despite the significance of Europeans’ activity in the Americas, most Africans and Asians were barely aware of its importance to them. As the chapter demonstrates, Asian empires in Ottoman-controlled lands and in India and China continued to flourish after recovering from the Black Death. Nor was Europe’s attention exclusively on the Americas, for its national monarchies competed for sway at home. Religious revolt in the form of the Protestant Reformation intensified these rivalries. In the wake of Columbus, the drive to build and protect empires across oceans—as well as religious conflicts abroad and at home—scattered peoples, shattered worlds, and created new cultural syntheses.

The Revival of the Chinese Economy

China’s economic dynamism was the crucial ingredient to Afro-Eurasia’s global economic revival following the devastation wrought by the Black Death. Under the Ming dynasty, commerce rebounded and the Chinese achieved impressive economic expansion.

China’s vast internal economy, not external trade, was the mainspring of the country’s progress. After the Ming dynasty relocated its capital from Nanjing in the prosperous south to the northern city of Beijing, Chinese merchants, artisans, and farmers exploited the surging domestic market. Reconstruction of the Grand Canal now opened a major artery that allowed food and riches from the economically vibrant lower Yangzi area to reach the capital region of Beijing. Urban centers, such as Nanjing with a population approaching a million and Beijing at half a million, became massive and lucrative markets.

Along China’s elaborate internal trading networks flowed silk and cotton textiles, rice, porcelain ceramics, paper, and many other products. The Ming’s concern about the potentially disruptive effects of trade did not dampen this activity, and efforts to curb overseas commerce following Zheng He’s

THE OLD TRADE AND THE NEW

Well before the products of the Americas entered the circuits of Afro-Eurasian trade, commerce had recovered from the destruction wrought by the Black Death. Just as political leaders had rebuilt states by mixing traditional and innovative ideas, merchant elites revived old trade patterns while establishing new networks. Increasingly, traffic across seas supplemented, if not supplanted, the overland transportation of goods. The Indian Ocean and China seas emerged as the focal points of Afro-Eurasia’s maritime commerce. Across these waters moved an assortment of goods, coordinated by Arab, Persian, Indian, and Chinese merchants, who often settled in foreign lands. There they facilitated trade and mixed with locals.

European mariners and traders, searching for new routes to South and East Asia, began exploring the Atlantic coast of Africa. Lured by spices, silks, and slaves, and aided by new maritime technology, Portuguese expeditions made their way around Africa and onward to India. Meanwhile, Spanish monar...
voyages; see Chapter 11) were largely unsuccessful. Merchants not only were tolerated but often thrived. And despite structures on overseas trade, coastal cities remained active harbors.

Although the Chinese kept the best products for themselves, their silks and porcelain were esteemed across Afro-Eurasia. But what did foreign buyers have to trade with the Chinese? The answer was silver, which became essential to the Ming monetary system. Whereas their predecessors had used paper money, Ming consumers and traders mistrusted anything other than silver or gold for commercial dealings. Once the rulers adopted silver as a means of tax payment in the 1430s, it became the predominant medium for larger transactions.

However, China did not produce sufficient silver for its growing needs—a situation that foreigners learned to exploit. Indeed, silver and other precious metals were about the only commodities for which the Chinese would trade their precious manufactures. Through most of the sixteenth century, China’s main source of silver was Japan, which one Florentine merchant called the “silver islands.” Chinese and European merchants alike plied the routes from Japanese ports to the Chinese mainland.

After the 1570s, however, the Philippines, now under the control of the Spanish, became a gateway for silver coming from the New World. The Ming had developed a commercial fleet, which enabled their merchants to ship goods to Manila in exchange for silver (as well as firearms, sugar, potatoes, and tobacco). Despite official attempts to control trade, China became the final repository for much of the world’s silver for roughly two hundred years. According to one estimate, one-third of all silver mined in the Americas wound up in Chinese hands. This influx fueled China’s phenomenal economic expansion. New World silver also bought Europeans greater access to China’s coveted goods.

The Revival of Indian Ocean Trade

China’s economic expansion occurred within the revival of Indian Ocean trade. In fact, many of the same merchants seeking trade with China developed a brisk commerce that tied the whole of the Indian Ocean together. As a result, ports in East Africa and the Red Sea again enjoyed links with coastal cities of India, South Asia, and the Malay Peninsula. Muslims dominated this trade.

India was the geographic and economic center of these trade routes. With a population expanding as rapidly as China’s, its large cities (such as Agra, Delhi, and Lahore) each boasted nearly half a million residents. India’s manufacturing center, Bengal, exported silk and cotton textiles and rice throughout South and Southeast Asia. Like China, India had a favorable trade balance (meaning they were exporting more than they were importing) with Europe and West Asia, exporting textiles and pepper (a spice that Europeans prized) in exchange for silver.

In dealing with China, Indian merchants faced the same problem as Europeans and West Asians: they had to pay with silver. So they became as dependent on gaining access to silver as others who were courting Chinese commerce. But unlike Chinese merchants, Indian and Islamic traders in the region’s commercial hubs did not obey one overarching political authority. This gave them considerable autonomy from political affairs and allowed them to occupy strategic positions in long-distance trade. Meanwhile, rulers all along the Indian Ocean enriched themselves with customs duties while flaunting their status with exotic goods. For glorifying sovereigns and worshipping deities, luxuries such as silks, porcelains, ivory, gold, silver, diamonds, spices, frankincense, myrrh, and incense were in high demand. Thus the Indian Ocean trade connected a vast array of consumers and producers long before Europeans arrived on the scene.

Of the many port cities supporting Indian Ocean commerce, none was more important than Melaka, located at a choke point between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Melaka had no hinterland of farmers to support it, so it thrived exclusively as an entrepôt (a commercial hub for long-distance trade) for world traders, thousands of whom resided in the city or passed through it. Indeed, Melaka’s merchants were a microcosm of the region’s diverse commercial community: Arabs, Indians, Armenians, Jews, East Africans, Persians, and eventually Western Europeans established themselves there to profit from the commerce that flowed in and out of the port.

Overland Commerce and Ottoman Expansion

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, seaborne commerce eclipsed but did not eliminate overland caravan trading. In fact, along some routes, overland commerce thrived anew. One well-trafficked route linked the Baltic Sea, Muscovy, the Caspian Sea, the central Asian oases, and China. Other land routes carried goods to the ports of China and the Indian Ocean; from there, they crossed to the Ottoman Empire’s heartland and went by land farther into Europe.

Of the many entrepôts that sprang up along caravan routes, none enjoyed more spectacular success than Aleppo in Syria. Thanks to its prime location at the end of caravan routes from India and Baghdad, Aleppo came to overshadow its Syrian rivals, Damascus and Homs. A vital supply point for Anatolia and the Mediterranean cities, Aleppo by the late sixteenth century was the most important commercial center in southwest Asia. The Aleppans, like others within the Ottoman Empire, revered successful merchants. In popular stories such as The Thousand and One Nights, they celebrated these wealthy traders as shrewd men who amassed enormous wealth by mastering the intricacies of the caravan trade. Those close to the trade recognized how difficult the merchant’s task was. The caravans gathered
on the city’s edge, where animals were hired, tents sewn, and saddles and packs arranged. Large caravans involved 600 to 1,000 camels and up to 400 men; smaller parties required no more than a dozen animals. Whatever the size, a good leader was essential. Only someone who knew the difficult desert routes and enjoyed the confidence of nomadic Bedouin tribes (which provided safe passage for a fee) could hope to make the journey profitable.

Ottoman authorities took a keen interest in the caravan trade, since the state gained considerable tax revenue from it. To facilitate the caravans’ movement, the government maintained refreshment and military stations along the route. The largest had individual rooms to accommodate the chief merchants and could provide lodging for up to 800 travelers, as well as care for all their animals. But gathering so many traders, animals, and cargoes could also attract marauders, especially desert tribesmen. To stop the raids, authorities and merchants offered cash payments to tribal chieftains as “protection money.” This was a small price to pay in order to protect the caravan trade, whose revenues ultimately supported imperial expansion.

**EUROPEAN EXPLORATION AND EXPANSION**

The Muslim conquest of Constantinople, Europe’s gateway to the east (see Chapter 11), sent shock waves through Christendom and prompted Europeans to probe unexplored links to the east. That entailed looking south and west—and venturing across the seas. (See Map 12.1.) Taking the lead were the Portuguese, whose search for new routes to Asia led them first to Africa.

**The Portuguese in Africa and Asia**

Europeans had long believed that Africa was a storehouse of precious metals. In fact, a fourteenth-century map, the Catalan Atlas, depicted a single black ruler controlling a vast quantity of gold in the interior of Africa. Thus, as the price of gold skyrocketed during and after the Black Death, ambitious men decided to venture southward in search of this commodity and its twin, silver. These intrepid adventurers did not allow their fears of the world they anticipated encountering to overcome their ambitions. The first Portuguese sailors expected to find giants and Amazons, seas of darkness, and distant lands of savages and cannibals. After all, stories and myths had shaped their views of the places and peoples they would encounter.

**NAVIGATION AND MILITARY ADVANCES** Innovations in maritime technology and information from other mariners helped Portuguese sailors navigate the treacherous waters along the African coast. In the former category were new vessels. The carrack worked well on bodies of water like the Mediterranean; the caravel could nose in and out of estuaries and navigate unpredictable currents and winds. By using highly maneuverable caravels and perfecting the technique of tacking (sailing into the wind rather than before it), the Portuguese advanced far along the West African coast. In addition, newfound expertise with the compass and the astrolabe helped them determine latitude.
European Exploration and Expansion

more costly in money and manpower, gave an advantage to larger, centralized states.

SUGAR AND SLAVES Africa and the islands along its coast soon proved to be far more than a stop-off en route to India or a source of precious metals. Africa became a valued trading area, and its islands were prime locations for growing sugarcane—a crop that had exhausted the soils of Mediterranean islands, where it had been cultivated since the twelfth century. Along what they called the Gold Coast, the Portuguese established many fortresses and ports of call.

After seizing islands along the West African coast, the Portuguese introduced sugarcane cultivation on large plantations and exploited slave labor from the African mainland. The Madeira, Canary, and Cape Verde archipelagos in particular became laboratories for plantation agriculture, for their rainfall and fertile soils made them ideally suited for growing sugarcane. And because it took droves of workers to cultivate, harvest, and process sugarcane, a ready supply of slave labor enabled Portugal and Spain to build sizeable plantations in their first formal colonies (regions under the political control of another country). In the 1400s, these islands saw the beginnings of a system of plantation agriculture built on slavery that would travel across the Atlantic in the following century.

