On August 3, 1492, the Genoese mariner Christopher Columbus set out on a bold expedition: to find a route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. It was a journey destined to change the course of world history. A seeker of fame and fortune, Columbus began his travel journal by restating the deal he had struck with the Spanish rulers financing his voyage.

"Based on the information that I had given Your Highnesses about the land of India and about a Prince who is called the Great Khan [of China] . . . Your Highnesses decided to send me . . . to the regions of India, to see . . . the peoples and the lands, and to learn of . . . the measures which could be taken for their conversion to our Holy Faith. . . . I was to go by way of the west, whence until today we do not know with certainty that anyone has gone."

—The Log of Christopher Columbus

Columbus never reached Asia. He landed on an island he thought was off the coast of Asia but was actually in the Caribbean Sea. Instead of finding the Great Khan, Columbus set in motion a process that brought together the American, European, and African worlds.

Columbus Crosses the Atlantic

In October 1492, roughly two months after leaving Spain, Columbus’s small fleet of ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, reached land. Columbus went ashore, where he encountered a group of people who would become known as the Taino (t’nô), from their word for “noble ones.” He planted Spanish banners and renamed their island San Salvador (“Holy Savior”), claiming it for Spain. Columbus spent 96 days exploring four coral islands in the Bahamas and the coastlines of two larger Caribbean islands, known today as Cuba and Hispaniola.
Convinced that he had landed on islands off Asia, known to Europeans as the Indies, Columbus called the people he met *los indios*. Thus the name *Indian* came to be mistakenly applied to all the diverse peoples of the Americas. The Spanish monarchs were thrilled with Columbus’s discoveries and funded three more of his voyages—this time to colonize the lands he had claimed.

**THE IMPACT ON NATIVE AMERICANS** By the time Columbus set sail for his return to Hispaniola in 1493, Europeans had already developed a pattern for colonization. They had glimpsed the profitability of the plantation system, realized the economic benefits of using native or local peoples for forced labor, and learned to use European weapons to dominate native peoples. These tactics would be used in the Americas.

The arrival of the Europeans devastated Native Americans by another means: disease. The Taino, for example, had not developed any natural immunity to measles, mumps, chickenpox, smallpox, typhus, or other diseases Europeans had unknowingly brought with them. Consequently, the Taino died by the thousands once they were exposed.

**THE IMPACT ON AFRICANS** With the decline of the native work force the European settlers of the Americas eventually turned to Africa for slaves. The Atlantic slave trade devastated many African societies, particularly in West Africa. Starting in the 1500s, African cultures lost many of their young and more able members. Before the Atlantic slave trade ended in the 1800s, it had drained Africa of at least 10 million people.

**THE IMPACT ON EUROPEANS** Columbus’s voyages had profound effects on Europeans as well. In search of new lives, Europeans began to cross the Atlantic by the thousands in what would become one of the biggest voluntary migrations in world history. Overseas expansion inflamed national rivalries in Europe. In 1494, Spain and Portugal signed the *Treaty of Tordesillas* (*tôr’də-sē’ələs*), in which they agreed to divide the Western Hemisphere between them.

**THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE** The voyages of Columbus and those after him led to the discovery of plants and animals in the Americas that were new to Europeans and Africans. Ships took items such as corn, potatoes, and tobacco from the Americas to Europe and to Africa. From these countries, they brought back livestock, grains, fruit, and coffee. This global transfer of living things, called the *Columbian Exchange*, began with Columbus’s first voyage and continues today.

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**Vocabulary**

**colonize:** to establish settlements under the control of a parent country

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**Main Idea**

**Analyzing Events**

1. What did Spain and Portugal agree to do in the Treaty of Tordesillas?

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**The Columbian Exchange**

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**Geography Skillbuilder**

**Human-environment interaction** How do you think the Columbian Exchange has enriched each hemisphere?
The Spanish Claim a New Empire

In the wake of Columbus's voyages, Spanish explorers took to the seas to claim new colonies for Spain. These explorers were lured by the prospect of vast lands filled with gold and silver. Known as **conquistadors** (kōng-kĕ́sta-dôrз’) (conquerors), they conquered much of the Americas.

**CORTÉS SUBDUES THE AZTEC**

Soon after landing in Mexico in 1519, Hernándo Cortés learned of the vast and wealthy Aztec empire in the region’s interior. With a force of 508 men, 16 horses, 10 cannons, and numerous dogs, the conquistador marched inland.