The Portuguese also applied knowledge absorbed from ancient Greeks and Arabs and had assistance from Muslim mariners who shared their wide experience of Africa and the Indian Ocean.

The Portuguese success in the Indian Ocean was also partly the result of a revolution in military technology that owed much to borrowings from Asia. It began with the adaptation of a Chinese technology: gunpowder. The Ottomans used it to conquer Constantinople in 1453 with enormous cannons and 800-pound cannonballs. In 1492, Christians used cannons to breach the walls of Granada. Europeans also used smaller cannons, which were more mobile and propelled iron balls in relatively flat trajectories, to destroy old fortifications. When mounted against warships’ gunwales, such cannons could bombard ports and rival navies—or merchant vessels—to shift the nature of ocean commerce toward military ends.

Within Europe the main beneficiaries of this revolution in warfare were the dynastic rulers, who could afford to equip large fighting forces with new armaments. Whereas in 1415 the English king had won the Battle of Agincourt against the French with fewer than 10,000 men, by 1492 the Spanish crown amassed a huge force of 60,000 Christian soldiers to drive the Moors out of Granada. Tactics shifted, too. In medieval Europe, a day of combat or a short siege of castles often settled matters. But by the mid-sixteenth century, battles often involved lengthy and inconclusive struggles. This way of war,
MAP 12.1 | European Exploration, 1420–1580

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sailors from Portugal, Spain, England, and France explored and mapped the coastline of most of the world.

- What empire to the east prevented Europeans from expanding trade routes by land?
- Trace the voyages that started from Portugal, and then trace the voyages that started from Spain.
- Why did Portuguese explorers concentrate on Africa and the Indian Ocean, whereas their Spanish counterparts focused on the Americas?
- What does the map tell us about the different patterns of exploration in the New World versus those in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea?
PRIMAR Y SOUR CE

Portuguese Views of the Chinese

When the Portuguese arrived in China, they encountered an empire whose organizational structure and ideological orientation were quite different from their own. Written in 1517, this Portuguese report reflects misrepresentations that characterized many Europeans’ views of China for centuries to come. It also signaled an aggressive European expansionism that celebrated brute force as a legitimate means to destroy and conquer those who stood in the way.

God grant that these Chinese may be fools enough to lose the country; because up to the present they have had no dominion, but little by little they have gone on taking the land from their neighbors; and for this reason the kingdom is great, because the Chinese are full of much cowardice, and hence they come to be presumptuous, arrogant, cruel; and because up to the present, being a cowardly people, they have managed without arms and without any practice of war, and have always gone on getting the land from their neighbors, and not by force but by stratagems and deceptions; and they imagine that no one can do them harm. They call every foreigner a savage; and their country they call the kingdom of God.

Whoever shall come now, let it be a captain with a fleet of ten or fifteen sail. The first thing will be to destroy the fleet if they should have one, which I believe they have not; let it be by fire and blood and cruel fear for this day, without sparing the life of a single person, every junk being burnt, and no one being taken prisoner, in order not to waste the provisions, because at all times a hundred Chinese will be found for one Portuguese.

Portuguese Views of the Chinese

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QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- What do you think was the main purpose of this report?
- How could this observer’s views be so inaccurate?
- What is the irony in the comment, “They call every foreigner a savage,” followed by instructions to destroy, burn, and not spare “the life of a single person”?


COMMERCE AND CONQUEST IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Having established plantation colonies on West Africa’s outlying islands, Portuguese seafarers ventured into the Indian Ocean and inserted themselves into its thriving commerce. In Asia, Portugal never wanted to rule directly or to establish colonies. Rather, its seaborne empire aimed to exploit Asian commercial networks and trading systems.

The first Portuguese mariner to reach the Indian Ocean was Vasco da Gama (1469–1524). Like Columbus, da Gama was relatively unknown before his extraordinary voyage commanding four ships around the Cape of Good Hope. He explored Africa’s eastern coast but did not encounter friendly traders or great riches. What he found was a network of commercial ties spanning the Indian Ocean, as well as skilled Muslim mariners who knew the currents, winds, and ports of call. Da Gama took on board a Muslim pilot at Malindi for instruction in navigating the Indian Ocean’s winds and currents. He then sailed straight for the Malabar coast in southern India, one of the region’s most important trading areas, arriving there in 1498.

To the Portuguese, who traded in the name of their crown, commercial access was worth fighting for. Da Gama was briefly taken hostage near Calicut, and though eventually allowed to take on a valuable cargo of spices and silks, he was incensed at the insult. While exiting from southern India, da Gama roughed up everyone he encountered, making sure local fishermen watched and spread the news.

On the difficult voyage back to Lisbon, da Gama lost more than half of his crew, but he had proved the feasibility—and profitability—of trade via the Indian Ocean. When he returned to Calicut in 1502 with a larger crew, he asserted Portuguese supremacy by boarding all twenty ships in the harbor and cutting off the noses, ears, and hands of their sailors. Then he burned the ships with the mutilated sailors on board. The Portuguese repeated their shows of force in strategic locations, especially the three naval choke points: Aden at the base of the Red Sea, Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, and Melaka at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. Once established in the key ports, the Portuguese attempted to take over the trade or, failing this, to tax local merchants. Although they did not hold Aden for long, they solidified control in Sofala, Kilwa, and other important ports on the East African coast, Goa and Calicut in India, and Macao in southern China. From these strongholds, the Portuguese soon
commanded the most active sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean. (See Primary Source: Portuguese Views of the Chinese.)

To assert their domain over Indian Ocean trade (west of the Melaka Strait), the Portuguese introduced a pass system that required ships to pay for cartazes—documents identifying the ship’s captain, size of the ship and crew, and its cargo. Indian Ocean rulers and merchants got cartazes for free, showing the limits of Portuguese control. Others calculated it was cheaper to pay than risk losses at sea from the Portuguese fleet. What made the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean world distinctive was that it did not interrupt the flow of luxuries among Asian and African elites; rather, the Portuguese naval captains simply kept a portion of the profits for themselves.

Over time, as Indian Ocean commodities made their way back to Lisbon, that city eclipsed Italian ports (such as Venice) that had previously been prime entrepôts for Asian goods. Even so, spices were less important in Europe than within the Indian Ocean world, where the Portuguese became an important player. Only with the discovery of the Americas and the conquest of Brazil did Portugal become an empire with large overseas colonies. For this to transpire, mariners would have to traverse the Atlantic Ocean itself.

THE ATLANTIC WORLD

Western European Christendom, in opening new sea-lanes in the Atlantic, set the stage for an epochal transformation in world history. New technologies aided European expansion, but diseases made the difference. In their encounters with the peoples of the Americas, Europeans introduced more than new cultures to this isolated world; they also brought devastating diseases such as smallpox, typhus, and cholera, for which Amerindian populations had no immunity. In the first years after Amerindians made contact with Europeans, their populations suffered a catastrophic decline. This decimation enabled Europeans to conquer and colonize the Americas as they could not do in Asia or Africa, where long-standing patterns of trade had resulted in the development of shared immunities.

The devastation of the Amerindian population also resulted in severe labor shortages. Thus began the large-scale introduction of slave laborers imported from Africa. After 1500, most of the people who made the Atlantic voyage were not Europeans but Africans. As a supplier of slave labor, Africa became the third corner in a triangular world order. Born of the links among the peoples and resources of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, this emerging “Atlantic system” enriched the Europeans. Through their access to the precious metals of the Americas, they now had something to offer their trading partners in Asia.

Crossing the Atlantic was a feat of monumental importance in world history. It did not occur, however, with an aim to discover new lands. Columbus had wanted to voyage into the “Ocean Sea” so as to open a more direct—and more lucrative—route to Japan and China. Fired by their victory at Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella had agreed to finance his trip, hoping for riches to bankroll a crusade to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim hands. Just as Columbus had no idea he would find a “New World,” Spain’s monarchs (not to mention its merchants, missionaries, and soldiers) never dreamed that soon they would be preparing for conquest and profiteering in what had been, just a few years before, a blank space on the map. (Thus the term New World, as applied to the Americas, reflects the Europeans’ view that anything previously unknown to them was “new,” even if it had existed and supported societies long before European explorers arrived on its shores.)

Although discovering the Americas was not Columbus’s goal, it took scarcely a generation for Europeans to realize the significance of their accidental find. As news of Columbus’s voyage spread through Europe, ambitious mariners prepared to sail west. By 1550, all of Europe’s powers were scrambling, not just for a share of Indian Ocean action but also for spoils from the Atlantic. In the process, they began destroying the societies and dynasties of the New World. The devastation of its peoples coincided with a sharpening of European rivalries.

Westward Voyages of Columbus

Few figures in history embody their age more than Christopher Columbus. His three ships set sail from Spain in early 1492, stopped in the Canary Islands for supplies and repairs, and cast off into the unknown. When he stepped onto the beach of San Salvador (in the Bahamas) on October 12, 1492, Columbus ushered in a new era in world history. He did not, however, return with the precious Asian commodities he had sought. Columbus would search in vain over three subsequent voyages for the valuable products of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

It is important to see Columbus as a man of his time. Like other expansion-minded Europeans, he aimed to Christianize the world while enriching himself and his backers. These goals—to save souls and to make money—drove the European colonization of the Americas and the formation of an Atlantic system. Still, it is noteworthy that Columbus’s voyages aimed not to create something new but to generate revenues to cover the conquest of Granada and the reconquest of the Holy Land.

First Encounters

When Columbus made landfall in the Caribbean Sea, he unfurled the royal standard of Ferdinand and Isabella and claimed the “many islands filled with people innumerable” for Spain. It is
Columbus. As Columbus made landfall and encountered Indians, he planted a cross to indicate the spiritual purpose of the voyage and read aloud a document proclaiming the sovereign authority of the king and queen of Spain. Quickly, he learned there was barter for precious stones and metals.

...fitting that the first encounter with Caribbean inhabitants, in this case the Tainos, drew blood. Columbus noted, “I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves.” The Tainos had their own weapons but did not forge steel—and thus had no knowledge of such sharp edges.

For Columbus, the Tainos’ naivété in grabbing his sword symbolized the child-like primitivism of these people, whom he would mislabel “Indians” because he thought he had arrived off the coast of Asia. In Columbus’s view the Tainos had no religion, but they did have at least some gold (found initially hanging as pendants from their noses). Likewise, Pedro Álvares Cabral, a Portuguese mariner whose trip down the coast of Africa in 1500 was blown off course across the Atlantic, wrote that the people of Brazil had all “the innocence of Adam.” He also noted that they were ripe for conversion and that the soils “if rightly planted would yield everything.” But, as with Africans and Asians, Europeans also developed a contradictory view of the peoples of the Americas. From the Tainos, Columbus learned of another people, the Caribs, who (according to his informants) were savage, warlike cannibals. For centuries, these contrasting images—innocents and savages—structured European (mis)understandings of the native peoples of the Americas.

We know less about what the Indians thought of Columbus or other Europeans on their first encounters. Certainly the Europeans’ appearance and technologies inspired awe. The Tainos fled into the forest at the approach of European ships, which they thought were giant monsters; others thought they were floating islands. European metal goods, in particular weaponry, struck them as otherworldly. The strangely dressed white men seemed godlike to some, although many Indians soon abandoned this view. The natives found the newcomers different not for their skin color (only Europeans drew the distinction based on skin pigmentation), but for their hairiness. Indeed, the Europeans’ beards, breath, and bad manners repulsed their Indian hosts. The newcomers’ inability to live off the land also stood out.

In due course, the Indians realized that the strange, hairy people bearing metal weapons meant to stay and force the native population to labor for them. But by then, it was too late. The explorers had become conquistadors (conquerors).

First Conquests

After his first voyage, Columbus claimed that on Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) “he had found what he was looking for”—gold. That was sufficient to persuade the Spanish crown to invest in larger expeditions, and to seek to conquer this promising new territory. Whereas Columbus first sailed with three small ships and 87 men, ten years later the Spanish outfitted an expedition with 2,500 men. Exploration now gave way to warfare, and to exploitation.

Between 1492 and 1519, the Spanish experimented with institutions of colonial rule over local populations on the Caribbean island that they renamed Hispaniola. Ultimately they created a model that the rest of the New World colonies would adapt. But the Spaniards faced problems that would recur. The first was Indian resistance. As early as 1494, starving Spaniards raided and pillaged Indian villages. When the Indians revolted, Spanish soldiers replied with punitive expeditions and began enslaving them to work in mines extracting gold. As the crown systematized grants (encomiendas) to the conquistadors for control over Indian labor, a rich class of encomenderos arose who enjoyed the fruits of the system. Although the placer gold mines soon ran dry, the model of granting favored settlers the right to coerce Indian labor endured. In return, those who received the labor rights paid special taxes on the precious metals that were extracted. Thus, both the crown and the encomenderos benefited from the extractive economy. The same cannot be said of the Indians, who perished in great numbers from disease, dislocation, malnutrition, and overwork.

It is no surprise that quarrels over spoils followed the conquests. The family of Columbus, in particular, had been granted a commercial monopoly on his discoveries, but some of the settlers challenged Columbus’s authority. To prevent insurrection, the crown granted more encomiendas to other Spanish claimants. As special grants became a common feature of Spanish colonialism, less favored settlers grew disenchanted. When the Indians and the gold supplies began to disappear, many settlers pulled up their stakes and returned to Spain. Others looked for untapped territories that might yield precious metals.
Not all joined the rush for riches or celebrated the conquistadors and encomenderos. Dominican friars protested the abuse of the Indians, seeing them as potential converts who were equal to the Spaniards in the eyes of God. In 1511, Father Antonio Montesinos accused the settlers of barbarity: “By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived idly and peacefully in their own lands, where you have consumed infinite numbers of them with unheard-of murders and desolations?” Dissent and debate would be a permanent feature of Spanish colonialism in the New World.

The Aztec Empire and the Spanish Conquest

As Spanish colonists saw the bounty of Hispaniola dry up, they set out to discover and conquer new territories. Finding their way to the mainlands of the American landmasses, they encountered larger, more complex, and more militarized societies than those they had overrun in the Caribbean.

On the mainland, great civilizations had arisen centuries before, boasting large cities, monumental buildings, and riches based on wealthy agrarian societies. In both Mesoamerica, starting with the Olmecs (see Chapter 5), and the Andes, with the Chimú (see Chapter 10), large polities had laid the foundations for subsequent Aztec and Incan empires. The latter states were powerful. But they also represented the evolution of states and commercial systems untouched by Afro-Eurasian developments; as worlds apart, they were unprepared for the kind of assaults that European invaders had honed. In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and then the Andes, warfare was more ceremonial, less inclined to wipe out enemies than to make them tributary subjects. As a result, the wealth of these empires made them irresistible to outside conquerors they never knew, and their habits of war made them vulnerable to conquests they could never foresee.

AZTEC SOCIETY In Mesoamerica, the ascendant Mexicas had created an empire known to us as “Aztec.” Around Lake Texcoco, Mexico cities grew and formed a three-city league in 1430, which then expanded through the Central Valley of Mexico to incorporate neighboring peoples. Gradually the Aztec Empire united numerous small, independent states under a single monarch who ruled with the help of counselors, military leaders, and priests. By the late fifteenth century, the Aztec realm may have embraced 25 million people. Tenochtitlán, the primary city, situated on an immense island in Lake Texcoco, ranked among the world’s largest.

Tenochtitlán spread in concentric circles, with the main religious and political buildings in the center and residences radiating outward. The city’s outskirts connected a mosaic of floating gardens producing food for urban markets. Canals irrigated the land, waste served as fertilizer, and high-yielding produce found easy transport to markets. Entire households worked: men, women, and children all had roles in Aztec agriculture.

Extended kinship provided the scaffolding for Aztec statehood. Marriage of men and women from different villages solidified alliances and created clan-like networks. In Tenochtitlán, powerful families married their children to each other or found nuptial partners among the prominent families of other important cities. (Certain ruling houses in Europe were solidifying alliances in much the same way at this time; see Chapter 11.) Not only did this practice concentrate power in the great city, but it also ensured a pool of potential successors to the throne. Soon a lineage emerged to create a corps of “natural” rulers. Priests legitimized the new emperor in rituals to convey the image of a ruler close to the gods and to distinguish the elite from the lower orders.
A hierarchy at the village level provided the bedrock for layers of increasingly centralized political authority. Local elders developed representative councils, which selected delegates to a committee that elected the dominant civil authority, the chief speaker. As Aztec power spread, the chief speaker became a full-blown emperor. He was, however, not supreme; instead, he jockeyed with rival religious and military power-wielders. Thus at the top of the Aztec social pyramid stood a small but antagonistic nobility. This hierarchically organized society held itself together through a shared understanding of the cosmos. The Aztecs believed that the universe was prone to unceasing cycles of disaster that would eventually end in apocalypse. Such an unstable cosmos exposed mortals to repeated creations and destructions of their world. The priesthood governed relationships between people and their deities. Their challenge was to balance a belief that history was destined to run in cycles with a faith that mortals could influence the gods, and their own fate, through religious rituals.

Ultimately Aztec power spread though much of Mesoamerica, but the empire’s constant wars and conquests deprived it of stability. In successive military campaigns, the Aztecs subjugated their neighbors, feeding off plunder and then forcing subject peoples to pay tribute of crops, gold, silver, textiles, and other goods that financed Aztec grandeur. Such conquests also provided a constant supply of humans for sacrifice, because the Aztecs believed that the great god of the sun required human hearts to keep on burning and blood to replace that given by the gods to moisten the earth through rain. Priests escorted captured warriers up the temple steps and tore out their hearts, offering their lives and blood as a sacrifice to the sun god. Allegedly, between 20,000 and 80,000 men, women, and children were slaughtered in a single ceremony in 1487, with the four-person-wide line of victims stretching for over two miles. In this marathon of bloodletting, knife-wielding priests collapsed from exhaustion and surrendered their places to fresh executioners.

Those whom the Aztecs sought to dominate did not submit peacefully. From 1440, the empire faced constant turmoil as subject peoples rebelled against their oppressive overlords. Tlaxcalans and Tarascans along the Gulf of Mexico waged a relentless war for freedom, pinning down entire divisions of Aztec armies. To pacify the realm, the empire diverted more and more men and money into a mushrooming military. By the time the electoral committee chose Moctezuma II as emperor in 1502, divisions among elites and pressures from the periphery placed the Aztec Empire under extreme stress.

CORTÉS AND CONQUEST Not long after Moctezuma became emperor, news arrived from the coast of strange sightings of
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Cortés a son, who is considered one of the first mixed-blooded Mexicans (mestizos). With the assistance of Doña Marina and other native allies, Cortés marched his troops to Tenochtitlán. Upon entering, he gasped in wonder that “this city is so big and so remarkable” that it was “almost unbelievable.” One of his soldiers wrote, “It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before.”

How was this tiny force to overcome an empire of many millions with an elaborate warring tradition? Crucial to Spanish conquest was their alliance, negotiated through translators, with Moctezuma’s enemies—especially the Tlaxcalans. After decades of yearning for release from the Aztec yoke, the Tlaxcalans and other Mesoamerican peoples embraced Cortés’s promise of help. The Spaniards’ second advantage was their method of warfare. The Aztecs were seasoned fighters, but they fought to capture, not to kill. Nor were they familiar with gunpowder or sharp steel swords. Although outnumbered, the Spaniards killed their foe with abandon, using superior weaponry, horses, and war dogs. The Aztecs, still unsure who these strange men were, allowed Cortés to enter their city. With the aid of the Tlaxcalans and a handful of his own men, in 1519 Cortés captured Moctezuma, who became a puppet of the Spanish conqueror. (See Primary Source: Cortés Approaches Tenochtitlán.)

Within two years, the Aztecs realized that the newcomers were not gods and that Aztec warriors, too, could fight to kill.
Cortés Approaches Tenochtitlán

When the Spanish conquered the Aztec Empire, they defeated a mighty power. The capital, Tenochtitlán, was probably the same size as Europe’s biggest city. Glimpsing Tenochtitlán in 1521, Hernán Cortés marveled at its magnificence. But to justify his acts, he claimed to be bringing civilization and Christianity to the Aztecs. Note the contrast between Cortés’s admiration for Tenochtitlán and his condemnation of Indian beliefs and practices—as well as his claim that he abolished cannibalism, something the Aztecs did not practice (although they did sacrifice humans).

This great city of Tenochtitlán is built on the salt lake. . . . It has four approaches by means of artificial causeways. . . . The city is as large as Seville or Cordoba. Its streets . . . are very broad and straight, some of these, and all the others, are one half land, and the other half water on which they go about in canoes. . . . There are bridges, very large, strong, and well constructed, so that, over many, ten horsemen can ride abreast. . . . The city has many squares where markets are held. . . . There is one square, twice as large as that of Salamanca, all surrounded by arcades, where there are daily more than sixty thousand souls, buying and selling. . . . In the service and manners of its people, their fashion of living was almost the same as in Spain, with just as much harmony and order; and considering that these people were barbarous, so cut off from the knowledge of God and other civilized peoples, it is admirable to see to what they attained in every respect. . . .