The Spaniards marveled at Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, with its towering temples and elaborate engineering works—including a system that brought fresh water into the city. “We were amazed,” one of Cortés’s soldiers said of his first glimpse of Tenochtitlán. “Some of our soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream.” While the Aztec city astonished the Spaniards, the capital’s glittering gold stock seemed to hypnotize them. “They picked up the gold and fingered it like monkeys,” one native witness recalled. “They hungered like pigs for that gold.”

The Aztec emperor, Montezuma, convinced at first that Cortés was an armored god, agreed to give the Spanish explorer a share of the empire’s existing gold supply. The conquistador was not satisfied. Cortés eventually forced the Aztec to mine more gold and silver. In the spring of 1520, the Aztec rebelled against the Spaniards’ intrusion. Regarding Montezuma as a traitor, the Aztec are believed to have stoned their ruler to death before driving out Cortés’s forces.

While they had successfully repelled the Spanish invaders, the Aztec were falling victim to the diseases that the Spanish had brought with them. By the time Cortés launched a counterattack in 1521, the Spanish and their native allies overran an Aztec force that had been greatly reduced by smallpox and measles. After several months of fighting, the invaders sacked and burned Tenochtitlán, and the Aztec surrendered.

**THE SPANISH PATTERN OF CONQUEST**

In building their American empire, the Spaniards lived among the native people and sought to impose their own culture upon them. The settlers, mostly men, tended to intermarry with native women. This practice eventually created a large **mestizo** (mĕs-tĕ́z’ō)—or mixed Spanish and Native American—population in the Spanish colonies. Nonetheless, the Spanish also oppressed the people among whom they lived. In their effort to exploit the land for its resources, they forced Native American workers to labor in an **encomienda** (ěng-kŏ-myěn’dá) system. Under that system, natives farmed, ranched, or mined for Spanish landlords, who received the rights to their labor from Spanish authorities.

**KEY PLAYER**

**HERNÁNDO CORTÉS**

1485–1547

Cortés made himself the enemy of thousands of Native Americans, but the daring conquistador did not have many friends among Spaniards. Spanish authorities on Cuba, where Cortés owned land, accused the conquistador of murdering his wife, Catalina Juárez. “There were ugly accusations, but none proved,” wrote Juárez’s biographer.

In addition, the Cuban governor, Diego Velázquez, who resented Cortés’s arrogance, relieved him of the command of a gold-seeking expedition to the mainland. Cortés left Cuba anyway. As he fought his way through Mexico, Cortés had to battle not only the Native Americans but also the Spanish forces that Velázquez sent to arrest him.

Note: 

- The process of intermarriage resulted in a mixed-race population known as mestizos, which significantly influenced the cultural landscape of the Americas.
- The encomienda system allowed Spanish landlords to demand labor and goods from Native American communities, often leading to exploitation and displacement.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Summarizing**

What factors enabled the Spanish to conquer the Aztec?
GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER
1. Movement  How many voyages to the Americas did Columbus make?
2. Place  In what years did the English and French sail to the Americas and which regions did they explore?
A number of Spanish priests demanded an end to the harsh encomienda system. In 1511, Fray Antonio de Montesinos delivered a fiery sermon in which he attacked the use of the native population for slave labor.

**A PERSONAL VOICE**  
**FRAY ANTONIO DE MONTESINOS**

“Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them? . . . Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? Don’t you understand this? Don’t you feel this?”

—quoted in Reflections, Writing for Columbus

In 1542, the Spanish monarchy abolished the encomienda system, and to meet their labor needs, the Spaniards began to use enslaved Africans.

**SPAIN ENJOYS A GOLDEN AGE** In 1532, Francisco Pizarro plundered the wealthy Inca empire on the western coast of South America. With this conquest and others, the Spanish built a vast empire, which included **New Spain** (Mexico, and part of what is now Guatemala), as well as lands in Central and South America and the Caribbean. Spanish explorers also undertook expeditions into what is now the southern United States. There, they established a string of outposts to protect their holdings and to spread their culture and religion to the Native Americans. Beginning with the efforts of Ponce de León in 1513, the Spanish settled in what is now Florida. In 1565, they established the outpost of St. Augustine on the Florida coast. The settlement has survived to become the oldest European-founded city in the United States.