It happened . . . that a Spaniard saw an Indian . . . eating a piece of flesh taken from the body of an Indian who had been killed. . . . I had the culprit burned, explaining that the cause was his having killed that Indian and eaten him, which was prohibited by Your Majesty, and by me in Your Royal name. I further made the chief understand that all the people . . . must abstain from this custom. . . . I came . . . to protect their lives as well as their property, and to teach them that they were to adore but one God . . . that they must turn from their idols, and the rites they had practised until then, for these were lies and deceptions which the devil . . . had invented. . . . I, likewise, had come to teach them that Your Majesty, by the will of Divine Providence, rules the universe, and that they also must submit themselves to the imperial yoke, and do all that we who are Your Majesty’s ministers here might order them. . . .


QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- What does Cortés’s report tell us about the city of Tenochtitlán?
- Why does Cortés justify his actions to the degree he does?
- Cortés writes, “I came . . . to protect their lives as well as their property.” Based on your reading of the chapter text, would you say he accomplished these objectives?

When Spanish troops massacred an unarmed crowd in Tenochtitlán’s central square while Cortés was away, they provoked a massive uprising. The Spaniards led Moctezuma to one of the palace walls to plead with his people for a truce, but the Aztecs kept up their barrage of stones, spears, and arrows—striking and killing Moctezuma. Cortés returned to reassert control; but realizing this was impossible, he gathered his loot and escaped. Left behind were hundreds of Spaniards, many of whom were dragged up the temple steps and sacrificed by Aztec priests.

With the Tlaxcalans’ help, Cortés regrouped. This time he chose to defeat the Aztecs completely. He ordered the building of boats to sail across Lake Texcoco to bombard the capital with artillery. Even more devastating was the spread of smallpox, brought by the Spanish, which ran through the soldiers and commoners like wildfire. Still, led by a new ruler, Cuauhtémoc, the Aztecs rallied and nearly drove the Spaniards from Tenochtitlán. In the end starvation, disease, and lack of artillery vanquished the Aztec forces. More died from disease than from fighting—the total number of Aztec casualties may have reached 240,000. As Spanish troops retook the capital, they found it in ruins, with a population too weak to resist. Cuauhtémoc himself faced execution, thereby ending the royal Mexica lineage. The Aztecs lamented their defeat in verse: “We have pounded our hands in despair against the adobe walls, for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.” Cortés became governor of the new Spanish colony, renamed “New Spain.” He promptly allocated encomiendas to his loyal followers and dispatched expeditions to conquer the more distant Mesoamerican provinces.

The Mexica experience taught the Spanish an important lesson: an effective conquest had to be swift—and it had to
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Andes (much as the bubonic plague had earlier spread through Afro-Eurasian trade routes; see Chapter 11). With the father gone, Atahualpa declared war on his brother, crushed him, forced him to witness the execution of all his supporters, and then killed him and used his skull as a vessel for maize-beer. When the Spaniards arrived in 1532 they found an internally divided empire, a situation they quickly learned to exploit. Francisco Pizarro, who led the Spanish campaign, had been inspired by Cortés’s victory and yearned for his own glory. Commanding a force of about 600 men, he invited Atahualpa to confer at the town of Cajamarca. There he laid a trap. As columns of Inca warriors and servants covered with colorful plumage and plates of silver and gold entered the main square, the Spanish soldiers were awed. One recalled, “many of us urinated without noticing it, out of sheer terror.” But Pizarro’s plan worked. His guns and horses shocked the Inca forces. Atahualpa himself fell into Spanish hands, later to be decapitated. Pizarro’s conquistadors overran Cuzco in 1533 and then vanquished the rest of the Inca forces, a process that took decades in some areas.

Meanwhile, Spaniards began arriving in droves at the new capital of Lima. They staked their own claims for encomiendas, outdoing each other with greed, and soon were at war with one another. In 1541, one faction assassinated Pizarro himself. Rival factions kept up a brutal war until the Spanish king issued new laws to prevent encomiendas from being heritable. This act sought to block the establishment of a powerful aristocracy, to deter uncontrollable civil war, and to reinforce loyalty to Madrid (since once an encomendero died, his title reverted to the crown).

The defeat of the New World’s two great empires had enormous repercussions for world history. First, it meant that Europeans had their way with the human and material wealth of the Americas. Second, it gave Europeans a market for their own products—goods that found little favor in Afro-Eurasia. Finally, it opened a new frontier that the Europeans could colonize as staple-producing provinces. Now, following the Portuguese push into Africa and Asia (as well as a Russian push into northern Asia; see Chapter 13), the New World conquest introduced Europeans to a new scale of imperial expansion. The outcome, however, would destabilize Europe itself.

Environmental Consequences of the Conquest

The Spanish came to the Americas for gold and silver, but in the course of conquest and settlement they also learned about crops such as potatoes and corn that would fuel a population explosion across Afro-Eurasia. They brought with them first of all devastating diseases, but also horses, wheat, grapevines, and sugarcane. Historians call this hemispheric transfer of previously unknown plants, pathogens, people, and products in the wake of Columbus’s voyages the Columbian exchange. Over
If the fourteenth century was an age of dying across Afro-Eurasia, the sixteenth century saw even higher mortality rates in the Americas. As a result of European conquest, the exposure to virulent diseases, and the hyperexploitation of their labor under miserable conditions, the Native American populations saw their numbers reduced by 85 percent. The numbers themselves, however, are highly controversial and have sparked intense debates. Some scholars believe that no reliable numbers can be found for the population of the Americas when Europeans first arrived. Others have used a range of methods and data sources to establish population figures, including European firsthand accounts from that period, archaeological and anthropological evidence, estimates of the maximum population size of people the land can contain indefinitely (carrying capacity), and projections built backward from more recent censuses. These estimates vary widely from as little as 8 million to as high as more than 100 million.

**QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS**

- Imagine yourself a historical demographer. How would you attempt to estimate the population of the Americas in 1492?
- What effect did European conquest and Amerindian dying have on the polities and religious beliefs of the Native Americans?
- Why do you think Native American population growth never recovered from the initial encounter with Europeans as Afro-Eurasian population growth eventually recovered from the Black Death?

**Area** | Population in 1492 | Later Populations | Mortality Rates
--- | --- | --- | ---
The Americas | 53.9 m | 8 m in 1650 | 85%
The Caribbean
Hispaniola | 1.0 m | extinct by 1600 | 100%
The other islands | 2.0 m | extinct by 1600 | 100%
Mexico | 17.2 m | 3.5 m in 1600 | 80%
The Andes | 15.0 m | 3.0 m in 1650 | 80%
Central America | 5.63 m | 1.12 m in 1700 | 80%
North America | 3.79 m | 1.5 m in 1700 | 60%
250,000 in 1900 | 84%

Native Americans who survived the original encounters could be harnessed as a means to siphon tribute payments to the new masters. Spain could thereby extract wealth without extensive settlement. In Mexico and Peru, where the Inca Empire suffered the same fate as the Aztecs, conquistadors decapitated native communities but left much of their social and economic structure intact—including networks of tribute. But unlike the European penetration of the Indian Ocean, the occupation of the New World went beyond the control of commercial outposts. Instead, European colonialism in the Americas involved controlling large amounts of territory—and ultimately the entire landmass (see Map 12.2).

By fusing traditional tribute-taking with their own innovations, Spanish masters made villagers across their new American empire deliver goods and services. But because the Spanish authorities also bestowed encomiendas, those favored individuals could demand labor from their lands’ Indian inhabitants—for mines, estates, and public works. Whereas Aztec and Inca rulers had used conscripted labor to build up their public wealth, the Spaniards did so for private gain.

Most Spanish migrants were men; only a few were women. One, Inés Suárez, reached the Indies only to find her husband, who had arrived earlier, dead. She then became mistress of the conquistador Pedro de Valdivia, and the pair worked as a conquering team. Initially, she joined an expedition to conquer Chile as Valdivia’s domestic servant, but she soon became much more—nurse, caretaker, advisor, and guard, having uncovered several plots to assassinate her lover. Suárez even served as a diplomat between warring Indians and Spaniards in an effort to secure the conquest. Later, she helped to rule Chile as the wife of Rodrigo de Quiroga, governor of the province. Admittedly, hers

Corn and the Rise of Slave-Supplying Kingdoms in West Africa.) Europeans also took away tomatoes, beans, cacao, peanuts, tobacco, and squash, while importing livestock such as cattle, swine, and horses to the New World. The environmental effects of the introduction of livestock to the Americas were manifold. In the highland regions north of the valley of central Mexico (where Native Americans had once maintained irrigated, highly productive agricultural estates), Spanish settlers opened up large herding ranches. An area that had once produced corn and squash now supported herds of sheep and cattle. Without natural predators, these animals reproduced with lightning speed, destroying entire landscapes with their hooves and their foraging.

As Europeans cleared trees and other vegetation for ranches, mines, or plantations, they undermined the habitats of many indigenous mammals and birds. On the islands of the West Indies, described by Columbus as “roses of the sea,” the Spanish chopped down lush tropical and semitropical forests to make way for sugar plantations. Before long, nearly all of the islands’ tall trees as well as many shrubs and ground plants were gone, and residents lamented the absence of birdsong. Over ensuing centuries, the flora and fauna of the Americas took on an increasingly European appearance—a process that the historian Alfred Crosby has called ecological imperialism.

Spain’s Tributary Empire

Like the Europeans who sailed into the Indian Ocean to join existing commercial systems, the Spaniards sought to exploit the wealth of indigenous empires without fully dismantling them. Those

Disease and Decimation of Indians. The real conqueror of Native Americans was not so much guns as germs. Even before Spanish soldiers seized the Aztec capital, germs had begun decimating the population. The first big killer was smallpox, recorded here by an Indian artist, covering the bodies of victims.

Silver. Silver was an important discovery for Spanish conquerors in Mesoamerica and the Andes. Conquerors expanded the customs of Inca and Aztec labor drafts to force the natives to work in mines, often in brutal conditions.
New World varieties of corn spread rapidly throughout the Afro-Eurasian landmass soon after the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. Its hardiness and fast ripening qualities made it more desirable than many of the Old World grain products. In communities that consumed large quantities of meat, it became the main product fed to livestock.