**Spain Explores the Southwest and West**

Throughout the mid-1500s, the Spanish also explored and settled in what are now the southwest and west regions of the United States. In 1540, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led a most ambitious venture, as he traveled throughout much of what is now Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, and Kansas in search of another wealthy empire to conquer. Failing to find gold and other treasures, the dejected conquistador returned home. After wandering for two years, the only precious metal Coronado carried home was his own battered gold-plated armor.

**THE SPANISH FOUND NEW MEXICO** Some 50 years later, the Spanish returned to the modern-day Southwest—in search not of riches but of Christian converts. In its Royal Orders of New Discoveries of 1573, Spain outlined the duties of these new explorers who now included Roman Catholic priests. When converting the Native Americans, priests were ordered to provide them with “the many . . . essentials of life—bread, silk, linen, horses, cattle, tools, and weapons, and all the rest that Spain has had.” Numerous Spanish priests had arrived in the Americas to spread Roman Catholicism. The barren land north of New Spain may have held little gold, but it was home to many Native American souls to convert. In the winter of 1609–1610, Pedro de Peralta, governor of Spain’s northern holdings, called **New Mexico**, led settlers to a tributary of the upper Rio Grande. Together they built a capital called Santa Fe, or “Holy Faith.” The hooves of pack mules wore down an 1,800-mile trail known as El Camino Real or “the Royal Road,” as they carried goods back and forth between Santa Fe and Mexico City. In the next two decades, a string of Catholic missions arose among the Pueblos in the area.

**THE SPANISH OPEN MISSIONS IN TEXAS** As early as 1519, Alonso Álvarez de Piñeda of Spain had mapped the coast of what is today Texas. Soon afterward, in 1528, the first Europeans had begun to settle in the interior. Over the next 200
years, using the San Antonio area as their administrative center, the Spanish sent
more than 30 expeditions inland to explore and to settle. The land was already
sparsely inhabited by Native Americans, including members of the large and
diverse Apache group, whom Spanish missionaries sought to convert to
Christianity. The first two Spanish missions in Texas were founded in 1682 near
what is now El Paso.

Beginning in 1718, a number of missions opened along the San Antonio
River. Founded in 1720, Mission San José y San Miguel de Aguayo in San Antonio
was by many accounts the most beautiful and successful Texas mission. Its com-
-pound included buildings for living, worshipping, storing grain, spinning and
weaving cotton and wool, carpentry, iron working, and tailoring.

**A STRING OF MISSIONS SPANS CALIFORNIA** In 1542 the navigator Juan
Rodríguez Cabrillo, exploring the west coast of North America, discovered the
harbor that was later named San Diego. In 1769, the Spanish missionary Father
Junípero Serra founded the first California mission at San Diego.

By 1823, Spanish Franciscan priests, followers of Saint Francis of Assisi, had
founded a string of 21 missions, each one day’s walk (about 30 miles) from the
next. Many of the missions were protected by forts, called presidios, built nearby.
A presidio and a mission founded in 1776 in San Francisco preceded the devel-
opment of that city. The aims of the missionaries in California, as in Texas, were
to convert the Native Americans to Christianity, to educate them in European
ways and skills, and to secure the area for Spanish settlement. Many Spanish mis-

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**Spanish Missions in the Southwest**

The missions built by the priests who accompanied the conquistadors combined the rich architectural heritage of Spain with symbols and traditions familiar to their Native American converts.

- In Texas and California, bells used to summon people to worship were often hung in *espadañas*, tiered clusters framed by a rounded wall meant to resemble a cloud. To the Native Americans of the Southwest, clouds represented power.

Most missions were a series of buildings grouped around a courtyard, which was used for festivals or services. These courtyards acknowledged the Native American practice of worshipping in the open air.

Mission San Luis Rey de Francia, California

Mission San Miguel, California
MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES
Create a time line of the major events and significant dates of Columbus’s voyages and the Spanish exploration of the New World. Use the dates already plotted on the time line below as a guide.

![Time line diagram](image)

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EFFECTS
What do you think were the most important long-term consequences of Columbus’s encounters in the Americas? Think About:
- conquering and claiming land
- forced labor of Native Americans and Africans
- the impact on Africa, Europe, and the Americas

4. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS
State three conclusions about Spanish exploration and settlement north of Mexico and the Spaniards’ interaction with Native Americans there. Why did the Native Americans of New Mexico revolt against the Spanish settlers?