Corn’s impact on Africa was as substantial as it was in the rest of Eurasia. Seeds made their way to western regions more quickly than to the south of the Sahara along two routes. One was via European merchants calling into ports along the coast; the second was West African Muslims returning across the Sahara after participating in the pilgrimage. The first evidence of corn cultivation in sub-Saharan Africa comes from a Portuguese navigator who identified the crop being grown on the island of Cape Verde in 1540. By the early seventeenth century, corn was replacing millet and sorghum as the main grain being grown in many West African regions and was destined to transform the work routines and diets of the peoples living in the region’s tropical rain forests all the way from present-day Sierra Leone in the east to Nigeria in the west. In many ways this area, which saw the rise of a group of powerful slave-supplying kingdoms in the eighteenth century, notably Asante, Dahomey, Oyo, and Benin, owed its prosperity to the cultivation of this New World crop. (See Chapter 14 for a fuller discussion of these states.)

The tropical rain forests of West and central Africa were thick with trees and ground cover in 1500. Clearing them so that they could support intensive agriculture was exhausting work, requiring enormous outlays of human energy and man-hours. Corn, a crop first domesticated in central Mexico 7,000 years ago, made this task possible. It added much-needed carbohydrates to the carbon-deficient diets of rain-forest dwellers. In addition, as a crop that matured more quickly than those that were indigenous to the region (millet, sorghum, and rice) and required less labor, it yielded two harvests in a single year. Farmers also cultivated cassava, another New World native, which in turn provided households with more carbohydrate calories. Yet corn did more than produce more food per unit of land and labor. Households put every part of the plant to use—grain, leaves, stalks, tassels, and roots were made to serve useful purposes.

Thus, at the very time that West African groups were moving southward into the rain forests, European navigators were arriving along the coast with new crops. Corn gave communities of cultivators the caloric energy to change their forest landscapes, expanding the arable areas. In a select few of these regions, enterprising clans emerged to dominate the political scene, creating centralized

was an exceptional story. More typical were women who foraged for food, tended wounded soldiers, and set up European-style settlements.

However, there were too few Spanish women to go around, so Spanish men consorted with local women. Although the crown did not approve the taking of concubines, the practice was widespread. From the onset of colonization, Spaniards also married into Indian families. After conquering the Incas, Pizarro himself wedded an Inca princess, thereby (or so he hoped) inheriting the mantle of local dynastic rule. As a result of intermarriages, mestizos became the fastest-growing segment of the population of Spanish America.

Spanish migrants and their progeny preferred towns to the countryside. Ports excepted, the major cities of Spanish America were the former centers of Indian empires. Mexico City took shape on the ruins of Tenochtitlán; Cuzco arose from the razed Inca capital. In their architecture, economy, and most intimate aspects, the Spanish colonies adopted as much as they transformed the worlds they encountered.

**Silver**

For the first Europeans in the Americas, the foremost measure of success was the gold and silver that they could hoard for themselves and their monarchs. But in plundering massive amounts of silver, the conquistadors introduced it to the world’s commercial systems, an act that electrified them. In the twenty years after the fall of Tenochtitlán, conquistadors took more precious metals from Mexico and the Andes than all the gold accumulated by Europeans over the previous centuries.

Having looted Indian coffers, the Spanish entered the business of mining directly, opening the Andean Potosí mines in 1545. Between 1560 and 1685, Spanish America sent 25,000 to 35,000 tons of silver annually to Spain. From 1685 to 1810, this sum doubled. The two mother lodes were Potosí in present-day Bolivia and Zacatecas in northern Mexico. Silver brought bounty not only to the crown but also to a privileged group of families based in Spain’s colonial capitals; thus private wealth funded the formation of local aristocracies.
kingdoms like Asante in present-day Ghana, Dahomey in present-day Benin, and Oyo and Benin in present-day Nigeria. These elites transformed what had once been thinly settled environments into densely populated states, with elaborate bureaucracies, big cities, and large and powerful standing armies.

There was much irony in the rise of these states, which owed so much of their strength to the linking of the Americas with Afro-Eurasia. The armies that they created and the increased populations that the new crops allowed were part and parcel of the Atlantic slave trade. That which the Americas gave with one hand (new crops), it took back with the other (warfare, captives, and New World slavery).

PORTUGAL’S NEW WORLD COLONY

No sooner did Europeans—starting with the Portuguese and Spanish—venture into the seas than they carved them up to prevent a free-for-all. The Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, drawn up by the pope, had foreseen that the non-European world—the Americas, Africa, and Asia—would be divided into spheres of interest between Spain and Portugal. Yet the treaty was unenforceable. No less interested in immediate riches than the Spanish, the Portuguese were disappointed by the absence of tributary populations and precious metals in the areas set aside for them. What they did find in Brazil, however, was abundant, fertile land on which favored persons received massive royal grants. These estate owners governed their plantations like feudal lords (see Chapter 10).

Coastal Enclaves

Hemmed in along the coast, the Portuguese created enclaves. Unlike the Spanish, they rarely intermarried with Indians, most
Chapter 12  Contact, Commerce, and Colonization, 1450–1600

This map examines the growth of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas over two and a half centuries. Identify the natural resources that led the Spaniards and Portuguese to focus their empire-building where they did.

- What were the major export commodities from these colonized areas?
- Looking back to Map 12.1, why do you think Spanish settlement covered so much more area than Portuguese settlement?
- According to your reading, how did the production and export of silver and sugar shape the labor systems that evolved in both empires?
Silver, the Devil, and Coca Leaf in the Andes

When Spanish colonists forced thousands of Andean Indians to work in the silver mines of Potosí, they permitted the chewing of coca leaves (which are now used to extract cocaine). Chewing the leaves gave Indians a mild “high,” alleviated their hunger, and blunted the pain of hard work and deteriorating lungs. The habit also spread to some Spaniards. In this document, Bartolomé Arzán de Orsúa y Vela, a Spaniard born in Potosí in 1676, expresses how important coca was to Indian miners and how harmful it was for Spaniards who fell under its spell. By the time the author wrote his observations in the late seventeenth century, the use of the coca leaf had become widespread.

I wish to declare the unhappiness and great evil that, among so many felicities, this kingdom of Peru experiences in possessing the coca herb. . . . No Indian will go into the mines or to any other labor, be it building houses or working in the fields, without taking it in his mouth, even if his life depends on it . . .

Among the Indians (and even the Spaniards by now) the custom of not entering the mines without placing this herb in the mouth is so well established that there is a superstition that the richness of the metal will be lost if they do not do so . . .

The Indians being accustomed to taking this herb into their mouths, there is no doubt that as long as they have it there they lose all desire to sleep, and since it is extremely warming, they say that when the weather is cold they do not feel it if they have the herb in their mouths. In addition, they also say that it increases their strength and that they feel neither hunger nor thirst; hence these Indians cannot work without it.

When the herb is ground and placed in boiling water and if a person then takes a few swallows, it opens the pores, warms the body, and shortens labor in women; and this coca herb has many other virtues besides. But human perversity has caused it to become a vice, so that the devil (that inventor of vices) has made a notable harvest of souls with it, for there are many women who have taken it—and still take it—for the sin of witchcraft, invoking the devil and using it to summon him for their evil deeds . . .

With such ferocity has the devil seized this coca herb that—there is no doubt about it—when it becomes an addiction it impairs or destroys the judgment of its users just as if they had drunk wine to excess and makes them see terrible visions; demons appear before their eyes in frightful forms. In this city of Potosí it is sold publicly by the Indians who work in the mines, and so the harm arising from its continued abundance cannot be corrected; but neither is that harm remediable in other large cities of this realm, where the use and sale of coca have been banned under penalties as severe as that of excommunication and yet it is secretly bought and sold and used for casting spells and other like evils.

Would that our lord the king had ordered this noxious herb pulled up by the roots wherever it is found. . . . Great good would follow were it to be extirpated from this realm: the devil would be bereft of the great harvest of souls he reaps, God would be done a great service, and vast numbers of men and women would not perish (I refer to Spaniards, for no harm comes to the Indians from it).


Questions for Analysis

• Why would the Spaniards ban the sale of the coca herb everywhere except Potosí?
• Why would Bartolomé believe that no harm would come to the Indians for taking the coca herb?
• How does this document reveal the central role of the Catholic Church in Spanish colonial thinking? Find several words and phrases that express this outlook.
Beginnings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Although African slaves were imported into the Americas starting in the fifteenth century, the first direct voyage carrying them from Africa to the Americas occurred in 1525. The transatlantic slave trade began modestly in support of one commodity, sugar. As European demand for sugar increased, the slave trade expanded. From the time of Columbus until 1820, more than five times as many Africans as Europeans moved to the Americas: approximately 2 million Europeans (voluntarily) and 12 million Africans (involuntarily) crossed the Atlantic—though the especially high mortality rate for Africans meant that only 10 million survived to reach New World shores.

First to master long-distance seafaring, the Portuguese also led the way in human cargo. Trade in slaves grew steadily throughout the sixteenth century, then surged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Chapter 13). Initially, all European powers participated—Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French. Eventually, New World merchants in both North and South America also established direct trade links with Africa.

Well before European merchants arrived off its western coast, Africa had known long-distance slave trading. In fact, the overall number of Africans sold into captivity in the Muslim world exceeded that of the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, Africans maintained slaves themselves. African slavery, like its American counterpart, was a response to labor scarcities. In many parts of Africa, however, slaves did not face permanent servitude. Instead, they were assimilated into families, gradually losing their servile status and swelling the size and power of their adopted lineage-based groups.

With the additional European demand for slaves to work New World plantations alongside the ongoing Muslim slave trade, pressure on the supply of African slaves intensified. Only a narrow band stretching down the spine of the African mainland, from present-day Uganda and the highlands of Kenya to Zambia and Zimbabwe, escaped the impact of Asian and European slave traders.

Within Africa, the social and political consequences were not fully evident until the great age of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, but already some economic consequences were clear. The overwhelming trend was to further limit Africa’s population. Indeed, African laborers fetched high enough prices to more than cover the costs of their capture and transportation across the Atlantic.

By the late sixteenth century, important pieces had fallen into place to create a new Atlantic world, one that could not have been imagined a century earlier. This was the three-cornered Atlantic system, with Africa supplying labor, the Americas land and minerals, and Europeans the technology and military power to hold the system together. In time, the wealth flows to Europe and the slave-based development of the Americas would alter the world balance of power.

Sugar Plantations

Along with silver, sugar emerged as the most valuable export from the Americas. It also was decisive in rearranging relations between peoples around the Atlantic. Cultivation of sugarcane had originated in India, spread to the Mediterranean region, and then reached the coastal islands of West Africa. The Portuguese transported the West African model to Brazil, and other Europeans took it to the Caribbean. By the early seventeenth century, sugar had become a major export from the New World. By the eighteenth century, its production required continuous and enormous transfers of labor from Africa, and its value surpassed that of silver as an export from the Americas to Europe.

Most Brazilian sugar plantations were fairly small, employing between 60 and 100 slaves. But they were efficient enough to create an alternative model of empire, one that resulted in full-scale colonization and dislocation of the existing population. The slaves lived in wretched conditions: their barracks were miserable, and their diets were insufficient to keep them alive under backbreaking work routines. Moreover, these slaves were disproportionately men. As they rapidly died off, the only way to ensure replenishment was to import more Africans. This model of settlement relied on the transatlantic flow of slaves.
THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE

Instead of uniting Europeans, the Atlantic system deepened the region's internal divides. In particular, the growing wealth of the Spanish Empire added to the Habsburg dynasty's power and attracted the attention of jealous competitors. On top of the transformations wrought by transatlantic opportunities and rivalries, a split within the Roman Catholic Church (the Reformation, discussed below) led to profound religious rifts among states and brought additional divisions to the continent.

The Habsburgs and the Quest for Universal Empire in Europe

The European dream of a continent-wide empire, which had persisted since the fall of ancient Rome, found expression under the Habsburg dynasts. They were heirs to the eastern half of Charlemagne's empire. Here a loose confederation of principalities, the Holy Roman Empire, continued to obey an emperor elected by elite lower-level sovereigns (dukes, archbishops, and kings of individual states like Bavaria). After 1273, the emperor usually came from the Austrian house of Habsburg. The Holy Roman Empire included territory incorporated into the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, and parts of present-day Italy, Poland, and Switzerland. Although the realm was enormous, it never enjoyed effectively centralized power.

In 1519, the Habsburg prince Charles V was elected Holy Roman Emperor, and for a few decades he controlled a transatlantic empire larger than any before or since. As grandson of Spanish monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand and of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, Charles inherited both Spain and its territories in the Americas, as well as the Habsburgs' traditional central European holdings. Oversretched by trying to keep such an ambitious empire intact, and unable to prevent some central European princes from embracing the new Protestant faith, Charles abdicated in 1556 and divided the realm between his younger brother Ferdinand and his son Philip. Ferdinand (r. 1556–1564) took the Austrian, German, and central European territories that straddled the Danube and became Holy Roman Emperor in 1556, enabling the Austrian Habsburgs to maintain dominance over central Europe.

Philip II (r. Spain 1556–1598) received Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, southern Italy, and the New World possessions. Moreover, he inherited the Portuguese throne (from his mother), adding Portugal and its colonial possessions to his empire. This gave him a monopoly on Atlantic commerce. Yet the Spanish Habsburgs had to defend their empire against Dutch revolts, as well as confront Ottoman harassment on land and at sea. The size and wealth of Habsburg Spain continued to provoke enormous tension within Europe.

Conflict in Europe and the Demise of Universal Empire

As the situation on the European mainland grew tense, French, English, and Dutch elites envied the riches of Portuguese and Spanish colonial possessions. These rivals yearned for their own profitable colonies. But in their New World explorations, the French, English, and Dutch had not yet found gold and silver, nor had they discovered an easier route to Asia. Still, they managed to claim a share of the wealth of the Americas by stealing it on the high seas. Some of the plunderers were pirates who raided for their own benefit, others were privateers who stole with official sanction and shared the profits with their monarchs. Often the distinction between pirate and privateer was blurred.

The most famous raider was Sir Francis Drake, whom the English crown commissioned to plunder Spanish possessions. Circling the globe between 1577 and 1580, Drake plundered one Spanish port after another. His favorite hunting ground was the Caribbean, where Mesoamerican and Andean silver, loaded onto Spanish galleons (heavy, square-rigged ships used for war or commerce), made lucrative targets. Besides, the many islands provided natural shelter. Although Drake undertook his exploits for personal gain, Queen Elizabeth approved of his assaults on the Spanish Empire and rewarded him with a knighthood.

To retaliate against English plundering and to prevent Elizabeth from supporting the Dutch revolt, the Spanish sailed a mighty armada of 130 ships and almost 20,000 men into the English Channel. But England amassed even more vessels from its Royal Navy and private merchant fleet. The subsequent defeat of the Spanish Armada saw the burning and destruction of many prized battleships. Thereafter the conflict between a rising England and Spain continued in other seas, and Drake returned to privateering. When news of Drake’s death in the Caribbean (from yellow fever) arrived in Madrid, the Spanish court erupted in jubilation. However, two months later an English fleet sailed into Spain's premier port of Cádiz, occupied the city for two weeks, burned 200 Spanish ships, and seized massive treasure from the Indies. Spain, the powerhouse of the Atlantic world, had been severely humbled. Two years later a despondent King Philip died. The dream of universal empire within Europe had failed, largely because Christendom continued to be at war with itself.
The Reformation

Like the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation in Europe began as a movement devoted to returning to ancient sources—in this case, to biblical scriptures. Long before Martin Luther came on the scene, some scholars and believers had despaired of the Catholic Church’s ability to satisfy their longings for deeper, more individualized religious experience. But interpreting Christian doctrine for oneself was still very dangerous in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for the church feared that heresies and challenges to its authority would arise if laypersons were allowed to read the scriptures as they pleased. The church was right: when Luther and his followers seized the right to read and interpret the Bible in a new way, they paved the way for a “Protestant” Reformation that split Christendom for good.

MARTIN LUTHER CHALLENGES THE CHURCH

The opening challenge to the authority of the pope and the Catholic Church originated in Germany. Here a monk and a professor of theology, Martin Luther (1483–1546), used his knowledge of the Bible to criticize the church’s ideas and practices. He sought no revolution but hoped to persuade church leaders to make reforms.

Beginning his career as a pious Catholic believer, Luther nonetheless believed that mortals were so given to sin that none would ever be worthy of salvation. In 1516, Luther found an answer to his quest for salvation in reading Paul’s Letters to the Romans: since no human acts could be sufficient to earn admittance to heaven, individuals could only be saved by their faith in God’s grace. God’s free gift of forgiveness, Luther believed, did not depend on taking sacraments or performing good deeds. This faith, moreover, was something Christians could obtain just from reading the Bible—rather than by having a priest tell them what to believe. Finally, Luther concluded that Christians did not need specially appointed mediators to speak to God for them; all were, in his eyes, priests, equally bound by God’s laws and obliged to minister to one another’s spiritual needs.

These became the three main principles that launched Luther’s reforming efforts: (1) belief that faith alone saves, (2) belief that the scriptures alone hold the key to Christian truth, and (3) belief in the priesthood of all believers. But other things motivated Luther as well: corrupt practices in the church, such as the keeping of mistresses by monks, priests, and even popes; and the selling of indulgences, certificates that would supposedly shorten the buyer’s time in Purgatory. In the 1510s, clerics were hawking indulgences across Europe in an effort to raise money for the sumptuous new Saint Peter’s basilica in Rome.

In 1517, Luther formulated ninety-five statements, or theses, and posted them on the doors to the Wittenberg cathedral, hoping to stir up his colleagues in debate. Before long his theses made him famous—and bolder in his criticisms. In a widely circulated pamphlet called On the Freedom of the Christian Man (1520), he upbraided “the Roman Church, which in past ages was the holiest of all” for having “become a den of murderers beyond
all other dens of murderers, a thieves' castle beyond all other thieves' castles, the head and empire of every sin, as well as of death and damnation.” As Luther's ideas spread, a highly important “colleague” entered the debate: Pope Leo X.

The church and the Habsburg emperor, Charles V, demanded that Luther take back his criticisms and theological claims. When he refused, he was declared a heretic and narrowly avoided being burned at the stake. Luther wrote many more pamphlets attacking the church and the pope, whom he now described as the anti-Christ. In 1525, he attacked another aspect of Catholic doctrine by marrying a former nun, Katharina von Bora. In Luther's view, God approved of human sexuality within the bonds of marriage, and encouraging marriage for both the clergy and the laity was the only way to prevent illicit forms of sexual behavior. Luther also translated the New Testament from Latin into German so that laypersons could have direct access, without the clergy, to the word of God. This act spurred many other daring scholars across Europe to undertake translations of their own, and it encouraged the Protestant clergy to teach children (and adults) to read their national languages.

OTHER “PROTESTANT” REFORMERS Spread by printed books and ardent preachers in all the common languages of Europe, Luther’s doctrines won widespread support. In fact, many German princes embraced the reformed faith to assert their independence from the Holy Roman Emperor. Those who followed the new faith identified themselves as “Protestants,” and they promised that their reformed version of Christianity provided both an answer to individual spiritual needs and a new moral foundation for community life. The renewed Christian creed appealed to commoners as well as elites, especially in communities that resented rule by Catholic “outsiders” (like the Dutch, who resented being ruled by Philip II, a Habsburg prince who lived in Spain). Thus the reformed ideas took particularly firm hold in the German states, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, and England.

Some zealous reformers, like Jean Calvin (1509–1564) in France, modified Luther’s ideas. To Luther’s emphasis on the individual’s relationship to God, Calvin added a focus on moral regeneration through church discipline and the autonomy of religious communities. He laid out the doctrine of predestination—the notion that each person is “predestined” for damnation or salvation even before birth. The “elect,” he thought, should also be free to govern themselves, a doctrine that upheld radical political dissent (as in the case of Puritans in England) and the rule of the clergy (as in the Swiss city-state of Geneva). Calvinism proved especially popular in Switzerland, the Netherlands, northeastern France, and Scotland (where it was called Presbyterianism). In contrast, those who remained loyal to the original Protestant cause now described themselves as Lutherans.

In England, Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) and his daughter Elizabeth (r. 1558–1603) crafted a moderate reformed religion—a “middle way”—called Anglicanism, which retained many Catholic practices and a hierarchy topped by bishops. (American followers would later call themselves Episcopalians, from the Latin word for bishop, episcopus. Although Anglican followers would later call themselves Episcopalians, from the Latin word for bishop, episcopus. Although Anglican followers would later call themselves Episcopalians, from the Latin word for bishop, episcopus. Although Anglican followers would later call themselves Episcopalians, from the Latin word for bishop, episcopus.) Although Anglicanism made it impossible for the Catholic Counter-Reformation to turn back the tide leading toward increased autonomy from the papacy.
Both Catholics and Protestants persecuted witches. Between about 1500 and 1700, up to 100,000 people, mostly women, were accused of being witches. Many were tried, tortured, burned at the stake, or hanged. Older women, widows, and nurses were especially vulnerable to charges of cursing or poisoning babies. Other charges included killing livestock, causing hailstorms, and scotching marriage arrangements. People also believed that weak and susceptible women might have sex with the devil or
be tempted to do his bidding. Clearly, by no means did the Reformation—or the Catholic response to it—make Europe a more tolerant society.

**Religious Warfare in Europe**

The religious revival led Europe into another round of ferocious wars. Their ultimate effect was to weaken the Holy Roman Empire and strengthen the English, French, and Dutch. Already in the 1520s, the circulation of books presenting Luther’s ideas sparked peasant revolts across central Europe. Some peasants, hoping that Luther’s assault on the church’s authority would help liberate them, rose up against repressive feudal landlords. In contrast to earlier wars, in which one noble’s retinue fought a rival’s, the defense of the Catholic mass and the Protestant Bible brought crowds of simple folk to arms. Now wars between and within central European states raged for nearly forty years. In 1555, the exhausted Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was compelled to allow the German princes the right to choose Lutheranism or Catholicism as the official religion within their domains (Calvinism was still outlawed). However, this concession did not end Europe’s religious wars.

Religious conflicts both weakened European dynasties and whetted their appetite for conquest abroad. Spain, with its massive empire and its silver mines in the New World, spent much of its new fortune waging war in Europe. Most debilitating was its costly effort to subdue recently acquired Dutch territories. After a series of wars spanning nearly a hundred years, Catholic Spain finally conceded the Protestant Netherlands its independence.

Wars took their toll on the Spanish Empire, which was soon wallowing in debts; not even the riches of its American silver mines could bail out the court. In the late 1550s, Philip II could not meet his obligations to creditors. Within two decades, Spain was declared bankrupt three times. Its decline opened the way for the Dutch and the English to extend their trading networks into Asia and the New World. Competition between the latter two bred trade wars, indicating that religious differences were not the only sources of inter-European strife.

Religious conflicts also sparked civil wars. In France, the divide between Catholics and Protestants exploded in the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572. Catholic crowds rampaged through the streets of Paris murdering Huguenot (Protestant) men, women, and children and dumping their bodies into the Seine River; parades of rioters displayed Protestants’ severed heads on pikes. The number of dead reached 3,000 in Paris and 10,000 in provincial towns. Slaughter on this scale did not break the Huguenots’ spirit, but it did bring more disrepute to the monarchy for failing to ensure peace. This was the beginning of the end of the Valois dynasty. Another round of warfare exhausted the French and brought Henry of Navarre, a Protestant prince, to the throne. To become king, Henry IV converted to Catholicism. Shortly thereafter he issued the Edict of Nantes, a proclamation that declared France a Catholic country but also tolerated some Protestant worship.

**St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre.** An important wedding between French Catholic and Huguenot families in Paris was scheduled for August 24, 1572. St. Bartholomew’s Day, but instead of reconciliation, that day saw a massacre, as Catholics tried to stamp out Protestantism in France’s capital city.
As princes sought to resolve religious questions within their domains, states increasingly became identified with one or another form of Christian faith—and, for Protestants, with a national language. In this way, religious strife propelled forward the process of state building and the forming of national identities. At the same time, religious conflict fueled rivalries for wealth and territory overseas. Thus, Europe entered its age of overseas exploration as a collection of increasingly powerful yet irreconcilably competitive rival states, whose differences stemmed not just from language but from the ways they worshipped the Christian God.

PROSPERITY IN ASIA

While Europe was experiencing religious warfare, Asian empires were expanding and consolidating their power, and trade was flourishing. If anything, the arrival of European sailors and traders in the Indian Ocean strengthened trading ties across the region and enhanced the political power and expansionist interests of Asia’s imperial regimes. These regimes have left their mark on world history. The Ming dynasty’s elegant manufactures enjoyed worldwide renown, and its ability to govern vast numbers of highly diverse peoples led outsiders to consider China the model imperial state. The Mughal ruler, Akbar, and the Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent (see Chapter 11), were equally effective and esteemed rulers.

Mughal India and Commerce

The Mughal Empire became one of the world’s wealthiest just when Europeans were establishing sustained connections with India. These connections, however, only touched the outer layer of Mughal India, one of Islam’s greatest regimes. Established in 1526, it was a vigorous, centralized state whose political authority encompassed most of modern-day India. During the sixteenth century, it had a population of between 100 and 150 million.

The Mughals’ strength rested on their military power (see Chapter 11). The dynasty’s founder, Babur, had introduced horsemanship, artillery, and field cannons from central Asia, and gunpowder had secured his swift military victories over northern India. Under his grandson, Akbar (r. 1556–1605), the empire enjoyed expansion and consolidation that continued (under his own grandson, Aurangzeb) until it covered almost all of India (see Map 12.4). Known as the “Great Mughal,” Akbar was skilled not only in military tactics but also in the art of alliance making. Deals with Hindu chieftains through favors and intermarriage also undergirded his empire.

Akbar’s court benefited from commercial expansion in the Indian Ocean. Although the Mughals possessed no ocean navy, merchants from Mughal lands used overland routes and rivers to exchange Indian cottons, tobacco, saffron, betel leaf, sugar, and indigo for Iranian melons, dried fruits, nuts, silks, carpets, and precious metals, or for Russian pelts, leathers, walrus tusks, saddles, and chain-mail armor. Every year, Akbar ordered 1,000 new suits stitched of the most exquisite material. His harem preened in fine silks dripping with gold, brocades, and pearls. Carpets, mirrors, and precious metals adorned nobles’ households and camps, while perfume and wine flowed freely. Soldiers, servants, and even horses and elephants sported elaborate attire.

During the sixteenth century, expanded trade with Europe brought more wealth to the Mughal polity, while the empire’s
Under Akbar and Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire expanded and dominated much of South Asia. Yet, by looking at the trading ports along the Indian coast, one can see the growing influence of Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English interests.

- Look at the dates for each port, and identify which traders came first and which came last.
- Compare this map with Map 12.1 (showing the earlier period 1420–1580): to what extent do the trading posts shown here reflect increased European influence in the region?
- How would these European outposts have affected Mughal policies?

**MAP 12.4 | Expansion of the Mughal Empire, 1556–1707**

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strength limited European incursions. Although the Portuguese occupied Goa and Bombay on the Indian coast, they had little presence elsewhere and dared not antagonize the Mughal emperor. In 1578, Akbar recognized the credentials of a Portuguese ambassador and allowed a Jesuit missionary to enter his court. Thereafter, commercial ties between Mughals and Portuguese intensified, but the merchants were still restricted to a handful of ports. In the 1580s and 1590s, the Mughals ended the Portuguese monopoly on trade with Europe by allowing Dutch and English merchantmen to dock in Indian ports.

Akbar used the commercial boom to overhaul his revenue system. Until the 1560s, the Mughal state relied on a network of decentralized tribute collectors called zamindars. These collectors possessed rights to claim a share of the harvest while earmarking part of their earnings for the emperor. But the Mughals did not always receive their agreed share and the peasants resented the high levies, so local populations resisted. As flourishing trade bolstered the money supply, Akbar's officials monetized the tax assessment system and curbed the zamindars' power. After other centralizing reforms, increased imperial revenues helped finance military expeditions and the extravagant beautification of Akbar's court.

Such fiscal policies reinforced the empire's growing commercialization. To generate cash to pay taxes, peasants had to sell their produce in the market—so market towns and ports flourished. Meanwhile, in the countryside, dealers in grain and money helped peasants get their produce to market. Up to one-third the value of burgeoning rural produce filled state coffers. Now the zamindars evolved from private tribute lords into servants of the state, though they continued to pocket a share of the peasants' income.

Centered in northern India, the Mughal Empire used surrounding regions' wealth and resources—military, architectural, and artistic—to glorify the court. Over time, the enhanced wealth caused friction among Indian regions, and even between merchants and rulers. Yet as long as merchants relied on rulers for their commercial gains, and as long as rulers balanced local and imperial interests, the realm remained unified and kept Europeans on the outskirts of society.

**Prosperity in Ming China**

In the late sixteenth century, China also prospered from increased commerce. Like the Mughals, the Ming seemed unconcerned with the increasing appearance of foreigners, including Europeans bearing silver. As in India, the Ming confined European traders to port cities. Silver from the Americas did, however, circulate widely in China. It allowed employers to pay their workers with money rather than with produce or goods. It also contributed to soaring production in agriculture and handicrafts. Through the sixteenth century, rural industries in China flourished. A cotton boom, for example, made spinning and weaving China's largest industry.

One measure of greater prosperity under the Ming was its population surge. By the mid-seventeenth century, China's population probably accounted for more than one-third of the total world population. Although 90 percent of Chinese people lived in the countryside, large numbers filled the cities. Beijing, the Ming capital, grew to over 1 million; Nanjing, the secondary capital, nearly matched that number. Cities offered diversions ranging from literary and theatrical societies to schools of learning, religious societies, urban associations, and manufactures from all over the empire. The elegance and material prosperity of Chinese cities dazzled European visitors. One Jesuit missionary described Nanjing as surpassing all other cities “in beauty and grandeur . . . It is literally filled with palaces and temples and towers and bridges. . . . There is a gaiety of spirit among the people who are well mannered and nicely spoken.” (In contrast, see Primary Source: Commentary on Foreigners from a Ming Official.)

Urban prosperity fostered entertainment districts where people could indulge themselves anonymously and in relative freedom. Some Ming women found a place here as refined entertainers and courtesans, others as midwives, poets, sorcerers, and matchmakers. Female painters, mostly from scholar-official families, emulated males who used the home and garden for creative pursuits. The expanding book trade also accommodated women, who were writers as well as readers, not to mention literary characters and archetypes (especially of Confucian virtues). But Chinese women made their greatest fortunes inside the emperor’s Forbidden City as healers, consorts, and power brokers.

To be sure, by the mid-sixteenth century Ming rule faced a variety of problems, from piracy along the coasts to ineptness in the state. Corruption and perceptions of social decay elicited even more criticism. Consider Wang Yangming, a government official and scholar of neo-Confucian thought who urged commitment to social action. Arguing for the unity of knowledge and action, he claimed that one’s own thoughts and intuition, rather than observations and external principles (as earlier neo-Confucian thinkers had emphasized), could provide the answers to problems. His more radical followers suggested, against traditional belief, that women were equal to men intellectually and should receive full educations—a position that earned these radicals banishment from the elite establishment. But even as such new ideas and the state’s weaknesses created discord, Ming society remained commercially vibrant. This vitality survived the dynasty’s fall in 1644, laying the foundation for increased population growth and territorial expansion in subsequent centuries.
Like the Mughals, the Ming confined the merchants to a coastal enclave. In fact, in 1574 the Chinese built a wall at the isthmus connecting Macao with the mainland; this barrier, and the soldiers who guarded it, restricted Portuguese access to inland trade. Nonetheless the Portuguese became important shippers of China’s prized porcelains and silks throughout Asia and beyond to Europe. They also dominated the silver trade from Japan.

Seeing how much the Portuguese were earning on Asian trade, the Spanish, English, and Dutch also ventured into Asian waters. With its monopoly on American silver, Spain enjoyed a competitive advantage. In 1565, the first Spanish trading galleon reached the Philippines; in 1571, after capturing Manila and making it a colonial capital, the Spanish established a brisk trade with China. Each year, ships from Spain’s colonies in the Americas crossed the Pacific to Manila, bearing cargoes of silver. They returned carrying porcelain and silks for well-to-do Europeans’ overseas expansion had originally looked toward Asia, and now the products from their New World colonies enabled them to realize some of those dreams. The Portuguese led the way, being the first Europeans to join the overseas trading networks bridging East Africa and China. Before long, they became either important commercial intermediaries or collectors of customs duties from Asian traders. In 1557, the Portuguese arrival at Macao, a port along the southern coast of China, enabled them to penetrate China’s expanding import-export trade. Within five years the number of Portuguese in Macao neared 1,000 (see Map 12.5).

True, Macao hosted many more Melakans, Indians, and Africans, who all enlivened the port. Moreover, although Ming authorities permitted a Portuguese presence there, the court refused to establish an official relationship with European traders. Like the Mughals, the Ming confined the merchants to a coastal enclave. In fact, in 1574 the Chinese built a wall at the isthmus connecting Macao with the mainland; this barrier, and the soldiers who guarded it, restricted Portuguese access to inland trade. Nonetheless the Portuguese became important shippers of China’s prized porcelains and silks throughout Asia and beyond to Europe. They also dominated the silver trade from Japan.

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**COMMENTARY ON FOREIGNERS FROM A MING OFFICIAL**

Although China had a long history of trade with the outside world, Ming officials were often hostile toward contact with foreigners. The bureaucrat He Ao (Ho Ao) wrote this commentary around 1520, portraying the Europeans (whom he called Feringis) as unruly, untrustworthy, and a threat to the country’s security. Such sentiments were also common among officials in subsequent centuries, even as China thrived in the commercial exchanges of an increasingly connected world.

The Feringis are most cruel and crafty. Their arms are superior to those of other foreigners. Some years ago they came suddenly to the city of Canton, and the noise of their cannon shook the earth [these were cannon shots fired as a salute by the fleet of Fernão Peres]. Those who remained at the post-station [places where foreigners were lodged] disobeyed the law and had intercourse with others. Those who came to the Capital were proud and struggled [among themselves?] to become head. Now if we allow them to come and go and to carry on their trade, it will inevitably lead to fighting and bloodshed, and the misfortune of our South may be boundless.

In the time of our ancestors, foreigners came to bring tribute only at fixed periods, and the law provided for precautionary measures, therefore the foreigners who could come were not many. But some time ago the Provincial Treasurer, Wu T’ing-chü, saying that he needed spice to be sent to the Court, took some of their goods no matter when they came. It was due to what he did that foreigner ships have never ceased visiting our shores and that barbarians have lived scattered in our departmental cities. Prohibition and precaution having been neglected, the Feringis became more and more familiar with our fair ways. And thus availing themselves of the situation the Feringis came into our port.

I pray that all the foreign junks in our bay and the foreigners who secretly live (in our territory) be driven away, that private intercourse be prohibited and that our strategical defence be close, so that that part of our country will have peace.

**Questions for Analysis**

- According to this document, what was the Chinese view of foreigners?
- How does this document compare to the earlier report from the European trader?
- In this translation, intercourse means “commerce” or “business.” Find the two places where this term occurs. Does the context indicate a difference of opinion between officials and merchants in Ming China?

**Source:** T’ien-Tse Chang, Sino-Portuguese Trade from 1514 to 1644: A Synthesis of Portuguese and Chinese Sources (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1934), pp. 51–52. Reprinted by permission of Koninklijke Brill NV.

**Asian Relations with Europe**

Europeans’ overseas expansion had originally looked toward Asia, and now the products from their New World colonies enabled them to realize some of those dreams. The Portuguese led the way, being the first Europeans to join the overseas trading networks bridging East Africa and China. Before long, they became either important commercial intermediaries or collectors of customs duties from Asian traders. In 1557, the Portuguese arrival at Macao, a port along the southern coast of China, enabled them to penetrate China’s expanding import-export trade. Within five years the number of Portuguese in Macao neared 1,000 (see Map 12.5).

True, Macao hosted many more Melakans, Indians, and Africans, who all enlivened the port. Moreover, although Ming authorities permitted a Portuguese presence there, the court refused to establish an official relationship with European traders.
European consumers. Merchants in Manila also procured silks, tapestries, and feathers from the China seas for shipment to the Americas, where the mining elite eagerly awaited these imports.

The year 1571 was decisive in the history of the modern world, for in that year Spain inaugurated a trade circuit that made good on Magellan’s earlier achievement. As Spanish ships circled the globe from the New World to China and from China back to Europe, the world became commercially interconnected. Silver solidified the linkage, being the only foreign commodity for which the Chinese had an insatiable demand. From the mother lodes of the Andes and Mesoamerica, silver made the commerce of the world go round.
antiquity (the Renaissance), an ambitious mercantile elite, and the spiritual fervor of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Learning from Arab seamen, European sailors perfected techniques for sailing into dangerous waters. Desiring Asian luxury goods, European merchants and mariners were eager to exploit trade routes leading eastward. More important, Europe’s location promoted expansion across the largely unknown Atlantic Ocean. With the Ottomans controlling Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean, Atlantic sea-lanes offered an alternative route to Asia. As Europeans searched for routes around Islamic territory, they first sailed down the coast of Africa and then across the Atlantic.

Encountering the “New World” was an accident of monumental significance. In the Americas, Europeans found riches. Mountains of silver and rivers of gold gave them the currency they needed for dealing with Asian traders. Europeans also found opportunities for exchange, conquest, and colonization. Yet, establishing these transatlantic empires heightened tensions within Europe, as rivals fought over the spoils and a religious schism turned into a divisive political and spiritual struggle.

Thus two conquests characterize this age of increasing world interconnections. The Islamic conquest of Constantinople drove Europeans to find new links to Asia, thereby demonstrating Islam’s pivotal role in shaping modern world history. In turn, the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs and the Incas gave Europeans access to silver, which bought them an increased presence in Asian trading networks.

American Indians also played an important role, as Europeans sought to conquer their lands, exploit their labor, and confiscate their gold and silver. Sometimes Indians worked with Europeans, sometimes under Europeans, sometimes against Europeans—and sometimes none were left to work at all. Then Europeans brought in African laborers, compounding the calamity of the encounter with the tragedy of slavery. Out of the catastrophe of contact, a new oceanic system arose to link Africa, America, and Europe. This was the Atlantic system. Unlike the tributary and trading orders of the Indian Ocean and China seas, the Atlantic Ocean supported a system of formal imperial control and settlement of distant colonies, and profoundly transformed the economies, agricultural practices, and environments across the globe. These catastrophes and exchanges would be foundational for the ways in which worlds connected and collided in the following centuries.

Other Europeans, too, wanted their share of Asia’s wealth. The English and the Dutch reached the South China Sea late in the sixteenth century. Captain James Lancaster made the first English voyage to the East Indies between 1591 and 1594. Five years later, 101 English subscribers pooled their funds and formed a joint-stock company (an association in which each member owned shares of capital). This English East India Company soon won a royal charter granting it exclusive rights to import East Indian goods. Soon the company displaced the Portuguese in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Doing a brisk trade in indigo, salt peter, pepper, and cotton textiles, the English East India Company eventually acquired control of ports on both coasts of India—Fort St. George (Madras, 1639), Bombay (1661), and Calcutta (1690).

It is tempting to see the Europeans’ arrival in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean as the beginning of the end of Asian autonomy. This was hardly the case, however. Through the sixteenth century, Europeans forged very weak connections to Asian societies. For the moment, the Europeans’ increased presence enhanced the wealth and might of Asian dynasties.

CONCLUSION

In this multicentered world of the fifteenth century, Europe was a poor cousin. However, a new spirit of adventure and achievement animated its peoples, stirred up by the rediscovery of
**FOCUS ON: Regional Impacts of European Colonization and Trade**

**Europe**
- Portugal creates a trading empire in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.
- Spain and Portugal establish colonies in the Americas, discover silver, and establish export-oriented plantation economies.
- As the balance of power in Europe shifts, the Protestant Reformation breaks out in northern and western Europe, splitting the Catholic Church.

**Africa**
- Trade in African captives fuels the Atlantic slave trade, which furnishes labor for European plantations in the Americas.

**Asia**
- Asian empires—the Mughals in India, the Ming in China, the Safavids in Iran, and the Ottomans in western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean—barely notice the Americas but profit economically from enhanced global trade.

**The Americas**
- Native Americans, lacking immunity to European diseases, perish everywhere.
- Spanish conquest and disease destroy the two great Native American empires in Mexico (the Aztecs) and Peru (the Incas).

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**CHRONOLOGY**

- Luther begins Protestant Reformation **1517**
- Columbus discovers the New World **1492**
- Cortés conquers Aztec Empire **1522**
- Pizarro conquers Inca Empire **1533**
- Da Gama sails to India **1498**
- Portuguese establish bases around Indian Ocean **1508–1511**

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. **Describe** the new trade patterns in the Afro-Eurasian world during the fifteenth century. How similar and different were they from trade patterns during the Mongol period?

2. **Describe** how Spain created a vast empire in the Americas. How did the spread of lethal disease influence this outcome?

3. **Explain** the environmental consequences of the first contacts between Europeans and Amerindians. What consequences did the Columbian exchange have on regions both beyond the Atlantic world and within it?

4. **Compare and contrast** Spain’s “tributary empire” in the Americas with Portugal’s “seaborne empire” in the Indian ocean. Why did these empires pursue such different strategies?

5. **Explain** what conditions promoted the strengthening of regional dynasties in Europe in the sixteenth century as opposed to the growth of one large European empire.

6. **Explain** the transformation of the African slave trade during this period. What role did the growth of sugar plantations play?

7. **Compare and contrast** political and commercial developments in the Mughal and Ming dynasties during the sixteenth century. How did the expansion of global commerce affect each region?

8. **Evaluate** to what extent an increased European presence altered the political balance of power in Asia at this time. How did Asian dynasties react to increased European contacts?

9. **Explain** the role of silver in transforming global trade patterns during the sixteenth century. Which regions and dynasties benefited from the increased use of silver for monetary transactions?